

REMEMBERING DRESDEN

February 1945



A Personal Reflection on a Public Commemoration

• | By Peter Coccia, Ready '68

Peace Candles
representing
Breslau,
Coventry,
Dresden,
Ostrava, and
St. Petersburg



My first awareness of the city of Dresden, Germany, came from a reading of Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse Five* during my college years at the University of Notre Dame. Vonnegut used his experiences as a prisoner of war in Dresden during the firebombing of the city in February 1945 as the basis for his novel. Subsequent readings in German history made me more aware of the controversy surrounding the bombing and the on-going moral debate about whether the destruction of the city was justified.

In early February of 2015, on invitation of the City of Dresden, Germany, I had the honor and privilege of traveling to Dresden, as the official representative of Dresden Sister City, Inc. (DSCI) and the City of Columbus for a special occasion — the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the destruction of Dresden at the end of World War II.

A commemoration is a calling to remembrance, and all memories must be placed in context. Nearly eleven years ago a group of citizens in Dresden came together to develop **Dresden, 13th February 1945 – A Framework for Remembrance**, expressing “the principles we feel bound to when we commemorate 13 February 1945.”

Here are just a few of their principles:

- ❖ We remember because past events show us why we need to stand up for peace and against violence and war.
- ❖ We remember because confronting our history during National Socialism and the war shows how we are responsible for creating a civilized, democratic, peaceful society.
- ❖ We want the thirteenth of February to be the starting point for a process of learning and commitment to peace and humanity extending beyond the date itself.
- ❖ We want to keep up our peaceful relations with the peoples who once opposed us and encourage further rapprochement.

The remembrance of Dresden's destruction has led its citizens to serious and thoughtful reflection, which perhaps can be crystallized with the question: How do we want to live together in the future? The official poster for the event pointed toward the answer: “With courage, respect and tolerance, Dresden shows what it stands for.”

February 13, 2015

On the morning of February 13, sister city representatives were the guests of Helma Orosz, Mayor of Dresden, at the panorama project titled “Dresden 1945 – Tragedy and Hope of a European City.” The panorama is a 360-degree artistic presentation that shows the destroyed city of Dresden after the bombing raids from February 13-15. We were provided a guided tour of the project by its creator, the artist Yadegar Asisi. As Asisi wrote in the exhibition catalogue: “I hope that this Panorama will stimulate people to think about the creativity and abysses of human nature, about the grim logic and insanity of war. For me Dresden is a symbol of the tragedy and hope of a European city. A few moments sufficed for the structures developed over centuries to be turned into dust and ashes.”

Sister city representatives attended a mid-day reception and lunch, at which Mayor Orosz welcomed His Royal Highness, The Duke of Kent, and the Most Reverend Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury. We then made the short walk from our hotel to the Frauenkirche (Church of Our Lady) for the official ceremony of



❖ Inside the Frauenkirche, the Most Reverent Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, delivered words of greeting

remembrance. Prior to my trip, I had thought that this location might be the site of demonstrations by extremist groups who have used the anniversary of the bombings for various political purposes, including attempts to play down the crimes of German National Socialism from 1933-1945. In recent months Dresden had also been the focal point for demonstrations expressing strong anti-immigrant sentiments. On this day, however, the march was peaceful. We were informed that no far right or neo-Nazi group had applied for a demonstration permit.

The Ceremony of Remembrance commenced with representatives from the cities of Coventry, England, Breslau, Poland, Ostrava, Czech Republic, and St. Petersburg, Russia, bringing peace candles to the altar. The symbolism was

unmistakable as these were four cities that had suffered greatly at the hands of German aggression during the war. As Mayor Orosz said in her remarks, "This symbol shows clearly where we stand rooted with our remembrance in Dresden today. We are part of an international community of those who place reconciliation at the focus of their thinking and actions."

The Remembrance Address was delivered by the President of the Federal Republic of Germany, Joachim Gauck. President Gauck gave a powerful speech in which he stated that Dresden had become symbolic of the German civilian population's suffering as a result of Allied bombing campaigns. But he also stressed quite strongly that it was Germany that started the war and that "...we will

never forget the victims of German warfare, even as we remember here and now the German victims."

President Gauck concluded his remarks by expressing his joy in welcoming "guests from the United Kingdom, Poland, Russia, and many different countries of the world here to the Frauenkirche today. We are profoundly grateful and very happy that you are here. Thank you all for coming. You should know that there is no lasting wrath in our hearts, just as there is none in yours. We feel ourselves united in remembrance, remembrance that focuses on the victims and our recognition of their suffering. Remembrance that also expresses a profound empathy that enables us to share in what happened to people as a consequence of war – be

Dresden-Columbus Sister City Relationship

Columbus is one of 13 cities throughout the world that have formed sister city or partner relationships with Dresden, Germany, over the years — Coventry, England, and Breslau, Poland, being the oldest, established in 1959, and Columbus and Hangzhou, China, being the youngest, established in 1992 and 2009 respectively.

Columbus' relationship with Dresden is in large part due to the tireless efforts of Frank Wobst, a native of Dresden and chairman of Huntington Bancshares at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the reunification of Germany in 1990. Under Wobst's leadership, Columbus responded to the 'Call from Dresden' in the early '90s to help rebuild the city, in particular the Frauenkirche (Church of Our Lady) that was destroyed by British and American bombing from February 13 to February 15, 1945. Columbus residents raised nearly \$500,000 toward the rebuilding of the Frauenkirche, and Wobst hand-delivered in person a check for the initial funds raised to church officials in 1996. The Frauenkirche reopened in 2005. Wobst was also instrumental in raising around \$200,000 toward the rebuilding of Dresden's only synagogue that was destroyed during the Kristallnacht on November 9, 1938. The synagogue was completed in 2001.



❖ Peter Coccia with the Sister Cities marker

it in London or Warsaw, Leningrad, Dresden, or Breslau. Once the ruins of the Frauenkirche served to remind us of the horrors of war. Today the rebuilt church is a symbol of peace and reconciliation.”

At the conclusion of the Ceremony of Remembrance, we moved to an outside stage in front of the Frauenkirche for a brief ceremony giving the call to form a human chain or Menschenkette. All citizens of Dresden were invited to participate in the Menschenkette and thereby, through a silent remembrance, be a visible sign for peace, tolerance, and freedom from violence. Approximately 10,000 people participated.

This was the most emotional and powerful experience I had in Dresden. At 6 p.m. all of the churches in the city began ringing their bells and, for 10 minutes, guests, citizens, and friends joined hands and stood in silence, remembering all those who had been victims of war, persecution, and genocide. As I glanced up from my location on the Bruehlsche Terrace and looked across the Elbe River, I saw thousands of people standing on the two bridges of the Old Town (Altstadt) and lining the shore on the other side of the Elbe River. My reflections and prayers reached out to all the victims of this gruesome war, including the more than 25,000 citizens of Dresden who perished in the firebombing of their city seventy years ago; the six million Jews who perished in the Holocaust, including thousands from Dresden; the 1.1 million people in Leningrad (modern-day St. Petersburg) who starved to death during a 2 ½-year siege of their city; the citizens of Coventry who died from German bombing raids; and so many more. I'm certain that the one hope all participants shared was that we could contribute to building a more peaceful world.

At the conclusion of the Menschenkette, we enjoyed a simple repast at a nearby restaurant, and I had an opportunity to briefly chat with Mayor Orosz and thank her again for the invitation she extended to Dresden's partner city, Columbus.

After returning home I wrote to Mayor Orosz that the February 13 commemoration ceremonies offered all people anew the opportunity to commit ourselves to strive toward peace and reconciliation. The beautiful city of Dresden, which had been destroyed seventy years ago at the War's end, lives today as a strong symbol of hope — a city whose goal it is that the dignity and worth of all people be recognized.

(Peter Coccia is a 1968 Ready grad and was the first Ready recipient of The Glenma R. Joyce Scholarship. He received his B.A. degree in modern languages [with an emphasis on German language and culture] from the University of Notre Dame and also holds an M.A. degree from Vanderbilt University. Peter has lived and traveled in Germany and taught high school German. After retiring from a long career in government administration for the State of Ohio, Peter continued German studies at The Ohio State University. He currently teaches German language to adults and for four years has been a director on the board of Dresden Sister City, Inc., a local non-profit organization supporting the sister city relationship between Columbus and Dresden. His trip to Dresden in February 2015 marked his first visit to the former German Democratic Republic [East Germany]. Peter lives in Columbus with his wife Nena Couch, a professor at The Ohio State University. Their son, Alexander, is also a graduate of The University of Notre Dame and is a Rhodes Scholar at the University of Oxford, England.)



The Human Chain (Menschenkette)

The ceremony of forming a human chain or Menschenkette around Dresden's Old Town (Altstadt) was started on February 13, 2010. A working group composed of members from a wide variety of civic, religious, and political organizations designed the chain to symbolically protect the Old Town against the ideology of right wing extremists and recall the events of February 1945. On that winter day, although planned for 1,500 participants, the chain attracted over 10,000 people to join hands in support of Dresden's desire to be a society of openness, tolerance, and respect for all human beings.



Weisse Rose

On the morning of February 13, all members of the sister city delegations received a silk white rose to wear as part of the day's commemoration of the destruction of Dresden. In so doing we joined thousands of citizens for whom the White Rose has become a powerful symbol of peace and reconciliation. It evokes the memory of the non-violent Munich student group of the same name that formed in 1942 with calls for active opposition to the Hitler regime. Many of its prominent leaders were tried for treason in 1943 and beheaded.

The city of Dresden asserts on its website that the white rose is a statement that "the remembrance of February 13 will not be used for ideologies or actions that are contrary to the spirit of democracy or the dignity of human beings." Rather it is a "symbol that the remembrance has another horizon – the overcoming of war, racism, and violence."

On the morning of February 13, Dresden Mayor Helma Orosz joined survivors of World War II in laying white roses at a former train station in Dresden from which Nazis transported Jews to concentration camps. During my exploration of the Altstadt (Old Town) in the days following February 13, I observed white roses at a number of other sites that called to mind the victims of Nazi genocide. The roses lay at the memorial for the Semper Jewish synagogue, built from 1838-1840 and destroyed by the Nazis in 1938; and at the wall near the New Synagogue, which bears the inscription of a Jewish prayer for the dead – "May their souls rest in the wholeness of life."



The Dresden Trust

Reconciliation and Friendship. These are two words very much embodied in the work of the British charitable organization, The Dresden Trust. Founded in 1993, the Trust has for over twenty years lent assistance in the rebuilding of Dresden. These efforts have included raising over 1 million British pounds toward the rebuilding of the Frauenkirche. In that regard, the Trust commissioned Grant Macdonald Silversmiths of the United Kingdom to make the Golden Orb and Cross for the church. As it turns out, the master goldsmith for Grant Macdonald was Alan Smith, whose father, Frank Smith, was one of the bomber pilots who had taken part in the raid over Dresden on the night of the 14th of February 1945. Per the Dresden Trust, "the Orb and Cross now stand atop the cupola of the Frauenkirche as a symbol of enduring friendship." It was my pleasure to meet and get to know several members of the Dresden Trust. Their story and efforts are fine examples of how people can work to heal the wounds of war.

