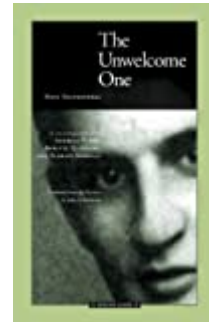




Hans Frankenthal. *The Unwelcome One: Returning Home from Auschwitz.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003. x + 169 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8101-1852-2; \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8101-1887-4.



Hans Frankenthal. *The Unwelcome One: Returning Home From Auschwitz.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003. x + 169 pp.

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In the Shadow of Auschwitz

The book is part of a larger series of eyewitness accounts about Jewish lives during the Third Reich and the subsequent *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in Western Germany, initiated by the Fritz Bauer Institute in Frankfurt am Main. By the time Hans Frankenthal returned to his hometown of Schmallenberg in 1945 at the age of nineteen, the Nazis had robbed him of his youth. The son of a Jewish livestock dealer, Frankenthal had been forced at age fourteen to work in a Jewish labor brigade building and repairing roads until the Nazis deported his family and him to Auschwitz. He and his brother were forced, as slave laborers, to help build I. G. Farben's synthetic rubber and petroleum works at Monowitz, near the Auschwitz death camp. Toward the end of the war the two brothers were conscripted to work in one of the notorious underground rocket factories, known collectively as the *Mittelbau*. The so-called tunnel factories were located near the town of Nordhausen in the midst of the Harz mountains, not far from Weimar, where the poet Goethe spent the greater part of his life. The Red Army

liberated Hans and his brother from Theresienstadt.

After returning to his hometown, Frankenthal had to cope with the fact that it no longer had any Jewish residents. He was also forced to realize that no one was interested in hearing about his horrible experiences or the suffering endured by Jews in general during the Nazi period.

Only after Frankenthal retired did he find the strength to speak openly about his past. He became a member of the Central Council of Jews in Germany and a representative of the Association of Critical Shareholders of "I.G. Farben in Liquidation"—a firm more interested in recovering its assets in the former East Germany than in providing restitution to its former slave laborers. Up until his death in December 1999, Frankenthal tried to draw attention to the plight of these exploited unfortunates.

Indifference, psychological repression, silence, and denial were widespread. Until the 1980s, commemora-

tions of the victims of the Nazi regime were confined to a committed minority in West German society. And the fact that various aspects of the Nazi regime have, in recent years, been singled out as topics for public discussion has not necessarily given rise to a critical analysis of the societal causes of the crimes committed. A not inconsiderable number of popular interpretations have been shaped by a resuscitated theory of totalitarianism that is ultimately nothing more than an attempt to relativize the crimes of the Nazis. Breaking taboos has provoked sharp controversies, as in the case of the Hamburg Institute for Social Research's traveling exhibition on the Wehrmacht's participation in crimes committed in the occupied territories during World War II. And the further breaking of taboos continues to engender bitter opposition and hostility.

Despite wide-ranging debates, many of the surviving victims of forced-labor camps and concentration and extermination camps still have difficulty finding an audience for their points of view and concerns. Fifty-plus years after liberation, the number of those who are able to report firsthand about the crimes committed against them is growing smaller and smaller. Therefore it is all

the more important to document their memories.

Hans Frankenthal's memoirs are a testament to the victims of Auschwitz and to the Resistance movement that more than once saved his life and that of his brother. But there is another reason for their extraordinary importance. Since he was one of the few survivors of a community of Jews who lived and grew up in a rural environment, he was able to describe firsthand a social milieu that has disappeared forever from Germany. Today there is virtually nothing left to remind people of the history of the Jewish livestock dealers in whose world Hans Frankenthal grew up and from which he was brutally snatched away. Finally, the story of his return to Schmallenberg in 1945 reveals how German society "came to terms" with its immediate past.

Given the especially problematic nature of Holocaust related testimonies, the book offers a valuable source for graduate students who will have to tackle the problem of using eyewitness testimonies in any endeavor. As for those who have been at it for many years, they too will appreciate this opportunity to re-examine their methodology and working assumptions about human nature.

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