Judith Liberman, LLM ’56: Remembering the Holocaust through Art

By Amy Wimmer Schwarb

Judith Liberman was born in 1929 in the city of Haifa—then part of Palestine and now part of Israel. Just 10 years old at the beginning of World War II, she was close enough to the Holocaust to know of its horrors, but too far removed to suffer its consequences directly.

“I remember the day Hitler invaded Poland in 1939,” Liberman says. “I was in a restaurant in a seashore community having lunch with my father. The news came over the radio, and my father said, ‘We are now at war.’”

Liberman, LLM ’56, would go on to become an artist renowned for her work inspired by the Holocaust. But as a child, she learned of the war’s atrocities through the incidental relationships of her young life: a Latvian schoolmate whose parents had been murdered, for example, and her childhood nanny, a Polish immigrant deeply concerned for the parents and brother she had left behind.

After World War II—just before Israel was about to become a state of its own—Liberman’s father sent her to the United States for college. She studied journalism at Syracuse University, earned a BA from the University of California at Berkeley, earned an MA from the University of Chicago, graduated with a JD from the University of Chicago Law School, and earned an LLM from the University of Michigan in 1956.

She enjoyed many aspects of Ann Arbor and Law School—including a favorite professor, Jack Dawson, who taught comparative law, and “all the beautiful houses with gardens in front.”
Not everything about Law School suited her, however. “My worst memory was doing my research, going up into the stacks through this narrow winding metal and wood staircase, and finding these tomes, these decisions of international courts, that were several inches thick and mostly in French,” Liberman says. “I think it was at that point that I realized I was in the wrong field.”

Liberman had come to Michigan after deciding to pursue a career as a law professor. But her education ended up being a roundabout way of finding her life’s work—not as a journalist, as her father had hoped, or as a teacher of law, as she had planned—but as an artist. The work for which Liberman is best known depicts the Holocaust and is dedicated to the memory of her husband, Robert Liberman. They met at the University of Chicago, and he, too, received an LLM from Michigan in 1956.

Before his law studies, he was part of the U.S. forces that helped liberate Europe at the close of World War II. “He saw Dachau in 1945,” Liberman says of her husband, “and never forgot any of it.”

Liberman has produced work in whatever medium best fit her vision at any given time; she has worked in oils, acrylics, graphics, collage, wall hangings, mosaics, and ceramics. Her work appears in collections in such museums as the Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem; the Museum of Our National Heritage in Lexington, Massachusetts; The William Benton Museum of Art in Storrs, Connecticut; The Temple Museum of Religious Art of Temple Tifereth Israel in Cleveland, Ohio; and the Florida Holocaust Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida.

The Holocaust pieces were created several decades into her career. When she was just starting out in the 1960s, she completed a flowers series, several self-portraits, and a series she calls Mother and Child. Typically, she pursued each subject as a series so she could explore it in depth.

“In retrospect, I’m very proud of all of it,” she continues. “But my father never saw a connection between what I was raised to do—to serve Israel—and what I was doing.”

Liberman’s father—a Zionist Jew who had immigrated to Palestine from Russia in the 1920s—had hoped his daughter would absorb Western values through her schooling and then return to Israel as a journalist.

He died in 1968, not long before Liberman produced her first socially conscious work: a series about the war in Vietnam. “I think my father was very disappointed when I went into art,” Liberman says.

Her career took a detour beginning in the 1970s, when her husband suffered a heart attack and then a stroke. “He became terribly depressed, as a stroke will do to anyone,” Liberman says. “Looking back, between his stroke and his death, I created a lot of very careful artworks to cheer him up. A lot of landscapes, things like that. He loved those.”

Robert Liberman died in 1986. Within months of his death, his wife began producing her Holocaust work.

And that, at last, helped Liberman connect with her heritage, and her father’s vision for her life. Her mother lived long enough to see it—and appreciate its relevance.

“My mother was herself an artist and poet, but still, she was hoping I would pursue the path my father had chosen for me,” Liberman says. “My mother died in 1990, but she, at least, saw reproductions of some of my Holocaust work. When she saw it, she said, ‘At last, you are using your education.’ I think that’s where the circle was closed.”