

*Into that Darkness*¹ 30 Years On²

Gitta Sereny

I am delighted about his [Anthony Stadlen's] method of having everybody introduce themselves. It has never happened in any of the many, many groups I have led or attended or whatever, and I think it's a very good idea. I mean, several of you now, I really remember what you said, I can't remember everything, but... And we will get to know each other better in the course of the day, and it's a good thing. And you are obviously all the kind of people who not only want to talk with us, but who we will enjoy and get something out of talking to. So I am very glad this happened and I am very glad to see you.

I will make one remark, and you will forgive me, immediately. You will never during the whole day, and this will be the only time that I use this word, hear me use the word 'Holocaust'. I am on record many times as saying that this is a word that should never have been used for the genocide of the Jews. It was a terrible idea, by a lobby in America, and it is an offence to the word 'Holocaust', it is an offence in fact to this whole terrible event. 'Holocaust' is something that happens, now I mention it the second time, that happens... These are catastrophes that constantly happen. They now diminish and make it almost impossible to refer to the terrible things that happen with the word 'Holocaust'. It was just a bad thing. I am saying that. I am now once again on record.

I am now going to do this with what I wrote for you today³.

Anthony Stadlen's generous thought to identify [one of the seminars in] the ninth year of his [monthly] international seminars with the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of my book *Into That Darkness* left me once again confronting my increasing reluctance to return publicly to the events I wrote about in that book.

It is not sudden shyness that causes this reluctance, but rather my awareness of *how* much these events have been talked and written about. I don't know whether you know that Hitler's twelve year rule has been written about more than any other period in history.

But I have to say today, especially, also to me the very discouraging fact that despite all that is known, we have recently seen and been unable to stop appalling acts of genocide and unspeakable brutalities in Serbia, Rwanda, and the Sudan, and have now found ourselves onlookers or participants in what many of us feel was a terrible, terribly wrong, and avoidable war.

And yet...and yet... I do find myself returning to that period in the forties, like today. Of course, I belong to the generation which is slowly dying out, for whom the events I finally wrote about thirty years ago were about people we had known and often liked, in my case by no means only victims, but people part of the nation of perpetrators.

We were at our most impressionable age in the thirties and forties, my generation. I knew wonderful Jews during my early childhood in Austria, when I didn't really know who was a Jew. I met fine Germans during the occupation of France, when I knew that as a passionately Francophile student I was under an obligation to my many French friends to hate Germans. But it is all so different if one has actually sat with people, ate and

drank, talked, argued and fought but also laughed with them, touched them or was touched by them, and I have always found it difficult to embrace the narrow solution of hating.

But it is finally not really so much the personal aspects of my early years why I find myself going back even now, such as coming to talk with you, today.

It is also because I believe, that although death is death anywhere and the loss of any human being by one act of violence is the same loss as by another, what happened in those ever further away days through the actions of one of the most cultured and civilised nations in Europe – now, I might add, returned to this civilisation – *is* unique, even in the huge historical panorama of violence including the many non-Jews, millions of orthodox Russians and, let us never forget it, three million catholic Poles, the Nazis killed. But it does remain unique in the enormity of its genocidal intentions and, despite the equally atrocious murders of human beings by human beings more recently, remains unique because of the monstrosity of the concept of industrialising the killing of millions.

It *is* necessary for present and future young generations to know about these times: not as horror stories, not either only as cinematic or TV history or dramatised individual fates, but as a warning for evermore, as a contribution to their understanding of morality – of the simple concepts of good and bad.

When writing *Into That Darkness* I deliberately kept myself out as far as possible, hoping and believing that the personalities of the men and women in those pages, and the meaning of their words and acts, would best emerge not from my questions, or explanations, but from what they said and how they said it.

Thus in my talks with people for *that* book as well as others, I asked questions only to the extent that would keep the conversations flowing with increasing intensity. This requires faith in the capacity of your *vis-à-vis* to think, patience to give him or her the time to do so, and finally the determination to tempt them into responding not just with but *to* their own thoughts, which means bringing them to the point where they both ask and answer their own questions.

Because, essentially, almost everyone wants or needs to talk about themselves. The result of this approach, as I have heard now in the past moments when you introduced yourselves, not unlike that some of you use in your professions, is that people develop or indeed discover an increasing curiosity, an increasing need to know about themselves: and this is certainly what happened to Franz Stangl, the principal personage in *Into That Darkness*, about whom I will mostly talk today, but also about the effects of these conversations and the methodology. I can show it to you best by using Stangl, as I have used him for years now, even though I know that some of you have read *Into That Darkness*.

Stangl, as you will have gathered, was a simple man, not at all unintelligent but unaccustomed to express himself on deep issues, and furthermore – and one must never forget this – he had a great deal to hide and years of experience of blocking his past even from himself. One always needed, and needs now too, to consider whatever he said – and people like him – not only from that viewpoint, but also in the context of his whole essentially subservient personality which principally expressed itself in his pathological need for the admiration and physical love of his wife, and his dependence on the approval of his superiors, all of which further fed his character deficiencies, largely due, I believe, to the acts of violence committed against him in his early childhood by his father. Mike

Tregenza, incidentally, I believe, will be talking to you about Christian Wirth, the superior Stangl feared most, and who as a result had a quite extraordinary effect on both his development and, I have to say, his actions.

But, while the effects of early trauma never quite disappear, it is quite true that children, as so many of you will know, are, thank God, resilient. And Stangl, whose brutal father died fairly early, while always lonely till he married, grew, after his marriage, into an 'ordinary' man.

In a normal bourgeois life, such as he had always planned and started before the Nazis took over Austria in 1938, with a wife he adored, he would have been a perfectly decent man – how often we have heard this: a good father, a loving husband and a steady wage-earner with a mildly successful career. Familiar to you? Yes, endlessly familiar. But – and there are countless examples of this – among others by the way in Christopher Browning's wonderful book *Ordinary Men*⁴, which I recommend to you – a violent childhood and a despotic government, or even authoritarian environment (as against a democratic one) brings out in men – and indeed women as we know from prison experiences – hidden tendencies toward force and often brutality.

My talks with Stangl, as many of you will know, conducted over two one-week periods between April 2 and June 27, 1971, lasted over seventy hours which were often agonising for him and certainly difficult for me, too. In the weeks I worked with him, I barely slept; in the years afterwards, when I researched and wrote *Into That Darkness*, nightmares of harm coming to my then young daughter – the kind of harm Stangl so graphically described to me – beset me virtually every night. It is amazing that my husband's and my marriage has lasted fifty-six years, because he has been put through, and my children have been put through, a great deal. "If one exposes oneself to evil," a kind bishop at the Vatican warned me on a visit to Rome during the writing, "it can invade one. Be careful, my child," he said and made the sign of the cross on my forehead.

Stangl agreed to our talks, I realised on the first morning, because he thought he could use me to support his appeal against life imprisonment. Disabused of this illusion, he still chose to continue. By the end of the first week he had become profoundly involved in his effort at self-knowledge. At the end – he wrote it to his wife in a letter she showed me months later – he only wanted to die.

For me, being with this man showed me as I believe no other could have done, the very essence of corruption. The book, of course, is the best demonstration of this, but I will try to describe it briefly now and there will be opportunities as we just said to talk further later.

At the beginning of our talks, I led him to speak of his childhood. This is of the greatest importance as almost every one of you knows in any effort to bring the human being to talk about himself. But by the fourth day, we got to his work as police chief of the 'euthanasia' action in Linz, in Austria, and then to Sobibor, his first assignment as commandant of an extermination camp. By September 1942, he had been promoted to command the largest extermination camp in Poland, Treblinka. By Christmas that year – within three months – he had it working to a t.

*'You've been telling me about your routines,' I said to him. 'But how did you feel? Was there anything you enjoyed, felt good about?'*⁵

"Well, it was interesting to me to find out who was cheating," he said. "I didn't care who it was, among my staff or the Jews; my professional ethos was that if something

wrong was going on, it had to be found out, and taken care of. That was my profession; I enjoyed it. It fulfilled me... I won't deny that..."

'Would it be true to say that you got used to the liquidations?' I asked. (This was some time later.)

"To tell the truth," he then said slowly and thoughtfully, "one did become used to it." And he drank: he took a large glass of brandy to bed with him each night and drank, he said.

'You became used to it in days? Weeks? Months?'

"Months. It was months before I could look one of them in the eyes... Thoughts came, of course, but I forced them away."

'Would it be true to say that you finally felt that they weren't really human beings?'

"...Cargo," he said in a dull voice. "They were cargo." ('Ware' in German. A terrible word, applied to people.)

'There were so many children; did they ever make you think of your children, of how you would feel in the position of those parents?'

"No," he said slowly, "I can't say I ever thought that way. You see," he then continued, still speaking with this extreme seriousness and obvious intent of finding truth within himself, "I rarely saw them as individuals. It was always a huge mass. I sometimes stood on the wall and saw them in the 'tube'" (the path to the gas chambers, which was surrounded by a high brick wall – the Germans called it the Road to Heaven). "How can I explain it? – They were... they were naked, packed together, running, being driven with whips, like..." Like cattle, he meant, but stopped short of saying it.

'Could you not have changed that?' I asked. 'In your position, could you not at least have stopped the nakedness, the whips, the horror of the cattle pens?'

"No, no no. That was the system. Wirth had invented it. It worked. And because it worked, it was irreversible."

He told me many things as he described the daily life in the camp. But there was one incident which, hearing him describe it – with relish I have to say, had very nearly driven me to end the talks.

The day this story came up was when replying to a question, Stangl told me that he had "quite friendly relations" with the so-called 'Arbeits-Juden' ['work-Jews'] – the selected few who were allowed to remain alive for a while to do the necessary work in the camp... Beyond his specific assignments, he said, that's what he enjoyed most: human relations. Especially with people like Singer and Blau, he said, both Viennese: "I always tried to give as many jobs as possible to Vienna Jews...after all, I was Austrian."

Singer, a former dentist, or engineer, he wasn't sure, he appointed chief of the 'Totenjude[n]' ['death-Jews'] – the men and women who did the terrible work in the upper section...the death camp, the site of the gas chambers.

But the ones he talked to most, were Blau and his wife, he said. He appointed them as head cooks for the work-Jews in the lower camp.

One day, at about mid-morning, Blau had knocked at the door of his office, stood to attention and asked permission to speak. "He looked very worried," Stangl said, "and I asked him what was worrying him." (Speaking in German, he represented himself to me – most unlikely – as addressing Blau with the respectful 'Sie', in German, rather than the familiar 'Du' – 'thou' – which they all used condescendingly when addressing the Jews⁶,

and the reported words, more grotesque in German, were ultra-friendly: “Was haben Sie denn auf dem Herzen?” which is even warmer than “Tell me what troubles you”. “Your heart. Tell me what is in your heart.”)

Blau said it was his eighty-year-old father; he’d arrived on that morning’s transport. Was there anything the Kommandant could do.

Stangl said, “Really, Blau, you must understand, it’s impossible, a man of eighty.”

Blau said quickly yes, yes, he understood, of course. But could he ask for permission to take his father to the ‘Lazarett’ – *i.e.*, the ditch where people were shot – rather than the gas chambers. And could he take his father first to the kitchen and give him a meal.

“I said ‘You go and do what you think best’,” Stangl said. “Officially I don’t know anything about this but unofficially you can tell the Kapo” – the supervising guard – “that I said it was all right.”

In the afternoon when Stangl returned from his lunchtime nap, Blau was waiting for him. “He had tears in his eyes,” Stangl said. “He stood to attention and said ‘Herr Hauptsturmführer... Herr Hauptsturmführer, I want to thank you. I gave my father a meal. And I have just taken him to the “Lazarett” – it’s all over. Thank you very much.’

“I said, ‘Well, Blau, there’s no need to thank me, but if you *want* to thank me, you may.’”

As I wrote about this in *Into That Darkness*, this story and the way it was told represented to me the starkest example of corruption I have ever encountered and, breaking off immediately afterwards (“You *are* coming back this afternoon, aren’t you?” Stangl said, by no means insensitive to atmosphere), I went to sit for nearly two hours in a pub across the street wrestling with the most intense malaise I’d ever felt at the thought of listening further to these disclosures, but even more, of being in physical proximity to that man and breathing the same air as he.

I have always ascribed something that happened to me in the middle of my talks with Stangl, to the tension of having listened to him tell me this story of Blau, with a kind of pride in his handling of him.

I have written about this in my book *The German Trauma*⁷. It happened on that day or perhaps another, equally tense, on an evening after I had stayed late at the prison talking to the prison director who was very interested in these conversations.

As I waited for the train to Cologne where I was staying with friends, the Düsseldorf station platform was virtually empty.

I heard the sound of crying...of many children crying it seemed to me, for a long time before a freight train, slowing down during its passage through the station, went past. And as it rolled through – the cries by now, I thought, desperate – I saw parts of small pale faces pressing against the narrow openings in each car. I’m not given to fainting, but I blacked out. The railway worker who helped me up told me the freight train carried cattle. It was calves, calves crying just like children. I still hear them sometimes in dreams.

Over the past two years I have talked often with an extraordinary man, the Cardinal Archbishop of Vienna, Franz König, who died earlier this year, aged 97.

We spoke a great deal about the terrible events that had taken and were taking place in Serbia, Rwanda and now the Sudan. And much more than that, we talked about Hitler’s

rule which I partially and he fully lived through, and how ordinary good men can turn extraordinarily evil.

‘Evil,’ we agreed, was not only what a man might do, but what he is, or has become. The Cardinal had read my books: “Like Stangl, of course,” he said, “and Blau: that incident which showed me the extent to which not only the perpetrator but the victim is subject to corruption. It was one of the saddest things I read in *Into That Darkness* or have ever read,” he said.

“Of course, to me,” he said, “both as a Christian and as a man, the origin of evil and the fact that it is a very human potential is the most important question in life, the greatest mystery. People complicate their lives, you know,” he said, “and by searching so diligently for the meaning of God and faith fail to enrich it simply... It *is* so simple: it is not that God created good and evil: it is that He created us as capable of making choices. So accepting God, in whatever religion, is not a mysterious impersonal thing: it is accepting that power of choice we were given and fulfilling it in a positive sense. You can see, can’t you,” he said, “if, for instance, Stangl had done that rather than pay lip service to what sadly is so often a mere convention of religion, what happened in and to him could never have happened.”

I was listening to Mr Bush the other day in his debate with John Kerry, and what I felt more than anything else was how tired I am of hearing political use being made of religion.

Religion and faith, it seems to me, is, or should be, a private matter of making moral choices, never to be used in party politics, never by politicians for personal or political benefit.

I am quite sure Mr Bush sincerely believes that God is central to his life. Where I think he failed here was when in response to a question about how the President felt about the thousand young Americans now dead because of what many people consider an unprovoked and unnecessary war, his reply was an anecdote about a young woman he recently met – in Wyoming, I think – whose husband was killed in Iraq. “We sat and prayed and teared [*sic*] and talked together,” he said and at the end, he said, she told him that her husband would have understood the need for this war.

Of course, an American president, just like a British prime minister, in the run up to elections, must travel and talk to voters. But the meaning this president tries basically to convey to the voters, as he did here by emphasizing or even just including the ‘praying’ element of his encounter with that young female voter, is that God directs his actions, which basically then means that God – relieving him of personal responsibility – approves what he represents.

Now, how is this relevant to our subject today? Unfortunately, very.

At the very end of my conversations with Stangl on June 27, 1971, I asked him whether he thought that God was in Treblinka.

His immediate, truly instinctive answer was: “Yes. Otherwise how could it have happened?”

He mumbled some other simplicistic philosophical things after that, but though I later realised I had taken them in, at that moment I didn’t know it. All I consciously heard was that appalling answer to my question ‘Was God in Treblinka?’ as “Yes, of course. How otherwise, how could it have happened?”

I had spent seventy hours with him. We had gone through ‘euthanasia’, which killed 80,000 Germans and Austrians, through Sobibor, where around 750,000 died, and through Treblinka, where during his rule 1,100,000 – almost a third of them children – were murdered. He had talked and talked. And apparently understood. And cried. And at the end what he essentially said was: God did it. Not men. Not he.

Stangl died the next day. At least that.

Thank you.

Notes

(by Anthony Stadlen)

¹ Sereny 1974.

² This is Gitta Sereny’s presentation, near the beginning of the Inner Circle Seminar, ‘*Into That Darkness 30 Years On: The Psychology of Extermination*’, conducted by Gitta Sereny, Michael Tregenza, and Anthony Stadlen, on Sunday 10 October 2004 in the Herringham Hall, Regent’s College, London.

³ For this introductory talk, Gitta Sereny read from a typescript. She spontaneously interpolated new sentences and clauses, and made small changes in the order of the typed sentences, as she spoke. The text reproduced here is a faithful transcription, from a tape recording, of what Gitta Sereny actually said in the seminar.

⁴ Browning 1992.

⁵ The single quotation marks for Gitta Sereny’s own speech, and the double ones for the speech of others (Stangl, the Cardinal Archbishop of Vienna, President Bush), are reproduced from her typescript.

⁶ See Stadlen 2000: 65 for a discussion of the use of ‘Sie’ and ‘du’ by guards addressing prisoners in Nazi concentration camps.

⁷ Sereny 2000.

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