

GERSHON ISKOWITZ

by Peter Mellen

All photos by the author unless otherwise indicated



I'm high. I'm really high. Way up there – floating free. Completely free! Next to me a friendly Chagall-like figure. The two of us high in the blue-mauve sky, floating over the land. A warm smile, a twinkle in his eye, “Hey! How come it took you so long to get here?”

Time to come down. A long way down. I look back up at the sky. It's a Gershon Iskowitz sky. Patches of blue showing through mottled clouds, a shimmering mosaic of color. I remember Gershon saying, “All the colors I use are from nature – the blues, the greens, the reds, the browns, the golds . . .”

It's 10:30 a.m. I know that Gershon is asleep, with the traffic roaring by his Spadina Avenue studio in Toronto. I know that last night he will have worked all night, as he always does, applying another layer of color to a small painting he has been working on for the past five weeks. He will get up around two o'clock, have some food, walk over to Yonge Street to see some galleries or some friends. Perhaps he will drop into Gwartzman's on Spadina, where he buys his materials, then across the street to Grossman's for a beer and a few jokes with John MacGregor or some of the younger artists who hang out there. By eleven or twelve he will be back in his studio ready to start work again. Night after night.

It's difficult not to over-romanticize Gershon Iskowitz's life, particularly when you

Kielce, Poland, in 1921, he began to draw and paint when he was about nine years old. Coming from a poor family, he could barely afford to buy watercolors or paper. When the Germans invaded Poland in 1939, Gershon was 18 years old. He was put to work in forced labour camps. He escaped. He was caught. He escaped again. He lived in unheated shacks, with the temperature often down to 20 degrees below zero.

“My whole attitude changed. I was a very delicate fellow. I think that in circumstances of survival you get harder – not just physically – but mentally too – in order to survive.”

In 1942 he was sent to Auschwitz. One of his brothers was sent there with him, but didn't survive. His father, mother, sister, and another brother were sent away for “resettlement,” and he never saw them again. After more than a year and a half at Auschwitz, he was transferred to Buchenwald, where he later tried to escape. Shot in the leg, and left for dead – because he was so emaciated – his friends brought him back to camp. The Americans liberated Germany shortly after, and it took nine months in hospitals before he recovered his strength.

If survival of this ordeal was not enough of a miracle, it is even more amazing to discover that he managed to continue painting during most of this period. He was

by painting their portraits. He sketched his friends and life at camp, knowing all the time that if he was caught it would mean immediate death.

“Why did I do it? I think it kept me alive. There was nothing to do. I had to do something in order to forget the hunger. It's very hard to explain, but in the camp painting was a necessity for survival.”

It is impossible to relate these experiences without wondering what effect they have had on his life. Gershon is conscious of them – as he is of being Jewish – but he also accepts them, and considers them to be a part of himself. He is neither bitter nor sentimental. If anything, he has gone beyond them to a full and joyful awareness of life in the present. In fact, Gershon would much rather talk about other things.

When I met him, I expected to find someone who was tortured, shy and introverted. But as we laughed, told stories, knocked back shots of vodka, and talked about everything but art, I realized how wrong I had been. When I told him of my naive expectations, he jokingly said, “Do you want me to cry for you?”

There is a child-like enthusiasm about Gershon. He likes to laugh, to have fun, and be with friends. He enjoys his food, his dates and his work. He has no romantic illusions about his life as an artist, no desires to be famous or to revolutionize the art world. His life is lived in the present.