

Naming the shadows: My visit to Lbeck

by [Heidi Neumark](#) in the [October 28, 2015](#) issue



DANCE OF DEATH: Following the bombing during World War II, the *Totentanz* was reimagined in stained glass in St. Mary's Church in Lübeck, Germany. Photo by DM1795 via Creative Commons license.

On their honeymoon in 1953 my parents visited Lübeck, Germany, to see St. Mary's Church, the world's highest Gothic cathedral built of brick. My father wanted to show my mother where he was baptized and confirmed. Eleven years earlier, on Palm Sunday 1942, an Allied bombing raid had attacked this jewel in retaliation for the Nazi bombing of England's Coventry Cathedral. When my parents visited, repairs were under way. They could look up past the soaring arches and see the sky.

Among the many works of art destroyed in the firebombing was a painted frieze that wound around four walls of the confessional chapel. It depicted a common medieval theme: the dance of death, or *Totentanz*.

In the painting, death dances with representative citizens, following a strict hierarchy. Death begins with the pope and the emperor, and then moves on to the cardinal and king. He slips a bony hand in the crook of the bishop's arm, then the mayor's. Death is all motion, leaping off the ground while the citizens of Lübeck stand stiffly resisting the inevitable: merchant, bailiff, nobleman, knight, doctor, moneylender, monk, hermit, farmer, sexton, peasant, maid, and finally, an infant in her cradle. For those who entered St. Mary's chapel for confession, the cityscape of Lübeck depicted in the background brings the point even closer to home. The painting includes an exhortation to lead a righteous life while time remains. It is part of a genre of art that spread during outbreaks of the plague; in fact, a plague claimed thousands of lives in the vicinity of St. Mary's only a year after the painting was installed.

A new version of the *Totentanz*, completed in 1956, is a point of special pride. The stained-glass window is a faithful vertical version of the original but has a few striking additions. Death goes through the same social ranks, but when he reaches the baby he is forced to his knees and covers his face with his hands. The child is Christ, and to make sure we don't miss this, a golden label floats over the baby's head: DEO. The baby in the crib is swaddled in bands for burial and appears to be rising from his crib as from a tomb, hands raised in blessing. The other departure from the original is the representation of the cityscape. The buildings of Lübeck are there along the bottom of the window, but the city is being attacked by angry, red tongues of fire.

This beautiful window draws millions of tourists each year. There is a sly social commentary in the original—the pope and peasant are waiting in line for the same dance partner. The point is the equalizing nature of our mortality. But given the church's setting and history, that's a lie. The 102 panels in this stained-glass meditation about death were all created within a decade of the Shoah in Germany, but there is no reference to the Holocaust. Not one piece of glass suggests the truth: not all deaths *are* equal. Not one piece suggests the lethal alliance of Shoah and church. Instead, Lübeck is envisioned as the *victim* of war with no role in and no contrition for the city's complicity in millions of deaths. Streams of visitors come, take their photographs, and purchase their postcards, but leave without any mention of the Shoah. They receive no invitation to meditate on how they might live their lives in the wake of the Shoah's macabre choreography.

Two of the citizens snatched away in Lübeck's Totentanz were my Jewish grandparents. Sixty years later I found myself in St. Mary's pulpit where Nazi bishop Erwin Balzer once had the church draped in Nazi flags. To stand and speak where he once stood and spouted hate was both chilling and empowering. I preached from Hebrews: "Let mutual love continue. . . . Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured."

Afterward a woman told me that her mother, like my father, had been confirmed at St. Mary's. She said she had hated her mother for 40 years because her mother was a perpetrator: "I've been coming here every Sunday for all these years and never, until today, has anyone mentioned anything from the pulpit about those days." For 40 years this woman had come carrying a toxic mix of hatred, anger, shame, and guilt and had never heard that her reality was connected to what was spoken or done in church.

Her words are convicting and challenging. What are the unmentionable topics in our churches? What do people need to hear voiced from the pulpit in order to know that their reality with all its shadows has a place there? What do people need to hear to know that God knows what the hell is going on? I try to remember to ask myself that every week. Of course we can tackle "unmentionable" topics in our sermons and feel that our words fall flat or meet with hostile resistance. We can wonder if our words make any positive difference.

My grandfather must have felt that way. In 1933, when the Nazis began to take over Jewish-owned companies, a group of his friends told him he needed to retire quietly and hand over his business and life's work. Instead of going along with this "retirement" lie, my grandfather wrote a letter, which reads in part:

"I will never leave my post as a coward! . . . If hard work and self-sacrificing devotion do not count in the new Germany, we should not disguise that anymore. I will not desert voluntarily, but only give way to force! . . . How far my old friends will follow me must be left to them individually. I will be back in the office on Tuesday. . . . Your devoted, Neumark."

Before long he was removed by force, taken to a camp with my grandmother, and murdered. It must have seemed to him that his stand for truth in the midst of deceit and lies meant nothing. But 80 years later, thanks to a city archivist who spent hours

going through hundreds of papers, my grandfather's letter has come to me, and his words break open my heart and inspire me to keep on keeping on no matter what.

You never know when your witness will break through. Recently, a 2,000-year-old seed for an extinct date-palm tree was found in an archaeological site in Israel. When scientists planted it, the ancient seed sprouted and produced a new tree, unfurling shiny leaves in the startled sun. As another prophet reminds us:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,

. . . so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;

it shall not return to me empty,

but it shall accomplish that which I purpose. (Isa. 55:10-11)

This article is adapted from Neumark's book Hidden Inheritance: Family Secrets, Memory, and Faith, published this month by Abingdon.