EL: What type of experiences?

WG: For example, Polish hospitality. Right, we get to one carver, we can, we would like to buy something, no, not possible, he doesn’t sell. That was near Lublin, the Projenta (?) and, ah, he said, where do you live, in which hotel, in Lublin? No, we don’t have any quarters yet. We didn’t know where to, and can’t we stay with you? And…ah….there….ah…something opened for him everything, so, that the people come from Germany and want to live with him. Right, that is totally different. When we, when we are hosts, then we give something, right, and there, the host receives something from the guest. And that’s totally different. That, at the next morning, we slept in their marriage bed during the night, and the next morning, we almost got the things for free which the day before we couldn’t buy, right. [laughs] And such key experiences, they are meaningful.

EL: And do you know, this connection or this experience were because of what happened between the Germans and the Poles.

WG: Well, yes, of course. And that we, that we learned Polish, and that one tries to cope in Polish, that was for the Poles also, when we came, they asked, where do you have a translator? [laughs] Are you from Poland, was always the first question. No, Berlin. And, I really have learned my first Polish words during the late 60s here in Berlin. It is actually that my father, during the first World War, was stationed in a garrison near Koenigsberg, and there tried to study Polish, because, there were lots of Poles there on the farms, and I have a dictionary from my father from the time, Polish-German, so, somewhere, it is tradition, the entire, my father was during the second World War, we were in the confessing church (*bekennende Kirche*), so, standing against Hitler, and so, that all has some tradition. I mean, I was a Hitler youth (*Hitlerjunge*), right.

00:12:36

WG: But that was, after what one heard about it, one was weaned quickly.

EL: Ah, that means, that he was at the beginning in the Hitler youth?

WG: Me.

EL: Oh, you.

WG: Not my father. My father was already, born 1891, but he really questioned it, he had, it was forced, right. That wasn’t voluntary, that one went to the Hitler youth. That was…and he would have got a penalty if he didn’t let his son go, right. And, well, and those…from my father I have got those first impressions from Poland and he had a Polish friend with whom he wrote until the beginning of the second World War, and then, of course, that all broke off and broke down, and we have, well, in a restaurant, a waiter spoke German well, and we asked, how come you know German so well, and he shows [gestures as if pulling up a sleeve] us his KZ number. Well. [laughs] That is quite difficult. Yes.

[….]

EL: And when that topic is concerned, the war, the Holocaust and so on, what can you tell me about that? For example, was there a lot by these artists, or…

WG: No.

EL: No.

WG: Mainly religious themes and, it was also avoided, that topic. I mean, the Jews aren’t particularly well received (*angesehen*) by the Poles, we experienced it in Krakow, during a tour in Kazimierz, in this Polish quarter, there, the guide told us, well, with Hitler it was good, he brought order. He didn’t need to make it so bad, but at least there was order. And then, I actually wanted to send him home [laughs] but, well. And that, one experiences that frequently, and one knows these stories of the KZ inmates who came home and weren’t allowed to get home, or the pogroms in Jedwabne and so on, and that is…one told me once Poland has always been ruled by Jews, Kumulka (?) was a Jew and, well, there was an anti-attitude (*Anti-Haltung*), I don’t know. One, maybe we can look with the figurines, who then also said, his name is Cerwinski (?) but the family was previously called Rothe, but after the first World War, they changed their name because they didn’t want to sound German. So, one often meets such fates. Or one meets somebody and asks them for their age, and he says, I don’t know. Why not? Well, I am, I was taken in during the war by nuns into a monastery, and they made me younger than I was because I didn’t want to go to Germany, for work. And there they have, I was three years older, but they made me younger and because of that I could stay in Poland. And now I should get a pension, but I don’t get it yet because I am not old enough. [laughs] Those are all such…anecdotes, but they are symptomatic, you repeatedly find them.

[…]

EL: What can you tell me about this one?

WG: Nothing. [laughs]

EL: Nothing.

WG: Well, it speaks for itself, the figurine, right. And Schauss interpreted it in his book, and I can’t really say more to it. And its, but there aren’t any, say, personal experiences by Kovac (?). He did, he carved once a KZ oven with a bridge over which all the figures crossed, very impressive. But he himself wasn’t confronted with this. He, he grew up by [Polish name] and then won the lottery, and bought an apartment in Stettin. And both of his sons, who studied art, are also in Canada. He was also in Canada for a while and had an exhibition there of his things…maybe it was in Toronto. I can’t say. It is quite a long time ago.

EL: But that means that the title in the book, that is mother protests agains genocide…

WG: Genocide, right.

EL: And that was by Schauss?

WG: I think so, yes. I think so. I mean, when one wants to make such a book, when one makes such a book in the GDR, one has to be mindful of the official interpretations. And so, one could simply say that it is a mother who protects her child. It doesn’t have to be genocide. One doesn’t have to set the stakes so high (*hoch ansiedeln*).

EL: But you described that in the book, in that way.

WG: I know. Those are concessions to those who approved the book. It is, you couldn’t write anything in the GDR without some people wanting to make capital out of it, and, well, and Schauss understood that. To word it in a pleasing way. One doesn’t have to take that in a negative way, that is legitimate. And if one feels it in that way, but it is not the intention of Herrn Kovac to point to large world events. I don’t know if, it didn’t have anything to do with Armenia.

EL: But did Herr Schauss, how do you say….sensitivity…

WG: Connection to…

EL: Connection to this topic, because it seems to me, in the book, a topic…

WG: For the reason I mentioned, in order to get the book approved. Everything, every production, and as a printer I know that, every production had to be approved. Get the stamp. And when in some way it didn’t match what the uppers wanted to see, then the stamp was declined. And then the book wouldn’t have appeared.

00:05:07

WG: And he said, religious topics, what is it to us? And so on, and that is then propaganda for the church and so on, and one had to see….he didn’t falsify anything, he hasn’t….but something like that was pleasing.

EL: Myriam, maybe you can help me here, because I’m trying to understand if Schauss himself had a particular interest in Holocaust-related or war-related themes, because there is this thread in the book about those topics, but…but I’m understanding from what he’s saying that those issues weren’t really coming from the artist, but so….I understand the complexities from the GDR context, that you had to be careful about what you said, but I’m trying to understand what Schauss himself cared about and what he actually wanted to say. And if he was trying, somehow, like, if he had a particular in war-time, Holocaust-related themes, and maybe why…so, if you can…

MG: Okay, what Dr. Lehrer would like to know, she understand how things worked in the GDR, but she noticed that there is nevertheless this topic related to the war or the Holocaust. And she would like to know what exactly was the interest on these figurines or if there was any kind of personal connection, and, and what he wanted to show with these figurines?

WG: Schauss, by showing them in the book, or Kovac?

MG: Schauss.

WG: Well, he wanted to publish the book. He was a graphic designer, he was artistic manager in my printing house, also a printing house of the block parties (*Blockparteien*). In the GDR, there were several parties who were always for segments of the population, where the SED couldn’t say, they had their people, the CDU, the LPDP, or the national democratic party of Germany, my God, it’s so long ago, and…there he was in the publishing house, and also in order to withdraw a little from the official propaganda. And, I mean, who isn’t touched by that, the Holocaust, and every decent person, they have to be touched by it.

00:08:03

WG: But it wasn’t something that for him was initiated through family or through birth. His parents, his grandparents, the had a clinic, that was actually Bourgeoise [laughs], and so on, and his mother brought the family through laboriously, after the war, the clinic was being expropriated. And he, his brothers were in West Berlin, and he was the only one had stayed here, well, and everybody…one can see that very negatively, or one can say, well, it was a survival strategy.

EL: I don’t quite understand, what could one look at negatively?

MG: Well, basically the way I understand it, there wasn’t really any personal connection between Schauss and these themes, he basically wanted to publish this book and he basically frame it in a way that it, it would be approved for publication.

EL: Right, so, where was the impulse at all for this topic to come in, because I understand its not from the artist, and so if you’re talking about Schauss framing it, it’s as if its coming from somewhere and he’s just trying to frame it so that he can publish, but I, is it coming from him? I…do you know…

MG: Okay, so, I, do you mean like, why did he pick these figurines that display the war and the Holocaust versus obviously religious themes?

EL: Well, for example, this piece, this Kovac piece, he, Schauss gave it the title in the book, mother protests against genocide, so, and Walter Graetz says, said that its not probably, he says the piece speaks for itself, this wasn’t, Kovac didn’t have any experience…

WG: Well, its not authentic, let’s say authentic Kovac – its an interpretation by Schauss of the figurine. That’s legitimate.

EL: Yes, well, I want to understand…it seems to me that Schauss himself had a sensitivity for these topics…

WG: Yes, he had.

EL: And he saw that…

WG: Of course, and somebody else wouldn’t see that. But, as I said, when you want to publish such a book, I have to see that I emphasize specific themes especially. Otherwise, he also had in other publications, or let’s say, he had always asked the artists about their experiences under fascism and….he wasn’t that close. For example, I was back then here in the church youth, in the young community. I was in the community church council, I had more, we were more at the front [laughs], and he pulled back, that wasn’t’ his thing, and God, one can’t judge one for that (*kann man keinem uebel nehmen*). That is a situation, which you never experienced, and you could always say what you wanted and, presumably, I am saying it like it….

00:12:05

WG: And although I know that its there are also constrains in capitalism, what one says and what doesn’t say, and what follows from that. That’s….its not all…what does Bengler (?) say…its not so simple if you take it double…[laughs]

EL: And do I understand it well that artists themselves didn’t speak very much about their own experiences with war or with the Holocaust?

WG: So, here, Chaijz was very touched by it, the entire KZ thing, he always kept coming back to that he, he was….Loger (?) was taken captive by the Germans and he was able to flee on the way and into the KZ, and so he told us that, and so, these weren’t partisans or resistance fighters. And, I also experienced once, during a night travel from Krakow to Berlin, on the train, there was something with the ticket and I discussed with the Kurovnik (?) in my perfect Polish, and so on, and there at this older gentleman and he was amused. And so he asked, how come you know Polish? I say, I don’t know Polish. He says, but I saw, are you from here, do you come, and so, he was a former partisan who became supreme judge in Poland, who was not in the party, but he was nevertheless judge, and he said, he thought he would never shake the hand of a German. And so, that was such a wonderful conversation, we had a lot of time, back then the train from Krakow to Berlin took 12 hours and we had a lot of time. And so, these type of experiences, and, and that doesn’t leave one.

EL: It seems to me that the Polish folk art is somehow a medium of German-Polish reconciliation.

WG: Yes, well, one shouldn’t hang it too high. They are simply, I always say, [Polish?] that’s Poland, and, and it just grows like that, and its, and I have an affinity for the Poles (*die Polen sind my sehr sympathisch in ihrer Art*) and this, this judge on the train said to me [points at the knuckles on his hand] in Poland there are always four official ways and then there is always one in between. [laughs] And that in-between is very interesting and very sympathetic. We are always, as Germans…stand up in a row (*in Reih und Glied stehen*), and that is not sympathetic to me.