



Gratz Insider, November 2012 - Story Continuation

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### **Unique Collection of Holocaust Art on Exhibit at Gratz**

His name was Novick, or so it appears. He is believed to have been a Russian Jew who served as a soldier in the Soviet Army during the Battle of Stalingrad in 1942. He is also believed to have been a Holocaust survivor, who was imprisoned in both a German concentration camp and a Soviet concentration camp until he was finally liberated.

In addition, Novick was a talented artist. This talent is apparent in the collection of nine pen and inks that are attributed to him and are on display at Gratz College through the generosity of the Henry and Helen Bienenfeld Foundation.

Henry and Helen Bienenfeld are also Holocaust survivors. They emigrated from Poland to the United States in 1947, where they met and ultimately married. Henry had survived the Holocaust by hiding in a hole on a Polish farmer's land with ten other people, including his brother, who was killed one week before liberation. Helen's family had moved east to Siberia, where they had suffered harsh conditions but managed to endure.

It is precisely because of this history that the Bienenfeld Foundation acquired the Russian pen and inks on display at Gratz. These works tell a Holocaust survivor story, and it is stories like these that the Bienenfeld Family is committed to sharing. It is also because of the Bienenfelds' history of survivorship that a Russian art dealer agreed to sell the collection to them in the first place. He had overcome his own reluctance to part with this collection because he knew that the Bienenfeld Family would respect and appreciate its historical significance.

Michael, the younger of the two Bienenfeld sons, is an art collector who brought these pen and inks to his family's attention. The works "evoke a visceral reaction," he says. "Jewish or non-Jewish, anyone who looks at them gets very emotional."

The younger Bienenfeld attributes the emotional power of the collection in part to the artist's technique, adding that Russian art of this quality from this era is hard to

find. He suspects that Novick—the name attributed to the artist because it appears as a signature on one of the works—was most likely professionally trained.

The medium used by the artist also contributes to the emotional impact of his work. As pen and inks, these works lack color, creating a starkness that evokes the somber mood of the scenes depicted.

It is because of this dramatic subject matter that the artwork is also particularly gripping. Yet, even among Holocaust art, this collection is unique, according to Bienenfeld, because it is a cohesive grouping that tells a story. In this series of artwork, the artist recounts the story of his life from his participation in the Battle of Stalingrad to his ultimate liberation.

For each work in the series, the artist provided titles, which the Bienenfeld Family had translated by individuals of Russian heritage. Determining what they believed was the proper chronology, the Bienenfelds then arranged the works by title in the following sequence: “Stalingrad 1942,” “On My Way to Concentration Camp,” “Plank Beds,” “Food Distribution of Scaled Fish” (There was some difficulty arriving at this precise title, but all of the translators agreed that the idea was food unfit for consumption.), “Dividing Bread with Pharmaceutical Precision,” “From German Concentration Camp to Soviet” and “Hitler Defeated.” Although the eighth work is titled “Meeting Grandfather,” there is a statue in the picture itself with a plaque that says “Nobody and Nothing is Forgotten.” The translation of the ninth work has yet to be confirmed.

Capturing the emotional impact of this artwork, Jack Bienenfeld explains that the pen and inks “are very powerful. They are beautifully done and horrific at the same time. They belong on some wall where as many eyes as possible can see them.”

*The Leona P. Kramer Gallery at Gratz College is free and open to the public Monday through Thursday from 9 to 5:30, Friday from 9 to 3 and Sunday from 9 to 2. The Bienenfeld collection of Holocaust art is on display for a limited time. The Henry and Helen Bienenfeld Foundation provides financial support to a number of Jewish and Israeli charities.*