Introduction

In the course of the last twenty years the situation for writers who deal with the consequences of National Socialism in general, and the Shoah specifically, has changed considerably. In what follows I shall examine some narratives by three writers from the “successor generation” who, in spite of the fate of their families, have chosen to live their lives in Germany as Jewish–German writers: Esther Dischereit, Rafael Seligmann, and Maxim Biller. To put their work in context, however, I shall begin with some brief remarks about some German–Jewish writers from the eyewitness generation who also wrote about their experiences decades earlier in ways that met with similar resistance from both publishers and readers who habitually brought sharply defined attitudes and expectations to bear on anything written about this most painful and sensitive of topics. Finally we shall look at a Jewish writer from Switzerland, Charles Lewinsky, whose life was of course not affected by the Holocaust in the same way as those of his coreligionists in Germany. Does his novel, which deals with four generations of a Jewish family, represent an effort to compensate, in some small way, the Jews for the families they had lost and for all the missing life histories attached to them? Is this perhaps a work that could only be written outside Germany itself?

In the writings of Jewish authors living in Germany, the consequences of the Shoah are still present as traces, often hidden and yet sometimes erupt-
ing in unexpected ways. They all focus on problems of identity arising from living in Germany, from struggling with their fate as Jews, living as a small minority among “ordinary” people and often being confronted with the Holocaust and the effects of the genocide. Many descendants feel they are still suffering from the morbus Auschwitz—as Grete Weil (1906–99), a German–Jewish author who escaped from the Nazis by hiding in Amsterdam, called it—the guilt of the survivors: “I suffer from Auschwitz as others suffer from TB or cancer. I am just as difficult to put up with as anyone with an illness.”1 In her narratives she insists that Auschwitz is something that affected not only the victims but an entire civilization. On her return to Germany she observed that the country was just as broken as she was. Fifty years on, there are others who still feel the same way and seek to express their struggle to achieve a meaningful life through various modes of writing. Esther Dischereit belongs to the younger generation who have to deal with the difficulties of living in Germany with the heritage of their Jewishness after the Shoah; at the same time she confesses to being tired of constantly having to satisfy the expectation that she should “wear the incarnation of suffering on her face” (Joëmis Tisch 68). Others from that generation dislike in turn the earnestness of most representations of the past and the kind of unnatural sternness they encounter. The desire to be allowed to use humor in their treatment of the Holocaust crops up repeatedly in the works of Rafael Seligmann and Maxim Biller. In their attempts to achieve greater normality in the coexistence between Germans and German Jews, they seek to push at the limits and even break through the pain barriers that generally circumscribe the topic of the Holocaust.

The Eyewitness Generation and the Problems of Representation and Narratability

It would be to mistake the situation to assume that the use of humor is simply an affront inflicted on the first generation of survivors by their disrespectful successors. In fact there are literary precedents for this way of dealing with the topic of Jewish persecution in the works of some of the survivor generation itself, such as Jurek Becker, George Tabori, and Edgar Hilsenrath. Hilsenrath, a survivor of a Jewish ghetto in the Ukraine, emigrated first to Israel in 1945, then went to the United States in 1951, and returned to Germany in 1975. His novel Der Nazi und der Friseur (The Nazi and the Barber: A Tale of Vengeance), written in 1968–69, published in the United States in 1971, and translated into eighteen languages, was rejected by over
sixty publishers in Germany before a small publishing house in Cologne finally accepted it for printing in 1977—only to withdraw it subsequently. Today it is considered to be one of the most significant works of German postwar literature. Hilsenrath’s first novel Nacht (1964, translated as Night in 1966) is a brilliant example of how “to express the inexpressible” in absolutely sober language, but it also illustrates the arbitrariness of a book’s fate and the inadequacy of a book’s initial reception by critics and readers. Nowadays experts regard Nacht as a book that deserves to be as well known as the “standard” early literary treatments of the Holocaust. Hilsenrath, who is still alive and living in Berlin, now appears at long last to be enjoying a degree of recognition.

The reason for the rejection of Der Nazi und der Friseur by German publishers lay in Hilsenrath’s use of satire, black humor, and the grotesque when treating the topic of the SS and the Jews. The novel reveals the banality of fascism at the same time as it perverts guilt and atonement and poke’s fun at justice. The grotesque (and the provocation it generates) was for Hilsenrath the appropriate aesthetic category to characterize the exceptional situation and the absolute debasement of human beings in the concentration camps. Similar debates about the use of such elements as the grotesque and farce sprung up at about the same time in the United States in relation to George Tabori’s drama The Cannibals (1965). Reflecting on those controversies, Michael Hofmann has emphasized the need for a discussion about the question of the adequacy of particular genres or forms in Holocaust literature. Hofmann argues, rightly in my view, that elements of farce can contribute successfully to the aesthetics and poetics of provocation by accentuating the consequences of the rupture of civilization that the Holocaust represents. He is also convinced “that the literary methods used . . . convey specific insights relating to the overcoming of conventional narrative strategies” (232). For most Jewish survivors, however, in the 1960s it was definitely too early to use these literary means to deal with the Holocaust in Germany. Even now, forty years later, the younger German–Jewish writers mentioned above are still meeting resistance from critics who disapprove of any such approach to the subject.

The persistence of these antagonisms—of authenticity versus fictionalization, gravity versus grotesque humor—suggests, contrary to what one might suppose, that what many readers regard as the acceptable literary means of representing the Holocaust seems not to depend simply on historical distance from the events. Rather, there is a series of elements that combine to make the impossible possible at a given point in time or, conversely, to lend authenticity to the seemingly inauthentic at some other point when we least
expect it. The demand generally placed on the first generation of survivors was for authenticity and documentary reliability when recounting personal experiences in the concentration camps and in the ghettos. Fictional treatments were not considered to be appropriate to the gravity of the topic. Over the years there has been no shortage of attempts to constrict and constrain writing after the Holocaust, but many of the survivors themselves did not in fact write in accordance with them, and many rejected the verdicts of critics and publishers.

A good example of this kind of recalcitrance is to be found in the work of the Austrian–Jewish writer Fred Wander who was born in Vienna in 1917 and died there in August 2006. Having spent over two years in various camps, Wander found that his only thought was to tell those outside what had happened once it was all over, but this proved much more difficult than he had imagined. Jorge Semprun encountered similar difficulties, whereas Primo Levi, a fellow sufferer with whom Wander was familiar and to whom he refers repeatedly, began to write about his experiences shortly after his return. Semprun and Wander, on the other hand, both had to wait many years before finding an adequate form in which to write about the past. The releasing factor for Wander’s writing was the painful death of his own eight-year-old daughter, Kitty, which reminded him of the death of a young boy in the camp, an event that clearly had a powerful effect on him but that needed the death of Kitty to force its way to the surface again. The novel *The Seventh Well* from 1971 is dedicated to Kitty’s memory. Wander here hides his own experiences behind the fate of his comrades in a fictionalized narrative while at the same time displaying his learning process about how to narrate such painful experiences. Wander has also insisted that narrating was, for him at least, the most important survival strategy in the camps. To narrate meant to be alive, to communicate with another person, not to be alone. Wander quotes Hannah Arendt’s observation that suffering becomes bearable when one can at least tell about it (*Das gute Leben* 341). Narrating about the past or even inventing fantastic histories from their former lives helped the prisoners to carry on believing in life and maintaining hope in a seemingly hopeless situation. That is also the reason why both Wander and Kertész were able to describe moments of happiness in the camps, something that was difficult for many readers of Holocaust literature to accept. Both writers were aware of posterity’s categorical expectations about how victims were supposed to write about their experiences: in a nonfictional mode and without any “alleviating” means such as humor. Yet in defiance of these expectations they both insisted on choosing their own means. Thus their autobiographical writing involves the interplay of more or less authentic memories with
consciously fictional elements. This technique deliberately reflects on the constructed nature of the text and on the impossibility of writing about a terrifying past without some means of protection for the writer. Thus Wander introduces the medium of a narrator who tells about the sufferings in the camp; only by processing things in this way can he even begin to express something of his own pain. He does not regard truth as something opposed to fiction or necessarily requiring a documentary approach. In his autobiography *Das gute Leben* (*The Good Life*), first published in 1996 and later rewritten and supplied with the subtitle “Happiness amidst Horror” (2006), Wander says little about the time he spent in the concentration camps, arguing that only by fictionalizing them was he able to write about certain areas of experience. For his generation authenticity had already become linked to “memory’s truth” in the sense referred to by Salman Rushdie and many other critics as subjective truth.³

### Dealing with Conflicts of Identity and Representation

For the members of the successor generation the Shoah has become a past historical event. Hartmut Steinecke summarizes his findings on the second generation of German–Jewish writers as follows: “For Jewish writers born after the Shoah (‘the second generation’), this event no longer occupies the central position in their texts. The Shoah is still an important event for them, especially its role in contemporary society and in the question of their own identity” (246).⁴

These writers have to deal with specific private problems personally and when meeting the public. Having lost members of their family, they also suffer from a loss of tradition. They feel marginalized by society, and this may be the reason why they do not feel any national affiliation. At times they have to listen to the reproach that they can rely on an “Auschwitz-bonus” (an expression used by Maxim Biller, “Harlem Holocaust” 114) as an aid to getting their work published. At the same time they must be wary of being sucked in by the Shoah-Business through participation in public events and commemorations.⁵

Even though they no longer focus on the Shoah as a main subject, it remains an important element in their self-perception and their public identity. Not only are they met with compassion and pity when people hear of their family fate, but they are often burdened with the knowledge that their parents felt a kind of “survivor’s guilt” that could make them try to hide their Jewishness or even make them become invisible. At the same time,
their German neighbors and acquaintances could feel uneasy about living together with descendants of Holocaust victims without knowing how to behave toward them in an unbiased way in everyday life. We know that Germans scarcely dared to use the word “Jew” for fear of being accused of harboring anti-Semitic prejudice. In German literary studies, the term sprachliche Vermeidungsstrategien (“linguistic strategies of evasion”) indicates this kind of gap of silence on both sides.

There is one more element that distinguishes the eyewitness literature of the first generation from the literature of succeeding generations. Whereas most of the survivors wanted to contribute to collective memory by communicating their experiences, the following generations often have quite different motivations for their writing. “Holocaust memory” is something imposed on them by their surroundings, above all by their family. They thus have to deal with an (often) involuntary attribution of identity as Jews and Jewish victims. Their narrative strategies focus on finding their own place in society, by either accepting the obligation to commemorate as part of the Shoah community, or refusing to do so by trying to establish an independent existence and showing their rejection of the prescribed role through various forms of opposition. No matter which way they turn, they have to fight against inner and outer obstacles when choosing their manner of writing. Writing gives them the chance to reveal and to deal with the aftereffects of the historical Holocaust, even as the Holocaust itself is slowly disappearing beyond the horizon of directly lived experience.

When narrating family histories or stories told by survivors or friends, the successor generation, lacking any direct, personal experience of the Shoah, are forced to use the means of fiction. They may deploy genres such as the grotesque and farce, or they may play on the whole scale of stereotypes and incorporate the most awful prejudices into their texts as Maxim Biller and Rafael Seligmann do. If non-Jewish authors had used the same kind of literary vocabulary, they would have been placed on trial. In fact, no German publisher was willing to print Rubinsteins Versteigerung (The Auctioning of Rubinstein), even though Seligmann was already well known as a journalist. Eventually he published the book at his own cost. Compared to the almost universal rejection of Hilsenrath’s book, however, the positive responses of the readers to this highly provocative novel indicate that a change of attitude has taken place, but what are the long-term consequences of breaking taboos? Does it mean that increasing historical distance will remove the inner and outer barriers that define the Shoah as an extraordinary matter that needs to be dealt with by extraordinary means? I think we will see a wide spectrum of different approaches in the future, depending on the authors’ inner and
outer relation to the issues they are dealing with. Until now, there seems to be one almost impassable frontier, which is to write about life in the camps in the voice of a first-person narrator, although even here there have been a few exceptions. Binjamin Wilkomirski, alias of the Swiss musician Bruno Doessekker, pretended that he had experienced a childhood in the camps, a statement that turned out to be false. *La vita è bella* (1997) (*Life Is Beautiful*), a film depicting a child who survived in a concentration camp thanks to the help of the inmates, was written by the son of a concentration camp prisoner, Roberto Benigni, who also plays the part of the father in the film. In Germany, Gila Lustiger, daughter of an Auschwitz survivor and historian, wrote a novel in 1987 titled *Die Bestandsaufnahme* (*The Inventory*). Using a first-person narrative perspective, she deployed the means of sarcasm and empathy, a choice that met with a good deal of criticism. This shows that it will indeed be possible for later generations to write Holocaust narratives and films in the first person without having any firsthand knowledge of life in the camps, but it also shows how difficult it is to do so in a convincing or satisfactory way.

These problems, and other related ones, are the issues that Esther Dischereit (b. 1952 in Heppenheim), Rafael Seligmann (b. 1948 in Israel), and Maxim Biller (b. 1960 in Prague) focus on in their writing. Their social and cultural experiences vary, and so do their approaches to the strategies of representation. Each of them depicts characters, often represented as first-person narrators, struggling with the problem of identity when writing about the difficulty of being Jewish authors writing in German or German authors of Jewish origin who live in Germany.⁹

**Esther Dischereit**

*The Impossible Identity*

The first author I will consider in more detail is Esther Dischereit, born in 1952 in Heppenheim. Her Jewish mother had managed to stay alive during the war while remaining in Germany, having survived out of sheer defiance, as she maintained. Dischereit was brought up by her mother and was instructed in Jewish religion and customs in a Hebrew School of the Jewish Community until her mother died. She trained as a teacher, but in the 1960s she became engaged in politics on the extreme left (“Red Cells”) and lost her job. Since then she has been active on the Left and worked as a publicist. She went to West Berlin and moved to Eastern Germany in 1989. In 1995 she became a Fellow of the Moses Mendelssohn Center in Potsdam, where
she also teaches in the area of European-Jewish Studies. She is known in the United States because of her visits to various universities, including Boston, Berkeley, Ithaca, and Amherst. She also travels a great deal in Germany, giving lectures on her topic—living in Germany as a Jewish–German writer—a topic that she cannot leave behind.

“No Exit from This Jewry” is the title of one of Esther Dischereit’s essays from 1994, written in English and published in German in 1998. Here she exposes the difficulty of accepting that to be a Jew is something normal, because everything that belongs to normality—for the majority—relatives, tradition, heritage, belief—was destroyed for the Jews in the Shoah. Dischereit is a representative of the second generation of German Jews who decided to stay in the country but who struggle to live an ordinary life. She focuses unremittingly on the problem of identity, using her own acute methods. Her main instrument as a writer is language, and because she is writing in German, she has a language problem. As many writers have complained, Nazism compromised the German language. There are words that simply cannot be used any longer according to Dischereit. Words such as Rampe (“platform”) or Jude (“Jew”) can never be ordinary words again in the way that puppet, boy, little, or sweet can (Übungen 19ff.). German thus remains a foreign language to her, but so does Hebrew. Writing German as a Jew feels like undressing in public, Dischereit says. The label Jew feels as if it contradicts the term German; there is a dissonance between them that cannot be resolved. Consequently, Jews do not belong to German culture; they never did, Dischereit maintains, analyzing statements such as “the Jews have enriched German culture.” If they “enriched” German culture, then they never were part of it, but something outside. Like Katja Behrens, another female writer, she stresses her firm conviction that there never was a Jewish–German symbiosis and she therefore refers to the “Jewishness” of her stories.

These are only a few of the many problems Dischereit confronts when examining her relationship between “the German” and her deeply problematic identity. She has no hope that she will find a new identity through writing, because “the mark of Cain, forgotten under the waters of Socialism, is still on my skin” (Joëmis Tisch 9). An additional issue is her lack of memories, childhood memories, family memories, and narratives transferred within the family—elements, as we all know, that help to establish and to stabilize personal identity. Dischereit feels exposed in both directions, to a German and a Jewish identity, but she sees a lack of understanding on both sides:

I declare that I am Jewish and I am not sure whether I am not lying. After all, I had not worried for decades about the fact that, or the question of
whether, I was one. My daughter declares that she is not a Jew, and knows that she too is lying. ‘I am not a diaspora Jew, no, not me. I am a German and proud of it,’ says a young friend, and she too is lying. Just as I am perhaps a ‘Jew in spite of myself,’ which is possible, she has become a ‘German in spite of herself.’ (Übungen 48)

In addition, Dischereit observes a certain feeling of rivalry among the Jews in Germany toward American, Israeli, and other Jews. They are rivals in Jewishness (Übungen 46), because German Jews presume that American and Israeli Jews do not share the same problems with their Jewish identity as they do, believing that the others are able simply to take their ethnic distinctness for granted. In her eyes, Israeli Jews seem to represent the prototype of this kind of Jew: anchored in a national state, they represent a majority and normality at the opposite extreme of the combination German–Jewish—a combination that American Jews in particular tend to regard as incomprehensible or almost indecent.11 Dischereit is said to be vulnerable and she admits that this is true. She is difficult and cannot change it. She does not like to be compared to other Jewish–German writers, such as Barbara Honigmann, even if they have much in common: they were both socialized into socialism and communism; they each had parents (Dischereit’s father) who did not practice any belief; they each decided to be Jewish at a certain point in their lives. “After twenty years of being an Un-Jew I want to become a Jew again” is how Dischereit opens Joëmis Tisch: Eine jüdische Geschichte (Joëmi’s Table: A Jewish Story) (9). Her specific situation as a feminist Jewish writer results in many invitations to schools, to read from her books and discuss what happened during the Second World War. She dislikes the kind of preparation pupils get before meeting a Jewish author, as it immediately draws attention away from the literary work and toward her most personal feelings as a human being. She also dislikes a certain kind of philo-Semitism, the kind of over-friendly and cautious behavior she experiences, which she finds worse than overtly hostile anti-Semitism (Übungen 206.)12 Even if such well-intentioned behavior signals good faith and is not meant to hurt, or even if the public has learned to show that they are shocked, the way people behave toward a Jew says a lot about the fact “that it is not normal to be Jewish and alive” (205). Here we find a strong similarity to the problem of being Jewish as presented by Lewinsky and Seligmann.

Dischereit considers herself to be a member of the Erinnerungsgeneration (“the remembering generation”). She reflects on her Jewishness and her identity problem in connection with the Shoah as her main experience: a col-
lectively experienced trauma of the past that is still present in her life, causing the destruction of all sense. This feeling might be responsible too for her lack of a preferred literary genre. She writes essays, poetry, and radio plays. The narrative *Joëmi’s Table* consists of mostly small paragraphs composed in non-chronological order, following associations, movements, fragments of memories, discussions, political statements, or historical episodes. There is a female first-person narrator, Jewish and German, but never quite graspable by the reader because she is characterized indirectly and is presented as Hannah’s daughter. While the mother is seen from the outside, through the eyes of the daughter or narratives overheard, the narrator comments on political events in the present and the past; refers to discussions and conversations, Jewish jokes, fragments of memories; shows letters; and asks questions and makes comments on statements, sometimes in a sarcastic way.

Dischereit positions herself as a Jewish-feminist writer, using the narrative techniques of the new autobiographical writing that transgresses the borders between reality and fiction, identity, and constructions of identity by reference to language and gender. Her writing exposes the problem of finding a genuine identity. There is the cultural double bind of the German-Jewish background, where one part is difficult to accept because of the Shoah, but the other part is essential because of the German language. In addition to this difficulty, most German-Jewish writers feel disturbed by the continuous confrontation with the modes of identification offered to them by others and by social interaction burdened by inhibitions. An illustrative example is provided by the following passage from *Joëmi’s Table*, where the narrator is addressed by an elderly lady:

> I have to confess something to you. I meet you, how should I put it, with inhibition. You know, you look like Ruth Deretz. She was in my class in those days. And somehow there was something similar about her—she was as attractive as you, a big, beautiful girl. You understand, she was then. . . . I was born in 1921. . . . Please excuse me. (55)

A person who is met everywhere by this attitude of caution and wariness will feel uneasy and unable to communicate in an ordinary way. The Jewish woman has a sense of not being seen as the individual she is, but rather of being reduced to the stereotype of a female Jewish victim by the German woman who is suffering from a bad conscience about the past. To live as a Jew in Germany, Dischereit concludes, requires practice, and there is no guarantee that she will succeed.
Maxim Biller and Rafael Seligmann

Maxim Biller, often compared with Philip Roth and strongly inspired by American writers, has Roth say the following (and clearly endorses his words):

I am an artist, I am not willing to keep quiet about anything just because Hitler and Goebbels were once up to mischief. I will laugh about me, about the Jews. Every people has a waxworks with heroes, anti-heroes, non-heroes, with good ones and bad ones. I feel responsible for the Jewish panopticon. I am a Jewish writer and I will not allow the Nazis, after all that has happened, to forbid my laughter. I will laugh and feel better afterwards. I know how difficult, how impossible this is. I am not so indifferent as to forget that six million were murdered during the last war. Damn it: I cannot help cracking heretical jokes, I want to get rid of my trauma in exactly the same way, incidentally, as the children of the perpetrators want to get rid of theirs. An irresolvable antagonism. (Hannes Stein, quoted in Braese, Deutsche Nachkriegsliteratur 403–4)

Born in Prague in 1960, Biller emigrated with his parents to Germany in 1970. He studied literature in Munich and now lives as journalist in Berlin. He became well known through the scandal caused by his autobiographical novel, Ezra, which had to be withdrawn by the publishing company in 2003 following a court judgment.

Up to this point Biller had written stories and novels with quite provocative titles and no less challenging content, for example, Land der Väter und Verräter (Land of the Fathers and Traitors) (stories 1994); Wenn ich einmal reich und tot bin (When I’m Rich and Dead) (1990); Moralische Geschichten (Moral Tales) (2005), a collection of satirical short stories, or Deutschbuch (2001), a collection of sharp, always cheeky and funny phrases about politics and public figures, including an essay titled “The Biller Principle.” Here is just one example: “I’m happy to talk about Israel. . . . Admittedly, when asked the classic asshole question about what we Jews are doing down there among the Palestinians, I always reply: ‘All sorts of things I guarantee the inmates of German concentration camps could only dream about,’ and immediately put an end to the conversation” (Deutschbuch 298).

Biller is the most extreme of the Jewish writers—he shocks the public by using provocative language, breaking taboos, and writing extensively about sex. It was possible to write about taboos in Germany only by employing black humor and irony, Biller says. He cites all the notorious stereotypes and
clichés about Jews, Germans, Arabs, and so forth, which are provocative and tiring at the same time, especially when used in all possible combinations and without scruples of any kind. What may be very witty when referring sarcastically to the media and public figures in a current political context becomes problematic when used in a religious context, in connection with the Holocaust, or generally without any regard to other people’s feelings. In his self-portrait, published in 2009 with the title Der gebrauchte Jude (The Jew Everyone Needs), he extends his role as a non-conforming troublemaker and enfant terrible in the direction of melancholy incorrigibility and whipping boy.

Some of Biller’s publications can hardly be considered good literature (although there are critics who hold his literary qualities in high regard), but even if we do not apply the criteria of literary quality we have to ask: Why does Biller wish to shock his readers? What does he want to achieve? Is it (self-) hatred, or the conviction that Jewish literature in Germany has to be different from German literature and adopt a non-conciliatory, critical tone? Biller likes to be thought of as a controversial and dangerous Jew; he enjoys his role of enfant terrible in Germany. Together with Dischereit and Seligmann, he belongs to that group of intellectuals who characterize the cohabitation of the German Jews with the Germans after the Holocaust as a “negative symbiosis.” Since he is convinced that there never will be a symbiosis, he is searching for a radical, anti-assimilatory way of writing in order to accentuate the difference. Karen Remmler, who understands Biller’s writing as genealogical in the sense of Foucault, emphasizes the point that the genealogy of Jewish stories is always fractured, and that they reveal not wholeness but the distorted images of a torn existence that bears traces of historical fragmentation (“Maxim Biller” 316). According to this view, Biller is less concerned with a search for identity than he is with making it clear that identity has become an object of consumption, a product of the culture industry bent on producing images of Jewishness to satisfy a German public. Biller’s intention is to highlight this “marketing strategy” by polarizing differences beyond the customary limits and by deploying the means of pornography.

Like Biller, Rafael Seligmann has been accused of “dirtying his own nest.” He too employs ironic and sarcastic means extensively, but having started in an aggressive mode, he appears to be moving toward a more conciliatory stance. Seligmann likes to spurn political correctness in the positions he takes and to attack openly long-established attitudes that bestow exceptional status on Jews, especially in Germany. He was one of the first Jewish writers to begin writing about everyday life in post-Shoah Germany. His
goal is clear: by provoking his readers, he wants them to discuss how the Shoah affects their lives. Nevertheless, he endorses the existence of a hybrid German–Jewish identity (Beegle 83–86).

Seligmann was born in Tel Aviv and followed his parents when they decided to go back to Germany when he was ten years old. He studied in Munich and gained his doctorate with a thesis on Israeli security policy. He then became a journalist and an editor of several well-known German newspapers and magazines, founded the *Jewish Magazine* in 1985, became professor of international relations at the University of Munich, and lives now as a free-lance journalist and chief editor of the *Atlantic Times*.

Seligmann's first novel, *Rubinsteins Versteigerung* (*The Auctioning of Rubinstein*), appeared in 1988 (as a self-funded publication). In 1990 he published *Die jiddische Mamme* and in 1996 *Der Musterjude* (*The Model Jew*). His titles contain pointed references to the Jewish–German double culture, the role in the family of the (strong) Jewish mother, and the phenomenon of overly compensatory social assimilation as an exemplary citizen.

*Rubinsteins Versteigerung* is about Jewish–German feelings of hatred and weakness and false reactions (born of uncertainty) on the part of German teachers, parents, or friends in everyday situations. The result is confusion on all sides about how to deal with one another, a situation the protagonist Rubinstein exploits to the full in order to take advantage of the German–Jewish victim role and thereby succeed in his personal and academic ambitions.

When we look at the narrative, we see that Seligmann uses a special technique to let the narrator communicate unrestrictedly with the reader, while at the same time pretending that the most awful things remain unsaid. A conversation between the mother and her twenty-one-year-old son Jonathan, who is still attending school and in danger of failing his school-leaving examination, will give an impression of how people interact with each other in this novel, especially when they meet resistance:

“Donkey, the situation is tough.”

“What have you been up to this time?”

“Nothing. It’s just that in French my situation is bad. . . . We can still stop me getting a five [the lowest mark], but you have to play along. It is basically very simple. That Schneeberger woman is obsessed with Nazis. She sees Brownshirts where it wouldn’t even occur to us Yids to look.”

“And why is that good for you?”

“If you’d just shut up you’ll find out!”

“Rubinstein, you need to get a grip on yourself! . . . The shouting has helped, as usual.” (*Rubinstein* 89–90)
He tells his mother that she must talk to his teacher. If the teacher is not willing to give him a better mark, she has to intervene: “You, my dear donkey, must make it clear how much our family suffered from the persecutions of the Nazis and that my failing would ruin us once more. It is of course rotten of us to exploit her no doubt decent feelings so shamelessly, but we aren’t harming anyone” (91). But his mother refuses to cooperate, accusing her son of being as cold, calculating, and evil as the Nazis. As he tries to calm her down before persuading her finally to fight for her child by appealing to her instincts as a Jewish mother, he simultaneously reveals to the reader his next steps in overcoming his mother’s resistance. Small wonder that no editor wanted to publish a book that depicted a youngster engaging in such offensive conversations and thoughts. Through these inner monologues, interwoven with the passages of dialogue, Seligmann has his Jewish protagonist utter quite unbelievable insults about his parents and those he lives among. Thus the narrator indicates Jonathan’s divided mind on the narrative level through the doubling of his quite contradictory utterances. Jonathan’s disrespectful behavior is perhaps not so much the symptom of a rebelling youth who merely wants to provoke as much as it is a cry for help to get out of an unbearable identity crisis.

The central issues Seligmann focuses on in the novel are philo-Semitism, Zionism, the cynical way Jewish Germans profit from the Holocaust, the widespread reserve toward Jews on the part of the Germans, or simply the absence of normal behavior toward Jews. Of course, only the means of fictionalization make it possible for Seligmann to write this autobiographically grounded novel in the way he does without ending up in awkward controversies. The ending of the novel has led some critics to believe that the protagonist finally accepts that it is his fate to live in Germany as a German Jew. After his girlfriend decides to leave him because she found out that her father had been a SS soldier, something that would always have been an obstacle for them and their families, he locks himself in his room in total despair. When his father finally breaks through the bedroom door and asks what has happened to him, he answers: “Ich bin ein deutscher Jude!” (“I am a German Jew!”) (1991, 199).

Of course, the situation is conveyed through the prism of irony. This extraordinarily outrageous and impertinent man is now like a helpless child. I do not believe that we can interpret this sentence as if it were spoken by a fortunate young man who has achieved his goals in life. Jonathan is stuck with the insight that he has to live with this double identity that will cause him trouble in each and every situation, as he just has experienced. Instability is his predominant state of mind and a condition that will also follow him
in all his social contacts. Only if other people were willing to desist from the prejudices that are common in society will German Jews and Germans ever have a chance of living more ordinary lives together.

Charles Lewinsky

_Melnitz: Jews in Switzerland, 1866–1945_

Although he deals with similar topics, Charles Lewinsky (b. 1946) can be seen as the antithesis of the authors discussed above. He is Swiss and lives both in Zürich and in France. He is a writer working for theater, TV, and film, and he established his name as a novelist with his family history, _Melnitz_ (2006). Lewinsky’s situation is quite different from that of the German Jews who lost their families during the era of National Socialism. Swiss Jews were safe from persecution, but they all had relatives in the occupied countries and they feared for their safety. Thus they too were affected by the fate of the Jews living abroad, and they were therefore confronted with the identity problem: Who are we compared to the others? That is why Lewinsky undertook the project he had had in mind for a long time: to write a family history of Swiss Jews over five generations. In spite of its length (nearly 800 pages), this book enjoyed great success and has already been translated into many languages.

Lewinsky studied the (local) history of Jewish families who had been living in the Swiss countryside for centuries. _Melnitz_ is a novel written with the intention of giving these Jews something that those who once lived in Germany no longer have: a family history and the knowledge of a tradition that generates a common feeling of identity and affiliation to the cultural community. Lewinsky portrays the everyday life of the Jewish people who kept to their traditions and thus lived together with the other people in two villages and yet always somehow stood out as different. The story of the Swiss Jews begins in 1866 with the fall of the Second Empire and ends in 1937 with a strong link to Nazi Germany and the increasing persecution of German Jews. There is an epilogue concerning the end of the war in 1945. The narrator reports the various changes in Swiss society over the years; we also read about the gradual adaptation of the Jewish people to the ongoing process of secularization. In the nineteenth century the Jews remained faithful to their religious particularity. The strain of trying to fit into everyday life can easily be felt. The reader is confronted with waves of anti-Semitism as well as solidarity and periods of relatively equal treatment of the Jews.
Lewinsky’s principal achievement consists in the connections he makes between contemporary historical events in Europe and the history of the family that unfolds in a backwater, away from the complexities of history. Thereby he imparts a degree of historical representativeness to the life of an extended Jewish family in Europe. From the outset, the none-too-large family has a number of international connections, for at the beginning of the story a distant relative from France marries into the family, later followed by another from Galicia. As they all speak Yiddish, albeit with different accents, they all understand one another.

The narration of the novel is focalized through an authoritative narrator who stands outside the story (heterodiegetic narration), which means that the reader’s interest is focused totally on the characters and events. While Lewinsky thus chooses the most traditional way of narrating a family history, giving the prehistory of the Shoah, he starts and ends the novel with an unusual narrative setting: the return of an old ancestor who embodies Lewinsky’s response to the Christian legend of Ahasver, the eternal Jew, condemned to wander across the world forever. Old Uncle Melnitz is one of the un-dead who returns to the place after every funeral: “Whenever he had died, he came back.” He constantly reminds the Jews of their perennial, inevitable misfortune, thus representing the suffering individual who stands for the suffering of all Jews who know no Christ to bear their pain. The quoted sentence runs as a leitmotif through the novel and dominates the epilogue. Old Melnitz is given the last word to end the narrative with a brief account to the uninformed Swiss Jews of the events between 1937 and 1945, the years that were omitted from the narrative proper:

He came back and reported. *Narrating made him come alive* [my emphasis]. New stories, he brought many new stories with him, each so fatally alive that the older ones faded away in comparison. . . . Stories that you could not believe, especially not here in Switzerland, where one had lived on an island all those years, on dry ground in the middle of the flood. . . . Melnitz . . . loved this country in which they would complain about hunger simply because there was shortage of chocolate. It was interesting to visit Noah’s Ark after her thousand-year journey. (*Melnitz* 761)

Highlighting several well-known myths that the Swiss had lived with during the war years, the narrator represents memory and non-oblivion, tradition, and the connection between the living and the dead. At the end, he has the overview and tells the truth that people do not want to see or hear. Lewinsky uses the means of paradox and irony to express the contradictory fact that
an ancient ancestor has to tell the survivors what had happened. At the same
time, the realistic representation of the historically verified family history
acquires a mythic and an ethical dimension, as Melnitz’s narration represents
the chances for a renewal of commemoration after the Shoah. The narra-
tive dialogue between the ancestors and the new generation creates a sense
of belonging and keeps tradition alive.19 His narrations represent a kind of
guarantee that the chain of generations will not be broken as long as there is
someone to tell the others what has happened.20 Conversely, it makes the loss
caused by the Shoah to the other Jews more palpable. Melnitz is an im-
portant contribution to the history and identity of the Swiss Jews, as well as a
significant contribution to the travail de mémoire that began in Switzerland
at the end of the 1980s.

In connection with his research into the history of the Jews, and in spite
of his fear of being marked down as a “professional Jew” and of boring him-
self by repeating the topic, Lewinsky, a nonbelieving Jew, wrote a text as a
film script titled Ein ganz gewöhnlicher Jude (A Quite Ordinary Jew) (2005) which
addresses the problem of how to live as a Jew in post-Shoah Ger-
many.21 Born after 1945, the protagonist Goldfarb is constantly confronted
with the past. He feels he lives a marginalized life as a journalist; he is an
outsider and what he dislikes most is demonstrative philo-Semitism. All he
wants to do is to live as an ordinary man in Germany. One day he gets an
invitation from a headmaster to come to his college and to speak to the stu-
dents about his identity as a “Jewish citizen.” Goldfarb feels it rather as an
affront (just as Esther Dischereit dislikes this part of her job as a writer, as it
gives her the feeling of being prostituted, exposed as a rarity [Übungen 205]).
He would like to reject the invitation out of fear of reaching the conclusion
that a normal Jew can never again exist in Germany.

The protagonist conducts an inner monologue, discussing the German–Jewish
relationship in an attempt to collect all the reasons for his refusal to
see the class. He looks at family pictures, remembering his mother’s paranoia
and the impact it had on him. He gets furious and highly subjective when
remembering his adolescence because his whole upbringing consisted of
warnings against everything that could result in “Risches” (Jewish for “anti-
Semitic reactions”) (Ein ganz 35). The sight of his wife and child hurts too.
The personal relationship founders on Goldfarb’s problematic identity, and
he simply cannot get over something his wife said to him: “You have become
so unbearably Jewish for someone who no longer wants to be one” (57).

Later Goldfarb starts typing. He continues to write during the whole
night, finally falling asleep in the early morning. Some hours later he starts
his class presentation with the words “Also gut!” (97) (“Now then!”), thus
indicating that this night’s controversy led him to the conclusion that he must accept it is his fate to live with two identities and always to be reminded of this by the perplexed questions of those whom he lives among. It seems clear that the problem is one with which Lewinsky himself is familiar and that writing about the conflict helped him to answer the question of how to live with his double identity. Goldfarb’s fear is that there will never again be normality for such as him, only an everlasting exception: “That we will always be Jews in Germany, and never Jewish Germans” (81). This is Goldfarb’s conclusion. It contrasts with Seligmann’s position, although it is difficult to know how seriously to take the latter because of the ironic and sarcastic elements in his style. An important feature of Lewinsky’s protagonist Goldfarb is the fact that writing serves him as the principal means of finding and creating his Jewish identity. The process will never be completed by the end of the night; rather, it has to be resumed and continued constantly in a debate with the past and a present that confronts German-speaking Jews with a quite unique challenge.

**Conclusion**

We have seen that all the authors mentioned have to struggle with their identity after having decided to live in Germany as Jewish writers. They share many likes and dislikes, but their literary means are different and so are their convictions. It is difficult to say what kind of impact Biller’s and Seligmann’s rejection of taboos will have in the long run. It seems that as writers they have to lay claim to the freedom to use precisely the means that they deem necessary, regardless of any objections that they are being indecent or inappropriate. In this respect they are no different from those writers of the first generation who felt compelled to use their artistic freedom to shape their material in accordance with their experiences, often in defiance of conventional expectations.

New generations are open to new perspectives and the prescriptions of the first generation survivors will become less influential. Will it make it easier to “overcome” the Holocaust, do away with prejudices between people when they are articulated openly? Or will the “rifts” be widened by citing the stereotypes and thus perpetuating them?22 As the Shoah is losing ground in the communicative memory, it will gain more space in collective and cultural memory, but this will depend on how the events are passed on. The road passes through cultural storehouses such as literature, art, or museums, and lieux de mémoire, where personal memory too gains a more enduring
form. The disappearance of the survivors represents a great loss because of the absence of direct personal experience, but on the social level there will be more possibilities of finding ways that are less restricted by existential factors. Like all forms of transmission, the disappearance of personal experience will make it easier to see the world from a different angle than earlier generations did, knowing that memory is a fragile thing. Maurice Halbwachs has made two important observations in this connection: First, “the present determines the past” (20). Second, Halbwachs speaks of the “social framing” of memories, a fact that explains the dissimilar shapes of narrations about the same happenings. Many taboos that constrained the wartime generation will vanish when they are gone. They set a standard for the narratives about the various experiences of ghettos, camps, and other places of misery, narratives that will be questioned by younger historians and writers. What is said about the second generation applies even more clearly to the third: the grandchildren of the Holocaust victims who question the traditional way of remembering the Holocaust and who obviously no longer want their lives to be as deeply affected by the past as those of their parents were. They even feel free to reveal subjective attitudes free from political correctness, and they openly attack habitual attitudes from which the Jews profit because they provide them with an exceptional status (the “Auschwitz-bonus”).

On the side of the perpetrators (to use this postwar term) too, the writings of the succeeding generations deal with the same kind of questions—the silence of the parents and the problem of identity after the rupture of civilization. To know that a father or a grandfather was responsible for war crimes in one way or another is a burden that affects a person deeply. To feel guilty for something that happened before one’s birth becomes more and more inadequate. And the new generation of writers is willing to look at this problem from a different angle as well.

The fact that a future perspective also will include the civilians on the German side among the victims, what for some people is equal to the perpetrators, shows the ongoing change in the perception of the past. We have to face the fact that it will result in a more holistic view of the entire period. This does not mean that the Holocaust will lose its exceptional character and its importance, but the perspectives will complement each other. The historian Reinhart Koselleck regards shared mourning as more important than the controversies around the question of comparability. He points out that by maintaining the division between victims and perpetrators, one follows the line of the Nazis who divided what once was a unity (205). We have to ask ourselves how long it shall take until this barrier is broken down and the language of memory becomes a common one (Rüsen 58–62).
According to Jörn Rüsen, we should also be aware that, contrary to a commonly held view, there are no grounds to believe that the greater the historical distance, the greater the objectivity. We live at the threshold between contemporary history and history. The loss of direct existential involvement can be compensated by careful critical interpretation of the material from today’s perspective, a task in which historians and philosophers mainly are engaged, or by fictional approaches that open new perspectives through new aspects and by asking different questions. But as we all know: thresholds are difficult to cross. While writers have to break new ground, readers will be acquainted with displaced focuses and unfamiliar topics. As many narratives demonstrate, Germany cannot dispose of a common memory because the population has to live with a traumatized memory of the war in general and the Holocaust in particular.

Therefore we will find a notable preemphasis on the topic of the search for identity on the part of the German–Jewish writers as well as a relentlessly (self-) critical view of their own mental condition within the self-imposed fate of living in Germany.

Notes

3. See also Ansgar Nünning, “‘Memory’s Truth’ und ‘Memory’s Fragile Power’: Rahmen und Grenzen der individuellen und kulturellen Erinnerung.”
4. “Second generation” is used here, as by Harmut Steinecke and others, as a collective term for the second and the following generations.
5. Charles Lewinsky refers to this reproach, making his protagonist Goldfarb sarcastically use the cliché “There is no business like Shoah-Business” (Ein ganz, 56).
6. Many contributions of American critics who deal with German–Jewish writings focus on the status of Jewish–German coexistence as represented in their narratives. They concentrate on finding advances or setbacks for the future of a cultural symbiosis in postwar Germany. Mostly they conclude that there will be nothing more than a negative symbiosis. Compare the contributions in Sander L. Gilman and Hartmut Steinecke, eds., Deutsch-jüdische Literatur der neunziger Jahre, and Leslie Morris and Jack Zipes, eds., Unlikely History. The anthology edited by Hope Herzog et al., Rebirth of a Culture, also includes Austria in the survey. Stephan Braese discusses a great variety of cultural aspects in his various contributions. His essay “Writing against Reconciliation” gives a survey of, among others, Dischereit’s, Biller’s, and Seligmann’s writing and this specific issue.
7. See Braese, Die andere Erinnerung, 7–24. The survey of relevant research reveals the difficulties experienced by German literary historians when dealing with the relationship between Germans and Jews represented in German literature after 1945.
8. See Seligmann’s essay “What Keeps the Jews in Germany Quiet?” in Gilman and Remmler, eds., 173–83, in which he tells about his problems to get his books published.
9. Anat Feinberg, “Die Splitter auf dem Boden,” gives a short overview over the characteristic as well as controversial standpoints of these authors.

10. The term is used by Gershom Scholem, Hannah Arendt, Esther Dischereit, Maxim Biller, and Rafael Seligmann. According to Dan Diner, the more adequate description of the relation between Germans and Jews after the Shoah is that of a “negative symbiosis.” See Diner, “Negative Symbiosis” and “Über Schulddiskurse”; and Melissa Beegle, Rafael Seligmann, who elaborates on both terms.

11. Seligmann’s discusses quite different identity problems of Jews living in Israel than Dischereit seems to identify in her texts.

12. In Mein Judentum, Jurek Becker answers the question of why he is a Jew simply by stating, “My parents were Jews.” In the absence of anti-Semitism, he had not felt Jewish for a second. “I have no affiliation, no feeling of happiness, I do not know any Jewish traditions. I do not feel like a Jew, but I am one, so what?” (15). Becker also objected to being identified as a Jew and finds it unacceptable that a Catholic or a Protestant can leave his church, while a Jew has no such opportunity. He has to bear his identity as a kind of guilt. For Becker, the overt politeness and the pitiful reactions when Auschwitz is mentioned are enervating and enlarge the feeling of foreignness. It deprives Jews of their normality.

13. See Norbert Oellers, “Sie holten mich ein, die Toten der Geschichte,” in Gilman and Steinecke, eds., 78–82, in which he discusses Dischereit’s enigmatic title and analyzes her elaborate poetic technique that leaves much free space for interpretation to the reader.


15. Seligmann likes to parody public figures and to compare himself with American–Jewish authors like Philip Roth. Stein emphasizes the difference between American Jews and German Jews: while the latter are marginal, the former (minorities in the United States, including American Jews) belong to the U.S.–American mainstream even as minorities. Stein finds that Seligmann underestimates the difference between the old American–Jewish and the new German–Jewish literature. For a critical discussion of the relationship see Jefferson Chase on Philip Roth and Rafael Seligmann, 2001.

16. See Rita Bashaw, “Comic Vision and ‘Negative Symbiosis,’” for an illuminating analysis that focuses on the conflict of comic vision and negative symbiosis in two of Biller’s texts.

17. Characterizing Biller’s writing as “counter-memory,” Karen Remmler finds that compared to Dischereit, Biller focuses less on identity problems than on exposure, not worrying about political correctness. “Maxim Biller,” 311. Biller and Seligmann deconstruct body and sexuality as images for the continuing social and cultural tensions between Germans and Jews, while Dischereit uses the female body per se as the expression of incorporated mourning. See “Maxim Biller,” 314–15.

18. The protagonist in The Auctioning of Rubinstein does not hesitate to criticize his parents for this decision and to accuse them of weakness and cowardice in an extremely impertinent way.

19. See Bettina Bannasch and Almuth Hammer, “Jüdisches Gedächtnis und Literatur,” 277–78, who show the importance of the connection between memory, historiography, and identity within Jewish tradition while secularization and acculturation exerted a negative influence on the culture of commemoration.
20. Hendrik Werner, in “Und da kam Onkel Melnitz,” draws attention to the fact that Melnitz seems to occupy an intermediate position between Benjamin (death living on through memory) and Horkheimer (death is dead). Cf. also Fred Wander’s belief in narration.

21. In the TV movie directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel, known from the film Der Untergang (Downfall, 2005), the well-known young actor Ben Becker plays the main character, Emanuel Goldfarb.


23. See the discussions by Aleida Assmann, Erinnerungsräume, and Ansgar Nünning, “Memory’s Truth,” of Halbwachs’s topic in connection with Rushdie’s term.


25. Looming large in Holocaust studies, the issue of traumatized memory offers rich and varied illustrations of the reciprocal relationship between memory and narrative. One indication of the complexity of traumatized memory of the Holocaust is that for the individual concerned it can be linked to as well as prompted by memories of all those involved in the event, including perpetrator, victim, and bystander. See Raul Hilberg, Th Destruction of the European Jews, 3rd ed., who makes systematic use of this tripartite distinction; Arne Johan Vetlesen, Evil and Human Agency, especially 1–13 and 235–57; and the studies of Holocaust memory referred to above.

Works Cited


