Bendel was born to the son of a local firefighter who lost his first wife and two children in the controversial 1945 Dresden firebombing – while he was, ironically, putting out the flames. (Pictured above: The destroyed city post-firebombing; Wikimedia Commons)

Lysann Bendel: 'Aha' moment. (Miriam Alster/Flash90)

Caught in a Zionist firestorm

Dresden native Lysann Bendel's love for Israel was set aflame by a surprising family secret

• By ORIT ARFA

German families are known to keep secrets about the Nazi era. Lysann Bendel's family in Dresden was no different.

Bendel was born to the son of a local firefighter who lost his first wife and two children in the controversial 1945 Dresden firebombing while he was, ironically, putting out the flames. Her childhood in East Germany was shrouded in silence – about the Allied firebombing and certainly about the Holocaust.

"I have a family that doesn't talk much," Bendel told *In Jerusalem* from Bialik Café in Tel Aviv, the city she calls home. "I think that's one reason why I'm here. I talk way too much for my family."

With wheat-tone blonde hair cut short, bright blue eyes and tanned skin, Bendel is "that cute German girl" in small Israeli cities. In the metropolis, however, she's not catalogued – just one of many creative, unique spirits. Speaking with her, no one would know that she was recently hospitalized for stroke-related treatment; she bubbles with energy. Usually, she takes her dog, Syd Barrett (after the Pink Floyd singer) everywhere with her, but she didn't want him to distract from the interview.

Her grandmother once told her about a Jewish neighbor who disappeared one day. When Bendel asked why she didn't ask about her whereabouts, her grandmother gave her an admonishing look. Her grandfather, Heinrich, was more talkative about the war years, although he didn't often get into specifics.

"I have his family name, which is a Jewish one, and it's he who taught me about the Second World War and the loss and the destruction, the pain," Bendel, said. "He died when I was seven and a half years old, and he always used to tell me that our generation is responsible for things not to happen."

Their tête-à-têtes were the catalyst for her visceral attraction to Israel and her eventual decision to pursue Holocaust studies at Bar-Ilan University.

"I believe he's my guardian angel in life."

Her move to Israel came at age 20 on a whim, joining a friend who was traveling through the Middle East. That was 1999. She never left – at least not for anything more than vacations.

Soon after landing she met and married an Israeli; they divorced about eight years later. Looking back, she realized she married too young, but she is grateful to her ex-husband (a good man, she said) for facilitating her life in Israel and her conversion to Judaism. She's convinced her soul is Jewish.

It was during her conversion that she came upon the family secret — the "aha" moment that made her understand why she left the city once known as the "Florence of the Elbe" only to live through the Second Intifada and endure health problems she attributes to the stresses of Israeli life.

She regularly followed news from Saxony, the German state of which Dresden is the capital – particularly in 2001 when the New Synagogue was inaugurated on the grounds of the synagogue that had been built on the banks of the Elbe River by prominent Dresden architect Gottfried Semper in 1840. Semper's synagogue was burned to the ground during Kristallnacht, largely to local indifference, except for a Dresden curmudgeon who was recorded as prophesying: "This fire will return to us; it will make a long curve and come back to us."

And to some firefighters.

"I was living already in Israel watching ARTE, the German station, and I think it was they that showed something about the rebuilding of the synagogue and going back in history. Then I saw pictures, and I recognized what might be my grandfather."

Bendel became hysterical and called her father, saying, "I think I saw my grandfather!"

The golden Semper-designed star is the only extant remnant of the Old Synagogue, today hanging over the door of the new sanctuary of the rectangular, modern synagogue that looks nothing like the Moorish-inspired original. The star was famously hidden during Nazi times (although who exactly hid it and where is the subject of an internal dispute).

Soon enough, Bendel found photographs of three firefighters on the roof removing the star amidst the smoke. Indeed, Heinrich, not a member of the Nazi party, was one of them. He never mentioned his role, Bendel said, probably because he didn't think it deserved special attention.

"I've been asking myself very often why he should actually risk his family's life," Bendel said. "I never had an idea of being Jewish or being part of that. So I asked myself: What brings his family to rescue the Star of David, hiding it from the Nazis... I seriously believe my grandfather knew about his Jewish roots. There is no other thing that makes sense to me, as he was very pragmatic."

This act of valor did not save Dresden from the fire that racked the city seven years after Kristallnacht. The

Allied firebombing of February 13-14, 1945, completely destroyed the Old City housing the Baroque churches and palaces built by Saxony's most famous Prince-Elector, August the Strong (who happened to have a Jewish financier, Berend Lehmann). At the time of Hitler's rise to power, more than 6,000 Jews lived in Dresden (compared to 1,500 some today). Its most well-known World War II documentarian was a Jewish convert to Protestantism, Victor Klemperer, saved from the Holocaust by virtue of his "Aryan" wife. His diaries are among the foremost first-person testimony of the war years.

Still, Bendel today knows little of the fate of her grandfather's perished family (she is a child of her grandfather's second marriage). Many of the 25,000 to 40,000 casualties of the Dresden firebombing died of asphyxiation as the firestorm sucked out the Old City's oxygen, with bomb shelters ill-equipped with air filters. Today, Bendel said, most Dresdeners view themselves as victims of the Allied assault; a siren (much like the one for Israel's days of commemoration) is sounded every February 13.

Bendel lives with often contradictory, mixed sympathy for both the Jewish and German people; on the one hand, she feels empathy for her destroyed city and the lives lost; on the other, Jewish salvation is a supreme value for her. About 100 or so Jews in the city were saved from their scheduled deportation because of the firebombing.

Even as the Second Intifada terrorism storm raged throughout Israel, she didn't go back to the now sheltered Dresden; instead, she deepened her defense of Israel as a Zionist, advocating Israel's position to Germans (her own father included). She considers herself a type of ambassador for both Germany and Israel, and the reconciliation between them, although these days, instead of facing the question: "Where was your grandfather during the war?" from Israelis, she's asked: "Why the hell did you come here?"

"I've always felt more at home here than I felt in Germany, people-wise. In Germany, I had the feeling of being the 'black sheep' in a way, and I felt different with people, the way I am – and the crazy, funny, stupid stuff. It's a very distant type of place sometimes. You don't speak with people on the street, and I will always talk to people on the street and smile at strangers... This is the connection in Israel. I can be who I am, fully."

Living in Israel comes at great sacrifice, however, threat of terrorism aside. Since moving here, her blood pressure has spiked and she's experienced two strokes and intestinal ruptures. She had to abandon her fast track to a doctorate in Holocaust studies so she could earn a living, working in fields that normally don't suit creative souls: Internet marketing for online gaming and even Binary/Forex. These days, her love for Israel is burning out.

"To stay in Israel comes at a great cost, basically," she said. "I understood in the last two years that we pay a price for everything we do; for me, it's health and finance. It's much harder in Israel to make your dreams come true than in Germany. I never would have stopped my PhD to make money."

In fact, two weeks after the interview she called in tears to say she might consider leaving; without notice, the bank froze her account since she had not yet filled out the obligatory tax forms. Israeli bureaucracy and the tears it inspires are extinguishing her flame for Israel.

But she's "wired to survive," in the tradition of the Jewish people. Recently, she joined the software giant Checkpoint at entry level, seeking a stable, balanced life while expressing her artistic, searching soul through painting.

Her parents, divorced, live in Dresden. Her family still cannot fathom why she would leave the "Baroque Pearl," which, since reunification, has undergone a revival; most of the bombed-out buildings have been carefully restored by the *Feinarbeit* (precision work) for which Dresden is known.

Bendel tries not to look back, despite pangs of "Ostalgia," nostalgia for life in East Germany, which left her with "beautiful memories."

"When I think back, if I had stayed there back then and not 'run away,' being only 20, I think my life wouldn't have been as exciting as I find it today," she said. "I love my life with everything going on, with every hardship – many of them. I found a freedom I couldn't have found there."

Writer Orit Arfa is a journalist and author based in Berlin. Her new novel, Underskin, *is a steamy Israeli-German romance between an Ariel native and a Dresden native.*