

Ursula Hien, Hamburg

Painful stories

Review

Robert Bober, *Berg et Beck*. Roman. Paris, P.O.L., 1999 [*Berg and Beck*. A novel]

"Because I had no letters or visits, and because I never went on vacation, my schoolmates realized that I was different. In their eyes, I suppose, I was already an orphan," writes Saul Friedländer in his autobiography *When memory comes*¹ about the time he spent in a French boarding school for Catholic children. His parents had sent him there to hide him from the Nazi bloodhounds, who they themselves had been unable to escape. They never returned after having been deported. The loneliness of a Jewish child hidden in a boarding school, the heartache of never receiving any mail, the overwhelming longing for a letter and, last but not least, the torment of never being visited by anyone on Sunday and of having no one to visit – these are the kinds of experiences described by Saul Friedländer, experiences which many of the children in Robert Bober's new novel share with Friedländer. In *Berg et Beck*, Bober portrays the secluded world of the children's home in Andrésy, where 118 children of deportees who did not return lived in the early 1950s. The author records the traces left in these children by the absence of their murdered parents.

French film maker Robert Bober

Summer camps and homes for the children of deportees figured briefly in Bober's first book, *What news of the war?*². The main focus of the novel was, however, a tailor's shop in the Marais quarter of Paris, where a small community of afflicted survivors, set adrift after the war, had gathered one year later.

French film maker Robert Bober made his debut as a writer with this prize-winning novel, which appeared in 1993 in France. Although *What news of the war?* is the debut novel of an author in his sixties – Bober was born in 1931 in Berlin as the son of Polish Jews who emigrated to Paris two years later – the novel is not a sign of a belated readiness or capacity to confront the Shoah. Writing was for Bober instead a necessary complement to his decades of cinematic work on the themes Holocaust and emigration. In 1970, for example, he filmed the documentary *La Génération d'Après*, and in 1979 he created, together with French writer Georges Perec, *Récits d'Ellis Island: Histoires d'errance et d'espoir*³, a film about the immigrants' island in New York harbor.

Instructive game

Before Bober began making documentaries, he worked in France as a tailor and an educator, among other things. The fact that he depicts the secluded world of the children's home from the perspective of an educator is therefore more than a mere coincidence. Bober portrays the children and their "painful stories" via the character Joseph Berg, who came to Andrésy as a twenty year old staff member in January 1952. He portrays Laura, who tried to make "her doll into an adult" by painting wrinkles onto her face, and who tried to have her doll cuddle her in its arms like a mother. Or Alex, who has carried a letter from his brother around with him for the past five years, despite the fact that it is simply an empty sheet of paper.

The children have kept these things for years. They are not keepsakes in the usual sense, that is, objects given to them by their parents to remember them by. Nonetheless, they are so inseparably

connected to the children's longing for family affection and love, that they take the place of their parents. These keepsakes, which have taken the place of the parents as symbols, have made the parents visible; they mark both the parents' absence and the deep-seated rupture which the children have been forced to experience.

Just as the children have no keepsakes from their parents, they also seem to have no "memories of life" which "would allow them to honor their dead parents." To commemorate their murdered relatives, the children must resort to knowledge handed down to them:

"Draw a line by connecting all the dots with one another in a certain order and you will have a lesson in geography," are the instructions Laura gives for the "Instructive Game" she has made up. The children and staff of Andr sy try to solve this riddle for weeks without success and finally discover by chance that the riddle is based on a map from the *Catalogue of Camps and Prisons in Germany and the Occupied Territories from 1939 to 1945*.⁴ The eighteen dots to be connected mark 18 concentration camps. And then there is Nathan, who, after liberation, searches the lists of returnees day after day, and then, when one day there are no more lists, piles up hundreds of shoes in his uncles's shoe store overnight – overwhelmed by photographs taken in Auschwitz in 1945. "Perhaps," Joseph adds softly to the tale of Nathan's act of memory, "perhaps one should have seen this pile of shoes in a shop window, to gauge the grief inflicted upon a child."

The children do not speak about their immeasurable grief, their feeling of abandonment, much less about the feeling of shame at having been abandoned, and these traumatized children do not speak of the disconsolate sorrow at having no one to count on, no one to confide in. References to such feelings are rather part of the care-givers' attempts to explain the children's often seemingly crazy actions, their fits of fainting, their acts of refusal, and especially their tears, which ran "a little longer than those of others, since they were nearly the only means the children had to make themselves understood." These are "difficult" children, finding their bearings between quiet speechlessness and noisy aggressiveness, children who often had no choice but "to provoke us, so that we would not determine their fates as we saw fit."

Once Joseph says: "One way or the other, as a matter of principal, we were on the side of the children," and this attitude of the narrator corresponds to Bober's empathy as a writer. Bober sensitively respects the space which the children must have to protect themselves; it is Joseph, rather than the author, who tells of their lives. Just how important this filter is, in the form of a figure who narrates and interprets at the same time, becomes particularly evident in the case of Marcel. Marcel lived in Andr sy for a time shortly after the war was over and acted "like a wild animal." [...] The other children lived in terror of him [...] They knew he was capable of doing anything." One day, Marcel hurled this sentence at the staff member responsible for him: "In Auschwitz I was free, there I could set the dogs on the Jews." Only because she knows of Marcel's "way through the dead" and of his decision to "never again be on the side of the victims" can she confess to Joseph: "He was a thirteen year old child who had survived Auschwitz and Buchenwald and sometimes I hated him."

The merry-go-round motif

Marcel is the only child of whom we learn that he was in a camp. But where do the other children who Joseph meets in 1952 come from? How did they survive? And where? Robert Bober leaves these questions unanswered, he does not describe the where from and where to. Bober takes snapshots, captures images, shows in short sequences how, in the year 1952, the history of extermination is present inside of the children. The result is a mosaic of narratives and conversations, images and motifs, which are, almost imperceptibly, taken up again and again and adapted to new contexts. In a scene typical of his method of writing, Bober has Joseph walk about

the grounds of the children's home, changing his standpoint and thus his perspective on the children. The author has Joseph look at the children from "all sides", like a character from Max Ophüls' *La Ronde*⁵, who is standing on a spinning merry-go-round and saying, 'People only see one side of things, I see them all, because I see from all around and that enables me to be everywhere at once.' In contrast to the film character, however, Joseph himself spins around, by constantly moving to new places and his perspective on the children gains new historical depth when he says: "There is that, which I see and there is that, which I know. But those are two things which I cannot keep apart."

Bober varies the merry-go-round motif several times, thus creating a parable for the children's lives. One little girl gives herself up to the circular motion of the merry-go-round "with trust and enthusiasm," while a boy cries throughout the entire ride. In contrast to the little girl, who knows that the horse "is only there to allow her to go around once and bring her back to where there will always be a soothing gesture or soothing look," the boy is able to "find neither his own place, not that of his parents."

The letter project

Joseph's story also tells of how closely intermeshed the two tasks are – finding one's own place and finding a place for those who were murdered. "What would be my place in this institution? Why was I there?" he asks upon arriving in January. And in the summer of the same year, he knows the answer to the question of whether, during summer camp, the educators should differentiate between children with and without parents. Yes, Joseph says, "I wanted them to have an advantage over those who had spent the year at home, in the family."

In the intervening months, his stay had taken on "a quite unexpected meaning." While systematizing the home's library, he comes across a copy of *Tom Sawyer's Adventures* and begins remembering his murdered friend and classmate Henri Beck, he remembers "that spring of 1942, when Beck and I were so close," close also in their shared enthusiasm for cycle racing, in particular for the races in the Vélodrome d'Hiver. On July 16, 1942, it is the Vélodrome d'Hiver, of all places, which becomes the starting point for his path to extermination, as the large scale raid in Paris begins. The copy of Mark Twain's presumably most famous book which Joseph and Henri owned together disappears with Henri. "Since apparently you are only alive because I am still alive," Joseph Berg decides to ward off forgetting by writing letters to his dead friend: "[...] history will not be deprived of you, merely because you cannot answer." Although the letter project threatens to fail in the end – ultimately, the intervals between Joseph's letters in the novel grow longer and the letters themselves grow shorter – the murdered boy is nonetheless present in his lack of answers, in his absence, and the classic children's book becomes a symbol of his destroyed existence.

"Vainly do we try to maintain, with our words, with our writings, what is absent". Robert Bober precedes his novel with these lines from Maurice Blanchot.⁶ It is a pessimistic motto, contradicted by the quiet, resolute power of his book. For *Berg et Beck* is itself testimony of the meaning of books as sites of memory. Just as the memory of Henri Beck is linked to the novel *Tom Sawyer's Adventures*, so too does *Berg et Beck* preserve the memories of the children in the children's home and their absent parents and the hope that, in spite of the monstrous rupture of civilization they have experienced, they will be able to lead a "difficult but fulfilled life." "Writing retraces the contours of the past with a possibly less ephemeral stroke than the others," notes Saul Friedländer in his book of memories, referring to his great desire to withstand the break which "was an abrupt one and it cannot become a part of everyday life." Writing "does at least preserve a presence, and it enables one to tell about a child who saw one world founder and another reborn."

Robert Bober, *Berg et Beck*. Roman. Paris, Le Grand livre du mois, 1999. 248 p.
In German: *Berg und Beck*. Translated from French by Tobias Scheffel. München, Verlag Antje Kunstmann, 2000. [*Berg and Beck. A Novel*]

Translation from German: **Paula Bradish**

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- ² Robert Bober, *What news of the war?* Translated from French by Robin Buss. [Quoi de neuf sur la guerre? English] London, H. Hamilton; New York, Penguin Putnam, 1998. In German: Was gibt's Neues vom Krieg? Translated from French by Tobias Scheffel. München, Verlag Antje Kunstmann, 1995.
- ³ Georges Perec with Robert Bober, *Ellis Island*. Translated from French by Harry Mathews [Récits d'Ellis Island. English]. New York, New Press, 1995.
- ⁴ *Catalogue of camps and prisons in Germany and German-occupied territories, Sept. 1st, 1939-May 8th, 1945* / prepared by International Tracing Service, Records Branch, Documents Intelligence Section. Arolsen, [Germany : The Service], 1949-1950. 2 v. : maps.
- ⁵ Max Ophüls, *La Ronde*, 1950 (Roundabout). Based on the play by Arthur Schnitzler, *Reigen* (Hands Around).
- ⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship*. Translated from French by Elizabeth Rottenberg [L'Amitié, 1971; English]. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997, p. 289.

Short biographical note

Ursula Hien, M.A., studied literature, history of literature, German literature and empirical literature in Tübingen and Hamburg. She has published on the history of Jews in Hamburg and on the history of the publication of the works of Edgar Hilsenrath (including his novel "The Nazi and the barber: a tale of vengeance"). She is currently an editor at the German weekly magazine "stern" [see her review on Tanja Hetzer, in: TRN-Newsletter 1, July 2000, URL http://www.traumaresearch.net/fr_boo.htm].

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