culture and his marriage to an Aryan, Klemperer's power in 1933. His diaries, written from 1933 to 1936, became my grandfather's patients. The Klemperer's then became close friends of the Isakowitz family, and the diaries reveal detail of their remarkable cultural life on their arrival in the early 1920's. From 1933 onwards it repressed and excluded them, forcing their departure in mid-1936. It was subsequently destroyed by the regime then allowed the Isakowitz family to leave Dresden. Despite his conversion to Protestantism in 1912, his strong identification with German Enlightenment, at the Technische Universität in Berlin, Gutkin removed—who knows where—his family. They had offered them safe haven, and a set of sixteen lithographs 'Das Maler Leben'—The Artist's Life.

Erich and Sofie, with their young daughter, always a set of sixteen lithographs 'Das Maler Leben'—The Artist's Life. Erich's practice, and to escape the growing anti-Semitism in Eastern Prussia, Dresden was at that time a thriving, highly sophisticated and cosmopolitan city, a renowned centre for academia, the visual arts and music. Erich and Sofie became part of the cultured and creative Jewish bourgeoisie of Dresden, a community of about 5000. Like their fellow Jews, they attended the Semper synagogue, next to the renowned Brühl's Terrace, but regarded themselves as completely assimilated and, above all, German. Their circle of friends included many in the arts, and in particular the painter Conrad Felixmüller, his wife Londa, and their sons. Between 1930 and 1936 Erich bought, or took in lieu of payment, work by Felixmüller, including an oil portrait of Sofie, drawings of himself and Lore, and a set of sixteen lithographs 'Das Maler Leben'—The Artist's Life.
Artist Monica Petzal reveals how working in Dresden helped her come to terms with her family's tragic past

Making art to ease the pain in a city of sorrow

At 9.45pm I stand on the Neumarkt — the New Market square — beside the rebuilt Frauenkirche, a giant candle projected on the cathedral's baroque facade. Then every church bell in the city tolls for 15 minutes. This was the time on a warm spring-like night in 1945 when the first of 1,000 British Lancaster bombers appeared in the clear skies over the city. I feel strongly that I am not interested in apportioning blame or taking sides, only to join the vast majority of the citizens in the need to move peacefully forward.

Two days later I am invited by Rabbi Nachama for Friday evening service. The community, which had diminished to 60 elderly members in 1989, has grown over tenfold, with most of the newcomers of Russian descent. For them, as for many Dresdners, the other significant date for commemoration is November 9, 1989, the day the wall came down.

Their new synagogue is breathtakingly sparse and beautiful, the service largely sung and transliterated into German as few of the community read Hebrew. The lengthy kiddush reflects their roots, with borscht, baked potatoes, stuffed egg, herring and piroshki, a kind of Russian sandwich.

Dresden has numerous archives and quangos dedicated to its recent history and I am doing the rounds. They were largely developed since re-unification and in 2001 started to consider the plethora of family pictures, documents and artefacts in my possession. As a British citizen, a Jew, whose parents had fled from the Nazis, my father having lost his entire family in the Holocaust, I was more than apprehensive about exploring these issues. As an artist I found it difficult to transform this powerful material into meaningful pieces of art. It took another 12 years to find the clarity of mind to return to Dresden and make work there.

I am working in a demanding, unorthodox and time consuming process on a large old litho press, initially making monoprints which are like paintings and superimposing photo-based images. Besides making prints, my project also includes visiting the sites which appear in the commenoration of the destruction of Dresden by Allied bombers on the February 13 1945. The anniversary's sombre bombshell, in which the horrors of the past are exacerbated by the neo Nazis attempts to hijack the occasion, is a tense day of demonstrations by the right and counter-demonstrations and blockades, largely by young people. I will make this, as well as the destruction of the city, the subject of further work.

I am invited by the City of Dresden as their guest for the official commemorations. The group includes members of the Dresden Trust and John Witcombe, the new Dean of Coventry Cathedral. We are taken out of town to the wooded Heidfriedhof, the cemetery where many of the 25,000 victims of the destruction are buried. Picturesque in the deep snow is its state occasion, with uniforms, immaculate white roses, a sole violin player and a significant police presence.

The mayor Helma Orosz is fierce in her commitment that the city reclaim this day from the neo Nazis. This is a divisive point, for the right-wing NPD party are allowed to attend the ceremony and so it is boycotted by members of the Left and of the Jewish community. Roses are laid at the memorial and at the diaries reveal much about my grandparent's and mother's lives from 1933-36.

Victor Klemperer, the Jewish literature professor who I Shall Bear Witness, the three volumes of diaries by the diaries reveal much about my grandparent's and mother's lives from 1933-36. This was the time on a warm spring-like night in 1945 when the first of 1,000 British Lancaster bombers appeared in the clear skies over the city. I feel strongly that I am not interested in apportioning blame or taking sides, only to join the vast majority of the citizens in the need to move peacefully forward.

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Dresden has numerous archives and quangos dedicated to its recent history and I am doing the rounds. They were largely developed since re-unification and are increasingly digitised. At every encounter my heritage German is met with helpfulness and interest in my project. At the Saxon Memorial Foundation Gabi Atanassow, who works on the archive of Jews deported from Dresden, shows me family files, and provides new pieces of the puzzle and leads to follow. She puts me in contact with my mother’s former school, the Gymnasium in Plauen, which would like to have copies of archive material I have to develop a project with its students. We also discuss the profound importance of I Shall Bear Witness, the three volumes of diaries by Victor Klemperer, the Jewish literature professor who chronicled events of the Nazi period in Dresden. The diaries reveal much about my grandfather’s and mother’s lives from 1933-36. With Susanne Ritschel I discuss the Stolpersteine Project, a European-wide effort to place small commemorative stones in pavements to commemorate victims of the Nazis. I am interested to have a “stumbling block” — for that is what it means — in front of my grandparent’s and mother’s last home in Dresden. Neither the street nor the house exists, but the archives show where it stood.

Dresden is full of ghosts for me and a palpable sense of tragedy seems to permeate the city. It is my hope that the artwork which will emerge from this visit will help to exercise some of those ghosts.

PHOTO: XXX

A symbolic candle to mark the devastating Allied bombing of 1945

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