

Mark Podwal, Prolific Artist of Jewish Themes, Dies at 79

His art included cartoons for The New York Times, collaborations with Elie Wiesel and images that traced the history of antisemitism. He was also a dermatologist.



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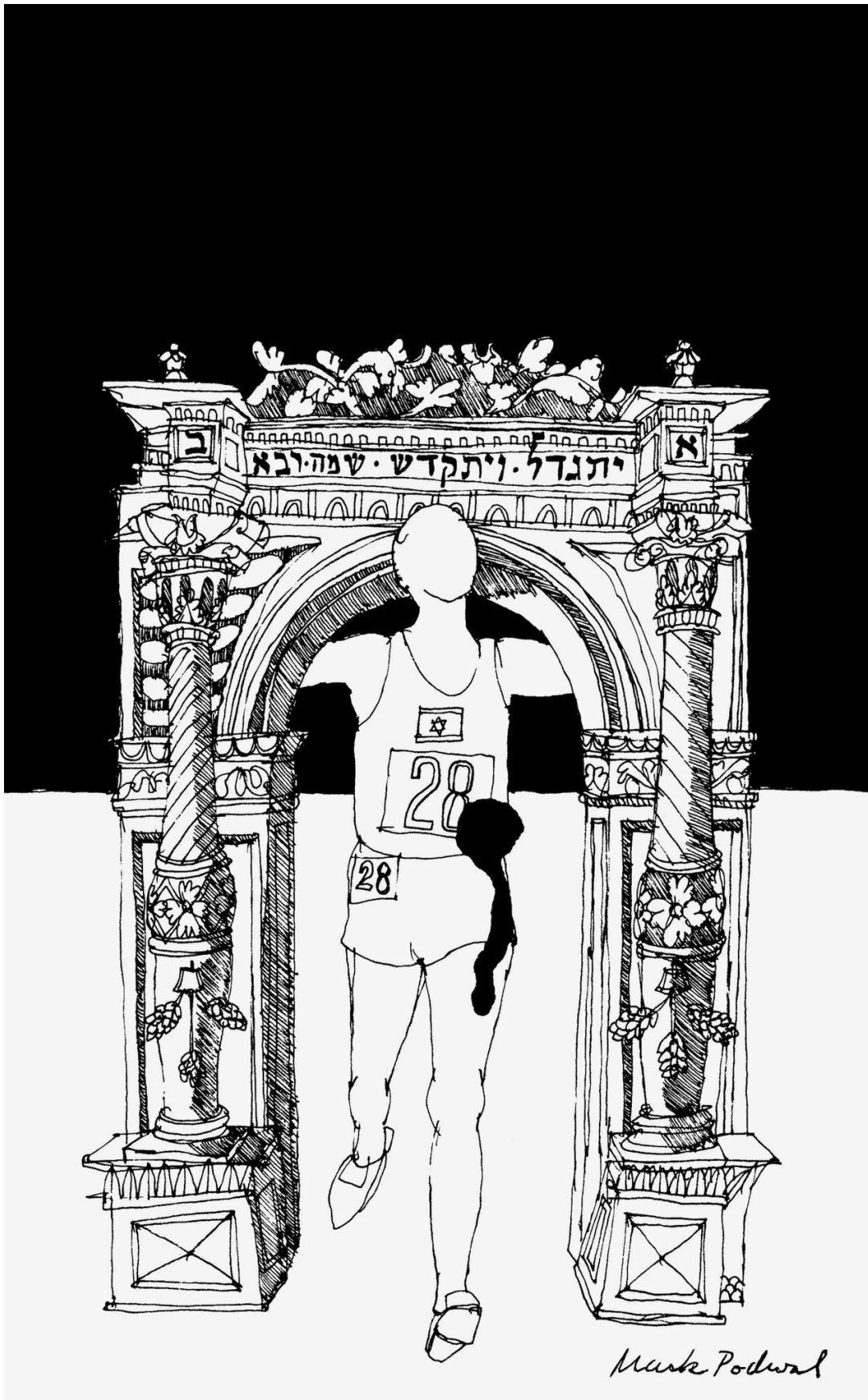
By Richard Sandomir

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Mark Podwal, a dermatologist with a parallel career as an acclaimed artist who drew political cartoons for The New York Times; illustrated books, including several written by the Auschwitz survivor and writer Elie Wiesel; and created a portfolio of Jewish-themed paintings, died on Friday at his home in Harrison, N.Y., in Westchester County. He was 79.

His son Michael said the cause was cancer.

Dr. Podwal, who chose dermatology as his specialty because it would give him time to pursue his art, began contributing to The Times's opinion page when he was a resident at New York University Hospital (now NYU Langone Health). His first cartoon, published after the massacre of 11 Israeli athletes and coaches by Palestinian terrorists at the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich, depicted a faceless Israeli runner, blood pouring from an abdominal wound, as he crosses under an ornate, undersize arch bearing words from the Kaddish, the Jewish mourner's prayer.



Dr. Podwal's first illustration for The New York Times was published shortly after 11 Israeli athletes and coaches were massacred by Palestinian terrorists at the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich. Mark Podwal, via Forum Gallery, New York

In 1982, he drew another evocative cartoon, an Israeli tank equipped with an oversized menorah as its main gun, to illustrate an article about the war in Lebanon. It was rejected by editors for being too inflammatory, but it was resurrected in 1989 for an essay by Abba Eban, Israel's former foreign minister, about "a false myth of Israeli weakness," according to "All the Art That's Fit to Print (And Some That Wasn't): Inside The New York Times Op-Ed Page" (2012), by Jerelle Kraus.

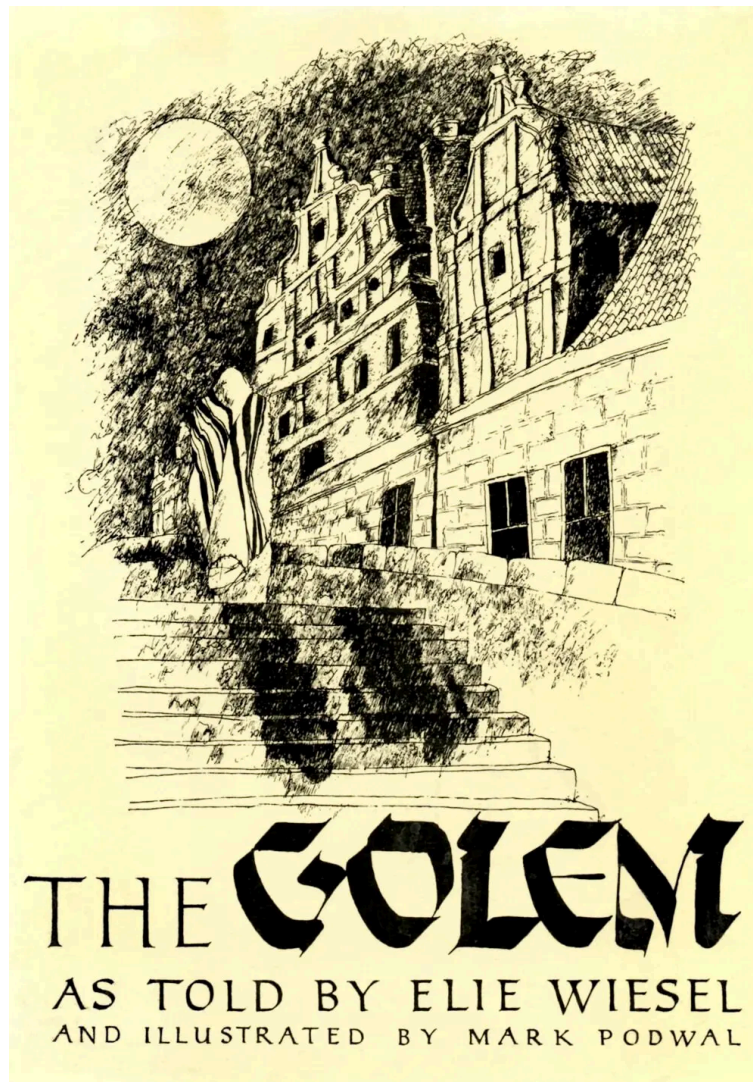
And after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks, he drew a hodgepodge of homes, with American flags rising out of nearly every one.

Steven Heller, a former art director of The Times's Op-Ed page (as the opinion page was then known), said in an email that his cartoons were "in the tradition of the great graphic satirists of the late 19th and 20th centuries: very conceptual, layered with symbolism, but accessible to the audience." He added: "He did not waste a line. It was as though his style had to be minimal to be able to juggle medicine and art."

A cartoon for The Times's letters page initiated Dr. Podwal's friendship with Mr. Wiesel. In 1977, after the arrest and abrupt release in France of the Palestinian terrorist known as Abu Daoud, the mastermind of the Munich attacks, Dr. Podwal drew the Eiffel Tower dreaming, through a thought bubble, of being an oil well.

"Within three to four days, I received a handwritten note from Elie saying, 'Dr. Podwal, your drawing on the Abu Daoud affair is magnificent, eloquent — let's meet,'" Dr. Podwal said in an interview for a forthcoming PBS documentary about Mr. Wiesel, who died in 2016.

The meeting led to a collaboration that included "The Golem" (1983), "A Passover Haggadah" (1993) and "King Solomon and His Magic Ring" (1999), a children's book.



Mr. Podwal's collaboration with the author Elie Wiesel included "The Golem" (1983), based on an old Jewish folk tale. Summit Books

In "The Golem," a 16th-century rabbi conjures a golem, a figure in Jewish folklore usually made of clay or mud, to defend Jews against their Christian enemies. In reviewing it for The Times, Kenneth A. Briggs, the paper's religion editor at the time, wrote that Dr. Podwal's "superb drawings evoke the climate, dark and filled with foreboding."

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Dr. Podwal designed the Congressional Gold Medal that President Ronald Reagan presented to Mr. Wiesel in 1985. One side is emblazoned with a likeness of Mr. Wiesel adapted from a photograph by Roman Vishniac; on the other side is an open book with a depiction of Mr. Wiesel's home in Sighet, Romania, on one page and an image of Jerusalem on the other.

Mr. Wiesel used the medal ceremony to plead with President Reagan — unsuccessfully, it turned out — not to lay a wreath at a war cemetery in Bitburg, Germany, where Nazi SS troops are buried.



Dr. Podwal, left, with Mr. Wiesel in 1999. Dr. Podwal designed the Congressional Gold Medal that Mr. Wiesel was awarded in 1985. Bill Cunningham/The New York Times

The next year, Dr. Podwal accompanied Mr. Wiesel to Oslo, where Mr. Wiesel accepted the Nobel Peace Prize.

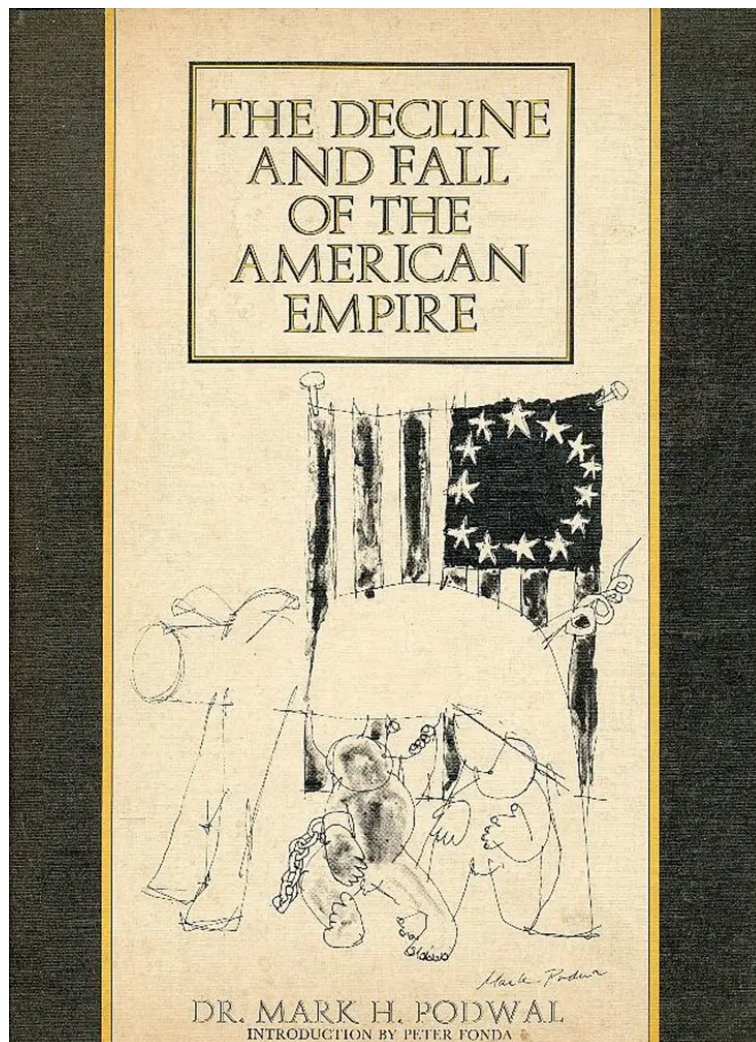
In an email, Elisha Wiesel, Mr. Wiesel's son, wrote, "Mark was unrepentant and proud in his Jewish identity and admired my father's depth of learning (though that didn't prevent him from strongly editing or refocusing significant portions of my father's work in their shared Hagaddah)."

Mark Howard Podwal was born on June 8, 1945, in Brooklyn and grew up mostly in Flushing, Queens. His father, Milton, owned a bar and grill on the Bowery in Manhattan; his mother, Dorothy (Applebaum) Podwal, was a Polish immigrant who ran the home. One of

his relatives, an uncle, was denied a visa to enter the United States because of a mistaken diagnosis of an eye infection and subsequently died in the Treblinka death camp in Nazi-occupied Poland.

Mark was drawing as early as kindergarten but never received formal training, so he took his parents' advice and studied to become a doctor. He graduated from Queens College with a bachelor's degree in 1968 and earned his medical degree in 1970 from what is now the N.Y.U. Grossman School of Medicine. But he continued to draw, influenced by Ben Shahn, who addressed social issues in his paintings, as well as by the cartoonist Saul Steinberg and the caricaturist David Levine.

When he was an intern, also at New York University Hospital, Dr. Podwal published "The Decline and Fall of the American Empire" (1971), a book of political and antiwar cartoons, with an introduction by the actor Peter Fonda. After being shown the book, Mr. Levine sent a note to Dr. Podwal. "Me, I'm a tennis player," he wrote. "You, you're no doctor. Draw."



Dr. Podwal published "The Decline and Fall of the American Empire" (1971), a book of political and antiwar cartoons,

when he was an intern at New York University Hospital.
Darien House, New York

His publisher brought the book to the attention of the editors of The Times's Op-Ed page, which led to decades of assignments.

In addition to drawing political cartoons, Dr. Podwal wrote many adult and children's books, including "Let My People Go: A Haggadah" (1972), in which he brought a contemporary spin to the traditional Passover text with illustrations about the difficulties faced by Soviet Jews.

Much of his work as an illustrator and painter dealt with Judaism, but he was not traditionally religious. "I like things done the Orthodox way as long as other people are doing it," he told The Forward in 2016, "I am a nonobservant Orthodox Jew."

Dr. Podwal, who was enamored of Prague, drew an illustration for "The Golem" of the 13th-century Altneuschul (or Old-New Synagogue) there, the oldest active synagogue in Europe. In pen and ink, he sent Hebrew letters flying out of the Gothic structure, "as if the entirety of Jewish learning is spreading from here across the heavens and the Earth," Ruth Oratz, an oncologist and professor at the N.Y.U. Grossman School of Medicine, wrote in a 2022 assessment of his art in Tablet, the Jewish online magazine.

"Built by Angels: The Story of the Old-New Synagogue," a 2009 children's book he wrote and illustrated, was praised by Kirkus Reviews as a "beautiful, Impressionistic introduction to a portion of Judaic lore and a European architectural marvel." It made Smithsonian magazine's annual list of notable children's books.



The 2004 painting "Matzah Moon" was one of Dr. Podwal's many works with a Jewish theme. Mark Podwal, via Forum Gallery, New York

Other works of his with a Jewish theme include the painting "Matzah Moon," in which a round slice of unleavened bread hovers over a ramshackle, purple-colored gaggle of houses that could be a shtetl; and 42 acrylic, gouache and colored-pencil images tracing the long history of antisemitism, which were exhibited in 2014 at the Ghetto Museum in Terezin, in the Czech Republic, where the Theresienstadt transit camp and ghetto were located.

He also designed a mosaic, based on Jewish interpretations of the zodiac, on the floor of the Museum at Eldridge Street, a former synagogue on the Lower East Side of Manhattan; and textiles for several synagogues, including a tapestry for the main Torah ark and five Torah covers at Temple Emanu-El in Manhattan.



Dr. Podwal designed a mosaic, based on Jewish interpretations of the zodiac, for the floor of the Museum at Eldridge Street, a former synagogue on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. via Podwal family

Robert Fishko, a director of the Forum Gallery in Manhattan, which represents Dr. Podwal, said in an interview that he “embraced the traditions and greater meaning of Judaism without any malice toward anyone.”

In addition to his son Michael, Dr. Podwal is survived by his wife, Ayalah (Siev-or) Podwal, and another son, Ariel.

In the preface to Dr. Podwal’s 2016 book, “Reimagined: 45 Years of Jewish Art,” the novelist Cynthia Ozick, whose work is imbued with Jewish thought, called him “the Master of the True Line; or of the line that opens into truth.”

“Like the Kabbalists,” she added, “he joins metaphysics to physics: essence to presence; ideas to real objects. Like the Hasidic masters, he owns a needle of incandescent wit.”

Richard Sandomir, an obituaries reporter, has been writing for The Times for more than three decades. More about Richard Sandomir