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Good Intentions On the Role of Philo- and Anti-Semitic Stereotypes in the Construction of the German Historical Narrative for Children Von Zohar Shavit

CHARLES

TILLY WHY?

More than twenty years ago, I began to study the construction of the past in historical novels for children published in West Germany between the end of WWII and German reunification.[1] I have come to the conclusion that the construction of the past in these novels was motivated by two contradicting desires: on the one hand, an urge to absolve Germans of their guilt and even responsibility for the atrocities of WWII; and on the other, a real desire to do good and correct the consequences of anti-Semitism. I have encountered these contradicting desires frequently in the mixture of anti- and philo-Semitic stances prevalent in these texts, which can be illustrated by the following citations:

[...] Weil sie nicht glaubten, dass Jesus der wahre Messias sei, weil sie ihn für einen Betrüger hielten, wie es deren schon andere gegeben hatte, deshalb haben sie ihn gekreuzigt. Und das haben ihnen viele bis heute nicht verziehen; sie glauben die unsinnigsten Dinge, die über Juden verbreitet werden. Einige warten nur darauf, die Juden wieder verfolgen und peinigen zu können. [...] Man wirft den Juden vor, sie seien verschlagen und hinterlistig!

Wie sollten sie es nicht sein?

Jemand, der immer fürchten muss gequält und gejagt zu werden, muss schon sehr stark in seiner Seele sein, wenn er dabei ein aufrechter Mensch bleiben will.

Man behauptet, die Juden seien geldgierig und betrügerisch! Müssen sie das nicht sein?

Immer wieder hat man sie beraubt und enteignet, immer wieder mussten sie auf der Flucht alles zurücklassen, was sie besaßen. Sie haben erfahren, dass Geld das einzige Mittel ist, mit dem sie sich notfalls Leben und Unversehrtheit erkaufen können.

Eines aber müssen selbst die ärgsten Judenfeinde zugeben: Die Juden sind tüchtig!

Nur Tüchtige können zweitausend Jahre Verfolgung durchstehen.

Indem sie mehr und Besseres leisteten als die Menschen, unter denen sie lebten, errangen sich die Juden immer wieder Ansehen und Geltung. Viele große Gelehrte und Künstler waren und sind Juden.

Wenn ihr heute oder morgen erlebt, wie man die Juden missachtet, dann bedenkt eines: Juden sind Menschen, Menschen wie wir! (pp. 56-57)

These citations are taken from *Damals war es Friedrich*, [2] one of the most popular young adult novels about the Third Reich and the Holocaust. Sold to and read by millions, it was one of the books most widely assigned and discussed as classroom reading in German schools, and participated as such in the construction of the German historical narrative for children and young adults. Events described in a chapter entitled "The Teacher" take place in 1934. In the preceding chapters we encounter a chain of events and people that gradually lead to the novel's catastrophic end. Among them we find friendly and hostile neighbors, an anti-Semitic grandfather, an attempt by a Jewish child to join the Hitler Youth, descriptions of the Pogrom Night, and so on. "The Teacher" depicts Friedrich, a Jewish student who is about to be expelled from his German school. His class teacher, who expresses compassion for Friedrich's plight, explains the reasons for anti-Semitism and traces the phenomenon back to its roots.

In an attempt to demonstrate his empathy for Jews, the teacher declares that Jews are human beings: "Juden sind Menschen, Menschen wie wir!" (p. 57), unwittingly raising the possibility of not seeing Jews as human beings. His statement then evolves into a different claim, implying that Jews are in fact "not like us" because they enjoy an *a priori* advantage over the Germans: "Eines aber müssen selbst die ärgsten Judenfeinde zugeben: Die Juden sind tüchtig" (p. 57).

The teacher moves on to Jesus' crucifixion by the Jews, presenting it as a proven historical fact. Here he also echoes the words of the Nazi grandfather in the preceding chapter, who has blamed the Jews for the crucifixion. After providing this kind of "historical justification" for the persecution of Jews, the teacher discusses Jews' reaction to that persecution, insinuating that historical circumstances have made Jews sly, mean, and avaricious. Thus, in its attempt to combat stereotypical anti-Semitic portrayals of Jews, particularly those used in Nazi propaganda, the novel creates another set of stereotypes, based upon traits taken from a reservoir of Jewish depictions in which both anti-Semitic and philo-Semitic traditions converge. This convergence of the two traditions should not

1 Good Intentions - On the Role of Philo- and Anti-Semitic Stereotypes in the Construction of the German Historical Narrative for Children :...

surprise us, since both tacitly assume that there is a fundamental difference between Jews and Germans, where "Jews" are not "Germans" and "Germans" are not "Jews." Moreover, the books do not recognize the hyphenated term "German-Jewish." In addition, the construction of the past in *Damals war es Friedrich*, as well as in dozens of other novels for children, is built upon a tacit claim that Germans were not "Nazis", and the "Nazis" were not Germans. This invented distinction between Nazis and Germans is based on descriptions of Nazis as "other" than Germans. One of the unintended consequences of this distinction is the creation of an (unintended) similarity between the Nazis and another group traditionally described in the German repertoire as "other," namely the Jews. The two groups are described by the following range of physical, mental and individual features that render them "other:"

Dark hair and complexion: Jews and Nazis have dark hair and dark complexions

Physical deformities: Jews and Nazis suffer from physical deformities

Rituals: Jews and Nazis are depicted by the various ceremonies each group performs; by their ritual objects; and by the accessories they wear

Madness: Jews and Nazis are depicted as mad and obsessed

Suicide: Jews and Nazis often commit suicide

Fraudulence and deceit: Jews and Nazis are cunning and deceitful

Control and exploitation of Germans: Jews and Nazis control the Germans and exploit them

The stereotypical treatment of Jews is reinforced by their depiction as a single block of people possessing identical traits, which makes it impossible to distinguish between them. All Jews look and sound alike, as Christina explains in *Geh heim und vergiß alles*[3]: "Ich hatte hundert gesehen und mehr, und alle sahen gleich aus" (p. 16). The narrator of *Im roten Hinterhaus*[4] comments: "Ich weiß nicht, welchen Vornamen der Gebieter des kleinen Hauses hatte; jedoch muß es ein alttestamentlicher gewesen sein. Isaak hätte er heißen können, Abraham, Esau, Samson oder Saul" (p. 89).

The books reveal an ignorance of basic Jewish customs, which is characteristic of stereotypical perceptions of the "other." For example, the Jewish family in *Damals war es Friedrich* observes the Sabbath, and the mother kisses the *mezuzah* on the door post whenever she leaves the house; yet they are portrayed as eating non-kosher food during their visit to an amusement park, where the Jewish father treats everyone to a frankfurter that is certainly not kosher. Gudrun Maecker's *Als die neue Zeit begann*[5] tells of a yarmulke-clad Jew selling his wares on a Saturday, of all days, while in . . . *aber Steine reden nicht*[6] a boy celebrates his bar mitzvah, normally celebrated at the age of thirteen, at the age of fourteen, without any comment from the text.

Needless to say, the authors of the novels did *not* identify Jews with Nazis; nor was their portrayal of Jews in terms of traditional anti-Semitic stereotypes deliberate. I actually believe that their writing was paved with good intentions, and that the negative consequences of their depitcions are largely unintentional and perhaps unconscious, which makes the final result even more agonizing.

A full discussion of the portrayal of the traits attributed to Jews is largely beyond the scope of this article. I will thus limit myself to a discussion of the *a priori* advantage over Germans that the novels attributed to Jews, which is one of the key concepts in their construction of the past. To begin with, descriptions of Jews never stand for themselves, but always appear in relation to Germans. Jews' advantage is absolute, all-embracing, and present in all spheres of life: social, economic, familial, and intellectual. In terms of their social standing, Jewish families always enjoy a position superior to that of Germans. From a professional standpoint, Jews pursue more prestigious careers and enjoy better wages. From an economic perspective, they are always better off than Germans. They are intellectually gifted, and their family relations are warmer and more harmonious. They surpass the Germans even in their very "Germanness."

Let us look at the following examples: Friedrich's mother in *Damals war es Friedrich* can afford a German maid, while the mother of his German friend works her fingers to the bone as a laundress. Only after her husband joins the Nazi party and obtains a job can she, too, afford to hire a maid. In *Wie war das eigentlich?*,[7] a memoir of his youth, Max von der Grün describes – in great detail and at length – the poverty his non-Jewish family suffers, the meager food, the fetid clothing, the child labor, and the long hours put in by those adults who were lucky enough to find work. Only then does he go on to describe the immense wealth of the factory owners – wealth that, as a child, he was able to view only from a distance. Thereafter he describes with considerable familiarity the home of the porcelain factory owner where his aunt works as a maid, dwelling on its unbelievable wealth and luxury. All these riches, described in minute detail in his aunt's stories, turn out to have belonged to the Jewish factory owner.

Jews are also depicted as enjoying social and professional advantages. In *Damals war es Friedrich*, almost all the Jews enjoy highranking positions. Dr. Levy and Dr. Askenase are physicians, and Herschel Meyer owns a large department store. Unlike his German neighbor, Friedrich's (Jewish) father has a job – and a job to be envied: he holds a tenured position as an official (*Beamter*). The German father in the story is compelled to join the Nazi party to obtain a similar job. The narrator's aunt in *Heute nacht ist viel passiert* [8] works for a Jewish shopkeeper. Susi, the protagonist of *Freundschaft für immer und ewig?*,[9] comes from a well-to-do family, but her friend Esther's (Jewish) family is far wealthier, as is evident from Susi's meticulous comparison after visiting Esther's home (p. 32). The Jewish family in *Damals war es Friedrich* is financially better off than the German family. In almost every scene in the book the

Jews' advantage is stressed in regard to even the most trivial details. Even the candy bags given to the children on the first day of school are different in size. The narrator's bag is smaller than Friedrich's and contains less candy: "Friedrich und ich bekamen eine große spitze Schultüte; [...] Meine blaue Tüte war ein wenig kleiner als Friedrichs rote" (p. 23).

Jews' advantage over Germans is not only economic, but intellectual and physical as well. Jews excel at mathematics: the Jewish Grandma Ehrenfeld in *Emma*[10] helps Julia with her math lessons, and Friedrich in *Damals war es Friedrich* is better at math than his German friend. Nadine in "Nadines Geschichte," in the anthology *Damals war ich vierzehn*,[11] is a particularly outstanding student and eager to help her friends (p. 115).

Good Intentions - On the Role of Philo- and Anti-Semitic Stereotypes in the Construction of the German Historical Narrative for Children :...

When it comes to familial relations, Jewish families are affectionate and tender, while German families are cold and strict. The atmosphere of Sabbath eve in *Damals war es Friedrich* is that of a loving, open, and united family. In the concluding scene of that chapter, the sound of Sabbath music emanates in the house. A parallel scene that takes place at the German family's home describes a visit by the grandfather, who terrorizes his family, and the entire evening evokes a military inspection more than a family dinner. Jews are profoundly devoted to German culture. They are immersed in it even more deeply than Germans themselves. *Mischling Second Degree*[12] describes the home of Ilse's Jewish grandmother as a kind of museum of German culture. The beautiful furniture, attractive tableware, well-stocked library, embroidered tablecloth, and mealtime etiquette all stand in sharp contrast to the norms prevalent among the German side of her family, where the house is devoid of books and her relatives don't mind their manners. Mieze's Jewish aunt and uncle in *Mit dem Rücken zur Wand*[13] enjoy a much richer cultural life than her German discourse and identified as "classically German," such as industriousness, hygiene, discipline, self-control, high esteem for culture, and bravery in combat. Miriam's grandfather in *Zeit für die Hora*[14] even articulates openly the societal requirement that Jews be more German than the Germans themselves: "Sie müssten deutscher sein als die Deutschen, um zu beweisen, wie ernst es ihnen ist mit diesem Vaterland" (pp. 122-123).

Furthermore, Jews are portrayed as loyal Germans and patriots who fought and died for the *Vaterland* in World War I. Mieze's uncle in *Mit dem Rücken zur Wand* served in the army for four difficult years, and her father died in the war. Wolf's father in the story "Hände hoch, Tschibaba!"[15] in Kordon's anthology of the same title is presented as a patriot who fought for Germany (p. 52). Miriam's grandfather in *Zeit für die Hora*[16] is a member of the society of decorated combat soldiers; Ernst Heine's father in *Die Webers*[17] and Herr Stern in *Im roten Hinterhaus* are decorated veterans of World War I and both received the Iron Cross.

Jews are depicted as extraordinarily courteous. Grandma Ehrenfeld in *Emma* is always friendly and pleasant, and the Jewish parents in *Damals war es Friedrich* are polite and cheerful – the father is courteous and the mother smiles. But what lies behind Herr und Frau Schneider's politeness and smiles? Since the text emphasizes how aloof they are and the fact that they do not befriend their neighbors, their courtesy becomes unnatural and suspicious. Later in the story, the Jews' smiles are even described as deceptive – ostensibly a sign of friendliness but actually a camouflage for Jewish cunning, as the German grandfather in *Damals war es Friedrich* maintains: "Ich hatte einmal einen Vorgesetzten, Geheimrat Cohn; das war ein Jude. [...] Er lächelte immer, sogar wenn er uns zurechtwies" (p. 20). I could go on and discuss the portrayal of Jewish "superiority" in other fields such as manners and hygiene, but I believe that I have made my point clear. I would like now to examine how the perception of Jews as having a permanent advantage over Germans is linked to both philo- and anti-Semitic stances. The novels present the consequences for Germans of so-called "Jewish" traits: Jews are characterized by power, wealth, and world control, and, as we have seen, always enjoy a relative advantage over Germans. As such, Jews constitute a threat to Germans, and even characteristics that at first glance seem positive turn out to have negative implications for the German people. The tacit message in the texts is that while it was hard for the Germans to keep up with the Jews, Nazism indirectly helped them combat the Jewish threat and close the gap.

According to *Wir waren dabei*,[18] Germans were unable to obtain good food until the Nazis came to power. Before then, it was only Jews who enjoyed the best of everything, and they did so at Germans' expense: "Erinnerst du dich noch, wie wir vor dreiunddreißig gelebt haben? Damals hat es bei uns keine Schnitzel gegeben!" (p. 69). Indeed, the German mother notes the improved condition of the Germans alongside the worsening state of the Jews, and expressly refers to the linkage between the decline of the Jewish advantage and the rise of Nazism: "Uns geht es besser heute", bestätigte sie, "aber dafür geht es andern auch wieder schlechter. Denk nur an die Juden!" (p. 70).

This, then, is the nexus linking philo-Semitism and anti-Semitism. The seemingly positive portrayal of Jews in philo-Semitic descriptions transmutes into anti-Semitic sentiment. The Jews' upper hand is perceived as an *a priori* advantage that harms Germans, who are unable to meet the challenge. Jews are portrayed as menacing rather than threatened, and their ability to cause harm – even as refugees or prisoners – is mythicized. The recurrent message is that trouble is to be found wherever Jews are present.

For example, in *Nacht über dem Tal*, [19] it is hinted that the narrator has picked up lice because she was in the vicinity of Jews (p. 144), and the risk of contracting typhus looms over the Germans because of their proximity to Jews (p. 73). The narrator's father in *Geh heim und vergiß alles* puts his own health at risk by treating Jews, and eventually contracts typhus and dies.

Not only do Jews manage to survive, but they often succeed in extricating themselves from oppressive situations and turning them to their advantage. Unlike the German father in Damals war es Friedrich, who fails to find work until Hitler comes to power, the Jewish father not only obtains a new job immediately after being fired from his previous position at the post office, but the new job - as head of the toy department in a department store – is actually a much better job (and every boy's dream). Upon hearing the children's admiration when they visit the store, the father admits, "Ich gefalle mir jedenfalls so besser" (p. 52). Thus the text suggests not only that Jews managed to maintain their relative advantage even under Nazi rule, but that thanks to the Nazi regime they even managed to improve it. Even when the books make an attempt to discuss anti-Semitism openly rather than sidestep the issue, those attempts are characterized by two opposing messages: that of the texts' official, overt and positive depictions, and that of the subtext with its anti-Semitic components. As we saw at the begin of this article, the teacher's speech in Damals war es Friedrich actually reinforces anti-Semitic contentions, rather than demolish them. His explanation for the rise of anti-Semitism indirectly justifies the phenomenon by according it historical validity, for it cannot be that such a long tradition is entirely devoid of truth. At the same time, the universalization of anti-Semitism links German sentiments to the pan-European hatred of Jews. This universalization of anti-Semitic sentiment recurs in several of the books I have analyzed. The epigraph of *Damals war es Friedrich* compares the persecution of minorities in the past and in the present. In her notes to Nadine Hauer's story in the anthology *Damals war ich vierzehn*, Renate Welsh addresses the universality of ethnic persecution. Likewise the historicization of anti-Semitism appears in several books, for example in Antoinette Becker's afterword to Judith und Lisa.[20]

6/16/2021 Good Intentions - On the Role of Philo- and Anti-Semitic Stereotypes in the Construction of the German Historical Narrative for Children :...

Becker's *Judith und Lisa* is among the few books that openly attempts to discuss anti-Semitism. It describes the role of schools as agents in the dissemination of anti-Semitism and the brainwashing of small children. The teacher's anti-Semitic speech describes the grave threat that Jews pose to Germans and depicts Jews as dark and hook-nosed, with a deceitful stare. The teacher's statements are seemingly contradicted, at least in part, by the unfolding plot. We learn on the very same page, for example, that Judith is a Jew, but that she is not evil and does not pose any threat to the German people. The author clearly aspired to counter the anti-Semitic propaganda in the teacher's speech. Yet the subtext tells a different story: since the illustrations of Judith include the very same physical traits the teacher ascribes to Jews – she is dark with dark eyes and a long nose – a double message is conveyed. On the one hand, the text attempts to shatter Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda; on the other hand, the illustrations support anti-Semitic propaganda. If the Jews do not look like Germans, perhaps they differ in character as well?

When the narrator blames Jews for Germans' distress, her tone is ironic. But alongside the irony, the text affirms some of the anti-Semitic claims: many German fathers in the text are unemployed and many German families are impoverished (p. 9), while in contrast Judith's parents own a pharmacy and nothing is lacking in their home (p. 13). The anti-Semitic charge that Jews steal food and good jobs from Germans secretly creeps into the text. Thus, even a book that sets out to undermine anti-Semitism doesn't succeed in deviating from the cycle of trying to cast doubt on anti-Semitism, only to unwittingly contribute to it.

Officially the texts endeavor to reject anti-Semitic claims and stereotypical depictions of Jews. But pre-existing models within the German repertoire for portraying Jews ultimately shape the resulting depictions more strongly than any good intentions. These models generate in-built patterns of writing, and habits of perception, in writers and readers alike. Sander Gilman has already demonstrated[21] that postwar German literature was characterized by a tension between anti-Semitic and philo-Semitic images – as, for example, in the writing of Günter Grass. During the 1950s and 1960s, Gilman argues, Grass created ostensibly "sympathetic" images of Jews by turning negative stereotypes into positive ones. But an analysis of his images shows that at least some of them were no more than a variation on earlier negative depictions of Jews.

Every culture employs a pre-existent repertoire of paradigms in order to describe "reality," and these paradigms largely predetermine a writer's choices. This is also the case with the Third Reich; the portrayal of the "reality" of that period is dictated – whether or not the writer is aware of it – by the available repertoire. German writers who portray Jews as "other" employ for this purpose models already present in German culture. Even if they consciously and officially aspire to rid German culture of its anti-Semitic paradigms, the writers remain captive to the pre-existent repertoire of models for depicting Jews; they are unable to deviate from it and introduce a new and different alternative repertoire.

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[3] Recheis, Käthe. *Geh heim und vergiß alles*. München: dtv (Pocket Book), 1st Edition 1988, 4th Edition 1992. *Das Schattennetz*. Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1964.

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[5] Maecker, Gudrun. Als die Neue Zeit began. Recklinghausen: Georg Bitter, 1985, 1986.

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[7] von der Grün, Max. *Wie war das eigentlich? Kindheit und Jugend im dritten Reich*. Darmstadt und Neuwied: Hermann Luchterhand, 1979; München: dtv (Pocket Book), 1st Edition 1995.

[8] Klare, Margaret. *Heute nacht ist viel passiert. Geschichten einer Kindheit.* Weinheim: Beltz & Gelberg, 1989; Beltz & Gelberg – Gulliver Pocketbook, 1st Edition 1993, 2nd Edition 1995.

[9] Klare, Margaret. *Heute nacht ist viel passiert. Geschichten einer Kindheit.* Weinheim: Beltz & Gelberg, 1989; Beltz & Gelberg – Gulliver Pocketbook, 1st Edition 1993, 2nd Edition 1995.

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[11] Bruckner, Winfried et al. *Damals war ich vierzehn. Berichte und Erinnerungen.* Wien: Jugend und Volk, 1978; Ravensburg: Ravensburger Maier, 1st Edition 1981, 9th Edition 1994.

[12] Koehn, Ilse. *Mischling zweiten Grades. Kindheit in der Nazizeit.* Reinbek: Rowohlt Pocketbook, 1979. Edition number not mentioned 64.000-66.000 1995 [Koehn, Ilse, 1990. *Mischling Second Degree. My Childhood in Nazi Germany.* New York, London, Victoria, Toronto, Auckland: Puffin. First published in New York: Greenwillow Books, 1977].

[13] Kordon, Klaus. *Mit dem Rücken zur Wand*. Band 2 einer Trilogie der "Wendepunkte". Weinheim: Beltz & Gelberg, 1990; 6th Edition 42.000-47.000 1995, 7th Edition 48.000-51.000, year not mentioned.

[14] Bayer, Ingeborg. Zeit für die Hora. Würzburg: Arena, 1988; Edition 20.000-24.000 copies 1989; München: Knaur Pocketbook, 1992.

[15] Kordon, Klaus. *Hände hoch, Tschibaba!*. Berlin: Klopp, 1985; Reinbek: Rowohlt Pocketbook, 1st Edition January 1988, number of edition not mentioned 17.000-19.000 November 1992, number of edition not mentioned, 20.000-22.000, 1995.

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021 Good Intentions - On the Role of Philo- and Anti-Semitic Stereotypes in the Construction of the German Historical Narrative for Children :...

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