

Helen Breger

Wartime Experience: Fled to Holland and Interned in Trinidad

A Short Account of Events

My parents were Baruch Hammermann, my father, and Ester, nee Wachsman, my mother. They came respectively, my father from Russia, my mother from Poland and settled as a young married couple in Vienna where they produced four daughters of whom I am the youngest. My father went into business although he had grown up a Talmudic scholar preparing to study for the rabbinate, but with his growing family he could not pursue his studies.

My mother was a partner in the business, an import-export firm of straw and felt hats, which in time prospered and grew to become a well-known establishment. At the time of the Anschluss, when the Nazis annexed Austria, we were a fairly well to do family living in a handsome apartment near the two vast museums and the Ringstrasse. Within a week of the Nazi takeover my father was arrested and taken off to an unknown (to us) destination in the first roundup of Jewish businessmen. My sisters and I scoured the city and finally learned that he was held at a hastily organized detention center and that he was given orders to vacate his business and with his family leave his apartment and all his possessions and emigrate within a dauntingly short period of time. We had no relatives in the United States nor elsewhere so could not expect affidavits, we lined up at foreign consulates but with no success. In the end almost when time had run out we learned through rumors that by paying a head tax (as it was called) one could for a short time enter into Trinidad, British West Indies, (at the time) before emigration there was closed.

My parents, myself and my married sister with her husband went to Holland and from there by ship to Trinidad. I was seventeen at the time, my oldest sister Rose far older and a single mother with a ten-year-old boy, my sister Nadja next to me in age a student in Paris with connections that enabled her to bring Rose and her son to Paris. After the fall of France Rosa and Heinz, her boy, managed to flee to Chile and Nadja to New York.

In Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, we arrived without any funds and only a smattering of English, but grateful to have been saved. However, we didn't know until much later in the war what had become of my other two sisters and the child.

In 1940 all the Jewish refugees were interned in Trinidad in a primitive army camp where we stayed until the end of the war. By that time we had attained our papers to immigrate to the United States. Eventually the family was reunited in New York. My mother's Polish siblings and their families had all perished.

I grew up in a household where art and music were valued, particularly my older sisters were involved, one an art student in Berlin, another sister had a boy who was a child prodigy on the piano. Very early on I drew all the time on whatever paper I could find, back of envelopes and bills, the margins of newspapers or magazines or even the flyleaves of books.

There was never any doubt in my mind that I would be an artist and when I won a scholarship to a major art school at fourteen though I was still in high school this extracurricular class launched me on a long life in art and a never-ending learning process. Teacher of art and maker of art were my occupations throughout my life and although retired from teaching now I am still going on with the learning process. For me the exploration never ends, I have only in fairly recent years taken up sculpture, have gone from mostly two-dimensional work into ceramic sculpture and from there into other sculpture media.

Drawing and painting remain my special passions and my most natural language, but all my visual knowledge comes into play at one time or another. As for the images that I produce they have always expressed my explorations, my particular spirit. The freedom to have a wide range of expressions is very important to me. I am not of the style in art that repeats the same work year in and year out. I have too much to say for that, too much to show and tell.

Thankfully I am in good health and full of ability so that I hope to produce a while longer and like Hokusai, the marvelous Japanese artist said in his eighties, "I am just becoming a really good artist. "