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INTO THAT DARKNESS – NOSTALGIA FOR A LOST WORLD

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Introduction

The subject of the Holocaust is an extremely sensitive issue today. This applies especially to such controversial figures as the “commandant of two death camps and a person jointly responsible for the Action T-4” – Franz Stangl (Młynarczyk 2013: 84). The aim of the study is to show the unusual personality of Franz Stangl through an interpretation of historical facts. The main research material is the book by Gitta Sereny, *Into That Darkness: From Mercy Killing to Mass Murder*. The method used by the author to the “most effective commander of concentration camps” was a series of interviews, which were given by Stangl at II trial of Treblinka in 1971 (Sereny 1995: 21). The basis for the analysis will be a kind of “melancholy

returns to the past of the camp”, by Stangl, which creates a sentimental image of the “lost world” different from what is described in archival materials – the mass extermination of the Jewish population and the functioning of the death camps emerge as something distant, and return to those memories is a nostalgia for the lost control over “life and death” (Sereny 1995: 177–178). But it is worth considering whether this nostalgia is an attempt to produce in the audience a sense that his actions resulted from deep and sincere belief, or on the contrary – they provide a colourful veil for the true intentions directing his behaviour and another manipulation of memories? But is it really realised and deliberate?

Functions of Nostalgia

Nostalgia is a universal experience of every human being, perceived by a given individual in a different way, but having some archetypal background. By definition, it is a kind of sentimental longing for the past and is understood as a positive symptom of trying to recreate one’s own past, return to the roots and make an insight into the ‘I’ of an individual (Arndt, Routledge, Sedikides, Wildschut 2006: 975–976). The concept of emotional state representing the said longing for the past events can be observed in antiquity, i.a. in the Bible or Homer’s *Odyssey* (Arndt, Routledge, Sedikides, Wildschut 2006: 975). The term of “nostalgia” was officially used only in the seventeenth century, by a Swiss doctor, Johannes Hofer, who used it to describe symptoms of a disease including: fit of crying, loss of appetite, irregular heartbeat and insomnia (McCann 1941: 166–168).

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In the twentieth century, there was a distinction between longing for a family home, childhood, sometimes treated as a form of nostalgia, and negative emotions connected with it (Arndt, Routledge, Sedikides, Wildschut 2006: 976). However, above all, nostalgia ceased to be seen as a medical condition, which paved the way for new readings and interpretations of these conditions. Feeling nostalgic may even improve the mood, help to make an insight into oneself, revise some of views, discover mysteries of the past or rebuild one’s own identity, based on a return to the stage when the consciousness of a given individual was developing (Davis 1977: 415–417). Moreover, despite the stereotypical view that nostalgia is an emotional state specific only to the elderly, studies suggest that it is experienced by people of any age (Arndt, Routledge, Sedikides, Wildschut 2006: 976).

It is worth considering when people are more likely to be nostalgic and what are the psychological functions of nostalgia. On one hand, the feeling of loneliness, negative emotional states, encourages weaving nostalgic narratives (Andersson 2010: 15–16). It should be noted,

however, that the stories of this nature arise also if one wants to mask or conceal certain events of the past, where they are aimed at manipulation, constructed in such a way that the recipient does not realise at which point the threads are untrue (Andersson 2010: 16–19). The narrative of nostalgic features is able to clothe very negative events in sentimental frames, neutralising their original connotation and meaning. This process often uses colourful metaphors or stories about very personal experiences in order to reduce the emotional gap between the narrator and the recipient (Andersson 2010: 26, 32, 36). This is because human nature has a tendency to identify with personal experiences of other individuals to a greater extent than with overall historical events. Looking at the above issue from a different perspective, the narrator may not be aware of the nostalgic nature of the story, unwittingly creating an alternative version of events that is different from the official, documented record or accounts of other witnesses to the event. This can happen because of the actual feeling of longing or some kind of sentimentalism, although sometimes these conditions occur in relation to people, phenomena or events of which the average person would not say that someone can feel similar emotions (Arndt, Routledge, Sedikides, Wildschut 2006: 976–977). The period of World War II and the feelings of Germans in relation to Hitler or the idea of the supremacy of the German nation are a good example.

Memory and Narration

According to Harald Welzer, the narration of one's own story, is aimed at dealing with the past and serves to create a coherent sense of identity (Welzer 2009: 42). The autobiographical memory involves these elements of reality that seem to be relevant for the entity in its present position with respect to the past. The dispersion of various aspects of past events connected with the period of the war and fragmentation of their perception reveal shaking the certainty and stability of one's own self, as well as the impossibility of semantic recognition of one's own experiences and giving them a new meaning, significance. On this basis, there may be shown the variability of perspectives of memories as a characteristic of individuals involved in the war and the way in which this variability influences the perception of one's own biography and its presentation (Welzer 2009: 43–44).

Paul Ricoeur in the concept of “narrative identity” shows that the process of talking about one's own self helps to keep the continuity of history as a result of balance between all time orders within which the person functioned (Ricoeur 2008: 294–296). In the context of the process of individualisation of history, there crystallises a strong influence of fear, especially the fear of losing one's own subjectivity and control over the possibility of making choices, also in

the context of the past (Ricoeur 2008: 310–313). It is worth noting that this phenomenon is of general nature, as well as of individual nature. It is characterised by irreversibility and constitution of a kind of emptiness, as well as going beyond accepted time orders. This affects the difficulty in finding not only one's own identity but also the distinction between what is a real experience and what is the product of imagination acting under specific conditions (Ricoeur 2007: 78–81). This becomes clear when having strong sense of nostalgia for what is past, though it is not certain whether these events actually took the form for which one feels the longing.

Narrative can fulfil also transgressive functions – of discovering, correcting or creating the individual's own self and his or her image (Trzebiński 2001: 90–96). The man has the ability to be self-aware and experience himself or herself as an individual who has his or her own world. The individual, himself or herself, can be the listener, the recipient. And the internal dialogue can support the change, working out the attitudes and behaviours. It is also a way to give meanings to reality and experiences. Another function of narrative is highlighting what is important for a person. Through verbalization, the events are more likely to impact the individual narrative can perform the following functions: making reassessments, giving the meaning, introducing changes, self-criticism, self-improvement, making internal integration (Trzebiński 2001: 109–112).

The events during the war often implied a desire to erase the memories as soon as possible and to conceal them from others. Therefore, the category of forgetting tends to correlate experiences presented in the form of “traces” and not full “images” (Neumann 2009: 252–253). Due to the inability to cope with difficult experiences within the psyche, the human mind cannot recall exact images of a given event; it keeps them only in a fragmentary form (Bielik-Robson 2004: 28).

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The process of closing the memory also affects the delay of the memories' return. A peculiarity that is explicit at this point, is that in fact the lived events become clear for awareness only when combined with other time or spatial structures and they provide an incentive to create a new relational model. Blurring the boundaries between the present and the affecting it past makes it extremely difficult to locate and determine the dimension of the experience.

The memory cannot revive that what is passed, but gives the memories a structural framework. Therefore, the process of recovering the past creates an image that is false to some extent (Neumann 2009: 250–254). On the other hand, it is an indispensable element of learning the truth about oneself, finding one's own subjectivity. There is also the problem of selective choice of memories, which leads to recognising them as authentic elements of mind, affecting the individual narration and identity. At this point, it is also worth noting that the task of memory is

not the storage and accumulation of past experiences. It constitutes the significance of past events, giving them a current sense, and creating a sense of their authenticity (Neumann 2009: 260–265). A process of linking current and past experiences presented in the form of fragmentary memories in order to achieve full continuity of identity of the individual.

“Inner Monster”

Is it possible for “inner monster” to activate and be seen in the behaviour of a given person only in certain social conditions, historical situation in which his existence was possible? There may be also considered whether the change of these conditions affects the sudden withdrawal from the earlier attitude and the ability to separate one’s own identity, and thus the memories, from what actually took place? These questions have become extremely important in the context of the attitudes of people involved in the operation of the “Nazi death machine” during World War II. Since Nazi torturers often could deal with the post-war realities and start a new life as blameless citizens. Most of them did not speak even to their relatives about what they experienced and what actions they made during the war, as if closing this phase from others, but also erasing it from one’s own consciousness and memory (Assmann 2009: 341–342). But is it even possible? If a given person decided to share his or her memories, a kind of “nostalgic return to a lost world” became apparent. This perspective of remembering and talking about the experiences is affected by many factors. The desire to diminish one’s own role e.g. in the mass extermination of Jews, attempt to partially rehabilitate himself or herself in the eyes of receivers are purposeful reasons for which a given person takes a nostalgic form of narration (Moller, Tschuggnall, Welzer 2009: 410–411). But there also must be taken into account the fact that some differentiate themselves as the executioners from the victims in their consciousness. Their memories are characterised by nostalgia for the time of youth, good financial situation, having power, and above all, being “masters of life and death”, when the existence of people depended on their decisions (Assmann 2009: 352–354). Does every man hide this “monster” that allows the transformation of an exemplary citizen into an executioner?

Not all people are the same, as they are individuals and differ from each other. These characteristics are not innate; they are dependent on the possibility of free development of a given individual. It is difficult to determine the components and functioning of “individual self” which forms the awareness of existence. However, it conceptualises the moral aspect of human behaviour and development. Therefore, the aforementioned “inner monster” is not born, but it arises as a result of interfering in the process of shaping human being. From this self

-consciousness, the social morality stems, dependent on the ability to make responsible decisions by individuals and choices between good and evil. Who a man becomes and how he or she acts is strictly dependent on the quality of life, and especially on freedom understood as freedom of development in the family, community, among peoples and of all humanity (Sereny 1995: 367). It also shows a certain interdependence and mutual responsibility of all the people against each other.

Transformation into an Executioner

The author of the *Into That Darkness* book, Gitta Sereny driven by the need to find a person who would be able to explain how it could be that seemingly ordinary people might have committed criminal acts of the Second World War, decided to analyse the personality of at least one of the executioners who were directly involved in wrongdoing. Learning the past of such a man, his childhood, motives of his conduct and his perception of certain specified behaviours would improve understanding of the extent to which evil in men is genetic, and how much it depends on their social environment (Sereny 1995: 10). Most of Nazi torturers did not have the courage to share memories of the war years and not verified their relationship to the past. After many efforts, Franz Stangl, one of the main wielders of the Holocaust, the commander of German concentration camps in Treblinka and Sobibór, agreed to take part in the conversation (Sereny 1995: 12–14).

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Franz Stangl – born in 1908 in Austria – joined the Austrian police in 1931, and soon after, to the local Nazi party (Heberer 2004: 70). He was also a member of the SS. His career in the Nazi terror apparatus began after the Anschluss of Austria by the Third Reich. He initially worked on a structured process of killing the mentally ill and disabled (Action T-4) in the Hartheim Castle (Heberer 2004: 71–72). In March 1942, he took the post of the commandant of Sobibór, where he served until September 1942 (Młynarczyk 2013: 85). Then he moved to Treblinka and served as the commandant of the camp. Always dressed in a white equestrian uniform, he had a reputation of the “best commandant of the Nazi concentration camps in Poland”, which was repeatedly underlined by his superior, Otto Globocnik (Sereny 1995: 11–12). Stangl was responsible for the deaths of approximately 900,000 Polish Jews, of whom more than 700,000 were killed during his governing at Treblinka (Młynarczyk 2013: 85). When he arrived in the latter camp, he was believed to make an obfuscation of the process of extermination and increase in its performance. For this purpose, he turned the station at Treblinka into an elegant facility so that the future victims could not have expected what awaited them. He also built a new

gas chambers, which could accommodate up to 3,000 people (Mlynarczyk 2013: 88–89). He streamlined the entire organisation of the camp, making the process of extermination run without interference. Stangl did not treat future victims as people, but as a “commodity” that has to be eliminated.

After the war, he managed to conceal his identity and, unrecognised, he escaped from his Austrian prison in 1947 (Sereny 1995: 11). Through Italy and Syria, he penetrated to Brazil, where he lived under his own name, unrecognised. It was only in 1967 when he was arrested and extradited to Germany (Sereny 1995: 11–12). Criminal process ended on October 22, 1970, when he was sentenced to a lifelong seclusion. Stangl died of a heart attack in prison in 1971 (Mlynarczyk 2013: 85).

Two Nostalgias

Describing the personality of Franz Stangl, his intelligence should be underlined. He claimed that he had agreed to talk about his experiences because of an inner need to penetrate into the past and understand the role he had played in it (Sereny 1995: 23, 25, 327). In the process of narrating, he revealed moral qualms, but often there were visible manifestations of a double personality. He was giving two versions of the same event (Sereny 1995: 98, 101). From a psychological point of view, this is an important observation as there were gradually revealing resigning from excuses, embellishments, presenting himself in a favourable light.

In this context, there are visible two types of nostalgic returns to the past, which were mentioned in the introduction. In the narration, Stangl is learnt as a sensitive person, sentient strong longing for the lost time of youth, which he described as “the happiest time of his life” (Sereny 1995: 27, 280, 354). For many people, the return to “the land of childhood” becomes an opportunity to reconstruct the time when their identity and personality were shaping; however, for Stangl, it is a peculiar form of seeking the balance between what is “clear” in his life and what brought him “into that darkness”. Describing his youth, he shows typical symptoms of an unconscious nostalgic return:

There were tears in his eyes before we even began to speak of his childhood [...] I had taught myself to play the zither and I joined the zither club [...] On Sundays I built myself a Taunus – a sailboat [...] It was my happiest time. (Sereny 1995: 25–27)

There should also be noticed the language layer of the narratives. Stangl had a habit of switching from a half-formal German language, which he had usually used, to the provincial

Austrian dialect – a colloquial form of communication of his childhood – when he had to answer questions that were difficult for him (Sereny 1995: 29, 31, 96, 302). He did not do this knowingly, and this did not mean that in such moments, he lied. When he had to tell about some shocking truth, then he sought refuge in the “cosy” language and definitions from his childhood (Sereny 1995: 29). Thus, he somehow tried to separate “work” that he carried out during the war, from being a husband, father, citizen and just a man. He attached a great importance to the inviolacy and non-permeability of both orders. There might be stated that these acts of nostalgic return to the past are to somehow neutralise the effects of actions of Stangl during his service in the camps of Sobibór and Treblinka.

“Everything I did out of my own free will [...] I had to do as best as I could. That is how I am” – he was instilled with this “deadly perfectionism” in the police academy in Vienna, along with the conviction that around him, there are only enemies, and all men are corrupted to the bone (Sereny 1995: 347). When he was speaking about his later life, he fell into a police jargon. He called the Schutzpolizei School the first step on the road to disaster (Sereny 1995: 29).

“I hate... I hate the Germans [...] For what they pulled me into.” (Sereny 1995: 39–40) He pleaded guilty to a minor offence, because he felt an inner need to say three words: “I am guilty.” He was unable to pronounce them, when the talking was about the murder of 400,000 to 900,000 Jews (Młynarczyk 2013: 85). In this way, he was seeking an acceptable substitute. With the exception of a monster, no man who participated in these activities was able to plead guilty and live with it. With respect to the man whose vision of the world was so disfigured that he could tell the story in this way, a relatively simple concepts of guilt or innocence, good and evil could not be applied.

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An another kind of nostalgic narrative used in the course of the story by Stangl is also worth noting. It is noticeable that “the most effective commander of concentration camps” consciously constructed convincing accounts of his actions during the war. However, it should be pointed out that Stangl manipulated the events in order to justify his own behaviour or escape from the responsibility (Sereny 1995: 70, 93, 157–161). When talking about “work” at Sobibór and Treblinka, he used a strong, confident tone, typical for an impartial observer who is able to emotionally describe gruesome and horrifying scenes, but, at the same time, he does this smoothly and objectively: “It was important not to adapt completely to it. Complete adaptation, you see, meant acceptance. And the moment one accepted, one was morally and physically lost.” (Sereny 1995: 173)

Everything he was talking about was in part a product of his imagination, and in part, an attempt to treat these events rationally. He somehow deliberately used means that are specific to

a nostalgic coverage of past events, such as the mentioned in the introduction colourful metaphors or peculiar descriptions of personal experiences (Andersson 2010: 26–27). These activities were aimed at bridging the gap between the narrator and the audience, and above all, at creating their sense of confidence in the Stangl. A perfect example of these actions is switching from the following statement: “It was [just] a freight”, as a term for Jews transported to death camps, and comparing their annihilation to a truly picturesque image of death of lemmings going to die into the sea (Sereny 1995: 91, 112, 138, 231). Stangl very often stressed the need to domesticate the evil to which he was forced to do: “Would it not have been possible [...] to show some evidence of your inner conflict? [...] But that would have been the end. That is precisely why I was so alone.” (Sereny 1995: 229)

Conclusion

Throughout the three days of this part of his story he manifested and intense desire to seek and tell the truth [...] He was telling the truth as he had seen it twenty-nine years ago and still saw it in 1971, and in so doing he voluntarily but unwittingly told me more than truth: he revealed the two men he had become in order to survive. (Sereny 1995: 157)

In doing the last remark, it is worth noting that this duality of the personality of Franz Stangl, expressed in his various narratives of a nostalgic nature (unconscious and conscious), could also result from an unconscious desire to construct his own personality, that is, a man he could have become, in opposition to a man he became. However, the juvenile intentions remained available only during nostalgic returns to the land of childhood – the land of happiness.

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SUMMARY

Into That Darkness – Nostalgia for a Lost World

The subject of the Holocaust is an extremely sensitive issue today. This applies especially to such controversial figures as Franz Stangl. The aim of the article is to show the unusual personality of Franz Stangl through an interpretation of historical facts. The main research material is the book by Gitta Sereny, *Into That Darkness: From Mercy Killing to Mass Murder*. The method used by the author was a series of interviews, which were given by Stangl at II trial of Treblinka in 1971. The basis for the analysis is a kind of melancholy returns to the past of the camp, by Stangl, which created a sentimental image of the lost world different from what is described in archival materials. Everything he was talking about was in part a product of his imagination, and in part, an attempt to treat these events rationally. He somehow deliberately used means that are specific to a nostalgic coverage of past events, such as colourful metaphors or peculiar descriptions of personal experiences. Stangl manipulated the events in order to justify his own behaviour or escape from the responsibility.

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KEYWORDS

Holocaust, Franz Stangl, nostalgia, memory, narration

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