

## A Fair Exchange

When people speak of the city of Dresden, they say one of two things: Either they say: “Oh, yes, that’s where they make the beautiful china!” Or they say: “Oh, yes, that city was bombed to smithereens.”

Porcelain and bombs. The delicate and the brutal. How are such polar opposites rectified in the psyche of the human mind and heart?

It took me ten years to write the slim memoir *On the Way to Feed the Swans*, which describes, in the voice of the young person I then was, the lifestyle of my parents and grandparents in the Dresden of the 1930’s.

I self-published *Swans* in the 1980’s because the publishers said they were not interested in memoirs unless they were written by famous persons. And, besides, they said that books about the Holocaust were now passé. Too many of them had already been published!

Ten years ago, when my mother’s casket was lowered into the ground, I heard a tiny voice in my inner ear. It said: “Send your book to Dresden.” And since I knew no one there anymore, I addressed the book to the Mayor’s Office.

Two years went by without a word. Then, one day, I received a letter from a Lilli Ulbrich of Dresden. She explained that she and others were working on a project, trying to trace the Jews and their families who had lived in Dresden during the Nazi period. Who went to the camps? Who was murdered and where? Who escaped? Who immigrated? Where are their descendants? And so on. Lilli Ulbrich said that she and others in this Christian/ Jewish effort had gathered close to 10,000 names. The biggest joy, she said, was having found my book, which so clearly described the lifestyle of one family before it all changed.

Of course, we became friends and regularly exchanged letters. And when in 2004 my daughter Elizabeth and I decided to visit Dresden for the very first time, Lilli Ulbrich waited for us at the airport with a bouquet of red roses.

In the summer of 2008, Lilli e-mailed important news. She said that *Swans* was being translated into German and that the Hannah Arendt Institute wished to publish the German edition in order to include it in its Collection of first person historical accounts. Additionally, Elizabeth and I were being cordially invited by the Institute to a public Book Presentation! It would take place on November 20 of this very year!

On November 19, 2008 Lilli was again at the Lufthansa arrival gate. She had arranged for a friend of hers to drive us to our hotel, the Steigenberger de Saxe, situated near the famous Frauen Kirche, which had been totally destroyed by the Allied fire bombings of Dresden on February 13, 1945, but which, sixty-one years later, was able to show off its complete and masterful restoration when Dresden celebrated its 800th anniversary in 2006!

In the Lobby of the hotel, we hear a boisterous greeting: “Welcome to Dresden!” I recognize Marianne Junger’s voice! She had come to meet us from Berne, Switzerland. Soon, much to our surprise, we were joined by Jacqueline Aupetit from Paris, Gisela Koepp from Munich, and filmmaker Barbora Eriksson with her two assistants: Anna Johnson Ryndova and Karina Nagin from Prague. That made six friends in Dresden, plus Elizabeth and me! Crazy and wonderful!

The next day, November 20, was the day of the formal reading from *Swans*. I had asked Lilli about how many people were expected and she had said “Maybe forty.” But by 6:00 p.m., well over one-hundred people had come into the Community Room of the newly built synagogue and every chair that had been stacked against the walls was now put into service.

I took my seat at a round table which had a perfectly functioning microphone ready for use. No technical problems here. But first some music! Dresden is still a musical city. From the little bit of walking I had done, I had noticed, out of the corner of my eye, that many people seemed to be carrying fitted cases for their musical instruments. I liked that very much, indeed.

Now, before my reading, four teenage music students from the Heinrich Schuetz Musical Conservatory started off the evening with perfectly rendered Tangos from Astor Piazzolla and Friedrich Schroeder. It was a fine beginning. And as the music played, my eyes swept over the faces of the people who had come. It seemed to me that few, if any, of these human beings had been born during the time which I would describe. Herr Dr. Clemens Vollnhals, the Director of the Hannah Arendt Institute, had said that they had come to hear what Dresden was like before their time. Before it was destroyed.

Sensing that, I chose to read some parts of the book that described a lifestyle I knew no longer existed, and that this lifestyle was best depicted by the description of Bergstrasse No. 16, my grandparents’ house. It had been located near Dresden’s “up-to-the-minute” railway station, which made it a particular target for the Allies when they dropped their firebombs—making sure that the Russians would get a destroyed city and not the unscathed diadem it had been throughout the War. And I remembered, of course, how I searched for Bergstrasse No.16 in 2004, when I returned to Dresden for the very first time. Number 17 was unscathed across the street! So, Number 16 had to be there! But what were those white modern housing units doing in its stead? They were not Number 16! No way could they be Number 16! I knew Number 16! I remembered it clearly and even now, if I had the furniture, I would be able to place each chair, each table, each carpet exactly where it had been! I would be able to re-furnish that whole, wonderful house!

So I began to read. I read in German. And I sensed the audience’s well intentioned and concentrated listening. They were with me. I carried them with me in my mind, in my memory. They came along wherever I took them. And sometime into this labyrinth-like journey, something seemed to shift inside me. That unconscious feeling of exile began to soften. It loosened from where it was stuck and became malleable. I was well received and the feeling of having been an exile lifted into consciousness and was ready to dissolve. I had given this audience what they came to hear, something of their past, which had been beautiful in my mind. And in exchange, they had gifted me.

This was a fair exchange, indeed.