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## “WIE EIN PHÖNIX AUS DER ASCHE” THE MEMORY OF 1945 RECORDED IN THE SPACE AND ARCHITECTURE OF WÜRZBURG\*

Whoever comes to Würzburg will, sooner or later, encounter the memory of 16 March 1945 – the destruction of the city and the years of its subsequent reconstruction. The air raid of the Allies, which took place on the evening of 16 March 1945, wiped out the city.<sup>1</sup> The period of no more than twenty minutes was enough to make Würzburg, its thousands of residents and most of its historic buildings, become history.<sup>2</sup> Years of reconstruction followed, during which the historic substance of the city was reconstructed. However, planning details were also improved.<sup>3</sup>

Würzburg is the object of my research. My studies have always focused on the area between visual arts and social (or national) memory. In the space of the city, some traces intentionally preserve the memory of the tragic event at the end of the war. Among them are both the official ones, like monuments or memorial plaques, as well as those less pompous, which mention the destruction of the urban structure while commemorating other events. I have published the results of my research on the structure

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<sup>1</sup> Oppelt (ed.): *Würzburger Chronik*, pp. 9–77.

<sup>2</sup> Freeden: *Würzburgs Kunstdenkmäler*, pp. 43–57; Weismantel: *Totenklage*; Otremba: *Würzburg 1945*.

<sup>3</sup> Zimmerer: *Würzburg*; Paczkowski: *Der Wiederaufbau der Stadt Würzburg*; Oppelt (ed.): *Würzburger Chronik*, pp. 185–239.

of memorials in this city as an excerpt from a study devoted to the memory of Głogów and as an independent paper.<sup>4</sup>

This paper aims to introduce selected themes to a wider audience. It is also a prelude to the next dissertation, in which the context of memory will be expanded to include the study of sacred places. The churches of Würzburg, in the context of their newness, the possibility of refreshing their decorations, forced first by reconstruction and then as a result of the influence already in the present century of the local bishop, Dr Friedhelm Hofmann (Bishop 2004–2017, now ‘Bishop Emeritus’), constitute an important element of the study of the structures of commemoration recorded in the architectural and urban fabric.

One of the main signs of remembrance is the model of the city centre destroyed in 1945. It is in the memorial chamber (Gedenkraum) on the ground floor of the city hall.<sup>5</sup> It is particularly impressive due to its twenty-four-hour accessibility. It is placed in the middle of a small hall, covered with anti-reflective, transparent covers, which gives a free and comprehensive oversight of a very impressive, three-dimensional and scaled image of the destroyed city. The photographs and artefacts displayed around it document the scale of the tragedy; they also educate viewers. A larger model, covering the entire historic centre of the city, is exhibited in the Fürstenbaumuseum (a part of the Museum for Franconia, Museum für Franken). It was made between 1985 and 1989 by Friedrich Schuller. Its limited availability and ban on photography make the smaller version, from Gedenkraum, better known.

A narrower audience is exposed to the paintings in the councillors’ hall, which is in the city hall. The monumental painting (with an area of 280 square metres), made with the use of the glue technique, was created between 1984 and 1987 on two walls of the meeting hall. Wolfgang Lenz, a local painter, designed it.<sup>6</sup> He portrayed the history of the Franconian city, starting from prehistoric ammonoids and dinosaurs to the state of the country’s fragmentation at the time of creating the painting. The 37 sections feature major events, figures and buildings. In the central part of the lower belt, behind the chairs of those presiding over the proceedings, there are

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<sup>4</sup> Ożóg: *Głogów*, pp. 142–153; Ożóg: *Pamięć o apokalipsie*, pp. 215–225.

<sup>5</sup> Horsinka et al.: *111 Orte in und um Würzburg*, p. 100.

<sup>6</sup> Papp (ed.): *Das Wandgemälde*, p. 7.

representations (quarters 31–33) related to the tragedy of 1945. The first is a painted black sheet covering the flames that come out from under it over the top edge. Another features a Jeep Willys with two American soldiers amid the ruins. The last one is a monochromatic, poignant image of a destroyed Würzburg. The view from the northeast includes the remains of the cathedral, Neumünster Collegiate church and the fortress. In an illustrated book about the work, Lenz described this composition briefly – *The Lament of the City. Würzburg in its deepest mourning of 1945, grave on the Main (Totenklage einer Stadt. Würzburg in seinem tiefsten Elend 1945, das Grab am Main)*.<sup>7</sup> While other sections have far more elaborate commentaries, here the description is dramatically brief. It expresses the tragedy of the moment. The panorama of the destroyed city is the central image, displayed on the axis of the main part of the painting. The story of 1945 has also been linked to the sequences of the Thirty Years' and Peasant Wars painted above (the Swedes, occupying Würzburg in 1631, are shown above the sections with American soldiers).

At the same time, *i.e.* in 1984 and 1985, Lenz created the painting series entitled *The destruction of Würzburg on March 16, 1945 (Die Zerstörung Würzburgs am 16. März 1945)*. It includes six works: *Friday, March 16, 1945, All Souls, The Cathedral – Heart in Flames, Through Fire and Time, Julius-spital on Fire – Trust in God's Presence and Martyrdom of St. Laurentius in Heidingsfeld (Freitag, 16. März 1945, Allerseelen, Der Dom – Herz in Flammen, Durch Feuer und Zeit, Brennendes Julius-spital – Vertrauen auf Gottes Gegenwart und Martyrium von St. Laurentius in Heidingsfeld)*. The small square paintings are on display at the Diocese of Würzburg Archives and Library (Archiv und Bibliothek des Bistums Würzburg). These images focus on the expressively presented theme of the fire consuming the city. Angels 'evacuate' residents; church interiors burn; clocks melt. Finally, an oneiric procession of phantoms passes by the burning hospital Julius-spital.<sup>8</sup>

Lenz's best-known painting is the work entitled *Würzburger Totentanz* of 1970.<sup>9</sup> The painting, which is on permanent display at the Museum für Franken, is also often reproduced and sold as posters and magnets. A quar-

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<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Schneider: *Wolfgang Lenz*, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Muth: *Der Maler Wolfgang Lenz*, p. 10–11; Idem: *Wolfgang Lenz*, p. 12; Kummer: *Staffeleibilder von Wolfgang Lenz*, p. 17–18.



ter century after the destruction of the city, Lenz paid tribute to the event; this tribute is still impressive. It is a *danse macabre* on the old bridge, which is the symbol of the city. The situation of the animated sculptures is heart-breaking. Saints and rulers are transformed into skeletons while wearing actual clothes. Instead of looking at one another, they turn 90 degrees and look toward the viewer, who ascends the bridge, beyond which the remains of the cathedral and city hall are visible in a strong, bright glow under a dark sky. The layout of the figures has been changed (which is obvious to residents). This makes Lenz's vision even more unreal and fills it with anxiety.

It might seem that a story like the one of 16 March 1945 would demand a monument, a strong sign in a centrally located public space, a sign that reminds, admonishes and pays tribute to the victims and the efforts of the rebuilders. However, there is no such form. As early as 1954, the victims were commemorated; they were buried in a common grave at the main gate of the city cemetery, on the outskirts of the historic centre of the city. Sculptor Fried Heuler created a monumental sculptural group, which is arranged horizontally in a hollow into which one descends by several steps. The form is reminiscent of recumbent tombstones, although here, it ties the whole family together: mother, grandfather and two children. Recently, glass plates with the names of buried citizens placed on the sides of the monument have been added to the structure of the monument. Nearby, at the façade of St. John's Church, there is the small sculpture of *Death by bombing* (*Tod durch Bomben*) authored by a Russian sculptor Vadim Sidur. Although universal in its message, with its dominant accent – the vertical sign of an aeroplane bomb piercing a diagonally aligned human figure – it refers to March 1945.<sup>10</sup>

In the very centre of the city, there are two – relatively small and not well-visible – sculptural signs dedicated to the destruction and reconstruction of the city. In 1987, an obelisk was erected at a small square at the Ulmer Hof. Balthasar Höhn and Klaus Rother made the artificial stone structure, divided into five horizontal strips, which looks like a slender rock in the desert. The relief on its surface shows the burning and rebuilt silhouettes of St. Peter's Church and Church of St. John Stift Haug, as well as the building structures of The Falcon House (Falkenhaus) and House Wit-

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<sup>10</sup> Kühl-Freudenstein: *Alte Kirchen*, pp. 30–32.

telsbacher Hof (Haus zum Schönen Eck). The lower part included a section of the city skyline, as seen from the fortress. The inscription mentions the destruction and reconstruction of the city, but it is worth noting that the unveiling was combined with the celebration of the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Balthasar Neumann.<sup>11</sup>

200 meters away, on the riverside promenade, a debris cart was set up in 2005 along with a section of rails (along the Main River, there were tracks for dumping excavated material onto barges). Initially, it was unoriginal. However, later, it was exchanged for an actual witness to the events of the time of the debris removal and reconstruction of the city.<sup>12</sup> Next to it are plaques telling of the object's origins and a tribute to the efforts of the men and women working to clean up the city (*Zum Gedenken der Trümmerfrauen und Trümmermänner*). Both monuments are not particularly prominent; the obelisk is lost between the café umbrellas and parked bicycles. The cart is obscured by the overhanging entrance to the restaurant.

Interestingly, as a rule, the sculptural structures made after the war for the public space do not include the story of its history. This can be seen in the fountains and sculptures located in the city centre.<sup>13</sup> The history of the space is far more often told and documented by preserved and exposed details, such as fragments of the original façade in the shopfront of the pharmacy at Market Square (Marktplatz). The administrative court building (Bayerisches Verwaltungsgericht Würzburg) on the Main Quarter (Mainviertel) is worth a stop. An element associated with the past is the entrance gate along with a section of the wall dividing the plots. The gate has been restored and protected with tin eaves; frayed elements have been preserved on it; there are even remnants of polychrome. A different approach can be found on the façade of the building on Virchowstraße 10. As a witness to its former state, it has been renovated to the maximum and covers two floors of the building's extreme axis. The crowning section of the brick wall, irregularly cut from the top, was separated from the rest of the façade by a kind of tin eave, matching the arrangement of the bricks.

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<sup>11</sup> DÜTHMANN (ed.): *Der neue Ulmer Hof*, p. 4; DERS.: *Würzburg. Sanierung Innenstadt*, p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> WOLF: *Würzburger Denkmäler*, pp. 51–52.

<sup>13</sup> THIERFELDER: *Würzburger Brunnen*, pp. 46–47.

Dozens of city centre tenement houses have sgraffito or painted decorations indicating the time of construction and reconstruction. Some more historically important buildings have commemorative or informational plaques, commemorating the date of 1945 or their later reconstruction. Haus zum Großen Stock at Bronnbachergasse 22 presents elaborate decoration and information; it may even be called poetry. On the left risalite of the staircase was the text “Zerstört am 16. März 1945”; below there are the coats of arms of Würzburg and Franconia, on the lower part, there is a view of the Marienberg fortress and St. Burkard’s Church. The risalite on the right says: “Wiederaufbau im Jahr 1953”, showing the coats of arms of Bavaria and Germany and a view of the Harbour crane Alte Kranen and Old Main Bridge (Alte Mainbrücke) underneath.

One of the four lion statues that guard the entrances to the Löwenbrücke Bridge has also earned its place in guidebooks looking for traces of history. A rifle bullet hole made in the spring of 1945 near the right hip is still visible.<sup>14</sup> A careful look around the city may yield more such elements and details in the interiors of churches. A good case in point is the neo-Romanesque Church Adalberokirche in the Sanderau district. Two commemorative plaques are embedded in the closure of the south arm of the transept on the sides of the altar there. On the right, there is – archaic in its form – a commemoration of the first pastor of the church – Christian Schmelz, who was killed along with many of his parishioners (“Er fiel mit vielen seiner Pfarr Kinder”) during an air raid on 16 March. On the left, there is a commemoration of his successor, Valentin Schober, who raised the church and parish from ruins (“[...] in schwerer Nachkriegszeit leitete er den Wiederaufbau von Kirche und Gemeinde”).

The Evangelical St. John’s Church is a hugely important commentary on the fate of Würzburg. It is a Neo-Gothic church built in 1895, which was ruined half a century later. It was rebuilt in the 1950s, following the design of Reinhard Riemerschmid, a Munich architect. In the 1970s, it became a war memorial, often compared to the Memorial Church in Berlin. The front elevation of the new temple continues the former neo-style tower (without the soaring finial); interestingly, even the traces of the fire have been

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<sup>14</sup> Bast: *Würzburger Geheimnisse*, pp. 56–57.

preserved.<sup>15</sup> Inside, there is a decoration with a rich symbolic programme.<sup>16</sup> However, the symbol of the city remains the church Marienkapelle in the northern frontage of the market square. The current structure of the church recreates its late Gothic form, although it is a reconstruction of the original, quite like the figures of Adam and Eve from the south portal – replicas of works by Tilman Riemenschneider. The task of resurrecting an architectural monument provided an opportunity to add elements filled with meaning and symbolism. The inter-nave pillars have consoles and canopies for the absent original figures. However, these elements have been reconstructed only partially. As one moves away from the altar, towards the west, there are fewer and fewer carved and complete supports and canopies on the pillars; they are gradually replaced by stone cuboids that grow out of the pillars. These peculiar knots of sculptural details hint at the building's fate in an extremely discreet but firm way.

Such elements in the space of the churches of this city are innumerable. In the side aisle of St. Peter and St. Paul's Church, one may find a memorial plaque dedicated to Ferdinand Winkler; directly next to it, on the wall, hangs a massive, wooden, overburnt crucifix, which came from the original church. It is another witness to 16 March. In the western, Romanesque part of St. Burkard's Church, two wooden plaques with reliefs of angel heads were mounted on the pillars. They were made after the war by Arthur Schleglmüning. One of them has a face partially obscured by a wing. It commemorates the destruction of the church and the city.<sup>17</sup> Another commemorates the church reconstruction. In St. Kilian's Cathedral, what strikes the viewer is the enormous number of corrections, additions and supplements – from the structure of the altars, through the stained-glass windows, the openwork bronze cast gates to the cloisters, to the smallest details.<sup>18</sup> However, it is worth noting the impressive sheet metal enclosure of the music choir that currently exists. It has the form of a wooden box or formwork.<sup>19</sup> In this part of the church, the old elements interact with the

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<sup>15</sup> Weiss: *Die St. Johanniskirche*, pp. 21–32; Sander: *Würzburg Architektur*, pp. 168–172.

<sup>16</sup> Kühl-Freudenstein: *Alte Kirchen*, pp. 29–52.

<sup>17</sup> Kuhn: *Die St.-Burkardus Kirche*, pp. 87, 90.

<sup>18</sup> Schömig: *Anruf und Botschaft der Kathedrale*, pp. 9–26.

<sup>19</sup> Fischer: *Zur Geschichte der Domorgel*, pp. 123–130.

new; the grille separating the narthex is original; it stands between the glass cuboid of the vestibule and the monumental menorah.<sup>20</sup>

One of the more impressive architectural commentaries in the Würzburg collection of churches is St. Alphonsus' Church, built on a hill surrounding the city from the south.<sup>21</sup> Being a modernist building, it makes a strong impact with its blank concrete facades and austere interior. However, in it, there is an important element with significant symbolism for its context. The church is not oriented; the choir faces north, toward the centre of the city. On the altar wall, there is a large-format (20×10 m) fresco referring to the Apocalypse, to the heavenly liturgy, created by Georg Meistermann. The dominant motif of flames, coupled with the unseen city skyline, is an obvious memory of 1945, a testament to the transformation, and perhaps a vision of the future.<sup>22</sup>

Somewhere, amid these built, carved or painted comments, there is another worth mentioning. An important element in the memory of 1945 is the Nagelkreuz (Coventry Cross of Nails), which is a material sign, a testimony of reconciliation between cities of formerly hostile countries that underwent a similar fate during the war. Würzburg is one of many German cities participating in the project to publicly display these crosses made of nails. The city has three copies: one is in the Gedenkraum on the ground floor of the city hall, another stands by the southern pillar of the Marienkapelle chancel arch, and the last has been dedicated to the city pilgrimage. Since 2002, once a year in March, it changes its storage location. Most frequently, it is displayed in churches, offices, hospitals or aid centres. For a year, it was exhibited in a prison. In many places, a reminder of this presence is a simple laser-engraved plaque with information about Nagelkreuz and the time at which it was hosted in the place. In St. Kilian's Cathedral and St. Lawrence's Church, located in the district of Heidingsfeld, a decision was made to continue its presence, displaying copy. The carrying of the third copy of the cross takes place during the 16 March anniversary celebrations. The bells of churches then ring continuously from 9:25 p.m.

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<sup>20</sup> Lensen: *Der Kiliansdom zu Würzburg*, pp. 68–77.

<sup>21</sup> Idem: *Aufbruch im Kirchenbau*, pp. 46–48; Sander: *Würzburg Architektur*, pp. 155–161.

<sup>22</sup> Hofmann: *Zeitgenössische Darstellungen der Apokalypse-Motive*, pp. 73–74, 168; Scheele: *Würzburger Apokalypse*, pp. 78–89.

to 9:42 p.m., while the moment has more of a spiritual, religious character than an official, state one.

The topic of the material expressions of memory of the destruction and reconstruction of Würzburg is, of course, immeasurably broader than the overview presented above. It includes a total of more than a dozen sculptural structures, numerous plaques and panels, and a large collection of small details mentioned in the context of the tenement houses. These are the symbolic programmes of the church decorations, references to eschatology and the city death experience written in paintings, altars or decorations. These also include exhibition arrangements in museums (especially in the Museum für Franken), as well as in the cathedral treasury (Würzburger Domschatz). When studying this phenomenon, one is struck by the lack of emphasis on the tragic event of 1945 and the years that followed, *i.e.* reconstruction. This can be understood by reading the city guides. It is impossible to find clear references to the city's tragic history in them. There are no shocking documentary photos or information about the monuments. Such information sparingly appears in the presentation of the city's historical outline; moreover, mention of a memorial chamber in the city hall are occasionally present. The monuments are not places that tourists are recommended to visit; sightseeing routes do not lead to them. The experience of history and the ways of remembering it, evident based on the memory signs in Würzburg, are a model that requires a separate discussion of the conclusions that result from the analysis of a sizable group of artefacts.

Translated by Marcin Walczyński

„JAK FENIKS Z POPIOŁÓW”  
PAMIĘĆ O ROKU 1945 ZAPISANA W PRZESTRZENI I ARCHITEKTURZE  
WÜRZBURGA

STRESZCZENIE

W artykule zostały przedstawione wybrane formy materialne upamiętnienia nalotu na Würzburg w dniu 16 marca 1945 roku oraz wysiłku związanego z późniejszą odbudową. Makiety, obrazy, pomniki, drobne formy architektoniczne i rzeźbiarskie, wyposażenie i wystrój kościołów przypominają o tym dramatycznym wydarzeniu, które radykalnie zmieniło miasto. Niniejszy tekst jest szkicem oraz jednocześnie elementem szerszego realizowanego przez autora projektu nad

formami przechowywania pamięci w miastach zniszczonych w czasie II wojny światowej.

„WIE EIN PHÖNIX AUS DER ASCHE“  
DIE ERINNERUNG AN 1945 FESTGEHALTEN IM RAUM  
UND IN DER ARCHITEKTUR WÜRZBURGS

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In dem Beitrag wurden ausgewählte materielle Formen des Gedenkens an den Luftangriff auf Würzburg am 16. März 1945 und an die mit dem anschließenden Wiederaufbau verbundenen Bemühungen dargestellt. Modelle, Gemälde, Denkmäler, kleine architektonische und skulpturale Formen, Kirchengestaltung und -dekoration erinnern an das dramatische Ereignis, das die Stadt radikal veränderte. Dieser Text ist eine Skizze und zugleich Teil eines umfassenderen Projekts des Autors über die Formen der Erinnerungskultur in den im Zweiten Weltkrieg zerstörten Städten.

Übersetzt von  
Renata Skowrońska

“LIKE A PHOENIX FROM THE ASHES”  
THE MEMORY OF 1945 RECORDED IN THE SPACE AND ARCHITECTURE  
OF WÜRZBURG

SUMMARY

The article presents selected forms of material commemoration of the raid on Würzburg on March 16, 1945, and the efforts related to the subsequent reconstruction. Models, paintings, monuments, small architectural and sculptural forms, as well as the furnishings and decorations of churches preserve the memory of the event that changed the city and its form. This text is a sketch and at the same time an element of broader research conducted by the author on the forms of storing memory in cities destroyed during World War II.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE / SCHLAGWORTE / KEYWORDS

- Würzburg; pomniki; pamięć; II wojna światowa
- Würzburg; Denkmäler; Erinnerung; Zweiter Weltkrieg
- Würzburg; monuments; memory; the Second World War

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Fig. 1: Town hall (Gedenkraum Grafeneckart) The detail of the model of the city centre destroyed in 1945. Photo. Kazimierz S. Ożóg



Fig. 2: The detail of monumental painting in the councillors' hall, made by Wolfgang Lenz.  
Photo. Kazimierz S. Ożóg



Fig. 3: The monument dedicated to the victims of 16 March 1945, at the main gate of the city cemetery, made by Fried Heuler. Photo. Kazimierz S. Ożóg





Fig. 4: Sculpture *Death by bombing* at the façade of St. John's Church, sculpted by Vadim Sidur. Photo. Kazimierz S. Ozóg



Fig. 5: The obelisk at a small square at the Ulmer Hof, dedicated to the destruction and reconstruction of the city, authored by Balthasar Höhn and Klaus Rother. Photo. Kazimierz S. Ożóg



Fig. 6: The original debris cart set up near the Main River. Photo. Kazimierz S. Ożóg





Fig. 7: The front elevation of St. John's Church with the former neo-style tower. Photo. Kazimierz S. Ożóg





Fig. 8: The inter-nave pillars of Marienkapelle with consoles and canopies, partially replaced by stone cuboids. Photo. Kazimierz S. Ożóg



Fig. 9: The wooden plaque with angel in St. Burkard's Church, made by Arthur Schleglmünig. Photo. Kazimierz S. Ożóg



Fig. 10: Large-format fresco referring to the Apocalypse on the altar wall of St. Alphonsus' Church, painted by Georg Meistermann. Photo. Kazimierz S. Ożóg