BLUE SKIES, lush vegetation and contented farm animals. These are not among the typical images one thinks of when hearing Holocaust survival stories. Whether it’s firsthand documents or fictional representations, depictions of the Shoah are often colorless — sometimes intentionally — and portray famine, depravity and human suffering.

But in a returning exhibit at the American Visionary Arts Museum (AVAM) in downtown Baltimore, “Esther and the Dream of One Loving Human Family,” late Holocaust survivor Esther Krinitz narrates her story through 36 colorful hand-stitched fabric collages that recreate the countryside of her small Polish village of Mniszek, before and during the Holocaust. In her story, told through an innocent child’s narration, suffering and struggle coexist with her village’s scenic beauty.

Krinitz’s daughters Bernice Steinhardt and Helene McQuade are respectively president and vice president of Art and Remembrance, an arts and education-based nonprofit founded in 2003, only two years after their mother’s death. The nonprofit not only brings Krinitz’s work to a wider audience, but promotes the use of art and personal narrative as healing mechanisms. Steinhardt believes her mother viewed her creations not as the work of an artist, but of a documentarian. Though visually soothing, the collection still tells the hard, discomfiting truths of a Nazi-occupied Poland. The collages’ artistic and aesthetic values are a welcoming means to an educational end.

“I have long observed that one of the things that makes my mother’s artwork so powerful is that because they are beautiful and so colorful, you approach them openly,” Steinhardt explained. “Unlike pictures of concentration camps — you kind of protect yourself when you’re getting ready to look — [hers] are so inviting that you’re already in them before you realize what you’re seeing.”

The collection had been displayed...
once before at AVAM in 2001. Curator and museum founder Rebecca Alban Hoffberger called Krinitz’s work “without question the most beloved and most frequently asked [exhibit] to return.” The collection will be on display until March 3, 2024.

THE STORY
Born in 1927, Krinitz was 12 when German soldiers invaded Mniszek in September 1939. In one of her earliest wartime memories, Krinitz and her sisters arrived at their grandparents’ house to find German soldiers out front pulling her grandfather by his beard and cutting it off with a knife. Over the course of three years, the Nazis harassed and interrogated Jewish families in her village while forcing men and boys to work in nearby labor camps. Each of these stark memories would later appear in Krinitz’s work.

On Oct. 15, 1942, Nazi forces ordered all the Jews in Mniszek to report to a nearby train station, at which point they were likely taken to concentration camps. Krinitz and her sister Mania escaped, changed their names, pretended to be Catholics and abandoned speaking Yiddish. Although there were several close calls, including when a swarm of bees stopped a Nazi soldier from interrogating Krinitz further, she and her sister ultimately made it through the war and settled in a displaced persons camp.

At the camp, Krinitz met and married her husband, Max Krinitz. Steinhardt, their first child, was born in Belgium before the family immigrated to America and settled in Brooklyn.

Steinhardt remembers her mother constantly telling stories about her life and family back in Poland. Krinitz’s memories, vivid as they were, were all she could share with her daughters. Krinitz herself said that not having documents of her life back in Poland inspired her to create her collages.

“I wanted to show my kids how I grew up. I was trying desperately, but I never drew anything in my life,” Krinitz said in a 1997 interview for a documentary about her life and work. “Well, I’m going to try. So I bought a piece of cheap fabric. I took a ruler, and I still see my house the way it was.”

Krinitz completed her first two collages in 1977, both pre-war memories. One was a rendering of her family home, the other of her and her siblings swimming in the river. She gave one to each of her daughters.

Steinhardt was living in Maryland by the time she had her own children, and Krinitz, who owned a clothing store in Brooklyn, moved her business to Frederick in 1983 so she could be closer to her grandchildren. At this point, Krinitz hadn’t created any additional collages and wouldn’t again until 1988. But the prolific nature of the following decade more than made up for the years she missed.

THE ART
Each of Krinitz’s collages has a hand-stitched paragraph along its bottom edge, narrating what is being portrayed by the image. In the exhibit at AVAM, the collages tell a chronological story, although this is not the order in which Krinitz created them. For example, after the first two images, “Childhood Home” and “Swimming in the River,” both created in 1977, the next frame, chronologically, is “My Brother Ruven,” which Krinitz didn’t create until 1996. Between 1988, when Krinitz started making the collages again, and 1996, she created 21 additional images.

In the display, images 17-21 are all of Krinitz’s memories from Oct. 15, 1942, the day she separated from her family. Even these images, which all take place on a single day, were made between 1991
and 1998, and like the rest of the collection were not made in chronological order.

Up close, visitors to the exhibit discover that the images are actually three-dimensional. Details like girls' braids and thatched roofs pop off the fabric canvasses. If viewed from a distance, the bright colors are reminiscent of paintings, but anything that appears like a single brush stroke or line drawn with a pen is in fact hundreds of stitches — one after another, after another.

Even details that would have been easier to draw with a marker, like swastikas on the Nazis' helmets or hundreds of blades of grass, are all woven individually. In the collage depicting salvation by bees, Krinitz stitched more than 100 bees with at least four layers of alternating black and yellow stripes.

When Terre Kroeger of Maumee, Ohio, learned that the exhibit would be on display in Baltimore, she knew she had to make the trip, and brought her daughter, Rena McMahon.

"My daughter and I both do embroidery, and more than 10 years ago I was living in Oceanside, Calif., and I first saw this exhibit when it first started touring around," Kroeger said. "It's not just embroidery. It's a mixture of knitting, and a lot of different styles. All the little intricate things like putting fringe on the capes, all the faces she did, and this is how I would tell a story, because I can't draw. And I can't write. So this touched me the first time I saw it."

THE EXHIBIT

AVAM was the first museum to display Krinitz’s work as a whole, in 2001. Since, the works have been featured in more than 40 museums across the world. In its return to AVAM, Krinitz’s collages are displayed alongside art made by ancestors of genocide survivors, artists who survived genocide themselves, or by those who worked closely with survivors of genocide, like humanitarian and art activist Lily Yeh.

"I saw [Esther Krinitz’s] exhibition maybe 10 years ago and was deeply moved," said Yeh. "I brought the book of her work and that of Frida Kahlo’s vivid paintings to Rwanda to help the genocide survivors in my workshop to tell their own stories through drawing and words."
Yeh’s work with Rwandans from 2009 to 2011 inspired her to create three paintings of her own representing life in a Rwandan village before, during and after the 1994 100-day genocide. All three are part of the exhibit.

A small corner of the exhibit is devoted to past and current genocides, listing alphabetically 18 of the most deadly mass slaughters. Across from the plaque is a brief biography of Raphael Lemkin, the Polish-born but later U.S.-based lawyer who coined the term genocide and successfully advocated for the adoption of Convention of the Prevention of Crime of Genocide by the U.N. General Assembly in 1948.

Another featured artist is Judy Tallwing, an Apache elder whose painting “Prayer for Peace,” textured by thousands of tiny individual prayer beads, is part of a small section of the exhibit outlining the history of Native American genocide in the earliest years of the United States. The section features an order by President George Washington to Gen. John Sullivan which reads, “The immediate objectives are the total destruction and devastation of their settlements and the capture of as many prisoners of every age and sex as possible. It will be essential to ruin their crops in the ground to prevent them from planting more.”

But true to Krinitz’s work, the exhibit is far from somber. Krinitz’s collages are displayed against walls painted bright red; in the center of the exhibit is a replication of Krinitz’s family home in Poland, complete with a green lawn and a giant stuffed-animal cow, dog and chickens.

“It’s really hard to make the subject of genocide child-friendly, but we tried very hard to do this in a way where they would learn from someone who was herself a child when the Nazis came and changed her family’s life forever,” said Hoffberger.

But even the grimmest items from Krinitz’s work are palatable for children, through bright colors and simply worded narratives. In one image, Krinitz shows her and her sister taking their cows to pasture. Just through the woods was a labor camp where men and boys were often shot and killed. One side is sunny, with blue skies and green grass, while the other is dark, gray and muddy.

“We do school programs. When I showed this picture to fourth graders, one boy raised his hand and said, ‘This shows me that there is a thin line between good and evil,'” Steinhardt said.

These deeper, intellectual meanings, Steinhardt believes, were not necessarily part of her mother’s objective.

“I don’t think she was analyzing or evaluating what she was doing. I think this was just direct from her memory and the memories she held were those of a young girl, so she expressed herself in that way, both in the text and in the images,” Steinhardt said. “Because of that it has an appeal for children, for young people as well as adults. The subject matter is dark, but the pictures are very light and vivid and colorful.”

Steinhardt sensed her mother’s presence in the AVAM exhibition, and noted it even has “a periodic apparition” of her. The documentary of her work is shown on repeat at one end of the exhibit, and whenever Krinitz appears on screen, her reflection can be seen in the window of the home AVAM constructed. It’s as if she is peering out.

During a tour of the exhibit led by Steinhardt and Hoffberger, Steinhardt began to discuss one of her mother’s more lighthearted, pre-war images, almost all of which took place around Jewish holidays. The collage called “Shavuot” shows her mother walking on a pair of stilts ahead of her brother and sisters on their way to their grandparents’ home. Steinhardt was hardly a sentence into her explanation when from across the room, her mother, via the documentary interrupts, discussing that very image. Steinhardt paused in disbelief.

“She’s talking about it now,” she said.