

# Gender, Remembrance, and Writing : Literary Memory Before and After Auschwitz

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Prof. Dr. Christina von Braun  
(Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin)

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LIT

Ulrike Auga, Christina von Braun (Eds.)

# GENDER IN CONFLICTS

Palestine – Israel – Germany

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LIT

Cover Picture: Ulrike Auga, Gay Pride March in Jerusalem,  
Christopher Street Day 2004

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# Gender, Remembrance, and Writing: Literary Memory Before and After Auschwitz

Inge Stephan

## I

Since the 1990s, the question about the connection between remembrance and gender has been posed with increasing regularity, within literary studies as well. The initial conclusions of Assmann's research into "cultural memory" as a system of organization for the stabilization of personal and collective identity explore the function of the body as a medium of remembrance: of recording, storing, and transforming cultural signs and the meditative practice of inscribing and archiving body knowledge.

The body is subject to precisely those rules of the discourse of power and sexuality as described by Foucault in his book *The History of Sexuality* (1980). With its gestures and body language symptoms, the body participates in storing and classifying cultural knowledge, which is doubly concealed: in the form of the repressed Other, and in the form of another knowledge which expresses itself otherwise. As such, the body can be construed as a field of symbolization from which traces of cultural meaning and significance can be deciphered, therefore also traces of repression, suppression, and traumatic remembrance. This refers back to Freud, especially to his early *Studies in Hysteria* (1895), which provides examples of the sexual codification of remembrance and forgetting. While Freudian psychoanalysis seeks the causes of repression in a traumatic event within the family, present-day works tend to stress the cultural and social context.

Historical research on National Socialism in particular has drawn attention to the problematic nature of gender-specific remembrance. "In view of the crimes of National Socialism," it is affirmed in *Memory and Gender* (2003), "the question of the meaning of gender differentiation for remembrance and commemoration might appear to many immaterial, secondary, even fallacious. [...] Nevertheless, closer examination will reveal that precisely this distinction, usually tacit, determines the perception, description, and evaluation of the historical genocide." I would like to demonstrate that this observation does not

apply solely to works written after the Holocaust by means of a text by Berta Pappenheim, who, as Anna O., belongs to the early history of psychoanalysis as well as to the prehistory of National Socialism. I will contrast it with a story by Judith Hermann, in which the Holocaust, as an unspoken remembrance, refers back to the very discourse of hysteria in which remembrance and gender enter into a consequence-laden connection.

## II

Much has been written about Anna O., the famous patient suffering from hysteria in Breuer and Freud's joint *Studies in Hysteria* (1895), especially since the disclosure by Freud's biographer, E. Jones (1953), that the pseudonym concealed the late Jewish suffragette, Bertha Pappenheim. The remarkable split between "two entirely distinct states of consciousness," as diagnosed by Breuer, her physician, seems to recur at a new level in the public reception. How can one reconcile the deeply disturbed patient Anna O. with the dynamic and successful suffragette? I am not interested here in the possible connections between the two sides of her personality, but with the fact that Bertha Pappenheim was both Jewish *and* a writer. As such, she is one of the forgotten and repressed examples of that painful symbiosis between Judaism and German culture that found its end in the Holocaust. She herself escaped by dying in 1936 in Frankfurt. In his notes, Breuer makes no mention of his patient's Jewish descent, but confirms her "poetic and fancifully inventive gift" (20), and professes himself impressed by the "stories" (26) she recounts. Her Jewish descent and commitment to the cause of Jewish women's emancipation play a prominent role in Jewish circles, but behind this the writer virtually vanishes. Her literary activities are seen almost exclusively in terms of her work in political journalism.

It seems to me that something of crucial significance is missing in this perception, namely the contradictory relationship of a Jewish female intellectual to German language and culture. In fact, language and speech are already crucial in the analysis of her hysterical condition, not only in the form of her body language, but also very concretely: the patient forfeits language. At first individual words are lost, then language altogether. Instead of German, substitute languages appear: French, Italian and, above all, English, which she spontaneously resorted to during the so-called "Snake Hallucination" (34): in vigil at her father's sickbed, she thought she spotted a snake which was seeking to bite him, and which she tried in vain to stop. The fingers of the hand she used turned into "little snakes with death-heads" (34). According to Breuer, this hallucination was the causative factor of all her later massive disturbances, including that of speech: "[...] in her fear she wanted to pray, but all her languages failed her; she was unable to speak in any of them, until finally she



found an English children's verse and could henceforth think further and pray in this language" (34).

Prior to this brief phase of total language loss, Bertha Pappenheim was an exceedingly proficient speaker. Not only was she fluent with intuitive self-confidence in the most diverse idioms, but she was also a gifted innovator. She invented the famous concept of the "talking cure" (33), thus developing an approach that would become the preferred mode of therapy for psychoanalysis, then in the process of establishing itself. The patient takes the lead, and symptoms are simply "related away." In her "talking cure", however, she not only related her symptoms away, but also fabricated stories, "sometimes three to five stories in one evening" (28). She also translated them with astounding facility from one language into another.

She pursued both storytelling and translation even after the conclusion of her treatment with Breuer and during her political activities. She translated from Yiddish the memoirs of Glückl von Hameln, a Jewish woman in seventeenth-century Hamburg—a highly valuable cultural-historical source for understanding the interaction between the history of the Jews and that of women. Bertha Pappenheim evidently also knew Yiddish, which Breuer omits to cite as one of her languages. And she translated Mary Wollstonecraft's emancipation manifesto (1792) from English, thus making it accessible to the feminist thinkers of her time. I interpret both translations—from Yiddish and from English—as conscious acts of remembering two episodes in her own biography, which play a very subordinate role, if any, in Breuer's account of her illness: her Jewish descent and her status as a woman. In my view, her selection of these two works for translation is by no means coincidental, but rather indicates how important it was for her to present herself in the traditions of both Judaism and female emancipation, thereby combining two themes which are biographically and historically distinct. Glückl von Hameln was not a suffragette; Mary Wollstonecraft was not Jewish. Bertha Pappenheim, however, who joined the two together in her translations, fused both lines of tradition in one person as a Jewish suffragette.

Bertha Pappenheim was not only a translator, but also an author who left an imposing journalistic as well as a strictly literary corpus. Her works, initially published under the pseudonym of P. Berthold (leaving her sexual identity ambiguous) and later under her surname, are abundant, dispersed, and barely studied. From the profusion of texts, I have chosen a volume of stories in which I believe the problem of language and remembrance, which already surfaced in her analysis, is bound up with her Jewish descent. Yet her literary works casts new light on the difficult relationship between the German language and Jewish identity, an issue not raised by Breuer.

The six stories, assembled together under the title *Struggles* (1915), transfer the words "torment, torment," which she uttered repeatedly during her treat-

ment under Breuer (23), to a literary and political plane. The stories all tell of persecutions, oppression, and pogroms, which grimly foreshadow the later Holocaust, and they all portray the inner strife of various Jewish protagonists, their struggle between the desire for assimilation and the Zionist search for a homeland. They are set in different Jewish milieus: Poland, Hungary, Galicia, Germany, England, and France. And, despite their different scenes of action, they are all concerned with the same conflict: between Orthodox Judaism and the assimilationist aspirations of the younger generation. It flares up over the overwhelming sway of scripture and the prohibition of images in Orthodox Judaism, and is presented as a dual struggle—between generations and between the sexes.

The story, "The Saviour," is representative. It concerns young Wolf Wasserschierling, descended from Russian-Jewish emigrants, but early orphaned, who falls into the clutches of a missionary whose aim is to turn Jews into Christians in the slum districts of London. The missionary, whose mixture of Yiddish and English wins the boy's trust, finally succeeds in luring him into the mission house under the pretext of teaching him English. Here, on the first night, Wolf desecrates the icon of Christ on the cross over his bed, which arouses a traumatic remembrance in him:

A terrible oppression overcame the boy.

He stared directly at the apparition. Behind the human body he saw the scaffolding of the cross in brown wood protruding from the wall. He saw the nails and wounds in the hands and feet of the crucified Christ. Wolf shuddered. When, where had he seen this apparition before? He gazed fixedly into the corner. It was at home, in Russia, that day on which the Christians had shot up the cottage in which his parents lived. Then they had erected just such a cross in the street. "That's the God of the Christians," his mother had said, laying her hands over the boy's eyes, whilst, trembling, they watched from an opening in the cellar how Jews were tortured and slain in the street.

A tumult surged past the windows. Suddenly his mother slid down, as if lifeless, to the floor. Outside the blood-drunken Christians had dragged a Jewish boy before the crucifix, forcing him to kneel before it. The boy's father, springing thither, plunged a kitchen knife into his back. In the next instant, father and son were stoned and trampled. (10–11)

He finally succeeds in escaping from the mission with his mother's prayer book, his sole possession. But ten-year-old Reisle, whom Wolf has befriended and vainly tries to warn about the mission, follows a different path. She succumbs to the temptations, accepts baptism, and adopts the name Mareile. She proudly announces to her friend that Jesus is now her "saviour" (19). He tries, unsuccessfully, to show her that, in fact, she has attached herself to an idol, whereby he molds an image of Jesus out of clay, and summarily destroys it.

In place of the Messiah, young Wolf offers himself as saviour to the bewildered Reisle-Mareile by promising to care for and protect her. In the plot, as it evolves, he loses sight of his promise, temporarily at least.

In the second part of the story, we reencounter Wolf and Mareile in Paris in separate walks of life. Wolf has become a successful artist, and is working on a bust of Theodor Herzl. But, although he honors Herzl, he does not consider himself a Zionist. Not far from his studio, Reisle-Mareile lives in modest circumstances under the name of Maria. She works in a shop for secondhand clothes. Chance brings them together, which leads to a renewal of their friendship. Reisle serves as Wolf's model for the statue, "Israel, awake!" that he regards as the "embodiment of Herzl's idea." Wolf now recalls his London days and his promise to be her "saviour." In the meantime, however, she has gone astray. She has, as he learns from her in horror, sold not only her soul, but her body. She reminds him of his old promise (36). And, indeed, he succeeds in freeing her from the claws of her procuress, but his "old Jewish notions of wedlock and family" prevent him from marrying her (37).

Wolf is finally informed by a friend that when she is not sitting as a model for his monumental statue, Reisle has taken up her old vocation. He spies on her, and discovers her in dubious company.

Around a circular table, lit by several glaring gas-lamps, a number of men were seated. They were smoking, and their faces were flushed with alcohol. [ ... ]

In the bright light, facing Wolf, was Reisle. A black dress, sharply *décolleté*, her lovely braids, as always, wound into a crown, around her neck the silver chain with its diamond cross. She laughed loudly, leaning forward to take a sip from her champagne glass, which the person opposite handed to her.

"To your health, lovely Marie!" another called to her.

Wolf was seized by rage. Springing from his covert, he bound over the forecourt into the brightly lit room. He grabbed the knife which had served in opening the bottles of champagne ... a fatal thrust at "Mareia" -

It was fulfilled. He had to be her saviour (42).

The murder of his old friend brings the story to its close. Reisle, who is not coincidentally called by her Christian name at the moment of her death, dies like the Jewish boy, who, forced by Christian constables to kneel before the crucifix, was slain by his father with a kitchen knife. This incident, traumatically imprinted on Wolf's memory, repeats itself in Reisle's murder, whereby the positions of perpetrator and victim are reversed, and contradictorily refer to the figure of the cross and the crucified Jesus. In the pogrom scene, the father is both perpetrator and victim, and the son is "pure" victim; father and son are both "stoned and trampled" by the "blood-drunken Christians" (10-11). The cross represents both butchery and torture. In the final episode, Wolf, as

Reisle's murderer and as a captive of "old Jewish notions," is likewise both perpetrator and victim. But Reisle is no "pure" victim. The diamond cross dangling around her neck betokens her as a double outcast. Her crown and the pendent are surely reminiscent of the crown of thorns and cross. In Wolf's perception, however, they are merely the ornaments with which she entices men. The role of saviour, which he adopts, is questionable and flawed by dint of his recourse to the figure of the Messiah and his despotism. Unlike Christ, he does not sacrifice his own life, but hers.

The writer's position in this story, as in the others, is remarkably diffuse. It is hard to determine on whose side she stands. Her criticism of the Christian mission is obvious; much less so is the extent to which she identifies with Orthodox Judaism, with her hero, or with the sacrificed woman. Wolf claims the role of saviour for himself. But, in actuality, like the father who killed his son, he is a murderer. In the case of Wolf, it is the woman whom he loves and loathes. Both murders involve the working out of conflicts long obsolete in the context of persecution. The "struggles"—which is one way of reading this volume—cannot be resolved self-destructively in internecine Jewish conflicts; they need to unite and direct their struggles against the persecutor and oppressor.

The tone of the stories recounted in *Struggles* is thus less combative than resigned. In their search for identity, all the Jewish male protagonists fail to a greater or lesser extent. They commit suicide, are murdered, or themselves become murderers. The fate of the female characters is likewise grim: they are either slain or take their own lives. As texts attesting to the search for identity between orthodoxy, assimilation, and Zionism, they offer no positive perspective, but rather variations of the same, invariably hopeless constellation, which cannot be suspended, even in the medium of literary fiction.

The degree to which Bertha Pappenheim was able to transcend this oppressive disposition in her work as suffragette on behalf of the Jewish feminist movement remains an open question. As the author of *Struggles*, as well as in numerous other texts, she repeatedly recalled the traumatic experience of a homeless Jewish minority lacking a sense of identity, language, and locale in a hostile milieu.

### III

I come now to the second text, a story by Judith Hermann in the volume *Summerhouse. Later* (1998). At first glance, "Red Corals" appears to bear no relation to the Holocaust. Instead, it contains two artfully interwoven remembrances: the story of the a woman in Russia at the start of the twentieth century and that of her great-granddaughter at its end.

The story begins with the curious question, "Is this the story I want to tell?" (11), which recurs in the middle (19) and appears at the end as "Was this the story I wanted to tell?" (29). These three questions structure the text, dividing it into the stories of the great-grandmother and her great-granddaughter respectively. Inserted between the first two questions is the story of the great-grandmother, who followed her husband to Russia, where he was employed as a stove-fitter. But he abandons her in the cold of St. Petersburg. The lovers she finally takes are unable to give her "shivering soul" (14) the warmth she longs for. When, following an absence of three years, her husband returns briefly to St. Petersburg, she reveals her infidelity to him. He reacts in the manner to which we are accustomed to from the novels of Theodor Fontane. He challenges his rival to a duel, in which he, however, not the other, is slain. Seven months later, after giving birth to a girl, she returns to Germany with her newborn child, just in time to escape the upheaval of the Revolution of 1905. She is accompanied by the Russian man who mediated as second in the duel between her husband and lover.

The great-granddaughter's story begins with the figure of the Jew, Isaac Barrow, with whom her great-grandmother had fled from Russia. She falls in love with his great-grandson. In the relationship that develops between them the story of their great-grandparents repeats itself in a strangely displaced fashion. The narrator seeks in vain to reach her lover. The old Russian histories that she relates to him are met with disinterest and rebuff. In the end, the narrator disengages herself with a grandiose gesture from her depressive lover, whereby the reader is liable to doubt whether this second story, like the first, is meant to be construed as an account of emancipation.

The uncertainty of this assessment resides in the third story, which the author inserts as a subtext amid the other two. This story involves the Russian Jew, Isaac Barrow, who mediated in the duel between the great-grandmother's husband and lover, and who "at the last second" was able to board "the German train" with her to leave St. Petersburg. But unlike the great-grandmother, who is returning home, he is a refugee without friends or relatives in Germany. The "crooked, hunchbacked" man clings to her with "lifelong gratitude" (18) for having made his escape from Russia possible. She keeps him close to her yet maintains her distance, by urging him into a marriage with her Pomeranian maid and then remaining in contact with his rapidly growing family. Her friendly connection with Barrow and his progeny—he and her maid produce seven children, "and these seven children granted him seven grandchildren" (19)—endures over a vast stretch of time, for it is the great-grandmother who enjoins her great-granddaughter to attend the burial of the parents of Isaac Barrow's last descendants:

The parents of my lover drowned in a summer squall on a lake, and my great-

grandmother bade me attend their burial. They, the last witnesses of the Petersburg past, were laid in the soil of Brandenburg, and their histories, whereof they themselves no longer cared to speak, together with them. And so I went to the interment of Isaac Barrow's grandson and his wife, and my lover stood at their grave and shed three grey tears. I took his cold hand in mine, and I escorted him on his way home. I could comfort him, I thought, with the Petersburg histories; I thought that he could relate them to me, once again anew. (19)

In the context of the narrative, her lover's parents' ostensible mode of death in water is absurd, considering what remains unspoken in the burial scene. Of Isaac Barrow's numerous progeny, only a "single great-grandson" (19) survives. It does not require much imagination to infer how the rest of his family died. Even if the word "extermination" is mentioned nowhere in the text, everything suggests that the "Petersburg histories" are only cited in order not to relate what consistently eludes relation: Isaac Barrow's grandchildren are not so much "the last witnesses of the Petersburg past" as the sole survivors of the Holocaust (19). The two descendants, in whose lineage and biographies the Russian and German histories intersect in a complex manner with that of Jewish persecution and annihilation, meet at the burial. The great-granddaughter's insistence on relating the "Petersburg histories" (19), and Isaac Barrow's great-grandson's refusal to hear them, can be interpreted as the failure of the German-Jewish dialogue in the following generations.

From this perspective, the protagonist's awakening at the end of the narration cannot be considered the beginning of emancipation, but rather the end of an approach cautiously commenced in her great-grandmother's generation at the outset of the twentieth century, when she delayed the train in St. Petersburg so that Isaac Barrow, the Jew, "could flee, at the last second" (20). But this spontaneous gesture does not give rise to a romantic relationship. The great-grandmother and Isaac Barrow no more become a couple than their progeny.

To be sure, by the end of the twentieth century the position of the sexes in terms of their mutual relationship had shifted radically. Isaac Barrow's "sole great-grandson" (19) sinks into depression and speechlessness, whereas the great-granddaughter provides herself with air sufficient for both breathing and narration. Her question, thrice posed, as to whether this is really the story she wanted to tell, shows how precarious the status of the narrative is. The actual story has yet to be found, for what befell the two generations between the great-grandmother and her great-granddaughter in the middle of the century remains unspoken.

#### IV

If one compares the two narratives from the beginning and end of the twentieth century from the vantage point of gender-specific remembrance, it is striking

that a "third party" appears in both: violence, albeit with different connotations. Bertha Pappenheim distinguishes between the different forms of violence in her story. Alongside the open form of violence is a latent violence, alongside the political form is its private acting out. Yet the diverse forms are closely bound together. On the private level, the victim and perpetrator are not readily separable—Pappenheim's protagonist unconsciously acts out his traumatic childhood experience in the murder of his beloved. In the racist pogrom, by contrast, the victim-perpetrator relationship is obvious: men and women, the elderly and children are equally victims of the massacre. Whether suffered or beheld, the violence proves so traumatic for the survivors that is repressed, only to seek a brutal outlet in later life. The psychological mechanisms which Pappenheim draws attention to in her story were surely familiar to her from her own analysis. The "talking cure" which she herself developed in order to "relate away" her trauma is not at the disposal of her characters. It certainly is, however, to her present-day readers, who recognize the operation of repression and remembrance in the text and can decipher the hidden trauma in the relationship between the sexes.

Such a diagnosis, somewhat modified, also applies to the characters in Judith Hermann's story. It is also a family history, and narrative and analysis both play a decisive role in it. Isaac Barrow's great-grandson regularly goes to a psychoanalyst in order to ascertain the cause of his depressions, and the great-granddaughter hopes to arrive at a stable identity in the recollection of her own family history. At the end of the story she even seeks out her lover's psychoanalyst. Since, however, the actual traumatic experience remains unspoken and is even excluded on the narrative level there is no rapprochement between the sexes. The narrating "I" releases herself in an act of forceful exertion from both her lover and the therapist, but it takes little imagination to realize that this cannot comprise true liberation. Hermann's characters, like Pappenheim's, lack insight into the actual trauma—both from a political and individual point of view. As such, a "talking cure" cannot help them either within a professional or private framework.

In both instances, however, the texts can serve as a "talking cure" for the readers, male and female, on the condition that they are prepared to enter into the potential for remembrance which texts in general carry. In the texts discussed here, this potential is especially important, since it relates to experiences of violence in which race and gender join in a coalition that, ill-understood, still remains uncontrolled today. Both stories are bound together by a further commonality: the family histories they relate function as "cover memories" for experiences of violence—whether the anti-Semitic pogroms heralding the Russian Revolution or the annihilation of the Jews in Germany under the Fascists.

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