

ISRAELA HARGIL PHOTOEROSION

On the cover: Letters that the artist's father wrote to her but did not know where to send. From one of the letters:
"I don't know where you are and how you are living. Do you know that today is your birthday? My dear daughter... so many golden dreams did we have, your mother and I, when you were born, so much sunshine and joy were there in our home... but fate had it otherwise. War. That cursed Hitler destroyed our paradise..."

Heaping Identities

Anat Gatenio



In a small, sealed, almost concealed space, Israela Hargil has constructed a hermetic sculptural installation that takes her and its viewers to a closed personal world whose roots are interred deep in her own private history.

Israela Hargil's current exhibition, **Photoerosion**, is not just another exhibition. In this loaded display, the artist, for the first time and more than sixty years later, touches memories and inner conflicts that relate to formative childhood experiences of an infant whose life changed unrecognizably with the onset of World War II.

Three works, framed in simple wooden frames and linked to one another by an intricate and winding line, greet the viewer upon entering the installation space. The composition, which joins two and separates one, presents collages based on photographs of the artist's nuclear family: her father, the baby daughter and her mother. Twisted air roots, which form a fragile and fluttery connecting element, seem to both bind and gently join the frames to one another. The organic element that, in nature, serves as a source of life alludes, upon entering the installation, to a disruption of the natural and to detachment and disbandment.

The baby Iza, which is the artist's birth name, was born on the eve of World War II to Elsa and Kalman Harnik in the Galician town of Brody in Poland. Young, bourgeois, educated, musician parents, living in the Jewish quarter, teaching at the Jewish school, but well-rooted in the Polish culture. Iza Harnik, the infant, vaguely remembers hiding in the basement during bombings; her father venturing out to seek milk, and upon his return talking about his friend Jacek Miklaszewski who had offered to help. Upon returning to their home, they find chaos and destruction, the work of the Germans. "Good thing we didn't hide Iza behind the bookcase", the child remembers hearing her father say.

Her mother disappeared very early on in her life, when she was only three years old. Later on it would become clear that she was executed, together with her brother, and buried in a ditch that they had dug with their own hands on the outskirts of town. Infant Iza has only few and vague memories of her mother, whose place was taken by her beloved grandmother, until she too vanished. From that time onward, strong longings for the loving tenderness of both women will haunt her, feelings that will intensify against the backdrop of the cold shoulder she received when forced to stay with strangers until her father's return at the end of the war.

Opposite the entrance to the installation, a long row of photographs hang, separated from one another by pages of text. A young woman, a stroller, a father, a mother, a grandmother, a hug, a smile - typical gestures that display, in black and white photographs, a pair of proud parents and their newly born baby girl, happy expressions of the anticipation of a shared future. The photographs are damaged, exposing the ravages of time, which allude to the destiny that will disrupt the peaceful appearance. This is exactly what transpires in author Ida Finks' introverted and subtle text, which is interspersed between the photographs,

from which the most dreaded rises up from among the lines of mild and measured words that describe a daily routine into which terror permeates in a non-dramatic manner.

"...although, obeying the order that had been posted the previous evening, I had left my house after eating a perfectly normal breakfast, at a table that was set in a normal way, in a room whose doors opened onto a garden veiled in morning mists, dry and golden in the rising sun. Our transformation was not yet complete; we were still living out of habit in the old time, that was measured in months and years..."

(from "A Scrap of Time" a story published in Ida Fink's book "A Scrap of Time", 1987).

The row of photographs accompanied by pages of text is reminiscent of the display method used in historical museums, which provides the viewers with factual verbal explanations about the visuality presented before them. Here, however, the text is not objective but rather a poetic text written by the author Ida Fink, whose own childhood was also disrupted by that same war that requires a different language and a different time.

"I want to talk about a certain time not measured in months and years. For so long I have wanted to talk about this time, and not in the way I will talk about it now, not just about this one scrap of time. I wanted to, but I couldn't, I didn't know how. I was afraid, too, that this second time, which is measured in months and years, had buried the other time under a layer of years, that this second time had crushed the first and destroyed it within me. But no. Today, digging around in the ruins of memory, I found it fresh and untouched from forgetfulness. This time was measured not in months but in a word."

(from "A Scrap of Time" a story published in Ida Fink's book "A Scrap of Time", 1987).

These words accompany the early childhood photographs of Iza Harnik, today Israela Hargil the adult, whose language is not the written word but rather the language of plastic art. She too is only now attempting, many years later, to delve into her own private "ruins of memory".

The photographs are torn, fretted by acid and salt, displaying signs of erosion resulting from the extended time they spent in a box that was buried deep in the ground. An act of preservation motivated by the humanism and kindness of the father's Polish friend, succeeded in salvaging photographs and documents that will constitute unique physical evidence to the existence of another world, another family, another reality.

These and other pieces of reality lay dormant within Israela Hargil until she was able to approach them, observe them, study them and talk through them in the language she knows so well - the language of creation. These are the key materials of this installation.

Covering both walls of the installation space are boxes displaying their contents, framing collections of items that physically bring to the present geographical locations, flesh and blood people, and concrete artifacts that belong to a life story that took place in a past place and time.

The use of the metaphor of the box, case or drawer takes us first and foremost to contexts of storage, organization and preservation, as well as to actions of sorting and archival cataloguing. All these are very relevant to the action taken by the artist in this installation. These are, in fact, memory drawers, cases that





store experiences and memories, whose time has come to be opened.

The form that stores within it meaningful items also hints at the case of family documents that was buried in the ground for safe-keeping during the shaken and chaotic reality of World War II.

The box-like form takes us back also to childhood when the personal box contains the child's treasures, and is full of different items that, to an outsider, seem to be trivial and meaningless, but to the child constitute an entire universe. It seems that, for the artist, these boxes are a late replacement of the treasure boxes that little Iza never had during a period deprived of childhood.

Nevertheless, these boxes also possess a visibility characteristic of museum display cases, showing artifacts "from there", personal objects that belonged to people whose fate is unknown, signs of complete lives that were never realized, reference to the plentiful life style of an extinct community.

Signs of identity that relate to the artist's parents can be discerned among the many items that fill the "memory boxes". These are reminiscent of a happy wedding, a world of music, smoking habits, Polish postage stamps, an ID card and handwritten postcards. An East European style napkin, a personalized monogram, an embroidered scarf and paper silhouettes, as made by the artist's mother, and remained a vague and long-lost memory in her heart.

Additional boxes contain various items that are related to the stories of the childhood and rescue of Iza Harnik, a young child who, with no preparation or advance warning, was given to a Christian Polish family so as to give her a life.

The idea of hiding the child was suggested by Jacek Miklaszewski, a close friend of her father and the head of a wealthy Polish family (which also included his wife Marysia and 7 year old daughter Wladzia) from the city of Brody. Jacek, a very devout Catholic, a musician and man of ethics, a resourceful and survival-intent man, also helped her father and two other Jews find a hiding place in a ditch in a village outside of Brody. Her grandmother stayed in the Ghetto where she passed away.

The transition to the Polish-Christian environment was very sharp and included a series of dramatic changes that the young child was forced to accept: Adopting a new name - Eva Miklaszewska, learning a new life history (as an orphan of Christian parents, killed in the bombing of their home in a nearby village), learning Catholic prayers and rituals and erasing her Jewish identify, practicing a clear Polish accent and avoiding laughter (" Because you have a Jewish laugh", as her "aunt" Marysia told her).

The house was large and spacious. A yard with horses and wagons, the neighbors' enchanted but locked garden. The head of the family (whom she called "uncle") treated her with warmth, but his wife exuded what the child perceived as a gust of alienation, coolness and at times also harshness. In the new home, she at first conducted herself freely, totally adhering to her new identity. However, in light of suspicions that arouse around town, she was transferred secretly from one strange house to another and from one village to another, until she finally returned to the family's house, hiding by day and wandering about freely only at night.

During the years she spent with the Miklaszewski family, she did not think she would ever go "home". She missed her father and her grandmother, but not her mother, whom she barely remembered. She recalls that the Ukrainian maid occasionally gave her something from her father. Once, she was taken to visit her father in his hiding place. She remembers descending into a horrible ditch, and a warm and loving hug with a mustached man in Ukrainian clothes. The father tried to persuade the Christian family to keep the girl, but they claimed that it was impractical.

Two boxes touch directly on the inner conflict experienced by little Eva, who is assimilating a new identity that includes a false life story and total adoption of a Christian consciousness, while living in constant conflict with another biography and a rejected identity of a Jewess.

Among the items in the "childhood boxes" the artist created, which emerge as distant memories, we can see reference to the materialist Catholic world that surrounded her as a child, who received from the Polish family a small prayer book, a personal prayer necklace and a medallion which she did not take off throughout the entire war years. Within the boxes and on the frames are paintings and sculptures of the Christian sacred figures and New Testament stories, a drawing of the bleeding head of the dead Christ, which the priest gave her as a going-away gift at the end of the war. Pictures of wooden sculptures of the crucified Christ, in road-side alters that resemble wooden house-like structures, prayer alters typical of rural Poland, a land of strong religious consciousness.

Positive feelings that relate to the external beauty of churches, a feeling of festivity, majestic ritualism, and a Christmas laden with gifts and homely warmth, are all mixed with a conflicted existential condition due to her true identity as a Jewess. A simultaneous sense of belonging and of not belonging. She recalls a strong wish to belong to the Christian world and to the Polish society in order to anchor her place and feel safe.

The Catholic state of mind, the stories of the sin and the punishment, the fear of the metaphors of evil and Satan were continuously present in her daily life routine. The ugly image of the Jew and the blame placed on the Jews for Christ's death constantly crept into the stories. After a time, she felt a physical aversion towards Jews.

Despite constantly remembering that she was Iza Harnik, the Jewess, she wished with all her might to erase that detail from her consciousness. She lived in constant fear that the truth will be discovered, or that she would have to return to her previous identity, which now took on such a negative connotation. She greatly believed in Jesus but was scared of him since he surely knew the truth.

She remembers walking in a religious procession, all dressed in white, carrying a pillow with Christ's crown of thorns on it, full of pride but also of great fear that something will go wrong and her Jewishness will be revealed. She also feared the Christian confirmation ceremony at church, lest her true identity be discovered at this event. Constant conflict between the attraction to Christianity and the repulsion by Judaism, between the wish to completely belong to the Christian world and the knowledge of the troubling truth that she in fact belongs to the despised Jewish world. A thought that accompanied her always was: "A am a Jew who belongs to those who murdered God... and that is awful."



Scattered among the boxes that contain objects indicative of an autobiographical narrative are other boxes with random ready-made objects collected by the artist. Old, rusty items, objects on which time has left its impression. Parts of indistinguishable tools, pipes, locks or various parts with amorphous forms joined together in a composition of inner beauty. The sculptural composition receives an abstract answer in various parts of the boxes. The content of these boxes remains unsolved - an element that introduces a mysterious and dark side to the entire set.

Abstract drawings on grease-proof paper that depict amorphous images appear as a central motif in additional individual boxes or within the "memory boxes" themselves, as kind of enigmatic interruptions that trouble the viewer. The small drawings are reminiscent of preparation drawings for an abstract sculpture that characterized the artist's work over the years. Many of the drawings depict plastic bodies with organic, unsolved forms. These metaphors can be interpreted as unidentified aggressive creatures, snakes, roots, parts of rock or anatomical descriptions. They infuse the installation, which is mostly based on concrete objects, with a concealed, and less explicit emotional facet. The depicted metaphors add feelings of terror, heaviness and distress to the over-all installation, and reflect the artist's debate with a more hidden stratum, with which the encounter is complex and multilayered.

The format or metaphor that is reminiscent of boxes, frames, crates or cases has been appearing in Israella Hargil's work for a long time. In the course of her work, these metaphors have received abstract formal treatment that uses a grid based upon horizontal and vertical division, with various proportions, while referring to the material the work is made from. In the past, the artist chose these metaphors intuitively, but in time they have developed into crates that contain different objects, some abstract, most enigmatic. Only in this exhibition does the box format receive a more direct autobiographic interpretation that suggests the crate metaphor as an archive of past time or as a storage drawer for painful memories.

Another characteristic of the artist's work is the use of common materials or objects (object trouvé) that carry previous history and baggage "on their back". Recycled materials, carrying layers of time within them and enabling the creation, albeit abstract and lacking narrative (characteristic of her past work), to exist within a set of associations that the material and the object summon.

Objects that grow branches or air roots (not connected to solid ground) appear repeatedly in the artist's work, stemming from her past interest in the connection between the industrial and the organic. Such objects could be seen in the exhibitions *Air Roots* and *Embalmed Liquids*, where the artist's father's briefcase first appeared growing dry branches (an early metaphor of the artist's occupation with her personal past and the document case that was preserved in the ground). It could be said that, at this stage, the discussion of separation and connection to roots and of the concept of time was left metaphoric and intuitive, and that only in the present exhibition is it revealed in its autobiographic context.

In the inner, concealed part of the installation, the viewer is exposed to a wall that looks more like a storage area, on which various artifacts are superimposed in total chaos. A kind of storeroom in which the past has frozen over. The objects, made mainly of wood or rusty metal, display the ravages of time, most of whose materialism and morphology ascribes them to another time and place.



Wooden heads on which hats were placed in Poland, the artist's father's violin, a sewing machine cover, an easel, old utensils. An ensemble of objects in extreme disorder, on the verge of collapse, arranged in complete contrast to the straight and restrained line of family photographs displayed on the opposite wall.

This chaotic pile of memories represents the confusion felt by a girl who lives in an existential state in which a war is taking place outside and a confusion of identities is occurring within. Even today, an entire life time later, the artist encounters difficulties "organizing" her crumbling and loaded past, and recruits the language of art, which is her language of expression, to help her face it.

Iza Harnik's life story during the war will take her from Brody to Cracow, where she will grow up in the company of Polish children and will deepen her Christian education in the kindergarten and school. Some time after the end of the war, her father will return from the Russian army (to which he succeeded in getting drafted during the war), with the hope of reuniting with his beloved daughter. The reunion between them will, however, be difficult and complicated. Long years of separation at a young age cover up the feelings toward the biological father who represents the repressed Jewish identity. Separation from the Polish family and the return to her father and to the old-new Jewish identity will be very gradual. Reunion with surviving relatives. Rebuilding the relationship between the father and his daughter. Exposure to Zionist activities at the end of the war, will lead to their immigration by boat from Marseilles to Palestine.

Eva Miklaszewska becomes the Jewish Iza Harnik again, but in Israel, in the same year that the State of Israel is established, becomes Israela Harnik. Another new beginning staying with relatives in Tel Aviv, intensive studying of the Hebrew language, and an attempt to belong, as a teenage girl who joined the youth group on Kibbutz Ramat Johanan.

Her father lived in Tel Aviv but had difficulties in making a new life for himself in Israel and passed away at an early age. Israela was orphaned at the young age of 14, and lived on the Kibbutz on which she was raised. Ten years of Kibbutz life will leave their impression and will constitute formative years in the making of her identity as a person and as an Israeli.

In her sculptural installation on display in this exhibition, Israela Hargil attempts to open up to the viewer her past and the many components that make up her personality, which was molded by layers of identity built one upon the other. But what identity did Israela Hargil form, and to which of the many identities did she really feel connected? Did she feel herself as a Jew, a Christian, a Pole, a new immigrant, a Kibbutznik, an Israeli? Do these identities live within her simultaneously, or do they occasionally emerge in different states of consciousness?

Israela Hargil's aesthetics are based on the connection with the natural, the material, and the local landscape. It was shaped within the artistic identity she developed as an artist-sculptor (and protrudes in her sculptures in stone, wood and earth). But alongside the outward observation she was always looking inward into her own private world, while drawing away from the narrative and being attracted to the more vague and abstract forms.



In her environmental projects and sculptures in which ready made objects were integrated, the concept was a leading factor in her artistic work and the material will serve it optimally. The language of shapes which in the past was chosen intuitively will indicate an affinity towards a private world that was not yet penetrated.

Now, however, a moment has arrived in Israela Hargil's life and in the course of her artistic creation, which are intertwined, when the process has "ripened", and an internal necessity was created to touch the issues themselves, and to avoid the indirect speech. Within this installation, which enables a biographical glimpse and which includes parts that refer to a seemingly historical display, she does not forego the abstract and enigmatic, in certain works that continue her artistic language familiar from the past. In these parts of the installation, the viewer can touch the path that leads into the complex and chaotic inner parts that make up the world of Israela Hargil.

