

Lo Tishkach

However absorbed I became in my art or the challenges of parenthood, I never lost interest in the pleasures of daily life. I continued to entertain, visit, enjoy theater and music, and see my friends. Nick and I, sometimes with Margaret, traveled together and were very active in sports. We all seemed to have been born craving physical exercise. Day in, day out, we swam, walked, played tennis, hiked and rode horseback together. Above all, we loved winter sports, especially skiing.

Oddly enough, and by a very roundabout route, it was our passion for skiing that led me to create my Holocaust Memorial.

The story began in Sun Valley, Idaho, where Nick and I often took vacations. In the hotel where we were staying one winter, there was a combination gift store and art gallery. We soon made friends with the owners, Fred Picard and his wife, Andree, French-speaking Swiss Jews, with an enormous acquaintanceship in the art world. They invited us to their Sun Valley home, where we saw their brilliant collection. Later, they came to Seattle to see my work.

Fred had a dream. The established greats, and also a number of gifted lesser-knowns, would each donate a special new work of art, the proceeds to go to designated charities. Each work was to be produced in limited editions of 50, so there would be 50 complete sets. Fred had already made the suggestion to Picasso, Miro, Calder, Chagall, Tobey and other masters, and they had agreed. Now he invited me. I was awed to be put in such company, but if

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Fred thought I was good enough, then I would do my best not to disappoint him.

There were 12 of us artists altogether, making up the Album International. Eleven submitted lithographs. My contribution was a bronze sculpture with a Jewish theme. My share of the proceeds went to the University of Judaism in Los Angeles. Some museums collected the full album, and that is how my work first entered museums.

It was Fred's idea that some of the proceeds should go to a Holocaust Memorial, preferably for the University of Judaism. I made some models, and the Picards bought the first one for their own home. Then I went down to Los Angeles and made my presentation to the Board of the University. They approved the design and the Picards agreed to cover the costs.

At just that time, however, the Jewish Community in Seattle announced intentions to erect its own memorial, dedicated to the relatives of Seattle residents who had been killed. My scalp prickled when I heard of it. A memorial dedicated to my own mother, my own brother, Nick's family—all our loved ones! This was, in the Hebrew phrase, *beskert* (destiny). I immediately withdrew my design from the University in Los Angeles and submitted it to the Board in Seattle. I really had no doubt it would be accepted—and it was.

The Memorial was to be erected on Mercer Island, at the new Jewish Community Center. This made it all the more stirring for me. By this time, perhaps 15 percent of Mercer Island's population was Jewish. No little children were suffering the isolation my Margaret had suffered. Because of her early experience, I felt that the recent flourishing of the Island's Jewish Community had a special significance for the whole family.

In a sense, we Bermans were pioneers. I was glad that my name and my work would always be connected with this new center.

That bigotry knows no borders was a lesson we had kept learning again and again. Some 30 years after the incident with Margaret and little Donna, we took our first trip to the Soviet Union. The

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Russians we met seemed very different from those we had known during the first year after the War. They were open and eager to talk and delighted to meet “Americans” who spoke some Russian, however rusty.

One day we were in a park, looking at a statue of the Cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, when we fell into conversation with a pleasant man in early middle age. As we spoke, a crowd began to gather around until we had an audience of twenty or so.

Nick, whose Russian was more fluent than mine, did most of the talking.

He was asking the Russian his opinion about various Russian leaders since the Revolution. “So what do you think of Gorbachev?” he asked.

“*Horosho* (excellent)!” the man declared. The crowd joined in, “*Da! Da!* (yes, yes).”

“And Stalin?”

“*Stalin? Stalin was a bandit,*” the man replied. “*Da! Da!*,” echoed the crowd.

“And Kruschev?”

“*Oh, he was a bandit, too. They were all bandits,*” said the man. “*Da! Da!*” yelled the crowd.

“And Trotsky?” asked Nick, referring to Stalin’s great rival, who had been driven into exile, assassinated, then eliminated from the history books.

“*Ah, Trotsky!*” the Russian exclaimed. “*He was excellent, even if he was a Jew.*”

We looked at each other. So much had changed in Russia—and yet so little. For the moment, the fever of anti-Semitism was burning low enough to allow these people to forgive Trotsky’s Jewishness. But they still clearly detested Jews in general.

Others might laugh off such an incident. We laugh too, but we can’t laugh it off.

The experience of the camps is something you don’t get over.

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You don't forget what it does to people; how it can change the soul. Nick and I are fortunate, in that we never allowed that change to paralyze us in our work, or keep us from functioning in everyday life, or hold us back from happiness and pleasure. We also did not, like some, become the sort of persons who turn their backs on others, caring only about ourselves, or only about the Jewish people. But there is no doubt our experience sensitized us to the sort of acute awareness of the world's sufferings that is possible only to survivors. We are like Geiger-counters, immediately registering the smallest stimuli.

We know how truly hard it is to be a Jew in this world. But also know that we Jews are not unique in our ordeal.

Nick and I have traveled a great deal—to our great pleasure, but also to our pain. We were in India, for example, at the time of Indira Gandhi's assassination. An acquaintance of ours had arranged an introduction to the Maharanee of Jaypur, a most gracious and lovely woman who invited us to banquet with a number of her friends. Except for the Taj Mahal, her splendid palace was the most beautiful piece of architecture we had seen in India, and the food and the company were both superb.

But our strongest memory of that trip was not the Maharanee's banquet. It was the spectacle of terrified Sikh refugees trying to escape the massacres that followed Mme. Gandhi's assassination. In the airports, train stations, and on the roads we saw them—families fleeing God-only-knew-where, taking nothing but what they could carry in their hands, their speechless children clinging to them, the sick and the old dropping off, falling behind.

For Nick and me, it was like being catapulted back more than 40 years. It wasn't simply that we could guess what those people were feeling. We knew what those people were feeling. We had felt it ourselves. Seeing them now, we felt it all over again. Seeing them, we were with them. We were one of them.

At another time, we were in Kenya and Uganda during the

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expulsions of the Indians. The entire administrative class, whom the British had brought to East Africa from India generations ago, was being driven from the only homeland they had ever known. Here again were the wide-eyed, terrified children, the helpless parents who could not protect them, the order to get out with no more than you can carry, the sick and the old dying on the floors of the railroad station, the threatening and unimaginable future, and the appalling knowledge that people are pursuing you who hate you so much that they lust to kill you—not for anything you personally have done, but because you are a member of a group.

These incidents haunted us in particular because in one case the Hindu Indians were the persecutors and in the other they were the victims. In both cases, we knew that those who were slaughtering their fellow beings felt they were justified. Sikhs had assassinated Indira Gandhi. Kenyans and Ugandans wanted to rid themselves of the symbols of British Imperialism. Yet the particular issues seemed to us irrelevant. What was relevant were those terrified children, those helpless parents, the inexorable closing in of hatred and death.

There are nights we can't sleep for worrying about Israel. Israel is like one big concentration camp, surrounded by an alien land of people consumed with hate. In Israel, the people live and work and wait from day to day, knowing that for most of them there is no escape, dreading that one day their neighbors will decide to annihilate them and find the means to do it.

Such experiences and such thoughts are what started me speaking to young people in their classrooms, and later to other groups. After my speech one night, a man approached me. "I expect," he said, "that in a month I'll have forgotten your name and your exact words. But I know I'll remember what you said for as long as I live."

These were the memories, these were the emotions, that I wished to embody in my Holocaust Memorial. I wanted people to look at it and wonder, What does this mean? Why does that tall,

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13 1/2-foot shape lift itself above the rest in such defiance and quiet grace? What is this image asking me to think, to feel, to take away with me?

The answer lies in the very meaning of the letters: *Lo Tishkach* (never forget).

The sculpture stands atop a circular platform, three steps high. Around the face of the steps are the names of the most terrible of the camps, Buchenwald, Dachau, Auschwitz, Stutthof and the rest. Behind the sculpture is a long curved wall, shaped like a partially opened Torah scroll, inscribed with the names of some 2,000 persons who died in the camps, persons who were relatives of the Jews of Washington State.

My own lost ones, and Nick's, are listed on that bronze scroll. The image of the scroll inscribed with their names always brings to my mind the blessing for the dead—that their names be “written in the book of life.”