

Naomi ALEXANDER

Discussions on emigrating: Last Tea Party in Riga, 1981

Oil on canvas

Donated by the Artist, 2016

The existential backdrop of this painting is the tragic history of the Jewish community in Lithuania in the early decades of the twentieth century. This period of intense political turmoil saw hundreds of thousands of people being forced to leave Lithuania and seek refuge elsewhere while others stayed and died.

Discussions on emigrating: Last Tea Party in Riga offers a glimpse of a moment prior to departure; a moment marked by farewell acts and decisions which, in Alexander's account, would affect the lives of future generations. A family - Alexander's husband's family, in fact - gathers to decide who will be leaving and who will be staying. The colour scheme, like a painted or tinted photograph, emphasises a sense of nostalgia. Alexander captures a real instant photographed in history, to which the viewer brings a chilling knowledge to what would otherwise seem a formal photograph of a family tea party of yesteryear. The simplicity of the scene of group at a tea table is thrown in to dramatic effect by the brushwork and the absence of details to their faces; a reminder of all the families that are forced to make these decisions.

The painting relates closely to Alexander's artist residency in Lithuania in 2001, which led to the project "Once Upon a Time in Lithuania". On this experience she wrote: "I felt intensely the presence of the Jews that once lived there, the homes they lived in, the things they must have done and the places they visited, and there is a sense that I am commemorating their lives here".

Naomi Alexander studied at Hornsey College of Art, London (1954-1959), and then spent two years as a postgraduate at the Central School of Art in London (1961-1963). She has had solo exhibitions at The Jewish Museum of Florida (USA) and the Shipley Art Gallery and Museum (Gateshead). Her work is held at the Victoria and Albert Museum (London), the Laing Art Gallery (Newcastle), and the Europos Parkas (Lithuania) and the Baker Tilly (London), among other collections.