**Mstislav Valerianovich Dobuzhinsky (Novgorod 1875 - New York 1957)**

**A View of Šaukėnai, Lithuania**
signed, inscribed and indistinctly dated 'MDobuzhinsky / 3* / Saukenai' (lower right)
pencil on paper
23 x 28 cm (9 x 11 in)

*A View of Šaukėnai, Lithuania* depicts a rural alleyway surrounded by timber buildings full of character and charm. On the left and right side of the street, we see residential houses, ornamented with carvings in the traditional fashion. At the end of the street, a grand eighteenth century wooden synagogue rises up, its triple roofs dominating the scene, demonstrating the importance of the building to the local community.

Judaism in Lithuania has had a long and turbulent history; from the early Jewish migrants settling there in the eighth century, there followed cycles of prosperity and persecution, unrest and understanding. The Grand Duchy of Lithuania ceased to exist in 1795, having been invaded and partitioned between the Russian and Habsburg Empires, and the Kingdom of Prussia. By the end of the nineteenth century, many Jews fled the Russian Empire to escape the pogroms which were engulfing the region, 2,000,000 leaving for the United States, United Kingdom and elsewhere between 1880 and 1914. Lithuania regained its independence in 1918, where followed a period of fierce border disputes with Germany and Poland externally, and fervent anti-Semetism internally. In 1940, the Soviet Union annexed the country, only for Germany to invade a year later. Of the 200,000 Jews remaining in Lithuania, 90% were to die in the Holocaust.

Šaukėnai in 1940 was home to around 700 people, 40% of them Jewish. On 26th June, German forces occupied the town, and in the first few days of occupation, Lithuanians entered the synagogue during prayers and dragged the men off to forced labour units. On 28th July, all the remaining Jews were forced from their homes and confined to the synagogue, where they were relieved of their valuables. They were then marched to a farm in the nearby estate of Shukishok, along with other Jewish families from surrounding villages. On 30th July, 200 of the 330 men, women and children on the farm were marched into the nearby forest wearing just their underclothes, led to a large pit recently dug by local

peasants. They were shot and buried in a mass grave. The survivors were divided into work groups in local farms, but in August 1941 were rounded up and led to the ghetto in Žagarė. None were to escape the infamous massacre of 2nd October.

The synagogue burnt down in 1944, by which time there were no Jews remaining in Šaukėnai. Today, with even the newest of the wooden synagogues nearing 100 years old, those that did survive have fallen into disrepair. With a lack of funds to sustain them, and very few Jews remaining in Lithuania, fewer than a dozen are estimated to remain.[1]

Dobuzhinsky sought an artistic education in Europe before settling in St. Petersburg in 1901, joining *Mir Iskusstva* the following year, to become one of the youngest and most gifted members of the group. He soon became noted for his cityscapes conveying the explosive growth and decay of the early twentieth-century city and this particular subject matter as well as his expressive technique set him apart from other members of the movement. From 1907 he expanded his activities to encompass stage design, teaching and book illustration. His most significant foray into the latter was illustrating Fyodor Dostoevsky's (1821-1881) White Nights, in which, as throughout his career, 'Dobuzhinsky interpreted the city as the real hero of the story'.[2] In 1924 he left Russia for Lithuania and subsequently travelled throughout Europe before finally settling in the United States.

[1] www.jewishgen.org.
[2] Rosenfeld, A., 'The World of Art Group: Book and Poster Design' in *Defining Russian Graphic Arts: from Diaghilev to Stalin, 1898-1934,* ed. Rosenfeld, A. (Rutgers University Press, 1999) p.89.

**Provenance:**
Ben Uri Art Gallery

**Artist description:**
Mstislav Valerianovich Dobuzhinsky was a Russian-Lithuanian artist noted for cityscapes conveying the explosive growth and decay of the early twentieth-century city. He was born on August 14, 1875 in Novgorod into the family of an army officer. From 1885 to 1887, he attended the Drawing School of the Society for the Promotion of the Artists. Between 1895 and 1899, he studied law at the University of St. Petersburg, studying simultaneously in private studios. After graduating from the university, from 1899 to 1901, he was trained under Anton Azbè in Munich and under Simon Hollósy in Nagybánya (Austria-Hungary).

After his return to St. Petersburg he joined the artistic society World of Art. He first collaborated with them as illustrator of books and magazines. From 1903, he took part in World of Art shows. The main subject of his works was city, he managed to show his understanding of St. Petersburg as composition of classical architecture with ugliness of urbanization. The cityscapes of different towns and cities became his main topic. From 1910 he travelled annually abroad, visiting Britain, France, Italy, Germany, and Holland. Dobuzhinsky was also a teacher who taught in different schools and studios. In the late 1900s he tried himself as a stage designer, and in the 1910s-1920s produced a great amount of book illustrations.

During the First World War Dobuzhinsky went with Evgeny Lanceray to the front lines to sketch. Later, he took part in the Second Congress of the Communist International. In 1918, he supervised the theatrical workshop at the State Educational Workshops of the Decorative Arts (the former Stieglitz School of the Technical Drawing). In 1923-24, he went abroad to study developments in European art and to arrange one-man shows. In 1924, he immigrated to Lithuania, and in 1939, to the USA, working primarily as a stage designer. He died in New York on November 20, 1957.

**Collections**
Dobuzhinsky is represented in the following instituions: The Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow; The Theater Museum of A. A. Bakhrushin, Moscow; The Russian Museum, St. Petersburg; The Picture Gallery of Armenia, Erevan, amongst others.