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## Truth and Lie *in extremis*: Holocaust Literature (*Jakob the Liar*, *The Final Journey*)

*Fiction* is a curious term. Among those who engage in the study of literature professionally it holds an elevated status as a literary form that bears a decided epistemological thrust — primarily in the direction of providing an enhanced understanding of human behavior and human relations. Within social institutions, the legal apparatus especially, the notion of fiction enjoys a less acclaimed status. In the world at large fiction is nearly synonymous with the concept of falsehood. Within fiction itself, as a form of imaginative writing, subordinate fictions are commonly incorporated within the greater fiction. These may be either "true" or "false," depending upon the tale itself; that is, fictions or outright lies are told against a background of ostensible truth, there being of course certain details that are taken as truthful within the fictive context, if not in reality.<sup>1</sup>

The notion of fiction embedded within fiction, which plays a considerable part in this essay, may be understood in at least two ways. First, independent stories may be embedded within the greater story, as an adventure is related as either a digression (of great interest but little relevance, as in Diderot or Gogol) or as an integral part of the work as a whole (as in Fielding or Dostoevsky), where it serves an explanatory role. Second, what is told may be simply and entirely false. Fiction, after all, necessarily contains aberrations and disfigurements of the truth in the form of false leads or

1 Interestingly, in Chaucer's time, for instance, "not even the general concept of fiction as a self-validating literary kind with its own truth existed" (Kane 94), making it still a challenge to gain acceptance of it as a viable epistemological mode for achieving certain understanding.

falsehoods. My interest here is in the second possibility, when the lie — taken as such by the reader, character, or both — finds its profound and necessary place within the structure of the work itself.

Any narrative may relate things that are accurate or inaccurate, exact or inexact, truthful or false. Narrative naturally accommodates these possibilities, in particular the opposition between truth and lie.<sup>2</sup> Yet a "lie" in fiction is different from a lie in life. In fiction, a falsehood amounts to simply another level of fiction, and has no actual consequences.<sup>3</sup> A false account may thus serve just as well to produce more story as one that is truthful (within the fictive context of which it is a part), since what counts is the very interplay between truth and lie, between the fiction that is "false" and the fiction proper that comprises the narrative itself. In fiction the lie may be requisite, or pivotal, to the very telling of the tale.<sup>4</sup> The lie, as a falsification of possible truth, thus has no ontological value outside the given fiction but may be a crucial compositional element within it or as part of it.

In the most general terms, fiction within fiction finds its place as that aspect of the work that is counterfeit but may also be crucial to the telling of, as well as the making an end of, the tale at hand. Such fictions, in other words, are constituted by a series of false signs that generate in turn a pivotally important false logic. So that the end result of the given tale is achieved precisely through the workings of that false logic, because on a certain fictional plane it works as fiction. In Holocaust literature, however, there is an added burden: it has to work as something more than, or different from, fiction. It has to appear as imaginative writing that shows a reasoned fidelity to history and biography, even an imagined biography, which may properly be designed to illustrate events of recent history.

Within the literary work the reader takes certain statements to be true within the fictive context, while others are deemed false. This again raises the issue of truth and lie in reality as opposed to the same distinction in fiction.

- 2 As Eco points out, "If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot be used 'to tell' at all" (7).
- 3 As Mukarovsky has it, a lie in literature "acts as an element of structure and not of real-life values having practical importance" (74).
- 4 "Every time there is a lie there is signification. Every time there is signification there is the possibility of using it in order to lie" (Eco 59). Such is the potential integral role of the lie in literature.

Clearly, truth and lie yield respectively a whole range of ramifications in life that do not and cannot exist in fiction. In reality there might emerge, for instance, the prospect of a long (perhaps undeserved) stretch in prison. In fiction, by contrast, it all comes down to a matter of good, convincing writing. Beyond that, ideally, the interplay of truth and lie has the added potential, in their internal (structural) dynamics, to afford a certain underlying profundity. In Dostoevsky, for instance, briefly put, Truth (articulated by a particular character) indicates a God-centered universe, while the Lie (espoused by an opposed point of view) intimates a world dominated by the Devil. It is up to the reader to define, or refine, in light of Dostoevsky's fictive framework, one's own moral and ethical position.

Further, in this same light, it may be argued that a character either lies on occasion or, more significantly, actually *represents* the lie. Odysseus, for example, often lies; that is, after all, part of his disguise — and his genius. Don Quixote, by contrast, in his misguided courtly behaviors, represents, even incarnates, what is patently false. Odysseus has his truth rooted in the linked images of Penelope, Ithaca, his palace; he need only achieve his great epic return to reclaim what is his. Don Quixote imagines his Dulcinea, his courtly world, his castles. Because his quest is ultimately misguided, ill-founded, in a word, quixotic, he can never truly claim what does not exist. Odysseus, who is a master of fabrication (and therefore a great storyteller), lives in a domain of truth. Don Quixote, who fancies himself a most honorable and truthful knight, exists in a sphere of falsehood, which ultimately depletes him. If Homer's hero is a prevaricator, whose addressee is the threatening world at large, Cervantes' figure of fun represents prevarication, with himself as its target and single, singular victim. The one never loses sight of his quest, which equates with the truth, embodied in wife and home. The other, until the very end, cannot give up (on) the lie, rooted in his own fanciful imagination. In these two classic works of literature, one offers a vision rooted in the past and a reality that the hero wants resurrected in the present, the other projects an imagination that generates what never was and never can be.

A like opposition may be seen within a single fictive universe (rather than two) — in the ideational opposition between the brothers Ivan and Alyosha Karamazov. The former rejects God's world (and wants to return his "entrance ticket"); the latter willingly accepts the world as it is, with all its contradictions, problematics, and horrors. For both brothers those horrors (including the torture and murder of children) are unbearable and inexplicable. But one brother retains his faith in the face of what is; the other does not. In

Dostoevsky's novelistic vision, his theodicy, one brother pursues the truth, the other a lie. Central to my concern here is the matter of horror and how it is treated in twentieth-century narrative, specifically in what has come to be known as Holocaust literature. As a related set of considerations, in Dostoevsky the assault comes from within; Ivan Karamazov must contend with his own personal demons (Raskolnikov's troubles, too, come from his own mind). In Holocaust literature the assault decidedly comes from without. Further, and more to the point, in Dostoevsky and elsewhere it is truth unequivocally that is understood and meant to be life sustaining. In Holocaust literature it is frequently a lie that is designed to prolong and sustain life. A lie rather than the truth offers hope and temporary tranquility, if not a permanent way out from the horror that threatens from without.

In these linked respects Holocaust literature represents a special, unique case in world literature and in the history of literature. Never before had the lie been given such prominence, as a virtue no less. Of course, as noted, numerous literary figures spin tales, fabricate and dissimulate, tell lies. Odysseus is a sterling example. One would have no trouble running a long list after him — beginning with the very pantheon of Greek gods, who, as Ovid and others tell it, seem never to despise a seductive lie; including Boccaccio's forever fibbing figures of fun; right down to today's modern con men, prevaricators, and failures. But in the literature of the Holocaust failing itself must be redefined, since any small resistance or minor triumph in the face of horrifically overwhelming odds might well be considered something other than failing. Perhaps a better expression would be *humanly hoping* — in the absence of all good reason to hope. Similarly, lying must itself be redefined in light of the basic specificities and peculiarities that make Holocaust literature separate, different, and unique. In part, that distinctiveness, even distinction, derives from a special relation between truth and lie that is unseen and unheard elsewhere. As part of that relation, paradoxically, it appears that the common distinction between the two may blur, elide, or actually become strangely irrelevant, as long as life prevails.

To make the point, I will treat Jurek Becker's *Jakob the Liar and*, relatively briefly, *The Final Journey* by Gudrun Pausewang. The two works share a certain complementarity and continuity that recommends their centrality in this study: they each make the lie a prominent feature thematically and structurally. Further, the latter work logically follows the former, since Becker's book focuses on the transport of Jews to the camps as a horrific potential that might still be avoided, as the central character keeps insisting in the face of

frightful fear and resultant suicides; while Pausewang's work documents vividly what such transports actually entailed, detailed and seemingly documented in the experiences of a young girl herded off with her grandfather. The one book picks up, in effect, where the other leaves off. It also renders as virtually irrelevant the question of whether the tale is in itself true — Is this, then, a precise account of a specific transport? — because the same thing, in its basic lineaments, did occur in fact over and over to untold millions of children and old folks. In a sense, Holocaust literature need not detail a specific life story, since what it tells is genetically true. As a case in point, the strange, horrific events related in Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* — which relates a young boy's wandering through the East European countryside, constantly threatened, perpetually in danger, until saved after some years by the oncoming Red Army — actually configure, in their basic lineaments, the early biography of the Israeli writer Aharon Appelfeld. The latter's life story thus confirms a certain truth contained in Kosinski's proclaimed fiction.

In fact, Becker's fiction centers precisely on the long, desperately awaited arrival of the Red Army, which appears in time to save Kosinski's fictional boy and Appelfeld's actual life, but does not manage to do the same for anyone in *Jakob the Liar*, where the lie is given immediate prominence not only in the tide but in the book's basic thematics and plot elements. What can be immediately derived from the work is that — contrary to expectations whereby what is positive is normally equated with truth, and negative with the lie — the relations between the two, as well as independent understandings of the one and the other, are at times reversed. Truth may condemn to death, by causing a loss of hope, by giving up on life. While a lie may (falsely) sustain hope and the very possibility of (more) life. Further, the lie may eventually turn out to be convertible, and even be transformed, by what ultimately emerges as history, into truth. Thus is Jakob the liar motivated, thus does he himself hope. What would he not give to be a truth teller instead of a (despicable, in his own eyes) storyteller? Does he not pray for the lie to be converted or transformed into truth; for what he initially and falsely proclaimed to become eventually history's well-established claims? Likewise, *The Final Journey* seeks repeatedly for some other truth than what looms, monstrosly, as *the* truth. In that related, common seeking for what cannot and never will be found, both works depend on the interplay between an elusive truth (the Red Army is on its way and will soon liberate us all; we are on our way to a work camp and not

a death camp) and a potentially lifesaving lie. Only in this literature, lives are rarely if ever saved. And in the two works at hand, virtually no one is spared.

Clearly, history is closely linked to the literature of the Holocaust. The war years have no comparable period in world history. This incomparable period has brought forth a new literature, one which — on the surface, and even below — would appear not to tolerate any play with fictions embedded within fiction, with "lies," in other words. The War fostered this new mode of fiction that must be true, in the sense of being faithful to a certain reality; or, rather, it must be *seen* as true, as being firmly rooted in historical fact. In this new form, born of previously unimaginable horrors, the reader must have the sense that what is related in the literature elicited by the Holocaust has its basis in actuality, if not precisely in actual events or actual personages. Yet, perhaps nowhere in world literature does mimesis play a greater role than in Holocaust literature, which must stand or fall (case by case) by its mimetic relation to what had been in reality. Literature of the Holocaust derives greatly from a sense of close mimetic relations between historical or biographical events and the literary works that emerge from those events. For this form of writing is supremely subject to scrutiny; one is tempted to say by both the living and the dead, where perhaps it is the latter, no less, who exert a greater claim upon the author to get the "facts" straight. Although, in fictive writing, paradoxically, there are no real facts per se. What we do have is the powerful requisite to establish a certain literary correspondence with facts. Hence, in *The Painted Bird*, the repeated motifs of hunger, fear, rife brutality, and bestial cruelty, coupled with the overwhelming desire to survive, correspond with factual details that belong biographically and historically to numerous childhood wanderers in the wastelands of wartorn Eastern Europe. Similarly, what we find in the fictional *Jakob the Liar* fits generically with life in historical ghettos, while *The Final Journey* documents accurately the transports that ended in death for entire populations. As with realism in general, we seek, then, a certain verisimilitude in the literature of the Holocaust, a verisimilitude in narrative, however, that never had more at stake.

For no matter how terrifying or hopeless the adventures recounted in Holocaust writings, nothing less than survival is ultimately and always at issue. In each instance there is the rare account of survival against harrowing odds or the more common tale of destruction and obliteration. In treating these most basic existential concerns, such writing necessarily presents them as topics that are born not of philosophical or abstract speculation but from concrete historical reality. In refining the barest poetics of this unique literary

form, one would need account for (among other things) the victims' haunting oppressive sense of being hunted; the fact that death by murder is ever-present and continuously threatening; that the time is Apocalypse, the end of time for the dead as well as the living. Correspondingly, this literature embraces a relatively limited set of spatial configurations. Iconic of the genre are cattle cars and lonely rail stations, barbed wire enclosing a hopeless sphere of human misery, containing stifling wooden huts, armed guards, vicious dogs, crematoria and smokestacks — and nowhere to hide. Hence the only spatial configuration that can possibly attend this literature is closed space — corresponding to the end of time or the only time that does not contain the promise of a future — in which horror is shut in and all possibility of human joy and hope are closed out. Nowhere in world literature is there a comparable sense of a physical and metaphysical, social and psychological, dead end. In D.M. Thomas' *White Hotel*, we read: "There are things so far beyond belief that it ought to be possible to awake from them" (288). Joyce's Stephen Dedalus likewise makes the famous remark that history "is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (42).<sup>5</sup> Yet there is no awakening from the nightmare documented in this peculiarly twentieth-century brand of realism, whose poetics depend upon frightful irony, a detached and isolated temporal and spatial reality, coupled with a fully cognizant, unrelenting epistemology that thoroughly invalidates positive reflections on moral limitations. In this widespread domain of evil, there are no such bounds. The source of the genre's profound and terrible irony lies in the thought that it had ever been so misconstrued that there are acts of horrendous cruelty that lie beyond human capacity. If not accomplished earlier in history (going back at least as far as the Middle Ages), the Holocaust disproves basic humane notions about humanity. In contrast to Dostoevsky, its emergent literature presents irrevocably (and perhaps irrefutably) a man-centered universe, in which God is either notably absent or, at best, is only vaguely present, somewhere on the periphery of human existence. As the child in *The Final Journey* ponders: "God. Did he exist or not? And if so, what had he to do with this journey" (137), multiplied countless miserable times?

What this suggests in Dostoevskian terms is that there remains no real distinction between truth and lie, no possibility for establishing a juxtaposition between the two, whereby one is situated with God and the other with the

5 To which there is the later eerie echo (especially in the present context): "Nightmare from which you will never awake" (Joyce 174).

Devil. For in the world chronicled by Holocaust literature there is hardly any evidence of a triumphant, life-affirming truth, set against a plethora of horrific detail, affording the presence, even omnipresence, of an invidious lie — one which shamelessly, fascistically, invalidates the worth of human life. And yet in other, historical, terms there is a fidelity to truth, to which the Holocaust writer must adhere, although the characters may espouse a lie, paradoxically, that is life giving and life embracing.

One may well argue, as I do here, that literature in general and narrative (the novel) in particular is highly mimetic — .is thoroughly intent upon documenting the detail, devoted perhaps above all else to identifying the specifying detail, of a certain time and place. But in Holocaust literature what is at stake in detailing the facts, the realia, of the time is nothing less than the survival and — more to the (historical) point — the demise of whole populations. The constant, perpetual tension, then, is between life and death, survival and succumbing, yielding to or struggling against insurmountable odds in confronting what is nearly inevitable.

*Jakob the Liar* is set in a generic ghetto, a place of habitual hunger and mass starvation, perennial beatings, unending fear of deportation or summary execution, and where one is greeted by a whole new array of dead bodies in the street exposed to the early morning light. Working in the cleanup detail meant "clearing the streets of garbage and of the bodies of those who had died of starvation" (148). The evident connection, even equation, made between humanity and refuse (human garbage?) is implicit but obvious. In a rare tirade, Jakob exhorts an interlocutor, a famous medical practitioner, to recognize "that we have almost nothing to eat, that in winter one in five of us freezes to death, that every day half a street gets taken away in transports" (165). And what does Jakob the liar have in his arsenal to combat such injustice and suffering? What does he employ as "the very last possibility that keeps them from just lying down and dying"? His only weapon is "words, do you understand? I try to do that with words! Because that's all I have!" (165) Hence, on one level, the novel is preoccupied with the power of the Word. More specifically, it focuses upon and provides an anatomy of the lie, a particular, even (in this case) special, use of the Word. The lie: its generation, dissemination, possible "mutilation" (212), yet providing, ideally, "some

modest consolation" (213), such is its sole purpose and entire reason for being, even if Jakob risks his whole being in its propagation.

At the center of the tale is Jakob's false claim that he possesses a radio, forbidden to all ghetto dwellers upon pain of death. "And the ghetto regulations are not merely suggestions for good behavior; it says right there in black and white what it means to listen to a radio, as well as what happens to those who know that someone is listening and who don't report it" (68). Jakob, supposedly, is listening. The simple remark, "I have a radio" (22), serves as the lynchpin for the entire plot; it supplies the makings for the book's penetrating anatomy of a lie as well as a potentially self-sacrificial life. At the core of it all is the hopeful, wishful notion that the Russians are coming hell bent on liberating us all at the first opportune moment. "The Russians are on their way, don't you understand?" (15), Jakob declares to the dead. "Somewhere in the distance Stalin's soldiers are approaching at an unknown speed" (73), the author tells us, appropriating Jakob's false immediacy. With his nonexistent radio, Jakob provides fanciful information, fanning the flames of a desperate people's burning desire. His aim: to afford them hope, without which, in his reasonable estimation, they cannot live.

In this literary creation of a man who lies out of sorrowful caring, the reader is presented with how the lie is initially generated and subsequently proliferated. According to a certain grammar of human behavior as much as of language, "I have a radio" is soon transformed into "[He] has a radio" (42), a matter of public conjecture and hearsay; it also shortly takes the exaggerated form, "The whole world knows he has a radio" (31). How the lie — or, better, an entire "tissue of lies" (224) — is proliferated and magnified derives from a set of (human) dynamics that is hardly specific to the ghetto. "Today you know about it, tomorrow the neighbors know, and the next day the whole ghetto is talking about nothing else!" (45) Such is the basic truth and such is the great risk that one man takes for his fellow man.

In presenting how the lie pyramids into other tall tales, as it essentially feeds upon itself, as others hungrily feed upon it as well, the author expressly explains, in parallel fashion, how his own story (not Jakob's, he insists, but his [33], since he appropriated it and is relating it) is made. The ingredients are (as they always are) ostensible memory and imagination. In fiction someone — invented or real, character or author — must be seen to remember the events related, testifying in effect to their veracity, affirming that they are true (within the fictional context) as told. Further, it takes an active imagination — to tell the thing, of course, but also to distinguish what is fictive, or false, in the text

from what is ostensibly the "truth." Jakob's recollections are thus grafted onto the author's fictive memory, as it were, in detailing certain events. Imagination, belonging initially to the character, who fantasizes his people's salvation, is subsequently revised and enhanced, as memory, by the author, who acknowledges the necessity to provide additional detail as viably and credibly as possible. "I tell myself that it must have happened more or less in such and such a way, and then I tell it and pretend that's how it was. And that *is* how it was; it's not my fault that the witnesses who could confirm it can no longer be found" (33). Telling it and pretending "that's how it was," or *is*, is also Jakob's main occupation. Between his fabrications and the author's fictions there exists but a fine line. Yet, as a rational basis for writing, for making the series of assertions that make up the work, the author declares further his reliance on "probability bordering on a certainty" (80), Holocaust writing, it is my contention here, requires and deserves nothing less.

Jakob determines on the other hand that his fellow ghetto inhabitants deserve nothing less than at least a modicum of hope, which serves singularly and consistently as the rationale for the lie, which is itself in effect a promise — that the Russians will soon deliver us. "In time the news becomes a promise" (17), we are told. "The Russians are waiting around the corner and will take care that not a hair on the head of a single one of you will be harmed" (236), we read. One statement is true, the other false. In between — both true and false — is the exhortation: "Stop taking your own lives," Jakob solemnly, silently pleads, "you'll soon be needing them again! Stop living without hope, our days of misery are numbered! Make an effort to survive.. .after all, you've managed so far. Just survive the last two hundred and fifty miles, then survival will be over, then life will begin" (24). As Jakob conceives it, in discussion with the skeptical, contrarian physician: "there is no medicine people need as much as hope" (164). One of Jakob's more complex, convoluted prevarications, offering a certain spiritual sustenance in the midst of (invented) military matters, is in fact punctuated by that very value. "Jakob divulges that Pry meanwhile has been taken but that halfway to Mieloworno the Germans have established a fortified line that will be fought over for quite some time, it appears, but which has already been breached at several points, this in turn leaving room for hope" (229-30). So, there is still room, it seems, but the futility of it all, all that lying, is also underscored: "You're lying!.. .You're all lying. You talk and talk and nothing ever changes!" (198)

In abstract terms that value, promote, and, ideally, sustain life, Jakob projects his whole rationale, which fluctuates between being rational and

irrational, but which remains firmly rooted in his guiding life principle, so that what is surely not true also reflects and maintains — in such terrible times — its own value.

The first lie, which may not even have been one, such a little lie, and [someone] is satisfied. It's worth it: hope must not be allowed to fade away, otherwise they won't survive. He knows for sure that the Russians are advancing...and if there is a God in heaven, they must come at least this far; and if there is no God, they must come at least this far and they must find as many survivors as possible, so it's worth it. And if we should all be dead, it was an attempt, so it's worth it. (60)

In contrastive, concrete terms the hard facts speak for themselves: "suicide figures have dropped to zero" (67). And, as Jakob argues with the skeptical doctor, soon to be a suicide himself rather than minister (as a heart specialist) to the stricken German commandant: "Since the news has been passed around in the ghetto, I haven't heard of a single suicide. Have you?" (166) Hence everyone, understandably, is seeking to catch onto a single life line, to catch "the latest news" (83), which equates with the latest lies, "the latest news, so to speak, from the ether" (152), invented, that is, out of thin air. Still, "they want to hear the news" (204), the lies, "that everything's going to change soon" (205).

In sum, after three years of ghetto living (203), Jakob's fellow denizens of the depths want to believe in only one thing: the future — which is as nonexistent as Jakob's radio, which promises them that hope. But that is the key notion, the key to their survival, as Jakob well knows, a future fervently wished for, and embraced or encapsulated in one or another single phrase: "when all this is over" (38), "when all these tribulations are over" (127), things will be better, they tell themselves. For "we've been waiting a long time for this glimpse into the future" (52). In promulgating her own life-saving little lie, a young woman plans her future, her marriage, her home, down to the last poignant detail: "and there must be a little shelf for all those spices" (53). Most poignant and most telling in its reiteration — that most persistent desire and need for something temporally, spiritually, materially, beyond this miserable present — is, of course, the future. Which is itself a term that thoroughly and entirely encapsulates the lie, as does — also in a word — the simple expression, "Afterward" (26). Because there will not be any future, any afterward. Rather, there is and will be only this terrible, awful *now*.

Isn't this the best time to prepare at least mentally for the future? (133)

I've been thinking for a long time that maybe I should try something different in the future. (133)

Furthermore, her father is at last beginning to have some tentative thoughts about the future. (194)

He merely wanted to drop by and say hello and talk a bit about the old days and the days to come... (215)

But such thoughts make their appearance just days before the ghetto's mass deportation. There will not be any "days to come." When the Russians do finally arrive, when "the Red army marched in" (178), as Jakob always said it would, there will be plenty of enemy to kill but no helpless ghetto dwellers, modern inhabitants of Hell, to liberate. "Somewhere down there the future lies hidden" (65) suggests one lost soul, his unwitting words resonating with a certain truth, should "down there" refer to Hades or its ilk, another place of perpetual darkness akin to where the thoroughly damaged, wholly condemned speaker is now.

Yet Jakob, in his great humanity as "something of a spiritual comforter" (215), who knows that "anything is better than telling them the truth" (225), continues to provide the comforting lie — "Later.. .when all this is behind us, when we two are sitting quietly over a glass of schnapps, when the pancakes are sizzling in the pan, then I'll tell you every thing... you'll hear the whole truth; we'll laugh and shake our heads to think how crazy the times once were" (90) — the comforting lie, without which there could be no life. "Come on, lean back and close your eyes, let's not spoil the pleasure by talking, let's take a few puffs and dream of old times, which will soon be back again" (103-04). "Old times," which, according to life experience, human experience, according to all "logic," should, being the past, continue into the present, which in turn will generate the future. Such is our (Western) temporal linear logic — which stopped, monumentally and eternally, with what Jakob in understated fashion refers to as those "crazy times."

Our point has been that those times fairly demand a fidelity to historical accuracy that sets Holocaust literature apart from other forms of imaginative writing. Becker, in the ironic manner that typifies the work, implicitly acknowledges the point. This becomes readily apparent, for instance, when he offers a poetics in a minor but significant key on the art of lying. "In this type

of activity, restraint and false modesty are inappropriate; you must go the whole hog, you must exude conviction...You must throw out figures and names and dates right and left; the [invented] battle of the Rudna is merely a modest beginning. It will never go down in history, but in our history it will be given a place of honor" (127). Clearly, the distinction made here is between history and "our history," between (ostensible) truth and lie — only in the dialectics of this novel, the lie is "given a place of honor," because, on a larger scale, it is designed to save lives. On a smaller, individual scale (depending upon how one measures these things), what one declares to be true (but is not) amounts to "a story when somebody must be lied to in order to make her a little bit happy" (47). Hence the lie — a "story," a fiction — is necessarily dressed up as truth in this most extreme situation, in what is here termed *in extremis*. Yet at the same time the recognition of, and preoccupation with, history per se is fully engaged and never lost from sight. Because Holocaust literature cannot afford to disengage from the facts, from the truth of what actually happened to millions of people.

In the novel, however, "the unadulterated truth" (72), "the whole truth" (90) — which may be summed up in the cautionary remark: "Just don't get the idea it's as good as over" (114) — must be subordinated to fiction, to invented battles that bring the Russians closer to our hellish situation. Thus the character creates his story, our (fictive) history, in parallel fashion with the author, his creator. "He has succeeded in achieving a substantial advance, he and the Russians; he has quietly let them win a great battle on the banks of a little river" (126), the reader is wryly informed. On another occasion it is acknowledged that Jakob has perhaps overreached himself. "You will gradually have to consider some withdrawal tactics, for in your enthusiasm you have allowed the advance to proceed at a speed that unfortunately won't stand up to grim reality" (213). So, Jakob, of necessity, in order to achieve credibility, must take reality into account, as must the author. And just as Jakob makes the Russians serve as his unwitting collaborators, Becker has his readers, whose confidence and faith he must seek. Only, again, his job requires greater special attention — to fidelity, accuracy, history. For even as Jakob is writing his own (false) history, or "ours," so to speak ("the Russians won't quite reach it but will come a good deal closer to it, Jakob has decided" [189]), Becker — in common with all writers of the Holocaust — is constrained to write what will stand up against history, what will jibe both in its essence and in its specific detail with historical fact. Hence the author's artful self-conscious preoccupation with his own imagination.

All I know is how it ended. I only know the outcome, nothing in between, but I can only imagine it to have been something like this. (43)

I imagine that for a moment he puts his finger to his lips, closing his eyes and listening, but there is not a sound. Then he goes to work on the little pile Filling one corner of the space, a little pile of useless stuff, a small heap of memories. (44)

I can't hear what [he] is saying or what the people inside are telling him, it's much too far away, but I can imagine it, and this is not a case of vague conjectures. The longer I think about it, the surer I am of his words, even though he never confirmed them to me. (115)

I imagine that by dawn the last battles are over, the ghetto is no longer a ghetto but merely the most run-down part of town. Anyone can go wherever he likes. (233)

That "anyone" is ostensibly only the author himself, who presents himself as "probably the only one who is still alive and able to reflect on the matter" (136). Hence the author is projected as a member of the ghetto community, as its sole survivor, and therefore as its only chronicler, which means, again, that there exists a special obligation on his part — as author, creator, chronicler — to tell it as it is, as it was, as it can never be again.

To underscore the fictional feature of the work as well as its truthful aspect, the author incorporates as a penultimate passage (223-34) "the ending that never happened" (223), which provides a contrived, imagined, admittedly false ending that might work just as well as the "actual" ending, which is likewise contrived as another form of fiction. Yet, in the stated opposition between "the invented ending" and what the author artfully terms "the true and unimaginative ending" (234) is the implied supposition, even covert suggestion, that one is false and the other true, certainly truer than the other. Yet the latter is also necessarily imagined — not the transport itself, which has countless historical counterparts, and to which the entire remainder of the ghetto has been assigned, but certainly the dialogue, for example, the words ostensibly exchanged between author and character during that fateful, fatal passage, when the former supposedly learns at least part of what he needs to know in order to write what he has written.

As a final underscoring of the complicity, as it were, between fiction and history, the book's closing words once again make the point. "We are heading for wherever we are heading" (244), the reader is told, and has no doubt where

that might be. For history will tell us, will pick up where the fiction — if that is what it is — leaves off. Finally, between Jakob's lies and Becker's fiction there exists a special distinction. If the lie needs a rationale (as we have seen that it does), a reason for being, a reason for lying, fiction generally needs no such thing. Art, of which fiction is a special, unique form, exists — as the Russian Formalists, for instance, pointed out continually and convincingly — for its own sake, for what it is, without reason or justification for its being. Yet Holocaust literature, as imaginative, fictive "testimony," exists *as* something more than itself, *for* something more, and therefore exhibits compelling, additional reason to exist.<sup>6</sup>

Towards the end of *Jakob the Liar*, a child, who plays a considerable role in the novel, naively and enthusiastically asks: "We're going on a trip?" (239). She finds it hard to believe that such wonderful news had been kept from her until the very last moment. In fact, the last moments of the book represent the first and continuing moments of *The Final Journey*, as the tide indicates. One book ends with a child and a man, Jakob, old enough to be her grandfather being shipped off on one of the countless transports. The other begins with a child and her grandfather being transported. The one picks up, in effect, where the other ends, each ending equally predictably. One appears a continuation of the other, both sharing similar concerns: acknowledging the general moral distinction between truth and lie, but also recognizing the peculiar benefits to be had from the latter in times of trouble; more specifically, keeping a child free from the contaminating, potentially damaging truth, itself a book-length preoccupation. The rationale for lying is the same in each work: to protect for as long as it is possible to do so. And to go on protecting *beyond that* as best one can for as long as one is able.

The child in *The Final journey* is not told that her parents have already preceded her on an earlier transport. Instead, she receives (falsified) typed letters describing a decent existence, while her mother is in supposed

6 "However hard we try to argue...that art is not truth, but a falsehood which helps us to come nearer to truth, the fact still remains that our aesthetic palate is greedy for this type of falsehood which we read off against the grid of things as we actually know them to be" (Almansi 28-29). In support of this argument, Holocaust literature represents an extreme case, in which something more than our aesthetic palate need be satisfied: our need for a sense of truth within "this type of falsehood."

convalescence. When she finally learns the truth, bluntly expressed by other, better informed children on the transport, she angrily confronts her grandfather. His response: "You could not possibly have understood the truth... *We* scarcely understand it." But Alice is not to be so easily consoled or put off. "They know all about it, so why not me? Do you think I can't stand the truth?" — a question that is more profound than the child really knows or can understand. So, it is left to someone else to point out: "If only one knew what was lies and what was the truth. . . Who knows if what we now think is truth really *is* the truth?" (72) A premium is thus put on what should, in ordinary times, amount to common currency. But these are uncommon times. And the grandfather can no longer stand up to their awful demands. "He is dead, Alice... It was all too much for him" (73), the girl is told. But what was too much? In part, it may be assumed, the irresolvable confrontation between truth and lie, themselves thoroughly intermeshed, the inability to distinguish between the two, or to know — in basic moral terms, themselves twisted and bent out of all recognizable shape — when to acknowledge the value of one over the other.

For the child the distinction that now must be resolved on numerous levels is between the "story" she has been told and the possibility of it being a "lie" (76). The stories she has heard, principally about her parents' sudden disappearance, in other words, must either be equated with fiction or with (some semblance of) truth. The matter is not just simply a part of the greater fiction which is the novel itself. Rather, it figures on a profound moral and metaphysical plane that resonates as a representative (mimetic) part of recent history. In contrast, at one point a woman reads a fairy tale aloud to engage the children. Yet everyone in the cramped railroad car listens "with interest" (87). The difference, of course — and what may make this story appealing to the adults as well — is the fact that it is pure story, with no encumbrances in the form of biographical or historical ramifications. One can participate in this fiction without fear, in actual respite from fear. A further contrast exists in the fact that the appeal of the fairy tale approaches a certain universality, while the nature of the "stories" told to Alice have their own highly delimited specificity. These are stories, or lies, that are told because there are children who "couldn't cope with the truth" (72). So, this is a kind of fiction that is designed to preclude coping. One need only try to exist under supremely trying circumstances without attempting to make sense of them. The comforting lie is meant to eliminate that inevitably unrewarding effort.

Yet such fictions breed others, as the character attempts to imagine a future (as in *Jakob the Liar*) that will never be. "Yes, soon a completely new life would begin... A life full of work. She would be learning new things from morning rill night... She did not need anything... and she was looking forward to the work" (106, 132). On certain occasions in this business of unwitting misconstruing, the truth is declared a lie, as when the children discuss the possibility that they will all be killed. "There are millions of Jews in Europe...You can't kill millions except in a war... Things like that don't happen" (109). At other times the truth slips out in a kind of fear that is the fairy tale's diametric opposite. "They call us pests that have to be wiped out, and sometimes I think they'll really do it" (111). Such is the talk of children "going on a trip," the kind of journey that one would have thought, wrongly, no one could ever have imagined, either in literature or in life. Affording a certain counterbalance in fiction that can have no corresponding basis in reality, Alice too plans one day to have "a wonderful family... Her children would play in the garden, under the big trees, and her husband would build them a tree house" (121-22). Again, there looms the universal, wholly unremarkable lure of the future, itself a kind of patrimony of the living but a sorrowful lie for those existing in the ghetto or riding along in a grotesquely crowded cattle car, which is "heading for wherever we are heading."

Upon arrival, among a whole host of terrible ironies, which are again a fearful mergence of grotesque truth and concealing, consoling lie, it seemed to Alice that, "Many things seemed to be possible here!" (145), because "they have thought of everything" (150), so that soon she would be washed clean by "the water of life" (154), all of which thoughts are but the prelude to an unseemly, previously unnamed, concentrational death. Curiously, at the end of the little volume, packed with falsehoods temporarily passing as truth, while truth itself is denied because of its patent incredibility, there is an afterword (in the English edition) that explains in three terse paragraphs all about the Final Solution, should there be a reader so naive and uninformed as not to know the historical context of the work just read. Whether there be a single reader who might require such tutelage, the inclusion of that final historical detail makes our point here: that the originating as well as the final word ascribed to Holocaust writings belong originally and ultimately to history. The one is entirely rooted in the other, so that the whole notion of fiction, as a means of understanding human beings and human relations, emerges as uniquely different from other imaginative literary forms and necessarily bears

new meanings, themselves fraught with terrible truths that must be forever taken into account in the making of such *fiction*.

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