Evil, Madness, and Truth

Gerda's Story

By

Tony Fry

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Contents

Author's Prologue

The story to be told is hybrid. It is a mix of fact and fiction, history and approachable philosophical thought. It begs understanding. It poses questions. It aims to be a compelling read. It has a history. Above all, it transgresses the spirit of the novel: it is didactical. This does not make it unique, but it does make it unusual. For the reader who wants to be captivated by a world that escapes reality it will disappoint. But for one who wants to better understand the dark side of the human condition, it has a lot to say – especially at this time when evil appears to be so manifest. So framed, what is presented invites serious reflection.

…

A long time ago I was a soldier, a military policeman. I was sent to a small garrison city in Northern Germany. It was home to two British regiments, one artillery, the other infantry, plus one Dutch infantry regiment. The Cold War was at its height. I was based at what was once a city prison, now functioning as a guard room, a base for soldiers on guard duty, a prison for minor offences with punishment up to twenty-eight days, and as a detention centre for soldiers awaiting court martial for major offences. Years later I discovered the significance of this prison in the story I am about to tell.

Fast-forward two years from my time in the garrison city. I am standing at a station waiting for a train. It will take me to Köln, where I will change to another train that will go to Ostend in Belgium. Here I will board a ferry to Dover and spend Christmas with family in Bristol after two more train journeys. The journey is long and boring, except for the leg to Köln. The train is very crowded, but not with its usual travellers. Almost every carriage is packed. Every seat is taken and the corridors are full of people standing, or sitting on bulging cardboard boxes tied with thin rope and heavy string, or on bundles of clothing or bedding. These people are thin, sad and mostly silent. Despair is palpable, as is

the smell of sweat and urine. I know who these people are – they are from a displaced persons camp and are the unwanted social detritus from the war in Europe. They lack a nation, proof of identity and anything beyond what they are carrying. I know where they have come from, which is a camp not far from my city. These people are former prisoners from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp that, until recently, existed nearby.

Belsen was liberated by British troops of the 7th Armoured Brigade. My father was in one of those troops. I have no idea if he was involved in the liberation. He never spoke about the war, but he was physically and mentally damaged by it. I remember my mother telling me that he threw his medals in the river.

I am in the train corridor, wedged between an old man wearing a dirty British Army greatcoat many sizes too big for him and a young woman with a baby held over her shoulder. Around half an hour into the journey the baby vomits green bile over the off-white mackintosh I am wearing. There is no way I will be able to get to the toilet to wash it off. It's a struggle to take the coat off and when I do, I roll open the carriage window and throw it out. The only exchange between me and the young woman is a shake of her head as she raises the hand of the arm holding the baby. I touch her shoulder and try to smile. The German Government has decided to close the displaced persons camps over a period. This is why these people are on the move, to who knows where.

This was the 1950s – a period of silence, shame and concealment that writers like W.G. Sebald were later to rage against. While the horror and the outrage of the Holocaust arrived in 1945 in the form of images, it took over a decade for its horror to be existentially articulated and given voice by a number of books. For me, three stand out: Elie Wiesel's *Night*, a memoir based on his experiences of the Holocaust in the Nazi concentration camps of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, published in translation in English in 1960; Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man / Survival in Auschwitz*, English translation 1959; and Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* from 1963. Adolf Eichmann was

a member of the group who organised the Holocaust. After the war he fled to Argentina, where he was tracked down by Israel's Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations (Mossad). Mossad agents smuggled him out of the country and took him to Israel, where he was tried for war crimes. He was convicted and in June 1962, was hanged. The trial got major global media coverage. Arendt's book was based on her reporting of the trial for *The New Yorker* magazine. Her use of the term "the banality of evil" has resonated ever since.

Just over a decade ago I was prompted to revisit these events. I was contributing to a book on "design in history" and decided to write on design and the Holocaust, whose orchestration, in design theory terms, had a design intent, a designed organisational structure and a design form delivering mass death. During the research for this contribution, I looked at a lot of images, including those of camp guards. One in particular stood out – a beautiful blonde young woman. She turned out to be a monstrously cruel and brutal person, deemed by her accusers to be evil. Her career and life, and the questions they posed, "inspired" the writing of this book. Besides raising the issue of the relationship between madness and evil, and the differences between them, questions about the significant challenges involved in representing madness and evil are provoked. The first issue I want to consider is this: How can we think about evil in a way that does not turn it into an abstraction and reduce it to an object of purely philosophical inquiry? And, on the other hand, how can we avoid mobilising evil emotively as if its meaning were obvious and clearly understood?

My response to these questions is to continually bring the meaning of evil into doubt, and to cut across a sensibility that asserts: "I might not be able to exactly describe what evil is, but I know it when I see it." The concept of evil is debated within many discourses, not least those of religion, philosophy and politics, and is accompanied by a huge literature that ranges from ancient Greek, Chinese and Indian texts, to those being produced in the present. There is no consensus. Some thinkers believe that the concept of evil should be abandoned in favour

of more morally grounded terms like wrongdoing. They believe, like Friedrich Nietzsche, that the term "evil" is dangerously emotive and invites extreme responses. The counter view is that evil, in multiple forms, is already deeply embedded in existing moral, theological and political thought. One of the most forceful examples of this view comes from the 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant who believed that anyone who lacked the will to be morally good was disposed toward evil. In contrast, Hannah Arendt's more modern view, framed by her experience of the Holocaust, was that evil is defined by the act of stripping a human being of their humanity. This, as she understood, and as the sociologist Zygmund Bauman confirmed, is not merely the individual act of a malevolent other but is equally the effect of a designed system and comprises many banal and seemingly innocuous actions.

As the concept of evil is so ensconced in everyday language and within many discourses, arguments about how to approach it are largely abstract, as the means to reform its usage simply do not exist. In fact, the embeddedness of evil in language has been reinforced in modern times, not least by the public exposure of the horrors of the Holocaust. What the use of the term evil in an inchoate way tries to express, and what proposed alternatives fail to do, is to evoke an act of excessive negation that exceeds merely doing wrong or causing harm based on ill intent. Rather, evil resides both in the intent and the desired consequences of an action. It may employ reason, but is not guided by it. Instrumentally-reasoned action is underscored and directed by an emotional and irrational desire to cause harm by the exercise of power against a powerless other (human or non-human). The question then arises: Is such action an act of sanity? After all, an insane act can result from the departure of reason, or be advanced by it.

Any serious consideration of evil brings awareness of a schism between discursive concepts, general usage of the term, and popular perceptions, and this raises another question: How can we deal with the problem of representation that evil poses, recognising that it is always

metaphorically circumscribed and unable to be defined in essence except in terms of unbounded excess?

Considerable literary imagination and visual iconography of evil exist that veer between the dark and mysterious and the sensationalised and horrific. A genre of books and movies supports the latter view. Exorcisms, witchcraft, mass murder, extreme sadomasochist violence – a litany of representational tropes, often clichéd – are exploited and evoke evil intent and acts. They are generative of stereotypical characterisations and act to obscure actual or metaphorical understanding of what is communicated by the concept of evil. Fundamentally, the essence of what the term evil strives to name is an excess beyond representation, which cannot be grasped, but invites being sensed as a depthless ineffable unknowability that is all-consuming.

Against this backdrop, the intent of the narrative is to reveal a movement from an understanding of evil as a "given" to an understanding of it as something "constantly to be questioned". Gerda's life journey mirrors this passage from an idea of evil as an assumed object of fear that occupies her, to a condition of uncertainty about it. Her life is, in effect, a lived meditation on the nature of evil and its relationship to madness, as the two ideas and experiences touch and are touched by each other. She sees the journey as a meditation in search of the truth of her mother and of herself.

Tony Fry

1
Now

I've gathered my thoughts. I am sitting at my desk looking out the study window of my apartment in Celle, a small city in Northern Germany. I moved in a week ago. I will be spending most of my time in my study, which is actually just a corner of my living room. The space is adequate for my reduced library. I sold most of my books for a pitiful amount just before I left the United States, where I spent most of my life.

The window in front of my desk overlooks the back yard of my two-up, two down apartment block. Each unit has a small, fenced garden. Mine has the prize, a beautiful cherry tree. I will sow vegetables soon. I've done this for many years – I like physical activity. I like gardening. It's a source of pleasure, and the results are rewarding. There is something satisfying about eating what you grow.

Another part of my life is walking. It counters the sedentary nature of the rest of my day. I'm just a five-minute stroll away from the paths along the banks of the River Aller. In one direction I can walk for hours, in the other I'm twenty minutes from the centre of the city. The location is one reason why I chose the place. Celle is a well-preserved, small medieval city, with ancient buildings, cobbled streets, elegant parks and a Schloss, now a classical music venue. All this attracted me. Before coming here, I read how it survived World War Two totally unscathed. The population surrendered *en masse* to the advancing British troops at the end of the War and so avoided the city's destruction. Maybe all this sounds boring, but not to me. Boring is what I need.

Not far from my desk is a small table on which I have placed a battered leather suitcase I bought in a junk shop for three marks. It has travelled with me over the entire journey of my life. We both show signs of damage: mine inner, it outer. We both have carried secrets. The suitcase has no interesting or redeeming features, no notable patina. Rather, it

just looks old, stained, scratched and neglected. It came into my life this way. Although worthless, there is nothing I value more. To see it comforts me, and always has. Against the odds we have both survived. This suitcase was, and is, the repository of so much of the historical material that set my destiny and carries my story.

I never expected or planned to come to Celle. But not long ago I had an irrepressible feeling that I had to be near where I was born, and the past that ruled my life. So here I am on a Strasse in Celle, which is wide, tree lined and quiet. Most of its houses are detached family homes. On fine days in the late afternoon, I can hear the sounds of children playing and people chatting in the street. Children have been a physical and emotional absence from my life. In my teens I made a decision never to become a mother. I will say why later. But somehow, and unexpectedly, the sound of these children in the street makes the absence painfully present; I hear them in my dreams. One night I awoke, and found that my pillow was wet. Yet I had no recollection of crying. I kept this door to my psychological self closed and locked for over sixty years.

There is nothing in the street that I will allow to make demands on me. I feel safe and am determined to stay so. I am, and will remain, unnoticed.

2
Birth and the Death-World

Many people have kind and loving mothers; the unlucky don't. Even so, almost nobody has a mother like mine. While we parted company just a few days after I was born, she nevertheless has been the dominant presence in my life. Since the age of twelve I have not spoken her name. Until that age I didn't even know of her existence. I was completely overwhelmed by the discovery and shame of who and what my mother was. Somehow casting her name into silence created its proper place of oblivion.

I have read horribly melodramatic articles and reports in which she was called the evillest woman of the twentieth century. Although this claim is sensationalistic and perhaps dubious, it's beyond doubt that she was a monstrous person. Others have told her story, and I have no intention of simply repeating those accounts. But unavoidably, in telling my story, I have to revisit hers. While it's true that she was absent, she touched my life forcefully, and in many unwanted ways. Her shadow fell over me and installed a deep fear within me. This fear ruled my life and played out across years of mental anguish and illness.

Apart from the acts of conception, gestation and birth she could lay no claim to the role of mother. I discovered that she did not even acknowledge my existence. She gave me nothing to belong to, no identity, nothing except the fear of becoming her. By any measure, she did not possess a single virtue. Her negativity was the powerful and all-directive force in my life. Yet I more than merely survived.

Though she was hanged in December 1945, public interest in her continued, and continues. There have been books, newspaper and magazine articles, plays, a really bad film, and even academic papers about her. Her life on the Internet has attracted and nourished a new generation of neo-Nazis.

Worst of all, after hunting down many photographs of my mother, every time I see myself in a mirror, I confront, and recoil from, the doppelganger looking back at me, no matter how hard I try not to. We look identical. For me the likeness is more than uncanny. For years, from my teens, viewing myself in the mirror and seeing that I looked the same as her was a spectre of terror. Without disfiguring myself I did everything I could to make myself look different. But what affected me most was the very nature of her existence and the fear that she, and it, infected me. Central to this fear was a fact that I believed was never disputed: she was evil. I became consumed by an inescapable question: Am I also evil?

As I said, I was twelve years old when I learnt who and what my mother was. At that time, her sister – the woman who, until that point, I believed was my mother – told me that my birth mother was dead. As a convicted Nazi, war criminal, member of the SS, and concentration camp guard, she was hanged. Even though I did not completely understand, I can't begin to find words for how it felt to receive this news. I said nothing, and my aunt walked away. Intuitively I knew that something had ended. My childhood was over and I would never be the same.

My aunt did not want to tell me more, but I did get a few scant details out of her. She told me my mother's career started at Ravensbrück concentration camp, had developed at Auschwitz and ended at Bergen-Belsen. I also discovered that my father, to whom she was not married, was also in the SS, and was an engineer working at Bergen-Belsen. Later I wondered what there was to engineer at Belsen – it had no gas chambers. The discovery of my parents' identities completely overwhelmed me. The words shock, confusion and anger get nowhere near registering how I felt. My existence fell into an abyss; it was as if everything I knew, felt and believed had been vaporised. At the moment of finding out that the person I thought to be my mother was, in fact, my mother's younger sister, I also felt abandoned. Why didn't she tell me earlier and gradually? I went to my room. I couldn't cry. I

was empty and numb. Maybe an hour later my aunt came to see me and said that the news she had given me had to be "our secret." What she really meant was that she did not want anyone to know who she and I were. It did not take me long – maybe a week– to realise I had been dealt an act of violence.

Over several weeks and months, many questions arose. They kept coming for years. Why did my mother do what she did? Who was my father? What happened to him? How do I find out more? But two questions overshadowed all the rest: Who and what am I? And, am I going to become like my mother? Looking back, the more I discovered, the more these questions haunted me. In time I did get some answers.

Over the years many people, including a number of psychologists, told me that evil does not pass from one generation to another. It was easy for them to say. It was just their opinion. They could cite no evidence. I knew they were trying to allay my fear, but mostly I think I was just being fobbed off. Anyway, their views made not the slightest impression on me. In time I learnt that my parent's genes were their sole gift to me, my looks were their looks, my blood was their blood. At the time I said to myself, why not their evil also? As far as I was concerned, I could not escape from what was within me. That I had not done evil things was of no comfort. It felt as if I was fated to do something terrible. The evil within was simply awaiting its opportunity. So I existed, frightened of myself, in an ever-present cloud of doubt. The same questions haunted my waking and sleeping hours. What did not arrive was an answer to the question about what evil actually was.

To be able to tell my story, first I have to recount where and how I came into the world, and say more about my mother. I was born in Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp. Officially, at the time, I did not exist. My birth was not registered, and only a few people knew about me. My birth was retrospectively recorded as having been on April 10, 1945. Because so many people's personal documents were destroyed by bombs, shelling and fire that consumed homes and offices where records of births, deaths and marriages were held, for a few years after

the war it was not hard to get a birth certificate. All you needed was a letter from a priest, lawyer, postmaster, or other official person, with the document's details certified by a justice of the peace. I presume my aunt organised this. My Christian name was recorded as Gerda. We will come to the issue of this and my family name a little later.

My coming into the world and the first few days of my life are a mystery except for two things: shortly after I was born, Belsen was liberated by the British Army and so, on April 15, 1945, I was discovered by the liberating troops, and taken to a German hospital near the camp. It strikes me as ironic that this place that existed to save lives was situated almost next door to a place that was designed to bring about the degradation and destruction of human life. As far as I know my mother never acknowledged my existence to anyone, but there is evidence confirming that she gave birth to me. This came from the woman who delivered me, herself a camp guard, as well as several *kapos* who were present. *Kapos* were the prisoners who were used to control other prisoners, and who retained their position of privilege by being brutal. It seems I started out as an item of trash, nothing more than the unwanted and abandoned offspring of a depraved woman. While this is a stark judgement, it's true.

Eventually I discovered that on the day the British arrived and liberated the camp, my mother, the most senior of the *Aufseherin* (female camp guards), accompanied the camp commandant, Joseph Kramer, to meet the arriving troops at the camp gate. As soon as the British officer in command was told who they were, both were arrested. Apparently, at this moment, my mother told the arresting officer about me. Not long after, I was found in her room. She had pinned a note to the blanket in which I was wrapped. All that was on it was the address of her father and stepmother. I read a doctor's report, when doing research as a graduate student, that said it was decided that I was to be "protected by silence regarding the identity of my mother" – a silence my aunt broke on my twelfth birthday.

There is no record of my mother making any reference to me either before or after the day she abandoned me. She said nothing in letters to her sister, Helen, or to her father. The note on the blanket was all there was. Why her silence? Was it an act of refusal or disassociation? I have no idea. Notwithstanding the note, I felt that my existence was disavowed. In a place where life had no value, and where it was literally wasted, it seemed to me that I was just another object of waste. The only source of doubt was the note naming my maternal grandparents, but it lacked even the briefest of messages.

According to the records I discovered, I was collected from the hospital at three months of age by my grandfather and his wife. I was passed to them by a British medical officer rather than by a German member of the hospital staff. By this time the war was over. There was no documentary reference to my parents or a family name. I was simply known as Gerda, *das lager klienes kind* – the small camp child. I have no idea who gave me my recorded name. My grandparents took me to the family home in the small town of Wrechen in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, a hundred kilometres or so east of Hamburg, in what was then the Russian sector, which in 1949 became the German Democratic Republic (East Germany). I discovered this, and other details, through research that was done on my mother soon after her death; this information included an interview with my aunt. While she would not talk to me about my mother, she eventually told me how we came to live in the United States.

I'm not sure how long I stayed with my grandparents, but it wasn't long. They were what would now be called dysfunctional, their lives wrecked by a decade of disasters, beginning in 1936 when my mother's father, a farm worker who also did contract milking, had a fling with a girl in the village. His wife found out and killed herself by drinking acid. He was left with four children to care for: two boys, one 15 and the other 17, and two girls of 14 and 11. He did what many men of his generation did – married a WWI war widow looking for support for

herself and her four much younger children. It was not a happy home and things got worse.

Although my grandfather joined the Nazi Party in 1937, as did his sons, he was furious when his two daughters wanted to join the Hitler Youth "League of German Girls." My aunt said that my mother had an extremely strong attraction toward fascism and the League. There were fights about it every day. My mother's identification with Nazi ideology was intense and was one of the reasons why, at the age of 15, she sought and obtained a job at the Hohenlychen complex, a famous Nazi convalescent home near Berlin for members of the SS.

Accounts I later read about my mother's life said she was "an attractive and impressionable young woman captivated by being in the presence of powerful members of the SS." There were reports that she even had brief conversations with a few of the Nazi luminaries she served at the convalescent home. The records show that in 1942, at the age of 18, she was sent to work at Ravensbrück concentration camp at the direction of the SS doctor who was the director of Hohenlychen. Her fate was sealed by this act. She progressed through a number of menial positions, and then in March 1943 she was transferred to Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland. By January 1945 she had worked in a number of "punishment commands" and was promoted and moved to Auschwitz camp number one, part of the camp complex. A key qualification for promotion was an ability to be extremely cruel. By March 1945 she managed to get a transfer to Bergen-Belsen to join her boyfriend, my father.

My mother's SS career produced a complete break with her father. Helen, when giving evidence at my mother's trial, remembered that the first time she returned home wearing the uniform of a concentration camp guard, her father beat her and physically threw her out of the house. That was the last time she went home. My aunt told me that my presence in the family home generated huge tension. Though some of the family regarded me as innocent, like all babies, others, including my grandfather, felt I was a child touched by Satan. As a result of the acrimony, Helen broke with the family and took me to Berlin. At the

same time, she changed her family name to Schwab, the name of a friend from Wrechen who died in the bombing of Hamburg while working in the city as a nurse in a military hospital. As already stated, obtaining identity documents, including for a change of family name, was not an unknown practice just after the war. When I asked Helen about why she changed her name, I was told it was not just because of the stigma of her family name, or because my aunt got notoriety in the press when she gave evidence at my mother's trial. Instead, she said it was for my sake. In truth, it was for herself. Schwab is the name on my birth certificate.

My stay in Berlin with my aunt was short. The Russians, fuelled by hatred because of the many millions of their compatriots the Germans killed, were still on the rampage. It was not a nice place for a young and attractive woman, and Helen was just as striking as her older sister. The fact that she had a baby meant she was a bit safer, but not much. Plenty of young mothers were raped. Times were hard, food was scarce and life was cheap. I'm not sure where or how, but she met an American army engineer who was being sent to Dusseldorf to disassemble machinery for optical instruments intended for the US. Apparently, we got a ride with him and he helped her get a job in the kitchens on the base where he was stationed. Again, this was not a history that she would talk about. What I realised was that she was a survivor and did what she had to do for both of us.

By the time I was three, Helen had a job in a US PX store on the base. She had a small apartment, an American boyfriend, a story about being a war widow, and an endless supply of chocolates, powdered eggs and potatoes. I still love chocolate and hate powdered eggs and potatoes. By the start of 1950, when I was enrolled in school, we were in San Diego, California. Helen was married to Marvin, the GI she met. He was now an electrician at the navy dockyard, and she was in the advanced stages of pregnancy. On 17 January 1951 she gave birth to Jason, and, fourteen months later, to another boy, Norman. Marvin never knew Helen was not my mother. Keeping him in the dark was part of "our secret."

When I learned of my circumstances as an adolescent, at first, I refused to believe most of what my aunt told me. Later I realised it was true, but Helen was selective. As a result, my emotional turmoil lasted years. It seemed as though I had an existence, but the reality of my life was unclear and might never be known. I wasn't certain of what was fact and what was fiction. Often in my teens I wanted to die.

Helen, after revealing the incomprehensible news in a flat mechanical kind of way, tried to assure me that everything would be all right, that I had a good life ahead of me, and that the past was the past. I knew that none of this was true. Instinctively I knew she didn't believe a word of what she was saying either. I now think that what she told me was really for herself, not me. She was offloading. She carried the burden of the lies of her life for a long time and suddenly she felt able to let some of it go. In dumping on me, she felt lighter. Whenever our conversations touched on our background during my high-school years, she repeated, "This is our secret, nobody else would understand. And remember, you need to keep your picture clear." I never worked out exactly what she meant by that. Anyway, the last thing I wanted to do was to share my heartache with someone else. Looking back, I have mixed feelings. Yes, I wanted to know, but Helen's way of telling me wasn't appropriate for anyone, let alone a child.

I realise that I was deeply affected by her rhetorical violence, even if it was unintended. I am now amazed that I mentally survived the trauma, albeit damaged. Maybe Helen needed help as much as I did. I have to say again, I believe the way she told me about my mother and her crimes was unforgivable. At the time, I didn't realise the harm being done by the insistence that I keep everything to myself. The experience led to clinical depression for which I eventually needed professional help.

I now understand that what stopped me from doing something stupid, what kept me alive, was my obsession with wanting to understand how the woman who was my mother could have done what she did. Were

there connections between her and me, and would I end up being like her? So I deferred giving up on myself.

Of course, while what I have just said is true, it's a retrospective view. At the time, while I had clear questions that I wanted answers for, I mostly felt very confused. I certainly had no idea if being frightened of myself was abnormal. I'm pretty sure that by outward appearances, and from a distance, it looked as if I was growing up in an uneventful suburban family environment. We had an okay house, I went to an okay school, I was a good, if almost silent, student. We went on occasional trips in the family car. Superficially, it seemed as if we were just another middle-class family like the others in the street. We were not.

There were fault lines in the family structure. Aunt Helen and I were acting, Marvin was pretending all was well, and the boys were oblivious. As far as Helen was concerned, keeping up appearances was what mattered. Neither Helen nor Marvin were unkind to me, but neither were they aware of, or able to address, my hurt. Helen's own traumas prevented her from having any sympathy for mine so it was easier to sacrifice me in favour of her natural family. I recognised that, although she appeared to be warm and happy, she was not. She, like me, was emotionally damaged and sad, which I worked out years later.

The overwhelming picture I have of myself during this period of my childhood was of being alone in my bedroom. I read, did my homework, listened to music on an old second-hand radio I bought in a junk shop for three dollars. I also spent hours sitting at my bedroom window looking up and down the street. I watched people pass by, trying to read them, to work out if they also had dark secrets. What could I tell about these people's lives from their faces, how they walked and what they wore? Were these people happy, sad, tired, bored, lonely, sick, God-fearing, criminals? What could you actually discover from what people looked like? I thought about Mr Kennard who lived two doors away. He lived on his own, never had visitors, was very old and must have been hard of hearing as he seemed to spend all day listening to the sports channel on his radio at full volume. Could he be

happy, and if he was, what could he possibly be happy about? Sport? Can listening to sports make anyone happy? Did he have a God, a wife who died, children who forgot him? Did he fight in the First World War? Was he just waiting to die? Was his face a mask, and if so, what did he hide behind it?

I didn't realise, at the time, how important questions of appearance would become for me. I wanted to believe what I saw to be true, but doubt always arrived. How do you know what is true unless you know what truth is? When I looked at Helen, I wanted to believe she loved me, and for a time when I was young, I thought she did. But after my twelfth birthday, I wondered. I was a belated and reluctantly-accepted duty bequeathed by her dead sister. Added to this was her absolute commitment to the image and idea she created of "the family." Inevitably, because of my history and the nature of my inner life, something was going to break, and it did. It happened when I was seventeen.

3
The Letter

In retrospect, having the mother I had meant it was not surprising that the fear and study of evil became a force directing my life. Although these ruminations were constantly with me, in actuality, as time went by, I discovered that reaching an understanding of evil would become increasingly elusive.

From the age twelve, through my teenage years and beyond, I either lay awake at night thinking frightening thoughts, or I slept in the land of nightmares. Sometimes I did both. Often, I woke myself with groaning or yelling, in a state of distress. I'm sure someone in the house must have heard me, but nobody ever came to my room or said anything in the morning. The images in my dreams came from visualisations arising from what I read about my mother. Concentration camps haunted me into adulthood. One recurring dream was of my mother hanging from a scaffold, her face purple, eyes bulging and a swollen tongue forcing itself out of her mouth. Another was of her, with whip and knife in hand, disfiguring the faces of young Jewish women.

Whereas most kids at my school went to the movies, swam, played baseball or tennis, watched football or went to the drug store for a soda or milkshake, I went to the library. I read everything on the Nazis I could find, even though most popular magazine articles about them were trash. No matter how bad it was, I made myself look. My preoccupation with the serious material started around 1958. By 1962 I had become an accomplished amateur Nazi hunter.

I was a good student and did well at school. By my own efforts I became a reasonable reader of German. By my mid-teens, I knew where a few important American and German war archives and collections were located, but I had yet to visit them. I learned how to find material from Ruth, a local librarian. She taught me how to make notes and record

references. I started to fill notebooks. These were the days long before computers and the Internet, so the process of gathering material was slow. I sometimes waited for months for replies to letters, especially from overseas libraries: often none came.

The research was done in secret, and I guarded my secrets. Ruth knew some of what I was trying to discover, but I was guarded. Secrecy was easy; nobody took any interest in what I was doing, and I kept my project to myself. I was very careful and organised. When I was fifteen, I acquired a post office box. All the mail was filed in a ring binder; my cuttings were pasted into scrapbooks and all my notebooks were numbered and dated. Together with a few books I bought, I kept these things locked in the old suitcase I've already mentioned. I kept it under my bed and wore its key around my neck.

As I grew older the gap between the family and myself widened, and especially the distance between Aunt Helen and myself. We were never close. One day, just after I turned fourteen, I said something to her in German and she totally freaked out. She pushed me against the kitchen wall, slapped my face and, talking between gritted teeth, told me never to speak to her in German again. I was shaken by the violence of her reaction. I looked over the top her head, said nothing, shrugged my shoulders, and walked off. Although I was really upset, I was damned if I would let her see my emotions.

The more strained things became at home, the more time I spent at the local library; it was my second home. Ruth became an important person in my life. She was a friend. As far as the family was concerned, I fit a pigeonhole labelled 'bookworm' and was a bit weird. That suited me fine. Once, when I was leaving the house, I bumped into Marvin as he returned from work, and he asked me where I was going. I said, "To the library." He replied: "Gee, I don't know why you bother when we've got a TV." I just smiled and walked on.

An area of research that became important over time was the reports and media accounts of war crimes trials. Long before I was able to read

the transcripts of my mother's trial, I discovered a report about it. What it told me was that she was tried, along with forty-five other war criminals, each of whom was accused of crimes contrary to the Geneva Convention of 1929. I read this report in a March 1946 edition of *Time* magazine that I found in an archive box in the library. It said the trial lasted for two months and was carried out under British military law in a court in Luneburg, a small city south of Hamburg. It went on to say that after being found guilty and sentenced to death my mother was taken to Hamelin prison to await hanging. I looked up Hamelin, on the Weser River fifty kilometres southwest of Hanover. I already knew she had been hanged but somehow the words on the page and picturing the place where it happened disturbed me. I cried that night, but why? Was it for the horror of what my mother did? Was it because I was connected to my mother's evil? Or was it that my mother was now real but had abandoned me? I never worked it out. I read the *Time* article only a few weeks after the "against the wall" incident with Helen, so maybe how I felt had something to do with that.

In the same week I read the article, I also read about letters written by my mother to her sister and her father shortly before her death. Both were presented by prosecutors as evidence in her trial. I really wanted to see them and thought that, if I was lucky, I might be able to find them. It took me eight months. With Ruth's help I got copies of published reproductions of both letters – they were in an article on my mother published by the German newspaper *Die Welt* in 1948. I found out much later that during this period the paper reported on the trials. At the time it had a pro-British editorial policy. Germany's turn against the horror of its own recent history was gathering momentum.

Although I thought the letters were interesting, at first I didn't think they were very revealing. But as I read them repeatedly and more carefully, I changed my mind. I realised that the style of her writing, especially to her father, was quite strange. It also became clear that the letters raised more questions than answers. One of the first things I noticed was that while the letter was addressed to her father and her

stepmother, the stepmother was not mentioned. Everything she said was directed to her father. More importantly, I remembered having read that my mother left school at fourteen and was "not one for writing." So I thought it strange that the letters were well written. Did someone else have a hand in them? This raised an unanswerable question: if someone else was involved, who could it have been?

Next, it struck me that the letters did not seem to be from an estranged daughter: they sounded affectionate. I doubt if father and daughter had any contact since the day he beat her and threw her out of the house in her SS uniform. Without any sign of a change of heart, or acknowledgement of the violence of their last encounter, or utterance of forgiveness, she addressed him as her "*lieber papa*." It seemed out of character and weird. It did not ring true. Neither did her description of herself as a "young brave girl, with a pure German soul inherited from her dear dad." This language was totally at odds with the way she must have viewed him after his abuse and violence.

A few lines later, knowing some of the monstrous things she had done, there was more fuel for incredulity: "I will go into the unknown with a clear conscience and above all proudly." The literary flourishes of the letter could not be hers. I just couldn't imagine her saying or writing: "I refuse to let any trace of fear or despair enter my heart. Peace and a great strength have replaced them, and to them I cling. They will be my true companions until my death." This is not the voice of a semi-literate.

Finally, it is absurd that she could claim, as the letter asserts, that "her conscience was clear" and that she was simply doing her "duty for the Fatherland." A similar sentiment was expressed in her letter to Helen: "Don't be sad, for I am dying for my country." This equally stilted letter was also written in a prose that seems out of character. It said very little except for a reference to a court observer called Annette who she refers to as if she were a friend. Apparently, Annette made attempts to procure poison so that my mother could commit suicide.

There was not a shred of remorse detectable in either letter. Neither was there any expression of sorrow, or an apology. She just invited her father "not to be ashamed" of her, and to hold his head high and to claim and recognise that in her death an "injustice has been done, which in time will be dealt with." Last of all, but for me most importantly, neither letter mentioned me. This brick did not hit me until I read both letters a couple of times.

Reading this correspondence many times over many years, I hear my mother's delusional voice *as well as* that of a more educated person who formally or informally helped her. The last lines of the letter to her father, with its hint of vengeance, suggests that this person was a Nazi. Perhaps, either my mother or her helper hoped to soften the blow of her death for her father and sister. Seen in the context of what I was to discover later, the letters completely reinforce my view that she lived in a fantasy. The image I settled on was of some kind of sympathetic scribe translating her sentiments into readable prose, not realising that the letter was to convince herself, via a fictional relationship with her father and sister. Reflecting on such thoughts led me to ask myself yet another question, one that opened up a new avenue of inquiry: What is the difference between madness and evil? Is evil not just one form of madness? And does madness exonerate evil?

What I found hard to deal with was that when I looked at pictures of my mother, she was beautiful. I was back with a particular version of the problem of evil and the relation of truth and appearances: can evil be beautiful? Hollywood would say yes, the ancient Greeks would have said no. What prevented me from quickly dismissing this question was that I had looked at every possible image I could find of camp guards. Every one of them was visibly marked by the experience. Even the halfway attractive ones looked hard and cruel. The worst reminded me of photographs of inmates at mental institutions I had seen in books on the history of photography.

In contrast, I collected a lot of images of my mother: she looked completely unlike the other female camp guards. In some she looked

angry, in others I saw tiredness and aggression, and in just one image (taken when she was in a prison cell), she looked lost, but in every image her beauty was evident and unmarked by the cruelty of her actions. The photographs taken during her trial by the court photographer were extraordinary. She appeared in some to be disinterested and bored, but in others she looked relaxed and "normal" and in one she even looked demure. When she arrived each day, with her hair groomed and her clothes clean and pressed, she looked as if she just came from behind the counter of a department store selling perfume, women's underwear or shoes. She glowed in the darkness of the courtroom. Most memorable among the images I found were a couple of professional portrait photographs taken in a studio when she was younger, which were stunning. The most interesting image was one taken in a prison yard shortly after her arrest. It was clear from the image, if only to me, that she had recently given birth. The woman was uncanny in every sense of the word. Her actions and appearance did not match. It was impossible to imagine this beautiful woman being the monster I knew her to be.

I have never stopped asking myself how it could be that this woman who did so many horrendous things was not visibly touched by her actions and their results. Nothing she did seemed to affect her. In none of the pictures did she look mad or evil. But as witnesses at her trial said in their evidence in various ways, the inhumanity of her actions surpassed that of all the other camp guards. The images over which I pored preyed on my mind for a long time. I might go to a movie and see an actress who looked a little like her and totally drift out of the image on the screen into a moment of unwelcome reflection. The same thing could happen if I was reading a magazine, or if I saw someone even vaguely like her on a bus. Obsessively trying to make sense of something that does not make sense feels, in itself, like a kind of madness.

Putting these images together with the letter to her father and her (ignored) stepmother, as well as the one to her sister, took me to another

area of investigation – the idea that she was a self-constructed illusion – an impression that others corroborated after her death.

I knew that my mother simply did not see the world around her as others did. The evil of her madness, or the madness of her evil, was not merely a condition of inner life directing outward action but the locus of her existence. For her, the unhinged world she inhabited was her *normal*. It's important to understand that in saying this I am talking about a person who shot people on a whim, beat the weak and helpless to death, and reportedly underwent an orgasm while disfiguring recently-arrived young and beautiful female prisoners. This is also a person who had sexual relations at Auschwitz with prisoners.

What I discovered about my mother eventually took me beyond the simple conclusion that she was evil or mad or both in any generalised sense. I realised that she was both totally delusional and also, probably, what psychologists diagnose as a "class four sadist", which means deriving sexual gratification from killing. The combination of these characteristics indicates that she was a psychopath. My mother was a person who was totally egocentric, emotionally shallow, very impulsive, and lacked any sense at all of empathy, guilt or remorse for any of her actions.

In later years I deduced that my mediated encounter with my mother produced in me a condition of clinical depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). First recognised in returning US soldiers from the Vietnam War, an understanding of PTSD as a mental illness was not fully developed until the mid-1970s. It is now recognised as a condition suffered by millions who fought in both the First and Second World Wars, and perhaps in all wars. In fact, any major trauma can produce it. The extent to which somebody is affected is linked to the complexity of their genetic disposition, state of mind, and frequency of exposure to traumatic events. One can expect almost everyone who has experienced severe trauma to display evident negative consequences in the form of PTSD.

My mother created PTSD in others rather than suffering from it herself. The trauma was folded into her being as her normality. What she witnessed was trauma as a structural condition of the everyday. Her lifeworld was the lived actuality of Hannah Arendt's designation of the Holocaust as "the banality of evil." It's hard to imagine anything worse than the events that occurred every day in places like Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. Such events were ones my mother not only witnessed but instigated and inflamed. To continually practise grossly dehumanising behaviour in such a setting produced conditions of inhumanity in both victim *and* perpetrator alike.

For all the knowledge I acquired there was a bridge I never crossed. Certainly, I gained and accepted explanatory accounts about who my mother was and what she did. But none of this meant that I understood and came to terms with what I knew. Above all, what I discovered made it even harder to live with my fears.

My SS father contributed to the genetic cocktail of vileness that made me. I have no words that can express what it was like to realise that I am not outside the horror that spawned me. Their genes are their cursed gift to me.

Realisation that I am the biological and psychological prisoner of my mother and father started to arrive when I was seventeen. I knew I could not escape from them biologically and maybe mentally. The problem was that I had no idea who they really were. My father, who I will say a little about later, was an almost total mystery.

For all that I read about my mother, she would always remain that stranger who, even as I recoiled in horror from her, I wanted to know. I anguished over question I could never ask, and so never get answered. Was I more than an item of biological trash to be dumped on her family as a reminder of her shame? Was there just the slightest skerrick of kindness or care in her? Against the totality of unkindness and hatred she amassed, would her feelings toward me, if she had any, have counted for anything? Why did knowing this matter, considering what

I read about her? The perplexities of these questions caused a breakdown. It was not total, but neither was it minor.

During my last year at school I worked especially hard to get the academic result I needed to get into a good university, so this stress may also have been a factor. Whatever the cause, I went over the edge for a while. I felt myself to be utterly alone, confronting a life to be lived in the unfathomable depths of an abyss. At the most basic level there were only two paths in front of me: one led to an endless journey of despair, the other took me to the other side of my obsession where I could create an alternative to living in the dark shadow of my mother. Three questions tormented me. I repeated them to myself every waking hour over and over for years. Am I, or will I become evil? Am I, or will I become mad? What kind of life will I live?

Depending on the answers that came to me as I researched at the library, I vacillated between two fates: a life of angst ending in suicide, or one of increasing mental disorder perhaps resulting in institutionalisation. As at other periods of my life, for weeks I lay awake at night crying. I spoke to almost nobody, and found it hard to eat and concentrate. Helen must have seen that something was wrong, but she said nothing and showed no concern. The only person who did notice was my school friend, Karen. She saw my distress and assumed it was a result of the pressure of schoolwork. She insisted that I go to see a doctor. I did, and she came with me, but I had no way of telling him what my problem was. Things went the way I expected. He said I was suffering from the "schoolgirl blues" and fobbed me off with a script for a low dose of Valium. We called in to a local Walgreens drugstore on the way home. I got the pills and took one. It made me feel worse.

The only thing that the Valium changed was that I felt less in control. I took the pills to school the next day and sold them for twenty-five dollars. Somehow, I just about managed to function, though I saw no prospects other than a shit life or an equally shit death. I'm not sure I would have made it through that time without Karen. Before the trip to the doctor our friendship did not go much beyond the classroom and

walking to school together. But after the visit, we somehow bonded. She did not do much. She just talked and cared. What she did not realise, and what I didn't tell her, was that nobody else did. Nothing was said, but knowing I was not totally alone helped a lot.

Gradually the darkness lifted, but not totally. In the end I concluded that I could only assuage the situation by pursuing more knowledge, no matter how hard it might be, or how strange it might seem to someone else. That was the only way to overcome the tyranny of my mother's shadow. I knew that it could not lead to anything that resembled a normal life; I also knew my fate was sealed from the day of my birth. Yet I was beginning to come to terms with furthering my pursuit. It was the only way I was going to have anything like a life of my own. Effectively I affirmed my life by arriving at yet another question, one thrown against the others that haunted me: could I actually transcend what I had been born as and into? I realised this question, itself, was a mark of progress. If I couldn't escape the darkness of my being, I could at least learn how to travel with it. As it turned out it took almost a lifetime to discover that it was the search for what I needed to know that gave my life its form, direction and meaning. Quite simply, curiosity, not least about myself, kept me alive.

The combination of my fear of what seemed fated, and my obsession to know and fight it, meant that for a long time I was mostly solitary. My inner life dominated. How could I possibly share my secrets, or my questions? Withdrawal was inevitable. It was the only way I could cope. My solitude suited the family who were distant and, at best, only superficially friendly – Helen even less. We ate together only occasionally as the TV displaced the dinner table and conversation. Breakfast was staggered, and was a DIY stand-up affair. My basic material needs were met, although looking back it seems weird, as if I were living as a recipient of charity almost like an unwanted poor relation in a Dickens novel. I was an appendage to the family rather than a member of it. They had their own space, and I had mine. I was never asked questions, and I never caused trouble. The only reaction I