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"Holocaust Laughter"? A German response to Punch Me in the Stomach

Abstract

Punch Me in the Stomach is the story of Deb Filler, the daughter of a concentration camp survivor. It is, in fact, an adaptation of comedienne Filler's one woman stage show, in which she plays the role of 36 different characters from her extended family. In the story, Deb is asked by her father to accompany him on a tour of the camps in which he was incarcerated during the Holocaust. She tells of this experience, but only after telling a wide range of other stories about her own family and growing up.

I [Tania Oldenhage] first saw Punch Me in the Stomach because it was recommended by a friend of mine who is working on second-generation writers of the Holocaust.
Michelle Friedman recommended it to me: "You have to watch it. It's really funny." she said.

I borrowed the video from her and watched it with a German friend. Afterwards we both felt awkward. We didn't talk much but I remember that my friend said, it was quite good, but it wasn't really funny. A few weeks later I heard from another German friend who had seen the film and didn't find it funny. Given that there is no such thing as a general German lack of humor, why was there this failure to be amused by Filler's show? How do Germans - how did I - respond to a film made by someone who is the daughter of a Holocaust survivor? One who enacts stories of her family, but enacts them in the ways of a comedian?

I watched *Punch me in the Stomach* again, this time self-consciously observing my reactions. I did, in fact, laugh at a number of scenes, when, for example, the officer says to Hitler "New Zealand has declared war against Germany", and when the non-Jewish woman asks Debby in a condescending tone questions about "the Jewish religion". I laughed about the ex-boyfriend on the deckchair and about several family members like the grandmother with the thick German accent.

At one point Filler suggests that the characters in her show are amusing because they are universally recognizable. But there are other scenes in Filler's
show that are less universal than specific because they pertain to her father's past during the Holocaust. I am thinking especially about two moments in the film: Debby's father is on a television show and tells his story starting with his childhood in Poland. He speaks with a tone and a plot that, I thought, caricatures the ways in which survivors often narrate their experiences. The second moment I have in mind takes place in the former camp of Theresienstadt. Debby and her father are visiting the barracks when he gets into a fight with a guide who instructs a group of visitors about "facts and figures" which he thinks are not true. Here, again, something typical about survivors is put on stage, the witnesses' claim of knowing what happened exactly, of having authority vis-a-vis a big Holocaust industry.

These scenes are funny, but they are disturbing, too. I had to smile but I felt uncomfortable. I felt that laughing would violate a taboo. In an article entitled "Holocaust laughter," written shortly after Art Spiegelman's Maus came out, Terrence Des Pres speaks critically about the proscription against laughter.¹ He describes it as a commonly accepted rule in Holocaust studies, part of a "Holocaust etiquette", one which "dictates that anything pertaining to the Holocaust must be serious, must be reverential in a manner that acknowledges (and supports) the sacredness of its occasion.’ (278)

Des Pres disagrees with this prescription. Referring to several comic works including Spiegelman's cartoon, he argues that laughter, humor and the comic mode
are helpful and important at times. A tragic response, he says, tries to stay as truthful as possible to the historical events, whereas a comic response makes no attempt at actual representation and refuses to take the Holocaust on its own terms. The comic mode therefore has a potential that the tragic lacks: it allows for distance, self-possession, evaluation and protest vis-a-vis the finality and brutality of the events. Des Pres writes: "In the realm of art, a comic response is more resilient, more effectively in revolt against terror and the sources of terror than a response that is solemn or tragic ... comic art resists that which has come to pass (281)." "Holocaust laughter," he says, is "life-reclaiming".

*Punch Me In the Stomach*, obviously, is a comic not a tragic response. Filler's scenes do not necessarily represent exactly what happened. Many of them are fabricated, she tells her audience toward the end of the show, like the one of her father as a survivor-on-television. Her father did indeed become famous in Australia because he was a survivor and because of Deb Filler's work, but that was life imitating art, not vice versa.

Filler's show, moreover, addresses what Des Pres calls the "survival-value" of laughter. During the television scene, the schematic course of her father's testimony suddenly gets interrupted when he says: "... and also, sounds funny I know, but you had to keep your sense of humor." Then he tells the story about his first night in the barracks. There was not enough space. He and his fellow inmates
were crammed so tightly into a bed that they could turn over only together and on command. "We laughed, we had to," he says. "What else could you do? We laughed the whole first night in Auschwitz."

When he travels to Theresienstadt decades later with his daughter the visit ends, too, in Filler's enactment of it, with a powerful comic twist. Returning from the run-down toilets of the museum, and holding in her hand a broken toilet chain, Deb and her father burst into laughter. "We were laughing so hard we couldn't stop."

These two scenes are crucial to me. Together with Des Pres' essay they make me understand that it was not so much the comic mode as such that made me feel uncomfortable, but the fact that the laughter Filler recounts and evokes has a "life-reclaiming" and "survival-value" function in a situation that is not my own. When I was in Poland visiting the camps, I wasn't confronted with a past that had haunted me all my life as it had haunted Debby. My situation is different not only because "my people", in the grand scheme of things, had been victimizers not victims in Auschwitz or Theresienstadt. It is also because these camps were not part of my memory and had been excluded from the landscape in which I grew up. For a long time, these places signified nothing but abstract numbers and a past far-away. In contrast, they have always been with Debby: "I've known this place my whole
life," she tells her father in Theresienstadt. This, it seems to me, when she holds the toilet chain in her hand, is the context for her laughter.

For me, laughter would have had a different meaning, a different function during my trip to Poland. If I had laughed in the museum in Auschwitz it would have been an attempt, I think, to distance myself from something that I had only just then begun to explore. It would have been intended to shut down my registers, to block out an alien history. I'm not saying that laughter, humor and the comic mode in relation to the Holocaust cannot be beneficial for me, too, at times and in certain contexts. Watching Debby and her father in Theresienstadt, however, I feel like a stranger intruding into something not my own and not necessarily my business. And I think that's why I am not fully at ease when Filler's show makes me laugh.