MODERN LANGUAGES & JOINT SCHOOLS
PAPER XIV EXTENDED ESSAY

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PAPER XIV TITLE: **Writing in Exile: Displacement and Identity in Ruth Weiss' Work**

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Honour School of Modern Languages (German)

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Summary

This essay is concerned with the writing of Ruth Weiss, a Jew who emigrated from Germany to South Africa in 1936. I begin by providing some historical context about German Jews emigrating to South Africa during the Third Reich and the attitudes to German Jews typically held by South Africans during this period. I will then explore the psychological toll that being exiled takes on refugees, drawing on the work of the cultural psychologist John Berry to consider why some immigrants are better able than others to adapt to life in a new host society. Arguably, Ruth Weiss is an example of someone who successfully adapted to her new circumstances, despite the fact that she was highly critical of South Africa. A contrast case is provided by Rudolf Schwab, another German Jew who emigrated to South Africa and who wrote letters to his family, explaining his circumstances there. In some ways Schwab also adapted to life in South Africa, although he differed strongly from Weiss in being much less critical of Apartheid. I will also explore Weiss' attitudes to Germany and why she continues to write in German, despite having had to flee from her homeland. Inevitably, I will consider the reasons why Jews fled from Germany and how the Holocaust affected the writing of Jewish authors. In this context, I will touch on the debate about whether testimonial writing is better suited than fiction in writing about highly traumatic events such as the Holocaust and, given that Weiss herself is a Holocaust survivor, the extent to which this debate is relevant to her writing. The majority of Weiss' literary output is concerned with Jewish characters and displacement, reflecting her own experiences as a displaced person who was exposed to serious forms of social conflict. I will explore how differences between her fictional and testimonial writing are influential in leading the reader to understand the past, including differences in opinions and political perspectives. I will draw on my reading of Weiss' books *Wege im Harten Gras*, *Meine Schwester Sara* and *Mitzis Hochzeit*, published interviews with Weiss, my study of the archive maintained by the Basler Afrika Bibliographien, the few secondary sources on Weiss, and my personal correspondence with Weiss.

Writing in Exile: Displacement and Identity in Ruth Weiss' Work

Abbreviations used for primary sources

DWI: Stäcker, Claus (interviewer), 'Ruth Weiss: "I try to do what is right"'. *Deutsche Welle,* 2014. <https://www.dw.com/en/ruth-weiss-i-try-to-do-what-is-right/a-17910802>
JIS: Weiss, Ruth, Juden in Südafrika (*Der Überblick*, 1978, Basler Afrika Bibliographien).
LFF: Weiss, Ruth, *Ein Leben für Freiheit und Frieden* (Aschaffenburg: Selbstverlag, 2014).
MH: Weiss, Ruth, *Mitzis Hochzeit* (Augsburg: MaroVerlag, 2007).
MSS: Weiss, Ruth, *Meine Schwester Sara* (München: dtv Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co KG, 2004).
PC1: Personal correspondence with Ruth Weiss, May 24 2019.
PC2: Personal correspondence with Ruth Weiss, September 11 2019.
PC3: Personal correspondence with Ruth Weiss, September 12 2019.
PC4: Personal correspondence with Ruth Weiss, January 10 2020.
WHG: Weiss, Ruth, *Wege im Harte Gras* (Lich/Hessen: Verlag Edition AV, 2016).
WSL: Weiss, Ruth, 'Wir sind die Letzten: Zeitzeugengespräch in der Alten Synagoge Essen', April 9 2019.
WOZ: Fistarol, Corina (interviewer), 'Können Sie sich in Deutschland je wieder heimisch fühlen?'. WOZ Die Wochenzeitung (2014). <http://static.woz.ch/1427/durch-den-monat-mit-ruth-weiss-1/koennen-sie-sich-in-deutschland-je-wieder-heimisch-fuehlen>.

During the Third Reich, many authors and individuals who later became authors went into exile due to the existential threat posed by the Nazi regime. A well-known example is Michael Hamburger who left Berlin when he was 9 to settle in London. The author who is the subject of this essay, Ruth Weiss, is a Jew who left Germany with her family in 1936, when she was 12 years old. She is one of the relatively few German Jews who emigrated to South Africa. Exile from Germany was prevalent in this period.[1] Whereas many of the exiled writers from this era had already established themselves as authors in Germany, Weiss, like Hamburger, was a child. She spent most of her formative years in South Africa and was able to integrate into South African society. Despite this, most of her books were originally

[1] For an analysis of exile from Germany and how it influences writers and other artists, see Evelein, Johannes F., *Exiles Traveling: Exploring Displacement, Crossing Boundaries in German Exile Arts and Writings, 1933-1945* (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2009), pp.13-20.

published in German. Remarkably, Weiss was exiled twice more as an adult, from South Africa and Rhodesia, due to her political writings in those countries. Drawing on her first-hand experience of what it was like to be oppressed, Weiss formed strong views about discrimination in these countries, especially South Africa. Her experience of exile, and how this influenced her writing, is the main focus of this essay, together with her sense of identity and attitudes to her country of origin, Germany.

Jewish emigration to South Africa

When Hitler came to power in 1933, there was a fundamental caesura in the lives of Jews in Germany. Some left Germany in fear that the situation would deteriorate; others left for practical reasons, for example because they lost their jobs and could not find alternative employment. The fates of these refugees diverged widely. Their lives had to be re-established by finding a country willing to accept them, somewhere safe to live, and new employment. Together with these practical problems, they faced the arguably more difficult and, as Gilbert puts it, 'the infinitely more prolonged process of creating a new identity in a new language, in unfamiliar places, among unknown people and cultures.'[2] Thus, even when the most pressing of the practical problems had been resolved, refugees faced ongoing struggles in rebuilding a sense of self and a feeling of belonging.

South Africa was a difficult place for Jewish emigrés to establish themselves. Before the 1930s, anti-Semitism in South Africa had been largely restricted to negative stereotypes. However, there was an upsurge of anti-Semitism in the 1930s, resulting in the 'Jewish Question' becoming prominent in public debates.

[2] Gilbert, Shirli, *From Things Lost* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017), p. 54.

Stimulated by Nazi racial theories, right-wing movements such as the South African Greyshirts adopted Nazi symbols, and developed propaganda arguing against Jewish immigration. The Quota Act of 1930, intended to limit the immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe, did not apply to German refugees. With correct documentation and a financial guarantee, Jewish refugees from Germany could enter South Africa. As a result, just over one thousand Jewish refugees arrived between 1933 and 1935. With rising Jewish immigration from Germany, pressure to limit it increased, and the governing United Party, worried about losing support to the anti-immigrant National Party, introduced legislation to restrict immigration in 1937. Although not explicitly directed at Jewish immigration, this legislation nonetheless was intended to restrict Jewish refugees from Germany, for now 'the selection of immigrants was no longer based on objective criteria such as country of origin, but on unspecific and subjective criteria such as 'assimilability'.'[3] It is estimated that between 1933 and 1939, 6,500 Jews emigrated from Germany to South Africa. These German-Jewish immigrants, victims of anti-Semitism in their home country, arrived in a colonial country that was sharply segregated along racial lines, where 'coloureds' were deemed to be inferior to white people, and black people were deemed to be inferior to 'coloureds'. As Milton Shain puts it, 'White Jews, who were still the victims in Europe, were suddenly the beneficiaries of a racial pecking order.'[4]

It might seem surprising that German Jews, who had themselves been subject to discrimination, would willingly become involved in oppressing other social groups.

[3] Hellig, Jocelyn, 'Seeking refuge: German Jewish immigration to Johannesburg in the 1930s, including aspects of Germany confronting its past' (Johannesburg: South Africa Jewish Board of Deputies, 2005).
[4] Shain, Milton, 'Jews and apartheid in South Africa', *Deutsche Welle,* 2012. <https://www.dw.com/en/jews-and-apartheid-in-south-africa/a-16391662>

Many German Jews who emigrated to South Africa, however, did little to fight against Apartheid, partly because they followed the example of South African Jews. Moreover, they benefited from their newfound social status in a society where they were less discriminated against than they had been in Germany. In *From Things Lost*, we can read letters that the German Jew Rudolf Schwab sent to his family after emigrating to South Africa. Apart from Weiss, Schwab's correspondence forms one the very few accounts by a German Jew living in South Africa in that era. Schwab sought to distance himself from his past and tried to completely reinvent himself. He refused to speak German at home.[5] The historian who produced the book, Shirli Gilbert, comments that Schwab 'threw himself determinedly into the project of becoming South African'[6] and observes that he 'came to love his adopted homeland and saw himself as a kind of ambassador'.[7] Indeed, Schwab went so far as to reject Germany altogether. He can be seen as an example of what Berry calls *assimilation*, a term describing immigrants who do not seek to maintain their old cultural identity and are keen to have close contact with the host culture. In his paper *Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaption*, Berry argues that this is not the most effective strategy for adapting to a new culture. Instead, he concludes that 'integrationist or bi-cultural acculturation strategy appears to be a consistent predictor of more positive outcomes than…assimilation.'[8]

We can also draw on Berry's notion of assimilation to explain Schwab's political views. Schwab supported the United Party member of parliament, Sarel Tighy, who

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[5] Gilbert, p. 131.
[6] Gilbert, p. 131.
[7] Gilbert, p. 133.
[8] Berry, John W. 'Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation', *Applied Psychology: An International Review,* 46 (1997), p. 27.

in 1940 became renowned for his energetic campaign to remove non-whites from Johannesburg and thereby uphold Apartheid. Schwab's relationship with Tighy reflects his conservative political leanings. Like many other Jews, Schwab supported the United Party and enjoyed the economic benefits of White domination. Of Schwab, Gilbert writes that:

> before the 1980s …, few South African Jews understood anti-Semitism to be related in any meaningful way to anti-Black racism, and most accepted the reigning order with little compunction. That German Jews were victims of what we would now call a racialised system was at the time neither evident nor especially significant. Most were too preoccupied with the basic concerns of existence to be concerned about institutionalised racism.[9]

It seems that in his concern to forget his past, Schwab failed to stand up for other persecuted groups in society. This is a stance that he and many other Jews either consciously or unconsciously adopted in South Africa. In focusing on their own lives and enjoying the benefits of living a relatively discrimination-free life, they failed to see the true nature of their new society or reflect on and draw parallels with their own experiences.

This contrasts starkly with Ruth Weiss' story. When she arrived in South Africa at the age of 12, she was immediately able to compare the discrimination she had experienced in Germany with the discrimination that black people in South Africa were experiencing. In her autobiography, she notes: 'Derartiges kannte ich noch nicht, aber ich stellte schnell fest, dass es in Südafrika gleiches Recht für alle gab, nur nicht für Schwarze, genau wie es in Fürth nur gleiches Recht für Arier gegeben hatte' (*WHG*, 34).

[9] Gilbert, p. 150.

In a 1978 article only available in the *Basler Archiv*, Weiss admits that many Jews in South Africa, like Schwab, adapted to life there, despite Apartheid: '…der jüdischen Gemeinde dazu verführt, sich der Apartheidgesellschaft anzupassen' (*JIS*). However, Weiss also notes that many in intellectual circles actively opposed government measures: 'Man kann aber trotzdem sagen, daß es in allen Oppositionsgruppen, auch unter den Wissenschaftlern und unter den Literaten Juden gibt...die die Apartheid bekämpfen.'[10] Weiss was one of these[11] and she adapted to life in South Africa by means of what Berry calls *integration*, which involves 'a willingness for mutual accommodation'.[12] Unlike Schwab, Weiss continued to speak German, returned to Germany in the 1950s to visit her in-laws (with whom she continued to have contact) (PC4), and even returned to live in Germany at a later stage of her life. She was therefore able, at least to some extent, to maintain a German identity. I argue that this contributed to her critical stance in relation to South Africa. When I asked Weiss about this, she responded as follows:

> Many German refugees adapted to [South Africa]. They were desperate and needed to make a new life for themselves. I think my abhorrence was fostered by the fact that we lived in Mayfair, a Poor White suburb, away from the immigrant ghettoes in the inner city – I was constantly confronted with the daily effects of apartheid… also, my later friends at the UKV [*Unabhängigen Kulturvereinigung*, a group of exiled German and Jewish intellectuals] reinforced my feelings. I wasn't the only one who hated the racist system, but yes, we were in the minority among the immigrants, just as white rejection of apartheid in the society as a whole were in the minority. (PC1)

[10] Gilbert, p. 150.

[11] It is worth noting some of the other 'Literaten Juden' who sought to oppose Apartheid. Joe Slovo, who emigrated from Lithuania in 1935, at the age of 9, became a senior figure in the ANC. Denis Goldberg was not an immigrant but was prominently involved in the leadership of the ANC and Spear of the Nation (MK) and resented the lack of support from the Jewish community.

[12] Berry, p. 24.

In directly experiencing the unequal and unjust society in which she lived, Weiss was able to draw parallels between her personal experience of discrimination and how black persons were treated in South Africa. Moreover, as an adult she became a journalist and was able to travel the world, which presumably increased her awareness of how others saw South Africa. This may have reinforced the unbiased perspective she gained through her experience of being exiled. Weiss also differed from Schwab in her motivation. Although she committed herself to learning English and Afrikaans, she was not, especially in later life, strongly motivated to remain in South Africa. Without knowing more about individual circumstances, it would be unreasonable to condemn those who appear to have been unable to apply lessons from their experiences in Germany to their new situation in South Africa. Nevertheless, Weiss stands as an example of someone who used her own experiences to stand up for social justice, demonstrating particular moral courage.

Ruth Weiss' national identity and ambivalent relationship with Germany

Having left Germany in 1936, in later life Weiss returned to the country several times to work and to live there. It may seem surprising that Weiss, a Jew with personal experience of the effects of anti-Semitism, returned to Germany in search of a new home. To some degree, this presumably reflects the identity issues that arise when someone is displaced from their country of birth. As Berry argues, it is never easy to strike a psychologically comfortable balance between old and new identities. Evidence of the extent to which Weiss struggled with these issues can be found in her autobiography. There she acknowledges that experiencing ambivalence about the degree to which she is rooted in one culture rather than another; for example, she writes that she no longer has the 'festen Glauben meiner Kindheit' (*WHG*, 23). Some outsiders nevertheless found it difficult to understand

her return to Germany. Her friend Ruth Kadalie wrote that 'Ihre Entscheidung, künftig in Deutschland zu leben, stieß bei einigen in ihrer jüdischen Verwandtschaft auf Unverständnis' (*LFF*, 64). In her autobiography, Weiss makes it clear that it was not an easy decision. She went to work for *Deutsche Welle* in the 1970s and experienced great difficulties living and working amongst Germans, who appeared to her to be consumerist, self-satisfied ('das Für-sich-leben' [226 WHG]) and doing all they could to ignore Germany's recent past. She also writes that she went with a heavy heart ('mit viel Zuversicht' [212 WHG]) to settle in her country of birth, feeling awkward ('so viel störte mich' [226 WHG]) and uneasy ('I hadn't felt at ease in Germany' [PC1]) about living there.

Many Jews struggled to find their place in society after the war, especially in German society. Having survived persecution and concentration camps, some Jews could not face everyday life, leading them to commit suicide, as portrayed in Christian Petzold's film *Phoenix*. After the Holocaust, many Jews regarded continuing to live in Germany as unimaginable; indeed, the World Jewish Congress stated that German Jews would never again be Jewish life in Germany because of its 'blood soaked soil.'[13] Nevertheless, there was an influx of Jews into Germany after the fall of Nazi Germany. This is partly because Jews were liberated on German soil and chose to stay, but also because Jews still faced anti-Semitism elsewhere in the world and chose to return there.[14] A further factor is that many Jews wanted to emigrate to the United States and the American zone in post-war

[13] Jewish Congress, 'Germany', in *Resolutions Adopted by the Second Plenary Assembly of the World Jewish* Congress, Montreux, Switzerland, 27 June–6 July 1948 (London: Odhams Press, 1948), p. 7.
[14] Kaiser, Max, Podcast interview with Michael Brenner. *New Books in German Studies*, 12 November 2018. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2018).
<https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/michael-brenner-history-jews-in-germany-since-1945/id671875824?i=1000423672960>.

Germany was seen as a stepping-stone to emigration.[15] As a result, there was an active Jewish community in Germany in the period between 1945 and 1950. However, it was a small community: in West Germany there were around 15,000 Jews.[16]

By the 1980s it became clearer that there would be a permanent Jewish population in Germany; it was no longer seen as a temporary state of affairs.[17] Slowly, Jews who had fled Germany before the war returned. By returning to Germany in the 1970s, Weiss was therefore a member of a Jewish community that was still finding its feet. She explains that her return was partly motivated by the contact she had in Germany with her parents-in-law, but also the security her association with *Deutsche Welle* brought: 'Not only was this a well-paid job with pension rights, but it was also a job that I enjoyed' (PC1). Moreover, in South Africa she had continued to speak German with her family: 'My mother spoke German at home, she hated to speak 'tortured' English with us and I continued to read German books during my childhood/teenage years as well as English books' (PC1). Another factor that may have encouraged her to return to Germany is that she enjoyed positive interactions with intellectual, left-leaning Germans in South Africa (the UKV), which may have coloured her vision of what Germany and Germans were like.

Weiss' discomfort with living in Germany raises the question of why she wrote the majority of her books in German, especially given that 'English is the language I think and dream in' (PC1). Furthermore, she might have been able to reach a larger audience by writing in English. By way of explanation, Weiss wrote to me: 'I

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[15] Kaiser, *New Books in German Studies*.
[16] Angelos, James, 'The New German Anti-Semitism'. *New York Times Magazine* (May 21 2019). <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/21/magazine/anti-semitism-germany.html>.
[17] Kaiser, *New Books in German Studies.*

used German when I began to write 'Wege', aware that what I was saying was of interest for Germans primarily' (PC1). This shows that she already had an audience in mind when starting her autobiography. In an interview with *Deutsche Welle*, Weiss states, 'It is important for young people to be able to speak to the people who witnessed all this. That is why I am prepared to take on this role, as long as I can' (DWI). In choosing to write in German, Weiss was addressing the need for Germans to come to terms with their country's past.

Another perspective on the issue of why Weiss wrote primarily in German is provided by Nobel laureate Kertész, who, in reflecting on the writing of émigré Jews, observed that 'the language in which we speak lives as long as we speak it. Once we fall silent, the language is lost too – unless one of the larger languages takes pity on it.'[18] He went on to note that German is the most likely to do this, describing the language as a 'temporary asylum'[19] for Jewish authors. The use of German by Jews in their writing may in part connect Jewish authors to a broader body of émigré literature. A similar kind of point has been made by Kristina Wydra, who suggested that 'For many German writers who left Germany during the Third Reich, their native language became by far the most important element of their identity, a piece of home that they held on to for dear life.'[20] It seems then that the victims of the Holocaust saw it as necessary to write in German not only to address a German-speaking audience but also because the German language, perhaps ironically, provided a shared means of reflecting on and communicating about their suffering.

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[18] Kertész, Imre, 'The Language of Exile'. *The Guardian,* (October 19 2002). <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/oct/19/featuresreviews.guardianreview12>.
[19] Kertész, *The Guardian*.
[20] Wydra, Kristina, 'I speak, therefore I am? German language and national identity'. Alumniportal-Deutschland.org (2016). <https://www.alumniportal-deutschland.org/en/germany/country-people/german-language-identity/>.

<u>The issue of *Heimat*</u>

Weiss makes it clear that although she now lives in Denmark and feels distanced from Germany, she nevertheless finds it important to visit the country for educational purposes. In her nineties, she continues to tour Germany to tell her story. I attended a talk in Essen [WSL] that she gave during one of those tours, at which an audience member asked *"*Wo für Sie ist Heimat?*"*. Her reply was that *Heimat* is a place where one is able to feel comfortable and make friends in order to properly integrate into society. Such an interpretation places an emphasis on subjective feeling. When I asked her further about this, Weiss replied:

> I have no homeland. Germany was my birthplace. South Africa is where I lived for the longest stretch of 30 years, I'd rejected [it], it was a country whose inhumanity was unacceptable. In other countries I was a guest who was allowed to live and work there. (PC1)

Interestingly, in my correspondence with Weiss, she translated my use of the word *Heimat* as 'homeland'. The fact that Weiss gave two apparently different responses to questions about *Heimat* can be explained in terms of the different contexts in which the questions were raised, one an on-the-spot answer to a question posed during a talk and the other a (presumably) more reflective response to a question sent by email. As Boa and Palfreyman have argued, the meaning of *Heimat* varies as a function of context and audience.[21] Whereas Bausinger[22] suggests that *Heimat* is a space in which an individual is able to experience safety, Ernst Bloch argues that: 'Die vergesellschaftete Menschheit im Bund mit einer ihr vermittelten Natur ist der Umbau der Welt zur Heimat,'[23] an interpretation that emphasises a feeling rather than a physical place. Although the answer Weiss gave in Essen

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[21] Boa, Elizabeth & Palfreyman, Rachel, Heimat, 'Introduction: Mapping the Terrain', in *A German Dream: Regional Loyalties and National Identity in German Culture 1890-1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 1-29.

[22] Bausinger, Hermann, 'Kulturelle Identität - Schlagwort und Wirklichkeit', in *Heimat und Identität: Probleme regionaler Kultur,* ed. by K. Köstlin (Neumünster: Wachholtz, 1980), p. 20.

[23] Bloch, Ernst, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (Frankfurt /M: Suhrkamp, 1959), p. 334.

shows that she is clearly aware of this 'feeling' interpretation, her response to my question implies a 'place' when applying the term to herself. Such ambivalence is understandable and may reflect the fact that Weiss has lived in many countries and as a result may be less inclined to interpret *Heimat* as referring to a feeling of belonging.

Another kind of ambivalence is evident in her answers to questions about belonging and identity. In one of the final sentences of her autobiography, Weiss wrote that 'Zwei Dinge werden immer mit mir sein: die Liebe meines Sohnes zu mir und meine zu ihm, und zu Afrika' (*WHG*, 273). Moreover, in the preface to Weiss' autobiography, her friend Nadine Gordimer wrote: 'Sie hat sich als eine der Ihren erwiesen und wird von den Afrikanern als solche vollständig angenommen. Afrikanität ist nicht nur eine Frage der Hautfarbe; sie ist vor allem eine Angelegenheit des Herzens sowie menschlicher Bindung und Anteilnahme, und Ruth Weiss verfügt über beides' (*WHG*, 272). This view is echoed by another friend, who described Weiss as 'eine Afrikanerin' (*LFF*, 103). These all point to a strong emotional bond with Africa. However, in response to my own question about *Heimat*, cited above, Weiss said that she rejected South Africa because of the country's politics. Moreover, in another interview, for *Die Wochenendezeitung*, she insisted that Africa is not her *Heimat*: 'Nein, von Anfang an nicht' (WOZ). In reflecting on why she has no *Heimat*, Weiss always refers to politics. In the same 2014 interview, she goes on to comment: '…[I]ch erlebte in Südafrika die gleiche Diskriminierung wie in Deutschland; die Zielgruppe waren einfach nicht Juden, sondern Schwarze. Das ging mir völlig gegen den Strich' (WOZ).

In response to my own question, she also mentioned not being able to accept South Africa's 'inhumanity' (PC1), a clear reference to Apartheid. In her quest for

social justice and her efforts to ensure that history does not repeat itself, Weiss seems to have become a displaced person not only physically but also, at least to some extent, psychologically. By not having a *Heimat*, however, one could argue that Weiss has been able to maintain a critical distance. Gordimer writes in an afterword to Weiss' autobiography: 'Die Heimat zu verlassen heißt, zu überleben' (*WHG*, 270). This could be interpreted as: whoever has no home has the freedom to create one of his or her own. Weiss' friend Helmuth Orbon has also commented that: 'Sie braucht keine Organisation, keine Ideologie, keine Partei oder Gruppe, um sich für die Verdammten dieser Erde einzusetzen. Das gab ihr viel mehr Freiheit und Kreativität als anderen Komponenten der Bewegung' (*LFF*, 99). In the face of adversity, Weiss has shown strength of character to remain so true to her ideals. Although Weiss does not necessarily have a *Heimat*, Berry's notion of integration does hold for Weiss. She found an intellectual *home* and a circle of friends in South Africa's left-wing political scene; the only thing that stopped her from becoming more deeply attached to the country was her commitment to social justice.

Ruth Weiss' writing[24]

Weiss is not a Holocaust survivor in the narrowest sense of the term. However, according to the broader definition used by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, she is: 'The Museum honors as survivors any persons…who were displaced, persecuted, or discriminated against due to the racial, religious, ethnic, social, and political policies of the Nazis... this definition includes…people who were refugees or were in hiding.'[25] Weiss was a refugee from Nazi Germany and her life was deeply affected by the events that culminated in the Holocaust. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these events played a central role not only in her autobiography (*Wege im Harte Gras*) but also in her fiction (*Meine Schwester Sara* and *Mitzis Hochzeit*), where she focuses on the lives of displaced Jewish characters.[26]

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[24] It is worth noting that the German editions of *Wege im Harten Gras* and *Meine Schwester Sara* may not completely reflect Weiss' current views. Both texts have been translated into English and the English editions contain passages that were not included in the German editions. When I asked Weiss about this, she stated (PC2 & PC3) that the translations were done 'much later' and that in the case of *My Sister Sara*, her editor 'felt some facts needed additional explanation so many years after the end of Apartheid.' Weiss also stated that although she does not tailor her writing to a certain audience, she does sometimes feel the need to explain aspects of German history that may be unknown to English-speaking audiences. This raises the concern that, despite writing in German in order to address an audience that should be coming to terms with its past, the German-language editions of Weiss' books have not been revised. In this connection, Weiss commented that she has not updated the German edition because she is certain 'it will soon have its run.' This shows that Weiss was not deliberately seeking to tell her English-reading audience something that is not being conveyed to her German-reading audience, but instead points to the fact that time differences in the publication of the German- and English-language editions and the (perceived) lack of a market for a revised German edition have in combination resulted in these textual differences.

[25] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 'Who is a survivor?', <https://www.ushmm.org/remember/holocaust-survivors>.

[26] *Meine Schwester Sara* describes the story of a young German girl, Sara, who is adopted by an Afrikaner family in the aftermath of the Second World War. Her adoptive parents are unaware of her Jewish identity until Sara's official papers arrive. She is then shunned by her adoptive family, especially the father. However, Sara herself remains unaware of her Jewish identity until this is revealed much later in a court case. Despite not knowing her background, Sara is keenly aware of the social injustice in South African society and becomes politically engaged in a way that conflicts with the pro-Apartheid views of her adoptive family. *Mitzis Hochzeit* tells the story of a woman, Mitzi, who leaves her wealthy Prussian family to live in Berlin in the 1920s. There, she meets three men, including a Jew named Stephan whom she later marries. During the war, one of her rejected suitors, Hans, reveals to the Nazis where Mitzi and Stephan have gone into hiding. Meanwhile their

The debate about testimony and fiction with regard to the Holocaust is therefore relevant to Weiss' writing. This issue of genre taps into the debate about whether the Holocaust was an appropriate topic for literature or simply too appalling to be written about. Victims had experienced something that had never previously been experienced, certainly not on this scale. This is crystallised in Theodor Adorno's infamous but often misunderstood 1951 pronoucement: 'Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch.'[27] This reflects the enormity of the event, making any literary effort seemed trivial by comparison. Moreover, it would be difficult to write about the Holocaust if there were no memories of the past to guide survivors in the present. Indeed, for any traumatic event, is difficult to write about something when there is no socially shared understanding of the event. People's experiences differ, and in any case, there is no *single* event.

As a result of difficulties involved in representing the Holocaust in literature, literary critics have raised various issues. One concern was with the ethical limits of representation, along with the view that the Holocaust is a 'limit event', one that taxes our ability to understand it. Drawing on Lyotard, Ann Parry suggests that the Holocaust takes on the status of the 'originary repressed' (something so traumatic that it cannot be represented in words): 'it is a silence, lost to representation…All art can do is struggle with and bear witness to the unsayable.'[28] However, Gillian

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daughter Amanda, together with Mitzi's other suitor, Felix, who is also Jewish, emigrate to Australia. After later discovering that Hans had betrayed Mitzi, Amanda and Felix avenge her death.

[27] Adorno, Theodor W., '*Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*', in *Gesammelte Schriften,* Bd. 10.1 (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1980), p. 30.

[28] Parry, Ann, 'Idioms for the Unrepresentable: Post-War Fiction and the Shoah', *Journal of European Studies,* 27 (1997), p. 420.

Rose has argued that it is *essential* to write about the Holocaust precisely because of its ineffability:

> To argue for silence, … that is, non-representability, is *to mystify something we dare not understand*, because we fear that it may be all too understandable, all too continuous with what we are – human, all too human (emphasis in original). [29]

Indeed, and perhaps inevitably, Holocaust writing did emerge, in both testimonial and fictional form. Testimonial writing tells us what a person remembers about events. Such testimonials help to create a shared social memory of the event. However, testimony cannot simply be regarded as the 'truth', because of the fallibility of human memory and the possibility of fictionalising the past. Testimony is also limited to the experiences of the individual witness, whereas fiction authors are not constrained by what they personally have experienced. This is why many authors, such as Kertész, used fiction as a way to tell their own stories: for Kertész, writing fiction was easier than writing testimony, in part because it is less self-confrontational.

Weiss also includes autobiographical elements in her novels. *Meine Schwester Sara* (first published in 2002) and *Mitzis Hochzeit* (first published in 2007) are both stories about Jews who escape the Holocaust by moving to a different continent, a pattern of events that resonates with the author's own experience. As a result of having escaped and survived, the protagonists in Weiss' novels experience feelings of guilt.[30] These also echo Weiss' own experience. In her autobiography she writes:

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[29] Rose, Gillian, 'Beginnings of the Day: Fascism and Representation' in *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 43.

[30] For other accounts of Holocaust survivor's guilt, see Levi, Primo, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York, Vintage International, Simon and Schuster, 1988), p. 73.

> In Südafrika war ich verängstigt, hatte stets das Gefühl, es dürfe mir nicht so gut gehen, wie es mir ging. Auch angesichts der immer offensichtlicheren Diskriminierung der Schwarzen hatte ich stets das Gefühl, versagt zu haben. Ich hatte mein Schicksal, meinen Krieg, im Exil überlebt. (*WHG*, 81)

In *Mitzis Hochzeit*, Mitzi's daughter Amanda (a half-Jew through her father) and Mitzi's Jewish friend Felix escape persecution by moving to England and eventually to Australia. Felix comments: 'Mit dieser Schuld, muss ich leben' (*MH*, 192). Amanda and Felix find themselves living as foreigners in a colonial country, reflecting on the momentous events that had happened in Germany. There are parallels here with Weiss' own situation. In the quotation from Weiss' autobiography, cited above, it seems that she also dwelt on the fact that she had avoided her 'fate' and struggled to come to terms with the fact that she could start a new life abroad whilst other Jews were denied that opportunity. It is evident that Weiss was able to draw on her own experiences of living in exile in writing about the characters of Amanda and Felix.

The parallels between fact and fiction are even stronger in *Meine Schwester Sara,* partly because it is set in South Africa but also because Sara, like Weiss, sees parallels between the fate of Jews in Germany and that of Black people in South Africa during Apartheid:

> [Die Juden] wurden zu Gefangenen im eigenen Land, ihre Menschenrecht und ihre Menschenwürde wurden in den Staub getreten…Hier bei uns befinden sich die Schwarzen in einer Situation, die mir erscheint, als ob sie auch nicht in Ordnung ist…Schwarze haben nicht dieselben Bürgerrechte wie Weiße. Unsere Rassengesetze – sind die nicht ebenfalls ungerecht? (*MSS*, 163-4)

The origin of Sara's 'radical' political views can be traced to an incident that echoes an event in Weiss' own childhood. For both of them, a school friend (Nellie in Weiss' case and Belinda in Sara's) was expelled from their respective schools because she was a 'coloured'. This event clearly has an impact on Sara (just as

the real-life event affected Weiss). Soon afterwards, Sara's adoptive brother Jo observes that in one of the letters she sends him, she is favourably impressed by protests against new Apartheid laws, and uses the same term (*Frauen*) to describe women of colour and white women, something that does not sit well with him (*MSS*, 131-2). Furthermore, in *Meine Schwester Sara*, Belinda's expulsion from school encouraged Sara to associate herself with a left-leaning circle of friends, much as Weiss did in her association with the UKV. As we can see, Weiss includes autobiographical elements in her novels. Unlike Kertész, however, she does not use fiction (at least, not exclusively) as a way of coming to terms with her past. As discussed above, she maintained a link with Germany, but also wrote an autobiography and thus through the process of writing was able to address her own past and struggles with identity. Through her fictional writing and testimony, Weiss has therefore been able deal with events from her personal history that also deeply affected other Jews who survived the Holocaust.

Turning to what Weiss' fiction contributes that is distinctive from her testimonial writing, it is worth considering the role of identification with the protagonists. Indeed, identification on the part of the reader is more likely to occur in fiction than in testimonial writing. Weiss chose to have Jo, a white Afrikaner, narrate the story of *Meine Schwester Sara*. In this way, we are able to see the events from the perspective of a non-Jew who comes from a background in which Apartheid is unquestioningly accepted, but who nevertheless sympathises with his adoptive sister Sara. Jo's loyalty to the system in which he grew up is evident when he speaks out at a student protest meeting in the UK: 'Ihr kennt mein Land nicht! Es ist unmöglich, Südafrika zu verstehen, ohne dort gelebt zu haben! Oder zumindest dort gewesen zu sein!' (*MSS*, 174).

By telling the story from Jo's perspective we gain an insight into the 'other' side of the political divide, a perspective that we do not get from Weiss' autobiography. This exploration of an alternative viewpoint helps the reader to understand what it would have been like to be an Afrikaner coming from a relatively privileged family. Through this exploration of the Afrikaner, pro-Apartheid viewpoint, we gain a better understanding of the basis of their opinions. An example is provided by the notion that the Afrikaners' zealous patriotism stemmed from the involvement of the English in the Boer War:

> Ja, die Deutschen hatten gewusst, was es hieß, eine Nation zu erziehen. Schlimm, dass es so gekommen war. Ihr Führer hatte die richtigen Ideen gehabt, er war genial gewesen, auch als Kriegsführer, aber was konnte er tun gegen die verdomde engelse, die sich die mächtigen Amis als Verbündete geholt hatten. Dieser Roosevelt, war der nicht sogar Jude? (*MSS*, 19)

Here we gain an insight into Afrikaner thinking, based on their particular reading of history. However, Weiss develops the character of Jo in such a way that we are eventually able to regard him in a different light. Throughout the novel, Jo continues to defend his adoptive sister when she is the target of discrimination and at the end of the novel, they confess their love for each other. After Sara's sudden death we are able to see how profoundly she has influenced his life and his political views:

> Es war mir erst sehr spät aufgegangen, wie absurd Apartheid war. Wie dumm alle diese Rassenüberheblichkeiten und Theorien waren und sind. Ich schlenderte meinen Lieblingsweg zu einem kleinen Teich entlang und dachte weiter über Sara und die Vergangenheit nach. (*MSS*, 118)

The fact that the story is told through Jo's eyes allows us not only to see the world from his perspective but also to understand how Sara influenced his political views. Jo comes to understand both sides of the debate at the end of the novel, after Sara and his father Zacariah are both dead. Jo remarks that they influenced each other's

lives: ‘Im Tod waren sie vereint, diese beiden, die sich trotz der Ablehnung von einer Seite nie ganz voneinander getrennt, ihr Leben gegenseitig beeinflusst hatten’ (*MSS*, 287). Here Jo is suggesting that beneath their largely negative attitudes to each other stemming from sharp political differences, Sara and Zacariah are ultimately both human beings. This enables both Jo, and consequently the reader, to see that being exposed to the other side of the debate enabled Sara and Zacariah to better understand the origins of their political differences, but also to treat the ‘other’ side of an intense political debate in a more ‘human’ way.

By the end of the novel, it is almost impossible not to sympathise with Jo. He states that he spent longer at the side of Sara’s dead body than at his father’s (*MSS*, 286). Jo’s deep love for Sara leads us to sympathise with him more than if he had simply been a loving brother. Thus, there is a parallel between Jo’s ideological journey and that of the reader. We are not only able to understand why Jo initially held conservative political views, but also how and why he later moves away from such views. Through this narrative, Weiss exposes the reader to different political perspectives and leads the reader to conclude, just as Jo has done, that Apartheid is unjust.

A further example of how Weiss’ fictional writing evokes sympathy for a flawed character is found in *Mitzis Hochzeit*. We learn at the end of the novel that Hans, one of Mitzi’s rejected suitors, betrayed Mitzi and Stephan by giving away their wartime hiding place, leading to their deaths. Hans explains his reasons for doing so; he loved Mitzi and did not want to see her with Stephan: ‘Ich wollte sie nicht töten – nicht Mitzi, ich liebte sie abgöttisch’ (*MH*, 262). Hans is portrayed as a Nazi

sympathiser. He explains his hatred for the Jews, despite his friends, Stephan and Felix, being Jewish: 'jeden Tag gab es Hetzreden gegen die Juden. Jeden Tag! ... Juden waren keine Menschen, sie waren schlimmer als Ungeziefer! … – der Mann hypnosierte alle' (*MH*, 258). Hans is a morally questionable character. He defends his actions by declaring his love for Mitzi, which is evident throughout the novel, but also on the grounds that he had been 'hypnotised' into believing that Jews are inferior and ought to be punished. Hans fails to accept responsibility for his actions. All these factors count against him, in the reader's eyes. However, after he admits his actions, Amanda (Mitzi's daughter) and Felix (another of Mitzi's former suitors) abandon Hans in the Australian landscape and later discover that he died from a snake bite: 'Beide waren sich bewusst, dass sie nie wieder unbeschwert zusammensein konnten. Sie würden überhaupt nicht mehr zusammensein können. Sie hatten keine Waffe benutzt, aber sie hatten trotzdem gemordet' (*MH*, 263). The narrator portrays them as murderers and thereby places Amanda and Felix on the same moral plane as Hans. Although Hans, Amanda and Felix are not *directly* responsible for the deaths that take place, we are led to think about the extent to which they play a role in these deaths, in that each of them makes conscious decisions in the events leading up to those deaths. On a broader level, this issue of personal responsibility can be related to the responsibility of ordinary German citizens and the role they played in events that culminated in the Holocaust. Weiss is implicitly inviting the reader to compare and contrast the two scenarios and to consider whether individuals may be morally culpable even when they are not directly responsible for the death of a fellow human.

Indeed, in reading about the death of Hans at the end of the novel, the reader is left pondering moral equivalence and does not finish the book condemning one particular character, but rather is led to question the extent to which people with

very different backgrounds may be flawed in different ways. As readers, we are led to realise that we should not regard Hans as more blameworthy than Amanda and Felix simply because our natural sympathies might lie with two Jewish characters, rather than a Nazi sympathiser. Further examples of Weiss calling into question assumptions about characters include Pip, a life-long friend of Mitzi who becomes an SS soldier but later helps Mitzi to save a communist from being killed (188 MH); and her sister's husband, Hubertus, who is a Nazi party member but who later comes to realise the error of his ways: '…wir hatten Unrecht! Wir wollten die rote Gefahr bekämpfen. Doch jetzt – jetzt wissen wir, wer sie sind – Diebe, Mörder, korrupte ehrlose Männer!' (*MH*, 243). These inconsistencies between expectation and outcome cast doubt on the reader's prejudgement of characters and suggests that people are capable of acting in morally admirable or despicable ways, regardless of background.

The critic Eaglestone has argued that while readers of Holocaust fiction can identify with characters in the text, there is a danger that identification involves an attempt to comprehend the incomprehensible:

> We who come after the Holocaust and know about it only through representations are frequently and with authority told that it is incomprehensible. However, the representations seem to demand us to do exactly that, to comprehend it, to grasp the experience, to imagine the suffering, through identifying with those who suffered.[31]

According to this argument, fictional writing that evokes identification is problematic, while testimonial accounts of the Holocaust are less likely to have this effect, and therefore may be thought of as less problematic. Indeed, Eaglestone also argues that:

> Many forms of prose writing encourage identification and while testimony cannot but do this, it at the same time aims to prohibit identification, on

[31] Eaglestone, Robert, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 19.

> epistemological grounds (a reader really cannot become, or become identified with, the narrator of a testimony: any such identification is an illusion) and on ethical grounds (a reader should not become identified with a narrator of a testimony, as it reduces and 'normalizes' or consumes the otherness of the narrator's experience and the illusion that such an identification creates is possibly pernicious).[32]

For Eaglestone, therefore, testimonial writing about the Holocaust gives rise to fewer ethical problems. Novels, he argues, tend to encourage us to identify with ethically dubious subject positions, such as perpetrator, passive victim, or bystander, leading to a 'tension… that unbalances even the most subtle of [. . .] novels.'[33] However, this argument presupposes that readers are uncritical and cannot deal with such complex issues in their reading. Eaglestone appears to have a somewhat limited view of readers' imaginative abilities, assuming that they are unable to deal with the humanity of the inhumane. He thereby underestimates the reader's capacity for moral discernment. Indeed, many novels, notably those of Günter Grass,[34] provoke the reader to adopt a critical stance in relation to characters' accounts of their actions. Allowing the reader to identify with characters in texts set during this period and to see how they fluctuate between different moral positions, helps us to appreciate the fact that ordinary human beings are capable of performing extraordinarily inhumane actions.

In the case of Weiss' fiction, I would in any case argue against Eaglestone's critique. Identification with a character involves some degree of empathy, in the sense that one is able to put oneself into that character's shoes, and is an essential ingredient of Weiss' novels. Weiss was a first-hand witness to two of the most important events in modern history (the Holocaust and the Apartheid regime) in

[32] Eaglestone, pp. 42-3.
[33] Eaglestone, p. 132.
[34] See Grass' use of unreliable narrators in novels such as Grass, Günter, *Die Blechtrommel* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1993.

which one group in society was persecuted by another. To comprehend how such events could have taken place, it is vital to hear from those who carried them out. It would be easy to dismiss the perpetrators as inhuman, as inherently evil and therefore unlike ordinary citizens. The importance of seeing the perpetrators of evil acts as human beings who experience the same kinds of emotions that we do is that we realise that we, too, might be led to act in the same way if we found ourselves in similar circumstances. If we identify with these characters, we gain an insight into their motivations. Weiss presumably hopes that others will realise that history can repeat itself and as a result refrain from acting in the same way. Whether or not Weiss was aware of the victim/perpetrator debates which arose in the 1990s following reunification[35] (as a result of her continued contact with Germany), her writing is relevant to this issue. Weiss avoids turning the central figures in her fiction into stereotypically evil characters and thereby does not enable readers to distance themselves from them. The perpetrators are not less than human. This is in stark contrast to the narratives given to citizens by the German and South African governments during the Third Reich and the Apartheid regime. Their propaganda was precisely that certain groups in society were in some sense 'less than human' and that it was therefore legitimate to treat them as such. Identification and empathy with such groups is exactly what was absent during these dark periods in history.

There are some interesting parallels between the two novels and how they relate to the broader historical context. Both novels focus on a strong female character whose views conflict with those of their respective families, especially with

[35] For contributions for this debate, see Cohen-Pfister, Laurel & Wienröder-Skinner, Dagmar (eds.), *Victims and Perpetrators, 1933-1945: (Re)presenting the Past in Post-Unification Culture* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006).

dominant male figures. In both cases, these powerful males attempt to silence the strong women and are to some extent successful in doing so. This can be seen as reflecting the ways in which the Nazi and Apartheid regimes suppressed dissent in German and South African society. Thus the family dynamics can be seen as a microcosm of what was happening on a national level. In this way, Weiss reflects her own strong, female fictional characters and is able to deal with the theme of silencing and dissent in a way that is effective precisely because it is not blatant. Another parallel between the two books and broader societal events is that they conclude on an optimistic note. Although both strong women ultimately perish, they leave a lasting legacy. Sara is able to inspire her adoptive brother to alter his political views. In Mitzi's case, the fact that she made it possible for her daughter Amanda to escape to Australia created the opportunity for Amanda to start a family of her own. The novel ends with her granddaughter's plan to get married, a wedding that echoes Mitzi's own and is, in some sense, a gift from her. Through these two female characters, Weiss is therefore able to portray both the significance of resistance and dissent and the ultimate futility of silencing such voices.

In creating a compelling fictional narrative, authors use their imagination and invite readers to use theirs. However, for imagination to work, it needs to be based on what we already know (otherwise it is literally 'unimaginable'). In the case of the Holocaust, gaps in our understanding of what happened can be filled by reading historical sources, watching documentaries or reading testimonies. Weiss' autobiography is therefore important because it provides us with a basis for our imagination. It is the extraordinary account of a German Jew who survived the Holocaust only to witness another social group being systematically discriminated against. Her testimony shows that history *can* repeat itself within decades and

therefore serves an important informative function. However, her fiction is also important because her novels enable us to see the characters as humans and thereby provokes a self-reflexivity that does not always result from reading testimony. This is not to argue that one form of writing is more effective than the other; rather, both are essential in providing the reader with complementary ways of learning from and engaging with the past. Admittedly, the distinction between the two genres is not always clear. For example, by reading Weiss' autobiography, the reader is able to identify elements in her novels that are based on her own experiences. However, knowing this is not essential, because the purpose of fiction is not to document history, but rather to add another dimension to the reader's experience. Whilst it is important to be factually accurate in portraying historical events, one of the goals of fiction is to engage the reader's emotions, rather than merely impart information. Reading fiction set in or around the Holocaust is therefore not simply to learn what happened, but to resonate with the enormity of the events, identify with the characters, and thereby arrive at a deeper understanding of *why* it happened.

Conclusion

It is evident that being a displaced person has had a profound influence on Weiss' life and sense of identity, and this influence is reflected in her political views and her writing. She has personal experience of being the target of discrimination and has also seen what it is like for other groups to be discriminated against. Her years in South Africa, and her role as a journalist, enabled her to engage with and understand both sides of the political divide during the Apartheid era. Her sustained contact with Germans and the fact that she continued to write in German enabled her to keep engaging with the country from which she escaped. She has continued

to be critical of Germany and sceptical about the extent of the progress made by its citizens in accepting the role they played during the Third Reich, but her engagement means that she is not dismissed or rejected out of hand. Her balance and her readiness to understand those who hold views contrary to her own are reflected in her writing. There we can see that Weiss does not invite the reader to sympathise overly with any one character, for in their different ways they are all flawed. Instead, she leads readers to question their judgements of characters by showing that they are capable of acting in unexpected ways or that their political convictions change in the course of a story. Many of her fictional characters act in ways that are morally or politically dubious; something that creates certain expectations on the part of the reader. However, at a later stage of the novel these same characters act in ways that confound these expectations. As a politically left-leaning exile living in South Africa, it is possible that Weiss was tempted to prejudge people, but her writing reflects her understanding of the ways in which people's thoughts and actions are shaped by circumstances. The fact that she herself has been exposed to such changes in circumstance has presumably shaped her own thinking to some degree. However, her commitment to social justice has been unwavering and this consistency is vital if one is to influence others, just as Sara's unwavering political commitment led Jo to change his beliefs. Weiss, Amanda, Felix and Sara are all outsiders. I propose that the fact that Weiss is a displaced person, that she does not have a fixed identity, and can therefore view events from an outsider's perspective, has enabled her to see the world in a different light and to remain true to her convictions.

Overall, Weiss' fiction deals with humans' capacity to act inhumanely by broadening our empathy for perpetrators as well as victims. Her books may not be highly critically acclaimed or regarded as high literature and it could be argued that

her direct and accessible writing style reflects her training as a journalist. However, I would argue that accessible literature on the topics she addresses is important precisely because it has the capacity to reach many people. Less readily accessible books may achieve greater acclaim but are sometimes too complex to have an immediate impact on ‘ordinary’ readers. I suggest that Weiss regards herself as much as an educator as an author. This is evident in the way she continues to tour Germany well into her nineties. Indeed, from 2002 to 2004 *Meine Schwester Sara* was selected as a set text for *Realschulen* in Baden-Württemberg. Although Weiss’ multiple achievements led to her being nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005, it seems regrettable that her writing is not more widely known.

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