



Keret's crumpled stories, alongside work from different artists, at the Jewish Museum Berlin

“Live your life like a kite in the sky”

Etgar Keret had been trying to write about his mother since her death three years ago. But it wasn't until he was offered the chance to create an exhibition for the Jewish Museum Berlin that he was finally able to bring her to life on the page. **Rebecca Taylor** speaks to the Israeli writer about the show, which features nine new stories from Keret, and his mother's distinctive and defiant worldview

REBECCA TAYLOR: How did the idea for the exhibition originate?

ETGAR KERET: When my mother died three years ago, I sat down to write a book about her and failed. In my book, *The Seven Good Years*, I had written about my father after his death in 2012. I could sum him up in my mind, like a photofit. But I had so many different perspectives of my mother. Whatever side I took, I wouldn't do her justice. I felt locked. I decided to take a sabbatical in Berlin to write a book about her.

RT: Why Berlin?

EK: One reason I like Berlin is that it reminds me of Tel Aviv. It's a city that is conflicted about its identity and constantly trying to define itself. In the same way, Tel Aviv can conjure the image of a van playing Hasidic music, but the city could also be a gay party or a ceremony for a Holocaust survivor. In both cities there is a meeting of east and west, and a strong immigrant presence. When I go to Paris, and in a sense to London, I feel I'm in a museum.

RT: Both your parents were from Poland and suffered enormous trauma in the Holocaust. What is it like to be creating something artistic in Berlin, a city irrevocably linked to that period?

EK: I took my mother to Berlin for her 70th birthday. I had a book reading there and going home on the metro, my mother told me about what happened after her mother and brother died [they were murdered in front of her by Nazi soldiers]. She told her father that she had no energy to fight any more. She just wanted to go up to the first Nazi soldier she saw and say, "I'm Jewish, shoot me. I don't want to struggle." But her father said, "You must struggle to sabotage the Nazis' plan, which is to wipe our memory from this earth. If they kill all of us, they succeed. Your job is to stay alive and to make a family and bring up children and grandchildren who will be like flies hovering above the planet, saying, 'You can't forget us, we're still around.'" My mother said, "When I saw the bookstore full of people queuing just to hear you, and there was a sign with our family name on it hanging in the street, I had this feeling,

if I died now, on the tube on the way home, and I met my father in heaven, I would say to him: 'I did what you asked me to, nobody can forget that our family existed.'"

RT: What gave you the idea to use the stories themselves as the exhibits?

EK: The Jewish Museum in Berlin asked me to create an exhibition based on their archive. But when I thought about that, I was really stuck. I didn't know how to confront my mother and our history. And then I came up with this idea of telling the story of my mother, the way my mother told her story to me. When the war started she was less than six years old. And when it ended, every person that she knew from before the war had died: her parents,

“Please tell Mr Spielberg that I'm not black and white like [the people] in Schindler's List. I have many colours”



brother, uncle, grandparents, neighbours and family. So her experience of this entire period was subjective and personal. Unlike most Holocaust survivor stories, where they might say, "In February 1942, they took us to the train station in Budapest." With my mother, it was more like, "I was walking in the forest, and a guy with a helmet and coat was running with a rifle, and I was trying to hide, but then his dog came and I played with his dog." Her stories that always sent me back to fairy tales. For my mother, and for me, she was Little Red Riding Hood, in the kingdom of World War II, walking in the forest of the Holocaust. When I read Little Red Riding Hood, it's not a story about how scary it is when a wolf tries to eat your family. It was more about how life can turn in a new direction and how you learn things about yourself from that.

RT: Is that why the show is called Inside Out? You are walking the reader through your mother's version of the war?

EK: My father used to say that when the Holocaust started, he didn't know it would last six years and be called the Holocaust. It was life. Both my parents resisted being defined as survivors or victims. They saw that as something that reduced them.

Usually when you hear the story of a Holocaust survivor, it's as if this person is a pebble in a huge mosaic of the period. The personal story serves a greater narrative. With my mother, the way she told the stories and the way I wanted to do the exhibition was the other way around. She used whatever happened as a way to understand who you can and can't trust,

“Israel is now part of a global phenomenon of polarised countries such as Brazil, Turkey and the USA”

or how, when you're 10 years old, you get up after a drunk Ukrainian soldier kicks you off a train and breaks your ribs.

As a child, my mother was never interested in facts, names or dates, just experience. I hope a person going through the show will feel by the end that they knew my mother. At the same time, they don't know her name, the name of her parents or date of birth, or where she was born. Intimacy comes from inside out.

There's also a toy vending machine in the show, but instead of it giving you a random gift when you put a coin in, it gives you a random story. One story is about the time someone came to interview my mother for the Steven Spielberg Foundation. The interviewer arrived and said, "Where should I set up my video camera?" And my mother looked at him and said, "You didn't clean your shoes

before you entered my home. And now my home is full of mud." The man said, "Oh, I'm sorry. I'll go and clean them. But where should I put my camera?" And my mother said, "No, our meeting is cancelled. Please take your stuff and leave." And the guy said, "But this is important for history. Steven Spielberg really wants to hear your story." And she said, "For me, it's important when you go to somebody's house, you clean your shoes before you enter. Please tell Mr Spielberg that I'm not black and white like [the people] in Schindler's List. I have many colours." That is very much my mum. She wasn't serving the collective memory of the Spielberg Foundation.

My mother disliked identity culture. She didn't like it when people boycotted artists because of their beliefs. She listened to Wagner, which is taboo in Israel, and also liked Ezra Pound, and TS Eliot. She said, "They were horrible people and if they came to tea, I would poison them. But I love their music, and books."

RT: She was resisting labels. Giving people labels was what the Nazis did with the Jews and everyone who didn't fit into their beliefs.

EK: After my mother died, I was asked to participate in events dedicated to Holocaust survivors. I refused. I said, "What you're doing is important and but my mum wouldn't appreciate me being part of it." She didn't want to feel that this experience, 70 years later, still defined her.

In Berlin, I like the stolpersteine [plaques on the pavements which commemorate people murdered by the Nazis]. It doesn't put the loss on a pedestal, you can step on it, not see it or throw a candy bar wrapping on it. It's a part of life. For my mother, it was important to insist on the humanity of her experience.

RT: I'm speaking to you the day after the Israeli elections, which returned Benjamin Netanyahu to power with the help of the far-right. Are we in the grip of a global shift towards extremism again?

EK: What I felt on election night was similar to what I felt when Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was murdered: how is it that so many kind, innovative people, who happen to be Jews, came up with this? Israel joins a global phenomenon of countries where beliefs are highly polarised, such as Brazil, Turkey and the USA. I used to write opinion pieces and felt I was engaging in a dialogue – even when I got death threats. Now it just fuels the opposition. Nobody changes their mind. Each side hates the other. There is no ambiguity.

RT: How do you challenge this mindset?

EK: My mum always told me to be critical about what my teachers said, not to always do what they told me. The force of inertia is destructive. It puts you in a place that is passive. Her idea was that you always need to be alive, with your senses open so that you make decisions all the time. My father made a vow that every seven years he would change his profession. He said, "I'm so happy I survived. I want to live many lives. Think of it as a metaphor: the ground is reality, and the sky is imagination. When we are children we are like kites and our parents hold the cord. But when my mother's entire family died and she saw that people were trying to cheat or rape her or steal her food, this cord was cut. She became a kite in the sky. She taught me that you can live your life like a kite. You can still see the ground but nobody is pulling the cord." ■

Inside Out is at The Jewish Museum Berlin until 5 February. jmb Berlin.de

A GOOD DAY BY ETGAR KERET

The short story, A Good Day (below), is one of nine pieces Etgar Keret has written for the Inside Out exhibition at the Jewish Museum Berlin. On the surface it's the story of a family visit to a restaurant but, with the lightest of touches, Keret touches on the trauma of violence, both in the past and in contemporary Israel

When I was a kid, I absolutely loved eating at restaurants. It's not that I was some kind of foodie, it's just that in those days, in socialist Israel of the 1970s, going out for dinner was such a rare and decadent event that it was impossible not to get excited about it. Once every few months, we'd drive to Victor's Place, a Tel Aviv eatery located next to a junk yard. After dinner, while Mom and Dad sipped Turkish coffee and smoked a cigarette, my brother would take my sister and me on an exhilarating tour of the junk yard, which we called "the car cemetery." We'd stop at each crumpled vehicle and try to guess how it had ended up there: trampled by an elephant, shot out of a cannon, or just driven too quickly and rammed into a stoplight.

One Saturday, when I was about six, we went to Victor's Place for my mother's and sister's birthday, since they were born on the same date. The mustachioed waiter wiped the table with a damp cloth and informed us apologetically that, due to a kitchen malfunction, the restaurant would not be serving fries. The rest of the family received this news somewhat indifferently, but I took it really hard. Instead of a big pile of delicious, greasy fries, the waiter put a dish of white rice on the table, and within seconds the lavish feast I'd been looking forward to for weeks turned into just another family dinner. My mother,

sensing my frustration, asked me if everything was all right. Nothing was all right, I snapped: If I couldn't have fries, the whole meal was a waste of time, and this birthday, which was supposed to be fun, was now the worst day of my life.

Mom listened patiently to my vitriolic complaints, and when I was done, she put the back of her warm hand on my nape and asked me in a half-whisper to tell her how many people were sitting in the restaurant. Being a good boy, I methodically counted them all. Saturday afternoon was one of the busiest times of week at Victor's, and other than our table there were twenty-six diners. "Twenty-six?" my mom exclaimed with a whistle, "That's a lot! Now, could you please tell me what all these people are holding in their hands?" "Oh, come on," I said with a grin, "that's easy. It's a restaurant. They're holding knives and forks." Mom was impressed: "Twenty-six people! Twenty-six hungry humans sitting at their tables, each eating only what's on their own plate. Twenty-six people holding knives, and yet not a single one of them is stabbing anyone else." She leaned over, planted a soft kiss on my forehead, and said, "Let's agree that this is actually a pretty good day." ■

A Good Day by Etgar Keret is part of Inside Out at The Jewish Museum Berlin. You can read more from Etgar Keret at his newsletter: etgar keret.substack.com



Clockwise from top left: Etgar Keret; poster for Inside Out; artwork by Katharina Trudzinski that is part of the new show; Keret's mother as a child in Poland