THE WEIGHT ON A CONSCIENCE

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***A Long Hot Day*, by Anne Ranasinghe, English Writers Cooperative of Sri Lanka. 183 pp., Rs.500**

Half a century after Anneliese Katz, then a 13-year-old girl, fled from the German town of Essen to England at the outbreak of the second World War to become the only survivor of the Holocaust in her family, a group of students from a school in Cologne faxed her a list of questions. The previous day they had watched a screening of the film, *Visitation*. The film, directed by one of Germany's foremost documentary directors, Michael Lentz, was based on Anneliese Katz's (now Anne Ranasinghe) childhood in Essen. As their last question to her, the students asked Anne:Why do you want to talk about the past?

In part of her answer to the question, Ranasinghe recounted an episode that took place during the filming of Claude Lanzmann's film, Shoah. The film has a section on Chelmno, the Polish village where Nazi administrators killed over 400,000 men, women and children with engine exhaust in specially built lorries. The speed of the killing depended on the way the drivers controlled the engines. Many of the people imprisoned in the lorries had not completely suffocated by the time the driver reached the Rzuchow forest, where they were thrown into pits and burned. Ranasinghe told the children:

> Lanzmann had traced one of the drivers who had been in charge of the lorries in Chelmno which were used for gassing people – I told you earlier that my parents died in one of those. Before Lanzmann could interview him the neighbours warned him, so he disappeared, and Lanzmann interviewed the neighbours instead.
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> He said to a good looking woman: "I wonder whether you know who your neighbor is?"
>
> She said, "He is a very good neighbor."
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> Lanzmann asked, "Do you know what he did during the war?"
>
> She said, "That doesn't interest me."
>
> Lanzmann said, "He is responsible for the deaths of 400,000 Jews," and she answered with blinking, "Everybody has his own private life."

Anyone who has lived in big city and encountered the anonymity that it allows, knows that the woman's answer, "Everybody has his own private life." epitomizes her post-modern life and its disinterested approach to the validity of a larger historical reality against a personal truth. In other words, the woman's experience, *her* truth, *her* narrative, *her* personal experience with the lorry driver, in this case his "good neighbourly-ness", subsumed and discounted his role in a historical narrative that is validated by facts, figures and most importantly firsthand accounts (it is not hard to picture this well-groomed woman shrugging her shoulders nonchalantly and saying in response to this paragraph: "That's what they say. They could be lies").

A few years ago, a 23-year-old Sri Lankan student in his first year at a UK university who had come home for his summer holidays contacted me about possible sources for a research paper. He was writing a revisionist history of Hitler's life. That summer, revisionist biographies of Hitler had become one of the hottest controversies in Europe and the US with the release of *The Downfall*, a movie about the last 12 days of Hitler's life. The director, Oliver Hirschbiegel, had based the movie primarily on the memoir by Hitler's secretary, Traudl Junge *Until the Final Hour*. The film won the Hamburg Bambi Prize for the best German film of the year and a Foreign Language film nomination at the Oscars.

The film "humanized" Hitler. It showed a feeble man, kind to his young female secretaries, loving to his German shepherd and full of charm and charisma. It also included most of the main characters in his life such as Eva Braun and the Goebbels, and portrayed each one's heartbreak and pain about the other's decision to commit suicide and their long discussions on how to commit the act. Some viewers of the movie see the depravity behind the entire set-up and the man portrayed. In any case, who *did not know* that Hitler and his officers were human beings? After all, hasn't that always been the real horror behind the Holocaust; that it was ultimately about the level of cruelty that one human being wielded on another, endorsed by a legitimate government?

The critics who opposed the movie took issue not for its portrayal of Hitler as a person but for its focus on aspects in a biography that then de-emphasised the larger impact of the

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subject's life on the world around him. To an audience that is well-read, keenly attuned to the nuances behind the events of the 2nd World War, such a movie would have been another opportunity to, indeed, revise, and give depth to their understanding of Hitler. On the other hand to an audience made up of those such as the young Sri Lankan student who had not even read world history in secondary school, the movie provided a foundation for him to believe his own one-dimensional thesis argument that "Hitler was not that bad." An equivalent closer home would be this: 60 years from 1983 a similar student (say a 23 year-old Britisher or an American) attempts a revisionist paper on the July riots arguing that the political leaders of the early 80s were human beings. Or, to take it to the lengths that revisionist historians have revised the Holocaust, that the '83 riots were, for instance, a collective conspiracy of the Tamil people to blacken the good name of the Sinhala people and a primarily Sinhalese government.

Yet, as American historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. writes in his book, *The Cycles of American History;*

> ...revisionism is an essential part of the process by which history, through the posing of new problems and the investigation of new possibilities, enlarges its perspectives and enriches its insights[1].

A Long Hot Day in which Ranasinghe has included the Cologne students' questions and her responses to them as well as several other essays, must be placed in this process that Schlesinger describes. In the essential and inevitable revision of narratives, where the distance created by the passage of time makes it difficult to understand and perceive an event and an experience, *A Long Hot Day* documents at first hand, one person's unique experience of a horrifying historical event, its aftermath and her response to her world after that. It becomes a vital publication because, as Dr Lakshmi de Silva writes in the preface, it also includes:

> ...two substantial essays by Klaus Harpprecht and Professor Leonard Mars. Harpprecht provides a compact, incisive view of the darker events in Sri Lanka from 1959 to 1989, interwoven with the course of her [Ranasinghe's] life and career, while Mars' paper is not only a meticulous and sensitive exploration but a celebration of her poems....

In other words, Ranasinghe's personal accounts are substantiated and authenticated by two scholars through the meticulous research of one and the literary analysis of the other. The book contains several poems, a significant collection at that, as Prof Mars annexes the poems he examines in the essay at the end of his paper. It also includes several of Ranasinghe's translations of German poems and essays, among them a fascinating account of the life of Oskar Schindler, which she tellingly titles, "The Heroic Non-hero." The book also highlights the uniqueness of Ranasinghe's life. She is the only Jew residing permanently in Sri Lanka. "I landed," she says,

> One glorious morning [in 1952] on an almost paradisiacal island that was graced by bright sunlight, a calm blue sea and golden beaches; a landscape of brilliantly covered blossoms, vast stretches of paddy lands, coconut groves, a central hill massif of verdant tea plantations, and a huge variety of trees in infinite shades of green.... The immediate post-independence period was rich in excitement and the spirit of adventure.

Over the course of living in Sri Lanka for almost 60 years, she watched one political decision after another drag this "paradisiacal island" into three decades of civil war, several insurgencies and horrendous political violence, leaving her with a set of experiences and perceptions that will never have a parallel in the life of any other Holocaust survivor. Because of her particular experience we read her poems "Auschwitz from Colombo" or "July 1983." Because of her continuous grappling with the loss of her mothertongue to her as her primary means of writing, her own ability to negotiate her way with perfect ease from one social group speaking English to another Sinhala, and her life in a country that bears the consequences of making the language of the majority the official language, she leaves readers acutely aware of the how essential the written word and education are, how language and culture define a person and how easily they are misused.

> ...it [the Holocaust] also raises questions which are relevant to those of us involved in writing or in the study of literary education and the values it inculcates. After all, the merciless barbarism for which the first half of the 20th century will be remembered sprang from countries that boasted of a great cultural heritage and Christian civilization. ...
>
> ...under Nazism language lost its meaning where words were misused, twisted and cheapened till the old connotations were destroyed. There was a time when it was asserted that a classical education conferred not only refinement of judgement but also greater understanding and tolerance of the human condition. But actually no evidence has been found to substantiate this. On the contrary there were instances in Nazi Europe where institutions of higher learning welcomed the monstrous new regime....

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Throughout the book, Ranasinghe documents her experiences and attempts to lessen the burden on her conscience. Because, as she says:

> An awareness of the unpredictability of the human mind should perhaps infuse our writing, with a sense of urgency to counter the possibility of ever increasing darkness. Even here, on the other side of the world from Hitler's Europe we have had our own experiences to lend substance to these fears.

Behind this urgency to document in order to counter is the question that permeates this book:

> How can we teach the generations to come to feel deeply about those deaths that the world was powerless to prevent or to be alert to the deaths that can be prevented today, that we can put an end to?

Is it possible to hope that if given clear, substantiated accounts by a holocaust victim or a survivor that the German woman speaking to Lanzmann 50 years later or the 23 year old Sri Lankan student writing a revisionist history of Hitler will be able to empathize and feel the pain behind the experience? And is it possible to hope that having had that refinement of experience through learning from a historical event that those two people and those of their generation would then be able to transfer that learning and stand up against the re-occurrence of a range of similar events were they to take place in their own countries: in prisons, in children's' homes, in refugees camps, in a neighbour's backyard?

In 1983 Ranasinghe returned to Essen for the first time since she fled the village in 1938. She returned again in 1986, accompanying Michael Lentz and his film crew. She says:

> When a Gallup poll questioned people [in Essen] at random (during the making of my film) as to what had happened to their erstwhile Jewish fellow citizens and taped their answers, some said they didn't know where. And some said the Jews had 'gone away', but they didn't know where. And some laughed and said most of them were gassed and went up in smoke. I have the tape. It is not an invented story. Even the laugh.

The burden on the conscience of a Ranasinghe is not only the burden to tell the experience, but also the far heavier knowledge that came to Ranasinghe on her visit to Germany in 1986:

> I felt that there had been little change in the behaviour and attitude of the German people since I left 44 years earlier.

The heaviest burden on anyone's conscience, in this case the "Lingering Weight on Germany's Conscience" as she titles the questions and her answers to the students in Cologne, is possibly the realization that despite an experience and event of the magnitude of the Holocaust, governments and people in Rwanda, or in Colombo, or in Essen may continue to perpetrate crimes of different degrees, driven possibly by similar intent. She says in her poem "July 1983":

> Forty years later
> Once more there is burning.
> The night sky bloodied, violent and abused
>
> And I–though related
> Only by marriage–
> Feel myself both victim and accused ....

Removed by time, distance, and living in a completely different socio-political environment, compounded by ignorance, many young people cannot comprehend the context that led to the Holocaust. What else would make a German reporter, apart from a warped sense of humour, ask Ranasinghe why her father (and the other Jews) did not defend themselves? And, on a similar note, isn't it possible that several decades into the future, living in a more equitable Sri Lankan society that a naive teenager would ask a parent why the Tamil people didn't call in the police when the mobs attacked their homes in July '83? Looking to a future such as this, having encountered it in 1986, Ranasinghe does the only thing left to do. She talks about the past and the present.

Ranasinghe reports events, on the surface as different from one another as *A Long Hot Day* when the Reserve Police Battalion 101, the German Order Police that operated in Poland, rounded up Jews and shot them in the head in the Josefow marketplace, and the bullock yoked to the cart fell on the road and couldn't rise in spite of the stick: "Plead Mercy–*Sabbe Sattha Bhavantu Sukhi Tatha.*"

She writes "what has to be said." ■

Endnote

[1] Arthur M.Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History*,1986, 165.

Ms. Jirasinghe is a Sri Lankan writer

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