

# Painting from the Holocaust's Barbaric Periphery

## A Personal Journey

Michelanne Forster



**Cover Fig.** *Tracks*, by author, September 2021



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## A Personal Journey

An exegesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
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Michelanne Forster, 2021





BARBARIC CIRCLE #1

A well-known massacre took place in Slutsk, near Minsk, on October 27 and 28th 1941. A report by the German Einsatzgruppen, the mobile killing units that massacred Jews after the invasion of Russia, states that 5,900 Jews were shot here over these two particular days. It was documented by a German court in 1961 that Lithuanian soldiers herded Jewish men women and children of the town into the marketplace. Those who guessed what was going to happen clung to fences, rafters, trees and corners of the house, screaming and wailing. Children, weeping and screaming, clung to their mothers but they were torn free and beaten. These unfortunate souls, whose only crime was being Jewish, were forced to stand by pits dug as mass graves, then machine-gunned down. Who did the shooting? This is where it is difficult to be exact. The Germans rotated the bands of killers so that everyone got a turn, and everyone was implicated. On this occasion it was established the 12th Battalion took part, with a German officer finishing off anyone still moving.

– Michelanne Forster

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# ABSTRACT

This exegesis examines my personal response to the Holocaust through the medium of expressionist painting. I identify myself as the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, and an immigrant to New Zealand. I discuss the concepts of “post-memory”, “vicarious past” and “intergenerational trauma” and question the moral right to make art out of other people's suffering. I discuss the tensions inherent in living and working in New Zealand, a country at a far geographical and cultural remove from the Holocaust, and reflect on how this affects my work in terms of memory, imagination, and style. I demonstrate the way Jewish artists Chaim Soutine, Marc Chagall, Charlotte Solomon, Abraham Rattner, and Hyman Bloom influenced my search for a personal painting language. I link my practice to other Jewish immigrant artists who fled Europe during the Nazi regime, and site myself in what Sidra DeKovan Ezrahi calls the “barbaric periphery” of the Shoah (Ezrahi qtd. in Katz-Freidman 119).



**Fig. 1** Self-portrait, by author, September 2021

# PREFACE

My father was a Jewish refugee from Vienna. He raised four children, of whom I am the eldest, without divulging his past or ethnicity. Our family immigrated to New Zealand from the United States when I was a teenager. Three years later my parents returned to California separately, then divorced. I remained in Aotearoa, left with the mystery of my father's past. Over the years, like a stone mason chipping at a block of granite, I tried, not only to solve the unanswered questions about his life in Vienna and Germany, but to create stories and theatre from it. I did this because creativity as a response to uncertainty is central to my being. In establishing narrative, I impose meaning and order, knowing, of course, my efforts are largely illusions. Ironically, this ability to creatively manage chaos with words proved challenging in undertaking a Master of Fine Arts. I thought I wanted to paint because I had run out of words, but I also felt I needed those words to explain my art.

## A conundrum

My exegesis, *Painting from the Holocaust's Barbaric Periphery — A Personal Journey*, is driven by a desire to use painting to express my identity as a second-generation Jewish immigrant to New Zealand. Some of my best work as a writer came from wrestling with my heritage and the gaps within it. But how to paint this complicated and deeply personal space?

The Holocaust is, for me, the biggest story in my life. It sits on my shoulder wherever I go. Elie Wiesel, Romanian-born Nobel laureate and Holocaust survivor, wrote fifty-seven books but said language was inadequate to describe his experiences. Facts alone can't represent the essence of the Holocaust. I have a belief, perhaps naive, that the arts: painting, literature, cinema, photography, theatre, dance, and music can enlarge our understanding about this impossible blot on humanity. My challenge in undertaking this topic, is to learn to express, in painting, how the Holocaust's shadow still falls, 76 years later, in a faraway corner of the Pacific.



**Fig. 2** *Dad 3*, by author,  
Acrylic on paper, July 2021.



# INTRODUCTION

This exegesis is divided into two parts. Part One questions the moral right of artists to use the suffering of others to make work and offers different artistic responses to the long-debated questions about narrating trauma. I discuss how Holocaust representation in the arts has changed over time, going from respectful memorialization to yet another a slice of history available to anyone who cares to exploit it. I draw on examples of Holocaust representation across various creative disciplines, focusing on the 1990s when second-generation artists began to respond to the experiences of their survivor parents. This discussion includes the work of American-Jewish visual artist Shimon Attie, the American-Jewish cartoonist and author Art Spiegelman, and Israeli artists Ram Katzir, Roe Rosen, Haim Maor, Simcha Sherman, and Joshua Neustein. I comment on the cultural shifts in representational boundaries and introduce three concepts about intergenerational trauma: “post-memory”, “vicarious past”, and “memorial candles” all of which affect second-generation artists. I offer insights gained from Victoria University Associate Professor Giacomo Lichtner about the process of dehumanization as it pertains to the Holocaust, and end Part One by situating my practice as a Jewish immigrant to Aotearoa who explores the legacy of the Shoah by approaching it from what Sidra DeKovan Ezrahi calls the “barbaric periphery” (Ezrahi 119).

In Part Two I focus on my development as an artist, revealing the false starts and the benefits I gained in changing my exegesis topic three times. I discuss my attraction to Expressionism as a painting style, and my decision to focus on Jewish painters, specifically Chaim Soutine, Marc Chagall, Charlotte Solomon, Abraham Rattner, and Hynam Bloom. I demonstrate the way critical feedback and daily practice resulted in finding a more consistent painting style. I make a connection with several New Zealand painters who fled Hitler, drawing on the work of historians Leonard Bell and Ann Beaglehole. I describe using my connection with the Jewish community in Aotearoa as a first audience for my art practice and I conclude that my past is a source of both tension and creativity, pulling me between the light in Aotearoa and the shadows cast by the Shoah.

BARBARIC CIRCLE #2

Old men and women are dead, as well as craftsmen and professional people: tailors, shoemakers, tinsmiths, jewellers, house painters, iron mongers, bookbinders, workers, freight handlers, carpenters, stove makers, jokers, cabinetmakers, water carriers, millers, bakers and cooks; also dead are physicians, prothesists, surgeons, gynaecologists, scientists – bacteriologists, biochemists, directors of university clinics – teachers of history, algebra, trigonometry. Dead are professors, lecturers, and doctors of science, engineers and architects. Dead are agronomists, field workers, accountants, clerks, shop assistants, supply agents, secretaries, nightwatchman, dead are teachers, dead are babushkas who could knit stockings and make tasty buns, cook bullion and make strudel with apples and nuts, dead are women who had been faithful to their husbands and frivolous women, dead too, beautiful girls and learned students and cheerful schoolgirls, dead are ugly and silly girls, women with hunches, dead are singers, dead are blind and deaf mutes, dead are violinists and pianists, dead are two-year-olds and three year olds, dead are 80 year-old men and women with cataracts on hazy eyes, with cold and transparent fingers and hair that rustled quietly like white paper, dead are newly born babes who sucked their mothers breast greedily until their last minute.

– Vassily Grossman

# PART ONE

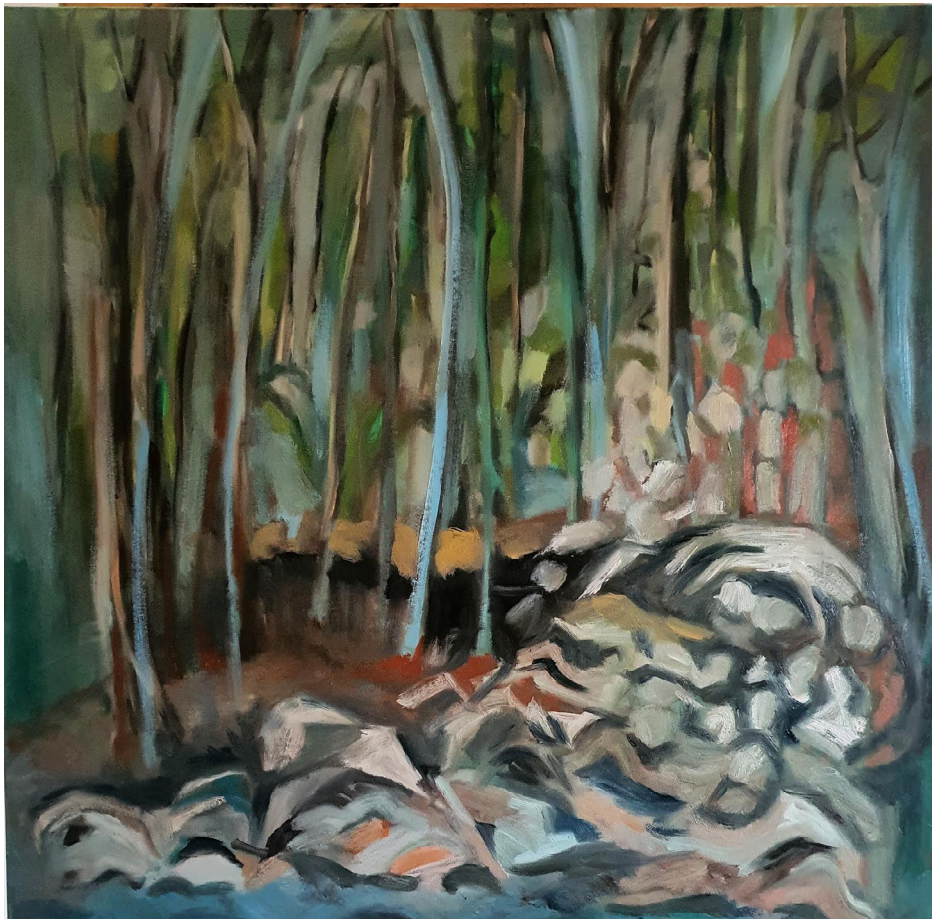
## The Ethics of Representing the Holocaust in Art

I started this project with a question: What moral right do I have or does anyone have, to make art out of the suffering of others? The German philosopher, Theo Adorno, famously said in 1951, there could be no poetry after the Holocaust. However, he amended that bleak pronouncement in 1966, acknowledging that suffering has the right to expression, just as the tortured man has the right to scream. The Holocaust continues to attract artists across a variety of disciplines. Whether they wish to trudge across the dark plain of human degradation, understand the lure of fascism, or see the tragic end point of racist ideology, the Shoah can inform. Some Jews refuse to engage with art that tries to reflect on, or represent, the Holocaust experience. Joshua Neustein, an Israeli installation artist said, “There is nothing in my lexicon that has privileged insight into the Shoah. I do not make Shoah art. It is not doable” (Neustein qtd.

Katz- Friedman 145) On the opposite end of the spectrum, Nathan Nuchi (b.1951), a second- generation Israeli artist who works in the USA, stated: “My position as an artist is that images of human suffering are still the truest, most enduring and most honourable approach to the Holocaust in art” (Nuchi qtd. in Katz-Friedman 146).

The American writer and philosopher Susan Sontag challenges us to consider our privilege when using photography featuring the dead and wounded in wartime. If we can’t do anything, is our viewing voyeuristic? she asks. She argues that “All memory is individual, unreproducible — it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds” (76). Sontag’s insight into the difference between individual memory and the “stipulated” collective memory is pertinent to this discussion. The Holocaust’s legacy, carried by the second and third generation, is “never again.” Survivors and their offspring are tasked with remembering the dead to honour their suffering, and to prevent suffering from occurring in the future. If an artist’s task is to question and push boundaries, where does this leave the Jewish artist who is also tasked to carry collective memory?

Consider *Einsatzgruppen*.



**Fig. 3** *Einsatzgruppen*, by author, oil on canvas, August 2021.

What appears to be a pleasing forest, light shining through slim, pale blue tree trunks, is revealed as the site of mass murder. Dismembered bodies are heaped in the foreground. The bodies are sandwiched between the forest floor, a mixture of yellow ochre, burnt umber and Indian red, and a pool of blue-green water. A pit, in burnt umber, has already been dug, ready to consume the bodies. The dark, gaping mouth at left of the canvas leaves no doubt this death was a terrible thing. The title of the work, in German, immediately raises the question: Who or what is the *Einsatzgruppen*? What has happened? As an artist, I must question if am privileging the murderers with my title. My intention is to shame and call out this bloodbath of innocents. My murderers have no face, no identity in the painting. They are already disappearing into the forest, but my title implicates them.

## Changes in Holocaust Representation

In my lifetime I have seen how Holocaust representation in film, television, literature, art, and social media, has shifted. In her essay, *Don't Touch My Holocaust*, Katz-Freiman states, "After the war, artists were concerned about upsetting survivors or misrepresenting their private experiences. Nor did they wish to desecrate the memory of the dead or question their status as victims of extreme trauma" (131). Over time, the idea that Jews went passively to the gas chamber like lambs to the slaughter, was rejected. This is largely because Israel saw passivity as a shameful backstory unfitting of a heroic new nation. Holocaust and Heroism", and "Negation of Exile" were ideas embedded in the Israeli psyche. This influenced who was included in canon of Israeli art (130). After 1980, as survivors began to tell their stories, second-generation artists added further layers about "memory, racism and the body" (134). As a new generation of artists grappled with Holocaust representation, there was a backlash against what some saw as distasteful commercialization. The artist Nathan Nuchi was so put off by the Holocaust being presented as a subject category like cookery or sport or business that he created photographs with library index titles: "The Holocaust as merchandise", "The Holocaust for the Middle Class", "The Holocaust as an Oscar Winner," and so on. Picking out bits of the Holocaust without embracing the whole of its horror can lead to objects of remembrance becoming false "idols" (Steir 214). When misused by the voyeur, who mistakes the part for the whole, this can distort memory and lead to consumer kitsch, putting an unintended redemptive slant on the Holocaust (215).

All Holocaust representation takes place in a polarized cultural space. Literature, theatre, cinema, commemorative rituals and sites, oral history and theories occupy that space. DeKovan Ezrahi argues that when the Shoah is seen as the epicentre of an earthquake or a black hole, and getting to that centre becomes a pilgrimage towards ultimate authenticity, we end up in a place where all life and meaning is swallowed up (Ezrahi 118). This idea reflects Adorno's question, 'How can there be cultural representation of that which culture itself collaborated in generating, or at least failed to prevent?' DeKovan suggests artists approach the Shoah from the "barbaric periphery" instead of aiming for its dark centre. There is, she says, a "constant unresolved tension between the centre and the periphery", between the gravitational pull of the black hole and the periphery which allows fictive possibility (119). Her essay supports the case for "imaginative reconstruction", and "the setting up of alternative sites and alternative scenarios" (120).

Understanding how Holocaust representation was received by the Israeli art world after the war offers a benchmark in cultural shifts. Katz-Freiman analyses what she calls the "intricate" and "hypersensitive" discourse around it in contemporary Israeli art. Ram Katzir and Roe Rosen (*Within the Line and Live and Die as Eva Braun*, 1997) both exhibited at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, had survivors calling for cancellations, saying the museum was playing with "an open wound" (136). The American artist Shimon Attie's portraits of pre-war Jewish street life, projected on the Berlin store fronts where Jews no longer existed (*The Writing on the Wall*, 1991), was seen by the Israeli art world as "too sentimental" ... "too Jewish" and "too diasporal" (137), although outside Israel the work was well-received. Haim Maor, son of a survivor, achieved "qualified acceptance" for his illuminated tattooed numbers from his father's arm (139) but when Simcha Shirman, also a son of survivors, represented Israel at the Venice Biennial using photos and objects split into Polish and German spaces, Israeli critics called his work "tacky and sentimental" (141). The site-specific work of Joshua Neustein (b. 1940) made from moist ashes (*Domestic Tranquillity, Bne Brak*) used video to link political speech-making with domestic ironing, suggesting a "laundering" of language. This work was accepted by Israeli critics, possibly because Neustein



positioned himself as declaring Shoah art “undoable”. Katz-Freidman’s findings, after surveying a wide range of artists’ work from the 1990s, concluded that humour and irony were not acceptable strategies, nor was manipulating the viewer’s gaze to rest on oppressors, nor was making comparison between the Holocaust and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

## **Vicarious Past, Post Memory, and Memorial Candles**

In the light of these two representational poles – reverent commemoration or exploitative commercialization – I wanted to come to a view about my obligations as a second-generation Jewish artist. Understanding and examining why I need to look over my shoulder at a vanished past that can never be reclaimed, is important in developing my practice. Elie Wiesel tells us, “To forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time” (Wiesel 14). Marianne Hirst introduced the idea of “post-memory” in 1992. It is characterized by “the experience of those who grew up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can neither be understood or recreated” (Hirsch 54). Many studies show the impact of the survivors’ trauma on their children, and “the resultant centrality of the Holocaust in their inner lives.” Batya Brutin writes movingly about children designated as “Memorial Candles” by their parents. These children are being tasked, subconsciously, to fill the actual and emotional vacuum left by siblings who perished in the Shoah. The term, coined by Dina Vardi, came out of her study of the second-generation, in her book *Nos’ei ha-Hotem (Marked for Life)*. Certainly, to create work when psychologically compelled to pay homage to your forbear’s trauma, is a heavy responsibility.

James E. Young, the highly respected author of *At Memory’s Edge* who writes about moral and aesthetic questions around Holocaust representation in art and architecture, uses the term “vicarious past” to delineate the distance between history as it happened” and the “post-memory” of it. Young argues that second-generation artists such as Art Spiegelman, Shimon Attie, and David Levinthal make work, “not about the Holocaust so much as how they came to know it and how it shaped their inner lives” (Young 3). For example, Spiegelman’s graphic novel *Maus*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, shows Nazis as cats and Jews as mice, creating a convincing psychological portrait of a father’s trauma which continues to haunt and shape his son long after the war is over.

Using historical or personal memories is not always welcomed. Shimon Attie (1957- ) exposed people from the Netherlands who aided the Nazis in a short film entitled *Neighbour Next Door* which disturbed the collective memory of being “the good guys” during the war. Even if the intention is to honour, memory work by the second and third generation can offend or cause distress. I offer an example from my life. When writing *Don’t Mention Casablanca*, a play based on my grandparents’ story, my father accused me of riding on the coattails of my grandfather’s fame. My play, he said, was “cheap”, making use of memory’s fictive possibilities a fraught business for me. Young offers three ethical guidelines for artists: 1/ There should be a “distinct boundary” between second-generation artists and the first generation. 2/ Any memory work tied to the Holocaust must not be redemptive. 3/ How we remember and commemorate the past must be ethically presented. (Young 9).

These concepts, explored in my work during my second year Masters, helped me situate my own practice.

## Dehumanization and Representation

Giacomo Lichtner (Victoria University, Wellington) specializes in the construction of memory in popular culture. He delivered a Zoom lecture to second-generation members in New Zealand and Australia about dehumanization in Holocaust cinema in August 2021. He noted that the historical reality of the Holocaust is difficult to convey, and unless we capture its subjective essence, we will fail to understand it. The Shoah, he said, does not allow for traditional cinematic narrative in which characters are caught in a crisis or moral dilemma and then overcome it. The normative experience in concentration camps was death, not survival. Fictional narratives, especially cinematic ones, often show a 'line in the sand moment' when a character, victim or victimizer, crosses from human to inhuman. It may make good drama, but Lichtner argues that becoming immune to human suffering doesn't happen instantly like this. Dehumanization is a process, he states. It was continuing humiliation and disfranchisement that led Germans to view Jews as sub-human vermin who must be extinguished for the health of the nation (Lichtner). The process of dehumanization is useful in trying to understand how false and racist narratives can become rooted in popular culture.

I wanted to consider the repercussions of social media using Holocaust images out of context. A video artist, Harry Martis, a.k.a. Denial of Service, raises questions about representation on public platforms and asks if we are doing more harm than good in using this footage. He writes, "As a child in the 70s, I was accidentally exposed to Holocaust footage on the television. It was a traumatizing experience, and the initial visceral memory still lingers on, as I still cannot make sense out of the 'sapiens monster,' its motivations and innate urge towards sadism..." Do Martis, and others who work in a similar vein, inadvertently retraumatize viewers or encourage voyeuristic dehumanization by using footage and photos from the Death Camps? My own experience of exposure to atrocity spurred me take a stand against it-but I am not a child of the digital generation. But, as an artist, I need to ask that question because I what I make is aimed at influencing collective memory.

## Imagination and Memory

The relationship between memory and the imagination as "an interstitial space between past and future in which cross-temporal transactions are made" is pertinent. (Keightley and Pickering 123) This space, whatever we call it, is where the artist sits to create. The authors state the interstitial space is where we organise a "hotchpotch of experience" into a "relatively coherent narrative structure. But does imposing narrative cheat the actual experience? Narrative is about action and consequence moving through time and so much of what happened during the Holocaust was random, a game of roulette, in terms of who lived and who died. I think about my father's wall of silence. I choose to think it signified a resistance to coherent narrative. I had to be content with fragmented memories that I mixed with imagination in order to try to understand.

## Situating my Practice/My Critical Strategy

I am positioning myself as a second-generation Jewish immigrant in Aotearoa whose paintings are informed by the legacy of the Holocaust. To make work about the Holocaust as if "I was there" is deeply unjust to its victims, as is trying to create a redemptive spin. My critical strategy is to inhabit the "barbaric periphery," using the pieces from the fragmented aftermath of genocide. I deliberately do not aim for the dark centre of the Shoah as I view it as a black hole that cannot be penetrated.

Elie Wiesel's declaration about indifference speaks directly to me:

*"The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.*

*The opposite of beauty is not ugliness, it's indifference.*

*The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference.*

*And the opposite of life is not death, but indifference between life and death."*

I aim to make work that overcomes indifference.

BARBARIC CIRCLE #3

Sooner or later someone will have to pay. Is this really true? We had another second-generation meeting last night. A new member of the group told us his family story which he had pieced together over the last two years. He'd heard things, over the years, from his father, and from various relatives, but he never paid careful attention, never tried to write down the whole story from beginning to end. Then, he made a start. He collected up what he'd heard and wrote it down; the names of great-grandfathers, plus photographs and biographical information that he, the living relative, did not know. Now he had the bug. He read aloud, in a hesitant monotone, what he had learned. He passed photos around, grainy copies straight from his home printer. There was his Polish great-grandfather, a learned academic and Rabbi, proudly surrounded by his beautiful wife Tamara and their three daughters, each impeccably groomed with a white bow perched on the side of her head, as was the style in those times. We all had seen photos like that – the happy family before the big 'H' struck. The lucky ones in our group still have those photos and the unlucky ones must imagine them.

– Michelanne Forster

## PART TWO

### Drawn to Expressionism

With no formal background in art history, and a short painting career that began as a hobby in 2016, I came to this course with big holes in my skill set. Of all the painters I looked at in my first year, it was Max Beckmann (b. 1884), a German expressionist, whose work excited me the most. I was entranced by his allegorical and boldly political subject matter, and his theatrical style. I learned when Beckmann was a soldier in East Prussia during the First World War, he had a breakdown and “innumerable scenes of horror continued to haunt the artist throughout his life” (Fisher 16). His hatred of the machinery of war and the butchery of violence infiltrated all his work. Beckmann placed himself under the banner of “New Objectivity” (21) which meant, for him, being “objective about our inner selves by dint of analysis and austere reflection” (22) but he is more popularly known as an expressionist painter along with, among others, Kandinsky, Nolde, Dix, Modigliani, Kokoschka, and Kirchner, all of whom I have become familiar with in trying to develop my own style. I suppose I am drawn to expressionist painting, and to Beckmann’s era, because Weimar Berlin was where my grandmother lived and worked. It is heartening that he and other expressionists were ideologically opposed to fascism. Because these German artists were forced into exile by Hitler, the historical connection is meaningful.

I continued to follow Beckmann and others into Abstract Expressionism, a movement in the United States which grew out of European expressionism, led by painters such as De Kooning, Pollack, Rothko, and Frankenthaler. I experimented with some “De Kooning style” paintings (YouTube is full of videos that promise to teach you to paint like De Kooning or Rothko etc.) but with little success. It was fun to try out some hugely energetic, almost frantic mark-making, but it wasn’t me. As a new devotee to expressionism, I spent more time looking at the British-born, New Zealand immigrant painter, Alan Pearson. I’d met Pearson while working in Christchurch and still remain in awe of his talent. As part of my learning, I also checked out 1970s neo-expressionists (Kiefer, Burkhardt, Basquiat, Hockney, Baselitz and Golub). The 70s, which I remember well, was a pretty macho time and I wasn’t surprised to learn that in 1981 an exhibition of neo-expressionists featured thirty-eight male painters and no women (Britannica). Certainly, neo-expressionism has much to offer but, for this project, learning from Jewish artists who had a connection to the Holocaust, made more sense.

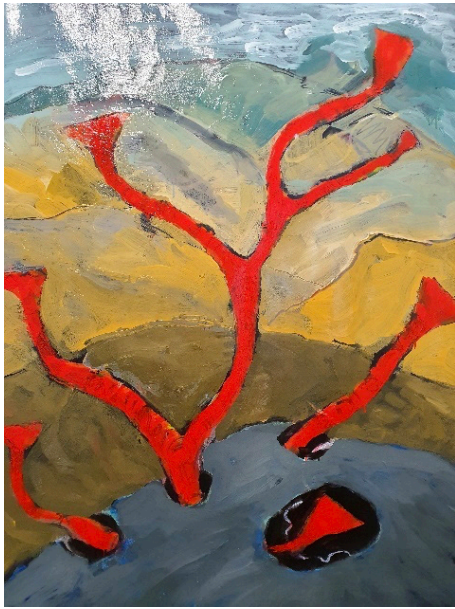
In terms of my own engagement with expressionism, a label I use very loosely to define my style, I like making paintings that are dramatic, colourful and gestural. I work by instinct, and with speed. I aim to build up texture and colour, sometimes scratching the canvas to let layers show through. I paint with a sense of pleasure. I like the physical sensations of mixing and applying colour and of using different brushes, sticks or even my hands, to make marks. Expressionist style painting, with its emphasis on the inner world of the painter, provides me with the freedom I need to work with memory and imagination in a bold theatrical way.



## False Starts and their Benefits

At the end of 2020 I proposed *Painting and Exile* as my exegesis topic. Josenhans, the editor of *Artists in Exile: Expressions of Loss and Hope*, states that we should move beyond the well-known story of male artists forced to leave Germany and other European countries because of Nazism. But for me, that story was a new one. I learned about the infamous “Entarte Kunst/Degenerate Art” exhibition in Munich and the so-called degenerate artists who were mocked and banned, including Max Beckmann. Aided by the American Emergency Rescue Committee, artists who fled Hitler were able to gain teaching positions in institutions across America, thus influencing a new generation of artists. Without investigating these artists I would have missed the historical context behind many paintings I admired.

Over the summer of 2020 I began to have doubts about my proposed exegesis, *Painting and Exile*, because the topic didn’t specifically address Jewish identity as an artist. But how does one paint Jewish identity? I took a detour, reading *Jewish Art: A Modern History* which quickly deconstructed the idea that the Jews were a “nation without art” (Baskin and Silver 15). The authors argue that after the Hezkalah (enlightenment) when European Jews moved out of ethnically homogeneous ghettos/shtetls, they were forced to negotiate the space between whatever dominant culture they lived in, and their Jewish identity. This, they say, is the commonality in all Jewish art; an awareness of “otherness”, or what the black writer W.B. DuBois calls “double- consciousness” (11). I went to Te Papa and mulled over McCahon’s use of Christian symbols within our landscape. Why not, I thought, use a seven-branch menorah, planted in the New Zealand landscape? Ritual objects and symbols integrated into landscape painting would say Jews are a part of this country’s history, and that idea appealed to me. In February 2021 I proposed a new exegesis topic: *Jewish Identity in the New Zealand Landscape*.



**Fig. 4** *Red Menorah* by author, Acrylic on canvas, March 2021.



**Fig. 5** *Blue Menorah* by author, Acrylic on canvas, March 2021.

*Red Menorah* bursts out of Otago hills like a monster in a science-fiction film. The seven-branched menorah, an important symbol of the Jewish people, is used as a life-force emerging from the landscape. In retrospect, the menorah looks cartoonish and flat, and doesn't offer the dignity and beauty I feel it deserves. *Blue Menorah*, which I consider a more successful work, is mysteriously rich. The shape is ambiguous but alive; it could be a tree in a nocturnal landscape or a figure reaching skywards. The colour, a mixture of alizarin red, cerulean and primary cyan, is the painting's strength. The layered hues of blue suggest an eternal and natural unity. Satin gloss additive in the paint gives the hue of a religious icon.

Consider *Mountain Menorah*





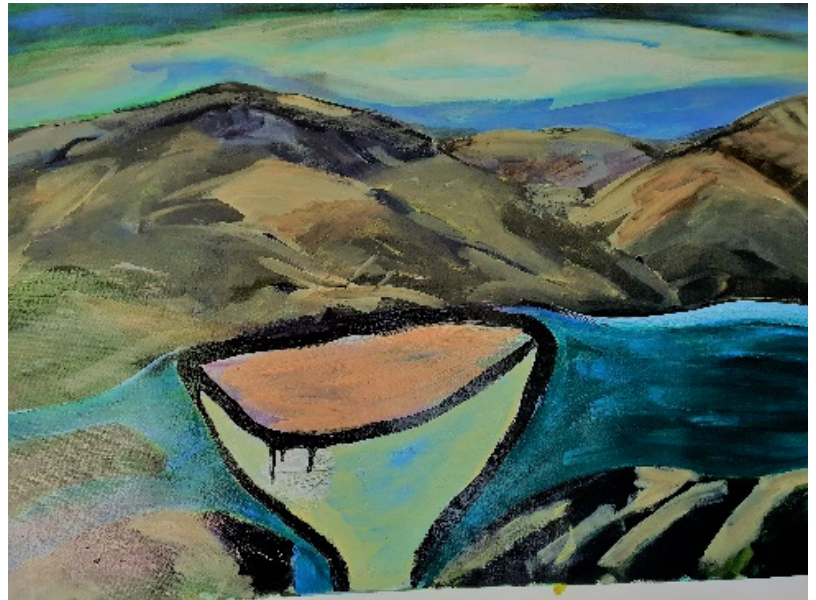
**Fig. 6** *Mountain Menorah*  
by the author. oil on  
canvas, August 2021.

A highly glazed menorah dominates a fantasy landscape. A mountain in the centre of the painting sits behind it, and further mountain ranges recede into a deep blue sky, animated by a yellow moon. Flowers, birds and unidentified flying shapes add an element of imaginative play. There is no solemnity in this painting. This menorah is surrounded by an abundance of life. Paint roils and twists over the canvas. This work, painted six months after I first started experimenting with the menorah shape, demonstrates my increasing confidence with colour, glazes and composition. Chagall's influence is evident in the use of perspective, free-floating shapes and non-representational colour.





**Fig. 7** Torah crown and Bells, Personal photo by the author, March 2021.



**Fig. 8** Kiddish Cup by the author, Acrylic on paper, March 2021.

When investigating *Jewish Identity in the New Zealand Landscape*, I spent time at the Wellington Jewish Community Centre (WJCC) under the helpful guise of the archivist, to see if other ritual objects or memorabilia might provide shapes to work with. I placed a Kiddush cup, used to drink wine to welcome in the Sabbath, over Wellington Harbour. The mountains capture a sense of land surrounded by the sea, but the Kiddush cup has a science-fiction flatness that sits uneasily next to the McCahon-style boulders on its right. At my first crit a classmate pointed out that I needed to consider the implications of viewing Aotearoa as an empty land or backdrop for my own cultural symbols. I realized then, that unless I grappled with the implications of colonization, a subject I didn't feel confident about, I would not be doing justice to my topic, or to tangata whenua. In addition, landscape painting as a genre was proving problematic for me. Although I looked at New Zealand landscapes by, among others, Alfred Sharpe, A.J. Cooper, William Hodges, and Doris Lusk, I was already restless. This country's landscape lacks the patina of childhood memories and the cultural connectedness that comes with that. Simon Schama, in the prologue to his book *Landscape and Memory*, tells us landscape is a bearer of history, memory and dreams (8). He recounts how the forest of his ancestors in the Southern Lithuanian became a colony of death when the Germans occupied Poland in 1939. To create a Jew-free forest zone, 900 villagers were forced to dig a mass grave then massacred. Survivors were hunted down in the woods. This part of Jewish history, long embedded in my inner landscape, was where my true interest lay. I realized I had to paint 'there' before I could paint 'here.'

### Consider Forest



**Fig. 9** *Forest* by the author, Acrylic and oil on paper, June 2021.

*Forest* is set in the blood-soaked soil of Eastern Europe. The work demonstrates my tentative use of a more abstract language. The background, an experiment, is made with a paint roller. The rust-red streaks foreshadow violence. Perspective is provided by dark marks of Van Dyke brown. A variety of blues, greens and purples, done in oils over acrylics, create an alluring but impenetrable shield. The grey mist and tree trunks tell us we are looking at a mysterious and slightly sinister forest that is hiding something. When I travelled by train from Krakow to Prague to Budapest I looked out the window at pine forests like these. I couldn't see past them, but I knew that among trees, just like these, massacres had taken place.

Pivonija

Malinwo

Katyn...



I was asked at this first crit if my focus was Jewish identity or the Holocaust. This surprised me. For Jewish people, Jewish identity and the Holocaust are different sides of the same coin. However, I realized my presumption that everyone understood the two ideas are inextricably linked hadn't been stated. The questions raised in the first crit led to my third and final attempt at an exegesis topic: *Holocaust representation in painting in order to express my identity in Aotearoa through a new visual language*.

Or something like that.

I knew I was reasonably skilled at taking complex historical subjects and finding a workable narrative but, in this case, painting was an entirely new language. And the subject was so monumental I couldn't place myself near it without shrinking into a formless puddle.

But uncertainty is the birth of creation. So, I plowed on.

## **Developing a Consistent Style**

Arthur C. Danto, in his book, *After the End of Art- Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (1997), states that modernism ended "not a moment too soon". Goodbye to formalist ideas about art conveying truth and beauty. By the 1960s, Danto states "artists were free to make art in whatever style they wished for any purpose they wished, or for no purpose at all" (Danto 15). I was now staring freedom in the face and it was hard. I was introduced to the artist Charline von Heyl, whose work encapsulates post-modern freedom in a colourful, non-ideological style. She declared: "Neither the act of painting itself, nor the materials I'm using, nor the history of those materials is in the least interesting for me. What interests me is how the painting, in the end, conveys a new image. Not in a classical way, not with a narrative, but with a new image" (Farago 4). As young painter von Heyl confessed she was unhappy because, "I didn't make anything interesting to me" (Farago 7) but she grew to understand her inner compulsions as an artist. The question she always asked herself was, "How can I make this painting more alive?" Inspired by this, I began to use her question in my own practice. When evaluating a painting in progress I stood back with a critical eye and asked myself, what will make this image more alive? I know I need a sense of drama pulsating on my canvas. I know I want to create beauty, mystery, and emotion. But there is no short cut to real artistry. As I prepared for my second crit my supervisor, Simon Morris, noted my work didn't look like I was always in control. No wonder. I never knew what was going to happen whenever I picked up the paint brush.

The story of the box is instructive.

I met with a friend who offered to help me by making wooden boxes that could be mounted on a wall like little kitchen cupboards. I could paint on the wood. Inside, would be written work and photographs telling the stories behind my paintings Both my supervisors were dubious. The paintings already provided a narrative about place and emotional experience, so why did I need extras? I was reluctant to concede this, but eventually dropped the box idea as an add-on and a distraction.

Shannon Te Ao, who led my second crit, summarized the group's responses: "We can't fully come to terms with our particular individual experiences and exchange them with yours. It's important to free yourself and us from getting inside your head... these don't look like planned and executed images. They

convey a sense of urgency; they are pictorial and psychological, so it's important to be able to relax and empathize with your imaginative experience. Challenge yourself by building a body of work, not just a stack of paintings. This installation looks like you are starting to balance a cohesive hang so start simply then let the layers of complexity build up. They should be stylistically cohesive. Work shown here is widely varied. Be tough on yourself when making decisions about what to show." This advice pushed me to stop experimenting with each new work, and to try to go deeper, rather than wider.



**Fig. 10** Michael Gross,  
*Man (the Artist's father)*,  
1963, oil on canvas,  
200x163, The Israel  
Museum, Jerusalem,  
[https://www.europeana.eu/mt/item/2024918/photography\\_ProvidedCHO\\_The\\_Israel\\_Museum\\_Jerusalem\\_401781](https://www.europeana.eu/mt/item/2024918/photography_ProvidedCHO_The_Israel_Museum_Jerusalem_401781) .  
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## Turning Points in my Use of Colour and Visual Symbols

When looking into *Painting and Exile* as a possible exegesis topic I'd delved into the history of Israeli art, looking for parallels between Aotearoa and Israel, two small nations intent on developing distinct artistic identities. It was during this phase that I saw the work of Israeli painter Michael Gross. *Man* shows a brooding figure, the artist's father, carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. He turns his back on the viewer, remaining eternally alone. The painting is full of tension. Gross uses a block of yellow ochre which almost vibrates with power. The work reminded me of my own father who, in a sense, is behind all my proposed exegesis topics. Exile, Jewish identity, Holocaust representation; all are interlocking pieces of the same puzzle. These three portraits of my father demonstrate the increasing importance of colour in my work.



**Fig. 11** *Dad 1* by the author, Acrylic on canvas, 2020.



**Fig. 12** *Dad 2* by the author, Acrylic on paper, 2021.



**Fig. 13** *Dad 3*, by the author, July 2021, Acrylic on paper, 2021.

*Dad 1* was painted from life in a single sitting before I started my MFA. I used primary colours with minimal mixing to create shadows. My background, a watery pale cadmium yellow, is almost as an afterthought and fights against the inherent drama of the subject.

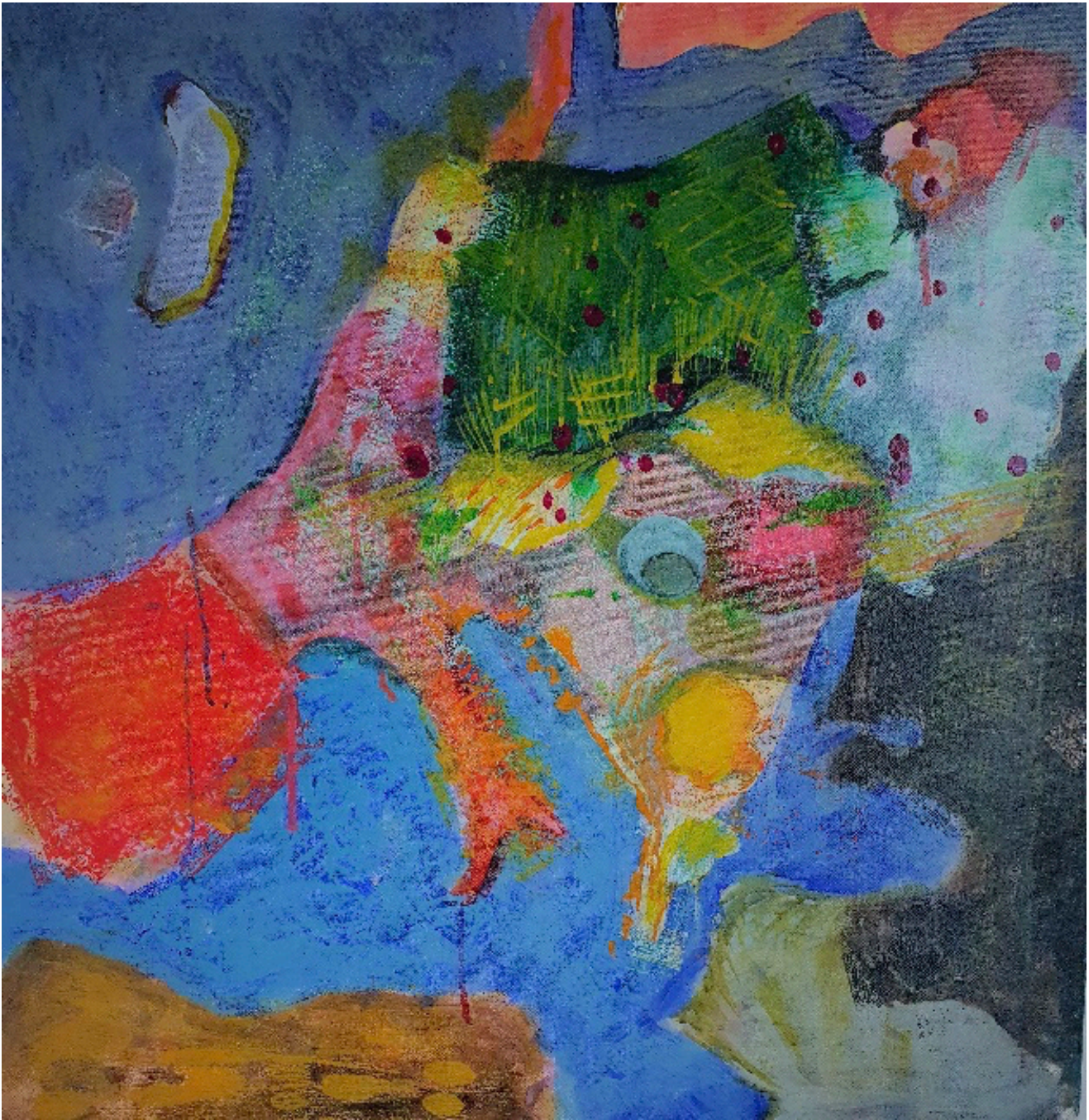
*Dad 2*, painted in July this year, uses a varied palette of earthy colours: yellow ochre, Indian red, alizarin crimson, burnt sienna, and burnt umber, usually in combination with ultramarine, sap green and flake white. The yellow ochre, seen so beautifully used in Gross's *Man* is now a staple of my painting palette. When painting *Dad 2* I had only a few minutes to put down patches of colour before my father woke. When he saw what I had painted, he grimaced as it was not the heroic portrait he'd been envisioning but I feel the work captures what I observed and felt.

*Dad 3*, painted while in MIQ, is highly stylized, using a mixture of cool and warm greys over a warm earthy background. Black outlines, a technique I picked up from studying Max Beckmann, gives the feeling of a woodcut. The man's eyes express fear and anxiety. This is not my father- it is him but it is also "everyman" facing death.

These small portraits show increasing confidence in mixing colours, including blacks, greys and flesh tones. Daily painting practice helped me increase certainty about being able to conjure up the saturation, tonal quality and texture I wanted.

Consider *Map of Europe*, 1944.





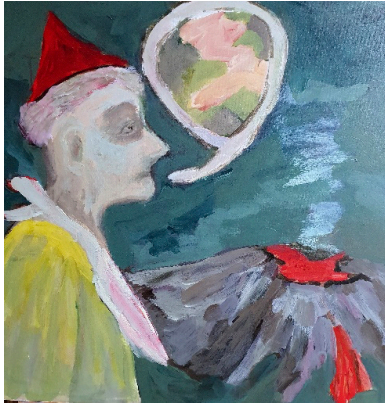
**Fig. 14** *Map of Europe, 1944*, by the author, Acrylic on canvas, May 2021.

*Map of Europe, 1944* helps me place the story of my paternal family under Nazi occupation. The crimson dots indicate the number and locations of concentration camps. A disembodied grey eye, planted slightly off-centre, references a colour etching by Ahmed Alsoudani, who fled Iraq for the USA. The eye looks downward anxiously. The sea, painted in cerulean and ultramarine blue, pops against the lollipop orange, yellow and pink of occupied nations. Germany, depicted in harsh military green painted over black, is scratched with steaks of mean looking yellow ochre. The surface of the painting lets layers of colour through, arresting and drawing in the viewer's eye. There is a sinister yet playful feeling to this painting. War is deadly and serious, but it is also incredibly, insanely and childish.



Another turning point in my journey was the recognition that I wanted to include figurative images in my work. Trying out ways to do this brought mixed results.

Consider these three works: *Impossibility*, *Faces* and *Disappearance*.



**Fig. 15** *Impossibility* by the author, Acrylic on canvas, May 2021.



**Fig.16** *Faces* by the author, Acrylic on canvas, May 2021.



**Fig.17** *Disappearance* by the author, Acrylic on canvas, May 2021.

*Impossibility* shows a man in clownish hat and an infant's bib, looking out with a weary detached expression on his face. A speech bubble comes out of his mouth but no words are visible, only indistinct shapes. To his right, a live volcano, painted in a cartoon-like style, threatens to boil over with red-hot lava.

*Faces* reflects the anxiety and panic Jews felt after the Reichstag burned in 1933. Suddenly the reality of facism hit home. Every individual had to make choices. Believe, ride it out, get out, carry on as usual... The colours are heightened, and a panic pervades the composition.

*Disappearance* shows detached heads floating in the air against a grey green background. Thin red lines, mimicking a spider's web, fails to connect the disembodied faces. These are people cut loose from their families and communities. In wartime, the bonds that hold people together, are severed.

All three paintings capture the underlying philosophy that my father, uncle and grandmother passed on to me; don't panic, detach to survive, and remember life is absurd.

Done in the middle of the year, these three paintings reflect my search for a more coherent style. Although I find these works too illustrative, they helped me build up a store of visual images which I tried out in in many different paintings, not shown here. In the following list I explain my growing painting vocabulary:

- Railway tracks, referencing the cattle cars carrying Jewish people who are shunted along the tracks to concentration camps
- Volcanos, referencing the boiling inner worlds of survivors, which unaccountably explodes from time to time
- Mountains, the sea, islands and bridges, referencing the isolation of the promised land of New Zealand
- Forests, referencing hidden massacre and persecution
- Smoke stacks/ belching smoke referencing the burning of bodies and destruction
- Menorah and flames referencing cultural heritage
- Disembodies hands and face referencing trauma, the past, and disconnection

My use of symbolism by itself doesn't constitute a good painting, however. I continued to experiment with composition and application of paint, and veered between painting from imagination, and from looking closely at the work of specific artists.

## **Jewish Artists and How They Informed My Work**

Goya, Picasso, Gerhard Richter, Anselm Kiefer and Hans Burkhard are masterful artists who paint the human tragedy of war but given the timeline for this project, I decided to narrow my focus to Jewish artists who shared my cultural history and had a connection to the Holocaust. I was under the misconception that the work of survivors or amateur artists might be useful to me but soon realized, to develop my painting technique, I needed to learn from established masters. This is not to discount the worth of amateur or minor artists who contribute a valuable part of the Holocaust's historical record. So, although I'd vowed not to head straight for Marc Chagall, (1887-1985), the obvious choice of a consummate Jewish artist, this is what I did. I also focused on Chaim Soutine, Charlotte Salomon, Abraham Rattner and Hyman Bloom.

## **What Chagall Taught Me**

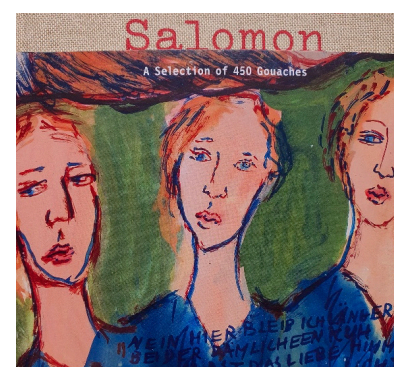
Chagall's childhood was spent in Vitebsk- a small town in the Pale of Russia. Yiddish was his first language, a language 98% of Jews spoke in the late 1800s, uniting them across borders and nationalities. European Jews had a network of social and cultural institutions, educational systems, societies, synagogues, prayer houses, hospitals, cemeteries, philanthropic and political organizations which the Holocaust destroyed, but Chagall's imagination kept Vitebsk, his childhood village, alive. His paintings contain a strong sense of nostalgia for a vanished world. "There is a sense of metaphysical hope in his work, an optimism deeper than that expressed by the platitude about the clouds with the silver lining (Werner 17). Although I was familiar with Chagall's most famous paintings, looking at a wide range of his watercolours, gouaches and oils showed me that perspective is neither here nor there (literally) in the world of imagination, and use of colour can be endlessly innovative and unexpected. When I looked at *White Crucifixion*, painted a direct response to growing fascism in Germany, I saw how the figure of Jesus spoke to the suffering of Jews



and Christians, uniting a burning synagogue, a distressed mother and child, and threatening soldiers. This mixture of humour and sorrow, encouraged me to embrace a more fantastical approach to my subject matter.

## What Charlotte Salomon Taught Me

Charlotte Salomon's gouache paintings, made as a loose-leaf book entitled *Leben? oder Theater? Ein Singespiel* translated as *Life? or Theatre? A Musical Play*, intrigued me. Her use of painted confessional text, detailing her family's ongoing domestic dramas, show the uncertainty and pressures she was under during Hitler's rise to power. This inner turbulence reflects her forced exile to the South of France which ended with her death in Auschwitz. I made *Hurry, she said* as a tribute to missing relatives, and as a response to Salomon, trying to capture the individuality and vulnerability of her figures. My painting was done in an MIQ facility after visiting my dying father in the United States. (Knowing Solomon's story made me grateful to be fleeing Covid and not the Nazis.) Although my use of text in this painting is tentative it is something I will continue to explore.

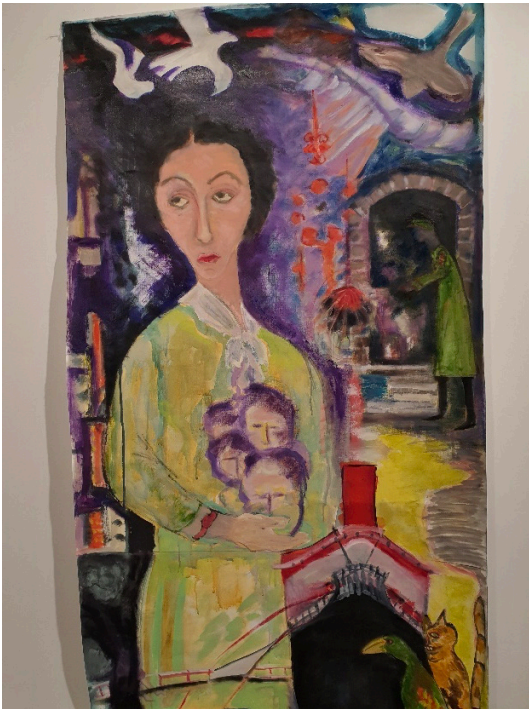


**Fig. 19** Charlotte Salomon book cover, Personal Photograph by the author, June 2021.

**Fig. 18** *Hurry, she said* by the author, Acrylic on paper, July 2021.

## What Chaim Soutine, Abraham Rattner and Hyman Bloom Taught Me

The Russian-French painter Chaim Soutine (1894-1943) left a shtetl in the Pale of Russia to live and work in Paris. As an expressionist painter, he is known for his highly individual portraits. Although he was ‘politically aloof’ and didn’t include autobiographical elements in his paintings, he, like van Gogh, focused and excelled in painting the “servant class” (Werner 10). Soutine captures personality with vibrant, energetic brushwork. *Decision* references Soutine’s *Portrait of Maria Lani*, who looks remarkably like my own grandmother. Using Soutine’s painting as my model, I filled a canvas with my Maria Lani lookalike grandmother, a ship, soldiers, a burning city, severed heads and doves. But next to Soutine’s portrait, my figure looks strangely lifeless and flat. This early work, done in the first year of my MFA, shows how far my painting has come. I would no longer attempt to use a clutch of symbols that need decoding, object by object and I am much more comfortable with ambiguity, and less reliant on illustration. From Soutine I saw capturing the essence of a person is not about anatomy, it’s about psychology.



**Fig. 20** *Decision* by the author, Acrylic on unstretched canvas, 2020.

Abraham Rattner (1895-1978), an American artist born to Russian and Romanian Jewish parents, integrates faces and figures into colourful, energetic fragments, often enhancing them by thick black lines to create a stained-glass effect. Rattner’s *And Let there be Light* stained-glass windows created for a Chicago synagogue in 1958, reflect that painting style. His work is also described as expressionist. He worked for twenty years in Paris, and in the 1940s returned to Jewish biblical and mystical themes as a response to the Holocaust. The American writer, Henry Miller, spoke of Rattner’s “restless searching heart” (Abrams as quoted in *Sacred Pilgrim*). His fluidity, overtly Jewish themes and use of colour are painting models for me.

Consider *Chaos*

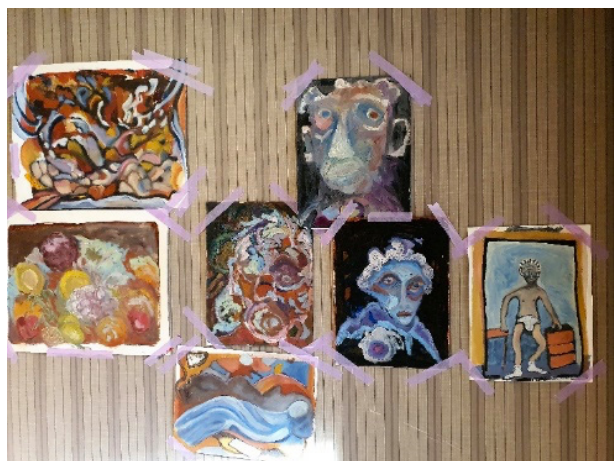




**Fig. 21** *Chaos* by the author, gouache on paper, June 2021.

*Chaos* is a test piece in gouache, made with reference to Rattner. Although I didn't capture the depth of his colour, I think this work is successful in terms of composition. I wasn't bold enough with the fragmented lines in black but, as a study, *Chaos* captures the way time is disjointed for the second-generation. The past and the present butt up against each other. Figures in this work are divided by sharp irregular lines, almost like slashes. A cat screeches, a man in a clown hat shaped like a volcano, speaks without saying anything. Grandmother, mother and granddaughter stand in front of a red theatrical curtain while a confused woman in the foreground tries to make sense of a broken family history.

In July 2021 I had to make an urgent trip overseas to see my father. On returning to New Zealand, I spent two weeks in MIQ (managed isolation). I had a portable easel and painted without stopping, turning the walls of my hotel into a little gallery.

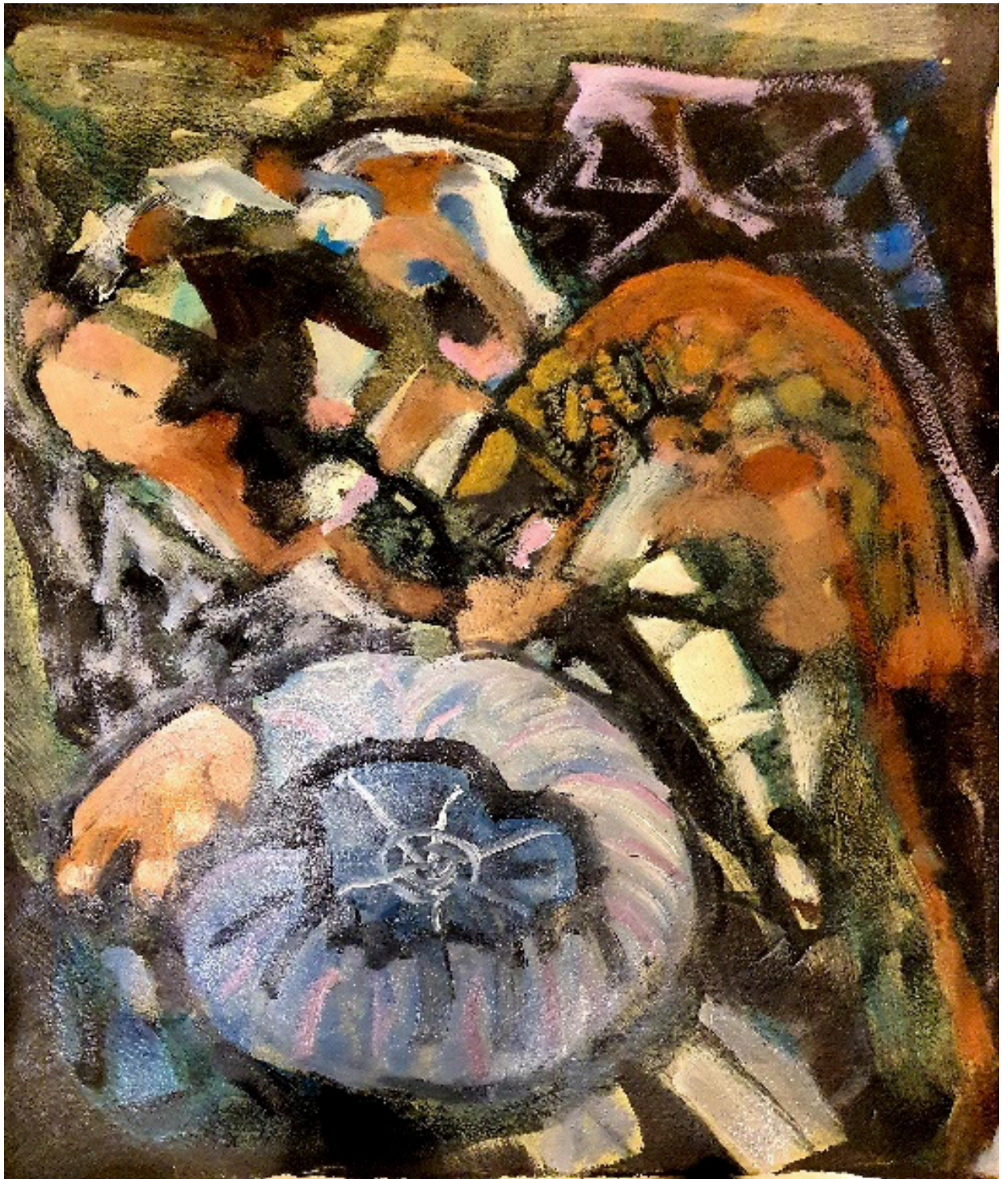


**Fig. 22** *Stamford Hotel Wall*, Personal Photo by author, August 2021.

It was during this time that I focused on Hyman Bloom (1913-2009), scrutinizing his work more closely. Born in Latvia, Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock called him “the first abstract expressionist”, a label Bloom rejected. His corpse paintings unflinchingly see bodies as decaying meat, combining life and death in close proximity. This juxtaposition gives his work power and dignity in the face of the Holocaust, the world’s supreme slaughterhouse. Bloom’s audacity to paint his self- portrait as a hunk of meat directly references Soutine’s still life, *Carcass of Beef*. (Soutine famously said, “In the body of a woman, Courbet was able to express the atmosphere of Paris — I want to show Paris in the carcass of an ox”). While I can hardly claim Bloom’s skills, his paintings opened a door for me in terms of ways to create a painting by using small areas of intense colour and pattern, which then become a whole.

Consider *Man with a Secret*.



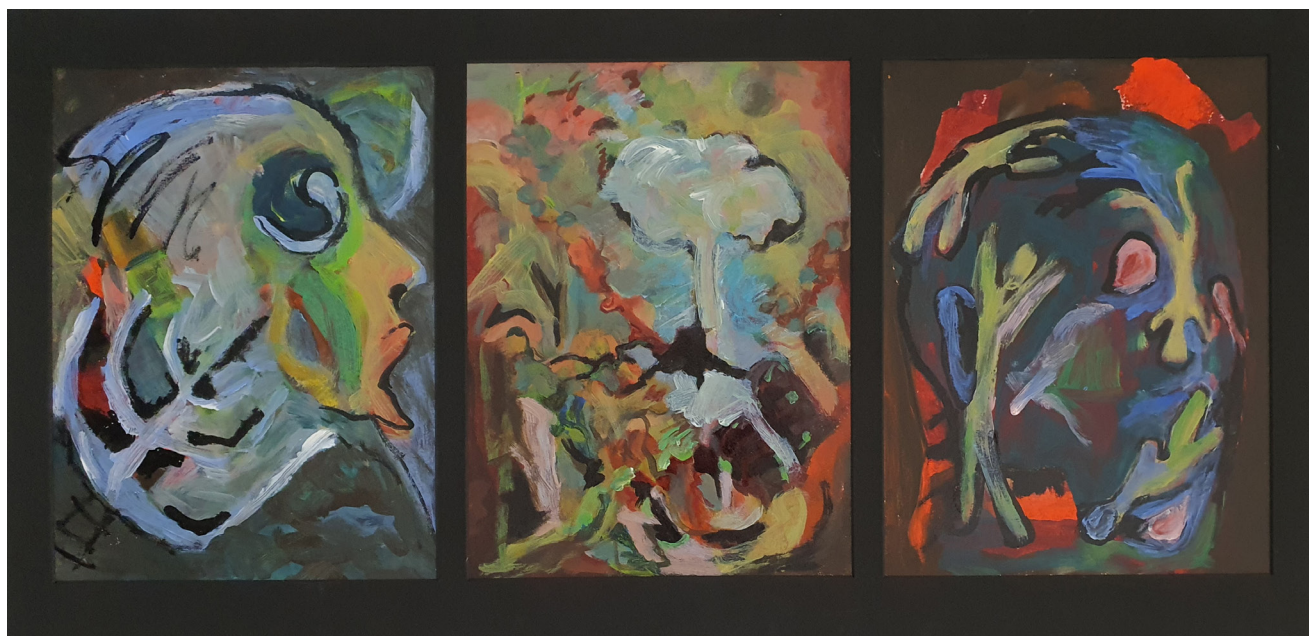


**Fig. 23** *Man with a Secret*  
by the author, oil on paper.  
August 2021.

A man is hunched over a pot or a basket, guarding it closely. An eyeball surrounded by darkness stares out of it, unblinking. Urgent circular brushstrokes surround the figure, placing him a hostile world. He's sly, guarded, closed in on himself. Brushstrokes are broken up with black spaces giving the work intensity and depth. What is the figure hiding? It's not gold, not jewels, only a forlorn eyeball, always open, always bearing witness. This is the eye that never closes.



Immersing myself in Bloom's work helped me create *Shoah Triptych* while in isolation. I am pleased with both the intensity and freedom in these small works on paper. I was very deliberate about linking the three images in terms of colour and gesture. The dark background, the style of Bloom, ties the works together. I made use of Rattner's intense colour and energetic composition, moving between light and dark so that the images are dramatic and vivid. The menorah, railway tracks, faces, and disconnected figures flying over a shaved head, convey anxiety and fear. This imagined representation of an experience I have read about and heard about, is closest I dare get to the dark centre.



**Fig. 24** *Holocaust Triptych*  
by the author, Acrylic on  
paper August 2021.

## Breakthrough

With a new appreciation of Bloom, and release from MIQ, I turned to an unfinished painting I'd been struggling over which was beginning to look like grey porridge at the bottom of a burnt pot. I picked up my brush and started again.

Consider *Arrival*.





**Fig. 25** *Arrival* by the author,  
Acrylic and oil on paper,  
August 2021.

Light- hearted figures form a chain across the landscape. My spirit, the survivor's daughter, is a floating face above the landscape on the right-hand side of the painting. The naked figures express the freedom my adopted country offers. Running along in the bottom third of the painting is a slash of a red railway line. Those tracks forever link me to the Shoah. I can't escape those tracks- but isn't it wonderful to be alive?

BARBARIC CIRCLE #4

'The artist resists the impulse

to make sense straight away

Instead she catches something from the corner of her eye,

something bright and twitching

she turns to look

and begins

– Michelanne Forster

## Connecting with Jewish- New Zealand artists

Mina Arndt, Grace Joel, Max Abbott, Paul Nathan, Caroline Faigan, and Ruth Gilbert: all New Zealand artists, all Jewish, but none declare their work is about Jewish identity or the Holocaust. I consulted Ann Beaglehole, who has written extensively about pre-war Jewish immigration and she introduced me to the work of second-generation, New Zealand artist, Hélène Carroll, the only child of Holocaust survivors. Carroll's *Alphabet Series* is deliberately didactic, the images set out like a child's picture book. Each painting portrays some aspect of the Holocaust (A is for apple and A is for Auschwitz). Carroll uses barbed wire motif and Pacifica imagery: shells, trees, insects, and birds. Her work convincingly ties the Holocaust to Aotearoa- but surely she couldn't be the only artist in Aotearoa doing this?

It was after reading Leonard Bell's work, *Strangers Arrive: Emigres and the Arts in New Zealand, 1930–1980*, that I understood framing my search in a different way could enlarge my search. Eleven hundred Jews came to this country as refugees from Nazism. Sixteen thousand applied for residency. Among the lucky 1100 were photographers, architects, writers and painters, all of whom emigrated because their lives were in danger. The cultural impact of this forced migration in the 1930s and 40s, was considerable and Bell traces the way these artists fleeing Nazi persecution enriched New Zealand culturally. Bell states visual arts in New Zealand were changed in two ways: "The new arrivals transmitted European modernist and metropolitan ideas and practices... and enhanced the standing of traditional European cultural practices" (Bell 3). While the arrival of these 'refugees' (a term Beaglehole says new arrivals disliked as they felt it marginalized them) provoked some suspicion, surveillance, and backlash but there was also successful intermarriage and salon-style intermingling. Kiwis sought out the food, culture, and artistic connections with the 'aliens' (Bell 12).

I argue a Jew who has lost his country, statehood, home, family and cultural heritage to Naziism can be called a survivor. Survivors came out of concentration camps, forests and cellars, attics and false identities. Survivors who were exiled to Aotearoa during these years of deliberate Jewish genocide were not immune to it. I speak from lived experience with a strong connection with other members of the second-generation. The trauma of the Holocaust should be considered in any reading of Jewish artists' work from 1933 to the present. For example, how do we read the New Zealand artist Tom Kreisler (1938–2002) whose parents who were Jewish refugees from Vienna? They fled to Argentina where Kreisler was born. Kreisler came to New Zealand as a teenager and worked on the edge of the art world, living in New Plymouth (and also with Simon Morris and his wife!) making enigmatic and ironic paintings that were exhibited in New Plymouth, and curated by his son. He described himself as a "foreigner and an outsider" (Bell 132). Those who married or partnered exiled Jews also may be affected. Denis Knight Turner, another New Zealand painter of great skill, married Hilde Simon, a German Jewish refugee. Hilde Simon escaped from a country where Jewish women were fully stripped and gassed so should we consider that when looking at his wife's half naked portrait? I think so. Bell suggests we pay more attention to the émigré artists who came here to save themselves. Their work has been "marginalized or forgotten in previous histories because they didn't fit into prevailing artistic categories and narratives" (Bell 17). This is a tantalizing idea for future study.

## Works Selected for a Final Exhibition

The decision to hold my final examination at the Wellington Jewish Community Centre is part of positioning my practice as a painter whose identity and interests are bound up with the legacy of the Holocaust. Welcoming people unfamiliar with Judaism to my exhibition, held in a small communal dining room at WJCC, which also contains a synagogue, pre-school, meeting hall, archive, and a Holocaust Education Centre, is a purposeful way of reaching out to those who want to understand the historical and cultural context of my paintings. For the Jewish community, who regularly use this space, there may be curiosity: are we in these paintings? How is our culture represented? For those attending from the College of Creative Arts, there is a different kind of curiosity: Do I need to be religious to be in this space? What is Jewish about these paintings? What does that mean? The two different ways of coming at my paintings will, I hope, make conversations about them all the more interesting.

Selecting what to show as a coherent body of work began with some ruthless culling. Overall, I tried to find a balance of paintings that confronted, intrigued and beguiled. I selected my largest painting, *Blue Menorah*, to draw visitors into the room with a recognized symbol of Judaism. *Mountain Menorah*, with its vibrant colours and Chagall-like optimism, is intended to uplift viewers, similarly, *Arrival*, which has a lilting poetic quality. These three paintings are intended as a contrast to the two works where I peel the Holocaust onion to its tear-making core. *Shoah Triptych* and *Tracks* are intended to freeze viewers mid-look... Oh, no! Really? I want viewers to recognize the genuine anguish in these works, and if they will walk down the hallway to the Holocaust Centre later on, that anguish will have been conveyed. There are four other more explanatory paintings where the viewer can fairly easily figure out what's going on. *Hurry, she said* is about a mother and child trying to get out of harm's way as fast as they can. *Map of Europe 1944* shows a sinister red rash of concentration camps speckled over Germany I included it because it simultaneously lures the eye and turns the stomach. I selected *Faces* because it also does two things at once; it raises a slight smile with its exaggerated graphic style, yet also conveys desperate anxiety. *Disappearance* stayed in because the colour palette soothes the eye, which is something my paintings don't often offer. I kept *Man with a Secret* and *Evolution* in the final cut because both works are ambiguous and juicily painted but the viewer is left alone to figure out what they mean. Given their titles and connection with the rest of the show, I expect my intentions as a painter will be somewhat accessible. *Einsatzgruppen*, my personal favourite, stayed in because it withholds its message in a very controlled way. The viewer's eye moves around this initially pleasant painting before the chilling narrative gradually reveals itself.



## Exhibition paintings



*Arrival*



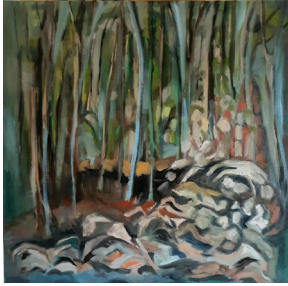
*Blue Menorah*



*Dad 3*



*Disappearance*



*Einsatzgruppen*



*Evolution*



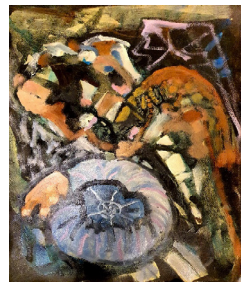
*Faces*



*Forest*



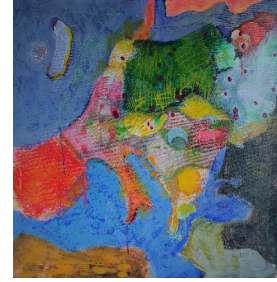
*Hurry, she said*



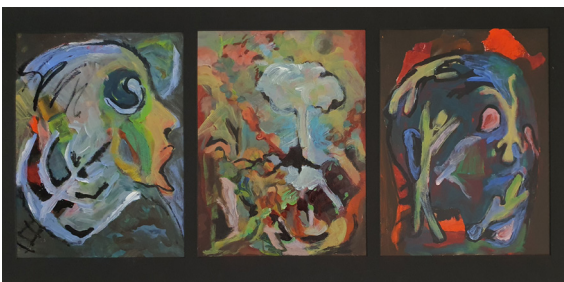
*Man With a secret*



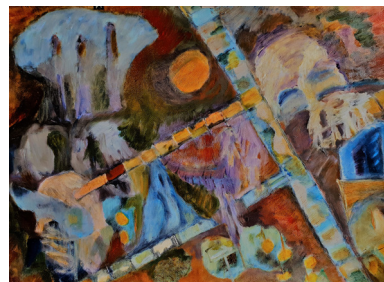
*Mountain Menorah*



*Map of Europe 1944*



*Shoah Tryptic*



*Tracks*

# CONCLUSION

This project-led exegesis has tried to answer several potent questions. The primary question I faced was, how do I resolve the tensions inherent in developing a personal painting language when I am tasked, as the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, to remember and memorialize the six million? How do I negotiate those two equally strong calls on my creative self? The second question that hung around my neck was, how do I express my immigrant Jewish identity as a painter? The final bedevilling question was, how do I locate myself in New Zealand and connect my “here and now” with the far-away places and historical events that shaped me?

I would be lying if I said I found definitive answers to these three questions at the end of my paintbrush. My hesitancy in choosing an exegesis topic is indicative of the complexity of my questions. I knew, after a long career in the arts, that producing work for the public is not a therapeutic exercise. Although artmaking can contain cathartic and revelatory moments for the artist, it is important to be guided by an intellectual framework. Informed thinking and research were, for me, as important as creative instinct and craft skills. This project allowed me to examine my longstanding questions through both experimentation and research.

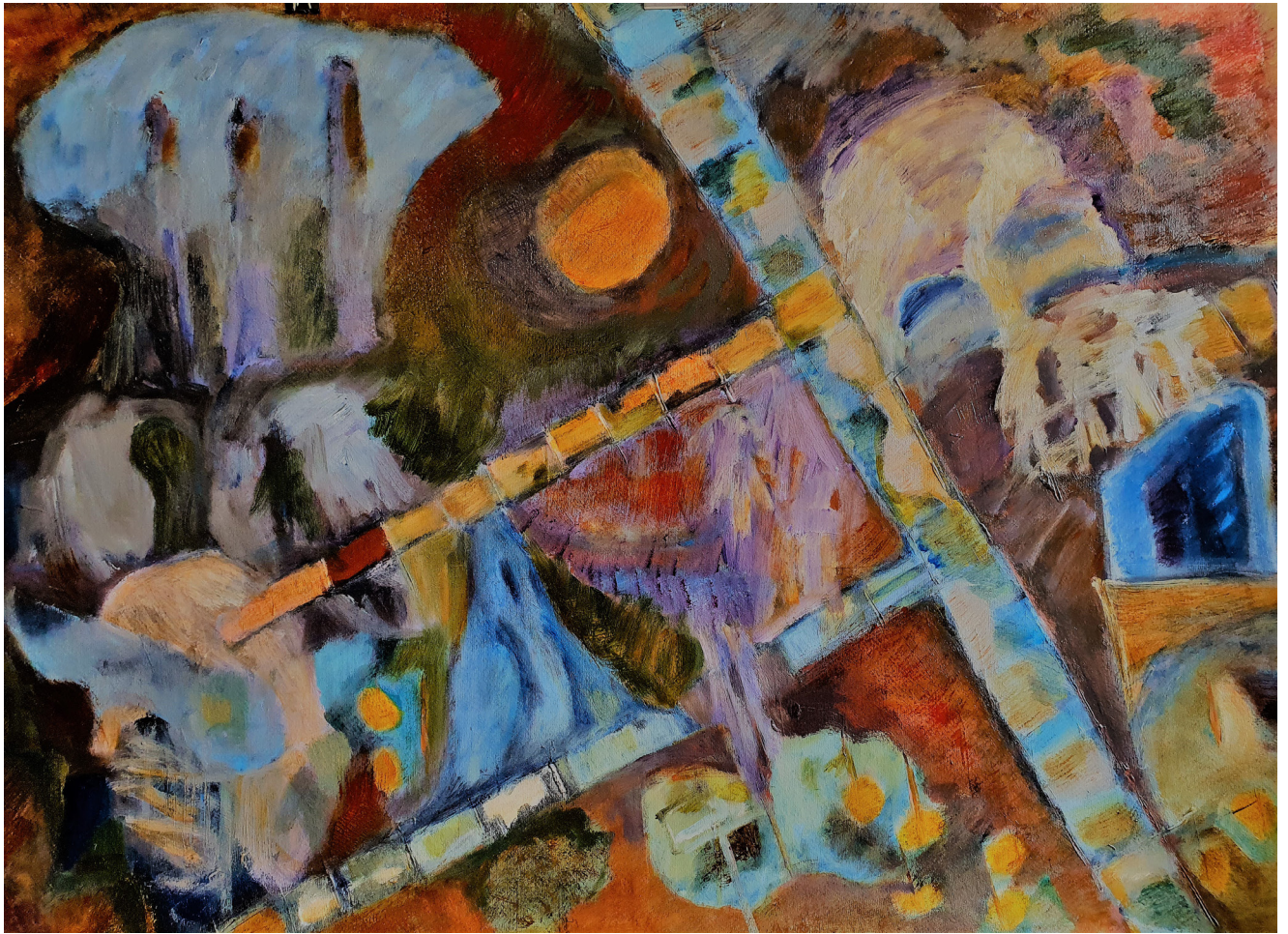
The study of painters in exile led to a new understanding of Expressionism, its political power and place in art history. My experimentation with Jewish symbolism in a New Zealand landscape led to the realization that the shadow of the Holocaust still hung over me and needed addressing. Through reading Young and Hirst, I understood the concepts of “post-memory” and “vicarious past”, which brought the realization that expressing myself as an artist required psychological boundaries. I was not under an obligation to replicate the first-generation’s Holocaust experience, nor could I. Ezrahi’s metaphor of the Holocaust as a dark centre, with fictive possibilities at its barbaric periphery, was an important light-bulb moment in adopting a critical strategy.

The question of how to express my identity in painting was resolved over an afternoon tea with a Jewish academic. “The fact is, you are here; you are Jewish, and you are painting. That is enough.” These simple but profound words, and my exposure to contemporary Māori art during my time at Massey, changed my thinking. I learned cultural symbolism should not be appropriated, but also, there is no obligation for those with knowledge and heritage to make art that overtly declares, *Ko Māori ahau*. Likewise, I didn’t need to prove how Jewish I was by putting a Star of David, or a menorah or a kiddish cup in my paintings. I know who I am, and that is enough. I also learned to value my immigrant backstory, and the different lens through which I see my adopted homeland.

Locating my work in Aotearoa, I’ve decided, is not an issue I need to “solve”. The world of imagination transcends geography. If my inner world is more potent than anything I see out my window, I can paint from that place. Art is not an illustrated geography lesson. If I never paint another fern, or cabbage tree, or tui in a kowai tree, that doesn’t mean I don’t belong here. In being challenged- where is Aotearoa in your work? – this is my answer: I am on a painting journey that does not want to leave anything behind. I occupy an in-between space that oscillates between cultural identities. Here and now. Then and there. Both locations are mine.

I trust memory and imagination to take me wherever I need to go.





**Fig.26** *Tracks*, by author,  
September 2021

A scene of turbulence hits the viewer's eye. Ambiguous shapes, perhaps buildings or faces or smoke push through a dried-blood red and brown background. Diagonal slashes hold the painting together. Are these railway tracks? Roads? Boxes? Fences? Branches? Small splashes of colour interrupt and ease the eye. Be alert, may you be the lucky one.



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