

## 6. HITLER AND HUMANITY

Hitler's perspective on humanity sounds like a contradiction in terms. Could Hitler, who was responsible for one of the most inhumane episodes of history have any thoughts about what it means to be human? At first I rejected the idea, but my experiences recorded in *The Pendulum* provide some answers which I believe are important to take to ourselves, however difficult and uncomfortable it may be to think about them.

When eventually I revealed to Oma what I had discovered through my research, I hoped that this would create an opening for expressing remorse and acknowledging that what our family had been a part of was wrong. I didn't see it as helpful to blame her for the past, rather hoped that I could create a safe space in which it was possible for us to reach these conclusions together. Instead, her response was to defend the indefensible, including with the following words about my grandfather that will always be so difficult for me to think of:

"Yes, he screamed like everyone else. He only beat them," she said, regaining her composure. "Those were the times! People did that type of thing and we just did the same as everyone else."

Two weeks later, Oma doubled down on her defence by suggesting that I, not the past, was the real source of trouble, as I had genetically tainted the family by marrying a man with three disabled siblings. My hope is that this moment in the book doesn't go amiss on any of you, and that it gives you pause for reflection. It is perhaps the most spine-chilling moment of all, as it provides a deep insight into Hitler's perspective of humanity, as expressed in his propaganda, and repeated by so many. Essentially, it says the following:

Humanity encompasses only a limited portion of the human species, which is divided by race and physical strength. That which is mixed or disabled has no place - purity and strength is right. Humanity means a world in which that limited portion of the human species which is pure and strong has the right to take whatever it likes in order for it to survive and to hold off the threat from human non-humanity. Its supremacy and the necessity of its survival means that no justification is required. Humanity's task is the racial struggle.

Where does this perspective of humanity come from? It is worth remembering that both Hitler and Oma were formed by calamities in their countries that must have seemed like hell on earth when they occurred. During WWI, when Hitler was recovering from temporary blindness after having experienced a mustard gas attack as a young soldier in the trenches, he reacted with shock and a sense of betrayal to the news that his country had surrendered to the enemy. He wasn't alone. Many in Germany felt the same way. His explanation, based on age-old entrenched anti-Semitism which had existed in Europe and elsewhere for centuries, was that a Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy represented by the government of Germany's fledgling democracy, the Weimar Republic, had betrayed the nation. What followed didn't make things better: after the savage blood-letting of World War I, Germany was forced to meet the conditions of the Treaty of Versailles which imposed onerous war reparations that led to the hyperinflation of the early 1920s.

These are not excuses for Hitler's views. At the same time, this background is important to take into account in order to understand how it is that humans end up resorting to their darker nature. You could compare Hitler to a modern-day terrorist who emerges out of severe crisis and state collapse, and connects to ideas that exist somewhere in many other people. Many in Germany, and indeed in Europe, were anti-Semitic at some level, but few could imagine the Holocaust. The

Third Reich is an illustration of the deadly combination of unchecked prejudice and the collapse of the rule of law.

Hitler's view of humanity forces us to turn the focus on ourselves and our time. The view that humanity is limited to a certain group of people is very much alive today. We experience it in the discrimination of religious groups, including Jews and Muslims, in the politics of exclusion, and in the choices of many who, in anger at the injustice they feel has been done to them, desperately seek scapegoats, and support leaders touting simple, ineffective and unjust measures.

Most of all, Oma calls my attention to where Hitler's view of humanity might reside in me today. I discussed prejudice with Holocaust survivor Hédi Fried (see the video series in 9.3), and both of us have come to the conclusion that no one is free of it. If we dig deep enough, each of us will find some trace of that limited view of humanity in some form. The question is, how can we become aware of it, contain it, challenge it and prevent it from growing within us.

- 6.1 What episodes in *The Pendulum* speak most to you about Hitler's view of humanity? Why?
- 6.2 Where and how do you see these views playing themselves out in the world today? Provide specific examples.
- 6.3 How can we expand our view of humanity and prevent it from shrinking when we are faced by crisis?