The 2003 Dorit and Gerald Paul Lecture

Alan Bern

"Who is Weiskopf? Joshua Sobol's Ghetto on East & West German Stages"

THE ROBERT A. AND SANDRA S. BORNS JEWISH STUDIES PROGRAM
Indiana University
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landing on the beaches of Normandy, World War II, in the view of many, finally came to an end. Surely, there is hardly anything that people in Germany have longed for more. And the much-publicized presence of their country’s leader at a public ceremony of such great symbolic importance, which never before included an official German representative, may indeed signal that the German yearning for normalization has now been achieved.

How Germany’s full acceptance and integration into an increasingly unified Europe may affect German-Jewish relations is less clear, especially at a time when European countries have seen a resurgence of anti-Jewish hostilities on a scale not witnessed on the continent for decades. To its credit, Germany has played a prominent role in decrying the return of public antisemitism; and as one expression of its concern, it recently hosted in Berlin a major gathering of European representatives to take stock of recurrent attacks against Jews and Jewish institutions and to develop means to monitor and act against such hostility. On the other hand, some of this aggression has taken place within Germany itself, and while the numbers of such incidents in the country do not rival those in France, where open antisemitism has become virulent, Germany’s Jews have had grounds over the past few years to once again feel uneasy about their place in the country. It may have taken some six decades to achieve, therefore, but Germany’s normalization within Europe has proceeded at a faster rate and more successfully than its relationship to the Jews. In the first instance, the country now stands as an equal among equals. In the second, it has worked hard to assume responsibility for the present-day welfare of the Jews as partial compensation for its murderous treatment of them in the past, but in the main both Germans and Jews recognize that a full normalization of ties remains unmet. To be sure, there have been gains in understanding over the years but, to quote from the ending of Alan Bern’s lecture, such understandings, desirable as they are, are “fragile” and “almost unimaginably difficult” to develop and sustain. For demonstrating some of the causes of the difficulty in such a vivid and thoughtful way, we are all in Alan Bern’s debt.

By offering us the text of his lecture at Indiana University, Mr. Bern helps to advance the aims of the Paul Program, which seeks to foster ongoing scholarly research into the complex interrelationships between German history and culture and Jewish history and culture broadly conceived.

The Dorit and Gerald Paul Program for the Study of Germans and Jews was established in 1986. Under the terms of the Paul Program, we regularly invite to the Bloomington campus of Indiana University scholars from Germany and elsewhere whose professional work involves them in serious study of German-Jewish interconnections. The first of these scholars was Professor Johann N. Schmidt, of Hamburg University, who delivered a lecture in the fall of 1986 entitled “Those Unfortunate Years: Nazism in the Public Debate of Postwar Germany.” Our second Paul Fellow was Professor Michael Brocke, of the University in Duisburg, who was with us in the fall of 1988 and addressed the following topic: “German-Jewish Symbiosis: Did it Ever Really
Foreword

This booklet presents the text of the second of two public presentations that Alan Bern offered as the 2003 Paul Lectures. The first of these lectures, given in Indianapolis on April 13, 2003, focused on the recent development of Jewish klezmer music in today’s Germany. Mr Bern’s second Paul lecture, reproduced here, was given on the Bloomington campus of Indiana University on April 14, 2003. On one level, it is a detailed and highly informative report on the staging of Joshua Sobol’s important and controversial play “Ghetto” at theaters in Essen and Berlin in 1992. As readers will soon discover, though, it is also a learned and deeply personal meditation on the ambiguities of Jewish identity and the tangled responses to it in contemporary German culture. Mr. Bern’s rehearsal of these psychological and social complexities is itself complex and reveals a mind struggling to make sense of some painful experiences that most observers probably would not hesitate to call antisemitic. The author, however, is reluctant to see them exclusively in these terms and instead subjects them to a kind of nuanced scrutiny that shows both his inherent fair-mindedness and reluctance to take recourse to easy explanations. The result is an essay ostensibly about contrasting productions of Sobol’s play but more tellingly about the inner and outer conflicts of and between Jewish identity and German identity, both understood against the lingering pressures of Germany’s Nazi past.

There are few people as capable of dealing with the contemporary resonances of these pressures and the tensions they invariably create between Germans and Jews as Alan Bern. For the past seventeen years, he has actively pursued a career in Germany as a composer and performer of Jewish music as well as an actor and musical director in German theater. As an American Jewish artist living in Berlin, Bremen, and other cities, he has exposed German audiences to aspects of Jewish culture that most otherwise might never come to know. He is also one of the people responsible for the revitalization and surprising popularity of Jewish music in Germany and other countries in Europe. Through manifold interactions over the years with German artists, audiences, cultural mediators, and government officials, Alan Bern has been inside German society as few other American Jews have been, and he writes about it, and the still highly-charged presence of Jews within it, with a rare degree of understanding.

We are publishing the text of his 2003 Paul lecture at what may be a decisive turning point in postwar German history. When, on June 6, 2004, Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder joined the leaders of the United States, France, Russia, and other nations to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Allied
Exist?” Professor Micha Brumlik, of the University of Heidelberg, visited Bloomington in the fall of 1990 and spoke on “The Situation of the Jews in Today’s Germany.” In the fall of 1992, Dr. Frank Stern, of Ben Gurion University, Israel, spoke about “Jews in the Minds of Germans in the Postwar Period.” The fifth Paul Fellow, in 1994, was Professor Gertrud Koch, of the Ruhr University, Bochum, who presented a lecture on “Jewish Characters in Postwar German Film.” In 1998 Professor Dieter Lamping, of Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, spoke on “The Representation of Jews in Postwar German Literature.” In the fall of 2000 Professor Amir Eshel, of Stanford University, delivered a lecture on “Jewish Memories, German Futures: Recent Debates in Germany about the Past.” Alan Bern, our most recent Paul Fellow, continues this distinguished line of visiting scholars.

My colleagues and I in the Robert A. and Sandra S. Borns Jewish Studies Program at Indiana University are extremely grateful to Dorit and Gerald Paul for enabling us to establish the program that bears their names. It will give us the opportunity in the years to come to continue a research program of the highest quality in one of the most compelling areas of modern cultural history.

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Who is Weiskopf?

Joshua Sobol’s *Ghetto* on East & West German Stages

**Introduction**

In postwar Germany a central cultural preoccupation has been to come to terms with the legacies of antisemitism and its culminating expression in Nazism. When such collective history has been interpreted through the collective form of a dramatic production, the result has sometimes been seen as a watershed moment in German cultural self-understanding. But how significant and resilient is that understanding? The following reflections address this question from an autobiographical perspective.

Between 1992 and 1994 I arranged and directed the music for several productions of Israeli author Joshua Sobol’s play “Ghetto” on German-speaking stages, including the Grillo Theater in Essen, in former West Germany, and the Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin, until 1990 an East German theater. I also worked with the actors on the historical and cultural background of Vilna and the Vilna ghetto, appeared as an actor and musician in over 150 performances of the play, and conducted foyer discussions with audiences following performances. In each of these roles I faced the challenge of understanding and representing Jewish identity, both that of the Jewish characters in the play and my own identity as an American Jew working with non-Jewish German colleagues portraying Jews and performing for mostly non-Jewish German audiences.

Although Sobel’s play is based on the lives and deaths of the Jews of the Vilna ghetto, the moral questions it poses go beyond that time and place and, like all serious literature, involve issues of broad or even universal human significance. But to comprehend the play at such a level, audiences must first understand the story in its Jewish specificity. For many German audiences, that entails contradictions of deeply ingrained habits of cultural imagination pertaining to Jews and the Holocaust. The tension between representing a specific, historical Jewish story and its claim to wider moral significance is the central challenge in staging “Ghetto.” In what follows I shall address how that challenge was undertaken by two German theaters in 1992, shortly after German re-unification, at a time when important differences between East and West German culture and dramatic traditions still strongly persisted.

“Who is Weiskopf?”

**Imaginable and unimaginable Jewish characters**

One night in early 1992, after a long day of rehearsing “Ghetto” at the Grillo Theater in Essen, Joshua Sobol, directing his own play in Germany for the first time, called me aside for a chat. Sobol had noticed my discomfort
growing during the rehearsal and realized I was reacting to apparently anti-Semitic caricatures in some of the actors’ work. His response was to ask me, “Who is Weiskopf?”

His question was intentionally ambiguous. On the one hand, Weiskopf is a central character in Sobol’s play, a fictionalized account of events that occurred in the Nazi-established Vilna ghetto. In the play, Weiskopf is a nobody who comes up with the idea of setting up a sewing factory to repair and return damaged clothing and uniforms arriving from the Eastern front, thereby saving the Nazis the time and expense of shipping them to Berlin and back. Through this scheme he becomes a millionaire in Ghetto currency. We witness his rise from a timid, late middle-aged lufmentsh to an arrogant con- niver with delusions of grandeur, both cunning and opportunistic, alternately obsequious and high-handed. A classic instance of hubris, Weiskopf eventually pushes his luck too far, which leads to his arrest and execution by the SS. Sobol’s question, “Who is Weiskopf?” pertained to the relation between this character and the historical Weiskopf, the real person who had lived in the Vilna ghetto and whose true story had served as the basis for the fictional character. And that real person, Sobol told me, had been a young, tough, petty street gangster, in his time a Jewish counterpart to the Rumanian and Albanian Mafiosi who control street crime in many Western European cities today. Ever since the first German production of “Ghetto” in 1984, though, Weiskopf had been played as a kind of contemporary Über-Shylock, a Jewish fat cat businessman seen through Nazi eyes. Why? Nowhere in the text or stage directions to Sobol’s play is Weiskopf described physically. But the image of a Jewish young street tough is so far outside the cultural imagination and experience of contemporary West Europeans, Jewish as well as non-Jewish, as to be virtually unimaginable.¹

By pointing out this discrepancy, Sobol wanted to call my attention to a kind of reflexive imaginative process taking place, which he himself was observing, not controlling. He had written Weiskopf one way, but something else was emerging. Why Sobol permitted this development to proceed will become clear later. For now, the point is this: after directors, actors, stage and lighting designers, composers, and everyone else involved in a dramatic production have confronted the text and one another with their own varied understandings, sensibilities, and abilities, the final result on stage reflects a collective act. For that reason, it can be used to diagnose cultural imagination and memory as much as or more than individual artistic intent.

“Ghetto”: production history

“Ghetto” was written by Joshua Sobol in 1983 and premiered that year in Israel. Its German premier followed in 1984 under the direction of Peter Zadek at the Freie Volksbühne in Berlin, with music by Peer Raabe, starring Ulrich Tukur and Michael Degen among other prominent German actors, and including the Israeli actress/singer Esther Ofarim and the Israeli clarinetist Giora Feidman as well. It opened, in other words, at the highest national
level of German theater and featured an all-star German and international cast. The play, which breaks taboos on several levels that will be discussed later, was a huge but highly controversial success in Berlin, and both the success and the controversy were soon repeated by productions in London, Los Angeles, and many other European and American cities.

In 1992, the Grillo Theater in Essen invited Sobol to direct the piece himself for the first time, working with the theater’s own ensemble plus a few guest actors for special roles. At the same time, the Maxim Gorki theater in Berlin, a former East German theater, was planning a production of the piece with its own in-house ensemble of East German actors. This was to be the first new production of the piece in Berlin since 1984, due to the intimidating prestige of the Zadek version. Further, “Ghetto” had been banned in East Germany, so this would be its first production by a still-essentially East German theater. The Essen production premiered in the early spring of 1992, the Berlin version some months later in the fall.

“Ghetto”: plot & historical basis

Sobol’s play is a fictionalized account of events in the Nazi-established Vilna ghetto. The plot is constructed around a number of fundamentally conflicting interests and personalities, many of whom are faced with radical moral choices and compromises if they have any hope to survive. At the center stands the character of Gens, based on Jakob Gens, the Nazi-appointed Jewish administrative director of the Vilna ghetto. Like the administrative directors of the other Nazi-established ghettos such as Lodz and Warsaw, Gens was responsible for all the operations of the ghetto, including making and carrying out selections and organizing transports. In Sobol’s play it is clear that Gens accepts this responsibility as part of a calculated gamble, hoping to keep alive as many Jews as possible until the end of the war. He therefore rejects and even suppresses the underground partisan movement’s call for a general uprising, convinced that it would lead to the immediate annihilation of all the ghetto’s inhabitants. Instead of open resistance he chooses a subversive strategy, using bureaucratic maneuvers to try to satisfy the Nazi orders minimally while actually postponing their final aim as long as possible. At the same time, while publicly and bitterly opposing the underground resistance movement, he secretly offers it support and weapons, preparing for the possible worst case in which the only remaining option would be armed struggle. But Gens’s activities go even further than this. Convinced that the Nazis will not demand the extermination of those Jews they perceive as useful to them, he helps organize several institutions meant to offer jobs and protection to Jewish workers, including a uniform repair factory and a ghetto theater and cabaret.

“Ghetto”: theater and music

Joshua Sobol has said in interviews that he wrote “Ghetto” after learning of the existence of a theater in the Vilna ghetto and hearing some of the songs
that were composed and performed there. In fact, the story of the ghetto theater is as central to the play as the story of Gens. The play, which has sometimes been incorrectly described as a musical, uses original songs from the ghetto theater as its dramatic backbone and for many of its most cathartic moments. These songs survived thanks to the Vilna poets Shmerke Kaczerginski and Abraham Sutzkever, both of whom also wrote extensively for the ghetto theater. Prior to the Nazis’ final liquidation of the ghetto, Kaczerginski and Sutzkever buried a large number of manuscripts before escaping to join the partisans. Both men survived the war to return and dig up their own buried treasures, which they subsequently donated to the YIVO Institute in New York, where they remain today. Kaczerginski later published a collection of 100 of these songs in Paris in 1947 under the title *Dos Gezang fun Vilner Geto*, and since then further collections have been published. Typically, they consist only of melody lines, song lyrics, and chords. Because the published songs are in this “bare bones” form, they can and must be thoroughly adapted to each individual production of the play. Consequently, although the melodies themselves are original and a fixed part of the play’s materials, their fully realized form in any production is ultimately a direct reflection of the act of collective imagination of all the players involved, including actors as well as musicians, directors, and even lighting and set designers. In other words, the music, like the text of the play, is only yet another template on which to construct representations, which can and will vary enormously from one production to another.

**Contradicting received history in the text of “Ghetto”**

When it first appeared in 1983, “Ghetto” created a sensation. The play calls into question or flatly contradicts many received images of Jews and Jewish life in the ghettos of World War II. Such images were widespread in the 1980s and, in fact, remain so even today. Among the ways “Ghetto” challenges such received history, three are particularly important:

i) Against the common idea of Jews in the ghetto as an undifferentiated mass of faceless victims, the play portrays highly diverse and complex social relationships among individuals and groups, who have partly competing and partly overlapping class, political, and ideological interests. The picture is one of a familiar, modern European society, albeit distorted into perverse and absurd forms by the pressures of ghetto conditions. By restoring individuality and modern social complexity to the image of Jews in the ghetto, the play contradicts the reductionist equation of Jews with victims (*Opfer*) and instead invites the audience to identify with them as normal people living in extreme and abnormal circumstances. On this level, the apparently unbridgeable difference between the audience and the Jews in the ghetto is seen as a matter of circumstance, not nature.

ii) Against the popular image of life in the ghetto as one of unremitting suffering and passive resignation (“lambs to the slaughter”), the play portrays the vitality, will to live, and creativity of the ghetto inhabitants. The central role
of the ghetto theater and its music in the play thematizes Jewish resistance of an unexpected kind, as a daily insistence on self-definition and self-expression and even a passionate appetite for the enjoyment of life. Several of the most important scenes in the play are live music and dance numbers, imaginative recreations of actual performances that took place in the Vilna ghetto theater. The effect of these performances is as shocking and taboo-breaking as it is dramatically effective. This effect works on two levels - intellectually, by portraying the ghetto theater as a place of moral resistance, not a distraction from real life in the ghetto, but essential to the possibility of continuing to live. Equally important, the live music and dance sweep the audience up and virtually force it to abandon its emotional and intellectual distance from the action on the stage. For a German, non-Jewish audience, it is doubly surprising to find itself emotionally identified with Jewish ghetto inhabitants, a clear breach in the emotional wall between Täter (perpetrator) and Opfer (victim). Even more shocking, this moment of identification is not solely one of Jewish suffering, which indeed is part of the moral education of most post-War Germans, but Jewish joy and lust for life! The final dramatic effect of this moment of identification is to challenge the strangeness and difference that accompany received images of Jews solely as victims.

iii) Finally, and most controversially, the play challenges the black-or-white moral depictions of the Judenräte (Jewish administrative councils) and Jewish police with a picture that is vastly more morally complex and difficult to come to terms with.4 In fact, none of the characters in Ghetto reflects either the traditional antisemitic picture of morally inferior Jews or the postwar philosemitic compensatory fantasy of Jewish moral superiority. Instead, we witness a variety of better and worse moral responses by a variety of Jews in a variety of conflict situations.5

These three challenges to the clichés of Jews and Jewish life in the Nazi ghettos all share a common point: they move to overcome the Jewish Otherness that was already a centuries-old symbol in European non-Jewish culture before finding its ultimate expression in Nazi ideology.

Staging Jews, staging the Holocaust

In moving now from the text of the play to its staging, some general remarks are necessary. In contemporary German Regietheater ("director's theater") the director has almost unlimited creative freedom when it comes to turning the text of a play into a piece of theater on stage. This liberty often goes far beyond directing how actors speak, move, and dress and can include deciding when and where the play takes place, its stage and lighting design, sound and music.

Further, the director (together with the dramaturge) determines how much and which parts of the text to use and even whether to incorporate into the production completely independent texts or images from other works. In the case of "Ghetto," though, a director in Germany is confronted with two challenges to this creative freedom that go well beyond those posed by most
other dramatic works. These are, first, how to represent Jews to German audiences, and second, how to represent certain Holocaust events on stage at all.

The first problem comes down to a choice between cliché and unintelligibility. There is, indeed, a rich vocabulary of signs available to identify a character on stage as a Jew, but virtually all are clichés inherited from several centuries of antisemitism. These include Jewish speech (yideln), Jewish dress (black coats and hats, or yarmelkas), Jewish appearance (shape of nose), Jewish movement (hyper-gesticulated, hurrying), Jewish temperament (hyper-emotional or calculating, depending on type), and Jewish character (arrogant or obsequious or both, again depending on type). All are signs of the Jew as Other, and some must be present for a character on stage to be readily identifiable as a Jew. Here lies the obvious problem when staging “Ghetto.” The text presents the existential predicaments of human beings who are Jews and implicitly asks the audience to identify with them. But the more recognizably “Jewish” the characters are portrayed on stage, the less possible is it for the broad public to identify with them, since it is precisely their Jewishness that sets them apart and makes them different. On the other hand, rejecting these signs of Jewishness effectively turns the characters into non-Jews and renders the story unintelligible. For many directors of plays set in the Nazi era, the way out of this predicament is provided, ironically, by the device of the yellow star, which the Nazis themselves employed once they realized that there were no reliable physiognomic signs of Jewishness. Attaching a yellow star to a person was to provide a foolproof external sign of Jewish identity. In this case, what works in life works just as well in theater. Ironically, a sign that was used since the Middle Ages to morally reduce its wearer survives in post-War German theater as one of the only ways to reliably identify a Jewish character without drawing from the repertoire of antisemitic clichés of Jewish body and speech.

The second problem any director faces who stages “Ghetto” is whether it is at all possible to portray certain events of the Holocaust on stage. This problem has several aspects. The first is the apparent impossibility of representing atrocity in ways that are plausible. Realism fails as an approach because it would seem that no realist portrayal could be brutal enough to achieve verisimilitude, and anything less than enough is either sentimentalizing or a Verharmlosung (whitewashing) or both. More stylized, abstract, or symbolic approaches avoid this danger, but they run the risk of a different kind of Verharmlosung by aestheticizing the subject. A further aspect of the problem is this: an essential element of theater is its power to transform, through exaggeration or estrangement, a mundane moment into a heightened or surreal one. But so many events of the Holocaust are already in themselves so extreme or surreal that they simply defy this transformation. To attempt to further estrange or exaggerate them would risk turning them into absurdities with no relation to their original power and meaning. Paradoxically, even a realist representation of such events on stage would, because of their inherent
strangeness, already read as a theatrical estrangement, once again robbing the events of their meaning.⁶

**The Grillo Theater (Essen) production**

I turn now to consider the ways that the Grillo (Essen) and Gorki (Berlin) stagings actually came to terms with some of these issues. In Essen, Sobol was directing his own play for the first time. In our first meeting he told me he wanted to try an experiment, to "give the piece to the actors," not to tell them what to do but to let them discover as much as possible on their own. The motivation for this move was not just egalitarian: Sobol was curious to see how the imaginations of the cast would interact with the text of the play, which was more interesting to him than imposing a single "directorial" vision on the production. For similar reasons, Sobol was unwilling to offer an intellectual, analytic interpretation of his own dramatic text: since the playwright himself was present, the dramaturge didn't dare intervene.⁷ That the story was a Jewish story was essentially taken for granted; Sobol's interest lay in helping the actors to understand the situation as a human situation per se. There was never any discussion of how to "act" or "look" or "talk Jewish," and the signifier identifying the Jewish characters was indeed the yellow star. The sole exception to this was, again, Weiskopf, whose character was richly identifiable by anti-Semitic clichés. The set, too, contained only one indirectly Jewish signifier, being a bare stage framed by mountains of old coats, a reference to the exterminated victims of the selections and camps. Only the songs, sung by the actors in Yiddish and arranged for two musicians (accordion/piano and clarinet) based on styles likely to have been actually heard in the Vilna ghetto theater, had an unambiguously Jewish character. The music therefore often carried the main weight of Jewish representation, and Sobol frequently emphasized its importance to understanding the world of the play. Otherwise, he provided actors with stories and direction intended to help them connect with the emotional meaning of a scene, but not its specifically Jewish meaning.⁸

This approach to directing dovetailed with certain cultural and theatrical traditions of West Germany in interesting ways. The majority of the actors in Essen had been trained in West Germany, learning an approach to acting that builds a character "from the inside out," beginning by understanding and identifying with it and then finding external expressive forms. In the absence of direction from Sobol on how to "act Jewish," and encouraged to discover the universal human meaning in a scene, these actors tended to create characters just like those in any other play, who just happened here to be Jews in Vilna. Except for the yellow star, tattered clothes, and singing in Yiddish, there were few if any signifiers of their Jewishness. Whatever constituted this Jewishness was entrusted largely to the kinds of understanding and imagination that the audience already brought with it. It was a reasonable assumption that most audiences would have a substantial background of ideas and images of Jews in ghettos and camps of WWII, since the Holocaust has been a recur-
ring theme in West German popular culture. Sobol’s direction concentrated, therefore, on creating moments of identification rather than difference. Three scenes can illustrate this emphasis.

In the first, a ghetto children’s choir performs a prize-winning song, “Shtiller, Shtiller” (“Quiet, Quiet”), composed by Alex Vulkovisky, an 11-year-old boy. In Sobol’s staging, the actors portraying the parents of the choir children exit the stage and go sit among the audience, suggestively transforming the Essen audience in 1992 into the ghetto theater audience fifty years earlier. The choir performance is interrupted by the sudden appearance of Kittel, the SS commandant, who chooses this moment to announce the selection and transport of every third child in the choir. The actors playing their parents, seated in the audience, rise up in a panic and rush up onto the stage as the children are forcibly carried away by SS men. For the audience left behind in their seats, the suggestion is strong that although it was not their children being carried away, it could have been. A moment of identification is created by a dramatic means that does not rely on external signs of Jewish Otherness.

The second scene portrays the return into the ghetto of a group of musicians and actors, long believed to be dead, whom Gens (the Jewish administrative director) somehow manages to save and bring back through the sewers in order to create the new ghetto theater. A plank opens in the floor of the stage, fetid steam rises from the hole, out of which crawl 20 filthy, emaciated, almost naked bodies. The text expresses the disbelieving, hysterical reactions of the inhabitants who greet these souls returned from the dead, who are then handed instruments and begged to play again. They try to do so in spite of their exhausted state, leading ultimately to an ecstatic and despairing dance of reuniting. Sobol refused to provide an exact form for this scene, relying instead on the actors’ and musicians’ ability to emotionally and psychologically identify with the situation and create the scene anew spontaneously in each performance. The first notes out of the clarinet are not Yiddish music, as one would expect, but the opening line of the Mozart clarinet concerto, challenging the audience to re-think the identity of the musician on stage. Only gradually is the music allowed to take on a specifically Yiddish character, developing into an ecstatic dance, which does not, however, use traditional Jewish dance movements.

The third scene is possibly the most telltale in understanding the underlying strategy of Sobol’s staging. In the next to last scene of the play, just before all the actors of the ghetto theater are massacred by SS machine gun fire, they come out on stage to perform, as an act of protest, what they know will certainly be their last show in front of Kittel, the SS commandant. In the first version of “Ghetto,” the scene was written as a highly symbolic and complex parable; the actors appear as walking clothes with no bodies in them, recounting a dream of redemption and homeland. But the prior reception of the play, together with the events of 1992 in Germany, had convinced Sobol that this gesture was far too ambiguous and aesthetic, and so he re-wrote the scene for Essen. In the Essen version, the ghetto actors appear for the last time
in full SS uniforms and perform, in front of Kittel, a parody based on the speeches of Karl Lueger and the Shylock monologue from *The Merchant of Venice*. The Eternal Jew is then vanquished, the 1000-year Reich proclaimed, and the SS-line dances a spastic can-can to the music of “An die Freude” from Beethoven’s 9th symphony, getting stuck in an endless loop, however, as the recording repeatedly skips and sticks on the phrase “werden Brüder, werden Brüder, werden Brüder...” (“become brothers, become brothers...”). This final parody locates the Nazi “aberration” within the broader lines of German history and culture. By identifying with the Jewish characters and point of view, the audience is challenged to go beyond the safe act of condemning dead Nazis and to reflect critically on its own cultural continuity with the Nazi past.

**The Maxim Gorki Theater (Berlin) production**

In many ways, the conditions of the Gorki Theater production can be seen as the reverse of those in Essen. The director, Charles Risse, was an East German non-Jew who had had very little contact with Jewish culture or history. The almost entirely East German ensemble inherited a theater tradition that stressed clarity and inventiveness of external expressive form rather than inner motivation. The director was constantly concerned to give definite form to characters and scenes and to weed out any and all vagueness and “naturalness.” Being “in character” meant staying within a form defined by pronunciation, intonation, posture, gesture, and movement. Risse would cry “Privat!” (out of character) whenever he spotted an actor being “too natural.” Whereas Sobol and the Essen actors began with “understanding” the existential situation of the characters and let outer form develop from there (“inside-out”), Risse and the Berlin actors began by finding a vocabulary of the “showable” from which characters could be inferred (“outside-in”). This approach entailed an extremely content-rich vocabulary of representation and immediately raised the question of what it was to talk, sound, look, move, and act “like” the Jews of the Vilna ghetto. Dovetailing with this theater tradition was the important fact that Jews and Jewish culture had been largely missing for 40 years from East German life and popular culture. In the Gorki Theater production, the absence of things Jewish in East Germany coincided with a theater tradition demanding representational clarity, the result landing squarely on the need to represent the Jewish characters as Jews. But this need was in deep conflict with the fact, as valid in East as in West Germany, that virtually the whole vocabulary of signs available to represent Jews to German audiences was permeated with antisemitism.

In the absence of Sobol, the responsibility for guiding the search for a usable, non-antisemitic vocabulary of Jewish representation fell explicitly on me, the only Jew involved in the production. Accordingly, over a period of eight weeks we watched documentaries and read books and articles about the history and culture of the Vilna ghetto, learned Yiddish dance and song style, and watched old films of Yiddish theater productions. The idea was not to have the actors imitate what they saw, but to fill in a missing education that
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would allow them to create their own vocabulary of representation, just as they would in any other case where they would already be familiar with the culture and characters to be represented on stage. From Risse and the rest of the directing team came a strong demand for authenticity wherever possible; in fact I suspect that I was hired to be musical director partly on the presumption that my being an American Jew and having already worked directly with Sobol brought an unimpeachable authenticity to the production. This presumption culminated in an absurd, tragi-comic moment, just before the opening night. Until then I had worked as musical director seated in the audience, giving direction to the actors and musicians on stage. But since I was eventually going to perform in the show as an actor and musician myself, the moment came when I had to abandon my safe audience seat and go on stage. At that point I asked the director for the kind of character information he had been giving to all the other actors and musicians in the ensemble: what should I portray once I got on stage? How should I move, look, gesture, what should be my form? The answer, coming from the same director whose favorite criticism was “Privat!”, was: “Alan, sobald du da siehst mit deiner wunderschönen jüdischen Nase, haben wir’s geschafft!” (“Alan, all you’ve got to do is just stand there with you’re beautiful Jewish nose, and we’ve got it made!)

Of course I was shocked, and for neither the first nor the last time. One of my reasons for being in Germany and for working on productions such as “Ghetto” was precisely to experience and try to understand whatever lies behind such remarks. It would be easy but wrong, in my opinion, to judge Risse’s comment as unambiguously antisemitic and leave it at that. But arriving at a balanced understanding of it is also extraordinarily difficult, both intellectually and emotionally, especially for the person who bears the brunt of such a remark. Clearly, the nose remark draws on a long history of antisemitic signifiers. On the other hand, Risse was correct in thinking that my nose would successfully function as a signifier of Jewishness for his audience. Given the real history of certain nose shapes as signifiers of Jewishness, it would in fact function as dramatically correctly in the production. Assuming that Risse wanted his audience to read “through” the Jewish specificity of the play to reach its broader moral meaning, such signifiers were necessary. And whereas having an actor put on a “Jewish nose” with makeup would invite the charge of antisemitism, place on stage a real Jewish musician who happens to bring along the “right kind of nose” would be equally effective while at least apparently resistant to such a charge.

In fact, Risse and the actors struggled mightily not to recreate antisemitic clichés. Whenever the choice between unintelligibility and cliche became apparently unavoidable, the choice itself was rejected and the scene was simply cut. The scene in which the actors return to the ghetto through the sewer, for example, is written to begin in stunned silence and to culminate in an ecstatic dance. But for the Gorki theater production, the beginning of the scene seemed to offer no toehold at all for representing Jewishness — how can a group of silent, stunned people still be Jewish? — and the ecstatic dance at
the end could only be imagined through clichés of wild, folkloristic Jews. Consequently, the entire scene was cut. Furthermore, this scene, and several others in the play, portray a kind of emotionality that the director and ensemble alike felt audiences would never "buy." Knowing that something happening on stage is, after all, "only theater," implied limits on how much represented emotionality would be believable. This argument perhaps covered up a deeper sense that went unstated: to portray certain kinds of emotionality on stage would be to fall into the antisemitic cliché of hyper-emotionality, which had to be avoided if the characters were to remain sympathetic. Finally, my own sense was that it would have been embarrassing to the actors to try to act with so much emotionality and that they would have been unable to satisfy the need for a clear expressive form while doing so. So, with the stated aim of preserving audience credulity and the unstated aim (I believe) of avoiding embarrassment, scenes where this problem arose were simply eliminated from the production.

As in Essen, the music and songs of the ghetto theater often provided the best form for representing Jews without falling into cliché, and several scenes were consequently expanded to make room for more use of them. Here the long tradition in East Germany of using theater to express disguised and forbidden political views allowed the director and the actors to appreciate the similarly subversive role the ghetto theater had played in Vilna. In one scene illustrating this, Kittel, the SS commandant, arrives in the ghetto theater carrying his saxophone and eager to play Gershwin, whose music had been forbidden by the Reichsmusikkammer (Music Ministry). He then forces the ghetto actors and musicians to accompany him in a rendition of Gershwin's "Swanee." While conforming to the letter of Kittel's command, they find a number of ways to subversively protest their situation and mock Kittel and the Nazis. This scene, with its representation of collective humiliation and outward conformity redeemed by subversive and disguised gestures of freedom, became so central to the Gorki Theater production that the poster for the show took over its motif, portraying a dancing Jew holding a star of David in a such a way that his limbs are forced into the shape of a Swastika. Many things come together in this image: the absolute power of the Nazis over the Jews in the ghetto, the Nazi appropriation of the Star of David as a badge of shame, the absurdity and humiliation of cabaret under ghetto conditions, but equally, the act of resistance which asserts an internal spiritual freedom in the midst of conforming to irresistible external oppression.

Sobol's revision of the final parody for Essen was also rejected by the Gorki production, which returned to the original, more indirect parable of the dancing clothes. The reason for this decision was also stated in terms of better "playability," but I suspect another, unstated reason. Sobol's revised finale implicitly addresses the audience as the children and grandchildren of the Nazis. This idea, while not uncontroverted, was also not new in West German culture, which traces its origins back to the years of de-Nazification. In contrast, both the official history of East Germany and its popular culture main-
tained that the East Germans, far from being the children and grandchildren of Nazis, were the heirs of the Nazis’ opponents, namely, the Communists. As late as 1992, this picture had not changed enough for an East German audience to accept that the critique of Nazi tendencies in German culture contained in Sobol’s revised parody could be plausibly directed at them.

I myself felt that this rejection was a kind of obfuscation, and I reacted by filling out the original “dancing clothes” parody with as much musical subversion as I could, trying to build a scene that the real actors and musicians of the Vilna ghetto might have appreciated or even created themselves. This move entailed musical motifs drawn from the Yom Kippur service and other “insider” references that neither the ensemble nor the audience would likely understand. It was admittedly my own private gesture of subversive rebellion against a production that seemed to me to have deftly avoided some of the more difficult confrontations of the play. It also reflected my own increased sense of difference as an American Jew working within an East German production. That my sense of difference could provoke a reciprocal response was illustrated a little over a year later in the following way:

One of the young actors at the Gorki Theater had thrown himself into his role with special enthusiasm, singing, dancing, and acting his heart out at each opportunity. He had also spent a year in America and fallen in love with American culture. We shared a dressing room with the rest of the male ensemble, and he and I spent many hours talking about American and Jewish music and culture. We had even made an implicit promise to work together again at the first chance. One day a special performance was given for several high school classes that had been bussed in to see the show as a supplement to their study of the Holocaust. Throughout the performance, the students acted out their resentment over their forced attendance, laughing loudly at inappropriate moments and constantly making audible comments. This behavior climaxed during the final scene. Just as the Jewish characters were being massacred on stage by machine gun fire, and before the curtain fell, the students began to yell and cheer “Zugabe, Zugaber!” (“Encore, encore!”). I lay on the ground, frozen in my position and deeply shaken by their reaction. After the curtain came down I stood up, and instead of appearing for the curtain call and bow, went up to the dressing room and sat down to collect myself. Moments later the door burst open and into the room stormed my young actor friend. With fury in his voice he yelled at me, “Das ist das Problem mit euch! Sobald euer jüdisches Gedudel nicht mehr ankommt, haut’ ihr einfach ab!” [“That’s the problem with you (all). As soon as your Jewish shtick doesn’t go over any more, you just run away!”]

That incident was devastating, and the challenge of understanding it occupies me still today. At the moment it was uttered I felt that all of my work had been in vain, that the remark revealed the persistence of a level of suspicion and hatred that simply could not be overcome. In the meantime I think of the incident in the following terms. When my young actor friend found himself being ridiculed by an audience of German non-Jews only a few
years younger than himself, he suddenly found himself rejected by the group which constituted his own proximate identity. He had taken the risk as an actor to play a Jew, and the consequence in that moment was exclusion by his peers. Standing next to him on stage, I held a threefold authority: being older, the musical director, and the only real Jew on stage. My colleagues expected me to lead the response on our behalf against the hostile audience confronting us, to reassert our identity and solidarity in the face of the attack. But the audience’s behavior had jolted me out of my temporary identification with my co-actors and thrown me back into the familiar sense of difference and separateness from non-Jews, a sense that is common enough anyway in Germany and had been exacerbated frequently during the course of the production. By leaving the stage on my own I signalled that whatever pact had been made among us as artists to transcend in imagination the boundary of German and Jew had just been broken by cold, hard reality. I unconsciously reestablished that boundary between us, the very boundary I’d asked my colleagues to cross, and which, by their having done so, had led them to this moment. My young actor friend responded by throwing that boundary back at me with a vehemence, expressing his sense that I had betrayed him and my own words by retreating to a separate identity rather than taking a stand with him.

The premise and promise of “Ghetto” and similar dramatic works was the possibility of re-imagining one’s own sense of identity and that of others, a step in the coming-to-terms with the legacies of antisemitism and Nazism. This challenge existed for those of us who brought the piece to the stage just as much as for our audiences. I believe that many of us did succeed in meeting this challenge much of the time, but the understandings we achieved imaginatively are fragile compared to the resilience of our inherited senses of identity. I do not conclude from this experience that the kinds of cultural understanding aimed at by works like “Ghetto” are impossible to achieve, only that the obstacles facing it are almost unimaginably difficult.
In fact, a particularly memorable character of this type, Benya Krik, was created by Isaak Babel in his “Odessa Stories,” which was available in Germany both before and after WWII. Following Frank Stern’s view of philosemitism as cultural policy in postwar Germany (see “Jews in the Minds of Germans in the Postwar Period,” 1992 Paul Lecture, Indiana University), morally exemplary Jewish characters such as Nathan the Wise and Anne Frank were celebrated, and by corollary, morally negative ones were taboo. Curiously, Stern neglects to consider possible evidence for this corollary, namely, the 1985 controversy surrounding the Frankfurter Schaubühne’s production of Fassbinder’s play, “Der Müll, die Stadt und der Tod” (“Garbage, the City and Death”). Claiming that Fassibinder’s portrayal of the central character, a Jewish real estate speculator, was antisemitic, the Frankfurt Jewish Community took over the stage and prevented the opening night performance. Was this a case of justified moral outrage over Fassbinder’s antisemitism or philosemitic censorship of his right as an artist to create a negative Jewish character, or a little of both? The terms of the debate were never satisfactorily settled.

A second, related, and equally important consideration here is the official postwar German categorization of Jews as Opfer (victims), in contrast to Nazi Täter (perpetrators). A character like Benya Krik is far too much in command of himself to plausibly be seen as an Opfer, he defies that category and so becomes unimaginable. In this respect the Shylock type, although a negative Jewish character, can still be seen as an Opfer of a kind, so the equation Jew=Opfer goes unchallenged, and Shylock remains imaginable as a type.

I emphasize the term “Nazi-established ghetto” to counter the surprisingly widespread mistaken belief that Jews already lived in ghettos in Eastern European cities prior to the Nazi occupation.

For more on the history of the Vilna ghetto, see Herman Kruk, The Last Days of Jerusalem of Lithuania: Chronicles from the Vilna Ghetto, (Yale University Press, 2002), which Sobol used in its original Yiddish, Togbuch fun Vilner Geto, (Workman’s Circle, 1961) as a primary source for his play.

For more on Gens and other leaders of the ghetto Judenräte, see Isaiah Trunk, Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe under Nazi Occupation (N.Y.: Macmillan 1971) and Leonard Tushnet, The Pavement of Hell: 3 Leaders of the Judenrat (N.Y.: St. Martin’s Press, 1972). For a fictionalized account of the kind of dilemmas that such figures as Jacob Gen faced and his strategies of meeting them, see Leslie Epstein’s novel, King of the Jews, (Putnam, 1978).

Morally ambiguous aspects of the Holocaust have been explored by other writers, notably Hannah Arendt in Eichmann in Jerusalem and Primo Levi in “The Gray Zone” in The Drowned and the Saved.

The popular success of “Ghetto” in Germany has sometimes been attributed to its morally ambiguous portrayal of Jews, which can be taken to relativize German culpability. Indeed, in many of the over 100 post-performance talks with the audience in which I participated, I did hear remarks such as “so the Jews were not so perfect after all either.” Remarks like this should be interpreted, of course, in the context of German antisemitism reaching back long before the 20th century, but not only in that context. The postwar philosemitism discussed by Stern (see footnote #1) effectively censored all public criticism of things Jewish, and Sobol’s play spectacularly broke that taboo. Perhaps this was possible only because Sobol himself is Jewish, as is the play’s first director, Peter Zadek. Therefore, presumably, the portrayal of Jewish moral ambiguity could be a kind of self-criticism rather than an antisemitic attack. But to balance this interpretation of the play’s popularity, I must add that in the post-performance audience talks I heard just as often astonished statements that the Jews in the Vilna Ghetto had been “just like us” (German non-Jews) and many expressions of
shock and sadness. One can speculate about whether these remarks were sincere or simply politically correct. But for me, at least, as one of the artists involved in bringing the work to the stage, it would be cynical and scornful of both the audience and my own work to assume that only the self-exculpating remarks could be honest.

6A single example suffices. Abraham Sutzkever recounts the story of a young boy, Jankel Solmanowitsch, who was taken in winter with a group of other Jews to the Ponar woods to be shot. Told to undress and lie down in the snow and wait, Solmanowitsch complied, until several hours later and insane with cold and fear he simply stood up and began to walk away. When the SS commandant, Kittel, challenged him and asked where he thought he was going, he simply replied “I’m cold, I want to go warm up.” Instead of shooting him on the spot, Kittel replied, “Well, if you’re cold, dress yourself and go home, of course.” Thanks to this moment of absurd mercy, Solmanowitsch survived. The event itself is so absurd, any further estrangement would only weaken its meaning. But portraying it realistically, “just as it happened,” would already read as theatrical artifice! For more on the difficulty of putting the Holocaust on stage, see Rolf Hochhuth’s reflections in Der Stellvertreter (The Deputy).

7In German theater the dramaturge is a regular part of the directing team, whose responsibilities include making cuts in the text, interpreting it, as well as historical and background research. These functions are naturally limited when the playwright and the director are one and the same person, and Sobol’s principled refusal to interpret his own play only made the limitations on the dramaturge more acute.

8An example: to illustrate how a group should react in a scene in which one of its members is publicly raped by an SS man, Sobol told of once seeing a group of cats sitting in a circle on the road, surrounding and observing another cat that had just been hit by a car and was dying. The translation of this vivid image to a Jewish, or simply human, context was left to the actors’ individual intuitions.

9The first major wave of attacks on foreigners since German reunification occurred in 1992, and many artists felt a response of some kind to be necessary.

10In writing what follows I’m aware that some readers may feel I become an antisemitism apologist. That is not my own view. I try to distinguish between the way antisemitic signifiers function and whether their use is antisemitic. This raises questions of conscious vs. unconscious antisemitism and even where meaning resides in language, both of which are beyond the scope of this paper. Finally, for some readers, my attempt to understand Risse’s remark will seem like a masochistic rationalization. But for me, the direct, personal experience of such remarks tests my thinking and my commitment to understanding.

11See Sander Gilman’s The Jew’s Body (Routledge, 1991) for a rich catalogue of physical signifiers of Jewish inferiority in German cultural history.

12But was Risse’s remark antisemitic? At the time he made it, Risse and I had already passed through eight weeks of rehearsals and many late nights together, and the trust and affection that we had developed for each other included the possibility of teasing. Notoriously, antisemitism and similar prejudices find expression in just such moments of teasing, when trust has led to letting down the guard of self-censorship. It is equally true that the meaning of teasing about stereotypical ethnic, religious, class, or gender characteristics depends heavily on whether the teaser and the teased person are both members of the same group. The same remark that is an insult when made across such a boundary is often a sign of solidarity when both parties are “insiders.” For that reason, when an outsider knowingly makes such a remark, its performative function can be to assert having overcome the difference with the other, a risk taken based on trust. This is how I experienced Risse’s remark. Using the nose cliché?, he
transgressed the boundary between an American Jew and a German non-Jew, positing my acceptance of him on “my side” of the boundary. That his remark nevertheless shocked me demonstrates the power of such boundaries and the risk involved in transgressing them.

Even more acutely than in the earlier passage discussing Risse’s “Jewish nose” remark, I’m aware that what follows runs the risk of being misunderstood. My attempt to see my own role in this incident is not a case of “shifting the blame to the victim.” I was not a victim in the situation, and I am not taking or assigning blame, simply analyzing an interaction. That something else could also have happened is clear; for instance, my colleagues could have protected me and initiated a gesture of solidarity themselves, rather than waiting for me and implicitly giving me the responsibility to defend us all against the attack. But the reality of my position as a director increased the unlikelihood of such an initiative on their part, and all of us were so unprepared for and shaken in the moment that a more considered response was impossible. Afterwards there was much discussion about what could be done if the situation were to arise again, but it never did.
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Copies of previous Paul Lectures by Johann Schmidt, Micha Brumlik, Frank Stern, Dieter Lamping, and Amir Eshel are available upon request to the Robert A. and Sandra S. Borns Jewish Studies Program, Indiana University, Goodbody Hall 308, 1011 E. Third Street, Bloomington, IN 47405-7005.