

Ein Harod: A museum to remember



LIFE, LIFE, LIFE
PAMELA PELED

A museum is not an obvious trigger for a heated debate with a daughter, but exactly as the first gusts of typhoon Trami hit Japan recently, my child and I braved the gloomy afternoon for one of the world's gloomiest testimonials: The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. A little sentence somewhere notes the unprovoked attack on Pearl Harbor that brought the US into World War II. The rest of the building showcases Japanese suffering and the narrative is clear: Hiroshima's civilians were innocent victims of America's inhumanity. Nobody should ever be nuked again.

Now I agree that nobody should be nuked. Of course I do. But, I wondered aloud, should museums be more even-handed when presenting history? What about Japanese culpability for the disaster? My daughter disagreed; our own multitude of museums in Israel, she argued, are all agenda-driven.

I suppose she's right. Museums are memory, but they also shape memories. And how pastoral, how peaceful-despite-the-pain, how picturesque the past seems through the prism of Israel's incredible first-ever museum: the Mishkan Museum of Art in Ein Harod.

Can there actually be another place on God's earth that funds an art museum when food itself is scarce? But in 1938, despite not yet having basic amenities like electricity (and while serving as a base for Orde Wingate's Special Night Squads against Arab riots), Kibbutz Ein Harod sent Haim Atar, resident baker and artist, to Paris to buy paintings.

Atar, like the other early members, hailed from the USSR; the kibbutz was founded in 1921 by Russian Jewish pioneers of the Third Aliyah who dropped their degrees for work dungarees to haul rocks and build roads in Palestine. Some 35 of them pitched their tents one evening at the foot of Mount Gilboa, by the cool, clear water of the Harod Spring. That is the same spring, of course, where Gideon camped in biblical days, with his too-many troops en route to rout the Midianites. God commanded Gideon to take his men down to the water; only those that lay and lapped were tapped to fight; the kneelers who cupped their hands to drink were sent home with the fearful and trembling. And those few, that happy band of 300 brothers, had a huge victory in the valley which was thick as locusts with Midianites, Amalekites and their innumerable camels.

Back to the future. Atar, coming from Russia as he did, called artists such as Chagall, Soutine and Modigliani "lands-

man." The kibbutz contact his mates, explained that he was expanding the tiny "Art Corner" of his own rural studio into a full-scale museum, and bargained for some paintings. Then began the ambitious project to build a permanent place to house them.

Almost without any proper funding, the kibbutz somehow got it together to construct their museum, designed by Samuel Bickels. What a structure it turned out to be! Years later, world-renowned architect Lorenzo Piano would claim to have found his inspiration on Ein Harod. The 14 exhibition halls harness the natural light that bounces off the Gilboan hills; special technology cuts the glare from the Mediterranean sun. Art treasures include over 18,000 paintings, drawings and prints, sculptures and objects of Jewish folk art from 30 countries.

A stroll through the cool stone rooms is, of course, a personal roots tour for any Jewish tourist. The full spectrum of the joys and pain of east European shtetl life are vividly recalled, from spiritual synagogue scenes to anguished souls fleeing pogroms. Works by pioneering Jewish painters draw the viewer into worlds that are lost: Horowitz and Hirshenberg, Wachtel and Minkowski and Markowicz pay a permanent tribute.

Jewish art is universally beloved. Impressionist Max Liebermann and Brodsky hang in Ein Harod. There are Jewish Cubists and Expressionists, English and American painters – Joseph, Herman, Max Weber, Lichtenstein. A collection from the hundreds of artists who perished in the Holocaust commemorates their lost lives; visitors lingering over their art can only wonder what masterpieces were never painted because the magic in those palettes was Jewish talent.

The gallery of Israeli art traces all our greats: Ruben, Zaritzky, Gutman, Janco, Yosi Bergner and many others are displayed, along with Atar himself, whose little wooden studio was the womb for this special space. Israel's first-ever museum was a trailblazer, drawing pioneers – farmworkers, plumbers and professors – into its halls even as they were draining the swamps.

In 1951, Marc Chagall visited Israel for the first time. "Pick a museum, any museum," the famous artist asked his host, "and take me there." According to director and curator Yaniv Shapiro, the choice was limited to one; Ein Harod's was the only one in the land.

Chagall's appreciative guest-book comments and commemorative painting are still on show today.

And today, in one of those quintessentially only-in-Israel twists, an American immigrant who made aliyah via Russia where she married a Soviet Jewish refusenik is breathing new life into the museum. Andrea Wine, whose CV



CAFÉ BICKELS in the sculpture garden is named for architect Samuel Bickels, who designed Ein Harod's art center. (Ran Arde)

would take up two articles, moved from Moscow to Tel Aviv some years after her divorce. A consultant in corporate governance and CEO recruiting, fluent in far too many languages to list, and unfairly beautiful to top it all, she soon met Gershon Silbert, pianist and businessman, whose family members were among the founders of Ein Harod. They soon conscripted her to head the Friends of the Museum; and Wine felt her Zionism "waking up" as she started shaking up the Israeli public to rediscover the treasures of what Shimon Peres dubbed "the pearl of the valley."

Plans include a 2019 retrospective of Chaim Soutine's work, next to that of Haim Atar, whom he so influenced, as well as 14 contemporary Israeli artists and their relationship to the Mishkan. In 2017, over 10,000 schoolchildren, mostly Arab, visited the museum, winning it the President's Prize for coexistence.

Museums are not merely memory, they also mold our moods. If Hiroshima shocks with its apocalyptic scenes, Ein Harod transports the visitor into an age that seems more authentic and cultured. Head in the direction of Beit She'an and see it for yourselves. It's a lovely way to spend the day. ■

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