

Obituaries

IDA ABELMAN, W.P.A. MURALIST

Ida Abelman, who was among a wave of socially conscious artists in the 1930s, died at home on Madison Street, Sag Harbor, on Monday after a long illness. She was 92.

Mrs. Abelman was born Ida York in 1910 in New York City, the daughter of Russian and Polish immigrants who spoke little English. Her late brother, Herman, was a follower of Eugene V. Debs, the Socialist politician who received nearly a million votes when he ran for president while serving a prison term, and she was deeply interested in political ideas from an early age.

As a budding artist, she spent hours at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, often walking there from the family apartment on the Lower East Side when a nickel for the bus fare could not be spared. One day she took a portfolio of her work to the National Academy of Art and was accepted to the same class as Ilya Bolotowsky and Raphael Soyer.

At the age of 19 she married Larry Abelman and, during the Depression, which had little effect on them as they were already almost penniless, they led a carefree existence in Greenwich Village. A friend, the art critic Harold Rosenberg, suggested that she apply to the Works Progress

Administration, which President Roosevelt had set up to help artists, and she was put on the payroll for \$23 a week.

After working on a mural at the Fashion Institute of Technology, Mrs. Abelman learned that a group of graphic artists was being formed called the American Artists Congress.

"We couldn't wait to do something that would reflect our times and anxieties," she told *The East Hampton Star* in an interview in 1984. "Often our funding was threatened and we would immediately set up picket lines. I took the job very seriously — I think I recognized even then that it was a historical series of events."

She was sent to Sioux City, Iowa, a meat-packing town hard hit by the Depression, and worked on an exhibit about public housing. It was the first time she had ever left New York City. There was so little money for the show that, although its designs incorporated the most radical architectural ideas coming out of Europe, its display was nearly all made with construction paper.

When she returned to New York City she won a commission to do a mural for a post office in Lewistown, Ill., a place known mainly as the site of Edgar Lee Masters's "Spoon River Anthology."

Packing a large trunk full of art materials, she set off alone once



Linda Sherry

again, having decided to paint Lincoln's debate with Stephen Douglas, which took place at the Lewistown courthouse, as the subject of the mural. This turned out to be lucky, as the postmistress told her that the townspeople had not yet forgiven Masters for his book, and would not have been happy to have it portrayed on their post office wall.

Another mural followed in

Boonville, Ind., a tribute to the town's founder, a cousin of Daniel Boone. The mural program came to an end with the arrival of World War II. At the age of 34, Mrs. Edelman gave birth to her first child, Margaret, and, on the advice of the Rosenbergs, they moved to Sag Harbor. The family did not find life easy there for the first 10 years, discovering, Mrs. Abelman told *The Star*, an unspoken anti-Semitism that left them rather isolated except from other artists, particularly Mary Whelan and her big family, who lived in East Hampton's Northwest Woods.

Mr. Abelman took a job selling wholesale fruit and vegetables, and his wife, while continuing to paint, also caned chairs, refinished furniture, and took in sewing to help the family get by.

Mrs. Abelman's work from the 1930s has been published in a number of recent books, including "American Prints of the 1930s" by the University of Michigan, "The Machine Age in American Art" by the Brooklyn Museum, and "20th Century Prints" by Queens College. Her later work, which included prints, abstract ceramics, and fine art enameling in addition to paintings, was shown over the years in galleries throughout the country and on the East End.

In addition to her daughter, Mrs. Abelman is survived by a son, Fred Abelman of Anacortis, Wash., six grandchildren, two great-grandchildren, and several nephews and nieces.

A brother and three sisters, Rebecca, Bess, and Fanny, died before her.

A memorial gathering will be held in the spring.