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STEPHAN - Introduction

What does it mean when our senses fail us, when the world becomes invisible and all sounds fall silent? Does a child have the right to make their own decisions? How do we define happiness? “You Ask, We Explain,” a podcast by TU Dresden in cooperation with Kunstverein Dresden, the Cosmo Science Forum, and the municipal libraries.

*Günther signalled and said he wanted to make some contributions.*

GUENTER

Yes, I would like to follow up on his words because many people know that I am a bit of a Neustadt photographer and I am very sad that almost all of the historical inscriptions that were here have disappeared due to the renovation and construction boom. For example, there used to be a whole series of signs here that led the way to a bomb shelter, but none of them exist anymore, and of the old historical inscriptions that recounted the diversity of crafts in Neustadt, only one remains. Sad.

TINE

The facade of the Rasskolnikov.

GUENTER

Rasskolnikov, for example, is one of the things that always makes me feel good, but all the others are gone.

STEPHAN

When I was in Coventry for the 80th anniversary of the Blitz, I sat in the newly built cathedral, which is a new cathedral building connected by a glass roof to the ruins of the old cathedral that was destroyed during the bombing of Coventry, and I sat in this cathedral and it was all very grandiose and, perhaps you can imagine, people had little flags and walked along the nave and recited texts and it was quite emotional and there was a slogan that said “Father, Forgive” not “Father, Forgive them” nor “Father, Forgive us” but “Father, Forgive” and for me - I didn't grow up in Dresden, I've been living here for over a quarter of a century, but I watched it - so this story of Dresden interests me and every year on February 13 February, we are now one day before February 13, on 12. February, I always have this big backpack with me, and it contains everything you can possibly drag along with you in terms of blame, guilt, generational conflict, remembrance, not remembering, dealing with history and everything that goes with it, and it's pretty big and pretty heavy, and I think that's how many people feel in Dresden, and in this cathedral (in Coventry), for the first time, I was able to leave this backpack outside the door and I felt that now I was in a place where the traces of the German war are unmistakable, because of the architecture and the reconstruction and so on, but still, I was able to leave my rucksack in the hotel for a while and didn't have to carry it around with me. Instead, I experienced a completely different way of dealing with the Second World War, with the bombings and all the suffering that is and was associated with them. I don't know if you were also in this cathedral, if you felt the same way there, or if you had completely different thoughts, or what you felt while you were there. Sabine?

SABINE

Yes, well, Coventry is of course a very special example of how to deal with... how architecture dealt with the ruins after the Second World War. There was a competition for the reconstruction, so perhaps it should be added that Coventry was the first city to suffer a real bombardment and the first ...

STEPHAN

They use the phrase Coventrate.

SABINE

Yes, exactly ...

STEPHAN

Cities were practically razed to the ground.

SABINE

Yes, that was a term that the Nazis then adopted, but the destruction of Coventry immediately took on national significance. A few days afterwards, Churchill arrived at the ruins and said that we needed to rebuild the city and the cathedral. Then there was a competition, and this competition naturally attracted many entries, and there was a lot of debate about whether we should rebuild it as it was or build something new in the Neo-Gothic style. But the outstanding design was from Basil Spence ... it was this really great idea, no, we leave the cathedral, we leave the ruins standing as open space, we also leave the walls standing, and then we build a whole new cathedral at a right angle to it, with a link, so to speak, that you already mentioned, which connects the two buildings, and today it functions or acts as a cathedral, as a place, so to speak, and this new cathedral also has a certain ... it also has a lightness, an architectural lightness that you may have also felt, and that I also feel when I go in there. For me, it's always been a place of elevation and joy, and many artists have also been brought together there, who didn't just focus on architecture, there was glass design, tapestry, interior design, flooring, furniture, lighting, and so on. It was as if not only the city, but the whole country somehow came together to create this special building, which is still outstanding today. Something like this could never be created today. Back then, in the early 1950s, there was still rationing in Great Britain, so it wasn't necessarily a time when there was a lot of money around, but there was still a social will, and then the money and financing became available, and people came together. It was an international collaboration that resulted in something truly outstanding, which continues to have an impact today.

STEPHAN

When you walk through Coventry, it's actually impossible to miss this cathedral building, as it stands in a very prominent location and is surrounded by a large area featuring sculptures by an artist who lives in Coventry and has left his mark there, so to speak, and whose biography you can read. As a human being, I think it's actually a good thing to combine these ruins with such a new building and thus open them up to the world.

SABINE

Yes, I think it's great, it's an excellent solution, and that's also what you call a palimpsest, as you can see the different layers in the city, you can see what happened here, there was a major traumatic turning point, but they turned it into something positive, it's not a place where you constantly mourn, it's a place where the cathedral is looking ahead and not just ecumenically, and it opens up widely to the city and society and is not just a religious place. For example, concerts are held in the ruins, or at Christmas there is an ice rink inside and things like that, so it really opens up to the city.

GUENTER

Full of life.

SABINE

Yes.

GUENTER

I can only confirm that this is a place where you don't mourn, but rejoice that life is still peaceful, and I compared that with my feelings about the Frauenkirche. I find it very sad that the Frauenkirche has been rebuilt in this way, because it gives the impression that war isn't so bad, we have enough money to rebuild it, and in Coventry that's a completely different matter, and even the words "Father Forgive" is something I imagine for Dresden, because that implies that we are all guilty, so behave yourselves and try to live differently.

STEPHAN

Of course, there was another reason why the Frauenkirche was rebuilt, and that is what has basically developed historically, and that is that over the period before 1989, this had virtually been in the making. Sabine ...

SABINE

Yes, well, it's interesting for me to hear from you that you find that very sad, and I'm also a bit torn about the reconstruction of the Frauenkirche. I was already here at the end of the 1980s when I did my internship at the Institute for Monument Preservation, and there was also a discussion about the Frauenkirche and Hans Nadler, who was very much behind it, the driving force behind ..., and for him it was a kind of life's work. Not only personally, but I also felt at the time that the GDR had prevented the reconstruction, so to speak, and how the GDR dealt with the entire legacy of National Socialism is also very questionable. That's why, for me, the reconstruction of the Frauenkirche is also a sign of overcoming the GDR and a sign of democratization, and the fact that it was possible to do this again was not prevented by the state authority that prevented it, so to speak. Now, with the result, of course, the Frauenkirche and the whole Neumarkt still seem very artificial at the moment, I mean, and there is a lot of comment on the reconstruction of the Frauenkirche, it's not that you ... you know in exhibitions everywhere that it's there, but that wasn't always the case, that it was rebuilt and that there were many discussions about it. It's true, it's perhaps too finished now and ... and these scars, well, they're no longer visible as such and will become less and less visible as more patina builds up on the new Frauenkirche.

JOHANNES

I would like to pick up on that point because, when it comes to the reconstruction of the Frauenkirche - a lot has already been said, but I wanted to emphasize this again - it is impossible to understand without also looking at the urban development after 1945 and the redevelopment plans that were not all implemented, but nevertheless the major changes that were carried out by the SED city government and state leadership during the reconstruction. A lot was cleared away, a lot was changed, and most Dresdeners had this slogan for it: it was the second destruction after the first destruction. That was a very important narrative, and only against this background can one understand why this call from Dresden came as soon as the Wall fell. The first actors came together and then today, 36 years ago, on February 12, 1990, we went to the press and said, as I said, we want to rebuild this church, and we're not going to do it with state funds, we're not going to do it with church funds, but only with donations. So that was the impetus, and many people from Dresden got involved, but also others from the old Federal Republic, as well as British and Americans. So, there was a broad foundation for this whole fundraising activity, and they all had their own motives. I was in the archives of the Society for the Promotion of the Reconstruction of the Frauenkirche and looked at all these letters explaining why people donated to the reconstruction. There is everything from "I wanted my hometown to be restored to how I remember it" to "I was involved in this attack as an American soldier and would now like to make my own contribution so that I can somehow make amends for what happened in Coventry... this action, so what is happening in Coventry, reconciliation, comes into play again.

STEPHAN

And then Rainer comes back into the picture with a new story, namely the story about young people who came to Dresden from Coventry in 1965 and helped clear the rubble from the buildings at the Deaconess' Institute, much to the delight of everyone who worked and lived there. You told me that an hour before they started work, they cleared away the rubble and never saw an end to it until finally people from Coventry came to the former GDR in 1965 and helped out there.

RAINER

And this book of memories that was published on the anniversary of this work assignment in 1965, called "Stepping Off the Map", because the GDR didn't exist for official purposes, you see.

STEPHAN

But you did not want to call it "In No Man's Land"?

RAINER

No, I thought about it and then I came up with another title, "Arglos in Kalten Krieg", but it would be too much now to explain the background for this title, but it's something which I really can't confirm, of course, from my own experience. In 1965, I was about the same age as the people who came from England to Dresden, and so I can imagine what it must have been like for them at the time. Many of those who worked there at the time experienced a change in their lives as a result of this experience. There was one who had just started studying chemical engineering and was on his way to making a career for himself, and then he came back and said, "No, what I experienced there," and he ended up setting up a faculty for social work in London. That was his conclusion. And the other thing you just mentioned, there was in 1965, there was a Deaconess named Margarete Herold, and she is truly revered by all the people who remember that time, by all English

people. She died two years ago, in 2023, at the age of almost 102, and I had the great privilege of speaking with her quite often before her death, and she said this: she said, "Basically, we were already desperate. Every day after the war, before we started our actual work, we spent an hour clearing rubble, and you couldn't see anything. You couldn't see that the dreams were fading, and the English who came over, according to the original plan, only wanted to clear the rubble for about a month and then rebuild. They cleared rubble for the whole seven months, it was so crazy, so bad". After 20 years, of course, everything will be caked, tightly packed, and trees will have grown and so on, but for the Deaconess' Institute I would like to venture the thesis that this has nothing to do with the fact that it was particularly strange that they came from Coventry, but simply with the fact that there were people who went there for reasons that are interesting to us, coming from the enemy's country and set about working there. If that hadn't been the case, we might not have a Deaconess' hospital today, because at that time there was a very serious discussion among the Deaconesses about simply ending all this work in the hospital and to continue in a completely different way. And then when they made this experience that something was happening here, an opportunity arose, they ultimately said, "Okay, let's continue."

STEPHAN

Are you still in contact with people from back then?

RAINER

Yes, with some of them. I'm still in contact with the woman who published these memories. She became a journalist and, above all, a historian, and she wrote a dissertation about this campaign 65 years ago, which can be borrowed from the SLUB, by the way it's available there, along with 2 or 3 others as well, who still come to Dresden, again and again. Last September, it was 60 years ago, and six or seven of those who were there at the time came and also shared their memories. The contacts are still there, yes, and just imagine this, 20 years after the end of the war. For us, for me, it's perhaps something like 1989 or 1990 in some ways, and how long ago was that now? It was just the day before yesterday, wasn't it? Twenty years after the end of the war, such opportunities arose, friendships were formed that have lasted for over 60 years.

STEPHAN

Is that a piece of hope for you, which is placed in the room symbolically, so to speak?

RAINER

It is a great source of hope; it is not just symbolic, but people have done something, and the current Mother Superior, Sister Esther Selle, has written the foreword to this book, and in the foreword she quotes an African proverb that says, if I remember correctly, "Many small people in many small places can change the world"; that is a hope that I have.

STEPHAN

Thank you very much for joining us so far, and because it's so enjoyable, the next episode will be coming soon, in which we will continue the topic.