

Alfred Bergel
Sketches of a Forgotten Life
From Vienna to Auschwitz

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by **Anne Weise**

Review by Cherry How

This is the story of one man and one family who lived in Vienna in the first half of the twentieth century. But their story is emblematic of the millions of Jewish people who suffered and died under the Nazi rule of the 'Third Reich'.

The Bergels were cultured middle class people. The father, Arnold, was an accountant and there were three children. The elder son, Alfred, studied fine arts and became an art teacher. The second son, Arthur, trained as a doctor and there was a sister Marianne. Ten members of the extended Bergel family were murdered in Auschwitz/Birkenau.

Anne Weise has devoted herself to researching and documenting these people and it is truly astonishing how many photographs and documents have been found and reproduced here. Significant people, places and works of art come to life through the pictures as Anne Weise's thorough, original and meticulous research reveals the destiny of this family.

The book was published in German in 2014 and this is the English edition, published by Temple Lodge in collaboration with the Karl König Archives. The format of short sections breaks up the intense narrative. The amount of German and other foreign names and addresses

is rather overwhelming for non-German speakers but the effect of the detailed documentation reinforces the impression of the countless victims and their lives before and after persecution.

The book is dedicated to Christof König, the elder son of Dr Karl König who founded the Camphill Movement in Scotland in 1939/40. Christof, with his wife Annemarie, lived in Camphill communities in Northern Ireland and England most of his adult life. He died in 2016 but was aware of the original edition of the book and its story and was very taken by it.

It was Karl König who led Weise to the Bergels because König's surviving diaries frequently mention his dear teenage friend Fredi. Who was Fredi? Anne wondered.



Alfred Bergel 1920



At the Prater in Vienna

Back row from left: Karl König, Alfred Bergel, unknown, Arthur Bergel; *front row from left:* Jeanette Bergel, Arnold Bergel, Marianne Bergel

We learn about Alfred Bergel through Karl König as Alfred himself did not keep a diary, and the extracts from König's very early diaries included here are of special interest to people who know the Camphill Movement.

The Bergel family were like a second family to Karl König who was an only child with busy working parents. And moreover their cultural, artistic and philosophical interests were nourishment to the searching soul of young Karl. Classical music, opera, poetry entranced him and his connection to all these was to last throughout his life. The father

Arnold was a mentor and example to the teenage boy.

But life was not serious all the time: there were outings to the woods and countryside and hikes in the nearby mountains, not to mention youthful pranks, falling in love and midnight rambles.

'He is my best friend,' wrote Karl of Alfred.

However, when the young men were 23 years old a fateful rift developed between them. König had discovered anthroposophy, the spiritual scientific world view of Rudolf Steiner, and felt increasingly drawn to it and to Christianity. He tried to share this with Bergel but they could not agree and from then on they were estranged. König left Vienna, each of them married and developed his own career. Even though König returned to Vienna in 1936 he was able to escape Austria after the Nazis took over the country and he entered Britain as a refugee in 1938.

Gradually Nazi oppression restricted the Bergels' lives. Their apartment and belongings were stolen and they had to endure all the oppressive measures, indignities and discrimination forced upon the Jewish population. They were unable to emigrate to Palestine as they wanted to.

The beginning of the end for Alfred was when he and his wife Sophie were transported to Theresienstadt, a ghetto near Prague, in 1942. His mother and his brother with his wife were also sent there.

Theresienstadt was not really a concentration camp. It was a large

walled off area of a town where Jews were forced to live, but conditions were dreadful: dirty, freezing cold, with only starvation rations. People had to sleep on the floor or in three-tiered bunk dormitories. The process of dehumanising ‘undesirable’ people began and from there regular transports left for Auschwitz, a long journey east.

Eyewitness accounts of survivors and research by historians and strongly motivated people such as Anne Weise have produced detailed accounts of life in Theresienstadt and they also reveal the unusual occupation of a small number of inmates, including Alfred Bergel.

They had to work in workshops where they made drawings, posters, catalogues and such like, colouring them by hand, and also craft items, all for the use of the Nazi leadership and the state.

Less widely known is the art forgery when the artists were forced to copy famous works of art for Nazi enjoyment or for sale in order to raise money for the Reich. These counterfeit copies of masterpieces were sold as originals, as is described by witnesses whose recollections are collected in the book.

This is one of the most interesting things about the biography and Anne Weise herself suggests the necessity of further research into it.

Another falsehood was perpetrated by the sanitised drawings of conditions in the ghetto which were shown to foreign agencies like the International

Red Cross to ‘prove’ that conditions were good, ‘a false, beautified image of the ghetto’ (AW). Thus the prisoners had to invent lies about their own suffering. Some of these works survive and are reproduced in the book.

This artistic role came with slightly better conditions but nevertheless there was the mental and emotional stress caused by loss of freedom and family and the uncertain future. And the workshop was subject to arbitrary inspections and punishment.

The prisoners, including Alfred Bergel, also gave the other inmates lessons in drawing and painting and lectures on artistic techniques and art movements. Professor Bergel was highly appreciated and remembered and the educational events were up-



Alfred Bergel, self-portrait 1918
(rights: Ghetto Fighters Museum Israel)

lifting and nourishing especially for the younger people there. Touchingly, the artists also made drawings of other inmates which were treasured by their relatives.

Many accounts tell of how the prisoners kept their spirits up by artistic and cultural activities: opera, classical music, study groups, all to a high standard.

Weise includes moving testimonies about how people strove to maintain their humanity through uplifting experiences, supporting each other and feeling part of a community. She points to the redeeming power of the arts and the mutual support which the victims of the Holocaust experienced in many ways. Many individuals are named and their further destiny described, if known.

Anne Weise concludes that Alfred Bergel must have encountered anthroposophy in Theresienstadt because several leading anthroposophists were in his circle and met to study and read works by Steiner which miraculously existed there, and to read the words of the Act of Consecration of Man.

'We felt helping forces to be with us,' said Martha Haarburger about these moments.

This had to be disguised as philosophical discussions.

Martha Haarburger was able to speak the words of the Act of Consecration by heart (except the seasonal prayers) and it was suggested by the others that she do this every Sunday.

It is touching to read how the little group earnestly asked themselves if it was allowed to do this since none of them were priests, but they concluded

that their 'extraordinary situation would permit an exception to a rule.'

They then experienced that they were doing the right thing and 'felt as though enveloped and flooded through by a strong power. Then I knew that the divine world approved of what I was doing' (M.H.)

The words were written down and hidden in case something happened to Haarburger and were later destroyed. Martha Haarburger survived the war. Her memories were published in *Die Christengemeinschaft* 5 (1978).

The group numbered from thirty to eventually ten people. They met at 10 a.m. every Sunday and celebrated the festivals together.

At times they had to sit outside in all weathers, when no room was available, softly murmuring the words. This gave them enormous strength and solidarity. 'None of us was alone.'

Alfred and Sophie Bergel and their six-month-old daughter Rachel were transported to Auschwitz on October 16, 1944, two years after arriving in Theresienstadt.

Alfred and Rachel were murdered almost immediately but Sophie survived. She escaped from a labour camp and later remarried, dying in 1970.

Arthur Bergel, his wife and mother were sent to Auschwitz twelve days later.

Alfred was 42 years old when he died. His boyhood friend, Karl König, was 63 at his death in 1966. Both of their lives carry the rhythm of the seven year cycle of human development.

The last chapters of the book focus on anthroposophy and the help it offers in understanding these kinds of events.

The Bergels 'disappeared' into the Holocaust. But through dedicated and painstaking scholarship Anne Weise has rescued them from anonymity and through this book they also represent the millions who suffered the same fate, yet each in an entirely individual and personal way.

That was also Karl König's intention: to dignify apparently unimportant lives.

König never knew what had happened to his friend Fredi or the family which had supported him in his teenage years.

He lived another 21 years and in that relatively short time he founded the Camphill Movement which has touched thousands of lives through its work with people with disabilities and socially marginalised groups, in communities where each person is an individual, not a number.

One can see how one of the tasks of Camphill, as envisaged futuristically by Karl König, was a direct response to the destruction of human values perpetrated by Nazism. In this way König humbly tried to compensate for what he himself, his immediate family and his friends had been spared.

Anne Weise points out that it was anthroposophy which caused the separation between Karl and Fredi. But just as much it was their youth and headstrong characters, as Karl himself acknowledged. The later realisation of this must

have caused both of them immense pain and regret.

One cannot help but perceive that the threads of destiny which connected Alfred Bergel and Karl König must have continued to work after their parting and into the future. Each of the two young men remained true to their youthful impulses and tried to alleviate the suffering of people who were 'forgotten'.

There are, thankfully, many Holocaust memoirs; however, there can never be enough because each represents an individual experience.

Perhaps we may be allowed to feel that our interest in and compassion for the Bergels now is something we can still offer to them, and also to Karl König, and in fact to all who died as well as those who, in spite of everything, lived.

