Albert-Reiner Glaap

with assistance from Michael Heinze and Neil Johnstone

Jewish Facets of Contemporary Canadian Drama

Reflections

Literatures in English outside Britain and the USA

Albert-Reiner Glaap (Ed.)

Volume 18

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This book is dedicated to the late

Dr. Paul Spiegel

President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, 2000-2006

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The last word goes to the reader, who may take this book for what it is meant to be: an overview of the Jewish facets of Canadian theatre, and an incentive for those working in theatre to look out for further plays from the pen of these and other Canadian authors of Jewish descent and – what is more – their productions, certainly a consummation devoutly to be wished.

I dedicate this book to the late Dr. Paul Spiegel, who was awarded an honorary doctorate – Doctor Philosophiae Honoris Causa – by the Faculty of Arts of Heinrich-Heine-University Duesseldorf

> in Anerkennung seiner Verdienste im Kampf gegen das Vergessen der Shoa, für seine Bemühungen, in Wort und Schrift, den nichtjüdischen Deutschen das Judentum näher zu bringen, für sein Eintreten gegen die Diskriminierung von Minderheiten und für die Achtung der Menschenrechte.
>
> (aus der Urkunde vom 11. Februar 2004)
>
> in recognition of his achievements in the battle against the forgetting of the Shoah, of his efforts, in the spoken and written word, to acquaint non-Jewish Germans with Judaism, of his fight against the discrimination of minorities and for the respect of human rights.
>
> (from the official document, dated February 11, 2004)

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JEWISH FACETS OF CANADIAN PLAYS. CONTEXT – CONCEPT – CONTENT

This book has grown out of a cultural context in which the legacy of the Nazi era, in particular the Holocaust and its aftermath, has been, and still is, an issue that cannot be excluded from political and public discussion. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, on the occasion of a visit to Israel in March 2008, made the following statement: "Only if Germany confesses to its never-ending responsibility for the moral catastrophe in German history, can we shape the future" (my translation). No tolerance towards intolerance any more, not forgetting what happened, doing everything in our power to prevent radical ideas from cropping up in people's minds and activities – these have been and must still be the guiding lines.

It is an encouraging development that today 105,000 Jews live in Germany again. 50,000 have come (from the former Soviet Union) after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Twenty synagogues have been restored or newly built in various parts of the country. Jewish newspapers are available again, some in German, some in English. Jewish schools were opened as well as Jewish and Yiddish Departments at German universities. Jewish life has again become an integral part of our culture, and most people do not merely accept but greatly appreciate this. Understandably, successive post-war generations in Germany have reacted in different ways to the legacy left to them, something which is mirrored in the three following statements. The first was written by a German born in 1934, in the early years of Hitler's dictatorship; the second statement is from the pen of a German who was born five years after the end of World War II; and this is followed by a brief comment from a young student, who left school only two years ago. She articulates her opinion on a play written by Canadian playwright David Gow, titled *Cherry Docs* (cf. chapter on author D. Gow), which was staged in a German theatre.

How could that happen? My long way to perception and reorientation
by Johann Michael Schmidt

"And believe me, believe me: he who doesn't lose his reason over certain issues, hasn't any to lose." Years ago, D. Sternberger turned to this evocative remark of Orsina in Lessing's tragedy Emilia Galotti *to express his horror at the Holocaust.*

Lessing's formulation expresses the impossibility of understanding this event – has the effect of a spontaneous reaction – but is based on intense mental activity; it went in this way with me: Only after I had considered the systematic extermination of the European Jews for a long time, did I reach the point where Lessing's words struck me. There are two explanations as to why I needed so long to realize this: the first has to do with my family background, the second with the subject I studied and teach, Protestant Theology.

As to the first reason: I was almost eleven years old when the war ended. I was little aware of Jewish fates. After the war, after becoming acquainted with the full extent of what had happened, I heard and read various reports, but was indifferent to them. My firm conviction that my parents had been opponents of the Nazis from the outset, and that they had stood by their Jewish friends, prevented me from becoming mentally involved with the Third Reich and its crimes. It was only at a later date that I understood why it was impossible for me to have Jewish friends either at school or at university. How did my parents survive this period unscathed? The answer to the same question, which an older colleague gave later, seemed to fit for my parents as well: "Partly luck, partly cowardice, partly cleverness." My father was a paediatrician and was allowed to continue his practice during the war. As the doctor in charge of medical examinations for the military he was fortunate in having an understanding superior, who, although critical of the small number of those he classified as "fit for service," accepted my father's well-founded medical reasons.

My parents had few Jewish friends, Jewish in the sense of the racial madness of the National Socialists. But they remained in personal contact with them as far as their friends wished. The memory of the Jewish general practitioners of both my parents was kept alive. I always heard my parents speak about them with great respect. My father had a Jewish superior who died before 1933. His children emigrated at the right time. Although my parents regularly listened to the BBC and Thomas Mann's speeches to his German listeners, they only found out about the systematic extermination of the Jews shortly before the end of the war. My father could not believe it, solely for technical reasons. Up to the present time I believe that my parents rejected the Third Reich, indeed hated Hitler. I remember that as a child I endangered my parents insofar as I chattered about some of my father's lively tirades of hatred of Hitler at school or to Nazi neighbours.

I can thus summarize my parents' attitude to the Third Reich as follows: decisive rejection from the outset, constant exchange of views with like-minded people, at the same time a feeling of paralysis and powerlessness which excluded all thoughts of political activity or resistance.

As to the second reason: my way into the Protestant Church led me to study theology in the '50s, but this gave me yet another reason for preventing my involvement with the question as to why and how all that could have happened in Germany. What I learned in my theological studies in the '50s prevented me from losing my reason for a long time. It was primarily the sharp separation between the murderous anti-Semitism of the violent rule of National Socialism and the centuries-old enmity towards the Jews based on the old religious doctrine of the church. The former was condemned without reservation, the latter was still fostered as indispensable for the sake of the "truth of the Christian faith." The Jews' physical existence was considered to be inviolable, their religious existence was still being killed.

I have long since understood what I was missing: personal contact with Jews. This did not exist in my schooldays, which I spent mostly after 1945, or at the university. A conversation with Jews would immediately have convinced me that the separation between the religious and political aspects of anti-Semitism is anti-Semitic in itself; for it does not recognise the Jews' understanding of themselves and their belief, let alone take it seriously. Furthermore, the separation made no impression whatsoever on anti-Semites. They take up everything that fuels their hate for the Jews.

In 1970, after our move to the Rhineland, I began to change my thinking. I met Jews, and colleagues who were already on the way to reconsidering their ideas. I then began a deep friendship with a Jewish colleague from Jerusalem and his wife and family, first in correspondence, and from 1977 in direct contact.

Meanwhile, I have also understood: the failure of the churches, which was already lamented in 1945, is not limited to their behaviour during the Third Reich; the roots reach far back into the beginnings of church history when Christians declared God's people of Israel rejected, and the church, its heir, the new people of God, the "true Israel." Since the end of the 19th century, religious hatred of the Jews had combined with the newly-arisen racial anti-Semitism; during the Third Reich it strengthened the murderous anti-Semitism ordered by the state, or at least weakened its resistance to it.

In the meantime, something else has become clear to me: in excluding Israel from its heritage, Christianity harmed itself; it took away from itself the share of Israel's heritage promised in the bible, and thereby its own foundations. Therefore, I am convinced that the Christians' self-inflicted harm can only be healed with Israel's help and heritage.

Communicating the way my own ideas had developed became evermore central to my teaching; I first taught at a Teacher Training College, and, since 1980,

have been doing so at the University. The topic, "Christians and Jews at the abyss of history" became more and more the central theme. Because of the biblical foundations and also in the perspective of church history, all theological themes are indissolubly connected with Judaism. For many centuries, this connection was used for Christian self-reassurance, through separation and enmity. Now, it promises all those who long for a renewed relationship with Israel, a possibility to regain their lost theological reason.

An urgent problem is how to communicate the subject. Among the questions in this book which were submitted to the Canadian playwrights with a Jewish background, one particularly catches my eye: "Plays written by contemporary Canadian playwrights on Jewish issues seem to me to have the advantage of being reflections on, rather than documentations of, what happened during the Third Reich and what is happening in today's Israel. What is your opinion?" I fully agree with the assumption that communication through people, stories, plays and films, providing a chance for personal identification, is incomparably more effective than factual documentary accounts. In Germany, a multi-part American Holocaust film, broadcast in 1979, provided conclusive evidence: the TV film quickly achieved what countless documentaries, 'teaching units' and explanatory texts had previously been unable to do. It showed the concrete individual fate of a Jewish family, with whom the viewers could identify. The fact that it was more successful in reaching people who had hitherto been uninterested, and at the same time may have put off those who were informed or even had been involved, does not change my belief that the choice of medium was fundamentally the right one.

In this context I think of my own efforts to deal with the topic of Judaism/ Christianity – not in isolation, but in the context of all the other standard subjects covered in the training of teachers of religion: the Holocaust need not form the main theme to trigger emotions; it can produce an even deeper resonance as a subsidiary theme when it is embedded in aspects of life with which the viewers and listeners are intimate and familiar. In the same way I consider the focus on details to be far more effective than striving for completeness and historical "correctness."

It is in the personal meeting as a place of communication that my individual experiences and didactic endeavours merge: texts which are read, spoken, or heard, are brought to life by people, by people in the texts, by people who "perform" them and by people who experience them together.

Dr. Johann Michael Schmidt (born 1934), Professor of Protestant Theology and its Didactics, specialises in Biblical Studies.