

## More on Auschwitz Jokes

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MOST students of sick humour cycles were probably unaware of the existence of Auschwitz jokes circulating in post-World War II Germany until the publication of 'Auschwitz Jokes' in *Western Folklore* in 1983.<sup>1</sup> These jokes are so repugnant and distasteful that some have questioned whether they should have been published at all.<sup>2</sup> One letter of protest, written by a Jewish graduate student in folklore at UCLA, was sent to the editor, while another angry response from a UC Berkeley student appeared in the campus newspaper, *The Daily Californian*, suggesting that it would be better if such 'sick' jokes were ignored by scholars.<sup>3</sup>

The answer, of course, is that censorship, be it imposed from without or be it self-imposed, is unthinkable in an academic environment of free inquiry and expression. Auschwitz jokes exist and continue to be told in contemporary West Germany, whether or not a sample of them is published in an American folklore journal. The authors of the article in question did not make up the jokes; they merely reported them. Folklorists, in our view, have an obligation to record and report folklore accurately, no matter whom it might offend. One might even go so far as to argue that if someone had observed and called attention to the degree of anti-Semitism in Germany *before* the holocaust, conceivably lives could have been saved. In any case, if anti-Semitism does flourish in Germany, or anywhere else in the world for that matter, one would think that Jewish scholars would be among the first to seek to document and attack such continued bigotry. Instead, the original article was rejected without review by *Jewish Social Studies*, and several hate-mail letters were sent to the American co-author of the article. One can't help wondering when some Jews will finally learn that pretending that anti-Semitism doesn't exist provides no help in a world unfortunately filled with intolerance and discrimination.

We should like to state once more that anti-Semitism is alive and well in Germany. According to a 1982 survey, less than twenty-five percent of all West Germans have abandoned the traditional pattern of prejudice, a frightening statistic if true.<sup>4</sup> Visual evidence of the seemingly endless anti-Semitic sentiments is manifested in the form of wall graffiti which consist of drawings of swastikas or gallows displaying a dangling victim bearing the Star of David.<sup>5</sup> Such drawings are analogues of the vicious jokes which advocate mass murder and which seek to make light of the death camp reality. And 'occasionally the prejudice goes from verbal violence to physical...The violence has chilling resonance in West Germany, where small neo-Nazi groups have seized the racial issue and made it their own.'<sup>6</sup> It is sad to think how easy it still is to document the persistence of German anti-Semitism, and it is alarming to realize that such prejudice feeds in part on a fantastic refusal to admit that the methodical murder of millions of Jews in Nazi Germany ever occurred.

With the construction of the death camps, the Nazis created a world so horrible that it became difficult to confront. For many years after the war, countless Germans pleaded ignorance or claimed that the atrocities never happened at all. While this hesitation to face the historical facts might be understood as an attempt to escape or resolve the problem

of guilt, such a repression of memories seems to have left Germans unable to feel compassion for the tormented victims or unable to grieve for the dead.<sup>7</sup> The denial of the past continues, although with the modern twist of mockery:

In 1978, at a demonstration of right-wing extremists in Hamburg, the participants gathered, dressed in black leather suits, wearing 'donkey-masks' over their faces, carrying large signs strapped to their bodies which read: 'Ich Esel glaube immer noch, dass in deutschen KZs Juden vergast wurden' (What an ass I am for still believing that Jews were gassed in German concentration camps!).<sup>8</sup>

In German folk speech as in English, an 'ass' or 'donkey' refers to a stupid, naive and dim-witted fool. Here the expression is used to ridicule those who have come to accept the atrocities of the death camps as historical fact. We find a similar response to such a direct confrontation with the past in the following incident, which evidently occurred in connection with the première of the German film *Die Erben* (The Inheritors) in 1982, a semi-historical docudrama about anti-Semitism in post-war Germany:

Just as the showing of the film at Hanover's 'Hollywood' theatre had come to its conclusion, a gang, dressed in black, marched in. Twenty toughs, headed by the previously convicted Michael Kühnen, planted themselves in the front rows, and when in the panel discussion mention was made of six million murdered Jews, they burst into roaring laughter.<sup>8</sup>

We see here no sign of remorse, regret, or sorrow. The response in both these instances consists of mockery and laughter. One might be tempted to argue that these actions reflect only the thinking of a relatively small set of neo-Nazi groups. However, we suggest that the views expressed by these actions are by no means confined to such extremist groups. The reason we say this is that the exact same sentiments are articulated in jokes about Auschwitz. Treating Auschwitz as a joke is of the same order of horror and insensitivity as the extremist demonstrations cited above. The difference is that many more individuals tell and listen to Auschwitz jokes—in private—than participate in public demonstrations.

To the corpus of seventeen Auschwitz joke texts included in the 1983 essay, we should like to add the following examples:<sup>10</sup>

- (1) Wie heisst ein judisches Feriendorf mit zwei Buchstaben?  
 What is the name of a Jewish vacation resort with two letters?  
 KZ [i.e. Konzentrationslager]  
 CC [concentration camp.]

In this joking riddle, the reality of the death camps is rendered metaphorically as a resort. The nuances hint at a place of rest, relaxation and enjoyment, but a second text, often told following the first one, reveals the true nature of this 'last resort.'

- (2) Wie betritt der Jude das Feriendorf?  
 How does the Jew enter the vacation resort?  
 Durchs Tor.  
 Through the gate.  
 Wie verlässt er es?  
 How does he leave it?  
 Durch den Schornstein!  
 Through the chimney!

The chimneys or smokestacks from the ovens appear as a common motif in Auschwitz jokes.

- (3) Was ist der Unterschied zwischen dem Weihnachtsmann und dem Juden?

What is the difference between Santa Claus and the Jew?

Der Weihnachtsmann kommt von oben durch den Schornstein.

Santa Claus comes down through the chimney from above.

One can compare this German text with 'sick' American jokes involving Santa Claus, e.g., 'What is the difference between Santa Claus and God?' 'There is a Santa Claus.' or 'Why can't Santa Claus have any children?' 'Because he comes only once a year and then it's down a chimney.' Somehow a sexual joke and a denial of the existence of God seem less 'sick,' if one can make such an ethnocentric value judgment, than burning Jews in ovens so that they therefore go up through the chimney from below!

From jokes about chimneys, we may move to texts involving ovens and burning. It still seems incredible that the incineration of human victims could possibly serve as a common theme for jokes.

- (4) Ein Bus voller Juden fährt 1972 nach München die Olympischen Spiele anzuschauen. In München sind aber alle Hotels belegt. Sie müssen in ihrem Bus von Hotel zu Hotel fahren, um zu fragen ob noch was frei ist. Der Leiter der Gruppe geht in ein Hotel rein und fragt den Portier: 'Haben Sie Platz für einhundert Juden?' 'Nein,' kommt die Antwort, 'Wir haben auf Ölheizung umgestellt.'

A bus full of Jews drives to Munich in 1972 to watch the Olympic games. But in Munich all the hotels are occupied. They have to drive in their bus from hotel to hotel to ask whether there are still vacancies. The tour-guide walks into a hotel and asks the doorman: 'Do you have room for one hundred Jews?' 'No,' comes the answer, 'we have switched to oil-heating.'

The reference to the 1972 Olympics rather than to the more commonly mentioned 1936 Berlin games may have been stimulated by the PLO terrorist murder of Jewish athletes at the 1972 games in Munich.

- (5a) Was ist der Unterschied zwischen einem kleinen und einem grossen Juden?

What is the difference between a short and a tall Jew?

Grosser Jude brennt länger!

A tall Jew burns longer.<sup>11</sup>

- (5b) Was ist der Unterschied zwischen einem dicken und einem dünnen Juden?

What is the difference between a fat and a thin Jew?

Brennt länger.

[The fat Jew] burns longer.

The reduction of masses of Jews into ashes is a theme repeated in the next text from Hannover in 1982:

- (6) Wieviele Juden braucht man für die Olympischen Spiele 1936?

How many Jews does one need for the Olympic games of 1936?

30,006. Sechs für das Olympische Feuer und 30,000 für die Aschenbahn...

30,006. Six for the Olympic flame and 30,000 for the cinder-track.<sup>12</sup>

Another version of the same joke contains an even more explicit reference to how the corpses were utilized:

- (7) Wieviele Juden braucht man zum Bau eines Stadiums?  
 How many Jews does one need for the construction of a stadium?  
 12,000. 10,000 für die Aschenbahn, 1,000 zum bauen, 500 für die  
 12,000. 10,000 for the cinder-track, 1,000 for the labour, 500 for the  
 Abtrittmatten und 500 für die Seife.  
 door mats and 500 for the soap.

Recurrent are images of the 'condensed' Jew who fits into an ashtray, who is reduced into the form of a door mat (a convenient metaphor for a people oppressed by the goose-stepping boots of the German military) or a piece of soap. Germans did experiment with transforming Jewish corpses into soap, a cruel metaphorical *reductio ad absurdum* to convert 'dirty' Jews into an agent of cleanliness.<sup>13</sup>

Auschwitz jokes are also recounted in countries of the Eastern Block. Although such texts draw on similar images, e.g. the equation of Jews and soap, they appear to convey a slightly different message from the ones told in West Germany. Historically, anti-Semitism has also flourished in Poland and many of the death camps were actually located in German-occupied Poland, e.g. Auschwitz is the German name for what was the Polish town of Oswiecim. A Polish text from 1981 may serve as an illustration:<sup>14</sup>

- (8) Do you know why there is a shortage of soap?  
 Because the authorities are trying to turn the soap back into Jews.

This text at least hints at some possibility of remorse. The extreme shortages of essential goods in Poland are a frequent subject of political jokes. In this instance, the soap shortage is 'explained' by the fantasized efforts of the government to ritually undo the heinous crime of turning Jewish corpses into soap. It should be remembered that the infamous experimental efforts to manufacture soap from human fat took place at the Danzig Anatomic Institute during the years 1943 and 1944. So the Poles have reason to have the soap jokes in their national consciousness and memory. At least in this Polish text, it is suggested that the process should be reversed. This may be contrasted with the following variant collected in Munich in 1982 from a thirty-year old East German informant:

- (9) Was ist eine (deutsche) Wiedergutmachungsmaschine?  
 What is a (German) retribution or recycling [literally: 'make-it-all-well-again'] machine?  
 Man tut Seife oben rein und unten kommen Juden raus.  
 One puts soap in at the top and Jews come out below.

Although the text might imply some regret for the Nazi atrocities insofar as there is an explicit desire to restore and bring back to life the dead, traces of anti-Semitism remain. Soap is on top while the Jews are at the bottom. Moreover, the oppositional structure contrasts the 'clean' soap with the Jews who by tradition are considered to be dirty. The elimination of the dirty Jew is found in another text:

- (10) Zwei Typen sitzen im Gefängnis. 'Was hast du denn gemacht?' sagt der eine zum andern. 'Ja, ich hab an die Grenze geschrieben "Juden raus!"—Und du?' 'Ich hab geschrieben "Juden rein!"—aber an die Gaskammer.'

Two guys sit in prison. 'What did you do?' says one to the other. 'Well, I wrote on the border, "Out with the Jews!" - and you?' 'I wrote "In with the Jews"—but on the gas chamber!'

Here we certainly have a play on *Juden rein* and *Judenrein*. One of the announced Nazi goals was to make Germany *Judenrein*, that is, 'clean of Jews.' This theme may also be expressed in other modern Auschwitz jokes:

- (11) Was ist eine judische Sauna?  
 What is a Jewish sauna?  
 Aus-schwitz.  
 Auschwitz.

This joke text contains a pun on the word Auschwitz by breaking it down into *Aus* (out) and *schwitz* (sweat). The German phrase *aus-schwitzen* (sweat it out) denotes a state of distress, anguish, and even fear, which here alludes to the emotional experience of the death camp victims. The association is partially obscured by the imagery of the 'sauna' in which sweating is produced intentionally to cleanse the body from impurities. In this context, the principal metaphor is one of total annihilation which succeeds in ridding Germany of 'Jewish impurities.'

The fact that the sauna is normally a place for pleasure calls attention to an important characteristic of these Auschwitz jokes. The whole problem of guilt for the Germans is solved through an insidious form of projection.<sup>15</sup> The Jews are depicted as masochists; they enjoy being victimized. Auschwitz is a sauna; concentration camps are vacation resorts (see texts 1 and 2 above). This technique of 'blaming the victim' is demonstrated by the following text:

- (12) Was ist ein Jude mit einer Gasflasche unter dem Arm?  
 What is a Jew with a gas-container under his arm?  
 Ein Süchtiger.  
 An addict.  
 Mit zwei Gasflaschen unter dem Arm?  
 With two gas-containers under his arm?  
 Ein Dealer.  
 A (drug) dealer.

The implication is that Jews wanted to be gassed: They became addicts and a few became so mercenary that they supplied gas to users. There may or may not be an allusion here to the conventional *Lachgas* (laughing gas) used as an anesthetic, so named because of the reaction of laughter and exhilaration that inhaling it may produce. In any event, the joke teller and his or her audience can pretend that the gas intended to kill Jews was never deadly, and that on the contrary, because of its pleasant effects, Jews came to like it. Through projection, Germans can fantasize that the gasification of Jews is not their fault, but that Jews wanted such treatment. The Jews themselves are to blame, some even aiding others in obtaining gas.

The majority of Auschwitz jokes are concerned solely with the total destruction of the Jews with little or no attempt to mask or conceal the virulent anti-Semitism. In these jokes, there isn't even a hint of self-reproach or compassion.

- (13) A German officer speaks to Jewish prisoners: 'I have some good news and some bad news for you. First the good news. Half of you are going to Auschwitz and half of you are going to Buchenwald. Now for the bad news: This half (indicates the torso midsection upwards) goes to Auschwitz, and this half (points to lower body) goes to Buchenwald.'<sup>16</sup>

Cutting bodies in half may be a not-so-oblique reference to the dreadful 'scientific' medical experiments in which hapless Jews were forced into being unwilling guinea pigs.

Children were among the many victims of Auschwitz. The following text reminds us of this fact:

- (14) Ein Wärter und ein kleines (jüdisches) Kind in Auschwitz:  
 Wärter: Und wie alt bist du?  
 Kind: Vier. Morgen werde ich fünf.  
 Wärter: Uh-uh (bewegt Kopf und Finger verneinend).  
 A guard and small (Jewish) child at Auschwitz:  
 Guard: And how old are you?  
 Child: Four. Tomorrow I'll turn five.  
 Guard: Uh-uh (moves his head and finger to indicate a negative response).

Sometimes the jokes make a specific point of excluding any sympathy for the real victims of the death camps.

- (15) 'Mensch, mein Vater ist im KZ umgekommen!'  
 'Du, Fritzchen, das tut mir echt leid.'  
 'Nicht wie du denkst, er ist besoffen vom Wachturm gefallen.'  
 Man, my father died in a concentration camp.  
 Fritzie, I am truly sorry about that.  
 It's not what you think. He fell from the watch-tower drunk.

The following text collected in 1983 in Giessen acknowledges Auschwitz as a death camp but misdirects the attention of the joke-teller's audience away from the suffering of the *human* victims:<sup>17</sup>

- (16) Welche Grupe hat die grössten Verluste in Auschwitz erlitten?  
 Which group suffered the greatest losses at Auschwitz?  
 Die Flöhe!  
 The fleas!

The disgraceful living conditions of the inmates of the death camps have been amply documented by the numerous survivors' accounts and even by some photographs and film footage. It is not completely clear whether the joke refers to the enormous number of fleas who were presumably burned to death along with the humans they inhabited or whether one is supposed to imagine that the parasitic fleas survived as they were forcibly separated from their 'hosts' who were incinerated or gassed. Either way the attempted displacement is a shocking one.

What is one to make of these Auschwitz jokes? It is clearly an effort to deal with a painful, embarrassing, and guilt-producing subject for contemporary Germans. We do not suggest that *all* Germans know or tell these jokes, but traditional jokes are, by their very nature, a collective phenomenon. These jokes are circulating in West Germany. Young Germans do not like to feel guilty for what they think are the sins of their parents or grandparents. On the other hand, the enormity of the genocide has created what may be a permanent scar on the German national conscience. Crime may ultimately hurt the criminal as well as the victim. In this case, we would argue that telling Auschwitz jokes may provide some sort of necessary catharsis for the guilt-feelings caused by the recognition of the historical reality of Auschwitz and the other death camps. One jokes about only what is most serious. Most comedy upon examination consists of treating

tragedy lightly. What is disturbing, however, in the present instance is that Germans are still killing Jews—in jest rather than in reality, but killing Jews nonetheless. While murdering Jews in fantasy is obviously preferable to murdering them in death camps, fantasy can be dangerous if it reflects an unhealthy state of mind.

It is for this reason that we have felt impelled to further document the existence of Auschwitz jokes. There is even a tendency to continue the long-standing anti-Semitic tradition of opposing 'good' Christianity to 'evil' Judaism in these jokes:

(17) Was ist der Unterschied zwischen Kreuzigung und Beschneidung?

What is the difference between crucifixion and circumcision?

Bei der Kreuzigung kann man den ganzen Juden wegwerfen.

In a crucifixion, one can throw away the whole Jew.

The evocation of pro-Christian=anti-Semitic sentiments cannot absolve the Germans of responsibility for their actions past or present. It is true that anti-Semitism was not and is not confined to Germany. But the excesses of inhumanity and torture that occurred at Auschwitz do have to be acknowledged, and while there is no way to undo the ritual murder of six million Jews, contemporary Germans should make a conscious effort to stamp out anti-Semitism and all the associated notions of super-race and racial purity. That is within their own power to accomplish. Telling jokes about Auschwitz might be, in theory, a step towards acknowledging the reality of the death camps, but at the same time, it may be nothing more than a perpetuation of the same kind of bigotry that led ultimately to Auschwitz in the first place.

For those who find Auschwitz jokes offensive—and we include ourselves in that group—we would ask only if they really think it would be better not to report such jokes. Do they honestly think that evil left to its own devices will somehow disappear? We submit that world history suggests otherwise. Prejudice, stereotyping, gross inhumanity, and even ethnic genocide do not seem to be on the wane. Folklorists with a sense of social responsibility have an obligation to do what they can to fight injustice.

Folklore is only a mirror of society, however. If one does not like the image seen in the mirror, it would serve little purpose to break the mirror. It is the ugly reality of society which needs to be altered, not the folklore which reflects that reality. Of course, the analogy is not perfect. One cannot stop folklore from forming and circulating. Auschwitz jokes exist and they are told in West Germany. This is true whether or not we report them. To the extent that folklore is not merely a passive reflector of society, but a moulder of attitudes, we admittedly take some risk in reporting these sick jokes. It is not our intent to encourage anti-Semitism. Quite the contrary! We are *not* reporting these jokes because we think they are amusing or funny. We are reporting them because we believe it is important to document *all* aspects of the human experience, even those aspects which most might agree reflect the darker side of humanity. One cannot stamp out prejudice unless or until one recognizes the causes and extent of that prejudice. Insofar as folklore is a factor in the formation and perpetuation of prejudice, it must be held up to the light of reason. Perhaps one day Auschwitz jokes or jokes like them will no longer be told.

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## NOTES

1. See Alan Dundes and Thomas Hauschild, 'Auschwitz Jokes,' *Western Folklore* 42 (1983): 249-260.
2. See Richard Albrecht, "'Was ist der Unterschied zwischen Türken und Juden?'" (Anti-)Türkenwitze in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1982: Versuch über ein gesellschaftliches Dunkelfeld,' *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 78 (1982): 220-229. Albrecht advocates self-censorship and reported only three out of two dozen texts actually recorded.
3. For the UCLA graduate student letter, see 'The Postal Connection' *The California Folklore Newsletter*, Vol.I, number 1 (Spring, 1984), [p.4]; for the UC Berkeley undergraduate letter, see S.E.Bingham, 'Darkness and Light,' *The Daily Californian*, Vol. XV, no.172 (Friday, July 6, 1984), p.4. Both argued that such jokes should be ignored by scholars: 'What a useless pastime and excuse for scholarship to collect these horrific anti-Semitic so-called jokes.'
4. See Alphons Silbermann, *Sind wir Antisemitisten?* (Köln, 1982); for a review of his study, see 'Holocaust mindert nicht den Judenhass,' *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 15 (January 19, 1984), p.44.
5. Peter Schütt, *'Der Mohr hat seine Schuldigkeit getan...'-Gibt es Rassismus in der Bundesrepublik?* Eine Streitschrift (Dortmund, 1981), p.75. Both authors have noted such graffiti in Berlin, Cologne, Frankfurt, and Koblenz between 1982 and 1984. A general reference to this type of graffiti is contained in 'Nutten und Bastarde erschlagen wir,' *Der Spiegel* 36 (27) (July 5, 1982), p.38.
6. Quoted from John Nielsen, 'Rising Racism on the Continent: immigrants face economic hardship and increasing prejudice,' *Time*, 123 (6) (February 6, 1984), pp.40-41.
7. A more extensive discussion of this problem may be found in Hamida Bosmajian, *Metaphors of Evil: Contemporary German Literature and the Shadow of Nazism* (Iowa City, 1979), p.xii.
8. See 'Rechtsradikale: Gegner 1,' *Der Spiegel* 37 (50) (December 12, 1983), pp.31-32.
9. See 'Neonazis: Drastische Gegenwart,' *Der Spiegel* 38 (7) (February 13, 1984), pp.57-61.
10. Unless otherwise indicated, the texts included in this essay were collected by Uli Linke in January, 1983, in Cologne, Aachen and Koblenz from male informants in their early twenties. We are, however, greatly indebted to folklorist Jess Nierenberg who generously shared his collection of such jokes with us. Jokes from Nierenberg are numbered 5b, 6, 11, 12, 14 and 17.
11. This text appears in Rainer Wehse, *'Warum sind die Ostfriesen so gelb im Gesicht?—Die Witze der 11-14 jährigen—Texte und Analysen*, Artes Populares: Studie Ethnographica Et Folkloristica, 6 (Frankfurt a.M. 1983) p.17, no.51.
12. For other versions of this joke, see Dundes and Hauschild, pp.251-252.
13. For an extended discussion of the possible anal-erotic factors underlying the Nazi efforts to 'eliminate' dirty Jews, see Alan Dundes, *Life is Like a Chicken Coop Ladder: A Portrait of German Culture Through Folklore* (New York, 1984) pp. 119-131.
14. Cited from Timothy Garton Ash, 'Jokes: explore the gulf between communist ideology and reality,' *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* (Sunday, October 23, 1983), section F, pp.1,4.
15. For further consideration of projection, see Alan Dundes, 'Projection in Folklore: A Plea for Psychoanalytic Semiotics,' in *Interpreting Folklore* (Bloomington, 1980), pp. 33-61.
16. This text was collected in 1974 in Fremont, California, from a German male in his late forties. It was reported directly in English translation.
17. We are indebted to sociologist Christie Davies at the University of Reading in England for making this text available to us.