Dealing with German Publishers for the Publication of Children's Books on the Jewish Experience*

Aliana Brodmann-Menkes
Wellesley, MA

Overcoming the Obstacles Created by Prejudice

The invitation to speak at this symposium came at a time when I was beginning to question my "obsession" with bringing "Jewish folklore" into German homes as a means of contributing to an understanding of our culture. In other words, I was beginning to feel as though I were forcing medicine down their throats, but like a good Jewish mother I took such delight with even the slightest evidence of appreciation that I continued, although I knew it would be a struggle. Without intending to do so initially, in assessing my published work I realize that there has been a progression.

I have moved from books about a specific Jewish experience (the Holocaust), to a Talmudic tale of universal relevance, and then to a non-moralistic, funny story, which intends nothing more than to provoke laughter from German and Jewish children alike.

My first two novels for children introduced Germans to the post-World War II environment of a Jewish child of Holocaust survivors in Germany. I think they were the first children's books that dealt with the effects of the Holocaust on the second generation. But they also dealt with the importance of overcoming the obstacles created by prejudice and making friends.

The Jewish Heritage: A Mystery to Jews and Germans Alike

It wasn't until after I had left Germany and was living in the United States that I began to feel free to reflect on my restricted childhood, which was overhung by darkness and an eerie kind of silence. But equally overwhelming are memories of my German friends, who, though forbidden in my home, became my closest allies in helping me connect with the "outside world." (The Jewish community was a closed circle composed mostly of survivors.) Their friendship was precious to me because it proved to me that all had not been destroyed and that there was hope.

Eventually, I found myself pretty much in the middle, between both sides and belonging to neither group, looking in on us and out at them. The dominant feeling that I had about my Jewishness—one that I never acknowledged even to myself until I sat down to think about this presentation—was one of embarrassment. I felt ashamed of belonging to a people so undesirable that exterminating them could be a "legitimate undertaking" by a Western government in the 20th century. Also, to my utter horror and despite visible evidence to the contrary, I perceived us Jews as unattractive. For me, the word "Jew" (in German *Jude*) to this very day remains the ugliest word in the German vocabulary, provoking images of emaciated, hollow-eyed victims—never mind that these images were created and perpetuated by the Nazis. When the issue of my Jewishness came up among my friends, they would often insist that I was really German, having been born in Germany, and I would wonder whether I should prove myself as a German—something that I know my parents and their contemporaries would have considered obscene—or insist on my Jewishness, with which I was not at all comfortable. I felt I could not possibly be both. I perceived my Jewish heritage, with its emphasis on martyrdom and suffering, as slightly absurd and alienating, and something to which my German friends of course would never have been able to relate.

I came to understand them better than they could possibly understand me, because their world was—to some degree at least—open to me, whereas mine was closed off to them. I was influenced by their culture. The aesthetics of their environment formed my own aesthetic perceptions. But my heritage was unknown to them—and to us collectively—in all its glory. My Jewish identity was tied to the Orthodox synagogue to which all Jews in my country belonged, regardless of their lifestyle outside. What I shared with my German friends was a lack of insight into the multifaceted "Jewish experience," and an understanding of what it meant to be a Jew, other than belonging to a group of victims. My writing came out of a feeling of empathy for their confusion and misconceptions about us and a deep desire to help bring about understanding.

Due to their history of displacement and their frequent need to flee in a hurry, Jews always had to restrict themselves to taking along their most important belongings. Among books, of course, these were primarily the religious scriptures, as opposed to secular works which had hardly any value in traditional Jewish life, and which were consequently few. I presume that what little of the latter genre there had been was diminished through losses in various pogroms. (In researching our folklore, for instance, I found references to Yiddish sagas along the lines of the great medieval sagas, which are long lost.)

This phenomenon of attributing importance mainly to our religious works also accounts for the fact that there was very little literature with Jewish content written or published for children during my childhood years. My most vivid memories are of the many poor renderings of the *Story of the Maccabees* and the *Story of Hannah Sacrificing Her Sons,* on cheap paper and with atrocious illustrations, while there were beautiful and inspiring books for "the others" for the Christmas/Hanukkah season.

Children's Literature for Both Germans and Jews

I always longed to see beautiful Jewish books, which could be proudly shared with German children, as they proudly shared

**Updated version of a paper presented at the First International Symposium on Jewish Children's Literature, Jerusalem, July 4, 1990.*

The story is based on an episode from my own childhood in Germany in the 1950s: A young girl sets out on a winter afternoon to spend the Hanukkah money she was given by her father. Visiting her favorite shops, she looks at all the things her money can buy. Her final choice is something priceless, however, and she is drawn into the magic that happens when people come together to share in each other's gifts, in this case two individuals from "different sides."

The other individual was a street musician/veteran of Stalingrad, of which there were many in those days; I remember sensing that both of our lives had been so terribly impaired by the same evil. Of course, the Sixth Army's capitulation and Stalingrad have long been taboo issues in Germany.

Had this book been acceptable to a German publisher, it might have marked the beginning of an attempt towards normal relationships with Jews. I can only suspect that the outright rejection of this story in Germany indicates that Germans are unable to see a Jewish protagonist as anything but a victim, least of all in the role of redeemer.

Aliana Brodmann-Menkes was born in Munich, Germany, 1949, a child of East European Jewish Holocaust survivors. She is now an American author who publishes mainly in Germany. Between 1974 and 1976, she published two novels in Germany, Und Du Bist Ab, *a semi-autobiographical account of a Jewish child's first year at school among a German majority in post-World War II Germany, and its sequel,* Damit die Welt Nicht Stumm Bleibt, *which follows the same girl into adolescence.*

After she had spent several years researching Jewish folklore, fables, and legends, one, Die Geschichte von den Feigen *(The Story of the Figs), was published in 1987 by Ellermann Verlag (Munich), and was chosen as Book of the Month for October of that year. Her latest book is* Ein Wunderlicher Rat, *published in Germany in 1989 and simultaneously in New York as* Such a Noise!, *in Denmark as* Et Maerkeligt Rad, *and in Mexico as* ¡Que Ruido!, *distinguished by the Banco del Libro, Venezuela, as one of the Ten Best Latin-American publications for 1990. Her book* Und Du Bist Ab *appeared on the Yearly Recommended Best List of Children's Literature issued by the International Youth Library (Munich). She has twice been nominated for the German Youth Book Award, and once for the La Vache Qui Lit Award in Switzerland.* The Gift *is scheduled to be published by Simon & Schuster in the fall of 1993. She is currently at work on an illustrated children's book based on the 17th-century diary of Glückel von Hameln.*

GATEWAYS
TO JEWISH LIFE & LIVING

JEWISH LIFE AND TRADITION INTRODUCED IN A UNIQUE WAY

TIMELESS THOUGHTS, CONTEMPORARY TONE AND HANDSOME DESIGN

Every month, we introduce our readers to the rich experience of Jewish traditional life--the practical and the visionary, the sad and the joyful, the awesome and yes, the humorous. Using a modern newsletter-style format, we combine a series of features to convey the sights and sounds, thoughts and feelings, the very "flow" of Jewish life and tradition--in the synagogue and at home, in marking Jewish life's personal milestones and in day-to-day life--all written in a warm and lively manner. Make Gateways a part of your library's collection. Subscription rates: $24.00 per year (eleven issues, one for July/August). Group subscription rates available. Orders outside U.S. add $5.00; must be paid in U.S. currency with International Money Order.

To obtain free sample issues, additional subscription information, or to order--write, call or fax:

THE ATID COMPANY, INC. 1-B QUAKER RIDGE RD.--STE.542 NEW ROCHELLE, NY 10804

PHONE: 914-632-0034 FAX: 914-633-6772