

BOOKS IN REVIEW/75

enough beguiled by his White House prerogatives. Or one can conclude that Safire's distortion, though real, is not deliberate: his position limited what he knew; as a writer he took too seriously the sense of high purpose that the administration's speeches sometimes expressed; and he was not only a significant repository of the decency that existed in the White House but perhaps misinterpreted others' motives in light of his own. Or, finally, one can conclude that Safire is right—that in thinking about Nixon's administration one is obliged to take into account not only Watergate but things unconnected and contradictory to it. Under ordinary circumstances, this minimal assertion might not sound much like partisan advocacy on Safire's part. In the case of Richard Nixon, its acceptance would already be a kind of partisan victory.

Treblinka

INTO THAT DARKNESS: FROM MERCY KILLING TO MASS MURDER. By GITTA SERENY. McGraw-Hill. 308 pp. \$9.95.

Reviewed by DOROTHY RABINOWITZ

IN 1970, the Düsseldorf court sentenced Franz Stangl to life imprisonment for his role as commandant of Treblinka where, it was estimated, a total of 900,000 Jews had been murdered in World War II, virtually half of them during Stangl's tenure. Nor had Stangl's earlier career been an innocuous one. An Austrian police chief, he had advanced by 1940 to the position of superintendent at one of the Nazi "institutes" which carried out the government-ordered murder of the mentally ill, the retarded, and others whose continued existence represented a blight on Aryan racial purity. After a six-month spell as commandant of Sobibor, an extermination camp in the Lublin district where, from the beginning of its operations in early 1942 to the fall of 1943, a quarter of a million Jews were killed, Stangl took charge of

DOROTHY RABINOWITZ, a regular contributor, is the author of *The Other Jews* and co-author of *Home Life*.

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Treblinka, which was then in urgent need of his services. By September 1942 the regular arrival of great masses of Polish Jews had caused the extermination machinery to fall behind schedule, creating confusion beyond measure. When Stangl took command, conditions were such that the corpses of dead Jews littered the entrance to the camp, while whole trains full of men, women, and children sat on the tracks for days at a time before those still alive could be unloaded and taken to the gas chamber.

It was to this chaos that Stangl brought order: he speeded up the killings and saw to it that corpses no longer littered the station and that the clothes and goods of the Jews were properly disposed of instead of being allowed to lie hip-deep on the ground. In addition, around Christmas of 1942 he ordered the construction of a fake clock at the Treblinka railway station, the installation of ticket windows where no tickets were sold, and the painting of signs that said "To Warsaw" and "To Bialystok"—train connections that did not exist—in order to ensure that arriving Jews would believe they were at a regular transit station, where nothing unusual was going on, and thus go peacefully from the train to the ramps that led straight to the gas chambers.

After the war ended, Stangl got out of Europe through the good offices of Bishop Hudal of Rome, one of a number of highly placed Catholic clergymen who devoted their energies to the task of providing escaping SS men with money, false identification papers, and contacts. The Vatican escape route took Stangl and his family to Syria, where they lived quite satisfactorily among other escaped SS men until a morally disquieting event occurred. The Police President of Damascus, who lived with his harem in uncomfortably close proximity to the Stangls, had begun to take too close an interest in their fourteen-year-old daughter. It was enough to make the Stangls pack up and leave for Brazil, which they did with no difficulty, and where they again lived quite well—these, Mrs. Stangl says, were the best years of all for them. Then, in 1967, traced to Brazil by

Simon Wiesenthal, Stangl was arrested and extradited to Germany. He was tried and sentenced to life imprisonment, and a year later, while awaiting the outcome of an appeal, he died in prison of a heart attack (his second).

Between the time of his sentencing and his death Stangl was interviewed at considerable length by Gitta Sereny, a London-based journalist whose articles on the Stangl trial first appeared in the *Daily Telegraph Magazine* in 1967. The result of the prison interviews is a work intended to "penetrate the personality of a man who had been intimately involved with the most total evil our age had produced." It was important to her, Miss Sereny further observes, "to assess the circumstances which led up to his involvement for once not from our point of view but from *his*." It is entirely possible that Miss Sereny is unaware, for instance, of the appalling wealth of material on the circumstances that led to Adolf Eichmann's career as told from his point of view during the 1961 Eichmann trial, or the autobiography of Rudolf Hoess, commandant of Auschwitz, but the "for once" is worth remarking, for it sounds the first note of an ingenuousness that informs this work from beginning to end.

To GET at the roots of Stangl's involvement and to penetrate his personality, Miss Sereny interviewed a great number of people, yet despite all the conversation recorded in this book not much light is provided either on Stangl's character or on that of anyone else. Miss Sereny contends that those she interviewed sacrificed their peace of mind and told their stories with extraordinary honesty, a belief difficult to sustain in the face of the evidence here presented. The fact is that people who were once a part of history often consider the interview a boon, a means of reemergence from the anonymity of ordinary life, a means of psychic revitalization. And it is up to the interviewer to resist the blandishments of his subjects if he wishes to get beyond the inevitably self-serving version of history they present him with. Miss Sereny, as she notes in her preface, "ap-

proached the research for this book with determination to question but not to hurt"—a commendable if not wholly advisable state of mind, given her subject. In fact she enters into a benevolent partnership with everyone she interviews, and all but distributes awards for cooperation:

Renate, the Stangl's middle daughter . . . is slim, blond, with a delicate and vulnerable face that looked, when I met her, much younger than her thirty-three years.

Theresa Stangl [Franz Stangl's wife] is small, blond, and attractive. She was sixty-four years old when I visited her in Brazil but looked far younger.

Miss Sereny carries on at some length in this fashion each time a new interviewee is introduced. There are a number of questions one might raise with regard to this propensity, but the one that matters is whether this is a proper critical disposition in which to undertake an inquiry into the nature of any man, much less that of the commandant of Treblinka.

Miss Sereny does try valiantly to break into the pattern of abstraction and denial which characterizes Stangl's attitude toward his victims. Not an unsentimental man, Stangl could sometimes recall a friendly exchange with this or that Jew whom he remembered from Treblinka. "But what happened to him?" his interviewer would ask, hoping by means of suggestion to make Stangl say something that showed he could connect with the facts. "Did you ever see him again?" Invariably, Stangl would reply to the first question that he did not know what happened to the person, which was a lie, and then to the second, "No, I never saw him again," which was, of course, the truth. Stangl never failed to sound faintly puzzled in making these replies, if Miss Sereny's recording of them is accurate: and not surprisingly, for whatever his interviewer meant to accomplish by them, such questions must have been a puzzle to one whose normal frame of mind with regard to his work was no different, in 1970, from what it had been in 1942. Killing Jews had been Stangl's work; that

was what the Jews were sent to Treblinka for. To ask him to "relate to" the fate of a particular Jew was to ask him to make a special to-do about something that had been a most ordinary—a natural—fact: it was the business of the Jews of Treblinka to die.

Toward the end of the book, Miss Sereny records the details of her last visit to Stangl, during which she brought him some homemade soup. They had gotten to be friends, she observes, and since this was to be her last visit,

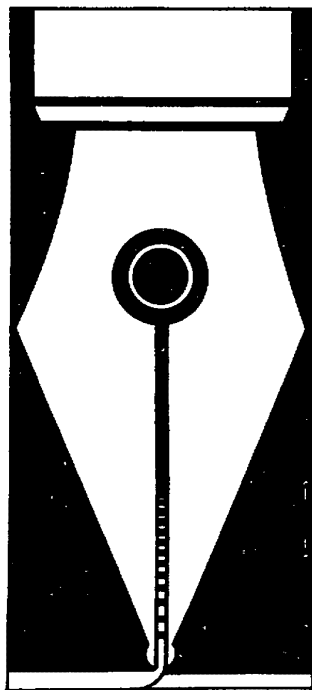
she pressed Stangl to come to some conclusion about himself and the things he had done: for at his trial, and thereafter, he had always maintained that his conscience was clear, that God alone knew the sort of man he was. Finally, at this last interview, Stangl's body sagged as he pronounced some words on the question of his guilt: "My guilt is that I am still here. . . . That is my guilt." Some nineteen hours later, he was dead, a circumstance Miss Sereny ascribes to her success in making Stangl face up

to the truth. "I think he died because he had finally, however briefly, faced himself and told the truth; it was a monumental effort to reach that fleeting moment when he became the man he should have been."

IN FACT, no one who reads this final scene can miss the transparent falsity of Stangl's admission of guilt, or the reason behind it. Not unaware of what was expected of him—the man who salvaged Treblinka from chaos and administered it at peak efficiency was no fool—he found it in himself to acquiesce wearily and say a few words about guilt as a final blandishment to his interviewer. A man who for twenty-five years was capable of enjoying all the benefits of freedom, prosperity, and a happy family life after the deeds he accomplished at Treblinka would not be so easily undone by the utterance of a few words.

In offering extensive testimony of Stangl's family life and domestic conditions—his daughters and his wife loved him dearly—Miss Sereny no doubt intends to suggest of Stangl that this too was a man, involved though he had been in an evil so great. That is the *raison d'être* of this work, and it is a paltry thing beside the fact that in the course of his career, Stangl presided over the murder of hundreds of thousands of innocent men, women, and children, and did so with all the skill and energy at his command. Five thousand Jews arrived at a time at the Treblinka station; they had been kept in sealed trains for days without air, food, water, or sanitary facilities. When they got inside the camps, dazed and exhausted, SS men fell on them with their whips and ran them into the gas chambers. Overseer and chief authority on the scene was Franz Stangl, striding about and dressed for the day's work, as always, in an impeccable white riding habit. It is, indeed, necessary to learn what makes the character of men like Stangl, but it will not be from their mouths, or the mouths of their wives, children, or sisters-in-law, or from interviewers who have no wish to hurt anyone, that we will learn it.

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