

When I first had the pleasure and privilege of interviewing Dorrit Karoline Epstein¹ (known professionally as Dekk),² for my PhD thesis about refugee women from the former Czechoslovakia, she had already endured a stroke. It affected her right hand, left her weakened and in a wheelchair, and virtually confined to her Kensington apartment. Tragically for an artist, painting was difficult, yet she persevered, and her sharp memory provided a spectrum of invaluable details for my study, for which I remain ever grateful.

A lady with a strong personality, Dorrit also held strong views expressed openly. She did not, for example, care for Simon Mower's novel, *The Glass Room*, based on the famous Tugendhat Villa in Brno, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. After all, she had known the *real* original owners from childhood visits with her mother, a second cousin of Madame Tugendhat, and taken tea.

Although Jewish by birth, Dorrit was baptized as a Protestant when a small child, but subsequently eschewed religion, and described herself as an atheist. Religion therefore played no evident part in her artwork, though it did affect her life.

The rise and spread of Fascism caused her and her mother, Valery Fuhrmann, to escape to Britain in 1939, thanks to the aid of the Quaker Mackinnon family which acted as guarantor. Life, however, was not easy for refugees, and could not compare with inter-war lifestyles that so many had led in the former Czechoslovakia.

Overcoming personal losses and difficulties, both women contributed to Britain's war effort. Whilst refugee men/women were not conscripted, many volunteered and joined the various armed forces. Valery worked for a time at the Foreign Office, then at Bletchley Park ('Station X'), translating into English, German documents seized after the 1942 battle of El Alamein.

Most exceptionally in the case of Britain's senior service, Dorrit was commissioned as a Third Officer in the Wrens,³ which she modestly claimed 'was only due to her [late] physicist husband and his work for the navy'.⁴ Known as 'the foreign Wren', her land-based role in 'Y Service' was radio intelligence, intercepting messages transmitted from German E-boats in the Channel.⁵ 'It was a fantastic job, very exciting!' she told me.

Exciting – albeit in a totally different way – is Dorrit's use of the bright prime colours she favoured, and her cheerful fun figures. Ever the artist, when I visited her in the nursing home shortly before her death, she asked which of two abstract works I preferred, on the wall facing her bed; then, as I was about leave, she suddenly said, 'I don't like the colour of your lipstick – take it off!'

I treasure the little painting Dorrit did as a 'birthday card for Tasha', a mutual friend who generously gave it to me, and I loaned it to the Ben Uri Gallery and Museum for its 2019 exhibition 'Czech Routes to Britain', focussing on Czechoslovak refugee artists. I think Dorrit would have been pleased.

Dr Jana Buresova, January 202

¹ Nee Fuhrmann

² Dekk is a made-up name comprising the initials of her first names, and the surnames of her late husbands, Leonard Klatzow, and her second husband, Epstein.

³ The navy was the most stringent service regarding recruitment, and few refugee women were commissioned in any of Britain's armed forces; Dorrit is the only known Czechoslovak woman to serve in the navy during WWII.

⁴ Leonard Klatzow was involved in the development of radar and infrared technology, which proved invaluable during WWII. Infrared was also mounted on rifles.

⁵ ‘Y Service’ also had counterparts in the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF 1939-1949, then WRAF), in which Czechoslovak women served during WWII.