

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

A conversation with Austin Ratner

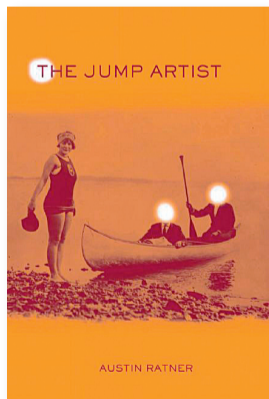
A medical doctor whose first novel is based closely on the story of renowned portrait photographer Philippe Halsman, the victim of the 'Austrian Dreyfus trial'

Philippe Halsman was one of the great portrait photographers of all time. Many of his images – of a bushy-haired and sad-eyed Albert Einstein, of model Constance Ford posed against a U.S. flag, of a frenetic Salvador Dali suspended in the air with three cats and a sine wave of water – have long since become icons, and marked their creator as one of the artists who most perfectly captured the zeitgeist of an optimistic and all-powerful postwar America. But the Jewish Halsman was born in Riga, Latvia, and by the time he arrived in New York in 1940, at age 34, he already had several “lives” behind him, the most significant of which was his unjust conviction and imprisonment in Vienna a dozen years earlier on the trumped-up charge of murdering his father.

Halsman's arrest at age 22, after his father's death during a hiking trip the two were taking in the Austrian Alps – and his subsequent trial and conviction (twice) for murder – can only be explained by the fierce strain of anti-Semitism that infused Austrian society at the time, and in retrospect can be seen as a harbinger of the subsequent collapse of the country's democracy and the murder of its Jews. An international campaign to gain Halsman's release finally convinced the republic's chancellor to grant him clemency, conditional on his permanent exile from Austria. He moved to Paris in 1931, where he opened a highly successful photo studio, but fled the city in 1940 after its occupation by Germany.

Halsman resettled in the United States, where he began his career again from scratch and quickly became a photographer whose images frequently graced the cover of Life magazine. Many of his subjects were celebrities, at a time when individuals were recognized for more than just being famous, and his portraits of Marilyn Monroe, Robert F. Kennedy and Frank Sinatra, among many others, are brilliant windows into their characters. He often asked his subjects to jump while he was shooting, saying that it caused “the mask” to drop from their faces. (For more about Halsman, and to see a sampling of his best-known images, see www.npg.si.edu/exh/halsman/intro.htm.)

American writer Austin Ratner, 37, was fascinated by Halsman's life story, particularly the fact that the photographer remade himself in America, never referring to his two painful years in an Austrian prison. Although trained as a physician, Ratner now writes full-time, and decided to use existing documentation about Halsman to make a novel of his life, “*The Jump Artist*” (Bellevue Literary Press, 300 pages, \$14.95, paperback). Austin Ratner spoke with Haaretz by phone from New York, where he lives.



Let's begin with some obvious questions. What made you turn from medicine to writing, and how did you turn to Halsman as a subject?

When I finished [Johns Hopkins University] medical school in 1998, I moved to New York, where I thought I was going to do a post-doctoral fellowship in cognitive neuroscience research. I was shown around a lab; they told me I could help with the surgery, which mainly involved planting hardware in the heads of macaque monkeys. The person showing me around said they had the happiest research monkeys around, and then opened the door to a closet-size room with 10 monkeys, each in a cage of about two feet by two feet, all with metal bars coming out of their heads. I don't know what an unhappy monkey is supposed to look like, but this seemed to be it. I knew right then this was not for me.

I took off some time to write, and reached a decision to forgo a neurology residency. Around the same time, I published a couple of short stories, and I got an agent.

And how did you end up writing a novel about this forgotten chapter in Philippe Halsman's life?

I stumbled across a reference to the “Austrian Dreyfus Affair,” as it was known at the time, in the magazine Reform Judaism, online. I forget what I was looking for at the time, but the little description I read there was fascinating to me. I already had some sort of murky idea of trying to write a historical novel, and basically, I started following up on it. The story, while very famous at the time, in the early '30s – and particularly in Austria and Germany – was forgotten in the shadow of the Holocaust, and Halsman himself suppressed it in his lifetime, so that it was not mentioned in The New York Times in his obituary [in 1979]. It was only in 1998, almost 20 years after his death, that his family spoke about it to anyone, when Mary Panzer of the National Portrait Gallery wrote an introduction

to a book of Halsman's photographs called “Retrospective,” and wrote up a summary of the case.

Are all the characters in the novel real?

I came across this epigram in Andre Gide's [novel] “Lafcadio's Adventures”: “Fiction is history which might have taken place, and history is fiction which has taken place.” My approach was that I was going to try not to alter the facts that I know, but that in the interstices of what we know, there is a lot to speculate about, mainly Halsman's subjective experience of these events. That was truly the driving force behind the book for me.

My interest was always in the arc of



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personal development that would have connected this idiosyncratically tragic event of 1928-1930, and the body of photographic work that emerges on the other side, whereby Halsman becomes one of the great architects of post-war optimism. His work embodies this joy, with his subjects even jumping in the air. It seemed so incongruous with what came before.

The book was very moving to read, but I was surprised by its minimalistic quality, by the fact that you told us so much by inference only. Was it hard to write?

I think that some of what you're describing – indicating without saying it, that old aphorism “show, don't tell” – may sound very simple, but is endlessly complicated to achieve. How to apply the principle, given the exigencies of pace. The level of psychic distance to maintain from your character. It requires a huge amount of working and reworking, and I often found myself cutting out things that explained too directly.

You depict Halsman as a swirl of emotions internally, but as someone who struggled to appear calm to the outside world. How do you feel about the historical Halsman?

There was a limit to how well I could know the historical Halsman, but I find him very moving. One of my primary sources was the book of letters that he wrote to his girlfriend Ruth [from prison].

She published it in 1930 as part of an effort to rehabilitate his character [and secure his release]. It's complicated to try and know him through these letters: They're written to his girlfriend, so that's a filter, and he knew that there was a censor reading his mail, so that's another filter, but a lot of them are statements of genuine emotion, and he comes across as a very sensitive, funny, charismatic kind of person, struggling with very difficult circumstances. I have a kind of awe for the way he was able to embrace joy and desire in his life, in a lifelong struggle. It's like reading the diary of Anne Frank.

His wife, Yvonne, told an Einstein biographer within the last 10 or 15 years that [the conviction and imprisonment] were a cause of suffering throughout his entire life. He's so funny, though, and he had to start over again and again and again. He had planned to be an electrical engineer, but his life plans were altered and his love relationship was destroyed. He came to France, where he became a well-known photographer. Then the Nazis came, and he had to leave behind his entire portfolio, and when he arrived in the U.S., nobody knew him. And yet, his most famous work was still to come.

Did you know that you would be writing a book about anti-Semitism and the Holocaust when you started out on this project?

Those things were mainly revelations to me, rather than being something I knew I was getting into. I learned a huge amount about the First Republic of Austria. This was a very exciting way to encounter the material. I read the New York Times coverage of events in Austria, sequentially day after day. It was a feeling like being there. There was something poignant to me about that moment in time, like when the chancellor, Johann Schober, was fighting for the fate of their country, and it wasn't clear what was going to happen. It was fascinating and moving, and the Halsman trial was a bellwether, a fissure in the edifice of the Austrian justice system. It represented the beginnings of the collapse of constitutional democracy.

The New York Times covered Halsman's trial?

No. The coverage I was reading was about the country's enormous unemployment and debt, and the struggles of the different political factions. Schober's coalition government was in constant danger of falling apart, and he was always trying to get loans from other countries. It was not at all clear whether Austria's future lay with the Western democracies or with those nations tilting toward fascism. I'm not a historian, but I had a very clear sense that it was not a forgone conclusion [that Austria would descend into fascism].

As a Jewish person, that was an interesting odyssey for me. I think that in my religious schooling, they had a tendency to paint the history in black and white terms. But I was reminded of the fact that Vienna was the most enlightened city in the world and carried the tradition of Emperor Franz Josef. Even in western Austria at the University of Innsbruck, for example, the medical faculty was fascist and against Halsman, but the law faculty was worried about his legal fate. Many saw the case as a worrying indictment of the justice system, an issue that had nothing to do with Halsman or Jews, but rather with their own values as a society.

David B. Green