

# Yom HaShoah

Survivor's art memorializes children of the Holocaust.

**Keri Guten Cohen**

Story Development Editor

**M**iriam Brysk of Ann Arbor was 4 and living in her native Warsaw when World War II started and forever changed her life. A child of the Holocaust, Brysk cannot forget her experiences; nor does she want to.



**Miriam Brysk**

Instead, she expresses her thoughts and feelings through art.

Her newest work, "Children of the Holocaust," can be seen in the auditorium of the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills through June. The emotional work is a fitting tribute as Jews

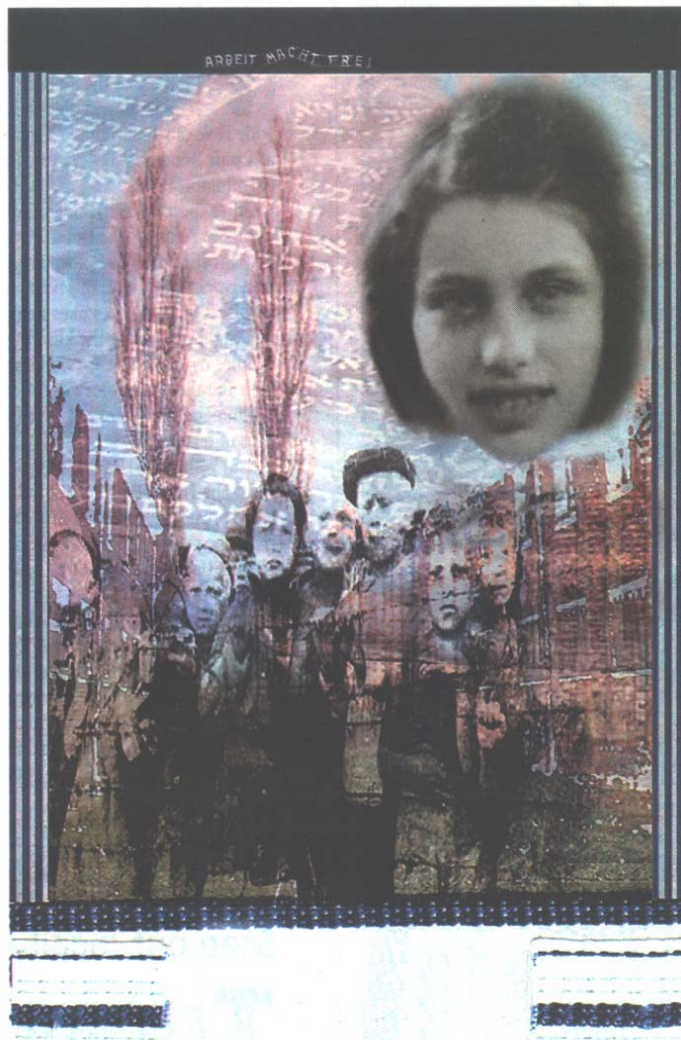
worldwide mark Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Memorial Day) on May 2.

"Children of the Holocaust" features a series of symbolic *tallisim* (prayer shawls), complete with *tzitzit* Brysk knotted herself. Each tallis is a blend of photos that include present-day memorials now standing where Nazi killing machines operated, haunting images of actual children and historic photos of these sites during the war. Text at the bottom gives information about the children and about the killing going on around them.

"I have recently published my memoir, *Amidst the Shadows of Trees*," Brysk said. "Dealing with the pain and emotions of my own childhood experiences led me to consider the plight of the 1.5 million Jewish children who had not survived. I thought of their disrupted rites of passage as beloved sons and daughters of extended Jewish families and their ultimate and untimely deaths in Nazi-designated killing places.

"The idea for a new art series began to emerge; I would focus on depicting the children who died, in the context of what they are likely to have experienced.

"One of the rites of passage from childhood to adulthood is the bar/bat mitzvah at age 13," she said. "At that event, children traditionally receive tallis from their parents. Most of the Jewish children who died in the Holocaust, however, were too young to ever have had a bar mitzvah, or to ever have worn a tallis. I, therefore, used the imagery of the tallis to frame each piece. Each child is contained within his own



**Odette from Brysk's "Children of the Holocaust" series**

tallis, the one he never received, as a gift of remembrance from me."

Brysk, 73, is a self-taught artist who uses tools she knows best — the computer and photographs.

"I'm Grandma Miriam, not Grandma Moses," she says of her modern bent. "I know how to manipulate the digital art, and I have always loved photography. I combined them in my need to express my thoughts of the Holocaust."

She learned how to accomplish large Xerox transfers with toners and solvents, and to add multiple layers of color and images in a way that brings the people alive in her work.

All images of the children come from authentic photographs of Holocaust victims; 10 of the children's photos came from survivors who asked her to preserve through art the memory of their relatives who perished. Others came from books or the Internet.

The children depicted in *Odette* and *Ralf* have Detroit ties. Born in Paris and interned in Auschwitz, Odette was the cousin of local child survivor Giselle Feldman. Ralf was born in Amsterdam; he and his parents were killed at Sobibor. He is the cousin of child survivor Esther Posner of Southfield.

## Holocaust Childhood

Brysk's own Holocaust story is unusual. After Warsaw fell to the Nazis, she and her parents, Bronka and Chaim Miasniki, left for Lida in Soviet-occupied Belarus. When Lida fell, they were herded into a ghetto. In Russia, most of the Jews were simply shot. In one day, Brysk says, 80 percent of the ghetto was liquidated that way.

Her father was a much-needed surgeon. Partisans rescued them from the ghetto and took them into the forest, where her father ran a partisans hospital. He earned the Order of Lenin for his work after liberation.

Brysk remembers having her head shaved and dressing in boys' clothes to protect her from being raped. At 8, she was given a pistol, which she proudly wore by her side.

The family moved to Brooklyn when she was 12. In America, she says, she was able to live out her dreams. A book about the exhilaration of discovering things led her to become a scientist specializing in dermatology, microbiology and microchemistry. She set up the laboratory at the medical school of the University of Texas at Galveston and worked there for many years.

She also dreamed of going to museums and one day expressing herself through art. Now three of her pieces have been added to the permanent collection at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, and her work has been exhibited across the country in Holocaust museums, municipal art centers and at Jewish community centers.

Brysk, 73, is married to Henry, a survivor from France. They have two daughters and five grandchildren.

As a survivor, she is very involved in speaking to groups about her Holocaust experience. In September, at Judge Edward Sosnick's request, she will address 400 students at the Oakland County Courthouse in Pontiac.

"I bring in a few pieces of my art, and I emphasize that I was able to overcome my handicaps and have a successful life," she says. "I teach about the Holocaust, but it's also about empowerment." □

For Yizkor Day details, see page A14.

"Children of the Holocaust" will run through June in the auditorium of the Holocaust Memorial Center, 28123 Orchard Lake Road, Farmington Hills. (248) 553-2400.