TED LUDWICZAK'S
SOULFUL SPIRITS
FROM STONE

Edward M. Gomez visits the Polish-born sculptor at his waterside home in New York's Hudson River Valley

Ted Ludwiczak was just about to turn thirty when he arrived in the United States after World War II. A well-educated young man—speaking Polish, German and some English—he had studied economics in his native Poland and had worked with the American military during the Allies' post-war occupation of Germany. He headed to New York, where relatives who had already immigrated to the US helped him become settled. In time, he would co-found and for several decades co-manage a laboratory that developed contact lenses. Ludwiczak married, became a father and, ultimately, realized a classic version of the American dream, eventually finding and moving into the modest house he now occupies, alone, in his retirement. The house is located in Rockland County, in the state of New York, about 58 kilometres northwest of New York City, on the west bank of the Hudson River.

That majestic waterway, which 17th-century European newcomers to the region compared to the Rhine, and which has played such a redolent role in American history, is literally Ludwiczak's back yard—perhaps it is actually his front yard, depending on how a visitor views his riverside home, which hugs the edge of a quiet, residential street and is surrounded on two sides by narrow patches of garden and, in the back (or the front), by all that water.

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Back in the 1960s, I decided to build a retaining wall to prevent the yard, which slopes down to the water from a higher elevation, from eroding and slipping into the river! Ludwickzack recalls. His property is situated along a short stretch of the Hudson in which, at the water's edge, the land is at the same elevation as the water, forming a beach. Using a construction method that is common in the New England region of the US, Ludwickzack stacked flat stones, without mortar, to create a holding wall. He hauled the material out of the river's shallow bank area. The same kind of reddish rock that was used to build New York City's famous brownstone townhouses in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Using chunks of this rock, Ludwickzack made his first stone carvings as decorations to adorn a section of his retaining wall that contains a lookout cave. The self-taught sculptor says: 'I carved the first three heads that I carved the three Stooges, after the comedians who were so popular a long time ago. As I carved each face, I fell in love with the way a distinct personality emerged, and I've been carving stone heads ever since.'

Ludwickzack's studio is nothing more than a tiny table that touches the side of his house, loaded down with tools and surrounded by works-in-progress and finished pieces of varying sizes. He uses a limited number of tools, including chisels, hammers and rasps, and says he tries not to impose a face or a style on his material as much as he seeks to respond to the 'spirit of each stone' — to be guided by each piece's aura and texture, and thereby to give visible form to the character or personality he feels is emanating from it. 'I'm here every day,' the artist says of his compact, humble, outdoor workspace. He says: 'I'm here even in the winter, when it's dry and bright enough to go outside.'

The simplicity of Ludwickzack's carvings, which feature almond-shaped eyes, noses that are long and pointed, or flat, or broad and bulbous, and an infinite array of head shapes, belies the expressive power of the multitude of faces he has conjured up out of rough stone over many years of diligent labors. More precisely, though, as Ludwickzack enthusiastically points out to a visitor, the locally based documentary film-maker Teresa Reglin, 'Except for hauling the stones up from the river, which is great exercise for me, my stone carving isn't work at all — it's pure pleasure.'

Last summer, Outside In, a short film Reglin produced about several self-taught artists, including Ludwickzack, who live and work in the mid-Hudson Valley region, was shown at the GAGA Arts Center in Garnerville, New York, a small town near the sculptor's home. Housed in part of a complex of former factory buildings dating from the late 1800s, the arts center is situated next to a broad, tree-shaded creek. There, GAGA's directors are installing a sculpture garden in which a collection of several dozen (or, prospective donations of the actual artworks permitting, perhaps even several hundred) of Ludwickzack's stone carvings will be given a permanent home. The character and quality of Lee's sculptures will contribute in a major way to the look and ambiance of the sculpture garden,' observes James Lipman, an academically trained sculptor who serves as GAGA's director.

When told about the prominent place his art will occupy in the cultural center's sculpture garden, for which landscaping is now under way, Ludwickzack smiles and admits, with genuine humility, that he hesitates to call himself an 'artist' at all. Instead, he explains, sounding very much like the unmistakably inventive artist and skilled craftsman that he is, 'I'm just happy — and I feel the most at peace and the most connected with the river and this place — when I'm handling and carving my stones.'