

**NORTH
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Weekly Dining and
Entertainment Section

**NOMI
KAPLAN**

The North Vancouver collage artist's
Holocaust memorial Kaddish is on exhibit
at North Vancouver's Presentation House
Gallery: 24

Rites of sanctification

Nomi Kaplan's Kaddish project keeps alive memories of the Holocaust's Jewish victims

WITH THE exception of a cousin, Nomi Kaplan's father's entire family was murdered by the Nazis during the Second World War.

"My grandfather was shot outside his house. The Lithuanians were zealots about getting rid of Jews," says Kaplan.

In 1940 she, her brother, mother and father looked to Canada as a haven, but found that this country was more interested in keeping Jews out than rescuing them.

"My mother's father's charisma got us in (to Canada)," she says. "He had a friend who spoke to a government official on his behalf, and when he met my grandfather he said he would issue a visa for him and his family because, he said, 'he wasn't the usual kind of Jew.'"

"There was a tremendous amount of pushing, tears and begging. It was a conspiracy of the part of the whole world not to let the Jews in and let them die."

Haunted by her father's grief and the memory of the millions who perished in the concentration camps, Kaplan, now 58, has created a personal and public history detailing one aspect of the Holocaust: the lack of last rites for those killed in mass murder.

The Vancouver collage artist has intermingled historical film stills, photo documentation, European memorials and inscribed burial texts in her art exhibit, which opened last September in Montreal and is currently running at North Vancouver's Presentation House Gallery.

She has also created large photographic murals of Polish Jews' gravestones. The long, dark rectangular images hang side by side on a contrasting white wall — stark reminders of a Jewish community that once flourished and now lies buried and destroyed.

Kaplan has appropriately named her show *Kaddish*, which means "sanctification."

The Kaddish is a Jewish mourner's prayer for the dead. It is recited at the burial, during the 11-month period of mourning after a death, and on the anniversary of the deceased.

It is Kaplan's own Kaddish for her father, who suffered for years in silence, and a memorial for the nameless who have vanished.

"This project isn't about death, it's about Kaddish and remembering and refusing to let the memories of these people die," says Kaplan, an attractive woman with cropped white hair and saucer eyes.

"It really bothered me that these people were treated worse than animals — killed in large numbers and thrown into a pit without proper burial ritual. They were robbed of respect and dignity. They didn't have anyone to say a prayer for them. That's a very horrible thing."

Both her exhibit and Los Angeles artists, Gay Block and Malka Drucker's *Rescuers of the Holocaust* (their show is running concurrently with *Kaddish* at Presentation House), a photo documentary of ordinary Europeans who hid and saved Jewish lives during the Second World War, seem a little out of place in a photo gallery. It's the kind of thing that would be more at home in a museum.

Even though there is clearly artistic merit, Kaplan agrees her em-



Evelyn Jacob

SPOTLIGHT FEATURE

phasis was more the issue, not the fine art esthetic.

It was a personal mission, she says, to let people know what really happened to the Jews.

So she felt a great sense of disappointment when the majority of people who turned out to hear her speak about her show were Jews.

Poland where Kaplan was able to find traces of a once vibrant Jewish community. Prior to the Second World War there were an estimated three million Jews living in Poland; today that number has dwindled to between 5,000 and 10,000.

Using fine cotton and oil-based crayon, she took rubbings of headstone engravings which she turned into photograms (an image produced on photographic material without the use of a camera, as by placing the object on material and exposing it to light).

The work, she says, was incredibly difficult — but doing it brought her in touch with the spirits of the innocent who perished.

"I really felt a kinship with my past — touching the stones and seeing the names. It was a



NEWS photo Mike Wakelield

NOMI KAPLAN and her "granddog" Musty in the artist's Vancouver home. It took Kaplan four years to create *Kaddish*, which runs until Sunday at Presentation House Gallery.

In the same way, she was discouraged throughout her travels in Europe by the shocking lack of memorial to the Jews who died.

Kaplan says the push is on to forget what happened during the war, to cover up the pogroms and the brutalities.

"With the exception of one museum in Berlin — the Topography of Terror — there is very little reminder of the Shoah (Hebrew word for Holocaust; literally, destruction).

"In that museum you can see 500 yards of one cell after the other; you can see bits of tiling and plumbing, and you can just imagine Jews being taken there for questioning. But there's been lots of pressure to have this place torn down for a mall."

About the only place one can find memorials is in the cemeteries, but they are slowly being vandalized, starting with the Nazis' destruction of Jewish gravestones for the building of roads.

It was in a Jewish cemetery in

reminder that there was a Jewish presence here, a strong, beautiful presence."

Perhaps even more important for her was the discovery that not all Poles are full of hatred toward Jews.

"I met people in the cemetery who helped me with my work because they liked what I was doing. It made me realize that not all Polish people are anti-semitic."

"In New York I met some American-Germans who were not anti-semitic. In fact one woman felt so bad about what happened that she converted to Judaism, she couldn't bear it."

"A lot of these people have problems with their parents, knowing what they did during the war. And I (her anger) feel softened by the fact that there are people struggling with these issues and trying to make the world a better place."

Kaddish and Rescuers of the Holocaust runs until March 8.