

A Friend From My Youth

In 1989, while on holiday in Paris, my son Raymond and I were quite surprised when we received a call from Tel Aviv from Moshe Rosenthalis.

– „Can I pay you a visit?“ asked Moshe sincerely.

– „Of course!“! „We look forward to it!“

My son and I both always enjoy visits from old friends.

As chance would have it, the poor tourists ended up in a run-down Arab owned hotel. That is where Moshe found us. Then began the interesting journey of three friends through Paris. (As in the famous novel by Remarque „The Three Friends.“)

There we stood by a Delacroix painting, mouths wide-open, salivating. Moshe then treated us to coffee. He-the capitalist. Us- the "poor soviet tourists".

To write about Rosenthalis is not difficult at all. I watched his work evolve, even though we weren't able to attend each other's exhibits. I constantly had his beautiful gifted catalogs in front of me. The one book was signed Dear Lyza and Augustinas Savickas from your friend M. Rosenthalis. Dated April 19th, 1988. The luxurious book, published in Jerusalem, had a fascinating introduction from Clara Malraux.

How did I acquire this album? I knew Rosenthalis practically my whole life. I graduated from Vilnius' Art Academy in 1949. Misha (as we called him in Russian) a year later. Not many students were enrolled in painting. We knew each other well, and we enjoyed socializing. We maintained ties even after he left Lithuania. In his large catalog, his older work from 1950-1957 was highlighted. The catalog was completed with a cycle called „ The History of the Jewish Nation“ painted in 1983. In 1992, I received another catalog of his work, albeit smaller. It was also dedicated with these words: „To my close and dear friends Augustinas and Lyza remembering the years past in Vilnius.“ With kisses! August 8, 1992 Safed (old city in the Galilee Mountains). How can you ever forget.....

Both Misha and I were left without parents. His father was killed by the Nazis in Mariampol, and his mother passed away. My mother, also Jewish, died during the war in Kaunas, and my father, the writer Jurgis Savickis, was living in Paris even before the war. When we were students, we were very poor. If we wanted to earn some money before the major soviet „holidays“ (May 1st and November 7th) the three of us-Rosenthalis, Petras Stauskas, and I stretched out long, red banners on the floor, and stamped them with slogans by the communist „prophets“ Marx, Engels, and Lenin. It was a most unpleasant and difficult task. But, a starving student was happy to get a small pile of money and fill his empty, hungry stomach.

Misha and my wife Leza got along famously. They were both from Mariampol, and both of them used to lecture me about drinking „drops from the devil“. My wife sympathized with the teetotaler Moshe. She liked him because of his personality, and not because he abstained.

At the Art Academy, he became well-known for his sketches. He sketched my wife Leza's portrait. The nude sketches he created were masterful. His pieces received the highest marks.

On occasion I went to Seneza with Misha, or Mykolas as we called him in Lithuanian sometimes. Seneza was a creative „base-camp“ near Moscow. There was a tradition to invite different artists from the „empire“ to a lovely place near a lake. The participating artists were from „sister nations“ and represented true talent, or lacked in it completely. We were put into small rooms, not to be disturbed, as we painted, wrote, glued, and assembled works for the „glory“ of the nation. Boy did we practice! After that of course, we would wash up and relax. The „devil's tears“ were the best remedy for relaxation. At least for me. Misha abstained, but I didn't. One evening, I had indulged, and there were men in town „recruiting“ young men into the Red Army. I was at a bar not far from the camp, and I was there when the „recruiters“ were there. We exchanged words, and continued to argue. They were unhappy that I spoke favorably of the U.S. which was a nest of the enemy. One of those patriots stabbed me in the head with a knife. I fell to the floor. I was taken to a nearby hospital, treated with iodine, and bandaged. Upon hearing news of the encounter, Misha and our cook came to get me, and took me home with a sleigh. I then continued to create paintings about the communist era. I was very unsuccessful at it.

When Rosenthalis arrived in Vilnius in 1990, I took him to the Art Academy where I was teaching at the time. I wanted to brag that I not only was swigging vodka, but was also teaching young artists. I also was painting and writing myself. Students surrounded him, showed him their work, and were asking for feedback. I saw that he was enjoying the interaction, and ongoing discussion.

This year of 2008 has been a year of losses. My wife Lyza left this world, as did my friend from my youth. A truly wonderful talented artist, and friend.

Augustinas Savickas

October 8, 2008s

Vilnius studio