

IN THE BEGINNING

The First International Symposium on Jewish Children's Literature: Background and Implications

Marcia Weiss Posner, Co-Editor

I am fortunate to be among those who have never had to relinquish the joy of reading children's stories, since much of my professional life has been devoted to the reading, critical evaluation, and analysis of their content for topics, themes, and inferences—the unwritten content, the messages between the lines. Because of this sustained interest, I recognized sometime in the late Fifties that stories with Jewish characters and themes were entering into the mainstream of children's literature. Along with feelings of gratification and excitement came a sense of loss for what had been missing in my childhood—the opportunity to read a book in which someone from my religious/ethnic background was being portrayed in the national literature of my country, in books that could be borrowed from the public library or purchased in the neighborhood bookstore.

As I have discussed elsewhere, with each year, the number of Jewish children's books published by trade publishers has increased (Posner, 1992). Talented authors and illustrators searched their Jewish heritage and began to write stories based on their grandparents' experiences, or plumbed their own childhood for its Jewish component or lack thereof. It became easier and easier for Jewish children in secular schools to assert their Jewishness and to participate in the classroom by describing their holidays and life-cycle observances to classmates, and by holding up attractive Jewish holiday and life-cycle books found in their own school libraries. As I describe in my article, "Jewish Children's Literature Around the World: A Survey" in this issue, because of the growth in Jewish children's book publishing in the United States, I began to wonder if European Jewish children enjoyed a similar abundance, although I doubted it. The remnants of the Jewish population in Europe were probably trying to be inconspicuous and would not constitute much of a market, and books do not get published unless they are marketable. Yet, once the idea took hold, there was no way to forget it. I felt that, somehow, we had to bring trade books of Jewish interest to Europe, to help

Jewish children there feel more secure and to encourage non-Jewish children to respect Judaism and Jewishness. Thus did my quest begin.

Taking advantage of The First International Conference of Israeli and Judaica Librarians, organized by the Association of Jewish Libraries in Jerusalem, Israel (1990), I convened a subsidiary conference, "The First International Symposium of Jewish Children's Literature," inviting authors of juvenile Judaica with whom I corresponded, while conducting a survey regarding Jewish children's books in Europe. Authors, librarians, and editors from around the world participated. By 1991, Susie Morgenstern, an American/French author of French children's books who had spoken at the symposium the previous year, helped to increase the number of Jewish children's books published in France and also sensitized assimilated French Jewish authors to write on Jewish topics other than the Holocaust. In the same year, the London *Jewish Chronicle* was approached to establish an award for the best Jewish children's book, and the British Jewish Book Council, to establish a Jewish Book Week for Children, which is now being considered. In 1992, the new Association of Jewish Libraries—Victorian Chapter in Australia, organized by Katrina Kolt (who had attended the Jerusalem symposium), organized its first Jewish Book Week and is considering establishing an award. In the first month of 1993, *The New Zealand Jewish Chronicle's* editor, Judith Clearwater, wrote to me inquiring about the mechanics of administering and funding book awards. From the initial stages of conference planning, American author Sonia Levitin offered to sponsor awards in two separate countries, if we could find a way of administering them.

Children's books with Jewish content are essential in the national popular literature of a country more than ever. The breakup of the Soviet Union has stirred feelings of nationalism, and loosened the tongues of antisemitic groups. A worldwide economic depression

has encouraged scapegoating, of which Jews are always the target. Jewish children need to have their ethnic self-identity reinforced, and non-Jews need to be educated in the ways of Jewish families and Jewish beliefs. Through the inclusion of children's books with positive Jewish content in national literatures and in school reading materials, antisemitism may be eased.

Progress in promoting the publication of Jewish children's books in Europe has been slow. The press of other duties intrudes, but with the publication of this issue of *Judaica Librarianship*, with its full coverage of the symposium—which I hope to distribute around the world (with a set of guidelines on how to seek donors to fund a children's book award and how to administer it)—I look to more progress in future years.

I thank my co-editor, Bella Hass Weinberg, and our style editor, Zachary Baker, for their careful attention to and long hours spent editing these proceedings.

Reference

Posner, Marcia W. "Fifty Years of Jewish Children's Books in the *Jewish Book Annual*," in *Jewish Book Annual*, vol. 50, 1992-1993 (New York: Jewish Book Council, 1992), pp. 81-98.

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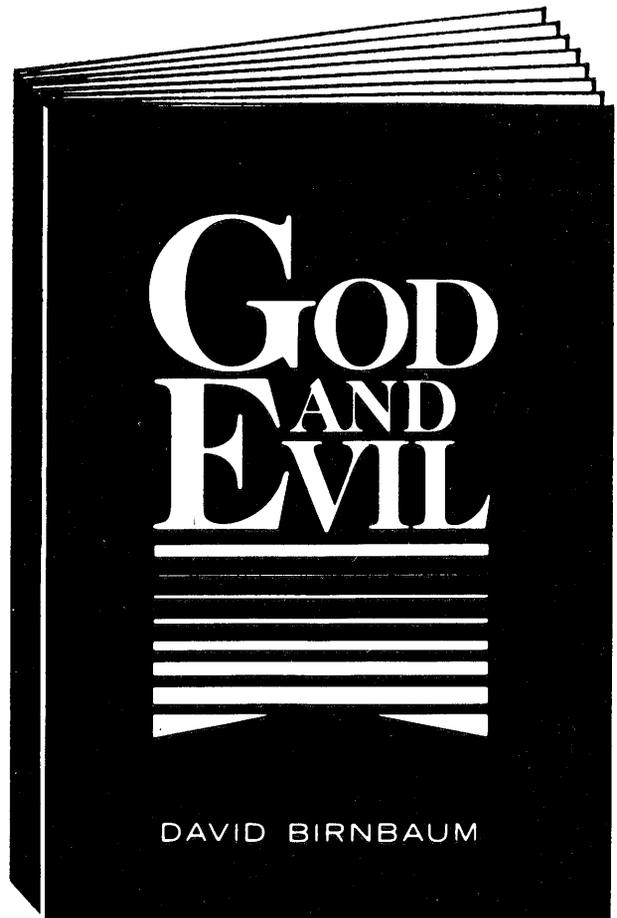
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