First Thoughts on Dresden: Reflections on the New Synagogue and the New Ordinations

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Rabbi Andrew Goldstein of the Northwood & Pinner Liberal Synagogue, Northwood, MIddlesex, U.K., reflects on the first ordination of rabbis in Germany since 1942.

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Rabbi Andrew Goldstein

The river Labe flows through Kolin and hundreds of miles later, now known as the Elbe it broadens out dissecting the German city of Dresden. On its right bank are the now reconstructed remains of the capitol of Saxony with palaces, great churches, museums and a beautiful opera house. They all stand on a platform formed by high stone walls, dramatic indeed. On the corner of this Altstadt stood a synagogue, proudly built in 1838, expressing the newly won freedom of the Jewish community. It was built like a fortress, tall stone walls with small windows, high up. Not to protect the Jews as in medieval synagogues, but to fit in with the monumental architecture of the buildings around it…amongst them the world famous Zwinger Palace. It was a prominent landmark, and a clear declaration of Jewish emancipation and presence in the city.

In 1938, a 100 years later, on Krystalnacht, it was burnt down, destroyed, only a few stones and one Jewish artefact surviving, perhaps the bombing of Dresden a few years later finished its obliteration. In 1990 Sharon and I visited Dresden and it was still a wreck of a city; many buildings, including churches deliberately left in ruins by the communists, a few ugly blocks of shops and apartments filling a few of the gaps left by the War.

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Now the city is returning to something of its former glory and is teeming with tourists. And on the spot where the old synagogue had stood, a new and dramatic building is found: die Neue Synagoge. It is also built like a fortress. A huge concrete cube with only one external window on its sides. Sounds frightening, but it is ingenious, for the more you look you see that the walls of the cube are not completely perpendicular, the building sort of leans over. You must enter for the real drama, because inside this mighty concrete cube which, in fact, has light streaming from huge windows in the ceiling, inside there is a smaller synagogue, like a theatre set in the middle of a large stage. A model inside an exhibition case. The front and back walls are made of a warm wood, the ark fits flush on the front wall, and the pews are wood, modern. And the sides are floor to ceiling netting, on inspection, like chain mail, gold colour with magen davids as a pattern. Coming in from the outside you can see through the walls to the pews and ark inside. Inside you realise that your synagogue is housed inside a larger building. It is ingenious, and it works. And I presume the symbolism is that once there was a very large community in Dresden, now there is a remnant, but the remnant is growing and maybe one day the shul will need to expand…..and there is room to do it.

And of course we were there for an historic occasion that so dramatically demonstrated the revival of Jewish life in Germany: the ordination of the first three rabbis in Germany since the Holocaust. And it was at a liberal seminary, the Abraham Geiger College, and I had the privilege of being involved in the ordination of 2 of the 3 candidates, both having spent time training at NPLS : Rabbi Dr Thomas Kucera from Czech Republic, and Malcolm Matitiani from Cape Town. And Sharon was honoured by carrying the Torah, and Ruth Weyl was there to enjoy our honour, to be interviewed by the German press, a real link to the past, there to see the revival of German liberal Jewry.

The night before there had been another symbolic gathering: this time in the city's most famous church: the Frauenkirche, also totally destroyed in the Second World War, this time by British bombers, in total ruins when last we saw it, now lovingly rebuilt since the fall of Communism. A replica of the former building, but for me, not very authentic, the paint too new, all looking like an opera house rather than a House of God. And we were there for a concert of Jewish music, and the audience mostly Christian. Another sign of harmony and reconciliation, and the Choir from the Dresden synagogue was all female and most were immigrants from the Former Soviet Union. And near an entrance door, the mangled remains of the huge cross that once stood on top of the church roof, saved from the rubble. And I was reminded that it was one of the British bomber pilots who raised the money for a replacement to be crafted to stand on top of the reborn church.

And I was told that it was a group of Christians who led the move to rebuild the Synagogue: the city must rebuild what its own citizens were responsible for destroying. And in the one window over the entrance door of the Synagogue is an artistic metal Magen David from the old building, rescued and stored throughout the war, by a noble gentile. Returned by him when he heard of the rebuilding of the Synagogue in 2000. Sadly he died just a few weeks before yesterday's service, but his name was mentioned alongside that of the Great German rabbis of the past from Abraham Geiger to John Rayner and Albert Friedlander, before the kaddish at the Ordination service.

On the stone lintel above the Magen David is a quote in Hebrew "My house shall be a house of

prayer for all people". Please God the Synagogue is more than a symbol of reconciliation, but an active centre of reconciliation. When we worshipped there on Thursday it certainly was a house welcoming all people: the great and the good of German civic and national political and religious life. The complete service televised live on German television. It was a privilege to be there, a triumph from Rabbi Dr Walter Hamolka, who founded the college and made this incredible event happen. For all there, it was truly an inspirational and deeply moving experience.

Each new rabbi was asked to choose a personal rabbinic motto, and the Hebrew words were embroidered on the tallit given to each as a present from the College. Malcolm Matitiani's said "Im lo achshav aimatai…if not now when?" and Tom Kuceras' quote said it all: "luchot v'shivray luchot ba-aron….the tablets (of the 10 commandments) and the broken tablets were both placed inside of the Ark of the Covenant" We were witnessing a miracle indeed in which the past glory of German Jewry was being linked to a new future by the building itself, but more vitally, by the 3 young rabbis who will take our glorious and much need tradition into, please God, a bright and successful future.

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