

Surviving History and Addiction:

The Trauma and Near-Life Experience of S. Hanala Stadner

By Christopher Cussat



Since leaving Montreal and moving to Los Angeles to pursue a career in television over twenty years ago, S. Hanala Stadner has seen and (sometimes unfortunately) done it all. Her positive and impressive life experiences include a successful cable television show which ran for a decade, hobnobbing with the likes of Marlon Brando, getting physically and mentally fit through exercise, finding a career as an aerobics and spin instructor, reconnecting to and coming to peace with her mother, and now, being recognized as an accomplished, comedic and autobiographical author.

However, there cannot be so many positives without some negatives, and Stadner has had her share. In addition to a nearly life-long, estranged relationship with her mother and father, she became an alcoholic at a very early age, a full-blown drug addict, a depressive, a victim of sexual assaults and generally, a lost soul living in L.A.

Stadner uses sharp humor and her gift of wit to tell her own story in the new book, *My Parents Went Through the Holocaust and All I Got Was This Lousy T-shirt*. The book explores how experiencing the Holocaust first-hand affected her parents (especially her mother) and how their reaction to that experience negatively affected Stadner as a child and lit the fuse that eventually exploded into her addiction problems. "I created a Holocaust of my own using drugs," Stadner noted, "The book is about how my parents survived Hitler and how I survived them, drugs and alcohol."

She further explained, "Hitler spoiled my parents for regular suffering and [as a result] my parents were incapable of empathy – no matter what happened to me, it happened to them worse because their experiences were worse – the Holocaust always won." As a result, Stadner grew up believing that her feelings were wrong and that she had no right to feel bad about anything. "We *are* our feelings. If you believe that your feelings are wrong, you cannot have any kind of self-esteem and you are going to want to shut your feelings down – what is better than alcohol for that?"

Stadner recalled the first time she got drunk (at age nine) after her mother embarrassed her during an anniversary party. "I gave her [my mother] a beautiful jewelry box in front of everybody as a present and she said, 'This is a present for a baby! Take it back!'" After years of being held at arms length by her mother, for whatever reason, that particular moment was the breaking point and it stayed with Stadner. It also marked the beginning of her alcoholism. "I felt so bad that I wanted to disappear into the floor, so I started finishing everybody's drinks when my mom upset me."

It is interesting to note that Stadner believes she was always prone to addiction of any kind and she feels that television and food were her first addictions. Without a required connection to her mother, she searched for understanding through the characters on the small screen and comfort in the snacks that she ate while watching. "I found normalcy in tel-

evision and food – if I just sat there with my food in front of the TV and watched Captain Kirk get everybody out of trouble, then things started to make sense.”

Stadner even inferred that television influenced her first turn towards alcohol. She explained, “I don’t know how I got the idea [to drink] – maybe it was from watching *Bewitched* when Darren would go to the back of the stairs, get a shot of booze, and then feel better when Samantha was using her powers and upsetting him.”

Regardless of what inspired her first drinking binge, Stadner was immediately hooked. “After I started finishing people’s drinks, all of a sudden, nothing mattered – including what my mother said to me.” In fact, the alcohol not only took away her embarrassment, it gave her something she had not felt before – a semblance of self-esteem. Said Stadner, “I wasn’t self-conscious.” When I drank that alcohol, I felt like a perfect child of God – I had no sing-song accent, no big nose, no buckteeth – I was Christie Brinkley!”

A few years later (still living in Montreal), alcohol and a boyfriend helped open the door to drugs. He easily convinced Stadner to start smoking hashish at age thirteen by threatening to break-up with her if she did not.

When Stadner moved to Los Angeles years later to seek career opportunities, she instead found more opportunities to expand and diversify her addictions. “I came to L.A. to get into television and instead I got into harder drugs, more alcohol and limos with strange men.” Stadner admitted that even men and sex proved to be just another addiction and a way that she could distract herself from her own personal angst.

It is no surprise then, that a strange man introduced Stadner to her next drug of choice –

Quaaludes. The experience not only added to her dependency, it also exposed her to an all too often consequence of drug use – sexual assault. Stadner recollected, “I met this guy by the pool and he asked me if I ever did Quaaludes – I said no and he said he had more at his place. I took [a whole one] and passed out. When I woke up I thought that someone in the room was having sex and when I could focus I realized that there was a naked man on top of me.”

With food still being a constant addiction, Stadner eventually gained weight, which indirectly led to her introduction to cocaine. “One boyfriend said he wasn’t that into fat chicks (which of course made me feel so good) and he gave me a vial of this white powder. After doing cocaine for a couple of months, I got really, really thin. When my mother saw me at the airport, she started to cry and said I looked like the people coming out of Auschwitz.”

Ironically, Stadner’s turning point came as a late Christmas present. Although Stadner claims she always knew that she was an alcoholic and not in denial of it, it took an extremely embarrassing event and a subtle intervention for her to take the first step to recovery. Stadner and her husband

were attending one of his patient’s Christmas parties. During one of her usual blackouts, Stadner knocked over the Christmas tree. “There I was, sitting with branches up my butt and everybody looking at me.”

The next day, her husband told her to call his patient (the party’s host) and apologize. Stadner remembered the conversation, “She asked me if I was aware that I was at an AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] Christmas party and that I was the only person drinking that night. She wanted to take me to a meeting and I told her I was going to try and control my drinking myself.”

Although Stadner tried to control her drinking for a few days, she soon realized that she did not have any friends left and was so depressed that she was calling the suicide prevention hotline so often that they would hang up on her. As a last resort, she called her husband’s patient back and went to an AA meeting with her. That was December 28, 1982 and Stadner has been sober ever since.

Stadner found that humor was a way that she could deal with the horror in her life. In fact, she gave her book its title because she feels that Jews do what many alcoholics do – turn horror into humor. She explained, “Even at AA meetings, people talk about the most pathetic parts of their lives and sometimes people would be screaming from laughter – these people told their stories and they were laughing one minute and crying the next and I thought, ‘These people are crazy [like me] – these are my people!’” In other words, humor and comedy can often help people cope with tragedy and trauma. This is why Stadner defines her book as a “TRAUMEDY.”

Stadner cites AA meetings, therapy, humor and exercise as the means to beating her addictions and she recommends these tools to those who want to recover. “I wouldn’t be sober without going to [AA] meetings and to the gym. I really do not believe that I would be sober without the endorphins that I get from aerobic activity – that really saved my life.” Not only can exercise help addicts beat their addictions, it also helps them to rebuild their health at the same time.

The chapters on recovery in *My Parents Went Through the Holocaust and All I Got Was This Lousy T-shirt* walk readers through the life-processes that Stadner used to beat her addictions. In conclusion, she offers this advice to addicts seeking help, “Understand that life is messy and understand that there’s going to be a lot of bad feelings. Just because you get sober, it doesn’t mean that life starts going your way – but if you don’t get sober, it’s going to get so much worse!”

S. Hanala Stadner encourages and welcomes e-mails, which can be sent via her website at www.myparentswent.com. Her new book, *My Parents Went Through the Holocaust and All I Got Was This Lousy T-shirt*, is available for purchase on www.amazon.com.