



Reviews



Writing the Holocaust for Children: On the Representation of Unimaginable Atrocity

—Adam Muller

Boraks-Nemetz, Lillian. *The Old Brown Suitcase: A Teenager's Story of War and Peace*. 1994. Vancouver: Ronsdale, 2008. 170 pp. \$10.95 pb. ISBN 1553800575. Print.

Kacer, Kathy, and Sharon E. McKay. *Whispers from the*

Ghettos. Toronto: Puffin, 2009. 176 pp. \$13.99 pb. ISBN 0143312510. Print.

Watts, Irene. *Goodbye Marianne: The Graphic Novel*. Illus. Kathryn E. Shoemaker. Toronto: Tundra, 2008. 128 pp. \$14.99 pb. ISBN 088776830X. Print.

When reflecting on the subject of children and the Holocaust, Abraham Sutzkever's "Poem about a Herring" (1946) nearly always springs first to my mind. In this profoundly moving and semantically intricate work, Sutzkever (1913–2010)—a Holocaust survivor,

partisan hero of the Lithuanian Jewish resistance, and "one of the great Yiddish poets of his generation" (Berger)—describes a scene of horror typical of the Einsatzgruppen "Aktions" that occurred throughout Eastern Europe following the commencement of

Operation Barbarossa, the Nazis' great Eastern offensive, on 22 June 1941. The Einsatzgruppen, or "Special Operations Squads," were paramilitary units composed of members of the Nazi SS and SD and of various German police forces, including the Gestapo, who followed in the military's footsteps as the Wehrmacht sliced through Poland and the Baltic states on their way to eventual defeat at Stalingrad in February 1943. At sites such as Babi Yar, they massacred over a period of two days more than 33,000 Jewish civilians, most of whom were killed by bullets fired at close range. Members of the Einsatzgruppen were responsible for the wet work of cultural cleansing from 1940 until 1942, when the psychological rigours of mass murder, coupled with the material wastefulness of this highly inefficient mode of human extermination, rendered concentration camps—capable of killing and disposing of millions of people—a more attractive option to the Nazi governing elite.

In his poem, Sutzkever imagines a mother and her child perched together on the lip of a burial trench, facing their Nazi executioners:

Right at the open lime-pit
a child broke into tears:
Mameh, I'm hungry, something to eat!
So his mother momentarily forgot where
she was
—or she was forgotten

by Him,
God Who snatches time right from under
our feet—
and she quickly opened her satchel
and gave her child this herring to eat.
As if it were some silver bounty
the young teeth
grabbed the herring with pleasure.
But quietly as though a nightingale
suddenly burst into song
from far away across blue waters
a fiery string of notes
of a sudden
gave his head such a jolt.
And out of the broken circle
the naked child
slid punctured into a pit.
Frozen and grotesque
this picture holds like a frieze:
a child with a bloody herring in his mouth
on a certain summer's morning.
And I search for that herring's salt
and still can not
find its taste on my lips. (581)

Here Sutzkever captures key elements of a child's experience of genocide, an experience marked by general incomprehension of his or her circumstances, vulnerability and mortal dependence on the kindness

of adults, nostalgia for earlier and more comfortable times, and the sudden exposure to unimaginably brutal violence.

Also present in the poem, partly because of the incomprehensibility of this violence, is the confusion of the surviving witness, Sutzkever's speaker, who is confronted with the responsibility for making sense of this tragedy. The child's final moments confound the speaker; try as he might, he cannot crack them open to peer inside. They offer no insight into the deeper meaning of the child's death, and synecdochically of the genocide, beyond their obvious evocation of disconnection, absence, and loss—all important components of mourning. The poem ends with its speaker attempting to locate the contours of the boy's death experience but failing to do so. The boy's final moments of suffering remain visible from a distance only, their substance veiled by the passage of time and by the inevitable psychological and moral gulf separating the victim from the survivor. Such agony resists not merely signification but conceptualization in the poem. It is what Theodor Adorno in his *Negative Dialectics* calls "the extremity that eludes the concept" (365),¹ and, by virtue of this elusiveness, it provides only weak (at best diffuse) support for any narrower moral judgments, life lessons, or themes the poet might wish to advance. In this sense, Sutzkever may be seen to describe an event that actively contests its own interpretation. The moral work to be done in the wake of

the Holocaust, he suggests, lies not in the thematization or judgment of the genocide (since the magnitude and arbitrariness of its violence quite literally beggars reason), but rather in the perpetual and always-already thwarted struggle to imagine—and thereby in some sense to recover and connect with—the phenomenal experience of atrocity itself.

Difficulties associated with representing the Holocaust and with the effects of its representation have been much commented upon. From Adorno's famous dictum concerning poetry's barbarity in response to Paul Celan's landmark Holocaust poem "Todesfuge" (1948), to Imre Kertész's claim that the Holocaust may only be known through the mediating (and distorting) agency of art, to Hans Kellner's assertion that the truth of the Holocaust must remain an article of faith, philosophers, historians, and creative artists have despaired of either generating or being given access to a stable conceptual platform from which to make sense of what is arguably the most traumatically significant event in the recent history of the modern West.

Alongside the many metaphysical and epistemological worries over the truth value of Holocaust representations lies a troubling moral concern perhaps best articulated by Adorno in an essay on political commitment in art. In "Commitment," Adorno writes that he does not wish to retreat from his earlier claim that it is barbaric to continue writing poetry after Auschwitz, since the "so-called artistic



For Adorno, beauty
and the aesthetic
pleasure accompanying
it undermine artists'
attempts to bear
witness to atrocity in
their works.



representation of the naked physical pain of those who were beaten down with rifle butts contains, however distantly, the possibility that pleasure can be squeezed from it" (312). For Adorno, beauty and the aesthetic pleasure accompanying it undermine artists' attempts to bear witness to atrocity in their works. Since all art claims at some level the power to please aesthetically, no art suffices to represent the cataclysmic atrocities of the Holocaust, a congeries of events whose grimness and accompanying moral seriousness preclude, on its face, pleasure of any sort. Aestheticizing the genocide at all, Adorno argues, makes "an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it becomes transfigured, something of its horror is removed" (313). Art—particularly what Adorno calls politically "committed" art, such as that attempting to derive a specific moral message from the Holocaust—disfigures reality. It does this in the case of genocide by serving to make unimaginable atrocities and suffering imaginable. The many languages of art bear witness to "how far the underlying poetic message and its subject have come apart" (311), their metonymic relation ruptured by the magnitude and variety of genocide's horrors. Adorno notes the embarrassment that typically accompanies encounters with the art of atrocity. This art remains morally troubling and a source of unease not merely because it positions the spectator/reader sado-masochistically as a voyeur,² but also because it produces a degrading complicity between the spectator/reader and the perpetrator in the name of "working through the past." This is a darkly ironic final role to assign to the victims of Nazi violence. Adorno argues that those destroyed by the Nazis "are used to create something, works of art, that are thrown to the consumption of a world which destroyed them" (312). Profoundly aware of mass culture's dangerously seductive anaesthetic power, he concludes that, "when even genocide becomes part of the cultural heritage in the themes of

[art], it becomes easier to continue to play along with the culture which gave birth to murder" (313).

Adorno nevertheless continues to value artworks for providing one of the sole remaining venues available for the (necessarily imperfect) representation of suffering. On his view, suffering can only be ignored by art at tremendous moral and psychosocial cost. Indeed, doing so imperils history itself. He writes that "The abundance of real suffering tolerates no forgetting. . . . Yet this suffering—what Hegel called consciousness of adversity—also demands the continued existence of art while it prohibits it" (312). This is because "hardly anywhere else does suffering find its own voice, a consolation that does not immediately betray it" (313). Art must suffice for the representation of atrocity, since nothing else even comes close to doing so. Art continues to exist after Auschwitz and, by the mere fact of that persistence, serves to rebuff the genocidaire's totalitarian demands for singularity and homogeneity, as well as for absolute political and moral conformity. He observes that "literature must . . . be such that its mere existence after Auschwitz is not a surrender to cynicism" (312).

Authors confronted with the massive task of representing the Holocaust, then, must strive hard to avoid a number of significant pitfalls that Adorno feels risk betraying suffering: they must acknowledge the limits of their representation in its power to evoke the past; they must grant the fact that the Holocaust

per se is unrepresentable as a totality and proceed in the knowledge that artists have available to them tools limited to the evocation of only fragments of the genocide; and they must understand their task as primarily that of the aestheticization of human suffering, all the while remaining attentive to the risks inherent in doing the artist's job too well. For aesthetic pleasure weakens (by complicating) the force of representations of atrocity; it risks attributing a pragmatic value to genocide and, concomitantly, it forces an elision of the reader/viewer's and the perpetrator's perspective both at the level of affect and (not entirely causally independently) at the level of moral judgment. Lastly, they must remain attentive to their responsibilities as transmitters of history, conduits (however imperfect) through which the events of the past come to be known and understood. The one who represents atrocity, real atrocity even if largely fictionalized—what Lillian Boraks-Nemetz refers to in *The Old Brown Suitcase* as a work of "documentary fiction" (196)—speaks for the dead and the damaged. The shaping of their world—and the narrative texture (at least in literature) given to their voices and thoughts—is therefore freighted with moral significance. This is perhaps the gravest responsibility assumed by those representing the Holocaust (and it is both an aesthetic and a moral burden): that of letting its victims speak as much as possible for themselves.

Sutzkever's poem succeeds as a Holocaust representation in precisely these terms. The poet readily

acknowledges the descriptive and evaluative limits of his representation. Indeed, the precise terms of the synecdoche linking Sutzkever's victims to millions of others remain unavailable from the poem. The poet's studied representation of his speaker's inability to penetrate the consciousness of either mother or child gestures toward the representational limits inherent in constructive artistic engagements with genocide. No representational language or medium, he finally acknowledges, will serve to reveal the intensity or deeper significance of their suffering. In this way, by refusing to speculate on their contents, Sutzkever avoids doing an injustice to the mother's and child's death experiences; he cannot provide them with a determinate (it would be wholly presumed) form and substance. By foreclosing on the readerly satisfactions arising from clear answers to such questions as "Why did this take place?," "What were they thinking?," "What might this have felt like?," and "What does this event mean?"), Sutzkever keeps these questions alive. Rather than speaking for the dead or pronouncing sagely on their fate, he instead proffers silence, confusion, horror, and regret.

How, then, must writers proceed when they intend to represent such events to children? The three works under review in this essay converge as well as diverge in their responses to this question. To different degrees, each of their authors follows Sutzkever in providing an inevitably partial glimpse at the wider horrors under

description in them, though, unlike the poet, each uniformly and systematically strives to create bases for identification between readers and subjects. The stock in trade of books like these (and there are many) consists in undertaking the work of moral and political education through affiliation by arousing readers' emotions and sympathies via their recognition of the dangers besetting people "just like them." By encouraging readers to see themselves in their protagonists, each of these texts aims in different ways to bridge the historical and cultural distance separating readers from the Holocaust. Such bridging arguably furthers the cause of social justice by rendering the injustice experienced, particularly by the Nazis' child victims, relevant to contemporary readers.

All three works centre on the lives of young people and their families; in each, the central characters face great difficulties and risk imprisonment and death at the hands of the Nazis. Lillian Boraks-Nemetz's *The Old Brown Suitcase*, first published in 1994, details a young Polish girl's experiences of the Warsaw Ghetto and subsequent relocation to Canada. The novel has been critically praised, translated into French and Polish, adapted for the stage, and is currently available in a new edition with a foreword by Robert Krell, Professor of Psychiatry at the University of British Columbia and president of the Vancouver Holocaust Centre Society for Education and Remembrance. It maps thirteen-year-old Slava Lenski's journey from a cultured existence as a member of a prosperous non-practising Jewish

family in Warsaw, through the indignities of life in (and a precarious escape from) the Warsaw Ghetto, time subsequently spent hiding in the Polish countryside, and finally the family's reunion and emigration to Montreal, via Halifax, in July 1947. Although Boraks-Nemetz's main focus remains the destruction of community and alienation from place that accompanied the Nazis' European pogrom, she continues to be nearly as much concerned in her novel with Slava's travails as she attempts to settle into post-Second World War Canada (Montreal, Ste-Adèle, and Rockville). The detailed descriptions provided of this new life, one free from most, but not all, of the prejudice and risk that marked her recent time in Poland, do much to shed light on Canadian domestic, political, and social relations of the period, as well as the struggles of immigrants in this country more generally. Throughout the novel, beginning with the Lenski family's arrival in Montreal, chapters detailing events in Poland (Warsaw and Zalesie) are interleaved with ones describing Slava's Canadian experiences. This formal disruption of linear time and space works to strengthen the reader's awareness of the significance of earlier events to immigrants' understanding of themselves in their new homelands. Additionally, and more pointedly, the juxtaposition serves to underscore the alterity and intense difficulty of Slava's earlier life.

This contrast manifests itself at several junctures in the novel, but especially early on when Slava is rudely

asked by Ina, the daughter of the Lenskis' Canadian sponsors, to explain why she is eating an orange so greedily. Rather than responding overtly to Ina's insensitivity, a confrontation that years spent hiding from the Nazis have trained her to avoid, Slava instead thinks to herself: "Because I haven't eaten oranges for six years. . . . Because there were no oranges in Poland during the war and none afterwards when peace finally came. Because I was often close to starvation" (8). The reasons for Slava's behaviour are available to the audience but not the other characters, and so readers are encouraged to understand her deprivations and losses not abstractly but concretely. The scene is delicate and subtle: Slava's deference to Ina might seem counterintuitive to contemporary imaginations weaned on a popular-culture diet of revenge and self-assertion, but the very strangeness of this behaviour serves as a placeholder for Slava's earlier trauma, the details of which are (as they appear in Slava's thoughts) strategically inaccessible. Slava's internal monologue gestures toward the phenomenology, the lived experience, of her suffering. Her pain is evoked through her imagined response to Ina just as it emerges from her silent acceptance of Ina's incredulity; in neither case can it be precisely delimited and easily understood. In this way, Boraks-Nemetz achieves a kind of referential integrity that links her fiction to the historical genocide.

Such semantically rich opacities and occlusions recur frequently throughout *The Old Brown Suitcase*.



. . . apophasis
temporarily and partially
returns to perception
the dead, the missing,
and those whom Toni
Morrison labels the
“disremembered.”



Perhaps the most disturbing of these concerns the death of Slava’s younger sister Basia late in the war. Basia is sent into hiding with Tomas and Anna, a childless gentile couple living in the town of Otwock. When Slava and her parents reunite in 1944, Basia’s absence is palpable and Slava’s father explains that Tomas informed him that one of his neighbours identified Basia as a Jew and reported her to the German authorities. Tomas and Anna were ordered to take Basia to the town’s administrative headquarters, following which, Tomas claims, she was murdered by soldiers. As proof, he takes Slava’s father to view the partially buried body of a young girl wearing Basia’s socks, a girl whose face has been disfigured beyond recognition. The family, especially Slava’s grandmother, is suspicious of Tomas’s version of events. In response, Slava’s father says: “Maybe you are right, Mama, even so, how can I prove it now? Tomas swears that she is dead.” Reflecting on her father’s words, and sensing the legitimacy of his doubt, Slava ponders to herself: “I want to think that Babushka is right, that Basia is alive somewhere. Will I ever know?” (136).

This is not a question to which the text returns, and the mystery surrounding Basia’s fate remains intact. The open-endedness of Slava’s question resists easy or comprehensive (and thus reductively distorting) explanations. The question relies on a form of apophasis, the rhetorical trope which invokes a thing’s presence by acknowledging its absence. As Kate McLoughlin notes in an essay on the language of war representations, apophasis is frequently deployed in representations of atrocities whose scale and intensity are otherwise unimaginable. It temporarily and partially returns to perception the dead, the missing, and those whom Toni Morrison labels the “disremembered” (275). As with Sutzkever’s speaker, who is confronted with the image of the mother and the child motionless before him, the text nevertheless remains unable to pass judgment on their fate.

The exploitation of silences and absences is not the only means available to those who represent atrocity and who wish to do justice to human suffering by allowing it to remain inchoate in their work. Simplification is an additional tool artists may use simultaneously to acknowledge and selectively to *under-represent* genocide and its effects. It is first necessary, however, to distinguish between “simplification,” which aims to pare a representation down to those of its features that contribute directly to capturing what Immanuel Kant calls the “noumenon” (250), or thing-in-itself, and what I wish to designate as “reduction,” which degrades a representation’s meaning and significance by reconfiguring its embodiment of the noumenon. Put another way, simplification aims at directness and largely concerns matters of form; reduction involves matters of content. Simplifications are not necessarily reductive, though they are sometimes conducive to reductivism. Instead, they are intended to generate clearer insights into whatever happens to be under their description. Alternatively, reductions pare; they are largely indifferent to complexities, most problematically when the noumenon is genuinely complicated. This indifference is precisely what makes reductions so prone to do moral harm since they underwrite what Charles Taylor, drawing on Hegel, describes as failures of recognition (25–73). While the moral stakes inherent in simplification and reduction (especially in representations of atrocity) are essentially

the same, reduction exposes artists more frequently to the risk of doing harm.

Goodbye Marianne, the graphic novel written by Irene Watts and illustrated by Kathryn Shoemaker, is a simplified work of Holocaust representation. Indeed, the Holocaust per se is nearly absent from the novel, which depicts the days prior to protagonist Marianne Kohn’s departure from Berlin for England as one of the ten thousand children rescued from near-certain destruction by the Kindertransport, the charitable initiative aimed at saving Jewish children from further persecution that was launched shortly following Kristallnacht.³ Its focus is not on murder but rather on what Art Spiegelman in *Maus* calls the inexorable process of “the noose tightening” (71), the felt intensification of the Nazis’ attempts to restrict the lives of Jews prior to their deportation and extermination. These attempts began in earnest with the passing in 1935 of the Nuremberg Laws, which radically restricted German Jews’ civil rights, including the right to German citizenship and the right to marry non-Jews. The Nazis’ efforts at persecution intensified in 1937 with additional attempts to deprive Jews of their livelihoods; by 1938, for example, Jewish doctors were prohibited from treating non-Jews and Jewish lawyers were stripped of their right to practise law. Also in 1938, all Jewish men were required to add the name “Israel” to their identification papers and all Jewish women to add “Sara,” a sinister act of bureaucratic redesignation, the pain of which Watts and Shoemaker capture with

admirable subtlety. Following Kristallnacht, the Nazis isolated Jews from their fellow Germans further: Jews were banned from public cinemas, theatres, sports facilities, public gatherings, and schools. It is precisely at this moment, on 15 November 1938, that *Goodbye Marianne* opens.

We first meet eleven-year-old Marianne leaving home for school, only to be rebuffed at the institution's front door. Her expulsion is foreshadowed by her recollection of earlier racist abuse she has suffered at the hands of Mr. Vogel, a Nazi zealot and senior teacher at her school, and it is suggested more indirectly by the novel's opening frame, the first of a sequence of single-paned title pages introducing every chapter. Under the heading "Expelled," we are shown a fuzzily drawn girl walking past a door to a building we later learn is her school. Her indistinct facial features—they are essentially absent—deny her a fixed identity. After all, the story has not yet begun, its characters are still strangers to readers, and the setting once the narrative gets underway is Marianne's apartment. The girl is intended to be unidentifiable. She serves as a generalization and is best understood not as a person but as a "Jew," her faith suggested by her anxious stoop below the fascist banners and by her apparent haste to pass the building. In the absence of more information (a sign, some kind of utterance, other people), this building likewise lacks a fixed identity. It is given to readers as simply an institution or a business of some kind whose

relationship to the Nazi state is signalled by the brace of Party banners hanging above its windows, flapping in the breeze and blocking their light. These banners evoke the inevitable ignorance that accompanies genocidal hatred the world over. More significantly, as they flap, the banners obscure large sections of the building underneath, provocatively suggesting the extent to which the Nazi project had secured political dominance in Germany by 1938 and created a broadly sanctioned social ethic, what Hans Georg Gadamer calls a "lifeworld" (182), predicated on the hatred of Jews. This lifeworld, as Daniel Goldhagen rather hyperbolically claims, effectively arose as a consequence of the transformation of ordinary Germans into Hitler's "willing executioners." It is with Marianne's confusion and terror at the ubiquity and terrible power of these "executioners" that *Goodbye Marianne* is primarily concerned.


Throughout the novel, we find plenty of instances of ordinary Germans more and less horrifically lashing out at Jews. Resting in a park following her expulsion from school, Marianne befriends an Aryan girl of roughly the same age with whom she plays. Upon identifying Marianne as Jewish, her playmate screams at her in hatred, informing her that she has no right to sit on park benches reserved for Germans. Walking home from the park, Marianne acknowledges a policeman who says "Heil Hitler" to her. She witnesses the after-effects of Kristallnacht and is especially troubled by evidence

of Jewish businesses destroyed or taken over by non-Jewish Germans. She observes first-hand the abduction of Jewish civilians by the SS and hears from her father, who has escaped recent detention and subsequent deportation by the authorities, about the horrors of the concentration camp at Sachsenhausen, used by the Nazis at this time primarily to house political prisoners. Marianne's more immediate concern, however, is the family's summary eviction from their apartment. Watts and Shoemaker are especially adept at depicting Marianne's surprise at these experiences, an emotion that is intensified by its contrast to the kindness and consideration that Germans otherwise show her when they are unaware of her heritage.


The most important of Marianne's encounters with ordinary Germans involves her friendship with Ernest Block, a young boy from the countryside who accompanies his mother on a brief visit to her old friend and Marianne's landlady, Mrs. Schwartz. Marianne's relationship with Ernest gives her the opportunity to witness a version of Nazification first-hand. Although their friendship begins amicably enough—both children share a passion for Erich Kästner's children's novel *Emil and the Detectives* and enjoy exploring Berlin's outdoor markets together—it falls apart when Ernest discovers that Marianne is Jewish. He has never met a Jew before, but he has learned about them from his beloved brother (a member of the Hitler Youth) and his father (a formerly unemployed Nazi booster). In the

wake of this revelation, Marianne challenges Ernest to choose between upholding his family's values or his friendship with her. He chooses the former. He verbally dismisses Marianne as "ignorant" and "a troublemaker" and gives her the Nazi salute before storming off to Mrs. Schwartz's apartment. Marianne's response to his cruel rejection is naked hatred, not just for Ernest but for all Germans. This hatred is a double-edged sword. While cutting through the pain of Ernest's betrayal it simultaneously lacerates Marianne to the bone, for she has up to this point in her life thought of herself as German too. Her devastation is complete: loathing and self-loathing combine violently to leave her feeling alienated from her former life, leaving her feeling thoroughly disoriented and scared.

The chapter containing Marianne's falling-out with Ernest ends wordlessly with a frame depicting only the girl's tear-filled, anguished eyes. It is in this subtle sense that I wish to claim *Goodbye Marianne* as a Holocaust novel. The word "Holocaust," after all, derives from Greek roots of the words for "burnt" and "whole," terms together signifying complete destruction. This is something perfectly captured by the Hebrew word for the Nazi genocide, "Shoah," meaning "utter devastation" or "catastrophe." Catastrophe, as the ancient Greeks knew it, betokened an overturning in which nothing is left unchanged, and what the novel succeeds admirably in depicting is how Marianne's lifeworld and, by extension, the daily lives of all



While the collapse of
Marianne's lifeworld
remains sublimely
profound, it comes to be
understood by readers
via the metonymic
agency of small moments
and (for the most part)
petty cruelties.



European Jewry, was catastrophized under the Nazis.

Such devastation is aesthetically sublime, in the Kantian sense of being boundless and therefore unrepresentable, since it is quite literally beyond the power of the senses to grasp. And yet it is testament to the aptness and force of Watts's and Shoemaker's collaboration that this catastrophe is evoked so perfectly in their novel. The simplicity of Shoemaker's drawings allows her images to convey the essence of Marianne's suffering efficiently while at the same time suggesting her imperfect understanding of the world around her. By minimizing the depiction of violence and concentrating instead on more familiar (and therefore cognitively and sympathetically accessible) alterations to social relations, Watts and Shoemaker also ensure that their young readers are not distracted by the awfulness and scale of the wider set of events adjacent to those being narrated. While the collapse of Marianne's lifeworld remains sublimely profound, it comes to be understood by readers via the metonymic agency of small moments and (for the most part) petty cruelties. Like Boraks-Nemetz's novel, *Goodbye Marianne* underdetermines rather than overdetermines its interpretation. Occurrences such as Ernest's parting note to Marianne, in which he does not apologize but nevertheless cryptically asks her to remember that all Germans are not the same, are encountered but never analyzed or discussed further. Readers remain at a loss as to what exactly to make of the statement. We only have Ernest's word that not all Germans are anti-Semitic, yet his earlier actions belie his words. Their meaning and their truth value are therefore indeterminate.

The most important question hanging over this novel, though, is a large one that has remained unanswered over the course of its being grappled with by historians, philosophers, and creative artists

both in Germany and abroad: how could something like the Holocaust have happened without at least the passive acceptance of a genocidal ideology by nearly all Germans (and their sympathizers) alive during the Nazi era? Watts and Shoemaker seem to endorse Goldhagen's view that

Germans' antisemitic beliefs about Jews were the central causal agent of the Holocaust. . . . [A]ntisemitism moved many thousands of "ordinary" Germans—and would have moved millions more, had they been appropriately positioned—to slaughter Jews. Not economic hardship, not the coercive means of a totalitarian state, not the social psychological pressure, not invariable psychological propensities, but ideas about Jews that were pervasive in Germany, and had been for decades, induced ordinary Germans to kill unarmed, defenseless Jewish men, women, and children by the thousands, systematically and without pity. (9)

Against the strength of this claim, Ernest's parting gesture seems frail and unpersuasive, but in its apparent sincerity it does make the matter of accepting Goldhagen's argument more difficult. This serves to keep the question of ordinary Germans' complicity in the Holocaust alive.

Of the three texts under consideration here, Kathy Kacer and Sharon E. McKay's *Whispers from the Ghettos*

is the most surprising and important when evaluated as a work of Holocaust children's literature. The text draws together twelve brief and otherwise unrelated accounts of children's experiences of ghettoization, the Nazis' strategy of gathering together Jews and other "social undesirables" in various densely packed urban centres prior to their deportation to concentration camps and, with the exception of handfuls of survivors, their summary execution. All of the volume's accounts are based on fact, though some literary license has been taken in their presentation. Nevertheless, ghettoization is correctly shown to involve the loss of property, starvation, disease, deportation, increasing fear and desperation, and both lingering and sudden death. These experiences proved traumatic, especially for children from wealthier families whose parents struggled (mostly unsuccessfully) to cope with their radically altered circumstances. Their earlier privileges profoundly ill-equipped them for the darkly Hobbesian character of ghetto life.

Ghettoization was a diverse phenomenon. As Kacer and McKay make clear in the brief but instructive introduction to their collection, the Nazis created 356 ghettos across occupied Eastern Europe between 1939 and 1945, in communities varying in size from small villages to large cities such as Warsaw. Ghettos housed populations ranging from a few dozen to hundreds of thousands of Jews. Some were bounded by walls, especially in larger urban centres, but in smaller towns



The collection's title alerts readers to the subdued and distorted character of its contents (the stories are still just whispers after all)



ghettos were often left open and Jews simply ordered not to leave specific neighbourhoods. No matter the ghetto, however, Jews were required at all times to wear the yellow Star of David on their clothing, and they were obliged to adhere (on penalty of death) to a series of dehumanizing, often petty regulations as the price of their continued existence. Ghetto inhabitants generally found the experience of conforming to these dictates difficult, often impossible, and in any case finally pointless since adherence could at best guarantee a temporary stay of execution, as well as the prolongation of fear and suffering.

Absurd hopelessness of this kind proves notoriously difficult to aestheticize, at least partly because its irrational core undermines reason's ability to make orderly sense of what is laid out (via the senses) before it. The unimaginability of ghetto life is repeatedly asserted throughout the collection, most consistently in Kacer and McKay's introduction where they write that "It's probably impossible to imagine that this could have happened to young people. . . . It's probably impossible to imagine that any one of us would have to give up our homes, our belongings, and be separated from our friends and neighbours. . . . Who could have imagined it?" (xiv–xv). In partial answer to these questions, Kacer and McKay recommend that their young readers "Hear [the whispers of those ghettoized]; listen; imagine" (xv). Their emphasis on the imagination here suggests that the contents of this collection are not intended to evoke a singular response to the Holocaust as a whole, but rather to stimulate readers' imaginations and strengthen their identification with the young victims of Nazi violence. The precise terms of that identification are deliberately under-specified in *Whispers from the Ghettos*. The collection's title alerts readers to the subdued and distorted character of its contents (the stories are still just whispers after all), and the

fragmentary character of the collection as a whole resists any decisive interpretative synthesis. Each of the collection's stories depicts a unique but emotionally resonant slice of time in the life of a young person who is confronted with the enormous challenges of survival in desperately awful conditions. Each contains a sharply delineated mini-tragedy whose connection to the larger genocide is explained in a brief postscript detailing the subsequent fates of the story's protagonist and his or her family. Crucially, however, each postscript falls deliberately short of offering a meta-level (moral or other) judgment of this outcome.

Especially striking in this regard is the experience of Elly Gotz, who was imprisoned in the Kovno Ghetto in what is now Kaunas, Lithuania, from 1941 to 1944. The Gotz family was trapped in Kovno for nearly the duration of the ghetto's existence in conditions that were very different from those they enjoyed prior to the war. Elly's story begins by recalling the normalcy of this earlier life only to slide quickly into an acknowledgment of the hardships of its ghetto successor. His mother has just watched a child die for want of medicine in the clinic in which she works, and his father is slowly starving as a slave labourer working to construct the Nazis' nearby airport complex. Elly himself despairs of ever understanding their oppressors' intense desire for confiscated Jewish property, most devastatingly (for him) his bicycle. For his father, it is not the disappearance of furniture and jewelry that most disturbs him but, rather,

the Nazis' destruction of books. "The mind must be fed too," he explains to his wife in defence of his refusal to relinquish his family's small pre-war library. It soon becomes clear that, for him, it is not what books contain but what they can do that matters, most importantly their power to preserve and transmit a culture. For him, the survival of books is crucially indexed to the survival of European liberal humanism and the accompanying secularism and tolerance that allowed Jews to flourish throughout much of Europe for the century or more preceding the Shoah. It is with this tradition that Elly's father, an assimilated Jew, most closely identifies.

In response to a new directive from the Germans to destroy all remaining books in the ghetto, Elly and his father lovingly pack the family's books into boxes that they load onto a wheelbarrow. Together, the two move their collection through the ghetto's streets, which are sparingly but vividly brought to life by the collection's authors. Arriving at the specified collection point, the community's synagogue, father and son are stunned to find the building overflowing with books, including masterworks of the Western canon. Elly is uncomprehending. His father, though, begins to laugh in delight at the vast cultural wealth on display before him. He says: "My son, they do not trust us with trinkets, but with books, more valuable than anything, they trust" (17). The sight of the treasures before them causes Elly's father to change his mind. With a contagious joy, he starts loading books by Shakespeare, Goethe, and

Tolstoy back on to his wheelbarrow, and together he and Elly make seven trips back and forth to the synagogue to pick up books and then stash them in the family residence. When the work is finally done, Elly claps his hands together in delight and thinks to himself, “It was a victory over the Nazis, *our* victory” (13). Here, in the midst of the horrors of internment, we unexpectedly locate pleasure and delight. More importantly, we find triumph in the midst of a most abject and thoroughgoing defeat. As Elly is keenly aware, the mere presence of these emotions in an environment marked by starvation and death constitutes a substantial victory over Nazi oppression.

We learn from the postscript to Elly’s story that his father’s library did not survive the ghetto’s destruction in 1944, rendering the lasting significance of the achievement inconclusive. However, we also learn that Elly’s entire family did survive the Holocaust. Elly explains that his father’s library serves as the source of his education for the duration of his time in the ghetto and that the books have become a part of him. His survival therefore ensures the survival of the values and liberal principles that the books represent and serve to reinforce. Readers are encouraged to take seriously Elly’s father’s prescient observation offered earlier in the narrative that “We shall outlive [the Nazis]” (12–13).

At the same time, the many other stories in *Whispers from the Ghettos* testify to the vast losses (of all kinds) incurred by Jews during the Holocaust, and so any

sense of real triumph, any idea that there might be some lasting good to come out of the genocide, is explicitly undercut. Here again we find Holocaust representers in their work giving with their left hands what they take away with their right ones, and the effects of this retraction, as with the techniques adopted by the authors of the other two books considered in this essay, are moral disorientation and semantic indeterminacy.

Each of the three texts considered in this essay is excellent in its own right. All are well crafted, inventive, and engaging, and all three reflect the state of current academic thinking about the Holocaust, particularly such scholarly trends as the turn away from the concentration camp as the paradigmatic location of the genocide. Over the last few years, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has staged exhibits dealing with topics as varied as Jewish resistance, ghettoization, the Nazis’ T4 program,⁴ and the remarkable Ringleblum Archive, the collection of documents⁵ assembled by intellectuals and members of the wider community preserving the collective memory of day-to-day life in the Warsaw Ghetto. Scholars now, for the most part, accept that there was not just one Holocaust, but many. By approaching the genocide in a way that acknowledges both its multi-facetedness and stubborn refusal to be known (and represented) in its entirety, the writers and the illustrator of the three texts I have discussed here all strongly merit further attention and critical respect.

Notes

¹ My thanks to Kate McLoughlin for this reference.

² For more on this concern, see Baer.

³ The term “Kristallnacht” refers to the “Night of Broken Glass,” during which Jewish businesses were attacked by Nazis and their supporters, leaving glass strewn on city streets across Germany and

Austria. The event took place on 9–10 November 1938.

⁴ This program targeted the disabled for extermination. Lessons learned from T4 informed the design of the concentration camps.

⁵ These include decrees, diaries, reports, works of literature and documentary reportage, coupons, and candy wrappers.

Works Cited

Adorno, Theodor. “Commitment.” *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. Ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt. New York: Continuum, 2005. 300–18. Print.

---. *Negative Dialectics*. Trans. E. B. Ashton. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973. Print.

Baer, Ulrich. *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*. Cambridge: MIT P, 2005. Print.

Berger, Joseph. “Abraham Sutzkever, 96, Jewish Poet and Partisan, Dies.” *New York Times* 23 Jan. 2010. Web. 6 May 2010.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Trans. and ed. David E. Linge. Los Angeles: U of California P, 2004. Print.

Goldhagen, Daniel. *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. New York: Vintage, 1997. Print.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. Print.

Kellner, Hans. “‘Never Again’ Is Now.” *History and Theory* 33.2 (1994): 127–44. Print.

Kertész, Imre. *A holocaust mint kultúra: három előadás [The Holocaust as Culture: Three Lectures]*. Budapest: Századvég, 1993. Print.

McLoughlin, Kate. “Not Writing about War.” *Fighting Words and Images: Representing War across the Disciplines*. Ed. Elena Baraban, Stephan Jaeger, and Adam Muller. Toronto: U of Toronto P, forthcoming. Print.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Plume, 1988. Print.

Spiegelman, Art. *Maus I: A Survivor’s Tale: My Father Bleeds History*. New York: Pantheon, 1986. Print.

Sutzkever, Abraham. “Poem about a Herring.” *Art from the Ashes: A Holocaust Anthology*. Ed. Lawrence Langer. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995. 581. Print.

Taylor, Charles. *Multiculturalism: With Commentary by K. Anthony Appiah, Jürgen Habermas, Steven C. Rockefeller, Michael Walzer, and Susan Wolf*. Ed. Amy Gutmann. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996. Print.

Adam Muller is Associate Professor in the Department of English, Film, and Theatre at the University of Manitoba and a Research Associate with the U of M's Centre for Defence and Security Studies and Mauro Center for Peace and Justice Studies. He is the editor of *Concepts of Culture: Art, Politics, and Society* (2006) and co-editor of the forthcoming *Fighting Words and Images: Representing War across the Disciplines* (2011). He is currently working on a monograph exploring the representation of war and atrocity in literature, film, and the visual arts.