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BOOKSHELF

Review: Anne Spoerry 'In Full Flight'

A woman's heroic work as a doctor in Africa takes on a different significance when her past deeds in a Nazi concentration camp are revealed. Diane Cole reviews 'In Full Flight' by John Heminway.



Dr. Anne Spoerry with a patient in Kenya. PHOTO: ROBERT ESTALL/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

By *Diane Cole*

Feb. 12, 2018 6:42 p.m. ET

Few life stories are as confounding as that of Anne Spoerry (1918-99), a physician whose tale of unconscionable evil and quest for expiation spanned several decades and two continents.

In Kenya, where the Swiss-French expatriate made her home starting in the late 1940s, Spoerry was revered as “Mama Daktari,” an indefatigable “mother doctor” and the first female member of the Flying Doctors service of the African Medical and Research Foundation (the nongovernmental organization now known as Amref Health Africa). For more than 30 years, she piloted her small plane across thousands of miles to remote areas of the country, in order to provide medical care to an estimated 1 million patients. By the time of her death, her reputation as an altruist extraordinaire had spread throughout the world via numerous admiring articles and honors.

Then her pre-Africa life came to light. At the end of Spoerry's life, a nephew found in one of her safes a cache of personal papers that revealed a closely guarded secret. She once had been known as “Dr. Claude,” a notoriously brutal *kapo* during her time as an inmate at Ravensbrück, a women-only Nazi concentration camp. A post-World War II French court found her guilty of “anti-French and anti-patriotic behavior” in 1946. The following year she was arrested in Switzerland, having been charged with torture by the Central Registry of War Criminals and Security Suspects. Her father bailed her out of jail, but the possibility of further trials and imprisonment loomed, and with the help of her family's connections, she fled to Africa. “In Full Flight: A Story of Africa and Atonement” is the attempt by one of Spoerry's many friends to

make sense of her stunning, opposing personae.

John Heminway, a winner of two Emmys, first met and interviewed Spoerry in Kenya in 1980, when he was working in Africa as a journalist and filmmaker. He was curious about Spoerry's past but was rebuffed when he asked her about it. Nonetheless, Spoerry let him accompany her as she flew from one rural village to another on her medical rounds—treating and operating on many of Kenya's poorest inhabitants and vaccinating them against polio and smallpox. Mr. Heminway wrote often about these journeys, and an expanded version of one of these profiles appeared in his book "No Man's Land" (1983). But throughout the 20 years that Mr. Heminway continued both to write about and socialize with Spoerry, he was never able to persuade her to open up about her life before she became Mama Daktari. On that, she remained silent and inscrutable.

Born in France to a well-to-do Swiss Calvinist family, Spoerry spent much of her early years at idyllic family estates and was educated at an elite English boarding school. But her parents were emotionally distant and rigid, Mr. Heminway tells us, and she apparently had few friends or close relationships, with the exception of her adored older brother, François. By the late 1930s, both siblings had moved to Paris, where he studied architecture and she pursued medicine. Then, in June 1940, France fell to Germany.

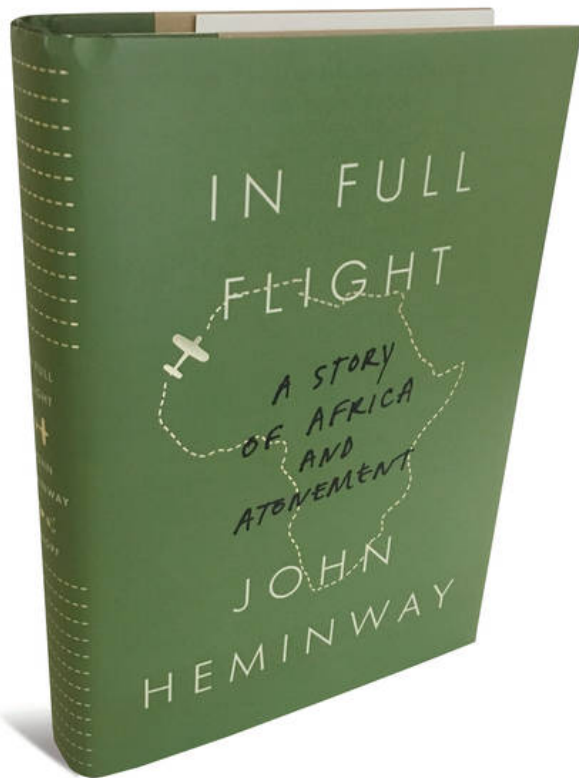


PHOTO: WSJ

IN FULL FLIGHT

By John Heminway
Knopf, 316 pages, \$27.95

By the end of 1942, Anne had joined her brother as a member of the Resistance. For more than four months she helped secure safe houses for British operatives who had been smuggled into France, delivered messages to other agents in the movement and opened her own apartment to a British spy equipped with a short-wave radio transmitter. After some members of her cell were arrested, Spoerry managed an escape for her British charge but was herself apprehended and soon transported to Ravensbrück.

There she was assigned to a makeshift infirmary for women suffering from tuberculosis and mental illness. Although Spoerry had not yet completed medical school, she became the close associate—and possibly the lover—of the infirmary's vicious leader, a Swiss woman named

Carmen Mory. Survivors who were there later testified to witnessing, among other things, Spoerry administering lethal injections to inmates at Mory's command; Spoerry assisting Mory, called by many the Black Angel, in the

torture of other inmates; and Spoerry participating in discussions about which prisoners to condemn to death transports. Mory had “bewitched” her, Spoerry would claim. But Mory’s protection also meant she received extra food rations and escaped the gas chamber. Did a desperate fear of death turn Spoerry’s moral compass upside down?

That she felt shame is evident in her avoidance of the topic throughout her time in Africa. In her new life, Spoerry worked assiduously to keep the details of her past private, and for the most part she succeeded. Yet she preserved many of the documents that laid out her guilt as a collaborator and perpetrator—just as she kept detailed logs of missions flown, villages visited and patients ministered to as a doctor. Spoerry’s refusal to retire, despite her failing health, suggests a hope that the accumulated weight of her good deeds would shift the final judgment of posterity in her favor.

When Mr. Heminway first wrote about Spoerry’s past in an article for the Financial Times in 2010, her friends and admirers were dumbfounded by the staggering revelations. For this book, Mr. Heminway has doggedly researched Spoerry’s story, uncovering her own writings, retrieving trial records and interviewing figures from different chapters of her life—including several of the Holocaust survivors from Ravensbrück who had testified against her.

“In Full Flight” strives for objectivity, but Mr. Heminway also tempers his account of his friend’s life with affection and understanding—perhaps too much so. One senses that he is trying to make peace with his own failure to uncover the enormity of her secret while she was still alive. The full trajectory of Anne Spoerry’s life provokes questions about the human capacity for iniquity and compassion, and about the possibility for rehabilitation and forgiveness. It also makes for a narrative as riveting as it is disquieting.

Ms. Cole is the author of the memoir “After Great Pain: A New Life Emerges.”

Appeared in the February 12, 2018, print edition as ‘Time Does Not Heal All Wounds.’



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