

I Am From Here

The Paintings of Maciej Frankiewicz

MOSHE MIKANOVSKY

I am from here. The Train. The Suitcase. Singer Sewing Machine. There is No Hope. Wierzbnik Synagogue. Neighbors. Death of the Hassid.

These are some of the titles of the artwork of Polish painter Maciej Frankiewicz, which were presented this month in Toronto. The Al Green Gallery and the Ashkenaz Festival jointly sponsored and arranged Frankiewicz's second showing at the GTA in the past two years, a prelude to the upcoming 8th Ashkenaz Festival which will take place August 31st to September 6th at the Harbourfront Centre. Frankiewicz participated in the last festival in 2008, when he also visited and participated in meet-the-artist discussion session with festival's visitors.

What makes Frankiewicz's story unique is that as a post-WWII child, born in 1968 to a Catholic family at the town of Starachowice which was known to its Jewish community before the war as Wierzbnik, his body of work mainly depicts Jewish life, the plight of the Jews and complete elimination from the town, both physically and for most from memory as well. In "I am from here", the show's namesake, a house in the

shteitel (Yiddish for small village in Eastern Europe) along with its inhabitants are raised above the rest of the houses by larger-than-life bearded figure, whose identity (whether Jewish or gentile) is unclear. One person is running away from the scene while another lady is waving from a balcony. In "The Suitcase", the entire shteitel is neatly tacked into a suitcase, ready for a trip. And in "The Train", a transport train is moving away from the town, leaving behind Jewish symbols, while many anonymous hands are reaching to the skies from all directions.

Although these images might look like they only deal with the terrible ending of the Jewish life at Wierzbnik, Eric Stein, Artistic Director of the Ashkenaz Festival, said that Frankiewicz deals with the life of the Jews as well. Stein met Frankiewicz in 1999 while on a trip to rediscover his roots in Poland, a trip he took with his brother. Before the trip he consulted with the Wierzbniker Society, a group initially started by Canadian immigrants who supported and helped other immigrants in their immigration and accommodation process. The Society's members recommended to Stein that he search for Maciej Frankiewicz, who was custodian of the Jewish cemetery. Af-

ter showing them the cemetery and the restoration work he did there, Frankiewicz invited the Steins to his home, and that is where they first saw his artwork. Both the quality and subject matter of the art touched Stein immediately. The rest of the story is unfolding a piece at a time, with this beautiful show.

Stein said: "His art ranges from idealized and nostalgic to abstract with strong imagery. He sometimes wakes up in the morning with a vision of a dream he just had, which he then puts on the canvas. In other cases, he meets and interviews people who survived the war and were originally from Wierzbnik, and then they appear in his paintings. His body of work is an historical recording, like a documentary."

The show opened last Wednesday with a special event by the Polish-Jewish Heritage Foundation of Canada and the Wierzbniker Society. The special program featured Howard Chandler, a Wierzbniker survivor who told the guests about Jewish life in Wierzbnik before the war. Also participating was a repre-



Maciej Frankiewicz (centre) with Wierzbnik survivors Howard Chandler (L), and Martin Baranek (R) at the 2008 Ashkenaz Festival with his paintings (photo by David Kaufman)

sentative from the Polish Consulate in Toronto.

Frankiewicz, father of 12, could not come to Toronto to attend the show, but his presence was felt by the strength of his artwork and his technique. Most of the work is tempera and oil pastel on paper, where he uses recycled and reconstructed layers of paper for the support of the work.

The show will be on until July 8th at the Al Green Gallery on Merton Street. The Al Green Gallery was founded by Canadian real-estate developer, sculptor, and philanthropist Al Green. The newly renovated gallery continues to embrace Green's dedication to sculpture, but has broadened its focus to include a wide range of artistic disciplines. The gallery provides a venue for artists, many of whom have limited opportunities to exhibit their work, while

also raising awareness and funds for diverse charitable causes.

The co-sponsors, Ashkenaz Festival, are a community-based non-profit organization dedicated to fostering an increased awareness of Yiddish and Jewish culture through the arts. Through its biennial festival and an expanding slate of year-round programming, Ashkenaz showcases the work of leading contemporary artists from Canada and around the world working in music, film, theatre, dance, literature, craft, and visual arts.

For more information on the Al Green Gallery call 416-440-3084 or visit www.thealgreengallery.com

For more details on the Ashkenaz Festival call 416-979-9901 or visit www.ashkenazfestival.com.

Moshe Mikanovsky writes for *Shalom Toronto on Israeli and Jewish Art matters in Toronto.*

Felicia's Journey; Psychologist Graduates From Bialik

DORIS STRUB EPSTEIN

The families and friends crowded the auditorium at Bialik Jewish Day School on a sunny, hot June day. The air was filled with joy as they watched and cheered at the ceremonies for the graduating class.

The new graduates sat on the stage – three rows of them, sparkling with excitement in their new suits and pretty dresses. Their fellow graduate, old enough to be their grandmother, sat with them. She too was sparkling with happiness and overwhelmed with emotion. She is Dr. Felicia Carmelly, a woman with two Masters degrees and a PhD. But she never completed elementary school – until now.

Felicia was born in 1931 in the beautiful resort town of Vatra Dornei in northern Romania. At the age of 10, she and her parents were taken by the Nazis to the killing fields of Transnistria where they managed to survive under the most brutal conditions for three years. In spite of her three postgraduate degrees, "I always felt embarrassed because I had not finished elementary school. All the Jewish kids were kicked out in grade one."

In Transnistria, teachers tried their best to educate the children. "We sat on the dirt floor. There were no books or pencils," she said.

Liberated by the Russians, emaciated and ragged, they walked for a year to get home. Sometimes the farmers let them sleepover. Soviet



Dr. Felicia Carmelly at the graduation ceremony

planes dropped food parcels. "I remember especially the thick bars of chocolate."

Felicia's family applied to leave Romania in 1958. Because of this, although she had a Masters in linguistics, "I got thrown out of my job and became a garbage collector."

Finally papers came giving them permission to go to Cuba. Once they were in Vienna though, they met a shaliach who managed to get them to Israel where she lived for two years. "Those were the best years of my life," she said.

But her parents couldn't adjust. They couldn't find employment. The climate was intolerable. Felicia, an only child, felt obliged to go along with their decision to immigrate to

Montreal. There she got a MSW and later a PhD in psychology.

For many years she worked for the government as a staff psychologist and did private counselling as well.

"[Rabbi Yossi Sapirman] looked me straight in the eyes and said, 'If you could graduate elementary school would you?'"

It had always been a source of pain for her and other survivors of Transnistria that there was a huge gap in knowledge and in public awareness about Transnistria, where half of Romania's Jewry was annihilated.

The Jewish population in Romania in 1930 was 800,000 to 850,000 – the third largest in Europe after Russia and Poland.

"The fact that this chapter of the Holocaust was consistently absent in literature and seldom, if ever, mentioned at commemorative events, was an additional source of pain for us, its survivors," she wrote.

So in 1994, she wrote the first book in English about Transnistria and what happened there, set in the context of the events and background of the times. Particularly vivid and poignant are the testimonies of the survivors in their own words, painstakingly gathered – including her own.

The book is called *Shattered: 50*

Years of Silence: History and Voices of the Tragedy in Romania and Transnistria. It took her three years, working 16 to 18 hours a day. "I was driven to do it. It almost killed me," she admitted. "Maybe I survived to bear witness for them. I was obsessed to get it out."

One day she was invited to a concert of her friend's choir at Beth Torah Synagogue. Rabbi Yossi Sapirman sat down beside her at the to chat. She remembers telling him that had never completed elementary school. "He looked me straight in the eyes and said, 'If you could graduate elementary school would you?'"

Felicia approached Beverley Young, Bialik's senior division vice principal and wife of the Beth Torah cantor, who began the arrangements. "I want you to meet your classmates," she told Felicia. A week before graduation, she spoke to their class, telling them her life story. "One question stayed with me. 'Did I believe in God after the camp?' Although I came from a religious home, I didn't from 1945 to 1959. I lived in a communist country. God was silent. I gave my mother a bust of Stalin for her birthday. Now I can say I believe in God."

Felicia has spoken to schools and groups in Canada and the US. She offered to develop a high school curriculum on the Holocaust for Romania, which she claims is still an anti-Semitic country, but the minister of education has never responded.