

The World's Only Yiddish Stained Glass Windows

By Donna Becker



One of the first things new visitors to Vancouver's Peretz Centre notice, as they tour the building, is the stained glass windows. Climbing the stairs to the second floor, whether a grey day softly illuminates them or direct sunlight creates a striking interplay of colours and shapes on the concrete staircase, the four stunning windows, which, with their Yiddish calligraphy and secular Jewish content are unique in the world, draw the eye, and hold it.

The ambitious windows were created and installed in 2002 by artist Rob Friedman shortly after the end of the two-year diaspora during which the Vancouver Peretz Institute was demolished and reconstructed on the same spot, and its name changed to the Peretz Centre for Secular Jewish Culture. Friedman, who has been creating stained glass since the early 1980s, states: "I like glass as a medium because it has to do with light sources What it has over 2-D canvasses is translucence and light-play, which is so seductive."

The four panels make up a vertical window 22 ft by 18 1/4 inches wide, and are designed to flow into each other. Each panel on average contains over 2000 cuts, and each piece was beveled to fit into the very thin detailed leadwork. Panel 1 is 4 ft high, while Panels 2, 3 and 4 are each 6 ft.

Panel 1 provides the foundation, and states, *We are of the earth*. Against a background suggesting the earth's stratification, *peys* and *gimls* (letters p and g) provide basic design elements. The *gimls*, present in the words *gortn* (garden), *grunt* (ground), and *grins* (vegetables), also bring to mind the flame of the candle, one of the three basic elements in Jewish traditional ritual, along with *khaleh* and wine. The *pey* (for Peretz) creates a butterfly and serves to lead upward into Panel 2.

Panel 2 enlarges on the garden theme of *gimls* and *peys* and the candle flame motif, while introducing a reference to wheat, which could be called the elemental form of *khaleh*. The bottom of an open book leads up into Panel 3.

Panel 3 depicts some of the rich cultural roots of the Jewish people: music, literature, theatre, and the quest for knowledge. Continuing up from the previous panel, an open book spells out *yidishkayt* (Jewishness), I. L. Peretz (one of the three fathers of Yiddish literature and the Peretz Centre's namesake), *lerer* (teacher), *geshikhte* (history) and *lektsie* (lesson). Further up the panel, the Yiddish words *freyd* (joy), *tants* (dance) and *musik* (music) can be seen. Other design

continued on page 26

DONNA BECKER was born and grew up in Brooklyn, NY and moved to Vancouver in 1971. She holds a BA from Vassar College and diplomas from the Vancouver School of Art and Vancouver Community College's Counselling program. She is Program Coordinator of the Peretz Centre for Secular Jewish Culture, and the webmistress of Outlook, the Peretz Centre, and Ahavat Olam Synagogue.

could sometimes snag a warm sweater or socks. If one was a good cook and became a favorite of the camp commander, she was able to bring better food back for her mates. In *FT: Belarus*, all the survivors were men, and some managed to escape and join the partisans. That was a tricky business, because “In order to join the Partisans you had to have a gun.” Some escaped, were recaptured, and escaped repeatedly, but almost all of the aged men and women who spoke to us from the screen were sent to a death camp and freed only when the camp was liberated by Allied forces.

We were surprised by how closely the camp inmates lived with the local townspeople, peasants or small merchants, especially in the makeshift camps where they were sent in 1941-43. In some cases, the transportees had to build their own barracks. Until these were completed, they slept in unheated barns and outbuildings belonging to local families, or else in half-ruined dwellings that had been seized from the local Jews before they were transported. “We would be thirty to a room,” said one woman, “but we didn’t mind. It was easier to keep warm that way.”

They bartered such personal belongings as they could, and bread and shoes emerged as

major themes: “One woman traded me a loaf of bread for my watch,” said a man. “A piece of bread was gold,” said a woman. “If you didn’t have shoes, you were dead,” said a man. “I survived because I wouldn’t give up my boots,” said another woman. “The guard beat me and beat me till I was black and blue but I wouldn’t take off my boots.”

Another emerging theme was how little they knew of the rest of the war. None of the people interviewed had had any idea of the scope of the Nazi project at the beginning of their ordeals. They had survived years of growing repression and anti-Semitic regulations before being transported, but they seriously believed they were working toward a decent end. “I was young,” said one of the men, shrugging at his youthful ignorance. “This was an adventure.”

Pribyl’s austere methodology insures a perfect correspondence between sound and image. When a camp officer is mentioned, the audience will see his picture. Amnon Goth puts in an appearance in *FT: Belarus*: filmgoers may remember him from Ralph Fiennes’ chilling performance in *Schindler’s List* as the officer who liked to aim out his office window and randomly pick a prisoner to shoot dead. Over-



Tears of Gaza.

all, the smooth flow of the recovered grainy visual material is eerie, as the viewer is compellingly transported back to another time.

Another film, *Tears of Gaza*, is as raw and emotionally devastating as documentary gets. It is a record of the 2008-2009 bombing of Gaza by the Israeli military, as filmed at the time by several Palestinian cameramen and put together by director Vibeke Lokkeberg. Torn and battered remains of children are pulled from bomb wreckage; white phosphorus chars bodies beyond recognition; the bystanders and survivors are overcome by what they have witnessed; the noise of mechanical and chemical attack is incessant and deafening. We are taken into and through these horrific events by three children who appear from time to time in the film and testify; their faces accuse. *Tears of Gaza* explodes all the rules of documentary art, and yet its effect is indelible.◆

WINDOWS...

Continued from page 24

elements include the symbolic drama/comedy masks and a fiddle neck that flows into musical notation showing the opening lines of the *Peretz Shule Hymn: zol vaksn un bliyen, di shule unzer shul* (may our school blossom and grow).

Panel 4 depicts basic values:

home, family, peace, and the survival of the Jewish people. Picking up on the themes of earth, roots, gardens and traditional Jewish ritual, the window is crowned by grapes, “the fruit of the vine.” The themes are reflected in a stylized dove with wings of *sholem* (peace) and the words *mir zaynen do* (we are here; the rallying cry of the

Warsaw Ghetto uprising, from the song “Zog Nit Keyn Mol”), *bobe* (grandmother), *zeyde* (grandfather), *eltern* (parents), *heyim* (home) and *unzer kinder* (our children).

The next time you are in Vancouver, or if you live in Vancouver, be sure to visit the Peretz Centre for an amazing visual treat.◆