

FAITH

Survivors of the Holocaust, these Oregon artists paint to renew the spirit

A Portland agency is celebrating their work this Passover, which 'is about freedom, rebirth and seeing things fresh and new.'

Tom Hallman Jr
The Oregonian/OregonLive

During much of her life, Rosalyn Kliot knew only that her parents had been sent to a concentration camp in Estonia simply because they were Jewish. The future was not measured in years, but hours or minutes.

Knowing their fate, her parents were among 20 prisoners who escaped. The couple fled to give their unborn child a chance at a better life, and Kliot was born during the war in occupied Poland.

"When I was growing up my parents never spoke of their lives," said Kliot, 77, who now lives in Lake Oswego. "They were trying to protect their children. When I was 12, my class read Anne Frank's diary. I began asking my parents questions about our relatives and grandparents. The answer was always just 'the war.' That was it. No more explanations. Even the word Holocaust did not come into being in our family."

Kliot is one of more than 100 Holocaust survivors living in the metropolitan area who are being helped by Jewish Family & Child Service, a Portland organization with roots dating back to 1947.

While offering multiple programs for the greater Jewish community, the agency also has the only program in Oregon with case managers specifically dedicated to helping Holocaust survivors. In addition to local fundraising, the program receives \$1.3 million annually from the Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany as well as financial support from Kavod Shef, a Jewish organization that helps survivors across the United States.

To celebrate Passover this year, the Portland agency decided to focus on the work of four local Holocaust survivors who are also painters.

"It seemed like just what we needed," said Ruth Scott, the agency's executive director. "Passover is about freedom, rebirth and seeing things fresh and new. These paintings let people know there are real people behind the numbers of those who survived the Holocaust."



Rosalyn Kliot's living room serves as a gallery of her work, which is featured throughout.
Beth Nakamura, staff

No exhibition is planned because much of the artwork has been sold over the decades, said Scott, who let supporters know about the artists in the agency's monthly newsletter. But she said the goal is to one day have a public exhibit.

It may seem strange to feature artists during a religious holiday, but as an artist Kliot says it is not only appropriate, but necessary.

The Jewish holiday, which began April 15 and ends April 23, commemorates the liberation of enslaved Israelites out of Egypt. The tradition was practiced during the Holocaust and by Jews in concentration and labor camps. Historians estimate that 6 million Jews were murdered during the Holocaust.

"Over the years, my work has become more colorful," said Kliot. "Sometimes it's even whimsical. There's none of the angst of the war. Art proves that you can be a victim, but you are not a victim."

Georgette Hancock, 86, of Hillsboro, another of the featured artists, draws strength from Passover, which she said celebrates not just the faith, but her personally passing over difficulties and memories in her life.

"I celebrated Passover with my parents and grandparents when we lived in Hungary," she said. "Then came the war. It is

not a pleasant thing for me to talk about."

Hancock said her father was taken to a labor camp where he was forced to work as a cook.

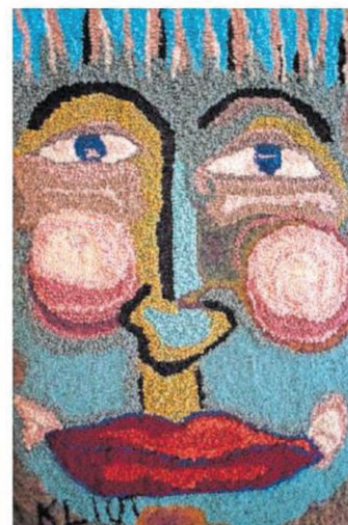
"He was a courageous man," she said. "My mother and the children, we hid in a house with other Jewish people. I was 7 years old. We were there with my cousins. The cruelty. It makes me want to cry."

Hancock said she came to art late in life.

"I was 60," she said. "A friend came over and brought some paints. We painted, and it started a whole new life for me. It helped me get back to my religion and spirituality. When I paint, I see beautiful things in the world and in myself. It reminds me that God did not create this planet for people to do cruel things. To me, Passover and art are reminders of that."

Sidonie Caron, 89, of Portland, another of the artists, was born in Germany to Jewish parents.

"German Jews were very integrated into society," she said. "My mother's cousin was a well-known writer, and my father was a high-end lawyer. But the German Jews were not very observant about what has happened in their country. That's what haunts me. They didn't believe it could happen. Then Hitler came to power."



Artist Rosalyn Kliot said she was never able to sell this fiber piece because it reminded her of her father. It currently hangs in her home. *Beth Nakamura, staff*



"A Lonely Man," by Boris Uan-Zo-li.
Courtesy photo

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Caron said her father came to his office one day and found, written in excrement in German, words that said: "Out Jews."

"He understood," said Caron. "We left Germany. I was a baby, and my parents told me they hid money in my diapers to keep it from the Germans. They were horrific times. We were stuck in Holland for nine months before we got to England."

Caron lived in Britain until she was 15 before her parents sent her to New York City to live with relatives for formal art training. She later returned to London to study art.

"My parents kept the stories from the war away from us," she said. "They did not talk it about it so as not to contaminate the children."

The fourth artist featured is Boris Uan-Zo-li, an 83-year-old Russian-born artist and engineer who immigrated to the United States in 2011 and lives in Hillsboro. He does not speak English. His son, Alex, who came to the United States in 2010 to attend graduate school, tells his father's story.

"By the time the war ended my father was 7," said Alex Uan-Zo-li. "Being Jewish in the Soviet Union was not an easy way to live. A Jew was discriminated against, and it was hard to get into school."

Uan-Zo-li said his father did not practice the Jewish faith, but that did not matter to authorities.

"In the Soviet Union, a Jew was someone who had a Jewish parent," he said. "It was written in ink in my father's documents. There was no way to escape it, whether you believe in God or not. His father, my grandfather, was sent to a concentration camp."

Alex Uan-Zo-li said his father eventually earned a master's degree in engineering and then worked designing airplanes and missile systems. He also took up painting.

"He worked during the day as an engineer and painted at night," he said. "My parents finally joined me in the United States. If you were Jewish and wanted to leave, you could lose your job. You are a living corpse. It's also a one-way street. You go, and you are never coming back. You will never again see your family."

Uan-Zo-li said his father has created hundreds of paintings.

"The earlier ones are darker and gloomier," he said. "Now, they are more colorful."



A painting by Sidonie Caron.

Courtesy photo

For all four of the artists, the past is never far away.

"I knew the war responsible for the death of our family," said Kliot. "But that was it."

Her father's name was legally changed — by mistake — when he arrived in the United States.

"They wrote Klott on the paperwork," said his daughter. "My father did not know much English and that is how it stayed — Leon Klott. That was my last name while I was growing up. My parents came to this country with nothing and built beautiful lives for their children. We grew up in a Chicago suburb. I eavesdropped on my parents, getting fragments of information about the war, but my father spoke seven languages and my mother five. I really knew very little about their lives."

Before he died in 1985 at age 75, Kliot's father gave each of his three children his handwritten memoir. He hand-delivered another copy to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum in Israel.

"I received the memoir when I was 50," said Kliot. "Even then my parents would not talk about the war."

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Artist learns family secrets from father's memoir

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The 400-page memoir was in Yiddish. "It was written in a language I could not read," said Kliot. "My father did not type or use a computer. It was written in long-hand."

She spent years trying to find someone to translate the memoir.

"I went to local synagogues, to the Oregon Holocaust Museum," she said. "They couldn't help."

Finally, she sent her copy of the memoir to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. She heard back that they would translate it for her at no cost. By then her parents had died. The book is now available to read online from the museum's website, his daughter said.

"They sent 20 pages at a time," Kliot said. "That was really all I could emotionally digest. This was my family. The Holocaust became personal."

It took five years to translate the book, and it was then that the past began to make sense for Kliot.

"When I was 12 I found a photograph in our home," said Kliot. "It was of a girl. I asked my mother about it then. She turned pale and told me to never talk about it."

The memoir explained everything. "The hardest part for me was learning that my father had been married before," said Kliot.

"He and his wife had a baby girl and they had escaped from the Polish ghetto. The baby was sick, and his wife wanted to return to the ghetto to be with her mother. They crawled back into the ghetto. Within a day my father was sent to a concentration camp. His wife and the baby hid in the ghetto. The Nazis found them and executed them."

In her father's book, Kliot learned her extended family had been murdered, either in the Polish ghetto or in concentration camps.

"In the concentration camp in Estonia my father got to know a woman," Kliot said. "They fell in love, and she became pregnant with me and then they escaped. If my father had not returned to the ghetto, I would not be here. The woman who is my mother would have died."

Kliot discovered she was named after the baby who was executed, the same name as her father's mother. Her father, Kliot learned, had carried the photograph — the one she found when she was 12 — in his boot all during the war.

"I have it now," she said. "It looks like a piece of fine porcelain with a thousand cracks in it because of how my father carried it in his boot. My father never spoke of his first child. But my name was to him a daily reminder, his way of keeping the memory alive of what had happened."

The death of her father and reading his memoir led his daughter to honor the man by legally changing her last name from Klott, the name she had carried for so many years, to the original last name — Kliot.

"I considered it," she said, "a final act of defiance against the Nazis."

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