

Inner Circle Seminar: The Psychology of Extermination

Angela Buxton

This is a commentary on the Inner Circle Seminar that took place on Sunday 10 October 2004, entitled '*Into that Darkness – 30 years on: The Psychology of Extermination*'. The seminar was led by Gitta Sereny, Michael Tregenza and Anthony Stadlen. This was an exciting opportunity to work with three people who have each independently conducted in-depth research into the lives of people who have perpetrated evil. At least one person in the discussion questioned whether it made sense to call anything 'evil' and therefore I want to make it clear from the outset that it seems to me that the only way to deny that the Nazi extermination camps were evil would be to deny that they ever existed; as indeed, some people do, despite evidence to the contrary.

Gitta Sereny, author and journalist, has written a number of books about her research into the lives of perpetrators of evil. Her books include phenomenological accounts of her meetings with these individuals. The set text for this seminar was Gitta's book, *Into that Darkness*, published 30 years ago following her interviews with Franz Stangl, the commandant of the Treblinka Nazi extermination camp.

Michael Tregenza is an English historian who has spent much of the last forty years in Poland, including Lublin, from where he has researched the life of Stangl's boss, Christian Wirth, head of the Nazi Polish death camps. By tireless fieldwork in Belzec itself, as well as elsewhere in Poland, Germany, and other countries, Michael has become the world expert on the Belzec death camp.

Anthony Stadlen, the existential therapist and convenor of the Inner Circle Seminars, has spent many years researching the Nazi use of psychology in the manipulation of the victims in the so-called 'euthanasia' programme and the extermination camps.

Thirty-nine people, in addition to the three main speakers, attended the seminar. The first words from Gitta Sereny invited us to give up our formal pre-arranged seating and draw our chairs closer to the three leaders of the seminar who were sitting facing us across the room from under the windows of Herringham Hall in Regent's College, London. This set the tone of the meeting that was as informal and spontaneous as possible given the constraints of the number of people wanting to contribute to the dialogue.

When we were more comfortably seated, Anthony Stadlen began by thanking us all, not just the invited speakers, for coming. He asked us to introduce ourselves. There were representatives of many professions, including historians, writers and lawyers; however, the majority of participants were practising psychotherapists, including several eminent teachers of existential therapy and some students such as myself.

Anthony Stadlen then briefly introduced Gitta Sereny and Michael Tregenza. He raised his first question for the seminar: How did the Nazi perpetrators so successfully manipulate their victims in the systematic extermination of 'non-Aryans'? He gave as an example the different treatment on arrival at the extermination camp Treblinka of Jews from the Eastern European countries and those from the West as described in *Into that Darkness* (Sereny, 1974).

Anthony Stadlen mentioned that Jews prefer not to use the ancient Greek term Holocaust, meaning 'sacred burnt offering', to describe the attempted eradication of the Jews and others but use instead the Biblical Hebrew word, Shoah, meaning 'devastation' or 'ruin'. Gitta Sereny took up this theme at the start of her talk, explaining her dislike of the word Holocaust to describe the Nazi extermination. The world has often seen slaughter on a mass scale: under Stalin, more recently in Rwanda and Bosnia and this year in Darfur (Pearsall, 2001, p. 895). The difference between these horrific genocides and the Nazi extermination was what Gitta Sereny spoke of as 'the monstrosity of the concept of industrialising the killing of millions'. While thanking Anthony Stadlen for inviting her to join the seminar on the thirtieth anniversary of publication of her book on Franz Stangl, Gitta Sereny said that she finds herself increasingly reluctant to return to the events of those years. She reminded us that Hitler's twelve year rule has been written about more than any other period in history. Her reluctance to return to these events is because, despite all we know about this period, we have since then seen genocide in Serbia, Rwanda and the Sudan and have been onlookers and participants in the war in Iraq.

Gitta Sereny is of Hungarian descent and was born in Austria where she lived until shortly before the Anschluss in 1938 which occurred when she was still a teenager. She has described some of the events of her life in her most recent book, *The German Trauma* (Sereny, 2000). In the seminar, she told us that during her life she has met many wonderful Jews and Germans. She said that to sit with people; to eat, drink, laugh, touch and be touched by people makes it difficult to 'embrace the narrow solution of hatred'.

As regards her interviews, in *The German Trauma* Gitta Sereny described how she always told her interviewees in advance where she stood with them. So, for example, Franz Stangl was left in no doubt in advance of the interviews of her horror regarding his actions as commandant of Treblinka. In the seminar, Gitta Sereny told us that she always shook hands when she met interviewees including Franz Stangl. It was important to her to demonstrate her acceptance of their humanity. She described to us how her aim in an interview was to keep herself out of it and to keep the conversation flowing with increasing intensity. This requires faith, patience and the determination to tempt them into responding to their own thoughts. She wanted to bring them to the point where they both ask and answer their own questions.

Gitta Sereny described Franz Stangl as a simple man, not unintelligent but unused to asking himself deep questions. He had a lot to hide. Gitta Sereny saw him as a subservient personality with a 'pathological' need for the admiration and physical love of his wife. She believes that he was severely affected by acts of violence against him as a small child by his father. She suggested that in a 'normal, bourgeois life,' he might have been a perfectly decent man: a loving husband and father with a steady job. Gitta Sereny believes that an authoritarian government can bring out in certain men and women hidden tendencies towards force and brutality. She described the origin of evil as the greatest mystery: 'how ordinary good men can turn to extraordinary evil'.

On the subject of religion, Gitta Sereny expressed frustration at hearing political use made of religion. 'Faith should be a private matter of making moral choices,' she said. She remembered her question to Stangl as to whether God was in Treblinka and his reflex answer: "'Yes,'" he said. "Otherwise, how could it have happened?" (Sereny, 1974, p. 364). Gitta Sereny was disappointed by this answer which seemed to place responsibility with God rather than himself but shortly afterwards Stangl talked of his own guilt: "I should have died. That was my guilt." (Ibid. p. 364). This

took place at the end of Gitta Sereny's series of interviews and Stangl died of heart failure nineteen hours later.

Gitta Sereny described some moving experiences that she has written about in her books and, rather than summarise them here, I will recommend reading both *Into that Darkness* and *The German Trauma* for anyone who wants to understand better how acts of evil can be perpetrated.

When Gitta Sereny finished speaking, there was silence. She quietly thanked us for not applauding.

Michael Tregenza spoke next and told us of his years of research into the history of the extermination camp, Belzec, and the life of the leader of all three main Polish death camps, Christian Wirth. His research began more than forty years ago when he realised that very little was generally known about Belzec or Christian Wirth. All four death camps, Chelmno, Sobibor, Treblinka and Belzec were obliterated by the SS before the end of the war. Farms were built from the bricks of the gas chambers to try to erase any evidence of the extermination that had taken place there. (Official Polish estimates are that '2 million Jews and 52,000 gypsies, at least one third of them children, were killed in these four installations between December 1941 and October 1943. Of all those who reached them, eighty-two survived' (Sereny, 2000, p.142).)

Michael Tregenza researched Belzec while living in Poland for many years where he was able to visit the areas of the camps and talk in depth with the eye-witnesses who worked in and around the camps, often actually participating in the construction of the gas-chambers, of whose purpose they were perfectly aware. In some cases, these people are still living in the nearest villages to the sites of the installations. Michael Tregenza also researched into the life of Christian Wirth who was assassinated in 1944. Michael Tregenza interviewed both sons of Christian Wirth, and even lived for some days in the home of Wirth's youngest and favourite son.

Wirth is believed to have had little relationship with his parents. His mother was pregnant with him when his parents were married and perhaps he was an unwanted and unloved baby. Although a physically imposing, strong-looking man, he suffered from asthma all his life. Michael Tregenza believes that this is a significant factor in the development of this man who by all accounts was a brutal murderer with, as Michael Tregenza said, 'a total disregard for human life, even his own'.

Wirth was a First World War hero who entered the police force and became notorious for his ability to extract confessions. He did not join the SS until 1939 but was quickly appointed as chief of the so-called 'euthanasia' programme, the mass murder of 80,000 Germans with physical or perceived mental defects such as being anti-Nazi. This programme provided a recruiting ground for those who were to run the extermination camps in Poland. Those who could tolerate killing Germans, albeit those perceived as unworthy Germans, were believed to be suitable candidates to organise and carry out the extermination of millions of 'non-Aryans'. Wirth held a reign of terror over his subordinates such as Stangl who hated and feared him.

Michael Tregenza's talk gave an account, in fascinating and humanising detail, of the life of Christian Wirth whom it would be much easier to regard as an inhuman monster. Wirth rejected his eldest son, who in appearance is much like him, preferring the younger, physically weaker son. Even Wirth was capable of love.

Gitta Sereny said that she believes that evil is not inborn. It is a human potential. She raised the question to the participants: Is evil innate?

The discussion began with a participant questioning Michael Tregenza's suggestion that asthma had caused a personality change. Michael Tregenza replied

that recent Polish research showed personality change in children who developed asthma. An asthma sufferer in the audience was able to confirm her own experience of rejection as a child.

In a very moving contribution, one participant described how he survived the deportation of Hungarian Jews from Budapest by changing his identity to that of a Croatian student. He described feeling guilt that he was not deported as were members of his family and friends. Also, he described feeling very lucky to have avoided the choice of becoming a Kapo that he might have been offered if he had been deported. Many teenage Jewish boy deportees were offered survival if they became a Kapo or disciplinary guard in the labour camps. These Jewish Kapos were driven by their own guards to be very cruel to Jewish prisoners. This participant brought out for me very clearly that none of us can know how we might respond under certain extreme conditions. What would I do given such a choice?

The participants turned their attention to the evil of anti-Semitism. The Nazi extermination was not confined to Jews although they were the majority of the victims. Where does this evil come from? Gitta Sereny told us that David Irving, who claims that Hitler was largely unaware of the extermination, once asked openly: Why do so many people hate the Jews? Irving's own answer was that it was what Jews did that made them hated. Anthony Stadlen said that, in empirical fact, the Jews have not been universally hated. There was no general hatred of the Jewish communities in China or India. Anthony Stadlen explained Hyam Maccoby's thesis that anti-Semitism has arisen where there has been a religious 'takeover' bid for the Jewish Bible, which Christians call the 'Old Testament'. In particular, Christianity developed hostility for Jews; in former days blaming the Jews for the crucifixion of Jesus. Islam was not especially hostile until more recent times when there has been conflict over the state of Israel.

The Nazi anti-Semitism was different, Anthony Stadlen said. It was a post-Christian secular anti-Semitism based on 'race' rather than religion. The Nazis saw the presence of Jews in Germany as a great evil and wanted to cleanse the country of this contaminant. Himmler talked of the eradication of Jews as of eliminating a germ. The initial Nazi solutions involved encouraging the Jews to leave Germany through economic measures. When the boycotts of Jewish businesses did not drive enough Jews away, the favoured solution was the forced emigration to a Jewish state far away, for example Madagascar or Siberia. When these proposals proved to be impractical the Final Solution of extermination was developed as a logical and rational answer to the problem.

A seminar participant drew attention to the incremental nature of corruption. Gitta Sereny agreed that those she had interviewed seemed to have gone through stages of corruption, at each stage distancing themselves from the results of their actions and compartmentalising their lives. Also, as Gitta Sereny had said earlier in the seminar, we are all composed of many qualities.

A participant said that she didn't know what was evil and what was good, although she knows evil if she comes across it. The discussion following her speech was heated with one or two participants agreeing that they dislike using the word evil.

A participant quoted from the novel *The Reader* by Bernhard Schlink where the protagonist concludes that understanding someone who has committed an evil act leaves no room for condemning and condemning that person leaves no room for understanding.

There was a lunch break at this point. After the break, Anthony Stadlen began the afternoon session by picking up on the words of the last speaker and formulating the

following questions for our discussion: How is it possible simultaneously to judge and try to understand? Is it possible to judge without understanding? Is it possible to understand without judging?

These questions which I think are central to our understanding of existential therapy sparked off a very lively debate. The majority opinion seemed to be that it is impossible to judge without understanding and yet it is also impossible to understand without judging. Some participants felt passionately that psychotherapists must not judge their clients but the majority seemed equally vehement that psychotherapists do make judgements and, indeed, are of little help to their clients if they do not. Anthony Stadlen used the example of Franz Stangl. If Franz Stangl when working at Treblinka had employed one of us as a psychotherapist, would we judge him? Even with this example of someone who was responsible for mass murder, it was impossible to reach a unanimous decision that if we were his psychotherapists we would judge him.

Anthony Stadlen raised some further questions: Is psychotherapy value-free? Should you work with someone whom you judge to be evil? A participant who had many years of experience as a probation officer said that in all her career she had met at most three people whom she would describe as evil. She described how in the physical presence of one perpetrator of evil she chose not to shake his hand. Another participant suggested that this sounded paranoid and similar to the Nazi position that a person could be contaminated by another when the other is perceived as evil.

Anthony Stadlen answered the suggestion of paranoia by reiterating that the work of therapy may change both the client and the therapist. His concern is that therapists who are unclear where they stand with good and evil may try to avoid making a judgement and thereby collude with the bad things that a client has done. He reminded us of Thomas Szasz's words in a previous Inner Circle Seminar when he described psychotherapy as an ethical exploration where two people struggle to find truth. Anthony Stadlen added: 'It is a complete confusion to think that psychotherapy is a quasi-medical treatment.'

There was some light relief at one point in the discussion when Anthony Stadlen, in the heat of the moment, asked for volunteers to defend *his* position. Although all agreed that no-one is as well-qualified to do that as Anthony Stadlen himself, there was no shortage of volunteers to put forward their own positions.

One participant said that victims are not only victims and perpetrators are not only perpetrators. It is important to try to understand who they are as individuals.

A participant who has many years of experience of working with mothers of young babies told us that in the days following the destruction of the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001, all of the mothers she spoke to said that they withdrew from knowledge of what had happened. There was no time to be shocked. They had young babies to care for. Perhaps sometimes people find the knowledge of evil too difficult to accept.

Gitta Sereny contributed her feeling that if her husband did something bad, she would feel partly responsible. To her, there is such a thing as co-responsibility if you live with someone. We cannot consider ourselves as living in a void.

Anthony Stadlen talked about his own research that he began with Aaron Esterson and Mini Gelbard in 1996 into the psychological manipulation by the Nazis of their victims. The starting-point of this research was the sophistication of this manipulation, which suggested that psychiatrists, psychotherapists or psychologists might be responsible. For example, Gitta Sereny wrote: '...the Nazis displayed terrifying astuteness in their understanding of the essential differences between the personality of the two groups [of Eastern and Western Jews]; an "achievement" which

can hardly be attributed to men like Stangl and Wirth, but probably originated either with Heydrich or ...the psychiatrists Professors Heyde and Nitsche' (Sereny, 1974, p.199).

The Nazis were responsible for the systematic deliberate manipulation of: firstly, perpetrators; secondly, victims; and thirdly, bystanders. In the course of his research, Anthony Stadlen has been able to gain access to the archive of the German Institute for Psychological Research and Psychotherapy that was run by Mathias Göring, cousin to Hermann Göring. This archive was supposed to have been destroyed by Allied bombing, but had in fact survived in an attic. It shows how deeply involved in Nazism these psychotherapists were, despite their post-war protests of innocence. There is some evidence that psychiatrists, psychotherapists and psychologists were employed to calm the perpetrators of mass murder in the SS. Anthony Stadlen mentioned that, incidentally, the Nazis were pioneers in the state registration of psychotherapists. Nevertheless, his research could find no trace of the use of trained psychiatrists, psychotherapists or psychologists in the planning and provision of methods of manipulation in the Shoah itself. It seems that what can be described as 'empirical' psychology was used by senior Nazis to plan manipulation of the perpetrators, victims and population. These empirical psychologists such as Eichmann, Hagen, Dannecker, Wisliceny, in the SD (Sicherheitsdienst, or Security Service), were highly intelligent men who knew exactly what they were doing, not 'mindless bureaucrats' engaged in the so-called 'banality of evil' as Hannah Arendt claimed. Indeed, Anthony Stadlen reported that Hagen's son told him that his father was contemptuous of professional psychologists, whom he evidently regarded as incompetent in the empirical psychology he practised.

A participant who is a writer told us that he had heard that Hitler had never read a novel. He suggested that possibly an absence of imagination meant that someone could not comprehend the suffering of others. Michael Tregenza confirmed that in the Wirth household he had seen only cookery books or dictionaries and no novels. There was general laughter when Anthony Stadlen pointed out that he had visited many homes like that. It is certainly true that many people do not read books and yet do not become mass murderers and similarly many people who have suffered violence in childhood do not themselves become brutal later in life.

A psychotherapist told us that in her experience with her clients she has noticed that a child who is born in a family where there is abuse – whether physical, verbal or sexual – may develop certain mechanisms in order to survive. These mechanisms may entail splitting. The person at an early age develops a way of cutting off emotionally from what is happening to them. A person who has learnt this survival mechanism in childhood may become quite hard and may split themselves from the harm they do to other people.

The last participant to speak before the close of the seminar had travelled from Warsaw to attend the seminar. An English businessman and historian, who has lived for years in Poland and is fluent in Polish, he has spent time in the villages surrounding the former death camps and has spoken to the elderly survivors of the Nazi era. He raised a final question: What is a collaborator when a whole village knows of the neighbouring extermination camp but in order to survive remains silent?

Conclusion

Attending this seminar was an intense experience for me. I feel that I cannot do it justice. I apologise to those participants whose comments I missed, in some cases

because I was so absorbed in what they were saying that I failed to take notes. I sincerely hope I have not essentially misquoted or misrepresented anyone.

The material covered was huge and, to me, central to my work as a therapist. Thinking of Gitta Sereny's approach to her work as a journalist and writer brings me to reflect on my own work as a therapist. I need to know where I stand with the issues that a client brings even if I don't tell them so directly. I need this self-knowledge, not so that I can make judgements or condemn, but in order that I can help the client to reach a clearer understanding of his or her life. I must remain open to what the client brings and I must be willing and able to be changed by the work. I must be clear about my own boundaries and know the difference between the client's issues and my own. I must aim to help the client to understand him or herself in the context of his or her world. All this is not enough if I don't bring myself and my values into the therapy.

I want to end with a quote from Anthony Stadlen from the seminar that I think sums up my conclusions: 'I fail the other in my task as therapist if I am blind to evil.'

References

- Pearsall, J. (2001). *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sereny, G. (1974). *Into that Darkness*. London: Random House.
- Sereny, G. (2000). *The German Trauma*. London: Penguin.