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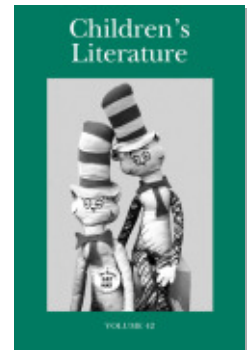
## Ever-Present Shadows of the Past

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## *Ever-Present Shadows of the Past*

Hamida Bosmajian

*A Past Without Shadow: Constructing the Past in German Books for Children*,  
by Zohar Shavit. New York and London: Routledge, 2005.

During her investigation of West German post-1945 children's literature about the Third Reich, World War II, and the Holocaust, Zohar Shavit was shocked to discover that German narratives had shifted the persecution and murder of European Jews to the margins of collective and individual memories and substituted German suffering and victimization as the central issue in historically contextualized stories. German authors, Shavit charges, had circumvented guilt and accountability and transmitted to future generations a past without shadow. The ethical and potentially dangerous consequences of this shift angered and disturbed Shavit; she decided to use her research results to rally the international academic and public community to exert pressure on German publishers, authors, and educators to correct this displacement and misrepresentation. The twelve chapters of *A Past Without Shadow: Constructing the Past in German Books for Children* provide evidence of the failure of the German book production establishment and lead to the conclusion that young readers are indeed politically and socially manipulated to accept a German past that is without guilt and accountability.

Shavit's astonishment over this discovery is somewhat surprising, for the phenomenon is just as evident in adult literature and its various means of denial and substitutions. While adult postwar literature hides and reveals through ironies a guilt-denying and guilt-obsessed German culture, children's literature, as a less critically respected and scrutinized narrative category, manages to construct a past without shadow as historically factual and true: Germans are the abused victims of Nazism and were unjustly punished by the Allied air war and the division of the country after the war.

The reader of Shavit's provocative study needs to be aware that the original Hebrew edition of 1999 was written "from an Israeli and Jewish perspective" (xxiv), as the author acknowledges. The 2005 English edition of *A Past Without Shadow* is the third critical study of children's literature about Nazism and the Holocaust to be included in Routledge's Children's Literature and Culture series, under the

general editorship of Jack Zipes. Though the 2005 edition is not updated, Shavit's work and findings are resonant with the scholarship published in North America since 2000, especially that concerning how narratives about the Third Reich and the Holocaust frame and select narrative patterns, for their representation in stories for young readers remains an issue of critical concern and debate.

Shavit takes the opportunity in her introduction to the English edition to advocate a public agenda, which she reaffirms in her conclusion, that would correct the "*distorted, and deformed, and immoral*" (296; my italics) West German narratives. In her introduction to the Hebrew edition, she describes how, growing up in an Israeli Zionist family, she did not attribute to the Nazi Holocaust a role in her young life (xxi). The murdered relatives of the Holocaust may have been a silent presence, but were rarely spoken of by her parents. Young Zohar Shavit could conclude that the victims "were not part of my 'story'" (xxii); her historical consciousness and conscience were raised in later years. Nevertheless, in her introduction to the English edition she is prompted to advocate that "we—the direct victims of the German wartime atrocities, or the Allies who saved the world from them—have fully earned the right to prescribe to Germans how they should deal not only with their *shame* . . . , but also with their guilt and accountability" (xix). Shavit's argument for an externally imposed change in narrative patterns is somewhat quixotic. The liberating Allies of 1945 are no more; the Germany that was divided is reunified. The only ally she can appeal to is the United States, "a country sensitive to the Holocaust" (xx). The narrative of a unified Germany about the Third Reich and the Holocaust could complicate the issues of marginalization and denial even more, since East Germany officially refused the guilt of fascism by celebrating socialism and the victorious heroism of the Soviet Union, a master narrative Shavit neglects to acknowledge.

Her angry agenda for prescriptive measures has, however, a deeper motivation and sense of urgency: "I believe that even in this age of postmodernism, memory can treat history with varying degrees of truth, justice, and accuracy. If postwar liberal Germany is not required to do more justice to the past memory of its victims, if Germany does not maintain a more truthful memory of its past, this memory will soon fade away, sentencing even the memory of the dead to a final death" (xix). Hovering between the conviction that there is an *essential* historical and ethical truth and the postmodern acknowledgement

that all writing communicates only “more or less,” Shavit fears that the memory of the survivors and the crimes of the perpetrators will die with them and leave only texts behind. The first stories children read are written for them by adults: so begins the selection and fictionalizing of the truth of experience.

An image of the past, argues Shavit, is constructed through “a rendering of personal memories and ‘historical material’” by means of a “deliberate and systematic process, unrelated to the author’s individual memory. Though probably unaware of it, the author functions within a pre-existing framework of the composition of historical discourse” and serves the interest of that culture (61). “Historical material” is by definition always already “organized” in terms of what a culture wants to retain and privilege. All collectively conscious people engage in this process, not just once but also in crisis moments that demand reinvention of the collective. What Shavit neglects to acknowledge is that the enabling rhetoric, even if one of its topoi is “victimhood,” always includes denial, displacement, or at best a marginalization of those perceived as the obstructive Other. More often than not the invention of the etiology of a social unit involves suppression of criminal acts such as territorial conquest or mass murder of the Other. Shavit points out that “the Jewish and the Israeli cultural repertoire offers a long list of models that shape the discourse on the Third Reich and the Holocaust—models that differ from those of the German discourse” (xxiv). She offers the reader no examples, but we expect that difference given the major premise of constructing an image of the past to serve collective needs.

Her major premise frames her data, analyses of the data, and public agenda. An image of the past as projected through an author’s narrative is driven by a teleological determinism that perpetuates the constructed past and serves the interests of the culture through repertoire and repetition. But, as a human-made structure, that past image can be altered and rearranged. This implies that an author can choose to meliorate his or her complicity in the paradigm and encourages the construction of alternative narratives that, eventually, would again serve the interests of the collective consciousness of a given culture. Shavit therefore titles her last chapter “‘Seeing It Differently’—The Alternative Narrative.”

Shavit begins with the chronology of the development of German children’s literature from 1945 to the 1990s. It is a literature that never denies “the reality of the Third Reich and its horrors” (28), but con-

structs the “story” in a manner that is “best suited to the general historical discourse in Germany” (28). German children’s literature becomes part of that discourse as it projects, with rare exceptions, the persecution and murder of European Jews through the narrative of the victimized German and therewith marginalizes or silences the Jewish victim’s voice.

Her second chapter, “The Keys to Germany’s Past Image,” offers the analytical tools and the official prototypical youth narrative about Nazism and the Holocaust: Hitler and a small group of Nazis coerced Germans to accept their alien propaganda and imposed a war on the country that brought terrible sufferings to the Germans. German Jews suffered persecution and were sent sometimes to camps where some of them died; in isolated cases they were even murdered. Germans loved the Jews and often tried to help them even in dangerous circumstances. For three years Germans were victimized through Allied bombings. This led to their defeats and the division of the country, “separating families and causing much anguish” (27–28). For the analysis of how this paradigm is manifested in individual narratives, Shavit defines eleven “keys of memory”: time; location; the Jews’ exceptional abilities; the “others”: Jews and Nazis as aliens; German powerlessness; German resistance; guilt; generations; the Allies; the German (and Jewish) victim; and the moral. In the chapters that follow, Shavit chooses over sixty narratives, written in or translated into German, and proves her central argument about the construction of the German imaging of a past without shadow through the employment of the memory keys. With few exceptions, she does not analyze, much less interpret, a text as a whole; instead, she persuasively applies the appropriate “key” to citations from a number of narratives in each chapter: e.g., the “others,” or German powerlessness. The data are convincing, but her method obliges her to quote out of context and prevents her from any psychological consideration of the narrator’s voice.

Shavit critiques the first-person perspective as a device that justifies the “main character’s ignorance and the handling of more difficult events in an evasive manner and through numerous screens. . . . [The] adherence to the child’s perspective exempts the texts from having to provide insightful presentations of the historic events” (131). Granted, the first-person point of view is always limited—the adolescent in the Hitler Youth who tells his story cannot possibly have much comprehensive knowledge of the Third Reich and its atrocities that would lead to “insightful presentations of the historic events.”

In Barbara Gehrts's *Don't Say a Word* (1975), for example, the central traumatic and autobiographically based event is the guillotining on 10 February 1943 of the narrator's father, who was accused of subversion and sabotage in the military. This overshadows everything in her memory, even the memory of the death of her best friend, Ruth Schmidtke, who committed suicide along with her entire family. When Ruth's mother leaves a butcher shop after anti-Semitic epithets are hurled at her, Shavit comments sardonically: "Her [the anti-Semite's] claim regarding Jewish arrogance is confirmed by Mrs. Schmidtke's readiness to forego her children's meat ration rather than suffer an indignity. The claim regarding Jewish cowardice is buttressed later on when the family prefers to commit suicide rather than cope with its difficulties" (139). The use of the word "buttress" reduces the tragic event to mere supportive evidence for the anti-Semitic remarks and implies that the author agrees with them. When the narrator gives Mrs. Schmidtke her own family's meat ration, Shavit argues that this supports the charge that Jews deprive Germans of vital sustenance. She makes the same accusation in her discussion of Innocenti's problematical *Rose Blanche* when the little girl, Rosa, improbable as it may seem, finds her way to an extermination camp fence and gives up her much-needed bread to feed the starving Jewish children. Once again, Shavit allegorizes this image as demonstrating that Jews are agents of harm to Germans because Rosa may have lived had she not given her bread. No matter what is said or done, Shavit sees the subtext again as concealing anti-Semitism, guilt, and lack of accountability.

Several narratives considered officially acceptable according to the West German construction of the past image were written by authors with a Jewish background. These autobiographically based stories are also rather well-known to the English reader. Shavit cites repeatedly from Judith Kerr's *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*, Ilse Koehn's *Mischling Second Degree: My Childhood in Nazi Germany*, and Doris Orgel's *The Devil in Vienna*. Through the form of a thirteen-year-old's diary, Orgel fictionalizes and remembers the few weeks in February and March 1939 when Germany annexed Austria and Hitler made his triumphant appearance in Vienna. Inge, the young Jewish diarist, is fully aware of the moment. She even picks out the "Horst-Wessel Song" (the Nazi anthem) on the piano, to the consternation of her parents, who forbid her to have any further contact with her best friend, a member of the BDM (Bund Deutscher Mädchen, the Nazi youth group for girls). Because the family is able to escape Vienna, Shavit concludes that

Orgel avoids discussing the end result of Jewish persecution—"the extermination of the Jews" (120). Since this is a teenage diary and since the war will start over a year later, Inge cannot know about Poland or the Wannsee Conference in 1942. *The Devil in Vienna* is told by an American emigrant author through the voice of a Jewish girl, a central voice aware of the immediate impact of events around her. But this is not enough for Shavit, for the story does not mention the transports to the killing centers, proving acceptable to the German discourse about a past without shadow.

In spite of the Jewish voice, *The Devil in Vienna* cannot be considered an alternative narrative. Shavit isolates four such narratives, translated into or written in German: Clara Asscher-Pinkhof's *Sternkinder* (*Star Children*; *Sterrekinderen* in the original Dutch edition of 1946); Gudrun Pausewang's *The Final Journey* (*Reise im August*, 1992); Winfried Bruckner *Die toten Engel* (1963); and two stories by Christine Nöstlinger and Ernst Nöstlinger in Bruckner's collection of stories *Damals war ich vierzehn* (1978). Asscher-Pinkhof's poignant vignettes in *Star Children* reveal the existential thrownness of the child survivor, who has no analytical or interpretive defenses against the traumatic events lived through by children wearing the yellow star. The lack of historical and political context experienced by the child survivor is appropriate, given the age of the child. The Dutch and English editions provided the reader with introductory contextualizations; the German edition omitted them. Shavit explains the lack of context in the primary text on the basis that the author could assume that the "background of the Third Reich, the Holocaust, and the genocide would be well known and undisputed by the book's readers," primarily the Dutch people and the survivors of the camps (262). Not in 1946—when the immediacy of the experience and the difficulty of communicating it motivated victims to record it, somehow. Post-memory authors and their narrators would *know* much more, filter the experience through that knowledge, but would lack immediacy. *Star Children* is one of the very first survivor memoirs and begins, unintentionally, to set the pattern of narrating the Holocaust for children.

Gudrun Pausewang's *The Final Journey* is an acquired memory attempt by a German author to project through third-person narration a Jewish girl's point of view up to the moment she finds herself in the gas chamber at Auschwitz and opens her arms to what she expects to be "the water of life." Shavits lauds Pausewang, an author known for her socially critical narratives about environmental abuse and nuclear

war, for offering a truly alternative narrative. While young Alice, whose family wove a web of lies to protect her from the imminent disaster, grows in awareness of what it means to be Jewish as her young and new Jewish friends enlighten her in the cattle car on the way to Auschwitz, Pausewang meliorates the victim's death in the gas chamber with deceptive references to "Alice in Wonderland" and the Grimms' tale, "The Water of Life." Throughout the narrative, the language, metaphors, and allusions to fantasy narratives create a complicated subtext, but Shavit disregards the problematical language in her eagerness to acknowledge Pausewang's attempt to represent a Jewish girl's consciousness on the transport to Auschwitz and at the moment of becoming a victim of the Holocaust.

*Star Children* and *The Final Journey*, imperfect as they may be, suggest what kind of narratives may fill the gap in German children's literature about the Holocaust. Shavit argues that this gap needs to be filled "on the basis of the memory of the victims" (xix). She is acceptant not only of the narratives in the historical victim's voice, but also of German authors attempting to image the Holocaust victim, as the Pausewang example demonstrates. However, when German authors, no matter how moral their intentions, appropriate the story of the Holocaust victim or the Holocaust survivor, new issues are raised with new complications. The ambiguities in narrative voices and their constructions of the past of the Third Reich, World War II, and the Holocaust will not go away; neither will the inevitable textual gaps and blanks. Shavit has difficulty accepting this.

Adult atrocities and murderous intentions against Jews by Germans during the Third Reich have not been part of the image of the past in German children's literature. There is no story titled *Extermination Camp Commandant: The Story of My Father*, nor is it likely that there will be, in spite of the recorded accounts about and by children of perpetrators. In her conclusion, Shavit begins with a useful summary of the controversial German debate over how the history of the Third Reich, the War, and the Holocaust should be organized, narrated, and "manipulated" in the continuum of German history (287–94). She then turns to the relevance of that debate to children's literature (294–96), concluding that the narratives offered to children are largely lies that protect the adult establishment from admitting German complicity, guilt, and accountability. The effects of this are "pernicious and immoral" in that the young internalize the stories, which then "become the cornerstone of historical memory and knowledge" (296).



She repeats that all nations construct an image of their past that suits their interests and asks, "Should Germans not have the same right?" The answer is an implied "No!"; the "*case* of the Third Reich and the Holocaust is not just "another *case* of a distorted story" (296; my italics). Its legitimacy must be questioned because the end result is a story that is "deformed," distorted," and "immoral." Shavit's many rhetorical questions (295) reveal her exasperation; her vehement language in the introductions and in the conclusion projects her anger. Almost everything she says in *A Past Without Shadow* is true and accurate, but at the same time more complicated than she would admit. At the end, the reader wonders about the content and the form of the story about the Third Reich, the War, and the Holocaust that Zohar Shavit wants to prescribe for the [West] German writer.