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# REMEMBERING FOR THE FUTURE

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## *ARMENIA, AUSCHWITZ, AND BEYOND*

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EDITED BY

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MARCIA SACHS LITTELL



PARAGON HOUSE

On one occasion, joined by Elisabeth Maxwell and Yehuda Bauer, the three of us were meeting with members of the Education Committee of the House of Commons advising them on the creation of a Holocaust curriculum and a mandate for the British schools. Within a year's time, the planning committee expanded and the executive group meetings grew to bi-weekly sessions.

The International Conference, "Remembering for the Future," which Elisabeth planned, organized, and, with the help of her husband, financed, was the first major conference of its kind ever held in the United Kingdom. "Remembering for the Future" took place in Oxford, England, July 10-13, 1988 and was followed by a Public Meeting at Central Hall, Westminster London on July 15, 1988. With great courage and determination, Elisabeth persuaded an entire country to begin thinking and teaching about the Holocaust.

After 1988, Elisabeth regularly attended the Annual Scholars' Conferences in the US. Several weeks before her death on August 7, 2013, Elisabeth's daughter Isabel telephoned me at her mother's bedside. Elisabeth, hardly able to speak, wanted me to know that, "The Annual Scholars' Conference has her blessing to use the title, 'Remembering for the Future,' in perpetuity." The 44th Annual Scholars' Conference on the Holocaust & the Churches, "Remembering for the Future: Armenia, Auschwitz and Beyond," was thus held at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles, California, on March 8-11, 2014, the weekend that would have coincided with Elisabeth's 93rd birthday.

Elisabeth's death was a great personal loss. She was a wise and caring personal friend, a beloved matriarch, and an invaluable mentor. For women of my generation who came of age in the early 1950s, inspirational women like Elisabeth Maxwell were rare. It was a special blessing to have her in my life.

Elisabeth dedicated the last three decades of her life to the study and pursuit of the Holocaust, a subject on which she published three books and was internationally recognized as an authority. Everything that Dr. Elisabeth Meynard Maxwell pursued was completed with integrity, conviction, grace and sincerity.

Her death makes clear witness to the passing of a unique generation for which there are no replacements. This volume is respectfully and fittingly dedicated to the memory of Elisabeth Maxwell z"l.

Marcia Sachs Littell  
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7 August 2015

## Contents

v	<i>Acknowledgments</i>
vii	<i>In Memoriam by Marcia Sachs Littell</i>
xiii	<i>Foreword by Michael Berenbaum</i>
xxi	<i>Preface by Richard Libowitz</i>

### PART I

#### THE ARMENIAN EXPERIENCE: 100 YEARS LATER

3	<b>CHAPTER 1</b> Pioneers of Risk Assessment: The Armenian Genocide, the Holocaust, and Early Warning Systems <i>Richard Dekmejian</i>
15	<b>CHAPTER 2</b> The Symbiotic Relationship between Turks and Armenians: A Macabre Outcome Obstructing Healing and Reconciliation <i>Rubina Peroomian</i>
29	<b>CHAPTER 3</b> Translation and Representation of the Armenian Genocide in Literature and Film <i>Sona Haroutyunian</i>

### PART II

#### PAST OR FUTURE?

43	<b>CHAPTER 4</b> The Armenian Genocide as Jihad <i>Richard Rubenstein</i>
----	---

- 69 CHAPTER 5**  
From Hitler to Jihadist Jew Hatred: Influences and Parallels  
*David Patterson*

- 89 CHAPTER 6**  
The Abuse of Memory as a Fig Leaf of Hate: Why Have the  
Lessons of the Holocaust Not Contained Contemporary  
Antisemitism?  
*Shimon Samuels*

---

*PART III*  
*THE EVENT*

---

- 107 CHAPTER 7**  
Against the Odds: American Jews & the Rescue of Europe's  
Refugees, 1933-1941. Researching the Mayer Lehman Charity  
Fund  
*Karen S. Franklin*

- 121 CHAPTER 8**  
The Role of Greek Jews in the Sonderkommando Revolt in  
Birkenau  
*Yitzhak Kerem*

- 139 CHAPTER 9**  
Seventy Years After: The Contribution of the Sonderkommando  
Research to the Understanding and Interpretation of the "Final  
Solution" in Auschwitz-Birkenau  
*Gideon Greif*

- 151 CHAPTER 10**  
Medics and Survivors: Emergency Care Administered by the  
Liberators  
*Diane Plotkin*

---

*PART IV*  
*THE AFTERMATH*

---

- 173 CHAPTER 11**  
The Origin and Reception of Martin Niemöller's Quotation,  
"First they came for the communists..."  
*Harold Marcuse*

- 201 CHAPTER 12**  
Against Forgetting: Another Look at Böll's *Billiards at*  
*Half-Past Nine*  
*Joan Peterson*

- 219 CHAPTER 13**  
Business as Usual: SNCF, Money, and Morality  
*Harriet Tamen, Esq.*

---

*PART V*  
*PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND EDUCATION*

---

- 227 CHAPTER 14**  
Acknowledging the "Other" in Suffering: Reconciliation in  
Jewish-Muslim Relations?  
*Mehnaz M. Afridi*

- 237 CHAPTER 15**  
Holocaust Education for Future Generations: The Role of a  
Catholic University  
*Harriet Sepinwall*

- 245 CHAPTER 16**  
The Emergence of Holocaust Memoirs and the Future of  
Holocaust Education in Brazil  
*Sarah da Rocha Valente*

259    **CHAPTER 17**

A Course on “The Holocaust and Music” at Boston University:  
Ideas, Goals, Course Outline, and Student Response

*Ludmilla Leibman*

271    *Contributors*

277    *Index*

**Foreword**

First a word of tribute: when I was a young graduate just beginning my career I attended the early conferences on the German Church Struggle and the Holocaust and remember the presentations, confrontations, debates, and dialogues that occurred among scholars who were beginning to tackle the Holocaust. There were tensions between Jews and Christians, between Christians and Christians, between Jews and Jews, between scholars of different disciplines, historians and theologians, psychologists and literary scholars. Sometime there were also tensions over individual works and even controversial topics. Hannah Arendt and the question of the banality of evil, the Judenrat and its role, the guilt of Christians and the guilt of Christianity, the guilt of American inactions, the guilt of the German Churches, the silence of the Pope and there were questions including the most basic “was the very title of the Conference misleading.” Was there really such a struggle among the German Churches?

External events intruded. The 1967 War brought the issue of Christian solidarity to the fore, the urban struggles of the late 1960s intensified Black-White tensions, the emergence of the women’s movement raised the question of where were the women scholars and also what about the suffering of women during the Holocaust. We did not yet speak of women perpetrators. The work had simply not been done. Emotions were raw and sometimes discussions were explosive. Thanks to its founders, the late Franklin Littell and Hubert Locke, the conference continued, the scholars got to know one another, even, over time, to trust one another—albeit not too much, not too easily—yet they did come to recognize in one another a common struggle with the Holocaust even if it led to divergent answers.

All who work in this field must be grateful to these founders for their vision, their persistence, their determination, their role model and their scholarly integrity. Franklin Littell has gone the way of all flesh, yet his presence endures in the collective enterprise he began and in the ongoing efforts of his wife Professor Marcia Sachs Littell and his students, among them Professor Richard Libowitz who continues his sacred work. Hubert

## CHAPTER 11

### **The Origin and Reception of Martin Niemöller's Quotation, "First they came for the communists ..."**

HAROLD MARCUSE

Since 1993, visitors to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. have read the following inscription on a wall in the Hall of Witness, a memorial space on the ground floor:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

The quotation is attributed to "Martin Niemöller (1892-1984), Lutheran Minister and early Nazi supporter who was later imprisoned for opposing Hitler's regime."<sup>1</sup> The Museum's online Holocaust Encyclopedia contains an entry for "Martin Niemöller: 'First they came for the socialists...,'" which offers the following discussion of the quotation and the groups it lists:<sup>2</sup>

The quotation stems from Niemöller's lectures during the early postwar period. Different versions of the quotation exist. These can be attributed to the fact that Niemöller spoke extemporaneously and in a number of settings. Much controversy surrounds the content of the poem as it has been printed in varying forms, referring to diverse groups such as Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Trade Unionists, or Communists depending upon the version. Nonetheless his point was that Germans—in particular, he believed, the leaders of the Protestant churches—had

been complicit through their silence in the Nazi imprisonment, persecution, and murder of millions of people.

Indeed, there are numerous versions of this quotation in circulation today, some of them set in stone, with varying claims of legitimacy. For example, visitors to the New England Holocaust Memorial on Boston's Freedom Trail find this version, inscribed in 1995:<sup>3</sup>

They came first for the Communists,  
 But I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist.  
 Then they came for the Jews,  
 and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.  
 Then they came for the trade unionists,  
 and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist.  
 Then they came for the Catholics,  
 and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant.  
 Then they came for me,  
 and by that time no one was left to speak up.

This version substitutes Communists for Socialists, moves Jews up before Trade Unionists, and adds Catholics as a persecuted group. Although various historical arguments can be made for the ordering of the groups, as we will see, the selection of groups generally relates to the person or organization employing the quotation. In this case it might be expected that predominantly Irish-Catholic Boston would use a version including Catholics, while in the Communist-phobic United States capital only a few years after the end of the Cold War, one might similarly expect that including Communists would have been awkward. We find a further common variation in Germany, from which Jews are excluded. For example, the Martin Niemöller Foundation's website gives an "official" version (my translation):<sup>4</sup>

When the Nazis came for the Communists, I kept silent;  
 I was after all not a Communist.  
 When they locked up the Social Democrats, I kept silent;  
 I was after all not a Social Democrat.  
 When they came for the trade unionists, I kept silent,  
 I was after all not a trade unionist.  
 When they came for me, there was no one left who could protest.

While such variations may be attributed to the respective context and speaker invoking Niemöller's words, they do raise the question, which groups Niemöller himself included. If he did exclude Jews, for example, would he have included Catholics? What about other groups persecuted by the Nazis, such as Roma, homosexuals, or the disabled? Since the 1990s scholars have debated these questions. In 1994 Ruth Zerner published an essay citing several witnesses who claimed Niemöller had never included Catholics.<sup>5</sup> In a 1997 article one of her witnesses, Franklin Littell, claimed that Niemöller himself did not include Catholics and would never have included gays, although he certainly included Jews, just not as the first group.<sup>6</sup> Recent internet searches indicate that the version excluding Communists at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum—which I will show is definitely historically incorrect, and indeed distorts both Niemöller's politics and original meaning—is becoming the most prevalent in English, and should be modified.<sup>7</sup>

So what did Niemöller himself say? It turns out that we cannot yet answer this question definitively. My research into the published interviews, sermons and speeches Niemöller delivered in the early postwar years 1945-1947 indicates that in January 1946 Niemöller began using a narrative version naming several groups—foremost among them Communists—but those texts do not converge into the rhythmically repeating "poetic" version, which he may have begun to employ during his speaking tour in the United States in early 1947. A short biographical overview shows why and with what meaning Niemöller began invoking this anecdote.<sup>8</sup>

Niemöller, a decorated naval officer in World War I, was a conservative German nationalist. He turned to theology in the early 1920s after the German navy had been disbanded under the terms of the Versailles treaty. He was the pastor of St. Ann's church in the wealthy Berlin district Dahlem from 1931 until his arrest in 1937. He welcomed Hitler's accession to power in 1933, objecting only to state encroachment on Church policy, in particular the exclusion of Christians with Jewish ancestry from serving as officers of the Church. In September 1933, in protest against the official German Protestant Church's willingness to accept Nazi interference in church affairs, he formed the Pastor's Emergency League, which became the Confessing Church in October 1934. Niemöller's continued

outspokenness against some Nazi rules finally led to his arrest in July 1937 and trial in February 1938. Although his 7-month sentence was less than the 8 months he had served in Moabit prison, so that he should have been released, Hitler personally had him sent to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp for "preventative detention."

It is important to understand that, except for Nazi decrees regarding Church policy, Niemöller was an avid Hitler supporter. As he later readily admitted, he sent Hitler a personal telegram of congratulations after Germany's withdrawal from the League of Nations in October 1933. Witnesses say that Niemöller greeted his Dahlem congregation with the Hitler salute, and at his 1938 trial he boasted about his patriotic unwillingness to turn over his submarine to the British after the November 1918 armistice, about his leadership of a *Freikorps* battalion in putting down a left-wing insurgency in 1920, and that he had voted Nazi since 1924.<sup>9</sup> He also testified in his defense that he found Jews "disagreeable and alien," which was typical of an "officer in the Kaiser's navy" from a "Westphalian family of peasants and clerics." However, ancestry was changed by baptism: one had to accept the "embarrassing and serious offence" that "God had revealed Himself through the Jew Jesus of Nazareth."

A year and a half later when World War II began, Niemöller did something else that came back to haunt him after the war. In September 1939 Niemöller, then 47, wrote to Admiral Raeder offering his services to the navy, a request that was turned down two months later. Although this would also have offered a way out of Sachsenhausen, we may believe the explanation Niemöller offered in interviews in the summer and fall of 1945, namely that he saw this as a way of supporting his country while being in a position to work to dislodge the Nazi government.

Niemöller was transferred to Dachau in July 1941, where he remained until the end of the war. As the US Army closed in on Dachau he was evacuated to Austria, where he was liberated in early May 1945. In an interview soon thereafter he said some importune things that made Allied observers critical of his hitherto spotless reputation as an anti-Nazi hero. For example, he denied the principle of German national guilt and defended those who fought in Hitler's armies as having merely obeyed the call of patriotism, for which, as we will see, he was roundly criticized in the US press.<sup>10</sup>

That criticism, and his exposure to international public opinion, led Niemöller to recognize that denying responsibility would likely backfire and bring harsher policies down on Germany. In August he laid the groundwork for a meeting of international church leaders in Germany in October. At that meeting he was instrumental in the formulation of what is known as the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt.<sup>11</sup> In fact, he insisted upon its most famous (and controversial) sentence: "We did fight for long years in the name of Jesus Christ against the mentality that found its awful expression in the National Socialist regime of violence, but we accuse ourselves for not standing to our beliefs more courageously, for not praying more faithfully, for not believing more joyously, and for not loving more ardently."

This profession of responsibility was limited to the Church as an institution, stopping short of taking on personal meaning, but it still elicited strong criticism from Germans reeling from the devastation of "total war." Shortly thereafter, in early November 1945, a key experience closely linked to the formulation of the insight in the quotation occurred when Niemöller visited the former Dachau concentration camp to show his wife where he had been imprisoned. He related the anecdote in several of his 1946 and 1947 speeches. A July 3, 1946 speech in Stuttgart, published under the title "The Path to Freedom," is a good example, also typical in that it is a transcript of his extemporaneous oral style (my translation):<sup>12</sup>

When I returned from prison a year ago, I played along with this game [of passing along the packet of responsibility to someone else]. I came home, actually after all of the dangers of the previous weeks and the many disappointments, loaded with a lot of good conscience. I had in my pocket a certificate that I had been deprived of my liberty from July 1, 1937 to June 24, 1945 as a political prisoner and personal prisoner of the Führer. Who is going to demonstrate to me that the guilt that is now being claimed of my people, has anything to do with me? Already I was standing in line and passed the packet on. I did that for quite a while, not a pleasant game, but a necessary game. Because if one holds on to the packet, it won't burn only one's fingers! And then one day something happened to me. One day I drove by near Dachau in my car. My wife was with me and said, "Couldn't I see your cell, where

you were imprisoned for the past four years?" I said, "I'll see what can be done." And drove there and was allowed to enter the cell block and show my wife the cell. Then something happened. When we came out the American officer accompanying us led us along a wall. I had often walked along it. There was a large gate in it. I had never seen it open. This time it was open. I knew what was behind it, but entered anyway. I stood with my wife in front of the crematorium in Dachau, and on a tree in front of this building there was a white-painted board with black lettering. [...] There one could read: "Here in the years 1933-1945 238,756 people<sup>13</sup> were cremated." While I read it, not aloud, I noticed that my wife fainted and sank trembling into my arms. I had to support her and noticed how at that moment a cold shudder ran down my spine. I think my wife fainted when she read the quarter-million number. That hadn't moved me. Because it didn't tell me anything new. What ran through me hot and cold at that moment was something else. That was the other two numbers: "1933-1945." I groped for my alibi and knew that the two numbers were the wanted poster of the living God for Pastor Niemöller. My alibi reached from July 1, 1937 to mid-1945. There stood: "1933-1945." Adam, where are you? Mensch, where were you? Yes, I know, from mid-1937 until the end you have an alibi. Here you're being asked: "Where were you from 1933 until July 1, 1937?" And I couldn't avoid this question any longer. In 1933 I was a free man. 1933—at that moment in the crematorium yard it occurred to me—yes 1933, that's right: Hermann Göring boasted publicly that he had gotten rid of the Communist danger. Since all Communists who were not under lock and key because of their crimes were now sitting behind the barbed wire of the newly established concentration camps. Adam, where are you? Hey, Martin Niemöller, where were you then? asked God with those two numbers. And then it occurred to me: this whole thing had made no impression on me; somewhere in a corner of my heart I may have thought, at least later I did think: this is a cheap way to actually be rid of the danger of godlessness. But that these people, with no law, no criminal charges, no investigation, no sentence, no enforceable sentence, simply had their profession, their family, their lives taken from them, were deprived of their freedom, that they were God's question put to me, to which I in God's eyes should have

answered, that did not occur to me. Back then I was a free man. Back then I had already given myself over to my true responsibility. And now the wanted poster was there, and I couldn't avoid this wanted poster any longer. And on that day, when we got home, I read the chapter Matthew 25 with new meaning: "I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink; I was sick and in prison and you did not come to me." As a Christian I could have known and should have known in 1933 that in each of these human brothers—may they be called Communists or whatever—God in Jesus Christ was asking me whether I wouldn't want to serve him.

In this case Niemöller did not follow the Dachau anecdote with a list of groups, but mentioned only Communists. He then went into detail about the meaning of the Stuttgart Declaration, about which, he said, there was so much misinformed talk in the press. He said that it was being absurdly distorted, for instance that the Protestant Church was admitting that Germany had sole responsibility [*Alleinschuld*] for the war.<sup>14</sup> He then quoted from memory what he called the key sentence of the Declaration, with "we" meaning the postwar German Protestant Church: "We know that we are one with our German Volk not only in a great community of suffering, but also in the solidarity of responsibility [*Schuld*]!" He argued that no one could deny that, invoking "the six million murdered Jews" to explain why Protestant Christians could not pass on the "packet of guilt." Again invoking Matthew 25, Niemöller limited the scope of the Stuttgart Declaration, saying that it meant that "the Protestant Church, at least in its leadership, again proclaims itself responsible: We are not avoiding our guilt; we recognize the responsibility that we neglected, and we recognize thereby at the same time the responsibility that we again desire to become just."

Let us go back to the earliest traceable texts from January 1946 to see how Niemöller invoked the Dachau anecdote, and its relationship to what was to become the poetic quotation. On January 6, 1946 he told an audience of representatives of the Confessing Church in Frankfurt, which one can assume was much more open to their own leader's message than other audiences may have been (my translation, emphasis added):<sup>15</sup>



When Pastor Niemöller was put in a concentration camp we wrote the year 1937; when the concentration camp was opened we wrote the year 1933, and the people who were put in the camps then were **Communists**. Who bothered with them? We knew it, it was printed in the newspapers. Who raised their voice, maybe the Confessing Church? We thought: Communists, those opponents of religion, those enemies of Christians—"should I be my brother's keeper?" Then they did away with the **sick**, the **so-called incurables** [*Kranke, sogenannte Unheilbare*].—I remember a conversation I had with a person who claimed to be a Christian. He said: Perhaps it's right, these incurably sick people just cost the state money, they are just a burden to themselves and to others. Isn't it best all-around if they are taken out of the middle [of society]? —Only then did it start affecting the Church as such [*an die Kirche als solche herangekommen*].<sup>16</sup> Then we started making noise, until our public voices again fell silent. Can we say, we aren't guilty/responsible? The persecution of the **Jews**, the way we treated the occupied countries, or the things in **Greece, in Poland, in Czechoslovakia or in Holland**, which were even written in the newspapers....

We preferred to **keep silent**. We are certainly not without guilt, and I ask myself over and over again what would have happened if we had in 1933 or 1934—it must have been a possibility—14,000 Protestant pastors and all Protestant congregations in Germany, if we had defended the truth with our lives. If we had **said** back then, it is not right when Hermann Göring simply puts 100,000 Communists in concentration camps, to let them die. I can imagine that then perhaps 30,000 to 40,000 Protestant Christians would have been made a head shorter, but can also imagine that we would have saved the lives of 30-40 million people, which is what it costs us now.

In this earliest known public delivery of the anecdote Niemöller names several groups: Communists, "so-called incurables," Jews, and those in several of the countries occupied by Germany. This particular speech also happens to be the most widely published of all of Niemöller's sermons from 1946. After its German publication, it was published in French and Danish as well, and in English in February 1947, under the

title *Of Guilt and Hope*, in New York shortly after Niemöller's speaking engagements there.<sup>17</sup>

On January 17, 1946 Niemöller gave a similar speech to students in Göttingen, in which he began the Dachau anecdote, then after a longer argumentative digression on the advisability of Germans under occupation admitting guilt, continued in the same vein, with Göring and the Communists, then "lives unworthy of life" [*lebensunwertes Leben*], and Jews. This time he was much more personal, using the pronoun "I" instead of "we."<sup>18</sup>

Hermann Göring wrote in the newspapers that on his command all active Communists were sent to the KZ in 1933. I knew that, I also knew about the killing of lives unworthy of life, I saw how the Jews were being persecuted on a grand scale [*im grossen Stil*] for the first time—and I kept silent [*habe geschwiegen*]. I only began to speak out [*reden*] when it was about the Church. I know I'm guilty.

This version, by the way, refutes a recent explanation or justification I have heard from defenders of versions that do not include Jews, namely because Niemöller was already imprisoned by the time the Nazi persecution of Jews became violent. Here Niemöller clearly acknowledges that the persecution was sufficient in 1933 that he should have spoken out. In the following months student audiences heckled him in Erlangen, Marburg, and Siegen, and his argumentation became more targeted and concise.<sup>19</sup> In a May 4, 1946 speech at Marburg University he expressed the argument in the pithiest form I have found before the poetic form emerged (emphasis added):<sup>20</sup>

Here is the basis of our Christian recognition of guilt in consideration of what happened. We did not recognize the Lord Christ when he came into our lives in the form of a suffering brother. I didn't recognize him when he was put in the camp as a **Communist**, nor did I recognize him when he was murdered as an **incurably ill person**, nor did I recognize him when he was gassed and burned as the poor **victims of his own people** [an allusion to the fact that Christ was Jewish]. Here I incurred guilt in my very personal responsibility and I cannot excuse myself, neither before God, nor before humanity.

In this case Niemöller set the anecdote in the context of Matthew 25:31f, in which Christ reproaches the self-righteous for not having recognized him in the lowly and needy of society. The groups are Communists, incurably ill, and Jews (with no mention of the Church), and the action is to recognize, parallel to the biblical passage.

Of the other texts from this period, there is one more that I would like to quote; the publication is titled *The Renewal of Our Church*, and the date and venue are not given. It is noteworthy because Niemöller names Jehovah's Witnesses among the persecuted as well:<sup>21</sup>

God didn't ask me where I was from 1937 to 1945, he asked me where I was from 1933 to 1937. From 1933 to 1937 I didn't have an answer. Should I perhaps have said: I was a brave pastor of the Confessing Church in those years, I risked speaking out [*ein Wort riskiert*] and thus risked freedom and my life? But God didn't ask me about all that. God asked: Where were you from 1933 to 1937, when human beings were being burned here? Those weren't my Christian brothers, who were burned there, those were **Communists, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.** [*ernste Bibelforscher usw.*]. That's why I didn't care [*mich nicht gekümmert*].

To summarize: from January into the fall of 1946 Niemöller presented various narrative versions of what was to become his famous quotation. They were part of his argument trying to convince Germans why they should repent and accept personal responsibility, in particular why the Protestant Church's Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt was only a prerequisite, a necessary first step in the restoration of German autonomy after its unconditional surrender. In the context of hostile receptions by some audiences Niemöller honed and personalized his argument, using the Dachau anecdote to show why even the Church's Stuttgart Declaration did not go far enough.

However, the meaning of the quotation as we know it does not fit into that context. The litany of groups used in Germany in 1946 was a personal profession of Niemöller's own guilt, used to argue why members of his audiences should not reject their own responsibility. In this context culminating with his own arrest in 1937 ("when they came for me") would have been irrelevant and even weakened his argument. In

contrast, the message of the poetic version of the quotation is an exhortation not to stand by when others are being persecuted, thus not to incur guilt in the first place, as opposed to accepting responsibility afterwards. For this reason, although I have not been able to find texts to document it, I believe Niemöller may have begun using the anecdote to convey this new, additional meaning during his speaking tour in the United States from December 1946 to April 1947.

At the end of November 1946 Niemöller was allowed to accept an invitation from the US Federal Council of Churches to go to the United States, where his speaking tour would begin in Seattle on December 4.<sup>22</sup> The agenda of his extensive tour included pleading with foreign Christians to send food aid to Germany. His opening speech in Seattle focused on the Church's *mea culpa* in the Stuttgart Declaration, mentioning the "planned murder of millions of Jews," but no other persecuted groups. Niemöller cleverly wove his plea for aid into his conclusion:<sup>23</sup>

Now I'm at the end. I thought it better not to offer you a wealth of details, but just to outline the important strands of development of the present-day life of our Church....

I intentionally did not speak about the material misery in Europe. We know that you know about that. You know yourselves that many of us would have died of starvation months ago, if not for your hands-on help and regular support. Believe me, we thank you for that from our hearts. But in spite of all human efforts hunger, cold and homelessness are continually increasing. No one can see the end....

However, his extended tour met with strong criticism from influential figures, which did not abate. Eleanor Roosevelt, after noting that Niemöller had said he did not disagree with Nazi politics except with regard to the Church, and that he had offered his services for submarine work in the Navy, wrote in her syndicated newspaper column on December 4: "I am sure he is a good man according to his lights but his lights are not those of the people of the United States who did not like the Hitler political doctrines."

The Federal Council of Churches, a chaplain who had interviewed Niemöller in Italy in May 1945, and the influential Chicago serial *Christian Century* all published articles in Niemöller's defense, which

Eleanor Roosevelt rejected in a later column. Niemöller spoke in 52 cities, with thousands sometimes coming to hear him speak, but press coverage of what he said was scant. In none of the reports did I find any mention of anything resembling the famous quotation. However, a German bi-weekly newspaper obtained and printed a translation of the speech he gave in New York on January 25, 1947.<sup>24</sup> I do not have the full transcript of the speech, but a substantial excerpt published a few months later contains the anecdote about Dachau, with the key sentences reading (retranslated):

I couldn't say: I was a brave pastor of the Confessing Church and opened my mouth wide, that wasn't what was going on from 1933 to 1937, those weren't the churchmen who were incinerated there, those were Communists and other people who were bothersome to those in power back then.

After a few remarks paraphrasing Matthew 23, Niemöller made his key argument—no longer that he now saw that he (and all Germans) had to repent and recognize his responsibility, as he had said so often in Germany—but that he realized that only if Christian teaching were true could he receive reconciliation and be rescued from damnation:

Yes, you see, dear friends, from that moment on the question of guilt was for me no longer a theoretical one, to whom guilt belongs; from that moment I knew either it is true, what was preached to me since my childhood, that there is a savior for sinners, or I am already in hell, without having died.

With a clever rhetorical pivot Niemöller said the gospel must of course be true, and appealed to his US-American listeners:

Dear friends and brothers and sisters, what then... counts is a Lord Jesus of Nazareth... who is so close that he holds one firmly when the earth trembles and one is about to sink into hell, then what is important is that he is so close as imaginable, namely so close that he grasps one and holds on.

I read this as Niemöller telling his American listeners that as Christians they should reach out and help their German brethren in spite of their past sins. Without other texts from this speaking tour we cannot

document conclusively that Niemöller wrote or said the poetic version of the quotation during that trip in the United States.<sup>25</sup> I reiterate, however, that he did shift the meaning of the longer anecdote to fit the new context and agenda: instead of calling on his listeners to recognize their own responsibility for atrocities, he was calling on them to reach out to Germans in spite of their responsibility for those horrific crimes.

When Niemöller returned to Germany in May—after having had a last appeal for Americans to send CARE packages into the Congressional Record—he faced strong criticism in the media for not having shown solidarity by defending his countryfolk.<sup>26</sup> Given the topics about which he spoke after that, namely against denazification and for clemency for convicted German war criminals, it is unlikely that he had occasion to preach his message of recognizing one's own guilt again for some time.

In fact, the next mentions of Niemöller's statement that I could find are invocations by others in English that were published in 1955, by which time the familiar "poetic" version had already emerged. These publications indicate that a more narrative version was still familiar in the early 1950s, but also that the version with the poetic refrain was already in circulation. As we have seen, Niemöller himself had included different groups at different times, perhaps intuiting the prejudices of his audiences. In Germany he would have wanted to strengthen his argument by using groups that he—and his listeners—would understandably not have supported. In the US, in contrast, his call for support might have been strengthened by naming groups with whom his listeners might sympathize. In any case, these earliest documented invocations of the quotation by others contain a selection of groups related to the identity of the speaker, not the audience.

Milton Sanford Mayer (1908-1986) was a Chicago-based Jewish journalist who spent time at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research in 1950-51, where he conducted what he called a "small experiment": interviewing ten "average" Germans about their feelings towards Nazism.<sup>27</sup> He summarized his findings in a 1953 article series in *Harper's Magazine*, and published them in book form in 1955 under the title *They Thought They Were Free*. Not in the article series but in the book, he included an invocation of Niemöller by the interlocutor he calls "the teacher," the only non-antisemite of the ten:<sup>28</sup>

Pastor Niemöller spoke for thousands and thousands of men like me when he spoke (too modestly of himself) and said that, when the Nazis attacked the Communists, he was a little uneasy, but, after all, he was not a Communist, and so he did nothing; and then they attacked the Socialists, and he was a little uneasier, but, still, he was not a Socialist, and he did nothing; and then the schools, the press, the Jews, and so on, and he was always uneasier, but still he did nothing. And then they attacked the Church, and he was a Churchman, and he did something—but then it was too late.

We note the order: Communists, Socialists, schools and press, Jews; and the key verbs: the Nazis attack, he was uneasy, but did nothing. Although Mayer did not publish this until 1955, we can use the date of his interviews, 1950-51, as a date before which Niemöller used the poetic form, since the paraphrase is pithy enough that it implies a paraphrase based on a repeating structure. That passage was quoted in July 1955 in an article in the *Annals of the American Association of Political and Social Science*, which was in turn quoted in a 1959 book.<sup>29</sup>

The other published invocation I found was printed that same year, in a March 1955 speech by African-American Communist activist Claude Lightfoot (1910-1991). Lightfoot, who had been convicted under the Smith Act for being a member of the Communist party, told his Los Angeles audience:<sup>30</sup>

It was under the smokescreen of “anti-Communism” that Hitler led the German people and the rest of the world to the brink of disaster. What proof do we still need in America before we learn the lesson of Pastor Niemöller?—“When Communists were jailed, it was all right—we weren’t Communists,” said Niemöller. “When Jews were hounded, we didn’t care. When the union leaders were arrested, we preferred to keep quiet .... When I was jailed—it was too late.”

Here the groups are Communists, Jews, and union leaders, and the actions are more varied, namely jailed/hounded/arrested, and all right/didn’t care/keep quiet. This not only indicates that Lightfoot had heard or read this from a different source than the teacher interviewed by Mayer, but also that he had a model with very precise actions. Interestingly, in a related pamphlet published about Lightfoot that same year, the poetic

version is rendered in bold and block form as a direct quotation of Niemöller:<sup>31</sup>

For those who still feel that what happens to the Communists won’t affect them, let them think over the words of Pastor Martin Niemöller, world famous German Protestant and leader of the World Council of Churches:

“When the Communists were jailed, it was all right, we weren’t Communists.

“When the Jews were hounded, we didn’t care.

“When the union leaders were arrested—we preferred to keep quiet; we were not union members.

“When I was jailed—it was too late to do anything.”

This pamphlet about Lightfoot, with its quotation marks and exact list of key actions (jailed, hounded, arrested; all right, didn’t care, keep quiet) indicates that it was based on a yet-undiscovered published source, or that it was a rendition of Lightfoot’s words as a direct quotation.

The next print appearance of the quotation I found was from 1958, in the script for a school play based on *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Its version, added at the end of the second edition as one of seven “Further Activities,” is again in the full poetic form:<sup>32</sup>

First they came for the Jews  
and I did not speak out —  
because I was not a Jew  
Then they came for the communists  
and I did not speak out —  
because I was not a communist  
Then they came for the trade unionists  
and I did not speak out  
because I was not a trade unionist  
Then they came for me  
and there was no one left to speak for me

(Pastor Niemöller, Victim of the Nazis in Germany)

Now the groups are: Jews, communists, trade unionists, me; and the actions are the repeated “come for” and “not speak out” (as opposed to

the varying “was uneasy,” “didn’t care,” or “kept silent”). The verbs in this version are the blueprint for most later versions, and the “poetic” form again indicates that there was a concise and probably published version that the authors used as a guide. Moving Communists from first to second position can be seen as the editors’ concession to anticommunist sentiment in the US in the 1950s. This order and the verb choice indicate that neither the narrative version from Germany published by Mayer, nor the “poetic” one used by Lightfoot, were the source for this invocation, but an additional, yet undiscovered, text.

The next time I found that Niemöller told the Dachau anecdote, and presumably used the narrative form of the quotation as well, was in 1962, in a script for an interview with the BBC.<sup>33</sup> In that interview Niemöller mentioned only Communists. Two years later, in a 1964 commemorative speech honoring the July 20, 1944 conspiracy against Hitler, Niemöller did not invoke the Dachau anecdote, nor did he use the narrative version of the quotation, but he did list three groups persecuted under Nazism. “Communists, Jews, and Jehovah’s Witnesses,” he said, “were all people whose suffering and dying rose up again [*wieder aufstand*] and came alive in the conscience of the men of July 20.”<sup>34</sup> It is unlikely that this speech was noted in the Anglophone world, but it does confirm that both Communists and Jews were among the groups Niemöller considered the primary victims of Nazism. This belies both the US Holocaust Memorial Museum’s and the Niemöller Foundation’s justifications for their omissions.

The next documented invocation of the quotation, in 1965, already contains the Catholics as a persecuted group. In an article in the journal *Social Education* about teaching values in a current events curriculum, the authors name “an American Civil Liberties Union newsletter” as the source of the following version:<sup>35</sup>

In Germany they first came for the Communists, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn’t speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me—and by that time no one was left to speak up.

—Pastor Martin Niemöller

This version including Catholics became the most widely invoked one from the 1970s through about 1990. One can find scattered printings of it in books published in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but once it was printed by Abigail van Buren in her “Dear Abby” column in 1977 it reached the widest readership, and was regularly requested by readers and reprinted every few years until 1993.<sup>36</sup>

I cannot say definitively whether or not Niemöller himself might have included Catholics as one of the groups in the poetic version. If, as I presume, he first coined it during his US speaking tour under the auspices of the US Federal Council of Churches, an ecumenical organization, he might well have added Catholics in some of his many talks. We also know that he was imprisoned with prominent Catholic resisters in Dachau whom he respected and with whom he celebrated mass. In a letter written two days after his November 1945 return visit to Dachau, responding to a friend who had apparently written that the (Protestant) Church had indeed protested against Nazism, Niemöller asked rhetorically, “Why were there in Dachau for example only 45 Protestant pastors but 450 Catholic German priests?”<sup>37</sup> On the other hand Ruth Zerner cites people close to Niemöller who claim that the pastor himself would not have and did not include Catholics. Littell writes that “when we asked him years ago,” Niemöller responded, “I never said it. They can take care of themselves.”

The question whether Niemöller included Jews as one of the persecuted groups is made more confusing by statements Niemöller himself made in the 1970s. The justification for this exclusion, found as far as I know solely in Germany, is given on the website of the Martin-Niemöller Foundation, which cites—and as I will argue misinterprets and takes out of context—Niemöller’s response in a 1976 interview.<sup>38</sup> That year Niemöller was interviewed by Dietmar Schmidt, who had already published a biography of him in 1959. The interview was published a decade later in a 1986 book made to publicize a documentary film about Niemöller’s life. Schmidt asked Niemöller about the origin of the poetic version of the quotation. Here is my translation of that dialog (emphasis added):<sup>39</sup>

[Q:] When did this poem originate with the saying: When they came for the Communists we kept silent ...?

[A:] That wasn't a poem, no. Once I gave a sermon in Oeffler's congregation, when the general bishop of the Lutheran-Slovakian church was there in the church in Siegelbach near Kaiserslautern. Afterwards we had a discussion with the congregation in a meeting room right next to the church. There the people asked their questions and spoke their minds. And then they asked **me** whether **we** weren't woken up after Kristallnacht 1938. And I say, for heaven's sake, don't ask me about after '38, in '37 I came into imprisonment and was always in a solitary cell and otherwise, you know, when they began **locking up** the **Communists** and maybe **we** heard about that right away, I don't know anymore, but **we** didn't protest, since **we** lived for the Church and in the Church, and the Communists were no friends of the Church, but on the contrary its declared enemies and that's why **we** kept silent then. And then came the **trade unions**, and the trade unions weren't any friends of the Church, and we had little or nothing to do with them anymore and said well let them contend with their own problems. There was no transcript or copy of what I said and it can certainly be that I expressed it differently. But the idea was certainly: The **Communists**, we just calmly let that happen; and the **trade unions**, we also just let that happen; and the **Social Democrats** we let happen too. That wasn't our business. **The Church** didn't yet have anything to do with politics back then, and one shouldn't have anything to do with them. **We in the Confessing Church** basically didn't want to resist politically, we rather wanted to confirm for the Church that that isn't right and cannot be legal in the Church, that's why we, in '33, when we established the Pastor's Emergency League, put the 4th point in it: if a united stand is made against the pastors and they're simply forced out as pastors because they are **of Jewish descent** or something like that, then we as a Church could only say: No. And that became the fourth point in the commitment and that was probably the first anti-antisemitic statement by the Protestant Church. That is all that I can say to this history of the: 'When they locked up the **Communists**, **no one** said anything, **we** weren't Communists and were ok with having those opponents off our backs.' But **we** didn't see ourselves obligated to say anything for people outside the Church, that wasn't fashionable then, and **we** hadn't come far enough yet that **we** understood that **we** were responsible for our [entire German] people.

There are two important things to note here. First, in paraphrasing the dialog from a couple of years earlier, Niemöller spoke of the Church, using "we" and "no one" speaking out, as opposed to the "I" of the 1940s texts and widely known poetic versions of the quotation. This indicates that Niemöller either forgot his original invocations of the anecdote and quotation, or that he was adapting it to the 1970s context and responding to a young audience's question about why the Church collectively, but not he personally, had not protested sooner. In his paraphrase of the incident he says "they asked *me* whether *we* weren't woken up," transitioning seamlessly from the self to the collective and remaining there.

Second, Niemöller gives a historically correct progression in this list of persecuted groups, naming the trade unions (outlawed May 1, 1933) before the Social Democrats (prohibited June 22, 1933), and twice putting trade unions right after Communists (arrests Feb. 28, 1933). Additionally, he does put people "of Jewish descent" after the Social Democrats (the Emergency League was formed in September 1933), implicitly including their persecution long before Kristallnacht in 1938.

The book also contains a rendition of the poetic version, inserted by the authors as an image on the next page, using a version common in Germany from that time until today, with only Communists, Social Democrats and Trade Unionists—in that order, and the key verbs "came for" (but lock up for the Social Democrats) and "kept silent," ending with "could protest." On that same page the book authors reprint a longer quotation from Niemöller's 1946 speech "On the Current Situation of Evangelical Christendom," in which he invoked Matthew 25 to make the point that the Protestant pastors hadn't realized that in the Jewish persecution of 1938 and thereafter, that Christ himself was already being persecuted and beaten and killed in the "lowest of our human brothers." Thus both Niemöller and the book authors understood the quotation in the context of the persecution of Jews, and based on this evidence alone one would not be justified in leaving them out of an "official" version of the quotation, discarding decades of invocations.<sup>40</sup> The book authors, in their choice of a version to print, ignored the order of groups Niemöller had used in the interview, so we may conclude that they were merely using recent invocations with which they were familiar, not his words as spoken in the interview. This conclusion is made more likely because

in the book's version Social Democrats are (ahistorically) the only group that was "locked up," while the interview used that action only in relation to Communists.

This raises the question of when Jews were dropped from the German version. As with Catholics in the English version, I have not yet been able to answer this unequivocally. To confuse matters, in an article published in 1979 Niemöller himself, quoting his own quotation, omits them. In a text for a political monthly initiating a series of prominent commentators reflecting on "30 Years of West Germany," Niemöller reproduces almost verbatim the Dachau anecdote as it was published in *The Path to Freedom* in 1946 (the version cited and reproduced above, see note 12). He begins the next paragraph by—incorrectly—placing the Dachau anecdote prior to the German Protestant Church's collective profession of guilt at Stuttgart.<sup>41</sup>

It was experiences such as this that stand behind the Stuttgart "Declaration of Guilt." It was the remembering of an experience that couldn't be relegated to forgetting any more [*nicht mehr vergessen zu machend*]: the common ground of Christians and atheists, of Communists and Social Democrats in Hitler's concentration camps, in their common affliction, in their common opposition against Nazi barbarism.

Within this new context of shared repression and solidarity forged in the camps Niemöller then quotes himself:

I once formulated this experience as follows (and I have often been quoted with it): When the Nazis came for the Communists, I kept silent; after all [*ja*] I wasn't a Communist. —When they locked up the Social Democrats, I kept silent; after all, I wasn't a Social Democrat. —When they came for the trade unionists, I didn't protest; after all I wasn't a trade unionist. —When they came for me, there wasn't anyone left who protested...

From this re-invocation Niemöller concludes—in 1979—that such solidarity is still important in the present day. This is a wholly new meaning compared to 1946, when he was trying to convince his countryfolk to recognize their own responsibility for the murder of millions of Jews,

as well as compared to 1974, when he was trying to explain how a lack of solidarity enabled the pogroms against Jewish Germans in 1938. Interestingly, in this case Niemöller himself quotes the commonly circulating version with "came for," but "lock up" for the Social Democrats, who again ahistorically precede the trade unionists. He also switches from "kept silent" to "not protest," which is also common in other German texts from the 1970s, adding his own ellipses, which may implicitly allow for the inclusion of other groups, such as Jews.<sup>42</sup>

I think the 1976 interview and 1979 article indicate that by this time Niemöller no longer remembered or cared about the original 1940s contexts in which he developed the quotation, but rather began to employ it with new meanings, similar to how it was being invoked by others for their own purposes. In light of the evidence from 1945-47 presented above, in the "original" context of its emergence, Niemöller's famous quotation was first invoked to move beyond the institutional declaration of guilt in the Stuttgart Declaration, to a personal profession of responsibility in his 1946 German speeches, and then back to an admission of collective German failure (now in the first person) on his US speaking tour in 1947. In all contexts, except the final one from 1979, Jews were always part of the context of the invocations. Only in the "solidarity" context of that last self-invocation did Niemöller explicitly omit Jews, and it thus does not provide justification for omitting from an "official" version of the quotation this best-known and universally recognized group of persecuted people in Nazi Germany.

In conclusion, what can we say about the "original" groups and their order? I would argue that we can ignore the 1970s statements by Niemöller, as they are corrupted by loose paraphrasing, poor memory, and new contexts. Based on the documents from 1946-47 and 1962-64, Niemöller *always* mentioned Communists, and with one exception Jews as well, although never as the first group. From the 1951/1955 Mayer and 1955 Lightfoot versions we can infer with some confidence that in the yet undocumented earliest poetic version(s), whether spoken by Niemöller himself or not, Communists came first, then Socialists/Social Democrats/trade unionists or Jews, perhaps depending on which language and which venue. As for the inclusion of Catholics, until new documentary sources are found, we cannot definitively state whether, when,

or by whom they came to be included in the quotation. Is it proper to include other groups? In some narrative versions Niemöller did name others, in particular incurably ill and Jehovah's Witnesses, but we have no evidence that he named them in any of his poetic versions. As a final point: Niemöller's original argument was premised on naming groups he and his audience would instinctively not care about. When his poem is invoked today it is usually to add one's own group to the list of persecuted. That was not a meaning that Niemöller ever wished to convey. The omission of Communists in Washington, and of Jews in Germany, distorts that meaning and should be corrected.

### Notes

1. The museum's FAQ offers the following more detailed information: "Source: Attributed to Pastor Martin Niemöller, as stated in Franklin H. Littell's foreword to *Exile in the Fatherland: Martin Niemöller's Letters from Moabit Prison*, edited by Hubert G. Locke (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), p. viii."

2. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Martin Niemöller: "First they came for the socialists..." Holocaust Encyclopedia. <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007392>. Accessed on June 15, 2014.

3. The accompanying explanation reads: "Martin Niemoeller / Lutheran Pastor. This statement, attributed to Pastor Niemoeller, has become a legendary expression of the lesson of the Holocaust. Ironically Niemoeller had delivered anti-Semitic sermons early in the Nazi regime. He later opposed Hitler and was sent to a concentration camp." A photo of the inscription is available in the Wikimedia commons: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:New\\_England\\_Holocaust\\_Memorial](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:New_England_Holocaust_Memorial)

4. See Martin-Niemöller-Stiftung, "Als die Nazis die Kommunisten holten..." Sept. 22, 2005 <http://www.martin-niemoeller-stiftung.de/search/a31>.

The original German reads:

*Als die Nazis die Kommunisten holten, habe ich geschwiegen; ich war ja kein Kommunist.*

*Als sie die Sozialdemokraten einsperrten, habe ich geschwiegen; ich war ja kein Sozialdemokrat.*

*Als sie die Gewerkschafter holten, habe ich geschwiegen, ich war ja kein Gewerkschafter.*

*Als sie mich holten, gab es keinen mehr, der protestieren konnte.*

The selection of groups is explained on the page: "Was sagte Niemöller wirklich?" Sept. 16, 2007, <http://www.martin-niemoeller-stiftung.de/search/a46>. This version was again used in an October 2011 article by Martin Stöhr on the Foundation's website; see: <http://www.martin-niemoeller-stiftung.de/4/zumnachlesen/a100>.

5. Ruth Zerner, "Martin Niemoeller, Activist as Bystander: The Oft-Quoted Reflection," in: Marvin Perry and Frederick Schweitzer (eds.), *Jewish-Christian Encounters over the Centuries: Symbiosis, Prejudice, Holocaust, Dialogue* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 327-340. Zerner cites conversations with Franklin Littell, who had been the Protestant adviser on denazification to the US High Commissioner in occupied Germany and had heard Niemöller speak in the US in 1946-47, Niemöller's daughter Brigitte Johannesson (born 1920), and his second wife Sibylle Niemöller-von Sell (married 1971).

6. Franklin Littell, "First they came for the Communists..." in: *Christian Ethics Today*, vol. 3, no. 1 (February 1997). A version of this article, updated in 2001, is available at the Internet Archive. As an aside on how different authors vary the groups, note that the title words in the URL indicate Jews as the "first" group, not Communists, in contrast to the article title: [http://web.archive.org/web/\\*/http://christianethicstoday.com/Issue/009/First%20They%20Came%20for%20the%20Jews%20By%20Franklin%20H%20Littell\\_009\\_29\\_.htm](http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://christianethicstoday.com/Issue/009/First%20They%20Came%20for%20the%20Jews%20By%20Franklin%20H%20Littell_009_29_.htm). Note further that Littell's 1986 publication cited by the USHMM (see note 1 above) does not name the Communists at all.

7. The frequent use of this version is attributable to the prestige of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and the google PageRank of its website. An example of the recent use of the USHMM version (Socialists, Trade Unionists, Jews, me) is: Laura Glenn, "The Reality of Modern anti-Semitism," *The Intelligencer*, June 6, 2014. [http://www.theintell.com/life-style/reality/the-reality-of-modern-anti-semitism/article\\_5cef2290-c461-5241-a8d5-8021db9d22c0.html](http://www.theintell.com/life-style/reality/the-reality-of-modern-anti-semitism/article_5cef2290-c461-5241-a8d5-8021db9d22c0.html). The Holocaust Memorial Park in Brooklyn, New York's Sheepshead Bay is another example; an image is available at: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/wallyg/1318026494/>.

8. The best short overview of Niemöller's entire biography I have found is: Matthias Schreiber, *Martin Niemöller* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1997). Unless otherwise noted, the information below is taken from that work. In English, the USHMM's Encyclopedia of the Holocaust entry on Niemöller is a reliable source: <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007391>. Hubert Locke's historical introduction to his 1986 edition of Niemöller's letters from Moabit prison (cited in note 1, pp. 1-10) offers a more detailed summary of key events from 1933 to 1938 in English.

9. See the document published in: Hans Buchheim, "Ein NS-Funktionär zum Niemöller-Prozess," in: *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 4:3 (July 1956), pp. 307-315, p. 312. The following remark about Jews is found on p. 313.

10. Clarissa Start, *God's Man: The Story of Pastor Niemoeller*. (New York: I.



Washburn, 1959; reprint 1979), chap. 18, "The Unfortunate Press Conference," pp. 145-151, recounts the May 1945 press conference at which Niemöller made his first public statements since he was imprisoned after his 1938 trial.

11. The text of that declaration is available at: [http://www.ekd.de/glauben/bekennntnisse/stuttgarter\\_schulderklaerung.html](http://www.ekd.de/glauben/bekennntnisse/stuttgarter_schulderklaerung.html).

12. Martin Niemöller, *Der Weg ins Freie* (Stuttgart: F. Mittelbach, 1946), p. 17-20.

13. I would like to note that this number from 1945 has long since proven to be incorrect. About 200,000 inmates were registered in Dachau; ca. 42,000 of them died during their imprisonment. The number cremated in the camp is probably around 15,000-20,000. See Harold Marcuse, "Dachau," in: John Merriman & Jay Winter (eds.), *Encyclopedia of the Age of War and Reconstruction*, vol. 2 (New York: Scribners, 2006), 763-766.

14. The following passages are found on Niemöller, *Der Weg*, pp. 22-23.

15. Martin Niemöller, *Über die deutsche Schuld, Not und Hoffnung* (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1946), p. 5ff. This is my translation, which is closer to the German original than the 1947 published English translation, which also contains additional biblical references and thus may have been slightly reworked by Niemöller himself. See Martin Niemöller, *Of Guilt and Hope*, trans. Renee Spodheim (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), p. 32.

16. The published English translation of this sentence, which may have been modified by Niemöller himself, reads: "And only after that did the attack on the Church itself begin. Then we did have our say, and did so until officially silenced too." It renders the German *herankommen an*, literally "come to," as "attack." It also makes the German "*in der Öffentlichkeit wieder verstummt*" more actively as "officially silenced" than the passive literal translation "fall silent."

17. See *De la culpabilité allemande* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1946), and *Tysklands Skyld, Tysklands Nød og Tysklands Haab* (Copenhagen: De Unges Forlag 1946). The English publication was announced in "Books Published Today," *New York Times*, Feb. 28, 1947, p. 21. According to a short announcement in the *New York Times* on Aug. 5, 1947, this translation was withdrawn from circulation by the Philosophical Society after it became known that Niemöller supported the Nazis as early as 1924.

18. Pfarrer Niemöller D.D. an die Göttinger Studenten. Rede, gehalten auf Einladung der evangelischen Studentengemeinde am 17. Januar 1946 zu St. Jacobi in Göttingen.

19. See Drew Middleton, "Pan-Germanism, Militarism Goals of Ex-Soldier Students at Erlangen," *New York Times* (Feb. 18, 1946), p. 1, 3. Start, *God's Man*, p. 176 writes that students threw stones at him when he left the venue in Siegen, a bomb shelter in a mountain tunnel. The Erlangen text was published as *Ansprache in der Neustädter*

*Kirche in Erlangen am 22. Januar 1946* (Dortmund, 1946). The Erlangen incident is also discussed in one of Niemöller's biographies: Dietmar Schmidt, *Pastor Niemöller*. (London: Odhams Press, 1959), p. 148.

20. Martin Niemöller, *Die politische Verantwortung des Christen im akademischen Stand: Vortrag gehalten auf Einladung der evangelischen Studentengemeinde vor Studierenden der Philipps-Universität zu Marburg an der Lahn am 4. Mai 1946* (Giessen: W. Schmitz, 1946).

21. Martin Niemöller, *Die Erneuerung unserer Kirche* (Munich, 1946); reprinted in: *Reden 1945-1954*, p. 19.

22. Start, *God's Man: The Story of Pastor Niemoeller*, chapter 23 contains the most detailed description of this tour I have found. Unless otherwise noted, my description is taken from Start's.

23. "Was Niemöller in Amerika wirklich sagte. Eröffnungsansprache auf der Tagung des Federal Council of Churches am 4. Dezember 1946 in Seattle" (Flugblätter der Bekennenden Kirche Nr. 7), Stuttgart 1947. I could not find an English publication of this speech; this is my retranslation into English.

24. "Der Fall Niemöller," *VVN-Nachrichten*, Aug. 17, 1947, p. 1 includes a long excerpt from the Jan. 25, 1947 speech, which it says was published in full in the June 21, 1947 issue under the title "Pastor Niemöller: Amerikanische Predigt."

25. We do, however, have Franklin Littell's presumably firsthand testimony that Niemöller "concluded many of his addresses [in the US in 1946-47] with the now famous statement." See Martin Niemöller, *Exile in the Fatherland: Martin Niemöller's Letters from Moabit Prison*, ed. Hubert G. Locke (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1986), p. vii.

26. These events are well documented in "Martin Niemöller antwortet seinen Freunden," in: *Amtsblatt der Bekennenden Kirche Nassau-Hessen* 1:3 (Sept. 20, 1947), pp. 17-20. See also the article cited in note 32.

27. Milton Mayer, "The Germans, Their Cause and Cure: My Ten Nazis" in: *Harper's Magazine* (Dec. 1953), 23-31; (Jan. 1954), 70-77; (Feb. 1954), 82-90.

28. Milton Mayer, *They Thought They Were Free: The Germans, 1933-45* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1955, 2nd ed. 1966), p. 168f.

29. Robert M. Hutchins, "The Meaning and Significance of Academic Freedom," in: *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, v. 300 (July 1955), 72-78, p. 75. Hutchins refers to Mayer's book as "forthcoming." The passage in this review was later quoted in: Sidney Hook, *Political Power and Personal Freedom: Critical Studies in Democracy, Communism, and Civil Rights* (New York: Criterion, 1959), 281f.

30. Claude Lightfoot, "*Not Guilty!*": *The Case of Claude Lightfoot* (New York: New Century, 1955), p. 4.

31. Lightfoot Defense Committee (ed.), *The Case of Claude Lightfoot* (New York: Lightfoot Defense Committee, 1955), p. 15.

32. Frances Goodrich, Albert Hackett, and Anne Frank, *The Play of the Diary of Anne Frank* (New York: Heinemann, 1958), p. 150. The quotation in the concluding instructional materials was not in the previous edition of this book, previous edition: New York: Random House, 1956.

33. I have not seen this document myself, but it is paraphrased in: James Bentley, *Martin Niemöller* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 164f. Bentley references a handwritten script preserved with Niemöller's papers at the Zentralarchiv der Evangelischen Kirche Hessen-Nassau, 62 Vol. 396/2442c. It is unclear from Bentley's text to what extent the Dachau anecdote is taken from the Sept. 23, 1946 Rendsburg church version he paraphrases and quotes on p. 164, as he seamlessly transitions to the 1962 manuscript, embedding the whole in a discussion of Niemöller's antisemitism. In the early 1990s, Niemöller's oldest child Brigitte Johannesson, told Ruth Zerner that she thought Niemöller might have started using the quotation in the early 1960s. This might be the origin of that speculation. See Zerner, "Martin Niemoeller, Activist as Bystander" (note 5, above), 327-340.

34. KNA [Katholische Nachrichten-Agentur], "Kirchenpräsident D. Niemöller über den deutschen Widerstand," in: *Politische Studien* 27(Sept./Oct. 1964), p. 581.

35. Phyllis Lieberman and Sidney B. Simon, "Current Events and Values," in: *Social Education* 29(Dec. 1965), pp. 532-533. This article was reprinted in: William Gardner and Fred Johnson, *Social Studies in the Secondary Schools: A Book of Readings* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1970), pp. 298-300. Simon again used the quotation in: Sidney B. Simon and Howard Kirschenbaum, *Readings in Values Clarification* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1973), p. 128. I have not yet been able to locate the ACLU newsletter in question.

36. The first publication I found was in the week of Sept. 16, 1977, when a reader responded to Abby's request for an attribution of the "recently published" quotation. Abby published again in response to readers' requests on Dec. 19, 1980; Jan. 23, 1984; Feb. 25, 1986 (with mention of Indians, Jews and Negroes by the requesting reader); Feb. 11, 1987; Feb. 1, 1990, and Apr. 29, 1993. In the 1984 column Abby writes that she has "kept it for nearly 30 years," thus dating her discovery of it to about 1955.

37. Wilhelm Niemöller et al., *Neuanfang 1945: Zur Biographie Martin Niemöllers nach seinen Tagebuchaufzeichnungen aus dem Jahre 1945*. (Frankfurt: Stimme-Verlag, 1967), 69.

38. See note 4, above.

39. Hannes Karnick and Wolfgang Richter, Martin Niemöller, *Was würde Jesus dazu sagen? Eine Reise durch ein protestantisches Leben. Ein Film Bilder-Lesebuch* (Frankfurt: Röderberg, 1986), p. 69f.

40. Admittedly most of these invocations, except for Mayer's teacher in 1950/51, were in English. I have not made as detailed a search in German as I have in English.

41. Martin Niemöller, "30 Jahre Bundesrepublik: Erlebnisse und Gedanken," in: *Blätter für Deutsche und Internationale Politik* 24:1(1979), 13-16, p. 16. Oddly, the Niemöller Foundation does not cite this publication.

42. The earliest of these other texts that I have found so far is: Erasmus Schöfer, and Werkkreis Literatur der Arbeitswelt, *Die Kinder des roten Grossvaters erzählen: Berichte zur Vor- und Frühgeschichte d. Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1975), 163. Interestingly, this version includes Catholics.

## CHAPTER 12

### Against Forgetting: Another Look at Böll's *Billiards at Half-Past Nine*

JOAN PETERSON

Since its publication in 1959, German writer Heinrich Böll's *Billiards at Half-Past Nine* has been alternately celebrated, criticized, and misunderstood—depending on the political mood of the time, the country of the reviewer, the theoretical stance of the critic, and the disposition of the reader. There are several reasons why *Billiards at Half-Past Nine* should be re-introduced to today's reader of the Holocaust. Though this novel is famous for breaking open the silence that pervaded Germany about the war, it did so in an ambiguous manner that at once mirrored the society of the time but also reached far beyond what members of that society were thinking at the time. Though this novel takes a fierce stance about an unspeakable past, it does not (perhaps cannot) look at, grieve for, or discuss the Jewish victims of the war except by way of very enigmatic and buried enclosures—something missed by previous readings but revealing in its very secretiveness. As such, this novel has much to teach about post-war West Germany, and about Böll himself, in relation to the Holocaust. I find references to victims of the Holocaust—both Jews and Jehovah's Witnesses. The way those references are sometimes blurred with Christian symbolism suggests that Böll couldn't write directly about victims who were not German; instead, Jews and Jehovah's Witnesses are hidden in the background of the novel. What readers bring to a text is always new, due to one's own history as well as the time in which one reads. I draw on Reader-Response theory—especially the idea that part of the meaning of a text resides within the text itself and part with the reader who brings him or herself to the text. In addition, I believe that *Billiards at Half-Past Nine* must be read in relation to the Germany of 1959, a time

that shapes the story, and gives readers necessary historical perspective.

*Billiards at Half-Past Nine* is a difficult and complex work, told from the perspective of eight different characters. A deep tone of sadness pervades the novel—manifested by stream of consciousness style, disruptions in time, modernist language that employs symbols, metaphors, repetitions, and allusions to 60 years of history. A German refusal to be reconciled to the past, accompanied by state-wide amnesia, result in rage and psychological disorder in the story of the Faehmel family.

The Nazi period in the novel is only designated by dates and the reader fills in occurrences that match the context of what one knows of a given time. The 1930s are mentioned much more often than the war years. Most importantly, the words “Nazi,” “Holocaust,” and “Hitler” are never used. Allusions to the Holocaust, to Jews, and to Jehovah’s Witnesses, are buried, mysterious, and sometimes confusing. Böll endeavors to dig up the roots of the Nazi past by focusing on Hindenburg—either because he cannot discuss Hitler or Nazism directly—or because he thinks that Hindenburg holds the key to understanding what transpired after his governance. It may also be that, in 1959, Germans were fixated on the *causes* of WW II and Böll was reflecting that fixation; however, the Holocaust lurks in the background in coded references.

In her important work *The Language of Silence*, written in 1999, Ernestine Schlant chastised the novels of Böll for avoiding any mention of The Holocaust, for using simplified metaphors of good and evil, and for his clichéd references to the few Jews found in his stories. Though she does not specifically discuss *Billiards at Half-Past Nine*, she concludes that Böll could not discuss Jews due to a deeply ingrained and unconscious prejudice. Other critics, including Theodor Adorno and Jean Amery, highlighted Böll’s strong moral conscience, and the attention he paid to victims and underdogs. He was called the man who “represents our conscience,” throughout Germany. Still others have written extensively on how the suffering incurred by Germans who did not follow Hitler was a critical element in all his works. Commonly known, long explicated by scholars, and still of consequence, Böll demonstrates in his work and in *Billiards* the failure of Christianity, German culture, and language, as he warns against a poisonous future.

Winner of the Noble Prize for Literature in 1972, Böll established the

“German Judaica” section of the Cologne City Library, dedicated to the history of the Jews in Germany, the same year he wrote *Billiards*. In 1967 he received Germany’s highest literary prize—the Georg Buchner Prize of the German Academy for Language and Literature, and in 1970 he was elected President of PEN. Eight works of Böll’s<sup>11</sup>, including *Billiards*, were recently released after having been out of print for some time. Böll was a member of Group 47, German writers who banded together and included Grass, Siegfried Lenz, Wolf, Thomas Mann, and also the dramatists Hochhuth, Weiss, Dorst, and others born between 1920 and 1930. They made *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or “coming to terms with the Nazi past,” part of their literary program and the basis of their political commitment to a democratic future. Considered the second wave of anti-fascist literature, works from Group 47 were literature by intellectuals for intellectuals, since “the population and the popular press derogated these efforts as *Nesbeschmutzung* (dirtying one’s own nest).”<sup>2</sup> Having no shared platform, they debated whether literature in Germany after “zero hour”<sup>3</sup> should be stark and transparent like Hemingway’s, or metaphorical and complex like Faulkner’s. What they shared was an anti-fascist consensus and a desire to understand how the German past would affect the new present. A writer of war stories that often depicted German soldiers disenfranchised and beaten down by the war, Böll was also known as a writer of “literature of the rubble.”

Before Group 47, and except for Wolfgang Koeppen’s *Death in Rome*,<sup>4</sup> the Nazi past accompanied by the Holocaust was seldom treated in German literature and in fact, there were no noteworthy novels written. 1959, however, was a watershed year. Both Böll’s *Billiards at Half-Past Nine* and *The Tin Drum* by Günter Grass, were published to rave reviews in West Germany and in the United States. Judith Ryan saw these two novels, along with Uwe Johnson’s *Speculations About Jacob*, as “reaching a new level of mastery” and “able to attack the large questions about the Nazi past with greater energy and more analytic subtlety.”<sup>5</sup> She found common themes around the suppression of memory and a concern for how the Nazi past connected with the post-war present. Group 47 acknowledged that German literature would henceforward have a political cast, but the Jewish victims of WW II were essentially absent in the literature that emerged.

In *Billiards*, the paralysis in which characters find themselves is also symptomatic of an inability on the part of the writer to discuss the Holocaust—yet Böll manages to insert references to Jews and to Jehovah's Witnesses that show he is thinking, perhaps even worrying about, the problematic silence that encompassed Germany over the Holocaust. Of the many issues cited that attempt to explain this suppression throughout Germany, the enormity of the crimes committed against Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roma and Sinti, and other peoples, makes the very fact of silence difficult to comprehend. Scholars note that immediately after the war, Germany was in ruins and under an allied-imposed denazification policy that had limited results and was despised by many Germans. In a few short years, the Cold War, the division of Berlin, the "economic miracle," the rapid rebuilding of cities, the normalization of relations with Israel, the materialistic and capitalistic society that took hold, demilitarization, German victimhood, reparations to victims, the need for distance, and the few Jews who lived in Germany, all served to make the Holocaust a peripheral concern—if it was a concern at all.

Eva Hoffman is taut and clear in her assessment:

In the immediate aftermath of atrocity, in the generation of direct participants, the gulf—moral, political, affective—between the victims and the perpetrator is nearly absolute. The gulf is created in the first place by the perpetrator's utter failure to recognize the humanity of the victim; it is reinforced by the injustice of the deed itself; and it is sealed, most often, by the failure of most perpetrators to feel remorse for the deeds they have performed.<sup>6</sup>

Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich's *The Inability to Mourn*, published in 1967, attempted to understand the psychology of German avoidance by pointing out that it was easier for Germans to dismiss the Nazi era and to lay blame on Hitler and his hierarchy than accept blame and guilt themselves. Hannah Arendt, visiting Germany in 1950, noted:

But nowhere is this nightmare of destruction and horror less felt and less talked about than in Germany itself . . . . And the indifference with which they walk through the rubble has its exact counterpart in the absence of mourning for the dead, or in the apathy with which they react, or rather fail to react, to the fate of refugees in their midst . . . .

The average German looks for the causes that lead to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise. Such an escape from reality is also, of course, an escape from responsibility.<sup>7</sup>

It is not until the late 1960s that Germans *begin* to "come to terms with the past" even though *Billiards at Half-Past Nine* preceded *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* by at least ten years. It is also during this time that German-Jewish voices are first heard. But when Böll wrote *Billiards*, his voice was largely a lone one, publically stating that Germany must cross a difficult, even anguished, threshold, by acknowledging, remembering, and mourning the crimes. Robert E. Sackett writes that, "The kind of German that he wants to see does not hate Germany, but is full of the emotion of loss, including both personal loss and the immense losses caused by German aggression."<sup>8</sup> Into this combination of sociological, political, and psychological hindrances, is the fact that Böll served in the German military as a young man, and was conscripted and saw combat on the Eastern front. He was wounded four times, deserted, and was a POW after surrendering to American soldiers. How those experiences shaped his work, and particularly *Billiards at Half-Past Nine*, has not been addressed in English. In the novel, the mother Johanna does say of her son Robert, "I only wish I knew just what he did in the war." (149) Publisher Dennis Loy Johnson noted, "He did survive the war, and he did write about having been a conscripted Nazi soldier very quickly after the war—he didn't obscure the fact for decades, the way Gunter Grass did. He did, very bravely, place himself squarely in the ranks of those who must atone, who took part in the horror."<sup>9</sup> Much of Böll's oeuvre, however, is much concerned with how former Nazis became part of the new coalition government and nested in that concern is the government's argument for amnesty of Nazi war criminals.

The novel takes place over a 24-hour period—Sept. 6, 1958—the day of Heinrich Faehmel's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. Robert, the main character, lives a strictly ordered, colorless life where the high spot of his day is a morning billiards game where he tells the stories of his past to the hotel bell hop Hugo. There are 14 characters in total and each of 13 chapters is devoted to various parts of each. Some of the characters serve as confidants to major characters and others let the reader "in on" what's really true of a

character. Because much of the novel is written in stream of consciousness, one character can morph into another and one time period can meld into a different time period, thus asking for vigilance on the part of the reader.

Two events are central to the story: the first concerns the exile of Robert Faehmel (son of Heinrich) and the concurrent death of Robert's friends who opposed and fought against the Brown Shirts in 1935. All the major characters grieve for these losses. The second is the destruction of St. Anthony's Abbey—bombed in the last days of the war by main character Robert. His father Heinrich, also an architect, built the abbey and Robert's son Joseph is supposed to reconstruct the Abbey. All the major characters secretly applaud the annihilation of the Abbey and despise the lack of moral opposition displayed by the Monks during the Nazi period. The following quotation encapsulates both events:

... he had waited through five years of war for that moment, the moment when the Abbey would be his booty, lying there like a gift of God. He had wanted to erect a monument of dust and rubble for those who had not been historical monuments and whom no one had thought to spare. Edith, killed by a piece of shrapnel; Ferdi, would-be assassin condemned by process of law; the boy who had pushed the tiny slips of paper with his messages into the letter box; Schrella's father, who had disappeared; Schrella himself, who had to live so far away from the land where Hölderlin had lived; Groll, the waiter in *The Anchor*; and the many others who had gone marching off, singing *How weary, weary these old bones* . . . No one could be called to account for them . . . (156)

Robert, in the German Air Force as an engineer, bombs the Abbey in the last days of the war in retribution for the silence of the Monks during the Nazi years. It is impossible to not read this action as heavily symbolic, knowing what we do now, about the Catholic Church's lack of public response to the Holocaust. Robert's act carries more weight than it did in 1959. The second part of the quotation refers to 1935, when Robert and his friends tried to defy and fight against the Brown Shirts. Böll appears to be authenticating that actors and resisters against Nazis resulted in deaths among them. He is establishing that there were good, young Germans, who risked their lives (like those of the White Rose)

who must be acknowledged and remembered. The young Germans in the story attempted to assassinate a reprehensible Nazi who had been a bully when all the friends were in school. The assassination failed and instead, Ferdi, who had the bomb, was murdered; Robert, who obtained the gun powder for Ferdi, was tortured and went into exile along with his close friend Schrella; the mysterious boy (also referred to as "the carpenter's apprentice") who secreted letters to Robert's parents was killed, along with Groll, a waiter who tried to intervene for the family; and Schrella's father, who hid Ferdi, disappeared along with other Germans.

The story is fraught with the tragedies of family, friends, and acquaintances of the Faehmels' during the war: Robert's wife, Edith, (also sister to Schrella) is killed during the bombing of Cologne; Robert's mother, Johanna, is institutionalized in an asylum at war's end; Johanna and Heinrich's son Otto becomes a virulent Nazi to the horror and bereavement of the whole family. Otto dies at Kiev—a city that echoes now, more than when the book was published, with the infamous murders of Babi Yar. Böll chose his place names well.

Oblique, well-hidden allusions bring the Holocaust into the novel. When Heinrich, the father, remembers the terrible times, he thinks of all the young people killed and how "even an uncalled-for glance, certain kind of hair, certain shape of the nose were enough . . . The father's or grandmother's birth certificate was enough." (163) Jochen, an old waiter at the hotel who disturbs the novel as a truth-teller, remembers one of the Brown Shirts and says, "If I knew all the things he's done, no doubt I'd be sick to my stomach . . . He's the type that has the gold teeth ripped out of corpses, that orders kids' heads shaved. . . murder in the air." (24) Though neither the words "Nazi" nor "Holocaust" are ever used, one overt and several significantly veiled references to the Jewish Holocaust are associated with two characters: Johanna and Hugo. In addition, there are hints that Schrella and his sister Edith are Jehovah's Witnesses, a group also persecuted by the Nazis. The following examines each of these four characters.

### Johanna

Johanna, according to Jochen, was a fine woman who lost three of her children and who, during the war, gave away most of her rations to

those in need—even at the expense of starving her own family. Early in the story she “went down to the freight yard and tried to go along in the cars with the Jews.” (21) Never again is this incident referred to and there are only two other mentions of the words “Jew” or “Jews” in the novel. Her mantra, the words she murmurs over and over throughout the novel, are “whywhywhywhy.” Though she has spent her life in an asylum since 1945, it is made clear by all characters in the story that she is saner than most Germans. Her granddaughter, Ruth, says “Her craziness is a lie, grief behind thick walls, I know it, I get drunk on it sometimes myself and swim away in a lie.” (232) Why did Böll cause Johanna to try to join the Jews on the train? I can only speculate that since he casts Johanna as the truest socialist and truest humanitarian in the novel, in retrospect, in 1959, she is the one who must shoulder what the great majority of Germans did not do—she must symbolize what could have been—or what should have been. Johanna’s attempt to unite with the Jews on the train positions her as the opposite of a bystander; her role as a woman and a mother limits what she could do during the war. But in 1959, she tries to complete the assassination that Ferdi could not by shooting at “M,” one of many former Nazis back in power campaigning as Minister: “I’m ready with death in my handbag to return to life.” (240) That former Nazis were indeed welcomed back by the Adenauer administration was anathema to Böll, who publically wrote and spoke about this sinister turn of events. His vehemence can be sensed when Johanna says, watching a parade of the Fighting Veterans’ League, that these faces frighten her and make her wish she were back among “poor old harmless lunatics.” These people she says, “will kill you all for less than a gesture, for less than a sandwich. You needn’t even be dark-haired or blond any more, or show your grandmother’s birth certificate. They’d kill you if they just didn’t like your faces.” (251) Johanna’s attempt at retroactive justice is most probably meant by Böll to underscore both how a “good” German could be turned into a murderer when confronted by newly empowered Nazis, and a pointed reference to the many war criminals who escaped justice in Germany after the war. Johanna, who feels herself a stranger among Germans, also gives voice to the lack of compassion and responsibility for the war and the war dead all around her: “Maybe I do need time, but even centuries wouldn’t be enough to get me used to their faces.

Respectable, respectable, without a trace of grief. What’s a human being without grief?” (251)

Johanna’s earlier effort to join the Jews on the train, however, passed over by critics and buried in thick text, can be viewed now as Böll’s small attempt to justify revenge for the Holocaust in one character. Her repetitious questioning of “why” is a reverberation voiced by characters in literature about the Holocaust through decades and certainly by anyone who is initiated into that history. Her whys just sound louder today. Finally, that she shoots and misses is arresting. She mimics Ferdi’s botched assassination attempt and the message seems to be that though violence begets violence, the good people must find other ways to contain evil. Böll was a Catholic pacifist,<sup>10</sup> thus, presumably, he could not have this character actually commit a murder. Perhaps to Böll, this sane, raging character living in an insane world, would lose the lucidity with which she viewed Germany at that time had she succeeded, though thinking of the bombing of the Abbey, Johanna says she would have “blown every abbey in the world sky-high” to have all the dead back . . . to be able to learn who Otto really was. *Killed at Kiev*. It sounds so stupid and smells of history.” (241)

### Hugo

The character of Hugo is a strange and more complicated invention. At the end of the novel, Robert adopts Hugo. I want to suggest that Hugo is actually Jewish and that his Jewishness is so deeply buried that even Böll himself couldn’t admit to it—whether personally, or whether publically in the writing of this novel, is not clear. Every morning Robert plays billiards in the Prince Heinrich Hotel in Cologne where his only attendant and confidant is Hugo—a young bell hop. The Germans outside the hotel are menacing: “Respectable matronly faces took on a depraved look. Frock-coated waiters with knowing eyes looked like so many bellzebubs, emissaries from Asmodeus, . . . now they seemed to be concealing cloven hooves inside cleverly constructed orthopedic shoes.” (32)

From half-past nine to eleven, while billiard balls roll in an oasis of calm, Hugo listens to Robert’s anguished stories of the Brown Shirts who made the lives of the Faehmel family and friends hell. Hugo is passive and attentive and slowly shares his own tale of being bullied by similar

types in more recent time. Of the neo-Nazis, Robert thinks, "These were the people who tormented Hugo—perhaps one of them was even Ferdi's hangman." (166) Hugo is an innocent but he is different from the other innocents in the novel. Beaten and tortured by thugs as a child, like Robert's friend Schrella, Hugo was also taunted as *lamby boy* and *God's little lamb*. Like Schrella, he is able to share his story only with Robert. If Hugo is Jewish and Schrella is a Jehovah's Witness, it is Robert who rails against the injustice rendered to both of these characters by old and new Nazis. Significantly, Robert can tell the stories of his own tortured past, a past that involved Schrella's secret, cult-like religious group, only to Hugo—perhaps because as a Jew, Hugo is the only one, in Germany in 1959, who can hear those stories.

Hugo longs to stay in the billiard room where time stands still, where time made his head spin—decades, half-centuries—"yet it was all there, hidden far back in time." (44) As a bellhop, all the guests in the hotel want to be served by Hugo, explained by the fact that he's very good looking. In fact, in a most bizarre episode, a woman in the hotel called the sheep-lady, whose parents said of her "*A thing like that should never have been born.*" (46) stalks Hugo. She exudes an odor of excrement, knits all day, holds court with a group of disciples, opens boxes of sheep dung for all to sniff, looks as if she drinks gall for breakfast, and "left a trail of dread behind her, the breath of disaster" wherever she goes. She tries to get Hugo to become "the Lamb of God in my new religion." She will make him rich and famous and asks him "Haven't you been around long enough to know that only a new religion can cure their boredom?" Presumably she is one who pulls the wool over the eyes of many Germans who still follow like sheep. Perhaps Böll was thinking of Matthew 7:15 when Jesus says "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves."<sup>111</sup> That she knits all day is suggestive of the mythological three fates who spin, measure, and cut the thread of a person's life as well as of Conrad's two women in black who knit black wool in *Heart of Darkness* or even Madame Defarge from Dicken's *A Tale of Two Cities*. It is Hugo that she most wants. Her portrayal is repugnant and her fawning over Hugo strange and aberrant. Hugo fears her. She is contrasted to the cruelty of former and new Nazis in this reader's mind and she evokes aversion. Her rendering is the closest

we get to the dreadfulness of the Holocaust—that she attaches herself to Hugo creates an image of vileness and depravity.

The most striking intimation that Hugo is Jewish is shown through his separation of himself from other Christians. He alludes to the fact that "they" have been lying in wait for him for five or six hundred years:

... why did Christ die, anyway? What good did it ever do me? What do I care if they pray every morning, take Communion every Sunday and hang a big crucifix in the kitchen . . . Nothing, that's how much I care. What's it all amount to, if they lie in wait every day and beat me up? It's been going on like this for five or six hundred years. Yet they're always shooting off about how old their church is . . . You know what they used to holler at me when they were beating me up? *God's little lamb*. That was my nickname." (59)

Böll was cognizant of theological anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism. Though one could argue that Hugo is simply not a Christian, rather than Jewish, he is called, by the bullies—or neo-Nazis—"a devil" an attack that harkens back to Christian condemnations against Jews in the Middle Ages. Thrashed and cynically called, "God's little lamb. Feed my lambs," also suggests the real Jesus—the Jesus who was a Jew. Hugo is well aware of his status as "other." He sees that throughout modern history, harassment of Jews continued: "I was one lamb they didn't feed, if I ever was His to begin with. No use, Doctor. The wind blows, the snow falls, the trees turn green, the leaves fall—they go right on eating potatoes and gravy, ham and cabbage." (60)

Hugo tells Robert how he ended up in a children's shelter after repeatedly running away from home. He did this in part because his mother, who drank, went out on "expeditions," and screamed *whywhywhy* over and over—the same mantra that Johanna cried. He is laughed at in the shelter because he doesn't know what breakfast is—similar to Edith who wasn't familiar with cutlery. Whether this is a reference to poverty, or to Jews, or to Jehovah's Witnesses, is mysterious as Edith's background is also blurred. Hugo doesn't know anything about the war—he hadn't been born and wants to know from Robert what it was like. A Jewish boy who doesn't know about the war seems impossible—unless German silence about the Holocaust is read into his ignorance—along with a



mother who, unlike Johanna, became genuinely insane.

At the end of the novel, when the whole family is reunited for Heinrich's birthday party, where Johanna's assassination attempt takes place, Hugo is there. Robert wants Hugo—says he needs him, calls him son, publically adopts him, and hopes Hugo needs them as much as they need him. He tells Hugo that he has Edith's smile and Ferdi's spirit, combining one who was a Jehovah's Witness with one who suffered and died fighting against Nazis. Heinrich accepts the adoption and says he's acquired a grandson but admits that some voice or feeling prevents him from calling Hugo "grandson." Heinrich, of all the older Faehmels, has been the least courageous over the years, and visibly lacks his wife and son's hostility towards old and new Nazis. The voice that prevents him from not calling Hugo "grandson" may come from some far-off anti-Semitic German compulsion—though Heinrich redeems himself in the eyes of the reader as the story progresses. Ironically, before learning about the adoption of Hugo, Johanna thinks about the various neo-Nazi's she might kill and thinks, "My grandson's murderer is sitting nearby on the balcony, can you see him in his dark suit, respectable, oh so respectable.... Death will bring the great wonder back into his face." (254) Johanna did not have a grandson who was murdered—unless she is thinking of Hugo—in a strange backwards-in-time way—and thinking about what might have happened to him, as a Jew, if he had been deported as a child during the war.

In a disturbing twist at the end of the novel, the sheep-lady tries to entice Hugo to come with her:

You're the one they're waiting for Hugo.... You'll see the whole world and they'll lie at your feet. . . . You won't need to say anything, you'll only need to be there.... It was just despair made me do it—come now, Hugo for their sake—they're waiting for you, you're our lamb...." (277)

What "despair" made her do what? Does she want Hugo in order to redeem herself—Germany—to the world? Hugo leaves with his new "father" Robert: "He could hear her sobbing on his way down the service stairs." (278)

### Schrella

Schrella, struck hard in the face by a ball again and again by Brown Shirt bullies, is saved by Robert, who stops the persecution by miraculously hitting a ball out of the ballpark, during a game of rounders. Robert learns the tormenters trip Schrella, beat him with barbed-wire whips, push him down steps, and break his arm. Alluding perhaps to centuries of Jewish men who hid circumcisions, Robert notes in the locker room that Schrella "never took a shower after a game, never took off his jersey in front of the rest." (38) Apprehensive, Robert trembles in fear over the possibility that Schrella might be Jewish:

... for now I had to ask him, and if once I did, I would be involved, there would be no turning back. It must have been a terrible secret.... Now it was almost dead still, and that gave a great weight to my impending question. It burdened it with eternity, you might say... I was saying goodbye to St. Severin's dark tower,... to my parents' house.... (41)

Böll appears to be suggesting that to become involved with a Jew meant life as Robert knew it would end. There is a long litany of places and people he will miss—including his religion and his future plans before he finally asks, "Are you Jewish?" The dread with which he asks the question is important because the reader knows that Robert will soon escape with Schrella. The passage suggests that neither Böll nor his friends knew Jews during the war—or were afraid to know them. Schrella answers that he is not Jewish but that he's a Lamb—one "sworn never to put the *Host of the Beast* to our lips." (42) Robert says he can't be a Lamb (presumably because he is of another religion) but Schrella tells him he can be a shepherd—and there begins Robert's initiation into a clandestine group that resists the Brown Shirts.

I believe that Schrella (and his sister Edith who Robert marries) are members of the Jehovah's Witness church. Only Schrella and Edith are called Lambs. During the 30s, Brown Shirts broke up Witness Bible study meetings and beat up school children. Witnesses refused to fight in WWI, refused to pledge loyalty to Hitler, or to fight, in WW II. Witnesses do not bear arms. Banned in Bavaria in 1937, they lost jobs and social welfare and pension benefits throughout Germany. Then, thousands were

sent to concentration camps. Most importantly to the novel, Witnesses met covertly in Germany during the war and became “an island of spiritual resistance to the Nazi demand for absolute German commitment to the state.” Nazis linked Witnesses to “international Jewry” by pointing out a reliance on certain Old Testament texts.<sup>12</sup> The 144,000 who are among the “anointed” are referred to as “lambs” and the remaining “great crowd,” are “the other sheep.” Allusions to lambs from both the Old and New Testaments abound in church literature. Witnesses believe in the end of the world. Schrella’s mother, so undone by the poverty all around her in the early 30s, gave away food, like Johanna, to hungry children. She starved herself, whispering “*Lord, Lord,*” while reading a prayer book that “foretold the end of the world.” (212)

Robert joins Schrella’s late night meetings though the words “Jehovah’s Witness” are never used in the text. Witnesses are pacifists, and several times the novel makes clear that Schrella was not involved in the bomb plot even though he escapes with Robert after the assassination attempt.

Only anointed Witnesses partake of unleavened bread and wine, but in turning Christian symbolism on its head, Schrella’s group refuses to “partake of the host of the beast” which is clearly National Socialism. “Wine was not wine, bread not bread, both aglow like ingredients of some secret vice.” (32) Robert, though a shepherd, not a lamb, also refuses this “host.” Böll blurs Christian, Judaic, and Witness allusions. It’s almost as if he can’t bring himself to write about Jews, perhaps doesn’t have the right. On the other hand, his inability to directly bind good Germans with Jews could come from motives, conscious or unconscious, that are deeper and more problematic. Jesus’ injunction in John 21:15 to “feed my lambs” is uttered over and over by group members. Hugo, at one point, is referred to as “that nice little young one who looks like an altar boy.” (19) There are intentional inclusions of Old Testament names. Johanna thinks of Heinrich as her “David,” as “Daniel,” and also as “Abraham.” Robert names his children “Joseph” and “Ruth.” Schrella is thought of as a “dark angel” and “God’s deputy sheriff” by Heinrich, come to take Robert away from his family. When Schrella returns to Germany after a 14-year absence, this “much-mocked student of Hölderlin wonders if anyone will recognize “his spectacles or his walk, or the close set of his

eyes...his foreign overcoat....” (217)

Schrella underscores the state of affairs of 1959 and the return of unrepentant Nazis—with their principles of order, obedience, and hypocrisy. He cannot stay in Germany—he’s afraid of houses where life goes on—where one gets used to anything in time. Cologne should seem a strange and changed place but instead he sees old Nazis returned to positions of power and the dead lost to memory—not even “remembered in the Jewish memorial services, since they weren’t Jews.” (269) He even states that to have children is precarious—they could become Nazis. He tells Robert, “I couldn’t have stood it if my children had grown as alien to me as Otto became to your parents.” (270)

### Edith

Edith, Schrella’s sister and Robert’s wife, is left alone and pregnant when Robert must disappear after the failed assassination attempt. It is Edith who tells Robert to kill the Brown Shirt who had tortured her brother, Schrella. Johanna takes her into her house though admitting she never liked “mystics,” and notes that all the other lambs had been scattered—only Edith remained—another allusion to disappeared Jehovah’s Witnesses. In order to save her, (in all probability from the Nazis) Johanna had Edith certified insane. She is portrayed as separate from the other Faehmels and different. She refers often to “The Lord,” and when she dies after a bomb hits the house, there are “no martyrs or cardinals, hermits, knights or saints standing around in adoration.” Witnesses do not have ordained clergy and, though Christians, do not see themselves as Protestants, and do not accept the symbol of the cross. Several times in the novel, Edith is connected to blood. (Witnesses refuse blood transfusions.) Johanna says, “I wrote ‘Edith, Edith’ in the layer of dust, with my fingers. I loved you more than if our blood had been the same. Where did you come from, Edith, tell me?” (244) On the other hand, Edith’s strong bond with the family suggests that true relationships are bound by behavior, rather than blood—something Robert confirms when he adopts Hugo and something that flies in the face of Hitler’s doctrine on the purity of German blood. Schrella, too, tells Robert that one can’t be a father but only become a father—hence his adoption of Hugo is correct:

"That feeling in the blood is false, the other feeling alone is true."

Calling her an "emissary of the Lord," Heinrich loves Edith more than he could a daughter and wonders if the message she brought was "revenge for the lambs." (162) Mixing Christian symbolism with that of Witnesses, Heinrich says, "Edith lay there as if our family coat-of-arms had come alive, a lamb with the blood flowing out of her breast . . ." (122-3) When Heinrich hears of the destruction of a twelfth-century crucifixion panel he thinks he would give up all the crucifixions throughout the centuries in order to see Edith's smile again: "What did the Lord's pictures mean to me, compared to His emissary's real smile"? (164) Edith is a stranger and Christ-like—or sometimes—Jewish-like. Her daughter Ruth, who only knew her to the age of three, says ". . . when I think of her, I think of seventeen or of two thousand years." (232) The blurring of religious symbols and peoples could suggest that in Böll's own mind, all victims—German, Jewish, Jehovah's Witness—were grouped together. Such a view would have to be seen as a failure to grasp the truth of what occurred. It's also possible, however, that the only course Böll believed he could take, given the silence and refusal of Germans to look at the horrors perpetuated by their country during the 1950s, was through the concealment and creation of victims who were indistinct. Today's reader can uncover some of that former obscurity.

The characterizations of Edith, Schrella, Hugo, Johanna and the Faehmel family carry havoc within them. They are an amalgamation of damage, fear, and tragedy. Scattered throughout the novel are vestiges of a buried, implied Holocaust. The tone of *Billiards* is urgent and somber. A rush of words and symbols tell of dreams flattened and lives lost. Death hovers around the edges of a terrible past. There are those who show compassion, those who are lambs, and one who is a shepherd. There is a palpable disdain for the failure of Christianity and a small hope for the promise that it contains. The future is one to be greatly feared as monsters of the past take over a new Germany. In 1959, the Holocaust is positioned in the background—boundless—and only faintly visible. The event is never grappled with—only alluded to—but it is not silent. Instead, remnants of the Holocaust are found prominently in the perpetrators returned to power, and incompletely, as through a glass darkly, in the ambiguous characterizations of Johanna, Hugo, Schrella and Edith.

### Notes

1. Eight works of Böll's, including a single volume edition of his short stories, were reissued in 2011 by Melville House. The total effort was called "The Essential Heinrich Böll."

2. Ursula Mahlendorf, "Confronting the Fascist Past and Coming to Terms with It." *World Literature Today, Entering the Eighties: The Mosaic of German Literature* Vol. 55, No. 4 (1981): 554.

3. Zero Hour is the term for the end of the German war and is referred to as midnight, May 8, 1945. It is thought of as a complete break with the Nazi past and a look towards a new future.

4. *Death in Rome* was Wolfgang Koeppen's third novel of a trilogy. It is a disturbing and angst-ridden portrait of unrepentant Nazis. Published in 1954, it was derided and then ignored by the German reading public.

5. Judith Ryan, "Postoccupation Literary Movements and Developments in West Germany." In *Legacies and Ambiguities: Postwar Fiction and Culture in West Germany and Japan*, edited by Ernestine Schlant and J. Thomas Rimer, 189-206. Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins U Press, 1991.

6. Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History and the Legacy of the Holocaust*. (New York: Public Affairs, 2004.)

7. Hannah Arendt, "The Aftermath of Nazi Rule. Report from Germany." *Commentary* 10 (Oct. 1950): 342.

8. Robert E. Sackett. "Germans, Guilt, and the Second Threshold of Heinrich Böll: A Study of Three Non-Fictional Works." *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 97, No. 2 (2002): 339.

9. Dennis Loy Johnson, December 2010, interview with Jessa Crispin on "Heinrich Böll and the Literature of Aftermath: A Correspondence." Johnson is the editor of the newly released editions of Böll's works: [www.bookslut.com/features/2010\\_12\\_016948.php](http://www.bookslut.com/features/2010_12_016948.php)

10. Böll later left the Catholic Church. He remained a pacifist.

11. Matthew 7:15. (The Access Bible. New Revised Standard Version with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books).

12. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Jehovah's Witnesses: Article." Holocaust Encyclopedia. <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10006187>. Accessed on 5/28/14.

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## CHAPTER 13

### Business as Usual: SNCF, Money, and Morality

#### HARRIET TAMEN, ESQ.

*Harriet Tamen has provided an update on the legal efforts to hold the French National Railroad (SNCF) responsible for its activities during the Shoah. Ms. Tamen, a New York-based attorney, is a lead legal expert pursuing the efforts against the SNCF. She first reported on the case involving SNCF at the 2010 Annual Scholars' Conference: "Legal Ethics After Auschwitz." That original report was published in the Journal of Ecumenical Studies, volume 46, Number 4, pp. 510-514.*

There is no anti-semitism in France today. Or so I have been told by French friends. Of course, no one making those statements is Jewish, although some said their Jewish friends have assured them there is no discrimination. I spoke to another friend about holding the French rail company, Société nationale de chemins de fer français, (SNCF) accountable for its wartime deportations. She was furious. She wanted to know what I was doing for the rail workers who helped the Jews.

The truth is, there is anti-semitism in France today; the truth is, rail-workers did not help the Jews. That willful blindness, that insistence on rewriting history, the refusal to accept responsibility, are among the reasons we have spent more than 14 years trying to hold SNCF accountable.

For those unfamiliar with the history, SNCF deported more than 75,000 Jews to Nazi concentration camps. The first convoy left Paris for Auschwitz on March 27, 1942. The last one left France on August 17, 1944, one week before the liberation of Paris. Fewer than 3% of those deported survived.

SNCF was paid, per head, per kilometer, for the deportations at the normal rate of .04 RM per kilometer, children under 4 rode for free. This was business as usual. Like any good business, SNCF billed quarterly; like