

JELINEK'S *RECHNITZ* AND GREENBERG'S *THE TESTAMENT*: TWO EXECUTIONS OF ONE MASSACRE

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476 On March 24, 1945, approximately one thousand Jewish forced labourers were transported ten miles from Kőszeg in Hungary to the Austrian border town of Rechnitz. Nazi Germany had annexed Austria on March 11, 1938, and throughout World War II, thousands of Austrians fought alongside German soldiers. Soviet troops reached the outskirts of Vienna by April 3, 1945 and liberated the Austrian capital ten days later. The deported Hungarian Jews were supposed to fortify the southeast trench of Rechnitz, in order to impede the Red Army invasion. Severely weakened and malnourished, one hundred eighty of the male Jews were considered unfit to perform this manual labour. It was decided that they had to be eliminated. That same night of March 24, 1945, the Countess Margit Thyssen-Batthyány (1911-89), the mistress of the Nazi Hans Joachim Oldenburg, hosted a soirée at her castle in Rechnitz. The countess, the daughter of Heinrich Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza de Kászon, was born in the castle. In 1933, Margit married Count Ivan von Batthyány. Like the family Thyssen, the Batthyánys, whose noble roots can be traced back to the ninth century, are associated with power and money. The countess was known for her close ties to SS officers and Nazi collaborators. Among the invited regular officers was the local Nazi chief Franz Podezin, who handed out guns to the guests. The British journalist David Litchfield suggests that fourteen to sixteen of the guests murdered the one hundred eighty unfit Jews during the party. Eighteen Jews, who had been forced to bury the victims in a mass grave, were themselves killed the following day. The grave was never found, nor were the perpetrators. On March 29, 1945, Rechnitz surrendered to the Soviet Army without much resistance. Auschwitz had been liberated on January 27, 1945.

The facts related to this event remain murky. Walter Manoschek, for instance, discovered inconsistencies between the official court files and the judgement of the

Austrian People's Court. The German magazine *Der Spiegel* quotes the German anti-semitism researchers Wolfgang Benz and Winfried Garscha of the Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance. Both argue that the party guests did not participate in the murder. The one hundred eighty murdered Jews were too weak to work or march and therefore, according to official Nazi policy, "were murdered everywhere at the time" (*Spiegel*). Eventually, the South African journalist Steven Krawitz confirms Litchfield's theory. Szilvia Pais-Horváth recaptures the research of the last descendant of a Rechnitz victim, the Hungarian surgeon Gábor Vadász. All sixteen attempts to find the mass grave have so far been unsuccessful. Pais-Horváth reports that "some of the prisoners were beaten to death; others were hunted down or shot in the head." She also states, "prisoners from the castle cellar were ordered to dig graves. One of them told an organization helping those who had been deported in 1945-46 that they dug up nine L-shaped graves, two meters wide and two meters deep." Franz Podezin, the alleged mastermind of the massacre, disappeared in 1945, Pais-Horváth assumes "with the help of the Baroness." Margit Thyssen-Batthyány moved to Switzerland, where she died peacefully in 1989.

477

This massacre has been the focus of several artistic productions. The film *Totschweigen* (1994), directed by Margarete Heinrich and Eduard Erne, is a documentary in search of the mass grave. Unable to find it, even though Heinrich and Erne participated in the search, the documentary shifts its focus to interviews with the local population. Katya Krylova calls *Totschweigen* "a powerful visual language for the repression of memory in Rechnitz" (70). The documentary leaves no doubt that the grave is a metaphor for a missing chapter in Austrian history.

Elfriede Jelinek's play *Rechnitz (Der Würgeengel)* (2008) presents a paradigm shift in the traditional Holocaust discussion. Neither the search for the grave nor the suffering of the Jewish victims takes centre stage. Her play intends to extort a confession from the local Austrian perpetrators, whose collective memory has gone missing just as much as the grave itself: "Jelinek portrays the Rechnitz group as suffering from a collective hallucination by denial" (Rizzo).

Amichai Greenberg's film *The Testament* (2017) is the latest effort in revisiting these tragic events. This Israeli/Austrian production looks at the Holocaust from a historical and Jewish perspective, hoping to solve the mystery of the missing grave. Different in presentation, genre and style, the two films and the play approach the topics of historical accuracy, justice, and personal responsibility (*Mitschuld*). This article places *The Testament* and *Rechnitz (Der Würgeengel)* in the same historical context. The juxtaposition of varying historical truths will uncover the multiple layers of history in and around Austria. The Jewish forced labourers of Rechnitz are victims of history. For them, finding the mass grave would mean discovering the proper documentation of historical facts. The facts are similarly hidden for the Austrian townspeople. For them, finding the mass graves means redrafting their version of history. Hence, the search for the grave is a metaphor: for the Jewish victims, it would mean closure to an unanswered chapter of the story; for the Austrians, it

would imply rewriting their Rechnitz chapter.

An American audience used to a commercial Hollywood production might call *The Testament* slow, or even boring. Cinematographically, the film does not follow traditional Hollywood conventions. The takes are unusually long and the lighting is basic. Expensive three-point lighting setups are often replaced with handheld camera moves with only one key lighting source. The typically attached shadows create suspense and visual variety. The shots are overwhelmingly put together using apparent cuts. Overall, the film resembles, in style and genre, Orson Welles's masterpiece *Citizen Kane*. Like *Citizen Kane*, *The Testament* is a documentary-style detective story in search of the meaning of *rosebud*, versus discovering the burial site of the massacred Jews. Both films substitute an inquisitive Sherlock Holmes with investigative journalists. In *The Testament*, suspense is created not by finding out who was killed but where. Despite possessing elements of a categorical documentary, such as its archival research and survivor interviews, *The Testament* falls into the subgenre of docudrama, since the film is based on a script and adds elements of fiction. Its narrative is arranged vertically, digging into the same facts repetitively without flashy and fast transitions between those chronologic units.

Historical accuracy is the focus of *The Testament* and its cinematographic cousin *Totschweigen*, in which "the metaphor of uncovering a troubled past, buried in Rechnitz ground, is used consciously throughout" (Krylova 67). In order to better deal with their collective guilt, the Austrian townspeople cover up the event after the war. Unable to find any willing witnesses in Austria, *The Testament* conducts its detective work in a research facility in Jerusalem. Although never mentioned by name, the location of this facility is closely associated with the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, which conducts innovative and interdisciplinary research. Topics such as globalization and sovereignty, religion, and secularization, as well as science, technology, and civilization, are at the core of the Institute's mission.

The different narrative aspects of the film *The Testament*—historical authenticity, archival documentary, mystery story, and meticulous research—come together in the film's main character, Dr. Yoel Halberstam, an accomplished historian and senior Holocaust researcher in Jerusalem. His character is loosely based on the last descendant of a Rechnitz victim, the Hungarian surgeon and truth-seeker Gábor Vadász. Like Heinrich Schliemann, who uncovered Troy, Yoel must find his Jewish Troy somewhere in Rechnitz, but his investigation is met with a trench of silence. The film visualizes such an enormous undertaking through "repeated pans and aerial shots of the sweeping landscape" (Krylova 70). The aimless panning movements of the camera visualize the search for the truth and the evasiveness of the witnesses, while the extreme long landscape shots imply its remoteness.

Skillful mass murderers must erase the traces of their crimes, and so do the perpetrators of the massacre. In the film, the Austrian government wants to develop a piece of land, possibly where the Hungarian Jews were buried. Yoel, played by Ori Pfeffer, must find evidence, in the form of human remains, to stop such a develop-

ment. His intention is not to accuse the killers, but to honour the dead. Yoel uncovers the content of that past in the form of a third-person omniscient narrator. He begins his investigation in Jerusalem. With the help of historical documents, personal diaries, official records, and classified testimonies of Holocaust survivors, he stumbles across a classified interview given by his mother, Fania, played by the Israeli actress Rivka Gur. In it, he learns that his mother is not Jewish. Fania's non-Jewish mother, who was unable to care for her daughter, had placed her with a Jewish family, where she quickly became a part of the family and of Judaism. When the Nazis deported her adoptive family, Fania decided to join them. Although not Jewish according to religious law, she is still willing to die as an honourable Jewish woman in the concentration camp. Facing extermination in the gas chamber, Fania asked one of her fellow inmates to marry her and legitimize her presumed Jewish identity as a Jewish wife. The day before her scheduled gassing, she gets married. In the gas chamber awaiting her death, the Nazis run out of Zyklon B gas, and she literally walks away from the ovens. Fania and her husband find their way to Jerusalem, where they lead a quiet, Orthodox Jewish life, raising two children.

479

In order to move forward, Fania keeps the door to her past shut, and neither her Gentile origin nor her experience in an extermination camp are ever discussed with her children. The Orthodox Yoel, whose professional investigation is equally met by silence, sees his personal life and his carefully constructed world falling apart. Because of his Gentile mother, Yoel is not considered Jewish either, according to Orthodox Jewish law. His Jewish identity eroding, he shaves off his *payot* (sideburns or side locks) and rids himself of all other visual religious identifiers. In the end, Yoel finds enough evidence to stop the real estate development, but the truth comes at a personal price.

The first scene in the Israeli film is open to multiple interpretations. The viewer encounters Yoel crossing a bridge, an image that Neil Young, in his online film review, calls "arresting." Customarily, the first shot serves as visual orientation, in which the bridge metaphorically links Jews and Gentiles. The monochromatic colour combination, the long shots, and the high camera angles, as well as the panning movement of the camera, keep the viewer at a neutral distance. Reviews of *The Testament* document the inability to decode the cinematographic subtext, or to establish a meaningful personal connection with it. Online reviewer Anne-Catherine Simon called the production "stilistisch simple gestrickt" [stylistically simply put together], and slow, in comparison to elaborate and fast-paced Hollywood productions. Jessica Kiang labels the film "rather pallidly shot" and "low-key with DP Moshe Mishali's camerawork mostly unfolding under gray uncertain skies and in sterile interiors." The monochromatic colour, the long takes, and the repetitive shots set a sombre visual background, in which the viewer becomes a witness to the tragic events of March 24, 1945.

The title, *The Testament*, brings together past and present. For any Jewish film viewer, the past is dominated by the Holocaust, which not only stands for a historical fact of the past, but also is significant for the present in the face of an increasing wave

of antisemitism. To balance past and present is a challenging task for Jews. The past is irrevocably connected to the Holocaust, while building a future “in which Jewish communities can become a vital, central part” (Remmler 801) of an increasingly diverse world is problematic. Jewish culture is steeped in the past, not only through remembrance, but also by its heavy focus on *Yahrzeit*, the annual commemoration of someone’s death. The tradition to bury the deceased within twenty-four hours, except when the death falls on a Sabbath, does not allow the mourners much time to say goodbye. A ritualistic grieving period, including the weeklong shiva, as well as the *Yahrzeit*, keep the past alive. The past as a physical point of return is also evident in the fact that Jewish cemetery plots are assigned permanently. Christian cemeteries in Germany, for example, reassign graves after a given period, allowing the past to be replaced with someone else’s past.

480 Although the testament of the past is relevant for all Jews, the Holocaust is of specific significance for those who were victimized by the Nazis. It is not only a historical document, but also a reminder of what might happen again to each Jewish individual. For some Jewish viewers, the history of the Holocaust is pertinent and personal. In other words, such viewers will have an immediate connection to the content of the film. Greenberg himself is the child of a Holocaust survivor. He describes the impact of the Holocaust as follows: “My father is a Holocaust survivor. I grew up in a household where everything seemed normal but I always felt something was wrong” (Goodfellow). It is at this point, where historical past and politicized present must meet. However, can that past and today’s different presents be applied to all viewers? *The Testament* presents different pieces of the past in the hope of completing a picture that might be relevant for the present. In the case of *Rechnitz*, however, different interpretations of time and fact have led to different histories. Consequently, the reception of the film depends on the perspective of the viewer. Some viewers have called the film a “frustratingly inert feature [...] one that may play best in educational [should we add Jewish only] contexts” (Young). For Young, the fact that Yoel’s world breaks apart is a “situation rich with comic potential,” and for Jessica Kiang, Yoel is a “forbiddingly unsympathetic lead character.” However, *The Testament* differs from a Hollywood film in terms of not only casting, but also cinematography. The action of a traditional Hollywood blockbuster is arranged on a horizontal axis of action-packed shots. Extreme short camera takes, spiced up with special effects, are lined up in order to provide endless visual stimuli for the mesmerized viewer. *The Testament* invites the viewer to take a journey on a vertical axis deep into the psyche. In this model, action is replaced with association. Therefore, Yoel is neither big-screen attractive nor action-filled. Viewers are invited to join Yoel on his personal journey to discover parallels in their own lives.

Two more recent films that break viewer reception patterns provide cases in point. Although historically inaccurate, Mark Herman’s film *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (2008) blurs the lines between victim and victimizer in the character of Bruno, the eight-year-old son of an extermination camp’s Nazi commander. Conventional

Holocaust film versions might picture Bruno witnessing Jewish people led to the gas chambers. In Herman's film, Bruno himself is gassed, along with his Jewish friend Shmuel. Nazi propaganda had dehumanized Jewish people in an effort to legitimize the mass killings. *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* emphasizes the equality of all human lives, Jewish and Gentile alike. The gassing of a non-Jewish boy allows the non-Jewish viewer to identify with Jewish Holocaust victims. In other words, the historical facts are applied universally, and the neutrality of history becomes personal; however, the film is not only historically inaccurate, but also untenable and a distortion of history. Michael Gray reminds us that any discussion about the Holocaust must "get the facts right" no matter what the genre" (123). His main criticism focuses on the implausibility of the film's story and its historical accuracy: "by focusing on a moral message about childhood, innocence, family and friendship, the Holocaust as a historical phenomenon is undermined at best and jettisoned at worst" (124). Debbie Pinfold argues that by allowing "the audience [...] to align with Bruno's naiveté" (268), the film places the responsibility for the Holocaust primarily on the Nazi elite. Lydia Kokkola is concerned about texts that are politically correct and economically successful, but historically inaccurate (305). After all, any departure from historical accuracy and fidelity to survivor testimony portends to make a "fiction of the Holocaust" (Vice 6).

481

In a similar way, Steve McQueen's British production *12 Years a Slave* (2013) is equally thought-provoking. Conventional slave narratives introduce the captured Africans after their gruesome journey across the Atlantic. The viewer does not hear their individual stories, their fate, or their language. The paradigm shift from human being to object takes place as soon as the slave ships unload their human cargo on American soil. *12 Years a Slave* is different: the Africans depicted remain individual, complex, emotional human beings, even after they are taken to the plantations. Before he is kidnapped and sold into slavery, Solomon Northup, the protagonist of the film, is a free African-American family man, a gifted violinist, and music teacher who lives in Saratoga Springs, New York. White people know his name and his family, have spoken with him, or stood in line with him at the local grocery store or at the barbershop. They might even have sent their children to him for music lessons. By humanizing and personalizing the slave narrative, the film allows the viewer to empathize and identify with Northup.

Special interest films, such as Jewish films, reach a limited audience and, therefore, generally have limited financial success. Produced and distributed by smaller companies, these movies lack the large budgets to attract top actors or to pay for massive advertising campaigns. Often state funded or subsidized, the thematic focus of German-speaking Jewish films is the burden of the past and how to cope with it. Directors such as Nadja Seelich (*Theresienstadt sieht aus wie ein Curort*, 1997); Lukas Stepanik (*Kieselsteine*, 1984, screenplay by Nadja Seelich); Robert Schindel and Lukas Stepanik (*Gebirtig*, 2002); and Ruth Beckermann (*The Waldheim Waltz*, 2018; *Those Who Go Those Who Stay*, 2013; *Zorros Bar Mizwa*, 2006; *Nach Jerusalem*, 1991;

Return to Vienna, 1983) are of particular importance in this niche genre. Their works have shaped the Jewish-German discussion significantly.

The Rechnitz massacre reconnoitres different pasts and selective presents, in which the Jewish deaths are a rear projection on the big screen of Austrian culture. Millions of people have participated in that installment of history, either personally or as bystanders. The German language uses the term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, the conscientious effort to come to terms with a collective past. This process requires a critical engagement with the facts, or, as Gili Izikovich states, “to dig deeply and to decipher the present through people who are long lost.” In an interview with an Austrian television team in *The Testament*, Yoel states “history is absolute.” In other words, historical facts do not need to be interpreted. History indeed is absolute; however, only one side, the winning side, writes, eliminates, selects, and interprets it. Therefore, “the search for the mass grave is also almost like a metaphor for the way the whole of Austria deals with the past” (Krylova 67). The six million Jews who died during the Holocaust do not have a voice, and their history, although recorded, is not absolute for the Austrians as depicted in the film. Hence, the viewer is left to combine two different histories: one Jewish; the other, Austrian. The Jewish focus is the past and the massacre. The Austrians must ignore the past in order to secure a brighter future. The town of Rechnitz is hoping to expand; after all, without proof, there are no facts, or as one witness states in the film: “I have no blood on my hands.” Yoel sets out to uncover a truth that is literally under ground, symbolically reflected in his Jerusalem basement office. Once he brings the facts to light, he is moved upstairs into a well-lit executive office. The muted voices of those who were killed in Rechnitz must also find their way into the light. However, the testimonies of some survivors are sealed and classified. Their voices have been silenced too. Jason Daley suggests that some of the documents of the United Nations War Crimes Commission remained sealed because they revealed that the Allies knew about camps such as Treblinka and Auschwitz much earlier than current historians claim. Such a revision would turn the victorious Allies into passive bystanders. In an interview, Amichai Greenberg, the director of *The Testament*, stated that Yad Vashem would not collaborate with any fictitious film, even if they were to see “the script” (Goodfellow). While it is important to preserve the historical accuracy of the facts, it is equally important to raise awareness. Yad Vashem could have added a valuable personal perspective to the film through its vast Holocaust archives.

The differing versions of history have been recorded in different languages. *The Testament*'s two locations, Israel and Austria, necessitate the use of Hebrew and German. In the film, older Jewish witnesses also speak Yiddish. Greenberg, however, adds additional layers through these language choices. For example, Yoel's mother Fania understood when a Nazi officer informed the guards that the camp had run out of gas. To German-speaking viewers, this scene foreshadows Fania's survival. With the help of language, Greenberg is able to manipulate the chronology by foreshadowing Fania's liberation from the gas chamber and flashback through her interviews

given years after her horrific experience. Moreover, Greenberg uses language as a declaration of independence from dominant European languages. For instance, an Austrian crew comes to Jerusalem to interview Yoel. Although Yoel speaks German, the German-speaking interviewer assumes that he would answer in English. Yoel, however, chooses to answer in Hebrew to manifest the legitimacy of Israel as a Jewish state and Hebrew as its official language. In Israel, Jews do not have to speak the language of their German-speaking oppressor. Yoel is secure in his linguistic and national identity but questions his faith and his religious identity.

Because Yoel's mother is not Jewish, he is forced to confront his own identity. Until now, Orthodox Judaism had influenced every aspect of his life: his social contacts, his personal life and beliefs, his clothing, eating choices, and living conditions. As an intellectual, he knows that history is absolute because facts are irrevocable, and the facts tell him that he is not Jewish. Because of his mother's testimony, his history is supposed to change. Yoel and the audience must decide what it means to be Jewish. Greenberg cleverly connects Yoel's personal identity crisis, caused by different definitions of "who is a Jew," to the conflicting interpretations of the mass murder by the townspeople of Rechnitz. At this point Yoel breaks away from his belief in an absolute history, in order to discover his own reality. Likewise, the perpetrators of the massacre must abandon their individual points of view, in order to gain insight into absolute history.

483

The Testament could have easily focused its plot on the most horrific aspects of the Holocaust: the ghettos, the gassings, and the medical experiments. In an interview, Greenberg stated that he "didn't want to impose it [the Holocaust] on the audience. I wanted to go sideways. I wanted to present it as a thriller [...] My real motivation was to deal with someone reaching a ground zero in his life" (Goodfellow). Orthodox Judaism does not consider an individual Jewish unless they are born through a Jewish mother, or convert. Modern interpretations define Judaism more liberally; intermarriage, conversion, and individual choice, rather than birth, are possible ways of becoming Jewish.

The Testament presents three generations of Jews: Fania, Yoel, and Yonatan, Yoel's son, symbolizing the past, the present, and the future. Fania, a Gentile by birth but Jewish by choice, lives an exemplary Jewish life. Her life shows that the observance of a strict religious lifestyle does not depend on one's birth. Jewishness, therefore, is not innate but culturally and socially acquired. Yoel, technically also a Gentile, questions his Jewish identity only after he is told that he is not Jewish. Metaphorically, Yoel washes away his Orthodoxy, cuts his hair, and starts wearing secular clothing. He too shows that Jewishness is neither innate nor genetically inscribed. He personifies the present struggle within Judaism, trying to find a place in a more and more secularized, antisemitic world. Online film reviewer Neil Young deliberately ignores the interconnectedness of individuality and Orthodoxy, when he describes Ori Pfeiffer as "ennui inducing low key in the underwritten central role of Yoel, a sadsack 40-something." Kiang calls Yoel "a difficult character [whose] faith seems to

bring him no joy or compassion.” She misses the point that Yoel believes that Jewish law determines his Jewish life; therefore, whether he executes his religious duties joyfully or without compassion is irrelevant. He does what he does because he was born Jewish. She reduces his religious beliefs to “a borderline antagonistic self-righteousness in the pursuit of his undoubtedly righteous mission.” Kiang disregards the impact of the Holocaust on each Jewish individual. The Nazi gas chambers did not distinguish between stereotypical Orthodox *Ostjuden* (eastern Jews) and secularized assimilated German Jews. Hence, Yoel’s “self-righteousness” is driven by uncovering facts, and as such, it serves, rather selflessly, as a collective Jewish memory.

484 Would Young have preferred an action-packed thriller to Greenberg’s archival docudrama? He seems to be bored by the meticulous research that attempts to uncover the truth behind the massacre, describing the film as one in which “the temperature remains stubbornly tepid throughout.” Character-driven, rather than content-driven, he laments missed opportunities for crowdpleasing, emotional scenes, such as those so common in reality TV and cheap *Jerry Springer*-like talk shows: “What should be a big confrontational scene between Yoel and Fania is a particularly unfortunate misfire, coming to an abrupt halt just when sparks seem about to fly.” According to Neil Young, Yoel’s methodology equals a “terrier-like pursuit of the truth.” Such an analogy is potentially dangerous, since it compares the Jew to a dog. This has been done previously with disastrous consequences.

Finally, Yonatan represents yet another variant of Jewish life. Unlike Fania and Yoel, Yonatan, played by Daniel Adari, is indeed Jewish since his mother, Yoel’s ex-wife, is Jewish. As the young boy is preparing for his Bar Mitzvah, he struggles with the Biblical language and the metaphorical message of his Torah portion. It is noteworthy that Yonatan’s mother, the only irrefutable proof of his Jewishness, is inconspicuously absent in the film. In the end, director Greenberg leaves the Jewish identity question open, allowing the viewers to insert their own beliefs and lifestyle choices. The son of a Holocaust survivor, Greenberg intended the film to be an invitation to discuss all issues of Jewishness and their foundation, reaching beyond identity and heritage. In an interview, he states: “This question of identity and who we are is arising now. You see it in Catalonia, in Brexit, in America. You have these extremes of very liberal and very nationalist” (Goodfellow).

Jews must once again navigate the historic waters of discrimination and eradication. After all, the normative history of Rechnitz negates not only the murder of Jews, but also their existence. Only the discovery of the grave can reestablish the facts. In her article “Reckoning with Rechnitz: On Elfriede Jelinek, Translation and Cultural Reproduction,” Allyson Fiddler emphasizes that Jelinek’s entire oeuvre is about “excavating Austria’s Nazi past in the attempt to keep alive memories that society might prefer to see buried and to explore in an artistic way the topic of historical cover-up and lack of atonement” (201). The victor records official history, but a meaningful discussion about the Holocaust is only possible when victims engage with their killers and both historical aspects are brought to light. Elfriede Jelinek’s

play *Rechnitz (Der Würgeengel)* does just that: it turns everyday Austrian citizens into killers, while rewriting history from the perspective of the victims. Like Yoel Halberstam, Jelinek's work questions the legitimacy of official history. If history is absolute, according to Yoel, why do several versions exist? Four key themes emerge in *Rechnitz*: first, the historical facts about the massacre on March 24, 1945; second, the location of the grave; third, the collaboration of Austrians with the Nazis, leading to partial responsibility (*Mitschuld*); and finally, the relationship between Austria and Germany.

The facts of the mass murder on March 24, 1945 have been documented by David Litchfield, Michael Omasta, Walter Manoschek, Christian Rüter, Teresa Kovacs, Pia Janke, Gerhard Scheit, and in the films *Totschweigen* and *The Testament*. Katya Krylova's chapter "Silencing the Past: Margarete Heinrich's and Eduard Erne's *Totschweigen* and Elfriede Jelinek's *Rechnitz (Der Würgeengel)*" displays particular historical accuracy. A crucial question remains, however: how does Jelinek portray the massacre? Chaotic and traumatic like the actual killing, the play presents short vignettes. A compilation of excerpts from the play reads as follows:

485

Twenty-seven times; the truck went back and forth twenty-seven times, then the delivery was complete. All flesh must go (68) [...] Who would have thought they'd drag in those dregs at the very last moment!, not a stitch of clothing on their bodies, so many dropped stitches, all in the ditches, and they didn't even have to clean up the mess, no, not in the ditches, they had already been stripped before, stripped of their Hungarian citizenship and then they stripped themselves, they were specifically told to "please take off your clothes" (74) [...] The victims were thrown into zigzag ditches or they fell in, some were still alive for sure, because killing is a lot of work, you can't imagine how much work that is, so we throw the victims, dead or alive, into the ditches, on top of one another, a mass of men, quite a mess (94-95) [...] Killing two or three people is peanuts, but two hundred! Hold on, I am told it was one hundred and eighty, nearly two hundred defenseless, I should say: perfectly defenseless men (101) [...] Screams and whimpers, cries of pain emanate from the shredded, lacerated bodies, ouch, that must hurt, it's supposed to hurt, but with a gun it's over relatively quickly, the hollow men were lucky that way. (114)

The play lists the facts kaleidoscopically, creating a human background to the murder. Jelinek has studied the facts, and she is aware of the historical denial of her audience: "Jelinek utilizes the unique power of theater as a public forum in order to confront her audience with ongoing strategies of self-exculpation, denial, and relativizing of the past" (Krylova 77). Jelinek's technique is effective, since it denies its viewer the pleasure of being entertained. The play requires an active and attentive audience because of its associative staging and innovative dialogue strategy. While its content focuses on the victimizer, the play addresses the audience directly. By replacing the customary discourse between actors on stage with soliloquies, consisting of mostly disconnected proclamations, bound for the audience, the play forces its recipient to confront the events at *Rechnitz*. Each viewer/reader begins to connect the number of victims with individual human beings. In order to achieve this goal, Jelinek exchanges the role of playwright with that of a prosecutor. In doing so, "Jelinek is able to portray

strategies of repression and denial of the past, negation of guilt or personal culpability” (Krylova 73). However, it is not the author alone who will preside at the trial. The messengers who are neither witnesses nor perpetrators will aid her: “As a messenger I would have certainly liked to provide you with more reliable written records, but that would have made me a witness” (*Rechnitz* 179). Symbolizing Greek chorus, jury, and conscience, the messengers will deliver their verdict in a united voice: “Our testimonies must hit the right tone and we should all sing to the same tune” (*Rechnitz* 73). Unlike the historian Yoel, who puts archival pieces together and wants historical justice and a proper burial for the dead Jews, Jelinek’s approach is that of a detective and prosecutor, collecting facts in order to obtain a confession from the perpetrators. The dead must reach out to the bystanders and witnesses.

In her new role, Jelinek presents the circumstantial evidence with the intention of coercing a collective confession from her Austrian audience. She pleads her case by giving a detailed description of the crime scene. At first, the play refers to the grave as a gravel pit: “Those graves will never be found, because we turned gravel pits into graves, every healthy construction company knows the *Kiesgrube* [gravel pit], the pit filled with crushed rock” (95). The quotation implies that the locals know where the grave is. The play gradually uncovers the many verbal layers of lies, once again reuniting the perpetrators with their victims. Jelinek’s use of language underscores “the covering up of the past that the grave symbolizes” (Krylova 75). The missing pieces are put together quickly: the grave is “this hollow pit of broken jaws, of broken bones” (106). Previously, the corpses and facts were concealed by the townspeople: “Now we also have to bury it all, in this pit, this cesspit, in this last of meeting places we will search sixty years later or so, maybe seventy, eighty, 180?” (106). Eventually, Jelinek describes the massacre, the perpetrators, and the coverup in her prosecutorial litigation as follows:

Of course, everything must be gone again, or they would be found, the dead, one 180 in all, it won’t be easy to transfer them. We can think about that later, now let’s get them in first. All that blood should have softened the hard earth; there is a hand still sticking out and there a foot or whatever it is. The earth maybe, but not us, we won’t be softened, not even by blood. Well, the ditch will be done sooner or later, they don’t have to be too careful digging in a zigzag line—a good design if nothing is to be found and a lot has to go into the smallest space, because afterwards no one is supposed to know where it is, the ditch. Well, a few will, but they won’t tell, and if they do, we kill them too, no problem; It’s much simpler to kill just one rather than a 180; if we can manage 180, we can easily handle one or two more. (130)

Jelinek leaves no doubt in her closing argument about partial responsibility, historical inaccuracy, and the collective guilt of her Austrian reader/viewer/bystander; as Edward Larkin states, “*Rechnitz* challenges the established understanding of the Holocaust as a bureaucratic process” (681). The local population was a willing and mute witness, even decades after the crime: “The poor locals will keep quiet about it, they always do. They are too busy saving themselves” (*Rechnitz* 71). Her play makes

clear that Austria became a part of Germany and that many Austrians collaborated with the Nazis; after all, "it's all tangled up in Jews" (187). Any attempt to abdicate responsibility with statements such as "We also suffered. We got our share" (75) is extirpated by the fact that the Jews were murdered in Austria by Austrians, and the deepseated antisemitism is revived in the massacre itself: "Oh well, we would have killed them anyways, no matter how much life was left in them, all of it had to go" (76). The killing of the Jews is easily justified, after all: "the Jew and his money, that's an indivisible unit. Where there are Jews, there is gold, any gold, all the gold" (137-38).

Whereas Germany has effectively completed its chapter of dealing with the Nazi past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*), Austria remains stuck in semantics and denial, or as Fiddler states, Austria's response to the Third Reich is "mere lip-service to the project of atonement" (202), or "an almost formulaic repentance" (203) if at all. The documentary *Totschweigen* attests to Austria's inability to visit the past in dilapidated Jewish cemeteries and desecrated gravestones. Veronika Zangl argues that Austria's role as victim of Nazi Germany is connected to the idea of "Other' (Nazism, Germany, Communism, Capitalism, etc.)" (277). Neither truly German nor Western European, Austria sees itself not only as a victim of Nazi Germany but also "as a victim of the Allied Forces" (Zangl 276) who, according to the Austrian narrative, invaded Austria just as much as the Nazis. Peter Utgaard maintains that the idea of suffering because of the Nazi invasion "resulted in the creation of a homogenized community of victims that encompassed nearly everyone, from Jews, to Wehrmacht soldiers, to civilians killed in air raids" (14-15). Thus, Austria created a "victim myth" (Zangl 278) that became part of the national identity. Unwilling to revisit the past, Austria perpetuated this "victim myth" through the "mechanism of silence that characterizes Austrian memory politics under the premise of victim discourse" (Zangl 283). By presenting the unspeakable, and therefore breaking with the tradition of silence, Jelinek's play is in its essence un-Austrian. Her farce *Burgtheater* (but also *Rechnitz*) "remains a politically understood strike against an authoritarian and postnazistic Austrian memory politics" (Zangl 285). Tomas Sommadossi argues that *Rechnitz* attacks the "hohle Semantik des Schweigens [empty semantics of silence]" (257).

Jelinek herself is Austrian and as such a part of Austrian history. Although she is not guilty of the murder, as a writer she is responsible for historical accuracy. Fiddler points out that "writing is indeed Jelinek's contribution to the process" (212). The first step to accomplish her goal is to obtain a confession from the culpable. Her task is monumental. How can an unspeakable atrocity, such as the Holocaust, be the thematic focus of a play, and how can it be put on stage? The answer is clear: in a chaotic, incomprehensible, almost unreadable manner, much as the Holocaust itself. After all, her play "makes no concession to performability" (Paul 126), and "resists straightforward genre delimitation" (Krylova 72). Fiddler explains, "the text of the play is made up almost entirely of a monologue of accounts, information, misinformation and opinions" (200).

This unconventional form allows Jelinek to dig deeper into the Austrian psyche. Is antisemitism indeed a part of “Austria’s rocky scenery, I mean its rocky history as a warning” (183), a history that is filled with Jewish blood? The play tries to provide several answers: “We, however, we shoot and we kill, unfortunately it’s nothing to write home about, since these men simply handed to us for this purpose; there was a telephone call, and then, around 1:30, 2 a.m.: screaming. It didn’t help to shut all windows and doors and cover one’s ears: screams, screams, screams, horrific screams” (103). Ignorance seems to be a lame excuse for their compliance: “I am sorry. But I had to do it. And it wasn’t easy” (190). In order not to repeat the mistakes of the past, the past needs to be addressed. With the discovery of the mass grave, Krylova claims, “the past will be brought to light in a concrete way” (67).

488 The generation of the collaborating perpetrators needs to come to terms with its crimes, while a new generation, such as Jelinek’s current reader, must come to the following realization: “My Austria, my fatherland, what did you do to my daddy, you asshole?” (183). Unlike Ibsen, whose heirs inherit the sins of their ancestors, Jelinek does not blame those who were not born yet. In an interview with *The Jerusalem Post*, Israel’s former Prime Minister Menachem Begin stated, “The Germans bear collective responsibility for the horror the like of which has not been known since God created Satan” (Avner), and so do the Austrians. Krylova suggests that the messengers, like the younger generation, “emphatically deny any suggestion of personal culpability” (73). Although there is no collective or partial blame (*Mitschuld*) for all Germans/Austrians, Jelinek admonishes the younger generation to learn from the past. Sacha Batthyány, Countess Margit Thyssen-Batthyány’s nephew, stated in an interview that even after becoming aware of the terrible events in Rechnitz, “he had never thought about it. He never thought there was a connection between the people in the castle and what happened there” (Izikovich). Jelinek’s “primary concern is how knowledge about the Second World War and the Holocaust is transmitted” (Krylova 73). One of the key issues in dealing with the past is to revisit the relationship between Austria and Germany during the Third Reich.

On April 10, 1938, an official plebiscite ratified the annexation of Austria (*Anschluss*) by Germany. Finally, Austria was able to come home to the Reich (*Heim ins Reich*). On March 12, 1938, German troops entered Austria without any military, political, or public opposition. For neighbouring Switzerland, however, there was “no *Anschluss*” (145), as Jelinek points out in her play. This historical fact changed the fate of all Jewish Austrians overnight. In her play, Jelinek revisits the complex relationship between Austria and Germany during the Third Reich. For her, Germany and Austria were synonymous during that period, in which a pest-control product, clearly referring to Zyklon B, comes from “*Deutsch Österreich*, from German Austria” (95). The reader is free to make the connection from Nazi Germany to Nazi Austria.

Austria’s emphasis on titles and hierarchy is reflected in the actual massacre: “Only when the countess picked up the gun did I know for sure it was her. It is her right. It comes with her title [...] There is a hierarchy in shooting, the highest in rank shoots

first" (99). In 2007, David Litchfield investigated the wealthy and powerful Thyssen family, and his conclusions implicate the Thyssens with the Rechnitz massacre. The Thyssens were one of the wealthiest and most powerful families in Europe. In 1867, August Thyssen had founded the iron works company Thyssen-Foussol & Co, which became the foundation for a worldwide iron and steel empire. August's granddaughter Countess Margit Thyssen-Batthyány was the host of the party at Rechnitz castle, at which one hundred eighty Jews were murdered. Since their bodies have never been found, nobody has ever been held accountable. Nevertheless, Jelinek, the prosecutor, demands a confession from the perpetrators: "The victims are dead and, as such, emphatically absent from her play" (Krylova 74). The play provides a clever paradigm change in the Holocaust discussion. A propagated Holocaust industry focuses on the victims in the form of documentation, eyewitness testimonies, roundtable discussions, academic conferences, and fact-inspired fiction. An academic discussion also focuses on the perpetrators and the psychology of the killers. Raul Hilberg, Ian Kershaw, Jan T. Gross, and Doris L. Bergen, among others, have written extensively about this subject. In his groundbreaking work, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (1992), Christopher Browning argues that ordinary men, such as the recruits of the police battalion 101, willingly rounded up and killed innocent Jews. The murderer's motif, according to Browning, was a belief in blind obedience, rather than deeply rooted antisemitism. Daniel Goldhagen's book *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (1996) is a direct challenge to Browning's theory. Goldhagen claims that German antisemitism was not only systemic but also inevitably moving towards an "exterminationist solution" carried out by ordinary Germans. According to Goldhagen, it was "not coercion, not obedience to authority, not bureaucratic myopia, not peer pressure, not personal profit or career advantage" (18), as Browning claimed, but systemic antisemitism. The ordinary Germans who became "killers commonly believed that the Jewish people is evil to the core and dangerous" (20). Moreover, they were proud to document their evil deeds by taking photographs (18). Although ahistorical and critically received by established historians, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* became an international bestseller and a commercial success.

Jelinek, too, explores the psychology of the killers. She does not focus on the mass murder of Jews, but rather on "forced labourers on the one hand and so called *Endphasenverbrechen* [crimes committed during the final hours] on the other hand" (Zangl 294). The play also goes against Raul Hilberg's notion that the Holocaust was an orchestrated and carefully planned process. Krylova calls the Rechnitz massacre "an orgiastic killing" (77) that portrays the deepseated antisemitism, the pleasure in killing, the inability to question orders, the inability to know right from wrong, and the administrative process to cover up an Austrian *Jedermann* [Everyman]. Her policy is "to intervene, sometimes by contradiction, and by provocation" (Fiddler 212). The bystanders of Rechnitz seem to have sympathized with the victimizers, not the victims. A key element in the play is "the tension between words and action"

(Paul 126), revealing the discrepancy between the silence of the killers versus the undiscovered corpses of the dead.

There is no need to enumerate the indescribable barbarities of the Nazis. Documentaries, Holocaust museums around the world, Yad Vashem, the Shoah Foundation, and others have done that. Jelinek's associative references are equally powerful. First, there is a reference to the infamous "Angel of Death," the SS officer Josef Mengele. Jelinek's understated reference of "Mengele and Co" (79) acknowledges his brutal experiments, while admonishing his willing helpers and accomplices, his Co-[mpany]. The clever use of the word "company," with its business connotation, legitimizes the Third Reich as a business venture. The play's German title, *Der Würgeengel* [*The Exterminating Angel*], is equally significant. The gruesome compounding of extermination and angel negates the common Christian belief in guardian angels. However, for the Jewish victims, the guardians were Nazis and executioners. A second reference evokes Luis Buñuel's film *El ángel exterminador* [*The Exterminating Angel*] (1962), in which the servants desert the guests at an illustrious dinner party. Krylova (72) and Fiddler (205) both point out that in Jelinek's play, the owners of the castle escape after the killing, leaving only the messengers accountable. Buñuel depicts the decline of morals and ethics of those left in the castle in his film. As in Jean-Paul Sartre's play *Huis Clos* (*No Exit*), Buñuel tests the limits of human behavior in an existential crisis. Here, pain is inflicted on each other and by each other. This is obviously not the case in the Rechnitz massacre, where the infliction of pain is decidedly one-sided. Hence, Jelinek's focus is "on the theatrical and real possibilities for witnesses of atrocities to narrate to others" (Fiddler 205). Bearing witness, not pain, is the task in Jelinek's trial by theatre. Yet, without a prosecutor, jury, judge, or even a verdict, the play creates its own existential crisis by asking the reader/viewer what they would have done, if they had been present at the dinner party. Fiddler sums up this moral dilemma in this way: the readers of the play "do not know whether we would have been on the side of the good or of evil, whether we were, theoretically speaking, amongst the revelers who indulged in the orgy or whether we were on their list of victims" (207).

The Testament follows the search for the mass grave, offering Holocaust survivors and their children the opportunity to mourn the dead. Historical justice would be served. The cinematographic text of this docudrama allows the viewer to form an emotional response to the individual characters and their stories. Thus, *The Testament* is the conclusion to a chapter in Jewish lives, albeit as ultimately determined by the Nazis. Commemoration of the dead, documentation of the massacre, and the salvation of lost and tortured souls, connect a collective past to a personal present.

Elfriede Jelinek shifts the focus from victim to perpetrator. The guests, who committed the mass murder, and the town residents, who have made every effort to forget and deny it, are centre stage in *Rechnitz*. The theatrical and kaleidoscopic mirror invites the reader/viewer to confess to crimes past and present. Jelinek, the playwright turned prosecutor, is intent on extorting a confession from an Austrian

Jedermann. Georgina Paul describes the effect on the viewer/reader: "Audiences and readers are drawn to Jelinek precisely because of the radicality of writing, its iconoclasm, its obscenity, the violence with which it addresses violence, coupled with its formal challenge" (130). Jelinek's play is unique. It requires an active and attentive audience with its associative staging and innovative dialogue strategy, which do not allow the viewer to be entertained comfortably. While its content focuses on the victimizer, its theatrical presentation addresses the audience directly. By replacing the customary discourse between actors on stage with soliloquies, consisting of mostly disconnected proclamations, bound for the audience, the play forces its recipient to confront the events at Rechnitz. With a heavy emphasis on the present, Jelinek's play admonishes her viewer/reader to avoid the mistakes of the past.

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491

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