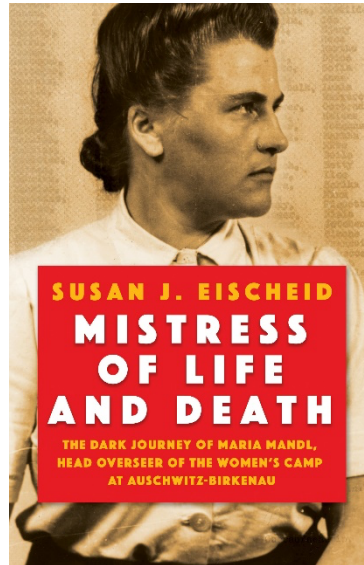


AUTHOR Q & A



1. What precipitated your interest in the Holocaust?

I was raised with little knowledge of the Holocaust and no education about the Holocaust in my public schools. In 10th grade I was assigned a report on the Warsaw Ghetto in a German language class. I was simply blown away by what I discovered and began to read everything I could find about the Holocaust, kicking off a lifelong interest. It seemed to me such a significant thing – socially, politically, in a humanitarian sense -in every way, that I could not believe people (regardless of their religion) were not constantly remembering, commemorating, and working to keep it from happening again. In later years, as a professional musician, I discovered the composers, performers, and music of the Holocaust and that added a whole new dimension to my understanding.

2. Has your profession as a musician and performer helped or hurt you in this quest?

It has helped me in every way. As a performer, I have been overwhelmed by the power of this music and by my power to give, in some small way, a voice back to those many musicians whose lives and careers were so cruelly silenced. I am humbled, and honored, to bring it back to life.

As a scholar and writer I firmly believe that the fact I am not a traditional historian has opened many doors. People were willing to talk to a musician, and we always found common threads in music, or in their life experiences.

Many deep and profound friendships evolved from these encounters and I treasure these relationships, many of which lasted years or decades until the person's death. To me this is about more than a book, it is about honoring their memories and those of the people they loved and, again, being humbled by their trust in me to tell their stories. I take that very seriously.

3. Do you believe that people can be intrinsically evil?

Barring a psychological disorder such as psychopathy, I do not believe people are intrinsically evil. I believe they can become evil through nature/nurture, the power of the community or the collective, societal pressures, and influences like hate speech, propaganda and rhetoric, and outside 'evil' influences.

4. Do you believe that Maria was intrinsically evil?

No, I do not. Indisputably she did incredibly evil things, some of which are beyond any understanding. She was responsible for thousands of deaths, many by her own hand. When you kill a person face to face, and often torture them before that death, you have taken a step into what is surely the most profound evil of all -taking someone's life.

In Maria's case this was behavior which evolved quickly after some major life traumas; losing her job in the Austrian Anschluss, being dumped by her fiancée – a Nazi supporter - because (ironically) her family did not support Nazism, a beloved nephew dying at the age of three, etc. Ultimately, she answered a job ad for overseers at a 'detention camp for asocial females' and quickly became indoctrinated in the culture of cruelty which was encouraged. Then, she began to kill.

After that and for the next several years Maria descended deeper and deeper into a kind of madness from which empathy disappeared and cruelty became the norm. Ultimately, she did not see her victims as human, they were just administrative problems to be handled and dispensed with.

I do believe that after the war, when she was arrested and detained, Maria gradually came out of this madness and began to really realize what she had done. Some personal accounting of responsibility definitely took place and very near the end of her life - shortly before she was executed - she begged forgiveness from a former Auschwitz inmate she met in the prison showers.

5. What surprised you the most about Mandl's life?

The transition which took place in Maria's personality, from an often described "Nice Girl from a Good Family," into a cold-blooded killer. Her Father was a very kind man, philanthropic in the community, and incredibly well-respected. Maria adored him and later, when she was imprisoned, agonized over what her actions were doing to him. Included in the book is an anguished letter he wrote to Maria's best friend after the war, seeking information about 'his Mari,' and expressing his devastation. Her mother was likewise traumatized by the disintegration of Maria's personality, and in the last years of the war went daily to mass, praying for Maria's eternal soul.

Understanding this transition, in fact, has been the impetus behind this project. Far greater minds than mine have struggled with the reasons good people turn to evil. I thought if I could trace just this one life, and fully explore Maria's transition from good to evil, that would lend us all a greater understanding of this perhaps unanswerable conundrum.

6. Are crimes the magnitude of Maria's forgivable?

I don't believe we should focus on the magnitude of the crime where forgiveness is concerned. Had Maria 'only' killed one person, I believe her moral culpability would be the same. I asked this question to an assortment of clergymen and persons of faith and there were a variety of responses. Since Maria was raised Catholic, I approached priests and nuns first, and they educated me in the Catholic doctrine that if a person truly repents her crimes and asks for forgiveness, then forgiveness is possible. I spoke to a mentee (now an elderly man) of the priest who was assigned to be Maria's counselor in the prison and who was required to attend her hanging. He spoke of the horrible difficulties of this responsibility and the things that his mentor could possibly have said to Maria at the end.

Other doctrines vary from outright forgiveness to no forgiveness possible. So, in the end, it comes down to a personal decision for every person to forgive or not to forgive. Although I'd like to think I could forgive someone unconditionally, I do not think it would be possible for me had that person harmed my family or someone I loved.

In the prison showers, when Maria begged forgiveness from the former Auschwitz inmate, that woman did find it in herself to forgive Maria and stated that, "I forgive you in the name of all the prisoners!" In later years, this kicked off a maelstrom of controversy among other survivors who were beyond irate that she would dare to speak for them, many of whom stated they would never forgive their oppressors.

7. What is the greatest lesson you have learned from this research?

That we all have the capacity for good and for evil within us, and more often than not, we fall down on the side of evil. We must be constantly diligent to fight dangerous influences. I have also discovered how very easy it is to get sucked into a vortex of evil. We must speak out when we see injustice, we must denounce hate speech and rhetoric and racial and ethnic profiling. We must be eternally vigilant and fight for what is right.