



In My Grandfather's Shadow:

A story of war, trauma and the legacy of silence

by *Angela Findlay*

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Great skill, dedication and artistry have produced this unique account of how war continues to affect individuals, families and nations long after it has been declared 'over'.

Angela Findlay tells the story of three generations of her German family (on her mother's side) interwoven with world events. It is at once a psychological inquiry and a gripping detective story as the author tries to uncover the roots of her personal struggle against her inexplicable sense of guilt, which she only much later in life realises is connected with her maternal grandfather, a German Wehrmacht general, whom she never knew as he died a week after she was born. Throughout the book, quotes from diverse sources keep the mind focused as individual stories are intertwined with the bigger picture.

The Prologue sets the scene, providing a useful reference point as the reader proceeds through the 400 or so pages. It opens with the startling observation from the first century BC statesman and philosopher Cicero:

"To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child. For what is the worth of human life unless it is woven into the life of our ancestors by the records of history?"

In the first of her vignettes, dated 1st February 1945, the author's mother is woken by her own mother at 4am to join the jostling crowd of women and children leaving behind all they possess as they flee from the small German town near Berlin that has been their childhood home. On the 1st May of the same year, in a small Italian village, a fifty-two year old Wehrmacht general, the father of the fleeing children, hands over his command of the German forces in Italy to the Americans. Decades later, on 3rd August 1987, the author, child of an English father and one of the fleeing children, walked into an Australian prison and felt instantly, albeit inexplicably, at home among the 'guilty'. Unbeknownst to her, this was the first step of her quest to find out what kind of man her grandfather was.

Beautifully written, meticulously researched and authoritatively presented, this interweaving of historical events with personal accounts must go down as a major work of literature. In the immediate aftermath of the conclusion of World War II an impenetrable silence descended, a silence that lasted for well over a decade. Few felt able to face the truth about the events that they had witnessed. People looked to the future "while silently stewing in an indigestible brew of psychological overwhelm, war trauma and impotent guilt, unwittingly handing on the task they were

incapable of accomplishing to the next generation". And this indeed is an account of inherited trauma.

The book could be described as an epic poem, impossible to paraphrase or summarise. It reads well aloud, and cries out for thoughtful group discussion. The theme throughout is that war is made possible when ordinary people follow orders without question because they never stop to think they have a choice. The most ghastly crimes against humanity are not simply perpetrated by evil monsters, but are the result of the active support and collusion of all because they have not thought.

Reporting on the Eichmann trial in the 1960s, political theorist and writer Hannah Arendt detected something that was not stupidity, but "a curious, quite authentic inability to think". Several years later she commented. "The deeds were monstrous, but the doer was quite ordinary". Eichmann was not an isolated case. On the contrary, comments Findlay, "the world was being confronted by a bureaucratic system made up of perfectly ordinary men and women committing monstrous acts." Findlay's quest was to discover what happened, who was guilty, and how to avoid the same man-made disasters in the future.

Healing of traumas through art therapy also threads through the book. The author recounts her exceptionally unusual life story, first as young drop-out from formal education and training, then as art therapist in prisons and as researcher into hidden truths about the reality of Western 'civilisation'. No light read, the book takes us on a whirlwind tour of people, places, themes and events, from the Eastern front in Russia, to a Sydney jail, a Stroud cemetery, across the colonial era and the slave trade and into the wastes of Siberia. The history is relevant to the whole of humanity, as individuals, families and nations. And it all hinges on the necessity for all to know their personal and collective past and to act upon that knowledge.

When the author was 23 years old her parents funded her through a diploma in artistic therapy "in the West Sussex countryside". Here she encountered the teachings of Rudolf Steiner. In a couple of pages she outlines anthroposophy, and the principles of art therapy that she was subsequently able to use with prisoners. This was at a time when 'normal' young women were considering "marriage, babies, mortgages and domestic bliss". Her mother wondered why she wanted to work with prisoners instead of with cancer victims or children, while her father despaired at the very notion of reforming the prison system through art. It took many years for Findlay to feel she had broken out of her own 'prison'.

Some of the most telling pictures of how life was for ordinary Germans during the war are those recounted by her mother to the author throughout her childhood. To quote from the book:

"Little Jutta had walked into the local shop and bid the shopkeeper 'Good morning'. A teacher who was in the shop asked why she hadn't said 'Heil Hitler'. Jutta explained that her mother had told her they didn't need to say 'Heil Hitler' to people they knew, an admission that had almost fatal consequences for my grandmother. She was reported, taken for questioning and released only when she managed to prove that her husband was a high-ranking officer in the Wehrmacht."

As a child, the author saw this story as "hard to

comprehend". She goes on to tell the story of her grandfather's role in the war of annihilation of the Russians on the Eastern front, where millions died in the most appalling circumstances. Told through her grandfather's letters home to his wife, the story makes very heavy reading. But it has to be read. For, as Findlay observes throughout the book, "A nation that doesn't understand its own history will be unable to understand its present". She cites her grandmother's observation, made in her memoirs written when she was in her eighties:

"We had heard of concentration camps but not in any detail. People who were released from them never talked about the horrors they witnessed. That was later never believed – but those who say that have never lived under a dictatorship. With the benefit of hindsight, it is so easy to judge and condemn... . But even the foreign diplomats couldn't see through things, and we civilians only got our knowledge through Dr Goebbels' propaganda on the radio or in the press. Hitler's pathological hatred of the Jews frightened us, but how intensively we were spied on. Every critical word was a big danger. Of course there was an underground resistance but not everybody felt themselves to be a martyr. I'd like to know how today's critics would have behaved."

That final sentence is indeed the key question crying out for answers. Not only must today's critics research the history of what took place in those terrible times, in order to understand a little better the source of the pressures to conform, but also the real-life stories in Findlay's book call us all to consider our role in condoning present evil.

So many stories wait to be told. Descendants of past migrants who experienced and participated in the events described in this book may have lingering suspicions that the sanitised version told by their parents and grandparents could hide a great deal of a trauma that is being handed down through the family as a general malaise.

The stories researched and told by the author portray the collusion of the majority of perfectly ordinary people with the powers-that-be that is all too familiar in every town and city across the world in the present day where there is a failure to question the propaganda and mass indoctrination on any number of current issues. All manner of curtailment of freedom of information currently ensures that the truth, not only about the causes and purpose of past wars, but also particularly the current war in Ukraine, are subjects that presently remain beyond the proper comprehension of all but a very few anywhere in the world.

As Rudolf Steiner observed: "Human beings are free insofar as they are able to obey themselves in every moment of their lives." Freedom, in other words, is the essential requirement of what it is to be human. And for the freedom not to follow orders to be exercised, knowledge of history of family, community and nation is essential.

In her quest to understand who her grandfather was, Findlay leads us all to join her in the ongoing search for answers to questions she has raised throughout the book. What makes perfectly ordinary people go to war against perfectly ordinary people with whom they have no personal grudge, committing and condoning atrocities as they do so?

One can but agree with the final quote from Albert Einstein: "Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow. The important thing is not to stop questioning." A debt of gratitude is owed to the author for her account of the inherited trauma embedded in the history of a war from which all can learn if humanity is not to find itself embroiled in a further world war.

Frances Hutchinson

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