

**Angela Schwarz, Duisburg**

**How to deal with the experience that "to be schizophrenic is to be normal, that unreality is reality" (Jakov Lind)**

**Papers to a conference on children's experience of the Holocaust in Marburg, Germany, held in May 1997**

Review

**Barbara Bauer, Waltraud Strickhausen (Eds.), "Für ein Kind war das anders." Traumatische Erfahrungen jüdischer Kinder und Jugendlicher im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland.** Berlin, Metropol Verlag, 1999. 448 pp.

"If growing up is a process of deciphering the world, how does one process experiences that transcend the limits of the expressible?" (Jacob Boas, p. 109)

Although conditions of discrimination, persecution and death during the Holocaust were very much the same for adults and children at a specific place and time, no one will question the dictum of Ruth Klüger, that children experienced the years of successive marginalization, the time spent in hiding, the ghettos, the concentration camps differently. In several countries, notably in the United States and Israel, the effects of the years of terror on the younger generations were widely discussed among scholars. In Germany, though, this important facet was hardly ever touched upon for decades after World War II. One might add that the peculiarities of women's experiences of the Holocaust have failed to draw scholarly attention for nearly just as long – and not only in Germany. That this is an eminent theme in its own right has been convincingly argued by Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman in "Women in the Holocaust" (1998), to name a late example. In recent years however, scholars in Germany from various disciplines ranging from psychoanalysis via historiography to literary studies have begun to examine the perspective of the child.

This book on children and adolescents offers both more and less than its subtitle suggests. It does not confine its analyses to National Socialist Germany as it embraces the hopes, fears, torments of youths living under Nazi terror all over Europe from the Netherlands and France to the Soviet Union and Hungary. It offers less than readers may deduce from its subtitle as it more often turns to the ways the children's traumata are dealt with than to the traumata themselves, and discusses how traumata are dealt with on two levels, firstly, by the children who have put down their experience in words in diaries, notes or later, as adults, in books or interviews, secondly, by the psychologists, historians, sociologists and literary scholars who have listened to or studied their accounts.

Compiled in this volume are the papers presented at a conference in Marburg, Germany, organized by two literary scholars. The idea was to bring together academics, teachers and eye-witnesses in a discussion of children's experiences of the Holocaust and those children's testimonies in the form of published and unpublished accounts of a more documentary character, of fictional narratives and of videotaped interviews as well as the various analytic approaches to these testimonies. Though the initial impetus came

from literary criticism, its methods and interests, the book covers a much wider range of approaches to childhood in the Holocaust. The first section is made up of personal testimonies made or presented by Hans Keilson, Guy Stern, Elisabeth Hoffmann, Frederik van Gelder, Jacob Boas and Konrad Feilchenfeldt. Five papers make up the section on psychoanalysis and historical study, aptly preceding the literary analysis of several documentary and fictional representations in the third section, since psychologists and psychiatrists were among the first to be confronted with the need to find ways to help survivors to cope with their traumatic childhood and/or youth. Memoirs and autobiographies are examined just as much as fictional texts such as Jerzy Kosinski's "Der bemalte Vogel", Jakov Lind's "Counting my steps" ("Selbstporträt"), Philip Roth's "The Ghost Writer". In attempting to explore the ways in which the inexpressible is put into words or images the form of presentation as either fact or fiction can be held to be of secondary importance. At least this is the editors' point of view. They follow the argument of Ruth Klüger who has contended that every representation of the Holocaust is interpretation (p. 23). The fourth section comments on three different forms of dealing with the Holocaust in film and in art: films with a more documentary character such as Claude Lanzmann's "Shoah", Charlotte Salomon's sequence of gouaches, and the "lieux de mémoire" in Germany, as works either newly created by artists or restored from a past vibrant with elements of Jewish culture. The words, images, films and works of art – as well as this book – aim to keep people from forgetting, to show the presence of the evil done to the children and youths whose experiences are the subject of this book.

School children today should acquire a knowledge of individual biographies, should empathise with those persecuted under the Nazi regime. Keeping the memory alive, a matter of concern not solely to the survivors, shall help to prevent such barbarism and cruelty from ever being unleashed against people again. Three model teaching units expounded in the fifth section are thought to go some way in ensuring the editors' intention to initiate more than just another academic conference.

Though the editors provide an extensive introduction to the conference's aims, to its papers and the arguments central to the debates of scholars, teachers and eye-witnesses, the discussion of some of the fundamental concepts is curiously missing or the concepts are only mentioned in passing.

There is no analysis of the term "trauma", which is repeatedly referred to as the central point of interest. Frederik van Gelder hints at the use of the term on all levels of debate today. Disparate phenomena are, so he says, studied within a psychoanalytic framework, so that over the years "moral-political discourses have progressively been replaced by the medical-therapeutic" (p. 106). His is an important point, a point that, enlarged upon in a thorough investigation into the term's meanings and the repercussions of its application to a great variety of Holocaust experiences, would have helped readers to grasp the singular perspective and broaden their field of vision at the same time.

The same applies to the ideas enclosed in the statement "It was different for a child". What exactly was different when seen through the eyes of a child? In what ways did the child's perceptions differ from those of adults? Unfortunately, the editors confine themselves to a few remarks only when they sum up this difference as follows:

"Children experience a situation differently, they lack a frame of reference which helps them to interpret their experience; they have only just begun to acquire such a frame of

reference. They remember that which has impressed, surprised, pleased or worried them in a way different from that of adults. Scenes of cruelty impress themselves more forcefully on their minds." (p. 15, my translation)

Although this fundamental argument is taken up in some of the papers, no in-depth analysis is offered. Again, readers – and presumably attendants to the conference – would have profited greatly from an exposition of this difference either as a starting-point or as a kind of summary of the papers' results.

In all, the conference and this book are a significant step towards breaking through the "conspiracy of silence" (p. 161). Dan Bar-On, who touches on this "conspiracy" in his paper, has interviewed the members of twelve survivor families in Israel. The results of his research not only highlight the after-effects of the Holocaust even in the third generation, but point once more to the complex network of protective mechanisms, anxieties, reactions to survivors which have influenced or even determined the way the experiences are dealt with. Over decades Israeli society did not want to hear about helpless victims. Those who had escaped wanted to forget and even make others forget. In the past few years, in Israel and elsewhere, many survivors whose childhood or adolescence was dominated by Nazi persecution have begun to end the silence. We should listen to them very carefully.

### **Short biographical note**

**Angela Schwarz** is Assistant Professor of Modern History at the University of Duisburg. She studied English, History and Political Sciences at the universities of Duisburg and Reading, England, got her degree in 1987. Her Ph.D. thesis "Die Reise ins Dritte Reich" (Göttingen, Zürich, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), awarded the Fraenkel Prize in Contemporary History in 1991, deals with the impressions and assessments of Nazi Germany as held by British visitors to the country in the 1930s. A second major study, "Der Schlüssel zur modernen Welt" (Stuttgart, Steiner, 1999) analyses the ways in which popular science in Britain and Germany in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century tried to make contemporaries greet enthusiastically or at least come to terms with the scientific discoveries and technologies that finally brought about the modern world. For a list of her publications, including links to reviews published on the internet, see <[www.uni-duisburg.de/FB1/GESCHICHTE/SchwarzPubli.htm](http://www.uni-duisburg.de/FB1/GESCHICHTE/SchwarzPubli.htm)>. In spring 2004 Angela Schwarz joined the Georg-August-University Göttingen as Visiting Professor.

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**Citation** Angela Schwarz, Duisburg, How to deal with the experience that "to be schizophrenic is to be normal, that unreality is reality" (Jakov Lind). Papers to a conference on children's experience of the Holocaust in Marburg, Germany, held in May 1997. Review of Barbara Bauer, Waltraud Strickhausen (Eds.), "Für ein Kind war das anders." Traumatische Erfahrungen jüdischer Kinder und Jugendlicher im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland. In: TRN-Newsletter 2, Hamburg Institute for Social Research, June 2004.

**URL** <http://www.TraumaResearch.net/review2/schwarz.htm>

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