

# My Grandfather in Auschwitz

## By Dora Holzhandler



### Overview of the Painting

*'My Grandfather in Auschwitz'*, 1962

Oil on canvas, 124.5cm x 102cm.

Dora Holzhandler painted *My Grandfather in Auschwitz* in 1962 in England. She was born in France, but her family fled to London in 1934, and she lived in England during the Holocaust.

Whilst her immediate family survived the Holocaust, a great deal of her extended family perished under the Nazi rule. This painting is an imagined scene of her grandfather, who was sent to Auschwitz concentration camp.

### Looking Closely

#### Form and Composition

The artist has depicted her grandfather as an old man with white hair. He sits in the centre of the composition, and a young girl holding what could be a baby or doll stands beside him. He wears striped pyjamas embroidered with the compulsory Star of David. He also wears a Kippah, and in his hand he holds a Holy book with Hebrew text on it.

The old man stares straight out at the viewer with large eyes and visible frown lines on his forehead. Two corpses are strewn behind him, and a larger pile of bodies are situated to the left in the background. A young boy stands to his left, clutching his stomach in hunger, whilst to his right march two Nazi officers.

The sky in the distance is scarred red, echoing the blood of the murdered victims of the Holocaust. A jagged barbed wire fence sits against the horizon.

### **Materials and Technique**

The painting was made using oil-paints on a primed canvas. Oil paints take a long time to dry, and the thickness of the paint can be built up in layers.

There is a naïve quality to Holzhandler's application of paint, with much attention paid to the patterned details of the ground, this contrasts with the primitive stripes of the pyjamas.

### **Contents and Ideas**

This is Holzhandler's only painting to depict the Holocaust, but Judaism is a recurrent theme in her work. Although she herself escaped the atrocities of the Holocaust, many members of her extended family, including her grandfather did not. In this sense she was directly affected by the Holocaust, and this painting conjures up a deeply personal and imaginative recollection of her grandfather in the most infamous of the Nazi concentration camps, Auschwitz.

The bleak and sombre scene is reflected in the palette of browns, blues and greys, with only hints of red to accentuate features and colour the sky. The blood-red sky may be referencing the millions of wasted lives, murdered at the hands of the Nazis. The barbed wire fence is a common symbol of the Holocaust for many artists, and serves as a reminder of the horrors that occurred within their perimeters.

By portraying her grandfather, Holzhandler is revealing a profoundly personal response whilst also creating a memorial and reminder to the viewer of the events of the Holocaust.

There are also several ways in which the artists' depiction of her Grandfather can be seen as defiant against his ultimate fate.

The Grandfather holds a Holy book with Hebrew text. Despite the practice of Judaism being prohibited, the Grandfather sits out in the open, reading from the book.

His beard is long and he wears a Kippah which both denote his long held faith in Judaism. He seems to be demonstrating that his faith cannot be taken away from him.

Despite the atrocity that is surrounding him, he has expression of calm and peace.

### **About the Artist**

Dora Holzhandler was born in Paris on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1928, into a family of Polish-Jewish refugees. Just a few months later she was sent to a Catholic foster family in Normandy, as a result of the collapse of her father's business. She was reunited with her family at the age of five, and the following year they moved to London. Holzhandler went back to Paris in 1946; she studied French literature at the Sorbonne and art at La Grande Chaumière.

Holzhandler returned to London in 1948 and attended the Anglo-French Art Centre. It was here that she fell in love with, and in 1950 married, George Swinford. They had three daughters together, Amalie, Hepzibah and Hermione.

Although Holzhandler's art can be described as having a naive style – they are childlike in execution – they often include complex and sophisticated narratives. Her style is distinctly recognisable, and focuses on themes such as self-portraits, mother and child, religious and Jewish imagery, lovers and landscapes. She considers herself both Jewish and Buddhist, and these religions largely influence and shape her work and style. She has exhibited her work in London, Bath, Paris and New York.

### **Why is the Work Important?**

The painting was made in 1962, seventeen years after the end of World War Two. It is therefore a reflective, retrospective and commemorative work. It is Holzhandler's only painting which makes direct reference to the Holocaust.

Perhaps, for her, this painting was a way of mourning the loss of her grandfather. Similarly this allows and encourages the viewer to mourn themselves for the countless lives lost in the Holocaust. It recognises the individual human-beings that were affected, rather than reducing the lives of the millions of victims to a statistic.

By keeping the memory of the Holocaust visible, Holzhandler is ensuring that the millions that perished, including her grandfather, will not be forgotten. The painting also provides an account of the concentration camps, whilst acting as a warning to future generations so that such atrocities of genocide might never be repeated.

## Terms Explained

**Star of David** the six pointed star is the most common emblem of Judaism. It is called the Star of David because it is said that it was the emblem on the biblical King David's battle shield. It is also on the flag of Israel, in a royal blue colour, flanked by two blue stripes.

**Kippah** also known as 'yarmulke'. A head covering worn by Jewish men. It must be worn at all times and symbolises their obedience to God by creating a physical barrier between their flesh and the heavens above.

**Genocide** intentional mass killing of an ethnic or national group.