

A Woman Tells The Story Of Surviving The Holocaust — In 36 Fabric Pictures

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Year after year, Esther Nisenthal Krinitz brought her needle up and down, up and down through the fabric, creating images of trees bright with new fruit, happy families with many children, cows in wide, open meadows — and then terror, everywhere death and fear, darkness, as though a black sky had fallen.

The Nisenthal family, including daughter Esther, lived on a farm in Mniszek in central Poland. In October 1942, the Nazis ordered all the Jews in the village to report for “relocation.”

Esther refused to go, however, and ran away with her sister Mania, eventually managing to survive the war.

Her parents and three siblings did not escape.

With Esther, always, were the memories: those filled with ordinary beauty, like how she walked on stilts to her grandparents' house for Shavuot and made matzah at the home of Mottel the shoemaker — and those of horror, like a Jewish woman screaming, “We will never come back! We will all perish!” as she set off on the road for “relocation.”

When Esther turned 50, she began sewing those memories into art, creating 36 panels that went on to become an exhibit.

On Sunday, July 16, the Jewish Community Center of Metropolitan Detroit's Janice Charach Gallery will hold an opening reception for the launch of “The Fabric of Survival: The Art of Esther Nisenthal Krinitz,” which also will include lectures, events and a film.

Vividly colored, extraordinarily detailed and powerfully moving, the works of art, with their folk-like realism, belie the horrors depicted with a closer look — meticulously stitched work beneath the pictures provide a narrative.

“‘Fabric of Survival’ is an amazing look into a life disrupted by struggle and turmoil that was a catalyst for a story not written, but brought to life by needle and thread,” says Janice Charach Gallery Director Kelly Kaatz. “We are honored to show an exhibition that contains so much depth and meaning as well as artistic skill. This powerful display should not be missed.”

Esther Nisenthal was only 15 years old when she and her 13-year old sister Mania ran through the tall fields and away from the Nazis. They hid in a haystack and changed their identities to Josephine and Maria Grochowiczka. Finally, they secured work with a farmer.

After the war, Esther met and married Max Krinitz in a Displaced Persons camp and, in 1949. Esther, Max and their daughter, Bernice, immigrated to the United States. (Mania married Lipa Kalenberg and moved to Israel, then later to the United States.)

The Krinitzes settled in Brooklyn, where Max managed a supermarket and Esther had a clothing store. They raised Bernice and then a second daughter, Helene.

Bernice remembers her mother as “a wonderful person and a very, very loving mother and grandmother.”

Esther was constantly busy cooking, sewing and cleaning. And while she worked she talked: about surviving the war, her mother’s delicious potato kugel, milking the cows and caring for the chickens, her brother and sisters — and about her dreams. While hiding from the Nazis she dreamt that her mother was running with her and said: “The black sky is falling, and when it reaches the ground, we will die.”

That day when her family and all the Jews in town were taken away had indeed been dark — with a heavy sky of clouds, the air filled with panic and crows everywhere, inexplicably en masse overhead.

“For some Holocaust survivors, it’s too painful to talk about,” Bernice says. “I was lucky because I knew about my mother’s loss, and I knew who she was missing.”

Bernice encouraged her mother to write down these memories — an idea that inspired Esther to actually show her daughters what her childhood had been like. Though certain she couldn’t draw, “with some trepidation, she picked up a large piece of fabric and drew, in very broad outlines, her house and her neighbor’s house,” Bernice recalls. “Then she started filling in with stitches.”

Esther created a work for each of her daughters — and then came grandchildren. “My mother’s imagination took flight,” Bernice says, with the babies, and she began making stuffed animals, cloth books, blankets. “It was an amazing outpouring of objects that were clearly filled with love for her grandchildren.”

Finally, 10 years later, Esther returned to what Bernice calls her mother’s “memory pictures:” the journey on stilts, the Nisenthal family

outside their home, watching her grandfather being beaten, the Jews being taken away while Esther and Mania watch in hiding — all of it.

“Once she realized she could tell the story, she continued seamlessly from then on,” Bernice says.

Though Esther died in 2001, she can be seen in interviews in a documentary about her life, on YouTube and on the Art & Remembrance website, where her words, like her images, are clear and direct.

In one interview she recalls the day and the time: 10 a.m. Thursday, Oct. 15, 1942.

That was when the Jews in her town were to report for “relocation.”

“Take your money and your jewelry,” the Nazis ordered. But they needn’t bother with food. They were told, “There will be lots of food where you’re going.”

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The opening reception for “The Fabric of Survival: The Art of Esther Nisenthal Krinitz” is

1-3 p.m. Sunday, July 16. Docents from the Holocaust Memorial Center will be available for questions.

The exhibit continues through Sept. 19 and is free and open to the public. For a complete list of activities held in conjunction with the event, visit jccdet.org/gallery. For more about Esther Krinitz’s story, visit artandremembrance.org.

By Elizabeth Applebaum Special to the Jewish News



Esther Nisenthal Krinitz in 1998



My Childhood Home: This is the first fabric piece by Esther Nisenthal Krinitz, made when she was 50. She had no experience as an artist but was confident in her sewing skills — and her daughters say she was a wonderful storyteller. Here, she shows her whole family, with her at the bottom of the picture carrying water from the river.



"[My brother] Ruven and I swim in the river below our house."



Esther's favorite childhood memories were of the Jewish holidays. "Shavuot 1938. My brother and sisters followed as I walked on stilts to our grandparents' house."



Digging Tank Trenches: "October 1939. As soon as the Nazis came, they put most of the Mniszek boys and girls to work digging tank trenches across the fields. None of these boys and girls would survive the war."



Janiszew Prison Camp: Esther and her sister Mania were tending cows for another farmer when they discovered they were next to a German prison camp. When the young boys grew too exhausted to work, they would be taken into the woods to be shot. "The composition in this picture is remarkable," says Esther's daughter Bernice. "It has this incredibly beautiful pastoral scene on one side, and this nightmare of violence on the other."



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Black Sky Falling: After becoming separated from their family, never to see them again, Esther and her sister wandered to another village. Taking on new Polish identities, they went to the sheriff's house to ask for help. "If we are going to pretend to be Yuzha and Marish," said Esther, "we have to act as they would." So they did, and received help. That night, Esther dreamt that her mother pulled her out of the house. When she asked her mother why they were running, her mother said, "Because the black sky is falling. And when it reaches the ground we'll die."