A legendary flying doctor’s dark secret

legacy-table table

Dr Anne Spoerry (right) preparing for a medical visit to Kiwaiyu Island, off the coast of Kenya

The most imposing tomb in a walled European cemetery on the island of Lamu, off the coast of Kenya, is that of Dr Anne Spoerry: born in France in 1918, died in Nairobi in 1999. The inscription tells visitors that she was a “legendary flying doctor”. And, indeed, she is revered in her adopted country for bringing healthcare to thousands of people living miles from help. “She probably saved more lives than any other individual in east Africa – if not the whole continent,” said her friend, the anthropologist Richard Leakey. Dr Tom Rees, a founder of the Flying Doctors, says “she personally eliminated polio from nearly 100 miles of the Kenyan coast.”

But after she died, her nephew, Bernard Spoerry, opened

one of three safes she kept in her up-country farmhouse. In it, there was a surprise. Among the many documents it contained was one, dated October 25 1947: “Central Registry of War Criminals Consolidated Wanted List. Spoerry, Anne Marie, C.R. File No: 191069 C.C. Ravensbrück (Ger.), Reason wanted: Torture, wanted by FR. (France).”

I knew nothing of this when I visited Spoerry’s grave with my wife in December 2000. My first reflection that serene evening by the Indian Ocean was on the selflessness of an old friend. Like so many others, I believed she was a verifiable heroine. But something did niggle – the memory of Spoerry’s total embargo on the subject of the second world war, any mention of which made her quick to anger. So the next day, when I ran into Bernard – who had inherited Spoerry’s many properties in Kenya – I asked why the subject of the war was so off-limits to his aunt. I had heard rumours that she had been tortured by the Germans – was it true? All he knew, he said, was a family story that Spoerry had once been denounced as a “sex slave”.

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I met Spoerry in October 1980, when I was working in Kenya as a journalist and filmmaker. After a long campaign on my part to secure an audience, she finally agreed to meet me. Imperious from the start, she kept me waiting for hours outside her Nairobi office in the headquarters of the African Medical and Research Foundation (Amref). I later learned that the little more than 5ft-tall woman who finally emerged regularly packed a .38 Special in her bush jacket.

She appeared to register stony indifference to my pitch – to write about a week in the life of a flying doctor – but just a few days afterwards, there I was, sitting in the co-pilot seat at the start of a four-day flying safari through the north of Kenya. I -carried much of her equipment and, at every clinic, marched to her command. We saw at least 150 patients, all tribal -people, some dressed simply in a

string of beads. We encountered ailments as diverse as mental illness, spear wounds, corneal ulcers, -leprosy, malaria, breech birth and one case of osteomyelitis.
legacy-table table

Anne Spoerry at work: ‘In her early days as a flying doctor she often saw 1,000 patients a month and inoculated 2,000 children a week’

Spoerry conducted three medical tours like this nearly every month for 35 years, often landing on barely discernible airstrips. Week one: the Northern Frontier District. Week two: villages along the shores of Lake Victoria, and week three: the Kenya coast, from Mombasa to the Somali frontier. In the early days, she often saw 1,000 patients a month and inoculated 2,000 children a week. By the end of our circuit, my reporter’s detachment had deserted me. I was besotted.
Over time, Spoerry and I became friends – she knew I was always good for dinner at The Norfolk Hotel or the Muthaiga Club, but I cannot recall one true confidence. She ordered without consulting me (“We’ll have the lamb

and the Margaux"); my task was to listen, amuse her with a tale or two, then pay the bill. Over these dinners, one subject was always taboo: the war. Once, I ventured to raise it and her response was furious: "No, I'm not going to talk about those times. Yes, I watched Panzer divisions move into Paris ... Yes, I was in the Underground ... and then I was taken prisoner. That's all."

Years later, in 1992, I interviewed Spoerry for a PBS documentary about Africa. When I mentioned the war – which, after all, she had obviously lived through – she turned red, bellowed and threatened to kick my crew out of her house.

During filming, I could see Spoerry had aged. I heard that several times she had fallen asleep at the controls of her plane. Ali Gabow, the nurse who accompanied her on her last flights, once had to shake her awake as the aircraft went into a power dive. Three times she had to be rescued from lonely airstrips where she was stranded, having forgotten to lower her landing gear. By the late 1990s, Amref forced her to fly with an assistant pilot.

In 1999, two weeks after she managed to renew her pilot's licence, one month shy of her 81st birthday, Spoerry died of a stroke in Nairobi. She had not long returned from her beloved brother François' funeral in Paris. Four services were held: the first in the garden of her Nairobi house, another inside the Flying Doctors' hangar, still another 300 miles away on Lamu next to Spoerry's burial site, and later a memorial service in London. A Kenyan who had walked miles to attend the Nairobi service told the 1,000 mourners of his love for the woman who had saved so many lives. Finally, the French ambassador intoned: "Anne has been an honour to France."

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But not always, I would learn. many months later I discovered she was once, in fact, deported from France. Swirling rumours, hushed-up secrets, fogged truth: in the spring of 2002, I set out to find what really had happened, from archives stored in Switzerland, France, England and

Germany. I interviewed three octogenarians who had been with Spoerry in the war. Later, I came to know many of her French, Kenyan and British friends and colleagues. Members of the Spoerry family spoke to me, most explaining that she had been the victim of a postwar communist witch-hunt in France. Another of her nephews, Yves, expanded: “We call it the High Acres … a chapter in Anne’s life that was taboo in the family.”

Both Spoerry’s wealthy Swiss Calvinist parents came from textile dynasties. The family home was in the French industrial city of Mulhouse, but summers were divided between a Mediterranean villa and an estate beside Lake Zurich. Having a Swiss foothold guaranteed the Spoerrys dual citizenship.

Martine, Spoerry’s youngest sister, described her sibling as a tomboy – “loving, but distant, and very secretive”. When Spoerry sailed her dinghy, she often sailed alone, to prove she was as accomplished as François, five years her senior. In Paris, Odette Walling, a friend of Spoerry’s before, during and after the war, explained the parents were “very Protestant, very wealthy, very oppressive … And François did a lot of emotional damage; he treated Anne like a little boy.”

The Spoerrys all spoke German, French and English – Anne even spent two years in London at the Francis Holland Church of England School For Girls. Her father hoped she would go up to Oxford to study art history, but she chose medicine, so the Spoerrys acquired a Paris apartment for her to attend the Faculté de Médecine.

In 1940, a disbelieving Spoerry watched German troops march into Paris. From the start she displayed her contempt, by breaching borders on her bicycle to pedal through unoccupied France for visits to her brother. On one of these trips – over New Year’s Eve, 1942 – Spoerry learned François had been made chief of a réseau or Résistance cell. She instantly formed her own réseau in Paris. For three months Spoerry thrilled to this new lark, running a safe house, secreting British operatives. But the

adventure was short-lived: she was betrayed and in March 1943, as she was working at Herold Hospital, the Gestapo seized her and took her to Fresnes Prison. From there, she was transferred to Ravensbrück.

Three years before she died, Spoerry wrote a memoir, *They Call Me Mama Daktari*. Maddeningly, she condensed the 16 months that began with her transfer from Fresnes in January 1944, into one paragraph, ending: “The horrors of -Ravensbrück are described in detail in Germaine Tillion’s book *Ravens-brück*. It is, I believe, the definitive work on the subject.”

From the archives, I learned that those 16 months began when she and several hundred other French women were shipped out in railroad cattle cars. Spoerry arrived at Ravens-brück as dawn broke. Before her, in sub-zero temperatures, were thousands of women at attention, flimsy as ghosts, heads shaved, clad in striped, numbered cotton uniforms. Ravensbrück was Germany’s only concentration camp built for females alone, imprisoning as many as 123,000 women. Fewer than 30,000 survived. It operated as a work camp, farming out inmates to local industries such as Siemens.

Late in July 1944, with Ravensbrück overflowing – as many as seven women sleeping to a bunk – Spoerry was assigned to Block 10, for tuberculars and lunatics. Each block was run by a Blockova, or block elder, a prisoner selected by the SS to police the camp from within. While not all of them were German accomplices, most Blockovas enjoyed power denied others. Spoerry’s Blockova was a woman called Carmen Mory. Her power was, simply, spectacular. Unfortunately, Spoerry became Mory’s friend. Mory had been in and out of Ravensbrück since 1941. In 1943, the camp’s doctor, Percy Treite, who had known Mory’s father in Switzerland, had her name struck off the list of -prisoners bound for the gas chamber.

On a rainy spring day, I flew to Bordeaux, to meet Dr -Louise Le Porz, one of the last living survivors of Block 10. Using a walker, this handsome, grey-haired lady

showed me to her sun porch. Her son was there to assist, but she needed no help in recalling memories of both Mory and Treite: “He was totally contemptible … and she admired him a lot. She did not hide it.”

After being beaten and probably raped, Spoerry was vulnerable. Mory was a fellow Swiss, supposedly an “intellectual” and, importantly, Spoerry’s eager protectress. A series of affairs had taken Mory to Berlin in 1933, where she set out to make friends in high places. One was propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels. In 1934, Mory became Gestapo agent number S1 and took to denouncing many of her friends on fabricated charges of being either “homosexual” or “communist”. Bruno Sattler, her embarrassed boss (who, after the war, was found guilty of overseeing the execution of 500,000 Jews and died in mysterious circumstances in prison) sent her to Paris with her fiancé, Fritz Erler. Their bungled attempt to murder a newspaper editor led to their arrest by the French, who, on April 28 1940, sentenced them both to death.

Weeks later Mory was free, having agreed to spy for the French against the Germans – betraying her fiancé while she was at it. On June 6, he was executed by firing squad. Mory contacted Sattler, but now he was wary and the Gestapo arrested her as a double agent. In February 1941, she was sent to Ravensbrück.

After the war, Spoerry insisted her friendship with Mory was platonic. Before a French military tribunal she denied any “sexual undertone” to their friendship. Still, in July 1944, Spoerry had enigmatically changed her name to “Dr Claude”. Several witnesses from Block 10 told a Swiss court that the two women were lovers.

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One May evening, I met an ailing Violette Lecoq in her beautiful fin de siècle apartment in Paris. Once a nurse in Block 10, she too remembered Mory and Spoerry: “Carmen Mory was a horrible woman and the little one followed her … They were lovers. Lesbians. Dr Claude

would do everything she asked her to do."
During this period, Odette Walling too encountered Spoerry in Ravensbrück. "I always told her to be careful: 'You are too close to this woman Carmen Mory. Tongues are wagging.' And she always waved me off and told me she knew what she was doing."
According to Le Porz, Spoerry compromised everything. Mory "used to receive medicine that she did not distribute … The food she kept for herself … Anne Spoerry was Carmen Mory's slave. She must have been very scared."
Le Porz also presented me with the most damaging Block 10 revelation. It involved a young Polish girl who possessed an exquisite voice. Confined to the ward for lunatics, she sang aria after aria, night and day. "And Carmen could not stand it," said Le Porz. "I think she must have asked the … head nurse [for] the authorisation to make her disappear. Then she wanted me to give her a shot and I refused."
"Why refuse?" I asked.
"Because, as a doctor, I was not trained to kill patients."
"So who did?"
Closing her eyes, Le Porz told me. "Claude … took the syringe. Yes. She did not hesitate … I was dumbfounded. This was a discovery for me. That anyone who is a medical doctor or wants to become one could deliberately execute a patient … I can only explain it by her fear of reprisals."
As I heard these words, I could only wish that Le Porz were not such a credible witness.
Testimony given for the Hamburg Ravensbrück Trials only supported Le Porz's memories. Lecoq claimed that another Polish girl, recovering from surgery, was "dragged by Carmen Mory and Anne Spoerry to the toilets and there, having hit her, they splashed her with cold water – all of which advanced her death." Lecoq also said that Spoerry administered a lethal injection to a hunchback. Another woman testified that Spoerry and Mory regularly threw buckets of cold water over the 65 occupants of the "lunatic room".

In Basle, Elsa Schütz gave testimony that “Claude … hit the inmates inhumanly and she’s got hundreds of human lives on her conscience with the injections she administered.” From Birmingham, England, Tryntje Duvivier De Beer testified: “Every day some 60 people died. Out of these were some who had been injected by Dr Claude. The persons injected were only lunatics … I suspect the cause of death was the injection, because after the injections the room became empty.”

But as the Allies advanced, the Germans relocated Mory to Bart, a low-profile camp. That was on January 1 1945; Spoerry never saw her again.

Five days later, “Dr Claude” was transferred to Block 6, for typhus and dysentery patients. Here she resumed using her real name – Anne – and started afresh. In Block 6, there were no injections or cold buckets of water. One survivor, Odette Fabius, said Spoerry saved her life by hiding her for three months in a sick block. According to another account, Spoerry opened a rear block window, and, pushing and shoving, helped six sick Hungarian Jews escape the gas chamber.

On April 25, the Swedish Red Cross liberated Ravensbrück and Spoerry was reunited with her family. She returned to Paris to complete her medical board exams and the following year began work on a tropical medicine degree in Basle.

For a spell, Mory also prospered. By September 1945, she was engaged to a British officer and working at the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. But then the British learned Mory’s Block 10 activities were not as she described. She was seized, accused of multiple murders. Now, her survival would depend on one person. With lukewarm testimony, Spoerry defended Mory, but when asked to appear at the Hamburg Ravensbrück Trials in her defence, she refused. Throughout 1946 and into 1947, Spoerry had her own problems. She too had been arrested on charges of -torture and murder, tried in both a court in Switzerland and a military tribunal in Paris.

When Spoerry learned that Mory was now accusing her of being the Block 10 murderer, Spoerry finally came forth: “I was driven by a feeling of pity for the accused Carmen Mory, in her desperate situation. In particular I want to be precise in saying I do not contest any of the statements made by Dr -Louise Le Porz, Jacqueline Hereil and Violette Lecoq.”

In agreeing with these witnesses, Spoerry essentially admitted her own complicity. But her father, Henri, had the resources to assemble a crack legal team and with few surviving witnesses of the Block 10 murders, the court ruled “non-lieu:” no substance. In February 1947, however, Mory was sentenced to death by hanging.

Walling recalls meeting Spoerry after the Paris -trials: “She had no fear of anything. I urged her to sit down with an -analyst and bring order to her past. She barked back at me: ‘I’m not crazy.’” But in a different setting she did say she had lost her mind. According to Hélène Suzanne Roussel and two others, in May 1946, former Résistance fighters convened a Free French Forces “Court of Honour” in Paris. Spoerry was forced to attend, charged with high crimes. According to Roussel, a juror, Spoerry denied everything, but then broke down. “She confessed about one injection because it had been ordered by Carmen Mory … She said that ever since she met her she had been spellbound.” Spoerry, said Roussel, called Mory “a devil”.

The Court of Honour found Spoerry guilty of impersonating a doctor, being a traitor to the French and bringing shame on France through inhumane behaviour. She was disbarred from the Free French Forces and exiled from France for 25 years. In April 1947, Mory killed herself with a razor blade, a week before she was due to hang.

Spoerry now had her tropical medicine diploma, but her medical degree remained elusive since the French Faculty of Medicine, knowing the Court of Honour’s verdict, had, at first, blocked it. Did Spoerry care? Not that I could determine. In the autumn of 1948 she left Europe and, with impunity, began signing herself “Dr Spoerry”.

Spoerry's first job was plying the Red Sea on board a pilgrim ship out of Aden. Her ambition was to settle in Africa. Late in 1949, she reached Kenya. She loved it from her first day. It was adventurous and welcoming and the colonials had the quaint custom of not asking questions about one's past.

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So began Spoerry's well-known life. At the end of 1950, she had settled in the White Highlands at Ol Kalou, first as a country doctor, then as a farmer/doctor. With Independence in 1961, when her 3,000-acre estate was nationalised, she bought a small one, near Sabukia, at the base of the eastern escarpment of the Great Rift Valley. legacy-table table

Anne Spoerry briefing a colleague. A neighbour remembers 'a very kind person ... who would always go out – even in the middle of the night

Spoerry was a popular member of the British expatriate community – playing polo, doting over dogs, and enjoying a G&T at the club. After Spoerry's death, Enid Grant, one

of her earliest neighbours, recalled her in a letter as “a very kind person” who “would always go out to an emergency – even in the middle of the night”. Grant also said: “The incarceration in Ravensbrück had had its effect on her. She couldn’t bear to be in a room crowded with women … The other thing was that when Anne was served with a plate of food, she set to and ate it very quickly – as though she might not get any more. As the years went by these things gradually faded.”

At 45, Spoerry learned to fly and, by 1964, she had found her calling. Tom Rees remembers Spoerry’s original job interview. “It was in the Lord Delamere Bar at The Norfolk. I was worried about a woman doing this very dangerous job, but as soon as I met her, I knew she was up to it. I could see she was fearless and I noted something better: she had a smell for -disease – the acumen for sniffing out bad situations.”

Spoerry remained a flying doctor for the rest of her life. Ali Gabow, her nurse, said that a year before she died, Spoerry confided that she was working on a second memoir – about Ravensbrück. Was Spoerry finally going to break her silence? Sadly, all that remain are five pencil drawings.

I still ponder Spoerry’s struggle, and whether even a -lifetime of good works can undo the evil she did to survive Ravensbrück. I wonder if Carmen Mory haunted her, and if she ever recalled the faces of those they tortured and killed. Did Africa succeed in freeing her?

In the final moment of my interview with Le Porz I asked what Spoerry’s life meant. She hardly paused: “She went to Africa for redemption … Sixty years ago, if I met her in the street, I would not have talked to her. Today, if she were still alive, knowing her suffering, and knowing now how beautiful her career has been and how much she has done for the world, my reaction would be different … I would embrace her.”

So, in time, may I.

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Inside Ravensbrück

These four scenes, depicting the horror of life in the camp, are taken from an album of 36 drawings by Violette Lecoq, the nurse in Block 10 who testified against Anne Spoerry at the Hamburg Ravensbrück Trials. The album is entitled simply “Témoignage”, the French word for evidence.
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‘Now, back to work...’
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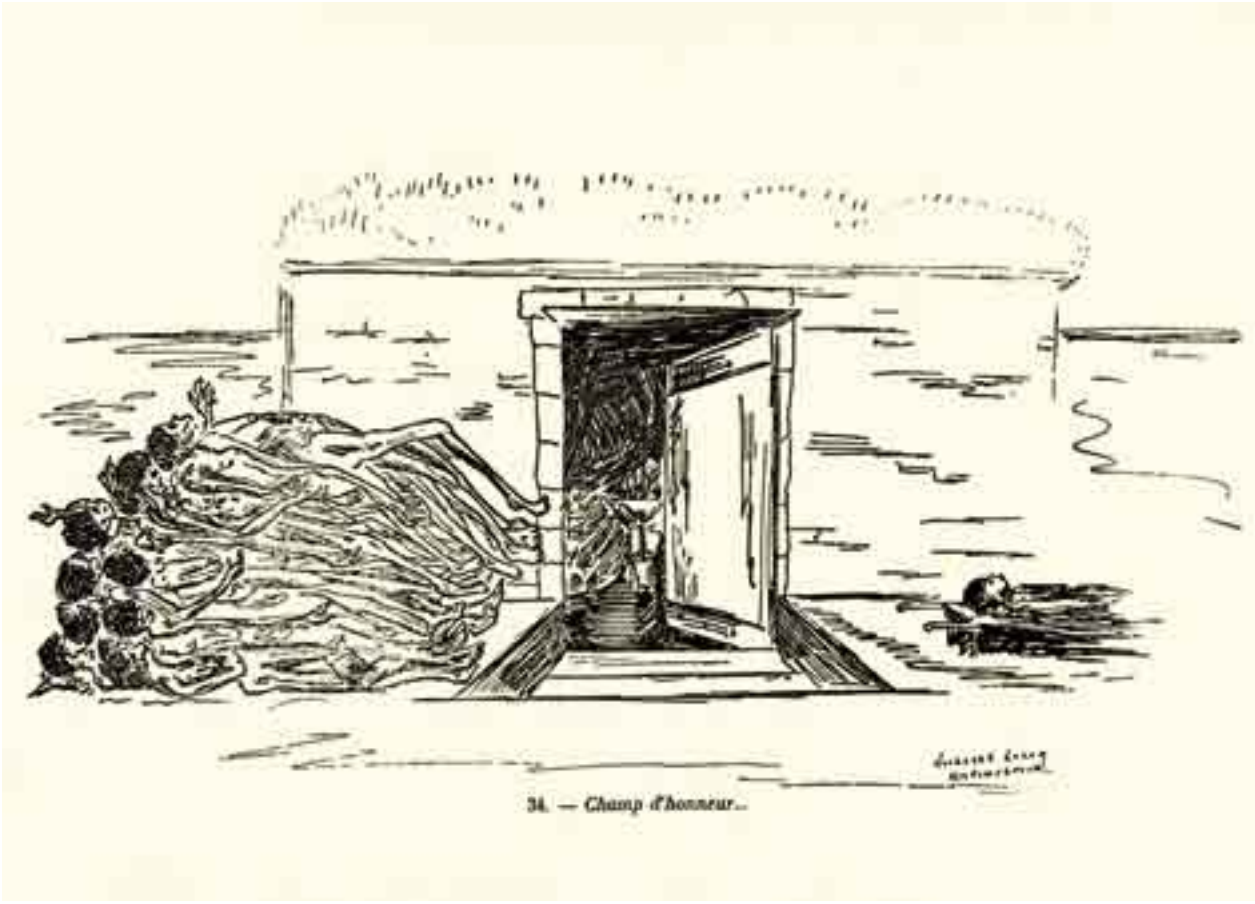
‘The morgue? No, the hospital…’
legacy-table table

‘The survival of the fittest…’
legacy-table table



‘Field of honour...’