



DIALOG

Dresden sets Luther Crest resident on spiritual journey

“I WAS BAPTIZED TWICE,” writes the Rev. Dr. Manfred Bahmann, a resident of Luther Crest in Allentown, Pennsylvania. “The first time was with water, the second time with fire. Both events left a profound impact on my life.”

Thus begins the “faith journey” that Bahmann, a retired Lutheran pastor, describes with brutal honesty and heartbreaking detail in his recently published autobiography, *When All Hell Breaks Loose: From the Ashes of Dresden to Existential Grace*.

The firebombing of Dresden, Germany, in February 1945 by American and British forces virtually incinerated the city, killing tens of thousands of civilians. Bahmann was 15 at the time, an “enthusiastic Hitler youth” who’d been seduced by the “fierce sense of patriotism” and promises of “joy and vitality” that the Nazi party preached. His own beloved father had been a minor local official in the party before dying of a stroke in 1941, and Bahmann, against the wishes of his devoutly Christian, Hitler-hating mother, had hoped to join the German Navy when he was old enough.

His plans were dashed, however, when he found himself taking shelter in his family’s basement with dozens of terrified friends and neighbors as the city—a non-military cultural center thought unlikely to be attacked—burned to the ground.

“This was how my conversion began,” writes Bahmann in his book. “First I uttered the agonized prayer, ‘Lord, have mercy!’ as the bombs fell. Then I felt the reality of Armageddon as described so vividly in John’s Revelation.” It was “the first heartfelt prayer of my life,” he says.

Soon after, with “fire and destruction” surrounding them, Bahmann’s family joined thousands of refugees who had escaped eastern Germany ahead of the Russian Army’s advance in the last months of the war. “We lost everything except what we carried.”

Eventually settling in a small village in northwestern Germany, the teen found the post-war years deeply troubling.

“When the full extent of Nazi brutalities was revealed after World War II, my entire spiritual universe came crashing down on me,” he explains.

“The shattering realization that unspeakable crimes had indeed been perpetrated by my own people” prompted “a profound feeling of shame.”

With Germany’s “collective guilt” hanging over their heads, Bahmann and a friend started a Bible study group for their high school classmates. They were “looking to our faith for an answer,” he says; for Bahmann, that ultimately meant going on to study theology in college and later attending seminary in Ohio. He gradually emerged from his “mental fog” eager to “serve the Lutheran church in which I had been baptized and raised as a child.”

Bahmann writes in great detail about his wandering ministerial career, which took him and his wife, Marianne, from U.S. military bases in Germany to a “rundown railroad town” in West Virginia; from the Stanford University campus in California to a church building literally adjacent to the Berlin Wall; and, later, from a German-speaking congregation in Manhattan to substitute preaching as a retired pastor in Pennsylvania.

Throughout the book, Bahmann reflects on his life experiences as well as his faith, both of which came together time after time to guide his service to others. Such was the case in September 2001 when he found himself present once again for a horrific attack from the air. Like many other New Yorkers, Bahmann made his way to Ground Zero to offer his help. The next day he made the short walk to New York University, where he’d been a part-time campus pastor, and addressed a large group of students who were trying to process what had happened.

“It is good that we are here together,” he told them. “I myself am a survivor of the firebombing of my hometown Dresden in Germany in World War II . . . Be assured that we have the whole world on our side right now, ready to support and help us.”

As for the present, Bahmann calls the Luther Crest apartment he shares with Marianne “our princely residence.”

“We are very happy with our choice.”

Taking part in the panel discussion were, left to right, the Rev. Dr. Manfred Bahmann, Mrs. Marianne Bahmann, Dr. Peter Pettit, and Dr. William Jennings.



Bahmann present for both Dresden fire-bombing, 9/11

LUTHER CREST RESIDENT, Dr. Manfred Bahmann may be the only living person present at both the fire-bombing of Dresden, Germany, in February 1945 and the attack on the World Trade Center in Manhattan Sept. 11, 2001.

That fact, which drew gasps from a standing-room-only crowd in Luther Crest's auditorium, was revealed during a January panel discussion on Bahmann's life as a Lutheran pastor and scholar, as well as celebration of publication of his autobiography: *When All Hell Breaks Loose: From the Ashes of Dresden to Existential Grace*.

Joining Bahmann on the panel were his wife of 56 years, Marianne; Dr. Peter Pettit, associate professor of Religion Studies at Muhlenberg College; and Dr. William Jennings, Luther Crest resident and former chair of the Muhlenberg College Religion Department.

Calling Bahmann "a considerable force in the life of the Lutheran Church," Bishop Samuel Zeiser, a Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries board member, noted that the blinding light that the Apostle Paul witnessed upon his conversion was not unlike the moment of Bahmann's own spiritual birth as firebombs rained down on his home city.

The despair Bahmann felt as a teenager after World War II, Zeiser added, drove him to become "a person of deep faith." He described visiting Dresden with Bahmann, standing on the city block where Bahmann had lived and hearing him describe his experience: "Seeing where your life was transformed was one of the most powerful spiritual experiences in my life," said Zeiser.

Pettit, who also directs the Institute for Jewish-Christian Understanding at Muhlenberg College, joked that Bahmann is "the Forrest Gump of the religious world," reflecting the fact that Bahmann has been present at a number of important moments in modern church history, among them the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Evanston, Illinois, in 1954, which Pettit described as "the high point of the protestant ecumenical movement," and the birth of "Latin American liberation theology" during

a conference of Roman Catholic bishops in Medellín, Columbia, in 1968.

Pettit credited Bahmann with "remarkable openness and generosity of spirit," noting that his book demonstrates the "confident faith and self-assurance that Manfred took with him throughout his life and his ministry. It's a wonderful memoir and reflection," he added. "I'm profoundly inspired by the courage and the commitment of your ministry in so many places down through the years."

Jennings said he was particularly moved by the section of Bahmann's book in which he describes speaking to a group of New York University students gathered in Washington Square Park the day after the 9/11 attacks.

"He comforted them by pointing out that he'd been in that situation before—during the bombing of Dresden," said Jennings. "It had been a pivotal event in Manfred's life. For a boy of 15, it was truly an apocalypse. So he was able to talk to the students who were in great despair and discuss the situation with them."

Marianne Bahmann described how her husband had "rejected values, family and culture because he saw how they can be destroyed by war. But he was very bright and curious, and people saw something in him. Reading the Bible and opening his heart to the Holy Spirit" turned him around, she explained, "and they've been guiding him ever since. It's been fascinating to be on this journey with him."

"The bombing of Dresden obviously had an enormous impact on me, no question about it," noted Dr. Bahmann. "But my 'conversion' was rooted not just in the destruction of Dresden and the senseless killing of all those defenseless civilians, but in the collapse of what I thought were our values. When the truth about the Nazis came out, I was thrown into complete despair and despondency."

What saved him, he says, were the "teachers and pastors who pointed me in the right direction and helped me to find the Living Christ."