

The Memory Project

TRAUMA, RESILIENCE AND REPAIR THROUGH ART

by Janlori Goldman



This is the story of Anna Huberman and her younger brother Kalman, how they were born in Wloclawek, Poland, and were later forced from their home into the Warsaw Ghetto, where they spent a hungry, desperate year as children, Kalman selling flint and cigarettes and Anna babysitting to make a little food money. This is the story of their escape, how the young teens, one after the other, left their parents behind — *Go, my child. Save yourself* — finding shelter in the small town of Ozarow, occupied by the Nazis, but seemingly safer than the ghetto. Anna rented a small bed in a small room. Kalman joined her a few months later, sharing that small bed and the little food that they had. He realized there wasn't enough room or food, so he went and found himself a place with a farmer who gave him food and barn floor in exchange for work on the farm. On weekends he came to his sister with an egg or some bread from the farm.

One night the Germans roused Anna and other Jews out of bed — *Jews, out, out, out!* — and shipped them to Skarzysko-Kamiennoto to make bullets and shells as forced laborers in the town's factory. Kalman was in the barn the night Germans came for Anna. To this day Anna wonders if her brother was taken a few weeks later with all the remaining Jews of Ozarow



Photo, above left, of Kalman Huberman at age 4; above, with his sister Anna in an artwork by Anna's daughter, Roz Jacobs.

to Chelmno, where they were all gassed. Did he escape the farm? Did he survive?

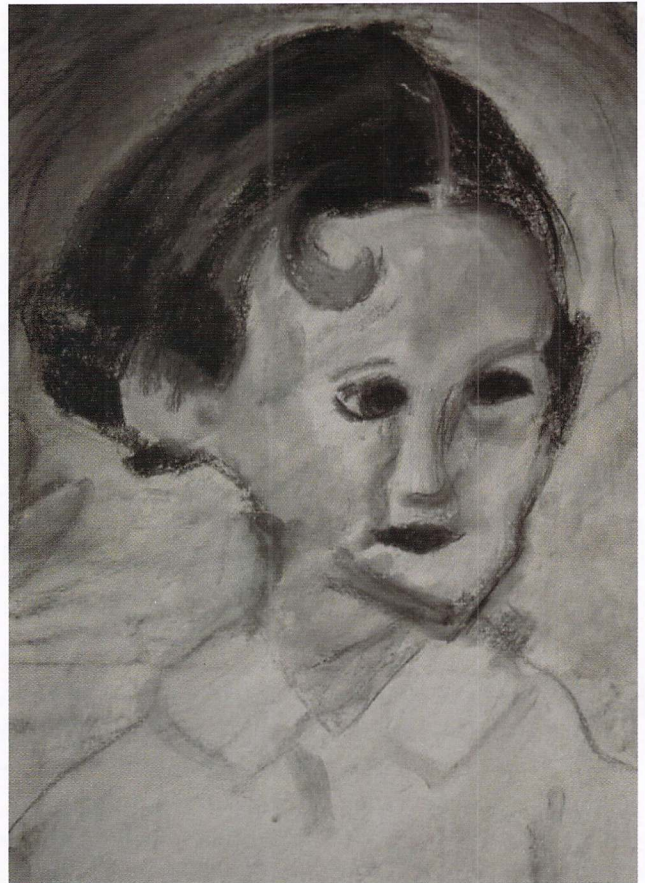
After a year in the labor camp, Anna met her future husband, Jack Jacobs, in 1942. They survived the war, but when Anna returned to Wloclawek, she found her home occupied by strangers and no trace of any family member or possessions, with the exception of a tiny photograph of Kalman, at 4, picked out of the garbage by a neighbor who had been friends with her brother. As Anna recounts, though she was so happy to hold the sole surviving picture of her family, she couldn't wait to get out of that town. *I felt like my feet were burning.*

A few years later, after Anna and Jack's two sons were born in Poland and Germany, the family made their way to New York, where their third child, Roz, was born. As a young girl, Roz pressed her mother to tell her the stories of her childhood: Why didn't she have grandparents, where were the aunts and uncles? Anna recalls, *There were things I didn't want to answer.*

Roz grew up to be a painter of lush landscapes. One of her early art teachers, the youngest son of the Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem, used to say, *Art telescopes time*, that the past and the future are in the present moment that art is created. Inspired by the stunning hills and fields of southwestern France, where she and her partner Laurie live part of the year, Roz's paintings are bold and moving, living portraits of how light moves across the earth, how wheat is caught in the wind, held in that present moment that speaks simultaneously of past and future.

Now we come to the story of memory, how trauma passes down from one generation to the other, how the American hand that holds the brush paints the horror of the mother's early years in the Warsaw Ghetto, paints the face of the mother's lost brother, moves the brush over dozens of canvasses in an effort to make the face of the painter's Uncle Kalman come to life. Still frozen as his 4-year-old self, still the child in Wloclawek, maybe a boy who got away, possibly escaped the death camps, had a future, and a present — the painter laying her brush against a flat surface to create a three-dimensional boy who grew up to be reunited with his sister.

Trauma may become a tragic genetic endowment, written in one's ancestors' DNA and passed on to children and grandchildren. A very recent scientific study of Holocaust survivors and their descendants by Dr. Rachel Yehuda, director of Mount Sinai's Traumatic Stress Studies Division, suggests that intense trauma can create epigenetic change, alterations in the chemical markers of genes, which can then be handed down to offspring. It is a remarkable discovery, not only for how certain shocks to the system be-



Pál Várnai, a Hungarian survivor, portrait by Andi in a Zachor Foundation Intergeneration workshop in Budapest, Hungary, 2014. Pál was 9 when his family was forced into the local ghetto, and his father was lost to slave labor. The family endured the camps of Strasshof, Bergen-Belsen, and Terezin, which the Soviets liberated a little after Pál's 10th birthday. "Two brothers of my mother never returned from forced labor in Ukraine . . . my father's sister did not return from Auschwitz . . . and neither did my father. I kept dreaming of him for a long time . . ."

come engraved in and shape our biological chemistry, but for the poignant futility of the traumatized generation's resistance to passing on these horrors in the form of stories. I vividly recall, as some readers may, my grandparents refus-

ing to talk of the world they'd left, unable or unwilling to talk about the brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, lovers and neighbors, mothers and fathers, killed in pogroms and the Holocaust.

But the past cannot be so easily erased. Trauma twists our DNA, trickles down through the generations, bubbles up in our children, moves through the hand of a painter as she stands in front of her blank canvas, a tattered tiny photo of her Uncle Kalman as a boy propped off to the side, within her peripheral vision, his story embedded in her body.

From a young age, Roz has been a dedicated artist, exhibiting in the United States, France, England, Israel, Germany, Russia and Japan (www.rozjacobs.com). Although primarily a landscape painter, after her 22 year-old friend Mischa died from a brain tumor, Roz was asked by Mischa's mother (whose own mother was also a Holocaust survivor) to share some memories of her son before he became ill. The woman shared a small photograph of her once healthy, vibrant 10-year-old, and from that image Roz started to paint Mischa over and over, painting after painting, as if, through the repetition of recreating his face, she could connect intimately to the friend now gone. During that fevered period, Roz bolted up from bed one night with a vision of Kalman, of how she wanted to share her own mother's story and bring Kalman to life again to be reunited with his sister.

In that moment, she conceived of the work ahead of her: to create a video installation that captured the process

of her painting, so that the viewer could experience the work in progress, and ultimately view the finished portraits, nine video monitors and nine paintings of Kalman side by side — eighteen elements signifying *khay*, the Hebrew word for life. *Fragments of memory, snippets collected through stories that my mother told*, Roz recalls. *Memories and paint fractured and rebuilt. I knew I would call it The Memory Project.*

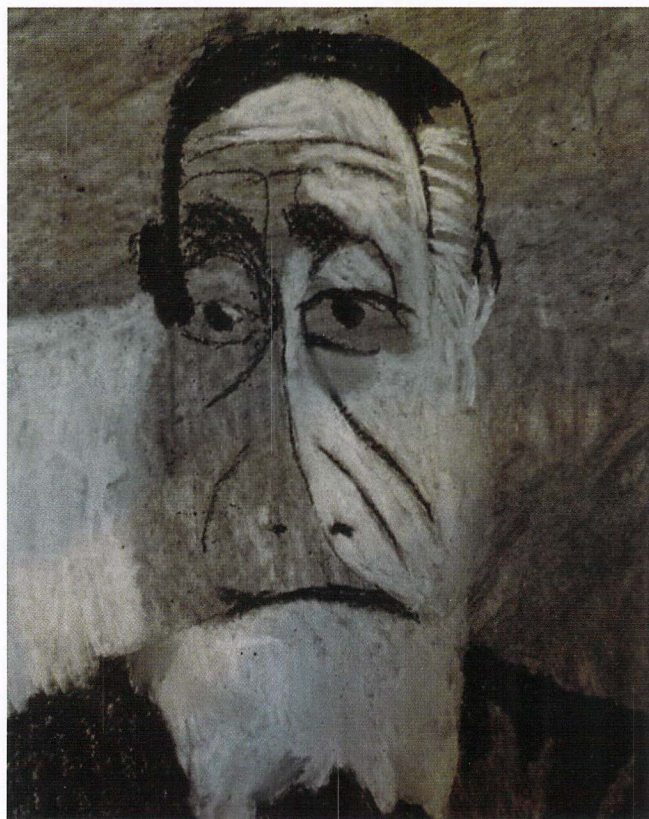
Her parents worked hard to give their children a life of love, free of danger and want. In 1969, Jack was shot in the back during a robbery. He was paralyzed from the waist down and in a wheelchair until he died in 2008 at 88. As Anna recalls, *Jack was an optimist until the day he died. He believed that if people learn, there's a chance they won't repeat the mistakes of the past.*

Roz and her partner Laurie Weisman met in 1979 at a Valentine's Day party. Laurie, with a degree in museum education, worked for thirty years in educational publishing, including with Sesame Street and Scholastic. During the early years of their relationship, the couple interviewed and videotaped friends of Roz's family who were part of a community of aging Holocaust survivors. Both Roz and Laurie struggled with questions of how people survive trauma and live a life of generosity.

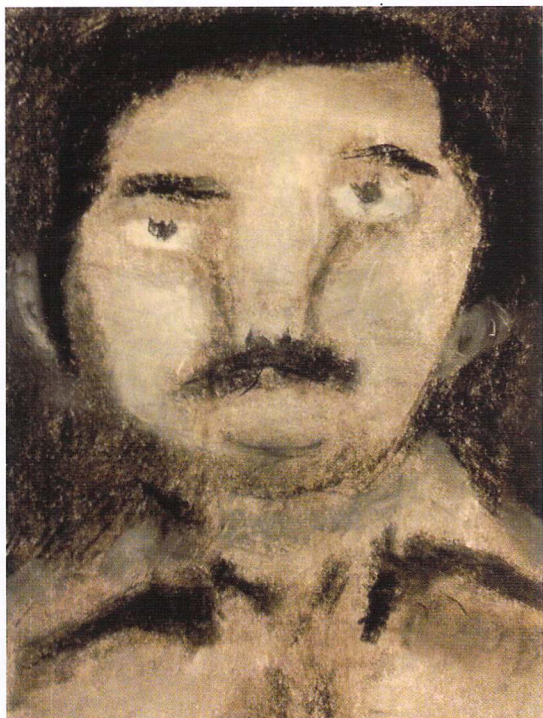
In 2007, the installation's first show opened in Boca Raton, Florida, close to where Roz's parents and their oldest friends spent their winters. At the show, stories poured out



Pinchas Schumacher, the murdered grandfather of Estera Azjen, a resident of Chelm, drawn by Agnieszka K. at a workshop at the Galicia Jewish Museum in Cracow, Poland. Estera Azjen survived in the Soviet zone of Poland. She married a Ukrainian Jewish soldier and moved to the U.S. in 1956.



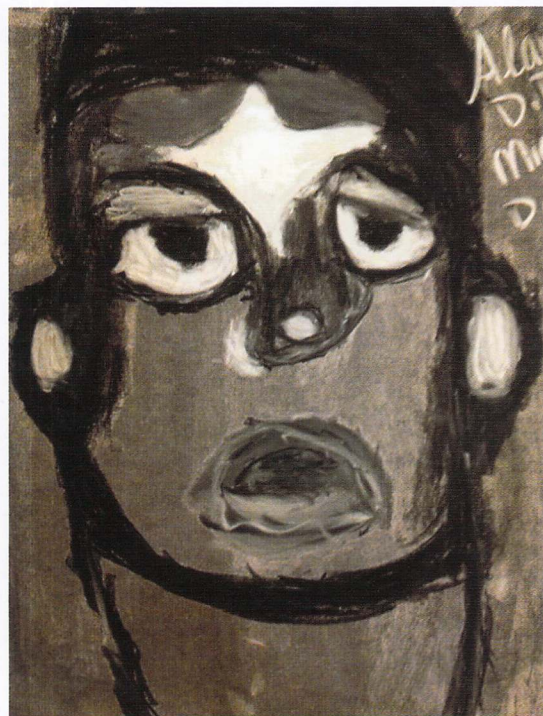
from The Memory Project's Brooklyn Public Library Family Workshop



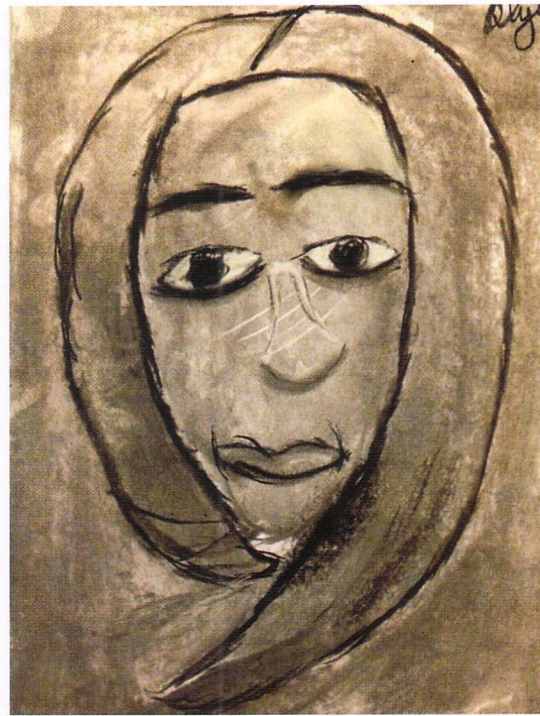
"In Bangladesh there was a war. Pakistan wanted to take control but we said no. My grandfather had to hide in many different places and some of his friends and relatives died so it was harder to survive. Now he has children and nephews and nieces to help him."—Ziaul H.



"She moved from Haiti to New York when she was only 15 years old with her mom and sister. There are way more opportunities here. I view her as very brave and outgoing to go through such a difficult change."—Nya G.



"Moving to New York was hard because he had to adapt to a new language and life. He left his whole family in Cuba!"—Alana D.



"An experience that my mom had that was life changing for her is that her father passed away before her daughter (me) was even born."—Alyssa B.

of her family and friends, memories of relatives lost.

Today, Roz and Laurie run The Memory Project Productions (www.memoryprojectproductions.com), a vibrant art, history, and education initiative that spans the globe. They produced *Finding Kalman*, a documentary in which Anna Jacobs recounts her life story as her daughter paints Kalman. The thirty-minute film aired on PBS and is shown in museums and classrooms. Anna and Roz have also co-written a book, *Kalman: A Boy in Six Million*.

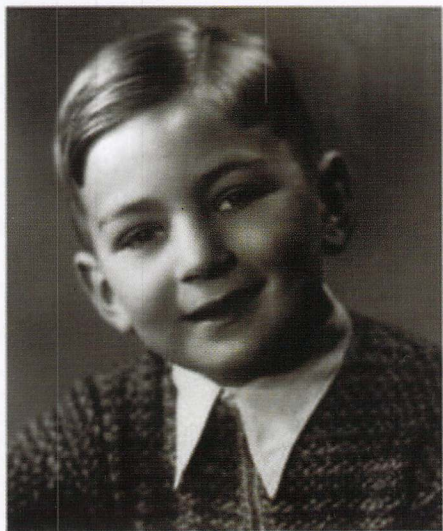
The Memory Project explores grief and trauma through art, in recognition that by painting the portrait of one person lost, we can experience the horror of the millions that were lost. Through one person's story we hear millions of others, all unique, each humanized through their re-creation, re-telling, re-imagining, re-membling.

Through this work, Roz and Laurie strive to engage people in the collective process of creating art as a way to experience loss, trauma, and connection, and to make more tangible their relationship to history. The Memory Project provides a chance for people to respond to Kalman's story by drawing and writing. Roz offers an art lesson on light and shade in which students create portraits from personal photos they bring to class. She works to break preconceived ideas we have of each other, and of how art is created, by turning their photos upside down and starting from an unfamiliar, fresh vantage point. She asks students to observe

the upended portrait, and, using pastel, to discover the form of the head by painting the movement and interplay of shadow and light through space, what is known as *chiaroscuro* (from Italian: *chiaro*, "light," and *scuro*, "dark"). Students cover a whole white canvas in dark charcoal to create a "ground."

Using black pastel, they begin to create a portrait from the photo they have brought with them. Then, using white pastel, students begin to follow the movement of light. Throughout, Roz encourages them to keep their eyes on their photographs and move along the page, observing where dark meets light. The goal is not to create a perfect likeness, but to observe something new in themselves and in each other, to recognize and express the stories we all carry within ourselves and our families, how we absorb these stories into our lives.

Many people participating in these workshops discover and give voice to some familial loss and trauma for the first time. Their classmates or community members often see them in a new light: *I had no idea your parents escaped from Kosovo . . . I didn't know your mother has cancer.* The group experience of creating art from personal photos offers the chance to connect, create richer and stronger com-



Roman Haar was smuggled out of the Rzeszow ghetto in Poland and sent to his mother, a convert to Judaism who was passing as a German cleaning woman and hid him in the apartment where she worked. Drawing by an unidentified student at Austin High School in El Paso Texas, 2012.





Fryderyka Mangel, who survived with her husband Edmund Kessler by being hidden in a farmhouse bunker by Wójciech and Katarzyna Kalwinski, Polish gentiles who hid numerous Jews. The Kalwinski family was honored by Israel's Yād Vashem as Righteous Among Nations in 1967. Drawing by Weronika T. at the B.I. Antonymcz Culture Centre in Gorlice, Poland, 2014.



munal ties, see something new and intimate in each other. For the individual, a window may open that allows a person to move from a place of shame, silence, and hiding, to being seen, respected, and admired.

Roz and Laurie hope that the stories we tell and the portraits we draw will keep us from walling ourselves off from “the other.” In Laurie’s words: *This project is a way to connect people to history and to each other’s humanity. I also want to share the inspiration and strength I get from the resilience of Holocaust survivors, who survived a horror I cannot possibly imagine and yet retained their ability to love deeply and live joyfully.*

In addition to their educational programs, The Memory Project has launched exhibits of the installation around the world. In Poland, the exhibit premiered at the Auschwitz Jewish Center, housed in the building that was a synagogue in the town of Oswiecim, which became notorious as the site of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. The exhibit has been shown in more than a dozen sites throughout Poland, including Anna’s hometown of Wloclawek, Czestochowa, and the site of the concentration camp in Zamosc, from which she was liberated. In the U.S., the exhibit has mostly been shown in Holocaust museums and centers, and Roz and Laurie are eager to expand into the

art world.

The Memory Project is energized by Roz and Laurie’s sweeping altruism, a belief in sharing our own stories and the stories of those who have died and suffered through inconceivable trauma, so that we become real to each other and move to a more humane and empathic existence. I wonder if through such healing work we can recode the trauma in our bodies and inherited memories. Anna, now 91, seems to think so, as she reflects on her life and the future: *I have my kids and great-grandkids. They’re all good people, educated people. That’s our revenge against the Nazis — bringing good Jewish people into the world.* **JC**

Janlori Goldman worked as a civil rights lawyer for many years before moving back to New York. Today she is a writing mentor at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, and teaches human rights and public health at both NYU Law and Columbia Law School. Her chapbook Akhmatova’s Egg was published by Toadlily Press, and Gerald Stern chose her poem “At the Cubbyhole Bar” for first prize in Jewish Currents’ first Raynes Poetry Competition. She co-founded and edits The Wide Shore: A Journal of Global Women’s Poetry, www.thewideshore.org. Her poems can be found at www.hugeshoes.org.