

THE STANGL CASE: PERCEPTIONS AND MEMORIES
OF NAZI-PERPETRATORS AND JEWISH SURVIVORS
OF THE HOLOCAUST

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses three major problems in the legal proceedings against Holocaust perpetrators after the destruction of the Nazi system in Europe: firstly the long period after the first major trials against them in Nuremberg in 1946 and the following years; secondly the effects of an over-twenty-year-long interruption of public discussions, self-victimizing in legal proceedings in Germany (the banished Germans) and Austria (as a whole), the strategies for denial on the one hand and for remembering as well as remembrance on the other hand; thirdly the influence of personal interests and personal experiences of judges, advocates and juries in proceedings with interrogations, and finally the passing of judgment on the perpetrators to give full or at least partial satisfaction to the surviving victims.

Key words: Nazism, war crimes, Holocaust, death camps, post-war trials, Franz Stangl, Austria

IL CASO STANGL: PERCEZIONI E MEMORIE DEI CRIMINALI NAZISTI E
DEGLI EBREI SOPRAVVISSUTI ALL'OLOCAUSTO

SINTESI

La relazione riguarda tre problemi fondamentali nei procedimenti contro i responsabili dell'Olocausto dopo la caduta del nazismo in Europa: i processi ai criminali di guerra nazisti, a partire da quello di Norimberga del 1946; le conseguenze della più che ventennale sospensione delle discussioni pubbliche, l'autovittimismo presente nei processi in Germania (tedeschi esiliati) e in Austria (nella sua interezza), la strategia del diniego da una parte e del ricordo dall'altra; gli interessi personali e le esperienze dei giudici, degli avvocati e delle giurie nei procedimenti con

interrogatorio e, infine, le condanne dei criminali nazisti, con le quali i sopravvissuti hanno avuto piena o, quantomeno, parziale riparazione.

Parole chiave: nazismo, delitti di guerra, olocausto, campi di concentramento, processi postbellici, Franz Stangl, Austria

Preamble

I started my research on Austrian participation in Operation Reinhard (*Aktion Reinhard*) a long time ago. Part of it consists of information from the capacious court records of the trial against Franz Stangl in Düsseldorf, Germany. I studied the records first in the office of the prosecuting attorney, and eventually in the regional archives of Düsseldorf. Both institutions refused to produce photostats of the documents. I do not know why they allowed me to transcribe the papers; but as they did, I typed them into my computer, a task that took a number of years. Every year I spent a week or more in Düsseldorf. And angrily I considered these working conditions an extraordinary disadvantage. But gradually, while reading and transcribing slowly, I realized that in this way I learned more and better about how to follow the winding paths of memory, oblivion and secrecy. Therefore, I now feel prepared to tell you more about the texts produced by the court as well as about my experience regarding the remains of the camps in Poland.

What was operation Reinhard?

Operation Reinhard was a cover term used by the Nazis after 1942 for physical annihilation of the European Jews in German occupied Poland and for the economic utilization of their assets. The operation began with the expulsion of the Jews from their homes, continued with the exploitation of their labour force, and ended with the expropriation of their properties and real estate. Deportations usually took place in the same way. Police surrounded a Jewish settlement, shot the old, the children and the sick, transported the others by train to a death camp, where men and women were separated and detained in a labour camp. Undressed, they were killed by gas, buried or burned, unless they were part of the group of deportees temporarily required to work in the camp, sometime after which they underwent the process of extermination.

Odilo Globocnik, in Lublin, a leading Austrian Nazi and former Gauleiter of Vienna was in command of the entire operation of expropriation and mass murder. He built three camps, one in Belzec, the second in Sobibor and the third in Treblinka. Their "killing capacity" was 60,000 persons a day.

After the operation was brought to a close, Globocnik and his staff moved to the Adriatic Coast to continue their work of expropriating and deporting the Jews, as well as fighting and killing the partisans in Risiera San Sabba in Trieste. In Trieste, Globocnik wrote his final report on Operation Reinhard for Himmler, claiming that he had handed over Jewish assets worth nearly 180 million Reichsmarks: cash and foreign currency, precious metals and jewellery; yet the greatest value from clothes (StAN, 1).

Who is Franz Stangl?

Franz Stangl was one of the commanders of the Operation Reinhard death camps. He was born in Upper Austria in 1908. Trained as a regular policeman, he began his career as a member of the state police in Austria. Before long he was collaborating with the Nazi underground, and after the Nazis annexed Austria in 1938 he continued his service with the Gestapo. Having spent some time involved in the persecution of Jews in Austria and Czechoslovakia, he came to feel slighted by his new German colleagues. So he moved to T 4, the institution established by Hitler to exterminate the physically and mentally handicapped, and eventually took part in the murders in Hartheim, near Linz. So in Globocnik's perspective he was qualified to command first the Sobibor and then the Treblinka death camps. After the operation was discontinued, he accompanied Globocnik to Italy, in September 1943, where he continued contributing to anti-Jewish activities and also became involved in the fight against the partisans, especially in Udine. After the unconditional surrender by Nazi Germany, he returned to Austria. The judicial authorities there imprisoned him for his participation in the Hartheim murders. With the support of the famous Nazi bishop in Rome, Hudal, he fled to Syria and eventually to Brazil. There he lived undisturbed with his wife and three children until he was arrested in 1967 and extradited to Düsseldorf, Germany. The Düsseldorf court sentenced Stangl to life in prison in April, 1971. But even before the sentence came into force—there were delays over jurisdiction, objections brought by the Supreme Court of Brazil—Stangl died of a heart attack.

The trial

After Stangl's arrest in Brazil, three countries claimed his extradition: Germany, Austria and Poland. Poland's demand was based on Moscow's Declaration of 1943. At that time the Great Powers agreed that all war criminals would be tried in the countries where they had committed their crimes. In Stangl's case, this was Poland. The Austrian demand was based on the crimes committed in Hartheim and on the fact that he was still an Austrian citizen. But the Supreme Court of Brazil decided in favour of the demand by the Germans, who raised the argument that he had commit-

ted the crimes as a German citizen. And there was yet another argument. The Stangl trial would not be the first in Germany against the criminals of Operation Reinhard or Treblinka. Trials had already proceeded in 1950 and 1951, and Kurt Franz, Stangl's deputy in Treblinka, had been sentenced in Düsseldorf only a few years before Stangl's arrest.

Quite some time, however, passed between the early forties and the late sixties, which caused some great problems during the investigations. Furthermore, only a few Jewish victims survived the death camps, most by escaping before or during the uprising in the Treblinka camp in August, 1943.

So in general the information about the situation in the camps was derived from interrogations of the German staff. Most of them confessed their participation and described, in detail, the annihilation system in the camp. But they usually claimed that they had been under unavoidable pressure and of course contested any personal guilt for their behaviour. The Austrians, however, often used a different strategy. They completely denied their involvement in mass murders or their knowledge of them. The best example in this respect was Globocnik's personal adjutant, Ernst Lerch from Carinthia, who was never taken to trial. Franz Stangl did not deny the mass murders at Treblinka, but similar to the Austrians' strategy during the trials he denied his personal responsibility.

In order to prosecute the defendants it was absolutely necessary to prove that the accused had been personally involved in the crime. The examinations focused on a questionnaire that would allow them to detect killings that could be proven by one or more persons, and to learn, furthermore, if they were committed with particular cruelty. This method left a great number of crimes out of the examination. For instance, we rarely find more than just brief mentions of rape or other types of assault on women, who as victims fade in comparison with others, victims of more severe types of cruelty under examination.

Perception and memory

There are no uninvolved witnesses in this case, except perhaps the Polish stationmaster who counted the trains departing for the Treblinka camp. As mentioned previously, the perpetrators were willing to confess to the crime in general, but they were reluctant to talk about distinct cases and about their personal involvement in them. Some had been killed during anti-partisan actions in Istria (for example Wirth, the chief of staff for Operation Reinhard, or Reichleitner, the commander of Sobibor after Stangl, who died in 1944 near Rijeka), and quite a few of them committed suicide after the war and during or after the legal proceedings against them (Eberl, Stangl's predecessor, died in 1948; Bolender and Höfle, the commanding chiefs of the deportation of Warsaw Jews to Treblinka, died in the '60s while awaiting trial).

Most of the Jewish victims did not live to witness the trials, just like the Roma and others killed in Treblinka. Of the estimated (at least) 700,000 people killed in Treblinka the prosecuting attorneys in Germany found only some 40 survivors.

The Jews required to work in death camps (*Arbeitsjuden*) could not move about freely within the camp. They always lived under the tight control of the commanding chief of the group in which they were integrated; nevertheless, they managed to communicate with each other and remain informed as to what was necessary moment by moment in order to survive. As they did not know the names of the Germans and the Austrians, they usually used nicknames, invented according to certain qualities the Jews associated with them. Deputy Chief Franz, for example, was called Lalka, which in Polish means "puppet." Then there was a chief called Whitehair and another one nicknamed Crookedmouth. The first attempt to connect Stangl to the function of chief of camp failed, because it turned out that the representative delegated to directly manage the working Jews was his deputy; consequently Stangl's presence was not conspicuous enough for the people to remember him.

Contrary to the Jews, the German staff moved freely in the different parts of the camp, although some of them specialized in certain tasks and were mostly present where that task was performed: arrival of the victims by train, withdrawal of their last assets (even stripping the people of their clothes), killing the disabled in the so-called Lazaretto, supervising the work of the Ukrainians and the Jews at the Gas Chambers and after. The commanders of Treblinka, Stangl and Franz, always denied their involvement in the direct action of murder. Franz insisted that his only obligations concerned the squad on guard, while Stangl maintained that his responsibility was only to assure the delivery of the Jewish assets – which he evasively referred to as "material" – to Globocnik.

Of course, there is a great difference between the facts related by the Jewish survivors and those reported by the German and Austrian camp staff. Arrived at the camp in a state of great shock due to the circumstances of transport, the Jews suffered a violent separation from their families or friends and were forced to accept the idea that it was only they (of the entire family) who survived. Immediately after that they had to help their department in sorting what had remained of the dead. They rarely survived after personally witnessing the gassing, recalling only the fact of the usual daily killings.

The Germans related the story of the Jews' arrival in a different way. Nearly all of them insisted that they were not aware of what had been going on in Treblinka, although most of them started their careers as murderers in the Nazi Euthanasia programme. Only the cook confessed that he had heard that Treblinka was not pleasant; but he said he was not involved in any of that. That was his error (LGW, 1). He remembered noticing a terrible smell of decay upon his arrival at Treblinka (LGW, 2). The German and Austrian accounts of Treblinka were full of flashes of cruelty and

terror: Josef Oberhauser recalled a camp full of Jews crying for water. Even Stangl found it terrible to look at all the dead bodies along the railway line. But all these images were altered into technical explanations, such as the following: "The interruptions of the annihilation of the Jews were due to the too small infrastructure, which was not suitable for mass transports." (LGW, 3) Or Stangl: "I was sent to Treblinka by Globocnik as a policeman." He also said: "I sent a hundred thousand Jews to Treblinka. Where did all the material go? Nothing has been sent to Lublin." (LGW, 4)

Franz Matthes recalled a situation in front of the gas chambers. The men entered the chambers without resistance, he said, then the doors closed and he was looking inside to prevent re-opening the door by mistake before the men and women in the chamber were dead (LGW, 5). The victims of the killings were the Jews who were no longer able to work (LGW, 6) and those infected by typhus fever (LGW, 7).

Final remarks

During the legal proceedings the image of the dead slowly faded away. The killed and buried or burnt Jews gradually lost their individuality in this unique fog of death that enveloped them all and left them with no name or personality. The small number of surviving victims, on the other hand, remained under the constant mental pressure of having to recall and relive their time at the death camp, being unable to forget.

The other side, the perpetrators, mostly pretended not to recall the events in question (although some of them could not escape from nor tolerate the memory, and consequently committed suicide). And not only did they attempt to avoid the recollection and hide their real knowledge about the time at the death camps, they even engaged in a process of self-victimizing; as for example Stangl, declaring to the prosecuting attorney in his interrogation: "Today nobody can imagine what I had to go through mentally during my activity in Sobibor and Treblinka" (NHW, 1).

But the legal proceedings against the Nazi perpetrators could have had the effect of establishing victims' rights, creating at least an awareness of wrongdoing. There were German members of the Treblinka staff who accepted their guilt and remembered their awareness even there (LGW, 8; LGW, 9). But others like Erwin Lambert tried to deny it: "I am not guilty of any crimes in Treblinka, except perhaps that of constructing the basement for the great gas chambers. I had nothing to do with other things taking place at the camp, I was only the chief of the construction squad" (LGW, 10).

Otto Stadie provided another proof of awareness of the personnel responsible for the killing or assisting of the killers, as he confessed: "The Ukrainians drank very much. I too drank very much. It was the whole situation that I had drunken there" (LGW, 11). And, as stated previously, we cannot forget the number of leading perpetrators who had taken their own lives.

Stangl, on the other hand, did not hesitate to make an attempt at conquering his memory. Gitta Sereny, a Jewish journalist exiled from Austria after the "Anschluss" of 1938, who had long talks with Stangl in prison, asked him in one of the meetings if he could ascribe any meaning to mass murder. Stangl answered: "Yes ... I am sure that it was by higher will. Perhaps the Jews needed such an enormous impulse to join together, to create a real nation, to identify themselves with each other" (Sereny, 1997, 426).

Although surely outrageous, Stangl's words did not create a scandal and were only published by Sereny after Stangl's death. But indeed they proved a sort of continuity to his ideas, which were in complete harmony with the Nazi program of murder and in complete contrast with what he had said in his defence during the legal proceedings. He insisted that he had been a victim himself in guiding the real victims to a destination that otherwise in his opinion they never would have reached. There were no victims therefore – the murderers worked as the instruments of destiny, and the Jews again became the eternal profiteers. They were resurrected in Stangl's mind when they formed a modern nation. Annihilating twice the victims they had killed, the perpetrators were ready shake off their responsibility and guilt.

PRIMER STANGL: POGLED IN SPOMINI NA NACISTIČNE HUDODELCE IN JUDE, KI SO PREŽIVELI HOLOKAVST

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POVZETEK

Referat razpravlja o treh poglavitnih problemih v pravnih postopkih proti nacističnim hudodelcem po zlomu nacizma v Evropi: sojenje proti nemškim nacističnim vojnim zločincem v Nürnbergu od leta 1946 dalje; posledice dvajsetletne ali celo daljše prekinitve v javnih diskusijah, samoviktimizacijskih dogajanj v Nemčiji (izgnani Nemci) in Avstriji (kot celota) na osnovi sojenj, strategije zanikanja na eni strani in strategije pomnenja na drugi strani; osebni interesi in izkušnje sodnikov, advokatov in porote v pravnih postopkih z zasliševanji, skupaj z obsodbami, izrečenimi nad nacističnimi hudodelci, s katerimi naj bi preživele žrtve dobile popolno ali vsaj delno zadoščenje.

Franz Stangl se je rodil v Gornji Avstriji leta 1908. Po opravljeni osnovni šoli se je šel učiti za tkalca, a se je prav kmalu pridružil policiji in se začel uveljavljati kot član politične policije med avstrofašističnim obdobjem kot tudi po nacističnem prevzemu oblasti v Avstriji.

Leta 1940 je sodeloval pri umoru psihiatričnih pacientov v Hartheimu pri Linzu, leta 1942 pa postal poveljnik taborišč smrti Sobibor in Treblinka, vse to v okviru tako imenovane "Aktion Reinhard", masovnega poboja judov v okupirani Poljski pod vodstvom Odila Globocnika. Po tamkajšnjem končanem iztrebljevalskem programu je bil jeseni 1943 premeščen v okupirano Italijo in tam nadaljeval s svojimi antijudovskimi posli. Med "Aktion Reinhard" je bil odgovoren za umor več kot sedemsto tisoč judov.

Po brezpogojni vdaji nacistične Nemčije se je vrnil v Avstrijo, a je še pred začetkom sodnih procesov pobegnil v Sirijo in nato v Brazilijo. Tam je živel vse do tedaj, ko so ga odkrili in odpeljali v Nemčijo, naravnost na sodišče v Düsseldorfu. Po razmeroma naglem sojenju je bil obsojen na dosmrtno ječo, a je že po dveh mesecih v ječi umrl.

Med pravnimi postopki, še posebej pa med glavno sodno obravnavo, so bili zaslišani judje, ki so preživeli strahote v Treblinki, da bi tam pričali o dogajanjih v taborišču smrti, tako kot so bili zaslišani tudi Stangl in nekateri njegovi taboriščni sodelavci, ki pa so med sojenjem predstavili povsem svojo različico o lastnem sodelovanju pri ropanju in množičnem umoru judovskih zapornikov. Njihovi tako različni pogledi na tedanje dogodke in njihova enako različna pričanja niso bila le posledica dejstva, da so hudodelci nagnjeni k minimiziranju svoje odgovornosti, marveč tudi posledica različnih vlog, ki so jih morali igrati v taborišču, tako kot tudi različnih načinov pomnjenja in dušenja lastnega spomina.

Ključne besede: nacizem, vojni zločini, holokavst, koncentracijska taborišča, povojni sodni procesi, Franz Stangl, Avstrija

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