

Richard Kimelman

Wartime Experience: Fled to England

My parents were both born in Poland at the end of the last century. In 1903, my father, Markus Kimelman, came to Vienna University to study medicine and specialized in internal medicine. In 1914, when the war started, he was drafted and spent the next four years in charge of field hospitals at the front. He was a romantic Idealist, as only someone of his generation could be and always believed that a universal civilization and peace could be attained. It seems particularly ironic that he came out of the war with an Iron Cross and another decoration – not for killing, but for saving life – yet was exposed to horrendous violence and brutality throughout his life.

When he was discharged from the army in 1918, he went to visit his family in Poland for a few weeks. He was soon trapped by the Russian Bolshevik forces which suddenly overran Poland. Two relatives were killed because they were landowners. The Bolsheviks badly needed doctors and forced him to work for them and to accompany them as they retreated, until he contracted typhus. He appeared to be dying and was left behind when they retreated once again. A farm family took him in and nursed him until he was barely strong enough to travel back to his own family. He got back to Vienna in 1920, two years after starting his brief vacation.

At this point, internal medicine seemed too strenuous and demanding to him – when practiced to his high standards – and he decided to change his specialty. During the war a new field had been developed in the Vienna clinics dealing with diseases of the mouth. My father decided to specialize in this and to qualify in general dentistry as backup. At this point he met my mother.

My mother, Emma Schaeffler, was sixteen when the war started. Her father was drafted and the rest of the family was evacuated into the interior of Poland. My mother was sent to a home for Jewish girls in Vienna where she completed high school and then enrolled in Vienna University Medical School. She was one of the first women at the medical school and was constantly harassed by the faculty: a famous anatomist who lectured with his back to the auditorium when women were present, professors who asked her impossible questions at oral examinations and mocked women mercilessly. She met my father in her final year, and they decided to marry. My father persuaded her to abandon the residency in pediatrics, which she had planned, and to join him in his specialties so that they could form a joint practice. When she died at age 92 she still regretted that she had listened to him – although eventually she practiced pediatric dentistry.

I was born in 1926. From my earliest memory, my mother worked professionally – and continued until she was in her late seventies. I spent much time with our maid and a neighbor's child, although my mother checked on me constantly. At that time it was unusual and unacceptable for middle class women to work full-time. I went to the local grade school and eventually a very prestigious – and brutally archaic – Gymnasium. I was in my second year there when in April 1938, the Germany Army suddenly overran Austria. I was very familiar with anti-

Semitism both officially at school and in the streets where I had often been attacked by gangs of boys. But I had learned to take care of myself and felt secure and confident. Nothing prepared me for what happened then. I remember on the first day, German tanks, guns, trucks and motorbikes rolled past our apartment windows for endless hours, sirens incessantly wailing a deafening and ominous dirge.

My father was among the first people arrested and he spent the next year as a prisoner, first of the Gestapo, then in Dachau concentration camp. Soon a German officer came to tell us that our apartment had been allocated to him and we had to leave. A German expatriate, who had returned from Chile expecting to make his fortune in the new Austria, bought our furniture for a few shillings. We had to hide and we did so in the villa of a friend's friend, until the owner killed herself one night. I remember being told that I had to stay out in the garden while the very troubled adults were busy inside. We had to leave immediately and find another hiding place.

My mother was a very determined woman, attractive and imposing. In April 1939, she very courageously managed to speak to the deputy leader of the Gestapo in Vienna who agreed to release my father if he could get out of the county immediately – otherwise he would be sent back to Dachau. This was desperately difficult: when you have nowhere to go, nobody wants you. With another frantic effort, she managed to get us a visitor's visa to England. In England, through the International Federation of University Women, she worked illegally as a nurse in a school. I was given a scholarship as a boarder to a very strict British public school founded in 1363, a bizarre experience, especially since I did not know a word of English. I feel extremely lucky to have escaped from Vienna, survived the war and even to have survived relatively undamaged when a German V. 1, a pilotless plane filled with high explosives, landed a few feet from where I was sleeping. It swept the house away over the top of me, leaving me with only bruises, glass cuts, and a fractured eardrum. If I had lifted my head, I would have been killed.

After the war, we discovered that the only other survivors of both my parents' families were an uncle who was in the Warsaw Ghetto until it was destroyed and then hid outside it, and his daughter who survived a jump from a moving train taking her to a camp and then joined Resistance fighters in the forest. We also know of an uncle who killed himself on a train to a camp. My mother's beloved young brother had fled from Vienna to Belgium with his very orthodox wife and child. There were waiting until a sufficiently Kosher family could be found for them in England when the Germans reached Belgium. There is no more record of all these people. Even the few photographs we had were destroyed in New York. My parents had hoped to immigrate to the United States and had already sent our few remaining belongings to New York. Our papers were delayed in Washington until the Atlantic blockade began and prevented our crossing.

In 1942, when there was a great shortage of all medical personnel because of the war, my parents who were highly qualified, were finally permitted to work because of their medical degrees - but only as dentists in a London school clinic. When they were settled in London, I joined them to go to college and graduated in engineering from London University in 1946. My

parents and I decided to settle in England and became British subjects. My mother continued to work with children and became a pediatric dentist running a clinic outside London. She died at age 92. My father never fully recovered from the year of being held by the Gestapo and then Dachau. He worked but had repeated heart attacks and died at age 76. I stayed in London working on the design of very large engineering projects – which is what I like to work on – until 195, when I went to work on the construction of a hydro-electric scheme in the north of Scotland.

I met Joan Sands in 1947, when she had just graduated from Cambridge University at age 19 – a real achievement when there were just two women’s colleges and most women students came from a few select schools. Joan was born in London but some of her extended family also perished in Europe. We married in 1953, and lived for two years on the beautiful South Wales coast.

Like many refugees, I have never felt settled anywhere – always prepared to move. So, in 1955, I uprooted us and we came to upstate NY where I worked on a huge dam. After several more years of moving - and three children – Joan persuaded me that we should buy a house near San Francisco. That was thirty-six years ago. I think now that I may have finally arrived.

I was always considered “artistic” but when I finished high school it did not even occur to me that I might go to art school. It was wartime and I was a refugee. I became a structural engineer and practiced for thirty years. All this time ,I drew and painted and made sculpture in my spare time until I realized that sculpture had become far more meaningful to me than engineering. During this time, my wife had gone back to school to get her doctorate in psychology while our three children were small. When she became established in her profession, it became possible for me to leave engineering and become a full-time sculptor.

I was making abstract sculptures in bronze until 1984, when we went to Israel for a vacation. To my own surprise, I decide I had to visit Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. This was a tremendous shock for me. When we returned home I abandoned the bronzes and slowly started to develop a mixed media style for my sculptures which expressed my deeper feelings. Recently I have started to use barbed wire, which is an extraordinary material for my purpose. It has a blend of graceful, beguiling curves and overt threat. I also use images of trees or their branches because they appear to me to be one of the most missed and yet ever surviving ancient elements in our world.