

ILYA BOGDANOVSKY

HELD HOSTAGE DURING THE SIEGE OF LENINGRAD, PRINTMAKER ILYA BOGDANOVSKY WAS ONE OF THE FIRST SOVIET JEWS TO EMIGRATE TO ISRAEL. DIANE WYSHOGROD EXPLORES THE INTERPLAY OF LIGHT AND DARK IN HIS LIFE AND ART

One hour south of Jerusalem, Ilya Bogdanovsky, formerly of Leningrad, now makes his home in the Elah Valley. Orange sherbet and neon pink blossoms of bougainvillea surround his small house. Button-sized Chinese lemons are yellow confetti tossed into the deep greens of the garden. Purple-green Wandering Jew sprawls in the shadows under the trees. Ilya welcomes me at the gate with a gentle, somewhat shy smile, although there is nothing hesitant about his handshake.

He ushers me through the house, past displays of hearty Russian stoneware, paintings, etchings and sculpture, up the stairs to his haven: the second floor studio-loft he built largely with his own hands and the help of his two grown sons. His wife, Tina, an architect and structural engineer, designed the room.

The studio is a symphony of blond wood and light. Carving knives and etching tools stand at glass-topped workstations. Printing rollers, both wood and metal, rest against a wall in ascending size order. Canvases, art books and magazines fill every nook and cranny; creativity balances with precision.

Before we begin our interview, Ilya spoons Earl Grey tea leaves into a small, fat-bellied ceramic teapot, adding his own

CREATIVITY BALANCES WITH PRECISION



touch: one of his Chinese lemons. Leaving the tea to steep, he talks about art and life.

Ilya is a printmaker, a master of lithography, etching, woodcarving, engraving and silk screening. His expertise has been honed over years of study and practice in Russia, first under the tutelage of Andrei Ushin, a well-known local artist, and later at the Leningrad Academy of Art. A master printer at the Leningrad Graphic Centre, Ilya's works were shown numerous times between 1967 and 1990, within the Soviet Union and also abroad. However, he was held hostage, not allowed to leave the country with his creations, so he pursued his own art discreetly.

Coping with oppression was nothing new to Ilya. He was born before the end of World War II, to a family that survived the 900-day-long siege of Leningrad. He links his mother's untimely death and his older sister's continual health problems to their severe deprivation during the war. After the war, Ilya remembers his father shutting off the radio in disgust rather than listen to state-sponsored broadcasts about the siege. The barely whispered truth was that some of those trapped could have escaped, but dead civilians made better propaganda.

Over the years, the injustices accumulated. Everyone was equal, but ordinary citizens went hungry, while Party officials had food, villas, privileges. His wife suffered from discrimination – mostly, ironically, from her Jewish boss, anxious to prove to his non-Jewish superiors that not all Jews stick together.

Ilya was fed up with the lies, discrimination and living in a prison. He wanted freedom, a new life. When Soviet Jews began emigrating to Israel en masse, he and his family were among them. They arrived in Israel in 1990 when Ilya was 45. He came with no Hebrew, no job, and too-rosy expectations. Confronting his new reality took determination and creativity. While seeking work as an artist he taught children to draw. The family's first residence, a caravan, was surrounded by a rubbish dump. He cleared the mess and created a Japanese garden out of stones and

bits of plants he found in the vicinity. Soon neighbours began asking him to create gardens for them. He's an expert skier, but skiing on Mount Hermon is prohibitively expensive. He taught himself to rollerblade instead, and set up a slalom course on a nearby slope. Before long, he was running a "rollerblade clinic" for friends and neighbours.

Opportunities to pursue his art came along by chance. Someone "happened" to recognize his skills just when the Israel Museum needed an expert restorer to prepare a special exhibit. A friend gave him a

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translation of ancient Egyptian myths just as he was contemplating a series on the Exodus. Chance? Maybe. But I think that Ilya is someone who casts his vision securely into the universe, and it delivers. "If you are not afraid," he says, "you can do anything." He will need that confidence. These are not easy times either for Israel or for artists. Investing in art is not a high priority and conservative local art dealers are skittish about promoting art that does not feature traditional treatments of the Kotel and the Tower of David. Printmaking is not currently a popular art form. It is painstaking work and is perceived as old-fashioned. Moreover, it can involve prolonged exposure to dangerous chemicals. Even his friends say that his work is beautiful, but too dark, too "Russian". Who will buy it?"

Ilya shrugs and smiles. One day his works will be exhibited as he envisions them. He says this with such confidence, I glance involuntarily at the wall, expecting to see them mounted. He laughs. Not today. But some day. Even if he has to do it himself. In fact, several years ago, he did, exhibiting his series of combined etchings/collographs on the Ten Plagues in an abandoned stone building near his moshav. Hundreds came.

Ilya is idealistic but practical. To support his family and his art, he works at the

Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem. His open, modest manner and undisputed technical expertise make him a popular teacher, both at Bezalel and at the Israel Museum, where he has taught continuing education courses. Over the years, many students have become friends.

Much as he enjoys teaching, Ilya's top priority will always be his art. His commitment to that is unswerving. He is not commercial. He produces every piece himself, from first sketch to final signature. No shortcuts. No assistants. Hand your work over to anyone else, and something about it dies. He can feel it. He challenges himself to see the world with ever-fresh eyes, and to produce that vision at the highest technical and artistic level.

His series *Impressions* dates from his first years in Israel, in 1991-92. His reactions to his new land came fast and furious. He felt compelled to record them. He created collagraphs, laying down pieces of cardboard, of fabric, applying layers of oil paint, rolling the small press he had brought from Russia over everything, creating an interplay of texture and colour, getting his impressions down fast, fast. Each day another print.

Here is a sharav, a Middle Eastern scorcher, the heat shimmering in red and yellow waves. There, the narrow streets of Mea Shearim pulsating with piety and

energy, a silhouetted Hassid immersed in his book vanishing off the canvas to the left. Masada, seen head on, looking straight into Herod's palace on the north face of the mountain. It is like getting a close-up of a well-known profile by staring into the nose and moustache.

His *Impressions* still speak to many of his Russian friends, but he has changed in the decade since he produced these pieces and he put them away, gently, but firmly.

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His works of this non-religious Jew are suffused with Jewish themes such as the Exodus. His connection to the Holocaust is personal: his father's parents were murdered by the Germans in Vitebsk, Byelorussia, from where his family originated. In 2000, he completed a series of intaglio prints entitled *Apocalypse: an Artist's Vision*. These stark etchings, some of which were exhibited at the Jerusalem Centre for the Performing Arts, feature stylized donkeys, dreydls, crenellated Old City walls,

and crescent moons, cavorting amid shadows of black on white, white on black. What first attracts you is the subtle beauty of the images, their clarity of line and the interplay of light and dark. Only later do you confront the content: these are not easy images, for they evoke the pain of Jewish dispersion and the Holocaust; a cry for redemption.

According to tradition, the donkey is the honest, stubborn beast of burden destined to carry the Messiah into Jerusalem, ushering in the End of Days. Ilya's donkeys soar, but are they free or floating into oblivion? Is he a pessimist or an optimist? He smiles: "To live in Israel, you must be an optimist!"

Tea is ready and he pours it into tall glasses, Russian style, offering me the sugar bowl. The tea is full-bodied, the tastes blending together: Europe and Levant, tradition and innovation, intensity and whimsy, bitter and sweet. Just like Ilya Bogdanovsky.

As I leave, he breaks off a bit of Wandering Jew from his garden and hands it to me, a gift, from one immigrant to another. "Just plant it," he says, smiling. "Don't worry. It'll take root."

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