

## **Launch of *Bella and Chaim: The Story of Beauty and Life* by Sara Vidal**

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The sub-title of this fine memoir is *The Story of Beauty and Life*. It is a remarkably affirmative title for a Holocaust and post-Holocaust narrative whose often lyrical descriptions of pre-war life in Warsaw and post-war life in Australia are interspersed with the horrors of the Warsaw Ghetto and genocide, including the death of most of the author's parents' relatives.

Let's note at the outset how well Sara Vidal can write. Consider this passage about pre-war Warsaw, seen through the eyes of her mother, Basia (referred to as Bella in the book's title), as a girl:

Untouched by accounts of programs in the countryside, Basia enjoys boundless love for her city. She takes sustenance and felicity in all manner of outings. A walk along the boulevards, visits to shops, cafés and Yiddish theatres, crammed into a tram zipping across the city to visit a friend or an excursion to the zoo. Everywhere one mingles with people of many nations and walks of life while immersing one's senses in aromas and colors. Closer to home, it is a delight to park oneself on a sunny park bench in the Jewish sector of the Krasiński Gardens. (20)

Observe the skillful way in which this passage modulates between the author's point of view ('she') and that of the mother ('one'), and how that blurring of boundaries reflects something that I will refer to presently: the way in which Holocaust experience crosses generations.

I guess we might say that there are two forms of affirmation in the face of great human tragedy. We might speak of blinkered affirmation where the person who affirms life refuses to acknowledge its dark side, and wise affirmation, where someone does indeed acknowledge the dark side but makes a profound moral, spiritual, emotional and intellectual commitment to affirm the value of life despite the undeniable presence in the world of evil, waste and atrocious suffering. *Bella and Chaim*, a book in which the word 'gratitude' occurs on many occasions, is affirmative in just this wise way.

In the spirit of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, one of Sara's intellectual heroes, she enjoins the reader in these words: '*Love it or not - choose life*' (159). The very writing of a book like this, however painful and confronting it must at times be, is itself a way of choosing life: choosing to put the facts – dark, light, and all shades in between – on record for the family and for posterity. It also involves choosing to use the power of the pen to summon a vanished world and relatives and others who vanished with it. Writers like Sara are among other things shamans who speak to and call up the dead, rescuing them from oblivion, restoring to them the dignity of existence. Sara often uses the word 'yearning' to describe the overwhelming need she feels for connection with murdered relatives she never met, and some of the most moving passages in the book are those in which her prose of yearning, summoning, frames photographs of these murdered souls, taking us into their presence as she knows of it from the stories of others or simply as she imagines it.

Writers who embark on narrative projects such as this have to perform a sort of emotional balancing act, weighing their own needs to tell it as it was, shed some of their burden of trauma, express outrage, against the needs of their intended readers, often above all their children, grandchildren, and generations to come. Many of these writers feel a moral imperative to pen pages that can sustain faith, not only ones that report horrors that could destroy the optimism of

younger and coming generations. Sara tells us that she began this project in 1992 – 25 years ago! – and I would guess that its long gestation reflects a determination to get things into the most livable balance wise reflection will allow, to sift through the vast complexities of the world as she has found it, and to refrain from dogmatic and unthinkingly conventional statements that might compound the intolerance, the regimented and unbalanced thinking, that lies at the root of the Holocaust and other catastrophes. She writes that:

Only man seeks to create identical, inflexible, indelible, entities and concepts: Rows of Barracks, Banks of Ovens, Synchronized Goose-steps, Rules and Rituals...containers of toxic waste, our gift to the future. (189-90)

Sara's response to this kind of toxic thinking is to write in a way that refuses to obey conventional grids of thought and feeling and thus to bequeath a different kind of 'gift to the future'. You'll see when you buy your copy that the book looks very unusual on the page: you'll observe the use of a variety of fonts and different degrees of spacing between lines; you will see that some informational passages appear in boxes, other material in conventional paragraphs; that the typeface is sometimes in bold, sometimes not, sometimes in italics; you'll notice that on occasion very short chapters are interpolated between much longer ones; you'll encounter quotations from myriad sources, prefacing or threading their way through parts of the text; and you will find, particularly in some chapter titles, the use of qualifiers within parentheses to highlight ambiguity, as in *SAPERE AUDE AND (UN)REASON* (59). To read this book is to feel that things are coming at you from all directions, that there is a tremendous onrush of life on the page.

I doubt that any author could achieve this effect without expert and patient help from their publisher and I congratulate Hybrid Press, my own publisher, on the outstanding and innovative presentation of the volume.

The feeling of life-force on the page reflects the sorts of qualities that the book celebrates: qualities such as resilience and indomitability. In *Bella and Chaim* what you see is what you get, and what you get is what you see. Writing of this kind is not without precedent, but it's clear that Sara is familiar with certain avant-garde literary and philosophical modes. I was not therefore surprised to find among her Acknowledgments reference to three courses she took at the University of Melbourne in what is called Critical Theory, a tradition in which Nietzsche is a major figure. Like him, Sara writes with transgressive gusto; and some of the writing techniques she employs, for instance the use of qualifiers within parentheses, have been used by so-called postmodernists, writers and thinkers deeply influenced by Nietzsche. It is no accident that Sara makes reference to a book about the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, one of the doyens of postmodernism.

However, here as in so many other respects, Sara seeks balance. She refers not only to philosophers in this tradition but also to major thinkers in rationalist-Enlightenment traditions. A good example here is her allusion to a famous passage in the writings of Emmanuel Kant in which the philosopher poses the question whether it is acceptable to lie about the whereabouts of someone if the consequence of telling the truth them would result in their murder. What an incredibly apt moral problem to pose with respect to the Holocaust! Sara's search for balance leads her to confront one of the most contentious issues arising out of postmodernism. She is attracted to postmodernism's claim that we should think not so much in terms of cold hard 'facts' but rather in terms of the innumerable interpretations that can be offered of any given 'fact' or set of 'facts'. On the other hand, she herself presents much 'factual' information about for instance the scale of Nazi genocide and does not wish to leave us in any doubt as to the moral character of such events. So she lays out the problem and tries as always to navigate the difficulties with an open mind and a questing spirit:

*Can we find space between?  
The space between your truth and mine, between rules and anarchy,  
the space wherein resides common sense, humanity. (128)*

Of course not many Holocaust memoirs are intellectual to this degree. Indeed it is useful to draw a distinction between say Australian Holocaust memoirs by authors who were adults during the war and the generation that followed. The older generation often had their educations disrupted, suffered very direct forms of trauma, had to acquire a new language when they came to Australia, and to work like hell to feed and clothe their families. When they eventually got around to writing memoir later in life, their narrative methods were, with exceptions like the remarkable Jacob Rosenberg, often quite straightforward. By contrast, the next generation had received a full education here, had grown up with English, were somewhat more removed from massive direct Holocaust trauma, and had more reflective leisure to produce intellectually speculative and aesthetically innovative forms of Holocaust narrative. I don't know whether Sara, who was born in Florence on 4 November 1945, would consider herself a child survivor or the child of survivors, but her book resembles other so-called 'second generation' Holocaust memoirs by writers like Doris Brett, Mark Baker and Susan Varga in its high aesthetic, intellectual, and reflective aspiration.

To say that authors born after the war missed the 'full brunt' of the Holocaust is not of course to say that trauma passed them by. Far from it. As you will know, a great deal of research and therapeutic energy is devoted to 'trans-generational' trauma, to trauma passed on, often in subtle and unwitting ways, from those who 'were there' to their children, grandchildren and even beyond. Sara makes clear that this is something she has had to confront throughout her life. Indeed I would guess that one of the purposes of the book is to work through such referred trauma, as in fine passages late on in which she explores her relationships with her elderly parents. Relationships at these stages of life are often complex anyway, but they can be vastly more so under the shadow of Holocaust trauma. An added complexity in all of this is that Sara, having 'married out', must grapple with identity issues even as she tries to come to terms with the family Holocaust history. I'm reminded here of Susan Varga's memoir, *Heddy and Me*, with its dual exploration of personal identity issues and relations between survivor mother and child survivor daughter. Sara's portraits of her parents in old age are as we would expect affirmative, though without glossing over difficulties, and there is a charming passage in a car in which we see mother and daughter in a moment of warm, healing mutuality. Basia says:

"I believe, everyone is just the same. I mean all people."  
She pauses again. "There are good ones and bad ones."  
My hands on the wheel, glancing at her, I catch the affirming nod of the head as she agrees with herself. I give her a reassuring smile. She smiles back, her eyes sparkling, pleased with herself. I am pleased with her too.' (202)

Memoir often comes about not simply because someone wants to look back but because they want to do so in order to learn from the past so that they can imagine and help shape a better future. Sara's book is driven by an anguish expressed in phrases like: 'What happened to "Never Again?"' (74), and 'Why, after all we know, is there so much hate?' (101). This memoir is a fine example of a genre of narrative that refuses to defer to hate and yearns to inspire a more humane future.

For this reason among many others it is my great pleasure to declare *Bella and Chaim: The Story of Beauty and Life* by Sara Vidal officially launched!

Richard Freadman  
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