

Interviewee: Kurt Herdan

November 17, 2009

Interviewer: Andrea Stutman

Kurt Herdan was born in Austria in 1926, and lived in Czernowitz, Rumania.

He was the happy child of a father who worked in an official capacity, and a mother who was a housewife; his sister was older than Kurt. His mother tongue was German.

Showing how his life had changed, Kurt said: In 1938, he owned 8 suits; in 1941, when recruited, he had to borrow a pair of pants.

Until 1935-6, life was pleasant with school friends of different countries, languages and religions. From then on, the differences became a reason to fight. Because of that, Kurt doesn't recognize any nation today. He has lived under Hitler and Stalin regimes, and hates all of them.

At age 13-14 he studied in a school that was half German and half Rumanian. The Rumanian flag flew outside the school. On a rainy day, when Kurt was leaving the school, the wet flag touched his face. When he made a motion to dry his face, the gesture was interpreted as an offense to the flag, and he was taken to jail. (Since then, he says, he hates flags!) Kurt lived in many countries and as many citizenships, although he doesn't care for any and felt a stranger in each of them.

Life as he knew it was over on June 28, 1940 with the Russian invasion. Kurt suffered more under the Soviets than under the Nazis. He says that the latter were following their own anti-Jewish laws, but that the Soviets did everything without any laws. An example: in 1941, a friend of the father (Christian) helped Kurt obtain a work permit to work in the friend's office. The Russian patrols tore it, after asking for it. Kurt says that the Nazis destroyed you physically whereas the Soviets destroyed your soul.

February 14, 1943, in a forced labor camp, they were put against the wall to be shot but they were not because of a difference of opinion between the Rumanian and the German commandos. There were 500 who were to be shot as they had been accused of sabotage. Upon the return to the barracks, an observant Jew saw this as God's intervention. He told Kurt: "you have to stop smoking on the Shabbat"! Until this day, Kurt doesn't smoke...even though he is not observant.

October 10, 1941, all the Jews of Czernowitz were moved to a ghetto. He slept under a table of a relative, with other 4 youths. There were 16 altogether in that house. From there, the Jews were deported to Transnistria. Those who had money to bribe the Rumanians were saved, though. Kurt's father bribed the mayor of the city who allowed them to return to their home. Kurt was 15 years old.

The young people had to go to work in the city, mainly restoring the bridge over the river Pruth (?) that had been bombed. That work took place from July 1941 until May 1942. After that, all people between the ages of 17 to 44 had to go to work camps in Rumania until 1944. Sometimes, Kurt was saved by pure coincidence, like being behind in a march, or following the wrong lines.

In May 1942, Kurt entered the first labor camp. He left on August 18, 1944. Type of jobs. Humor in the labor camp.

Kurt is not religious but he is not against religion. In 1943, on Yom Kippur, in the labor camp, the Rumanian commanders allowed the inmates to observe Kol Nidre. Kurt was the only one who did not participate but heard the melody from his barrack. He was and still is moved by it.

Liberation. In 1943, after Stalingrad when Russia began advancing, Kurt was in Moldavia in a labor camp. The Germans began withdrawing and, for two days, the camp was with no head. Most of the inmates returned to Czernowitz. The Soviets were already there. Kurt went to Bucharest. Joint helped some but not him, as Kurt was known for belonging to a very well-to-do family. He slept for 3 nights in a park, washed up in a fountain. A man took him home, washed him and fed him and he slept again for 3 days. Kurt found out later that the man who saved him in the park was a Nazi opera singer, who was doing that to expiate his sins. Help was found for Kurt through a relative of a cinematographer from Hollywood.

Kurt enrolled in the Fine Arts school in Bucharest. The school allowed the war survivors to complete their studies in an accelerated fashion. Kurt finished his studies in 1950. He began to work in stores, architectural firm, doing humor caricatures for newspapers, and more. He lived in a students' residence funded by the Jewish community. Communism in Rumania. Kurt lived under the communists from 1944 to 1950.

In 1947, Kurt wanted to go to Israel in order to leave Rumania. (He was a member of Betar.) After the Struma was sank, the illegal immigration to Israel ended, while Kurt was very close to his turn to leave. In 1950, after having graduated, he requested to immigrate to Israel. Thanks to a pact between Israel and Rumania, mediated by the US, 1,500 Jews could go to Israel each month. The infirm and old went first. A former colleague from school, now in a high position in the communist government, helped him change the year of his birth so that Kurt could immigrate earlier.

In Israel, Kurt experienced freedom for the first time in a long time. (He did not like the ideology, though.) He worked for the government in public works. As a graphic artist, he was involved in the opening of the road to Eilat. He designed the invitations for its opening, and extended three of them to some young girls he had studied with in Europe. They were killed on the road! Jerusalem then.

Going to Italy to enjoy its art. Parents, who were already in Chile, caught up with him then. In 1953, he left for Chile to join them.

Kurt says that during the war he was not moved by the big triumphs or the big disappointments as they were occurring. He thinks that because of his privileged childhood he couldn't assign due importance to major events.

In 1989 he exhibited his art in Germany for the first time. The Germans asked about his life during the war. Kurt refused to tell. A journalist even sent him blank tapes to Chile, to start him on the narration of his life story during the war, but Kurt did not comply. Only in Chile, after he met his wife, he started to live again, leaving behind his bitter odyssey.

Meeting his father in Chile after 12 years and a war, he did not want to discuss it.

A window appears in each one of Kurt's paintings. It represents the two years he lived without one during the war. Since there was no window, he couldn't see what was going to happen, and no one could look in. He says that a window is his human right. The other leit motif of his art is the word "now what"? in German. That was a question Kurt often asked himself.