

## Article

# Foreign Stories and National Narratives: Yiddish and Fictionality in Jurek Becker's *Jakob the Liar* and Edgar Hilsenrath's *The Nazi and the Barber*

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**Abstract:** This article uses two examples of postwar German Jewish literature to explore the way in which these literary reflections on fictionality can also serve to subvert and complicate the national narratives that were developed in East and West Germany. The novels explored here, Jurek Becker's *Jakob the Liar* (1969) and Edgar Hilsenrath's *The Nazi and the Barber* (1977), directly thematize storytelling and specifically, storytelling in the context of the Holocaust and its aftermath. Both also share an interest in the intersections between German and Yiddish narrative traditions and reflect on the ways in which the latter was coopted by the former in the decades following the Second World War. Ultimately, this article argues that these two novels of lying create spaces in which the foundational myths of both German states are called into question.

**Keywords:** post-war literature; Holocaust literature; Cold War literature; Yiddish; Edgar Hilsenrath; Jurek Becker; fictionality

## 1. Introduction

The narrative suggested by East German writing and cultural events related to Yiddish is that the storytelling traditions in this language, particularly anything that could be connected to a proletarian *volk*, were part of a broader Germanic antifascist tradition.<sup>1</sup> This is seen, for example, in the ways in which the Yiddish-speaking world was portrayed on East German stages and the ways in which translations of Yiddish literary classics were packaged and introduced to readers.<sup>2</sup> In the West, several notable novels that thematized Yiddish instead seem to paint as uncanny this language and culture that is at once so familiar and so distant,<sup>3</sup> particularly after the near destruction of Eastern European Jewry in the Holocaust.<sup>4</sup> Yiddish, in the West German imagination, seems to be held at arm's length, appropriated and fetishized, but perhaps reluctantly. This article concerns itself not

<sup>1</sup> The revival of a folk tradition in the East German cultural sphere was seen primarily in the context of the theater. East German dramaturgs and playwrights relied primarily on Bertolt Brecht's idea of a *Volks theater*, as outlined in his "Volkstümlichkeit und Realismus" (1938) and "Anmerkungen zum Volksstück" (1940), to develop a politically palatable conception of a proletarian (as opposed to plebian) *Volk*. For more on the discussions and the debates surrounding the depiction of a proletarian *Volk* in East German productions, see (Kreuzer and Schmidt 1998).

<sup>2</sup> For more on Yiddish and its association with the proletarian folk in East Germany, see (Shneer 2015; Woelk 2017); For information about Yiddish translations in Cold War Germany, see (Woelk 2015).

<sup>3</sup> This tension created by the perceived simultaneous proximity and distance between Yiddish and German is, of course, not new in the West German context. This is noted, for example, in Fabius Schach's *Ost und West* (1901) and Franz Kafka's "Einleitungsvortrag über Jargon."

<sup>4</sup> In addition to *Der Nazi und der Friseur*, these novels include Jeannette Lander's *Ein Sommer in der Woche der Itke K.* (1974), Hermann Kinder's *Ins Auge* (1987) and Maxim Biller's *Harlem Holocaust* (1990).

with the precise ways in which these narratives about what Yiddish culture is are constructed from the outside, but with how the postwar German narratives about the status of Yiddish culture in Germany were challenged and dismantled from the inside (though the former necessarily provides the context for the latter). The two novels at the center of this study, *Jakob the Liar* (*Jakob der Lügner*, 1969) and Edgar Hilsenrath's *The Nazi and the Barber* (*Der Nazi und der Friseur*, 1977) both deal explicitly with Yiddish-language culture and specifically with the dissembling power of narrative, that is, lying.

There are, of course, some lies that are much more palatable than others. The same is, of course, true for fictions. Becker's protagonists Jakob Hein, who lies about the proximity of the Red Army to his fellow ghetto inmates, evokes quite a different reaction in readers than Hilsenrath's Nazi-turned-Jew, Max Schulz, whose story was controversial enough to warrant a six-year delay in the publication in German. Yet, both novels open themselves up to controversy and misreading. Both novels, though set largely in exotized locations abroad, deal directly with uncomfortable realities in literary landscapes of the post-war German states. By explicitly thematizing fiction, deception and German's othered cousin, Yiddish, these works reflect on the relationship between fictionality and national identity in Germany after the Second World War.

Becker's most famous novel, *Jakob the Liar*, tells the story of Jakob Hein and his fellow prisoners at a fictional concentration camp in Eastern Europe. The novel's narrator, a survivor of the camp, pieces his telling together from his own experiences and from the narrative unloaded by Jakob as the prisoners were deported from the camp. The story, which the narrator stresses is but *a* story, begins when Jakob, who has been sent to a camp administrative building for supposedly staying out past curfew, overhears a German radio broadcaster announce that the Red Army is outside of Bezanika, a town he knows cannot be far off. The next day, Jakob tries to use this good news to deter a friend from stealing potatoes and likely being caught and killed. When the friend, Mischa, does not react as expected, Jakob decides to raise Mischa's spirits by announcing that he has radio. And here, Jakob's sustained fictions begin.<sup>5</sup>

Becker's novel always plays a central role in the narratives crafted by literary scholars and historians tracing the depiction of Jewish themes in East German discourse. Indeed, Pól O'Dochartaigh and Thomas Schmidt have already pointed to *Jakob* as a deviation from East German literary norms not only in content, but also in form, as the self-referential narrative style stood in contrast to the preference for linearity and clarity of Socialist Realism.<sup>6</sup> This new form is often attributed to supposed similarities between Becker's literary style and the aesthetics of classic Yiddish fiction based on the assumption that the primary utility of Yiddish literature was to insert humor or hope into the lives of the downtrodden. Indeed, hope is at the center of almost all critical readings of the novel.<sup>7</sup> I would suggest, however, that the novel can be read not necessarily or not exclusively as a celebration of hope, but also as a reflection on fictionality itself. This reading will also correct faulty assumptions that Becker's style is based on Yiddish writing and not by rejecting any relationship

<sup>5</sup> My use of the term fiction is similar to that of Cohn (1999). In this work, Cohn distinguishes herself from writers such as E.L. Doctorow and Hayden White, who have attempted to erase the division between fiction and nonfiction, by subsuming both into the category of narrative. Cohn is instead interested in a more specific definition of fiction, which she describes using the phrase "nonreferential narrative." For Cohn (1999), the term nonreferential "[f]irst and foremost [...] signifies that a work of fiction itself creates the world to which it refers by referring to it" (p. 13).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Schmidt has written, of *Jakob*, "Der sozialistischer Realismus kennt kein Deutungsproblem, und das Reflexivwerden der Konstruktions- und Wahrheitsbedingungen des Erzählens schließt er kategorisch aus" (see Schmidt 2006). Pól O'Dochartaigh similarly described the relationship between narrative and truth in *Jakob*, writing, "Becker's [narrator] rarely knows exactly what happened". He continues, "Becker is thus challenging a basic tenet of socialist realist literature, by refusing to portray a total picture of life in the ghetto through the eyes of an omniscient narrator" (see O'Dochartaigh 1997).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Marcel Reich-Ranicki's review "Das Prinzip Radio" or Thomas Schmidt's reading of the story as replacing the traditional hero of East German Holocaust narratives, the Red Army or the resistance fighter, with the hope provided by storytelling.

between the two, but by analyzing the way in which Becker employs Sholem Aleichem as a symbolic figure within the text rather than as a literary model for the novel itself.<sup>8</sup>

Hilsenrath's *The Nazi and the Barber* (1977) is also haunted by a Yiddish-speaking muse, one whose shadow looms large over the central storyteller. In this instance, however, this model is also the narrator's victim. Hilsenrath's novel tells the story of Max Schulz, a member of the SS who murders his Jewish childhood friend, Itzig Finkelstein, only to later take on Finkelstein's identity and move to British Palestine after the war ends. Though both Max and Jakob create sustained fictions, Max creates a fictional self—a fictional uncanny double. Yiddish here is employed as a part of a repressive fiction, though one through which Max misguidedly seeks to attain salvation. In this novel then, too, like in Becker's, Yiddish allows for the construction of a fictional world that exists outside of (German) political realities. In both cases, this allows for a novel that calls into question the very fictions and fictional strategies that stand at the heart of post-war German identities.

## 2. Jakob the Liar

In his essay on his relationship to Judaism, *Mein Judentum*, Becker rejects the assumption that he modeled *Jakob* on Yiddish-language writing. He writes that many reviewers placed *Jakob* in the "narrative tradition of Sholem Aleichem" (Becker 2000)<sup>9</sup>. "The truth is", Becker (2000) responds to these critics, "that I first read Sholem Aleichem after I had seen the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*" (p. 297). It is easy to see why Becker, who is described by Marcel Reich-Ranicki as "a Polish Jew and a German storyteller", may have been fed up with attempts to place him in an Eastern European, rather than the German, literary tradition, given the way in which his novel was reviewed by his contemporaries and the fact that his novel was first published with illustrations by Marc Chagall. But the fact remains that Becker, in the very same essay, writes that while he lacks a "sense of belonging to a religious community," he is more connected to Judaism than any other religious culture in the way that he describes as "literary" (Becker 2000, p. 297). More importantly, Becker cannot honestly claim a complete lack of awareness of Sholem Aleichem's legacy as he composed his novel, since the Yiddish writer is mentioned more than once in the course of *Jakob*, as will be discussed in much greater detail below. (Despite what he claims, it is also impossible that Becker saw *Fiddler on the Roof* before writing several drafts of the novel and highly unlikely that he had any access to it before completing his manuscript. The play did not debut in East Germany until after the book was published and the film came out even later<sup>10</sup>).

Although the novel was a critical success in the German Democratic Republic, its deviation from the preferred narrative did not go unnoticed. "What kind of liar is this Jakob?" asks the review of the novel that appeared in *Neues Deutschland*. The answer: "Jakob Heym is an objective and tragicomic liar, because he believes that people's hopes can only be kept alive at this point through invented battles, places and marching speeds" (Neubert 1969). While the author of this review is willing to concede that these types of facts might be important "during wartimes and in situations for those fighting justly", he then writes, "the most powerful moral research is, in the end, the trust in class position and political consciousness. Jakob Heym, the former small tradesman, lacks this." West German reviews, however, laud the hope Jakob creates as a powerful alternative to other attempts at resistance. Jakob, Wolfgang Werth writes in *Der Monat*, like his "literary predecessors", makes "the best of bad situations by creating happiness with humor and imagination" (Werth 1971). These ancestors, according to the article, are all figures from Yiddish literature: "Tevye, the Dairyman, Menachem-Mendel, Fishke the Lame and the many other comically loveable heroes of Eastern

<sup>8</sup> My interest is not dissimilar to that of Shandler (2008), in which he explores the cultural function of Yiddish and the way that Yiddish or references to Yiddish make meaning within texts whose readers have an "affective or ideological relationship with Yiddish" (p. 4). I am interested in the ways in which authors played with the cultural status of Yiddish literature as an idea in East and West Germany, as opposed to the interpretation of specific examples of this literature by German authors after 1945.

<sup>9</sup> All translations into English by the author unless otherwise noted.

<sup>10</sup> The play was performed in West Germany a few months before Becker submitted his final manuscript, but Becker's access to West Germany was very limited until the novel became successful in that country.

European Jewish Literature". Marcel Reich-Ranicki's review in *Die Zeit*, which announces its interest in hope (through its allusion to Ernst Bloch) with its title "The Principle of Radio", does not explicitly mention Yiddish authors or their characters. The review, however, ends with the proclamation, "this young writer is of the lineage of the sad humorists" (Reich-Ranicki 1970). This is immediately preceded by a short paragraph reading, "this book knows neither hate nor resentment, it is neither aggressive nor angry, but rather amazingly gentle. But it never comes across as appeasing: Becker's equanimity has nothing to do with lukewarm forgiveness". Reich-Ranicki's review at once implicitly echoes comparisons made between Becker's novel and Yiddish classics and introduces a key concept that other authors overlook in their unnuanced attention to hope, the absolute lack of forgiveness offered by the novel<sup>11</sup>.

The simultaneous attention among East Germans critics to hope and the continuance of tradition suggest the focus on a hope that extends beyond the figures within the text to the readers themselves. The same belief that the hope of supposedly passive Jews might transcend the fact that they died a supposedly apolitical death that makes the story more difficult to subsume into the standard DDR narrative of political resistance and Jewish victimhood also makes the story easier to subsume into the DDR narrative of the Eastern European rescue and revival of Yiddish culture (according to which communist Eastern Europe helped Yiddish to survive, despite everything the capitalist West did to counteract this<sup>12</sup>). But Becker's reflections on storytelling, and on the specifically Yiddish storytelling tradition, are not primarily about the power of narrative to instill hope in its audience through deceit, but about fiction as fiction.

Scholars have long lauded Becker for the contribution *Jakob the Liar* made to the subversion of dominant narratives of the Second World War within East German discourse that insisted the Nazi genocide be subsumed into a Marxist view of history and created a hierarchy of victimhood in which the memory of the supposedly passive Jew would necessarily be overshadowed by the celebration of the political resistance fighter. Schmidt, for example, writes that Becker found "intricate narrative strategies to guarantee the Holocaust its historical autonomy and to protect it from being annexed into 'our history'" (Schmidt 2006, p. 405). While the novel certainly challenges political and aesthetic norms of East German Holocaust literature, it is less directly invested in the separation or removal of the Holocaust from dominant paradigms than reflecting on the nature of narratives and the worlds created therein.

In one of the novel's central scenes, Jakob actually becomes the radio he has been pretending to own. The reader's attention is called to this scene not only by Jakob's apparent transformation into the radio itself, but also by the effect Jakob's description of these events has on the nameless narrator. Upon hearing of the radio programming, including interviews with Winston Churchill, that Jakob creates for Lina, the young girl he cares for after her parents are deported from the ghetto, the narrator is moved not by Jakob's ability to deceive (he does not), but his ability to create fictional worlds. Jakob tells the narrator that he wanted Lina, who saw through the performances but said nothing, to find out. Jakob notes that "everyone else would have been appalled at the truth, but she was happy afterward" (Becker 2000, p. 165). Hearing of Jakob's impressive performances, the narrator replies, "if I had known then everything that you are capable of, I would have come to you and asked you to show me a tree". Here, the narrator refers back to the novel's opening lines, "I already hear everyone

<sup>11</sup> Reich-Ranicki's description of Becker's tone is reminiscent of postwar German attempts to characterize class Yiddish literature. See, for example, the afterword of the translated collection *Des Rebbe Pfeifenrohr. Humoristischen Erzählungen aus dem Jiddischen* (East Germany, 1983). The reader of Yiddish literature, the afterword states, "sieht sich einem Humor gegenüber, der aus der Tragik geboren wurde". And the softness Reich-Ranicki describes finds its echo in the following comment about the *Ostjuden* in the same afterword: "Ihr Spott richtete sich gegen das eigene Ich, er ist gutmütig und ehrlich, mitunter traurig und demütig" (Sforim et al. 1983).

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, the forward to the Yiddish story collection *Die Heimfahrt des Rabbi Chanina und andere Erzählungen aus dem Jiddischen*, in which the editor Rudolf Hirsch notes, "die Juden, die sich vor den Mördern nach Israel retten konnten, leben heute dort unter anderen Bedingungen. Das Jiddisch wird nur noch in der Sowjetunion, in Polen und in Rumänien gepflegt" (Berlin: Union Verlag) (Hirsch 1962, p. 240).

saying, a 'tree,' what is that? A trunk, leaves, roots, little bugs in the bark and a nicely trimmed crown when it comes up, so what?" (Becker 2000, p. 9). The narrator, fascinated by trees and unable to justify this in a way that satisfies his listeners, struggles not only because he is unsure as to exactly which referent the signifier "tree" refers, but also because, as the reader quickly learns, there are no trees in the ghetto. For the narrator, Jakob remains the hero of his story not for the fleeting hope his stories provided, but for his ability to create alternative worlds. While the narrator at first remains bound and limited by the bareness of the world into which he has been confined, unable to refer meaningfully to anything outside, Jakob is able to capitalize on the power of language to create fictions, which, according to John Searle, rests on the ability to refer to referents that do not in fact exist (Searle 1975).

And here, we must consider what Becker's thematization of fictionality has to do with Yiddish literature. In a text so invested in fiction and fictionality, it is remarkable that only one author is mentioned by name. Reflecting on his fake interview with Winston Churchill, Jakob thinks, "the interview was a little thin [...] and also a little over Lina's head, but, and this won't change unfortunately, I am no Sholem Aleichem when it comes to inventiveness" (Becker 2000, p. 171). As mentioned above, Becker shies away from claiming Sholem Aleichem as a literary influence, but cites him here as Jakob's ideal. What is crucial here, however, is not simply that Jakob sees himself as aspiring to emulate the Yiddish literary tradition, but what exactly he values in this tradition. Unlike the demonstrated trend in postwar discourse to associate Sholem Aleichem with ethnographic mimesis of Eastern European Jewish life, Jakob is able to see him for what he is, a writer of creative fiction. And yet, Sholem Aleichem did not merely create worlds, as Jakob does, he constructed a literary tradition and with it, a useable past. Storytelling is often about looking backward, about making an interpretation of the past viable for the present. This, of course, is what had always been going on in East Germany, but to thematize this aspect so clearly highlights how these narratives are manufactured from a particular historic perspective, that they are part of a particular constructed narrative and that alternative narratives can therefore be crafted as well.

The potential powers of storytelling and its limits come up again and again in the novel. Both in Jakob's claim that he wants Lina to see through his stories and in the narrator's statement early in the novel, "I have tried to a thousand times to unload this damn story", the reader is expected to understand that there is pleasure not only in being told fictions, but also in telling them (Becker 2000, p. 11). The narrator's story, like Becker's, is not framed as a memoir. "I am telling a story", the narrator notes, "not his story" (Becker 2000, p. 46). So independent is the narrator's story from the historical protagonist Jakob, that the narrator hints the possibility that his narrative might exist even if Jakob never did. Though he originally suggests that Jakob stands out as the man without whom this story could never have happened, he quickly adds, "but even their opinions differ" (Becker 2000, p. 12). Although the narrator corroborates his story by saying that he has used everything Jakob told him and even by describing a research trip to visit a former camp guard in West Germany, he has no illusions that his story, too, is another fiction.

Even the narrator's statement "I was there" is made not to assert his story's accuracy or authenticity, but to distance himself and Jakob from the postwar readership. He says of Jakob, "he spoke to me, but I am talking to you; that is a big difference, because I was there" (Becker 2000, p. 46). This instance, that a story's audience plays a large role in the shaping of the narrative, has implications for those who chose to read *Jakob* as a novel announcing the survival of the Yiddish literary tradition and its continuance in the GDR. Even if this storytelling tradition continued after the war, the implication seems to be that it couldn't survive in its original form without its prewar readership. And yet it is no mistake that Sholem Aleichem is held up by Jakob as the ideal narrator. In addition to the Jakob's comments on Sholem Aleichem described above, the giant of Yiddish fiction also comes up in a telling scene in which Jakob's self-perceived lack of creativity leaves him coveting scraps of a Nazi newspaper. At one point in the story, Jakob notices a German camp guard entering an outhouse with a newspaper only to emerge empty handed. Thinking that the newspaper, knowing it is likely filled with "false reports", might at least provide material for future stories, he decides to sneak into the outhouse (Becker 2000, p. 105). "If I had been born with a cleverer mind, imaginative

like Sholem Aleichem—what am I talking about?—half of his talent would suffice”, the narrator reports Jakob to be thinking as he plans the move, “then I wouldn’t have to plagiarize like this” (Becker 2000, p. 106). Jakob regrets his inability to craft an entirely new story not only because the task he has now given himself is dangerous, but because any story he might now craft will be limited by the constructed Nazi narrative of the war.

But this escape from pre-constructed narratives is exactly what the narrator achieves. And it is in this way that the novel leaves its mark on East German literary history. The narrator holds Jakob up as a hero even after Jakob has been revealed as a fraud shortly before the prisoners of the ghetto are deported, not because he appreciated the fleeting hope offered by lies before he learned the truth, but because he saw value in Jakob’s stories as works of fiction. The novel is neither purely a celebration of hope nor does it justify the hope critics found in heralding the novel as a Yiddish-East German hybrid. Rather, the novel is a celebration of the creative force of storytelling. The fact that the type of storytelling that Jakob aspires to, and that the novel itself achieves, is associated with the Yiddish tradition does not mean that Becker’s work is to simply be categorized as part of that tradition, as it was both explicitly and implicitly in its packaging, but that, for Becker, Yiddish writing was seen not primarily as an ethnographic craft or a means to atonement, but as an alternative aesthetic model that allowed for a way out of constrictive literary and political norms. Becker openly defies East German expectations for how the Holocaust is to be narrated and he gets away with it, in part, because his references to a Yiddish literary tradition are misunderstood. The fact that the novel was read as a revival of an exoticized and fetishized culture in East Germany seems to support the conception of the GDR as the better, antifascist Germany. The novel, however, does anything but support a single, subsuming historical narrative and instead calls into question the very reliance on such a narrative that stands at the center of East Germany’s foundational myth.

### 3. The Nazi and the Barber

Hilsenrath’s novel begins on the day on which both Max Schulz and Itzig Finkelstein are born in the then-German town of Wieshalle. Max is born to Minna Schulz and one of five potential fathers. Itzig is born to the successful barber, Chaim Finkelstein, and his wife, upstanding members of the Wieshalle’s Jewish community. Max becomes a close friend of Itzig’s, eventually attending a synagogue with the family and training under Chaim Finkelstein to become a barber. From his friendship with the Finkelsteins, Max becomes familiar with Jewish history, customs, and prayers, and also learns Yiddish. Although not all Jewish families in Wieshalle speak Yiddish, the Finkelsteins, who come from Pohodna in Galicia, speak Yiddish at home. Max grows up to join the Nazi party and then the SS. Working with the SS, Max personally kills Itzig and his parents. At the end of the war, Max works at the fictional concentration camp Laubwalde, from which he flees before the Red Army arrives. After he makes it back to Berlin, he survives as a wanted man living off the black market before deciding to live out the rest of his life as Itzig Finkelstein. To maintain his cover, Max relies on everything he learned from the Finkelsteins, including Yiddish. In fact, he is able to adjust to his new life in British Palestine more easily than the German Jews he encounters there.

Once Max is on the run from the Red Army, he begins to see parallels between himself and the Jews he has murdered. Soon after he leaves Laubwalde, Max is taken in by Veronja, who bears a striking resemblance to a witch in a fairytale. When Max remarks to Veronja, “I was not an *Untermensch* yet”, the old woman responds, “now you are” (Hilsenrath 1996). Imagining himself being cooked in Veronja’s cauldron, Max explains that he “looked into the thin broth ... saw my behind [...] saw the behind of a mass murderer ... saw my eyes ... saw millions of eyes” (p. 130). In this moment of self-reflection and self-pity, Max sees himself as a mass murderer in the same breath he draws a parallel between himself and his victims. This perverse form of identification with his victims gives rise to the fiction that allows Max to save himself and escape prison time in Germany. Under the assumed identity of the murdered Itzig, Max boards a ship for British Palestine and begins a new life there.

As in Sigmund Freud’s description of the *unheimlich* (uncanny), it is, in addition to Max’s callousness and capacity for violence, the permeable boundary between the self and the at once

intimately familiar and decidedly foreign other that make this performance so troubling<sup>13</sup>. The disturbing tension between reality and fiction is, however, not limited to the double 'I' Max takes on once he uses the identity of his friend-turned-victim, Itzig, to escape to what was then British Palestine. The other double image present throughout the novel is cast by the constant comparison by the reader between the Itzig Max kills and the Itzig Max brings to life. While Max at times addresses his narration directly to the reader, marked by the use of the formal *Sie*, his reports on his life in Tel Aviv are often addressed directly to the original Itzig, marked by the informal *du*. In one such passage, Max describes his trip to British Palestine by boat and he fellow passengers to his old friend. "Dear Itzig", he begins, "they used to call me 'Mr. Finkelstein. [...] But not it's just Chaver Itzig!" (Hilsenrath 1996, p. 281). As Max travels from Germany to British Palestine, he recreates himself in the image, or at least in Max's image, of the murdered Itzig. Not only does Max, as the German Jew Itzig, become less German and more Jewish, he imagines himself to be more knowledgeable about Jewish languages than the original Itzig. "Do you know", Max asks, "what 'Chaver' means?" Chaver may come from Hebrew, a language Max learns that Itzig never did, but it is also used in Yiddish, a language Max learned from the Finkelstein family. It is through the connection he cultivates to Yiddish and Eastern European Jewry that Max continues not to emulate but to outdo his predecessor. One of Max's first stops in Israel, for example, is a kibbutz on which he is asked, "are you really a German Jew, Chaver Itzig?" (Hilsenrath 1996, p. 314). When Max replies that his parents came from Galicia, he is told, "then you are a Galician" (Hilsenrath 1996). Proud of his identity as the Galician Chaver Itzig, Max refuses to go by anything else. When it is suggested that he go by the Hebrew version of the name, Jitzhak, he ironically replies, "I won't consider it. I'm not changing my name" (p. 332). Of the original Itzig, however, the reader is told nothing that would suggest he identified as anything other than German. The Jewish community of Wieshalle, after all, had its center at the corner of Goethestraße and Schillerstraße.

These stark contrasts between the murdered Itzig and his revived double, embodied by Max, provide a clear reminder of the fictionality of the character Max creates. Additionally, the competing, or at least geographically distanced, ideas of where the Jewish home can be mapped relate both to the tension between the multiple 'I's at play in the novel created by Max's fictional life as Itzig and to broader postwar attempts to resurrect or re-appropriate the culture of the *Ostjude* as the authentic Jewish culture. Erin McGlothlin argues that the Finkelstein parents present themselves as "prototypical German Jew[s]", only to then "complicate this notion" by speaking Yiddish and that "the Finkelsteins' seamless integration into German culture is further complicated by our awareness that the so-called German-Jewish symbiosis [...] was largely an idealized construction" (McGlothlin 2007). In addition to commentary on the status of Jews in German culture before 1933, however, I would argue that Hilsenrath's novel is also concerned with the place of Eastern European Jewish culture in the postwar German imagination or in postwar German *fictions*.

At the hand of the narrator, Yiddish is violently removed from Germany, both through the murder of the Finkelstein family and through his (in the voice of his double, Itzig) continued denial of his own Germanness. Max's need to maintain his own fictional reality by identifying and having others identify him as an *Ostjude* in Israel stands in stark contrast to the Finkelstein family's relationship to Yiddish and German. Far from calling into question their German identity, Yiddish language, for the Finkelsteins, provides a direct and deep connection to Germanness. Max, retelling what he was told by Chaim Finkelstein, explains early in the novel, "Yiddish is a type of Middle High German, a language that is closer to the German soul than our High German, which really [...] is only 'a butchered, corroded, highfalutin Yiddish'" (Hilsenrath 1996, p. 30).

<sup>13</sup> In "Das Unheimliche" Freud describes the connection between the uncanny, the secretive and the home, relying on the German linguistic similarity between *unheimlich*, *heimlich* and *Heim*. For Freud, the concept *Heim* is intimately connected to a much smaller site of identity formation, the self. He writes, for example, as an example of the uncanny of "die Identifizierung mit einer anderen Person, so daß man an seinem Ich irre wird oder das fremde Ich an die Stelle des eigenen versetzt, als Ich-Verdopplung, Ich-Teilung, Ich-Vertauschung" (see Freud 1978).

Max's fictional Itzig, however, is invested not in maintaining his connection to German culture, but to the preservation of a German notion of authentic, Eastern European Jewry, an identity he bases largely on a knowledge of and proximity to Yiddish-language culture. As mentioned above, the heart of the Wieshalle Jewish community is proudly located at the corner of Goethe- and Schillerstraße. When Max begins counting trees in Israel, an activity intimately connected to counting his victims both through his frequent claims of "I did not count" and "I don't like to count" and through the various mentions of the "Forrest of the Six Million" he counts in the Sholem Aleichem Street, Anski Street, and Peretz Street (Hilsenrath 1996, p. 360). While the center of Jewish life was once centered at an intersection named for the German authors they admired, Max now associates Jewish death with streets named for Yiddish-language authors. For Max, however, the very fact that he lives among these streets in Israel authenticates him as a Jew.

However heavy Max's own emphasis on his Yiddish abilities and connection to Yiddish-language culture, his narration is almost exclusively monolingual. Though a few food names appear in Yiddish throughout the novel, the postwar German readership is barely confronted with this foreign language at all. As much as there is a clear attempt to remove Yiddish from the German-speaking sphere, it is this simultaneous repression and presencing that creates the uncanny tension between the real and the imagined in this novel. Max's self is replaced by another self, as Freund describes one manifestation of the uncanny. This imagined self that Max takes on is, to use Freund's language, something "wiederkehrendes Verdrängtes" (254, "something repressed which recurs" (Strachey 1953)). Max has called back his onetime friend whom he violently *verdrängt*, in the sense of eliminating and whose death he seems to have *verdrängt* in the sense of repressing by eerily taking on his name and story. Here, Hilsenrath's brutal critique of the postwar German dual interest in and deliberate fictionalization of Eastern European Jewish culture, all but destroyed in the Holocaust, is to be found. The novel reflects the ambivalent cultural position of anything Jewish in West Germany after the Holocaust and highlights the tension between the simultaneous embrace of Jewish culture and the anxiety at the prospect of this culture refusing to keep its distance.

Both Becker and Hilsenrath, through their liars, thematize and participate in a broader postwar German attempt to use an image of Yiddish-language culture to reflect on the narratives that inspired and constricted German literary and cultural production following the Holocaust and during the Cold War. In the case of the former, the reader is confronted with what have been read as hopeful lies, while in the latter case, the liar is malicious and self-serving. Yet despite the vast differences Becker's and Hilsenrath's liars, the focus on both novels on lying and fictionalizing through the medium of Yiddish creates spaces in which postwar cultural and self-definitional narratives dominate on both sides of the Berlin Wall, could be called into question. Importantly, these spaces are both literary and geographic. The novels themselves expand potential interpretations of recent German and German Jewish history not by offering a single alternative to an accepted narrative, but by reflecting critically on the act of narration itself. Both novels also guide readers, at the hands of unreliable narrators, through geographic spaces often portrayed as singularly reflective of two very different visions of Jewish culture. The novels distort accepted images of the ghetto as site of religious passivity and rare political resistance and of a Zionist state risen out of oppression without offering new monolithic, concrete images in their stead. In doing so, both also call attention to the ways in which narratives shape our understanding of physical and political space. During the Cold War, when space and identity were interwoven particularly tightly, these disruptions of how spaces are read require new interpretations of the self. Both *Jakob the Liar* and *The Nazi and the Barber* use references to Yiddish literary tradition and specifically, Jewish spaces to resist the ways in which these were commonly coopted into hegemonic and self-serving national narratives in both German states and to instead highlight the act of storytelling, of creating fictions, as an ongoing process that meets subjective needs rather than mirrors some historic truth.



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