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Dresden Christ Superstar A Farce in five acts

It was in October 2009 that the idea of a Pathway of Remembrance for Dresden was first proposed to the Lady Mayor. At a podium discussion a month later the concept was laid out in detail before a well-disposed audience. On the 13 February 2010, the day that marked the 65th anniversary of the bombing of Dresden, a walk along the Pathway of Remembrance was held for the first time.

The initiators, trumpet virtuoso Ludwig Güttler and his companions, had great expectations for the walk. It was intended to play a 'role that profoundly deepened the knowledge and reinforced the identity of Dresden and the Dresdeners'... The objective was a walk along a route that allowed people to 'share the experience of authentic locations at which authentic writings and contemporary witness testimony would be heard'. This, they intended, would provide a 'contribution to remembering – against forgetting – the 13 February 1945, that fateful day in Dresden's history'.¹

Of course the centre of attention was to be the Dresdeners' suffering on that fateful day but also how it was overcome and not forgetting that the efforts of the inhabitants to reconstruct the city had to be properly acknowledged too. Ultimately the commemoration was to serve the future, to help open wounds to heal, leaving nothing behind but heroically scared tissue. If anyone, Ludwig Güttler was the one to know about these things. When the ruin of the bombed Frauenkirche (Church of Our Lady) was reconstructed – as a symbol of peace and reconciliation – Güttler was more than peripherally involved. Along with this reconstruction though, the city had misplaced a location for commemorative rituals and sentimental rituals suddenly became scarce. New rituals were required, at least according to Güttler and his allies. And so the idea of a Pathway of Remembrance was born. Although this walk was only established with difficulty, it is nevertheless a powerful symbol: of the ignorance of a history characterized

¹ Press Release of the Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Frauenkirche Dresden e. V., 2 Feb. 2010.

by culpability and self-pity and the city's unbounded self-aggrandizement. This made the Path of Remembrance the ideal setting for a farce.

The Characters: The travellers on the Path of Remembrance

- **Ludwig Güttler**, Dresdener, trumpet virtuoso, Chairman of the Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Frauenkirche Dresden e. V. [The Society for the Advancement of the Frauenkirche] and board member of the Stiftung Frauenkirche [Foundation of the Frauenkirche]
- **Harald Brettschneider**, Oberlandeskirchenrat i. R. [Member of the Council of the Saxony State Church (retired)]
- **Gerhard Glaser**, Sächsischer Landeskonservator i. R. [Chief Conservator of the State of Saxony (Retired)] All members of the Arbeitsgruppe Gedenkweg der Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Frauenkirche Dresden e. V. [Pathway of Remembrance Working Party of the Society for the Advancement of the Frauenkirche]
- **Gunther Emmerlich**, Dresden singer and TV-personality from the local Public Television Channel MDR, Co-initiator
- **Christine Hoppe**, actress, Staatsschauspiel Dresden [State Theatre Dresden]

- **Pink Rabbit**: Main character of the campaign of the same name initiated by the Friends of Nature Youth Programme Berlin in 2009, the super year of commemorations. The pink stuffed rabbit appeared at several events concerned with the Germans' relationship to their own nation. Among many other appearances there was one in Dresden on the 13 February 2010.²

- **Setting**: Dresden, the Pathway of Remembrance. It follows a route through the old town. A short performance is presented at each of nine different stations. It takes the form of readings or music.³ At

² <http://www.pink-rabbit.org> (accessed: 11 Nov. 2012).

³ Route, locations and quotes are based on the actual *Pathway of Remembrance*. Unless otherwise noted all quotes translated from: The Society for the Advancement of the Frauenkirche: Programm zur Veranstaltung Der Dresdner Gedenkweg – 13.02.2010, 16.45-18.4, Dresden, 2 Feb. 2010.

each of these stations one of the commemorators appears together with an irritated Pink Rabbit who comments on the performances as a polemic and ironic inner voice.

Act One: The Beginning

Scene One: The courtyard of the Dresden Synagogue

Güttler: With the torchlight procession of the National Socialist through the Brandenburg Gate marking their seizure of power on the 30 January 1933, a fire was ignited. The flames reached the Dresden Synagogue on the 9 November 1938 and reduced our city to rubble on the 13 February 1945.

Pink Rabbit: The National Socialist destruction of the previous building in the year of 1938 is to be commemorated here. That's what's written in the programme. That being the case I have to ask myself: Why is this being commemorated here, today, the 13 February, and not on the 9 November? Well, for obvious reasons: Burning down the old Semper synagogue on am Hasenberg was only the 'beginning of the destruction that was completed in 1945'. The November pogroms were, so to speak, the initial acts in the demolition of Dresden and not the starting point of the revocation of civil rights and the deportation and annihilation of the German Jews. Here Dresden itself becomes an early Nazi victim.

Act Two: Suffering, Destruction, Martyrdom

Scene one: In front of the statue "Large Mourning Man" by Wieland Förster.

Glaser: Germany, with frenzied red cheeks, reeling around at the high point of wild triumph, about to conquer the world by the virtue of a treaty it was disposed to keep and had signed in its own blood. But now it is falling, caught in the embrace of demons, a hand over one eye, cataracts in the other, tumbling from despair to despair.

Pink Rabbit: Thomas Mann's Dr. Faustus. So you are suggesting that I consider the bombing of Dresden to be the punishment for the war begun by Germany? Ok, So far I get it. But obviously Dresden itself had nothing to do with that. Dresden was, as always, simply beautiful. That's at least the impression I get when Förster is quoted:

How, then, should Dresden, my city, stand alone and unharmed through a mercilessly conducted war of annihilation [...] Dresden, you hoped your great beauty would protect you from the firestorm, but your heart was incinerated.

Scene Two: Nearby, in front of the debris from the cupola of the destroyed Frauenkirche

Pink Rabbit: A statement by the Chief Inspector of Churches, Hermann Weinert, a statement 'completely under the influence of the event, the unthinkable.' as Güttler put it in his introduction. What's so unthinkable? That the cupola of the church was incapable of withstanding the bombs? I don't get it. Was the 'Cathedral of the German Christians' indestructible, harder than steel, as enduring as the Nazi's

'millennial empire'? Güttler probably just liked the sound of the words. In the end Dresden became a sudden and unexpected victim. But it was not futile, as we are about to see.

Scene Three: In front of the Pietà of Dresden Cathedral

Güttler: In 1973 Friedrich Preß completed the Pietà and the new altar here in the Johann Nepomuk Chapel to commemorate the victims of the 13 February 1945 and all the iniquitous violence. We are reading segments from the text *Stabat Mater*, the 1847 version:

Christine Hoppe: For the sins of His own nation / She saw Jesus wracked with torment / All with scourges rent / She beheld her tender Child / Saw Him hang in desolation / Till His spirit forth He sent.

Pink Rabbit: So Dresden is now Jesus? Really. Dresden slips into the New Testament. Just as Jesus died for 'the sins of his brother', Dresden was martyred for the sins of the German nation. Well, according to the Christian belief, after sinning comes expiation. It's logical really. But do I really understand it correctly? Is Dresden, like Jesus, free from sin? Dresden, the immaculate beauty. And I always thought that true expiation – which is how the bombing of the city is presented as here – calls for a recognition of guilt. Remorse looks different to me. But let's get on with it.

The martyrdom of Dresden leaves us all feeling grief and despair, exactly as Mary felt at the sight of her son. A German Pietà, so to say. But that's not all, as Güttler goes on to explain: 'The Pietà symbolizes more than the inconsolable grief, that the martyrdom of Jesus caused in Mary.[...], it has wider implications [...] This very vivid experience of grief and despair extends its meaning to include the senselessness of the destruction of everything. Whether we call it civilization, property, house or city is of secondary consideration because hope, life, and the will to live are all destroyed. This symbolism extends to involve the entirety of human existence and human life as we know it and to the very threat of the war itself'.⁴ Never again Dresden. Never again war. To learn from Dresden, is to learn of peace.

Well, as far as I know the story isn't finished with martyrdom: when your sins are expiated, you are ready to receive god's forgiveness. In the Christian belief this happens with through the resurrection of Jesus after the crucifixion which was the penance for the sins of humanity that He took upon himself. Güttler and his friends desired the same effect, preferably with a new monument, a sculpture entitled: He Who Has Risen. The Saxon newspaper was enthusiastic: 'A fallen man who gets up again, a fallen man who rises under his own power. Just like the Dresdner, just like the city'.⁵ But the city did not want the new sculpture even though it was thought that it would certainly serve to counteract the sadness and despair of the Pietà. 'Despite all the sadness, all the mourning, all that being-smashed-to-the-ground, all the hopelessness, it was with the last remnants of hope, from the weakness of the re-awa-

⁴ Ludwig Güttler, Begründung des Zusammenwirkens von Pietà in der Hofkirche und der Aufstellung der Plastik von Michael Morgner, Dresden, July 2009. Unpublished draft of the presentation (from the author's archive).

⁵ Peter Ufer, Ein Denkmal für die Kraft der Dresdner [A memorial to the strength of the Dresdener], Sächsische Zeitung, 5 October 2009.

kened strength that it attempted to rise again and refused to allow death the final word'.⁶ Gunther Emmerlich wanted to call the monument The Double Resurrection because the city had been reborn twice: 'Once after the war, and then again after 1989.'⁷ Supporters of the Path of Remembrance are not only concerned with the stroke of fate embodied in the bombings here but also that represented by the GDR. So instead of simply focusing on mourning what had been lost, they demonstrated an identity-generating pride about the reconstruction and the victory over the 'second dictatorship' by means of the peaceful revolution. But since the city does not want this monument, they have to find another way of bringing these aspects into play. I can't wait to see what they come up with.

Act Three: Completion of the annihilation

Güttler: "We must prevail over annihilation"

Scene one: In front of the Busmannkappelle Memorial (still under construction) at the former location of the Sophienkirche (Saint Sophia's Church)

Güttler: The destruction of the city on the 13 February 1945 and the ruination of the buildings that had given the city its character over the following two decades sprang from abuses of power. This threatens to be forgotten: 'Against forgetting – knowledge through remembrance.

Emmerlich: Right from the beginning the will to reconstruct the monumental buildings that characterized the image of our city for the world was unbroken... Despite the joy of achievement from rebuilding the city in a postwar era that lasted forty years and the inspiration offered by the opportunities after the peaceful revolution, we are nevertheless in danger of forgetting that monumental buildings were destroyed after 1945 as well as before.

Pink Rabbit: Alternating members of the procession read aloud the names of the buildings that had been destroyed and the churches that were torn down after 1945. This was accompanied by a great deal of pathos. It's striking how often I hear the word obliteration and I find the form that this all takes – the reading out loud the names of destroyed buildings – equally striking. This commemorative pathway seems to have become a programmatic, staged event aimed at making relativized comparisons. According to this, 'completing the annihilation'⁸ would then have been carried out with Walter Ulbricht's personal participation'. I understand: what the Nazis began with the Synagogue, was, in fact, finished by this second ruination of Dresden. And Günther Emmerlich, speaking as an expert on experiences in totalitarian systems, once again gives us food for thought: 'Today, at one of the most important locations for the story of our city (Sophienkirche, author's note), we can only remind ourselves of the causes

⁶ Ludwig Güttler, Loc. cit. Begründung 2009

⁷ Peter Ufer, Emmerlich will "Zeitzeichen" für Dresden, Sächsische Zeitung, 6 October 2009.

⁸ Noted by the author at the podium discussion 'How does Dresden commemorate the victims of the 13 February 1945?', 10 Nov. 2009, Haus der Presse, Dresden.

and effects that surrounded the Second World War, of the dead in the ruins of the city, of the abuse of power that lasted for 55 years under two different political systems.'

Act Four: Overcoming

Scene one: am Altmarkt [Old Marketplace], at the memorial area where the dead were cremated.

Güttler: Gerhard Hauptmann, witness to the events, wrote the following in February 1945 whilst watching the city burn from the *Weißer Hirsch*.

Emmerlich: 'Whoever had forgotten how to cry, learned it again during the destruction of Dresden.'

Pink Rabbit: Gerhard Hauptmann, the German author who was appointed by Goebbels to the post of Literature Laureate of the German Empire, who was not brought to tears by anything during the preceding twelve years – not by the propagated and lived out acts of hate, the deprivation of rights or the persecution of Jews, the millions of murders, the chanting masses – this man cried at the sight of bombs falling on Dresden. It was clear to me all along that this sentence couldn't be left out. No sentence summarizes the narcissistic self-referentiality of Dresden better than that. And with the help of Erich Kästner the loss is further dramatised in order to make the reconstruction appear all the more heroic. I must admit it the Pathway of Remembrance proponents really know about theatricality: 'Yes, Dresden was a wonderful city [...] the Second World War managed to wipe it out, with one single strike in one single night. It took centuries for form her unmatched beauty. A couple of hours were enough, to eradicate it from the face of the earth...'

Güttler: But in spite of this she was not lost.

Scene Two: In front of the Woman of the Ruins in Rathausplatz.

Güttler: 12 million cubic meters of debris had to be removed to be able to even consider reconstructing the city. Women and mothers did it with nothing more than the hammers in their hands.

Pink Rabbit: Slowly it is time to overcome the first destruction. The trumpeter glorifies the cleaning of the stones by the now-grown-up Bund Deutscher Mädel (League of German Girls). A couple of profound verses are supposed to make me receptive to the heroism of these deeds – *After the War* by Rita Jorek: 'Women alone / Or sometimes in pairs / Children a pledge to life / Growing up in devastated lands // The men are dead / The sons far away/ Nothing in balance / Lonely is this place'. And it soon continues with devastated land ...

Scene Three: In the Kreuzkirche, Dresden

Emmerlich: 'How deserted the city now lies, that was once so full of people.'

Pink Rabbit: The old classic of the Dresden liturgy, the motet, *Dresden*, by Rudolf Mauersberger. It was composed by the Kreuzkirche (Church of the Holy Cross) cantor in 1945, as a free interpretation of the *Book of Lamentations* by the prophet Jeremiah. Very free, in my opinion. As far as I know these

lamentations which recount the destruction of Jerusalem and the First Temple in 586 B. C as a punishment by God, included lamentation about the misery and destruction as well as a confession of sin and repentance. This is the only way can one expiate sin and earn God's salvation. As I mentioned . But here, yet again, this part is omitted. Mauersberger limits himself solely to lamentation. He acknowledges no sin. How could he? He was, I heard, quite devoted to the National Socialists and, on occasion, was quite happy to let the choir boys sing in church dressed in their Hitler Jugend uniforms. This is, however, still a much-praised 'Hymn to Dresden' used to stage its suffering. The motet fits perfectly into the drama-turgy of the Pathway of Remembrance. Before the Pietà Dresden was presented as Jesus. And if I have connected up the dots correctly, Dresden's path of suffering is extolled in Mauersberger's motet in the same way as Christ's Passion. Because that is the role of the lamentations in Christianity. Now the only thing missing is the resurrection. But everything at its proper time and place. First of all though, I have to eavesdrop on the reading of a letter written by the cantor to his Crucians. Just the final sentence: 'It is terrifying'. Now that's quite enough! Where one person abruptly learns how to cry, another experiences sudden terror. Both perfectly into the Dresden liturgy. And off we go again with the text. Into the heat of the city's history. It's time to overcome the 'second dictatorship', to bring about the peaceful revolution. Our gaze should see past the sorrow and despair, to find the Pietà's counterpart. Since there is no monument or sculpture this role must be taken on by the Kreuzkirche as the cradle of the revolution.

Bretschneider: In 1982, inspired by the biblical vision 'swords to ploughshares', a group of adolescents printed up flyers with a typewriter. It was an invitation to a memorial service to be held in Frauenkirche on the 13 February.

Pink Rabbit: 37 years later -13 February is reset as 'zero hour'. This is when Dresden realizes that war is evil. That the birth of the memorial tradition in Dresden is presented as an act of resistance obviously fits in with the whole concept: this is the one event in which staged Dresden sorrow merges with the overcoming of the 'second dictatorship' into a single event.

Bretschneider: Forty-four years later, on the 9 October 1989, members of The Group of Twenty [...] reported to those who had gathered in the Kreuzkirche and three other churches the conversation they had with the Lord Mayor of the city concerning a general request for freedom of assembly, freedom of movement and freedom for the prisoners. Furthermore they said that 70.000 people had joined in peaceful demonstrations on the inner ring in Leipzig. Praise God, the word of the Messiah had come true.

Pink Rabbit: Güttler immediately followed up with the words of the messiah in Gospel according to St. Matthew: 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth'. Dresden overcame the second 'fateful blow' with the peaceful revolution, just as the *Trümmerfrauen* of the BDM overcame the first one. Peacefully, because for Dresdeners, citizens of the great and beautiful city, violence is something foreign.

If you ignore some of the collateral consequences of the *Wir sind ein Volk*⁹ mentality, that is. Jorge Gomondai died on the 6th of April in 1991, the first victim of right-wing violence. But I don't want to seem petty, that was almost two years later. But the fact remains... The Path of Remembrance radiates the pride of accomplishment, the 'annihilation overcome'. At least over everyone else but me. I don't want to miss the end, though. We're off to the last station. To the grand finale of a double resurrection.

Act Five: The Resurrection

Scene 1: At the Neumarkt [New Market]

Pink Rabbit: The procession reaches Neumarkt and the memorial event 'Remember Truthfully - Live in Reconciliation'. Here I become witness to how the Path of Remembrance reaches it's hopeful conclusion. Our eyes travel the panorama of the reconstructed city centre. I have to admit, the staging works to perfection. The Martyrdom, represented in the Pietà, the Passion, extolled in the lamentations, comes to an end. Just as Jesus expiated all human sin by dying at the cross, Dresden expiated the sin of all Germans by being destroyed. In the resurrection of Jesus, mankind receives divine absolution, just as Germany receives absolution through the resurrection of Dresden. The two blows of fate, the complete destruction, is overcome. Dresden has arisen. Twice. Advantage, Dresden. I congratulate you, Dresden Christ Superstar.

⁹ *Wir sind das Volk* (We are the people) was a Protest-slogan during the Alexanderplatz demonstrations that led to the fall of the Berlin wall and was later turned into *Wir sind ein Volk* (We are one People).