Episode 128: Light before the Dark: Life, Death and Art in Early Modern Nuremberg

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VOICEOVER
Welcome to Up Close, the research, opinion and analysis podcast from the University of Melbourne, Australia.

JENNIFER COOK
I'm Jennifer Cook thanks for joining us. Nuremberg once thought of as the unofficial capital of the Holy Roman Empire, this Bavarian city north of Munich has been lauded as the flower of the German Renaissance. But when we think of Nuremberg today, it's more likely the stark image of the huge Nazi party rallies, and the war crime trials post World War II that jump into the modern mind. Nuremberg loomed large in the mythmaking of the Third Reich. But of course, the history of this intriguing city is far richer and more complex than this snapshot.

In today's episode, we're going to travel back to the 16th century and with the help of professor of history at the University of Melbourne, Charles Zika, and joining us via Skype, Professor of History from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, Joel Harrington, we are going to walk through the eight gates of Nuremberg and discover for ourselves who and what pumped life through the heart of this vibrant city. From street urchins to executioners, to artisans and councillors, we'll meet just some who called Nuremberg home. Gentlemen, welcome to the programme.

CHARLES ZIKA
Thank you Jen.

JOEL HARRINGTON
Hi.

JENNIFER COOKE
Now Charles and Joel, I don't want to delve back into the 16th century without first
Charles, could you just give us a brief insight into how Nuremberg sees itself today and how has it reconciled itself with its more recent past?

CHARLES ZIKA
Yes sure. Nuremberg really has a problem as a city. I mean it was the home of the Nazi Party rallies. It was the home of the racial laws which were promulgated in the 1930s and, of course, you know that's where the Nuremberg war trials were held. It took a fair time after the war, partly also because, you know, it was 90 per cent bombed and the question was, what do we do with this city? It took some time before they decided to rebuild the old Kern, the old medieval centre of the city. They rebuilt it, but still okay that was physically, that was architecturally, but then I think there was psychologically, how do they deal with it? How do they deal with those vast rally grounds in the city, like a coliseum, the so called Congress Hall, what do they do with it? It was really not until the 80s that they began to see a way forward and now, I think, they've come to terms with that to some extent.

Two of the interesting things that they've done is in the Congress Hall, they've built a documentation centre which talks about that period, has films about that period, takes people around and says, we can't wipe this out, this is the terrible history of our city, we've got to look at it straight in the eye. On the other hand what they've done is they've tried to turn it into a city of international human rights. Outside the Germanisches Kunstmuseum the Germanisches Art Museum, they've established a way of human rights. Opened in the 1990s and designed by an Israeli architect, where they have 30 articles of the decoration of human rights from 1948 on these poles in different languages. They're trying now to also market themselves as a city of refugees, a city of migrants, so in other words to get over that terrible period in their history in the 1930s and 40s where they were a symbol of Hitler's Third Reich.

JENNIFER COOK
Joel, what's it like to walk into Nuremberg today? Can you give us a sense of the city?

JOEL HARRINGTON
Sure, there is the old city the Alstadt, which is the historical centre and the town walls which have been reconstructed since the destruction in January 1945 are massive. There's a large moat around the city. It looks more or less as it did probably 400 years ago in terms of being this very impressive, almost island fortress. Of course, that's just the inner city. The city today is much larger and has about half a million residents, which has spread into villages that used to be outpost of the city territory. So it's got the core of the original Nuremberg, but it also is a much larger metropolitan area today.

JENNIFER COOK
So let's strip back those centuries now and let's take us back to the 16th century. Let's imagine that we're approaching this city in that time. What would we see and what would the effect be upon us?
JOEL HARRINGTON
Well the city of Nuremberg is surrounded, even today, by forests. So the people would be probably travelling through a forest and then come into an open area and the city would be standing out on the horizon.

CHARLES ZIKA
You'll even see that Joel when you come in by plane. One of the extraordinary things coming in by plane is seeing those massive forests around the city. But go on, go on.

JOEL HARRINGTON
No, no, it's very much, the forests surrounding Nuremberg is very much a part of its identity and it is a contrast to that. It is a civilisation in the middle of the wilderness. When you come out of the wilderness and you see the city, what you see is really the emblem of all civilisation for the Holy Roman Empire. You see the Kaiserburg which is a castle up on a hill in the inner city. It's quite impressive and you'll also see some church spires, not necessarily as dramatic as some place like Cologne or Strasbourg, but really still a stunning contrast to the surrounding countryside where you just have a few hamlets, a few dirt roads and you come up to the city and the closer you get to it are these massive walls and this large moat. Charles, that's the way I picture it.

CHARLES ZIKA
Yeah, yeah sure. And you know, I could add to that, that seeing that castle, which you still do as you come down one of the main routes on the tram, you see it up on the hill there. That was symbolic both then and now. If I could just switch back to the now, you know, that was one of the things that Hitler saw. He wanted to connect what he was trying to set up in the 1930s, this Third Empire, Third Reich, with the first empire. The city saw itself very much right through this period and the late middle ages into the 16th and 17th century, it saw itself very closely connected to the Empire. It was an imperial city. So you also see that today now, everywhere you see the Imperial Eagle emblazoned on the gates and on the castle and so on. That was very much part of its identity and it's still there now.

JENNIFER COOK
You talk about that strong visual image of the eagle. Now let's talk a little bit Charles about the printing industry that happened there, and also the impact that images of Nuremberg had. Who controlled them, what were they trying to say?

CHARLES ZIKA
Yeah, well I think this is a very interesting aspect because really the flowering of culture in Nuremberg in the pre 19th century was in the later 15th and 16th centuries. So that was bound up precisely with the new technology of print. Somehow, despite the conservatism of the city fathers, they were aware that this was a very powerful medium. They got onto the bandwagon pretty quickly.

JENNIFER COOK
We're so used to technology now of course. But I'd just like you Charles, give us the bare facts about what was invented and what were they doing? Why was it such a revolution?

CHARLES ZIKA
Sure, sure. I think this is not often so well known, but printing began in the 1450s. By the late 1480s/90s it's still a very young technology and technologies didn't develop quite as quickly as computerisation develops in our modern world. So on the one hand it was the print technology that you didn't have to write everything out in longhand, but you could gradually and this improved, the techniques improved, that you could produce a 100 or up to a 1000, sometimes 1500 copies of a particular book. It might take you a year or year and a half, even two years. But on the other hand, it was much, much quicker than writing out a manuscript of 1000 pages and so on. That would take a lot more man hours.

The other thing that really developed in Nuremberg, a man called Anton Coburger who was the leading printer of the city who had branches and delivered his books right through Europe, from Western Europe into France, into Paris, Lyon. Into Eastern Europe, into Krakow in Poland, into the north into Denmark and so on. He had about 100 people working for him in the city of Nuremberg and he began to experiment with a combination of his print technology which was to do with the word, and print making technology, the use of wood cuts using wood blocks and also metal cuts, engravings and the way in which you could put these together.

It's not as though that was new, because manuscript illuminations had been used. But here you could do the same and you combine the two on the one page. He was really instrumental in getting out these books, and the most important book of that kind is the so called Nuremberg Chronicle, a chronicle of the world from the first day of creation until virtually now, and not even now but also the end of the world. Slap bang in the middle of that he stuck a picture of the city of Nuremberg amongst all those cities of Europe at the time this was the centre page, this was one of the most important cities.

JENNIFER COOK
Yes, this positioning of Nuremberg in maps as the centre, I found that just fascinating it says so much.

CHARLES ZIKA
Yes.

JENNIFER COOK
You're listening to Up Close, coming to you from the University of Melbourne, Australia. I'm Jennifer Cook and we're talking about Nuremberg in the 16th century. I'm speaking with historians, Charles Zika and Joel Harrington. Now Joel, I'd like to ask, if we turn to the actual people of the city. You've done some fascinating research on the executioner of Nuremberg for some time. This man who was a father of seven and married and quite respected within the town. If you could talk us through a little bit about him. Looking at what this says about this city and that juxtaposition between a very bloody job and state power and personal ambition.
JOEL HARRINGTON
Sure, the person I'm writing a book about right now, his names is Franz Schmidt and they all called him Meister Franz. He lived from 1554 until 1634, so that's quite a long life for any period, especially so for this period. His life corresponds from the mid-16th century to the early 17th century to what I would really consider the beginning of Nuremberg's decline. So what Charles has described is a city that's really at its peak in every way. It's the centre of the German renaissance, it's politically powerful and astute, it's very wealthy, it's got incredible variety of endowments and public institutions and part of the Nuremberg of the mid-16th century when Mister Franz becomes executioner, is it's known as a law enforcement city. That it's a city where one of the Emperors one time asked the Nurembers, how do you keep your city in such good order? He said, with kind words and heavy penalties. Indeed they really? they are known as a string them up sort of city in the sense that their execution rate was quite high for the empire and therefore they had a need for a permanent executioner, as many cities of the day did. The person I have been writing about besides having a remarkable tenure, 45 years working in the profession, he also kept a journal and that's what first attracted me to him that we have somebody we don't identify too closely with, hopefully, keeping a record of his life's work.

JENNIFER COOK
You found historian gold.

JOEL HARRINGTON
Yeah, well I think so. It was a real eureka moment. So I went through the journal and I translated it into English and I began to get a better sense of this person. My goal was not just to tally up the executions and the types of execution and so on, but to try to get a sense of this person and the one you mentioned, the person who has some thoughts of his own, who has a family, who is considered to be a quite pious person, which is probably something you'd think is surprising for an executioner. But that's the person I wanted to try to approach and I think I'm getting there.

JENNIFER COOK
The translation that you've done of his diary entries, his journal, they're very specific aren't they? They're very businesslike. But you noticed a change as the years went on didn't you? Tell us about that.

JOEL HARRINGTON
Over the course of 45 years, most of us, our perspectives change somewhat. The reason that he has for writing a journal in the first place can change and evolve over time. I think initially I look at it as more of a curriculum vitae, a resume that he keeps track of his successful executions and he's a journeyman looking for a permanent position.

JENNIFER COOK
That's right; he saw himself as a guilds person, didn't he?
CHARLES ZIKA
This is a trade, that's why he's called Meister when he finishes and gets his professional position if you like.

JENNIFER COOK
He had a great deal of pride, didn't he, in that his son followed him into the trade. Even his wife was the daughter of an executioner as well.

JOEL HARRINGTON
Well that's an interesting question because it turns out that his son did not follow him in. That's part of Meister Franz's goal. His father was an executioner and his grandfather was an executioner and in the book I talk about how that actually happened, how do you get into this trade. It's not normally something somebody would seek out for themselves or for their children. I'll just save that surprise for the book. But as far as his life and his son, he did think of it as a craft, but he thought of it as a craft that was somewhat forced upon him. Later in life when he's writing in his journal and writing also in other sources, he's very clear the profession he really felt a call to, and he said in his own words, everybody has something in them that they're meant to do, was a physician. During his lifetime he had a very lucrative side business as a medical consultant, healing wounds and other sorts of injuries. This is not unusual for an executioner because executioners have on the one hand this sort of magical aura and lots of superstition surrounding them, but they also had a very practical knowledge of the human body, as you would imagine, and its frailties and also how to fix them. He ended up keeping a tally of his patients, his medical patients and by his own estimate I'm not saying that this should be taken at face value, but by his own estimate, he treated 15,000 people over the course of 45 years. By contrast, he executed 361 people.

JENNIFER COOK
Oh I'm sensing a need to balance the ledger as he's getting closer to god. Am I right?

JOEL HARRINGTON
Well I think so, and I think that's part of his identity. The other part is that these people who he does execute, especially some of the more vicious robbers, he feels that it's justified. That these are people who, to make an analogy would be like the wild west and robber gangs that are going around, and when they're caught and when they're executed he really feels that he's providing some consolation for the families and the victims and also stopping the reign of these marauding bandits and robbers.

JENNIFER COOK
I've found that intriguing, this sliding scale he had of the severity, which crimes were worse. Tell us a bit about that Joel.

JOEL HARRINGTON
Well that's something I came to spending a lot of time with his journal and finding
patterns of things that really upset him more than others. Of course, like anybody, he's upset by murder and the more gruesome murders, what people are gratuitously tortured or otherwise assaulted, that very clearly upsets him. For him, high on the scale is maybe a little different from our period. For instance, criminals, when they killed people and left their bodies unburied out in the woods or on the road somewhere that deeply upset him. That upset a lot of people's sensibilities at that time.

CHARLES ZIKA
Because of the lack of Christian burial? Is that?

JOEL HARRINGTON
Yeah, I think so. I think also it has to do, strangely, with the question of honour. This may sound, I say, strangely coming from an executioner, but this as Charles knows, this is a society that is just soaked in an obsession of honour and what's honourable. So to treat somebody's body or child or their name. He's especially upset about slander and when people are falsely accused and in a few cases led to torture by him. He more or less says, it wasn't my fault.

JENNIFER COOK
Charles, I'd like to take us back now to this important area of print making and wood cuts. One of the most stunning examples of course is the Schedel Chronicle. Can you tell us a bit more about what this represents about Nuremberg?

CHARLES ZIKA
Well the Schedel Chronicle in itself was this monumental volume with many, many hundreds of illustrations and, as I said before, the history of the world from creation, pretty well up until the present. Plus having some leaves empty that could be filled in later as time progressed. But in this specific illustration, wood cut of the city of Nuremberg in the centre really did portray a lot of those things that one still sees now walking into the city. The fantastic thick walls, the castle and especially the parish churches, and interestingly the parish churches are labelled. It would have wished to portray them I think, in a very traditional way with the two parish churches. There's no cathedral in Nuremberg. The bishop and the cathedral was about 50 miles north of the city in another very beautiful city which survives today, which wasn't bombed, the city of Bamberg. But really the power in the city lay with not so much, the church did have power that's true, they held considerable land both within the city and outside the city. There were many religious orders and so on. But the real power lay with the patriciate, with the senior members of the community who had wealth and standing and honour. Once again who were considered to be the leading families in the city, 40 to 50 or so, and it was especially through the internal industries in areas such as metalwork, dyeing and the making of cloth, fustian and so on. But as well as that, and this is what distinguishes cities like Nuremberg and Augsberg and so on, Cologne at that time, they had a whole group of people who were merchants, both working regionally and internationally. Nuremberg, they were very prominent in the German House of Merchants in Venice,
for instance. The Nurembergers were very involved in long distance trade. For instance, pepper was absolutely fundamental, one of the leading families in the city, the Imhoffs, were in the pepper trade. Through the marketplace and then of course if you go into the city now, is very prominent historically, that's where the Nazis also had their rallies and so on, and that has an interesting history as well. Of course, that's not there, that's not prominent. The fact that that marketplace was the largest marketplace in the 14th and 15th century north of the Alps, paved market place and that was one of the comments that was always made, that it was paved. Much of it was on the site of the Jewish community that was pretty well destroyed and moved out of that area in a pogrom in the mid-14th century.

On the site of that, you had the Hauptmarkt, the main marketplace and also one of the main churches in the city, the Church of our Lady, which was on the site of the previous synagogue. So Nuremberg does have a very chequered history going right back into the medieval period. I'm not saying for those reasons it wasn't displayed, but I think it would have been difficult to display it in this particular wood cut.

JOEL HARRINGTON
If I could expand on what Charles just said. The patriciate really thought of themselves as town fathers, the city fathers and it had a very proprietary and paternalistic approach to everything that went on in the city. As Charles says, a really remarkable small group of families that are eligible to serve in the real council of power, so they're almost all related to each other, they almost all socialise with each other. It's very close endogamous group and that helps them in some ways to rally come across as a unified force when they make these decisions for their city. They make decisions on everything, road repairs to whether we should go to war, to a question of religion to a baby found on a doorstep, to a case of adultery. They're real, what we would today call micromanagers because they really did think of it as their city, their responsibility.

JENNIFER COOK
You're listening to Up Close and we're coming to you from the University of Melbourne, Australia. I'm Jennifer Cook. Our guests today are historians, Charles Zika and Joel Harrington, and we're discussing life in 16th century Nuremberg. Now let's talk about the status of children in Nuremberg. Could you tell us a little bit about the children that were abandoned and also the story of the Robber Child.

JOEL HARRINGTON
Sure, well Nuremberg or all or early modern Europe has a lot in common with developing countries today in terms of the social structure and the economic structure. One of those, a demographic feature, is that they have a high proportion of children. They have a very large population of people under the age of 18, let's say. So there were lots of children in this society. You would go everywhere and hear children on the street. What I looked at was those children who for one reason or another, were rejected by their families or ran away from their families. One of the people that I focussed on, you mentioned, is a boy called Jorg Meyer who runs away from home and he becomes a very prolific burglar. He makes a pretty lucrative living at this for many years until he is caught at the age of 16 and he is ultimately
executed as a 16 year old.

JENNIFER COOK
That image of a 16 year old being executed, said out loud it kind of stops me. Is there a context you can put it into in Nuremberg?

JOEL HARRINGTON
Well I find it shocking too, very disturbing and I think people at the time did as well. It was not something that was common. But I think what it really reflects is that they're really desperate because this is somebody that was arrested over a dozen times, banished, flogged, they did not know what to do. They did not have long prison sentences during this period because if you seen any of the prisons from this period, you know why they thought it would be cruel and unusual to lock someone up for several years, unless they were dangerously insane. So there really was an expression of their desperation that they kept banishing somebody and flogging him and he still kept stealing and they really just did not know what to do.

JENNIFER COOK
And he kept coming back.

JOEL HARRINGTON
Coming back in the region. He wasn't just active in the city he was in the countryside, and at one point one of the juvenile criminals that I write about, the magistrate is interrogating her. He says, why did you keep coming back after being banished and flogged so many times? She just says, I didn't have any other place to go.

JENNIFER COOK
That just says it all doesn't it?

JOEL HARRINGTON
Yeah.

JENNIFER COOK
Now Joel, I'd really like you to explain to us where you got this information from. How do you find these details and how on earth have you managed to give us such a rich portrayal of those lives?

JOEL HARRINGTON
Well thank you for that. It's difficult, as Charles will attest as well. The sources for this period are mainly religious or legal, that is the written sources that have survived. These legal sources were mainly interrogation of people. Not just questions about what did you steal and how much did you get when you fenced it, or who was with you, but also facts and details, what I would call little nuggets of information about their everyday life that are buried in the transcripts. So it's just a question of going through the transcripts very closely. Like the type of archaeology where you really spend a lot of time digging in the dirt and sifting and you find these
bits and pieces that help piece together these lives that otherwise have been
forgotten for four centuries.

JENNIFER COOK
Back to the execution, I'm thinking of a 16 year old boy. How was he executed, what
were the most common ways, I'm thinking of levels of cruelty, were there different
way that people were killed?

JOEL HARRINGTON
Well the execution was based on the crime. So theft was normally punished by
hanging, which was an extremely dishonourable punishment. They did not have the
drop of the modern hanging. It was basically strangulation at the end of a chain or a
rope. The bodies were left there for the crows and other animals.

CHARLES ZIKA
This is where honour comes in again too. Even at the point of execution. Go on, Joel.

JOEL HARRINGTON
To that I would contrast a more honourable execution, the one that nobles were
guaranteed, the one that everybody who was condemned wanted, and that's
execution by the sword. That would be kneeling or sitting before the executioner and
he has this long sword that's about three feet long and very heavy, and the idea
would be to chop off the head in one stroke, which is relatively quick and I guess,
you could say merciful. It's also, as I said, considered honourable. That the sword
has that connotation, as it has since roman days. It's a very ancient sense. There
are other types of executions, but the one I would really mention, which has the kind
of, what we would think of as medieval cruelty or barbarity is execution by the wheel.
This is something that is reserved for what they considered the most atrocious
murderers. So these would be serial murderers or robbers, or men who'd killed their
pregnant wives.
The idea of this execution was not to be quick and swift, not to be honourable, but
what they would essentially do is stake out a person on the ground and put little slats
of wood under their joints and then the executioner would take a large wagon wheel
and the idea was to inflict as much pain as possible before the person expired. If the
judges wanted to be merciful, they would declare execution from the top down, which
meant that the executioner would do a quick blow to break the neck, and then break
the bones after the person died. But if it was somebody who was considered
especially terrible, they would start from the bottom up. It's graphic cruelty and public
torture that was not uncommon. There's another kind of execution drawing and
quartering, which we all know about from stories, that was pretty rare. Execution by
the wheel was not rare. This was something that most people would have seen at
least at one point in their lives.

CHARLES ZIKA
We should maybe also just mention that for various religious crimes, blasphemy and
also witchcraft, although there were very few of these in Nuremberg, the execution
was by burning in some other places in the empire of course, it was far more
frequent. As a kind of plea bargain the person was able to get very dry brush that was used, because that burnt very quickly and it meant that the person died a little more quickly than with the green or the stuff that was slow to burn where the person who was executed really choked to death, suffocated.

JOEL HARRINGTON
I'm glad that Charles brought this up because there were all different degrees of mitigation, which really gave a lot of power to the judges to be merciful or not. In Nuremberg, you're right, they don't use execution by fire very often. When they do for something, they almost always except in one case, they strangled the person and killed them before they put them in the fire. So they did not have live burnings.

JENNIFER COOK
Well that was a very vivid portrayal. Thank you both, Charles and Joel for that. Gentlemen I'd like to thank you both for your time today. You've taken us inside the walls of Nuremberg and you've given us such an incredible glimpse into the life and times of people in that 16th century. Thank you so much.

JOEL HARRINGTON
My pleasure.

CHARLES ZIKA
My pleasure.

JENNIFER COOK
You've been listening to Up Close, and I've been speaking to historians Charles Zika and Joel Harrington about the fascinating world that was 16th century Nuremberg. Relevant links, a full transcript and more info on this episode can be found at our website at upclose.unimelb.edu.au. Up Close is brought to you by Marketing and Communications of the University of Melbourne, Australia. This episode was recorded on 21 January 2011 and our producers were Eric van Bemmel and Kelvin Param. Audio engineering by Ben Loveridge. Up Close is created by Kelvin Param and Eric van Bemmel. I'm Jennifer Cook, until next time, goodbye.

VOICEOVER
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