

The Inception of *The Judas Window*

Noun: *A small aperture or lattice in a door, orig. the door of a prison cell, through which a person can look without being noticed from the other side; a spyhole, a peephole. Now somewhat archaic, it came to refer to church peepholes that priests could look out through and make sure that the person seeking entrance was not of ill intent (a “Judas”). Alternatively, historically a means for someone inside to betray the building by admitting a besieging army.*

Word origin: *C19, after Judas Iscariot.*

The public hall was perfectly anonymous. Hard wooden seating, drab orange curtains that hung forlornly from plastic rails; formica floor tiles underfoot. We could have been waiting in any number of European cities. But this was Krakow.

I corralled the students as I had done a thousand times: phones away and no eating, please. Whispered instructions to stop fidgeting, settle down.

In time, a diminutive elderly lady mounted podium. Slightly unsteady on her feet, she made towards a microphone that seemed to loom over her. An adjustment on the metallic arm, a tap to check sound and a demure cough. Without introduction, she began speaking. As a Brit familiar with the formalities of public speaking I was more than a little frustrated that she had not introduced herself, given us her name, a little context to her talk. How ignorant I was. It was only after listening to her forty-minute address, utterly riveted to that hard wooden chair that I realized how insensitive my initial reaction had been. This woman had no name, no context. Innocuous in all other settings and circumstances, our remarkable speaker had only been an infant when she staggered from Auschwitz almost seventy years before.

She had been orphaned; the only memory of her mother being the faint memory of a pair of white hands proffering peelings smuggled from the kitchen in an attempt to give her daughter adequate sustenance. When liberated (but what did “liberation” mean to such a small child?) she had no idea of her name, her age. Possibly four, more likely five, the doctors said later. Perhaps even six, but so underdeveloped in every way it was difficult for the authorities to tell.

The time came for a few questions, by which point I was struggling to choke back my emotions. Fortunately, my students were less diffident. One girl, studying A-Level Psychology, asked the woman sympathetically why she would possibly want to keep reliving such an abominable past; the vague memories of the doctor with the nice smile she would only much later come to know as Mengele; recollections of the months she endured in hospital while her body was purged of disease, slowly rebuilt. Why did this woman not try with every fibre of her being to forget?

“You must understand,” she nodded, understanding the need for such a question. “For me there is no choice. I must remember these things so that it is *you* who will never forget.”

Auschwitz. Ravensbrück. Sachsenhausen. Many, many times Sachsenhausen. What began as educational trips with students to these sites has become embedded as a more personal attempt to understand those crimes of the past that reshaped the 20th Century and reverberate into the 21st. *The Judas Window* is borne of a novel entitled *A Mind Prone to Evil*, to be published in 2025 by Stairwell Books, its timing coinciding with the 80th anniversary of the

start of the Nuremberg Trials. We remain perplexed by the question, how is it that a perfectly civilized, modern, cultured society can take ordinary citizens and turn them into rabid sadists who kissed their wives and children goodbye and reported for duty at the gates of the camps?

A Prone Mind and its stage adaptation, *The Judas Window*, are not 'Holocaust texts' in the conventional sense – though the events, messages, themes and repercussions of the Holocaust are at the heart of these works. They are the result of a year research immersed in the life and crimes of Hermann Göring, as well as drawing on years of wider reading. We sincerely hope that the play is true to the conviction of the elderly lady on the podium that day in Krakow. This is a very personal project, and it is our intention that it uses the terrible events of the Nazi regime to speak to the preoccupations of the present as we seem to teeter on a precipice that threatens to engulf us once again in the terrors of the past. I leave the last word to the writer Clare Wigfall who put it best in her endorsement of the novel:

"Given the turbulence of our present day, this novel holds not only historical curiosity, but also a stark reminder of what can occur when power and inhumanity go unchecked; I felt chills as I read."

Clare Wigfall is the author of *The Loudest Sound and Nothing*, winner of the BBC National Short Story Award.