

Howard Goldenberg's talk at the launch of *The Unsung Family Hero*

At the time that Dr Paul Gardner began writing this book the world felt tolerably well. At least the human world felt pretty well. (If you happened to be a Black Rhino or an Amur Leopard or an Orangutan from Borneo, your world felt pretty sick: your critically endangered species was on the way out.) When Paul started writing this book we had a different incumbent in the White House, we hadn't heard of wet markets, coronaviruses interested virologists only, you could travel across the world, you could cross the street to your coffee shop.

Paul wrote in a world where liberal democracy seemed secure, where authoritarian leaders were fewer on the ground. Racism didn't trouble most of us. Antisemitism was pretty much dead, wasn't it? And back then Black lives didn't matter.

This book starts in a Germany we can recognize, a country where human rights are enshrined, where liberty prevails, where gay people and disabled persons and Romani and Communists and Jews live in security. In the pages of this book we pass into darkness where whole ethnic groups experience the life of the Black Rhino and the Orangutan of Borneo. We witness how fear rises and rises across a nation, how its flames are fed; we witness how, in the ambient fear, slowly, slowly, inexorably, democracy is dismantled; we witness some who assist the dismantling actively, we witness the many who fall silent and enable by passivity. And in the silence genocide proceeds.

By the time Paul had finished writing and had published this fine work our own human world had changed. Darkness was falling. Democracy was failing and the Plague had fallen. Across despotic regimes and democracies alike, life became abruptly more difficult, suffering became more prevalent, regimes became more authoritarian. People felt angry and started looking for someone to blame.

The *Unsung Family Hero* is an ordinary bloke named Gerhard Badrian. For a long time he lives an ordinary life and then he changes. He transforms himself. He defies tyranny, his actions mock the SS, he blazes across his world until, abruptly, he is extinguished. He dies childless, his lover grieves, the War comes to an end, his comrades die and Gerhard falls into obscurity. With the exception of the odd distant relative and a scattering of Dutch people Gerhard Badrian is lost to memory. Forgotten. Until Paul Gardner performs his human archaeology and searches for the *unsung family hero* and brings him back to life.

In different times Paul's highest achievement would have been to bring pleasure and satisfaction to his family but in our darkening moment, Paul sings a hero for us who lights the darkness. At least it lights mine. His story disturbed me, then it inspired me. It asked the questions of me that the Talmudic sage Hillel asked:

*Im ein ani li mi li?*

If I'm not for myself who am I?

*im ani rack le'atzmi, mi ani?*

If I am only for myself, who am I?

*V'Im lo achshav ei mattai?*  
And if not now, when?

I don't think you can read Paul's book without him asking questions of you: Will you be an active enabler? Will you be a silent permitter? Or will you be like Gerhard, the ordinary human who rises to his full self?

*To every man upon this earth  
Death cometh soon or late.  
And how can man die better  
Than facing fearful odds,  
For the ashes of his fathers,  
And the temples of his gods?*

For many decades Paul Gardner lived in hiding in the dusty world of academic research. He published over one hundred scholarly articles. Paul successfully disguised himself as a scholar, a teacher, an academic. In fact he was quietly preparing himself for the writing of this book; he was practising the meticulous research that was to unearth Gerhard Badrian and bring him vividly before us.

In telling Gerhard Badrian's story, Paul resists melodrama. He neither exclaims, nor judges, he practises a disciplined quietism. In these pages he shows us both protection and betrayal. It's Anne Frank and her family again - brave Dutch gentiles acting nobly, others doing the opposite.

[The civilian people of wartime Holland were tried desperately. I was acquainted with a few. For many years one particular, older Dutch couple was well known to me as patients. Highly neurotic, the two were haunted by unnamed wartime memories. It wasn't until I'd been tried and tested by them over about twenty years, that they confided in me. They had tried to hide and save a Jewish couple who repeatedly betrayed their trust, leaving the house at night to consort with Jewish friends. Neighbours witnessed the night sorties; they became a matter of gossip. In doing this, the Jews in hiding endangered their hosts' lives. Eventually the host couple told their guests to leave. They never learned the fate of their former guests. They never got over their ambiguous role. Possibly they felt driven to choose this Jewish doctor to help them to exorcise their guilt. ]

In writing across the spectrum of the heroic, Paul investigates, he considers evidence and he weighs it. He gives us real people, whom I can recognise, humans in their credible complexity and their individuality.

Paul does not need to shout; he trusts his reader to discern and ponder.

Paul's book falls broadly into two parts, the narration of Gerhard Badrian's life followed by a highly informative Epilogue. The Epilogue includes the author's account of how he learned what about the family hero who had gone for so long unsung. What Paul shows us here is how a human who was lost to memory can be found, brought back and known.

**Paul's research shows us the significance of a human life; we see that the passage of a human leaves a crease in the universe; that fossils may survive**

**and persist; that a life makes a mark, that through search we can trace that mark, we can recapture that human who was lost.**

In carrying out this research Paul Gardner performs a sacred task: **he raises up a name, he builds a *Yad Vashem***, a memorial. He reminds us that a life matters.

Paul Gardner's book is important for more than a suspenseful narrative, it's more than a poignant tale, and more than one person's memorial. It represents additional value as a sort of template, as an exemplar of the power of research. We learn with Paul Gardner, former academic, transmogrified to a palanteologist or an arachaeologist of the human. In Paul's hands a found sliver of bone, a broken shard of pottery, gives us a man's life and times.

With research of this order, no-one who dies need remain lost. **Gerhard Badrian lives, duly and fully sung.**

**He lives again in this book that I now declare launched.**