

KERTÉSZ AMONG THE GERMANS

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Imre Kertész's current role in the German debate about the Holocaust is contrasted to the reception of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, the influence of György Lukács, and the prominence of Martin Walser. Kertész's popularity in Germany dovetailed with that of Goldhagen, but whereas the latter's impact was fleeting, Kertész has become a guardian of Holocaust memory in Germany. While Goldhagen repudiated past German culture, Kertész is both a survivor of the Holocaust and champion of a lost Central European Jewish-German culture, in the tradition of Wagner, Nietzsche, and Thomas Mann. In this capacity he serves as an anti-Lukács, reviving or rather honoring a lost cosmopolitan tradition. Both Kertész and Walser capture the adolescent confusion, but the message and consequences of Kertész's camp experiences of 1944 and 1945 and Martin Walser's autobiographical account of the same years in the Hitler Jugend are starkly different. In the present German dialogue on the Holocaust, Kertész's language of homelessness acts as an antidote to Walser's cult of the *Heimat*.

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In the fall of 2002, Americans asked who is Imre Kertész? An undercurrent of irritation accompanied the question: Nobel Prize Winners in Literature are expected to be celebrities. They win because their books, their scripts, their movie adaptations are successful. Americans were shocked to discover that Kertész was not that well known in his own country. In Hungary the question was why is the prizewinner Imre Kertész? Hungarian literary nationalists reacted to the choice as if it had been a studied affront. After a century's neglect of Hungarian literature, the Nobel committee chose a writer whose work flaunted the central taboo of post-1945 Hungarian cultural politics – Hungarian complicity in the Holocaust. *Fateless* had been Kertész's ticket of admission to what Germans call *Weltliteratur*. The Nobel committee seemed to be responding to Kertész's enthusiastic

readership in Germany that had grown dramatically since 1995. In Germany, at least at the Frankfurt book fair October, 2002, there was the satisfaction of having bet on the right horse.

A grateful Kertész acknowledged that his work has been spread in the German language. The German President, in turn, expressed his admiration that an author who had suffered through the German concentration camps would nevertheless become a translator and conduit of German culture into Hungary. Kertész would spend much of his year as Nobel Prize Winner as the honored guest at various German state functions. On January 27, 2003, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, now the day Germany commemorates the victims of Nazism, he returned to Buchenwald in the company of the Minister President of Thuringia. On October 3, “the Day of German Unity”, the Hungarian Nobel Prize Winner stood on the same podium with the German Chancellor in Magdeburg. He heard Gerhard Schröder praise him, and then proceeded to chastise Schröder’s foreign policy as anti-American. Such chutzpah seemed to endear him all the more to his German public. Kertész’s willingness to express disconcerting opinions at public events was expected, perhaps even required. In January, 2004, he spoke at the formal closing of the traveling exhibition, “War of Annihilation – Crimes of the Wehrmacht, 1941–44”. It is difficult to think of any major event in Germany that involves the Holocaust in the immediate future that will not seek to include Imre Kertész on the rostrum.

How are we to understand this surprising success in Germany? Certainly, Kertész’s hitherto obscurity helps – he has not yet overstayed his welcome. He remains a novelty, a belated find. Unlike Günter Grass, the most recent German-language Nobel Prize Winner of 1999, Kertész has not tired the German public with untoward political opinions. Instead, Kertész’s infectious delight in his newly won celebrity status is reciprocated in the self-congratulatory tone of the German public toward their Hungarian protégé.

On a more serious level, German-speaking audiences have been intrigued by the tension in Kertész as an unrelenting witness of the Holocaust but also as a grieving devotee of German Kultur. In *Fateless*, the knowing reader recoils when the naïve adolescent protagonist admires the clean, efficient death machine. In his prose and public speeches, Kertész presents himself as the Last of the Mohicans, the last of the great and now lost tradition of Central European Jewish writers for whom the German language and its culture was a second home. He is at once the merciless scribe of the horrors of Buchenwald, and the pilgrim entering the Goethe House in adjoining Weimar as if it were a shrine. It is this combination that gives him an appeal that transcends the divisions of the German-speaking world. He can flatter West Germans by praising their democratic society, their *Bildung*, and their efforts to confront their past, but he also can claim that he is able to understand the problems in sudden freedom and the torpor and ideological dead hand

of East German life better than the West Germans. It was an East German publisher that first published *Fateless* in 1990, and Kertész's first literary award in Germany was the Brandenburg Prize of 1995. One of the jurors, an East German, has said that it was Kertész's uncanny ability to approach Auschwitz through the experience of the soft totalitarianism of post-Stalinism that tipped the scales in his favor.¹ Kertész can also commiserate with Austrians over the lost glories of an imperial multiculturalism. Like so many Budapesters in 1989, Kertész hurried to Vienna, the sibling city of Hungarian dreams. Vienna chose Kertész for their "One City, One Book", program, distributing 100,000 copies among the Viennese of *Step by Step*, the screenplay of *Fateless*. *Step by Step* will not have an American happy ending. Kertész has objected strongly to Spielberg's shift from black and white to color and light in the last scenes of the survivors in *Schindler's List*. However, Kertész has apparently agreed to give *Step by Step* a German rather than a Hungarian ending. The last scene will not be the disturbing return to Budapest, but will depict, instead, the liberated protagonist still on German soil, awaiting departure in bombed-out Dresden.

This paper will explore Kertész's German connection by considering his relation to three antipodes: György Lukács, Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, and Martin Walser. 1. I will argue that Kertész functioned within the world of Budapest Jewry as an anti-Lukács, redeeming German culture from the aspersions cast upon it by Marxist Mandarins. 2. In Germany Kertész has reinforced the Goldhagen phenomenon, as an outsider who serves as a catalyst in the ongoing German debate on the Holocaust and its legacy in Germany. While the Goldhagen furor of 1996 highlighted the crisis of Holocaust historiography, the Kertész reception shifted the focus to the crisis of the literary representation of the Holocaust. 3. This has resulted in a confrontation that has yet to take place, may never take place, but one which has nevertheless hung over the Kertész reception like a storm cloud: the counter-point of Imre Kertész and Martin Walser, which once again pits the cult of the *Heimat* against the prison of homelessness.

I

Americans after 1945 tried the guilty and fostered a culture of regret, but East European Communists were less convinced that the population could be cleansed and focused instead on distancing society from its past. To do so the intelligentsia was expected to adhere to an explanatory historiography. Lukács staged his own cultural show trial aimed at purging many of the very German thinkers who had absorbed his attention in Budapest at the turn of the century. The indictment had been worked out in Soviet exile when his own existence was on the line. Lukács presented his fellow Budapest Jewish intellectuals with a strict intellectual regi-

men by which they might undo the Nietzscheanism in themselves as the first step in becoming the new Soviet man.² Kertész's trajectory moved in the opposite direction from socialist realism to existentialism and back to German romanticism. Already in the early 1950s Kertész rebelled against the denigration of the Hungarian Jewish-German bourgeois culture. He was intoxicated by Wagner's operas, which he found so exuberant and so unlike the Puritanism around him. He took the posthumous Thomas Mann as his mentor, whom he resembled in avoiding the university while adopting the mannerisms of the *Gebildeten*. In time Kertész would labor to de-Nazify those German thinkers – notably Nietzsche – whom Lukács had so brilliantly Nazified in *The Destruction of Reason*. With the exception of a few weeks in East Germany in 1962 and another few weeks in West Germany in 1983, Kertész approached the German world through the *Innerlichkeit* of his wartime memories and his translations. Since 1989 Kertész's growing influence has improved the link between German and Hungarian culture in Germany and legitimated the renewed embrace of German bourgeois culture in Hungary. But the connection has a twist with Hungary falling short of the West German example. Hungarians, Kertész argues, have missed the boat. They had failed to confront Auschwitz, and now it is too late. "Germany became richer in that it dealt with the past. This didn't happen in Hungary." Kertész writes. "The cartel of silence still rules."³

II

Since 1945 West German historiography has confronted its past by fluctuating between destructive and evasive theses – the destructive viewing the Holocaust as the logical outcome of German history and the evasive viewing the genocide as an accidental intrusion into German history.⁴ The destructive thesis sought to master the German past by devaluing the German past. It is generally seen as coming from non-Germans, from outside initiative: the Nuremberg trials, the Israeli capture of Adolf Eichmann, the American TV mini-series *Holocaust*, and the Goldhagen book tour. The evasive thesis is seen as the defensive, apologetic German response from inside: Adenauer's policy of financial restitution and benign neglect of the Nazi past, the normalization initiatives of the 1970s, and the relativization of the Holocaust in the 1980s. Yet there was always a German constituency for the destructive thesis, just as there was a non-German constituency for the evasive thesis. The destructive thesis searched for a new basis of recovery. The evasive thesis responded by insisting Germans were normal. The destructive thesis operated with overstatement and eloquence, but could soon exhaust its possibilities and staying power. The evasive thesis did not defend the crimes: the most extreme form of evasion, Holocaust denial, simply denies the crimes took place.

The evasive method countered condemnation of the German past with a web of complicating and extenuating factors, but once in place, the evasive thesis sought to make of itself a new orthodoxy. It inclined to moral indifference and finally was blind-sided by the sudden revival of the destructive thesis. The evasive thesis may have begun as concealment, as a conspiracy of silence, but once raised to an orthodoxy it bequeathed a form of autism. This inability to express oneself, masquerading under the injunction of silence, condemned the following generations to the role of dupes and cowards. No wonder the younger generations of the 1960s and the 1990s resented inheriting the evasions of their elders.

In comparing the destructive and the evasive theses, one can say that the destructive thesis has the merit of logic: it deduces history from its conclusion. Goldhagen's formula, "No Germans, no Holocaust," puts it succinctly. Yet it raises a moral problem, as it aims at judging a whole nation and people. To condemn whole societies can lead to an inverted racism, to anti-Germanism. In a different way the evasive thesis avoids the issue; it destroys the continuity of German history by treating Nazism as a fluke. Goldhagen resolved this problem by asserting on the one hand that the Holocaust was a German project, not a modern, fascist, totalitarian, or Asiatic project. But in the same breath, or rather in the conclusion, Goldhagen offered absolution to the Germans. Destroy your past, reject the political culture of the nineteenth and first-half-of-the-twentieth century, and you shall be free.

The Goldhagen furor echoed the controversy of 1986 when the argument was floated that the destruction of European Jewry could be equated with the suffering in the Gulag or the death of Wehrmacht soldiers as they retreated in 1944/45. In the *Historikerstreit* Holocaust historians denied this relativization. One of the striking features of the whirlwind Goldhagen book tour of 1996 was that left-liberal-leaning audiences favored Goldhagen over the prominent left-liberal historians they had championed a decade before. This time around the public resented the historians' flaunting of Holocaust expertise as the final arbiter. Goldhagen was seen as besieged by a clique of historians, who expected that he meet their criteria. The crudities of Goldhagen, his penchant for the pornography of violence, had more appeal than the refined esoterica of the functionalist/intentionalist debate. By turning the discussion of Auschwitz into an argument over the timing of Nazi decision-making, German historians, with their insider knowledge of how the Third Reich operated, could assert a kind of intellectual monopoly over the discussion of the Holocaust. Also their much heralded structuralist approach turned out to have troublesome ties to Nazi *Volksgeschichte*. There was outrage that German historians, so diligent in uncovering the past of other professions, had blurred their own history. Goldhagen's spotlight on the "willing executioners" had inadvertently shed unwelcome light on Hitler's "willing historians."

Goldhagen embodies the Americanization of the Holocaust as exemplified in the creation of the Holocaust museum on the Washington Mall and the penchant of identifying German *Kultur* with the Holocaust, that is, making its starting point Kafka and Celan rather than Goethe and Schiller. Kertész represents an East-Europeanization of the Holocaust. The Goldhagen controversy was almost exclusively a West German affair. East German voices were hardly heard. Just as the focus of Holocaust scholarship is moving eastward, so Kertész's concern with the destruction of Jewish and German culture in Eastern Europe reflects the crisis of the literary representation of the Holocaust.

III

Two years after the Goldhagen book tour, Martin Walser's speech on receiving the Peace Prize of the Frankfurt Book Fair, ignited a scandal when he complained that although Germans had become a "normal people" Auschwitz continued to be used as a "moral club" against the German nation and its culture. In a 1965 essay, "Our Auschwitz," Walser had rallied his age group, the Hitler Jugend generation, to assume responsibility by facing the German past. Imre Kertész and Martin Walser are the same age. Walser was born in 1927, Kertész in 1929, but survived Auschwitz by claiming to be born two years earlier. Kertész has been integrated as the missing voice into the literary exchange of those born in the 1920s – this so-called Hitler Jugend generation and the youngest age-group to survive the camps.

Walser has been called a German John Updike, a prolific and prominent delineator of the provincial German middle class since the 1950s. Unlike Updike, Walser was a frequent commentator on German politics. In the late 1980s Walser grumbled that belated remorse for Auschwitz was being used to justify German disunity. His call in 1998 that enough is enough received a standing ovation. Only Ignatz Bubis, the German Jewish leader, and his wife, remained sitting. Outside on the steps of the Paul's Church, the site of the 1848 German Parliament, Bubis accused Walser of "spiritual arson".

In the months preceding Kertész's Nobel Prize, Walser was again in the news. His latest novel had its protagonist, a novelist, murder an obnoxious Jewish critic. The thinly disguised caricature of Marcel Reich-Ranicki was deemed by many as anti-Semitic, and Chancellor Schröder was criticized for entering into a radio discussion with Walser. In October 2002 Kertész's publisher denied press reports that Kertész had said that he had been personally offended by Walser's anti-Semitism. Kertész claimed his remarks had been misunderstood. Kertész subsequently said he did not find any anti-Semitism in Walser, only bitterness and wounded pride.⁵ In February, 2004 Kertész and Walser switched publishers; when Kertész

moved from Rowohlt to Suhrkamp, Walser complained of lack of loyalty on the part of Suhrkamp and moved to Rowohlt.

Recently Walser has also released an autobiographical novel celebrating the intrinsic goodness of popular village culture in the German Catholic Southwest as he experienced it during World War II. Although he volunteered for military service at age sixteen, his adolescent character did so without knowledge of Nazi crimes, and, in any case, was fully immunized by his village culture against its brutal temptations. His act was ideological only in the sense that a mixture of Nietzsche and Karl May together with a dash of patriotism made the war seem alluring. Rather than berate the sentimental blinders of provincial Germany, Walser offers a paean of praise for hearth and home. "Without a home man is a miserable being, a leaf in the wind. He cannot protect himself. Anything can happen to him. He is a wild beast."⁶ In Walser's world homelessness becomes the ultimate pathology. He laments the decline in the sense of home, for one cannot have too much nurture.

When asked about Walser's protagonist, lost in an innocent subjectivity, Kertész termed it an "historical lie", declaring he did not believe it was possible for a sixteen-year-old to be unaware of what was happening in Germany in 1944.⁷ Kertész's language of homelessness is the antidote to Walser's cult of the Heimat. Kertész finds Walser's expression – *wegschauen* – looking away – as fundamentally harmless and ultimately pointless since Auschwitz happened and cannot be wished away.⁸ Auschwitz is not a Jewish event but a traumatic rupture in the fabric of western civilization. For Kertész all roads lead to and from Auschwitz. "Whatever I think about, I always think about Auschwitz. Even if I am seemingly speaking about something completely different, I am speaking about Auschwitz. I am a medium for the spirit of Auschwitz. Auschwitz speaks through me." Kertész presents himself not as an historian but as the exemplar of the last age-group to directly experience the Holocaust. "We are the last. Question us. We are the ones that know", Kertész told the audience upon receiving a German literary prize a day before he heard that he had won the Nobel Prize.⁹ At the closing of the Wehrmacht exhibition, Kertész warned of the "dark energy of hatred."¹⁰ Germans had once taken the road to total hatred, but had learned to honor truth by confronting themselves, thereby becoming one of the most stable democracies in Europe. While one can talk of similar Walser–Kertész exchanges in Hungary, these take place without the backdrop of forty years of assuming responsibility. Hungarians were, instead, locked into a catechism of disingenuous Communist pseudo-explanations, and the false antidote has been a martyrdom in which blame has rested elsewhere and amnesia has locked out the freedom of introspection.

Notes

- ¹ Hendrik Röder: "Vom Glück im KZ". *Die Welt*, December 10, 2002.
- ² Endre Kiss: "Lukács versus Nietzsche, or The Most Significant Stalinist Trial Against Philosophy," in *East Europe Reads Nietzsche*, edited by Alice Freifeld, Peter Bergmann, and Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (Boulder, CO – New York: East European Monographs, distributed by Columbia University Press, 1998), 207–218.
- ³ Ira Radisch (interviewer), "Die Glückskatastrophe", *Die Zeit*, September 17, 2003.
- ⁴ For a more extensive treatment see Wolfgang Wippermann, *Wessen Schuld? Vom Historikerstreit zur Goldhagen-Kontroverse* (Berlin: Elefant Press, 1997); Peter Bergmann, "Daniel Goldhagen in Germany: An Exploration in German Historiography", *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 26:1 (2000), 141–159.
- ⁵ *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, January 9, 2004.
- ⁶ Wolfram Schütte, "Vom 'Händedruck mit Gespenstern' zum 'Springenden Brunnen' – und weit darüber hinaus: die Friedenspreisrede, das Gespräch Walser-Bubis und andere Rauchzeichen", *titel, Magazin für Literatur und mehr*, Part 10 (2000). http://www.titel-magazin.de/walser_10.htm
- ⁷ Ira Radisch (interviewer), "Die Glückskatastrophe", *Die Zeit*, September 17, 2003. See also Barbara Mahlmann-Bauer, "Über Autobiographien der Jahrgänge 1927/28 und Martin Walsers Roman 'Ein springender Brunnen'", *Literaturkritik*, 1:6 (June 1999). http://www.literaturkritik.de/public/druckfassung_rez.php?rez_id=215
- ⁸ *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, January 9, 2004.
- ⁹ FAZ.Net, October 10, 2002.
- ¹⁰ Imre Kertész, "Bilder einer Ausstellung", haGalil onLine 29-01-2004; www.hagalil.com/archiv/2004/01/wehrmachtsausstellung.htm