

WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 13, 1999
AFTERNOON SESSION A 14:00-15:30

Holocaust Education Through Art - A Slide Lecture

by
 Akiva Sagan

“MY BROTHER’S KEEPER: THE HOLOCAUST THROUGH THE EYES OF AN ARTIST” (on the paintings of late Holocaust survivor, artist and educator Israel Bernbaum) & “UNDER THE WINGS OF G-D: DRAWINGS ON THE HOLOCAUST IN EUROPE, 1939-45” by American Jewish artist Akiva Sagan USA

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE FOLLOWING BOOKS HAVE BEEN USED IN CREATING INTERPRETATIVE ARTWORKS IN UNDER THE WINGS OF G-D ARTWORKS:

The Children of Izieu: A Human Tragedy, by Serge Klarsfeld (Abrams, NY, 1985)

The Warsaw Ghetto: The 45th Anniversary of the Uprising (Interpress, Warsaw, 1983)

The Jewish Quarter of Warsaw is No More! The Stroop Report (Pantheon Books, NY, 1979)

A Vanished World, by Roman Vishniac (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, NY, 1983)

Polish Jews: The Final Chapter, text by Earl Vinecour, Photos by Chuck Fishman (McGraw-Hill Paperbacks, 1977)

Felix Nussbaum, Jewish Museum Exhibit Catalog, NY

The Warsaw Ghetto in Photographs: 206 views made in 1941, Ulrich Keller, ed (Dover, NY, 1984)

The Warsaw Ghetto: A Photographic Record, 1941-1944, by Joe Heydecker (I.B. Tauris, London, 1990)

In the Warsaw Ghetto, summer 1941, photographs by Willy Georg (Aperture, NY, 1993)

Pictorial History of the Holocaust, Yitzhak Arad, editor (Yad Vashem, with MacMillan, London, NY, 1990)

A CHAPTER ON BERNBAUM’S LIFE & ART APPEARS IN:

A Mission in Art: Recent Holocaust Works in America, by Vivian Alpert Thompson (Mercer Univ. Press, 1988)

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS TO SLIDE PRESENTATION

What you’re going to see is how two very different artists spent years creating artworks on the Holocaust. I’m one of them. I’m neither an expert on the Holocaust, nor a scholar or historian. Because the Holocaust is so complex – the killing of millions of people is not something that happened overnight, you’ll have more questions than I have the ability to answer. Please ask!

The older artist, Israel Bernbaum, was born in the second decade of the 20th century in the Jewish quarter of Warsaw, Poland, and grew up on Muranowska Street. The Nazis forced over 500,000 Jews into the historic Jewish Quarter – about 15 square blocks and sealed it into an area we call the Warsaw ghetto. There were 15-20 people per room. It was a prison, a concentration camp from which very few people survived.

Bernbaum fled east into the Soviet Union (Now Russia) days before the ghetto was sealed in and survived the Holocaust serving as a soldier in the Soviet Red Army. The Soviet Union was allied with America and Britain against the Germans. In the last years of the war he was stationed in Siberia, a safe place for a Polish Jewish Soldier to be – thousands of miles from the killing fields of Nazi-occupied Poland. After the war he returned to Warsaw, which was destroyed, went to Paris where he lived until 1957 when he moved to New York

He studied art at Queen's College in NY, got a degree in 1973, and spent years working on the paintings that make up "My Brother's Keeper." He also wrote the text for the book. In 1990 he was awarded the 34th "German Prize for Young People's Literature" for the book and went to Germany to be honored. Most of his paints, sculptures and drawings are in the permanent collection of the Holocaust Resource Center of the Jewish Federation of Clifton-Passaic, New Jersey, which has graciously allowed me to use slides of his paintings for teaching purposes.

I am the other artist. I was born in New York in 1950, five years after World War II ended. I went to Poland three times in the mid-1980's which profoundly affected my thinking. In 1991, I began my own drawing series on the Holocaust [For student audiences, I add the following]: It's not necessary to take notes on dates, years and places. The Nazis murdered six million Jews, half a million Gypsies, and a quarter of a million physically and or mentally disabled people, two million Soviet prisoners of war, homosexuals, among others. Many, many more millions of people who weren't murdered made moral and ethical choices. Everyone in Europe, even Americans, had choices: There were people who murdered, people who helped the killers, people who were silent accomplices, people who turned in Jews and /or turned in people who hid Jews. There were individuals who helped Jews ("Righteous Gentiles") or who helped people who were helping Jews. And there were victims; even some of the victims were confronted with choices.

DEVELOPMENT AND FORMAT – THE SLIDE SHOW

Bernbaum gave slide shows of his paintings to thousands of school children in the U.S., Germany and Israel. In the fall of 1994, a year and a half after Bernbaum's death, I assembled a slide show offering audiences Bernbaum's paintings and my drawings, interwoven with Warsaw Ghetto photos. Also included were examples of Warsaw Ghetto photos that we each used for source material in our respective artworks.

I begin the slide show with an image of two newspaper articles featuring black and white

photos of Bernbaum. The slide also includes two ink sketches that he drew when he accompanied American teens on the “March of the living” program to Poland and Israel in 1992. One sketch depicts a group of Ethiopian Jewish Immigrants in Israel; the other depicts American teens walking on the train tracks leading into the Birkenau death-camp site. The next slide is of the front and back cover of his book “My Brother’s Keeper.” Before showing slides of Bernbaum’s paintings, I showed a slide of anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda images followed by two slides of Warsaw Ghetto market scene, from photos taken around 1941. The first slide, a multi-image, includes five anti-Semitic images from the 1930’s in Germany and two photos taken in Poland after the 1939 invasion.

The propaganda images are:

A poster for the Nazi feature movie “The Eternal Jew” (1940) The poster shows an odious-looking large-nosed Jewish man. A map of Germany with a Hammer and Sickle superimposed over it is clutched under his left arm. One hand holds a whip while the other begs for money. These are common stereotypes about Jews: They are beggars living off the work of others, and slave masters or taskmasters. They’re Bolsheviks or Communists out to dominate the world and conspirators out to take over Germany.

Two cartoons, each showing a Jewish man “preying” on “pure, Aryan girls / women;” one of the men is a physician.

A beer coaster with an ugly caricature of a Jewish man with the words “He who buys from a Jew is a traitor to his people”
an anti-Semitic slogan painted on the fuselage of a small airplane.

The post-occupation photos are:

Three Jewish men standing side by side, photographed after German SS soldiers with Stars of David had cut into their foreheads.

A Jewish man having his religiously proscribed sidelcurls cut off by German soldiers for sport.

The next two slides are photos of Warsaw Ghetto market scenes, probably from 1941, when life, superficially at least, seems to show a semblance of normalcy. At this time I give a brief history of the creation of the Warsaw Ghetto: its population and population density; the 100,000 deaths attributable to disease, starvation and deportation during the first year of its existence; the mass deportations of 1942 and 300,000 who were “resettled”; the events leading up to the liquidation and destruction of the ghetto at the time of the heroic April – May 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

From here I proceed with the following examples of Bernbaum’s artworks; they are interspersed with slides of photos of children in the Warsaw Ghetto

Gedenk! (painting)

On Both Sides of the Ghetto Wall (painting from My Brother's Keeper)
 The Warsaw Ghetto Streets (painting from My Brother's Keeper)
 The Jewish Child in the Concentration Camp (painting from My Brother's Keeper)
 a study for The Jewish Child in the Concentration Camp
 Remember! (painting)

GEDENK!

The Gedenk! Painting (Yiddish version) is a powerful painting, one of three paintings making up the tryptich that includes Remember! (English) and Zachor! (Hebrew). Three exquisitely painted hands with fingertips reaching up dominate the bottom two-thirds of the painting, palms facing towards the brick wall that dominates the background. Star of David armbands are shown on the sleeves which rise up from the bottom of the picture plane. The word Gedenk! Is dramatically painted in white against the brick background in the top third of the canvas; Gedenk! is painted with the Hebrew letters that Yiddish is written in. The hands are children's and adult hands. On the brick wall splotches of red paint are seen, which is probably meant to suggest the execution of Jews shot in front of walls in the Warsaw Ghetto and in concentration and death camps. Gedenk! Provides an excellent introduction to Bernbaum's work for younger school age audiences. Remember! (the English version) is shown at the end of the Bernbaum portion of the slide show.

GEDENK! – DISCUSSION AND EDUCATIONAL USE WITH UPPER LEVEL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AUDIENCES: INTRODUCING RACISM, ANTI-SEMITISM AND THE HOLOCAUST

[Author's note]: Grade school audiences of the 4th, 5th and 6th grade are given a modified version of the slide presentation They see and discuss the slides of Gedenk!, Remember! And one painting from My Brother's Keeper: The Warsaw Ghetto Streets.

For the Under the Wings portion of the slide show, the students see three slides; then the class comes to the front of the classroom and we discuss an enlarged photo of someone from which I've created an Under the Wings drawing and the actual drawing, which I either hold up or place on the blackboard.

Several classes of 5th grade students have attended interactive Workshops: The first hour is the slides and viewing of original drawings from the Under the Wings series; the second hour the children drew from actual birds wings. [see illustrations]

Most Americans have ancestors who came from somewhere else, and many immigrants speak languages other than English as their native language. I discuss how different languages spoken in the world by people of many different races; religions and nationalities make the world very diverse. I mention that my own grandparents spoke Yiddish. Gedenk! in a language unfamiliar to most students, offers children a lively

discussion on the great variety of peoples and languages that make up the world's population. I continue with discussion on how some people look down on other people because of their language, religion, skin color, eyes, etc.

The Star of David armbands offers discussion on how the Nazis isolated and branded Jews as different and inferior to "pure" ethnic Germans and Austrians. I discuss Star of David lapel patches, in different versions in different countries, and how these caused humiliation and degradation to those forced to wear them.

I ask children of 5th and 6th grades to interpret what they think some of the images are in Bernbaum's paintings and why he painted them: e.g. Nazi soldiers are faceless. The hands reaching up generate a wide variety of interpretations from elementary school age children. A typical response is that the hands reach toward freedom, heaven, the sky or light. Some suggest the victims did find freedom – by surviving, or by becoming angels. One particularly insightful child said, "walls keep people in" but also "keep people out".

TWO WORKS FROM 'MY BROTHER'S KEEPER'

ON BOTH SIDES OF THE GHETTO WALL

1973, 3ft 4" high x 5 ft wide

This is Bernbaum's most famous painting. It addresses the role of the Catholic Church, the role of the allied leaders who knew about the genocide, and how individuals throughout Europe responded to the slaughter. It can also be a starting –point for further discussion on Catholic- Jewish and Christian - Jewish relations today.

On the left side he depicts a carnival that took place outside the ghetto in the "Aryan" side of the city during the time of April 1943 Uprising and the ghetto's destruction.

On the right the Warsaw Ghetto is in flames with individual Jews on building balconies: a devout man in a prayer shawl, a mother with children, among others, wailing to G-D and awaiting death at the hands of the murderers. Of note for their small scale are the Polish "Righteous Gentile" couple (left side below Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin) facing away from their Polish neighbors and bowing their heads in shame. In the carnival area there is a priest, a clown holding a bottle of vodka and a boy who watch the ghetto burn. The clown who holds a bottle of vodka provides an entry to discussion of German bribery: The food and liquor can lead a discussion about those who turned in Jews and those who turned in gentiles hiding Jews.

Of historical note in art is the group of "white-faced Poles" above the priest and clown. They bear such a strong resemblance to the carnival-goers of James Ensor's paintings, (the famous turn-of-the-century Belgian artist) that I can't help but wonder whether Bernbaum was an admirer of Ensor. The symbolism of people depicted with masks offers many possible ideas of interpretation. For example; Ensor's most famous painting 'The Entry of Christ into Brussels' depicts white-faced masked carnival goers.

THE WARSAW GHETTO STREETS

1979, 5 ft high x 7 ft 6" wide

This is my favorite Bernbaum painting because I find the inspiration for the painting very moving. Sometime in the 1970's he came across a photo that had been taken at the war's end, of an area within the Warsaw Ghetto in total ruin. In the photo was a metal street-name plate of the street where Bernbaum's own grandparents had lived when he was a boy, two streets from his home. He was so moved he decided to create a painting that would memorialize all the different streets, houses and buildings that once existed there. Generations of Jewish children, women and men lived there, and except for art, archival photos and the memories of a diminishing number of survivors, they are gone forever.

The center bottom third of the painting prominently features over 80 pieces of rubble. Affixed to each piece of rubble is the metal street name-plate of a street that had once been in the Jewish quarter of the Warsaw Ghetto. Only three street names have numbers:

Mila 18, the headquarters of the Jewish Fighters organization that led the Warsaw Ghetto uprising.

Tlomackie 13, housing Union of Jewish Writers. Bernbaum was especially fond of the organization; its destruction represented the death of Yiddish literature.

Muranowska 32, Bernbaum's home

In the lower left is a symbolic representation of Jewish fighters, the young people from the Jewish Fighters Organization, preparing for the famed April 1943 Uprising in their hidden and secret bunkers. In the upper center there is a towering figure of a Jewish man in prayer shawl clutching a Torah that dwarfs the other figures in scale. In the upper left and right are symbolic cutaway views of the walls of the Warsaw Ghetto with GEDENK! painted in Yiddish script on the ghetto wall.

In upper center the Great (Tlomackiei) Synagogue of Warsaw and its world-famous library is shown in ruins. After the Warsaw Ghetto was destroyed, German SS Major General Stroop, in charge of the murderous destruction, had the synagogue and library blown up. Of Stroop's report to Berlin: "There are no more Jewish living quarters in Warsaw," Bernbaum wrote:

"This macabre statement confirmed the catastrophe which had befallen the Jewish people, a catastrophe unparalleled in human history. The Germans knew full well that the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto symbolized the end of the existence of the Jews in Europe. My paintings are a tribute to my Jewish Warsaw and its men, women and children who shared the fate of the six million Jews murdered during the Holocaust "Al Kidush Hashem" (for the Sanctification of His Name).

UNDER THE WINGS OF G-D

I began the “under the Wings of G-D” series in late 1991 with the pen and ink drawing the Muranow Street Trolley in the Warsaw Ghetto, India ink, 32” x 32” Muranowska Street was in the heart of the Jewish quarter, eventually swallowed up in the Warsaw Ghetto; Muranowska was also the street Bernbaum was raised on.

The Muranow Street Trolley car drawing was drawn from a photo in the book “The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising: 45th Anniversary” (Interpress, Warsaw, 1987). I found myself drawn to the ‘movie-still’-like photos of people, buildings, and objects all frozen in time, only they weren’t movie stills, they were real life photos; the people murdered, the buildings turned to rubble. The grainy photos also lent themselves to pen and ink drawing: pointillism (dots) and dashes, gestural lines, crosshatching, and parallel lines.

On completion of the trolley portion of the drawing, I was struck by the image of it floating in space against the white paper. I took the drawing to the University of Washington’s Burke Museum, which has an ornithology collection of wings. On successive visits I drew wings (drawn from actual birds wings) on the trolley. This gave the trolley’s three visible occupants (from the photo the conductor and two men, the latter two peering out from the left and right side of the trolley’s entryway, and the trolley itself), a metaphoric and poetic flight denied in real life.

In the Torah wings are symbolic of shelter and redemption. Depictions of humans in flight and as angels are common to many cultures. They are certainly not unique to either Judaism or Christianity. Wings are a metaphor for freedom.

The series title “Under the Wings of G-D” came to me while working on the second drawing, Man with Tattered Coat depicting an anonymous, nameless man sitting on a Warsaw Ghetto street. There are fifty works planned for the series. As of May 1999, there are 35 works completed in the series with eight more in various states of progress. Most are singular pieces, although many drawing portray more than one person. Most of the completed drawings are black and white. There are a smaller number of works in color; several utilize mixed media techniques, including stitching with twine and thread, gouache, watercolor and colored pencil. Most of the drawings are poster size. There are three life-size drawings are drawn from Warsaw Ghetto photos, including a companion pair of an adolescent boy and girl. Each drawing depicts someone who was murdered during the Holocaust and is drawn with a depiction of wings. Most of the wings, like those drawn on the Muranow Trolley, are drawn from actual bird wings on-site at the University of Washington’s Burke Museum.

There are images that do not show people in the series. They include the Great Synagogue of Warsaw (destroyed), the Lesko, Poland synagogue, Candelabras, Polish Jewish gravestones, shop signs that pre-date the Warsaw Ghetto, Judenrat-issued Work ID

papers, an 18th C. Italian-Jewish wedding ring, a 19th C. Polish Torah crown, a destroyed building from the Warsaw Ghetto – Possibly a water tower. One portrait has been drawn from an artist’s self-portrait painting: German – Jewish artist Felix Nussbaum’s “Self-Portrait with Identity Card.” Nussbaum created this painting while in hiding in Brussels, Belgium; he and his wife were arrested and deported on the last trainload of Jews from Belgium to Auschwitz.

INTRODUCING THE UNDER THE WINGS...SECTION OF THE SLIDE PRESENTATION - STEREOTYPING

I begin this section of the presentation with a 1963 photo of my two eastern European grandmothers and myself at age 13 wearing heavy horned rimmed glasses, providing unintended comic relief for many teenage audiences. In the photo there is a two-tiered candelabra on the piano behind me; the candlestick holders peer out from behind the top of my head. The next slide is of Michaelangelo’s “MOSES,” his famous sculpture depicting Moses with giant horns. This allows me to introduce discussion on stereotyping. The next slide shows stereotyped images of Native American (American Indians) and African-American (black American) in early and late 20th C. American literature, movies and advertising. Also in the slide are words from the Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Elie Wiesel: “No human race is superior; no religious faith is inferior. All collective judgements are wrong. Only racists make them.”

Following the discussion on stereotyping, the presentation includes:

Examples of black and white and color Under the Wings...drawings

Under the Wings...drawings depicting anonymous, nameless victims and victims known by name. Many of the latter depict murdered family members of people I’ve met

Under the Wings...drawings depicting Polish-Jewish victims

Under the Wings...drawings depicting Jewish victims from elsewhere in Europe

Under the Wings...drawing inspired by photos from the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

Slides of Warsaw Ghetto photographs are interspersed

A slide showing hate material downloaded from Internet sites

The slide show ends with ‘upbeat’ slides: One shows a table at which 5th grade school children are drawing from birds wings (following an Interactive Presentation on the Holocaust); the other shows two smiling girls at an exhibit standing in front of an Under the Wings...drawing

SLIDES OF THE “WINGS” DRAWING – THEMES FOR CONSIDERATION FOR AUDIENCES

Using handouts, I ask older audiences (junior high school age +) to think about the

following:

1. The drawings as art:

Balance of negative and positive space

Some figures are 'floating in space' yet others are 'grounded' on the picture plane

Use of the drawing paper as an essential component of the image

How the white of the drawing paper is used as an integral part of the imagery

The wings:

Let viewers interpret for themselves

Some wings are drawn in great detail, yet others are just hinted at. Why would some of the wings be drawn with just an outline or with little if any detail?

Possible theological, spiritual, historical and political reasons for the art

TWO UNDER THE WINGS OF G-D DRAWINGS

By Akiva Segan, excerpted from Label Copy notes for the Under the Wings of G-D exhibition at Seattle Central Community College Gallery, Seattle, WA, April 1998

30 1/8 inches high x 20 inches wide

Dodye Feig was the maternal grandfather of American the Nobel Peace Prize Winner Elie Wiesel, who was liberated from the Buchenwald concentration camp while a teenager. Wiesel writes lovingly of his grandfather in his autobiography "All Rivers Run to the Sea" (Knopf/Random House, NY, 1996).

A Jewish visitor "to my studio saw the portrait on the wall (before the wings were drawn) and exclaimed: "He looks like everyone's zadie!" Zadie is Yiddish for grandpa, grandfather, granddad.

The wing on viewers' right is anatomically goofy, even with my interpretative drawing style. I planned to draw a very long and elongated wing, something sleek and graceful for this loving and religious old Jewish grandpa who perished in the Holocaust. I created the wing from three or more different wings at the Burke. It didn't come out as intended, but Dodye Feig's life didn't proceed as intended, either, did it? For the wings on viewers left, I asked (the Burke staff) if they had a wing in the collection of a bird indigenous to the region where Feig lived (Rumania /Hungary) or, if not, if they had a wing from a bird which lives around Israel or migrates over it? The wing used was from a bee-eater from Kazakhstan and this particular type of bee-eater lives in Israel. I like to think that Dodye Feig, whom Professor Wiesel adored when he was a boy, got his wings, metaphorically, at least, and the famous saying of Jews "Next Year in Jerusalem!" is fulfilled in an artistic way for the educational purposes of the series.

MAN WITH TATTERED COAT

India ink, 1992

38 inches high x 26 inches wide

Drawn from a photo of a man, perhaps in his 20's or 30's, whose coat appears to be unraveling everywhere, exposing layers of fabric and the insides of the garment. In this photo I am struck by his direct gaze into the camera lens. His look is not dissimilar to some young homeless people I see in downtown Seattle every day. As in photos of other people in the Warsaw Ghetto he was sitting on the sidewalk, waiting...for death, perhaps?

HOW THE DRAWING ARE USED AS EDUCATIONAL TOOLS

Audiences of a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds, races, faiths, and of all ages, including children, have found something in the drawings they can relate to their lives. By presenting Holocaust victims as individuals drawn to show how they looked in real life, I hope to provide an avenue for reflection and contemplation. One doesn't need to show the horror of open mass graves or piles of corpses to convey a feeling of terror, loss, and pain. Ideally, the drawings can break down the incomprehensibility of the murder of 6,000,000 Jews and half a million roma- sinti (Gypsies) to a number of victims that today's audiences can grasp and identify with in some way – most frequently through the personalizing of the victims with the art and accompanying text.

In classroom presentations the drawings are a catalyst for questions and discussion. This demonstrates the value of art as a teaching tool for interpreting a troubled world. Students can admire the drawings for their aesthetic qualities, and criticize them.

My intent is to offer viewers who might not otherwise go to see an exhibit or read a book on the Holocaust a way to access this important history and have a contemplative response. Many people (Jewish and non-Jewish) have strong emotional reactions to the drawings

INTERMEDIATE AND LONG TERM EDUCATIONAL GOALS FOR THE SERIES

Children's and adult books in separate text editions.

A video and CD-ROM, available for individual, class, library and institutional use.

Traveling exhibitions to art museums, history museums, and Holocaust education centers and university galleries, in the U.S. and other countries.

Posters for classroom and personal (home and office) use of the drawings, published in conjunction with an educational institution; I am regularly asked about same-size reproductions of individual drawings in the series.