

Memories of Fear:
The Artwork of Gerda Cohen

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Gerda Cohen

Gerda Cohen was a child refugee from Nazism born in Vienna to Polish-Jewish parents in 1925. She was able to migrate to England with her mother at the age of 12 while her father fled to The Netherlands.

He was imprisoned in Westerbork and Bergen-Belsen before being reunited with his family in 1946. Gerda had limited contact with her father during the first months of his imprisonment and learnt more of his experiences in the years afterwards. His experiences, and her own experiences as a child refugee and of grief for her extended family members who were killed in Auschwitz, inspired much of her work.

Gerda studied at Cardiff School of Art before she eventually moved to Southampton with her husband, Leslie Cohen (lecturer in Mathematics at the University of Southampton), where she later worked as an art teacher. During these years, Gerda produced a body of work spanning various art forms including sketches, paintings, sculptures, and poetry alongside raising their four children. She also had several exhibitions of her artwork in and around Southampton, including at the University in the early 1960s.

In her later life, Gerda moved to New Zealand where she spent the final years of her life and completed her last collection of artwork. She passed away in 2018.

About the Exhibition

The exhibition 'Memories of Fear: The Artwork of Gerda Cohen' includes a collection of art held in the University of Southampton's Special Collections which was donated by Gerda's family in 2023. The selection of works include a variety of sketches and paintings which demonstrate the range of art forms and styles Gerda experimented with throughout her lifetime. Two of Gerda's poems are also included in this programme to accompany the exhibition. Though produced as part of different collections over several decades, the pieces work in dialogue with one another as an exploration of traumatic memory and identity. The exhibition title 'Memories of Fear' was inspired by the title of one of Gerda's sketches and her poem *Memories of Fear Rushed Back*.

Themes within Gerda's Artwork

Much of Gerda's work is reflective in nature, and many of the pieces are abstract depictions of the impacts of traumatic memory on her adult life. Though none of the works explicitly deal with what she experienced as a child refugee, or what her father and extended family members experienced, the themes of memory and persecution can be seen in the many faceless figures that feature in several collections of her work. Often these figures are ghost-like, with gaunt faces created through her use of shading and definition through harsh lines. Many of Gerda's pencil sketches lean on abstract expressionism to convey emotion, while her paintings rely more on the use of colour. For example, *'Memories of Fear'* (1980) and *'All in the Head'* (undated), depict the mental burden of memory on her throughout her life by representing multiple identities through multiple connected faces in a more surrealist abstract style.

One of the most prominent themes within Gerda's work is that of motherhood, which appear as abstract explorations of her own navigation of motherhood and the implications of trauma on the family unit. The imagery of 'mother and child' appears in Gerda's paintings, such as in *Mother and Child, No. 55* (1970), as well as in many of her sculptures and works in plaster. Interestingly, there are a couple of cases where Gerda focuses on her separation from and relationship with her father as well as his experiences of incarceration during the Holocaust such as in *Holding On, No. 345* (undated), where a man appears to embrace or shield a child. Gerda also mentions her father in the poem *Belsen/Bergen-Belsen* (c. January 1998), during which she expresses her struggle with her identity as a child refugee and the impacts of inherited traumatic memory from the experiences of her father and extended family.

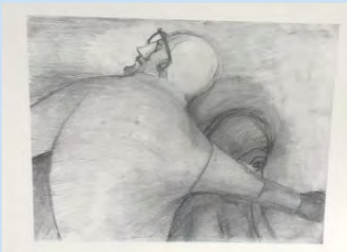
Catalogue of Art



Memories of Fear
(1980)
Pencil on paper



Silent Voices
Undated
Pencil on paper



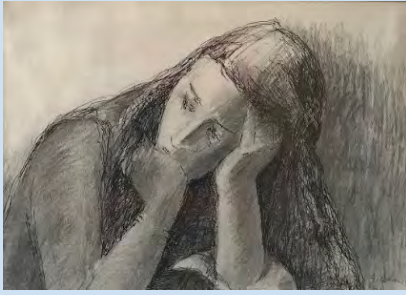
Holding On, No. 345
Undated
Pencil on paper



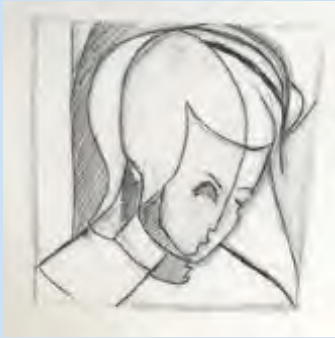
All in the Head, No. 344
Undated
Pencil on paper



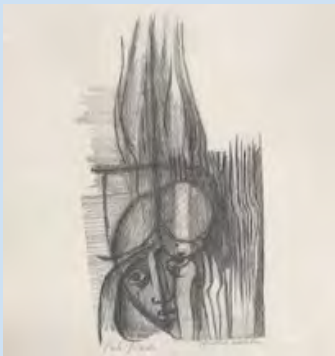
Oneness, No. 348
Undated
Pencil on paper



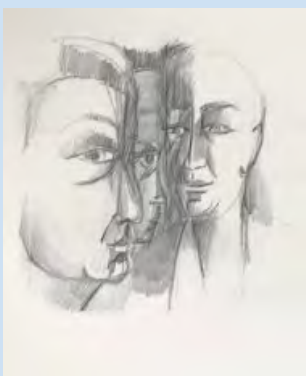
Untitled, No. 39
(1979)
Pencil on paper



Pensive, No. 351
Undated
Pencil on paper



Petrified, No. 353
Undated
Pencil on paper



Secrets, No. 350
Undated
Pencil on paper



Moments, No. 22
(1978)
Pencil on paper



Untitled, No. 138

Undated

Pencil on paper



Untitled, No. 159

Undated

Acrylic and oil pastel on hardboard



Untitled, No. 257

Undated

Acrylic on paper



Timeshift, No. 352

Undated

Pencil on paper



Untitled, No. 133 & No. 134

Undated

Pencil on paper



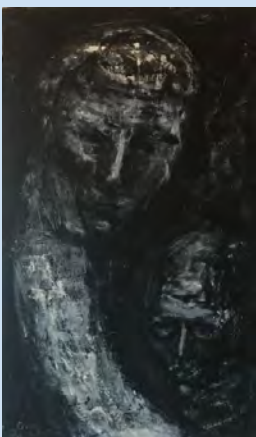
Untitled, No. 82
Undated
Acrylic on hardboard



Untitled, No. 160
Undated
Acrylic and oil pastel on hardboard



Hunger, No. 54
(1970)
Acrylic on hardboard



Mother and Child, No. 55
(1970)
Acrylic on hardboard



Untitled, No. 75
Undated
Acrylic on hardboard

Belsen/Bergen-Belsen

(c. January 1998)

“Belsen,” I said and was not understood.

I froze – I was already frozen at having to present myself when I thought everything should be obvious.

Present myself to a man who has heard and knew so much from so many.

I was not in Bergen-Belsen – my father was.

I did not die in the Auschwitz gas chambers – my family in Poland did.

How can I think that what I can say can be unique to add, be of some value. How dare I come out of that deep shadowy place that suffocates slowly and has no permission to breathe, whatever one has achieved, avoided, DONE.

However much social permission I have given myself and received from so many, when I work at my expression in painting, drawing or sculpture – however much or little I do the permission is not there. Only the frozen, numb, painful, claustrophobic, hopeless, uncertain state that won't go away.

Perhaps I can't give myself that permission when so much in the world is “in it” – the forsaken loneliness of oppression, persecution, the not-understood, the continuous battles, oustings, killings – so much of it.....

more than any of us will ever totally know.
At least as much as the love we have, forever.....
“humanity hidden!”

For ever chaos – SCREAM.....

.....Quietly at least.

CRY when nobody looks.

SHAME.....at not being able to feel counted.

When will I learn that when I feel brave, powerful,
privileged, that I too become an oppressor: from the
spiritual power of pain?

An oppressor with lifting numbness, unclear, shocked.

Chaos made worse by certainty,

“I’ve made it” the heart screams.....

There is more!

Much more!

Memories of Fear Rushed Back

(c. January 1998)

Unprepared for the personal shock

we heard the

wondrous news

of a Holocaust Memorial

in Vienna

where I was born.

Wondrous news indeed.

Memories of fear rushed back

Heavy heart

Numb

Oh IT'S there

still there

repression, oppression,

chaos,

danger in the air

that was

AND IS...

...At 12 years old
Hitler came
through Vienna
in white coat
car and
Nazi salute.
Numbed girl
misunderstood
wide-eyed
numb
secured.
Well trained,
in numbed response
she stayed, strayed,
lost in fear
she grew.

Lost, lost
pieces to be found
lying around
in a heap of
dead bodies
on the ground.

Live life
they said.
Aren't you glad
you survived.
Accept
accept
you had no choice .

Legacy of Gerda's Work

Throughout her life, Gerda was passionate about the importance of art as a means of processing lived experiences. It seemed that her art and experimentation with different materials was a cathartic practice rather than an endeavour for artistic recognition or success. Knowing the impact of having this creative outlet, Gerda established the 'Silent Voices' Arts Trust in Banbury in 1999 to support victims of prejudice and abuse in processing their trauma through art.

In 2004, Gerda held an exhibition entitled '*Inner Landscapes*' in New Zealand. Over four decades of her artwork including paintings, sketches, and sculptures were displayed. The title indicates that many of the pieces were deeply personal, and the result of Gerda using art as a creative outlet to explore her own 'inner landscape', emotions, identity, and traumatic memory.

The pieces of Gerda's artwork that have been donated to the University of Southampton's Special Collections will provide the opportunity for students to continue to work with it to develop an understanding of curatorial issues in the fields of Holocaust studies, Jewish studies, and refugee studies as well as engaging with themes of traumatic memory and identity after displacement.



Gerda Cohen 's '*Inner Landscapes*' Exhibition in New Zealand (2004)

Credit: Photographs courtesy of the Cohen family

About the Curator

Maddie Walch is a Doctoral Researcher in History and Rothschild Foundation Hanadiv Europe Doctoral Fellow in Academic Jewish Studies at the Parkes Institute for the Study of Jewish/non-Jewish Relations at the University of Southampton. Alongside her thesis, 'Masculinities of Grey-Zone Prisoners during the Holocaust', she has had a long interest in visual representations of the Holocaust, particularly the production of artwork by first- and second-generation survivors. She began working on the 'Memories of Fear' Exhibition as part of a Parkes Outreach Fellowship in 2025.

The Parkes Institute

The Parkes Institute is a world-renowned centre of Jewish studies. We comprise scholars, archivists, librarians and students and are home to one of the largest Jewish archives in Europe. We specialise in Jewish history, the Ancient World, migration studies and Holocaust research and heritage. We research, teach and raise awareness of relations between Jews and non-Jews, from antiquity to the present day.

Acknowledgements

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