

# The unknown uncle

## Holocaust Museum's 'The Memory Project' celebrates life, not loss



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE EL PASO HOLOCAUST MUSEUM

**Roz Jacobs** works on a portrait of her mother's family. "They were absent but present at the same time" while she was growing up, Jacobs says of her mother's relatives, who died in the Holocaust.

By Doug Pullen  
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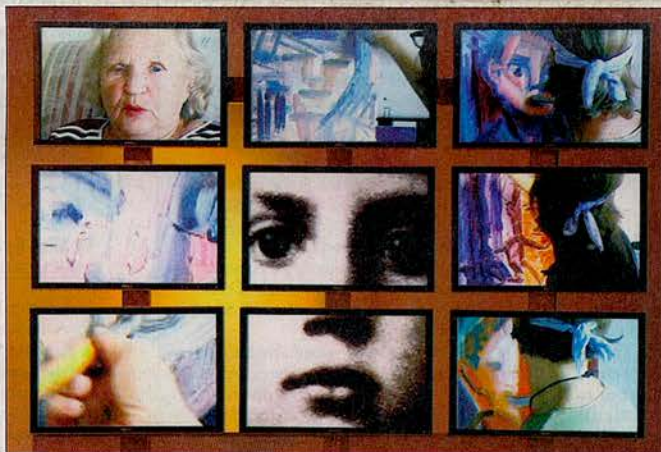
**R**oz Jacobs grew up with stories about her Uncle Kalman.

Jacobs, a painter in New York, never knew her uncle, one of 1.5 million Polish Jews who died in the Holocaust, but she felt as if she did — especially when her mother talked about him.

She felt the same about other family members who were among the 6 million Jews who died in the insidious Nazi genocidal campaign.

"He was sort of a part of my life, as were the other members of my mother's family," the artist said. "My mother's a great storyteller. I was so eager to know who these people were, (people) who were there, but weren't there. They were absent but present at the same time."

Jacobs' mother, Anna Jacobs, or "Momma J" to family members, is an 87-year-old Holocaust survivor who lived in the Warsaw ghetto and a Nazi labor camp, which she escaped. She returned to Poland in 1945, only to learn that almost everyone in her family had died or disappeared.



Paintings and videos from "The Memory Project."

She left with a photo of her little brother Kalman, retrieved from the garbage by a child, and stories she didn't tell completely.

Roz Jacobs found a way to bring Kalman back to life with "The Memory Project," a multimedia art installation

that will open a four-month run Wednesday at the El Paso Holocaust Museum and Study Center.

Jacobs created nine paintings of the uncle she never knew, and the details of

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### Make plans

- ▶ **What:** "The Memory Project," a multimedia exhibit by artist Roz Jacobs and filmmaker Laurie Weisman.
- ▶ **When:** Wednesday through Feb. 9. Jacobs and Weisman will appear at an opening reception from 4 to 7 p.m. Wednesday.
- ▶ **Where:** El Paso Holocaust Museum and Study Center, 715 N. Oregon.
- ▶ **How much:** Free.
- ▶ **Hours:** 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays, 1-5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays.
- ▶ **Information:** 351-0048, elpasholocaustmuseum.org.
- ▶ **Also:** Jacobs and Weisman will attend a preview of the exhibit at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday. The cost is \$36. Call 351-0048, ext. 24, for tickets.

### More events

- ▶ **Broadcast** of "Finding Kalman," 7:30 p.m. Friday, KCOS-TV, channel 13.
- ▶ **Screening** of "Finding Kalman," 2 p.m. Nov. 4 and Jan. 6.
- ▶ **Extended museum hours**, 4-7 p.m. Nov. 15, Dec. 20 and Jan. 17.
- ▶ **Reading** from the book "Finding Kalman: A Boy in Six Million," 2 p.m. Nov. 25.

# Memory

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whose death remain a mystery. She filmed herself in the process. Laurie Weisman, who has worked on TV and multimedia projects for Disney and the Children's Television Workshop (now Sesame Workshop), edited about an hour's worth of that film into a 10-minute loop, which shows simultaneously on nine TV monitors in the exhibit.

The exhibit will "take up every wall" of the museum's 1,000-square-foot multipurpose room, according to Maribel Villalva, the museum's executive director.

"It's a very family-friendly show, despite the fact that it does deal with the Holocaust," Villalva said.

"It's also a very universal story," she said. "You don't have to be a Holocaust survivor or child of a survivor to relate with a family's loss."

It is, essentially, a celebration of life, the creators said.

The number of paintings and screens in the exhibit — 18 — is no coincidence. It represents *chai*, the Hebrew word for life.

"The number 18 in Judaism is symbolic for life," Jacobs said. "It's kind of like out of the fragments of stories, our stories, we're using the creative process to bring him to life."

Jacobs and Weisman, who formed The Memory Project Productions, have done that in a number of ways. In addition to the exhibit, they made a 28-minute documentary, "Finding Kalman," which has won a handful of awards at film festivals.

The film, which will air at 7:30 p.m. Friday on KCOS-TV, Channel 13, features Anna Jacobs' stories and recollections, plus interviews with Roz Jacobs; Anna Jacobs' granddaughter, violinist Maya Jacobs of Tel Aviv; and her great-grandson, Israel-born New Yorker Roy Gross.

There's a companion book, "Finding Kalman: A Boy in Six Million"; a



COURTESY OF EL PASO HOLOCAUST MUSEUM

**Artist Roz Jacobs, left, and videographer Laurie Weisman will appear at a preview of "The Memory Project" on Tuesday and at the opening reception Wednesday.**

workshop, "Paint Your Own History: It's in the Making"; a six-minute video art lesson, "Painting With Light and Shade"; and a 28-page educational guide, "The Memory Project: Connecting Art and History."

Jacobs and Weisman felt it was important that the lessons of the Holocaust live on even as its survivors slowly fade away.

"I wanted to do an art project of this story, which needs to be told again and again," Jacobs said. "Every survivor has an amazing story, but I wanted to have this second-generation story, how it echoes through time, to show the reverberation of that story, not only through film but art."

Tragedy, she added "shouldn't be the whole story. That's not who we are."

"What Roz felt was a connection to this boy, a very visceral and tangible one, from painting him again and again," Weisman said. "There's a moment she describes in this video where she suddenly felt this gesture of Kalman looking up (from the canvas). She sensed the child looking at

**"You grow up imagining your uncle or grandfather or somebody in a gas chamber, which is terrible and traumatic to live with. This process is about re-discovering who the live person was."**

**Artist Roz Jacobs**

the camera. There was a physical, real connection."

The project dates to 2006, when Jacobs was asked by a friend to create something to commemorate her son, who had died of brain cancer. She made a series of paintings.

"It was a very intense experience," Jacobs said. "I realized we are all so much a part of each other. Once I

had the look and feel of what I wanted to do, I scanned photos into a grid and saw all of his faces. That was exactly the time when I formulated the idea for 'The Memory Project.'"

Weisman wants people to find inspiration in the story they tell and the example Momma J has set, "that ability to live a rich and joyful life" as a survivor.

She found inspiration in Anna Jacobs' participation, especially since she has to deal with those awful memories.

"We're looking at an abstraction of someone we wish we had known," Weisman said. "We've created a memory for ourselves through our stories, and she's having a memory triggered."

Villalva first saw the exhibit and met the artists at a Holocaust museums conference last year in Houston. "They were flooded El Paso even had a Holocaust museum, which is pretty much the reaction I get anywhere," said Villalva, who runs one of only 13 Holocaust museums in the country.

She was interested in bringing "The Memory Project" to El Paso, but worried the small, nonprofit museum couldn't afford it. She pitched it to her board. "They saw the potential of it coming here," Villalva said.

The board spent a year raising the \$25,000 budget from several donors, including businesses and individuals, mostly from the El Paso area.

Villalva calls it "the largest exhibit of this kind" to be shown at the museum, filling all 1,000 square feet of the museum's multipurpose room. She hopes it will attract up to 5,000 visitors by the time its run ends in February.

Museum staffers have programmed a number of activities to try to make that happen, including three days of appearances by Jacobs and Weisman. They'll attend a media preview at 2 p.m. Tuesday and a ticketed preview at 5:30 that night. Tickets cost \$36, or "double chai,"

said Villalva, who noted that "a lot of our supporters make donations in multiples of \$18."

The pair will also appear at a free public reception from 4 to 7 p.m. Wednesday. Also that day, they'll conduct training sessions for the museum's docents and teachers interested in using the exhibit as an instructional tool. On Thursday, Jacobs and Weisman will discuss their work at the museum with students from the Bridges Academy, then travel to Parkland High School that afternoon.

"We have them booked from the minute they get here to when they leave," Villalva said. She added that the collaborators will film a public service announcement for KCOS during their stay here.

The museum has lined up several other events, including screenings of the "Finding Kalman" DVD at 2 p.m. Nov. 4 and Jan. 6, and a reading from "Finding Kalman: A Boy in Six Million" at 2 p.m. Nov. 25.

The museum also will have extended hours from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. on the third Thursday of each month during the exhibit. It usually closes at 4 p.m. those days.

The idea, Villalva said, was to "keep it fresh in people's minds" until the exhibit closes in early February.

That, in essence, is what Jacobs and Weisman intend to do with "The Memory Project" wherever it goes.

"It's that idea of having lived so long with the images of the deaths and what we got from a lot of the (Holocaust) films," Jacobs said. "You grow up imagining your uncle or grandfather or somebody in a gas chamber, which is terrible and traumatic to live with. This process is about rediscovering who the live person was."

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