

BOOK REVIEW

What a Life: From Nazi Germany via Neo-Marxism to American Academia

Author: Salomon Rettig (Hunter College of the City University of New York, NY)

Salomon Rettig's memoir documents his childhood as a Jew in Nazi Germany, his exodus to Israel whereby he escaped the holocaust, his coming of age on a Kibbutz, and his immigration to the United States after the war where he became a social psychologist. His story is emotionally gripping and haunting, and provides a timely account of the processes and consequences of authoritarianism on a personal and collective level. Rettig inspires the reader with his resilience.

Rettig's account integrates a lucid description of his personal reactions to events with an insightful analysis of these events in their social context from an eclectic mix of theoretical perspectives. The reader can identify with his personal reactions on a deep emotional level while also viewing them from an objective philosophical and scientific perspective. Rettig explicates how the collective evil of Nazism created a profound sense of alienation in him, and how he reconstructed his humanity over his lifetime by the application of reason and compassion to himself and others. His story demonstrates how altruism persists in the face of cruelty, and how the choices we make in the situations into which we are thrown perpetuate good, as well as evil.

Rettig speculates on the epigenetics of collective trauma across successive generations. Along with trauma, the epigenome may also carry resilience across generations. This resilience may be partially facilitated by a sense of alienation expressed in temperamental disposition throughout developmental phases. Along with an accumulation of trauma over successive generations, the epigenome may carry forward a sense of alienation that gives one the sense of being 'in it, but not of it' relative to collective groups. Rettig's shifting of objective and subjective perspectives is not simply wisdom in hindsight. It reflects a sense of alienation from others that is at once a source of wisdom, a profound loneliness, and a survival mechanism that perhaps facilitated his Protean journey.

The reader also senses the obligation that results from an altruistic act that delivers one from evil, such as Rettig's removal from Berlin to Palestine by the orphanage in which his mother placed him, and from which he was the sole survivor. Like evil acts, altruistic acts are paid forward to others, and ramify over time and place, perhaps without the knowledge of people in the chain. In Rettig's account, one is struck by an absence of recognition of the good he has done for others in his life, perhaps without thinking of it in those terms since altruistic acts are not done from the perspective of self-aggrandizement, and may resemble acts of chance rather than choice. One senses that Rettig's commitment to compassion in his own life compensates for any sense of 'survival guilt' which one might otherwise expect from someone in his circumstances.

Rettig's experiences strongly resonate with one's personal experiences even if the circumstances of one's life are not exactly the same. For this reader, the events are familiar from accounts of the experiences of his Armenian grandparents and the circumstances that forced them to flee Turkey in World War I. Rettig's

account raises one's awareness of experiences resulting from stereotypy, stigma, persecution and other processes by which a social identity is imposed on us by those around us to pernicious effect. In particular, we sense our obligation to posterity to break the trajectory of suffering across generations, whether the result of epigenetics or tradition. Alienation from others often hides the cognitive distance required to perceive that social identity is a myth used to manipulate people, stifle their individuation, and stunt their morality.

Given the current rise in authoritarian regimes around the world, Rettig's story opens one's eyes to the incremental evil pervading our everyday world. What may seem to be a banal act of childhood bullying is a personal trauma and at the same time a continuation of state policy by other means. Blindness to this continuity allows collective evil to grow without opposition. Rettig's story helps to counter the authoritarian malignancy threatening our world today. His testament is an altruistic act that redeems his suffering by opening our hearts and minds to guide humanity in a life affirming direction.

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