

ALFRED BERGEL – SKETCHES OF A FORGOTTEN LIFE

From Vienna to Auschwitz

By Anna Weise, Temple Lodge, 2021

Reviewing this extraordinary book was an honorable task. My Jewish background and 50 years as a Camphill coworker gave me a particular interest in the research the author had done.

I knew that Karl Koenig was from a Jewish family, many of his friends and colleagues who would become the founders of Camphill were of Jewish origin, and he had successfully escaped Nazi-occupied Austria and the horrors of the Holocaust. To learn that he had a close and intimate Jewish friend through his childhood and youth certainly piqued my interest. Indeed he had a very dear friend, Alfred Bergel, who as an adult went a different way and carried a different destiny.

Anna Weise, the author, is a sleuth of immense proportions, as she pieces together an incredible mosaic of information collected from documents, diaries, letters, photographs, artwork, and interviews, all containing names, addresses, dates, and happenings. As a clear-headed investigator she is able to assemble all these pieces drawn from her myriad of sources into a coherent and moving story.

We meet Alfred Bergel and Karl Koenig as true brothers through their childhood and youth. Spiritually and emotionally they supported each other during the time of the First World War. Alfred's father Arnold was also a guiding star and loving personality for the young Karl Koenig.

We see Alfred, affectionately called Fredi, and Karl part as each one takes up his own individual calling into adulthood, Alfred as an artist and art instructor, Karl as a doctor rooted in Anthroposophy. Karl Koenig experiences both the sadness and the necessity of their parting in his short story "The Revelation of Karma."

We see Alfred rise to some recognition and prominence in the field of art education in Vienna. At the same time we follow the dehumanization of society and human existence, particularly for the Jewish people, as the Nazi annexation of Austria takes place. Life and all human values are repressed and defamed, and Alfred Bergel and his family are torn out of life in Vienna by the Nazi madness.

We go with him to Theresienstadt, the model Nazi concentration camp which is made to look wholesome to outsiders but is a cruel incarceration on the inside. We see Alfred rise as one of the carriers of the cultural life in Theresienstadt, teacher of art and art history, both openly and secretly, nourishing the soul-spirit of his fellow inmates, a soul-spirit that refuses to be extinguished.

We follow Alfred and thousands of others to their deaths at Auschwitz.

The moving, inspiring, and tragic life journey of Alfred Bergel is successfully put in the context of the horrific events of the Twentieth Century. To this the author adds a chapter on the life of Anthroposophy within Theresienstadt, preceded by a touching reflection on human dignity. Robert O. Fisch, a survivor, is quoted from his writings:

The Holocaust teaches this lesson: Love overcomes hate.

*Even among the most sorrowful memories,
The humanitarian acts performed by compassionate individuals
Shine above the dark side of brutality.*

The book concludes with a detailed following of the destinies of Bergel family members.

I salute the author for creating such a moving and coherent saga, well documented and wonderfully illustrated, out of fragments collected with meticulous care and fused together with clarity and integrity. This is a life truly remembered!

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