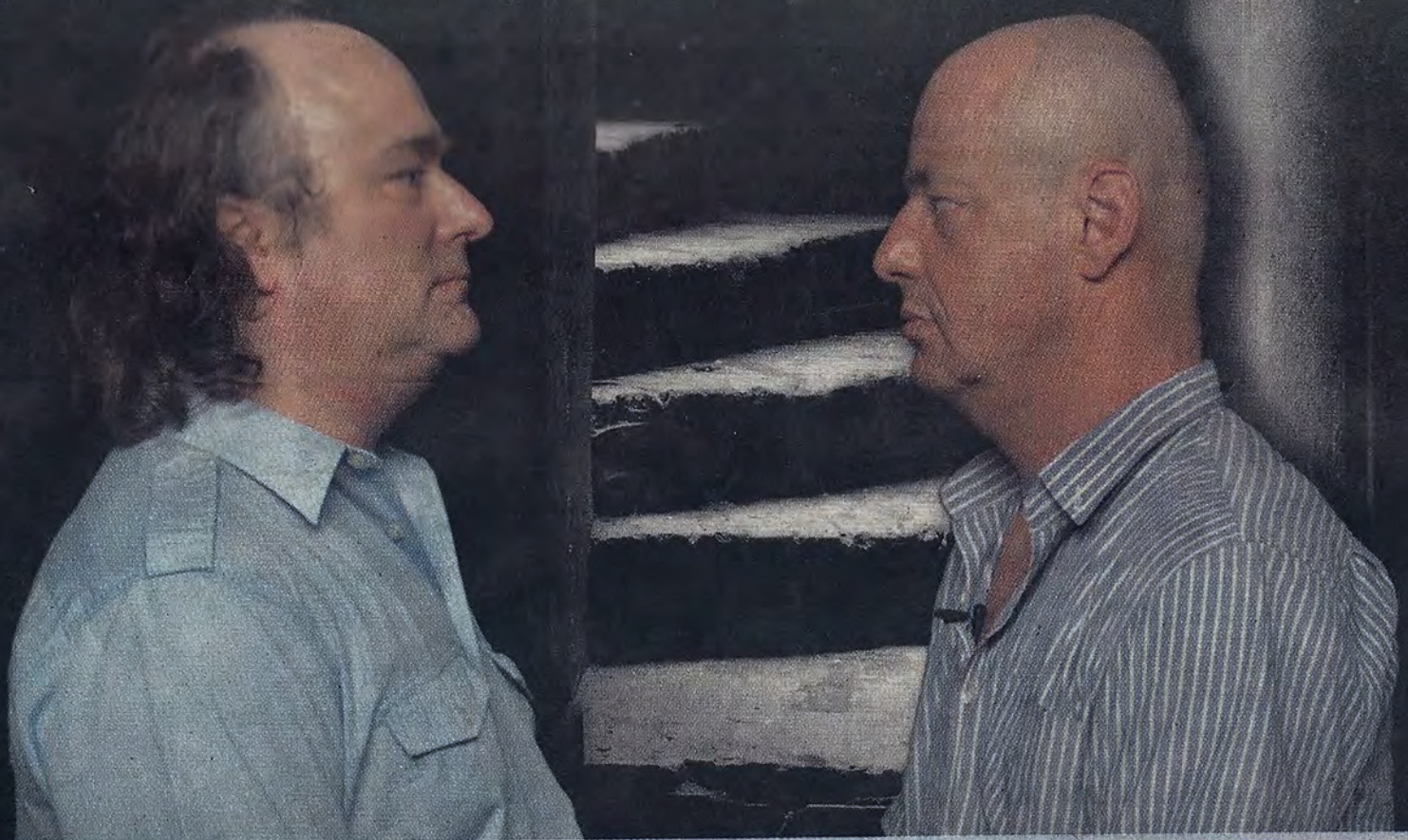


What do a second-generation Holocaust survivor and the third generation of a Nazi family have in common? A joint exhibition on their roots

The odd couple



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Shimon Lev's
parents' house in
Berlin. (Shimon Lev)

A tale of two families

The descendants of a family mostly destroyed in the Holocaust and a clan of Nazi supporters join forces to trace their roots in a Tel Aviv exhibition

• By BARRY DAVIS

Art is definitively supposed to be an emotive experience, both for the creator and for the observer of the end result. The "Two Family Archives" exhibition, which opened on July 10 at the P8 Gallery in Tel Aviv, a joint show of works by Shimon Lev and Friedemann Derschmidt, is far more than just another moving contribution to the world of culture.

Two Family Archives is just that. It



Friedemann Derschmidt (left) and Shimon Lev. (Ludwig Loeckinger)



A postcard Shimon Lev's father received is being read by someone who lives in the building where Lev's grandparents' apartment was. (Shimon Lev)



Children doing a Hitler salute in 1938. (Courtesy Friedemann Derschmidt)

digs into the painful recent history of the exhibitors' families, displaying objects and images which dredge up memories of cataclysmic events that wreaked havoc just one generation ago. But while one family was the victim of Nazi evil, the other was complicit in inflicting the suffering.

Lev's late father, Ze'ev, was born in Vienna and escaped to England on the Kindertransport in January 1939; he was subsequently deported to Canada as an enemy alien. Though the British government magnanimously helped save the lives of close to 10,000 Jewish

children and young people between December 1938 and August 1939, it also placed anyone over the age of 16 who hailed from an enemy country in an internment camp - including, paradoxically, Jews. Some were stashed away on the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea, while others were sent far away to places like Canada and Australia.

When the teenaged Lev left for England, his parents and younger sister remained in Berlin (the family had relocated there in 1934). They all died in the Holocaust. Incidentally, my own mother was also sent to England

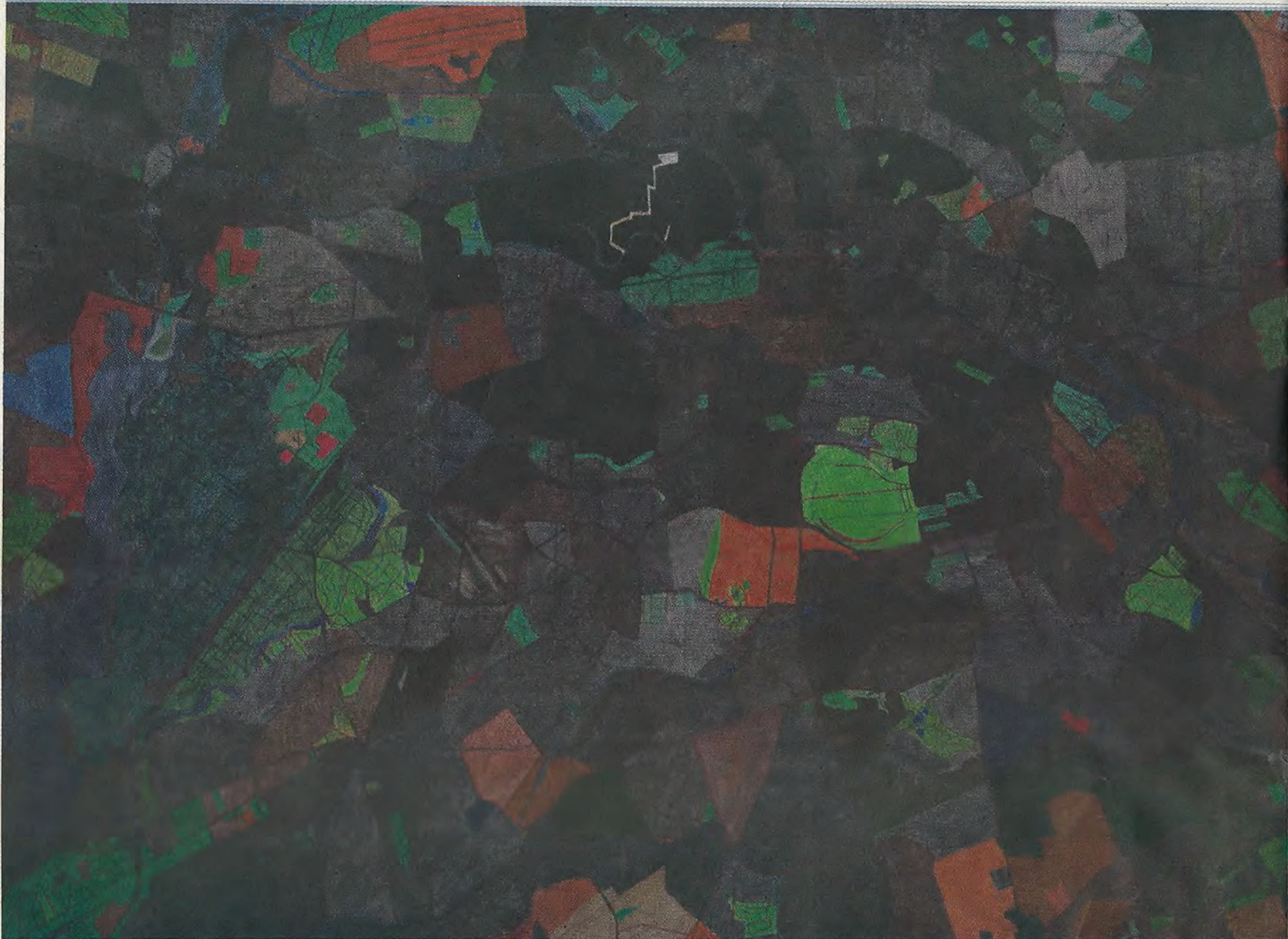
on a Kindertransport in December 1938, together with her two older sisters.

Many years after his enforced relocation to North America, Prof. Lev made aliya, and in 1969 founded the famed Lev Institute for technological studies in Jerusalem. Seven years prior, he had been awarded the Israel Prize for his work in the field of exact sciences.

THE CONTRAST between the two artists' families could not be greater. Like the father of his collaborator in

the Two Family Archives show, Derschmidt also comes from Austria - but while Lev's father's family was decimated by the Germans in the Holocaust, Derschmidt's antecedents were bona fide Nazis.

In fact, the Austrian's family's nefarious intent began some time before Hitler came to power. His great-grandfather, Dr. Heinrich Reichel, was a eugenicist who set out to produce as many offspring of his own as possible, to ensure he did his bit to maintain "racial purity." He later wrote a paper titled "Alfred Ploetz and the Contemporary Eugenic



A reconstruction of the walk that Shimon Lev's parents and sister took from the synagogue in Berlin to the railway station from which they were sent to Auschwitz. (Shimon Lev)

Movement," which appeared in a paper published by the highly respectable Viennese Society of Physicians in 1931. Ploetz was a racist physician, biologist and eugenicist who coined the term "racial hygiene," and was an avid supporter of the Nazi Party.

As a child, all Derschmidt knew was that he came from an upper-class, and apparently special, family. Gradually, however, he began to unearth some unpleasant skeletons.

"I started to realize, with the help of some family members, that there is a very sophisticated cocoon woven around our family, made up of myths, narratives and lies about the former generations," he explains. "I learned that people I truly loved were actively weaving this net of self-aggrandizement, and some are still doing so today. Within the cocoon I discovered that some family members had been Nazi Party supporters or even members, and SS and army officers."

Derschmidt set about pulling the masks off the family's acceptable

façade, and enlisted the help of as many relatives as possible. In so doing he, at best, alienated many of the extended family members, while others were downright incensed at his initiative. "In 2010 I set up a Web 2.0 platform together with my cousin Eckhart Derschmidt, inviting family members to join and contribute to it," says the Austrian. "I provoked them by asking: 'Did the eugenicist Dr. Heinrich Reichel conduct a personal genetic experiment on his own offspring? Are we the result of this experiment?'"

That set the cat among the pigeons in no uncertain terms, although Derschmidt allowed his familial adversaries some time to consider their stance, and the possibility of joining him in confronting their discomfort. "I promised the family members that the platform would not be made public for two years (2010-2012)," he says.

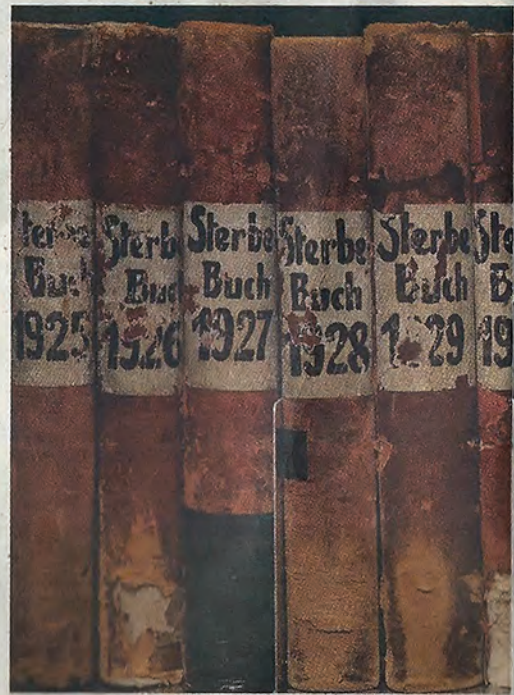
Reichel Komplex is the Community Web 2.0 platform created by Derschmidt as a closed weblog for the members of his extended family. The

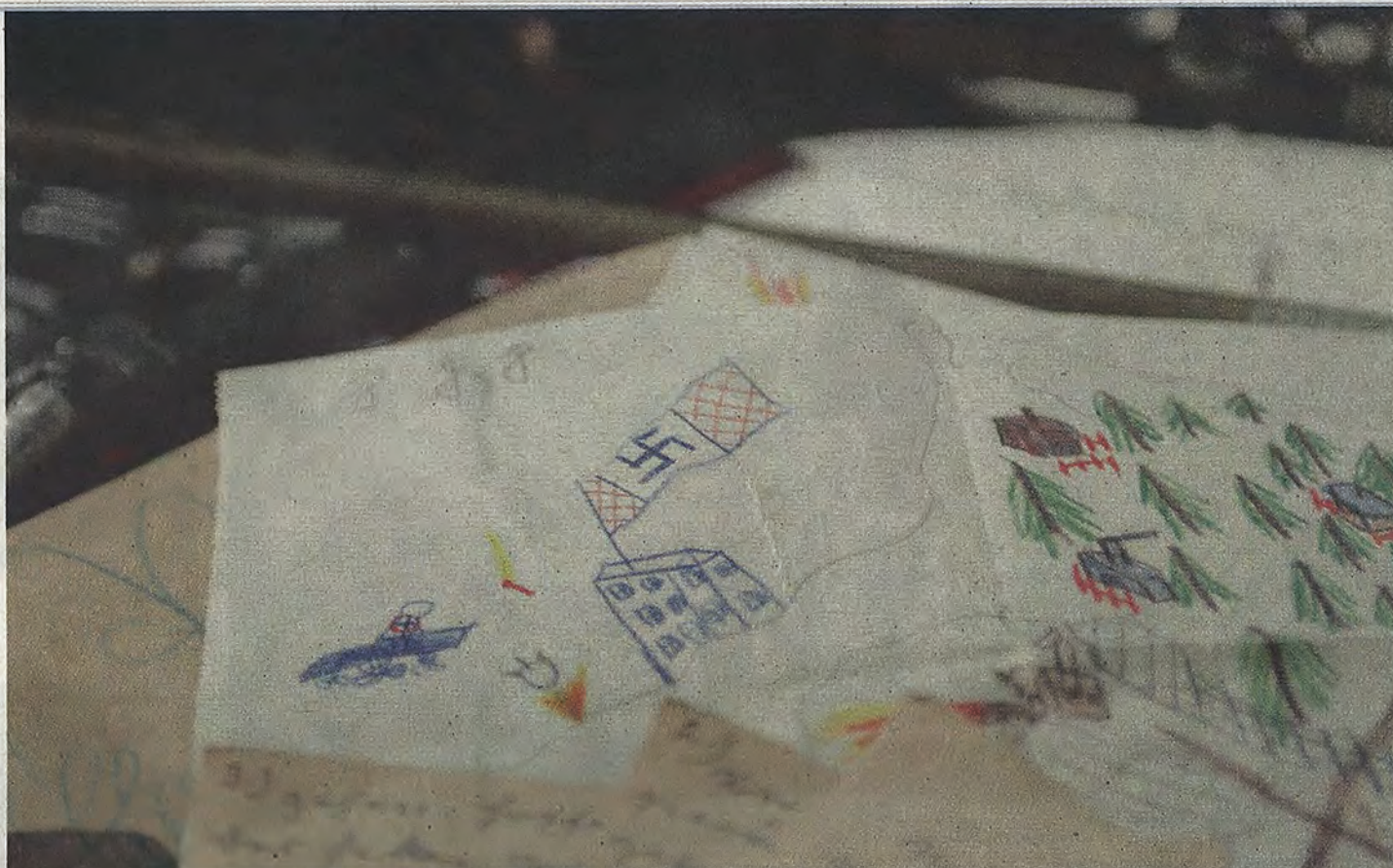
project is designed to collect family myths and narratives while also supporting the collective as it confronts the sensitive issues of guilt and involvement of earlier generations in the Nazi movement.

"During a difficult and painful process, one-third of the extended family joined the project," Derschmidt continues. "I also gained some real family enemies who objected to my 'meddling' in the past. Ironically, I became an antagonist of my great-grandfather, doing exactly what he wanted people to do: family research. But my interest is not in 'the genetic stream,' rather in the 'ideological stream' of six generations of this bourgeois family."

LEV WAS also aware he could be running the risk of backlash from certain quarters, by joining forces with "the enemy." "This is a daring exhibition, and I know that I might annoy a few people," he says.

Lev embarked on his odyssey of familial historical discovery some years





From the website Derschmidt set up about his family. (Courtesy Friedemann Derschmidt)

back. This is not his first foray into the sphere.

"I have done all kinds of things connected to the family," he notes. "Since the beginning of the 1990s, I have been working on a project that deals with my family's background and memories. The 'Family Photo Diary' contains hundreds of photographs portraying different aspects of the family. Over the years, questions have arisen regarding Jewish culture continuity, attitudes to the Holocaust, and the rupture and calamity following the Holocaust."

The idea was not to take in the enormity of the tragedy that befell the Jews of Europe, rather to get a better handle on what happened to his father's family, and where they came from. "As part of the Family Photo Diary, over the last few years, I have been working on a project titled 'Objects of Memory' in Vienna, Berlin, Ukraine and Israel. I photographed and traced the locations, roots and memories of my father's family," continues Lev.

That family history, says Lev, has also colored his own life here and has wider implications for society as a whole, both here and there. "The works in this exhibition deal not with the broad, general and impossible-to-grasp aspects of the Holocaust, but rather with facing the complex and complicated private past, along with the present personal outcomes of growing up and living in Israel. The works negotiate



The cemetery where Lev's grandfather is buried. (Shimon Lev)

with the past and present, while dealing with the questions of both personal and national histories, the possibility of a dialogue with Austrians and Germans, archives, and the method by which history is implemented, excluded, shaped, represented and taught to a society."

The confluence between Lev and Derschmidt came about when the Austrian asked a number of Israeli artists to participate in his MemScreen project, which examines artistic practices in the context of the politics of memory and visual research, primarily in Austria and Israel. It was a natural fit for both artists, their diametrically contrasting personal baggage notwithstanding.

Two Family Archives includes a map that Lev called "The Walk," which indicates the route along which his father's parents and sister were force-marched by the Nazis, from a synagogue to the railway station from where they were sent to Auschwitz.

Another seemingly innocent but chilling image in the exhibition shows a blonde woman reading a postcard. The woman in question now lives in the Berlin building where Lev's grandparents lived. The epistle was sent to Lev's father by his parents, via the Red Cross.

"Two Family Archives" runs until August 9. For more information: 050-861-6601, www.p8gallery.net

Books in the Jewish archives in Berlin with information about Lev's family. (Shimon Lev)