SPARING THE CHILD

GRIEF AND THE UNSPEAKABLE IN YOUTH LITERATURE ABOUT NAZISM AND THE HOLOCAUST

HAMIDA BOSMAJIAN
SPARING THE CHILD

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GRIEF AND THE UNSPEAKABLE IN YOUTH LITERATURE ABOUT NAZISM AND THE HOLOCAUST

HAMIDA BOUSMAJIAN

Routledge
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To Haig, Harlan and Vilka—
   In this our life and time
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Dedicated to furthering original research in children’s literature and culture, the Children’s Literature and Culture series includes monographs on individual authors and illustrators, historical examinations of different periods, literary analyses of genres, and comparative studies on literature and the mass media. The series is international in scope and is intended to encourage innovative research in children’s literature with a focus on interdisciplinary methodology.

Children’s literature and culture are understood in the broadest sense of the term children to encompass the period of childhood up through late adolescence. Owing to the fact that the notion of childhood has changed so much since the origination of children’s literature, this Garland series is particularly concerned with transformations in children’s culture and how they have affected the representation and socialization of children. While the emphasis of the series is on children’s literature, all types of studies that deal with children’s radio, film, television, and art are included in an endeavor to grasp the aesthetics and values of children’s culture. Not only have there been momentous changes in children’s culture in the last fifty years, but also radical shifts in the scholarship that deals with these changes. In this regard, the goal of the Children’s Literature and Culture series is to enhance research in this field and, at the same time, point to new directions that bring together the best scholarly work throughout the world.

Jack Zipes
T he image of the child with a gun, officially sanctioned as a combat-ready soldier, made our collective memory’s cherished romantic image of the child unreliable. Photographs of child soldiers in all parts of the world have redefined the child as a potential and actual executor of adult violence. First among such iconoclastic images of the child was the film footage of twelve-year-old Hitler Youths standing in soldiers’ uniforms before their Führer in the early spring of 1945, ready to die for him. That blurred footage remains in our historical memory Hitler’s last public appearance, not before a mass audience but before a few soldier children, licensed and ready to kill—as they did, fearlessly and without regard for their mortality. The child with a gun startles and shocks, perhaps even more than the child as victim of starvation, rape, mutilation, or murder. We expect children to be helpless, passive, and powerless in the violent social and political worlds we have made. The child as perpetrator, the child as victim—both challenge our assumptions of and desire for a pastoral, innocent and joyous childhood. There are indeed some children who live for a time in such an age of wonder, but most children exist in the social and political realities of their contexts. Documentary footage has left us collective memories of children rushing toward helicopter gunships or throwing rocks at adult soldiers. We have seen on film ten-year-old Hitler Youths beating their drums at the party rally at Nuremberg, and we have seen the shadowy images of children being shoved into cattle cars destined for Auschwitz.
Children are used and abused in history; they have no power though they are the inheritors of the future. Adults have often feared that future. Herod ordered the slaughter of the innocents and the victorious Greeks threw baby Astyanax, the son of Hector, from the ramparts of a defeated Troy. The child is the promise of our future but also a threat to established authority. Children are socialized to repeat the patterns of the adult world, a process that has led authoritarian societies either to coordinate children politically or to eliminate them as a threat. National Socialism did both in its ideology and action; it made children a means to an end in the course of its disastrous history.

The image of the child in the memories of adult witnesses haunted me in my earlier explorations of the Holocaust and Nazism in German post-war literature. A child plays with a red ball; an SS smashes her skull against the Black Wall of Auschwitz; a child eyewitnesses another child hanging from the gallows; a child screams “you’ll pay for this” and is carted off on a truckload of children destined for the gas chamber. The mere physical existence of the child, in all its powerlessness, inflamed with murderous license the perpetrator’s emotionally anesthetized and impotent self, a licentiousness legitimized by the state. The images of such children became a focus for me when I began to explore literature for young readers about Nazism and the Holocaust.

I agree with Saul Friedlander’s insight that we must continue to address the Shoah even after we know that no new data will be added to its familiar and disastrous history. Friedlander contends, that, while we never can “master” the Nazi epoch or the Shoah, the self-awareness of the historian or critic is essential for “working through” the text. It is a self-awareness expressed through the voice that interprets texts even as it acknowledges the impossibility that neither text nor interpretation can ever represent with immediacy the trauma experienced in history. Friedlander urges that any “working through” must address both Nazism and the Shoah because one is incomplete without the other, even though perpetrators and victims experienced the historical moment differently. Michael Geyer and Miriam Hansen also advocate the discussion of such a linkage: “The Holocaust is now written into the act of representation itself. It is inscribed there as the remembrance of past lives and their mass death: as the re-imagining of the unimaginable ‘violence of linkage’ (Gewalt des Zusammmenhangs) that holds Germans and Jews together ever since the moment of genocide. To understand Auschwitz in this way as ‘sign of history’ is the task of the postwar generation.”
A parodic complementary often links the images of Nazism and the Shoah. For example, the concept and actuality of “the camp” defined a site where the human person was to be stripped of the familial identity given by home or community and instead was redefined as either acceptable or unacceptable to National Socialism. The Hitler Youth camp removed the child from the influences of home and school; the death camp was the site where the child was physically and psychologically stripped of all that was once normal life and consigned to have its identity erased altogether through murderous annihilation.

After the disaster of the Third Reich, memory became a primary problem for both perpetrators and victims. “The victims of Nazism,” writes Friedlander, “cope with a fundamentally traumatic situation, whereas many Germans have to cope with a widening stain, with potential shame or guilt.” Rarely has the “widening stain” been acknowledged by Nazi perpetrators, but among those who were born between 1924 and 1933—the Hitler Youth generation—there have been a few, such as Günter Grass and Siegfried Lenz, who have felt themselves as both perpetrators and victims of Nazism and have had the courage to acknowledge their legacy of guilt. Some of them, for example, Hans Peter Richter, Horst Burger and Barbara Gehrts, have translated their experiences of growing up in the Third Reich into narratives for the young with the intention of raising the historical consciousness and conscience of their young readers; at least that is the hope of the official text of their narratives. Similarly, some Holocaust survivors (who were adolescents in 1945 when the Allies liberated concentration and extermination camps) wrote for young readers, decades later, accounts of their experiences.

Nazism dehumanized all children as a means to an end. The desirable child was the politically coordinated child; the undesirable child was to be eliminated. Identified with Hitler by its very name and propagandistically useful throughout the time of the Nazi struggle for power, the Hitler Youth after 1933 became politically coordinated as Staatsjugend, youth of the German State whose incarnation was Hitler himself as the slogan “Ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Führer” (One nation, one people, one leader) proclaimed. The declaration “Du bist nichts, dein Volk ist alles” (You are nothing, your Volk is everything) propagandized especially the boy child toward an education for death, for nothing was deemed more loyal and true than to die for Führer and Fatherland. The “you are nothing” denied individualized personhood in the Nazi child and was, of course, also the exclusive definer of the Jewish child and all children who were defined as “lebensunwürdig,” unworthy of life. In either case, Nazi ideology, which
officially celebrated the child, denied the future to its own children and the child it defined as “other.”

Though children were the victims of Nazism, their victimizations are highly unconventional subject matter for children’s and young adult’s literature. If Jacqueline Rose’s contention that “children’s fiction is an impossibility,” even in its most conventional forms, the subject matters of Nazism and the Holocaust may appear as totally inappropriate. Rose argues that “children’s fiction sets up the child as an outsider to its own process” by building “an image of the child inside the book . . . in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp.” Adult writers construct the child in the book and, by extension, the child as reader. The centripetal and centrifugal tension that is part of any narrative fiction is accentuated in children’s literature where the child in the book and the implied or projected reader of the book are a construction by an adult who attempts to rein in the “otherness” of the child and align it with a world adults deem appropriate. The construction of the child or adolescent in narratives for young readers about Nazism and the Holocaust began after 1960. During the first fifteen years after the war, the cultural and political climate in Europe and North America inhibited the discussion of both topics.

Children’s literature is rarely avant-garde or “the antenna of the culture”; instead, it responds to the prevailing social climate. Two conflicting motivations are at work here. One is the construction of the child as a socially and culturally acceptable image, even where the child character goes counter to cultural values. This constitutes the official text of the story. The other authorial motivation, often preconscious, is that element in narratives for children that the official text disguises, usually through the text’s rational and didactic intent. The author who chooses to write for children about serious matters avoids (to a far greater extent than writers of adult narratives) the critical gaze of the adult reader, for children do not interpret the text and adults generally eschew the reading of children’s literature. As a result, children’s literature is a medium that spares both the author and the child reader as the official text of the story sublimates and disguises a personally or socially complicated subtext. The sparing, the protective censoring and intentional limiting of the reader’s understanding, becomes ever more problematical the more a narrative claims verisimilitude. There are few fictional narrative genres where these claims exert a greater pressure than in Holocaust literature with its overwhelming historical facticity. Here, the giving of reliable testimony is inextricably part of the ethos of the narrative voice and the author’s ethical com-
mitment to historical truth. In choosing to write for young readers about the Holocaust, the author, as a narrator and as a person struggling with traumatic memories, may conceal or limit the site of atrocious history with reader-protective strategies that intend to spare the child but also enable the author to censor, sublimate, deny, or release personally experienced traumatic events.

How, then, are Nazism and the Holocaust remembered? To what extent can the genres of the representations of memories based on experience or based on acquired knowledge do justice to Nazism and the Holocaust, especially in literature for young readers? What shifts in perception will occur in succeeding generations as cultural climates change? These are the primary questions that concern me in this study. There is so much information and knowledge available about Nazism and the Holocaust that “the problem is no longer ‘never to forget’: it is how to remember” (my emphasis).7

As of now, the familiar dicta “lest we forget” and “never again” constitute the didactic motive of the official text of Holocaust narratives for the young; however, their meaning applies also, with some qualifications, to narratives about Nazism, primarily as that period is remembered by former Hitler Youths. Here the narrative voice as authorial projection conceals both historical fact and psychological response. Narrators protect and thus spare the child the attractiveness Nazism held for many youths, the charisma of its theatrical effects and the empowerment achieved by submerging one’s individuality in a mass movement. The depiction of such temptations is almost taboo in postwar youth literature. Holocaust recounts, on their part, spare the child the ultimate sites of atrocity such as the gas chamber or crematorium. Both genres, though for different reasons, have in common the problem of unresolved mourning. The Hitler Youth, whose ideology aggrieved the world, cannot mourn the loss of his faith; the Holocaust survivor’s mourning of individual and collective loss cannot be resolved for that would be the beginning of the end of forgetting the dead. Desire and unresolved grief constitute the main subtextual tensions in narratives for the young about Nazism; desire for normal life and a necessarily unresolved grief for those who perished characterize Holocaust narratives.

The didactic motive is the veneer that hides the unresolved grief in narratives about Nazism and the Holocaust. The young reader is to become conscious of the Nazi era and the suffering of its victims and, through the act of reading consciously, critically, and empathically, appropriate a memory—or rather post-memory—that is not part of his or
her experience but is supposed to ensure that “never again” will there be a repetition of such a disaster. In reading about a Hitler Youth or an adolescent Holocaust survivor, the implied reader is to undergo both identification and rejection. In the case of a Hitler Youth story, writers de-emphasize the attractions to Nazism and highlight alienation and personal forlornness during and after the collapse of the Hitler regime. In the case of a Holocaust survivor story, writers understate the extremes of atrocious history and emphasize acts of ingenuity and kindness or accentuate heroic gestures to inspire the young reader. Yet, these rational motives in the official narratives for young readers are almost always subverted by subtexts through which the author hides and reveals what is deeply disturbing. Authors may try to write “master narratives,” but none of them can “master the past” and the gaps left by catastrophic losses.

The textual discussions in this study will emphasize the manifestations of inhibited or unresolved grieving processes. Individually and collectively, western culture defines the psychological process of grieving in terms of progressive stages leading the aggrieved to a level of “acceptance” where he or she can again be whole and healed by achieving maturation through grief. Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich’s study, *The Inability to Mourn*, critiques postwar German society for not achieving that maturation.*8* Studies of the trauma of Holocaust survivors usually highlight the problem of the victim’s inability to “work through” traumatic memories, forgetting that the survivor may inhibit such working through for the sake of the dead who cannot and must not be forgotten. The underlying assumption seems to be that the grieving process, with its beginning, middle and end, is exclusively a natural phenomenon rather than a social construction. This valorization of the “process” and its intrinsic ambivalences implies that, when we have finished processing grief, we will have made progress toward personal maturation or collective healing. Official texts often engage in this processing, but their subtexts preserve the memory of loss and trauma as an object of melancholic contemplation.*9* The pain of loss is still there, even after the rational telling of how the loss occurred. In ordinary time—and Nazism and the Holocaust were not ordinary time—human beings experience painful events and relationships that may lead to a healing grieving process, but they also can remain arrested in a persistent and objectless state of melancholy. The sufferer may have assumed that grief has been successfully worked through, when, in a moment of crisis or even while just dully walking along, the individual realizes that nothing, nothing has been resolved or concluded. In the autobiographically motivated works I will
discuss in this study, the grieving process of narrators who survived Nazism and the Holocaust remains inconclusive and reveals its tensions through narrative representation and concealment.

If sparing the child is part of the rhetoric of Holocaust narratives for young readers—as it is part of stories about Hitler Youths—then the belief that reading about historical trauma will prevent recurrence is illusory. Moreover, if the imagination of adults is extremely limited in representing the extreme situation of Auschwitz, as repeated use of words like “unthinkable” or “unimaginable” indicate, the imagination of children cannot fathom even an inkling of the horror of Auschwitz. Representation of Nazism and the Holocaust in narratives for young readers officially intends to reinforce the imperatives of “lest we forget” and “never again,” but the subtext of such narratives conceals an often private agenda, namely that the author is more at ease writing for young readers whose critical awareness and imagination are limited. By definition, all Holocaust literature is metaphorical as it employs structures by which the tenor of the experience seeks to communicate itself, unsuccessfully. The young reader who is to acquire memory through reading in order to become a witness will, finally, know very little of disastrous history, for the facticity of that history and the grief of the author are concealed by a delimiting rhetoric that ensures the impossibility of representing that history and that grief.

In struggling with this subject, I have come to realize that my memory, too, retains images expressive of a subtext, even as I interpret and critique. Decades ago, my husband, Haig Bosmajian, did research at Stanford’s Hoover archives for his doctoral work on the Nazi speaker system. I was his translator and, in the basement of Hoover Tower, turned with him the brittle yellowed pages of the *Völkische Beobachter* and the anti-Semitic tabloid, *der Stürmer*. In that basement and through this intellectual but somewhat mechanical exercise, I became aware of the Third Reich and its consequences. Thereafter, when I looked at a photograph of myself as a three-year-old girl playing ball in April of 1939, I saw not only a memory point, but also a child raised in a nation state where the air she breathed would before long contain carbon released from crematoria and where the language that shaped her speaking and thinking was subtle with innuendoes of prejudice and denial, and authoritative with commands such as “keep your mouth shut” and “don’t talk back” (“halt den Mund” and “keine Widerworte”). These realizations were the beginning of my resolve to “talk back” always and publicly against the Nazi enterprise of death-determined dehumanizations.
I have done so in *Metaphors of Evil: Contemporary German Literature and the Shadow of Nazism* (1979), but I also discovered that it is easier to “talk back” in public than in private. In the 1970’s, German relatives invited me to a cruise on a German luxury liner. Everybody spoke German, except a small group of Jews from New York. “What are they doing here?” someone asked, puzzled. “They paid for their passage,” I replied, and I wanted to tell my Jewish compatriots that their memory of how the bread once tasted in Berlin was not worth this journey. I restrained myself. I had by that time finished my manuscript and wondered if writing about Nazism and the Holocaust might not be pointless. Then, at the end of the Schlussball, the last festive evening on board, I realized that I could offer what I had to say in *Metaphors of Evil* as part of an ongoing process of interpretation; at least my voice could contribute to “making a difference.”

A Schlussball is a socially euphoric event. My group of middle-aged and well-to-do Germans, inspired by champagne, retired to a small room where a sumptuous midnight buffet had been prepared. High-piled dinner plates balanced on unsteady knees. Champagne glasses in hand, the compatriots suddenly began to reminisce about “when I was an adjutant in the Führer’s headquarters” during that “wild and crazy time” (“Es war schon eine tolle Zeit”). One of the travelers turned aside and when he pivoted about face again he had combed his hair diagonally across his forehead and held his black comb under his nose in lieu of a well-known moustache. As he raised his arm in salute, convivial laughter recognized his transformation. And I, who had promised to be a good sport for the evening, withdrew into stony silence so as not to embarrass family members. I knew that the subject of Nazism and the Holocaust would never be worked through and that I would always have to talk back, at least in a public context.

At the end of *Metaphors of Evil* I had anxiously wondered if the written page could ever communicate more than surface intimations of creative or catastrophic depths: “As the living memory of the Holocaust will pass, the surfaces of written records or photographic images and the site of the concentration camp itself will rigidify, will become historical scar tissue impervious to the memory of pain. This is no genuine healing, but is an inevitability in human reality” (222). The sparing of the child in literature about Nazism and the Holocaust contributes to the reduction of disastrous history to a set of predictable signifiers intended to facilitate collective historical memory, develop critical thought, and educate in empathy. Thus children’s literature, by the very nature of its genre, is con-
Sparing the Child: An Introduction

Children’s literature has always been perceived as formative in the young reader’s socialization and in the development of aesthetic sensibilities. Though it was and still is trivialized in North America as a serious field of study, it was considered politically and socially formative in the Third Reich, and its power to “re-educate” German youth was part of the Allies’ official de-Nazification program after the war. In the context of “Holocaust awareness” in Germany, in Israel, and in the United States, literature about the Holocaust for young readers has become an integral part of education. The development of aesthetic sensibilities in such narratives is rarely part of authorial intent. Viewed from this perspective, the texts discussed in *Sparing the Child* are not “masterpieces of children’s literature”; nevertheless, they implicitly raise two issues characteristic of all postwar literature about the representation of Nazism and the Holocaust: the problem of deformation in representing extreme situations and the degree to which the author’s official narrative is made indeterminate by the subtext through conscious or preconscious subversion. Adults who write for the young do not assume that their readers will discern the subtext and, as a result, the adult presumes to be safe in the revelation and concealment of problematic memories. This is endemic to children’s literature in general, but in children’s literature about Nazism and the Holocaust becomes a personal and cultural screen between painful and guilty memories and officially proclaimed ethical motivations.

*Sparing the Child* is not a survey of postwar youth literature about Nazism and the Holocaust; others have provided this service.¹º It does not include narratives depicting young people in hiding or rescued by Christians. With the exceptions of Schenzinger’s *Hitlerjunge Quex* and Doris Orgel’s *The Devil in Vienna*, I chose those narratives about Nazism whose authors had been Hitler Youths. My examples of narratives about the Holocaust were guided by the degree to which the authors, out of their personal or acquired memory, chose to represent the extreme situation in the Shoah. Schenzinger’s prototypal and Nazi-approved account of a Hitler Youth provides in my discussion a necessary corrective to the diminished self of Nazi youths in postwar narratives. Orgel’s autobiographical fiction about a Viennese Jewish girl and her Hitler Youth friend at the time of the annexation of Austria to the Third Reich in 1938 is the only narrative where authorial distance enables the narrators to depict the spellbinding charisma of fascism as well as its life and identity threatening power. As a Jewish author whose family managed to escape, Orgel
can offer a perspective not feasible for an author who depicts his Hitler Youth years nor for a memoirist who, in the struggle to represent the memory of disastrous experience, refuses (personally and culturally) to explore the fascination of fascism and its expressions of power. Though narratives about Nazism and the Holocaust often use the same clusters of motives and images, there are sharp contrasts between the two genres. For example, stories about Hitler Youths deny their main characters heroic gestures and instead depict them as diminished selves. Narratives about the Holocaust, on the other hand, have their characters attempt the heroic gesture, even in situations of utter powerlessness. Another difference is that German narratives reveal the moral imperative to somehow (usually unconvincingly) address the persecution, if not the murder, of European Jews, whereas stories about surviving the Holocaust rarely interpret the Nazi persecutor, who is simply projected as a caricature or a personification of evil.

As is the case with Holocaust literature in general, no one narrative for young readers is sufficient in knowledge or understanding of Nazism and the Holocaust. At best, a story may spark the interest to read further. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case. Young readers do not usually choose to read about such subjects; they are introduced to them by teachers who themselves have only limited knowledge of the historical period between 1933–1945. At school, the subject becomes part of a unit; the disaster may be reduced to one narrative, such as Elie Wiesel’s Night, or one video in order to fulfill the obligation of “Holocaust awareness.” I hope that my study contributes to the realization that nothing is fulfilled and very little is understood by such radical reductions. The struggle to know about Nazism and the Holocaust demands the reading of many texts, demands the patient wisdom of a Scheherazade who cured through a thousand and one tales her bridegroom’s violent misogyny.11 No one story, no one film, no one photograph can suffice even as mere information about a historical disaster that led to the murder of six million men, women, and children.

Even the most frequently used collective terms that we employ to describe the disaster are insufficient as metaphors for Auschwitz, which has become itself a trope for personal and collective memory. Disaster is historically and philosophically conceptualized by Maurice Blanchot in Writing After the Disaster. Holocaust came into usage after the Eichmann trial, but its Christian association with a religious sacrifice related to Jewish suffering prompted the secular introduction of the Hebrew word for catastrophe, Shoah, which is officially translated as “holocaust.”12 I
will use the three terms interchangeably to refer to the genocide of European Jews by German National Socialists, in part to alert the reader to the instability of each term. The Holocaust was a catastrophe, the patterns and consequences of which are, to certain degrees, comparable to other human-perpetrated disasters; but each catastrophe and the suffering inflicted by it on the human person is unique. Thus, while we can discover a grammar in the narratives of persecutions and exterminations, such a grammar must not obscure difference and the need to acknowledge that difference. Human-made disasters or catastrophes engulf us with disorder; it is, therefore, humanly understandable that we desperately seek to restructure the chaotic ruptures, afterward. Such attempts, however, also keep from us that simple and authentic listening that eases the abysmal gap between experience and memory of those who survived.

These ideas are applicable to and need to be qualified in relation to the Hitler Youth. There is a great difference in the roll call of 15,000 women lined up in Auschwitz-Birkenau and 15,000 Hitler Youths in formation at a Nazi rally, clicking their heels and raising their arms in the Nazi salute. The common denominator is dehumanization through Gleichschaltung. Such images of the massive negation of the human evoke in the reflective beholder a yearning for human unpredictability as a powerful antidote. We know that such moments occurred in the concentrationary universe, but they cannot be universalized as “triumphs of the human spirit.” Such universalizing with its implicit “happy end” and the affirmation that “life is beautiful” may be an understandable human longing but it is always expressed at the expense of those thousands and thousands who were murdered into oblivion. Children’s literature, given the nature of the genre, insists by definition on the life-affirming support for the child. Children’s literature about Nazism and the Holocaust seriously challenges that convention, usually with subtexts that are deeply ironic. At its best that subtext provokes in the thoughtful reader the idea that the experience of a disaster undermines, as Kafka reminds us in The Metamorphosis, “our dreams and good intentions.”

The two parts of Sparing the Child—narratives about Hitler Youths and narratives about young people in the Holocaust—emphasize how authors hide and reveal their ambivalent relation to Nazism and the Holocaust through their official texts and subtexts. The spectacular theatricality of Nazism’s official self-representation, on the one hand, and the extreme situation of suffering in concentration camps and death camps on the other are screened, displaced, and deformed through self-censoring in autobiographical narratives, ostensibly for the sake of the
young reader. As I will demonstrate in the introductory chapters to each of the two parts, the deflation of the heroic is part of post-1945 youth narratives about Nazism while the infusion of heroic gestures becomes part of Holocaust narratives for young readers. In both cases, authors emphasize the victimization of the young and de-emphasize the traditions, the politics, the propaganda—the ways and means—of the perpetrators that implemented the disaster. It is this emphasis on the victim and the neglect of the perpetrator that make doubtful the effectiveness of the official intent of narratives about Nazism, and the Holocaust for young readers, namely the development of the ability to recognize the signs that could lead to a new disaster. The empowered perpetrator who overpowers the victim exhibits a behavior that is not incomprehensible to the student of prejudice. The often exclusive focus on the victim, who is always overwhelmed by the perpetrator and who is defenseless and muted during the disaster, actually prevents the knowledge and understanding necessary to read and resist the recurrent signs of prejudice and persecution. Though Orgel’s *The Devil in Vienna* is to some extent an exception, this gap is evident in each of the narratives discussed in *Sparing the Child*.

My first chapter, “Official Histories and Counter-Texts: Literature for Youth about Nazism,” attempts to fill that gap by exploring the Nazi construction of the Hitler Youth through a heroic imaging that was deformed after the war into the alienated and diminished youthful self. Nazi heroic imaging was complemented by the policies of official and politicized anti-Semitism grounded historically in Christianity and the evolution of German nationalism. A sophisticated and centralized propaganda office saw to it that this dichotomy was relentlessly communicated through integrative and agitative propaganda after the Nazi seizure of power in 1933. Nevertheless, without devaluing the need for a rational understanding of the rise, the methods, means and ends of National Socialism, there is a point where reason fails us.

As Saul Friedlander notes, there is an intrinsic *Unheimlichkeit*, an uncanny horror that cannot be housed in rational constructs whenever one attempts to link Nazi anti-Semitic political and social propaganda with its “Final Solution,” the murder of European Jews. Friedlander uncovers this uncanniness in Himmler’s famous speech to the SS, given in Posen on October 4, 1943, well over a year after the “Final Solution” had been officially insinuated at the Wannsee Conference on January 20, 1942. Himmler argues that “This [the extermination of the Jews] is the most glorious page in our history, one not written and which shall never be written.” Friedlander argues that Himmler conveys to the SS that they are
aware of committing “some total transgression which future generations will not understand, even as a necessary means toward a ‘justifiable’ end.” The implied order “never a word” demands an abyss of silence that absorbs mass murder and demands of the perpetrator the conscious knowledge that what he does negates millennia of knowing what it means to be human. Here, the word as logos un-creates and demands of the SS man that he becomes what he intends for his victim at Auschwitz, an automaton or simulacrum of the human emptied of all humanness. It is here that one has an intimation of the uncanniness that resists rational analysis and understanding. In the realization that the crime was committed and denied not by passion-blinded men, but by men who willfully averted their educated and rational intellect from what their civilization had until then defined as “the good,” one finds an abyss as unbridgeable as the abyss the Holocaust survivor perceives between the experience of the disaster and the attempt to put one’s memories of it into words. Needless to say, literature for the young rarely even hints at these profound blanks, especially in reference to Nazism, though Barbara Gehrts’ directive “never a word” and Doris Orgel’s metaphor of the “hole in the world” suggest the uncanniness of the horror.

Writing is, fundamentally, a solitary activity. In critical writing, the interpreter establishes a relation with the text at hand. This is well known, but when the text examined by the writer is about events such as Nazism and the Holocaust, a peculiar ambivalence enters the scene. Here, even a critical discussion becomes a mimesis of the text by using its language through the filter of critical interpretation. When a narrative depicts the fanaticism of National Socialism, the interpreter inevitably must use the language of fanaticism and thus communicates, at least to a degree, the spirit of the fanatic’s message. When, on the other hand, the interpreter examines a Holocaust survivor’s choice of a story that can be told, the interpreter is implicated with committing a subtle act of violence against the survivor’s acute and painful efforts to shape the memory of the experience of the disaster. Subtextually or quite overtly, critical discourse always challenges the primary text, even as it elucidates and amplifies the text by making it more accessible, more complex and, yes, more human. I am very much aware of the ethical issues that emerge in this process.

My own solitary activity of writing Sparing the Child has been shaped by many important influences. The voices to which I listened again and again belong to those who have thought deeply about the
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Holocaust and are intellectually and emotionally committed to that disastrous subject. The resonance I feel with these voices is not possible for me when I turn to the many thoughtful studies of German fascism, most likely because there is necessarily an intrinsic authorial distance from the carefully studied subject matter. Raul Hilberg’s historical account of the destruction of European Jews, Saul Friedlander’s philosophical explorations of Nazism and the Holocaust, and Lawrence Langer’s interpretations of survivor memory and testimony have consistently influenced me. To Lawrence Langer I am indebted not only for his intellectual inspiration, but also for the support he gave to my first effort about this subject, Metaphors of Evil.

I also gratefully acknowledge the teaching release extended to me by Seattle University so that I could conclude Sparing the Child in due time. The helpful assistance of the librarians at Stanford’s Hoover Institute provided me with access to its vast resources on Nazism that proved essential for my research. In the early stages of my project I was also actively encouraged by Suzanne Rahn of Pacific Lutheran University, by my department chair David Leigh and by my friend of old, Ruth Mandel, Director of the Center of American Politics at Rutgers University and Vice Chair of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Whenever I contacted her, she came forth with suggestions that proved to be invaluable.

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My deepest gratitude goes to my husband, Haig Bosmajian. His making untiring trips to the library, his remaining alert to new resources, his reading of my chapters, his giving helpful suggestions and patient listen-
ing to my struggle as I shaped my ideas are only surpassed by his kindness at those times when I felt beset by radical doubt as to my ability to complete my self-set task. In this world of mutability he proved the center that was always there for me.

I contribute this study in grief called *Sparing the Child* as a small part of our collective memory and interpretation of the disaster.

**Notes**

3. Friedlander 131.
5. Friedlander 124.
8. Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn, Principles of Collective Behavior*, trans. Beverly R. Placzek; preface by Robert Lifton (New York: Grove Press, 1975). This influential study has, in agreement or critique, provided many scholars with a challenge about the inability to mourn among postwar Germans. Recent scholarship would argue that this inability had been furthered by an inhibiting social climate.
15. Friedlander 107.
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The wishful thinking that zero-based 1945 as *das Jahr Null* (the year zero) soon faded as Germans realized that the Third Reich, the war, and the Holocaust could not be conveniently annulled by a mathematical metaphor. “Memory,” reflects Christian Meier in *40 Years after Auschwitz*, “includes not only consciousness of history, but also what has been repressed subconsciously in ways that make it continually present.”¹ German history as such, argues Meier, is somehow colored by the events of the Holocaust, “even when a direct causal relationship cannot be established. While Auschwitz could not have been the goal of German history, it casts a very dark shadow over it, afterwards.”² Much of postwar German writing about the National Socialist era in the social sciences, history, literature (including literature for the young), and literary criticism is less of an attempt of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, a coming to terms with the past, than an effort to raise and retain consciousness about the Nazi era. And yet, raising into consciousness implies metaphorically that much will remain submerged and that official history will have gaps and subtexts that inevitably stimulate the creation of counter-texts. Such texts are not necessarily correctives to official history; they can also project unrestrained desires, evident, for example, among various neo-Nazi groups that tend to attract alienated German youths.

In general, Germans have been faulted for their inability to grieve authentically over their losses and over the crimes perpetrated against the victims of Nazism. It is indeed possible for an individual to experience a meaningful grieving process after a personal traumatic loss that leads
through anger and resignation to wholistic acceptance. Such authentic mourning may even be possible in a small community, but it is unlikely to occur in a mass society. There is no historical precedent for such authentic grieving. Nation states may come “to terms” with their losses and crimes, but, as Ernestine Schlant observes in her study of postwar German literature, that “is not equivalent to ‘working through,’” and it leaves the victims and the crimes as unmourned as they always have been.” Moreover, such Trauerarbeit, the grief work, would have to have been two-pronged for Germans, each prong being ethically problematic. First, there would have to have been the public expression of grief over the defeat of Nazism. Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich explored that impossibility in The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior where they argue that in Germany the inability to mourn the loss of the Führer “is the result of an intensive defense against guilt, shame and anxiety, a defense that was achieved by the withdrawal of previous power libidinal cathexes. The Nazi past was de-realized, i.e. emptied of reality.” As a “collective ego ideal,” the Führer was loved and “personified a new conscience.” The individual who valued the collective felt “if I identify with him with all my strength, I feel the oppression he exercises not as a burden but as a joy” and “obedience to [the Führer] becomes a pleasure, a mark of distinction that will go down in history.” After the war, Germans who had been fervent adherents to the regime denied the reality of their affective adherence to Nazism and were capable of turning resolutely to new economic and political ideologies and realities while memories of Nazism were defined in terms of “the theory of enforced obedience” where the leaders “were alone responsible for putting genocide into practice when in fact all levels of society, and especially those in positions of leadership . . . had given the regime their decisive and enthusiastic support.” Perhaps this is inevitable, for “the burden of guilt which they faced was so irreconcilable with the self-esteem essential for continued living. . . . Time not only heals wounds, it also lets the guilty die,” especially if they see themselves as victims of evil forces.

The second prong is grief over the fate of the dead and the surviving victims of the Shoah. It is deeply ironic that what Aaron Hass terms “the inhibition of the mourning process” for Holocaust survivors is, for different reasons, also applicable to the German inability to mourn the victims. Holocaust survivors often feel that they cannot mourn the loss of their families because that loss is small compared to the millions who were murdered. The Holocaust survivor, in a sense, chooses not to work through the disastrous losses because that would inevitably initiate the
process of forgetting, a process that time may make unavoidable but that is inadmissible to the ethical consciousness. For Germans, a collective and eventually successful grieving, while it temporarily raises the past into consciousness, would ultimately lead to the repression of memory as the working through ends in a kind of meaningful closure that is at best problematic. The inhibition of the mourning process of Jewish survivors and Germans differentiates itself in that the Holocaust survivor chooses not to reach such closure for the sake of those who died, whereas Germans have generally not made such a conscious and ethically determined choice. As a result, the narrative voice in German literature, for adults and for young readers, is always more or less conscious of both the inability and the inhibition to mourn.

The study by the Mitscherlichs established an official explanation of Germany’s inability to mourn collectively, but neglected to question if such grieving is possible in mass societies. After all, German fascism (grounded as it was in Germanic nationalistic myths and ideologies that had existed for well over a century) was empowered by the techniques of total and unceasing propaganda where the Führer was a carefully constructed libidinal projection to which alienated individuals responded in the equally carefully constructed context of the national and racial community (Volksgemeinschaft) into which they had been or were to be politically coordinated (gleichgeschaltet). The very artificiality of propaganda as a belief structure may well have enabled many Germans, who succumbed to it or went along with it opportunistically, to officially and quickly reject Nazism after 1945 and diminish their complicity to the sentimental melancholy of nostalgia.

Postwar German historians and social scientists have persistently researched, analyzed and interpreted Nazism, the “Final Solution,” and the resulting Holocaust, though there prevails an objective distancing in such accounts of the disaster, a distancing that inhibits mourning. Nevertheless, much of postwar German literature has probed the individual’s experience and reaction to Nazism along with the inevitable alienation felt after the collapse of the regime. The point of moral vulnerability in that literature creates a textual gap that can be attributed to a conscious or pre-conscious repression of the memories of Nazism and the Holocaust but also to a moral inhibition. The theatricality of Nazi monumentalism, the attractions it held, and the enthusiasms it provoked cannot be imitated through representations that effect a positive reader response. Instead, the spectacles of Nazism are depicted through ironies or the cor-
rective militancy of satire. In short, National Socialism must be uninspiring in postwar literature that tries to compensate for the past.

The blanks regarding the Holocaust originate from a different moral inhibition on the part of German writers. Most of the authors writing after the war, Günter Grass for example, were too young to participate in the persecution and murder of the Jews, but they were in the Hitler Youth, volunteered for the Wehrmacht (the armed forces), or were drafted at the end of the war. These authors feel that they must be knowledgeable about the Shoah, but have no entitlement to appropriate imaginatively the suffering of its victims. There is also the notion that the act of writing has potency in manifesting, if not creating, the traumatic situation once again. The Holocaust survivor who writes in her memoir about her parent or brother or friend going to the gas chamber fixes that event in a permanent now on the printed page as she commemorates it. For the German writer who grew up in the Third Reich the act of writing about the center of atrocity would not be an act of testimony but one of continued perpetration. A third point of vulnerability is a denial of grief not over a lost ego ideal, but over personal sufferings and losses of German lives in the war. The textual gaps in German literature are, therefore, due to a denial of memory, as well as a deliberate inhibition of both personal and acquired historical memory.

Literature for the young, too, is inhibited. While Nazi monumentalism held a very real attraction for the youth of the Third Reich, “fascinating fascism”¹² could not be made attractive to postwar young readers, instead it became unofficial memory, thereby reducing if not de-politicizing the Nazis and the Hitler Youth. Narratives for the young about the Holocaust are similar in that the young reader is spared descriptions of ultimate horrors. Both types of narratives share a decidedly pedagogical motive undercut by the sparing of the reader, for that sparing always contributes to a de-realization of the matter of history, a crucial though unintentional irony in texts written to raise consciousness about history, retain memory, develop empathy, and enable critical judgment.

Sparing the child is always a motivation when adults write for children. The following discussion will show how National Socialism, which perceived itself at a historical turning point of momentous significance (Zeitenwende), constructed its young readers and their literature in terms of the heroic gesture and image and how it repressed, or at least controlled, in its narratives the hate propaganda of racialism and anti-Semitism at the very same time when youth encountered, agreed with, and even participated in events that actualized that propaganda in daily
life. After the official disintegration of the Third Reich in 1945, when the horror of the disaster was made visible to all, German literature for the young de-realized the past by focusing on Germans suffering through bombing raids or fleeing the advance of the Soviet army. Not until the 1960s were National Socialist Germany and the Holocaust subjects in young readers’ literature. To appreciate the gaps in such narratives, one must be familiar with at least some of the official history of the Hitler Youth, especially with its persistent heroic imaging, during the Nazi era and the inevitable re-interpretations afterward.

My discussion of the official definitions and subtexts of youth literature about Nazism will first address the National Socialist definitions of youth and its literature and then show how postwar youth literature about Nazism had to be a re-visioning of the Nazi era. In either case, however, literature for young readers has been deemed crucial in socializing the young in their attitudes toward Nazism.

I. The National Socialist Production of the Hitler Youth

In examining the intellectual origins of the Third Reich, George L. Mosse notes that “ever since Turnvater Jahn and the founding of the fraternity movement at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the cause of nationalism had aroused youth.” Youth became the vanguard of the German revolution and formed a uniquely German movement that was romantic and always political. The National Socialist obsession with the desirability of youth and youthfulness is well known: youth does not think critically; youth is easily incited toward a fanatic faith and blind obedience; youth is not accountable for its actions because of its immaturity. Hans Schemm, the head of the National Socialist Teachers Federation (NSLB), expressed in 1936 the mythology of youth through the triune formula of Hitler Youth–German Volk:

... National Socialism is the awakening of the youthful strength of the German Volk, regardless of the age of the individual. ... All of us, spiritually viewed, were rejuvenated through Adolf Hitler and his work. ... Adolf Hitler returned Germans to their childhood. Every event in our present economic, political, cultural and governmental life finds its parallels in youthful life-affirmations. We are a Germany that must always remain young.

The Hitler Youth is the visible incarnation of this youthfulness which Baldur von Schirach, the Reich Youth Leader, celebrates in almost liturgical strains as he addresses Hitler: “You gave us your name, the most
beloved name Germany ever had. Adolf Hitler, leader and flag bearer. Our youth is your name. Your name is our youth. You and the youthful millions can never be separated.” Hitler was the role model for all Hitler Youths. His lifefstory was required reading written as hagiography or condensed into prefaces in Hitler Youth handbooks such Pimpf im Dienst (The Pimpf in Service) which concludes: “Today, Adolf Hitler stands tall before us as a human being and as the Führer. Everything about him is grand yet simple. We want to thank him and obey him. We want to become like him. We want to learn from his wonderful life for ourselves and our service.”

It was youth, not childhood, that interested National Socialism. Hitler defined in Mein Kampf the birth of a child as the birth of a “little national and racial comrade. . . . [whose education must be devoted to] the breeding of absolutely healthy bodies. The training of mental abilities is only secondary. And here again, first place must be taken by the development of character, especially the promotion of will power and determination, combined with the training of joy in responsibility, and only in the last place comes scientific schooling.” Schirach echoed, “we define as ‘children’ those non-uniformed beings (Wesen) who have never participated in a den evening or an excursion” [Ausfahrt]. From the age of ten, when the boy becomes a Pimpf, a cub in the Hitler Youth, he is to be self-reliant: “Children travel in the company of their parents. The Pimpfe go on expeditions with their leaders. Conventional parents speak of their children, the parents of Pimpfe say: ‘My son the Pimpf!’ A sentence that expresses the profound transformation of our youth.” Another advocate is more specific about the Nazis’ long-range goals for the Hitler Youth: “In earlier times the young German was viewed as a child. He did not have political duties toward Volk and state. . . . Today the ten-year-old Pimpf learns among his comrades that he has to do service (Dienst) for Germany. Our ideological and physical schooling creates at an early age operative assumptions so that he can fulfill as a man his duties toward Volk and state.”

By age eighteen, the Hitler Youth had to be prepared to be a warrior willing to die for the Führer. In order to realize that ultimate goal, youthful illusions were stimulated with verbal, visual and aural images of monumentalism and power that promised invincibility if not immortality, for to die for Führer and fatherland remained always the official desire of the committed.

Less than two years after the founding of the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP) on August 8, 1920, the party newspaper, der Völkische Beobachter, published a call on March 8, 1922 for the
found of a German youth federation, the tentative beginnings of the Hitler Youth. After Hitler’s release from prison in 1926 and the reconstitution of the NSDAP, the Hitler Youth was officially established at the second Reichs Party Day rally on July 4, 1926. The first Schwesternschäften (sororities) of the Hitler Youth emerged in 1928 and were consolidated as the Federation of German Girls (BDM) in July 1930. The division of the Hitler Youth into two gender differentiated groups—the Deutsche Jungvolk and the Jungmädel (boys or Pimpfe 10–14; young girls 10–14) and the Hitler Youth (boys aged 14–18) and the BDM—began in 1931, the year Schirach became Reich Youth Leader. For the sake of law and order, the Weimar Republic banned Nazi displays and activities from April 13 to June 17 in 1932, a year of intensive recruitment and street actions, culminating in the mass gathering on Reich Youth Day in Potsdam, October 1–2, when approximately 100,000 youths listened to speeches by Hitler and Schirach. This crucial year of the Hitler Youth is the scene of action in Schenzinger’s Hitlerjunge Quex.

After the seizure of power on January 30, 1933, all youth groups, including church affiliated ones, were gradually subsumed into the Hitler Youth which reached a membership of six million by the end of 1934, the year the party awarded a gold medal those “old fighters” who had joined the Hitler Youth before October 2, 1932. However, after the Nazis came to power, the Hitler Youth not only became institutionalized as Staatsjugend (youth of the state), but began to lose its once distinctly working-class and lower-middle-class character. Until then a youth of working-class origin could advance to leadership rank, but with the influx of members from all classes, middle- and upper-middle-class youths were preferred for new leadership positions. After 1934, members of the Hitler Youth became automatically part of the NSDAP at age eighteen. The year 1936, dedicated to the Deutsche Jungvolk, culminated on December 1 in the passage of the Hitler Youth Law which made membership compulsory: “All German youth of the Reich are included in the Hitler Youth. All German youth, aside from family and school, are to be educated in the Hitler Youth physically, spiritually and ethically in the spirit of National Socialism for service to the nation and Volksgemeinschaft.” The law began to be strictly enforced by 1939, no doubt in view of the imminent war.

Already before the German defeat at Stalingrad in 1943, the Hitler Youth was quite involved in the war effort. It collected materials such as newspapers, scrap metal, and clothing for use at the front; members manned tank units, acquired skills as pilots and were numerous as
Luftwaffenhelfer, anti-air gun personnel. Alfons Heck, who was such a youth and who describes the Hitler Youths as “enthusiastic victims of the Führer,” remembers “that the Hitler Youth had been far more fanatic then the average party member . . . we misguided children had been far more ruthless than our elders.” As late as April 1945, all boys aged sixteen were drafted to serve in the Wehrmacht. It is instructive to recall that the generation aged fourteen in 1933 had reached the age of twenty-six in 1945 and had been indoctrinated with Nazi propaganda for at least twelve years. In spite of their past attitudes and actions, such Hitler Youths, if they were born after June 1, 1919, were classified as “juveniles” after the war, were exempted from the de-nazification processes, and received general amnesty.

Officially, the Nazis saw the Hitler Youth as the third formative and most crucial context for the young; the parental home as well as school remained acceptable if they had been politically coordinated with the goals of the Hitler Youth. The party was supportive of youthful rebellion against traditional parents or school, for, in spite of its authoritarian structure, its focus on Hitler and the Führerprinzip (the final authority being Hitler’s will), National Socialism should not be interpreted as patriarchal. Instead, as one astute observer noted in 1924, the appearance, behavior, and attitude of Nazis during the unsuccessful Putsch of 1923 demonstrated a decidedly pubescent behavior in its exhibition of childish resentment, symbolic gestures, theatricality and self-aggrandizement which “determines the leader-follower ideology and defines a new type of leader, already anticipated in expressionist literature by sons breaking away from the world of the fathers. With the aid of ritualized collective symbolism the new type of leadership defines and directs the NS Youth Movement.” The focus on the leader from the smallest party unit to the Reich was defined neither paternally nor fraternally, but rather in terms of follower-comrade or gang member–gang leader. The Hitler Youth, which eventually superseded all other youth groups, was to be free of the authority figures of parents and teachers. Hitler made this intention quite clear in Mein Kampf:

Youth has its own state, it has a certain closed solidarity toward the grown-up. And this is perfectly natural. The ten-year-old’s bond with his playmate of the same age is more natural and greater than his bond with grown-ups. A boy who snitches on his comrade practices treason and thus betrays a mentality which, harshly expressed and enlarged, is the exact equivalent of treason to one’s country. (415)
Youth is here defined over and against the adult world in a context of its own closed society, a precursor to the nation, but kept together by the leader. Hitler, concludes Erik Erikson, “was the unbroken adolescent who had chosen a career apart from civilian happiness, mercantile tranquillity, and spiritual peace: a gang leader who kept the boys together by demanding their admiration, by creating terror, and by shrewdly involving them in crimes from which there was no way back. And he was a ruthless exploiter of parental failures.”

After the war the former BDM leader, Melita Maschmann, concludes that “the principle that youth must be led by youth meant that the young generation was lacking contact with mature people.”

National Socialism aimed to draw youth out of “its own state” into the politically coordinated Volksgemeinschaft. Since that community was defined as youthful, it would again be “natural” for the Hitler Youth to align itself with it and serve it with loyalty “unto death.” To ensure such political alignment, the socialization of the Hitler Youth defined itself as an education toward leadership. Ever ideologically correct, Schirach sees the leader first evolve because of his physical prowess and then strive “to become that image which his followers have of him. . . . Youth movement and self-governance (Selbstführung) of youth are inseparable . . . [it] means to demand more of one’s self than of one’s followers. . . . only he who is both creative and self-disciplined can be a leader in the truest sense of the word” (1934 64–65).

Comradeship, not friendship, was the value of the Hitler Youth unit, for friendship implies intimacy and privatism over and against an action-oriented group.

The self-governance of the Hitler Youth was of course an illusion. The Nazi state demanded that the child be seized (erfasst) at the earliest possible age and removed from the sphere of influence of the traditionally conservative and patriarchically authoritative family as well as from the liberal progressive family context. The Nazi use of the compound noun Volksgemeinschaft (lit. “people’s community”) defined Germans as a racial community sharing a common language, culture and history and as being constituted in a nation state that claimed to be a “community,” a Gemeinschaft. The term precluded any possibility of critical evaluation by an individual who was expected to live by the ubiquitous slogan “Du bist nichts—Dein Volk it alles!” As Hans Jochen Gamm in his study of National Socialist leadership and seduction notes, the words nothing and everything lead to total commitment, even unto death: “Because they counted for nothing, [human beings] could be moved at will on the strategic-ideological chessboard.”
devaluation of the individual’s personhood, and nowhere is that personhood more accessible and vulnerable than in the formative years of childhood and adolescence. Since humans have difficulty “being nothing,” National Socialist rituals and symbols, the charms of political power, gave youths and adults the illusion of “being something.” Demonstrations, marches, and camps, along with the flag and songs coordinated and bonded the young person to the goals of National Socialism and the Führer.

In the spirit of Nazism as a “movement,” the Hitler Youth, too, was on the move, be it in small units or in massive national rallies. Propagandists noted repeatedly how wonderful it was to see German youths as Hitler Youth on the road, setting up camp where the flag was hoisted and songs were sung around the campfire. Eventually, of course, all that movement took direction to increase German *Lebensraum* by crossing national boundaries. Camp, away from family and school, was the temporary site for communal experiences and ideological confirmation, especially the *Schulungslager* established after 1933. Gamm interprets the camp as communicating to the individual his or her transitoriness and unimportance. Those on the march for the movement had to liberate themselves from the rootedness of house and home and be always on call to move on at a moment’s notice. As a means for Gleichschaltung (political coordination), march and camp devalue the person and at the same time inflate him or her with the illusion of purposefulness and power. The antitheses of the Hitler Youth march and camp were the death camp and the death march of the Holocaust where the Germans actualized the *du bist nichts*, the nothingness of the human person.

The anthem of the Hitler Youth was composed by Schirach for the film *Hitlerjunge Quex* and soon thereafter sung on every possible occasion. Here, “propaganda through marching and singing, through theme and action, symbolizes through movement how the Hitler Youth of the *Kampfzeit* progresses toward a struggle filled future” (*kampferfüllte Zukunft*)

> Our flag unfurls before us.  
> Moving into the future  
> Man for man.  
> We march for Hitler  
> Through night and need  
> With the flag of youth for freedom and bread.  
> Our flag unfurls before us,  
> Our flag is the new time
And our flag leads us into eternity!
Yes, our flag is more than death.

“Thus emerged the contradiction between the faces of children and the often murderous songs they had been taught.” Image and melody imprinted themselves through the rhythm of the march or the gathering around flagpole or camp fire, stifling the possibility of critical thought and confirming absolute faith in the movement and its leader, fostering the willingness to die for both. Clearly, the song was a rehearsal for what was envisioned to be a sublimely heroic death.

While official Nazi accounts depict the Hitler Youth as gleichgeschaltet, ordinary life continued, as one former member, whose father belonged to the SS, recalls with unintentional ambivalence: “Only in a subconscious way was it all hammered into us, National Socialism and Adolf Hitler. Basically, in terms of our behavior, we remained young children; via our subconscious, they attempted to prepare us for the later phase.”33 After 1933, when membership in the Hitler Youth increased and became compulsory by 1936, the problems of leadership grew acute. Rather than leaders evolving through group-internal processes, they were increasingly trained in leadership schools where they became potential recruits for the SS. Externally, the Hitler Youth was challenged by traditional German youth movements, by Catholic youth groups, and by the notorious “Edelweiss Pirates” and “Swing Kids.” Of these last two groups, the former consisted of loosely allied working-class youth gangs, while the latter were primarily middle- and upper-middle-class youths indulging in “forbidden music.” Both groups defined themselves as apolitical, but under Nazism they would be implicitly political. Of course all formally organized groups were eventually outlawed.34

The Hitler Youth fulfilled its long-range goal of fighting and dying for the Führer at the end of the war when thousands of its members faced active duty. Though the Reich Chancellory declared on March 7, 1945 that those born in 1928–29 were not to be drafted for active duty, an exception was made for the “special forces” (Sondereinsätze) ordered by Hitler himself. By February 1945, those were the youths who fought throughout Germany: “Children were victims of the NS party leadership but they were also perpetrators.”35 If they deserted, they were hung, but most of them possessed fanaticism, resolution, and battle fervor. One eye-witness recalls: “They stood like organ pipes, chests out, faces unmoved. Expectation and devotion lay in their expressions, for they still believed in the Reich, the great mission, the honest battle, the good cause and the
Führer whose name they bore, whose youth they were. They did not respond to the tears and rage of their mothers who could no longer influence them. The “you are nothing” made of them fierce fighters, eager to die as the first officially appointed youthful killers in the twentieth century.

Our collective memory retains these child-soldiers in the soundless film footage of Hitler’s last public appearance. Ascended from his bunker, he greets a small group of boys assembled before him. The day was March 20, 1945; a regional paper described how Hitler greeted each of the twenty youths, the youngest of them aged twelve. Before descending again he declared, true to his high blown phrases till the end: “You know battle now from personal experience . . . and you know that we are wrestling with the being or nothingness [Sein oder Nichtsein] of the German people. In spite of these hard times, I am convinced that we will achieve victory in this battle, especially as regards German Youth and especially as far as you are concerned, my boys.”

The history of the Hitler Youth spans over twenty years, but it is a history that could not become the matter of narratives after the war unless the heroic posturing of ideologically conditioned youths was redefined as essentially unheroic and ironic. The rituals and symbols of Nazi monumentalism had to be negated and devalued in adult and children’s literature. Before we turn to these issues, the Nazi attitude and policy toward children’s literature needs to be briefly examined, for it provides a further obstacle for the post-1945 writer.

II. Nazi Attitudes and Policies toward Youth Literature

As Christa Kamenetzky has shown in *Children’s Literature in Hitler’s Germany. The Cultural Policy of National Socialism*, Germany, along with most European countries, began to see the importance of childhood and children’s literature beginning with the enlightenment and intensified its focus during romanticism’s interest in folklore as an expression of national genius. Children’s literature was perceived as formative and received serious critical discussion, especially by Heinrich Wolgast (1896) who advocated quality over profit margins, opposed national chauvinism, and generally advocated that children’s literature should have the same aesthetic ends as good literature in general. Wolgast’s objection to tendentiousness in children’s literature was critiqued by the Nazis who confronted in the Weimar Republic a kind of “golden age” in German children’s literature.
National Socialism recognized the formative influence of children’s literature for the propaganda of Gleichschaltung. In an address honoring the Book Week of Greater Germany in 1938, Schirach officially announced the value of children’s literature for the Third Reich: “Surely only those who experienced in their early years happy hours with a book will retain positive attitudes toward books. Children’s books have here a special task. We at the Reichs Leadership have occupied ourselves intensely with books for children and youth.” Schirach argued that youthful readers, informed and interested in current events such as the Spanish Civil War and faithful to “the inspiring role model of Adolf Hitler, find Wild West stories of Karl May no longer interesting. Moreover, self-reliant experiences of German youths on the road or at camp demand stories that reflect these experiences.” While Schirach acknowledged that books offer depth perception of what it means to be German, he assured his listeners that the stereotype of the bookish German was of the past, for Germans have not only read belles lettres, but also history books and “have demonstrated that [they] have learned from these books.”

Well-loved children’s books for boys and girls continued to be read and provided some alternatives to the official policies of the Party and the National Socialist Teachers Federation (NSLB). However, the hierarchically ordered “ten-best list” compiled for young readers by the NSLB in 1935 made the political intentions of privileged texts indubitably clear:

1. Adolf Hitler, Mein Kampf.
3. Hans Günter, Kleine Rassenkunde (Little Racial Primer).
4. Otto Dietrich, Mit Hitler an die Macht (a collection of personal essays by the Nazi press chief about campaigning with Hitler).
5. Benedikt Lockmüller, Hans Schemm (a biography of the president of the NSLB).
6. Alois Schenzinger, Der Hitlerjunge Quex.
7. Erhard Wittek (Fritz Steuben), Durchbruch anno ‘18.
10. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm Children’s and Household Tales.

The list promotes prominent Nazis as heroic role models and focuses exclusively on the male hero in history and fiction. Even the Little Racial Primer highlights the heroic nature of the “Nordic race,” distinguishing it from the Jews who are defined as “non-Europeans and racially mixed.” The heroic rush reaches an apex in Dietrich’s description of Hitler among...
German youth, a sentimental and politicized countertext to “let the little children come unto me” (Luke 18:15–17):

German Youth—I can say it after all the personal impressions I was privileged to experience—is the sunshine of the hard and work-rich life of Adolf Hitler. Hundreds of times, I saw again and again the pure and happy joy of the Führer when he beheld German children, whether they offered him greetings or flowers at a meeting or crowded around our car shouting “Heils” and “hellos.” “I truly cherish those beaming boys and girls”—the Führer would often tell us as we rushed through the young and cheerful crowd.45

Heroic history is fictionalized in Schenzinger’s Hitlerjunge Quex, which had become a canonical text by 1935. Durchbruch anno ’18 (1933) was written as a nationalist and pro-heroic reply to Remarque’s All Quiet on the Western Front. Its author was a late convert to Nazism who “did not want to believe that National Socialism would bring us the Führer for whom we all waited with shame and despair in our hearts.” Götz’s narrative emphasized colonialist aspirations. The result of the list was the guarantee that the books would be found in youth and school libraries throughout Germany.

The NSLB also recommended politically consonant themes to be considered by book reviewers. Such themes de-emphasized negative propaganda, such as anti-Semitism, and stressed instead “positive” Nazi values and attitudes by recommending (1) books that awaken enthusiasms for the heroes of legends, saga, and history, for the soldiers of the Great War, for the Führer, and for fighters for the new Germany; (2) books that celebrate the beauty of the German countryside and the national genius; (3) books that illuminate the magic of far away places and the longing of all Germans for a return to the Reich; (4) books that stimulate love for nature and give advice about crafts and technology; (5) books that value folk literature, along with contemporary issues; and (6) books that advise and assist Hitler Youths in their activities. Deemed unsuitable for young readers were books that moralized too overtly, had no heroic models, or did not inspire enthusiasm for Germany.48

Given the Nazi perception of themselves at “a turning point in history,” it was inevitable that youth literature privileged politicized narratives about heroes and their communities over stories of personal individuation in private life. However, politics and history were not subject to critical discussion; instead, concludes Peter Aley, “The political youth books of the NS era did not want the critical citizen, rather [as one editor argued] they wanted ‘to inspire German boys and girls toward the fulfillment of
new duties’ and confirm them in their fanatical faith in *Volk* and *Reich* and in the Führer whose legacy they were to inherit one day.” Historicized narratives were to reveal the destiny of Germans and raise their consciousness to the historical import of present day events.

National Socialism empowered male development and exhibited a deeply reactionary attitude toward the emancipation of women in the Weimar Republic. Though many women were fanatic adherents of Hitler, they were excluded from political decision-making and action, both in the Kampfzeit and after 1933. As Magda Goebbels wrote in the foreword to an inspirational role model book for the BDM, “The young National Socialist woman unconditionally relinquishes to man the political battles at meetings and in the streets, in S.A. centers and in the public arena. In this way she is to return to the essential value and the essential meaning of her existence.” The book itself tells of the exciting time experienced by a Hitler girl during the Kampfzeit and thereby suggests a potential subversion possible in the BDM. Indeed, an unintentional side effect of the BDM was that girls, by being with each other, could emancipate themselves for a time from the strictures of their childhood family and from their destined roles as wives and mothers.

On one level the BDM perpetuated and confirmed male dominance, but on another level it provided a context where girls and young women could gain strength and confidence by being with each other. The postwar narratives of Ilse Koehn’s *Mischling Second Degree* and, to a lesser extent, Doris Orgel’s *The Devil in Vienna* confirm this. The basic service (*Dienst*) of BDM girls consisted of home evenings, physical exercise, and field trips (*Fahrten*); their intellectual development was even less emphasized than that of boys and men. Each girl, however, had to be familiar with the life of Hitler and other heroes of the movement. In her study of girls’ fictions in the Third Reich, Voight-Firon notes how the narratives confirm for girls the correctness of Nazi ideology and validate their unconditional faith in its male leadership. Moreover, they foster communal feelings among women who, after 1939, would feel an increased sense of importance as they began to contribute to the war effort. While both the Hitler Youth and the Federation for German Girls emphasized leadership and comradeship, the latter experienced these values differently due to the girls’ socialization and their eventual destiny to be the helpmate of the hero and the mother of his children.
III. Anti-Semitism and National Socialist Youth Literature

Christa Kamenetzky notes that portrayals of anti-Semitic stereotypes were relatively rare in Nazi youth literature and were most frequently found in older narratives included in reading anthologies. In spite of some notorious exceptions—such as the anti-Semitic picture book published by Julius Streicher, editor of the pornographically anti-Semitic newspaper *der Stürmer*—anti-Semitism was displaced and screened in youth publications and in education by the emphasis on the heroic and physical ideal German male or female in service to the Volksgemeinschaft. Even the passage of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, which explicitly defined German citizenship and deprived Jews of theirs, did not generate increased negative imaging of Jews in educational readers and primers. Peter Hasubek, in his study of this topic, finds this one of “the curiosities of National Socialist educational policy.” Hasubek cites four anti-Semitic texts that attribute negative characteristics to Jews such as thievery, graft, and unrestrained ambition, one of which concludes with an explicit anti-Semitic coda:

> Jewry, in its totality, “worked” as unscrupulously and as ruthlessly as this Jewish father and his sons. It would have become the gravedigger of Germany’s character if the Führer had not reversed German fate on January 30, 1933, if the Nuremberg Laws had not been passed and, even more importantly, if “the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor” had not been declared on the Reich Party Day of Freedom in 1935, and thus ending the subversion by Jews.

Moreover, Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, heading the NSLB top-ten list, is in every chapter pervaded with anti-Semitism! Furthermore, upon concluding the Volksschule at age fourteen, all graduates received the NSLB publication *Du und Dein Volk* (1940), which, besides recommending Günther’s *Little Racial Primer*, admonished its readers: “Remember you are German. As a German choose only a partner of the same or of the Nordic blood. When choosing a partner, ask about his ancestors.”

We may speculate about this “curiosity of National Socialist educational policy,” for certainly the Hitler Youth itself provided its members with enough anti-Semitic propaganda and street action without leaving much doubt about its ultimate goals. Those goals, however, were obscured with secrecy after 1939 when murderous actions and killing centers began to terrorize the Jews of eastern Europe. Heinrich Himmler defined that secrecy and its perpetrators in his address to the SS leaders in October 1943: “Most of you must know what it means when 100
corpses are lying side by side, or 500 or 1,000. To have stuck it out and at the same time . . . to have remained decent fellows, that is what has made us hard. This is a page of glory in our history which has never been written and is never to be written.” Saul Friedlander interprets this famous passage as an uncanny (unheimlich) exhortation of men designated as elitist killers who are licensed to abandon themselves in a rush (Rausch) or orgy of violence and death through which they bond themselves more deeply to the Führer (Führerbindung) whose will they execute. Unlike other reigns of terror which flagrantly advertised their violence, “Himmler’s vow of secrecy,” argues Friedlander, “seems to indicate that there is no higher comprehensive argument which would justify such an annihilation in the eyes of posterity.” The goal of the unwritten page of history would have been fulfilled if youngsters, indoctrinated with Nazi ideology, would never have had cause to inquire about that disastrous blank because Nazi Germany would have completed the “final solution” and de-realized history by silencing the disaster.

In their everyday life children were also surrounded by anti-Semitism in slogans, on signs at stores and on park benches, at rallies and demonstrations, in their marching songs, and, most importantly, when their Jewish schoolmates were dismissed from school. Moreover, children and their elders were part of the European and Christian anti-Semitic tradition until Hitler’s fascism politicized it and defined Jews as the exclusive Other who was responsible for all the ills that beset Germany. Since “Otherness” was determined racially, biology became destiny and the most important determinism of character, as even the relatively mild Little Racial Primer made clear. As one former Hitler Youth (whose father was a member of the SS) recalls when seeing at the age of fourteen the anti-Semitic and highly successful film Jud Süss: “It was a film against the Jews, but I didn’t recognize it as an inflammatory film. For me it was a simple fact: that’s how Jews are. The film portrayed them as dregs of humanity.”

Officially, Nazi education and youth literature highlighted the production of the mythos of the Germanic hero and the cult of the Aryan family, taught in the subject Familienkunde. The Germanic myth of origin came to be seen in Tacitus’ Germania, while tracing one’s Aryan ancestor back to 1650 prepared students to qualify themselves as National Socialist. These mythologies, along with anti-Semitism, were communicated through “age appropriate texts.” Both image clusters had a long history in German thought and letters. An immediate precursor of the Nazis wrote in 1920 for adult readers: “The man of nordic race is not only
the most gifted, but also the most beautiful human being. . . . The nordic man is the unconscious longing of all who have sight.66 The youth that would be father to that man was to be “swift as greyhounds, tough as leather and hard as Krupp steel” (Hitler, September 14, 1935). Anything and anyone antithetical to that image would be ostracized or eliminated.

IV. Postwar Treatment of the Third Reich in Literature for Youth: Official History and Counter-Text

After the collapse of Nazi Germany, East and West Germany reconstructed their recent past in terms that suited the adversarial ideologies which shaped the content and the form of narratives about Nazism and the Holocaust. As Jeffrey Herf in his comparative study of the two Germanys points out, the narratives of official history and countermemory by the two Germanys are in an inverse binary relation to each other.67 In the Federal Republic, both Christian conservatives and the democratic left took a strong stance against anti-Semitism, acknowledged the Holocaust and advocated strong ties with Israel. From the start, however, they struck a political compromise: “Bundes Chancellor Adenauer [in effect] struck a bargain with compromised Germans: in exchange for his reticence about the Nazi past, they would agree to accept the new democracy, or at least try not to destroy it” (Herf 389). Only in the 1960s did “the relationship between memory and democracy” begin to change (390–91), primarily because of the Social Democrats; the insistence on memory about Nazi crimes and the Holocaust has since then remained a politically liberal issue (392).

The Holocaust as a “tragedy without redemption,” argues Herf, “did not fit into any optimistic theory of history or postwar policy of reconstruction, whether it promised the first socialist society in Germany in the East or an ‘economic miracle’ in the West” (392). From the beginning, the Democratic Republic of Germany defined itself as anti-fascist. The narrative of Communist-Soviet memory insisted on Soviet martyrdom and triumph as “the core of postwar memory.” Soviet “fighters” were preferable to “Jewish victims,” and the Holocaust became an “irritating competitor” (381), as well as just one more excess of capitalism. If East Germany forgot the Holocaust in favor of the Soviet Union, West Germany chose to follow the Western Alliance’s suppression of memory regarding the Soviet Union’s role in winning the war. East Germany did not begin to admit the issue of “the Jewish question” until the 1980s. In West Germany key events such as the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials of
1963–65 and the screening of the television series “Holocaust” (1978) contributed to the general level of awareness about Nazi crimes. How charged the issues still were in the late 1990s is evident in the public debate generated by the 1996–97 exhibit “War of Annihilation: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941–1944” which once more pitted the generations against each other in heated discussions.68

When Dieter Bossmann, in 1977, published his student survey “What I heard about Adolf Hitler...,” scholars and educators were alerted to the need for both improved teacher training and better instruction about the Nazi period. Many students, of varying age groups, assumed that Nazism and Communism were the same, that unemployment led to fascism, that Hitler was Jewish, and that he had a Jewish mistress. Their understanding of Nazi racialism and the Holocaust was muddled at best and disabled by inarticulateness and incoherence in thought and language. Typical student responses were: “Tens of thousands of Jews were gassed. I don’t know why, but Hitler was always against the Jews”69 or “Hitler was an Aryan and was despised by all. Hitler was an Aryan and Aryans have dark hair and brown eyes, but, in spite of that, he, the dark haired one, wanted to breed blond Germans (Germanen). He opened up breeding institutions. Blond men humped girls who became mothers of children” (Bossmann 19). The survey revealed a glaring lack of understanding of the history and policies of Nazism as well as an embedded anti-Semitism, expressed primarily through language usage. According to one teacher, the irrelevance of the history of the Third Reich to these youngsters was predictable, for “the dimensions of what happened then are hardly comprehensible for students [and are] comparable to what the Inquisition and the witch-trials were for us in our time” (Bossmann 358). That history is remembered—or repressed—which experientially involved and affected the young person; all other collective remembrance depends on the transmission of acquired or post-memory.

Perhaps it is unfortunate that there is no youth book written in German or English that would predispose young readers against Nazism the way the generation in 1933 was inspired toward Nazism by Hitlerjunge Quex. In their reader response, the young focus on action or adventure or the interpersonal relations between characters, and not on historical or political information, no matter how much such information might shape readers subliminally. Young readers rarely discern nuances in
historic events. Those authors, including narratives written in German and English, who write for the young about the Third Reich are motivated by the need for the consciousness of memory (the “lest we forget” motivation similar to Holocaust literature) and the need to prevent recurrence of atrocity. Several authors, including Horst Burger, Hans Peter Richter, and Barbara Gehrs—all former Hitler Youths—evoke these memories out of a strong therapeutic need, inhibited as this need may be by the inability to mourn.

In this context, literature for the young also exemplifies the inability to mourn because of the author’s motivation to “spare the child” and, indirectly, spare himself or herself even as information and experiences are communicated. If readers never went beyond such narratives, their knowledge of Nazism would remain severely limited, in part because of the first person narrative, which censors and spares. In this way authors contribute to the construction of historical narratives that follow, more or less, the construction of history advocated by West Germany. Among the crucial blanks created in such texts is the sublimation or devaluation of Nazi heroic monumentalism with its secular sacredness once so attractive to adults and youngsters alike. In describing the Kampfzeit, the time of the Aufbau (reconstruction), or the war, German narratives for youth are, for obvious reasons, not to indulge in “the thrill of it all.” Broadly speaking, the aesthetics of political power as practiced by the Nazis is replaced, implicitly or explicitly, by an ethical critique in youth books after 1945. Up to now, youth literature has not been affected by the aestheticization of Nazism that can be found in the art and literature for adults.

Winfred Kaminski has severely critiqued German authors of children’s literature for missing an opportunity in the first decade after the war. While authors and publishers adjusted [in both Germanys] to the sudden shift in official values, children’s authors did not problematize the genre of children’s literature as such in light of immediate German history; instead they generally chose to cast contemporary content into old forms or continued to promote traditional children’s literature, including that by authors who stayed in Germany, but were prohibited by the Nazis. Kaminski asserts categorically that there was no new beginning for children’s literature in West Germany after 1945. This in spite of the fact that the Allies issued specific directives regarding youth literature; for example, they prohibited “all books and writings for youth containing National Socialist or military-imperialist tendencies . . . ” (Kaminski 299). There were no free and independent publishers in West Germany until 1949, though the American sector appears to have been less restric-
tive than others as reflected in proclamations such as “The Civil Affairs Division feels that out of policy reasons we should not try to take a hand in the writing of proposed juvenile texts.” An American Committee of Book Publishers critiqued the state of German children’s literature in 1948: “Today, Grimm and Struwwelpeter are not enough for growing minds. These minds are particularly important to us because the future has to be built on today’s children.” Reiner Wild, however, does not find it surprising that the discussion of fascism, war, and the Holocaust did not begin in children’s literature until the 1960s. The turn to traditional conventions in youth literature was one of the effects of a collective repression of the past which resulted in a general de-politization and de-historicizing of education. “Moreover, parents feared embarrassing questions from the younger generation which might be provoked by literature” focusing on annihilation, politics, and economics.

It took Germans well over a decade after the defeat of the Third Reich to begin to tell the story that demanded to be told. Although the Allies officially supported the retention of the recent past in the collective consciousness of both Germanys, repression of Nazism and the Holocaust was the order of the day, especially in children’s literature. Children’s literature published in West Germany in the early 1950s denied German guilt by de-realizing the Nazi past and focused on Germans as victims of Allied bombings, as refugees from the Soviet Army, and generally, as trying to cope as best they could during the hard times immediately after the war. Bernd Otto argues that in the latter case the young reader is given the impression that the Second World War overwhelmed Germany like “some inexplicable fate,” for hardly a narrative mentioned that Germany started the war.

Almost half of all fictional narratives published about the Nazi era, Otto notes, are about German suffering (68), followed by “the meaninglessness of war” (24). It was not a German but a Dutch author, Leonard de Vries, who in Jaap Finds the Promised Land (1958) introduced young German readers to the issue of Jewish persecution. By 1980, sixteen fictional narratives were published on that topic. Youth and their daily life under Nazism began to be addressed by 1962, but the number of publications rose no higher than eighteen by 1980. Otto comments that one of the problems in these narratives is that the authors, most born between 1922 and 1933, neglect representations of Nazi ideology and the causes of the Nazi seizure of power because their narrators focus on their personal experiences. Thus history, concludes Otto, becomes too “personalized” (138). Only fourteen books dealt with resistance against Nazism, a topic
always considered subversive because it challenges by definition the value Germans place on established authority. To some extent this can be explained by the fact that if German authors had highlighted resistance, the young reader could easily have gained the impression that the majority of Germans were anti-Nazi. This is somewhat comparable to the focus on “Christian rescuers” in literature during the 1990s about the Holocaust, which conveys the impression that there were a great number of gentiles who risked their lives for Jews. Resistance and rescue inevitably favor the individual heroic gesture and thus obscure political terror and massive suffering. The least attention, notes Otto, has been given to the prehistory, the causes and the Kampfzeit of National Socialism as well as to the theme of exile and emigration (nine titles for each). Even if they are critical about the paucity of narratives for readers, official assessments conclude that stories about Nazism, the war, and the Holocaust simply do not sell nor are of interest to the young. The values of knowledge and consciousness, then, are problematized by how buyers and readers are constituted and by the genre of children’s literature as such.

Our understanding of literature for the young about Nazism must come from the author or, rather, from the author’s second self, the narrative voice of the text. The narratives selected for discussion in this study are based on the memories of the generation that experienced their childhood and adolescence in Nazi Germany. When these authors told their stories, they were approaching middle age and thus depict, as adults, the youngsters they were. The therapeutic impulse is clearly the subtextual motivation in these stories told by first person narrators who are limited as far as their understanding of Nazi politics and policies are concerned. Their authors were socialized and politicized in a system that officially aggrandized them, but actually was interested in them only as means to an end. As adults they may be haunted by the recollections of the Hitler Youths they were, but as writers for young readers, whom they attempt simultaneously to enlighten and spare, they are also able to censor memory and self-implication. Such limitations of the first person narrator along with the historical experience and knowledge of the author are bound to be at odds and diminish the authority of the narrative voice.

Their narrators, therefore, exemplify diminished selves in contrast to the officially inflated selves of the “heroic” Hitler Youths. Their stories are about the way they were but should not have been. Conditioned by Nazi role models, they become negative role models as narrators, or at least highly ambivalent role models. The choice of first person narration,
to a great extent motivated by the assumption that young readers respond best to narrators who speak as youthful voices, puts the authors into the situation where they, in their now superior knowledge of history, must create a limited narrator whose mistakes they cannot redeem. As in all therapeutic situations (so, too, in the act of writing), the author engages in living again and failing again. We find here the negative narcissism of narrators stunted in their development and their inability to grieve, for one’s personal grief over loss of faith or loved ones must diminish before the grievous devastation wrought by the adult world, whose children they were and whose memory they inherited.

Notes
5. Mitscherlich 19.
7. Mitscherlich 15.
8. Mitscherlich 44.
11. The Mitscherlichs as well as other commentators on Germany’s inability to mourn have been influenced by Sigmund Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia.” Freud argues that, when mourning is “completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again,” whereas the ego experiences an impoverishment in melancholia: “In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* 14, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957/1991) 246.


27. Aware of the possible objections that the Hitler Youth unit and its leadership could not respond to adolescent sexual development, Schirach declared: “The sexual problem of youth is non-existent with us; it is an invention of the café societies, whereas the Hitler Youth lives with the motto: ‘Be pure and mature’ . . . if something unnatural emerges, the leadership expels the misfit from the healthy community” (62–63). The anxious subtext about homosexuality was repressed by endless physical activity and intrusive control.


36. Holzträger 37.

37. Klose 263.

40. Schirach 165.
41. Schirach 167.
42. The NSLB, located in Bayreuth, founded already in 1933 a Reich Office for Youth Literature and published lists of desirable and undesirable books. Its influence was limited to suggestions and recommendations to the NS Ministry of Education with which the NSLB had a fairly competitive relationship, as it did with the Reich Youth Leadership Office. This is not surprising since the Nazis consistently undermined the tradition of respect claimed by teachers and educational institutions.
43. The list is offered by Peter Aley, *Jugendliteratur im Dritten Reich: Dokumente und Kommentare* (Hamburg: Verlag für Buchmarktforschung, 1967/1969) 59–60. Note: Dietrich Eckhart (1868–1923) was a nationalist poet and early inspiration for Hitler. His imperative “Deutschland Erwache!” became a central slogan of the NSDAP. He personally furthered Hitler.
49. Aley 1967/69 143.
50. Aley 93.
53. Ilse Koehn, *Mischling, Second Degree. My Childhood in Nazi Germany* (New York: Green Willow Press, 1977). Koehn, a child of a mixed marriage, tells of her experiences in the BDM. The story fascinates because the narrator appears to be oblivious to her Jewish background as she aligns herself with BDM values. Doris Orgel’s *The Devil in Vienna* is the subject of chapter 5 in my study.
55. Kamenzky 194.
56. What makes this especially interesting is that Hans Schemm (d.1935), the first president of the NSLB, was virulently anti-Semitic as is clearly evident in the posthumously published *Hans Schemm spricht*, ed. G.K. Furthmann (Bayreuth: Gauverlag Bayerische Ostmark, 1936).
57. Hasubek 59.
58. Hasubek 60.
59. Klose 178–79.
60. A typical example of anti-Semitism in the Hitler Youth is Heinz Schramm’s *Das Hitlerbuch der deutschen Jugend*, 4th ed. (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1933) 17–18: “Karl Marx . . . was a Jew, and, as Adolf Hitler looked around among the Marxist
leaders, he found that most of them were Jews. . . . Now Adolf Hitler recognized clearly the true enemy of the German people in his full power and terror. It was the Jew, dispersed over the whole world, inciting and subverting all nations. . . . Adolf Hitler knew now what had to be done if the German people were to be rescued from ruin. Jewry and Marxism, they must be annihilated in a grim battle to the death so that there would be no possibility that they could exercise once more their destructive dealings in German lands.”


63. For a thorough discussion of historical and current intellectual influences on NS see George L. Mosse (1981), especially chapter 17, “The Anti-Jewish Revolution.”

64. Bar-On 209. The impact of the film “Jud Süss” is made evident in the narratives by Hans Peter Richter and Horst Burger.

65. Nassen 52.


73. Kaminski 1990, 299.

74. Kaminski 1990, 300.

75. Wild 1990, 334.


CHAPTER TWO

“A Hitler Youth Does Not Cry”: Text and Subtext in Der Hitlerjunge Quex

Karl Aloys Schenzinger’s Der Hitlerjunge Quex (1933) takes place in late spring and early summer of 1932, the last year of the Kampfzeit, the “time of struggle” before Hitler became Reich Chancellor on January 30, 1933. Shortly thereafter and certainly during the period called Aufbau (reconstruction), “old fighters” (alte Kämpfer) of the party would look back nostalgically to the days they battled with communists for dominance of the streets, as they did in Berlin during the tumultuous and decisive year of 1932. Der Hitlerjunge Quex, therefore, was published at what must have been for the author and the Nazis a most fortuitous historical juncture, namely that moment when the past became legendary, while a new political power shaped the present. After the Nazi seizure of power, party members and Hitler Youths who had joined before 1933 would be designated as “old fighters.” Given the death cult of the Nazis, the death of a loyal follower of any age was always the “supreme sacrifice.” Schenzinger’s novel, while it claims to be Zeitgeschichte (contemporary history), was already in 1933 a nostalgic look backward to a time when the fictional fifteen-year-old working-class Heini Völker, nicknamed Quex, is martyred for the Nazi cause.

In telling Heini’s story, the narrator frequently mentions the historical Herbert Norkus who became for the Hitler Youth what Horst Wessel had become for the NSDAP when he died in 1930 during a street brawl in Berlin—a national hero and National Socialist saint. Herbert Norkus, too, was elevated to “sainthood” after he died on January 28, 1932 in a bloody assault by communist youths. For the young reader and for Heini, who
will die a similar death, Norkus becomes a role model. By displacing the Norkus story with the fictional story of Heini Völker, Schenzinger was able to develop his narrative beyond the standard hagiography of Nazi propaganda and could produce *Hitlerjunge Quex* a prototypal political Nazi youth novel with a psychological subtext. Published in installments by the Nazi newspaper *der Völkische Beobachter* between May and September of 1932 and as a book in December of that year, the novel went through multiple printings, was made into a film (1933), and could be found not only in libraries, schools and Hitler Youth dens (*Heime*) but also in the backpacks of Hitler Youths and soldiers at the front.

Such wholehearted support by the Nazi political and educational establishment seems surprising after a close inspection of the text. Heini Völker, a hypersensitive, nervous, and unfocused youth who often violates orders, seems to be anything but the ideal Hitler Youth were it not for his unconditional and uncritical faith in the movement. As a result, the novel has two levels: one is dominated by the history, values, and rituals of National Socialism; the other is an almost clinical study of a child from an abusive home, whose manic and depressed behaviors offer psychological reasons as to why deeply alienated individuals gravitate so often toward authoritarian mass movements.

Nazi reviewers recommended the novel for ages twelve and up and perceived *Quex* as politically coordinated (*gleichgeschaltet*): “*Der Hitlerjunge Quex* fulfills the demands made of a political text for youths. . . . The fate of this Hitlerjunge Quex raises our consciousness as to the struggles of conscience that have to be fought whenever authentic decisions are made. One believes Schenzinger’s portrayal of the irresistible power of the National Socialist idea which the little proletarian boy cannot escape. . . . The comradeship, the ‘New Order,’ loyalty to the Führer and readiness for sacrifice are described in a truly credible way.” There were of course many Nazi youth books with this typology, but *Quex* may well have appealed to young readers because the protagonist also problematizes the official image of the Hitler Youth even as he is a fervent adherent and an inspirational martyr for the movement.

In her postwar study of National Socialist Youth literature, Dagmar Grenz, who relates *Quex* to narratives of conversion and transformation, notes that Heini is controlled exclusively by his feelings and “as a result succumbs helplessly to political movements that appeal to his ‘soul.’ The transfer to *völkisch* heroism is complete when Heini submits to the order to stop crying over the death of his mother and thus surrenders the right to cultivate his personal inner life.” Luke Springmann likewise sees a
split in the narrative where “the exclusive hierarchical order of the Nazis serves no well defined mission in Quex other than to absorb new members. Emotions bind the group through representations of nebulous ideals, leaders, insignias, banners and demonstrations fuel the movement.” J. D. Stahl emphasizes how these emotions, coupled with the need to escape the despair felt over the social, economic, and political chaos in Berlin leads the hero of Schenzinger’s novel to an “internal, atavistic faith in the force of a blind movement, a stream of followers relentlessly marching to the commands of their Führer” that ultimately fulfills a death wish. As a structure of conversion fundamental to propaganda literature, argues Stahl, “the rule of action in this novel is not so much political or even ideological as [it is] metaphysical and psychological.” Moreover, the choice to omit Nazi hate propaganda, such as anti-Semitism, from his narrative freed Schenzinger “to concentrate on the features of his protagonist’s experience rather than on a problematic issue that might have alienated segments of a broader audience he was trying to convince.” In this, Schenzinger follows the Nazi direction that youth education should emphasize the heroic rather than negative agitation propaganda.

Unlike most post-1945 youth narratives, Quex is not narrated in the first person experiential point of view, for Heini, the true believer, would be intellectually incapable of understanding the historical moment that involves him. Stahl observes that “the absence of authorial comment encourages the impression that readers are intended to form their own judgments of events” and creates a “deceptive appearance of objectivity” (1988, 142). Schenzinger’s narrative voice is clearly authoritative as it contextualizes places and times in 1932 in often panoramically descriptive chapters stylistically appealing to the book culture of the middle-class reader. While the narrator refrains from analyzing Heini explicitly, Heini appears to interest him as a case study of a psychologically alienated youth who escaped private sorrows and revulsions over socio-political chaos by joining the Hitler Youth. Schenzinger’s medical background qualified him for writing such a study.

In her discussion of Schenzinger (1886–1962) as a skilled literary opportunist, Marianne Weil argues that his profession as a neurologist influenced him as a novelist. As a medical student Schenzinger specialized in neurology, served as a military psychiatrist during the Great War, and practiced neurology after the war, except for 1923–25 when he worked in New York as a medic and as a cinematographer. Schenzinger, who wrote only one other youth novel, devoted himself to writing fiction after 1925, primarily novels about science, and continued his career as a
writer well into the postwar era. Politically, Schenzinger saw Nazism and Communism as the only viable alternatives to the Weimar Republic. In *Quex* he even shows one moment where the two political enemies cooperate to help the disenfranchised (246–48), a scene omitted from the film (Weil 298).

My discussion of *Hitlerjunge Quex* begins with its official precursor, the hagiography of Herbert Norkus. Schenzinger transformed that official text by means of a counter-text in which Heini Völker, infatuated though he is with the Nazi movement, remains an unreliable Hitler Youth because of his psychological instability. At times the reader gets the impression that two stories are being told, for the counter-text is sometimes so ambivalent that it could be read as a critique of Heini’s ideological context. The Nazi narratives about Norkus eschew such ambivalences; they are clearly inspirationally agitative propaganda. In contrast, the psychological realism of Schenzinger’s narrative portrays the young Nazi with ambivalences and ironic tensions characteristic of literature rather than propaganda. The film, however, emphasized Heini Völker’s propagandistic value: “. . . hunted down by the commune and caught, he [Heini] dies the sacrificial death of German youth, just as an earlier generation died before him at Langemarck, death for the sake of the new fatherland.”

I. Hero without Tears: Herbert Norkus as Prototype

Sunday morning January 20, 1932, Herbert Norkus, an active Hitler Youth in the communist dominated Beusselkietz section of Berlin, became a “blood witness” for the Nazi movement when he died of several stab wounds. One Nazi source commemorated the death in these dramatic terms:

Totally isolated, Herbert saw himself delivered to the knives of the raging mob that needed a victim. He had already fallen or been beaten to the ground several times. Again and again he got up, lashed out with his tough fist, caught his breath and dashed on. The chase tired him, the loss of blood made him feel faint. Once again he got up, held on to a lamp post; he wouldn’t collapse yet. But then the jeering crowd pulled him down and trampled on their helpless victim. He saw a flash of knife blades, felt a few stabs.

And this satanic orgy of slaughter did not lack spectators. On the balcony of the house on Zwinglistrasse 4 a fat man stood in his undershirt and, having just rolled out of bed, stood tall and curious and watched: a living image of today’s Philistine. No help could be expected. Mothers stood behind windows and watched as the son of another mother and father was being murdered. And no one helped! Germany, Germany, where were you! What did peace and chaos, Versailles and inflation, want and hunger do to you and the German people that
you remained a silent spectator of this beastly deed . . . [Norkus tries to escape into an apartment building.] . . . The blood-smeared hand grasped for the buzzer, reached into empty space. Its bloody imprint remained on the wall. He lay in his blood and whispered: “Help me,—help me!” Then, he lost consciousness, and, as he lay there, blood gushed from six stab wounds with each beat of his pulsating heart.

Only his father, a taxidriver and a Nazi, was able to identify Herbert’s disfigured face in the hospital. That afternoon the news reached Goebbels at a Berlin mass rally: “A single cry went up from the thousands assembled and they stood in silence commemorating this youngster who had to die for Germany and the movement. . . . Thus Herbert Norkus became what Horst Wessel had become for the SA: the image of its simple life and death in service to the cause. We don’t lose many words about that; it’s a matter of course and at the time it’s significant and sacred.”

Nazi propaganda projects Norkus as “all boy,” but with a sensitive side: he draws, plays the piano and exhibits a tendency to depression, especially after his mother dies in a mental institution. While his father recalls how Herbert’s “whole being emanated joy,” he also observed how “his firstborn son stood, sunk into himself, his large eyes gazing into an emptiness. . . . It was mother’s death that made him thus.” The Hitler Youth diary of Gerhardt Mondt, leader of Norkus’ unit, notes that the “constant anxiety had a fateful effect on the poor woman who saw dangers everywhere for her husband and her two boys. It got to the point that her mind became confused. Her husband had to commit her and she died in the institution after much suffering.” As in Hitlerjunge Quex, the mother’s emotional needs and psychological fragility become problematic for the hero. Both texts, though most likely unintentionally, suggest through the image of the fragile mother, the binary of the heroic Führer called to rescue and resurrect a weak and abused Germany.

During the Kampfzeit, twenty-six Hitler Youths died violent deaths in Germany and Austria; three of the six boys who died in Berlin came from Wedding, the Beusselkietz working-class area. One of them, Herbert Norkus, communicated through his death the message: “Be prepared, always prepared, to live, to fight and to die like Herbert Norkus.” After 1933, these young placard-posting streetfighters became the old fighters of the movement and role models for the Hitler Youth as Staatsjugend. Every Hitler Youth, boy or girl, learned about the history of the Hitler Youth during the Kampfzeit, including Herbert Norkus’s struggle and sacrificial death. In his discussion of this phase of the Hitler Youth, Werner Klose concludes: “To live for Hitler, to die for Hitler. It became
the fate of an entire generation. . . . He [Norkus] led the eternal fellowship of dead Hitler Youths.\textsuperscript{16}

Two years later on January 1, 1935, Baldur von Schirach spoke at Norkus’s grave:

I stand at the grave of our little Herbert Norkus. The microphone that broadcasts my voice throughout the Reich and to you my comrades, boys and girls, stands on the ground that covers his body. What the Hitler Youth became since January 1932 it owes to a great extent to the sacred symbol of that youthful willingness for sacrifice and heroism called Herbet Norkus. With his name we move into the new year. . . .\textsuperscript{17}

The conduit of inspiration is effected here through technology; the microphone is the medium through which the “spirit” of the dead youth rises and speaks through Schirach’s words.

The ideal of Herbert Norkus, role model and prototype for Heini Völker, is undermined in Quex by Heini’s manic-depressive behavior. Both have personalities that aim to please and both displace unresolved grief into fanatic faith in the Hitler movement. While Heini ostensibly also dies for the Führer, Schenzinger subverts Heini’s Gleichschaltung by having him act out of his need to “prove something,” even if it goes against orders. It is Heini’s individualism, not merely his dedication, which leads to his death. Propagandistic hagiographies, such as those by Littmann and Mondt, allow only one text for the hero Norkus. Schenzinger, too, is an official propagandist, but he bases his official text on the unresolved issues of Heini’s life and the psychological effects these issues had on his emotional fragility. Even his name Heini Völker, suggests this fundamental ambivalence, for “Heini,” the diminutive of Heinrich, connotes not only a certain infantilism, but suggests the trickster-dummling of German folklore. Völker (nations), on the other hand, makes Heini a metonymy for the Volk while Quex renames him, from the Nazi point of view, as an uncritical and blindly devoted Hitler Youth. However, Heini’s mercurial personality (Quecksilber is German for mercury) reveals him as a psychologically high strung adolescent with propensities for fainting spells, depression (even suicidal depression), and individualistic actions contradictory to the demands of absolute obedience.
II. Hitlerjunge Quex as Official Text

*Hitlerjunge Quex* is a highly politicized narrative about the Kampfzeit; its implied readers are Hitler Youths after 1933, the time of “reconstruction.” Characters in the novel hotly debate the present and future of Germany, but Heini Völker never contributes to these discussions because he has no historical or sociopolitical understanding of events; he simply has faith. In terms of Nazi values, that personal limitation is a mark of political merit and distinguishes Heini as an ideal Hitler Youth. However, the authorial narrative voice ensures that relevant historical events are included in *Quex*: In January, Herbert Norkus was murdered; on January 27 Hitler gave his famous speech to the German industrialists assuaging their anxiety about the “socialist” meaning of his party. After Hitler became a German citizen on February 25, he decided to challenge President von Hindenburg. He received 13.4 million votes, but Hindenburg was re-elected in the April 10 run-off election. On April 14 the government ordered a ban on all Nazi uniforms; the ban was lifted on June 16—a great day in *Hitlerjunge Quex*, for the Hitler Youth, too, was prohibited from wearing its uniforms, though Reich Youth Leader Schirach had tried to separate the Hitler Youth from the NSDAP before the ban went into effect. The lifting of the ban allowed Schenzinger to focus on the uniform as one of the crucial Nazi symbols; the other, even more powerful symbols in the novel are the flag and songs, though Schirach’s Hitler Youth Anthem, which he wrote for the film *Hitlerjunge Quex*, was not adopted by the movement until after the release of the film. The Hitler Youths in the novel are portrayed as well disciplined and as animated by an “idealistic” *esprit de corps*. Their main agenda is recruitment. The novel does not mention that the Hitler Youth had only 799 Berlin members in 1932. The death of Norkus and the mass rally of the Hitler Youth in Potsdam in October alerted many Berliners for the first time that there even was an organization called the Hitler Youth; during the summer and fall of 1932, membership increased.18

In the novel, the Hitler Youths campaign for the Reichstag election of July 1932 which gave the Nazis 230 seats, making them the largest political party. Throughout this time, however, Communists and Nazis engaged in the “battle for the streets” of Berlin. A week after the election, Heini, who has been removed from his home turf for his own protection, is allowed to return as leader to his unit in Beusselkietz to help with recruitment. He dies shortly thereafter, no later than the first half of August. Before his death, however, with his Scharführer he previews the
site in Potsdam where on October 1 Schirach and the NSDAP staged the first Reich Youth Day, an event much anticipated by Heini. The Nazis had expected 20,000 youths and were overwhelmed by the 100,000 who had streamed into Potsdam to hear the Führer and sing their anthem. All boys and girls who joined the Hitler Youth by October 1, 1932 received in June 1934 the golden insignia of “alte Kämpfer.” Hitlerjunge Quex concludes with a pro-lepsis to this event: “. . . Seventy-five thousand boys march with the same flag, with the same song and with shining faces past their Führer.”

During the Kampfzeit, the Hitler Youth recruited primarily from the lower-middle and working-class, as well as the disenfranchised. Middle- and upper-class youngsters often joined to provoke their parents. The character of the articulate and somewhat arrogant Fritz Dörris in Heini’s unit is, in that sense, typical. Heini’s father, an abusive drunkard and self-proclaimed proletarian, is an unemployed Communist. The Communists do not appear as party members in Hitlerjunge Quex but are reduced to a left-wing gang, the Nordstern Clique. Stoppel, their gang leader, wants Heini, the fifteen-year-old carpenter’s apprentice to join, but Heini is repulsed by their crude behavior, especially by their sexual liberties. It is Fritz Dörris who attracts him and whose sister Ulla, a “blond brightness” (63), will be Heini’s first tentative interest in the opposite sex. Fritz tells him that the Nazis make no class distinctions: “All one has to be is a good comrade, a true and decent fellow, whatever happens . . .” (63). In contrast to the communists and to the perceived degeneracy of Berlin in the Weimar Republic, the Nazis “looked orderly, clean and straight, their leather stuff at high polish. They reminded him of the order, decency and discipline he had read about in old stories” (8).

It is this image of the Nazis which attracts Heini and compensates him for the conflicts that plague him, though he ultimately resolves the latter only in death. At the core of his conflicts is his love for his mother whom he cannot protect against his father’s violent abuse; he feels guilty over this lack of courage. The night he plans to attend the dedication of the Beusselkietz Kameradschaft’s new den, the Norkus Heim, his father, assuming Heini will go to a meeting of the Nordstern Clique, hands him for the first time the key to the apartment. The clique, however, attacks the Kameradschaft’s meeting place while Heini is there. The police pick up Heini, but are unable to get any information from him. As a result, both the Hitler Youths and the clique believe either that he protected them or that he was a spy.
Stoppel informs Herr Völker of Heini’s betrayal. Threatened by his father and the Nordstern Clique, Heini tells his mother that he must move away from home. That night she turns on the gas, intending to kill herself and Heini. Heini is saved and convalesces in the hospital where he is visited and accepted by Hitler Youths and their leaders. When he understands that his mother is dead, he falls into a severe depression. Only the rigorous and encouraging persuasion of the Bannführer enables him to overcome it. With his new Hitler Youth uniform, Heini accepts his new identity and moves, for his own protection, to West Berlin where he becomes his Bannführer’s “girl Friday” (186 “Mädchen für alles”). His eagerness to run errands and execute orders earn him the name Quex, quicksilver, but no matter how dedicated Heini is “in service,” he remains conflicted about his left-wing associations because Stoppel continues to exert pressure on him. As a result he needs to prove himself, to prove that he can act on his own, though the Hitler Youth viewed such independence with skepticism. In a gesture of bravado, he steals the clique’s red flag and burns it; it is a Hitler Youth who betrays his identity to the clique, and they will take their revenge.

The narrative makes clear that Nazis and Communists competed for the allegiance of the young. Schenzinger describes this in the election campaign of 1932: “Every party vied for the young, and youth fought in the front rows of their party which promised them a future” (223–24). Hitlerjunge Quex is as much a description of the Nazi struggle to capture Heini Völker as it is a revelation of Heini’s conscious and preconscious adolescent conflicts. The novel was acceptable to the Nazis as an archetypal Kampfzeit youth novel in part because Kampf (struggle), seen as essential to life in Nazi ideology, permeates every part of the narrative. Struggle is resolved only in death, and death is the premier sign of loyalty and commitment to the Führer and the Nazi movement. In all of his struggles, Heini is willing to accept without question or critical reasoning the emotional power emanating from Nazi symbols and gatherings. Though his willingness to die for the cause makes him an acceptable image, the novel never reaches the point where the reader could say, “now Heini’s political coordination as a Nazi is total and complete”; he never internalizes National Socialism as his superego. Instead, Heini’s need for personal relationships remains in conflict with the Nazi leadership’s requirement that loyalty be focused on the Führer and on comradeship, without regard for intimate and personal relationships and friendships. Furthermore, Heini’s intellectual and critical limitations leave him often emotionally lost in subjectivity.
Heini Völker—like Norkus, not only rather short of stature but also psychologically younger than his chronological age—is fifteen when he joins the Hitler Youth without having been in the Jungvolk as a Pimpf (a cub). Being in the Hitler Youth meant, officially at least, that one did not “make new friends” but aligned one’s self with the leaders and comrades of the group, a bonding preparatory for becoming a soldier, as the German word for comradeship, Kameradschaft, implies. Moreover, the Hitler Youth, an image of order for Heini, offers leadership opportunity, even for a working-class youth. Schenzinger here supports attitudes Hitler began to institutionalize in Mein Kampf where he asserts that “youth has its own state, it has a certain closed solidarity toward the grown-up” (415; see chapter 1). Leaders of Hitler Youth units emerge from within a unit, but are appointed by the leaders of larger units, evidence of the hierarchical power of the Führerprinzip. Heini, therefore, will be appointed by the Bannführer to become the Kameradschaftsführer of the Beusselkietz unit.

Early in the narrative, during his first and only outing with Stoppel’s communist clique, Heini experiences an epiphanic moment that intensifies his longing to be a Hitler Youth. Repelled by the dissolute behavior and suggestive language of the clique, Heini yearns for “. . . water, forest and sun. He had a real hunger for joy” (39). He is overwhelmed by one of his recurrent depressive moods, but at night, when “the forest stood in blackness and the sky was a deep quiet blue,” Heini asks himself about God and at the same time feels “himself threatened by a large animal” (44). He penetrates into the forest toward a distant glow until he reaches the periphery of Hitler Youths gathered around a huge bonfire.

About a thousand youth stood around a flaming pyre, perhaps only a hundred. It seemed to him, as if this wreath of human beings reached to the ends of the earth. Side by side, right before him, stood boys such as he. Each held a long staff vertically against the sky, black pennants and bright red ones with jagged signs in the center of the cloth. One looked like the other, short pants, brown shirt, scarf around the neck. . . .

They did not sing. They all looked silently toward the fire. A tall young man stood there and spoke to them. He was giving a real speech. Heini understood only certain words, he heard “movement” and “leader,” he understood half a sentence: “each his life for the others.” As he listened and considered if he should move in closer, a sudden fright went through him. “Deutschland, Deutschland über alles,” sung from a thousand throats, flooded over him like a hot wave. I am also a German, he thought, and this awareness came over him with such force and so completely unexpected as never before in his life, not in school, not at home, not before the Reichstag. . . . He wanted to join in, but his voice failed. This was German ground, German forest, these were German
Youths, and he saw that he stood at the margin, alone, without help not knowing what to do with this sudden powerful emotion. (46–47)

Schenzinger’s “deutscher Boden, deutscher Wald . . . deutsche Jungens” (German soil, German forest . . . German youths) taps into the deeply nationalistic myth of origin Germans found in Tacitus’ *Germania*, a myth politicized by the Nazis. Heini comes upon what the Nazis defined as a *Feierstunde*, a sacred celebratory hour where the energies of political faith converge communally. Schenzinger splits the scene between Heini’s epiphany as an outsider and the Hitler Youth as community. The lance-like staffs, the jagged runes, the uniformed bodies shape and organize the earlier intimation of a threatening animal. In his comment about the same scene in the film, Rentschler observes: “The natural setting and the human ornament merge; this is the spectacle that rivets Heini’s gaze, a ceremony with an impressive composition, a striking choreography, a binding power. If the Communists contaminate nature, the Nazis contain it . . . [though] it is a domesticated nature.” Heini, emotionally vulnerable, is persuaded and converted not by argument and reason but through spectacle and ejaculatory words and phrases, the preferred method of National Socialism as a mass movement in an alienated mass society. As Schirach declared: “Our world view is a matter of the heart. Feeling is more important to us than reason. A working class youth whose heart is impassioned for our Führer is more essential for Germany than a highly educated esthete who stifles every stirring of his weak emotions with intellectualized rationalization.”

Heini, who loves the word “masses” (254), cannot follow a sequential presentation and eventually, when he himself is called upon to give a speech to the Hitler Youth at a recruitment evening, he prepares himself by jotting down ideas about “flag” and “comrades.” Unlike Hitler, Heini is not a calculating emotional speaker; he retains a naïve innocence and remains an emotional bundle of desires and needs that makes him “graspable” (*erfassbar*) in the Nazi sense. In fact, as he moves toward the podium he lets “himself be pushed and positioned, without remembering a word he had wanted to say” (233). Then, “during the entire speech he had the feeling as if he were running over thin ice. But he spoke without pause. . . . The whole thing was like a rush (*Rausch*) from which he did not emerge until thunderous applause rolled over him” (233).

Saul Friedländer has explored the Nazi connotations of Rausch, an elated intoxication or rush, generated through repetition and cumulation of ever larger numbers, as in mass killings, but the theatrical demon-
strations of the Nazis also generated a pressure to which the participant responded in an ecstatic rush. Heini’s intense, often contradictory and unresolved feelings find release in the non-rational phrases that originally converted him to the movement. That conversion, however, did not stabilize his ego which continues to “run over thin ice,” sustained by the sense of levitation during the experience of Rausch, an illusory and momentary sense of empowerment. Klaus Theweleit acknowledges the repressed erotic energy of that empowerment through a Rausch: “This is the orgasm of oratory—surpassed only by the orgasm of killing”—when the speaker as Führer moves the listeners into formation through mutual contact that “must not be expressed as actual male love.” At that point even tears are permitted, are even called for. The speech leads to his appointment as Kameradschaftsführer. To the implied youthful reader of the novel, the official text projects Heini as overwhelmed by his emotional enthusiasm, not as an ideologically aligned fanatic. It is not through intimidation but through inspiration that the working class Heini may inspire the young middle-class reader to align himself politically with the Hitler Youth.

While Heini’s Rausch is as yet innocent and its ultimately deadly manifestation is as yet distant from Heini’s world, the Nazis were experts in stimulating such rushes artificially; for example, at the Potsdam Reich Youth Rally on October 1 and 2, 1932. During their preview of the site, Heini’s Bannführer promised him that he would be able to participate. As Schenzinger implies, he will be there in spirit only:

A few weeks later the flags billow again in the wind, out there in the streets of Potsdam, on the festival grounds, in the stadium, they shine in the glow of torches, in the brilliance of the sun. Seventy five thousand youths with the same flags, the same song, but with shining faces march past their Führer.

III. Counter-text in Hitlerjunge Quex: “They Don’t Understand the Words, but They Know the Melody”

Moments before he dies, “Heini, eyes wide open, sits upright in his bed. His gaze flickers, sees no one, sees into emptiness; his eyes close again. The nurse lays him back. He utters something. His comrades hear it clearly, but cannot understand anything. Then a grey horror seizes them. Heini sings. They are petrified. They do not understand the words, but they know the melody. . . .” (“sie verstehen nicht die Worte, aber die Melodie kennen sie” 263–64). The incantatory melos of a Nazi song has been
internalized unto death. Schenzinger heightens the subtextual connotations significantly by not identifying the song. On the one hand the statement implies that Heini still can carry the tune, but is as inarticulate as usual. However, the reader can also infer that Nazi youth does not really need to understand the ideological significance of Nazi language; the melody alone is enough to sweep them away. The melos, the rhythm of Schenzinger’s narrative, too, carries the reader from excitement to excitement, stimulating the desire to belong. There is, therefore, no need for the typical official Nazi propaganda, no reason for anti-Semitism and no need to understand concepts and policies, for the melody of *Hitlerjunge Quex*’s rhetoric entices the young reader to join a movement where the young can find heroic gestures and martyrdom.

The subtext of *Hitlerjunge Quex* is not the “dark side” of Nazism: it is Heini’s unresolved private griefs which are inhibited, if not prohibited, by the Kameradschaft, the comradeship of the Hitler Youth which tolerates no private intimacy of feelings or relationships because these detract from dedication to the cause and from the propaganda goals of a pseudo-intimacy fostered by Nazi ceremonies and rituals. While Heini has a manic side (signified by his nickname Quex), he is equally predisposed to depression, that sadness without an object that his mother’s suicide should replace with the kind of mourning Freud defined as “work” for “when completed [it] leaves the ego free and uninhibited again.”

Because the Nazis inhibit his grieving process, Heini escapes into manic behavior whenever he wants to please, but also into a sullen obstinacy that prods him to disobey the leaders of his Hitler Youth unit. However, unlike some of his comrades, Heini is incapable of reasoning or of following and understanding a rational argument. Neither acceptance through pleasing nor actions based on personal or intuitive decisions, no matter how well intentioned, are acceptable motives for the Nazis; only faith and obedience count. Thus Heini’s lack of critical thought, his predisposition to depression, and his unresolved grief constitute the vehicle for Schenzinger’s subtext. As a result, he can project the Nazi movement as a force of order that is free of hate and prejudice. Heini’s private weaknesses, not his alignment with National Socialism, predispose him for a death that is then officially defined as martyrdom for the Nazi movement.

Heini’s inability to reason reveals itself in his indifference whenever his Hitler Youth friends, Fritz Dörris and Bruno Hellweg, argue over whether the Nazis and Communists will ever make common cause. Heini is uninterested in spite of his former acquaintance with communism; he dunks cake into his coffee and “can’t quite follow” (249–50) the argu-
ments. While Bruno and Fritz argue whether Communists and Nazis share a concern for the downtrodden or whether they are essentially different, Heini daydreams about how he once beat up his roommate. He is also unable to understand strategies or contradictions. During his contentious final meeting with Stoppel, the young Communist, Heini is desperately inarticulate as his feelings overwhelm his reason. Stoppel wants argument rather than an emotional rush and challenges Heini:

“What do you know about the NSDAP!”
“What I need, I know.”
“A snot like you doesn’t know anything about politics.”
“We are not political.”
“Don’t make me laugh . . .”
“. . . we learn.”
“What might you be learning?”
“How—how to be obedient. I never could believe in you nor my teachers nor my father. I believe in my leaders. That’s it. That’s why I belong—because I believe in my leaders and my comrades and—”
He could not continue. (205)

Stoppel launches into a diatribe about left-wing goals worth fighting for; Heini agrees with these goals, but then gushes that the Nazis fight “for much, much more. . . . We fight for—for a flag” (206).

He had joined the Hitler Youth at a most vulnerable moment, as he recovered in the hospital from the gas that killed his mother. During that night, Heini, who always felt guilty over his inability to protect his mother from his father’s brutalities, awoke from a dream about a battlefield. He could hardly move as he smelled the gas but managed to drag himself to the window and opened it before he fainted (128). He faints again in the hospital when the nurse tells him of his mother’s death. In this descriptively concise section of the narrative, a traditional symbolic death and rebirth of the hero, official text and subtext interface. Heini, well taken care of by the hospital staff, wonders why his mother does not visit. Instead, an official contingent of the Hitler Youth—Kass the Beusselkietz Kameradschaftsführer, Schärführer #2, and Führer of the Gefolgschaft Moabit #2—check on Heini. Clearly, the party is interested in him! They are followed by Heini’s friends from the Beusselkietz Kameradschaft who present Heini with his Hitler Youth uniform. After they leave, Heini, who faults himself for thinking of his friends rather than his mother, finally asks the nurse why his mother does not visit. She is silent. “‘Dead?’ he asks very quietly. The nurse only nods. Slowly, the eyelids close over Heini’s eyes” (147). His mother’s death and his grief over it are repressed,
but can be discerned in his feelings and actions, even if he is not conscious of them. In the hospital, Heini succumbs to a state of “paralyzed apathy” and refuses all nourishment. His deeply concerned caregivers, assuming that his gas-injured body cannot cope with the additional trauma of losing his mother, believe that he needs complete quiet and rest (148).

It is Hitler Youth Kass who effects the decisive change in Heini. Through Kass the official world makes itself known at the expense of private grief. Kass, who first presents himself as a role model by recounting, in entertaining fashion, his adventurous life which eventually led him to the Hitler Youth, gives Heini, on a subsequent visit, a “talking to” that in effect prohibits he grieving process:

Your mother is dead. A healthy, a good woman, a dear woman. It happens; one day mother is gone, or a companion or a girl, a comrade . . . a boy may bawl as much as he likes. A Hitler Youth does not cry. Well, as far as I’m concerned he can, but he must stop. He must be able to say to himself: now I stop.... (155)

He exerts pressure on Heini, whose total loneliness is obvious: “I need tough guys in my Kameradschaft. I don’t want you to be political. You don’t understand that anyhow. . . . But you need to stop bawling when ordered” (155). Heini now realizes that his mother committed suicide and wanted “to take him with her”; he cannot react to this, partially because he once again did not do what mother wanted, but also because the thought that she wanted his death is inadmissible.

After the death of his mother, Heini is deprived of all human intimacy. The Bannführer, who removes him temporarily from the dangerous Beusselkietz district, makes him shy in spite of all his efforts to please him. Though the Beusselkietz Kameradschaft becomes a surrogate family of peers, Heini desires his comrades as friends, regardless of their political allegiance and in spite of the exhortation given to him by his Bannführer:

You don’t have six or eight comrades, Heini, you have a hundred thousand comrades in Germany. They all wear the same shirt, as you wear, the same badge, the same armband and cap. The uniform is not decor or a parade costume, my boy. It is the garment of community, of comradeship, of the idea, of the rank and file [Eingliederung]. Do you understand? The rank and file. It equalizes everybody. It gives to each and demands of each. He who wears that uniform may no longer make demands; he has to obey. If he can’t follow orders, he might as well take off the uniform. We won’t cry any tears. (170)
Heini’s inner conflicts make it difficult for him to become politically co-ordinated, no matter how well intentioned he is. Not only does he continue to insist on his individuality, his right to make even foolish decisions, he also values friendship over comradeship and, on the deepest level, internalizes his dead mother as a subconscious influence. During an outing when all Hitler Youths are ordered to attend the morning “devotion,” Heini reflects, “Mother is dead. . . . Mother is no more. Where is she? . . . Mother is within me,” he realizes suddenly. “Something of her is in me. I feel it” (191). A burden seems to be lifted from him and he turns to join a war game where each participant wears a woollen thread around his wrist. Heini is told: “That is your soul, my man. When someone tears it off, you are dead and can no longer participate” (191). The game will become Heini’s reality—in death he fulfills the mission of a Nazi youth, but as an iconized martyr he can no longer participate in the game.

Heini’s manic side emerges after he is assigned to serve the Bannführer. At first he felt “grief and emptiness, and lacked all vitality” (183), in part because he was removed from his Beusselkietz unit for his own protection. “Movement” is Heini’s imitation for liveliness: “. . . movement was a need, was a diversion, perhaps even a healing. He wanted to be ordered, he wanted to obey. He wanted to admire, to revere . . . . He did not walk, he ran. . . . ‘Pure quicksilver,’ said the Bannführer to his secretary, as Heini once again dashed out the door” (183). Through Heini’s intellectual and subversive roommate, Schenzinger correlates Heini’s need for motion as a microcosm to the macrocosm of the National Socialist Movement: “The direction of this [Nazi] movement is irrelevant. Movement itself is life . . . and the more intensive it is the more it foments life. The direction of the whole thing is uninteresting. In the end everything would anyhow become profane and banal” (184–85). Heini in motion is nicknamed Quex. His speed suits the Bannführer who makes him his “girl Friday” (186). Moreover, he becomes emotionally dependent on Heini who accompanies him on car trips, who tells stories, sings songs, and makes the landscape come alive. When the Bannführer suggests that Heini should attend a leadership school, Heini requests that that be postponed, and “the Bannführer hid his thoughts, but he felt radiant within” (218).

National Socialism repressed and persecuted homosexuality through law, socialization, and outright brutality. Schirach implied as much when he granted that youths should “not be ashamed of their natural drives. . . . [but should conduct itself in terms of the motto] ‘remain pure and mature.’ Where unnatural tendencies manifest themselves, the leadership
is obliged to eject from the healthy community the one who has gone astray.”

The youthful male, officially idolized through heroic projections in sculptures, paintings, photographs, and films, became, not infrequently, an object of desire for Nazi leaders who attached themselves to youthful male companions. Schirach, notes Hans Siemsen in his memoir *Hitler Youth*, had “relations with a certain boy with whom he was seen about everywhere over a long period. The word *quexen* became part of the vocabulary of the Hitler Youth; it is easy to imagine what it means.”

Rumor had it that the actor who played Quex in the film was Schirach’s lover. Schenzinger makes these erotic ambivalences part of the subtext, but leaves Heini unconscious of them, protected by his manic and innocent “gushyness.”

When the Bannführer informs him that “we need young leaders who know the meaning of comradeship, who have a sense of honor, who are true to the cause and don’t fear the devil,” Heini is unenthusiastic even when the leader appoints him to head a Kameradschaft. If he is to be leader, it will only be of the Beusselkietz Kameradschaft. The Bannführer screams mutiny, but Heini replies:

> We don’t keep soldiers from battle because there is shooting. [The Bannführer] grabbed Heini’s head by the ears and pulled him close: “You are an unbelievably impudent snot!” Then, he pushed him gently away, stepped to the desk and took a colored cord from the drawer: “This is the leadership cord, Quex. Wear it with honor.” He blanched. Then, he rushed toward the Bannführer, clasped his neck and kissed him on his stubbly cheek. (253–54)

Heini’s innocent kiss is a subversive reward for the leader’s officially correct behavior. Schenzinger reinforces the homoerotic subtext of the scene when Heini, immediately afterwards encounters his roommate Witewskie, who is courting two girls with quotations from the “Song of Songs” about the “lilies of the valley, legs of gazelles and doe-like eyes.” He introduces Heini as, “‘My comrade Quex, passionate defender of platonic love’” (219).

Heini’s budding sexual interest is directed to Ulla, the *Hitlermädel* (BDM or Hitler girl), who during the rehearsal of a skit involving romantic relations, grabs Heini’s head “and heartily kissed him on the mouth.— ‘So!’ Beet-red, they looked at each other for seconds. ‘Nobody has died of that,’ laughed Ulla, finally. Heini gasped for air, then he also laughed, and they finished rehearsing the scene” (260). Heini is flanked politically by the Bannführer as “good angel” and Stoppel as the communist bad
angel; erotically, the Bannführer could become his “bad angel” to Ulla, the “healthy” heterosexual Aryan girl.

Yet, Ulla’s positive influence must be denied; Heini cannot be diverted from his destiny. After the kiss, Heini departs from her and her brother Fritz Dörris with a manic feeling of joy, enters a dark street, and shortly thereafter his friends hear him scream. Schenzinger places the violent assault “off stage”; Heini’s assailants remain unknown, for the enemy might be anywhere and anyone. In Schenzinger’s novel, Heini does not die of the blow to his head; he dies in the hospital of “brain fever” (262). Once again, Schenzinger affirms the subtext. Aside from the fact that a bedside death scene where Heini once more rallies to visionary heights would be impossible had he died on site, meningitis (Gehirnhautentzündung, lit. inflammation of the brain membrane) suggests one more time how incapable Heini has been of reasoning and understanding. His illness is indeed a metaphor for his political and emotional life.

Counter-text and official imaging prevail until the end. The words that Heini sings before he dies are a death rattle that frightens his comrades who leave “shaken, disturbed and despairing. They sense it. No one says it, but they know: here death sings” (264). The chorus in Schirach’s anthem for the Hitler Youth relates flag and death: “Unsere Fahne flattert uns voran,” our flag billows before us—the flag more important than death. As Rentschler notes, “Hitler Youth Quex [the film] mediates the myth of the martyr in order to mobilize emotions. The dead Herbert Norkus becomes the raw material for the fictional Heini Völker, who, brought back to life by a nameless amateur actor, metamorphoses into Hitler Youth Quex, whose dying body, in turn, segues into a waving flag that becomes a screen for the sights and sounds of a party. Human substance evaporates into disembodied function” (69).

Heini is such a disembodied function in the last paragraphs of the narrative. His funeral has both an official and unofficial version. Heini “lies in state with candles, with flags, with wreaths. An honor guard stands motionless. Outside they dig the grave amidst other dead comrades. They line the inside of the grave with pine branches.” The unofficial ceremony takes place “at the grey of dawn when undefined shapes steal to the grave, set the branches on fire, spit into the grave and disappear before the watch can catch them.” They are most likely Heini’s Beusselkietz comrades, his intimates who magically bury a part of themselves with him and through their fire evoke once more Heini’s very private conversion in the forest. The official funeral procession, however, includes “hundreds of flags [and] a thousand friends marching to muffled drums; everyone knows:
this was a good comrade” (264). There is no personal expression of grief at Heini’s funeral. The fact that Heini’s death came from a willful individualistic action to “prove himself” is ignored. In Schenzinger’s narrative, Heini, like Herbert Norkus, is complete, not as living participant, but as a functional myth. As official myths Herbert Norkus and Heini Völker must have no subtexts. As a functional Hitler Youth saint, Heini, the fragile and insecure boy-child, must be sublimated. While the author cannot erase in the text of the narrative Heini’s unresolved conflicts and ambivalences, the unacknowledged subtext in this hagiography of a Hitler Youth is that the hero rises only when the all-too-human boy is killed.

**Notes**


9. Quoted in Rentschler from the official press booklet for the film, 57.


11. Littmann 129.

12. Littmann 31 and 25.


18. Klose 17.
20. The approximately 50,000 girls who were also present would have raised that number to over 100,000!
22. Rentschler, 62.
23. In Mein Kampf, Hitler makes clear the power of night-time persuasion: “At night, however, they [the masses] succumb more easily to the dominating force of a stronger will” (475). There is always a decided feminization of the masses in relation to the orator in Hitler’s discussions of this subject.
28. Schirach 1934, 63.
29. Rentschler 327 note 68.
In the penultimate episode of *The Time of the Young Soldiers* (1983), the last of Hans Peter Richter’s (1925–1993) three autobiographical fictional accounts of growing up in the Third Reich, the unnamed narrator, a lieutenant, is aboard ship with hundreds of refugees. There is standing room only, and it is impossible for the narrator to reach the latrines:

“Shit, lieutenant, and stand still!” The guy behind me barked.
Tears came to my eyes.
I undid my belt; I excused myself. I unbuttoned my trousers under my jacket.
No one paid attention.
Slowly I let down my trousers. I wanted to squat . . . But the others would not budge. Eyes closed, they muttered resentfully because I moved.
And, half-standing, I relieved myself, squeezed in among all these people.
They didn’t even pull back the tips of their boots.
I looked around apologetically.
“Let it be, lieutenant,” my neighbor comforted me, “the rain will wash it away.”

Though he cannot be identified with them, Richter’s unnamed narrator experiences here the humiliation inflicted for days on end on all Jews in the closed cattle cars that shuttled them to their final destination. To relieve oneself in the confined and crowded space of the cattle car was but a foreshadowing of a place often called “the asshole of the world”: Auschwitz as metonymy for all death camps; Auschwitz as absolute
deception and absolute reality. In contrast, shortly after Richter’s narrator experiences his degradation, he is told in the final episode “es ist Friede,” we have peace. The above incident and Richter’s entire trilogy, however, convey that peace will always be troubled with uneasy and anxious memories. The narrator’s degrading situation is real and plausible, but, placed as it is at the end of his experience as a Hitler Youth and as a soldier, the incident carries the weight of symbolic accumulations that make every sentence hint at the problem of being German during and after the Nazi era.

Richter’s young narrator wears the uniform of a lieutenant, his insignia are clear and legible. In full public view his disciplined appearance is undone, but in this Volksgemeinschaft, transformed now into an alienated crowd, each individual is isolated and tries to preserve a Lebensraum of one foot square. Here, the soldier turns little boy again, abandoning his toilet training. It is small comfort that no one cares if shit splatters on boots. “The rain will wash it away”— the excremental underside of Nazism’s anal retentive show of discipline will dissipate, and a wasted past will be de-realized as people simply turn their attention elsewhere, be it to the socialist state or the “economic miracle.” As Mitscherlich argues, the memory of Hitler, after the collapse of the Third Reich, is extinguished or rejected as the individual sheds responsibility and blames the Führer for demanding an obedience that led the German people into a catastrophe. However, Richter’s narrator in The Time of the Young Soldiers never laments or articulates directly the incipient and manifest waste of the Third Reich; instead, he is made to concretize it in physical relief. No one will be shocked by his infantile letting go; the memory of wasted time will simply rinse off, or so it seems.

Hans Peter Richter, who received his doctorate in political science in 1968, rejected the idea that his three narratives about the Nazi era, Friedrich (1961), I Was There (1962/1964), and The Time of the Young Soldiers (1967) were written to warn young readers against recurrence: “I do not write for children or for teenagers or for grown-ups—I simply write.” And yet, such a claim is disingenuous. On the one hand the author admits that his writings are autobiographical—“Everything I am writing, deals with myself; even those books that I have only edited are, in essence, about myself” (275)—on the other hand, he tries to conceal himself. His seemingly self-effacing discomfort indefinitely defers both consciousness and admission of guilt in his trilogy about the Hitler era: “As soon as someone asks me to pass judgment on myself—and writing about myself is just that—well, then as soon as someone asks me to make a
statement about myself, I feel ill” (275). Thus, the narrators he constructs for his three texts about the Nazi era seem both compelled to report their experiences and to hide themselves in anonymity. Their feelings and their guilt are the subtext of a persona who claims to report objectively by declaring: “I simply write.”

Richter saw Friedrich and I Was There (Wir waren dabei) narrated by the same voice, though in the first story the fate of the Jewish boy Friedrich seems privileged, while the second foregrounds the Hitler Youth. The Time of the Young Soldiers renders “an account for myself of how I rose . . . in public recognition—from student to commissioned officer—but how inwardly I more and more abandoned my decency, my inner values. Although I think that this becomes clear enough in the book, there are again young readers and listeners who only hear and read the adventurous parts” (281). The reader response of the young, then, assures the self-concealment of the authorial voice.

Though none of the three novels glorifies the Nazi regime, Richter listened to National Socialist oratory as well as to the Hitler Youth Anthem and the Horst Wessel Lied while writing Friedrich. His children picked up the tunes and sang enthusiastically the “forbidden songs,” causing Richter paranoid anxieties:

And there began a time of anxiety for my wife and me. How easily it could happen that, against all exhortations, one of the children, in school or in a youth group, might intone a song like “Our flag flies before us . . .” or “Up with the flag, close tight the ranks . . . ,” the song of the Hitler Youth or the National Socialist national anthem! The consequences would have been incalculable; because at that time my books, which could have been my alibi, were not yet published. Today I could more easily afford it; for as a writer who is read everywhere in the world, I enjoy a certain “carnival’s license.”

Ostensibly, Richter needed the speeches and songs for “inspiration” even if it meant risking “our economic and professional existence” in the Federal Republic of Germany where laws ward off the resurgence of National Socialism, anti-Semitism and the denial of the Holocaust. Richter’s dependence on this “stimulus material” reveals at best an ambivalent attitude toward Nazism and toward postwar Germany. The reader is, therefore, surprised to find in Richter’s narrators, despite the evidence of the epigraphs, no fanatic believers; instead they are colorless and nameless participants in the gray violent world of the Third Reich. Theirs is less an inability to mourn than a state of affectless existence that consigns them to melancholia, an objectless, unrelieved flat sadness.
Such a condition precludes “objective narration” in that the pretense of objectivity functions as a screen for what disturbs the narrator and the author. How this affects the three narratives will be the focus of discussion and critique of Richter’s trilogy.

In contrast to the witness narrator of the first two accounts, the narrative point of view in *The Time of the Young Soldiers* is more explicitly autobiographical and requires a more mature reader; here, too, the narrator is as affectless and alienated as he was at a younger age. In all three narratives the development is episodic rather than continuous, though *Friedrich* and *I Was There* (literal translation *We Were There*) are structured chronologically in their historical contexts. None of the narrators connects memories into a pattern of meaning; they are not “coming of age stories” of a young man who, in fact, never reaches a point of maturation or individuation. There is, by definition, a distance between the narrator and the implied author. In 1945 the narrator is twenty years old, but even though he was politicized from childhood on, he lacks a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of National Socialism, as well as the critical ability to evaluate his experiences, attitudes, and actions. The formation of such a limited consciousness was of course the goal of National Socialism, but it is also typical of one who lived in a given history rather than of one who learned about it. The distance between narrator and implied author—a distance Richter may well have wanted to project—blocks reader empathy and identification with the narrator and focuses attention on the events in history rather than on the self of the narrator.

The narrator’s limitations are compensated for authorially by the additions of extensive and rhetorically controlled chronologies at the end of *Friedrich* and *I Was There* and by the thematic value of the epigraphs in each narrative. In *Friedrich* the chronology focuses on measures against the Jews. As these accumulate after 1933, the reader understands the increasingly intensifying harassment and persecution these measures and statutes inflicted on German Jews in daily life. Moreover, the chronology reveals the relentless decrease of the German Jewish population from 500,000 in 1933 to 215,000 in 1939 to 130,000 in 1942 to 15,000 in 1944, with the radical decline after 1942 when the “Final Solution” was implemented after the Wannsee Conference on January 20. The author does not mention that conference in the chronology, an omission explainable by the fact that the narrative ends in 1942, though the chronology mentions 1945 and the collapse of the Third Reich.

The Wannsee Conference, along with major anti-Semitic actions, is included in the chronology of *I Was There*, but now the dates listed are
also important for the history of the Hitler Youth and Germany’s invasion of Europe before and during the war. It breaks off with the defeat at Stalingrad in 1943, “foreshadowing the collapse of Hitler’s Third Reich more than two years later.”5 There is no chronology following The Time of the Young Soldiers, just as there is no orientation of place, year, or month in the text itself, which de-realizes the narrator from the history in which he projects himself as a participant. His participation is, however, overwhelmingly limited to non-combatant daily life in the army.

Though I will discuss the three narratives as fictional recountings, the author defines their autobiographical impulse in the epigraphs for I Was There and The Time of the Young Soldiers. The latter reads “When the war broke out, I was fourteen; when it ended I was twenty years old. I was a soldier for three years. What I saw and what I did I considered justifiable because no one objected openly.” Given the history of the Wehrmacht, the narrator’s infractions are minor, though the author-narrator hints at deeds that are more than infractions. Moreover, there is an existentially and ethically exonerating argument implied in the epigraph: if one is not exposed to open objections, one is bound to consider one’s actions justifiable. The epigraph to I Was There affirms this: “I am reporting how I experienced and perceived that time—nothing more. I was there. I was not only an eyewitness: I believed—and I will never believe again” (my translation). By insisting that he was once a believer, he implies that he did not evaluate or interpret, though other characters in the narrative engage in critical thought and activity. Unlike the Holocaust survivor as eyewitness who values eyewitnessing above and beyond personal victimization, the narrator privileges “loss of faith” as the primary loss, though none of the narratives shows him as a “true believer.” There is a definite discrepancy, therefore, between the epigraph and the narrator’s tale. The need to write I Was There may well have sprung from a desire to mourn; the narrative, however, thwarts that desire and reaffirms once more the inability to mourn.

The English edition of Friedrich does not include the epigraph of the original German edition of Damals war es Friedrich (At That Time It Was Friedrich), the title implying that today the victim is someone else:

At that time it was the Jews . . .
Today it’s the blacks over there, . . .
here it’s the students. . .
Tomorrow it may be the whites,
Christians or public officials (Beamten). . .6
According Zohar Shavit, “the comparison implies, not only a devaluation of Nazi crimes, but also (what I consider even worse) a parceling out of responsibility. In most German children’s books the attempt is made to evade acceptance of responsibility. Hitler appeared like a deus ex machina, and only he is responsible for what happened.” While this epigraph may be a pedagogical reminder that the social construction of the “Other” can occur at any time, the random accumulation that includes the majority and “public officials,” trivializes the Shoah by reducing it to just another example of recurring prejudices and persecutions.

Chronologies and epigraphs—radicals of narrative and thematic synthesis—frame the narratives told by the narrator who claims credibility, but is unreliable in terms of values, critical thought, and emotional response. An author may highlight the rational motive for a hortatory tale, but the therapeutic need to “confess” is certainly a deeper motivation. In Richter’s case, the author’s official persona places between himself and the reader a narrator whose self is alienated and diminished, especially when compared to the strong selves of his doomed friends, Friedrich, Heinz, and Günther. The nameless narrator, who may be intended as an everyman figure, hides behind his anonymity, but he is also a typical projection of the denial and lack of self-evaluation of many Germans “who were there.” His namelessness implies that he cannot be called to account for his greatest failing—his inability to respond emotionally and empathetically through reflection, word, or deed to crises that demand such responses. Through the first and last name, a person is given boundaries as a being in the world and becomes countable and accountable. The nameless person, however, is a universal that cannot be located to give account. The often-praised “objectivity” of the narrator (and of the author) is a masking of his failings and of his inability to mourn.

Only on rare occasions does a poignant image suggest that the narrator is emotionally and ethically conflicted. After Herr Resch, the Nazi landlord, denies him refuge in the air-raid shelter, Friedrich is killed during an air raid in 1942 and is found lifeless at the entrance. Without comment, the narrator concludes the story of Friedrich:

Herr Resch lifted his foot and kicked.
Friedrich rolled out of the shelter entrance way onto the stone path. A trail of blood went from his right temple to his collar.

*I clutched the thorny rosebush*

“His luck that he died this way,” said Herr Resch. (147) [my emphasis]
The narrator’s anesthetized self moves chronologically through time, but remains in a state of arrested development. Though each tale is filled with actions and behaviors that drive it to fatal or ambivalent conclusions, the narrator remains incapable of responding critically or emotionally. Richter’s trilogy is perhaps most interesting in its privileging of historical events which enable the narrator to hide under the guise of objectivity. In that guise he becomes the kind of person who supported with silent consent the system and goals of Nazi Germany. After the system’s collapse, such an individual was usually left in a state of objectless and melancholic alienation in a wasted world.

Because *Friedrich* is the most widely read and is, therefore, very influential in shaping attitudes among young readers toward young Jewish victims and young Nazis, I am privileging this narrative with a more detailed discussion than I give to *I Was There* and *The Time of the Young Soldiers*. All three narratives, however, are told by the same narrative voice, a voice of melancholy anonymity that evades a critique of Nazism as well as committed compassion toward the suffering of human beings.

I. *Friedrich* and the Retreat into Melancholy Anonymity

From one perspective, *Friedrich* (1961) is Hans Peter Richter’s contribution to fictional narratives about the persecution of the Jews by Germans and Nazis. The first to address this subject in German youth literature, this short narrative is generally considered the most important and influential contribution to this topic. The problem of how “hell on earth” can be described in a narrative for young readers is “solved” for Bernd Otto by Richter’s step-by-step description of increased measures against the Jews after 1933. Otto lauds the rational and stylized presentation of the subject and feels that it enhances the reader’s understanding. Because the narrative begins in 1925, the birth year of Friedrich Schneider and the narrator, Richter correctly shows that “Jewish persecution existed already before the Third Reich—‘hell’ was already in daily life [for Jews], while Auschwitz became the endpoint of this development.”

Zohar Shavit, however, argues that the characterization of Friedrich and his parents undermines the “rational” treatment of the subject with Jewish stereotypes and even a thinly veiled anti-Semitism, in spite of the occasionally overstated philo-Semitic attitudes. The fact, she argues, that the Schneiders are somewhat better off economically, that Herr Schneider finds employment in a Jewish owned department store after the dismissal
of all Jewish government employees, and that the narrator’s tyrannical grandfather’s anti-Semitism is motivated by having been badly treated by a Jewish employer perpetuates preconceived notions about Jews. Even more problematic for Shavit is Schneider’s admission that he might have joined the Party if he had not been Jewish, implying that there is nothing wrong with Nazism except its anti-Semitism. Finally, the narrator’s father’s advice that the Schneiders emigrate and Herr Schneider’s refusal to do so suggest that Jews themselves were to some extent responsible for their fate. Malte Dahrendorf takes issue with Shavit: “Even if there were Jews who were in the Party or who wanted to join it, is not important because it is not representative. The moment Richter chooses one Jewish family for the sake of describing [persecution], he must make them representative.” Unlike Otto, Dahrendorf finds the matter-of-fact historicality of the narrative problematic because it omits a penetrating analysis of the interconnection of events through emotional and evaluative responses to them. Friedrich has also been critiqued for isolating anti-Semitism from Nazi racial theories so that the problem of Jewish persecution seems without relationship to Nazism in general.

These conflicting opinions emerge primarily because of the narrative point of view. The reader’s sympathies are clearly with Friedrich, a bright, well-socialized, and caring boy who is the positive half of the binary Friedrich/Hitler Youth narrator. While Friedrich is the character the narrative privileges and while the historical trauma that finally overwhelms his family dominates his personal life, his character is not developed in depth. Friedrich may be of primary interest to the young reader, but it is the unnamed narrator who requires the most critical interpretation. He not only becomes a young Nazi, he is also an active perpetrator at one point. The text foregrounds Friedrich and extends a cloak of anonymity to the narrator while the subtext reveals the making of a certain type of Nazi.

This ambivalence begins with the “pre-historical” chapter of the birth year 1925: “Someone had called him Polycarp, and he kept this name all the time he ruled over the front garden.” Polycarp is a garden dwarf owned by the landlord Herr Resch, a confirmed anti-Semite and a fervent Nazi. When Friedrich is killed during the air raid in the last chapter, a piece of shrapnel cuts off the tip of Polycarp’s hat, which Resch will repair. This extraordinary name for a garden ornament, is not only a leitmotif in the narrative, but also thematically related to the epigraph. Young readers will not know that Polycarp (c.69–c.156), when burnt at the stake as an old man, was in his imitatio Christi well within the Christian anti-Jewish tradition as the original account of The Martyrdom of Polycarp.
shows. Here it is the Jews who heckle and incite the Roman officials and eagerly gather materials for the pyre. The allusion implies again Richter’s claim that over time persecutors and victims become interchangeable, thus obscuring important differences among persecutions. A piece of shrapnel cuts off the tip of “Polycarp’s” cap; a piece of shrapnel apparently killed Friedrich through the right temple. When we remind ourselves of the phallic nature of garden dwarfs whose pointed caps are substitutions for the phalloi the ancient Romans stuck into their gardens in honor of Priapus, we have to acknowledge that the classically educated author is playing a devious subtextual game with the ritual of circumcision: the garden dwarf will have his tip attached again, but the Jewish child’s trail of blood signifies his death. The final irony is, of course, that his death is the result of “enemy bombers” and not because of anti-Semitic Germans. Indeed, it is “his luck that he died this way.” Herr Resch is well informed in 1942, the year of the Wannsee Conference!

The chronological sequence of Friedrich breaks into five segments, each characterized by the impossible desire and need for friendship between Friedrich and the narrator, which Nazism made impossible because of Friedrich’s definition as the “Other,” and because of the character of the narrator. The first five chapters, 1929–31, span the childhood of the boys until their first school day. Their friendship begins when the narrator’s mother agrees to baby-sit Friedrich—the boys, both only children, play, eat potato pancakes, and are bathed together. At that point the mother notes: “Well, Fritzchen, you look like a little Jew!” (13), an exclamation many young readers may not be able to interpret. Casual and censored as the remark may be, it defines Friedrich as “Other.”

Authoritarianism in the German family is projected in the chapters “Snow” (1929) and “Grandfather” (1930). While Friedrich and Frau Schneider seize the moment to have fun after a sudden snowfall, the narrator’s mother refuses to join them until her household chores are done, even though her young son begs her to go outside and reports to her the fun he is observing from his window. As a good German housewife she cannot deviate from her routine and see that time out for play with her child and her neighbors might have priority. By the time she is ready, it is too late. Friedrich has by mistake stepped on the snow covered rose bushes of Herr Resch who spoils all joy by yelling “Will you leave my roses in peace, you dirty Jew boy, you!” (18).

The authoritarian maternal grandfather of the narrator is clearly the superego of the family. Dependent on his financial support, father and mother are thwarted from maturing into their own personal authority,
which would tend to be liberal rather than conservatively patriarchal. In his patriarchal authority, the grandfather is obsessive about cleanliness to the extent that he examines “the crosspiece between sole and heel” of his grandson’s shoes for any ingrained dirt. Worse yet, the grandfather is a Christian anti-Semite and, when he hears that the narrator has befriended Friedrich, he announces: “I do not wish the boy to associate with this Jew” (“Ich wünsche nicht, dass der Junge mit diesem Judenbuben verkehrt”) (22). This will become official policy after 1933 through the Nazi institutionalization of anti-Semitism.

Shortly thereafter the narrator participates in the Sabbath with the Schneiders and receives a very different impression of family life. He is impressed by the preparation and serving of the Sabbath meal and by the evening mood where “everything was dipped in red” by the setting sun—clearly a foreshadowing of the destruction of a culture. The spiritual values of the Schneiders and the family intimacy they share through the ancient rite contrast sharply with the lack of such values in the alienated family of the narrator. Richter does not valorize Christianity, which is primarily an absence in his narratives, most likely because of its tradition of anti-Semitism. However, his positive evaluation of the Schneiders’ family life is undercut in the next chapter when they invite the narrator’s family to an amusement park to celebrate the first day of school. Because they cannot afford to spend money as liberally as Herr Schneider, the narrator’s parents feel second rate and Herr Schneider’s kind acts will cause ambivalent feelings in the family.

Each chapter appears as a self-contained episode in a given year, but the point/counterpoint rhythm of attitudes, characters, and actions in the narrative provides continuity and persistent tension in the chronologically driven text. Important years receive several chapters, foremost among which is the pivotal year (Zeitenwende) of 1933. It is the year that Germans are given public license to express their anti-Semitic sentiments. The boycott of Jewish businesses is represented by a stationery shop, which a loyal customer visits in spite of the protesters. Friedrich loudly greeted the owner, Abraham Rosenthal, while the narrator “merely nodded to him” (38).

In 1933, eight-year-old Friedrich is still naïve enough to want to join the Jungvolk against his father’s wishes and accompanies the narrator to the typical Wednesday “club night” (40; Heimabend 37). Shavit critiques this chapter because Friedrich’s desire to join seems to glorify the Hitler Youth, but also because the one “super Nazi” who addresses the youths is such a ludicrous figure that regular and “decent” Germans must be auto-
matically exonerated from being “fanatical believers” (32–33). Friedrich’s wish to belong to the Hitler Youth, to carry the flag and sing marching songs in the street was not that unusual, for Jewish children.15 It does, however, make a difference, if the author describing such a desire is of Jewish or German background. In the case of Richter, Friedrich’s need to belong communicates “the Hitler Youth was irresistible to young-sters, even Jewish youngsters,” thus indirectly excusing the narrator’s unconditional commitment to the movement.

At the meeting, Friedrich, wearing a regulation black scarf tied with a swastika-adorned leather neckerchief ring, loses his innocence about Nazism as he experiences his first personal humiliation. The fanatic Nazi guest speaker announces to the group that “Jews are our affliction” (44); he approaches Friedrich and asks him to repeat the sentence. Friedrich, choked with anxiety, is silent until the Nazi grabs him by the scarf and pulls the ring up to his neck, threatening to choke the boy and lets go only after Friedrich repeats loudly “the Jews are our affliction” (45). When Friedrich leaves the meeting humiliated, the narrator, succumbing to peer pressure, stays with his group. The authorial voice implies no critique of the narrator; instead, critique is deflected to the Nazi speaker whose shrill voice and generally “non-Aryan” appearance make him, along with his slogans, a ludicrously despicable character.

In spite of their humiliations in 1933, the Schneiders are granted an illusion of reprieve when they go to court after Herr Resch had given Herr Schneider an eviction notice “because you are a Jew” (51). The judge decides in their favor, but Friedrich utters so loud a cry that the narrator becomes conscious how “everyone looked at us” because they are associating with Jews, though they are protected by the authority of the court. When the judge assures Friedrich that “nothing can happen to you. That’s why I am here, to see that justice is done,” Friedrich wipes his eyes and says “You, yes” (62). The theme of reprieve continues when Herr Schneider, after his dismissal as a Beamter (a bureaucratic official) at the post office, is given a job at Herschel Meyer’s Department Store, hardly a secure position. Friedrich takes the narrator to visit his father’s place of work where the narrator tells him that his father has joined the Party. Herr Schneider had considered his neighbor his friend, but now his trust begins to crumble.

After teaching a class about the history of Jewish persecution in the diaspora, Friedrich’s and the narrator’s teacher, Herr Neudorf, bids farewell to Friedrich who, as the only Jewish student in the narrator’s class has to leave the school in 1934. Herr Neudorf, is based on Richter’s
own beloved teacher and role model, Phillip Neumann, about whom he writes: “I hope that individual features of this human ideal become clear in the narration [in Friedrich and We Were There]. . . . Whatever I am, I owe in large part to this teacher. I am a Neumann through and through, and to this day I bow down in reverence to my former teacher.”16 If Richter presents the teacher as such an ideal in Friedrich, the attentive reader can only conclude that Richter shares the teacher’s values, for it is unlikely that the author deconstructs his ideal with an ambivalent subtext for a teacher who compromises himself.

On the one hand the teacher dispels prejudice, on the other he maintains it. Though he mentions Roman rule, he asserts: “Because Jews did not believe Jesus to be the true Messiah, because they regarded him as an imposter, like many before him, they crucified him. And to this day people have not forgiven them for this.” Instead of correcting this view, he simply broadens out the topic and concludes with less than moral fortitude: “If today, or tomorrow, you should see Jews being mistreated, reflect on one thing—Jews are human beings, human beings like us” (69–70). The teacher says good-bye to Friedrich and then gives the Nazi salute before the class, who respond in kind.

No doubt a teacher who joined the Party out of opportunism might have given such a lecture to his class, but authorial choice did not need to perpetuate the “Christ killer” myth and its implied argument that Jewish persecution is grounded and explainable through tradition. Herr Neudorf concludes his lecture about Jews with the banality “they are human beings like us” (71), a platitude that cloaks potential evil with the mantle of sentimentality, for the banality confirms the us/them paradigm, which by 1934 had already dehumanized Jews often to the point of making them appear as human simulacra. The assumption is that Jews are so “other” that one might make the mistake of not perceiving them as humans! The perniciousness is heightened here because the banality is uttered by one in authority. Surreptitiously, the conflicted teacher visits Friedrich at his bar mitzvah and offers the gift of a pen to his former pupil.

In such conflicted situations, the characterization of the Nazis tends to be subtly favorable. For example, when the narrator’s father formally tells Herr Schneider about his party membership in 1936, he does so with acute discomfort: “Guiltily, Father looked at the floor. In a whisper, he told Herr Schneider, ‘I have joined the Party.’” He then gives his reasons: “‘Herr Schneider, I have become a member of the NSDAP because I believe it’s of advantage to my family and myself.’” To this Herr Schneider replies: “I understand you very, very well. Perhaps—if I
weren’t a Jew—perhaps I would have acted just like you. But I am a Jew” (78). The father admits that he does disagree with some Party policies, but then every party and its leadership has “its dark side.” Herr Schneider acknowledges: “Unfortunately, I stand in the shadows this time.”

The conversation makes it appear as if the father had joined only recently, but the reader knows that he has been a member since 1933 when the narrator told Herr Schneider about it during the department store visit. By 1936 the Nuremberg Laws (1935), depriving Jews of their citizenship, had been passed. What motivates the father to speak to Herr Schneider now is that he had been to a Party meeting where “one gets to hear a lot about the plans and aims of the leadership, and if one knows how to listen properly, one can add quite a bit besides” (79). On the basis of this, but without revealing any details, he advises Herr Schneider to leave Germany. The latter thanks him for his frankness and then offers his reasons for staying in Germany, reasons that make the reader wonder if he is informed about the anti-Semitic edicts and statutes passed by Nazi Germany since 1933. Although anti-Semitism was public policy by this time, Herr Schneider actually believes that, because it is the government that makes such policies, Jews “don’t have to fear that the people will murder us pitilessly” (80). Moreover, he considers it almost a moral imperative to stay in Germany: “Perhaps if we’ll manage to put an end to our wandering by not seeking flight any more, by learning to suffer, by staying where we are” (81). The father does not contradict him and with a nod consents to look after Herr Schneider’s family “if something should happen to me.”

The reasoning and the motivations of the father and Herr Schneider, while not impossible historically, obfuscate the sociohistorical context to such an extent that they could only be justified in an ironic narrative about human delusions in historical crises. Zohar Shavit severely criticizes this exchange by challenging the logic of the father’s reasoning: if one has the misfortune of not being a Jew, then one has to join the Party in order to get work. If one did not have the misfortune of being a Jew, one would perhaps join the Party (or the Jungvolk, in the case of Friedrich), for implicitly, there is nothing wrong with National Socialism except its anti-Semitism (34). The father, she argues, is almost a hero by giving his advice which, not taken, makes Jews participants in their fate (35). By using the language of innuendo, the politically opportunistic father does Herr Schneider no service by concealing specific dangers in store for German Jews. On his part, Herr Schneider succumbs to wishful thinking
by defining suffering as redemptive and by placing hope in a government that passed the Nuremberg Laws. The rhetoric of this fiction, especially with the last image of the father pressing Herr Schneider’s hand intimately and firmly, conveys to the young reader the message that here are two good men who do not yet know the horrors to come. While it is possible for such an exchange to have taken place in 1938, the fact that both men are metonymic for Germans and Jewish Germans opens so many textual gaps that any pedagogic values of the narrative are annulled. The problem is not one of unreliable narration—in fact, the narrator’s character becomes even more understandable through a context such as this—but of authorial displacements and censorings. Richter, without giving authorial clues to the bitter irony in this chapter, would like the young reader to think that the parent and grandparent generation during the Nazi area were “decent folk” made powerless by Nazism.

The narrator attends Friedrich’s bar mitzvah in 1938. This celebration of coming of age as a Jew provides another occasion for voicing “Jewish attitudes” about persecution. The officiating rabbi explains that “We must continually remind ourselves that the Lord our God has determined this fate. We must not and cannot escape it, not even when we feel we will collapse under it” (91). Here, persecution is not the result of politicized anti-Semitism—by this time all Jews must have the middle names of Israel or Sarah and have their passports marked with “J”—but is the result of the will of God until the day the Messiah comes and leads them to their homeland (91). The eternal scheme of things, therefore, implicitly demands that Jews submit to the tyranny of temporal authority. It is the German obedience to authority, both in religious and political contexts, which is ultimately the most disturbing subtext of this canonical German youth book about Nazism and the persecution of the Jews. There is not even an indirect critique of that subtext where those who submit to the authorities know what is in store for them or their neighbors; they cloak that knowledge through the language of innuendo or fantasy.

The mythologies of anti-Semitic propaganda are acted out in the pogrom of Kristallnacht (November 9–11, 1938). The Nazis had officially decided to exclude Hitler Youths from participation in this “spontaneous event of the people’s anger,” but Richter’s narrator does participate and thus acts in excess of what his commitment to Nazism requires of him. He joins a group, armed with crowbars and heads toward the Jewish apprentices’ home, hardly a residence of wealth and power. He justifies his participation by denying conscious moral choice and affirms instead
the power of the crowd mentality: “All took part . . . I was pulled along with the throng . . . all this was strangely exhilarating . . .” (99–100). His intoxication increases after someone hands him a hammer; he smashes it into a glass bookcase and admits: “I felt so strong! I could have sung I was so drunk with the desire to swing my hammer” (101). Suddenly, and typical for one who participates in mob action, he feels “tired and disgusted” and, without self-recognition, he looks briefly into a mirror on his way out (102). Richter has to implicate his narrator as a perpetrator, but the appeal to irrational impulses, especially when we compare this chapter with the Kristallnacht chapter in *I Was There*, meliorates the narrator’s guilt. When he comes home and realizes that the Schneiders’ apartment has been completely vandalized and that Frau Schneider, who has had a heart attack, is barely alive, he does not assist Friedrich because the Nazis are still in the apartment. He retreats with his mother to weep behind closed doors. The implication is that he would never have participated had he known that “real people” would be affected. It is unclear whether mother and son weep over their moral failure and cowardice or simply because they are confused and afraid. What is clear is that they submit to the terror of Nazi violence, as yet expressed through mob violence, though laws and statutes have already prepared the way for licensed and systematic murder.17

Friedrich and the narrator tenuously maintain their friendship because Friedrich, increasingly isolated, reaches out twice to the narrator. Both try, unsuccessfully, to see the anti-Semitic film *Jud Süss* and Friedrich, again distinguished by his high moral values, tells the narrator that he broke off a friendship with a non-Jewish girl so as not to endanger her. Eventually, the Gestapo picks up Herr Schneider. As he is dragged out of his apartment, Herr Schneider turns to the father with “you were right, Herr . . .” but a blow cuts off the father’s name and preserves his anonymity (134). Friedrich is now alone and homeless. One more time the narrator’s family shelters, feeds, and offers Friedrich a bath, but they comply with the authorities when he is ejected from the air-raid shelter. Friedrich, struggling to survive to the very end is killed by a piece of enemy shrapnel. Herr Resch will repair his “Polycarp,” but Friedrich marked for death by his “difference,” will receive no such restoration. In fact, “his luck that he died *this* way” deflects attention from the ultimate cause of his death and once more exonerates the true perpetrators.
II. Melancholy Anonymity in *I Was There* and *The Time of the Young Soldiers*

In the preliminary stages of the “final solution,” German perpetrators and bystanders understood and rationalized that the increasing persecution and isolation of German Jews manifested the realization of National Socialist ideology, but there never were specific indications or instructions that Jews should be killed. Instead, as Raul Hilberg has put it, the active participants in the “final solution” were given “an authorization to invent.”18 On the other hand, as Shoshana Felman observes, most victims and the victim-survivors of the Shoah did not fathom “the purpose and destination of what they [saw]: overwhelmed by loss and deception, they [were] blind to the significance of what they witness[ed].”19 After the disaster, the victim-survivor may shape the specific fragments of memory into a story that she or he can tell, but the question of what could possibly motivate the perpetrators toward such atrocities remains an opaque point in survivor narratives and retains the past, according to Friedlander, as unredeemable with the point of opaqueness being perhaps a last defense.20 The desire for meaning, be it in the act of bearing witness before a court or in the writing of a narrative, is indefinitely deferred—the rituals of justice do not gratify or assuage, the narrative does not exorcise or liberate, and meaning remains elusive. If they speak or write at all, perpetrators and bystanders retain the point of opaqueness as self-defense, as a rationalization that supplements insight and admission of having acted on impulses inadmissible in civilized contexts. Bystanders, such as the narrators created by Hans Peter Richter, insist on reporting, without interpretation what they saw and thus protect the point of opaqueness in their narratives about Nazism. With compulsive repetitiveness the image of a melancholy self—a narrator without affect, without consciousness and conscience—projects the details of “I was there” or “we were there” while the search for meaning is not only deferred but denied.

Peter Sichrovsky was among the first to examine the effect these denials had on the children whose parents were Nazis. He found that the inevitable absence of the admission of guilt, the failure of the perpetrators to truly bear witness and the preference for silence led to a large extent to the neuroses in the children of Nazis.21 The family of a perpetrator was, according to Eric Santner, used after the war as a “primary site where a damaged self could be respecularized . . . as a sort of looking glass that would magically make one whole again. . . . In this way the second
generation was blackmailed into complicity with the parents’ inability to mourn.” Thus the postwar generations have “inherited not guilt so much as the denial of guilt” (Santner 34). In a sense, this will be the state of the implied reader of Richter’s trilogy whose narrator, though he finds himself progressively in implicating situations, remains exonerated.

To what extent were those Hitler Youths born between 1925–1930 perpetrators? Omer Bartov reminds us in his military history of the Third Reich: “Most of the men who served as the Wehrmacht combat troops during the Second World War were either children or teenagers when Hitler came to power in 1933. An eighteen-year-old soldier in 1943 would have been only eight during the Nazi ‘seizure of power.’ Thus the fighting spearhead of the Third Reich was composed of men who had spent the formative years of their youth under National Socialism.” Aside from the SS, which recruited from the Hitler Youth, the personal oath of allegiance to Adolf Hitler was sworn only by members of the Army and the Hitler Youth (Bartov 118). Exposure to Nazi propaganda, ruthless action and fanatical commitment to die for the Führer in the last weeks of the war, as well as repressive attitudes after the war, implicated the Hitler Youth generation.

Unless they committed specific crimes, all Hitler Youths were automatically de-nazified and exonerated in February 1947. Those few who had the capacity for self-reflection—writers like Günter Grass or Siegfried Lenz come to mind—were haunted, at least with what Karl Jaspers defined as “metaphysical guilt, the solidarity among humans that makes them co-responsible.” When we have lived in a murderous context, we feel guilty in a way not adequately conceivable either legally, politically, or morally: “That I live after such a thing has happened weighs upon me as indelible guilt.” Through innuendo such guilt permeates Richter’s trilogy, but it is not articulated. The narrator can avoid such self-assessment because the narrative’s point of view effects the illusion of personal and immediate involvement in events and actions that preclude the reflective and critical stance made possible through narrative distance. What he saw occurred in the context of National Socialism, but, because he was a “mere” Hitler Youth, the horizon of his seeing was limited. At the same time, however, his epigraphical admission “I believed” is not evident in the text which reveals theabei sein, the being there, of the German title, but not the fanatical faith. Thus the young reader is spared and limited by the narrative; he or she is not stimulated to fantasize about joining the Hitler Youth, but might be left wondering why anyone would want to join it.
The German title *Wir waren dabei* (*We Were There*) subsumes, unlike the English title *I Was There*, the narrator in the collective and defines the Hitler Youth more as fellow-travelers rather than active participants in Nazism. The word *dabei* denotes “being along side of” rather than “there” (*da*), suggesting a peripheral instead of a central focus of participation or observation. Though Friedrich appears again, this sequel focuses on relationship with the peer group where the unnamed narrator is flanked by two opinionated young men, Heinz and Günther. Theirs is a friendship rather than a Kameradschaft, though the potential subversiveness of that relationship remains unexplored.

Heinz, a year older than the other two, is the son of a confirmed Nazi, instrumental in targeting Jewish businesses for the Kristallnacht pogrom. Günther’s father was imprisoned for his communist activities and remains a sullen nonconformist. Günther, too, is an outsider and joins the Hitler Youth only after membership becomes compulsory. Occasionally, he does not hesitate to voice what he thinks. When his youth leader asks why he did not volunteer for the Jungvolk, he replies: “You imprisoned my father because he is against Hitler” (61). His courage actually gains him respect with the leadership and, after Heinz volunteers for the front, he becomes leader of his unit. The tolerance of the youth leader, however, is once more a subtle example of Richter’s subtextual privileging of Nazis, even though the leader’s attitude is historically entirely possible.

Günther, and to some extent the narrator, idealize Heinz, the upper-class Hitler Youth. Heinz is the inspiration and, on the surface, the conscience of the group. In contrast, the narrator exhibits no leadership and blends so vapidly into the group that his father comments:

How long have you been a member of the Jungvolk and the Hitler Youth? And what’s become of you? Heinz! No effort required on his part. He was older than you, and his father had a position in the Party. But even Günther, the son of that—well whatever—he made it to platoon leader! I’m in the Party. And my son? I don’t understand it.

I sat at the table and couldn’t think of an answer. (157)

Richter has his narrator associate with “decent guys” who retain their critical consciousness, in spite of occasional visits by Nazi propagandists. Only the occasional propaganda slogan or anti-Semitic slur clouds the adolescent life of the boys, the chapters “The Jew” and “Kristallnacht,” being the exception. Nevertheless, the narrator persists in his diminished self, usually through introverted and sullen silence.
The dominance of a relentless historic chronology and the drama of historical events also inhibit the growth of self-knowledge and self-criticism. The very facts of history are a welcome barrier to insight. The narrative begins in 1933, the Nazi seizure of power, and ends with 1943, the year of the German defeat at Stalingrad between January 31 and February 2. Each year is projected through three chapters, except for the five chapters for 1942 and the one chapter—“Night”—for 1943. While this careful organization suggests a very precise consciousness of history, the narrative begins in the middle of things and simply terminates without arriving at any interpretations of experience. The narrator/author’s account of the Hitler Youth omits any reference to the seductive fanaticism and theatrics of Nazism; to be a Hitler Youth means to stand and wait, to march to no purpose and to listen to boring propaganda speeches. In 1934, Heinz and the narrator wait for a long time in the hot sun until Hitler arrives and addresses the ten thousand assembled. The narrator joins the waves of “Heil,” but Richter undercuts any “uplift” by focusing on the narrator’s physical discomfort: “I massaged my wrists while shouting ‘Heil!’—‘Heil’” (29, 28).

The narrator’s moral cowardice is very evident in 1935 when a gang from the Jungvolk, to which the narrator belongs, attacks a Jewish boy, who is none other than Friedrich. “From the corner I could see everything” (43, 46), admits the narrator as one of the Hitler Youths tries to draw him into the circle of harassers who are finally stopped by Günther, not yet a Hitler Youth. He and an adult passer-by break up the melee and walk away as three non-conforming outsiders. Even the Hitler Youth Heinz is astonished over the narrator’s cowardice and asks why he vandalized Friedrich’s apartment during Kristallnacht:

“I don’t know,” I confessed. “At first I only looked on, and suddenly I was right in the middle of it all. I don’t know how it happened.”
Heinz sighed. “One could weep over you! Weren’t you once friends with the boy who lives above you?”
I nodded.
“And then you go and smash those people’s things to bits?”
“I didn’t do that!” I protested.
“But you were there!” Heinz accused me. (78–79; 92–93)

Heinz, overhearing an official telephone conversation of his father, knew that the Hitler Youth was not to participate in the pogrom, but chose not to inform his friends. Thus, in spite of his moral posturing toward the narrator, Heinz is more implicated than either the narrator or Günther; he
protects his Nazi father before all and fails intellectually and morally. Nevertheless, he persists in moral superiority over his friends as he challenges Günther: “Who made you do anything against the Jews?”

It takes Günther some time before he can tell how he became involved in the pogrom. He had gone to Abraham Rosenthal’s stationery store, already introduced in Friedrich, to buy a notebook. In anticipation of the pogrom, the owner had closed the store but admitted Günther. The crowd breaks in, yells at Günther “You pig, buying from Jews,” and demands that he throw a jar of chocolates at the feet of Rosenthal whose arms have been “pressed against the shelf as if they were crucifying him.” Günther is kicked and again ordered to throw the jar, but he does so only after “the old man with the goatee nods to me.” Finally, he sees Rosenthal punched to the floor and realizes that there is nothing to be done but to go home.

Günther endures punches and kicks and slaps in the face, but he cooperates only after the victim signals him to do so. He is deeply disturbed by the event and feels guilty, though he is the least implicated of his friends. The narrator himself assesses his participation accurately as an example of crowd mentality; when such a crowd dissolves, the participant usually experiences alienation or denial. It is Heinz who could have prevented his friends from these negative experiences, as Günther realizes: “And you didn’t warn us. . . . And you call yourself a friend?” On such matters the narrator is, as usual, silent. In German the chapter is called “die Kladde” (the rough draft), suggesting that what is euphemistically called “the night of crystal” was a rehearsal for the Holocaust.

Günther always questions the function of the Hitler Youth in the Third Reich: “They will turn us into soldiers.” What sustains him in the Hitler Youth is Heinz, who also admires Günther. When Heinz volunteers for the Wehrmacht at age seventeen, he commits Günther to the Nazi cause by making certain that he will succeed him as leader of the Hitler Youth unit: “They need a leader who will assume responsibility for his orders” (124). Heinz eventually manages to have his two friends join his unit at the eastern front. Here, Günther inadvertently causes Heinz’s death, the “ultimate sacrifice for Führer and Fatherland.” The potential heroic stance is undercut, for the cause of his death is the sleepiness of his two inexperienced Hitler Youth friends. The general staff needs a Russian prisoner and Heinz is ordered to capture him. Günther and the narrator huddle in a lookout and are ordered not to fire. Deeply fatigued, Günther seems asleep; the narrator nudges him and Günther’s machine gun goes off. Heinz is killed in the barrage of machine gun fire that erupts moments
later and traumatizes the two former Hitler Youths. Günther overcomes his terror and “flings himself into the inferno” to rescue Heinz. The narrator remains behind, “dreadfully afraid” (179) and, as usual, avoids feelings of self-implication. The narrator is “there” at the site of violence but commits no violent act directly, yet he cannot exonerate himself.

The title of Richter’s *The Time of the Young Soldiers* is an ironic counterpoint to Werner Altendorf’s battle hymn “Ein junges Volk steht auf” (1934–35), sung by the Hitler Youth in *I Was There* (102, 124):

The youth stands ready, ready for the storm  
Raise the banners high, comrades.  
We can feel our time is near,  
The time of the young soldiers.  
Before us march with tattered flags  
The dead heroes of the young nation,  
Above us move ancestral heroes.  
Germany, Fatherland, we’re on our way!27

Richter displayed nicety of conscience about his indebtedness to Altendorf’s anthem: “The author of the text and composer of the music was a very high-ranking leader of the Hitler Youth. When I borrowed the line from the song, I was not able to locate the owner to the rights of this song. I took the words without permission. But my conscience did not let me rest.” After he eventually discovered that Altendorf committed suicide at the end of the war, he was unable to reach his surviving daughter.28 In his insistence on crediting the author of one of the most seductive Hitler Youth anthems, Richter once more registers subtextually his oppositional attitude toward the official anti-Nazism of West Germany in the 1960s.

*The Time of the Young Soldiers* is written against two myths about the German military: the National Socialist propaganda about the soldier as hero who makes the final sacrifice and the postwar construction of the Wehrmacht’s soldier as a decent man, the latter myth being fully operative at the time the narrative was written. Richter’s narrator is decent only insofar as he does not participate in any mass killings, but he also cooperates in the Wehrmacht myth by erasing almost all references to Nazism. Richter projects for the reader the image of war as a “tedious hell.” Thus *The Time of the Young Soldiers* follows *I Was There* in its de-realization of Nazi propaganda of the heroic and continues the denial of mass atrocities. While the Hitler Youth, the military and the war are not projected as heroic, they are also “not that bad” [my emphasis].
Unlike the previous narratives, *The Time of the Young Soldiers* does not communicate a sense of political and military history as it recalls, episodically, the unnamed narrator’s experience in the Second World War. The narrator, emotionally blocked though occasionally ego-inflated, is here more consonant with the autobiographical motives of the author than were the narrators of the previous two novels. He is, however, not to be identified with Richter, in spite of the latter’s epigraph. Narrative distance is maintained between author and character through the decontextualization of time and place as well as by the absence of any precise definition of political situations or military campaigns. There emerges instead the portrait of a confused and unpleasant young man, alienated from himself and the world. In spite of his flaws, he is a victim of his historical time and place who indefinitely defers any acknowledgement of complicity or guilt. Nazi or Wehrmacht atrocities are not part of this narrative, which barely hints at the existence of concentration camps. In his personalized account of historical participation, Richter projects a melancholy young man as an officer whose supposedly objective narration avoids the construction of the “decent German soldier” myth, but de-realizes himself and the war.

The narrator begins his account as a Hitler Youth who enlists over the objections of his parents, has his arm amputated, is promoted and receives the Iron Cross for his injury, attends an officer training school and at the end of the war leads a platoon of misfits. He has one goal only—to survive. One need only contrast this book with Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* to note how connected the young soldier of the Great War was with friend and foe alike. The narrator of Richter’s tale has neither friends nor comrades, neither faith nor purpose as he stumbles from situation to situation, isolated and alienated. His profound estrangement alienates him even from his own body, as shown in the episode when his arm is amputated under a local anaesthetic:

> It did not hurt; there was a roaring in the brain; there was a trembling in the feet. Everything in me trembled. I screamed like a brute.
> The medical orderly placed his entire weight on my head. I felt someone throwing himself over my legs.
> Suddenly it was over.
> They let me go.
> I thought I was floating.
> A medical aide appeared at the operating table with an old dirty munition box.
> I still saw how the doctor threw my arm into the box. . . . (58, 56)
He objectifies himself, his body’s reactions are involuntary, and, afterward, he registers no emotional response over the loss of his limb. A similar detachment is evident in the episode that immediately follows. Six men, whose room he shared in the hospital, gang-rape the young Russian cleaning woman who “resisted stubbornly. Yet even while defending herself, she took care not to hurt anyone’s injury. The excited heavy breathing in the room was louder than the song sung outside” (59 57). It is not clear if the narrator participated or not, but he certainly did nothing to prevent the assault.

Close to the end of the narrative he objectifies an endless column of emaciated bodies marching along the road by asking: “What is that?” (138). His companion informs him that the concentration camp is being evacuated to prevent the inmates from falling into the hands of the Soviet Army. This is the first and only time that the camps are mentioned in the narrative. The two men “watched for a while and then sought a side road away from the street where the inmates were moving west.” There is silence between the narrator and his companion until the latter remarks that it is no surprise that the inmates are so emaciated: “We, on active duty, get a daily ration . . . that hardly keeps us on our legs. But they . . . were put into the camp as punishment. It’s more than just that they get less grub.—No wonder they look as they do!” (138) The narrator, and by implication the author, has no response to this simplistic, compassionless and uninformed deduction. While this confirmation of an unrelieved ironic mode is not unusual in texts for adults on whose critical discernment the author might rely, it becomes highly problematic in books marketed for the young reader who, in this case, is left with the impression that Holocaust victims received deserved punishment. Richter’s claim that he writes for himself rather than for a specific audience, in spite of the fact that his primary readers are the young, enables him to obscure if not obfuscate from himself and the reader his problematical involvement in the Nazi era.
defines as “a primitive self—wounded, incomplete, empty . . .”30 “One could weep for you,” said Heinz after the pogrom—one could indeed.

It is by means of this voice that Richter works through unredemptive mourning, an objectless grief over a lost “faith” and an alienated self. Richter projects his narrator as a victim who suffered the seductions of fascism and the humiliations of being a soldier in the Second World War, though he never defines himself as a victim, for that would be presumptuous in the face of the immense suffering inflicted by the Nazis on the victims of the Holocaust. The narrator does not perceive himself as the grieving ego that Freud described in “Mourning and Melancholia” as “worthless, incapable of achievement and morally despicable,” nor does he vilify himself and expect himself to be cast out and punished.31 Instead, his sadness expresses itself through a constant state of dis-ease that remains unrelieved, even in the penultimate scene quoted at the beginning of this discussion. For self-protection, the narrator prefers his state of moral and spiritual vacuity; it is the condition of his being. His so-called objective narration of events is that of a nameless and colorless voice, unable to connect with self or world. Only in the evacuation of his own physical waste does the narrator find relief. If the implied reader of this trilogy were to be an adult, Richter could have projected the dreaded non-entity of an alienated man in a mass society, a simulacrum of the truly human. As it is, the implied reader is either a child or young adult who is unlikely to become aware that the author reveals through these narratives the inability to mourn the loss of others and of one’s self. Through the persona of the objective observer, the author projects a fundamental problem of personal and collective self-knowledge in Germany after 1945.

Notes


8. *Friedrich* has been a “bestseller” among youth books about Nazism and the persecution of the Jews. By 1985 it received seven printings in Germany alone. It has been translated into English, Spanish, French, Dutch, Danish, Swedish, and Italian. In the United States it is used widely in intermediate German language instruction. This kind of distribution and its inevitable influence increases the importance of reading Richter’s novel critically.


15. The German-Jewish playwright Peter Weiss admits to being overwhelmed by the overpowering emptiness of Hitler’s speeches—“it was as if we heard God speak in oracles”—and as he and others see a “golden future” in “the storm of joyful shouts about death and self-sacrifice,” Weiss’s stepbrother informs him: “Too bad that you can’t take part in it” and explains that “my father was a Jew.” Peter Weiss, *Abschied von den Eltern* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1964) 86–87; another example can be found in Doris Orgel’s *The Devil in Vienna* where the ten-year-old Jewish girl, Inge Dornenwald, would like to sing the Horst Wessel Lied and, to her parents’ consternation, practices the tune on the piano. (See chapter 5).


17. For an extensive discussion of violence channeled through obedience to authority, as defined in the Milgram experiment, see John P. Sabini and Mary Silver, “Destroying the Innocent with a Clear Conscience: A Sociopsychology of the Holocaust” in Joel E.


27. This battle anthem for the Hitler Youth is free of anti-communist and anti-Semitic ideological content, but resonates with the Horst Wessel Lied, especially through the imperative to raise the flag and the solidarity with the dead. The song was intended as bridge between old and young fighters and meant to convey the idea that being a warrior is a constant that makes death an integral part of life. Heaven and earth are united in one everlasting and gigantic army led by those who died recently while ancestral warrior spirits hover above. In such a setting it is impossible for sons not to follow the call of their heroic forebears. For a thorough discussion of the song see Günter Hartung, Literatur und Ästhetik des deutschen Faschismus: 3 Studien (Cologne: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1984) 232–239 and Hans Jochen Gamm, Der braune Kult (Hamburg: Rütten & Loening, 1962) 16.


29. It is unclear why the English translation omits this one encounter with the victims of the Holocaust. I am, for the convenience of the reader, translating here the entire episode:

Totally unexpected, they came towards us.

We had to clear the street. Slightly elevated, we stood at the roadside. From there we could hardly see the end of the line.

In rows of four or five they dragged themselves along like an endless serpent. Dirty, ragged—all in striped clothing. To the right and left of the emaciated beings the guards with their guns.

No one noted us at the side of the road. The men who were driven along were too exhausted to raise their eyes.

“What is that?” I asked my companion.
He shrugged his shoulders. Then he climbed from our viewpoint towards one of the guards.

"The concentration camp is being evacuated," he explained when he returned. "So that they," he pointed with his thumb towards evacuees, "don’t fall into the hands of the Russians."

We looked at the faces: indifferent, emaciated, starved . . .

"They sure look bad," I said.

My companion nodded. We continued to look for a while, then we found ourselves a road away from the street along which the inmates were moving west.

"Well, we shouldn’t be surprised," my companion started suddenly.

"What?" I asked.

"That these guys from the concentration camp look so bad."

"How come?"

"Well," he replied, "that is a simple calculation: We are on active duty. As our daily ration we get a tenth of army bread and fifty grams of horse sausage. That hardly keeps us on our legs. But they," he pointed back, "they were put into the camp as punishment. It’s more than just that they get less grub.—No wonder they look as they do!" 137–38.


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CHAPTER FOUR

Hitler Youths with Private Values:
Barbara Gehrts’s Don’t Say a Word and
Horst Burger’s Why Were You in the
Hitler Youth?

The narrators of Barbara Gehrts’s Don’t Say a Word (1975) and
Horst Burger’s Why Were You in the Hitler Youth? Four Questions
to My Father (1978) differ in several important ways from the
affectless and passive-aggressive attitudes of the nameless narrator in
Hans Peter Richter’s three autobiographical fictions. Each narrative
depicts a Hitler Youth who, in one way or another, is an alienated and iso-
lated self afflicted by the inability to mourn personal or collective losses.1
However, Gehrts’s Hanna Singelmann and Burger’s Walter Jendrich dis-
tinguish themselves from the Hitler Youth narrator of Richter’s trilogy in
that they have values, primarily ethical and empathic, that conflict with
the public values of the Hitler Youth and, by extension, the Nazi regime.
Though belonging to the Hitler Youth is compulsory for both narrators,
they compromise themselves by their membership, Walter Jendrich more
so than Hanna Singelmann. Both keep their conflict private, but develop
already as young persons the split consciousness typical in oppressive
political contexts where the individual appears to conform but also “cor-
 rects” himself or herself internally in order to retain a sense of self.

Gehrts’s and Burger’s titles indicate from the outset the narrators’ eth-
ical scruples. Don’t Say a Word (Nie wieder ein Wort davon) may suggest
repressive denial of the past, but as an imperative statement it orders a
silence that at the time of the Third Reich was intended to preserve the
narrator’s family. Silence was supposed to keep the terror at bay, a repres-
sion the author could liberate only decades after the war. Even then she
cannot bridge the gaps created by her silence nor can she mourn her trau-
matic experience and loss. “Why were you in the Hitler Youth?” is one of four questions asked by Walter Jendrich’s son. While his true motivation for asking these questions is not made clear, Walter Jendrich has to break the silence about the past and render an account of himself.

Don’t Say a Word and “Why Were You in the Hitler Youth?” Four Questions to My Father were published in a decade of “generational discord,” as Ernestine Schlant defines that time in her study of postwar West German literature. In spite of all democratizing and re-education efforts, argues Michael Schneider, parents continued in the private sphere of the “sanctity of the family” to raise their children with the “age-old Prussian pedagogical maxims which dictated that the child’s will had to be bent or broken, and that the child had to be beaten and punished in order to ‘temper’ it. . . . Fathers were not able to handle any back-talk from their children and felt compelled to silence the children whenever they asserted themselves.” Even twenty or more years after the defeat of Nazi Germany, parents rarely communicated reflectively and critically with their sons or daughters about the Nazi era; it was even rarer that parents implicated themselves.

During this period of generational discord there occurred an ideological crystallization in the younger generation that disabled them from “working through” the collective memory of Nazism and the Holocaust. They attacked instead the parent generation during the decade of 1962–72 as “fascist” and simplified the Holocaust as the ultimate expression of authoritarian willfulness and license. As Schlant points out, the German author’s concern is “never with the Holocaust for its own sake; the emphasis lies on using the Holocaust to accuse the parent.” The Holocaust thus became a rhetorical means to an end. When the American mini-series Holocaust was televised in Germany in 1979, many Germans were forthcoming with their memories. However, because the narrative of the series did not originate in Germany, Germans were able to view this story of the disaster as a narrative from another cultural context, even though the story turned out to be [their] own history.

Barbara Gehrt’s and Horst Burger’s narratives are motivated by their anger or apprehension over how the generation of the 1970s misunderstood or misread the parents who were Hitler Youths during their adolescence. Gehrt’s official motivation to write her autobiographical fiction Don’t Say a Word originated in the outrage she felt when she witnessed a student debate at a German university where left-wing idealists argued that “everything had to be thrown overboard” because parliamentary democracy prevented the realization of socialist dreams. One student
Hitler Youths with Private Values

even claimed that “freedom is merely the absence of force.” Profoundly shocked, Gehrts decided to record her youthful experiences under Nazism. In *Don’t Say a Word*, the brute power of the regime manifests itself in the central event of the story: the execution of the narrator’s (and the author’s) father who is charged with undermining the war effort. *Don’t Say a Word* is a daughter’s defense of her father whom she celebrates and mourns as a hero and martyr. The narrator and her brother, Hannes Singelmann, were, for appearance’s and safety’s sake, encouraged by their parents to conduct themselves as exemplary Hitler Youths. Father and children thus implicated themselves by wearing the uniforms of the regime they rejected, mocked, and attempted to subvert. Through her narrator’s young adult voice, the author feels compelled to write an *apologia* for herself and her beloved father and brother in answer to the aggressive reductions of the younger generation.

Horst Burger’s autobiographical fiction *Why Were You in the Hitler Youth?*, which received an award from the German Socialist Party (SPD) in 1978, three years after Burger committed suicide, has a sixteen-year-old frame narrator who concludes that he understands his father:

> I understand my father now. And his generation seems no longer alien to me. We’ve to put ourselves in their situation. A rough hand raised them. They were taught that fighting, destruction and annihilation were, on a higher level, good and honorable. When the war was over and they came home defeated, there wasn’t any time to brood. They spat into their hands and got to work reconstructing all that the heroic nonsense had smashed and ruined. They had no shoulder to cry on; no one patted them on the back. They were expected to simply function. And they labored in silence. Then, we, the new generation, criticized them for not understanding us. We forgot that the word “understanding” wasn’t part of their vocabulary. They took and gave beatings and forgot how to comfort. We shouldn’t blame them. We should show more understanding.

Nevertheless, the subtext of the narrative makes evident that the son cannot possibly understand his father. This insurmountable gap or rift between the generations is not addressed by the father; rather, it is sublimated by the implied author’s confidence that rational recounting and critical reasoning are sufficient to bridge the gap. The perceptive reader, however, is aware that the frame narrator’s father, Walter Jendrich, is profoundly alienated, both during the immediate postwar years and after he has attempted to communicate with his son.

The intellectual and pedagogical climate of Germany in the 1970s and 1980s was more receptive to Burger’s than to Gehrts’s narrative. The latter was frequently defined as a “girls’ story” and criticized for implying
that Hitler alone was the cause for all Nazi crimes and that, with his death in 1945, the Nazi period was concluded. In contrast, Burger’s narrative was usually read as a major contribution to anti-fascist education. Inger Sannes-Müller, for example, credits Burger for using Brecht’s technique of the “alienation effect” to avoid the problem of uncritical reader identification with the narrator. Instead, she contends that the reader relates to the present situation of the sixteen-year-old frame narrator for whom the history of the father’s generation is incomprehensible. In contrast to what the son tells the reader in the conclusion, Burger aims not toward empathetic understanding but toward a critical understanding of the relationship between personal life and social history that relativizes the son’s naïve assumption that something like the Nazi era could not happen in his generation. Malte Dahrendorf, on the other hand, faults the novel for attempting an objectified narrative form that precludes self-exploration: “Critically viewed, the position of the author, who is figured as Walter Jendrich, is not free of contradictions and, therefore, remains unclear. His narrative at times seems like an apology and a plea for understanding.” Dahrendorf is especially critical of the emotionally and intellectually confused last section of the narrative, but it is precisely that section that unintentionally communicates that the privileged veneer of Marxist reasoning cannot solve the emotional alienation of the narrator.

Both Burger’s and Gehrts’s narratives demonstrate the unconscious social phenomenon of the inability to mourn. The persecution and murder of the Jews and the psychological annihilation of individual personhood under Nazism, the propaganda of “you are nothing; your Volk is everything,” cast Walter Jendrich, always a lukewarm Hitler Youth, into melancholy alienation. He cannot grieve over the traumatic losses and the atrocities of war that he witnessed at the Western front, for to do so would be an affront to the victims of Nazism. Hanna Singelmann, who never bonds emotionally with the Hitler Youth, in spite of the fact that she is a low level leader in the BDM, cannot adequately grieve the loss of her first boyfriend, her father, her brother, and her home in Berlin. Both narrators feel isolated in the end—Jendrich is in a state of alienation and Hanna, shortly before the war ends, escapes the unredeemable world of wartime Berlin.

Burger and Gehrts explicitly and implicitly critique the new generation as they recollect the past in stories that tell “how it was”; but the chasm between experience and the constructions of memory through story cannot be bridged. The facile conclusion by Burger’s narrator shows little understanding while Gehrts’s authorial stance defensively differen-
iates the narrator and her family from the Nazi regime that devastated the Singelmann family. The author and her narrator seem to retreat into a personal intactness akin to the so-called “inner emigration” constructed by those Germans who disapproved of Nazism and yet appeared to adjust to the regime. The message that both author and narrator subtly communicate to the young reader is that “we, as a family, were very special then, so special that you, today, cannot possibly understand us.”

I. The Illusion of Privatism and the Heroic Gesture in Gehrts’s

*Don’t Say a Word*

In the official text of the narrative, Hanna Singelmann’s family name signifies the illusion that the middle-class values of private family life and personal integrity could remain unimpaired in the Third Reich. Although traditional gender roles are maintained by the Singelmanns, the family could generally be classified as democratic and liberal. Even though three family members wear Nazi uniforms, the Singelmanns form among themselves a quasi conspiratorial unit where their anti-Hitler, anti-war, and anti-Nazi attitude is communicated through the sarcastic and supercilious tone characteristically adopted by the minority of well-educated upper-middle-class Germans who were anti-Nazi and defined the regime as “upstart Nazi riff-raff.” Nazism, however, considered the unpoliticized and self-contained family unit a threat to the state and would obviously not tolerate a politicized anti-Nazi family. By encouraging his children to be exemplary Hitler Youths and by donning himself the uniform of an officer of the Reich Air Travel Ministry, Franz Singelmann intends to camouflage his family’s private attitudes while enabling himself to subvert the Nazi war effort.

If Barbara Gehrts had written *Don’t Say a Word* for young readers in the German Democratic Republic rather than for readers in the Federal Republic of Germany, she would and could have been much more explicit about the subversive activities of her father. Erwin Gehrts was a member of the *Rote Kapelle* (the Red Orchestra), a loosely structured group of Catholics, socialists, conservatives, and former communists who infiltrated in Nazi bureaucracies and supplied both the western Allies and the Soviet Union with information about the war. After the reunification of Germany in 1990, the Red Orchestra began to be acknowledged as a resistance group against the Third Reich. Until then the communist members made the group unacceptable to West Germany, though East Germany had always celebrated them as anti-fascists.
Gehrts was eleven years old when Germany invaded the Soviet Union under the code name “Operation Barbarossa.” She knew that she had to be silent about everything that transpired in her parental home and she knew intuitively that her father was critical of the regime and engaged in subversive activities that “undermined the war effort.”14 Erwin Gehrts was arrested on October 9, 1942 with over a hundred members of the Red Orchestra. Of these, thirty men and nineteen women received the death sentence. Gehrts, who was a student and teacher of natural sciences and literature as well as an outstanding fighter pilot during the First World War, described himself as a “conservative revolutionary.” After the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 he was unable to continue his career as a journalist, but given his war record, he eventually received an appointment to the Reich Air Ministry (Reichsluftfahrtsministerium) which enabled him to pass on information. He was tried on January 10, 1943, sentenced to death and guillotined on February 10, 1943. His wife, Erika Gehrts, exerted great efforts for a more lenient sentence. On the evening of February 10, while her daughter was feverishly ill at home, Frau Gehrts attended a production of Beethoven’s Fidelio at the Berlin Opera, unaware of the significance of the hour.

Gehrts clearly pays tribute to her father in Don’t Say a Word, though in 1986 she still had to be circumspect if not silent about his values. To a large extent that silence is not only necessitated by the brutal power of the Nazi regime, but also by the attitudes of Cold War Germany. Her grief over the loss of her father was first inhibited by the stresses of material existence at the end and immediately after the war. However, later, as a student at the University of Freiburg, Gehrts was confronted by a professor of history who accused her that Erwin Gehrts had been a traitor of the fatherland. Gehrts was speechless at that charge and felt deeply ashamed that she could not muster the courage to defend her father on this occasion.15 Her choice to tell her memories through a work of children’s literature may well have enabled her to grieve over her father and protect him and her family by privileging private life over political commitment. She certainly did not feel free until after German reunification to acknowledge her father’s resistance activities against Nazism.

Thus Franz Singelmann appears to be a good servant of the regime and distinguishes himself early in the narrative by his promotion to colonel in the Reich Air Travel Ministry (RLM). Although Gehrts does not mention it, this central office for aviation was established in 1933 by Hermann Goering, two years before Goering became commander in chief of the Luftwaffe (air force). Franz works within the Nazi bureaucracy,
though the reader never learns what he does and what he sabotages. From the outset, there is a necessary communication gap and a conspiracy of silence between Franz and his family. This protective rift controls the reader’s sympathy in favor of Franz and exonerates the author/narrator from critiquing Franz’s ambivalence. Hanna’s brother Hannes trains to be a pilot in the Hitler Youth, but after his father’s execution, he is drafted into the Reich Labor Service where he is mistreated and ostracized. He contracts an ear infection that turns septic and leads to his death by heart failure. Hanna and her mother, whose first name is never mentioned, survive four massive air attacks on Berlin. After their home is destroyed, mother and daughter find refuge in the northern landscape of Schleswig-Holstein where Hanna observes the theater of war from a distance: “The planes sailed high up through the blue like silver fish. Far below the flak exploded—little white clouds that slowly disappeared” (167/157). By 1943 Hanna is eighteen years old and has sustained the loss of Eric, her first love, as well as of her brother and father. The family that thought it could escape into privatism is no more.

The narrative begins in September 1940 and concludes shortly after November 1943. While Hanna’s personal losses overshadow historical disasters, she cannot escape history as the cause of her losses. The deportation of Jewish Germans had already begun in February 1940; the decree ordering all Jews to wear the yellow star was implemented on September 1, 1941. Shortly thereafter Hanna’s friend Ruth Schmidtke commits suicide with her family rather than face imminent deportation. The Germans invade the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941 and are defeated at Stalingrad by February 2, 1943, a time when the terrified and terrorized family awaits the execution of Franz Singelmann, which occurs on February 10, 1943.

To maintain the illusion of privatism in order to support Franz’s subversive efforts, the Singelmanns must master the art of playacting. Franz’s uniform and Frau Singelmann’s increasingly heavy make-up mask what they think and feel. Hanna and, even more, Hannes are aware of the need for the mask. On the one hand the family coheres because of shared values and attitudes, but they also must live inauthentic lives in the world as well as with each other. The subtext of Don’t Say a Word makes it clear that the author is aware of this rift, but she spares the child the complexities of duplicity and inauthenticity through the limitations of her narrator. Hanna’s first person point of view recalls those years as “at that time,” but she is not distant enough from it. Her voice, quite different from the
angry authorial mood of the epilogue, is without self-indulgence or self-pity but also without critique of her family.

This is most evident in Hanna’s portrayal of her father, whose ambiguities she leaves unexplored in favor of acknowledging his heroic production of self for the sake of his surviving family members. Physically, he is a man short of stature who attempts to keep up family morale with the casual lightness of a persistent sense of humor. Hanna projects her father, far removed from Nazism, as a “general in the Red Cavalry,” theatrically mounted on a black stallion (8). The theme of playacting is heightened by the Singelmanns’ attendance at two performances of German classics: Goethe’s *Faust* and Beethoven’s *Fidelio*. These performances, along with Hanna’s dreams and refuge into illness are the vestiges of private life that remain available, and even these are stimulated and caused by the context of Nazi Germany.

Shortly before Franz’s arrest by the Gestapo in the fall of 1942, the whole family attends a production of the first part of *Faust* with Gustav Gründgens as Mephistopheles. Gründgens, a communist sympathizer, switched political allegiances after 1933 and became a celebrated actor in Nazi Germany. Dear to German middle-class sensibility as an object of desire and anxiety, the figure of Faust was mythologized as a quintessential expression of what it means to be German. Faust’s seduction by Mephistopheles, who promises to empower the thinker as a doer on the world stage, has been allegorized as Germany’s seduction by Hitler. The range, scope, beauty, and grandeur of Goethe’s language make this tragedy, which rationalizes and ultimately forgives Faust’s ruthless drive for world power, comforting and acceptable. As Hanna recalls: “By Faust’s first speech, I had forgotten everything around me. And not only that... the events of the past months might never have happened [the death of her first love and the suicide of her Jewish friend] (71). However, Hannes draws her attention to their father who, wrapped in a tense anxious silence, pays no heed to the production.

The second dramatic example is Beethoven’s *Fidelio*, whose ethical and idealistic humanism triumphs over tyranny as a woman liberates her imprisoned husband through her love and courage. This is of course Frau Singelmann’s dearest wish after the arrest, trial, and sentencing of her husband, and raises her efforts to save him to mythic proportions. As she and Hannes watch the opera in the evening of February 10, 1943, they do not know that Franz’s execution has already been carried out at 6 p.m. (122). Hanna stayed home with a high fever and had one of her anticipatory dreams. In the order of their deaths, Hanna first sees Ruth, then Eric...
receding from her. Her father appears and wards her off mournfully with eyes that are “the fixed, lifeless eyes of a dead person” (121). In history, the faithful wife or the loving daughter cannot save the beloved husband or father. Nazi Germany denies the idealistic heroism of Beethoven’s Leonore and her Florestan.

All that is left is the irony of the heroic gesture that Franz Singelmann can extend to his family in attitude and words as he constructs an image of himself, an image that his family can bear to remember. Hanna—and by extension the authorial self—narrates the moment without interpretation or critique, but also without aggrandizement. She depicts her father as the hero who is condemned to die, but whom his family admires. Franz’s self-production sustains them and himself as he frames his loving words through the conventions of the final farewell and the last letter, making the intolerable bearable through familiar language. In their final meeting, Franz speaks as a father to his son:

“. . . And you will act like a man, won’t you? Mother and Hanna will need you very much. You have great responsibility.”
“1 know, Father. You can rely on me.”
“That’s good to hear. Thank you. I am proud of you.”
“I am proud of you, Father. very proud. No matter what happens.”
“That’s also good to hear, my boy. I’ll take it with me into my solitude.”

(110–11)

The rhetorical conventions of Franz’s final letter, which the family receives after his death, sustain what cannot be expressed, but also project Franz as a hero and Christian martyr. He begins with an expression of gratitude for the final family meeting; he thanks them for their love and asks their forgiveness for “having to inflict so much sorrow on you.” He requests, “Honor my memory in spite of this death that brings so much shame on you” and imagines them reading the letter after he has “left the prison walls . . . [and] . . . reached that freedom that will make me smile when, in a little more than an hour, the order for execution is given.” He assures them of his continued presence in spirit and offers his final prayer for their tranquility. In closing, he tells them that he is waiting for the sacrament, blessing them with “God protect you in these difficult years! God protect you in the war, my son” (124). The Christian virtues of gratitude, humility, forgiveness, fortitude, and hope, along with the sacramental “do this in memory of me,” construct Franz Singelmann not merely as a secular hero but also as a martyr consciously engaged in an imitatio Christi. After citing the letter, the narrator simply declares: “We held
the funeral the way Father planned it” (124). While tempering the drama and sentiments of the letter, this sentence confirms Franz’s fashioning of himself as heroic martyr. Hanna does not mention until later (154) that the family never learned what happened to the body, further enhancing the transcendent quality that overlays Franz’s end, and inhibiting the survivor’s ability to mourn.

Lawrence Langer’s argument that heroic memory is hard to erase as “a defamiliarized event is drawn by familiar vocabulary back within the perimeters of heroic memory” applies not only to victims of the Holocaust but also to Gehrts’s narrative.17 The difference is that the production of heroic memory in relation to Holocaust victims and survivors can to some extent be publicly understood and sanctioned as an emotional need, but that the same need must be moderated if not suppressed in nonfictional or fictional narratives by Germans. The “hero” cannot be privileged over and against the millions murdered by Nazi Germany. Nevertheless, in spite of Gehrts’s occasionally humorous portrayal of Franz, the youthful reader will respond to his heroics and be moved. As he leaves, flanked by two SS men, “he turns once more and looks at us. His eyes are very large” (113). Such gestures, needed as an expression of the rage for order in the face of personal disintegration, occur indeed in “real life,” but in texts they are made confluent with textual antecedents that we have come to define as “meaningful.” Franz Singelmann was murdered by the Nazis and, if it were not for Gehrts’s narrative, he would be among the dead about whom no word is said.

The heroic consolation is undercut by the one official document Gehrts includes in Don’t Say a Word: the “Statement of Costs” for Franz Singelmann’s trial and execution sent to his wife by the “Public Prosecutor’s Office in the Court-Martial of the Third Reich.” Frau Singelmann is charged 871 Reichsmark for her husband’s execution, but Hannes intercepts the letter, makes arrangements for payment, and gives the letter to Hanna before he leaves for the Reichs Labor Service. Gehrts inserts this stark document almost without comment. This bill, which places “fee for capital punishment” as just another line item along with “postage” (130), underscores with bureaucratic brutality the absurdity of heroic or transcendent gestures.

Hanna’s feverish flu, Frau Singelmann’s scarlet fever and Hannes’s infection occur at crisis points in the narrative. While these illnesses may be based in the experience of the author, infection becomes a significant image cluster in the text and links the supposedly innocent Singelmann’s with the ethical issues of complicity and unacknowledged guilt. As Susan
Sontag has made clear, “illness is not a metaphor,” but it is nevertheless associated with stereotypes of national character and with punitive or sentimental fantasies. The Nazis used metaphors of infection, especially blood poisoning, in their anti-Semitic propaganda; Gehrts, through the cumulative clustering of infections implies that Nazism “infected” Germans with degrees of complicity. Hanna is least seriously infected, but Hannes’s feverish hallucinations at the end of his life signify not only the seriousness of his illness but also his participation in Nazism, coerced as that might have been:

He slept. He lay completely motionless. Only his breathing fluttered. Then his hands began to move over the bedclothes. “There is a devilishness at work. Turn out the SS! The Soviets are planning something. We need the tanks! Quick, quick, the tanks!” Fever dreams. I held his hands. They trembled. He opened his eyes very wide. They were unusually large. Like Father’s eyes in my dream, large and glowing. He looked at me but seemed not to recognize me. (151)

The two Singelmann men die; though less guilty than the society in which they live, they have implicated themselves.

Hannes’ death does not detract from the heroic imaging of Franz Singelmann. While Franz’s “innocence” is privileged in the narrative precisely because the reader never knows anything specific either about his complicity or his subversive activities, Hannes, far less empowered than his father, is projected as being in the inextricable “midst of things,” and, as a result, feels himself more implicated, even though he consistently remains opposed to the regime. Hanna attempts to withdraw into privatism; she refuses Nazi presence at her brother’s funeral and insists on a Christian burial. Grieving, however, is relegated to a textual blank—neither Hanna nor her mother are shown mourning their dead. Publicly, the author curtails the right of the private self to express grief over personal losses over and against the massive losses in the nightmares of the Third Reich. Privately, Gehrts admitted that “during the four decades after my father’s death, I tried not to have my thoughts about him overshadowed by the memory of how he died. This conscious compartmentalizing enabled me to retain the shining moments of childhood.”

Through image and thought Gehrts reveals to the young reader that she is an ethically conscious writer, but she spares that reader by enabling her to connect emotionally with the narrator’s account of her beloved father’s death; the other horrors of Nazism are, therefore, necessarily marginalized. This is especially the case with the author’s treatment of the persecution of German Jews. Zohar Shavit has severely criticized
Gehrts’s *Don’t Say a Word* in her discussion of “how Jews die” in West German youth literature. She points out that “almost no Jew is murdered by Germans”; instead, suicide is the preferred means of death. Thus, terrible events can be described but leave Germans free of responsibility. When Hanna’s friend Ruth Schmidtke writes in her farewell letter that she and her family will “fall asleep together. My Father prepared for that long ago,” Shavit concludes sardonically: “Well, the Jews go to sleep, and the Germans can continue to sleep with a pure conscience.”21 The historical record, however, supports that Jews did indeed commit suicide, individually or as couples or as families, in anticipation of worse fates that had been prepared for them. Doris Orgel includes one such tragic event in her novel for young readers, *The Devil in Vienna*, a city where Jews committed suicide in unusually large numbers after the German annexation of Austria in 1938.22 At issue, it seems to me, is not so much that Gehrts includes the suicide of a Jewish family in her narrative, but rather that the narrator, who offers the reader a retrospective of her adolescence in the Third Reich, has nothing to say about the persecution of the Jews and the Holocaust. This lack of reflection is, at least subtextually, a problematic textual gap, for the narrator sees herself, at the end of the novel as a solitary adolescent self, removed from the theater of war. The moment for self-reflection in the context of history occurs, but is passed over, perhaps because the memory of family trauma overshadows other horrors.

The Singelmanns have acted kindly toward the one Jewish family with whom they were acquainted, but they never endangered themselves in their furtive gestures of kindness. It is significant that Franz knows not only about anti-Semitic policies but also about the extermination camps (88; *Vernichtungslager* 84). Hanna recalls this when she and her mother return home late after an air raid and see a truck being loaded with people. Both realize “those people were Jews, Jews that they were collecting for evacuation. Yes, it was called ‘evacuation’ when Jews were removed. Where? No one knew exactly. To the East, to work camps it was said. But Father had said: to extermination camps” (88/84). Mother and daughter are ordered to move along, but Frau Singelmann steps up to an elderly couple she knows and says “God keep you.” A policeman pushes her away, shuts the tailgate, and “the truck started, drove off, and disappeared into the darkness. We stood listening long after there was nothing to hear.”

Frau Singelmann’s symbolic gesture has no effect on the fate of the victims: God alone can protect the Jewish couple! This witnessing incident occurs after the narrator has told the reader about Jews wearing the yellow star and about the Schmidtkes’ suicides; it is the last incident that
mentions Jewish persecution. If Hanna knew about extermination camps, then her mother, at best a “decent bystander” here, did as well. There were Jews who survived the war in Berlin because they were assisted and hid by Berliners, as, for example, Inge Deutschkron testifies in her autobiography Outcast: A Jewish Girl in Wartime Berlin. But such assistance is not even a passing thought for the Singelmanns, who, as private and politically special people are removed from other suffering humans, though they themselves are torn asunder by the power of Nazism. The trauma of the Gehrts family is the main subject of Don’t Say a Word. The ostensibly motivation for writing Don’t Say a Word was the author’s outrage over the simplifications of left-wing radicals; the subtext is her outrage over her father’s death and over the cultural climate in West Germany which defines that death as shameful rather than heroic. Gehrts acknowledges the crime of the Holocaust, but in terms of her personal experience and her choice of narrative point of view that crime is, comparatively, at the periphery of her consciousness.

II. Alienation in Horst Burger’s “Why Were You in the Hitler Youth?”

Like Gehrts, Horst Burger needed three decades before he wrote his autobiographical fiction “Why Were You in the Hitler Youth?” Four Questions for My Father. Unlike Gehrts, Burger’s deepest anxiety is the continuance of fascism as an unacknowledged subtext in the sociopolitical fabric of postwar Germany. To transfer James Young’s terms used to describe Holocaust writing, his defenses are his “factually insistent narrative” that rearranges personally experienced trauma along a cultural continuum and thereby both meliorates the memory of violence and acknowledges its enduring power.23 The cultural continuum in Burger’s case is not only the Nazi era and postwar Germany, but also the official ethos of critical analysis, particularly Marxist analysis. However, that ethos is not a sufficient defense against the anxiety generated by the subtext in Why Were You in the Hitler Youth?

It would be a misreading of the narrative to deny affect to the voice of Walter Jendrich who was far more politicized as a Hitler Youth than Hanna Singelmann and more self-consciously alienated from Nazism than the affectless and melancholy narrator of Friedrich and I Was There. Walter Jendrich answers four questions asked by his son: How could the Germans consent to the persecution of the Jews? Why did almost all of you join the Hitler Youth? Why did you enlist in the army at the end of
the war? How did you assess National Socialism after the war? The questions are answered in the third person, though between each answer the point of view reverts to the first person of Jendrich’s son, the unnamed representative of his generation.

There are two rhetorical reasons for these shifts: the first person frame narrative of the son “connects” him with his peers, the youthful readers, while the third person narrative of the father distances, depersonalizes, and generalizes Walter’s Hitler Youth experience for the sake of critical assessment by the reader. In the end, the son neither understands nor connects emotionally with his father. Walter Jendrich, the ostensibly objective and critical narrator, is left with unresolved emotions, memories, and grief. Perhaps a more authentic reason for the displacement of the story into the third person is that the author/narrator cannot emotionally afford to re-collect traumatic memories and the emotions that they have accrued. He must objectify himself in order to tell his story. By means of that objectification Burger also avoids the excuse of victimization and does not claim for himself the status Alfons Heck dramatically appropriates in his autobiography Child of Hitler: “Tragically, now, we are the other part of the Holocaust, the generation burdened with the enormity of Auschwitz. That is our life sentence, for we became the enthusiastic victims of the Führer.”

It is in answer to the fourth question that the objectifying and critical ideological agenda of the narrative most clearly emerges. The time is immediately after the war. Walter Jendrich, the sole survivor of his military unit, treks through the war-torn landscape with Karl Lademann, a concentration camp survivor and a Marxist. Lademann offers the alienated Hitler Youth an explanation of Nazism that Erich Kahler has termed an anonymous criterion of “functional systems,” enabling us to displace, objectify, and deaden our and others’ experiences of pain and loss.

Lademann explains to Walter: “Fascism is a manifestation of capitalism, which Hitler, as we know, never challenged. On the contrary, not a few entrepreneurs will regret his passing because now they will have to deal with the workers directly rather than order them” (127).

To sixteen-year-old Walter such ideas are new: “Hitler and Germany . . . that was for us one and the same thing.” His parents were believers and so were he and his friends, “and now all of a sudden everything is supposed to have been wrong” (129). Walter’s plaintiveness communicates here the Mitscherlichs’ argument that “after the idol has fallen, [the] weak ego again makes itself heard. It confesses to having succumbed to an overwhelming power, but, like a weak child, disclaims any responsi-
ility for the mistaken educational practices of its elders. [Hitler] made it possible for the Germans to believe that their infantile fantasies of omnipotence could be realized.” Heroism, militarism, obedience, and discipline are not natural and true; they must be resisted and critiqued. Walter seems sure of only one thing: “No more war . . . my need for that has been filled. I am for peace.” But Lademann does not let him get away that easily: “. . . you must realize that war is the externalization of internal conflicts. It simply channels into new tracks the tension between rich and poor, between the powerful and the powerless who have been exploited” (129). Resignedly, Lademann concedes: “It would be something at least if people simply got along and didn’t hate each other” (130). It is as if Burger himself does not believe the Marxist argument his character espouses so forcefully. Though Walter is reluctant to accept a new and functional system as a substitute for his lost faith in Nazism, the Marxist explanation offers him—and perhaps also the young reader—a rationale that, logically at least, makes sense.

Subverting the veneer of rational explanation and the seemingly easy converse between father and son is a profound and very un-Marxist pessimism about history. That pessimism generates a pervasive melancholia as well as doubt in the human ability to learn, communicate, and change. The ethos of the Marxist argument is deconstructed in the official text of the narrative when Lademann, the permanently displaced person in post-war Germany, meets Walter again after several years. Together they attend a screening of a Soviet film, which is heckled by former as well as neo-Nazis. That night Lademann hangs himself, presumably because Germany has learned nothing from the Nazi experience. His suicide, which foreshadows that of Horst Burger himself, bears witness to his profound alienation. Instead of becoming a role model, if not the wise man on Walter’s quest, he leaves Walter almost equally alienated: “Walter Jendrich moved through the busy city streets like a sleepwalker . . . What had happened? Nothing could happen that would stop this stream of busyness. Stir up an ant-heap—its industrious inhabitants will not cease to scurry about, work hard and do what they always have done” (152). The functional system has failed; Walter has lost a mentor; his loss and grief have not been worked through.

Insightfully, Walter admits that “guilt feelings are always a question of memory” (7). Unsuccessfully, he seeks to come to terms with his memories and tries not to become like his father who returned from an American POW camp proclaiming that “he was a National Socialist and always would remain one.” Upon hearing this, Walter “suddenly smelled
the stench all around. My God, did I think that way too? How false and vile everything was. From the start. How far would one have to go back to find the source for this mendacity?” (7) The source is to be found in murder motives and their denial of preconscious impulses and their socio-political manipulation as admitted by an adult who remembers the child that he was.

The etiology of Walter’s guilt occurs when he, as a five-year-old, pushed a Jewish boy, Gerhard Wandres, into a river where he drowned. Burger invents here a highly suggestive displacement of German guilt and denial and their resulting inability to mourn. The incident is recollected as a response to Jendrich’s son’s first question: How could the Germans consent to the persecution of the Jews? The year is 1934; President Hindenburg has died on August 2, an event of decisive and symbolic import for Hitler’s seizure of power. The conservative Field Marshal Hindenburg had legitimized Corporal Hitler by appointing him on January 30, 1933 German Chancellor in a coalition government. Germans could delude themselves, therefore, that neither revolution nor a coup d’état was to upset order after the turbulent year of 1932. With the death of the “father figure,” the upstart son assumed the titles of Führer and Reich Chancellor. The rule of traditional law came to an end and was replaced by the triumphant “will to power” that Riefenstahl would celebrate in her film of the Nuremberg Party Rally.

Walter and his friends are aware of the importance of the death of the president and decide to play “Hindenburg’s funeral.” Because he owns a helmet from the Great War, Walter is supposed to act the corpse, but he does not happen to have the helmet with him; perhaps he does not want to play a corpse. Instead, Gerhard Wandres, thought to be “too stupid to play even a corpse,” will be the victim. Gerhard is a pale and weak-looking boy who, in order to gain peer approval, acts the daredevil and climbs beneath the bridge railing. Momentarily alone with him, Walter notices a mole on the boy’s neck, as well as his narrow shoulder, his hitched-up pullover and old-fashioned suspenders:

If I shove him now . . . The thought was quite suddenly there and could not be stifled. Walter felt his heart race. The fear of “you can’t do that” dwindled as he imagined what might be if it happened. The urge to do it became more and more powerful. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply.

He didn’t even hear the splash. When he opened his eyes, Gerhard Wandres had disappeared. (11)
The text is unclear as to whether Walter followed through with his urge or if Gerhard had an accident. What is important is that Walter believes he pushed Gerhard, that “the teasing fantasy had become reality” (11), as did so much of Nazi phantasmagoria.

Little Walter’s murder motive surges up precisely at the moment when Gerhard tries to assert himself. This is intolerable to Walter who comes from an unloving and authoritarian family where he is a nonentity. Gerhard is the reflection of Walter’s weakness. Little Walter knows he “has been bad” and confesses to the father of one of his friends who reassures him: “Gerhard fell into the water. Nobody pushed him. Keep that in mind. . . . Don’t tell the police you pushed him. For it is not true, and we must always tell the truth” (12). Finally, one of his teachers who is also a member of the SS pushes through the crowd and dispels Walter’s fears: “A German boy doesn’t cry . . . and you are a German boy, aren’t you? . . . I know your father. He is all right. Go home now. And don’t be afraid. We’ll fix this” (14). The SS assumes that Walter pushed Gerhard, but licenses the act because Gerhard’s mother is Jewish.

Thus the boy Walter receives here what Raul Hilberg has termed “the authorization to invent” which could lead to “something that was not yet capable of being put into words” and “deal with the problem of not letting the world know what had happened.” 27 Burger’s unconventional image of a five-year-old succumbing to murder motives is nevertheless symptomatic of German guilt and denial. In such a young child the super-ego has, at best, been only partially and vaguely internalized. The child, therefore, cannot be held accountable for the act, much less criminally charged. Walter was not motivated by anti-Semitism; he barely knew that Gerhard was Jewish. He was provoked by his perception of Gerhard’s physical weakness. Subtextually, the scene is a microcosm for the regressive if not infantile attitudes of many Germans who, after 1945, claimed that they did not know “what came over them” when they collaborated with the Nazis who ostensibly seduced them and sanctioned their murderous behavior. Under this guise the child, that is, the average German, is spared and guilt becomes de-realized through textual blanks or repressed memories. Walter, as he matures into his teens, is able to split his consciousness and conscience between the Nazi demands for absolute obedience and political alignment and his personal humane ethical awareness. The latter always enables him at least to recognize that “man’s inhumanity to man” is intrinsically wrong.

On November 10, 1938, one day after the infamous Kristallnacht, Walter witnesses through the basement window of his school how the SS
abuse Jews whose torturous movements remind him of figures “from a Charlie Chaplin film” (23). The ten-year-old trembles as he holds on to the grating over the window:

He suffered with those being abused in the basement. At the same time he resisted the reality of what he saw. It seemed as if he were at the movies. What he saw could not be real, could not be true. He felt for these people the way we feel for the victims and oppressed in a film. Cruelty can only be tolerated if it is not true. . . . (23)

At this moment his memory of Gerhard Wandres’s end overlays what he witnesses and he decides that it could not have happened because that would be unbearable: “The SS man told him it wasn’t that bad. . . . Nobody died. No human being. Only a Jew” (24). The five-year-old does not draw the conclusion “a Jew is not a human being,” but five years later the older boy reveals how much he has internalized Nazi propaganda in spite of his compassionate nature. The narrator at first does not perceive the human beings in the basement as Jews; they are “these people” who are the victims of torturers, among whom, the SS man who five years earlier assuaged his conscience. The school principal, catching Walter at the window, “corrects” his vision:

I will help you see things correctly. . . . I don’t deny they are exercising them roughly but heartily in the basement gym. But these are not poor and pitiful people, as you seem to think. You must realize clearly: the SA and SS have arrested a few Jewish petty thieves and criminals. Now they are being taught that the Germans no longer are afraid of them. (25)

Walter has to promise that he will tell no one what he saw. The youngster is enclosed in the complicity of silence: “You are a German and can keep your yap shut.”

Walter remains suspect among the ruffians of the Hitler Youth and has to prove himself by accompanying their leader to the Wandres’s book bindery in order to smash in the windows of the store. The leader first knocks against the window and runs when Frau Wandres timidly peeks out from behind the curtain: “Walter also wanted to take off, but something in him resisted the impulse to simply run away” (32). The rowdies return and he witnesses the smashing of the window; ashamed he lies awake that night:

He could not erase the care-worn face of the woman at the window. Her intimidated posture, her sad worried look, her resounding silence. “Jews are also
human,” mother said sometimes, without being aware of the thoughtlessness behind her remark. There was such a disgusting arrogance in that, as if she had said: “To be sure Jews are far below us as abominable living things, but somehow they are an inevitable part of nature.” How could the civilized world even raise the question if Jews are human or not? (34)

The next day, Walter decides to pay for the window and returns to the bindery only to witness the emptying of the Wandres’s household. He makes inquiries and is suspected of somehow belonging to the Wandres by SS supervisor:

“Are you one of them? Are you perhaps related to them?”

Only after Walter denied this, did the SS become more approachable: “They were all rounded up for transport this morning,” he explained and grinned. “They’ll probably go on a big trip. It’s doubtful if they ever come back.”

Walter listened as if from a big distance. Something crumbled inside of him, as if the man had said: they are all dead and buried somewhere. He had no idea how close he was to the truth. (36)

Walter’s conscience and complicity collide. Burger’s subtle allusion to the betrayal of Jesus by Peter in response to the question “Are you one of them?” intensifies his moral failing. Something cracks in him, but, unlike Peter, he cannot weep over another’s suffering and his own moral cowardice, for German boys “keep their yap shut” and do not cry. He will not think about Jews again until he hears the concentration camp recounts of Karl Lademann.

In response to his son’s question if adults knew how youth was being manipulated by the Nazis, Walter’s split consciousness is again evident:

If the boys get blisters on their feet while marching and hoarse voices through singing, they at least won’t have time for stupid ideas. Anyhow, that was the primary concern of the Nazis—someone might get stupid ideas. Those who thought otherwise and spoke out were arrested. The system they invented took people in hand: the Führerprinzip and the conspiratorial community. It began with the Hitler Youth. . . . [That] community made you strong. It had to be because, as we were told, the world was full of enemies. “You are nothing, your Volk is everything,” that was the key slogan. . . . (37)

Burger focuses on the political alignment, the Gleichschaltung of the Hitler Youth as Staatsjugend and on its eventual military alignment. Though Walter admits that youth had a need to belong (58), there is neither glamour nor heroism in his memory of the Hitler Youth. As an adult he realizes that his deformation began at age nine when he could not wait
to join the Hitler Youth. The inflationary propaganda of Nazism had taken effect:

When one is nine years old, the word ‘Germany’ sounds grand, especially when it is constantly shouted out, sung about, and declaimed. It was a grand old time, we were proud to be Germans . . . Hail to the Führer and the Party. They shaped us up and taught the undertakers of the Reich—the wheelers and dealers, the communists and socialists and, especially the Jews—a thing or two. (15)

In the final analysis, however, Walter exonerates the Hitler Youth: “Youth was misused. Young people were trained to fight for an evil cause, but realized this only after it was too late” (38). Reductively, he concludes that we made “one crucial mistake when we ‘treated’ ourselves to Hitler” (70). Once again Burger and the narrator demonize the once deified Hitler as the sole cause and convenient scapegoat for the chaos unleashed by Germany. In early 1945 he and his friends still believe that only in the army could they find the “truest of the remaining true” (71). At the end of the war, Walter, the Hitler Youth soldier, is no longer interested in being a hero; he only wants to survive. Earlier he could still pray: “If you exist, Lord, help me! Make me come out of this alive. And I’ll never ask for anything else” (96). Burger alludes here to the prayer of Clovis in 486 when this Frankish king, facing the Roman and German armies, prayed: “Jesus Christ, if Thou grants me victory, I will believe in Thee,” a bargain that once was a touchstone in German history lessons.

Walter not only rejects the Christian tradition of the hero, but also the charisma of the tragic Homeric hero, Achilles, who, doomed to the underworld, denies his desire for fame and admits to Odysseus that he would rather be a poor man’s slave than a shade in Hades. Walter, too, does not want to die: “He was no hero. . . . How could he have wanted to participate in this war? What did the war mean to him? Better to lead the most miserable life than to die, even as a hero. What idiots they had been to join this murderous adventure” (96–97). It is doubtful whether Walter could reflect in this fashion during the heat of combat; rather, his thoughts are post-experience intellections that explain the urge for survival he felt as a Hitler Youth soldier. It is the experiences of war, not the thoughts about war, that traumatize him; but, the experience, too, depends on metaphor and simile to bridge the abyss between experience and reflection, as, for example, in the following memory of the time he approached the shattered body of one of his comrades:
He forced his memory to take in every detail with the precision of a camera in order not to forget the gaping skull, its contents dumped into the helmet like into a pot, the lopped shoulder joint gleaming through the blood vessels and nerve strands, the curiously twisted hip and, then, surprisingly and weird, the completely sound legs in dusty boots stretched out in the grass as if their owner had lain down for a short nap. (110)

At the opening of the fourth section of the narrative, young Jendrich asks his father why the Germans, who fought for the Third Reich to the last hour, denied the Führer after the war and pretended that they had nothing to do with Nazism (121). Walter admits that memories of the Third Reich were repressed by the “simple trick” of defining everything in terms of “fulfillment of duty” (122). Young Jendrich notes that Walter has learned from the past, though he cannot liberate himself from it and, as a result, feels somewhat ill at ease with the values of the postwar generation. Walter replies that the shock of defeat in 1945 could have been overcome if what happened had been confronted authentically. His generation, however, did not want to be reminded of it. Walter’s reply subverts the authorial intent of Why Were You in the Hitler Youth? Suddenly, the emotional subtext of the narrative is privileged and undercuts the stated values of critical thought and self-examination:

What was once important no longer means anything to you. . . . Today it seems as if there never was greatness in history and courage and readiness to sacrifice and carry out one’s duties. The reason this means nothing to you is that you relate such values to Hitler. But I can’t throw those traditional values overboard and merge into a petty bourgeois consumerism which demands no obligation and has everyone focus only on his advantage. You may call it individualism. But sometimes it seems to me that it’s just another form of inhumanity. (123)

Walter appears to forget that former Nazis and in-the-know-bystanders were instrumental in constructing the consumer society of postwar Germany, the “economic miracle” that made everything “well again.” He also has forgotten the deeper level of his split consciousness, the traditional values that were his before these were redefined and corrupted by the propaganda of the Third Reich. What, unfortunately, emerges here is a vague and conservative nostalgia accompanied by the tendency to blame the new generation. Father and son, therefore, not only do not understand each other; they are at the verge of “generational discord.”

This last section returns once more to the central ethical issue of Jews and Nazis in the powerful retelling of a concentration camp incident The communist survivor, Karl Lademann, tells the story of how one prisoner
confronted Scharführer Veske, an SS of the lowest rank. When two criminals taunt a Jewish political inmate in order to curry favor with Veske, the Jew, a skilled boxer, fights his harassers. Veske decides that the fight was fair, but the Jew can only briefly enjoy his new status. When he lines up at roll call with dirty boots, Veske loses control: “I’ll tell you what you are . . . you’re a malcontent, a revolutionary. You want to bring chaos into this camp.” He demands that another inmate put the offender’s boots into the latrine and then orders him to “lick them so clean that they’ll shine like a monkey’s ass.” Pale, but in control, the inmate removes his boots, but when Veske orders him to lie down and practice licking, he refuses and Veske shatters his skull with his side-arm, beating the victim long after he is dead (137). Walter, who listens intently to this story, remembers suddenly the scene in his school basement; nevertheless, he protests, “we didn’t really know what happened in concentration camps.” Lademann concludes his story by remembering how Veske’s rage for order grew so perverse that he straightened out the barbs of the barbed wire fence, forgetting that at night the current would be turned on (140).

Lademann’s description of Veske and the Jew goes beyond Marxism. On the licensed killing ground of the camp Veske enacts his raison d’être: “I kill; therefore, I exist. His fanatical fear of disorder fuses with his rage for order in the grotesque and anally aggressive imagery of the excremental (death, disorder, latrine), boot (rigidity, discipline, violence), “licked clean” (order and humiliation), “monkey’s ass”—the purified anus of the ape of God, the anus mundi of the concentrationary universe, the licensed end of the “granite-like discipline” of the Nazis. The episode is one of the strongest and most confrontational in literature for young readers about Nazism. Part of its power comes from the possibility that the murder motives of the child Walter could well have evolved into the atrocities of Veske.

While young Jendrich’s facile concluding remarks about understanding the world of the fathers may be accepted by some young readers as an enabling rhetoric, the more authentic but unresolved conclusion is given by Walter in his third person narrative. After he has learned that Lademann has hanged himself, Walter walks through the city in a highly self-aware state of melancholy. He picks up a newspaper and reads about the disruption of the showing of the Soviet film: “Citizens protest against communist propaganda! . . . As could be ascertained from our sources, the county administration is considering a ban of all organizations which undermine our constitution and threaten the peace and order of our country.” For Lademann, Jendrich, and Burger nothing has changed: the mur-
der motives the Third Reich licensed lie dormant now but wait for the moment to manifest themselves again.

* * *

Writing out of anguished and personal memory, both Gehrts and Burger leave their young reader with the image of the reflective, solitary, youthful witness who, by wearing the uniform of the Hitler Youth, became to varying degrees a culpable participant in the nightmare of the Third Reich. Hanna and Walter each have a scrupulous conscience that makes both of them superior to the unreflective melancholy self of Richter’s narrator. However, their ethical scruples and sensibilities intensify their anguish as they clash with the brute power the Nazi state perpetrated against the individual whose personal conscience, resisting the dictum “you are nothing, your Volk is everything,” would be sufficient to make her or him suspect in the eyes of the total state engaged in total war. Had Hanna or Walter been adolescents in the Great War of 1914–1918, they might have been able to grieve their losses as private individuals, but as children of the Hitler Youth that grief had to be stifled.

In spite of their consciousness and conscience, Gehrts and Burger seem to be among those German authors who feel that it is not their right to represent the persecution murder of the Jews of Germany in any other way than through the limited perceptions of their narrators. This reduces the Holocaust to a shadowy but ominous presence in their narratives and simultaneously privileges the typical attitudes and limitations of so-called “decent Germans.” Hanna’s and her family’s privatism and Walter’s unsuccessful attempt to maintain his consciousness and conscience in the experience of violent history place both narratives in the context of post-war German literature’s continuous struggle with its disastrous past. Perhaps the disaster of Nazism and the horror of the Holocaust must, in the final analysis, remain subjects that no story can “come to terms” with, for such “terms” would in one way or another give meaning to a disaster that never, in any way, can have meaning. Instead, the desired closure to the “working through” of guilt and grief must be indefinitely deferred to the more humble and persistent work of memory and consciousness, which, to their credit, resist an ethically unacceptable closure.

Notes


5. Schlant 96.


7. Barbara Gehrts, *Don’t Say a Word*, Trans. Elizabeth D. Crawford (New York: Macmillan, 1986) 168–69; German *Nie wieder ein Wort davon* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1975) 158. Textual references to the English and German version will henceforth be given in the text. Note: I have retained the narrator’s name as Hanna, rather than the “Anna” of the translator.


15. Dertinger 217.

16. Hannes’ life and death are based on the fate of Gehrts’s stepbrother, Hans-Erwin, who was five years older than Barbara. He died of sepsis somewhere in Poland during his time in the Reich Labor Service. Because he was the son of an enemy of the fatherland, adequate medical care was not provided (Dertinger 214).


19. One might speculate over a possible allusion in the death of Hannes to the death of Joachim, Hans Castorp’s cousin in Thomas Mann’s *Magic Mountain*. The gesture of raking the bed covers can be found in both scenes. As a university student, Gehrts had studied Thomas Mann. Joachim is free of the political ambiguities that imbue Hannes;
Joachim goes to his death from tuberculosis under the dictum of Goethe’s Valentin in *Faust*: “A soldier and brave.”

20. Dertinger 216.


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Doris Orgel was reluctant to write *The Devil in Vienna*, a narrative she later considered “probably the central book of my career.” Born in 1929 in Vienna, she was nine years old when Hitler’s army crossed the border on March 11, 1938 and annexed Austria to the Third Reich in what was euphemistically called the *Anschluss*. She remembers how Hitler’s official arrival licensed the public abuse of Vienna’s Jews, and while this frightened her, she was not surprised because “it was not so different from the way I had imagined the world right along” (196). Her childhood reading had already introduced her to the notion that “being white meant being superior to other races, but that Jews, although being white, were inferior and to be despised” (196). As a child reader of the Wild West stories of Karl May, she would have been exposed to May’s racism and anti-Semitism, but also to the blood brotherhood ritual between Old Shatterhand and his Apache friend. In childlike imitation of such magic and with a touch of feminist revisionism, the Jewish girl Inge Dornenwald and the Hitler Youth girl Lieselotte Vessely bond themselves in blood sisterly love by drinking a few drops of each other’s blood in a glass of cooking wine in *The Devil in Vienna*. Needless to say, this childish ritual, expressive of genuine affection and love, would have been an anathema to any National Socialist.

Doris Orgel’s grandfather was jeered at and publicly humiliated by the Nazis who forced him and others to use toothbrushes to scrub off anti-Nazi slogans on walls and sidewalks. Her father was dismissed at work because he was Jewish and nine-year-old Doris was dismissed from her
third grade class along with seven Jewish classmates. The family managed to escape Vienna by August 1938, but only later did young Doris realize that “we got out by a hair’s breadth.” Orgel does not think of her family and herself as “survivors” and feels that this word belongs to those who suffered imprisonment in concentration camps. Nevertheless, as is the case with most survivors, it took her a long time to shape her memories into a story that could be told. For many years, even in the company of other refugees, “we never mentioned anything about our lives before coming to America.” The taunts and insults suffered in Nazi Vienna still burdened her and others with the silent shame they felt as children (1995; 204). Around 1960, Ursula Nordstrom of Harper and Row, who had already edited two of her books, asked: “When are you going to write about being a Jewish child in Vienna, and how you got out?” (1995; 207). *The Devil in Vienna* was published eighteen years later. The diary of thirteen-year-old Inge Dornenwald, a composite of her older sister and herself, became for Orgel the mode that could contain her painful memories.

Inge’s intelligence, imagination, and precociousness enable Orgel to accurately contextualize the narrative politically and historically, but the young reader will respond primarily to Inge’s and Lieselotte’s efforts to maintain their friendship in difficult times. That same reader might also become aware of how Inge grows through her sense of being Jewish, how she suffers from anti-Semitism and how she also knows that she is not the person described by the Nazis. The reader may also empathize with Lieselotte’s struggle to maintain her personal and religious values and her friendship with Inge, in spite of the pressures to align herself politically as a Hitler Youth Jungmädel in the Federation of German Girls (BDM). The politically and historically astute reader, however, realizes that history will destroy that friendship and negate the implicit authorial desire that such a human relationship could transcend historical vicissitudes.

Although Orgel relates to the reader the essential historical events occurring between February 10 and March 30, 1938, the nightmare of history that began for Vienna’s Jews during the early days of the Anschluss remains largely an authorial subtext, which is, however, unmistakably the foundation of Inge’s diary entries. Inge never sees Hitler, but he is a very real presence for her in Vienna. Orgel, through Inge, does not demonize, but other characters do so to an extent that the young reader will conclude that Hitler is the “Devil in Vienna,” a trope that spares the young reader the cruel reality of history. Orgel’s narrative exhibits that special relationship between text and subtext so characteristic of all narratives about Nazism, Judeophobia, and the Holocaust. Through the confines of a
young girl’s diary, Orgel establishes narrative distance between herself, the memories that haunt her, and her acquired adult knowledge of history. The diary’s limitations offer the young reader a story that can be told about the time when most Austrians welcomed Hitler to Vienna with great enthusiasm and when Viennese anti-Semitism was licensed in a reign of terror against Viennese Jews in the spring of 1938.

In support of her argument that literary and aesthetic values should take precedence over pedagogic goals in youth literature about National Socialism, Claudia Maria Toll highlights Orgel’s *The Devil in Vienna* as exemplary. She argues that Orgel not only respects the young reader’s maturity by avoiding a hortatory or instructive tone, but also by offering a multi-leveled narrative perspective. As Inge Dornenwald writes about events occurring between February 10 and March 31, 1938, she also reflects on early childhood experiences, presents entire conversations in direct speech, and copies into her diary, without comments, Lieselotte’s letters about her experiences in the Hitler Youth. The literary value of the narrative, argues Toll, is brought out by the fact that Orgel’s distinguishes itself from other youth narratives about this subject in that it problematizes the act of writing about Nazism and the persecution of the Jews. Inge has already grasped that language is ambivalent and multi-leveled and at times does not suffice to express the inexpressible (1986 68): 4

When confronted with true unbearableness, language fails. Although she never turns mute, Inge occasionally and consciously surrenders conceptual precision and resigns herself to casual discourse simply because she cannot express herself any better. But she still attempts to articulate, as when she writes: “Going home by myself, I had awful thoughts: Like that the hole in they smashed in Herr Fried’s store window is connected with the hole in the world I thought I was just making up as a way of writing how I felt on Saturday, and so that hole is just as real. This doesn’t sound as though it makes sense, but it does to me.”

Toll concludes that what for Inge is at first a metaphor, describing her psychological reaction to trauma, becomes realized in the smashed window of Nazi aggression.

The narrative is titled *The Devil in Vienna*, not *The Story of a Friendship*, for Inge’s and Lieselotte’s friendship can only be contained in a book (240). No matter how much the author focuses on the narrator, it is the political and historical context that defines Inge’s life. Something has intruded into Vienna, something that will destroy the comfortable middle-class life of the Dornenwalds and the friendship between the two girls. The intruder, who is never depicted directly, is foreshadowed
through the metonymy of the Devil, but Inge, who cannot bring herself to write or say “Hitler is in Vienna,” stops using the metonymy when historical reality manifests itself. It is Mitzi, the Dornenwald’s maid, who, prone to the superstitions of folklore, utters for the last time the decisive trope on March 14: “Today comes the Devil to Vienna” (133). Orgel’s subtext makes it clear that such tropological thinking is atavistic and prevents us from astute critical thought about the trauma human beings inflict on other human beings in political and military history. My discussion will focus on how the narrative moves from and between trope and historical reality and how that context shapes Inge, Lieselotte, and the world both girls inhabit. As children they both believed in the devil; as adolescents they experience how human evil begins to tear apart their friendship and their world. In the course of the narrative, Inge realizes herself as an individual, while Lieselotte, though she struggles valiantly against the pressures to conform as a politically coordinated Hitler Youth girl, is bound to blend into a propagandized mass society. If the latter moves toward a deeply ironic integration, the former escapes from the society that cannot be rescued from itself. The ground for the struggle of both girls is history, a context that will make their friendship impossible.

I. The Fears, Fascinations, and Temptations of Inge Dornenwald

When Inge begins her diary on Thursday, February 11, the weekend of her thirteenth birthday, she is home alone and experiences “writer’s block.” She has been assigned to write on the topic “My Best Friend” with her “real and true feelings” (5), but her best friend Lieselotte moved to Munich three months earlier where Herr Vessely, a fanatic Nazi, was assigned to work for the party. Moreover, Inge must not write about her true friend because the friendship has already been forbidden by both sets of parents. Though Inge has received one letter from Lieselotte, she experiences a deep fear: “I don’t know whether she got my letter, or why she didn’t write me again, or whether she has changed, or how. It’s possible, it’s even probable, she isn’t my friend anymore. I’m more scared of that than the Devil—in whom of course I don’t believe anymore” (10). Fear, Lieselotte, and the Devil are thus connected from the beginning.

The word “scared” always triggers the memory of the first time she felt that emotion as a six-year-old in the forbidden underground viaduct where she encountered the “Devil” after hearing of him in legends about St. Stephen’s Cathedral. While still struggling with the alphabet, she had written her first story about the mischief the Devil wrought in Vienna.
As a child, Inge internalized the legendary image of the Devil as a repository for “badness,” but the adolescent Inge senses that losing Lieselotte to an anti-Semitic ideology is far more scary because that loss means that Inge necessarily would be as “Other” to her best friend as the devil is to the culture in general.

Inge recalls how she entered the dark viaduct, heard a match struck, and knew she saw the devil because “his eyebrows seem to slant weirdly devilishly up.” Her encounter in the darkness of the viaduct foreshadows not only the devil Hitler, but also Nazi propaganda depictions of “the Jew.” The “Devil” invites her with a “Come here, little girl” and then orders “Look,” as he exposes himself to her and she sees “a stick or something stuck straight out from his unbuttoned pants” (13). Inge knew at the time what that “something” was and knew that he wanted her to touch it. As a thirteen-year-old she wonders why she still cannot use the appropriate word (13). As a child, she ran in panic out of the viaduct, relieved to find Lieselotte and her brother, Heinz, outside. Heinz defuses Inge’s fright: “Did old Kaugummi [chewing gum] Karl open his pants? Did he show you his Schwanz [tail]?” (14). Heinz, too, uses a trope for penis, but his somewhat coarse humor eases Inge’s fright.

Though she eventually has her first crush on a young family friend, Inge’s early childhood memories establish a subtextual association between sexuality, seduction, and dangerous political power. In 1938, Inge’s grandfather encourages her to look at the anti-Semitic slogans on the walls and even the demonized and pornographic images of Jews in der Stürmer, for to be informed becomes a survival strategy. Nazism, however, was also seductive in its grasping (erfassen) and political alignment of youth through an emotional rush that, quite intentionally, supplemented youthful sexual energy. Inge’s intimacy with Hitler Mädel Lieselotte becomes a life-threatening intimacy that must be forbidden, but the lies and maneuvers both girls exercise as they plan their trysts resonate with the strategies of secret love. On her birthday, Inge panics over the prospect of losing Lieselotte; she watches the telephone, hoping that Lieselotte will call from Munich: “Then my mind went blank. As blank as the page before me, as the big empty desert must be. I felt I was in a desert too—hot, and my lips and throat were dry. And I thought, Lieselotte’s different now, she doesn’t care about me anymore, she doesn’t want to know me” (70). Inge, as a Jewish girl, is by definition aligned with the Nazi caricature of “the Jew” as satanic seducer. It is unlikely that any of this becomes obvious to the young reader, but this subtext in part explains why it took Orgel such a long time to shape her
memories through the genre of a girl’s story and at the same time balance the ambivalences of “fascinating fascism”7 held even for a Jewish girl on the threshold of rebellious adolescence.

In its next manifestation the trope of the “Devil in Vienna” reveals mythic power. Inge recalls how she and Lieselotte stood outside St. Stephen’s Cathedral and intimidated Mitzi by telling her the legend of how the second steeple came to be shorter because the builder sold himself to the Devil, who eventually manifested himself triumphantly as a “huge gigantic shape with a green vest and horns . . . seen hovering over the shambles” [of the collapsed tower] (22–24). Frightened, Mitzi accepted the story as truth, but as the three entered the cathedral, Inge wished she, too, could have dipped her hand into the holy water. Had she been able to do so, she and Lieselotte might not have succumbed to naughty and uncontrollable laughter when both saw a pretentious woman scratching herself on the behind (26). Inge still feels shame over her behavior and continues to wonder “what possessed us” (26) as she exorcises these feelings by telling a story in which she is someone who has no recourse to names and rituals that may protect her from the Devil who “tickled the girl’s funny bone (which people think is near the elbow but is actually somewhere else, only the Devil knows where)” (29). Her laughter on seeing the woman scratch her buttocks suggests again an uneasy sexual curiosity, but Inge also suggests that if she were not Jewish, she could have crossed herself with holy water and thereby prevented her irrepressible response (27). She defines herself as outsider; it does not matter to her that Lieselotte also misbehaved in a sacred place. She feels at fault and the incident becomes her myth of the origin of “Otherness,” a state that will become official policy once the Nazis seize political control of Vienna and demonize “the Jew as devil.” By definition, Inge is in “league with the devil,” the father of lies, as she continues her friendship with Lieselotte in spite of her parents’ prohibition. Nevertheless, her “fall” leads her not only to maturation, but also eventually facilitates the rescue of the Dornenwald family.

Inge must overcome her attraction to Catholicism and to Nazis—both generated by her need to belong—and accept herself as a Jewish girl in a dangerous time. When Inge was ten years old, Lieselotte taught her the seductive tune and words of the “Horst Wessel Lied,” the Nazi anthem, that followed the national anthem at every official occasion in the Third Reich. Doris Orgel translates the first stanza as follows:
Doris Orgel's The Devil in Vienna

Raise high the flag,
Close fast and firm the ranks,
SA, march on,
With calm and steadfast tread!
Our comrades who were shot in red-front reaction,
March in spirit side by side with us. (48)

Inge remembers on February 12 how “the words sounded noble. And the melody stirred up feelings in me I didn’t know I could have, such as wanting to march also and being sorry for the ‘comrades who were shot in the red-front reaction,’ whatever that was. I pictured their shirt fronts getting red with blood” (49). Again, Inge cannot explain these feelings that make her long to be swept away in the rush of a fanatic and purposeful mass demonstration. Orgel projects ten-year-old Inge as hovering between childhood—her misreading/reading of “red-front reaction” as bloody shirt fronts—and the more critically thinking adolescent who, in 1938, is no longer “ignorant about world events” (48).

As Lieselotte teaches her the Nazi song, Inge the child fantasizes herself singing it in a crowd that welcomes Hitler who singles her out because of her beautiful voice. When she tells him her name, he frowns and asks, “Isn’t that a Jewish Name?” Inge confirms her identity and offers proof with her Mogen David pendant. “Hitler clasps his hand to his forehead and exclaims, ‘I have been wrong about the Jews!’ And from then on he likes Jews and treats them like everybody else—because of me!” (49) In her daydream Inge is in control; she can proclaim her Jewishness in the crowd and convert Hitler into a philosemite. The “devil” has been reformed; the little girl is his redeemer.8 The underlying pathos of this dream is the magical childish reasoning so typical of children in distress. Inge’s fantasy about her excellent singing of a Nazi street fighters’ song enables her to stop anti-Semitism with a single voice and thus make the world whole. When she later picks out the tune on her family’s piano, her parents are outraged and severely limit her contact with Lieselotte. At this point Inge resolves, “as soon as they left, I sat down and wrote my heart out, how angry, disappointed and betrayed I felt. I remember I began, ‘On this night I cease to be a child. Children do as their parents tell them. I won’t, I can’t, because they are wrong. I will stay best friends with Lieselotte” (51). Inge moves to a new level of ethical and self-perception where, as a thinking and feeling person she engages in the struggle to acknowledge differences rather than to subsume persons in metonymic definitions. She remembers and records the moment of her “fall” precisely, for it is at this point that she breaks with parental author-
ity and begins the lying that divides her into the officially good daughter and the “blood sisterly” friend of a young Nazi.

The most poignant moment of Inge’s struggle as a writer occurs in her entry for Saturday March 12, 1938, one day after the Anschluss of Austria. It is Sabbath; her father and grandfather have been arrested by the Nazis and are forced to scrub the pavement of Vienna with toothbrushes while Nazis and bystanders jeer and taunt them: “Something happened today that tore a hole in the world, at least that’s how it felt. I couldn’t have imagined it yesterday. I will write it down very calmly, or the hole (which got patched back together) will open again, and I’ll feel again as though it is swallowing me up.” (120) Carefully and systematically, she narrates the facts of that day, as they were told to her and as she experienced them. Nobody can comfort her, not even her usually so controlled mother who sobs “so hard that the bed shook. I felt I was in a nightmare, falling, as though the bed with us in it were falling down the hole. At the same time I felt very angry, like shaking her and screaming, You be the mother, you comfort me!” (122) Inge’s only defense is the act of writing which enables her to order raw experience and emotion and to place that ordering between herself and events.

The immediacy of the diary and the fact that Inge is at home on the day that Vienna’s Jews were abused in the streets limit the means with which the events of the day can be communicated, but they also preserve Inge from internalizing “the hole in the world.” The metaphor does not become “a hole in the heart” or a “hole in her being” as is frequently the case in memoirs of traumatized Holocaust survivors. Her writing, the support of her family (even as she rebels against them), and the fact that she experiences only what were the initial stages of persecution make it possible for her to remain relatively whole as a Jewish adolescent.

The disaster tears the fragile assumptions of the Dornenwald’s, their illusions of reprieve that made them delay applying for the quota numbers necessary to escape Austria. Highly conscious of her thirteen-year-old self at this historical moment, Inge had literally seen the writing on the walls in meter high letters “Jews, Go Croak” (Juda Verrecke) (29). She looked, and looked away, but her grandfather admonished her: “You should look. As hard as you need to, to know what you are seeing. Then you should write down what you saw. . . . It’s good to write down what you see, also how you feel about it. It helps you understand things better. And later it helps you to remember” (89).

Though Inge writes in part because she needs to communicate her feelings for Lieselotte and her anger against her parents, it is the histori-
cal crisis which transcends the “dear diary” mode. During those weeks that crisis will transform the Dornenwald’s comfortable life into a life or death situation. Once the “devil” has been welcomed to Vienna, flight is the only option for survival; no compromises are possible. Inge must, therefore, replace personal desires and feelings with clear-headed thinking. The diary, given to her by her grandfather as a book with empty pages, becomes a repository of events and the preserver of a friendship history has made impossible. As Inge says to Lieselotte during their farewell meeting: “Our friendship is in a book now” (240). On the one hand it is an achievement, on the other it is an expression of mourning. Inge’s last sentence to her friend is in reply to Lieselotte’s “I wish I could read it”: “I wish you could, too. Maybe some day you will” (240). The girls do not know that their friendship is over because of the rupture history opened between them; their entire story has been an exercise to spite history with their personal friendship.

II. Lieselotte Vessely: Hitlernädel in Distress

Inge copies into her diary Lieselotte’s letters about her Hitlernädel experiences, making them part of her text. Moreover, by the time she copies them, she has read the letters so many times that she “almost knows them by heart” (151). Thus she internalizes what it means to be a young female Nazi, but in copying the letters without commentary into her diary, she retraces Lieselotte’s experiences vicariously, confirms Lieselotte’s loyalty by making her part of the text and, at the same time, controls and maintains the friendship history denies her.

Lieselotte, too, has a symbol parallel to Inge’s “hole in the world” when her world also suddenly fractures and makes her conscious that nothing is normal any more. When her father belts her for having lied about avoiding a class in National Socialist Ideology and for continuing to befriend Inge, she describes to Inge how she once had a favorite cowbell: “It sounded like green meadows and cows coming back after grazing on clover all day. I rang it and rang it. Then Heinz wanted to ring it, and he grabbed it. I grabbed it back, and the clapper came out. So then it was mute . . . I feel like that bell now” (172).

While the narrative line of Inge’s story is typical of ironic comedy where the hero escapes a society that cannot be redeemed, Lieselotte, if she is to preserve her personal and religious values, will experience an increasing tragic isolation even as she appears to be politically co-ordi-
Looking down at the path, seeing all those dark-skirted, wind-jacketed, brown-capped girls marching by, was like seeing my whole future. I’ll have to march with them, do everything they make you do; there is no way out. It made me want to die. In my religion that’s an awful sin. And I can’t confess it. . . . I just hope that God can forgive me directly [without confession and absolution] and that God helps me stay as I am. . . . On the outside I will be like them. . . . On the inside, God willing, I’ll stay the me you know. (159–60)

Because Lieselotte has the appearance and personality that appealed to the image of female leadership in the Federation of German Girls, her struggle will not be easy. During this decisive first outing, *Führerin* Irmgard recruits her enthusiastically, not only because Lieselotte’s father is advancing in the ranks of the SA, but also, though Orgel does not mention it, because Lieselotte belongs by definition to the Kampfzeit of the Austrian BDM which, like all Nazi affiliations was outlawed in Austria before the Anschluss. After her family had moved to Munich so that Herr Vessely could continue working in the SA, Lieselotte, in a fantasy parallel to Inge’s singing the Horst Wessel Lied, imagines that Inge would march with her in this first outing: “That would show them! Then they’d know what Quatsch [nonsense] that is, the stuff they say about the Jews” (152). As it is for Inge, the “nonsense” is everywhere. She describes the picture from the notorious picture book where Jewish children are dismissed from school to the jeers of the “Aryan” classmates. Anti-Semitic propaganda as the right attitude for acceptance by her peers is a constant pressure for Lieselotte and the sinister side to the theatrics and glamour of the “fascinating fascism” that attracts her. Lieselotte’s struggle to resist Nazi definitions suggest again the authorial wish that such a friendship, even if one partner in it has to go into inner immigration, is possible.

Lieselotte’s hope that Irmgard, the much admired Jungmädel *Führerin*, could not possibly be anti-Semitic is shattered by Irmgard herself. Among the Jungmädel, Lieselotte can escape her domineering father, her passive mother, and her bullying brother. Irmgard is beautiful and many of the “girls have crushes on her.” During the outing, Lieselotte’s perceptions, too, are charged with preconscious erotic tension. Irmgard tells her enthusiastically about the events planned for the group, including a giant youth rally where Magda Goebbels, the most beautiful woman in the Reich might make an appearance. She also promises that she will do everything to get Lieselotte into “Faith and Beauty,” a select group within the BDM where girls considered physically and ideologically per-
fect prepared themselves for their designated roles in National Socialism. Lieselotte admits to Inge that she felt “so flattered my whole head started buzzing,” but she also wondered about a persistent ache in her belly (155).

Irmgard asks her enthusiastically if she is not proud to be living in such exciting times and when she answers affirmatively, the leader asks her to carry the flag. In writing to Inge, Lieselotte must split her consciousness as she juxtaposes “swastika” with “Inge, if you had seen me holding it, would you ever want to see me again?” At the time, however, she did not think of Inge, but, in what is a preconscious awareness of the rift in their friendship, she admits “I felt so strange, I felt as if my own breath from my lungs was rushing into it [the flag], making it billow like that, as if the flag were pulling me, instead of me carrying it. . . . Can you possibly know what I mean?” (156) Lieselotte is not conscious of Hitler’s rhetoric regarding the flag, but the banner and her relation to it exert their effect on her thirteen-year-old self. Hitler wrote in Mein Kampf:

And what a symbol it really is! Not only that the unique colors, which all of us so passionately love and which once won so much honor for the German people, attest our veneration for the past; they were also the best embodiment of the movement’s will. As National Socialists, we see our program in our flag. In red we see the social idea of the movement, in white the nationalistic idea, in the swastika the struggle of the mission for the victory of the Aryan man, and, by the same token, the victory of the idea of creative work, which as such always has been and always will be anti-Semitic.12

By being offered to carry the Hitler Youth version of that flag, Lieselotte is called upon to join and lead. Indeed, it appears to her that her feeling of elation over being selected animates the flag. Embodying the essence of the movement, the billowing flag was perceived as being animated by the flag-bearer who, in turn, was inspired by the magic power of the flag that propelled the bearer into the future of National Socialism. Orgel emphasizes this by having the troupe of girls start off the Hitler Youth anthem: “Unsere Fahne flattert uns voran” (Our flag billows before us) as they are led by Lieselotte into the “new time” (156).13 As yet the pressures on Lieselotte are relatively mild, but they are likely to increase, especially after Inge has disappeared from her life. Uniform and insignia, songs and propaganda, as well as the need to be accepted by her peers are pressures that threaten her promise to remain, even in her deepest self, loyal to her young Jewish friend. When Inge, on her last day in school (March 22) attends a Nazi dominated school assembly, she is glad for her
Jewishness which excludes her from uttering Nazi propaganda, whereas Lieselotte has to rely on the “switch” in her mind that, she thinks, will enable her to turn the propaganda she utters into gibberish and thus save her from becoming a politically coordinated Nazi (207).

As flag and song inspire and inflate Lieselotte’s ego during the outing, she matures, not like Inge through a “fall,” but in her body’s coming of age through the menarche. “White as a sheet” and with an acute belly ache, Lieselotte runs into the woods and stares at the inside of her underpants where “the crotch was bright, bright red.” Unable to comprehend at first what this signifies, she admires the color “as if they were tulips.” Then, she worries that “I’ve hurt myself, I don’t know how, I don’t know where, but somewhere deep, too deep to ever heal. . . . Inge, can you imagine? I would never tell this to anyone else as long as I live” (157). It is not the discomfort of the menarche that has hurt her; rather, the deep wound that will never heal is her alignment with Nazism. It is a wound that makes her fleetingly consider suicide, even if that is against her values as a Catholic (159).

The blood of physical maturation becomes now associated for Lieselotte with National Socialism’s demand for blood—the ultimate blood sacrifice demanded by the Nazis of those willing to die for the Führer and the bloody violence against all those the Nazis defined as the “Other” or the enemy. Irmgard defuses Lieselotte’s embarrassment and anxiety over the menarche by handing her a napkin and reassuring her matter-of-factly: “Just think, it happens to half the people in the whole world, every single month” (158). Lieselotte, whose mother hushes her about the menarche so that father and Heinz won’t be offended with this “women’s business” (161), is deeply grateful to Irmgard who demonstrates the modern attitudes the Nazis advocated in these matters (158). Having trusted Irmgard with this intimate experience, Lieselotte is encouraged to ask: “Irmgard, do you believe the things people say about the Jews?” (159) With certainty the leader replies: “Sure! Don’t you” and gleefully begins to sing “when Jewish blood spurts from our knives” while assuring Inge that girls do not carry knives, but Hitler Youths do, and “they are no toys” (159). Though flippanly sung and casually commented upon here by the Führerin, the blood imagery points to the murderous destiny the Nazis designed for the Jews of Europe.

Whatever joy and confidence Lieselotte had experienced during the outing evaporates. She wants to escape into the woods and live on berries like a fairy tale character, but she knows this is impossible and that her only option is her dismal vision of marching gleichgeschaltet into the
future while trying to preserve her inner self with God’s help alone, for
she experiences herself as isolated from family, from peer group, and
from Inge. Orgel has written for Lieselotte what is potentially a tragic
story line about a self that is conscious of her alienation in a mass move-
ment.

Against her father’s wishes, Lieselotte signs up for religious instruc-
tion rather than National Socialist Ideology. When Herr Vessely is
informed about how she lied and manipulated the system, he belts her
three times. Lieselotte screams “like an animal” and vomits as her father
not only destroys her world but also rids her “of any good feeling I’d ever
had for him” (170). Her “fall” is different from Inge’s in that her confes-
sion and promises are inauthentic and ethically invalid because exacted
under the aegis of physical violence and pain. For Inge the “fall” involves
consciousness, guilt, and ethical conflict as her disobedience endangers
the life of the family. The brutality of Herr Vessely, however, makes
Lieselotte mute, but it cannot force her to be ethically compliant or to
have qualms over disobeying an abusive parent.

III. The Devil in Vienna: A Trope Made Real in History

On March 15, 1938, Inge, secluded in her private world, reads the letters
Lieselotte wrote between November 9–16, 1937 about her Hitler Youth
experience. On this beautiful spring day “Hitler addressed a vast, deliri-
ous crowd, estimated at a quarter of a million people, in Vienna’s
Heldenplatz. . . . Hitler Youth and girls from the Bund Deutscher Mädel
were bussed in from all parts of Austria. . . . But for all the organization,
the wild enthusiasm was undeniable—and infectious. The less enthusias-
tic had already been cowed into submission by the brutality of the Nazi
hordes.” Inge is no where near that orgiastic triumph which once and for
all erased any fantasy she might have had about saving the Jews of
Vienna. Lieselotte, as a Jungmädel, has to strew flowers “for you know
who” (143), a sight the friendship could not survive. Inge retreats into her
private world but reads about the public life of the reluctant Lieselotte.

With Father Ludwig, Lieselotte’s uncle, Orgel creates a fictional minori-
ty of one. The priest refuses to raise the swastika banner at his church. As
Kershaw points out in his biography of Hitler, Catholic churches pealed
not only their bells on orders of Vienna’s Cardinal Innitzer, they also flew
the Nazi flag from their steeples because the cardinal had pledged his full
support of Hitler and had even signed that document with “Heil Hitler.”

Orgel’s official text avoids a direct critique of Vienna’s Catholic power
structure; she highlights instead Father Ludwig’s somewhat unbelievable solitary heroic nonconformity.

The lone symbolic gesture of a parish priest protesting the Anschluss and the friendship of two girls pledging undying “blood sisterly love” to each other are an authorial projection of a desire, comparable to Inge’s redemption fantasy, namely that the personal can make a difference and that friendship with all its intimacies can survive the onslaught of a violent and death-driven political movement. This authorial desire that personal friendship can endure the violence of history is undercut, however, by the facticity of historical events, particularly the events of March 11–15, 1938. As one historian summarizes, the Nazi takeover of Vienna on March 13, 1938 gave “the world an illustration of the Blitzverfolgung or lightning-like persecution” of the Jews that surpassed anything that had transpired so far in Germany. Whatever seems outrageous in Orgel’s narrative—such as Inge’s father and grandfather being forced to scrub the streets—must be duplicated in scope and intensity many times in order to approximate historical reality.

For Hitler the triumphant return to cosmopolitan and multi-national Vienna was a return to the place that had rejected him as an artist and turned him into an anti-Semite who admitted in Mein Kampf: “In this period there took shape within me a world picture and a philosophy which became the granite foundation of all my acts.” Vienna was thus a highly symbolic place for Hitler who as a “down-and-outer” once stood awestruck “in front of the Opera” and who perceived the whole Ring Boulevard “like an enchantment out of The Thousand-and-One-Nights” until the day his fantasies were realized on March 15, 1938. Orgel spares young readers this triumph of a loser, spares them the enthusiasm of the Viennese and spares them the sight of Lieselotte’s participation in this event. She includes, however, enough historical information and examples of the harassment and humiliation of Jews to indicate that she is deeply familiar with the events that transpired in the few days covered in Inge’s diary.

Inge records several events leading to the Anschluss. With the help of Germany, Austrian Nazis staged an unsuccessful Putsch for control of the government in 1934. German policy after this focused on the possibility of achieving the Anschluss through an evolutionary process, facilitated especially by Franz von Papen who was appointed ambassador to Vienna in 1936. The patience of German and Austrian Nazis ran short by 1937, the year the Vesselys moved to Munich because the Nazi Party was outlawed in Austria. Of the political events before March 11, 1938, Orgel
includes Hitler’s summoning of Chancellor Schuschnigg to Berchtesgaden to propose a non-military annexation of Austria and demand the legalization of the Nazi Party as well as the release of all political prisoners. This “mountain top meeting,” unlike the mountain top meeting between Hanna and Franz Dornenwald as imagined by Inge (81), ended in an impasse. Schuschnigg returned to Austria and decided by March 6 to hold a plebiscite on March 13 for Austrian self-determination. Inge’s family and friends, as well as the liberal teachers of Inge’s humanistic gymnasium, welcome this plan. On the “black Friday” of March 11, however, Hitler commissioned Göring to demand by telephone the resignation of Schuschnigg and the appointment of Nazi front man Seyss-Inquart to the office of Chancellor. Inge records these events in detail (117–119) and includes a reference to Schuschnigg’s moving resignation speech. But, as the family listens intently to the speech, Evi Fried, the only daughter of their Jewish neighbors, asks Inge to play. When Inge later hears that “the government has fallen” (119), she regresses into childlike literalness by imagining the Austrian officials facing a firing squad.

On March 12, under the pretense of “straightening out the chaos in Austria,” Hitler arrived in Linz and in Braunau, his birth place. On March 14, Hitler made his triumphal entry into Vienna, an event that is a textual blank in The Devil in Vienna because Inge is at home and Lieselotte is a participant in Vienna’s welcome to Hitler. It is a significant textual blank, a very conscious and ethically motivated authorial choice that denies Nazism its inflated theatrics, its “triumph of the will,” and focuses instead on the beginnings of Nazi brutalities against the Jews which, after the onset of “the Final Solution,” were never to be recorded, but were to be, according to the head of the SS, “a page of glory in our history which has never been written and is never to be written.”

On March 11, the day before all Viennese schools were closed to make youths available for pro-Nazi demonstrations (Botz 74), Inge and her classmates are translating Cicero: “As yet I have encountered no man who would not rather yield to Caesar’s demands than fight” (115), a critique of Austria’s attitudes and a tribute to Latin, a language loved by Orgel and her mother. As the students leave school, they see the streets are crowded with Nazis (116). As warm-up for the main event, the Reich Youth Leader Baldur von Schirach had arrived in Vienna to address 40,000 “Hitler Youths and BDM girls who in disciplined and orderly fashion lined up before him . . . [as] . . . he announced that ‘from today on the Austrian Jungvolk would cease to exist, there would be only one Hitler
Most of them participated in Hitler’s triumphal entry into Vienna and listened to his address in the Heldenplatz on March 15 where he announced: “. . . as Führer and Reich Chancellor of Germany I announce to history that my homeland has become part of the German Reich.” The masses responded with roaring applause, sustained “Sieg Heils,” the singing of the German national anthem and the Horst Wessel Lied. It is in this context, with its tremendous pressures to conform, that Lieselotte must be imagined. Hitler concluded his business in Vienna by receiving Cardinal Innitzer of Vienna who, that afternoon, pledged his wholehearted support followed by a pastoral letter instructing Catholics to vote for the Anschluss in the plebiscite. The Catholic Church’s official position, then, makes Uncle Ludwig’s stance very radical and rather unlikely as he facilitates the escape of the Dornenwalds and others by pre-dating baptismal records.

Random and systematic violence against Europe’s third largest Jewish community began from the first days of Nazi rule; the Austrian police stood by:

The most visible and wide-spread form that this lightning persecution took was street-cleaning actions. Jews, young and old, rich and poor, religious and non-religious, were ordered out into the streets to scrub pro-Schuschnigg slogans and symbols from the sidewalks and pavements. But the Nazis added several features to make the work more in keeping with their purposes. The water given to the Jews was often mixed with acid, which burned their fingers, and the implements they were given for this “cleansing” were often toothbrushes. Wealthy Jews were ordered to wear their best clothes.

As the Jews bent over their work, storm troopers and Hitler Youth stood by to harass and humiliate them in every way possible. In Währing, one of Vienna’s wealthier sections, Nazis, after ordering Jewish women to scrub streets in their fur coats, then stood over them and urinated on their heads.

When Inge’s father and grandfather come home from this ordeal on that March 12, she does not recognize them: “I thought they were two old beggars. . . O.O. was stooped over like a ninety-year-old man. Vati’s eyes were red and swollen, he could hardly see out of them. His hands shook. His mouth quivered when he spoke” (127). They, too, had used the toothbrushes and had a bucket of ammonia thrown over them while the crowd “joked and jeered, and not one said a word against it” (128). Dornenwald also mentions the moral heroism of Chief Rabbi Dr. Taglicht who, while scrubbing the street said “I am cleaning God’s earth,” a gesture of almost futile dignity, desperately remembered in the midst of rampant abuse.

Orgel was no doubt familiar with a well-known photograph depicting
a Jewish boy painting the word “Jud” on the foundation of a Jewish business as he is being supervised by a Nazi in Austrian attire and surrounded by jeering youths. When Inge walks home on March 18, she encounters just such a scene:

... I saw a bunch of people standing outside a stationery store. A little boy with a skullcap on was painting J E W on the window. A man in leather pants with a swastika armband on was making him do it. I only saw it for a second. I didn’t need to look longer than that. It will always be there in my mind, and so will Herr Fried’s store, smashed in, even when I am an old, old woman. ... (192)

Throughout the narrative, Orgel has emphasized Inge’s manner of seeing her first anti-Semitic slogans scrawled on the walls: she looks at the threatening image, looks away, but the image stays imprinted (89). What she sees now distorts normal reality so that for a moment she is not sure what is real. When she arrives with Evi Fried on March 18 at Herr Fried’s jewelry store to have the chain of her Mogen David necklace repaired, the trope of the “hole in the world,” the deep wound inflicted on her when her father and grandfather were abused by the Nazis, concretizes itself in the shattered window of Fried’s store and her perception is momentarily disoriented in a world gone awry:

When we were nearly there, a car drove by, and the sun hit the windshield in such a way, it made a glare that hurt my eyes. I put my hand over my eyes. When I took my hand away, I thought my eyes were not working right—because the glass window of Herr Fried’s jewelry store looked all zigzagged to me ... it was smashed. (189–90)

As the necklace, symbolic of her Jewish identity, is repaired, she relates the window to “the hole in the world I thought I was just making up as a way of writing how I felt on Saturday, and so that hole is just as real” (192). Metaphor has once more become historical reality.

The hole in the world, the abyss that destabilized everything, made life unbearable to Franz Dornenwald’s business partner: “Ingelein, he killed himself. They sent his brother to Dachau. Max couldn’t bear it. He thought he might be next” (187). Orgel acknowledges here through one example the drastic increase in suicides after the Anschluss, especially between March 11–18, the majority of whom were Jews. Franz himself is endangered as revealed through his need for comfort when he draws Inge unto his lap and tells her that his partner did not have a daughter who would have kept him from such a desperate act. Inge, who has just come from a meeting with Lieselotte, feels sick with guilt as she extricates her-
self from her father’s embrace. Ten days later when she goes with her mother to the Yugoslavian consulate to negotiate for visas, she sees a Stürmer headline: “A HUNDRED JEWISH SUICIDES DAILY NOT ENOUGH. THOUSANDS NEEDED. GOERING CALLS FOR JEW-CLEANSED VIENNA” (226). By that time it is clear to her that she “cannot go on ‘endangering our lives’” by having Lieselotte as a friend (213).

The Dornenwalds cannot get a visa unless they present officials with a baptismal record dated no later than 1936. They hope that Father Ludwig will let them fill in the dates, but he insists that Herr and Frau Dornenwald go through the ritual of baptism. Thus the priest’s willingness to fudge the date on the certificate is undercut by his unwillingness to spare the Dornenwalds the ritual. The enforced baptism, enacted so many times historically, makes Inge glad that she does not have to be present, because as a minor she will travel with her parents: “I didn’t want to be there when it happened” (234). Young Inge can remain officially Jewish. In gratitude to the girls’ friendship which facilitated the means to the Dornenwalds’ escape to Yugoslavia, Inge’s parents allow them one final get-together. They go to the Prater, Vienna’s amusement park, and, when both are at the top of the ferris wheel, Inge has the impulse to release her blue balloon and Lieselotte follows suit with her yellow one (the Austrian colors). As they watch them sailing into the sky, Lieselotte allegorizes: “They look like our friendship floating away.” Inge, however, neither needs nor can afford tropes: “No, they’re just balloons. They just have helium in them, not blood” (240). After Inge assures Lieselotte that their friendship will be in a book that she might, someday, be able to read, Orgel leaves blank the moment when the two friends actually part. At best, Lieselotte must live with a split consciousness, hiding her real self in her innermost being. Inge, however, can achieve closure through her maturation. She has become conscious of being Jewish and no longer desires to be accepted by the community that ostracizes her. Finally, she has given closure to her friendship by containing it in a book, her diary. As a result, Inge is “not sad to be leaving Vienna behind. Oh, sure, it’s where I was born, and where my parents were born—and if we were not getting out, it’s also the place where we might die. I don’t mean when we’re old, I mean a lot sooner” (242).

Orgel’s choice of genre, the diary of an adolescent, is her primary means of sparing the child by limiting what Inge can report about the terror let loose against Viennese Jews. But there is one other gap that the narrator (and the author) create. Inge emphasizes repeatedly that she writes in order to record how she “really feels” about Lieselotte, but Inge never
Doris Orgel’s *The Devil in Vienna* describes those feelings as history begins to deconstruct their friendship. She describes her behavior toward Lieselotte, her actions and reactions, but not the nature of her bond. The dichotomies a “Nazi girl’s best friend is a Jewish girl” and “a Jewish girl’s best friend is a Nazi girl” create a subtextual uneasiness throughout the narrative. Except for very overt conflicts such as parental prohibitions, the implications of that uneasiness remain unexplored. The central fiction of the narrative—the possibility that such a friendship could endure through atrocious history—is made plausible by the immediacy of a thirteen-year-old’s narrative point of view. I suspect that was also for Orgel a necessary fiction, a stay against the hopelessness and despair that overwhelmed Jewish families during those days and in the months to come. Inge leaves Vienna before Lieselotte is consumed by Nazi history, by the ruthless dominance that tore a hole in the world and negated hope for the fragile bond of friendship.

The hole in the world, the bell without a clapper, the cracked window are in Doris Orgel’s *The Devil in Vienna* images of vulnerability that will widen into an abyss, the abyss of disastrous history, but also the abyss between experience of the disaster, the memory of the experience, and the telling of the memory of the experience by means of a common language that is not capable of bridging that abyss. Orgel’s refusal to define herself as a survivor seems an implicit acknowledgement that the survivor of the concentrationary universe has a far more difficult task as a writer than she has. Orgel’s choice of genre condenses the narrative to seven weeks, from February 10 to March 31, 1938, a short time span that compresses the speed with which the Nazi reign of terror overwhelmed the Jews of Vienna. From the moment the German army crossed the Austrian border, Nazism in Austria surged up and filled public consciousness. For the majority of Austrians this was a celebratory event which Orgel pushes to the periphery of the narrative, though the reader knows that Lieselotte reluctantly participates in the triumph of Nazism. Instead, Orgel focuses on the life-threatening legitimization of anti-Semitism, the *Blitzverfolgung* of Viennese Jews and its effect on the Dornenwalds who, politically informed though they be, are overwhelmed by the speed of events. Their private and professional upper-middle-class lives offer them no security. The civilizing structures of their life led to the illusion that as well-educated and assimilated Jews they were beyond the coarse and crude anti-Semitism that had always existed in the culture. They have to realize very quickly that the prejudice against them is now politically organized and sanctioned. Reluctantly, the Dornenwalds recognize this
and take the appropriate steps to leave Austria.

Through Inge’s diary, the official text of the narrative, the author can limit herself to the immediate concerns of a thirteen-year-old and to her gradual maturation into life-saving political awareness. However, the diary of an adolescent, is also the medium through which the writer can express desires and values that counter the values of her family. As a result some adult readers may find the sympathetic portrayal of a friendship between a Jewish girl and a Jungmädel reprehensible, but attempts at such friendships were not that rare, just as the at least fleeting fantasy of belonging to the “movement” was not unheard of among Jewish youngsters. Doris Orgel writes out of her childhood memories as well from the distancing perspective of her American context and her acquired knowledge of political and social history. This enables her to portray Inge as desiring the friendship with Lieselotte even more fervently than the latter desires Inge’s friendship. Inge is an only child in a cultural context that overtly and subliminally communicates to her that she is “different.” The resulting sense of isolation certainly motivates her to long for a genuine and intimate relationship with someone her age. However, from the outset of the narrative, that intimacy is a nostalgic wish, for the politics of National Socialism have already separated Inge and Lieselotte who will never share the intimacy they symbolically pledged to each other in the childish and magic ritual of “blood-sisterly-love.”

Inge has to sacrifice her desire for friendship, but Orgel never discredits the intrinsic value of the relationship between the two girls. There is no betrayal of friendship, as there is in Richter’s Friedrich between the narrator and the Jewish friend of his childhood; there is no secret anger or lingering guilt on the part of either girl. Both tried, unsuccessfully, to bridge the ever widening abyss that history begins to open up between them; both, but especially Inge, become aware that there is no escape into privatism when “the Devil in Vienna” is no longer a mere metaphor.

Notes


3. While a few critics have expressed doubts as to Inge’s interest in current events, one Jewish survivor of that time remembers: “We children had to be alert and informed, and read the daily news, and not just the sports pages.” Thomas Chaimowicz, ““Lacht


5. Toll 72; Orgel 192.

6. Toll 72.


8. Such fantasies were even part of dreams remembered in the dreams of victims of anti-Semitism. See Charlotte Beradt, The Third Reich of Dreams, trans. Adriane Gottwald with an essay by Bruno Bettelheim (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968) 127–129. Beradt records the dream of a Jewish doctor who “cured Hitler . . . the only one in the Reich who was able to.”

9. Those members of Germany’s Hitler Youth who joined before October 2, 1932, were considered “old fighters” and received a gold medal in 1934 in recognition. After the seizure of power in 1933, the Hitler Youth soon lost their militant aura and became politically coordinated as Staatsjugend, youth of the state. In Austria the time of struggle lasted, of course, until the Anschluss.

10. Julius Streicher endorsed the infamous picture book by Elwira Bauer, “Trau keinem Fuchs auf grüner Heid und keinem Jud bei seinem Eid” Ein Bilderbuch für Gross und Klein (Nuremberg: Stürmer Verlag, 1936). This book includes “Aryan” children jeering as Jewish students are dismissed from school and, significantly, has as its final full page a picture where Jews are driven out of the country along a one-way street. The image on the back cover shows a grotesque caricature of a Jew behind the Star of David. The slogan underneath that image reads: Eine Lösung der Judenfrage, eine Erlösung der Menschen (A solution of the Jewish problem, a salvation of humanity). Satanic images abound in this picture book.

11. “Glaube und Schönheit” was officially established by Reich Youth Leader von Schirach in 1938; it emphasized “feminine” education in domestic sciences and fashion design along with physical fitness and ideological correctness. Membership was not automatic and was limited to girls seventeen years or older. Orgel is probably correct in assuming that “Glaube und Schönheit” was discussed informally in 1937, but Lieselotte would not be eligible to join for at least four years.


13. The Hitler Youth anthem “Unsere Fahne flattert uns voran” was composed by Schirach for the film version (1934) of the prototypical Nazi youth novel Hitlerjunge Quex. See chapter one for the lyrics.


15. Kershaw 81–82.


17. Hitler 22.


19. For historically summative accounts of Austria and the Anschluss consult: George Berkley, Vienna and Its Jews: The Tragedy of Success 1880’s-1980’s ; Gordon Brooke-

20. This famous quotation is from the speech given by Heinrich Himmler in October 1943 when he exhorted the SS, who were by then implementing the final solution, to remain “decent” in spite of the difficult orders they had to follow. For further discussion see chapter one.


22. Botz 70.


24. Orgel 128; Berkley 260.


If we had a language that could truly represent the horror of the Holocaust, we would shun and flee the speaker of that language, for Auschwitz—the site where human beings were demolished—is a radical antithesis to human desire. Auschwitz cannot be real for those who were not there or for those who came after. As Primo Levi alerted us, our language is our limitation, for, when “we say ‘hunger,’ we say ‘tiredness,’ ‘fear,’ ‘pain,’ we say ‘winter’ . . . [we use] free words, created and used by free men who live in comfort and suffering in their homes.” In his study on listening to the recountings of survivors, Henry Greenspan concludes that at best the survivor found private listeners in the early years after 1945; as human beings who needed “interest and care, they wanted to hear simply because they wanted to hear.” At that time the words Holocaust and survivor did not have the connotations they received decades later nor did listeners expect from survivors of concentration and extermination camps a “rhetoric to live by.”

Nowhere is such an enabling rhetoric more immediately evident than in Holocaust narratives written for the young. Nowhere does the adult reader, familiar with the genres of Holocaust literature in general, get a keener sense of the rhetorical construction of narrative for the sake of a clearly defined implied reader, the child or young adult. And yet, despite its artifice, this enabling rhetoric is embedded in the range of historically and culturally evolved perceptions of the Holocaust and the Holocaust survivor. Such an enabling narrative rhetoric attempts and sometimes presumes to communicate an inexpressible content while sparing both the
author and the reader, especially if the listener or reader is a child. In her discussion of the adult writer’s attempt to give voice to the child in the Holocaust, Naomi Sokoloff argues that “a child’s partial understanding helps alleviate the adult narrator’s struggle with language and artistic expression. . . . The child serves as a way to sidestep trying to formulate an interpretation of evil that defies understanding.”3 The memoirist who intentionally writes for a youthful implied reader can sidestep the representations of extremities of the Shoah, but can also avoid contextualizing such evil historically and politically by inviting the reader to respond solely to the memories of specific situations and to the emotions of the victim. Moreover, even very young children are already socialized in their expectations about the nature of narratives. Narrators appeal to these expectations by selecting memories and expressing them through conventions familiar to the listener or reader. At the root of these conventions are binaries such as death/rebirth, lost/found or experience/meaning; the first term signifies the trauma while the second term urges the memory of destruction toward affirmation. A variable of this is, for example, memoirist Ruth Minsky Sender’s “the Holocaust Lady” (see chapter seven), an oxymoron where the two terms interface the memory of the disaster with the survivor’s new life, in contrast to the time of the disaster when the drive for sheer physical survival made use of the persona of the special self, the lady.

Most often, these binary ways of organizing experience privilege the modes of quest romance and tragedy, as Déborah Dwork observed in personal accounts of adult child survivors, but they dominate almost every Holocaust narrative for young readers. The survivor who chooses to speak, and we hear only the one who does, produces in the telling a self in the world, but does so at a price. Greenspan sees that price in the unbridgeable difference between the terror recalled by a survivor and the tellable tale he or she recounts where

...every version is not only “selective” but precarious, often contested by memory at the same moment that memory is given voice. As listeners, however, we hear what we hear—which includes what we anticipate hearing and what survivors, anticipating our anticipation, have constructed as hearable.5

In children’s literature, the adult authorial self is in control and, inevitably, posits an implied reader who has been acculturated to narrative strategies and genres, but who always knows less than the author, either in terms of life experience or reflection about experience. While such authorial narrative distance may be an artful choice in literature for
Distance is already generated when adults remember “seeing the child in the Holocaust,” seeing the child at play, or the child about to be murdered. Distancing is also evident in the expressions of children, especially the children of the “model camp” Terezin, who communicated their experiences of suffering and death, of fears and hopes through conventions that any adult would approve. During the Shoah, the child as poet or artist, the child at play, and the adult perceiver of the child in extremity alert the interpreter to the problem of content and form in any and all representations of the Shoah. Children expressed themselves during the Holocaust in terms of adult approved conventions and on their own terms. But none of these expressions can compensate for the destiny Nazi Germany intended for Jewish children.

When Primo Levi published Se questo è un uomo in 1947 (If This Is a Man, later Survival in Auschwitz) the world was not interested in his experiences. In the first decade after the war and the liberation of the camps, the social, political, and cultural climates were such that they tended to inhibit survivors from recounting their experiences. For that to happen the climate of the survivor’s context had to become more receptive to memories of the Shoah, so that the individual would feel safe and sustained in telling his or her story. This applies to oral recountings, to written memoirs, to fictional narratives and, of course, to children’s literature about the Holocaust. In a sense, then, Holocaust narratives for the young are nested in a supportive historical and cultural context that is very different from the contexts from 1933–45 or 1945–1960. This supportive context constitutes the implied young reader through an enabling rhetoric that makes her or him responsive to the horror through the form of a tale that can be told. Responding, however, is not the same as knowing and understanding, especially if the response is conventionally emotional, as young readers’ responses usually are. The knowledgeable reader of Holocaust narratives should be the kind of active reader who participates in the reading by continuously and anxiously engaging in correctives that compensate for the inevitable blanks in the text.
I. Children as Writers, Children at Play, Children as Image in the Holocaust

“Hitler built a town for the Jews” claimed the German fiction about Terezin, or Theresienstadt. Terezin was a ghetto and transit camp for the killing centers in the east, primarily Auschwitz. The special circumstances of this ghetto-camp made it possible that some of the inmate children could express themselves in poems, writings, and artwork before their eventual transport to eastern extermination camps. Terezin, near Prague, was built as a garrison town in 1780 to house 7,000 Habsburg soldiers and their families. On orders of SS General Heydrich, Terezin was cleared of its population in 1941 and declared a “Jewish town.” The Nazi deception worked, for when the Red Cross inspected the camp as late as 1944, the organization’s report approved Terezin. By September 1942, 58,500 people were living in Terezin. The camp was designated for “prominent” Jews who had distinguished themselves through military service, in business, or in the arts and Germany’s intellectual life. That image, too, was deceptive as more and more inmates were crowded into this “forced community.” During its existence, Terezin held 141,000 inmates of whom 33,300 died in the camp while 88,000 were transported to extermination camps. Only 3,500 survived these transports. In his comprehensive study of Terezin, H.G. Adler, an inmate himself at the time, computes that the number of children under age fifteen numbered 10,000 over the three years; of these 8,400 were murdered in extermination camps. Only about a hundred children over age fourteen had survived their evacuation from Terezin at the time of liberation of the death camps; survival for children under fourteen was almost impossible. When the Soviet Army liberated the ghetto town, 1,633 children were still alive in Terezin itself.6

It is estimated that one and a half million children perished in the Holocaust. If the child embodies the future, the Nazis intended to make a Jewish future impossible by murdering Jewish children. Three hundred children were found alive when Auschwitz was liberated.7 At Chelmno, a camp designated exclusively for the extermination of Jews, thirteen-year-old Simon Srebnik—who had been spared until the end because the SS liked his singing voice, was wounded but survived the Nazi shooting of the few remaining Jews—was one of two survivors.8 Only if a youngster could “pass” as a workable adolescent or was chosen for “medical experiments” was death temporarily delayed. Upon arrival at extermination camps, the SS selected almost all Jewish children immediately for the gas chamber. Starvation and disease had of course already taken their toll in
ghettos, swept periodically by the SS in their euphemistically labeled *Kinderreinigungen* and *Kinderaktionen* ("child cleansings" and "child actions," both terms being equally ambivalent in German). The killing center Auschwitz-Birkenau had for six months even a *Kinderheim*, a desperate rescue effort by inmate Fredy Hirsch who persuaded the SS that it would be good public relations. Suddenly, in early March 1944, the SS gave the order to liquidate the home and gas approximately 700 children.9

Among well known instances of Nazi obsession with eradicating Jewish children is the case of the forty-four children hidden at Izieu, France who were discovered, transported, and murdered in April 1944.10 On April 20, 1945, two weeks before the end of the war, twenty children, who had been subjected to medical experiments, were hanged by two SS officers in the basement of the school at Bullenhuser Damm.11

These few brutal examples must suffice as reminders of the destiny that awaited all children in ghettos or transit camps. They confirm that the life of the children at Terezin was at best a parody of personal, familial, and communal life. The very active cultural life of Terezin may have made life momentarily bearable for the inmates in this "Jewish Town," but it was an illusion of reprieve, for the "real purpose" of Terezin remained obscure to most inmates until the very end. Adler cites the incident of the arrival of 1260 children from the ghetto of Bialystok on August 24, 1943, children who had witnessed the execution of their parents and older siblings and were in terrible physical and mental condition upon their arrival. They knew about gas chambers and when they were brought to the Terezin shower rooms, they screamed, "No gas, no gas!" "Finally, the Germans pushed them in by force. They clung to each other in despair with cries and lamentations. We did not understand why they were so upset and were not allowed to ask. Before their arrival we had been warned not to speak with them under pain of death." The children were transported from Terezin on October 5, 1943 to Auschwitz where they met the death they had anticipated at Terezin.12

The poems and drawings of the children of Terezin must be read in relation to the realities of their existence—the disease, the hunger, the ever-present threat of transport, and the thousands who died and were cremated in Terezin. And yet, a number of dedicated inmates from the Youth Welfare Department (*Jugendfürsorge*) tried to give the children a clandestine education and encouraged them to write poems, paint pictures, and construct collages. There even was a youth magazine called *Vedem* (*We Lead*).13 Some teachers "saw that the children of Terezin needed a form of artistic expression as a way to moderate the chaos in their lives."14
A selection of the children’s poems and art work was first published in Prague in 1959 and appeared in English in 1964 as “...I Never Saw Another Butterfly...” Children’s Poems and Drawings from Terezin Concentration Camp, 1942–1944. It was re-published in 1978 and appeared as an expanded edition on the occasion of the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1993. The introductory note from the museum, the foreword by Chaim Potok, the epilogue by Jiri Weil and the afterword by Vaclav Havel frame or nest—appropriate and institutionalize—these few poems and artworks by children into the context of adult authority. ...I Never Saw Another Butterfly... becomes thus an accessible, exclusive, and canonical text in Holocaust literature.

In that text, the voice and image of the young poet or artist project a normal child who is victimized in a totally abnormal context. This normality, encouraged through poetry contests and classroom instruction, spares of both child and adult. Adult artists in Terezin who went beyond Nazi commissioned assignments and depicted what they really saw in the ghetto were tortured and executed.15 It is understandable that adult teachers of children would emphasize conventions and “correctness” if for no other reason than safety. As a result, the poems support Sokoloff’s critique that they are less “mature reflections than...youthful attempts to sound grown-up and to mimic adult wisdom.” Sokoloff notes further that the editor selected those poems which made the writers appear younger than they actually were: “Many of the poems, in fact, are by any measure the work of adolescents (ages 14–16), and they merit reading and analysis in the context of adolescent compositions such as Anne Frank’s diary.” For example, the title quotation is from the last line of a poem written by twenty-one year old Pavel Friedman.16 The collection includes no poem where the child speaker is projected in such a way that the adult reader would not approve. Out of necessity, many children became adept in survival strategies, but no poem describes the child as a trickster, smart at lying or clever at pilfering, nor is there any poem or drawing that reveals through its form a child traumatized emotionally and intellectually by its life in Terezin. In the poems selected, all the children’s voices are appropriately socialized. Although such a child’s voice or vision may have assured safety in Terezin, it distorts through convention and sentimentality the deprivation and horror of that life and thereby creates an inevitable distance between the content and the form.

As H. G. Adler makes clear, children were very complex human beings in the complicated world of Terezin. While adults made serious attempts to give groups of children nurture and education, there remained
always the unsolvable problem of the children’s physical and psychological neglect. Torn from their family contexts, most children had already experienced persecution and ghettoization before arriving at Terezin. At best, the neglected child was able to form constructive peer collectives; at worst, they formed gangs or simply became self-centered individuals. Moreover, children were well aware that all traditional adult guides, from parents to teachers, had been disempowered and deprived of their traditional authority by the persecutors.17 Perhaps this is why the collection includes only one poem, “A Letter to Daddy,” that expresses a child’s relation to parents. The other poems express collective suffering such as the longing for a lost home or the hope for a better future, but they do not reveal close ties to parents or siblings.

For those who live in normal circumstances it is shocking, even unconscionable to imagine children at play in the Shoah, but play they did, even in the shadow of the extreme threat: the gas chambers. Their games often reflected the adult world into which they had been thrust. In his Children at Play in the Holocaust, George Eisen denies Huizinga’s concept of play as a “free activity standing quite consciously outside ordinary life as being not serious” as he notes that adults observed how “mass murder and play could exist side by side.”18 He comments how only the small children, carried by their mothers into the gas chamber, could be deluded; how older children, numbed already in ghettos to ever-present death, could play “tickling a corpse” and were able to look at everything “with wide eyes and . . . mind shut.”19

Play as supplement for the real is reduced to the “rules of the game” that, in this context, enable the players to seize momentary control over sights no child should see. The patterns of play rehearse the child for what is in store or, in the case of the perpetrator, what will be expected of him. Through play, the child tells a story, a story about what will happen and about what has happened. Through such gruesome games children engage in a pre-verbal witnessing that foreshadows the acts of testimony after the disaster, though we have to agree with Eisen that this kind of play “did not mean, could not mean, joy and happiness” as we generally associate it with traditional childhood games.20 Two extreme examples of children at play in Auschwitz must suffice here. They include both perpetrators and victims and demonstrate how the child and the future of that child have been devastated.

In None of Us Will Return, Charlotte Delbo, inmate and survivor of Auschwitz, remembers “the commandant’s sons’ play in the garden. They play horses, ball, or else they play commandant and prisoner”: 
The commandant stares down at the prisoner he cast scornfully on the ground; he is foaming at the mouth. His fury is spent. He feels only disgust. He boots him—a fake kick since he is barefoot; they are only playing. But the little one knows the rules of the game by heart. The kick turns him over like limp bundle. He lies there, mouth open, eyes glazed. Then the big boy, pointing his switch at the invisible prisoners around him, orders, “Zum Krematorium,” and walks off, stiff, satisfied and repelled.21

George Eisen cites another eyewitness account of children at play in Auschwitz:

They played “Lageraeltester” and “Blockaeltester,” “Roll Call,” shouting “Caps off!” They took on the roles of the sick who fainted during roll call and were beaten for it, or they played “Doctor”—a doctor who would take away food rations from the sick and refuse them all help if they had nothing to bribe him with. . . . Once they even played “Gas Chamber.” They made a hole in the ground and threw in stones one after another. Those were supposed to be people put in the crematoria, and they imitated their screams. They wanted me to show them how to set up the chimney.”22

Equally disturbing and poignant are the indelible memory points that image the presence of a child in the killing centers. One woman survivor was able to protect a little girl for several weeks before both were transferred to Auschwitz: “All night long the child did not sleep. She did not eat anything. She just kept asking me: ‘Does the gas hurt?’” Finally, the woman has to choose between the child and the crematorium: “I felt very bad. I cried very much. And the child was crying. And I parted from the child and left.”23 Otto Wolken, a Viennese physician, testified at the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials in 1964 about a group of boys designated for gassing at Auschwitz after their arrival from Dachau: “The children screamed because they sensed that they were to be killed. When a fourteen-year-old boy told them ‘Don’t scream. You’ve already seen how your parents and grandparents were murdered. You will see them again up there’ [in heaven] he was mercilessly beaten for this by the SS.” Another boy said to Wolken: “I’m not afraid. In heaven it can only get better. . . . I know that I know much. I also know that I will learn nothing more. And that is sad.”24 Both children have knowledge and consciousness of a world that offers no escape other than that of the body as “smoke in air,” as Yehuda Bacon depicted it as a fifteen year old survivor and artist and as the poet Nelly Sachs lamented it in her poem “Oh, the Chimneys”:

O you chimneys,
O you fingers
And Israel’s body as smoke through air!25
My inquiry into Holocaust texts for young readers is guided by the question of how close the author-narrator takes the young reader to this extreme situation.

II. Writing for Children about the Holocaust: Critical Concerns

German critical concerns about Holocaust narratives for the young are always influenced by the fact that Germans were the perpetrators of the Shoah, but they share with critics in the United States and Canada the pedagogic assumption that new generations need to be informed and reflective about the disaster. While German authors may feel ethically impelled rather than desirous that the young read about the Holocaust, North American Jewish and gentile authors, educators, and critics do desire the young to read about it for a variety of reasons. Young readers may react strongly and positively to the topic, usually presented in an educational context, but Holocaust literature is rarely their reading matter of choice.

In 1977, after major texts such as Richter’s *Friedrich*, Reiss’s *The Upstairs Room*, Meltzer’s *Never to Forget: The Jews of the Holocaust* and Moskin’s *My Name Is Rosemarie* had already been published, Eric Kimmel discussed the above narratives in terms of the concentric circles of Dante’s *Inferno* and concluded: “While no juvenile book has as yet faced the ultimate tragedy . . . the appearance of a novel set in the center of the lowest circle is only a matter of time.” He questions whether such a narrative could give significance to the “monstrosity of corpse-choked pits” and limits himself to the importance of asking the question.26

Among the historical, sociological, and cultural events that prepared a supportive climate for the discussion about children reading and learning about the Holocaust have been the opening of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in California (1977), the issue of whether American Nazis could march through Skokie, Illinois (1977–78), the airing of the internationally much watched mini-series *Holocaust* (1978), the eventual release of the film *Schindler’s List* (1993), and the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (1993).27 However, the horrific and complex nature of the subject is reflected in the ambivalence commentators feel about the possibility of representing the Holocaust in youth literature and exposing young readers to it in spite of the ethical imperatives to do so. While many stories for youths leave no doubt as to the ultimate fate of European Jews, that fate is limited to Jews in general and occurs “off stage,” so to speak; it does not happen to the main character of the story.
who usually emerges at the end with an “I have come through” attitude. Along with the implicit assumption that a comprehensive narrative about the Shoah is impossible, the endings confirm the belief that stories for young readers must have an affirmative, if not a happy end, at least in North America.28

Such “happy endings” are part of the process of conventionalizing the experience and survival of Holocaust trauma in narratives that are predictable and conclude that the disaster was ultimately meaningful for the survivor-narrator. Meaning is culled from the disaster in that the child, after absorbing the content through the form of the narrative begins to reflect on the nature of evil as opposed to virtue, “which engenders faith in humanity,” and thereby instills confidence in life itself; meaning emerges as the child becomes conscious of egregious prejudice and learns to resist that prejudice; meaning emerges, finally, not only through the child’s education in empathy, but also in terms of transcendent values. The very language of one critic makes this clear: “Knowledge of the Holocaust forces us all to confront the fear, ignorance, and hatred lurking in the dark recesses of the soul. And in these stories of suffering humanity, we may at times hear above the cries of despair, the faint, persistent murmuring of the compassionate heart that will lead us out of the darkness and toward the light.”29 The Dantean metaphor of passing through the center of gravity over the thigh of Satan and out to the starlight of a new shore asserts itself again and is justified by the adult assumption that such transcendence meets the child’s needs.

In its insistence on the “search for meaning,” hortatory, pedagogic, and even heroically inspirational rhetoric in narratives and critical commentaries obscures the conclusion of Elie Wiesel, Saul Friedlander, Lawrence Langer, Claude Lanzmann, and others that, no matter how we struggle for meaning, the Holocaust was and is essentially a meaningless disaster: it opened an unbridgeable abyss between those who experienced it and those who came after. Naomi Sokoloff and Adrienne Kertzer, however, have problematized the prevailing assumptions about the child reader and Holocaust narratives. In her work on the representation of the child as a fictive voice in adult literature, Sokoloff asserts that, while adults have all experienced childhood, “the depictions of childhood engender a series of complications in the debate about otherness.”30 Childhood and adulthood are opposites, which has led to our construction of childhoods where the voice of the child remains subdued so that any attempt to render a child’s perception from a child’s point of view remains problematic. According to Sokoloff, “children frequently cannot articulate as much
as they perceive,” [in part because] “their language, one in process of being learned, is given to continual change and dramatic transformations.” As she turns specifically to the child in Holocaust literature, Sokoloff argues that this given inarticulateness of the child is “well suited to treatments of the Holocaust, for these contend with the fundamental tension between silence and words . . .”32

Sokoloff, then, links the gap between a child’s perception and articulation with the gap between Holocaust experience and representation. Adrienne Kertzer, focusing specifically on Holocaust literature written for the young, accepts this inevitable textual gap and the necessary refusal of understanding the Holocaust by “making sense of it,” but asserts that, in spite of the insufficiency of knowledge over experience and in spite of the limitations of language, we still should tell children about the Holocaust. Accepting Lanzmann’s affirmation of the unbridgeable abyss between possible explanations of the Holocaust and its reality, Kertzer concludes: “For even if children’s books never satisfy the stringent premises of Langer, Wiesel, and Lanzmann, it may still be possible to write children’s books about concentration camps that acknowledge Lanzmann’s insight and incorporate it as part of the explanation that the books provide.”33 The narrative Kertzer defines here has not yet been written, for even the story she finds most consonant with her assumptions, Carol Matas’s *Daniel’s Story*, “respects the happy ending so necessary to children’s books, but in a way that foregrounds its fragility: ‘And for the moment, I am content.’”34

Our cultural construction of the necessity of an affirmative, if not happy, closure in children’s literature transfers adult desire to what a child reader supposedly needs; it denies the child the chance to imagine and rehearse through ambivalent, even tragic narratives life situations that are indeed possible. Adult desire for a future where life is good and meaningful is always generated retrospectively from a past or present that is found wanting and, because the child is perceived as holding the potentialities for that future, the child is charged with finding or making a better world.

### III. Holocaust Testimony: Reluctant Narrators and Their Implied Readers

While the narrator’s point of view is crucial in all Holocaust narratives, the textually implied reader becomes equally important in Holocaust texts for the young and contributes to the way memory, personal or collective,
is screened, displaced, and shaped. The distance between narrator and implied reader is usually reduced because the narrative voice approximates the young reader or because the narrator is a parent or teacher. The primary scenes of communication where the survivor tells her or his story to the young reader are between parent and child, between teacher and student, and between narrator and reader. Each site is both historical and instructional as the teller communicates for the sake of remembering and through remembering hopes to transform the listener into a witness of the Shoah so that the disaster might never be repeated.

All narratives about the Holocaust—autobiographical, historical, or fictional—construct both an official memory and a countermemory. In children’s literature that binary seeks both to inform and to spare the child. On the surface, the narrative line and the individual’s traumatic experience appear easily accessible, but much is consigned to a blank or gap in the text. Raul Hilberg, whose work focuses on German strategies in the destruction of European Jews, reflects in his intellectual autobiography on survivors’ ways of telling:

In their accounts, survivors generally leave out the setting of their experiences, such as specific localities or the names and positions of persons they encountered. Even when they talk about themselves, they do not necessarily reveal mundane information. . . . Ghetto life and the early labor camps are not given prominence. The principal subjects are deportations, concentration camps, death camps, escapes, hiding, and partisan fighting. Understandably the survivors seldom speak of those experiences that were most humiliating or embarrassing, and whereas they may mention their hunger, thirst, pain and fear, it is precisely in these passages that one confronts the implicit or open dictum: “No one who was not there can imagine what it was like.” Only one fact is always revealed clearly and completely. It is the self-portrait of the survivors, their psychological make-up, and what it took to survive.

Hilberg classifies the chronological stages toward annihilation through definition, decree (laws), expropriation (such as dismissal and confiscation of property), concentration (ghetto and concentration camp) and, unless the victim was able to emigrate, annihilation. The paradigm can be amplified in personalized narratives through definition through name-calling, expropriation such as the dismissal of children from schools and all public activities, ghettoization, transport, the trauma of the camp and liberation. These, then, are the schemata of official narratives that more or less obscure counter-memories.

Whether the writer’s knowledge of the Shoah is based on personal experience or acquired knowledge, the choice to write for young readers
is deliberate, but the motives, especially in autobiographical writings, are usually complicated. Because of their limited experiential, intellectual, and linguistic resources the young reader or listener typically responds with banal yet profound utterances such as “Your story is so sad.” The questions of young listeners also strike us as clichés, as obvious yet unanswerable: “Did the Holocaust change your life?” or “Can you forgive them?” The implied reader, the child or adolescent, is the ideal reader, listener and eventual witness for the narrator-author. The very limitations of the reader enable the narrator to shape experience into a story that the narrator can bear to tell and the child supposedly can bear to hear. Thus, the suppression of counter-memory spares, censors, and limits both narrator and implied reader.

If the narrator screens and suppresses the memory of humiliating, embarrassing, or personally and ethically compromising situations, she or he creates an even deeper textual gap by omitting the details about the perpetrators’ nature, strategies, and acts. The Holocaust was the result of German intentions for the Jews of Europe and was rooted in the religious, ideological, and political history of Germany and Europe. Historians generally agree that National Socialist policies regarding the elimination of Jews from German life and, eventually, from the life of Europe, evolved toward annihilation after the declaration of war with the Soviet Union. The Nazis may have been ideologically and culturally prepared for “the final solution,” but they “made up the plot as they went along” and, in doing so, shaped the master narrative of annihilation. Thus, we find an important subtext in fictional and autobiographical narratives, namely the relative obscuring if not blanking out of the perpetrators, their motives, and strategies. In literature for the young such a textual blank may appear to be a critical omission, given the pedagogical imperative, for how can recurrence be prevented if the perpetrators are faceless and their strategies remain uninterpreted? How can persecution be prevented if the signs cannot be read in our social and political contexts?

It may be that, at all cost, accounts of the Holocaust must avoid presenting Nazis as fascinating in terms of power, even though their power was over life and death. There is a profound cultural as well as personal reason for the survivor’s neglect or refusal to contextualize the trauma of the Shoah in the context of the history of Nazi Germany. Hilberg argues that the “fadeout of the perpetrator is no accident,” but that the practice is the “ultimate effect of an admonition in Deuteronomy, where one may find the words, ‘You shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.’” “May his name be erased,” said one rabbi upon the men-
tion of Adolf Eichmann, for modern Jews, too, argues Hilberg, know the hazards of giving the perpetrators a face and choose to remember only what they themselves did. Amalek is in a sense an aggregate of German functionaries who signed "their memoranda only 'Klemm,' or 'Krause,' or 'Kühne.'"37

The perpetrator, therefore, should be known by acts alone. This belief also explains why young readers' literature treats Nazi Judeo-phobic propaganda almost cursorily and limits itself usually to the specifics of name-calling, graffiti, and to the obligatory wearing of the yellow star. Virulent anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda, its death-driven and pornographic excesses, are blanks in the text. This is understandable, for the horrific power of this propaganda is such that the imaginative or critical act of writing becomes inhibited with anxiety over using such language. The language of hate against the Jews, its terrible power of definition, is thus avoided; the child is spared both the definition and the power to define.

Narrative point of view and the projection of an implied reader constitute a textual microcosm of Novick's argument that "every generation frames the Holocaust, represents the Holocaust in ways, that suit its mood."38 This applies even to the most famous narrative of the Shoah, The Diary of Anne Frank, a text that does not deal with the extremity of the Holocaust. When Anne was told that witness accounts of Nazi oppression would be in demand after the war, she rewrote and edited her diary "omitting passages she didn't think were interesting enough and adding others from memory."39 She was very conscious of her narrative voice and the implied reader. Her attempts at authorial control have, however, been vastly overshadowed by reader appropriation of her narrative, to the extent that one can discern through The Diary of Anne Frank how each generation of readers has framed the Holocaust through its reading and interpretation of her text. Her diary, which is read by adults and youths alike, is the prototype of those narratives that have contributed to making the Shoah bearable to the reader. Judith Tydor Baumel notes that Anne Frank was "singled out over other diarists who also perished . . . [because of] "timing, public response, publicity and calculated molding of reality that initiated a cycle which created a heroine who appealed to Jewish and gentile readers."40 In 1952, The New York Times Book Review praised the diary for being "no lugubrious ghetto tale, no compilation of horrors . . . This wise and wonderful young girl brings back a poignant delight in the infinite human spirit."41 Such statements reveal how readers want a human being to act in extremity and privilege Anne's famous "... I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart,"42 an
affirmation defined by Anne as one of the ideals she needs to maintain because “It’s utterly impossible for me to build my life on a foundation of chaos, suffering and death. . . . I must hold on to my ideals. Perhaps the day will come when I will be able to realize them.”

While the Frank family has been critiqued for almost denying their Jewish identity, it is precisely its secularism and middle-class milieu, which afforded the diary its universal appeal. In contrast, the intense, almost mystic religiosity in the diary of Moshe Flinker, a highly intelligent Dutch Jewish sixteen-year-old who also perished in the Holocaust, “is essentially a Jewish document.” Lawrence Langer admits that “Anne is not oblivious to the doom of the Jews, despite her limited access to information . . . ,” but she is also in her early adolescence and concerned with “her aspirations as a writer and her passage through adolescence and puberty to young womanhood.” The diary is read as a coming of age story of a Holocaust heroine who does not know that she will not come of age, for the Holocaust is in the ending of Anne’s life, not in her diary. “Who owns Anne Frank?” asks Cynthia Ozick, as she recalls herself as an adolescent who saw in Anne a role model who “was strong for me. She had so much hope when I was ready to call it quits.” The reader’s need and desire appropriate the Anne Frank of the text to the point of forgetting that Anne Frank the girl did not survive the nightmare of history.

The Holocaust survivor as narrator is both reluctant and impelled to tell her or his story. In young readers’ literature the teller is often a female voice who was an adolescent during the Shoah. A narrator who remembers the Jewish child she was is surrounded as an adult survivor by a penumbra of otherness as she seeks to communicate her experiences in the Shoah to those who cannot possibly fathom them. Decades after the trauma of the Holocaust, the presence of which is always just below the surface of her present, the survivor tells young people through the spoken or written word about events she cannot talk about unless she distills them into selected situational images, such as “selection to the left and to the right” upon arrival at Auschwitz. When a surviving victim of the Holocaust is simply called a “survivor,” the transformation of the traumatized human into the hero has begun, but what is neglected is that the overlay of heroism is undermined by memory. Cordelia Edvardson recognizes this in her autobiography Burned Child Seeks the Fire:
She survived. She became a survivor.

Someone who was left over; someone who had been pulled across the border between life and death, who had slipped and stayed behind in the gray mist of no-man’s-land... Half blind, tapping the ground with the white cane of instinct, she drifted about in the fog, gliding her fingertips across the braille of life.... Doors that must not be opened, thresholds that must not be crossed, for behind them dwells the scream, the scream that must not be allowed to escape and explode.47

The etymology of the word—the super-vivere or überleben—places the survivor above and beyond the ordinary into the margin of otherness.

The choice to overcome silence and to tell of personally experienced traumatic events in oral or written narrative form requires a socio-cultural climate that is receptive to such recounting, a receptivity that is furthered by the perception that one’s memory is also part of a group memory with which the narrator can connect. As Novick makes clear, the 1950s were not receptive to public or published recountings of the Shoah, in whatever narrative form, including private discourse: “Even in the way we talk about our direct experiences and feelings, we rely on our culture to provide us with a menu of appropriate responses.”48 A victim may never be able to afford recounting traumatic memories, but if she or he is not contextualized in a receptive climate, as happened for over fifteen years after the war, that memory inevitably will remain sublimated or repressed.

Children of Holocaust survivors are, in a sense, the original implied readers in Holocaust narratives for the young, for they often ask the questions that lead a parent to form memory into story. Children pick up clues, overhear memory fragments, or listen to master narratives of their parents’ ordeal. Moreover, children construct their own version of their parents’ past and thereby attempt to cope with what remains unfathomable. The boy Momik in David Grossman’s novel See Under: Love overhears his survivor relatives and constructs for himself a fantastic world where the Nazi hunter Wiesenthal pursues the “Nazi Beast.” In his epigraph to Maus, when the boy Artie Spiegelman cries because his friends skated away when he fell, his survivor-father chides: “Your friends? If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week... Then you could see what it is, friends.” Artie has, of course, no idea what this means; neither did Carl Friedman when she heard as a child that her father had “camp” in a way that children have “chicken pox.” She writes in her autobiographical tribute to her father: “Because he is different, my mother is different too. And because the two of them are different, Max, Simon, and I
are different from ordinary children. At home you don’t notice, but at school you do." As reader of his or her survivor-parents, the child struggles with or accepts the context of difference in the family vis-à-vis the child’s public life at school.

The survivor’s narrative, be it oral or written, is reliable because of the predictable patterns and images of any Holocaust narrative, because of the ethos of the narrator and because of his or her good intentions toward the listener or reader. In oral tellings, as they are represented in Sender’s *The Holocaust Lady*, young listeners can observe and respond not only to the telling, but also to the physical signs of the teller’s powerful emotions as fragments of deep memory emerge and are given form. The young listener and potential witness is encouraged to comment and question, but a genuinely interactive communication between speaker and listener, or between narrator and reader, is impossible—the distance between experience and memory is too wide a gap. Moreover, the narrator’s motive to instill the values inherent in the phrases “lest we forget” and “never again” is jeopardized from the start. The youthful “witness” is essentially unreliable, unless early exposure leads him or her to a commitment to learning about the Holocaust that goes beyond the sentiments of Holocaust education.

The narrator also assumes and trusts that the implied reader will never be a Nazi or a victim; even more, that he or she is free of prejudice, is kind and good because life is as good for the implied reader as it was for the narrator before the advent of the Nazis and the Shoah. Obviously, this is an idealistic construction of the implied reader that has little or no foundation in the psychology and socialization of children and adolescents. Implicitly, the young reader is defined as limited and, for that reason, is spared. Such sparing is, for example, evident in the Shoah Foundation’s video “The Forgotten Children of Berlin.” Accustomed to the fifty-minute classroom session, American high school students are told by survivors that they were “kids just like them” who preferred having fun with peers rather than worrying about politics with their troubled parents. Perhaps some children did indeed live under such illusions of reprieve, but most urban middle-class Jewish youngsters were quite in the know and alerted to the need to save themselves. The death camp footage in the video spares the viewer through artfully constructed dreamlike montage that projects in no way the shock value of standard documentary footage.

Survivor testimonies that I have listened to and observed on occasions of Holocaust education have persuaded me that the limitations of such efforts must be acknowledged. Survivors would focus on the camp expe-
rience and begin usually with great detail describing the moment of arrival and the first selection (to the left or to the right). Clearly, the trauma of arrival at Auschwitz remained a precise imprint in the memory of the then young person who, in spite of ghetto and transport experiences, was still innocent of the day to day existence in a death camp. The trauma of arrival can be told. After that focus, there is a tendency among survivors to generalize about the crowded barracks, roll call in summer heat or winter cold, the hunger, the hard labor and the struggle to survive at all cost, even at the expense of other victims. Generally, young listeners do not hear about the teller’s physical, social, ethical, or spiritual compromises. Nevertheless, like subtle illustrations to simple texts, the facial expressions and the voice quality of the survivor communicate to the listeners and therewith make listening an experience in empathy supported by the narrator’s admonition that young people should never give up hope and should love one another. The value of this oral testimony should not be underestimated, though one may wonder if the speaker really believes that her listeners’ empathy is sufficient to resist “man’s inhumanity to man.”

On one occasion, after viewing with junior high school students an abbreviated version of the film “Weapons of the Spirit,” I trespassed against the students’ comfort margins by posing a hypothetical but very possible situation: “Let us say that you come upon a scene where some of your peers are harassing a kid they have defined as a nerd or a geek. Would you step up and put a stop to it? Would you rush to the office and report it?” A show of hands revealed that only two or three out of twenty-five students would interfere somehow. The gap between then and now was not bridged. Peer pressure and approval were considered more powerful than ethical values and risk taking for the sake of righting a wrong. Without substantive learning over an extended period of time, Holocaust education can easily be reduced to sentimental education, an instance where the young person connects tenuously and momentarily with a survivor.

Narratives that emphasize learning are Holocaust histories written for the young and told by authoritative adult voices such as we find in Milton Meltzer’s Never to Forget: The Jews of the Holocaust or Barbara Rogarsky’s Smoke and Ashes: The Story of the Holocaust. The authority of the official voice of the historical texts communicates that the narrator has comprehensive knowledge of Nazi Germany’s war against the Jews, but that very focus obscures the ways and means of the Nazi seizure of power in Germany and their political and military hegemony and aggres-
sion against the nations of Europe. The discussion of the Shoah follows the typical and historically based pattern, but presents that pattern more definitively for the young reader. Each history, which relies both on general discussion and lengthy citations of eyewitness accounts, does describe the death camps, but always ends with a chapter on resistance and liberation, and thereby transforms the nameless victim into a martyr or survivor hero.

In such historical accounts, the youthful implied reader in historical narration is directly addressed but is not sentimentalized; rather, the reader is assumed to be a person whose intellect and reason are capable of being educated and enabled toward activism against prejudice. The implied reader may be younger and less knowledgeable than the narrator, but is potentially the narrator’s equal. If the autobiographical witness account projects an empathic reader who will bear witness for personal and collective suffering, the historical narrative with its emphasis on resistance stimulates the fantasy of the heroic gesture as the primary topos of its enabling rhetoric. Heroic resistance becomes a privileged concept and term that is expanded beyond the “armed resistance” of a minority to include the struggle for survival of every death camp inmate. In her *By Words Alone*, Sidra de Koven Ezrahi points out that the hero in Holocaust literature “has been reduced to the dimension of the survivor and his acts to the minimal gestures of self-preservation.” In most historical and fictional narratives for the young, the Holocaust victim is elevated to the heroic survivor.

Young adult fictions support the heroic survivor through their emphasis on a central and resourceful character who often speaks in the first person. She or he always survives with individuality intact and thus is implicitly a role model for the young reader. As will become evident, the heroic posture is largely due to the main character’s existential self-definition which, authors assume, is a possibility even in extreme situations where perhaps only the choice of attitude is left. Such an existentially defined and heroically gestured central consciousness receives less the compassion than the admiration of the implied and actual reader. Subtextually, however, there is the subtle implication that those victims, whom the camp world debilitated so much in body and spirit that they became indifferent even to being gassed, are somehow less than the central consciousness of the narrative.

A case in point is Hannah Stern in Jane Yolen’s *The Devil’s Arithmetic*, the story of a present day American and quite secular Jewish girl who is vaguely informed about the Holocaust. Hannah moves back in
time, arrives at a death camp but remains always conscious of who she really is. In the end, Hannah, her arms around the waists of two companions, moves toward the gas chamber with a brisk “ready or not, here we come . . .” and walks “in through the door into endless night.” In her afterword, Yolen comments: “That heroism—to resist being dehumanized, to simply outlive one’s tormentors, to practice the quiet, everyday caring for one’s equally tormented neighbors. To witness. To remember. These were the only victories of the camps.” To be sure there were victims with such goodness; to be sure there are victim-survivors with such care, but they are not the norm; however, it is as a norm that the reader will perceive them. The humane, if not saintly inmate is as rare as is the Christian rescuer of Jews—another privileged topic in literature for the young, though one beyond the scope of this study. Given that kind of focus, the untutored reader may indeed conclude that the camps brought out the best in the victims and that Christians, given their values, were inevitably disposed to rescue the Jews.

IV. The Limitation of Enabling Rhetoric in Holocaust Literature for Young Readers

In his discussion of “the romancing of survival,” Henry Greenspan quotes at length the reaction of Sally Grubman, Auschwitz and Ravensbrück survivor, to the pressure she received from teachers to celebrate “the joy of survival” with young students:

There is a tremendous interest in the Holocaust that we didn’t see when I came. . . . I see an awakening of consciousness, but also some confusion about the reality. American Jewish teachers invite me into their classrooms to speak, but they do not want me to make the Holocaust a sad experience. They want me to turn us into heroes and create a heroic experience for the survivors. There is this book they use, The Holocaust: A History of Courage and Resistance, but the Holocaust was never a history of courage and resistance. It was the destruction by fire of innocent people, and it’s not right to make it something it never was. We are not heroes. We survived by some fluke that we do not ourselves understand. And people have said, “Sally, tell the children about the joy of survival.” And I can see that they don’t understand at all. If you are in a canoe and your life is in danger for a few minutes, you can talk about the joy of survival. We went through fire and ashes and whole families were destroyed. And we are left. How can we talk about the joy of survival?

Lawrence Langer likewise critiques our desire for a positive meaning and message over and against the disaster:
When we speak of the survivor instead of the victim and of martyrdom instead of murder, regard being gassed as a pattern of dying with dignity, or evoke the redemptive rather than the grievous power of memory, we draw on an arsenal of words that urges us to build verbal fences between the atrocities of the camps and ghettos and what we are mentally willing—or able—to face. When we greet “liberation” with relief and celebrate it as a victory for endurance, we block out the images of emaciated bodies that the Allied troops found as they entered places like Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen, as if a single horrific term could erase the possibility that survival might also be a life-long sentence to the memory of loss.54

A survivor’s need to somehow give meaning to his or her trauma caused by persecutors who had it in their power to construct for their victims unnatural scenes of dehumanization and death is part of surviving survival; however, when those who were not there construct the Holocaust as meaningful, their language tends to become a means to an end. In the case of children, such language spares and aids the child with happy endings and meanings that coincide with values we privilege and desire. Flawed as German youth literature about Nazism and the persecution of the Jews is, it never presents the Third Reich and the Holocaust as a learning experience that improved Germans. Such a production of meaning is simply not admissible. As we have seen, German narratives usually end with the main character feeling isolated, alienated, or in a state of profound ambivalence. As Kertzer admits, North American youth literature about the Holocaust respects “the happy ending so necessary to children’s books.”55 It is an assumption that is accepted as an unchallenged given rather than as a cultural value.

The enabling rhetoric of positive thinking, along with what Langer calls “the grammar of heroism and martyrdom,”56 adjusts and bends the facticity of the Holocaust to its own ends. Langer understands that we cannot foresee the gas chambers if we have never heard of them and, as a result, “no one before has ever said ‘When I get to Auschwitz, I . . .’”57 But after the disaster and after being informed about the camp world, what student of the Holocaust has not caught himself or herself imagining “if I were rounded up for transport to Auschwitz. . . .” Given the inevitably reductive context of children’s narratives about history and experience in history, such fantasies will indeed be stimulated and will be dominated by heroic imagings of resistance, rescue and survival over and against the murder of millions and the inexpressible state of grief of those who were there but survived.
It is doubtful if the culturally approved enabling rhetoric of the heroic gesture assures that “never again” and “lest we forget” will indeed define our collective future. Actually both statements deny the horror and cast an illusory bridge over the abyss. When those who lived to survive the Holocaust repeat these phrases, they speak them with a meaning that is far more profound than when they are used in public discourse, be it by teachers or politicians. Both statements, when personalized, reveal the tensions between moving away from the past, the fear of forgetting, and the constant emerging of memory. As public statements these imperatives privilege the heroic gesture over the memory of millions of human beings who perished not as heroes but as brutally violated children, women, and men. Only survivor narratives, for the young and for adults, insinuate almost as a counter-memory the tremendous losses in contrast to the affirmation and hopefulness expected of them by their implied readers. Why does this happen? The sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, writing before Nazism and the Holocaust, may have answered this question by relating it to cultural contexts:

The individual who does not want to forget vanished kin and who obstinately repeats their names will soon experience universal indifference. Walled in by his memories, he tries unsuccessfully to intermingle the preoccupations of present society with those of bygone groups; what he lacks is support precisely from the groups that have disappeared. A person who alone remembers what others do not resembles someone who sees what others do not see. . . . Society is like the woman from Ephesus who hangs the dead in order to save the living.58

Sparing the reader, sparing the child appears to demand an enabling rhetoric that is always and necessarily at the expense of the dead and at the expense of loss and grief. A person with inconsolable grief becomes tedious to those who do not share that grief. “Get over it” and “get on with it” is the self-preserving and collective demand of the living. Sentiment and heroic gestures assure that we are indeed getting on with it, and do so at the expense of lived experiences whose horror we cannot fathom. We pretend we are bridging the gap, but in so doing we confirm and accept the abyss and keep ourselves safe from those who were there. We cannot bear much reality.

Does this mean that narratives about the Holocaust should not be written for young readers? It does not. I agree with Kertzer that we need to find ways to tell children that Auschwitz did happen, but we must do so in ways that somehow manage to include the complexities discussed here. That means that narratives ought to communicate an awareness of
the difference between narrative truth, the truth of memory, and the truth of experience. Literature for young readers, too, must acknowledge in complex and subtle ways the problem of representation of a disastrous reality. It must go beyond the feeble disclaimer “it’s so difficult to talk about that”; rather, the fabric of the text itself can, even for young readers, both hide and reveal the Holocaust and do so without making the official text rhetorically so enabling and authoritative that loss and grief are almost denied. The failures and successes in writing such narratives for the young will be the subject of the following discussions about Holocaust literature for young readers.

Notes

5. Greenspan xvi.
9. Inge Deutschkron, “… denn ihrer war die Hölle. Kinder in Gettos und Lagern (Cologne: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1965) 49–55; For a biographical sketch of Fredy Hirsch, who had organized sports activities for youngsters at Terezin, see We Are Children Just the Same. “Vedem,” the Secret Magazine by the Boys of Terezín, prepared and selected by Marie Růžičková, Kurt Jiří Kotouč, and Zdeněk Ornest (Prague, Philadelphia and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995) 52–53.
13. Adler 554; also the entire We Are Children Just the Same.


17. Adler 547–73. Adler’s account is exceptional in its focus on children and youths and makes a concerted effort to show attempts at a nurturing environment and the failure to achieve such.


20. Eisen 118.


22. Eisen 81.


24. Deutschkron 122.

25. I discuss these metaphors in Metaphors of Evil: Contemporary German Literature and the Shadow of Nazism (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1979) 196–207.


27. For a chronological discussion of the evolution of that climate see Peter Novick, The Holocaust in American Life (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), especially “Part IV: Recent Years.”


32. Sokoloff 1994 262.


34. Kertzer 252.


38. Novick 120.


41. Quoted in Novick 118.

42. Diary 332.

43. Diary 332.


52. Yolen 169.


55. Kertzer 252.


Ruth Minsky Sender’s Memoirs and the Construction of the “Holocaust Lady”

The Holocaust survivor, living posthumously, must “remember forgetfully” the experience that is, afterward, named the disaster, the Holocaust, the Shoah. The unbridgeable abyss between remembered trauma and its representation in word or image constitutes not a mystic “still center” but what Sara Horowitz has called “the trope of muteness,” the central trope “to the way imaginative representations of the Shoah address linguistic, ethical, and metaphysical concerns.”

“Muteness,” as distinguished from meaningful silence, suggests a choking of the urge to speak. In the memoirs of Holocaust survivors we find such muteness transmuted by the compensatory strategies of representation. Ruth Minsky Sender’s memoirs—The Cage (1986), To Life (1988) and The Holocaust Lady (1992)—once again affirm the binary of text/subtext and maintain the dividing line both for the protection of the implied reader and in defense of the special way the narrator constitutes herself. Formative for both narrator and reader is the construct of the child, the child in historical time and the child as trope.

When Sender’s memoirs were published, the development of “Holocaust awareness” in America had been part of educational concerns for over a decade and a half. Young readers had already been addressed through memoirs such as Isabella Leitner’s Fragments of Isabella (1978), Aranka Siegal’s Upon the Head of the Goat (1981) and Grace in the Wilderness (1985) as well as Marietta Moskin’s fictionalized survivor coming of age story I Am Rosemarie (1972). The first conference on “Women Surviving: The Holocaust” had already taken place in New York
in 1983 and its proceedings, including oral testimonies of survivors, had been published. The American context for Holocaust awareness, including the education of the young, was, therefore, more than receptive for Sender’s memoirs, even though her account in The Cage of how she became a writer makes it appear as if she had been the first to address the young. Actually, Sender is among the women who joined a worldwide link of women survivors who, after raising their families, felt compelled by the need “to bear witness” to their experiences as children and adolescents in the Holocaust.

As the number of women’s voices increased, the question began to be asked if women’s experiences and memories of the Holocaust were in some ways different from those of men, even though both sexes were in the same traumatic context. Judith Tydor Baumel highlights the following gender characteristics in women’s Holocaust memoirs written since the mid-1970s: women tended to assist each other during the Shoah, they expanded the chronological framework of the memoir to include the cultural history of Jewish women’s lives between the wars, and they inclined to be reticent about sexual matters. The latter contrasts sharply with accounts written in the 1940s and 1950s, which were often surprisingly frank about women’s intimate lives in the Holocaust. Finally, the memoirs of the Holocaust awareness era frequently communicate religious or moralistic overtones, whereas earlier accounts privileged the perspectives of politically committed survivors.

With their often simplistic moral messages and sentimental appeals, with their aim to teach new generations and have themselves become witnesses to the Holocaust, Sender’s narratives are clearly part of the Holocaust awareness era survivor accounts. As such they constitute official texts. Her three memoirs also affirm the supportive bonding between women, though Riva, the author’s younger self, as well as the adult narrator of the memoir, is always the primary recipient of such support. Her world in the camps is, negatively and positively, dominated by women, but gender specific issues, especially as they relate to women’s bodies and sexuality remain, in general, unmentioned in this account about an adolescent. Nevertheless, though Sender conforms to the American context of “Holocaust awareness” and the need to bear witness so that the unspeakable disaster will “not happen again,” the subtext of her memoirs reveals, unintentionally, a woman whose troubled if not traumatized personality undermines the official moral “where there is life, there is hope.”

Holocaust memoirs usually have a three part structure: the time before the disaster—usually an idyllic and happy time—the time during
and the time after the trauma of the Holocaust. Sender’s memoirs also distinguish themselves by not dwelling on family life before the disaster or romanticizing it. Her widowed mother, Nacha Minsky, worked hard even before the German invasion of Poland to maintain her family and business in Lodz, but Sender, in keeping with the future-directedness of hope, focuses instead on the “new life” in America, which is both a longed for dream and a difficult reality. In this she is not atypical, for it is in the new life context where the survivor struggles to define her public persona, the official self deemed normal by the world in which she lives now. For Sender this will be the “Holocaust Lady.” Chronologically the disaster is in the past, but the American present is continuously disrupted by the emergence of what was then and by the mournful desire for what can never be: the moment of reunion with the irrevocably lost mother and brothers. That mournful desire shadows every joyful event (for example her reunion with her sisters). For the narrator, the forever absent remains always an object of desire that leaves grief unresolved.

When Riva Minska, the sixteen-year-old girl who would one day be the American Ruth Minsky Sender, witnessed her mother being rounded up for transport from the Lodz ghetto, she did not know that she would never see her again. Ignorant of her final destination, Nacha Minsky was transported in September 1942 to the extermination camp Chelmno, which was used since December 1941 as an exclusive killing center for Jews even before the Wannsee Conference of January 20, 1942 had implemented the “Final Solution.” With forethought, Nacha Minsky had sent her eldest son, Yakele, and her two older daughters, Chana and Mala, across the border to the Soviet Union where they survived the war. Riva and her younger brothers, Motele, Laibele and Moishele, continued the struggle for survival in Lodz. Laibele died before Riva and her two brothers were transported in 1944 to Auschwitz where the brothers perished immediately upon arrival. Riva, considered work-able as an eighteen-year-old, was transferred a week later to a labor camp. Though she would eventually be reunited with her siblings, at the time of liberation Riva experienced great difficulty in accepting the possibility that she might be the sole survivor of her family. Yet, her urge to survive was strong and manifested itself in decisive but ambivalent ways that led to what Robert Lifton has termed “death guilt [which] begins . . . in the gap between physical and psychic inactivation and what one feels called upon to do and feel. This is one reason why the imagery keeps recurring in dreams and in waking life.” The narrator’s muteness in representing her memory of the disaster is caused by the trauma of the historical context and by
her sublimated guilt over her inability to prevent the murders of her mother and brothers. It is that form of survivor guilt which remains unresolved. Disastrous as her experiences were in the labor camp Mittelsteine, they did not reduce her to the stages of loss of physical and psychological dignity, the ultimate *Entwürdigung* of human beings to which the perpetrators reduced their victims in Auschwitz.

Her adult self-definition “I am a child myself but also a mother” is the key to the subtext of her three memoirs. As Ruth Minsky Sender, the narrator is the wife of Morris Sender (Moishe Senderowics) and the mother of their four children; but as Riva she is also the orphaned child who, though “she felt lost and helpless,” was appointed the legal guardian of her brothers so that the siblings could stay together as a family. As a Jewish administrator of the ghetto tells her: “You are losing your rights as a child. Today you become an adult” (C, 54). Riva, however, deprived of childhood and youth, is still desperately in need of mothering, and that need undermines her official designation as mother in the ghetto and afterward. She is a “mother” who loses her “children” to Auschwitz and forever grieves and hopes that sometime she will suddenly find them again. Her secret, the pain over having been deprived as a child and of having failed as a mother, is her deep memory.

The memoirs swathe that pain with the emotion of hope, which along with the simple will to live, was among the primary coping behaviors of concentration camp inmates and survivors. Joel Dimsdale defines their hope as either active or passive. The former insists that “this cannot go on forever”; the latter expresses the attitude “where there is life there is hope.” This attitude of passive hope pervades the memoir and concludes each narrative. Hope, crystallized in the iteration of a cliché, screens the subtext and enables Riva the survivor to participate in the life of ordinary time. But the screen is porous; the past seeps through into the most everyday moments, translating Riva back to *that* time and *that* place. Sender’s text and subtext are shaped by what Charlotte Delbo calls “deep memory” and “common memory.” Langer amplifies Delbo’s concepts: “Deep memory tries to recall the Auschwitz self as it was then; common memory has a dual function: it restores the self to its normal pre- and post-camp routines but also offers detached portraits from the vantage point of today, of what it must have been like then. Deep memory thus suspects *and* depends on common memory.” Sender further complicates the relationship by displacing deep memory through her recourse to abstract truisms, clichés, and generalized expressions of the emotions of grief.
For Riva, deep memory emerges with a rush of powerful emotions that gradually find their expression through the accessible or public language of the “Holocaust Lady,” the official persona of the narrator. It is a definition suddenly offered to her by two school girls who ask her if she has come to listen to “the Holocaust Lady”: “I feel a sharp pain in my chest. My new title catches me by surprise. My voice trembles. ‘I am the Holocaust Lady’” (HL, 9). Though the name is given in the third memoir, she has evolved her public persona toward that definition from the beginning. It is a persona that manifests James Young’s argument that the “survivor’s literature . . . becomes testimony not so much to the deaths at Auschwitz but to his life after Auschwitz,” a life that is proof (my emphasis) that the survivor has defeated the “Final Solution.” The Holocaust Lady constructs herself in terms of the conventions of femininity, she is a lady who is special, her sensibilities are refined and her emotions are delicate and tender. Holocaust, reduced here to an adjective, not only modifies Lady, but severely challenges and subverts the socially approved but fragile construction of a lady. The fragility of a lady suggests also the vulnerability of the victim. “Holocaust Woman” would have connotations that are quite different, as would the appellation “Holocaust Gentleman.”

The label connects Riva’s official self with her private self-definition: “I am a child myself but also a mother.” She is a woman, but also a daughter whose days are linked in continuous grief. Her story is less the story of the woman as Holocaust survivor than of the girl as a survivor, for the girl whose girlhood was denied always returns to the site of that loss. This sense of deprivation often leads the narrator to portray herself as emotionally overwhelmed to the point of tears, a regressive coping strategy that claims assistance from others, for whom “the motivation to help a crying child or adolescent was very strong. Such crying seemed to elicit a helping response from the older inmates, even in Auschwitz.”

However, the claim of the crying child for support and nurturance also suggests the narcissism of childhood with its illusion of being special in even the most adverse circumstances. The narrator’s tears in public and private discourse become her signature, her nonverbal and muted signifier that communicates to the reader or listener the desire for empathic connection or the moment of achieved empathy.

The narrator, the Holocaust Lady, tells the young reader or listener about irredeemable losses, the powerful urge to live, and, more indirectly, about the compensatory strategies required in managing losses and life. Her enabling rhetoric, through which she defines herself and her youthful audience, relies on the sentimentalizing of strong emotions in
order to find and offer release in feelings of sadness and pity. That rhetoric generates the image of herself as victim and as a passively heroic self, distinguished by the ability to express herself movingly through words. The child reader will remain unaware that this existential self-defining affirmation is but a fragile compensation over and against the abyss of the Shoah; it cannot resolve permanent grief.

In these memoirs childhood’s “story lady” becomes the “Holocaust Lady” whose young readers will not question the sentimentalizing of strong emotions, but will feel sad and compassionate toward the lady who tells a “sad story.” They will not remember the history of what we must not forget, but they will remember the image of the Holocaust lady as teller of a tale that could be told, though her nonverbal (subtextual) emotions may tell another story. Sender communicates to the young reader simply and reductively through familiar sentiments, morals, and images—all within the conventional means of storytelling. However, that official genre is subverted, especially in To Life and The Holocaust Lady, by allusions to complexities such as her Auschwitz survivor husband’s depressions, his smoldering anger and the ensuing marital stresses caused by these two survivors who are unable to communicate with each other about their Holocaust trauma.

The need to communicate and the apprehension of doing so inform each memoir. The Cage opens in the present tense on an idyllic spring morning with the narrator feeling calm and happy because no nightmare haunted her sleep during the night. Her recurring nightmares transport her back to the time when she was a child unable to save her brothers. Awakened by her screams, her husband holds her wordlessly and she assures herself: “He knows my nightmares” (C, 2). But, on this sunny spring day she contemplates her child Nancy, apparently with joy, for “new life is growing all around me, reaching toward the sun” (C, 3). Suddenly, Nancy cuddles up to her: “Why, Mommy? Why? Why did the Nazis kill them, my grandparents?” and “suddenly it is 1939 again” (C, 4). The child’s question frames the memoir for young readers. It is doubtful that the narrator told little Nancy her story; Nancy is not mentioned again until the end when she comforts herself that her mother has now a new life in America where such nightmares of history will not recur. To her questions “could it happen here, Mommy? Could it happen again?” the narrator replies as teacher and mother: “If we forget the past, it could happen again. We must learn from those horrors. We must learn what happens when people remain silent while others are persecuted.” I feel the sharp pain of remembering. ‘We must learn, my child, not to ignore the
ugly signs, the danger signs, as my family—as the people of my generation—did’” (C, 242). Sender, however, with the exception of mentioning a pamphlet denying the Holocaust (HL), never explores “the ugly signs” with her young listeners or readers; she prefers to evoke not critical thought but gentle feelings of easy compassion and thereby neglects one of her stated educative goals.

To Life and The Holocaust Lady reveal the lasting effects of the Shoah on the survivor; in The Cage, Riva remembers her experiences between 1939 and 1945 in Lodz before and during the time of the ghetto, her one-week stay in Auschwitz, and her labor camp experiences. The Cage is thus the Holocaust memoir as such, whereas the succeeding narratives reveal an ambivalence between memories, levels of consciousness, and the new life that make the narrative matter less focused, but increasingly interesting to the adult reader as a document of a survivor’s recounting.

To Life opens in the present tense of the Sender family’s arrival in New York harbor on February 2, 1950. Riva’s heart is “singing with joy,” though her voice quivers as she calls to her son: “Look, Laibele! Look! The Statue of Liberty” (TL, 1). But Riva’s mind wanders back to May 5, 1945, to the time of liberation by a Russian soldier on a white horse, to her attempts to return to Poland where she finds a virulent anti-Semitism. Without success she looks for her mother and brothers; she meets Moishe (Moniek) Senderowicz who was in Auschwitz for five years: “There is a silent apology in his eyes. ‘I survived many work details, selection to the gas chambers. I faced castration. I faced death. I survived five years’” (TL, 45). These are the details he communicates to her about his suffering. Two months later, on July 7, they marry and are typical of survivors who had no time for prolonged courtship. Tydor Baumel describes such young couples starting their lives in displaced persons camps: “The urge to marry and raise a family as fast as possible was the paramount desire among both male and female Holocaust survivors, many of whose entire families had perished during the war. . . [F]emale Holocaust survivors often found themselves carrying a double burden—attempting to return to physical and mental equilibrium, while establishing a household, completing pregnancy and later caring for small children. This was particularly difficult as many women lacked home-making experience due to the turbulence of the war years.”11 Riva and Moniek share life in displaced persons camps for five years and struggle with the bureaucracy of emigration to the United States. By the time they succeed, Riva has been reunited with her two sisters and has given birth to her first two sons. It is in the DP camps that Riva tentatively begins her public roles as teacher
and as writer about the Holocaust. The subtext of *To Life*, however, is her persistent grief over losses that are irredeemable and cause her at the end to “still search for Motele and Moishele [her brothers], for members of my family. I still write letters to various organizations engaged in tracing lost families. Sometimes I study the faces of strangers or stop short when someone’s voice sounds familiar.—As long as there is life there is hope” (229).

Her public self as a writer has made her the Holocaust Lady in the third memoir which continues the struggles of the Sender family in the new life and the growth of their family. Riva’s bond with her children, especially with her daughter, compensates her somewhat for her difficult marriage. Most of all, however, the narrative reveals her development as a writer and speaker whose memory is conventionalized in a story she can afford to tell. Her writing complements her oral recountings to school children in the safe environment of the classroom, a familiar site for many survivors who teach Holocaust awareness. She looks “normal” and accessible to the students as she admonishes them that they “will have to be witnesses [and] stand guard against hatred and indifference” (HL, 13). To her inner eye, however, there flashes the picture of a bag lady with two heavy bags she once saw in a train station: “I, too, carry heavy bags. Invisible bags. Bags filled with memories of horror, pain, courage, hope. My life. My past” (HL, 10). Like “bag lady,” “Holocaust Lady” is an oxymoron, for no story can yoke the permanent abyss between the two terms. Sender, however, appears not to be aware of nor is she consciously reflective about this fundamental impasse in representing the Holocaust—the facts of traumatic experience and the limits of language; instead, she perceives herself as an effective communicator, especially when her young listeners respond with tears.

Time and again the repetitions in the three memoirs confirm the author’s ambivalence because grief “is repeated in reduced, normatively controlled, and socially supported form.”12 “Victims of trauma,” argues LaCapra in his study on representing the Holocaust, “may experience not only ‘guilt’ about surviving but intense anxiety about rebuilding a life and beginning again. One basis of anxiety is the feeling that building a new life is a betrayal of loved ones who died or were overwhelmed in the past that will not pass away.”13 As with Sender’s first two memoirs, *The Holocaust Lady* begins with the present but then moves into the common memory of life in America as it is influenced by the deep memory of Riva’s experiences in the Holocaust. The narrative concludes in the present with the joyous day of her grandson’s bar mitzvah, during which he
acknowledges that he is the grandson of Holocaust survivors and, therefore, belongs to the generation of Jews the Nazis never intended to be born (HL, 191–192). Before her inner eye float the faces of those who perished as she simultaneously affirms but leaves unfinished her dictum “Where there is life . . .” (192). She retains the baggage of the Holocaust Lady, but feels justified in assuming that her burden is acknowledged by the world and her family.

In each of her memoirs the narrator devises a master narrative about three subjects: this is what I went through during the Holocaust; this is what happened after the war until we emigrated to the United States; this is why and how I became a teacher and writer about the Holocaust. The official claim in each narrative is that in spite of grievous losses and personal trauma, an individual with special gifts will find meaning and significance. These master narratives are directed to young readers who, like Nancy, may ask questions such as “Why did the Nazis kill your brothers?” The text does not answer such questions, even as it attempts to transform the young reader-listener into a witness. By definition, however, the young witness is a diminished self in relation to the master narrative with which she or he cannot compete experientially. In relation to the Holocaust, the story of that diminished self is always less than the master narrative. Because she or he lacks the experiential past of the narrator, the young witness can only further reduce and sentimentalize as post-memory his or her affective response to the survivor’s story.

It is, therefore, not in the officially stated and enabling rhetoric that the significance of narratives such as Ruth Minsky Sender’s can be found. Her choice to write for children and young readers, who are unlikely to engage in analysis and interpretation beyond emotional reader responses, protects her subtexts. Sender has received scarce critical attention, but her narratives and especially her descriptions of classroom visits are an accurate representation of survivor visits to American classrooms and for that reason alone deserve to be studied. Moreover, the subtext of her memoirs reveals a traumatized and damaged self that is both typical of Holocaust survivors and unique in the defensive narrative maneuvers that enable the narrator to construct for herself a public image with which to overlay her private deprivations.

In my discussion of Sender’s memoirs I will focus on the scenes of deprivation that lead her to define herself in terms of the dictum “I am a child but also a mother,” the subtext of her narrative. Her child needs are claimed through real and visible illnesses that succeed in gaining her nurturing attention even in the most adverse contexts. It is through her per-
Sparing the Child

sona as speaker and writer—the public definition of her self which begins with “letters to Mama” in the Lodz ghetto after the mother has already been murdered in Chelmno—that Sender claims for herself a mother substitution through which she can channel publicly her unfulfilled needs as a child. In 1939 Riva Minska was thirteen; at the time of “liberation” in 1945 she was nineteen. Adolescence was impossible in ghettos or camps.

The narrator privileges that implied reader who is younger than she was in 1939 when normal development was wrested from her by atrocious history. She feels protective of and wants to spare the young reader, the child that she wanted to be, even as she intends to transform the reader into a witness who will testify to her trauma. What the narrator of these memoirs fails to realize is that, just as she was unable to fulfill the premature designation “motherhood” when she was still a child herself, so the reader is incapable of comprehending, much less resisting atrocious history as told in the appealing language of the pity of suffering. This appeal gratifies both the reader and the teller of the tale, but limits both, even as both delude themselves that their exercise in memory and post-memory engages them in preventing a repetition of the Holocaust.

I. The Time of the Disaster: Riva Minska and the Cage of Memory

Sender’s Holocaust memoir, The Cage, is aptly titled. On the literal level, the cage is the various imprisonments in which she finds herself—the Lodz ghetto, Auschwitz, and the labor camps. However, as a trope the cage is memory, the inner prison that shadows everything she does and everything that happens to her after the disaster. The adult reader is soon aware that the narrator depicts herself as an unusually sensitive person who is easily shattered by the too-muchness of the world that overwhelms her. To cope, she claims specialness through illness and poetic expression. However, in comparison with memoirs such as Charlotte Delbo’s Auschwitz and After it is evident that the unthinkable is not revealed or even implied in Sender’s narratives. There are signs in her memoirs that her husband, who struggles with depression and anger, did endure the unthinkable in Auschwitz, though he can never find relief through words. Riva-Ruth speaks and writes, but Moniek Sender remains mute about his Holocaust memories.

Riva’s first cage is the Lodz ghetto into which all Jews were forced to move by December 1939. The ghetto was sealed on May 1, 1940, a finality that the narrator commemorates: “May 1940. The gates of the ghetto in Lodz are shut tight. One hundred and eighty thousand men, women and
children are herded together inside a barbed-wire cage. Unemployment, hunger, disease: they come together and spread their pain and misery.” (25). As Michal Unger points out in her historical review of the ghetto, 71,227 men and 85,175 women were counted in the ghetto census by June 16, 1940. “The hardest year for the Jews in the ghetto was 1942, when starvation claimed more than 18,108 victims, approximately 40% women and 60% men.” Deportations of the Jews of Lodz to the killing center of Chelmno began on January 16, 1942, the so-called “first phase.” Nevertheless, the Lodz ghetto operated until August 1944; by that time it was the last ghetto on Polish soil. In part, the sustaining of the ghetto was due to the vast workforce laboring for the German army in the textile and garment factories of Lodz. As Unger makes clear, this slave labor was in “payment” to the Germans for maintaining the ghetto; they had of course already stolen most of the Jews’ money and property. While Sender, who was in Lodz until August 1944, does not venture into the political or economic contexts of the ghetto, her narrative reflects the harsh living conditions and the brutal treatment of the Jews by the Germans (C, 18–20).

Referring to the agonizing year of 1942, the narrator writes: “The ghetto walls are closing in. Terror and panic fill every home. Nazis are inside the ghetto, taking away the sick, the old, and the children. The streets are deserted” and the silence is broken only by the Nazis shout of “Jews out, Jews out” (32). In her effort to hide and protect her tubercular son, Laibele, from being captured during the search, Riva’s mother follows the Nazi call, hoping that, if she makes herself and her other three children visible, the Nazis will not search the apartment. But, because Nacha Minsky looks ill, she is selected for transport and her protesting children are brutally kicked away: “I hear Mama’s agonizing scream, and the wagon disappears from sight. Moishele and I help Motele up. He is bleeding. I wipe the blood with my sleeve. We stare at one another in shock—three bewildered kids in the middle of an empty world” (35). Doomed as she was, Riva’s mother was selected on that day because she wanted to protect the weakest of her children. Though Laibele was indeed saved, all four children were orphaned and could stay together only if Riva became their legal guardian and accepted the official but precocious definition of herself as “mother.” Feeling lost and helpless, the sixteen-year-old can only mother by expressing affection. Her brothers, instead, give her active care after the effects of malnutrition force her to stay in bed and to turn needful as a child in her emotional and physical dependence on them.
Laibele is also confined to his bed and his eventual death is the only death Riva can accept through conventional grief work—she sees him dead and she visits his grave after the war. She herself suffers from swollen legs and gallstones (which will not be treated until she has immigrated to America). The years in the ghetto not only establish patterns of illness, but also generate in her the desire to teach and to write. She receives the necessary encouragement after she falls in love with Yulek Schwartz, a young socialist and avid reader who recites poetry with her. He urges her to continue writing her “Letters to Mama” as well as her journal: “You see, Riva, some day it will all end, and those letters will be very important. We may forget what happened today, but your letters will remember” (C, 85). He exhorts that “we must teach mankind what evil, hatred and prejudice can do.” When he and his sister are placed on the list of deportees and Riva seeks to prevent his leaving, he reminds her that she is legally and morally responsible for her younger brothers, just as he is morally responsible for his sister (106). Their young love ends when Yulek is transported; she remembers him not only as a voice of conscience but also as the only man in her life who had the gift of words and the ability to communicate.

Because Yulek is a young socialist, Riva feels energized even in Lodz to the extent that she offers her apartment for socialist meetings. She also benefits from the privileges extended to her by her like-minded supervisor in the tailor shop who knew her “parents from their union activities before the war” (C, 43). When her name appears on a list of adolescents about to be deported, the supervisor replaces her with another victim. Riva is spared but is deeply conflicted and, in writing about her privilege, experiences the tainted memory that Langer defines as a “narrative stained by the disapproval of the witness’s own present moral sensibility. . . . Tainted memory is nonetheless a form of self-justification, a painful validation of necessary if not always admirable conduct.”16 The conflicted Riva can only weep as she accepts her privilege along with the supervisor’s rationalization. He claims that he was not personally motivated in taking her off the list, but cognizant of the duties that she, Riva, has as the legal guardian of her brothers:

Riva, I had to play God. I had to choose. The list called for teenagers, true, but you are only a teenager in years. In reality you are a mother of two younger children. You are the legal guardian of your brothers. I did not save one life—I saved three. Your brothers would go with you if you were deported. They would volunteer. They are so young. What chance would they have in a labor camp? You are their mother; you must protect them! You must think of them. I did. (C, 97)
The supervisor and Yulek are voices of the superego that Riva cannot internalize, not only because the disaster is bigger than the power of personalized conscience, but also because she herself is a teenage child in need of a mother. She responds to her supervisor’s reasoning by burying her “face in his chest,” crying hysterically (C, 97). Nevertheless, this incisive event confirms her specialness in disastrous history, even as it suggests that being privileged is always at the expense of another. Later, Riva will claim privilege for herself as a prisoner in a labor camp and will justify that claim through her ability to write poems that maintain the morale of her fellow inmates and awaken “human responses” in the Nazi commandant.

After five years of struggle for survival in the Lodz ghetto, Riva and her brothers must report for transport in August 1944. Upon their arrival at Auschwitz the train is emptied with characteristic and terrifying speed—“to the left, to the right”—and Riva is separated from Motele and Moishele: “Where are you my brothers! Where are you my children? Don’t leave me alone” (C, 134). Once more her desperate voice reveals her conflict between surrogate mother and child in need.

Riva is in Auschwitz for one week; a group of supportive women sustains her in this world, the purpose of which she cannot fathom. Sender communicates to the young reader what she saw and experienced—the shaving of hair, the delousing, the crowded barracks, the kettle of “soup,” and the latrine. She describes the latter in the language of the Holocaust Lady who de-familiarizes conventional euphemisms with the excremental imagery of disaster: “The toilet consists of a huge barrack filled with holes in the ground, over which the rag-clad women stand with their legs apart, answering nature’s call” [my italics] (C, 142). The Shoah’s vanishing point, the gas chambers and the crematoria, remain for her an ominous and puzzling warning: “You’ll end up in smoke. You’ll end up in smoke. Those words spin around and around in my head. What is that smoke? What did those words mean?” (141; Sender’s emphasis). She did not witness the final moments of victims; she was spared from death and, as a woman, she would never have been selected for Sonderkommando (special detail) work at the gas chambers or crematoria. As narrator she can spare the child by limiting herself to what she saw. Her most traumatizing moment, however, occurs not in Auschwitz but in the labor camp Mittelsteine. Here the female commandant becomes the “bad mother” who licenses child abuse.

Time and again survivors recall the refined, gratuitous, and totally absurd cruelty with which the perpetrator tortured the victims collective-
ly or individually. There is no “why,” no objective correlative for such cruel punishment. The narrator testifies about two hungry sisters, Faige and Chane, who stole potato peels. To learn a “lesson,” the young women of the camp line up before the commandant to witness the punishment. When Faige pleads for her sister and offers that she should be punished instead, the commandant hands her the whip with the order “Here, you do the punishing” (173). Chane curls up on the ground and each time the whip bears down on her “a strange sound tears from Faige’s throat” (174). Faige laughs hysterically and cries:

“Mama! Can you see me, Mama? Can you hear me, Mama? I did not let them hurt Chanele. I love my sister. I did not hurt her. See her dance. Hear her laugh. Come, Mama, take my hand. Take Chanele’s hand. Let’s dance. Let’s sing.”

She kisses Chanele’s tear-stained face softly. Whip in hand, she dances around her horrified sister. “Chanele, Mama came to take us home. Mama is here, Chanele. Let’s go home.” Then she sits down on the ground, singing softly.

We stand frozen in horror. “She is crazy,” the commandant says in disgust. “She’s lost her mind. Take them away!” (174–75)

The commandant absolves herself: “I did not beat her. Her sister did” (175). Her last order is to the kapo: “No food for anyone today!” The women run to their barracks to avoid the clubs and whips of the guards. “Shaken, horrified by what we have just witnessed, we each crawl into our cubicles,” (175) unaware that the commandant and the guards were anxious to clear the ground, to stifle any possibility of protest or heroic gesture.

In her recounting of this physically and psychologically sadistic incident, Sender’s narrative voice speaks from the collective of the young women as eye-witnesses: “We stand frozen in horror.” The memory is called up in the present tense, without commentary or hortatory reminders of hope—the event speaks for itself through the witness who was paralyzed with horror as the sight of abuse imprinted itself. Yet, the incident is remembered not only because it was traumatic, but also because it is such an infernal inversion of Riva’s hopes and desires. Faige’s call to the absent mother and her inability to protect her younger sister parallels Riva’s relation to her brothers, a connection the text does not acknowledge.

Riva’s defense against this traumatic event and its perpetrator, the commandant as evil mother, is complicated. After a friend steals a pencil for her, she seeks relief by writing her first poem on September 23, 1944. She begins to perceive the act of writing poems as a most reliable friend:
“I share all my dreams, share my hopes with my friend/ Share the pain that is filling my heart.” Her friend Tola acknowledges “Riva, you speak for all of us. . . . They cannot kill our spirit, our hunger to survive” (179). Riva’s poems do not bear witness to specific atrocities; they express generalized emotions and conventional images and precepts. Nevertheless, the blanks in such poems enable poet and listeners to associate in their responses freely and by doing so reassure themselves that they still can feel. The specificity of atrocity in the camp world and Sender’s muteness as a witness are consigned to deep memory. In a world where all conventions are shattered, the familiarity of the clichés about hopes and dreams is reassuring, but also emphasizes the abyss between experience, memory, and recounting.

Through her poems the narrator effects a feeling of community with her fellow sufferers, but the apparent ease with which this is accomplished is complicated by two events. Riva falls seriously ill with blood poisoning and the inmate-physician persuades the commandant that Riva needs surgery at a proper hospital so that she can return healed and continue to write poetry to keep up inmate morale: “Madam Commandant, as long as the girls have a will to live, they can still work. The girls’ morale is important. Riva is important for their morale. You must try to save her” (187). Riva needs three trips to the hospital before she is cured. The second event occurs during her convalescence when the commandant notices her during the “Christmas show” as Riva recites, in Yiddish, her poem “Message for Mama,” a personal message shared by “four hundred Nazi victims in this camp to four hundred mothers crying for their children” (214).

Riva faints at the end of her recitation. The commandant enters the sick room and Riva finds herself “all alone with this beast who takes pleasure in punishing helpless victims.” The commandant places a small notebook on the bed:

“You do not have to hide your poetry,” she says. “I was sure that we killed all your emotions, that all you can feel is hunger, all you can think of is bread.” She stops, looking away. “Your poems are full of hope, of love. You still feel. You still dream. You yearn for your mother. You reminded me that I, too, have a mother.”

She stands up and leaves the room without looking at me.

I pick up the notebook with shaking hands. This did not really happen. I must be dreaming. There is something human in that woman, something that can be moved by a poem. I touch the small notebook. It is real. I am not dreaming. It is real. (217)
The narrator interprets the incident in terms of her power to move, reaffirming her individuality and hope. Anything was possible in the inverted world of the camps. The record shows that even in a death camp an operation was occasionally performed under general anesthesia and the patient would not be “put to sleep” permanently. Furthermore, the brutality coupled with sentimentality of the commandant is typical of Nazis who defined their victims as subhuman and simultaneously could claim “I am no murderer.” “For women,” as Claudia Koonz points out in her study of women in the Third Reich, “to be a guard meant a major departure from the moral values and experiences of women.” Female guards “seemed” more cruel because their behavior deviated further from our conceptions of ‘feminine’ models than men guards’ behavior departed from stereotypes about men. This is why female guards such as the notorious Irma Grese of Auschwitz-Birkenau became such epitomes of evil. Grese, sentenced to death by a British court in 1945, is known to have cut open women’s breasts with her whip and then watched with erotically suggestive glee the painful operation performed afterward on her victims.

The narrator is unable to acknowledge the commandant’s sentimental hypocrisy of “you reminded me that I, too, have a mother”; instead, she concludes that the SS woman has a modicum of goodness and humanity because she, too, had a mother. Her implicit assumption is that all human beings that have mothers have a core of goodness because they were mothered. She is unaware that the scene with the commandant sitting at her bedside is an exercise of refined victimization and selfish manipulation. Her capricious and self-interested favoring of Riva undermines the psychological resistance of her victim. The evil mother becomes for the moment the sentimental daughter, a daughter just like her victim longing for a mother. Believing in the redemptive power of her poetry, Riva is oblivious to the possibilities that her poems contribute to maintaining the camps operations by sustaining inmate morale and that the “kindness” of the commandant may well be motivated by ensuring a friendly witness at the end of the war. This “blind spot” in the narrative, comparable in its unintentionality to the blanks in Richter’s trilogy, reveals the narrator’s tendency to see herself as a special individual even in the context of atrocity. The naïveté of the implied dictum “people are really good at heart” originates from her emotional needs and from her trust that goodness can be called forth by the right words even in an intrinsically evil context. The enabling rhetoric of this scene communicates to the implied reader that a person with special talents will always be acknowledged. Riva has made
herself indispensable in the camp and gained through poetry and illness an individuality denied to others. The effect of such confidence on the implied and actual reader celebrates the heroic gesture and daydreams of rescue.

II. Grief and the Construction of the Survivor’s Self in To Life and The Holocaust Lady

The narrative of Sender’s The Cage opens and closes with the images of an idyllic spring day. The narrator and her young daughter, Nancy—much younger than the implied reader of the narrative—communicate gently and lovingly in a warm sunlit room at home, the positive antithesis to “camps, camps. The word penetrates my numbness” (C, 230). As a published recounting, The Cage is by definition a public statement, but there is an inward turn in the narrative to the private intimate sphere as the daughter who lost her mother is now a mother to her daughter whose loving attitude compensates for her inability to comprehend the mother’s experience in the Shoah. The attempts of hope and affirmation exert a healing pressure against the persistent resurgence of the memory of loss, pain, and grief. The ending appears to signify that a sequel would be unnecessary, for the moment of “liberation” has been recounted; love and the need for vigilance have been affirmed.

But, as writings by survivors such as Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel demonstrate, one master narrative is usually not sufficient, for, to amplify Maurice Blanchot, the very intactness of the world to which the survivor returns accentuates the disaster that ruined everything. The disaster did not change, much less did it redeem the world. Sender’s To Life and The Holocaust Lady are about “surviving survival” and about the construction of the self as survivor through the increasingly public discourse of the survivor. The struggle and evolution of that discourse begin in To Life and are completed in The Holocaust Lady through the public persona of the survivor, the scar tissue of memory indefinitely defers the healing of the “dirty wounds” of experience.

In his study of recountings by Holocaust survivors, Henry Greenspan highlights the reciprocity between the expectations of the audience and the survivor’s discourse. In the intactness of the world of those who were not there, the recounting of the disaster must not ruin anything. According to Greenspan, we have, therefore, imaged the survivor by means of both a ceremonial and a psychiatric rhetoric. “The former honors the survivor as hero and celebrant of life; the latter depicts him as ghost and wreck. So
self-sufficient have these discourses become that they are increasingly detached—not only from each other—but from remembering the Holocaust itself.” As a result, the intact world notes the psychological consequences of the Holocaust—such as survivor guilt or depression—“as diagnostic confirmation” of disaster rather than as an invitation to discussion.” Young readers or listeners, who live in the intact world that the survivor affirms and cherishes, are at the same time expected to become witnesses to the survivor’s memory of the disaster that ruined everything. The bridging between those two unbridgeable worlds is an illusion facilitated through the enabling rhetoric of an increasingly public discourse.

Greenspan insists that the ceremonial and psychiatric discourse about and by survivors are separate repressive strategies, but Sender’s To Life and The Holocaust Lady, as their very titles signify, integrate both. Her ceremonial, even heroic assertions are associated with the theme of hope; her symptoms such as physical illness, depression, and compulsive weeping express her unresolved and unresolvable grief. In choosing to write for the young—though text and subtext repeatedly problematize that choice—she can protect herself from difficult and painful self-reflections about her reaction to the disaster. It is a profound irony that narratives such as Ruth Minsky Sender’s, determined as they are by the expectations of the implied reader, contribute to the erosion of deep memory whose fading is feared as survivors near the end their lives in ordinary time. Another compensating irony is that the survivor’s public narrative is always complicated and subverted by her often pre-conscious subtext and by textual gaps not admitted in the narrator’s official rhetoric.

Those survivors who can afford to express themselves through text and subtext give voice, unintentionally, to those for whom muteness is not a trope but a painful reality. Moishe (Moniek) Senderowicz, Riva’s husband, suffers because he cannot speak about his five years in Auschwitz. In To Life and The Holocaust Lady his silenced story is a third possible recounting. The attentive reader of Sender’s memoir begins to wonder “what happened to Moniek in Auschwitz? What did he have to do in order to survive?” The narrator, however, never asks such questions, never intrudes on her husband’s memory. When he gives Riva his original summative account of his Auschwitz experience, he does so “with a silent apology in his eyes” (TL, 45). What is his motive for the nonverbal apology? Many survivor accounts, including those of long-term inmates, indicate that underlying the daily struggle for life was a sense of certainty that they would not survive. Such a radical hopelessness enabled some individuals to act in ways antithetical to previously internalized ethical val-
ues. In her study of the evolution of the survivor to witness, Annette Wieviorka can cite only one example of a self-implicating member of the Jewish police in the Warsaw ghetto who wrote before deportation with the assumption that he would not survive. Interviewers of death camp survivors also admit “that we haven’t managed to interview people who belonged to the Jewish police or those who were not particularly nice.”

Is it possible that Moniek’s Auschwitz story would be what Langer calls “a story of dirty wounds,” a wound that Riva makes literal in her account of blood-poisoning but otherwise transmutes into poetic sentiment? Moniek’s silence fully retains his experience of the disaster and refuses enabling by means of ceremonial or psychiatric rhetoric. His inability to articulate becomes, however, a serious problem in his marriage, especially after Riva begins to contribute publicly to the discourse of Holocaust awareness. When he, after the publication of *The Cage*, accompanies Riva to a presentation and book signing at a Catholic school, a reporter asks him about Auschwitz. Moniek admits to Riva; “I couldn’t handle it. I choke. The words remain in my throat. Tears fill my eyes.” On the way home, he reflects: “I wonder how you are able to do it. . . . I know it is hard for you. . . . So why? Why do you need the nightmares that follow?” She replies: “Moniek, we live nightmares if we speak about it or not. . . . Maybe by sharing our nightmares, I can make a difference.” They drive home in silence (HL, 184–85). Shortly thereafter, Sender decides to write *To Life*, “the book about the survivor’s struggle to find a home, to build a new life . . .” (HL, 185).

*To Life* is in part a tribute to the way Moniek was in the first years of their marriage, a hopeful time when he struggled for a future beyond the displaced persons camps; however, during the struggle for economic independence in America and Riva’s increasing need to establish a separate and public identity for herself as a Holocaust survivor, tensions mount between husband and wife. The inability to resolve, much less work through grief afflicts both, but while Riva manages her grief through the ceremony of telling her story, Moniek fluctuates between depression and anger and finds relief only in moments such as his grandson’s bar mitzvah where the thirteen-year-old acknowledges “I am a grandson of Holocaust survivors. . . . So with great love and admiration I give this day to you” and enables Moniek to sob wordlessly in the community of celebrants (HL, 191–92). Riva’s and Moniek’s marriage exemplifies the kind of survivor marriage Aaron Hass describes, namely, a commitment occurring perhaps too soon after liberation and motivated by the desire to avoid the mourning process and to replace lost family members. A social level-
ing frequently occurred, based “on the belief that the fellow survivor was the only one who would understand, [though] the partners knew little of the details of the spouse’s experience. These unions had a lack of closeness at best, hostile stalemate at worst.”

The title To Life proclaims affirmation; indeed, Riva marries, gives birth to her first two sons, discovers that her siblings survived in the Soviet Union, writes letters to Moniek’s and her distant relatives, begins her work to teach Jewish identity to children of survivors, and supports Moniek’s effort to attain emigration papers. After an initial attempt to return to Poland, where she encounters a persistent and virulent anti-Semitism, Riva feels safest among fellow survivors in the DP camp and summarizes several of their stories in her memoir. Most of the time, however, the displaced survivors do not talk about their experiences; it is enough for them to know that they all share similar memories. For five years she is defined as a “displaced person,” literally and figuratively. Moreover, the camps are all in Germany and each site reminds her of a concentration camp. This transitional and yet seemingly endless stay in the camps defers the start of a genuinely new life which, in turn, will be complicated by the emergence of memories once the Senders are in America. The uneasy oxymoron of “Holocaust lady” will be for Riva the only possible synthesis.

As is the case with many survivors, Riva’s affliction is not “the inability to mourn” (Mitscherlich), rather it is an ethically required mourning, a permanent subtext to her official affirmations of hope in a new life after the disaster. If The Cage is a recounting of what happened to Riva during the Shoah, To Life depicts her inconsolable grief over the loss of her mother and younger brothers. The death of her brother Laibele, “who died in my arms on April 23, 1943,” is real to her and, even though his body was carted off unceremoniously with other corpses, she can assure herself “that in the Jewish cemetery in Lodz he has a grave” (TL, 20). She visits his grave when she returns to Lodz in 1945 with the hope that her mother is still alive (TL, 38). When she hears a depersonalized voice of the Jewish Relief Committee announce that “the Jews of the Lodz ghetto taken during the Nazi raids in 1942 were gassed in trucks in Chelmno,” Riva, by focusing only on the deportation, denies what she knows to be the truth: “My head spins. I jump up. A horrified scream rips my body. ‘No! No! My mother was taken during those raids’” (8). Years later, shortly before she assumes the persona of the Holocaust Lady, she admits in conversation with neighbors that she has no mother: “She was gassed by the Nazis. . . . She died because she was a Jew” (HL, 125). Her neighbor’s
half-reproachful comment “You never speak about it” resonates and motivates her to come forth and speak and write. Eventually, she can make a summative statement as tears flow over her face:

When I returned to Lodz from the death camps, I learned that the people taken from Lodz in September 1942 were gassed in the town of Chelmno. The trucks had Red Cross symbols on them. The people entering them believed they were going to be examined by doctors, but gas was pumped into the trucks. They all died. My mother was one of them. (HL, 15)

She refers her students to Lanzmann’s film Shoah where the numbers of the murdered flow over the green field of Chelmno and she asks the youngsters to “think of my mother, a loving compassionate woman who believed in a world that would not be silent” (HL, 16). When she sees tears in their eyes, she offers the children her message of hope, even as the images of her mother and brothers float before her inner eye. For herself and the reader she concludes: “They died. I survived—and became the Holocaust Lady!” (16).

In her presentations, she shapes her mother’s murder into an official story, but her body language insists on her permanent grief and, as she struggles against her tears, she communicates less information about the Holocaust than the event of a Holocaust survivor who speaks in a classroom and hopes for tears in the eyes of the children. “Now I see tears in some of the children’s eyes” (HL, 16) is the moment she seeks to effect, the moment that confirms her persona and the assumption that the children are compassionate and will not be silent as the world was during the Holocaust. The classroom visit also conveys the illusion that grief is “worked through” by the narrator’s public self in the ritual of a repeated recounting for which she has a personal need.

While her mother’s murder is made indisputable by the fact that there were only two male survivors of Chelmno, the vanishing of her brothers at Auschwitz is complicated by the fact that she was their surrogate mother and that they disappeared without a physical trace. Regarding them, her grief and hope are constant, though she realizes at a conference of survivors in 1983, that her hope for their survival is an illusion she shares with others: “We are living with false hope.... We are searching. Forever searching” (HL, 180). Furthermore, in naming their children after murdered relatives, Riva and Moniek follow not only Jewish custom but also confirm the persistent memory of loss through the presence of their children. At the birth of their first son on August 27, 1946, two years to the date after Riva arrived in Auschwitz, Riva mourns her unknown father-in-
For Riva the dead will always shadow the living and her first family will always have precedence over her new life with Moniek. When she is in labor for the birth of her first child, Moniek brings her a letter from her oldest sister, Chana, who informs her that her sister Mala and her brother Yankl also survived. Nevertheless, her joy is choked when she notes that Chana does not mention Laibish, Mala’s husband. It is the absent name that upsets her deeply and she feels a tightness in her chest and a shortness of breath, not because of her labor pains but because a man she never knew might be dead (TL, 113–115). Loss through death becomes a fear of loss and, finally, is transformed into anxiety and fear over any absence of her siblings, as if the absence of a person meant death.

After her third son is born in Boston, she becomes seriously depressed and admits, after an irritated Moniek asks why she is constantly crying, “I miss my sisters, my brother. . . . Let’s move to New York, Moniek, please” (HL, 59). Not only will it be difficult for Moniek to find work in New York, but also Mala’s apartment is small. When the Sender family of five moves in, Mala realizes the root cause of Riva’s need to be with them: “You were robbed of your childhood. . . . You had no childhood, Riva” (HL, 63). Her sister’s nurturing in a “home filled with warmth” offers Riva a maternal substitute. Once again she has defined herself as a crying child in need, a definition confirmed by a stranger’s comment while she travels to New York with her small children: “You look like a child yourself. It must be hard on you. I do not think I would have the strength” (HL, 50). Riva’s acute separation anxieties stay with her for many years and seem to fade only after her children reach adolescence and early adulthood.

Her relation to her first family and her need for them consign the childhood of her four children to a textual blank. Her children are never difficult; they live happy and charming childhood moments. Sender broaches the issue of the problems of children of survivors when Riva admits to a group of women survivors that “the children of survivors, even if they do not speak about it, feel the hidden agony of their parents. I think that in their own way they, too, are survivors.” When asked if children of survivors have emotional problems, she replies evasively: “I am sure some do. I know very few.” Then, turning defensively angry, she charges that those who are not survivors have children with emotional problems.
(HL, 112–113). In her memoirs, Riva’s children are of interest to her only when they demonstrate active concern in their mother’s traumatic past. As a family the Senders appear to have silenced the Holocaust. It is as a public self that Riva can talk to the more or less neutral audience of school children.

Riva, who never received a formal education, has, nevertheless, a natural talent and genuine interest in teaching that are manifested in her preschool care for children in the DP camps. When she begins to speak about her memories to school children in America, she notes that “with each personal appearance at public schools, private schools, temples, parochial schools, organizations, I gain more confidence. In each published piece, I share more of the past. I feel drained each time I walk away from the typewriter” (HL, 163). Her desire for public recounting strains her marriage; only her daughter Nancy shows understanding and compassion privately and publicly, as when Riva speaks to Nancy’s class about her experiences.

Riva’s persona reveals a constant need for attention, a need that families rarely fulfill. Though unschooled, she struggles to fulfill her dream to be a teacher and a writer, with her personal experience and reaction to the Shoah as her exclusive subject matter. During the late 1940s and for most of the 1950s, the survivor culture in the DP camps and, later, in America tended to silence personal recounts of Holocaust experiences. Riva tells how survivors prefer to be with each other because they need not speak about their sufferings. Even in the intimacy of marriage, muteness about the disaster was an unspoken agreement; one’s partner simply understood because she or he had been there. Yet, while there is a basic pattern to the experience in the Shoah, these patterns have infinite variables in situations and personal responses. In her situations and in much of her behavior, Ruth Minsky Sender is representative of the Holocaust survivor, but, more than others, she is distinguished by the urgency to gather the shattered fragments of her dream to become a teacher and writer. This is her primary goal, which she can only fulfill by recounting what she knows—her experience in the Holocaust and her emotional reactions to it. The historical evolution toward the murder of the Jews of Europe, as historians or social scientists would reconstruct and contextualize it, is not part of her witnessing.

Because Moniek will not speak about his Auschwitz memories, Riva, whose experiences were comparatively less horrific, is restrained from speaking about hers. Her siblings, who had more than a difficult time in the war-torn Soviet Union, differentiate their experiences from hers: “We
were not in the death camps” (TL, 122). Ostensibly, her children are protected from the trauma of the past; they will read about their mother’s experiences eventually or listen to her, as Nancy does, in the classroom.

Riva initiated her voice as a writer in Lodz through her “Letters to Mama” after her mother had been deported. She writes to an absence that she imagines as an “addressable thou”; moreover, her friend Yulek’s fate-ful encouragement “You keep on writing, and never stop being yourself” (C, 85), links her writing with the construction of self. However, Sender does not raise the issue of whether it is possible to represent the Holocaust in a narrative and she never acknowledges the inherent difficulties in the medium of language asked to represent the Holocaust. Compared to other survivor narratives—Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz*, Wiesel’s *Night* and even Spiegelman’s *Maus*—she makes few attempts at representing the disaster with that understated sparse voice that distinguishes the master narratives of the Holocaust; instead, she directs her memories into generalities such as “horror, pain and degradation,” the vitality of the human spirit and, always, to the tearful response, the outward sign of her ordeal. In part she spares the young reader through this verbal and nonverbal rhetoric, but she also constitutes her self in the telling by adjusting herself to audience expectations, though her examples and precepts mean, no doubt, something quite different to her than to her young listeners or readers.

The crucial moment that motivates her to tell her story occurs in Riva’s English language class for adults when a fellow student, a widow with grown children, admits “now I have time for school. So I keep coming back . . . That’s my story” (HL, 78) Riva listens to an inner voice clamoring “you have a story to tell, for, if the story is not told, we should be running around mad “ (HL, 79; Sender’s emphasis). She goes home, takes a pen and stares at the blank page until “suddenly today disappears” and it is September 1942. The physical act of writing affects memory and emotion kinetically: “My pen moves swiftly over the paper. I remember. Tears blind me. I keep on writing. I remember. . . I feel worn out and slump heavily into a chair.” She sends her first person story to *The Reader’s Digest*; it is rejected, “they have no room for my story” (HL, 81). She also continues to write poems, and some of these appear in Jewish publications, but most remain hidden in a drawer.

When she announces to her husband “I want to go to the Jewish Teachers Seminary. . . I always wanted to be a teacher of Jewish history and culture,” an angry Moniek reminds her that she is the mother of three children who need her at home (HL, 99–100). Riva, who was defined as
a mother at age sixteen, accepts this official designation, but motherhood is her self-identity: “My life was torn apart, my dreams destroyed. I must begin again” (HL, 100). She enrolls in the seminary and accepts its goals: “We must remember . . . we must learn . . . we must teach.”

She gives her poems to her seminary teacher, for she “feels guilty that my poems, the witnesses of horror and degradation, stay buried in a drawer, silent and useless.” Moved by them, he sends the poems, a “valuable testimony to the strength of the human spirit” to the Institute of Jewish Research and tells Riva: “You are the living Anne Frank. . . . She wrote in hiding. You wrote in concentration camps. You both held on to hope” (109). The comparison with Anne Frank would be made publicly in a review of The Cage, designated as “an excellent companion to The Diary of Anne Frank. It is a book that Ann[e] might have written had she survived.”

In content and literary quality, there is of course no comparison between Anne Frank’s diary and Sender’s memoirs other than the fact that both were adolescents. Anne perished in Bergen-Belsen in a context far more disastrous than the labor camp. Moreover, Anne has two implied readers: the blank pages of her diary which she calls “Kitty,” an ideal friend who absorbs and keeps within its covers everything Anne wants to confide. The second implied reader is the world after the war, a world eager to hear about the suffering, not of Anne, but of the Dutch people under German occupation. For that undefined reader, Anne rewrote and edited the first version of her confidences to “Kitty.” Anne did not write for young readers, though she longed for a friend; she neither sought empathy from others nor did she intend to teach. In her last entry to “Kitty” she is unsure and confused about herself and the world: “[I] keep trying to find a way to become what I’d like to be and what I could be if . . . if only there were no other people in the world” (336). Anne, conscious that her diary may well be read some day, records not only her own frustrations, but also tells of the historical situation in Nazi-occupied Holland. She is free of sentimentality and self-pity and does not have the desire to instruct; Sender, however, while claiming to teach, seeks the compassionate audience that will weep with the motherless child that she was.

Nevertheless, Anne Frank, the young girl who reaches mythic proportions through a work written at the periphery of the disaster, is in the cultural context of Holocaust awareness the measure for any text about the experience of an adolescent or young adult in the Holocaust. To compare Ruth Minsky Sender to Anne is typical of how American culture
wants to remember the Shoah—the desire to replace victimization with heroism. Sender attempts the latter when she writes about an episode in her life with her brothers in the Lodz ghetto and thereby commemorates the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising by honoring her brothers as “those gentle souls who tried in their own way to fight for honor and dignity” (HL, 127). Here, she clearly attributes an intention to her brothers that they were not conscious of in their daily struggle for survival. In retrospect, however, the narrator and her readers wish that it had been so. She is also conflicted as to whether she should give her brothers American names, as she does to her children, rather than their Jewish names, for she concedes “you are writing so that others can identify with your family” (HL, 158). At the fortieth anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, Riva attends in April 1983 a conference in Washington, D.C., an American gathering of Jewish Holocaust survivors, their children, and grandchildren (HL, 167). In this context she finds that it is acceptable to articulate memories, and feelings and she experiences a profound sense of community. The outside world, however, appears to be uninterested and a publisher informs her, “My dear lady, it is a sad fact that Holocaust books do not sell” (HL, 174).

Two years later, Macmillan accepted the manuscript of *The Cage* for publication and, when Riva calls the editor, she can identify herself: “This is Ruth Minsky Sender” (HL, 176); her personal identity as a writer has been acknowledged publicly. Her difficult youth in the trauma of history has been shaped by the public persona of the writer-teacher, the Holocaust Lady who can maintain the precarious balance between then and now, there and here as she is accepted by the uncritical sympathetic young listener and reader.

Sender’s narrative voice is symptomatic of many Holocaust survivors, especially women, who contribute to Holocaust awareness by talking to school children. Their recounting is recursive, not only in that they repeat their experience in terms of a story that can be told, but also, as is the case in Sender’s memoirs, that the end always returns to the beginning. The recounting of the disaster can neither be “worked through” in one telling nor in reiterated tellings. Holocaust memory demands reiteration even as the sites of the telling change from a sun-filled room, to the arrival in New York harbor, and to a classroom of receptive, wide-eyed children. Crystallized as her tellings and her feelings about the disaster become over time, Sender, too, cannot conclude conclusively, as the end of her third memoir shows: “as long as there is life. . . .” The reader of the three narratives may finish the sentence with
“hope,” but the ellipsis also suggests the continuance of unresolved memories and grief.

Notes


10. Dimsdale 171.


13. LaCapra 200.


15. Unger 129.


22. Greenspan 49.

23. This creates an interesting parallel to Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* where Vladek destroys the journals of Anja, Artie’s mother, thereby maintaining his story as the exclusive master narrative.


29. For a severe review of *The Holocaust Lady* see Hazel Rochman, “How not to write about the Holocaust,” *Booklist* 89 (October 15, 1991) 416.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Acquired Knowledge about the Holocaust in Fictional Narratives: Heroic Gestures and Unredeemable Ironies

No memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections,” wrote Maurice Halbwachs in *Collective Memory*.1 His thought resonates in Peter Novick’s somewhat wistful conclusion after considering the various readings and misreadings of *The Diary of Anne Frank*: “Every generation frames the Holocaust, represents the Holocaust, in ways that suit its mood.”2 The deformation of a historical event to suit the collective desires and aspirations of a society is inevitable as historical experience is transformed into official collective memory through the acceptable and accessible forms of a given time. Beginning with the moment of “liberation,” the Holocaust victim’s struggle with “surviving survival” was and is intensely personal. When that struggle with the memory of personal experience became contextualized in the historical, social, political, and psychological evolution of a collective need for “Holocaust awareness,” the survivor began to voice the personal through a public persona, as I have shown in my discussion of Ruth Minsky Sender. The public persona, in order to communicate, has to channel lived experience through accessible and approved images, conventions and genres that align personal memory with collective memory and values. However, when the content of an experience as disastrous as the Holocaust is communicated through familiar literary and narrative conventions, the attentive reader, aware of the conventions, perceives a jarring contrast between the narrative’s content and form. In his doubly autobiographical work *Maus*, for example, Art Spiegelman alerts the reader’s attention to that discrepancy by
deforming a Holocaust memoir into the trivial if not derided form of a conmim.

Conventions, from dead metaphors to cherished archetypes, are perpetuated through redundancy and repetition that enhance the accessibility of the content they convey. One such over-determined symbol is the mirror as reflector of self-knowledge, and it is not surprising that the traumatized and physically altered survivor of Auschwitz or Buchenwald would glance into a mirror, after liberation. Inmates were deprived of watches and mirrors, crucial objects for human orientation in time and space, and often did not see their reflection until the camp was liberated. The confrontation with one’s image could at such a moment trigger a disturbing existential epiphany. However, since all men and women under ordinary circumstance experience such moments before the mirror, the mirror is also a highly accessible image that leads the reader to assume he or she can connect with the experience of the Holocaust survivor. At his conclusion of Night, Elie Wiesel offers such a moment in a description so powerful that it appears to have become a precedent for other Holocaust narratives:

One day I was able to get up, after gathering all my strength. I wanted to see myself in the mirror hanging on the opposite wall. I had not seen myself since the ghetto.

From the depths of the mirror a corpse gazed back at me.
The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me.3

The linearity of narration in Night implodes here in the eyes that are framed and reflected in the mirror; the eyes express “the look” that contains the entire experience of the disaster synchronically. With great physical effort, the narrator desires to identify himself, to assure himself that the young man he once was still exists. What he discovers in the mirror is a corpse gazing at him, but, because literal identity with a corpse negates life, the narrator dissociates himself from the image as he internalizes the “look in his eyes, as they stared into mine.” Night has been about the origin of that look, a look that contains everything the narrator cannot communicate but must remember. When and if Eliezer’s epiphanic self-confrontation took place in Elie Wiesel’s experience is beside the point; what matters is the moment in the narrative of Night, its effectiveness as closure which reconfigures for Holocaust literature the conventions of the mirror as symbol of self. Each of the narrative fictions I will discuss here includes a mirror moment, but each is also a deformation of Wiesel’s poignant imaging.
In Gudrun Pausewang’s *The Final Journey*, the twelve-year-old Alice Dubsky defines herself as she sees her reflection on the dark surface of coffee in her cup: “She gave her frowning brows, her compressed lips a hostile stare. Did that face look evil? Or was it just the way she was holding the torch? . . . it was important that that face should cease to exist. . . . She must get rid of it. So she raised the cup and drank.”4 By contorting her face and tilting the angle of the flashlight in a way that her image appears demonized, Alice tries to match her appearance with the anti-Semitic definition of herself, but she is not what she struggles to express, and even the drinking of the reflection will not transform her. In *Daniel’s Story*, Carol Matas simplifies for the young reader Wiesel’s complex mirror image: “I found a mirror and looked into it. Who was this tall, gaunt boy with large blue eyes who stared back at me? It was like looking at a stranger.”5 James Forman, on the other hand, sensationalizes the convention of the mirror moment experienced by the adolescent David Ullman in *The Survivor*:

There also was a steam-shrouded fragment of a mirror, which he cleaned on his shirt. For the first time in months David saw his own face. Hollow cheeks, black holes for eyes, cracked lips. He looked like a corpse gazing back from beyond the grave. “Oh, my God,” he said. If he hadn’t been so tired, he would have gone to the latrine and put his finger down his throat, but it was all he could do to return to his bunk on legs so unsteady it seemed a wonder they clung to his body.6

Literature for the young, including youth literature about Nazism and the Holocaust, aligns its implied reader with the official consciousness and the conventions that are the vehicles by which a civilization expresses its memories, desires, and fears. While postwar literature for the young about Nazism emphasizes the diminished self in the mode of irony, deflated of the heroic posturings of Nazi propaganda, Holocaust literature, especially when directed toward the youthful reader, projects its main characters as hovering between the diminished self and the self that at least attempts the heroic gesture. This is most evident in nonfictional Holocaust histories for young readers such as Milton Meltzer’s *Never to Forget* or Barbara Rogarski’s *Smoke and Ashes*, where the directness of documentary data is buffered by an enabling rhetoric that privileges resistance and hope.7 However, “romancing survival,”8 as Henry Greenspan calls it, encourages the narrative mode of the quest romance where the hero overcomes seemingly insurmountable obstacles until integrated into his or her civilization as a living role model or as a celebrated
martyr who exemplifies collective values. Judith Tydor Baumel describes one such hero, Hannah Senesz, a young Zionist from Palestine who parachuted into occupied Hungary: “Hannah Senesz, who was executed in Budapest at 23, has a place of honor in the Israeli pantheon. A symbol of courage, fortitude and pioneering spirit, she refused to request a pardon from the Hungarian authorities and became a prime example of ‘purist’ Israeli heroism, bridging the gap between the Holocaust and the rebirth of a sovereign Jewish nation.”

Heroic imaging always connects with a civilization’s desires and aspirations. If the hero perishes, she or he is even more powerful than the hero who joins the triumphant society, for such a hero immortalizes in death the values of a society. The mass murders in Nazi camps of annihilation, however, have problematized this tradition, through the dead whose bodies haunt as “smoke in air” the memory of the living. Holocaust narratives are generally keyed to the mode of irony where the heroic gesture is a mere resonance of the hero and heroic actions. As Greenspan admits, “there were certainly heroes and sages among the Holocaust victims, [but] few are remembered and none stand elevated and apart from the collective annihilation. . . . Unmitigated atrocity, mass murder, the eradication of several European Jewish cultures—all in the context of the world’s general indifference—are what the Holocaust provides” (1998; 4). The inmate of Auschwitz cannot be portrayed in conventionally heroic terms, either by himself or by others; such individualization is unacceptable because it would be an act of hubris to exalt the individual over and against the millions who, for many reasons, could not possibly have mustered even a minimally heroic gesture.

In *Holocaust Testimonies*, Lawrence Langer observes that survivors demur at the idea of the heroic with “dismay and disdain” and refuse the language of the heroic. In written accounts, however, concepts such as “spiritual resistance” are more acceptable because they do not “require any control over one’s physical destiny” (Langer 1991; 149). Such an inner attitude is obviously hidden and beyond verification and is comparable to the claim of “inner emigration” made by many Germans after the war. The claim of such an “inner” resistance signifies both the powerlessness of the individual in the nightmare of history as well as the individual’s memory of the claims of culturally approved heroic attitudes and actions. Maurice Blanchot’s distinction between “knowledge of the disaster” and “knowledge as disaster,” reminds Langer of an inmate’s paradoxical discovery that one can “be alive after Sobibor without having survived Sobibor” (Langer 1991; 159).
For Langer, the unheroic memory of the diminished self “is disheartened by the subversive realities it discovers” and is “imbued with the spirit of irony, its defense against a reconciliation that it cannot embrace” (1991; 169–70). “Unheroic memory” is the only possible designation for the type of memory of an individual who both evokes and denies the traditional values of the heroic: “What we might name heroic memory died a difficult death in the Holocaust for many of these witnesses, who are loath to view the will to survive as the last gasp of a superseded idea. Self-esteem is crucial to the evolution of heroic memory; the narratives in these testimonies reflect a partially traumatized or maimed self-esteem, lingering like a non-fatal disease without any cure” (Langer 1991; 176).

The unresolved grief and the unbridgeable gap between those who were in the disaster and those who were and are outside the disaster make the former intruders on the comfort of the latter. We, as outsiders, experience discomfort if not resentment against those who have insider knowledge of the Holocaust. Our sense of social and legal justice, our religious values, and our personal belief in the rightness and importance of human empathy and compassion demand that we convert our ignorance of the unknown “into some appreciation of the disparate, half-articulated tensions that inhabit the former victim’s narrative” (Langer 1991; 159). However, we do not gain that appreciation by superimposing our desires and myths on the victim’s narration; if we do, we have not listened and are simply serving our own needs. As readers of Holocaust narratives written by those who were in the Holocaust, we are asked to become “ethical readers,” a definition that includes acknowledgment of our biases and interests.13 Because all Holocaust narratives are at best approximations that attempt to bridge the abyss between experience and memory of experience expressed in terms of story, the reader, too, can at best approximate an ethical reading and simultaneously acknowledge the inability to bridge the abyss.

Regardless of age, most readers or listeners resist the demands of such attentive and empathic listening or reading. Instead, the narrator is expected to recount the disaster in terms of an enabling rhetoric that appears to find language and form to control the content of traumatic history. The narrative voice is expected to complete the sentence that cannot be articulated and shape disastrous history in a story that has a beginning, middle, and end. These conventional structures of communication imply in and of themselves a meaningfulness not present in the lived trauma and they can even affirm dubious themes such as “the victory of the human spirit”14 or “life is beautiful.” Haunted memory and unresolvable grief
over unredeemable losses are thereby forced into a “good ending,” an affirmative resolution. Thus the narrator complies with the listener’s or reader’s desire for closure, though both effectively block the demand for an ethical reading and deny what the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has called “the specific ethical aporia of Auschwitz,” a site where it was “not decent to remain decent” and where those “who believed themselves to preserve their dignity and self-respect experience shame with respect to those who did not.”

The unredeemable irony of the reality of Auschwitz is that Auschwitz was gratuitous, useless, and antithetical to all that is life affirming. To obscure that reality by insisting on an apotheosis of the human spirit demands a deformation of Auschwitz through the mode of romance.

Recountings by survivors are always post-traumatic and we expect them to fall, according to Greenspan, into two types of discourse: celebratory or ceremonial and psychological or pathological. In the former the teller is the heroic survivor, in the latter she or he is “the haunted victim of destruction.” Both modes of discourse neglect the subtext inherent in the form. Ceremonial or celebratory recounting displaces and censors the horror of the memory of the disaster; whereas, psychologically pathological discourse focuses on the damage that was done and neglects that the narrator may also have struggled for and even achieved, at least partially, a useful and perhaps meaningful life in the private or public sphere, though the memory of “then” always remains a parallel undercurrent. That form of Holocaust literature, for any age, that highlights the ceremonial approximates the mode of romance. Holocaust narratives that communicate the damaged and diminished self are in the mode of irony where the teller remains restricted by the memory of the disaster.

The above categories may appear to classify Holocaust narratives all too conveniently, but their grammar needs to be made explicit because future Holocaust narratives will most likely be narrated in the modes of irony or romance, with each mode overlapping the other. Because literature written for the subculture of young readers is usually not scrutinized as attentively as literature for adults, authors are enabled to experiment with “the matter of the Holocaust.” The issues of finding a language to bridge the abyss between the memory of traumatic experience and the telling of it, as well as the issue of stunted grief or the inability to mourn will no longer have the influence they have had until now. The Holocaust
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Gudrun Pausewang’s *The Final Journey*, Carol Matas’s *Daniel’s Story* and James Forman’s *The Survivor* are fictions based on their authors’ responses to learning about the Holocaust through reading, research, and understanding. The privileged genre is still the survivor’s eyewitness memoir, but, as Sara Horowitz contends, Holocaust fictions can indeed be a serious vehicle for thinking about the Holocaust, though many readers consider such fiction “a weaker, softer kind of testimony when compared to the rigors of history, or—at worst—a misleading, dangerous confusion of verisimilitude with reality.” This explains why fictional narratives for young readers are usually contextualized with chronologies, prefaces, postscripts, and glosses to the language of Nazism and the camp world, thereby acknowledging the need for the rigors of history for which the fictional narrative might be preparatory. However, in the fictions themselves the official text is frequently subverted by a subtext that originates in the author’s socialization and historical agenda rather than in his or her personal experience of trauma.

All acquired knowledge of the Holocaust constitutes what Marianne Hirsch defines as “post-memory” which she relates to Artie Spiegelman’s listening to his father’s Holocaust experience in *Maus*. Post-memory is distinguished from memory “by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Post-memory should reflect back on memory, revealing it as equally constructed, equally mediated by the processes of narration and imagination.” We can expand the concept of post-memory and claim that the master narratives of Holocaust survivors, be they oral or written, have an authoritative ethos that a historical or fictional post-memory narrative cannot equal. Constructed fictional narratives from acquired knowledge, even where the author has a far more comprehensive understanding of Nazism and the Holocaust than most victim-survivors, suffer from a peculiar sense of belatedness that undermines their ethos, even where the narrative voice acknowledges that belatedness. Here the narratives by children of survivors, such as Art Spiegelman or Carl Friedman, are instructive as to how the language of

fictional narrative will be a well-told tale, an exciting if somewhat gruesome adventure story, a commodity. Whatever their authorial intent, the narratives to be discussed here show signs of this. They are not canonical texts of Holocaust literature; at best, they prepare the young reader for “further reading.” In order to help ascertain to what degree an author can communicate the extreme situation in a fictional narrative, I am limiting my choice of texts to fictions that attempt to communicate to young readers the center of the Holocaust, the annihilation of the Jews.

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post-memory writers can both acknowledge and cope with belatedness without claiming “mastery” of the subject matter.

Only survivors have no obligation to contextualize or interpret the disaster historically; their ethos is the personal experience, and in the story that survivors can afford to tell, the persecutors can be silenced through textual blanks. The post-memory narrative cannot afford such gaps. It is a second irony, then, that an author who is knowledgeable about the Holocaust, who understands much about the disaster and who has reflected self-consciously and critically about the subject, is bound to give the appearance of “mastering” the subject, even if he or she acknowledges “belatedness.” Scope and depth of knowledge as well as the intensity of the attempt or failure to bridge the abyss between the master narratives of experience through the narratives of post-memory constitute the ethos of Holocaust narratives based on acquired knowledge. This is especially relevant in Holocaust fictions for young readers.

In spite of the illusion of a “master narrative,” a Holocaust fiction for young readers—and any other reader for that matter—is but a “knothole view.” Matas makes that point by having her first-person narrator take photographs. As Barbie Zelizer convincingly argues, the eyewitness frame of the Holocaust photograph is a true image, but a partial view nevertheless. Likewise, Gertrud Koch claims that “the monstrosity of the event as a whole disintegrates into fragments that we perceive as though through a peephole, and we compose an image of the whole, mediated through this partial view, according to our own emotional capacities and needs for comfort.”

There is an unintentional narrative irony in Holocaust fictions. Because the persecution and annihilation of the Jews of Europe followed, especially in historical hindsight, a predictable pattern, the crystallization of the pattern in terms of narrative convention and genre becomes problematic; it increases the accessibility of the Holocaust narrative and reduces it thereby to a formula. In order to avoid the formula of the fictional Holocaust story, the temptation to aestheticize the Holocaust may become difficult to resist as the horror of Auschwitz is used to stimulate in the reader the frisson of a Gothic effect as we find it in Thomas’s The White Hotel, in Styron’s Sophie’s Choice or in Tournier’s The Ogre, the latter having been severely critiqued by Saul Friedlander in his discussion of the relationship between Nazism, kitsch, and death. While kitsch was indeed part of the anus mundi of Auschwitz—the commandant attends to the gas chamber and then celebrates Christmas with his family—we must be cognizant that when such antitheses are transferred into a narrative, the
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Gothic thrill is effected. Forman achieves such an effect repeatedly in *The Survivor*. The attempt at the heroic gesture can also be part of that aestheticization, especially when acted out by one individual, for it is intrinsically theatrical and becomes isolated in memory as a stunning and iconic act. As a shared value the heroic gesture, or rather, the heroic attitude in the concentrationary universe takes two directions. It is generated from social and political hopes, especially for a homeland in Palestine or it is acted on out of a profound hopelessness, the “nothing left to lose” that prompted armed rebellion in several killing centers. Because fictional narratives reveal the suffering and emotional responses of an individual in the nightmare of history, the heroic gesture is usually subverted by the ironic mode of the narrative. As the narrative takes an outward turn and documents verifiable data of atrocity, the greater is the inclination to compensate for the sake of author and reader with the rhetoric of the heroic. This is especially a motive in historical narratives for the young reader who must not lose trust in a meaningful future. Each of the three fictional narratives chosen for this discussion struggles with these issues.

I. Gudrun Pausewang's *The Final Journey*:  
“The Knothole View” of Irony

Officially, Pausewang’s (b. 1928) narratives assert that children must be told the truth about the abuses in history and society so that, as adults, they cannot claim the rationalization “we did not know.” In *The Final Journey* the third person adult narrative point of view relates the experiences, emotions, and thoughts of Alice Dubsky who is on the track to Auschwitz in a cattle car. Alice is a victim not only because she will be murdered, but also because her family intended to protect her from the brutal realities of Nazism with an elaborate system of fabrications. In private life and in history, Alice lives in a mendacious world which obscures from her the dead end of Auschwitz. The unintended subtext of *The Final Journey* raises two questions: Does Pausewang contribute to the mendacity she critiques by using Alice’s ignorance as a screen that enables the narrator to consign the perpetrators to an almost total textual blank? To what extent is it “taboo for a German to fantasize a Jewish existence, during and ‘after’ annihilation?” The emphasis is here on the word *fantasize*. Because fiction writing, unlike the writing of history, requires an authorial projection into the experience and emotions of a created character, German authors hesitate to appropriate such a projection of
Holocaust victims. The attempt to empathize, through projection, how another human being feels is an encouraged and fundamental value that becomes problematized in the relationship between Jews and Germans because the empathizing fantasy denies the difference between perpetrator and victim, especially in a narrative that claims a mimetic representation of the Holocaust. The difference between Jewish victims and German perpetrators continues to have an ontological and ethical hold on the cultural and historical consciousness of either side, even when there is a struggle to go beyond the binary opposition.

The German colloquialism for lying, the “erzähl mir keine Märchen” (“Don’t tell me any fairy tales”) may well be applied to the textual gaps of *The Final Journey*, but signifies also the presence of the ironic mode through which Pausewang subverts the romantic mode of three popular Grimm fairy tales: “Rapunzel,” “Star Taler,” and “The Water of Life.” The way Pausewang censors the identity of the persecutors aligns *The Final Journey* with the telling of fairy tales. In spite of the story’s gruesome and realistic details about a journey in a cattle car, the textual blanks displace fault and guilt in insidious ways and make the narrative part of the mendacious world Pausewang seeks to expose.

If most Holocaust narratives follow the chronology of persecution, ghettoization, transport, camp, liberation, *The Final Journey* ends with the main character’s arrival in Auschwitz. The original German title, *Reise im August* (Journey in August), inverts the genre of “the summer vacation” narrative: In August 1944, the almost twelve-year-old Alice Dubsky is sealed into a cattle car with her grandfather and forty-seven men, women, and children: “The sliding doors of the railway truck closed with a deafening clang” and the journey begins to an unknown destination somewhere in eastern Europe. The confined space of the cattle car is a microcosm of the macrocosm of destruction that awaits the fifteen men, seventeen women, and seventeen children who experience thirst, hunger, illness, a birth, and deaths in this poorly lit space that all too soon shrinks, as the ever-increasing pile of human excrement threatens to engulf them. When it finally inundates the wagon, Alice takes refuge in her grandfather’s hold-all “as if she were in a boat. And without concerning herself with others’ cries and the feverish wiping up, she dozed off again” (135).

Until the time of their arrest, Alice and her grandfather hid in the basement of the family’s home they once owned. Alice is told that she cannot leave the basement because everything is so dirty outside, one of the many lies that define her as an ignorant innocent. Her parents have disappeared into the “east,” but Alice is told that her mother had to be hos-
Acquired Knowledge about the Holocaust in Fictional Narratives

pitalized in a “dental clinic.” When she asks her grandfather, “why do we have to travel like this, in a train without seats and lavatories,” he replies: “There is a war on. . . . Everyone has to put up with things” (13). After the arrival at Auschwitz, after having her head shorn and her clothes stripped, Alice is engulfed in the annihilating lie of Auschwitz: the “shower” of the gas chamber. Packed with hundreds of others and yearning for a cleansing stream of water, Alice wonders why there are so few nozzles in the ceiling; she does not know that this engineered wilderness is the antithesis of a märchen.

Pausewang’s allusion to Rapunzel hidden in the tower refers to Alice’s hiding in the basement of her parental home, but even more significant are the allusions to “The Water of Life,” of which Alice is deprived and for which she waits at the end. Here she stands in the attitude of “Star Taler,” the little girl who gave everything away until she stood naked under the night sky when, suddenly, a shower of star gold made her rich for life. Alice, however, stands naked beneath the ceiling of the sealed gas chamber and expectantly raises her arms toward the cleansing shower. Nothing is as it seems in this world; language has redefined everything in terms of a monstrous lie. Unlike her namesake “Alice in Wonderland,” she will not be able to escape her nightmare at the moment of death by exclaiming: “Who cares for you? . . . You are nothing but a pack of cards!” When she gives her name upon arriving in Auschwitz, the inmate at the ramp says: “Alice in Wonderland. . . . That’s easy to see” (142). She does not even know that she is in a disaster; the word is not in her vocabulary.

In comparison with other depictions of pre-adolescent children in the Holocaust, Alice is improbably ignorant of the political, military, and social definitions of her context. Her Jewish identity is denied to such an extent that her grandfather at one point admonishes her—to the outrage of others in the cattle car: “A German girl is not afraid” (47). Slowly her peers begin to enlighten her after she begs: “Tell me what I ought to know. . . . I haven’t learned anything for so long. I want to know everything” (31). As she expresses her wish, grandfather calls her to him, holds her hand, and goes to sleep so that “now she could not move from the spot without waking him up” (31). As in her novels about the dangers of nuclear energy, Pausewang wants to spare the child the disastrous consequences of adult lies and inhibit the disclaimer “we didn’t know about that.” In the context of the Holocaust, however, the truth-telling value is more complicated: both, ignorant Alice and her informed peers are all designated to be murdered. As is typical for the mode of irony, the read-
er is more empowered than the character in the narrative, for the reader knows about the Holocaust and anticipates that Alice will die. The young reader, therefore, knows the truth and, by implication, will insist that the truth never be repressed. Though Pausewang chastizes adults who lie to children for their own good, she herself manipulates her narrative so as to spare the German child reader the truth of German guilt in the Holocaust by concealing the identity of the perpetrators. A further deformation of fault is in the implied argument that, because Jews participated in the world of lies, then victims, like Alice and her family collaborated in the lie of Auschwitz and thus “made it happen.”

In Pausewang’s post nuclear war narrative, *The Last Children of Schewenborn*, the seventeen-year-old narrator Roland, once an “average kid,” empowers himself after the disaster with the heroic gesture of trying to educate the last children of Schewenborn, even though he knows it is futile. Nuclear war brings out “the best” in Roland, just as some Holocaust narratives depict the disaster as enabling the heroic gesture. However, as a German writer, Gudrun Pausewang cannot in any way imply that the Holocaust causes Alice to be at her best. She cannot stimulate in the young German reader fantasies of wanting to be a heroic Jewish adolescent in the Holocaust. Alice’s vision of the world when she is in the cattle car is, therefore, limited to the knothole in the wall through which she sees idyllic, even paradisiacal glimpses as well as scenes of terror. Hers is “the cattle car point of view” of confinement which unsettles and mocks the “impulse to choice and the will to freedom” (Langer 1991: 55–56).

The cattle car point of view, the exclusive concentration of the adult narrator on the consciousness of Alice, and the fade-out of the perpetrator spare the child. *The Final Journey*’s opening sentence makes this clear: “The sliding door of the railway truck closed with a deafening clang.” In comparison, Aranka Siegal’s description of how she, her sister, and her mother were forced into the cattle car to Auschwitz, leaves no doubt about the perpetrators in the reader’s mind:

“*Nein!* You will not touch my daughters!” she declared in German and repeated in Hungarian, her voice filled with anger and fear.

They laughed at her . . . Iboya, Mother, and I were pulled apart by three leering Germans. The back of my neck was suddenly in an iron grip, and a coarse, rough hand brushed down my chest over each of my breasts, bursting the buttons of my blouse. Bending over me so close that I could smell his sausagy breath and then see the tobacco stains on his teeth, the soldier reached into my bloomers and felt inside my private parts. . . . He shoved me on. . . . Mother
leaned down and asked Mr. Shuster, “Do you know what ‘Auschwitz’ means?” But before the German guard yelled, “Achtung! Rein! Rein!” and Mother pulled her head back just in time to avoid being struck by the door as it closed with a loud metallic clank.28

Pausewang describes the perpetrators in Auschwitz as “uniformed men with dogs”; all the interactions of the newcomers are with inmates “in striped clothes” working at the ramp. In her brief afterword, Pausewang separates Germans from Nazis: “In 1938 Hitler declared that ‘one of these days the Jews will disappear from Europe’ and in Germany and occupied Europe his regime began systematically to round up Jewish people and transport them to concentration camps” (155).

Pausewang spares the young German reader (the book would be read quite differently by an American reader) any collective indictment and therewith inhibits the raising of consciousness and conscience, but she does something even more ambiguous. During the journey Alice hears from others about anti-Semitism and Jewishness. She becomes conscious that she, too, is a Jew. Confused about herself, she illumines her face with a flashlight and ponders her reflection in her coffee cup (a rather implausible feat): “Alice, Jewess, also known as pest. No one had asked her before she was born if she wanted to be Jewish. She gave her frowning brows, her compressed lips a hostile stare. Did that face look evil? Or was it just the way she was holding the torch?” She concludes that “it was important that that face should cease to exist. . . . She must get rid of it. So she raised the cup and drank” (134). Self-hatred defines this negative narcissism.

Pausewang compounds the problem because Alice is exposed to negative images not through Nazi propaganda, but through the information and arguments offered her by her Jewish peers who tell her how the Nazis define Jews. Not only is her self-image negative, but she imbibes her image and thereby voluntarily accepts and internalizes the negative self-definition. Moreover, as Alice drinks her image with the dregs of her coffee (her family was in the coffee trade), Pausewang indulges in dangerous symbolism: the cup does not pass her; she extinguishes her image in the cup by drinking the product that was the livelihood of her family. The symbolism suggests here a subtextual anti-Semitism by implying that “the Jews have done it to themselves.” Drinking the cup, the metaphoric cup of Jesus at the moment of agony in the garden or the actual cup of hemlock prepared for Socrates, always exonerates the one who offers the
cup and always implies that the one who swallows the drink accepts its deadly content voluntarily.

In Auschwitz, Alice, completely ignorant of her imminent death, expects to “drink coffee with the grown-ups” after her shower. The subtext of The Final Journey diverts the acknowledgement of fault to the victims, not the perpetrators. Though her teenage peers in the cattle car try to enlighten her, it is too late. The lies of adults in Alice’s world are more prominent in the reader’s consciousness than the lies of German anti-Semitism. It, therefore, appears as if Jews brought Auschwitz on themselves, for they deceived Alice too well. After entering the “shower room,” Alice cannot identify who the “uniformed man and the men in stripes” are. “The heavy iron door [is] slammed shut” and Alice waits as if she is about to receive a blessing from above:

Alice tipped back her head. Soon, soon, water would pour down over her from the nozzle up there. The water of life. It would wash her clean of the dirt and horror of the journey, would make her as clean as she had been before. She raised her arms and opened out her hands. (154)

Deceived at the last moment of her life, the image of Alice under the nozzle obscures the author’s proclaimed moral motive to tell the truth; instead, by privileging a delusory hopeful expectancy, the author spares the reader and avoids the agony of the gas chamber forty-seven years after the truth of that agony was exposed to the world.

II. Carol Matas’s Daniel’s Story: Personalizing an Official Text

The Canadian writer Carol Matas (b. 1949) acknowledges that her fictional narratives for young readers have “one theme in common: one person can make a difference.” In the 1980s she was introduced to the history of Denmark’s conduct during the German occupation and was surprised at this small country’s successful efforts to save the Danish Jews: “How was it that I had never heard this story before? After all, I am Jewish. I went to Hebrew school, I went to [the] university, and I thought I was educated. I had been taught about the six million who had been murdered. And yet nobody had taught me about this country that had managed to save its entire population. I knew I had to write about it.”

The result was Lisa’s War, published in Canada in 1987 and in the United States in 1989.

Daniel’s Story began in 1992 when Matas was contacted in the name of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which was to open in
the spring of 1993 with an exhibit called “Daniel’s Story.” Matas was asked to write a story completing the exhibit. As the museum spokesperson put it: “Our character is an everyboy [exhibit]. Yours must be an individual story. We want you to use the same name, Daniel; he must live in Germany, be sent to the Lodz Ghetto, Auschwitz, then Buchenwald. He must live. The rest is up to you” (144). With this invitation, Matas agreed to write her first Holocaust book and began to research books and videos, the latter in order to visualize for herself settings such as Lodz. However, Scholastic Press, her publisher, did not “leave the rest up to her,” but sent extensive critiques of “mistakes” as well as her use of source materials. She was required to omit all references to “the Jewish Police in the ghetto” and had to meliorate her narrator’s donning of the Hitler Youth uniform in order to exercise his skill in eyewitness photography. Matas was disappointed when Daniel’s Story was not reviewed upon publication because the narrative was considered a mere novelization of the exhibit and not a story in its own right. Nevertheless, the book became eventually an important teaching tool in Canada and the United States (144–145).

Matas’s autobiographical comments reveal that Daniel’s Story was an ambivalent project for her: her narrative was institutionalized as an official text from the beginning. However, the Holocaust research needed for her project changed Matas’s life and challenged her faith: “When asked if I would write this book I can’t really say why I agreed so quickly—it never felt like a decision. I simply would never had said no to such an offer. But once into the material I had to confront all the cruelty I had been avoiding all my life” (145). She became seriously depressed, concluding that the human race “didn’t deserve to exist,” but, realizing that such a one-sided view was similar to the monistic perception of Nazism, she began to struggle toward a more balanced vision of good and evil.

As a fictional narrative, Daniel’s Story is a composite of Holocaust history and Holocaust memoir. Growing up in Frankfurt as a middle-class child and adolescent nurtured by a loving family, Daniel is not only well-educated for his age, but is socially and politically far more aware than Wiesel’s narrator is in Sighet or Sender’s narrator is in Lodz. Nazism does not suddenly overwhelm Daniel like an inexplicable force; instead, as an amateur photographer, he records the increasingly violent empowerment of the Nazis in the streets of Frankfurt as well as in Lodz, Auschwitz, and Buchenwald. Matas uses the literal and symbolic significance of the eyewitnessing photograph as the informing image of her first person narrative and therewith personalizes and varies the prescribed narrative line of her assignment. At the beginning of each of the four chapters Daniel
reflects on the recent past while a train carries him to a new destination. He travels to Lodz on a passenger train, to Auschwitz in a cattle car, to Buchenwald in an open box car through a wintry night, and, after his liberation, returns once more by passenger train to Lodz. Only that last journey is made by choice; otherwise, the linear track of the train propels him toward an unknown destination. The history of the Holocaust and Daniel’s experience of that history are narrated reflectively in linear time, while the photographic image implodes linearity into a synchronic inclusive moment of memory. As Daniel relates each stage of his ordeal, he always begins with a memory point captured in a photograph, usually a personal photograph, and then photographs of the unredeemable world of Nazism and the Holocaust. As a narrator, Daniel would appeal to a wide-range of middle-class European and American young readers.

One may view Matas’s choice of the photograph as informing image as a conventional device, as a credible hobby of an inquisitive teenager with whom the young reader can identify. One can also view the image as complementary to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s official narrative history of the Holocaust through photographic images. However, her choice of that image leads us also to the subtext of Daniel’s story. On the surface, the photos and Daniel’s mental retention of images when he has no camera are all potential testimony before a court of law where the perpetrators will be brought to justice. Two desires produce each photograph: to preserve Daniel’s memory of a person he loves and to capture, surreptitiously but aggressively, the atrocious deeds as well as the hypocrisy of the perpetrators. Most important, however, is that the photograph, as image in Daniel’s Story preserves what is no more. Matas’s use of the image is consonant with Roland Barthes’s binary inherent in photography: “Life/Death: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print.” In English, the colloquial phrase “to shoot a picture” implies the inherent aggression in the act of photographing, an aggressive assertion against the inexorable erosion of human time and memory. Daniel, however, never uses the colloquialism, even though it would be appropriate for his age; instead, he claims objectivity by always “taking pictures.”

In her study of documentary photography and the Holocaust, Barbie Zelizer notes that the photograph testifies beyond the subjective response to “the inconceivable horror” over the disaster of the Holocaust. Through its technology “the record of the camps’ liberation was mandated to be seen . . . shocking [the United States and Britain] out of their skepticism and processing the unbelievable atrocity story into plausible interpretive
Important here is the phrase “the record of the camps’ liberation,” for it is after the disaster that the effects of atrocity are witnessed. All students of the Shoah are familiar with the canonical images now part of our collective memory—Jews harassed and publicly humiliated in Germany or Austria, Jews begging and starving in the ghettos of Warsaw or Lodz, Jews forced into cattle cars, even Jews arriving at the ramp in Auschwitz—then comes the photographic record of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen or Buchenwald. But there is a profound textual blank: there are no photographs of victims in the gas chamber, of Sonderkommandos at work, of bodies in the crematoria and only a rare distant image of the burning pits of the summer of 1944. After the opening of the camps, the pictures of corpses record a disaster, the essential disastrousness of which has already happened.

Carol Matas, however, invents the improbable moment when Daniel photographs one of the cremation pits where murdered human bodies were burned because the crematoria could no longer process the masses of corpses in the summer of 1944. Daniel, selected with his father for work in Auschwitz, is contacted by members of the Auschwitz resistance who want him to photograph an atrocious site. They plan to smuggle the photos out in order to “convince the Allies that mass murders are actually taking place” (90). Supplied with a camera, Daniel is directed to the open burning pits. Like his biblical namesake, Daniel is almost engulfed by “the fiery oven” as he moves toward the pit, throws alcohol “onto the blaze, and for one terrible moment [is] forced to look into the pit”:

There I saw corpses of every size turning black from heat. And I realized that people I knew could be in there, that they were not just bodies but each one a murdered human being. And I almost threw myself in with them. That was the closest I’d come to ending it all, which was strange, because it was supposed to be the moment I defied the nazis and could once again feel like a human being. But what did it mean to be a human being? That we could do this to our brothers and sisters? Perhaps it would be better to resign from the human race altogether. It was my father who saved me. He came up behind me and spoke quietly:

“Daniel, if we let them kill all those who still remember what it is to be human, what will be left?”

Still, I wasn’t convinced. I didn’t care.

“Daniel, if you jump, I’ll jump after you.”

I knew he meant it. I couldn’t be responsible for his death. I took the camera out of its case and made sure the exposure was such that the flames would look like a bright white background and blackened bodies would show through
clearly. I took three pictures before I put the camera back. Then I threw the rest of the alcohol into the pit and turned away, the blistering heat tearing through me. (93–94)

Daniel steps back from the abyss, but its site has imprinted itself: “Even now the fiery image of that day stays burned in my mind—I will never forget it” (95).

Upon a first reading of this passage, it appears that that Matas does not spare the child. Actually, however, Daniel describes what he saw in one sentence only; everything else is description of his action and feelings. Moreover, Daniel’s existential reflections at the edge of the abyss are only possible after the atrocity. His struggle with the temptation of suicide and his father’s control of that temptation expand in time upon reflection. While the decision between life/death occurs instantaneously and instinctively under such circumstances, the reflective process provides a buffer between seeing atrocity and communicating it to the reader. Though traumatized, Daniel is thus the victim capable of the heroic gesture; he decides to act and sustains his agonizing effort with the belief that his pictures may change the course of Auschwitz’s history. But his effort is reduced to a futile gesture that only affects him personally. A few days later a member of the resistance informs him that the Allies already knew about the gas chambers, “and still they do nothing. Your photos may arrive too late to save this last batch of Jews . . .” (96).

And yet, the gestures of heroism continue to inspire him, especially when made visible through active resistance. Matas offers a transformation of the apocryphal story of how an inmate (a woman) disarmed an SS, shot him, and then was gunned down herself (see Forman’s use of that anecdote). The resister in Daniel’s Story is a young man, active in the camp’s resistance plans, who makes his attempt as the SS unloads prisoners at the ramp: “I admired him. He had chosen his way to die. I took a deep breath. If the rest of us had to die for that act, then so be it. I stopped trembling. And I vowed that if they came for us, I would be shot fighting too” (98). Matas neglects to point out that such single gestures at heroism had usually cost the lives of hundreds of inmates who would immediately be consigned to death in retribution. Daniel may choose such a death for himself, but his “so be it” denies others that choice. Nevertheless, even a small act, such as listening to an illegal radio in Lodz can become a “symbol of defiance” that “gave us some dignity knowing that in this small way we were breaking the rules and defying them” (43).
After surviving the transport to Buchenwald, Daniel’s father is assigned to make furniture for the SS while Daniel photographs an SS and his family, “so well fed, the model of a perfect family” (108). Daniel is eyewitness to how the SS murders a young boy by shooting him, gradually, and then turning to Daniel with the order “clean that up” (108). Witnesses have recorded such a willful and individual atrocity in Holocaust memoirs and testimonies and Daniel, too, cannot comprehend the incident: “The loving father, two children of his own. And yet he was capable of that. I felt so sick, I thought I would vomit, but before I could do anything, two camp kapos rushed out and took the body away, leaving me standing in the street” (108). The incident readies him to join the resistance at Buchenwald.

Matas avoids descriptions of the horrendous conditions at Buchenwald, which became a receiving camp for the thousands of evacuees from the eastern extermination camps; instead, she focuses on Daniel’s individualized memories, which prepare him to join a final resistance. As the Americans advanced toward Buchenwald, the inmates feared that the SS would evacuate or liquidate their victims, but by April 11, 1945, the SS had withdrawn from the camp and “members of the camp defense formations, who had been in cover fully armed, at once cut the barbed wire, occupied the tower and the gatehouse and broke out the white flag on the main tower.” Buchenwald had liberated itself by the time the Americans arrived.33

Matas highlights Daniel’s heroic gestures during that moment in Buchenwald’s history. He is armed: “My heart pounded. I was sweating so much, the gun felt slippery in my hand. And yet I felt happy . . . I really didn’t mind if I died like this, fighting” (115) When a guard, seriously wounded by Daniel, cries for help, Daniel replies enraged: “I’m just a filthy Jew. You wouldn’t want my help.” His father reminds him: “Every live Nazi is one more we can put on trial . . . we are not like them. If they’ve made us into them, they’ve succeeded” (115). Daniel struggles with his deep need for revenge, especially in his final encounter with the SS who shot the boy, but even when he tells that SS “I’ll be there to testify at your trial” (116), he finds no satisfaction: “What did I think I could accomplish with that? Teach them something? It was foolish, stupid and mean. They would never learn . . . I stalked away feeling dirty and miserable” (116–17). Daniel admits to himself that he is simply numb and alienated when he finally looks at himself in the mirror.

He realizes that anti-Semitism has not been eradicated with the defeat of the Nazis (122), but he also resolves never to be its victim again. After
he has returned to Lodz and is reunited with Rosa, his one and only love; they decide to marry and go to Palestine, for “there is no place for us here anymore” (128). Rosa encourages him with words that summarize the simple hope of survivors: “We will name our children after those murdered and we will go to Palestine and help build a country. We will dedicate our lives to making sure that this can never, ever happen again” (130). As if moderating this affirmative goal, Daniel, in present tense now, defines himself cautiously: “I put my arm around Rosa and hold her tight as we walk. And for the moment I am content” (131). Daniel knows that such contentment is as transitory as the heroic gesture. He implicitly knows that he is still in history and that, like the photo of a happy family, civilization is a thin veneer covering our rage and outrage (131). Daniel is in history. Palestine is not a paradise suspended in time and space but is a place on earth; to go there will mean to clash with human realities, will mean the continuance of history. For Daniel, Palestine remains a possibility, but for Matas, Palestine is part of human history and all the potential good and evil that this involves. Daniel’s mood at the end of the story suggests that he, too, will share these ambiguities of history. Thus Matas does not merely leave the reader with the uplift: “Look we’ve come through!”

The official text gives Daniel, in spite of all traumatic experience, dignity and a fighting spirit. The young reader, therefore, attracted to that dimension of Daniel’s story will remember that emphasis. As a result the heroic gesture and the issues raised by it are not resolved. The emphasis on individualism, courage, and the heroic gesture is an enabling rhetoric that, to borrow Hilberg’s words, easily leads to the conclusion that “when relatively isolated or episodic acts of resistance are presented as typical, a basic characteristic of German measures is obscured. The drastic actuality of a relentless killing of men, women, and children is mentally transformed into a more familiar picture of a struggle—however unequal—between combatants.”34 Such a struggle, argues Hilberg, reinforced the German propaganda about a Jewish “spirit of opposition” that warranted retaliation. In spite of Matas’s attempts to remind the reader of the ironic pointlessness of the Holocaust, the official text of Daniel’s Story supports the argument of Hilberg’s critique.
III. James Forman’s *The Survivor*: Acquired Memory and Aesthetic Effects

James Forman (b. 1932), who studied psychology at Princeton and law at Columbia, has written about complex historical and sociopolitical issues in his narratives for young readers. He acquired his knowledge about the Jewish experience in the Holocaust because of his many unresolved questions about war in general. As he tells it, “even before the war I had become acquainted with a Jewish family that were refugees from Vienna, and through them I got a head start on the war. . . . I met a number of people who fought on the other side—good friends now . . . but of course monsters then, which has left me with a number of unresolved questions about the nature of war and I suppose I go on writing about it in the hopes that I may stumble on the answers.” The scope and range of his acquired knowledge about the Holocaust are quite evident in *The Survivor* supported as they are by his authoritative third person narrative voice that focuses on the experiences, thoughts, and emotions of young David Ullman. His historical, sociological and psychological facts and concepts are usually presented in a plain, credible, and strictly informational voice as if he had transferred materials from his sources directly into his narrative. On one level, *The Survivor* stimulates “further reading,” though most young readers will be carried along by the exciting story about a dangerous time.

There is, however, another dimension to *The Survivor*, a playful experimentation with literary allusions and gothic effects that aestheticize the narrative. In this manner the story unintentionally highlights not only the heroic gestures, as it did with Matas, but also the whole issue as to whether the subject of the Holocaust will increasingly become subject to aesthetic experimentation. One suspects that Forman gratifies himself rather than his young readers with this kind of play, for few young readers would catch the implications of his allusions. A typical example is the opening of his chapter “Purgatory. Westerbork Detention Camp,” a camp in Holland:

The truck with its three prisoners arrived at Westerbork Detention Camp on the afternoon of November 15, 1943. Westerbork had begun as a place of refuge for Jews fleeing Germany. Even under German occupation, it remained in Dutch control until the summer of 1942. Now it was a dismal, unpainted place made of scraps and leftovers. . . . The boys were directed by an FK guard to the general camp mustering square. . . . They moved rapidly through the Tweedledums and Tweedledees of officious bureaucracy. . . . (160–61)
Here, Forman undermines the credibility of a matter-of-fact narrative with dubious literary allusions. While the next chapter, “Auschwitz: Summer and Autumn, 1944,” needs no elaboration, Westerbork, with which few young readers would be familiar, is made interesting by the misnomer “Purgatory.” Familiar with Dante, Forman should know that purgatory comes after the inferno; it is not an ante-chamber to hell but the site where the soul is purified. The second allusion, to the indistinguishable twins in Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, trivializes Nazi-sanctioned or Nazi-operated bureaucracies regarding Jews, which always had one goal only—the annihilation of the people who were being “processed.” But there is a more insidious insinuation in this allusion. The narrator informs the reader that Westerbork was from the start administered by Jews “and run so efficiently that the Germans had not disturbed its structure and lurked only in the background.” Now the Jewish administrators “were known as the Jewish SS” (160). Jewish administrators in ghettos and camps are historical fact, but Forman’s literary allusion equates Jews with Nazis in this context of an efficient bureaucracy, implying without differentiations that “one is as bad as the other.”

*The Survivor* is the story of twins, David and Saul Ullman. Saul is the intellectual, the introvert, the pessimist, and eventually, the “shadow” to David’s extroverted, action-oriented, and relational personality. They are the sons of Abraham Ullman, an Amsterdam physician, intent on his patients rather than his family. Abraham’s brother Daniel, a Berlin attorney who lost everything during the *Kristallnacht* of November 9, 1938, embarked on the ill-fated *St. Louis* to seek asylum in Cuba in the spring of 1939. After this ship of refugees was denied admission by the United States government, Daniel is returned to Europe where he joins the Dutch resistance against German occupation. He becomes a heroic role model for David. The center of the Ullmans’ family life is Rebecca Ullman, the mother, who dies before David, Saul, and Abraham are discovered and arrested. David’s older sister Ruth, a beautiful and talented risk-taker, becomes a fervent Zionist. The youngest, Rachel appears to have survived her hiding place and found refuge in Palestine with Daniel after the war; at least that is David’s hope.

After their hiding place is discovered, Abraham and his sons are transported to Westerbork, the transit camp to Auschwitz. During the initial selection at Auschwitz, Abraham does not heed David’s advice to present himself as a physician; instead, he prays, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one” and is waved to the left for immediate gassing. Saul eventually deteriorates physically and psychologically to the state of
a “Musulmann” and dies during the death march after the evacuation of Auschwitz in the winter of 1945. David, the sole survivor, is rescued from a cattle car after a dramatic encounter between the Germans and the advancing Americans (212). Eventually, he treks back to Holland and meets on the way a Dutch girl, Hannah Cronk. However, he cannot commit himself permanently to her—Europe is no longer his home; he starts on his passage to Palestine in search of Daniel, Rachel, and a new future.

As was the case with Matas’s Daniel, David and Saul are in Auschwitz at the time of the mass murders of Hungarian Jews in the summer of 1944. David, unlike Matas’s Daniel, is never an eyewitness to the ultimate extreme situation. He hears about the gassings and he smells the stench from the crematoria and has dreams of “corpses wreathed in fire, giving off choking fumes, [he] saw faces that he knew... with hair and eyes aflame, melting like wax candles in the heat” (190). As a substitute for seeing, the third person narrator reflects through David’s consciousness on the work of the Jewish Sonderkommando at work in the gas chambers and crematoria, doomed men whose gruesome orders are compensated for by the transitory pleasure of enough food and drink until it is their turn to be annihilated and replaced by a new group.

The dominant imagery of the Auschwitz chapter is the heroic gesture, even though it is always subverted by the futility of heroism in Auschwitz. The Twelfth Sonderkommando stages a revolt with “explosives smuggled in the false bottoms of soup kettles. They had destroyed at least one crematorium and killed seventy SS soldiers before they themselves had been shot down to a man” (196). David sees them as heroes who will be celebrated, but Saul replies, “all they did was die.” Historically, the revolt was allegedly inspired by the heroic gesture of one “Dutch woman” selected for gassing from the Frauen Konzentrations-lager in Auschwitz-Birkenau in the fall of 1944 because her assertive attitude was perceived as threatening by the SS.

The narrator depicts the young woman as the antithesis of Irma Grese, “the whip-snapping terror of the women’s camp” (196). She is imagined as very feminine, a blond and blue-eyed dancer, who, David wants to believe, might be Ruth. He envisions her being approached by an SS officer who asks her to dance. She complies, moves toward the SS, extracts his pistol from his holster, and shoots him before she herself is gunned down (196–98). This incident, apocryphal or not, haunts recountings of heroic gestures in Auschwitz, but Forman’s version heightens, sensationalizes and aestheticizes this projection of desire in terms of erotic gothicism:
She must have become her old self again as she danced, no longer an automaton doomed to die, but the old fearless fighter, her nakedness, the very incongruity of the moment, giving her a balance and style she had lacked in the old days. She must have pirouetted there, eyes shining, her whole face glowing, the cold autumn sun seeming to shine through her as she danced for her executioner, so fine in this last refrain that he glanced at the ground, pinching his cigarette between slim fingers, spitting out a piece of leaf as she whirled closer, arms extended, seeming to float on the air. Then her strong arms had darted out as sure as eagles’ talons to seize the pistol, and, in an instant of unbelief, they had pumped nine bullets into his astonished body, so fast they made a single roar.

She manages to run toward the electric wire, “an uncertain target in the pale light and shadow.” She is shot into the legs because the SS want to make an example of her in a public execution. However, she manages to crawl toward and grasp the electric fence: “This might be called a death in the tradition of Kiddush Hashem, a martyr’s death in the name of God. She had taken her life into her own hands at the end. She had shown others how to die, this marvelous Dutch girl whom they could not defeat, let alone destroy” (198). Of course, they did defeat and destroy her!

David imagines the scene as a fulfillment of his own desire for heroism. Here are all the components of Auschwitz kitsch—the naked victim suddenly becomes an object of erotic desire moments before her violent death, the SS can barely look at her beauty, back-lit by the autumn sun. He himself is transformed into the dark sinner who is said to have uttered not only the Christ-like expiring words “My God, what have I done to deserve such agony,” but who also allegedly quoted Rilke’s “It’s only a queen who dares to dance, yes, dance in a city street.” The narrator, as if doubting his recounting, admits “nothing seemed far fetched at Auschwitz” (198). Saul does not share David’s fantasy that the dancer must have been Ruth; however, he, too, is involved in his own “fascinating fascism” fantasy: “Ruth had long ago ceased to exist for him. She had less substance than his dreams, in which he wore a black uniform. ‘I was one of them, all black with silver piping’” (199).

A pre-text for this incident in The Survivor may well have been Bruno Bettelheim’s account of the incident in his interpretations of the extreme situations in the camps. Bettelheim also causally connects the revolt of the Sonderkommando with the anecdote of the dancer and uses both to affirm the possibility of existential choice in even the most extreme situations: “Once, a group of naked prisoners about to enter the gas chamber stood lined up in front of it. In some way the commanding SS officer
learned that one of the women prisoners had been a dancer. He ordered her to dance for him. She did, and as she danced, she approached him, seized his gun, and shot him down. She too was immediately shot to death.” Bettelheim reinforces existential dignity by concluding, “No longer was she a number, a nameless, depersonalized prisoner, but the dancer she used to be. Transformed, however momentarily, she responded like her old self, destroying the enemy bent on her destruction, even if she had to die in the process.”

If Forman inflates the dancer anecdote with existential heroic attitudes and gestures with implicit sadoeroticism and religious martyrdom, Tadeusz Borowski, who also alludes to the incident in “The Death of Schillinger” chapter of his Auschwitz memoir refuses to do so. He chooses a version that preserves the anecdote strictly in the mode of irony. As if admitting the possibility of different narrative modes, Borowski’s narrator Tadek admits that there are various versions of this heroic rumor. He, however, tends to believe a sardonic member of the Sonderkommando who assesses the incident in terms of the difficulty it caused the commando in readying new arrivals for the gas chamber. The newcomers were shocked that “women are made to strip along side of men” and the commando had to work extra hard and fast to avoid protest. Borowski’s woman does not dance. SS officer Schillinger complicates the work of the commando when he “takes a fancy to a certain body—and, indeed she had a classic figure.” He takes her hand when, suddenly, she scoops up a handful of gravel and throws it in his face. As Schillinger cries out in pain, he drops his revolver (which was drawn during the operation), she picks it up and shoots him several times into the abdomen. She, too, is shot; the place goes wild and the chaos the commando feared threatens to take over now as the naked crowd surges toward the SS: “But we managed, thank God, We drove them all right into the chamber with clubs, bolted the doors and called the SS to administer Cyclone B.” When Tadek is told that Schillinger died with “O God, my God, what have I done to deserve such suffering?” he concludes that Schillinger’s lack of understanding, even at the very end, is a strange irony of fate—an interpretation mocked by the commando worker. Matter-of-factly, Tadek reports that that same Sonderkommando, anticipating liquidation, staged a revolt in the crematoria for the purpose of clearing the way to escape into the open fields—“several SS guards turned the machine guns on them and killed every one—without exception.” Borowski’s rhetoric permits no individualism and dignity; he deforms the heroic gesture that Forman and Bettelheim inflate with gratifying existential meaning. The reader wishes for the
events to have happened in terms of Bettelheim’s existential values or even as Forman describes them through the images of erotic desire, fascinating fascism and religious martyrdom. However, like Tadek, the astute reader knows that, if the events happened, they most likely occurred in the mode laconically recounted by the Sonderkommando worker.

One of Forman’s contributions to Holocaust literature for young readers is his attempt to portray the appearance, psychology, and impact of the “Musulmann” in the extreme situation. He does so through David’s twin, Saul, who deteriorates to that final stage of dehumanization before annihilation. Forman informs his reader accurately about the condition and effect of the Musulmann: “Poor food encouraged spirit-destroying dysentery, typhus, boils and cysts. And when the spirit failed, that was the end. One joined the damned, the silent living dead known as Muselmen. These wandering shadows were despised and rejected by all, the more because it was the fate to which all felt susceptible. No food was wasted on them. They were dead already” (192). David, who promised to be his brother’s keeper, experiences Saul’s deterioration as his own likely destiny and compensates for this threat with heroic gestures and attitudes in order to keep from being reduced to a cipher, empty of humanity and consigned to the gas chamber as a “remnant of Auschwitz.” Giorgio Agamben understands the phenomenon of the Musulmann as the ultimate aim of Auschwitz: the blanking out of the human. Ironically, in that condition the Musulmann is the ultimate witness who can no longer witness to atrocity: “It is then possible to understand the decisive function of the camps in the system of Nazi biopolitics. They are not merely the place of death and extermination; they are also, and above all, the sites of the production of the Muselmann, the final biopolitical substance to be isolated from the biological continuum. Beyond the Muselmann lies only the gas chamber.” It is Saul who, through his mere presence, is eyewitnessing with his body and mind the extreme situation just short of physical annihilation.

Forman, however, complicates the deterioration of Saul with the erasure of the binary persecutor/victim: Saul is not only a threatening shadow for David, he also assumes attributes of the SS, perhaps as a last attempt to preserve his selfhood. While such transference is psychologically valid and historically possible, Forman’s use of it does contribute a gothic frisson to Saul’s tragedy. From a Nazi point of view, the SS embodies a phallic power and heroic ideal that is sublimely terrifying in a uniform of black and silver and its insignia of skull and cross bones as a tro-
phy signifying mastery over life and death. In his utter helplessness Saul assumes the SS “as the ideal incarnation of fascism’s overt assertion of the righteousness of violence, the right to have total power over others and to treat them as absolutely inferior.” As Susan Sontag writes, “Fascism is theater. . . . As is sado-masochistic sexuality. . . . Never before was the relation of masters and slaves so consciously aestheticized. . . . there is a master scenario available to everyone. The color is black, the material is leather, the seduction is beauty, the justification is honesty, the aim is ecstasy, the fantasy is death.”

Forman experiments aesthetically with these ideas. After Auschwitz is evacuated and the prisoners are driven westward through the icy winter landscape, Saul, feverish with typhus, first begs his brother to hold him, but then, dissociating himself from David, identifies himself with the SS. He shouts “Sieg Heil” and sings the chorus of the “‘Horst Wessel Song’ in shameless imitation of the SS squad who had shouted it out around the camp.” Mocked by an SS guard with “you want to join the SS?” Saul responds “Jawohl” because he considers himself SS material. The guard slaps Saul’s head backward and forward and stalks off with, “No food for this one. . . . He is finished” (208). The Nazis’ rigid hierarchy fostered identification with the oppressor, either in terms that the oppressor was “human after all” (see Sender’s experience) or, far more frequently, in accepting the Nazi valorized qualities of ruthlessness and violence. For Saul, as an inversion of the heroic gesture, only the shell of the SS is accessible for illusory empowerment.

Such an identification with the SS perpetrator as a phenomenon can be understood through the demand of “absolute obedience” to another’s commanding will, the Kadavergehorsam, the obedience of a corpse, a slang term used by the Nazis, not necessarily derogatorily but as expressive of absolute submission to the will of the Führer. This led to one of several grotesquely inverted parallels between oppressor and oppressed in the concentrationary universe: the inmate was expected to submit totally to orders, no matter how absurd they were. Such an exertion of power by the oppressor contributed, of course, to the reduction of the human to a cipher. A mere remnant of Auschwitz, a Musulmann, Saul internalizes the Kadavergehorsam until he is indeed “finished,” and yet, there is a crucial difference between the SS and a Musulmann. The latter reaches this state through his unwilled biological deterioration; the former chooses to become a simulacrum of the human by fusing his identity with the insignia of Nazi power, without which he would be nobody. Saul’s last effort, then, is an essential human activity—symbolization. By identify-
ing himself as SS, the official image of the terrifying heroic gesture, Saul tries to avoid being the cipher the SS guard intends him to be.

David sees in Saul a reflection of what he himself might become, and his mirror moment (cited on p. 181) after liberation reveals how close he came to the cipher-state. Unlike Wiesel, who has to dissociate himself from the corpse—the it—that looks into his eyes, the third person narrator keeps the identification: “He looked like a corpse gazing back from beyond the grave” (217). Only severe fatigue prevents him from succumbing to an overwhelming nausea in response to experiences that he cannot digest, including his joining other inmates in the revenge action of locking a Nazi guard into a shower, turning the water to scalding, and refusing to respond to his cries until “there was only the sound of the steam turning him into a lump of scalded flesh” (217).

The mirror moment does mark the turning point toward life for David—“every-day his body revived” (217), though he struggles several times with depression, moments of symbolic dying and resurrection. He reveals no serious signs of a grieving process, but this omission is psychologically plausible given the time frame of the narrative; we know that grieving, for many survivors, was possible only years later. By summer 1945, he decides to return to Holland. On the way, he meets Hannah Kronk, a Dutch girl with whom he falls briefly in love. During their journey, they come upon Erich von Weichs, an aristocratic officer of the Wehrmacht, an aesthete who peripherally participated in the assassination plot against Hitler on July 20, 1944, thus defining him as a “decent German.” Forman cannot resist aestheticizing this clearly fictive episode. Sitting under a tree and contemplating suicide, Weichs greets the two young people with: “Yes, please, sit. Tell me sad stories of the death of Kings.” David and Hannah do not know what to make of this and it is highly unlikely that the young reader will catch the self-dramatizing allusion to Shakespeare’s *Richard II* (3.2.155–56) who was skilled in death-obsessed aesthetic gestures but incapable of effective political leadership. Weichs appears to assume here a posture of mock grief over the demise of the Third Reich and its Führer who also had a propensity toward theatrical self-display. The episode allows Forman to indulge once more in gothic aestheticism. Kitsch and death imagery dominate Weichs’s ancestral castle where he introduces David and Hannah to his vampiric mother as Hansel and Gretel (241).

The weirdness is in the kitsch of the episode. Hilberg understands such kitsch as a “debasement of the history of the Holocaust” (141), though, as Friedlander has suggested, the Nazis themselves favored such
kitsch. It is a kitsch with cosmic dimensions, noble kitsch or Edelkitsch, as it is called in German. Writers, or film-makers, who project such imagery are actually not far off the mark in their representation of Nazism. The issue of audience response, however, complicates the ethical use of such kitsch. If kitsch imagery is used satirically, it can serve as ironic critique; if, however, it is used for theatrical effects, it stimulates a thrill in the reader. Inflated to an unwarranted sublime ego loss and the thrilling “uplift” that provides, this type of kitsch makes death narcissistically desirable. It is a literary experimentation that fails because the author is himself not clear what he wants to achieve here through the gothic imagery. While Forman does not reach the heights of post-memory kitsch, as these are reached in Syberberg’s fantasy Hitler: A Film from Germany, he does anticipate, in this episode, those aesthetic experiments with gothic thrills that are ethically very ambivalent in literature for young readers about Nazism and the Holocaust.

David decides to leave Europe—“he was finished with the past”: “In Palestine, he felt confident, he would reestablish what remained of the family, and those who were dead, would have a place. He would not weep for them. Like pearls in an oyster, they had painfully worn a place, and now they were lodged safely in his heart” (271). David reduces Auschwitz as a nightmare from which he has emerged: “He would be part of a new dawn and a brand new tradition. In Palestine, men would live as brothers. They had known the desolate cities and the house of bondage. There would be no more war” (271). The Jews who died in Auschwitz were not like the martyrs of old, for “Auschwitz had no glory, no divine inspiration. It was totally without purpose” (259). The contrast with Matas’s Daniel is striking: Forman’s David decides not to be burdened by the past, by memory, by the inability to bridge the abyss between experience, memory, and those who were not there. The authorial support for David here, unadulterated with irony as it is, implies that history will be redeemed and that Auschwitz will be the desert from which the quester has to emerge with great struggle in order to reach the promised land where all men are brothers.

Historically, we find this attitude among some survivors, primarily those who were politically activated. As the survivor, David is projected as typical, which he is not. Forman radically swerves from other survivor portraits in Holocaust literature by having David define himself as being among the fittest: “What Hitler and the Nazis had all along proclaimed had finally been proved: the fittest, in the end, survived. The fittest were the good men of the earth, not the bad” (271–72). The definitiveness of
this conclusion, its unambivalent self-assurance goes counter to the admissions of survivors such as Wiesel, Levi, Frankl, and Borowski, namely that the best did not survive, that the survivor feels an uneasy shame for having survived even as she or he begins to build a new life. For David there is even the possibility that a new covenant might come out of the “European holocaust, as it had come for Moses from the fires of Mount Sinai, it would be found in Palestine” (272). The problematic causal connection between the Holocaust as a heroic myth and the founding of Israel is here acknowledged in the analogy between Moses’ quest romance and the Holocaust as the necessary “wilderness” that must be endured before the vision of the promised land. The imagery is confirmed as David sets out at sunrise: “Let the ship carry him. Tomorrow? The future remained a question mark. What mattered was that it no longer frightened him” (272). The young reader is assured that Auschwitz was but a dark night of the soul that led to the sunrise of a new beginning for the hero’s well-deserved future. As “the survivor,” David refuses to be the diminished self, a conclusion that Matas does not reach, because the moment of Daniel’s happiness, or rather contentment is experienced only as a temporary relief from memory and the obligation of testifying. David’s geographical relocation as a cure for a traumatic experience, however, reduces the Holocaust to a necessary antecedent that can be shelved. It represses the need to study and struggle and understand the Holocaust as much as is possible; instead, it implies that Auschwitz can be overcome by a survivor who emerges whole from the disaster in spite of his traumatic experience.

* * *

Until this turn to Holocaust fictions written out of acquired or post-memory, narratives about Nazism and the Holocaust written for young readers were grounded in the authors’ memories of the twelve years of Nazi oppression in central and eastern Europe. The historical memory of the authors, children or adolescents though they were, had a physical connectedness with a place and its materiality—the Berlin of Gehrts and the Vienna of Orgel are communicated quite differently than the Frankfurt of Matas. The physical details about sites of atrocity such as Auschwitz or the intolerable conditions of transport are available to such a degree that acquired memory can conjure a mimesis that almost seems based on personal memory. Forman, Matas, and Pausewang are able to re-create such memories at certain points in their narratives. However, if autobiographical Holocaust narratives inevitably reveal a tendency to channel the chaotic content of the experience into the forms and conventions of narrative,
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in short into symbolizations of the experience, then we can expect that form or symbolization will come to be privileged as memories of lived experience recede and eventually vanish. Especially in Israel, in Germany, and in the United States, the Holocaust and the Third Reich will come to “stand for something” in shared memory. What that something is depends on the cultural climate of a given epoch.

The tension between concealment and revelation in autobiographical narratives, particularly for young readers, generates the subtext of the official narrative about the Holocaust and Nazism. With the loss of personal experience in future writings about the Holocaust or Nazism, the subtext is bound to change as authors rely on and abstract from resources which they then re-form or de-form by means of accessible symbolic and rhetorical conventions of narrative. Of the three fictional narratives discussed here, the most complicated subtext is still to be found in Pausewang’s *The Final Journey*. Her textual blanks regarding the distribution of fault, the inability to mourn a victim who is so well-deceived that she receives her imminent murder in a prayerful attitude all point to the fact that the truth-telling Pausewang advocates is severely limited. It is limited because Pausewang, as a German author, still writes out of her youthful memories of the Third Reich and its disasters. Carol Matas reveals that even when an author accepts a very explicit public agenda for a narrative, she still can acquire a post-memory of Holocaust history that affects her on a deeply personal level—though she does not incorporate that part of her process into *Daniel’s Story* (except for tentative suggestions that the possibility for extreme evil is something any civilization must guard against). *Daniel’s Story* foreshadows the likelihood that Holocaust narratives will acquire an increasing predictability through which the collective post-memory of the disaster continues to be conveyed. Forman’s narrative suggests how future fictional narratives may use the Holocaust to aestheticize an exciting tale. While the range of his acquired knowledge about the Holocaust is evident in the story, Forman’s experimenting with heroic gestures, sensationalism and gothic effects, along with stereotypical archetypal situations of death and rebirth, predict that young readers’ literature, too, will use the Holocaust to engage readers with an exciting story rather than provoke ethical reflections about history and human behavior. The deep motivation for “lest we forget” or “never again” will become shallow as the time of the disaster becomes more abstract.

All three narratives discussed here reveal unintentionally that the issue of mourning or the inability to mourn will fade as fictional narra-
tives are structured into accessible aesthetic forms by an increasingly official and collective post-memory. Though she hides her grieved reader response to the materials of her Holocaust readings, only Matas’s Daniel shows at least muted grief as he moves toward the future. Pausewang may have been motivated as an activist to include the Holocaust in her range of social justice narratives, but her Final Journey does not originate in the unresolved grief of personal experience or out of the collective guilt of being German. Forman, although affording David a moment of “a hemorrhage of tears” (258), is quite obviously not concerned with the issue of grief as a subtext. His narrative is based on his research about the horror and on his interest in experimenting with fictional conventions. None of the narrators imply, as Sender does, that mourning cannot cease because those who died such horrible deaths must not be forgotten.

That the Holocaust can become a commodity of post-memory has been most glaringly demonstrated in the at first celebratory and then outraged reader responses to Binjamin Wilkomirski’s Fragments (1996).43 This bogus memoir of a child’s horrific experiences in the death camps was accepted as a genuine account by an adult survivor who, after decades, was finally able to evoke repressed memories of the horror he experienced in his infant years. Wilkomirski acquired an admirable post-memory through his reading and research of the Holocaust, but, if we look at his account after the exposure of its inauthenticity, the Holocaust becomes a complex metaphor for the author’s unarguably difficult childhood and youth.

The cultural climate when Fragments appeared was such that the apparently autobiographical memory of such tremendous child abuse found an empathic reader response, especially since there was no memoir of a survivor who lived through the Holocaust as an infant. The rhetoric of Fragments is so convincing that several scholars of the Holocaust, myself included, were deceived by the apparent authenticity of the text.44 At the same time our current ethical values regarding truth in Holocaust survivor memoirs demand that the narrator personally experienced the disaster. After it became evident that Fragments was fictional rather than autobiographical, reader confidence in the authenticity and truth of any future Holocaust memoir was subverted, for Wilkomirski could have lived through the events he imagines. When chronology is no longer an issue, all narratives about the Holocaust, whether memoirs or not, will come to be regarded as historical fictions. Saul Friedlander has predicted in 1993, “with the passage of two or three decades at most, the memory of the Shoah will be essentially ritualized for some and historicized for
the great majority, like any other past event saved from oblivion. The destruction of the Jews of Europe will become an empty formula and, in any case, ‘mere history.’” 45 It is important, then, as Sara Horowitz has stated, that there be continued study of the rhetoric with which fictional recounts of the Holocaust are constructed, including, and especially so, narratives for young readers.

Notes


3. Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Stella Rodway (New York: Bantam, 1960/1886) 109. In contrast to Wiesel’s Eliezer, Tadek, the narrator of Borowski’s *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* cannot see himself in the mirror: “...I am troubled by one persistent thought—that I have never been able to look also at myself” (176).


   Then I accepted the little mirror handed to me, and the lipstick. And I make believe that I am here, alive, like other people. Yes, I will make my lips beautiful, red, vibrant. I will look like other people, and nobody will know where I come from. If I look like everyone else, most assuredly I will feel like everyone else. I will have conquered it all.

   My hands are not steady, but now I am determined. I begin to move the lipstick on my upper lip, and I look into the mirror. But all I can see is smoke... smoke circling madly in the mirror. I can’t see what I am doing. My lips are red, huge, smeared, I am wearing the grin of a clown. (100)


12. Sobibor, a liquidation camp like Chelmno, was in operation between 1941–1943; it is famous for its armed uprising by about 150 desperate inmates on October 14, 1943. Accounts of the heroic gestures of the revolt in Sobibor have been collected in Miriam Novitch, *Sobibor: Martyrdom and Revolt: Documents and Testimonies* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1880); see also the television film *Escape from Sobibor* (1987).


17. Greenspan 52.


21. Gertrud Koch, “‘Against All Odds’ or the Will to Survive: Moral Conclusions from Narrative Closure,” *History and Memory* 9 (1 & 2 1997) 397.


27. Gudrun Pausewang, *The Last Children of Schevenborn*, trans. Norman M. Watt (Saskatoon, Saskatchewan: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1988); *Die letzten Kinder von Schevenborn, oder sieht so unsere Zukunft aus?* (Ravensburg: Otto Maier Verlag, 1983). Note: The English version of the novel is limited to the edition by a small independent Canadian press. Clearly, the narrative was too controversial in its graphic detail and tragic end to be published in the United States during the Cold War. I discuss
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32. For a description of the cremation pits dug primarily for the bodies of Hungarian Jews see Deborah Dwork and Robert Jan Van Pelt, Auschwitz: 1270 to the Present (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996) 338–43. While comparatively few prisoners were eyewitnesses to the gassings and the crematoria, the two burning pits were far more visible. Vladek Spiegelman, for example, was eyewitness to the cremation pits (Maus II 72).


35. Biographical details are from Something about the Author 70, eds. Donna Olendorf and Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale Research 1992) 61–65.


38. I am using the most frequent German spelling of the slang term “Musulmann,” though the reader will note that the spelling varies from source to source.


44. Among the scholars who were deeply impressed by Wilkomirski’s fictional narrative are Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, “See Under Memory. Reflections on When Memory Comes,” Memory and History 9 (Fall 1997) 364–375 and Adrienne Kertzer, “Do You
Know What ‘Auschwitz’ Means?’” Children’s Literature and the Holocaust,” The Lion and the Unicorn 23 (1999) 238–256. Kertzer, who did not consider Fragments appropriate for children, notes that the book has appeared on several “essential reading” lists for young readers. That Fragments struck most readers as authentic may well be due to the fact that readers tend to trust “the voice of the child” in narratives.

Children receive picture books for their instruction and delight, at least that is the conventional wisdom regarding this seemingly trivial and un perilous genre. But, as is often the case with children’s literature, the picture, too, can be for the creative imagination of an artist a vehicle that affords the displacement and deformation of very adult issues. In that case, the adult perceiver—and occasionally the child—is struck by images that suggest significance and stir the interpretative imagination toward an appropriation of meaning. Maurice Sendak’s pictures for Wilhelm Grimm’s sentimental tale of *Dear Mili* can have this effect, especially on the perceiver alert to images of the Holocaust.¹ There are picture book illustrators who simply try to enhance the narrative text, but there are also picture book artists who tell an alternative if not a contrary story in relation to the narrative. At first glance, the flat surfaces of Sendak artwork in *Dear Mili* project simple scenes that could be sets for a theatrical production for children, but the subtext—the palimpsest or *pentimento*—of the images links these picture book scenes with the genre of Holocaust art, as that art subverted and transformed conventions and archetypes in painting.

Grimm narrates in *Dear Mili* a small child’s archetypal quest story: a crisis at home sends her into the wilderness where, after being lost, she comes to a place of healing transformation until she is ready to return home again. Though he follows Grimm’s narrative line, Sendak tells an altogether different story by means of a hidden pattern through which he expresses his grief over two losses that are mutually dependent: the first
is the Holocaust in which members of his extended family were murdered; the second is the loss of naïveté with which he could cherish his affection and affinity for German romanticism, especially through the art of Phillip Otto Runge. Sendak surreptitiously grieves over both losses and works through his private sadness by means of a simple tale.

In its simplest form a picture book enables the child to name things in the world through simple schemata of representation: A is for apple, B is for ball. Picture books also introduce the child to narrative sequence and, eventually, to differences in storytelling between printed text and illustration. Pictures often parallel the text, interpret the text, or amplify and complicate the primary story until it becomes something quite new. The genre of the picture book begins to develop in the child the expectations inherent in convention and genre as well as the rudimentary skills in interpretation. Intrinsic to the picture book are basic issues such as the representation of the child’s familiar world and interpretation or transformation of the familiar through words and images. A picture book about the Holocaust, a world far removed from the child’s experience, seems a contradiction of the genre’s values. Nevertheless, for the sake of memory and witnessing, the medium of the picture books has been used to introduce and instruct the child about this difficult subject.

Jacqueline Rose’s definition of the rupture in children’s narratives between the adult and the child reader is most glaringly evident in picture books about the Holocaust, for these books are not about what a child wants, “but of what the adult . . . desires in the very act of constructing the child as object of its speech.” Memory and testimony are motivations for the adult creator of such books, but their radical simplifications and de-contextualizations of the Nazi Holocaust usually reduce and deform the disaster to the schemata of a “Holocaust primer” or to a fantasy analogy of death and rebirth patterns which assure the child that “there will always be a new spring.” Maurice Sendak’s artwork for Wilhelm Grimm’s story “Dear Mili” is a rare exception because this picture book has as its subtext the Holocaust, a subtext that subverts the official Christian *märchen* by Wilhelm Grimm. It is through the subtext that Sendak conceals and reveals his own struggle with representing the Holocaust through his preferred medium, the picture book. Born in America, Sendak’s Holocaust images are post-memories projected as possibilities, for if Sendak’s family members in America had stayed in Europe, they would have been murdered in the Holocaust. Moreover, as we will see, Sendak felt an ethical urgency to mourn the Holocaust in his way by hiding and revealing the disaster in his art and thereby problematizing his
affinity for the images of German romanticism. Given these complex motivations, it would have been impossible for Sendak to create a picture book with the Holocaust as official text. By hiding and revealing the Holocaust as subtextual *pentimento* in a book for a young child, Sendak may well have come upon the only credible way in which this subject can be presented in this genre.

His manner inevitably spares the child, but his approach to representing the Holocaust differs from that of other picture books; he does not urge the child to become a witness to the disaster by acquiring post-memory. This is in stark contrast to typical picture books about the Holocaust and aligns Sendak more with those artists who have struggled with conventions and genres as insufficient means to express the radical otherness of the disaster.

I. Holocaust Art and the Picture Book

“Holocaust art” seems an oxymoron because, in matters of this disaster, we have come to privilege ethical over aesthetic values. And yet, if they had means available, many inmates of Terezin and even Auschwitz felt a profound need to express themselves in basic or artistically complex images. At their most rudimentary, such expressions were signs scratched into concrete as “sacred graffiti of the soul.” Concentration and death camp art has two general categories: official and secret art. The Nazis commissioned official art, such as idyllic scenes or panoramic views of camp work-projects, for public display. The inmates who produced this art had access to materials that enabled them, at great risk, to record surreptitiously the true conditions of their world. Most of the subversive art was generated in Terezin where it could also be safely hidden, but it was also possible in Auschwitz. The primary purpose of such art was to bear witness. After the war, as Ziva Amisha-Maisels argues, this witnessing expressed itself often in obsessively reworked themes and images that seem to yearn for an indefinitely deferred catharsis.

Holocaust art is usually less a photographic mimesis of camp experiences than an expression of the emotional responses to these experiences. It is not surprising, therefore, that Holocaust artists often felt a greater affinity with expressionism than with realism. The inmate artist internalized a context without precedent, real or imagined, so that all antecedent catastrophes, real or imagined, became henceforth mere analogies. Moreover, the authority of the documentary record, photographed or filmed at the end of the war, became immediately so definitive in our col-
lective perception and memory of “what the Holocaust was really like”
that it overshadowed the personal feeling and memory of the traumatized
survivor, be he artist or not. Holocaust images such as the barbed wire
fence, the chimney, the emaciated human being, the corpse, either as an
individual or in a heap and, by analogy, the cross, martyrdom, and even
the pietà soon became over-determined. Conversely, the SS are generally
depicted in terms of dehumanized “predatory animals, symbols of death
or inhuman monsters,”8 decidedly in the mode of expressionistic
grotesques. Gassing and cremation were rarely depicted, partly because
the artist who worked on official art was removed from the center of the
death camp.

Only one artist, the painter David Olère (1902–1985), penetrated into
the crematories of Auschwitz-Birkenau and survived, willing to testify
through his art. In his catalogue of Olère’s work, Serge Klarsfeld observes
that “in his paintings he himself is often present, the witness [whose]
ghostly face observes with pain the inhuman scenes that cannot be erased
from his almost photographic memory.”9 In the case of Olère and other
painters, educated as artists before they became victims of the Holocaust,
it is quite evident that their art is both analogous to and an ironic inver-
sion of the art that influenced them. However, Olère’s postwar effort to
depict the unfathomable cannot escape the grammar of tradition as he
alternates between infernal images of apollonian rigidity or dionysian
chaos, for example in his painting “Extermination” (Klarsfeld 101) where
the death camp is a parody of the schemata traditionally associated with
the Last Judgment and the City of God. At the center is the artist’s face as
witness, his forehead split by an active crematoria chimney. The “saved”
on his right are two tortured bodies of a woman and a man while the
damned are represented by a bloated SS guard who, in a drunken stupor,
fills his mug with blood from Olère’s exposed heart. There is no tran-
scendence, no world above or below, there is only the eye of the witness
in a mutilated world where the SS throw live children into burning pits
and where the artist is forced to bury the rent limbs of children, horrors at
which few viewers can bear to look. Such atrocity was the fate of children
in the Shoah, their suffering and death was a real event in human time, but
it also became a sum of evil so great that to view even a mimesis of it
remains deeply threatening.

While Olère attempts to show the extremity of the Holocaust through
traditional schemata, Samuel Bak hides and reveals the absence of the
victims in mystically symbolic waste-land settings. In his interpretive
essay accompanying Bak’s paintings, Landscapes of Jewish Experience,
Lawrence Langer notes that Bak’s large canvases are “dramatic bulwarks against amnesia.” Born in 1933, Bak survived the Vilna ghetto until the Soviet Army recaptured it in 1944. With three exceptions, the large canvases of “Landscapes of Jewish Experience” do not contain human figures. Instead, Jewish experience is translated into landscapes of stony rubble where symbols have lost their context and where memory struggles against the power of repression, as the painting “Ghetto” painfully reveals. Here, remnants of a ghetto are exposed beneath massive stone plates that appear to have undergone a tectonic shift: beneath the rift, façades of houses lean against stony walls, their empty windows like the open eyes of the dead.

“Sounds of Silence,” “Nuremberg Elegy,” and “Self-Portrait” depict male human forms. Langer rightly perceives that “‘Self-Portrait’... violates our surmise of what such a title usually intends. The boy who grew up in pre-war Vilna with an intact family is not the same as the one who survived the catastrophe remembering a murdered father and a ruined community.” Left of the viewer are two rough wooden collages, faceless youthful figures with raised hands, three of which have stigmatic holes through their palms. Behind these is a torn, photolike image of an adult man’s face, a striking older version of the boy’s grief-stricken expression. The wooden collages are ghostly demarcations of one of the most famous photographs of a child in the Holocaust: the small boy in the Warsaw Ghetto who raises his defenseless hands as the Germans capture him. This figure is more definitively represented on the viewer’s right, his memory-provoking image hovering over an empty pair of shoes.

The boy in the self-portrait is seated in a chair; his torso emerges from a tattered blanket that has slipped over his right knee. His left hand holds the blanket in place to conceal something while the right holds a pen or a painter’s brush. He seems to record something secretively, something he sees in front of him, something not part of the painting. What does the boy see? Does he see the painter who re-creates the boy that he was, a boy who experienced and felt what the painter now tries to represent? Does the boy view with compassion the adult he would some day be? Or, does the boy see what has become an absence in the landscapes of Jewish experience, the victims of the disaster? The boy looks deeply into nothingness, the millions of murdered victims have left an emptiness no representation of the human form can fill. The human perceiver finds that the landscape resonates with disastrous history, with absences. Through allegory and realistically surreal human images, Olère tried to represent the violence of the Holocaust; Bak projects the void it left. Both artists strug-
Visual representation of the Holocaust in picture books, however, usually attempts to teach as it displaces and obscures the horror through archetypal conventions and Holocaust images that have become iconically acceptable. This is evident, for example, in Gerda Weissmann Klein’s *Promise of a New Spring: The Holocaust and Renewal*, illustrated by Vincent Tartaro: On two lines of barbed wire flutters a tattered rag with Star of David inscribed “Jude,” representing and screening the disaster of gas chamber and crematorium. The accompanying text seems at first a bald description of brutal facts: “Many Jews were killed in the cities and in the countryside. But the Nazis sent most Jews to special places called concentration camps. Behind the barbed wire fences of the concentration camps the Nazis murdered the Jews. The Nazi murder of the Jews is called the Holocaust.”

The abstraction in the definition of “Holocaust” and the phrase “special places” are an assurance that camps are far away from the child’s world and occurred once upon a time when an inexplicable evil force called “Nazis” was unleashed in the world. It killed out of season, as does a forest fire, the extended analogy that dominates this picture book with peaceful and then panicked animals. After the above statement, the author and illustrator turn to the forest fire and direct the young reader’s emotional response to the threatened animals. When the story returns to human survivors, we see parent and grandparent figures care for and play with the new generation in a springtime world. They tell the children how beautiful the world was “before so much was destroyed by evil,” and the children smile without comprehension as they are assured “you are the new spring in the forest of the world.” The image accompanying this final sentence shows a little girl in a meadow holding a nestling bird in her hand as a deer gazes up to her. The author has evoked here memories and desires that DeKoven Ezrahi calls “a kind of nature preserve,” an inevitable “part of childhood’s idyll” into which the Holocaust intruded as an unnatural rift into a paradisiacal world created by the memory of childhood and reconstituted again for the children of survivors. Children, living in such a paradise, cannot begin to follow the history of the Holocaust.

In the context of truth-telling the photograph might be deemed a more reliable medium. Chana Abell’s *The Children We Remember*, a collection of thirty-nine chronologically arranged photographs from the archives of Yad Vashem accompanied by a text of two hundred and six words, inad-
vertently problematizes the reliability of the medium. The “we” of the title could suggest that the photographs are intended for adult survivors rather than for children, but the simplicity of the text makes the book appropriate for the preschool child. While the children, before the arrival of the Nazis, engage in universal activities of childhood, the medium of photography also highlights their historical and cultural differences and thwarts identification on the part of a young viewer. Their world is by no means idyllic, yet, Abell shows the viewer the kindness of Jewish children; however, after the invasion of Poland it does not matter how kind the starving children of the ghetto are; the Nazis come and take them away “because they are Jews.” The caption “sometimes they put children to death,” which identifies a blurred photograph of a single soldier aiming his gun at a mother and child, illustrates this last point. After six portraits of children who were murdered, the picture book presents images of children who survived through escape, rescue, or baptism, communicating implicitly that escape from the Nazis was indeed possible. Naomi Sokoloff’s argument as to why the child, as a character in a story, appeals to writers of adult Holocaust fiction applies to the implied reader of Promise of a New Spring and The Children We Remember: “The focus on a child’s partial understanding helps alleviate the adult narrator’s struggle with language and artistic expression, for the young character’s incomprehension serves to indicate the incomprehensibility of the catastrophe.” Both picture books reveal unintentionally the adult’s struggle with Holocaust language and imagery and, by reducing the disaster into simple tales of the mythos of “the eternal return” or historical linearity, they reveal the pathos inherent in the adult’s struggle to communicate the unspeakable to a child.

The color illustrations of Karen Ritz for David Adler’s Child of the Warsaw Ghetto, attempt to narrate and image the Holocaust far more directly for a child, at least nine years old, who is challenged to be intellectually and emotionally alert. Here, an omniscient narrator tells the life of Erwin (Froim) Baum, a survivor of the ghetto as well as of Auschwitz and other camps. The fairy tale topos of marginal existence and precise historical location opens the narrative and denies, from the beginning, nostalgia toward an edenic past: “Chaim Baum was a poor Jewish tailor. His shop at 8 Solec Street in Warsaw Poland was at the back of his one-room house. The room had a woodburning stove, but no running water. The toilet was outside.” Froim is the youngest of seven children. Though in dire poverty, he does not complain. After his father dies, Froim is accepted into Janusz Korczak’s orphanage. To Froim, Korczak is “a hero,
a king, a kind and gentle grandfather,” but eventually Froim witnesses Korczak’s and the orphans’ deportation to Treblinka. The somber colors of the sometimes full-page illustrations attempt a realistic imaging of the overcrowded ghetto. Froim is eventually sent to Auschwitz, Buna, Birkenau, and Stutthof. Eventually, the Americans liberate him at Dachau where emaciated inmates gaze at the viewer from their crowded bunks. On the last full-page illustration, the “liberated” Froim (he could be any other survivor) turns his back to the viewer and limps away, supported by an American soldier. The text simply states: “Froim Baum survived, but almost three million Polish Jews were murdered by the Nazis. In all, six million Jews were killed. One-and-a-half million were children.” Nineteen-year-old Froim is bent like an old man wounded in body and spirit by the trauma of his experience. Even though Froim (Erwin) Baum eventually emigrated to the United States, the story’s text and imagery block any vision of “the new life,” of heroism or a nostalgic looking back to a pretraumatic time. Life for Froim was always very difficult. Adler’s narrative and Ritz’s illustrations respect the young reader’s ability to accept these harsh facts without easy consolation. The ethos of text and illustrations communicate serious truth-telling by an authoritative narrative voice that refuses to infantilize the implied reader with verbal or visual clichés and instead attempts to challenge rational and ethical consciousness and conscience. This is admirable, but also spares the young reader the words and images of extremity that go beyond reason.

While Adler evokes and denies the topos of the fairy tale, Roberto Innocenti confirms it in *Rose Blanche* where aesthetics and fantasy are valued over historical context and ethics. The story is told through full-page scenes, including eight double spreads, that unfold for the reader Rose Blanche’s life in a stony town and her quest into the forbidden clearing in the woods. Here, she comes upon a group of starving children in striped clothing highlighted by the Star of David. As the war increasingly deteriorates her town, Rose, having grown very pale and wan, brings food to the children until she discovers one day that the camp is destroyed. Shots ring out in the foggy forest and Rose Blanche disappears. When spring returns, a meadow in bloom reveals morning glories winding up the fence post of the camp, and from the remaining barbed wire, Rose Blanche’s blue flower droops, similar to the rag and Star of David in *Promise of Spring*.

This picture book impresses the viewer primarily with the romantic beauty of its artwork, an impression strengthened by the dreamlike realism that precludes any serious consideration of the Holocaust. Rose
Blanche’s quest to the young inmates is only possible in a fairy tale, not in history. Innocenti wanted to pay tribute to Sophie Scholl’s activist group “The White Rose” and also “to illustrate [my emphasis] how a child experiences war without understanding it.” Signifiers such as swastika flags, German and Soviet army uniforms, the upraised arms of a Jewish boy, again a transformation of the famous photograph from the Warsaw ghetto, may resonate with the historically aware reader, but not with the child. In *Rose Blanche*, the artist indulges in a beautiful fairy tale, the subtext of which is an unarticulated horror. As Patricia Campbell has observed in her critique of Innocenti, “*Rose Blanche* is a deeply problematic work. . . . Without a grounding of fact, this is a story full of puzzles and intimations of unusual horrors . . . A young child has no orientation in time, place, or reality for this book, no frame of reference for understanding its broader implications.” The motivation to acknowledge a resistance group whose key members were executed is aestheticized here through artwork whose painstaking beauty is an end itself and makes mourning and memory a sentimental gesture rather than a profound struggle.

Maurice Sendak refuses to aestheticize the Holocaust in his artwork for Wilhelm Grimm’s *Dear Mili*; instead, he problematizes the fairy tale tradition and German romanticism through the subtext of Holocaust images that pressure against the conventions of a fairy tale quest through the forest. Moreover, he has no intention of either teaching about the Holocaust or even commemorating it in any official way; his memorial is personal, and his witnessing is evident only to those also engaged in memory and testimony. Sendak’s palimpsests of Holocaust and German romanticism generate multi-leveled and interrelated subtextual connections to such an extent that the flat and decorative quality of the surface of the pictures becomes an ascetic rather than an aesthetic choice as it heightens the illusory quality of all art, but especially representational art.

II. Memory and Desire in the Landscapes of Sendak’s *Dear Mili*

In 1816 Wilhelm Grimm wrote a letter of consolation to a girl named Mili who apparently grieved over a personal loss. Grimm assures her that his “heart goes out to you, and though my eyes have not seen you yet, it loves you and thinks it is sitting beside you.” The letter and the story were discovered in 1983 and published with Sendak’s pictures in 1988. Grimm’s tale is a sentimental story of a mother who lost all her children except the youngest; a blessed child with whom she lives impoverished but content-
ly at the edge of a great forest. Their idyllic existence is disrupted by the approach of a great war, and to save her child “from the wicked men,” the mother sends her off deep into the forest. The experience is terrifying for the girl, but, with the help of a guardian spirit, she eventually arrives at the hut of St. Joseph who cares for her and asks her to do meaningful work. The girl and her incarnated guardian spirit roam and play in the wondrous garden near St. Joseph’s hut. She does not want to leave, but St. Joseph sends her home to her mother after three days (thirty years) with the promise that the rose he gives her will bloom when it is time for her to return to him.

Shortly after the publication of Dear Mili, Maurice Sendak spoke at the University of Washington about the creative process that led to his pictures for the fairy tale. In the course of his rather personal lecture, Sendak declared, “Dear Mili is a book about landscape, through which she runs.” He described Mili as moving through the landscapes of three experiences: a “dark wood” experience, a “paradisiacal” experience, and a “nostalgic” experience. The landscape of Dear Mili is thus clearly symbolic, but not only because the story is suffused with the supernatural aids characteristic of the mode of romance, for Maurice Sendak accomplishes much personal work in Dear Mili. To some extent his pictures parallel Grimm’s text, but they also tell an altogether different story. It seems that Sendak the artist projects in these pictures a personal selva obscura, a dark wood of loss, acknowledgment and grief at life’s midpoint.

Sendak became aware of the Holocaust at his bar mitzvah in 1941. His paternal grandfather and eventually all his relatives in Europe died in the Holocaust. However, it was not until after he had been asked to illustrate Dear Mili that he began to confront what the Holocaust meant to him. He admitted during his talk that he did not want to do the pictures for Grimm’s tale, nor did he know how to do them because of the story’s Christian theme and symbolism. Besides, he had to go to Holland to design the set for two short operas. During his stay in Amsterdam, Sendak decided that this time he would not avoid visiting the Anne Frank House. He did not mention the effect this visit had on him; instead, he highlighted how his creative process was stimulated by Van Gogh’s paintings in the Amsterdam museum and by the artist’s letters to his brother Theo. Sendak had already read Robert Rosenblum’s Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition when he was working on Outside Over There and admitted that the critical study stimulated his creative process. Rosenblum argues that the romantic landscapes of artists such as Caspar Friedrich and Phillip Otto Runge, the landscapes of Van Gogh, and even...
the abstract expressionism of Mark Rothko transpose traditional religious imagery to nature and sheer color and thereby achieve “a kind of Protestant meditation upon the mysteries of the great beyond.” Van Gogh’s landscapes made Sendak realize that “the emotional impact comes from the landscape” (“Creative”). However, in spite of his fascination with Van Gogh’s search for religious meaning through the imaging of landscapes, Sendak found himself still troubled over the challenge of creating pictures for such an overtly Christian tale as *Dear Mili*.

The Christian issue resolved itself so easily for Sendak that one can surmise it had functioned as a screen for more important questions, namely, how could the romantic and spiritually meaningful landscapes and forest scenes of the German painter Phillip Otto Runge retain their meaning if those landscapes and those intimate forest clearings were also the sites of the Holocaust? Sendak overcame his scruples about the Christian theme after he befriended the Franciscan Brothers in Cambridge, New York. He had hoped to acquire one of the German shepherd pups bred at the monastery where he had gained access by claiming to be an illustrator of dog books. After he revealed his true identity, he shared for a time the monastic life of the brothers and told them of his conflict. When the abbot told him that St. Joseph had been a Jew, Sendak felt that a major obstacle to his project had been removed (“Creative”).

I had acquired *Dear Mili* just prior to the lecture and immediately noticed its allusions to the Holocaust, especially on the textless double-spreads of Mili’s experience in the forest of the dead and of her paradisical experience in St. Joseph’s realm, where she seems oblivious to the fact that the scene is shared not only with the saint and Mozart, but also with Anne Frank and the children of Izieu. The latter were a group of Jewish children hidden in a house at Izieu and eventually sent to their deaths by Klaus Barbie, the Nazi in charge of this area in France. I found it significant that Sendak explained the allusion to the house and the children of Izieu and even mentioned that their picture had appeared in *The New York Times*, but he said nothing about Mili’s dark night of the soul in the forest. Sendak’s omissions in his talk were as important as his affirmations.

Sendak’s artwork for *Dear Mili* is a working through of the artist’s affinity with German romanticism and his acknowledgment that this tradition is forever challenged, if not parodied, after the romantic sites had been appropriated by the Nazi death camps. The artist shares with Mili’s mother the wish that there will be sites of safe-keeping for children in the wilderness of war, and yet he knows and acknowledges that such safe-
keeping would only be possible if there had been a site transcendent of historical time and place. In my reading of Sendak’s artwork in *Dear Mili*, I will focus on the sites of Mili’s landscapes as repositories of memory, mourning, and desire and show how these landscapes eventually contract to the vanishing point in the aged mother’s memory of the child, the little girl she sent into the woods.

The forest appears on every page in *Dear Mili*, but our familiarity with this topos of children’s literature tempts us to limit it to the “into the woods and back again” convention and thus blocks our perceptions of Sendak’s many-leveled use of the forest. Sendak blends the fairy tale convention of the forest with the romantic paintings of Runge and the documentary photographs of persons and scenarios associated with the Holocaust. The child reader will, of course, miss the intertextualities in *Dear Mili* and recognize primarily the familiar quest of “into the woods and back again,” the screen by which the artist attempts to cope with the issues that disturb him.

As Robert Pogue Harrison reveals in his study *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, the forest as a natural place and as a symbol has had a profoundly ambivalent hold on the human imagination. The forest is an archaic place of origin, where the emerging consciousness is enveloped by the canopy of the trees and kept protected from the piercing eye of the open sky. It is a place of escape and abandonment, of discovery and transformation, of concealment and revelation. Its clearing is the moment of history as civilization’s institutions are constructed over and against the forest until they are again absorbed by the wilderness.23 The adversarial image of the forest dominates western civilization, at least until the romantic era. As deforestation took its toll, the king’s hunting privileges made preservation of forests possible, because in the forest the king could release his wildness in order to govern afterward better within the strictures of civilization (69–70). Harrison reminds us that when the forests are destroyed, “it is not only an accumulated history of natural growth that vanishes. A preserve of cultural memory also disappears” (62). As a metaphor for the subconscious, the forest is a repository of memory. Symbolically, then, deforestation is an attempt to erase memory. Through the ages humans have compared themselves to trees, and we may surmise that history, as an expression of what we choose to remember, will come to an end when the last trees have been cut.

I have not “gotten off the path through the woods,” for the ideas above are very relevant to *Dear Mili*. As Simon Schama has shown, the imaging of the German forest in particular has a special relation to German nation-
al identity as it brings together “religion and patriotism, antiquity and the future . . . in the Teutonic romance of the woods,” a northern Germanic wood, “a place of firs and beeches and monstrously deformed oaks.” That Teutonic romance is invalidated when the clearing in the forest is settled as the site of a concentration or death camp.

Forest and Holocaust (or, the “final solution”) join in a historical moment as territory and as a human construct. As parodic inversion of the secular city, the camp was indeed a world in the clearing of the forest, but, unlike the city, sought to hide permanently in the thicket. In one of the first experientially based discussions of the camp world, Eugen Kogon, inmate of Buchenwald, notes that, “as sites for concentration camps the SS invariably chose inaccessible areas, preferably forests and moors, not too far from the larger cities.” Buchenwald, near Weimar, was a gift of real estate to the SS consisting of 370 acres of hardwood and pine forest in an area utterly unsuited to human habitation and subject to harsh weather conditions. “The location was symbolic. Weimar had long been regarded as the cultural heart of Germany . . . And here was Buchenwald, a piece of wilderness where the new German spirit was to unfold. This contrast and juxtaposition of sentimentally cherished culture and unrestrained brutality was all too characteristic . . . A trackless region of tumbled trees and jumbled roots” was cleared in the summer of 1937. Left standing in the center of the camp was an oak tree known as the “Goethe Oak” (Kogon 49). The very name Buchenwald, forest of beech trees, is thus charged with ironic connotations. Here, as in the glen of birches — Birkenau — it is impossible for the creative imagination to find its sacred grove.

The camp world has been compared to “a forest of the dead”; victims have been memorialized in the “Martyrs’ Forest near Kesalon in the Judean Hills outside Jerusalem . . . as a living memorial to the six million Jews who perished in the Holocaust.” James Young points out that here, “through the planting of trees, the memory of the victims is cultivated in the founding of the state: in taking root in the land, the memory of the martyrs binds rememberers to the state itself” (220). Thus history constitutes the landscape. In its more aggressive manifestations, the forest, becomes the symbol of “an army which has taken up a position which does not flee in any circumstances, and which allows itself to be cut down to the last man before it gives a foot of ground.” Such an army is celebrated in Triumph of the Will where human faces are obscured beneath the flag forest’s panoply of swastika banners. Harrison points out that with the onset of Romanticism forests begin to be associated with memory.
“They are enveloped . . . in the aura of lost origins,” evoking a nostalgia whose ambivalence “cannot but evoke the condition it laments, and by the same token . . . cannot present its lost paradise (or forests) as anything but imaginary, inaccessible, or unreal” (156). Jack Zipes agrees that the Grimms nostalgically advocated through their journal *Altdeutsche Wälder* (*Old German Forests* which emphasized the gathering of neglected texts) that “the Volk, the people, bound by a common language but disunited, needed to enter old German forests . . . to gain a sense of their heritage and to strengthen the ties among themselves.”29 To this day the German forest, *der deutsche Wald*, has psychological resonance for Germans who might deny the concentration camp’s forest of the dead, but lament over the *Waldsterben*, the dying of the forest from the acid rain of civilization.

From the sacred groves described in Tacitus’ *Germania*, to the Grimm brothers’ *Märchenwald*, to the imagery of National Socialism, the forest is symbolic for the history and politics of German culture, both nostalgically and in terms of the repression of memory. Maurice Sendak may not be acquainted with the full range of the forest imagery in Nazism and the Holocaust, but, as a person whose extended family was murdered in concentration and extermination camps, he knows that such “territories” were hidden in the woods, and he projects that knowledge in the first double spread of *Dear Mili* where the forest is indeed a “trackless region of tumbled trees and jumbled roots.” At this point in the young child’s Dantean quest, the protective meaning of the forest is lost as the primal place for the creative imagination as depicted by Phillip Otto Runge (1777–1810).

Amy Sonheim’s discussion of the influence of three Runge paintings on *Dear Mili* begins to unfold the richness of influences on this children’s book. The dust jacket displaces motifs from Runge’s “The Source and the Poet,” while the rose tree and the materialized angel after Mili’s dark night of the soul are transformations of the “Rest on the Flight into Egypt.” Most important, however, is the influence of “The Nightingale’s Lesson.”30 Runge enclosed his aesthetics in a complex faith that combined the Protestant mystical tradition with an admiration for Catholic imaging.31 Sendak, however, argues Sonheim, does not paraphrase Runge’s cosmogony but secularizes and displaces it by privileging the earthbound over the transcendent and by employing the ironic, the comic, and occasionally, even the burlesque. While Runge interrelates the natural, the human, and the transcendent, Sendak blocks such connections. As a result his Mili lacks the archetypal intensity of Runge’s children and is endowed “with such staidness that it is difficult to believe that she will eventually
be able to transcend her hardships as intimated by Grimm’s ensuing narrative” (Sonheim 123–25). Nevertheless, concludes Sonheim, Runge’s influence functions as a palimpsest in Sendak’s pictures, but, while in a true palimpsest the first text has no relation to the text written over it, Sendak’s illustrations demand that the reader take Runge into account (133).

Why does Sendak bother with Runge at all if he displaces him so decisively? Amplifying Sonheim’s use of palimpsest or *pentimento*, I contend that this device is a memory screen whose content is acknowledged and repressed. Sendak has stated that the two dominant images of his childhood were Mickey Mouse and the photo of his bearded and severe maternal grandfather who seemed to the boy Maurice “the exact image of God.” We see here already Sendak’s attraction to the serious (the patriarchal Jewish grandfather) and his appreciation of the playful, that is, Mickey Mouse, his alter ego. However he may displace Runge in *Mili*, Sendak attempts to cope with something deadly serious in his pictures—the Holocaust. To do this he must deny Runge and turn romantic sublimity into the countersublime. Sendak achieves this by reducing archetypal images to a decorative flatness, for the countersublime is defined not only by the ludicrous, but also by drawing attention to the possibility that the settings of the sublime may be mere theatrical effect, thereby trivializing the cause of the oceanic feelings of transcendence the sublime usually stimulates.

Like Runge, Sendak values music as furthering the creative process of poet and artist. He acknowledges in “The Shape of Music” the “quickening” power of music in his own work and in the work of artists he admires: “The word *quicken* . . . suggests something musical, something rhythmic and impulsive. It suggests a beat—a heartbeat, a musical beat, the beginning of a dance. This association proclaims music as one source from which my own pictures take life. For me ‘to conceive musically’ means to quicken the life of the illustrated book.” Such quickening emanates in *Outside Over There* and in *Dear Mili* from a still center signified by the figure of Mozart. In both cases the child characters are oblivious to Mozart’s presence. Ida walks right past the center of intimacy where Mozart is at the keyboard; Mili turns her back to Mozart, choirmaster to Anne Frank and the children of Izieu. Mozart is a metonymic for the possibility of the transforming power of music through which renewal, if not transcendence is possible. Thus “Mozart” is discoverable in the woods, in the confusions of emotions, in the chaos of history. Sendak and his palimpsest Runge are not too far apart here. In Runge’s
“The Source and the Poet” and “The Nightingale’s Lesson,” it is music that quickens the world deep within the forest. Both drawing and painting project the sheltering darkness of the forest that contains luminous depths. Runge explained the role of music in “The Nightingale’s Lesson” in 1802 when he defined the dense forest as a place “where a brook rushes through dark shade” and yet its sound is “as the sound of the flute in the shady tree above” as “the musical harmony between figure and landscape becomes an instrument of the soul to harmonize with love.”

“The Nightingale’s Lesson” is a mythopoetic portrait of the painter’s fiancée Pauline as Psyche. She sits in the oval of the painting within the branches of a strong fallen oak. Slightly above her, Amor as boy holds two small flutes. Behind them a rosy cupid sleeps on a rust-red pillow in the darkness of the woods. The oval is surrounded by a trompe l’oeil metallic frame covered with arabesques that repeat the “lesson” through images of the child geniuses of the lily and the rose, heavenly and earthly love. The nightingale perches as musical inspiration on the finger of the lily genius, while the genius of the rose stretches his arms out to her in yearning. The top of the frame depicts a lyre-playing Amor in oak branches. The dust jacket for Mili is a playful transformation of Runge’s frame.

The intimate still center in Runge is protected by the romantic forest, whose primal darkness, however, does not fail to admit the light that surrounds the forest, accepting and nesting the shadowy depths as consciousness acknowledges the value of the unconscious. This is a world so radically different from the murderous clearing of the death camp hidden in the forest that the artist who is influenced by both image clusters must discover revisionary patterns that enable him or her to “write over” the palimpsests of both cultural/historical memories, thereby acknowledging both in the process of transformation. This is Sendak’s artistic problem in Dear Mili. As he has admitted, he is attracted to the artist’s search for the transcendent in the natural, to landscapes where the natural seems to become sentient or where the natural expresses the artist’s nonartistic experiences and questions (“Creative”). However, the mode of irony is inevitable for most artists who have reflected on the nightmare of history in the twentieth century, certainly so for Sendak.

Dear Mili follows the quest narrative typical of fairy tales about prepubescent children, namely into-the-woods-and-back-again; it is the pattern Sendak has followed in his major picture books. Mili, however, attains no maturation; instead, Sendak defines the third stage of her quest as “nostalgic” (“Creative”). Nostalgia is not only the yearning to return to
the home that one had; it is also the imagining of a sense of an “at-home-ness” that never existed.

The first picture in Mili shows mother and daughter before their cottage in the garden where, as Sonheim points out, the triangle formed by the dogs and the mother’s protective gesture shelters Mili (125), as does the larger frame of the gabled cottage. They live “at the end of the village,” at the margin of civilization and wilderness and would be the first to suffer the violence of war. Marginal existence thus threatens the intimate cottage idyll from the outset. The hut itself suggests a soulless habitation—no smoke rises from the chimney, and the windows and door open to a blank darkness within. The flowers are in bloom, but the leaves droop. As in Grimm’s text, the mother holds a basket of flowers in her lap. She may be desperately poor, but she is a self-involved romantic who absentmindedly strokes Mili’s hair with the back of her hand. Mili turns her back to us, as she will do several times in the picture series, and tentatively touches the luxurious coat of her golden retriever. The only alert being in the picture is the German shepherd, whose rational and questioning gaze at the mother urges acknowledgment of the fiery smoke rising beyond the trees. Even the angelic guardian is here completely concerned with himself: He is perched precariously, eyelids lowered, in a slender tree. His imaging is especially significant because it appears to be the first allusion to a photograph we find in Serge Klarsfeld’s The Children of Izieu where the future victim is daringly poised in a sapling, his legs dangling over the branch, his right arm raised up along the trunk. In Sendak’s picture the guardian spirit is at first only a strangely displaced child, as endangered as Mili herself. If we expand the photo and the group portrait of the children transmuted to Sendak’s St. Joseph’s garden, we could conclude that, by association of images, one of the children of Izieu will become Mili’s guide.

Thus, the first full picture in Sendak’s book sets up the subtextual and intertextual tensions for the imagings of Mili’s quest and prepares the reader and the viewer for Mili’s ghostly, if not ghastly, nostalgic return. In spite of gestures of protectiveness, the child’s situation in the world at the edge of the forest is one of imminent and immanent danger, even as mother and daughter are momentarily oblivious to it. When mother and daughter become suddenly aware of the fiery clouds of war on the next page, they look directly at the threat. The mother holds the right hand protectively over her child while raising her left arm against the overwhelming force. The guardian angel, still perching in the tree, now covers his eyes with his right arm. The golden retriever eyes the repast, while the
German shepherd cowers under the table, his nose almost touching a many-paged open book on the ground. The book will appear again, opened the same way, on the last double spread of the story.

In the face of historical trauma, the fairy tale motifs of guardian angels and helpful animals are ineffectual: humans must act. So powerful is the mother’s decision that even the guardian spirit appears to listen with attention on the next page. Grimm’s text coincides with Sendak’s imagining: “And, in her fear, she decided to send the child into the forest, where no enemy could follow.” All self-involved absentmindedness is gone. The most intense communication between two persons takes place in this picture of mother and daughter, who, as Sonheim points out, become mirror images of each other (128). The mother’s decision to send her child into the woods goes counter to the desire that a family should stay together, for she supposes that one person, in spite of dangers, may have an increased survival chance. Lesson time has replaced dream time, and the reader familiar with Runge’s “The Nightingale’s Lesson” cannot but see in Mili and her mother a reflection of the same intensity as that found between Amor and Psyche-Nightingale. In spite of her gossamer wings, Runge’s Psyche is no elfin dryad; her ample hips and bosom, her strong hands and solid feet promise earthly and capable motherhood. Psyche’s and the mother’s profiles share not only a quite similar hairstyle, but also the features of a strong nose and the intense gaze that binds the child figure to them. Mili’s mother seems an older version of Runge’s Psyche. The darkness of the woods frames the figures in both pictures. The branches of Sendak’s trees suggest, though in muted fashion, the branches of Runge’s trees against the dawn.

The next panel prepares the reader for the double spread of Mili’s dark night of the soul. The guardian spirit is asleep in the maternal shell of a hollow tree, the prominent images hawk and crow foreshadow violence and death as Mili walks away from her mother into the indeterminate brightness of a forest path. This is the last time we see Mili wearing her rose-colored slippers; she will be barefoot hereafter in the quest through the forest and in the transcendent realm of St. Joseph, for the dead of the disaster do not wear shoes. Sendak does not show us Mili in her extreme situation; we see her after the trauma in the first of three double spreads: a trackless region of tumbled trees and jumbled roots, many in cadaverous or monstrous human forms. Sendak shows Mili in the attitude of a person who has internalized something no human should experience or behold. Her posture alludes to two precursors. First, Mili sits in the pose of Runge’s Psyche on a fallen oak, but unlike Psyche, Mili’s gaze
is nondirected. She is also an inverse image of Dürer’s “Melancholia I,” an allegorical figure of the creative imagination (melancholia imaginativa) surrounded the disarray of objects that were once meaningful. Mili is here a child-image of Melancholia, unable to understand the trauma that befell her. Raised into consciousness, the disaster is for the artist, as descendant of Holocaust victims, a permanent object of melancholic contemplation. Mili’s sleeping guardian spirit is not only the blissfully sleeping winged child in the center of the forest’s intimacy, but is also the indifferent putto in Dürer’s “Melancholia I.” Sendak contributes here, in his manner, to the postwar transformations of Dürer’s “Melancholia I,” as we find them also in Bak’s “Nuremberg Elegy” as a transformation in the landscapes of Jewish experience, in Anselm Kiefer’s “Melancholia” (1988) and in Günter Grass’s The Diary of a Snail. Dürer’s Nuremberg, a medieval town romanticized as quintessentially German, became the site for Nazi myth-making at the annual party rallies and was leveled during Allied bombing raids. Dürer’s Melancholia, then, is metonymic for unresolved grief.

Mili is not at the killing center as such, but is lost in the forest of the dead where the murderous violence occurred. The book’s gully separates her from a group of cadaverous and ragged beings that are crossing a raggedy bridge over a stony river. Two of the figures turn their heads toward Mili with an expression of wonder or beckoning. Sendak, notes John Cech in his Jungian interpretation of the artist, had first depicted this group as children “being marched by Nazi soldiers into a building that takes its outline from the infamous main entrance to Auschwitz.” Thus it is Auschwitz, not Runge’s dawn in the “Lesson” that looms as the center of the wilderness. Had Sendak kept the swastika insignia on the Nazi soldiers, the text of his pictures would have changed entirely, for no longer would the Holocaust have remained subtext; Dear Mili would have become a picture book teaching about the Holocaust rather than an expression of Sendak’s personal mourning and melancholia over the disaster. Sendak creates in Mili a synchronic image of the child as victim of war who is transported through the pattern of a Märchen into a realm of safekeeping. At the same time he acknowledges that this is but an adult wish-fulfillment dream, for the subtext of the Shoah, while hidden, is undeniable and insistently present.

Though Mili is transported to a timeless realm, that state of being is premature: her development is arrested and stunted, as if she were indeed dead. She is remembered as she was at the time of the beginning of the disaster that sent her into the woods. Grimm’s text makes it clear that St.
Joseph’s cottage is but a way station. As she moves through the forest toward it, she sees the stars above as bright nails on the door of heaven. When she sees the cottage window from a distance, she believes at first that it is a fallen star. It is not God but St. Joseph, protector of orphans and provider of easy deaths, who welcomes her. In the context of the symbolism that surrounds him, this St. Joseph is less the foster father of the divine infant and more like Joseph of Arimathaea, mentioned by each of the evangelists as a rich council member who provided proper burial for Jesus in a garden adjacent to the site of the crucifixion (John 19:38–42). Sendak’s St. Joseph’s garden is a place of tombs and headstones, disguised by lush and exotic vegetation and flowers. His cottage in the wilderness is under a cosmic sky. This is the dream logic of nurturant maternal desire blended with the Dantesque quest from inferno to purgatory to an eventual transcendent homecoming. The parent hopes for the safe haven—the woods or the house at Izieu—from whence a joyful reunion becomes a future possibility. Unlike history, the fairy tale’s mode of romance can acknowledge and transcend the disaster; in the mother’s ruin of memory, Mili will always be the little girl that she was until the night of the mother’s death, when Mili becomes the mother’s fantasy of salvation.

At St. Joseph’s cottage Mili does healing and meaningful work by gathering and preparing food, but she also roams in free play with her guardian spirit, now a little girl like herself. Even in this serene environment Sendak never shows the viewer Mili in full frontal view. Her back is turned to the viewer seven times and nine times she is shown in profile or partial profile view. She is not whole and complete, her development is arrested by the disaster and she never reaches consciousness of self in relation to her contexts. She stands before St. Joseph with an empty bowl as if expecting it to be filled, somehow.

St. Joseph’s Eden is profuse with flowers, but bears no fruit. Here the northern forest flourishes alongside the luscious plants of Southeast Asia and the products of Sendak’s greenhouse in Connecticut (“Creative”). There are Asian tombs and temple fragments, the ruins of a cloister, a Jewish cemetery, and the house at Izieu. A comparison between the double spread of St. Joseph’s paradise with that of the dark night of the soul makes clear a transformation of motifs. Mili is again on the right side of the gully, turning her back to us now and embracing a companion. The skeletal trees are now headstones on Jewish graves. On the left side is St. Joseph, thoughtfully picking the budding rose, the “golden bough,” that will enable Mili to go back to her mother and then return to St. Joseph.
He clearly displaces the tree and the skeletal figure on the extreme left of the “dark night.” The stony river has become a clear stream flowing into the center of the double spread, where a tropical flower rises as tall as a tree. The entrance gate to Auschwitz-Birkenau becomes the house at Izieu in paradise, obscured in part by trees. The group that crosses the bridge is now the group inspired by the photograph of the children of Izieu and photographs of Anne Frank, both quickened by choirmaster Mozart.

What makes the children of Izieu and Anne Frank so memorable is that we have a record of them; they were photographed and encouraged to express themselves in writings and drawings. Because one of the caregivers of the children hidden at Izieu arrived with a camera, the forty-four children who were murdered left us an image of the children they were before Klaus Barbie ordered their transport to extinction. Serge Klarsfeld’s paid them tribute by including that record in a book: “Lest anyone claim—as some have already done—that these children never existed at all [or] omit the reason for their martyrdom: the fact that they were Jews.” The same motive can be attributed to Sendak, who transforms one of the photographs for his singing group against the backdrop of the house that sheltered them. By including the house, the children, and Anne Frank in St. Joseph’s paradise, Sendak implies that our desire for safekeeping, especially of children, is in the nightmare of history often so unrealizable that a totally other world might as well be the only possibility for safety. These children, not seen by Mili and her guardian spirit, are clearly the spiritual center of this double spread: all nine of them confront us with a full frontal view and Mozart, who lies with his back to us, gazes at them as directly as we do.

The last double spread of Dear Mili reveals that the forest, once at the edge of the maternal hut, has now receded to the distant hills. There are the tilled fields of civilization and the ruins of the cloister and the castle of history that rise on the hillside. An autumnal ripeness pervades the scene as the sun is setting behind the hills under a cloudy sky. Paradise’s tropical flower as axis mundi has been replaced by an intertwining vine and apple tree; the fruit of both, recalling the most significant fruits of the Old and New Testament respectively, is richly ripe, as the leaves are turning red and yellow. This image is perhaps the greatest support for Sendak’s understated assertion that “the ending is not sad” (“Creative”). The tree separates the returning Mili from the right side of the double spread (in the two other double spreads Mili has been on the right), where her cadaverous-looking blind old mother sits before the severely dilapidated cottage in her now flowerless garden and opens her arms toward
Mili. At the mother’s feet, shod as of old in rose-colored slippers, lies the still unread open book.

The image that might frighten the child reader of Dear Mili is the image of the mother. Grimm describes her as an “old, old woman . . . enjoying the last rays of the evening sun that hung low over the forest.” When she recognizes her child, she cries out “in joyful amazement.” She had feared that “wild beasts had torn her to pieces,” even though she retained the hope that she could see at least a glimpse of Mili “just as she was when she went away.” The artist chose not to depict her as a kindly old woman whose heart is wise and full of love; instead he depicts a woman who seems a hungry, galvanized corpse or a survivor of immense suffering and grief. Her gnarled hands are as claw-like as the fur that borders her jacket. She is an astonishing picture of unfulfilled physical and emotional needs. While so much has changed beyond the fence of her garden, the two trees that flank the cottage have hardly grown at all in thirty years. Here, Sendak balances carefully the ravages of time and the arrested development of a person traumatized by events in time. There is also a deep sense of an ending that finds its objective correlatives in sunset, ripe fruit, ruined cloister, decaying hut, age, and return. At the same time there is incompleteness—the sun is halfway set, the moon is a sliver, the book needs to be read to the end. The image of the book open at the middle is reflexive about the picture book Dear Mili and about all tellings of our personal and collective histories. We are still in medias res; our story is not finished.

Sendak said that the third part of Mili’s quest is “nostalgic.” Mili, however, is not the one who feels nostalgic. St. Joseph had to urge her to return to her mother, and she did so because he promised her that she could return to his garden. Mili’s return resonates with the return of Persephone to Demeter, but Mili’s mother never roamed the world in search for her daughter; she stayed anchored at her cottage and fixed in her nostalgic memory of the image of Mili lost in the catastrophe of war from which she tried to preserve her.

Mili has been her mother’s memory and desire, past and future, and so strong are both that in the tale a miraculous materialization occurs as Mili emerges from some great forest far away. Mili’s stiff, processional march toward her mother is indicative that she is a “construction” rather than a girl rushing into her mother’s arms. Moreover, the mother’s blindness reinforces the idea of an inner vision. After thirty years Mili is a fiction of her mother’s imagination, where she is forever the little girl that
she was. At the end, she is the psychopomp, the guide of dead souls, who leads her mother across the threshold between life and death.

Every telling of the catastrophe is a revision and as such a psychological defense. Had his grandparents not emigrated, Maurice Sendak, who was fourteen by the time the “final solution” was officially instituted, would have been a child of the Shoah. Sendak does not appear to forget this, though he is no documentary recorder. Sendak’s art transforms Wilhelm Grimm’s tale into a difficult story as complex as a poem that requires a hermeneutic exercise on the part of the reader. The Holocaust is a very difficult story to tell. The artist places the memory of catastrophe and the desire for transformation in the overlay of landscapes and acknowledges that these two human faculties are always active, for better or worse, in our tellings. The tensions in Dear Mili make it clear that the artist is aware that “how it really was” cannot be told, because every telling, in order to communicate, must have recourse to conventions, conventions of art, literature, and of ordinary discourse that, though they distort, make the disaster bearable to the memory of human experience. This Maurice Sendak achieves in “Dear Mili . . . a book about landscape through which she runs. . . . ”

Notes


32. Lanes 9.
37. My appreciation goes to the students in my fall 2000 children’s literature class who alerted me to Mili’s loss of shoes and to the likelihood that St. Joseph in *Dear Mili* is not the foster father of Christ but rather Joseph of Arimathaea.
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On occasion, we rediscover serendipitously a book we treasured as children. At such moments, Maurice Halbwachs observes, we anticipate reliving “the memory of our childhood.” As we leaf through the pages, we become aware that the book is quite different from our remembered childhood response. The stories seem now “less extraordinary, more formulaic, less lively.” We also note gaps in the text as well as verbal and pictorial images whose significance and meaning escaped us as children. Such phenomena of the memory of reading apply both to narratives we have loved and to narratives that frightened us when we were unaware how subtly conventions and genre shape and structure our experienced and acquired memories. The question I ask myself at this point is what will be the response of an adult when she or he peruses a book written for young readers about Nazism or the Holocaust, a book once read as a child or adolescent?

Few readers will be able to say: “This is where my interest in the subject began.” Recalling how we felt as children or adolescents as we leaf through the pages, we may note now how reductive and minimalist the representations of the Third Reich and the Holocaust are. Other readers might remember how sad they felt after reading a story about a Jewish adolescent struggling to survive in a ghetto or a camp or a Hitler Youth succumbing to the enthusiasm of a Nazi rally. A few will recall that they read the story as if it were a tale of a gruesome adventure and somehow found it exciting, at least in comparison to the usual history lessons at school. Most narratives about the Holocaust and Nazism are indeed read

Conclusion: “. . . And There Remains the Story That Can Be Told”
in school, ostensibly to raise consciousness, conscience, and empathy in the young reader. It is clear, however, that no one book is likely to have made a young reader a life-long witness to the Shoah perpetrated by Nazi Germany.

Only several years after the reunification of Germany has it become evident and disconcerting to learn that the youth of the Federal Republic of Germany and the youth of the Democratic Republic of Germany received two very different stories about National Socialism and the Holocaust depending on how each Germany was constituted ideologically. In East Germany “the message was uplifting, couched in the myth that the Germans of the communist state had resisted Hitler’s capitalist regime” and, therefore, Germans could retain their national pride. Schoolchildren were taken to Buchenwald not to become conscious of the “final solution,” but to see the cell where Ernst Thälmann, the head of Germany’s pre-war communist party, died in 1944. In West Germany, as Birgit Rommelspacher points out, schoolchildren were exposed to history lessons that presented the facts of National Socialism and the Holocaust either prosaically and without interpretation or from a standpoint of moral superiority on the part of the teacher. Rarely was the Third Reich presented in the context of the German political or ideological tradition. Rhetorical attitudes and matter-of-fact recounting would be supplemented by documentary footage of atrocities and deaths in the camps, without the teacher having prepared the students adequately for such images. Students were thus emotionally abandoned and left to cope with their feelings of shock, revulsion, and outrage.

Officially, young readers’ narratives about Nazism or the Holocaust seek to teach publicly accepted ethical values. Holocaust narratives transmit these values through the enabling rhetoric of heroic imaging and a reliance on existential self-realization; narratives about Nazism have recourse to the rhetoric of the cautionary tale about diminished selves whose heroic gestures are either ironic or denied. In the first decade after the war, the child was spared exposure to memories of Nazism and the Holocaust. Instead, German children’s literature emphasized the suffering and struggles of war and defeat, thereby confirming and structuring the experience children and their elders had lived through. Hitler and the Nazi seizure of power, as well as the enthusiasms of the Hitler Youth, were marginalized if not blanked out altogether. German consciousness also managed to gloss over, suppress or displace anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, even though the temper of the times and educational policies officially demanded that they be made conscious. Even fifty years after
the war, that silence, notes Rommelspacher, still governed family discourse about the grandparent and parent generations. Silence was thematized as a symptom that concealed something very threatening. This concealment led to displacements so that when a new generation inquired about the attractions to Nazism and Nazi atrocities, such inquiries were deflected by lengthy stories about German suffering during the war. As a result, the inquiring generation was directly and indirectly encouraged to rationalize, if not excuse, the past of the parent generation.4

Even after German children’s literature began in the early 1960s to address Nazism and the persecution and annihilation of the Jews, the complicity and guilt of the parent generation tended to be rationalized and displaced, even exonerated. Richter’s trilogy, Gehrts’s heroization of the father, and the conclusion of Burger’s frame narrator that his father, once a Hitler Youth, is now all right and a man with good intentions exemplify such rationalizations. Although these narratives were published after German youth had begun to rebel against the parent generation and their Nazi past, the authors imply that the parents ought to be understood and absolved. These same authors do not attempt to depict the Holocaust, a gap that can in part be explained through their choice of narrative point of view—the adolescent consciousness of a Hitler Youth narrated in the first person. But the lack of Holocaust representation in German youth literature cannot be exclusively attributed to such technicalities or to authorial denial and the desire to spare the child. Authors such as Burger and Gehrts suggest that they have no right to appropriate the suffering and murder of European Jews through narrative representation. As I have shown in my discussion of *The Final Journey*, when German authors try to represent the extremity of the Holocaust by showing, as Gudrun Pausewang does, a young victim in the gas chamber, unforeseen problems emerge subtextually; these problems place a German author in a far more ambivalent situation than when she or he limits representation to the persecution of the Jews in German cities of the Third Reich, representations that are usually based on the author’s experience and memory.

Similarly, the issue of silence and the moment when the author or narrator is called upon to tell her or his story are the inciting motive for narrating a Holocaust story for young readers or listeners. As the memoirs of Ruth Minsky Sender and the acquired memory narrative of Carol Matas demonstrate, there is initial authorial resistance even to address the disaster, much less to describe it to young readers, though memory demands the telling. The desire to numb the pain through silence must be overcome by the ethical imperative to bear witness. The personal and the collective
memory of the Shoah is from the perspective of its victims, a memory of acknowledged and continuous grief. In contrast, German memory of Nazism and the Holocaust is complicated by the difficulty of acknowledging collective guilt unambiguously. Both types of narratives remain inconclusive and open-ended—grief and guilt remain unresolved.

The author of such narratives has been my primary interest, not in a biographical sense but in terms of how she or he is constituted in the context of then and now. Intentionally or unintentionally each author subverts the official text of the narrative with a subtext. Be they about Nazism or the Holocaust, the narratives I have discussed have a rather clear instructive purpose and an activist goal crystallized in the legend “never again.” This is their overt and official purpose, but I have been more interested in the subtext, the covert purpose. That subtext usually remains opaque to the young reader, but it is here that the author both reveals and conceals personal and collective memory. Usually it is with the claim of sparing the child the excesses of Nazism and the Holocaust, but actually it is to spare the author from confronting painful memories and unresolved grief. In Dear Mili, Maurice Sendak’s art acknowledges this process quite consciously.

Officially, the narratives proclaim to the young reader: “Look, we can and must talk about this!” Such surface respect does not prevent the author from censoring fascinating fascism or extreme situations in the Holocaust. With their existential alienation from self and world, former Hitler Youths are depicted as inversions of the Nazi cult of heroic youths. To some extent Schenzinger’s Hitlerjunge Quex foreshadows that the alienated protagonist can become a Nazi hero only in death. Hans Peter Richter’s sullen, nameless, and melancholic narrator, Burger’s self-consciously alienated Walter Jendrich, and the divided self of Orgel’s Lieselotte Vessely make evident that the convention of the youthful hero’s thoughtful and active quest toward individuation is severely impaired if that hero wears the Nazi uniform. In response to the theatrical projection of the heroic youth under Nazism, postwar German youth literature is compelled to substitute the diminished self for the hero.

The official text of the narratives about Nazism and the Holocaust for young readers is shaped by conscious and preconscious myths, by the needs and desires of past and present, by personal and public contexts. The official rhetoric of the narrative bends the memory of personal experience to suit the conventions that make the disaster accessible to the values of a reader who has no experience of either Nazism or the Holocaust. The story told insists on the historicity of events—an insistence that is
always the primary ethos of the narrative point of view. However, the ethically motivated claim that the events were extraordinary also opens a gap between narrator, text, and reader. The reader, who was not there and cannot possibly understand the event and its disastrous effects, is challenged to become a witness to the testimony of those who lived through it. But the gap generated by the narrator’s self-censoring of the deeply corrosive and corruptive effects of Nazism and the Holocaust on the survivor of either defers indefinitely an authentic representation of these two disasters. This is especially obvious in literature for young readers who are expected to understand Nazism but reject the attraction Nazism had for the young. That same young reader is expected to understand the Holocaust and empathize with its victims, but admit that she or he cannot possibly understand what the victim endured. More often than not, Nazi power or aggression overwhelms the individual like an inescapable fate or a natural catastrophe. Rarely does a narrative address the social conditions, ideological framework, or propagandistic strategies that led to Nazi power, Horst Burger’s *Why Were You in the Hitler Youth* and Doris Orgel’s *The Devil in Vienna* being the exception. Only Orgel, a Jewish American author, can afford to describe accurately the fascination fascism had for the young and impressionable human being. Thus in spite of chronologies and historic facts, provided often in appendices and notes, the representations of Nazism and the Holocaust in narratives for young readers are surrounded by connotations of a-historicity that lift the disaster above and beyond the ordinary time of human experience.

As Nazism and the Holocaust are transformed and reduced over time in our collective memories, they will take on the aura of legend if not myth, perhaps comparable to the catastrophic battle of Masada between Romans and Jews in 73 C.E., a battle almost forgotten during the diaspora but made prominent again as Israel emerged into statehood. The social and cultural needs of, primarily, Germany, Israel, and the United States, have already encouraged narratives that respond to current collective fears and desires. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the diminishing of the heroic and the yearning for it in young reader narratives about Nazism and the Holocaust. The unheroic and diminished self, once the politically coordinated child of Nazism and the young survivor of the Holocaust who struggles to appropriate the heroic gesture, is part of the revealing text and concealing subtext in narratives. Existential alienation from self and world and the resulting withdrawal into a melancholy isolation characterize the diminished self of former Hitler Youths to the extent that the youths depicted in the narratives become an inversion
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of the Nazi cult of heroic youth. In West German youth literature, the author withholds from the young reader the possibility of heroism in the context of the Third Reich.

In contrast, the aim of Auschwitz was to diminish the human completely to its empty shell, the *Musulmann*. While it may be true that the questions raised in Auschwitz survivor accounts “remain permanent obstacles to the rebirth of the heroic self” who “helps to create its own tragedy” and lives and dies by the consequences, it is at least rhetorically understandable why Holocaust narratives, fictional or nonfictional, attempt to image the heroic gesture or the attitude of personal individuation for the sake of the young reader. In youth literature, Zionist aspirations for a new life in a new land call forth the most obvious heroic gestures, as yet unadulterated by the ironies of future history. Heroic gestures in the context of the Holocaust are usually subverted by that context. Nevertheless, given the severe diminishing of self experienced by youths who survived the camp world, the struggle for heroic self-assertion is persistent even as loss and grief devastate the survivor. From antiquity on we have cherished the assumption that a few select individuals are potentially heroic in significant, usually traumatic situations. We desire the heroic to rise above our own vulnerabilities, and yet Moses and Achilles reveal from the beginning of the tradition that the heroic persona is a mask that conceals fear and grief.

The listener’s or reader’s expectations of the heroic subtly influence the diminished self of the victim as she or he attempts to shape a story of disaster by using familiar conventions and language that include heroic attitudes and gestures. As the desire and expectations of the listener or reader are met, the narrator is drawn into and accepted by the rhetorical community, so much so that she or he is eventually convinced that the uniqueness of the heroic self was indeed possible during the disaster. The official text of Ruth Minsky Sender’s memoir communicates this through the image of the talented Holocaust Lady whose unresolved pain and grief are displaced by the approved and heroically sentimental attitude of her public persona. In narratives of acquired memory, as exemplified by Matas and Forman, the usually graphic description of the extreme situation in the death camp is mitigated by an even stronger assertion of the heroic, now aligned with a social and political agenda. At the very end, the young survivor leaves the historical wasteland of Europe behind and, as he looks forward to the life of a youthful pioneer in Palestine, believes that the memory of the Shoah can be rationally set aside in the struggle toward a meaningful future. The young reader is left with a sense of an
ending that is affirmative through the illusion of heroic gestures and prospects. A historicizing of such endings, however, would reveal once again how hopes and prospects become ambivalent in a new era of history.

Saul Friedlander wonders “whether at the collective level . . . an event such as the Shoah may, after all the survivors have disappeared, leave traces of a deep memory beyond individual recall, which will defy any attempts to give it meaning.” The key phrases here are collective level . . . traces of a deep memory . . . any attempts to give meaning. In spite of my anxiety that the narration of the history of Nazism and the Shoah will fossilize into predictable clichés and conventions, I remind myself that such patterns are but expressions of our rage for order, are but our myth of cosmos against chaos, pitiful defenses in the end. The traces of the disaster—of the man-made world where the question Warum? (Why?) was answered with “Hier ist kein warum,” here is no why, no reason, no causal relation—will not scar a universal collective memory, but only the collective deep memory of Jews and Germans. In spite of the overlays, the thick tissue of conventions, tropes, and easy themes and explanations, the grooves cut into collective preconscious memory are the script that tells what humans are capable of when they appropriate or are granted the power to reduce other humans to utter powerlessness, and do so without restraint or accountability. At a definite time and in a definite place Germans and Jews experienced, in the flesh, those extremes that no “meaning giving activity” can explain away. In the future, to which Friedlander refers, there will be moments when the scars of deep memory will ache with phantom recollections of the temptations of absolute power and powerlessness, temptations most humans are heir to when time and place expose them to it.

Even if we do not find ourselves in the extremity of history, there will be certain books to probe the traces of deep memory, to question the distempered part of our selves. The young Franz Kafka, after much reading about the lives of nineteenth century poets and thinkers, wrote to his friend Oskar Pollak in 1904: “We need these books, which affect us as if we are overcome by a great misfortune that pains us like the death of someone who we loved more than ourselves, as if we were exiled into the woods away from all humankind, as if there had been a suicide—a book must be the axe for the frozen sea in us.” Or, as Paul Celan wrote after the Shoah: “Passed into the land with the indubitable track: Grass, written apart.” Without doubt the track of the trace will be in our memory,
usually untended and unlooked for, suddenly remembered as a cut in our being that we thought had healed.

Even acquired memory can inscribe the trace. It all depends how much the gatherer of memory has risked what Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub term “the hazards of listening.” It begins, in the course of time, when a human being listens, passively but with all faculties alert, to the testimony of those who bear witness to collective atrocities. Such listeners “cannot fulfill their task without, in turn, passing through the crisis of experiencing their boundaries, their separateness, their functionality, and indeed their sanity.” They are at risk in the process of coming to know.9

The work of Friedlander as well as that of a few others such as Lawrence Langer, reveals that as readers and writers they have been willing to expose themselves to the hazards of listening to narratives about the disaster. One senses, then, that such listeners have been deeply affected and stunned by the recounting of this evil, suffering, and death.

Such listener or reader responses cannot be demanded of children. Those who speak to children or write books for them about the disaster seek to inform, perhaps to teach, but not to shock so severely that the young reader is lost and alienated. A children’s book cannot be the axe for the child reader. At most, therefore, children’s literature about Nazism and the Holocaust can offer rudimentary tales about these disasters, first stories of a thousand and one recountings to prevent the reduction of collective memory and keep alive the thought that it was the human being who was traumatized and annihilated at the site of atrocity. Thus, I cannot accept the official claims for youth literature about the Holocaust, namely that it can prevent forgetting and repetition; such assumptions are too simplistic. Although the representation of this difficult subject must continue to be attempted, its limitations should be fully acknowledged by writers and adult readers.

The hazards of listening to a devastating telling are clearly revealed in Art Spiegelman’s commix Maus where Artie Spiegelman listens to his father’s, Vladek’s, eyewitness testimony about the Holocaust. At the end of Maus II, Vladek says to Artie: “I passed once a photo place what had a camp uniform—a new and clean one. To make souvenir photos.” He hands his son a photograph depicting himself as a dapper Auschwitz inmate. Though always a resourceful man, we can be certain that Vladek did not look like the handsome, bright-eyed and capable man we see in the photo. He gave the photo to his wife: “Anja kept this picture always.” Stunned, son Artie can only say: “Incredible.”10 What is incredible to Artie? What Vladek eyewitnessed in Auschwitz? That he managed to sur-
vive? That he is oblivious to the illusion he created when he costumed himself as an inmate? That Anja cherished that illusion and kept the photo as a keepsake? Artie would consider any of these options “incredible.” He takes the photo, an example of remembering to forget, and makes it part of his story about how he created the illusion that his father talked with him when he, Artie, urged him to have memory speak. Vladek, a trickster figure in many ways, excelled in self-production before and after Auschwitz.

Anne Frank, too, young as she was knew in more ways than one that we produce ourselves as we aim to please and as we struggle to appropriate some sort of immortality. When it was pointed out to her that the postwar world might be interested in reading about the inhabitants of the “Secret Annex,” she made adjustments in her diary, but she could not have anticipated the range of reader desires which would further adjust and reconstruct it. The diary reveals that Anne anticipated on several levels what her end would be, though she could not know that the future would end in Bergen-Belsen. *The Diary of Anne Frank* can be read as a “coming of age story” about a precocious and gifted adolescent, but this child writer also intuits the issues that are central to representing Holocaust narratives. Her entry for Saturday July 15, 1944 concludes:

> It’s a wonder I haven’t abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart.

> It’s utterly impossible for me to build my life on a foundation of chaos, suffering and death. I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness, I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too, I feel the suffering of millions. And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquillity will return once more. In the meantime, I must hold on to my ideals. Perhaps the day will come when I’ll be able to realize them!11

Anne experiences the abyss between what is and what she desires. She can express the horror of what is only through abstract terms—suffering and death—or through metaphors—chaos, wilderness, and thunder. Looking up at the sky, the convention of the gaze yearning toward transcendence, holds no answer for her, no revelation, only a vague feeling of possible renewal that temporarily alleviates her persistent dread. She needs to hold on to the absurdity of the ideals she conceals, including her faith in the goodness of the human heart. But she also feels that...
she is not yet what she could be and fears that her wish to be truly herself could only be realized “if only there were no other people in the world.”

On August 4, 1944 the inhabitants of the “Secret Annex” were arrested, transported first to the transit camp Westerbork, and then to Auschwitz. After two months in Auschwitz, Anne and her sister Margot were evacuated to Bergen-Belsen where Margot died in the typhoid epidemic that claimed tens of thousands of lives. A few days later, around the end of March 1945, Anne succumbed to the same disease. She was buried in a mass grave. As readers made Anne Frank into a heroine on the basis of the words, fragments and sentences she actually used in her diary, they denied the subtext of fear and dread that pervades her entries, even in her moments of frenzied extroversion.

She stored what she had written in her father’s briefcase. When the arresting SS officer turned the case upside-down, he scattered over the floor of the “Secret Annex” the diary and all the loose pages written by this knowing child who anticipates repeatedly the difficulty of writing about the disaster of the Holocaust. The protector of the Franks, Miep Gies, gathered the pages and placed them, unread, into her desk drawer for safe-keeping. Like the wind-blown prophecies of the mythic sibylline leaves, the scattered pages were gathered and eventually bound in a single volume that will remain unfinished. Though we will continue to misread that volume in our desire to spare the child, the story preserved in *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank keeps insisting that we risk reading and misreading, as do other gathered memories of the disaster we have named the Holocaust.

**Notes**

8. These are Celan’s opening lines to his poem “Engführung” (point of constriction) which concludes the collection *Sprachgitter* (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1959). My translation.


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