

Interview by Sharon Adler

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DESSA: "Berlin is the city in which I have come to terms with my Jewish family history. Painting, Collages, Installations. Remembrance through art."

Family, Emigration, Jewish Identity

Sharon Adler: You were born in 1948 in Bulawayo, the second largest city in Southern Rhodesia, which since 1980, after gaining independence, is called Zimbabwe. The approximately 7,000 members of the country's Jewish community came from Eastern and Western Europe - Hungary, Poland, Lithuania, Germany - as well as from Mediterranean countries. Where did your family, your parents, come from? And how did they survive the Shoah?

DESSA: Emma Liebermann, my mother, was born in Warsaw in 1912, the fourth of six daughters. Only four of the six girls survived. One sister was murdered with her parents, my grandparents; another sister died of natural causes, two emigrated to Israel, one to Paris, and my mother to Southern Rhodesia in 1930 to marry a cousin. This arranged marriage very likely saved her from a terrible fate had she remained in Poland. But her life was not easy.

The marriage was not a happy one and after the birth of a daughter they divorced. She was then married for a short time to a British military soldier who died, and later married my father. She never saw her parents again, and I often think about how and if she managed to cope with her loss so far from home. Sometimes she would just sit there, motionless, staring ahead. I always asked myself: Was she thinking about her family in Poland? Did she feel guilty for leaving, or was she bitter that they had arranged the marriage and sent her to Africa? Maybe it helped her deal with her pain that she forbade us to bring anything "Made in Germany" into the house. When I gave her something, I always made sure to carefully check the origin.

My mother worked part-time as an accountant. She liked to play cards and met regularly with a group of women, many of whom were emigrants. She was a pretty woman and had artistic talent: she had a beautiful soprano voice and did crochet, tapestry, and knitting. I am using some pieces for an installation in my project on Alice Salomon. Her tablecloths are on my dining table, and when her grandchildren and great-grandchildren sit around her beautiful handicrafts, she is also present in some way today.

I have some of her drawings which I found after she died. When I looked at her tapestries, among them I found one with the stamp of a gallery in Durban, so she must have tried to sell

her work at some point - she never mentioned it. She rarely talked about the past and I never asked about it.

My father was born in 1900 in Debrecen, the second largest city in Hungary. His mother Hermina, née Bloch, ran a Jewish girls' school. His father died when he was still a child. My father studied medicine in Würzburg and in Padua and worked in two clinics in northern Italy until he fled from fascism to Africa in 1938.

I met a doctor in Italy who found my father's degree certificate in the archives of the medical university in Padua. On the telephone he cried and shouted, "Deborah - centodieci su centodieci!" (one hundred and ten out of one hundred and ten). My father was brilliant, eccentric and unlike any other father I knew. He had long hair, refused to wear a tie in the heat, spoke many languages, appreciated literature, and built an extensive personal library. He opened the first private multi-ethnic clinic in Bulawayo, working seven days a week for five shillings per patient, regardless of the illness or the treatment required. A kind of Albert Schweitzer. He was completely disinterested in material things and drove the same old car until he died at the age of 70.

Sharon Adler: Did your parents talk to you about your murdered grandparents? How did they deal with their own survival, knowing that their families had been killed? How did you react to this as a child?

DESSA: Although we spoke little about the Shoah and my grandparents, or even Warsaw, my subconscious was shaped by this tragic family loss and this dark time in history. How can a small child watching insects at work in the African sun come to terms with the death of grandparents in the gas chambers? It was to take me about forty years to approach this through my work when I dealt with questions regarding identity, which continue to evolve. It seems that I did what probably most would have done. I repressed the pain and the loss of my grandparents until I had the maturity and mental strength later in life, to deal with it.

The path to becoming an artist DESSA

Sharon Adler: Was becoming an artist a way for you to arm yourself to deal with the trauma? How did you get into art?

DESSA: If becoming an artist was a way of dealing with the loss and trauma, it was completely unconscious. My husband noticed my talent when I was painting at home and I decided to take lessons, especially as my occupational therapy degree did not include art lessons and it could come in handy when working with future patients. I found my true "mother tongue", my way of personal expression, and had my first exhibition soon after.

Sharon Adler: "Uniting through art" is a leitmotif in your work. How do you think art can act as a "transmitter" to fill the gap, concerning collective as well as individual memory? How can art contribute to the collective Jewish memory?

DESSA: I build bridges between music and painting, between past and present, between peoples of different cultures. With the project "A Legacy from Theresienstadt" I have combined both concepts - not only Viktor Ullmann's music and my painting, but also historical events from the past to the present.

My motivation to bring back to life a part of our collective history is certainly related to the loss of my own family. The burden of what I call "the little black hole of nothingness" inside me, which will never disappear, is perhaps easier to bear when one illuminates the stories of others. "A Legacy from Theresienstadt", which I completed in 1997, had a great influence on my artistic career.

Visual art is universal, as is music, and both are powerful tools for communicating ideas to people of all educational backgrounds. In terms of collective Jewish memory, I think it is very important to record and capture memories and create progressive cultural memory projects that spark the interest of younger generations. Working in a group with people who have similar concerns provides an opportunity to share experiences and ideas and to discuss issues of intolerance and exclusion, which I have also experienced. Through art, I reach groups who know little about Judaism and its history.

Berlin and the importance of memory culture through art

Sharon Adler: You have lived and worked in Pully, Switzerland, since 1981 and alternately in Berlin since 2000. You have had a studio in Berlin since 2005. Has Berlin, Jewish Berlin, changed your perspective on your work, your art? What influence does this city have on your work against the background of your personal family history, the loss of your grandparents?

DESSA: A large part of my life has "followed a path", partly through reflective choices and partly by chance. My close relationship with Berlin began with the exhibitions of my work at Galerie Bremer, but my involvement with Jewish history and this city started in 2000, when the Berlin Cathedral presented my project "A Legacy from Theresienstadt", inspired by Viktor Ullmann's music. During the weeks I was in Berlin for the exhibition, I rented a flat and came across the 1912 company album "Die Hygiene im Wandel der Zeiten" (Hygiene through the ages), published by the N. Israel department stores', in an antiquarian bookshop.

My curiosity has always been boundless, but this time it has led me in a completely new direction in my work, namely, to deal with the Jewish history of Berlin - or one could say the history of Berlin, because I have not only researched and collected information on the history of the department stores and the Israel family, but also aspects of Berlin's development at that time.

"Stolzesteine/Stones-of-Pride"

Sharon Adler: Stones have had a special meaning for you since your earliest childhood in Zimbabwe. You developed your project "Stolzesteine/Stones-of-Pride" as a counter-project to the Stolpersteine (stumbling stones). How did that come about?

DESSA: This project was a second homage to N. Israel, but especially to Wilfrid Israel, whom I had only mentioned in my first homage. I wanted to create something unique to remember and honour him. When I moved from Charlottenburg to Wilmersdorf in 2012, I discovered some Stolpersteine on the pavement in front of a building and at the same time I also saw that someone had placed two large metal plaques with the same names on the wall of the building, as if this was a "counteraction". I think it is important to remember the lives of the murdered people. With my commemorative artwork "Stolzesteine/Stones-of-Pride" I honour each life with natural stones that I have collected around the world.

Stones have had great meaning for me since my childhood. As a child, I loved to roam around Matobo Park among the most beautiful rock formations that are thousands of years old. I still marvel at these natural sculptures and the energy that stones contain, and I think they are a fitting medium for memory work.

Placing a stone on a grave is a Jewish custom. In Hebrew the word for stone is "EVEN" and it contains the words for father (Av) and son (Ben). This suggests that the stone is a symbol of transmission from generation to generation.

"A Legacy from Theresienstadt" - Paintings based on Viktor Ullmann's Piano Sonata No. 7

Sharon Adler: Can you please tell us something about your art project "A Legacy from Theresienstadt", about Viktor Ullmann's music which he wrote in the concentration camp Theresienstadt and your paintings?

DESSA: In 1995 I heard Viktor Ullmann's Second Symphony, which is based on the 7th Piano Sonata he wrote in Theresienstadt before he was murdered in Auschwitz in October 1944. In this music I "heard" different images: Forces colliding and being torn apart, sparks and lightning, darkness and light, serenity, and sadness. The symphony ends with variations and a fugue on a Hebrew folk song. The melody is imbued with fullness and peace of mind. This music brought back memories of the loss of my grandparents in the Shoah.

A Tribute To Kaufhaus N. Israel 1815-1939/Homage to the Department Store N. Israel 1815-1939

Sharon Adler: In 2000 you came across the Berlin department store "Nathan Israel" and its founder and manager. How did that come about, who was the Israel family and what did your research reveal?

DESSA: In 2000, I found the aforementioned purple album with the inscription "Kaufhaus N. Israel Album 1912: Die Hygiene im Wandel der Zeiten" in a Berlin second-hand bookshop.

That made me curious, because 1912 is the year my mother was born, and the name Israel pointed to a Jewish theme. My German was still very poor at that time. A friend translated for me what the volume was about, and I learned that "N. Israel" had been the name of a department store. I looked for the place where the shop must have stood, directly opposite the Red City Hall, and found... nothing. Yet it had been Berlin's oldest and for a long time also its largest department store. Wilfrid Israel, the last owner of the department store before its "Aryanisation", went to England in 1939 and saved thousands of Jewish children through the Kindertransport.

In another second-hand bookshop I found another album of this series. The books fascinated me because you could see that someone had put a lot of effort into making them. I tried to find out more: Who was the Israel family? Why had they published these volumes? During my research in Berlin, London, and New York, I found more albums. In the album from 1900, an article described all the things the family had done for their staff - from social benefits to leisure activities, and I thought: This must be publicised! Someone has to remember the family. So, I started making collages and paintings. The series "A Tribute to Kaufhaus N. Israel 1815-1939" was shown in 2004 at Gallery Bremer in Berlin and a year later at the Jewish Museum Westphalia.

"The Art of Remembrance - Alice Salomon"

Sharon Adler: For your 2018 project on the social reformer and women's rights activist Alice Salomon, which was shown in Berlin's House of Representatives to mark the 150th anniversary of her birth, you created collages, paintings, and installations. How did you come across her? What can you tell us about your research on Alice Salomon in archives around the world and flea markets in Berlin?

DESSA: I was introduced to Alice Salomon by the biographer and former Alice Salomon Hochschule student, Isabel Morgenstern, whom I met at my exhibition at the Mitte Museum. I told her that I planned to continue my tributes with "Stones of Pride". She sent me the names of five women, and as I learned more about Alice Salomon, I decided that her extraordinary life deserved its own project, especially since she was not very well known at the time.

The Alice Salomon Archive is not far from my studio in Berlin-Wilmersdorf. There I spent many hours collecting data and reading the original unabridged version of her autobiography "Character is Destiny." The book provided a basis for my project, but also raised questions in my mind about Salomon's identity from a personal, cultural, and historical perspective. In addition to my online research, which included the Leo Baeck Institute and the Jewish Women's Archive, I searched for visual material. I combed flea markets, antique shops and bookshops in Berlin and found material in the USA.

I followed Salomon's tracks to Franz Mendelssohn's villa, where she attended salon concerts, and to Engelberg in Switzerland, where she spent her summer holidays. I also collected material about the time she spent in Geneva. I made a very special "find" at the antiques market on Fehrbelliner Platz: all the issues of the Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung from 1904 to

1914. I looked at every single page in search of useful pictures, hoping to find something about Alice Salomon.

My patience was rewarded: in the last album from 1904 there was an article by Adele Schrieber about the International Women's Congress in Berlin and among the photos was one of Alice Salomon! I used this article to make an installation for my project.

Sharon Adler: How did you create the artistic approach to her life and philosophy, to make social reform and social work visible through art?

DESSA: I can best answer this question by quoting two outstanding women. Prof. Dr. Adrienne Chambon, who received the Alice Salomon Prize from the Alice Salomon University in 2022, wrote in her review of my book: "I was delighted to discover through DESSA's rich and vivid material new ways of looking at Alice Salomon and thinking beyond her about how to 'do' historical memory work." I had learned the methodology of how to 'do' memory work from my earlier tribute to the N. Israel department store.

I would also like to quote Dr Adriane Feustel, the long-time director of the Alice Salomon Archive, who wrote about my exhibition "The Art of Remembrance - Alice Salomon" presented in the Berlin Parliament: "The presentation of the individual works of art on a long wall enables the viewer to grasp the entire life and life's work at a glance and at the same time to become aware of its diversity and richness. Only visual art is capable of shaping temporal succession as spatial juxtaposition, of translating it into a kind of simultaneity. Through the tranquillity that this exhibition radiates, DESSA's artwork makes tangible the unifying element in Alice Salomon's work, that which carries her work, her life. It is the "one" Alice Salomon herself spoke of in her autobiography."

Sharon Adler: In your book "The Art of Remembrance - Alice Salomon" you not only published your collages, paintings, and installations, but also "an imaginary conversation" between you and her. How should she be remembered, and how relevant do you think her achievements and demands are to this day?

DESSA: During the months of creative work in my Berlin studio, the presence of Alice Salomon was so strong that I felt I could "talk" to her. I wrote an imaginary conversation with her in which we discuss many topics, including the value of social work as a profession and her experiences in the German National and International Women's Councils, all of which are still relevant today. Alice Salomon was far ahead of her time. However, her professional successes and cosmopolitanism did not prevent her from being unjustly banished from Germany. Her last years in New York were difficult. I am pleased that I was able to contribute to the 150th anniversary celebration of her birth in her hometown with my work and thus honour her work.

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DESSA: "Berlin is the city where I came to terms with my Jewish family history." DESSA is a pseudonym for the first letters of Deborah Sharon Abeles. (© Sharon Adler/PIXELMEER, 2022)



"Emma Liebermann, my mother, was born in Warsaw, Poland, in 1912, the fourth of six daughters. She was a pretty woman and had artistic talent: a beautiful soprano voice, she crocheted, made tapestries, and knitted a lot. I used some pieces for an installation in my project about Alice Salomon. Her tablecloths are on my dining table, and when her grandchildren and great-grandchildren sit around her beautiful handicrafts, she is present in a way today too." (© Sharon Adler/PIXELMEER, 2022)



Born in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), the artist Deborah Sharon Abeles (DESSA, her pseudonym) became a Swiss citizen in 1983. From 1986 onwards, numerous exhibitions and presentations of her work took place in museums, galleries, and concert halls in Europe. Since 2005, she has had a second studio and a residence in Berlin. (© Sharon Adler/PIXELMEER, 2022)



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