Rising from the ruins

Dresden and Coventry have long been united by the terrible legacy of World War II bombing. Artist Monica Petzal reveals how her own family history links her to the two cities.

Growing up in the 1950s and 60s at the edge of Hampstead Heath, I did not think that I was mostly German; indeed, I was determinedly British. Throughout their lives, my parents, German Jewish refugees, sustained the language, culture, and lifestyle of their native Berlin and Dresden. Religion did not figure. However, in their own peculiar way they felt assimilated and were deeply attached and loyal to the country that had given them refuge. My father, his study shelves lined with the books of testimony from the country that had given them refuge, did not think that he was mostly German. In the late 1920s they moved to Dresden and the wider destruction of Berlin and Dresden and the wider destruction of Great Britain and Germany during World War II.

My mother and her family had fled the Nazis in a relatively well-planned way – their ability to leave due to foresight and financial means. By contrast, my father Harry Petzal, born in Berlin in 1908, escaped just before war broke out on forged papers. He requested asylum and volunteered for the military. Not interned because of his specialism as a metallurgist, he served in the British Army Aeroplane Corps, and from 1943 at Lucas, which made aircraft components. His expertise may have contributed in some small measure to the allied bombing.

Both sides of my family had considered themselves “more German than the Germans”, both grandfathers fought for Germany in World War I, one winning the Iron Cross. The fortunate ones who fled were devastated at being forced to leave their homeland. Britain did not welcome them warmly, but it did take them in. The German Jewish refugee community flourished and the immense contribution Hitler’s emigres made to British life and culture is widely recognised – their narrative is as relevant today as it was then.

“My Dresden project led me to reclaim my German citizenship”

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Making this artwork has altered my connection to my heritage. I am more politicised and have a greater awareness of German history and current events, in particular the rise of the anti-Islam movement Pegida in Dresden. As someone who now holds dual British and German nationality, and as a Jew, I want my work to emphasise the significance of individual stories, as well as the importance of reconciliation between countries and faiths. The Dresden Project is about us all. It asks us to consider how we construct our identity, and to consider our roots.

Flanking the printed images, with the names of Coventry and Dresden uppermost, are the place names of the 32 other most bombed towns and cities in Great Britain and Germany during World War II.

While I am now involved with Coventry, exhibiting 75/70 in the Cathedral and the Dresden Project at the Herbert Art Gallery Museum, the city has none of the tragedy I associate with my relationship to Dresden, which remains a highly politicised and fragmented city permeated by a culture of remembrance.


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