

I was born on 1 February 1939 in Augsburg, one of the three oldest cities in Germany and one of the most beautifully preserved. It is situated in the south-western part of Bavaria, sixty kilometres from Munich. I was the second child of Erika and Paul Zylla. My brother, Eckhard, is two years older than me. We lived with my maternal grandparents on Kaiser Strasse, a long and broad street with a tramline down the centre and lined with chestnut trees on both sides. I can remember the City Theatre, an impressive old building with colossal columns, at the end of the street.

My parents were ordinary working class people. My mother enjoyed painting as a hobby, especially with watercolours. My father was a talented artist - he enjoyed and excelled at drawing and painting. He was also a qualified letterpress retoucher and worked in an Augsburg printing business, *Graphische Kunstanstalt Alfred Eckert*, his entire life.

My parents were both deaf, but neither of them was born deaf. They both became deaf after infant illnesses. My father was very involved with the local Association for the Deaf, and it was through this organisation that he met my mother, daughter of Christian and Elizabeth Merz.



Paul Zylla, pencil drawing on paper, 1940
Erika Zylla, watercolour on paper, undated

Living with grandparents in their large and comfortable ground floor apartment was a very practical arrangement. Not only were they able to help my mother with the demands of raising two energetic young boys, but they could teach us how to speak, something our parents could not. Eckhard and I did not learn sign language; we communicated with our parents by lip-reading. This was because Nazi Germany was notorious for the way it dealt with disabled citizens. Obsessed by their vision of racial purity, the Nazis tried to get rid of anyone looking, sounding or even behaving differently. Though my grandparents did their utmost to protect Eckhard and myself from discrimination, we always carried the stigma of being children of disabled parents. Other children would joke about the way our parents sounded when they spoke in public. These childhood memories have stayed with me forever. Many decades later, I made a large three-panelled painting entitled *Pieta* (2008). It is a monument to people with disability and features a disabled mother holding a disabled child. My entire life I have supported the recognition of disabled people's rights and opposed discrimination against the disabled.

One of my earliest childhood memories is of the bombing of Augsburg during the Second World War. I was five years old. I remember the sound of the sirens and the ensuing panic, fear and chaos as people rushed down into the cellar. There everyone, including the children, would be fitted with gas masks. I still remember those moments of confusion and discomfort, and my distress as I heard myself breathing into the mask. Once down in the cellar, we would wait for the all-clear siren. Most often we would spend the entire night there. I remember very vividly coming out of the cellar on a wintry morning and seeing the ground covered in snow. After being locked up in a crowded cellar for the night, I instinctively wanted to run and play in it. As I started running, I saw sticks, lots of them, stuck in the snow. Then someone must have shouted at me to come back. These were not sticks - they were unexploded phosphorus bombs, and they were everywhere.

We lived in Augsburg until 1944. By then the war had moved into the air and indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets was on the increase. The Nazi authorities moved mothers and small children into villages up in the mountains. My mother, Eckhard and I were sent to Aitrang, a small Alpine village about eighty kilometres from Augsburg. Though my father was not fit for conscription, he was not allowed to move to Aitrang with us. He stayed behind in Augsburg, where he continued to work. We were also separated from our grandparents and from our friends.

No one we knew was sent to Aitrang. There is no mercy during war. Many families were separated. During the five years we lived there, my father would come and visit us every three to four weeks, cycling the eighty kilometres from Augsburg on his bicycle. Eckhard and I were sent to the local school in Aitrang. I think it was there, in Aitrang, at the age of six, that I learned how unreasonable and difficult life can be. The local school was not very welcoming and we, the two Zylla brothers, were subjected to extreme mockery because of our mother's disability. Even the teachers were mean to us. So I was miserable during school hours, but after school I had no shortage of childhood fun. I loved playing soccer on the big field across the road from our house.

Eckhard and I had lots of toys, all of which my parents made. We had a particularly good selection of finger puppets. My father built a portable stage for our puppet shows. It was light and easy to carry around. Our puppet characters included the Jaker and his Girlfriend, a Policeman, a Princess, a King, the Devil, the Devil's Grandmother, a Thief and some animals. My mother's great talent as a seamstress was evident in the impeccable outfits she made for each puppet. We often had different outfits for each performance. We loved our puppet shows, and eventually



The Devil, watercolour on paper, 15 x 21 cm, 2011
Manfred with grandfather, 1944



took our portable stage to the big field. The shows became increasingly popular. We decided to make some money and started charging a few pfennige for each performance. Eckhard used to scribble the story on a piece of paper and we would stick it onto the back of the stage before the show. This strikes me now as funny, because it was not really necessary. We always told the same basic story and always made sure that the Devil did not get the Princess in the end. I am not sure what happened to those finger puppets of my childhood. I remember them so well, each character.

A few years ago, in my studio in Munich, I started making papier maché pieces of these characters. I did not make them into proper puppets. I made the heads and placed them on my cupboard to contemplate the next step. They are still there - I never finished the project. But the Devil character has remained a part of my life since childhood. A few months ago, in 2011, when I repainted my house in Observatory, Cape Town, I added a little painting of a devil on the outside wall.

Although my father was not part of my daily existence in Aitrang, he played an important role in both my life and Eckhard's. As he was getting ready to return to Augsburg, he would find objects for us to draw. Often he would group objects in still life compositions. It was only a game, but during the three to four weeks before his return, Eckhard and I would practise drawing each day. We would draw and re-draw the still life compositions, making sure that the objects remained exactly as my father had arranged them. The five years I spent in Aitrang (1944 – 1949) were filled with drawing, painting, playing soccer, giving puppet shows and reading. In the midst of war, I had a happy childhood.

During this time my mother earned a little bit of money working as a seamstress, doing the odd sewing job for people in the village. She was very good at making clothes, but her greatest talent and means of supporting us was fortune-telling. She used ordinary playing cards for this purpose and became very good. Eckhard and I were regular customers, queuing along with the locals to hear about our destiny. These were serious sessions and we were not allowed to misbehave or laugh. She never charged any money for her services as a seer; she asked only for food in exchange. Many of the locals in the village believed that my mother was a witch.

My grandparents came to Aitrang for regular visits, and these were always eagerly anticipated. I used to love going for walks with my grandmother. I remember one day in particular, when I was six years old. While walking in the village with Grossmutter I looked up

into the sky and predicted that the war would end the next day. It was 1945. The following morning, American tanks arrived in the village. It must have been the middle of the year, because the trees were green and there was no snow.

My memory of that day is as visual as a scene from a war film. Hundreds of tanks crawled out of the forest making a huge noise, like a parade. These tanks were literally covered with people. I did not know it then, but they were all prisoners of war. In the village people ran around chaotically, looking for white bed sheets to hang from their windows as a sign of surrender. As the tanks rolled into the village, the American soldiers tossed sweets into the streets.

Years later, when I was living in Cape Town in the 1980s, I made a painting called *Bullets and Sweets* (1985). It was a comment on the situation in South Africa at the time but, subconsciously, I must have drawn inspiration from that day in Aitrang back in 1945: the day the war ended.

It was another four years before we could return to Augsburg. The city, like many others of its kind in Germany, had suffered serious damage from bombing during the war. I was ten years old when we went back, but still many of the buildings on *Kaiser Strasse* lay in ruin.



Bullets & Sweets, pencil/watercolour on paper, 120 x 160 cm 1984 (museum collection)

These ruins became our playground. We were now living in a second floor apartment in *Bahnhof Strasse*, where my grandparents and father had moved to escape the heavy bombing in *Kaiser Strasse*.

By the time we returned to Augsburg I had developed an interest in reading and particularly enjoyed Westerns and adventure stories. I read all the time: books like *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Robinson Crusoe* and countless history books about the adventurer Hernando Cortés who invaded Mexico. I also learned how to play the violin. But even back in Augsburg I hated school. The place became a battlefield where I had to deal with authority, bullies and discrimination. I enjoyed few subjects apart from history and drama. School plays became my escape. I remember one play in particular: *Wilhelm Tell* by Friedrich Schiller. I played the part of Tell's young son.

When I turned twelve, I was old enough to perform on stage at the newly-renovated City Theatre during my school holidays. I was an extra in non-speaking roles in musicals, operas and plays. I performed there every holiday until I was seventeen. It was a comprehensive education. During those five years, I learned the music and the words of most of the greatest composer's works. In retrospect, I developed my love for classical music on the stage of the City Theatre.

Eckhard and I both opted for an early exodus from school. We preferred the option of an apprenticeship at the printing company where my father worked. The admission requirement for *Graphische Kunstanstalt Alfred Eckert* was an ability to draw. Of course this was not a problem as I had been drawing my whole life. I started working in the lithography department. Eckhard, two years ahead of me, had chosen the letter press retouching department. Eckhard completed his apprenticeship under our father, Paul Zylla, who was then considered the best in his field in Augsburg. At that time the printing trade attracted predominantly young school leavers. I was seventeen years old and still living at home when I enrolled for my apprenticeship. It was a three-year programme and the monthly salary was nominal. It was also customary to hand over this monthly stipend to my parents. Apprentices were expected to attend the local college for one day a week. This is where I met Frieder Pfister, the man who would become my life-long friend. Frieder and I were both interested in art. We started painting together over weekends. We were joined by my brother Eckhard and a few artist friends. We were young, ambitious, determined and dedicated. We formed a painting club and decided to focus on painting landscapes. After a while, Frieder and I were unable to limit our painting sessions to weekends only. We started painting at night too, then



every holiday, and then whenever we could find a spare moment. We took ourselves very seriously and decided it was time to acquire a studio. Another artist friend, Otto Geiss, joined our group and the three of us rented the studio together. Now that we had the space we started exploring other media including sculpture, mosaic, ceramics and batiks. But we never stopped painting. Over weekends we regularly visited the Schaezler Palais, our art museum in Augsburg. We practised our painting by copying the works of our favourite Renaissance artists particularly Hans Burgkmair and Hans Holbein the younger, both were born in Augsburg. I also enjoyed making drawings of sculptures, which developed my ability to capture movement. It was also during this time that we discovered Bertolt Brecht, whose place of birth was very close to our studio. Brecht has been the single most important influence on my life. I cannot imagine my life without Brecht as a source of inspiration, despite the fact that my list of influences had grown longer and longer over the years.

The three of us - Frieder, Otto and I - were dedicated artists and the cheapest and most obvious way to prove this was to wear berets. We used to sit in the local coffee houses debating Brecht and many other great writers and poets. Smoking cigars added to the mystique. But I never really enjoyed smoking - I used to just puff and play with the cigar. To this day I love the smell of cigars and on a trip to Cuba in 2009 I bought up huge reserves as gifts for all my artist friends.



In my late teens I also discovered poetry and music. My favourite musician at the time was Kurt Weill. My childhood violin lessons stood me in good stead until I developed an interest in jazz music: there was no place for a violin in jazz. I decided to learn the trumpet instead and the moment I could play the trumpet, I went looking for a Dixieland band. This was not a difficult task in Augsburg at the time.



Pastel drawings of sculptures, on paper, at Schaezlerpalais, Augsburg, 1958
 Manfred painting in nature 1959
 Landscape painting, pastel on paper, 60 x 90cm, 1958

On the River Paar, pastel on paper, 60 x 90cm, 1960