

Review of Wendelgard von Staden's *Darkness over the Valley: Growing Up in Nazi Germany*
(YDS 10-166)

I have been unable to discover whether this review, written in about 1981, has been published. This draft degenerates into notes at the end, but before that it is a connected and polished piece of writing. CPH ?1981d.

Wendelgard von Staden's *Darkness Over The Valley: Growing Up in Nazi Germany* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1981) is a memento of those terrible years that struck at the lives of millions and millions of Europeans with the power of an elemental force. They were like an earthquake that distorted the landscape in the twinkling of an eye and opened up a huge chasm between the years 'before' and 'after'.

In a different way the same could be said and has been said about the First World War in personal retrospect. The social memory of the British in particular has never got over the ghastly slaughter, the decimation of the whole generation of the young men who died between 1914 and 1918. With them, as Paul Fussell told us in *The Great War and Modern Memory*,¹ died innocence, the redeeming power of personal sacrifice, the personal force of patriotism. The very character of the language as an instrument of social and literary communication came to be changed. Admittedly, there is something almost artificial, if not fallacious about trying to compare the quality of the personal memory reflecting on the first and second wars. And yet one comes across some differences again and again. There was the sense of unbelieving surprise in 1914. 'Can you tell me how this came about?' the German Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg asked a visitor at the time. Nothing like that in 1939. Von Staden can write:

Slowly and relentlessly the war approached. The tension increased from crisis to crisis, and the expectation that something irrevocable would happen hung over us like a storm cloud. Thus when the war finally did start, it brought almost a feeling of relief. Even Frau Firebs?, my co-worker in the onion fields, put down her pitchfork suddenly one day and surmised: 'It would be better if they started the war now. It'll come anyway.'

There is no need to touch on the contrast between elevated jubilation in 1914 and the depressed weariness of 1939, in every participant country conflagrations. William Shirer and others have testified how amazed they were by the lack of jubilation in the heavily indoctrinated Nazi capital even after the rapid victory in the Polish campaign that Fall.

But in so much of the personal literature there is one noticeable thread distinctive of the second war, that of having been touched by an almost personal evil, the malevolence of a daemonic will that had the power of unleashing fury but had no staying power, that could destroy but never build. The image of the *bad dream* is a recurrent one, and therefore also of incredulity at the events and at oneself in them, the sense of having to come to terms with them, but also the sense of tentativeness - because it simply doesn't make sense. One can't explain, but one must come to terms. We have the image of the bad dream at least once in Von Staden's book, in the words of a Catholic priest from whom the author's mother seeks comfort during the latter months of the war:

I didn't believe him as he explained quietly that we would put these times behind us like a bad dream and that afterwards the world would be a different place.

And yet in retrospect she writes as though to confirm just what she didn't believe at the time. He turned out to have been right. It *was* a bad dream; it was the conversion of nightmare into reality, and after six years it was over as suddenly as it had started. Everything had been changed, but it had all been done by a force that had simply evaporated. There was, you will recall, nobody in Germany after 1945 who had *ever* been a Nazi. I knew exactly one man who admitted it, and it was startling.

The force of the present book, which has stirred up considerable attention in the author's native land, is that it evokes the seductive power of that dream, its penetration into, its intermingling with the daily round of ordinary life and the gradual realization of the horror of the captivity once the evil had taken firm hold of reality and nothing could be done. It is an astonishingly successful evocation, done with great verbal and pictorial economy and precision, of the way mammoth events and small-scale personal life converged to form the same world, so that there was not even an escape from public into a private sphere. And finally, it is a memorial to the author's mother who, even though herself mesmerized by the force of that repellent and yet magnetic dream, and even though herself regarding it as having something of the quality of fatedness, nonetheless refused to be paralyzed *morally* by it. And because of that refusal, the book is a personal testimony to the always all-but-lost and yet enduring strength of humaneness in the presence of evil. To see something ghastly

coming with all too great a clarity and yet to defy it not so much on political as on moral grounds, is one way to be truly human.

The author, Wendelgard von Staden, whose husband was to become ambassador to the U.S. between 1973 and '79 and who had a diplomatic career in her own right, was born in 1925. Her parents owned a small farm not far from Stuttgart. They were, in a word, impoverished aristocracy who had to work the land with their own hands. They were deeply in debt, and the mother would get up at 4.30am to drive to market and sell their vegetables. The consciousness of class structure and social differentiation is at once present and yet not important. They were nobles, but they worked like ordinary, poor farmers and lived among them. They were on the land, in a firmly traditional small rural setting, yet the city and the bureaucratic organization that made Germany such a formidable power were only minutes away. It was, in a way then, a family that embodied or at least was in touch with much of the variety of the German population except the industrial proletariat - not typical (who is?) but something of a social microcosm nonetheless. Except in one respect: her father's brother was Konstantin von Neurath, one of those conservatives who had agreed to join the Nazi government in 1933 and was Hitler's foreign minister until 1937, and later became governor of occupied Bohemia and Moravia and was sentenced to a long prison term at the Nuremberg trials.

Early life was poor, yet idyllic: the depiction has those overtones of rural romanticism and closeness to land, village and tradition that has played so heavy a part in the ideology of the German past and certainly in the ideology of the German past which the Nazis exploited: One can almost sense the devotion to the soil, though indeed not to the myth embodied in the Nazi slogan 'Blood and Soil'. This heady mixture is vividly portrayed in an early chapter which English speaking readers may find slightly off-putting. She describes the youth culture of the 1920s and early 30s whose romanticism was so successfully co-opted by the Nazis. Those hiking organizations with their guitars and their German mythology and their mournful songs were ideal grist for the Hitler Youth Organization, a stupendously successful bureaucratic and political invention of enormous importance in building the Nazi war machine. In a conversation I had with Mrs von Staden about the translation, her very first question was whether it conveyed the spirit of those poems and songs, with their curious Wagnerian infatuation with mourning and death. And indeed the spirit of that folk ideology, mixed with the image of soldiers riding away toward death and the slow sweet sadness of it all, that mood of mesmerizing, dream-like unreality, was the most difficult to convey – though the capable translator did her best. But it is easy to see why it was so important to the author. For if one senses *that*, one can also understand how she could as a young girl go to hear the Führer speak in Stuttgart and be absolutely frozen into speechlessness by the figure with the almost fluorescent blue eyes, gazing

at something far away which no-one else could see, and how she, a twelve-year-old, could swear in her heart that she would die for the Führer if that is what he wanted.

One is struck, in the description of this as in virtually every other small vignette, by the extraordinary and extraordinarily effective linguistic economy of the book. It takes very few strokes of the pen to render with powerful vividness and, one judges, faithfulness, a scene or the nub of a conversation; and in every case there is that startling and persuasive coincidence of the small-scale intimate report and its simultaneously paradigmatic character: Two weeping girls, their heads shaved, are led through jeering crowds, the placards on their backs reading, I slept with a Jewish pig, and one remembers endless scenes like it from every side of the conflict, together with the social forces and conflicts, the transiencies?. In the preface to the English edition, the author stressed that she had not written a novel or a short story but simply an account – a report. The verbal economy goes hand in hand with what, for want of a better expression, I can only call a lowering of the special voice, a deliberate self-removal of the author's guiding hand. There is nothing impersonal in this book, nothing that is not strained through her personal experience, and yet her style and mood combine to force the reader to be directly engaged with the texture of the described persons and events. A friend of mine aptly said on reading the book that, 'this seemingly straightforward "documentary" style masks a fine literary sensibility'. It is perhaps a paradox, but it is nonetheless the case that the form of the book forces on into a personal engagement with its substance precisely by the powerful understatement of the interior life that underwent these experiences. It was perhaps for that reason that the editor of the major German publication *Die Zeit*, a contemporary of the author now in her mid-fifties, said that no other book evoked the atmosphere of that time so vividly, or the ordinary German's experience of it so reliably.

It is well to remember that millions of non-Nazi Germans greeted the advent of Hitler to power as a time of national renewal, that to an extent - reluctantly, temporarily and confusedly – even the author's strong, politically conscious, Social Democratic mother is caught up in the appeal of it. But then one sees with the curious mixture of inevitability and persuasiveness of a tragic drama how the seeds of evil flower, how the romantic illusions are dispelled – the dawning recognition that the dream had been a nightmare all along. It is striking that there is not a word about the Jews until well into the book, but then, when the moment of recognition comes, it comes with the sense that this was the heart of the matter all along, even though one had not seen it or seen it only fragmentarily in a variety of separate instances up till then. But now the whole of Nazism is laid bare and is of a piece. In his last book, on the SS, Albert Speer details some of the internal conflicts of the organization, especially the cold-blooded arguments whether the policy of racial

extermination was to be carried out consistently or whether able-bodied Jews were at least temporarily to be used for slave labor. Von Staden describes how, after her return to the family farm in 1944, part of the land is expropriated - a hidden valley on which, after a rocket factory has been started on adjacent territory, a 'special camp' is constructed. In what will for most readers be the climactic part of the book, the family discovers the meaning of the term 'special camp'. They have been ordered to supply some beans and straw to the camp, and the mother had said that since they didn't have enough workers, some of the prisoners would have to come and collect the stuff.

There is a terrible scene in which Mrs. von Neurath orders potatoes to be cooked for the prisoners and they, in crazed starvation, fight each other for the contents of the boiling pot that had been spilled on the ground. 'They are Jews,' says one of the guards, 'subhumans. You can see that for yourself.'

The rescue of the prisoners - Jews, but others also - becomes an obsession with the mother and she plots, at once unsuccessfully and at considerable risk to herself, not only how to supply them but how to save them from the SS once the inevitable retreat from the advancing allied armies will set in.

It is perhaps something of a betrayal of a commentator's job simply to summarize the book he is supposed to introduce, but in this case it is inevitable, since the sheer, stark descriptive power of the book is its strength together with the fact that it is utterly bereft of all individual or collective self-glorification, excuse-making or even explanation, and of all inquiry into the subtleties, terror and ambiguity of one's own internal reaction. Description is all, yet only because the passion of moral accuracy controls the whole and all the details.

We are witnessing a whole raft of such remembrances published right now, by people in their fifties and sixties. Not that there has not been a steady trickle of them right along, but in the last few years it seems to have widened into a river. Why now, one asks? Is it in part that this is the time when enough psychic distance has been gained? So that one can now confront better than before the fact that one *must* come to terms with the chasm between before that time and since then, the chasm made so specially deep by the dream-like absurd quality of those days that demand an accounting even or especially if it is true that one cannot find an adequate explanation?

And what part does guilt play? Will we ever know - survivors guilt is after all a notorious phenomenon. Yet I think that in this case this latter type of question may finally be fruitless.²

¹ Oxford: OUP, 1975.

² After this, the manuscript dissolves into notes.