

POSTCARD  WEST GERMANY

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WHEN GERMANS TALK about Hitler, World War II, and the Holocaust, they invariably deploy the term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. In English, that word is usually rendered as "coming to terms with the past," though the literal translation of the verb *bewältigen* might tell a more accurate story. The dictionary lists "to conquer," "to overcome," or "to surmount" as equivalents. History, one might surmise, is not remembrance but a duel, not the "seamless web" of past and present but an ancient foe who must at last be bested.

Last May *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* scored a big one when Chancellor Helmut Kohl managed to drag Ronald Reagan to a forgotten military cemetery in Bitburg so that an American president would at last pay homage to Germany's dead of World War II—Wehrmacht soldiers, Waffen-SS, and all. This fall the conquest of history moved up another notch and to another stage. The place was Frankfurt, the stage was that of the city-financed *Schauspielhaus* (theater), and the drama was about a play left behind by the late Rainer Werner Fassbinder, titled *Trash, the City and Death*.

West Germany's playhouses, traditionally given not to entertainment but to heavily subsidized edification, rarely rate top billing in the national media. Yet this month the front page has been filled with stories about the "Rich Jew," the anonymous (archetypical?) protagonist of the Fassbinder play. And while normally Pershing bases and airport runways provide the targets of organized discontent, this time the demonstrators took over the stage of the Frankfurt *Schauspielhaus*, blocking the premiere of *Trash* with their bodies. What's more, for the first time in anybody's memory, it was young Frankfurt Jews who took "direct action." Meanwhile, the city's Greens stood outside upholding orderly procedures in the name of artistic freedom, and their allies in the leftish press bemoaned the occupation as a grievous "breach of the law."

Trash, the City and Death is an allegory, and it features a familiar cast of Fassbinder characters: whores, pimps, and homosexuals; a corrupt police commissioner, a dwarf, and a nameless lead known only as the "Rich Jew." The language is vulgar, and the action is rife with sadomasochistic ritual. But that is not what turned *Trash* into a nationwide *casus belli*. The issue was "subsidized anti-Semitism" (as one of the protest posters put it) in a country that gave the world Auschwitz and Treblinka.

Fassbinder always denied the charge of anti-Semitism—pointing out that fictitious phrases declaimed by fictitious characters do not fit an indictment make. His intent, he claimed, was "Brechtian": to use the stage as teaching tool, to make transparent what was evil about contemporary urban life in West Germany. The play's locale is "the

Moon, because it is as uninhabitable as Earth and its cities in particular." The city "devours" its dwellers, those who came to seek happiness and riches. The attack against *la condition urbaine* is hardly a novel motif in German literature; what is new in post-Holocaust Germany is the role the "Rich Jew" plays in this brutish setting.

His job is to keep the wheels of alienation and destruction grinding. He says of himself: "I buy the old dwellings in this city, tear them down, build new ones, and sell them well. . . . I must not care whether children weep, whether the old and crippled suffer. I must not care. And the angry screams of some—I simply do not listen to them. . . . The city needs the unscrupulous businessman who acts so that it may change."

Jews, especially the tiny band of survivors (about 30,000) who have made their home in postwar Germany, have heard this tale before, and if they are too young to have read *Der Stürmer* or listened to Dr. Joseph Goebbels, the message is indelibly imprinted in their collective memory. To which Fassbinder aficionados might reply: "But it is not Jews whom Fassbinder was attacking: his *real* target was ruthless Capitalism, which turns our cities into moon-scapes, which tears down old buildings . . . , etc. Isn't the 'Rich Jew' merely a cog in the mechanism, *himself* a victim of the System rather than its engineer?"

If so, Fassbinder chose a peculiar symbol indeed. Why, if the System is the culprit, not feature the "Large Bank" or the "Rich Insurance Company"? Any one of these gargantuan, anonymous institutions has done more to turn Frankfurt (the real-life locale of the play) into a "Manhattan-on-the-Main" than all of the town's Jewish builders put together. Why pick on the "Rich Jew" for "heuristic purposes" if not to strike a responsive chord in the lowermost layers of the German unconscious where this archetype has been buried by the Holocaust, but not exorcised?

The Jew as scapegoat occupies a venerable place in the anti-Semitic mind-set, but there is more to come as we listen to the "Rich Jew": "The Police Commissioner is my friend . . . , the Mayor likes to invite me over, I can count on the members of the City Council." Or as we watch Roma B., the whore, reporting on her customer's extraordinary sexual potency and proclivities. Or when we learn at the end that the Police Commissioner himself hushed up the murder of Roma B., committed—surprise, surprise—by the "Rich Jew." Allegory here turns into pure demonology, with the rapacious and omnipotent Jew providing the ultimate rationale for the anti-Semite's annihilationist fantasies. Since the Jew is endowed with demonic qualities, he is beyond reform—and the solution must perforce be a Final One.

These themes antedate the Holocaust by centuries. Yet Fassbinder has managed to dredge up a new motif that would have Uncle Sigmund clapping in morbid delight. Listen to one of the central figures in *Trash*, Hans von Gluck: "He sucks us dry, the Jew. Drinks our blood and puts us in the wrong because he is a Jew and we carry the guilt. . . . The Jew is guilty because he makes us guilty—

because he is there. Had he stayed where he came from, or had they gassed him—I could sleep better today. They have forgotten to gas him. This is no joke, this is how it thinks in me.”

This is what you might call “anti-Semitism in spite/because of Auschwitz.” The Jew has not only *done* wrong; in his postwar incarnation, he is *existentially* guilty because, as long as he lives in their midst, he will remind Germans of the past that was Auschwitz and Treblinka. His presence in postwar Germany is a permanent indictment. And to exorcise the ghosts of history and handed-down guilt—the survivors too must be extirpated. “Be-gone or be dead so that I may rest easy” is the unspoken message Hans von Gluck has for the graduates of the death camps.

Whether Fassbinder invented von Gluck as a parody or “Brechtian” provocation was immaterial in the end. So were the whiny pleas of Gunther Rühle, the general manager of the Frankfurt *Schauspielhaus*, to treat *Trash* as a lofty contribution to Judeo-Christian understanding. Indeed, the more encounter sessions Rühle organized to soften the opposition, the angrier became Frankfurt’s Jews. “Where do you get the guts,” asked one Jewish woman, “to tell me, a survivor of Auschwitz, how to interpret this play?”

Nor did it help to turn *Trash* into philo-Semitic garbage on the stage—“to Aryanize” the “Rich Jew,” as the critic of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* put it with dripping irony. “Where did it go, that murderous cliché right out of *Der Stürmer*: the lewd, avaricious, treacherous, revengeful, and ready-to-kill Jew?” Instead, after the 30 or so Jews occupied the stage on opening night, a select group of critics was treated to a Nordic banker type, decked out in cashmere, homburg, and weltschmerz, during a hermetically sealed “dress rehearsal.”

BETWEEN the blockade of the premiere on Halloween and the rescheduled opening on November 13, published opinion in West Germany turned slowly but inexorably against *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* à la Fassbinder and Rühle—with only the leftish *Frankfurter Rundschau* condemning the “illegality” of the stage takeover by Frankfurt Jews and celebrating *Trash* as “some of the best the current German theater has to offer.” On the eve of the second try, bemoaning the “irrationality” of the debate, Mr. Rühle removed *Trash* from this season’s repertoire.

Perhaps it is a whiff of normality when young Jews in postwar Germany try their hands at “direct action” just as their Christian contemporaries have done since the 1960s. On the other hand, it may be no fluke that *Trash*, which languished in the archives for a decade, followed hard on the heels of Bitburg. There the president of the country that brought the Germans Nuremberg was to proffer not just reconciliation but absolution. In *Trash*, the conquest of history goes one better: redemption is not so much solicited as taken, and guilt not accepted but dispatched—by projecting it onto the victims-as-perpetrators.

Trash was finally canceled—to the relief of those Germans, representing a solid consensus, who do not believe

that their country’s history is like a supermarket where you can proudly cart out the Goethes and the Beethovens and leave the Hitlers and Himmlers behind. But the urge to escape continues—and we have Fassbinder’s Frau Müller (chained to the wheelchair, a symbol of postwar Germany?) to make that point toward the end of *Trash*: “Still, I won’t lose faith; I will fight for our happiness. We won’t let ourselves be crushed by terms which are not ours, which others laid down so that we may suffer them.”

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WHITE HOUSE WATCH

JUDGING JUDGES

THERE ARE two things you need to know about Alex Kozinski. One is that the case against his nomination as a federal appeals judge was weak. Kozinski, 35, an emigrant from Rumania who topped his class at UCLA Law School, was accused by several Senate Democrats of lacking judicial temperament. How so? Some of his underlings when he was special counsel at the Merit Systems Protection Board in 1981 and 1982 had found him overbearing. He was accused of puffing up his record at the board when he testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee. Also, he sent several friends a copy of a radio editorial that linked a group opposing his nomination to the left-wing Institute for Policy Studies and, by extension, to terrorists; the group claimed to have severed its connection with IPS. Oh, yes, the second thing you need to know about Kozinski is that he was confirmed November 7 only by the skin of his teeth; 43 senators voted against him.

When a nominee draws this many negative votes, something is up. The Kozinski fight foreshadows a long and bitter struggle over judges between the Reagan administration and Senate Democrats. Joseph Biden, the senior Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee, says the 43 nay votes signify a “rebellion” against Reagan’s judicial appointees. “This was more than a vote on one man,” adds Senator Paul Simon of Illinois, who’s been assigned by Biden to conduct the initial Democratic screening of judicial appointees. “It was a message that we’re concerned about the way things are going.”

Biden, Simon, and other Democrats insist the administration, led by Attorney General Edwin Meese III, is trying to stack the federal judiciary with conservative ideologues who are young and thus eligible to remain as judges for decades. This is antidemocratic, argues Biden. “They’re trying to put in place young, committed, ideologically