

## **Ella Dreyfus** Walking in Wiesbaden

Aktives Museum Spiegelgasse, 11 March – 14 May 2017



I arrived in Wiesbaden on 29 December to fulfil a life-long dream, to visit Germany, the birthplace of my father, research my family's roots and have some experience of German life, beyond that of a tourist. Due to a fortuitous meeting and friendship in Paris in 2013 with the artist Sandra Heinz from Mainz, I learnt about the Bellevue-Saal Artists Residencies at the Kunsthaus in Wiesbaden. Last year I sent a proposal to the Bellevue-Saal Kunstverein and I was delighted to be offered a studio residence in the Kunsthaus in January and February this year. I am very grateful to the chairman of the Bellevue-Saal Kunstverein, Herr Ulrich Meyer-Husmann who took a special interest in my project. He approached Herr Georg Habs from the Aktives Museum Spiegelgasse für Deutsch-Jüdische Geschichte, and together they discussed the idea of holding my exhibition here. Georg was also very enthusiastic about my work, and I am honoured to be the first Australian artist to exhibit in the museum, and the first collaborative event between the two institutions. I thank you Ulrich, and you Georg, for this wonderful opportunity, and for the amount of hours, days, weeks and months of hard work you have done, to make this project possible.

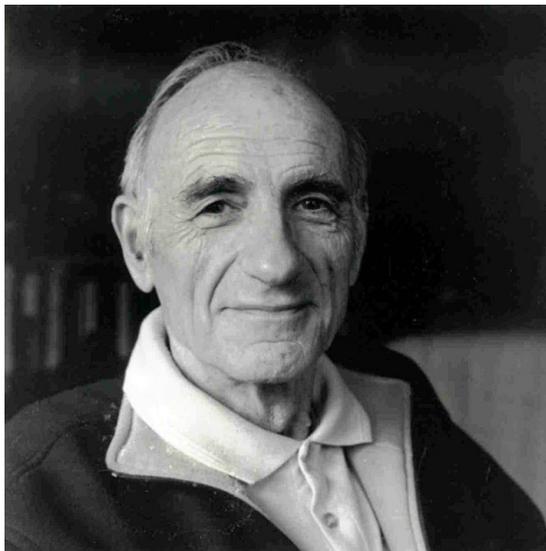
I have now lived in Wiesbaden for 58 days, and in that time I have walked at least 200 kilometres, taken over 10,000 photographs, eaten too many loaves of bread and made

many new friends. Here, tonight, in the Aktives Museum Spiegelgasse you will see the result of my creative research, an exhibition called *Walking in Wiesbaden*.

I would like to give you some background into this exhibition and explain the context, which is primarily situated around the idea of family, memory, loss and childhood; and how to bring new ways of looking at and experiencing the unforgettable tragedies of World War Two and the Jewish Holocaust in Europe.

Wiesbaden Wuppertal Mainz

What did these strange words mean? I heard them spoken occasionally in my childhood but I didn't understand them, only that they had something to do with my father's childhood, a long time ago and a long way from our home in Sydney, Australia.



In 1939, my father Richard Dreyfus, his brother George, along with 15 other children escaped from Germany with a Kindertransport, on a boat called *The Orama*. These children were saved from certain death, by the Australian Jewish Welfare Society and landed in the *Larino Home for Children* in Melbourne. There, they were nicknamed *Hitler's Children* and without exception, suffered mental and emotional disturbances from being uprooted

and displaced from home, family and country.

Most of these children never saw their families again, but George and Richard's parents, my grandparents Alfred and Hilde Dreyfus from Elberfeld in Wuppertal, managed to get visas through a German-Australian Wolfgang Matsdorf, and they made it to Australia just after the war began.

As an adult I sought to understand the effect of the massive displacement on my father, as there was no doubt in my mind, that I was affected by his experiences. Our family looked normal on the outside, but inside the trauma reverberated at a cellular level,

hidden deep under the surface and rarely acknowledged, or spoken of only in hushed tones.

As a daughter of a refugee survivor and as an artist, I knew that one day I would rise to the creative challenge of making art about this difficult topic. It isn't easy to make art about the complexities of anti-Semitism, war, history, family, and migration without falling into clichés, and even harder to find one's authentic voice and vision.

*Walking in Wiesbaden* is my artistic response to returning to the so-called *Vaterland*. It is a site-specific, installation, combining elements of performance, photography, print and hand-made objects. It resides somewhere between the genres of political activism, personal portraiture, documentary photography, fine art and craft; with the clear intention of activating mutual intergenerational trauma, knowledge and memories.

Upstairs I have created an *Erinnerungsraum*, a Room of Remembrance, to the families whose lives were shattered while simultaneously re-claiming with *Lebenszeichen*, signs of life, shining a light on their Jewish identity in the cities they belonged to. I evoke the notion of childhood using coloured, felt letters that I hand-stitched, to bring a sense of hope and joy for the future. In public I proclaim the names of my immediate ancestors, the Dreyfus's of Wuppertal, the Ransenburgs of Wiesbaden and the Brettheimers of Mainz. As I walked the streets of Wiesbaden every day, I re-traced their footsteps, positioning my coloured letters in places I felt their presence and imagined they had walked in.

The first thing I did when arriving in Germany was to seek places remembering my family. With my husband David Chemke I visited the memorial wall at the site of the Michelsberg synagogue, situated just below the Kunsthaus. Here are the names of Ida and Albert David Ransenburg, my great-grandparents who perished in 1942 at Auschwitz and Theresienstadt. We also walked up the hill to their former home at Richard Wagner Strasse to see the Stolpersteine in their honour, and to Geisbergstrasse, to see the building that was an Altersheim (old people's home), which was their final residence before deportation. And at the corner of Rhein and Wilhelmstrasse we saw where Ida Ransenburg's family the Brettheimers, had their clothing store. At the State Archives Georg Habs and I discovered a photograph of this shop from 1880 with the Brettheimer name above the entrance.

I also found another precious piece of evidence of my family's life in Wiesbaden, one that no official records, photographs or books would have known about.

One Sunday afternoon in Wiesbaden, I walked up to Richard Wagner Strasse and rang the bell at number 30. An elderly gentleman, Dr Axel Schulz, answered and invited me into his home where I explained my connection to his house. I was delighted when he agreed to show me around the house so I could get a glimpse of its history. It's hard to describe my sense of excitement as we went through the entire house together - from the basement and cellar, to the garage and garden, first and second floors, and up to the attic. I photographed everything and was very pleased, yet there was something waiting for me in the attic that would bring me undone and make my heart leap. In a small empty room was an old wooden, bed base. Along one side there were hand-written words that seemed to give a code and an instruction:

*RH 964. Von Berlin Lehrtr Bhf nach Elberfeld. 31.10.21*



I deduced, with Dr Schulz's agreement that the bed must have belonged to the Ransenburgs, who lived in Elberfeld before retiring to Wiesbaden. The bed was actually in the house when Dr Schulz bought it 37 years ago, along with the bed head,

sides and matching bedside table. I found this quite amazing, and very moving. In the following days I couldn't stop thinking about the discovery of the Ransenburg bed, wondering who might have slept there, been conceived there, played or even died there.

I realised that the bed was now part of my art project, and needed to be exhibited, not merely as a wonderful historical artefact, but as an affective, singular motif of the entire project, it signifies how the past can reach out to touch us in the present.

When you climb the stairs to the *Erinnerungsraum* you will see the bed all broken up into pieces, like *Sperrmüll*. This acts as a potent symbol of the disrupted lives, the loss of home, safety and family, and the exile from one's land. The Ransenberg bed is on loan to the Aktives Museum for the duration of the exhibition, through the generosity and permission of Dr Schulz, who values it as much as I do. And I am very pleased that Dr Schulz is here tonight, as my guest of honour, thank you very much Dr Schulz.

There are a great many other people to thank who made enormous contributions through their skills, expertise and support to this exhibition and to my experience of living in Wiesbaden. Firstly, to the Kunstverein Bellevue-Saal, thank you for selecting my proposal and inviting me for the Residency. A huge thank you to Wolfgang Gemmer, the talented, generous and kind manager of the Kunsthaus, who supported me with equipment and moral support whilst living in the studio, and who has been the chief installer of this exhibition; transporting and assembling the bed with his assistant Darwal, and skilfully installing all the photographs in the museum. Thank you very much Wolfgang. I also thank Christina Wagner-Hübinger for her administrative assistance in the Kunsthaus, and the Cultural Office of the City of Wiesbaden for their ongoing support of visiting artists.

My very personal and special thanks go to the artist Karin Hoerler, a member of Bellevue-Saal Kunstverein, who showed great interest in my project from the outset, and generously gave her time, knowledge, energy, friendship and artistic eye to my photographs, at many stages of production, including here in the museum during the installation period; as well, she introduced me to the Kaiser Friedrich Therme, which is now my favourite place in Wiesbaden, and I will miss it very much when I return to Sydney next week.

The eminent Designer and Typographer Dr Albert Ernst is responsible for the beautiful invitation, poster and banner for the exhibition. He was a pleasure to work with and I thank him very much for everything he did for me.

I met so many wonderful people at the Aktives Museum and I would like to thank them all: Barbara Moser has been so helpful in the office, and the research group comprised of Inge Naumann-Göting, Elisabeth Lutz-Kopp, Gisela Kunze, Henning Clüver and Dr Joachim Pieperhoff enthusiastically shared their knowledge and wisdom, and made me

very welcome in so many ways in Wiesbaden, including family meals, tours and allowing me to use their home for a photographic session.



My dear Uncle George Dreyfus is 87 years old and is the only member of this family still alive. He lives in Melbourne and before I came to Germany he gave me the names of his friends in Germany, who I contacted. All welcomed me with great warmth and interest. I met his colleague Dorothee Lottmann-Kaeseler and I thank her for her warm, generous and informative tours of Wiesbaden. I respect her

extensive knowledge of the current and past history of the city, including that of my family. I also thank Dr Manfred Bruston of Wuppertal, who shared his historical archives of my family and other Australian Jews of Wuppertal, and his wife, the wonderful artist Annalie Bruston for her hospitality. In Mainz, the eminent historian Dr Hedwig Bruchert introduced me to the city of my ancestors for which I am very grateful and say a huge thank you.

The beautiful photographs you see on the museum walls were expertly printed by Carsten Riffel of Picta, it was a pleasure to work with him to produce works of such a high standard, thank you very much Carsten. I also had excellent help with German translations along the way from Elisabeth, Gisela and for this speech, from Helga Lazar, thank you all.

In particular I am very grateful to Georg Habs for everything he has done to bring my exhibition to fruition at the Aktives Museum Spiegelgasse. In the build-up to opening night he worked tirelessly to ensure the professional delivery of this exhibition. We have developed a strong working relationship and understand each other's pedantic peculiarities very well. Thank you Georg, I couldn't have done this without you.

I also thank the Aktives Museum group of volunteers, who will look after the exhibition, and keep it open to the public; and Gina Büttner who helped so much during this last week of preparations.

I also thank my husband David Chemke in Australia, who accompanied me for the first month of this great adventure, and always gives enormous moral, physical and emotional support to my artistic life; my daughter Felix and son Axel are very proud of their mother and wish they could be here tonight. I thank my friend the artist Bettina Bruder who was actively involved in the conception of the proposal, encouraged me to apply for the residency and helped with the installation of the letters; and lastly to my dear friend, the artist Sandra Heinz who has been so kind and supportive during my time here. Sandra, if we hadn't met at the Cite in Paris, I would never have heard of the Bellevue Saal Residency in Wiesbaden. Who could believe that a friendship in France would lead to such a meaningful artistic experience in Germany?

Finally, I thank my lovely Australian and Israeli friends - Alan and Jenny, Jo, Mel, Ella and Alon, who travelled all the way from Prague, Paris and Tel Aviv, to be here tonight to celebrate the opening of my exhibition.

I apologise if I forgot to thank anyone, please tell me, and I thank you all very much for coming tonight, and I hope you enjoy my exhibition *Walking in Wiesbaden*.

### **Photographic credits**

1. Portrait of Ella Dreyfus by Jane Burton Taylor, 2016
2. Portrait of Richard Dreyfus by Ella Dreyfus, 1998
3. Photograph of the old Ransenberg Bed by Ella Dreyfus, 2017
4. Portrait of George Dreyfus and Ella Dreyfus by Rachel Dreyfus, 2016