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Reflections on the Holocaust: The Holocaust Art of Aba Bayefsky

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Reflections on the Holocaust

The Holocaust Art of Aba Bayefsky

Laura Brandon

In July 1997 it was announced that work had begun on the design and construction of a new 16,000 square-foot addition to the Canadian War Museum In Ottawa, a section of which will be devoted to a memorial Holocaust gallery. The curator of this exhibit, Fred Gaffen, has already been actively searching for photographs, artifacts, documents, memories and recollections which will tell the story of this dark period In human history to all Canadians.



However, a visual record of one concentration camp - Bergen-Belsen - already exists within the art collection of the Canadian War Museum. Three of Canada's official war artists, Alex Colville, Aba Bayefsky, and Donald Anderson, visited this,,German concentration camp shortly after its liberation by the British Army in April 1945. Alex Colville's work from Belsen is probably the best known of the three, and there can be no doubt that what he saw became a permanent part of his creative imagination.¹ Donald Anderson's watercolour sketch of the exterior of the camp has rarely been exhibited while Aba Bayefsky's nine works have been exhibited from time to time. However, what has provided them with a particular force in recent years is their relationship to the artist's later work on similar themes. Bayefsky has never stopped painting and drawing what he saw and experienced in May and June 1945. Images of death, suffering and cruelty now travel with him, and are a part of him. Over the years they have become the source for several paintings, and a drawing series, *Epilogue*, that grouped together span a period of 45 years. It is all on display at the Canadian War Museum until the end of August 1998.

Flight-Lieutenant Aba Bayefsky enlisted in the RCAF in October 1942. He was 19 years old. After service in Canada in Quebec City, and in Manitoba, he was posted overseas in May 1944 to Skipton-on-Swale Station, Yorkshire in No.6 Bomber Group. Appointed an official war artist in December 1944, he completed assignments at Topcliffe Conversion Unit in Yorkshire and 437 (Transport) Squadron, Blakehill Farm, Wiltshire. He was then attached to No. 39 (Reconnaissance) Wing of the RAF's Second Tactical Air Force which disbanded in Luneberg, Germany in August 1945. It was during this period that he visited Bergen-Belsen, and painted damage in the German towns of Hamburg, Niemunster and Hanover.

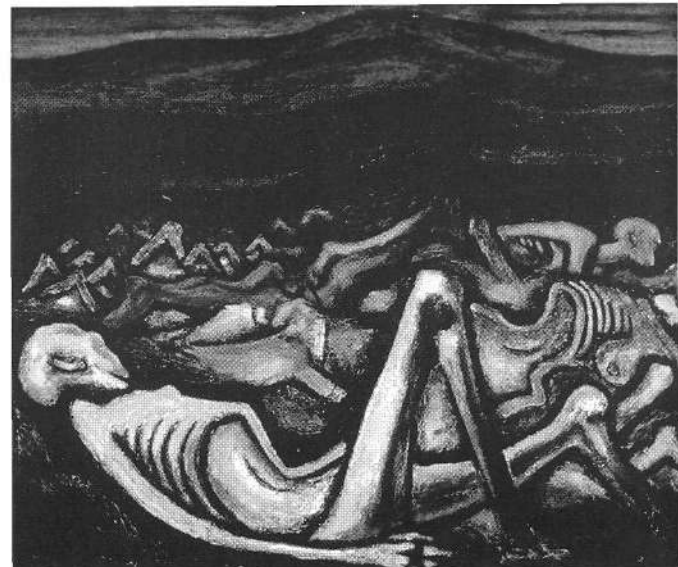
Bayefsky had just turned 22 when he visited Belsen for the first time on 10 May 1945. For the young Jewish man the experience was of critical importance to his later career, and to his attitude to life. In an interview he said, "It was the determining factor in everything I have done since."² He described what he first saw in an interview in the *Canadian Jewish News*. "The truck loads of dead inmates were being placed into newly dug pits by captured German soldiers and German civilians who were denying any previous knowledge or connection with the death camp."³ Three works depict a mass grave. The drawing completed on 10 May shows a jumble of bone-white emaciated bodies, like broken skeletons, piled one upon the other. The dark side of the pit rises up behind them providing a stark tonal contrast, while above the sky is leaden.⁴ The artist revisited Belsen a week later, and sketched another pit scene. This work shows signs of tension in that the lines of the



Above left: "Belsen Concentration Camp - The Pit,"
10 May 1945. (CWM CN 10846)

Below left: "Belsen Concentration Camp - The Pit
No.2," 17 May 1945. (CWM CN 10847)

Below right: "Belsen Concentration Camp," c. 1945.
(CWM CN 10845)



composition are scratched in an urgent manner, and are possessed of an anxious, nervous quality. The bodies are more contorted, and the mood is one of agony. There is no sky, just the bleak black walls of the pit, with which the white forms of the corpses seem to intermingle.⁵ The final work, an oil on canvas, is more like the first drawing. The contorted, nervous lines are gone. Perhaps the agony is over, and some kind of peace has been found for the victims. On the back of the painting is a quote from Goethe, "Man needs but little earth for pleasure and even less for his final repose."⁶

At the same time that he was sketching a pit for the second time, Bayefsky made a sketch of a starving German Jewish boy who ultimately died the next day. He returned to this theme twice more. In each version, the artist strove to capture the pathos, misery, and hopelessness of the boy's situation despite the fact that the camp was now liberated.⁷ Echoes of these compositions reappear in two works entitled *Boy with Butterflies* dating from 1948 and 1949, and based on sketches the artist made in displaced

persons camps around Paris and Milan in 1947.⁸ On a third visit to Belsen on 28 May 1945, Bayefsky sketched one of the slave workers.⁹ As he said in an interview, his reactions to his subjects were coloured by the fact that, "For the first time [he had] become aware of man's monstrous capacity for evil."¹⁰ On his 10 June visit Bayefsky sketched one of the typhus victims, returning to the theme in a subsequent work.¹¹

Bayefsky's experiences in Europe had been disturbing, and he found it difficult to settle down in Toronto, finding himself at odds with the establishment. One 1950 painting, *Recruiting Poster*, initiated a theme he was to refer to again and again in the much later *Epilogue* series. It features a grinning skeleton holding a kite, strung along whose tail are dangling masks. At the foot of the skeleton lie more masks, and eye glasses. While the message does not directly refer to the Holocaust in this instance, the image, with its allusions to death in the form of a skeleton and the "grim reaper," to broken bodies, and to the fact that evil is often masked, shows an obvious indebtedness to recent experiences.¹² A 1959



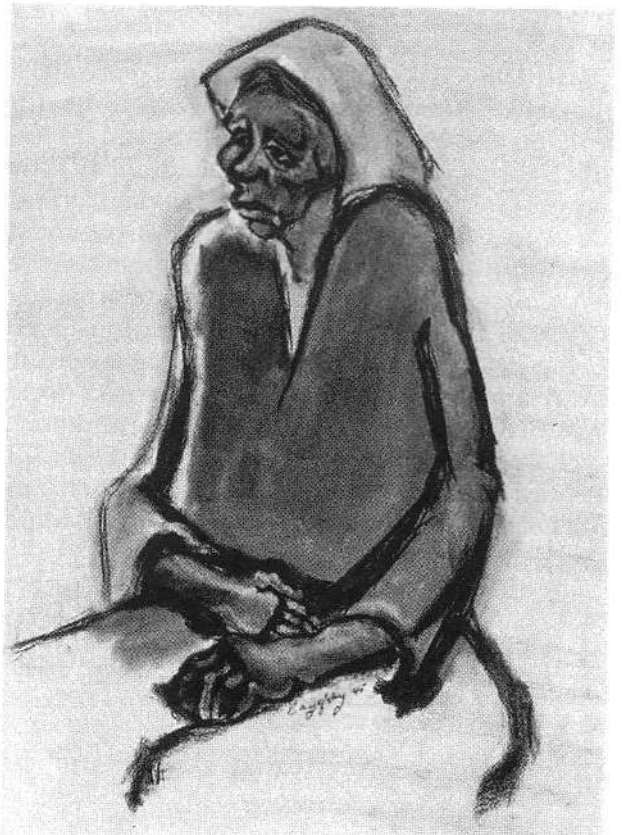
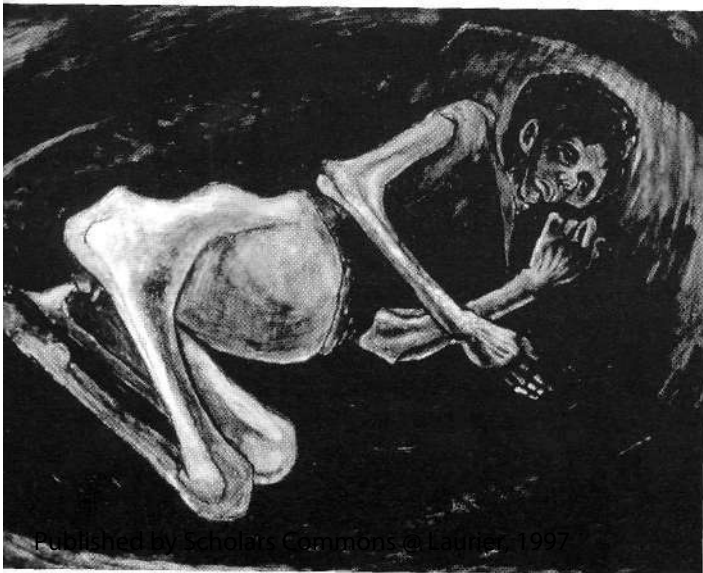
Top left: "Belsen Concentration Camp - Malnutrition No.2," 17 May 1945. (CWM CN 10843)

Left: "Belsen Concentration Camp - Malnutrition," 19 May 1945. (CWM CN 10842)

Top right: "Belsen Concentration Camp - Malnutrition," December 1945 (CWM 10841)

Bottom right: "Slave Worker," 28 May 1945. (CWM CN 10882)

Bottom left: "Belsen Concentration Camp, Malnutrition Wards," 1945. (CWM CN 10844)





Left: "All Quiet on the Western Front," 1988

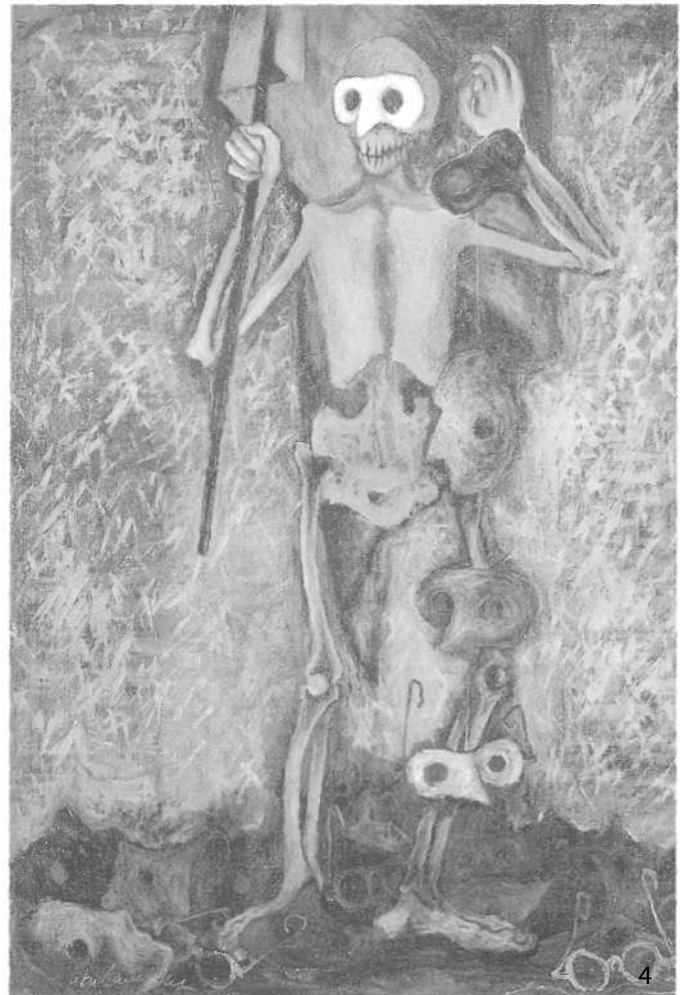
Another work from 1988 is entitled *All Quiet on the Western Front* (see left and back cover).¹⁶ In it a helmeted and booted skeleton, obviously German as he has an iron cross pinned to his rib cage, tramples on a pile of skeletons against a background of barbed wire. The colours are strong - red for the canvas, green for the skulls, blue for the skeleton. The artist's anger is barely controlled. The anger is rooted in his personal reactions to anti-semitism, to revisionist historians, and to the obliteration of the facts of the Holocaust. The artist feels a moral obligation to speak in paint, as it were, for those who cannot. "Art and social comment go hand in hand," he is quoted as saying. "As examples, Goya dealing with the Inquisition and Picasso's most famous painting of the Spanish Civil war called *Guernica*."¹⁷

The themes present in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Remembering the Holocaust* and *Recruiting Poster* form the basis of the 41 piece

painting, *Viewing the Shows*, whose subject is art critics, also uses the skeleton as its dominant motif, demonstrating again that the iconography of some aspects of Bayefsky's art, even when not Holocaust related, has its origins in the searing images of Belsen's mass graves.¹³

In 1980 Bayefsky painted a self-portrait of himself to commemorate his return to health after an operation. Surrounding the canvas are the Hebrew words that form the Kaddish - the prayer for the dead.¹⁴ The compositional format used in this painting reappears in his most powerful Holocaust work, *Remembering the Holocaust*.¹⁵ Surrounding the monochromatic figure of the "grim reaper" and the mutilated bodies that form its crop, are the names of the major concentration camps of the Second World War. Flame-like forms rise behind the murderous creature, and the whole scene is convulsed with the kind of frenzy that is also present in Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* in the Sistine Chapel in Rome.

Right: "Recruiting Poster," 1950.



sequence of works on paper collectively entitled *Epilogue*.¹⁸ The earliest drawings dating from 1988 are studies for *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Remembering the Holocaust*. The pencil strokes vigorously outline the skeletal figures with only the occasional addition of watercolour wash. The forms explode off the paper which seems hardly big enough to contain them. The 1989 drawings show Bayefsky experimenting with less vengeful images as his subjects. In many cases the skeletal figures are broken or injured, and the German soldier now has only one leg, and a stick, an image which finds a disturbing parallel with one drawing of a Holocaust victim with a stick from the same year. An argument can be made that there is a relationship between this broken imagery and the fact that the Berlin Wall fell in the same year. However, in 1992 and 1993, the skeletal figure is reinvigorated and dances across the pages. The artist is perhaps again putting in pictorial form a personal reaction to world events which by then had seen the rise of neo-nazi movements especially in Germany. In one drawing, for example, the skeletal figure is successfully struggling to free himself from an entanglement of barbed wire. The 1994 works continue this theme, but with a greater use of watercolour wash. In several sketches the skeletal figure plays a drum, symbolically beating out a message that the artist wishes the world would heed and undermine. As Bayefsky said in the interview with the *Canadian Jewish News*, "One would think that after such a catastrophic occurrence, anti-Semitism would have disappeared. Instead, we have a regeneration of the animosities that the Jewish people have had to deal with throughout our history."¹⁹

The Canadian Museum of Civilization Corporation has committed itself to the building of a memorial Holocaust gallery at the Canadian War Museum in order both to recognize the very real fact that the death of millions of innocent victims happened, and to send out its own message that such a thing must never be allowed to occur again. Aba Bayefsky has not found it easy to show his Holocaust works, nor has any institution or private collector showed much interest in acquiring them other than the Canadian War Museum. The Museum is showing them all because they believe they form an

important body of work in Canadian art, and because the message they convey is of significant importance to our civilization, and is one with which they agree.

Notes

1. In connection with his Bergen-Belsen work, see, "Genesis of a Painting: Alex Colville's War Drawings," *Canadian Military History*, Volume 4, Number 1, Spring, 1995, pp.100-104.
2. Christopher Varley, *Aba Bayefsky Revisited: a retrospective exhibition* (Toronto: The Koffler Gallery, 1989), Exhibition catalogue, p. 13.
3. *The Canadian Jewish News*, 27 April 1995, p.B4.
4. *Belsen Concentration Camp - The Pit*; 10 May 1945, watercolour and charcoal on paper, 36.1x52.4 cm, CN 10846.
5. *Belsen Concentration Camp - The Pit No. 2*; 17 May 1945, ink and watercolour on paper, 35.2x51.5 cm, CN 10847
6. *Belsen Concentration Camp Pit*; c. 1945, oil on canvas, 91.6 x 121.8 cm, CN 10845
7. *Belsen Concentration Camp - Malnutrition No. 2*; 17 May 1945, charcoal on paper, 35.2x51.9 cm, CN 10843, *Belsen Concentration Camp - Malnutrition*; 19 May 1945, charcoal and conte on paper, 47.9 x 34.4 cm, CN 10942, *Belsen Concentration Camp - Malnutrition*; December 1945, charcoal on art board, 59.2x40.7, CN 10841
8. *Boy with Butterflies*; 1948, conte crayon on paper, 39.4 x 49.5 cm, Hart House Permanent Collection, University of Toronto, *Boy with Butterflies*, 1949, oil on board, 61.0 x 43.5 cm, Collection J. Desmond Boggs, Ottawa
9. *Slave Worker*; 28 May, 1945, charcoal on paper, 51.6 x 36.3 cm, CN 10882
10. Varley, p. 13.
11. *Belsen Typhus*; 10 June 1945, charcoal on paper, 34.0 x 50.7 cm, CN 10848, *Belsen Concentration Camp, Malnutrition Wards*; 1945, oil on canvas, 69.5 x 91.5 cm, CN 10844
12. *Recruiting Poster*, 1950, oil on canvas, 117.0 x 86.0 cm, collection of the artist.
13. *Viewing the Shows*, 1959, oil on canvas, 127.0 x 101.5 cm, collection of the artist
14. *The Kaddish Self-Portrait*, 1980, oil on canvas, 167.0 x 122.0 cm, collection of the artist
15. *Remembering the Holocaust*, 1988, oil on canvas, 167.5 x 121.5 cm, collection of the artist
16. *All Quiet on the Western Front*; 1988, oil on canvas, 127.5 x 102.0 cm, collection of the artist
17. *The Canadian Jewish News*, 27 April 1995, p.B4.
18. These works on paper, either drawings or watercolours, are all in the collection of the artist.
19. *The Canadian Jewish News*, 27 April 1995, p.B4.

Laura Brandon is Chief, War Art at the Canadian War Museum.