

Memory, Identity, and Resistance: Jurek Becker's Narratives as social Commentary on Holocaust Trauma

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Abstract

This article examines the life and work of Jurek Becker, focusing on his unique perspective as a Holocaust survivor and his contributions to post-war German literature. Although Becker's literary legacy remains largely within German borders, his novels - particularly *Jakob the Liar* - offer profound insights into the Holocaust and Jewish identity in the context of both Germanies. Born into a Jewish family and surviving the horrors of the Lodz ghetto and concentration camps, Becker's writing reflects his ambivalence towards Jewish identity and his complex relationship with German society. This article explores Becker's thematic focus on memory, loss, and the search for identity, revealing how his experiences shaped narratives that address universal themes of human resilience and suffering. By analyzing Becker's novels, essays, and personal reflections, the article underscores his role in grappling with Germany's Nazi past and confronting themes of memory and belonging that resonate well beyond the GDR's ideological confines.

Keywords: *Jurek Becker, Holocaust, Jewish Identity, Memory and Loss, German Literature.*

Introduction

Jurek Becker occupies a unique position in post-war German literature, as both a Holocaust survivor and a writer whose works transcend ideological and cultural boundaries. His fiction, particularly *Jakob der Lügner*, delves deeply into the enduring scars of trauma, the fragility of memory, and the complexities of Jewish identity in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Born into a Jewish family and having survived the Lodz ghetto and concentration camps, Becker's narrative voice is shaped by his lived experience, yet it refuses to conform to conventional portrayals of victimhood or resilience. His works instead explore the liminal spaces where personal trauma intersects with collective memory, presenting a nuanced portrayal of human suffering and survival. Becker's narrative strategies align with trauma theories advanced by scholars such as Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman. Caruth's assertion that trauma is "not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival" (Caruth, 1996, p. 58) is particularly relevant to Becker's characters, who grapple with the psychological and moral ambiguities of surviving under oppressive regimes. Similarly, Felman's exploration of testimony as both a narrative act and a process of bearing witness (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 5) resonates with Becker's insistence on storytelling as a vehicle for ethical engagement. Through his fiction, Becker reconstructs fragmented histories, interrogates the unreliability of memory, and challenges

ARTICLE INFO

Literary studies

Received: 14 October 2024

Accepted: 20 November 2024

Published: 22 November 2024

DOI: 10.58970/JSR.1058

CITATION

Guglielmi, M. (2024).
Memory, Identity, and
Resistance: Jurek Becker's
Narratives as social
Commentary on Holocaust
Trauma, *Journal of
Scientific Reports*, 7(1),
301-317.

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readers to confront the emotional and ethical complexities of the Holocaust. This paper argues that Becker's works not only reflect his own conflicted relationship with identity and memory but also actively engage readers in a process of ethical reflection and historical reckoning. By employing humor, irony, and dialogic narrative structures, Becker subverts expectations of Holocaust literature, destabilizing binary notions of victimhood and heroism. His portrayal of memory as both a personal and collective act reveals the ways in which historical trauma continues to shape identity and belonging. Through an analysis of *Jakob der Lügner* and other key texts, this paper examines Becker's unique contributions to Holocaust literature and situates his work within broader theoretical frameworks of trauma and memory.

1. Jurek Becker narrator and essayist

As a child, when asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, Jurek Becker consistently replied, "Schriftsteller"¹. Writing was always of paramount importance to him, initially as a means of integrating into German society and later as a medium for expressing his "Meinungsverschiedenheit"². Irene Heidelberger-Leonard identifies a striking mathematical symmetry in Becker's narrative oeuvre: his first, third, and sixth novels address the challenges of being a Jew, while his second, fourth, and seventh novels explore the difficulties of being a socialist. This thematic organization reflects Becker's overarching focus on identity, which is inextricably linked to his biographical experiences. His formative years in the ghetto and concentration camps, as well as the circumstances surrounding his departure from the GDR to the BRD in 1977, profoundly influenced his work. Across his novels, the Jew and the socialist are depicted as figures engaged in a continuous search for identity. Critics have primarily analyzed Becker as a novelist. However, he was also a prolific essayist and contributor to newspapers. In 1996, he compiled a selection of essays, conference texts, and lectures under the title *Ende des Grössenwahns*³. This collection offers critical insights into his personality and intellectual evolution. To provide a comprehensive understanding of Becker's work, this analysis considers both his narrative and essayistic contributions. Becker's understanding of literature was rooted in its capacity for dissent. In 1989, he articulated this perspective, stating:

Ich vermute, daß seit den Anfängen von Literatur der wesentlichste Antrieb zum Schreiben das Bedürfnis nach Stellungnahme gewesen ist, also nach Widerspruch⁴.

Almost all of the most significant books for the writer were characterized by a "Nichteinverstanden sein mit etwas"⁵. For Becker, this "Bedürfnis nach Stellungnahme" served as the foundation of his literature, as he rejected escapist works. While he denied the notion of books as "Vehikel um Ansichten darauf zu transportieren"⁶, he nonetheless embraced the role of a "political commentator"⁷, a figure operating on two fronts: writing novels and engaging in non-narrative work. Becker's essays, conferences, and newspaper articles reveal his engagement with a wide range of topics. For instance, in a 1978 radio address, he contested the idea that his Jewish

¹Becker Papiere: *Begründung der Berufswahl*, 9. Februar 1957, Cit in Sander L. Gilman, *Jurek Becker*, List, Berlin, 2004, p. 55. This text will henceforth be indicated with the acronym SLG.

²(diversity of opinion)

³Jurek Becker, *Ende des Grössenwahns*, Frankfurt/M, Suhrkamp, 1996. This text will henceforth be referred with the acronym EG.

⁴Jurek Becker, *Warnung vor dem Schriftsteller. Drei Vorlesungen in Frankfurt*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M, 1990, p.13, (I suppose that since the beginning of literature, the impulse to write has been the need to take a stand, hence a contradiction.). This text will be referred with the acronym WS.

⁵Ibidem p. 14 (disagree with something).

⁶Ibidem, p. 32 (vehicles to be transported as an overview).

⁷See Oliver Sill, "Lieber sprechen als hören, lieber gehen als stehen". *Jurek Becker als politischer Kommentator*. In: Heinz Ludwig Arnold (ed.) *Jurek Becker. Text + Kritik*, München, 1992, pp. 70/76. This text will from now on be indicated with the acronym LA.

origins fundamentally shaped his identity⁸. He clarified his break with the SED and the GDR Writers' Association through interviews in "Spiegel"⁹; in an article in "die Zeit" he diagnoses the reasons for the cultural decline of our time¹⁰; in another he energetically contradicts Martin Walser's considerations on the "German question"¹¹; in yet another he criticizes the former citizens of the GDR for their relationship with the past¹²; in a conference he explains the situation of literature in the GDR¹³. Becker's narrative and essay work have many elements that bring them together and many others that distance them. In the two genres, the writer uses different stylistic techniques. In his novels, for example, he frequently uses dialogue: in the form of a discussion between different figures, issues are illustrated in their contradictory facets. In this way, the problems can be observed from different angles and from different points of view. The opinions, often expressed with vehemence and bitterness, relativize each other and thus form the ambivalence and multiplicity of the reality represented. In *Jakob der Lügner*¹⁴, for example, the fulcrum around which the entire novel revolves is explained through an argument between the protagonist and Dr. Kirschbaum¹⁵. In this way, Becker achieves his literary goal: the task of his narrative is not the legitimacy guarantee and the development of his opinion, but rather the presentation of the argument, illustrated in all its facets, for the following purpose:

daß *Leser* sich beim Lesen Meinungen bilden, *ihre* Meinungen, auf eine Wiese, wie es ihnen ohne die Lektüre nicht möglich wäre¹⁶.

Germanist Volker Hage observed that what is striking in Jurek Becker's novels is his "opinion on opinions":

„Noch Heute gerate ich in Panik wenn ich mit einer Meinung allein stehe“, heißt es in *Bronsteins Kinder*. Der Journalist aus *Aller Welt Freund* sagt von sich er sei "jemand ohne Überzeugung". And Simrock, the Lehrer from the Buch *Schlaflose Tage* which is with the Beobachtung: „So oft er in die Situation gekommen war, eine Meinung vorzutragen, habe er stets (...) die von den anderen erwartete gewählt.“ Gleichzeitig wünscht sich dieser Mann (...) einmal sagen zu können: „Dazu habe ich keine Meinung“.¹⁷

⁸See Jurek Becker, *Mein Judentum, Ende des Grössenwahns*, Frankfurt/M, Suhrkamp, 1996. This text will henceforth be referred to as EG, pp. 9/21.

⁹See Jurek Becker, „*Ich glaube ich war ein guter Genosse.*“ *Schriftsteller Jurek Becker über die Nach-Biermann-Ära in der GDR*. Interview in *Der Spiegel*, Nr.30/1977, pp.128/133. And „*Ja wenn Stalin ein großer Mann war...*“ *Schriftsteller Jurek Becker über seine Existenz zwischen East und West*, Interview in *Der Spiegel*, Nr.10/1980, pp.205/212.

¹⁰See Jurek Becker, *Über den Kulturverfall unserer Zeit*, EG, pp. 38/46.

¹¹See Jurek Becker, *Gedächtnis verloren – Verstand verloren*, EG, pp. 78/84.

¹²See Jurek Becker, *Zum Bspitzeln gehören zwei*, EG, pp. 78/84.

¹³See Jurek Becker, *Die Wiedervereinigung der deutschen Literatur*, EG, pp. 118/135.

¹⁴This novel tells the story of Jakob Heym, a resident of the Lodz ghetto, who plays the hero by revealing to his companions that he has a radio - which is false and also forbidden by the Nazis. He tells them that the Russians they are reconquering the occupied territories and that liberation is near.

¹⁵Towards the end of the novel, Dr. Kirschbaum goes to Jakob Heym's house to reproach him for having spread the news he had learned from the radio in the ghetto, thus endangering the lives of all its inhabitants. The protagonist points out, in a very moving speech, how that news had revived the hope of those people, how although nothing had changed in their daily lives, since those people had learned of the approach of the Red Army, there had not been a single case of suicide. In the end, even Kirschbaum changes his mind, asking himself: "Warum ist mir das nicht aufgefallen?" (Why didn't I notice?). See Jurek Becker, *Jakob der Lügner*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1976, pp. 213/214.

¹⁶WS, p. 58. (that *readers* construct opinions by reading, *their* opinions, in a way that would be impossible without reading).

¹⁷Volker Hage, *Die Wahrheit über Jakob Heym*, HL, p.131 ("Even today I panic if I find myself with just one opinion" he says in *Bronsteins Kinder*. The journalist of *Aller Welt Freund* says of himself that he is "someone without conviction". And Simrock, the teacher in the book *Schlaflose Tage*, torments himself with the

The writer himself states in his poetics lectures held in Frankfurt in 1989: "Die Bücher starren vor Meinungslosigkeit"¹⁸. Literature, therefore, for Becker has no opinions, knows no certainties, presents invented, fake data and facts. In short, literature for him is nothing but a "Lüge", a lie. In the form of fictitious events, however, the writer presents the reader with concrete problems but indirectly, in order to lead the public to reflect, without imposing his point of view.

In the essay form, however, Becker does not invent anything, he expresses his opinions clearly, always remaining faithful to his irony and his tendency to narrate¹⁹. The story, in fact, is an expedient that the writer often uses in speeches, conferences, articles and has a precise function: it constitutes an illustrative element and provides the testimony of an experience. These narrative fragments, however, are never the result of a "reines Denken"²⁰ above reality, but rather the result of his knowledge. In *Mein Judentum*²¹, for example, the writer uses the narration of the meeting with an Orthodox Jew who had embraced him at the age of eleven to describe a contradictory side of his Judaism. In *Zum bespitzeln gehören zwei*²², to support his theory on the opportunism of the citizens of the GDR Becker reports a conversation with a Stasi official: this acquaintance, after drinking a couple of glasses too many, reveals to him that his work would be impossible without the complicity of the people who let themselves be spied on. In the same text, Jurek Becker addresses opportunism in the writers' environment, telling the story of a colleague of his who had written a book that could not be published in his homeland because of censorship; this writer, therefore, waits for more favorable times to ask for its publication in the West, to avoid inconveniences in his daily life, but in the end, when he decides to do so, after the fall of the wall, his book is no longer of interest to anyone. Another example of a story in Becker's essayistic work can be represented by the text entitled *Eine alte Geschichte*²³. Here the writer introduces the need for resistance, this time against the violence of *skinheads*, by recounting his childhood experience with a violent and overbearing classmate.

The way of presenting the same themes, therefore, is different in the two literary forms: the "political commentator" expresses himself explicitly in essays, speeches and newspaper articles and implicitly in the novels, through which Becker wants to go beyond the horizon of his own opinion and address that of the reader: in *Jakob der Lügner*, for example, Dr. Kirschbaum is introduced, a character who feels forced to be Jewish only because of the Holocaust without having any idea of what this Judaism means for him; this man, who tries in vain to discover what he has in common with the people of the ghetto, is the reflection of a problematic aspect of Becker's personality, an aspect that the writer makes explicit in *Mein Judentum*²⁴.

Jurek Becker's use of humor and irony in his works, particularly *Jakob der Lügner*, demonstrates his innovative approach to Holocaust narratives, subverting traditional expectations of solemnity while offering tools for coping with trauma. Becker's humor operates not as a dismissal of suffering but as a mechanism to explore the human condition amidst oppression. In *Jakob der Lügner*, humor emerges through Jakob's fabricated radio reports, which offer the ghetto inhabitants a semblance of hope. These lies, although small and seemingly trivial, provide a

observation that "every time he found himself in the situation of having to express an opinion, he had always chosen (...) what others expected". At the same time, this man also hoped to be able to say one time "I have no opinion about it").

¹⁸WS, p. 85 (the books are full of lack of opinion).

¹⁹This characteristic of the writer will be explored in the next chapter.

²⁰See Oliver Sill, "*Lieber sprechen als hören, lieber gehen als stehen*". *Jurek Becker als politischer Kommentator*, LA, p. 70. (pure thought)

²¹Jurek Becker, *Mein Judentum*, EG, pp. 9/21.

²²Jurek Becker, *Zum Bespitzeln gehören zwei*, EG, pp. 78/84.

²³Jurek Becker, *Eine alte Geschichte*, EG, pp. 158/162.

²⁴Jurek Becker, *Mein Judentum*, EG, pp. 9/21.

psychological refuge, momentarily alleviating the crushing despair of their reality. As Volker Hage observes, Becker's humor "creates a necessary distance, allowing the reader to grapple with the weight of history without being overwhelmed by it" (Hage, 1992, p. 123). Irony, a hallmark of Becker's style, challenges conventional Holocaust literature by reconfiguring the dynamics of resistance and passivity. In *Jakob der Lügner*, Jakob's fictitious stories, meant to inspire hope, ironically underscore the profound influence of narrative on shaping reality. This literary choice transforms Jakob into a figure of imaginative resistance, countering despair through invention rather than physical defiance. As recent scholarship notes, Becker's irony "does not trivialize the Holocaust but rather exposes the absurdities of survival under extreme conditions, drawing attention to the human capacity for resilience" (Schneider, 2020, p. 56). Becker's integration of humor and irony also serves to subvert the expectation that Holocaust narratives must adhere to a solemn, monolithic portrayal of suffering. By blending tragic and comedic elements, he enriches the reader's understanding of trauma, showing its multifaceted nature. As noted by recent studies on Holocaust literature, such an approach "fulfills dual purposes: offering psychological relief and providing a critique of rigid historical narratives" (Rosenfeld, 2019, p. 78). This duality aligns with Becker's broader literary aim of engaging readers in ethical reflection, challenging them to navigate the complexities of human emotions and moral choices under duress. Through these strategies, Becker not only reframes Holocaust literature but also bridges personal and collective memory, offering narratives that are as much about survival as they are about the enduring human spirit.

In most of his novels Becker addresses the theme of the integration of the Jews into German society after the liberation from the concentration camps, as well as the difficult relationship between a father who is reluctant to talk about the past and his son; these topics are treated directly in texts such as *Mein Vater, die Deutschen und ich*²⁵. In the novel *Schlaflose Tage*, through the protagonist Karl Simrock, the author presents the difficulties of a teacher in the GDR of the seventies in directing his students towards the formation of independent thinking, just as he explains later in his essay *Die wünschenswerte Schule*²⁶. The composition of this last novel coincides with a turning point in the history of the GDR: the so-called "Biermann case"²⁷, an event that also profoundly influenced the life of Jurek Becker: from then on he was no longer willing to keep his "Meinungsverschiedenheit" to himself or within the party environment. From then on his motto became "ich will mich nicht raushalten" (Becker, 1980, p. 212). Thus followed, in the following years, a flurry of attacks on the authoritarian tendencies of the West and the East. Becker's arguments on political and social issues of the GDR were very frequent: he addressed the issue of people's disposition to adapt, which generated opportunistic behavior, and the need for conscious and united resistance. The theme of opportunism is also one of the central topics of Becker's fiction: it is treated in the novels *Irreführung der Behörden*, *Schlaflose Tage*, *Amanda herzlos* and also in the short story *Nach den Ersten Zukunft*.

²⁵Jurek Becker, *Mein Vater, die Deutschen und ich*, EG, pp. 177/202.

²⁶Jurek Becker, *Die wünschenswerte Schule*, EG, pp. 156/157.

²⁷ Biermann, Wolf (Hamburg 1936), German poet, writer and singer-songwriter. The son of workers killed by the Nazis, for political reasons he moved to 1953 East Berlin, where he studied philosophy, political economy and mathematics. In the early 1960s he composed poems and songs that earned him the government's aversion. His lyrics combine feelings of loyalty to his political choice, that is, the socialist homeland, and at the same time the denunciation of the lack of the most important achievement of Western democracy, freedom of expression. Following the publication of the poetry collection *The Wire Harp* (1965), he was banned from appearing in public in the German Democratic Republic and was forced to publish his other works in the Federal Republic. In 1976, an authorised tour in West Germany was the pretext to get rid of an inconvenient artist: Biermann was expelled from the GDR, a decision that sparked a chorus of protests throughout the country.

The danger of consciously or unconsciously bending to the pressure of the State, the escape into comfortable opportunism, the willingness to submit to the point of self-renunciation, are different variations of a leitmotif that pervades all of Jurek Becker's works, both narrative and essayistic. This leitmotif consists of a field of tension between a forced adaptation to society and the need for resistance. Becker urges an active opposition to injustices that range from opportunistic social behavior to Nazi war crimes against Jews and contemporary crimes by neo-Nazis. Both contexts have as their backdrop the widespread carelessness and the need for awareness of past and present errors. From this "Widerstand"²⁸ of Becker emerges a double nature of political commentary in the writer's work, made up of explicit and combative positions in current political debates and aesthetic and implicit positions as a principle of narrative writing. Without a doubt Jurek Becker gives precedence to his narrative writing of which he often emphasizes "die größere Intelligenz"²⁹:

Mitunter lese ich auch Texte von mir und habe das Gefühl, daß diese Texte intelligenter sind, als ich es bin. Daß mir bei diesen Texten etwas gelungen ist (...), was ich zum Beispiel nicht fertigbringe, wenn ich so mit ihnen rede.³⁰

2. Judaism for Jurek Becker

Sooft ich in der Vergangenheit nach Herkunft und Abstammung gefragt worden bin, habe ich geantwortet: „Meine Eltern waren Juden.“ Ich benutze diesen Satz wie eine feststehende Formel, die in nicht zu überbietende Klarheit Auskunft gibt. Wenn der Frager mitunter dann konstatierte: „Sie sind also Jude“, berechtige ich ihn jedesmal, in dem ich noch einmal meine Formel sagte: Juden.“³¹

These are the first words of *Ende des Größenwahns* which opens emblematically with a text entitled *Mein Judentum*³² presenting Jurek Becker from his origins and in relation to Judaism. The Jewish descent was an intricate theme that accompanied the writer throughout his life, sometimes in search for his identity, other times on the occasion of debates on National Socialism as treated in the two Germanies. Jurek Becker was born in Lodz, Poland on 30.09.1937. As we read later in the same text, he was born into a Jewish family and this *circumstance* had no small consequences: the author had to spend his childhood until the age of eight in the Lodz ghetto and then in the Ravensbrück and Sachsenhausen concentration camps, where his mother died of exhaustion shortly after his liberation. In 1945 his father, an Auschwitz survivor and his only surviving relative, found him with the help of an American humanitarian organization and the two later settled in East Berlin. Becker has no strong memories of life in the ghetto and the Lager. As a child he could not consciously recognize threats. Furthermore, a childhood spent in a ghetto cannot be eventful. The absence of memories also had other causes: the period in which his

²⁸(resistance)

²⁹Oliver Sill, "Lieber sprechen als hören, lieber gehen als stehen". *Jurek Becker als politischer Kommentator*, LA, p. 75.

³⁰Volker Hage/Jurek Becker, *Hinter dem Rücken des Vaters*. Interview in Volker Hage (ed.), *Deutsche Literatur 1986*, Stuttgart 1987, p. 333 (Sometimes I also read my own texts and have the feeling that these texts are more intelligent than I am. That I have succeeded in doing something in them (...) that I cannot, for example, do when speaking to you).

³¹Jurek Becker: *Mein Judentum, Ende des Größenwahns*, EG (Whenever I was asked in the past about my origin and ancestry, I answered: "My parents were Jews." I used this phrase as a fixed formula that provides the information with the greatest clarity. If it then happened that the person asking the question stated: "So you are Jewish," I corrected him each time by repeating my formula: "My parents were Jews.").

³²"*Mein Judentum*" was written in August 1977, a few months before the writer left the GDR for West Berlin. The West German critic Hans Jürgen Schultz had asked him to write an article for a series of radio essays on Jewish identity, which was to be broadcast on the "Süddeutschen Rundfunk" in Stuttgart in early 1978. From SLG.

mother tongue was Polish must have been lost together with this language when his father stopped speaking to him in Polish with the intention of forcing him to learn German. The past was a topic that was also little discussed between father and son. The father's intention in repressing the Lager period, which can also be deduced from strongly autobiographical novels such as *Der Boxer* and *Bronsteins Kinder*, seems to be a protective measure to detach the child from that tormented past and make a new life possible for him. It was certainly also a personal defense of Max Becker who was hit much harder by it than his son. The writer's father, who with his reserve and lack of communication about the past avoided a direct confrontation between father and son, however encouraged the adult Becker to transfer this confrontation into his narrative works, and to transport it into the characters of his novels. Jurek Becker himself confessed that a large part of his writings focus on this topic³³. In *Die unsichtbare Stadt*, another text included in *Ende des Grössenwahns*, the writer talks about the influence of the lack of memories in his life, experienced as a mutilation, a disadvantage:

Als ich zwei Jahre alt war, kam ich in dieses Ghetto, mit fünf verließ ich es wieder in Richtung Lager. Ich kann mich an nichts erinnern. So hat man es mir erzählt, so steht es in meinen Papieren, so war folglich meine Kindheit. Manchmal denke ich: Schade, daß dort nicht etwas anderes steht. Jedenfalls kenne ich das Ghetto nur vom dürftige Hörensagen.³⁴

Jurek Becker, therefore, only knows the ghetto by hearsay, but despite his forgetfulness he wrote stories about the ghetto as if he were a master, hoping that perhaps by writing these stories he would remember something, but he never succeeded, perhaps he had begun to mistake inventions for memories³⁵. The theme of the lack of memory in *Die unsichtbare Stadt* is addressed on the occasion of a photographic exhibition on the Lodz ghetto. Through the images the writer tries to bring some memories to the surface of his mind, but the endless comparison of photos of his childhood has no effect. Becker studies the images of the women looking for his mother whose face he did not know. All that remained of her was the obscure image of a woman with two little hands that caressed him with gentle movements when he was agitated³⁶. But suddenly his concentration is distracted by two photos with children, one when they are waiting for their meal and the other when they have interrupted their games to look at the camera. These images suck his gaze. So he begins to look for his child figure among them, but in vain:

Nein, ein so Kleiner, wie ich damals gewesen sein muß, ist nicht dabei.³⁷

At this point the tone of the narration becomes very touching in the attempts to remember those children: perhaps he knew them, perhaps among them there was someone who had beaten him, or someone who could have become his friend. But for fear of showing himself too much emotionally, he immediately specifies:

Ich hasse Sentimentalitäten. This Verstandestrübungen, ich würde gern alle Löcher zustopfen, aus denen sie kriechen könnten, jedesmal, wenn meinen Vater die Rührung

³³For example in the interview by Paul O'Doherty and Colin Riordan, *Ich bezweifle, ob ich je DDR-Schriftsteller gewesen bin. Gespräch mit Jurek Becker*. In: Colin Riordan, *Jurek Becker*, p 12/23-23. This work will henceforth be referred to as CR.

³⁴Jurek Becker, *Die unsichtbare Stadt*, EG, p. 114. (When I was two years old I arrived in this ghetto, at five I left it again to go to the Lager. I can't remember anything. That's what I was told, that's what's written in my documents, that's how my childhood was consequently. Sometimes I think: it's a pity that something different isn't written there. In any case I only know the ghetto from hearsay.)

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Jurek Becker, *Ein Bild von Picasso und mir*, EG, p.57.

³⁷Jurek Becker, *Die unsichtbare Stadt*, EG, p. 116. (No, there is no one as small as I must have been then.)

überkam, bin ich aus dem Zimmer gegangen, bis er sich wieder im Griff hatte. Plötzlich spielt das keine Rolle mehr, die Bilder erfüllen mich selbst mit Rührung, ausgerechnet mich, und ich muß mich die dümmsten Tränen aus den Augen wischen.³⁸

The photographs are in front of him, "so unbegreiflich nah"³⁹, in a sequence that never seems right to him. He combines them, associates them, but no order seems possible to him, nor does it help that he tries to remember until he goes mad. This is a rare instance in which Becker expresses his emotion towards his Jewish past. Until then, the writer had always been annoyed when he was indicated as a "victim of fascism" and was frightened by such solidarity with his fellow sufferers. Here, instead, he recognizes the painful condition of wanting to take part in that common past but not being able to do so:

Ohne Erinnerung an die Kindheit zu sein, das ist, als wärest du verurteilt, ständig eine Kiste mit dir herumzuschleppen, deren Inhalt du nicht kennst. Und je älter du wirst, um so schwerer kommt sie dir vor, und um so ungeduldiger wirst du, das Ding endlich zu öffnen.⁴⁰

In conclusion *Die unsichtbare Stadt* the writer states that this is the part of his life that has decided everything by attributing an enormous value to his origins. This approach has as a result the trilogy of novels on Judaism and the Shoah⁴¹. But this should not be taken as a declaration by Becker of belonging to a Jewish identity. The relationship with it, as he himself recognizes, is very ambiguous: once the light of memory is extinguished, the bond with Judaism seems to him something mysterious, which he often sees only in negative with anti-Semitism or with philo-Semitic prejudices. In numerous statements in the text of *Mein Judentum*, Becker denies his Judaism as a key factor in his person and his work. Here the writer places himself in a privileged position by assigning himself the task of consciously exploring what he unconsciously seeks in his works: through the medium of the essay, the search for links with the writer's Jewish past, affirmed in the aforementioned trilogy of novels, is conspicuously denied. At the heart of this text is Becker's thesis that his identity was formed by external forces of history: that his parents were Jewish was a purely coincidental fact, consequently it was also coincidental that he had been a "victim of fascism". In the essay, his confused relationship with Judaism, an element of central significance in his life, emerges. The introductory form of *Mein Judentum* already reveals an unclear attitude towards this theme: in the first sentences quoted at the beginning of this paragraph Becker states that the difference between having Jewish parents and being a Jew seems

³⁸Ibidem, p. 116. (I hate sentimentality. These clouds of reason, I would gladly plug all the holes through which they could crawl out; every time my father was overcome by emotion I left the room, until he regained control of himself. Suddenly this no longer has any importance, the images fill even me with emotion, me, and I am forced to wipe the most stupid tears from my eyes.)

³⁹(so incomprehensibly close), Ibidem, page 117.

⁴⁰Ibidem, p. 114 (Having no memory of childhood is like being condemned to constantly carry around a box whose contents you don't know. And the older you get, the heavier it seems to you and the more impatient you become to finally open the thing.)

⁴¹*Jakob der Lügner*, *Der Boxer* and *Bronsteins Kinder* are often referred to by literary critics as a trilogy. All three novels deal with Jewish existence during the *Holocaust* and afterwards, presenting a historical continuity and thematic affinity. (This denomination of trilogy appears for example in *Klaus Briegleb: Negative Symbiose. Juden in der Literatur*. In: Hansers Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur. Bd. 12, Gegenwartsliteratur seit 1968, Munich 1992, pp. 121-133/128.) With these three novels Jurek Becker ideally traced a path that arose spontaneously and was not the result of a pre-established plan. The journey begins with the problem of the ghetto discussed in *Jakob der Lügner*, continues with *Der Boxer*, which can be considered a possible continuation of the story of Jakob, a ghetto survivor, and ends with *Bronsteins Kinder*, a novel that takes stock of current events and the past (See Irene Heidelberger-Leonard, *Auschwitz denken. Auschwitz schreiben*, HL, p. 193.).

important to him without explaining exactly why. His precision in answering the question about his origins by refusing to utter the words "I am a Jew" indicates a clear distancing of the writer from Judaism. It almost seems as if he wanted to deny his biological origins or that these do not matter. However, he adds later, he has had to suffer the consequences of this Judaism through discrimination and anti-Semitism. As already mentioned, Max Becker, Jurek's father, had always avoided talking about the past and Judaism, but he let his thoughts filter through his behavior and brief statements, which were of fundamental importance for his son's intellectual education.

Wenn es keinen Antisemitismus geben würde – denkst du, ich hätte mich also nur eine Sekunde als Jude gefühlt?⁴²

Indeed, like his father, Jurek Becker leaves one to think that he would never have felt Jewish if anti-Semitism had not existed. Jewishness and Judaism are in themselves difficult to define. Stefano Levi Della Torre distinguishes Judaism as a "Jewish doctrine" from Jewishness as a "Jewish condition", which includes the Jew who knows Judaism as what it is by symptoms, by name, by a residual rite in the family, by a memory or because he or his relatives were caught being Jewish by persecution. "The Jews" and "Judaism", in fact, are not the same thing: if by Judaism we mean a system of doctrines, traditions, practices, we must note that there are very many Jews who ignore them completely or in part. Taken together, the Jews are not a people but not a non-people either; they do not identify with a religion but have something to do with a religion, they are certainly not a race but their ancestry has weight. Thus the Jewish identity presents itself, in its variations, as an indeterminate specificity (Levi Della Torre, 1990, p. 34). Max Becker was "officially"⁴³ Jewish because he joined the Jewish community, but not for religious reasons, but rather to find people with a common past. He went to the synagogue but rarely and not to pray, always keeping little Jurek away:

Mich hat er nie mitgenommen, auch dann nicht, wenn ich ihn sehr darum bat⁴⁴

With this clarification, Becker once again underlines his estrangement from the Jewish faith by stating that he had never been in a synagogue, indeed that he was so estranged from that place, and consequently from that religion, that he was forced to make a reconnaissance there to avoid mistakes in a film. The interest in Judaism, therefore, could arise from professional needs without touching the emotional sphere. Later in *Mein Judentum* Jurek Becker continues to deny the spiritual connection and religious interest towards the Jewish faith always insisting on coincidence:

Die Gesellschaft oder Bekanntschaft von Juden habe ich nie gesucht und nie gemieden. Ob einer, mit dem ich es zu tun bekam, Jude war oder nicht, erfuhr ich, wenn überhaupt, nur zufällig.⁴⁵

His encounters with Jews were only casual and he was irritated if these people expected him to behave differently towards them, as if he had to recognize himself as belonging to the same group only because of birth. For Becker, however, belonging to a group of people called "Juden" derives from a voluntary decision, from an ultimately intellectual purpose because this also has to do with convictions, with rites and professions of faith. And when someone recognizes him as a Jew, he

⁴² *Mein Judgment*, EG, p.12 ("If there were no anti-Semitism – do you think I would have felt Jewish even for a second?").

⁴³SLG, p. 43.

⁴⁴ *Mein Judentum*, EG p. 13 (He never took me with him, even when I begged him to.).

⁴⁵Ibidem. (I have never sought or avoided the company or acquaintance of Jews. If anyone I happened to be dealing with was Jewish or not, I found out, if anything, only by chance.).

feels this as an "Okkupation"⁴⁶, or worse still as " the Mahnung eine Schuld zu begleichen "⁴⁷ that he had never taken on and did not intend to take on. Furthermore, although he feels the question of his origins as an important issue, he is annoyed by the conjectures and judgments of other people about him. It is very difficult for Jurek Becker to determine and describe what Judaism is for him. Perhaps it would be easier to say what distances him from Judaism: as an atheist, the Jewish religion does not convince him more than any other, he does not feel pride in the great works of some Jews, nor does he feel close to those Jews who establish themselves as masters in the Near East, for whom he claims to feel ashamed⁴⁸.

The defensive tone becomes softer when he speaks of an encounter with a believing Jew at the age of eleven. This encounter made a deep impression on him: this person made him experience for the first time that there is another path. Here Judaism becomes something intangible, more metaphysical than earthly, a strong and unrecognized bond because it is difficult to define it in clear and comprehensible terms. This passage expresses all the spirituality of a relationship with a vast and heterogeneous reality, a world of values that rotate and are never static, a non-univocal way of life that has multiple meanings, of which it is difficult to understand the logic that governs it. Although Jurek Becker sometimes feels the influence of Judaism, he still does not feel he belongs to that community and, continuing the essay, he goes back to exploring the reasons why he does not feel this bond: perhaps it could have been the fact that Judaism in the environment in which he grew up was not exposed to external attacks and therefore that need for unity that develops between people when they have to face a common problem had not developed. Even the fact of not feeling he belongs to Judaism, therefore, is determined by external and casual agents. The author will later admit that not belonging to a group does not exclude the possibility of being influenced by it. Becker therefore does not deny his Jewishness, he does not feel Jewish, and yet he feels a sort of involuntary attachment, which he is not aware of but which exists. He does not know what it means exactly to be Jewish and yet he is, he does not want to be labeled as an author of the Shoah, and yet many of his works have as their central theme the fate of the Jewish people and the problem of the integration of Jews in the aftermath of Auschwitz. When he is compared by critics to the major exponents of the literature of the "Ostjudentum"⁴⁹ he openly denies these opinions:

Als mein Buch "Jakob der Lügner" erschienen war, schrieben einige Rezensenten, ich befände mich damit in der Erzählertradition Scholem Alejchems und Isaac Baschevi Singers. Tatsache ist, daß ich zum ersten Mal Scholem Alejchem las nachdem ich das Musical „Der Fiedler auf dem Dach“ gesehen hatte, eine Weile nach dem Buch. And von Singer kenne ich bis heute keine Zeile.⁵⁰

It is natural that for Jurek Becker the literary heritage transmitted by previous generations was important. He often states that one of the authors who most influenced his writing was Kafka, a Jewish author. Kafka's influence on Jurek Becker's writing is evident not only in stylistic choices but also in thematic preoccupations, particularly the exploration of alienation and fragmented identity. Kafka's existential dilemmas resonate profoundly within Becker's narratives, where characters grapple with the absurdities and oppressions of their social realities. This alignment

⁴⁶Ibidem, p. 15 (occupation).

⁴⁷Ibidem (the exhortation to pay off a debt).

⁴⁸In line with the official policy of the GDR in 1977, Jurek Becker believed that Zionism was a form of racism and racial discrimination linked to Nazism and therefore criminal. This theory was retracted in 1996.

⁴⁹Eastern Judaism.

⁵⁰ *Mein Judentum*, EG, p. 21. (When my book "Jakob the Liar" was published, some reviewers wrote that I was in the narrative tradition of Scholem Alejchem and Isaac Baschevi Singer. The fact is that I first read Scholem Alejchem after seeing the musical "Fiddler on the Roof," some time after the book. And I don't know a single line of Singer to this day.)

can be observed in *Jakob der Lügner*, which echoes Kafka's portrayal of isolated protagonists. Like Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*, who becomes alienated from his family and society due to his transformation, Jakob's role as the bearer of false hope isolates him psychologically, even as it binds him to his community. Both characters illustrate the isolating effects of imposed roles within systems of incomprehensible oppression (Heidelberger-Leonard, 1992, p. 75). Similarly, the instability of identity—a recurring theme in Kafka's works, such as Josef K.'s futile search for self-definition in *The Trial*—finds a counterpart in Becker's fiction and essays. Becker often engages with the fragmented nature of identity, as seen in *Bronsteins Kinder*, where the protagonist is caught between the inherited trauma of his father's past and his own search for place in post-Holocaust Germany (Rock, 1996, p. 102). This crisis parallels Becker's personal reflections in *Mein Judentum*, where he interrogates his tenuous connection to Jewishness, shaped more by external forces than by personal conviction⁵¹. Like Kafka, Becker portrays identity as both imposed and elusive, a construct perpetually reshaped by historical and societal pressures. Kafka's use of existential irony to underscore the absurdity of human suffering is also mirrored in Becker's work. In *Jakob der Lügner*, Becker employs humor and irony to highlight the paradoxes of life in the ghetto, where acts of kindness can simultaneously perpetuate and resist despair (Hage 1992, 123). This interplay between resistance and complicity recalls Kafka's *The Hunger Artist*, where the protagonist's self-imposed suffering is both a rejection of societal norms and a futile bid for recognition. Becker's narrative strategy, much like Kafka's, engages readers in ethical reflection without prescribing clear resolutions, instead emphasizing the complexity of human resilience under duress. In this way, Kafka's legacy extends beyond stylistic parallels; it provides Becker with a framework for addressing themes of alienation, identity, and resistance. While Becker's focus on Holocaust narratives roots his work in specific historical contexts, the universality of Kafka's existential concerns imbues his fiction with a timeless relevance, bridging personal trauma with broader philosophical questions about human existence. Becker was certainly not a stranger also to the the Yiddish art. However, with Alejchem and Singer, he denies any connection, yet in his novel there are references to this author:

Hätte mich meine Mutter mit einem klügeren Kopf geboren, phantasiebegabt wie Scholem Alejchem, was rede ich, die Hälfte würde schon genügen, dann hätte ich solchen Mundraub nicht nötig.⁵²

So Jurek Becker, when he wrote *Jakob der Lügner*, was aware of the writer in question and not superficially. Perhaps he had not yet read his works but he knew his great creative force that had made him the most representative author of the Yiddish scene until the mid-1950s. Nevertheless he contests the possibility that this writer may have influenced his work. At first glance, this seems like a further rejection of the clearly existing links with Jewish culture. But looking more closely, the writer seems to be referring to those important influences, which he speaks of in the conclusion of *Mein Judentum*, "gravierend" but invisible influences, which make him a Jew in thousands of "Beziehungen" even if he does not feel like one:

Ich stelle mir vor, ich verkennte Einflüsse, die ganz gravierend sind, ich sähe Beziehungen nicht, die unübersehbar sein müßten, ich fühlte mich nicht als Jude, bin ich aber einer in hunderterlei Beziehungen einer.⁵³

⁵¹ *Mein Judentum*, EG, p.13.

⁵² Jurek Becker, *Jakob der Lügner* Suhrkamp Verlag Frankfurt am Main 1976, p. 110 (If my mother had given birth to me with a more intelligent mind, endowed with imagination like Scholem Alejchem, I say, half of it would be enough, I would not be forced into such plagiarism).

⁵³ *Mein Judentum*, EG, p. 21 (I imagine that I don't recognize influences that are very serious, that I don't see relationships that should be obvious, that I don't feel like a Jew, but I am one in a hundred different relationships.).

Jurek Becker stated in an interview in 1990 that he had much to thank for the Jewish oral narrative tradition (Rock, 1996, pp. 24/44, 31). Becker had not learned about this tradition in his home in Lodz, but later, during the post-war period in Berlin, when his father's acquaintances habitually visited him in the Becker house and they told stories. In the same interview, in fact, the writer states that as a child his father had motivated him a lot to "train" this tradition:

Richtig ist, dass ich nach dem Krieg auf Erzählen getrimmt worden bin (...) Das mündliche Erzählen spielte für mich, seit ich ein Kind war, eine Rolle.⁵⁴

For this reason the author has always had the desire to talk and tell, a fundamental characteristic of a storyteller (also characteristic of Jakob). This peculiarity of Jurek Becker, therefore, is linked to an aspect of Jewish family life and its culture. Through the memory of the stories he heard as a child, Becker also acquires a humor typical of the Jewish narrative tradition. The Jewish-Oriental tradition, in fact, is formed in daily life through a constant succession of stories that are expressed in the soul of its people and are thus transmitted and perpetuated. This tradition had become part of Becker's personality even if unconsciously. It is an aspect that brings him closer to Jewish authors even if he does not know them thoroughly. Aware of his ambivalent relationship with Judaism, Jurek Becker alternates in *Mein Judentum* phases of approach and distance from Jewish culture, trying to find logical explanations for this sometimes distressing condition. Without this, however, Jurek Becker would not be Jurek Becker. In fact, the author concludes the essay by stating that he does not know how to solve this enigma and that he wants to carry this mystery with him forever throughout his life; after all, this is a fundamental element that enriches his personality:

Wozu frage ich mich, muß ich einem solchen Rätsel unbedingt und auf den Grund kommen wollen? Wäre ich hinterher klüger? Ich fürchte nein. Ich fürchte: ich würde nur vergeblich versuchen, ein Geheimnis aufzuklären, ohne das mein Leben ärmer wäre.⁵⁵

3. The language question

On February 13, Max Becker moved with his son Jurek into a spacious apartment on Lippeher Straße 5 in Berlin, in the Soviet sector⁵⁶. Starting a new life was difficult for them: they had only insignificant advantages, such as housing subsidies, food or clothing, but they lived a difficult life economically. There was also no shortage of pro-Nazi accusations in which Jews were sometimes considered foreigners, mainly from the East, who had "occupied" Berlin. Like many *displaced people*, Max Becker felt like a "guest", a man perpetually on the move. He did not feel absolutely obliged to follow the ethical rules of a society that had locked him up in the ghetto and the Lager. To repay the life of little Jurek, he looked for things that represented something special. These could only be obtained on the black market. One day he brought him a bicycle, a sign of well-being, and sent his son around the neighborhood, even though it was too big for him, to show everyone what he could get for his son. Max Becker was unable to integrate into the new world and showered Jurek with material things instead of talking honestly with him about his past and his feelings. But becoming a German meant above all learning German. When Jurek was 8 years old, his father stopped speaking to him in Polish to force him to learn the new language. Jurek forgot Polish faster than he learned the new language, which meant that for a certain period the child had to literally remain "sprachlos"⁵⁷. Together with Polish, the association with German, the

⁵⁴Karin Graaf, Ulrich Konietzny (eds.), *Werkheft Literatur*, Munich 1991, p. 62. (It is true that after the war I was trained in storytelling (...) Oral storytelling has been important to me since I was a child.)

⁵⁵*Mein Judentum*, EG, p. 21 (Why do I have to want to get to the bottom of such a mystery? Would I be wiser afterwards? I'm afraid not. I'm afraid I would only try in vain to solve a mystery without which my life would be poorer.)

⁵⁶See SLG.

⁵⁷(speechless) Jurek Becker, *Vorstellung*, EG, p. 50.

“language of the Lager,” also disappeared. Language and memories were lost at the same time. German for him was a “Vatersprache”⁵⁸. Max Becker taught his son to read and write in a language he himself did not master well. For him, Yiddish was “bad German” and Polish was the language of anti-Semites. Jurek had to become a good German and speak German as he would have spoken Polish if things had gone differently. Jurek Becker now had to learn the language of his former oppressors. The first German words he remembered were the orders shouted to him and his parents in the ghetto: “alles alle”, “Antreten – Zählappell!” and “Dalli-dalli”⁵⁹. German was not learned spontaneously or in relation to the needs of his age, this process was a “Resultat einer organisierten Anstrengung”⁶⁰. In the lectures in Frankfurt in 1989 he spoke of his learning the language as a game: his father rewarded him with small change for every correctly written sentence and took it back for every mistake. As a result he developed a strong emotional bond with German, which he later referred to as a “Perversion”⁶¹. As an adult he was only aware of what this linguistic medium meant for his role as a “German” author. Belonging as German was the fundamental problem of Jurek and Max Becker in the aftermath of the war, and language was the only means of achieving it. At the age of 10, Jurek was placed in school. He was much taller than the other 6-year-olds and spoke much worse German than them, and many of his classmates thought he was stupid. So the faster he learned German, the less likely it would be that others would notice that he was a foreigner:

Und wenn die Fehler ganz und gar aufhörten, würden sie mich eines Tages, wenn auch fälscherischerweise, sogar für einen der ihren halten⁶².

Language represented a possibility of belonging to the group. Jurek did not want to be labeled as either a foreigner or a Jew. While other children were interested in age-appropriate things, he played with words and sentences:

Der Umstand, daß ich erst mit acht Jahren Deutsch zu lernen anfang, könnte verantwortlich dafür sein, dass mein Verhältnis zu dieser Sprache ein ziemlich exaltes wurde. So wie andere Kinder meines alters sich für Maikäfer oder Rennautos interessierten und sie von alle Seiten betrachteten, so drehte und wendete ich Wörter und Sätze. In einer extrem intensiven Beschäftigung mit der Sprache sah ich das einziges Mittel, dem Spott und den Nachteilen zu entkommen, die sich daraus ergaben, dass ich als einziger Achtjähriger weit und breit nicht *richtig* sprechen konnte.⁶³

In this intense activity with the language he saw the only way to escape the ridicule of his classmates. The better Jurek learned the language and tried to become like the others, the more his self-esteem grew. One of the myths of Central European anti-Semitism was the belief that something “Jewish” remained in people’s ways, no matter what language they learned. Even Jews who had no idea of Yiddish or Hebrew suffered from this complex. The cultural difference of Jews was felt in a marked way even when the differences did not exist. But in Jurek they did exist, in fact he spoke a language that he himself branded with the name “Lagersprache”. His fear that

⁵⁸SLG, p. 47.

⁵⁹WS, p. 10. (all-all, in line – roll call, forward-forward).

⁶⁰Ibidem, p. 10. (result of an organized effort).

⁶¹Ibid., p. 10. (Perversion).

⁶²Ibidem, p. 12. (And if the errors had completely disappeared, one day they would even consider me, even mistakenly, one of them.)

⁶³Jurek Becker, *Mein Judentum*, EG, p. 12 (The circumstance that I began to learn German only at the age of eight may have been responsible for the fact that my behavior towards this language became quite exalted. Just as other children of my age were interested in Beetles or racing cars, observing them from all sides, so I turned words and sentences over and over again. In such an intense occupation with the language I saw the only means of escaping the ridicule and inconveniences that arose from the fact that I, as the only eight-year-old, simply could not speak *properly*).

other people through his way of speaking could draw conclusions about him, was the fear of being considered Jewish and of not being able to integrate into German society. Even though Becker was able to learn German quite quickly, something foreign always remained hidden in his linguistic identity. In his youth, at a certain point when others no longer noticed any linguistic differences, he continued to feel like an outsider. In fact, despite his publishing successes, German always remained a foreign language for him, as he stated in his inaugural speech at the "Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung"⁶⁴ Darmstadt in 1983:

Das ist vorbei, der Lernprozeß ist inzwischen gut vorangekommen, wenn ich ihn auch längst nicht für abgeschlossen halte⁶⁵.

However, his linguistic problems initially also brought advantages, since he had to scrupulously follow the rules, this type of learning led him to a "besonders bewußten Verhältnis zur Sprache"⁶⁶. Over time, Becker considered this relationship with the language a disadvantage, confessing to loving some authors such as Arno Schmidt who:

Regeln verletzen, die Sprache zerbrechen, wie um nachzusehen was drin ist. The liegt mir nicht, und ich es doch versuche, habe ich das empfinden, mich zu verstellen.⁶⁷

And furthermore, in his above-mentioned inaugural speech, he made the surprising statement that he did not hear "Zu-Hause-Sein" in the German language:

ich komme mir nicht zu Hause inmitten all dieser merkwürdigen Wörter und Konstruktionen und Andeutung vor. Ich will nicht sagen, daß ich mich unwohl darin fühle, das nicht. Doch es fehlen mir Vertrautheit und eine Sicherheit, die zum „Zu-Hause-Sein“ wohl gehören und die ich dann und wann bei anderen zu bemerken meine. Ich dagegen muß immer auf den Hut⁶⁸.

Taking up a definition by Heidegger that language is the "Haus des Seins", Chaim Shoham states that learning the language was a means of acquiring a new and independent identity. According to Chaim Shoham, through the narrative act, Jurek Becker tries to create a new identity and erase the old one. For David Rock, on the other hand, with the narrative act by means of the German language, Becker was looking for a Jewish identity that he had erased from his memory as a child. Writing and life were for Becker in an inseparable relationship. In his novels he brings into play imaginary biographical constellations (therefore not really lived) through the medium of fiction. The Holocaust robbed him of his memories, and literature thus became a sort of substitute. Other sources were based on research and reflections. This favors a perfect direction that helps to avoid too manifest emotions. The criteria of good literature for him are "Tiefgründigkeit, Sprachgenauigkeit oder Ernsthaftigkeit"⁶⁹.

⁶⁴Academy of language and poetry.

⁶⁵Jurek Becker, *Vorstellung*, EG. p. 50 (This is finished and, in the meantime, the learning process has continued well, even if I do not consider it concluded at all.).

⁶⁶WS, p. 12 (particularly conscious relationship with language).

⁶⁷Ibidem, p. 12 (they break the rules, they break the tongue, as if to check what is inside. This is not to my taste and if I try anyway, I feel like I'm faking).

⁶⁸Jurek Becker, *Vorstellung*, EG. p. 51 (I don't feel at home among all these strange words and constructions. I don't mean to say that I feel uncomfortable among them, no. But I miss a familiarity and confidence that are presumably part of "being at home" that I think I notice from time to time in others. I, on the other hand, have to be constantly on my guard.)

⁶⁹Ibidem, p. 50 (depth, linguistic accuracy or seriousness).

Although literary critics had almost without exception praised his abilities as a writer, during his 1983 speech Jurek Becker was clearly skeptical about the invitation to join the Academy and thus be counted among the German writers:

Ich habe inzwischen einige Bücher geschrieben, die mich ziemlich enttäuschen; dennoch müssen die Bücher für Sie der Grund gewesen sein, mir diese Ehre anzutun. Das freut und beruhigt mich ein wenig, wenn ich auch einen Grund darin sehe, Ihrem Urteil gegenüber skeptisch zu sein.⁷⁰

Despite this skepticism, Jurek Becker remains an important figure in German literature. This "Reihe von Zufällen"⁷¹ which, as he himself stated, resulted in his becoming a German writer, also determined his highly original style. Marianna Birnbaum comments that she has never read a German writer who writes so lapidarily as Jurek Becker. She calls his style "Reichtum der Einfachheit"⁷². Hannes Kraus, on the other hand, comments with the following words:

eine eigentümliche Mischung aus Kargheit und gedanklicher Präzision, einleuchtend klar und schnörkellos; eine Synthese aus Anstrengung und Leichtigkeit, die keine Nachlässigkeit und kein überflüssiges Wort toleriert. Nicht Fabulierlust prägt diese Sprache, eher ein Hang zur Minimalisierung und eine fast zwanghafte Suche nach der zutreffenden Formulierung.⁷³

According to Kraus, Jurek Becker's language is loose and precise at the same time, characterizing not only the dialogues of the series but also the novels, interviews and literary essays of the writer. The ductus is difficult to describe and even more to imitate. Becker's aspiration would be to express states of fact with simple and possibly exact means, building a new complexity in the whole. In the end, it is not something static that comes out, but a double meaning that is sometimes malicious. Jurek Becker does not want to show any Achilles heel: in his literary texts, as well as in interviews and discussions. He clearly disguises himself behind different roles: in public he likes to play the role of the provocateur, in private life from time to time that of the "oberflächlichen, anmaßenden, und rightaberisch Gernegroß"⁷⁴. These masks are signs of a distrust that has developed towards those he encountered as a child, whose language has now provided him with the raw material for his work. In connection with language, his need not to show weaknesses is also quite clearly articulated. Behind his laconic sentences the existential drama of the Holocaust unfolds. He did not want to accept forced identities (of Jew, of victim, of recipient of compassion). With the help of language he attempted to integrate with his potential executioners. With the same language Becker had to resist common models of overcoming, hasty explanations, repression, imposed roles, sentimentality, superficial harmonizations. Knowing his tormented identity, the author developed a defense against pity. He apparently never wanted to encounter situations in which he could not manage alone again. His cold and lean inclination towards linguistic perfection is an expression of a need for autarchy. Precision was to protect him

⁷⁰ Ibidem, p. 50 (In the meantime I have written some books that were quite disappointing to me; however for you these books must have been the reason that led you to do me this honor. This pleases me and reassures me a little, even if I also see in this a reason to be skeptical in the face of your judgment).

⁷¹ *Mein Vater, die deutschen und ich*, EG, p. 177 (series of coincidences).

⁷² Marianna Birnbaum, *Gespräch mit Jurek Becker* (1988), HL (wealth of sobriety).

⁷³ Hannes Kraus: *Sprachspiele – bitterernst*, LA, p.39 (a strange mixture of poverty and mental precision, clear and without frills. A synthesis of commitment and lightness that does not tolerate carelessness and superfluous words. This language is not made of a wealth of imagination but rather of a minimalist inclination and an almost forced search for the pertinent formulation).

⁷⁴ Heinz Kahlau, *Verteidigung eines Vaters*. In: *Liebes- und andere Erklärung. Schriftsteller über Schriftsteller*, Berlin DDR, Weimar, Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag Berlin, 1972, p. 21 (superficial, arrogant and overbearing puffball).

from “Denkschwache”⁷⁵, literature became a means to achieve “größtmöglicher Bewußtheit”⁷⁶, while irony and sarcasm served to preserve him from numbness of vision:

Ich suche den einem Stoff unangemessenen Erzählstil. Wenn ich eine Geschichte erzählen möchte, die man, wenn nichts anders hört als die äußeren Umstände, als Tragödie empfindet, suche ich den komischen Weg, sie zu erzählen. Wenn ich eine Geschichte habe, die saukomisch klingt, suche ich die Tragödie daran.⁷⁷

Calculation, play and provocation become weapons against an irrational inhumanity that is spreading. What sounds like a desire for provocation refers to an emergency situation in historical life.

Conclusion

Jurek Becker’s literary contributions provide a powerful lens through which to explore the intersections of trauma, memory, and identity in Holocaust literature. His nuanced approach, exemplified in works like *Jakob der Lügner* and *Bronsteins Kinder*, challenges traditional narratives of heroism and victimhood, emphasizing instead the complex moral ambiguities faced by individuals in the shadow of historical atrocity. Drawing on personal experiences and engaging with collective memory, Becker constructs a narrative landscape that reflects the fractured and often paradoxical nature of post-Holocaust identity (Schneider, 2020, p. 45). The use of humor and irony as coping mechanisms in Becker’s work subverts conventional expectations of Holocaust narratives. These tools not only allow characters to navigate their circumstances but also invite readers to engage critically with the ethical and emotional dimensions of survival. Becker’s dialogic storytelling aligns with trauma theories by Cathy Caruth, who describes trauma as “an enigma of survival,” and Shoshana Felman, who emphasizes testimony as a means of witnessing and ethical engagement (Caruth, 1996, p. 58). By situating individual stories within broader historical and cultural frameworks, Becker’s works demonstrate how literature can serve as a form of bearing witness, fostering dialogue between past and present (Rosenfeld, 2019, p. 63).

Beyond its literary achievements, Becker’s oeuvre offers insights into contemporary issues of memory politics, cultural integration, and the ongoing struggle to reconcile historical injustices with present realities. His exploration of the Jewish experience in post-war Germany, as well as his critique of opportunism and complicity, resonates in today’s global context, where societies continue to grapple with questions of identity, belonging, and moral accountability. In bridging the personal and the universal, Becker’s works remind us that confronting the past is an essential step toward understanding and shaping the future (Hage 1992, 121). By blending deeply personal narratives with broader reflections on resilience and resistance, Becker’s writing remains a testament to the enduring power of literature to illuminate the complexities of human existence in the face of profound historical trauma. His work not only memorializes the past but also challenges us to think critically about how we engage with it, ensuring that its lessons remain vital in an ever-evolving world.

⁷⁵Jurek Becker, WS, p. 31 (intellectual weakness).

⁷⁶Ibidem (maximum awareness).

⁷⁷ Karin Graaf, Ulrich Konietzny, *Jurek Becker*, Iudicium, Berlin, 1991, p.65. (look for that narrative style of inexact material. If I want to tell a story of which you feel nothing but the external circumstances, experienced as a tragedy, I look for a funny way to tell it. If I have a story that seems so funny, I look for tragedy in it).

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