

What's Wrong with This Picture?

Shoshana London Sappir

GERMANY IS TORN BETWEEN two extremes when it comes to dealing with its Nazi past. On the one hand, it will go to extraordinary lengths to assume responsibility for the extermination of the Jews, beg forgiveness, pay reparations, erect monuments and museums. But it longs to put the past behind it and be accepted as a renewed, peace-seeking and tolerant nation. Germans are asking with increasing openness: "When is enough enough?" The generations that were not yet born during the Nazi era are growing tired of paying for the sins of their fathers and grandfathers, and wonder whether perhaps the time has come to move on.

The tension between the politically correct effort to preserve historic memory and the urge to suppress it is illuminated from a rare perspective in a new Hebrew study, "A Past without Shadow," by Israeli researcher Zohar Shavit, with troubling findings. Shavit examined hundreds of German-language children's books published in the last 40 years to find out what they say about the Third Reich and the Holocaust. She discovered a virtually formulaic narrative of that historic period, characterized by an avoidance of responsibility and a rejection of the burden of guilt.

The underlying formula is strikingly consistent. At first glance, the story looks realistic. All the ingredients are present: Nazis, a terrible war, atrocities, concentration camps, trains, Jews, widespread death, terror, displacement, hunger. A close reading, however, reveals that over and over these historic elements are patterned so as to create a skewed picture of the past: The Nazis were a small band of powerful, evil people who took over Germany. Most Germans opposed them but were powerless to resist them. The Nazis caused great suffering to the people of Germany and to its Jews. Most Germans loved the Jews and tried to save them from the Nazis. The main victims of the war were the Germans. The Jews disappeared. The Jews and the Nazis resemble each other physically. They are both different from real Germans.

"This is the story Germany has chosen

to tell its children," says Shavit in an interview at her home in a sunny Tel Aviv suburb. "It recurs in innumerable texts. This is the official story. Germany refuses to take responsibility for the Holocaust and see itself as guilty. The distinction between Germans and Nazis makes them not guilty."

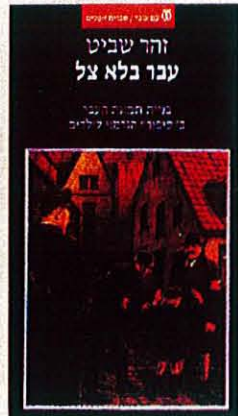
The Israeli-born Shavit, 48, is a professor of culture at Tel Aviv University, and an internationally recognized expert on children's literature. She is also an outspoken advocate of Hebrew culture, lamenting what she sees as the decline in the status of the language.

Shavit embarked upon the study of German children's books incidentally, 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 Christine Nostlinger, 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 waded on, she felt a growing unease. "I felt something was off-key, 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 insidiously distorted 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 14 books. The main criticism she heard was that her sample was too small and non-representative. So she went back and looked at all the hundreds of children's books about the Third Reich that had been published since 1945.

"I wished my hypothesis were proven

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



**Avar Belo Tzel
(A Past without
Shadow)**

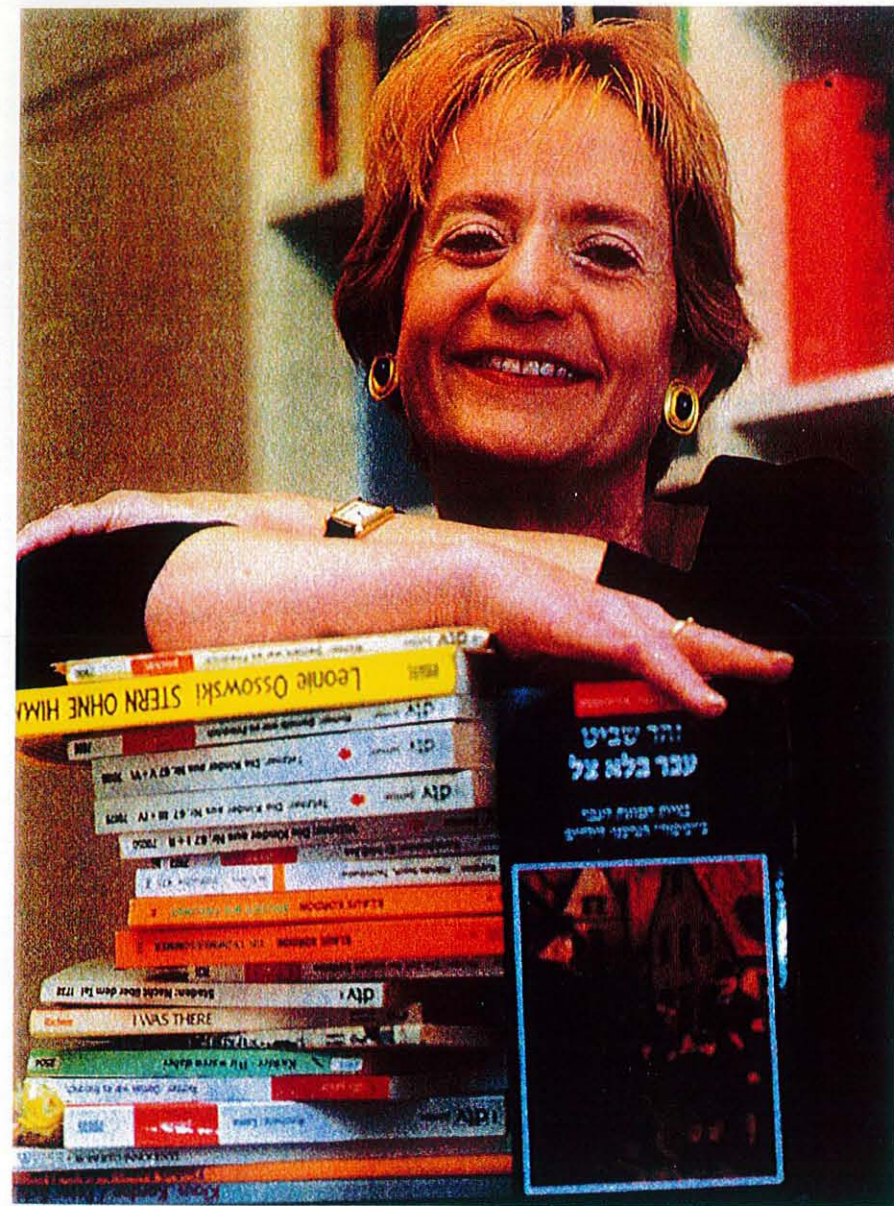
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wrong, but unfortunately I found it to be true," Shavit says. The gradual revelation of the latent anti-Semitism and the denial of Germany's past were painful, she adds, but once she noticed the emerging pattern, she felt she had to proceed. Each of 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."

Shavit's 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 aroused "general astonishment." "The Israeli 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 partly justified. Some of the paperbacks she presented have been sold in more than 100,000 copies."

"My generation accepted the findings but thought I was exaggerating," she says. "The older people didn't accept them at all. I felt as if I were facing a firing squad."

Prof. Malte Dahrendorf, a German colleague who had collaborated with Shavit



ESTEBAN ALTERMAU

on an earlier paper, wrote: "I protest against the unfair criticism of German youth literature, criticism that is not based on knowledge of the subject. Shavit's arguments are a mixture of truths, half-truths and gross generalizations." Dahrendorf added that "I do not want to deny that it is hard for Germans to write about Jews (as well as Nazis, when they themselves have something to hide, or even just pangs of guilt), but the opposite is true too, that it is hard for Jews to write about Germans or German phenomena without consciously or unconsciously being affected by the memory of the Holocaust."

BEFORE SHAVIT "CRACKED THE code," a lot slipped by her. "Fly Away Home," for example, has a repulsive, dark character called Cohn, with curly black hair and pointy ears. In an early reading, it escaped Shavit that Cohn — a cook in the Russian army with no first name — was a Jew. Later she realized that Jews and

SHAVIT: Says her earlier books were labors of love but with this one, 'I feel as if I were raped and this is the baby'

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 inverted anti-Semitic stereo-

types. "Saying the Jews are 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 other Jews 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.

Stressing that German children's writers are conscientious, well-meaning, progressive and provocative, Shavit poses the obvious question of how they could possibly have created what 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," adding, "My argument is not with the structure but with the contents. I ask whether it is pedagogically right to tell a lie. I say it is immoral because there is no assumption of responsibility. The past is being dealt with in the easiest way, by amplifying German suffering."

Shavit says she wrote the book "with great agony," 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 quotes and anecdotes.

An illustration in "Rosa Weiss," by Roberto Innocenti, alludes to the famous picture of a Jewish child in the Warsaw 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 regime, rather than facing approaching 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-known photograph seems to enhance the documentary nature of this story, at second glance it appears that it actually seeks to divest the story of its historic credibility." ●