

Features



Their family stories
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researching their family trees

10

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Beit Hatfutsot celebrates 20 years of a project that has had hundreds of thousands of youngsters researching their family trees



Contributors come from dozens of countries. (Courtesy Beit Hatfutsot)

• By BARRY DAVIS

Family, as we all know, is traditionally an integral part of the Jewish way. While technological advances have left a heavy imprint on the nuclear family-centric lifestyle, there are, it seems, still plenty of youngsters keen to dig into their predecessor history and find out from whence they hail.

For the past two decades, part of the impetus for that wholesome enterprise has been provided by Beit Hatfutsot – The Museum of the Jewish People’s “My Family Story” project, which has had hundreds of thousands of youngsters age around 12 to 15 researching their family trees.

The participants have come from dozens of Jewish communities all over the globe, and the select fruits of their work – and, it must be said, the efforts of other members of their family – have been proudly displayed annually at the Tel Aviv institution.

This year’s 20th-anniversary display, which takes place under the auspices of the museum’s International School for Jewish Peoplehood Studies, was officially opened on Sunday and takes in 43 winning entries sent over from all corners of world Jewry – Latin America, North America, the former Soviet Union, Europe and Australia – as well as some domestically produced works. All the exhibitors, from Israel and abroad, were invited to attend the opening ceremony.

If the exhibits are anything to go by, the future of the Jewish people is in good hands. The youngsters are clearly blessed with nimble minds and limbs, and the culmination of their heritage-rummaging has produced an attractive and intriguing spread of aesthetic approach and ingenuity.

It has been a sustained effort. “What you see here is the result of work that

has gone on throughout the year,” notes project manager Ron Merkel. “You have things here from around the world, from Morocco through Turkey, Greece, Australia, the US and Canada.”

Merkel details how the museum joined forces with various international organizations to access the relevant schools and students.

“For example, the Jewish Agency collaborated with us in accessing youth in the FSU. Through Hephzibah [a network of Jewish schools in the FSU], we got to schools from literally all over the place. There’s a work here which comes from a place near the Chinese border, and there are others from Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova.”

The venture has grown incrementally over the years, says the project head. The evolution does not just pertain to numbers, but also to the spread and significance the kids’ industry has taken on in each locale.



“The project has been running for 20 years in Latin America. There, it is related to as an event that defines the community – in the communities of Mexico, Buenos Aires in Argentina and Costa Rica. One of the peak events of the whole year, for the communities there, is the completion of the work on this project.”

The youths clearly throw themselves into the root-searching industry with gusto, often getting siblings, moms and dads, and even

grandparents in on the act. The 43 winning entries to the project – the International Competition in Memory of Manuel Hirsch Grosskopf, to give it its full titular due – were chosen out of works by some 20,000 students from 155 schools.

One of the most striking exhibits is *Aliya Bird* by Nofar Sereche, for the Draca Menachem Begin High School in Gadera. Sereche assembled a bird-shaped plane, complete with Israeli flag and images that tell the tale of the family’s arduous odyssey from Ethiopia to Israel 30 years ago. The feathered-friend reference was inspired by Sereche’s mother’s recollection of her infant reaction to seeing the El Al jet that was to bring them here – the first time the then-eight-year-old had ever seen an airplane – “a big bird came down from the sky.”

Talia Avnon Benveniste asserts that the project is not just about researching family roots, but also about getting the young competitor’s family actively involved in the heritage work. That offers precious added-value all around.

“There are plenty of families abroad in which not everyone is Jewish,” notes Avnon Benveniste, who heads Beit Hatfutsot’s International School for Jewish Peoplehood Studies and curated the new exhibition. “You have students with one Jewish parent and one non-Jewish. What this project does for the family, and for the competitors themselves, is that the Jewish story takes on a central role in the student’s identity while they work on it.”

Two decades on, the project has presumably produced some enduring proof of the identity-reinforcement benefits of the venture.

“We tried to track down program alumni from the last 20 years, and we found a former participant who was born in America and made aliya with his family,” recounts the curator. “He is a professional musician who makes a living from playing and working with music at Jewish summer camps all over the world. It is a wonderful story.”

“Family Loops’ by Lily Davies of Bialik College, Melbourne. (Courtesy Beit Hatfutsot)

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The said young man, Shimon Smith, was also on-hand for a musical turn at the exhibition's official opening on Sunday.

One of the most emotive items in the exhibition is *Walls of Hope*, entered by Noya Michaeli, as a tribute to her grandfather Yair Dori. Dori was born in Argentina in 1947 and made aliya with his family as a child. Taken prisoner by the Egyptians during the 1969-1970 War of Attrition, Dori was released just before Passover – and Michaeli's entry is based on a Seder table surrounded by members of her family. Her grandfather is at the head of the table and is surrounded by fencing, signifying his former prison walls.

"Noya depicts the situation at the time – when her grandfather returned from Egypt but was still in a prisoner-of-war state of mind," explains Avnon Benveniste. "Here, Noya is saying this is the story of family, but it is also the story of an entire generation and of the whole country."

Just a glimpse of the entries is enough to clearly indicate that the students – and their families – have put a lot of effort into the project, and often looked to convey universal messages as well. *The Puzzle* by Gali Polichuk Lulka from Mexico City, for example, is an intricately crafted wooden affair that takes in different aspects of her family history. Four quadrants unfold to show objects representing each of Lulka's four grandparents, while triangles represent family members who perished in the Holocaust at a young age, and therefore were unable to start their own families.

One of the most work-intensive entries was sent in by Lily Davies, a student at Bialik College in Melbourne, Australia. Her creation is called *Family Loops* and is based on a breakfast cereal format, complete with a list of ingredients of wholesome human attributes such as love, energy and reliability. Each "family loop" is designed differently, and either bears the name of a family member or a value the family holds dear. The circular loops represent the Jewish life-cycle and the continuity of Jewish tradition.

Davies's vision of her relatives is the sum of dozens of unique experiences, each playing their part in her Jewish story – which represents the broader story of the Jewish people's endurance, survival and accomplishments.

Identity is a common theme of all the works.

"You take, for example, a Jewish-American youth who, through the research he does for this program, discovers where his relatives came from – Poland, Germany, Russia and other places," says the curator. "Today we all engage in the topic of identity, which is a very intricate matter these days. If you take, for example, Judaism and being an American, a lot of kids address this kind of question. There are numerous processes here which the teenagers went through to understand who they are and where they belong."

Avnon Benveniste is living proof of the enduring rewards of meddling in one's family history.

"I did my roots work 30 years ago, and that's how I started my own Jewish story," she reveals. "That is why, today, I work in Beit Hatfutsot."

Avnon Benveniste might have added that she is also a Reform rabbi.

The opening ceremony also marked the release of an impressive tome containing works of art inspired by the genealogical backdrops of a diverse slew of celebrities from around the Jewish world, including former UK chief rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, American stand-up comedian Sarah Silverman and Nobel Prize-winner Prof. Dan Shechtman.



The opening of the anniversary display. (Nir Shaanani)