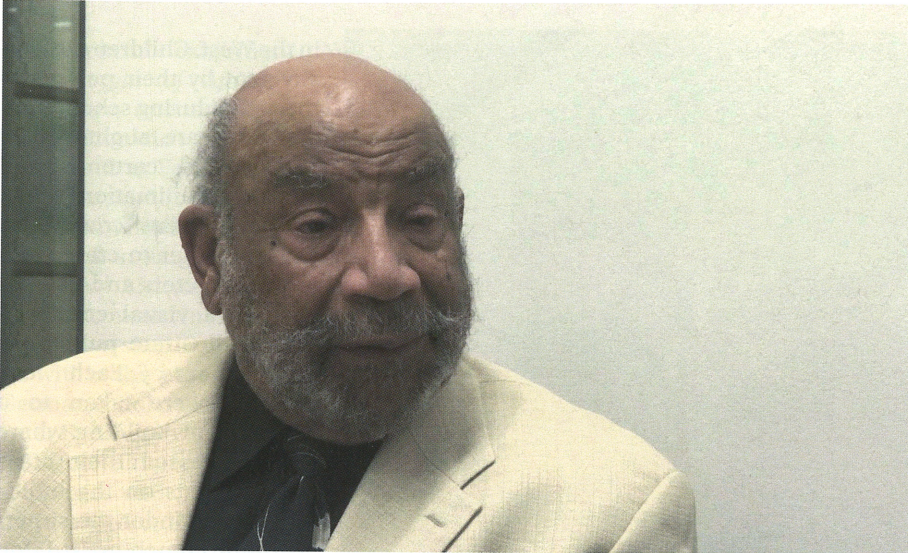


“The race issue is still firmly embedded in people’s minds”



Theodor Michael, who was born in Berlin in 1925 to a Cameroonian father and German mother, miraculously survived both the terrors of the Nazi regime and the Second World War

Deutsch Sein und Schwarz Dazu (“To Be German and Black”) is a treasure and a gift for German historiography. It is a treasure because Theodor Michael succeeds in vividly describing and analysing key events of his dramatic life in a historical and political context, covering the period from the Weimar Republic to this day.

His personal experiences make contemporary history comprehensible. His writing is clear and coherent, combining meticulously researched facts and personal anecdotes. Owing to a complete absence of pathos, bitterness and self-pity, the blows of fate Theodor Michael has suffered deeply affect his readers but he does not hide them – he has experienced and survived them. His book is a gift because it shows that it is possible to survive the worst adversity, trauma.

The author, an Afro-German, miraculously survived both the race-related terrors of the Nazi regime and the Second World War. His desire to live, his deep faith and his immense appetite for knowledge and understanding without being judgmental are the gifts that helped him to survive unimaginably harsh emotional injuries. By sharing his experiences he shares these gifts with his readers. Theodor Michael was born the youngest of four children in Berlin in 1925 to The-

It is a powerful book which demonstrates that the life story of a “contemporary witness” can be much more than a “mere” collection of personal memories.

ophilus Wonja Michael, a colonial migrant from Cameroon, and Martha, his German wife. He survived the Holocaust playing different roles: that of child actor at *Völkerschauen* (ethnographic exhibitions), young pageboy or hotel porter, and an extra in German feature films.

After the war he married Elfriede Franke, a young woman from Silesia, and started a family. He worked as an interpreter and actor, studied politics in second-chance education in Hamburg and Paris, worked as chief editor of the *Afrika-Bulletin* and became a renowned expert on Africa. It was in this role that he was eventually recruited by Germany’s Federal Intelligence Service (*Bundesnachrichtendienst*). Following his retirement he took up acting again and

became involved in the Afro-German community, an activity he still pursues today.

As a child he knew very few “compatriots” – African migrants and colleagues of his father’s in Berlin. The nationwide Afro-German community of today did not yet exist and although there are significant differences between living conditions and political circumstances in those days and the way things are today, there are still major similarities, particularly regarding the issue of national, cultural and psychological identity.

The title of Theodor Michael’s book, *Deutsch Sein und Schwarz Dazu* (“To Be German and Black”), highlights a central issue which has remained important to this day and wends its way leitmotif-like through his autobiography. It is a powerful book which demonstrates that the life story of a “contemporary witness” can be much more than a “mere” collection of personal memories. It reflects social systems, brings up central issues of humanity, and documents political truths and global contexts which are absent in our history books.

Michael clearly speaks of the level of racist brutality which loses any abstract notions in the light of his personal experiences. His conclusion is both sober and shocking: “The race issue is still firmly embedded in people’s minds to this day, even if German laws are no longer racist. This is evident not only from various crimes but small, everyday incidents”.

The consequences of more than 500 years of international colonial history are still apparent every day and everywhere in the world. *Deutsch Sein und Schwarz Dazu* encourages people everywhere who are affected by racism and who are refused fundamental human rights. This slim, compact paperback is a political concentrate, an indispensable document of Black and White contemporary history and a call for democracy and humaneness.

ANNETTE VON WANGENHEIM

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