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# “The Grey and the Coloured Truth”

*Memory and Post-memory in  
George Tabori's Holocaust Plays*

ANTJE DIEDRICH

This essay discusses George Tabori's plays *The Cannibals* and *My Mother's Courage* as works of postmemory, works that mediate memories of Tabori's parents' experience of the Holocaust through imaginative investment and creation. Referring to Tabori's notion of lying as an imaginative and subversive act, the discussion focuses on the representation of his mother and father in these plays and on the aesthetic and dramaturgical choices through which their experience is mediated. Tabori reimagines his parents as heroes but situates this idealized representation within a context that represents processes of memory as unreliable and difficult. He deliberately employs his parents' experiences in order to subvert prescribed feelings and attitudes toward Holocaust commemoration and to create a space that enables the attempted therapeutic of memory work.

Whenever the German-speaking media reported about the Jewish Hungarian American playwright and theater director George Tabori, they tended to dwell upon his unusual biography. Major points of reference were the murder of two-thirds of his family in German extermination camps during World War II, his time as a scriptwriter in Hollywood in the 1950s, and finally the German premiere of his play *The Cannibals* in West Berlin in 1969. This play marked the beginning of Tabori's belated career as a director and playwright in the German-speaking theater, which ended only with his death in 2007.

Sandra Pott and Jörg Schönert examine this unusual interest in Tabori's biography in their article "Tabori among the Germans: Stages of an 'Authentic Existence'?"<sup>1</sup> They convincingly describe how Tabori's identity was subjected to a gradual process of "stylization," eventually turning him into a cultural icon of German public life, and how later the artist himself participated in this process. Tabori came to embody certain cultural roles, such as "the stranger" or "the Jew." His life story was understood as the "symbolic (and culturally relevant) representation of the life of a middle-European Jew and artist of the 20th century" and his work regarded as an expression of an "authentic existence."<sup>2</sup> This process gained momentum with the success of his play *Mein Kampf* in 1987 and reached its high point around his eightieth birthday in 1994. At this stage the focus on his personal history, particularly in relation to his father's and mother's biography, and its symbolic relevance significantly intensified.<sup>3</sup> Tabori always fed this interest through the amalgamation of his personal experience with his artistic life and historical events in his interviews, essays, and some of his plays, and by the mid-1990s he willingly participated in a variety of media events that confirmed and extended these already established public "roles."

Pott and Schönert also demonstrate how Tabori used playfulness, parody, and humor to distance himself from and to undermine these ascribed "roles" he plays in (t)his life story.<sup>4</sup> Around and after his eightieth birthday, Tabori increasingly employed another subtle strategy in interviews to challenge the notion of a verifiable "authentic existence." Not only did he question the reliability of his own memory; he also posed as a dissembler, as someone who could not be trusted. "If one processes one's life—like me—in one's writing, one can no longer distinguish between fact and fiction," he confessed in an interview shortly before his eightieth birthday.<sup>5</sup> Some years later he publicly toyed with the idea of publishing—like Malraux—an autobiography that is full of lies.<sup>6</sup> The question of authenticity vs. lies becomes particularly pressing when dealing with works that claim to be based on, or at least derived from, his parents' experience of the Holocaust, raising ethical and aesthetic questions about the possibilities and limits of the representation of historical trauma.

Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" provides a particularly useful paradigm for any discussion of Tabori's plays, allowing a fuller understanding of the paradoxical notion of an "authentic liar." Hirsch first

developed the term in relation to children of Holocaust survivors.<sup>7</sup> It refers to memories of memories, second-generation survivors' memories of their parents' recollections of their traumatic experience (these children often experienced their upbringing as dominated by their parents' narratives of a past life). Hirsch's paradigm not only emphasizes the doubly mediated nature of second-generation memory work; it also embraces imaginative and creative activity:

Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because the connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. This is not to say that memory is unmediated but that it is more directly connected to the past.<sup>8</sup>

Hirsch later refers to postmemory as "a *structure* of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience," with this process being severely disrupted by trauma.<sup>9</sup> She argues that personal and family memories of the Holocaust, once entered into the public domain through publication or institutionalization, allow for versions of affiliation, since stories and images of the family are instantly recognizable and easy to relate to. Affiliated postmemory thus reactivates and reenergizes memories of the Holocaust at a time when the connection to the past has been weakened by the passing of time.<sup>10</sup>

Within this framework of analysis, *The Cannibals* (1968) and *My Mother's Courage* (1979) are works of postmemory, mediating the complicated testimony of Tabori's parents' experience of the Holocaust in artistic form. Strictly speaking, then, Tabori is both survivor and second-generation survivor. Born in 1914, he escaped Nazi persecution by migrating to Britain in the 1930s and by spending much of World War II in the Balkans and the Middle East as a war correspondent and an intelligence officer in the British army. Nonetheless, he had no firsthand experience of the Holocaust and learned about the events only after the war. Although he does not have the "generational distance" Hirsch ascribes to postmemory, his engagement with the subject is certainly based on a "deep personal connection."<sup>11</sup> My discussion traces two lines of argument. One is predominantly concerned with the writer's imaginative investment and creation when "testifying" about his father's and mother's

experience of the Holocaust; the other examines the dramaturgical and aesthetic choices through which Tabori attempts to mediate this “experience.” First, however, it is necessary to unravel Tabori’s notion of “lying” as an imaginative act and to trace the motif of “the poet/liar” in his plays and autobiographical anecdotes. Mapping the net of references to the “liar” as poet and vice versa across some of Tabori’s works will contextualize the processes by which Tabori manages to negotiate aspects of his parents’ biography. It will be seen that he deliberately employs his parents’ experience in order to problematize as well as enable personal and collective processes of memory and commemoration of the trauma of the Holocaust, particularly in postwar Germany.

One can distinguish between two notions of “lying” in Tabori’s non-fictional writings and statements. The first equates lying with an imaginative act: with fantasizing or inventing stories. Tabori makes his point by telling an anecdote from the 1960s when he was undergoing psychotherapy in New York. On one occasion he admitted to his therapist that most of the dreams he had told her had been in fact not real but lies. She reassured him that these lies were no less valuable than his dreams; they still enabled the therapist to come to conclusions about her patient:

“[Y]ou believe that what you told me were lies, but for you it was as real as a dream. When you invent a story, develop a fantasy, you are trying to force a reality into being, there’s something behind that. You are trying to say something, you are feeling and thinking something.” As a theatre practitioner I felt reassured.<sup>12</sup>

Tabori conceives developed fantasies or invented stories as expressions of unconscious thoughts, feelings, and wishes that seek expression; they can therefore be more “real” or “authentic” than other, less imaginative forms of expression. This view is strongly informed by Tabori’s engagement with psychotherapy, and particularly Gestalt therapy. Gestalt therapy regards spontaneously developed fantasies and dreams as projections, coded expressions of oneself and one’s life situation. Thereby the elements of a dream or a fantasy represent disowned parts of one’s personality, which can be reintegrated by identifying with them to restore one’s wholeness.<sup>13</sup>

Tabori also uses “lying” in another sense: “for the appearances of the

world are a fabric of lies, our words, our gesture, our faces, our bodies are woven into a net of lying signals, not due to badness, but due to self-preservation.”<sup>14</sup> “Lying” refers to the way in which we communicate with our bodies, gestures, and words and is equated with inauthentic behavior, the playing of social roles or wearing of social masks. In Tabori’s view, we are “authentic” when our behavior appears to be in correspondence with our thoughts and feelings.<sup>15</sup> We behave “inauthentically” when our behavior matches the expectations of other people, complying with the appropriateness of certain social situations, and is by and large determined by our understanding of what is socially, morally, and culturally *appropriate*. This “social lying” or inauthentic behavior is learned in the process of socialization. Tabori’s ideas reflect the mood of postwar existentialist philosophy and its preoccupation with authenticity and the problem of “self estrangement.” The latter comes into being when people identify too strongly with the communal character of existence, when they model their behavior on those values and beliefs that dominate their culture and society, which releases them from the burden of taking responsibility for their lives, of exercising their existential freedom, of living authentically. For Sartre self-estrangement can be internalized, or become living in “bad faith,” when people construe their self-image and consciousness too much in the way others see them.<sup>16</sup>

The trope of lying as an imaginative (and subversive) act forms the core of a story from Tabori’s childhood in Budapest, published under the title “Cops and Robbers” in 1984.<sup>17</sup> Five-year-old George (Tabori was born in 1914), his eleven-year-old brother Paul, and their companions fervently play “revolution.” The boys all want to belong to the party of the just and the good, and when reenacting the Russian Revolution, Paul decides that only paying members can be admitted to the revolutionary party. One of their friends, “fat Hugo,” uses his family’s milk money to buy membership. In the evening, his mother questions him about the missing milk, and Hugo confesses. Two days later, George and Paul are picked up from school and taken to the Political Police, where the policemen offer them hot chocolate and treat them very nicely. Paul, who has a very vivid imagination, is unwilling to let go of the fantastic revolutionary game and admits that they were planning to blow up the royal palace and shoot Admiral Horthy. Two hours later the policemen send the boys home and arrest

their father. He returns the following morning—battered by the police—with his front teeth missing. Tabori claimed that the story, which he incorporated in a slightly different version into his play *Mein Kampf* (1987) three years later, was true.<sup>18</sup> He also confirmed in an interview that his brother Paul was indeed a pathological liar and therefore “a really great poet” and that he, George, belonged to a club of liars, where members did their best to make other members believe in their fabrications.<sup>19</sup> Although the story ends on a dark note, it nonetheless treasures the dangerous and subversive power of the imagination, particularly under oppressive regimes. In addition, Tabori seems to cherish the free and uninterrupted flow of the imagination, which is at work when children are playing and which tends to wither in the process of growing up, when poet-liars turn into social liars.<sup>20</sup>

Tabori had already made use of the story in his second play, *The Emperor's Clothes*, which premiered on Broadway in 1953.<sup>21</sup> The author's synopsis is revealing:

Little Ferike . . . establishes the standard of truth in the play. The serious part of *The Emperor's Clothes* concerns political tyranny in Budapest and the effect it has on Ferike's father, a teacher dismissed for dangerous political expressions. Anxious to get a school again, the father compromises his principles; and little Ferike despises him. At the close of the play the father re-instates himself in his son's adoration—presumably because he finally adheres to the truth.<sup>22</sup>

The play, set in Budapest in 1930, is overtly about different kinds of “truths,” about “the grey and the coloured truth,” Tabori states in an interview more than thirty years later.<sup>23</sup> The gray truth is that Ferike's father, Elek Odry, who was dismissed from service and blacklisted seven years earlier, can hardly support his family and renounced his political beliefs in various petitions to the authorities. The colored truth is that Ferike sees in his father nothing but a great scholar and hero of adventurous stories. There are striking similarities between the life of the character Elek and that of Tabori's father. Cornelius Tabori was a Jewish left-wing journalist, historian, and intellectual, who supported the communist revolution under Béla Kun in 1919 and found himself blacklisted after it was crushed. Like Elek, he had to settle for holding a variety of odd jobs to support his

family. Tabori's introduction to the play suggests that the child's imagination is superior to the dull reality of his father's life. Unlike the child in Hans-Christian Andersen's fairy story, who sees the visible truth of the emperor's nudity, Ferike's truth is invisible. He sees possibility beyond reality. "What man *can* do may be truer than what he is doing. But for such visions we'd be monkeys still," argues Elek's brother Peter to defend his nephew's "lies."<sup>24</sup> Ferike's fantasies and stories express his wish for a heroic father. The son (the poet-liar) reinvents his father (the social liar), and the father—after initial fear and resistance—decides to live up to this image by admitting to the police that his son's testimony is true (although the "testimony" is a fabrication, it reflects Elek's critical stance toward the regime). The play proposes that there is not *one* truth in relation to reality but multiple points of view, visions, and mediations. It also suggests that the imagination is a powerful and subversive tool in transcending and transforming reality. This appreciation of the power of the imagination is strangely at odds with the strict naturalist mode in which the play is presented. The script is obsessively detailed in regard to set and props, outlining the position of doors, windows, stove, furniture, carpets, lamps, books, ornaments, and objects such as a telephone, china fruit bowl, coal bin, and candlesticks in the Odreys' living room, in order to convey "the prosperity of bygone days" and "evoke other, more spacious quarters."<sup>25</sup> The stage directions also contain a detailed psychological profile of each character and prescribe most of the actors' movements and delivery of lines. The author seems anxious not to leave any space for the actors' and director's interpretation. In defining every detail, Tabori also restricts the audience's opportunities for complementing the stage action with their own imagination.

By the time *The Cannibals* premiered off Broadway in 1968, Tabori's theatrical aesthetics had radically shifted.<sup>26</sup> This was certainly due to his struggle with the subject matter: his father's death in Auschwitz. Tabori claims that he wrote a novel about the subject straight after the war but decided not to publish it, since he felt that someone with no direct experience of the Holocaust was not entitled to write about these events.<sup>27</sup> (This is not true, for Tabori submitted the manuscript of his novel, "Pogrom," to his publisher, who turned it down for lack of originality.<sup>28</sup>) Nonetheless, the subject continued to haunt him, and he eventually found an appropriate



form in *The Cannibals*. Tabori developed a nonillusionistic mode of presentation, which he credits to Brecht's epic theater.<sup>29</sup> However, the play-in-a-play dramaturgy he employed in *The Cannibals* may also have derived from his production of *The Merchant of Venice* for the Berkshire Theatre Festival in 1966. In Tabori's radical version, concentration camp inmates performed the play for ss officers and their families.<sup>30</sup>

*The Cannibals* is set in Auschwitz. A group of inmates accidentally kill one of their fellow prisoners in a fight over a piece of bread. Almost starved to death, they decide to eat his corpse, against the declared resistance of the central character, named Uncle. A moral dilemma unfolds within the play in the form of an argument between Uncle and the other inmates: does resistance require one to behave totally unlike the victimizers and to reject any form of barbarism, or is the cannibalistic act justified as the only means of survival? When the ss commander Schrekinger raids the inmates' shack and orders them to eat the meat cooking on the stove, most of them refuse and immediately have to go to the gas chambers. Only two obey, and they survive. In the course of the play, it soon becomes apparent that the action is set not in Auschwitz, but in a western postwar society twenty-five years *after* Auschwitz, around the time when the play was written. The inmates are not "real" inmates; the two survivors and the sons of the victims have gathered to reenact the events. The characters occasionally step out of the reenactment and comment on events in direct addresses to the audience. This nonillusionistic framing device completely changes the status of the stage action. It is no longer "about" Auschwitz but about remembering or imagining Auschwitz and about the difficulty of so doing. The play's self-reflexivity on processes of memory and theater undercuts any certainty about the past.

Tabori counterbalances this dramaturgy of uncertainty with some apparently authenticating devices. He dedicates the play to the memory of his father. The central character, Uncle, is also addressed as "Cornelius" and "Uncle Tabori" (which implies that the son embodying him represents the writer himself). In an interview, Tabori relates the genesis of the play to a survivor's testimony: he claims that someone told him about cases of cannibalism in Auschwitz and that his father refused to partake.<sup>31</sup> He insists that writing the play was a kind of therapy, a way of coming to terms with his father's death, of working through his personal trauma: "[H]is

poor ghost did not let me rest in peace, until this play was written; it is neither documentation nor accusation, but a Black Mass, inhabited by the demons of my own self, in order to free myself and everybody else who shares this nightmare with me.”<sup>32</sup> Through this contextualization, Tabori builds and maintains a tension between the (auto)biographical points of departure and the artistically crafted and fictionalized result of the writing process. How does Tabori’s father feature in this Black Mass? Uncle rejects any form of barbaric behavior or violent resistance and stresses the importance of upholding certain principles of courtesy and cultured behavior. Tabori does not unreservedly idealize the character, but he creates some critical distance through the ironic exaggeration of his principles, for example, Uncle’s insistence on wearing white gloves. However, Uncle upholds his (sometimes ridiculous) principles against the contempt, anger, and aggression of his fellow inmates, and in the end, they join him in his refusal to become a cannibal. Tabori pays tribute to this refusal as a gesture of real (although ineffective) moral and political resistance: “Violence can be a great liberating force, but there are times when the most pragmatic, most human and—if you like—most violent act simply lies in the refusal to be forced to do something; a gesture of denial which holds a deep secret: not to eat although one is starving to death.”<sup>33</sup>

Tabori had already formulated this notion of resistance in a text he wrote for his production of *The Merchant of Venice*. Here he speaks about the fate of a group of sixty prisoners, mainly writers and actors—Tabori’s father was one of them—who were among the first to be arrested by the Nazis under German occupation. After some time in prison, they were sent from camp to camp and finally perished in Auschwitz. Tabori holds onto their legacy:

Most of them went up in smoke. What matters though is the manner of their dying. Their resistance, i.e. the affirmation of their own humanity was, I believe, wholly efficacious. One would read St Augustine, another insisted on shaving even on the day of his murder, and father was seen entering the shower room with a gesture of extreme courtesy as though he were saying, After you, Alphonse. The poet J. Fothy, one of the few survivors speaks in his memoirs of resistance that may derive from standing erect, or looking at the moon, or simply giving in to one’s tears.<sup>34</sup>

Tabori also claims that a small illegal movement wanted to liberate his father, who refused, “for he asked what would happen to the remaining 1200 people in the camp.”<sup>35</sup> Fothy’s notion of resistance possibly helped Tabori to make sense of his father’s refusal to be freed. In *The Cannibals*, Tabori—like little Ferike—reinvents his father as a hero. His heroism lies in the affirmation of his humanity and dignity—despite his fear and weaknesses—in the most inhuman and undignified circumstances; as Tabori put it, “Cornelius Tabori died in Auschwitz 25 years ago, with unviolable dignity.”<sup>36</sup>

Unlike his father, Tabori’s mother survived the war and was able to testify to her experience. Elsa Tabori was arrested in Budapest in the summer of 1944 and found herself on a train to Auschwitz together with four thousand other Jews. At the Hungarian border, she persuaded a German officer that her arrest was unlawful, since she was in possession of a protective passport issued by the Red Cross, which she had forgotten at home. The German believed her and sent her back to Budapest, where she survived the war in hiding. She died in London in 1958.

During a stay in Italy after the war, Tabori encouraged his mother, who like many others remained largely silent and did not want to talk about her experience of Jewish persecution, to write down her life story.<sup>37</sup> She produced a one-hundred-thousand-word manuscript, in which three pages were dedicated to her escape from an almost certain death. Although the manuscript was lost, this particular episode apparently struck a chord with Tabori. In the 1960s he turned it into a short story with the title “My Mother’s Courage,” which he reworked first into a radio play and then into a stage play with the same title in the late 1970s.<sup>38</sup> Tabori admitted that he added and invented a few things but asserted that the short story and the play were by and large based on his mother’s account, and that his mother—unlike him—never lied, she only told the truth.<sup>39</sup>

In *My Mother’s Courage* Tabori develops a dramaturgical model similar to that of *The Cannibals*, although with a much stronger emphasis on the narrative elements. This may have to do with its metamorphoses from short story to radio drama to stage drama. The two main characters are the son and the mother, resembling mother and son Tabori. The son functions as a narrator, telling the story of his mother to the audience.

The mother enacts—together with other actor-characters—some of the events the son describes. The son's narration in the past tense confirms that the events are by-gones and that the audience does not witness the "real thing," but a reenactment on stage. A few other devices that disrupt the illusion of past events enhance this deliberate tension between the artificiality of the theatrical performance and the authenticity of the life story.<sup>40</sup> Most notably, mother and son engage in short dialogues about the "truthfulness" of the report. The mother intervenes, corrects, adds, approves, or disagrees. But her interventions by no means verify the accuracy of the account: "I told you a story, and now you're telling a story. How can two stories be the same?" she queries.<sup>41</sup> And when her son asks her to tell the story herself, she replies,

Even as a child you would turn things, I mean, life into stories. I always admired you for that. How could a person, especially a child, live his life and at the very same time turn it into a story? I always admired you for that. I can't tell you my story. What I did remember, for your sake, so that you could turn it into a story, I've already forgotten. All I can do is to correct you now and again, if that is what you want, because you tend to exaggerate and embellish, my darling, and only very little of it was as beautiful as you now make it sound. (116)

Again we find the motif of the son as the storyteller and inventor of his parents' life in his imagination. Although the narration is based on the mother's recollections, the son "owns" her story and tells it his own way. This raises some important questions. How does the writer Tabori fashion his mother's story through the son's narration? How does he represent his mother in the play? Tabori very subtly situates his mother as the heroine of a fairy tale. This subtle poeticization takes place on a variety of levels. There are a few direct uses of the fairy-tale register, most notably when the son-narrator recounts a moment when one of the deportees in the dark cattle car makes a joke, which is met by a giggle, conjuring up "the atmosphere of a children's room at night, with the children enjoying furtive jokes under the covers while the grown-ups danced above. A fairy tale, and no one would be saved from getting baked in the oven, except for one" (117). The fairy-tale motif is also reflected in the frequent juxtapositions of images of beauty and horror. Tabori emphasizes several times that

the events of arrest and deportation take place under a clear blue summer sky, only one of “many sunny days of disaster” (112). At the border, where the deportees change trains, they encounter an idyllic rural scene of peasants loading hay, where “[t]here was no terror in the landscape” (120), until a young man steps forward to pick some poppies and is shot.

This tale of beauty and horror has two heroes with almost magical powers. Tabori insinuates that the mother’s “incomparable blue eyes” (109) save her life. They compel a tram conductor to help her escape from the two policemen who arrested her (113), and they convince the German officer to let her return to Budapest (125). Equally, the German can magically silence four thousand people in an instant with a not very loud “Quiet down!” (116). The special position of the mother and the German officer in the play is enhanced by the grotesque distortion of the other characters. The fascist neighbors carry the attributes of animals. The family Csibotnik is “fish-faced,” the janitor’s wife a croaking “froggy creature” (110). The two policemen Klapka and Iglódi are portrayed like two fools from a slapstick routine. And the Green Shirts that assist the German officer are marked as exceptionally ugly: one is a “chinless wonder” (116), the other a “snotface” (124). Even Keleman, one of the fellow deportees and a member of father Tabori’s Pity Club, who saves the mother by pushing her to protest against her deportation, is a pathetic creature, “a fat little zombie, goo-goo-eyed,” whose “farts would stink before they could be heard” (122).

The impression of a fairy-tale land in which ugly monsters surround the two heroes is not only very subtle, it also contrasts sharply with the historical context of deportation and mass murder around which the play is organized. Within this context, Tabori celebrates his mother’s courage in walking away from the protective anonymity of the crowd in order to face uncertainty on her own. Once the mother has survived her adventure, the image of the heroine is reversed. Back on the train to Budapest, the mother’s legs begin to tremble and she wets her pants. Even the German officer who joins her in the compartment is de-idealized: “Away from the courtyard, he looked different, smaller, somehow, more normal. He had taken off his cap, revealing his balding pate” (127). The fairy tale full of wonder and horror is over; the heroes are unmasked as very ordinary human beings.

Although *My Mother’s Courage* is more clearly based on autobiographi-

cal memories than *The Cannibals*, the poet-liar nonetheless intervenes in the way the story is told in order to underline his mother's "heroism of human dimensions."<sup>42</sup>

This reveals that Tabori can show his parents' experience only "from the uncertain perspective" of the son's imagination.<sup>43</sup> Two processes are at work here, and they complement each other. The writer reimagines and fictionalizes his parents as the imperfect heroes of a black mass and a "mock fairytale."<sup>44</sup> At the same time, he uncovers and disrupts this process of fictionalization through the use of nonillusionistic framing devices, which unmask the fiction as unreliable processes of memory and theater. Both plays are works of postmemory and simultaneously represent processes of postmemory. In the case of *The Cannibals* Tabori had to deal with "absent memory," since his father was murdered in Auschwitz and could not testify to his own experience.<sup>45</sup> Inspired by a few fragments of information that reached him after the war, Tabori invents a plot and characters but places them within a framework that situates remembering the Holocaust as a difficulty and a struggle. This struggle includes the survivors, whose memory betrays them, as well as the sons, who try to understand their fathers and come to terms with the experiences they went through.<sup>46</sup> In the case of *My Mother's Courage*, Tabori dramatizes his mother's testimony. He addresses his mediatory role by making the dialogue between mother and son a core element of the play. *My Mother's Courage* also represents a process of memory: of the son turning his mother's experience into a "story." In both plays Tabori's dramaturgy suggests that we can neither be certain about the past nor represent it accurately on stage; he draws attention to the discontinuities and gaps in knowledge pertaining to memories of traumatic experience, and to the inter- and transgenerational transmission this entails.<sup>47</sup>

Where does this leave the audience or reader? Does the playwright express any position beyond this uncertainty or did he write the plays only as a subtle form of personal therapy? Tabori expressed his thoughts on memory and commemoration of the Holocaust most clearly in several texts written between 1969 and 1978 (he moved from New York to Berlin in 1971). This coincided with a period of increasing public awareness of the Holocaust in both the United States and West Germany (after near-

ly two decades of memory suppression), starting with the Eichmann and Auschwitz trials in the early 1960s, gaining momentum in the 1970s, and preliminarily culminating in the screening of the television miniseries *Holocaust* in the United States and in West Germany in 1978 and 1979, respectively.<sup>48</sup> Roger Luckhurst outlines how the emergence of the trope of “trauma” in US culture throughout the 1960s and 1970s was tied up with identity politics and how the identity of the “survivor” became a focus of political activism, particularly that of the severely traumatized Vietnam War veteran and the female survivor of rape and other forms of sexual abuse. The tropes of “trauma” and “trauma survivor” were consolidated by the inclusion of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the diagnostic manual of the American Psychiatric Association in 1980.<sup>49</sup>

Although Tabori never made use of the word “trauma” in his writings, his thoughts surrounding Holocaust commemoration in the theater nonetheless reflect some of the concepts that were later to be articulated by cultural trauma theory. This is particularly evident in his essay “There We Go Again,” a commentary on *Shylock Improvisations*, Tabori’s adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*, which openly confronted the Holocaust through a close examination of the character of Shylock. Tabori’s reflections on the production foreground the inexplicable and inexpressible, the “secrets” and “silences,” that surround the play, the character of Shylock, the relationship between Germans and Jews, and the Holocaust. He acknowledges that the production was an attempt to speak about these secrets and silences, to testify to the Holocaust, while acknowledging that this was potentially impossible, that the event was beyond comprehension.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, Tabori asserts the therapeutic *necessity* of remembering and confronting the Holocaust as a way of overcoming the potential psychological harm or damage memory suppression can cause: “There are taboos that must be broken or they will continue to choke us,” he comments in “The Cannibals,” a short text written for the German premiere of the play, and in “There We Go Again,” he equates memory suppression with sickness and physical torment; the “indigestibility” of the Holocaust triggers “soul vomiting” and causes states of near suffocation or explosion due to the unreleased pressure of the resurfacing memories.<sup>51</sup> Anat Feinberg discusses the parallels between Freud’s notion of *Erinnerungsarbeit* (memory work) as a three-part process of remembering, repeating, and working



through and Tabori's notion of memory in his theater works.<sup>52</sup> Without true "memory work," the repressed memory will continue to resurface: "Only a few of us have succeeded in remembering what we would have liked to forget, and we will only forget what we have really remembered. Until then tormenting memories will surface over and over again."<sup>53</sup> Tabori, whose ideas about humanity, life, and theater are informed by Freudian psychoanalytic theory, regards such memory work as not only necessary to cope with individual and collective trauma but also as a key to preventing history from repeating itself.<sup>54</sup>

Tabori himself asks the question of *how* we should remember in order to free ourselves from the burden of the past.<sup>55</sup> His answers try to do away with any form of "social lying," with the ultimate aim of getting to a more personal, direct, and honest engagement with the subject, resisting any form of Holocaust sacralization. He clearly attacks socially established and fixed attitudes and feelings toward Holocaust commemoration. These include officially prescribed piety and sentimentality toward the victims as well as the manipulation of feelings of guilt among Germans (which will only cement already existing defense mechanisms).<sup>56</sup> He always considered these as "sado-masochistic games of disguise," which only hide our true thoughts and feelings and "which conceal all our grief and hate and also love."<sup>57</sup> Not fully aligning himself with any national or ethnic community and writing from the position of "transnational observer," Tabori polemicizes against clichés and stereotypes of national, religious, or ethnic identity and against any easy allocation of the roles of victims and perpetrators in the Holocaust: "If we cannot look beyond taboos and clichés and regard each other as human beings and not as abstractions, we might as well light the ovens again."<sup>58</sup> In *The Cannibals* Tabori challenges the notion of the noble victim by "mixing the celestial and the excremental" and by "showing the scorn and disgust of their [the victims'] humanity, before finally celebrating their resistance."<sup>59</sup> Tabori's inmates urinate, swear, and are overtly sexual, violent, and cowardly. Nevertheless, they hold the capacity of behaving heroically. In *My Mother's Courage* Tabori undermines the easy stereotype of the monstrous and brutal perpetrator. The German officer is gentle and cultivated and saves the mother's life, a fact that puts her moral certainties into disarray and paradoxically makes her hate him for having to "love" him.<sup>60</sup>



Tabori's Holocaust drama and theater can be said to provide a "locus of remembrance," a space in which audience members confront and work through personal or collective memory.<sup>61</sup> This space seeks to be free from any "social lying" in the form of imposed attitudes, manipulated feelings, clichés, and generalized moral certainties, which as an external imposition would interfere with truly personal memory work. In order to create such spaces (and in order to undertake memory work himself) Tabori "employs" his parents' experience in his plays. This deeply personal connection also legitimizes his often-provocative stances. In *Family Frames* Hirsch describes how family pictures gain significance through "image-texts," through the narratives that imbue them with meaning.<sup>62</sup> Usually the significance of a family snapshot is lost on those who do not know these interlocking imagetexts. This is particularly evident in the case of Holocaust family pictures. They are "connected to the Holocaust by their context and not by their content."<sup>63</sup> The horror is not in the picture but in the story of loss and destruction that frames it, that has become part of it but lies outside it. Tabori's life story and his position of personal involvement, from which he wrote the plays, became a "playtext," a framing narrative that bestowed his work with significance and meaning, particularly with a seductive aura of "authenticity." His decision to live and work in Germany and to include the Germans in his memory work added to this "playtext." He also became "the representative of a possible dialogue between Jews and Germans."<sup>64</sup> Perhaps this explains why Tabori's life story has become an important and intrinsic part of the reception and interpretation of his works and why the man and his work seem so inextricably linked in the German public consciousness.

## Notes

1. Sandra Pott and Jörg Schönert, "Tabori unter den Deutschen: Stationen einer 'authentischen Existenz'," in *Theater gegen das Vergessen: Bühnenarbeit und Drama bei George Tabori*, ed. H.-P. Bayerdörfer and J. Schönert (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1997), 346–77. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from German to English are mine.

2. Pott and Schönert, "Tabori unter den Deutschen," 351.

3. Pott and Schönert analyze two television programs and one feature film. The semidocumentary "*Nach Ihnen, Herr Mandelbaum*": *George Tabori in Auschwitz* (3sat, 1994) charts Tabori's visit to Auschwitz in memory of his father, Cornelius Tabori. In

1996 the Arts Channel Arte devoted a whole evening of television to Tabori. The different programs used the three biographies of father, mother, and son as major points of reference for the presentation of Tabori's work. Tabori also featured as a narrator in Michael Verhoeven's film *My Mother's Courage* (1996), an adaptation of Tabori's play of the same title. Pott and Schönert, "Tabori unter den Deutschen," 363–74.

4. This is particularly evident in the TV program *George Tabori in Auschwitz*. Whereas the aesthetics of camera and editing clearly aim at inducing shock and sympathy in viewers, Tabori undermines these intentions (to some extent) by using play, parody, and humor and thus refusing to display personal emotional involvement. Pott and Schönert, "Tabori unter den Deutschen," 365–72.

5. André Müller, "Ich habe mein Lachen verloren," *Die Zeit*, May 6, 1994.

6. See Jan Strümpel, "Große Krise, kleine Krise, lustige Krise," in *George Tabori*, ed. Jan Strümpel, Text und Kritik 133 (Munich: Edition text + kritik, 1997), 51; see also T. Trenkler, "Ich bereite mich auf den Tod vor': George Tabori über seinen einzigen Theaterskandal, lebensrettende Zufälle und das Fremdsein," *Musik & Theater*, 1997, <https://web.archive.org/web/20030813235821/http://www.musikundtheater.ch/mt/interview/regisseure/tabori.html>. Tabori published a very short (and possibly incomplete) autobiography covering his family, childhood, and youth titled *Autodafé: Erinnerungen* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2002).

7. However, Hirsch stresses that the concept of postmemory may also be applied to "other second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences." Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 22.

8. Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 22.

9. Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008): 106.

10. Hirsch, "Generation of Postmemory," 115.

11. Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 22.

12. Peter von Becker, "Diese große Lebensreise. George Tabori: Zeuge des Jahrhunderts—im Gespräch mit Peter von Becker," *Theater Heute* 5 (1994): 15–16. The story also features in Andrea Welker's interview, "Das Wort ist eine heilige Waffe und kein Ephebenfuzz," in *George Tabori: Dem Gedächtnis, dem Lachen und der Trauer gewidmet*, ed. Andrea Welker (Vienna: Bibliothek der Provinz, 1994), 302. Here Tabori claims that he went to two therapists at the same time. Another version of the story can be found in Müller, "Ich habe mein Lachen verloren." In Müller's interview, Tabori gives the story an ironic twist by claiming that his therapist was almost deaf and that he thought she did not hear what he was saying.

13. See Frederick S. Perls, *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim* (Highland: Gestalt Journal, 1992), 87–90; John O. Stevens, *Awareness: Exploring, Experimenting, Experiencing*

(London: Eden Grove, 1989), 137–67. or a detailed discussion of Gestalt therapy and Tabori's theater practice, see Antje. Diedrich, "'Talent is the ability to be in the present': Gestalt Therapy and George Tabori's Early Theatre Practice," *New Theatre Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (2002): 375–91.

14. George Tabori, *Unterammergau oder Die guten Deutschen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981), 28.

15. George Tabori, "Vom Wesen des Glücks," in Welker, *George Tabori*, 80.

16. See David E. Cooper, *Existentialism: A Reconstruction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 109–25.

17. George Tabori, *Betrachtungen über das Feigenblatt* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1993), 24–26. The story was originally published in the program of Tabori's production of Istvan Eörsi's *The Interrogation* at the Schaubühne in Berlin in 1984.

18. See Gundula Ohngemach, *George Tabori* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1993), 104.

19. See Welker, "Das Wort ist eine heilige Waffe," 302.

20. Tabori notes that his brother changed and stopped "lying" at the age of thirteen or fourteen. Welker, "Das Wort ist eine heilige Waffe," 302.

21. *The Emperor's Clothes*, directed by Harold Clurman, Ethel Barrymore Theatre, New York, premiere: February 23, 1953.

22. George Tabori, *The Emperor's Clothes* (New York: Samuel French, 1953), 4.

23. Tabori quoted in Ohngemach, *George Tabori*, 140.

24. Tabori, *Emperor's Clothes*, 57.

25. Tabori, *Emperor's Clothes*, 7–8.

26. *The Cannibals*, directed by Martin Fried, American Place Theatre, New York, premiere: October 17, 1968.

27. Dietmar N. Schmidt, "Aus Betroffenheit Kunst: Nathan Shylock," in Welker, *George Tabori*, 106; see also Welker, "Das Wort ist eine heilige Waffe," 301.

28. See Anat Feinberg, *Embodied Memory: The Theatre of George Tabori* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999), 199.

29. See George Tabori, "A Note on Draft IV" (of *The Cannibals*), unpublished typewritten manuscript (1968), Akademie der Künste, Berlin, George-Tabori-Archiv, No. 1385, 2.

30. *The Merchant of Venice as Performed in Theresienstadt*, Berkshire Theatre Festival, Stockbridge Playhouse, Massachusetts, premiere: July 19, 1966.

31. Welker, "Das Wort ist eine heilige Waffe," 301.

32. Tabori, *Unterammergau*, 37.

33. Tabori, *Unterammergau*, 38–39.

34. George Tabori, "Notes on *The Merchant of Venice*," unpublished typewritten manuscript (probably 1966), George-Tabori-Archiv, No. 3079, 1.

35. Becker, "Diese große Lebensreise," 9.

36. Tabori, *Unterammergau*, 37.

37. See Herlinde Koelbl, "Georges [sic] Tabori," in *Jüdische Portraits: Photographien und Interviews* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1989), 236.

38. *My Mother's Courage*, Münchner Kammerspiele, Theater in der Reitmorstraße, premiere: May 17, 1979. It is interesting that Tabori directed the play after having completed yet another adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* that used the Holocaust as a point of reference: *I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear: Improvisations on Shakespeare's "Shylock,"* Münchner Kammerspiele, Keller in der Knöbelstrasse, premiere: November 19, 1978.

39. Tabori quoted on the television talk show *Boulevard Bio*, Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR), February 20, 1996.

40. Pott and Schönert, "Tabori unter den Deutschen," 354.

41. George Tabori, "My Mother's Courage," trans. Jack Zipes, *Theater* 29, no. 2 (1999): 116. Further references will be from Zipes's translation of the play and will be given in the text. Originally the play was written in English and then published in German translation. However, the original English manuscript is not publicly available.

42. Martin Kagel, "Mit den Augen der Mutter: Über George Tabori's *Mutter's Courage*," in *Verkörpernte Geschichtsentwürfe: George Tabori's Theaterarbeit / Embodied Projections on History: George Tabori's Theater Work*, ed. Peter Höyng (Tübingen: Francke, 1998), 104.

43. Georg-Michael Schulz, "Die Shoah und das Theater: Gewalt in George Tabori's Dramatik und Theaterarbeit," *Deutschunterricht* 52, no. 6 (2000): 61.

44. Feinberg, *Embodied Memory*, 227.

45. Marianne Hirsch quotes the term "absent memory" from Nadine Fresco. See Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 22.

46. The two survivors, Hirschler and Heltai, remember things differently and cannot agree on one version of past events. See George Tabori, "The Cannibals," in *The Theatre of the Holocaust*, ed. Robert Skloot (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 1:212.

47. Hirsch, "Generation of Postmemory," 111. In a sense Tabori's writing is sensitive to what Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub termed a "radical historical crisis of witnessing" in relation to the Holocaust. They suggest that the events of the Holocaust were beyond comprehension; they burst existing cultural frames of reference and categories of understanding, thus impeding cognitive assimilation and inducing testimonial silence on an individual and collective level. Testimony could therefore be expressed only in flashes and fragments and necessarily remained incomplete, leaving gaps of knowledge and uncertainties. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Tes-*

*timony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London: Routledge, 1992), xv–25.

48. See Dora Apel, *Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 14–15; Mary Fulbrook, *German National Identity after the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1999), 171.

49. Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (Abingdon: Routledge), 59–76.

50. Tabori, *Unterammergau*, 202–5.

51. Tabori, *Unterammergau*, 37, 201.

52. Anat Feinberg, “Erinnern, Wiederholen, Durcharbeiten: George Tabori’s *Jubiläum*,” in Strümpel, *George Tabori*, 71–80. See also Feinberg, *Embodied Memory*, 237.

53. Tabori, *Unterammergau*, 201.

54. On the influence of Freudian theory, see Antje Diedrich, “‘The Stage Is Not a Different Country but an Extension of the Bathroom’: George Tabori’s Theatre Practice as an Investigation into the Relationship between Art and Life” (PhD thesis, Liverpool John Moores University, 2000), 27–38. On history repeating itself, see Tabori’s discussion of Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlichs’ study *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior* (1964; New York: Grove Press, 1975) in his essay “Hamlet in Blue,” *Theatre Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (1975). Tabori adapts the Mitscherlichs’ thesis that the Germans had failed to mourn the loss of their beloved Führer. Hitler embodied many Germans’ dreams of grandeur and superiority. His defeat and the worldwide condemnation of the regime lead to a feeling of self-devaluation. Against this feeling Germans built up enormous psychic defense mechanisms, which resulted in a collective amnesia, a general unwillingness to deal with memories of the Third Reich. The Mitscherlichs regard such a state as problematic, since these defense mechanisms indicate that no real change in people’s consciousness has taken place. A change of consciousness would require a process of mourning on the basis of an admission of guilt and a subsequent critical debate of the past. Without this change of consciousness, we face the danger that “compulsive repetition realizes itself in history.” Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern* (Munich: Piper, 1977), 64. Tabori reiterates this danger of compulsive repetition: “No other country is more sensitive to its barbaric past or less incompetent to integrate it into the present. ‘Let’s not wallow in the past!’ is their favorite slogan. Those that do not wallow in the past are condemned to re-live it.” Tabori, “Hamlet in Blue,” 130.

55. Tabori, *Unterammergau*, 201.

56. Tabori, *Unterammergau*, 38, 24.

57. Tabori, *Unterammergau*, 24.

58. Birgit Tautz, “The Effects of Transformations: The Case of George Tabori’s *Mutters Courage*,” *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies* 41, no. 1 (2005): 21, 24.

59. Tautz, "Effects of Transformations," 38.
60. Tabori, "My Mother's Courage," 126.
61. Feinberg, *Embodied Memory*, 200.
62. Hirsch borrowed the term from W. J. T. Mitchell. See *Family Frames*, 3.
63. Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 20–21.
64. Pott and Schönert, "Tabori unter den Deutschen," 348.