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Layers of memory, layers of the present

By AARON HOWARD
11.MAR.10

Once upon a time, there was a nature preserve located on the site of a former quarry, just 10 kilometers from the city center of Kraków. And Poland, being what it is, it turns out that the Bonarka Nature Preserve sat on the site of the Plaszow concentration camp. That location, made famous in the Steven Spielberg film "Schindler's List," was erected over the site of two Jewish cemeteries.



"Preparing for Purim at the Koshers Soup Kitchen" is a black-and-white palladium print. The photo was taken in 2007 at Mukachevo, Ukraine, but has the appearance of a scene from six decades ago.

Plaszow contained two sections: one for Jews and one for Poles. As Soviet armies approached in the summer of 1944, SS leaders eliminated both camp sections, then dug up the mass graves and burned the bodies in huge piles in an attempt to eliminate evidence of the mass murder.

In an attempt to remember the past, a group of Kraków residents started a volunteer reclamation project to dig around Plaszow to find the original pre-camp Jewish gravesites. Fort Worth photographer Loli Kantor volunteered to go to Poland and dig in the soil. It was the beginning of her journey to discover what happened to her mother and father's families in Poland prior to the Holocaust.

Since that initial visit, Kantor's journey subsequently has taken her to Poland and Ukraine six times to photograph the living remnants of those pre-Holocaust Jewish communities. Her photographs, a mixture of art and photojournalism, form the corpus of the exhibition "There Was a Forest: Jewish Life in Eastern Europe Today 2005-2008."

"There Was A Forest" will be on display from March 7 to May 21 at the Robert I. Kahn Gallery at Emanu El synagogue, 1500 Sunset Blvd. A reception for the artist will be held on March 17 from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. The exhibition is part of FotoFest2010, the biennial photography program held at more than 80 Houston venues. This year's theme is contemporary American photography.

Kantor's mother died in childbirth, giving birth to her in January 1952. Her father died when she was 14.

"Not having my parents there to ask about our family's past, I always



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had the sense I wanted to go to Poland," Kantor said, "not to visit for a week, but to do research in the archives. I speak a little Polish, so going wasn't such an overwhelming idea."

Volunteering at the Kraków-based reclamation project gave Kantor the opportunity to visit the archive in her father's hometown of Czestochowa. It was a town where Jews comprised one-quarter of the population before the Holocaust. Kantor discovered that she wasn't satisfied with visits to archives and cemeteries. She wanted to visit living communities.

"I heard about communities like that in Ukraine, small enclaves that still are remnants of the shtetls," Kantor said. "So, I went in 2005 with some contacts I had made to the western part of Ukraine, the trans-Carpathians. I wanted to photograph people, Holocaust survivors, and anything else I found; I didn't have a set plan. I work very intuitively. I go and if I see something interesting or important, I stick around."

Like the soil where she dug outside Kraków, Kantor found both the past and the present, layered together in western Ukraine.

"For example, I found a small town (Drohobych) with a major, unoccupied synagogue building standing in the middle of downtown," Kantor recalled. "The building was a furniture store during the Soviet era. Now, the local Jewish and non-Jewish community was attempting to renovate the building to at least create a little prayer room. For the non-Jews, they made friendships with the local Jews, and they saw that something positive needed to be done with the building. They helped with their hands, with their labor, because there was no money available. Everybody is poor."

Kantor's photos from her initial 2005 visit are all black-and-white. The subject matter consists mainly of survivors and reminiscences of empty synagogues and artifacts. Kantor moved beyond these initial impressions. She realized that her role was to use the camera to record and provide visual evidence of these people – particularly since most of them are elderly and are not expected to live longer than 10 more years.

This desire to interpret the past and document the present led to Kantor's decision to use two separate techniques in her work.

Kantor's 13x19 color photos reflect the colors of the places she visits. These are reflected in the fabrics and domestic hues of everyday life. In contrast, Kantor's palladium works are contact prints made from black-and-white negatives. The palladium photos are small in size and look like images from old photo albums. Palladium prints come from a 19th-century technique in which each photo is handmade and unique. Thus, these photos have a timeless element, as if one were looking over an imaginary viewer's shoulder at an old family album. For example, although the photo "Preparing For Purim at the Kosher Soup Kitchen" was taken in 2007, everything – the wooden table and chairs, the kitchen implements, the body-builds and clothing of the subjects – suggests a scene out of the past.

On one level, the large color shots and the small black-and-white photos appear to be two bodies of work. On another level, they reflect the interplay between past and present, between memory and the gritty present of Ukrainian rural life. Thus, Kantor's exhibition functions as a sort of visual archaeology: the understanding of human culture through the recovery and documentation of material culture. In this visual recovery and documentation, we understand what was lost.

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