

JT Style

Cross Culture: Morikami Preserves Unique Florida

KAREN LUSTGARTEN LIFESTYLE EDITOR

Larry Rosensweig was washing dishes in a Japanese restaurant in Philadelphia 20 years ago when he got the call to become the founding director of the Morikami Museum. When he first set foot in the small, empty building, there were no art collections, no staff, no donors, no programs and no mission. The annual operating budget was \$25,000 and the location was in the boondocks among thousands of nurseries in undeveloped Delray Beach near the turnpike.

Mr. Rosensweig was a 25-year-old graduate of the University of Michigan with an master's in Asian studies (Japan). He had no museum or art background.

He pulled together a citizen advisory committee and wrote a mission for an ethnic cultural museum: to collect, preserve and interpret objects related to Japanese culture and Japanese-American heritage.

Two hundred acres were donated by George Morikami, a survivor of the Yamato Colony of Japanese farmers that struggled to work the land in Boca Raton from 1904 into the 1920s. The colony disbanded but Mr. Morikami remained, prospered and dreamed of honoring the colony's memory and bridging gaps in cultural understanding.

In two decades, Mr. Rosensweig spearheaded the Morikami Museum and Japanese Gardens with an annual operating budget that has grown to \$1.8 million, 25 employees, 250 volunteers, a permanent collection of 4,000 objects, a \$5 million new building opened in 1993, master plans for a 200-acre park and much more. Today the Morikami is the only museum in the United States dedicated exclusively to deepening understanding of Japanese culture and the Japanese-American heritage.

So what's a nice Jewish boy, raised in an observant (Conservative) household, doing as head of a Japanese museum? His high school Rotary Club sent him to Japan on an exchange program for a year. "It was a startling experience to be in contact with a culture I found both fascinating and infuriating," says Mr. Rosensweig, who had no knowledge of the country or people when he went. It was a life-changing adventure that set



DAVID POLLER

his destiny.

"Japanese culture opened my eyes to question everything American and religious," he says of his stay living and working in Japan in the late '60s, during the Vietnam war. "There are many ways to solve universal problems. The Japanese do things completely differently than the way I was brought up ... so I became a cultural relativist."

In his case, cultural relativism means being Jewish, marrying a Baptist, raising his two sons in both religions and working in a Buddhist environment. At home, he and the boys remove their shoes before entering the house, as he did in Japan, but his wife does not. They eat fast food and do Japanese cooking. On his trips to Japan, he buys art for his personal collection that is "not in competition with the museum."

But these days, his job as director "has less to do with Japanese culture and more to do with business," Mr. Rosensweig says. The Morikami presents a unique challenge. It's a Japanese museum neither situated in a Japanese-American community nor supported by one, not aimed specifically at its ethnic group; with a board, staff and audience composed of Caucasians and a high proportion of Jewish volunteers and visitors (150,000 per year).

There are no major Jewish donors, although the museum is surrounded by a burgeoning Jewish community. "Lots of Jews don't like Japan

Cultural relativist: Museum director Larry Rosensweig has adopted the Zen outlook.

due to trade issues," Mr. Rosensweig's uncle warned him.

"For many Jews, their first introduction to the Japanese was dropping bombs on them in World War II," Mr. Rosensweig says. The Jews who show an interest in the museum have business connections to Japan. His biggest challenge is inspiring visitors to get involved.

Among the museum's many programs, workshops, classes and exhibits scheduled for 1998 is "Visas for Life: The Story of Chlune and Yukiko Sugihara and the Rescue of More Than 6,000 Jews." The dramatic exhibit about the Japanese consul who risked his life to sign exit visas for thousands of Lithuanian Jews during World War II runs April 21 to May 31 at the Delray Beach site.

Mr. Rosensweig says he has never encountered anti-Semitism in Japan since he was a high school exchange student there. "The people have had little experience with the Jewish culture," he says, "so they have no preconceptions or prejudices about Jews."

Although he celebrates both Chanukah and Christmas with his family, the museum director says, "The Japanese culture has become my culture. I've adopted the Zen outlook: Whatever you do, master it and put your whole being into the process." □



Morikami Museum and Japanese Gardens, 4000 Morikami Park Rd., Delray Beach. 495-0233.