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The Gift of Biography

Abstract: In her multifaceted, polyphonic essay "The Gift of Biography" Caroline Stoessinger offers her reader an intimate insight into the emotional substratum of the ineffable bond between the biographer and her subject. The rapport, whose complex texture involves compassion, respect, and attentiveness, unwittingly manifests itself to the reader as the *sine qua non condition* of an authentic dialogue soon after he or she accepts Stoessinger's invitation to join her in retracing the history of her friendship with Alice Herz-Sommer, the heroine of her internationally acclaimed book *A Century of Wisdom*. In the process of the shared recollection, the emotional horizons of the autobiographer and the reader fuse, allowing the latter to sense that the (auto)biography to which she or he has been made privy, has been gifted to them by the author, who has, imperceptibly, become a dear friend. Two selves sharing their inner lives – Herz-Sommer and Stoessinger, Stoessinger and the reader – share the space of authenticity, in which the hope that reverberates through the genius of Beethoven pierces the darkest of nights.

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Early in our friendship, Dr. Ethel Person, a psychiatrist, told me, "I cannot really know a patient, nor a friend, unless I have a clear picture of their love life." We had become close friends after she sublet my apartment one summer. Her coal-black hair and exotic eyes spoke volumes to most men; but in the case of Hans it was her brilliance, like a magnet, that drew his attention. Hans Joachim Morgenthau, a towering 20th-century intellect, colleague of Reinhold Niebuhr and advisor to Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson, appeared older than his sixty-four years. Little more than five feet two inches tall and balding, he was often mistaken as Ethel's father. Educated in a musical, upper-class German family, Hans could play Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" from memory. By contrast, high culture had been missing from Ethel's background in Louisville, Kentucky. She enjoyed the company of the older man but I doubt that his glittering coterie or history of White House dinners escaped her notice. Only thirty-two, Ethel had recently completed her analytic residency and divorced her first husband. As they talked of marriage, Hans spent a king's ransom on a 19th-century dining table and chairs for Ethel's spacious apartment. They socialized with New York's elite. However, when Hans accepted a government invitation to spend three

months in India working on an international project, Ethel refused to interrupt her practice for the lengthy sojourn, pleading that her absence would be unfair to her patients. While Hans was in India, Ethel reconnected with a former boyfriend from Chicago. On a whim they decided to marry. The morning of their wedding, Ethel tersely dictated a telegram she asked me to send to Hans: "Let me know your arrival plans – Ethel." Disturbed both by her startling news and apparent disdain for Hans's trust, I reluctantly stood in line at the telegraph office.

Ethel met Hans's flight on his return. Driving into the city from Kennedy airport, she announced, "I got married two weeks ago, but we will always be friends." He said nothing. Two weeks later, Hans made a suicide attempt that permanently damaged his heart. When I visited him in the hospital, I asked why he had swallowed those pills. "The pain," he muttered, "the pain was unbearable." With those words, Hans dared to admit his vulnerability. For the first time I understood, in matters of romance, the human heart is ageless. The moment also attested that greatness grants no immunity from grief. Without this incident I would never have recognized the hidden terrain of his humanity nor felt the same depth of empathy for Hans's suffering from a shattered illusion of love. As a fragment of Hans's biography, this telling episode, from the titan's inner life, should be read with the eyes of the soul.

Ethel claimed she knew me from the collection of biographies I had stacked on every available surface from the coffee table to the top of my Steinway grand piano. Biography is my favorite literary form, but more importantly it serves as my major source of investigating history and human behavior. When my friend John Matteson invited me to write this article, I felt intimidated; recalling the invaluable companions I had found in biographies– Goethe, Disraeli, Beethoven, van Gogh, Brahms, Renoir and his son Jean, Lincoln, Clara, Paderewski, Robeson, Dvorak, Marian Anderson – my only response was "I am incapable of delivering a piece on this subject." "Think about Alice," he countered.

Before the war, Alice Herz-Sommer, the subject of my book, *A Century of Wisdom*, was a blissful Czech woman – surrounded by life-time friends, happily married, the mother of a little son, and, since performing successfully with the Czech Philharmonic, engaged in a burgeoning career as a concert pianist. Then came war and Hitler's madness, and Alice's strength was tested when she became a prisoner in the Theresienstadt Concentration Camp. Even after her mother and husband were killed, Alice found the humanity, burned deep into her character, to inspire hope in her fellow prisoners. After the war, she refused to descend into hatred. Through her well-lived life of 110 years, Alice set a heroic example of one woman's humanity. Hundreds, maybe thousands of times, she declared with a firmness that no one could presume to question, "I hate no one." Within Alice's story, one observes the essential value of biography, as opposed to the broader brush

of history: the true story of a single life reveals more memorable information, and surely carries more empathetic weight, than the horrific but impersonal number of the six million murdered. Statistics educate me only so far; since my college years, when I first heard Elie Wiesel speak, I have tried to glean the unspeakable truth and terror of the Holocaust from the intimate stories of survivors. As a concert pianist myself, I felt a powerful bond to Alice. My friendship with her became part of a mission I undertook to tell the story of the Hitler's most cynical concentration camp. Dubbed a "model ghetto" by the Nazis, it was hidden, in plain sight, in the small town of Terezin, about one hour from Prague.

Sitting across from me, filling the room with her apparently boundless energy, was an extraordinarily ordinary woman who had survived the past one hundred years – an era paradoxically marked both by unimaginable scientific and cultural achievements and by the worst degradations of the human spirit the Western world has known. How could I begin a personal conversation about her years in the concentration camp? "And your little son, Rafi, how could you care for him?" I asked. "After the first shocking day in the camp," she replied, "we laughed together playing a symbolic game; we pretended to frighten the dragons in a fairy tale." As Alice continued, the memory of the comforting fantasy was edged aside by the facts of their incarceration: "He was only six when we were arrested and transported to the camp in the small fortress town of Terezin, the former home of the Czech Army. Not far from home, on our own soil, we were captives imprisoned inside a grotesque new world, a Nazi prison administering laws and regulations that abolished our very humanity. As soldiers shouted *mach's schnell*, we were pushed in a mass like cattle through the enormous iron gates. Afraid of losing Rafi in the crowd, I whispered. 'Hold my hand tightly, never let go.' He cried, 'I want to go home; I don't like it here.'"

At our first meeting I was struck by the ease with which Alice could break into a laugh. I asked Alice how, after all the horror she has witnessed, she could laugh so freely and so often. "Why not," she said "laughter makes me and everyone else feel better. I have always laughed. Even in the concentration camp, sick and depressed people sought me out just to hear me laugh. They said it was their best medicine." Until her death at 110, Alice ended most of her remarks with laughter reminiscent of the Dalai Lama's.

Although she spoke excellent English, Alice's strong voice betrayed a sharp German accent; and her short thinning hair was an insubstantial frame for her age-chiseled face, marred with a heavy scattering of moles. Dressed in a pale blue knit dress, fashionable thirty years ago, she wore white sneakers. At 104 years of age she lived alone. Completely independent, using neither a cane nor a walker, she shopped and cooked for herself. Feeling inadequate in her presence, I was wondering if I could gain her trust before continuing the interview, when Alice

asked "What do you do?" Confessing I was a pianist, she barked "play something." Embarrassed, I moved to her piano bench and began the first movement of Beethoven's transcendent 30th Sonata. "Very good," she announced, "You are a real pianist, you can understand music is my language." With that blessing Alice indicated I could speak freely with her. Already I felt very attached to her and I thought she was pleased to discover that I, too, lived my life in music.

An antique walnut-cased, upright Steinway piano was the only item in Alice's one-room London efficiency apartment, stuffed with a hodgepodge of used furniture, that could not be described as bland. A small wooden rocking chair, a single bed doubling as a sofa during the daytime, one side table, and a standing television filled the space. Scrawny plants living in tin cans and glass jars decorated the solitary window sill. The walls were hidden behind family photographs and a neat stack of videos filled the shelf underneath the 1980s TV set. Less prosaic was a time-worn book, *Die Welt von Gestern* (The World of Yesterday) by Stefan Zweig, visible on her side table. Nothing matched. The color throughout was drab. Still, the room exuded life, thought and promise. Every item had been assigned its permanent place as the miniature home filled up with bare necessities and surviving mementos. Just as Alice began to slice another piece of cake, my eyes fixated on the tea table, perhaps a clue to Alice's past. She had set the outdoor style metal table, donated from someone's patio, with a collage of mismatched china cups, saucers and plates painted with assorted rosebuds. Although the cups were chipped and the plates showed cracks, their presence added an intention of beauty, even elegance. Everything in this artist's home became a telling background, a true-life stage set, for her monumental story. That same week, after Christmas, 2006, Alice and I were enjoying tea when she interrupted our chatter with "now that I am at the end of my life and nearly twice as old as Beethoven when he died, why do you want to write about me? I am only one of millions, I was just lucky to survive." "Music, Alice, your life in music," I whispered.

She smiled. I remember wanting to take care of her, to share her afternoon strolls. I told her that, in the early 1970s, Ethel and I had attended a private screening of the remnants of the Theresienstadt propaganda film, *The Fürher Gives the Jews a City,* hosted by New York's Museum of Modern Art. The footage had shown scenes of concerts performed in the camp. Even though the musicians had been temporarily dressed in appropriately dignified costumes, neither the camera nor makeup could not hide the prisoner's sunken cheeks or bulging, expressionless eyes. "Was one of your performances filmed?" I asked. Alice said "Yes, but the Nazis destroyed most of the film before the war ended." Then I asked, "Alice, do you remember how you spent New Year's Eve 1944 in the concentration camp?"

There was a personal motive to my question, for, as Alice described her forced performance for Hitler's cameramen, memories of my own New Year's Eve 1944

flooded my mind. My mother had roused me from a deep sleep to walk with her, dressed in my pajamas, to the town's "Watch Night" service which would begin at 11:30 pm. Far away from home, my father was working on a freight train, hauling military equipment – ranging from tanks and trucks to guns and bombs – to military bases in the deep South. "Put on your shoes," she said automatically. Absorbing her loneliness, I obeyed. I was five years old.

Gripping my hand tightly as we slowly made our way on the dark sidewalk two blocks up the hill to the church, Mother reminded me, "When the war is over, our town will get street lights, but tonight we must be brave and think of the poor soldiers who will never come home again. As we wait for midnight in the church, you must think about the bad things you did this year, pray for forgiveness for your sins, and promise you will do better in the coming year. And never forget, wasting time is a sin. Time lost is gone forever." Though I was too young to grasp the deeper meaning of her words, the somber tone of her teaching felt momentous. When we arrived, most of the seventy-five seats in the small sanctuary were already filled with our neighbors and friends, wrapped in their coats and gloves against the cold. Someone was playing soft music on the rickety piano. To save electricity, the lighting had been dimmed, resulting in an eerie effect. We sat next to Mr. and Mrs. Lark; he put his arm around his wife's shoulder as she wiped her tears with a lace handkerchief. Mother whispered she was crying for her son, Walter, who had lost his life in France when his B29 plane was shot down by a Nazi fighter. As Mother and I knelt to await the New Year, I felt something terrible was about to happen. Would the church be bombed? Were the Nazis coming to get us? Mother had explained midnight would be announced by a train whistle because the railroad men kept accurate time with their pocket watches. If only the New Year would hurry, I thought to myself. Frances Crenshaw, the cranky, old-maid postmistress, read aloud the names of local boys killed that year in the war. Though she must have known those soldiers from their toddler years, she read without emotion.

After what felt like a day or a lifetime, Proctor Lamb, the engineer in the train yard finally blew his whistle, breaking the silence. Everyone stood, like soldiers at attention, as the friendly telephone operator sounded the fire siren and old Mr. Jacobs, who was living with a disability, rang the church bells. No one said "Happy New Year." More than three quarters of a century later, New Year's Eve, for me, is still colored with angst and loneliness. The distant sound of a train whistle is still one of the most mournful sounds I know.

"Alice, do you remember how you spent New Year's Eve 1944 in the concentration camp?"

"No one has ever asked that question," she said before explaining. "You see, in the camp we believed our chances for survival depended on our ability to keep our memories of normal lives alive. Before the war we always celebrated New Year's

Eve with a concert. So naturally, we prisoners gave a concert for our fellow prisoners still alive in the camp on December 31, 1944. It was all-Beethoven, our code name for liberation. We invited everyone, including amateurs and children, who remembered a piece to participate. I played the 'Appassionato' Sonata; the concert ended with a bass singing the 'Ode to Joy' in Czech. Instead of joy we substituted the Czech word for freedom. Symbolically we relished defying the Nazis guards with our singing prayer. Our New Year's Eve in Terezin 1944 inspired a moment of hope and the optimism to persevere for another few weeks or months." With her eyes downcast, Alice paused, "Pessimism takes a toll on the human spirit. I am an optimist." This answer from this woman was breathtaking.

Continuing, Alice said, "So many of us were professional musicians. We played countless concerts. Prisoners performed for prisoners. I played more than 100 programs during my two years in Hitler's propaganda camp. People living in the town or journalists wandering by could hear music emanating behind the barbed wire fences; music the Nazis thought validated Hitler's claim of treating Jews better than most German citizens. Their propaganda was effective while, at the same time, most of the performers and all of the composers were secretly deported to Auschwitz where they were killed. Fortunately for us, the Nazis were unable to grasp music's power to provide comfort for the performers and their audiences was stronger than the terror of Hitler's acolytes. The instruments were terrible; the best piano had neither legs nor pedals. Yet, we were music and every concert became a moral victory against the enemy. Through music performers could hold onto their personal identities, while the audiences, transported out of time and place, could feel for an hour that life was almost normal."

Later the great Czech novelist, Ivan Klima, wrote of his first night in Theresienstadt "as a boy of thirteen," sitting among many elderly men, watching a full-length performance of Smetana's opera *The Bartered Bride*. "There were no costumes, no orchestra, no sets, it was cold, but we were transfixed by the music. Many cried, I felt like crying too. Years later when I saw a beautifully produced performance, it was not nearly as moving as the one I remembered."

"Alice, I learned of *Brundibar* from the scene in the propaganda film shot in Terezin. Was Rafi a member of the cast?"

"Ja, he sang the role of the sparrow; in that film he is standing on a box on the left side of the stage. My friend Hans Krasa, the opera's composer, had smuggled his copy of the score into the camp. He was phenomenally talented and so empathetic with the children." Krasa was only 45 when the Nazis murdered him in Auschwitz on October 17, 1944.

Brundibar is a kind of moral fairy tale of good triumphing over evil. The title role, a heinous character named, Brundibar, parodies Hitler. In the climatic scenes of the opera, a wild chase ensues; with great glee the children vanquish

evil Brundibar, then join hands to proudly sing a Victory Song. "Can you imagine the Nazis actually permitted this? They thought it would be great propaganda especially for the Red Cross representatives when they next inspected the camp."

I had to ask, "But didn't the Nazis realize the opera ridiculed the Führer?"

"Nein," she answered definitively, "they were perceived as useless, sickly Jewish children waiting to be deported to the gas ovens; besides they sang in the Czech language the Nazis felt no need to translate. They were incapable of believing those child prisoners or their opera had any merit. Of the 15,000 children imprisoned in Theresienstadt, fewer than 100 survived." Emphatically nodding her head Alice added, "The Nazi guards and their commanders were clueless. The symbolism of the little opera was keeping hope alive, not only for the children, but also for the adults who attended one of the 55 performances."

To this day, survivors can still hum the *Victory* tune.

"And," Alice added, "The Red Cross unconditionally bought into this bizarre Nazi propaganda scheme. Although their representatives were forbidden to talk with us prisoners, didn't they have eyes to see, or were they too callous to face truth?"

"Were you aware of President Roosevelt's death?" I asked. "It was a shock," she uttered softly. We learned that from the Nazis soldiers who were celebrating the news. Fearful of what they might do to us, we were demoralized."

I told Alice of my childish love for President Roosevelt. When Mother called "Come, the president is speaking," I ran towards the standing radio to catch the sound of his comforting voice. The day he died is seared into my memory. Spring had come early that year to my little town. Apple and cherry trees were in full bloom; tulips and lilac bushes were bursting open with color. The air was warm as we walked downhill to the drug store for mother's late afternoon lemon Coca-Cola and a double-dip ice cream cone for me. Crowded with friends and neighbors huddled together with downcast eyes, the room was alarmingly silent. Mother asked loudly "What's wrong?" Ray Martin, the pharmacist, put his arm around her shoulder as he spoke, "Edith, haven't you heard? Roosevelt is dead."

"No," she screamed, as we ran towards our house. Seated on the front porch, she lifted me onto her lap. "A great man is gone," she said softly. "We will have another president, a little man from Missouri."

"Can he win the war?" I asked.

"We hope so, but we don't know much about him."

"We thought the Americans would soon free us." Alice commented. "We knew they were on the way because we heard through the underground they had liberated Marienbad. What we did not learn at the time was General Patton and his troops were ordered to halt their advance and wait in Pilsen three weeks so the Soviets could liberate Prague." Shaking her head she continued "Three weeks! Can you imagine how different the next forty years would have been

if Patton had been allowed to rescue us a few weeks earlier? Czechoslovakia would not have been punished with a Communist government."

"Please tell me what you can recall about May 8, the day the Soviet Army liberated Theresienstadt." "I remember chaos," Alice began. "Everyone was running around, but going nowhere. Some of the stronger men were trying to kill the Nazi guards with their bare hands when a very tall man, Rabbi Leo Baeck, pushed his way into the crowd. Taking command, he ordered them to stop. "Take your hands off those guards. You must not harm them. The Nazis will be punished, but in a court of law," he shouted. "Can you imagine, he literally saved the lives of our enemies? And, just as he predicted, those guards were put on trial. Former Jewish prisoners testified against them; only one was given the death sentence, the others were sentenced to prison." Ja, Leo Baeck was a beautiful Menschbilder, a noble soul.

Conventional histories can teach us much. One quality that they may be inadequate for teaching us is sympathy. After World War II, Hannah Arendt observed: "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the committed Nazi or the dedicated communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction, true and false, no longer exists." And, indeed, the facts of history are essential. Yet we need more than the power to distinguish truth from falsehood. We also need – and need desperately – the power to understand the smaller, quieter struggles of individual people, who know love, taste grief, and stand bravely in the face of hatred and death. And this ability to understand and feel, so much more than what I dare to call "mere history," is the gift that biography gives us. Our minds are capable of leaping into time past, parts unknown and unspeakable situations if the biographer can accomplish the difficult task of bridging time to bring life to the subjects, their environment, and even warnings for the future. Elie Wiesel, the biographer of the Holocaust, addressed this issue after publishing his signature book, *Night*, in 1960. Although a short volume, less than 200 pages, Elie explained he had labored ten years struggling for the right words – explicit words that could not be challenged or gainsaid – to document the truth he had witnessed.

Having heard that I traveled frequently to her former motherland, Alice asked me why an American would be so interested in the Czech Republic. And so it was my turn to tell a story. In early January, 1990, as producer of the Opening Ceremony for a conference sponsored jointly by the Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity and the Nobel Peace Committee, I flew to Prague to meet with the Republic's first free president in forty years, the newly elected Vaclav Havel. Still wearing a hard hat, his face blacked with coal dust from inspecting an infamous coal mine, Havel was surprisingly jovial. He was relaxing in a bar underneath Prague Castle, and I thought he must be the world's first avant-garde president.

Intimidated by Havel's informality, I struggled to explain the purpose of my visit. "Mr. President, may I beg you to give a speech in Oslo this summer for a human right's conference?" I hastened to add that the gathering would be attended by world leaders including Nelson Mandela, President Mitterrand and the King of Norway. Awkwardly he replied: "I don't think I have time to write the speech." "But Mr. President, the program is being televised; your speech must be brief, maximum five minutes." "In that case, I accept. Tell me, what should I talk about?" "Mr. President, anything you wish, it is your speech." "Please, help me," he quipped. "I have never been a president before." Embarrassed, I spluttered one word, "Hope."

In Oslo, introduced by Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck, President Havel closed his talk with:

> I am not an optimist because I do not know all will end well.
> I am not a pessimist since I do not know if things will end badly.
> But, I always carry hope in my heart,
> For hope is as great a gift from God as life itself.

Alice is gone now. So, too, is the son whose hand she held so tightly as they walked through the iron gates at Theresienstadt. But the boy survived the horror and grew up to be an extraordinary musician in his own right. Lovers of classical music fondly recall the grace and fluency of the cellist and conductor Raphael Sommer. We have also said our farewells to Elie Wiesel and Vaclav Havel – illustrious names to those who read this, cherished friends to me. When I began the writing of this essay, it was not wholly clear to me why it was important for me to tell not only the story of Alice Herz-Sommer on New Year's Eve 1944, but also my own story of that same evening, a few hours later. Now, I understand. It is a question of simultaneity – the realization that, as we go about our daily lives, immersed in petty cares, other stories are, at the same time, being written. Many of them are stories of oppression and courage that we will never know. As a child in a dimly lit church, I frightened myself with images of Nazis who were thousands of miles away, and who would never come. At Theresienstadt, Alice gave hope and courage to others as very real Nazis, armed and impassive, stood at her elbow. Yes, Alice is gone now. But her story is alive, touching our humanity, inspiring us to think beyond ourselves and to ease the burdens of others. Such is the gift of biography.

New Year's Eves remain special occasions for me. For years, I hosted a New Year's Eve Concert for Peace at St. John the Divine. The first concert featured Frederika von Stade, Leonard Bernstein, and Odetta. Over the years, we welcomed the American Symphony and New York Philharmonic, Octavio Paz, Kathleen Battle, Placido Domingo, and Luciano Pavarotti, as well as film stars Gregory Peck, Cicely Tyson, James Earl Jones, and Harry Belafonte. Now, each

year on December 31, I recreate a mini-program in my home for friends who felt the need to share a quiet, memorable time. In 2019, following a casual buffet dinner served between 9:30 and 11:00, we gathered around the piano to await the invisible moment. Guests were asked to contribute their hopes for the coming year; a biographer friend began with a beautiful story; Eva Haller remembered garnering hope in 1944 while she was hiding in the Hungarian mountains; a young violinist, Sirena Huang, played an unaccompanied movement of a Bach partita. Ellen Burstyn read Tennyson's "Ring Out Wild Bells." As we approached three minutes of midnight, soprano Camellia Johnson sang "This Little Light of Mine" as one by one we lit slender candles, passing the flame from one taper to the next. Midnight was announced by the sounds from Central Park of New York's fireworks. Led by Terry Cook, the Metropolitan bass, all joined the singing of "Auld Lang Syne." Protected with the warmth of our communal humanity, New Year's Eve no longer felt formidable nor lonely as one year dissolved into the new.

New Year's Eve 2020 was observed remotely on Zoom as we respected the Covid-19 mandates and America's grievous suffering. We shall light our candles separately, yet they still will shine. Considering the nearly irreparable, damage inflicted on our democracy during the past four years I am reminded of something Reinhold Niebuhr said, when the Nazis were rising to power in Germany. "There are historic situations in which refusal to defend the inheritance of a civilization, however imperfect, against tyranny and aggression may result in consequences even greater than war."

Only a few years ago Vaclav Havel issued a warning from the depth of his own experience. "When we overthrew the god of communism that god was quickly replaced with two new gods of money and celebrity." Reminiscent of Havel's struggles to repair forty years of communist destruction, President-Elect Biden is facing a similar situation with members of his opposition fighting every step and every signature of his pen. Many Americans believe Joe Biden, a man motivated by knowledge and experience while guided by his humanity, will prevail. I am also reminded of what Havel wrote in his foreword to my book, "[…] we rise to find the best in ourselves." Biden is expected to be responsive to America's critical needs and to problems worldwide; his empathy quotient is high on issues large or small, his personal humanity, a given. During a spontaneous interview with him during his last term as Vice President, he surprised me with quotes from Elie Wiesel. "Speak out, do not be a bystander." As he was leaving the room he paused for another moment. "Speak out," he repeated thoughtfully. "I would walk to New York for that man."

Late December begs reminiscence. I have been thinking of Ethel's influence and only yesterday reread parts of her seminal book, *Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters*, a literary and psychological examination, even biography, of one of our

primary, often inexplicable, emotions. Ethel believed in the power of romantic love to unlock the soul and argued the emotion as a centerpiece of human culture. But Ethel's worthy thesis, although significant, is not the whole story. I am reminded, too, of Eleanor Roosevelt and Jacqueline Kennedy with exemplary dignity, after their husband's tragic deaths, encouraging calm rather than terror and chaos as they mourned during some of our nation's darkest moments. Biographers must dig ever deeper for something spiritual in people's lives, those moments of authentic generosity, joy, grief or strength that can expose secrets of their humanity.

The subtitle, *An Ordinary Woman*, Stefan Zweig chose for his unconventional tome on Marie Antoinette, drew me into the story, not as the impervious queen, but of the child-bride's troubled life portrayed amidst the cruelty of tactics sanctioned during the French Revolution. Zweig's intimate reprisal of Baron von Fersen's failed rescue attempt and Marie Antoinette's heart-breaking homage to their love were intensely human. Hours before her barbarous death, she dispatched a sympathetic messenger to return the ring, Fersen had placed on her finger, to him. Engraved with "tutto a te mi guida" (all things lead me to thee), that ring sheathed their eternal bond.

As he strove for biographical truth, Stefan Zweig put forth emotional and spiritual keys to help unlock our understanding of the humanity in his subjects. Fearlessly Zweig negated accepted myths and clichés perpetuated to foment hate and prejudice by generation after generation; rather he searched for glimpses of humanity. Brimming with life, his pages of elegant storytelling designated him Europe's most popular biographer before the rise of the totalitarians. Perhaps, sensing the future, Zweig admonished us, "Only the person who has experienced light and darkness, war and peace, rise and fall, only that person has truly experienced life. Once a man has found himself there is nothing in this world that he can lose. And once he has understood the humanity in himself, he will understand all human beings."

New York City *December 20, 2020*

Caroline Stoessinger, the author of the *A Century of Wisdom. Lessons from the Life of Alice Herz-Sommer, the World's Oldest Living Holocaust Survivor*, prefaced by Vaclav Havel and translated into many languages, is both a writer and a concert pianist. In this last capacity, Stoessinger has appeared on the stages of Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center and for twenty-five years has performed with the Tokyo String Quartet and the Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra. Stoessinger produced the televised dedication of the Schindler violin at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and the first New York production of *Brundibar*. She has played in concert halls from Tokyo and Prague to Spillville, Iowa, and for many years served as the artistic director at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. She is artistic director of chamber music

at the Tilles Center, artist-in-residence at John Jay College, director of the Newberry Chamber Players at the Newberry Opera House, and founder and president of the Mozart Academy. She lives in New York City. (Source: Google Books, Penguin-Random House)