

# The incredible story of Joseph and Rebecca Bau

Famous and well-respected among an older generation, the story of the artist and his wife, both Holocaust survivors, is virtually unknown today. But their two daughters keep their memory and legacy alive with the same humor and sensitivity they learned from their parents

• By LAURA KELLY

A small museum, holding an incredible collection of Israeli animation, film, painting and poetry, is an overlooked national treasure just off busy Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv.

The story of Joseph Bau and his wife Rebecca – Holocaust survivors and Zionists – is being kept alive through the tireless efforts of their daughters, the affable Clila and Hadasa Bau. They have run their father's original artist's studio, located at 9 Berdichevsky Street, as a museum since he died in 2002.

"We have a dream," Clila says. "Because we don't have the money, we want someone to buy this place so it will stay open forever."

Joseph, known as the "Walt Disney of Israeli animation," immigrated to Israel from Poland in 1950 with his wife and young daughter. Already an established cartoonist and graphic artist in Krakow, Bau came to Israel with very little, arriving in Haifa and staying in a transit camp.

Joseph told his wife he wanted to make animation films, and rented a small studio on a narrow, tree-lined street. He created almost all of the movie posters and advertisements for films from the 1960s and '70s.

"He was so proud," Hadasa says during a tour, quoting him as saying, "I am the one who designed the new Israeli font, after 2,000 years."



Clila Bau is seen giving a presentation to a school group in London. (Courtesy Clila Bau)

The sisters don't usually begin tours with the story of their parents' survival. Instead, they build a picture of their father as a man of ingenuity, optimism and determination.

They point out a messy contraption, rusted and dusty. To make the move into creating animation films, Joseph used a discarded X-ray machine to mount a camera for making stop-motion films. He built his own projector using found items, including the motor from a sewing machine and a hair dryer for cooling the light bulb.

Clila and Hadasa still screen their father's films using his original projector. They show the films on a tiny screen on the opposite wall, and Clila says they've applied to the

*Guinness Book of World Records* to have the movie theater recognized as the smallest in the world, but lack the \$9,000 entry fee to be considered.

"One man did everything," Hadasa says. "Everything alone."

Unlike other residences of famous Israelis that have been turned into museums – such as Beit Bialik, Beit Reuven or David Ben-Gurion's home – the Bau studio space is still rented, putting it at the mercy of the real estate market and rent prices that have continually increased since he first entered in 1956.

Located on the ground floor, the entire studio can only fit around 40 to 50 people at a time. The front room serves as the gift shop where Joseph's memoirs of the Holocaust –

*Dear God, Have You Ever Gone Hungry?* – are sold in multiple languages.

"He wanted to call it *The Miracles that Happened to Joseph and Rebecca Bau*," Clila explains, a small insight into the humility of the couple, who said they survived on good luck and downplayed their role of their own ingenuity in their survival.

Joseph and Rebecca met in the Plaszow concentration camp in Poland and secretly married in the women's barracks. Their wedding was famously portrayed in Steven Spielberg's acclaimed film *Schindler's List*.

"On February 14, it will be the 70th anniversary of our parents' wedding and 20 years since the film came out," Clila says. "We want to make a



'Chess,' one of the works Bau created based on the Holocaust. (Courtesy Joseph Bau museum)



'Couple #3,' an oil painting by Joseph Bau. (Courtesy Joseph Bau museum)

really big event."

Visitors are easily captivated by the Bau story. The couple survived the camps using their own trades. Rebecca was a cosmetologist and was conscripted to be the manicurist for sadistic SS captain Amon Goeth. As the story goes, Goeth placed a pistol next to her elbow and said that if she nicked him at all during the manicure, he would shoot her. Despite her fear, she continued, and her position ultimately led to her being able to save her husband's life.

It wasn't until the premier of *Schindler's List* in 1993 that Joseph discovered his wife was directly responsible for his survival.

At a showing of the film, Rebecca told a reporter that one day in the

camp, she had seen a guard about to shoot and kill the mother of Goeth's secretary. Rebecca intervened and told the guard that if he killed the woman, Goeth would kill the guard. Before the camp was to be liquidated, Rebecca went to Goeth's secretary and asked that her husband be put on Oskar Schindler's list for transfer to his factory. She told the reporter at the film showing that she had feared more for her husband's life than her own, and she was transferred to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where in front of the angel of death, Josef Mengele, she managed to talk her way out of the line for the gas chambers three times.

A man with a relentlessly creative mind, Joseph penned many poems and pictures while in the camp, recording them in a booklet he was able to hide in the palm of his hand. One of his poems, "The Parting," he wrote for his wife on the day they were separated, and it features in his memoirs.

In the camp, he was conscripted

as a sign- and mapmaker. He had been studying graphic art at the University of Plastic Arts in Krakow, and his ability to write in Gothic lettering – a script the Nazi regime favored – saved his life and endowed him with the tools to save the lives of hundreds of other Jews.

Although exact numbers are unknown, the sisters say their mother, who died in 1997, wrote in her diaries about the lives the Baus saved, and they hope to publish the accounts at some point.

Clila explains her father's rationale of staying when he could have easily forged his own documents: "He said, 'If I escape, who will save the others?'"

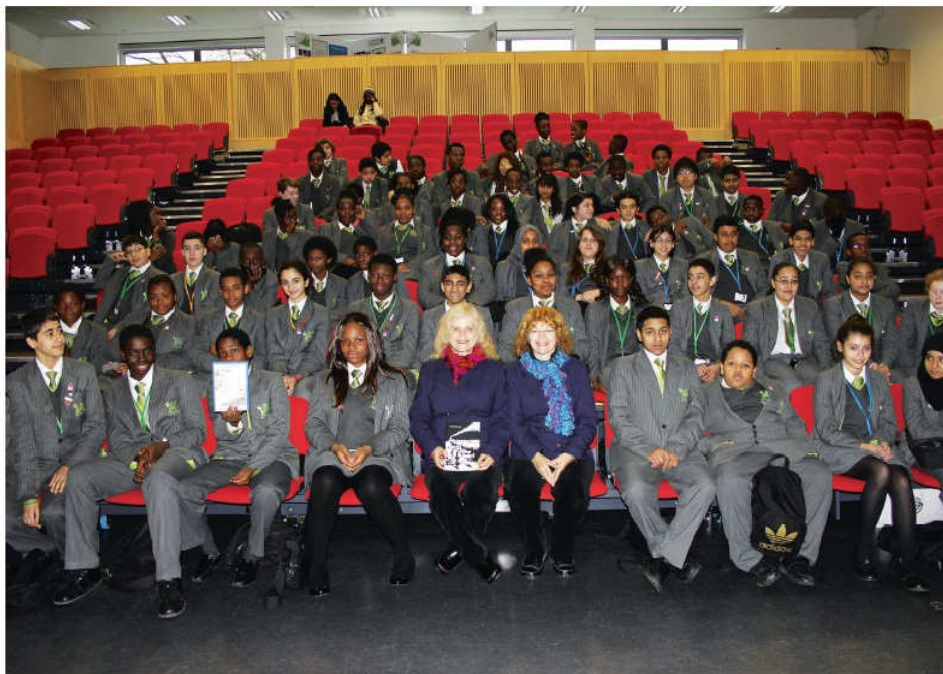
Clila and Hadasa are a tag-team, and their unwavering positivity and humor is a testament to the spirit of their parents. In addition to operating the museum, they travel all over the world telling their parents' story and showing their father's works. His artwork has been displayed at the UN Headquarters in

New York, the Spanish Parliament in Madrid, and the Knesset.

Clila recently returned from a trip to Winnipeg, Canada, to speak at schools and community centers. After her trip she told *Metro* that she was shocked to run into people who still didn't know the Holocaust had happened. "We have to tell so that everyone will know that the Holocaust existed and, God forbid, that something like this will never happen again."

Clila says she traveled to Canada with very little on her itinerary, invited by a government office working with projects against the denial of the Holocaust. In the end, she spoke at 18 venues, finishing one lecture and being invited to another. She was interviewed on morning radio and told a story that a chance meeting at breakfast opened up a surprising connection. "We met two men over breakfast and we started talking and they were from Germany."

"Where are you from?" Clila tells.



Hadasa (left) and Clila Bau sit with students from a high school in London after a presentation. (Courtesy Clila Bau)

"My husband and I, we said we are from Israel, and he had kind of a different look on his face, 'Israel?' and we started talking, and I could feel he was a little anti-Israel."

The men asked what Clila and her husband were doing in Canada, and when Clila explained she was in there to lecture, she invited the man to come along. "At the end he came up to me crying and thanking me and I said, 'Why don't you come visit Israel?' and he said, 'I never thought of it!'"

The story of Joseph Bau is an enigma but it would not have reached as far as it has if not for Clila and Hadasa, who are the embodiment of their father's legacy, retelling his story with humor, sensitivity and the ability to relate it to even the most unlikely of audiences. Yet the daughters are getting older, and family and health problems threaten their effervescence. What is left is the studio, which is threatened by increasing costs, but is the only way the sisters believe they can preserve the legacy of their family.

In the museum, the sisters describe a childhood full of laughter and imagination. They talk about growing up with a father and mother who wanted nothing more than for their children to laugh and to make other people laugh. They paint a picture of a man of incredible talent



The sisters have traveled all over to tell the story of their parents' survival. (Courtesy Clila Bau)

and insight who found humor in even the darkest places, putting it into his work.

For the sisters, storytelling is their strong suit; raising money is harder.

"Sixteen years, we couldn't even think to [move] from the original place," Hadasa says. "But now we came to the conclusion, [we'll] change the place."

At the Devora Fisher Gallery in the ZOA House in Tel Aviv, an exhibition of some of Joseph's most seminal works was on display. It included prints signed by the artist, ranging from artwork he created

while in the concentration camp, to advertisements and caricatures of Hebrew puns, which he compiled in his book *Brit Mila*.

At the opening of the exhibit in September, around 100 people came to support the Bau sisters in their push to raise \$5 million to move the museum to a new permanent location.

"There we will have six, seven rooms, even more," Hadasa says.

In the current space, the sisters lament that they have so much of their father's work to display but nowhere to put it. In a new location,

We have to tell so that everyone will know that the Holocaust existed and god forbid that something like this will never happen again.  
— Clila Bau

they hope to make a room for each category of his work, and will include the movie posters, graphics of the Hebrew language, and oil paintings, as well as an auditorium where they can hold presentations for groups.

The event, which finished in October, was organized with the help of the American Friends of the Joseph Bau Museum in New York, and those who came out to support the effort included famed director Menahem Golan; gallery benefactors Dr. Eli Fisher and his daughter, Sigal; and the deputy Polish ambassador to Israel, Wislawa Kotzl.

"He was a wonderful artist who contributed a lot," Kotzl said. "I think [it] is important for Poles to know more about him."

Lenny Ravitz, chairman of the NGO Am Sameach, which operates on the philosophy of positive thinking, spoke of Joseph's example that "humor gives man the ability to overcome tragedy."

Many speakers praised Joseph for his revolutionary voice, which represented a generation tragically cut short by the Holocaust.

Clila and Hadasa expressed gratitude at the opening of the exhibition for having an additional platform to expose their father's work.

"There are not words," Clila says. "He would begin the day with empty paper, and by the end of the day he created a new world."

"He was a big ear to hear everyone who needed something," Hadasa says. "Our mom was the same."

"You know what their biggest love was? The people."

"Through him we tell the story of the Jews, because it's from the Holocaust," Clila explains. "To come to Israel, the beginning of Israel, the creation, the nation come alive again. Resurrection from the Holocaust and the resurrection of Judaism [is apparent] through our father's story."