THE FAITHFUL EXECUTIONER

Life and Death, Honour and Shame in the Turbulent Sixteenth Century

'Considered and fascinating'
HILARY MANTEL

JOEL F. HARRINGTON

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About the Book

Welcome to the world of Frantz Schmidt: citizen of Nuremberg, executioner of 394 unfortunates, and torturer of many hundreds more.

Most unusually for his times, Frantz was also a diarist. Drawing deeply on this exceptional and overlooked record that he kept for over forty-five years, *The Faithful Executioner* takes us deep inside his world and his thinking. But the picture that emerges is not of a monster. Could a man who routinely practiced such cruelty also be insightful, compassionate – even progressive?

Young Frantz enters the trade as the Apprentice, following in his father's footsteps. Later, as the Journeyman, he travels the roads of Franconia, learning to reconcile his desire for respectability with his violent work. After a lifetime working amid human cruelty, tragedy, injustice and simple misfortune as the Master in Nuremberg, Frantz has become a moralist and storyteller, the Sage. And, in the closing chapters of his life, retired now from his role as executioner, he is the Healer, running the large medical practice that he always viewed as his true vocation.

The Faithful Executioner is the biography of an ordinary man struggling to overcome an unjust family curse and a panorama of a Europe poised on the cusp of modernity, a world with startling parallels to our own.

About the Author

Joel F. Harrington is a professor of history at Vanderbilt University. He is the author of *The Unwanted Child,* winner of the 2010 Roland H. Bainton Prize for History, as well as *Reordering Marriage and Society in Reformation Germany* and *A Cloud of Witnesses*. He lives with his wife and two children in Nashville.

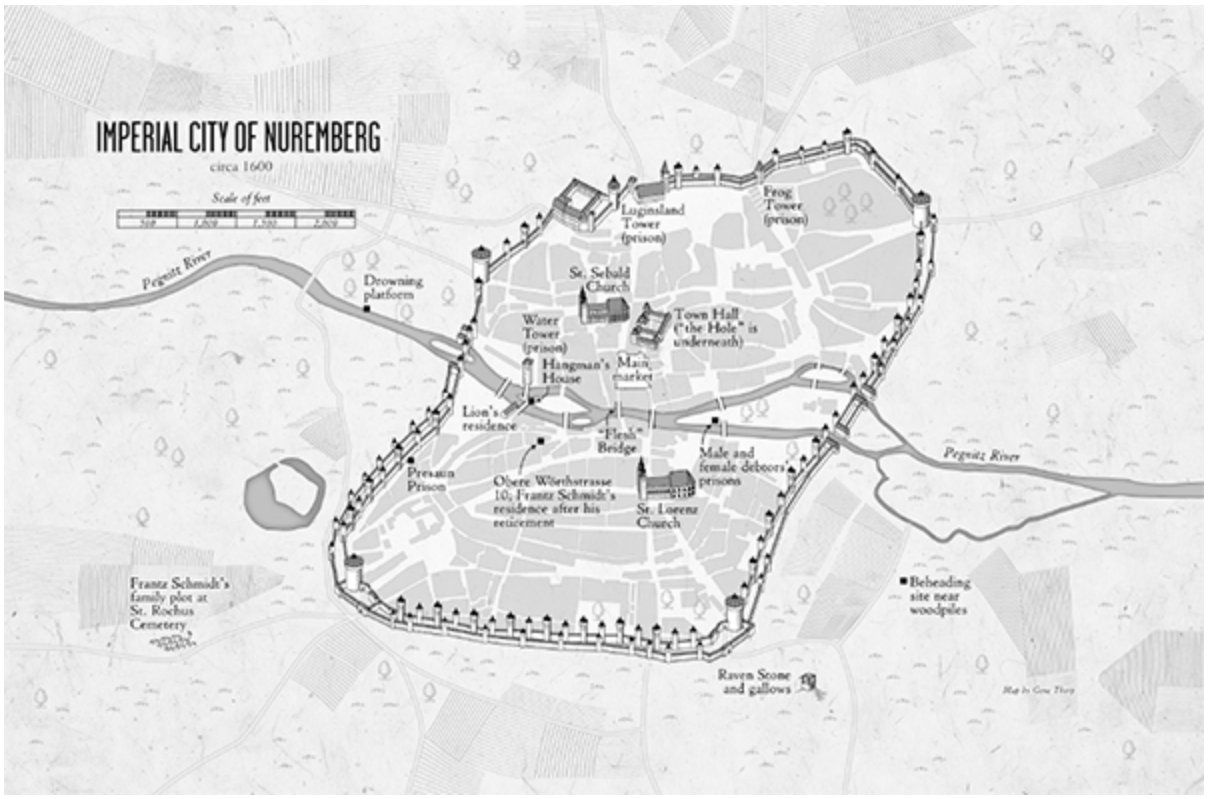
ALSO BY JOEL F. HARRINGTON

Reordering Marriage and Society in Reformation Germany

A Cloud of Witnesses: Readings in the History of Western Christianity

The Unwanted Child: The Fate of Foundlings, Orphans, and Juvenile Criminals in Early Modern Germany


THE WORLD OF FRANTZ SCHMIDT
North Sea
Baltic Sea
Elbe
Rhine
FRANCONIA
Danube
A L P S
SAXONY
Saale
Gräfenthal
Sonnach
Hof
Kronach
Presseck
Lichtenfels
Main
Kulmbach
BOHEMIA
(Bad) Staffelstein
Weismain
Weyer
Main
Eschenau
Bayreuth
Hollfeld
BAMBERG
FRANCONIA
WÜRZBURG
Pegnitz
Forchheim
Betzenstein
Regnitz
Gräfenberg
Velden
Neustadt an der Aisch
Herzogenaurach
Fürth
Pegnitz
Lauf
Hersbruck
Langenzenn
Altdorf bei Nürnberg
Amberg
MARGRAVATE OF BRANDENBERG-ANSBACH
NUREMBERG
Feucht
UPPER PALATINATE
Ansbach
Schwabach
Pyrbaum
Röth
Lichtenau
Sulzbürg
Regnitz
Hilpoltstein
Heilbronn
Heideck
Altmühl
Danube
Scale of miles
DUCHY OF BAVARIA
Map by Gabe Thorp


IMPERIAL CITY OF NUREMBERG
circa 1600
Scale of feet
Pegnitz River
Drowning platform
Luginsland Tower (prison)
Frog Tower (prison)
St. Sebald Church
Town Hall ("the Hole" is underneath)
Water Tower (prison)
Hangman's House
Main market
Lion's residence
"Fleish" Bridge
Male and female debtors' prisons
Pegnitz River
Pressain Prison
Obere Wörthstrasse 10; Frantz Schmidt's residence after his reincement
St. Lorenz Church
Frantz Schmidt's family plot at St. Rochus Cemetery
Beheading site near woodpiles
Raven Stone and gallows

For my father, John E. Harrington, Jr.

THE FAITHFUL EXECUTIONER

Life and Death, Honour and Shame in the Turbulent Sixteenth Century

†

JOEL F. HARRINGTON

THE BODLEY HEAD
LONDON

Preface

Every useful person is respectable.

—Julius Krautz, executioner of Berlin (1889)[1]

THE SUN HAS barely cleared the horizon when a crowd begins to form on the chilly Thursday morning of 13 November 1617. Yet another public execution awaits the free city of Nuremberg, renowned throughout Europe as a bastion of law and order, and spectators from all ranks of society are eager to secure a good viewing spot before the main event gets under way. Vendors have already set up makeshift stands to hawk Nuremberger sausages, fermented cabbage, and salted herrings, lining the entire route of the death procession, from the town hall to the gallows just outside the city walls. Other adults and children roam the crowd, selling bottles of beer and wine. By midmorning the throng has grown to a few thousand spectators and the dozen or so town constables on duty, known as archers, are visibly uneasy at the prospect of maintaining order. Drunken young men jostle one another and grow restless, filling the air with their ribald ditties. Pungent wafts of vomit and urine mix with the fragrant smoke from grilling sausages and roasting chestnuts.

Rumours about the condemned prisoner, traditionally referred to as the “poor sinner”, circulate through the crowd at a dizzying pace. The basics are quickly conveyed: his name is Georg Karl Lambrecht, age thirty, formerly of the Franconian village of Mainberheim. Though he had trained and worked for many years as a miller, he most recently toiled in the more menial position of wine carrier.

Everyone knows that he has been sentenced to death for counterfeiting prolific amounts of gold and silver coins with his brother and other nefarious figures, all of whom successfully got away. More intriguing to the anxious spectators, he is widely reputed to be skilled in magic, having divorced his first wife for adultery and “whored around the countryside” with an infamous sorceress known as the Iron Biter. On one recent occasion, according to several witnesses, Lambrecht threw a black hen in the air and cried, “See, devil, you have here your morsel, now give me mine!” upon which he cursed to death one of his many enemies. His late mother is also rumoured to have been a witch and his father was long ago hanged as a thief, thereby validating the prison chaplain’s assessment that “the apple did not fall far from the tree with this one.”

Shortly before noon, the bells of nearby Saint Sebaldus begin to ring solemnly, joined in quick succession by Our Lady’s Church on the main market, then Saint Lorenz on the other side of the Pegnitz River. Within a few minutes, the poor sinner is led out of a side door of the stately town hall, his ankles shackled and wrists bound tightly with sturdy rope. Johannes Hagendorn, one of the criminal court’s two chaplains, later writes in his journal that at this moment Lambrecht turns to him and fervently asks for forgiveness from his many sins. He also makes one last futile plea to be dispatched with a sword stroke to the neck, a quicker and more honourable death than being burned alive, the prescribed punishment for counterfeiting. His request denied, Lambrecht is expertly shepherded to the adjoining market square by the city’s longtime executioner, Frantz Schmidt. From there a slow procession of local dignitaries moves towards the site of execution, a mile away. The judge of the “blood court”, dressed in red and black patrician finery, leads the solemn cortege on horseback, followed on foot by the condemned man, two chaplains, and the executioner, better known to residents,

like all men of his craft, by the honorific of Meister (Master) Frantz. Behind him walk darkly clad representatives from the Nuremberg city council, scions of the city's wealthy leading families, followed by the heads of several local craftsmen's guilds, thus signalling a genuinely civic occasion. As he passes the spectators lining his way, the visibly weeping Lambrecht calls out blessings to those he recognises, asking their pardon. Upon exiting the city's formidable walls through the southern Ladies' Gate (Frauentor), the procession approaches its destination: a solitary raised platform popularly known as the Raven Stone, in reference to the birds that come to feast on the corpses left to rot after execution. The poor sinner climbs a few stone steps with the executioner and turns to address the crowd from the platform, unable to avoid a glance at the neighbouring gallows. He makes one more public confession and a plea for divine forgiveness, then drops to his knees and recites the Lord's Prayer, the chaplain murmuring words of consolation in his ear.

Upon the prayer's conclusion, Meister Frantz sits Lambrecht down in the "judgment chair" and drapes a fine silk cord around his neck so that he might be discreetly strangled before being set on fire – a final act of mercy on the part of the executioner. He also binds the condemned tightly with a chain around his chest, then hangs a small sack of gunpowder from his neck and places wreaths covered in pitch between Lambrecht's arms and legs, all designed to accelerate the body's burning. The chaplain continues to pray with the poor sinner while Meister Frantz adds several bushels of straw around the chair, fixing them in place with small pegs. Just before the executioner tosses a torch at Lambrecht's feet, his assistant surreptitiously tightens the cord around the condemned man's neck, presumably garroting him to death. Once the flames begin licking the chair, however, it is immediately clear that this effort has been botched, with the condemned man

pathetically crying out, “Lord, into your hands I commend my spirit.” As the fire burns on, there are a few more shrieks of “Lord Jesus, take my spirit,” then only the crackles of the flames are heard and the stench of burnt flesh fills the air. Later that day, Chaplain Hagendorn, now fully sympathetic, confides to his journal, based on the clear evidence of pious contrition at the end, “I have no doubt whatsoever that he came through this terrible and pitiful death to eternal life and has become a child and heir of eternal life.”[2]

One outcast departs this life; another remains behind, sweeping up his victim’s charred bones and embers. Professional killers like Frantz Schmidt have long been feared, despised, and even pitied, but rarely considered as genuine individuals, capable – or worthy – of being known to posterity. But what is going through the mind of this sixty-three-year-old veteran executioner as he brushes clean the stone where the convicted man’s last gasps of desperate piety so recently pierced the thickening smoke? Certainly not any doubts about Lambrecht’s guilt, which he himself helped establish during two lengthy interrogations of the accused, as well as the depositions of several witnesses – not to mention the counterfeiting tools and other incontrovertible evidence found in the condemned’s residence. Is Meister Frantz perhaps re-envisioning and ruing the bungled strangulation that made such an embarrassing scene possible? Has his professional pride been wounded, his reputation besmirched? Or has he simply been hardened to insensitivity by nearly five decades in what everyone considered a singularly unsavoury occupation?[3]

Normally, answering any of these questions would remain a speculative endeavour, a guessing game without any chance of a satisfactory resolution. But in the case of Meister Frantz Schmidt of Nuremberg, we have a rare and

distinct advantage. Like his chaplain colleague, Meister Frantz kept a personal journal of the executions and other criminal punishments he administered throughout his exceptionally long career. This remarkable document covers forty-five years, from Schmidt's first execution at the age of nineteen, in 1573, to his retirement in 1618. As it turned out, his gruesome dispatch of the penitent counterfeiter would be his final execution, the culmination of a career during which, by his own estimate, he personally killed 394 people and flogged or disfigured hundreds more.

So what was going through Meister Frantz's mind? Astonishingly, although his journal has in fact long been well known to historians of early modern Germany (*c.*1500 to 1800), very few, if any, readers have attempted to answer this question. At least five manuscript copies of the since-lost original circulated privately during the nearly two centuries after its author's death, with printed versions appearing in 1801 and 1913. An abridged English translation of the 1913 edition appeared in 1928, followed by mere facsimiles of the two German editions, both issued in small print runs.[4]

My own first encounter with Meister Frantz's journal occurred some years ago in the local history corner of a Nuremberg bookshop. While considerably less dramatic than, say, the discovery of a long-lost manuscript in a sealed vault that opens only after you solve a series of ancient riddles, it was nonetheless a eureka moment. The very idea that a professional executioner from four centuries ago might be fully literate, let alone somehow motivated to record his own thoughts and deeds in this manner, struck me as a fascinating prospect. How could it be that no one to this date had made significant use of this remarkable source to reconstruct this man's life and the world in which he lived? Here, consigned to a back shelf as

a mere antiquarian curiosity, was an amazing story begging to be told.

I purchased the slim volume, took it home to read, and made a few important discoveries. First, Frantz Schmidt was by no means unique among executioners in his self-chronicling – although he remains unsurpassed for his era in both the length of time covered and the detail conveyed in most entries. While the majority of German men in his day remained illiterate, some contemporary executioners could write well enough to keep simple, formulaic execution lists, a few of which have even survived to the present day.[5] By the beginning of the modern era, the executioner's memoir had become a popular genre in itself, the most famous being the chronicles of the Sanson family, an executioner dynasty that presided in Paris from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. The subsequent decline of capital punishment across Europe prompted a final wave of published reminiscences from "last executioners", some of which became bestsellers.[6]

Still, the continued obscurity of this fascinating figure remained puzzling until I examined the journal more closely and made a second, more daunting discovery. Although Meister Frantz is undeniably riveting in his portrayals of the diverse criminals he encounters, he consistently keeps himself tantalisingly in the background – a shadowy and taciturn observer despite his vital role in many of the events he describes. In this respect, the journal itself reads less as a diary in any modern sense and more as a chronicle of a professional life. Its 621 entries, ranging in length from a few lines to a few pages, are indeed written in chronological order, but in the form of two lists, the first comprising all Meister Frantz's capital punishments from 1573 on, and the second covering all the corporal punishments he administered from 1578 on – floggings, brandings, and the chopping of fingers, ears, and tongues.

Each entry contains the name, profession, and origin of the culprit, as well as the crimes in question, the form of punishment, and where it was administered. Over time, Meister Frantz adds more background information about the culprits and their victims, more details about the immediate crimes and previous offences, and occasionally fuller descriptions of the last hours or moments before an execution. In a few dozen longer entries, he provides still more information about the deviants in question and even re-creates certain key scenes, with colourful descriptions and occasional lines of dialogue.

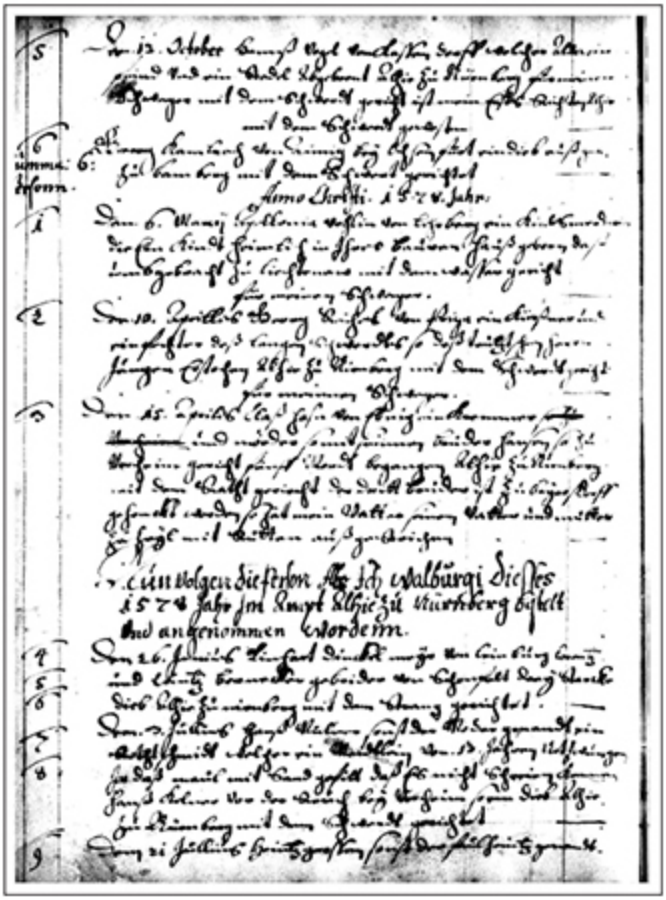
Many historians would not even consider Schmidt's journal a proper "ego document" – the kind of source, such as a diary or personal correspondence, that scholars look to for evidence of a person's thoughts, feelings, and interior struggles. There are no accounts of moral crises brought on by long sessions of torture, no lengthy philosophical discourses about justice, not even any pithy speculations on the meaning of life. In fact, there are strikingly few personal references at all. In over forty-five years of entries, Schmidt only writes the words "I" and "my" fifteen times each and "me" only once. The majority of instances refer to professional milestones (e.g. *my first execution with the sword*), without expressing an opinion or emotion, and the remainder appear as random insertions (e.g. *I whipped her out of town three years ago*).[7] Significantly, *my father* and *my brother-in-law*, both fellow executioners, each appear three times in a professional context. There is no mention at all of Schmidt's wife, seven children, or numerous associates – not entirely unsurprising, given the focus of the journal. But there is also no acknowledgement of kinship or affinity with any of the crime victims or perpetrators, many of whom he demonstrably knew personally, including his other brother-in-law, a notorious bandit.[8] He makes no explicit religious statements and in

general uses moralising language sparingly. How could such a studiously impersonal document provide any meaningful insight into the life and thoughts of its author? The ultimate reason why one had yet made use of Meister Frantz's journal as a biographical resource, I decided, might just be that there simply wasn't enough of Meister Frantz in it.[9]

My project too would have been doomed at the outset were it not for two important breakthroughs. The first occurred a few years after my initial encounter with Meister Frantz when, while working on a different project, I discovered in the city library (Stadtbibliothek) of Nuremberg an older and more accurate manuscript copy of the journal itself than any previously used. Whereas the editors of the two previous published editions relied on late-seventeenth-century copies, both modified by baroque copyists for greater readability, this biographical portrait draws on a copy completed in 1634, the year of Schmidt's death.[10] Some of the variations introduced in the later versions are minor: different spelling of certain words, numbering of the entries for easier reference, slightly divergent dates in a few places, syntactical improvements, and the insertion of punctuation in the later versions. (There is no punctuation in the 1634 version, and it's probable that Schmidt, like most writers of his educational background, used none in the original journal.) Many discrepancies, however, are significant. Some versions omit entire sentences and add completely new lines of moralising language, as well as various details culled from Nuremberg's city chronicles and criminal records. These later pastiche versions rendered the journal more appealing to the bourgeoisie of eighteenth-century Nuremberg, among whom these limited-edition manuscripts circulated privately. But at the same time they often robbed the journal of Meister Frantz's distinctive

voice, and thus his perspective. In later editions, the final five years in particular diverge radically from the 1634 version, leaving out several entries altogether and omitting the names of most perpetrators, as well as details of their crimes. In all, at least a quarter of the older text varies to some degree from later versions.

The most interesting – and useful – difference appears at the very outset of the journal itself. In the 1801 and 1913 published editions, Frantz inscribes his *work begun for my father in Bamberg in the year 1573*. In the version used for this book, the young executioner instead writes *Anno Christi 1573rd Year* [*sic*]*: Here follows which persons I executed for my father, Heinrich Schmidt, in Bamberg*. The distinction, at first sight a subtle one, in fact sheds light on the most elusive question about the entire journal: why was Frantz Schmidt writing it in the first place? The wording in the later copies suggests more of a paternal imperative than a dedication, with the elder Schmidt dictating that his journeyman son begin building the equivalent of a professional curriculum vitae for prospective employers. But the older version of the journal specifies that it was the first five years of executions, not the writing itself, that Frantz undertook for his executioner father (also mentioned here by name). In fact, as a later reference in this version makes clear, the journal itself was begun not in 1573 but in 1578, the year of Schmidt's appointment in Nuremberg. Looking back, twenty-four-year-old Frantz can only remember his previous five years of executions and omits virtually all his corporal punishments, since *I no longer know which persons I so punished in Bamberg*.



A page from the 1634 copy of Frantz Schmidt's journal, the oldest extant version, located in the Stadtbibliothek Nürnberg. The enumeration of executions in the left margin was likely added by the copyist.

This discovery immediately prompted several new questions, most notably, if Frantz Schmidt did not start writing for his father in 1573, who was he in fact writing for and why? It's doubtful that he intended the journal for subsequent publication, particularly given the sketchiness of most entries for the first twenty years. Perhaps he imagined that eventually it might be circulated in manuscript copies – as was indeed the case – but again, the earlier years are far less detailed (or interesting) than the city's other competing chronicles and overall read more like a ledger than a genuine literary attempt. Possibly the journal was never meant for anyone but the author himself, but this raises the question of why he started it when he did, at the time of his appointment as Nuremberg's full-

time executioner in 1578, as well as why he steadfastly avoided any mention of private matters.

The second key that unlocked the mystery of Frantz Schmidt's journal is a moving document from his later years, now preserved in the Austrian State Archives in Vienna. After spending his entire life in a profession that was widely despised and even officially designated as "dishonourable", the seventy-year-old retired executioner made a late appeal to the emperor Ferdinand II to restore his family's good name. The petition was clearly formulated and penned by a professional notary, but the sentiments expressed are highly personal, even surprisingly intimate at times. Most revealingly, the elderly Frantz recounts the story of how his family unjustly fell into their infamous profession as well as his lifelong determination to avoid the same fate for his own sons. The thirteen-page document includes the names of several prominent citizens healed by Schmidt, who maintained a sideline as a medical consultant and practitioner – a surprisingly common occupation among executioners – as well as an enthusiastic endorsement from the Nuremberg city council, his employer for four decades. His long service to the city and personal propriety, the councillors declared, had been "exemplary", and they urged the emperor to restore his honour.

Could it be that the council itself had been the journal's intended audience all along, with Schmidt's quest to have his honour restored the guiding motive? He might have been the first, but hardly the last German executioner to adopt this strategy.[11] Rereading Meister Frantz's journal entries with this foundational motive in mind, I began to see a thinking and feeling author step slowly from the shadows of what had initially seemed an impersonal account. Thematic and linguistic patterns emerged; discrepancies and shifts in style grew more significant; an

evolving self-identity became ever more pronounced. Here was an author utterly uninterested in self-revelation, yet one who inadvertently exposed his thinking and passions in virtually every entry. The very subjectivity that later copyists had unintentionally expunged became a gateway, revealing the author's antipathies, fears, prejudices, and ideals. Well-defined notions of cruelty, justice, duty, honour, and personal responsibility emerged and, over the course of the journal, converged to provide the outline of a coherent worldview. The journal itself took on a moral significance, its very composition a testament to the author's unwavering lifelong campaign for respectability.

The complex individual who emerges from this reading, supplemented by extensive archival sources, is a far cry from the stereotypical emotionless brute of popular fiction. Instead we encounter a pious, abstemious family man who is nonetheless excluded from the respectable society he serves, forced to spend most of his time with convicted criminals and the thuggish guards who assist him.[12] Though effectively isolated, the longtime executioner paradoxically exhibits a high degree of social intelligence, a capacity that makes possible both his brilliant professional success and his gradual reversal of the popular stigma oppressing him. Thanks to the broad chronological scope of the journal, we witness the literary and philosophical evolution of a minimally educated autodidact, whose journal entries progress from laconic summaries of his criminal encounters to virtual short stories and in the process reveal ever more of their author's innate curiosity – particularly on medical matters – as well as his moral cosmos. Despite his repeated exposure to the entire gamut of human cruelty and his own regular administering of horrific violence, this apparently genuinely religious man seems never to waver in his belief in ultimate forgiveness and redemption for those who seek it. Above all, we

vicariously experience a professional and private life dually animated by a man's bitter resentment of past and present injustices as well as by his unshakeable hope for the future.

The book that has resulted from all of this digging contains two intertwining stories. The first is that of the man Frantz Schmidt. Starting with his birth into an executioner family in 1554, we follow him through a youthful apprenticeship at his father's side to his independent travels as a journeyman executioner. Moving back and forth between his own words (always in italics) and a re-creation of his historical world, we become familiar with the necessary skills of a professional executioner, his uneasy social status, and Frantz's early efforts at self-advancement. As he matures, we encounter the legal and social structures of early modern Nuremberg, the middle-aged executioner's relentless attempts to advance socially and professionally, and his concepts of justice, order, and respectability. We also meet his new wife and growing family as well as a motley assortment of criminals and law enforcement associates. Finally we witness the blossoming in later life of two increasingly dominant identities – moralist and healer – and in the process catch a glimpse of the inner life of this professional torturer and killer. The accomplishments of his final years are rendered bittersweet by disappointment and personal tragedy, but the steadfastness of his solitary quest for honour remains in itself an object of wonder and even admiration.

The only fully reliable portrait of Frantz Schmidt that has survived, drawn in the margin of a legal volume of capital sentences by a Nuremberg court notary with artistic aspirations. At the time of this event, the beheading of Hans Fröschel on 18 May 1591, Meister Frantz was about thirty-seven years old.

At the heart of this book lies another narrative, a reflection about human nature and social progress, if there are such things. Which assumptions and sensibilities made the judicial violence that Meister Frantz regularly administered – torture and public execution – acceptable to him and his contemporaries yet repugnant to us in our own times? How and why do such mental and social structures take hold, and how do they change? Certainly early modern Europeans did not enjoy any monopoly on human violence or cruelty, nor on individual or collective retribution. Judged purely by homicide rates, the world of Frantz Schmidt was less violent than that of his medieval forebears but more violent than the modern United States (no mean feat).[13] On the other hand, measured by state violence, the higher rates of capital punishment and frequent military pillaging of all premodern societies pale in comparison to the total wars, political purges, and genocides of the twentieth century. The continuing worldwide practice of judicial torture and public executions alone underscores our ongoing affinity with “more primitive” past societies, as well as the tenuousness of the

social transformation that allegedly separates us from them. Is capital punishment truly destined to become extinct everywhere, or is the human drive towards retribution too deeply rooted in the very fibre of our being?

What was Meister Frantz thinking? Whatever we find out, the godly executioner from Nuremberg will always remain a simultaneously alien and familiar figure. It's hard enough to understand ourselves and those most intimate to us, let alone a career killer from a distant time and place. As in all life stories, the revelations from his journal and other historical sources inevitably leave many unanswered – and probably unanswerable – questions. In the only contemporary drawing of Schmidt that can be deemed reliable, the steadfast executioner is – fittingly – turned away from us. Yet in making the effort to understand Frantz Schmidt and his world, we experience more self-recognition and empathy than we might have expected when engaging with this professional torturer and executioner. The story of Meister Frantz of Nuremberg is in many ways a captivating tale from a faraway era, but it is also a story for our time and our world.

Notes on Usage

Quotations from Frantz Schmidt

All direct quotations from Schmidt are set in italics and are my own translations, based on the 1634 copy of his journal and the 1624 petition for restitution of honour.

Names

Spelling was not yet standardised during the early modern period and Meister Frantz, like other writers, often spelled the same proper names differently, sometimes within the same passage. I have modernised the names of towns and other locations as well as most personal first names; family

names have retained their early modern orthography, albeit in a standardised form for the sake of clarity. I have also kept female surnames in their early modern form, typified by an occasional vowel shift in the penultimate syllable and the invariable *-in* ending. For example, Georg Widmann's wife would be known as Margaretha Widmänin or Widmenin, while Hans Krieger's daughter becomes Magdalena Kriegerin or Kriegin, and so forth. Popular nicknames and aliases have been translated from contemporary street slang (known as *Rotwelsch*) to their closest modern U.S. equivalents, thus permitting some artistic licence on my part.

Currency

There were many local, imperial, and foreign coins in circulation during the early modern era in German lands, and currency exchange values also naturally varied over time. For the purposes of scope and comparison, I have provided the approximate equivalent of each sum in florins (or gulden, abbreviated *fl.*), the largest denomination. A household servant or municipal guard during this period might earn ten to fifteen gulden per year, a schoolteacher fifty, and a municipal jurist three or four hundred. A loaf of bread cost four pence (0.03 fl.), a quart of wine about thirty pence (0.25 fl.), and a year's rent in a slum dwelling about 6 fl. The approximate equivalencies are as follows:

1 gulden (fl.) = 0.85 thaler (th.) = 4 "old" pounds (lb.) = 15 batzen (Bz.) = 20 schilling (sch.) = 60 kreuzer (kr.) = 120 pence (d.) = 240 heller (H.).

Dates

The Gregorian calendar was introduced in German Catholic lands on 21 December 1582, but not adopted in most Protestant states until 1 March 1700, or later. As a result, the intervening years saw a discrepancy of ten days (later

eleven) between Protestant territories such as Nuremberg and Catholic states such as the prince-bishopric of Bamberg (e.g. 13 June 1634 in Nuremberg was 23 June 1634 in Bamberg. Contemporaries thus sometimes wrote 13/23 June 1634). Throughout the book I rely on Nuremberg's calendar, where (as in most places by this time) the year began on 1 January.

1

THE APPRENTICE

> A father who does not arrange for his son to receive the best education at the earliest age is neither a man himself nor has any fellowship with human nature.
>
> —Desiderius Erasmus, “On the Education of Children” (1529)[1]

> A man’s value and reputation depend on his heart and his resolution; there his true honour lies.
>
> —Michel de Montaigne, “On Cannibals” (1580)[2]

NEIGHBOURS IN BAMBERG had become accustomed to the weekly ritual getting under way in the rear courtyard of Meister Heinrich Schmidt’s house and went about their business uninterested. Most of them were on cordial terms with Schmidt, the prince-bishop’s new executioner, but remained wary of inviting him or any of his family members into their homes. His son, Frantz, the focus of his father’s attention on this May day in 1573, appeared to be a polite and – if one could say this of the offspring of a hangman – well-bred youth of nineteen. Like many teenagers of the day, he planned to follow his father into the same craft, a path he began as early as the age of eleven or twelve. Frantz’s childhood and adolescence had been spent in his native Hof, a small provincial town in the far northeast

corner of modern-day Bavaria, ten miles from what is now the Czech border. Since the family's move to Bamberg eight months earlier, he had already accompanied Heinrich to several executions in the city and nearby villages, studying his father's techniques and assisting in minor ways. As he grew in size and maturity, his responsibilities and skills developed apace. Ultimately he intended to become, like his father, a master in the practise of "special interrogation" (i.e. torture) and in the art of efficiently dispatching a condemned soul in the manner prescribed by law, using methods that ranged from the common *execution with the rope*, to the less frequent death by fire or by drowning, to the infamous and exceptionally rare *drawing and quartering*.

Today Meister Heinrich was testing Frantz on the most difficult – and most honourable – of all forms of execution, *death by the sword*, or beheading. Only during the past year had father considered son capable and worthy of wielding his cherished "judgement sword", an engraved and elegantly crafted seven-pound weapon that spent most of its time hanging in an honoured spot over their fireplace. They'd begun their practise months earlier with squashes and pumpkins before moving on to sinewy rhubarb stalks, which better simulated the consistency of the human neck. Frantz's first attempts were predictably clumsy and at times endangered himself and his father, who held *the poor sinner* firmly in place. Over the weeks, his gestures gradually became more fluid and his aim more accurate, at which point Meister Heinrich deemed his son ready to ascend to the next level, practising on goats, pigs, and other "senseless" livestock.

Today, at Schmidt's request, the local "dog slayer", or knacker, had assembled a few stray canines and brought them in his ramshackle wooden cages to the executioner's residence in the heart of the city. Schmidt paid his subordinate a small tip for the favour and removed the

animals to the enclosed courtyard behind the house, where his son was waiting. Though there was only an audience of one, Frantz was visibly anxious. Pumpkins, after all, did not move, and even pigs offered little resistance. Perhaps he felt a twinge of apprehension about killing “innocent” domestic animals, though this is likely an anachronistic projection.[3] Above all, Frantz knew that successful decapitation of the former pets before him, each requiring one steady stroke, would be the final step in his apprenticeship, a visible sign of his father’s approval and of his own readiness to go out into the wider world as a journeyman executioner. Meister Heinrich again played the part of the assistant and held the first yapping dog fast while Frantz tightened his grip on the sword.[4]

A dangerous world

Fear and anxiety are woven into the very fabric of human existence. In that sense they link all of us across the centuries. The world of Heinrich Schmidt and his son, Frantz, however, was characterised by much more individual vulnerability than members of a modern, developed society might imagine bearable. Hostile natural and supernatural forces, mysterious and deadly epidemics, violent and malevolent fellow human beings, accidental or intentional fires – all haunted the imaginations and daily lives of early modern people. The resulting climate of insecurity may not account entirely for the frequent brutality of the era’s judicial institutions, but it does offer a context for understanding how institutional enforcers like the Schmidts might simultaneously be viewed with gratitude and disgust by their contemporaries.[5]

The precariousness of life was evident from the very beginning. Having survived a combined miscarriage and