Power of memory and the presence of a collective history in Holocaust literature: Analysis of Jewish and German perspectives

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The Power of Memory and the Presence of a Collective History in Holocaust Literature: Analysis of Jewish and German Perspectives

by

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B.A. The University of Montana, 1989

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In this thesis I undertake an analysis of the power of memory and the presence of a collective history in Holocaust literature from a Jewish and a German perspective. The introduction outlines the long history of Jewish persecution in Germany and in Europe leading up to the Holocaust. I then discuss the need for Jewish survivors to bear witness to atrocities perpetrated against their people in an effort to preserve Jewish history and the need for German writers to confront the shame and disgrace resulting from Germany’s recent past. I also highlight some of the problematic issues of creating a genre of Holocaust literature, and I describe common themes and struggles faced by writers trying to preserve and confront memory. Some of these themes are: spiritual resistance, the burden of memory and survival, bearing witness, (breaking) silence, guilt, collective identity, and confronting the past. The body of this thesis deals with Holocaust literature from a Jewish perspective. I chose three well-known Jewish authors whose experiences and connections to Judaism varied greatly from one another. Primo Levi was an assimilated Italian Jew who had a distant connection to Judaism and who never experienced racism until World War II. His memories and writings differ from Jean Amery’s, an assimilated Austrian Jew whose works reflect the difficulties he experienced as a German-speaking Holocaust survivor who never identified with Judaism. In the final chapter I explore the life and writings of Elie Wiesel, an Orthodox Jew whose works reflect struggles with faith, with God, and with the goodness of man. In order to provide a point of comparison, in the conclusion I discuss common German reactions to the Holocaust and explore the difficulties Germans had confronting memory and their connection to a collective identity. I highlight the major themes in a discussion of how personal experiences affected the works of the German writers Martin Walser and Günter Grass. Walser’s writings address the German need to confront the past in order to recognize the dangers of competition, apathy, and the abuse of power fundamental to the success of Nazi Fascism. Grass criticizes the lack of resistance to the Nazi movement. He strongly feels that such an atrocity is a threat in a country whose citizens refuse to confront their past and who refuse to speak out against injustice. Memory and collective identity inspired many of the issues addressed in their socially critical works, just as the power of memory and past experience motivated the themes in Jewish writing.
Preface

My interest in Germany and the literature of the Holocaust is deeply rooted in my own German heritage. Being the daughter of a German citizen, I grew up listening to my Oma (grandmother) and my Tante (my great-aunt) reminisce and recount the weeks prior to the beginning of their new lives in Kochel am See southwest of Munich. They talked about the difficulties they encountered prior to and following the end of the war.

Every year when I visited I would learn a little bit more about the horrible night when my family was informed that they had thirty minutes to pack fifty pounds of their belongings before walking down the streets of their hometown for the very last time. Every year I gained further insight into how hard and desperate the post-war years were for those who were transplanted into new communities, for those who were starving and poor, and for those left with broken families at the end of the war. I was told how my mom, who was four years old, took a train every day to the neighboring villages to try to find food, and how the family sometimes only had a loaf of bread and a small piece of cheese, or maybe a bit of potato to eat. Every year I heard stories about how Oma and Tante worked long hours in factory-like conditions to eventually save enough money to establish their own business to provide as best they could for my mother and my aunt.

It seemed like no matter where we were in Germany or Austria, whether we were shopping, out to dinner, at a Seefest, or visiting friends, something triggered a memory of those days of hardship. Not a single evening went by without my Oma or Tante telling a story about damals, back then. And it wasn’t typical only of my family. All of our friends and neighbors had very similar memories, and they all had the similar need to re-tell and
compare their memories with those around them.

With each visit I was reminded again and again how important it was for older Germans like my Oma or Tante, those who really struggled to survive the war years, to relive those painful times through personal and shared memories. Those reminders led me to the further realization that in all of those years I had never heard my mom or my aunt ever talk about any childhood or early adolescent memories: no school days, no biking accidents, none of the usual childhood experiences. And what’s more is that never in all of those visits has anyone in my family ever mentioned the Holocaust. Nor have I heard any of our friends or neighbors ever comment about that part of the war, that part of Germany’s history.

A few summers ago I took a group of my High School German students to Dachau. My family was shocked and appalled. Why would I want to take my students there when there are so many beautiful things to see in Bavaria? How could I think of doing such a thing? That same summer I asked my Tante about what she knew and what she thought about the Jewish tragedy. She told me that they did not know, that their friends and neighbors did not know, that it had all been kept very secret. On the radio it was announced that the Jews were being moved to holding areas and would then be resettled. She told me that her initial reaction to that announcement made around 1939 was one of envy and resentment. She thought they were going someplace with food and security, a place free from the poverty and starvation my family was experiencing.

After news of the devastation was made known in the weeks following liberation of the camps, she could not believe it was possible, that it even happened. She told me that
even if they (the German citizens) had known, they would have been powerless to stop the chain of events. In an attempt to understand the past, Tante has spent the last fifty years of her life reading every biography and autobiography published that tell the stories and memories of Germans who survived the war years and who were able to start over. She finds comfort in the similar memories of others. None of the books that she reads, however, tell the stories or memories of Jewish survivors. When I asked her why not, she told me that she isn’t ready yet.

It is a familiar story. My Oma and Tante were like many of the “Trümmerfrauen” in Germany, women who, either deserted by their husbands or widowed due to the Second World War, rebuilt their homeland and picked up the pieces of their lives from the rubble that reminded them every day of the devastating power of war and hatred. It is also an unfortunate occurrence that the trauma of many Germans’ own personal experiences with hunger and fear and struggle for survival during the war and post-war years left them unable and unwilling to think about the full extent of the devastation and what it meant for Germany and for Germans. Primo Levi, in his book, *The Drowned and the Saved* discussed why memories are sometimes altered or suppressed:

> It has been noticed, for instance, that many survivors of wars or other complex and traumatic experiences tend unconsciously to filter their memory: summoning them up among themselves, or telling them to third persons, they prefer to dwell on moments of respite, on grotesque, strange, or relaxed intermezzos, and to skim over the most painful episodes, which are not called up willingly from the reservoir of memory and therefore with time tend to mist over, to lose their contours. (32)

Because of my interest in the post-war years in Germany I enrolled in a course in
Holocaust Literature, Art, and Film last summer. During those few short weeks I was exposed to hundreds of pages of poetry, short stories, novels, plays, films, and documentaries concerned with the side of the war to which I never had much exposure.

Since that time I have been reading numerous essays, articles, and works of literature dealing with the Holocaust. I have also been examining the various problematic issues still being addressed by both the German and Jewish people. I am particularly interested in the power that memory has wielded in this era of the world's recent history, and I hope to better understand the struggles faced by everyone who has been affected by this devastating event.
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Jews and Christians in the Newly Founded German Nation: The Anticipation of Future Events

In the decades and centuries before the emancipation of the Jews in Germany, Jewish residents endured repeated pogroms, persecution, and isolation from the rest of German-speaking society. In addition to having limited employment opportunities, Jews were forced to adhere to dress codes, required to live in strictly Jewish communities (ghettos), and expected to obey restrictions which limited their relations with non-Jews. As they were not desirable members of the community, they were not allowed the same basic rights as their Christian neighbors.

Limitations and restrictions were first placed on the Jews in 321 when the Roman Emperor Constantine declared that Christianity was the official religion of his Empire. Constantine tolerated Jews, however, because he recognized that their financial strengths could be exploited. Wealthy Jews were appointed to the Curia, the city’s governing body. Not only were Curia members responsible for collecting taxes, they were also required to pay for any unpaid taxes out of their own pockets. It was neither a desirable nor an avoidable position, but as long as Rome received its payments, the Empire permitted Jewish communities to thrive. In the eleventh century, however, the attitude toward the Jews became more hostile.

Between 1070 and 1270 there was religious persecution and violence in the form of pogroms. The First Crusade of 1090 resulted in the deaths of five thousand Jews in the Rhine region who refused conversion to Christianity. Many crusaders felt these robberies,
murders, and rapes were given the church's blessing. Pope Innocent III declared in 1205 that the Jews were "Sons of Crucifiers" and, therefore, eternal servants of the Christian world who needed be set apart from Christians (Hope 33). In November 1215 he presided over the Fourth Lateran Council at the Church of San Giovanni in Laterno in Rome that proposed in canon 68 that social restrictions be placed on Jews:

It happens at times, that through error Christians have relations with the women of Jews or Saracens, and Jews or Saracens with Christian women. Therefore, that they may not under pretext of error of this sort excuse themselves in the future for the excesses of such prohibited intercourse, we decree that such Jews and Saracens of both sexes in every Christian province and at all times shall be marked off in the eyes of the public from other people through the character of their dress. (qtd. in Gay 20)

For many Christians throughout Europe, however, such social limitations were not enough. They preferred the formal expulsion of Jews from Christian territories altogether. France threw out all of its Jews first in 1182 and again in 1394. England expelled its Jews in 1290, Spain followed in 1492, and Portugal in 1496. In the German territories there were also a number of expulsions: in 1424 Cologne drove out its Jews, Augsburg did the same in 1439, Mainz in 1473, Nuremberg in 1499, Bavaria in 1551, and Brandenburg expelled all Jews in 1573, after the Kurfürst was murdered and his Jewish financial advisor "confessed under torture that he had killed the monarch" (Hope 35).

Following the death and destruction of the Thirty Years' War in 1648, Jews were granted more privileges than they had enjoyed for quite some time because they were needed to help rebuild the economy of the various kingdoms, but they were still required to live in ghettos, wear different clothes than the Christians, and were not allowed to
fraternize with non-Jews. It wasn’t until after Jewish emancipation, in 1871, Germany’s founding year as the Second Empire under Bismark and Wilhelm I, that Jews were finally granted privileges they had never before enjoyed. For the first time, for instance, they could own property, they could choose to live in non-Jewish districts, they could marry non-Jews, and they could even hold political office or work as civil servants. Following hundreds of years of persecution, discrimination, and isolation, the Jewish community was given the chance to assimilate themselves into German society rights granted to all citizens.

Some of these newly granted liberties, however, came with a rather high price: that of total assimilation. Jewish citizens wanting to hold a civil office, for example, were expected to give up the religious beliefs and traditions associated with their collective Jewish history, convert to Christianity, and adopt the traditions of a society that had always been considered foreign and hostile. The term “collective history” was well defined by Primo Levi, an Italian Jew and writer, in the following quote from his final work, *The Drowned and the Saved*:¹

> There exists a spirit of each people (otherwise it would not be a people) a *Deutschtum*, and *italianita*, an *hispanidad*: They are the sums of traditions, customs, history, language, and culture. Whoever does not feel within himself this spirit, which is national in the best sense of the word, not only does not entirely belong to his own people but is not part of human civilization. (183)

During the next few decades, Jews were faced with the difficult choice of either joining the

¹ Terms such as collective history, collective identity, bearing witness, silence, and memory appear repeatedly in Holocaust literature and in essays about Holocaust literature and also will be used throughout this thesis.
ranks of the German bourgeoisie and taking advantage of new opportunities available to them, or of remaining closely bound to the Jewish traditions and beliefs passed down from generation to generation, and thereby remaining "outside" of mainstream German society.

Jews choosing to become a part of the once hostile and uninviting German society isolated themselves from their own collective history through assimilation. They thereby renounced the faith of their people, the Hasidic religious and cultural traditions of the Ostjuden, and attempted to disassociate themselves from other aspects of their collective history, all in order to gain entry into the community that was for so long forbidden and off limits to them. During this time of emancipation many of these Jews experienced the development of a "split self." Some were enticed by the prospect of entering politics, law or various academic fields, even if it meant changing their religious beliefs and adopting a new lifestyle. Many even felt relieved to be rid of the burden that marked them as outsiders. Many converted to Christianity, took Christian spouses, and raised children to follow the religious and social traditions present in typical Christian households. At the same time a number of prominent Jews, already well established in profitable industries, such as textiles and banking, saw their emancipation as a new beginning, a time when the German people finally would be willing to accept the differences of their non-Christian neighbors. This presumption was premature, however, and problems did not cease.

Instead of the Jews and Germans moving closer together because of Jewish emancipation, the gap between the two cultures continued to expand in significant ways. Talented, assimilated Jews endeavored to flourish in all aspects of German culture, and by the 1930s Jews had become well established and very successful in the arts, in law, in the
academic world, in commerce, and in publishing. But for many anti-Semites such “Jewish striving and Jewish success, real or imaginary, was perceived as the behavior of a foreign and hostile minority group acting collectively to exploit and dominate the majority” (Friedländer 82). The legal emancipation of the Jews could hardly alleviate deeply rooted feelings of suspicion and hatred.

Economic envy became another key factor in confirming division between Jews and Germans, and served to fuel anti-Semitic attitudes among many non-Jewish Germans. By the end of the nineteenth century, the critical interests in banking and commerce were heavily controlled by Jewish families. Jews owned more than 50% of the major banks and occupied nearly 80% of the primary positions in the major banks in German-speaking Europe (Friedländer 80). In her book The Jews of Germany, Ruth Gay discussed the irony of Jewish success in finance and trade: “The church’s abhorrence of money lent at interest had turned Jews into the sole lenders. Meanwhile, the guilds barring Jews from their crafts and the municipal regulations prohibiting them from owning land conspired to force them into trade” (70). Hannah Arendt, an assimilated Jew who grew up in Königsgberg, discussed how emancipation further ignited anti-Jewish sentiments:

emancipation allowed for the social advancement of a large number of Jews within a context in which their social function was losing in specificity and in which political power no longer backed them. They increasingly became the targets of various forms of social resentment. Modern anti-Semitism was fueled by this conjunction of increasing visibility and increasing weakness. (qtd. in Friedländer 82)

The increasing visibility as well as the increasing weakness to which Arendt refers can be attributed to the emancipation and surprisingly successful assimilation of many of
her people. As numerous Jews became wealthier and more prosperous, and as more and more Jewish individuals found success in the various fields now open to them, they could no longer be ignored or considered a relatively marginal part of German society. At the same time, many assimilated Jews, who thought they had detached themselves from their collective history, battled simultaneously to shake themselves free from ties with the past, while struggling to establish a new connection in and to a society, which, at least in part, was not eager to accept transformed German Jews as equals.

Total assimilation implied a collective disappearance of cultural and traditional elements of Jewish lifestyle and beliefs, which was both impossible and problematic for a variety of reasons. Assimilated Jews tried to erase hundreds of years of traditions and culture connected to their collective history merely through religious conversion. In this way they hoped to become a welcome addition to German society. However, these assimilated Jews were no more considered equals by German citizens than unassimilated Jews were warmly embraced by their German neighbors: “Religious and cultural distinctiveness was reinforced by the increasingly negative reactions of German society in general to the very rapidity of the Jews’ social and economic ascent” (Friedländer 80). Noteworthy is that, given the contributions and success of the Jewish people in Germany, less than one percent of the German population in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was Jewish. It seems hard to imagine that such a small number of Jews could be the focus of the intensifying hatred which led to the catastrophe that ultimately forced Germans and Jews to confront the burden of their collective pasts.

With the rise of Adolf Hitler to Chancellor and the increasing power of the Nazi
party, and its outwardly evident anti-Semitic intentions, it became increasingly clear that life in Germany was about to undergo dramatic changes. These changes affected all Germans and Jews, young and old. In the weeks following January of 1933, the life of the Jewish people seemed, from the outside at least, to be proceeding as normal. Because the westernized Jews were so deeply wedded to many aspects of German life, no attempts were being made at this time by Hitler to disclose plans for the annihilation of the Jews, and furthermore, very few Jews or Germans gave much thought to this possibility.

Since the end of WWII one point of contention in many writings about this period has been the question: “Why didn’t more Jews leave when Hitler came to power?” Some scholars have suggested that many Jews, in particular prominent Jews, saw Hitler’s actions as something temporary. Most believed that at any moment the innate German love of order and decorum would rise up and reestablish dominance. In an essay entitled “The Authority of Silence in Elie Wiesel’s Art,” Terrence Des Pres commented that: “Over and over the survivors tell us that one reason they did not resist was that, until it was too late, their ‘faith in humanity’ made the prospect of such monstrous inhumanity impossible to imagine” (qtd. in Rosenfeld and Greenberg 51). Other Jews saw little reason to leave as long as their businesses were flourishing. Many shopkeepers stayed open until 1938, and Jews in the textiles industry enjoyed almost boom-like conditions even through part of the war (Grunberger 457).

Whether these Jews truly believed that humanity or the strength of their businesses could protect them from the annihilation that was clearly present in Nazi propaganda, many writers and historians blame Jewish naivete for their apparent lack of
awareness. In his autobiographical work *Night*, Elie Wiesel described the extent to which most Jews refused to acknowledge their doomed futures:

Our first impressions of the Germans were most reassuring. The officers were billeted in private houses, even in the homes of Jews. Their attitude toward their host was distant, but polite. They never demanded the impossible, made no unpleasant comments, and even smiled occasionally at the mistress of the house. One German officer lived in the house opposite ours. He had a room with the Kahn family. They said he was a charming man—calm, likable, polite, and sympathetic. Three days after he moved in he brought Madame Kahn a box of chocolates. The optimists rejoiced.

‘Well, there you are, you see! What did we tell you? You wouldn’t believe us. There they are your Germans! What do you think of them? Where is their famous cruelty?’ (19)

Jews such as these watched as SS officers marched into their communities. They complied with the ordinances that required all Jews to move into ghettos and to obey strictly enforced laws much different than those for Jews. Many even shared their limited rations with and gave up their homes to men they knew had sworn a solemn oath to Hitler and to his anti-Semitic ideals. These Jews experienced first-hand the Nazi take over of their community just as they had heard was done in other towns, and still many of them were absurdly naive and refused to believe that such horrible rumors could come true until it was too late.

Aharon Appelfeld addressed the theme of naivety in his book *Badenheim 1939*. The Jewish citizens in the community of Badenheim learned that they were going to be relocated to a new community. They were convinced by signs posted by the newly re-organized “Sanitation Department” that they were moving to paradise: “Labor is our Life....The air in Poland is fresher....Sail on the Vistula....The Development Areas need You....Get to Know the Slavic Culture” (30). Most of the Jews of Badenheim were not
suspicious of their true destination, and even at the end of the story when their eminent doom became horribly clear, some of them still refused to see the truth:

An engine, an engine coupled to four filthy freight cars, emerged from the hills and stopped at the station. Its appearance was as sudden as if it had risen from a pit in the ground. “Get in!” yelled invisible voices. And the people were sucked in. Even those who were standing with a bottle of lemonade in their hands, a bar of chocolate, the headwaiter with his dog—they were all sucked in as easily as grains of wheat poured into a funnel. Nevertheless Dr. Pappenheim found time to make the following remark: “If the coaches are so dirty it must mean that we have not far to go.” (147)

Many scholars also attribute this naivety to the lack of awareness many assimilated Jews had about their Jewish identity. It is interesting to note that at the time when the rights and privileges of all Jews were restricted, the assimilated Jews did not recognize that their fate was bound to the same destiny and collective history as Orthodox Jews. This is because the first Jews to be publicly persecuted or beaten were those most obviously Jewish, the traditional Hasidic Jews. Hasidims, pious Jewish men, could immediately be recognized by the way they wore their hair and beards and from their easily identifiable clothing. Assimilated Jews could not be so easily identified. Moreover, most assimilated Jews did not even consider themselves to be Jewish. Many had been attending the Catholic or Protestant church all of their lives and had never celebrated a Jewish holiday or ever heard Yiddish. Martha Appel, a Jewish survivor from Berlin, addressed this issue when she described how only after the Nazis began to restrict the rights of all citizens with Jewish blood that she and other assimilated Jews realized: “with every passing day under Nazi rule that the chasm between us and our friends grew wider. Friends with whom we had had warm relations for years did not know us anymore.
Suddenly we discovered that we were different” (qtd. in Friedländer 38).

Orthodox Jews always knew they were different, but assimilated Jews only now realized they were different from their non-Jewish neighbors and co-workers, and from other Aryan citizens who envied and resented their economic and cultural success. Is it possible, though, that envy and resentment alone could account for the brutalities and injustice inflicted on the Jewish people? Most Germans were not witness to the public beatings of Hasidic Jews in Jewish quarters away from the major city streets, but they were directly affected by the dismissal of Jewish academics, civil servants, lawyers, and other intellectuals in the first weeks after Hitler came to power. A number of Jewish survivors described the general attitude of the Germans during the years prior to the war as having been indifferent, but not particularly hostile or sympathetic. Others, ranging from common farmers to prominent intellectuals (e.g. Martin Heidegger), were described as having eagerly supported these dismissals. In 1933 about twelve hundred Jewish intellectuals lost their academic positions and not one major formal complaint or protest was recorded by a life-long neighbor or long-time associate. According to Saul Friedländer, there were only a few mild petitions that praised Jewish colleagues (Nazi 52).

Furthermore, persecution of the Jews continued to be justified by religious proclamations such as seen during the Crusades of the Middle Ages. Violence against Jewish citizens was often incited by rumors that Jewish Rabbis had sacrificed Christian babies in rituals, or that they had desecrated Christian symbols, usually the host, the consecrated wafer representing the body of Jesus. Jews were even accused of having poisoned the wells in German-speaking lands which led to the “Black Death,” a plague
resulting in the deaths of approximately twenty-five million people. As a result of several hundreds of years of such religious persecution, a number of general stereotypes developed. In an essay entitled, “The Importance and Impossibility of Being a Jew,” Jean Amerý described the most commonly held misconceptions of the Jew when he remarked:

Daily, for years on end, we could read and hear that we were lazy, evil, ugly, capable only of misdeed, clever only to the extent that we pulled one over on others. We were incapable of founding a state, but also by no means suited to assimilate with our host nations...Our bodies—hairy, fat, and bowlegged—befouled public swimming pools, yes, even park benches. Our hideous faces, depraved and spoilt by protruding ears and hanging noses, were disgusting to our fellow men, fellow citizens of yesterday. (qtd. in Rabinbach & Zipes 84)

During the early years of Jewish persecution many Germans experienced a “split-self” in the form of a “split consciousness.” Many claimed they disagreed with the brutal and unfair treatment of the Jews, but at the same time they quietly enjoyed and, often, even reinforced the changing turn of events that seemed to put the “Jews in their place.” Jewish Nobel laureate James Frank, a Professor in Göttingen who was granted immunity from dismissal from his job due to his veteran’s status, renounced his position in a letter stating: “We Germans of Jewish origin are being treated like foreigners and like enemies of our country.” Forty-two of his colleagues, who until the existence of this letter felt his teaching position should be saved, declared his words to be an “act of sabotage” (qtd. in Friedländer 50). Thomas Mann, who wavered in his views early on, stated that “many people might not have agreed with the brutality of dismissal of Jewish intellectuals from their positions, but they welcomed the cleansing of the ‘excessive influence’ of Jews from cultural life” (qtd. in Friedländer 13). It is noteworthy that with all of the dismissals, acts
of brutality, and restriction of rights "the only public demonstration of sympathy for the Jews ever staged during the Third Reich involved Gentile wives of Jewish husbands rounded up for deportation from Berlin in March of 1943" (Grunberger 464).

Hitler further justified acts of brutality by using a distorted interpretation of the Catholic Church's traditional stance on Judaism. He used the Church's position to demonstrate the connection between the German people and their collective history. In this way he provided an almost legitimate means for many Germans to rationalize their general acceptance or ignorance of past events and to compel their participation with or acceptance of future actions concerning the treatment of the Jews. He was quoted as having told Bishop Willhelm Berning von Osnabrück:

I have been attacked because of my handling of the Jewish question. The Catholic church considered the Jews pestilent for fifteen hundred years, put them in ghettos, etc., because it recognized the Jews for what they were. In the epoch of liberalism the danger was no longer recognized. I am moving back toward the time in which a fifteen-hundred-year-long tradition was implemented. I do not set race over religion, but I recognize the representatives of this race as pestilent for the state and for the church and perhaps I am thereby doing Christianity a great service by pushing them out of schools and public functions. (qtd. in Friedländer 47)

Hitler was a master of beguilement and distortion. He drew upon the idea of a Germanic collective history; he rationalized German envy of Jewish economic and social success, and he distorted traditionally held views of Christianity in order to fuel a propaganda machine that presented inaccurate portrayals of events to urge and convince a number of ordinary citizens to help him and the Nazi party make the dream of a German Germany credible. Hitler envisioned a Germany made up of proud and honorable citizens whose histories, traditions, and heritage were purely Germanic and Aryan. The Jews
became the scapegoat any time citizens demanded an explanation of an event that threatened Germany or German nationalism (i.e. blaming the Jews for the loss of World War I)(Gay 243). Each time an event was attributed to supposed Jewish schemes to destroy German culture, it fueled the fire of hatred burning in the hearts of those who wanted a scapegoat, and it may help account for the otherwise ambivalent attitude present in Germany up to and throughout the years of war and Jewish deportation.

Beginning with the first Jewish deportations and rumors of death, Jews engaged in spiritual resistance in an effort to remember their collective past. In November 1938, Herszel Grynspan, a young Jew, murdered Ernst Eduard von Rath, a German embassy staff member in Paris. After the SS announced that it would avenge this wrongful death by a Jew, the stage was set for the Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass, which occurred on November 10, 1938. At least ninety-one Jewish Germans were murdered, most Jewish synagogues were set on fire, and Jewish homes and stores all over Germany were broken into and vandalized by frenzied SS officers and citizens eager to participate. Following this event, twenty to thirty thousand wealthy Jews from the major German cities were arrested and sent to concentration camps where they awaited expulsion from Germany or death (Friedländer, Nazi 272).

As a result of these events, the need to bear witness to the possible future destruction of their people fueled an intense need for Jews to survive. Most recognized the Nazi attempts to strip Jews of their Jewish history and identity, so they focused on their ability to remember—to remember their families, their customs, their traditions. These Jews vowed to survive the physical destruction of the Jews by recording their history and
thus preserving Judaism forever—it was labeled spiritual resistance. Family photographs were hidden in shoes, letters were smuggled out of ghettos, and diaries kept by Jews living in ghettos before and during liquidation were buried in milk containers in cellar floors in an effort to preserve collective histories.

Many of the Jews writing in ghettos considered their diaries to be acts of spiritual resistance related to martyrdom. Their work showed remarkable confidence and very little apprehension in dealing with events occurring around them. They seemed to believe that, in the event of annihilation, their legacy would remain to teach future generations, and provide hope to those who thought there would and could be no survival. Once transported to concentration camps, many continued to write out of a sheer necessity to bear witness, as the Lodz Chronicle underscores: “A Jew is a fatalist... he consoles himself with the knowledge that he has already suffered greater losses and ordeals and somehow survived them too... while we wait for a better tomorrow. Such is our mentality!” (qtd. in Hartman 53).

Many assimilated Jews recognized the importance of remembering their people’s traditions, religion, and culture, but, ironically, knew very little about their Jewish history. These Jews had to re-discover their Jewish heritage. Most assimilated Jews had such a weak connection to their Jewish roots that they did not even realize they were Jewish until they lost their jobs and were moved into ghettos by the Nazis. An even more perverse irony is that some assimilated Jews never accepted their Jewish identity and were as racist toward Orthodox Jews as the Nazis. This lack of understanding and acceptance led to confusion and disunity in the ghettos and in the camps which made the struggle to
bear witness and to record the traditions of Judaism even more problematic. Not all the Jews who survived the concentration camps were devout. Not all understood what it meant to be Jewish, and some were not willing to accept that they were Jewish.

Picking up the Pieces of the Past and Confronting the Unimaginable

After the liberation of the concentration camps and the realization that the war was over, there followed a period of silence, a feeling of Jewish guilt, and the overwhelming burden of memory. Jews who survived needed time to find relatives who had also survived, and they needed time to reestablish a link with their own humanity. During the war many persisted in "holding on," not merely as a means of spiritual resistance, but also out of a reverence for life itself. However, after the extent of the devastation became known, it became all too clear what it meant to be a survivor. Instead of feeling joy and relief at the time of liberation, prisoners felt sorrow, guilt, and shame. They felt grief in knowing that they might be the only survivors in their family or in their neighborhood. Most survivors were alone, without a home, and isolated. Many were silent. In her memoir entitled Bridge of Sorrow, Bridge of Hope, Riva Chirug explained: "We who survived the Holocaust, have needed the perspective of time in order to form the events of the past into a shape that can be transmitted to the world around us, a world that was unable to absorb what happened" (qtd. in Mesher 238).

Many survivors also needed time to regain a sense of their humanity. They were ashamed of the animals they became in order to survive. Primo Levi, in his book Survival
in Auschwitz, remembered an incident one day toward the end of the war when he had discovered water dripping from a faucet. He did not share his discovery with his friend Daniele who was standing on the other side of the chemistry lab, but chose only to tell fellow inmate Alberto who was standing near him. Although that memory reminded him of what he did to survive, he was haunted by the guilt that that memory imbued, because as soon as he and Alberto had drunk their fill, Levi remembered catching sight Daniele, his friend and fellow inmate who was himself on the brink of death. Daniele never forgot that he had not been included. Even several months later he asked Levi, “Why the two of you and not I?” (Drowned 80-81).

Many writers, including Primo Levi, needed to tell their stories, to confess, and to speak about what they had witnessed so that those who were not there could hear and understand. They also wrote so that the traditions, history, and culture of those who did not survive were kept alive. The collective history that drove many to “bear witness” in the ghettos and the camps, came to an end during the Holocaust and existed afterwards only in the memories of those who survived and in the manuscripts of those who had perished. The need to remember had been replaced by the burden to never forget:

Ever since the first Jew tried to remove himself from the crowd of exiles mourning by the waters of Babylon, the presence of the one still implied the presence of the many. For if the self desired to bear witness to the destruction, it then became the symbolic survivor of the community; or if, as a result of ideology or devastation, it wished to detail its willing or unwilling departure from the community, the rejected group loomed just as large as the self; and if, despite all odds, the self succeeded in negating the group, the self was invariably lost as well. (qtd. in Roskies 133)

The resulting struggle for the Jewish people became one of a different kind of
survival. After liberation many Jews fought to retain, or even to regain their humanity and battled not to lose their “self” in a sea of collective memory. Survivors felt an enormous burden to preserve the memories and traditions and legends and histories of the six million men, women, and children who died. In so doing, these survivors ran the risk of forgetting who they were because all of their energy went to preserving the memories of those who had died. Assimilated Jewish survivors, in particular, struggled with questions of identity. Many still did not know what it meant to be a Jew. In an interview about his book *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi admitted that he only considered himself to be a Jew because his critics and readers labeled him a Jewish writer, but otherwise, he had only a vague notion of what Judaism entailed. Luigi Luzzatti, an Italian assimilated Jew, expressed another commonly held attitude by Jews with little connection to their roots: “I was born a Jew, and I return passionately to being one whenever I am criticized for being Jewish or my being Jewish puts me in danger” (qtd. in Ledeen 279).

Some Jewish survivors, both assimilated and Orthodox, could not bear the burden of being messengers of the dead and attempted to remain silent, rejecting or suppressing their burden. They saw themselves as people who had “escaped being turned into ashes but looked at ‘themselves’ as a kind of cursed ghost wandering in a twilight world halfway between the Holocaust dead and the living of the present who did not want to hear ‘their’ message” (Halperin 71). Others remained silent because they felt isolated and outcast from the rest of the world and could not imagine breaking through the ambivalence they perceived around them. Still others were isolated and left silent because of their connection with the nation most responsible for the attempted destruction of Jewish
collective history. These Jews frequently rejected their German heritage, avoided their native language, and resettled in countries foreign to them.

Those who chose not to remain silent revisited the Holocaust again and again in their memories in order to bear witness and were frequently confronted by guilt and the emergence of a split self. Many felt hopelessly guilty for having survived while millions of others, including family members and neighbors and friends, perished (Halperin 21). This burden created in Jewish writers a split self, because they knew that to create in a time of catastrophe, they needed an anchor in the past. They needed to take the Holocaust’s “dark legacy upon themselves,” and that came in the form of memory (21). It also resulted in the development of a “split self.” They would have to re-enter their past and the “self” of that time in order to uncover the inspiration necessary for the “self” they had become as writers to serve future generations.

Abraham Sutzkever, who witnessed the slaughter of Jews in Vilna in 1941, discussed both the power of memory Jewish writers encountered while attempting to recreate their collective history as well as the split self that resulted. Out of allegiance to one’s memory there are three distinct shifts in memory, according to Sutzkever, that a writer experiences while creating in a time of catastrophe. Some writings demonstrate a shift from a state of romantic exuberance to pained confession, or from move from periods of private grief to episodes of public exhortation. Other writings illustrate how an epic statement compels a writer to commune privately and metaphysically with the dead (21).

In a number of Jewish writings one can easily recognize the move from “romantic exuberance to pained confession.” Many Jews felt they had survived at the cost of others,
or had acted wrongly while trying so desperately to survive and bear witness. For this reason they felt a compulsion to confess, to defend their own moral behavior in front of some external witness in order to pass judgement on their own “self” (Roskies 232). The moral self of the present sought to defend the moral behavior of the self forever bound in the memory of the past. Following liberation, many felt a need to confess to the inhumanities they had witnessed and had taken part in, in order to survive a horror few could possibly imagine. It is doubtful that even one liberated prisoner could claim that they hadn’t stolen bread from another prisoner; many even stole from someone they knew, a neighbor, a friend, a relative. Prisoners needed to tell their story, they needed to be heard, otherwise they could never possibly come to terms with the de-humanized beings they became in order to survive.

This need to confess and pass judgement on one’s own moral behavior is present in the second shift in memory which occurs in works with themes stirring from “private grief to public exhortation.” Initially, writers sought to come to terms with the recurring theme of “one’s own,” of everyone and everything belonging to their own personal history being reduced to the idea of “one’s self.” In the reality of a time “governed by daily fear and hunger, when most human beings were stripped of the luxury of caring for anyone but one’s own,” many felt an overwhelming sense of guilt that their “self” continued to exist while so many of their “own” were irretrievably lost (Langer, Ashes 155). At the same time, though, their writings began to provide direction to others as they recognized their role as “one-eyed seers, men possessed of a double knowledge: cursed into knowing how perverse the human being can be to create such barbarism and blessed
by knowing how strong he can be to survive it” (Rosenfeld, Confronting 26).

The third shift occurs when writings containing an epic statement that reverts back to a “private, metaphysical communion with the dead” (Roskies, 229). According to Sutzkever there are two ways to retell the Holocaust in literature that correspond to this memory shift. The first way is expressed clearly in the words of Elie Wiesel, a Jewish writer, survivor, and witness who wrote: “There were ... messages I had to deliver to the living from the dead. There were things I had to do, words I had to speak, moments which I had to dissect in order to show the world what I had seen and lived through, on behalf of the millions who had seen it also—but could no longer speak. Of their dead, burnt bodies I would be the voice” (qtd. in Halperin 13). He, along with other Jewish survivors who chose not to be silent, named names and conjured up the apocalypse as a means of remembering. This literary trend of these first generation Jewish survivors involved using their own memories of the people they had known, the horrors they had witnessed and the inhumanities that they had experienced while incarcerated, in order to communicate to the world what had taken place. People who died in camp were immortalized in the pages of these texts. The memories of real persons, rooted in concrete events, were revered. There was a one-to-one intervention of language, that occurred when a narrator or protagonist addressed a known addressee, such as those who perished, those who accepted their fates passively, those directly responsible for the atrocities which took place, or God. Through memory, writers examined the human experience when faced with unimaginable horrors.

The human experience of the Holocaust could also be retold through the
implosion of history. By referring back to some element of the collective history, an ancient text or story or archetype, or by recreating a moment in the past, a Jewish writer could force the reader to face the realities of Jewish memory and to ask: Who were these people who perished? Did this event even really happen? In so doing, the writer could ease himself of the burden of bearing witness to and remembering such an expansive collective past. In an essay entitled “The Problematics of Holocaust Literature,” Edouard Roditi explained: “The most important literature of our day may well be that which predicts, records, interprets, or evaluates the experiences of those who foresaw or witnessed the Holocaust. Nothing can ever be for future generations, of a moral or literary value that might compare with that of the diaries of Ithel witnesses of the agony of Polish ghettos” (qtd. in Rosenfeld 12). In *The Holocaust and the War of Ideas*, Johanna Kaplan explained that with each diary and with each autobiographical novel, the people unwilling to confront the atrocities of the Holocaust could no longer avoid it:

> By now, after all the powerful, anguished novels of Elie Wiesel, Jerzy Kosinski, Primo Levi, Aharon Appelfeld, and others, after all the simple, heartrending documentary accounts, the stringent, haunting historians’ texts, the pained and arduous movies—that shocking newsreel footage ... after all the necessary, nightmare lists of involuntary martyrology, by now our response to the singular horrific barbarity of our time is—just the tiniest bit dutiful. (qtd. in Alexander 1)

The aftermath of the Holocaust left German citizens with a number of similar issues to consider. Following the liberation of the concentration camps, Germans found themselves stunned and silent in a ruined civilization with nowhere to turn. “The human imagination after Auschwitz is not the same as before. The addition to our vocabulary of the very word Auschwitz means that today we know things that before we could not even
imagine" (Rosenfeld, \textit{Double} 13). Theirs became a need to face a collective past so as not to forget "the most somber lesson of the Second World War: the fragility of civilization, and the ease and speed with which, in certain circumstances, barbarism can break through that thin crust and even, if backed by power and sanctified by doctrine, be accepted as the norm" (Trevor-Roper 3). In a country, whose every citizen and tradition was somehow associated with one of the worst atrocities in modern history, Germans were reluctantly compelled to come to terms with and make sense of their collective history, yet in many ways have still failed to do so.

For very different reasons than those of the Jewish survivors, most German citizens and scholars, both still in Germany and abroad, were silent after the war, and hesitated to confront the atrocities perpetrated against the Jews. Many tried to avoid association with the Holocaust by claiming collective exoneration. Again a "split self" emerged. A huge number of Germans pushed the entire burden of responsibility on Hitler, who wasn't even a German, and on those directly involved with him in the upper echelons of the Nazi party. They maintained that the "selves" they were during the Third Reich years were people who were \textit{only following orders or had no power to do anything against what was going on around them}. Beginning in 1945 and continuing through the end of the Nuremberg trials, Germany experienced a period known as the "Hitlerization" of Nazism that aided citizens in their attempt to wind the circle of guilt tighter and tighter around Hitler, so that everyone else in Germany could become the victims of Nazism. These were citizens who claimed exculpation because they were also starving, also trying to survive, were also without homes or separated from family members. These citizens
could, with some legitimacy, claim "victim" status for a few years of war and post-war suffering, but their despair and loss was incomparable to the years of persecution and almost complete devastation experienced by the Jews and other concentration camp victims.

For these German citizens the burden of responsibility and the guilt associated with the atrocities were too much to bear. Many chose to be silent and suppressed their memories about the Jewish tragedy focusing instead on their own personal suffering and on rebuilding their lives. There was also a period of silence among the German scholars. To lend perspective to the number of years of public silence among German writers, two of the most active political and social writers in post-war Germany, Günter Grass and Martin Walser, did not publish their first works until the early 1950s. The Germans who became most active in promoting a need for understanding and for coming to terms with the Nazi past were writers who were adolescents or teenagers during the war.

Not until Germans began to speak up did they begin to associate the guilt they felt with the power of personal memory and the denial of their collective responsibility. Many Germans had been passively "involved" in the destruction of the Jews, and did not recognize a connection until it was too late. One of the most meaningful quotes addressing this passive attitude was made by Martin Niemoeller, a protestant clergyman and concentration camp survivor:

The Nazis came for the Communists, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn’t speak up because I was a Protestant. Finally they
came for me, and by that time there was no one left to speak up. (qtd. in *Horror* 43)

This powerful statement adorns an exterior wall near the entrance of the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.

The Germany of which intellectuals and writers had been so proud before the Third Reich, *das Land der Dichter und Denker*, emerged from the ashes of Auschwitz a tarnished and divided nation. German writers, hence, realized the national need to confront the past and to accept responsibility for atrocities against the Jews. This transpired slowly, but perhaps significantly with a generation of writers who were only teenagers during the war. Writers like Martin Walser and Günter Grass wrote critical essays and explored various elements of the German past in their literary works, in an attempt to shed some light on the motivations behind such a devastating tragedy. These young writers recognized the staying power of literature and the important influence it had on the public. They also acknowledged the correlation between the power of literature, the power of memory, and the power of history.

Some Germans thought that the passing of time could help to relativize the events of the Holocaust, placing these events in the long context of a collective history and thus make them seem less inexcusable. This argument was presented by Ernst Nolte in a controversial article that appeared in 1986 in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. In his article "Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will," Nolte asserted that the National Socialists' actions against the Jews were partly in response to Bolshevik atrocities. Nolte claimed that Nazi crimes against the Jews were no worse than atrocities perpetrated by
other nations (i.e. the purges during Stalin’s regime). He argued, “didn’t Hitler actually fear that the Russians might seek to carry out such an ‘Asiatic’ deed against the Germans” (Maier 29). Although the opposing camp considered these ideas to be controversial, Nolte made the important point that Habermas’s fixation on the Jewish part of the Holocaust diminishes the role as victim of all of the others who were persecuted and killed in concentration camps.

It was not long after the publication of Nolte’s article that German intellectuals and citizens recognized weaknesses in his main argument. Jürgen Habermas responded almost immediately to Nolte’s contention in an article entitled “Eine Art Schadensabwicklung: Die apologetischen Tendenzen in der deutschen Geschichtsschreibung” that appeared in the July 1986 issue of Die Zeit. He rebutted that the Nazi atrocities were unique and the history of the Holocaust should be addressed and confronted. Habermas claimed that historians like Nolte and Klaus Hildebrand tried to “relativize” the Final Solution so that German citizens could avoid national responsibility (Maier 41). By putting the atrocities into the larger context of genocides it takes away the from the uniqueness of the Jewish Holocaust and it de-emphasizes the need for Germans to accept responsibility. He also believed that Nolte’s attempt to justify Hitler’s actions is dangerous and unsubstantiable.

Scholars like Habermas recognized that even though so few people could claim a direct connection to the Holocaust, it was such a frighteningly powerful phenomenon that it became part of the world’s collective history, and, therefore, an event that fought relativization. He considered Nolte’s position to be part of an attempt to establish a new nationalist and conservative movement. Habermas urged German citizens to recognize
that the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis were unique and must be confronted by the
nation. Recognizing the danger that forgetting poses, many German writers and
intellectuals urged citizens to confront their collective history and come to terms with the
burden of memory that would no longer accept denial.

The post-war period in German literature, known as *Stunde Null*, or the *zero hour*,
was characterized by the need for German writers to restructure and recreate the German
language and traditions associated with the recent past. Writers attempted to "wipe the
old slate clean" of Nazi association, and they resolved to purify the German language and
cleanse the German culture in hopes of regenerating a new German identity. The
nationalistic and propagandistic elements of language and literature during the Hitler
period would be eliminated. Literature portraying the essence of the loyal and strong
military man or the virtuous, industrious woman was no longer considered desirable traits.
Certain words and phrases like "Vaterland," "Volk," "Blut und Boden," and any other
terms that could be identified with the atrocities of the Holocaust would forever be
associated with Hitler's twelve-year Reich and needed to be purged from the written and
spoken language.

West German post-war literature was diverse; themes dealt with issues pertinent to
the Germans and the reestablishment of a new German identity. Some works were
introspective, welcoming the reader to take part in self-reflection, while other works more
openly challenged readers to tear down the security of their silent barrier, to delve into the
power of personal memory, and to confront the reality of the horrors prevalent in their
recent collective history. There were, however, many problematic issues to consider.
The Problematics Involved in Writing Holocaust Literature

Unquestionably, one of the most problematic issues encountered at the beginning of the post-war period concerned the attempt to define and create Holocaust literature or even to consider whether it was possible to write. Some writers, such as Theodor Adorno and Reinhard Baumgart, objected strongly to the creation of a category of literature dealing with the Holocaust. Baumgart felt that themes necessarily would be softened and thus have an artificial meaning. He asserted that, “by removing some of the horror, [it] commits a grave injustice against the victims” (qtd. in Rabinbach 14). Adorno thought it impossible and “barbaric” to attempt to create art from the ashes of the eleven million who perished under Hitler and the Nazis: “After Auschwitz to write a poem is barbaric....Through aesthetic principle or stylization ... the unimaginable ordeal still appears as if it had some ulterior purpose. It is transfigured and stripped of some of its horror, and with this, injustice is already done to the victims” (qtd. in Katz 44). Abraham Sutzkever initially criticized those around him who sought to create Holocaust literature because he felt that because of the Holocaust there no longer was any continuity, “no poetic tradition.” Everyone must now “start out from the beginning and is therefore a step backwards” (qtd. in Roskies 230).

Although some rejected the idea of a new genre, most would agree that this catastrophe had to be remembered, whether as an attempt to recreate and preserve the Jewish heritage or out of necessity to confront the German collective history. The power of memory, perhaps, helped those who had suffered to heal and to confront their past. It
further functioned in post-war writing as a catalyst to teach future generations about the limitations of mankind, and the evil of which man is capable. For this reason, many who originally opposed the attempt to create Holocaust literature eventually reconsidered, even Adorno. In the essay “Negative Dialectics” he wrote: “Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it many have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems” (qtd. in Katz 45).

The literature itself, however, posed the next challenge. “How can we accept a realism more extreme than any surrealism yet invented?” (Rosenfeld, Confronting 16). For centuries, people have been drawn to that which is haunting, uncanny or horrific. The fictional writings of Edgar Allen Poe or Franz Kafka have enticed readers to step into a horrible world beyond the boundaries of their imagination and to take part in situations that test a character’s sanity, and force readers to the limits of what seems possible. As long as readers can comprehend that the worlds and circumstances are manufactured, they can easily maintain a distance from personal involvement, but as soon as Holocaust literature is considered, the horrible and haunting, which are no longer fictional, become unbearable. It is almost impossible not to recognize that the tales told in Holocaust novels, short stories, poems, and plays were actually experienced by human beings. What makes reading these unimaginably inhuman nonfictional accounts horrifying and shocking is that the author is recording personal encounters, insights under duress, and even epiphanies that resulted from personal experiences under extreme and unique circumstances.

Matters become further complicated when considering fictional works about the
Holocaust. It is difficult to discern fictional works from those that are non-fiction. Generally speaking, to write a believable work of fiction dealing with a historical event requires some sense of understanding, personal insight, and experience. The first generation of Jewish Holocaust writers, all have first-hand experience with and an understanding of events that go far beyond the comprehensible. Therefore, as readers we accept that the fictional stories could just as easily have happened to someone or could have been witnessed by someone within the authors’ newly forming “collective” of fellow survivors, because we lack the insight and experience necessary to recognize any inaccuracies. Not being able to differentiate between truth and fiction, especially when dealing with the pain and suffering of the Holocaust adds another problematic issue to reading Holocaust literature.

There is no “personal” burden attached to the experience of reading traditional works of fiction. When examining the appeal of the fictional works of Kafka or Poe, one experiences a sense of relief in knowing that the horrifying and uncanny, although terrifying, did not “really happen.” By contrast, this is no longer an option when reading Holocaust literature. Events that would have seemed incomprehensible before must now be accepted as authentic and struggled with, must be remembered, and must be considered humanly possible, and thus is a responsibility not all readers are prepared to accept.

In addition to the powerful experience of reading Holocaust literature, there are other considerations concerning the politics of remembering these events. How do individuals and nations memorialize such a tragedy? Even after 50 years Germany cannot
agree upon the appropriate Holocaust memorial. As I write this thesis, the committee
selected to design an appropriate Holocaust memorial is at odds about how to
memorialize the event or who should be included in the memorial. The committee
members proposed a memorial to commemorate fallen German soldiers, unfortunate
German casualties, and all of the innocent victims, Jewish and other, killed during World
War II (Kunz 49-50). An obvious problem with a memorial of this kind is that German
soldiers and citizens would achieve the same “victim” status as the Jews, which seems
unacceptable. Soldiers enlisted and fought proudly for a cause in which they strongly
believed. The Jews were persecuted and systematically dehumanized, tortured, and
brutally murdered by German soldiers and civilians.

There have also been several designs for Jewish Holocaust memorials. Some
proposals have been rejected based on the argument that the Holocaust is a catastrophe
that should not be monumentalized. German scholars have contended that “once we
assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the
obligation to remember,” which is precisely what must not happen (Hartman 4). Other
proposals have been rejected because they do not appropriately or accurately capture the
essence of the catastrophe. Jewish writers have argued that the passing of time has
allowed too many Germans to shape their memories so that they become less painful or
seem less inexcusable and that an inaccurate or inappropriate monument would reinforce
those beliefs. In a chapter of The Drowned and the Saved called “The Memory of the
Offense,” Primo Levi discussed the problem of memory in conjunction with the passing of
time: “The memories which lie within us are not carved in stone; not only do they tend to
become erased as the years go by, but often they change, or even grow, by incorporating extraneous features” (23).

Will the passing of time affect the memories in Holocaust writing as well? Considering the breadth of literature already in print about the Holocaust, is there even a need for Jews to bear witness anymore, or should the burden rest solely on the Germans? Surely the world has been reached by now, hasn’t it? It is certain that the message is there, but the question remains, how many have received it?

Many Germans continue to write and continue to experience frustration and despondency because their message seems to fall only on deaf ears. Jewish writers have experienced a similar disillusionment. Again and again Jewish writers, in trying to bear witness, have reached a somewhat ambivalent world, an audience that did not want to hear any more. Jean Amerý, Paul Celan, and far too many other Jewish writer-survivors came to realize the impossibility of survival in a world that, through its annoyance at being reminded of the past, left them victimized by their own burdens. Viewing themselves as failures, and because they did not succeed in their quest to pass on their collective history, a lot of Jewish writers saw suicide as the only escape. Writers such as Jean Amerý, Primo Levi, Paul Celan, and the author of “This Way for the Gas Ladies and Gentleman,” Tadeusz Borowski, who ironically committed suicide by gassing himself, are just a few of those who survived the Holocaust in order to bear the burden of memory. In the end, however, they could not shoulder this burden or the frustration of trying to reach an unaccessible audience worldwide.

In this introduction, I have touched on some of the numerous complexities
surrounding the uniqueness of the Holocaust and its legacy. The singular nature of the Holocaust was addressed in an editorial published on January 28, 1995 in *The Economist*:

> Never has the extermination of an entire people, coupled with the technology of industrialization and even applied by a regime that had been more or less democratically elected, been attempted so systematically as an end in itself. Never has mass murder been so efficiently, so scientifically, perpetrated. Never has the annihilation of a race been so central to an ideology (18)

Since the war hundreds of memoirs, thousands of essays, and tens of thousands of books and articles have been written, uncovered, and published in an effort to remember, confront, and make sense of an event that should have been beyond the capacity of our twentieth-century civilization. Given the amount of literature dealing with the Holocaust, and given the variety of themes and issues surrounding the creation of art “out of the ashes,” it would be impossible to focus on the writings of a single author, German or Jewish, or a single work and declare it a representative work of Holocaust literature, just as it would be impossible to focus on all of the quintessential themes and characteristics of the genre.

For this reason I have chosen to focus in this work on the power of memory and the presence of a collective history in the literature of prominent first-generation Jewish and German writers, writers who had first-hand experiences with the Holocaust or with World War II. I am not limiting my exploration to German writers, because the Holocaust affected Jews and non-Jews from all regions of European society. The Holocaust experience, therefore, has no language or cultural boundary. Since it has become part of the world’s collective history, it should be explored from the perspective
of those involved most extensively as the victims, the Jews, and those associated most directly with the perpetrators, the Germans.

I selected three well-known Jewish writers who present different perspectives or attitudes toward Jewishness. It is interesting to compare the themes and struggles in the writings of assimilated and Orthodox Jews. For example, Primo Levi was an Italian born Jew who had little understanding of his Jewish heritage and experienced no anti-Semitism until the Nuremberg Laws were adopted in 1935. After he joined an anti-fascist resistance group in Italy, he was arrested by Nazi soldiers and deported to Auschwitz, but he returned home after liberation where he immediately recorded his memories. He had little understanding of his Jewish heritage, but he had a home in Italy and identified strongly with his Italian family history. Jean Amerý, on the other hand, was an Austrian-born Jew, who had no connection to his Jewish heritage and eventually became estranged from his family history. He was completely bound to a German-speaking heritage, but following Austria’s annexation by Nazi Germany, Amerý attempted to abandon the German-speaking world. He changed his name from Hans Mayer to Jean Amerý, but continued to write in his native language, and struggled with his identity until his suicide in 1978. Elie Wiesel also struggled with his identity, but for completely different reasons. He was an Orthodox Jew who experienced life in a ghetto, the loss of his family, and the loss of his home. He used his Jewish religious beliefs to help him to survive the Holocaust, to encourage him to bear witness to future generations, and to find the strength to rebuild his life. His faith influenced his life and his writing.

Although the emphasis in this thesis is on Jewish writers, the conclusion illustrates
how German writers addressed some common social tendencies regarding memory and the Holocaust in order to provide a basis for comparison between Jewish and German literary themes and personal struggles. Among non-Jewish German authors it is intriguing to explore the prominent themes and concerns prevalent in the political essays, short stories, and novels of such prominent thinkers as Martin Walser and Günter Grass. Walser wrote many essays that explored the destructive nature of capitalism and materialism—ideologies that gathered strength in the 1950s with the re-building of Germany as a nation and as an economic power. The use of power as a means of manipulation became a recurring theme in Walser’s writing. He was interested in exploring what mental processes individuals went through in order to assume an authoritative role and what mental processes they employed to insure conformity. Walser’s narrative style is characterized by interior monologue that exposed the consciousness and psyche of the main characters. This technique helps Walser to portray the life and struggles of the public in a realistic, straight-forward fashion, and it demonstrated that the past cannot be escaped and cannot be buried.

Günter Grass’s writings also stressed the need for citizens to confront the atrocities of the German past. His novels and political short stories focused on the important theme of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, coming to terms with the past. He believed that the rapid “normalization” of Germany after the war and the avoidance of the past could lead to another catastrophe. Grass believed that the Nuremberg Trials punished the most obvious criminals, but allowed those who were less directly involved or who were silent to return to their lives and to free themselves of collective responsibility. Grass
feared that if citizens allowed the passing of time to lessen the severity of the Holocaust, especially if they felt no responsibility for the atrocities, the past could repeat itself. In an interview in the September, 1995 issue of *The Economist* he warned that a “dangerous Germany lurks behind today’s comfortable one,” and if given half a chance, it could come marching back (43).

For German writers like Martin Walser and Günter Grass, coming to terms with the Holocaust required the willingness of the German people to remember their nation’s history and to confront their personal responsibility in order not to forget the past. For Jewish writers like Jean Amerý, Elie Wiesel, and Primo Levi, memory was used to record their people’s history in order to insure the preservation of their traditions for future generations. The power of memory in the presence of a collective history from both the Jewish and German perspectives undoubtedly has in common a number of similar issues and themes, despite some clear differences.
You who live safe in your warm houses,
You who find,
Returning in the evening,
Hot food and friendly faces:
Consider if this is a man
Who works in the mud
Who does not know peace
Who fights for a scrap of bread
Who dies because of a yes or a no.
Consider if this is a woman,
Without hair and without name
With no more strength to remember,
Her eyes empty and her womb cold
Like a frog in winter.
Meditate that this came about:
I commend these words to you.
Carve them into your hearts
At home, in the street,
Going to bed, rising;
Repeat them to your children,
Or may your house fall apart,
May illness impede you,
May your children turn their faces from you.
(Primo Levi, Survival 12)

Following his liberation from Auschwitz Primo Levi immediately began writing one of the most widely read works of the Holocaust, *Survival in Auschwitz*, or, as it was originally titled in Italy, *If this Be a Man, Survival in Auschwitz*, published in Italy in 1947. He began writing for two reasons: to bear witness to future generations his experiences and his memories of the Holocaust, and to examine what it means to be a man who is stripped of everything associated with humanity and human nature. As was the case for
many Jewish writers after the war, the need to bear witness served as a means to prevent
the relativizing of history. After the publication of *If this Be a Man, Survival in
Auschwitz*, Levi discussed why he felt compelled to bear witness:

> The gap exists and grows wider every year... It slides fatally toward
simplification and stereotype, a trend against which I would like to erect a
dike.... For us to speak with the young becomes ever more difficult. We see
it as a duty, and, at the same time, as a risk: the risk of appearing
anachronistic; of not being listened to. (qtd. in Stille, 366)

The message of his first work of Holocaust testimony was not well received by the
Italian public until it was reprinted in 1958. It has since been translated into eight
languages, has been adapted for radio and theater, and is considered a classic among
Holocaust works. In 1959 Levi received news that a German publisher had acquired the
translation rights for his book. He confessed that he originally wrote the book with no
specific audience in mind, but:

> When I heard of that contract everything changed and became clear to me:
yes, I had written the book in Italian, for Italians, for my children, for those
who did not know, those who did not want to know, those who were not
yet born, those who, willing or not, had assented to the offense; but its true
recipients, those against whom the book was aimed like a gun were they,
the Germans. Now the gun was loaded. (Levi, *Drowned* 168)

He explained that he wasn’t interested in revenge. He considered the Nuremberg
Trials to be a symbolic, yet in no way complete, attempt at modern morality. Since it was
carried out by professionals, by the most powerful governments in the world, he was
satisfied. His role as a Jewish survivor and writer should not include taking part in the
handing down of sentences and punishments. For him, the task at hand was to understand
and to use reason to make sense of the events and people who perpetrated those acts of
hatred, either directly or indirectly.

He continued to write essays, short stories, and novels, but did not stop working as a chemist and manager of the chemical factory in his hometown of Turin until 1977, when he retired to devote all of his time to writing. During the years before his retirement, he wrote and published (1963) *The Reawakening*, which recounted Levi’s long journey back to Italy and described the struggles he encountered when trying to pick up the pieces of his life and resume his life as a chemist and member of society. In the “Vanadium” chapter of *The Periodic Table*, which was published in 1975, Levi described the irony of the Nuremberg Trials as being an incomplete act of “human morality” that condemned war criminals (Drowned 168). While in Auschwitz, Levi worked under a German chemist named Dr. Müller, who always misspelled the chemical Vanadium. Years after the war, Levi came into indirect contact with Dr. Müller after he recognized the misspelled chemical on an order form in the Italian chemistry lab that he managed. Apparently Dr. Müller’s role in the atrocities went basically unpunished. Levi wondered if this doctor had read his words, and confronted his own guilt, and if his writings were reaching other people like him, civilian specialists who had worked in the camps and factories manned mostly by Jewish prisoners. It became clear to Levi after he received several letters from both Germans and Jews, that there were people reading about what he witnessed. As will be pointed out later in this discussion, some tried to justify their actions or the actions of the parents, and others claimed innocence or even denied their role in the death of so many Jews. Dr. Müller himself wrote a letter to Levi in which he asked Levi for forgiveness, and asked if they could someday meet. They never did.
With the passing of time, Primo Levi began to feel less hopeful that he truly was reaching an interested and conscientious audience. In his later essays and, particularly, in his final work *The Drowned and the Saved* (1988), published decades after Auschwitz, Levi’s disenchantment with his earlier hope of both overcoming all of the psychological and moral implications of the Holocaust and of reaching a receptive audience, was unmistakably evident. After his apparent suicide in 1987 it was widely accepted by other Holocaust scholars that he could not come to terms with the inner anguish that developed in Auschwitz. Following years of self-contemplation, it is possible that Levi could not rid himself of the misery he witnessed in himself and in others. Even after decades of rationalization and hope, he too could not escape the tragic irony that the Holocaust has left a far more prominent legacy of guilt and shame among the survivors than among those who were directly and indirectly responsible for its occurrence. In order to better understand the inner and outer struggles which led to the death of this significant figure, we must go back to the beginning of his life and trace the steps in his experiences and writings that progressed from hope to despair.

Primo Levi was born in Piedmont, Italy in 1919. He was an assimilated Jewish son of a well-educated middle class family, whose history in Italy went all the way back to 1500 after his Jewish ancestors were driven out of Spain. Following their exodus from Spain, Levi’s ancestors, as well as many other Spanish Jews, settled in Italy, where they enjoyed success and very little discrimination. Up until the late 1930s, Jews were treated almost no differently than any other Italian citizen. Although they never made up more than one-tenth of one percent of the Italian population, they occupied eleven percent of
the university seats, and during World War I so many Italian Jews volunteered for service, that the Jewish community was commended for producing such patriotic and brave citizens. Following the end of the war, one thousand Jewish soldiers were honored with medals of valor. As a further sign of the successful assimilation of Jews into the Italian community, according to a 1934 census, the number of mixed marriages in Italy was a staggering forty-four percent compared to a rather low eleven percent in Germany that same year (Eberstadt, 42).

It wasn’t until he was a nineteen-year-old chemistry student at the University of Turin that the racial laws adopted in Italy in 1938 made Primo Levi a Jew. His lack of a deep familiarity or connection with a Jewish collective religious or cultural identity was typical of most assimilated Jews, both in Italy and throughout Europe. For these Jewish writers, their Jewishness was generally associated with memories of “fat uncles, eccentric aunts, good smells from the kitchen,” and a language made up of “code words” to be used in front of the Gentile servants (Eberstadt, 42). Levi reflected on his pre-war conception of a Jew as “somebody who at Christmas does not have a tree, who shouldn’t eat salami but does, and who has learned a bit of Hebrew at thirteen and then has forgotten it” (qtd. in Eberstadt 42).

Even though the racial laws labeled him a Jew, a new enemy of the state, Levi was one of many young, well-educated, middle-class Italian citizens, both Christian and Jewish, who grew up under a system of fascism which had never before threatened their future prospects. The Italian government became Fascist when Levi and a number of his friends were only three years old. As Levi entered High School he developed a hatred of
Fascism which stemmed "not only from the regime's actions, but also from its overblown rhetoric" which he described as "a collection of dogmas, unproved affirmations, and imperatives" (qtd. in Tager, 283). In science, particularly in chemistry, Levi found that language was succinct and clear, and that theories and assertions were tested and verified. Levi recognized that science offered him a surer path to truth and understanding of how the world worked than the dogmatic "truths" of fascism. Although he despised the official political stance, he remained passive, devoting his time to scientific endeavors.

Most of his friends were also passive and politically uninterested. The only objections they voiced before the collapse of the fascist regime in Italy in 1943 were aimed at the "insistence on homogeneity" placed on the German Fascist movement infiltrating Italy, which Levi instinctively recognized as a threat to the Jews. After the July twenty-fifth collapse, Levi and a group of his friends headed for the mountains in the hopes of joining the famous resistance movement Giustizia e Liberta. These hopes were squelched in December of 1943 when Levi and his friends were captured by the fascist militia. Levi wrongly assumed his Jewish identity would not be held against him in Italy, and after admitting he was a Jew, he was sent by this German fascist militia group to a detention camp in Fossili. In February 1944 Primo Levi was transported to Auschwitz with six hundred and fifty Jewish men, women, and children. Only twenty survived (Eberstadt 41-43).

Levi maintained until the end of his life that he was able to survive Auschwitz because of certain privileges he enjoyed. In Auschwitz, he was assigned to work first at a labor camp connected to the synthetic rubber factory at Monowitz-Buna, but due to his
scientific background, he was transferred after a few long months to a chemistry lab where he worked until liberation as a chemist. This position offered him certain privileges not available to many other prisoners. Because he was working in a chemistry lab, he did not experience the extreme fatigue of prisoners assigned to hard, physical labor posts. He was also fortunate to have made the acquaintance of an Italian civilian worker in the lab who brought him extra food rations every day for weeks.

In addition to privileges gained as a scientist, Levi attributed his survival, ironically, to the timely acquisition of a deadly illness. On the eve of liberation, Levi was diagnosed with scarlet fever and was assigned a cot in the camp infirmary for infectious disease, die Infektionsabteilung. Later that day the remaining prisoners were marched out of camp by SS soldiers and began a trek that led to the death of all twenty thousand men. On the eve of January 27, 1945, Primo Levi and the other inmates left for dead in the camp infirmaries were liberated by the Red Army. Primo Levi and his friend Charles were outside at the time of liberation. When they saw the red troops Levi remembered that, “Charles took off his beret. I regretted not having a beret” (Levi, Survival 172).

There were few tears of joy shed by Levi on this day of liberation. He had survived, but he hardly recognized the human being he had become. He described the horrific realization that he and other inmates experienced when they understood that they were free: “Just as they felt they were again becoming men, that is, responsible, the sorrows of men returned: the sorrow of the dispersed or lost family; the universal suffering all around; their own exhaustion, which seemed definitive, past cure; the problems of a life to begin all over again amid the rubble, often alone” (Drowned 70-71)
Only after liberation, after they were once again addressed as and treated like human beings did these prisoners recognize what they had become in order to survive.

All the men in the camps had stolen, many from a friend, some from a father or a son. Levi explained that many considered themselves “collaborators” because they enjoyed extra food rations in exchange for working as *Kapos*, leaders of work squads, or sweepers, kettle washers, night watchmen, checkers of lice, messengers, interpreters, scientists, or bed smoothers (Levi, *Drowned* 46). Some were forced to work as *Sonderkommandos*, the unfortunate individuals who had to unload Jewish passengers from and clean out the cattle cars as they arrived, or who were made to sort through the belongings of the millions of people who died, or who had to carry the dead bodies from the gas chambers and load them into the crematoria ovens. At the time of liberation all of these men, men who had stolen or who had committed worse crimes, were left with feelings of shame and guilt. Levi reflected on this in a description of the Russian soldiers who liberated his camp:

They did not greet us, nor smile; they seemed oppressed, not only by pity but also by a confused restraint which sealed their mouths....It was the same shame which we knew so well, which submerged us after the selections, and every time we had to witness or undergo an outrage: the shame that the Germans never knew, the shame which man experiences when confronted by a crime committed by another, and he feels remorse because of its existence, because of its having been irrevocably introduced into the world of existing things, and because he has proven nonexistent and feeble and was incapable of putting up a good defense. (*Drowned* 72-73)

Liberation from the camps should have been a time of spiritual renewal and of Jewish unity. It should have been a time of great joy at having survived, at having
preserved some remnants of the Jewish spirit to rebuild and pass on to future generations. There was, for Levi and many others, however, no tribute of thanks paid to God. About his relationship with God Levi commented: "Actually the experience of the Lager with its frightful iniquity confirmed in me my non-belief. It prevented in me and still prevents me from conceiving of any form of providence or transcendent justice" (qtd. in Goodheart 519). He was Jewish, he had survived, but there was no unity, but rather a disunity, of Jewish spirit felt in his heart.

As mentioned earlier, most assimilated Jews at the time of incarceration had a weak connection to their Jewish roots. Many were not religious. Most had lost touch with Hasidic traditions as their families assimilated. They were nevertheless Jewish and were incarcerated and killed just like the Orthodox Jews. In the camps there was a large number of Orthodox Jews who resented this lack of Jewishness, and considered these ‘non-Jews’ to be outsiders, to be grouped with the enemy. And among many of the assimilated Jews there was not only a strong resentment of the Orthodox Jews, but in some cases a hatred almost as deep as that of the perpetrators.

He knew upon liberation that he had to record his memories and preserve for future generations all that he had experienced and observed, but words were insufficient to depict what he had gone through. In his writings Levi used the description of situations and experiences to express the irony of his own Jewishness and the disunity of Jews within the camps. He also used literary irony when trying to express what it was to be a human being after having been reduced to an animal, how it was possible to survive such inhumanity, and the struggles that remained for those who survived. In the following
discussion, I explore Primo Levi's struggle to express in words how his memories of Auschwitz and his connection, or rather lack of connection, to his Jewish identity reflect the irony present in his writings, in his life and inherent in the Holocaust itself.

"We the survivors, are not the true witnesses... We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority. We are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are... the complete witnesses, the ones whose deportation would have a general significance, they are the rule, we are the exception. (Levi, Drowned 83-84)"

This sentiment has been expressed again and again in the writings of Primo Levi, whose insightful observations about the experience and survival of Auschwitz examine, define, and explore the relationship between the survivors of the Holocaust, those who perished, and the rest of us who had no direct link to the atrocities. As a camp inmate, Levi was dragged to the brink of inhumanity. He was forced to endure physical and verbal abuse, public humiliation, and abject human despair. Levi owed his survival partly to his capacity to spiritually resist the attempts made by his persecutors to strip him of his humanity. By remembering who he was, his name or his field of study or where came from, Levi, and others like him, were able to persevere long enough to experience liberation.

The presence of a collective history tied to memories of past learning, culture, and traditions served as a crucial reminder to Levi and to many others seeking desperately to maintain a link with their humanity. According to Levi, "Dehumanization, not death, is the worst that can befall a human being, which is the reason why it is important to have an
ideal of what it means to be human” (qtd. in Goodheart 523). Conjuring up memories of life and culture before incarceration helped Levi suppress his base instincts and maintain reason, but it would not be sufficient for a pure understanding of what it means to be human. He also used his scientific background to provide him with another form of spiritual resistance, another means of maintaining human dignity.

His past training enabled him to observe and to analyze his fellow man. These observations served as a means of understanding what it means to be human, which helped him to preserve a sense of human dignity and helped him to recognize later how unconscious “human solidarity” among inmates in the camps ultimately aided in the survival of a number of those incarcerated in the death camps. In his book *Survival in Auschwitz* Levi explained how this drive for human insight led to “human solidarity” and to survival when he reflected about a fellow inmate:

I believe that it was really due to Lorenzo that I am alive today; and not so much for his material aid as for his having constantly reminded me by his presence, by his natural and plain manner of being good, that there still existed a just world outside of our own, something and someone still pure and whole ... for which it was worth surviving. (qtd. in Goodheart 526)

Levi used memories of his camp experience to recreate in his writings the methodical process of dehumanization that drove so many to abandon their moral standards and to rely completely on their base instincts. Some prisoners went so far as to collaborate with the perpetrator as a means of survival. This process of breaking down moral barriers was based on language. Verbal and nonverbal language was used to structure a prisoner’s identity. Upon arriving at the camp prisoners experienced “kicks
and punches right away, often in the face; an orgy of orders screamed with true or simulated rage, complete nakedness after being stripped; the shaving off of all one’s hair; the outfitting in rags” (Levi, Drowned 39). A prisoner’s name was then replaced by a number. The tattoo symbolized the next step in the descent from human being to animal. Prisoners were no longer seen as human beings and, therefore, no longer addressed as human beings. They were called “Haftling” (prisoner), “Stück” (piece), or “Ding” (thing). Levi described the erasure of his name as an attempt to wipe out his connection to a collective history: “Haftling: I have learnt that I am Haftling. My number is 174517; we have been baptized, we will carry this tattoo on our left arm until we die” (Levi, Survival 27). From this point on, any successful attempt to remember past information, one’s name, or a line of poetry, was a successful act of spiritual resistance.

Language functioned to promote the collapse of one’s personal moral code and, as such, further stripped one of humanity. Violence in the camps was intense and unpredictable. Levi felt that “it is an obvious observation that where violence is inflicted on man it is also inflicted on language” (Drowned 97). Violence undermined a prisoner’s connection to his past, with his future, and even with the present. It broke down moral understanding because prisoners were struck randomly without knowing why. Levi recalled that after time “in the daily language of punches and slaps, the prisoners learned to recognize nuances in the violence, and could distinguish between blows designed as “nonverbal communication,” and those intended to inflict pain” (qtd. in Tager 276).

Jargon also developed in the camps which reflected this collapse in the moral standard heeded outside of camp. Inmates no longer used “essen” to describe eating, but
“fressen,” a word used to describe the way animals devour food. “Morgen früh,” tomorrow morning, was used to mean “never” in camp and served as a constant reminder to all inmates of their impending death. Even violent terminology, such as “abhauen,” to cut or chop off, was adopted as a way of saying “to go away.” These terms were dehumanizing, but also served to create a life devoid of hope.

Such terms were rather easily adopted by most prisoners, because the majority of inmates spoke a language other than German. Levi described the “confusion of languages” as a “fundamental component of the manner of living here: one is surrounded by a perpetual Babel, in which everyone shouts and orders and threatens in languages never heard before, and woe betide whoever fails to grasp the meaning. No one has time here, no one has patience, no one listens to you; we recent arrivals instinctively collect in the corners ... afraid of being beaten” (Survival 33). Because of the difficulties involved in communication with no common language other than camp jargon, the atmosphere in camp was chaotic and uncanny, but coupled with the physical abuse, it became almost unbearable and impossible for most prisoners to remain composed, or to maintain a grasp of reality.

Unless the reader of Levi’s works experienced the surreal qualities of life in the camps it is very difficult to imagine what it was like. Levi recognized immediately the difficulties that recreating in words what life in the camp entailed. His writings have often been described as detached, scientific, and unemotional. He felt that the style of language should not be difficult to understand, that there was a need for clarity and reason when describing the events he witnessed. His style of writing can partially be attributed to his
scientific training which emphasized the use of concrete and clear description, objective
analysis, and detached observation. The voice in his works is that of an observer who
records outward experience, but does not project inward, who analyzes and acts as a
rationalist, but does not judge. His goal was to remain available to readers and not to
seem dominant or superior, because language was used to the prisoner’s disadvantage in
the camps:

When describing the tragic world of Auschwitz, I have deliberately
assumed the calm, sober language of the witness, neither the lamenting
tones of the victim, nor the irate voice of someone who seeks revenge. I
thought that my account would be all the more credible and useful the
more it appeared objective and the less it sounded overly emotional; only
in this way does a witness in matters of justice perform his task, which is
that of preparing the ground for the judge. The judges are my readers. (qtd.
in Tager 285)

Aside from the use of clear and concise language to recreate his memories, Levi
used irony to make the use of language and description of situations that much more
powerful. Irony was abundant in all aspects of the Holocaust and its aftermath. In order
to survive, an inmate tried desperately to remember his past in order to retain a sense of
humanity. Following liberation, however, the struggle for memories of past education and
culture as a means of preserving human dignity was replaced by the anguish of forgetting
the horrors they endured and by the need to bear witness, to preserve the struggles,
experiences, and memories of the “true witnesses” for future generations. The very task
of writing about the Holocaust, as Robert Gordon points out, is ironic because, “with only
flawed vocabulary to describe these events, writings itself takes on the moral burden and
the moral content of coming to terms with the Holocaust, and the particular stylistic
qualities of any one utterance are as if supplementary to its primary, monumental 'being there'” (337).

Levi knew in the first few hours after his incarceration that words alone were insufficient to describe these horrors: “There is nowhere to look in a mirror, but our appearance stands in front of us, reflected in a hundred livid faces, in a hundred miserable and sordid puppets ... for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man” (Survival 26). After months of hard labor and thirst and hunger and fatigue, he again considered the difficulties of using normal language to describe the events of Auschwitz: “Just as our hunger is not that feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word. We say 'hunger,' we say ‘tiredness,' ‘fear,’ ‘pain,’ we say ‘winter’ and they are different things. They are the free words, created and used by free men who lived in comfort and suffering in their homes” (Survival 123).

Just as verbal language was ironic in that it led to dehumanization, a breakdown in communication and the obliteration of moral standards, nonverbal language was also ironic when juxtaposed with the values and customs of normal civilized society which bases its unique human quality on the ability to use language to communicate. It isn’t moral to communicate through physical abuse, but in the camps “all Kapos gave beatings: this was an obvious part of their duties, their more or less accepted language. After all, it was the only language that everyone in that perpetual Babel could understand” (Levi, Drowned 74).

Aside from language, irony drew out and highlighted the contradictory and
complex variety of human character when placed in extreme situations. In an effort to make sense of and understand events of Holocaust, many writers have used language and memory as tools to reach an audience, and help them to understand the horrors.

Unfortunately, when dealing with the Holocaust, there has been the tendency to split participants into the "We" and the "They" group. Levi recognized in his first few moments in camp that it wasn’t always clear who belonged to which group. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi focused on his theory of grouping individuals not into a zone of absolutes, but rather into a "grey zone."

Because the Holocaust was unique, Levi felt that the boundaries of right and wrong, of moral and immoral became grey and difficult to determine. Those who were privileged or collaborators fit into the grey zone in two ways: Either they were forced to collaborate or die, or they used their privileges to attain power and survive. Prisoners were tortured on a daily basis by hunger, thirst, and fatigue. As time passed, morality was replaced by compulsion. These human beings did almost anything to survive. Strong men were forced to work alongside the perpetrators in the *Sonderkommandos*, the Special Squads. In addition to dehumanizing them in the usual ways, these unfortunate Jews were forced to take part in the murder, to collaborate with their own tormentors. These human beings were driven to guilt beyond silence and were told: "You no longer are the other race, the anti-race, the prime enemy of the millennial Reich; you’re no longer the people who reject idols. We have embraced you, corrupted you, dragged you to the bottom with

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2 Levi elaborates on this issue in *The Drowned and the Saved* in the chapter entitled “The Grey Zone.”
us. You are like us, you proud people: dirtied with your own blood, as we are” (Levi, Drowned 55). In this case Levi felt it necessary to suspend blame of these collaborators because of the Nazi attempt to shift the burden of guilt on to the victims. Under normal circumstances the actions of the Sonderkommandos would be considered immoral and unforgivable, but under those circumstances they had to be forgiven. They had no prospect of spiritual resistance. They failed in “human solidarity.”

Collaboration, the lack of a common language, and the dehumanization process all contributed to disunity of the Jewish community and spirit. Levi again used irony to address the second group of privileged Jews, those who collaborated and became corrupt from the power granted them. The Jewish system in the camps and in the Ghettos was structured similarly to the very state that persecuted them. The system of privilege was based on power, from the Judenrat, the Jewish council in the ghettos, all the way down to those privileged enough to clean the dinner pot for an extra few spoonfuls of soup. In his writings about these Jews, he suspended judgement for the most part, but he made a compelling statement about the power of corruption associated with National Socialism. Chaim Rumkowsky, the Judenältester, chairman of the Judenrat, of the Lodz Ghetto, gave speeches in a style similar to Hitler and Mussolini, had guards armed with clubs to maintain peace and order, had stamps printed with his picture on them, and rode in his carriage through the ghetto as if he were King. His power, however, did not prevent his own liquidation from the Lodz Ghetto in September of 1944. Powerful and corrupt Jews were still Jews to the Nazis. Levi remarked, “That a Rumkowsky should have emerged from Lodz’ affliction is painful and distressing. Had he survived his own tragedy and the
tragedy of the ghetto he contaminated, superimposing on it his histrionic image, no tribunal would have absolved him, nor, certainly, can we absolve him on the moral plane” (Drowned 68). Later he continued: “We [all privileged, Kapos, prisoners, etc.] are all mirrored in Rumkowski, his ambiguity is ours, it is our second nature” (69).

A demand for justice underlies Levi’s witness. By recreating the violence of the concentration camp through language and irony, he placed the event in a “political realm where it can be discussed, analyzed, and judged” (Tager 277). Due to the disunity of the camp and the uniqueness of every situation, Levi portrayed the individual and his unique circumstance, not just characters representing a collective. These individuals have been described by Robert Gordon as having a “metonymic potential” (343). They were partly representative of the collective, but they were representative specifically because each individual was unique. Levi suspended judgement of victims who were forced to do the unthinkable in order to survive, because he understood that every situation and every prisoner was unique, each had his own pre-camp history, each did what he had to to live. In extreme situations one is able to rationalize behaviors and outcomes differently than during an otherwise normal situation. The dangers arose with the recognition of this by those associated with the perpetrators, and those who tried to associate themselves with the victims, tried to relieve themselves of the burden of guilt by claiming they too were forced into collaboration against their will.

Primo Levi wrote for a variety of reasons: to commemorate the memories of individuals he knew and in order to create a permanent record of the events that millions had experienced. He also stated in an interview that “It’s a great relief to confess … by
telling your story, you break free from it. But there’s more to it than that” (qtd. in Sodi 356). Most importantly, Primo Levi used the power of being a writer to confront his oppressors. Through his words he hoped to “corner them, tie them before a mirror,” and to force them to face their own consciences, and more importantly, to confront their guilt (Levi, Drowned 168). His writings addressed those citizens in Germany and Europe who chose not to believe the unimaginable stories and horrible rumors of the atrocities, but kept silent during the war, and his memories confronted all of those who were too cowardly to cry out against the immorality that was right in front of them.

After years of remembering, of bearing witness, of suspending blame, and of rationalizing his own shame, Levi’s final work The Drowned and the Saved has been considered the most emotionally charged and most confrontational of all of his works. His earlier writings were characterized as being distanced, approachable, and hopeful. Levi believed his words would help a German audience come to terms with its shame. He counted on it. By the time he completed his final work, however, this belief was no longer evident. The tone in his last effort was not one of hope, but of resentment. Some scholars, including Cynthia Ozick, read Levi’s final work as a suicide note: “The Drowned and the Saved is the record of a man returning blows with all the might of human fury, in full knowledge that the pen is mightier that the fist. The convulsions of rage have altered the nature of the prose, and — if we can judge by Levi’s suicide— the man as well”( Ozick 41). The Drowned and the Saved was a reexamination of his years as a writer, of his memories, and was his final assessment of what he had learned in all those years of reflection. In his words frustration and anger are present. It was as if Levi no longer felt
hopeful that he could reach a receptive audience.

Consider a relatively positive statement made by Levi in 1960 compared with those made much later. In a letter to his publisher Levi stated, “I do not believe that man’s life necessarily has a definite purpose, but if I think of my life and the aims I have until now set for myself, I recognize only one of them as well defined and conscious ... to bear witness, to make my voice heard by the German people, to ‘answer’ the Kapo who cleaned his hand on my shoulder, and by their heirs” (Drowned 174). In these words Levi still recognized the possibility that his message could be received. In response to a letter written to him by a German woman justifying the actions of her people, Levi replied:

I will be honest with you: in the generation that is over forty-five, how many of the Germans are truly conscious of what happened in Europe in the name of Germany? To judge from the discerning outcome of a number of trials, I feel they are few: along with heartbroken and compassionate voices, I hear others, discordant, strident, too proud of the power and wealth of today’s Germany. (Drowned 184)

In his chapter on shame in The Drowned and the Saved, Levi expressed his frustration even more powerfully when he states: “There are those who, faced by the crime of others or their own, turn their backs so as not to see it and not feel touched by it. This is what the majority of Germans did during the twelve Hitlerian years, deluding themselves that not seeing was a way of not knowing, and that not knowing relieved them of their share of complicity” (86).

The frustration must have been too much for Levi to bear. Perhaps the saying about survivors was true in Levi’s case: “The survivors never really survived, but merely lived on; that having died once, they will wish to die again; that they are un-restorable
even by love” (L.W. 42).

Whatever the reason for his death, Levi recognized the importance of memory and the need to write about the Holocaust in order to bear witness. He also understood the need to suspend judgement of those who were forced into the “grey zone” of collaboration in order to survive the camps, and to confront those who turned their backs so as not to see. It compelled Levi, and many other Jewish writers like him, to confront their own humanity and their personal connection or lack of connection to Judaism, and to consider what was required for them to come to terms with the past. When asked in an interview if he could forgive the atrocities perpetrated against him he replied: “Since I’m not a believer, I don’t really know what forgiveness is. It’s a concept that’s outside my world. I don’t have the authority to bestow forgiveness. If I were a rabbi, maybe I would; if I were a judge perhaps ... the authority does not rest with me” (qtd. in Sodi 364).
Final Thoughts about Primo Levi and his Views on Suicide as an Introduction to
the Life and Writings of Jean Amerý

When in April 1987 the news of Primo Levi’s apparent suicide became public, many scholars and friends were shocked. They were shocked that his life had ended in suicide just as so many other Jewish survivors who, like him, had felt an overwhelming need to bear witness following liberation from the camps. In the obituaries published in the *New Republic* in late April 1987 the disbelief of Levi’s untimely death was poignantly expressed: “His suicide is spirit-destroying. For it was Levi who was back from death. It was he who stood for the chance of composure after catastrophe, for the possibility that order and decency awaited the survivors of those camps....Levi remained attached to the world, despite what it did to him. He hated oblivion. He was intact. Or so it seemed” (L.W. 42). Levi’s early writings seemed to confirm his connection to the world, but perhaps his final work anticipated his death as Ozick noted when she observed that Levi’s final work *The Drowned and the Saved* was full of rage and resentment which was uncharacteristic of his writings.

Primo Levi had addressed suicide in *The Drowned and the Saved*. He explored why suicides in the camps were rare, and he discussed why suicide was so prevalent following the war. Not many prisoners had time to contemplate taking their own life in the camps. Because death was such a part of daily life, most focused on survival, on finding the strength to make it through one more day. Some prisoners stole from each other. Others collaborated to gain access to food. Many relied on instinct to survive. Most had
been reduced to animals. Levi explained that suicide was uncommon under these circumstances because it is an act of man, not animal.

Upon liberation, many prisoners recognized that they had lost touch with their humanity. They had been made helpless and powerless to defend themselves, and as a result, were guilty and ashamed of what they had become. At the end of the war, many came to the harsh and abrupt realization that they had done nothing wrong and that there was no need to feel guilty, but they also knew that their memory was too powerful to escape. Levi recalled a day when he and other prisoners were forced to watch the hanging of a resister. During the hanging Levi had the recurring thought: "You too could have, you certainly should have. And this is a judgement that the survivor believes he sees in the eyes of those (especially the young) who listen to his stories and judge with facile hindsight, or perhaps feel cruelly repelled. Consciously or not, he feels accused and judged, compelled to justify and defend himself" (Drowned 77-78). Some survivors could not deal with this reality and committed suicide shortly gaining their freedom. Perhaps taking their own life was their final human act that granted them freedom from confronting the kind of beings they had become in the camps.

Despite these initial suicides, many others waited until several years after liberation before committing suicide. Many of these were writers. They wanted to share their memories in the hope that a future catastrophe could be prevented. Unfortunately, several of these Jewish writers felt that their intended audience had failed to acknowledge their memories and concerns. In addition, they were haunted by the memories of their loss of humanity. Some thus saw suicide as the only means of escaping the painful
memories of their experiences, the unescapable despair of being a survivor, and their perceived failure to bear witness. Perhaps, however, these deaths should not be considered acts of *selbstmord*, self-murder, but rather *freitod*, voluntary or self-willed death. The former describes an act of violence, the latter an act of free-choice.

With Primo Levi’s suicide, or in any case, self-willed death, we are reminded that he was not the first Jewish writer to survive the hell of Auschwitz, only to enter the hell of survival. He was not the first Jewish writer to be confused about his Jewish identity. He was also not the first Jewish writer to suffer from his memories, nor was he the first Jewish writer to feel indignant about what he perceived as indifference shown to his writings and despair about their ineffectiveness.

The Role of Resentment and the Influence of Enlightenment Philosophy and Humanism on the Essays of Jean Amery

The frustration that culminated at the end of Primo Levi’s career was similar to the disappointments and obstructions that Jean Amery experienced throughout his life. Both were Jews with little connection to their Jewish collective identity. Both were intellectuals who used reason and analytic skills to survive, and later used them in their attempts to understand the inhumanities they had experienced. Most importantly, both grew more and more disillusioned with the public’s general indifference that seemed to increase with the passing of time. In his first work, *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*, published in 1966, (At the Mind’s Limits [1981]), Jean Amery reflected: “Nothing really happens as we hope it
will, nor as we fear it will. But not because the occurrence, as one says, perhaps ‘goes beyond the imagination,’ but because it is reality and not fantasy. One can devote an entire life to comparing the imagined and the real, and still never accomplish anything by it” (qtd. in Langer, Ashes 124).

These words served almost to foreshadow the obstacle that he, as an intellectual and humanist, could never overcome. Not only was he a Jew with no connection to his Jewish heritage, but he was an Austrian whose history, culture, and language were closely associated with the people who persecuted and tortured him. As a result, Amerý’s writings are laden with resentment. In his works, which consisted mostly of essays, he addressed the question: “How is it possible to remain human in the grip of extremity?” (qtd. in Stille 521). As the main character of his essays, Amerý characteristically took the reader from a description of the events and emotions exploring the “self” of his incarceration and compared them to the “self” after his liberation. He hoped that through truthful and accurate descriptions of past and present events and feelings, his writings could best represent the moral value inherent in his resentment.

The bitterness that Amerý felt intensified after the war. Jean Amerý did not write about his memories or experiences of torture and persecution for nearly twenty years. When he finally did begin to write, he wrote political and philosophical essays. In At the Mind’s Limits, he targeted his resentment at the men and women directly responsible for his alienation from the world and at the ambivalent attitudes of the citizens who allowed the atrocities to take place. Shortly thereafter in 1968 he published two more books of essays Über das Alter (About Aging) and Umeisterliche Wanderjahre (Lean Journeyman
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Years). The themes in these essays were aimed at those who attempted to allow the passing of time to lessen the severity of the atrocities that haunted his memories. Furthermore, he expressed his hope that a receptive audience could prevent history from repeating itself.

During the last few years of his life, Amery wrote essays that were more autobiographical and personal. In 1976 he published his first book called Hand an sich legen (To lay a Hand on Oneself). This was his most controversial work because it defended suicide. He asserted that society must not condemn or judge a person who has chosen to take his life. A person must experience from within the thoughts and experiences of someone on the brink of suicide in order to fully comprehend the situation. His final book of essays Radical Humanism was published in 1978, shortly before he himself committed suicide. In these essays, he addresses a wide variety of personal and philosophical topics such as how he became a writer, what his role as a Jew was, and how the philosophy of Sartre influenced his own thinking.

Amery's essays reflected the struggles he faced as an intellectual, as an Austrian Jew, and as a survivor of the Holocaust--struggles that were quite different from those of counterparts like Primo Levi, who did not experience prejudice in his homeland until immediately prior to his deportation to Auschwitz, and who after the war returned to his hometown, raised a family in the house where he grew up, and resumed his old job. Amery, on the other hand, had been ridiculed for being Jewish, fled Austria following its annexation, and did not return until 1978.

After receiving news of Amery's suicide, Levi was not surprised. He described
how Amerý’s experiences with the Holocaust were made intrinsically more problematic than his own for several reasons. Amerý was an intellectual who could not suppress the urge to philosophically confront the inconceivable and immoral on a daily basis. His mind was tortured because of the inhumanity he saw, and he began to lose faith in humanity. His situation was complicated further because his collective identity was tightly bound to the very nation that condemned him. It is ironic that, even though Amerý did not consider himself to be a Jew, he was isolated from many other Jews in Auschwitz because he spoke the enemy’s language, and he was physically tortured by the enemy for being a Jewish resister. As a result, Amerý lost “trust in the world” (qtd. in Langer, Ashes 136).

In an essay dedicated to Amerý An Intellectual in Auschwitz, Levi compared his personal suffering as a foreign Jew to the different form of despair that Amerý suffered as a result of language and heritage:

He suffered from it because German was his language, because he was a philologist who loved his language, just as a sculptor would suffer at seeing one of his statues befouled or mutilated. Therefore the suffering of the intellectual was different in this case from that of the uncultivated foreigner: for the former the fact that the German of the Lager was a language he did not understand endangered his life; for the latter, it was a barbaric jargon that he did not understand but that scorched his mouth when he tried to speak it. One was a deportee, the other a stranger in his own country. (Levi, Drowned 135)

Later in the same essay, Levi offered a defense of Amerý’s decision to take his own life when he remarked: “Had I too seen the world collapse upon me, had I been sentenced to exile and the loss of national identity, had I too been tortured until I fainted and lost consciousness and beyond, perhaps I would have learned to return the blow and to harbor like Amerý those ‘resentments’ to which he dedicated a long, anguish-filled essay” (Levi,
Drowned 138).

The essay to which Levi refers here is “Torture.” It reflects Amery's commitment to moral reason which was driven by resentment. The power of memory and the problematic association with a collective history drove Amery to first be silent and then to bear witness to his experiences, not offering a message filled with hope, but rather one of resentment. As mentioned earlier, the goal of many of his writings was to confront those criminals directly responsible for his persecution, and to direct his frustrations to the indifferent nations, particularly Germany, who allowed the crimes to occur. He disapproved most vehemently of the German good conscience that developed after the end of the war, and voiced his objections to those who felt that monetary reparation or monuments were sufficient to make up for the atrocities perpetrated on humanity.³

In addition, he confronted those who attempted to simplify history by allowing the passing of time to underscore the destruction and inhumanity of the Holocaust. In so doing, Amery hoped to overcome the powerful burden of remembering his torture which, after twenty-two years, still haunted his mind and kept him isolated. In his writings, he addressed the frail morality of human life present in themes like aging, suicide, torture, exile, failure, and deceived love. Not surprisingly, these are all things that he experienced or was burdened with until his death. Amery expressed his frustration in confronting some of these concepts in his “anguish-filled” essay:

³ This attitude is prevalent in some government policies and statements made by German political figures. For further discussion see; “From the Liberation of the Jews to the Unification of the Germans” by Frank Stem, and “Hitler’s Shadow: On being a self-conscious German” by Peter Schneider.
Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world. The shame of destruction cannot be erased. Trust in the world, which already collapsed in part at the first blow, but in the end, under torture, fully, will not be regained. That one’s fellow man was experienced as the antiman remains in the tortured person as accumulated horror. It blocks the view into a world in which the principle of hope rules. One who was martyred is a defenseless prisoner of fear. It is fear that henceforth reigns over him. Fear—and also what is called resentments. They remain, and have scarcely a chance to concentrate into a seething purifying thirst for revenge. (qtd. in Langer, Ashes 136)

To best understand the source of these resentments it is vital to consider Jean Améry’s experiences both prior to and following the Holocaust, and the role collective history played throughout his life. Jean Améry was born Hans Maier in Vienna, Austria in 1912. His father, whom he never knew, was a full-blooded Jew who died in 1916 while serving as a rifleman in the Austro-Hungarian army. His mother had a connection to Judaism because her father was Jewish, but she considered herself a Catholic and went to church on major holidays. In an essay called Being a Jew, published in his final book Radical Humanism: Selected Essays (1978), he reflected that: “Jews weren’t spoken of, although everything connected with my origin was known to me” (12). He was told that his grandfather was a butcher who spoke Yiddish and practiced Orthodox Judaism, and he remembered that the neighbors considered him a Jew because of this distant connection. But, before Hans Maier was nineteen years old, he never really considered himself to be a Jew. He was an Austrian.

One of the turning points in his life as a young Jewish Austrian occurred when he moved from Voralberg, a rural region of Austria, to Vienna. Because Vienna was a hotbed of political and cultural development, Améry took full advantage of all the knowledge
available to him. He was especially interested in an increasingly popular political figure in
Germany named Adolf Hitler, whose racial platform was causing a resurgence of anti-
Semitism in Germany and Austria. At this point, however, Jean Amerý was not threatened
by these developments, because he did not see himself as a Jew. He remarked that, “No
one can become what he can’t find in his memories” (qtd. in Rabinbach and Zipes,
Germany 82).

If the collective history of a person confirmed who and what he/she was, as Jean
Amerý believed, then by his own determination, he was an Austrian. He heard no Yiddish
until he was nineteen, he did not believe in the Jewish God of Israel, and he grew up
celebrating Christian and Austrian traditions and holidays. He reflected in an essay
entitled On the Necessity and Impossibility of being a Jew: “I see myself as a boy at
Christmas, plodding through a snow-covered village to midnight mass; I don’t see myself
at a synagogue....I hear my mother appealing to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph when a minor
household misfortune occurred; the picture of my father did not show me a bearded
Jewish sage, but rather a Tyrolean Imperial Rifleman in the uniform of the First World
War” (qtd. in Rabinbach and Zipes, Germany 81).

Amerý was convinced that he could not just choose to be a Jew. He remembered
thinking at age nineteen that “one can reestablish the link with a tradition that one has lost,
but one cannot freely invent it for oneself, that is the problem” (qtd. in Rabinbach and
Zipes, Germany 82). His views were made even more problematic when he met and fell in
love with the young woman who became his wife. She seemed to be like any other
Austrian girl. She was from Graz, spoke a dialect similar to his, had red hair and freckles;
she even preferred the traditional Austrian folk dress, the *Dirndl*, to more contemporary clothing. What Amerý initially did not know about her was that she was a full-blooded Jew, and what's more, her father was an immigrant *Ostjude*. Amerý was shocked and surprised when his mother immediately expressed disapproval and prejudice: “Das ist ein polnisches Judenmädchen” (Amerý, *Humanism* 12).

This direct exposure to religious prejudice laid the foundation for Amerý’s lifelong journey as an intellectual who specialized in a philosophical humanism that was initially inspired by the basic tenets of Enlightenment theory, but which developed into a more radical form of humanism resulting from his personal experiences as a Jew. At first, Amerý ignored his girlfriend’s background. He admitted that he made this decision because he was not ready to confront or to accept his own Jewish destiny: “Why not? Well, it is clear: By reading so many national-socialist works, I had allowed the enemy to import his image of my self upon me and had completely internalized it...I really found myself in a confusing state of mind: I was an Austrian who had been raised as a Christian, and yet I was not one” (Amerý, *Humanism* 14). He added, “since I was not a Jew, I am not one; and since I am not one, I won’t be able to become one” (qtd. in Rabinbach and Zipes, *Germany* 82).

He ignored his girlfriend’s connection to Judaism and avoided his own association with it until it was no longer an option. In September 1935 Jean Amerý read a feature story in a newspaper in a Viennese coffee house that forever changed the way he viewed himself and the world. According to the Nuremberg Laws recently passed in Germany, Jean Amerý was a Jew. In the words he read in print, he realized that destiny had been
determined, his sentence was passed: "To be a Jew, that meant for me, from this moment on, to be a dead man on leave, someone to be murdered, who only by chance was not yet where he properly belonged ... the denial of human dignity sounded the death threat" (Rabinbach and Zipes, *Germany* 83). In addition to restrictions traditionally placed on Jews, such as the prohibition of marriage between a Christian and a Jew, and the general social restriction between citizens of Aryan descent and Jewish heritage, the Nazis, for the first time in the history of persecution of the Jews, labeled them a race of people and not just a religious group.

Following the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany, Jean Amerý took his new wife and fled to Belgium where he turned his back on his collective identity. In Belgium, Austrian-born Hans Maier changed his name to the anagram Jean Amerý. Jean is one of the most common names in the French-speaking world. Amerý felt, therefore, he would not be identifiable with anyone in particular. It is also noteworthy that he chose to use the letters of his last name in the creation of his new French-sounding identity. Even though he tried to reject the culture, the history, and the language associated with the people who persecuted him, he could not completely abandon it. By rejecting the heritage, the traditions, and the memories of the Austrians, Amerý would be rejecting all that he was and all of his memories. In a symbolic gesture to retain some elements of his heritage, Maier became Amerý.

But he still did not accept being a Jew: "The environment in which I had lived in the years one acquires one's self was not Jewish, and that cannot be reversed" (qtd. in Rabinbach and Zipes, *Germans* 92). He lived in a Jewish community in Belgium, but he
still felt like an outsider. His first experience with the community was described as stupid:

“I reacted with the most extreme irritation to the fellowship that surrounded me. The Yiddish language, in which I was addressed everywhere, was an unspeakable embarrassment for me” (Amerý, Humanism 16). This was a common reaction for many German-speaking non-Orthodox or assimilated Jews. Because standard German was their native language, most German-speaking Jews considered Yiddish to be “jargon” or bad German (Brenner 49).

Amerý made a final attempt to evade association with the Jewish community when he joined the resistance movement in Belgium. Years after liberation, Amerý explained in his essay On Being a Jew: A Personal Account that “the Jews were hunted, cornered, arrested, and deported because they were Jews, and only because of that. Looking back, it appears to me that I did not want to be detained by the enemy as a Jew, but rather as a resistance member. It was my last, absurd effort to escape a collective fate” (Amerý, Humanism 17). He recognized that: “the exile-in-permanence that I chose was the sole authenticity I could attain for myself; being Jewish, blockaded all other outlets for me” (19). In this last-ditch effort to avoid association with his Jewish identity, Amerý realized that he not only was not at home among the Jews, but he was not at home anywhere. His memories and experiences defined him as an Austrian, but the Germans defined him as a Jew, a group with which he could not identify. Amerý expressed the further irony of this realization with the statement: “I too am precisely what I am not, because I did not exist until I became it, above all else: a Jew” (qtd. in Rabinbach and Zipes, Germans 92).

Circumstances leading to the experiences of the final years of the war left Amerý
permanently scarred, long silent, and ultimately frustrated and disillusioned. In 1940, Amerý was arrested by Belgian officials, deported to southern France, and imprisoned in several camps, including Gurs, on the charge that he was a German partisan. He escaped from prison in 1941, rejoined the resistance movement in Belgium, and worked for two years before being caught, this time by the Nazis. Amerý was immediately sent to the infamous Gestapo prison at Fort Breendonk between Antwerp and Brussels. It was here that he was tortured for information which he did not have. Once his Jewish identity was known, Amerý was deported first to Auschwitz and then to Bergen Belsen where he remained until liberation by British troops in 1945. After liberation, Amerý returned to Belgium and wrote newspaper articles for Swiss audiences.

Amerý's long public silence about his experiences between 1935 and 1944 lasted for nearly twenty years. It is astounding that during this time he wrote approximately five thousand articles totaling about fifteen thousand pages of print, and not one page was about his memories of the Holocaust. He published six extended articles about jazz music and famous contemporaries, like Winston Churchill, and he wrote several newsworthy pieces for publication in journals, but he had not yet discovered his voice as a Holocaust writer. He suppressed the experiences that connected him with Jewish memories of loss and inhumanity that had compelled many other Jews in his situation to bear witness.

Memory and humanism played a key role in Amerý's inability to bear witness to the atrocities of the Holocaust until 1964. As a student, Amerý had been impressed by the ideals presented in Enlightenment thinking. During the Enlightenment, philosophers focused on a set of moral principles with the authority of a divine command, but not based
on a belief in God. As an atheist, this appealed to Amerý. He was also interested in the Enlightenment investigation of human nature and of humans as rational beings. According to Eugene Goodheart in his article, "The Passion of Reason," Amerý did not view rationalism as a faith, but rather as a means of declaring "a belief in the world that can be challenged by moral reason" (Goodheart 520). As rational beings, humans have the ability to exercise reason in order to become free. Philosophers at this time regarded prejudice as the major obstacle that had to be overcome in order to exercise reason and attain the freedom that they sought. These characteristics are considered elements of Humanism, which regards all people as equal and the same, to the extent that they are rational beings capable of becoming free.

As a German-speaking intellectual who was ousted by the very group with which he associated his collective identity, Amerý felt that after the war it was "mentally and morally impossible to work in, or for, Germany" (Amerý, Humanism 2). The memories of torture, suffering, and alienation kept Amerý silent:

Can it be, is it thinkable that I, the former Auschwitz inmate, who truly has not lacked occasion to recognize what he is and what he must be, still did not want to be a Jew, as decades ago, when I wore white half socks and leather breeches and nervously eyed myself in the mirror, hoping it would show me an impressive German youth?....No matter how the disguise may have looked on me, it now lies in the attic. If today discomfort arises in me when a Jew takes it for granted, legitimately, that I am part of his community, then it is not because I don't want to be a Jew, but only because I cannot be one. And yet must be one ... the necessity and impossibility of being a Jew, that is what causes me indistinct pain. (qtd. in Rabinbach and Zipes, Germans 80-81)

Every day, Amerý looked at the number tattooed on his forearm and was reminded that he was a Jew. Each time he spoke, he was reminded that as a German-speaking Jew with no
personal connections to his Jewishness. He was alienated from the memories of his childhood, memories of his education, and memories of his family.

As an intellectual who was not at home with the Jews, who had lost trust in the world, and who had only memories associated with the people who tortured and persecuted him, it is not difficult to understand why Amerý felt a need to be silent. It is ironic that a man who valued the power of language could be made mute by it. This irony was further underscored by Amerý’s loyalty to Enlightenment philosophy. As a humanist who believed in progress, human equality, and the use of reason to attain freedom, it becomes even more clear why Amerý was compelled to silence for so long. But just as some Jewish survivors chose silence because, “better silence than speech or, if speech is inescapable, it must always know its limitations and finally confess its impotence,” others, like Amerý, eventually recognized that “speech is necessary, because total silence would mean oblivion, and the moral imperative is never to forget” (Goodheart 518).

Following liberation, Amerý was made speechless by the horrors that he had witnessed. As a philosopher, Amerý found it difficult, if not entirely impossible, to use the traditional arguments of Enlightenment and Humanism to recount and make sense of such an utterly immoral and inhumane event. Martin P. Golding discusses this difficulty in an essay “On the Idea of Moral Pathology:”

Horrifying events are more than realities (actual or imagined) that evoke fear. Horror is evoked by dangerously threatening situations that are imbued with the weird and unnatural, uncanny departure from the usual. It is not surprising, then, if one ‘can’t believe’ an account of some horror; nor is it surprising if we find it difficult to comprehend horrifying facts whose existence we are finally prepared to accept. Departures from the usual often strike us as unintelligible in some sense; our difficulties in explaining
or understanding horrifying departures seem to be compounded. (qtd. in Rosenberg and Myers 129)

Many years had passed since the first reports of the death camps were made public, and Amerý was finally ready to share his memories and bear witness. All that Jean Amerý needed now was a platform.

The turning point in his career as a philosophical writer occurred in Brussels in 1964, after Jean Amerý met a German writer named Helmut Heissenbüttel. Following a discussion with Heissenbüttel, Amerý thought he recognized in him the emergence of a new and “other” Germany. Interested in Amerý’s philosophy, Heissenbüttel offered Amerý the opportunity to address the German public for the first time on a program called “Radio Essay,” which was part of the Southern German Broadcasting Corporation. Amerý was delighted. It had been many years since he had felt hope or a connection to his Austrian heritage. He believed that things had changed in Germany and that maybe the attitudes he had experienced between 1935 and 1944 had disappeared. He agreed to express his views live on public radio “as though everything between Germany and me had suddenly been cleared up (which naturally was also an illusion, but I realized that only when I began writing)” (Amerý, Humanism 3). He read five essays on the air and in 1966 published those essays in At the Mind's Limits.

When this book was first published, it sold only seven thousand copies. Looking back, many scholars felt that the rather cold reception of this work was partially due to the fact that he wrote it “at a time when a certain fatigue and impatience had begun to surround the subject of the Holocaust” (qtd. in Stille 362). He objected to the argument
accepted by many Germans that it had become “rude, inappropriate, and mean-spirited to dwell on the past, or to speak of German guilt or collective responsibility” (qtd. in Stille 362). As a result, his need to bear witness was proclaimed, and Radical Humanism ensued. By confronting the painful memories of his past experiences, Amery’s true voice as a writer emerged, and the German-speaking people he rejected became his audience.

In this and other books, Amery tackled the issue of how such a moral disaster could have occurred in the midst of such a great literary and intellectual community. Germany was described as being das Land der Dichter und Denker, the country of poets and intellectuals. As an intellectual, Amery was left with the haunting and unsettling conclusion that “the intellectual was alone with his intellect,” he was deprived of the “reality of the world of the mind” (Langer, Ashes 119). Similarly, while incarcerated, Levi had come to the realization that “no bridge led from death in Auschwitz to Death in Venice” (119).

To a certain extent, the mass murder and inhumanities of the Holocaust are beyond the range of philosophical analysis. In particular, the paradigms used by the Enlightenment thinkers to address history, evil, or the liberal state no longer seemed valid after the Holocaust. The following dilemmas were addressed by contemporary philosophers on the topic of What Philosophy Can and Cannot say about Evil. According to Emil Fackenheim, “the Holocaust poses radical ‘countertestimony’ to traditional philosophy.” He concluded that “where the Holocaust is, no thought can be, and where there is thought, it is in flight from the event” (Rosenberg and Myers 92). The late Arthur Cohen once remarked: “There is something in the nature of thought— its
patient deliberateness and care for logical order— that is alien to the death camps” (qtd. in Rosenberg and Myers, 91). Kenneth Seeskin expanded the dilemma faced by philosophers following the Holocaust, especially those philosophers influenced by Enlightenment philosophy, with the following:

The Holocaust refutes moral relativism by showing that at least one judgement is absolute. The Holocaust refutes moral absolutism by showing what can happen when people do not question orders. The Holocaust shows that the traditional understanding of God is bankrupt. The Holocaust shows that the theory of the liberal state is unacceptable because it has nothing to guarantee that such a catastrophe will not be repeated. The Holocaust shows that the absolute state is an abomination. The Holocaust shows that many of the dominant notions of rationality are false. The Holocaust shows that irrationality is too dangerous to contemplate. (qtd. in Rosenberg and Myers 100)

In addition to addressing the possibility that a crime such as this could be carried out by civilized intellectuals, Jean Amerý took a speculative approach when he wrote. He set out to answer fundamental questions that revolved around the major themes discussed earlier: torture, aging, alienation, suicide. And although many philosophers thought it was no longer possible to use the ideals of Enlightenment philosophy, Amerý remained committed to its conceptual tools. His philosophy has been labeled a Radical Humanism that found “its expression in his loyalty to reason and enlightenment, his intellectual and personal integrity, his moral rigorism, his unwavering defense of humane values” (Amerý, Humanism viii). Let us consider a few of the questions he raised and the ways in which he used moral reasoning and memory to confront his oppressors, to address those who were indifferent, and to preserve the memories of those Jews who died before him: Was it an advantage to be an intellectual at Auschwitz? What does physical torture do to a person’s
sense of his own body and his place in the world? How much home does one need? What should the survivor do with his feelings of anger and resentment?

In two decades of contemplating what happened to me, I believe to have recognized that a forgiving and forgetting induced by social pressure is immoral... What happened, happened. But that it happened cannot be so easily accepted. I rebel against my past, against history and against a present that places the incomprehensible in the cold storage of history and thus falsifies it in a revolting way. (qtd. in Stille 362)

Rebelling is something that Jean Amerý had been doing for years. He rebelled against his Jewish identity. He rebelled against the German-speaking Aryans who rejected him, and he rebelled against the memories of the torture that a collective, his collective, inflicted upon him. The issue most prevalent in his thoughts was what physical torture did to a person's sense of his body and of his place in the world, and how the power of memory affected it. Amerý described his initial reaction to torture with the following reflections “What was inflicted on me ... was by far not the worst form of torture....And yet, twenty-two years after it occurred, on the basis of an experience that in no way probed the entire range of possibilities, I dare to assert that torture is the most horrible event a human being can retain in himself” (qtd. in Langer, Ashes 122).

The memory of being physically tortured terrified Jean Amerý, but not only because of the physical pain it inflicted. He was terrified by the people who exercised their freedom of choice to demoralize another human being. He was horrified by the lack of morality that convinced him to lose trust in the world, and he was dismayed at the indifference shown by the world when all that remained of his torture were memories.

In the beginning of his essay “Torture,” Amerý expressed his dismay in a
description of a return visit to Fort Breendonk where he had been tortured. He stated that the creators of the National Museum of Fort Breendonk intentionally left everything the way that it was between 1940 and 1944. He mentioned the "yellowed wall cards: 'Whoever goes beyond this point will be shot' (qtd. in Langer, Ashes 121). At the end of this description he noted the pathetic monument to the resistance movement which stood just before the entrance of the museum. It depicted a man forced to his knees, but who defiantly raised his head "with its oddly Slavic lines" (121). The monument is certainly not necessary to remind visitors of what occurred behind the gates. Amerý recognized the danger that such monuments posed, as evident in his statement that the German people "cannot allow a piece of their national history to be neutralized by time, but must integrate it" (Stille 365). With this he meant coming to terms with collective responsibility through reason, and not by integrating art into memorials.

After reentering the Fort, the memories of his torture intensified. He re-experienced the uncanny sensation that resulted from the deterioration of his preconceived notions about the kinds of men involved in such an immoral operation. He expected to encounter men with "twisted noses, hypertrophied chins, pockmarks, and knifescars" (qtd. in Langer, Ashes 124). Men who possessed inhuman traits themselves were certainly the only men capable of inflicting physical torture and thriving in their sadistic power to forever nullify the world of the victim. Instead of possessing the deformed gaze of a beast, Amerý's torturers were ordinary men, with ordinary names. He used his power as a writer to confront all of those ordinary men who, more than likely, were not appropriately punished during the period of "normalization" in Germany, and who probably had
resumed a normal life after the end of the war. In his essay, Amerý named the man who tortured him. By naming his perpetrator, Amerý not only heightened the horror of his torturous memories, but confronted the perpetrator directly. His past was uncovered. He must answer to anyone who discovered the truth: “Why, really should I withhold his name, which later became so familiar to me? Perhaps at this very hour he is faring well and feels content with his healthily sunburned self as he drives home from his Sunday excursion.... The Herr Leutnant, who played the role of a torture specialist here, was named Praust. P-R-A-U-S-T” (qtd. in Langer, Ashes 129).

The torture itself did not scar Amerý as much as the psychological anguish that resulted. Those who hunted him, arrested him, and finally tortured him spoke the language and shared the culture of his childhood. This led to his feelings of alienation. He described the experience of torture as the next and final step to his “interminable death” (Stille 364). A human being has the capacity to reason. This ability to reason bestows on each individual with the certainty of a moral universe, filled with memories of family, friends, history, philosophy, language, literature, and homeland. After torture, these certainties no longer exist. The body generally serves as a border between one’s self and the world which contains one’s moral universe. Torture disregards this boundary. It devalues the world for the victim to the extent that even if the victim survives, the torturer has succeeded in nullifying the victim’s moral universe. As is clear in “Torture,” this results in the victim losing trust in everything:

Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world. The shame of destruction cannot be erased. Trust in the world, which already collapsed in part at the first blow, but in the end, under
torture, fully, will not be regained. That one's fellow man was experienced as the anti-man remains in the tortured person as accumulated horror. (qtd. in Langer, *Ashes* 136)

As the victim of torture, Jean Améry was reduced almost to nothingness. "Without trust in the world I face my surroundings as a Jew who is alien and alone, and all that I can manage is to get along with my foreignness" (qtd. in Rosenberg and Myers 92). The memories of his dehumanization haunted him for years and forever changed his connection to himself and to the world. The memories of his torture also served as a starting point in his quest to understand how he, as an intellectual, survived, and if an intellectual was at an advantage in Auschwitz. After suffering physical pain to the brink of moral collapse, Amerý found that his pain was the only tangible reality left within his moral universe. It became for him a new point of departure, a means of survival.

Surviving the camps reinforced in him the belief that what was more crucial to surviving such inhumanity, "more crucial than moral power to resist," was the power "to hit back" (Rabinbach and Zipes, *Germany* 87) Spiritual resistance, an option for some prisoners like Primo Levi, who had a connection to his Italian collective identity, was not available to Jean Améry. His lack of connection to Judaism coupled with his rejection of a German heritage left him spiritually isolated. He tried to take pleasure in memories of culture as a means maintaining humanity. One day he was delighted to remember a line from a favorite poem by Hölderlin: "The walls stand speechless and cold, the flags clank in the wind" (qtd. in Stille 363). The poem, however, did not elicit the same response that it had in the past. It "no longer transcended reality" (qtd. in Stille 363). Primo Levi had
remarked that sometimes memories were better left forgotten: “Reason, art, and poetry are no help in deciphering a place from which they are banned. In the daily life “down there” made up of boredom and interwoven with horror, it was salutary to forget them, just as it was salutary to learn to forget home and family” (Levi, Drowned 142).

Because spiritual resistance was not a viable option for Amery, he relied on his body and on his devotion to reason to help him maintain humanity. He remembered how his torturers reduced him to less than a man: “I have not forgotten that there were moments when I felt a kind of wretched admiration for the agonizing sovereignty they exercised over me. For is it not the one who can reduce a person so entirely to a body and a whimpering prey of death a god, or, at least, a demigod?” (qtd. in Langer, Ashes 133).

He developed the belief that he could retain a sense of human dignity through physical means. Amery reflected on an incident in the camp when a Kapo named Juszek struck him in the face, as was usually done spontaneously and without cause. Amery, who was smaller and much weaker, retaliated and struck the Polish criminal back, even though he knew he was going to be severely punished. He, however, understood how vital it was for him to retain human dignity in order to survive:

Painfully beaten, I was satisfied with myself....I had grasped well that there are situations in life in which our body is our entire self and our entire fate. I was my body and nothing else: in hunger, in the blow that I suffered, in the blow that I dealt....My body when it tensed to strike was my physical and metaphysical dignity. In situations like mine, physical violence is the sole means for restoring a disjointed personality. (qtd. in Goodheart 520)

As an intellectual focusing on the importance of reason, Amery possessed the analytical skills necessary to adapt enough to survive the affliction of life in camp.
Thinking back to life in Auschwitz, Amerý remarked that “we did not become better, more human, more humane, and more mature ethically” (Amerý, Humanism vii). He did believe, however, that he left the camp experience wiser and “better equipped to recognize that the severest demands placed on us by reality are of a physical and social nature” (Amerý, Humanism viii).

Some of the physical demands simply had to be endured. Unfortunately, many intellectuals possessed a commodity that was not in demand in the camps, they possessed a mind. For this skill intellectuals were rewarded with hard, physical labor and guaranteed no hope of transfer. Other physical demands, however, could be resisted. As an intellectual, whose mind was vital for a decision-making and rational human being, Amerý chose to fight for human dignity to insure his survival. He did not accept physical brutality without retaliation, or at least without making an effort to avoid it. He exercised his right to choose to fight back.

Others, either those who were too weary to rationalize the moral significance of their decisions, those determined to survive, or those who no longer cared, relinquished their power to choose how they lived, and in the end, surrendered the responsibility for their fate to those in control of their existence. I recently heard something to substantiate this claim in the United States Memorial Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. A male survivor of Auschwitz reflected on how he had survived. He said that if he was told to go left, he went left. If he was ordered to jump, he jumped. If he was told to work all day long for no reason, he did not question, he just obeyed. He followed orders, gave up his freedom to choose, and with it his responsibility for himself and his fate.
The prisoner, whose memories I heard, had made a decision based on social demands. He allowed his moral “self” to be rewritten to adapt to his new environment. Individuals living in a community become socialized to the extent that they adopt the rules, values, and ideals shared by the community in which they live. This may be explained by an individual’s desire for approval or feelings of good will within the collective. An individual who has been socialized in this manner possesses a “moral self.” As a prisoner trying to survive, the freedom to choose what is moral was replaced by the values, rules, and standards established by the collective, which, as we have read, was no longer moral in the way that civilization had understood it.

Because logic and reason were skills that Amerý possessed, he recognized the danger inherent in such an attitude. Not only did one risk crossing the boundaries of one’s moral limits, which happened when prisoners stole and collaborated and beat other prisoners, but one also risked adopting a “moral self” which was accepted by a collective with a faulty moral makeup. In extreme situations one is able to rationalize behaviors and outcomes differently than under normal circumstances. The danger comes with the recognition of this by those associated with the perpetrators. Those who tried, associated themselves with the victims and claimed that they were forced into collaboration against their will. Obviously the “moral self” of a Nazi SS officer differed greatly from the “moral self” of a Jewish prisoner or of a member of an anti-fascist resistance group. Citizens who did not use their ability to reason, helped to create a moral structure in Germany which counted on blind obedience and which resulted in disaster.

Many prisoners chose to adhere to the moral standards established in camps and
elsewhere because it alludes to or invites a unity in spirit. In his own lack of connection to Judaism or to his Austrian heritage, Jean Amerý recognized that disunity among groups was more often the case. From a connection to a collective, a person experienced a feeling of home, of belonging. The question of how much home one needs was another issue very much on Amerý’s mind. How important was it to belong to a group? Amerý was a man with no home in Austria and with an involuntary and undesirable connection to his Jewishness. The only exposure he had to Judaism as a religion was during the winter of 1940. At that time he was incarcerated at a prison in Gurs. He attended a Chanukah celebration and was immediately struck by his lack of understanding: “Hearing the gripping, sorrowful cries to which the singsong of the worshippers intensified, I felt that I had been cast into another, thoroughly alien world” (Amerý, *Humanism* 14-15). Many other Jews with backgrounds similar to Amerý’s did not speak about their “Judaism,” but rather what it meant to them to be a “Jew.” Not having an understanding of what “Judaism” as a faith entailed considerably isolated Jews with a weak connection to their distant heritage. Amerý discussed how “Being Jewish without Judaism leads to a melancholy that I must live through daily; a melancholy that accompanies my existence” (Amerý, *Humanism* 20).

This lack of awareness of Judaism accompanied him wherever he went. Everyone in the camps knew who was orthodox, who was assimilated, and everyone knew where they fit into the hierarchy. There was a strict social structure in the camps. The prisoners with the highest status were German Aryan prisoners from the Reich. Germans from the Eastern countries were next on the list. The Ukrainians from occupied Poland had a higher
status than a Polish citizen, and an Italian was higher in stature than an East European laborer. On the bottom were the Jews. Origin did not matter. But, even among the Jews there was a hierarchy, and there was obvious dissension among the groups. Just belonging to a group by no means implied acceptance. In the memoir of Jewish survivor Erno Szep, this sentiment was clearly expressed: “Actual Jews, that is officially of the Israelite denomination, were hard to find among the tenants of this yellow-starred house ... many of them were anti-Semitic bigots (born Christians or converts of twenty years' standing) who would have nothing to do with Jews— that is, those Christians who had converted recently” (qtd. in Mesher 239). After being deported, Szep described the problems that this disunity created in camp: “Every minute some person would come up to introduce himself ... good heavens, now I would have to say hello to all these folks as long as I lived....There were many ordinary types, the louder ones, and seedy-looking characters as well, who delighted in addressing those richer and better dressed in casual, informal language” (qtd. in Mesher 239).

Many Jews felt alienated, but Jean Amerý was left even more isolated than most. Not only did he not belong to a Jewish community, he was an Austrian who spoke German. Even though Amerý rejected his connection to his German roots, he was still an outcast in camp because of his association with the collective identity of the perpetrators. He had abandoned his home among German-speakers, and yet could find no home among the Jews. In his writings he tried to answer the question of how much home one needed. As an answer he suggested:

The only thing that binds me positively to the majority of Jews in the world
is a solidarity that I have long since not had to enjoin myself as a duty: a solidarity with the state of Israel"... "Even if I don’t speak their language and their way of life could never be mine, I am inseparably bound to the people of this tragic land, who are alone, abandoned by the entire world... For me, solidarity with Israel means keeping faith with my dead comrades.” (Amerý, Humanism 19)

He kept faith with those who died before him by using the power of memory and of philosophical convictions to write about his experiences. Although his writings generally focused on himself or on just a few individuals, he sent an important message to his readers that the legacy of the Holocaust must not be forgotten, but rather that it needed to be integrated into the culture to prevent a future reoccurrence. Although his works are highly regarded, he considered himself to be a failure as a writer. He began to bear witness around the time when most people had heard enough, and as a result, Amerý felt they were greeted with too much indifference or ambivalence. During the twenty years prior to the publication of his first Holocaust work he had observed that, “the generation of the destroyers- the gas chamber constructors, those ready at any time to sign their name to anything, the generals, duty-bound to their Führer- is growing old with honor” (qtd. in Stille 362).

Amerý grew more and more resentful about the general indifference shown by the world and of the lack of a warm reception. He had learned to remember his past and his struggles, and he tried to trade blows with his audience and with the world just as he had in Auschwitz. This tactic had helped him to maintain human dignity there, but it failed in the world had did not experienced the breakdown in the moral structure first hand, it failed.
As a result of physical complications from his torture and malnutrition, Amerý suffered physically long after liberation. The memories of these experiences scarred him psychologically beyond remedy. In 1979 Jean Amerý committed suicide. Perhaps, however, this act should not be considered *selbstmord*, but rather an act of *freitod*. In “a final affirmation toward” what he called “the last path toward freedom,” Jean Amerý’s death could be viewed as a final, voluntary protest of humanity’s failure to reject prejudice and exercise reason in order to become free. To the end of his life, Jean Amerý maintained his commitment to the study of classical Enlightenment philosophy:

I profess loyalty to enlightenment, specifically to the *classical* enlightenment— as a *philosophia perennis* that contains all of its own correctives, so that it is an idle game dialectally to dissect it. I stand up for analytical reason and its language, which is logic. In spite of all that we have had to experience, I believe that even today, as in the days of the Encyclopedists, knowledge leads to recognition and recognition to morality. And I maintain that it was not Enlightenment that failed, as we have been assured ever since the first wave of the romantic counter-enlightenment, but rather those who were appointed its guardians. (qtd. in Goodheart 520)
Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never. (Wiesel, Trilogy 43)

The above lines are a very well known quote from one of the most widely read books, *Night*, by probably the most recognized name in Holocaust literature: Elie Wiesel. Like Jean Amerý, Primo Levi, and many other Jewish survivors, Wiesel realized on a night like the one described above that “if by some miracle, I emerge alive, I will devote my life to testifying on behalf of those whose shadow will fall on mine forever and ever” (qtd. in Rosenfeld and Greenburg 202). Wiesel believed that as a witness he owed “nothing to anyone, but everything to the dead” (Wiesel, Kingdom 16). He continued: “I owe the dead my memory. I am duty-bound to serve as their emissary, transmitting the history of their disappearance, even if it disturbs, even if it brings pain. Not to do so would be to betray them, and thus myself” (16).

In addition to serving the memories of those who died, Wiesel also understood the value of writing about his memories, as both an attempt at being understood by those who were not there, and also as a means of reaching a personal understanding. And as was true for most survivors, including Levi and Amerý, Wiesel perceived the difficulties
of addressing an audience that could not conceive of such horrors, and he immediately recognized the obstacle that language presented.

In an essay titled "Why I Write," Wiesel addressed the issue of understanding and being understood. He confessed that he, personally, did not understand. Wiesel could not make sense of the unnecessary deaths of five million mothers and fathers, and he would never accept the senseless murder of over a million Jewish children. In an interview he stated: "To me, the whole event remains a question-mark. I still don't know how man could have chosen cruelty. I still don't know how God could have allowed him such choice. I still don't know why Jews kept silent. In fact, I know nothing" (Sherwin 298). He remarked that his purpose as a writer, therefore, was to "warn the reader" that they too will not understand. Most survivors felt a person had to have firsthand experience with the death and suffering and torture that they had experienced in order to fully comprehend, if possible, what occurred. "You will not understand. You will never understand," warned Wiesel. "You, who never lived under a sky of blood, will never know what it was like. Even if you read all the books ever written, even if you listen to all the testimonies ever given, you will remain on this side of the wall, you will view the agony and death of a people from afar, through the screen of a memory that is not your own" (qtd. in Rosenfeld and Greenberg 203-04).

In addition to the problem of comprehending the Holocaust, Wiesel immediately recognized the difficulties posed by using normal language to represent emotions and events that seemed incomprehensible. Wiesel discussed how he confronted the problem of language in his first and most famous autobiographical work Night. He explained that he
could begin to express the horrors he experienced “only in the night” (201). Night is a
time when the civilized go to their sheltered slumber while the beasts come out to feast
and to scavenge. Night is the only time that could come close to representing the loss of
humanity, the terror, and the inconceivable devastation present in his memories:

The language of night was not human; it was primitive, almost animal—hoarse shouting, screams, muffled moaning, savage howling, the sound of beating....A brute striking wildly, a body falling; an officer raises his arm and a whole community walks toward a common grave; a soldier shrugs his shoulders, and a thousand families are torn apart, to be reunited only by death. This is the concentration camp language. (Wiesel, Kingdom 15)

Elie Wiesel, Jean Amerý, and Primo Levi all shared similar memories of
devastation, loss, thirst, and fatigue. They all felt a need, at some point in their lives, to
bear witness. They all recognized the difficulties that language presented, and they all
experienced obstacles in their attempts to understand and to be understood. And although there are some general similarities among Levi, Amerý, and Wiesel, there are far more
differences in the lives and writings of these three Jewish survivors. Unlike Levi and Amerý who had little or no connection to their Jewish identity, Wiesel was deeply rooted in his Jewish heritage. He grew up in an Orthodox Jewish community in Eastern Europe, went to a Jewish day-school and, by the age of twelve, was quite knowledgeable about the traditions and religious beliefs of his people. These early religious experiences are reflected in the themes present in Wiesel’s writing and in the narrative style for which his work is known.

And although all three of these men survived the Holocaust, Wiesel did not
commit suicide. He has survived. He attributed his survival both during the Holocaust and
after liberation to his religious faith. While he was incarcerated he held firmly to the Jewish celebration of friendship as a means of building community, of strengthening personal conviction, and of ensuring human survival. In one of the final scenes in *Night*, during the death run, Wiesel was reminded of his father's important role as friend and community member. He recalled how his desire to be free from his earthly pain seemed overwhelming until the presence of his father reminded him of his strong bond:

Death wrapped itself around me till I was stifled. It stuck to me. I felt that I could touch it. The idea of dying, of no longer being, began to fascinate me. Not to exist any longer. Not to feel the horrible pains in my foot. Not to feel anything, neither weariness, nor cold, nor anything. To break the ranks, to let oneself slide to the edge of the road....My father's presence was the only thing that stopped me...He was running at my side, out of breath, at the end of his strength, at his wit's end. I had no right to let myself die. What would he do without me? I was his only support. (92-93)

Wiesel further attributed his survival to his religious connection and to the power of language. His faith shielded him in the camps from spiritual isolation, and it reminded him that the power of language could also protect him. The legend of the great Rabbi Hanania ben Teradyon, part of the liturgy of Yom Kippur, reminded persecuted Jews that “Our enemy may kill us but he is powerless against what we embody” (Wiesel, *Kingdom* 29). According to the legend, the rabbi was condemned to burn at the stake because he had been teaching the Torah in public. He was wrapped in the sacred scrolls and set on fire. His disciples asked him: “Master, what do you see?” He replied: “I see the parchment burning but the letters are floating in the air. For the letters cannot be destroyed; the enemy will always be rendered impotent by the power of language” (Wiesel, *Kingdom* 29). The power of language and the strength of religious conviction
protected Wiesel from giving up while imprisoned because they served as a constant reminder that what he embodied could not be destroyed, therefore he had nothing to fear.

After liberation, however, his religious teachings reminded him that language and memory could also destroy. As a writer bearing witness, Wiesel recognized the impotence of language. He felt that many survivors, including Amerý and Levi, committed suicide because they were frustrated by the limitation of language. He explained that: "Writers live because they write. Holocaust writers realize that their writing is not what they want it to be. Their disappointment is profound, metaphysical....Where language fails, what can be its substitute?" (qtd. in Cargas 161). He further felt that faith saved him from a fate that so many others bearing witness could not escape because he recognized that it was "dangerous to linger among the dead; they hold on to you, and you run the risk of speaking only to them" (qtd. in Rosenfeld and Greenberg 204).

Wiesel accepted the limitations of language and the power of memory by allowing his faith to guide and strengthen his convictions. His religious upbringing inspired him to study other periods in history and to explore the destinies of other people. It also taught him to question the existence of God and to contemplate his role as a stranger in the world. Wiesel's religion led him from a devoutly pious childhood, to an experience that caused him to reject his God, and finally to many years of introspection and reflection that rekindled his faith in love, life, and his faith in God. As a result Wiesel overcame similar frustrations that drove so many others to suicide and has been able to pursue a successful and fulfilling career.

A Hasidic legend tells us that the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov,
Master of the Good Name, also known as Besht, undertook an urgent and perilous mission. He wanted to hasten the coming of the Messiah....For having tried to meddle with history, the Besht was punished. He was banished along with his faithful servant to a distant island... The Master replied “I have forgotten everything.” And so they fell to weeping. Suddenly the Master turned to his servant and asked, “My friend, remind me of a prayer, any prayer.” “If only I could,” said the servant. “I too have forgotten everything ... except the alphabet”....And together the two exiled men began to recite, at first in whispers, then more loudly the Hebrew equivalent to the ABC’s, and each time more vigorously, until the Besht regained his memory....

I love this story ... most of all because it emphasizes the mystical power of memory. Without memory, our existence would be barren and opaque, like a prison cell into which no light penetrates, like a tomb which rejects the living. Memory saved the Besht, and if anything can, it is memory that will save humanity. For me, hope without memory is like memory without hope. (Wiesel, Kingdom 237-38)

These words were spoken by Elie Wiesel on December 10, 1986 in Oslo, Norway when he accepted the Nobel Prize for Peace. As is customary in his speeches and in his writing, he began with a story, which, generally speaking, is religious in nature, and concluded with thoughts about the power and necessity of memory. In his essays and stories, which are guided by his Jewish faith, he has enjoyed success both as a writer who focuses on his memories of the Holocaust and as a scholar who considers religious and philosophical issues pertinent to Judaism, freedom, and humanity. Since the publication in 1958 of Night, he has written over thirty works of fiction and non-fiction. His success has been overwhelming. In addition to the prestigious honor of receiving a Nobel Prize for Peace, Elie Wiesel has been rewarded with 118 honorary Ph.D.s over the last twenty-five years by universities and colleges in Europe and the United States, and has won several awards for his autobiographical and philosophical writings as well as for his commitment to for peace. In 1964, France awarded Wiesel the Prix Rivarol. That same
In the year he was awarded the *National Jewish Book Council Award* in America. For excellence in literature, Great Britain gave him the First *Annual Jewish Heritage Award* in 1966, and America honored him with the *Harry and Ethel Daroff Memorial Fiction Award of the Jewish Heritage*. In addition, he has received several medals of honor for his work toward racial equality, humanitarianism, and world peace.

Elie Wiesel is probably the most widely read Holocaust writer today. It is evident in his essays and stories that he accepted his role as a witness for life and that he used this role to overcome many obstacles. In his autobiographical and fictional stories, Wiesel shares the religious turmoil he experienced as a young, devout Jew who encountered pure evil. As a result of the inconceivably immoral events he endured and witnessed, Wiesel turned his back on God and, in the years following the war, he used his writing and his religious background as a means of grappling with the basic questions foremost on his mind as a Jew, questions concerning the existence of God and his role in society. He recalled an important lesson he learned as a young boy. According to a Rabbi from his hometown in Sighet: "One must always seek to know: one's role in society, one's place in history. It is one's duty to ask every day, 'Where am I in relation to God and to others?'" (Wiesel, *Kingdom* 136). His role as witness, the influence of Judaism, and the power of memory guided him in his search. In this Chapter I explore the role of religion in the life and writings of Elie Wiesel. Because his writings reflect a period in his own personal growth, I will begin with his childhood and incorporate a discussion of his works and how Judaism, with its characteristic style of story-telling, and the themes of silence, friendship, and the stranger, have profoundly affected his writing, his personal life, and his
readers for many years.

Eliezer Wiesel was born on September 30, 1928 in the town of Sighet located in the heart of the Carpathian mountains in northern Transylvania. He was the only son of Reb Shlomo and Sarah Wiesel who also had three daughters, Bea and Hilda, Elie’s two older sisters, and Tzipora, who was born when Elie was seven. The Jews in and around Sighet were very poor but very devout and traditional. At that time marriages between Jewish families were arranged, and religion, family, and community were the most important elements of daily life. Most worked as merchants, traders, craftsmen, or religious teachers. In her book *Witness for Life*, Ellen Stern described life in Wiesel’s childhood village: “Life centered around his family, his community, and the Holy Laws. Those who were poor helped the ones who had even less, but all shared one day in the week on which they felt rich” (5).

Elie’s family was wealthy enough to afford a part-time housekeeper to help his mother Sarah with the daily chores. He remembered his mother as being highly educated compared to other women in his region. She was one of the few girls who not only attended high school, but also graduated. Sarah was raised in such a strict and pious household that German books were forbidden because her father considered them to be too worldly and too distant from her Jewish beliefs. Because she was always very curious and stubborn, she secretly taught herself to read German and memorized whole sections of the most famous poems and works of Goethe and Schiller. Elie remembered his mother as being very beautiful, loving, and kind, and he regretted not having told her more often how much he loved her. In his second work, *Dawn*, Wiesel paid tribute to his mother in a
scene where the main character Elisha reminisces about his own mother:

I was very fond of my mother. Every evening, until I was nine or ten years old, she put me to sleep with lullabies or stories. There is a goat beside your bed, she used to tell me, a goat of gold. Everywhere you go in life the goat will guide and protect you. Even when you are grown up and very rich, when you know everything a man can know and possess all that he should possess, the goat will still be near you. (Wiesel, *Dawn* 176)

Her beautiful voice always remained in his memories.

In addition to her duties as a mother and housekeeper, Sarah helped her husband and two older daughters run the family-owned grocery store every day. In their store one could buy food, supplies, and all the wares usually found in a general store, and because such commodities were in great demand, Elie remembered his father spending long hours away from home. He generally left early in the morning and kept the store open until late at night. Shlomo did not return home until very late, because after closing the store he attended various meetings and served as a community council member. Shlomo was respected in the Jewish as well as in the Christian community. The townspeople admired his dependability and valued his opinions. Elie described his father as an “enlightened man who believed in man” (qtd. in Stern 10).

The one day during the week that young Elie always looked forward to was the Sabbath, which began at sunset on Friday and continued until sunset the following day. He fondly remembered the importance of community and family: “It was a pause from work, routine, and normal activity. Shabbat was a healing time, a time for love, for peace, for rest. All other days of the week led to it, and from it flowed the inspiration to face the days that came after it” (qtd. in Stern 6). Families prepared plenty of food to last through
the day of rest, and they even made extra for unexpected guests.

The Sabbath also reminded him of his Jewish roots. Sighet was located in the mountains that were once home to the sainted Israel Baal Shem Tov, the Jewish Master of the Good Name. On the Sabbath he recited his favorite saying of Baal Shem, “God sees, God watches. He is in every life, in everything. The world hinges on His will. It is He who decides how many times the leaf will turn in the dust before the wind blows it away” (qtd. in Stern 3). Elie recognized at a very early age the powerful role that memory played in Judaism. The legends of Baal Shem were themselves over two hundred years old. Elie spent many hours with his father learning the ancient language of Hebrew and studying the Talmud. During this time Elie was greatly influenced by his maternal grandfather, Dodye Feig, who lived seven kilometers from Sighet.

Even though Shlomo spent many hours teaching Elie Hebrew, his religious pursuits were most greatly influenced by his grandfather. He spent the majority of his lonely childhood reading and studying. Because his parents were so diligent and due to the poverty of the community, most of the Jewish children did not have toys. Elie played chess with his father during the Sabbath, but he spent most of his free time learning and contemplating what he had learned from his grandfather Dodye. According to his family, Dodye was a real Hasid, short for Hasidim, which comes from the Hebrew word for “grace” or “piety.” Dodye was known in the area as a great storyteller whose ancient religious stories always contained valuable lessons from which Jews could learn about the modern life of man. Elie never tired of hearing the same stories over and over. Ellen Stern described how he marveled at Dodye’s wit, his sense of timing, choice of words, and
the beauty of his songs:

The melodies were either joyous or sad, but always filled with meaning. In them Elie sensed the agitation and joy, the sorrows and sadness of being a Jew. The songs spoke of the Jew's savage love of justice, and the desire to be one with God. When he was a child, Elie only knew they were beautiful; later he understood that with his songs his grandfather had passed on to him the tradition of his ancestors. (qtd. in Stern 16)

Dodye's influence stirred Elie's passion for Judaism. Whenever his father Shlomo attended synagogue, Elie went with him, and whenever Dodye attended the Hasidic House of Prayer, Elie was sitting next to him, drinking in every word that was spoken. His grandfather gave him confidence: "he made him feel at home among the pious, chanting men in their long black coats. In the candlelit room, all were united in kinship, all were part of God in His sanctuary" (qtd. in Stern 12). Among this group of devout men, Elie was first exposed to the Hasidic celebration of friendship. To a Hasidic Master, friendship was equally as important as faith. The Masters met, not only to share in the celebration of their religious teachings, but also to share in friendship and community.

An important lesson Elie learned as a young man was "do not isolate yourself from your fellow man, but seek his affection, his love" (Wiesel, Kingdom 84). This explains why many of the characters in Wiesel's books felt so strongly about friendship. In The Town Beyond the Wall, published in 1964, the main character Michael finds salvation by saving the life of a friend. In this unselfish act of friendship Michael realized the value of life and his own existence. In addition, friendship was viewed as a haven in Wiesel's works. When thinking of his father in Night, Wiesel explained how his friendship with his father protected him from Nazi efforts to dehumanize and deprive him:
The technicians of death tried to deprive us of it. Everyone for himself, they told us. Forget your parents, your brothers, your past, or else you will perish. But what happened was the opposite. Those who lived only for themselves, only to feed themselves, ended up succumbing to the laws of death, while the others, those who knew whom to live for—a parent, a brother, a friend—managed to obey the laws of life ... how could I recall my friends of those days without mentioning the best, the most devoted, the most generous of them all—my father? I lived only for him. And by him. He needed me—and I him—to live one more day, one more hour. (Kingdom 83)

The influence of the Hasidic Masters and their wise teachings contributed to the beginning of young Elie Wiesel's religious journey. The basis of Jewish learning began with the memorization of the 613 commandments of the Torah, the five Books of Moses. This stage of learning is called the Mitzvot. These commandments have been used to guide the daily lives of Jews for hundreds of years. After completing of this task, Elie was introduced to the Oral Tradition which includes all of the rules of conduct developed after the Torah was written. These rules are found in the Mishna, which is a book of laws categorized into groups such as family life, holy matters, damages, etc. The Oral Tradition also includes the study of the Gemara, a book of commentaries of the Mishna.

Elie progressed so quickly that by the young age of ten he became the pupil of a strict teacher, Rebbe Selishter, who could guide his spiritual growth. During this time he became very devout and serious about his quest to become a great religious man. At one point in his life his parents were very worried that Elie might be sick, because he was so thin and pale. They did not know that he voluntarily fasted each Monday and Thursday. He felt that "self-denial" could help him attain the religious discipline he needed to become either a Rabbi or maybe even a Maggib, a wandering Jew who traveled from town to town
telling stories about Jewish legends and lore in an effort to pass on Jewish tradition (Stern 18). To Elie, his grandfather was like a Maggid.

Not totally satisfied with the progress he was making under the tutelage of Rebbe Selishter, early in 1941 at the age of twelve Elie asked to be introduced to a Hasidic Master who could instruct him in the Kabbala, the teachings and lore of Jewish mysticism. He had become obsessed with the religious questions that had been debated among Hasidic Masters for generations: When would persecution and suffering stop for the Jews? When would the world achieve peace? When would the Messiah appear to finally proclaim the kingdom of God? He strongly felt that he could only attempt to answer these questions if he studied under a Hasidic Master. His father told him he was too young to be accepted, but he refused to give up.

Elie decided not to wait for a Master to accept him, and he found his own Master, Moshe, who was the caretaker of the synagogue in Sighet. Together Elie and Moshe studied, talked, and discussed all the issues and questions burning in Elie’s heart. They spent many nights reading in the Zohar, the Book of Splendor, the most important and difficult text in the Kabbala. Outside of his immediate family, Mosha was the first friend that Elie ever had. In 1942, Elie Wiesel celebrated his Bar Mitzvah with his family and Mosha. Life seemed to be heading in the right direction. He was satisfied with the progress in his learning, and he was becoming more certain of who he was and was becoming because of his learning. The knowledge that he gained from the many discussions with Mosha later helped Elie to survive the Holocaust and to learn after the war that it was possible to live and love again.
In the late spring of 1944, however, all of the Jews in and around Sighet had to move into one of the two newly designated ghettos. This was the beginning of Elie’s long spiritual journey that led him away from his place in the world, away from his life, away from God, and back again. Interesting to note is that many Orthodox Jews, like those in Sighet, considered the ghetto a place of unity and community. Wiesel later remembers being afraid that Christians would beat him up or kidnap him: “To live in a Jewish world, a world where Christians would scarcely have any access, a protected world, ordered according to the laws of Sinai. It’s strange, but awakening in the ghetto comforted me” (Wiesel, Kingdom 138). This presents very different perceptions and reactions from Levi’s and Amery’s.

Judaism teaches the Jews about the genuineness of man, which can only be found within his own culture, traditions, and history. Wiesel learned in his studies of the Old Testament that Abraham and God agreed to the terms that made the Jewish people strangers. God told Abraham that the Jews were to be exiled to live as strangers in foreign lands with no home of their own. Abraham agreed to this fate because he recognized that all countries and communities need strangers in order to thrive and to grow:

Judaism teaches us ... that we don’t want to make Jews out of Christians; we want to make Jews out of Jews, and to help Christians to be better Christians. We want the stranger to offer us not what we already have—or whatever we may have given him—but that which he has and we don’t. We don’t want him to resemble us any more than we wish to resemble him. We look at him hoping to find his uniqueness, to understand that which makes him different—that which makes him a stranger. (Wiesel, Kingdom 62)
The only warning found in the Covenant cautioned the Jews never to become strangers to their past, to their collective identity. This happened to Jews who went too far into lands foreign to their heritage and familial identity. Modern Jews view Baruch Spinoza and Heinrich Heine as prime negative examples of this. Many Jews feared they could become estranged which demonstrates why so many survivors felt a need to remember, to bear witness.

It also explains why many Jews avoided assimilation when they were given the opportunity to belong to non-Jewish communities, and why they discouraged the conversion of Christians to Judaism. To the pious Jew, conversion is unnecessary because the stranger represented an essential component in any community. And many Jews had long since recognized that assimilation had other negative implications. To the Orthodox Jews assimilation meant that they were to be “disarmed, undressed, transformed ... he would be welcome to stay, but only after giving up his name, his past, his memories, his bonds with his own people” (Wiesel, Kingdom 60).

In the summer of 1944, however, Wiesel and the Jews of Sighet discovered that to the Nazis, the Jew was a stranger who was no longer welcome to assimilate because he was the “bearer of an evil omen, [and] could only undermine the established order. He had to be expelled. Or even killed” (Wiesel, Kingdom 60). The goal of the Nazis was to undermine any sense of community or belonging. The goal was to shame, to disfigure, and to destroy the Jews so that they would become strangers to each other, to themselves, and to their world. Elie discovered in the 1960s that his grandfather had been targeted for shame by the Nazis. While thumbing through an album of photographs taken near the
mass graves in the forest of Buchenwald, he found a photo of his old grandfather, Dodye, dressed in the clothing he had told Elie he was going to wear to meet the Messiah. He was on his knees and was surrounded by several SS officers who were cutting off his beard with their daggers. The Nazi goal was not just to kill, but to dehumanize and to humiliate. Elie sensed from the photograph, however, that the attempts to destroy Dodye's faith had failed. Wiesel felt that his grandfather and many other Jews went passively and almost in an uncanny orderly fashion to their deaths because they refused to succumb to the self-hate and the estrangement the Nazis tried to instill. The Nazis wanted to make these Jews look at themselves and at each other through the eyes of a stranger. This process began with the ghetto, continued with deportation, and was executed with full force in the camps.

Following deportation, Elie, his family, and the rest of the Jews left in the Sighet ghetto were transported to Auschwitz. Wiesel describes how the Nazis tried to ruin his faith by destroying his sense of community and making him a stranger to himself. First, he and his father were separated from the women in the family. Next, he was stripped of his personal possessions, shaved, and tattooed. He became A-7713, but because of his devotion to friendship with his father, he did not become estranged from himself. He remembers how vital it was to his survival that he and his father supported each other. He recalls a simple incident where his father advised him not to eat all of his bread at one time because tomorrow was another day. Not only was this act of sharing crucial to Wiesel's survival, but he was reminded by his father's advice that he still had the human ability to choose, to assert his individuality.
While incarcerated, Wiesel used the lessons of his Jewish faith to retain a grip on his identity. His knowledge of ancient legends reminded him of the power of language and memory. The mystics often spoke about the “exile of language” and how it was used again and again in an attempt to trick the Jews or to confuse them about their religious commitment. The “exile of language” refers to the “distance between words and what they mask. It signifies the tension between language and its subject” (Wiesel, Kingdom 31). The Nazis were certainly gifted in language usage, i.e. propaganda. Jews were never deported, they were “relocated.” Auschwitz was not a death camp, it was a “concentration camp,” and the “final solution” to the Jewish problem was “special treatment” for the Jews. SS officers called prisoners “things” or “pieces.” They were not human beings, they were objects, hence, the SS officers were not assassins, not killers, but rather sanitation specialists.

Wiesel used the Nazi language of night and fog in his own writing to re-create his experiences after the war. As was discussed earlier, the language of night was represented by language that characterized the primitive elements of the world, language that evoked images reminiscent of beasts that follow no moral code. The description of the events Wiesel witnessed using the language of night could only be interpreted as immoral and evil, there is no a grey area. The systematic torture, starvation, and gassing of over six million men, women, and children was immoral.

The language of fog, however, delved into situations with fuzzy boundaries of moral interpretation. Sometimes a similar event was judged completely differently depending on the circumstances. Wiesel explained that while in the camps, prisoners were
forced to watch the hangings of other prisoners. After watching the hanging of a resister who proudly proclaimed “Long live liberty! A curse upon Germany!,” Wiesel remembers that “the soup tasted excellent that night” (Night 69-70). But after the hanging of a young boy, he heard a man standing behind him ask: “Where is God now?” And I heard a voice within me answer him: ‘Where is he? Here he is— He is hanging here on the gallows....’ That night the soup tasted like corpses” (Night 72). The death of the man who was proud and fighting for a cause seemed to be just, based on Wiesel’s memories, but the death of the small boy served only one purpose: It was another attempt by the Nazis to break down the prisoners’ faith. Wiesel uses language to differentiate between events so that the proud death of the resister seems more justifiable and rekindled his faith in the goodness of man, whereas the death of the small boy, was immoral and tested his religious resolve.

He further drew upon his religion and his memory to portray the horror he felt as he watched fathers and sons turning their backs on their commitment to each other out of sheer desperation:

Rabbi Eliahou ... had lost his son in the crowd. He had looked in vain among the dying. For three years they had stuck together. Always near each other, for suffering, for blows, for the ration of bread, for prayer....Then I remembered something else: his son had seen him losing ground [in the death marches], limping, staggering back to the rear of the column. He had seen him. And he continued to run on in front. He had felt that his father was growing weak, that the end was near and had sought this separation in order to get rid of this burden, to free himself from an encumbrance which could lessen his own chances for survival. (Night 96-7)

Later in the story, Wiesel described how the Rabbi found his son among a pile of dead
corpse. The son abandoned his friendship and perished, but the Rabbi held on to his communal ties and survived.

Wiesel demonstrates the importance of community and friendship for survival, and he portrays the guilt many felt when they abandoned this commitment, even if only briefly. He and his father had survived the horrors of Auschwitz together and were made to evacuate camp toward the end of the war with the rest of the prisoners. After several days of running and hunger and exhaustion and eminent death, Wiesel awoke from a short rest to find that his father was not with him. He went to look for him, “but at the same moment this thought came into my mind: ‘Don’t let me find him! If only I could get rid of this dead weight, so that I could use all my strength to struggle for my own survival, and only worry about myself.’ Immediately I felt ashamed of myself, ashamed forever” (Night 111).

By the end of the war Wiesel was alone, tired, and spiritually estranged. On April 11, 1945 he was liberated from Buchenwald. But he was not overjoyed. He felt guilty that his father had died. They both could have stayed at the infirmary at Auschwitz instead of going on the death march that killed his father, but they thought at the time that the prisoners in the infirmary were certainly going to be shot. A few days after liberation he learned that those prisoners were liberated. He described his feelings in an essay called “Making the Ghosts Speak:”

I felt like a stranger. I had lost my faith, and thus, my sense of belonging and orientation. My faith in life was covered with ashes; my faith in humanity was laughable; my faith in God was shaken. Things and words had lost their meaning. an image of the Kabbala described the state of my soul at that time: all of creation had moved from its center in order to exile
itself. Whom was I to lean on? What was I to cling to? I was looking for myself, I was fleeing from myself, and always there was this taste of failure, this feeling of defeat inside me. (Kingdom 142)

Following liberation Wiesel began a period of self-imposed silence that lasted for many years. He chose silence for many reasons. He explained that “after the liberation, illusions shaped our hopes. We were convinced that a new world would be built upon the ruins of Europe. A new civilization was to see the light. No more wars, no more hate, no more intolerance, no more fanaticism anywhere. And all this because the witnesses would speak. And speak they did, to no avail” (Kingdom 20-1). He recognized that the Nazis had counted on the world’s unwillingness to believe such atrocities were possible, and after a short time they would forget and move on, so he had to assume his role as witness through silence. Wiesel felt there was a “conspiracy of silence” against the testimonies of survivors. In an article entitled, “The Authority of Silence in Elie Wiesel’s Art,” Terrence Des Pres described this conspiracy: “Silence is born of terror and sustained by the knowledge that the truth of Auschwitz can never be communicated, or that in any case a guilt-ridden world prefers to ignore this kind of truth” (qtd. in Rosenfeld and Greenberg 200). Only after years of silence and quiet contemplation could Wiesel discover the “perils and power” of the written word (201).

Another reason for his period of silence was religious. Although Wiesel questioned his faith as a result of his incarceration, he did not abandon it. He turned his back on God and became silent while in the camp because he could not comprehend the possibility of God’s existence in the presence of the pure evil he witnessed. He learned
many years before while studying the Zohar that “When Israel is in exile, so is the word.” And as long as that is true “the word has deserted the meaning it was intended to convey” (Kingdom 14). He also realized that only in the absence of God and the power of His words could His presence most strongly be felt. Wiesel believed that the value of his memories could be measured by the weight of its silence.

Through silence he assumed the role of blasphemer. This was traditional in the Jewish faith following a devastating event. As a blasphemer he engaged in a one-sided quarrel with God by refusing to celebrate language, by remaining silent. It is not considered by Jews to be the rejection of God, but a disappointment inspired by love and sympathy for God. In his book The Gates of the Forest, published in 1964, Wiesel explored this blasphemer role and, in the process, his relationship with God:

You are blaspheming, he repeated gently, as if he were envious, as if he would have liked to blaspheme as well. God’s victory, my son, lies in man’s inability to reject Him. You think you’re cursing Him, but your curse is praise; you think you’re fighting Him, but all you do is to open yourself to Him; you think you’re crying out your hatred and rebellion, but all you’re doing is telling Him how much you need His support and forgiveness. (33)

He ended his vow of silence in 1955 and began to bear witness because he felt it was time to make his silence speak, but it had taken ten years of quiet contemplation before Wiesel wrote his first work.

At the end of the war Elie Wiesel moved to Paris and avoided all contact with people. He felt guilty for having survived and was ashamed of humanity. He wanted to live completely isolated from the rest of the world, but he soon became restless. He had
no job. He had no community. He needed to re-build. After a few months, Wiesel registered at the University at Sorbonne. During this time he studied philosophy, psychology, and literature—anything that would help him understand what he witnessed. After several weeks, he began to attend synagogue again.

A turning point in his religious reaffirmation occurred one night when Wiesel encountered the man who became his next Master. He described this wandering Jew in Legends of Our Time: "Always dirty, hairy, he looked like a hobo turned clown, or a clown playing hobo. He wore a tiny hat, on top of his immense round bloated head; his glasses, with their thick, dirty lenses, blurred his vision. Anyone encountering him on the street would step out of his way with distaste" (qtd. in Stern 118). That night he tried to find the wandering Jew, but failed. He looked for him for weeks, but to no avail. Finally, after several weeks they met on a train. For the next three years Wiesel and Rav Mordecai Shushani met twice a week to study and to share. Wiesel had re-established a friendship.

With the development of this friendship came Wiesel's willingness to live again as a member of the Jewish and world community. The beginning of Wiesel's career as peace advocate and writer took place in 1949 when he got a job working as the Paris correspondent for an Israeli Newspaper called the Yediot Aharonot. Because this job took him to Palestine, he decided that he could no longer be silent about his memories. It was time for him to tell his stories. He had contemplated God's role and understood his own place in the world. He also felt that the world's guilt needed to be acknowledged openly. It was time to make Auschwitz part of the general consciousness of the world in order to preserve humanity. He also felt it was time to bear witness so that he did not betray the
memories, traditions, and histories of those who had gone before him. With the publication of Night, his public vow of silence was broken.

In 1956, shortly before the publication of his first work Night in France, Wiesel was sent to New York to cover the United Nations General Assembly for his newspaper. During this time he tried to publish his book in America, but no publisher accepted his manuscript. Publishers told him that the Holocaust was not suitable subject matter for an American audience. He received several letters like this one: “Beautifully written, but the story is too sad to appeal to our readers. We are herewith returning your manuscript” (qtd. in Stern 135). Following the success of Night in France, Wiesel finally received word that Mr. Arthur Wang of Hill & Wang wanted to publish his book. Night has since become one of the most widely read works of Holocaust literature.

Each essay, each story, and each novel written by Wiesel represented a stage in his personal growth. During Wiesel’s first summer in New York, he was struck by a taxi and severely injured. He remembered someone standing above him telling the medical technicians that he was not going to make it. As a result of his experiences, he wrote his third book, The Accident, which was published in 1960. While in the hospital he wondered if subconsciously he had wanted to die and consequently walked in front of the vehicle so that he could free himself from his earthly bondage. He was not afraid of death. One day in the hospital Elie considered his doctor’s misconceptions about death: “Death is not my enemy. If he doesn’t know that, he knows nothing. Or at least he doesn’t know everything. He has seen me come back to life, but he doesn’t know what I think of life and death” (Accident 221).
Wiesel also spent a great deal of time in the hospital questioning the relationship between God and man. He remembered a story his grandmother had told him as a child. Following a discussion about who keeps dead souls warm in their graves, young Elie was surprised to learn that God keeps every soul warm: "I remember that then a strange sadness came upon me. I felt pity for God. I thought: he is more unhappy than man, who dies only once, who is buried in only one grave...God is buried alive! I would have preferred to reverse the roles, to think that God is mortal and man not" (Accident 230). The relationship between God and man was one he continually pondered.

In 1962 Wiesel returned to Germany for the first time since 1945. He was at once struck by the general self-satisfaction of the citizens he encountered. Germany was economically successful and had again earned its status as a world power. He was initially disappointed that the Holocaust victims felt shame and a need to remember, but there was little guilt and a resistance to memory among the citizens whose nation had inflicted the pain. But he soon realized that he no longer experienced any hatred toward the young people of Germany. There was, in his opinion, no need for the burden of memory to force the German collective to feel guilt and responsibility. In an interview about Israel, he used the Holocaust to substantiate his claim:

The Holocaust teaches nothing. I object to Israeli politicians when they claim that ‘Israel is the answer to the Holocaust.’ It is not ... I refuse to give children in tomorrow’s Israel such a burden, such guilt. I do not want them to think: If we are free and independent, it is because of the Holocaust. This would mean being, in a way, responsible for the past. (Sherwin 287)

As a result of this visit to Germany, Wiesel wrote The Town Beyond the Wall
published in 1964. It is the story of a young, disillusioned Jew named Michael who
returned to his hometown following the war in order to try to understand the people who
aided in the destruction of the Jews in his town. He was haunted by the memory of a
"face in the window." It was the face of a neighbor, a fellow human being who did not
resist, but just watched. But just as Wiesel forgave the Germans and chose to live, so did
the main character Michael. As mentioned earlier, Michael saved a friend and found peace
and salvation.

The visit to Germany was a profoundly important journey, but not as significant in
the life of Wiesel as was his 1964 journey back to Sighet. He intentionally returned to
Sighet in the middle of the night so that he could walk through the empty streets and try to
remember the way it had looked when he was fourteen. Everything looked as it had all
those years ago, except that other families, strangers, were living in the Jewish homes, in
his home. The following day he tried to find a familiar Jewish face, but could not. He
visited an old neighbor, but the neighbor did not recognize him. Wiesel even visited his
schoolteacher, but she could not put a name to his face. It was as if he had never
belonged to this community. To be certain that it really was Sighet, he visited the
cemetery. It was as he remembered. He admitted later that his "journey to the source of
all events had been merely a journey to nothingness" (qtd. in Stern 148).

Memory played a significant role in the essays and works that followed Wiesel's
visit home. He called this period in his writing a "protest against history." It expressed his
intention to remember all of the people and events that shaped his life and his philosophy
about man and faith (qtd. in Stern 153). Wiesel's stories almost always contain a Hasid, a
child, an old man, a beggar, and a madman. He explained the reason for this: “They are all part of my inner landscape. The reason why? Pursued and persecuted by the killers, I offer them shelter. The enemy wanted to create a society purged of their presence, and I have brought some of them back. The world denied them, repudiated them, so let them live at least within the feverish dreams of my characters. It is for them that I write” (Wiesel, Kingdom 20).

One of the most significant post-war events in the life of Elie Wiesel took place in 1969 with his marriage to Marion Erster Rose. This important event marked not only an ultimate act of friendship, it more importantly reaffirmed Wiesel’s hope in humanity. He expressed this hope in A Beggar in Jerusalem, published in 1970. In Jewish folk tradition, a beggar is a magic figure who can perceive truths that are incomprehensible to all others. In Wiesel’s story beggars gathered in Jerusalem at the Jerusalem wall because they believed that here in God’s presence the past and the present merged and that all questions became perfectly clear. David, a soldier with the Israeli army, sat with a group of beggars hoping to find out what had happened to his friend Katriel. He learned that his friend was dead, but, more importantly, he realized that he himself was alive. The story demonstrates the survivability of Judaism. Despite all efforts to destroy it, it survives through memory.

This realization continued to affect the life of Elie Wiesel. On June 6, 1972, Elie and Marion Wiesel brought a son into the world. Elie described the birth as an “act of supreme defiance” (qtd. in Stern 175). The birth of a Jewish child proclaimed hope for the future. When Shlomo Elisha Wiesel was circumcised and named, Elie remembered the
Rabbi announcing that “a name has returned” (175).

Elie Wiesel wrote out of love for those who influenced him with their knowledge and memory: “The stories that I most like to tell are the one I heard from my grandfather. I owe him my love of tradition, my passion for the Jewish people and its unfortunate children. And he, who never read a novel, is a presence in my novels. My old men often bear his features, sing the way he did and, like him, disarm melancholy with the magic of words” (Wiesel, Jew 80). Wiesel wrote out of love for his God, because the use of language is the celebration of God’s message. And most notably, given his experiences with the pure evil of which man is capable, he wrote out of love for humanity: “because Auschwitz symbolizes the culmination of violence, hatred, and death, it is our duty to fight violence, hatred, and death. Because Auschwitz deprives us of hope and love to the point of making us lose the desire to live, we must affirm hope and love in the name of life itself which will carry us through” (Wiesel, Night 4).
Some Final Thoughts Exploring Common German Reactions

In the previous chapters I explored the power of memory from a Jewish perspective. Major themes illustrated the importance of recording past experiences, the difficulties involved with creating Holocaust literature, and the influence that a collective identity had on Jewish writings. I discussed the need for Jewish survivors to bear witness to past experiences and explored the various obstacles faced by assimilated Jews who had little or no connection to their Jewish identity. In these writings authors explored themes such as what it meant to be a survivor of the Holocaust by illustrating the struggle to understand Judaism, and the difficulty of bearing witness to an unfamiliar tradition. I also addressed the religious and existential issues that Orthodox Jews faced following the atrocities. The major issues in these works examined God’s role during the Holocaust and illustrated the Orthodox Jews’ struggle to regain faith and a belief in the goodness of man.

In order to have a basis for comparing themes in Jewish and German literature and the difficulties involved with memory, the following discussion focuses on a number of common German responses to the Holocaust. Just as much Jewish literature concentrated on the themes of guilt, (breaking) silence, and struggling to confront the past, so too did German literature, but for a number of different reasons as Thomas Mann points out:

Some have survived the pitiable remnants of the multitudes of innocent men, women, and children who were sent to German concentration camps...It is a solace to know that these few have been wrested from the power of their tormentors and returned to the laws of humanity For the German, however, quite different emotions are mingled with this feeling of relief. (T. Mann 535)
German citizens were relieved that the long war had come to an end. Germans could finally rebuild their communities and resume their lives. Many had no homes because allied bombs had destroyed their communities, and others had lost family members in the air-based attacks. However, the end of the war also signaled a very bitter realization. They could no longer pretend they did not know where all of their Jewish neighbors had gone. In the weeks following liberation, Allied forces took many German citizens to concentration camps like Dachau. The Allies knew that the reports describing the atrocities were too horrible to believe. Germans needed to see for themselves that the Holocaust really had happened so that each time they encountered a friend, relative, or neighbor who had been a party member, or who had turned in a Jewish neighbor, or who had participated in other anti-Semitic activities, they would be reminded that the deaths of six million innocent Jewish victims and five million other human beings had been carried out by their nation, their friends, maybe even indirectly by them. Hitler's great promise to make Germany a proud nation again had been engulfed in a black cloud of shame and humiliation.

The disgrace was too much to bear, and the atrocities were too hard to believe. As a result, many Germans became silent. The Holocaust was over, and there was nothing that could be done about it. One way to cope with the guilt was to suppress the memories, forget that it ever happened, and begin a new life. In an interview with the author Ursula Hegi, Katharina, a German woman from the city of Heidelberg, stated that "the Holocaust was unspeakable, and the silence—eventually —spoke much louder than the words would have" (Hegi 13). Breaking the silence and confronting the past became
an important theme in German literature known as *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.

This term has been defined and interpreted to mean many things. Scholars have described it as a need to confront the past, or to come to terms with the past. It is difficult to remember a traumatic event. Many Jews who suffered blocked their memory in order to avoid renewing or re-experiencing their pain. After discovering the extent of the destruction inflicted on the Jews, many Germans suppressed their memory in an attempt to diminish personal responsibility or guilt, or to lessen the magnitude of the destruction. Noteworthy is that some Holocaust survivors initially did not anticipate that confronting the past would be become an issue. Elie Wiesel recalls for example: “I had anticipated an existential change, a total mutation. I thought that, somehow, after the event, the human condition would be different to a degree that we would all paradoxically benefit from its lessons” (qtd. in Caras 158). It is, however, clear from previous chapters and from the amount of literature dealing with the importance of coming to terms with the past, that writers have had to urge citizens to even confront the past.

Rather than a coming to terms with the past, some scholars have argued that *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* could be defined as “mastering the past.”\(^4\) These interpretations, however, imply two very different and equally problematic definitions. On the one hand, “Mastering” the past assumes that everyone in Germany had a complete understanding of the events that took place. The problem is that very few Germans fully

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\(^4\) See, for example, “Autobiographical Writing as *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (Mastering the Past) by Helmut Peitsch or “The Jewish Question in the German Question” by Anson Rabinbach who discuss this issue.
comprehended what had taken place during the Holocaust, and it is very difficult to confront the past if one’s personal memories are incomplete. On the other hand, there is the problem of mastering the events that did take place. This does not undo what happened. It could be argued that this interpretation best describes efforts made by some Germans to repress or control memory in an effort to relativize history or to lessen the severity of the atrocities. Many scholars have argued that a lack of personal recollection or an unwillingness to remember makes comprehending the events almost impossible.

Some scholars maintain that comprehending the Holocaust involves memory in a different way. In her book entitled *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt explains: “Comprehension does not mean denying the outrageous....It means examining and bearing consciously the burden which our century has placed on us—neither denying its existence nor submitting weekly to its weight” (qtd. in Halperin 16). Many German writers recognized the need to confront the horrors of the past just as a number of Jews had.

Jewish and German writers also shared the fear that their memories would be forgotten and their message would be ignored. In this concluding chapter I briefly discuss the lives and writings of Martin Walser and Günter Grass. I focus on prevalent themes and literary techniques that they used to confront an ambivalent audience. Walser’s writings address the German need to confront the past in order to recognize the dangers of competition, apathy, and the abuse of power fundamental to the success of Nazi Fascism. He believes the same danger is present in the capitalism responsible for the *Wirtschaftswunder*, the quick economic recovery in post-war Germany. Grass criticizes
the lack of resistance to the Nazi movement. He strongly feels that such an atrocity is a threat in a country whose citizens refuse to confront their past and who refuse to speak out against injustice. Memory and collective identity inspired many of the issues addressed in their socially critical works, just as the power of memory and past experience motivated the themes in Jewish writing.

The Influence of Personal Experiences on Themes Related to Vergangenheitsbewältigung in the Writings of Martin Walser and Günter Grass

Martin Walser was born March 27, 1927 in the village of Wasserburg near Lake Constance. His parents, Martin and Augusta Schmid Walser, operated a small coal and wood business and owned an inn that catered mostly to the local community. It was at the family inn that young Martin had his first experiences with theater and the performing arts. He recalls spending several evenings as a child watching a variety of traveling companies perform their acts on the family stage. These and other early childhood experiences influenced his later social and political views.

Walser’s parents were hard-working and provided well for their family, but they were not highly regarded in the community. Augusta, a devout Catholic, was so strict and God-fearing in an archaic sense that Martin sometimes felt like he had been raised in the Middle Ages. Her antiquated religious beliefs often bewildered him and left him feeling isolated from the Catholic community, but she was not the cause of the public’s disapproval of the family; the Walsers were not respected because of Martin’s father. He
lacked the religious views and social values expected of a member of a small, conservative southern German town like Wasserburg. Instead of taking over the family inn, Martin's father would have preferred teaching and reading literature. In his spare time, he studied theology and contemplated a variety of general theological issues. He was especially fascinated by Indian philosophy, but was not interested in the dogmatic tendencies of Catholicism.

Walser did not discover his father's academic interests until after his death in 1938. It was then that he found manuscripts hand-written by his father and boxes of books filled with classic works of poetry and fiction by great German poets such as Schiller, Goethe, and Hölderlin. Thinking back on his early years, Walser recalled hearing again and again from community members how higher education could betray a healthy community and was to blame for class superiority and community dissension. They often remarked that the more a person studied, the more arrogant and "superior" he became. Only after his father's death and the discovery of his secret intellectual pursuits did these comments take their full effect.

The villagers' attitudes compelled Walser to pay close attention to economic and societal differences in the people he encountered, and these observations, especially during the years following his adolescence, influenced the major themes and tendencies in his writing. From 1938-43 Walser attended Gymnasium in Lindau near his home town. After the war broke out in 1939, he volunteered to work at an anti-aircraft station when he was not in school or at the inn. Later, he decided he wanted to become an officer in Hitler's army and joined the Marine-Hitler-Jugend before being recruited for military duty as an
alpine scout. Walser soon gave up the idea of pursuing officer's status and deserted his company with four other scouts before being captured in 1945 by American troops near Garmisch-Partenkirchen in southern Germany.

Walser spent his brief imprisonment working for the Americans in the library of Radio Munich, the Third Reich's former main broadcasting station. He used his time in the library to read the great works of poetry and literature that he had grown to love. Particularly fascinating to him were the works of Heinrich Heine with their socially critical irony and wit. Heine's influence later almost cost Walser his diploma, but it inspired him not to be afraid to speak critically. After his release from P O W. camp, he returned to his Gymnasium and in 1946 took his Abitur, the college entrance examination. When he received his diploma, he read a poem about his school experiences that included critical commentary about how his generation was privileged to receive instruction about war, about the corruption of power, and about mass destruction of people and homeland.

After graduation, Walser enrolled at the College of Theology and Philosophy in Regensburg. There were not many books in the library, and there were very few courses offered, but, he was content with his involvement in the student theater. After three semesters in Regensburg, Walser transferred to Tübingen University where he became quite proficient in theatrical production working as an actor, a writer, and even as a production assistant. In 1948, however, his focus changed.

The first two years of Walser's education were financed by his mother. But after the currency reform on June 20, 1948, German currency was devalued, and as a result his mother could no longer support him, and he was forced to earn his own living. It did not
take long, however, for him to find work. In fact, his stage connections proved very useful. A university friend who was working for the South German Broadcasting System (SDR), Helmut Jedele, helped him get his first part-time writing job at the same radio station in Stuttgart. His experiences at SDR significantly influenced the characters and themes in his later writing.

Characters in Walser's works tend to possess personality traits similar to his own, but exaggerated to a dangerous extreme. Many of the characters in his plays are noticeably aware of their humble class origins, and most of the protagonists are bright, creative, witty, and driven. These qualities help them to earn promotion after promotion, resulting in the acquisition of more and more power. Walser's writings reflect his deep-seated hostility toward competition and capitalism. He felt that competition leads to the abuse of power, which stimulates the destructive force of capitalism. Competition is necessary for a capitalistic society to be successful, and power leads to its abuse and, ultimately, to catastrophe. He strongly believed that capitalism is especially dangerous in a society like post-war Germany because the citizens have not had enough time to heal from the social and cultural devastation caused by Hitler's abuse of authority. Economic success, he suggested, could be mistaken as a justification to forget the horrors of the past and as an invitation to celebrate a new tradition of economic strength.

Walser recognized the power of competition in 1949 when he started working as an assistant in the entertainment division for the SDR. He was aware that his status shifted with each promotion. He was competitive, worked hard, and achieved success, and by the time Walser left the radio station in December of 1956, he had worked as a
reporter, an interviewer, an editorial writer, as head of the political division, and as a lead writer of radio plays, seven of which aired between 1952-1956. After each promotion he gained more power as far as authority and connections were concerned, but in contrast to his fictional characters, he did not abuse it. He recognized that he could use his power as a writer to confront and to influence his audience.

For a writer there is no greater recognition of talent than a receptive audience. It was a great accomplishment to have seven successful productions, but the turning point in his writing career occurred in 1955 when his story "Templones Ende" won first prize at a Gruppe 47 meeting. After this 1955 success, he took the next steps to insure his influence as a writer. In December 1956 he moved to Friedrichshaven with his wife and four daughters and dedicated himself completely to his writing. His first novel *Ehen in Philippsburg* (1957), introduces a narrative style distinctly his own. The protagonist Hans Beumann, possesses trademark characteristics: he is smart, clever, from humble origins, and eager to compete for a position of power, which ultimately leads to his destruction. He easily recognizes how the capitalistic system in Philippsburg works, and he uses his talent, wit, and competitive nature to maneuver himself from a destitute and weak position to one of high status. Walser then demonstrates how Beumann’s abuse of power leads to loss of self-respect and alienation from himself.

Walser generally uses a character’s loss of identity to make socially critical comments about German society. Characters like Beumann lose touch with their emotions and consequently vacillate from one extreme to another. In his quest for status and power, Beumann shifts from one political or social extreme to another. For example, he
alternates between the tender, genuine love of his fiancé, Anne, and that of his cold and self-satisfied mistress. In addition, Walser's protagonists are often portrayed shifting from allegiance to their origins to feeling a societally driven compulsion to deny them.

Walser's use of interior monologue allows the reader to access the subliminal thoughts and wishes of the characters or to perceive what is occurring in their consciousness. In addition to the traditional dialogue and description of external events and developments, interior monologue fills in the gaps. Because readers have access to thoughts and desires that normally would be concealed, there is no longer any need to question what the characters really feel or believe. As a result, Walser's first novel was critically acclaimed and described as being a realistic portrayal of public life. He used this literary device to present what he perceived to be happening in Germany during the 1950s.

He discovered during a trip to the United States in 1958, however, that the power of capitalism was not only flourishing in Germany. During the summer of that year, Walser participated in the Harvard International Seminar organized by Henry Kissinger. While he was there, he noticed how influential and powerful advertising was. As a result of his experiences in the United States, Walser decided to begin a new writing project with which he entered the political scene. This turned out to be a trilogy (1960-73) about a traveling salesman, Anselm Kristlein. In the first book Halbzeit he uses his intelligence, ambition, and opportunistic nature in order to progress from struggling for a meager existence to leading a successful life with a position of status, when he becomes an advertising expert. In this first book of his trilogy, Walser examines how social pressure and social behavior, combined with competitive pressure, molds and controls a person's
actions and emotions.

Before publishing the second book of his trilogy, Walser put his creative energy to work on a series of significant plays that continued the Walser tradition of portraying the abusive nature of capitalism and of confronting Germany’s past. In 1962 he published the play *Eiche und Angorra* that not only addresses the abuse of power and the importance of memory, but makes direct accusations about the way the Germans have suppressed their memory, repressed their guilt about the Holocaust, and have replaced their shame with the *Wirtschaftswunder*, the miracle of economic recovery resulting from normalization and capitalism in the 1950s.

In many of his plays, including *Eiche und Angorra*, Walser explores the human psyche and the mental processing that relates to submission and repression. In these plays, he explores how relatively easy it is for a fascist personality to use his talents and drive for power to achieve a position of authority. Walser demonstrates how dominant individuals who possess absolute power can wield their influence over a group of more submissive characters. In *Eiche und Angorra*, he openly addresses the abuses of Nazi power, the willing submission of citizens, and the horrors of the Holocaust. With his portrayal of Alois Grubel, a communist, who characterizes the Jewish position, Walser confronts Germans with a number of issues that most would rather have forgotten.

The play begins in 1945 in the small town of Brezgenburg in the Schwarzwald. At a town gathering, the citizens are informed that the French are about to invade and that they must defend their home. The protagonist of the story, Alois, also volunteers to fight. He assures the townspeople that he is no longer a communist, but a loyal Nazi; he has
been “cured”-- he had been in prison during the war for being a communist. As part of his “cure,” Alois was castrated in a medical experiment and miraculously emerged at the end of the war a bonafide Nazi who spoke the jargon and who sang the songs. The townspeople agreed to allow him to fight.

Walser portrays Alois as a communist rather than a Jew because critics say many German citizens and soldiers during the war rationalized the brutalities committed against Jewish citizens because they believed Hitler’s claim that the Germans were at war with the Jews who were in control of communist Russia. Acts of brutality against European Jews, it was claimed, were thus only in response to Jewish-led Russian atrocities perpetrated in Turkey and in their gulags. And because the Nazi power structure was such that absolute authority rested on one man and decreased through the ranks, the lower-level officers in the SS and the police did not feel responsibility for their actions. Walser is critical of the German tendency of dismissing personal responsibility by shifting blame to Hitler.

Historical documentation to support these claims appears in the book *The Good Old Days: The Holocaust as Seen by its Perpetrators and Bystanders*. Nazi police officer Kurt Möbius made the following statement:

In addition Hauptsturmführer Lange said to us that the orders to exterminate the Jews had been issued by Hitler and Himmler. We had been drilled in such a way that we viewed all orders issued by head of state as lawful and correct. We police went by the phrase ‘Whatever serves the state is right, whatever harms the state is wrong.’ I would also like to say that it never even entered my head that these orders could be wrong. Although I am aware that it is the duty of the police to protect the innocent, I was however at that time convinced that the Jewish people were not innocent but guilty. I believed all the propaganda that Jews were criminals and subhuman and that they were the cause of Germany’s decline after the First World War. (qtd. in Trevor-Roper 220)
Walser is also critical of the German impulse to blame the victim for events that reflect poorly on national pride. In *Eiche und Angorra* the citizens cannot defeat the French troops and surrender. The town declares its surrender by raising a white rabbit hide that had been sold to community members by Alois. The defeat is subsequently blamed on Alois's communist past, and he tries to learn anew from the community which political beliefs are acceptable. Five years later he gives a speech to the community to commemorate Hitler's birthday, and he expresses doubt as to whether he ever was a victim during the war.

With this scene Walser shows how weak and impressionable the protagonist is. Alois's political views are easily shaped by the dominant opinions held in the community. He, however, does not have the ability to discern which or when views should be proclaimed publicly or be suppressed. In fact, he is always out of step with the ever-changing idiosyncratic shifts. Alois thought he could be part of the community by voicing opinions that he had heard around him, but after his speech he is sent to an asylum to receive re-education for falling back on Nazi ideologies that were no longer suitable. In an essay entitled "The Discourse of Antagonist Memories in Germany," Frank Stern discusses how personal and societal views of the Holocaust could be treated in an ambiguous manner by some Germans:

Most images of Jews reflect ambiguous patterns of thought and of emotions based on the cultural and religious heritage of western civilization. Even more importantly, they are influenced by the given cultural and social context. Concerning Jews, it is not always important what one believes but what one is led to believe and what one is expected to voice in public according to widely held popular attitudes and normative social expectations. (46)
Walser uses his writing to be critical of Germans who have not learned from the horrors of the past. He maintains that they have merely learned to suppress their beliefs, but still possess the views promoted by Naziism. Because of this tendency, the memories of such citizens, based on ill-founded reasoning, cannot be considered anything more than fantasy. He criticizes how many Germans have tried to rid themselves of any reminders of the past. People avoided talking about events that dealt with mistreatment of Jewish neighbors. Many repressed their memories of the camps, the ghettos, or the cattle cars hoping that with time these images would fade and they could then be forgotten. Walser recognized the importance of confronting Germans about their selective memories. He demonstrates in *Eiche und Angorra* how difficult it is for citizens to forget the Holocaust and the Nazi past when there are living reminders, like Alois. This is portrayed especially poignantly in the final scene. In 1960 Alois desires to sing in a competition, but he is told by the community that he cannot participate until he gets rid of his foul-smelling rabbits. After he kills them he learns that the townspeople do not want him to sing in the competition after all because his castrato voice is a reminder of their suppressed memories. At the end of the play Alois expresses his frustration by nailing up the bloody skins of the dead rabbits, representative of the six million dead Jewish victims, so that the community can no longer avoid confronting the horrors of a past that they struggle to forget.

In his next major play *Der Schwarze Schwan* (1964), Walser explores another problematic issue dealing with memory. Based on personal observation, he again addresses ways in which Germans commonly avoided personal responsibility and thus excluded themselves from national guilt. Before discussing themes in the play, it is
important to recall what some common German tendencies were. Historical information corroborates that many of those directly involved with the brutalities inflicted on the Jews rationalized their actions, and likened them to incomparable acts in order to make them seem less inexcusable than they were. In this way they could convince themselves that they have no need to feel guilty. In a book called *Born Guilty: Children of Nazi Families*, one Egon recalls how his SS father dealt with his guilt:

> He was proud of his role [as a doctor] in the war to the very end. His favorite saying was that doctors protect and prolong the lives of people. Doctors who are nationalists do that, if need be even at the cost of the lives of others. That, he said, was the difference between a doctor who has political convictions and one who doesn’t....He did not think that all lives were equally valuable....He used to say that basically all people act the same, except that some actions are justified and others aren’t....In his eyes the German nation was an organism, a body, and as a doctor it was his duty to shield that body against sickness and disaster, to remove the diseased part and to conduct research to prepare this body for the future. That was his constant refrain. (qtd. in Sichrovsky 120-21)

Rationalizing is one method of avoiding guilt. Another way was evident repeatedly—each time a German claimed that there had been no other choice. Some followed orders passed down from above, from those whom they then held responsible for Germany’s fate. Others maintained that they only had had their family’s best interests in mind. The following statement by Maximillian Grabner, head of the Political Department during the Third Reich, shows how personal responsibility is denied and blame is shifted entirely to Hitler:

> To kill three million people is in my view the greatest crime of all. I only took part in this crime because there was nothing I could do to change anything. The blame for this crime lay with National Socialism. I myself was never National Socialist. Nevertheless, I still had to join the Party....I
am a Roman Catholic and today still believe in God. I believe there must be such a thing as divine justice as well as justice on earth. I only took part in the murder of some three million people out of consideration for my family. I was never an anti-Semite and would still claim today that every person has the right to life. (qtd. in Trevor-Roper 252)

Burying the truth or changing one’s identity was another common way of avoiding personal responsibility or experiencing guilt. A large number of SS officers and their families left Germany and changed their identities. Perhaps in a world where no one knows you or your history, there is no need to face a horrible past and the guilty could escape blame and shelter themselves from confrontations with personal guilt or shame. In essence, a family history could start over, and the collective history would only include memories essential to the establishment of a new, unblemished, guilt-free tradition. Most SS families left Germany to start a new life, but some stayed in Germany and attempted the same thing. Often children in these families do not know what their true family history is. In an interview, Monika, a young German girl, describes how she was raised to believe that her father was really her uncle Franz:

When I was thirteen my parents told me that my father’d been in the SS. For a long time after the war he lived under another name, probably quite unnecessarily so; he pretended to be my mother’s brother ... Today my father’s fears seem almost incomprehensible. On the one hand, I really don’t know what he did during the war, but on the other hand I can’t believe him when he says he hadn’t done anything. Because if that were so, why did he hide for so long after the war, why was he so afraid that he pretended to be the uncle of his own child...Everything was shoved under the rug, everything was hidden: the uniform in the basement, the photographs in the linen closet. To this day I don’t know of what or why he was afraid. (qtd. in Sichrovsky 101-02)

In Der Schwarze Schwan Walser explores the problem of national guilt, and he addresses
the struggles with which a young generation of Germans was faced during the 1960s. Because so many Germans who were adults during the war repressed their memories, many of those born at the end of the war or during the post-war years had little or no information about what had happened to the Jews and even less understanding about their parents’ roles in the atrocities.

In his play Walser depicts the struggles of a young boy after he learns about his father’s past. The protagonist, Rudi Goothein, found a letter stuffed between the pages of an old book. It was a certified letter postmarked 1942, addressed to a concentration camp administration office, and was signed for by Rudi’s father. Upon opening the letter, Rudi read detailed descriptions of the daily routine of a concentration camp, and he is shocked to learn that his father was not only an SS officer, but also an accomplice to the murder of numerous Jews. Rudi struggles with two problems. First, he is not sure how and if he should confront his father about the past. Second, he wonders if he would have done the same thing had he been in his father’s shoes. He becomes obsessed with the idea to the point that he can no longer function; he cannot go to school, he can no longer hold a normal conversation. Finally, he is convinced that, “Was ein Vater tut, das hätte der Sohn getan,” and, in an effort to convince his father to accept responsibility for his crimes, Rudi literally assumes his father’s role (qtd. in Fetz 91).

In an effort to help his son recover, Rudi’s father takes him to the institution where his friend Dr. Libere is working. Rudi, who thinks he must pay for crimes that his father committed, demands that his father accept responsibility for his actions. His father, however, is convinced that this is unnecessary because he served a three-year prison term
for crimes against humanity, which he felt was a just and adequate punishment. There is, in his opinion, no need for further introspection or guilt. His son cannot accept this.

Rudi resolves to settle the issue by speculating what he would have done had he been in his father’s shoes. In a desperate attempt to convince his father of his guilt, Rudi stages a play with him (Rudi) in the lead role of SS officer and with a number of mental patients playing the parts of the Jewish prisoners. Because he does not possess any real memories or factual knowledge of the concentration camp, he tries to imagine what it was like for his father and for Dr. Libere. By the end of his performance he cannot bear that his father refuses to acknowledge any guilt, and he shoots himself, perhaps in the hope of atoning for his father’s crimes.

In much the same way that Rudi tries to come to terms with his father’s past by putting himself in his father’s shoes, Walser uses his plays and novels to compel readers to examine their repressed memories and guilt. *Das Einhorn* (1966), the second book in his trilogy, is a socially critical novel that explores the power of memory with respect to self-identity and national identity. Noteworthy is that the opening scene takes place at a costume party. Walser often sets scenes at a party or a celebration where people gather to socialize, to forget the troubles of daily life, and to create new, positive memories and contacts. It is even more symbolic because at a costume party people put on masks and assume other identities. Anselm meets a Swiss publisher who commissions him to write a non-fiction book about love. Memory becomes the main focus of the story. In an effort to understand love, Anselm delves into his past experiences, but he gets confused between memory and fantasy, which reflects Walser’s belief that memories can be shaped or altered
making them unreliable. He also recognizes the difficulties many Germans have had when trying to work through their memories.

In his essay, "Auschwitz und kein Ende" (1989) he offers personal insights concerning the problem of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Walser asserts that it is not difficult for most people to objectively discuss the causes and outcomes of events from the distant past, because a personal distance can be maintained. It is not likely that a German reflecting on the devastation of the Thirty Years’ War will experience personal trepidation, but a single photograph taken of a concentration camp reminds Germans that this catastrophe occurred in their recent past and thus prompts feelings of guilt. This issue requires elaboration before further discussion of Walser’s essay. Frank Stern addresses the trend that resulted from such realizations as: “an ambiguous German historical consciousness is developing which promotes an emotional and intellectual distance from the Holocaust for the sake of a new German national state” and national identity (56).

This is true even of Germany today. During a 1992 exhibition in Berlin of World War II memorabilia, the Holocaust was barely addressed and the Jews were portrayed as exotic strangers. In 1995 several German officials meddled in the inauguration of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. expressing their fears that the museum could damage Germany’s image. The German government offered the museum millions of dollars in an attempt to convince museum officials to include an exhibit depicting post-war Germany. Rudolf Augstein, editor of *Der Spiegel*, commented that although Auschwitz belongs to German collective history, a new myth of German innocence is developing because “there is no way of speculating, that the young Germans,
who know Auschwitz only from their schoolbooks, may be forced to remember” (56).

Germans certainly want to be associated with a history and a society that is home to Goethe and to Schiller or with the classical works of composers such as Beethoven, but few want to be associated with the atrocities of the Holocaust. In an interview with Ursula Hegi in *Tearing the Silence*, Johanna recalls growing up in a household that repeatedly proclaimed “we did not know,” and believed the guilty were justly punished and there was, therefore, no need for them to consider collective guilt or responsibility. After seeing film footage of a camp liberation, however, Johanna was brought to the realization that some of these crimes were also committed by ordinary Germans and not just by those convicted of crimes: “If this can be done by human beings, it can be done by me” (Hegi 13).

Walser elaborates on this topic in “Auschwitz und kein Ende.” He feels that many Germans attempt to hide behind the weak notion that the individuals directly responsible for making decisions and giving orders were tried, convicted, and justly punished for their crimes against humanity. These individuals should feel guilty and responsible, those Germans claim, but the collective should not have to be responsible for the crimes committed during the Holocaust. Walser agrees that those directly linked to the atrocities should feel guilty for their actions and must be punished. However, he criticizes the tendency of those not directly involved to reject a need for personal responsibility. In the courtroom, only those found guilty were considered the perpetrators, and not the rest of the nation.

Shifting the burden of responsibility onto the actions of a small group of
individuals can help a nation and its citizens justify or legitimize a claim that has been made since the industrial revolution. According to Walser, the notion of being responsible only for one’s own actions can be linked to the principle of the division of labor and the birth of experts. An expert specializes in one area of a specific field, and is thus only accountable for his own work, his own findings, and his own input (Walser, Deutschland 25-26).

This ultimately led to what Walser labels a kind of “moral expert-lunacy.” Scientists, for example, developed the idea of producing weapons of mass destruction. Despite the question of morality involved in such policies, these experts were able to create such catastrophic devices completely free of guilt because the nation legitimized it. It is conceivable that the development of these weapons was deemed a necessity and a matter of national security. The National Socialists took a similar position with Jewish cleansing. There were experts who made racism a scientific discipline. Some developed the racist doctrine for use in politics and social settings. Others worked to legitimize these party ideals and goals by distorting religious texts, and still others used this information to propagandize hate. Hitler even enlisted scientific specialists to create the most efficient death factories possible.

Because of the work of individual experts, Auschwitz stands as an example of a collective shame. Walser believes that German citizens recognize this, which explains why it is so difficult for them to settle the internal struggle within themselves. He explains that if someone from America or France looks at the Holocaust they might think: “How could those Germans have done something as horrible as that?” But if Germans consider
what transpired, they cannot so easily think: "How could we have done something like that?" It is, therefore, often the case that they suppress recollection of personal involvement, put the blame on Hitler, and claim that they belong to the German nation that existed before the Third Reich (Walser, Deutschland 28).

Walser comments that some Germans consider themselves to be from Berlin, or from Bavaria, or from the West, but not from Germany, not from that nation. It is easier to blame all wrong doing on the Nazis rather than to consider ordinary men as part of the cause and aftermath of the atrocities (Walser, Deutschland 28). He maintains that no German can elevate himself above the Lager floor and with a clear conscience proclaim that only the psychopaths or experts are guilty (26). He stresses that a danger for disaster will always exist in a society where the people and states within that society compete and abuse power in order to become strong enough to first legitimize and commit atrocious crimes and to then later select perpetrators to assume guilt. In this way, a nation can wipe the collective slate clean of a guilty conscience and proceed as if cleansed and atoned.

As difficult as it seems, Walser feels that Germans must try to come to terms with Auschwitz, not only for others, but also for themselves. The memorials, the various organizations of reconciliation, and all the other attempts to apologize or to make up for the catastrophe are limited. They cannot solve the internal struggle that Walser believes must continually go on within everyone. It is not enough to ask parents and grandparents how it was then, it is also vital to consider how it is now because of what happened.

Walser doesn’t believe that it is probable that history will repeat itself, but he does maintain that German history has molded the people, their attitudes, and their culture. In
his writings he continually stresses the importance of recognizing how past experiences and memories affect people. This holds true especially for his own life where past experiences became major themes in his writings. He repeatedly focuses on the German need to confront history and to learn from it so that the atrocities are never allowed to happen again.

For his fellow writer, Günter Grass, history also played a role in the Holocaust, but unlike Walser, Grass believes that a “dangerous Germany lurks behind today’s comfortable one,” and if given half a chance it could come marching back (Economist 43). Grass experienced many of the same frustrations that Walser did concerning the repression of memory and the avoidance of personal responsibility. Since the common problems and tendencies have already been outlined and described in detail, the following discussion primarily focuses on elements of Grass’s writing and personal inclination that are radically different from Walser’s.

The prevalent themes in Grass’s writing are greatly influenced by his personal history. Born in Danzig, now Poland on October 16, 1927 he became a member of the Hitler Youth at age fourteen. By seventeen he was in the Panzer division in the army, and he finished his service as a prisoner of war. He believed that the ideals taught in the Hitler Clubs were wholesome: love of homeland and tradition, unity of spirit, loyalty to parents, etc. He was certain that as a soldier he was fighting for a just cause. Even as a prisoner of war he had no doubts that his convictions were right. It was not until he was taken to Dachau by American troops in the Spring of 1946 that he began to “realize what, behind a smoke screen of martial music and irredentist bilge, they had done to my youth. It was
only then that I began to find out—the full horror was not revealed to me until years later—what unthinkable crimes had been committed in the name of the future of my generation” (Harrington 55).

Grass could not believe what he saw. He had given up his youth and had believed in a cause that had deceived him. He had believed in an adult world that had lied to him. He recalls: “When I was nineteen I began to have an inkling of the guilt our people had knowingly and unknowingly accumulated, of the burden of responsibility which my generation and the next would have to bear” (55). And even though he remembers being told that he had been born too late, and that the generation of “Hitler Youth were free of responsibility,” he also recognized the personal shame he had to confront (55).

Grass was convinced that had he been older during the Third Reich he would have been a fanatical Nazi, and this caused him great shame. He remembers no one speaking out against the Nazi movement. Those who opposed it simply withdrew into themselves in the hopes that Hitler and his ideals would fade away. Entire communities of Jews disappeared, and no one resisted. Grass felt deceived, and thus after the war he retreated to the German countryside where he worked first as a farmhand in the Rhineland and then in a potash-mine before serving as an apprentice to a stone mason. In 1951 he traveled through Italy, and in 1952 he hitchhiked through France and began to write poetry and short stories but he was not yet prepared to write about his memories and personal experiences.

Although Grass had been writing short plays and essays, he was not inspired to write socially critical works until 1955. During this year he was awarded third prize in a
poetry contest and was invited to a *Gruppe 47* meeting to read some of his work. It was at this meeting that his true inspiration was ignited. After reading an abstract of an idea for a novel, Grass was awarded a five-thousand-mark prize by the group to finance his work. He and his wife Anna went to Paris in 1956, and he began writing his most famous novel *The Tin Drum* (1962). He became obsessed by his inspiration and he did not stop writing until he had completed 750 pages. He commented that:

...the twenty-five-year-old witness of June 17, 1953 had not yet reached the point where he could react by writing directly. Things of the past, losses, his origins, shame still clung to him. It was not until three years later, when I moved from Berlin to Paris, that the distance from Germany enabled me to find the language and the breadth to write down ... what was necessary for me to write, in spite of and after Auschwitz. (Grass, *Two States* 112)

Grass knew that as a writer he finally had the power to confront the generation that allowed the Holocaust to occur. He was aware that "those things that really happened can be stylized away, tomorrow even, before they repeat themselves, as some kind of burdensome nightmare. I want to warn against this time-honored means of dealing with the past. I prefer, myself, to keep the wound open" (qtd. in Hollington 18). He had observed from working and traveling that most citizens felt little or no shame for the Holocaust and had successfully repressed their memories: "Years after mankind’s greatest crime was brought to a halt by the unconditional surrender of the Great German Reich, adjustment to the crime is spreading. It has become a chapter in a schoolbook, a subject at the mercy of history teachers" (Grass, *Two States* 96).

In his writings Grass emphasized his personal history to show that the atrocities that had occurred in Germany could very easily happen again. His stress on personal
history was important for several reasons. It provided him with points of reference, which
gave credibility to his claims that Germans need to confront their guilt and acknowledge
that such an atrocity could happen again: "I, too, born almost late enough, am held to be
free from guilt. Only if I wanted to forget, if you were unwilling to learn how it slowly
happened, only then might words of one syllable catch up with us: words like guilt and
shame; they too [are] impossible to stop" (qtd. in Miles 12-13). He also demonstrates
through his memories that he, himself, represents the prime example of why the atrocities
occurred.

After the publication of *Die Blechtrommel*, Grass’s work received mixed reviews.
Many critics praised Grass’s ingenuity in dealing with history. *Die Blechtrommel* is a
first-person narrative told by a child protagonist named Oskar who symbolizes the history
of the Nazi movement and its aftermath. It is a story that begins with Oskar’s confession
that he is both a mental patient and a murderer, and through his memories, laden with
grotesque and sexually perverse imagery, we re-enter the immoral and destructive world
of the Third Reich. Grass won several literary prizes for this work which was considered
horrifying and gruesome yet very powerful. But for each award there were just as many
protests denouncing the novel as blasphemous and obscene.

Grass was, however, only reacting to challenges faced by writers resulting from the
aftermath of the Holocaust. As has been discussed, Nazism impacted language and
extended the limits of moral boundaries. He knew that words had been disgraced and
perverted, so he chose to write in the tradition of the grotesque, a tradition that combined
the fantastic and the realistic in a way that alters a reader’s perception of reality and forces
him/her to experience the gruesome truth through horrible images. By offending the codes of sexual and social morality, Grass demonstrates the immorality of the Holocaust and the perverse nature of Hitler's ideology.

Gruesome reality is represented by Grass's trademark of using objects to represent people and ideas. In this way people and abstract concepts are subordinated and made to seem unnatural or perverse. In *Die Blechtrommel* the protagonist Oskar symbolizes the personification of the Third Reich and the aftermath of Hitler's destruction. He is a blue-eyed child who at times seems sensible, but at other times is dangerously irrational and capable of large-scale destruction. The movement of the Third Reich is depicted as an interruption in Oskar's growth. Oskar's decision to throw himself down a flight of stairs in order to stop growing symbolizes the interruption of Germany's growth during the twelve years that Hitler was in power. Hitler's ideas are represented by the protagonist's obsession with beating a tin drum. Each time Oskar feels threatened or demands notice, he beats on his metallic drum so that he cannot be ignored. He also discovers that he has the ability to scream in such a shrill tone as to break glass which symbolizes the Kristallnacht and other devastating events perpetrated on the Jews. Grass illustrates the impotence and unnatural quality of the destructive Nazi movement in a graphic sexual scene in which Oskar, using drumsticks as his penis, is unable to satisfy himself with his partner Linda Greff who feels neglected due to her marriage to a homosexual.

The use of perverse elements in much of Grass's writing stems from the profound influences his personal experiences have had on his life and personal philosophy. He is
bitter that he forfeited his childhood to a destructive and devastating movement that caused only shame and sorrow to Germans. He also resents the loss of homeland. It is a loss that he will never overcome. It is also a loss that further inspires his harsh and bitter social critiques:

Even if someday a major new effort is made to right this wrong, the shame will remain. Shame and sorrow. Because the crime brought into the world by us Germans resulted in further suffering, further injustice, the loss of homelands. Millions of East and West Prussians, Pomeranians, and Silesians had to leave their birthplaces. This burden cannot be equalized. The war cost those Germans more than it did other Germans...I, too, took the loss hard. Time and again I had to remind myself of the reason for it: German arrogance and disdain for human beings; German blind obedience; that German hubris which in defiance of all legality proclaimed an all-or-nothing as its will, and in the end, when everything lay buried in suffering, refused to acknowledge the nothing. (Grass, Two States 32)

The loss that he suffered as a child is depicted through the perversion of social themes. Traditional familial roles are reversed, for instance. Since Grass lost his childhood to Nazism, the protagonist Oskar is portrayed by a child, but due to Grass’s use of role reversal, Oskar is also the character who is most socially and politically aware in the text. It is through his memories of his life that the reader is exposed to the irrational and perverse elements of Nazism.

The adults in Die Blechtrommel are portrayed as naive, irrational, reactionary, and seemingly powerless. They symbolize the danger that ideologies such as Nazism still pose to Germany. When Oskar’s mother discovers she is pregnant, she fears that she may be carrying another monster like Oskar. In an attempt to rid herself of the fetus she stuffs herself with poisoned eel, and in the process of aborting her fetus, she kills herself. Grass illustrates the need for German citizens to be politically and socially aware so that they can
recognize and resist the dangers of the ideologies that led to the birth of Nazism before the seeds are planted. If Germans are too slow in their resistance, it can only lead to self-destruction and shame.

Grass illustrates through confessional first-person narratives what can happen to those who ignore the dangers. The narrator expresses feelings of guilt and personal responsibility through the repetition or contradiction of thoughts, through fixation on events, and by the inability to reach a resolution. The use of these literary devices were influenced by the picaresque mode often used by Bertolt Brecht. In an article called "Nazism and Postwar German Literary Style," Ann Mason describes the picaresque mode as an "appropriate commentary on the chaos and destructiveness of war; it is a form that incarnates the disorder and violence of a period in which evasion, changes of identity, emigration, and exile become everyday events necessary for survival" (64).

In the novella *Katz und Maus*, published in 1961, Grass uses the power of memory and the theme of shame to explore the ambiguities of moral judgement that thrived during the Third Reich. This is accomplished through the guilt-ridden confession of Pilenz concerning the death of his friend Mahlke. Pilenz is the ideal picaresque narrator because he self-consciously plays a role in an effort to conceal his true identity, and because of his efforts not to reveal the entire truth about himself and his memories, the reader is never really sure what happens in the story or who is responsible for the death.

*Katz und Maus* is the story of a group of young boys growing up in Danzig before and during the Second World War. The protagonist of the story is named Joachim Mahlke. He is a devout young man whose only fault is that he is different; his large
adam’s apple becomes the symbol of his difference. Although Pilenz and the others marvel at his talents, especially his ability to out swim them, Pilenz becomes envious and obsessed with the idea of breaking Mahlke down, persecuting him, and ultimately destroying him. At the end of the story Mahlke apparently drowns. It seems clear that Pilenz is at least partially responsible for his death, but he hesitates to accept personal responsibility. At one point in the story he implies that he killed Mahlke, and then he immediately recants by stating that maybe Mahlke committed suicide or that he deserved to die. Grass accuses the German citizens of being just as responsible for the persecution and deaths of the Jews as the Nazi perpetrators, but they are, like Pilenz, unwilling to accept any personal responsibility. They make excuses, or they change the recollection of their involvement.

Grass also uses confessional first-person narratives to underscore the German tendency to shape memory or to repress or contradict facts as a means of avoiding guilt. Pilenz is guilt-ridden by the death of his friend Mahlke. After he begins his confession we are certain that he committed the murder and is trying to atone for his sin. But, as the story progresses, he contradicts his memories, and we are no longer sure that he killed Mahlke. In the beginning of the story he reported that Mahlke lived “in der Westerzeile,” but less than two lines later he states “Nein, Euer Haus steht, in der Osterzeile” (Grass, Katz 22).

Grass also demonstrates how repression of memory is achieved through repetition. By fixating on an insignificant detail in a memory, an individual can shift the focus away from vital information. Pilenz mentions having a terrible toothache at the beginning of his
confession: “Mein Zahn lärmte” (5). Each time he remembered a detail that implicated him in the events leading to Mahlke’s death, he repeated that he had a tooth ache:

“Mahlke schlief....Das Krematorium arbeitete bei Ostwind....Die Katze übte....Neben ihm hatte ich Zahnschmerzen” (5). When he finally confronts the death of Mahlke, he no longer has a toothache, and he no longer can remember clearly who was at fault: “So jung war die Katze, so beweglich Mahlkes Artikel—jedenfalls sprang sie Mahlke an die Gurgel; oder einer von uns griff die Katze und setzte sie Mahlke an den Hals; oder ich, mit wie ohne Zahnschmerz, packte die Katze, zeigte ihr Mahlkes Maus: und Joachim Mahlke schrie” (6). Grass demonstrates that many Germans do not accept responsibility for their past, but rather try to shape their memories in order to make them seem less inexcusable, less disturbing.

Grass fears that until all Germans are willing to remember the truth, there will always be the possibility that the disaster could happen again. He considered the division of Germany into two nations to be just punishment for the Holocaust. He recognized, like many other writers of the post-war period, that their roles were those of “real patriots” who were trying to re-establish a new national German identity, but one that took a critical view of the past (Roberts 247). Grass believed that to truly be able to view the past critically, the two German states needed to work together as a united cultural unit, but as two separate political units. He strongly felt that a unified Germany was too dangerous.

Grass, and other German writers, realized that because they were unable to fully understand what events in Germany caused the Holocaust, they thought it unwise to wake up the sleeping monster lurking inside the German mind and were therefore very much
against the idea of the re-unification of the two German states (Kupferberg 69). With each passing day and every new event, history is added to or even rewritten, but the scars of unimaginable past horrors do not easily disappear. Following the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, Grass was reported to have said, “I went to the Brandenburg gate and could still see the unmistakable attributes of the naked (Jews) standing across from the power that stunk of pigsleather (Spiegel 75). He commented about his opposition to the term reunification in an essay entitled “Thinking about Germany”: “I’d really like to avoid the word reunification, because it implies a return to what existed before. And a politically reunified Germany, leaving aside the question of the borders of 1937, is something I don’t consider desirable” (Grass, Two States 46). Grass, like many other leading intellectuals, “had gradually come to see the permanence of two separate German state structures as the best insurance against a repetition of the incomprehensible plunge into the barbarity of Germany under Hitler” (Kupferberg 69).

Even after unification Grass has maintained that a united Germany is too big for its own good. In his mind the two states should have remained separate confederations with a common culture and its disrupted history (Economist 43). He stated that “German culture has always derived its strength from it diversity,” and it could accomplish more as a politically divided nation of Germans than it could as a united nation (Grass, Two States 42). He remarked that both Germany’s share a common political responsibility:

By common political responsibility I mean this: after the experience of two world wars started by Germany, both states have an obligation to prevent future wars, to contribute more than other countries to the reduction of tensions, the tensions first of all in their house, between Germans. And I could imagine a dialogue developing between the two states, maybe first in
the area of culture, which would be an easing of tension, so that our neighbors would stop fearing, as they do now, a new concentration of power in the center of Europe. (38)

It is almost as if this notion can be interpreted as Grass’s belief that the history of Germany (past ideals, past literary works, and past battles) ultimately led to the nation’s capability to commit such horrendous crimes, and as long as there was a clear break in this history, future catastrophes could be prevented. With the emergence of two German states this volatile legacy was diffused, providing a buffer zone from the possibility of a recurring disaster. In a speech called “The Destruction of Mankind” Grass writes: “As a contemporary I have written against the passage of time. The past made me throw it in the path of the present to make the present stumble. The future could only be understood on the basis of past made present” (Grass, Speak 140).

Grass feared that the reunification of the two German states would be detrimental to the efforts of writers to confront Germans about the need to remember and acknowledge personal responsibility. In an interview with Der Spiegel he explains that the concept of “unity” makes a number of things possible, even permissible and likely. Reunification would mark the end of the post-war period, thereby establishing a symbolic end to the necessity of bearing the burden of shame and guilt over the war (75). Germans could “redefine” themselves (77). They would no longer be judged by the world. The Statute of Limitations would be in effect and the German people could finally bury that which haunts them most. Such developments were all viewed by Grass with skepticism, even trepidation.

Günter Grass, Martin Walser, and many other German writers continue to write
socially critical works that address the power of memory and the influence of their personal experience, and they continue to face the difficulties and frustrations of trying to reach a unreceptive German audience which is not unlike the struggles faced by Jewish writers. In this thesis I have discussed why both Jewish and German writers have struggled to make the memory of the atrocities of the Holocaust part of the world’s collective consciousness. This sentiment was poignantly expressed by Walter Benjamin in the second of his “Theses on the Philosophy:”

The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one....Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a real messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. (qtd. in Friedländer, Memory 126)

It is obviously impossible to provide a comprehensive analysis of all of the problematic issues related to Holocaust memory. The purpose of this thesis is to highlight some of the most prevalent themes in Holocaust literature dealing with memory and collective history from mainly the Jewish, but also the German perspectives. By comparing and contrasting the lives and writings of prominent Jews and Germans dealing with the Holocaust I have explored why remembering the atrocities is important and the various struggles and difficulties that writers have had when dealing with their/the past. The following quote by Elie Wiesel expresses an appropriate final sentiment: “I am not afraid anymore that it will be forgotten....We have worked for memory....Now I am afraid of trivialization. To trivialize the memory would be as tragic as the forgetting itself” (qtd. in Caras158).
Primary Works


--- *Über Deutschland Reden*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989


**Secondary Works**


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