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IMAGINARY TALES IN THE LAND OF THE PERPETRATORS

This article explores three recent works of fiction, all concerned with what I call “imaginary tales in the land of the perpetrators”. All the writers are women, albeit of varied backgrounds and nationalities. The earliest is Marcie Hershman (American, Tales of the Master Race, 1991), followed by Gila Lustiger (German-Jewish, Die Bestandsaufnahme, 1995, published in English as The Inventory, 2001) and Rachel Seiffert (British, The Dark Room, 2001). Although only Lustiger is the child of a survivor, all may be counted in the ranks of the second, or even third generation, who strive, each in their way, to recreate the day-to-day workings of society in the lives of “ordinary folk” under the Third Reich, to pose once again that all-consuming question: How could it have happened? Working at the intersection of history and fiction, fact and invention, imagination and memory, these novels may indicate a new and more risky trend in Holocaust literature away from the victims to the victimizers.

In retrospect, “Auschwitz” is the most important thing to know about World War II. But that is not how things seemed at the time.

(Judt 12)

[On 8 May 1945] all are eager to forget the mounds of bones and the mass graves, the flagpoles and the party books, the debts and the guilt.

(Grass 384)

A few days before Christmas in 1939, Felix Breslauer, a mapmaker by trade, arrives at his place of employment in Munich and discovers that the firm, Schermer Brothers, has been shut down until further notice and the two owners and their families have disappeared, although no one is exactly sure what happened and where they went. The suspension of business in this case, however, was not exactly a surprise; it was five years, after all, since the new laws had been passed. Felix, the first person narrator (as yet unnamed) is elated at this turn of events. An excellent time to open his own shop, just when Germany was triumphantly refashioning the boundaries of Europe in its favor. To his further good fortune, he happened to have in his possession the company’s base maps, which he had taken home the night before to complete a job. Now they were his. No fear of legal action; not exactly plagiarism, he decides, but “a starting point” for his own topographical series, Breslauer’s World, which he will establish, he decides, not in Munich, but in a neighbouring town, where competition will be less intense. He’ll need a printer, and lucky for him, he spots such a shop on his way to register his new apartment with the police and present his certificate of Aryan purity. The owner is a certain Herr Volkmann, one of the few Jewish proprietors left in town. A man about his

own age, Felix observes, “with finely drawn—that is, almost Aryan features”, but, all the same he is to be addressed as “Israel” (Hershman, *Tales*, 59–63, 68–70). Towards the end of 1942, it later transpires, Felix will have long acquired the store and its inventory at auction. Volkmann has been gone for almost a year now—“must have been sent east to work for the State” (148)—and Felix is busy carrying out plans for expansion and has started the first run on a new printing press, when the first British bombs start falling (163). It is early 1943 and the news of the German defeat at Stalingrad is just around the corner.

Felix (is his name significant? the happy, prosperous one) is a fictional character in Marcie Hershman’s *Tales of the Master Race*. Published in 1991, the book focuses on an imaginary town, Kreiswald, situated in Bavaria between Munich and Passau, and offers us glimpses into the lives of a number of its quite ordinary non-Jewish inhabitants whose relationships and stories are interlinked, by coincidence or otherwise, whether for business or for pleasure or for both, during the war years 1939 to 1943. Cognizant of changing orientations in both space (geography) and time (history)—although for professional reasons from which he stands to profit—the figure of Felix (we will hear more about him later) offers a point of departure for examining a trio of recent novels (Hershman’s included) published over a ten-year period (1991–2001) by three different women novelists. All are situated in what I call “the land of the perpetrators”, and all examine the lives and experiences of quite average persons who, for better or for worse, are in the grip of the Nazi regime and its aftermath. The world portrayed in Gila Lustiger’s *The Inventory*, originally published in German as *Die Bestandsaufnahme* (1995), takes a wider-angled view than Hershman’s interest in a single town in order to provide an extensive snapshot series of thirty-odd distantly interconnected vignettes of a broad range of characters—victims and victimizers alike—Jews and Christians, children and adults, men and women, Nazis and Communists, from all walks of life—that populate pre-World War II and wartime Germany from the streets of Berlin to the forests of Lithuania and the Polish death camps. What these authors share, however, despite differences in scale and scope, is the effort to scrutinize this society from within. Each in her own way strives to recreate, to re-imagine the day-to-day realities of these “ordinary folk” in extraordinary times—their attitudes, routines, activities, behavior and relationships with one another—whether relatives, neighbours, co-workers, clients, school friends, acquaintances, petty bureaucrats, enemies or strangers in chance encounters.

By contrast, Rachel Seiffert’s *The Dark Room* (2001) limits its purview to three disconnected novellas that function like a triptych to trace the impact and legacy of the Nazi period on three young Germans (Helmut, Lore and Micha) at separate points of time and location before and during the war, in its immediate aftermath and up to the last years of the twentieth century. This more limited focus on a child of each generation across a time span of eighty years (from the boy, Helmut’s birth in 1921 in the first story to Micha’s quest in the late 1990s for information about his Waffen SS grandfather in the last) approaches the burden of the Nazi era in another way through the prism of family relationships that pits loyalty against conscience (or consciousness) of still unresolved questions of German guilt. Yet *The Dark Room*, too, joins with the other two books in its subordination of characters, plot and narrative to the obsessive project of returning anew to those terrible times.¹

Each work was a first novel for its respective author, although they differ in nationalities and backgrounds. Two are Jewish (Hershman and Lustiger); one is not (Seiffert).

Marcie Hershman is American, while Gila Lustiger is a German Jew who at the age of 18, left for Israel, and has lived in Paris since 1987. Born of an Australian father and German mother and raised bilingually in Britain, Rachel Seiffert eventually resided in Berlin for some years after the publication of her novel (although, as of this writing, she has recently returned to London).

Despite the differences in age (Hershman: b.1951; Lustiger: b.1963; Seiffert: b. 1971), all can be counted in the ranks of the second generation or later, although only one (Lustiger) is the actual child of a survivor, and one (Seiffert), quite the contrary, is half-German in nationality. That Lustiger left Germany permanently to make her home elsewhere and Seiffert went in the opposite direction is not an insignificant measure of their different experiences and allegiances, as we will shortly see. In any case, it seems hardly likely that they have even crossed paths, and literary influences seem not to be a factor. Yet what these works have in common, broadly speaking, has struck me as a noteworthy trend in the production of Holocaust fiction, one that situates itself in the framework of what I have designated “imaginary tales in the land of the perpetrators.” Working at the intersection of history and fiction, memory and imagination, fact and invention, all three novels resort to a variety of intriguing and not entirely dissimilar narrative strategies, especially with regard to continuity and sequence, as well as in the cool and unemotional sparseness of their styles, in order to probe the all-consuming question that seems to haunt us still: how could it have happened? What did ordinary Germans think and do during this period, when certain classes of persons, especially, but not only, Jews, were progressively made social pariahs, disenfranchised, stigmatized and finally outlawed? How did an apparently normal and diversified society assent to Nazi measures of increasing violence, directed first and foremost against the neighbours in their midst? What happened to conscience, moral choice and human decency, even under the fierce pressures of ideological fanaticism that sorted the world into perpetrators, victims and bystanders? What did these ordinary folk know? And what did they care?

History and fiction

In recent years, historians and social scientists have approached these issues with increasing urgency as new information has become available and new methods of research refined. Studies of daily life (*Alltagsgeschichte*) as well as the assessment of public opinion and levels of engagement, knowledge and culpability during the Third Reich (and after) have proliferated and are by no means limited to the outpouring of German scholarship itself, whose conceptual and archival work surrounding such uncomfortable findings demonstrates ever greater density and complexity (see, for example, Gellately, *Bankier*, Koonz, as well as Newman and Erber). Historiography, with its controversies and conflicting interpretations, is, of course, in quite another category than fiction, which by necessity places a whole set of other demands on the author as on the reader. And nowhere more so than when it comes to the Holocaust as an event or series of events that challenges the very validity—or at least, appropriateness—of fictionality itself and the burdens of representation (or misrepresentation) it is asked to bear in the face of such concepts as “truth”, “verisimilitude” and “factuality”, while foregrounding issues of artistic as well as moral and historical integrity.

Each of the authors in question, to be sure, has done her homework. Hershman prefaces each chapter with copies of actual documents: a warning sign, an official order, a diary excerpt, a newspaper clipping, secret correspondence, an arrest warrant, and early on, of course, a map, and has studded her text with significant dates from 1939 to 1943. Lustiger flatly states in a prefatory note: "All events described are based on historical fact. Many characters are freely invented, but their fate resembles that of thousands of others. Biographical details of some of the protagonists correspond to reality, while individual sequences of events, thoughts and motives are fictitious." Seiffert makes no such specific claims, but has disclosed in interviews that, aside from more general research, she drew upon stories told to her by her maternal family in Germany with whom she retains close ties.

Fiction, however, makes other demands, of course, in shaping material to a formal design and in creating a text rich in layers of meaning. It is necessarily a contrivance, an artificial construction of a world that challenges the reader to attend to themes, tropes and generic conventions, to the development of character and incident, and authorial voice(s), however these may be subverted in the telling. In these particular works of fractured narratives, discontinuities and competing points of view, the demands on the reader are far greater. There is no sustained storyline, for the most part, and characters, who often come and go (Hershman) or, as in Lustiger's case, make cameo appearances, are subordinated to the pervasive atmosphere of the larger society in which they are situated. The documentary impulse, so often a feature of Holocaust novels, is strongly evident here, serving not only to authenticate experience, but through a mounting accumulation of often petty details to foreground the fragmentation and randomness of a mundane reality that makes up the lives and actions of ordinary individuals on the periphery of grand events.

What sets these novels apart in the genres of Holocaust literature, in my opinion, is a critical shift of point of view that addresses the Nazi era from within its own territory and frames of reference, and they do so without ever falling into the equally treacherous alternatives of demonization or exculpation in order to register the corrosive effects of an already institutionalized evil. There is no need for characters to profess a heartfelt ideological commitment to Nazi goals that justifies a Goldhagen-like indictment of a pervasively radical antisemitism. A factory manager initially joins a citizens' band in his town as a second-trumpeter "for camaraderie and because I was afraid. All around me, he says, our little town was dressed up and shouting—all of Germany was dressed up and shouting. And I stood out because I didn't make a sound. I had to find some sweet little part in all the excitement. The rest of it, well, to be truthful, I shuddered to think of the rest of it" (Hershman, *Tales*, 104).

In Seiffert's first story, the young Helmut's parents join the Nazi Party, but beyond minor economic advancement, nothing further seems to be gained. Helmut's own fierce loyalty to the Nazi cause does not diminish even in the face of the bombs that are destroying his city in January 1945. Barred from military service by a physical handicap in a society that disdains the less than perfect specimen of manhood, Helmut's patriotism is born not out of conviction, but as a desire to affirm an identity he cannot fully claim. Only in the last hours before the fall of Berlin when the "order comes for the last stand of the German people" is he finally enlisted into service, albeit in the company of a ragtag group of other rejects. "This," he can declare, "is the best time of his life" (Seiffert 45).

To take another trivial, but more commonplace, example, Lustiger's Frau Helga Pfeifer, a busybody Hausfrau mother of four sons, boasts in a letter of her Party membership since 1933, her bronze star for motherhood and her undying loyalty to the Führer, People and Fatherland. The context, however, is an unctuously worded petition to get a good deal on penknives for her soldier son from confiscated ghetto goods (Lustiger, *The Inventory*, 201–202). The compelling value of a close-up such as this lies in its exposure of a recognizably messy reality. It is one that “reveals itself as a blend of all kinds of secondary motives such as opportunism, careerism, greed or various other familiar forms of baseness” (Diner 225) that, once officially sanctioned, promote a general indifference, callousness and passivity in the face of increasing Nazi persecution of Jews and other so-called “undesirables”.

There is no need to trumpet slogans. The Nazi apparatus comes across as a network of impersonal forces that operate behind the scenes to suggest an already taken-for-granted worldview in the conduct of ordinary life. The appearance of slave worker transports on the streets of Kreiswald is not even noticed (Hershman, *Tales*, 145). The SS men who have come to take away Frau Volkmann's half-Jewish children (her husband is long gone) admonish her for making a scene: “Please, Frau Volkmann, think of your neighbours. They're right in front watching” (189). In Lustiger, confiscations of property are an integral part of the system; they happen every day, as does its redistribution in the form of penknives, clocks, watches, pearl necklaces or department stores. It is, rather, the accumulation of detail upon detail, trivial and momentous alike, that adds up to a thick description of a society that during wartime is represented as mostly oblivious to the consequences of its exclusionist and murderous policies. If Lustiger, the only one who includes Jewish narrators in her extensive inventory of other types and situations, gives voice to their bewilderment and anguish, the fact that those voices are embedded in the general roster of characters, while not exactly “normalizing” the indignities and worse that are visited upon them, serves at least to contextualize their experiences within the same social and economic environment.

Why this kind of fiction and why now? Has the historians' more detailed investigations of life under the Third Reich filtered down to the literary imagination? Or is it a matter of generational change that might account for these efforts to penetrate to the heart of a society that sanctioned the unparalleled atrocities committed in its name? Has the passage of time given the license to imagine real-life figures and not mere stereotypes, and to strive to represent, if not to forgive, the breakdown of humanitarian values on such a scale? Or conversely, has the passage of time in the face of new and other deadly manifestations of brutal inhumanity renewed attention to the paradigmatic example of murder in our midst? Certainly, to my knowledge, it is not German fiction, for all its preoccupation with the Nazi past and its residue, that is able to take up this challenge, with the possible exception of Ursula Hegi's *Stones from the River* of Oprah Winfrey fame, but Hegi has lived in the United States for a long time and writes in English.² Conversely, other Jewish writers of the second or third generations, whatever their nationality, are concerned with the more typical themes of traumatic encounters, re-enactments of the past, broken lives, parental secrets, crises of identity and the enduring memory of the offence.³

If there are no satisfactory answers to these larger questions, we can perhaps delineate each author's subject position and the particular circumstances that motivated them

to undertake such a risky enterprise. In Hershman's case, a beloved grandmother's loss of her family in Slovakia spurred her desire to probe the doings of a society where decent folk let such things happen to their neighbours. Yet her ideas took more concrete shape through an improvised visit to Germany in 1987 and a chance meeting with Anna Rosmus, of "The Nasty Girl" fame, whose research into what her town and its population had done during the war earned her the vicious hostility of its inhabitants, still eager to keep up the pretence of its anti-Nazi record. (It is not accidental, by the way, that Kreiswald is situated between Munich and Anna's hometown of Passau and a minor figure is named Dr Rosmus).⁴

Lustiger and Seiffert are much closer to their subjects. Lustiger, whose father Arno is a survivor and founding member of Frankfurt's postwar Jewish community, can approach the Nazi past from intimate knowledge of the present society with a seemingly ironic detachment of a would-be chronicler, who never intends, however, that the ghosts of history be laid to rest. In the well-known bind of a native-born Jew in Germany as both insider and outsider, her efforts to retrieve "perpetrators and victims alike from a fog of anonymity" by giving them a name and a story, however brief, commands an authority (and an audience) that only her special status can confer.⁵

As for Seiffert, her mixed identity (German-British) and divided loyalties suggest an almost uncanny counterpart to Lustiger. In Britain, her German background was a liability. Growing up in Oxford, she was bullied at school and even called a Nazi. Yet she loved her German family and she knew about the bombs and the postwar chaos and starvation that attended defeat. "I think in common with many Germans or people with German families, I grew up with stories like Lore's, or hearing about the bombing in the cities which Helmut experiences." The disparity between her feelings for her family and the Nazi legacy was not, and is still not, easy for her to resolve. "Being German," she says, "is not quite right and I still have that feeling... The Holocaust was such an appalling crime, still within living memory, and it can't help but resonate... It's unfortunate for people who were not alive at the time but it is still a part of their lives." The third story, about the young middle-class teacher, Micha, who is obsessed with what his adored grandfather did as a member of the *Waffen SS* in the East, especially regarding the massacre of Jews, is the one that chimes most with her own position and, like Micha, she has to live with a history that is forever marred by unbearable truths. The focus of her book, after all, is the "children and grandchildren of Nazis. And if you're German or if you're Jewish," she says, "you can't get away from that century. And I'm German."⁶ Yet however these authors' backgrounds and motivations have earned them "le droit de parole", let us take a closer look at the works themselves.

Fragments of quotidian realities

In Hershman, the narrators of the book's nine chapters are unified by the fact that all are "Aryan" inhabitants of the same town, and, however individualized their voices, it is their words and only their words we hear (or overhear) regarding their own affairs, the activities of their town and the life around them in wartime. Economically and socially speaking, Kreiswald is a microcosm of a rather homogeneous society consisting of policemen, clerks, factory managers, landladies, lawyers, construction workers, house-

wives and—oh yes—mapmakers, whose various relationships thread their way through the book. I earlier referred to Felix Breslauer, the mapmaker, as an emblematic figure in his professional approach to the temporal and geographical realities (or hopes) of Nazi conquest. Yet his figure also stands at a point of intersection among a number of other stories and characters, as told by others: the previous tenants of the flat he rents were the young police clerk and his wife before she left him for his boss; his own adulterous affair with the landlady is interrupted by the unexpected return of her brutish husband, just back from three years of construction work somewhere in Poland named Auschwitz. An unwitting partner in an erotic triangle, Willi offers his skills (he knows how to handle foreign labourers) to oversee the renovations of Felix's shop. Volkmann, deported in 1942, although married to an "Aryan wife", has children who are earlier excluded from activities at school, as narrated by a favorite playmate, and then under the cover of the bombing raids in 1943, as earlier mentioned, are themselves picked up by the SS for deportation. Breslauer's new young assistant, Thea Wenngarten, the Volkmann's neighbour, is the one, it turns out, who filched ink and paper from the shop for printing illegal pamphlets, and in the aftermath of that fateful air raid, she is the one who stole the police files that went missing when they were transferred from the ruined station to cabinets briefly stored in her building (Hershman, *Tales*, 213).⁷ By way of transition, however, as the only citizen of Kreiswald we know who has profited directly from Jewish misfortune (in acquiring his printing shop at auction), Felix represents the larger theme of the desire for material gain that will be the leitmotif of Lustiger's *The Inventory* and accounts in no small part for the irony of the book's title.

To begin with, Lustiger's ambitions are much more far-reaching than Hershman's and the structure of her work accordingly more complex. In spreading her net more widely to include both pre-war and wartime Germany, Lustiger introduces a more extensive cast of characters in 35 chapters, which vary in length and detail. The narrators are more diverse and seemingly more randomly selected, speaking sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, depending on the individual story. What is more, these voices range across the entire spectrum of society in a variety of attitudes and situations—the complacent and the desperate, the virtuous and the venal, whose lives may also intersect, at times, even across years from the 1930s to the 1940s. As regards the victims—Jews, yes, of course, in the largest numbers, artists, furriers, department store owners, newspaper editors, dentists, booksellers, war heroes, converts, and families large and small—but also other "enemies of the state"—union organizers, communists, homosexuals, the retarded, the so-called "degenerates," petty criminals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and so on. At the same time, "quietly and terribly interspersed with the lives of Jews and other outcasts, there are also stories of Germans—a woman sews clothing from scraps; a typist is stalked by a co-worker; a party member's wife is divorced for buying a compact from a Jewish store—as there are those who denounce their neighbors, betray their friends or send home plundered jewellery to their wives from the front" (Anon., *Kirkus Reviews*).

In Hershman, the society of the single town remains always the center of concern. Undesirables are glimpsed only from afar or casually dismissed (like Volkmann) or remain on the periphery of vision, even when violence is in the streets. The mapmaker again sets the tone. Momentarily panic-stricken just after his arrival that his theft of the maps may have been discovered, he rushes back to the railway station in the middle of the snowy night, only to encounter a group of 50 or 60 unfortunates,

herded by soldiers who are abusing them—old people and younger, and very young children. “Stateless”, he presumes, “probably Jews” (Hershman, *Tales*, 75). Yet no matter, what attracts his anxious attention is the sight of policemen on the sidelines that prompts him to scurry away guiltily and retrace his steps. An angry domestic scene is briefly, but only briefly, interrupted by the sound of a siren and a cry to Jews to halt. Even the bursts of gunfire that follow fail to distract the couple—that police chief and his underling’s former wife—in the midst of their private crisis (137–139). An early riser, the landlady on her way to an assignation with Felix, notices “trucks going past”. The faces are blurred, it is true, but once she spots “the yellow blinking of six-pointed stars flapping back and forth below these,” she figures it out: “Jews, not laborers” (180)—and goes on her way. That second trumpeter we earlier met in Kreiswald Citizens’ Band who, to his dismay, is drafted to lead off a grand parade in a neighbouring town, completes his description of the crowd’s (and his own) mounting excitement with a casual reference to a banner proclaiming the city *Judenrein* (116). There are some ugly secrets though hidden away about which the townsfolk prefer not to know: the deportation of sick children from a hospital noticed only by a woman who lies recovering from a stroke and would herself be in danger of disposal were it not for her devoted husband, a policeman, or the use of a guillotine hidden in the basement of the police station for the execution of German citizens condemned as traitors.

Most of Hershman’s characters are hardly likable or, for that matter, memorable; their ordinariness is not redeemed by flashes of insight or introspection; life is lived on the surface, caught up in the routine activities of daily life, indulging in their pastimes, satisfying lust, doing their duty and getting by. Her own fury at the obtuseness, the complacency, of these good burghers, whatever their hidden secrets and scandals, unredeemed by a few timid signs of scruples and moral distress (although not towards Jews), erupts in the two anonymous questionnaires that frame the novel. Numbered consecutively, they are no doubt meant to be read together, but book-ending the narrative as they do, they reinforce the ethical insufficiency of the characters and, by extension, the entire town. No one knew; didn’t see; don’t really believe; not my business, reported atrocities, yes, but no names of those involved; need to feel at home and so on (1–5, 217–223).

Lustiger’s main venue is Berlin, the great metropolis, where there are neighbours too and an assortment of relationships, casual or otherwise, although on a much larger scale and with a greater variety of situations as befits the more chaotic sprawl of urban life. By contrast to Hershman, moreover, she brings to our attention a virtual roll call of familiar examples of Nazi barbarity in its escalating measures of persecution: book-burning, boycotts, the Nuremberg Laws, disbarment, forced Arya-nization of businesses, revocation of citizenship, passports marked with a “J”, detention for *Rassenschande* (defiling the race in a mixed marriage), the paroxysms of *Kristallnacht*, enforced sterilization and euthanasia, with a final shift to the killing fields in the East and deportations to Auschwitz itself. Yet not in the abstract. These and other aspects of life in the Third Reich are embedded in brief vignettes that give a face, a name, a voice and a story to the many characters who parade before us in a relentless catalogue that comprises an inventory of offences, given or received, incidental or life-shattering, that captures the creeping demoralization that has taken over an entire human society, and with what alarming speed! A character looks back at the

waning days of the Weimar Republic and reflects: “Yes, we were presumptuous, because we considered ourselves untouchable, because we thought that luck was on our side. And had anyone said to me then that my life would be destroyed in less than three years, and that I would lose everything that was dear to me, I would have laughed in his face” (Lustiger, *The Inventory*, 128).

Viewed through the eyes of the young

Seiffert, the last in our series, takes an entirely different route than the other two, as earlier observed. The book consists of three entirely discrete narratives, each of which revolves around a single character, identified as the offspring of Nazis or Nazi sympathizers, each narrated from a perspective of an innocent young person who is challenged in one way or another to come to terms, now or later, with tainted knowledge. Despite its considerable differences from the other two novels—in substance, timeline and perhaps too in its ultimate goals—like their work, the actions and reactions of the characters are motivated and determined by the conditions of Germany society, in which, now more than ever, they are (or will be) compelled to find a place and meaning for their lives. There is an enormous gap, not only in time, between the first and third narratives—the one centering on Helmut, the boy with the drooping arm who comes of age in Berlin during the war and who, despite his growing skills as a photographer, remains an uncomprehending witness to the world that has largely excluded him, and the other, some fifty years later in the story of Micha, the young schoolteacher, whose obsession with what his beloved Opa may have done as an SS officer on the Eastern front, drives him in the opposite direction: to pursue the answers, even at the cost of alienating his family.

Micha’s quest for knowledge sets him apart from the earlier two figures. As a young schoolteacher, he already knows the history of the Holocaust and is seeking compulsively, like so many Germans of the second and third generation, for the information withheld from them by parents and grandparents. It is a story we have heard before. Seiffert’s real achievement, however, in my opinion, is what she accomplishes in the first two stories. Both of them, set during or just at the end of the war, make use of immature actors, or rather, witnesses, who are drawn into events that they hardly understand, and by this device she can approach the devastation and crimes of the Third Reich from an innovative angle of vision.

Helmut, the only pampered child of ordinary parents, excluded from his peer activities, including enlistment in the army because of his minor defect, is a strange and solitary figure in the streets of Berlin, increasingly so, as the bombings begin and he loses his home, his family and even his boss. At times he seems to border on the autistic, even at the age of 21, in his fixation with trains and timetables and his increasing devotion to developing his skills as a photographer’s assistant without, however, ever grasping the import of the pictures he takes. As readers, we may take a few suggestive hints that are shadowed beneath the radar screen: his birth defect prevents him from raising his arm above his shoulder; his interest in trains and their human cargo both parodies a German obsession with modern efficiency and gestures towards that means of transportation we associate with deportations and worse. The disconnection between what Helmut observes (Berlin’s gradual loss of its inhabitants,

the violent rounding up of gypsies, wounded soldiers returning from the front and the chaos of a city in ruins) and what he actually understands is never bridged, not even at the end. Watching “the refugee masses flooding back,” he “takes their photos and welcomes them home... They describe an army the size of a continent, angry and brutal and without mercy. These people speak of punishment, and bring with them a faint sense of deserving. As they pass they tell tales of emaciation and ashes, of stinking smoke and pits full of bodies. Some say they have seen these things, others dispute it” (Seiffert 46). Helmut’s mind is elsewhere: another photograph, this time with himself included, at last, in the rubble brigade commandeered for a last and hopeless defense of the city.

In the second story that takes place in April 1945 in the last days of the war, the teenage Lore will also confront evidence of Nazi atrocities, but in quite another way, as she embarks on a journey both actual and psychological through the combat zones of Germany. When her father, an SS officer, is carted off and her mother arrested, Lore is left to shepherd her four younger siblings on a 300-mile trek from Bavaria northward to her grandmother’s house in Hamburg. Instead of a Helmut in his self-delusional isolation, Lore is both surrounded by those she loves and for whom she is responsible and thrust into a world of strangers. It is a perilous journey, mostly on foot, across a chaotic landscape of competing Allied forces, fleeing refugees and suspicious villagers, with hardly any access to food and shelter. They find no protection, except from a mysterious stranger, Tomas, whom they come to trust, but whose unmasking at the end as a petty criminal who has stolen the identity card of a dead Jewish prisoner, is perhaps the last blow to any of Lore’s illusions. Chronologically, this story may be seen as a kind of sequel to Hershman’s and Lustiger’s narratives, which both end officially in 1943. It is only now in these early days after defeat that an entire society is finally faced with the terrible evidence of the Holocaust and is stunned by having to confront the outcome of its genocidal policies that were only glimpsed in the previous works.

The child’s perspective is a brilliant device through which to capture a world of suddenly shattered values and brutal revelations, whereby love, loyalty and trust are forever compromised. “Fictions presenting ways in which a child’s mind attempts to come to terms with adult meaning,” observes Naomi Sokoloff, “necessarily bases its plot in confrontation between contrasting frames of reference” (23) and, by the same token, the child’s ignorance offers an oblique means of resituating that adult world in a context we already know. Lore’s journey is a progressive initiation into uncertainty, moral confusion and an irretrievable loss of innocence. Central to this traumatic awakening are the photographs she first witnesses tacked up in a village square: “the heaps of ashes, hundreds of skeletons, hips and arms and skulls in tangles; the open railroad car, the shallow graves, the skin as thin as paper over bone” (Seiffert 77). Everyone is talking about them, on trains, on streetcars, and the newspapers are full of them. Yet what should she believe? Are they just a set up engineered by the canny Americans, an overheard conversation on a train suggests (126–127), or are they in fact Jews, as later in Hamburg the lady on the tram insists (145–146). And side by side with those pictures of the victims are others, the ones who killed them, men in uniform, wearing the same black collars with bright lightning flashes as her beloved Vati whose existence early on she dimly realizes she should never speak of, his incriminating photographs buried out of sight.

What gives this story its power is in no small way an effect of its narrative style, its insistence on remaining only within the child's perspective, leaving us to interpret the impact of what she sees and hears in all its immediacy.

Lore tries to unravel Tomas and prisons and skeleton people; lies and photographs; Jews and graves; tattoos and newspapers and things not being as bad as people say. In middle of it all are Mutti and Vati, and the badges in the bushes and the ashes in the stove and the sick feeling that Tomas was both right and wrong, good and bad; both at same time. (151)

Names and meanings

Seiffert shares with the other two authors a dispassionate, objective, even quasi-documentary style that, for the most part, precludes editorial comment or prescriptive judgments. The youthfulness of Seiffert's characters (especially in the first two chapters) restricts our vision to their innocent and often uncomprehending understanding of events. Metaphor is rarely, if ever used. Understatement and plain speaking, avoiding both judgment and justification, function as forms of impartial but deadly witnessing. The effect of a cool ironic detachment is reflected in all three works through the type of names chosen for chapters. For Hershman, it is the event itself or its anonymous agent that normally determines the titles, always nouns, such as "The Map", "The Parade", "The Tryout", "The Trespasser", "The Shift" and so on. In Lustiger's *Inventory*, the chapters, true to the book's name, are composed largely (although not exclusively) of objects and things: the pearl necklace, the brooch, the stamp album, 50 kilos of gold fillings, 100 furs, the lighter. Seiffert, for her part, resorts simply to the first names of the three young characters (Helmut, Lore and Micha), signifying their status as children in the families of Mutti, Vati, Oma and Opa, but no more than that.

The individual titles of the books themselves, however, are rich with implied meanings and tonal ironies. *Tales of the Master Race* works in two directions. The designation hardly fits the mundane, at times, scandalous affairs of an assortment of ordinary, often commonplace, characters; yet it is the claim of racial superiority, at the heart of the entire National Socialist enterprise, that has undermined the moral fibre of the town and repressed their responses to ethically repugnant behavior. Lustiger's title, *The Inventory*, is more than a listing of assets, more than a catalogue of objects that may be exchanged, bought and sold, given as gifts, or confiscated and plundered, themselves sometimes enumerated in lists. Objects belong to their owners, who may cherish them, but owners, too, may be reduced to objects in the economy of the Third Reich. When the department store owner is forced to sell all his assets at a pittance early on, the unnamed narrator observes:

He was a businessman and knew the facts: The Jew was good business. Stealing his fortune was a fruitful affair. The little bit of effort bore no relation to the profit, for many civilians helped with the plundering free of charge. Soon the simple operation would be restructured into a regular branch of business.

(Lustiger 167)

This is but a first step that leads to its logical conclusion some hundred pages later in the official order sent from Berlin to the commandant of the camp:

Maximum profit is the aim of every undertaking. The decrease in value or the demise of the Jews is not to be viewed as loss but rather as success. One has managed to collect a large store of this raw material. But one does not know what to do with it. The Jews should be driven on to work and to wear themselves out working... and then away with them. (271)

Yet, for all the cynical manipulation of property and propriety, an inventory is also a reckoning, a calling to account, and a mode of review and recapitulation: a formal necessity, indeed, given the often apparently haphazard assortment of characters, stories and fates. A chapter towards the end of the book concerns stolen files (we might recall Hershman here) that literally yield up a huge inventory of assets with exact numbers and weights. These include brooches, fountain pens, telescopes, wedding rings, powder compacts, dental gold, furs, pocket watches, penknives, stamp collections, jewellery and so on (246–247). We recognize many of these items as figuring previously in the individual stories. Their accumulation here are metonymies, as it were, for their owners whom we have met, reduced now to the sum total of their mercantile value, whether for loss or another's profit. The human reckoning, however, is to come in the final chapter, entitled "The Final Balance" (*Schlussrechnung*), which conveniently brings before us a roster of all the characters that have passed through the pages of the book in a last reprise. Who was still alive on 10 June 1943, where were they and what were they doing? What actions occupied them, trivial or tragic? What lay before them? What characters were already disposed of? Who were to be enrolled among the dead on this very day, when a final judgment still lay in the future? (283–291).

The Dark Room too is a title that is susceptible to several levels of interpretation and provides an essential thematic focus in both literal and metaphorical terms: it begins with the first story of Helmut, the photographer's apprentice, who learns to hone his technical skills there and is faced with having to gauge the fidelity of his prints to what he has actually seen, and culminates in the grandfather's photograph as a young man that Micha steals from a family album to help him in his quest. Throughout there are numerous references to photographs, cameras, and the process of taking and developing pictures that vary in significance and value. "Pictures are taken, framed, buried, stolen, burnt, copied and sought for," as one critic points out, "They record personal history and document public shame" (Spencer). "A photo may be a family relic or criminal evidence" (Sacks) or both. The uses of photographs might suggest that the title was meant "to connect the novel with the process of clarifying things (developing photos) and documenting things (taking photos, keeping photos)." However, the author herself demurs: "A dark room is also the place where memories and events too painful to recall are *kept hidden*." (Random House; emphasis in original). Its darkness suggests both ignorance and reflectiveness. At the same time, if a dark room is a repository of photographs, it is also a laboratory—a place in which "the truth can be edited, arranged, and brought to light" or, conversely, one in which pictures show only half-answers. As historical evidence, can "photographs ever get at the truth of an event which has passed?" Seiffert would not be alone of her

generation whose “immediate connection to this period is through photographs and film” (Richter).

Family, memory, history

The article in this special section by Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer draws our attention to the importance and ubiquity of photographic images in Seiffert’s book and their conflicting relationships with truth, cognition and memory. What I wish to emphasize, however, is the ways in which photographs demonstrate how the individual and family are interconnected with history. Family photographs figure in each story with somewhat different effects. In Helmut’s chapter, the photographer who employs his father and later himself takes portraits of the family threesome every year: they are records of Helmut’s development, his dependency upon and love for his parents and theirs for him. In Lore’s chapter, the mother first goes through the photograph albums, removing incriminating pictures, and Lore herself disposes finally of those that remain as too dangerous to keep. When in Hamburg, a neighbour takes photographs of the children to send to their mother, imprisoned by the Allies, these are now sources of anxiety since one sibling is not there, felled by a stray Russian bullet along the way. “Lore feels her stomach shrink while Oma writes the address. Mutti will see that Jochen is gone” (Seiffert 143). Micha in the last chapter, as already observed, steals his Opa’s photograph from his Oma’s album as it is the only clue he has to his grandfather’s identity at that age. The abstraction of the photograph (it is a wedding picture) from its familial context is the single connecting link to the outside world of war, atrocity and history.

Family photographs are first and foremost relics, precious images of what is vanished and gone, the source of recollection and memory, the only secure evidence that attests to one’s existence—and nowhere more so than in the context of the Holocaust. Lustiger alludes once to these cherished mementoes. Ordinarily, her characters remain within their stories of the moment or look ahead to the near future. Only once does she relent and offer us a full autobiography, the story of a man who survived and, many years later, reflects upon his life from his earliest days up to the present. In this, the longest chapter (Lustiger, *Inventory*, 113–142), the narrator, Ernst Fuchs, has lost everything he loved: his wife, his child, the happy and fulfilled life he led before the war at home and in his work. He recalls his childhood in a small town on the Polish border with his parents and siblings.

Twice a year we were spruced up and sent to a photographer. These sittings seemed to last an eternity—What torture! The day before I was dragged to the barber by my father, because I hated and feared him. (115)

But now he says:

Those numerous photos taken in front of ever-changing backgrounds could tell a historian far more about the tastes, fears, and dreams of our times than the silly statistics so fashionable today, as though figures could describe our reality. Those photos have of course disappeared without a trace. I have no idea who took them

when my family was driven out of their house one night. I keep the hope alive that one day while out taking a Sunday stroll I will come across my father, my mother, and my awkwardly smiling sisters at some flea market, among orphaned cups without handles, headless dolls, and other old worthless objects. They could only mean something to me, surely not to anyone else. (116)

The loss of these photographs, except in the memory of a lone survivor, exemplifies the difficulty of the task that each author has set herself: to record and recall what one has not known, in all the horror, the sorrow, and the anger. At the same time, as a fully realized character with whom we can identify, Ernst Fuchs in Lustiger's work is an exception to the general techniques and strategies I have earlier described as common to the three novels under consideration. To a large extent, these writers, each in her own way, "solve" the problem of imagining the tenor of life in the Third Reich, especially from the perpetrators' (or perpetrators' children's) perspective by refusing the ordinary expectations of fiction through discontinuities in sequence, shifts in narrators, fragmentary discourses and planned incoherences. No major protagonist, no exploration of character, no unifying voice or set of voices, no depths of ambiguity and little opportunity for empathy. Above all—no forgiveness.⁸

Notes

1. Seiffert's last story, "Micha," exceeds the time frame of her other two stories, as well as that of Hershman and Seiffert. Accordingly, I generally exclude it from discussion.
2. Hegi, like Hershman, focuses on a single town, albeit in a longer time frame and with a sympathetic narrator, a dwarf, who observes her surroundings from an outsider's perspective. For an overview of relevant German-language literature, which she calls "a literature of silence", see Schlant, and for an excellent discussion of the limitations upon German writers, who, no matter what their attitudes and experiences, are still (and perhaps forever) identified with the perpetrators of atrocity, see Bosmajian. Nevertheless, this judgment needs further research.
3. See Sicher for a brief survey of Holocaust literature, in which he mentions Lustiger and Hershman (167–168). In later work, both Hershman (*Safe in America*) and Lustiger (*So sind wir*) return to more traditional Jewishly inflected themes—both, oddly enough, in the form of family sagas.
4. The German title of the film is *Das Schreckliche Mädchen*. Rosmus was effectively driven out of Germany and immigrated to the United States in 1994.
5. See Cornelia Geissler's sensitive (but not untypical philosemitic) review for the *Berliner Zeitung*, who compares the book's impact to that of Klemperer's diaries.
6. These quotes are an amalgam taken from different interviews with Seiffert found on the Internet (Richter; France; Hicklin).
7. Wenngarten's illegal activities refer to the "White Rose" group of student resistance, whose best-known participant was Sophie Scholl. Captured with the others, she was guillotined as a traitor in February 1943, the date on which Hershman's book officially closed. Scholl's fate inspired the first chapter, "The Guillotine" (see Hershman's interview with Claffey).
8. My gratitude to Annelies Schulte Nordholt for her original initiative in planning and hosting the conference, "Writing the Memory of the Shoah: The Generation After"

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