

INTERVIEW WITH THE KOMMANDANT

C A R O L D I N E

This work was inspired by Into That Darkness: An Examination of Conscience by Gitta Sereny (Vintage Books, 1974), which was first excerpted in London's Daily Telegraph Magazine and her earlier book, The German Trauma: Experiences and Reflections (Penguin Books, 2001).

APRIL, 1971. DUSSELDORF REMAND PRISON, SECOND FLOOR

In a small windowless room the size of his cell, Franz Stangl and I sit across from each other, his breath mixing with smoke from my cigarette. His deep-set eyes narrow, a frown creases his brow. The hands are broad, reddish, workingmen's hands. I can't help but notice the gold cufflinks. Now his fists move across the table toward me; my insides shiver, though I know a guard is just outside the door. I recall the warning of an old friend, a bishop: 'If you expose yourself to the devil, he can invade you.'

Stangl's wearing a starched white shirt open at the collar, his v-neck sweater, grey, like his thinning hair. I open my notebook. It was just four months ago that I had seen him in the courtroom. He was seated back from the microphone in the dock, a wooden cube like a pen; a soldier stood guard beside him. He stared into an imaginary wall beyond the courtroom, beyond his wife who'd travelled to hear the verdict. It came down: Kommandant of Treblinka, guilty of murdering 900,000 people, sentenced to life in prison. He would appeal the sentence.

I had one more day here to try to get some answers—What was it that drove him? Did he ever feel remorse? I approached Frau Stangl, asked if I might talk with her husband. She hesitated, then nodded her head; she'd ask him.

He had been in solitary for four years. Now sixty-three, perhaps he was ready to open up. Though it was twenty-five years ago, I could still hear the voices of the accused at Nuremberg like distant gongs, their answers by rote: 'just following orders.' Could I possibly get Stangl to go deeper into telling me *why*? I sensed his intelligence, also his arrogance. Could I edge him into thinking that I'd help him to restate his case?

* * *

Q: In spring, 1942, did you know what awaited you in Poland?

A: I knew nothing. I was told that I'd be in charge of constructing Sobibor, to be used solely as a supply camp for the army. They said I was qualified since I'd administered the Euthanasia Programme.

Q: During which you authorized the death of children?

A: They were grievously ill; it was merciful.

Q: At the camp, when the exterminations started happening, how did you feel?

A: I was working in my quarters in the barracks, away from the forest. I could live without seeing anybody dying or dead.

Q: Did your wife ever ask about your work?

A: During my leave, she and our young daughters took a room in the village, near Sobibor. She told me she'd heard rumors. 'My God,' she said, 'what are you doing?' 'Whatever is wrong,' I said, 'I have nothing to do with it.' I knew I was lying to her—I had to.

Q: What happened after your leave in Sobibor?

A: I met with the SS lieutenant. 'I have a job for you,' he said, 'strictly a police assignment.' I knew right away there was something wrong with it, but I didn't know what. 'You're going to Treblinka,' he said.

Q: Here was your chance. You knew all about Treblinka. Why didn't you tell him you couldn't go on with this work?

A: Don't you see? I had no idea if my family was safe. Was he holding them as hostages? He had me flat.

Q: What were the lieutenant's exact orders?

A: 'We've already sent 100,000 Jews up there,' he said, 'and nothing has arrived here in money or materials. Find out where it's disappearing to.' I went there with an SS driver.

Stangl begins to sweat, lowers his head.

A: We began to see bodies, hundreds of them, lying there in the heat. I stepped knee-deep into money, precious stones, jewelry.

At 5:30pm, the guard leads me outside.

6:00pm, still feeling feverish, I wait at the Dusseldorf station for the train to Cologne. The platform is dark, empty. A train approaches, slows down on the track in front of me. I hear children, crying. I see small pale faces pressed against the openings in the cars. I black out. A railway worker helps me up. 'It was a freight train,' he tells me, 'It was carrying calves.'

As if my voice, my body are not my own, I sit at dinner with the Bismark family with whom I'm staying. Klaus and the children go to the study. 'You didn't eat a thing,' Ruth-Alice says.

'What's wrong?'

I tell her about the freight train. 'Honestly, I don't think I can go on.'

Ruth-Alice takes my hand. 'You know, the children wondered what you're doing here; we explained.' I take in a deep breath.

'Gitta, your work's so important. The children told their teachers about it; now they're having discussions at school.'

That night lying in bed, I realize that it's always been about the children, their wellbeing. My mind snaps back. 1940, Paris is occupied, the children sick, starving. Vallandry, I sneak in food rations, medical supplies for the orphans.

Hear I'm about to be imprisoned— escape through Madrid to New York City where my parents are. Mother, the actress, stepfather, economist, a Jew.

I'm nineteen. With her stage presence, in my nurse's navy blue, I lecture to college students about the fate of Europe's children.

Tired, driving from state to state, I'll never forget the shame I felt for being safe.

In the Bismarks' guest bedroom, I sleep soundly. The next morning in the prison, I notice right away that Stangl, usually clean shaven, has not shaved. Maybe I'm getting to him. I walk toward the table aware that I'm standing straighter than usual.

Q: There were 200 children from the Warsaw Jewish Orphanage in Treblinka. What did you feel when you saw them?

A: I just don't remember a group of children like that.

Q: I ask you, would it not have been possible in Treblinka to express that you were conflicted? Isn't this the basis of your appeal?

A: I talked to another officer about it. If I had made public what I felt, and had been killed, it would have made no difference. It would all have gone on just the same, as if I had never happened.

He looks down at his hands which are trembling, as if on their own.

Q: How is it you were not afraid of the just retribution you were certain existed?

A: It was all part of the way I construed it. I am responsible only to myself and my God.

Q: Is God good?

A: He is good and bad.

Tell me, though, if a man has a goal he calls God, what can he do to achieve it?

Q: In your case, would it be to seek truth, to face up to yourself?

A: My conscience is clear about what I did.

Stangl clears his throat. I'm losing patience. My time for these talks was running out. I'd be coming back just once more before flying home to London. We talk back and forth about God who he says is 'everything higher which I cannot understand but only believe.' We discuss free will. He insists he 'need

not answer' for what he did against his free will. I hear the guard pacing by the door, a signal that it had become very late.

Q: Can you now face up to yourself?

A: I have never intentionally hurt anyone, myself. But I was there.

He takes in a deep breath, grips the table as if he's just holding on.

A: In reality, I share the guilt. My guilt . . .

He pauses.

A: My guilt is that I'm still here. That is my guilt.

Finally, what I'd come for. I pick up my briefcase, he carries our coffee cups. Days later, the prison governor leads me into the empty cell. Beside Stangl's cot, a book from the prison library he'd marked with pieces of paper, its title, *Laws and Honour*. Franz Stangl had died of heart failure nineteen hours after our final conversation.