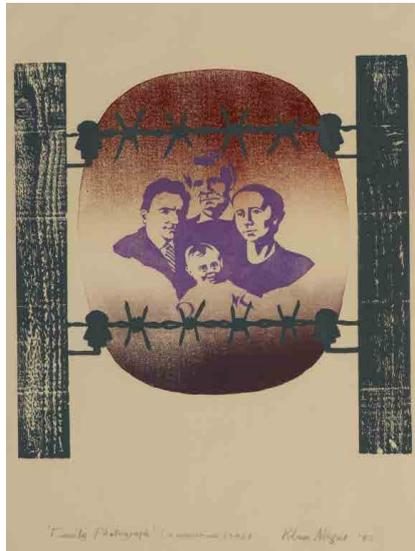


# Family Photograph (in Memoriam 1942)

## By Klaus Meyer



### Overview of the print

*Family Photograph (in Memoriam 1942)*, 1982

Woodcut and linocut

Karl Meyer was a German Jew who came to England just before the Second World War in 1938. After the war, he discovered that his mother, his brother, Ulrich, and his wife, Anne-Marie, had died in the concentration camp at Auschwitz in Poland, where almost one million Jews from all over Europe were killed. Meyer made this woodcut as a commemoration forty years after they died.

### Looking Closely

#### Form and Composition

The picture shows the heads and shoulders of two women, a man and a young child in the centre of an oval shape. This is suspended behind two rows of barbed wire, stretched between two wooden posts with four 'helmet' shaped silhouettes attached to them.

The family group is in the very centre of the picture; the oval looks as if it has been cut from an old-fashioned photograph album.

The two vertical posts either side of the photograph confine the portrait and the two horizontal lines of barbed wire create a barrier between the family and the viewer, giving a sense of imprisonment and distance.

The family's arrangement is reminiscent of the way a family tree is arranged: the eldest person (the artist's mother) is at the top and back of the group and the parents (the artist's brother and brother's wife) are in the middle; the youngest person, the baby, is at the bottom and in the front.

The heads of the parents lean in towards one another as if sheltering the child, but leaving enough space for the head of the artist's mother to be visible. Relationships within the family are suggested through their physical positioning. The heads of the three adults are placed close together, forming a triangle – a strong shape suggesting togetherness and stability. The clothing of the adults merge together, so you cannot tell where the body of each person begins and ends – again suggesting closeness between them. The child is cut out against the dark background as if formed, but also protected, by the adults' bodies.

### **Materials and Technique**

Meyer has created this art work by using two separate printing techniques. First, he has made the faces by carving them into lino and printing them with ink. Then, the posts and barbed wire were made by carving into wood and printing on top of the lino cut.

There are different textures visible in this picture. The wooden posts show very clearly the grain of wood from which they were printed. Their rough texture provides a strong contrast with the simplified, clean-cut portraits of the family. The grainy graded background of the oval helps give the portraits a feeling of age while the crisp, stark spikes of the barbed wire stand out strongly in front of the photograph.

### **Contents and Ideas**

The artist called this work *Family Photograph (in Memoriam 1942)*. The oval shape is the photograph and the group is related – perhaps a grandmother, father, mother and child. “In memoriam” implies that the family is dead. 1942 is the date they died, which was in the middle of World War II.

The barbed wire fence suggests that these people are imprisoned together and probably died in the same place. The silhouetted helmet shapes mimic those worn by the Nazis who imprisoned and kept guard over them.

The expressions on the faces could tell us something about each person's character. The artist's mother looks straight out at the viewer with a solemn, wary expression; perhaps she has already seen many horrors of war. The parents of the young child look in opposite directions across one another; their expressions are more ambiguous. They may be hopeful, resigned, cheerful or expectant. By contrast, the young child has a wide smile and opens his arms out trustingly, unaware of any danger or problems.

### **About the Artist**

Klaus Meyer was born into a non-religious Jewish family in Berlin, 1918; his father was a doctor and his mother a painter. Even though Meyer's parents were both well integrated into German society and were non-practicing Jews, they both perished under the Nazi regime. In 1935 his father was banned, as a Jew, from practising medicine. This had a devastating effect and was followed by his death in 1937. His mother also died – in Auschwitz, along with other members of his family.

In 1938, as the situation worsened for Jews, Meyer fled Berlin almost penniless. He joined his elder brother, composer Ernst Meyer, and his sister in London; he studied graphics at the Central School of Arts and Crafts and also took drawing classes.

At the outbreak of WWII, Meyer's attempt to join the Army was refused; in 1940, he was taken to a prison camp in Shropshire, and then interned in Onchan Camp, on the Isle of Man until 1942. Onchan had an active artistic community and many exhibitions were held there. They also had their own newsletter – The Onchan Pioneer – for which Meyer submitted drawings. He continued to produce art during his internment with the scarce materials available, even using wallpaper as a painting surface. After his release, he worked as a commercial artist on propaganda posters.

In 1942, after release from Onchan, Meyer married Celia Petszaft, a fellow refugee from Poland. In the early years of their marriage they had financial difficulties and lived in cramped conditions in Hampstead. Meyer was one of the founding members of the Hampstead Artist's Council and went on to study painting and printmaking at the Slade School of Fine Art. He then taught at the Hornsey College of Art and Kilburn Polytechnic in the 1960s and 1970s. He also worked as an examiner at Cambridge University.

Meyer had many solo and group exhibitions; he found inspiration for his art in the natural environment of the ponds at Hampstead Heath. He was also inspired by literature and poetry, particularly by Goethe and other German writers. His bold style and use of experimental materials carried on into his senior years; he continued to produce right up to his death in 2002, in Cambridge.

## Why is the Work Important?

Whilst *Family Photograph* is not an actual photograph, it has the same choreographed family representation found in many family photographs, and is therefore can be seen as easy for people to identify with. It shows three generations of a family in typical 'snapshot' pose – in stark contrast to the overlapping image of the barbed wire fence.

The fence and the date – 'in Memorium 1942' – tell the viewer that this is not the usual carefree portrait found in many family photo albums; it is a bold reminder of family members lost in the prison camps of WWII.

As Meyer's mother and other family members had died in Auschwitz, the art work can be viewed as a direct memorial to them. It could also represent loss on a wider scale, symbolising the many deaths of family members who had perished in the prison and labour camps. The survivors would have been left with only photographs and memories of their loved ones.

## Terms Explained

**Woodcut** is a method of relief printing whereby the artist carves the image into a piece of wood; taking away areas that will remain uncoloured. The ink is added directly to the surface of the wood and the paper placed over the top. Pressure is placed on the paper to lift the ink from the wood; sometimes this is done through a printing press, but can also be done by hand. The wood can be carved into and re-inked many times to create multiple layers of colour.

**Linocut** a method of printing similar to woodcut. A piece of linoleum (Lino) is cut into with a v-shaped blade, leaving behind the design to be inked and printed from. Lino is a popular material used for covering floors; it is made from a hard, solid substance on a canvas backing. The surface can be carved away at varying levels to create grooves, patterns and depth within the image. If the lino is warmed it is easier to cut into and, therefore, often preferred by some artists who find woodcutting more arduous.

**Onchan Camp** Onchan was a village, north of Douglas, on the Isle of Man (which is in the Irish Sea between Ireland and North West England). It was made into a camp by surrounding it with barbed wire – separating it from other camps on the island. The buildings contained within were mostly boarding houses whose inhabitants had been forced to evacuate. Male internees were held in Onchan for the duration of WWII and were mostly German Jews.

**Internment:** confining or imprisoning groups of people without an official trial. Although still prisoners, internees were generally free within their camps to act at will, but were confined to small areas with minimal food and supplies and only their basic needs met.

**Goethe:** Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was a famous German writer, poet, politician and artist of the late 18th and early 19th century.