Picture this

The Holocaust, which saw the extermination of about six million Jews, ended 69 years ago. But for survivor Sara Atzmon, the awful past is as fresh as the paint on her canvas.

E.06-07

Thursday’s Theme
Art & Culture

Weather
10 April 2014
Weather: 20-23°C Humidity: 70-95%
Mainly cloudy. One or two rain patches

E.05
Masterpieces
The Palace at 4AM
Giacometti takes us into the void

E.12
Editorial Room
Tastes like chicken
Food of the future

Memories on canvas

Through her emotive paintings, Holocaust survivor Sara Atzmon hopes to remind the world of what evil is capable of doing if not stopped, and create messages of awareness and tolerance that can be passed on and on.

“A

A timeline of terror

A 1934

B 1939

C 1941-1945

D 1945

E 1945

F 1941-1945

G 1939

The darkest days

When the Nazi Party came into power in the 1930s, thousands of people were under threat. The leader, Adolf Hitler, ordered the rounding up and killing of millions of Jews, along with homosexuals, the disabled and other ‘undesirable’ citizens, in what was later termed the Holocaust. As a little girl, Atzmon went through tremendous fear, hardship and humiliation. Ghettoes, factories, concentration camps, forced labor camps. The 11-year-old was taken and transported from one hell to another.

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She was forced to work from day to night with barely enough food to have some energy to believe that you will survive,” she said. And Atzmon did survive. In April 1945, she was freed by US troops, weighing only 17kg at the age of 12. The Holocaust took 61 members of her family, including three of her brothers, four nephews, her father, grandmother, aunts and cousins.

Don’t look back in anger

Despite the indescribable pain that Atzmon went through, the messages she strives to send through her paintings are not about rage or revenge. Instead, she hopes that her pictorial stories will serve as positive messages of awareness and tolerance. “The message is... they [people] need to keep the flame small and not let it grow,” Atzmon explains. “Flare the flame... As soon as it is, it is too dangerous.”

The remains

“Then I had a feeling that I had to do something, because words are too small. Words go in one side, out the other side,” she said.

Under the age of 12, I experienced a miracle – I was actually rescued from hell,” Sara Atzmon said during her address at the opening ceremony of the exhibition “Surviving Evil: The Pictorial Language of Sara Atzmon.” The painter, born Sara Gottdiener into a Hungarian family in 1933, was only a child aged 11 when the Nazi nightmare descended upon her.

The Aryanization of the country brought many changes to Hungary, her country of birth, for the first time after the Holocaust that she decided to speak through paintings. Her home had been destroyed in the war and Atzmon asked Hungarians one question which led to astonishing answers. “I asked all the people, ‘Where are the Jewish people from here?’ Nobody knew. They lived in one houses. They used our furniture, and everything. And they did not know what happened to the Jewish people."

The infuriating experience provoked Atzmon to paint her memories of the horrible past. “Then I had a feeling that I had to have some energy to believe that you will survive,” she said. And Atzmon did survive. In April 1945, she was freed by US troops, weighing only 17kg at the age of 12. The Holocaust took 61 members of her family, including three of her brothers, four nephews, her father, grandmother, aunts and cousins.

A combination of Atzmon’s fears during two different wars: World War II and the Gulf War. While the train tracks on the cardboard refer to those that took her to the concentration camps, ‘Wiper’ as illustrated in the painting, was the code name for pictures from words to pictures.

A painting created out of Atzmon’s memory of her days in Bergen-Belsen, when she had to stand in the snow to eat cold messy food, is the physical record of the phylacteries (פְּרַקְטְרֵי) look like human figures, the painter explains.

In 1934, Germany invades Poland (Polen) to begin World War II. The Nazis conduct a reign of terror in occupied Europe, sending increasing numbers of Jews and others to death camps.

World War II begins. Germany invades Poland (Polen). The country with the largest Jewish population in Europe (Europa), Jews are forced to mark ghettoes, ‘Viper’, as illustrated in the painting, was the code name for pictures from words to pictures.

And They Turned into Ashes

Atzmon’s first painting after her devastating visit to Hungary when she discovered that some Hungarians appeared to be unaware of the fact that many Jews ‘turned into ashes’ because of the Holocaust.

A gallery on survival

A guided tour of the exhibition is also being exhibited at the Goethe-Institut Hong Kong from now until 3 May.

Guided tours and lectures

A 1/F, T.T. Tsui Building, University Museum and Art Gallery, The University of Hong Kong (HKU)

Venue: 1/F, Fung Ping Shan Building, University Museum and Art Gallery, The University of Hong Kong (HKU)

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