

The Jews Were Alien, Just Like the Nazis

Zohar Shavit, *A Past Without Shadow: Constructing the Past Image in German Books for Children*, Am Oved, Ofakim, 402 pp.

Ort Prague

Zohar Shavit's book about the unique strategies employed by authors of children's books in Germany in their presentation of the past image of the Third Reich is a cultural bombshell and piques special interest. The book refutes the notion of a "new Germany," a term which may now have gained a different and disturbing meaning: What price did the Germans pay to reshape their country so quickly and successfully? How did they create a "proper," capitalistic, democratic and environmentally conscious culture?

The author instills a certain tension in the reader, making him continually unsettled, without explicitly raising the moral question until the closing sentence; the backdrop and strength of her research are, in effect, a great moral question, not only for Germany regarding Germany, but for each nation regarding itself. How does a nation relate to its past? How does it shape its past? What model of collective memory does it promote?

The book does not address the issue of the Holocaust from a Jewish perspective, but focuses exclusively upon the German understanding of the Holocaust and the shadow that it may or may not have cast on Germany during the last fifty years. "He who has no shadow should not walk in the sun" is the quotation inspiring the title. Perhaps its rather simplified nature threatens to minimize the complexity of Shavit's study. Indeed, the threat of simplification hangs over the entire book, owing not to any lack of research but to the unequivocal statements it contains. These are quite severe statements with regard to German culture, which considers itself enlightened and distinctly non-racist. The author addresses the ramifications of her study in an excellently structured manner and provides instructive examples from German

children's literature in a lucid and non-burdensome fashion.

The core of the study includes 74 books which have won literary prizes; it is assumed that these gave a clear expression of what the cultural elite saw fit to be socially "desirable" and "correct." Shavit maintains that the Germans created a past image of the events of World War II different than the one familiar to us.

The past image that arises from German children's literature emphasizes German suffering during the war and marginalizes the Jews' suffering. Germans are dissociated from Nazis. The Nazis appear in German history as "the Others"; aliens who arrived in Germany and subsequently left, causing the German people much suffering as well as punishment at the hands of the "Allies."

Shavit maintains that the German past image of World War II has been deliberately and systematically distorted for several decades, in response to the demands of historians and politicians. Images arising from children's stories are allegedly marginal in culture, but in fact they are not. Children's literature constitutes images and symbols that are internalized at an early age and become a foundation of both historical memory and historical knowledge.

A small but central chapter in the book briefly addresses the method of remembering and forgetting which creates a past image. This study's point of departure study is the assumption that personal memory always consists of models of collective memory.

There is more in German children's literature than a naïve and unintentional development of the past image. Shavit demonstrates the various strategies employed by this literature for the creation of this image, where death, for example, is the lot of the Germans more than of any other nation, whereas the death of the Jews is concealed. In general, the "misplacing of [familiar] elements," a term coined by the author, is present in most of the stories. The prevalent historical discourse shifts the Jews'

suffering to German suffering. The well-known experience of the railcars in which the Germans transported their victims from the occupied countries to detention and extermination camps is applied to the Germans. They become the train passengers and suffer in the sealed, fetid and hopeless railcars. Another strategy is fracturing borders of time and space and confinement to a restricted area, thereby universalizing the suffering and obscuring clear historical delineation which distinguishes between victims and victimizers.

Within this framework emerges the notion of overwhelming resistance to the Nazi regime. The resistance is either passive or active and encompasses most of the German population. Responsibility for the Nazis' acts is rejected, and all of the strategies, convincingly described, lead in fact to the question of German collective and individual guilt. German responsibility remains unshouldered, assigned to a small group of Nazis, or restricted to passive consent by silence.

One of the book's illuminating revelations is the external and collective identification between Nazis and Jews. Shavit stresses that the obvious intentions of the official children's literature are not in any way anti-Semitic. However, the past image still expresses a stereotypical position

regarding Jews, even if the negative characteristics are negated. In any event, due to their foreignness, Jews are described as not belonging to Germany. Since Nazis don't belong either, Jews, being "Others," are identified with the Nazis and to a large extent exhibit common traits including even physical similarity.

In order to highlight the prevalent historical discourse Shavit presents several alternative literary works. One is "Star Children,"** – a collection of stories written by a Dutch-Jewish author and translated into German in the 1950s, before the prevalent historical discourse was formulated. The others are four works written in the 1990s. The alternative texts demonstrate the feasibility of presenting a different past image.

It seems that the German "educational" past image attempts to use the war to convey a universal message of improvement of mankind. While doing so it conveniently ignores, in a rather troublesome and alarming manner, the period in which an ideology of evil drove an entire nation and state to cruelty previously unknown to humanity. This past image also rejects the responsibility for this historical memory.

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