

# A Very Different Germany



RUTH TAYLOR JACOBSON tells of an invitation to exhibit that she hesitated to accept

husband. However, this invitation seemed to be a sincere gesture of reconciliation. Much of my work is an exploration of my Jewish identity and through it I could be an ‘ambassador’ for my people. By a chance of fate I was spared the ravages of the Holocaust and I feel compelled, in my art, to create memorials for those who have no other. Many of my works are inspired by poetry and song, and by events in our history. For many years I found etching the most effective medium to explore visions and ideas, which develop on the metal plate through a mesh of fine lines, luminous highlights, and dense shadow. I now work in stained glass, which combines these qualities with jewel-like colour and the strong rhythms of the lead-lines.

Siegen lies about 60 miles to the east of Cologne. Its most famous ‘son’ was the painter Peter Paul Rubens and a Rubens prize for painting is awarded every four years.

Jews were originally forbidden by the local Counts of Nassau to live in Siegen, though they were permitted to trade there. In the late 19th century, a flourishing steel industry grew up in the town, and Jews were attracted to settle. They founded a community, which in 1938 numbered 111 souls, but their synagogue was burnt down on the day after Kristallnacht. No one raised a hand in defence of his Jewish fellow-citizens. A bunker was built on the site and it is now a museum dedicated to their memory, movingly recreating their lives through photographs.

Siegen was heavily bombed and much of the town was destroyed. A small part of the old town survives, steep, twisting cobbled streets and houses clad in slates arranged like fish-scales, often in fanciful designs, as protection against the weather. An exquisite filigree crown, wrought of gold from the New World, surmounts the spire of St Nicholas church, to mark the rise of the Counts of Nassau to princely status. It has become the symbol of the town.

What should I choose to exhibit in Siegen? I knew that I would be talking to groups of schoolchildren and I wanted to make our history real for them, firstly, through a series of four stained-glass panels, entitled ‘Masks for a Purimspiel’. To me they encapsulate the fragile position of Jews during our long Diaspora, tolerated for our usefulness by capricious rulers, vulnerable to the hatred of vicious ministers or murderous mobs. “Not once only, but in every generation, men have risen up to destroy us”, as the Passover Haggadah relates. This is tragically all too true and Hitler was perhaps Haman’s most monstrous re-incarnation. The Purim story ends happily for us Jews, which is why we celebrate it in Carnival spirit, but in subsequent ‘pogroms’, there was no beautiful, courageous Queen Esther to plead the cause of her people.

Another ‘key work’ is an etching, *Wedding in Cracow, 1939*. Whilst clearing out a drawer many years ago, my mother found a photograph taken at her eldest brother’s wedding. On the back

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We are friends of the concert pianist Norma Fisher, who organises the London Master-Classes, and musicians are attracted from all over the world to these inspiring events. Over the years, we have offered accommodation to some of the students and it has been a delight hosting these gifted young people. Five years ago, our guest was a wonderfully talented 16-year-old pianist, Sarah Hiller, accompanied by her lively mother, Rita. Rita admired my paintings and stained glass, and, remarking that my work may be of interest in their hometown, she suggested that I make up a small album of photographs for her to take back with her. Quite unexpectedly, last August, we received a phoned call from Fritz Hiller, inviting me to exhibit in Siegen in March 2008. The Gesellschaft für Christlich-Jüdische Zusammenarbeit, (Society for Christian-Jewish Co-operation) invite a Jewish artist to exhibit in the Town’s gallery every year, in memory of the suffering of the Jews during the Third Reich.

At first, I had misgivings – this was Germany! My mother lost most of her family during the Shoah and my parents never visited Germany after WW2. Likewise, neither did I, nor my

was an inscription in Polish, and the date 1939. A few months later, the Nazis would invade Poland, and only two of this smiling group of 24 men, women and children, would survive WW2. I retraced their vanished faces in a mesh of fine lines, and printed the ghostly image in sepia ink. But for a fragile image found by chance, all memory of them would have vanished for ever.

Numbers become meaningless, but individual stories touch the heart and imagination. Lyuba Levitska was a popular operetta star in the Poland of 1930s. She could have been sheltered by non-Jewish friends outside the Vilna Ghetto, but she threw in her lot with her people. She worked as a courier for partisans but was caught and condemned to death. It is said that she walked naked to her execution, singing 'Two Doves', the song for which she was best known and loved. I was shocked and moved by her story of courage. How would I have behaved in that nightmare world? I have drawn her proudly defiant, her head held high, her emaciated body faintly glowing against crude, stark cross-hatching. On either side of her loom two large dark sinister heads. No doves.

I came to Siegen in time to supervise the hanging of my show, 'All our Yesterdays', by the skilled, hard-working gallery staff. It is beautifully displayed in the bright, spacious Stadtische Galerie Haus Seel. We were very warmly received by everyone we met, notably Fritz and Rita Hiller, who welcomed us to stay in their lovely home. In spite of icy winds and driving rain, there was a sizeable gathering at the Private View. Among the speakers were: Paul Breuer, patron of the event, Steffen Mues, the mayor of Siegen, Fritz Hiller, Cultural Director of Siegen and Alon Sander, the Jewish representative of the Society for Christian-Jewish Co-operation. The speeches were interspersed with the exquisite playing by our hosts' daughter, Sarah Hiller, of pieces by Béla Bartók (an outspoken opponent of Nazism) and Rachmaninov.

This seems a very different Germany from that of 70 years ago. There is now a feeling of shame and horror at the atrocities of the Nazi regime and a sincere wish for reconciliation. There is a strong movement of pacifism among the young, in contrast to the aggressive militarism of the past. There is also a keen interest in Israel. Several people we met had visited the country and some had children who married Israelis and live there. Some of the guests spoke a few words of Hebrew, wishing me 'Shalom' and 'Kol hakavod'. One lady apologised to me for what her people did to mine. What can one say? Children are taught about the Holocaust as part of their education, and survivors are invited to schools to describe their experiences. The 'Train of Memory' travels round Germany, stopping at different towns, large and small. It is one of the trains once used for the deportation of Jews to concentration camps, and on board is a photographic exhibition of those who once travelled on such trains – the emphasis being on the doomed children.

I spoke (in English) to two classes of teenagers. They were lively and curious both about my artistic techniques and my family history. One art-teacher told me she planned a project about my exhibition in a subsequent class. However, I noticed that a few of the students wore checked keffias around their necks. Was this just a fashion, or a sign that among the youngest generation, sympathy for Jewish suffering has been transferred elsewhere.



Left: *The Wicked Haman*, One of four stained glass panels 'Masks for a Purimspiel'

Top: *Two Doves*, etching

Centre: *Wedding in Cracow, 1939*, etching

Bottom: Ruth Taylor Jacobson with husband Uriah and hosts Rita, Fritz and Sarah Hiller