

The Guardian

'She worked against forgetting': Holocaust survivor's art goes on display



Ceija Stojka was imprisoned in Auschwitz, Ravensbrück and Bergen-Belsen. She began painting images of Nazi atrocities in the 1980s. Photograph: Rainer Jensen/EPA

Ceija Stojka, who died in 2013, dedicated her later years to chronicling Nazi atrocities

The paintings of Ceija Stojka, dabbed from decades-old memories in oil and acrylic, often lack titles. They are seldom necessary.

In one, a train travels into a red sky along a track etched with a swastika; in another, the white of a wide-open eye holds a billowing chimney, a single skull and a handful of black birds trailing lengths of barbed wire.

Six years after her death, the paintings and drawings of Stojka, an Austrian-Romany woman who survived Auschwitz, Ravensbrück and Bergen-Belsen to become a tireless chronicler of the Nazi genocide against the Roma and Sinti, are the subject of a major exhibition at Madrid's Reina Sofía museum entitled: "This has happened".

Stojka, who had her first child aged 15 and went on to earn her living as a carpet seller, had no artistic training, little in the way of education and, for much of her life, no desire to revisit the atrocities of her childhood.

Born to a family of Romany horse-traders in the Austrian state of Styria in 1933, Stojka was not quite five when the Anschluss took place and Nazi racial laws came into effect in the newly annexed land.

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Three years later, her father, Wackar, was arrested and sent to Dachau. He was murdered at Hartheim euthanasia centre in 1942, and Stojka, her mother and her five siblings were deported to Auschwitz the following year. Stojka's youngest brother, Ossi, died of typhus in the camp at the age of seven, but the rest of the family survived the war.

Stojka clung to life in Bergen-Belsen by eating plants and tree sap as she waited, among the corpses, for the camp to be liberated.

"Within the family, she hardly ever talked about the experiences," says her son, Hojda, who grew up in Allied-occupied Vienna. But every now and then, there were reminders of what had happened.

"I remember very well, when I was about four or five years old, my mum and me were walking along the street. Suddenly she saw two men in uniform: Russians. She was never really strict with me, but at that moment, she grabbed my hand fiercely and told me to stay close with her. I think she panicked." By the time she reached her early 50s, however, Ceija felt she could no longer keep the past at bay. She began to write down her memories and then - inspired by a trip to meet the Buraku "untouchable" underclass in Japan - she started to paint.

Between the late 1980s and her death in 2013, she wrote three books, filled more than 30 notebooks and made more than 1,000 drawings and paintings.

"My mother worked against forgetting," says Hojda, now 70. "She wanted young people to know what

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had happened, to tell them that it should never happen again and to tell them where they came from.”

By writing and painting and drawing, he adds, his mother also managed to come to terms with her own life.

“She liberated herself by telling the story – it was if she finally had power to speak out against it.”

Or as Stojka herself put in in one of her poems: “auschwitz is my coat, bergen-belsen my dress and ravenbrück my vest. what should I be afraid of?”

Hojda was surprised by how much his mother remembered and by the extraordinary level of detail in the pictures that record her early life and the Porajmos – the devouring – during which up to 500,000 Roma and Sinti were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators.

Bodies, some naked, some dying and some burning, sprawl throughout her work, hemmed in, more often than not, by the inescapable barbed wire.

Many of the paintings are personal. One, painted in 1994, shows a red forearm bearing the number Z6399: the tattoo she was given in Auschwitz as a nine-year-old girl.

Another shows grey uniform trousers tucked into high black boots – as seen from the viewpoint of a small child.

But there are also images of Stojka’s early childhood – of horses, sunflower fields and caravans in the days before their owners had to remove the wheels and turn them into wood cabins.

“Stojka’s vision may not be that of a trained ‘professional’ but it is very, very sophisticated,” says Manuel Borja-Villel, the director of the Reina Sofía.

“Decades on, she can paint her childhood memories from a child’s point of view. You can see that in the perspective, like when she paints the boots. It’s a child’s way of looking at the world and that requires a visual refinement when it comes to using paint and other materials.”

For the next four months, the work of a woman who came late to painting and later still to recognition will share a gallery roof with perhaps the most famous anti-war painting of all time – Guernica, Picasso’s huge protest at the German and Italian bombing of the Basque town in 1937.

The Ceija Stojka International Fund, set up last year

to help promote the artist’s life and work, hopes the exhibition will help spread her memories and messages.

“The challenge of this show is to introduce the widest possible public to a talented, self-taught Romanian artist,” says Paula Aisemberg, a member of the fund and one of the exhibition’s curators.

“But the exhibition is also about the political and historical need to remember a little-known genocide – the Porajmos – so that it doesn’t happen again at a time when far-right racists are winning power in some European countries.”

Hojda Stojka also sees echoes of the past in the politics of the present. His mother was scared and furious when the far-right rose again in Austria and would be scared and furious were she still alive to see the state of Europe in 2019. But, he adds, she would also be shouting and leading the fight from the front.

“She always said: ‘I’m afraid Auschwitz is only sleeping.’ Now it’s more and more like an awakening.”



Untitled (1995)

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