

COURAGE and HEROISM IN "SOPHIE SCHOLL: THE FINAL DAYS"

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The film "Sophie Scholl: The Final Days" blends history with cinema to create an intense, meaningful docudrama celebrating the courage and heroism of the Munich University White Rose campaign against Adolf Hitler and National Socialism during 1943. As much as transformation, the theme of this film series, requires a subject capable of thinking in the face of terror and tyranny, the film is a study in the restoration of the capacity to think. Indeed, it is the capacity to think, in the meaning implied by the late British psychoanalyst, Wilfrid Bion, which serves as the headwaters of political resistance in the face of the collective madness that is the trademark of such bizarre regimes.

When I speak of "thinking," in this context, I am speaking about an emotional experience motivated by the need to know our own psychic reality and the psychic reality of others. This also involves the capacity to transform undigested experience into elements that can be linked together and are "life promoting." Bion speaks of the importance of being able to "dream" current emotional experience whether asleep or awake. There is a need to dream our life in order to explore its full meaning.

In the case of Nazi Germany, Hitler's grasp on the German psyche bypassed thinking and went directly to visceral emotion. Thinking was supplanted by crazy thoughts, a national hallucination glued together by primal affects. It was a psychotic mentality reinforced by massive denial of reality, paranoia and terror, including vicious attacks on thinkers whose ideas could precipitate thinking and resistance. Despite its craziness, Nazism ignited the imagination of a nation seeking a father/savior while marginalizing womanhood, labeled in the film "the weaker sex," and with it the foundational role of the mother-infant pair in development. This is a theme I will return to later.

I find Bion's perspective on dreaming particularly helpful as he describes dreaming as a primary means to preserve the personality from a psychotic frame of mind. If we all have a crazy side that hates reality and seeks to destroy it, dreaming is our way of working with our subjectivity towards dealing with reality. Unlike Freud who viewed dreams as disguises for unconscious wishes, Bion views dreaming as a metabolizing process by which experience is transformed into usable meaning. It is what makes our minds unique but also keeps us in the reality game. In this model of the psyche, dreams, daydreams and thinking are closely connected ways of digesting life. This is an important topic now in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, under the rubric of "mentalization," the capacity to psychologically reflect on our own mind and conceive of another's.

Patients who are in the grip of severe depression, for example, often lose the capacity to think (in a deeper sense) or dream and the return of this mentalizing function signals the onset of recovery. Dreaming life experience is key to developing insight and personal growth.

If we can extrapolate to the societal level, a society that has lost its capacity for dreaming is prone to fixation on shallow propaganda and manipulative stereotypes while evacuating what doesn't fit or belong. This quality of fixed ideas and failure to reflect or process experience reveals the telltale sign of thoughts without thinkers. There is no psychological work being done. Mass psychology through trance, illusion and group hysteria rule based on total submission to the Leader. Narratives emphasizing life and death struggles predominate and, in the case of Nazi Germany specifically, a Germanic, hypermasculine grandiose solution evolved – the primal father comes to save his family from destruction by Jews and Bolsheviks while creating a race of Aryan supermen.

The society-gone-mad threatens everyone else's survival while it talks of the threats facing it. Nazi Germany ably fit this description. A primitive narcissism prevailed in which society had to be cleansed of its presumed vermin, its subhuman dross, as there was no capacity to face psychic pain and unfavorable truths. Such a thoughtless society cannot sleep (and process feelings) but also cannot waken from its madness. Omnipotent thinking without the anchor of reality quickly spins out of control, becoming increasingly bizarre and destructive.

Slogans and propaganda, the literature of totalitarianism, exist without thinkers. Indeed, psychotic regimes everywhere treat thinking as subversive and a betrayal of the Leader's beneficence.

And yet, why do some people retain the capacity to think in the face of such demagoguery bolstered by murderous violence to oppositional voices? Sophie, her brother Hans, Christopher Probst and others aspired, perhaps naively in 1943, to promulgate a rebellion against Hitler and in this spirit wrote, printed and distributed anti-Nazi leaflets. One can compare their technology, an old printing press, to modern resistance by way of cellphones, YouTube and Facebook. In an information age, it might have been more successful. Munich 'U' has been replaced by Tahrir Square.

The printing press, however, suggests powerful symbolism in the film. "In the beginning was the Word," begins the book of John, "and the Word was with God and the Word was God." The word is the tool of communication but it also implies the will of God, which, as described in the Old Testament, can arise in a

dream and represents the medium by which God or the word of God, exerts influence through the organ of human thought and dream-work.

Sophie and Hans were thus doing God's work in the context of their strong Christian faith. Sophie speaks of the role of conscience in inspiring her resistance but she is also alluding to consciousness and the capacity to think. Conscience requires a consciousness of guilt.

Here is the dream that she reports:

"It was a sunny day, I was carrying a child in a white dress to be christened. The path to the church led up a steep slope, but I held the child in my arms firmly and without faltering. Then suddenly my footing gave way ... I had enough time to put the child down before plunging into the abyss. The child is our idea. In spite of all obstacles it will prevail."

The dream juxtaposes the steep ascent towards Christendom with its association to purity, new life and birth, to the plunging descent into the abyss of death. There was no place to stand in Nazi Germany for people like Sophie but she had given birth to an idea, which would outlive her. In the dream, the idea and its survival are given primacy over mortality as the idea implies a thinker who is capable of giving transcendent life to thought. The thinker dies while the thought lives on.

Focusing on Sophie her self, this saintly martyrdom in some way negates the awful reality that a vivacious young woman of 21 has died a horrible death of decapitation. I would not reduce her sacrifice to masochism, however, but rather to her inner awareness that the greatest revenge has come from the triumph of thinking in the face of a delusional and destructive mindset.

Such individual courage is closely linked to the preservation of the capacity to think, to be able to do unconscious psychological work, to dream, in the face of the omnipotent delusional juggernaut of a mad society. Scattered throughout the Third Reich were individuals who resisted total alignment with Nazi ideology throughout the period. I am not sure, however, that we have a theory to explain or predict whom these people will be.

It certainly takes courage to set aside serious risks to one's person and condemnation by the powers in control. Sophie saw herself as acting in the service of Germans:

"I am, now as before, of the opinion that I did the best that I could do for my nation. I therefore do not regret my conduct and will bear the consequences that result from my conduct."

Someone must begin was her message and she was sure that she acted on behalf of a latent resistance.

As Sophie observed:

"What we wrote and said is also believed by many others. They just don't dare express themselves as we did."

Maybe she is right that many others shared their misgivings but I would not equate, for example, the uncomfortable shuffling of the Nazi audience at the trial with their deeper realizations of the truths being expounded by Sophie and her co-conspirators. Indeed, to cut off their heads was certainly a group attack on thinking as well as an assault on this particular group of thinkers. In this regard, among the numerous options available, the means of execution seems purposeful. Sophie's flushed beatific face, pregnant with life and meaning, as if she is a new mother, adds to the significance of the death scene. We do not know whether we are at a scene of death or birth. She is a young woman but also a mother intent on saving her baby.

But who will muster that courage, that independence of mind, values and spirit that can become the source of resistance? In Sophie and Hans' case, their father's ethics and willingness to oppose Hitler had already made its mark during the time she was studying biology and philosophy at Munich University. Robert Scholl was found guilty of telling an employee an evident and prescient truth: "This Hitler is God's scourge on mankind, and if this war doesn't end soon the Russians will be sitting in Berlin." In the film, her parents manage the final, emotional meeting with their children without discarding their dignity or respect for the principled but life-ending stance of their two children. They fight to be heard but not to negate the path their children have chosen to follow.

Are not moral courage and bravery the legacy of parents who could cherish their children but let them pursue their autonomy, and not make them beholden on those who brought them into the world? In other words, courage can be seen as a developmental achievement, not only of the heroic protagonists, but of the prior generation that inspired both a deep sense of ethics and emotional autonomy to traverse a dangerous path with potentially grave consequences.

Moreover, valor and the capacity to think, to dream a better and more just life, are inextricably linked. Indeed, valor, that capacity to face danger with firmness and bravery, without thinking is no longer valor at all but simply folly, a headlong charge into oblivion.

Sophie Scholl, thus, represents the voice of valor and resistance; an unaltered, incorruptible point of comparison and intervention that represents the vanguard

for the rehabilitation of a nation. It underscores the little recognized role of revenge as fundamental to allowing the self to stand apart from mass delusion in order to create an essential oppositionalism.

Revenge is a necessity of thinking in this context. Here I am not referring to the injustice collectors of this world who turn every mishap into malevolence against them but of that part of morality that knows the true value of outrage and is prepared to take a stand against brutality and evil. Revenge becomes ethics in action in this context; it provides a narrative voice to a deeply moral stance in this case against the perverse homicidal sickness of Nazism. Sophie and her comrades were deeply offended to their core about what had been done in their name. She understood implicitly that all Germans were implicated in the Nazi crime and only an unequivocal moral action that put her life on the line for good reason could ever undo, in a small way, the millions of lives that had been eliminated for no reason other than some warped bizarre madness.

In Sophie's case, to have received mercy or anything less than death would have diluted her vengeance and undermined her act of pure resistance. When the truth came out, she refused any out or compromise due to gender that would have lessened her sentence. She re-stated her position at every key juncture. Her profound guilt in the eyes of the fanatics only served to underline her innocence in the eyes of God and civilized people with conscience.

Failure to live up to the ego ideal results in shame as compared to guilt when we do the wrong thing. To be sure, the dynamics of shame are often much harder to grasp clinically than guilt and have a way of becoming entrenched in the psyche. Sophie felt a deep sense of shame for what the German nation had done to innocent people in the name of blind subservience to the Hitler trance. She would have shared in that shame to do any less. She was sure that Germany would be the scourge of nations after the war as a result. The white rose represented a symbol of purity in the face of the diabolic. It contrasted innocence with guilt while vengeance established a beachhead for pride and a defense against the deep sense of shame for the actions of the German people.

The flower is also a feminine symbol. In the film, Sophie's femininity, her beatification at the end and feminine courage based on conscience and ideals is contrasted with National Socialist masculinity, which is perverse, defined by violence (total war) and based on brute power, patriarchal rule and women's sole obligation to produce babies for the Reich. Family is subordinated by patriarchy with Hitler as the ultimate Father. In this context, Sophie's supposed shame is that she benefited from the beneficence of the Father who let her attend university while biting his hand. Ironically, and part of the perversity is that her crime of thinking at a time that thinking was forbidden occurred at a university which should be a sacred place for thinking and thinkers.

As such, Sophie's femininity asserts itself against a backdrop of male perversion; brown shirted goons who enact a parody of manhood. In this sense, the trial is an entirely male affair where Sophie's femininity stands in bold relief.

The National Socialist movement basically had no place in its ranks for women and its misogyny apparently ran deep. In spite of mitigating assurances by the top Nazi leadership, this non-recognition of women remained a basic ingredient and differentiated National Socialism from other political groups and parties. Hitler's own twisted relations with women and likely sexual impotence is also pertinent.

One of Hitler's cronies in his later testimony described a repetitive nightmare of Hitler that apparently haunted him: a cruelly chained naked Germanic woman is approached from the background by a lurking Jewish butcher, while Hitler himself, feeling paralyzed, does nothing to set the woman free but leaves her to him. Hitler's fear and loathing of women shaped his power politics. Regarding girls and education he wrote in *Mein Kampf*: "The goal of female education has invariably to be the future mother." He could see giving women no other benefit or consideration.

Here womanhood is denied precisely because the female can only be a mother. She is stripped of her personhood. Paradoxically, it is actual motherhood in its complex psychological sense that is eliminated and with it: the foundational capacity of the mother-infant couple initiating the process of thinking.

The great British pediatrician/psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1960, p 39 fn) wrote: "there is no such thing as an infant {apart from the maternal provision}." He was underscoring the notion of a mother and baby as a single system inaugurating a process of being human. Indeed, psychoanalysis recognizes that the psyche is a joint construction built on the intersubjectivity of the infant-parent matrix. In this same way, society represents a joint project of men and women. Masculinity and femininity exist in a dialectic defining each other. Maleness without femaleness as its counterpoint quickly descends into a bizarre caricature that loses its connection with reality.

Sophie represents the return of the repressed femininity and with it the role of the mother in explaining and anchoring reality for the infant. You can kill her but she is still the source of new life. She thinks for a nation that must recover from this scourge of mankind as her father called Hitler.

Heinz Kohut (1985) is one of the few psychoanalytic writers to have addressed the subject of courage." He relates courage to what he terms the nuclear self

and defines it as "the ability to brave death and to tolerate destruction rather than betray the nucleus of one's psychological being, that is, one's ideals" (p. 6).

He sets out to answer what it is that "allows (or compels)" (p. 5) some individuals to defend their beliefs to this ultimate degree. Kohut makes a distinction between the "martyr-hero" and the "rational resister," based on the degree to which courage is "predominantly determined by the cognitive functions of [the] ego" (pp. 22-23). His hypothesis is that heroism of the White Rose kind involves so intense an identification with one's ideals that survival carries a vastly reduced significance. For Kohut, this identification marks the ultimate expression of the core self.

There is certainly value in this observation though it avoids the role of aggression and specifically vengeance in providing the initial psychic inoculation against the mental paralysis caused by propaganda. It could be argued that Germany, beleaguered by the chronic humiliation of the terms of the Versailles Treaty after WW I and the Depression, found its rescue plan in the bizarre manic triumph of Nazi mythology in which the Ultimate Father demanded total, unquestioning obedience. Internal despair, shame and humiliation was replaced an external enemy, the Jew, presented as the ultimate betrayer of Aryan supremacy in Western civilization. Was this then the elixir that entranced the mind of a nation? A retreat to a primal narcissism emptied into a Leader who was viewed as a superior human being capable of delivering total solution for his people?

Delusional, starved of reality and in the grip of a failed messianic cult, the Nazi catastrophe finally came to blows with the likes of the White Rose while the Russians and allied forces pummeled them militarily from all sides. The real rescue plan for a beleaguered Germany, however, was to recover its capacity for thinking so that it could wake up from the terrible nightmare it had insisted on sharing with the rest of the world. The nascent phase of this recovery is then the theme of this moving film.