

Final Panel

The Artist's Perception - a Contribution to Citizenship Education?

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In my book *"In den Augen meines Großvaters"* ("In the Eyes of My Grandfather") (2004), I addressed the individual perpetration and guilt of a family member. Without empathy I would have been unable to approach the topic of my grandfather, the *Wehrmacht* general Wilhelm Crisolli, but that empathy jarred on both readers and critics. "Should this be allowed?" was the question; "Why not?" my equally rhetorical response. This was a clear case of a taboo being broken, a break almost unimaginable today in the light of Jonathan Littell's novel *"Die Wohlgesinnten"* ("The Kindly Ones").

I took the risk of getting as close as possible to my grandfather for a number of reasons. First, I had no desire to issue myself a certificate of moral superiority by remaining at an accusatory distance. My main purpose was to find out how a professional officer of three armies like my grandfather had viewed his rapidly changing world. What interested me most was the question of what place this undiscussed character had assumed in my family's post-war memory, and what conscious or unconscious affect it had on it. It was not my intention to completely reconstruct a life story from the *Kaiserreich* through the Weimar Republic up to the "Third Reich". The impossibility of closure or completeness were silent conditions for my project. I was operating with fragments of memory, and the result was therefore fragmentary.

I had already stepped into the border area between interconnected fact and fiction by choosing the biographical approach: a German *Wehrmacht* general by the name of Wilhelm Crisolli, who spoke good Italian and set up his quarters in Tuscan villas, who conversed with the ladies of the house, had two women and a priest shot, and himself became the co-incident victim of a partisan ambush in the Apennine – all this appeared much more the stuff of novels than a factual war biography. In order to determine the typology of this veteran professional officer who was involved in war

crimes, I did avail myself of fictional means, but always on the basis of empirical data. I neither succumbed to pure imagination, nor did I trust only the power of recollection. The definitive factor was a multi-genre mould, which was broken several times by the tale of the death of the German *Wehrmacht* general in Tuscany. Thus emerged a composition made up of cultural-historical essay, autobiography, novel, micro-history and oral history. The last word was always left to the instruments of critical historical research, archive research, source criticism, and corresponding results of research into the history of the time.

Such approaches to addressing the contemporary history of the Second World War are an expression of the current change from communicative to cultural memory. With the growing distance to the historical events of the war and the loss of the generation of surviving contemporary witnesses to the mass extermination and the Second World War -- but also with the end of a Federal German culture of conscience -- we have entered into the era of post-memory. Instead of direct testimony, there are broken memories of the memories of the witnesses (James E. Young) and thus the problem of how the past can be represented. This opens up the game of portrayal – and questions of artistic perception and the relationship between facts and fictions come to the fore under the conditions of post-memory. Only now, after the end of biographically-approved history, can the entire bandwidth of artistic interpretation be given free rein. The archives of historical science still remain just as much at our disposal as a reservoir of information, as do certain traditions of literary history. This is why I find that the question of whether artistic perception can make a contribution to the formation of a public consciousness -- at least in terms of the portrayal of extermination, genocide, Auschwitz -- covers up the real problems of conveying the past. There is a silent assumption, not just that artistic forms of representation are capable of portraying genocidal perpetration and guilt, but that this is also desirable for reasons of national education. It should not be forgotten that there was a long-standing opinion that the reality that reached its zenith in Auschwitz went beyond what language or any kind of literary form can express. The German writer Marcel Beyer drew attention to the relevance of the unspeakability topos

insofar as he suggested that there was agreement on the facts, but that this did not make it possible to infer a "consensus language".

With the transformation of memory into history, a new generation of actors has also appeared. For the descendants of both perpetrators and victims, the transmission of traumas from the first to the second generation played the central role. Literary fictionalisation by representatives of the second generation were mainly set in the sphere of familial memory. But recently it seems that the focus is no longer on the after-effects of the Shoah in the form of trans-generational traumas, rather the historical events of the extermination and/or the Second World War themselves. With that, the contemporary history-oriented novel would take the place of the psychological "family novel".

Jorge Semprun clearly determined the task of literature in this context. The duty of literary prose, he wrote, was to assume the persuasive powers of the departing generation of surviving contemporary witnesses. The memory of "Auschwitz", according to Semprun, can only be saved with the help of literary fiction, which must assume the function of memory. He sees the preservation of the "inexhaustible truth of the experience of extermination by fictional means" realised in two prose texts, one of which adopts the perspective of the victim, the other that of the perpetrator. The first of these is the fictitious 'diary tales' of "Klaras Nein" ("Refusal") by Soazig Aaron (German 2003), the second the novel *"Die Wohlgesinnten"* by Jonathan Littell (German 2007).

Soazig Aaron was originally the subject of controversy in France; Jonathan Littell, if he has not already been forgotten in the meantime, was and remains controversial above all in Germany. The problematisation pointed in the same moral-aesthetic direction in both cases. While in France, people asked whether it was permissible for members of the second generation to fictionalise the experience of Auschwitz, here in Germany the question was whether it was permissible to give the perspective of a direct perpetrator a fictional form. The debate about these and other questions was also a symptom of a new stage in the post-memory remembrance discourse. The

family novel, driven by the generational conflict, and until recently the most popular style of coming to terms with the past, appears to have lost its topical urgency after eruptions that were sudden and violent in equal measure. Whether in the form of survivor's guilt on the part of the victims or as a life feeling of "being born guilty" on the part of the perpetrators' descendants, the Shoah itself, in the form of given it by both its authors and its victims, appears to be returning to the fore. If this diagnosis is correct, the historical discourse of the third generation would come closer to that of the first. In his "Dossier K." Imre Kertész acknowledges that in his novel "*Roman eines Schicksallosen*" ("Fateless") he had had to "reinvent Auschwitz and bring it to life". This is also the task facing the post-memory generation. We thus find ourselves at an experimental stage with an unclear outcome. The question is whether it will continue with what's known as 'Holocaust literature' in the style of Jonathan Littell.

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