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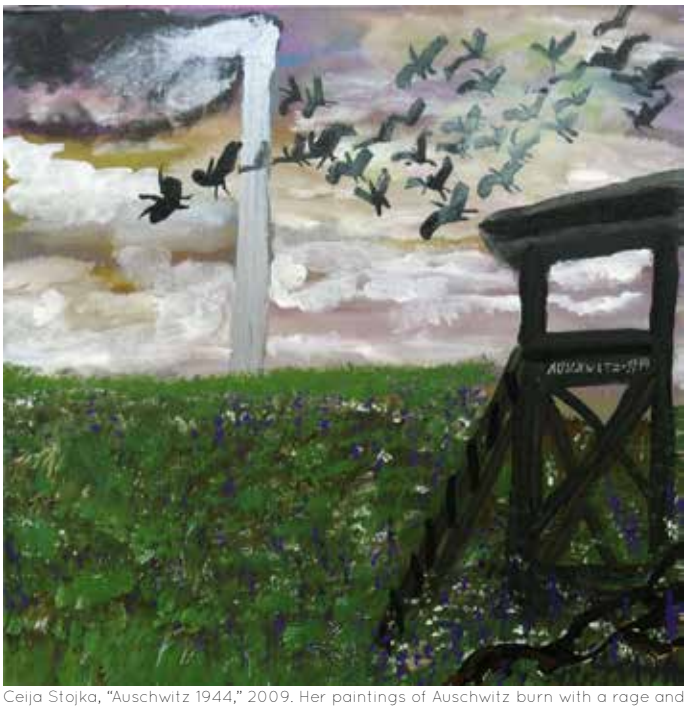
The Survivor of Auschwitz Who Painted a Forgotten Genocide

Philosophers said the Holocaust defied representation, that art could not render its horrors. But Ceija Stojka made more than 1,000 incredible images of her ordeal, and the effort to exterminate the Roma.



Ceija Stojka, "Auschwitz 1944," 2009. Her paintings of Auschwitz burn with a rage and shame not dulled by three-quarters of a century. Ceija Stojka/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Bildrecht, Vienna; Collection of Antoine de Galbert, Paris

MADRID — At first the soldiers of the Red Army found almost nothing when they reached the camp in the southwest of occupied Poland that January. The retreating Nazis had blown up its crematories, dismantled its gas chambers; the prisoners had been marched west, in the freezing cold. Only later, as the Soviets liberated Auschwitz 75 years ago Monday, did they discover the last, straggling survivors, too ill or young to leave the inferno where at least 1.1 million people were murdered, 90 percent of them Jews.

Immediately after the war, writers and philosophers maintained that the death camps defied representation; no art could ever do justice to their horrors, and even the concept of poetry after Auschwitz, in Theodor W. Adorno's notorious phrase, had become "barbaric." Yet survivors themselves, as early as Primo Levi's 1947 memoir, "If This Is a Man," have forced themselves to make sense of the horrors they endured in art — and as Auschwitz recedes into historical distance and the last survivors disappear, there are voices even the greatest skeptic of representation cannot afford to tune out.

One is the self-taught Austrian artist Ceija Stojka (1933-2013), a member of the Roma minority (sometimes derogatorily called "Gypsies"), who turned the ordeals of the camps into an art of immense power. At 10, she was deported to Auschwitz, the first of three camps she would outlast. She slept on the pathway to the gas chambers, and hid among heaps of corpses; she survived by eating tree sap.

Ceija Stojka, photographed in 1995. She arrived at Auschwitz in March 1943, as a girl, and was assigned to filthy barracks reserved for Roma prisoners. The Z in her tattoo, stood for Zigeuner, "Gypsy."Credit...Christa Schnepf

For more than 40 years after the liberation she kept quiet about what she had withstood. Then it flooded out: scenes of rhapsodic childhood and unspeakable

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torture, painted with runny pigment and in brazen colors, impassioned, unashamed, irrefutable.

She made more than 1,000 such paintings and drawings between 1990 and her death in 2013, and I saw more than 100 of them recently at the Museo Reina Sofía, in Madrid. I had seen a few of her paintings in isolation at an art fair in New York last year (the first time her work had been shown in the United States) but I was not prepared for the full intensity of her art of barracks and cattle cars, ravens and sunflowers, sadistic kapos and emaciated prisoners. Not only a testimony to an occluded genocide, Stojka's art also stood up for the possibility – even the necessity – for human creativity to represent, and take ownership of, the darkest chapters of history.

Stojka (her name is pronounced CHAY-ya STOY-ka) was one of six children born into a family of nomadic horse-traders. The family spoke both Romani and German. After the Nazis annexed Austria, they gave up their itinerant life and settled in Vienna.

A prologue to the Reina Sofía exhibition includes some of the "light paintings" Stojka made of her childhood. We see women in kerchiefs and long dresses as the sun sets beside their caravans. Sunflowers blossom like fireworks. Willows pullulate with blotchy foliage that recalls her fellow Austrian Gustav Klimt.

In 1941, her father was deported to Dachau; he would later be murdered at what was euphemistically called a "euthanasia center." The next year, Heinrich Himmler issued a decree that "all Gypsy mixed-bloods" were to be deported to Auschwitz, and treated "on the same level as Jews." (That decree contradicts the falsehood, widely espoused after World War II, that the Roma were "antisocial" and not specifically targeted for extermination. The Roma genocide was not raised at the Nuremberg trials; West Germany recognized the persecution as a racist act only in 1982.)

Stojka would paint the cattle car in which she was deported: a rickety thing, its rear window barred, charging into a sky burning white, pink and orange. She arrived at Auschwitz in March 1943, and was assigned to filthy barracks reserved for Roma prisoners. The girl's arm was tattooed, with the number Z-6399. The Z stood for Zigeuner, "Gypsy."

She painted that too, in one of her sparest and most modern pictures: a red hand and forearm lost in a sea of black, interrupted by a shaft of white suggesting an absent god. In old age Stojka would treat her tattoo almost as an insignia; a photomural at the Reina Sofía shows her smiling for a portrait, cigarette between her fingers, her decades-old number proudly visible.

Ceija Stojka, "Untitled," 1995. Her art stood up for the possibility – even the necessity – for human creativity to represent, and take ownership of, the darkest chapters of history. Ceija Stojka/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Bildrecht, Vienna; Collection of Nuna & Hojda Stojka; Ceija Stojka International Fund, Vienna.

Ceija Stojka, "Untitled/Vienna - Auschwitz."Credit...Ceija Stojka/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Bildrecht, Vienna; Collection of Nuna & Hojda Stojka. Ceija Stojka International Fund, Vienna.

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Her paintings of Auschwitz, where she was interned for a little more than a year, burn with a rage and shame not dulled by three-quarters of a century. Prisoners, presumably fellow Roma to judge from their kerchiefs, peer from their barracks as the kapos wield their bullwhips, while wraithlike captives walk single-file past a cart full of corpses. Nude women, arms thrust to the sky, march at gunpoint into the lethal showers. The sky rots into an otherworldly purple interrupted by the white smoke of the crematorium. Birds recur as gashed Vs, barbed wire as rows of Xs. And bodies: faceless, reduced in places to a few strokes of black.

Many of these paintings are done on cardboard; she sometimes used her fingers to score the paint, which gets Van Gogh-thick in places, fluid and emulsified in others. They have a detachment and unsentimentality that recalls the fiction of Imre Kertesz, the Nobel-winning novelist and fellow Auschwitz survivor. Though Stojka used painting to give form to trauma, these works do not express private grief so much as they bear public witness. One painting, which gives the Reina Sofía show its title, states its testimonial character as bluntly as possible: "This Has Happened."

For compared to the Holocaust of European Jewry, the Roma extermination has been less studied and less commemorated. What in Hebrew is called the Shoah ("calamity") is, in the Romani language, known as the Porajmos: the "devouring." No authoritative death toll has ever been established; estimates range from 250,000 to 500,000 people, or up to half the Roma population of Europe. Their persecution went on after World War II, and still does. In 2018 Matteo Salvini, the leader of Italy's far-right League party, proposed a census of the Roma population as part of a "mass cleansing."

In 1944, Stojka and her family were transferred to Ravensbrück – only weeks before all the remaining Roma prisoners of Auschwitz were gassed on a single night. She was moved again, to Bergen-Belsen, at the start of 1945. In Stojka's paintings of this final camp, the coldblooded order of Auschwitz has given way to chaotic, even apocalyptic desolation. Fires rage before acres of black earth, and skeletons lie tangled in darkness; a single prisoner, stranded in the snow, looks goggle-eyed at a pair of blackbirds on a barbed-wire fence.

The British liberated Bergen-Belsen that April. Ceija and her mother walked across Germany and Czechoslovakia to Vienna. She resumed an itinerant life at first, then spent decades as a carpet seller – and only in 1988, encouraged by the documentary filmmaker Karin Berger, did she begin to speak of what she survived and to teach herself how to paint. Her writing and art made her a public figure in Austria, as well as an advocate for Roma across Europe.

This will be the last major anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz with a significant number of survivors. And the further we get from Auschwitz, the easier it is to reduce its horrors to kitsch or light entertainment. (Consider the self-satisfied, Nazis-are-people-too "Jojo Rabbit," garlanded with a best picture Oscar nomination.) There is so much bad art out there, in our libraries and streaming services, that you can ask yourself whether Adorno was right all along: better to just stay silent.

Yet the better question, 75 years on, is not whether one can represent Auschwitz. The question is: for what purposes would one want to make a new image of the worst place on earth?

Rare are the artists who can answer that question convincingly. Stojka was one of them, establishing a living archive for those not yet born. You don't paint for yourself; you paint for the world you want to see, to silence the blind nationalists and denialists who have been given a new lease on life. "How can they say, 'There was no Auschwitz'?" she once retorted. "I have it right on my arm."

Jason Farago is an art critic for The Times. He reviews exhibitions in New York and abroad, with a focus on global approaches to art history. Previously he edited Even, an art magazine he co-founded. In 2017 he was awarded the inaugural Rabkin Prize for art criticism.

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