

HAND PAPERMAKING

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FRONT COVER: May Babcock and Lindsey Beal, *Lamina: Undertow #1*, 2016–2018, 11 x 8.5 inches, cyanotype on artist-made paper from pigmented cotton and cornhusk with gouache. Collection of RISD Museum. Courtesy of the artists. **BACK COVER:** Valentin Bakardjiev, *Indigo Night 2*, 2024, 18-centimeter diameter (7.1-inch diameter), indigo plant (*Persicaria tinctoria*) handmade paper, pigmented with indigo. Courtesy of the artist.



Resurrect Blue

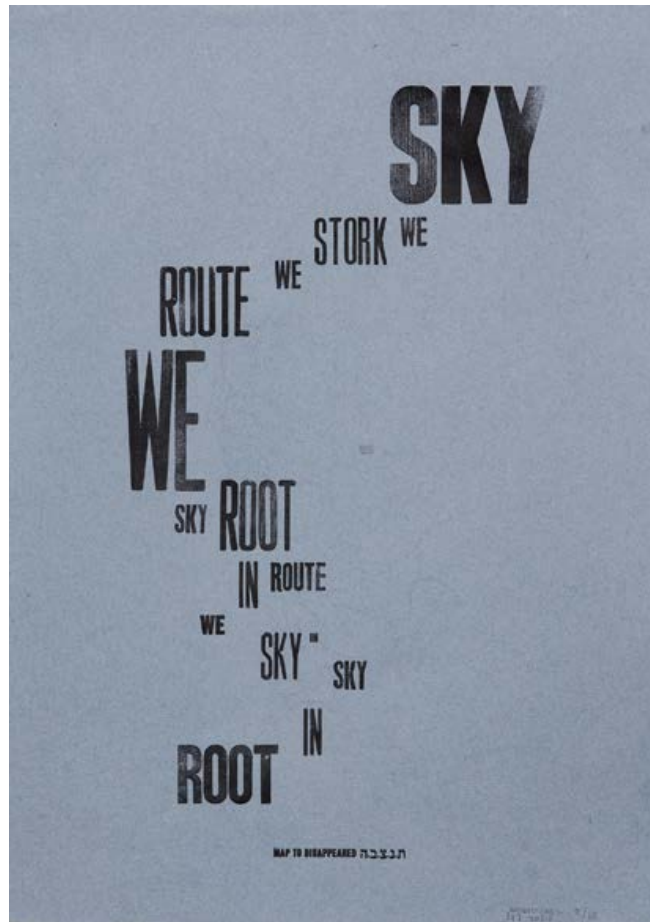
EMET EZELL

The artist examining Jewish graves alongside road P130 in Latvia. Photo: Laura Miglone, 2025. FACING PAGE: emet ezell, Map to Disappeared, 2024, 70 x 50 centimeters (27.6 x 19.7 inches), ink on blue handmade paper. Photo: Ben Mönks. All photos courtesy of the author unless otherwise noted.

In Latvia, shades of blue advance towards me. Two blue butterflies. Then a kingfisher, batting sapphire wings. Summer meadows erupt with tall stalks: chicory, chicory. Blue—divine sign of protection and ruin. And the Rabbis asked: *How is blue different from all other colors?*

Since 2023 I have travelled, each summer, to my family's former village in Latvia, researching the architecture of their erasure. In 1915, they were forcibly removed from their homes, sent to workcamps in Eastern Russia as part of a larger campaign to ethnically reshape the border region. Historian Eric Lohr estimates that roughly one million individuals were impacted by these deportations: Germans, Poles, Muslims, and Jews.¹ Entire villages were depopulated so that the Russian Empire could reconstitute its territory. Yet my Jewish family's mangled trace continues to haunt the hillsides. A decibel of ghosts. I am learning to read their signs, which consistently appear in vestiges of blue.

Last year, Latvian sculptor Ojars Feldbergs drove me to the Baltic Sea. Along the way, we stopped by a cluster of graves, emptied and exhumed. I ripped the ground open to reveal carved inscriptions. My hands roved each rim. I busted up dirt, snapping soft roots and agitating ant hills. The black earth caked my fingernails, imprinting dark moons on each tip. Ants a fury in the grass.



As I dug into the ground, I noticed that the gravestones had been painted a pastel blue, the faintest remains of which could be spotted along their cold edge. Was it clay? Chalk? Some mixture of ink? Regardless, the stones preserved a blue tint, hidden inside the steep groove of Hebrew letters. I'd never before encountered this custom: blue tombs. The surface of the stone as significant as its epithet, like print on paper, the two inseparable.

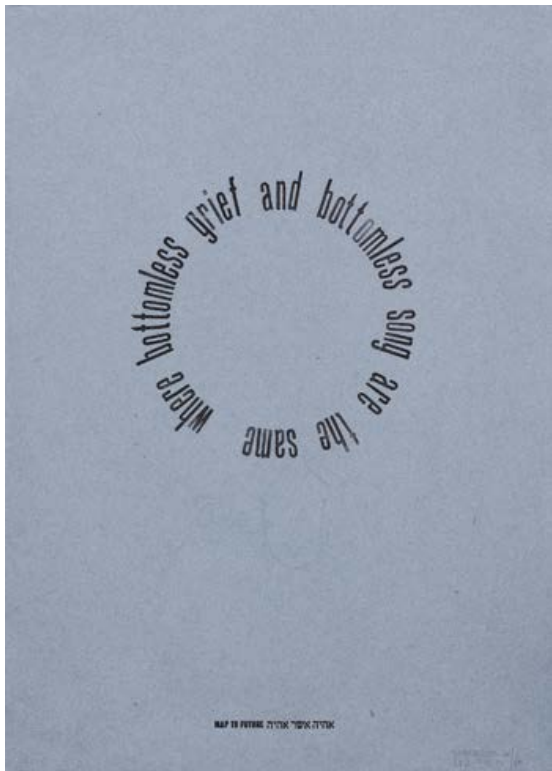
I looked out onto the road, which remained silent but for the occasional vehicle that would pass in a torrent of speed. The dirt groaned, unable to transmute the violence of conquest. My discarded dead. How to wrong the wrongs of history? How to trace a blue destiny?

Before the synagogue in my family's village of Sabile was abducted, its ceiling was painted blue. This was a common practice in Eastern Europe—the blue more akin to ash than a bright pigment. An old woman from Sabile once described the synagogue ceiling to me as studded with stars, immaculate with celestial detail. The mural a mimicry of sky. She remembers it from her childhood, when the synagogue was occupied by the Soviets and turned into a basketball gym and a vegetable cellar. In 2018, the local municipality boarded up the ceiling and painted it white. Blue a spectral memory, color of phantom presence.

And the Rabbis answered: *Blue is like the color of the sea, and the color of the sea is like the color of the sky, and the color of the sky is like the first light of the morning star, which is similar, in color, to the Throne of Glory.*²

One hundred kilometers from my family's village is another village—Valdemārpils—where the synagogue attic still carries its blue. I climbed a narrow ladder to see it. Walls plastered Soviet green; long division scribbled in corners. Time an onion, layer upon layer, forming one rotten bulb. For years, the synagogue housed an after-school program for Latvians. After 1989, the building sat empty until it was purchased, in 2023, by a local villager for cheap. What will he do with our ruins? What benefit will he derive from our afterlife? Architecture'd theft. The original dirt floor remains.

More than any other color, blue is linked to the printing of Hebrew books. Bibliographer Brad Sabin Hill writes that “the use of blue paper in Hebrew printing, in its extent over time and place, is unparalleled in the history of the book.”³ The first book ever printed on blue paper was published in Venice, 1514.⁴ Three years later, a Christian publisher from Antwerp, Daniel Bomberg, issued a Venetian printing of the Rabbinic Bible, with the entire Hebrew text appearing on lavish blue



emet ezell, *Map to Future*, 2024, 70 x 50 centimeters (27.6 x 19.7 inches), ink on blue handmade paper. Photo: Ben Mönks.



Blue-painted grave detail near road P130 in Latvia. Photo: emet ezell, 2025.

paper. Blue tractates of the Babylonian Talmud followed shortly thereafter, with the trend quickly extending from Italy into Central Europe. In 1559, the *Zohar*, foundational text of Jewish mysticism, was issued in blue-paper editions from Mantua and Cremona respectively. In the sixteenth century, the blue paper was so dark in hue that the text itself was often illegible, obscured by blue depths. Yet this rich blue tone is what imbued the paper with its power: God's dense glory. These blue editions were undoubtedly deluxe copies. They were often given as gifts or, when sold, they could potentially finance an entire print run for another book.⁵ Sabin Hill suggests that for Central Europe, the blue paper vogue was a recycled infatuation with indigo dye. Hangovers from the Renaissance, an excuse for bourgeois extravagance.

In Eastern Europe, blue paper came to prominence for Hebrew printing in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. With paper being the largest expense of book production, many books were printed on bluish paper for purely economic reasons. Blue paper was thin, and often easier and cheaper to access than paper that had been bleached white. Printing on thin, blue paper in the East was more likely a practical choice than an elite trend. Some printers even combined different paper stocks, mixing incongruent blues into the same book. Hebrew print

on blue paper was common across the territories now known as Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania. "Pale bluish papers appear even later in the century at Lemberg (Lvov)," Sabin Hill writes. But by 1836, Tsarist decree had closed all the Jewish printing presses. A century later, with the Nazi looting and destruction of Jewish books, a vat of precious blue pages disappeared.

Papermaking, like any craft, reveals a dense history of communal and social relations. Despite varying geographies and contexts, a blue paper fervor can be traced across generations of Jewish communities. Baghdad's first newspaper, for example, which went by the name *Ha-Dover*, was edited and printed by Barukh Moshe Mizrahi from 1863 to 1871. The newspaper was bilingual, appearing in both Hebrew and the local Judeo-Arabic, and was printed using lithographic technique. In 1871, *Ha-Dover* was circulated in light-blue pastel. Copies of *Ha-Dover* can be viewed in the Hamburg University library, thanks to the Hebrew manuscript collection of lawyer Heyman Baruch Levy, whose collection was purchased in 1906.⁶

The ubiquity of blue paper across Hebrew printing reveals its spiritual undercurrents. To encounter blue is, for a Jewish imagination, to encounter signs from the world beyond the world—a world in which messianic fervor, devout righteousness, and divine protection are intertwined.

Sabin Hill traces the “last flourish” of blue paper to Djerba, Tunisia. There, Jewish printer Boaz Haddad printed protective amulets, copies of the *Zohar*, and Passover *Hagaddot* well into the 1950s. These blue canvases conjure a disappeared time—one in which Jewish people, paper-making, and print were prolific throughout the Eastern and Southern hemispheres. It is this retracted past—the vast and tangible blue of it—that I reach for in my paper-making practice, a means of interfacing with an evaporated time and evaporated place.

The blue paper of Eastern and Central Europe was most likely made from rags, a combination of black and white cloth that resulted in a dove-blue tint. At times, the blue was almost gray, so subtle the colored hue and fibers. Fabrics that had already been dyed indigo—either from the European woad plant (*Isatis tinctoria*, dyer’s weed) or through imported South American bloodwood (*Haematoxylum campechianum*)—were stripped and beaten into paper pulp.⁷

In Lublin, Poland, where I produce my work, I tested various samples of black pigment, combining white and black pulp until I arrived at a fibrous and subtle blue. The material itself involved a combination of cotton, linen, hemp, and wood that I churned through an old hydropulper to shred into pulp. The fibers floated in the vat like clouds; the pulp flaked and clung to my hands. Sheet after dripping sheet, I pulled the screen from the vat. Dip and pull, dip and pull. Blue stream.

I was producing work that would be shown as part of “Destruction Is and Is Not Forever,” a solo exhibition that debuted in my family’s ancestral Latvian village. The exhibition opened on May 15, 2025—the one-hundred-tenth anniversary of the Russian deportations that depopulated Jews from the Baltics. The exhibition itself was staged in the Jewish community’s abducted synagogue, now the Sabile Arts, Culture, and Tourism Center.⁸

At the time of production, I did not know that I would have an exhibition. I was listening to the dead, attempting to transmute the retracted trace of my people in a Polish basement, making paper by hand.

A quickening between the spiritual and the material. My ancestors no longer in the past tense. Perhaps what is forgotten was known all along. Perhaps blue will once again re-route the seven rungs of heaven. Blue, mirror of sky and sea. Blue, which encases the fish, and the fish, whose eyes neither close nor blink.

Conceptually, I work with language. In the years that I travelled to and from my family’s village in Latvia, I composed a series of poems to transmit the ambivalence and confrontation inherent to the work of return. I took these poems and printed them on handmade paper, reserving two for a blue surface: *Map to Future*, *Map to Disappeared*. I arranged those works in an old wooden typeface known as Rex Gruby. During the first World War, the Rex typeface was frequently used to print obituaries in Polish newspapers. In Poland, the typeface still carries an aesthetic necrologue. I was working with type that dated back to the early twentieth century—my hands arranging a different time.



Ha-Dover, local newspaper, Baghdad, 1871, 18 x 12.5 centimeters (7 x 4.9 inches), lithography on blue paper. The newspaper was edited by Barukh Moshe Mizrahi and printed in Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic. Cod. Levy 136, fol. 241r. Collection of Hamburg Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Carl von Ossietzky, Germany. Courtesy of Hamburg Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Carl von Ossietzky, Germany.



The artist pulling the screen from the vat in Lublin, Poland. Photo: Tal Schwartz, 2024.



Installation view of "Destruction Is and Is Not Forever," solo exhibition by emet ezell at Sabile Arts and Culture Center, Latvia, May 15–July 15, 2025. Photo: Zigmārs Šteins.

For the exhibition, I displayed my handmade paper works in custom light boxes. This framing allowed the intricate and fibrous strands of the paper to become visible, something akin to stained-glass sky or blinking stars.

In the aftermath of ethnic cleansing, is return even possible? In what form? At what cost? Blue paper became a gestural reach towards my erased world, a retracted historical and material inheritance.

Artistically, I am interested in the precise way that the past haunts the present, how it reverberates in multi-directional hum. I swirl the cellulose in the vat; I press excess water from a stack of sheets; I wait for my paper to dry. These ritual actions not only represent but call forth divine life as it manifests in concrete symbols, symbols which, despite time and geography, beam blue.

NOTES

1. Eric Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).
2. *Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Menahot 43b:13.*
3. This and later quotations are from Brad Sabin Hill, "Hebrew Printing on Blue and Other Coloured Papers," in *Treasures of the Valmadonna Trust Library*, ed. David Sclar, (New York: 2011), 84–111.
4. Irene Brückle, "Historical Manufacture and Use of Blue Paper," in *The Book and Paper Group Annual 12* (1993): 5–7.
5. These insights arose in private conversation with scholar David Sclar who has spent a great deal of time with rare Hebrew printed books from the early modern period. He generously offered me his expertise on blue paper.
6. Hans-Walter Stork, "Geschichte per Hebraicasammlung," in *Manuscript Cultures no. 6*, exhibition catalogue for "Tora–Talmud–Siddur: Hebräische Handschriften der Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg," presented at the State and University Library Hamburg, September 18–October 26, 2014 (Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, 2014), 13–24.
7. Brückle, "Historical Manufacture and Use of Blue Paper," 5–7.
8. The exhibition, "Destruction Is and Is Not Forever," took place from May 15 to July 15, 2025 in Sabile, Latvia. An exhibition document is available online at https://emetzell.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/destruction-is-and-is-not-forever_.pdf.