

EDUARD FREUDMANN

Archives of Memory



Viennese artist Eduard Freudmann describes The White Elephant Archive as his “most important project.” Beginning in 1979, his grandmother began to assemble an archive of objects and documents — “texts and poems, photographs, letters of correspondence, Super 8 recordings, audio recordings” — related to her family’s history during both the Holocaust and, later, in Austria’s Communist movement. Freudmann’s grandmother died in 1987, and in 2004, via Eduard’s uncle, her archive — this White Elephant — came into Eduard’s possession. He then made plans on how best to deal with it artistically.

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“I choose my media and format according to the subject that I work with,” Freudmann explained, and in the case of The White Elephant Archive, “I understood for a couple of reasons that the theatrical format as an art discipline would make the most sense.” Freudmann first presented the material as documentary the-

ater in the summer of 2012 while as artist-in-residence at Artport Tel Aviv. The piece is performed in English, in order to “speak to people who share the same family stories as me, coming from families that had a relationship with Vienna” — second- and third-generation Holocaust survivors in Britain, the United States and Israel.

Born in 1979, Freudmann lives in the city where he grew up, Vienna, which he described as having “very few Jews but a lot of Jewish accents.” Though he was only six or seven, he remembers the Waldheim Affair as a “very important moment in history” that affected, engaged and mobilized his family. “I remember that, with a friend, we drew election campaign material and handed it out to people” and “went to demonstrations,” he said. His family “stopped being Jewish for political reasons in the late 1940s.” After the Holocaust his grandparents, following a pattern of many survivors who chose to remain in Europe, subscribed to Communism, negated their Jewish identity and assimilated.

Coming from an assimilated background, then, Freudmann spoke of having to go through a process of reconnecting with Jewish identity, which started “very early as a kid. I understood I was Jewish but for quite a long time it was hard for me. I had a scattered identity,” he said, principally because his family “was not related to the community. I couldn’t find anybody to exchange with about it.” In that respect, it was important for Freudmann to leave Vienna and experience Jewish life in other countries — Israel, the United States and Canada — where Jewishness isn’t exclusively characterized by its relationship to negative aspects, like the Holocaust and anti-Semitism.

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poems in the concentration camps and these poems enabled him to survive.” Although his grandmother did not have an artistic aim in mind when compiling it, Freudmann considers her archive a way of dealing with “family history using artistic tools and strategies.” The ways in which “my family had dealt with art became very relevant at a certain point when I studied,” he said. Freudmann studied at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna and Bauhaus-Universität Weimar.

Indeed, if one examines Freudmann’s body of work, a consistent theme is the ways in which art can deal with historical memory, especially in relation to the Holocaust. One of his earliest projects, *Niemals Vergessen* (Never Forget), was a kind of guerilla project, providing a counter-narrative at Austrian sites of relevance to the Holocaust, in response to the government’s sanctioned program of public art projects responding to the anniversary of the end of World War II. Other projects of his have responded to anti-Semitism during the time of empire, the expulsion of Jews from Vienna under Nazism, and the treatment of minorities such as Romani and Albanians in Europe.

“Art has been a very important tool in Austria in order to deal with the past,” Freudmann said, although fine arts — as opposed to literature, film and theater — has not traditionally fulfilled such a role, perhaps because “in the past, it was considered harder to deal with explicitly political subjects in fine arts.” Freudmann made these artistic interventions, however, “out of necessity” and in reaction to the ways in which Austria has failed to come to terms with and acknowledge its associations with Nazism and its role in the Holocaust.

It is The White Elephant Archive, though, which is closest to Freudmann’s heart. Although he did not undertake it to please anyone, “The reactions in Israel and Europe have been very positive. It is something that gives me a lot of strength.” ■