

A Laughing Matter? The Role of Humor in Holocaust Narrative

by

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## ABSTRACT

Approaches to Holocaust representation often take their cues from both academic and public discourse. General opinion demands serious engagement that depicts the full range of the brutality and inhumanity of the genocide and the victimization of targeted groups perpetrated by the National Socialists. Such a treatment is considered necessary to adequately represent the Holocaust for generations to come.

The analysis of four texts will show that humor is not only appropriate but is also an important addition to Holocaust discourse. This study argues that humor plays an important role as a stylistic tool for discussing the Holocaust as well as for its remembrance and representation. Jurek Becker's novel *Jakob der Lügner* and Ruth Klüger's autobiography *Weiter Leben: Eine Jugend* are witness-texts by Jewish authors. Humor in these two works helps the authors engage and work their experiences. Klüger's autobiography also utilizes humor to critically engage in the discussion of Holocaust representation. This study also analyzes two non-witness Jewish texts: the stage play *Mein Kampf* by George Tabori and the feature film *Mein Führer, die wirklich wahrste Wahrheit über Adolf Hitler* by Dani Levy. These two works utilize overt humor to challenge established Holocaust representations.

Drawing on ideas from Mikhail M. Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva, Giorgio Agamben, the core argument of this study demonstrates humor performs two main functions in the Holocaust literature and film chosen for this investigation. First, it restores a potential loss of dignity and helps victims endure the incomprehensible. Second, it challenges the prevailing truth and the established order.

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The *New York Times* recently published an article by Eric Lichtblau titled “The Holocaust Just Got More Shocking”. In an attempt to catalogue every Nazi ghetto and camp, researchers have so far documented 42,500 of them throughout Europe. The chosen headline and the article itself suggest that the information we previously had about the Holocaust inaccurately showed only a fraction of the suffering. The documentation of the ghettos and camps is insofar important as it allows survivors to gain public recognition and it gives them the opportunity to receive restitution from European insurance companies like other survivors who were imprisoned in historically documented sites. While the detailed research adds to a more accurate, factual documentation of the historical record, it does not necessarily add to a more refined knowledge about Holocaust memory. The Holocaust, as one of the most brutal, devastating events in human history, continues to concern academics and artists almost 70 years after the end of World War II. An assumed and unwritten moral code within us presumes that the brutality and inhumanity of the National Socialist genocide and victimization of targeted groups requires that only a serious engagement with the full range of atrocity can adequately represent it for generations to come.

In the present study I engage the topic from a different perspective. “A Laughing Matter? The Role of Humor in Holocaust Narrative” explores the role of humor in Holocaust narrative through the examination of four primary “texts,” broadly defined: an autobiography, a novel, a stage play and a feature film. What is at stake in the close reading of these four examples is an understanding for the uses of humor within varying

Holocaust representations, which move beyond an exploration of the comedic and the use of jokes. In attempting to define humor, it is almost impossible to come to a comprehensive conclusion as the editors of *It's a Funny Thing, Humour: International Conference on Research into Humour and Laughter* (1976), Anthony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot, point out in their foreword. However, we can locate two poles of humor: the first describes the more comedic realm to which belong, for example, jokes, slapstick, or comedy, and the second which addresses a more nuanced notion of humor to which we can count sarcasm, irony, satire, parody, or black humor.

This study focuses on the second pole in which humor functions as a meaningful process that challenges already accepted, highly serious representations of the Holocaust. By means of a close reading in dialogue with other academic and news articles, I analyze the different forms and layers of humor found in each of these texts, and how these varying forms of humor ultimately change from one generation to the next. Jaye Berman Montresor voices the underlying assumption to this approach convincingly in her article “Parodic Laughter and the Holocaust” (1993):

But what about literature, films, television programs, plays, and visual artworks that deliberately depart from factual, even realistic portrayals of the Holocaust? Can fictional representation meaningfully complement or even supersede the lessons of historical representation? And more provocatively, is it permissible, even healthy for such works of the imagination to evoke laughter in response to the Holocaust? (126)

Consider a controversial Holocaust joke told in 2012 by Tom Ballard on the Australian radio station Triple J that relates Hitler and fan-forced ovens to wind farms, which motivated author David Slucki to write an article called “Too soon? The case for Holocaust humour.” Ballard’s joke has long been removed from any material available online and is now only accessible as a short paraphrase. Ballard’s controversial comment and Slucki’s article are important, because they illustrate common misconceptions about the use of humor in relation with the Holocaust. Ballard’s remark during a morning breakfast show on a youth radio station was criticized for being inappropriate. The title chosen by Slucki and the first paragraphs of his article, which link Holocaust humor exclusively to jokes, feed into common, misleading assumptions that humor is limited to jokes and that humor always produces laughter.

What the examination of humor in these four texts shows is that the use of humor moves beyond the comedic and engages two core supporting functions. First, humor works to restore or maintain a potential loss of dignity, and helps victims of atrocities endure the incomprehensible. Second, humor assists in dismantling established frameworks of power, which set accepted notions of truth into place. I chose the two witness-texts by the Jewish authors Jurek Becker and Ruth Klüger and two non-witness texts by Jewish authors George Tabori and Dani Levy, because I want to explore the different ways they use humor. The humor in Becker’s *Jakob der Lügner* (first published 1969) and Ruth Klüger’s autobiography *Weiter Leben: Eine Jugend* (1992), is subtle and the humorous effect is predominantly achieved through contrast and understatement. The humor in both works fulfills the main two functions. George Tabori’s stage play *Mein*

*Kampf* (premiered 1987), and Dani Levy's the feature film *Mein Führer, die wirklich wahrste Wahrheit über Adolf Hitler* from 2007 (henceforth, *Mein Führer*), use humor to upset the existing hierarchies of power apparent in each work and thus help unsettle established Holocaust discourse. Their distanced perspective motivates a more obvious humor in their works as opposed to the subtle humor in witness narratives. By virtue of their personal distance to the Holocaust, Tabori's and Levy's work do not show signs of humor that allows victims to restore a potential loss of dignity. But both works offer a humorous alternative reality that helps audiences approach the incomprehensible.

Important for the thesis will be a range of theoretical texts. An underlying idea is based on the concept of abjection, which is prominently discussed by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982). Kristeva describes the abject in terms that range from the physical repulsion one feels when bodily fluids or corpses are encountered, to the symbolic repulsion one experiences when their moral compass is disturbed. I quote at length:

The corpse (or cadaver: cadere, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life



withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—cadere, cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything (3).

The abject – is not an object, but it is rather a process that occurs on the level of the unconscious. It is the set of complex feelings we experience when we encounter the boundary of what we consider acceptable, what she references here as waste and decay. We are initially attracted to the borderland, a desire to know what lies on the other side of that boundary, but in the moment of encounter the body reacts in repulsive ways. Those moments of repulsion represent the abyss that we need to encounter to ground ourselves and to re-evaluate our sense of self. The concept of the abject illustrates our range of expectations and reactions in relation to the Holocaust. The Holocaust fascinates us, because it brings us to the abyss. We feel the need to understand, to see, come as close to experiencing it as possible, yet we do not actually want to fall into the abyss. The experience of Holocaust prisoners attracts us by virtue of our wish for understanding the limits of human experience, and trying to grasp what it means to be human. Witness narratives like Ruth Klüger's, Jurek Becker's or Tadeusz Borowski's allow us to experience the incomprehensible. Tadeusz Borowski and Ruth Klüger for instance bring us to the moment of their captivity, they describe their abyss, and with it a potential loss

of dignity, and let us be part of it through their narratives. When we encounter the moments of horror, when we are close to the abyss, the subtle forms of humor as tools of contrast, lead us back into safety. Klüger envelops us in the absurdity of the Holocaust through the use of humor, allowing us to take a more objective view. If we were to move permanently into the abject, we would become irrecoverable, the corpse as described by Kristeva.

The abject also describes an internal moral compass that needs a basis. The abject, that which disturbs, helps us to find grounding through a constant reevaluation of what we hold as core beliefs. In a broader sense we can use Kristeva's ideas to engage with established Holocaust representations. Ruth Klüger and Leslie Fiedler, both camp survivors, in returning years after the war to the camps where they were imprisoned, engage with expectations about their feelings towards the memorial sites. Both approach an established sense of Holocaust remembrance critically and use humor to engage with their feelings towards a memorial culture that is defined by "high seriousness" (Des Pres) and in which the rebuilding of camps or parts of camps become part of the already accepted approach to Holocaust representation (see chapter 2 for an in depth discussion).

Survivors of the Holocaust suffered great physical pain caused, for example, by malnutrition, harsh environment and physical abuse. But besides these visible and visceral effects, there are the psychological effects of the Holocaust, like the potential loss of dignity as part of the camp or ghetto experience. Following Kristeva, humor gives back some sense of a potential loss of dignity to the victims, and it helps to endure the incomprehensible by means of parody, sarcasm, or irony. Taking Kristeva's ideas on the

abject further, we can see satires and parodies as reflective of the abyss. In order to reevaluate an established discourse, satires and parodies as critical forms of humor break with taboos. They take us to the abyss, so that we can engage with the issue, in this context, Holocaust representations and remembrance, from a new perspective. The humor allows for it to be non-judgmental and playful at times. But even though the humor evokes a chuckle or even laughter, it does not lessen the critical aspect of the perception, and it also does not equate humor with a lack of respect for those who have experienced the Holocaust or anyone who is personally affected by it.

In 1976, during a conference that explored many facets of humor, Jacob Levine presented his findings on humor as a form of therapy. The main ideas of this conference are available in *It's a Funny Thing, Humour: International Conference on Research into Humour and Laughter* (1976). Based on Freudian ideas, he argues for the liberating and elevating effect of humor and he concludes, that “humor helps man to rise above his present state of pain” (127) as famously described in *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*. Freud argues that jokes and comical stories about Jews invented by them admit their shortcomings as well as their merits (166). From an in-group perspective, these ethnic jokes or references from a group insider elevate and strengthen the group identity and pride (see for example Boskin und Dorinson 1985; Fish 1980; Leveen 1996; Dorinson and Boskin 1988). Coming from a group outsider, ethnic jokes or comments have a reversed, destructive effect. One particular kind of Jewish humor is gallows humor, described by Antonin J. Obrdlik in “‘Gallows Humor’ – A Sociological Phenomenon” (1942) as

... a type of humor that arises in a type of precarious or dangerous situation. On the basis of experiences in Czechoslovakia following the advent of Hitler it may be stated that gallows humor is an index of strength or morale on the part of oppressed peoples. The positive effect of gallows humor is manifested in the strengthening of morale. (709)

Gallows humor does not ignore or even downplay the Holocaust, but rather provides camp prisoners with an often unspoken sense of endurance to persevere through the harsh realities they find themselves in. The humor is therefore limited to the witnesses of the atrocities. Any humorous remark about the Holocaust by a non-witness has the reverse effect and it is one that is sanctioned by moral standards set by the community, as the controversial Holocaust joke by Tom Ballard on the radio station Triple J illustrates. In her analysis of *Life is Beautiful* and *Jacob the Liar*, Ilona Klein summarizes the form and role of humor during the Holocaust effectively and it is worth quoting her at length:

Humor (which was strictly forbidden in the ghettos by the Nazis) was sometimes used by Jews as a form of relief from the frustration and horrors of everyday life. Their humor was but a tenuous attempt at laughter: a clandestine, whispered smile. Such peculiar “humor” mostly involved a sense of bitter irony, a biting sarcasm. It was black humor, desperate humor, generated by Jews forced to live in unimaginable conditions. Bitter laughter was often the only form of resistance that these slave-prisoners could muster, and for some of those victims, a bitter laugh

constituted the only means of defense they had against anti-Semitic measures. (Klein 18)

We can see the positive effect of humor during the Holocaust in Becker's *Jakob der Lügner*, a story centered on the main character Jakob Heym, who brings hope to the ghetto by claiming to have a radio.

An important function of humor is its ability to unravel established notions of power and it is one that all four authors (Becker, Klüger, Tabori, and Levy) integrate in their respective works. Productive for understanding the complex set of connections at play in this upending of existing power structures is the Rabelaisian idea of the carnival as explained by Mikhail M. Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*:

The suspension of all hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance. Rank was especially evident during official feasts; everyone was expected to appear in the full regalia of his calling, rank, and merits and to take the place corresponding to his position. It was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary, all were considered equal during carnival. (10)

The novel, the autobiography, the stage play and the feature film each use humor in order to question ideas about power and the frameworks of truth that stem from it, much like the carnival in Rabelaisian literature. We can see this questioning of established hierarchies in *Jakob der Lügner*, *Mein Kampf* and *Mein Führer* in which inferior positions of Jewish main characters are turned on their heads. We can see the Rabelaisian idea of carnival more broadly, and from this perspective, understand its role for

questioning established discourses. We can then apply this as a function to each of our four primary sources as a way to examine this overarching approach to Holocaust representation. I have introduced this thesis by arguing that there is an assumed moral code, which calls for a serious engagement with the atrocity of the Holocaust. Dvir Abramovich discusses this sentiment in his 2008 article “Holocaust Survivors Are Not Laughing,” in which he dismisses the use of humor in Holocaust discourse altogether by arguing that:

We shouldn't be surprised when people start believing the Holocaust wasn't so bad after all, with material that plays down the horror. More than anything else, the feelings of the survivors need to be privileged. They shouldn't be subjected to more pain. They have suffered enough. There's a moral obligation to show them respect and to acknowledge their pain, not trivialize it.

Abramovich's argument is unconvincing, particularly in light of his choice of references that include Holocaust jokes, stand-up routines, TV shows and feature films. In the article he generalizes various types of humor in relation to the Holocaust, including Becker's *Jakob der Lügner*, even though it is a work written by a Holocaust survivor. Ruth Klüger, as a Holocaust survivor and Professor Emeritus of German at the University of California, illustrates with her autobiography that we cannot generally dismiss the use of humor as a stylistic means in Holocaust related texts. With her rather sarcastic and humorous style, she challenges the discourse in which tragic witness narrative and serious Holocaust memories are seemingly the only accepted form of narration (Schwarz). In Daniel E.

Schwarz' discussion of Holocaust narratives, he responds to Terrence Des Pres and his essay "Holocaust Laughter?" (1988), which points to the humorous aspects and their potential in *King of the Jews*, *This Way to the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, and *Maus*. When Des Pres references the carnival aspect in his reading of *King of the Jews*, Schwarz responds that he cannot "share the laugh" (279), moreover, Schwarz also asks himself and his audience whether or not he would "become a collaborator himself" (281), perhaps indicating that he misreads Des Pres' article. In his response Schwarz interprets Des Pres' use of the idea of the carnival in ways that do not distinguish humor as something that only can evoke laughter, perhaps missing the point that humor is also about strength and endurance.

Schwarz addresses in the introduction to *Imagining the Holocaust* his own ambiguous views and explains it through his Jewish heritage, which is possibly the same reason behind Abramovich's views. In order to understand Des Pres' thoughts, we only have to go back to his essay "Holocaust Laughter?" where he argues:

I do not mean to say the Holocaust becomes a carnival, but rather that in a world of death the spectacle of life defending itself is open to unusual perspectives...the tradition of high seriousness will not be abandoned, but at this point in time – a certain weariness having settled upon us – I want to consider the energies of laughter as a further resource. (222)

Steve Lipman summarizes that "laughter was part of their lives, a part nurtured by their suffering" (9). Mary Berg wrote in her Warsaw diary that she was first indignant at the jokes "which took as their butt the most tragic events in ghetto life," but then she came to

realize “that there is no other remedy for [their] ills” (9). Coming back to Bakhtin, he summarizes that “the medieval and Renaissance folk culture was familiar with the element of terror only as represented by comic monsters who were defeated by laughter. Terror was turned into something gay and comic (39). Jurek Becker and Ruth Klüger as Holocaust survivors support the great potential for the use of humor as a way of dealing with the incomprehensible, but also as sources that question the established discourse of Holocaust narratives that assume a strict seriousness.

The Rabelaisian concept of the carnival as a tool to question an established discourse is important in both Tabori’s *Mein Kampf* and Levy’s *Mein Führer*, which are more closely examined in chapter 3. Laughter, according to Bakhtin, has the ability to overcome fear “for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations” (90). The following passage provides a comprehensive summary of Bakhtin’s argument:

Laughter is essentially not external but an interior form of truth; it cannot be transformed into seriousness without destroying and distorting the very contents of the truth which it unveils. Laughter liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from great interior censor; it liberates from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power. It unveils the material bodily principle in its true meaning. Laughter opened men’s eyes on that which is new, on the future. (94)

Tabori’s *Mein Kampf* and Levy’s *Mein Führer* offer examples of Hitler representations, which move beyond the more traditional representations of him as evil authority figure to



instead explore the humorous and parodic potential that his exaggerated character brings forth. If we see both works, in total, as encompassing Giorgio Agamben's notion of the face (also discussed at length in chapter 3), then the humorous elements of satire, parody, and exaggeration challenge the audience to look beyond the surface of the Hitler figures, in order to see the deeper critical role that they ultimately play. These satires, with their obvious deviations from the truth, challenge the reader's and viewer's assumptions of Holocaust representation. The humorous approach can reverse the numbing effect that too many pictures of Holocaust victims, piles of corpses and the description of the horrors may have on the audience.

Ultimately this study illuminates the more subtle nuances of humor which challenge assumptions about humor as always needing to be funny and provoking laughter. Instead the examination of the witness texts by Jurek Becker and Ruth Klüger, and the non-witness texts by George Tabori and Dani Levy reveals that humor functions in complex ways that show its ability to heal and to stimulate rethinking established ideas about Holocaust representations.

## CHAPTER 2

### HUMOR AND WITNESS NARRATIVES

Tadeusz Borowski was one of the first camp survivors to write about the Holocaust utilizing humor. Even though he was not a Jew and his work is not the focus of the present study, his perspective is nonetheless important to comprehend the role of humor in witness narratives. His detailed description of camp life and his use of humor lay the foundation for the analysis of the witness narratives *Jakob der Lügner* by Jurek Becker (1969) and *Weiter Leben: Eine Jugend* by Ruth Klüger (1992), which forms the focus of this chapter. Both Becker and Klüger serve as good examples for witness narratives from a German Jewish perspective. Both works incorporate the author's personal connection to the Holocaust as witnesses with a more distant spatiotemporal approach to the events through a complex narrative style that shifts between perspectives. In both writings we can see multi-faceted humor that shows subtle, biting wit used in immediate witness narrative as in Borowski's *This Way to the Gas Ladies and Gentlemen*. But we also see satire and parody that requires both a personal and temporal distance to the event. With the help of different approaches to the Holocaust through the lens of humor in both works, we "may come closer to comprehension through the effort of artists whose works incorporate and transcend representational reality, rather than through histories and documentary eyewitness accounts" (8) as Lilian S. Kremer argues in her comprehensive study of witness narratives in *Witness Through the Imagination*.

Jurek Becker's fictional narrative *Jakob der Lügner* about the Holocaust from a witness/survivor perspective allows for a complex engagement with the topic. As with

Klüger's autobiography, the reader never gets comfortable because of the different modes of narration that keep the reader actively engaged throughout the story. *Jakob der Lügner* shows a carnivalesque type of humor as described by Bakhtin, but it also shows a biting, dark humor that is typical of narratives by survivors like the one from Borowski. The fictional character of the story in particular allows for the distance and the different perspectives portrayed in the story.

Because Ruth Klüger's writing combines a recounting of her own witness narrative with a broader critical analysis and engagement with the Holocaust as an object of study, her work *Weiter Leben: Eine Jugend* is a crucial text for engaging the discussions about humor that ground this thesis. The biting remarks are a stylistic tool, that help her draw attention to topics such as survivor narratives, or public Holocaust memory. Offering insight into her personal history, it allows her to critically engage in the discussion of Holocaust memory. Her autobiography is personal, yet distanced, which allows her to also engage in the topic from an academic, critical perspective. The format of an autobiography allows her to be part of the complex Holocaust discussion as a witness and as a scholar. Her narrative thus doesn't become simply another diary, but instead she finds power in her own critical thinking skills. Had the work only been a dramatic recollection of her Holocaust memory, we would have fallen into the trap of Holocaust narrative that takes seriousness for granted and numbs the reader with its descriptions of horrors. Instead she engages Kristeva's notion of the abject, leading us to the abyss of her Holocaust experience, only to pull us back utilizing humor as a way for the reader to actively engage with her past and with our present. While Borowski's and

Klüger's background, their experience and thus their narratives differ, they both share a biting humor that challenges the reader and doesn't offer resolution or closure (Goertz 171). Given the importance of Tadeusz Borowski's work as a foundation text for understanding the role of humor within the Becker and Klüger examples, it is critical to examine his work and its theoretical framework more closely.

As a non-Jewish camp survivor, Borowski offers the perspective of a member of the slave labor team in Auschwitz. In this position, he was a prisoner, but had a superior position than others. For example, he had more food than the other prisoners, and had contacts in the camp. The negative side to his position was his role in taking away the new arrivals' belongings, aiding the Nazi officers with sending prisoners to the gas chambers and helping with the disposal of the dead. His collection of short stories about Auschwitz and the wartime period was first published in 1947 in Polish. Both, the German (*Bei uns in Auschwitz*) and the English title (*This Way to the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*) frame the narrative in the time of the Holocaust.<sup>1</sup> The English title is probably the most biting and suggests the cynicism in the book which reflects his strong emotional reaction towards his experience. Borowski's perspective as a witness is noteworthy, because he exemplifies what camp survivor Primo Levi calls the "grey zone," a concept that Giorgio Agamben explains in detail in his work *Remnants of Auschwitz*:

Levi calls it the "grey zone." It is the zone in which the "long chain of conjunction between victim and executioner" comes loose, where the oppressed become oppressor and the executioner in turn appears as victim.

A grey, incessant alchemy in which good and evil and, along with them,

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<sup>1</sup> The narrative is also known in English as *Ladies and Gentlemen, to the Gas Chamber*

all the metals of traditional ethics reach their point of fusion. (Agamben “Remnants”, 21)

Borowski was not part of the *Sonderkommando*, but he was a slave laborer with a similar role. He aided the German officers with handling new arrivals and disposing of bodies. The “grey zone” concept is important, because it illustrates how the roles of victim and victimizer blur. The harsh labor and the presence of death are dramatically contrasted with the presence of play and normality. A longer quote from Agamben is necessary, to illustrate the contrast:

The extreme figure of the “grey zone” is the *Sonderkommando*. The SS used the euphemism “special team” to refer to this group of deportees responsible for managing the gas chambers and crematoria. Their task was to lead naked prisoners to their death in the gas chambers and maintain order among them; they then had to drag the corpses, stained pink and green by the cyanotic acid ... And yet Levi recalls that a witness, Miklos Nyszli, one of the very few who survived the last “special team” of Auschwitz, recounted during a “work” break he took part in a soccer match between SS and representatives of the *Sonderkommando* ... This match might strike someone as a brief pause of humanity in the middle of an infinite horror. I, like the witnesses, instead view this match, this moment of normalcy, as the true horror of the camp. For we can perhaps think that the massacres are over – even if here and there they are repeated, not so far away from us. (Agamben “Remnants”, 24)

This longer passage illuminates two crucial aspects that can be found in Borowski's writing. First, it gives an example of the harsh contrast and the emotional tension that prisoners in Borowski's position had to endure. Second, the quote shows that it is not the killings and disposal of the bodies that are the most shocking, but the description of play and normalcy, while the massacre continues nearby. The playfulness, the release of tension, actually emphasizes the tension. It releases it, only to be brought back more intensely, because we are now more aware of the horrific.

Borowski's narration exemplifies how horror and banality join. In the first of the short story of the collection titled "This Way For The Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen", the nameless first person narrator recollects a moment in the sleeping quarters, in which a description of food overlaps with the description of inmates in bad physical condition, indicating the role of sarcasm as a stylistic means.

... I have enough, we eat together and we sleep on the same bunks. Henri slices the bread, he makes a tomato salad. It tastes good with the commissary mustard. Below us, naked, sweat-drenched men crowd the narrow barracks aisles or lie packed in eights and tens in the lower bunks. Their nude withered bodies stink of sweat and excrement; their cheeks are hollow (Borowski 11).

The chapter continues to describe in unbearable detail about the narrator's daily routine aiding with the new arrivals to the camp and disposing of bodies. At the end of the day he summarizes:

It is almost over. The dead are being cleared off the ramp and piled into the last truck, The Canada men, weighed down under a load of bread, marmalade and sugar smelling of perfume and fresh linen, line to go ...The stars are already beginning to pale as we walk back to the camp. The sky grows translucent and opens high above our heads – it is getting light. Great columns of smoke rise from the crematoria and merge up above into a huge black river... (Borowski 29).

This passage, like the one before, contrasts death with indulgence in light of the circumstances. Additionally, the horrific description of the working day finds an almost romantic ending with the description of the sky. But this peaceful release of tension is only momentary and the author reminds us about the death in the crematoria.

The author's cynicism and sarcasm are stylistic tools for distancing himself from the events and overcoming them. We can find this function of humor as a protective shield in the following sentence: "It is camp law: people going to their death must be deceived to the very end. This is the only permissible form of charity" (17). The narrator informs the reader about this law when he explains his work, part of which involves taking the new arrival's belongings and leading them into the camp. This sentence is meant to be a sarcastic remark to deal with a situation he cannot change, because he is a prisoner himself and a subordinate of the Nazi officers. But the sarcasm in the sentence also works as a protective shield, because he is aware of the possibility that he himself could be the next one in the crematorium. He is deceived or needs to deceive himself to keep his sanity.

The potential loss of dignity in Auschwitz, as Borowski's description of the camp inmates in the first quote exemplifies, is a key issue that Holocaust survivors are confronted with. Giorgio Agamben addresses this potential loss of dignity in *Remnants of Auschwitz*:

Before being a death camp, Auschwitz is the site of an experiment that remains unthought today, an experiment beyond life and death in which the Jew is transformed into a *Muselmann* and the human being into a non-human (52).

No matter what social roles men, women and children had before the Second World War and before they were brought to concentration camps, they were all stripped of their dignity and were treated in the same inhumane way. While Agamben makes a distinction here between the Jew and the human being, with the Jewish prisoner being turned into a *Muselmann*, a term used among prisoners to refer to those suffering from starvation and exhaustion and resigned to their pending deaths, ultimately the camp experience would eventually remove all semblance of human dignity and humanity. The loss or potential loss may begin for some people with the lack of freedom, for others with the lack of privacy. Humor found in the witness testimonies works like the suspension of hierarchy that we see in Rabelais' carnival and laughter. In both cases the official world is questioned, and for a short period of time a new order is established. Humor functions here as a means to challenge fear and situations that are beyond our control and understanding. In situations where one group deprives another's autonomy, their thoughts



can still remain untouched. Humor then works as a shield and as a way to frame the situation in a more bearable light.

In Jurek Becker's *Jakob der Lügner* and Ruth Klüger's *Weiter Leben: Eine Jugend*, we can see humor as a protective shield, and a way to maintain dignity. In Becker we can see humor as an element that deconstructs authoritative hierarchies and semblances of power. Klüger's work contains a more critical approach. She uses humor to question the current discourse on Holocaust memory. Both authors were children at the time they experienced the ghettos and camps. Jurek Becker chose to write a fictional narrative, because he could not write a first-hand account from his own memory. Writing fiction allowed him to explore different perspectives in which humor serves several functions. Humor contrasts and emphasizes the harsh reality of the ghetto, but it also allows for a human centered, dignified representation of Jews in the Nazi ghetto. Finally, as we will see, fiction allows Becker to overturn the National Socialist hierarchies in the ghetto. This reversal of power structure is a core function of humor. We will see this function in all four texts in this thesis.

Unlike Becker's fictional narrative, Klüger uses the genre of autobiography to recollect the Holocaust. Humor in her text illustrates the absurdity of the events she finds herself in, and it also provides her with a way to distance herself from the events. This gives her a unique position from which she can critically engage with her memories of the Holocaust, while simultaneously allowing her space to analyze the intimate details of these memories. The process itself ultimately provides her a deeper understanding of the complexities of Holocaust representation. In many respects, humor creates a neutral

ground for Klüger to point at contemporary issues of Holocaust representation, without folding in any accusatory remarks.

### **Jurek Becker: Humor, Hope and Self-Elevation**

Jurek Becker was born in 1937 in Poland, and at the age of two, he was forced to move to the Lodz ghetto along with his parents. Between 1943 and 1945 he was deported to Ravensbrück and Sachsenhausen respectively. His mother and the majority of his big family were dead by the time the war was over, leaving only Jurek Becker, his father, and a distant aunt who immigrated to the United States. After the war, Becker settled in East Berlin with his father until 1977, when he moved to West Berlin with the authorization of the East German government. Years after the war he learned that his mother actually died of malnourishment; because she gave the spare rations to her son. Jurek Becker died in 1997 from cancer.

*Jakob der Lügner* was first published in 1969<sup>2</sup>. In order to understand the story of *Jakob der Lügner* and the role of humor, it is important to learn more about Becker's writing process for the novel. Jurek Becker's father provided the idea for *Jakob der Lügner* by telling him about a man in the ghetto who owned a radio. The man was executed when German authorities found out about it. Important to Becker in writing the novel was not to give readers a lesson in history, but to encourage his audience to think critically about the role of hope during war and how to judge the lies in circumstances

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<sup>2</sup> Jurek Becker showed a script of *Jakob der Lügner* to the East-German studio DEFA in 1963, but who denied it. After its publication in 1969, DEFA accepted the script and released the movie in 1974, which was, as the only East-German movie, nominated for the Academy Awards. Before his death, Becker approved of the 1999 re-make of the movie with Robin Williams as the lead character. The re-make had a limited success (Becker 309).

like the ones described in the narrative (Becker 327). The narrative about the ghetto itself and Jakob's story about the radio can be seen as an engaging tall tale in which the real and the imaginary blur. While *Jakob der Lügner* is personally motivated, it is nonetheless a well-researched fictional novel about the Lodz ghetto at the end of the Second World War. The author recalls his first memories only from the time after the war. His own explanation for this is the lack of events; while his parents lived in fear, he was too young to comprehend and he viewed the ghetto as being boring since there was nothing to do (Becker 292). One motivation for Becker to write the novel was his hope to remember details about the time in the ghetto during the writing process (Becker 303). He calls himself Kaspar Hauser and as someone who is without a past, without a sense of orientation. The reference to the mysterious child, who allegedly lived in a darkened room for the first years of his life and who claimed to be without a proper childhood, corresponds to Becker's experience in the ghetto. He was confined to a small area that allowed for only limited stimulus to a child. *Jakob der Lügner* is an attempt to write an autobiography (Becker 313), but because most of his experience in the ghetto is not available to him as vivid memory, he uses the fictional form to explore his role as a Holocaust witness. The realm of fiction also allows him to take on a broader perspective through the lens of an omnipresent narrator who, as opposed to the novel's main character Jakob Heym, survived the transport to the concentration camps. While Jakob is the main character of the story, the narrator gives detailed insight into the life and feelings of the minor figures. This tall tale takes away any kind of pathos, heroism or

shock with the help of irony and humor, because the narrator knows about the suffering and because he doesn't shy away from the terror (Becker 324).

While the ghetto itself, the people, the street names, are a work of fiction, Becker carefully researched the ghetto life. He went to the archives in Poland, where among other data, he found his own registration to the ghetto. The characters in the novel are fictional creations, but the description about ghetto life is based on historical facts. And the registration is proof that Becker, even though he doesn't remember much of it, was part of it, which provides his fictive work with credibility. Like in *Jakob der Lügner*, the real ghettos were blocked off from the outside world, and no information through the media was available to the people. Work was an important part of the daily routine and food was scarce, like in other ghettos. Hunger and typhus killed a considerable number of Jews in the Lodz ghetto and caused a breakdown of the "normal" camp conditions, schools shut down and food rations became fewer (313-314). The book doesn't offer a clear timeline of events, but in reality, German authorities began with their transports to concentration camps in 1942. Being in a desperate situation encourages the desire to know about one's situation. In the commentary to the story, we learn that in 1941 the Gestapo arrested and executed a man who owned a radio. Later, despite the known risks, a group of men build a device with which they could overhear foreign news. In 1944 those men were caught and executed (317). Shmuel Krakowski, a member of one of the illegal organizations says that the illegal radio was of utmost importance to the morale of the ghetto (qtd. in Becker 317).

Critics put Becker's first novel *Jakob der Lügner* in the same narrative canon as Scholem Aleichem and Isaac Bashevis Singers. However, Becker says he only read Aleichem after he finished the book and never read Bashevis Singers (Becker, 302). In the appendix of the 2012 Suhrkamp edition of *Jakob der Lügner*, Becker stresses in the essay "Mein Judentum" that his parents were Jews, but he would have had to make an effort to become a Jew. Becker says about himself: "Ich hätte mich also, um Jude zu werden, schon selbst bemühen müssen" (301). Becker's life wasn't embedded in a rich Jewish culture that would have influenced his life and writing. However, his experience of the Holocaust, the loss of his mother, the displacement is all part of the genuinely Jewish experience. Even though Becker doesn't identify himself as Jewish, I will refer to him as being Jewish by virtue of his origin and his experience during the Holocaust. While Becker seemingly rejects his Jewish identity, we can find some typical Jewish elements in his story. One of the most obvious is the relationship between Jakob and his friend Kowalsky. At some point during the friendship they decided to profit from each other's business: Jakob as a restaurant owner allows Kowalsky to eat as many potato pancakes as he wished, and in return Kowalsky gives Jakob haircuts for free. Throughout the story the reader amusingly finds the two men complaining about the unfair deal, at the beginning Jakob is upset because he cannot possibly get a hair cut every day, but Kowalsky keeps coming to his restaurant, and later it is Kowalsky who still has to give Jakob haircuts and beard trims, even though there are no potatoes to make pancakes anymore. This friendship with its humorous self-irony, frames Becker's novel and himself as genuine Jewish. As Freud pointed out, in jokes and comical stories about Jews

invented by themselves, they admit their shortcomings as well as their merits (166). Coming from a group outsider, ethnic jokes or comments have a destructive function. Ethnic jokes or references from a group insider have the reversed effect in that it elevates and strengthens the group identity and pride (see for example Boskin und Dorinson 1985; Fish 1980; Leveen 1996; Dorinson und Boskin 1988).

Right after its publication, critics praised Becker's narrative style. Rolf Michaelis, journalist of *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, described the novel as a "blutiger Witz, wie eine Humoreske mit Trauerrand". The English translations "bloody joke" or "bleeding joke", don't do the German meaning justice, which exemplifies the ambiguity of the Holocaust humor. It illustrates the emotional relief that a joke can provide at the same time that it attempts to make sense of the horrific and the unspeakable. Marcel Reich-Ranicki, acclaimed German literary critic and camp survivor himself, comments on Becker's novel "[er] beweist, dass man auch vom Grauensvollsten leicht und unterhaltsam erzählen kann" (qtd. in Matzowski 5). More than ten years after its publication, the literary world has a more critical view on the novel and asks the question if literature doesn't run the risk of trivializing the suffering (Becker 330). Becker is accused of making the exceptional experience of the ghetto as something ordinary and an enjoyable read by mostly omitting the horrors (Becker 331). These accusations have been made about many other Holocaust representations, which utilize humor and depict the events in a fictive form (see chapter 3). I do not support those sentiments and I argue that the narrative offers a different, but nonetheless valuable approach, to the discussion and the memory work of the Holocaust. Contrary to the accusation, I argue that the humor in

Becker's novel works as a protective shield, it works as a process to maintain threads to human dignity, and humor functions as an element that deconstructs authoritative hierarchies, and discourses (see introduction for a detailed description).

*Jakob der Lügner* follows the life of the Jewish protagonist Jakob Heym in the ghetto of Lodz in Poland during the German occupation of World War II. Jakob hides and takes care of a young girl named Lina, whose parents were both killed. We can see here a connection to Becker's own life. The role that his mother played for him, in that she sacrificed her own food rations to keep Jakob alive, is represented in the relationship between Jakob and Lina. Like Becker's mother, Jakob's first priority is Lina's well-being and safety.

The main story with the explanation for the tall tale of a radio begins with Jakob walking through the ghetto close to the night's curfew. Jakob is stopped by an officer who orders him to ask for his punishment at the German headquarters. At the station he hears a radio news report about the approach of the Russians. The officer sends Jakob home without any punishment, and he gives his friend Mischa the good news about the Russians the next day. Mischa reacts with skepticism, so Jakob tells him about a hidden radio, otherwise forbidden in the ghetto. The news spread quickly in the ghetto and Jakob finds himself confronted with questions about the liberation from the east, which leads him to invent even more lies.

The novel has two endings. The first one is labeled as a fictive ending in which Jakob dies, but the Russians arrive soon after to liberate the ghetto. The second focuses on Jakob's friend Kowalsky who is one of the steady characters in the story. In his

character the reader gets a sense of despair for news about a possible end of the war, and for how the lies about a nearing liberation by the Russians installs hope. Lipman calls humor “the currency of hope” (10); for the characters it is the radio that brings hope, for the reader, it is the humorous narrative style that engages the reader in a complex story with a possible positive outcome. Through Kowalsky, who thinks about possible career plans after the war, the reader is confronted with the possibility of a better future, an alternate reality outside of the ghetto. When Jakob tries to find his way out of this sticky situation by saying that his radio had broken, Kowalsky contacts an acquaintance, who knows how to repair them. Ultimately though, Kowalsky fears the consequences from the German authorities and, luckily for Jakob who invented the existence of a radio, backs out from the plan. In the “true ending” Kowalsky hangs himself shortly after Jakob's confession that he never possessed a radio. In the end, everyone is deported to the death camps. But even though the story ends with a horrific ending, the build up to the end shows the characters as dignified, creative, human beings who, even in a desperate situation like living in a ghetto with deportation and murder as the final stage, keep their spirits high. The above mentioned business relationship and Jewish self-irony offer an interesting way to think about the stylistic use of humor. The Nazis took their victims’ physical freedom, but not their spiritual freedom. Kristeva’s ideas about the abject and Agamben’s ideas on the potential loss of dignity help to explain the function of humor as it is embedded in the story. The humorous mode throughout the narrative in the detailed description of every day life creates a general characterization of the people in the ghetto



as dignified. In the face of abjection, the possibility of normality, which is created through the sense of humor, gives back some sense of dignity to their lives.

An important stylistic means to illustrate the gravity of the situation and to situate us into the actual horrors of the Holocaust is the use of contrast. The story begins with a description of a tree that incorporates a child-like sense of curiosity. The description of the tree symbolizes life on the one hand and a naïve innocent view of the world on the other. The nameless narrator remembers instances in his life in which the tree played an important role. He recalls an event in the past when he spent time with a girl under a tree and how they were distracted by a boar, or possibly several boars, because he couldn't really count them while running away. This description makes the episode sound innocent, almost playful, where we can see two young lovers run away giggling over being caught in the act by the animals. A bit later, he shares another memory about a tree: "Und wieder ein paar Jahre später ist meine Frau Chana unter einem Baum erschossen worden" (Becker 10). In this one single sentence, he introduces his wife Chana and also informs the reader that she was shot under a tree. The narrator shifts his narration to the present where he informs his audience that trees are forbidden in the ghetto he is currently in. Within two pages of narration, there is a shift from carefree normality to the brutal reality of the Holocaust. Costica Bradatan argued in his essay "To Die Laughing": "without contrasts, the entire universe would be nothing but an amorphous mass" (743). Using the tree as a starting point for his narrative is a powerful metaphor. A tree symbolizes life, given water and light, it can easily outgrow a human. Like a human, a tree shows signs of good and bad health. If you look at a tree trunk, based on the

thickness of the rings, you can tell how old a tree is and what years brought enough nutrition and which years were scarce. Trees are therefore strong and resistant towards time, but they are also vulnerable. Over the course of the narrator's time a tree was witness to his first child-injury, to his first romance and later to the death of his wife. We can see the tree as a silent witness to the changes of a carefree time to World War II. And in the ghetto, German authorities do not allow trees to grow at all. By beginning the narrative with a description of normality, Becker is able to lend the narrative about Nazi ghetto life more meaning. It is this contrast between the carefree life before the war and descriptions of the ghetto life during the war, which makes the narrative even more tragic. Similarly, in Roberto Benigni's film *Life is Beautiful* (1997), the story also begins in a playful mood in which the main characters and their lives are introduced. Benigni's film juxtaposes the comedic aspect of the first part of the movie against the implied pain and the horror of the camp experience, making this experience that much worse. The rather carefree tone in *Jakob der Lügner* only lasts for about a page and a half of the book, but nonetheless shares a similar effect with that of the introduction of Benigni's film. Maybe it is even more powerful, because right when the reader imagines the tree and gets lost in the narrative, the reader is pulled back to the unpleasant Holocaust reality. Ilona Klein argues in her analysis of both *Life is Beautiful* and *Jacob the Liar*, "the moments of humorous relief are never far from the shadow of the mass deportation" (Klein 25).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Klein analyzes the Hollywood remake of the DEFA movie from the 1970s. While the Hollywood movie stresses more the comedy character of the narrative and narrative details differ, Klein's observation about the humorous relief and the horrific reality of ghetto life hold true for the novel as well.

The scene in which Jakob goes to the German headquarters gives another example for a narrative contrast. When Jakob is called into the German headquarters, he doesn't know what to expect. Even though it is clear that it is not yet past the curfew, the informed reader knows that Jakob is dependent on the officer's right of scrutiny. The reader follows Jakob in the building and the fear for Jakob to get caught by an unpleasant officer builds up. Jakob first hides successfully behind a door, only to get stuck with his shirt in a closed door. The reader is pulled back from this tragic-comic moment of a man who desperately tries to get his jacket from the door by Jakob's matter of fact thoughts about possible ways to escape this situation. The narrator reminds us that Jakob cannot leave the jacket because his remaining clothes lack the Jewish Star of David, but he also cannot simply pull himself away, because this would result in a tearing of the symbol. An officer finds Jakob and takes him to the right office to ask for his proper punishment. The obvious imminent danger finds its comic relief when Jakob finds the officer sleeping and the narrator commenting that Jakob heard a few people sleep before, he has an ear for it (Becker 18). The humor in these scenes is created by the contrast between fear and its comic relief, but also by a trivialization and matter of fact narrative style.

Later in the story we learn about Jakob's friend Mischa and his relationship to his fiancée Rosa, which again poses a humorous moment through the contrast between fear and the comic. Due to scarce space, Mischa shares a room with another man. Being young and newly in love, Mischa and Rosa want to be intimate at night, but Rosa has reservations because of Mischa's roommate. Desperate for physical attention, Mischa convinces Rosa that his roommate is a deaf-mute. His plan succeeds and Rosa feels

comfortable enough to get intimate with Mischa. Later, when Rosa sleeps, Mischa hears his roommate talk in his sleep. For Mischa it is a desperate moment, but for the reader it is a classical humorous situation. In both instances the use of humor illustrates the well-known saying that if you don't laugh, you'll cry. The use of humor in an actual grave situation like the one in the headquarters and a rather harmless scene between the two lovers supports the main idea of the narrative to describe the ghetto population as dignified, strong minded people.

The matter of fact narrative style as described in the headquarter scene, is used again later in the story as a way to rise above a desperate situation that cannot be changed. In the scene, we learn about Mischa's boxing career. Before the war, during his active years, he tried to gain weight, in order to box in a different weight class. We then learn that when Mischa had almost reached his goal and gained about 170 pounds, the ghetto interfered with his plans, making it sound like any other inconvenience that destroyed Mischa's plans.

The following passage illustrates Becker's use of contrast, downplay and sarcasm through the use of changing perspectives within the narrative. It is reminiscent of the passage in Borowski's work, in which the narrator argues that you have to be deceived to the very end.

Wir stellen uns in einer Reihe auf, sehr beherrscht und ohne die geringste Drängelei. Das haben sie uns so beigebracht, unter Androhung von keinem Essen. Es muss so aussehen, als hätten wir im Moment gar keinen Appetit, schon wieder dieses Essen, kaum hat man sich richtig eingearbeitet, wird

man schon wieder unterbrochen durch eine der vielen Mahlzeiten. (Becker 39)

There are two perspectives at play in this quote: One perspective shows the harsh reality imposed by the German officers. The last sentence has an insertion that offers a second perspective, “schon wieder dieses Essen, kaum hat man sich richtig eingearbeitet, wird man schon wieder unterbrochen durch eine der vielen Mahlzeiten”, in which the focus shifts to an indirect speech of the ghetto narrator who mocks the situation sarcastically. Throughout the book the reader learns about the constant hunger: Mischa keeps losing weight, at one point Jakob trades three cigarettes for one carrot to give Lina as her sparse supper and one of Jakob’s acquaintances dies after eating a dead cat. Later in the story, German officers cancel the little lunch the workers receive at work as punishment. The humor here functions to elevate oneself, and rise above the situation. We can see Kristeva’s ideas about the abject here; humor, in this case sarcasm, helps to keep or give back a potential loss of dignity. While the situation is clearly a desperate one and the ghetto inmates are dependent on the officer’s grace to give them food, the sarcastic remark offers a new perspective on the situation in which it is ultimately the ghetto inmate who wins. The humorous aspect takes away the horror of the experience and functions as a release of the intense emotional and physical effects that the ghetto places on the people. The absurdity removes the seriousness, even if it is only temporarily, and it makes the situation less deterministic. By saying the opposite of what he actually feels and thus allowing himself to rise above the given situation, he also allows the human mind to become free from the underlying horror of inhumanity.

Humor in the narrative is also used to elevate oneself. In the scene, Jakob reads small scraps of newspaper, intended to be used as toilet paper in the officers' toilet, to get more news. Meanwhile, a German officer needs to use the toilet badly since he has diarrhea (100). While the officer paces impatiently up and down the occupied lavatory, Jakob takes his time going through all the pieces of news that are available. In this scene, even with this obvious element of slapstick, the roles of power are reversed, and the officer is ridiculed by exposing his weakness. Despite the very lighthearted comedic aspect of the scene through the use of slapstick, this scene fulfills a very important role in questioning established hierarchies. Bakhtin sees the carnival and laughter in his analysis of Rabelais as “the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions”, and carnival “celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order“ (10). Similarly in the scene from *Jakob der Lügner*, the power roles are reversed when Jakob occupies the only lavatory while the German officer desperately needs to use it. The officer's diarrhea further strengthens Jakob's power over him.

Three of the most distinct scenes in the narrative in which humor underlines the dramatic character of the given situation are intertwined with each other and they are all related to the radio. In the first scene, Lina desperately wants to find the radio. She has never seen a radio, so she mistakes a lamp for the device. It is an amusing scene as it shows her childish naïveté, but it also illustrates their desperate situation in which an 8-year old has no idea as to how a radio looks. In the second scene, Jakob pretends to have a radio and invents a radio for Lina who sits behind a partition wall and who cannot see

that it is Jakob who is performing the show. Jakob finishes his performance with a tale about a princess, who wants to have a cloud, but who is sufficiently happy with a cotton ball instead by the end of the story. During Jakob's performance, Lina walks behind the partition wall without Jakob noticing. While Jakob pretends to have a radio, Lina later pretends to have not seen anything. By that, both lie to the other person, and both find their humor in the other person's joy about the playful situation that is also a dangerous one. In the third scene, Lina re-tells the story about the princess to other children in the ghetto, and one of the boys says that he doesn't believe the tale and tells Lina her princess has a "fart in her head" ("Einen Furz im Kopf!"). This playful, while harsh scene for Lina, stands as a contrast to the ghetto life. Ultimately Jakob dies for his lies about a radio that never existed outside the German headquarters. The humorous scenes that evolved out of his lies about the radio, and the hope he brings to the ghetto, make his death at the end of the novel even more tragic.

Like in Borowski's daily descriptions, the reader gets lost in the description of every day life, only to be pulled back to reality and reminded of the setting of the story. By that, humor contrasts and emphasizes the harsh reality of the ghetto. The humor in the story also helps to portray the Jews as a human, dignified people who have not lost their communal life, despite their desperate living conditions in the ghetto. Finally, it serves as an elevation above the German officer in the particular lavatory scene, but the living conditions themselves, to which the Jewish people have no influence. In conclusion, the use of humor and the story itself does not trivialize the suffering and it doesn't make the exceptional experience of the ghetto seem as something ordinary, as critical comments

about *Jakob der Lügner* suggest. To the contrary, the use of humor juxtaposed with the continuous representation of death, hunger and displacement, adds another emotional layer that may be closer to a true ghetto experience, as mentioned in chapter one, than the one-dimensional serious ones.

### **Ruth Klüger: Humor and Holocaust Memory**

Ruth Klüger's autobiography fulfills two purposes. First, she recalls her childhood memories about her Holocaust experience from a critical perspective almost half a century after the events. Second, she uses her experience to point at contemporary issues of Holocaust representation. Klüger utilizes humorous devices such as sarcasm and irony to engage with current issues, which allow her to enter into a critical dialogue with her audience, without folding in any accusatory remarks. Throughout the autobiography, Klüger brings her readers with her to these specific sites of her Holocaust experience and she does this primarily through relating her memories of the events in these places. These memories are shaped, for example, either through a direct engagement with the past (e.g. reliving her eleven-year-old experience in Vienna), or with a direct encounter with the present (e.g. revisiting Theresienstadt/ Terezín as the author of this autobiography).

This type of encounter with the Holocaust past can be illuminated through the important experience of Holocaust survivor Leslie Fiedler, who reacts similarly to Klüger when returning to the camp in which he was imprisoned. In his piece as part of the volume *Testimony: Writers Makes the Holocaust Personal*, Fiedler relates the set of expectations he thought he would have upon returning, describing them as “a sense of



tearful compassion or nauseated revulsion.” Instead, he felt a sense of anticlimax, which was “nearly comical that [he] came close to laughing out loud” (Fiedler 225).

Fiedler finds it ludicrous that the gas chambers at Dachau were not the originals, but reconstructions. He did not laugh about the Holocaust itself but at the type of hyperreality recreated at Dachau in its function as memorial site (225). Not the historical Dachau itself is the source of humor here, but the parodic representation in the form of what Jaye Berman Montresor describes in the key article “Parodic Laughter and the Holocaust” as “‘some horrific Disneyland’ that induces the urge to laugh” (27). This example shows two important aspects of humor: first, that it is one of the many natural human reactions to a traumatic event, and second, that it serves as an entry way into a critical engagement with Holocaust memory. It is almost repulsive to think of humor and the Holocaust together. However, as I have demonstrated with Borowski’s example at the beginning of this chapter, humor works as a protective shield for victims, and it allows us to question the established discourse, allowing new ways of engaging with the topic. Established Holocaust representations shown publicly in documentaries, museums and monuments, consist primarily in the range of horrific images of victims after their liberation, and moral and ethical sympathy for victims and survivors. The perspective of this discourse, however, is restricted by the strange need to react with sincerity and deep seriousness. Because humor works through dissonance, it is able to challenge this common perspective, since it “pulls the rug out from underneath us”, but it also offers a safety cushion. If we recall the discussion from the introductory chapter on the functions of humor described by Freud, humor, in itself, offers comfort and relief. Montresor refers

to the humor that she detected in Holocaust related narrative as a “deliberate distortion that promotes estrangement rather than identification of a situation” (12), that no one who didn’t experience it in person, can fully grasp.

Ruth Klüger was born in 1931 in Vienna. She was deported to Theresienstadt concentration camp together with her mother at the age of 11. She and her mother survived, but her father died in the Holocaust. She studied philosophy and history at the Philosophisch-theologische Hochschule in Regensburg and then moved to the US, where she is Professor Emeritus of German at the University of California. Klüger only began working on the text of *Weiter Leben: Eine Jugend* while she recovered from a severe road accident in Göttingen in 1988, almost half a century after the end of the war. Klüger’s academic thinking is apparent in her personal, but yet analytical autobiography. Living in California in the 1960s, she discovered her feminism, and she views her childhood memory with the eyes of a feminist. Thus, her memoir is not only a coming to terms with her past, but also a text against male domination in the Holocaust discourse (Reiter 236). Her memoir is dedicated to her friends in Göttingen, but it addresses Germany as a whole (142)<sup>4</sup>. Klüger began her work 3 years after the controversial visit to the former Bergen-Belsen concentration camp by U.S. President Ronald Reagan with the German Chancellor Helmut Kohl whose attempt it was to normalize the past during his term. In this recent approach to coming to terms with the past, historians argue that a continuing negative preoccupation with the Nazi past is damaging to a positive national self-image (Goertz 176). The idea to study the Third Reich in relation to other genocides and free Germany of its stigma is one way historians argue to come to terms with the past

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<sup>4</sup> “Den Göttinger Freunden ... ein deutsches Buch” (Klüger 4).

(Goertz 176). With these thoughts come a generalized idea of the word *victim* to everyone fallen during the war. This idea was prominently argued by Reagan, who defended his visit with chancellor Kohl to the Bitburg cemetery where also German soldiers are buried by saying that the German war dead were “human beings, crushed by a vicious ideology” (Weinraub). Klüger’s autobiography is not simply a recollection of her memory, but she actively engages in the discussion about the memory of the Holocaust. Through biting references to a German acquaintance named Gisela, she illustrates “how foolish, inappropriate and callous” the idea of the *victim* as a displacement of collective responsibility is (176). She acknowledges that there have been numerous books and stories that describe the camps and those accounts have influenced her as well, so that she cannot write about it as if no one knew about the camps (79).

The autobiography is divided into five main parts: The first one is devoted to Vienna, the second to the three camps in which she was imprisoned (Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, Christianstadt [Groß-Rosen]), the third and fourth parts are devoted to her life in Germany and New York and in the epilogue she gives insight into her life in Göttingen as well as to the writing process. Her writing style is very organic and seems like a memory work in progress. She talks about her childhood experience, but she also ties it in with the present in which she engages with the established Holocaust memory discourse.

Klüger’s writing style is reminiscent of Borowski’s in that both have as an overarching tone, a matter-of fact narrative style. Compare for example the first two sentences of their works:

All of us walk around naked. The delousing is finally over, and our striped suits are back from the tanks of Cyclone B solution, an efficient killer of lice in clothing and of men in gas chambers. (Borowski 9)

Der Tod, nicht Sex war das Geheimnis, worüber die Erwachsenen tuschelten, wovon man gerne mehr gehört hätte. (Klüger 9)

Both authors focus the attention of their writing to the Holocaust right away. As part of her introduction, Klüger mentions that those who forbade her as a child to ask questions were now gone, scattered across the world, gassed, or they died in beds or other places (Klüger 10). Like Borowski, her writing shows distance to the events. In both works, though, we can also see how the events affected the authors. In *This Way to the Gas Ladies and Gentlemen* the narrator feels paralyzed and helpless about the surrounding death in the camp, and he expresses a sense of nausea (Borowski 20-21), which he can suppress only for some time until he has to vomit (Borowski 28). In Klüger's work her personal feelings towards the camps relate to seeing her mother in a vulnerable situation (Klüger 138). In both works, the humor works as a type of protective shield to keep the distance to the horrors of the camps.

Klüger's autobiography incorporates satiric, ironic and sarcastic elements of humor, each of which demonstrate her personal and temporal distance to the events she describes, which allow her to reflect on her past and be able to actively and critically engage in the discussion about Holocaust memory in Germany. In her writing she specifically points out that a feeling of senselessness towards the events and absurdity run

deeper than her sense of outrage over the Holocaust (Klüger 148). She gives an example of one absurdity at the beginning of her chapter about Theresienstadt:

Der Geist der Geschichte genehmigt sich oft auf Kosten der Juden  
schlechte Witze: Zum Beispiel daß die Festung Theresienstadt  
ausgerechnet von Joseph II., dem Kaiser der jüdischen Emanzipation in  
Österreich, erbaut wurde... (81)

She begins another sub-chapter to “Auschwitz-Birkenau” with the question: “Ob die Nazis die deutsche Romantik sarkastisch verhunzen wollten, wenn sie den Lagern die hübschen Namen gaben?” (114). A person without any knowledge of the camps could sing the words “Birkenau” and “Buchenwald” along to traditional German folk music and could add nature related rhymes with no trouble (114).

Both Becker’s and Klüger’s writing show a childish sense of humor during the Holocaust. In *Jakob der Lügner* there are Lina and the other children, who, despite their situation, play and tease each other verbally. In *Weiter Leben*, Klüger recollects her childhood in Vienna when the war had already started. She remembers how much she enjoyed looking at the foreign money her brother brought with him from Czechoslovakia<sup>5</sup>. She also recollects the fun she had over lunch with the sausages her father made. Her mother found it to be a scandal to be so childish and gay during those times. Later she comments on the humorous double of “tor” in her father’s name “Doktor Viktor”, a humorous interpretation which, according to Klüger, is not accessible to adults. She explains it with a different perception on life. A comment that can be expanded to not

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<sup>5</sup> Her mother had a son from a previous marriage who lived with his father in the Czech Republic, and who visited them occasionally.

only different perspectives between adult and child, but also different generations with a different experience, but even then, there is not one perspective of one event, but many different perspectives. This particular childish humor has two functions one is that, like in Becker's story, it allows the reader to see Becker's and Klüger's ghetto and camp experience from when they were imprisoned as children. She remembers: "Wir taten uns nicht leid, wir lachten viel, wir tobten und machten Krawall, wir meinten, stärker zu sein als 'verwöhnte' Kinder 'draußen'" (Klüger 88). The second function addresses Klüger's critique of Holocaust memory and her perceived dissonance between individual and collective memory, the later being a more "uniform, socially constructed" one (Goertz 167). Her autobiography demonstrates that coping with the Holocaust cannot be limited to the tradition of high seriousness as Des Pres phrased it and as it is viewed to be the only permissible engagement with the events. Klüger argues at a later point in her autobiography that danger is a good soil for comedy, even though she cannot give a good explanation for its reason (174). A friend of hers argues with the Freudian concept that comedy is a vent for suppressed emotions (174). Bergson in his analysis of laughter points out that "many dramas will turn into a comedy" (11). Klüger is another example for the comic relief for Holocaust witnesses as discussed in chapter one.

Humor is not only used as a coping mechanism and to allow the reader insight into the naïve, innocent feelings of a child. As mentioned before, Klüger's autobiography goes beyond the reflection of her own memory. She uses biting remarks and satirical comments to critically engage with the Holocaust discourse in Germany. One of the topics for critique is the memorial culture in Germany. She introduces the topic with a

recollection of an encounter with two young German men whose task it is during their civilian military service to paint the fence at Auschwitz white: she calls it “Zivildienst als Wiedergutmachung”. Her encounter motivates her discussion about the purpose of the memorial sites and the museums and her resentments towards memorial sites like Auschwitz, Buchenwald, or Dachau. Klüger begins the second part of the autobiography named “Die Lager” by pointing to the crowds of tourists whose itinerary leads them first to the famous church bells in Munich, later to the cute little wooden dolls and last to the memorial site Dachau where a photo session seems mandatory for the historic conscious mind (69). Klüger acknowledges later how difficult it is to speak about the past and especially to listen to the witness reports. She raises the question as to whom the witness memoirs are for and what purpose they serve (142). She does not give answers, and asks her readers in order to provoke them, urging her audience to engage in the topic that goes beyond looking at the well-known camp liberation photographs, and a sentiment beyond complicity and sympathy. Her sentiments towards the witness reports and the concentration camp tourism along with her plea to step outside the boundaries becomes obvious in how she structures her narration. Her headline of the second part “Die Lager” raises expectations based on our exposure to Holocaust documentaries and photographs, and visits to one of the memorial sites and museums. But Klüger deconstructs this image or rather, asks her audience to re-evaluate the purpose of the means and places of remembrance. Her rather humorous approach by giving the example of the rather obvious absurd memorial tourism provides a critical, but nonetheless judgment free base to re-think the intentions and actual usage of the memorials. Her humorous narrative style is

effective, in that she merely observes Holocaust consumerism without directly criticizing or pointing a finger.

Instead of using a memorial site like Dachau to conserve a certain moment in time, without allowing it to taking on another meaning through time, she proposes the word *timescape* to imply the function of a place in time (78). This approach is more organic as it allows layers of history to exist side by side. Years after the war, she went back to the former ghetto Theresienstadt, which is now a small town with the name of Terezín. In the building where she lived with 30 other girls during the war, now lives a woman for whom the place is a comfortable, peaceful home. The town, while it still looked like it did during ghetto times, changed throughout the years, and it is now a place where families live and children play on the streets. Klüger can still see the ghosts of the past, but the present dominates, so she feels a sense of relief, because it was not a concentration camp museum, but a small town that was full of life (105). Her notion of *timescape* captures her negative sentiments towards memorial sites such as Dachau or Auschwitz where time stands still and the past is conserved through renovations and replica, rather than through the visceralness of sweat and the abjection she associates with the space as prison and site of death. Her concept of *timescape* allows for a more integrated approach to Holocaust memory.

In the British documentary *KZ* from 2006, director Rex Bloomstein illustrates Klüger's sentiments. The documentary raises the question about a possible normal life for the citizens of Mauthausen. In the documentary, scenes alternate between the memorial site and the town itself, in which the narrator asks the townspeople about their daily life.



As an indirect question, the documentary asks whether there can be normal life. But at the same time it mocks the memorial site tourism that Klüger opposes. Her work is not only an important contribution to the witness narratives in the German language, but it also asks important questions about the official memory of the Holocaust in Germany. In a few years, there won't be any living witnesses to talk about their experience and about their feelings towards the official memory that has been developing over the past 50 years. Their memoirs, the museums and the memorial sites will be what will be passed on to the next generation apart from the official historical accounts of the events. Klüger raises the question with her work if we are going in the right direction with museum culture and memorial site tourism. Instead of finding an answer to this question, the readers find themselves confronted with more questions about the dominant Holocaust discourse. Klüger's autobiography supports the demand for a more diverse representation of Holocaust experience. She challenges our understanding of proper representation and remembrance, and shows with her personal approach to Holocaust studies that we are far from normalizing the past.

With an analysis of George Tabori's play *Mein Kampf* and Dani Levy's film *Mein Führer*, the third chapter takes on the question of what a proper representation of the Holocaust, and more specifically Hitler, is. The analysis of the primary sources will draw attention to the potential of humor, but also their limitations and possible dangers. In both sources, their main potential is that the alternative realities explored in the play and the movie offer a fresh perspective on the events and the accuracy of their representation. The humorous representations of Hitler demystify the leader of the Nazi

party, and thus challenge established hierarchies. The humor and its potential can only be understood and appreciated with prior knowledge about Hitler as a dictator and the Holocaust as a devastating event of mass murder. It is important to approach the sources with prior knowledge and a sensitive interpretation that acknowledges the horrors of the past, but with an open mindedness towards the potential of humorous representations of the Holocaust and Hitler. Without it, narratives such as *Mein Führer* can be misinterpreted as trivializing the horrors and Hitler may seem as a cute gnome, or clown as Central Council of Jews in Germany, Dieter Graumann, is quoted on the website for Germany's leading news and political magazine, *Der Spiegel* ("Mein Führer").

## CHAPTER 3

### HUMOROUS HITLER NARRATIVES FROM A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

The previous chapter analyzed Holocaust narratives that are motivated by personal experience. The humor found in these texts functions as a protective shield to distance the authors from the events, to rise above the situation they find themselves in, and to question the established truth and order. Ruth Klüger recollects her memories and critically engages with the established discourse on public Holocaust memory. Jurek Becker seeks to come closer to his memories through personally motivated fiction about the ghetto. In this sense, both authors' works and the experiences depicted in them, help them to show their true face, that aspect of one's countenance, which holds a sacrosanct truth. Their integrity as Holocaust victims and with it, their representations, are unassailable. In the second chapter of his work *Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics*, Giorgio Agamben elaborates on the meaning of "the face" in politics as a display of truth, which can be transferred to humans in public space in general.

All living beings are in the open: they manifest themselves and shine in their appearance. But only human beings want to take possession of this opening, to seize hold of their own appearance and of their own being-manifest... This is why appearance becomes a problem for human beings: it becomes a struggle for truth... The face's revelation is revelation of language itself (Agamben "The Face", 91).

The face, as Agamben views it, is a struggle for truth and is open for interpretation. It functions in similar ways as the sign, which the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure described

as having two distinct sides: the representation itself (signifier) and the meaning of this representation (signified), or the concept it represents. Ruth Klüger as a Holocaust survivor and witness shows her own face and her own experience that itself holds an inviolable truth. Jurek Becker is in a unique position, because he uses fiction to process his experience and access his memories through the writing process. Even though he uses fiction and several perspectives for his approach to master the past, by virtue of being a Holocaust survivor, his “face” is truthful. As survivors, both authors belong to the first generation who lived through the Holocaust from first-hand experience. The author of the stage play *Mein Kampf* (1988), George Tabori, and the writer and director of the feature film *Mein Führer* (2004), Dani Levy, are Jews who belong to the second-generation, to which I count everyone who does not possess memories from first-hand experience. This concept is based on what Marianne Hirsch describes as post-memory. In her article *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* she elaborates on this idea and describes it as a form of memory that is:

...mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation...Post-memory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated (22).

Hirsch is aware of the possible shortcoming of the prefix “post”, in that it could be read as a stage beyond memory and purely historical (22). But she argues that “...post-

memory, is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection” (22). If we use Hirsch’s notion of post-memory to understand the authors’ engagement with a past that wasn’t their own, then we can think of Dani Levy, who was born in 1957, as someone belonging to the second-generation. George Tabori, who was born in 1914, is residing in a grey zone between the first and the second generation by virtue of his age, his exile and spatiotemporal distance from the Holocaust. George Tabori and Dani Levy, by not having experienced the Holocaust themselves, need a fictional setting and another face to tell their story, if we come back to Agamben’s notion of the face and the truth it holds. George Tabori uses Schlomo Herzl in his play *Mein Kampf* (2004) and Dani Levy uses Adolf Grünbaum in *Mein Führer* (2007) as the Jewish characters, who focus attention on Adolf Hitler as the prime figure of the period. In the context of these two works, both Tabori and Levy implement Agamben’s own transfer of the concept of “the face” and its focus on truthful representations to characters in fictional settings. Here Agamben utilizes the example of pornographic photographs or movies in which the actors look into the camera, which “violently belies the fiction that is implicit in the consumption of such images” (94). In a key sentence, he concludes that:

...in that precise moment, the insubstantial nature of the human face suddenly comes to light. The fact that the actors look into the camera means that they *show that they are simulating*; nevertheless, they paradoxically appear more real precisely to the extent to which they exhibit this falsification. (Agamben, “The Face” 94)

Tabori's *Mein Kampf* and Levy's *Mein Führer* are examples of Hitler representations, which move beyond the more traditional representations of him as evil authority figure to instead explore the humorous and parodic potential that his exaggerated character brings forth. Both works are contrasts to Hitler representations that attempt to be close to the truth like Oliver Hirschbiegel's film *Der Untergang* (2004), which is based upon the books *Der Untergang: Hitler und das Ende des Dritten Reiches; eine historische Skizze* (2002), by historian Joachim Fest and *Bis Zur Letzten Stunde* (2002), the memoirs of Getraud "Traudl" Junge, one of Hitler's secretaries. Levy points out in the director's comment on the DVD of *Mein Führer* that "the fantasy, the fable that isn't dependent on fact, is perhaps closer to the truth, than the dramatized stories." Like the actor in Agamben's example, who establishes a connection to the audience by looking directly into the camera, the two primary sources, with Helge Schneider as an obvious parody of Adolf Hitler in *Mein Führer* and the pitiful, clueless Hitler character in *Mein Kampf* bring awareness to their fictive character. If we see both works, in total, as belonging to and engaging Agamben's notion of the face, then the humorous elements of satire, parody, and exaggeration challenge the audience to look beyond the surface of the Hitler figures, in order to see the deeper critical role that they ultimately play. *Der Untergang* (2004) by Oliver Hirschbiegel is based on historical accounts and depicts the last days of Hitler, and features an actor who is praised by critics for his great performance. Based on Bruno Ganz' impersonation of Hitler, *The New Yorker* author David Denby criticized the realistic depiction of the Nazi leader, because it made "the dictator into a plausible human being". As a contrast, Helge Schneider, as a parody of Hitler couldn't be further from the truth

and yet, screenwriter and director Dani Levy is accused of making him a laughable clown. Both approaches motivate heated discussions about how to appropriately depict Adolf Hitler. Using Agamben's framework, the parody accomplishes what the attempt for an accurate historical depiction fails to do, it looks the audience directly in the eye and allows for a critical engagement with the material.

Michael D. Richardson in his work "“Heil Myself”: Impersonation and Identity in Comedic Representation of Hitler" points to Charlie Chaplin's character Adenoid Hynkel in *The Great Dictator* (1940) as "the most memorable and iconic portrayal" (277) of Hitler. The film mocks Adolf Hitler and by doing so it shows the superiority of the people that he considered most inferior. Through their work, Chaplin, as well as Tabori and Levy, allow the Jewish victims to have the last laugh in their works, and they have it as the creators of the text and the joke. Along with Richardson's essay, David A. Brenner's analysis "Laughter amid Catastrophe: *Train of Life* and Tragicomic Holocaust Cinema" discusses the use of humor in Holocaust narrative and points out its potential for adding a new layer to the discussion about Holocaust representation. Brenner, in his analysis of *Train of Life*, a 1998 French-Romanian co-production about a fake deportation train heading for Palestine instead of to the camps in Poland, argues for the inclusion of humorous characteristics to allow for a critical engagement within the Holocaust discourse that does not take on an accusational quality, as we have already seen in the analysis of Klüger's work. The humor also "strengthen[s] the tragedy", he points out, quoting the film's director Radu Mihaileanu (Mihaileanu qtd. in Brenner 266), which is a quality also present in Becker's novel. In addition, Richardson explains the

motivation for Hitler comedies during the war, seeing Hitler parodies like *The Great Dictator*, or *To Be or Not to Be* (1942), by exiled German director Ernst Lubitsch, as being used to mock the leader of Germany, to make him appear less frightening, and as war propaganda.

While both authors point out the potential for the use of the humor in depictions of the Holocaust and Adolf Hitler, Brenner addresses in his final comments to his analysis of Holocaust comedy and Hitler parodies the troublesome transformation of film media as fast entertainment through internet, or DVDs, and he hints at its potential loss of critical reception (272). And Richardson sees the danger in the abundance of Hitler parodies, because of the potential “detachment of Hitler the character from the real Hitler that poses the greatest risk for historical understanding” (293). Referencing Ferdinand de Saussure, Richardson argues that he fears “Hitler” becomes an empty signifier “onto which contradictory meanings are projected” (293). These arguments point to an important issue that leads us back to the initial discussion about “the face” as understood by Giorgio Agamben. The Holocaust as a horrific event in human history has been the source for numerous representations, which have been based on both historical facts and on fiction. Helge Schneider, the actor portraying Adolf Hitler in Levy’s *Mein Führer*, was asked by his interviewer Stefan Raab how he prepared for the role. Schneider replied that he didn’t need to study for the role, because there is an abundance of documentaries and fiction about the period, any one of which is most likely being shown on any given day on German television (Raab). His answer may be exaggerated, but a continuous fascination with and representation of Adolf Hitler and the Holocaust are undeniable.



This fascination, which also supports Richardson's argument of Hitler and the Nazis becoming an empty signifier, is most prominently visible in three examples from the internet. The first are the YouTube memes that use the famous scene from the film *Der Untergang* in which Hitler rants about a failed attack and which add unrelated subtitles for humorous effect. Another example, where the actual historical figure is removed from the signifier, is the website [www.catsthatlooklikehitler.com](http://www.catsthatlooklikehitler.com) devoted to "kitlers", which are cats whose coloration and fur pattern resemble Hitler's signature hair and mustache. The opening address to their website audience illustrates Richardson's argument in which Hitler becomes an empty signifier, meaning that it is detached from its actual meaning: "Does your cat look like Adolf Hitler? ... Does he keep putting his right paw in the air while making a noise that sounds suspiciously like 'Sieg Miaow'?". On the website "Hitler" is replaced by "Kitler" and only the cats with their fur pattern remind the viewer of the Nazi leader. But the displayed image is so far removed that we can look at the pictures without any further thought about the actual man and the atrocities of World War II. A last important example is the Godwin's Law described on [www.knowyourmeme.com](http://www.knowyourmeme.com), which states that the longer an online discussion lasts, the more probable it is for Hitler to be brought up in the discussion. Harald Mertensen in his analysis of *Mein Führer* offers a plausible explanation that corresponds with Richardson's argument: "Hitler und die Nazis sind, in der Popkultur, inzwischen eine von den politischen Zusammenhängen weitgehend befreite, abstrakte Personifizierung des 'Bösen'". There is a correlation between Richardson's and Brenner's observation in that the fast entertainment offers possibilities for a creative reproduction of material online as

written text, or visual images such as photographs of cats or memes of an Adolf Hitler rant. By fast entertainment, I also refer to how movies are watched today, as opposed to when *The Great Dictator*, for example was released. The abundance of movies that are available through internet sources or DVDs can potentially lead to a less critical reception. The continuous representation of the Holocaust and Hitler numbs the audience with a “we’ve already seen this, we know everything about it” attitude.

The stage play *Mein Kampf* and the movie *Mein Führer* take a more liberal approach in their respective depictions of Adolf Hitler and the Holocaust and through their satirical approach bring awareness to the audience. Both works use the real figure Adolf Hitler and a few broadly known facts. *Mein Kampf* for example refers to Hitler’s failed attempt to enter the art academy in Vienna and his notorious book *Mein Kampf*. *Mein Führer* broadly refers to Nazi ideology, the Nazi’s political strategy and Hitler’s deteriorating health conditions towards the end of the war. These facts ground the works and their representations of Adolf Hitler as a real figure and the Holocaust as an actual historical event. The humorous approach functions to break with established hierarchical structures as we have seen in the Rabelaisian idea about the role of the carnival formulated by Mikhail M. Bakhtin, as I have discussed in the introductory chapter. To recall his ideas, Bakhtin points out the carnival’s ability to liberate from censorship, and limitation through sentimentality and single meaning. Precisely because they are satires and deliberately deviate from historically accurate depictions of the past, they play with the audience’s expectations about Holocaust narrative. By doing so, it allows the viewer

to engage more in a critical reception and reevaluate fixed ideas about Holocaust representation.

George Tabori's stage play *Mein Kampf* is loosely based on the time period between 1905 and 1913, which Hitler spent in Vienna and was rejected for admission to the art academy. Based on historical facts, the play describes his friendship with his Jewish roommate who peddled Hitler's watercolor paintings for him. But those facts are merely the starting point for a grotesque fictional story about the early time Hitler spent in Vienna.

Both works presented in this chapter, *Mein Kampf* and *Mein Führer*, characterize Hitler as helpless and pitiful. At the same time they mock the dictator. In both works, it is the central Jewish character, who plays an important role for allowing the fictional Hitler to succeed. Carl Weber argues in the editor's note to *Mein Kampf* that "victim and victimizer become inseparable partners in an unholy symbiosis making them engender and in need of each other" (Weber, 40). Again, we can see here the concept of the "grey zone" previously discussed in reference to Tadeusz Borowski, where he states that clear definitions of the victim and the victimizer can blur. While the narratives that structure both Tabori's play and Levy's film do not deal specifically with concentration camps and the assigned roles that Agamben refers to, the narratives play with the different roles that the main characters develop throughout the plot. In *Mein Führer*, the actual roles with Hitler as the dictator and his Jewish speech trainer Adolf Grünbaum as the inferior seem to be fixed. However, in the movie, as in the play *Mein Kampf*, the roles of power shift

throughout the narrative. In both, it is the Jew who prevails and who, literally, has the last laugh.

The stage play and the feature film accomplish two things. First, they mock Adolf Hitler and by doing so show the superiority of the people that he considered most inferior. Second, the use of a satire in both works brings awareness to the genre of Holocaust narration. The absurdities in both texts function in similar ways to the look initiated by the actor into the camera in Giorgio Agamben's example discussed earlier, in that it acknowledges its "falseness" in respect to their historical accuracy. By doing so, both Tabori's stage drama and Levy's comedic feature film challenge the established and expected discourse about the need for seriousness within Holocaust representation.

### **George Tabori's *Mein Kampf*: Parodying Hitler's Rise to Power**

Vielleicht ist die Angleichung von Heiligkeit und Humor der große jüdische Beitrag zur Zivilisation, und jeder wirkliche Humor ist Schwarz. (Tabori 102)

George Tabori was born in 1914 in Hungary and he worked in Berlin as a writer and theater director in the early 1930s. Due to his Jewish heritage, he was forced to leave Germany in 1935. He first moved to London to work for the BBC, and in 1947 immigrated to the US where he worked as a translator and screenwriter. Tabori's mother and brother survived the Holocaust, but his father died in 1944 in Auschwitz. In 1971, he returned to Germany, where the theater became his main focus. *Mein Kampf* (2004) is a

play written originally in English by Tabori and translated by Ursula Grützmacher-Tabori. The play had its world premiere in 1987 in Vienna.

The plot is loosely based on Hitler's early years in Vienna where he applied for the art academy and was turned down. Based on historical facts, the play describes his friendship with his Jewish roommate who peddled Hitler's watercolor paintings for him.

Tabori's play exemplifies what the playwright himself means in the above cited quote by saying that humor is one of the big Jewish contributions and that all real humor is black. Despite its absurd character, the stage play foreshadows to the Holocaust using black humor. Like in Becker's *Jakob der Lügner*, Tabori describes his character using Jewish stereotypes. Schlomo Herzl has a big nose, short gnome-like stature and uses his pitiful appearance for making more profit (5). Later on Herzl claims to be the "Meisterlügner von Lüttich, Ex-Präsident des Lügenvereins von Pest" (56). But like in Becker's narrative, Herzl is ultimately portrayed as a likable character, which refers back to Freud's statement saying that Jews themselves mocked their own shortcomings, knowing about their true character. This affectionate mocking of Herzl by the narrator and himself is contrasted by comments made by Hitler. In one scene, he feels betrayed by Herzl and declares a "weltweite Verschwörung der Ahnen Zions" (43), a remark that is reminiscent of anti-Jewish sentiments.

The wit and word play foreshadows the actual Hitler and the Holocaust without directly addressing the issue. The absurdity of the play serves as a powerful contrast to the allusion to actual historic events. The humor in the play is created by either the absurdities of the situation, or by the macabre allusions to history. A central part of the

story is a book Schlomo Herzl, the main Jewish character, is writing. But he only has one melancholic sentence and he is incapable of adding to that one sentence “IN EINER KALTEN NACHT, DIE IN DEN MORGEN GRAUTE, DER KÄLTESTEN SEIT MENSCHENGEDENKEN” (11). His friend Lobkowitz advises him to simply start writing before the beginning. Herzl proposes the names “Mein Leben” and “Meine Geschichte” for the unfinished book, which Lobkowitz rejects as bad titles. Finally he approves of Herzl’s last idea, which, ironically is called “Mein Kampf”. This scene at the beginning of the play points to the combination of reality and pure, absurd fiction. Lobowitz’ suggestion to start before the beginning also points to a possible alternative reality. The only sentence in Schlomo’s book can be read as a metaphor to the Holocaust as the darkest moment in human history. Schlomo’s incapability of continuing to write forward from that moment suggests a connection to Adorno’s often quoted argument that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, or that there can be no poetry after the Holocaust (Adorno 34). Adorno criticized the production of monuments and literature linked to the atrocities by the very culture that was responsible for the Holocaust. By implicitly referring to Adorno’s ideas, he produces a critical reception in which writing after the Holocaust is challenged. The first sentence to Schlomo Herzl’s book, is the same sentence that opens the play. While Schlomo Herzl in the narration is incapable of continuing to write after the initial sentence, George Tabori offers a complete play in which an alternative reality is presented. However, there are several moments where a play on words clearly link the fictive story to those facts about the concentration camps

that have become formal motifs in the representation of the Holocaust. For example the following excerpts:

... und Camp mag ich nunmal nicht, diese Hochstilisierung perfümiertes Verlogenheiten; das führt zu einer anderen Art von Camp, der Konzentration von Gebeinen. (26)

...

Du warst sehr nett. Ich schätze deine Handreichungen. Wenn meine Zeit gekommen ist, werde ich dich angemessen entlohnen. Ich werde dir einen Laden kaufen, damit du es warm hast, und wenn du alt bist, finden wir eine Lösung für dich... (40)

Both quotes clearly hint to the concentration camps and what the Nazis referred to as “the final solution.” The first is from Schlomo’s inner monologue, where he takes on two distinct personalities, as a critic and as a poet. The words “Camp”, “Konzentration” and “Gebeine” link the fictive story that takes place at some time at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (neunzehnhundert-Punkt-Punkt-Punkt) to the actual events of World War II. In the second quote Hitler acknowledges Schlomo’s hospitality, and for everyone who is familiar with history, the sweet and caring remark to thank Shlomo turns out to be a foreshadowing of actual tragic events which are only alluded to indirectly in the play. The biting, macabre humor in the quote by the use of a play on words takes on its additional meaning only for a reader with an understanding of history and the wording used to describe the events.

The continuous word play alludes to the historic events, and Hitler's character and outward appearance transforms more and more to that of the dictator. Ironically, it is his Jewish roommate, who helps Hitler with his signature mustache and hairstyle. It is also Herzl, who encourages Hitler to pursue a career in politics with the comment "du bist ein mieser Schauspieler ... du solltest in die Politik gehen" (60). The transformation from an unsuccessful artist to the political figure reaches its climax, when Herzl allows Hitler to use his book "Mein Kampf", for one of Hitler's works to help his political career. The title of the book, and play, refers to the infamous book of the same title by the historical figure Adolf Hitler. Hitler's work was first published in two volumes in 1925 and 1926, and combines autobiographical information with an exposition of his political ideology. In the play, Schlomo Herzl indirectly hands over the one and only poignant sentence of the book, which the play continuously hints at throughout the play by letting Hitler use the title of the book. Towards the end of the story, there is another play on words describing Hitler in one scene, as "Hitler, ein wahrer Führer" (82).

The allusion to the historical Holocaust becomes clearer at the end of the play and the humour becomes more grotesque. The word play, which previously hints at historical events, takes on a more concrete form when Hitler and his friend Himmler fry Schlomo's pet chicken: "Wenn ihr beginnt Vögel zu verbrennen, werdet ihr enden Menschen zu verbrennen" (81). In the play, this sentence appears as a quote. The initial quotation is taken from Heinrich Heine's tragedy *Almansor*, in which it originally says "Das war ein Vorspiel nur, dort wo man Bücher / Verbrennt, verbrennt man am Ende Menschen" (81). The initially humorous scene, in which Hitler and Himmler chase the chicken through the



apartment so that feathers fly and the bird cackles, turns into a tangible reference to the Holocaust. At this point in the play, the reader perceives the chicken as more than merely a bird. Herzl names the chicken “Mitzi” and by that allows her to take on more human characteristics.

The link to the Holocaust becomes even more obvious when Fräulein Tod appears at the end of the play. Her role in the play is to take Hitler away, who hides in the bathroom. Fräulein Tod claims that all good stories end with death, with which Schlomo disagrees. As a continuation of the chicken scene, Fräulein Tod responds “O, lieber Schlomo, wenn Sie wüssten, was kommt! ... Feuer, Feuer und Sie werden die versengten Körper, wie den der Henne, beneiden, von den Flammen verzehrt, die Ihr Zimmergenosse [Hitler] entzündet hat” (83). At this point, the play has established a tight link to the Holocaust and its atrocities. Fräulein Tod appears as a way to prevent her prophecies from fulfilling themselves. The end of the play suggests a continuation that follows history.

At the end, when Hitler is taken away, Schlomo Herzl takes a bite of the fried chicken, not because he is hungry, but to take in the strength of his poor friend, which he would need in all those years, if the *Schuhplattln* were to be replaced by the thunder of the boots. The German sentence referring to this scene is ambiguous based on its grammatical form: “eine Kraft, die er in all den Jahren brauchen würde, wenn das Schuhplattln zum Donnern der Stiefeln geworden wäre” (84). Like the play itself, this sentence plays with alternative realities and possibilities. The first part suggests a possibility in the present tense of the subjunctive mood, while the second part of the

sentence in the past tense of the German “Konjunktiv II” which refers to a possible event in the past that did not happen. The actual translation to this sentence would be: “a strength he would need, if the *Schuhplattln* had been replaced by the thunder of the boots.” The sentence itself is ambiguous, and it leaves the outcome open. But the references in the narrative to the actual events, especially at the end of the play, the hinting at Hitler’s one notorious literary work *Mein Kampf*, corresponds with the reader’s knowledge about the Holocaust. Thus, the final scene strongly suggests a continuation of the story according to historical records.

George Tabori’s play *Mein Kampf* offers a fresh perspective to Holocaust discourse, because in its absurd satire, it weaves in foreshadows and hints to the atrocities. Like the other works discussed in this thesis, the contrast, here between absurdity and reality, between fiction and fact, challenges the reader. The play challenges our knowledge of the Holocaust. The play begins and ends with allusions to the Holocaust; it thus frames it as a serious narrative. The playful mode at the beginning changes throughout the play. The subtle hints to the Holocaust become more obvious at the same time as the fictive Hitler takes on more features of the historical figure. Reminiscent of Klüger’s writing style, Tabori switches his narrative mode between humorous fiction and grotesque word play that alludes to actual events. The reader experiences the same tension, except that Tabori’s humor is dark and explicit, and the situations he describes are absurd unlike Klüger’s descriptions of her experience. While the humor is different, the reader experiences the same sensation of having a rug pulled out from under him. The play is an important addition to Holocaust literature, because it offers an alternative way to examine

the historical events through its use of humor, but is careful not to drift too far into the realm of the unbelievable. It provides a balanced mixture of absurdity and historical fact, allowing the reader to remain cognizant of the tension. Despite the absurd story and dialogue, the word play and allusions to the tragic events bring the reader's attention back to the historical Holocaust. When the word play and allusions to the actual events are unmistakably clear, Tabori ends his play with "Sie blieben die ganze Nacht wach und erzählten sich Scherze, über die nur die Gläubigen lachen können" (84). Tabori acknowledges the tragic events, but he approaches the topic in a more conciliatory way. Dani Levy, in his role as the director of the Hitler satire *Mein Führer* argues that both sad and humorous approaches are human reactions to tragedy, but comedy is more conciliatory in its nature.

Dani Levy's film *Mein Führer: Die wirklich wahrste Wahrheit über Adolf Hitler* approaches the involvement with the Holocaust from an equally conciliatory perspective as Tabori by offering a humorous alternative to historical events. Most prominently, the movie mocks Adolf Hitler and it shows the main Jewish character Adolf Grünbaum as a strong, intelligent individual who ultimately prevails over Hitler. The movie also critically addresses the question how Germans could blindly follow Hitler, but through the use of humor, it does this, like Klüger, without any accusatory remarks. During the credits, interviews with Germans across three generations are shown. They are asked what they know about Adolf Hitler and Adolf Grünbaum. The answers show that while the older generation shows resentment toward talking about the leader of the National Socialist party, the younger generation advances an image of an evil pop star. What these

interviews ultimately demonstrate is the fine line between how fact and fiction intertwine and become blurred.

### **Dani Levy: *Mein Führer* and the Caricature of History**

The 2007 German parody *Mein Führer* by Dani Levy provoked a discussion in Germany about whether or not it is permissible to laugh about Hitler and more specifically, who is allowed to laugh about Hitler. German bishop Gebhard Fürst argues “nur die Opfer könnten uns das Recht zugestehen, über Hitler zu lachen” (Broch). He also believes that the suffering does not allow for Hitler to be represented as a clownish figure, Fürst calls it “eine unangemessene Verharmlosung” (Broch). Fürst isn’t alone with his criticism, the vice president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Dieter Graumann, is quoted arguing that Hitler was no “putziger Räuber Hotzenplotz, kein tollpatschiger Clown” (“Mein Führer’: Massive Kritik”). Writer Rolf Hochhuth calls the movie a glorification of Hitler and the time period, and he raises the question of how one can produce such a falsification of history (“Mein Führer’: Massive Kritik”).

The analysis of *Mein Führer* will show the movie’s potential as an important contribution to cultural representations of the Holocaust and as a humorous way to engage in a critical discussion on Holocaust representation and memory. With the help of the humor, the movie asks the uncomfortable question why Germans, seemingly without any hesitations, followed Adolf Hitler and his philosophy despite the obvious discrepancies related to his ideas about what constitutes a true Aryan German citizen, even though his own appearance deviated from this racialized image.

Dani Levy, born in 1957 in Switzerland, is a filmmaker, theatrical director and actor. He is Jewish, but there is no information about his family's experience in the Holocaust (Stephens). According to the director, *Mein Führer* is a direct response to the drama about Hitler's last days, *Der Untergang* by Oliver Hirschbiegel (Stephens). Hirschbiegel advertised his intentions to provide a 'realist' image of Hitler's last days (Blasberg and Hunke qtd. in Ashkenazi). The historians David Cesarani and Peter Longerich have linked *Der Untergang* "to a prevalent longing for a form of historical escapism that strives to forget, or deny, Germany's responsibility for its past" (88). Ofer Ashkenazi argues that "Bruno Ganz' impressive impersonation of Hitler (as a symbolic embodiment of Nazism and its fate), resonates with the German spectators' propensity 'to see themselves as victims of Nazism and war'" (88). While Hirschbiegel chose a "highly serious" mode of narrative style that would be close to actual historic events in *Der Untergang*, Levy says he didn't "want to give this cynical, psychological wreck of a person the honor of a realistic portrayal," he had the feeling "that [he] must do it with another genre, do it by being able to exaggerate through comedy" (Levy qtd. in Stephens). *Mein Führer*, unlike the serious Academy Award nominee that aims at historical accuracy, indirectly and directly points to the Germans' role as Hitler followers.

Before it was released, the movie motivated a discussion in Germany about the humorous representation of Hitler. In an interview with Stefan Raab, Helge Schneider, the actor who played Hitler, points out the logical mistake most journalists make when they raise the question "Darf man über Hitler lachen, über den Holocaust" (Raab). The actor argues convincingly that the question is asked incorrectly, because we are of course

allowed to laugh about Hitler, but we cannot laugh about the Holocaust. Critics like the ones quoted earlier, who say that there can be no parody of Hitler, confront both director and actor with accusations. Furthermore, director Dani Levy reports he was accused of creating a falsification of history (Raab). Both director and actor argue that the movie doesn't glorify Adolf Hitler, nor does it try to make the atrocities of WWII less devastating. As for the falsification of history, the movie makes it very clear that it is a satire and thus it does not attempt to accurately depict historical events. As opposed to movies in a serious mode, it constantly reminds the viewer about its non-realistic approach. In his essay about the face mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Giorgio Agamben addresses the moment when actors look in the camera. Interestingly this meta-moment, when the actor purposefully addresses the audience (one famous example is the scene in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* in which Allen steps out of his role to address his audience directly), actually makes the moment seem more real. Humor adds another layer to this paradox: the concept of reality and illusion are challenged. Agamben calls it "tragicomedy of appearance" (94). Later in the chapter he argues that human beings are divided between proper and improper, true and false, possible and real (97). This ambiguity is the central idea in *Mein Führer*.

The full German title *Mein Führer: die wirklich wahrste Wahrheit über Adolf Hitler* hints at the nature of the movie and exemplifies Agamben's idea of the possible and real. By suggesting that this movie is really the truest truth about Hitler, we assume a critical perspective and question what we are about to see. The movie is loosely based on historic facts about Adolf Hitler and his role in WWII.

At the beginning, the movie establishes a direct link to the actual events of 1945 with a black and white documentary style view from the perspective of a person driving through the streets past an enthusiastic crowd of people in Berlin. The narrator, Adolf Grünbaum, sets the scene for his audience while the camera drives past the cheering crowds on the streets and with the monumental Schinkel buildings of Berlin in the background decorated with Nazi flags:

Seit nunmehr 12 Jahren wird Deutschland von einem Mann regiert, der in einer idyllischen Alpenrepublik namens Österreich geboren wurde und eigentlich Maler werden wollte. Aber da ihn die Kunstakademie ablehnte, wurde er Nationalsozialist. Der Mann heißt Adolf Hitler. (Levy)

Levy uses actual footage of Adolf Hitler driving through the streets of Berlin. The narrator comments on the scene that there is no doubt, “der Führer hat es geschafft das deutsche Volk zu verführen.” Millions of men went to war for him and he adds with a tone of disbelief, that millions of women even wish to have a child with him. At this point in the movie, a link to the actual Hitler and historic events is established. The narrators mocking voice changes dramatically when he informs the viewer that it is not Hitler’s story he is going to tell, but his own. At the same time we see documentary footage of a Hitler speech with the camera switching from the Nazi leader to the cheering crowds, the narrator recollects the last five days with Hitler before January 1, 1945. According to the narrator, Hitler isn’t feeling well, but neither is the narrator, Adolf Grünbaum. The black and white

frame changes to a colored one at the moment, when we see blood pouring down Grünbaum's head. With a smile on his face he adds the disclaimer that his story is so true that it may never appear in a history book. Like *Mein Kampf*, which takes a few known facts about Hitler and World War II, *Mein Führer* creates a staged reality, but it never deceives its audience by claiming to accurately depict historical events.

The movie continues with a description of the events starting five days before the actual speech. Hitler's staff removes the famous Jewish actor Prof. Dr. Adolf Grünbaum from the concentration camp Auschwitz and asks him to work with Hitler on his New Year's Day speech. At first, he resents the idea of assisting Hitler with his speech, but after negotiating with Hitler's staff to have his family brought from Auschwitz, he agrees. During the preparation for his public appearance, Hitler gets into a rant caused by his stylist who accidentally cuts off half of his famous mustache. This scene is reminiscent of the famous bunker scene in *Der Untergang*, in which Bruno Ganz as Hitler verbally attacks his staff after they inform him of a failed attack. Ganz uses his entire body in the scene, his face first shows calm anger, but it gradually transforms into an evil grimace. Even though we are saved from his verbal attacks, we can feel the emotional tension. This scene motivated hundreds of memes on the internet that added unrelated, humorous subtitles. In one for example, Hitler loses his pet rhino, in another his expulsion from x-box live causes his strong emotional reaction. The tension of the original scene finds a humorous release in the memes. In the rant scene in *Mein*



*Führer*, Hitler calls his hairdresser an elephant, an untalented potato, and a silly cow among other absurd names. Hitler's rant causes the loss of his voice and his transformation from being a clownish parody of Hitler, to a pitiful one.

In the final scenes of the movie we see Grünbaum again underneath the covered podium delivering the speech for Hitler as he is unable to speak himself. Unlike the beginning of the movie that showed original footage, this time we see the actor Helge Schneider as Hitler. Having a pistol directed at his head, Grünbaum anxiously begins with his presentation of the officially prepared speech. He speaks of Germany's power, purity and their progress in their destruction of communists, homosexuals, and most notably, Jews. After some hesitation, he shifts gears and continues:

Ich danke euch für euer blindes Vertrauen in mich. Treu und  
Deutsch seid ihr mir gefolgt die Welt zu Sauerkraut zu machen.  
Heute liegt unser geliebtes Vaterland in Schutt und Asche. Ihr seid  
alle arisch blond und blau-äugig, außer mir. Und trotzdem jubelt ihr  
mir zu. Heil mir selbst! [the crowd cheers] Warum tut ihr das? Ich  
bin bettnässer, drogenabhängig, ich kriege keine Erektion. Ich  
wurde vom Vater so oft geprügelt bis mein Gefühl verstummt war.  
Und so quäle ich das Wehrlose, wie ich einst wehrlos gequält wurde.  
Ich räche mich an den Schwulen, den Juden und den Kranken in  
ganz Europa für die Qualen in meinem Kinderzimmer. Jedes  
ungeliebte, hasserfüllte Würstchen kann die Welt erobern, wenn

ihm Millionen fol...[Grünbaum cannot finish his sentences as he is shot by one of the German officers]. (Levy)

The speech by the professor is humorous in different modes. It plays with stereotypes by referencing sauerkraut, it points at the most obvious absurdity, that Hitler himself had dark hair and eyes while he promoted the importance of the Aryan racial ideology, and finally, he questions Hitler's manhood. Embedded in the humor, this last scene captures an important critical aspect; it draws attention to the Germans' responsibility, and it challenges the convenient idea to see themselves as victims of Nazism. Throughout the movie, Grünbaum's position is inferior to that of Hitler and the German officers, but in the final scene the roles are reversed. With the microphone in his hand, he seizes the moment of power and ridicules Hitler in front of his staff and a big crowd of Germans. The ridicule is particularly devastating, because Hitler himself moves his lips like a puppet to the mocking words by Grünbaum. But it is not merely Hitler who is the center of the mockery, but his followers as well. With the speech, director Dani Levy, touches on the debate of the victim and victimizer which has already been discussed along with Ruth Klüger's autobiography.

The subtle humor from the introduction of the movie turns into an abundance of rather simple slapstick jokes, starting from continuous references to the Hitler greeting, to jokes about Hitler's incontinence and his small genitals. *Mein Führer* uses predictable and low-brow humor, for example the returning Hitler greeting jokes that reach their climax when Heinrich Himmler appears with his right arm fixed in a cast and

permanently extended to the Hitler greeting. Whether or not we like the humor in the main part of the movie, it creates a safe ground for an engagement with the topic of the role of the German people as supporters of Hitler. As Levy pointed out, the humorous genre can raise daring, uncomfortable questions. The movie is framed by actual footage of Hitler driving through Berlin and then holding his speech in front of the monumental building of the old museum in Berlin. Before we even see anything, we hear the cheering, enthusiastic crowds. Even when Grünbaum openly mocks the audience, they cheer in unison.

The chapter on Ruth Klüger already mentioned the controversial visit to Bitburg by former American president Ronald Reagan. Reagan explained his visit to Bitburg with the fact that the German soldiers on this cemetery were young men, implying that they are victims of the Nazi regime themselves. In an interview at the end of the movie *Der Untergang*, Hitler's secretary Getraud "Traudl" Jung, whose memoir the movie is partly based on, admits her obliviousness about the gravity of the Nazi regime. She came to this conclusion after realizing how young the German revolutionist Sophie Scholl was, when the Nazis executed her for being an active member in the resistance group, the White Rose.

Both Hirschbiegel's and Levy's film criticize the blind acceptance of Hitler during World War II, but this criticism is also directed towards Hitler admirers and those who believe in extreme right ideas today. According to [netz-gegen-gewalt.de](http://netz-gegen-gewalt.de) there were 22,400 extreme right followers based on their party affiliation. The numbers are far higher, though, if we consider non-member affiliates. In 2010, about 8% of the

population (6.4. million Germans), supported extreme right ideas. Most Germans who support extremist ideas come from low-income families with little educational background. While numbers decreased according to the statistics, news about Nazi gatherings and Nazi motivated crimes towards homosexuals or foreigners are a constant reminder that there are still extreme right followers. Over the past several years, the German government has implemented laws that forbid Nazi demonstrations, gatherings and their ability to play a role in the German government. Parallel to that, Berlin's city center was transformed into a Holocaust memorial, the Jewish museum Berlin was opened to the public in 2001, and The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe was inaugurated in 2005. Not far away, the memorial for the gays and lesbians targeted during the Nazi regime was opened to the public in 2008 and in 2012, the monument for the Sinti and Roma was inaugurated nearby. Along with the memorial sites, there are the stumbling stones, a project to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust in several European cities. But who are the memorial sites for? As Klüger sarcastically pointed out regarding the former concentration camp Dachau, the memorial sites and museums are items on tourists' itineraries. Are the museums and the memorials mainly for the tourists? Are they a political position from the German government as a sign of remorse for the world to see? Are they for Germans to educate themselves about the German past? After the movie *Mein Führer* ends, there is a series of short interviews with German pedestrians. They are asked the questions "Who was Adolf Hitler?" and "Who was Adolf Grünbaum?" For both questions Germans from three generations give their reply. The young children either don't know who Adolf Hitler is, or their answers range from saying

that Hitler screamed, or that he was the former king of Germany, or that he made sausages out of people. The teenagers' reaction ranges from a humorous, exaggerated impersonation of Hitler, to calling him a Jew and sexually frustrated, and a drug addict. The older generation responds with shock to the question, one man admits to get the chills when he hears the name Hitler. One woman calls him "unser Führer," while another man distances Hitler from Germany as a whole by saying that he is unworthy of a noble country like Germany. The last answer to the question is by a woman, who refuses to comment and asks the interviewer to leave her alone with that and not to ask her about it, because "wir wissen doch schon alles über ihn". As a contrast we hear comments in the next clip answering the question who Adolf Grünbaum was. This time, the response from the older generation is shown. Either the interviewees don't know who he was, or they speculate from his name that he was Jewish. Some guess that he was a scholar or opera singer. One younger interviewee believes Grünbaum to be a famous soccer striker. A little girl has the last word and she claims that Adolf Grünbaum was her great great great grandfather. The juxtaposition of the two questions and responses from different generations shows how Hitler has become an imaginative persona based on popular, limited images created by the media. As shown in the analysis, the movie has the potential to use the format of a satire to critically engage with the Holocaust and its representation. However, if a viewer is not sensitized with the subject and approaches the movie not from a critical, analytical perspective, the movie can be easily viewed as a simple comedy with rather predictable jokes and a mediocre plot. Here we see David A. Brenner's argument about the possible lack of critical perception of "fast entertainment".

If we take Jaye Berman Montresor's critical perception of memorial sites as "horrific Disneyland", then a satire like *Mein Führer* has a potential for critical reception, but we can also view it as form of "disneyfication" of history where a few historical facts are presented, but with little depth, so that the entertainment aspect predominates. Both George Tabori and Dani Levy focus on Hitler and a distortion of him as both evil dictator and circus buffoon. These works present alternatives to Holocaust representations and with their obvious deviation from history they have the potential to challenge the discourse of Holocaust representation.

Obviously these are only four sources using humor in relation to Holocaust representation. They help us understand the importance of humor for challenging the accepted tone of seriousness, which pervades the majority of such representation. As we move further away in time from 1945, it is of continued importance to engage with alternative approaches to Holocaust representation so that future generations have diverse points of access to history.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

Holocaust representation by its very nature engages a wealth of differing approaches. On the one hand, historians meticulously trace all ghettos and camps that existed during World War II. *The New York Times* article referenced in Chapter One suggests that the new statistics about the extent of the Nazi concentration and slave labor camp system, as well as the number of ghettos make the Holocaust even more shocking. While these types of statistics provide important information for understanding the scope of the Holocaust, they also represent a more intricate reading of individual experience and suffering at a more detailed level. Learning about these additional camps and ghettos adds to Holocaust memory and has the potential to complicate the stereotypical image of a camp that is tightly connected to that of Auschwitz. The academic desire to learn as much about the life during the National Socialist occupation through the help of former ghettos and camps and from the perspective of witnesses stands in greater contrast to contemporary popular associations with the words Holocaust, Adolf Hitler and Nazi. These become detached from their historically accurate meaning.

As an example, the reaction to the plans of the EU to resolve the economic crisis in Cyprus, Cypriots voiced their frustration about the EU actions. Their anger was targeted primarily at German chancellor Angela Merkel, an important political figure in the European Union, who has been vocal in her compassionate, yet strict EU policies. For a recent article appearing on *SPIEGEL ONLINE* a picture was used showing two people holding a poster with a crossed out EU flag, which exclaimed:

HITLER

MERKEL

THE SAME SHIT<sup>6</sup>

In their anger about the economic crisis, the demonstrators targeted Angela Merkel as the one person guilty for their situation and equated her with “evil”. In their mindset, the one person most associated with the word “evil” is Adolf Hitler. But the name “Hitler” is not the only term dissociated from its historical position, the term “Nazi” has also been transformed. In popular imagination both terms have now turned into a vague, bad dictator-type label used to refer to pedantic people, as for instance famously used in the NBC show *Seinfeld* episode “The Soup Nazi”. In addition, the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) launched a controversial campaign in which they compared the poor treatment of animals with images from the Holocaust. In the blog entry “PETA’s ‘Holocaust On Your Plate’ Campaign”, Gwen Sharp collects the controversial advertisements in which pictures of animals in bad physical condition are juxtaposed to Holocaust pictures with similar settings. One picture for example shows a number of young prisoners behind a fence opposite several piglets behind bars. The examples show how the words Holocaust, Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist party have become the epitome of suffering, evil and dictatorship, but they are often detached from the historical events and the historical figure(s) themselves.

Seventy years after World War II, the Holocaust still occupies us, be it historically or metaphorically. The present study represents an important addition to Holocaust discourse. It acknowledges humor as an important tool for the victims of the

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.corbisimages.com/stock-photo/rights-managed/42-44779034/demonstration-in-cyprus>



Holocaust, but also for succeeding generations to actively and critically engage in a discussion about Holocaust memory and representation. The thesis introduced Tadeusz Borowski as a first generation Holocaust witness to write about his experience in the camps utilizing humor. The immediate use of humor for victims is its use as a shield and as a tool for rising above an incomprehensible, horrific experience. We can see this form of humor in both Jurek Becker's novel and Ruth Klüger's autobiography. The authors lead us to the abyss, they let us experience the abject following Kristeva's concept, but with the help of humor-based contrast, they keep us at a safe distance. A "highly serious" autobiography or novel, would lead us to the abyss, but we would lose our distance. We would get lost in the descriptions of suffering and pain, which would allow no room for the reader to critically engage with the Holocaust discourse.

Using humor Ruth Klüger and Jurek Becker allow us to experience the ghetto and the camps from a more distant perspective, which provides for more opportunities for reflection. Klüger's autobiography is an important addition to Holocaust discourse in that it represents not only a witness autobiography, but also an academically motivated discussion about Holocaust representation. Her work responds to important questions, such as: Are we moving in the right direction with current museum culture? What is the actual purpose of memorial sites such as Dachau or Auschwitz? How should we remember the Holocaust? This last question has to be split into two parts, because there is a public memory motivated by politics and a personal memory motivated by a number of motifs such as family background, citizenship and education. Using Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject again and the idea of a moral compass that needs to be reevaluated

to find grounding, George Tabori's stage play *Mein Kampf* and Dani Levy's feature film *Mein Führer* challenge the moral compass related to Adolf Hitler and the Holocaust. They permit us to question dramatic fictional representations of the Holocaust, which are highly successful in Hollywood.

In a recent attempt to approach the Holocaust, the public television station ZDF aired the three-part-film *Unsere Mütter, Unsere Väter* (2013). To contextualize the mini series, ZDF published an article titled "Zeitgeschichte, zeitgemäß erzählt: Für den Dialog der Generationen - Vorwort der Redaktion" in which they remind their audience that there is little time left for the war generation to engage in a dialogue with their children, grand children and great grand children, and the movie "soll Anlass sein, zu fragen und zu hinterfragen, den Dialog zu intensivieren" (Hempel). The movie was produced with an accompanying motion comic. The premise behind the comic and the comic involves five friends meeting for the last time in 1941 before they are separated and their lives taking different turns. The movie focuses on their individual stories after 1941, while the motion comic tells their story before they separate. The comic is reminiscent of Art Spiegelman's *Maus I* and *Maus II*, in which Spiegelman recollects his father's Holocaust experience, but also critically engages with his role to represent the Holocaust, particularly as a reflection of the first part in the second part. The graphic novel format and the motion comic are playful in nature, but they offer interesting new perspectives to critically engage with a topic like the Holocaust, that has been represented numerous times in more traditional media. Using the graphic novel, or a motion comic as a tool to engage in a discussion of the Holocaust in itself offers a new perspective.

While the ZDF in Germany tries to engage the Holocaust from new angles that encourage a discussion about the Holocaust as an actual event in history, in his recent novel, *Hope: A Tragedy: a Novel* (2012), American Jewish author Shalom Auslander uses the most famous Jewish Holocaust victim, Anne Frank, as one of his main characters. The story is told by Salomon Kugel, husband and father, who moves with his family to a different town for its lack of history. The character ironically engages with his personal past and with his Jewish identity. A secluded old woman, who claims to be Anne Frank, hides in his attic working on her next novel. The cover of Auslander's book is exemplary for the nature of its content: it shows a roe deer and the title with all words crossed out. As readers we move between a father's life story to rather absurd references to an old Anne Frank who has been hiding in attics of different houses for decades. The reader engages with representations of the Holocaust, but it is all part of the main character's life which turns more and more into a catastrophe. The novel doesn't deny the Holocaust, neither does it view the atrocities lightly. Despite the absurdities, the novel engages critically with Holocaust tourism, reminiscent of Ruth Klüger's work. From the main character's perspective as a tourist, we witness how his mother, who falsely claims to be a Holocaust survivor herself, desperately wants to see the crematorium at the memorial site Sachsenhausen outside of Berlin, and how she convinces her son to smile for a photo. In a different scene, the main character encounters a young girl in a book shop who mixes up names of concentration camps, as if the representation of the camps is too blurry and all camps simply become one. One of the most important sentences in the novel

exemplifies the use of humor and illustrates its critical potential to engage with established Holocaust discourse:

I don't know who you are, he said, or how you got up here. But I'll tell you what I do know: I know Anne Frank died in Auschwitz. And I know that she died along with many others, some of whom were my relatives ...The old woman stopped typing and turned to him, fixing that hideous yellow eyes upon him. It was Bergen-Belsen, jackass, she said. (25)

Shalom Auslander's novel is direct, sometimes hysterically funny, sometimes crude. He takes us to the abyss, plays with ideas we have, plays with our sense of normality of what we see as established truth. His novel combines Kristeva's idea on the abject. He tests our comfort limits (in one scene he discovers that Anne Frank had used the vent system as a toilet), and he tests our knowledge of history. What do we actually know? Isn't the picture of Anne Frank a fabricated one that isn't true to the actual girl? What do we know about the camps? Have we seen pictures of one and use this as fine print for all camps? Based on the continuous nature of Holocaust representations, be they realistic or fictional, the Holocaust, as an event of incomprehensible horror and devastation, will keep us occupied for years to come. Terrence Des Pres' article from 1988 asked the question "Holocaust Laughter?" to imply if it exists, if it is permissible. Using his own words, I conclude that "the tradition of high seriousness will not be abandoned, but at this point in time – a certain weariness having settled upon us – I want to consider the energies of laughter as a further resource" (222).

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