



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST

Transcript of interview:

PROFESSOR PEDRAM KHOSRONEJAD – CURATOR

CAMP ART – GERMANS OF PERSIA INTERNED IN AUSTRALIA DURING WORLD WAR 2

NOVEMBER 2021

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

Thank you, Tim. It's a great pleasure to be here in your podcast.

Tim Stackpool:

In the introduction, I explained the derivation of this art. But the way in which you discovered this art existed is a story within itself. Can you give us a bit more background on that?

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

The story began approximately in August, September 2019, when I came to Australia to visit my family in Sydney. And only by chance, I found out the story of civilian Germans of Iran, Persia, at that period, who after the first war escaped a big depression period of Europe, including Germany. And there were no market. And suddenly Persia became a good market opened by Reza Shah, the King of Iran, for developing the infrastructure of country. Something between 7,000 to 10,000 civilian Germans moved and lived in Iran peacefully. They had lovely salary, they bought houses, they brought their wife to Iran and settled down, their children were born in Iran. And they were really integrated to the Iranian society included urban, rural and nomadic areas. But I think it's interesting for your audience to know that Churchill was against this because of the Iranian oil pipes in the South, which was under the protection of Brits.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

And also he knew, if the Second (World) War happened, Germany will attack first Russia, then come to Iran and through Iran go to India, which was very, very important colonial country, and then go to South Asia. So Churchill shake hand with Russia a few months or a year probably before the outbreak of the Second World War. In case we have Second World War, we invade Iran and block Germany on the Russian frontiers. And this is what happened. And they invaded Iran the 1941. And one of the first things that they do is capturing these German civilians or civilians Germans of Persia who were informed by the ambassador of Germany, at that time in Iran, they escaped their homes and went as a refugee to the German summer garden in Tehran. And then, after the invasion of Iran, Russian and Brits surround the embassy's garden, forced separation of mother and children, escort them to the border with Turkey and send them back to Germany and Austria under the war.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

And they detained 512 single men in that garden, captive them, send them to temporary interrogation desert camps in Basra, today Iraq. And, after seven weeks interrogation, they didn't know anything, what's their destination, where are their wife and children. Then they said, "Well, we deport you somewhere, unknown destination, on the boat". They go close to Indian shores, and there they change the boat. And it is only there that they inform them, "Well, your destination is Australian Second World War camps". They arrive here in November 1941, at Adelaide. Then, with them, there were six families also. The families they send to Tatura camps, in Victoria. And the rest of single detainees from Persia goes to Loveday Camp. So it was very harsh moment. Anyway, they stay until 1947 in the camp.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

And then some, very few, died in the camp. Some deported and many stayed here, brought their family from Germany here, settled down. Children, after seven to nine years, did see their father. They were unknown to their father. They'd grown up during the war and then they settled down here and they

became Australian citizens. So 2019, when I came here, I found by accident one of those children. And this is the beginning of the story. They didn't know each other. And, one by one, I found them and now is about two years that we work together as a research team. And then, from the beginning, as an anthropologist, I encouraged them to look at their family collections. The collection that maybe some of them were not aware of their existence, or they knew something is in that box that mother, father, or grandfather, grandmothers left behind in the garage, or some of them were very aware of what they have. But because of childhood trauma, they never properly talked about what happened in Persia and camp separation.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

And suddenly, in one of the family collections, Wulff family, which belong to Dr. Hans Eberhard Wulff, among the huge collection, because this individual is very important among our group, because of what was his project in Iran, he was interested, when he was in the camp, collect also the art of the camp made by these Germans of Persia. And I was really surprised to see a folder of art. There's between 200 to 300 original artworks, mostly drawings, hand print makings, including etching, woodcut, linocut, water colour, caricatures, a lot of things and different materials. And I was surprised.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

So it was the first time that the project really became quite interesting, when we opened the gates to the family collections. Since we are working on each family, each children is working on their own family, and I'm happy to say that the edited volume of the two years hard work of members of our project will be ready, which is the diaries and memories of their parents before going to Persia, after the First World War. Their lives in Iran, their business in Iran, what they did and see in Iran, and also some reports and life stories of Australian Second World War internment camps.

Tim Stackpool:

Are you talking about a published book?

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

This is a published book that I'm editor, but contributors are the members of project, and a majority of chapters edited by the children. So the works done by fathers or mothers, their handwritten memories, in Persia or before going, 1930s, 1935, 1936, 1937, just before the outbreak of Second World War in Persia. And also some of the single mothers in Germany and fathers in the camp. They're all done by their parents. Many of them were in German, translated to English by their own children and then edited in a way that is really an academic book that users will have in the hand, not simple memory or diary.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

And this for the first time in history that we talk about this group of civilian Germans of Persia, innocently captured by British army and Iranian sword and brought to internment camp in Australia, knowing the fact that in general, in history of modern Australia, we are really, really late regarding general history of Second World War camps in Australia, because the Germans of Persia were 512, but this system and/or policy or politic of captivating civilian Germans, Japanese, Italians was big plan of Churchill in a way that, by the end of 1942, there were approximately 50,000 civilians on behalf of British army in Australian internment camps. So, it's huge history that is still really unknown.

Tim Stackpool:

Professor, why is it that you think this story, this discovery of such artwork is so important? Not necessarily just to the expat Germans who moved to Persia and then were moved into internment camps here in Australia. Why is it important to all of us?

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

Well, let's talk a little bit first in general, the importance of the artworks of Second World War, in general. I hope I don't exaggerate. But, in general, we did not really work, the scholars and this work in academia, on the importance of Second World War camp art. And if in rare cases we have some publication, mostly we talk about Western Anglo-Saxon internees, which are intern by German army, intern by Japanese army. So always we talk about English speaker internees, Canadian, Americans, Australians. But we did not talk in general about the history of non-English speaker Second World War internees, especially regarding their artworks. Let's come to our topic. Let's talk about internees of Australia, which were majority Germans, Japanese, Italians, from Finland and some other minorities. The importance here we can divide it into two major fields in academia. One is art history, looking at these artifacts as visual representations created by one professional artist.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

But the other side is deeper and probably more complex, which is my interest, the importance of the internment camp art as a tool or system of healing and helping to resolve the trauma of the internment life. Going beyond the visuality, not only psychology because it's still art history. So let's talk about our group. These Germans and Iranians they were very young. Some of them were old, but majority were very young with young partners, wife, and very small and young born babies. You went to your embassy, you are refugee. For five, six weeks, you lived under the tent like refugees, and suddenly one morning they say, "Okay, you, they separated from your wife and children for unknown destination. And your wife and children are only safe if you don't escape." And they sign and say, "Okay, we don't escape. But save our wife and children." And then find themselves in desert, in Iraq, Basra.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

Then, after seven weeks, a group separated sent Palestine for further investigation, under accusation, all of them are accused being Nazi. So that is big, big accusation because today we know majority of them escaped Germany under Hitler, going to Iran to have safe life. And we know today that, maybe not majority, but we find one by one, many of them were from Jewish background. Maybe not Jewish by faith, but Jewish by blood and genealogy. So they escaped Germany to Iran to be safe. Now they are captured and accused as a Nazi in desert in Basra, they don't know what happened to their babies and wife. Now, on the boat. Then, they say, "Oh, Australian deserts." You should read really the diaries from the first days of captivity in Tehran. And this is where the artwork begin.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

We have one artwork that is on our website. Our artist, when he was captured by Tehran local police, and he was in the hospital of Iranian police, Eugen von Mensdorf. The first earliest image that we have, he did, is a box of Persian cigarettes, very famous one, Oshno-Vizheh, and with a flower on the top of the box. And it's very dramatic, for me as an Iranian, I understand that nostalgia on that box of cigarettes. But he's not only in hospital, he's in police hospital. Then the second series of art I'm speaking, when they are in Basra. And you see in diaries, when you compare the diaries with the camp arts, for instance, the work done by him again, Mensdorf, they are struggling for food. It's hot and

insects and many things. And then they find themselves in camp in Loveday, in the South, harsh weather. They don't speak English. They don't know English and they don't know what's happening to them.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

So here is the core of why I'm interested, we are interested, how we can look at these artworks of the camp made by these Germans of Persia to go beyond the surface and see the individual trauma that it's beneath in these pictures. And we are just in the beginning, scratching the surface, because, still, we don't know how many artwork exists. We were lucky that Dr. Wulff collected this series. And here and there, we find some more in family collections. But I can say, generally speaking, in Australia until today a big group of internees, they were The Dunera Boys, the German Jews of London. They escaped again from Germany to London and they were captured and sent here.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

As Dunera Boys are more familiar to the scholars, there are some books which published, especially under artworks. There were (TV) series about the internment life. But it's only about Dunera Boys, which are very talented and Jewish. And we have one or two articles and book about Italians, which were very talented again. But this group, Germans of Persia, not only we don't know anything about their history, these artworks really reveal because they were unique. These 512 internees of Persia were not random people. They were talented, educated engineers, mechanical engineer, civil engineer, miner engineers. And among them you find suddenly big names. Professor Wilhelm Eilers, one of the most famous, if not the most famous linguists and archeologists of the Middle East and godfathers of Orientalism, who went to Iran and captured. You have someone like Zubek, who was the famous Jewish violinist, who was invited to Iran to build up the Department of Music in University of Tehran.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

So this group of single Germans, when arrived at Loveday camp, inside the camp, they run and establish one college, get authorization from Red Cross, do it to educate the other internees of other nations, in a way that when they graduated of that camp college, after the war, they went directly to university. All of the mentors and lecturers of this college were Germans of Persia. And they taught Persian language inside the camp, they taught writing of Persian inside the camp, among many other, mathematics, physics, astronomy, naturalist studies, minology, it's huge what they did.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

But this art done by them, not random internee that has no diploma. All of them were trained and all of them were talented, in one way or another, on craft making. So art, visual art, is one of the crafts that they made inside the camp.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

But, back to your main question, the importance that we need to go through them, and this is part of Australian Second World War history. It happened here, inside the camps at Loveday, and then in Tatura. Step by step, all corners of these prints, there are messages of trauma, isolation, injustice. This is the message that, after camp, they forwarded to their family members, horrible things happened to internees that still people ashamed to talk about that. We really need to reveal this visual art of the camps in Australia and open the debate.

Tim Stackpool:

So the collection does tell us quite a lot, as you've said. And, obviously, going through a few names there, it's uncovered some surprises for you, as well.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

Yes.

Tim Stackpool:

But how about all the families and some of the families that you spoke to? Did they, first of all, not realize how important these works were? And then, secondly, after you started discussions with them, did it engender any type of deep, emotional response within them, as well?

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

Let's talk about the family collection first, then come to artworks because I see these artworks part of family collections. The majority of cases, especially fathers kept the history far from their children. Because what happened after Second World War, they were labeled in Australia, on Australian territory, enemy aliens. And that was very pejorative term to use for them. And still children remember. Children, when I say, members of my team are between 80 to 85 years old. They remember their childhood. Many families changed their family, their names, that doesn't look like German. No one wanted to be German in Australia, especially after the Second World War. So these collections were hidden somewhere. Children need to learn about Australian culture, which is very beautiful. Children need to learn English. All children, let's say that, are grateful to Australia, including fathers. This project was one eye opening for these families.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

"Oh, letters are important. Tokens of the camp are important. This painting is important. Oh, there is a painting. Who did that? Oh, it's not my father. Someone did for my father. There is a caption behind it. Who was that chap?" And by this, Tim, the beginning of our project was in the beginning of COVID-19. And I should say, I'm very happy to say that our project was like healing for my project members and collaborators. Under the harsh COVID situation, they suddenly introduced to their own family collection and went deep into it, dive into it and produce such amazing materials. Then here suddenly, visual material became important. Suddenly, yes, family understood the importance of them, preservation of them, scanning them, frame them, clean them. And I can say, from our group, Australian War Memorial has two artworks of big master Brandenstein, who did majority of woodcut prints that they have two of those that we put on our website. We have original ones in our collection.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

And also another organization that I should really thank them from the beginning blog, Australian War Memorial, Australian National Archive, is Tatura Museum. Tatura Museum, which the bigger name is Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum, they are the real museum of internment camp in entire Australia, which was huge, because majority of family captives and internees live in Tatura camp. Their children, grandchildren return there and donated things to the Tatura Museum, which amazing archives and artworks. And we are grateful to them.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

I think they have some or copy of especially caricatures done by one of our group artists is there. But the rest disappeared, families gone. And I think it's only our project that has these treasures, especially Wulff collection. And this is where our website is important. And, again, I should say thank you to your team that help us to establish... No, honestly. It's for the first time in history of war and Australia, that we opened the gates of public and researchers to these artworks. And I hope we can go further and do much collaboration with you and your platform. And I hope really this podcast can open more audiences to our work team.

Tim Stackpool:

In terms of the website, and you mentioned, and you are excited about it. I can hear you clicking through it while we're having this conversation.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

Yes.

Tim Stackpool:

It's really only, dare I say, a superficial look at how far this project has gone.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

Yes.

Tim Stackpool:

And you've talked about the book.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

Yes.

Tim Stackpool:

But how far does this need to go? Are you hoping for perhaps a museum exhibition? Should it go on tour? Where do you go from here?

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

Thank you for this question, Tim. I hope our website is just the beginning with very limited number of artworks. So I hope in due time with our collaboration, we add more images and material to that. But in the book that we are publishing, I will have one chapter as introduction academically to this artwork in that book. And second aim is to have proper catalog and book about the artworks of German internees of Persia in Australia. We have amazing number of them. But the question is, which is the general question, majority of members of our project transfer their family collection to me, as temporary scholar and curator, until we find a good house institution. Now I open the debate to listener of your podcast. Please be in touch, if you are in such an organisation and you think you can help us.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

And this is our aim Tim, especially these artworks around 300. My aim, as an anthropologist curator, is always to keep collections together, even if they are from different materials. Diaries, photographs, artworks. I know that museum institutions today cannot handle, because of expenses or space, all

collections together. But these artworks deserve to be hosted first somewhere. It takes time. Acquisition in art museums and wherever institution takes time. But yes, we would love to have one exhibition somewhere. Real exhibition in one art gallery, in one museum that open these 300 artworks to everyone, show them and, beside that, a good symposium to talk about this history behind this Germans of Persia, open the public. And definitely, I'm one person. In our research group, we have seven person. But, when we open it to the public and especially scholar, I'm sure there are much more interest to see and work and collaborate together.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. The artwork is the catalyst for the bigger story. The artwork stands alone. However, the bigger story behind it has so many facets to it, Professor. The story, I think, is also part of the artwork.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

It is, Tim.

Tim Stackpool:

Part of the construction.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

It is because just think, sorry I interrupt you. Just think, in the end of day, they are prisoners. Sorry, I'm against the word "Internment" and members of my group say, "You should not say them prisoners. Our fathers never said they were prisoners." But, for me, based on human rights today in 21st century, all of them were detainees and prisoners, sorry to say that. And they are with limited material and possibilities inside the camp life. So how they found the mediums for their artwork, as a pigment based materials I mean, water colour, oil, ink, how they found the support for the execution of their artwork. Papers, toilet papers, extra useless piece of wood. Just let's think about hand print making process, which is amazingly difficult because I was teaching it for years, in university of art.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

How, for God's sake, inside the camp you can make metal, which is gravure, print? How you can find linoleum to do linoleum print? Okay, you find linoleum. There are legends that they found it in their temporary hospital, under the carpet. But how you can cut it? You need tools to cut it. And then where did you find the ink?

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. At best online we can show the imagery and the artwork. We can't really tell the story. We can't really communicate the texture.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

In this is stage, no. But our website is good because, as we decided you and I, we have four categories there, like drawing, caricatures, water colour, print, and we added also oil painting, which are very rare. Then, our audience can see some samples. The selection is made, not only by themes, not only by category of techniques, but also I picked those that emotionally can show what you and I discussed today together. Harshness of life, sadness, being alone. What is this land escape? Sand, desert, with sunshine, storms, harsh weather, working.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

And also loneliness is something really you see in majority of them. In the end of day, they wrote in their diaries, "We are prisoners. When we arrived there, we wanted to cry. When we arrived on the gate, at Loveday, we understood we are not anymore in the hand of God, we are in the hand of British army and we are in prison." So, later on in publication or in talks, this is first time actually I talk, you know that, and thanks to you again. Interplay between diaries text and these paintings can reveal really what's behind them. And, again, our website is just a beginning and I hope with our collaboration, due time, we add more explanation, more scholarship texts to the website for the public and the scholars.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. It is a big story to tell, Professor, and perhaps one that takes a lot more than just a quick podcast interview to explain fully.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

Yes.

Tim Stackpool:

But I do thank you for your time and your support of Inside The Gallery, as a podcast, and for approaching us to be part of this project. And I look forward to actually having a conversation again over the coming months about how this is progressing and where it can be taken.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

Thank you, Tim. I should say also thank you. Because the website that we created is the first ever online exhibition too, online gallery. We are inside the gallery somehow for our website. And I really hope that we reach greater audiences and, with your support, help us think better together what we can do, especially with these artworks of the Australian Second World War internment camps.

Tim Stackpool:

Thank you again.

Prof Pedram Khosronejad:

Thank you, Tim, for your time and your interest to our project. I'm deeply grateful from you, your time and support.