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## The Presence of the Past in Children's Literature

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Edited by  
Ann Lawson Lucas

*Prepared under the auspices of the  
International Research Society for Children's Literature*

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PRAEGER

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*In memory of my dear uncle, Colin Lawson*

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## On the Use of Books for Children in Creating the German National Myth

Zohar Shavit

**T**he following is a rough outline of what a German child is likely to learn about the Third Reich and the Holocaust from reading a range of German historical novels for children, both original and translated from other languages:

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 victim 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.

So what? one may ask. 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 have no great literary value, nor are they, as children's books, particularly well positioned in the culture.

Despite the low cultural status of children's literature, books for children play a fundamental role in the construction of a national past. This is because they often serve as the leading, at times the only, mediator between their readers and history. The unequivocal view of these books as a central socializing agent implies that at an early stage they are actively involved in the creation of a national past. Understanding the past as it is manifested in books for children simultaneously creates images of the past and provides a paradigm for interpreting the nation's present and future.

Every national children's literature produces both direct and less direct historical narratives which seek to shape the child's view of his/her nation through a certain understanding of the past. The historical narratives created by the various texts for children have pretensions to historical accuracy and strive to be historically credible. At the same time, they aim through subjective retellings of the national myths, to be sources of national pride and identity, to provide the underpinnings for children's sense of belonging.

The issue raised in this chapter concerns the mechanism of constructing distorted historical narratives as manifested in German narratives for children. How can "reality" be depicted in a manner that is so distorted and yet still retain historical relevance? How, indeed, is it possible to create this kind of historical narrative? The answer, it seems, is simple, almost trivial: German books for children, like most other national narratives, represent a wishful image of their history. As in the case of other historical narratives, the German historical narrative for children is also the result of constructing and reconstructing available historical material. The ways in which this material is modified and altered, as well as the subsequent version(s) of a community's history, are determined by the given community's or nation's cultural and political needs at a specific point in time.

Although it is commonly believed that historical novels enjoy more freedom than other historical narratives, in principle they are devised according to the same methodology. Like other historical narratives, their construction entails the selection and organization of a given body of historical matter. In terms of organizing events and protagonists, the narrative of German books for children is constructed primarily from the following constituents:

- Fictive borders of time and space;
- Anti- and philo-semitic descriptions of the Jews;
- An opposition between the Germans and the Jews;
- An opposition between Nazis and pseudo-Nazis;
- An analogy between the Nazis and the Jews;
- Foregrounding the Underground;
- Presenting the Germans as victims and depicting their mourning;

Rejection of the burden of guilt;  
Misplaced elements.

My book, *A Past without a Shadow* (1999, published in Hebrew), addressed in some detail the ways in which the German narrative is organized. Here, however, I can only allude briefly to some of them, so I will address the representation of the Germans, the Nazis and the Jews, and the portrayal of German victimization. My findings are based on a careful and thorough reading of books for children published after 1945 in the former West German Republic. *A Past without a Shadow* deals primarily with 74 titles that have been awarded prizes in Germany. The prize-winning books were selected for analysis because they represent what is regarded by "people-in-culture" as the best mainstream literature; in other words, my analysis concerns books that were well received and institutionally recommended as culturally the most valuable. Moreover, they are perceived as representing the most "fitting" and preferred version of the German past. At the same time, in order to establish a control sample, I also analyzed several books that did not win awards; the results yielded by these analyses are similar to those of the prize-winning books.

#### 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 are not perceived as Nazis and the Nazis are not perceived as German. In order to draw an even sharper distinction between Germans and Nazis, an analogy is drawn between Nazis and Jews. Absurd though it may sound, 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-since provided 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 are hardly ever ascribed physical descriptions, both Jews and Nazis always are. For instance, in Hans Peter Richter's *Damals war es Friedrich* [Then it was Frederick] (1961), 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 way of direct or indirect physical descriptions. Moreover, Jews and "real" Nazis always resemble each other: they are physically small, if not diminutive, and dark. Little Cohn in Christine Nöstlinger's *Maikäfer flieg* [Fly away, ladybird!] (1973) who has curly black hair and pointed ears, Abiram in *Die Webers* [The Weber family] (Noack, 1980), Frau Schneider in *Damals war es Friedrich* (1961), Ruth in *Nie wieder ein Wort davon?* [Not one word ever again?] (Gehrts, 1975), Dr. Jokesch, Lajos and the American commander of the camp in *Geh heim und vergiß alles* [Go home and



forget everything] (Recheis, 1964), Sofie in *Im roten Hinterhaus* [In the red annexe] (Berger, 1966), and the Jewish grandmother in *Emma oder Die unruhige Zeit* [Emma, or The troubled time] (Fuchs, 1979) are all described as small and dark.

Like the Jews, the Nazis are depicted as small and black-haired, mirroring, needless to say, 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* [We were there] (Richter, 1962), the Nazi Siegbert in *Wann blüht der Zuckertütenbaum?* [When does the sugar-cone tree bloom?] (Hartig, 1986), and the hunchback in *Damals war es Friedrich* (Richter, 1961), all of whom are either dark or small, or both.

A further analogy between the Jews and the Nazis is constructed by showing members of both as active participants in strange or bizarre ceremonies and rituals. In addition, the Jews and the Nazis are both ascribed national credos, while the Germans are hardly ever represented through shared national or cultural affiliations, particularly those which might be perceived as "peculiar." In presenting the Jews and the Nazis, the texts are replete with detailed descriptions of seemingly strange ceremonies, such as the Friday night ceremony before *Shabbat* (Saturday, the seventh day of the week, considered as the Jewish day of rest), a *Bar Mitzvah* (the initiation ceremony for 13-year-old Jewish boys), and the consecration of the Nazi *Jugendvolk* (youth movement) organization.

Another similarity involves the tendency of both Jews and Nazis to give orders, which is juxtaposed to the German trait of simply obeying orders. The grandfather in *Damals war es Friedrich* is a tyrant who abuses his family, and his behavior is likened to that of a Jew named Cohn who was once his supervisor. His conduct is also said to resemble that of Herr Schneider, who obviously enjoys ordering his workers about.

While the Nazis and Jews never seem to want for food, the Germans are always either starving or have extremely little to eat. Furthermore, the Nazis and the Jews are described as working in tandem to feed the starving German people: both in *Damals war es Friedrich* and in *Als Hitler das rosa Kaninchen stahl* (1973, translated from Judith Kerr's *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 texts suggest that had they been given the chance, the Jews themselves would readily have joined the Nazi Party. *Damals war es Friedrich* presents the Jewish protagonists as being prepared to join either the *Jugendvolk* or the Nazi Party. When a neighbor tells Friedrich's father that he has joined the Party, the father expresses his understanding and adds that he, too, might have joined the Nazi Party had he not been Jewish. This notion resonates elsewhere: earlier in the story, Friedrich enthusiastically tries to join the *Jugendvolk*. Seemingly ultra-Catholic, 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."<sup>1</sup> Despite the alleged proneness by the Jews to join the Nazis, there are very few Nazis to be found in Germany. Notwithstanding their alleged numerical marginality, the Nazis do manage to oppress their victims, namely 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 the first World War, 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 the pre-war 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 densely detailed descriptions of German suffering; it would appear that the greater the evidence provided of German suffering, the more forcefully persuasive the narratives are thought to be. *Damals war es Friedrich* portrays a German family in the 1920s which experiences various kinds of hardship. The father is unemployed, and he and his family are financially dependent on the tyrannical grandfather. Noack's *Die Webers* (1980) begins by describing masses of people queuing in the 1930s for their unemployment allowance, which is scarcely enough to keep them alive. Highlighting hunger in the wake of unemployment, brutally harsh weather conditions, and the loss of all civil rights, the text implies that the German people became victims and that the circumstances were beyond human control.

Klaus Kordon's *Mit dem Rücken zur Wand* [With your back to the wall] (1990) gives a comprehensive description of unemployment in the 1920s and 1930s and of the appalling misery and disastrous social consequences it entailed. Accounting for the rise of the Nazis to power, the book stresses, over and above the political situation, the unbearable living conditions of the working- and lower-middle classes. Large families raise cramped and undernourished children in tiny, foul-smelling flats, and only a few were lucky enough to be employed. All the Germans, even the high-ranking ones, endure hunger to some degree. In *Nie wieder ein Wort davon?* (Gehrts, 1975), the family of Anna, daughter of a high-ranking officer in the *Wehrmacht* (armed forces), is short of food. From time to time, however, thanks to her father's position, the family does manage to procure an extra supply of food, although her mother still has to queue for it.

Not only were the Germans hungry before the war, it seems; during and after the war they were again humiliated by hunger. In *Sonderappell* [Special Roll-Call] (Schönfeldt, 1979), we are told that while serving in the RAD (*Reichs Arbeits Dienst*),<sup>2</sup> the girls were forced to eat worm-infested food: Charlotte was so hungry that, disgusting as it was, she ate fruit soup which had worms in it. *Heute Nacht ist*



*viel passiert* [A lot happened last night] (Klare, 1989) describes the prevalence of hunger after the war. The two children, Hilde and her friend Franz, walk for miles to find a bit of bread, and are not always lucky. If it were not for their aunt's connections through which they manage to obtain a little bread, people in their street, especially the elderly, would surely have died of hunger. The hunger suffered by the Germans is underscored by juxtaposing them to the Nazis, who never want for food. The social scale is clear and unvarying: the Nazis always eat royally, while the Germans go hungry. *Wir waren dabei* (Richter, 1962) describes the grand meals served in the home of Heinz's Nazi family alongside the hunger in Günther's Communist family, where the father is unemployed.

German suffering does not end with hunger and starvation. *Stern ohne Himmel* [A star with no heaven] (Ossowski, 1978) describes the torment undergone by Kimmich, a political prisoner in a concentration camp. He is just one of many good Germans who experienced suffering and hardship under the Nazi regime. *Sonderappell* describes a girls' RAD camp located not far from 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, including *Maikäfer flieg* (Nöstlinger, 1973), in which Gerald's father and Auntie Hanni are killed, *Stern ohne Himmel*, in which numerous civilians are killed at the end of the war, *Damals war es Friedrich*, the final scene of which recounts the destruction of Germany, *Wir waren dabei* where Günther and Heinz die on the battle-field, and *Die Webers* which contains a long list of dead soldiers, including Mrs. Krüger's twins, both killed in battle on the same day. In *Das Jahr der Wölfe* [The year of the wolves] (Fährman, 1962), so many soldiers lose their lives that the local priest can no longer mention them all as he used to in his Christmas sermon.<sup>3</sup> *Nacht über dem Tal* [Night over the valley] (Staden, 1979) highlights the great number of German casualties, both dead soldiers and civilian victims, felled by the occupying armies and the bombing raids.

These texts provide detailed descriptions of encounters with the dead and the wounded, never sparing the reader. In *Sonderappell*, Charlotte gives a graphic description of the circumstances of her uncle's injury. "Als der Bahnhof brannte," by Käthe Recheis, published in the collection *Damals war ich vierzehn* [I was fourteen at the time] (Bruckner, 1978), describes the destruction of an entire city, where a man's headless body is discovered by children in the ruins. *Sonderappell* vividly describes Charlotte's horrible encounter with death when she comes across a mother carrying her dead baby and fleeing for her life.

Not all these deaths are attributed to German responsibility, or to Nazi Germany or 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 indeed the Germans who suffered the greatest losses. The war is regarded as the result of a clash of cosmic powers, while

the presence of German soldiers all over Europe is not explained. The texts emphasize the distress and hardship brought about by the war, but hardly say anything about the circumstances which led to the war, or about its consequences for non-Germans. In fact, the texts seem to suggest that virtually all the Germans who died in this war, whether young or old, soldiers or civilians, lost their lives for no good reason. In no way were they responsible for the war, nor for the rise to power of the Nazis, nor for any of the other events which led to the war.

The recurrent descriptions of countless German victims seem to suggest that Germany was in fact guiltless: an innocent nation suddenly confronted with a monstrous war that inflicted a terrible toll. Cities and villages, whole families and individual parents, all mourn those who died—as it appears—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 narrative about how the Germans were victimized. It is hardly surprising that when asked in 1995 whether the exile of the Germans from the East was as much a crime against humanity as the Holocaust, 36 percent of Germans answered affirmatively, 40 percent of these being people aged over 65.<sup>4</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

It may well be asked how Germany—as I believe—managed to create a historical narrative which absolves the Germans and enables them genuinely to believe that they were blameless during the Third Reich. The answer seems to lie, at least partially, in the historical narrative provided by German books for children. In all the books examined, except a few such as Clara Asscher-Pinkhof's *Sternkinder* [Children of the star] (1961), Winfried Bruckner's *Die toten Engel* [The dead angels] (1963) and Gudrun Pausewang's *Reise im August* [A journey in August] (1992), the horror of the Third Reich is systematically screened and filtered, concealing the darker, most oppressive aspects of German history.

The books examined are sanctioned by the cultural establishment of modern Germany, and sell in great numbers; as already mentioned, most have received glowing reviews and have been awarded prestigious literary prizes. Their success can be attributed to the way they respond to the tacit demands of present-day German society. In fact, it may be assumed that most attempts to violate the national consensus on German history would be rejected.

Metahistorical, sociological, philosophical and psychological discussions, including a number of recent studies, address the creation, recreation and denial of the various phases of communal and national past images (Bond and Gilliam, 1994; Diner, 1990; Friedlander, 1993; Hobsbawm, 1983; Kaes, 1989; Lewis, 1975; White, 1992). All these studies seem to agree that images of the past are subject to manipulation favoring national, political and social interests. Rather than reiterate the shared arguments embodied in this rich corpus, I have preferred to use them as a point of departure for determining the ways in which texts for children serve as



an effective means for creating, disseminating and internalizing past (self-)images, and crystallizing past (self-)perceptions. In the case of the German past, the prevailing narrative for children fails to acknowledge German responsibility for the suffering caused by the German people during the Third Reich and the Holocaust; this means it cannot come to terms with the existence of German guilt. German books for children create a wishful picture of the German past with which the German people can live comfortably, and which they can, without question, pass on to their children. Whether their children and grandchildren will choose to adopt this image of the past still remains to be seen.

## NOTES

This chapter is based on a comprehensive research project which discusses the "story" created by German historical novels for children. The author wishes to thank the Bertelsmann Stiftung for the generous support provided for the research.

1. H. P. Richter, *Damals war es Friedrich* (Nürnberg: Sebaldis, 1961), p. 55.
2. The RAD was the state work agency of the Third Reich.
3. W. Fährmann, *Das Jahr der Wölfe* (Würzburg: Arena, 1962), p. 52.
4. Robert G. Moeller, "War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany," *American Historical Review* (October 1996), p. 1009.

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## 15

# Reverberations of the Anne Frank Diaries in Contemporary German and British Children's Literature

Susan Tebbutt

### ANNE FRANK AND HER DIARIES

The internationally famous *Diary of Anne Frank*, first published in 1947, recounting the everyday pleasures and pains of the childhood of a German Jewish girl, forced into hiding in the annex of a canal-side house in Amsterdam, was originally written in Dutch. It has now been translated into over 50 languages, has sold two million copies worldwide, and in a 1996 survey was 26th in a list of the hundred best literary works of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> The *Diary of Anne Frank* is arguably the world's best-known work of children's writing, while Anne herself is perhaps the best-known female autobiographer, and is seen by many as an icon, a symbol of the Holocaust and of Jewishness.

Questions about the authenticity of the diaries have diminished since the publication of the authorized new version, in which material originally censored by Otto Frank, Anne's father, has been included.<sup>2</sup> Although considered by some to be a historical source, as a document of the period, it is important to remember that the diary was conceived as comprising both fact and fiction, evident not least in Anne's inclusion of a number of fictional stories in the diary.<sup>3</sup> She does not merely reflect the world around her, but sets out deliberately to revise her own work to make it more accessible. Readers can now see Anne's three separate