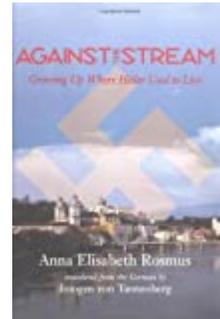




Anna Elisabeth Rosmus. *Against the Stream: Growing Up Where Hitler Used to Live.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002. xi + 158 pp. 24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-490-9.



Reviewed by Charles Lansing (Department of History, Yale University)

Published on H-German (October, 2004)

The Nasty Girl in Her Own Words

In her often-engrossing autobiography, Anna Rosmus, whose story was the basis of the 1990 film *The Nasty Girl*, recounts her grass-roots struggle to publicize and, when possible, rectify historical injustices with the goal that “we, the young Germans, not only should, but must learn from such past mistakes” (p. 111). The slim volume, consisting of thirty-one vignettes, chronicles her efforts to “swim against the stream” of German society: from researching and publishing an account of Passau in the early Third Reich, to pressuring municipal authorities to create state-supported memorials to victims of Nazism, to rejecting German society and moving her family to the United States. Although meandering and repetitious, her story nevertheless illustrates vividly the complex process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, illuminating the difficulties of and possibilities for success in teaching a German community about its past.

The first half of the work is a gripping retelling of her early experiences with Germany’s, and more specifically, Passau’s incomplete process of coming to terms with its recent past, covering much of the same ground as Michael Verhoeven’s film. The first sixteen vignettes

also establish the basic pattern of her activities: desiring to know more about an historical topic, she undertakes a research project that is, at first, hindered by local personalities, including city or Catholic Church officials. She enlists the support of journalists and other powerful individuals in order to apply pressure and thereby to gain access to the desired material. The episode describing Rosmus’s participation in an essay contest sponsored by the Koerber Foundation in 1980 illustrates this approach particularly well. Researching the contest’s prescribed topic: “The Prewar Years in My Hometown,” the twenty-year-old recent high school graduate initially assumed her findings would validate the conventional account that the city’s notables had resisted the creation of a National Socialist state and society. Her efforts did uncover resistance, though of a very different kind than she had anticipated. Local state and Church archives, as well as private individuals, employed various obstructionist tactics to withhold information from her. Examining back issues of a local newspaper, she discovered that Passau’s citizens had, in fact, embraced National Socialism, as exemplified by the case of the former editor-in-chief of the newspaper, who in the 1930s had written ar-

ticles supporting Germany's right to *Lebensraum*. Winning third prize in the contest failed to put the issue to rest, however; Rosmus had secured a publisher and intended to turn the essay into a book. Facing the continued resistance of the local archivists and a lawsuit resulting from public statements she had made about the former editor-in-chief, she turned to Martin Hirsch, a retired Federal Constitutional Court judge, for advice and assistance. The result was the publication of her first book, *Resistance and Persecution in Passau from 1933 to 1939*, and, after having taken the City of Passau to court, access to the municipal archives.

The second half of the book is a loose collection of episodes centered on her diverse efforts to bring about reconciliation between contemporary residents of Passau and the city's former victims. One important way was working to facilitate a visit to the city by a handful of Jews who had emigrated in the 1930s. Rosmus lobbied a reluctant municipal government to support financially and to celebrate officially the Jews' return. She initially encountered the same kind of bureaucratic resistance that had plagued her research and publishing, an attitude she unjustly equates with that of the *Schreibtischtäter* of the Holocaust as well as of "those who had decided, by simply pointing a finger, who would go to work in the concentration camps and who would go to the gas chambers" (p. 88). Rosmus ultimately prevailed, and the individuals were received in Passau as guests of honor. Her efforts to convince the city to construct a memorial to Nazism's victims were less successful, however. A small one was designated not in a square in the center of town, as people had originally planned after the war and as Rosmus had hoped, but, after years of delay, at the gravesite of Passau's only so-called "*Volljuedin*" to survive the Third Reich.

Despite the work's sometimes fascinating and incendiary subject matter, its style and structure detract significantly from its overall impact. Narrating her life story by means of vignettes, most of them only a couple of pages long, results in a high degree of repetition. Issues, individuals, and even words or phrases with their translations appear in multiple chapters, cluttering up the narrative. This is exacerbated by Rosmus's extensive reprinting of correspondence—much of it her own—and lengthy newspaper articles. In the chapter detailing the bequest to the author of one of the three death masks of the politically-engaged intellectual Kurt Tucholsky, Rosmus includes three separate articles that not only reiterate material about her earlier struggles covered elsewhere in the work, but also all make the same point: that

Anna Rosmus is an intellectual heir of Tucholsky and thus a natural choice for the mask. This had been explicitly stated just pages before, however, when Rosmus quotes Tucholsky's companion as saying that the mask "should belong to somebody Kurt would have loved ... I want you to have the mask. He had always looked for someone just like you, unfortunately in vain. He would have loved you" (pp. 99-100). The structure also results in some interesting points being raised but not adequately addressed. Rosmus writes in chapter 6 that upon reading *Resistance and Persecution* for the first time, she discovered that the editor or publisher had changed some of the text and removed the photographs. The story, regrettably, ends here; she does not tell the reader what, if anything, she did to find out how and why someone had revised her manuscript without her knowledge.

Although evaluating the content of an autobiography is particularly difficult, one expects that the individual episodes are not digressions but contribute to the overall narrative. In the case of *Against the Stream*, more than a few passages fail to meet this standard. Does the reader need to know, as Rosmus writes in chapter 27, that "something that was never made public was the plan for a practical joke that was never realized. Originally I was to fly to Berlin and make a surprise appearance, confronting the puzzled Oberbürgermeister of Passau by asking him some of my questions on live TV. The idea was tempting, and I could have easily made a fool of him, but all in all it wouldn't have accomplished anything as far as furthering my work went. 'You always have to swim against the stream' ('Du und dein Querkopf'), I was told when I mentioned the idea to people I knew. And I respected their opinion: But I no more wanted to be used by the City of Passau for their cheap purposes of self-promotion than I wanted to serve as a spokesperson against the city. So I stayed home" (pp. 132-133). More worrisome, on more than one occasion, Rosmus seems to be settling old scores with individuals who she believes have wronged her. For example, she intimates past questionable intentions of one local editor who in the early 1980s had allegedly signed a false deposition against the author: "He himself had waited outside the Leopoldinum [the high school she attended] more than once offering to drive me home. He lived in our neighborhood. I didn't trust him, though, and so I had never taken him up on it" (pp. 33-34).

By the end of the work, this reader wished Rosmus had spent more time reflecting on the larger, more permanent effects of her activities on the society and culture of Passau and Germany. Her more recent efforts seem

to have engendered far less opposition. For example, in 1991 some city councilmen even aided her in financing the publication of the artwork of the Jewish emigre Robert Klein. To what extent did this represent a larger transformation? Had many Passauers begun to come to terms with the city's less than sterling reputation? If so, what accounts for the change? The most striking manifestation of this shift in attitudes is the acceptance of her efforts by the local press. By the early 1990s, Passau's main newspaper was no longer vilifying Rosmus and her efforts but facilitating and even supporting them, advocating in print on behalf of Rosmus and Mr. Klein. This

development, though only touched upon in this work, is as interesting to and potentially as significant for historians of postwar German history as her earlier struggles against the state and her fellow citizens.

Despite its flaws, Rosmus's work provides historians with an enthralling look into the personal and institutional hurdles one strong-willed young woman had to surmount in order to find out about and to publicize the true history of her hometown in the Third Reich. Selected vignettes from the first half of the work could be a particularly effective teaching aid as part of an undergraduate reading packet for a course in modern German history.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Charles Lansing. Review of Rosmus, Anna Elisabeth, *Against the Stream: Growing Up Where Hitler Used to Live*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. October, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9840>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.