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Saskia Sassen's Missing Chapter

Steve Pyke for the chronicle review

Saskia Sassen, a professor of sociology at Columbia U., has had to reckon with her father's relationship with Adolf Eichmann.

By Marc Parry | DECEMBER 05, 2014

The mass murderer visited on Sundays. Nearly 60 years later, Saskia Sassen can still picture his arrival. A gaunt man in a raincoat and dark hat, with a face that seemed paralyzed in a bitter smirk, the visitor would disappear behind closed doors with her father and a tape recorder. They remained there for hours.

Sassen—now a professor of sociology at Columbia University, then a girl of about 10 growing up in Argentina—didn't know who the visitor was. She didn't know what he and her father were talking about. She knew only that her mother detested the guest, whose visits triggered hysterical arguments between her parents.

"I wanted to find out what this was," she says. "I just needed to know."

The visitor, she eventually learned, was Adolf Eichmann. And what the Nazi fugitive was doing in her home is detailed in a new book that is changing how scholars view one of the chief architects of the Holocaust.

In the late 1950s, Eichmann discussed the Holocaust in a series of recorded talks with Sassen's Dutch-born father, Willem Sassen, who had been a Nazi SS volunteer and propagandist in World War II. Bettina Stangneth, a philosopher based in Germany, draws on these and other records in *Eichmann Before Jerusalem* (Knopf). Her book challenges Hannah Arendt's famous depiction of Eichmann as an unthinking, nonideological bureaucrat who had simply been following orders.

But while reviews and news coverage have stressed the showdown-with-Arendt angle, Stangneth's book also illuminates another story: the little-known family history of an eminent scholar.

Saskia Sassen, 67, is an authority on globalization whose books have been translated into more than 20 languages. Her classic 1991 work, *The Global City* (Princeton University Press), showed how changes in the world economy were transforming major urban centers. The scholar's influence extends beyond the academy: Corporate elites listen to her, as do activists for social and political change; she socializes with celebrities from journalism (*The Guardian*'s Alan Rusbridger), philosophy (Jürgen Habermas) and the arts (the late Susan Sontag). Sassen's Twitter account, followed by 24,000, chronicles an itinerary of media and conference appearances that rivals a secretary of state's.

Courtesy Saskia Sassen

Saskia Sassen and her parents, Willem and Miep, lived in Ireland between his SS service during World War II and the family's settling in Argentina.

Her friend and Columbia colleague Ira Katznelson, president of the Social Science Research Council, says Sassen has "altered the agenda" in the social sciences and is "well known and influential on every major populated continent." Another friend, Craig Calhoun, director of the London School of Economics and Political

Science, praises her ability to synthesize and make sense of issues cropping up around the world. "If you wanted to say, 'Where does Saskia Sassen do fieldwork and research?'—she does it in the business-class seats of international air travel, talking to the people who happen to sit next to her."

One topic that Sassen has struggled to talk about is her father's past. She excised it from autobiographical writing. She refrained from discussing it with friends and colleagues. "This is not the subject that I am really wanting to talk about," she says. But in recent years Sassen has found herself repeatedly confronting this missing chapter of her biography, as archival records emerge and scholars, journalists, and filmmakers seek her participation in projects connected to her father's history. She declined most of the film requests. When she does talk about her Argentina years, as she did with me recently, her eyes at times moisten with emotion.

The roots of Sassen's public reckoning with her father's history date back, in part, to a prominent documentary that aired on German television in 1998. *Adolf Eichmann: The Exterminator* recounted Eichmann's role in

organizing the deportation of European Jewry. But what caught the attention of Stangneth was its use of rediscovered recordings from Eichmann's talks with Willem Sassen in Argentina. Stangneth decided to investigate further.

At the heart of her book is a question. How did Eichmann—whose notoriety had been reflected in nicknames like Caligula, Czar of the Jews, Manager of the Holocaust—come to be seen as a cog in the Nazi machine? To answer that, Stangneth burrows into the thicket of records he left behind during his postwar years living under a false identity in Argentina. She emerges with a portrait of Eichmann as a master manipulator of his image—and an unrepentant murderer.

Eichmann Before Jerusalem has attracted international media attention since it first came out in German in 2011, including a September *New York Times* profile timed to the book's U.S. debut. That interest keeps growing. When I reached Stangneth at home in Hamburg recently, she was busy with more interviews for the release in Australia.

Stangneth corresponded with Saskia Sassen during her research, and *Eichmann Before Jerusalem* amounts to a minibiography of her father. It reads like spy fiction. War correspondent, novelist, actor, demagogue, bon vivant: Wilhelmus Antonius Maria Sassen played all of those roles. "If there was one constant in Sassen's life," Stangneth writes, "it was his fascination with National Socialism."

Sassen was no murderer. During the war, he joined an SS propaganda unit whose writers and broadcasters reported from the front lines of combat. In 1948 he escaped with his family to Argentina, where he linked up with a circle of local and refugee Nazis who harbored ambitious plans to "foment a revolution in Germany," Stangneth writes. One of their ventures was a kind of perverted academic symposium. Participants convened in Sassen's living room, where they

debated books, gave lectures, and tried to redeem Nazism. They were particularly obsessed with discrediting what they saw as enemy propaganda about the Holocaust.

Enter Eichmann. He was invited to participate in the project because of his knowledge of Jewish affairs. But over the course of the discussions, which were recorded in 1957, Eichmann didn't help the Sassen circle distance Nazism from the Holocaust. Instead, Stangneth writes, he made a confession.

"If of the 10.3 million Jews … we had killed 10.3 million, I would be satisfied, and would say, Good, we have destroyed an enemy," Eichmann told the group. He added, "We would have fulfilled our duty to our blood and our people and to the freedom of the peoples, if we had exterminated the most cunning intellect of all the human intellects alive today."

During these talks, Sassen felt horrified by the bloody details he learned about the concentration camps, Stangneth writes. But he was sure that Eichmann had been manipulated into organizing such crimes. Sassen's project, out of which he had hoped to write a book, eventually collapsed. Then, in 1960, Israeli agents abducted Eichmann. Rumors spread in Argentina that Sassen had betrayed him. "The German community thought, after Eichmann's kidnapping, that knowing Sassen could be a risk for your own life," Stangneth says.

On a Monday afternoon in late October, a doorman ushers me to Saskia Sassen's 12th-floor apartment overlooking New York's Washington Square Park. With her gray hair, loose blouse, and patterned skirt, she looks more like an aging hippie than an economic expert whose ideas shape the thinking of global corporate elites. After some preliminaries—coffee served, seats taken at a long wooden table at the end of her living room—we are back in Argentina, and before long back to the chaos that followed Eichmann's capture.

"I was not dominated by fear," Saskia Sassen says. "I was dominated by the fact —*aha! I knew it!*" She delivers three quick knocks on the table. "I knew that there was something weird going on. Because, remember, for so long I had been trying to understand why this person was coming."

Soon after his kidnapping, Eichmann's sons turned up at Sassen's house in the middle of the night. They were frantic to find their father, as Neal Bascomb relates in his 2009 book, *Hunting Eichmann*. They were also armed. Saskia Sassen's memories of that moment bubble up in fragments: Her mother trying to keep her away from the scene. Her trying to get back. Ringing phones. Other Nazis alerted. Hysteria.

Her mother, terrified, wanted to take the kids to Europe. Her father refused. The Sassen home became an epicenter of activity. What happened? Who betrayed? What's next? "To me it was like adventure central," Saskia Sassen says. "I never slept. I can't remember even going to school in that period. … After that kind of experience, a lot of these things that academics worry about—their safety, or their conditions of work—it's like child's play."

Eichmann was eventually tried in Jerusalem and hanged in 1962. Willem Sassen sold pieces of the Eichmann interviews to *Life* magazine. But Sassen cleverly camouflaged his relationship with Eichmann, Stangneth says, portraying himself as a journalist who met the mass murderer by chance in a pub.

At home, Sassen didn't hide his political views from his precocious daughter. Father and daughter discussed the war, politics, things that weren't taught in school. Saskia Sassen proclaimed herself a Communist at age 12. "We were like two little titans having a lot of political debates," she says. "When it came to politics, we disagreed completely. And he was part of my political education, clearly."

Willem Sassen believed in a strong state. He spoke in terms of the workings of political systems, not personal beliefs. "That probably is now present in my work," Saskia Sassen says. "I'm very interested in systems."

From an early age, she was also very interested in leaving home. In 1970 she set out for the University of Notre Dame, where, despite being an illegal immigrant with no college degree, she intended to pursue graduate work. She earned a Ph.D. in economics and sociology and, over time, a reputation for producing audacious scholarship.

Sassen's first major book, *The Mobility of Labor and Capital* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), focused on international migration. At the time, globalization research was in its infancy, says William I. Robinson, a sociologist of globalization at the University of California at Santa Barbara, who has written an overview of Sassen's career. Economists and sociologists studied how companies were becoming multinational. Separate researchers focused on the migration of people, Robinson says, attributing those flows to forces like the pull of better wages. Sassen connected those two domains of scholarship. She demonstrated how foreign investment can disrupt local communities—think, for example, of Mexican peasants displaced when a multinational firm sets up an agribusiness plantation on their land—which then generates a flow of migrants, Robinson says. And the migrants tend to move to the country or region from which the investment originated.

Sassen didn't just study migrants; she also tried to improve their lives. She got involved with Cesar Chavez's organizing of farmworkers and helped set up a child-care center for the children of migrant laborers in South Bend, Ind. That was one piece of a life active in various left-wing causes dating to the 1960s: Vietnam protests, the McGovern campaign, the Central American solidarity movement. Her exploits, like her father's, crackle with adventure. The time she was

blindfolded to meet a dubious character who had been connected to the Weathermen. The time a mob stoned her bus in Colombia. The time she smuggled evidence of napalm bombings out of El Salvador.

All of those experiences—plus her nocturnal forays into performance art—are narrated in an autobiographical essay she contributed to a 2005 book called *The Disobedient Generation: Social Theorists in the Sixties* (University of Chicago Press). But, as she wrote there, Sassen seldom discussed her political activities with academic colleagues.

By the early 1990s, what fellow scholars saw was the next phase of her intellectual ascent. Her second major book, *The Global City*, examined how global economic changes were altering urban life. It focused on three hubs—New York, London, and Tokyo—that had emerged as "command centers" of the global economy.

Cities, Sassen observed, should diminish as commercial centers with the rise of technology that allows instant long-distance transactions. They hadn't. Major cities became important marketplaces for investment banking and financial trading, as well as business-to-business services like law, consulting, accounting, and advertising. The global dispersal of manufacturing and production, Sassen argued, seemed to necessitate the simultaneous centralization of certain financial operations and services. Those agglomerated in major urban centers.

When the book came out, in 1991, "everybody thought decentralization is happening—everything was leaving major cities," says Susan S. Fainstein, a senior research fellow at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. "But she argued that no, they weren't, actually, in terms of these cities that played this kind of function."

Sassen's book—a multilayered argument that unfolds over 447 chart-packed pages—caused "a whole body of research to follow in its tracks," says Fainstein. Articles and books examined the global-cities phenomenon. Conferences popped up with "Global City" in their titles. Sassen found herself in demand as a public speaker, invited to address audiences as diverse as big-city mayors and scholars of literature.

Yet even as her public profile rose over the years, she continued to wrestle privately with Willem Sassen's legacy.

There were the arguments: father-and-daughter battles that continued until shortly before his death, in 2001. At the same time, making her way in New York presented more-practical challenges.

Saskia Sassen began her academic career at Queens College, where many Orthodox Jews studied and taught. She also joined the New York Institute of the Humanities, which brought together intellectuals from a variety of backgrounds, like Susan Sontag and Joseph Brodsky, the Russian émigré poet. The people around her knew history. They knew, in particular, Hannah Arendt.

In 1963, Arendt had published *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, her much-debated account of Eichmann's trial. Willem Sassen, whose interviews came up at the trial, appears in the book. (What's more, Sassen's husband, Richard Sennett, a prominent sociologist, had studied under Arendt.)

Sassen felt on guard. She avoided mentioning Buenos Aires.

"I tried not to have too many very personal friends," she says. "Because I knew that then I would have to get into histories that I didn't want to talk about."

One day, probably some time in the mid- or late 1980s, Susan Sontag asked her directly, "So what is your story in Argentina?"

Sassen paused. She had been prepared for such a question. But she wasn't ready to talk.

"Complicated," she said.

Sontag died in 2004. In the decade since, the relationship between Willem Sassen and Eichmann has attracted fresh scrutiny from researchers. As a result, Saskia Sassen has answered Sontag's question in a series of film and print interviews. One of the most prominent of these projects, a 2010 German docudrama called *Eichmann's Fate*, even features an actress depicting Saskia Sassen as a child. The film cuts between a contemporary interview with Sassen and a historical re-enactment showing the child actress opening the door of her home to the strange man in the dark hat.

Sassen's appearances have elicited a slew of messages via email and social media, some of them innocuous ("Oh, I didn't know"); others more sinister (one person, alluding to a poison used in Nazi death camps, told Sassen she should take a "Zyklon shower").

"I find her very brave to make these interviews," says Bettina Stangneth, who worked on the *Eichmann's Fate* movie. "It's not easy to talk about such things with a camera in front of you."

But, to my surprise, Sassen hasn't seen that movie. Nor has she read Stangneth's book. And the longer I speak with Sassen about her father, the clearer it becomes that her account clashes with Stangneth's.

Willem Sassen, in his daughter's description, is a more palatable figure. A bit of a fanatic, yes. A journalist aligned with the Nazis, yes. But a man whose great passions were theater and journalism.

In *Eichmann Before Jerusalem*, Stangneth describes how Willem Sassen grew infatuated with Hitler in his youth. She tells me how, after Eichmann's capture, Sassen protected the murderer by manipulating the transcripts of their discussions and never going public with the original recordings. (Stangneth found no evidence that Sassen had betrayed Eichmann to the Israelis.) Stangneth's book also describes how, in a 1991 interview on Argentine TV, Sassen continued to justify Josef Mengele's "experiments" on Auschwitz victims.

By contrast, Saskia Sassen tells me that her father "did not like the Nazis." She emphasizes how he clashed with Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda minister. "My father detested Hitler," she says. "He detested him."

And the Argentina circle? The dreaming of Nazi restoration? Willem Sassen's attempt to discredit "propaganda" about the Holocaust?

"That's not what I remember," she says. In her telling, Willem Sassen comes across as a mouthpiece for local Nazis. He wrote for them but ranted about them at home. The "ridiculous texts" he produced were "to have an income," she says. At another point in our conversation, Sassen says, "My father was more a journalist—a journalist wants to discover stuff—than he was pro-Nazi, actually." It's not that Stangneth is lying in her portrayal, she tells me. "But she was dealing with archives. … She doesn't understand, in my home, what I experienced."

After our interview, Sassen resumes her hectic public schedule with a succession of appearances at events in Paris and Berlin, plus a lecture in Chicago about her latest book, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Harvard University Press).

Meanwhile, I try to make sense of her private and public lives, and how they might connect, by talking with people who know her. The person best positioned to help, Richard Sennett, won't discuss her family past much, except to play down

its significance. "I wouldn't be so determinist about this," her husband says. "She made her own life. That's to me the story of her in her youth—that she left the moment she legally could and made a life for herself."

Susan Fainstein, who has known Sassen since her Queens College days, does see a connection between her background and her work: "I think her concern with people who are emigrants, who don't belong in any particular location, comes out of the peculiarities of her childhood."

The Harvard scholar also gives me a sense of how quiet Sassen had kept her family history. Fainstein considers Sassen a good friend. She even had Willem Sassen to dinner (a "charming elderly gentleman," as she recalls). Yet Sassen didn't tell her about his history. Only later, in part through reading about *Eichmann Before Jerusalem*, did Fainstein, who is Jewish, come to appreciate its significance. "I wish she had told me," Fainstein says, "and given me the option of inviting him to dinner or not on that basis."

As Craig Calhoun puts it, "Most of her life, Saskia compartmentalized this a lot."

She still tries to, as I soon learn in a series of emails that reveal a different side of the scholar who had greeted me so warmly in her apartment. Yes, Sassen will play the role of Willem Sassen's daughter in Eichmann projects. But, by writing about her father at length in an article focused on her, it's as if I have crossed an invisible boundary.

The problems begin with a list she sends me of possible interviewees. Sassen tells me that she has not discussed her father with these people. They are "major public figures," she writes, and Willem Sassen "is not the subject to bring up" with them.

She informs me that the "real story" is how she managed "to become a worldwide famous scholar in spite of unusual hardships."

Stangneth, for her part, empathizes with Sassen. Germans have a lot of experience with such family stories, she says. A child can grow up loving Grandpa, a nice man who brings gifts, only to learn that he led a death camp.

"I cannot imagine what it means to be the daughter of Willem Sassen and to be a person of such public interest like Saskia," she says.

But Stangneth also defends her depiction of Willem Sassen. She tells me that he spent most of 1960 trying to write a book about Eichmann. A few years ago, after her own book had already come out, she discovered a copy of this unfinished manuscript.

The contents were tough going. Willem Sassen had tried to convince the world that Jews weren't the real victims of German history. Eichmann was.

Marc Parry is a senior reporter at The Chronicle.

Saskia Sassen wrote a letter in response to this article. Read it here.

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