

Traces of Existence

What to do on a rainy day? Artist, Hila Laviv

2 June – 1 July 2018

Jewish Museum c/o Dalarna Museum

In a kitchen in the desert in Israel a young girl is occupied with cutting out and folding paper figures. The kitchen is in the home of her maternal grandmother, and cutting out paper figures is part of a family tradition. She has learnt to do this from her grandmother Anna Warburg who wrote a book entitled “Vad Ska Vi Cora? roliga sysselsättningar for barn” [What can we do? Fun things to do for children] at the beginning of the 1920s. The book was beautifully illustrated by Elsa Beskow who contributed so much to the treasury of Swedish children’s literature.

Many years later the cut-out figures led to an exhibition in Tel Aviv and the kitchen in her grandmother’s house was recreated in Hila Laviv’s delicate paperwork. Her cutouts are sensuous, transparent, delicate and transitory. Just like memories and history.

At the same time the Jewish Museum in Stockholm was searching for traces of Jewish existence in Swedish history.

The little kibbutz in Falun, known as Hälsinggården, caught the museum’s interest and the name Warburg turns up in both Anna and her daughter Eva. They had now left Germany and were helping to organize aid for child refugees. 500 children are to be allowed to come to Sweden in a movement entitled Kindertransport [children’s transportation]. Of the five hundred children from 14-16, about 50 end up in Falun where they create a self-supporting kibbutz and a successful business manufacturing toys and handicrafts.

Many of these children remain in Sweden despite the fact that they were originally intending to move to Palestine. They were all young and convinced Zionists.

This narrative can sound idyllic but nothing could be further from the truth. None of the children were able to travel with their parents because the Kindertransport rules did not permit this. The local Jewish community was responsible for the children’s financial needs. Otherwise the children were not welcome to Sweden. The children’s grandparents were murdered by the death machines of the Holocaust. Why were they not able to accompany the children? And why were so few children – merely

500 – Included in the scheme? Sweden’s refugee policy dating back to World War I is also an important aspect of the story. It is the narrative of how few Jews were allowed to enter Sweden and how extraordinarily difficult it was for the European Jews to avoid being caught up in the Holocaust in a Europe which would not open its borders. Swedish refugee policy was notable for being extremely restrictive and for maintaining that Sweden was not a country of immigration. Sweden operated a “selective policy” which meant that refugees were screened.

To an extent, Jewish refugees were welcome to Sweden but they experienced much greater difficulty in acquiring permits than did non-Jewish refugees. Sweden was by no means unique in this and the same policy operated in all of the European countries. Topography of the Holocaust 80 years on we are back at the kibbutz in Falun. Israeli artist Hila Laviv brings the garden and the apple tree back to life on the old Hälsinggården site. Her cut-out paper figures that sway in the spring breeze become links with history. Sweden-Germany-Israel-Sweden. The links between the countries are so typical of the history that surrounds the Holocaust. Where people are driven out of their homes and the community that they once belonged to they form other ties. The need for a sense of belonging and of community is infinite, even in exile in Falun far away from the world that these children once knew. They found themselves at the mercy of each other, dependent on their strong faith in Zionism and on the hope that somewhere there would be a home in which they would have the right to live. Two perspectives that both end up in a little kibbutz in the Swedish mining town of Falun. One is about being spared and about those who escaped the Holocaust. The other is about the people who ended up in Auschwitz or Treblinka. Both of these narratives are equally important as the Jewish Museum in Stockholm reawakens hidden aspects of Swedish history and of Jewish life in Sweden.

Welcome to the exhibition!

Christina Gamstorp, Director Jewish Museum in Stockholm