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RAFAEL SELIGMANN was born in 1947 in Tel Aviv to German Jewish parents who had fled to Palestine in 1934. His father, Ludwig Seligmann, was a commercial clerk and his mother, Hannah (née Schechter) had been a textile worker before marriage. Despite the reasons behind the move to Palestine, the Seligmans remained strongly bound to their German heritage and raised their son with German as his first language. When Rafael was ten, his parents returned to Germany and settled in Munich. Since the end of the 1970s, Seligmann has worked as a journalist while pursuing other career interests. He studied political science and history in Munich and Tel Aviv and wrote his doctoral dissertation on Israeli security politics. From 1980 to 1984 he lived in Bonn, West Germany, where he worked as a political adviser for the Christian Democratic Union and as a reporter for Die Welt. In 1985, he founded the Jüdische Zertung (Jewish newspaper). From 1985 to 1988 he taught at the University of Munich. He became known as a fiction writer with the publication of his controversial first novel, Rubinsteins Versteigerung (Rubinstein’s Auction), in 1989. As of 2001, Seligmann had published five novels, a book on German-Jewish and German-Israeli relations, and numerous essays and was living in Berlin with his wife and son.

Major Themes

Over the years Seligmann has produced numerous essays on a wide variety of topics, including post-Holocaust commemorative practice and the debates surrounding Holocaust representation, the history of antisemitism, contemporary politics between Germany and Israel, and the implications of German unification for German-Jewish relations. But a recurring theme in his writing is the critique of the persistent stereotypes that hinder dialogue and debate between Jews and non-Jews. Seligmann’s focus on stereotypes and his condemnation of attitudes that elevate dead Jews over living members of the community is bound up with the concerns about Jewish identity and post-Holocaust consciousness that permeate his entire oeuvre. Seligmann has repeatedly decried the reduction of Jewishness to an identification with the Holocaust and a community of victims, or Opfergemeinschaft, rather than an affinity with Jewish culture, tradition, and religious belief. He is acerbic in his criticism of so-called Vergangenheitsbewältigung (coming to terms with the past), arguing that it is of no use if unaccompanied by a Bewältigung der Gegenwart (coming to terms with the present). Commemorative politics for superficial political or personal ends represent “Zerredung” (talking to death) of the past, he says in Mit beschränkter Hoffnung (With Limited Hope; Hamburg: Hoffmann and Campe, 1991, p. 172) rather than any kind of substantive confrontation with the impact of the Holocaust on contemporary German-Jewish relations.

Seligmann’s critical stance toward what he terms the Holocaust-Kult—and the appropriation of the Holocaust by both Jews and non-Jews who use the past to manipulate the present—in combination with the perceived irreverence of his fictional portrayals of Jews as morally ambiguous characters has earned him the epithet Nestbeschmutzer (nest-dirtier) from within Jewish ranks in Germany. Seligmann’s response to his accusers has been to highlight his goal of normalization through provocation. By offering exaggerated images both of Jewish and non-Jewish Germans, Seligmann aims to spark controversy and debate that will eventually lead to an examination of the realities of German-Jewish relations.

He also maintains that the aggression and hatred expressed by his characters are emotions that have been repressed in the majority of Jewish writing about contemporary Germany. In Seligmann’s view, Jews in
Germany feel compelled either to justify their decision to live in the country that launched the Holocaust or to distance themselves from their Jewish identity. Commenting on the two most often-cited rationales for Jewish life in Germany, namely, to prevent Hitler from achieving a posthumous victory in the form of a Jew-free Germany and for Jews to serve as emissaries of German-Jewish reconciliation, Seligmann argues that the latter leads to the avoidance of conflict he observes in contemporary German-Jewish writing ("What Keeps the Jews in Germany Quiet?" in Reemerging Jewish Culture in Germany, edited by Sander Gilman and Karen Remmler, New York: New York University Press, 1994, pp. 175–176).

In his own assessment of his status and career as a novelist, Seligmann regards himself as a pioneer chronicler of a largely unrepresented frontier of contemporary German-Jewish relations (see especially "German Jewry Squawking at the Approach of Danger," in Speaking Out: Jewish Voices from United Germany, edited by Susan Stern, Berlin: Edition Q, 1995, p. 175). It is for this representation that Seligmann has been most widely recognized—and criticized. Reception of his work has been mixed and reflects divergent responses ranging from critical dismissal to high praise. On the one side are those who see his writing as ammunition for antisemites and thus condemn it outright as detrimental to the Jewish cause. On the other side are those who laud his efforts to undermine the preconceptions that make any form of self-affirming Jewish identity impossible in the first place. Negative critiques of his fiction tend to foreground his unvarnished greed and self-interest.

The Novels

The fascination with sex and the Schickse in Seligmann’s fiction has led to repeated comparisons with Philip Roth—the character Rubinstein in Seligmann’s first novel has been described as “a Munich Portnoy full of chutzpah” (quoted in Blumenthal, p. 20)—but Seligmann himself finds such comparisons misplaced (Mit beschränkter Hoffnung, p. 185). Seligmann’s best received novel thus far, Rubinstein’s Versteigerung, has been the primary focus of critical reception in English and is also the only work that has been translated in part into English to date. This largely autobiographical work addresses the conflicted situation of the children of Holocaust survivors living in Germany, where they must deal not only with their own struggles to define themselves but also with the legacy of their parents’ suffering. Over the course of the novel, Jonathan Rubinstein develops from an awkward but obstreperous teenager—impatient with his parents’ Holocaust trauma and their decision to return to Germany from Israel—into a young man aware of the complexities and contradictions of contemporary Jewish life. After testing and abandoning his youthful plan of “going up” to Israel, Jonathan comes to a realization and acceptance of his identity as a German Jew. This in itself represents a considerable achievement, particularly since Jonathan’s fear that he will lose his strength because of “the neurotic situation of a Jew in Germany after Auschwitz” (Frankfurt: Eichborn, 1989, p. 104) is never completely laid to rest. In this context, the novel’s closing sentence, “I am a German Jew” (p. 189), retains a note of ambiguity, at once affirmative and resigned.

The three novels following Rubinstein’s Versteigerung—Die jiddische Mamme (The Yiddish Mama, 1990) which satirizes the stereotype of the domineering Jewish mother; Der Musterjude (The Model Jew, 1997), an exposé of philo-Semitism in contemporary German society; and Schalom meine Liebe (Shalom My Love, 1998), a journey of self-discovery that takes the protagonist from Germany to Israel and back—focused on the lives of the younger generation whose attitudes toward Jewishness were complicated by the Holocaust trauma their parents both suffered from and exploited. Seligmann’s 1999 novel, Der Milchmann (The Milkman), however, is told from the perspective of the survivor generation. Inspired by a supposedly true story and dedicated to the murdered relatives of his mother’s family, Der Milchmann is the first novel in which Seligmann portrays the experience of the Holocaust itself.

The opening chapter describes the protagonist’s chance discovery of a crate of milk powder that has fallen from a freight train near the concentration camp. Jakob Weinberg, whose later nickname serves as the novel’s title, originally plans to keep all the milk for himself, but finds that he is too weak to carry the crate back to the camp alone. The implausibility of the incident, which judging from Jakob’s words takes place in Auschwitz, and the prisoners’ success at getting the crate back to the barracks undetected is offset by harsh depictions of inmate interaction and camp life. Neither the protagonist nor his fellow prisoners are idealized in Seligmann’s portrayal, and the battle over the milk powder that ensues when the prisoners return to the barracks reveals the contradictory emotions that arise under conditions of extremity, ranging from compassionate friendship to unvarnished greed and self-inter-
est. Although Jakob has demonstrated that he himself belongs to the latter category, his observations of his fellow prisoners only serve to confirm his loss of faith in God and he even goes so far as to claim in his Yiddish-tinged German that “God is a German. Hitler is God” (Munich: DTV, 1999, p. 21). After the orgy of milk drinking has been broken up by SS guards who beat the prisoners brutally, Jakob has the revelation that his barracks will be exterminated the next day. To save his own skin, he steals a wedding ring hidden in the clothes of an injured prisoner and uses it to bribe his way into another barracks. To ensure that the head count of prisoners in his adopted barracks will be the same in the morning he drags the body of a sickly prisoner into the latrine and assumes the vacant place on the bunk. The rule of self-preservation he has learned in the camp causes him to disregard the value of any life but his own. His strategy proves successful: while his old barracks is eliminated, he survives.

The rest of the novel is set in Munich, Germany, where Jakob is now an old man with a legendary past, the product of his own self-transformation from villain to hero. Based on a story he invented about his camp experience in which he figures as the selfless savior of his barracks by providing his fellow prisoners with a case of milk powder, Jakob has earned the nickname “Milkman,” a term of respect used by both friends and admirers. While Jakob’s far from milk-white lie separates him from the benevolence of Jurek Becker’s Jakob the Liar, the allusion to Becker’s novel is as deliberate as the associations to the biblical figure of Jakob and his deceitful machinations. The dissonance between the protagonist’s real behavior and that of the persona he invents after the fact points to a theme of recurring relevance in Seligmann’s writings: the critique and simultaneous deconstruction of the myth of the “good” Jew.

Weinberg on the eve of his seventieth birthday is increasingly haunted by the past and the remainder of the story is largely devoted to the psychological turmoil characterizing his life as a survivor in Germany. As a Polish Jew, Jakob has no national affiliation to the memories of his family’s murder and his dehumanization by the SS guards who continue to haunt his thoughts and dreams. His abhorrence of the Germans is contradicted by his passionate relationship with his non-Jewish German lover and his insistence on driving a Mercedes, while his ostensible patriotism for Israel is weakened by his lack of desire to live there.

These are precisely the contradictions that Seligmann has raised in his earlier works, but the difference here is his detailed depiction of the trauma that dominates the survivor’s situation and psyche and the dilemma of locating Jewish identity in culture and community without an allegiance to God. While Weinberg appeared to be an exception in Seligmann’s novels because of the difference in generation, the question he faces is one common to all of Seligmann’s protagonists: what does it mean to be Jewish in Germany? The solution Seligmann proposes is to move away from a victim mentality that identifies Jewishness with the Holocaust, and instead to embrace Jewish culture and Jewish tradition as part of Germany’s history going back more than a thousand years. The intent of such a shift in attitudes would be to free both Jews and non-Jews from a relationship in which the Holocaust obstructs interpersonal interaction as well as personal growth.

For scholars of the Holocaust and its repercussions for German-Jewish relations, Seligmann’s significance lies in his critique of Holocaust memory politics as well as in his satirical exposés of the anti- and philo-semitic stereotypes that continue to color German-Jewish interaction. His use of satire and exaggerated imagery to deconstruct the very stereotypes that hinder the encounter between Jews and non-Jews are intended to shake his readers into an examination of their own preconceptions and stimulate dialogue. Not until Jews cease to be held to a higher moral standard will both Jews and non-Jews be able to confront the complexities of their shared existence in Germany and begin to come to terms with the present.

Translations from the German by Kathrin Bower throughout.
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"What Keeps the Jews in Germany Quiet?" 1994.

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