

# Foreword

The famed director of the film *Shoah*, Claude Lanzmann, bitterly insisted that there can be no explanation for the Holocaust. He echoed the line from a Primo Levi story, in which an SS guard at Auschwitz declares to a prisoner who asks for an explanation of the misery all around him, “There is no ‘why’ here.” Indeed, it appears that there can be no comprehensible explanation for the Holocaust. It was as indifferent to human suffering as an earthquake that indiscriminately swallows lives. But unlike an earthquake, with its blind remorselessness, the *Shoah* was conceived and carried out by human beings who could see into the eyes and hear the cries of those they willfully destroyed.

How do we then come to terms with the Holocaust? At the most specific level of historical analysis, we might infer that the majority of the German people were so intoxicated with Hitler’s renewal of their national pride in the early years of his regime, and so terrified of him and his henchmen in the later years, that they simply were pushed down a brutally tragic path. Or that German society at that time was so unusually prone to accept authority and so poisoned by anti-Semitism that Hitler’s fanaticism overpowered any opposition. We might consequently conclude that the Holocaust says nothing about *us* —that *it could not happen here*. We want to believe that the Holocaust does not derive from anything inherent in the human condition. We can therefore insist that

the human beings who perpetrated it were thoroughly evil, so unlike us that we need not give their behavior any more thought than we expect predatory animals to show kindness to their prey. We confidently proclaim that *we* would never, could never, do what *they* did, nor would those we know and love.

But the Holocaust is not the only time that human beings have been so relentlessly malevolent to other human beings. It is only the worst, most horrific of such episodes in its scale, not its kind. Human history presents us with an endless, gruesome parade of massacres and genocides. Alexander the Great, tutored as a boy by Aristotle, the author of what is arguably the most renowned text on ethics in history, burned the city of Tyre to the ground, crucified its men and sold its women and children into slavery. Hulagu Khan's massacre in 1258 of Baghdad left grizzly stacks of human heads around the city; according to some reports, the size of its population did not recover until the last century. The bones of a generation bleaching in immense killing fields stretching across the Cambodian landscape, and the images of young Rwandan men hunting down their former neighbors and hacking them to death with sun-glinted, blood stained machetes are but two of many recent reminders of genocide. The ghastly historical record is as endless as it is merciless.

When burdened by knowledge of History's villainies, we cannot evade fearful questions. Is it possible that that this barbarism reflects some capacity within all of us? How do we come to terms with the realization that genocides have not been perpetrated by depraved lunatics, with bizarre life stories and opaque eyes that can't focus, like sharks', but that they are carried out by ordinary human beings? Only if the world were starkly simple would we be let off the hook from having to contemplate things so disturbing that they resemble the calibration of evil in hell.

In facing History's record, we often feel stunned and lost. Some resort to a resigned nihilism, in which, without a fixed moral order, "all things *really* are possible," as Dostoyevsky feared. A few others might slide into a bloodlust that bellows a deadly rage signaled by an impulse in

our limbic brain as a way to protect us from victimhood—or give vent to revenge. Most of us simply move on, unwilling and unable to look back and reflect on what lies behind us and in us, and which, even more terrifyingly, may foreshadow what lies before us. But in some interior chamber of ourselves, in the rational mind or in the mysterious longing of the heart, we strain for comprehension. The past and the future compel us to discover why human beings commit intentional, shattering slaughter—and then to use that understanding to subdue violence and to learn humanity.

This remarkable novel offers an attempt at answering these questions, not through analysis, but through the unfolding of ordinary lives lived in a world where horror happened on an unprecedented scale. Doug Skopp presents the Holocaust through the experiences of a Nazi medical doctor, Johann Brenner. Brenner is a fictitious character, but through Skopp's meticulous historical research, he is a composite of very real figures—doctors who should have been a bulwark against the cruelty of the Holocaust but who, nevertheless, participated in its torturous medical research and helped to perfect its barbaric efficiency. Skopp is not interested in reductive and easy interpretations. He requires that we see the world as Brenner and the others in his circle lived it.

As we struggle to comprehend Brenner's moral universe and, as easy answers are denied to us, what are we left with? Like Schopenhauer, Skopp does not want to "curse or judge but to understand." Through a novelist's eye, he reveals the skein of forces that press on an ordinary life: professional ambitions; needs for esteem and belonging; the desire to emulate or obey those charismatic and self-certain figures who would shape us for their own ends; the anesthetizing affects of family crises; the self-serving construction of historical memory; and inattention to the best convictions of the good people who love us. If we allow it, these forces can draw us into a forbidding indifference to the suffering of others.

In limpid, beautifully crafted prose, the novel weaves these themes together in ways that are rich with detail and nuance. Psychological, sociological or historical analyses by themselves can be too didactic,

somehow too incomplete as our only interpretive lenses, when faced with an event as resoundingly inconceivable in the magnitude of its protracted, insensate terror as the Holocaust. What is called for, and what Skopp provides, is a kind of indirection—the circling around and around until, with enough glimpses from enough different angles and enough intricate insights, we gain awareness of how ordinary people actually lived lives that led them to become so ultimately disconnected from the persons they intended to be. Gradually, we acquire a sense of how indifference can take root and ossify until it defines a life—an ordinary life of a normal human being, not merely the life of a one-dimensional beast to whom we cannot relate: the life of a person we might know, even as we know our own. This novel is powerful in the way it constructs this awareness and in the unexpected, haunting, and richly symbolic unfolding of its final moments.

*Shadows Walking* could only have been written by a person like Doug Skopp. By the acclaim of admiring friends, colleagues and generations of students, he is a quintessentially gentle and profoundly good man. Yet he has spent much of the last twenty-five years staring into the smoldering pit of suffering that is the Holocaust. In his case, this is not the reflection of a morbid preoccupation or obsession. It has been an act of bravery. He has sought the understanding the world needs, but may not want. His work has led him away from the human tendency to easy condemnation of others, especially those who commit terrible wrongs, which, as he has tried to teach and implies here, only lays the foundation and the deluded justification for more futile hatred and more genocides.

Skopp's sorrowful but determined quest has led him to understand tragedy in its deepest sense. Tragedy in which the divided individual human heart can engender the destruction of others, as it leads to its own destruction. In this ancient understanding of tragic destiny, well-meaning, idealistic individuals can become the authors of the collapse of the world they share with others. This is, paradoxically, an insight that can lead human beings on a journey toward a cautionary understanding of human responsibility and prepare them for the arduous construction of the essential ethical strength to stand against an inward drift to indiffer-

ence. The demands of ethical courage require us to engage in a perilous trek around our own ambitions and fears and to open our eyes “to the child dying at our feet,” as Nikos Kazantzakis vividly portrayed.

Skopp opens us to the possibility that empathy, not retribution, lights the only hopeful path to justice. To some, this path, no doubt, seems unnaturally demanding and emotionally much less satisfying than a calculated, formal spasm of assault on a despised person or group whom we judge to be the cause of our discontents. Such spasms of assault frame the disconsolate record of history. But, the more worthy injunction implied in this novel is to understand and overcome our own human capacity to allow a frozen darkness to engulf our hearts, leaving us as lost in the ice of indifference as the inhabitants of Dante's Ninth Circle of Hell. Finally, this awareness requires that we be acutely attentive to the good people in our world who possess the moral clarity to save us from failure in this task, and who can redeem us if we do fail. We must learn to recognize that, like Johann's wife, Helga, these individuals may not be dominating or overpowering, but they are as necessary to the meaning of our lives as a lover who whispers truths in a quiet voice.

Perhaps the mosaic of subtle understanding that Doug Skopp offers is, in the end, the most for which we can hope. But his intention is just that—to leave us with some hope and a decent purpose—in respect and compassion for others—to which we can commit ourselves.

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