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# Combining Fact and Fiction: My Collection of German-Jewish Writing

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**Corey Twitchell**

**Neureuther Student Book Collection Essay Competition**

**Combining Fact and Fiction: My Collection of German-Jewish Writing**

Because reading—and an appetite for reading—often begins early in life, I shall begin at the beginning, with my childhood. I grew up in a small town in southeast Kansas, situated on the entirely forgettable Verdigris River. Coffeyville, known almost exclusively for brick manufacturing and the 1892 Wild West-style shoot-out ending with the grisly deaths of several members of the notorious “Dalton Gang” (gruesomely re-enacted every October to commemorate the event and the civic bravery of the town’s early citizenry and law enforcement), was not exactly abuzz with frenetic metropolitan activity. Growing up there inspired me to spend many a drowsy afternoon by sitting in the shade of my grandmother’s front porch. There, I would devour book after book after book under the watchful eye of a wizened sweet gum tree. In the summers, my favorite place in Coffeyville was the small, but well curated, public library, which had been designed by a student of Frank Lloyd Wright. The invitingly crisp, modernist interior offered a welcome respite from July and August’s brutal heat and humidity. Indoctrinated in the Dewey Decimal System by the time I was eight or nine, I knew my way around this library. I quickly graduated from the children’s wing—where many a happy hour had been spent—to explore the books intended for older (i.e. “adult”) readers, housed in tasteful wooden shelves that mirrored the building’s clean, mid-century lines.

Among the many things these shelves had to offer, I found myself gravitating towards two types of books: the ones that had stories and the ones that had facts. Today, as a graduate student who studies what he loves—literature—I can say that what I loved as a kid in equal measure was fictional discourse and non-fictional discourse. I loved stories, any kind of story, really. Folk tales, fairy tales, anecdotes, short stories, long stories, novels, you name it. I was thrilled with how a story unfolds—how it happens, why it happens, and who makes it happen. But I was also and still am enthralled by narratives that construct and present facts. When I had a trouble falling asleep at night, I sought out a volume from my parents’ set of encyclopedia. I often read for hours intrigued by the complex minutiae that the world had to offer. Though the encyclopedia rarely had the soporific effect I had originally thought they might have, I did find it calming to be able to access facts and data, pictures and graphs, tables and abbreviated, yet descriptive paragraphs, related to all sorts of topics—whenever I liked. My hometown may have been small, but my access to the world through books felt to me expansive, if not limitless.

The first time I realized that I somehow combine my two favorite types of books—the ones that had the intriguing stories and the ones that contained the riveting facts—was in my seventh grade English class. A rather enterprising teacher, who was of opinion that all students should be able to diagram sentences and thereby demonstrate their understanding of the vicissitudes of English grammar, decided to teach the class how to construct and compose a research paper. The students were given free license to choose the topic, but we were expected to develop some kind of argument and then demonstrate facts to back up said argument. Little did I know this at the time, but this project would end up being my first academic paper on literature. For reasons I am still a little unclear on, my adolescent self decided that a research paper on the 19-century Russian author Anton Chekhov would be exactly the right thing to tackle in this middle school assignment. I had previously come across a collection of his short stories and wanted to know more about this Russian doctor, grandson of a peasant, who had become one of most celebrated writers in the Russian language. Lest you think me to have been far too precocious for my own good, gentle reader, let me also say that my interest in Chekhov was pure accident and I am pretty sure that my hypothesis was the most jejune ever written. BUT, the process of reading the stories, thinking about them, and trying, with my feeble skills, to analyze them—now that was very nearly amazing to me. I had so much fun working on this assignment that I am pretty sure somewhere deep in my subconscious this is the reason why I do what I do today.

Before entering high school, my family moved from Coffeyville to Norman, Oklahoma. A medium-sized college town in the Midwest, Norman, in comparison to Coffeyville, was Paris or London. Nearly all of my high school friends had parents who were professors or were affiliated in some way with the university. Everyone I knew loved to read and habitually recommended and shared books (by some miracle being a nerdy teenager in Oklahoma in 1992 was something no one batted an eye at). My love of books slowly transformed to include buying and assembling them on my own shelves at home. While I still made regular trips to the library—particularly the university's sizable research library—I also found that I took great pleasure in amassing my own resources. I began to collect voraciously. My passion for short stories quickly expanded to encompass novels—particularly novels by French, Spanish, German, and Russian authors. I still loved Chekhov, but I was wild about 20<sup>th</sup>-century authors like Franz Kafka and Albert Camus. As a result of my burgeoning interest in and study of foreign languages, my book collection grew to include titles in more than just English. When I went off to college in 1995, I took all my books with me.

I now know that the collection I wish to address specifically in this essay began with a particular book I came across while I was at Grinnell College. One day in 1997, I was in the campus bookstore and happened upon a collection of modern European short stories. Containing works by a few authors whom I recognized and many whom I did not, I bought the title on a whim. And one of the stories caught my eye. I read it again and again. And then I read it some more. It was only a few pages in length, but it was one of the richest, densest texts I had ever encountered. Cozily sandwiched among other, longer stories, this story, translated into English as “A World Ends,” changed my whole outlook on literature, and quite possibly on life. “A World Ends” was about a narrator who attends a private party on an artificial island, populated by wealthy intellectuals who devote themselves to “the true and eternal culture.” When the island breaks apart and sinks, only the narrator is daring—and smart—enough to tread on decorum and leave the gathering before drowning. This text was marvelous—witty, tongue-in-cheek, strange, satirical, ominous—I could go on and on. This story, originally titled “Das Ende einer Welt,” was composed in 1952 by German-Jewish author Wolfgang Hildesheimer. At that point, I had never read anything by anyone I could identify as a German Jew. I started to do some research. I found out that Kafka had been Jewish and was treated in the scholarship as a writer in German of Jewish heritage. It was a similar case with Hildesheimer. Through my love for literature, I had found a world entirely new to me and it was fascinating. As a graduate student in German here at Washington University writing a dissertation on post-Holocaust German-Jewish literature, I now understand that literature became a way for many German Jews to explore and negotiate their place in a German-speaking world that was often hostile—historically speaking—to the roles that Jews were playing in German and Austrian culture. After this initial encounter with German-Jewish writing, I had to know more.

I started studying the German language on account of Hildesheimer’s short story. At the time, I was a Classics major studying Latin and ancient Greek. But I was looking for a modern language that I could both read AND speak. I pursued German and found that I liked it. A lot. At the same time, I kept reading works by German Jews, translated into English. My goal was to read these works in the original language. As I finally became competent enough to decipher these texts in the original, I was ready to embark on an M.A. (and overjoyed that I had access to these remarkable texts in more than one language). I ended up writing my M.A. thesis on Wolfgang Hildesheimer’s first collection of short stories, aptly named *Loveless Legends* (or *Lieblose Legenden*). Published in the 1950s, these stories offer a unique combination of humor and nostalgic sadness. As a writer who had served as a simultaneous translator at the Nuremberg

Trials and witnessed the horrors of the Nazi regime first hand, Hildesheimer seems to have been obsessed with how German culture (Goethe, Beethoven, etc.) had been used and misused both during World War II and in the early postwar period. Pushing myself to develop scholarly tools in both English and German, I read and re-read these stories time and again, analyzing and investigating them. Once I finished the thesis, I had a firm grip on Hildesheimer, but the world of German-Jewish writing was much bigger than one author. My adviser at the time, aware of my interest in German-Jewish literature, encouraged me to widen my scope, explore more authors and more types of writing (journalism, essays, political tracts, etc.) produced by German Jews. This sage professor was essentially advising me to consider both fiction and non-fiction, to take account of the complex spectrum of textual output produced by writers in German of Jewish heritage or descent. I needed to look not only at literary writing, but also German Jews writing about writing, as well as German Jews writing about other things—like politics, culture, society, psychology, religion, aesthetics—in short, an entire body of writing, starting in the middle of the nineteenth century and continuing to the present day.

Since then, I have taken her advice seriously. While I began my doctoral studies here in St. Louis, I have been exploring what I have come to understand is an immense body of work. And my collection of German-Jewish literature has only grown alongside my passion for this literature. I made substantial additions to this collection while studying in Berlin for the year in 2010-2011. I combed the many used bookstores throughout the once-divided German capital, sometimes lucky to spot a dusty original copy of a title published in the former East by an author like Jurek Becker, famous in both Germany and the English-speaking world for his novel, *Jacob the Liar*. Many more titles followed, by German-Jewish authors such as Edgar Hilsenrath, Hans Mayer, Anna Seghers, Fred Wander, etc. As my research deepened and my dissertation project began to take form, my collection of German-Jewish writing grew to the point where I was forced to mail most of my new acquisitions back to the United States, as my two suitcases and two carry-ons overflowed with paperbacks and hardbacks assembled after a year of literary exploration. My collection, comprised of texts in both the original German and the English translation, reflects not only the combination of my intellectual curiosity and course of academic study, but also a lifelong pursuit exploring the intersections of fact and fiction.

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