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# Festering wounds

Brutal perpetrators and complicit bystanders in the tale of one town

By **David Herman**



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### A FAIRY TALE UNMASKED

The teacher and the Nazi slaves

164pp. Vallentine Mitchell. £18.95.

Dieter Vaupel and D. Z. Stone

**A** *Fairy Tale Unmasked* is two books in one. The first part tells the story of a young teacher, Dieter Vaupel, who arrives in a small, idyllic German town, Hessisch Lichtenau, in 1983 and encourages his pupils to find out about the town's past during the Nazi years. In the face of considerable resistance from the residents, especially the older generation, they discover the town's extraordinary hidden past. The ruins on the outskirts had once been one of the largest munitions factories in the Third Reich, and thousands of slave labourers, including a thousand women and girls from Auschwitz, worked there under appalling conditions.

Part Two is the account of Blanka Pudler, who as a fifteen-year-old girl had been one of those slave labourers. It is a deeply moving memoir of how she and her family were sent to Auschwitz, where her mother was killed on arrival, the conditions there, and then her experience at Hessisch Lichtenau. The chapters on Auschwitz are familiar: deportation, selections, the terrible food, thirst and hunger. The chapters on her time as a slave labourer are no less powerful. “During the long walk through the village, before and after work”, she writes, “we do not experience any sympathy, not a single human remark by the people of Lichtenau. They just pretend that they don’t see us.”

The work is extremely hazardous and physically exhausting. “I have to inhale the bitter-tasting, unhealthy vapour constantly ... The hot explosive splashes into my face and burns my skin.” She is terrified that if anyone sees her “festering wounds” she will be sent back to Auschwitz. In the spring of 1945 they are evacuated to other camps. After liberation, she and her sister go to Budapest where they hear their father was killed in Dachau, but they are reunited with their other siblings.

What is most striking about the book is not the brutality of the perpetrators, but the complicity of the bystanders, then and forty years later. No one in the quiet little town would talk about what had happened during the war. But then a few witnesses began to speak out, and documents emerged telling the story of what had happened in Hessisch Lichtenau. Despite the dark accounts of the slave labourers, the book ends on a positive note. The teacher and his pupils uncover what happened and Blanka rebuilds her life in Israel. It is a fascinating account of inhumanity and silence.

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