

# The Untold Story: What German Writers Tell Their Children about the Third Reich and the Holocaust

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**Résumé:** Dans cet article, Zohar Shavit examine la reconstitution du passé dans les romans historiques allemands destinés à la jeunesse, que l'auteur juge particulièrement représentatifs du discours historique de l'Allemagne contemporaine. Ces romans mettent en oeuvre des stratégies narratives qui proposent une image idéalisée de l'histoire: les éléments les plus douloureux sont plus ou moins censurés et les éléments mineurs, valorisants, sont hyperdéveloppés. Sont mis en relief la résistance au nazisme, l'assistance accordée aux Juifs, et la responsabilité de ces derniers quant à leur propre sort. Il en ressort (a) que la majorité des Allemands s'opposaient à Hitler et (b) que la plupart ont tenté de sauver les Juifs d'un Führer tyrannique. Si bien que par un transfert de responsabilités et un jeu d'initiatives héroïques, les Allemands finissent par être les grandes victimes du Troisième Reich, qu'Hitler devient un bouc émissaire qui a trompé les Allemands et les a entraînés dans le malheur, alors que la misère des Juifs et des autres nations se voit marginalisée. Même s'ils abordent les atrocités de Troisième Reich, les livres pour la jeunesse traitant de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale les filtrent systématiquement, laissant dans l'ombre les parties les plus noires de l'histoire allemande.

**Summary:** This article discusses the construction of the German past in some German historical novels for children. It focuses on books for children because of their function as a mediator between readers and history and because they tend to be characteristic of the entire German historical discourse. The article presents the strategies deployed in the construction of a wishful image of German history. It describes how the period's most painful events are censored, at least to some degree, whereas relatively minor, agreeable events, are allotted inordinate space. Emphasized are the Germans' resistance to the Nazi regime, the assistance they rendered Jews, and the Jews' responsibility for their own fate. In fact, the books create the impression, that (a) most of the Germans opposed Hitler, and (b) most of the Germans cherished the Jews, and were trying to save them from the tyrannical Führer.

*These historical images are created by the use of various strategies, the most significant of which are the installation of fictive boundaries of time and space and of a network of fictive oppositions. The books set up the fictive oppositions as follows: Germans vs. Hitler, Germans vs. the Nazis, "Unreal" Nazis vs. "real" Nazis.*

*These oppositions frame a world in which the Germans, just like the Jews, are themselves Hitler's victims and victims of Nazism. The trials and tribulations of the Germans are vividly described, and the Germans become the main, if not the sole, victims of the Third Reich, while the plight of the Jews and other nations is marginalized. Hitler becomes the scapegoat for the German people, a *deus ex machina* whipping boy, a non-German entity executing his plans by fooling the German nation. Thus, while these books for children do not deny the horrors of the Third Reich, they screen them systematically, allowing the darker parts of history to remain unilluminated.*

### Introduction

This article is based on a research<sup>1</sup> project which investigated dozens of historical novels for German children published in the former West German Republic since 1961, all authorized by pretensions to historical accuracy and all allegedly historically credible. The article does not detail the research itself, which is presented fully in my recent book, *A Past without Shadow*,<sup>2</sup> only its main lines of argument by means of some illustrative examples. It endeavours primarily to explore the "story" told by the books, not to "blame" the Germans for producing such narratives, nor to "lecture" to them.

Since my research project aimed at understanding the historical images a child-reader might obtain through his/her reading of historical novels, it takes into account all the historical novels available to the child-reader in Germany. This means that beside original texts, translated texts, which occupy a central place in the German children's system, were discussed as well. It is, however, worth noting that most of the books selected for translation do not challenge the German historical narrative but support it.

My findings are based on a careful and thorough reading of almost all the relevant titles which have been awarded prizes in Germany (so far more than fifty). In addition, I have also analyzed several books which have not received awards in order to establish a control sample. Prizewinning books were selected for analysis because they represent what is regarded by the "people-in-the-culture" as the best mainstream literature; in other words, my analysis concerns books which were well received and recommended by the establishment as most culturally valuable. Moreover, the establishment perceives these books as representing the "story" of the German past, which is not irreconcilable with the German historical narrative as a whole, but

rather in agreement with it (for discussion of the German historical narrative see, for instance, Angress; Brockmann; Diner, "Historical Experience and Cognition"; Domansky; Friedlander, "National Identity and the Nazi Past"; Gilman; Moeller, and Peitsch).

The following is a rough outline of the "story" a German child is likely to learn about the Third Reich and the Holocaust after having read a range of historical novels for children in German:

*There was a terrible war in Germany, in which the Germans suffered dreadfully. People had no food and were often forced to flee their homes. Hitler alone was responsible for this war, since the German people themselves had no desire for it. The Germans were not Nazis and the Nazis were not Germans. In fact, the German people were victimized by Hitler. Under the Third Reich, the Germans assisted the Jews, resisted Hitler, and some even risked their lives to oppose him by joining the Resistance movement. The Nazis oppressed the German people, who are the main victims of the Third Reich. It is true that the Jews, in most cases, the German Jews (Jews of other countries hardly ever receive attention), were also oppressed by the Nazis, but nevertheless they are to be blamed for their own fate.*

The first reaction to this story, at least when read by a non-German, is to wonder how "reality" can be depicted in a manner that is so distorted and yet retains historical relevance: How is it possible to create this kind of historical narrative? What mechanism underlies this construction of historical narratives that may seem totally falsified, at least to some of the groups involved, such as "the Jews" and "the Israelis"? The answer seems to be simple, almost trivial: German books for children, like most other national narratives, represent a wishful image of history. What they wish to achieve, first and foremost, is a certain retelling of the national past which provides a source of national pride and a sound basis for the child's feeling of belonging.

Every national children's literature produces direct and less-direct historical narratives, which aim to shape a child's view of their nation through a certain understanding of the past. The ways in which the available historiographic material is modified and altered, and, the ways in which the subsequent "story" of a community's history is told, are determined by the given community or nation's cultural and political needs at a given point in time. However, although such attempts are typical of the construction of all national narratives in Western culture, the German case distinguishes itself by the lack of almost any alternative narrative, which is present in other cases of Western national-historical narratives. In other national literatures, there is almost always a group of writers, usually of higher status, which challenges overprotective attitudes towards children and actively confronts or contests the limits of social consensus. This is also true for books in German — as long as they do not deal with the Third Reich. Once German

writers treat the Third Reich, even writers such as Christine Nöstingler and Peter Härtling, who have shown themselves to be challenging and daring elsewhere, conform to consensual models.

Generally speaking, German children's literature is known throughout the world as provocative and progressive. German books for children are enterprising in the sense that they present an anti-establishment range of themes. It is only in the context of the Third Reich that German children's books prefer the consensual "story" of German history. Surprisingly enough, these prominent models of German children's literature have changed only slightly over the period of more than thirty years; some of the prominent models were established as far back as the sixties and have continued to dominate the field.

The first model describes the persecution of the Jews, filtered through the story of a friendship between a German and a Jew, which is narrated from the perspective of a German protagonist. The theme of the persecution of the Jews has changed slightly with the introduction of translated texts, although the selection of texts for translation appears to have been determined primarily by their adherence to the governing original models. The second model describes the trials and tribulations of the German refugees.

Although new models did enter the field, those which prevailed in the sixties still dominate. The most prevalent models are autobiographical, offering the story of a German childhood under the Third Reich; a plot involving the citizens' helplessness in the face of dictatorship; or an account of the German underground. There have, however, been some changes in children's historical fiction over the last 30 years. In particular, the literature for children gradually begins to deal with themes previously prohibited (although the number of books based on new models is relatively small). Still, the governing themes of the books, even those which are based on new models, remains as before: German suffering and the victimization of the Germans. Even when the persecution of the Jews is described, it is described from the perspective of the Germans and has usually been annexed to the suffering of the Germans.

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As in the case of other historical narratives, the German historical narrative for children is the result of constructing and reconstructing available historiographic material. Meta-historical, sociological, philosophical and psychological studies, including numerous recent ones, address the creation, recreation and denial of the various phases of communal and national images of the past (Bond & Gilliam; Caruth; Diner, "Between Aporia and Apology"; Friedlander, *Memory, History*; Halbwachs; Hobsbawm; Hutton; Jonker; Kaes; Johnson & al.; Ladurie; Lewis, "Masada and Cyrus"; Lewis,

"Medium and Message"; Morgan; White; Yates; Young; Vaughn). All these studies appear to agree that the image of the past is subject to manipulation, serving national, political and social interests. I shall, therefore, not repeat the shared arguments in this rich corpus, but will use them as a point of departure. In other words, I will examine the ways in which texts for children serve as a major and effective source for creating, disseminating, and internalizing (self)images of the past, and crystallizing (self)perceptions of the past, in communities which produce books for children. The point of departure for this discussion is the understanding that any historical narrative is the result of a societal attempt to reconstruct historical material according to its own needs.

Like all other historical narratives, the German historical narrative is processed and configured through the selection, according to a preset model, of elements, events, and historical figures (Even-Zohar; Lotman; Tadmor). Each historical narrative is constructed according to a set model of presentation, be it a historical novel, or a scientific historiography. Although it is commonly believed that historical novels enjoy more freedom than other historical narratives, in principle they are built on the same methodology. They, too, harbour pretensions to historical accuracy, and they, too, seek historical credibility.

Thus, the questions raised in my analysis concern the kinds of models and principles which guide the process of selecting historical events and protagonists: Which events are included and which are overlooked and/or excluded? Why are certain events valorized over others? And what are the relations between these and other events? It is not the events and persons described that are contestable; it is the way these events and persons have been constructed in the narrative that is open to question. The difference between the various historical narratives lies in the way they organize incontestable data such as racial persecution and the murder of millions. Thus, historical narratives may be based on the same data, but they organize it on the basis of different narrative models.

Since the history of the Third Reich and the Holocaust are beyond human imagination, any depicted episode can be made credible, if it refers to a corresponding slice of "reality" in a series of "real events." In other words, the most monstrous occurrences, along with the most unlikely manifestations of human empathy, can be accounted for in referential terms, for it is possible to base all the events comprising the history of the Third Reich and the Holocaust on acknowledged historical sources and documents. Thus, historical credibility is not contingent on an event's "facticity," or whether or not specific events actually transpired, but depends rather on the extent to which events are represented, and the ways in which they are hierarchized in historical narratives. This holds true for historical novels as well.

In the construction of the historical “story,” repeated patterns play a significant role. In fact, it is the repeated patterns that underline the “hard core” of the texts. After reading several of these historical novels, the reader would quickly become familiar with the patterns. For instance, the reader will identify a person who is described as having an advantage over his German friend as either a Jew or a Nazi. If a person is described as small and/or dark, the reader can anticipate that s/he will be introduced as a Nazi or as a Jew. The narrative created by these patterns is constructed primarily along the following lines:

- Certain facts, emotions, and perspectives are displaced elsewhere;
- the novels’ temporal and geographical frameworks avoid certain years and certain locations;
- descriptions of the Jews have both anti- and philo-semitic overtones;
- analogies are drawn between Nazis and Jews;
- oppositions between Nazis and pseudo-Nazis are set up;
- the German Underground is highlighted;
- the victimization of Germans assumes a certain character and importance;
- the burden of guilt for the Holocaust is rejected.

Given this relatively broad range of constructions I will allude only to a few, and briefly at that; I will address the displacement of facts and perspectives, the temporal and geographical dimensions of the novels, the representation of Germans, Nazis and Jews, German victimization, and German guilt. My analysis will focus on Hans Peter Richter’s *Damals war es Friedrich*, which is regarded as the jewel in the crown of German children’s literature. One of the first books to deal with the Third Reich, it established a preferred model for representing the Third Reich, was sold in almost a million copies, and translated into several languages, including Hebrew (by Yad Va-Shem).

### *Displaced Elements*

At first glance, texts addressing the Third Reich and the Holocaust appear to cover a range of well-known historical events and key figures associated with the history of the Third Reich: the Nazis, Hitler, the war, the trains, food deprivation, the persecution of Jews, the terror of the occupying forces, and the concentration camps. By recounting events regarded as typical of the period in question and which illuminate well-known historical characters, these texts seem historically valid. However, the proportional staging of their components, the contexts into which these components are placed, and the ways in which they are interrelated, are clearly manipulative strategies in themselves. In other words, these “stories” of the past are determined neither

by elision nor exclusion, but by the modes of representation they deploy.

Let's look at some concrete examples:

(a) *The terror of the occupying army*

The terror of the occupying army is never denied; on the contrary, it is strongly and vividly manifested. Only it is not the terror of the German army which is made manifest, but rather that of the Russian army. In *Maikäfer flieg*, the appalling state of the Russian army is described with empathy even as it is treated ironically; in *Stern ohne Himmel*, the entire population, not only the Nazis, is terrified of the approaching Russians. The narrative hardly questions this terror, and the Russian army is portrayed as ruthless and savage:

Und wer in Gefangenschaft geriete, verhungere oder werde zu Tode geprügelt oder käme zu Zwangsarbeit nach Sibirien, so hieß es. (*Stern ohne Himmel* 62)

Those who are captured by the Russians will either die of starvation, be beaten to death, or sent to Siberia for hard labour, so it was said. (my translation)

'Die Russen kastrieren alle' ... 'So, kastrieren?' fragte Antek, 'weißt du denn überhaupt, was das ist?' (*Stern ohne Himmel* 117)

'The Russians castrate them all' ... 'Really, castrate?' asked Antek, 'Do you have any idea at all what this means?' (my translation)

'Die Russen schneiden den Frauen die Busen ab und erschießen die Kinder und rauben die Häuser aus und zünden alles an, und alle verbrennen,' sagte meine Schwester. (*Maikäfer flieg* 29)

'The Russians cut off women's breasts, shoot children, loot homes, then set everything ablaze and they all burn to death', said my sister. (my translation)

Meine Mutter hatte vor betrunkenen Russen Angst. Betrunkenen Russen wurden schreckliche Dinge nachgesagt. Vielleicht zu recht, vielleicht zu unrecht. Wer konnte das schon wissen? Meine Mutter konnte es nicht wissen. (*Maikäfer flieg* 100)

My mother was afraid of drunk Russians. There were rumours that drunk Russians were doing terrible things. Perhaps they were, perhaps they were not, who could have known that? My mother could not. (my translation)

So streiften die Russen in der ganzen Gegend herum und wurden gefährlich. Wenn ihnen ein Deutscher mit dem Fahrrad begegnete und es ihnen nicht sofort gab, wurde er erschossen. (*Nacht über dem Tal* 99)

The Russians were everywhere and a danger to all. If they met a German riding his bicycle who didn't hand it over immediately, they would shoot him on the spot. (my translation)

Und die Nachrichten aus den von den Russen besetzten Gebieten waren

schrecklich. Mit Panzern war die Rote Armee den Flüchtlingszügen nachgefahren, hatte sie eingeholt und in den Schnee gewalzt, mit den Panzerketten sich auf ihnen gedreht, bis nichts mehr übrig war. Wo immer sie hinkamen, hatten sie die Frauen vergewaltigt, von denen viele sich nachher das Leben nahmen. (*Nacht über dem Tal* 116)

And the news from the Russian occupied areas were dreadful. The Red Army with its tanks came after the marching refugees, ran them over and rolled them over with the tank chains into the snow, until nothing was left. Wherever they came, they raped the women. Later on, many women committed suicide. (my translation)

### b) Concentration camps

While concentration camps are featured in the background, they appear to be far away, and what actually takes place in them is never very clear. In Fuchs's *Emma*, for instance, the half-Jewish grandmother is taken to a concentration camp. The child asks the grandmother what will happen to her there and gets a blunt answer: "Ich weiß es nicht!" (*Emma* 93) — "I don't know" (my translation).

There is no further reference in this story to concentration camps, nor is there any attempt to try to account for what happened to the grandmother. Such presentation is possible because the narrative adheres to the perspective of the child. Books for children are usually told from an adult perspective, sometimes in embedded speech, and rarely from the child's perspective. However, in the case of books on the Third Reich and the Holocaust, the books tend to adopt the child's perspective. Furthermore, the books in question refrain systematically from confronting the child's perspective with that of the adult, even though all the books are written from a later and much more knowledgeable standpoint. Although the books make this retrospective point of view clear, they do not use it to introduce into the texts what they as children could not have known, but most probably knew as adults. Neither do the books generally use the option of constructing an additional story over and above the "story" told from the child's point of view, as does, for instance, Gudrun Pausnwang in her *Reise im August*.

It may be that the German writers in question adhere to the child's perspective, which enables them to screen the described events through the child's perspectival limitations, because this limited perspective furnishes them with an easy and reliable way of presenting the consensual historical narrative.

Auschwitz is seldom, if ever, mentioned in novels describing this period, except in rare instances, such as Schönfeld's *Sonderappell*. This book describes the girls recruited to the RAD, the girls' labour groups who were assigned to the concentration camps as part of Germany's war efforts. The

girls' camp is located near Auschwitz, and the reader is led to perceive Auschwitz as nothing more than a neighbouring camp in which there is a pharmacy:

Sie arbeitete in Auschwitz in einer Apotheke ... Übrigens, ich bin jetzt auch einmal da gewesen, wo sie die Juden einsperren. Sie stehen hinter dem Stacheldrahtzaun, und mein Freund sagt, sie hätten nichts zu essen, aber es sind ja auch keine Menschen wie wir, das sieht man gleich.' (Sonderappell 98)

She worked at a pharmacy in Auschwitz.... By the way, once I was also there, where they imprison the Jews. They stand behind a wire fence, and my friend says they have nothing to eat, but clearly they are not human beings like us, this you can see immediately. (my translation)

At this point the story ceases to mention Auschwitz, but later briefly and very vaguely notes the extermination of the Jews.

(c) *Key elements*

The use of elements commonly identified with the narrative of the Third Reich seeks to colour these texts with, as it were, the "truth." In *Rosa Weiss*, Roberto Innocenti uses an image that has a particular symbolic value, and inserts it into a different context. The title of the book alludes to the famous underground group. In addition to the use of this evocative title, Innocenti incorporates an illustration alluding to the famous picture of a child holding up his hands, which has come to represent the Warsaw Ghetto. As he inserts it into his narrative, Innocenti changes the original meaning of the photograph, finally inverting it (see colour plate 6).

It almost goes without saying that the original photo is identified with the uprising of the Warsaw Ghetto. The title of the photo reads: "dragged out of the Bunkers" and it was taken from an album belonging to Jürgen Stroop, the SS Commander who fought the Jewish uprising and annihilated the Warsaw Ghetto. In the original photo, a huddle of helpless and frightened women and children are standing in the background with their hands raised, surrounded by Wehrmacht soldiers who have their rifles pointed at them. The photo conveys a sense of the terror they must have experienced at that moment, their lives hanging in the balance. They are clearly quite submissive, if not subservient, before the camera, and the eye behind the camera is plainly malevolent and menacing. The original photograph was unquestionably taken by a Nazi officer ready to massacre a line-up of frightened subjects who are staring straight at him.

Roberto Innocenti has entirely inverted the original point of view of this photograph. To begin with, he has omitted from the background the women and the children standing with their hands raised, and replaced

Werhmacht soldiers with members of the SS; this is evident by their uniforms. Further, in this illustrated version of the photograph, one of the children is raising his hands and looking out in fear, but what the child is looking at is not at all clear. Since the entire text is presented in an embedded speech with Rosa Weiss, it may be assumed that the child is facing a guileless and innocent gathering, especially because the Nazi mayor of the city and the SS people are not placed in front of him, but rather behind him, next to him, and diagonally across from him.

In the next illustration, Rosa Weiss is watching the surrendering child being driven to a truck, in which a number of people are already seated; how they got there is not described by the text. The child is not looking at her face. She is not depicted as the executor, nor is the child about to be executed. In fact, the text merely suggests that the child is Jewish, yet does not unequivocally identify him as such. The point of view depicting the surrendering child has been transformed: in the original photo it was the Nazi commander, while in Innocenti's story it is the helpless child himself, in defiance, as it were, of the regime. The text further informs us that it is eventually Rosa Weiss who gets killed, not the child with the raised hands.

Thus, while on the surface the displaced versions of the well-known photograph seem to enhance the documentary nature of this story, at closer inspection, one sees that they actually divest the story of its historical credibility.

### *Temporal and Geographical Borders*

In terms of time and space, the texts seldom refer to events that took place outside Germany, nor do they cover events that occurred between 1942-1945. The years between 1942 and 1945 are only addressed in order to describe the suffering of German civilians during the final years of the war. For instance, *Nie wieder ein Wort davon*, *Im roten Hinterhaus*, *Wir waren dabei* and *Damals war es Friedrich*, begin with Germany's economic inflation during the early years of the Reich. They end with Friedrich's death in an Allied bombing raid in 1942. *Maikäfer flieg* concerns itself mainly with the events of the last months of the war, as do *Stern ohne Himmel*, *Nacht über dem Tal*, *Enna*, *Wir werden uns wiederfinden*, *Krücke*, *Das Jahr der Wölfe*, *Geh heim und vergiß alles*, *Er hieß Jan*, *Sonderappell*, *Johanna*, *Die roten Matrosen* and *Der erste Frühling*.

Dwelling on the 1920s keeps the focus on Germany's deficient economic situation, its high rates of unemployment, and its absence of civil rights; it constructs Germany as a society not yet fully Nazified whose concentration camps were filled with Germans. This makes it possible to overlook, as it were, the more ruthless oppression of the Jews, not to mention their extermination, and allows the texts to emphasize the plight of the Germans while minimizing the distress of the Jews. Centring on the final years of the

war also highlights the plight of the Germans, who unquestionably experienced hardship and adversity then and after 1945, and provides an expedient excuse for ignoring the plight of the Jews, for Germany is indeed by then "Judenrein," as explicitly remarked in *Stern ohne Himmel*:

Richtig hatten sie alle noch keinen Davidstern gesehen, denn Juden gab es nicht, auf die schimpfte man nur. (*Stern ohne Himmel* 26)

In fact, none of them has seen the Star of David, because there were no Jews, they were only cursed by people. (my translation)

The texts in question draw a new, partial map of Germany, very different from that depicted in the dream of the thousand years of the Reich. Confining themselves to those parts of Germany which suffered heavily from the Allied bombardment, these texts frequently refer to Berlin as a preferred location. Another popular theme is the flight of German refugees westward en masse from various parts of the Reich such as Bohemia and Czechoslovakia. (On the *Vertreibungsliteratur* see Dahrendorf). Even concentration camps which were located on German soil, like Dachau and Buchenwald, are hardly mentioned, except in a few texts which seek primarily to recount the trials and tribulations of the German prisoners there. For instance, *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* recites the sufferings of a well-known scholar in a concentration camp:

A famous professor had been arrested and sent to a concentration camp (Concentration camp? Then Anna remembered that it was a special prison for people who were against Hitler). (*When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* 81)

Another example appears in *Stern ohne Himmel* which details Kimmich's sufferings in the concentration camp (*Stern ohne Himmel* 57, 58), and in passing mentions that 8,000 Jews were exterminated there by gas.

### *Representing the Jews*

The texts in question seek to counteract the imposition of negative traits onto Jews. In so doing they create an alternative set of stereotypes grounded on the premise of an essential difference between Jews and Germans; these characterizations draw on a reservoir of converging anti- and philo-semitic traditions, with basic commonalities, which also fed Nazi ideology. As a result, these books are rife with traditional German philo-semitic and anti-semitic stereotypes, between which there are finally only marginal differences. Undoubtedly, the authors of these German books for children mean well. They attempt to point out the injustices committed and are repentant of the atrocities inflicted upon the Jews during the Third Reich. In the name of their good

intentions, philo-semitic stereotypes are placed, as it were, at the forefront, while anti-semitic ones are relegated to the background.

On the surface, it would appear that the teacher's speech in *Damals war es Friedrich* is delivered in protest against Nazi policy and conduct, and in the desire to express empathy for Friedrich, who is no longer permitted to attend school. Officially, the teacher says: "Juden sind Menschen, Menschen wie wir!" (*Damals war es Friedrich* 57) — "Jews are human beings, human beings like us!" (*Friedrich* 63). Out of sheer philo-semitism, he adds: "Die Juden sind tüchtig!" (*Damals war es Friedrich* 57) — "the Jews are very capable people!" (*Friedrich* 63). Implicated in the allusion to Jewish "capability" is a certain *a priori* advantage over the Germans. In other words, through this philo-semitic ambiguity the teacher in fact constructs an anti-semitic superstructure. To begin with, the teacher explains that anti-semitism has a long tradition dating back to Roman times, thereby rationalizing it historically, for such longevity must surely be justified on certain grounds. At the same time, representing anti-semitism as a universal phenomenon means that the Germans cannot be held more responsible than others for having held anti-semitic beliefs.

Next, the teacher tells his students about Christ's crucifixion:

Weil sie nicht glaubten, daß Jesus der wahre Messias sei, weil sie ihn für einen Betrüger hielten, wie es deren schon andere gegeben hatte, deshalb haben sie ihn gekreuzigt. Und das haben ihnen viele bis heute nicht verziehen. (*Damals war es Friedrich* 56-57)

Because Jews did not believe that Jesus was the true Messiah, because they regarded him as an impostor like many before him, they crucified him. And to this day many people have not forgiven them for this. (*Friedrich* 62)

This seemingly cordial explanation, which is actually quite hostile, leads to a discussion of Jewish responses, in which the apologetics for Jewish traits clearly transgress the thin line between philo- and anti-semitism:

Man wirft den Juden vor, sie seien verschlagen und hinterlistig!

Wie sollten sie es nicht sein?

... Man behauptet, die Juden seien geldgierig und betrügerisch! Müssen sie das nicht sein?

... Sie haben erfahren, daß Geld das einzige Mittel ist, mit dem sie sich notfalls Leben und Unversehrtheit erkaufen können. (*Damals war es Friedrich* 57)

Jews are accused of being crafty and sly. How could they be anything else? ... It is claimed that Jews are avaricious and deceitful. Must they not be both?

... They have discovered that in case of need, money is the only way to secure life and safety. (*Friedrich* 63)

This structure of philo-semitic descriptions, which actually invert anti-semitic ones, characterizes other scenes of the book as well. Virtues first considered to be positive are illuminated as negative when viewed in the context of their consequences for the German people. Let's take, for example, the way *Damals war es Friedrich* handles the Jews' putative generosity. A Jewish family asks a German family to join them at the amusement park. The Germans feel obliged to go, although they have no money and know that they cannot really afford it. The Jewish family quite generously treats the German family to almost everything. However, the Germans' pride prompts them to spend their last few pence, treating the Jewish family to some candy and a group photograph. As a result, the Germans cannot afford to buy themselves lunch and end up going hungry, ostensibly, as it were, thanks to the behaviour of their Jewish neighbours. Hence, the Germans pay the price, so to speak, for Jewish generosity.

Jews are also ubiquitously described as extremely kind and genial. *Damals war es Friedrich* portrays them as ever-smiling; particularly the father, mother, and Friedrich. However, elsewhere in the text, their smiles are described as deceptive, as signs of false amiability hiding Jewish cunning, as is later confirmed by an incident in which the father smiles at one of his workers. This process of verifying anti-semitic suspicions continues throughout the text: a small shopowner's claim that the Jews ruin her living is verified by the fact that she has to compete with a large Jewish department store (36); and once Jewish cunning is rationalized in the philo-semitic apologetics of the teacher, it is confirmed in the testimony of a policeman who tells a German boy:

'Glaub mir: Wir Erwachsenen haben unsere Erfahrung mit Juden. Man kann ihnen nicht vertrauen; sie sind hinterlistig und betrügen'. (*Damals war es Friedrich* 39-40)

'Believe me, we grownups have had plenty of experiences with Jews. You can't trust them; they are sneaky and they cheat'. (*Friedrich* 40)

No matter how innocent they seem to be, Jews always appear to be inflicting some damage. For instance, Friedrich is responsible for the mess in his neighbours' apartment, and eats all the potato pancakes, leaving nothing for the German father, who will have to go hungry.

Even as refugees, the Jews cause trouble. In *Stern ohne Himmel*, the Jewish refugee child, Abiram, who escaped from a concentration camp, finds a treasured food hideout and practically robs the German children of it. He is able to get away with this as he is free to move about, while the German

children are locked up in their room.

The Jews enjoy all manner of advantages over the Germans: social, financial, familial, intellectual and even Germanic. Socially speaking, the Jewish families are always superior in status to Germans, and, professionally, they occupy more prestigious positions and reap correspondingly higher financial rewards. Even when living in poor neighbourhoods, Jews are comparatively better off. *Im roten Hinterhaus* describes a poor suburb on the Rhein, where hunger and hardship are endemic. The German boy visits one of the Jewish families who lives there. From his description, it becomes clear that the Jewish family has a better life than the Germans:

‘Ich weiß nur noch, daß es darin einen mächtigen Schreibtisch gab und einen riesigen Wandschrank, dessen Glastüren den Blick freigaben auf silberne Leuchter, Schalen und funkelnde Gläser. Dinge, die es damals in keinem Haus im ganzen Rheinviertel zu sehen gab’. (*Im roten Hinterhaus* 121)

‘I just know that there was a tremendous desk and a giant cupboard, behind whose glass doors were silver candlesticks and crystal glasses, things which at that time could not be found anywhere else in the whole suburb’. (my translation)

In *Damals war es Friedrich*, the Jewish family is conspicuously more comfortable than the German. The Jewish father has a job, unlike the unemployed German father. In nearly every scene in the book, the Jewish boy Friedrich is depicted as bearing some material possession which shows up that of his German counterpart:

Friedrich und ich bekamen eine große spitze Schultüte;... Meine blaue Tüte war ein wenig kleiner als Friedrichs rote. (*Damals war es Friedrich* 23)

Friedrich and I each received a large, cone-shaped paper bag from our parents.... My blue bag was a little smaller than Friedrich’s red one. (*Friedrich* 20)

Mutter hat mir ihr Fahrrad geliehen. Es sah zwar nicht mehr schön aus, aber es fuhr noch sehr gut. Friedrich kam mit seinem neuen blauen Rad. Er hatte es dazu auch noch blank geputzt. (*Damals war es Friedrich* 66)

Mother had loaned me her bicycle. It didn’t look beautiful any more, but it still worked very well. Friedrich arrived on his shining new blue bicycle. Not only was the bicycle new; he had polished it as well. (*Friedrich* 74)

In Judith Kerr’s *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*, the Jewish family’s financial advantage is strongly emphasized: Max’s best friend, Günther, is frequently invited to eat with Max, is given Max’s old clothes and food to

take back home, since his father is unemployed. In *Damals war es Friedrich* the Jewish mother can afford a housekeeper — a German housekeeper — whereas the German mother is forced to hire herself out as a washerwoman. She can afford a housekeeper only after her German husband manages to land a job by joining the Nazi Party. The Jewish mother has time to play with her son, whereas the German mother always has too much work to do.

In terms of family relations, the Jewish family is warm and kind-hearted, while the German is cool and stern. Descriptions of the Jewish family on the Sabbath eve portray it as loving, open and unified. The final scene of the chapter describes the graceful melodies emanating from their house. The parallel German family scene recounts grandpa's visit, which terrifies the family, and the entire evening resembles a military parade more than a family dinner. Further, the Jews enjoy more than mere material advantage. They are also more gifted, both intellectually and physically. Friedrich is much better at math than his German friend, is more adept at riding his bicycle, and is a better swimmer and diver:

Er konnte viel besser schwimmen als ich, und er war ein sehr guter Taucher. (*Damals war es Friedrich* 67)

He could swim much better than I, and was an excellent diver. (*Friedrich* 75)

In *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*, Anna is something of a prodigy: she wins prizes for her essays, and excels in math. Her brother, even as a refugee in Paris, wins first prize as the most distinguished student.

Interestingly, the Jews are represented as even more German than the Germans, in that many of the stereotypes applied to them are those which have traditionally been constructed as "German." They manifest, for example, industriousness, cleanliness, and discipline, advantages which imply the inevitability of a struggle between Germans and the Jews — the latter being cast as a precocious foreign people intruding on German soil, with whom it is difficult just to keep up, let alone gain an edge.

Unlike the Germans, the Jews always manage to turn a bad situation to their favour and, even more importantly, they always manage to survive. Whereas the unemployed German father cannot find a job until Hitler comes to power, the Jewish father uses his recent unemployment to find a far better job with a Jewish firm. True, the Jewish father was fired for being Jewish, but we are given to understand that this is compensated for by his greater job satisfaction. Moreover, his new job is the realization of every child's dream: he is director of the toy department in a big department store. This not only assuages potential German guilt over discriminatory employment laws, but also suggests that the Jews have actually benefited from the Nazi regime. When the children visit the father and marvel at his new job, he confesses:

“Ich gefalle mir jedenfalls so besser!” (*Damals war es Friedrich* 52) — “I for one like myself better this way” (*Friedrich* 57). Even when oppressed, Jews manage to take advantage of the situation.

The books’ adherence to traditional depictions of Jews is compounded by ignorance about actual Jewish customs and ways of life. For instance, the Jewish family in *Damals war es Friedrich* is presented as a semi-orthodox family: it keeps the Sabbath, the Jewish mother kisses the Mezuzah upon leaving the room, and the family celebrates Friedrich’s Bar Mitzvah in an orthodox synagogue.

Yet they are depicted eating non-kosher food: when visiting the big amusement park, the Jewish father treats them all to a manifestly non-kosher Bockwurst. Moreover, as the Jewish mother is in her death throes after the pogrom in their apartment, the Jewish doctor takes it upon himself to administer a version of sacramental last rites, urging her to make a confession:

‘Bekennen Sie Ihrem Mann Ihre Sünden!’, riet Dr. Levy ihr.

‘Höre, erleichtere dich!’ bat Herr Schneider. (*Damals war es Friedrich* 85)

‘Confess your sins to your husband’ Dr. Levy advised her. He looked directly at Herr Schneider, then moved away.

‘Listen, unburden yourself!’ Herr Schneider implored her. (*Friedrich* 98)

### *The Representation of Germans, Nazis and Jews*

The texts establish a polar opposition between the Nazis and the German people, according to which the Germans were not Nazis and the Nazis were not Germans. In order to draw an even sharper distinction between Germans and Nazis, a symmetry is drawn between Nazis and Jews. Though this sounds absurd, this construction has a logic of its own: The depiction of both Jews and Nazis is drawn from a reservoir of *alien* attributes which has long supplied the range of physical, mental, individual and national features attributed to Jews. Since it is not only the Jews, but the Nazis as well, who are contrasted with the “real” Germans, the symmetry constructed between the Jews and the Nazis as “non-Germans,” is almost unavoidable.

As a result, Nazis and Jews share many traits. Whereas Germans almost never receive physical descriptions, both Jews and Nazis always do. For instance, in *Damals war es Friedrich*, Herr and Frau Schneider, Herr Rosenthal and the Rabbi, as well as the “real” Nazis, Herr Resch and Special Delegate Gelko from the District Office, are introduced in the text by direct or indirect physical descriptions.

Moreover, Jews and “real” Nazis always resemble each other: they are physically small, if not diminutive, and dark. Whether Little Cohn of *Maikäfer flieg* who has curly black hair and pointy ears, Abiram of *Stern ohne*

*Himmel*, Frau Schneider, in *Damals war es Friedrich*, Ruth in *Nie wieder ein Wort davon*, Dr. Jokesch, Lajos and the American commander of the camp in *Geh heim und vergiß alles*, Sofie in *Im roten Hinterhaus*, or the Jewish grandmother in *Emma* — they are all described as small and dark. Only the telltale nose is conspicuously missing, though *Als die neue Zeit begann* makes amends for this oversight:

Die Tür öffnete sich ... Dann erschien eine kleine, spindeldünne Gestalt. Ich kannte ihn gut, der da kam. Er hatte ein vogelnasiges Gesicht, graue Haare, eine viel zu weite Hose, die ihm um die Beine schlotterte, und auf dem Hinterkopf ein schwarzes Käppchen. Auf der Schulter trug das Männchen einen Leinensack. (*Als die neue Zeit begann* 60)

The door opened ... there appeared a small and thin figure. I knew him well, he, who came. He had a bird-nose [vogelnasiges] face, gray hair, baggy trousers loose about his legs, and a small cap on the back of his head. He was carrying a linen sack over his shoulder. (my translation)

Like the Jews, the Nazis are depicted as small and dark, mirroring, it almost goes without saying, the image of Hitler himself as a type of Super-Nazi. For example, there is the parade commander who welcomes the Führer in *Wir waren dabei*, the Nazi Siegbert in *Wann blüht der Zuckertütenbaum*, and the hunchback in *Damals war es Friedrich*, who are all either dark or small, or both.

Another analogy between the Jews and the Nazis is constructed through the way both are shown to be active participants in strange or bizarre ceremonies and rituals. Moreover, the Jews and the Nazis are both ascribed national credos, while the Germans are hardly ever represented through shared national or cultural affiliations, particularly never ones which might be perceived as "peculiar." However, in describing the Jews and the Nazis, the texts are replete with detailed descriptions of seemingly strange ceremonies, such as the Friday night ceremony before Shabbat, Friedrich's Bar Mitzvah, and the consecration of the Nazi Jugendvolk organization.

Another similarity involves the tendency shared by Jews and Nazis for dispensing orders, which is placed in contradistinction to the German trait of simply obeying commands. The Grandfather in *Damals war es Friedrich* is a tyrant who abuses his family, and his behaviour is likened to that of a Jew named Cohn who was once his supervisor. His behaviour also resembles that of Herr Schneider, who obviously enjoys ordering his workers about.

While the Nazis and Jews never wanted for food, the Germans were always either starving or had precious little to eat. Furthermore, the Nazis and the Jews worked in tandem to feed the starving German people: both in

*Damals war es Friedrich* and *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*, the unemployed Germans are “nourished,” as it were, by Jews until the Nazis replace them as providers.

What’s more, these German texts for children suggest that had they been given half a chance, the Jews themselves would readily have joined the Nazi Party. In *Damals war es Friedrich*, the Jewish protagonists are represented as prepared to join either the Jugendvolk or the Nazi Party. When a neighbour tells Friedrich’s father that he has joined the Party, the father expresses his understanding and says that he, too, might have joined the Nazi Party had he not been Jewish:

‘Vielleicht — wenn ich nicht Jude wäre — vielleicht hätte ich genauso gehandelt wie Sie’. (*Damals war es Friedrich* 63)

‘Perhaps — if I weren’t a Jew — perhaps I would have acted just like you’. (*Friedrich* 70)

This notion resonates elsewhere: earlier in the story, Friedrich enthusiastically tries to join the Jugendvolk. Seemingly more Catholic than the Pope, he is the only young child in possession of a swastika ring. Later, when Friedrich takes his friend to the department store, he greets the man outside the District Council building with a rousing “Heil Hitler” (55).

Leaving aside the alleged inclination of the Jews to join the Nazis, we come upon another peculiarity: there are apparently very few Nazis to be found in Germany, and regardless of their ostensible numerical marginality, the Nazis still manage to oppress their victims — the Germans of the Third Reich.

### *Victimization*

The books in question present the “*German People*” as the ultimate victims. Their tale of woe begins with World War I, continues through the years between the wars, and ends with the rise of the Third Reich, when they too are subjected to Hitler’s tyrannical ruthlessness. In corroboration, the texts emphasize prewar conditions which gave rise to the Third Reich: unemployment and its deprivations, postwar devastation and ruin, disease, mourning, family disintegration, and the tragic displacement of individuals.

The texts are saturated with detailed descriptions of German suffering. In an attempt to strengthen the notion that the German people suffered greatly, the texts seem to assume that the more evidence of German suffering they amass, the more persuasive their narratives are bound to be, and finally, the more German suffering will become unquestionable.

*Damals war es Friedrich* depicts a German family in the twenties who experiences various kinds of hardship. The father is unemployed, and he

and his family are financially dependent on the grandfather, who is a tyrant. Noack's *Die Webers* opens with long lines of people queuing for their unemployment allowance, which is hardly enough to keep them alive. Highlighting the adversities of hunger in the wake of unemployment, the brutality of harsh weather conditions, and the loss of civil rights, the text suggests that the circumstances which made victims of the German people were, in fact, beyond human control:

Keine Arbeit, nicht genug zu essen, nichts Rechtes mehr anzuziehen,  
und dann auch noch dieser verwünschte Winter! (*Die Webers* 7)

No work, not enough to eat, nothing appropriate to wear and then this  
damned winter. (my translation)

Klaus Kordon's *Mit dem Rücken zum Wand* gives a comprehensive description of unemployment in the nineteen-twenties and nineteen-thirties, the appalling misery it entailed, and its disastrous social consequences. In describing the events preceding the rise of the Nazis to power, the book stresses, over and above the political situation, the unbearable living conditions borne by the working- and lower-middle classes. Even when some are still lucky enough to have employment, large families raise cramped and undernourished children in tiny, foul-smelling flats.

Not just before the war, but also after it, the Germans suffered the pangs and disgrace of hunger. *Wann blüht der Zuckertütenbaum?* emphasizes the viciousness of hunger during the war:

Weil Krieg war, gab es nicht genug zu essen, und alle Leute waren  
abgemagert.... Mama seufzte oft kummervoll, wenn sie ihre zwei  
Ältesten anschaute. (*Wann blüht der Zuckertütenbaum?* 6)

Because it was war, there was not enough food and all the people grew  
lean.... Mama often sighed anxiously when she was looking at her two  
older children. (my translation)

In *Sonderappell* we are told that while serving in the RAD, the girls were forced to eat worm-infested food. Charlotte was so hungry that she had to overcome her disgust and eat fruit-soup which had worms in it:

Zwischen den zusammengeschrumpften Beeren schwammen weiße  
Würmerleichen, und Charlotte hatte zuerst methodisch eine nach der  
anderen herausgefischt und an den Tellerrand gelegt, aber dann hatte  
sie gemerkt, daß sie nie damit fertig werden würde, und aß das Kompott,  
ohne hinzusehen. (*Sonderappell* 140)

Some corpses of white worms were swimming between the shrunken  
berries and at first Charlotte had fished them out one after the other and  
put them on the side of the plate, then she noticed that she would never

manage to get them all and had eaten the fruit soup without looking at what she was eating. (my translation)

All the Germans, even the high-ranking ones, endure some degree of hunger. The family of Anna, daughter of a high-ranking officer in the Wehrmacht, suffers from the scarcity of food. From time to time, however, thanks to her father's high-ranking position, the family does manage to procure an extra supply of food, although her mother still has to stand queuing for food.

*Heute nacht ist viel passiert* describes the prevalence of hunger after the war. The two children, Hilde and her friend Franz, have to walk for miles to find a little bread, and at times they are unsuccessful. If not for their aunt's connections through which they are able to obtain a little bread, people in their street, especially the elderly, would surely have died of hunger.

'Wenn Tante Hanna nicht am Wirtschaftsamt wär, wären schon manche Leute in unserer Straße verhungert, vor allem alte,' sagt Katha. (*Heute nacht ist viel passiert* 65)

'If aunt Hanna had not been working for the ministry of finance, some people in our street would have starved to death, especially the old ones,' said Katha. (my translation)

*Krücke* describes the first encounter between Crutches and Thomas. Thomas looked so desperately hungry that Crutches invites him to a poor-house lunch, which is comprised of bread and horse-sausage.

'Wir sind beide arm wie die Kirchenmäuse, obwohl ich noch nie eine arme Kirchenmaus gesehen habe. [...]Geh mal rein in diese Villa. Auf dem Tisch liegt mein Sammel- und Vorratsbeutel. Pack das Brot aus, die Pferdewurst'. (*Krücke* 19)

'We're both poor as church mice, although I have never seen a poor church mouse.... Go right into this villa, my collecting bag is lying on the table. Get out the bread and the horsewurst'. (*Crutches* 14)

Further, the daily menu in *Maikäfer flieg* consists of potatoes, more potatoes, and more rotten potatoes:

Die Großmutter schälte Erdäpfel und schimpfte auf die Erdäpfel und auf den Krieg. Sie sagte, vor dem Krieg hätte sie der Gemüsefrau solche dreckigen, fleckigen Erdäpfel an den Kopf geschmissen. (*Maikäfer flieg* 7)

Grandmother peeled the potatoes and was cursing both potatoes and the war. She said that before the war she would have thrown such lousy rotten and spotted potatoes back to the grocery. (my translation)

The hunger suffered by the Germans is underscored by juxtaposing them to the Nazis, who never want for food. The scale is unmistakable: the Nazis always eat royally, while the Germans go hungry. *Wir waren dabei* describes the grand meals served in the home of Heinz's Nazi family (71) and then goes on to describe the hunger prevalent in Günther's house, who comes from a communist family where the father is unemployed.

*Stern ohne Himmel* describes the torment undergone by Kimmich, a political prisoner in a concentration camp. He is just one of many good Germans who in one way or another experience suffering at the hands of the Nazi regime; as noted specifically in *Lena*:

Am 18. Februar hatte Goebbels im Berliner Sportpalast zum totalen Krieg aufgerufen, und die Opfer, die sie von uns verlangten wurden immer größer. (*Lena* 219)

On February the 18th Goebbels declared a total war in the Berlin Palace of Sport, and the victims expected from us grew more and more. (my translation)

*Sonderappell* describes the girls' RAD camp, which is located near the neighbouring camp of Auschwitz, of which little is said. On the other hand, the suffering undergone by the girls in their own camp is described in detail.

Misery, pain, and the horror of death are foregrounded, described repeatedly and in considerable detail, in all the books, from *Maikäfer flieg*, in which Gerald's father and Auntie Hanni are killed, to *Stern ohne Himmel*, in which numerous civilians are killed at the end of the war, through *Damals war es Friedrich* whose final scene recounts the destruction of Germany, and *Wir waren dabei* where Günther and Heinz die on the battlefield, to *Die Webers* which contains a long list of dead soldiers, including Mrs. Krüger's twins, both killed in battle on the same day:

Tot! Gefallen für — wie hieß es doch gleich? — für Führer, Volk und Reich. Da stand es: ganz oben links auf der Seite, und daneben waren noch fünf solcher Anzeigen. Oben ein Eisernes Kreuz, darunter die Namen. 18 Jahre, 21 Jahre, 19 Jahre, 35 Jahre, 18 Jahre.... Sechs Anzeigen nebeneinander, und darunter wieder zehn, zwölf andere. (*Die Webers* 93)

Dead! Died for — how was it exactly called? — for the Führer, the people and the Reich. This was written there, on the top of the left side of the sheet of paper, and next to it there were five more similar announcements. An Iron Cross on top, and under it the names. 18 years, 19 years, 35 years, 18 years.... Six announcements next to each other, and then under it, another ten, twelve. (my translation)

Not all these deaths are traced to Hitler. Many are ascribed to bombing raids carried out by the Allies. The texts hardly refer at all to the countless victims of other nationalities and religions, and seem to imply that it was the Germans who indeed suffered the greatest losses. The farmer who hides Regina in *Er hieß Jan* lost her four sons in the war; her husband died of grief. While still alive, she becomes a living monument to the dead and a symbol for all mourning mothers:

Manchmal denke ich, daß sie versteinert. Daß sie irgendwann wirklich eine schwarze Statue sein wird: trauernde Mutter. (*Er hieß Jan* 70)

Sometimes I think that she is turning into stone. That she will virtually become a black statue: the mourning mother. (my translation)

In *Das Jahr der Wölfe* the number of soldiers who lost their lives is so great that the local priest can no longer even mention them all as he used to in his Christmas sermon (52). The priest refers to soldiers and civilians who lost their lives in the same breath, and prays for mercy for the refugees (*Das Jahr der Wölfe* 53). *Nacht über dem Tal* highlights the great number of German casualties: dead soldiers, civilian victims felled by the occupying armies and the bombing raids.

In this way the texts seem to suggest that virtually all the Germans who died in this war, whether young and old, soldiers or civilians, gave their lives for no reason. The war is regarded as resulting from a clash of cosmic powers, while the presence of German soldiers all over Europe is perceived as self-evident. The texts emphasize the distress and hardship brought about by the war, but say hardly anything about the circumstances which led to the war, nor do they mention its consequences for non-Germans.

In their characters' encounters with the dead and the wounded, the German writers do not spare the reader. In *Sonderappell* Charlotte describes in full detail the circumstances of her uncle's injury:

Eine Panzermine ging hoch, zerfetzte die beiden anderen Kameraden, riß ihm das eine Auge aus dem Kopf, ließ ihm das Trommelfell springen, ätzte ihm die Gesichtshaut blau und schwarz von Pulver, und in den ersten Wochen konnte er auch mit dem zweiten Auge nichts sehen. (*Sonderappell* 83-84)

A tank-mine exploded, tore up the other two comrades, ripped his eye off his head, tore the drumskin, turned his face blue and black from the gunpowder and during the first weeks he could not see anything with his other eye either. (my translation)

"Als der Bahnhof brannte," a short story by Käthe Recheis published in the collection *Damals war ich vierzehn*, describes the destruction of an en-

ture city, where the headless body of a man is discovered by children in the ruins:

Diesmal aber war es unheimlich still.

Das ganze Bahnhofsviertel lag in Trümmern. Der Himmel war grau hinter einem dicken Mauerstaubschleier. Willi und ich kletterten über die Trümmer.... Dann sahen wir eine Frau im Schutt liegen. Die Frau hatte keinen Kopf mehr. Ich konnte nicht weiterklettern. Willi nahm mich an der Hand, zog mich fort. (*Damals war ich vierzehn* 84)

This time it was however uncomfortably still.

The entire area around the railway station laid in ruins. The sky beyond the heavy layers of wall-dust was gray. Willie and I were climbing over the ruins.... then we saw a woman lying in the rubble. She had no head. I could not go on climbing. Willie seized my hand and led me away from there. (my translation)

*Sonderappell* describes Charlotte's encounter with death when she meets a mother fleeing for her life carrying her dead baby. The horrible picture of the dead baby is vividly described:

Nein, es war nicht der erste Tote gewesen, aber es war der erste Tote, den Charlotte berührt hatte, den sie auf dem Arm getragen hatte, und sie vergaß nie, wie kalt, wie unirdisch kalt und weich sich die Wangen des toten Kindes angefühlt hatte. Sie sah die anderen kleinen Bündel im Schnee liegen, dunkle Flecken im lautlosen Weiß, Steine, steif und kalt und tot. (*Sonderappell* 62)

No, it was not the first dead person, but it was the first Charlotte touched and carried on her arm. She never forgot how cold, how unearthly cold and soft the cheeks of the dead child felt. She saw the other small parcels lying in the snow, dark spots in voiceless white, stones, stiff and cold and dead. (my translation)

As a result of the allies' bombardment, Germany is flooded with refugees. *Krücke* creates the impression that the entire German people became refugees. *Stern ohne Himmel* describes how the city was overrun by the refugees whose invasion of the city is likened to a natural disaster: "[... wie] ein Heer von Termiten" (*Stern ohne Himmel* 82) — "[... like] an army of termites" (my translation). Recurrent descriptions of the countless German victims suggests that Germany was rather guiltless: an innocent state suddenly confronted with a monstrous war which took a terrible toll. Villages and cities, families and individual parents — all mourn the people who died, it would appear, in vain. The story of the Third Reich, as well as that of the First and the Second World Wars, is transformed, so to speak, into a story about how the Germans were in fact victimized.

When in 1995 Germans were asked whether the exile of the Germans from the East was as much a crime against humanity as the Holocaust, 36% answered positively (40% of the older people over 65, Moeller 1009). As Moeller describes in his article on "War Stories," the pattern of the victimization of the Germans is not unfamiliar: it accords with the nation's image of its past. In fact, his study describes how the Germans have initiated numerous projects aimed at documenting German suffering both during and after the war, transforming the story of the Third Reich and the Second World War into a story whose main narrative addresses the suffering of the German victims.

### *Germans and Guilt*

Why victimize the Germans? The portrayal of the German people as the ultimate victims of the Nazi regime facilitates the absolution of the Germans from responsibility for the fate of the Jews during the Third Reich. Relieving them of this responsibility is further enhanced by the way the Germans are presented as though they were committed to preserving Jewish wellbeing. Social and religious institutions such as the courts and the Church, as well as German individuals, are generally represented as having supported the Jews against the Nazis. The German mother in *Nie wieder ein Wort davon* donates her own tiny meat ration to a Jewish family; the schoolteacher in *Damals war es Friedrich* asks the children to stay friends with Friedrich; Crutches in *Krücke* risks his own life to help Bronke escape; Christina's father in *Geh Heim und vergiss alles* is willing to do everything to help the Jews, even at the cost of his own life.

Unfortunately, the Jews do not appreciate the help offered, nor the good advice given them by their German friends, until it is too late. For instance, in *Damals war es Friedrich*, the German father counsels Friedrich's father to leave Germany.

'Viele Ihrer Glaubensbrüder haben Deutschland bereits verlassen, weil man ihnen das Leben zu schwer gemacht hat. Und das wir noch nicht aufhören, das wird sich noch steigern. Denken Sie an Ihre Familie, Herr Schneider, gehen Sie fort!' (*Damals war es Friedrich* 64)

'Many of those who share your faith have already left Germany because life was made too hard for them here. And it will only get worse! Think of your family, Herr Schneider, and go away!' (*Friedrich* 71)

The Jewish father unwisely disregards the warning which is delivered at such personal risk to the German, and thus has only himself to blame for his exposure to Nazi oppression. Indeed, Friedrich's father later confirms his own responsibility for his plight by telling the German father once it is too late to flee: "Sie haben recht gehabt" (*Damals war es Friedrich* 105) — "You

were right" (Friedrich 125). Thus, Jews are frequently described as people who neglected to save their own lives, despite help offered by their German friends. Furthermore, Jewish deaths are never presented as directly resulting from German conduct or action. German books for children barely note that masses of Jews met their deaths, let alone that they were murdered or massacred, during the Holocaust or the Third Reich. Even when the story covers the years 1942-1945, Jewish extermination is ignored. However, since it cannot be altogether denied that at least some Jews lost their lives during World War II, the issue is modified primarily in two ways: Jews tend to either commit suicide or die in bombing raids conducted by the Allied Forces.

Whether Jews die at their own hands or from bombs thrown by the Allied Forces, German responsibility is diminished or concealed, if not altogether eradicated, except where the inexplicable deeds of an alien force named Hitler, which descended out of nowhere upon Germany, is concerned. Hitler becomes the scapegoat for the German people, a sort of *deus ex machina* whipping boy, a non-German entity who manages to carry out his plans by way of deceiving the entire German nation. In other words, Hitler is ascribed demonic, supernatural powers and qualities, as if he were a pagan god; this implicitly helps to absolve the Germans, who were mere humans, of all guilt, even for having let themselves be hoodwinked. After wreaking havoc upon the Germans, Hitler's disappearance permits the nation to return to its pre-1933 German self.

### Summary

In an interview for Israeli TV held on April 9, 1994, the Führer of the German Republicans, Herr Schönhuber, ironically observed the retroactive change in representing the image of the German past. According to him, the 80% majority which supported the Nazi regime during the Third Reich has become an even larger majority (90%) which today claims to have supported the Jews during the Third Reich and to have offered them assistance. With this, Herr Schönhuber identifies a key motif in the construction of the past under the Third Reich.

It may well be asked how Germany managed to create a historical narrative which enables the Germans to see themselves as victims of the Nazis, no less than the Jews — who are regarded as largely responsible for their own fate. The answer seems to lie, at least partially, in the narrative provided by various historical and historiographical sources, including German books for children. In all the books examined, with the exception of only a few titles, such as Clara Asscher-Pinkhof's *Sternkinder*, *Reise im August* by Gudrun Pausewang, and *Die toten Engel* by Winfried Bruckner, which imply the possible existence of an alternative narrative, the horrors of the

Third Reich are systematically filtered, allowing the darker, bleaker parts of history to escape illumination. The most painful events of this era are censored, while relatively minor, unobjectionable events are allotted inordinate space, far beyond their historical significance.

It is true that historical narratives for children tend to create an utopian image of the world, emphasizing almost exclusively the better side of life. The presentation of “nice” Germans, who like their Jewish neighbours and help them, might thus be accounted for by some of the basic narrative tendencies and models inherent in children’s literature in Western culture. These tendencies are probably in place because society tries to protect children from a confrontation with its unpleasant aspects and believes that children should be spared the darker side of history. They will have enough occasion to confront it, so the argument goes, in their adulthood. The naivete behind the assumption that children will believe any supposedly historical narrative — even when adults know it is not true — can and should be questioned. However, as we have seen, child readers are not spared suffering. They are repeatedly confronted with very detailed, cruel descriptions of German suffering. It is only the representation of non-German suffering which is elided in the corpus under consideration.

Furthermore, the books children read, so the argument goes, should enable them to create images of the world which might serve as part of their repertoire of models for imitation. Even if this point of departure is accepted, one might ask what is the best way to present children with such a repertoire of models. Should the children not also be presented with sets of values that are to be rejected? Is it not better, from a pedagogic point of view, to let children consider various possible value systems and guide them to choose the one preferred by the writer or society, rather than conceal from the child the very existence of other sets of values?

What kind of moral can children draw from a narrative that presents a world of well-intentioned people, citizens possessing goodwill, who all fought in vain against an unbeatable demon? Should they draw the lesson that there is no sense in trying to help people to struggle against a dictatorship? If indeed most of the German people were engaged in helping the Jews and other persecuted communities, as the historical novels for children seem to imply, why were their efforts all in vain? Is this the moral children should draw? Would it not be better to teach them a different lesson, that if more Germans had been willing to oppose dictatorship, history might have been different? Moreover, one may ask whether it is the children the writers wish to spare, or the adults — spared from being confronted by their children and spared from having to confront the older generations who were complicit, in one way or another, actively or passively, in the history of the Third Reich.

And having said all this, one might still ask: So what? What is the

significance of this shared historical narrative in books for children? After all, these texts are read mostly, often exclusively, by children; more often than not they do not have great literary value, nor are they particularly well-positioned in the culture.

I contend that despite the low cultural status of children's literature, the books in question play a fundamental role in the construction of the image of the German past. They were authorized by the cultural establishment of Western Germany, were sold in large quantities, and quite a few of them have been awarded the most prestigious literary prizes. They often serve as the leading, at times the only, mediator between their readers and history. They participate in determining the world-view of children, and due to the socializing function of children's literature, they take part in establishing attitudes towards the world which the children carry into adulthood. Thus, these books are indeed actively involved in the creation of a national past and provide a paradigm for interpreting the nation's present and future. These books, unsophisticated and often oversimplified as they may be, are of course subordinated to the public historical narrative, but as is often the case, they also participate significantly in its creation. Only time will tell whether the united Germany will choose to create a different story about its past and will leave to posterity a different image from the one constructed by books for children published in Western Germany before 1990.

### Notes

- 1 I wish to thank the Bertelsmann Stiftung for its generous support of the research.
- 2 This article was received by CCL in January, 1998, and the results of the comprehensive research project were recently published in a book in Hebrew by Zohar Shavit entitled *A Past without a Shadow* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1999. 402 pp.).

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