

Interview with Frederick Terna-2-15-90

Frederick Terna is an excellent artist who also reads widely. His house is filled both with books and his paintings. His wife is a physician.

WH: Your mediums are acrylic and aggregate and some of your paintings deal with Holocaust themes. How do you try to express what you went through in the work you do?

FT: I try to describe a specific moment without trying to encompass the entire experience. I try to paint a feeling of a particular moment rather than painting the whole thing. I try to convey with colors, shapes, and surfaces, certain attitudes.

WH: What particular moment are you trying to capture?

FT: In some paintings it's about the Auschwitz experience---the gas chambers, the idea of a crematoria.

WH: When were you born?

FT: In 1923, in Vienna, but I grew up in Prague. I entered Auschwitz in 1944 and most of my transport was killed. I had been in other camps from 1941---Terezin and other places. I had a younger brother who died in Treblinka. My father was killed in Auschwitz and my mother died when I was quite young. I was eventually sent to Kaufering 4, part of Dachau. We did slave labor and got 600 calories a day.

WH: Did you sustain any permanent injuries from the camps?

FT: Several, but I manage. My left side always hurts. I describe it as a dull toothache. I've seen doctors---psychiatrists and neurologists, but it hasn't gone away. I think it comes from an "unfriendly" interrogation at the hands of the Gestapo.

WH: How far had you gotten in school?

FT: I had begun gymnasium. I had not shown any real interest in art, though I know now that I was already thinking as an artist even then. I started drawing in Terezin. I began drawing trees and haven't stopped drawing since.

WH: When are you most aware of the Holocaust today?

FT: It's always in the back of my mind, but especially so at simchas. I'm always aware of how lucky I am.

WH: You've drawn a number of paintings dealing with Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac. Does your thinking of it have anything to do with the Holocaust?

FT: Of course. It is essentially an old, old theme that asks why is this happening? So, in the Middle Ages, for example, Jews used this theme to ask why did so many Jews die in Worms and Troyes during the Crusades. The theme has, therefore, been prepared for me.

WH: But isn't it antithetical to the Holocaust in the sense that it says, ultimately, that we don't ask people to die for our sins as the Christians do?

FT: I see it as a theme to speculate on. There are so many midrashim that offer different interpretations, such as the idea that he was actually killed and resurrected. The connection to the Holocaust is that at all times of persecution in the Jewish community, the image of the akedah called up, saying, in a way, you, God, intervened then. Where are you now?

WH: Do you ask that question yourself?

FT: No. To me it's an absurd question.

WH: Why?

FT: I'm totally nonreligious although I'm very much involved with Judaism. To me that question implies the existence of a deity. If you argue with God, that means there's someone there to argue with.

WH: And you don't believe that?

FT: No, not after Auschwitz; and even before. I was kind of open to the idea as a teenager, but I didn't really believe in it.

WH: What makes you Jewish?

FT: I'm culturally and intellectually Jewish. I know more about Jewish history and culture than the average person. Certainly more than the average religious Jew who will know more about the halacha and the Talmud. This is my link.

WH: How about emotionally?

FT: Very much so. It is my group, my clan. I have no choice.

WH: But you do have a choice. You could change.

FT: Well, since religion was never a real part of it, I would not pick Christianity or Buddhism or Islam because I don't believe in that either. I identify in the sense

- that most of my paintings are on Jewish themes. We keep a kosher house for the sake of Rebecca's family.
- WH: Will you give your child any sort of Jewish education when he is older?
- FT: Absolutely. Let him have that part of a Jewish education which I did not have so he can make him up his own mind.
- WH: What helped you survive?
- FT: I think I did one thing in particular and I owe it to my father---that my head was in good working order. I knew who I was, what I was, what the German's were trying to do to me, and that there were certain things I could do and could not do. I understood the value system by which I lived and that Nazism would perish by its own weight. In my darkest moments in Auschwitz I thought, maybe I will not make it, but Nazism is doomed.
- WH: Where did you meet your first wife?
- FT: In Prague. She was literally the girl from down the street. We met in 1940, just before I went to camp. She was in Terezin and in Auschwitz. After the war we married. She was badly maimed emotionally and physically. She died of cancer. She also was manic-depressive. We divorced in the 1970's because in her manic phase she tried to kill me several times and once nearly succeeded. She was hospitalized fourteen times. Eventually lithium helped somewhat. She couldn't have children.
- WH: I guess you really loved her to keep the relationship going through all that turmoil.
- FT: Yes, yes, but eventually I saw it couldn't go on like that. She died soon after we divorced; she had neglected the cancer.
- WH: When did you come here?
- FT: In 1952. It took seven years to get a visa. At first we stayed in the Hotel Paris on 97th Street for a very short time until we found a top floor penthouse at 838 West End Avenue. We stayed there about two years. The rent was about \$80.00 a month.
- WH: What type of work did you do at first?
- FT: I was a production expediter for a vacuum cleaner company. Then I worked in a place that produced religious art for Catholics.
- WH: Did you become friends with survivors?

FT: We stayed away from survivors. There are two kinds of survivors---the ones who never got out of the camps and the ones who got away from the camps. I think I'm one of those who got away. The first group only talked about the camps---what happened to whom; who was where. I feel that's living backwards rather than forwards. Our survivor friends didn't focus on the Holocaust.

WH: How would you feel about that when compared to the idea of zachor?

FT: I'm very much involved in that. Yesterday I was out in Jackson Heights, Queens, talking to a group of school children. But I'm slowly stopping it because it wipes me out emotionally.

WH: What do you think of the survivor organizations, like the one that meets at Madison Square Garden?

FT: That's a "Group Number One". They're professional survivors. I think they do some good. That's their way of handling it. It's not my way.

WH: Are your politics liberal?

FT: Definitely. I vote Democratic.

WH: Does that fact that Rebecca's parents are survivors make it easier for you to relate to her?

FT: It certainly makes it easier. In fact, she's pushing me to write a book about it, to write my memoirs. But I don't have enough facts to do that. It's enough that I speak. And my closing statement usually is: "I want you to remember 60 years from now that you spoke with a survivor in 1990."

WH: What lesson do you think all that happened should teach us?

FT: I think it's a simple lesson---you've got to get involved. Jews were involved, but German's weren't involved in local day-to-day politics. And I'm involved in local politics here on every level. We fought the machine on the Upper East Side and became a Reform club. I was on the nominating committee which gave me a lot of power.

WH: Were you involved in any Jewish organizations?

FT: Because my first wife was so badly maimed emotionally, any involvement as a Jew was impossible. It would have scared her out of her wits. I had a few books on Jewish topics and they were carefully spread through the library. If I occasionally went to a meeting of something Jewish, she would never go. It wasn't that she didn't want to be Jewish; she just didn't want to be involved.

WH: What did you think of the Central reunion?

FT: I thought it was a pretty abominable setup. I mean, everything was done the wrong way.

WH: What did you think of the people?

FT: It was like, you know, being taken on a trip to see the aborigines in Upper Ogoshu. I don't run into this kind of a group often enough. I come out of a Central European Jewish configuration. This was second, or third generation, Eastern European, a religious group. I have contact with Gerer Hasidim through Rebecca's family. I see it as a contradictory lifestyle because they have to deny a lot of evidence around them, including what happened from 1939 to 1945. To be a religious person means to do some kind of intellectual calisthenics---children dying and things like that.

WH: Do you belong to a synagogue?

FT: Yes. I don't believe but I go because Jews go to shul. They light candles on Friday night and say a blessing. It's not logical, but that's what we do.

WH: Where did you meet Rebecca?

FT: In a subway---51st Street and Lexington. We had come back from a big Holocaust survivor's rally in 1982. Jerzy Kosinski was speaking. We were married half a year later. I'm 67 and Rebecca's 43, but I'm in good health and our son is three. I thought that this child will have an old father and that I'm depriving him of a father who does things with his son; but its great fun and I love it.

WH: What achievements in life do you take the greatest pride in?

FT: Trying to lead a sensible life, painting a handful of paintings that will survive. I have a painting in the Yad Vashem Museum.

WH: Have you met other artist survivors?

FT: Only one and he became very successful painting nudes. But now nudity doesn't mean anything.

WH: Do you ever get annoyed at seeing obtuseness of people who don't appreciate art?

FT: Not at all. It's the rule rather than the exception.