

ART AS FAMILY LEGACY

A Daughter Returns with Memories in Art

ESTHER NISENTHAL KRINITZ 1927-2001

My mother, Esther Nisenthal Krinitz, had an enormous story to tell. She was 12 years old in 1939 when the Nazis occupied her village, Mniszek, and the nearby town of Annopol, then known by its Jewish name of Rachów. After three years of brutal occupation, the Jews of the region were deported, ordered by the Germans to leave their homes and report to the train station in Kraśnik, about 15 miles away. My mother refused to go. Instead she created new identities for herself and her 13-year-old sister, Mania, as Polish Catholic farm girls separated from their families. Armed only with this story they eventually found work in the village of Grabówka, where people were willing to take them in. Near the end of the war, in 1944, she learned that none of their family had survived.

I grew up hearing these stories. In fact, I can't recall a time when I didn't know my mother's stories. Unlike many other Holocaust survivors, my mother couldn't keep from talking about her life, not only

during the war but also before the war.

“How much it would have meant to my mother to know that her memories had returned to Poland, and particularly to her home village.”

Years later, when Esther was about 50, she decided that simply telling her stories was not enough. She wanted my sister and me to see what her home and family looked like. She had never been trained in art, never thought of herself as an artist, but she could sew anything. Creating things from fabric was second nature to her. So she came to tell her story in a way that only she could do: she embroidered a series of stunningly beautiful tapestries with stitched narrative captions that depicted her life before and during the war, along with her postwar arrival in the United States.

In October 2015, exactly 73 years after my mother left for good, I returned to her home,

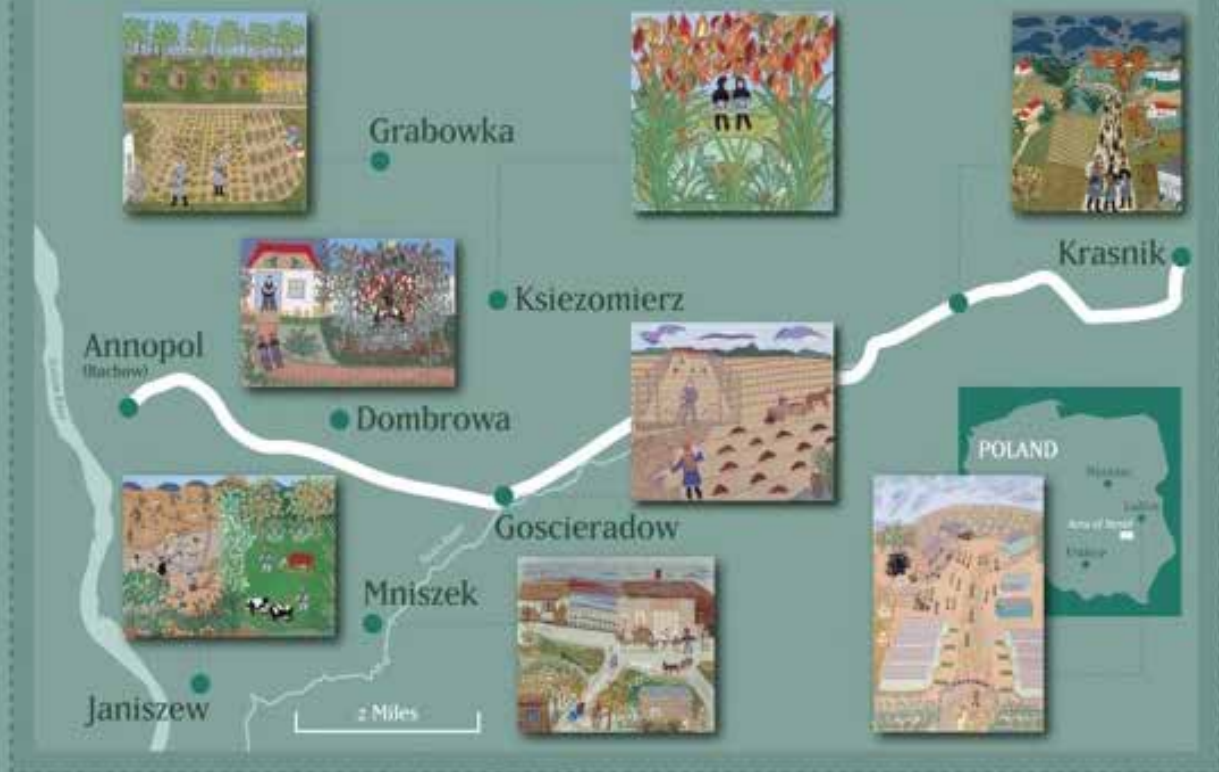
Bernice Steinhardt

*President and Chairperson,
Art & Remembrance*

bringing her art and story back with me. Thanks to a grant from the Koret Foundation, I traveled to a handful of cities and towns near my mother's childhood home, presenting the documentary film *Through the Eye of the Needle: The Art of Esther Nisenthal Krinitz*. I had known about these places from my mother's stories and had been touring the exhibit of her art in the United States since 2003. But now, in Poland, they came to life for me in a new and deeply moving way.

My journey began in Lublin at the Brama Grodzka (Grodzka Gate). Once the passage to the city's Jewish quarter, the gate now houses a namesake organization that is dedicated to preserving the memory of the many cultures that once lived side by side in Lublin, focusing on the thriving, centuries-old Jewish culture that was extinguished in just a few years in the 1940s. The Lublin audience was made up of local residents familiar with the history of the German occupation and the fate of the Jews. One woman in the

ANNOPOL/RACHOW DISTRICT, POLAND



audience had been imprisoned as a young child in Majdanek, the concentration camp on the outskirts of Lublin. For them the film and program introduced a first-hand view of what life had been like for the Jews in the villages outside of Lublin.

Near my mother's village of Mniszek we came to the town of Gościeradów. Earlier in the year an exhibit of photographic images of my mother's tapestries had been displayed in the library and community center, presented by the Galicia Jewish Museum of Kraków

as part of a touring exhibit. Many people returned to Gościeradów for the film screening, including the town officials. I wanted everyone to know how much it meant to me to be in their hometown, once my mother's hometown, too. How much it would have meant to my mother to know that her memories had returned to Poland, and particularly to her home village.

On our way to Kraśnik, the next stop on our tour, we decided to drive to all the places that my mother and

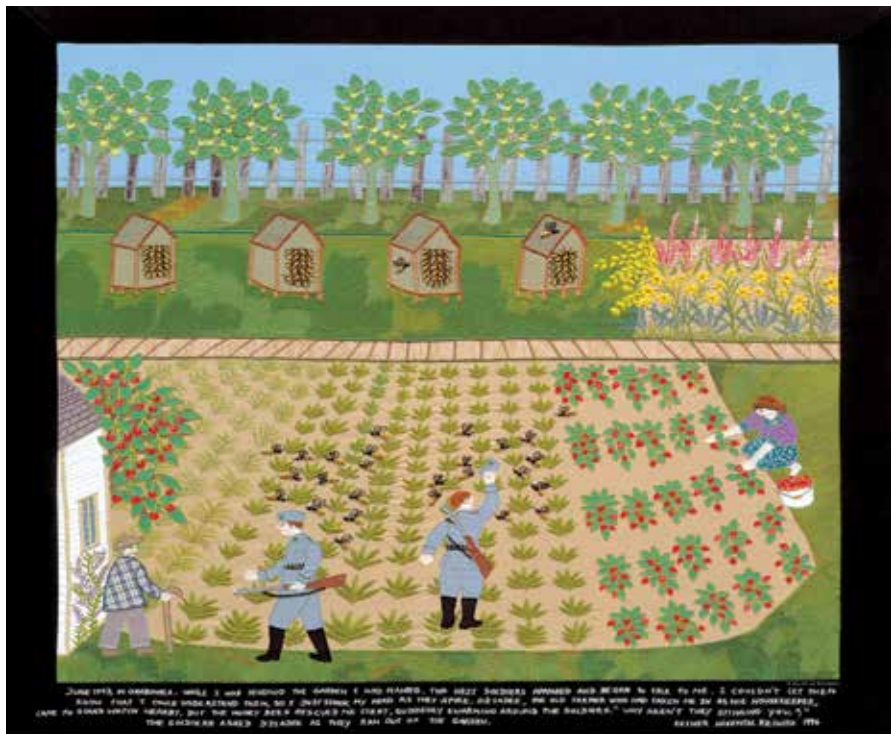
aunt traveled to once they left their family. Walking in Esther's footsteps, so to speak, we retraced her journey. Starting from Mniszek, we went to Dombrowa (Dąbrowa Tarnowska), the village where Esther's father's friend Stefan had lived and where Esther and Mania went in hope of finding work and shelter.

Next, we drove to Gościeradów and Książomierz. These were the villages where Esther and Mania went after being sent away by Stefan, for fear that the Germans would come

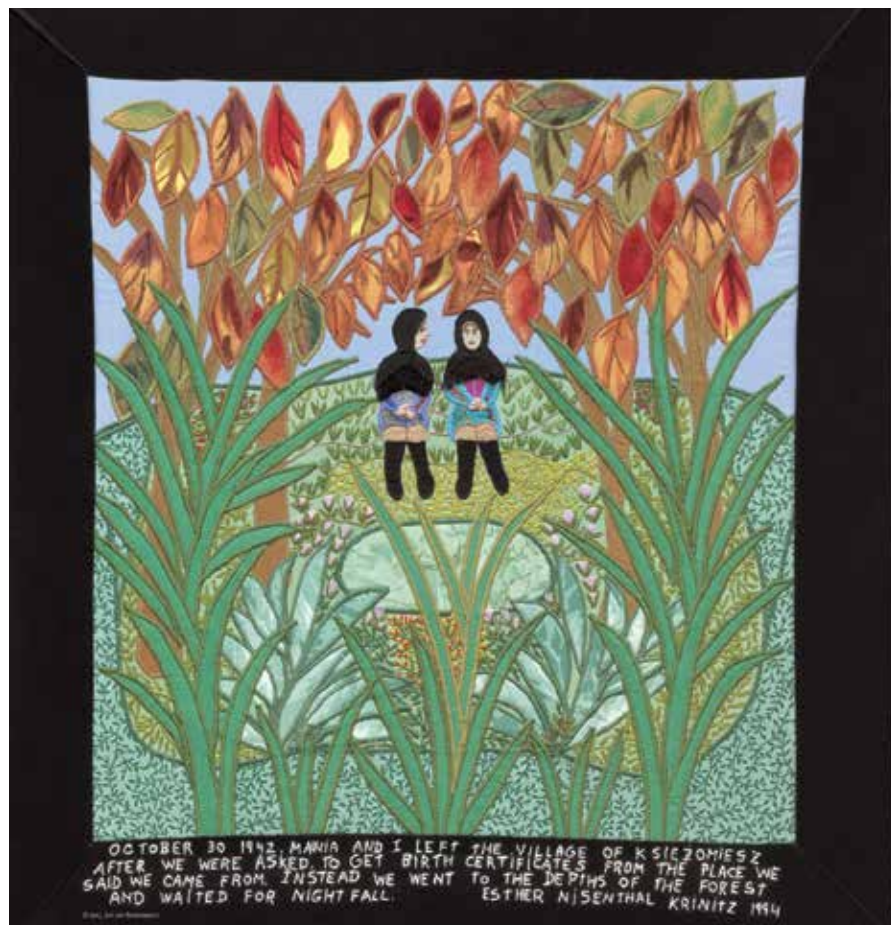
after him and them. No one in Gościeradów and Książomierz was willing to take them in without papers proving their identity. Finally, we drove to Grabówka, the village where they ultimately found refuge. Because I had been there before, I could recognize some landmarks, particularly the remnants of the village well and the house in which Esther had lived, with its large yard where her employer, the old farmer, once kept beehives.

All along our way, we drove by golden woods, sunlight radiating through the leaves. I kept thinking that this was how the woods appeared when Esther and Mania made their journey in the same month (October), 73 years earlier, when these woods, stately and calm, were their hiding place.

Being there, traveling these same roads, visiting these same places but without my mother, only her art and story – was an exhilarating, joyous, and at the same time sad experience. I felt deeply both her presence and absence.



Esther Nisenthal Krinitz, *The Bees Save Me*, 1994, embroidery on cloth



Esther Nisenthal Krinitz, *Depths of the Forest*, 1994, embroidery on cloth

A Daughter Returns with Memories in Art, Continued

I wished she had been there with us to see Mniszek looking full of life today. I wished she had been there to know that her memories there will endure.

We continued on to Kraśnik, the largest city close to Esther's home, where she and Mania were supposed to have gone with all the other Jews of their village. Our program was held in one of the public libraries that had earlier displayed the exhibit of photo images. As in Gościeradów, the people in Kraśnik greatly admired my mother's art and story and returned to see the film and to meet me.

In particular, a group of women had been inspired to create their own tapestry, a depiction of the *rynek*, or town square, in Kraśnik. Constructed of fabric and yarn, with pinecones and other decorations, the piece was an act of civic pride, an expression of love of their city. In its spirit the work echoed my mother's own love of home. But I noted with a sense of poignancy that the



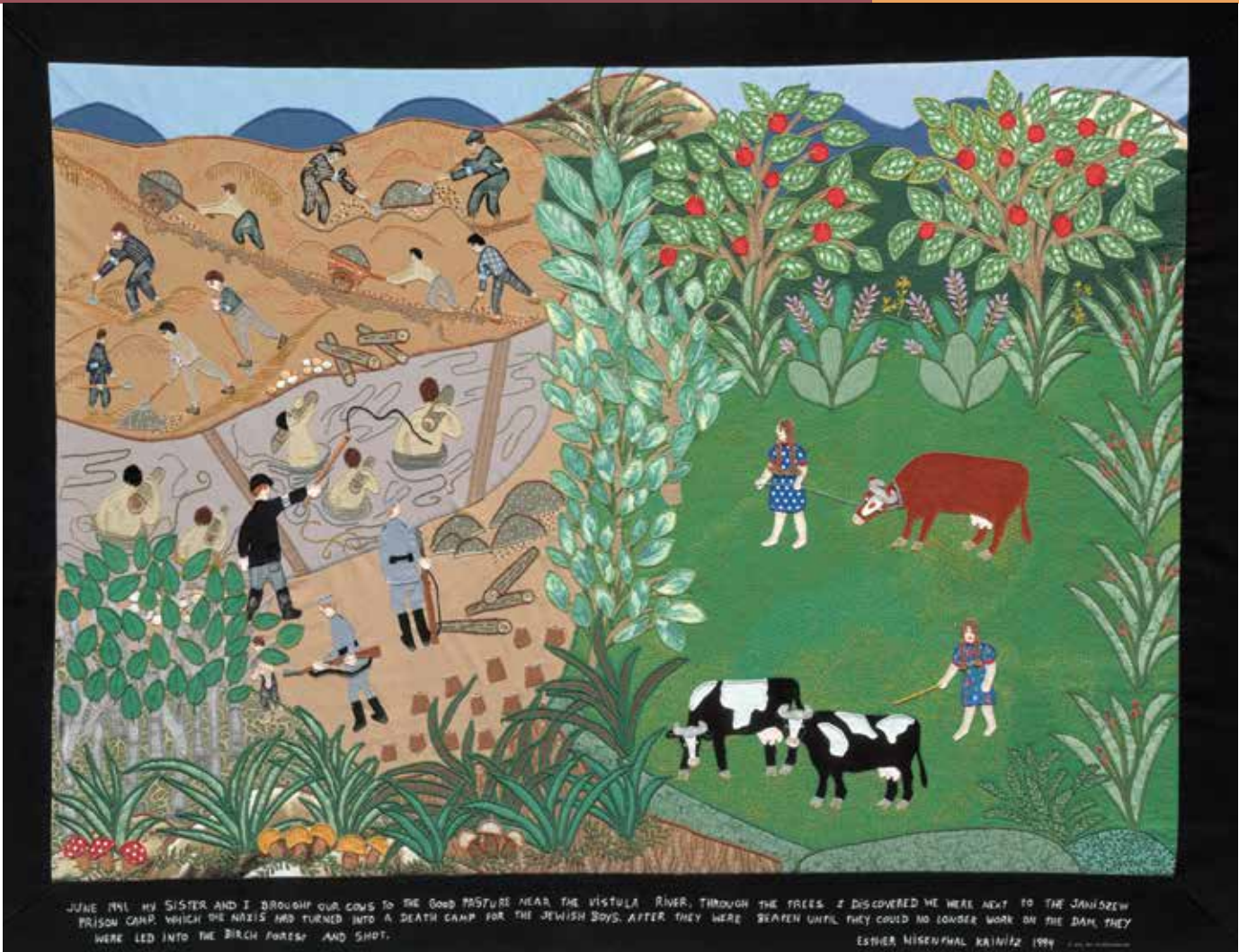
Bernice Steinhardt, third from right, with the women of Kraśnik

rynek of which they were so proud was where the Jews of Rachów were assembled before being loaded onto train cars to Beżec, the death camp where they were slaughtered. Many of the Jews never made it to Beżec and met their end in that town square.

The next day, we left for Zamość and the opening of the exhibit of photo images of my mother's work. The exhibit was in the Zamość synagogue, now a cultural and

community center beautifully restored by the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland. Zamość itself is a beautiful baroque city, and the synagogue has the ornate and light-filled style of that era. There, we also screened the film before an overflowing audience of local high school students, who toured the exhibit before viewing the film.

When we returned to Warsaw before heading home, we spent



Esther Nisenthal Krinitz, *Janiszew Prison Camp*, 1994, embroidery on cloth

our last days visiting POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews and the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute. From the intensely personal history of my mother's family and home, we broadened our scope to the thousand-year history of Jews in this country, a history largely unknown to me before. How could this history have ended so starkly in just a few short years?

Perhaps it had not. The interest in Jewish life and culture in present-day Poland is very striking; the existence of the magnificent new

museum in Warsaw stands as evidence of that revival. In its own intimate way my mother's art also fills in some of the history of Jewish life in Poland. Her stories of Jewish holidays celebrated before the war, of life during the occupation, of the search for family at the end of the war – my mother only wanted her daughters to know that history. She created her art just for us. But her art was clearly meant to be seen by the world, and nowhere more so than in Poland, where I was grateful and honored to be able to return it to its home. ■

Images of Esther Nisenthal Krinitz's art work can be viewed on the website of Art and Remembrance, artandremembrance.org. *Through the Eye of the Needle* can be viewed online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=HCvIhYCKruQ; with Polish subtitles at www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOEv_NTZmDU&feature=youtu.be.