

Whose memories are they?



A Tribute to Otto Kraus and his daughter, Melita, pastel and ink on paper.

Many artists draw inspiration from their memories. They paint, write, sculpt, sing, quilt, compose, or use any other media to depict scenes from their childhood, their lives, and their loves. Marc Chagall (1887-1985), the face of Jewish art in the twentieth century, left his family near Vitebsk in Russia to familiarize himself with modern western art in Paris. But many of the works he made in France show memories of the Russian shtetl of his childhood, including farmers, horses, wagons, cows, beggars, wooden Russian houses in the snow, Chassidic rabbis, and Shabbat afternoons with his family. Charlotte Salomon (1917-1943), a German-Jewish artist from Berlin, painted her memories, her life in Germany before the Nazis murdered her, on many canvasses in her *Life or Theater?* Mayer



Kirshenblatt, aka Mayer Tamuz (1216-2009), survived the Holocaust and came to America after his world, the Polish shtetl of Apt (Opatov), was destroyed. Originally not an artist, he took up painting in his old age. With his photographic memory, he created an impressive tribute to a Jewish world that is no more. The work of these painters has not only artistic value but historical significance as well. On a personal, but much less dramatic, level I did the same. After I came to America, I made numerous drawings about my life in Holland, Berlin, and Jerusalem, my travels to Prague and other cities, and legends and lore “from home,” to preserve my own world in thought and on paper and canvas. For example, in one drawing I painted an artist surrounded by different landscapes and cities: *The Life of the Artist* (see above). In others, I situated a classical composer,

like Beethoven, in cities where I had listened to his music, but these are not necessarily places the composer had visited himself.

Painting from memory, however, can go a step further. Let me explain. In 2017, I curated an exhibition in New York about the Golem and met an artist from Croatia, Melita Kraus, who would become a close friend. She stayed with me for some time during the exhibition. It was Sukkoth and we sat in my home-made

sukkah built from crates and pieces of wood, eating, drinking kvas, and discussing art. Although growing up in different countries, Holland and Croatia, we have a very similar background and outlook on life and art. We both love to paint (Yiddish) stories, including our own. Melita made drawings of us, my husband, and a friend sitting in the sukkah, or of us drinking coffee. The next year, I visited her in Croatia, and our friendship deepened after many evenings



Melita Kraus: Drinking Coffee, a gift from the artist which is now in my studio.

discussing life, our children, families, the vagaries and vicissitudes of the lives of Jews in Europe, and art, drinking wine on the porch of her tiny holiday home—a house straight from the shtetl—near the Adriatic Sea. We ate fresh fish bought directly from a boat at the quay, and painted together. Melita told me about her life, her father, who was a doctor, and asked me to make a kaddish for him. I have created calligraphic kaddishes before, and asked her for a photo of her father. She showed me one with her father talking to her, a little girl in a short dress with puffy sleeves



Kaddish



and a big white bow in her short hair, as was the custom for little girls at the time.

I thought about this, made a sketch at the kitchen table in Croatia, and took a digital copy of that photo with me to Brooklyn. But that year life became hectic, visiting my elderly parents in Holland, helping my daughter with her two babies, and a myriad of other things. I didn't pick up the photo again until much later. I decided, for now, not to make the traditional calligraphic kaddish but to work out my pen sketch in color. It gave me a bit of a strange feeling: I am painting somebody

else's childhood memories. Melita had told me a lot about her family but still, it's her first hand memory and for me a "memory from a photo." However, I remembered the conversations we had about Melita's family, her father. Artists are solipsistic creatures par excellence. What you see in our canvas is purely our own interpretation of what we see. You don't have to agree with us or see it the same way; we paint what we see and not necessarily what is



there. Therefore, my interpretation of that photo became mixed with my own observations and memories. I situated the scene at the Adriatic Coast, around the holiday home which Melita's father had built long ago and which I had visited a few years ago. The mountain with the little church on top (to the right), the dark blue sea with many islands at the horizon, the lush gardens in the village, the sandy path leading to the beach, lined with olive trees and all kind of other trees, shrubs, and flowers, the warm sun and the humming of insects—which cannot be painted but is implied in the colors,—and the little harbor with sailing boats and fishermen. The fish, connected to the sea and to my memories of small, delicious, fried fish for lunch, are prominently displayed in the air. The father holds his little daughter's hand. She follows him, full of trust, into the realm of childhood memories which cannot fade, hence the bright colors, the abundance of flowers, the deep blue of the sky.

So, whose memories did I paint? Melita's, but seen through my own personal lens? My own? Both? This is why no two artists can paint exactly the same.

I would like to hear your thoughts on this concept.

Shoshannah Brombacher, Brooklyn, August 2019