

## Creative Living

Mario McGee editor/591-2300



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# Remnants: Couple uncover the survivors of Poland's past

By Corinne Abatt  
staff writer

It's almost like looking at a lost civilization, this exhibition of color photographs from a book about Jews left in Poland after the Holocaust, at Birmingham's Pierce Street Gallery. These are gentle, thought-provoking glimpses of a way of life that seems to disappear as you watch it.

The first chapter of the book, "Remnants: The Last Jews of Poland" has a one word title, "Why?"

Why would a young, married, Polish couple from Warsaw, Tomasz Tomaszewski, free-lance photographer and Malgorzata Niezabitowska, journalist, want to write about Jews? Like 90 percent of the Poles, they are Roman Catholic. The Jewish population of Poland has all but disappeared. Why did they want to interview old people, living by themselves in small towns and villages? And in turn from the Jews they could find, came another why. Why us?

But, the couple persisted from 1980 to 1985, working on their project quietly while they did other assignments, driven by a curiosity that wouldn't go away.

She said, "My grandmother, who brought me up, told me about Polish Jews. It was a normal part of Polish history. My grandmother was a very clever person. She wanted to educate me in a particular way, and Jews were part of my heritage."

With that said, this slim, blond, blue-eyed journalist spoke of the atmosphere when she was going to school in the '50s and '60s. "The Jewish subject was taboo in Poland. The Jewish subject was untouched — in the press, on TV, in books — there was just nothing."

SHE WONDERED WHAT, if anything, was left of the once second largest Diaspora in the world that numbered more than 3 million before World War II. Their influence on the culture and economy of Poland had been significant for a thousand years.

Her curiosity was fueled by a well-remembered pain. "In 1980, 25,000 Jews left Poland. They were very assimilated. It was very painful. They considered themselves Poles, not Jews. They were invited to emigrate. I had some very good friends who were Jews in high school and my first year of college. I was very shocked. It was the first serious experience of my life. They came to my apartment. We discussed it all night. It stayed with me — the pain. But I was too young to deal with the subject."

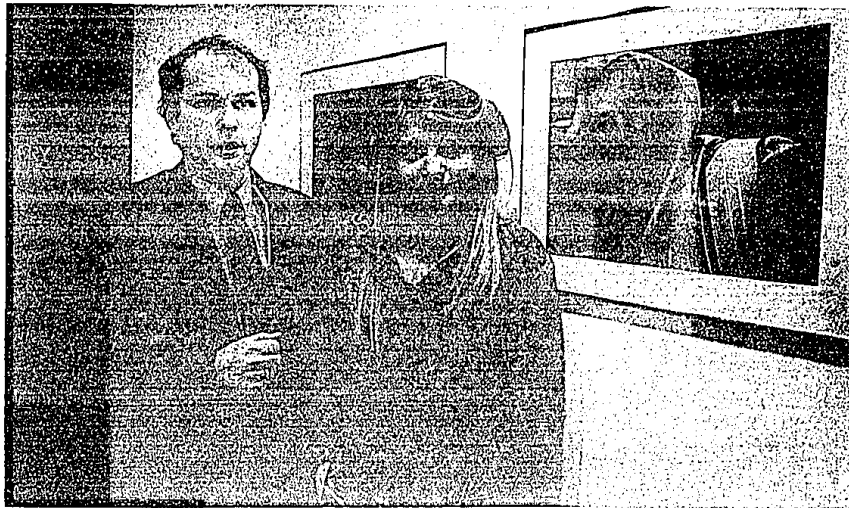
Niezabitowska, with degrees in law and journalism, from the University of Warsaw, and Tomaszewski, a free-lance photographer, trained in physics and optics, at the University of Warsaw, met in 1977 and were married in 1978. Both were active in the Solidarity Union and she went to work for its paper, Solidarity Weekly, from the first issue on. When that was closed down, she worked for other papers and many of her articles appeared in Western publications including Paris Match, Los Angeles Times and Moment/USA.

THEY USED THEIR OWN funds on the project to find, talk with and photograph the Jews of Poland. In all, she did 1,000 interviews and he took 7,000 pictures. Film was often difficult to find and so were the Jews they wanted to photograph and interview.

"We could write the next book on how to find the people," Niezabitowska said. "They are not hidden, but they are not publicized at all. It's very important to win the trust of the first person. They were anxious, surprised, suspicious. Many of them are lonely. No one visits them. When we came they asked why."

Tomaszewski said he printed some of his pictures to show them what he had done. "They liked the pictures very much. They saw they were not manipulated."

She added, "After the first barrier was crossed, they were friendly. They called us children. They wanted us to stay with them and they told us many stories."



Photographer Tomasz Tomaszewski and journalist Malgorzata Niezabitowska spent more than five years tracking down the surviving Jews of Poland. They worked out of the public eye, on their own time, using their own money to complete a major

documentary book. In the photo on the wall is the last kosher butcher in Warsaw, Zygmunt-Szul, during prayers in the Warsaw synagogue.

Staff photos by Jerry  
Zolynsky

He said, "They had the feeling they are the forgotten people."

She said many live in small, remote villages. "They don't need money or clothes. What they need is human being. They were very nice to us. We became friends. We stayed in contact with them."

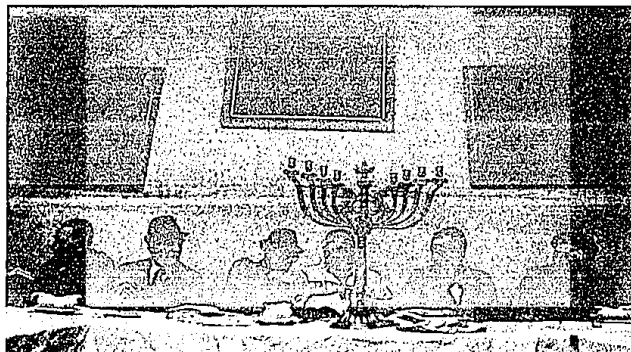
Tomaszewski is vice president of the Union of Polish Art Photographers, the only one of its kind in the country. Membership brings an I.D. card that is the essential credential for free-lance photographers.

When he had an exhibition of 120 of the photographs of the Jews at this organization's gallery in Warsaw in 1985, the response was heartwarming.

SOME 12,000 ATTENDED during four weeks run, a record breaking figure. The photographs of the Jewish cemeteries in serious disrepair stimulated a movement to raise funds and volunteer help to care for them.

He said, "Poland has 450 Jewish cemeteries, most in very bad condition. Even people who live near these places don't know they are there. We just wanted to shake the people and it worked."

While the book has not been printed in Poland, a German version is being printed in Switzerland for distribution in Germany, Austria and, Tomaszewski hopes, Holland.



Seder at the Jewish Community Center in Warsaw was photographed by Tomaszewski in 1983.

He said the book is like the second chapter of Roman Vishniac's photographs of Jewish life in Poland before World War II.

But, in the last year, life has changed dramatically for this talented, energetic couple and their daughter, Maryna, 8. They are living in Cambridge, Mass., where Niezabitowska is on a yearlong Nieman Fellowship for Journalism at Harvard.

He is working on "Discovering Americans," an assignment from

National Geographic. They just returned from a trip to Wyoming and before that made a 5,000 mile, 28-day trip by car from Boston to Los Angeles.

He reports with a smile of delight that he has shot 300 roles of film and adds that quality is paramount when shooting for National Geographic. "You have to bring them the best of the best."

He remembers when film was hard to come by and many things in-

terfered with the work, but he doesn't dwell on the past and neither does she. It is as if they have a sense of destiny and there are many missions to accomplish.

"Remnants: The Last Jews of Poland," Malgorzata Niezabitowska and Tomasz Tomaszewski, Friendly Press, \$35, Pierce Street Gallery, 217 Pierce, Birmingham. Hours are 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday.

## Exhibit marks Art Association's 30th birthday

By Corinne Abatt  
staff writer

No work of art to come out of the 43-year-old Birmingham Society of

Women Painters has had a more profound effect on the community than the founding of the organization that was to become the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Association.

It was because they needed a suitable place to hold classes that the Women Painters came up with the idea of an art center.

Now 30 years later, that seed of an

idea has blossomed into an exhibition and teaching facility with county-wide impact.

Ken Gross, BBAA executive director, said, "We currently have 1,100 students registered, that's the biggest winter term enrollment in our history."

Gross also said there are long-range plans taking shape to rebuild the classroom wing and include a community room for meetings, programs and classes. The fund-raising campaign for it will be officially launched in March.

The membership of the Women Painters continues to be actively involved as artists, teachers, fund-raisers, board members and all around volunteers.

WHEN THEIR 41st exhibit opens at the Art Association Friday, Feb. 6, it will be a 30th birthday celebration as well as a 7-9 p.m. reception for artists, friends and general public.

In honor of that, the Women Painters are publishing and selling a weekly date book with 55 drawings chosen from those submitted.

Suzanne Velick and Shirley Gower, co-chairman of the exhibition, said it will be a double show. The 55 original drawings for the book will be on exhibit and (some) for sale in the de Salle Gallery. The multi-media art exhibit of works by the Women Painters, juried by Mary Jane Bigger, will be in the main gallery.

Velick said the whole atmosphere of the opening "will look very birthday partyish."

As a tribute to the BBAA, disc jockey, Marc Ackerman, will be playing music from the 50s at the opening.

Back in 1957 when the Women Painters started thinking about an art center, they contacted a well-known local artist, the late Robert Thom. He agreed to help with the plans only if it was an organization that would serve the whole community.

THOM THEN became the first president of what was first called the Bloomfield Art Association. It was located in a house at 351 N. Woodward, Birmingham. When that had to be vacated, the Art Association leased the old sewage plant at 1514 S. Cranbrook for \$1 a year for 25 years from the city of Birmingham.

What also was immediately obvious was that the ugly plant would need a lot of help to become a thing of beauty. The tank area became the main gallery, fill dirt and a new roof helped, so did the addition of classrooms in 1978.

Improvements have been made almost continuously since the tanks were sealed and the building deodorized in 1957.

Sizeable monetary gifts from artist, Reva Shwayder and gallery owner, the late Peggy de Salle, provided for outdoor deck and courtyard areas. The main gallery has been remodeled and improved.

When a faculty exhibition was held last fall, 58 teacher/artists in the community were invited to take part, indicating that the BBAA's role as an employer is significant.

AS A catalyst, it has generated interest in and appreciation for art that has favorably affected the aesthetics, the lifestyle and commercial structure of the community. The number of framing stores, artists supply stores and art galleries in the area has increased noticeably over the last three decades.

The Birmingham Society of Women Painters wanted a suitable place to study and exhibit art. As it turned out, so did thousands of other people. And that's what first president Robert Thom, apparently sensed from the beginning.

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Suzanne Velick, left, and Shirley Gower, are co-chairing the opening reception for the Birmingham Society of Women Painters that also is a celebration of the 30th birthday of the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Association.