

The Eternal Presence of Absence

Carolyn Manosevitz

Yaacov Naor is a child of Auschwitz survivors. One year for Passover, he decided to surprise his mother. He invited all the remaining family (only a handful) to come to the Passover seder. For years, his mother had lamented over all those who were missing from the seder table. That year they all came. After the meal, Yaacov said to his mother, “Well, are you happy now? Everyone came.”

“Not *everyone*,” she replied.

The absence of a person at the seder table, or any other, is indeed felt as a presence. This phenomenon is one that I struggle with—the presence of an absence. It is all too familiar to me.

My father was the youngest of twelve children in a Jewish family in Kremenets, Ukraine. He emigrated to Canada in the early part of the twentieth century. All of his siblings, however, were murdered during the Shoah (the Hebrew term, meaning *catastrophe*—used by contemporary scholars to define Hitler’s “final solution”). They are buried in a mass grave in Kremenets. Nevertheless, I heard their Yiddish names spoken daily. Since I had no faces to go with the names, I called them my invisible faces. Their absence was indeed a presence in our household and at family functions.

In his essay “Witness and Legacy,” Stephen Feinstein reminds us that, as it pertains to the Shoah, “the quest for a visual language and a means to convey memory continues.”¹ The task is even greater for those of us, myself included, who attempt to portray memory of an event at which we were not present. Our connection to the Shoah is only indirect, albeit visceral. Nevertheless, we are compelled to strive to do what we feel we must—to keep the memory alive.

Memory of an event, even the memory of participants in that event, can be elusive. Memory of a historical event depends on who is writing the history. In addition to individual stories, as it pertains to the Shoah, I prefer to examine the collective memory of those who were victimized and those who lived through that period in history. It

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is that collective memory that shapes our perception. As more and more survivors begin to feel their own mortality and tell their stories, we gain a better understanding of the horrific nature of that event. However, with survivors rapidly leaving us, so too will their memory go with them. Who will remain to tell their story and the story of the rich and vibrant European Jewish community prior to the Shoah?

In his memoir, Elie Wiesel says, "What would man be without his capacity to remember? Memory is a passion no less powerful or pervasive than love. What does it mean to remember? It is to live in more than one world, to prevent the past from fading and to call upon the future to illuminate it."²

But what about those of us who strive to keep alive someone else's memory? We too endeavor to keep the past from fading. Can we assume that memory as if it is our own? For those of us who make art, it is our visual imagery, I believe, that can act as the vehicle.

According to Feinstein, those of us who were not present may not convey memory of the Shoah. We can only interpret what we have seen and heard. We can only *respond* to among the most heinous crimes in human history. That is what I have attempted to do with my series of three-dimensional paintings: *the eternal presence of absence*. My intention with this series is to recall a world, a tradition, a culture that was all but lost. In 1933, when the Nazis came to power, there were nine million Jews living in Europe. In less than a dozen years, two out of every three were gone. And with them went thousands of years of Jewish history. Only a thread survived.

It is the lost world of my mother and father, my grandmothers and grandfathers, that I wish to capture, to honor, and to preserve. It is a world that was very much a part of my life growing up, but one that I never really inhabited. It was an absence whose presence was felt daily. The memory of that world is not ours, but it belongs to us. It has been passed down to us through



reconstructing the story I



reconstructing the story II



we who are the remnants



trees are witness

stories and photographs, through ritual and celebration, through prayer and custom.

Life within the *shtetl* (Jewish community) was more or less insulated. Religious and spiritual ritual were part of everyday life and much of it was practiced in the home. With all the oppression that existed for the Jews of Europe, they were still able to celebrate life and sanctify G-d in their homes. They did so by celebrating festivals and holy days. They dressed up in their finest and posed in front of the camera. The people in the photographic images in my art were proud people. These images do not reveal their suffering—generations of suffering at the hands of their neighbors or whoever was in power at the time. Nor do these images tell the story of what was to come—the story of how in an instant the Jews of Kremenets who had been there since the twelfth century were wiped out. On August 10, 1942, they were forced from their homes to walk to a rifle range where they were shot into open pits. Of the fifteen thousand Jews in Kremenets, only fourteen survived. None were my relatives.

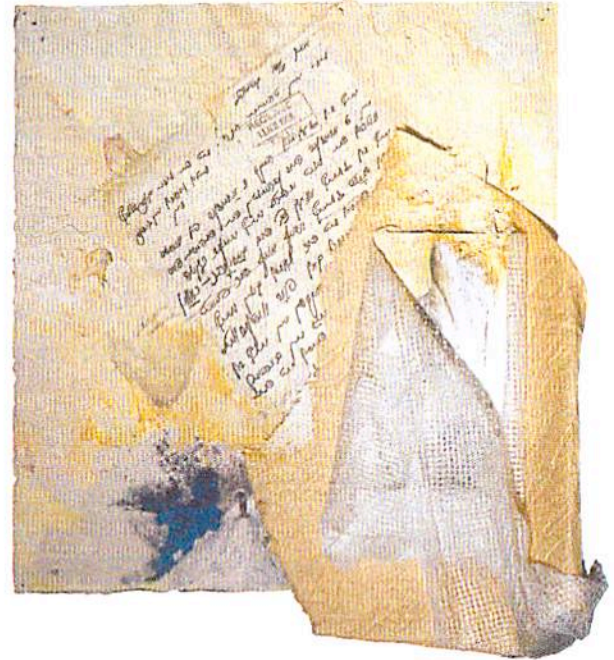
For those of us who followed, our responsibility is to preserve and honor the memory of the lost world of European Jewry. That lost world has left a void in our lives. The emptiness of that void is now a presence—a hole never to be filled. The only means we have to honor that world and those who perished is to remember. Preserving memory and carrying it into the future with us is one way.

I believe strongly in the power of the visual image not only to communicate and educate, but also to evoke memory, to convey memory, and to inspire the viewer. Visual imagery can bring forth powerful emotional responses from the viewer. While that is not my initial intention, it has certainly been my experience. Although I was not present to witness the destruction of the European Jewish community, I am intimately familiar with it. Within these limitations, I continue to remind my viewer of the eternal presence of its absence.

With this series of paintings, I endeavor to describe a world that once was. Utilizing elements of *shtetl* life: faces, places,



eternal presence of absence I



eternal presence of absence II

language, these narrative pieces act as a reminder of that world and the aftermath of its destruction. They are an *echo* of the reality that once was. Paintings such as *reconstructing the story I*, *reconstructing the story II*, and *we who are the remnants*, are inspired by my 2003 visit to the Ukraine—to reclaim the past and the family whose absence has been such a strong presence in my life. I also went to recite the Kaddish (Hebrew prayer for the dead) at their burial site—a gigantic field of grass and weeds.

One great fear that victims of the Shoah had was that there would be no one to recite Kaddish for them. Often, we are told, they recited it for themselves, prior to being slaughtered—an unprecedented phenomenon in Jewish history.

The echo of the lost world of European Jewry is conveyed in works such as *trees are witness*, *eternal presence of absence I*, and *eternal presence of absence II*. In each of these paintings, my intention is to protect and preserve the memory of those who are portrayed visually. Fragments of Yiddish, the language of the *shtetl*, are sometimes

buried within the compositions. Layers of handmade papers wrapping the composition seem to protect the images. Sometimes it may just be a “canopy” or thickness of wrapped wire that guards them.

While I cannot claim the same vision or memory as survivors, creating this body of work has made me aware of my own pain and that of the collective Jewish community. I feel a strong responsibility to uphold and preserve the legacy of those whose absence we now feel as a presence. |||

1. Stephen C. Feinstein, “Witness and Legacy,” in *Witness and Legacy: Contemporary Art about the Holocaust*, exhibition catalogue (Minneapolis: Lerner Publications, 1995), 10.
2. Elie Wiesel, *Memoirs: All Rivers Run to the Sea* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 150.