In my Grandfather's Shadow by Angela Findlay[1]

SIBYLLE EICHSTAEDT

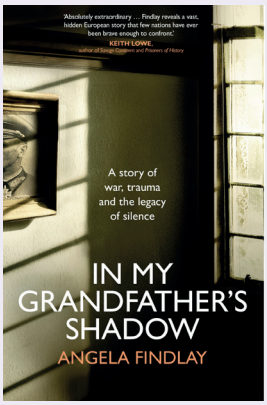
'In my Grandfather's Shadow – Aaron Mirkin in conversation with local writer Angela Findlay' was the title of one of the recent cultural events at the Stroud Christian Community that drew me: I had first met Angela in the early 90s when she was a student at Tobias School of Art and Art Therapy, but had not seen or heard of her for about twenty years.

The community room was packed, and the ensuing conversation inspired many of us to buy a copy of Angela's 417pp book then and there. The book's subtitle is: *A story of war, trauma and the legacy of silence*.

Angela (now in her late 50s) was born and raised in Britain, but has a German mother. Driven by her early, at the time quite inexplicable, but painfully existential feelings of guilt and shame, Angela began a quest that led her to work as an artist and art therapist in prisons – in Australia, Germany and Britain. Her quest crystallised into what became a life-shaping research question, as she was "seeking insight into the natures of those considered guilty in order to try and understand not whether they were guilty but *how* people become capable of evil. And how – if ever – they can redeem themselves, or be redeemed."(p.203)

Her relatively late interest in her maternal grandfather, Karl von Graffen, who had been a decorated General in the German Wehrmacht and had died a week after her birth, led her to immerse herself deeply in the background and history of WWII. Her wide-ranging historical and psychological studies, her travels, her work and subsequent insights into human nature – insights born out of intense, relentless inner grappling – led to the writing of her book. The more she immersed herself in the theme the more she experienced a dawning sense that she and her grandfather's paths had crossed as she was on her way 'down' and he on his way 'up', and that he handed her a 'baton' – a task that would assume increasing magnitude with far-reaching import.

Angela is not only an exceptionally gifted visual artist[2] capable of such different styles, but also what I would like



to call an 'artist of the Logos'. The way she weaves together into a rich tapestry of thought and word the entirety of her inner and outer experience, her emerging understanding of transgenerational trauma and the question of evil, and her all-pervasive attitude of compassionate enquiry rather than judgement, reads like a Manichean initiation story.

Referring to talks that that she has given to international audiences, including members of the Jewish community, Angela writes: "It is an ongoing process, but for a moment, within the duration of the talk, we are united in trying to comprehend the incomprehensible, love the unlovable or forgive the unforgivable." (p.377)

"Maybe he [her grandfather] had inspired me to channel his warrior spirit not into waging war, but into cultivating a patch of peace inside myself where heroes, villains and victims co-exist as elements of all human beings, each with the capacity to be all those things." (388)

It's been a gift to meet Angela again and to follow her journey through her own words; a journey which, it feels to me, she has undertaken for all humankind, and which she now shares as a widely travelled and broadcast speaker, bringing a deeply touching message of hope, compassion and transformation to so many listeners, including young people still at school.[3]

Sibylle Eichstaedt, Stroud. E: creativespeech@icloud.com

1. *In my Grandfather's Shadow – A story of war, trauma and the legacy of silence.* Bantam Press 2022
2. www.angelafindlay.com
3. www.angelafindlaytalks.com