

Places of Galicia

Nina Talbot's new series of oil paintings refers to Jewish life in the former historical Galicia, a province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which today is part of Poland and Western Ukraine. The painting images present Galician places, its people and events, from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, highlighting memory and commemoration in connection with Jews in Galicia. The paintings evoke memory of the Jewish communities that flourished in this part of the world and its tragic destruction at the hands of the Nazis and the war.

Talbot's maternal family was from Dynów and paternal family from areas around L'viv (Lwów, Lemberg) including Kamyanka Buzka (Kamionka Strumiłowa), Seredpil'tsi (Śródopulce, Radekhiv (Radziechów), Brody, Horodok (Grodek), Chortkiv (Czortków), Skole, Sukhostav (Suchostaw) and Vovchuky (Wołczuchy).

Those who perished by Nazi bullets do not have graves— their remains are huddled together beneath mounds of earth, unknown souls except to those who live in the memory of their descendants.

The heart mourns the thought of facing the loss of existence and memory bringing a future of forgetting the Jewish communities in the former historical Galicia. It is an obligation to save the embers of the burning fires, which flickered and destroyed a place where Jewish families found rest and settled. It has taken [me five] years to collect crumbs and shards of the history of our villages— its life, its sorrow. But of all of this we've got a few drops.

—Excerpt from The Dinov Yizkor Book, 1979, Tel Aviv

{Paintings are oil paint on linen stretched on frames and measure 24" x 18" (60 cm. x 17 cm.)}

Across the Battlefields Back to Life

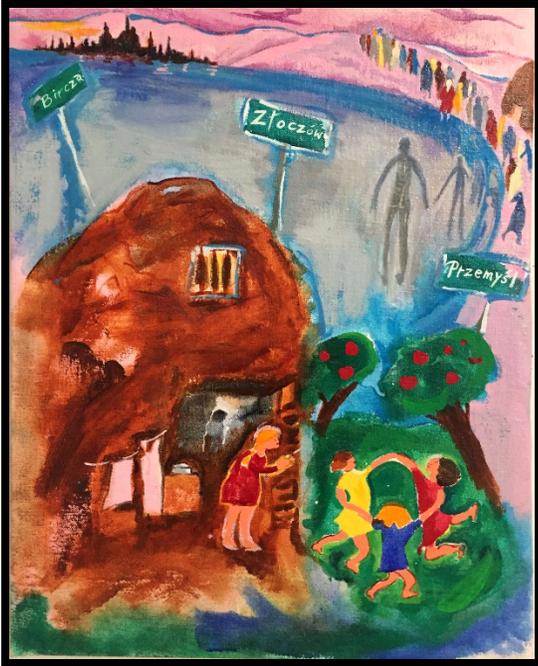


Our situation lasted this way for almost a year and a half. Then the Russian Army, with a heroic struggle, retook the area. This was heralded by heavy bombardment from the air. The Russian military entered and liberated us from the hopeless situation. We were free.

We already were depleted of strength, barely dragged ourselves with the help of sticks across the battlefields back to a life.

- From "The Road of Suffering", By Rywka Klein-Weinik, Story from the Dynów Yizkor book, 1949/50

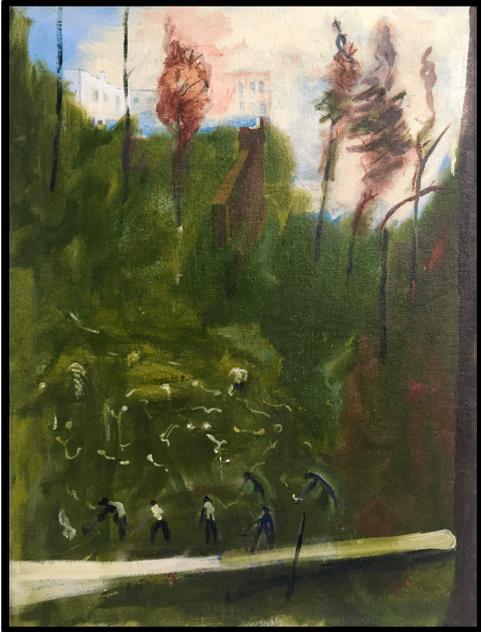
Why Can't I Play?



My child often looked out through the cracks between the boards and saw the children playing. She begged me that she also wanted to play. I told her that we Jews could not go outside because the Germans were killing Jewish children. To this she asked: "Must I be a Jew when it is so bad?" ...She was then four and a half years old.

- From "The Road of Suffering", By Rywka Klein-Weinik, Story from the Dynów Yizkor book, 1949/50

Forest Harvest



In my maternal grandmother's town of Dynów, about 400 Jews were murdered when the Nazis invaded. There are two killing fields where this took place. One of them was in the Zurawiec Forest on Karolówka Street, where my great-great grandmother Chaya Spinrad was killed at the age of close to 100. The other killing field is located on a plot of land on the outskirts of town at the intersection of now Ożoga and Słowackiego Streets. This place is where the Nazis marched 200 men down the road where they were ordered to strip, dig a ditch and were shot into it. Thirty-seven members of my family were murdered at these two sites.

After the war, workers dug up the remains of the bodies in the Zurawiec Forest, and buried them in the old Jewish cemetery a small distance away. Villagers put a cross on the forest site in memorium to mark the killing field.

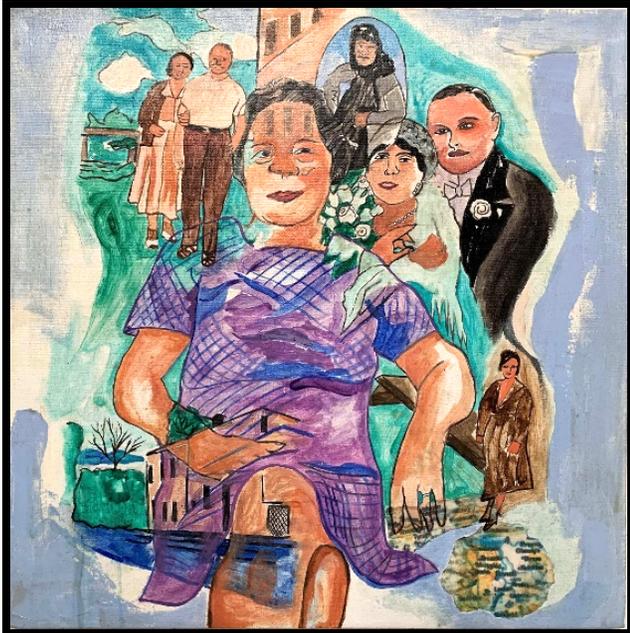
Broken Tree



Thirty-seven members of my family from my maternal grandmother's side were murdered in their hometown of Dynów on Rosh Hashanah 1939. One does not know what branch of their family tree is cut off until you go looking. There are other members of my family that most likely were murdered during the Nazi invasion of Poland, as when I did go looking for them, I came to the end of the trail, and also based on survivors testimonies from their towns in East Galicia, now Ukraine.

This painting documents the thirty-seven members of the Neger and Spinrad families from Dynów whose lives were stamped out by the Nazi murderers. Not only were those lives snuffed out, but any possible future generations as well.

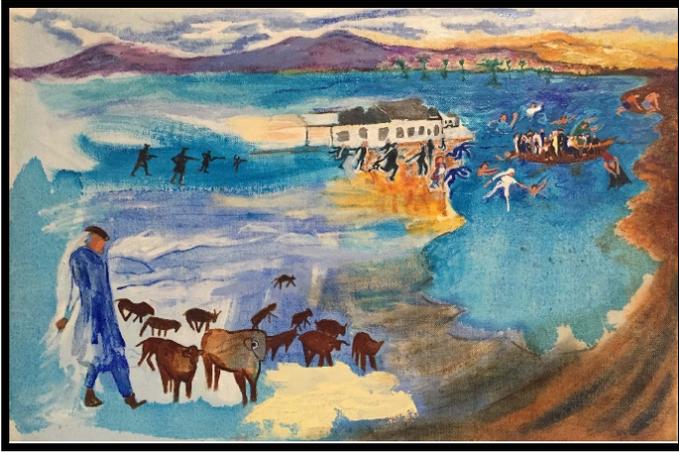
Bella



Bella Neger was my grandmother. She was born in Dynów, the daughter of Avraham Neger and Taube Neger (née Spinrad). Bella was the eldest of Taube and Avraham's eight children. She grew up on Łazienna Street. Taube died of Cholera, which she contracted during a pogrom in 1914. During this time, the Cossacks pillaged the town killing many Jews. Bella returned to town without her mother. In her grief, she spent every night at her grandmother Chaya's apartment, which was across the street from her father's house.

Bella came to the United States when she was 17 years old. Her sorrow over her mother's death prompted her to seek a new life for herself. She arrived by boat into the U.S. and went to Buffalo, NY to stay with relatives. Bella later came to New York City where she worked in a hat factory on the Lower East Side. Eventually she met her husband Joseph Tolpen. They moved to the Bronx and raised their family there. In later years, Bella ran the concession at the New Yorker Theater on the Upper West Side. She was known as the Candy Lady of the New Yorker Theater, which was run by my father Dan Talbot.

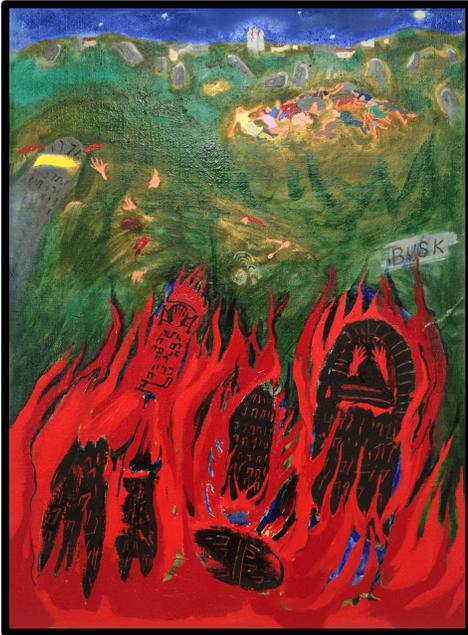
Galicia Landscape with Nazi Chasers



My Uncle Sam Neger described the Nazi invasion in Dynów chasing Jews across the San River. Many of them drowned— the elderly, women holding children.

Sam's father, grandfather, brothers and uncles were cattle dealers and kosher butchers before the war.

Burning Busk

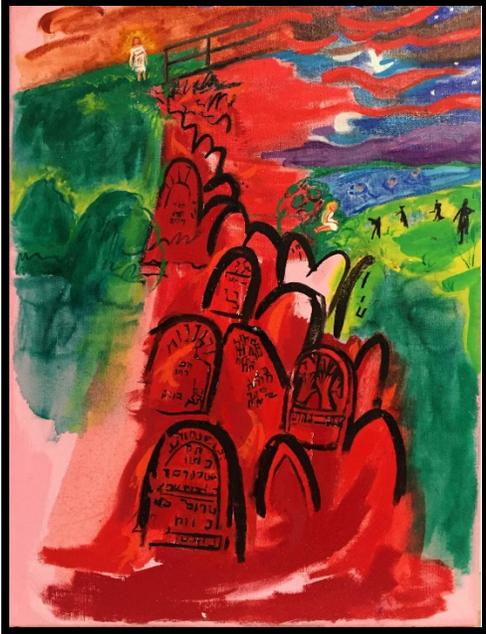


Our guide drove us to Busk on the way back from Brody. I didn't know why we were going there, as I didn't have any records of family from this town.

I learned about Father Patrick DeBois, the French Catholic priest who made it his mission to identify mass graves in Ukraine and Poland. In his book, "Holocaust By Bullets", Father DeBois describes his visits to Busk, meeting elders who witnessed the shootings of the Jews of their town. Many of them had not spoken about this horror until the priest recorded their testimonies. One witness recalled that the Nazis forced local Poles to cook extravagant meals for them, served on tables next to the killing site. The Jews were shot into the ravine and buried, but the earth above the pit would move for two or three days. After a while, blood would begin to come to the surface and seep out of the pit [Testimony from Anna Dychkant].

We visited the site of the mass grave in Busk, where many gravestones still stood. It was a beautiful sunny September day, a farmer and his cows from a nearby farm looked at us. A stream from the Bug River meandered through the land. I wondered if on May 21, 1943, when the Jews were murdered on this site if it was also a beautiful sunny day...

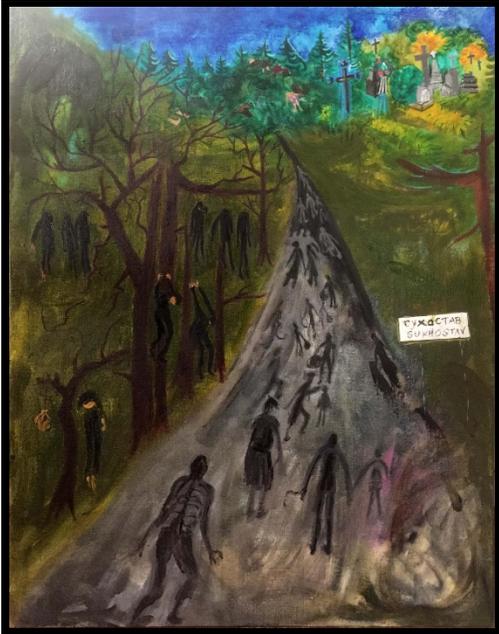
Dora and Burning Tombstones



I hurried to the station [Kristanopol]. It was a mess. Everyone was being evacuated. Only the explosives trains were being left behind. The line running south to Lwów had been demolished; rails had been removed, the sleepers torn out and heaped in pyres. I spent the night at the station. The rings of fire grew closer and more intense. I saw a large fire nearby and I headed over. The mounds of sleepers and other wood were blazing around the depot. It was a clear night, with a full moon shining in the starry sky. I turned to go back and saw something fantastic: hundreds of stone slabs, red, burning, with Hebrew letters glowing. At first I couldn't understand what I was seeing. But then I realized: this was a Jewish cemetery. The glowing gravestones were reflecting the flames. It was an extraordinary spectacle, as if generations— centuries— of Jews had returned from the past to the mystical moonlit night, to gaze with fiery eyes at the horrors closing in on their shtetl.

- From "The Enemy At His Pleasure" [Original title: The Destruction of Galicia], S. Ansky, pg. 57

Suchostaw Mound

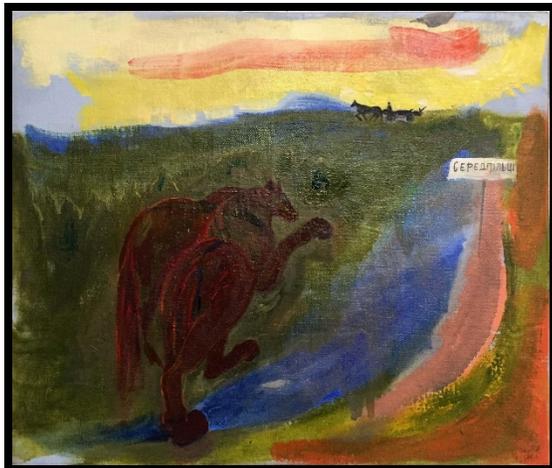


We'd already gone through enough misery and horror. When the Germans came back to our town [Suchostaw] and began shooting at us, we hid in the cellars for five days without food or water. Somehow or other we managed to get by, but the thirst was unbearable. A father and mother went down to the river to get water and they never came back. Later on, we found their corpses. The day before yesterday, when the shooting fell off slightly, we ventured out of the cellars. The general ordered all Jews, including children, to assemble in the marketplace. There were sixty-eight of us. Thirty men were pulled out, arrested, and put in the trenches. We don't know what's going to happen to them. The rest of us were banished. We left on foot. Walking was terrible. It was raining. The road was covered with thick mud, and my daughter was pregnant, ready to give birth any moment—and we also had the two little boys. We dragged ourselves along for twenty-four hours. At one point, my daughter asked me: "Mama, look! What's hanging from those trees?" I looked. There were three Jews. I was afraid to take a closer look—I might know them."

- From "The Enemy At His Pleasure" [Original title: The Destruction of Galicia], S. Ansky, pg. 37-38

Artist's note: I was in Suchostaw on Friday, September 14, 2018. Suchostaw is the town where my maternal grandfather Joseph Tolpen was from. When we were there, we found a local woman, Maria, who took us to the town Greek Orthodox cemetery, where she pointed out a mound, somewhat apart from the elaborate graves, which she said her mother told her that was where the Jews of Suchostaw were shot by the Nazis and buried into a mass grave. When I asked Maria how her mother knew about it, she said that her grandmother was a witness. Maria's grandmother told her daughter that the mound was moving for several days afterwards.

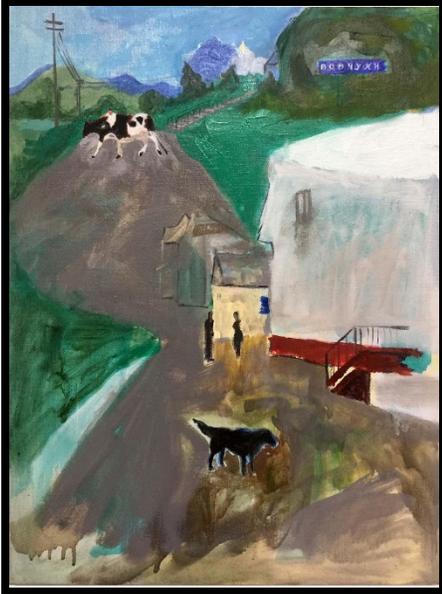
Seredpil'tsi Fields (Środopolec)



The town name means 'between fields.' This was the birthplace of my grandfather Israel Distenfeld and his parents Leizer and Deborah. We saw more horses than people here.

Our guide found an older woman to ask her if she remembered anything about the Jewish community before the war. She told us that her neighbors were an older Jewish couple, but she didn't remember their names. She said that the Nazis wiped out the entire Jewish population from their town. She said there was a tavern owned by a Jewish man near the entrance of Seredpil'tsi. We searched for traces of the old tavern on the way out, and that's where I saw a cart pulled by two horses on the horizon outlined by a bright yellow sun.

Runaway Cow



This place was hard to find--when our driver caught up with a woman walking in the road and asked her where was Vovchuky (Wołczuchy), she said, 'Right here.' The only sign with the town name was at a railroad stop. My great-great grandfather Hersch Charak and one of his sons Jacob were born in this town, and emigrated in the early 20th century to New York, must have originally traveled from that same railroad station.

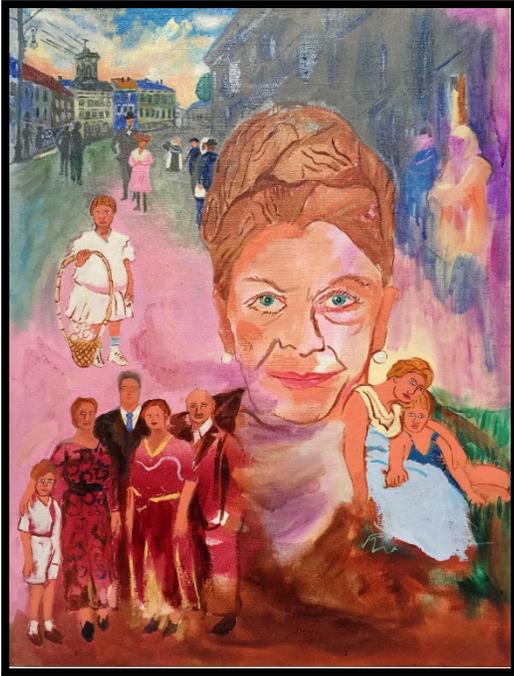
We got water from a hand pump and our driver asked a couple of locals about the town. A sparkling golden Greek Orthodox church spired into the evening sky. While standing there, out of the blue, a black and white spotted cow came running down the road, chased by a young boy. Maybe the cow wanted to travel too...

Radziechów Shul (Radekhov)



Radziechów is the Jewish Kehilla of Środopolce. The shul stands in the shadow of the town of Radziechów like a burnt ghost surrounded by weeds and broken trees. We were led inside with our guides. Bright light from the windows high up on the walls streamed inside forming shafts illuminated on the earthen ground.

Franciszka Jean Charak



My paternal grandmother, Franciszka Jean Charak, was born in the city of Przemyśl. She emigrated to the United States at the age of nineteen with her parents and younger brother Poldek in 1920.

Her family settled in The Bronx, New York. Her fiancé, my grandfather Israel Distenfeld arrived two years later, they married, and lived in several locations in the East Bronx, where my father Daniel was born.

I have loving memories of Grandma Jean, and only learned as an older adult of her unhappy marriage. She was an independent woman, however, running her own shop, “Jean’s Variety Store” on the corner of Burke and Wallace Avenues in the Bronx. My father recalled his mother’s customers, Polish women in the neighborhood, with whom she conversed with in Polish. My father also remembered the large metal cash register, which went “Boom!” when the drawer was opened. He also recalled going down to the Lower East Side to buy wholesale goods with his mother on Sundays.

I remember my Grandma Jean visiting our home, bringing large boxes of chocolate wafer bars. She also crocheted, knitted and sewed beautiful items: bedspreads with hundreds of little gathered sewn circles, crocheted blankets of colorful squares. I still have two crocheted suits she made for me, consisting of skirts and tops, one purple, one turquoise. After her husband, my grandfather died, Grandma Jean traveled a lot, which she loved. She went to Israel and Florida. She enjoyed meeting people in airports.

It was only a few years ago from this writing that my mother unearthed a box of photographs in pristine condition of my grandmother's relatives. Jean was a beautiful woman, and prided herself on her appearance, wearing stylish clothing. She was very feminine, but also dressed in men's suits, looking a bit like Greta Garbo. In photographs of her with my father, her only child, it is obvious how much she loved her son.

When I traced her family's path from various towns in Poland (now Ukraine), I was fascinated. So many places: Grodek, Skole, Brody and Czortków. My father told me that Jean's father, Isidore Charak worked as a government clerk, and his theory was that it was best that the family travelled to these towns, following him where there was work.

Doing this work, I wish I had been closer to my grandmother. She passed away in 1977 when I was seventeen years old. I feel sad when I look at her photographs, because I didn't really know her.

Leizer Distenfeld



Leizer Distenfeld was my paternal great-grandfather. He was born in the small village of Śródopolce, (now Sereďpil'tsi, in the Oblast L'vivs'ka Oblast, Ukraine). Liezer married Deborah Adler and their eldest child, my father's father Israel was born in the same town in 1896. Leizer moved with his young family to the nearby town of Kamionka Strumiłowa (Kamyanka Buzka), where the rest of their children were born.

My father told me that his father Israel said that his parents Leizer and Debora died before the Second World War and were spared the Nazi atrocities. But after my extensive research, that does not appear to be the case. On a photograph dated 1941 (no month indicated), Leizer, Debora and their daughter Adele are depicted in a studio in formal dress. Leizer would have been approximately seventy years old in 1941.

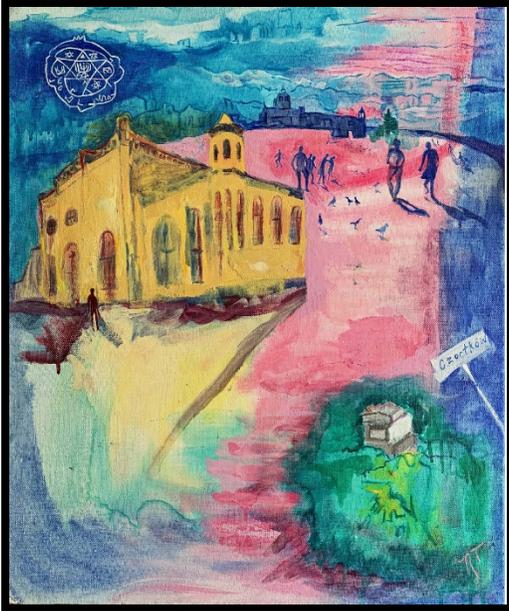
The Nazis invaded Kamionka on June 28, 1941, one week after the start of the nightmare begun with Operation Barbarossa, when the Nazis turned east, launching their invasion of Russia. Most of the Jewish population in Kamionka was rounded up, and shot in a nearby forest. The rest were transported to Bełżec, and murdered there in gas chambers.

I met a survivor from Lwów whose brother went to Kamionka during the war to meet up with his fiancée. The survivor never heard from him again and didn't know of any survivors from Kamionka.

"The Germans occupied the city on June 28, 1941, and the next day they detained and murdered 200 Jews. July 2, 1941, the local population staged an anti-Jewish pogrom with the encouragement of the Germans. The same month the Germans established the Judenrat, a Jewish council that would comply with all Gestapo requests, including cheap labor. German actions continued and a labor camp was established in the city. Jews from the nearby small villages were driven to the Kamionka- Strumiłowa camp. On September 15, 1942, the big selection took place and 1,500 Jews were sent to the Bełżec death camp. A few days later, 600 Jews were murdered in the vicinity of the city during another German action."

- From The Kamionka Strumiłowa Yizkor Book

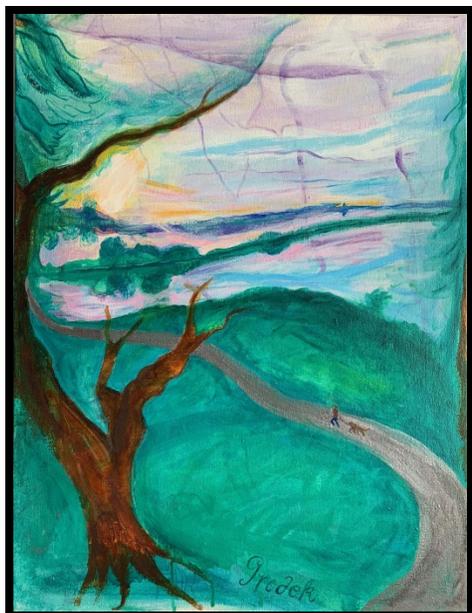
Czortków



Czortków (now Chortkiv) meaning 'Devil City' is a place where strange sounds can still be heard. This town was the last residence of my paternal great-grandparents, Isidore and Amalia Charak before they emigrated to the U.S.

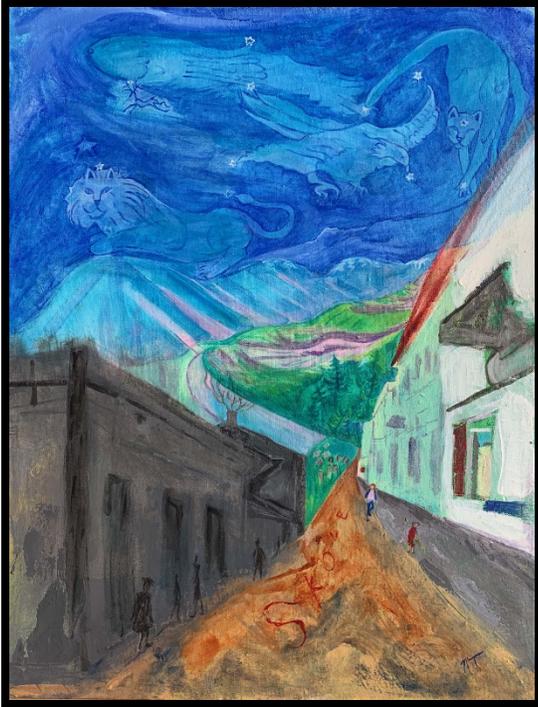
We saw the old synagogue, in crumbling condition, a memorial to The Husyatyn Rebbe, and expansive plaza with shadows of pigeons.

Grodek (Horodok)



There is no evidence of the pre-war Jewish population in current day Grodek. A lovely park with views surrounds the Smotrych River, a tributary of the Dniester River. We were there at sunset and I imagined that a hundred years ago my great-grandparents enjoyed those same views that I saw.

Skole

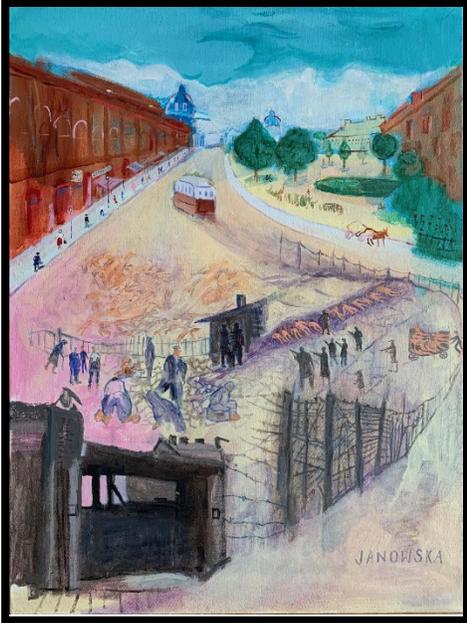


Skole was one of the towns where my great-grandparents Isidore and Amalia Charak lived before they emigrated to the U.S.

The four animals from the Mishna written by Yehuda Ben Taima— the lion, the eagle, leopard and deer dominate the ultramarine sky as witnesses to the Jewish communities of the past.

On the left side of the painting, an antique gray street with ghosts of Jewish pedestrians contrast with the right side of the painting of Skole in the current day, the street and buildings. The Jewish cemetery is at the end of the road framed by the glistening Carpathian mountain landscape in the distance.

Janowska Road/ Lwów (L'viv)

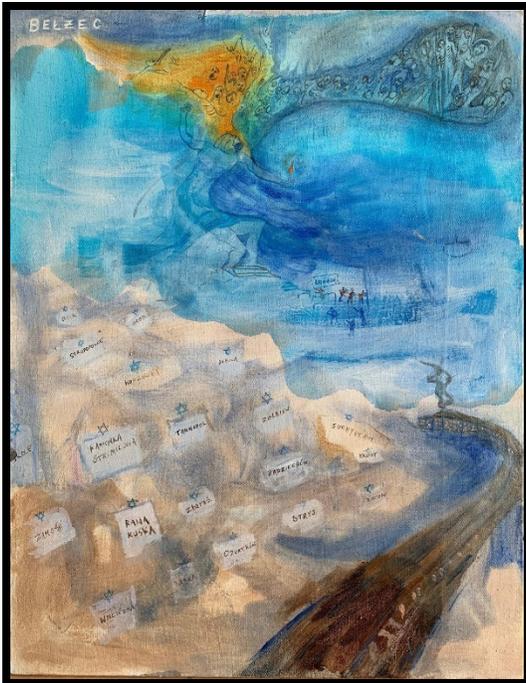


The bones of the Jews lie in the dunes of Lvov and its environs, in the crematoria of Bełżec, in the forests and along the roads of Galicia. Their remains decomposed in the killing pits that were excavated alongside every city, town and slave labor camp.

-From "Smoke and Sand; The Jews of Lvov, by Eliyahu Yones, pg. 255

My cousin Max Distenfeld perished at the age of 17 at Janowska.

Bełżec



This is the site of the murder of about 500,000 victims of the Bełżec Death Camp established for the purpose of mass mechanized killing on an industrial scale of the Jews of Europe, whose lives were brutally taken between February and December 1942 by Nazi Germany.

Earth do not cover my blood

Let there be no resting

Place for my outcry

Job: 16: 18

-Writing on wall at entrance to Bełżec

Here in this carload

I, Eve,

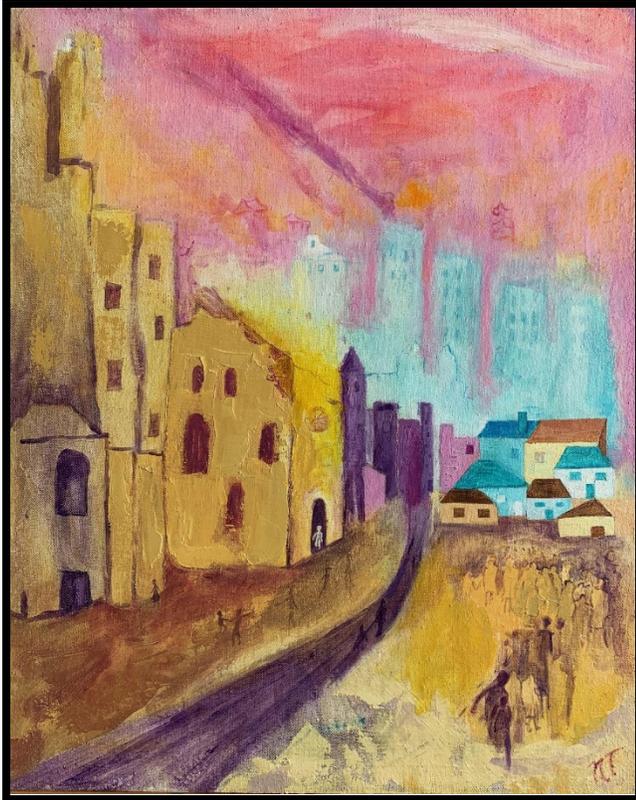
With my son Abel.

If you see my older boy,

Cain, the son of man Tell him that I...

-Dan Pagis 'written in pencil in the sealed freight car'

Shtetl in the Shadow of the City

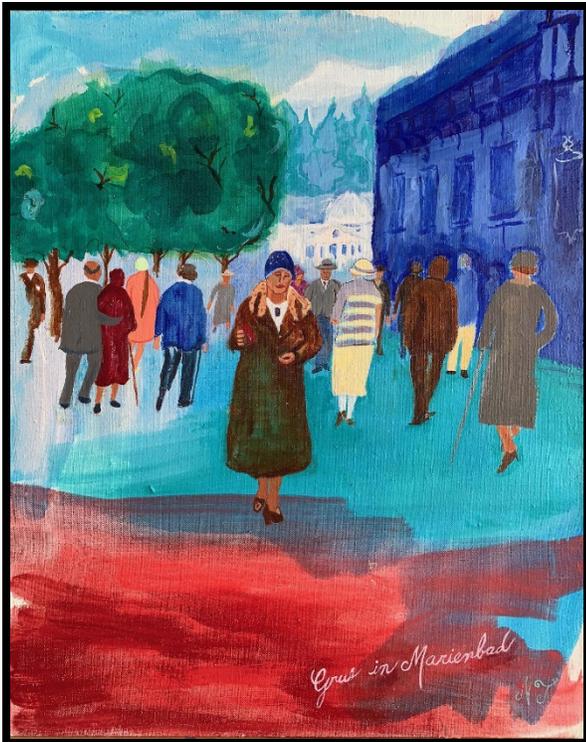


Purple shadows of figures from the Jewish communities of Galicia walk and play on the yellow sidewalks of the past.

The Galician city fades into the background amidst a pink sky.

Many Jews went to the cities of Eastern Europe and beyond, in search of work, but the memory of their shtetl was never far away.

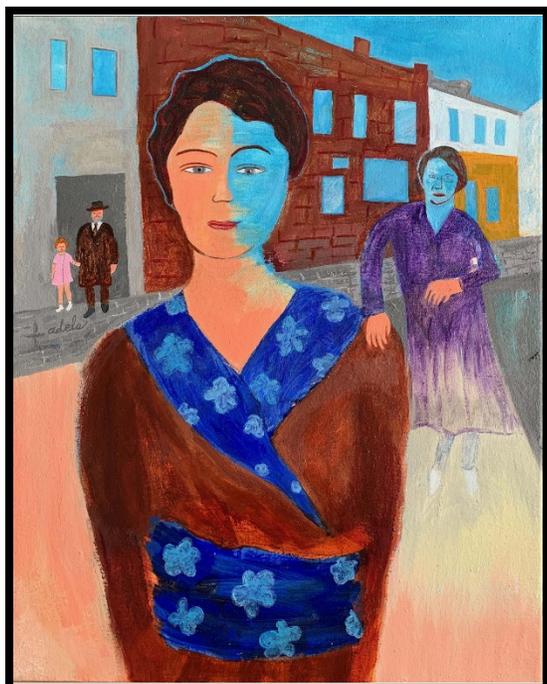
Grus in Marienbad



Amalia Charak, whom we called 'Grus' was my paternal great-grandmother. She was born in Skole 1882. She and her husband Isidore lived in many cities in the Lemberg/Lwów/L'viv area, where Isidore found work as a civil clerk.

I have a photograph of Grus, looking very elegant in a fur-trimmed coat on a metropolitan street with a large domed building in the background. Originally I thought the location of the photo was in Vienna, as that was one of the places where the family spent time. It turns out that the location is in Marienbad near the Pavilion of Cross Springs.

Adele



Adele Distenfeld was my paternal great-aunt. She was born in Kamionka Strumiłowa, a town near Lwów. My father told me that his father, Israel Distenfeld, Adele's older brother said that Adele died in childbirth before the war. I found Adele's birth record of 1905. I think that Adele did not die in childbirth.

Based on the history of the Nazi invasion of this town on June 28, 1941, and a photo of Adele with her family dated 1941, I believe that Adele was murdered in a forest nearby, among hundreds of other Jews, or at Belzec.

In another photo of Adele's uncle, Israel Adler, holding the hand of a little girl, is the name 'Adela' written on the front of the picture. I have a feeling that perhaps this is the child of Adele.

When I visited Kamionka Strumiłowa in September 2018, our guide found the street, and location of a building where Leizer, Adele's father had a restaurant. I imagined Adele walking out on that street, with her mother, uncle and child in the background.