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Jerry Zolynsky

A Soul In Sculpture

Over five years, a local Soviet Jewish refugee poured his life and soul into an intricate 7-foot sculpture.

See story on page 75.

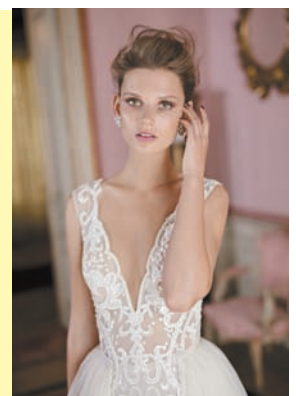
The Holocaust memorial "plaza": Lev Davidov created sculptures and laid a white-and-blue tiled floor to evoke a sense of peace in this section of his monumental *Inner Sanctum*.



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A Soul In Sculpture

Julie Edgar | Special to the Jewish News

Jerry Zolynsky | Photographer

Over the course of five years, a local Soviet Jewish refugee poured his life, his memories, his faith — and his soul — into an intricate and exquisite 7-foot-tall sculpture.

After arriving in Detroit in 1978 as a refugee from his native Azerbaijan, Lev Davidov cobbled together 80-hour workweeks to support his wife and three young daughters. He worked his way up from stockroom to showroom at New York Carpet World, using his days off for other jobs like delivering pizza and measuring rooms for carpet. When NYCW was sold, Davidov bought a furniture store, financed a Russian restaurant that his wife Galina ran, and opened a salon for his daughter Yanna.

Throughout the decades of hard work, something was simmering in his soul, a very personal project that he would tackle once he could fully devote himself. Davidov, 75, had created whimsical metal sculptures that he sold through a local art gallery, but this project would represent his truth as an artist.

Five years ago, Davidov finally got started on that proj-

ect, throwing himself into constructing a dazzling 7-foot egg-shaped sculpture that opens onto intricate and illuminated worlds that depict the captivity and redemption of the Jewish people.

“Remembering about myself” is how Davidov of West Bloomfield describes his vision when he began work on what became *Inner Sanctum*.

When the Soviet Jew and his family arrived in Michigan, they were aided in establishing a home within a predominantly Jewish community by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS). The community support Davidov received helped strengthen his faith and his roots, “the true inspiration for *Inner Sanctum*,” he says. He wanted to leave his children a piece that would remind them of his — and by extension, their — history as Jews.

The sculpture is 32 inches at its widest point — measured so it will fit through the door connecting the house to Davidov’s studio in the garage. It is comprised of thousands of pieces of recycled wood — mahogany, maple, rosewood and walnut among them — cut to lengths of ¼ and ¾ inches and meant to resemble the color variations of Jerusalem stone. Embedded throughout are stones of various shapes and colors, Swarovski crystals, glass, copper, tile and tiny lights. Faberge egg-like, his staggering creation holds surprises at every turn. “A little bit old, a little bit future” is how Davidov describes it.

All the more amazing is the few tools at Davidov’s disposal. His studio is neat and basic: It consists of a workbench against a wall that is mounted with an electric saw and vise, a sander,

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Davidov cut and fit thousands of pieces of wood, each measuring less than 1 inch in length, to create the 7-foot-tall *Inner Sanctum*.

details

To further explore *Inner Sanctum*, visit levdavidov.com.

continued from page 75



Details include a Holocaust memorial plaza and man blowing a shofar (not shown) and tiny hamsas used as door handles to the Ark (above).

a handsaw and other tools, and bins that hold bits and pieces of the materials he uses. A plastic table and chairs provides a place to rest and have a smoke.

Remarkably, Davidov stood up for a good part of the 12 hours he put in every day to make *Inner*; Galina estimates he spent 250 days each year working on the sculpture. Davidov started out with a vision, but he let each phase of the sculpture guide the next.

There's a Holocaust memorial that occupies a lower level of the sculpture, its floors a mosaic of tiny tiles, two abstract sculptures of twisted wires, barred windows and tiny electric flames set at a height that forces the viewer to bow — or pay their respects, as Davidov envisioned — in order to take it all in.

“It reminds me of how many Jewish people were killed,” he says.

Moving upward, the mood lightens. On a higher level is the Western Wall, replete with weeds springing through the cracks, and gates that welcome visitors. Behind it is a lectern and Ark, doorways fashioned from pounded metal, pillars covered in copper, Hebrew letters inset in the exterior, a stone engraved with a woman's profile — his grandmother.

Davidov speaks fondly of her and his grandfather, a rabbi who took him in when his father was conscripted into the Russian army at the start of World War II. They lived in Kuba, a mountain village in Azerbaijan, until his father returned at the end of the war. His grandfather's praying still rings in his ears.

“I'm not religious, but I'm Jewish in my blood,” Davidov says.

Galina Davidov busies herself showing photos of his work, of which she is clearly proud. She helped him assemble pieces of *Inner Sanctum*, which drew on her talents: A corner of their dining room table is given over to the complicated jigsaw puzzles she likes to work.

Davidov isn't a trained sculptor; his mother told him that at the age of 5, he was drawing all the time. Davidov remembers at the age of 10 or 12 doing work he calls *chikanka*, a form of bas-relief using copper. He just likes working with his hands, he shrugs.

Daughter Yanna Davidov, who

He wanted to leave his children a piece that would remind them of his — and by extension, their — history as Jews.

lives nearby, drops by to say hello. She sits at the kitchen table.

Her father's sculpture, she says, "is a beautiful piece of history. It all came from his mind."

Kristina Davidov, who runs a gallery in San Diego, watched the progression of the sculpture by Skype. She considers it an incredible work of art.

"I think it's beautiful," she says. "The time and details my father put in it are exquisite." A third daughter, Ilona, also lives in San Diego.

Davidov is light on his feet, unbowed by age. The only ailment he speaks of are his aching hands, which have been

in service of this sculpture. Once spring comes, he says, his hands will be nimble enough to begin work on smaller offshoots of *Inner Sanctum*. Davidov calls them "collections."

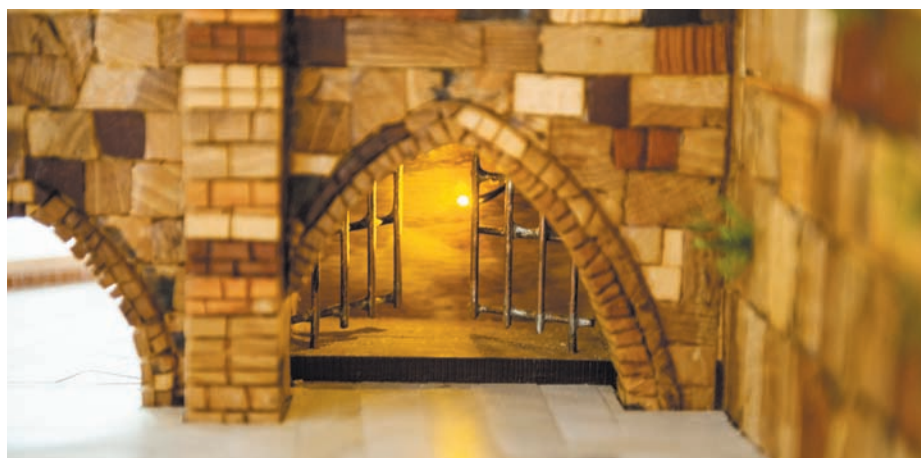
And he plans to build a rotating pedestal for *Inner Sanctum* so that it can be viewed in its totality from one spot.

Davidov isn't interested in selling the sculpture; he sees it as a legacy piece that his children and grandchildren can both learn from and savor.

"The money is not for me very important," he says. "This is what I have in my heart. When I die, my kids will decide what to do with it." ✳



A view of the Western Wall



An illuminated gate leading to the Western Wall



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