BALTIMORE
JewishTimes

March 17, 2017/19 Adar 5777

Candle Lighting: 6:58 p.m.

WHEN WHAT'S PAST IS PROLOGUE

Jewish Museum of Maryland exhibit looks at the Holocaust from new angles

Story begins on page 28

YOU SHOULD KNOW
ISRAEL ADVOCATE
PAGE 16

NEW RABBI NAMED
AT BOLTON STREET
PAGE 22

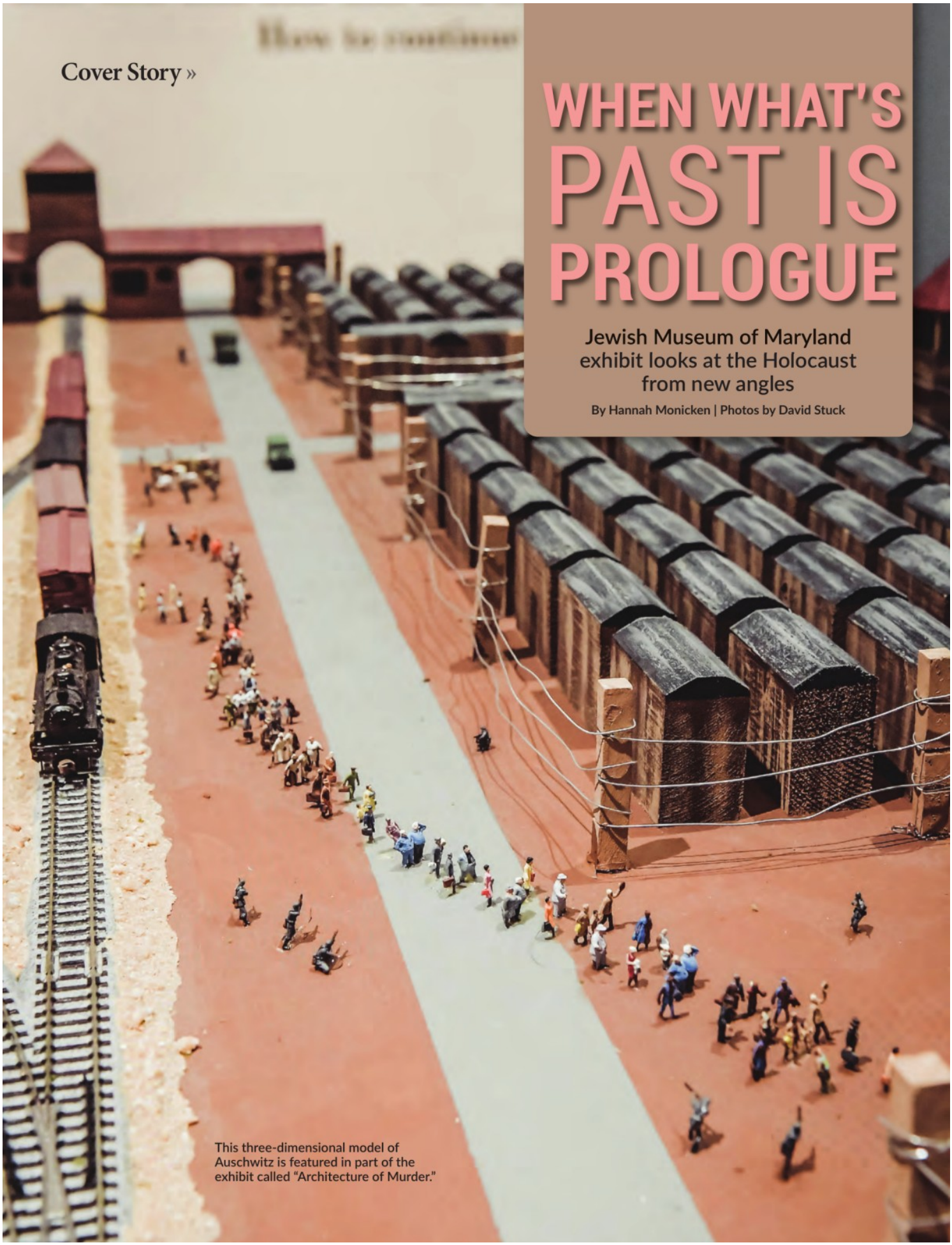
$0.75
0 74470 19778 2

Cover Story »

WHEN WHAT'S PAST IS PROLOGUE

Jewish Museum of Maryland exhibit looks at the Holocaust from new angles

By Hannah Monicken | Photos by David Stuck



This three-dimensional model of Auschwitz is featured in part of the exhibit called "Architecture of Murder."

Arbeit macht frei — work sets you free.

> **"I HAD THE WHOLE TIME THIS QUESTION OF HOW DO I RECONCILE WHAT IS WITH WHAT WAS."**
>
> *— Keron Psillas, photographer*

That simple phrase is the now-chilling epitaph that greets visitors at the entrance to concentration camps — most notoriously, Auschwitz.

Auschwitz is one of the most well-known symbols of the Nazis' horrifying ideology — "The Final Solution" to the "Jewish Question." Before it was liberated by the Soviet Union army on Jan. 27, 1945 (now known as International Holocaust Remembrance Day), more than one million Jews had been murdered there. These days, the museum that now resides on the site sees nearly two million visitors a year and was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979.

But before Auschwitz was the infamous concentration camp, it was Oswiecim, a thriving market town of about 14,000 — more than half of whom were Jews.

It's Oswiecim and its complicated legacy that is at the center of a new exhibit from the Jewish Museum of Maryland called "Remembering Auschwitz: History. Holocaust. Humanity." that opened earlier this month in the Samson, Rossetta and Sadie B. Feldman Gallery. It runs through May 29.

The full exhibit brings together four smaller ones in the museum's first Holocaust exhibit in more than a decade. It starts with an exhibit from the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, "A Town Known as Auschwitz: The Life and Death of a Jewish Community," followed by "Architecture of Murder: The Auschwitz Birkenau Blueprints," then "Loss and Beauty: Photographs by Keron Psillas" and, to end the exhibit, stories from local survivors called "The Holocaust Memory Reconstruction Project."

Deborah Cardin, the museum's deputy director for programs and development, spearheaded this exhibit after seeing "A Town Known as Auschwitz" at the Museum of Jewish Heritage a couple of years ago. She noticed that the "Architecture of Murder" traveling exhibit was available and had the idea to bring the two together.

"Those were really the first two components," she said. "But then, what I felt was missing were the stories of our local community."

To solve that problem, the museum commissioned a project from artist Lori Shocket as a part of her "The Holocaust Memory Reconstruction Project," which she has undertaken at other Jewish centers and museums from Los Angeles to Melbourne, Australia.

In the meantime, she had a recommendation from a local photographer about fellow photographer Keron Psillas' collection called "Loss and Beauty," which takes photos she took at Eastern European World War II sites (especially concentration camps) and creates a composite with another image, attempting to grapple with the contemporary beauty of places with

"A Town Known as Auschwitz" tells the story of Oswiecim, Poland, which once had a thriving Jewish population.

very dark pasts.

And so, the exhibit came together. It already has been a popular venture, attracting more than 350 people in its first week. On opening day, the museum bused all those who participated in the survivor stories project to the exhibit and presented them with a book of their collages.

"There were a lot of people there — participants with their families and other survivors who just came," said Felicia Graber, a Holocaust survivor who saw her collage numbered among those on the wall. "It was just a beautiful event. We didn't have to just go when we had time. They made a special effort."

"A Town Known as Auschwitz" opens the exhibit, with the early history of Oswiecim played out in written descriptions, photos, maps and stories of the Jewish families who lived there. In its heyday in the late 19th century to the pre-war years, the townspeople, both Jewish and non-Jewish, coexisted peacefully and, for the most part, happily.

"It was actually a fairly well-integrated community," Cardin said as she led the JT on a preview tour of the exhibit. "Which isn't to say there weren't challenges."

Once Oswiecim was annexed by the Third Reich in 1939 in its bid to establish what it felt were the rightful boundaries of the German empire, however, Jewish residents started being deported, with 90 percent ending up at the Auschwitz camp.

Remarkably, Oswiecim still exists as a town today, although, unsurprisingly, no Jewish families reside there. A combination of harsh economic times in post-war Poland and lingering anti-Semitism pushed them all out, mostly to Israel and the United States, by the early 1960s. Szymon Kluger, the last native Jew of Oswiecim and its last Jewish resident,

More than 90 local families participated in "The Holocaust Memory Reconstruction Project" part of the exhibit.

died in 2000 — a disheartening, if fitting, contemporary history for a town burdened with such a difficult past.

Exactly as it sounds, "Architecture of Murder" features the Auschwitz blueprints, photos from its construction and a three-dimensional model of the whole camp. This part of the exhibit is located in a smaller room — "a gallery within a gallery," as Cardin put it. If those contemplating the exhibit didn't already know the gruesome history of Auschwitz, the preliminary plans and photos would look entirely conventional — a dichotomy perhaps best represented by Hannah Arndt's immortal phrase, "the banality of evil."

"One of the points is that Auschwitz was really constructed by ordinary professionals," Cardin said. "It was really the intent that turned it into a camp of death and destruction."

While this first half of the exhibit is Auschwitz-centered, the final two pieces are meant to show attendees the stories of survival and hope — seeing the present through the lens of the past.

Photographer Psillas has created a collection called "Loss and Beauty," full of photos in which she composited two images into one, often reflecting, as Psillas said, "a full story." The images come from trips she took to Eastern European World War II sites such as concentration camps, and the composites juxtapose the sites' contemporary beauty with their horrifying pasts.

"I had the whole time this question of how do I reconcile what is with what was," she told the JT. "Because I was confronted with vibrant, beautiful colors in a place I thought should be black and white."

The photo to introduce the displayed collection, as an example, is accompanied by a caption and title of "Journey." It depicts a stark, black-and-white tree over an image of old train tracks. Both photos that make up this one image were taken at Terezin, a Czech fortress and walled town that later became home to Theresienstadt concentration camp.

"YOU SEE THOSE WHO TRIUMPHED AND SURVIVED, THAT THEY CONTINUED TO LIVE ON. AND I THINK THAT'S A PERFECT END TO THE STORY."

— Lori Shocket, artist

"The tree has long been a metaphor for life," the caption reads. "Its roots depict our ancestors and its branches our children. Its strength and spread are described by fertile ground and life-giving water. The rail tracks invoke journeys.

Above, "The Town Known as Auschwitz" exhibit; below, "Architecture of Murder" gallery

Journeys to and journeys from."

Those journeys can feel abstract now, of course, and that is where the final, and potentially most individually affecting, piece of the exhibit comes in, "The Holocaust Memory Reconstruction Project." It takes the form of a wall of plaques from 91 local survivors and their families created in about a dozen workshops. Each plaque features a collage of images meant to represent one person's story — photos from before, during and after the war (if available, since many such artifacts were destroyed for many families) along with other artifacts like ID cards or yellow Star of David patches.

From names like Heller, Pasternak and Rosenbaum to Rubenstein, Zippert and Friedman, these are the stories the Baltimore Jewish community commemorated — whether it was a personal story or that of a parent or grandparent.

Survivors telling their stories in this form — going through photos and reliving the memories — often brings out their stories in new ways, or even parts they hadn't remembered before, Shocket said. She added that she loves watching survivors tell their stories through collage because they often start at first with a touch of repetitiveness from having told it multiple times, but the collages soon morph into passion projects, and the survivors, or their descendants, will get really particular with how they — and their stories — are represented.

Graber was one of the many local survivors to participate. She was born just five months after the Nazis invaded Poland and, starting at 2 years old, had fake papers identifying her and her mother as Catholics, while her father went into hiding. All of them managed to survive. But that comes with its own scars.

"I actually, over time, kind of forgot my Jewish heritage," she said of that time in her young life when she was trained by her mother to act convincingly as a Catholic.

This project was a new approach to telling her story, which Graber has done numerous times, and she appreciates any form that will speak to people about the realities of the Holocaust.

"I am not really an art person," she said. "I couldn't draw if my life depended on it, but this is really something very different. It's extremely interesting and very effective.

I think it's really important that people help younger people, whether Jewish or non-Jewish, learn about what happened and remember," she added.

The project is so successful because it's so visceral, said Selma Rozga-Lean, who participated in the project as a child of survivors. She grew up knowing her parents were survivors, but she had never seen their, or others', stories presented in this way.

"It gives me goosebumps still to think throughout the world the project is going on," she said.

This human element is a natural way to end the exhibit, Shocket said.

"You see those who triumphed and survived, that they continued to live on," she added. "And I think that's a perfect end to the story."

The wall of plaques is accompanied by quotes on the wall from a few of the survivors. One in particular, from David Handelsman, seemed to sum up the theme of the whole exhibit: "We must remember the past, live in the present and hope for a peaceful tomorrow." JT

hmonicken@midatlanticmedia.com