

Sight Unseen

By Scott Palmer

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(An essay about my friend Frances Starr, whom I helped as a volunteer for a Phoenix social-service agency.)



In 1927, Herman Hesse published his novel *Steppenwolf*. Leon Trotsky was expelled from the Soviet Communist Party. "My Blue Heaven" was the most popular song on the radio. American medical pioneer George Whipple was trying to cure tuberculosis.

Somewhat less remarked at the time, Frances Starr arrived back in the United States from the Soviet Union.

Now a Scottsdale resident, Starr was born in Pennsylvania in 1909 and taken to Russia in 1911 by her parents, Russians who wanted to return home.

Shortly after the family arrived back in Russia, however, they were beset by war, revolution, and poverty. When the chance presented itself, her father sent Starr back to America, to safety -- and to an uncertain future, faced all alone.

A feisty, diminutive lady of 87 with only a hint of her old Russian accent, Starr is something that most people would think impossible: a blind painter.

Though legally blind since the early 1970s because of macular degeneration, Starr continues to paint, and paint well. Her tiny apartment in Scottsdale is crammed from floor to ceiling with framed and unframed portraits, nudes, landscapes, and scenes from plays she helped to stage. Canvas, paints, and other art supplies litter work tables and easels, spilling out onto her small patio. When she paints, she uses her fingers to feel her way along the canvas. The results are amazing.

If a doctor said they were going blind, most people would give up, at least on a career in painting. But not Frances Starr. As a girl in Russia, she'd survived pogroms and terrorism. When she was nine, and violence closed the only school in her town, she found some books and taught herself. As a young woman in America, she'd faced culture shock, the challenge of learning English, abandonment by her husband, and the death of her son. She'd survived. A little thing like going blind wouldn't stop her.

"When something bad happens, you can either get hysterical about it, or you can think about overcoming it," Starr said.

That "all-American" outlook took her from stage and TV productions, where she worked as a wardrobe mistress with stars such as Zero Mostel, Howard Keel, Maureen Stapleton, Betty Hutton, Rock Hudson, and Jackie Gleason, to her current career as a painter.

Starr's paintings reflect her indomitable optimism. Landscapes, portraits, and crowd scenes brightly lit, with sunshine and happy faces, adorn her walls. On her patio, a soft sculpture called "The Queen of Recycling" gazes regally over the palettes and easels, reminding the viewer to dispose of trash properly.

The closest hint of sadness comes in "The Prayer," which shows a man holding a baby. On the ground to the man's right is a rifle, and the background is dotted by smoke and cannons. On the ground to the man's left is a tattered parchment: "Oh Lord our God, forsake us not, free us from wars and sickness."

After she painted "The Prayer," she realized that it was even more autobiographical than she'd thought. "The man looks like my husband, and the baby looks like my child," she said.

Another painting, "The Petrified Trunk," shows a burned tree trunk, and reflects how she felt as a child during the wars in Russia. Caught once in the midst of a battle, she was "petrified." But most of her paintings, such as "The Square Dancers," evoke only happy feelings and images.

Her latest painting is a rustic landscape of Arizona, with mountains, cactus, and even a running stream. She can't see the real thing, of course, but has depicted it on canvas with eerie accuracy.

After surviving wars, coming to a new country, and losing her sight, Starr doesn't dwell on her own problems. She paints, and in her spare time, has done volunteer work to help other blind people -- some of whom are blind to all the good things she sees with her mind and heart.

Quoth Frances Starr: "Blindness is not the worst thing in life."

And she should know.