

The Warsaw Ghetto Boy and Anne Frank are living icons of the Holocaust

About the meaning of depictions of symbolic “Holocaust children” for both artists and non-artists we talk with Batya Brutin (PhD), an Israeli art historian, curator and a member of the WGM`s Permanent Exhibition Team. Ms Brutin`s book – „Holocaust Icons in Art: the Warsaw Ghetto Boy and Anne Frank” – has just been published by a prestigious, German publishing house De Gruyter Oldenbourg

12 sierpnia 2020

Is there a way – for an art historian – to find out about a personal attitude of the artists who are commemorating the Holocaust, towards the Shoah?

There are several ways to find out about the personal attitude towards the Holocaust of the artists dealing with this subject. Through interviews with the artists, by reading the artists' statements, by art researches interpretation on the artworks, and mostly by profound observation of the artworks themselves. My book is in the field of art history; therefore, it emphasizes the visual expression of the topics and images of the artworks of the different artists. Its method combines the artistic-biographic approach and socio-historical reference in order to create a link between the iconographic and stylistic artistic debate and the historical time and social-cultural context in which the artworks were created. In this way, we can simultaneously see the personal point of view of each artist and learn about general trends and processes indicating the attitude of the artists to the boy from the Warsaw Ghetto and Anne Frank as Holocaust images in art.

Can the personal experience of Holocaust as a survivor or a survivor`s child result in

creating more interesting piece of art regarding the Shoah or it is not necessarily so?

I think that there is no such thing as a more interesting piece of art. Every artwork has its own meaning, significance, interest, and uniqueness. It depends on many factors: the personal connection to the Holocaust: Holocaust survivors, second generation descendants of Holocaust survivors and those whose family members perished in the Holocaust react more sensitively when depicting the Holocaust; the purpose of the artistic presentation of the Holocaust: exposing, telling, and commemorating the Holocaust, or using the Holocaust for political purposes. The artistic style, media and means used by the artists influence the effect of the artwork and the degree of impact on the viewers.

While living in hiding in wartime Amsterdam, your mother Ruth witnessed Anne Frank`s family being put on a truck to be sent to the camps. Was it one of the reasons behind your research concerning the descriptions of Frank in artworks?

Definitely. In preparation for an interview for the Center for Educational Technology for the program Second Generation Speaks, in 2007, I came across my mother's yellow Star of David in my desk drawer. It reminded me of a story my mother used to tell us about herself when my sister Nilly, my brother Aharon and I were children. She worked as a seamstress, under a fictional identity, in a small sewing workshop in Amsterdam on Prinsengracht Street where Nazi uniforms were sewn. One day an event occurred in front of the workshop which everyone went out to watch, including my mother. A Jewish family was taken out from its hiding place, put on a truck and sent to the camps. My mother noted that it was clear to everyone where the Jews were taken. The workshop's manager, who was the only one to know that my mother was Jewish, asked her to quietly pick up her belongings and leave the place permanently. Along the way, a roundup of Jews took place and my mother happened to meet the son of Dutch acquaintances and asked him to help her get away. He took her to a hiding place on a boat his family owned, where she hid for several months. After reading the diary of Anne Frank, as an adolescent, I realized that my mother had witnessed the Frank family taken out from their hiding place. Right after the interview in 2007 I started to look for artworks referring to the image of Anne Frank. I discovered that in many artworks Anna Frank is portrayed with a yellow

Star of David with the word "Jude" in German, in the center, just as my mother wore. Although the German Jews had been living in the Netherlands, they wore the German badge in order to distinguish them from Dutch Jews. Looking at Anne's depictions with the badge, it reminded me of my mother's photographs with the Star of David and it intensified my interest in researching the descriptions of Anne Frank in artworks.

How did the picture of the little boy from the Warsaw ghetto`s Stroop Report become „the poster-child for the Holocaust”, as Marianne Hirsch, cited by you, reckons?

The spectator's attitude and emotions are influenced when photographs depict vulnerable and helpless children. One of the main reasons that this photograph became an iconic one is that unlike photographs depicting piles of corpses, humiliating nude, skeletal hungry Jews, in this photograph all the figures are dressed, the representation of violence is restrained and it does not immediately evoke an association of death.

How much do the Warsaw ghetto boy and Anne Frank photographs mean to the memory about Holocaust? Why are their visual representations so powerful?

The photographs of the boy from the Warsaw Ghetto and Anne Frank became famous worldwide as documents representing the Holocaust. Behind Anne Frank's photographs there is a young girl whose life story is known through her diary and the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, while the identity of the boy in the photograph from Warsaw Ghetto is unknown. The boy from the Warsaw Ghetto represents east European Jewry experience during the Holocaust while Anne Frank represents the fate of western Jewry during the Holocaust.

In your book you call the Warsaw ghetto boy a symbol and Anne Frank an icon representing the Jewish children`s fate in the Holocaust. How do they differ in their influence on both artists and non-artists?

I am using these two words as synonym. Many artists adopted them as a source of inspiration

to express their feelings and ideas about Holocaust events in general and to deal with the fate of these two victims in particular. By using the image of children of the Holocaust, the artists evoke our sympathy and at the same time stir our anger against the Nazi crime: the murder of one-and-a-half million children during the Holocaust.

The artists like Samuel Bak and Weinshall Liberman – among many others you mention in your book – identify themselves with the Warsaw ghetto boy and Anne Frank. Can we call it a kind of artistic obsession of artists of the survivors` generation?

I would call it personal need rather than an obsession. Some artists personally identified with the Warsaw Ghetto boy and Anne Frank, choosing them as figures to represent the victims of the Holocaust. Sometimes this identification stemmed from taking personal and human responsibility for preserving their memory and, occasionally, from a desire to figure out how the artists would have acted if they had been “there.” As a result, the artists’ personal identification with these figures serves as an entrance into the existence, the situations, and experiences of the victims by depicting themselves as if they were the Warsaw Ghetto boy or Anne Frank.

Is the Warsaw ghetto boy and Anne Frank`s impact going to last?

Artists used the images of the Warsaw Ghetto boy and Anne Frank to examine the boundaries of memory and our ability to organize the memory of the Holocaust. They expressed their concern about the place of the Holocaust in the collective memory of future generations. Will the memory of the Holocaust always be part of our collective sorrow, or will it vanish through the years? The boy from the Warsaw Ghetto and Anne Frank are vivid visual icons of the Holocaust in art today. We must ask ourselves if they will continue to be such icons for future generations or will they fade away? Only time will tell.

Interview conducted by Anna Kilian

Photo Batya Brutin

Publication

date: 2020-08-12

Print date: 2021-10-14 00:34

Source: <http://1943.pl/en/artykul/the-warsaw-ghetto-boy-and-anne-frank-are-living-icons-of-the-holocaust/>