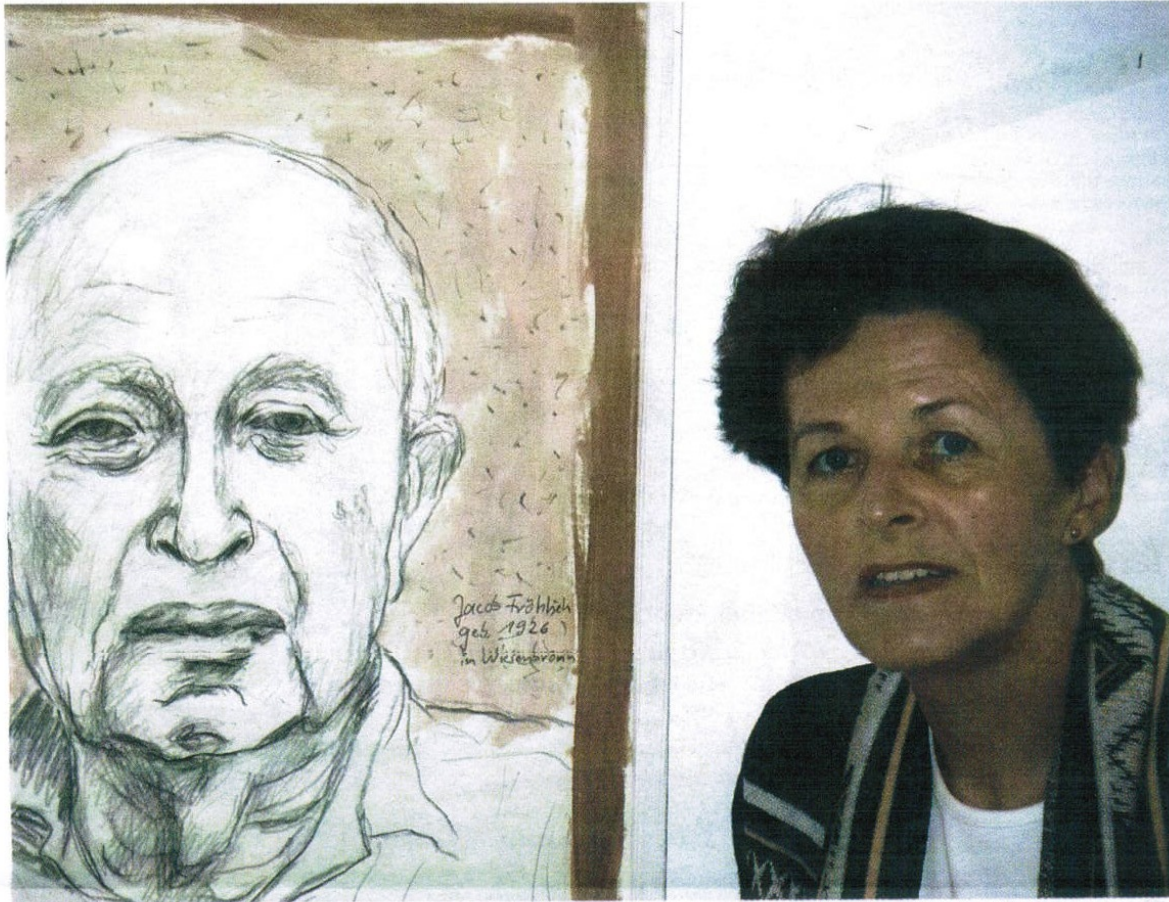


A PERSONAL ENCOUNTER



'GERMAN ARTISTS always made Jews look ugly and evil. I wanted to paint them with sensitivity,' Glaser, with her portrait of Jacob Frohlich. (Diana Bletter)

But on the very first day of her visit to the home of Shavei Zion founder Jacob Frohlich, he told her, "Feel at home." At those words, Glaser almost burst into tears.

"Nobody ever said that to me in Germany," she said, her voice still choked with emotion. "Here I was, the daughter of a Nazi soldier, arriving at the home of a Jew who escaped Nazi Germany... and he told me to feel at home." Frohlich's warm welcome convinced her that she was on the right artistic journey.

Asking residents to allow her to draw their portraits presented a further challenge. Glaser was sensitive to the history of German art and its caricatures of Jews.

"German artists always made Jews look ugly and evil," she said. "I wanted to paint them with sensitivity." When she was painting another resident, Pinchas Erlanger, she was scared he'd think [his nose] looked too big. (He did not.)

Her pencil portraits are accompanied by paintings of symbols that serve to illuminate the portraits and give them more depth: a tree, an object and a name. For Glaser, the tree is the most potent motif. In fact, the exhibit's formal title, "Abraham planted a tamarisk tree..." comes from Genesis.

"Trees symbolize life, hope and growth," Glaser says, "The Jewish refugees planted their first trees in what was then Palestine as an act for the future."

Glaser also chose objects in the people's homes she felt helped explain who they were – a loaf of bread, a German-Jewish cookbook, a menorah. Finally, she explored the subjects' names.

"Names have a lot of meaning in Judaism," she related. "And when the Jews arrived from Germany, they shed their ordinary German names to take on new identities. Heinz became Jacob, Walter became Amos. The truth of their history is hidden in their names."

The paintings of the trees and objects are colorful mélanges of primitive art and folklore combined with Hebrew words, sayings and bits of the residents' personal histories. There are lemon trees in orange and yellow, bright red pomegranate trees and blue olive trees with olives splashed through the branches like stars in the sky. In contrast, most of her pencil portraits of her subjects themselves are somber and their faces reflect a quiet pensive, thoughtfulness.

A visitor to the Nahariya

Painting their true faces

Meet artist Marlis Glaser, the daughter of a German Nazi soldier who has found her own path in Judaism

• By Diana Bletter

The daughter of a German Nazi soldier has painted a series of moving portraits of German Jews in Israel and is currently exhibiting them in two galleries in the Western Galilee. But what gives the exhibit of Marlis Glaser, a well-known artist in Germany, even more power is that her exploration of Jews and Jewish themes in her art has sparked her own journey toward converting to Judaism.

Glaser's exhibit of portraits of Jews who fled Germany and established Moshav Shavei Zion will be displayed until May 6 in the Nahariya Water Tower Gallery. Some of her paintings are also on display in the Shavei

Zion Library in conjunction with Shavei Zion's 70th anniversary. In fact, most of Glaser's subjects are founding members of the moshav, who came as a group from the southern German town of Rexingen – near where Glaser lives.

Born in 1952, Glaser grew up in Germany not really knowing about her father's role as a Nazi soldier during World War II. In a recent interview during her fifth visit to Shavei Zion in the past three years, Glaser said she knew no Jews and knew nothing about Judaism throughout her childhood. It was only when Glaser was in her 20s that she began speaking to anti-Nazi resistance fighters and painting their portraits. Through them, she met a Jewish woman who

opened the door to a world she had never known.

Glaser embarked on her project painting residents of Shavei Zion in 2005. She found it fascinating that 41 men, women

and children left Rexingen for Palestine as a group and transplanted themselves to the sandy shore of the Mediterranean. The group left for Palestine in March 1938. Six months later, during Kristallnacht, the Rexingen synagogue was destroyed and many of the remaining Jewish men in the town were deported to Dachau.

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LOOKING DEEP. Glaser also chose objects in the people's homes she felt helped explain who they were – a loaf of bread, a German-Jewish cookbook, a menorah. Finally, she explored the subjects' names. In photo: Children learn from her paintings. (Courtesy)

gallery, Charlotte Green – who lives in Shavei Zion but is herself a transplanted American – said, “You can see the characters of my neighbors in these portraits. You can tell that for the artist, this is a labor of love.”

Glaser said, however, that she often felt her subjects' discomfort. She had wanted to draw Aharon Klapfer, husband of Alisa Klapfer, who came from Germany as a child and grew up in Shavei Zion. Yet Klapfer avoided speaking to her.

“Aharon could not look me in my eyes,” she related. “I felt for him. I had such deep feelings for his story.”

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In a separate interview, Klapfer admitted that he did not want to be included in Glaser's exhibit, but his wife did. Klapfer simply did not want to talk about what he had endured during the Holocaust. Born in Poland, he and his three siblings hid with their father in a hole in the forest

after their mother was shot by the Nazis. For the next two years, the three children and father hid underground in a hole in a peasant's pigsty. Klapfer's father died just a month before the war ended.

“I decided after the war not to talk about my experiences,” Klapfer said. “I raised my two children in Shavei Zion never saying a word to them. I thought that if I talked about the Holocaust, how could my children have happy, normal childhoods?”

Klapfer recounted that it was only after his children encouraged him to take a “roots” trip

back to Poland two years ago that he finally shared his experiences with them. To this day, he said, “I still can't believe that anyone could have survived more than two years underground and still be sane.”

After this trip, Klapfer reluctantly shared his story with Glaser – only, he said, because it

was important for Germans to hear about Jews' experiences. Yet Glaser herself says that often, Germans don't want to know.

“Germans are still not interested in delving too deeply into the subject of what happened to Jews during the Holocaust and all that Germany has lost,” she said. “Germans are politically correct when Israelis visit Germany but they still have a lot of resentment toward the Jews.”

She believes that their resentment is due to the “psychological consciousness of Europe which remains fundamentally Christian and anti-Semitic.”

“They are still looking for something bad and evil in Jews,” she said. To minimize their wrongdoing in the Holocaust, she said, they have created a supposedly moral equivalent in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It's as if, she says, Germans say, “Well, we might have done something wrong to the Jews, but look what the Jews are doing to the Palestinians.” She feels that journalists writing about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict do not research historical facts but

present things in a simplified manner, deliberately putting Jews in a bad light.

That is why it doesn't surprise her that her own career has taken a turn for the worse since her art is now intricately linked to Jewish themes. She continues to show her work in galleries across Germany but three gallery owners no longer sell her Jewish-oriented paintings. One gallery owner told her to contact him when she was “finished” with her Jewish themes.

“But my artwork is now part of my own identity,” she said. She and her husband, cerami-

the German Education Ministry. The teacher who handles conflict resolutions in the school informed her that she had handled the situation by inviting a speaker – a Palestinian.

Alisa Klapfer said that Glaser has become an important messenger for both Israelis and Jews. She is helping educate Germans, she said, by “showing who we really are.”

“By doing this art, Marlis really wants to help repair history,” Alisa Klapfer said. “And for that, we have to honor her. To help us tell our stories, to turn our

‘I still can't believe that anyone could have survived more than two years underground and still be sane’ – Aharon Klapfer, survivor

cist Bernd Fischer, have two sons. Glaser said she deliberately gave Joshua, 11, and Samuel, 15, Hebrew names. She said they are deeply committed to living a Jewish life, made difficult by the fact that the closest synagogue is 100 kilometers away. But they each take an interest in Jewish subjects and are exploring the idea of conversion to Judaism. One of her sons has begun a collection of rare Jewish books.

When her son Samuel was reading a book about Jews in school one day, Glaser said, several boys in his class called him a “dirty Jew” and reminded him that there were gas chambers for Jews. Glaser said that when she spoke to the boys' parents, they defended their sons. The principal did nothing until Glaser contacted an official in

lives into art, she is sacrificing so much.”

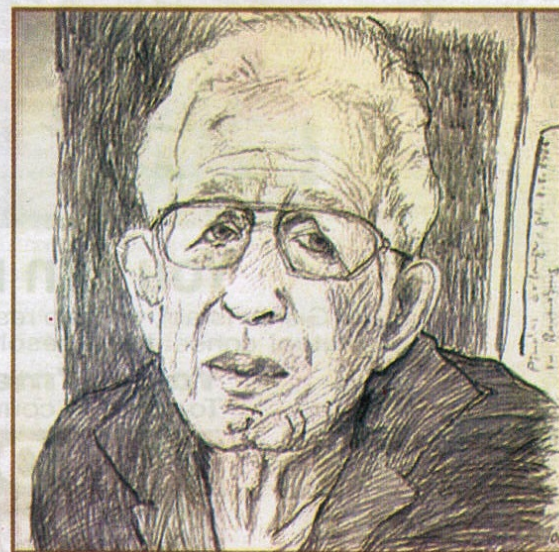
The exhibit is sponsored by the European Association for Jewish Culture. Glaser said that after the show ends its tour through several cities in Germany, she plans to give all her paintings to her subjects' families.

The Nahariya Water Tower Gallery, 12 Jabotinsky Street, Nahariya, (04) 951-1214.

Hours: Sundays through Thursday, 9 a.m. – 1 p.m. Tuesday, 4 p.m. – 7 p.m. Saturday, 10 a.m. – 2 p.m.

Shavei Zion Library, Moshav Shavei Zion, (04) 952-2451

Monday, 5 p.m. – 7 p.m. Wednesday, 4:30 p.m. – 6:30 p.m. Thursday, 10 a.m. – 12 p.m.



OLD STREOTYPES. Glaser was worried that Pinchas Erlinger, in the portrait above, would think that his nose was painted too big. (Courtesy)