Aba Bayefsky at the Market

For over a century Toronto’s two famous marketplaces have been drawing crowds in search of the fine necessities of life—cheeses, fruits, vegetables, breads, baked goods, meats, and sausages. There is the farmers’ market of “St. Lawrence Market” where every Saturday farmers come to Toronto from out of town to sell their produce. Located at the busy corner of Jarvis and Front Streets, not far from the edge of Lake Ontario, the atmosphere and appearance of the Saturday market has remained unchanged over many decades. Several rows of tables run the length of a large hall. Laid out on these tables with no space between them are a great variety of produce, grown and baked, prepared and arranged by the very people who stand behind the tables selling to buyers. There are all varieties of brightly colored vegetables and fruits piled high in small cardboard containers; sausages and meat spread out behind glass counters or hanging above the heads of sellers; liquid maple syrup in shapely glass bottles; solid maple syrup sculpted into maple leaves in neat little boxes. In the crowded hall people squeeze past each other along the narrow lanes between the rows of tables, searching for goods, questioning vendors, filling their shopping bags. While the market offerings vary depending on the season, there is always a reliable supply of the staples and the farmers’ market is always filled, noisy, and lively.

In another part of downtown Toronto is “Kensington Market,” a place with a remarkable history: A major wave of Jewish immigration to Toronto from Eastern Europe and Russia was well underway by the early 1900s. Word was spreading among these new immigrants that there was affordable housing in “Kensington Place,” the land then divided up and for sale originally owned by the Denison family from Europe (Cochrane 2000: 9–17). People began to move in and the Jewish market, which was called “Kenzigtyn” without the word “market,” was born (Duval and Lappin 1991: 117). A community built up around synagogues, Jewish schools, and narrow, tall homes with the fronts converted into stores. The new community became a popular place to buy and sell and a place to meet and “exchange political views” (ibid.: 7).

Many of the original buildings in Kensington are still standing, and while starting in the 1970s Kensington gradually changed “from a primarily Jewish sector to a truly multicultural one,” it has remained a small village unto itself, separate and unique from the modern city surrounding it (ibid.: 9).

Artist Aba Bayefsky was born in west Toronto in 1923 on Awde Street near the Dufferin race track. When he was getting his first introductions to the market going shopping with
his mother and father, Kensington Market was essentially “a Jewish merchant community” (ibid.: 8). Since Kensington was only a streetcar token away, over time Aha began to explore it on his own. He kept a journal throughout his life. He wrote: “I began drawing in Kensington at the age of 16. I am now 68 and after hundreds of drawings it still stimulates . . . the market has been like a magnet” (Bayefsky 1991).

When Aha was first introduced to Kensington Market he would have seen a place where the “hawkers” or vendors shouted out to shoppers, advertising what they were selling, and a lot of bargaining took place before things were bought. One of the phrases being shouted was “Bargains, bargains, koyft bargains!” (Duval and Lappin 1991: 119). Koyft is Yiddish for “buy”—to “buy” bargains. Haggling in stores and on streets, shoppers mingled with the odors of “fruits and vegetables ripening in the sun, fresh bread and bagels from the bakeries, creameries with varieties of cheeses, smoked fish and pickled gherkins in barrels” (ibid.: 119).

Reflecting on his market drawings and paintings Aha wrote in his journal: “My pleasure is real when I wander through the market sketchbook in hand, picking out details of a store front, a door, a sign on a store window, a lamp post or a street sign, the arrangement of fruit and vegetables and above all how people relate to all these atmospherics . . . The underlying quality that is the marketplace is the human interaction that permeates every corner and nook on every street. . . . The area vibrates with this interaction between people” (Bayefsky 1991).

At Victoria College, University of Toronto, the art collection includes a very large, very colorful oil painting by Aha. It is called “Saturday Market” and is one of my favorite paintings. It shows people gathered around a booth, vendors and buyers, talking and enjoying each other’s company. This is the farmers’ market of St. Lawrence Market where my father would often take me.

Aha Bayefsky was filled with boundless energy and enthusiasm for his work. It was catching—I remember the anticipation I felt when we would go to the market on the weekends. We had been there many times before but each time was a new experience, a new chance to see, buy, and sample the food, talk to the vendors, feel the excitement of life. Aha’s oil paintings and watercolors are based on his market sketches. He would find a space from which to stand with his sketchbook, look out at the action, and quickly record it.
Throughout his life he embraced cultural diversity. He traveled to Japan and southern India several times on Canada Council grants. Here he was again drawn to the bustling marketplaces, to the workers in the fields, to the Japanese tattoo community, to the people who were out and about. Celebrity never interested my father. He painted from the conviction that people going about their daily lives were interesting and worthy subjects for the artist. This outlook is apparent in his views about art trends coming out of the major world capitals, trends that were so successful in the commercial art world. He never tried to become a part of it. His work was often ignored by the galleries and the critics.

Paul Duval writes that in Kensington Market over time “the few Jewish shops that remained were surrounded by an exotic mix of merchants from around the world. The kosher chickens that once hung in shop windows were replaced by Chinese, West Indian, Asiatic, Middle Eastern and European fare. Bayefsky’s eyes were delighted in these changes and he recorded them with a skill and sensibility that encapsulates the spirit of the place” (Duval and Lappin 1991: 9). Aba writes in his journal: “then it was chickens and ducks, barrels of pickles and herring and the smell of freshly baked bread. Now we see goats and lamb; octopus and squid, Jamaican foods, Oriental vegetables and salt fish” (Bayefsky 1991).

Toronto’s market history comes to life in hundreds of Bayefsky’s pen and ink drawings, watercolors, and oil paintings that span many decades. The last painting Aba did, the one he was working on in his King Street studio a few days before he entered the hospital for the last time in 2001, was of a front door in Kensington Market. We have kept this painting on its easel exactly as it was when he left his studio that final time. In recognition of his art and his lifetime of work as an artist, Aba was awarded the Order of Canada in 1979.

Toronto’s two famous markets are about to undergo huge changes. There will be a large new building for the farmers’ market with an impressive modern design and an underground parking lot. A new Loblaws and other business developments are planned for the Kensington Market area. I find it sad that historical landmarks that add to a city’s uniqueness and character cannot be left alone. However, as Paul Duval writes, the markets’ “people and places will persist” in Bayefsky’s paintings, watercolors, and drawings (Duval and Lappin 2001: 9).

REFERENCES