

JEWISH EXPONENT

Arts

NMAJH Exhibit Painted Through Witnesses' Perspectives

By **Rachel Kurland** - October 25, 2017

Florida-based artist Bruce Gendelman hopes to keep survivors' memories, stories and their history alive through his "post-witness Holocaust art."

His current exhibit, *Sifting Through Ashes*, will circle the globe, but first stop at the National Museum of American Jewish History.

The exhibit is composed of nine large-scale textured oil paintings and 20 photographs from a trip Gendelman took to Poland and Ukraine, where he visited Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Sifting Through Ashes will be on display at the NMAJH Oct. 27 — Gendelman will be at the museum that day at noon for a meet-and-greet — through Jan. 7, 2018.

Gendelman's brother-in-law is a sculptor whose piece was being dedicated in Krakow's Jewish quarter, Kazimierz, in 2015, so he tagged along with his sister.



Bruce Gendelman | Photos provided

Word got around to their native Jewish Federation in Milwaukee, so Rabbi Hannah Rosenthal, the former U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, decided to make a mission trip out of it.

About 35 people went, alongside Father Patrick Desbois — a Catholic priest who has devoted his life to investigating the Holocaust — who joined them briefly in Poland, where they met witnesses, survivors and deniers.

Once on their own, Gendelman and his family wanted to know what happened to their ancestors who were murdered, something his grandfather, originally from a small town in Ukraine called Bolechow, never knew as he was the only one in his family to survive the war.

With influence from the memoir *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* by Daniel Mendelsohn, in which he researched the lives of family members who lived and were killed in Bolechow, Gendelman had a blueprint to find his own ancestors.

Through research, guides and witnesses, he concluded that members of his family were paraded through the city naked and walked to their death across town into a forest.

"It was a very emotional trip because we felt like we sort of closed that loop that our grandfather never knew," he added.

A guide took them to that forested burial place — by crossing a disgruntled farmer's field with a gnarly German shepherd and hopping a barbed-wire fence — where all the Jews who lived there since the Spanish Inquisition are buried.

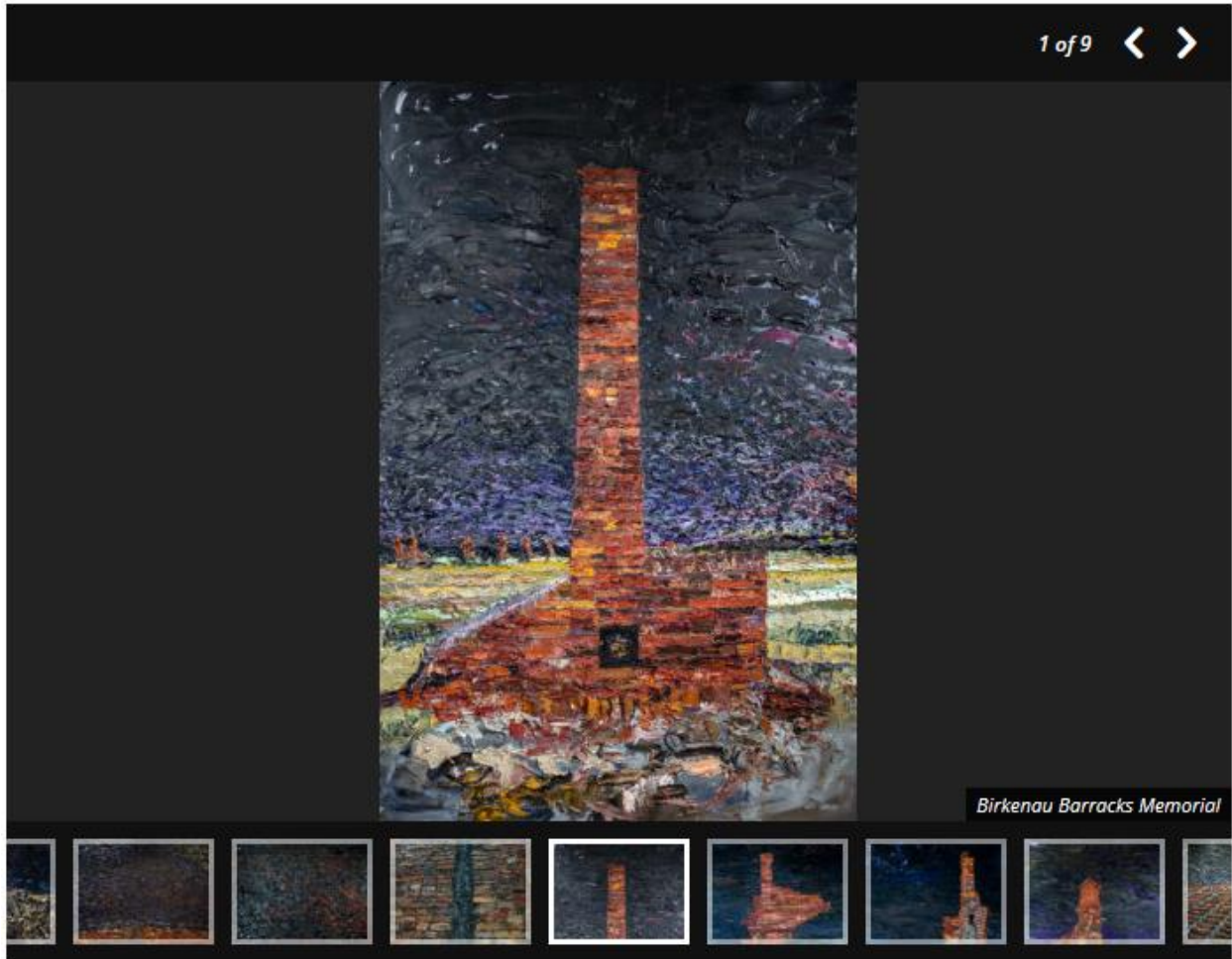
Gendelman estimated 30,000 graves, though they only counted about 80 headstones since the majority were desecrated during the war.

Among the rubble, they stumbled upon his great-great-great-grandfather's headstone in Yiddish, a name they knew prior from records.

Though the field was more than 20 acres, Gendelman was in awe of the "overwhelming" size of Auschwitz.

He walked to its border and "looked back and all that remained in this big horizon was hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of chimneys," he recalled. "That's all that remained, and these were all built by Jewish slave laborers."

He pondered further: "None of these people had monuments. They weren't buried anywhere. They weren't even known. It struck me — these are their monuments."



He made four paintings of chimneys from a ground-level perspective, looking up at the “monuments” in front of a dark-ashed sky.

He used a trowel to paint, a tool prisoners used to build the chimneys.

Gendelman started experiencing nightmares about the camp, so he painted those visions, too — “deathscapes,” he called them — abstract perspectives of the camp, zooming in closer and closer to the plume of smoke through a series of three paintings.

“You know that’s where you’re going to end up,” he said of the feeling he wanted to convey.

Josh Perelman, NMAJH chief curator and director of exhibitions and collections, said the exhibit syncs with the museum’s overall programs.

"Art is an unexpected way to experience history in a history museum," he said, "but art can provide us with insight and perspective on events in our past in different ways than types of material culture that we exhibit in our core exhibition."

Perelman found one of Gendelman's photographs in particular deeply introspective. It shows the archaeological remains of chimneys from the barracks with a large tree in the foreground that has remained since the war.

"The tree stands [as] the witness to the events that took place in Auschwitz-Birkenau and as a witness to the people who lived and died at the camp and who were the residents of those barracks."

After NMAJH, the collection will be on display at the Holocaust Memorial Center near Detroit, then the Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow.

"It's not just this artistic reflection of a historical event," Gendelman said of his works. "There are almost no witnesses left. ... How do you teach new generations about these horrors?"

"It's a tool to attract younger people to introduce them to the subject. From looking at a painting or looking at art, it can be any language. You can just feel it."