



Drawing: "Kezek" ("Hands"), Károly Koffán, 1971.

Exposé

for the documentary
"The Art of Resistance – Károly Koffán's Open School of Art"
on the resistance of Budapest's artists during World War II
by
Laurent Kruppa

*Est-ce que ça va revenir?
J'y ai beaucoup pensé, il y a une seule chose:
qu'on soit responsable et conscient de ses actes devant soi même.*

*Will it reoccur?
I thought about it over and over again, but there is only one fact:
that we shall be conscious of our acts
for which we have to take responsibility.*

André Mézaros (Paris 2004, freely translated), 1924–2006,
posthumously honored as "Righteous among the Nations".

Exposé

We are working on a documentary film about a civil resistance group in Budapest, which comprised of artists and their students. On March 20th, 1944, Germany occupied her ally, Hungary, in an attempt to prevent her from changing sides in the Second World War. Led by Adolf Eichmann, the Germans systematically began to murder Hungarian Jews, deteriorating their presence in Hungary even further. In response to the German invasion, Hungarian artist Károly Koffán founded a resistance group to protect persecuted Jews. He founded the group in the Open School of Art, a private painting and drawing school he directed. The Open School of Art was located in the center of Budapest, in the government district Erzsébet tér 7. People from all social circles, such as artists, intellectuals, communists, clerks and officers, met regularly at the school

at night to protect Hungarian Jews. The most prominent members of the group were Károly Koffán and his colleague Lajos Szentiványi. For our film project, we interviewed, amongst others, Koffán's former students, László Ridovics and André Mészáros, who were both involved in the actions of the group. We also interviewed Koffán's former Jewish students, Edith Weinberger and Klára (Claire) Szilárd.

Using their creative skills, the artists in the Koffán group forged papers, completed stolen blank documents, and imitated official stamps in order to help persecuted Jews survive. They also organized hiding places for the Jews, including a hospital, which today belongs to Semmelweis University in Budapest.

They implemented a rotating system at the hiding places. At night, Jews hiding from Nazi persecution slept in the

The only known photo of Koffán's Open School of Art, taken on the third floor of the building. During Budapest's liberation, the school was destroyed under Soviet air raids. Today the Kempinski Hotel is located in its place at Erzsébet tér 7.

school's classrooms, leaving the premises before classes began. The members of the Koffán group then took them to their next hiding places and provided them with food. They liberated Jews by pretending they were soldiers, although they had already deserted the Hungarian Army, previously allied with the Germans. The father of Amos Biedermann, a cartoonist for the Israeli Haaretz, is one example of a survivor who benefited from Koffán's assistance.

With the help of the forged documents, the Koffán group could move relatively freely in Budapest. The Swiss Consul Carl Lutz and Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg provided the artists with Schutzpässe (safety passes), which they then distributed to the Jews. The Germans generally accepted the passes, since they were issued according to international law,



and released the pass holders. In spite of numerous raids, nearly every member of the artist group survived.

The Koffán group was completely unknown to the public until our project. The aim of our project is to deliver insight into the actions of the Koffán group of artists, whose members knew how to distinguish between right and wrong in the darkest era of humanity and were willing to rescue their friends and strangers, even at the risk of their own lives.

On the following pages you can read biographies of the Koffán group's heads.



The Koffán couple (top row far left) in their Parisian apartment, 1937, together with their friends, the Ortuthay (bottom row left) and the Radnóti couple (bottom row right). The Nazis deported and assassinated Radnóti, a Jewish poet, to former Yugoslavia. After the war, his body was discovered with love poems in his coat pockets that were translated into English and German.



Károly (Charles) Koffán ...

... was born in Hungary in 1909 and died there in 1985. In the 1930s, he immigrated to Paris with his wife. He worked as a marionette maker and led an active social life in the leftist intellectual, artistic circles of Paris. In 1940, he returned to Budapest, and founded the Open School of Art in 1941 at Erzsébet tér 7. He tried to integrate the Parisian ideas of a free education

into his art school.

When the Germans occupied Hungary in March 1944, he founded a civil resistance group and decided to rescue as many Jews as possible in a non-violent way. He owned and lived in an apartment in the Open School with his wife and children, where he hid several Jewish acquaintances. Due to his aptitude in drawing, he could imitate handwriting perfectly, to the extent that even those he imitated were not able to distinguish his handwriting from their own. The documents he forged were therefore never revealed.

After the war, Koffán became a lecturer at the Hungarian College of Fine Arts in Budapest. He kept contact to Paris and to the Hungarian-born photographer Brassai. After the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 however, he lost his position as lecturer and gave up drawing almost entirely. Instead, he became a specialist of bird photography.

Lajos Szentiványi in his studio in
Budapest in the 60's (undated).





Lajos Szentiványi ...

... was born in Hungary in 1909 and lived in Budapest until his death in 1973. During his childhood, one of his legs was paralyzed due to infantile paralysis. He taught at Koffán's Open School. Immediately after the German invasion, he organized the resistance group together with Koffán. He lived two buildings away from Koffán's apartment, at Déak tér 3, and he also hid many Jews, communists, and deserters in his studio. A popular anecdote about Lajos Szentiványi states there were so many hidden Jews and deserters in his apartment that at times one could hardly enter after opening the door. He was a great role model for his students. One of his students described his character perfectly: "When he couldn't say anything positive about a person, he preferred not to say anything at all."

Szentiványi's father was Vice President of the Agrarian Workers and Civic Party

(Kisgazda Párt), which was hostile to the Germans. After the Wehrmacht entered Budapest on 20th of March 1944, the Germans arrested Szentiványi's father and deported him to a concentration camp. He was among the first twenty Hungarian citizens arrested by the Germans on the first day of their invasion. His son maintained contact with his political acquaintances. Szentiványi's father survived his imprisonment in the concentration camp.

François Gachot, a French cultural attaché, writer, art collector, and political historian, lived in the same house as Lajos Szentiványi. He was also a friend of Koffán's and a member of Charles de Gaulle's intelligence group in Budapest. In 1940, Gachot wrote a preface for one Koffán's art books and in 1944, he organized an art exhibition for Lajos Szentiványi. It is likely that Gachot supported the Koffán group.



László Ridovics in his studio, Budapest 2007.
Photograph by András Ridovics.

László Ridovics ...

... was born in 1925 in Hungary. Together with his brother, he grew up as an orphan in the small town of Szombathely, in the house of a single woman who took care of them. After he finished school, he moved to Budapest, where he worked as an apprentice to a house painter and took drawing and painting lessons at Koffán's school. During the war, he found many Jews in the death marches that took place in Hungary at the end of 1944, and brought them Schutzpässe to save their lives. After the war, he studied art at the College of Fine Arts in Budapest with his best friend André Mészáros, Edith Weinberger, and other students of the Koffán group. After his studies, he taught art in Budapest, where he still lives today. Ridovics currently works as a painter and has had numerous international exhibitions, in cities including Paris, Tokyo, Warsaw, Moscow and London.



Passport photo of László Ridovics at the age of 19.



Edith Weinberger with her companion M. Ribinsky
in her favorite local "Le Dôme", Paris 2005.



Edith Weinberger as a young woman in Budapest.

Edith Weinberger ...

... was born Budapest in 1926, her father was a Rabbi. She took lessons at Koffán's Open School of Art. After the German occupation, Weinberger also found assistance in Koffán's school. She met André Mészáros at the school, who hid her and her brothers, even rescuing the eldest of them from the ghetto of Budapest. After the war, Weinberger and Mészáros studied together at the College of Fine Arts in Budapest. In 1949, after having completed their studies, they decided to leave communist Hungary. Their destination was Paris. Mr. Koffán had previously told them many positive things about the city. André and Edith married and immigrated to Paris, where Edith worked as a painter. Weinberger died in Paris in 2006.



André Mészáros in Paris 2004



A. Mészáros in Budapest when he was about 20 years old.

André Mészáros ...

... was born in 1924 in Kisbér in Hungary. From an early age, he was interested in drawing and other art forms. After his family moved to Budapest, he worked as a decorator and freelancer and took art lessons at Koffán's school. Encouraged by their teachers Koffán and Szentiványi, he and his best friend László Ridovics helped to rescue as many lives as possible.

Mészáros immigrated to Paris with Edith Weinberger in 1949, whom he met at Koffán's school. Mészáros protected Edith Weinberger and her family. The Weinbergers nominated Mr. Mészáros for Yad Vashem's "Award for the Righteous among the Nations." Unfortunately, Mészáros only obtained the award posthumously in Paris in February 2007. Due to our research, the Weinberger family learned about the history of their rescue and decided to nominate the other members of the Koffán group for Yad Vashem's award as well. We therefore gave our material for their use (there is a copy of this DVD in the archives of Berlin's Jewish Museum). At the moment, Yad Vashem in Jerusalem is studying the Weinberger case. Mészáros worked as an architect and as a painter in France; he died in Paris in 2005.



Claire Szilárd 2006



Claire Szilárd and Füstí Pál 1990

Klára (Claire) Szilárd ...

... was born in Budapest in 1921 and was interested in art as an adolescent. Her father however, who quite a successful Jewish lawyer, wanted his daughter to become a judge. Szilárd nevertheless became a famous artist despite her father's worries. She is still considered a renowned artist today. She was also one of Koffán's students, and received documents from him that enabled her to flee to Switzerland. Due to forced labor for male Jewish

citizens, Szilárd was separated from her husband Füstí Pál during the war. She was able to obtain a position as an interpreter in Budapest from the Wehrmacht and with her new position managed to escape from the Russians. The Gestapo however, suspecting her to be a spy, denounced and sentenced Szilárd to death in April 1945 near Schaffhausen at the Swiss border. Luckily, the French Army took over the city the night before the scheduled execution. Claire Szilárd lived and studied in Switzerland until 1951, working as an illustrator for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. She immigrated to Israel with her second husband, Imre Baum, where she continued to be a successful artist.

After Baum died, she met her first husband again. Pál had also re-married in the meantime, and was widowed. They fell in love again and Claire Szilárd returned to Budapest where she works as a painter and sculptor today.

Claire Szilárd with her first husband Füstí Pál (about 1940), whom she remarried 60 years later.





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Press Review:

About our project the Israeli *Haaretz* has published an article “Art for life’s sake” by Anshel Pfeffer:

<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/907397.html> (english)

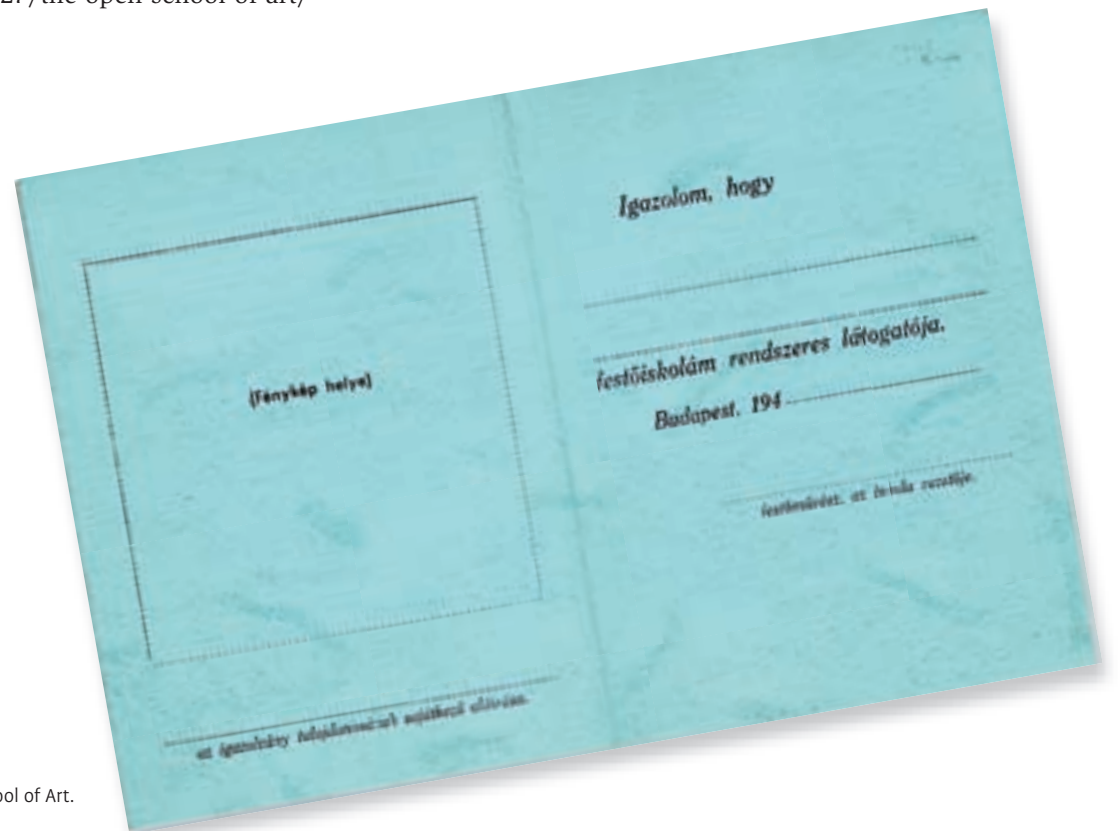
<http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/spages/907273.html> (hebrew)

The Haaretz article appears on the following websites:

<http://philosemitism.blogspot.com/2007/10/koffn-kroly-group-hungarian-righteous.html>

<http://www.pqbon.com/~wdeutsch/blog-archive/001018.html>

<http://www.neatorama.com/2007/09/27/the-open-school-of-art/>



Student identification card for the Open School of Art.



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We welcome your donations!

We began our film project in 2004 and have financed it entirely on our own. To support our project, please send your donation to:

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Laurent Kruppa Script, Direction, Production

was born in 1981 in Berlin to a french mother and a hungarian father. He studies law at the Humboldt University Berlin. He founded the film production company lionelfilm together with Max von Matthiessen.

Veronika Lábás Editor

is the child of hungarian parents and grew up in Budapest, Stuttgart and Munich. Since 2007 she lives in Berlin and studies Editing at the College for Film and Television HFF «Konrad Wolf» in Potsdam-Babelsberg.

Max von Matthiessen Camera

was born in 1980 in Berlin. He completed an apprenticeship in audiovisual media design. He studies at the College of Film in Ludwigsburg, and works as a freelance photographer in Berlin.

Samuel Schidem Scientific Advisor

was born in 1974 in Israel. He is a PhD candidate in jewish studies at the University of Potsdam and he works in the educational department of the Jewish Museum, Berlin.

Exposé designed by Andre Trecksel.



Drawing "The Violinist" from Charles Koffán's "De Profundis"; the last of 32 etchings from his Parisian days (1934–1939), published in 1940 in Budapest with a preface from François Gachot.