

A survivor's story told in art

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Thea Weiss will exhibit works of art in Wellington, New Zealand next month telling the stories of her mother-in-law Lotte's two lives...one in Auschwitz and the other in New Zealand and Australia.



Thea and Lotte Weiss look at one of Lotte's books

91-yr-old Lotte Weiss spent 40 years of her life following her two and a half year's Auschwitz internment in Wellington and Sydney where she lives today.

Lotte Weiss will travel next week with Thea and husband John to Wellington to attend the opening of the exhibition...her first visit to the city in over thirteen years.

The exhibition *My Two Lives*, inspired by Lotte's 2003 book of the same name, contrasts the unimaginable horror and losses of her youth, when she was interned in the Auschwitz Birkenau concentration camp and Theresienstadt, with her valiant post-war efforts to rebuild her life in New Zealand and Australia. It will be staged at the prestigious National Portrait Gallery in the New Zealand capital.



Branded

She told J-Wire: “I will make time in Wellington for a very important visit...to the graves of my husband Alfred and his brother Leo.”

Lotte, who was born in Bratislava, will also visit the The Holocaust Centre of New Zealand based in Wellington.

Colorado-born Thea Weiss listened to her mother-in-law Lotte’s Holocaust tales, never imagining she would spend years turning the stories into artworks.

Lotte’s first life began in November 1923, and ended in March 1942. Her second began in May 1945, when, burdened with the trauma and memories of her camp existence, she arrived in New Zealand, where she lived for the next 40 years. With the compassion and acceptance bestowed upon her in Wellington, she was able to regain her strength and rebuild her confidence to start a new life.

She derived great pleasure from outings to Oriental Parade, the Botanical Gardens and Raumati Beach. These peaceful locations were tranquil, nurturing gardens of Eden – an immense contrast to the barbed wire and horrors that had been seared into her memory.

Lotte has been a guide at the Sydney Jewish Museum since its inception in 1993 and is much sought after for her exceptional memory and calm ability to relate her stories without apportioning blame.



OUT OF THE SHADOWS
 2015 / Encaustic and oil paint on water board / 102 x 82 cm
 When Lotte arrived in Wellington in 1945, the memories of Auschwitz enveloped her every waking. As the years of hardship, Lotte grew more confident and the war no longer consumed her by the ghost of her past.

An inspiring and courageous woman, she has captivated audiences with her stories of hope and survival against all odds, and, despite losing her parents and siblings during the war, maintains an intrinsic belief in the goodness of all people.

Thea Weiss says she has found her artistic journey with her mother-in-law’s personal history immensely enriching and humbling: “Lotte has proven that she believes in miracles. Her memory has remained razor-sharp, and her calm words flow without hesitation, and without anger or bitterness.”



Lotte Weiss branded 2065 by the Nazis

Thea, who was born in Denver, Colorado, graduated with a BFA in painting from the National Art School in Sydney in 2006, and an MA in printmaking at UNSW Art & Design (formerly COFA), in 2012. Prior to that, she had a successful 20-year career in fashion illustration and writing.

Thea is a studio-based printmaker and painter. Her printing methods concentrate on etchings, both on zinc and copper and caustic soda on linoleum. Her paintings utilise encaustic and oils on wafer board.

There has been much to interpret, Thea says. “The choices I have made for this exhibition reflect the book passages that highlight Lotte’s courage to withstand all that she has endured – the miracles and her memories.”

Much of the work utilises words and numbers, which have been eloquently relayed to Thea, both orally and in writing. The many layers of Lotte’s life resonate in Thea’s work, with the overlapping of forms and textures. Letters are stamped onto canvas, etching plates or wooden boards to replicate the stories told and the images interpreted.

Thea has had solo exhibitions in Jewish and Holocaust museums in Australia in Sydney and Melbourne and in the U.S. in Richmond, Virginia and Houston, Texas. Her prints have been exhibited in group shows in Australia, China and Taiwan.