REDEFINING HEIMAT:
Language and the Search for Homeland
in Modern German Jewish Writing

by

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Abstract

The example of Jewish writers living in post-Shoah Germany can be taken as a case study for the ways in which language creates a homeland—a Heimat. Because the concept of Heimat lies outside the realm of national affiliations, German-speaking Jews have been able to redefine and establish a German homeland without having to associate themselves with the German national state. Heimat in language creates an environment which they can—for the most part—safely inhabit.

Since the heterogeneous Jewish population of postwar Germany lacked a well-defined identity, German Jewish authors born or raised after 1945 needed a new way to find a sense of belonging. Both the prewar notion of the “German citizen of Jewish faith” and the postwar model of “Jews in Germany” proved inadequate for the post-Shoah generation. This required German Jewish authors to create their own models of identity and homeland.

This paper also scrutinizes how the political culture of post-reunification Germany has affected Jews in contemporary Germany. I probe to what extent the current Erinnerungskultur—Germany’s collective project to consolidate the trauma of the Shoah—influences and shapes Jewish identity. Jewish writers such as such as Henryk M. Broder, Barbara Honigmann, Esther Dischereit, Richard Chaim Schneider and Rafael Seligmann are confronted with the issue of how to be themselves if Gentiles try to define or appropriate Jews for their own agendas. In the context of a united Germany, and its increased preoccupation with Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung (working through the past), this paper emphasizes that the notion of Heimat remains a difficult concept for Jews. Thus, the process of writing allows them to find a homeland outside the German nation. Language may hold the key to the understanding why German Jews choose to live where the history of the Shoah remains most painfully present.
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Redefining *Heimat*:
Language and the Search for Homeland
in Modern German Jewish Writing

Unlike our parents, those of us who are born after 1945 have a choice. We can leave this country any time we like; the borders are open, we are young, healthy, multilingual. But this country is our birthplace, our home, whether we care to admit it or not.


It is December 23 and I am standing in the checkout line at the supermarket. There is a full grocery cart in front of me. A pink Christmas goose is peeking out. The woman with the cart still remembers me from when I was in kindergarten. She is trying to figure out what these poor Jews must do with themselves at Christmas time. So she asks me, “Are you going home to Israel over the holidays?” As if I were not at home in Germany.

*Yael Grözinger, Oh, You’re Jewish? That’s Okay* (1995)

**Introduction: A Homeland in Language**

The fact that any Jew after 1945 would still be prepared to consider Germany as his or her homeland—or *Heimat*¹—is a phenomenon that has evoked mistrust and suspicion among Jews and non-Jews alike. As Edgar Hilsenrath poignantly remarked: “Can you understand this? A Jew who loves Germany! In spite of the six million [victims]!”² Hannah Arendt stated similarly in 1946: “But how can one stand to live there as a Jew, in an environment that does not deem it necessary to even speak about

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¹ Although *Heimat* translates into “homeland,” it is also an idiom for a particular sentiment, a “feeling-laden expression of a close association with a particular area” (“Gefühlsbetonter Ausdruck enger Verbundenheit gegenüber einer bestimmten Gegend.”). *Heimat.* *Duden: Deutsches Universalwörterbuch* (Mannheim: Dudenverlag, 1983).

our problems, and that is of course our dead.”³ Since the Second World War these admonitions continue to haunt Jews in Germany. The question of why Jews decided to stay or to return in 1945 to the country of their persecutors is posed repeatedly, not only to Shoah⁴ survivors but also to Jews who were raised in postwar Germany. As a more recent example, Israeli president Ezer Weizman during his 1996 visit to Berlin inquired with bewilderment why any Jew would decide to live in Germany at all.⁵ Rafael Seligmann writes: “All aspects of Jewish identity in Germany after 1945 are a consequence of this question. The issue of why Jews remain in Germany will always remind them of who they are and where they come from.”⁶

The issue of contemporary Jewish identity and belonging in Germany is addressed with particular force and poignancy in the works of writers of the so-called “second generation” of postwar Jews—those born or raised since 1945. Authors of this second generation such as Richard Chaim Schneider and Yael Grözinger choose language as a form of self-expression and individuation. This paper argues that literature is the key criterion in how second-generation German Jews create a homeland—a Heimat—without having to subscribe to any national affiliation. For Jewish writers raised in post-Shoah Germany, the need to find their own identity is an essential and even existential task, as the heterogeneous Jewish population in Germany lacks a well-defined identity. Both the prewar model of the “German citizen

⁴ I will use the Hebrew term “Shoah” instead of “Holocaust” whose etymological roots originate in the Greek holokauston. The latter is a translation of the Hebrew ola kalil (1. Moses 22, 1. Samuel 7,9) meaning “that which entirely rises in smoke” (a divine sacrifice). Since Israel’s Declaration of Independence in 1948, “Shoah” has been used for the destruction of the European Jewry by Nazism. Micha Brumlik, ed., Zuhause, keine Heimat? Junge Juden und ihre Zukunft in Deutschland (Gerlingen: Bleicher Verlag, 1998), 216.
⁶ “Alles Aspekte jüdischer Identität in Deutschland nach 1945 sind auf die eine oder andere Weise eine Funktion dieser Frage.” Rafael Seligmann, Mit beschränkter Hoffnung: Juden, Deutsche, Israelis (München: Knau, 1993), 54.
of Jewish faith" and the postwar notion of “Jews in Germany” proved inadequate for
the post-Shoah generation. The present model of Jews as a “special ethnic minority”
in a multicultural society seems to be an unattainable goal in Germany as well, at
least as long as the German nation continues to define and categorize its citizens
ethnically according to the “blood law,” the *jus sanguinis.*"7 Thus the problem of
Jewish identity in Germany persists as an unresolved source of tension.

The manner in which individual authors distinguish themselves is through
their relationship with language and the meaning it holds for them. Barbara
Honigmann, who repeatedly questions her own *Befindlichkeit* (state of mind) as a Jew
in autobiographical novels and short stories, describes this phenomenon as the fusion
of self and language, a thought that has been developed since Lev Vygotsky (*Thought
and Language*, 1964), for whom speaker and language are no longer two separate
entities.8 Honigmann argues that “the writer is what he writes, and above all he is the
language in which he writes.”9

Barbara Honigmann’s portrait of herself as a Jew and as a writer also brings
into focus the fact that, ultimately, it is impossible to find a clearer understanding of
self without conjuring up an environment against which one recognizes oneself. For
Jewish writers in Germany, the search for identity is therefore inherently bound up
with the search for a homeland. But since in most cases Jewish authors have
difficulties accepting Germany as a Heimat, they create a homeland for themselves in
their own writings. Honigmann underscores the argument that this redefinition of
Heimat does not reject Germany as a homeland altogether. Instead, the search for

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9 "Der Schriftsteller ist das, was er schreibt, und er ist vor allem die Sprache, in der er schreibt." Barbara Honigmann, “Selbstporträt als Jüdin,” *Damals, dann und danach* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1999), 18.
Heimat in language allows Jews to maintain a sense of belonging to Germany without having to identify themselves as "German nationals" or "German citizens":

I feel I belong existentially more to Judaism than to German culture, but culturally I probably belong to Germany and nothing else. It sounds paradoxical, but I am a female German writer, though I don’t feel like a German and haven’t lived in Germany for years... Not only do I write in German but the literature that has formed me and shaped me is German literature, and everything I write I relate to that literature, to Goethe, to Kleist, to Grimm’s fairy tales and to German Romanticism; I know very well that these respected writers were all more or less anti-Semites but that does not matter. As a Jew I left Germany, but in my work, with its very strong bond to the German language, I am always going back.10

Even though as a Jew Honigmann feels estranged from Germany, she considers herself a German author who is deeply indebted to the German cultural and literary tradition. However, to call herself a German writer does not mean that she sees herself as German. It is important to emphasize that literature provides her with a German identity that never leaves the realm of language. Honigmann only feels, thinks and acts German, as long as her identity is bound by language. In this, language allows her to experience and represent Germanness without officially designating herself as a German citizen. Whereas her identity as a writer is intimately linked to the German language and Germany’s literary heritage, another part of

10 "Dass ich mich existentiell mehr zum Judentum als zum Deutschtum gehörig fühlte, aber kulturell gehöre ich wohl doch zu Deutschland und zu sonst gar nichts. Es klingt paradox, aber ich bin eine deutsche Schriftstellerin, obwohl ich mich nicht als Deutsche fühle und nun auch schon seit Jahren nicht mehr in Deutschland lebe... Ich schr...
herself rejects anything German. In order to come to terms with this inherent paradox Honigmann decided to relocate to Strasbourg/France in 1984 while continuing to publish in German.

Not many other Jewish authors would admit to such a close relationship with Germany, yet it is evident from their writings that they are similarly entangled with their native country. As a matter of fact, the trend to divorce the idea of Heimat from nationalistic colorings is a recurrent theme in most second-generation Jewish literature in Germany: Henryk M. Broder maintains that “for Jews, Heimat has never been a territorial concept,”11 and Richard Chaim Schneider asks himself and his readers “why must I, as a Jew, define my homeland geographically?”12

The present discourse on German Jewish writing maintains that Germany is a hostile territory for Jews, and that Heimat remains an unattainable goal for them even in cases when—due to inertia or because of a “geographical accident”13 (Janusch Kozminski)—they decide to stay. In Anat Feinberg’s view, “the past, the Holocaust in particular, stands like barbed wire between them, the children of the survivors, and society. Estrangement and restlessness are at the heart of their mental and emotional lives. Theirs is the voice of the nomadic Jew.”14 Feinberg also postulates that “there can be no sense of belonging where the body is disjointed, or dismembered, and the soul scathed and scarred.”15 Jeffrey M. Peck contends that for Jews “now Germany

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11 Henryk M. Broder, “Heimat? No Thanks!,” *Jewish Voices, German Words*, 84.
15 Ibid., 176.
might be a home, but not a Heimat." And Dieter Lamping labels the writings of young Jewish writers in Germany as "a second generational exile literature." Lamping seemingly agrees with Robert Menasse whose female protagonist in Selige Zeiten, Brüchige Welt concludes that "the exile of the parents also signifies exile for the next generation, and this generation is in exile wherever it is." In this perspective, language serves as an escape route, which allows second-generation Jewish authors to abandon an unbearable homeland. For Germany can be a difficult or even impossible homeland. Germany might not even be a homeland in which the Jews who reside there prefer to live. Indeed, the majority of Jewish authors who write in German oscillate between several countries and continents. They all seem to share the feelings of Stephan Peter Jungk who ponders, "inside of me is an unrest with which I am burdened for life."

However, one needs to keep one important point in focus: despite the fact that many of these writers are either perennially migrant or live abroad, they continue to probe what it means to be a Jew on German soil. Why is it that Jewish authors who continuously traverse international boundaries return to Germany in their writings? How do we explain the fact that each defines his or her private identity and public role against a non-Jewish German environment? The often-cited cliché of the German-Jewish symbiosis offers an unsatisfactory explanation. It is probably more accurate to state that a strong affiliation to the German language and culture provides Jews with a communal feeling that transcends territorial borders. Or to phrase it more

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18 "Das Exil der Eltern bedeutet auch Exil für die nächste Generation, und die ist im Exil, egal wo sie ist." Robert Menasse, Seelige Zeiten, brüchige Welt (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1997), 140.
provocatively: because the notion of Heimat lies outside the realm of national affiliations, German-speaking Jews can redefine and establish a German homeland without having to associate themselves with the German national state. By no means is it wrong to argue that Germany cannot be a Heimat for Jews. However, rejecting the term “Heimat” as if it were synonymous with the German nation is tantamount to throwing the baby out with the bath-water. For second-generation Jewish authors in Germany, Heimat is a concept. Yet the fact that the idea of Heimat remains intangible does not suggest that it does not exist at all. A more differentiated study of Jewish identity in postwar Germany challenges the conventional definition of homeland. If scholars equate the term Heimat only with a specific geographic location, they miss crucial insights into the various means by which human beings crave a sense of belonging.

Another important point to bear in mind is that even the loss of Heimat does not inevitably lead to Heimatlosigkeit (being homeless). The need to find and define one’s homeland is never as insistent as during times in which people fear that they no longer have a Heimat, or when they have difficulties coming to terms with their country of origin. The latter is definitely the case for today’s German Jewry, as, in the words of Richard Chaim Schneider, “Jews in Germany live with an ever-present past and an ever less certain future.” Ina-Maria Greverus writes in The ‘Heimat’ Problem: “Any reflection on Heimat in literature always is preceded by the ingestion of an alien environment, of an alien people, and of an alienation itself. It seems as if only when Heimat has been lost, it becomes a problem . . . In this, Heimat resembles identity. Evidently, the search for identity and the search for Heimat represent parallel

lines of one and the same quest: a quest for a place one feels bound to."^21 Heimat and identity are interrelated per se as people define and mirror themselves within and against their surroundings.

Whereas first-generation authors (Shoah survivors) tended to focus on both the collective memory of Jews and their personal recollections of the persecution, their preoccupation with Jewish life in postwar Germany remained only marginal. An explanation for the second generation’s preoccupation with present-day Jewish-German relations is the fact that this generation was born and raised during a time in which the after-effects of the Shoah intersected with the Federal Republic’s attempted normalization process. Because German Jewish authors born after 1945 experience the Shoah both in proximity—as children of survivors—and as once-removed observers, they have the emotional distance to confront the past. Moreover, they will also feel a greater need to leave their parents’ “ghetto of fear and isolation,”^22 as Rafael Seligmann writes, and to lead an independent existence which is not permanently saturated with Shoah memories. The route to autonomy and independence is a long and strenuous process. Thus, forty years elapsed before an author published the first Jewish contemporary novel in Germany.^23 In the current German literary landscape, Jewish authors are represented in various genres such as autobiographies, essays and newspaper articles as well prose and poetry. In contrast to German Gentiles who address the Shoah mainly on a political platform, Jewish writers are unable to separate it from their daily existence.

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^20 Richard Chaim Schneider, *Home—Sweet Home?*, 94.
^23 Rafael Seligmann, *Rubinstein's Versteigerung* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1989). See also: Sander L. Gilman, “Neue Juden in Deutschland: Rafael Seligmann,” *Jüdischer*
A recurrent theme in second-generation literature is its blending of both fictitious and autobiographical elements. A further commonality is that as a reader one can never really know for sure whether and when these narratives are fact and when they are fiction. Often Jewish stories are called *Geschichten*, a German term that is of a highly ambiguous nature. It stands for both *stories* and *histories*. Without context and further explanation, the word *Geschichte* reveals little. Whatever story the narrator tells, it could be all true or a mere illusion. In this sense, the reluctance of many Jewish authors in Germany to situate themselves clearly within any given category serves as a fitting analogy to describe both Jewish life and literature in Germany. On the one side, Jewish writers in Germany feel the need to be mobile, and continually straddling national borders. On the other side, they are anxious not to be typecast by critics and the German public. This elusiveness—meaning their conscious effort to be both present and absent at the same time—can be detected in almost all modern Jewish literature in Germany. Elena Lappin, who edited the first anthology of postwar German-Jewish literature in English, defines Jewish writing to be intimate and self-referential: “Contemporary German literature tends to be abstract and impersonal; Jewish authors represent a different approach. They tell stories in which the author/narrator’s personal voice is strongly felt. Their language is an instrument of storytelling, of soul-searching, not a cold medium for linguistic experiments.” Contemporary Jewish writing can be seen therefore as an example of how identity is based in language, and how second-generation Jewish authors continue to seek a better self-understanding through their narrative voice.


24 For example Laura Waco’s autobiographical novel *Von Zuhause wird nichts erzählt: Eine jüdische Geschichte aus dem Nachkriegsdeutschland* (München: btb Taschenbuch im Goldmann Verlag, 1999).
In the light of recent developments, this paper will probe in particular how the political culture of post-reunification Germany has reshaped these surroundings and how, in return, they have affected the Jewry in contemporary Germany. I will look at how the current *Erinnerungskultur*—Germany’s collective project to consolidate the trauma of the Shoah—influences and shapes Jewish identity. It seems that the Jewish desire for a homeland begins and ends in language, and that language might hold the key to the paradox of why German Jews stay closest to where the history of the Shoah remains most painfully present.

"*In the House of the Executioner*: Jewish Life in Post-Shoah Germany

The question "Why do you stay here?" has haunted Jews in Germany ever since 1945. A question like this has unavoidable political implications. As Edward Said has pointed out in another context, if we continually ask people why they live in a particular country, we question their right to be there: "For if you belong in a place, you do not have to keep saying and showing it: you just are."26 Most Jews born in postwar Germany share the experience of not-belonging, of being—as Esther Dischereit writes in her novel *Merryn*—an “integrated foreign body”27 in Germany. The origins of these feelings of estrangement and hostility can be traced back to the Shoah and its after-effects.

Until German reunification took effect in 1989, Jewish communities in postwar Germany were of a negligible quantity which maintained a low public profile. Whereas in June 1933 the *Statistisches Reichsamt* counted 499,682 registered

Jews, a mere fifteen thousand survived inside Germany twelve years later. Y. Michal Bodemann concludes that at this point "a revival of Jewish life seemed inconceivable to most." Between 1945 and 1950 an estimated 250,000 Jewish survivors lived in German camps with Displaced Person status. Over ninety percent of them emigrated to Palestine, the United States, Canada, Australia, and other countries. Only about 15,000 of them—or whom merely about 3,000 to 4,000 were of German extraction—decided to stay in the Federal Republic. Thus, the core of the Jewish community in post-Shoah Germany consisted of East European—mainly Polish—Jews for whom German was not their mother tongue. Among them the majority felt that they did not belong to anything more than a "provisional liquidation community" (Liquidationsgemeinde).

Many Shoah survivors have used the phrase "we sat on packed suitcases waiting to leave" as a metaphor to illustrate both their refugee status and their rejection of Germany as a permanent homeland. This rather skeptical and distanced approach to their domicile is also reflected in their terminology: the official Jewish representation in the Federal Republic named itself the Central Council for Jews in Germany (founded in 1950), and represented about 24,431 registered Jewish community members. The phrase "Jews in Germany" was intended to insinuate that the Jews did not consider themselves German, and that their community was a provisional one.

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In the 1950s and 1960s, during the period of bureaucratic reconsolidation, Germany became a land of immigration for Hungarian Jews after the anti-Soviet uprising (1956), Polish Jews in the wake of anti-Zionist campaigns (1967) as well as Czech and Slovak Jews after the Prague Spring (1968). In 1969, the President of the Central Council of Jews in West Germany, Werner Nachmann, proclaimed that German Jews and non-Jews “should live a completely normal existence among each other.” This policy of rapprochement was to a large extent wishful albeit controversial thinking. The idea of “normality” remained an unattainable goal in Germany, and perhaps even more, an inherent paradox. Although Jews and Gentiles in Germany made efforts to create a culture of normality, the two sides constantly reproached one another due to these attempts at normalcy.

Until 1989, there was a steady number of approximately thirty thousand officially registered Jews in West Germany. In 1990, the Jewish communities of the former GDR consisted of only 370 Jews. Due to large waves of immigrant Soviet Jews, those numbers began to rise. The largest communities today, which constitute about three-quarters of all Jews in Germany, are in Berlin (9,840), Frankfurt (5,715), Munich (4,168), and Hamburg (2,359). The total Jewish population in 1995 was 45,000 and increased to about 70,000 by December 1998. The important point to keep in mind is that if we speak of “German Jews” we need to be aware that they are largely former Ostjuden (Jews from the East) and their offspring. The reluctance of

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33 "Wir sollten doch einfach ganz normal miteinander leben." Quoted in Y. Michal Bodemann, “‘How can one stand to live there as a Jew . . . ‘. Paradoxes of Jewish Existence in Germany,” *Jews, Germans, Memory*, 34.
many Jews in Germany to define Germany as their Heimat, although they are state citizens with German passports, comes partly from the fact that their cultural origins are non-Germanic. Even today most children of Shoah survivors are reluctant to call themselves either German Jews or Jewish Germans. Though they repeatedly justified their choice of domicile, for most Jews the proximity to "the house of the executioner"\(^{35}\) prevented the necessary process of articulating difficult and painful memories. Relegating the Shoah to history was their only means to continue a somewhat ordinary existence. Yet Shoah survivors were doubly entangled with Germany: on the one side, they were compelled to legitimize and defend their choice of residence while on the other side, many felt guilty and ashamed about not having left. In his autobiographical recollections, _Kein Weg als Deutscher und Jude_ (1996), Micha Brumlik describes how Jews in Germany internalized this perceived disgrace:

> The feeling that ran through and dominated the existence of all the Jews who lived in West Germany after the war—no matter how different they may have been otherwise—was shame... All those who had lost anyone were ashamed that they had survived at all, ashamed that they had not put the gift of life to use anywhere else but in the land of the murderers, on the cursed soil of Germany.\(^{36}\)

\(^{35}\) "And for the Jews in Germany? For them more than for all others, Israel represents psychical support, an identity substitute, for they must constantly and repeatedly explain to themselves and to the Jews of the world why they create the impression, through their presence in the house of the executioner, that normality could have returned between German and Jews after Auschwitz—as if nothing had happened." ("Und fur die Juden in Deutschland? Fur sie stellt Israel mehr als fur alle anderen eine psychische Stütze, einen Identitätssatz dar, müssen sie doch standig und immer wieder vor sich und vor den Juden der Welt rechtfertigen, warum sie durch Anwesenheit im Hause des Henkers den Eindruck erwecken, nach Auschwitz sei zwischen Deutschen und Juden Normalität eingekehrt—Normalität, als sei nichts geschehen." Dan Diner, "Negative Symbiose: Deutsche und Juden nach Auschwitz," _Babylon_ I (1986): 17-18.

As a result, many Shoah survivors living in Germany attempted to distance themselves from history and their own memories. Germany was too close emotionally to deal with. Dan Diner maintains that such a withdrawal from the past was not an escape but a necessary survival strategy: “The past remains repressed for the Jews who live in postwar Germany. The very physical and psychic proximity to ‘Germany,’ a basis for identification only through negation, leads to an intensified denial of what happened then.”

In 1979 and 1980, two books signalled the first signs of a reemerging Jewish culture in Germany: Fremd im Eigenen Land (Strangers in Their Own Land, 1979), edited by Henryk M. Broder and Michael Lang, and Dies ist nicht mein Land: Eine Jüdin verlässt die Bundesrepublik (This is Not my Country: A Jewish Woman Leaves Germany, 1980), by Lea Fleischmann (b.1947), who left Germany one year prior to the book’s publication. On the one hand, both works deal with the notion of Jewish estrangement vis-à-vis a non-Jewish environment, while conversely, they reveal the authors’ need to be recognized on their own terms by Gentile Germans. In the previous postwar decades, Jewish culture in the Federal Republic had remained largely invisible, with the exception of the country’s memorial landscape and its literary tributes to deceased Jewish émigrés. During this revival phase, both Jewish communities and Jewish student organizations started publishing a series of periodicals such as Babylon, Cheschbon, Frankfurter Jüdische Nachrichten, Freie Stimme, Nudnik, Semit (later renamed to Semittimes), and Tachles. The Jewish “renaissance” constituted a trend that was not coincidental, but a reflection of the
writers’ political and cultural environment at that time. Forty years after the Second World War, Jewish self-assertion was a response to many Germans’ increased concerns with their own past.

The Search for Normality in “Post-Auschwitz Germany”

Although the Federal Republic has made numerous attempts to confront Germany’s Nazi past during the first thirty years after the war, it has largely remained a culture of denial, forgetting and forgetfulness. Germany’s reluctance to evoke the image of, as Rafael Seligmann writes, “Post-Auschwitz Germany” (“Nachauschwitz-Deutschland”)\(^38\) certainly proves Ernest Renan’s claim that the concept of nationhood is defined by a people’s capacity to remember as well as their need to forget.\(^39\) Therefore, in order to define itself as a nation, the Federal Republic had to impose and endorse a normalization process. For example, after the end of the Second World War, former SA and SS personnel gathered together for veteran reunions throughout German townships. Upon retirement, all qualified for old-age pension. Judges who pronounced death sentences during the Third Reich continued to hold professorships at German universities. It was also possible for former National Socialist party members to become Chancellor (Kurt-Georg Kiesinger) or Bundespräsident (Karl Carstens).\(^40\) To this day, barracks of the Bundeswehr are named after Nazi generals. With respect to the Federal Republic’s official response, 25 years had to pass until a

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German chancellor—Willy Brandt—knelt in front of the Warsaw ghetto memorial, and it required 40 years before a Bundespräsident—Richard von Weizsäcker—acknowledged Germany’s collective guilt.⁴¹

Yet the early 1980s also proved to be a turning point in West Germany’s attitude toward its own history. Several key events prompted Germans to confront Nazism, while all questioning the legitimacy of the so-called ‘normalization process.’ In 1985, Ronald Reagan accepted Helmut Kohl’s invitation and laid a wreath at the Bitburg military cemetery which was also a burial site for SS officers. That same year, Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s alleged anti-Semitic play Die Stadt, der Müll und der Tod (The City, Garbage and Death) generated protest marches. During the following two years, the historians’ debate centred on the usefulness and danger of minimizing Nazi atrocities. Related incidents included the debate over the remnants of the Frankfurt ghetto and Peter Sichrovsky’s book about children of Nazi parents.⁴²

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 followed by German unification (October 1990) Germany showed an even greater concern with the country’s past. One reason for this was the resurgent wave of anti-Semitism during the early 1990s such as the arson attack at the Jewish barracks at the Sachsenhausen memorial site in September 1992. Other incidents like the heated public debate about Daniel Goldhagen’s book Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust (1996) and the ten-year long discussion about the planned Holocaust Memorial in Berlin were revealing signs of Germany’s struggle to come to terms with its tarnished history.

Most recently, the well publicized controversy between Heinz Galinski’s successor the late Ignatz Bubis (head of the Central Council from 1992 until his death

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⁴¹ Weizsäcker urged Germans to “look truth straight in the eye—without embellishment or distortion.” Quoted in Jeffrey Herf, Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys (Cambridge: Harvard
in August 1999) and Martin Walser has exemplified how difficult it still is to avoid the polarization surrounding the issue of Vergangenheitsbewältigung ("mastering the past"). The debate also illuminates the fact that in current German politics the principal question is no longer how to remember the past; instead, it focuses on how the past is formative for the new Berlin Republic, and Germany’s role within the European Union. Whereas Ignatz Bubis wanted the voices and records of Shoah sufferings to resonate in public plaques and monuments, Martin Walser—an acclaimed novelist and 1998 recipient of the Peace Prize of the German Booksellers—preferred Vergangenheitsbewältigung to be confined to classrooms and concentration camp remembrance sites. The dialogue escalated after Walser’s acceptance speech on 11 October 1998, in which he criticized the “instrumentalization of our disgrace for contemporary purposes” and discounted the Berlin Holocaust memorial as a monumentalizing of Germany’s guilt. For Ignatz Bubis, such a statement promoted the dangerous practice of repressing history as well as erasing the collective memory, and he argued that it was the equivalent of "intellectual arson." The former leader of the Council went so far as to label Walser a revisionist historian and linked him to the political right-wing movement. The polemical quarrel stretched over two months and involved other key players such as the former mayor of Hamburg, Klaus von Dohnanyi, Richard von Weizsäcker, Monika Maron, and Henryk M. Broder. Bubis later acknowledged that he had

42 Peter Sichrovsky, Schuldig geboren: Kinder aus Nazifamilien (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1987).
43 "It is neither appropriate to use Auschwitz for routine threats nor as material to quiet people at any time; neither as a bludgeon for morality nor as a moral bludgeon for required exercises" (Auschwitz eignet sich nicht, dafür Drohroutine zu werden, jederzeit einsetzbares Einschüchterungsmittel oder Moralkeule oder auch nur Pflichtübungen Moralkeule."), TAZ 13 October 1998. <http://www.taz.de/tpl/fr/home>.
misunderstood Walser’s intentions and withdrew some of his accusations. He nevertheless continued to stress that Walser’s choice of words could be politically misappropriated. Both agreed that the appropriate language for dealing with the German past has not yet been found.\textsuperscript{45} In an interview with Volker Müller on the nature of this debate, Bubis was asked to explain why he lived in the country of mass murderers. Bubis answered: “I have posed this question myself. How could I do this? I don’t know.” \textsuperscript{46}

Both the search for and the breakdown of language are telling aspects of this recent episode. German Jews and non-Jews are still seeking the answer to, yet stymied by, the question of the most appropriate language or form of representation for the Nazi period and the Shoah. Likewise, the Bubis-Walser debate underscores how a private decision—the right to choose one’s domicile and the need to feel at home—carries political weight. In the context of a united Germany, and its increased preoccupation with \textit{Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung} (working through the past), it illustrates to what extent the notion of Heimat remains a difficult concept for both Jews and non-Jews. The German Jewry is literally trapped between history and current politics. As “Germans right now are absorbed in an elaborate exercise in “solidarity,” if not identification with Hitler’s victims,” writes Jane Kramer,\textsuperscript{47} Jews are confronted with the issue of how to be themselves, if everybody else tries to define and appropriate them for their own purposes. Given this environment, it becomes understandable why Jews in Germany need to create a world of their own. The act of writing allows them to find a homeland outside the German nation; at the

\textsuperscript{45} “Bubis und Walser stimmten jedoch darin überein, daß die angemessene Sprache für den Umgang mit der deutschen Vergangenheit noch nicht gefunden sei.” \textit{Berliner Zeitung} 14 December 1998.

same time, their immersion into language leaves them sheltered from anything German they find unacceptable. Yet literature is no escape. The fact that their books address—at times even confront and perturb—the German reading audience suggests that German Jewish authors attempt to foster a dialogue with non-Jews in contemporary Germany.

A Homeland Outside the German Nation

In the fifteenth century the word Heimat (in Latin domicilium) became a legal term and designated the location where a person owned one’s house. During the 1780’s, for Romantic writers such as Karl Philip Moritz, the word conjured up a “homey tranquillity and happiness . . . which is contained in the lovely sound of the German word heim [home].” Prior to Germany’s unification in 1871, the idea of Heimat and its provincial character were promoted as state-building and permeated society’s view of nationhood:

The idea of Heimat as a nostalgic evocation of a closed and close-knit community . . . potentially embraced all of Germany, from its individual parts to its newly constituted whole. It offered Germans a way to reconcile a heritage of localized political traditions with the ideal of a single, transcendent nationality. Heimat was both the beloved local places and the beloved nation; it was a comfortable, flexible and inclusive homeland, embracing all localities alike.

50 Ibid., 11.
One vital aspect of Heimat—a common language—became one of the major contributors to the formation of German nationhood. Peter Gay argues that "language was the great unifier, language and the free migration of writers, artists, composers, and performers from court to court, city to city. Whatever local and regional peculiarities might persist—and there were many—German culture enjoyed the benefits of the Zollverein of the free mind, a free traffic of masters and masterpieces across political frontiers."51 Like Peter Gay and Benedict Anderson, Celia Applegate does not consider the origin of national consciousness to be a mere response to political and economic circumstances, but understands it as growing out of a cultural tradition. It is important to stress that in the nineteenth century the idea of Heimat evoked a sense of solidarity with others. One's need to belong prompted a desire to be acknowledged by the society in which one felt at home. People who have a Heimat, according to Celia Applegate, consider themselves accepted and recognized, and they develop a sense of "a feeling of belonging together (in German 'Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl'), whether across class, confessional, or gender lines, or across the lines that divided the province from the nation surrounding it."52

Although Gentile Germans consider the link between Heimat and nation as problematic and ambivalent, they nevertheless subscribe to it. This can be observed in the proliferation of idyllic Heimat-films in the 1950s and 1960s, the German penchant for "Heimattrachten" (traditional costumes), and "Heimatkunst" (folk art). But due to the National Socialists' appropriation of Heimat-sentiments for their nationalistic self-representation—the Volksgemeinschaft (community of people) and the Fatherland—the term contains negative undertones for many Germans. In a recent

opinion poll in *Stern*, one of Germany’s leading magazines, prominent Germans were asked to reflect on what occasion they are proud to be German. Their answers ranged from “while taking a shower,” “one should feel ashamed to ask such a question!,” to “whenever I am reminded of the fact that Hitler was an Austrian,” and “never!” The only Jewish person asked was Marcel Reich-Ranicki, the “eminence gris” of Germany’s literary critics. He replied: “This question insinuates that I am German, and that I am proud to be one. Both are not the case.” In response to the question how he would describe Germany to foreigners he said: “It is the country in which Goethe’s residence and the concentration camp Buchenwald are separated by a few kilometres.”

To claim that Jews reject German nationality solely on the basis of Auschwitz would simplify the complexity of the issue. For Jews, the marriage of Heimat and national identity has always been difficult if not to say outright undesired. As Carl E. Schorske concludes about Austrian Jews in fin-de-siècle Vienna:

They did not constitute a nationality—nor even a so-called unhistorical nationality like the Slovaks or Ukrainians. Their civic and economic existence depended not on their participation in a national community, such as the German or the Czech, but, on the contrary, on not acquiring such a status. Even if they became assimilated completely to the culture of a given nationality, they could not outgrow the status of convert to that nationality.

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52 Celia Applegate, x.

“The fact that Jews in Vienna did not identify themselves in terms of nationality does not suggest that they necessarily must have considered themselves foreigners. The analogous case of Jews in Wilhelminian Germany portrays a people that was very comfortable with both their Jewish and German identity. They latter was achieved without the need to equate Germanness with German nationality.” Peter Gay, *Freud, Jews and Other Germans*, 99.
Schorske’s point of view suggests a Jewish predisposition and affinity to alternate, non-territorial places of belonging.\textsuperscript{55} These are places in history, memory, and language which are embedded within the religious, literary, and artistic culture of Judaism. For Jews in Germany, they might also be entrenched within a German cultural, intellectual, and historical context. Whether or not these realms of seclusion—this “inner exile”—proved successful and comforting was always at the mercy of a given political system. Sometimes a retreat into their spiritual or religious world provided Jews with a safe parallel existence vis-à-vis the Gentile world, a place they could deliberately choose or not choose. At other times, their refuge became their prison. In the case of the Third Reich, the Nazi regime began expelling Jews from all intellectual and cultural engagements and events already in 1933.

Since the Nazis’ ideology of Heimat and nation ultimately led to the articulation of racial policies and the Final Solution, Jews consider the pairing of Heimat and nation morally and ethically problematic if not unacceptable. This might explain why so many of them are perpetual migrants or have settled abroad. Among the authors mentioned in this paper, Henryk M. Broder, the son of Shoah survivors, moved with his parents from Poland to Germany in 1958. Since 1981, Broder has resided both in Berlin and Jerusalem as—paradoxically—”a Jew in Germany, [and] a non-resident holding a German passport in Israel.”\textsuperscript{56} Dan Diner and Micha Brumlik—both outspoken Jewish intellectuals who hold academic positions at German and Israeli universities—divide their time between both countries. Ronnith Neumann was born in Haifa in 1948, and moved with her parents to West Germany in

\textsuperscript{55} “Karl Renner (1870-1950) developed the concept of ex-territorial nationality. As a cultural community (Kulturgemeinschaft) and an autonomous association of people (autonomer Personenverband), the nation need not be territorially delimited.” Malachi Haim Hacohen, “Dilemmas of Cosmopolitanism: Karl Popper, Jewish Identity, and ‘Central European Culture’,” \textit{The Journal of Modern History} 71 (March 1999): 113.
1958. Her response to the question whether she is not afraid to live in Germany is: “With one leg abroad—no.”\(^{57}\) Maxim Biller (b. 1960), having arrived in Munich from Prague in 1970, frequently travels between his city of origin and the Bavarian capital. Other authors who were either born or raised in Germany left for good: Helena Janeczek resides in Italy since 1983 because of an “awareness of strangeness and latent aggression”\(^ {58}\) in Germany, Peter Stephan Jungk lives in Paris, and Laura Waco settled in California in 1968. From the former German Democratic Republic, Chaim Noll took up residence first in Italy and then in Israel. For him, his “image of Germany was determined from early on by this narrowness, by feelings of apprehension, unreasonable alternatives.”\(^ {59}\) Barbara Honigmann relocated to Strasbourg, France, because as she explains, “We are a Jewish family and tried to find a Jewish life in Germany that is non-existent.”\(^ {60}\) But some authors continue to have their permanent domicile in Germany: Esther Dischereit and Rafael Seligmann live in Berlin, Richard Chaim Schneider resides in Munich.

Among Jewish writers in Germany, Seligmann is the only one who considers himself fully assimilated in his country. In an interview in *Semittimes*, he calls himself “a German Jew,” and criticizes other Jews who decide to tentatively stay in Germany while they constantly lament their domicile: “There is nothing else you can do if you have lived your whole adult life in Germany. You can’t spend your whole life in exile, unless a real emergency forces you. But there is no real physical

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\(^{57}\) “Mit einem Bein im Ausland—nein.” Ronnith Neumann, *Heimkehr in die Fremde: Zu Hause in Israel oder zu Hause in Deutschland?* (Göttingen: Verlag Bert Schlender, 1985), 52.  
emergency for Jews in Germany. If someone believes that he can’t stand it here . . .
then it is smarter to go to Israel, or some other country where he feels better. But to
stay here and to complain, that is no solution.”61 In his analysis of the current Jewish-
German relationship, he states: “I have lived here for centuries. German was my
mother tongue. I was thinking and dreaming in my mother tongue. The German
culture was my culture. During the past centuries Jews contributed to both the
language and the culture of this country. I was part of German history . . . I am a
German Jew.” 62 The same applies for the main protagonist in Seligmann’s Shalom,
My Love who finally decides to stay in Germany (after his Christian fiancée decides
to convert to Judaism), and proclaims with pride and optimism that “I am a German
Jew. Period!”63

In contrast to Seligmann, most Jewish authors would hesitate to call themselves
“German.” Lea Fleischmann (who emigrated to Israel in the late seventies) distances
herself from Germanness although she keeps her German nationality. As a matter of
fact, her passport is the only relationship with Germany she is able to accept: “I am
Israeli. It sounds strange, but not unpleasant. If I said: ‘I am German,’ there was a
stab in my heart each time, and so I avoided saying: ‘I am German.’ I always got
around it by saying: ‘I have a German citizenship’ or: ‘I have a German passport’ or:

60 “Weil wir eine jüdische Familie sind und Anschluss an ein jüdisches Leben gesucht haben, das es in
Deutschland nicht gibt.” Barbara Honigmann, Am Sonntag spielt der Rabbi Fussball (Heidelberg:
Verlag Das Wunderhorn, 1998), 5.
61 “Wenn man sein ganzes erwachsenes Leben in Deutschland verbracht hat, bleibt einem gar nichts
anders übrig. Man kann ja kein Leben im Exil verbringen, ausser die Not zwingt einen dazu. Es besteht
aber keine physische Not für Juden in Deutschland. Wenn einer meint, er könne es hier nicht aushalten . . .
dann ist es am klügsten, nach Israel oder in andere Länder, wo er sich besser fühlt, zu gehen. Aber
hier zu sitzen und sich zu beklagen, ist keine Lösung.” Rafael Seligmann, “Warum ich nicht in Israel
62 Rafael Seligmann, Mit beschränkter Hoffnung, 152.
63 Rafael Seligmann, Schalom meine Liebe (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1998), 76.
‘I was born in Germany’.” Fleischmann’s distinction between Germanness and German nationality serves as an illustrative analogy: whereas Germanness requires a sense of belonging as well as a certain degree of active involvement and commitment to German affairs, owning a passport is nothing else than a passive act. Fleischmann’s excuse for being a German citizen is that she cannot help but owning a German piece of identity; after all this paper is her birth-right, otherwise she feels estranged from her country of origin. Not surprisingly, Fleischmann’s autobiographical novel, Dies ist nicht mein Land, is one of the most discerning and unforgiving examinations of the West German postwar mentality. The situation presents itself differently with Richard Chaim Schneider. The son of Hungarian refugees decided to stay stateless for 22 years. The choice to accept the German nationality was extremely difficult for him. Schneider knew with certainty that it would obligate him to defend his decision both in private and in public. The latter would, in return, bring about a redefinition of his own identity as well as his sense of communal belonging. Once he completed it, the result—becoming an “official” German—confirmed his worst fears:

Bur naturalization did not mean that my problems were over, not by a long shot. The fact is, the ambivalence of my own feelings became immeasurable when I was given my German passport at the counter, opened it up and read the sentence on the first page: “The bearer of this passport is German.” My grandfather would have turned over in his grave at that moment, had he not gone up in smoke at Auschwitz. It was a moment of shame vis-à-vis my ancestors who had died in the gas chambers, a moment when I felt I had betrayed them.

65 Richard Chaim Schneider, “Home—Sweet Home?” Speaking Out, 97.
Schneider’s recalling of his perished ancestry underscores to what extent the second generation lives with painful memories and the awareness that Germany might be forever scarred and remembered as, in Rafael Seligmann’s words, “Naziland.” Even though children of Shoah survivors might not directly relate to horrors of Auschwitz, the latter and its after-effects—such as the anguish of their parents—always seem present, whether it is in daily confrontations, in memory or history. For Laura Waco, the ever-present history of the Shoah prevents her from finding her own identity in postwar Germany. Instead she internalizes numerous voices that mirror back different aspects of her self. In consequence, Waco seems incapable of resolving her inner conflict. The only solution she can accept is to conceal her Jewishness, in particular from German authority figures such as her teacher:

But I can not simply explain to him that I am also a Jew, not only a German, and that actually I don’t really know what I should be or could be or may be, German or Jewish, that I can't throw it all into one pot, and that I just have to try to live somewhere else than Germany, that I sometimes don't want to live in Germany at all, if I think of the past. But only then.

Katja Behrens recollects why she always felt obligated to negate her family’s shame for choosing to stay in Fascist Germany. Her short story, ironically titled Alles normal (Everything Normal), reveals to what extent the past and the present still converge—symbolized in the way the same words (“getting picked up”) change their

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67 “Aber ich kann ihm einfach nicht erklären, dass ich auch eine Judin bin, nicht nur eine Deutsche, und dass ich eigentlich nicht weiss, was ich sein soll oder sein kann oder sein darf, deutsch oder jüdisch, dass ich es nicht in einen Topf werfen kann, und dass ich es einfach mal versuchen muss, woanders zu
meaning in time: “I thought I could make up for it by leaving, taking the place as it
were of those who had stayed, representatively and retroactively, because it was not
necessary any more, in any case not necessary for survival; getting picked up was
only for the dance lesson, and Mother got a so-called reparation, even if her glance
was fixed to the floor, not to speak of her walk. Her head was down until the end,
lower and lower, but whether it was from shame about her nose or shame about
having survived remained her secret.”

Psychoanalysts explain that the so-called “second-generation-Syndrome” or
“survivor-child-Syndrome” of children of Shoah survivors causes them to undertake
the role of a deceased person within their family in order to shelter their parents from
unbearable traumas. From an early age on, children of the second generation
internalize other personalities and fashion their own individuality according to their
parents’ wishes. In consequence, these children are unable to distinguish themselves
as individuals. For Helena Janeczek, the pressure to fulfil her parents’
expectations—which means to become the person who justifies their
survival—would, ultimately, lead to an abandonment of herself. In her
autobiographical novel *Lezioni di tenebra*, Janeczek reflects how the loss of self is
compensated for by role-playing; not only does the author write in Italian, the
language of her adopted homeland, but she also often makes reference to herself in

leben als in Deutschland, und dass ich manchmal gar nicht in Deutschland bleiben will, wenn ich an
die Vergangenheit denke. Aber nur dann.” Laura Waco, *Von Zuhause wird nichts erzählt*, 293.

Ich dachte, ich könnte das Fortgehen nachholen, sozusagen stellvertretend für die, die geblieben
waren, stellvertretend und rückwirkend, denn es war ja nicht mehr notwendig, jedenfalls nicht
überlebensnotwendig, abgeholt wurde nur noch zur Tanzstunde, und Mutter bekam eine sogenannte
Wiedergutmachung, wenn auch der Blick weiter am Boden haftete, keine Rede von aufrechtem Gang.
Kopf gesenkt bis zum Schluss, immer tiefer, ob aus Scham über die Nase oder aus Scham, überlebt zu
haben, blieb ihr Geheimnis.” Katja Behrens, “Alles normal,” *Salomon und die anderen: Jüdische

Werner Bohleber, “Das Fortwirken des Nationalsozialismus in der zweiten und dritten Generation
nach Auschwitz,” *Babylon: Beiträge zur jüdischen Gegenwart* 7 (1990): 73. See also: Yolanda
the third person: "My mother and my father stayed alive, so they wanted to live. They wanted me, a child. For this child it is not easy to be the embodiment of the notion that life goes on, it is not possible unless it is at the price that this life is not its own." Whether or not one chooses to adopt this Freudian interpretation, it can be suggested that Jews born in post-Shoah Germany see themselves caught between a generational conflict: their parents’ horrific and overbearing recollections, and their own need for independence and autonomy.

**Heimat and Language**

This paper argues that language is the key component in how the second generation searches for its own independent Jewish identity in Germany. Why is the Jewish passion for narratives so intimately linked with their quest for Heimat? Following the course of Jewish history, language has always been a principal constituent of self-definition: from the destruction of the Second Temple until the birth of the Israeli state, a Jewish sense of home resided in the Torah and in the Talmud. The belief that a Jewish homeland exists in language is, in particular, perpetuated among Jews in the Diaspora. In a recent interview in the German newspaper *Die Welt*, Marcel Reich-Ranicki contended that "Jews did not built castles, palaces, towers or domes. Nor did they found any kingdoms. All they ever did was

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70"Mia madre e mio padre erano rimasti vivi, quindi volevano vivere. Quindi volevano me, un bambino. Per quel figlio non è facile fare la parte della vita-che-continua, non è possibile se non al prezzo che quella vita non sia la sua." Helena Janeczek, *Lezioni di tenebra*, 131.
assemble words." When he was asked, "What about Israel?" he responded that, after all, Israel is not a kingdom. What is so remarkable about this answer is not that Reich-Ranicki might be wrong but that he empowers language with almost mythic proportions. It appears therefore that the question of Heimat is so forcibly raised in literature because Jewish authors subscribe to the belief that only words will be capable of moulding and shaping a homeland.

During times in which Jewish people have lost all their possessions, this belief became an imperative survival strategy. In the context of postwar German Jewish history, 1945 compelled Shoah survivors to gather strength for a new beginning. Like writers who invent their own narratives, Jews in post-Shoah Germany nourished the hope that they could reinvent their own lives. A German sociologist and co-editor of Babylon, Cilly Kugelmann, writes that "the act of establishing oneself in Germany seemed to offer a kind of paradoxical advantage. It was precisely the proximity to the country and society which was responsible for the destruction of one’s own life that allowed a fictitious new beginning, something like a Jewish Point Zero." Much as the notion of any life starting all over at "point zero" remains wishful thinking, it remains to this day a powerful legend in postwar Jewish literature. Another approach to explaining the importance of language and identity-formation in post-Shoah Germany is that literature provides a non-threatening realm for self-expression and for voicing one’s concerns. It frees Jews from "the unbearable closeness to Germany," as, in many instances they find it still intolerable to accept the German nation as a concrete reality. For Ruth R. Wisse, Jews in the Diaspora ask too much of

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their literature as they desperately cling to it like a life-saver: “Without religion or national framework, Jews seek a satisfactory substitute, and ask literature to do what it cannot do—to constitute a Jewish culture of the mind alone, in place of law and custom and practice.”

For some writers, it is the silence of their parents which prompts them to search for words. “The second generation Jews are not crippled because of Auschwitz, they are crippled because of their parents,” says Henryk M. Broder. At last, the answer to why language is so crucial might easily suggest itself: Language creates reality; perhaps it evokes the only reality there is as the narrator in Katja Behren’s Jewish story *Salomo und die anderen* concludes: “If one does not talk about something, it does not really exist.”

For Esther Dischereit, this sense of reality is conveyed in her use of language; her home is where she writes her poetry and her novels. Like Honigmann, she does not associate herself directly with Germanness. Instead, Dischereit establishes a relationship with the German language through a device, her typewriter, that symbolizes her role as a writer. This strategy allows her to bypass the question whether she herself, independent of her writing, engages in any relationship with Germany:

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The room is my country
I speak German
with my typewriter
A shred on the margin
The room is my country
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73 Barbara Honigmann, *Selbstdarstellung als Judin*, 17.
Among the various components which constitute a sense of belonging for Jewish writers—whether it is a religious affiliation or a turn toward a life moulded in rituals and traditions—language has the greatest bearing on their self-definition. The Jewish author Ewa-Maria Slaska, who moved from Poland to Germany, argues that “the home of a writer, whether male or female, is located respectively in his or her language.” Rafael Seligmann explains that German language as well as culture is his Heimat. With the exception of Maxim Biller, even those German authors who reside abroad continue to write in German. Chaim Noll experiences Heimat only in the written word:

I can therefore call myself a German writer: I concern myself daily with the German language, even in other countries, far beyond the typical average in Germany today. I was also born in Germany, as was even my grandmother. It just isn’t enough, after everything had happened, to give me feelings of a homeland that would lie outside my language.

For him, his former domicile in Italy sharpened his awareness of the German language. Noll claims that life in Germany had rendered his mother tongue

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80 After he has moved back to his birth town Prague, Biller contemplated: “The German falls away from me like the memory of an unromantic, disconnected situation, this language obviously never took root in me, and I didn’t even have the power to fight for it.” (“Das Deutsche entglitt mir wie die Erinnerung an eine unromantische, belanglose Situation, diese Sprache hatte offenbar niemals Wurzeln in mir geschlagen, und ich hatte auch gar keine Kraft, um sie zu kämpfen.”) Maxim Biller, “Der Anfang der Geschichte,” Land der Väter und Verräter (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 370.
81 “Einen deutschen Schriftsteller kann ich mich also nennen: Ich beschäftige mich täglich mit der deutschen Sprache, sogar im Ausland, weit über das Mass hinaus, das im heutigen Deutschland üblich ist. Auch geboren bin ich in Deutschland wie schon meine Grossmütter. Es genügt nicht, nach allem
incomprehensible, and that the only reason he understands German again is because of his total immersion into the Italian language and culture\(^{82}\): But whereas Slaska, Seligmann and Noll feel safe in their native tongue, the latter symbolizes an inherent threat for Talia Bloch. In her essay, “Meine Muttersprache” (“My Mother Tongue”), she maintains that “my mother tongue [is] the language of murderers.”\(^{83}\) Likewise, for Esther Dischereit, language is not only the link that overcomes isolation and separateness, it is also a disturbing testimony to the past: after all, how can a Jew speak in a language that has such words as, for example, the verb “vergasen” (“to gas”)? Dischereit describes how extensively German colloquialism is still infiltrated with Nazi idioms and phrases.

She is disturbed at how Germans thoughtlessly use these words. In consequence, she illustrates how not only her soul and spirit feel “Jewish,” but her entire body: ““Even German, as a language, is both indifferent and not indifferent to me. Not all words in German are available to me. For example, the word ‘Rampe’ (ramp). I simply can not use the word any more, not for anything. Did you know for example that furniture, when it is sold from a warehouse is picked up from a ramp? I can’t stand to hear someone say that they picked up their furniture on the ramp. My hands, my hair become Jewish then.”\(^{84}\) In her short story “Alles normal,” Katja Behrens makes similar observations. For her, Nazi language continues to exist as long

\[^{82}\] “Im Fremden spiegeln wir uns. So spiegelt sich meine Muttersprache in den Sprache, die ich im Ausland lese und spreche, und erst dadurch wird sie mir wieder verständlich.” Chaim Noll, *Leben ohne Deutschland*, 92.


as the country remains inhabited by former party members who lead their daily lives as if nothing had happened. She, therefore, would like to escape the world of "those self-justifiers, the silent ones, the distorters, those who claimed they had nothing to do with it, those who wanted to forget, no longer to be where you do something until you are 'gassed,' where you butter bread, do arithmetic, practice the flute until you are 'gassed.'"

These last passages express the complexities and contradictions of Jewish identity in post-Shoah Germany. For Jewish writers, language means Heimat. They search for Heimat in the same manner in which they search for words. However, for second-generation Jews language is highly ambivalent because it prompts both feeling of closeness to and distance from Germany. Proximity arises from the writers' strong ties to their language and their need for self-expression in their native tongue. After all, this is the language in which they were born and raised. Distancing comes from the awareness that the National Socialists had employed the same language to rationalize and justify Jewish mass annihilation. Thus, literature contains both the hope and desire to express oneself and the fear that the intrinsic nature of German language makes this goal impossible. What seems at first sight to be a paradox might contain a truism: for Jewish writers in post-Shoah Germany, the process of writing originates in their inability to speak. Esther Dischereit explains how she overcomes silence in writing. Her conclusion is that language remains an approximation, but that it comes as close as possible to find meaning:

I am, therefore I talk. I can not talk, therefore I write. If I had words,

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I would not write. There are events in our life, in our history, in our memory, that are not to be named or grasped with names. And nevertheless they exist—without doubt. Shoah, Auschwitz, Holocaust—attempts to speak about something where language breaks down.86

In many instances, the children of Shoah survivors attempt to make up for their parents’ reluctance to speak. Helena Janeczek’s portrait of her Polish survivor-mother in Lezioni di tenebra exemplifies why the first generation’s inability to talk about the Shoah causes their offspring to be constantly preoccupied, if not obsessed, with language. Indeed for Janeczek, literature becomes the only way to approach her mother who would otherwise remain a shrouded secret: “It is true, I have no idea who my mother was and how she lived between 1939 and 1945. I can not even pretend that I would know my mother, as people generally believe of their own parents. I am only somewhat able to represent my mother’s story as something real, at least I can follow it as the story of a literary figure.”87 Evidently, the process of getting to know her mother was necessary in order to know herself. The fact that Janeczek is the only second-generation Jewish author who writes in a foreign language makes her a unique case study. It could be argued that she distances herself in order to create her necessary detachment as a writer and biographer. Yet there is also a second aspect to her choice of language. Following the Second World War, Janeczek’s mother, who sold Italian designer shoes in Munich, was mistaken by her German customers as an Italian native. In her early desperate attempts not to look and

act Jewish, the mother gratefully played this part and concealed herself behind this imposed persona. The Italian language becomes, therefore, for Janeczek a means to approach and confront her mother in her camouflaged existence. Yet Janeczek’s story also underscores the fact that the German misrepresentation of her mother’s Jewish identity changes, and at times even disfigures the latter’s self-image.

Studies on multiculturalism, such as Charles Taylor’s theory of the politics of recognition, try to explain this phenomenon: Taylor claims that our identity is largely formed “by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.”88 In the current German context, there are two starkly contrasting portrayals of Jewish identity. “The Jews in Germany,” Dan Diner argues, “can only be legitimate to themselves if they understand themselves as the caretakers of memory. They can not escape this task, on the penalty of the loss of their dignity.”89 This private aspect of Jewish memory-work is starkly contrasted by its public instrumentalization. Some Jews resent the fact that Germany’s mass production of memorials dispossesses them of their memories. Although Jews want Germany to remember the Shoah victims, they also perceive the country’s need to memorialize its own crimes as an intrusion of their personal and safeguarded realm of memories. The Jewish contention is that Germans do not really want to work through their past, but rather try to eliminate it by littering the landscape with memorial sites.

89 “... Here the memory is strongest, here their constant presence challenges the collective culprits to make the deed present again—as if in Germany, through Germany, what was lost could be found again. A kind of being chained down with irons.” Dan Diner, “Negative Symbiose,” 19.
This phenomenon of reverse intent has been described by Pierre Nora, Rafael Samuel, and James E. Young. The following observation by Young captures the tone of criticism that was brought forward in the recent debate about the Holocaust Memorial planned for Berlin:

For once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember. In shouldering the memory-work, monuments may relieve viewers of their memory burden . . . Under the illusion that our memorial edifices will always be there to remind us, we take leave of them and return only at our convenience. To the extent that we encourage monuments to do our memory-work for us, we become that much more forgetful. In effect, the initial impulse to memorialize events like the Holocaust may actually spring from an opposite and equal desire to forget them.90

Given their claim that monuments do not promote public memory but—paradoxically—tend to distance the public from the past, do German Jews want Germany to do away with monuments? Yes and no: they want Germans to remember the dead, but they also want Germans to enter a dialogue with those Jews who are still alive or born after the Shoah. In particular, Rafael Seligmann is adamant about using remembrance sites as springboards for further discussions promoting a better understanding between Germans and Jews. He contends that “the past can never be mastered. What needs to be mastered are the present and the future—for this it is necessary to learn from history . . . to remain stuck in the past may lead to similar results like denying the past: the inability to deal with current challenges.”91

Jews in Germany feel constantly compelled to represent and perpetuate the "Jewish theme": In the case of Esther Dischereit, we see that all her efforts to be identified as both German and Jewish are undermined by an environment in which she is classified as one or the other:

An editor comments that he finds the piece, of which I read an excerpt, successful; he congratulates me. But he also has reservations: what about those passages that are specifically Jewish, why not cut them? The Jewish theme disappears anyway as the action continues, and is perhaps minimized. On the other hand, the audience has been led to expect a continuation of the Jewish theme. It is a very German reservation, that of most Germans. The Jewish ought to be, yes, but as a pure piece, of contemporary history, a piece of contemporary criticism as they say, a sociopolitical discourse against National Socialism as part of the great spiritual conflict of our days. The position should be articulated as a theme, not so much as in the form of action within the categories of guilt, please, only pure. As a sociopolitical theme for a discourse, nothing less, all other conditions of being Jewish minimize Jewishness.92

What Dischereit and others perceive as threatening to their identity is German society's definition of a "Jew." Writers such as Bodemann, Brumlik, Seligmann and Schneider emphasize that the prominent national presence of Jewish institutions, such as the Central Council of Jews in Germany, conceals the fact that the people behind these collective representations remain invisible: Jews are "a people to be visited as if out of antiquarian interest," claims Micha Brumlik.93 Richard Chaim Schneider criticizes that "The Jew is nothing more than a descendant of Auschwitz survivors, he is nothing but a potential or real victim. Most of us are simply folklore-Jews."94 For Y. Michal Bodeman, Jews are a German invention. In other words: "the German Jew" exists for non-Jews primarily as an imaginary figure in remembrance ceremonies,

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92 Esther Dischereit, "Now Exit from this Jewry," Reemerging Jewish Culture in Germany, 267.
such as the fiftieth Anniversary of *Kristallnacht* (November 9, 1938), when 10,000 memorial events took place in the Federal Republic alone.\(^95\)

The German “epidemic of remembrance,”\(^96\) writes Y. Michal Bodemann, has intensified since reunification in 1989. It appears that the need to come to terms with the histories of the two Germanies, as well as the difficult task to harmonize German internal relations prompted an increased concern with the country’s Nazi past. Presently, Germans practice an *Erinnerungskultur* which is reminiscent of a national obsession, a Shoah-mania. “Everything is Holocaust,”\(^97\) ponders Richard Chaim Schneider. Maxim Biller interprets Germany’s attempts to cope with the country’s Nazi past an “endless aria of reconciliation with the past.”\(^98\) Henryk M. Broder calls Auschwitz “an hysterical amusement park.”\(^99\) Every German political and social decision is evaluated with regard to the extent of which it carries weight for the interpretation of Auschwitz. The spectrum reaches from the profound to the profane. On the one hand, it took ten years until the German Parliament finally decided on the fate of the Berlin Holocaust Memorial. On the other hand, public services like ‘Continuing Education’ cannot produce enough courses focusing on Auschwitz-relevant issues such as “Masculinity and Auschwitz.”\(^100\) In recent years, the process of normalization went beyond mere acts of recognition of Nazi atrocities. The new trend is to relinquish Nazi documents, photographs and art pieces from the archives and

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\(^94\) “Der Jude ist also nichts als ein Nachkomme derer von Auschwitz, ist nichts als ein potentielles oder wirkliches Opfer. Volklorejuden, das sind die meisten von uns.” Richard Chaim Schneider, *Zwischenwelten*, 150.


\(^96\) Ibid., 85.


make them available to the general population. For the first time since the Third Reich, in 1995 a German city—Hamburg—featured an exhibition documenting the atrocities of the Wehrmacht (Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944). In 1999, Hitler’s private art collection went on display in Weimar, the home of Goethe and Schiller. Faced with public protest, the curator, Achim Preiss, commented on the historical importance of showing these paintings: “They are really shockingly boring. But of the 120 works, perhaps 90 have not been seen in Germany since 1945, and they are critical to our understanding of Nazi rule.” In September 1999, the question of how to work through Germany’s past was faced with yet another challenge, as the Nazi era was subjected to a new level of artistic liberties. In the controversial new German movie Nichts als die Wahrheit (Nothing But the Truth), director Roland Suso Richter presented an action-packed, Hollywood-like, thriller about the fictitious trial of Josef Mengele.

Richard Chaim Schneider writes, “the Holocaust has become necessary. Our present-day culture finds its most important object in the Holocaust, politics finds its most important source of values.” He believes that “when you talk about ‘the aesthetic problems of representing the Holocaust,’ you are just giving yourself absolution.” Whereas male Jewish authors deal with the question of how the German Erinnerungskultur affects Jewish identity in an intellectual way, women writers like Esther Dischereit and Barbara Honigmann consider the German

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100 Henryk M. Broder. Personal interview in Berlin, 9 August 1999.
103 Der Holocaust ist eine Notwendigkeit geworden. Die Kultur der Gegenwart findet in ihm ihren wichtigsten Gegenstand, die Politik ihren wichtigsten Wertmassstab.” Richard Chaim Schneider, Fetisch Holocaust, 9.
appropriation of their identity as a constant threat that distorts or even violates their self-image:

Now and then I act like a Jewish woman, and find myself in conversations on the topic of “Jews in the GDR” or “Jews in Germany” or even “Judaism and Femininity.” These conversations are fairly tense, because I have the feeling the people are demanding something from me that I can’t give them, and want to hear something that I can’t say to them. Every time in these situations I feel somehow as if my identity has been mistaken, for I feel myself so little related to the one I am asked to represent, just like now, in this moment, on this podium.¹⁰⁵

Esther Dischereit’s language is radical and provocative. She uses the image of the whore as a metaphor for the intellectual and cultural dispossession of an ethnic and/or religious minority. The dominant culture is represented as a “John” who exploits the woman for personal gratification: “To write in a Jewish way for the German public has an unbearable, even prostitute-like quality—as when a woman undresses in front of the eyes of men. I know it. But I see no alternative.” Dischereit’s case illustrates that, although history can be provide a place of potential forgiveness and reconciliation, difficulties arise when Jews find their own history misrepresented by non-Jews, or if they feel that they are historicized as “Alibi-Juden” (“token Jews”). In the latter case, their presence would be sought in order to help a guilt-ridden Germany work through its past traumas, and to show the world that life in this country has normalized again.

¹⁰⁴ “Indem man über die ästhetischen Probleme der Holocaust-Darstellung spricht, erteilt man sich selber Absolution.” Ibid., 16.
Conclusion

The example of contemporary Jewish authors living in Germany can be taken as a case study for the ways in which language creates a homeland and becomes an instrument in the ongoing project of working through one’s past. Second-generation Jews who have tried to find Heimat in post-Shoah Germany have been confronted with a difficult proposition. On one hand, they have had to deal with Germany’s efforts to create a “usable,” or even “bearable,” past, while on the other hand they were compelled to cope with their survivor-parents’ traumatic memories. Although language in itself poses a difficult set of issues, they have chosen the German language to be their homeland. Whereas many younger Jews feel that Germany’s resurgent nationalism does not offer anything beyond “an ever-present past and an ever less certain future,” language creates a place which they can—for the most part—safely inhabit. Micha Brumlik explains why the marriage of language and identity creates such an important relationship for Jews in Germany: “There are stories that bring us to silence. And nevertheless we must say more. By speaking we tell other stories, and by telling stories we build identities.”

I would contest the claim that the translation of reality into fiction is a mere substitute for a missing homeland. Indeed, language is the crucial constituent for how second-generation German Jews define their identity without having to subscribe to any national affiliation. Whether or not young German Jewish writers end up feeling at home in Germany, language will always remain the most important criterion in how they define themselves. Ironically, they write their own Heimatdichtung.

106 "Es gibt Geschichten, die uns zum Verstummen bringen. Und dennoch müssen wir weiter sprechen. Indem wir sprechen, erzählen wir unter anderem Geschichten, und indem wir Geschichten erzählen,
Whereas the term is usually used to describe a particular genre of German literature that perpetuates the image of an intact and idealized homeland—a *heile Welt*—Jewish writing in Germany is a discerning critique of their country's attempts to master its past. Likewise, Jewish authors seriously question the post-reunification attitude toward Germany's Jewish population.

Jewish literature in post-Shoah Germany is therefore neither an escape nor a quest for utopia. It conveys the vital human need to belong even in times when there is nothing to hold onto. Contemporary German Jewish writing is an expression of courage as well as an act of resistance. To stop writing is the equivalent of surrendering and becoming a victim. However, for many Jews their decision to stay in Germany is based on more than on a spiritual or an emotional attachment to the German cultural tradition. Sammy Speier, a Jewish psychoanalyst in Frankfurt expresses their shared sentiment when he writes, "the moment I leave here, Hitler has won." 107 Therefore, the German domicile of Jews also signals an act of political defiance: if they leave, Germany would ultimately become what Hitler intended it to be: "judenrein," that is, "free of Jews."

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