

Madison artist makes empty vessels that are full of meaning



Leora Saposnik

By Stephanie Wagner

An empty vessel, like a shoe or a milk can, can be full of meaning when Leora Saposnik creates it.

Saposnik is a Madison-based mixed-media artist who works primarily in ceramics and mosaics.

Much of the meaning of her work is shaped by the Holocaust and Saposnik's experience collecting oral histories for Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust memorial and museum, and the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation.

"Shoes figure strongly in my work," said Saposnik. "Most of my shoes tend to be period pieces, evocative of the 1930s, a time before the war and the destruction it brought."

They are an expression of Saposnik's view of art as an exploration of "humans' connections to each other and between an object and the human who once used it."

Her shoes enable people to imagine a connection between the shoe and the person who wore it — who were they and where they walked.

The artist's ceramic "Milk," currently on display at the Jewish Museum Milwaukee, is also an empty vessel that's full of meaning.

The piece was inspired by the story of Emanuel Ringelblum and the clandestine organization he created in the Warsaw Ghetto to document the German Nazi destruction of Polish Jewry.

Ringelblum hid the documents in three milk cans, which were buried under a Jewish school. Only two of the cans were unearthed after the war; Saposnik's piece represents the third.

Saposnik intentionally placed on the can's surface photos showing "the ordinary lives of the survivors and

their families prior to the grim destruction... I wanted us to see these families not as victims, but as ordinary people smiling and enjoying doing the ordinary things in life."

"Milk" was constructed of coiled clay, which "harkens back to the biblical conception that man is made of clay." Saposnik notes the tension between the concept of nourishment evoked by a milk can and

the story of destruction that inspired her creation. She encourages people to insert their own notes, such as a family history or a prayer, into "Milk."

The artist describes herself as "a unique blend of Wisconsin and Israel." Her father was Irving Saposnik, an English literature professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and director of the UW-Madison Hillel Foundation for many years.

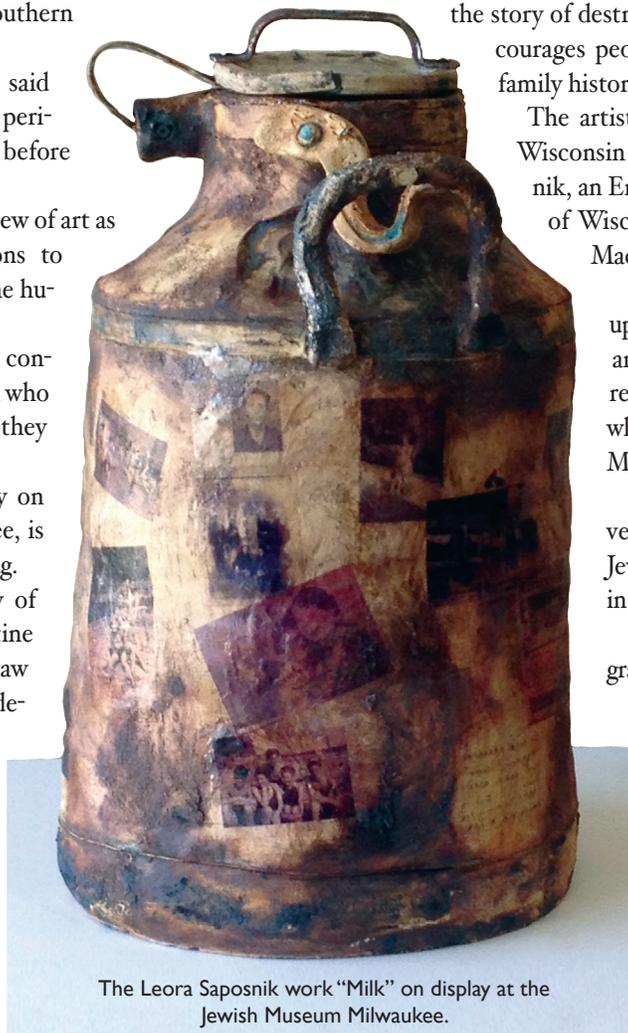
She moved to Israel as a toddler and grew up in Haifa. Since then she has moved back and forth between Madison and Israel. She returned most recently with her husband, who is a professor of horticulture at UW-Madison, and their two teenaged children.

Saposnik was educated at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where she studied Jewish history. She earned a master's degree in Jewish history from UW-Madison.

"Milk" will be on display at JMM, a program of the Milwaukee Jewish Federation, through Jan. 15.

It then will travel to the Lyric Opera of Chicago for the production of "The Passenger" (1968), a Holocaust-themed opera by Polish-Jewish composer Mieczyslaw Weinberg (1919-1996). ■

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The Leora Saposnik work "Milk" on display at the Jewish Museum Milwaukee.