



**SUPPLY  
LINE**

## Aba Bayefsky

Official War Artist , Royal Canadian Air Force

After joining the Royal Canadian Air Force when he was only 19, Aba had become an Official War Artist by the age of 21. A year later, he painted the dreadful conditions he witnessed when the Allies liberated the Nazi concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen.



Snapshot of war artist Aba Bayefsky.  
George Metcalf Archival Collection  
Canadian War Museum 20040082-006

### Early Years

Aba was born in 1923. He grew up in Toronto, Ontario, where he attended classes at the Children's Art Centre at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Among his mentors were the

Group of Seven painters Arthur Lismer and A.Y. Jackson, who had both served as official war artists during the First World War.

## Document the War Through Art

When Aba was 19, he enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force. It was October 1942, and he spent the next year and a half training in Canada, before going overseas to England.

In December 1944, he was promoted to Flight Lieutenant. He had also been named an official war artist, tasked with documenting the war through art.

In May 1945, while stationed in Germany with the **Royal Air Force**, he visited Bergen-Belsen, a Nazi concentration camp recently liberated by the **Allies**. He was devastated by the sight of tens of thousands of sick and dying inmates among piles of unburied corpses.

Aba, who was Jewish, was changed forever by what he witnessed. As he later recalled: “For the first time I had become aware of man’s monstrous capacity for evil. It was the determining factor in everything I have done since.”

Aba’s Belsen paintings reflect one young Canadian artist’s unflinching testament to the horrors of the Holocaust, from the skeletal bodies of emaciated victims to the hollow, vacant eyes of survivors barely clinging to life.

Upon his return from the war, Aba’s life and art remained influenced by what he had seen. Several of his post-war paintings are infused with his own angry reactions to the consequences of hate and **anti-Semitism**.

They serve as a reminder to us all to remember – and to never allow this history to be erased by those who would rather we forget.

## Remembrance and Recognition

Aba became a well-known artist after the war. He taught at the Ontario College of Art for more than 30 years, and was made a Member of the Order of Canada in 1978.

He died in 2001. His war art resides in the collection of the Canadian War Museum, along with several of his post-war paintings relating to the Holocaust.

## Vocabulary

### **Allied**

The countries, including Canada, that joined together in opposing the Axis powers during the Second World War. The largest Allied nations were the United Kingdom, the United States, the Soviet Union and China.

### **Anti-Semitism**

A form of racism that involves prejudice, discrimination, and hostility against Jewish people.

### **Royal Air Force**

The air force of the United Kingdom, created in 1918. Canada had its own Royal Canadian Air Force, although many of its members served in Royal Air Force units at one time or another during the war.

