

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

By Arie A. Galles

I grew up in Poland among the ruins of World War II listening to accounts by our neighbors, both Jews and Christians, of those dark times. Although their tales of cruelty and hatred evoked imagery of a distant, monstrous nearly inconceivable land, the stories were recent local history. The land on which such suffering took place, where members of my family became ashes in the slaughterhouse of Belzec, was also the flowered field where my friends and I ran and played.

Years passed, and on January 19, 1993, I entered the Holocaust Memorial Room at the local Jewish Community Center: an empty octagonal space, seven walls divided into fourteen sections. In an instant the "Fourteen Stations/Hey Yud Dalet" suite crystallized in my mind as I recalled Elie Wiesel's references to the countless Calvaries in Nazi concentration camps. Auschwitz-Birkenau, Babi Yar, Buchenwald, Belzec, Bergen-Belsen, Gross-Rosen, Dachau, Chelmno, Treblinka, Mauthausen, Maidanek, Sobibor, Ravensbrück and Stutthof, those infamous names emerged from my memory as the first fourteen "stations." In a blinding heat I ran to the office of Sara, my wife, who worked in the same building and sketched the entire concept for the drawings on a sheet of paper. That evening I telephoned my friend, poet Jerome Rothenberg, and he proposed writing Gematria poems based on the Yiddish names of the camps.

Although the project began by serendipity, years of research and drawing followed as the undertaking took possession of my life in an exhausting and humbling process. Over time, amid countless rolls of Luftwaffe and Allied aerial reconnaissance photographs, I discovered negatives to serve as source images for the drawings.

These photographs bear witness to the death camps, and are documents by accident. Neither Nazis nor Allies were concerned with photographic recordings of these sites. They were non consequential locations in the path of strategic targets, merely areas amid a landscape of changing fronts and dueling armies. The photons bouncing off the camps, fixed forever in crystals of photographic emulsion, went unnoticed by the world and the silent heavens. The abstraction of these images, the recording of the massive industrial scale of the Nazis' "Final Solution to the Jewish Problem," locks the horror into calm banality. Considering the vacuum of expanding malevolent lethargy, I often created in an effort to keep the expansion in check. I spent uncounted days peering into geographic Hades, mapping humanity's darkest undertaking. I drew a Midrash, an exegesis, a different way of thinking about the Holocaust. There, among mundane views of occupied Europe grew embedded cancers. The cancer consumed glorious landscape and barely concealed its rapacious appetite for devouring my people. All within a rational, geometric layout. As I drew I concentrated on what things looked like, not what they represented. This distancing enabled me to contemplate the dichotomy of the intrinsically fascinating aerial views apart from their horrifying truth. However, the two were not easily separated. When my consciousness insisted that the shapes represented crematoria, freight trains, ash pits, barracks, barbed wire fences, my posture of distance-equals-security proved false and emotion overwhelmed me. Harmless as the landscapes themselves appeared, the images bore lethal radiation. Cumulatively and without warning, the debilitating effects would strike my heart and my intellect. Nine years of hovering above these hells changed me. I marked paper with charcoal, literally drawing with ashes. And, sometimes, it felt to me that the physical act of drawing gave voice to the unheard screams of the murdered.

The English title of the project refers to the "Fourteen Stations of the Cross" and to the fact that each concentration camp was established near a railroad station. The Hebrew title "Hey Yud Dalet," the acronym of "Hashem Yinkom Damam," "May God avenge their blood," has been carved into the gravestones of Jewish martyrs throughout the centuries. Within each drawing I have hand lettered and embedded one fourteenth of the Kaddish. Interwoven into the texture of each drawing, these Aramaic and Hebrew phrases are invisible. The full suite of drawings completes the Kaddish, offering the prayer for those who perished and had no family to recite it for them. This Kaddish is also for those to whom the prayer was foreign, whose lives were extinguished in the same braid of horror and smoke that devoured Europe's Jews. I offer the "Fourteen Stations"/"Hey Yud Dalet" suite of drawings as icons for compassion and remembrance.

Under no condition can art express the Holocaust. To withdraw art from confronting this horror, however, would assign victory to its perpetrators. That must not be. Each survivor, individually, must affirm his or her humanity and existence. As an artist, and a child of survivors, I can do no less.