

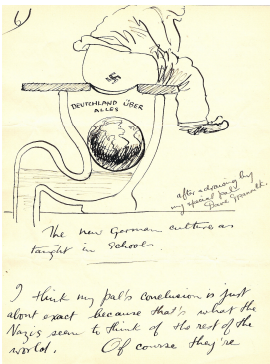
A life in letters across the Pond

The promising East End artist Sylvain Kluska died tragically young in the last war. But he lives on through his correspondence with his American cousins, writes ANDREW S ALMANZA

“I am now an old boy of 24, skinny, a big eater, and not bad as blokes go. I'm also an artist (but I don't wear a beard and long hair and I wash as often as possible).”

Thus Sylvain Kluska introduces himself in August 1935, with parenthetical disclaimers that betray his characteristic sense of humour. He penned these lines as he prepared to close a letter inaugurating a pre-World War II epistolary exchange that Sylvain, a naturalized British citizen and resident of the East End since the age of three, initiated with the US branch of his mother's family. In that introductory letter, he explained: “I want to be sociable and get to know my relatives over the pond.”

This drawing below in one of Kluska's letters is captioned: “The new German culture as taught in schools”. He writes that it is after a drawing by a “special pal” and says: “I think my pal's conclusion is just about exact because that's what the Nazis seem to think of the rest of the world.”



I have inherited several of these letters because my grandfather, a second cousin and contemporary of Sylvain's became one of his primary pen-pal correspondents in the US.

The letters are remarkable not only for what they reveal of the character of their author but for what they impart of the period in which he lived and the place in which he matured. Sylvain's era, as for most of us, defined him even as he often transcended it. But that era also ended Sylvain's life prematurely and tragically, an end Sylvain himself appears to anticipate with a nebulous sense of foreboding.

Yet Sylvain remains very much real, alive and present in his letters, forever describing the East End and London as it was during those last years of peace as though Europe were ever at the precipice of war, always warning of the imminent and mounting threat presented by the Nazis as though the inevitable international conflagration could yet be averted by some heroic feat.

He was a born writer and artist who depicted his world with equal ease by pen and by paint. An astute observer, he was as comfortable chronicling the day-to-day life of the average Londoner or explaining local customs as he was analyzing world developments, describing national sentiment on a particular subject, or commenting on the human condition. His words remain lodged in the amber yellow of those pages, giving pristine form to a world long gone and fresh urgency to causes seemingly rendered obsolete by the passage of time and intervening historical developments.

Sylvain's background, and that of his family, is, in a certain sense, emblematic of the experience of Jews who came to settle in the East End and of the Jewish diaspora experience. The life of his immediate family was marked by frequent dislocations and movements, sometimes triggered by persecution. Sylvain was not born in England, the country in which he would be raised and would call home. Nor were his parents born in the countries in which their two children were born; both had been born in eastern Europe.

Sylvain once observed the effect of having assimilated varied cultures on the Kluska family home life when he noted of his family's discussions: "Constantly you will hear English, Yiddish, and French being spoken, and sometimes it's very funny how one sentence will contain phrases of all three languages, capped more often than not by a Roumanian word."

Sylvain's only sibling, his sister, Ethel, later recalled that their father had fled his native Poland as a young man after witnessing the murder of his father by anti-Semites. He settled in France, where he changed his name to Charles, and married Anna Weintraub, an emigrant from Romania, in 1910. As Sylvain assured his cousin Leo in his first letter, he was born on the "respectable later date" of April 17, 1911, in Paris.

Little is known of his childhood, beyond the sparse details he offers in his letters. In 1914, when he was three, the family moved to England and settled at 19 Little Turner Street in the East End, where the elder Kluska practiced his trade as a ladies' tailor. Late in 1920, Sylvain's sister, Ethel Renee, was born. In one of his numerous descriptions of his sister redolent with brotherly pride and the aesthetic orientation of an artist, Sylvain told his "Yankee cousins" she was "a real picture face" (he was always less glowing about himself, referring on the back of one photo he enclosed with a letter to his "gloriously clumsy pan").

Sylvain was educated at the Davenant Foundation School in Whitechapel and, after proving a precocious artist, was enrolled in the St. Martin's School of Art. When he was 14, according to a newspaper article, one of his paintings was attracting the attention of a London gallery. At the age of 17, he had two paintings accepted by the Royal Academy for the 1929 summer exhibition, making him and another artist named Joan Manning-Sanders the youngest exhibitors at the Royal Academy.

His paintings were often inspired by his surroundings, and those early submissions to the Royal Academy were no exception. Sylvain was attracted by urban scenes that might have been overlooked as banal or even unattractive. The two Royal Academy paintings, *Soho Roof-Tops* and *Odds and Ends*, depicted urban London. The first portrays the London rooftops he could see from the Saint Martin's School of Art. One newspaper said it "shows every brick and tile", and added: "Perfection of detail is an obsession with Kluska."

The second painting is described in the article as showing "rubbish – broken pots and ash-pans" in the backyard of his home in the East End.

Sylvain enclosed photos of these paintings to my grandfather, writing: "... as a matter of fact the papers made a hell of a fuss over me at the time because I was only seventeen when I did [the paintings]". His achievement was noted in the press overseas. An article was disseminated to US newspapers by the Associated Press, and even *Boys' Life*, the magazine of the Boy Scouts of America, included a photo of Sylvain in its July 1929 issue depicting the young artist beaming before a canvas on which he was at work.

Sylvain Kluska at his easel, pictured in *Boys' Life*, the magazine of the Boy Scouts of America, in July 1929. The caption reads: "This seventeen-year old London boy, Sylvain Kluska, has the unique distinction of having two pictures accepted by this year's Royal Academy. This is the first time one so young has been thus honored."



Further professional success followed, according to his letters and to his entry in *Who's Who in Art*, published in Britain in 1934. He would be exhibited twice more at the Royal Academy (in 1931 and 1936), at the Foyle Gallery and at the Whitechapel Gallery. He regularly illustrated stories for East End newspapers and would have some of his illustrations published in magazines such as *Flight* and in the publication issued by the Sadler's Wells Theatre. He also had several articles on art published in magazines.

Yet he never achieved lasting fame. The national recognition he received for having been exhibited at the Royal Academy at a young age was fleeting and would not recur in the decade until the beginning of the war that brought his life to an abrupt end.

Around late 1938, the family moved out of the East End to settle in Castellain Mansions, Maida Vale, mirroring the larger exodus of the Jewish community from the East End.

In 1939, Sylvain put his career on hold. At the outbreak of the war, he enlisted in the RAF to train as a pilot. His sister, Ethel, has recalled two details about his war service: that he was at one time involved in RAF Bomber Command and that he asked his comrades-in-arms to call him "Sam".

Eventually, he joined 527 Squadron, a radar-calibration unit, as a wireless operator. According to his sister, his studio was destroyed in the London bombings, leaving few paintings intact. His *Soho Roof-Tops*, which with *Odds and Ends* had gained him brief national recognition as a teenager, was left with nicks in the canvas from shattering glass or flying debris.

Sylvain had celebrated his 33rd birthday just over three weeks before he took off from Digby in bad weather in his Blenheim IV to carry out what an RAF Historical Branch report described as a "ferrying flight". With him were navigator Frederick Edward Wood and serviceman passenger Charles Henry Setterfield.

What caused the accident is obscure – whether the instrument panel on the aircraft failed him, as his sister believed, or whether it was simply due to poor visibility, which was the official explanation – but the outcome remains devastatingly clear. Sylvain and the two other occupants of the aircraft were killed instantly on May 9, 1944 when it crashed into high ground, as the official report noted, “near Hartfell, north of Moffat, Dumfries, Scotland”.

It was exactly four weeks before the D-Day allied invasion that would liberate France within a couple of months and almost a year to the day before V-E Day, a date that would mark the end of Hitler’s tyrannical reign and his mad imperialistic ambitions. Sylvain, the man, had passed away, but Sylvain, the inhabitant of a pre-war correspondence, remained for other generations to meet.

On a personal level, there is much I owe Sylvain, as I owe my late grandfather for having saved his “Limey” cousin’s letters. Even as a child, I identified readily and closely with Sylvain, as a young man who dabbled in art, tended toward introspection, and had also tried his hand at writing. I believe my early exposure to Sylvain’s letters has been a positive influence on my writing. His letters were also responsible for kindling my interest in genealogy at a young age more than a decade ago, an interest that has opened me up to the possibility that those who came before us are not as distant, and their ideas not as archaic, as one might first assume. My studies of the fascinating life histories of many more of my antecedents have only confirmed me in this belief.

“What is distance?” Sylvain once rhetorically asked of his cousin on the other side of “the pond”. His answer: “It is mind over matter.”

Indeed, I have come to believe that what Sylvain had contemplated about space holds for time, too. If the Atlantic Ocean was not too great a chasm to interfere with the desire to know someone on the other side, then, perhaps, time is not as formidable as it seems either, when striving toward the same end. So we might approach the words and stories of those who came before us, see the timeless humanity in them, recognize the cyclical nature of things, observe the continuities between generations, and somehow know those not of our time.

I am no longer really the kid I was when I was first captivated by those letters and by their author and so I guess it is also appropriate that when I finally write about him I am now, to borrow Sylvain’s expression, an “old boy of 24”, the same age as Sylvain when he first put pen to paper to write to his Yankee cousins.

My only regret regarding the letters has always been that there are not more of them. I have always wondered what they might have said, what new aspect of Sylvain’s character, reasoning, or life story they would divulge to augment my knowledge of him and his times. But I know that I would still not be sated even if I did have more letters. I would always want to know more, just as someone who loses a close friend may wish for one more conversation.

Sylvain once followed descriptions of his relatives with the words: “These are very brief accounts of very fine people.” I do know him enough to conclude that Sylvain was a very fine man, and that, like his life, this account of him is far too brief.

Can you add anything to the Sylvain Kluska story? Maybe you knew members of the family or have come across his paintings. His American cousins would love to find out more. If you can help, please contact us at editor@jeecs.org or write to JEECS at PO Box No. 57317, London, E1 3NU.