The Dorit and Gerald Paul Program for the Study of Germans and Jews

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"‘Those Unfortunate Years’: Nazism in the Public Debate of Post-War Germany"

The Jewish Studies Program
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We are pleased to share with interested readers the text of a lecture delivered at Indiana University on October 15, 1986 to an audience that included benefactors Dorit and Gerald Paul of Indianapolis and West German Consul General Götz von Boehmer and his wife, among many others. The lecture inaugurated the Dorit and Gerald Paul Program for the Study of Germans and Jews, a program established by the Jewish Studies Program at Indiana University to encourage scholarship here and in Germany on the multifaceted interrelationships between Germans and Jews. We are extremely grateful to the Pauls for their generosity, which will enable us in the years to come to continue a research program of highest quality in one of the most compelling areas of modern cultural history.

Alvin H. Rosenfeld
Director, Jewish Studies Program
Foreword

This lecture by Professor Johann N. Schmidt of Hamburg University inaugurates the Dorit and Gerald Paul Program for the Study of Germans and Jews, a new initiative on the part of the Jewish Studies Program at Indiana University that will enable us to devote ongoing scholarly attention to some of the most crucial questions of modern culture. It is our hope that over the course of the years the Paul Program will permit us to advance understanding of the complex connections between German history and Jewish history comprehensively conceived. In the years to come, indeed, we shall look forward to public lectures and published research on a broad range of issues.

At the very beginning of our work, however, there is only one point at which we can properly begin, and that is at the point of trauma. Hence the appropriateness of Professor Schmidt’s focus on “Those Unfortunate Years: Nazism in the Public Debate of Post-war Germany.” Dr. Schmidt brings to our inaugural program professional credentials of an exemplary sort. As Dorit and Gerald Paul know, under the terms of the program that bears their name we aim to invite to Indiana University not only good scholars but men and women of conscience, scholars who realize that the subject at hand has an inherent moral dimension as well as inherent academic interest. It is precisely these qualities of mind that direct Professor Schmidt’s scholarly work and that establish a tone for the kind of effort we wish to sponsor throughout the course of the Paul Program.

The keynote for this tone was sounded most forcefully on May 8, 1985 in President Richard von Weizsäcker’s address to the West German Parliament. To quote briefly from this memorable speech:

Hardly any country has in its history always remained free from blame for war or violence. The genocidé of the Jews is, however, unparalleled in history.

The perpetration of this crime was in the hands of a few people. It was concealed from the eyes of the public, but every German was able to experience what his Jewish compatriots had to suffer, ranging from plain apathy and hidden intolerance to outright hatred. Who could remain unsuspecting after the burning of the synagogues, the plundering, the stigmatization with the Star of David, the deprivation of rights, the ceaseless violation of human dignity? Whoever opened his eyes and ears and sought information could not fail to notice that Jews were being deported. The nature and scope of the destruction may have exceeded human imagination, but in reality there was, apart from the crime itself, the attempt by too many people . . . not to take note of what was happening . . .

All of us, whether guilty or not, whether old or young, must accept the past. We are all affected by its consequences and liable for it. . . . It cannot be subsequently modified or made not to have happened. . . . Whoever refuses to remember the inhumanity is prone to new risks of infection.

The Jewish nation remembers and will always remember. We seek reconciliation. Precisely for this reason we must understand that there can be no reconciliation without remembrance.

It will be years before we know how and in what ways these words echo through the German nation and even more years before such reconciliation may come about. Nevertheless, one recognizes the rightness of the sentiment and hopes that there are many in Germany who share it and will do what is necessary to bring President von Weizsäcker’s noble aims to fruition.
On the occasion of our first Paul Lecture, President von Weizsäcker sent a message to the Jewish Studies Program, as did Richard Burt, the United States Ambassador to West Germany. The texts of the two messages follow:

I welcome the scholarly commitment of the Jewish Studies Program of Indiana University to undertake substantial research on the relationship between Germans and Jews, with the support of a generous gift from Dorit and Gerald Paul. By engaging in constructive scholarly dialogue with German scholars who are working in this area, you and your colleagues will, I am certain, make a major contribution to a better understanding of the interrelationship between Jews and Germans. At the same time, this cooperation between German and American researchers will help strengthen the bonds between scholars on both sides of the Atlantic.

I wish all of those involved with the Jewish Studies Program success. Only by improving our understanding of the interrelationships among peoples and cultures can we hope to lay foundations for a better and more peaceful world.

Richard Burt
U.S. Ambassador to West Germany

[1] convey to you [my] appreciation and thanks for the wonderful initiative taken by the Jewish Studies Program at Indiana University to establish a scholarly research program for the study of Germans and Jews and for the generous gift by Dorit and Gerald Paul that will make this program possible.

In the United States as well as in Germany we observe a growing interest in the study of the history of Jews within the context of German history. The initiative taken by the Jewish Studies Program is a clear example of this development. It is in fact a most welcome contribution to enlarging our knowledge about an important element of both German history and the history of the Jews, in the United States as well as in Germany. This program may even have a stimulating effect on the already intensifying dialogue between Germans and Jews. A growing number of Germans place great significance on this dialogue. Projects like the initiative taken by the Jewish Studies Program at Indiana University will be understood by many Germans as an encouraging answer to their quest for re-establishing close and intensive contacts between Jews and Germans despite the terrible things that did happen in the past. This past shall never be forgotten—it will always add an extraordinary dimension to any kind of contact between Germans and Jews wherever and whenever it may take place. In our day people in many countries are hoping for a better world, for peace, social justice, and for the preservation of human rights. Jews and Germans are also called upon to contribute to the creation of such a better world by using once again the potential that lies in the possibility of their future cooperation. The Jewish Studies Program is taking an important step in this direction.

Dr. Richard von Weizsäcker
President, Federal Republic of Germany

Encouraged by these expressions of support and good will, we proceed with the work before us and take satisfaction in presenting to you this paper by Johann N. Schmidt, letting it point the way in a most important undertaking.

A.H.R.
‘Those Unfortunate Years’: 
Nazism in the Public Debate of Post-War 
Germany

1

“Das vergangene Unheil,” “jene schreckliche Zeit,” “die schlimmen Jahre”: These expressions, still rather common in Germany today, reveal themselves as blatant euphemisms that save the speaker from speaking out what is for him unspeakable. They imply not only that the years between 1933 and 1945 were unfortunate but also that the German people suffered an unfortunate fate, similar to that of a cruel destiny which heaped tragic guilt upon them. There are many other expressions that work the same way. “Kristallnacht” has a better sound than “pogrom,” and “final solution” must appeal to anyone who prefers well-ordered circumstances. Strangely enough, only the year 1945 is described in much gloomier terms. What had taken place at the end of the war is not commonly regarded as liberation from Nazism, but often as “catastrophe,” “disaster,” or “collapse” (Zusammenbruch). If anything, it freed the German people from “barbarian forces” that had overrun and ruled the country and, one is led to believe, had seduced its inhabitants. When today the average man or woman talks about the Nazi years, we should expect the confirmation of how difficult it was to remain decent in a world of such seduction and depravity. Instead, we find history embroidered with innumerable little stories about inner resistance and symbolic acts of bravery.

After I had agreed to present this talk, I faced one major difficulty. What did I actually want to prove by talking about the public debate about Nazism in post-war Germany? There is perhaps no need to prove that Nazi ideas still exist in our country. Isolated instances of Nazi ideology can be found, and yet a simple enumeration of these would give a totally distorted impression of a country still imbued with Fascist thought. Clearly this is not the case, and I strongly resent the misapplication of the word “Fascism” wherever classical right-wing ideas are involved, since it devalues the historical phenomenon. In fact, most people in Germany would like to forget about the past today rather than tomorrow. There is a fairly common consensus that—to put it in the same vague manner—“things like that should never happen again.” Overt Nazi statements can be ascribed to a “lunatic fringe,” which, of course, does not mean that we should’t take them seriously. No, things seem to me more complicated. The problem cannot be resolved into simple dichotomies, with a facile depiction of the political or ideological opponent. Today the actual scandal lies in thoughtlessness and opportunism rather than in any confessed adherence to Nazism, in playing down the unimaginable rather than in its outright denial. The phenomenon has been described as “helpless anti-Fascism,” helpless precisely because of its mental inertia, its refusal to spend more than just a few lazy thoughts on the past, its flat moral appeals that lack a clear notion of morality.
II

Certain deficiencies in our public debate about Nazism became most obvious when such a debate had to be held under the stress of actual circumstances. This was the case during the Frankfurt affair last year involving the planned stage performance of a play by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Alvin Rosenfeld writes in an article on President Reagan’s visit to Bitburg that a number of political and moral issues were stirred up by this event, “often in inchoate and conflicting form.” Such an observation holds even more true for the arguments and confrontations surrounding Fassbinder’s Der Müll, die Stadt und der Tod (Garbage, the City, and Death). But whereas the Bitburg affair was discussed internationally and gained major symbolic importance, the debate about the Frankfurt events was chiefly confined to the Federal Republic of Germany itself. As such it represents a form of national discourse perhaps not easy to comprehend elsewhere. Littered with paradoxes and contradictions, the debate was almost as chaotic as the play itself.

It is a commonplace that in order to structure reality, we tend to think in binary oppositions as a means to orient ourselves in a moral and political system of fixed coordinates. We gather from a person’s arguments whether his political alignments are more on the left or on the right, whether he is a racist or anti-racist, and whether we find ourselves in good or in bad ideological company. Now, the debate about the Fassbinder play caused disturbing displacements within this normally reassuring system. Liberal commentators were hopelessly split in their opinions. The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, a conservative newspaper, performed an exercise in double binds that could delight only the schizophrenic: in its art columns it condemned Fassbinder’s play as downright antisemitic whereas in its political columns it made the insidious allegation about Jews expecting German subservience especially in the delicate matter of financial recompense. The established fronts split open and allowed insight into quite unexpected turns of discourse, blurring the traditional categories of right and left, of what is usually considered antisemitic and philosemitic. One reason for the complication may lie in the fact that issues of art, or rather of artistic freedom, were involved. But ultimately I think that the debate raised political issues which, for a long, long time, so we had been told, had been settled or “worked through” (aufgearbeitet). I refer to that process which is euphemistically called “the mastering of the past” (Vergangenheitsbewältigung). All of a sudden, though, one single play made us disconcertingly aware that we had come to terms with the past mainly in the balmy clichés of Sunday speeches and the rhetorical reassurance of a clean, democratic consciousness.

In principle I dislike hanging a positive moral on an altogether unpleasant affair. The Frankfurt events, however, seemed to me painfully instructive since they did not offer a way out into a comfortable moralité gratuite. If wounds were opened, these were wounds that had healed perhaps too quickly.
In the course of this talk I shall offer a chronicle of what happened in Frankfurt, a brief description of the play, and a few quotations from it—from monologues that I shall be able to read out only reluctantly.

In the mid-seventies Fassbinder, one of the most prominent and prolific German filmmakers, became the principal of the "Theater at the Tower" (Theater am Turm) in the center of Frankfurt. At this time, he was really at the nadir of his career, constantly quarreling with his collaborators and acting out the more unpleasant sides of his Sturm und Drang character. After having sent postcards from the Caribbean in which he abused his own ensemble, he allegedly wrote the entire play on two transatlantic flights. He must have been in an extremely venomous mood: before the drama could be performed on the stage, he resigned, leaving bad feelings behind. Frankfurt, surely not the most idyllic of all German cities, had become a synonym for Fassbinder's failure to turn conflicts—even inevitable conflicts—into something more positive. Significantly enough, Fassbinder went to Berlin where he shot films in a sophisticated high-camp UFA style, melodramas on the verge of powerful feelings and full of cliché-ridden sentimentalism, before he died of an overdose of sedatives and pep pills, leaving behind some thirty films and six plays.

It was the renowned Suhrkamp publishing house, itself rightly famous for its many Jewish émigré authors, which edited Fassbinder's dubious farewell gift to the city of Frankfurt. Only shortly afterwards Suhrkamp withdrew all copies of the play on the grounds that antisemitic feelings would likely be stirred up against the "true intention" of the play. Apparently the Suhrkamp people hadn't read the script carefully enough before publishing it, nor had they realized that the play was based on a controversial novel by Gerhard Zwerenz, written a few years before under the title Die Erde ist unbewohnbar wie der Mond (The Earth Is as Uninhabitable as the Moon). In this novel a rich Jew called Abraham acts as one of those unscrupulous real-estate speculators who, in the sixties and early seventies, turned the old residential area of the Frankfurt West End into an overpriced concrete wasteland of office blocks and bank buildings. The character is counterbalanced, however, by the liberal Jewish State Attorney Bauer, who was mainly responsible for getting the Auschwitz trials under way.

The play by Fassbinder is far less interested in the social and historical dimensions of its theme. Indeed, it comes close to manifesting what Saul Friedländer, in his book Reflections of Nazism, describes as a discrepancy between the author's professed moral and ideological position, on the one hand, and the aesthetic impact of Nazism as an experimental field for unleashed fantasies, on the other hand. The play is a wild conglomeration of laboriously connected sketches about outsiders of society, reminiscent of expressionist plays of the twenties in which the prospect of apocalypse was conjured and exorcised in cries and whispers, in the self-conscious exhibition of current clichés and stereotypes that had to frighten off the petty bourgeois (thus really an exercise in épater les bourgeois). Fassbinder's play, in all its preference for the bizarre, tries to be everything: a run-down Brechtian morality play and a Christian mystery play about sacrifice and death; it tries to be trash and poesy, soporific kitsch and smutty pornography, grand opera and pièce à thèse, an honest expression of the contradictions in its author's soul and a celebration of the artiness of art, which allows the playwright to speak only tongue-in-cheek. Nothing in it seems ever developed or dramatically explained. Quite on the contrary, grand and ready-made statements are used merely as
declamations to express ultimate ennui and disgust. One critic called the dramatis personae “exchangeable speaking puppets,” another one “paper-nosed targets in a shooting gallery.” Since a Jewish character is prominent among them, this description speaks volumes. The positive characters are also flat and one-dimensional. They conform exactly to the statement of Theodor W. Adorno, made in a different context, that virtue sentimentally reflects the terror which it spreads. Nowhere else in Fassbinder does it become so evident that unbearable sentimentality is just the mirror-image of cynicism.

At the core of the dramatic action are the rise of a prostitute and the downfall of her pimp, whom she loves but who is homosexual. This prostitute, one Roma B., is financially supported by “the rich Jew”—I shall comment on his namelessness later on—who thereby tries to humiliate her father, an old and unreconstructed Nazi. Poor Roma can no longer exist in a world of insoluble conflict and begs the Jew to release her from life. Only the act of murder seems to promise closeness and mutual understanding. And so he strangles her with his tie, not without first fingering a scapegoat with the help of the Frankfurt chief of police, who shields him because the city needs the Jew to carry out its real-estate development plans.

IV

Fassbinder portrays a chilly world in which everyone probes the functional value of his fellow men in order to make a profit. Desire, crying aloud for fulfillment, is left without response since this is not a place for feelings but only for trash and human garbage. Whoever professes to love is doomed to perdition. The Jew himself confirms at the end of the play that the city has made him what he is by a simple twist of fate and some unfortunate circumstances, having their roots both in the bad conscience of the Germans and in the ruthlessness of some to play on the inhibitions caused by that bad conscience to their own advantage.

“The rich Jew,” as he is called in the script, reveals himself in the rather simplistic device of melodramatic self-nomination. One of his monologues reads:

Am I a Jew who must take revenge on little people? It ought to be that way and it is proper, too!

I buy old houses in this city, tear them down, build new ones which I sell at a good profit. The city protects me, it has to. For in addition, I am a Jew. The police chief is my friend, one could call it that, the mayor is happy to invite me and I can also rely on the town councillors.

The city needs the unscrupulous businessman who helps to change its appearance.

I couldn’t care less if children cry, if the old and feeble suffer . . . I disregard people’s screams of fury.

The response comes from an old Nazi, described as a man full of ugly resentment:

He sucks us dry, the Jew. Drinks our blood and puts us in the wrong, because he is a Jew and we bear the guilt, take the blame. And it is the Jew’s fault because he makes us guilty for the simple reason that he is here. If he had remained where he came from or if they had gassed him, I would be able to sleep better today. They forgot to gas him. That is no joke, thus it thinks in me. I rub my hands when I think how he would have choked in the gas chamber.

“Thus it thinks in me.” This is certainly a clear indication that the antisemite, driven by dangerous inner urges, proves incapable of transforming his dark feelings into reflection. When Fassbinder was accused of antisemitism, it was forgotten that it is a figure in the play to whom the author lends his voice and that the playwright is
not to be identified with his characters. It is rather the overall tendency of the play, the bringing together of various, often conflicting, voices and attitudes that illuminates the vision of the author. In this respect Fassbinder’s attitude seems to me as muddled as the whole play.

One of the reasons for this is that he believed both in rational enlightenment and in the perennial power of myths. On the one hand, he confirms that antisemitism remains unpardonable, so that even if we happen to meet a Jew who conforms entirely to the Nazi cliché, we are not free to respond in Nazi fashion. On the other hand, he discovers the comfortable defense mechanism of prejudices, which must appeal to the melodramatist in him. Good and bad are presented in letters larger than life. We know that antisemitism largely eludes moral demands, reasonable arguments, and practical knowledge since it springs from a deep-seated need for a mystifying justification of what is wrong both in this world and in ourselves. The late Jewish writer Jean Améry assured us that Fassbinder was not antisemitic but that his understanding of antisemitism and of the effect that its fictional representation might have on true antisemites was devoid of any psychological insight, any sense of history, any consciousness of moral dignity. The fact is, damage is done if one creates a play in which Fascists can feel comfortable (“at home,” so to speak) since it voices their prejudices without demanding any moral and intellectual effort to elucidate the deeper reasons for these prejudices.

In an interview Fassbinder himself conceded that he was frightened by what he considered a series of misunderstandings on the part of the public. He declared that his play was simply “a spontaneous reaction to a reality that I have found in Frankfurt. . . . I think that creating a sense of taboo about Jews can lead to open hostility against them. When I met a Jew as a child [in post-war Germany, that is], I was always told behind a cupped hand: This is a Jew, be good, be friendly. . . . I never felt that this was the right attitude.” Fassbinder then cites Robert Neumann’s famous statement about philosemites being simply antisemites who love Jews, and he further insists that he has to be free to employ “dangerous, perhaps contestable methods in a work of art. . . . If I am not allowed to do so, I am not allowed to do anything. And it is far better to discuss things in order to make them less dangerous rather than talk about them in a hushed way.”

If we take this as a general statement about the artistic treatment of taboos, there is more than a grain of truth in it. I suspect that not all of those protesting against the play were free of a rather uneducated, narrow, illiberal understanding of what literature should be allowed to express. Once an author develops so circumspect a sense of “responsibility” that he avoids all risks, his work may gain the quality of a carefully balanced leading article. This indeed cannot be the function of art, and we should add that Fassbinder himself couldn’t have been able to make his cinematic masterpieces, admirable as they are, without undertaking considerable risks.

The trouble with Garbage, the City, and Death, though, seems to me that it is risky in a very superficial way, sparing the costs of truly painful reflection and avoiding any real risk which would arise from an honest and ruthless tracing of the Nazi heritage, of all the displacements and hypocrisies that result from forgetfulness, or of the routines of annual remembrances. One could imagine a play about seemingly unbiased people who, as soon as they feel wronged by a Jewish citizen, become incurably prejudiced. One could imagine a play about local politicians who, seeking to be on good terms with respectable members of the Jewish community, might use their relationships as a cover to ward off any investigations into obscure business methods. Such an attempt, by the
way, was made in 1985 during the Berlin corruption crisis when some crooks made
insinuations about an Israeli being involved in their evil doings.

V

I'm afraid, however, that Fassbinder's play uses antisemitism as a mere stereotype
to provoke a cheap aesthetic thrill. Alvin Rosenfeld and Saul Friedländer tell us about
the enormous difficulties of authors dealing with Nazism and the Holocaust in literature.\(^3\) In rational or even artistically "responsible" discourse there seem to be certain
limitations to describing the indescribable. Hence the appeals to our imagination, the
return to myth, and the release of aesthetic energies in order to encompass the perverse
fascination of the terrible. Hence the confusion of truly radical art and the seemingly
daring gesture of breaking taboos. Which taboos?

Fassbinder maintains that the German authorities used Jewish survivors to carry
out the operation of property development: "They knew they were absolutely safe
because of the taboo in Germany on attacking the Jews in any way." From several
individual instances Fassbinder draws broad and rather improper generalizations. Cer-
tainly, some Jewish real-estate speculators had helped to evict tenants from old housing
to make way for more profitable high-rises, not without the financial aid of "respectable"
German banks and the assistance of the city government, then Socialist in its majority.
In Germany they made use of a situation when all political parties tended towards a
dubious ideal of untrammeled progress and economic growth (dubious from today's
point of view). A few years ago, young squatters, most of them determinedly anti-
capitalistic, combined forces with old established tenants who, happy about the un-
expected solidarity, confirmed their will to stand together side by side against the "Jewish
exploiters" (and it mattered little whether they were in fact Jewish or not, as long as
they bore names that sounded Jewish). There was more than one moment of embarr-
assment in view of the strange allies who were glad to return to anti-Judaic prejudices,
muttering ominously that "the Jews have come back."

For indeed, in the first decades of our century (and of course in the time before)
the Frankfurt West End had been populated by a large Jewish community, numbering
more than 26,000 members in 1936. It would be a rewarding task (if it hasn't yet been
undertaken) to write about the contribution of Jews in Frankfurt to culture, the sciences,
and economics. In the late forties only a few hundred returned to their old homes.
The new non-Jewish house-owners, by the way, could produce a so-called "property
assignment" with which they had bought the estates at a fraction of the actual value
after the former owners had been expelled in 1937. So much for speculation.

"The Jews have come back." One should know that a majority of the few who
actually had come back depended on social welfare and that they hardly dared to
confess their Jewish origin since, having been anxious to assimilate themselves fully
before 1933 (and how many possessed the Iron Cross for bravery in World War II!),
they were even more accustomed to live inconspicuously after 1945. They were dis-
quieted by the arrival of Jews from the East who acted as middlemen between the city
and the big banks. These newcomers, it was feared, would be prominently noticed and
might make a bad impression. Perhaps the Frankfurt affair has shown that even complete
assimilation does not offer protection from the old suspicions that affect all members
of the community. And yet, one cannot live in the fear that there might be a black
sheep who could bring shame on the whole flock.
Everyone familiar with speech act theory knows that it is not only important what is being said but in which context, with which emphasis, and to which purpose. What exactly is the relevance of the image of a money-grubbing Jew in view of the many more Christian speculators, Catholic bank directors, and Protestant commission agents? (The enumeration shows how ridiculous these classifications in fact are.) The answer is that, in the history of prejudice, there has long existed a distinction between the lazy capital of usurers and middlemen and the clean, active, useful capital that helps to create new values. In Nazism the two possibilities were represented by thefurtive profiteer and the upright captain of industry. And then, secondly, we tend to be easily offended if someone whom we want to meet without prejudices behaves in a way that disappoints our noble intentions. This, by the way, seems to me the subtlest and most widely held form of antisemitism since it condemns the former victims to constant self-observation whether they are a match for our expectations or not. One reporter tells us about the nice lady who was totally on the side of the Jewish community but who implored its chairman to stop any conspicuous financial transactions which would befoul Jewish names “in a situation as precarious as this.” One man wrote to the editor of a paper, protesting against the allegation that all Germans were infected with “the grossest anti-semitism.” Should it be more subtle, less gross?

I think the true scandal of the affair lies not only in the clichés of the play (with which I’m still going to deal), but in its obtrusive attempt to prove something. In order to tear down a taboo, Fassbinder depicts the tabooed object in the most glaring and lurid colors. His figure is not a Jew in the individual sense but the ugly representation of a Jew, a figure who has led an ominous existence in the imaginative landscape of folklore and graphic propaganda. No wonder that journalists began to write about “members of the Jewish capital” as if Jews controlled the whole German housing market. The “rich Jew” in Fassbinder’s play resembles too clearly—and is probably meant to resemble—his historical counterpart in the propagandistic movie Jud Süß and the caricatures in the Nazi journal Der Stürmer. Both his economic and his sexual potency make him dangerous beyond words. When he takes revenge upon the daughter of a KZ bloodhound, he appears as the traditional violator and ravisher. “The Jew is an expert at his business,” we read in Fassbinder, echoing the warning of a Nazi tract that each Jew is a specialist in his pernicious trade. That the Jew stands in secret alliance with the mighty appears again as a mere reverberation of Hitler’s words that he is impudent enough to approach the government for protection.

Perhaps most important of all, Fassbinder’s Jew bears no name, a fact that increases his almost generic status. To talk about “the Jew” or “the Jews” in a drama where all other figures are individuals with proper names is to make us forget that generic membership had once meant, for the Jews, the death sentence. Such generic reference is still existent in such popular sayings as “They have prices like Jews,” “We shouldn’t make the deal in Jewish haste,” and the like. One article in the weekly Die Zeit brings the point home: “In Frankfurt they talk of the devil. He is Jewish and nameless. No one knows him but some have seen him knocking down old villas with his own hand.”

One might object that Fassbinder introduces the cliché solely to exhibit it as a cliché, tongue-in-cheek, so to speak, in order to conjure up the demons of the past and make the audience grapple with their own prejudices, make it exercise the ghosts that the artist has brought back to them in his own fictional world. The trouble is that Fassbinder plays with clichés that were death-bringing only forty-five years ago. His Jew, superficial figure that he is, seems to have escaped from some horror melodrama.
or Grand Guignol. If, therefore, we are critical of Fassbinder’s claim to take risks, our criticism has nothing to do with questions of “good taste” or a normative understanding of what art should or should not be allowed to show. The worst such art can do is to deal with Nazism and antisemitism in an artistically inadequate, intellectually thoughtless way. The mayor of Stuttgart, Manfred Rommel, felt reminded of an adolescent test of courage, and he went on: “Sometimes it takes more courage to be less daring and to bear in mind that others could be frightened almost to death by such irresponsibility.” To put it briefly: doing away with the “taboo” of someone swearing death to the Jews is not an act of enlightenment and courage, and it has nothing to do with the freedom of speech.

VI

Almost every newly appointed principal of the Frankfurt Theater was confronted with the question of whether and how to stage the text. Finally Günther Rühle, a former (and renowned) critic of Die Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, made a new attempt against numerous protests. The city of Frankfurt had to be freed from the blemish of censorship, he said with the tremor of a man who carries the burden of liberalism in Germany, and he called to mind how the ban on books had led to dictatorship. (One recalls the prophetic saying of Heine: “Where they burn books, they will also burn human beings.”) Rühle also pleaded for the abolition of taboos and is cited for a sentence which he later denied having made: “The no-hunting season is over” (“Die Schonzeit ist vorbei”). There were those who interpreted the remark, indeed, to signal the opening of a new hunting season. Whatever Rühle’s precise words (and I think we have to respect his denial), he insisted on having the play performed—if not now, then never: “All arguments are exhausted. The next argument must be the actual staging.” Since the premiere coincided with the anniversary of the Kristallnacht pogrom, it should be understood as a gesture of reconciliation, so he believed. Not very surprisingly, the Jewish community in Germany had quite a different idea of how to remember the first step on the way to the Holocaust. They couldn’t allow their history to be delegitimized by conscious or unconscious revisionism, no matter what the artistic point.

It was one of Rühle’s former colleagues, the journalist and Hitler biographer Joachim Fest, who tried to give the debate a specifically political dimension by accusing Fassbinder of left-wing fascism. Fest wanted to destroy the fairly common belief that antisemitism on the left is a contradiction in terms. This belief stems from the anti-Fascist alliance of the thirties between the German left and German Jews and from the historical support of Nazism by right-wing factions. It certainly lies in Fest’s intention, as it likewise was behind the symbolism of Bitburg, to incorporate Nazism into some universal notion of “totalitarianism.” Often enough the Nazi regime appears in the phraseology of politicians as “the rule of terror” or as the “one-party state,” not exactly euphemisms but characteristics also of other regimes in the world. This is the one side of a growing relativism. However, as Friedländer rightly observes, there is also “a sizable proportion of the young intellectual Left” which found itself “effectively immunized against any confrontation with Nazism as the smug old bourgeois Philistines had been, whom they so vehemently attacked.” Amongst them it became fashionable to deny Israel’s right to exist (the Arabs as the “new Jews”) and yet to sign petitions against racism and genocide. Many felt they were anti-Nazi and anti-racist by their own definition and political conviction. It hardly occurred to them that only pointing the
finger was not enough to deal with the past, since at least three fingers pointed back. The historical relativism on the right had its mirror image in flippant remarks such as "the holocaust of trees" caused by air pollution, or in fixing the star of David on one's jacket whenever one complained of police harassment. Thus signs and meanings were transferred onto situations which, however deplorable or even condemnable, bear no resemblance to the Nazi genocide.

It was no less embarrassing to observe who among the non-Jewish Germans protested against the play. Still, it was not without logic that those who wanted to forget about the past altogether felt uneasy about the debate that stirred it up again. They had come to terms with the Jewish community precisely because it represents such a minority. Largely the same people who advocate a restriction of constitutional immigration rights and introduced a motion that strikes a parallel between the denial of the Auschwitz crimes and the denial of crimes committed during the expulsion of Germans from the Eastern parts in 1945 advocated a ban on the play, perhaps with more than secret sympathy for the classical Nazi denunciation of unsettling art as "perverse" and "degenerate." Members of the Jewish community couldn't help wondering about the fervent support of politicians who had just awarded Ernst Jünger the Frankfurt Goethe prize and thus honored the champion of military steel baths. Surely, the official Jewish organizations welcomed any allies in their protest against the play, but many of them knew that they would not feel very happy if they probed some of the deeper motivations behind these protests. At last there was a respectable cause that allowed one to wash one's hands in innocence and to utter disgust against a filthy play. It's undoubtedly true that one cannot always choose one's friends, but if Fassbinder had employed most dubious means for the dramatic representation of a supposed taboo, some of his opponents did their best to make everyone believe in the existence of such a taboo.

VII

When at last the play was scheduled to be staged, the quite unexpected happened. Members of the Jewish community and sympathizers daringly occupied the stage and stopped the play as soon as the curtain went up. Although the actors read a statement pleading for them to be allowed to go on, the demonstrators refused to leave the stage. Outside the theater about a thousand demonstrators chanted slogans denouncing the play as antisemitic. The survivors of mass murder argued that in their view it was simply deadly to allow Nazi opinions to be expressed publicly whatever the intention behind such expression might be. Some showed their concentration camp numbers tattooed on their arms. There was general agreement that one did not merely expect "tact and taste" but justice for the victims, who had grown alarmed at what was going to be said on the stage. "I am scared to death," one of them said, "and the others talk about the freedom of art." They argued against the reproach that they were imposing censorship (a reproach that is no longer valid as soon as the still higher good of the "dignity of man," guaranteed by our constitution, is disregarded). Certainly, any one of them would have been happier if Rühle had not insisted on a stupid demonstration of his authority. The neo-Nazi paper Nationalzeitung, otherwise illiberal to the extreme, now talked about Israel's power to enforce censorship in a German nation no longer independent. Even on the left there was an incomprehensible confusion between State censorship (to be met with mistrust in any case) and a campaign usually regarded as a constructive alternative to censorship.
For many young Jews brought up in Germany after the war, these events meant, as one of them said, a “coming out,” a coming out of the ghetto of one’s own self-image as a guest in the country in which one is asked to behave according to the rules of the hosts, a liberation from the misguided belief that it was to be the others who defined Nazism and antisemitism. These young Jews now came to see that their social integration should cease precisely at that point where their Jewish identity was threatened with being blotted out in everyday life. They refused to accept the return to that standard of normalcy so vehemently endorsed by the supporters of the play. They knew, in these terms, that what passed for normalcy in Germany had the ring of an abnormal situation.

A few weeks after the demonstration the principal of the theater organized a private performance of the play designed for critics and special guests, who were escorted into the building as into the high security wing of a prison. The producer of the play did his best to blunt the harshest criticism levelled against the play: the rich Jew was newly given a name as well as a few more character traits that tried to render him tragic rather than melodramatic. Thus there was a pathetic attempt at repair where damage already had been done. By then, however, no one talked about the play anymore. What had moved into the center of interest was the quality of the debate itself.

The key arguments of the debate can be summarized as follows: 1) the claim for a desire for normalcy, 2) the call for giving up supposedly “exaggerated” moral inhibitions concerning the past, and 3) a growing weariness regarding the Nazi past and its atrocities. Thus there is a growing preference today for the more heroic or positive phases of German history. Some members of the Frankfurt audience who were keen to see the play shouted at the demonstrators: “Leave us alone with your [sic] Auschwitz!”

In such a manner was Auschwitz as a moral and historical property handed back to the victims. A well-known drama critic wrote: “When they [the Frankfurt Jews] were at their wit’s end, they threw Auschwitz and German guilt into the debate in order to silence the language of theater.” The archbishop of Cologne felt the need to declare: “We should not, again and again, exhume past guilt and mutually [sic] committed injustices, in constant self-torment.”

I find it difficult to tell who exactly it is who blackmails us into a tormenting self-image. A visitor to Germany today will not witness the country prostrate with grief and in need of consolation. Moreover, the appeal to what we Germans should no longer be made to feel corresponded with an equally strong appeal to the Jewish survivors about what they should feel towards the Germans. The Jews should not only tolerate the play but welcome it as an educational piece about the undesirability of taboos. They should be forced into a reconciliation whose terms were to be defined by those who would be forgiven. Former prisoners of extermination camps were told the exact amount of antisemitic dialogue that they were expected to put up with. They were encouraged (as by a young man on the political left) “to give up their well-functioning symmetrical moralism that discerns between culprit and victim, confession of guilt and moral self-complacency.”

I don’t know what experiences and inner restraints lie behind such remarks. Perhaps the author of the words just quoted feels himself to be a victim of history and wishes to be reconciled with his symbolic family discredited in the past—with the long-despised father, a newly-discovered nation, and traditional values rejected for a long time. Having achieved great material prosperity and international respectability, the country, or at least a significant strain of sentiment within the country, worries about the represen-
tation of our history in a tone of sometimes diffuse and whiny self-pity. Hence the lopsided parallels between Nazism and other terror regimes and hence the ghostly spectacle of Bitburg. As Thomas Elsaesser wrote in an article on Bitburg, "History becomes the phantom signifier of endlessly interchangeable referents."

VIII

While well-meaning and intelligent literary scholars fought out a dispute over whether the troubling passages of the play could be taken out of context and thus misused, two right-wing politicians gave startling proof that such misuse was indeed possible. One of them, Hermann Fellner, a Bavarian member of the Federal Parliament, criticized the old and unfulfilled claim of Jewish survivors to be recompensed by Flick for many years of forced labor. In the population at large, Fellner worried, there would be the ever-growing impression that "Jews ask leave to speak up whenever they hear the tinkling of money in German cash-registers." Fellner pleaded for more sensitivity toward the Germans, and though, under the pressure of his embarrassed party friends, he apologized for his remark, he couldn't help but assert that it had been intended as a piece of friendly advice—even more than that, as an attempt to save the Jews from a relapse into ill-repute. Shortly afterwards, Graf von Spee, the mayor of a small town in Northrhine Westphalia, complained of a problem with deficit spending in the public budget in these terms: "In order to finance the budget, one would have to slay a few rich Jews." Fassbinder's "rich Jew," such a remark graphically revealed, had taken possession of the imagination of elected politicians whose protests that they had learnt the lesson of history suddenly sounded rather shallow.

I come to the end of my talk. In 1959 Theodor W. Adorno, who had to leave Frankfurt in the thirties and came back after the war to direct the Institute for Social Research, wrote a sentence worth quoting: "We'll have come to terms with the past only when the causes that had led to it will be abolished." This mode of reconciliation can never come about through forgetfulness. On the contrary, we should consider what President Weizsäcker said in his remarkable speech of May 8, 1985, before the Bundestag, namely that reconciliation without remembering will be an impossible task. Individual and national identity cannot be awakened at the cost of repressed truths, false historical legitimations, or the fear of being possibly misunderstood (especially when one speaks abroad and feels free to criticize what one thinks is wrong in one's country). Today the real danger seems to me not the few neo-Nazi organizations that might be stirring now and then but the readiness to belittle the crimes of the past, or, as in the case of some historians, to try to put things "into perspective," so to speak, by equating the Nazi crimes with those committed by other nations, by establishing dubious parallels, and by denying the singularity of what had happened.5

I think the Frankfurt scandal opened our eyes at a time when the public debate about Nazism had exhausted itself in a few stock phrases about the "dark times" that seemed to belong as much to the past as the dark Middle Ages. Breaking up a false consensus can be painful, but it can also contribute to authentic healing. This in fact is the hope of many people, Jewish and non-Jewish, people who are anxious that the shadows of the past be illuminated so that they will not again fall upon the future.
Notes


2. Cf. the article by Theodor W. Adorno, "What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?" (1959), in Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective, pp. 114-129.


4. A friend of mine criticizes the usurpation of language by the Nazis and our own dogmatic perpetuation of it. But I don't think that language remains "innocent" in the course of history, nor do I believe that we can wash it up like dishes.

5. In the meantime there has been a settlement between Rühle and the Jewish writer Henryk Broder who, in his book Der ewige Antisemit, quotes the remark. The new version of Rühle's remark, which one is free to quote, is as follows: "The Jews mustn't be kept in a preserve (Schonbezirk) to the end of time." What a linguistic compromise!

6. Vide the present controversy between German historians about whether the Nazi annihilation camps didn't have historical precedents and an "Asian heritage."

7. These parallels appear in Chancellor Kohl's recent comparisons between Gorbachev and Goebbels and between political prisons in East Germany and the Nazi concentration camps.

8. Thomas Elsaesser, "West Germany's Inability to Commemorate: Between Bitburg and Bergen-Belsen," in On Film, 14 (Spring 1985).

9. Of course every historian must be free to describe structural similarities between different historical periods. In our case, however, some approximation is attempted which is meant to qualify the mentioned "singularity" (a state had decided and pronounced, with the authority of its responsible leaders, to annihilate a large group of human beings, including old people, women, and children, as completely as possible, and had carried out that decision with official power and all available technical means).

The talk draws upon material in the following collections of primary sources and articles:

Heiner Lichtenstein (ed.), Die Fassbinder-Kontroverse oder Das Ende der Schönzeit (Königstein, Ts.: Athenäum, 1986)

Elisabeth Kiderlen (ed.): Deutsch-jüdische Normalität . . . Fassbinders Sprengsätze (Frankfurt/M.: Pflasterstrand, 1985)

as well as articles in Die Zeit, Süddeutsche Zeitung, and Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.
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