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Arts

Dina Babbitt, Artist at Auschwitz, Is Dead at 86

By BRUCE WEBER
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Dina Babbitt, who as a prisoner at the Auschwitz concentration camp bartered her services as a portrait painter for her life and her mother's life, and spent the past several decades trying to retrieve her paintings from the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and State Museum, died on Wednesday in Felton, Calif. She was 86.



The cause was cancer, said her daughter Michele Kane.

Ms. Babbitt and her mother, Johanna Gottlieb, were Czechoslovakian Jews sent to Auschwitz by the Nazis in 1943. Formerly an art student, Ms. Babbitt was asked by a fellow prisoner who was overseeing a children's barracks to paint pictures on the cheerless walls. Her paintings of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, as well as of animal figures, made with purloined paint, eventually came to the attention of Josef Mengele, the infamous Nazi physician known as the Angel of Death, who wanted her to work for him to document his experiments.

Mengele was dissatisfied with photographs he had taken of Gypsy, or Romany, prisoners as he tried to prove them genetically inferior, and he summoned the young artist and asked her to paint their portraits, paying particular attention to their skin tone. Before she would agree, she said she would walk into the camp's electric fence if he didn't spare her mother as well.

"When I said, 'I'm not staying here without my mother alive,'" Ms. Babbitt recalled in [a 2007 interview](#), "Mengele said, 'What's her number?'"

The postwar history of Ms. Babbitt's watercolor portraits is unclear, but in a 2001 statement, the Auschwitz museum said that six were acquired in 1963 from a camp survivor and a seventh was acquired in 1977. Ms. Babbitt learned of the existence of the first six in 1973.

She traveled to Poland to authenticate her works and, she thought, to take them home. But the museum directors would not allow it, saying the paintings' historical and educational value superseded her right of ownership. It is the position they maintained to the end of her life, at one point, her daughter said, informing her in a letter that if anyone other than the museum had a right to the paintings, it was the heirs of Mengele.

In recent years, as the museum has grown in stature and professionalism since the fall of Communism, it has softened its responses to Ms. Babbitt's pleas. This year it sent careful reproductions of the art to her. But the originals remain in Poland.

"I always felt there was a special tragedy in this case," said Rabbi Andrew Baker, the director of international Jewish affairs for the [American Jewish Committee](#)



and a member of the International Auschwitz Council, which advises the Auschwitz museum. This spring Rabbi Baker tried to broker an agreement between Ms. Babbitt and the museum under which two of her originals would be returned to her, but the museum declined.

"The people at the Polish museum aren't devils," he said. "They want to maintain Auschwitz as authentically as they can, and I can appreciate the role exhibiting the paintings plays. What I've always thought is there is no one else in the world who so values these paintings as Dina Babbitt and the directors of this museum."

Annemarie Dinah Gottliebova was born in Brno, Czechoslovakia, on Jan. 21, 1923. She and her mother were living in Prague when the Germans invaded in 1939, and as a Jew she was forced to abandon her art classes. In January 1942 she and her mother were sent to Theresienstadt, a camp in northern Czechoslovakia. They were transferred to Auschwitz the following year.

After the war she and her mother went to live in Paris. There, she was interviewed for a job as an animator for [Warner Brothers](#). She married her interviewer, Art Babbitt, an animator who, remarkably, had worked on Disney's "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs." They moved to Los Angeles, where Ms. Babbitt worked as an assistant animator on films, cartoons and other projects. Her favorites, her daughters said, were commercials for Cap'n Crunch cereal, because she loved drawing the children in the ads.

Her marriage ended in divorce. In addition to Michele Kane, who lives in Las Vegas, she is survived by another daughter, Karin Babbitt of Felton; and three grandchildren.

In recent years Ms. Babbitt's quest to have her paintings returned gathered a range of public supporters, including Representative Shelley Berkley, Democrat of Nevada, who urged the State Department to get involved; the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies in Washington, which is devoted to documenting and publicizing America's response to the Holocaust; and the comic-book luminaries Neal Adams, [Stan Lee](#) and Joe Kubert, who with Rafael Medoff, director of the Wyman Institute, created a comic-book version of Ms. Babbitt's story.

Ms. Babbitt's daughters said in a phone interview on Friday that they would continue pressing the case for their mother, who, they said, never opened the reproductions the museum sent her.

"Her dying wish was to get her artwork back," her daughter Michele said.