

# Pioneer of happiness

## The art and humor of noted Holocaust survivor Joseph Bau

• BY EMANUEL MFOUKOU

The tragic history of the Holocaust and its lessons for our day are on display at Yad Vashem and countless other museums and memorials around the world. One unique place dedicated to the memory of the Shoah is the Joseph Bau Museum in Tel Aviv, where a survivor of the Holocaust used his artistic and literary talents to recount this dark period in imaginative ways, even with a touch of humor.

The Joseph Bau Museum can be found at 9 Berdechevsky Street, just off the famous tree-lined Rothschild Boulevard in the heart of Tel Aviv. The neighborhood is known for its many Bauhaus apartments and international-style buildings.

Joseph Bau was born in Krakow, Poland in 1920 and was educated as a graphic designer at the University for Plastic Arts in Krakow. During the Nazi occupation of Poland, he and his family were deported to the Plashow concentration camp, a site which today is covered by trees and walking paths. A single monument has been erected to mark the location of the camp, but the best proof of its existence is still the accounts of its survivors.

Joseph Bau was a multi-talented man – a husband, caring father, author, graphic designer, painter, poet and one of the first creators of animated films in Israel. His many talents led to him being dubbed “the Walt Disney of Israel.”

His first book, *Dear God, Have You Ever Gone Hungry?*, was published in 1982 and tells his life story with a focus on his family’s experiences in the Holocaust. So far, it has been translated into five languages.

During his time in Plashow, Bau met his wife Rebecca. They fell in love and got married in the camp. One of their daughters, Hadassah Bau, was born in



JOSEPH BAU, the noted Israeli painter, writer, poet, animator and humorist whose many talents helped him survive the Holocaust. (Courtesy of Bau family)

Poland shortly after the war.

In a recent interview with *The Christian Edition*, she recalled their love story with great enthusiasm, describing her late parents as one of the most romantic couples ever. She noted that her parents’ wedding rings were made from a silver spoon melted down by a jeweler inside the concentration camp.

Through Rebecca, Joseph was able to gain a place on Oskar Schindler’s list of factory workers and was transferred to his Emalia workshop. The marriage scene in Steven Spielberg’s movie *Schindler’s List* is based on Joseph’s wedding with Rebecca.

In 1950, Joseph and his wife left Poland and came as new immigrants to *Eretz Israel*. Some years after their arrival, he moved into an art studio on Berdichevsky Street, which became the center for his unique works. Art and creativity were his life! In fact, they had spared his life when the Germans discovered his talents and began using him to make signs in Gothic letters.

A member of the Jewish underground, he also used his artistic skills to save the lives of many fellow Jews by forging false identity documents for them.

Over the years, Joseph’s varied paintings and other creations have been displayed in museums and institutions all over the world, including Yad

Vashem, the Knesset, the Spanish parliament in Madrid, the Art Gallery of Krakow, Auschwitz and even the United Nations in New York.

Joseph and his wife both have now passed away, but their memories are preserved in his many books, animated films and paintings, not to mention the Bau House museum where his studio once birthed many of his art works. His legacy is also being passed on through his daughters, Hadassah and Clila Bau.

In between international speaking tours, the sisters enjoy hosting visitors in their father’s workshop, where they keep the atmosphere filled with love and laughter. On the walls are photos of father Joseph and mother Rebecca, as well as Steven Spielberg and the two actors who portrayed the Bau couple in the director’s acclaimed film. The work table used by Joseph during his time in the ghetto was located after the war and also adorns the room.

“This was our father’s studio,” Clila said proudly. “He opened it in 1960 and developed it into a special place where people came and talked with our father about the Holocaust. They came here for therapy, as my parents understood what they had gone through.”

Visitors are told Joseph and Rebecca Bau’s story, laced with humor and song.

“Christian tourists should come to our museum,” insisted Clila.

“Our father always wanted people to laugh and be happy. He was a pioneer of happiness. My parents were born like that,” she said.

“Our father wrote about the Holocaust in a way that makes you smile,” Hadassah added. “Once he was asked why he was writing about the Holocaust with humor, as if he was out of his mind. He responded, ‘No! To the contrary, people are afraid of reading about this subject, and I want everyone to read it. So I write it in such



JOSEPH AND Rebecca Bau, the real couple who got married in Oscar Schindler's factory.

(Courtesy of Bau family)



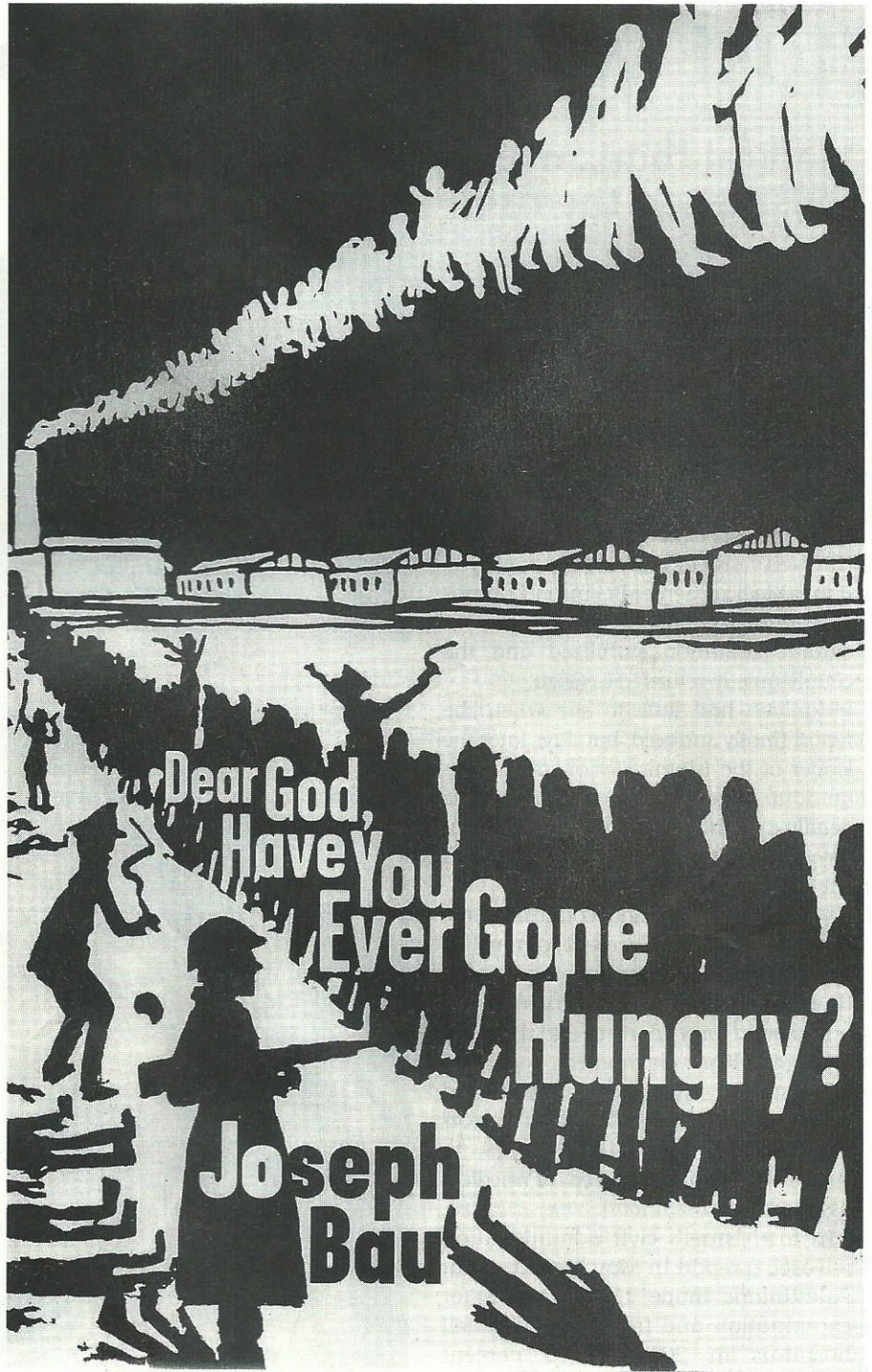
HADASSAH AND Clila Bau with a poster depicting their father's light-hearted artistic style. (Emanuel Mfoukou/ICE)

a way that everyone can understand, because the world needs to know what happened during the Holocaust.”

“After the Holocaust most survivors did not tell their children what had happened to them. Our parents were different,” she explained. “When we were small, we always talked about it.”

The sisters were invited recently to the opening of a large exhibition of their father’s work in Oscar Schindler’s factory in Poland. The exhibit included a small movie theater where their father’s films were screened. While in Poland, the sisters also spoke at an international humor conference about their father’s unusual sense of humor. The gathering was amazed at Joseph Bau’s ability to stay upbeat despite the horrors he experienced.

Joseph Bau’s art and literature have inspired thousands around the world. The Tel Aviv city council has acknowledged the importance of his life and work, and wants to keep the Bau House museum open for all. Hadassah and Clila rely on lectures, art shows and book sales for funding, but the building’s landlord is



BAU'S BIOGRAPHY of his time in Nazi camps is laced with humor.

threatening to end their lease.

Joseph Bau saved hundreds of Jews from the gas chambers. His art has graced museums and stately halls worldwide. His poetry and prose have lifted many. And still, the Bau sisters are struggling to keep

his legacy on public display.

“We need immediate support to help us save this building,” Hadassah pleaded. “We cannot leave. We have to keep the Joseph and Rebecca Bau story alive.”