

**The Artist Who Made Beauty Out of Destruction**

**Episode 16 of *Exile* with Mandy Patinkin**

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*MUSIC*

*SFX: FOOTSTEPS OVER RUBBLE*

**MANDY PATINKIN:** The year is 1940. An overcast day in north London. Overnight, Nazi war planes, the *Luftwaffe*, have flattened a whole street of buildings in Golders Green.

In the quiet of the morning, after the dust has settled, a man picks his way through piles of shattered brick and twisted metal. His eyes searching, scanning the wreckage.

He is not looking for the bodies of loved ones or scavenging for valuables. Instead, amidst the rubble and debris, he is looking for inspiration.

He is searching for materials to create something new. A way to express what he has lost, a way to forge some meaning, some beauty even, from the destruction.

This man is Samson Schames. A Jew fleeing fascism. An artist in exile.

*THEME MUSIC*

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Welcome to Exile, a podcast from LBI, the Leo Baeck Institute, New York. I'm Mandy Patinkin. When everything is taken away, then what? From LBI's archives, untold stories of Jewish lives in the shadow of fascism.

Today, the story of an artist who forged the debris of war into works of striking creativity and lasting power.

## MUSIC - HISTORICAL PIANO

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Samson Schames was born in 1898, on the cusp of the twentieth century.

His early years were rich with tradition and community.

His family were descended from one of the oldest Jewish families in Frankfurt, who had been part of the *Judengasse* community, the Jewish ghetto, since the 15th century.

## SFX: GROUP OF PEOPLE CHATTING

They lived in East Frankfurt where he had an orthodox Jewish schooling. From the window of their apartment, he could look out and see the *Friedberger Anlage* synagogue, which his family attended.

Samson, his sister Luise and his brother Paul lived in comfort. Their father worked at the Rothschild bank and they were looked after by a nanny.

But in those first two decades of the 20th century, as Samson moved through his teens into adulthood, Germany was also the centre of a dynamic, new artistic movement. A movement which would reverberate through his art and his life.

**SAMANTHA BASKIND:** I've noticed in his lines the influence of German expressionism, which was an early 20th century art movement in Germany that emphasized the artist's inner feelings or ideas over replicating reality.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** This is Samantha Baskind, Professor of Art at Cleveland State University.

**SAMANTHA BASKIND:** So that was characterized by simplified shapes and bright colors and like gestural marks or brushstrokes. And these movements

consequently came in stark contrast with other movements that preceded this because that focused more on accurate depictions of reality and nature.

*SFX: NATURE SOUNDS*

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Vincent van Gogh, Edvard Munch, Egon Schiele. These are now among the most famous of the expressionists, concerned more with evoking inner feelings, with bold colors and distorted forms, than replicating reality. And it was a movement to which Samson had a personal link.

His uncle, Ludwig Schames, opened a gallery to champion a group of young expressionists known as *Die Brucke*, or the Bridge, founded by painter and printmaker Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, whose work would come to wield enormous respect and influence.

Ludwig took Kirchner under his wing, but for Samson, he was nothing more than a distant uncle.

Samson later wrote about Ludwig in his memoirs.

*SFX: WRITING*

**SAMSON SCHAMES:** My uncle Ludwig Schames was a simple, quiet man. I could never be close to him, but this was perhaps my fault. I never spoke to him about art.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Ludwig's indifference must have been disappointing because Samson was committed to art, and to his artistic training, from early on.

He attended the Arts and Crafts college from the age of 16, and began at Frankfurt's premier art school in 1920.

But in 1923, everything changed for Samson.

*MUSIC - PROPULSIVE*

In the aftermath of the First World War, Germany, forced to sign the peace agreement known as the Treaty of Versailles, was a country left defeated, humiliated, and indebted. The country entered a spiral of devastating hyper-inflation.

By November 1923, one U.S. dollar was equivalent to 1 trillion German marks. To buy a newspaper or a loaf of bread, you'd need a suitcase full of money.

After Samson's father died of a heart attack in 1905, Sophie Schames and the children had been living off a comfortable pension from the Rothschild bank. But suddenly, that became worthless.

**SAMSON SCHAMES:** My mother and we, her three children, could not cope with this state of affairs and would have perished if well-to-do relations had not helped us.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Samson was forced to drop out of art school and take a job that he despised.

**SAMSON SCHAMES:** Since I could not complete the course at art school, I had to work as a stage designer. It was a demoralizing situation: I had to design and execute settings that were calculated to produce cheap effects; in my spare time I painted. I could not do justice to either.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** He aspired, above all, to create fine art. He sneered at spectacle, and bristled at the job of creating a backdrop for the work of others: he wanted to be center stage.

So while he filled his days designing sets, he continued to create his own work.

*MUSIC - PENSIVE*

Samson painted "The Opera Square" in 1930, when he was 31.

The painting is framed as if the viewer is on the steps of the grand Frankfurt Opera House, looking out on the busy square out front. A square that once included Uncle Ludwig's old office and gallery.

Charlie Scheidt was friends with Samson in later years, and cherishes this painting.

**CHARLIE SCHEIDT:** I grew up with this painting of the Frankfurt Opera Square. And it's wonderfully melancholy. It seems to be a rainy day. And he has chosen to portray not the opera and the glitz of the opera and the comfortable people in the opera, but he's chosen to portray the square in front of it. And it's a very ordinary day. We have a car parked and a bicycle in the foreground. In the background, trolleys are indicated, and slight outlines of people.

*SFX: TROLLEY, CROWDS*

**MANDY PATINKIN:** This is Samson's world in 1930. A life rich with culture, immersed in theater and art and music. But also, a life slightly outside the artistic elite to which he aspired.

**CHARLIE SCHEIDT:** In the foreground, we have one person who looks stooped. And we have him and his shadow. And I think that's a bit of social commentary on Samson's part.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** The foreground figure, hands in his pockets, face in darkness, might be a melancholy portrayal of Samson himself. Or perhaps it's a comment on the antisemitic threat rising in Germany.

*MUSIC - OMINOUS*

In 1933, the Nazis seized power.

*SFX: MARCHING*

In 1935, they announced the Nuremberg Laws, the rules that codified National Socialist racial ideology into law, and officially downgraded Jews from citizens to "subjects" of the Reich.

In this year, Samson painted another oil on canvas titled "A Street in Autumn."

*SFX: PAINTING*

Two figures in black struggle along a sidewalk in the wind, their umbrellas strained. Beside them, the trees and greenery of Frankfurt's Rothschild Park.

This painting is darker than "The Opera Square." Darker tones, a sense of forceful winds, of energy and disturbance.

We can't know what Samson felt as he painted this, or what he intended. But it is tempting to see in the struggling figures, a resonance with his own precarious situation. By then, the Nazis had begun to confiscate property belonging to Jews, and they had started coming after artists whose work they regarded as "degenerate."

Then, in 1938, state-sponsored antisemitism spilled out into nationwide violence and vandalism: Kristallnacht, the night of Broken Glass.

Finally, Samson knew he must go.

But he had to leave so much of his work behind.

*SFX: WRITING*

**SAMSON SCHAMES:** Many of my paintings I lost. many of them I gave away. A former classmate, Franke by name, gathered up masses of stuff to carry home with him. Kranz, another colleague, came to say goodbye.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** But just as he was losing it all, a miracle.

**SAMSON SCHAMES:** Without intending to do so, Germany gave me a final unexpected, unintentional gift. At the last moment I met my wife with whom I built a new life in the new countries. The night is not long enough, and I have not paper enough to write about the balance and the stimulation she afforded me. Had it not been her encouragement, I would often have given up the fight.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Flame-haired Edith. Exuberant, outspoken, passionate. The love of Samson's life, who would be together with him until the end. They left Germany to start a new life.

*MUSIC - PROPULSIVE*

*SFX: TRAIN*

Samson and Edith arrived in London in 1939. If they had hoped for a warm welcome in their new country, their timing was catastrophic. Because on the 3rd of September, Britain officially declared war on Germany.

**NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN:** I am speaking to you, from the Cabinet Room, 10 Downing Street. This country is at war with Germany.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** All Germans, even the Jews fleeing Nazi oppression, instantly became "enemy aliens."

By the spring of 1940, as the Nazi military machine overwhelmed Belgium, the Netherlands and France, British anxiety about the Germans in their own midst sharpened to acute paranoia. Who among them might be a spy?

So all German men and boys over 16 were sent to internment camps.

*SFX: BUS DRIVING*

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Samson had escaped the Nazis, but found himself behind barbed wire anyway.

**RACHEL PISTOL:** The largest internment camp in the UK, was in a place called Huyton, which is just outside Liverpool, and it was an unfinished housing estate.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Dr. Rachel Pistol is an historian from King's College London who studies the British internment camps.

**RACHEL PISTOL:** At its height, Huyton held 5000 men. And these were a mixture of genuine refugees, some pro-Nazis were in there as well.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Each of the unfinished houses took at least twelve men, three or four to a room. There was one toilet and no hot water. The food was basic, rations tight.

**RACHEL PISTOL:** For some people, it was incredibly traumatic given that they had escaped Germany. Some of them had been in concentration camps such as Dachau, Sachsenhausen, and they had come across to the UK expecting refuge and then been placed behind barbed wire again. And the big concern was that if the Germans had invaded Britain successfully, then the Britons would have done the Nazis jobs for them, because all of the Jewish refugees, they'd have no chance of escape.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Now in his 40s, Samson was separated from his beloved Edith, in exile from his homeland and family, imprisoned in squalor.

He could have collapsed into depression. He could have lost hope. But something curious happened: Samson, the artist, thrived.

*MUSIC - HOPEFUL*



**RACHEL PISTOL:** But the biggest challenge was what to do with people's time during the day. Because you'd have roll calls. So you're on sort of this military system of, you have to appear outside of your house and they have to tick you off the list to make sure that you are there. And this is where you really get the creativity and the resourcefulness of the internees shining through.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** His creative impulses were inspired by the adversity.

*SFX: TINKERING, BRUSHING*

From tufts of his own hair and bits of wood, he made brushes. Using everything from condensed milk to shoe polish, Samson improvised paints.

With pieces of cardboard or paper for a canvas, he set about capturing this bleak new world.

*SFX: CHAIN LINK FENCING*

**MANDY PATINKIN:** The painting titled "The Gate" shows a fence, lined with barbed wire, a narrow gap leading into the camp. In the background, out of focus figures stand around in clumps, evoked with a few simple brushstrokes, dark smudges barely visible against shadowy buildings and a grey, oppressive sky.

*MUSIC - OMINOUS*

During his three-and-a-half months of internment, Samson produced more than twenty paintings, as well as a series of small sculptures out of barbed wire called "The Wandering Jew."

The truth is, he wasn't unhappy.

**SAMSON SCHAMES:** It was not bad! It was a very interesting interlude. Room and board were taken care of; models were plentiful.

**RACHEL PISTOL:** In many of the camps you get the creation of camp universities because you've got a complete cross-section of society. And many internees say that actually in terms of meeting people they would never normally get a chance to meet, internment was an incredible opportunity. And so a lot of academics and other people who had expertise in different subjects would give lectures on what they would normally teach at university.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Samson would also encounter other artists like Ludwig Meidner, the great German expressionist. And some of them even collaborated.

**SAMSON SCHAMES:** After a time, we painters arranged a show where we sold not only to inmates, but also to British officers. I drew and painted, but also made figures out of barbed wire which I later on showed on Bond Street.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Once a sympathetic camp commandant began allowing instruments to come in, the musicians interned there started to put on little cabarets and concerts.

Among them was the celebrated Austrian composer Hans Gál. He had fled the Nazis and settled in Edinburgh a few years earlier. Despite suffering terribly from the miserable conditions, Gál was able to perform and lecture, and even continued to compose in the camp.

#### *MUSIC - THE HUYTON SUITE BY HANS GÁL*

He dedicated one piece in particular to his fellow internees: The Huyton Suite, a delicate and playful four part composition for two violins and a flute.

In these cold, cramped, dirty houses, as they feared for family members left behind, Samson Schames, his fellow artists, academics and musicians, found each other in glorious creativity and companionship.

To escape through imagination, to create beauty even, amidst the desolation. A defiant act of joy.

About four months later, Samson was released from Huyton in October 1940. He made his way back to London into the most intense period of the Blitz, a relentless string of bombings by Nazi war planes.

*SFX: ALARMS, PLANES, BOMBS DROPPING*

Without a job, he volunteered for the Civil Defence and took on the duties of a fire guard, protecting London from blazes that raged, and often spread, after bombing raids.

But he was an artist still. And new circumstances demanded new materials, a new response.

**SAMSON SCHAMES:** One day when I went by a bombed building I saw some long rusty nails on the ground. It seemed to me that they formed a crown of thorns. Taking this as my title, I produced my first mosaic and dedicated it to an unknown victim of the blitz lying beneath the rubble.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** Samson pushed these rusty nails into limestone plaster to outline a face, the eyes squeezed shut as if in pain, with a heavy iron beard. Some pieces of broken pottery as hair.

The genteel melancholy of life in Frankfurt, the opera square, the park, that was all gone. This world demanded something much more brutal.

**SAMSON SCHAMES:** It is made and meant to represent the “crown of thorns” that we all carry with us throughout our lives and under which our suffering existence takes place.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** The mosaics and paintings from this period reflect a world in pain, broken and struggling.

*MUSIC - PROPULSIVE*

*SFX: BOMBS FALLING*

But as the bombs fell, Samson was living in a thrill of danger and creativity. Time was precious, emotions vivid, pleasures all the more intense.

**SAMSON SCHAMES:** Though the pace was quick, one loved life. Lovers quickly met; time was pressing, the uncertain future was a very busy match-maker. The embraces were hasty because time was always short; service, duty, the front line were relentlessly calling. I do not believe that tenderness was slighter, the experience less significant because the hourglass was under high pressure. Every day, indeed every hour was a gift. Would one see each other again? Could one hope for such a gift?

**MANDY PATINKIN:** What's more, Samson's artistic work was finally being rewarded and recognised.

**SAMSON SCHAMES:** Between 1939 and 1947 I had five one-man shows in London. I also exhibited at the London Group and the Royal Academy among others. Of the appreciative notices, I remember best that of Jan Gordon in the Observer because he fully understood the essence of my nature: "the paradox might be said that the unhappier he is, the happier he is."

*MUSIC - HOPEFUL*

*SFX: SHIP HORN*

**MANDY PATINKIN:** In 1948, Samson and Edith left England for America.

They headed to New York and settled in a tight knit group of Jewish emigrés, many of them also from Frankfurt.

Marguerite Green was a child when Samson and Edith arrived. She knew him by his nickname, Fritz.

**MARGUERITE GREEN:** We lived in Kew Gardens, Queens, which was a lovely little village. Edith and Fritz lived just in the next village over, Forest Hills, which was about a little bit closer to the city and in an apartment house.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** It was a community of exiles, parents and grandparents who had fled from German fascism, and created a home away from home.

In conversation with her daughter Natalie, Marguerite remembers just how tight the community was.

**MARGUERITE GREEN:** When we went to the butcher or the cleaner or the candlestick maker, you know, they all spoke German. And, I grew up speaking German as my first language, so it was, I guess you call it, what, a ghetto?

**NATALIE GREEN GILES:** Well, a lovely ghetto.

**MARGUERITE GREEN:** A lovely ghetto. Yeah.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** She can still picture Samson from when she was 9 years old.

**MARGUERITE GREEN:** I have great memories of him sitting in our living room, my parents home. And, first impression, I was scared of him. Not just a little bit, but a lot! Here was this very imposing figure with dark, long hair. Mostly in dark clothing. I sort of remember turtlenecks. Uh, something high up and dark. And nothing like I had ever seen. The bohemian style was not something that I was familiar with at, let's say, the age of nine or ten years old.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** During this period, Samson was continually inspired by his wife Edith. Their relationship, now in its second decade, was as passionate as ever.

**MARGUERITE GREEN:** I heard conversations that my mother had. My mother was quite friendly with Edith, as a friend. They shared a lot of personal information, and I heard some of this stuff, and I think they really had a great relationship. *[laughs]*

**MANDY PATINKIN:** In America, Samson and Edith had reconnected with their community. But Samson still craved recognition for his art—and to make some money.

In 1950, a major opportunity. He would exhibit his work, solo, at the Carlebach Gallery in New York. The space was offered for free as a friendly favor.

**SAMSON SCHAMES:** I showed mosaics, a number of gouaches and some pictures employing mixed media. They had all been done during the war in London. The notices in Digest and Art News were appreciative. The New York Times praised the show.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** The exhibit seemed a solid success.

An enormously influential connoisseur of the art world, Alfred H. Barr, saw the exhibition, and was impressed. Barr had served for 15 years as the director of The Museum of Modern Art. By 1950, Barr was no longer in the job, but he wrote to Samson, expressing his admiration and suggesting he submit one of his mosaics to the museum with the hope they would buy it for their own collection. “The Crown of Thorns,” his very first mosaic from London.

After this recommendation from such a powerful figure, it was a savage blow when he was finally rejected.

CUE UP/ OUT

Now in his 50s, unable to make a good living from selling his work, disillusionment began to set in.

And like so many, he would continue to be haunted by the people he had lost. He had fled Germany almost a decade and a half earlier, leaving behind his mother and sister. For all that time, he had heard nothing, their fate unknown. In 1954, he would receive devastating news.

*MUSIC - MELANCHOLY*

**SAMSON SCHAMES:** What has happened lies so far back and is yet so close. I have just received a letter, a report from Germany. It has been ascertained that my mother was deported to Theresienstadt in September of 1942 and that she died there in February of 1943. The thought tape is running in reverse. It is like a reel of a projector. The pictures are not clear. Suddenly they come to a halt and I see my mother in a gloomy room, some sort of sack lying on the floor. A picture which I often had before me. My sister vanished and has never been heard of. No way of ascertaining where and when she died. It must have been prior to 1942 that she was separated from my mother. Was she carried off to a labor camp, to the officers' quarters of a Nazi camp? Did she have to serve the troops, did she have to suffer all the Nazi tortures? She was thirty at the time, blonde, good-looking, a plain good human being. I hope death reached out for her soon lest she go through all this misery.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** During an interview in his later years, Samson was asked whether he would ever consider using the same kind of materials that characterized his art during the war.

No, he said. Never. Those materials were intimately connected with the time and place. It would have no meaning, it would be immoral.

But he was drawn back, in 1956, to build up mosaics once more with fragments of material, assembling images from shards of colored glass. A reference, perhaps, to the Night of Broken Glass in 1938, after which Samson finally fled Germany. Only this time he smashed the glass, and put it back together, himself.

We heard Marguerite's early memories of Samson. And recently, Marguerite's daughter, Natalie, along with her own daughter, Gabrielle, took a trip to the Jewish Museum in Frankfurt. It was a pilgrimage of sorts, to connect with their origins.

**NATALIE GREEN GILES:** I mean, every time I go to Frankfurt, I just feel like the ancestors are somehow talking to me because our family actually, that Schames side of the family goes back to, oh my gosh, to the Jewish lane of the Middle Ages. Like our roots are really, really, really deep.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** They had the chance to see an extraordinary piece from Samson's later life called "Blowing the Shofar," which depicts a figure holding the ram's horn of Jewish ritual.

**NATALIE GREEN GILES:** I mean, to me, stained glass, which is what this looks like, is, sanctifying.

**GABRIELLE GILES:** Yeah, that's actually, that's a better word.

**NATALIE GREEN GILES:** Or holy, very holy. Um, and the shofar, of course, is the representation of when the shofar is blown, it says, pay attention, something important is happening here. It's either a call to arms. Or it's a call to worship, or it could just be the start of the new year, as we do it now.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** The mosaic is displayed lying flat, illuminated from underneath, as if the sun were shining through the pieces of a stained glass window.

**NATALIE GREEN GILES:** You stand there and you just feel the light shining through and you feel everything that was broken, maybe a little bit, starting to be repaired.

**GABRIELLE GILES:** And also, I would say, like, the fact that he's been embracing these Jewish icons later in life, to me, is more...I don't know, I'm the third generation, but it seems to me that like, that's the point at which, you



know, there's been some time in multiple rounds of exile and then maybe a sort of reconciliation or connection to, you know, this part of his identity.

*MUSIC - PENSIVE*

**MANDY PATINKIN:** In 1964, Samson painted a self-portrait. A dark face before a bright background.

*SFX: PAINTING*

Features emerge from wild strokes of black, over wide smears of grey and rusty brown. Thin dark lines define the eyes in jagged, overlapping circles and imbue them with a kind of haunting weight. The heavy contours, perhaps, of a life textured with pain, with loss.

But his response to exile, his response to internment, to war, to struggle, was always to create. To capture through the stroke of a brush, or the debris of a broken city, something deeply felt, something true, something with its own kind of dark beauty.

Samson's friend Charlie Scheidt.

**CHARLIE SCHEIDT:** Samson had plenty of adversity in his life. He dealt with all of that, continuing to create, continuing to be charming and witty. He had this indomitable spirit of creativity and perseverance. And I would argue that that speaks to an insistence that art and creativity and the human spirit can and must survive.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** As that art critic noted years earlier, it was in the most difficult times when Samson really flourished.

**NATALIE GREEN GILES:** So how ironic that we're sitting here talking about him. How wonderful, because he's finally getting his due in some ways. And that his third generation out, American born family, that we're sitting here talking to you about him and making a trip to Frankfurt to see his art that's

hanging on the Jewish Museum in the old Rothschild Manor. I mean, it's pretty extraordinary. I think he's, he would be happy now.

**MANDY PATINKIN:** And with this fresh attention on Samson's work, perhaps he's finally getting the recognition he longed for.

### *THEME MUSIC*

**PRODUCER:** In addition to exhibition catalogs and other printed material about Samson Schames held in the LBI Archives, the LBI Art & Objects Collection holds over two dozen works by Schames on paper and one of his sculptural works made from debris he collected in London during the Blitz. The entire collection can be viewed online at [www.lbi.org](http://www.lbi.org).

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