

Alfred Bergel Opens a New Chapter on Holocaust Art: Spiritual Sustenance and Forced Forgery

Anne Weise

Here we were enduring incredible hardships, bidding our friends, family and colleagues good bye forever at regular intervals, living surrounded by death, sickness, hunger, filth, and cruelty of every imaginable kind – and this brilliant man tried to teach us - secretly - after the official curfew time about such esoteric fine points as color, harmony, balance, form, beauty.¹
(Charlotte Guthmann-Opfermann about Alfred Bergel in Theresienstadt.)

It all started with repeatedly reading the name Fredi in the diaries of Karl König as part of my task in the Karl König Archive. It was clear that they were best friends during their youth, but who was Fredi – whom we soon identified as Alfred Bergel... but who was he? The internet gave the information that he was imprisoned in the concentration camp Theresienstadt and murdered in Auschwitz, and, step by step, I found some quotes by survivors who remembered Alfred Bergel from Theresienstadt. After contacting several Holocaust museums who almost all told me that they did not know of him, my curiosity was completely awakened, but also a sense of responsibility. Shouldn't we use the many diary entries to reinstate this forgotten soul of the Holocaust, one of thousands that vanished into oblivion? Long lasting and thorough research started. His biography could gradually be re-constructed, including surprising activities in Theresienstadt of copying or even forging art, opening a new chapter in Holocaust research!

Alfred Bergel, a Viennese Jew, artist and art teacher was forced to work with art in the concentration camp Theresienstadt from 1942 to 1944. In those desolate and soul-destroying circumstances it was, in a certain way, luck to be assigned to work in an art workshop as it was not hard physical labor and the workshops had sanitary facilities like a properly working toilet and running water which was often not the case in the living quarters. He was also allowed to work alongside of like-minded people, fellow artists with whom interesting conversations were possible, where a sense of community and even friendship could compensate somewhat the despair everyone must have felt. In addition, the artists often also had access to cultural activities which were abundant in Theresienstadt. Thousands of lectures were held, often several per day on all imaginable topics, even entire courses in history, philosophy, art, medicine that took place in attics, or secretly in backrooms, later on officially permitted. Like many others who took a stand with inner spiritual resistance, Alfred Bergel did not give himself up to hopelessness and fear, but tried to work against it. He held many lectures, and courses in art history: the themes of three of them are known. In June and September 1944 he gave a lecture on "Painting Technique", in August 1944 on "Cubism". He not only gave lectures but also lessons to care givers and children in the children's homes L 410 and L 414, sometimes together with Friedl Dicker-Brandeis of Bauhaus fame. Having access to art books and supplies like paper and artist's colors was applied wisely by Alfred Bergel for disobediently teaching children and young people. Several surviving former students of these children's homes remembered this revered individuality, Charlotte Guthmann-Opfermann wrote: *I was a member of a small group of Betreuer (caregiver) students who attended Professor Bergel's presentations on Wednesday evenings, after our regular workday. We were in awe of this learned and privileged fellow prisoner.²* Alfred Bergel worked in at least two different art workshops in Theresienstadt, first in the "Firma Lautsch", also called Lautscher Werkstatt", and later when that had been closed after a raid in September 1943, in the "Sonderwerkstatt" (special painting studio). In both workshops all sorts of drawings, paintings and artisan products were produced. The workers in all art studios were forced to portray a false, beautified image of the ghetto. Despite this hated task, a creative atmosphere among the artists was possible. On the one hand, it indeed was a privileged working place in Theresienstadt which also allowed the artists – including Alfred Bergel - to devote themselves at least partially to their profession as they had access to artist's supplies for their own artistic activity.

On the other hand, who would have liked to be in Alfred Bergel's shoes when he was being chased around, in and outside of the camp, by the harassing, extremely unpredictable Commandant Rahm, forcing him by fear of his life to draw certain views of Theresienstadt. He had to paint under his surveillance and more so, often he was exactly told by Rahm which details he had to draw. For example he was forced to paint a nonexistent fountain and people taking a stroll on the market place with planted greenery and flowers although in truth the prisoners were not allowed to set foot in that space. As Käthe Starke remembered: *'Bergel go make me a fountain.'* – he [Rahm] demanded. *And Bergel... 'made' him a fountain with photographic fidelity, and he had to fill the space with strolling idlers, who were not to be seen, because under penalty of death it was forbidden to enter it, and he had to populate the pavilion with a conductor and a band.*³ Particularly macabre is the watercolor, which Alfred Bergel had to make of the private room of the subsequent commander, Anton Burger, who was notorious for his cruelty and despotism. We can hardly imagine what Alfred Bergel must have felt and thought when he had to paint this room at the mercy of commander Burger who he might even have known from Vienna after the Anschluss in 1938, as Burger was working under Adolf Eichmann in the Central Agency for Jewish Emigration in Vienna when Bergel's wish to emigrate was unsuccessful. Astonishingly, after the end of the war, Burger could escape American imprisonment twice and was able to live unrecognized in Austria and West-Germany until he died a natural cause in 1991.

The “special painting studio” was a secret painting project which had to comply with instructions directly from the commandant's office. It was temporarily even housed directly in the SS headquarters, in the lion's den! Thus, considering that this art workshop was not under the control of the Jewish self-government, as was usual with most workshops, Bergel and his colleagues were particularly at the mercy of the commanders of Theresienstadt. Obviously the intent was to hide these activities, not wanting witnesses. But the question can arise: what was important enough to hide in a place where anyway every inmate could have been openly shot or beaten, many different things were officially produced, which were not a secret at all, so why was this particular artist's studio taken under the control of the commander personally? In this special painting studio all kinds of paintings were requested: they had to paint alpine landscapes, family portraits, horse pictures and sunsets for members of the SS to decorate their private homes, to enhance their collections or for public buildings. It is, however, hardly known that they were also forced to copy masterworks of art, and now evidence begins to surface that they were forging to order! Charlotte Guthmann-Opfermann, a survivor of Theresienstadt, reported that ... *Professor Bergel from Vienna,... [was] engaged in creating fake, high quality, counterfeit copies of famous art masterworks (and some counterfeit 'originals') by order of the SS Kommandantur*⁴. While researching Alfred Bergel's life we had stumbled over this new chapter of silenced history. The differentiation that appears here is certainly important: The artists, including Alfred Bergel, were forced to create *"counterfeit copies of famous art masterworks (and some counterfeit 'originals')"*. The latter meaning imitating the style of a famous artist, painting new works that could fit into the oeuvre of the painter. While describing the lessons given by Alfred Bergel Charlotte Guthmann-Opfermann once more discerned between copied works of art for the amusement of the SS officers and actual counterfeiting for the international market: *He [Alfred Bergel] covered the great masterworks, but showed us also so-called Degenerate Art, inasmuch as he was helping create counterfeit copies of this genre, also, for the Kommandant [commander] and his superiors to enjoy and for sale on the international art market.*⁵ These statements could also be affirmed by the artist and Holocaust survivor Fred Klein.⁶ As this was such a secret undertaking, of course, many fellow prisoners did not know about it, and anyway it was policy that the lives of those who knew too much ended in Auschwitz. But there are a few more former prisoners who documented these machinations. Lote Pollaková, for example, reported: *There was a "Special Workshop", and there we continued painting copies of the old masters then this Viennese professor Bergel who copied the Old Masters.*⁷ And another prisoner told that Dutch painters were forged; notably she mentioned the artist Jan van Goyen⁸. She explicitly used the word "counterfeits", which clearly goes beyond mere copying: *"Yes, they made*

copies, virtually counterfeits of Dutch masters, one was specialized in van Goyen.”⁹ These statements potentially indicate an as yet unrecognized, macabre chapter in the history of the Nazi regime dealing with art produced in concentration camps where prisoners in Theresienstadt were forced to fake works of art to be sold on the international art market, thus acquiring foreign currency to finance the war. Much is still a mystery. These copies might have decorated the walls in houses or offices of Nazi officials, which is, of course, reprehensible but would only be classed as forgery if they had been circulated fraudulently as originals. This is exactly the question that poses itself after studying the fate of Alfred Bergel. The above quotations suggest that this boundary was often transcended. Those voices testify consensually of forgery, meaning copied works that were to be sold under the pretenses of being originals and thus not readily identifiable as copies. Inquiries about this subject at the Terezín Memorial, the Jewish Museum in Prague, in YadVashem in Israel as well as some other Holocaust archives and museums resulted in the response, that, although oral testimony to the counterfeiting activities do exist, nobody has studied and followed up these findings yet. Much more research needs to happen. Many questions remain. How did it happen? Did they copy/counterfeit from originals or prints? In Theresienstadt there was a workshop for restoring old masterpieces of art, which has also hardly been documented. Therefore, in the same building as the special painting studio they did have originals to copy from. The author has done a great deal of research already, in particular listening to countless oral testimonies of former inmates and collecting the relevant statements, which are published in the extensive biography about Alfred Bergel, but much more research is necessary to bring this hidden chapter completely to light. Thanks to the impulse gained from the diaries of Karl König we could at least rescue this biography of Alfred Bergel from the darkness. But it seems that penetrating this darkness has directed us to the first outlines of a further monster of Nazi terror.

Anne Weise: Alfred Bergel : Skizzen aus einem vergessenen Leben : Wien, Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, Stuttgart, 2015 (Editor: Karl König Institute for Art, Science and Social Life)

1 Guthmann-Opfermann, Charlotte in: Forging the Future, Art, War and the Pact with the Devil, Prague 11 February 2004.

2 See endnote 1.

3 Starke, Käthe: Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt, Berlin, Haude & Spener, 1975, p. 119 (Translated from German by Anne Weise)

4 See endnote 1.

5 See endnote 1.

6 <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-holocaust&month=0005&week=a&msg=BbUDmJPzXceGcOM/vrEprg&user=&pw> retrieved January 22, 2014, Online discussion network of the Humanities and Social Science Department in the H-net for scholars of the Holocaust

7 Conversation between Anna Lorencová and Lote Pollaková on 8 November 1991 in Prague, Shoah History Department, Jewish Museum Prague (Translated from Czech by Anne Weise)

8 Jan van Goyen, Dutch landscape artist (1596-1656)

9 Interview with L.J, Archive of the Jewish Museum Prague, Shoah History Department, Jewish Museum Prague (Translated from Czech by Katka Králiková)