Germans have written plenty of children’s books about the Nazi period, but until Israeli scholar Zohar Shavit came along, no one accused them of having a subliminally anti-Semitic agenda.

Shavit, a professor of culture at Tel Aviv University, and an internationally recognized expert on children’s literature. She’s also an outspoken advocate of Hebrew culture, lamenting what she sees as the decline in the status of the language.

Shavit embarked upon the study of German children’s books incognito, during a working stay at the German National Library in 1986, after being asked to read them for an Israeli publisher. “I asked for their best books,” she recalled. The Library “gave me historical novels such as Hans Peter Richter’s ‘Friedrich’ — regarded as the jewel in the crown of contemporary German children’s literature — and ‘Fly Away Home,’ by Christiane Wulff, the most important children’s writer in the world today.”

Shavit was impressed by both books and recommended that “Fly Away Home” be translated into Hebrew. But as she waited, she felt a growing unease. “I felt something was off,” she says, “but I couldn’t tell exactly what it was.” Slowly she realized that although elements of the Holocaust story were present, they were manipulated in a way that produced an undistorted picture. With a grant from the Bertelsmann Foundation, Shavit began a systematic analysis of German children’s books for historic content. The study confirmed her suspicion that the Third Reich story was methodically, albeit unconsciously, twisted according to a fixed pattern. She presented her findings at conferences in Germany and Israel in 1995, based on an in-depth study of hundreds of children’s books about the Third Reich that had been published since 1945.

“Wish my hypothesis were proven wrong, but unfortunately I found it to be true,” Shavit says. The gradual revelation of the latent anti-Semitism and the denial of Germany’s past was painful, she adds, but once she noticed the emerging pattern, she felt she had to proceed. Each of her 10 earlier books was a “labor of love,” she says reflectively. “With this book, I feel as if I were raped and this is the baby.”

Her findings sent shock waves through intellectual circles in that country and aroused a debate reflected in numerous newspaper articles as well as letters sent directly to Shavit. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung wrote of a lecture by Shavit, on her initial findings in Israel in 1996, that it was “offensive and anti-Semitic.” The leftist listeners as well as the Germans could hardly accept Shavit’s research results. Nobody wanted to believe that under the surface such a distorted historical picture could be growing. As to the criticism raised against Shavit, that the historic consciousness of German youth is determined today predominantly by school curricula and television shows and not by children’s literature, it is only partially justified. Some of the paperbacks she presented have been sold in more than 100,000 copies.

Brodie Shavit “CRACKED THE CODE,” a lot slipped by her. “Fly Away Home,” for example, has a repulsive, dark character called Cohen, with curly black hair and pointy ears. In an early reading, it escaped Shavit that Cohen — a cook in the Russian army with no first name — was a Jew. Later she realized that Jews and Nazis are always depicted as small and black-haired, “mirroring, it almost goes without saying, the image of Hitler himself as a type of Super-Nazi.” Thereby, the Nazis and the Jews are depicted in one fell swoop as “other,” as not real Germans. Both groups are depicted as having an advantage over the Germans: The Nazis never wanted for food during the war, while the Germans suffered hunger. The Jews are depicted as “capable.” They are always superior in status to the Germans: socially, financially, intellectually and in their warm family relations.

Shavit says the philo-Semitic stereotypes are intended to highlight the cruelty of the Jews’ treatment. However, they are in themselves invented anti-Semitic stereotypes.

“Saying the Jews were better is another way of saying they are different.”

The Jews in these stories die as a result of Allied bombings, commit suicide, are killed by others or disappear. Death is rampant, but its main victims are Germans. The impression created is that when taken as a fraction of the millions of deaths for which Hitler was responsible, the number of Jews who were murdered wasn’t large.

Shavit says the philo-Semitic writers are conscientious, well-meaning, progressive and provocative, Shavit poses the obvious question of how they could possibly do what they did. She concludes that the answer appears, “at least to Israelis and Jews,” to be a totally falsified historical narrative. “The answer seems to be simple, almost trivial. German books for children, like most other national narratives, represent a wishful image of German 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.”

When asked whether she sees any similarities with Israeli children’s literature, Shavit is evasive: “Everybody asks me that, and I don’t like the question,” she says reflectively. “It is difficult to give a general answer about the structure but with the contents. I ask whether it is pedagogically right to tell a lie. I don’t think it is possible to give a clear assumption of responsibility. The past is being dealt with in the easiest way, as a picture, with the order of cause and effect.”

Shavit says she wrote the book “with great anxiety,” procrastinated and pushed her publisher to the point where he accused her of breach of contract. It is meticulously researched and heavily footnoted (the first asterisk appears after the words “Chapter One”), includes color photos of the children’s book illustrations (these too are deconstructed and analyzed) and is replete with anecdotes.

An illustration in “Rosa Weiss,” by Roberto Innocenti, alludes to the famous painting, “Death of the Ghetto,” his hands held in the air under SS gunpoint. In Innocenti’s version, which also adorns the cover of Shavit’s book, nobody is threatening the child. He may well be raising his hands in defiance of the Austrian woman who is supervising his execution. In the story, Rosa the German underground fighter gets killed, not the boy.

Concludes Shavit: “Thus, while on the surface the misplaced version of the well-meaning, conscientious, ambitious to enhance the documentary nature of the story at the same time, it 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.”