

## **Conscience - Article 2.**

I went for a three-week working tour in Canada and the USA, three weeks after the collapse of the Historical Archives in Cologne. It was then with some distance that I sensed the loss of the personal family archive as dumb and suppressed shock in me.

I dreamed that this mass of white crumbled cement, which I could observe at close hand, had become alive with the souls of my long-dead relatives – metaphorically, my family had become a part of the archive rubble heap.

My father, who appeared as a young man in this vision, was looking out of a still intact window leaning at an angle into the ruins; he was trying without success get out of the Historical Archive, but was trapped because the window would not open. In reality, Peter was able to flee Nazi-Germany alone as a teenager. Two of his operas and other compositions, are lying somewhere under the ruins.

A first meeting of the City Archive estate depositors was on the 11th May, in the Historical Town Hall. The authorities had not informed me as one of these estate depositors – fortunately a relative had told me of the email address mentioned in the Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger (City Advertiser), where we should get in touch.

At the meeting the Lord Mayor spoke first: “We are all devastated... this collection of cultural treasures was exceptionally valuable for cultural history... The depositors are especially affected... Nobody could possibly have foreseen that this would happen – there were no indications that the building would collapse – one wouldn’t have allowed colleagues to work there.”

One of the “especially affected” depositors shouts: “You did”.

Fritz Schramma wanted to comfort the couple of hundred gathered there, but his platitudes provoked annoyance – we have known for some time that Eberhard Illner, the former City Archive Head of Department had reported damage of extension joints and door frames in the cellar, as well as wide cracks in the cellar ceiling, from November 2008 to January 2009. Nothing had however been undertaken to close the building, or to store the cultural treasures elsewhere. Schramma: The memory of the city has been damaged – not destroyed. There are numerous intact pieces. It will take decades to repair damaged pieces. It is Sisyphus work, with systemisation and restoration a puzzle will be put together. Archive experts and restorers have been brought in from all over Germany and abroad to save the cultural items. Please carry on trusting the archive workers; they have already achieved much. The salvage work will continue until the end of May, only then will we have an overview regarding the personal archives. Circumstances must be clarified; and then, decisions concerning digitalisation and the building of a new City Archive will have to be made.

But our trust has been completely betrayed - nothing can change that. Later, in the meeting’s discussion round, with little sense of tact regarding the affected who were present, enquiries were made as to whether anyone had new estates to offer for safekeeping.

After Schramma, Stephan Neuhoff, the Director of Cologne’s Professional Fire Service, reported neutrally: the collapse occurred over a time-span of 10 minutes – side walls

caved in and fell forwards, resulting in ruins with a radius of 25 metres and the depth of 60 metres. On the first day - to be precise, within hours of the collapse, an emergency covering, weatherproof roof of plastic sheeting was raised as a

Then the inspection of the rubble, a mixture of building debris and archive material was undertaken - paper fragments were first separated from the mass. The 9,000 tons of wreckage were then examined. After 9 days of searching for missing persons, 1,700 cubic metres of cement was poured into the underground structures to stabilise them against the risk of groundwater damage.

Although all these means were actually undertaken concurrently, focus was then given to the archive objects. The Fire Service had its own archive material deposited in the Archive, so there was particular interest to be working there. In three week larger building measures will be undertaken. Herr Neuhoff did not mention any details.

Subsequently, the Cologne Arts Administrator Professor Georg Quander spoke: some things will be lost, a large amount saved. Not everything has yet been secured. How one should handle things found in groundwater, which technology should be utilised, has not yet been decided. The Historical Archive has lost its former working structure, but 5 new colleagues have since been employed.

(I ask myself what difference merely 5 new colleagues will bring: later a Dr. Gisela Fleckenstein is introduced to us as the single contact person to deal with any questions all estate depositors might have).

Quander continues: a provisional archive must be organised so that we can again be active. Discussion of insurance, digitalisation etc. will be undertaken on the 24th June. He requests support from the depositors.

A murmur runs through the audience at the last remark – we ask ourselves what kind of support is meant here. It is we who should actually be expecting support.

To lay conspiracy theories to rest, famous Cologne buildings still standing are listed, as ridiculous evidence that no less care has been given regarding the security of the City Archives than other cultural assets of Cologne have received. As though what had become of the City Archives had merely been a twist of fate?

Then Frau Herz, the Archive's lawyer, addressed us: The Archive had been insured for 60 million euros, the highest compensation sum for municipal "Art Exhibit Insurance", utilised by several museums. Permanent loans will be covered but testimonies from experts have not yet been made. We can only give a statement when the cause and responsibility for the accident has been clarified. And only then can a KVB (Kölnener Verkehrs-Betriebe AG - Cologne Transport Company) compulsory possessions' insurance be utilised to clean objects.

That was the single reference to the Cologne North-South-City-Railway construction works being undertaken by the KVB from 2002 that with all likelihood have caused the collapse of the building.

The City of Cologne Historical Archive's director Dr. Bettina Schmidt-Czaia, who on the day of the incident, like other colleagues, escaped the collapsing of the building, by

running out with only her jacket and handbag, told us how she then observed the clouds of dust developing. She admitted that it was common practice to invite all depositors together; it would actually be fairer to invite each personally. She continued by informing us how, following the collapse, everything from 3 different subsided locations had been thrown together. Things that were wet and mouldy were brought to Bonn and several other sites, further objects to Cologne-Porz. Paper objects were then cleaned and flattened in stacking areas and store in locations elsewhere (outside Cologne). The putting together of the puzzle was now being dealt with. Nothing is thrown away. Of interest is the fact that the many helpers who offered assistance were obliged to sign an oath of secrecy – “we do not read” is the motto, she tells us.

This statement triggered questions for me: volunteers were not being paid from insurance or any other funds – their generosity was being exploited. Their efforts should actually be being paid out of the 60 million Historical Archive insurance funds.

And re the aforementioned maxim – thank goodness some do read! - in this way a rather strange story came about. Doris Frohnapfel, the artist and friend of mine, volunteered her assistance with the sorting of documents in Porz. Her interest came about from research for her exhibition „Athens 487, Die Ausgeschlossene“ (The Shards) 2008, about the combination of history, destruction and being an outcast.” “The porcelain shards were found at the site of the *Société Céramique* in Maastricht, shortly after the pulling down of the factory buildings in 1993.” (Frohnapfel: notes on the chronicle of an ongoing working concept).

Among the objects in the ruins that she had been sorting Doris found 2 postcards addressed to my mother Sylvia Ury. They are not necessarily very important. Other documents in our personal archive are more significant for German history, my grandfather Alfred Unger’s scripts, the writings of great uncle Wilhelm Unger and the stories of flight and survival, or the murder of other Jewish family members – I wanted to keep all other family documents, letters, photos etc. stored together for possible future interest, however, and gave them to the Archive together with all other documents etc. in 1999.

The postcards are not necessarily very important but when Doris told me about them - the first sign that I received from anyone regarding the family archive - it became clear to both of us that this represented a meaningful coincidence, something that connected Doris and myself. I first got to know her when she exhibited her photo series “Corpus“, 1994. Part of this series was the story of Sylvia Plath. A couple of years later with Doris’ assistance, I completed a photo series *Triptych for a Jewish Princess Second Generation* 1996 – she photographed me posing naked in a German air force coat from the last World War. This piece was dedicated to Sylvia Plath and my mother Sylvia.

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