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***How I Became a German:
Jurek Becker's Life in Five Worlds***

Sander L. Gilman

HOW I BECAME A GERMAN:
JUREK BECKER'S LIFE IN FIVE WORLDS

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PREFACE

Alois Mertes, the statesman and politician whom this series of memorial lectures commemorates, was not just an expert in German foreign policy and international relations. He also was engaged in the dialog between American Jews and Germans and in issues concerning Germany's Nazi past. Indeed, during the public debate about Bitburg in 1985, Mertes, who was undersecretary of state in the government of former chancellor Helmut Kohl, showed more sensitivity and understanding than most politicians in the Federal Republic for the complex question of the limitations set by Germany's past on the country's search for a new identity.

Over the last few years the Alois Mertes Memorial Lectures at the German Historical Institute have stressed the role of Germany in the Cold War (Wolfgang Krieger in 1995 and Melvyn P. Leffler in 1996), as well as questions of religion and politics in the United States (Michael Zöllner in 1997). In 1998 the Institute invited a prominent scholar who would remind us of another lifelong concern of Alois Mertes: The dialog between Germans and Jews in the twentieth century. We were fortunate that Professor Sander L. Gilman of the University of Chicago, an outstanding scholar in the field of German and Jewish cultural studies, agreed to speak. No one was a better choice to lecture on the relationship between Germans and Jews after 1945. Professor Gilman's intellectual courage and imagination are demonstrated by the fact that he chose the biography of novelist Jurek Becker (1937–97) to introduce and analyze the complex topic of diasporic Jewish culture in the old and new (Central) Europe.

Jurek Becker's oeuvre and biography uniquely document Germany's coming-to-terms with the Holocaust. In particular, Becker's perspective gives us insight into the life stories of its survivors. Clearly, Becker's life and work—and Gilman's lecture, for that matter—remind us of the different Jewish cultures that were destroyed or reconstituted in the course of the twentieth century. Above and beyond that, we should perhaps not forget that Jurek Becker, not unlike Alois Mertes, was a transatlantic personality who spent time as writer-in-residence at Oberlin College in 1978 and as a visiting professor of literature at Cornell University in 1984. Furthermore, the recent Hollywood production of Becker's famous novel, *Jacob the Liar*, may stimulate renewed interest in Becker and the questions he raised.

Sander L. Gilman currently is Henry R. Luce Professor of the Liberal Arts in Human Biology at the University of Chicago. He holds positions at Chicago as a professor of Germanic Studies, Comparative Literature, and Psychiatry, and is a member of the Fishbein Center for the History of Sci-

ence. He is a cultural and literary historian and the author or editor of over fifty books. His most recent publications are a collection edited with Milton Shain, *Jewries at the Frontier: Accommodation, Identity, Conflict* (1999); a monographic study, *Making the Body Beautiful—A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* (1999); and, with Jack Zipes, *The Yale Companion to Jewish Writing and Thought in German Culture, 1096–1996* (1997). He is the author of the basic study of the visual stereotyping of the mentally ill (*Seeing the Insane*, 1982, 1996), as well as the standard study of *Jewish Self-Hatred* (1986). He was a member of the humanities and medical faculties at Cornell University, where he held the Goldwin Smith Professorship of Humane Studies. During 1990–1 he served as the Visiting Historical Scholar at the National Library of Medicine in Bethesda, Maryland, and during 1996–7 he was a fellow of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Stanford, California. He also was the Northrup Frye Visiting Professor of Literary Theory at the University of Toronto, the Old Dominion Fellow in the Department of English at Princeton University, and the Visiting B. G. Rudolph Professor of Jewish Studies at Syracuse University. In addition, he was a visiting professor at Colgate University, Tulane University, the University of Paderborn, the Free University of Berlin, the University of Witwatersrand, the Ohio State University, the University of Cape Town, the University of Potsdam, and the University of British Columbia. His many awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1972–3. Professor Gilman was president of the Modern Language Association in 1995, and he was awarded an honorary doctor of laws from the University of Toronto in 1997.

We are pleased to present Professor Gilman's lecture on Jurek Becker and on German-Jewish identities in Central Europe as the eighth Alois Mertes Memorial Lecture and as the twenty-third issue in our Occasional Paper series.

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HOW I BECAME A GERMAN: JUREK BECKER'S LIFE IN FIVE WORLDS

SANDER L. GILMAN

My title may be perplexing to those who have never heard of Jurek Becker—a novelist, a film and television writer, and a public intellectual who died on March 14, 1997, at the age of about fifty-nine. I say "about" for he was officially born on September 30, 1937; "officially" because his birth certificate was lost when the city of Lodz, Poland, was destroyed—and everyone has to be born on some date. Becker's life provides a means of thinking about the complexities of Jewish culture in Central Europe from 1937 to 1997. These sixty years encompassed the invasion of Poland, the Shoah, the collapse of Nazism, the rise and fall of Communism, the reunification of Germany, and the beginnings of a reconstitution of Central European Jewish life.

Writing a biography about someone you knew and liked is complex. I hosted Becker during his stay at Cornell University in 1984 and taught his works with him for a semester. He had taught in the United States before, at Oberlin College, and would later teach at Washington University in St. Louis and the University of Texas at Austin. He taught German literature, and yet he felt that the tasks of the critic and those of the writer were very different. The metaphor he employed quite often for this difference was that of the ornithologist and the bird. I was the ornithologist; he was the bird. However, my task as a critic was never scientific but rather empathetic; I was a birdwatcher rather than an ornithologist, and he was a *rara avis*, a rare bird.

Becker was a Jewish child-survivor author and an Eastern European Jew who held a major position in the culture of both Germanys. He thus was partly *The Painted Bird*, Jerzy Kosinski's metaphor for the mindless torture that marked human relationships in the Shoah.¹ But he also was a completely secular Polish Jew at home in post-1945 Germany. He was the Polish eagle and the German eagle combined. These eagles are perhaps too bellicose an image for someone who was essentially gentle in his manner of dealing with the world. It was this difficulty of identification that made him and his works fascinating to me.

¹ Jerzy N. Kosinski, *The Painted Bird* (Boston, 1965).

As a cultural critic and a literary historian, I have written analytically about Becker and his work, among other things, in my study of Jewish selfhatred.² But after Becker's death I wanted to capture his life and understand his writing in all of the registers in which he wrote. His oeuvre rests on a set of novels that are truly unique in postwar German writing. His biography is not unique but unusual enough as to encompass many of the questions about identity and culture in Central Europe from the 1930s to the 1990s. To explore them I needed to get into Jurek Becker's head as well as into his texts—something he truly feared.

What I intend to do in this biographical sketch is write about Becker's life within the context of the multiple histories he lived—the history of all the Germanys since 1937, of the Jews in Europe, of Poland, of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), of the island city of West Berlin, and of the new, united Germany. This biography will be a cultural history, a literary history, and a media history—a story of friends and of families—some long dead and most quite alive. But mostly it will be the tale of one extraordinary man, Jurek Becker. It will tell the complex tale of how he became a German writer while living in five different worlds. Indeed, the initial title for the manuscript of his third novel, *Bronsteins Kinder* (1986), part of his extraordinary trilogy about the Shoah and German-Jewish sensibility in the GDR, was "How I Became a German"—which is not a bad title for his biography.

Becker himself commented in 1989 that Balzac had claimed that the entire history of his time could be extrapolated from his novels.³ This is, in a complicated way, also true of Becker's oeuvre. Yet, as I noted, Becker was terrified of having his works reduced to the simple recording of his experience, to facts seemingly better gotten by reading history books. His fear was that his critics would "get into his head": "You must protect yourself, they want to get into your head! That is certainly a bit of an exaggeration, perhaps certain aspects of my biography are the reason that I have such panic attacks, but I don't want to examine that now. I think: Why do they want to know that? Above all I think: Why must I know that?"⁴ It is this act of knowing the unknowable, what goes on inside another's psyche, that is the biographer's task. But in Becker's case it was even more frightening, for that act of knowing meant exploring the gap in his memory that spanned his life as a Polish Jew and as a German writer. This was his obsession—or at least the obsession of his biographer.

² Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred* (Baltimore, 1982). A German edition of the book appeared in 1992 with Jüdischer Verlag in Frankfurt am Main.

³ Jurek Becker, *Ende des Grössen Wahns* (Frankfurt am Main, 1996), 95.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 222.

Becker's works and life enable us to tell the tale of Germany in Europe, of the Jews of Central Europe, from prewar Poland to a reunified Germany. Becker himself was acutely aware of the role of culture in defining identity. He was forced across borders from occupied Poland to Germany in 1944 and from the GDR to West Berlin in 1977; he finally became aware of being a citizen of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) with reunification; he switched languages from Polish to German; and he moved elegantly from film to television to fiction to the essay. He also redefined himself at each stage.

THE FIRST WORLD: POLAND, 1937–1939

To write a life is to tell the story of a person's lived experience in its context; and the contexts of Becker's life map the history of Central Europe and the Jews of Central Europe in the middle of the twentieth century. It is the story of a Germany that in the 1950s (as it is again) was a multicultural melting pot where the acquisition of the German language and its complex culture made a person German. According to Becker's narrative, his father was a Lithuanian Jew born in Bavaria, who moved with his parents to Poland as a small child; his mother was born in Poland. This narrative was contradicted by further archival work, which uncovered the fact that his father was born in Poland. When Becker and his father returned to the defeated Reich in 1945, father and son were seen not as refugees but as returnees, which simplified their lives.⁵ His father was a typical, inherently secular Jew—not a contradiction in the Poland of the 1920s and 1930s. He rarely went to the synagogue, even after he moved to Berlin in 1945, and thus his son was raised to see himself as a "person" rather than as a secular Jew.⁶ This person was given a recognizably Polish first name at birth, an unremarkable thing to do by the 1930s in the large urban areas of Poland. Becker was temporarily renamed Georg when he served in the *Volksarmee* (People's Army) of the GDR. Jurek, which was a sign of not being too Jewish in Lodz in 1937, came to be seen as a sign of being too Polish in the GDR of the 1950s.

In a rather famous radio talk in 1977, Becker asked how one made a Jew; he understood that when two human beings reproduced, they made another human being. This secular identity, formed in the GDR after 1949, was the natural extension of the Polish-Jewish secular identity of the interwar years. Its Enlightenment roots were clear—all human beings are equal. But history had made that impossible for Becker—and his struggle with

⁵ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 12–13.

that promise of his own personal autonomy as a human being rather than as a Jew and then as a human being who was a Jew marked his creative life.

The Enlightenment model of Jewish emancipation and secularization was, in complex way, a German model. The *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment of Moses Mendelssohn, had prompted the integration of Jews into the German petty states of the eighteenth century; in Poland, at least in Congress Poland, until World War I, civic emancipation of the Jews and their integration into a modern Polish world was much slower in coming. As in Germany in the nineteenth century, it was industrialization and the establishment of a strong Polish constitution in 1921 that made possible the idea of a Polish-Jewish identity, parallel to that of a German-Jewish secular identity. No longer was "being Jewish" a religious identity. In post-World War I Poland, being Jewish could mean a political (Zionist) or even an ethnic designation (analogous to the presence of Lithuanians who wrote and spoke Polish in the new state).

Interwar Poland was only nominally democratic, however. It quickly became the authoritarian country of General Józef Piłsudski, who seized power in 1926. After his death in 1935, Poland was transformed into an anti-Semitic, pseudofascist state that paralleled Austro-fascism more than Nazism. But during this move to the right, even with the increasing political anti-Semitism, there was present a world rarely discussed today—that of the Polish-speaking Jewish bourgeois into which Jurek Becker was born in 1937. Multilingual, speaking Polish and Yiddish, and even some German and Russian, they were the Jewish middle class in transition to becoming a Polish-Jewish middle class.

This transformation was especially evident in the industrial city of Lodz, the Manchester of Poland, where Becker was born. But by 1937 middle-class Polish-Jewish life in Lodz had already become a myth, as in Israel Joshua Singer's account of it in his great novel *Di brider Ashkenasi* (The Brothers Ashkenazi).⁷ These were not sentimentalized *Ostjuden* (Eastern Jews) with their *peyes* (sidelocks) and *klezmer* (festive music); these were members of a forgotten Jewish middle class—closer in their social and cultural relationships to their Polish neighbors than to the ultra-orthodox Jews depicted in Isaac Bashevis Singer's autobiography *Mayn tatn's beys-din shtub* (In My Father's Court).⁸ These were Jews in the process of becoming Poles, as Jews in Germany had become German Jews: secular Jewish Poles, but Poles nonetheless.

Although there had been some Jewish intellectuals who had already identified with the tortured political history of Poland in the nineteenth

⁷ Israel Joshua Singer, *Di brider Ashkenasi* (1936; English ed., 1936).

⁸ Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Mayn tatn's beys-din shtub* (1956; English ed., 1966).

century. by World War I there appeared a Polanized lower middle class, and Lodz was its center. The Lodz into which Becker was born in 1937 was a city with a virtual Jewish majority; it was a city of substantial Jewish presence, but a modern presence rooted in a new Polish identity. However, after the Shoah, Becker admits to understanding himself as a Jew, whatever that meant, but he never felt himself to be a Pole. His father, afterward, understood the Polish betrayal of the Enlightenment promise. Polish anti-Semitism of the prewar and postwar worlds colored his sense of being a Pole for himself and for his son. Becker's new German identity was created as the antithesis to a Polish identity.⁹ Even in the GDR, a world where there was a compulsory sense of the "friendship" that bound Germans and Poles, even in a world where one of the rewards for success was recognition in the East, Becker kept his distance. For him, as for his father, the acquisition of a secular Jewish-Polish identity was the promise that failed.

THE SECOND WORLD: THE GHETTO AND THE CAMPS

On September 1, 1939, German troops dressed in Polish military garb attacked a German border station. The Nazi state that had seized the Rhineland, partitioned Czechoslovakia, and occupied a willing Austria, then "defended itself" by marching into Poland. The Soviet Union, with which it had entered into a secret agreement, helped Germany dismember their common neighbor. Independent Poland had existed for barely twenty years. For Becker and the other Jews in Lodz occupied Poland quickly became the Poland of the ghettos and the camps. The middle-class, Polish-speaking Jewish child of Lodz became the Jew in the ghetto at Litzmannstadt. It was at that moment, when they were herded into the ghetto, that the Beckers became Jews. What made the Beckers Jews, at least according to Becker's father, was the anti-Semitism of the Poles and the Germans.¹⁰

Becker and his family survived the Lodz ghetto and, when Becker was five, he and his mother were moved to the camps at Sachsenhausen and Ravensbrück. The world of the child, not the sentimentalized or even novelized place but the one of day-to-day existence, was a world of consummate boredom and ultimate fear. Becker's life in the camp was marked by this boredom and by the increasingly bad health of his mother, who suffered from tuberculosis, as did many of the inhabitants of Lodz. She died shortly after Ravensbrück was liberated and was buried there. Becker

⁹ Becker, *Ende*, 217.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

was placed in a United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (UNRRA) children's camp, where the Red Cross reunited him with his father in 1945.

Becker claimed that his boring existence in the ghetto and the camps between the ages of two and eight left no impression. Yet, in the most recent attempts of those who were interned in the camps as small children to recount their memories, fragments do remain. In Susan Rubin Suleiman's *Budapest Diary: In Search of the Motherbook*, her effort to "remember" her life as a small child reveals that the trauma of separation remains burned into the child's psyche even a half century later, much like the afterimage of bright light on the retina.¹¹ Suleiman's memories of being left by her parents with a farmer outside of Budapest in 1944 are fragmentary and are filtered through both tales told about experiences in families, communities, and world, as well as the powerful need of the adult to remember. If Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* is now dismissed as "merely" fiction, then these autobiographical accounts are heralded because of their role as authentic representations of the past. The line between fiction and memory is much too fine to be drawn with certainty. Becker's loss of memory itself is an artifact of the past, but like all the survivors he lived in a world in which there were constant evocations of that time.

As an adult, Becker retained no memory of the Shoah or of his life prior to 1945. He wrote in 1989, in the catalog of a fragmentary set of photographs by Mendel Grossmann from the Lodz ghetto, that his loss of memory was complete: "When I was two I went into the ghetto and at five I left to go to the camps. I cannot remember anything. I was told about it, it is in my papers, thus it must have been my childhood. Sometimes I think: Too bad something else is not written there. In any case, I know of the ghetto only what I was told."¹² The forgotten experiences of the past, the silence of his father, and the obsessive discussion of the Shoah in the GDR and the FRG all provided material for his work and filtered his memory. Becker did not remember his experiences or the language in which they were cast; but his literary work remembered them for him. As he notes seemingly in spite of himself, he would much rather have had another past, but that is something that all of us desire and none of us can have.

Is Becker's total lack of memory surprising? Even visual impressions were wiped out, for they were cast in language; his father refused, except at one or two moments, to speak of his experiences in German or in any other language. Yet Jurek Becker lived in a world compulsively concerned with the Shoah. For being a Jew (however defined) in Germany after 1945, one could not escape

¹¹ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Budapest Diary: In Search of the Motherbook* (Lincoln, Neb., 1996).

¹² Becker, *Ende*, 114.

the narrative of the Six Million. Becker's "being told" about the Shoah was not being told by his father but by the culture in which he lived.

It is in the move to Berlin in 1945 and Becker's acquisition of German that his memories begin. Becker's claim is that he lost his Polish after the camps and replaced it with German. His German was, as I have noted, the seat of his new identity. But that identity as a German was coupled with the other major loss in the camps: his mother's death. His mother enabled him to survive in Sachsenhausen. Small children alone rarely survived except in the fictions of the Shoah, such as those by Kosinski and (as has recently been revealed) Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Bruchstücke: Aus einer Kindheit*.¹³

Becker's construction of the Shoah in Germany was odd; it was clearly gendered. In looking at Grossmann's collection, he saw in the photographs from the ghetto that almost all of the children were boys: "Only boys, how come? Is that the reason why girls have been, as far back as I can remember, special beings?"¹⁴ The girls form the other link that was missing and that clearly was the most important thing Becker lost in the Shoah. The death of Becker's mother meant abandonment by the central parent. This sense of abandonment can be read as parallel to Suleiman's obsessive search for the father who abandoned her twice, first as a four-year-old, when he hid her with a farmer, and again when he died of a heart attack when she was a teenager.

Suleiman subtitled her memoir *In Search of the Motherbook*, the English parallel to the Hungarian term for record book. But we speak also of Becker's "mother tongue," not the Polish and Yiddish spoken by his mother but the *Lagersprache* that became the lingua franca of the camps. This language, spoken by Becker perhaps as his primary language, was clearly lost after the death of his mother. It is Polish that he remembered speaking, not the language of the camps, the composite language with its overlay of German. What he retained in his mind were the first German words he heard in the *Lagersprache*, words necessary for survival: "All everyone," "Formation-count off!" and "hurry, hurry" (*Alles alle, Antreten-Zählappell, and Dalli-dalli*).¹⁵ Even the very word *Lagersprache* evokes the problems of the Jew who, after the Shoah, in the Diaspora, attempted to speak German. Becker commented that when his father found him in 1945 he spoke Polish like a four-year-old rather than like an eight-year-old "for it was at this age that I was exposed to circumstances that made language superfluous."¹⁶

¹³ Benjamin Wilkomirski, *Bruchstücke: Aus einer Kindheit 1939–1948* (Frankfurt am Main, 1995).

¹⁴ Becker, *Ende*, 116.

¹⁵ Jurek Becker, *Warnung vor dem Schriftsteller* (Frankfurt am Main, 1989), 10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

No language would have been sufficient, yet for the terms of the camp, the patois of the camps was necessary.

Becker's mother remained a vague memory: "I remember someone from my childhood, a women with two small hands, which she held before her and calmed me through gentle movements to and fro, when I was upset: 'Quiet, my dear, it's all right.'"¹⁷ His missing mother resonates in all of his writings; the loss of his mother is central to his experience of the post-Shoah world. But it is also the loss of a language associated with the mother, the language of the camps. Unlike Paul Celan, who was raised in a German-speaking home in Bukovina and for whom the deformation of German as a language could be measured against the value of German high culture in his own world, Becker came out of the camps with German as the veneer of his experience.¹⁸ Learning German meant forgetting the language of the camps and repressing the association with his abandonment by his mother.

The missing mother, as Sabine Gözl has elegantly shown, figures repeatedly in virtually all of Becker's fictional work, from his first novel, in which the title character of *Jakob der Lügner* (Jakob the Liar, 1969), assumes the material role for a child abandoned in a German raid in the ghetto, to his last novel, *Amanda Herzlos* (1992), in which the title character appears only in the words of the three men in her life.¹⁹ His absent mother and his forgotten language were formative in Becker's life after the camps.

THE THIRD WORLD: SBZ AND GDR

In 1945 Becker's father found the eight-year-old Jurek in a hospital run by UNRRA. Having been separated from his wife and son in 1944, when he was sent to Auschwitz, he sought them only to find that his wife had died and that his son was ill. After having recovered his son, Becker's father then moved to the Soviet sector of occupied Berlin. Why Berlin? Becker's father felt safe in Berlin, in a defeated Germany whose shame was inscribed, like the tattoo on his arm, on its national body by its division. After the Shoah and his move to Berlin, Jurek's father observed over and over to his young son that he was simply more comfortable in Berlin: "It wasn't the Polish anti-Semites who lost the war."²⁰ Thus, Becker's third world is the

¹⁷ Becker, *Ende*, 57.

¹⁸ Paul Celan (1920–1970), pseudonym for Paul Antschel, was a German-language poet and translator.

¹⁹ Sabine Gözl, "Where Did the Wife Go? Reading Jurek Becker's 'Parkverbot,'" *Germanic Review* 62 (1987): 10–19.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 11–12.

world of the "building of socialism." It was the Soviet zone of occupation (Sowjetische Besatzungszone or SBZ) that in October 1949 became the German Democratic Republic. Unlike in the building of the FRG, where the exiles found it difficult if not impossible to have a significant say in the establishment of the new state, the GDR was created by a cadre of returnees. The leadership of the SBZ and the later GDR returned from Moscow, from Mexico City, from Los Angeles. All were communists; many were secular Jews. This was for most of them an insignificant part of their identity—but a present one, for the SBZ and the GDR were anti-fascist worlds but not philo-Semitic ones. There was not quite the brutality of the pogroms and murders in Poland after 1945, but it was a world that was beginning to evolve quite differently than West Germany with regard to a Jewish presence. But what both shared was the language of a German high culture compromised, as Victor Klemperer elegantly illustrated, by the Nazi world of words.²¹

Becker survived the experience of the Shoah as an eight-year-old—but without any memory of it. He initially claimed that everything that he had experienced before he was eight, including his arrival in Berlin, he had forgotten. He even forgot the language he spoke "because I have been selected into a circle in which the central obligation is the correct use of the German language. It is vital to mention that my mother tongue was Polish. When I was eight years old, my father, my only relative to survive the war, stopped speaking Polish to me from one day to the next. His intentions were certainly the best. He thought that I would be able to do nothing else but learn German immediately. What didn't occur to him was that I forgot Polish more quickly than I learned the new language. Thus, I was for a time literally without language. That has passed, the learning process has succeeded, even if I don't think that it has been completed."²² For Becker, language and memory were lost simultaneously. His new language, German, became the world that defined him: "A love affair with language, totally enamored with words, that would be a curious excitement; yes, it would be in many eyes a perversion, one that should be resolved within the individual and not presented in the market place."²³ The perversion that Becker sensed was his affective relationship to his new language. It was German that was the new mother tongue and the new mother. But it was the new mother that heightened his awareness of the loss of his past.

Becker was more than aware of the implications of that change in language for his role as a "German" author. He initially took the position

²¹ Viktor Klemperer, *LTI: Notizbuch eines Philologen* (Berlin, 1947).

²² Becker, *Ende*, 50.

²³ *Ibid.*, 98.

often ascribed to Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov, that the shift in language placed him in a self-conscious position with regard to writing. But this claim seems to work better for writers such as Conrad and Nabokov, who as adults began to write in their second language. The loss of language (and the concomitant memories of language) as a child presents other, more complex problems. Suleiman, a Hungarian who learned French and English, and who wrote her memoirs in the latter, illustrates this. Becker, in his Poetic Lectures in Frankfurt in 1989, began to imagine a different life for himself (and by extension for other child-survivors who shift languages to write). He thought of learning the new language as a desire to please, a desire not to make errors. He spoke of a game that his father played with him, wherein his father gave him fifty pfennigs for a cleanly written page but subtracted five pfennigs for each error: "I always wanted to show how well I learned my lesson; no one should discover my errors and draw his conclusions from them."²⁴ In *Jewish Self-Hatred*, I observed that one of the tropes of anti-Semitism in Central Europe internalized by Jews was the belief that no matter how well they learned a language "not their own," their German, French, or Polish remained "foreign." Even Jews who spoke no other language—not Yiddish, not Hebrew—suffered under this view. It was a means of establishing the difference of the Jews, their cultural "dual loyalty" even where no such difference existed. For Becker, such a difference did exist. He actually did speak a "Jewish language," the *Lagersprache*, and his desire not to have the "others draw their conclusions" meant not to reveal his sense of diasporic difference, of Jewishness.

It is vital to understand that, after the trial of Rudolph Slansky in 1952 in Prague and the aftershocks of the so-called doctors' plot against Stalin in 1953, being Jewish was not necessarily something that was understood as positive in the GDR. Indeed, as Jeffrey Herf has shown, with the Paul Merker trial in the GDR, which parallels those in Prague and Moscow, the very idea of a Jewish identity became compromised. Merker's secret trial before the GDR's Supreme Court in March 1955 was well publicized and marked the clear rejection of the GDR's obligation to the political memory of the Shoah. Merker had returned from Mexican exile convinced that anti-Semitism and the Shoah had to be central issues in the ideological struggle to form a new socialist state in Germany. The government of Walter Ulbricht disagreed, and the court convicted Merker of violating Article 6 of the GDR's constitution and Allied Control Council Directive 38 of October 12, 1946. He was tried and convicted under a law that was designed to thwart the revival of Nazism in postwar Ger-

²⁴ Becker, *Warnung*, 12.

many. On March 30, 1955, Merker was sentenced to eight years in prison.²⁵

Being Jewish became a public and political sign of "dual loyalties" in a world in which the claim of a "universal" Marxist identity beyond national and religious definition permitted only one level of identification, and that was with the new state. The new GDR was, at least after the anti-Zionist campaign of the 1950s, incompatible with a "Zionist" or "Jewish" identity. The impact of this view was powerful (both in the GDR and among the left in the FRG). As late as 1977, Becker dismissed the Zionist project, using the rhetoric of the GDR, as Nazi-like and therefore criminal.²⁶ He withdrew this comment in 1996 as "exaggerated and false." He had come to understand that in this specific context anti-Zionism was anti-Semitism because it did not permit the identification of oneself as a Jew in the public sphere of the GDR. Becker's sense that there was no anti-Semitism in the Berlin of his youth was based on the notion that there was a clear line to be drawn between those "incidentally" Jewish by accident of birth and those who chose to highlight that aspect of their identity.²⁷ It was later clear to him that this line was not a permissible one. Indeed, even in the small East Berlin Jewish community in the 1960s and 1970s the anti-Zionist rhetoric was expected and even imposed (if often undermined).

Becker's father never was a convinced soldier in the building of state socialism. He was a Jew, like many of the displaced persons, who stayed in one of the zones of occupied Germany because it was the less awful choice, not because it was the best choice. Why did Jews even move to or stay in any part of Germany after 1945? Michael Brenner shows elegantly that accident of place and limitations of options rather than any plan of action motivated these individuals.²⁸ But Becker was raised as a good citizen of the GDR. His was the first generation of children to come of age and become full citizens of the Workers' and Peasants' State. With no past, a tabula rasa, Becker became the first of a new group of German citizens, the citizens of the GDR. But the ambiguity that existed between his father's life in a limbo, called Germany, and his own new life as a citizen of the GDR became evident to him. This question is central to the re-emergence of the culture in the GDR in which Jurek Becker lived and about which he wrote

²⁵ Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997); or, more specifically, see Jeffrey Herf, *East German Communists and the Jewish Question: The Case of Paul Merker*, German Historical Institute Occasional Paper series, no. 11 (Washington, D.C., 1994).

²⁶ Becker, *Ende*, 17.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁸ Michael Brenner, *After the Holocaust: Rebuilding Jewish Lives in Postwar Germany* (Princeton, N.J., 1997).

in *Der Boxer* (1976), his most overlooked novel. In that novel the father discovers his son in an orphanage and takes him to Berlin, where he is raised as a young German, his name changed from Aron to Arno. But the father's inability to speak to his son means that as the son matures, he has no sense of who he is and what he can do. During the Six-Day War (1967) this young communist vanishes and goes to Israel to defend the Jewish state. He dies there. The father is numb with grief and can only ruminate on what had made his son turn into a Jew.

Becker's own father spoke only about "the Germans" when he was back in Germany after 1945. He would ask Jurek: "How do *the Germans* treat you in school?"²⁹ He and his father were "returnees," but that never mitigated his sense of being an outsider, and that, according to him, was not only because he had to learn a new language. His father taught him: "Let them know that you don't belong to them—they won't forget it anyway."³⁰ Becker's father felt that, under the new circumstances, he had to play the role of the Jew, often in a more public way than he wanted because this was expected of him.³¹ This sense of belonging but not belonging, of being a German but inexorably being a Jew because of the loss of identity, of memory, of mother, marks Becker as a German writer. It is a Jewish identity in Germany marked by loss that is the foundation of his sense of what being German and being Jewish is—it is the attempt to ameliorate loss with the command of language.

The ambiguity of how one becomes a German and a Jew is a theme in all his works. It appears in his novels of the 1970s as well as in those of the 1990s. In his most commercially successful novel, *Amanda Herzlos*, he has a moment that parodies this theme. The novel is told from the viewpoints of Amanda's three lovers; Amanda herself appears only in that she has no voice. The final section of the novel deals with the attempts of the unseen and unheard protagonist to leave the GDR in order to marry her Western lover, a radio correspondent, virtually on the eve of the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The couple turns to a well-placed lawyer to help them leave the GDR, a man named Colombier. Amanda asks Colombier and his wife whether, because of their names, they were Huguenots; then an exchange takes place between the husband and wife:

Oh no, we are not Huguenots, we are Jews. We are not Jews, we are of Jewish descent, you know the difference? We don't keep kosher, we have no knowledge of prayers, our two youngest sons are not

²⁹ Becker, *Ende*, 180.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 182.

even circumcised. If you are a Catholic and leave the Church, then you aren't a Catholic anymore. With the Jews it is sadly different. Therefore, I answered for simplicity's sake: We are Jews. It is unimportant that until our emigration to France we were called Tauber. You know, we lived in a stable for two years. It wasn't a stable but a barn. It was a combination of barn and stable, but who cares. If you have nothing to do day and night but freeze or shoo flies, you have time to think about another life.³²

They chose a new name, new ancestry, but remain Jews—or at least of Jewish ancestry even in the GDR. Especially in the GDR, Becker implies, the more one's identity as a Jew was hidden, the more public it was. I might add that when Becker gave me a copy of the prepublication version of this, his last novel, over breakfast at a cafe on the Kurfürstendamm, he winked and said: "You'll even find something in it to interest you!" And indeed this aspect of his work did and does interest me, as I believe that it serves as the key to all of his other work and to the way he shaped his sense of self.

The movement of Jewish displaced persons from the East (including Jews from Poland) must be contrasted with the more recent establishment of a new generation of young Russian (now German) Jews who have emigrated to Germany in relatively large numbers during the past decade. The children of these new immigrants will form the next cohort of German Jews, much as the displaced persons of the late 1940s formed the first cohort of German-speaking Jews in both the FRG and the GDR. In the 1980s Becker took part in this rebuilding of the German-Jewish community as he later acknowledged—whether he desired to or not. He, according to his own account, "neither sought nor avoided the presence of Jews. Whether one was or was not a Jew, I experienced most accidentally, if at all. If someone drew my attention to this, I always asked myself: 'Why does she tell me this?' Perhaps I was even a bit alienated because I thought that the person expected that after such an admission that I would relate to him differently than I normally would have."³³ It is the sense of being and not being, of the desire to pass merely as a person, not as a person who is also a Jew. But this sense of a "common mental construction," to use Sigmund Freud's definition of the salient quality of the Jew, is one that came to be acknowledged by Becker. In his last published interview, surreptitiously recorded by the photographer sent to photograph him while he was dying of cancer, he noted that "I would argue with you about the question of whether I am or am not a Jew.... I am also conscious that that which you call 'being Jewish,'

³² Jurek Becker, *Amanda Herzlos* (Frankfurt am Main, 1992), 326–7.

³³ Becker, *Ende*, 13–14.

that is, Jewish culture, played a role for me in a hundred different ways."³⁴ I would add that the culture in which Becker found himself embedded was one of loss and recovery, of becoming Jewish in Germany, out of the experience of the Shoah.

It is in the SBZ and the later GDR that Becker became a German, and in complicated ways, becoming a German under those circumstances also meant becoming a Jew. His trajectory is typical of those given consideration in the GDR for having been a "victim of fascism." In 1955 he graduated from the gymnasium and in 1957 was admitted to the Humboldt University of Berlin to study philosophy. He was expelled from the university shortly before he was to take his examinations because of unstated but unacceptable activities. His life in the GDR, at the Humboldt University, was one of a "normal" citizen of the GDR—but it also was different because he was a "victim of fascism"; it was in this atmosphere that he began to write for the political cabaret Die Distel. His literary model was not only socialist realism, which he was reading in school; it also was Franz Kafka, who was banned and ignored especially after the eager participation of the GDR in the Prague Spring invasion.³⁵ In his father's bookcase Becker found Max Frisch, Nikolai Gogol, Maksim Gorki, Karl May, Henryk Sienkiewicz, Rex Stout, and Edgar Wallace. It was Frisch, and especially his novel *Stiller* (1954), who provided him with the insight that there was a close relationship between the serious and the comic, and that "tragedy must not always wear a dark suit and comedy a T-shirt."³⁶ German literature became the medium by which Becker's new role and new identity could be crafted. His role as an author was central to his own sense of self. But it must be stressed that unlike many authors, his was not a world of "high culture." Indeed, Becker parodies that sort of writer in his final television miniseries in 1994, *Wir sind auch nur ein Volk*, in which the famous West German author Anton Steinheim is persuaded to write a television series on German reunification. Becker took all of his writing seriously, whether as a novelist of first rank or as a television writer with broad acceptance.

Becker learned to write, as he later said, in a world in which writing had a "substitute quality," replacing newspapers, radio, and film.³⁷ Novels sold out virtually as soon as they were published and were read as if they hid complex meanings. It was writing from the margin, writing code, a task well suited to someone who never felt quite at home in his language, who always sensed his alienation from the official literature. Becker's im-

³⁴ *Der Spiegel*, no. 13 (1997): 215.

³⁵ Becker, *Ende*, 37.

³⁶ *Der Tagesspiegel*, May 15, 1981.

³⁷ Becker, *Ende*, 120.

age of the socialist state, with its central control of the media (and remember that Becker was trained to write for the media), is one that drove readers to reading the books of "deviants."³⁸ He counted himself among those deviants. His struggles with the state censors became a game for Becker, as for many writers of that first generation of GDR citizens who lived with the specter of the Cold War. It was a unique situation because it was always possible, even if it was politically complicated or dangerous, to write for a German-reading audience in the FRG.

Suddenly one sees a set of complex advantages to being an insider who is an outsider. There were advantages of access in being a Jew in the GDR, but only if one was not too publicly Jewish; there were advantages to being an oppositional writer in the GDR, but not if one was publicly identified as oppositional. Becker confronted the former in his novel *Bronsteins Kinder*, the latter form the core of his lectures at the University of Frankfurt in 1988, later published as *Warnung vor dem Schriftsteller*. These "plus points" (to use Michael Wolffsohn's phrase about the advantage of being Jewish in Germany after the Shoah) to being an oppositional writer who did not have to rely on translation (as did the exile writers from Poland) meant that writers such as Becker, in his own estimation, had greater freedom.³⁹ But it is greater freedom only within one's self-conscious ability to exploit one's status as "Jewish" or "oppositional." Few writers in the GDR, even Jewish writers such as Stefan Heym or the "part-Jewish" Thomas Brasch, were as articulate about the dangers of these plus points. Indeed, even those much younger GDR intellectuals, such as Chaim Noll, who became quite self-conscious about the linkage of their Jewish and oppositional identities (at least when he came to the West) seemed oblivious to what made them attractive as intellectuals for their West German audience. This audience was as interested in their oppositional status, which captured their sense of the GDR as a place of danger, as in their roles as exemplary Jews in a society that was not quite sure of the meaning of self-identified Jews as spokespeople for a marginal position both within and beyond societal self-definitions.

Becker's lost language, the language of his childhood, would have limited his development; his new language encouraged it, but only with his own conscious awareness of his distance from it. Becker continued to publish his work in the GDR (with Hinstorff Verlag in Rostock) even after he left the GDR in 1977.⁴⁰ The internal documents, which presented his novels

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Michael Wolffsohn, *Die Deutschland Akte: Juden und Deutsche in Ost und West: Tatsachen und Legenden* (Munich, 1995).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 123.

to the collective and to the state apparatus, took little issue with what he was able to write in the West.

Becker learned to write in the context of the half-spoken and partially overheard. Writing in a dictatorship (even of the proletariat) is difficult but, in complex ways, rewarding. He commented in 1977 (after coming to the West) that no book would cause a West German coalition to collapse; the fear of literature and its manipulation was based on the idea that literature in the GDR had power—but it was power given to it by the state, as in George Orwell's *1984*.

The 1960s were heady years, years in which one could truly believe in what one was doing as one helped to build a socialist state and then alter it in new and positive ways through the act of writing. These were the years when the GDR still had the international reputation of being the "good," the "Antifa" (antifascist) German state. Yet, the unarticulated feelings of anti-Semitism on the part of officials and people on the street alike were the silent background to Becker's writing. He wrote initially for the mass media, including the cabaret. In 1961 he wrote satirical screenplays for the "Stacheltier" unit of DEFA. The next year he collaborated with Klaus Poche on a situation comedy for GDR television under the pseudonym Georg Niklaus. In 1964 he wrote a screenplay for his first DEFA film, the comedy of manners *Ohne Pass im Fremden Bett*. These early experiences as a writer of mass culture (indeed, given the realities of the GDR, perhaps a cut below mass culture) inspired him to write one of his most widely read novels, *Irreführung der Behörden* (1973), which is a classic on how to work in a repressive cultural environment.

In 1965 Becker wrote his first serious movie script for DEFA, titled "Jakob der Lügner." Situated in an unnamed ghetto in Poland, it is the tale of a lower-middle-class Jew named Jakob Heym who overhears a bit of news while being held at the Wehrmacht guard's office. He announces the news but intimates that he has a radio. The presence of a radio, forbidden by the Germans, gives the people in the ghetto a renewed sense of optimism. In the course of the novel, the fictive radio appears repeatedly. Becker notes that his childhood had been spent listening to the radio and imagining the world.⁴¹ Here the radio literally is the *deus ex machina*. In the Germans' final raid on the ghetto Jakob is transported eastward. Becker provides a double ending—Jakob's death is announced by a narrative voice, by a friend who clearly survives the Shoah to tell the reader the tale. This device suggests the possibility not only of surviving the Shoah but telling about it as well. In what language, in what form, in what way could such a tale be told? Film seemed the evident medium to Becker because it was a

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 205.

means of reaching the widest possible audience in a way that was not seen as suspect or perverse.

Yet GDR officials saw the inherent danger of "Jakob der Lügner." Because of the political crises in 1965, DEFA (and the Ministry of Culture) did not approve the script. No film or novel about the Jewish experience in the Shoah had been produced or published up to that point. The typical form of the fictive and cinematic representation of the Shoah in the GDR was Bruno Apitz's *Nackt unter Wolfen* (1958). This tale, set in the Buchenwald concentration camp, presents the "Jew" only in the form of an infant, which was hidden by political prisoners (none of whom are identified as Jews). But to make a film like Becker's, in which a self-identified Jew and the murder of Jews stood at the center of attention, was politically unacceptable.

Becker's anger at the rejection of the script transmuted the film script into a novel, which was published by Aufbau Verlag in 1969 (and in West Germany by Luchterhand Verlag in 1970). It was one of the first "comic" novels about the Shoah, or at least a novel that did not rely on simple pathos as a way of understanding the events of the Shoah. Retrospectively, Becker felt that the story of Jakob the liar "was a good enough topic for a first novel, because it enabled him to tell the tale of terrible things, such as the ghetto and the persecution of the Jews, not in a voice choked with tears but rather in a comic tone."⁴² It was the narrative voice, as much indebted to Johannes Bobrowski's novel *Levins Mühle* (1964) as to any other work in the GDR, that captured and fascinated the reader. It was the voice of the Jew speaking for himself; a voice not heard up to that point in the GDR, either in terms of the author or in terms of the character.

In the summer of 1969 I was in West Berlin and asked a friend at the Akademie der Wissenschaften (Academy of Sciences) to suggest some new books for me to read. He noted that there was a wonderful new translation from the Polish that had just been published—Jurek Becker's first novel. It was not only not a "translation" from the Polish but also one of the most authentic German voices I had ever read on the Jewish experience in the Shoah. I was hooked on Becker's voice and on his gift as a storyteller. It also was the first self-consciously Jewish voice I had read in the GDR about the Shoah. I was not alone in my enthusiasm—after its publication in the FRG, *Jakob der Lügner* received the Heinrich Mann Prize (1971), the Literary Prize of the City of Bremen (1974), and the Swiss Charles Veillon Prize (1971). As a result, DEFA and GDR television jointly produced a filmed version of the story, directed by Frank Beyer and with a new screenplay by Becker. It

⁴² Ibid., 147.

was awarded the GDR's National Prize Second Class (1975) and was the first East German film shown at the Berlin Film Festival; it also was the only motion picture from the GDR ever to receive an Academy Award nomination for best foreign film.

By the time Becker and Beyer were nominated for the Academy Award in 1974, the civil relations between the state and its critics had already begun to unravel. As Manfred Krug showed in his notes to the transcriptions of tapes made during his own more-or-less voluntary exile from the GDR, Becker began to assume a rather unique position on the margins of both the official GDR and the opposition.⁴³

Becker had joined the Socialist Unity Party (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands or SED) in 1957. In 1969 he took a "comic" approach to the history of the Third Reich in his film *Meine Stunde Null* (directed by Joachim Hasler). Starring Krug, who was featured in most of Becker's films, it recounts the adventures of Hartung, a Russian prisoner of war who sneaks behind the German lines to kidnap his commanding officer. In 1976–7 Beyer directed the comedy *Das Versteck*, again with Krug in the lead, this time playing the architect Max who attempts to win back his ex-wife by pretending to be pursued by the police. He fails in his attempt because his wife Wanda has learned to live without him. This film was seen only in very limited release in the GDR because Krug left for West Berlin shortly before its premiere.

Becker was aware that the film and (by extension) the novel were texts of the late 1960s and the early 1970s. In an interview with the GDR weekly *Der Sonntag*, he commented that such a film would have been impossible five years after the war: "Immediately after the war the observer would have seen such a treatment of this theme as blasphemy. I believe that our tale demands a high degree of knowledge. I can approach people with a tale like this only after they have been bombarded with information about that time for twenty or thirty years. In other words, for someone who knows nothing about what had happened then, this is an inappropriate text."⁴⁴ In 1975 Becker's sense of the film was that it formed some type of reaction to his earlier experiences. The interviewer discovered, according to Becker, that the ironic voice of the narrator reflected this reaction as the key to what made the novel and the film different from the wide range of socialist films dealing with fascism. Indeed, in April and May 1975 the GDR sponsored a film festival of "anti-imperialist films," among them was *Jakob der Lügner*, the only film with any sense of irony and self-reflection.

⁴³ Manfred Krug, *Abgehauen: Ein Mitschnitt und ein Tagebuch* (Düsseldorf, 1996).

⁴⁴ Date of interview: April 20, 1975.

THE FOURTH WORLD: THE FIRST EASTERNER IN WEST BERLIN

Becker was truly committed to an idealized notion of what state socialism could become in Germany. Indeed, the standards to which he held the GDR were ones the ideologues who created the state had themselves established. Central to these was the role that was to be played by those "perverse" oppositional writers who were tolerated (and even published) in the GDR but who also were voices of a very different GDR as read in the FRG. During 1977 Becker joined writers of great visibility, such as Stefan Heym and Stephan Hermlin, to protest the official banishment of Wolf Biermann from the GDR, an act as powerful as the expulsion of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn from the USSR in 1974.

In December 1977 Becker finally left the GDR, following Reiner Kunze's expulsion from the Writer's Union. He was given a two-year visa and encouraged to leave for West Berlin; two years later the visa was extended for ten years, and thus became invalid just when the GDR had vanished! He did not go into exile but rather created a new world. Yet he never truly left the GDR. "I left the GDR in 1977 and have lived since then in West Berlin; one can describe me as well integrated. Even today, after sixteen years in the West," he wrote in 1993, "none of my books deal with the West. All of my texts, which I have published, play in a land that no longer exists, in the GDR. That seems unusual to me, a case for a psychiatrist, and you can be certain that I have tried to do something about this. But all of my attempts to make this new, strange home the subject of my books have been in vain."⁴⁵ It is, of course, a fantasy GDR by the time he leaves. It is the world that promised to create the solution to the void he felt—the loss of language, of mother, of place. His GDR was a world in which reality was very different from its promise. The promise was to create a world without hate and conflict, a promise that was not kept. Becker's secret police files, which fill four rather large notebooks, chronicle his daily life during his final years in East Berlin. They mark his exit from one Berlin to another. Most important was his code name—*Lügner*—which was clearly based on his most famous novel; it evoked all the nastiness that Becker had ironized in the novel. The Jew as liar, as misfit, as perpetual outsider were the themes that were given voice in the novel. In the secret coven of the Stasi, Becker became his own work.

Becker's new world was West Berlin. It was in that remarkable city, fixed in time, that he felt himself most at home. And yet it was a West Berlin that was itself an artificial construct of the Cold War. Becker had often been

⁴⁵ Becker, *Ende*, 173.

in West Berlin before the Wall was built, and after it went up he was able to travel to West Berlin frequently. Thus, moving to the "West" in 1977 meant moving to a city in which he could always feel himself only one step away from returning to the GDR. Both Berlins were for him, as it was for many of the GDR expatriates living there, a "middle thing," a Western, capitalist economy designed by a GDR firm.⁴⁶ Berlin was neither fish nor fowl; in the middle of the GDR and yet not of it, it provided a window into the East. Becker visited East Berlin at least once a month, usually on private business, although he actually did do a reading there in the late 1980s.

West Berlin symbolized the ability for individual change and development, counter to the prevailing models of social identity in both the FRG and the GDR. This was the reason he felt himself at home in West Berlin and why, according to his view in 1989, the bulk of East Germans were so very dissatisfied with their lives in the GDR. The younger generation saw their parents as having toed the line for thirty or forty years. They saw them as having become "old, ugly, bent, unsympathetic, embittered."⁴⁷ And they saw no promise of change. He notes in a *tageszeitung* (or *taz*) interview in 1989, as citizens of the GDR were streaming through Hungary on their way to the West, that one is at home "where one's contradictions are taken most seriously."⁴⁸ That was clearly not the GDR but rather West Berlin.

In the West, Becker was able to travel more freely. His first trip to the United States was in 1982, when he taught at Oberlin College. In 1982 he also was named the "city author" of Bergen-Enkheim, a low-paying but honorific position that enabled him to write unencumbered. But it was West Berlin that became his home.

Only now, after the GDR has vanished, can we begin to understand the significance of the artificial world of West Berlin. It was neither the GDR nor the FRG—it was a virtual city, and Becker became one of its real inhabitants. It was a place for misfits, for deviants. There Becker quickly became one of the major writers for the cinema. His reputation as the author of *Jakob der Lügner* preceded him, and he was invited to write the screenplay for the first German film about the Shoah undertaken by a Jewish writer and director (Peter Lilienthal). This was a disaster because the script for *David* (1979) was overly sentimental from Becker's point of view, and he pointedly wrote on the final draft that he would have nothing at all to do with it. A later film, written with his fellow GDR expellee Thomas Brasch, was *Der Passagier—Welcome to Germany* (1988). Becker was even less

⁴⁶ *tageszeitung* (*taz*), Sept. 24, 1989.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

happy about this collaboration, a film about the making of a documentary film on the Third Reich in which Jews were taken from the death camps and used as actors. (This parallels the actual anti-Semitic quasi-documentary *Der ewige Jude*, made by Fritz Hippler in 1940.) Set in contemporary Germany, this film starred the American actor, Tony Curtis, in a role that reflects on Curtis's own Hungarian Jewish past and the problem of creating art to reflect history and identity. In 1984 Becker turned to writing for television, a new medium where he believed he could have greater artistic and intellectual control.

In West Berlin, Becker also continued his major chronicle of Jewish life during and after the Shoah with *Bronsteins Kinder*, the story of a young man born in the GDR well after the Shoah. It followed *Jakob der Lügner*, set in the ghetto but ending with the haunting voice of the survivor, and *Der Boxer*, the story of a child survivor raised in the GDR and his father. *Bronsteins Kinder* deals with the GDR in 1973, the year of Walter Ulbricht's death. Becker's own father had died the year before. This was the moment when the promise of change within a socialist model could have been fulfilled, but this was not to be; Erich Honecker turned out to be but a younger Ulbricht. The plot deals with a survivor and his son. The mother is dead and the sister institutionalized because of trauma suffered from being hidden by a Polish farmer during the Shoah. The plot turns on the discovery by the son that his father and two of his cronies have found and kidnapped a guard from the Neuengamme camp, which they had survived. Central to the novel is a scene, repeated in a number of Becker's works, in which the son becomes involved in the filming of a movie about the Shoah in which his Jewish girlfriend plays the role of a Jew in the camps. This trope about the confusion between role and representation is a central one not only to Becker's literary work but also to his own sense of self.

Bronsteins Kinder also is a novel about the failure and loss of a father. The trope of the absent mother, while present, functions as a counterweight to the conflict between father and son. The father is by no means a good father; his parenting skills, his skills as a human being were destroyed by his experiences in the camps. The "natural" presence of the mother (always in the idealized form of memory) is not a buffer between the father and the son. The generation conflict is exacerbated by the experience of the Shoah. The fathers in *Der Boxer* and *Bronsteins Kinder* are "bad" fathers because their connections with humanity were severed by their experiences during the Shoah. If the central question at the beginning of *Bronsteins Kinder*, as in all Becker's novels, is, How I became a German? By its end the real question is, What is a German, and how does being a German and being a real man, a father, go hand-in-hand with it? This is a question asked from the outside: It is asked from the position of the insider as outsider,

whether Jew or Easterner or writer. This position has been called "disaporic"; it is one's awareness of one's marginality to the world in which one lives or in which one desires to live.

Becker's Shoah trilogy and his great novella *Die Mauer* form the major literary record of the survival—not the death—of Jews in Germany. These novels are not an account of the Shoah but rather of survival, the reconstitution of a Jewish life—no matter how fragmentary and misunderstood—in postwar Germany. This is the brilliance of Becker's "Jewish" writing: It is no more a mimetic representation of the past than the novels of Jerzy Kosinski; Becker would have been horrified if they were so read. They are not novels that merely mimic the experience of Jews (however defined) in the GDR; they capture the emotional power of the diasporic sense of the marginal through the evocation of such settings and individuals as the fictive embodiment of the author's sense of identification and alienation. Thus, they capture the central question of Jews in today's Germany: What is a Jew in Germany today and how does one live as such? It is the effect of this question that shapes Becker's novels.

In 1988 there began a shift in history that was later marked by the fall of the Wall in 1989. The Shoah began to become history, and the effect that Becker felt about the question of living a life as a German and a Jew after the Shoah came to be contested in his own mind. Martin Walser, one of the great liberal regional authors of the 1960s and 1970s, published a memoir of his youth during the Third Reich in the newspaper *Die Zeit*. He bemoaned how talk of the Nazi period robbed him of the most beautiful memories of his childhood. As in Edgar Reitz's 1984 television film *Heimat*, the Shoah vanished completely from such fantasies of childhood. Becker was incensed by this pathetic claim to the right to an unencumbered memory of childhood, when his memories had been obliterated during the very time that Walser praised. He openly confronted Walser on the pages of *Die Zeit*, noting that his childhood was very different than that of Walser. The loss of twenty members of his family in the Shoah by "gassing or beating or starvation" was very different than the "cozy memories" of Walser's childhood.⁴⁹ "At least," Becker said, "you have memories and you can express them in the elegant style of your novels." He began his excoriation of Walser by noting that "reading such a piece of drivel makes one need to reread those books by Walser that one had praised. Given the superficiality of Walser's fantasy, one must suspect the very quality of those novels." Becker again challenged Walser's attempt to revive the older notions of family, land, and state, which by the 1990s had reappeared—as an answer to the FRG's view of German self-definition as part of a greater European iden-

⁴⁹ Becker, *Ende*, 82.

tity. Walser claimed that all the neo-Nazi activities of the postunification period were the result of a lack of power, of national identity on the part of Germans; had such an identity been present, Walser claimed, skinhead activity and antforeigner sentiments would not have surfaced with reunification. Becker, in a powerful interview in the magazine *Der Spiegel* in 1994 dismissed Walser's views again as mere resentment.⁵⁰ He notes that Walser returned again and again to his role as the victim and attempted to define the world from that position. Walser remained for Becker the "German" author—a Western author whose novels deal with the minutiae of local life in Swabia.

During this decade of transition in West Berlin, Becker made a serious attempt to write experimental fiction for the literate public. This desire to write clearly and with a real audience in mind clearly sprung from his work in cinema and television. His experiences in the GDR remained paramount in terms of his subject matter, but he worked to raise these experiences to the level of art. Thus, in *Schlaflose Tage* (1978) he meditated on what had happened to the GDR—how an experiment had failed at the hands of petty officials.

In 1986–7 Becker began work on what was to become the most popular series on German television, *Liebling, Kreuzberg*, the tale of a lawyer, Robert Liebling (played by Manfred Krug), who tried to bring the inequities of the capitalistic class system into popular awareness. This series, which centered around an antiauthoritarian lawyer, was an attempt to create a new type of liberal popular hero. Unlike in American courtroom dramas with their theatrical give and take, the character Liebling worked with people to help them shape their fates and their futures. After nineteen extremely successful episodes, the series was unsuccessfully taken over by his DEFA colleague Ulrich Plenzdorf. Becker returned to the series in 1996 and added twenty-seven new episodes.

THE FIFTH WORLD: THE NEW GERMANY

Becker criticized the GDR government but maintained close ties to family and colleagues in the East. He included his old friends in his various projects, and *Liebling, Kreuzberg* made Manfred Krug a major star in the new Germany. With the fall of the Wall Becker became one of the most articulate spokespeople for a new, kinder, more introspective Germany. Unlike Günther Grass he was actually listened to and became a moderate force in dealing with the new federal states (*neue Bundesländer*). The man who

⁵⁰ *Der Spiegel*, no. 50 (1994): 195–200.

wrote that he did not know how he had become a Jew came to realize that he stood at the very epicenter of a new group of Jewish writers in the new Germany. This even permeated his last novel, *Amanda Herzlos*. It ends in 1989 with the heroine and her son being permitted to move to the West and to "the land of endless bananas."

This final line of the novel is an ironic reference to the sadness Becker felt when he confronted his new role of writer in a reunited Germany. In a piece first published in the United States, Becker bemoaned the radical change in the function of literature in both the GDR and the FRG. He saw in the imminent reunification of the country a "reunification" of their literatures under the banner of the new Germany. Becker viewed the role of literature in the GDR not as "merely" oppositional but as a space in which ideas could be and were debated seriously. Becker's view was rather pessimistic in the sense that the authors and publishing houses of the GDR would have to change. How radically even he could not know. The obliteration of the literature of the GDR in the first few years after reunification was marked by scandal after scandal, many, such as that involving Christa Wolf, revolving around writers with whom Becker was befriended.

Not convinced of the desirability or of the need for reunification, Becker became one of its first chroniclers. Becker's critique of the newly reunified Germany found its expression in the film *Neuter* (1990) and even more so in the nine-part television miniseries *Wir sind auch nur ein Volk* (1994). The series used the frame of some of his earlier work, the making of a film, as one of its key elements. The confrontation between the "Westler" Anton Steinheim, a successful author who is to write a television documentary series on the problems of the new states, centering on the fictional "Ostler" Grimm family in Berlin, provides a structure for Becker to work out the complex questions of difference and language, all of which form core questions in his "Jewish" works. Thus, it is clear that although Steinheim and Benno Grimm seem to speak the same language, each believes that his own is the most authentic because it reflects his own experiences of the world. The title of the series heralds the normalization of such an awareness, an awareness that Becker had first grasped when he learned to be a German—which meant learning to be a Jew. Difference is at the core of Becker's structuring of the world. And here the diasporic imagination becomes a tool in learning to represent such productive disparities of awareness. Becker thus is one of the great examples of the resolution of "multiculturalism" in Germany—a Pole and a German, a Jew and a citizen of the GDR in the West, a producer of high as well as mass culture—all of which made sense of his unique position.

The figure Becker created to represent the West was Anton Steinheim, and author with a life only in West Berlin. He was purposely alienated from the East. After almost two decades in the west, Becker was not alienated

from the East, but he sensed the gap between his earlier experiences and the experiences of that generation that flooded out through Hungary and caused the "Velvet Revolution" in Leipzig and Berlin. Becker turned to the families of his married sons in the former GDR for authenticity. They immediately became suspicious. "You were never interested in our activities before," they accused, but made themselves available with the same sense of being observed as the Grimm family did in the series.⁵¹ Becker had "used" his father in his earlier novels; now, he was the absent father using his own sons and grandchildren. The tensions within the fictitious family between the somewhat dotty father-in-law and the rest of the family mirror the sense of tension existed between Becker and his children. Becker's father was never a good-enough father, and he repeated this in his relationships with his own sons. This distance was the distance of the father damaged in the Shoah visited upon his own sons; but it is also the distance of the son to that state (the GDR) that served as a surrogate father. The relationship between new and old, between West and East, also was mirrored in the world of the fictional families.

In 1996 Becker was diagnosed with cancer. It is a wasting disease, and at a certain point one can be fed only intravenously. Unable to eat or drink, he began slowly to waste away. In dying, Becker's ironic sense of the role of memory and of his own unremembered but never forgotten past re-emerged. Six months before his death his wife, Christine, recorded that he looked down at his emaciated body and said in English: "Back to the roots." He had begun to look like the photos of concentration camp victims. It was exactly that world that he had survived and chronicled; but its memories were indeed etched on his body. His death in their country house at Sieséby and his burial in the graveyard there marked the end of a life searching for an identity. Born a Polish-speaking Jew in prewar Lodz, raised in the hell of the Nazi ghetto of Litzmannstadt, losing his mother in Ravensbrück, becoming a young German and later a young communist in the GDR, a true believer and yet one of the most outspoken critics of the regime, Becker came to be one of the most important voices in both the mass media and literary worlds of the FRG in the 1980s and 1990s. His themes always were the "uncomfortableness" of the world as it exists and the problem of the stability of identity in the light of history. His was an atypical and exemplary life; his works speak to his own generation and to all future generations about the world of Central Europe after 1939. Five worlds—Poland, the Shoah, the GDR, West Berlin, and the new Germany—one life.

⁵¹ Ibid.

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