



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 Nuremberg Trials and Winston Churchill's history of WWII, never spoke of his immediate family, all of whom had died in Auschwitz. My mother, however, spoke glowingly of Dresden, its beauty and culture, and our house was full of Dresden porcelain and German silver.

As an artist, I chose to put my complex heritage mostly to one side, until I realised, the narratives were emerging without my conscious consent. As I approached

my 60th birthday, I decided I had to confront this and in July 2012 went on reconnaissance to Dresden. Welcomed at the Grafikwerkstatt, a remarkable, city-owned print workshop, I eventually worked there for two lengthy periods in 2013 and 2014.

The Dresden Project which emerged explores my extensive family archive, historical documentation, and personal experience through the medium of print, also considering the Allied bombing of Dresden in February 1945, its aftermath and some aspects of contemporary cultural and political life in Dresden.

My mother, Hannalore (Lore) Isakowitz, was born in 1915, and her parents Erich Max Isakowitz, a dental surgeon, and Sofie Berlowitz came to Dresden in the early 1920s to escape growing antisemitism in their native eastern Prussia. They became active members of the cultured Jewish bourgeoisie, including amongst their friends the Expressionist painter Conrad Felixmüller and the academic and diarist

Victor Klemperer. From the late 1920s they lived in Dresden Plauen; Lore went to the Deutsche Oberschule in Plauen, receiving her Abitur in spring 1933. From then on daily life became increasingly constrained; Lore, a student of Klemperer, was not allowed to attend university, and Erich was not allowed to treat Aryans.

Sofie travelled to London in 1935, and petitioned successfully for permission for Erich to work in London, accompanied by his family. In his famous diaries, *I Shall Bear Witness*, Klemperer gives a revealing account of my grandparents' and mother's last years in Dresden and their eventual departure. Erich and Sofie settled in Hampstead in the summer of 1936, and were never to see Germany again. Lore married and had three children, my two older brothers and me. Our family visited Dresden in 1985, then still a city of the DDR and largely in ruins. For Lore it was a traumatic visit in every way; highly distressed, she never recovered her equilibrium, and died the following year.

(Left) Dresden I; Lithograph over Monoprint, 70 x 100 cms, Unique, 2013;
(Above) Dresden V; Lithograph over Monoprint, 70 x 100 cms, Unique, 2013

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 Pioneer 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 émigrés made to British life and culture is widely recognised – their

narrative is as relevant today as it was then.

Initially a personal exploration, I could not have foreseen that my project would be exhibited at the Kreuzkirche in the heart of Dresden as a significant part of the 75th commemoration of the bombing.

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

Nor did I contemplate the thought that it would lead me to reclaim my German citizenship, join the board of the reconciliation charity Dresden Trust, and accept the challenge to produce artwork for Coventry.

75/70 is a site-specific installation for Coventry Cathedral to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the bombing of the city by the German Luftwaffe on 14 November 1940. A series of 20 prints, in four ‘towers’, it concerns the twinned cities of Coventry and Dresden and the wider destruction of the cities of Britain and Germany during World War II. Conceived to reflect the scale and significance of the cathedral, it addresses the historical background of the cities; the bombing and destruction; reconstruction; and contemporary life in both places.

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.

Whilst I am now involved with Coventry, exhibiting 75/70 in the Cathedral and the Dresden Project at the Herbert Art Gallery and 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.

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 own histories and how we understand who we are and what we stand for. ■

The Dresden Project runs until Sunday 7 February at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Jordan Well, Coventry, CV1 5QP. 024 7623 7521. www.theherbert.org. See www.monicapetzal.com