

Jewish Textual Architectures

Jewish Spaces, Places, and Architectures in Literature. Online Anthology

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Between adult expectations and children's play

SOURCE DESCRIPTION

The three excerpts presented here are taken from the first issue of the school newspaper of the Jüdisches Landschulheim Herrlingen [1], Herrlinger Leben: Blätter des jüd. Landschulheims Herrlingen bei Ulm a. D. The Landschulheim had originally been established in 1926 by Anna Essinger as a progressive pedagogical establishment. In late 1933, following Essinger's decision to move her school along with a number of pupils to England, and in reaction to the persecution of Jews and growing uncertainty they felt under the National Socialist regime, the pedagogue and Zionist Hugo Rosenthal took over the Landschulheim. His goal was to make it into a specifically Jewish institution, though several non-Jewish students studied there in the first years. Herrlinger Leben was one of two school newspapers written by the pupils themselves between the years 1934 and 1938, the other being the later Chayenu [Our life]. Both newspapers reported on daily life, the goals and aims of the school, major events, Jewish holidays, and cultural-religious practices. The school newspapers also included fictional stories and artwork created by pupils. Taken together, the newspaper presents a relatively rare glimpse into the minds and experiences of Jewish youth in 1930s Germany. The four excerpted pages reflect three distinct texts and voices. The first page introduces the newspaper as a collective voice of the student body. A short essay that explains one student's motivations for coming to a Jewish school can be found on the second and third pages. The last excerpted page is a comical drawing.

Between Adult Expectations and Children's Play

The school newspaper Herrlinger Leben, written by children and youths between the ages of eleven and sixteen, reflects an interesting tension between how the children confirmed the aims and expectations of the adult world, on the one hand, and expressed their unique perspective, on the other. The first page, for example, introduces the school as a new institution and presents the newspaper as the school's collective voice to the reader. The tone of the text is marked by a considerable degree of seriousness and even resignation, beyond what one might expect from a child or even a teenager. The author writes of "das Grau der Arbeit, der Pflicht, der Aufgabe..." pointing to a weighty sense of responsibility that the pupil takes upon him or herself at the school. The tone also appears to suggest the anonymous author's awareness of the new, historically unique, and dire circumstances that surrounded them.

The School as a Site for Community-Building

The text further rehearses, at least in part, the official narrative of the school, stressing that it aimed to be a protected place for community and community-building, with the word Gemeinschaft [2] being repeated

no less than three times. We know from other sources that Hugo Rosenthal and other teachers at the Landschulheim [3] placed significant emphasis on the school's role in serving as a *Gemeinschaft* for all who lived there, children and adults. An early school brochure, for instance, written to inform potential pupils and parents about the Landschulheim and probably penned by Rosenthal himself, stated the school's goals succinctly: "Wir haben den Willen, jüdischen Kindern in dem kleinen Raum unserer Gemeinschaft eine Heimat zu schaffen, die ihnen den geistigen Boden bereitet, der für die Erziehung seelisch gesunder und lebensstüchtiger Menschen notwendig ist." Accordingly, the school was a physical space that enabled the creation and flourishing of a community that could provide both a sense of home and a mental foundation for the children's education in the broadest sense. The various programs at the school, and the school newspapers in particular, were thus conceived as ways in which the children and youths could gain a sense of control over their future or, at least, over their own present-tense conditions.

Creating Ties that Bind

The second text is a short, anonymous essay entitled "warum bin ich in ein jüdisches Landschulheim gegangen?". Despite being a personal explanation of why one Jewish pupil chose to attend a Jewish school, the text echoes the experiences of many Jewish children and youths during the National Socialist era. As the author of the text recognizes, their own experience was nearly universal for all Jewish pupils: "so ging es fast jedem jüdischen schüler." Exploring the failure of Jewish integration and acculturation as a result of National Socialist antisemitism and the attending spiritual and psychological hardship it wrought, the author tells first of their desire to switch from a Jewish school to a public school during the Weimar era, believing that this would make them "more German." The pupil proceeds to tell of how their worldview was upended with the rise of the National Socialists, mentioned not by name in the article, but through a reference to spring 1933 (the time of the National Socialist consolidation of power, or *Gleichschaltung*). The pupil recalls the experience of exclusion initiated by a teacher and the ensuing and continued sense of not belonging. Like many other Jewish pupils and their parents, the author hoped to transfer to a Jewish school that provided them with a community and an answer to existential questions. The pupil poignantly (and rhetorically) asks: "was aber können wir tun, um wieder freie und aufrechte menschen zu werden, was tun, um zu verhüten, dass die lehre von der minderwertigkeit unserer rasse sich nicht auch in unsere hirne einfrisst?" The student already had an answer: „wir müssen wieder mit dem judentum verwachsen! wir müssen lernen, dass jude-sein ein stolz und nicht mit minderwertigkeit identisch ist.“ This was a message that would be expressed elsewhere by Rosenthal and other teachers at the school. As one teacher, Kurt Bergel, wrote: "Stolz auf unser Judentum – kein sturer Chauvinismus, sondern ein Stolz, der auf Kenntnis und Erlebnis gegründet war – war uns der Weg zur seelischen Gesundheit unserer Kinder, die in der Atmosphäre des erzwungenen Ghettos bedroht war." To these ends, Rosenthal made it a central aim to increase the pupils' pride in Judaism and knowledge of it. As he explained in his report for the school year 1935/1936, he organized all activities around "religiösen Gemeinschaftserziehung". Both the curriculum and extra-curricular activities, such as celebrating Jewish holidays and shabbat together, were designed to help make the pupils proud of their Jewish heritage and teach them about religious and cultural notions, to help them become "kulturbewußten Gliedern der jüdischen Gemeinschaft." In a sense then, in the first two texts of *Herrlinger Leben*, we can see that pupils expressed their agency by participating in the repetition and adoption of the official goals and narrative of the school. In addition to serving as a mouthpiece for the official school aims, however, the school newspaper also gave voice to a

children's perspective: one that could and did regularly express awe and often amusement at the new circumstances, potentially undermining or at least playing with messages from the adult world.

Caricatures of Space and Identity

The school's geographical location in rural Swabia—in most cases both far culturally and physically from the urban environments in which the children had been born and raised (e. g., Cologne, Berlin, and Munich)—served as a source of significant amusement. The local dialect, the different dress, and the many farm animals were regular subjects of jokes in the newspaper, playful photographs taken by children at the school, and even inspiration for costumes for Purim. The third excerpt, a handwritten image of two Swabian farmers in dialogue, expresses the children's amusement with the local patois and clothing. Although the caricature highlights both the different dress and speech of the imagined Swabian farmers, it also demonstrates a familiarity with local cultural and linguistic practices and suggests that the children interacted, at least in passing, with others living in the area. The same year, the first prize in the school's Purim costume competition went to a teacher who dressed up as a “Schwäbische Bäuerin”. Yet in so doing, the young artist-author of the caricature undermines the serious tone of discourses on Heimat—a discourse not only common in German society at the time but also repeatedly thematized at the school where both lessons in Heimatkunde and about the Jewish homeland and Zionist endeavor were regularly taught. The earnest desire for belonging, voiced with much pathos in the second text, is at once confirmed through the artist's attempt to imitate the local dialect and lampooned as exotic. The artist further pokes fun at a potential source of German nationalist belonging by depriving the speakers of any meaningful message; the characters' dialogue is inane and ends with the two figures taking leave of the other almost as soon as they meet.

Summary

The history of the Jews of Germany, certainly in the modern era, is almost synonymous with major cities such as Frankfurt, Hamburg and, above all, Berlin. Yet, rural and provincial places continued to play important roles for Jews into the 1930s, as both real and imagined spaces. In the case of the Jüdisches Landschulheim in Herrlingen, the school—located in rural Swabia—functioned as a physical space that helped educate Jewish children, prepare them for emigration, and provided firm ground under their feet, helping many to deal with the profound psychological challenges accompanied the dire antisemitic persecution they and their families faced under the National Socialists. The children also regularly partook in classes and activities that aimed to strengthen their knowledge about and affiliation with Judaism, activities that were intended to encourage positive self-worth as Jews. Finally, the text's fundamental importance stems arguably from the fact that it was the result of the ideas and efforts of the pupils at the school. Although the narratives of the adult world are clearly reflected and repeated in the text, so too are the children's perspectives. Through the newspaper, the various children and youths could negotiate their own responses to the unfolding tragedy that surrounded them and, at times, also find moments to question ideals that adults held so dear.

Selected bibliography

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Notes

[1] Jewish rural boarding school Herrlingen

[2] community

[3] rural boarding school

About the Author

Dr. Sarah Wobick-Segev is a research associate at the Institute for Jewish philosophy and religion at Universität Hamburg. Her research focuses on the cultural history of modern European Jews with a particular interest in the histories and experiences of understudied actors, including women, children, and the elderly.

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