Bruce Gendelman grew up with stories of the Holocaust.

His father, Max, was an American sniper in the Battle of the Bulge who survived by escaping from three German POW camps. His great-grandparents, great-aunts and countless other relatives perished in the Holocaust.
Despite this, he has written, he “found it tempting to turn away from the details of this blinding nightmare.”

Until two years ago, Gendelman’s brother-in-law, Milwaukee artist Richard Edelman, had created a sculpture to be dedicated in Kazimierz, the old Jewish quarter of Krakow. Gendelman and his sister, Nina Edelman, decided to accompany the artist on his trip to Poland and Ukraine.

Word got out to the Edelmans’ Milwaukee Jewish Federation and members of the community, and Rabbi Hannah Rosenthal, the former U.S. State Department special envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism, decided to make a mission trip out of it. About 35 people traveled to sites where slave labor and death camps had decimated their families. During part of the trip, they were joined by Father Patrick Desbois, a Catholic priest who has devoted his life to investigating the mass murder of Jews.

Prior to the trip, Gendelman had researched his maternal grandfather’s family, who originated from a small Ukraine town called Bolechow — his grandfather, the only member of the family to survive the war, never knew what had become of the others. Eventually, Gendelman and his family came to believe that their ancestors were paraded through the city naked and walked to their death across town into a forest. Throughout his trip, which included visits to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Gendelman met Holocaust survivors, witnesses — and deniers — and wrestled with how to describe what he saw.

Gendelman, 63, who grew up in Milwaukee and now lives in Palm Beach County, has been a hobbyist artist since the third grade. He had a special passion for photography and painting and turned to art as an important means of expression.

“When I saw these things,” he says, “I had an overwhelming desire to convey those nightmarish feelings to other people, and in a way that would reach across to post-witness generations.” He
decided to interpret his photographs on canvas and in sculptural projects — and the results have been termed shocking, engaging and brutal.

Friends who knew Gendelman’s earlier work wanted to see the images and artwork that had become so important to him. After visiting his studio near his home, they passed along their impressions to others in the community. Groups started requesting visits, and Gendelman did presentations that brought his artistry to wide public attention for the first time.

Two friends, Myrna and Spencer Partrich of Bloomfield Hills, were so moved that they suggested an exhibit at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills. The pieces became part of an expanding tour that began at the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia.

“Sifting Through Ashes,” which includes a life-size diorama of the Birkenau barracks as well as nine large-scale paintings and about 20 photographs, will be on view Jan. 21-March 27.
Gendelman, who is covering the costs of transporting the pieces, will help launch the exhibit with a talk Jan. 22. He will be joined by Arthur Berger, a retired official whose background includes service with the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. The topic, “American Diplomacy and the Holocaust: The Roots of Hatred Explained in History and Interpreted in Art,” will communicate personal and broader perspectives.

“This is a complicated exhibit because it’s meant to be a powerful statement about genocide and the Holocaust in particular,” says Gendelman, who has seen other exhibits at the Holocaust Memorial Center during periodic business trips on behalf of Bruce Gendelman Insurance Services.

“My works are meant to convey a message about there being limited numbers of people remaining who suffered through the Holocaust — and the remembrance has to continue. I hope that others who view it will have a gut emotional feeling that will jolt them into thinking about the viability of the Jewish people.”
Because these European travels left Gendelman with a heavy heart, he wanted to convey the weighty feeling by developing enormous canvases, as wide as 12 feet, with hundreds of pounds of oil paints. He used trowels instead of paintbrushes to emphasize that trowels were used by slave laborers to build structures of death.

“I read a lot about the Holocaust, but I wasn’t overwhelmed until I saw firsthand the scale of Birkenau and the other sites,” Gendelman says. “The barracks and the facilities go on for acres. I took pictures of the chimneys, and they became symbols in the paintings.”

The photographs show Krakow, Auschwitz II-Birkenau and Tuchow in Poland as well as Bolekhiv and Lviv in Ukraine.

The paintings, completed with a mix of darkly somber colors and brightly colored Van Gogh-esque details, include four Birkenau Barracks Memorials, which portray the chimneys that remain part of the landscape; Dom Katolicki, which details remnants of the building where the artist’s ancestors were tortured; three Birkenau Deathscapes, which depict Gendelman’s own nightmares after the trip; and Aerial View of Birkenau, which conveys the industrial design of the horrific places.

“I’m hoping that the methods used to create the art and having a visual interpretation would add a medium that can reach younger people who don’t have the historical context,” Gendelman says. “Using the art doesn’t require words or reading for younger, less knowledgeable viewers to become engaged. I think that is one of my motivating factors.”

Gendelman invited Robert Miller, an attorney and longtime best friend, along on the trip. Although Gendelman had not anticipated an exhibit, he had wanted to create a Shutterfly book with his images and Miller’s avocational poems. The two had collaborated on other books just for themselves.

“The publisher’s mother was a survivor of Birkenau, and he published *Sifting Through Ashes: Words & Images* [Gefen Publishing House], in part because it affected him so personally and emotionally.” The book and an exhibit catalog will be available at the center.

Gendelman, who is Reform, belongs to an Orthodox synagogue in Florida and a Reform synagogue in New York because he relates to the messages of both rabbis.
With upcoming exhibits anticipated for Poland and Israel, Gendelman thinks about his own message for viewers — including his wife, Lori; four children; and four grandchildren — and is adding to the content.

“I will have one final piece for “Sifting Through Ashes,” and I’m working on it whenever I can manage the time,” he says. “It’s a mobile sculpture about the selection process at Birkenau.”

The Partriches will see the mobile piece as they join 40 of Gendelman’s friends to open the exhibit in Poland.

“A chimney at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

“Bruce’s work reflects the horrors of the Holocaust, and the emotions he expresses jump right out at me,” says Myrna Partrich, who has watched Gendelman’s projects evolve. “My husband and I wanted to bring these pieces to the Jewish community around Detroit because we think it’s important to share what he has expressed.

“When we go to Poland, we also will be looking for the places where our perished relatives had lived, and we appreciate the people at the Holocaust Memorial Center available to advise anybody seeking tracking information.”

Gendelman is grateful to have the experience he’s had. “It’s changed me in so many ways,” he says. “When I went on this trip, I had an overwhelming desire to convey the feelings I had to other people.

“All these exhibitions have come from other people who’ve seen my work in my studio. These were wonderful gifts to me that were unexpected — but have allowed me to reach out to other people and, hopefully, have an impact.”
details
“Sifting Through Ashes” runs Sundays-Fridays, Jan. 21-March 27, at the Holocaust Memorial Center Zekelman Family Campus in Farmington Hills. Free with admission ($5-$8) or membership.
(248) 553-2400; holocaustcenter.org.

Bruce Gendelman will speak with Arthur Berger at 7 p.m. Monday, Jan. 22, on “American Diplomacy and the Holocaust: The Roots of Hatred Explained in History and Interpreted in Art.” Reservations are required: call (248) 536-9605 or email rsvp@holocaustcenter.org.

Docent-led tours: 2:30 p.m. Feb. 4 and March 18; 7 p.m. Feb. 12 and March 12. Tour signups: (248) 553-2400, ext. 110.
HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE DAY
Saturday, Jan. 27, is International Holocaust Remembrance Day. In observance, the Holocaust Memorial Center Zedelman Family Campus will supplement “Sifting Through Ashes” with a simultaneous exhibit showing works created by Holocaust survivors in the center’s permanent collection.

Among the pieces on display will be three sculptures by Henry Friedman of West Bloomfield, who is a speaker at the center and will address visitors at 12:15 p.m. Friday, Jan. 26.

Friedman’s works, made of mixed metals and donated to the center last year, include *Fallen Soldiers* (which honors the American soldiers who gave their lives in World War II), *KL* (which describes Friedman’s life as an inmate in a Konzentrationslager, he says, where inmates “were branded like cattle”) and *El Moley Rachamim (May God Have Mercy)*; which depicts an extermination camp with the Angel of Death taking the souls of the murdered people to heaven).

Friedman is a dedicated Holocaust survivor speaker who has touched the lives of thousands of people. Although he has spoken nearly every week at the Holocaust Memorial Center for the past four years, his testimony is not recorded. “I couldn’t tell my story on film,” Friedman says. “It’s too heartbreaking. I live with it.”

Born in 1924 in Rastenberg, Germany, Friedman was sent to the first of seven concentration camps at the age of 16. In May 1945, he and two brothers were liberated by American troops from the Mauthausen-Gusen camp in Austria.

“When my time comes, I will need to ask an important question,” says Friedman, who will be 94 in March. “Did I do enough to preserve the memory of the Holocaust? Perhaps no one can, but I tried my best.”

Friedman has created moving sculptures to convey his personal experiences during the Holocaust. He also transforms stories from the Bible into sculpture. He takes great care with each sculpture using armaments combined with a variety of metals to depict emotions and scenes from the Holocaust. He painstakingly weds the pieces together, working out of his home where he said “it takes a lot of machining, handwork and brainwork” to create his sculptures.
Mountains of Dishware, Auschwitz, Poland

Birkenau Deathscape 1 — View from the Far Wire