

# Auschwitz Jokes

ALAN DUNDES  
THOMAS HAUSCHILD

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Nothing is so sacred, so taboo, or so disgusting that it cannot be the subject of humor. Quite the contrary—it is precisely those topics culturally defined as sacred, taboo, or disgusting which more often than not provide the principal grist for humor mills. In a history of world atrocities, which unfortunately includes far too many instances, it would be hard to think of any one example more gruesome than the methodical murder of millions of Jews in Nazi Germany. The sordid, unspeakably cruel, and vicious details of the extermination of Jews in such concentration camps as Dachau, Buchenwald, and Auschwitz have been amply documented many times over, for example, by Terrence Des Pres in *The Survivor; An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*. In reading the accounts written by survivors, it is hard to imagine that any humor could possibly arise from the mass gassing of thousands of individuals.

It is known that there is such a phenomenon as “gallows humor.”<sup>1</sup> However, this generally refers to jokes made about and by the *victims* of oppression. Such jokes are told by those supposedly about to be hanged, not by the hangmen. In situations involving great anxiety, it is not uncommon for participants to tell jokes to relieve the tension. In time of war, for example, some individuals facing death are able to joke about it. These jokes may be a form of bravado, a kind of necessary defense mechanism, designed to articulate genuine fears and at the same time partly allay terror through humor.

The aggressive tendency in jokes has been obvious at least since Freud’s pioneering study *Wit and Humor in the Unconscious* appeared

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1. See Antonin J. Obrdlik, “‘Gallows Humor’—A Sociological Phenomenon,” *American Journal of Sociology* 47 (1942): 709–716; Elfriede Moser-Rath, “Galgenhumor wörtlich genommen,” *Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde* 68/69 (1972/1973): 423–432.

in 1905. Jokes told about the members of one particular ethnic, national, or religious group may offer a socially sanctioned outlet for the expression of aggression towards that group. When members of the group in question tell jokes about their own group, it may still be a matter of aggression. The concept of self-hate may explain why Catholics tell anti-clerical jokes or why Jews tell anti-Semitic jokes.<sup>2</sup>

Yet there are some anti-Semitic jokes which would rarely if ever be told by Jews. It is one thing for a Jew to poke fun at the alleged proclivities of Jewish women (either the Jewish mother or the Jewish wife—for example, How do you cure a Jewish nymphomaniac? Marry her. What's Jewish foreplay? Twenty minutes of begging.) It would be quite another matter for a Jew to tell jokes about World War II concentration camps. Nevertheless, such jokes do exist, though they are not ordinarily told by Jews. There are traditional jokes about the plight and fate of Jews in World War II, jokes which are current in the 1980s in West Germany. This type of sick humor which many will no doubt find to be in extremely bad taste might be said to constitute a form of "executioner's humor" rather than "gallows humor." Whether one finds Auschwitz jokes funny or not is not an issue. This material exists and should be recorded. Jokes are always an important barometer of the attitudes of a group. The jokes exist and they obviously must fill some psychic need for those individuals who tell them and those who listen to them. They demonstrate that anti-Semitism is not dead in Germany—if documentation were needed to prove that point.

Anti-Semitism is not confined to West Germany. One can find it throughout Europe, North and South America, and elsewhere. Several of the jokes we report from Western Germany, for example, have also been collected in England, Sweden, and the United States. The implication is that to the extent that anti-Semitism is international, the jokes expressing such prejudice are equally international. However, we do not believe there are parallels for all the Auschwitz jokes we shall report from modern West Germany.

Here is a text collected from an informant from Mainz in 1982:

(1) Wie viele Juden passen in einen Volkswagen?

How many Jews will fit in a Volkswagen?

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2. For an early discussion of self-hate, see Kurt Lewin, "Self Hatred Among Jews," *Contemporary Jewish Record* 4 (1941): 219-232.

506, sechs auf die Sitze und 500 in die Aschenbecher.

506, six in the seats and 500 in the ashtrays.<sup>3</sup>

This joke is quite similar to the following text collected in Berkeley, California, in 1980:

How many Jews can you fit in a Volkswagen?

Fourteen. Two in the front, two in the back, ten in the ashtray.

The Jew-ashes equation turns out to be an all-too-common theme in Auschwitz jokes.

- (2) Wussten Sie schon, dass an der Olympiade 1936 in Berlin 50,000 Juden teilgenommen haben?

Did you know that 50,000 Jews took part in the 1936 Olympic Games at Berlin?

Nein.

No.

Ja doch, auf der Aschenbahn! [als Asche]

But yes, on the cinder track! [as ashes]

Although historically inaccurate, the implication is that Jewish ashes made the red-colored (blood?) track. The joke alludes to Hitler's attempts to keep Jewish athletes from participating in the Olympics. The Nazis were embarrassed when a half-Jewish fencer won a gold medal (for Germany) and when Jesse Owen, the celebrated black track star, won his medals for the United States.

- (3) Zum Abschluss der Olympiade in München hält Hitler folgende Rede: "Ich danke dem deutschen Volk, das die herrlichen Bauten errichtete, welche diese Olympiade ermöglichten. Und ich danke dem jüdischen Volk für die Erfindung der Aschenbahn."

At the conclusion of the Olympic Games, Hitler spoke in Munich as follows: "I thank the German people who made possible the Olympic Games by providing these wonderful buildings. And I thank the Jewish people for the invention of the cinder track."

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3. Unless otherwise indicated all texts were collected by Thomas Hauschild in West Berlin during the summer of 1982 from informants ranging in age from 26 to 60 years.

The joke refers to the post-war pro-Semitic argument that the German people received so many inventions and intellectual contributions from the Jewish minority, for instance, quantum physics and psychoanalysis. Hitler's "respect" for these inventions is rendered metaphorically as "Jews are only good for burning." In a shorter variant collected from a fourteen-year-old informant in Tübingen, there is a clearer reference to burning:

Wozu hat man die Juden 1936 bei der Olympiade gebraucht?

What were the Jews used for in connection with the 1936 Olympics?

Für die Aschenbahn und fürs olympische Feuer.

For the cindertrack and for the Olympic flame.<sup>4</sup>

Burning as a theme in these jokes is just as common as ashes. It is, after all, essentially the same theme.

(4) Kennst du die jüdische Hitparade?

Do you know the Jewish Hit Parade?

Nein.

No.

Die geht so: Platz 1 "Hey Jude"; Platz 2 "In the Ghetto"; Platz 3 "I'm on Fire."

It is: 1. "Hey Jude" [Hey Jew]; 2. "In the Ghetto"; 3. "I'm on Fire."

This joke is obviously of modern vintage inasmuch as the record titles refer to recordings made by the Beatles, Elvis Presley, and others. A variant of this joke circulating in Sweden in the early 1970s asks, Which tune is Number 1 on the German hit parade? "Hey Jude" with the Gas Chamber Choir.<sup>5</sup>

(5) Was ist der Unterschied zwischen einer Tonne Koks und 1000 Juden?

What is the difference between a ton of coal and a thousand Jews?

4. We thank folklorist Utz Jeggle in Tübingen for sending us this text.

5. We are grateful to folklorist Bengt af Klintberg in Stockholm for providing all the Swedish texts cited in this essay. He indicated that such "judevitsar" (jokes about Jews) were popular among teenagers in the early 1970s.

Die Juden brennen länger.  
Jews burn longer.

- (6) Warum fahren die Juden nicht mehr so gerne nach Italien in Urlaub?

Why don't Jews like to go to Italy anymore for their holidays?

Weil sie dann über den Brenner müssen.

Because they have to go over the Brenner [Pass].

*Brenner* is the German word for burner, as in a gas burner.

Other elements of the Holocaust are to be found in Auschwitz jokes.

- (7) Ein Kind spielt mit einem Stück Kernseife. Da sagt die Oma:  
"Willst du wohl die Finger von Anne Frank lassen?!"

A child plays with a cake of soap. [Kernseife is a type of soap that is raw and unscented.] Granny says, "Keep your fingers off Anne Frank."

The Germans did experiment with transforming Jewish corpses into soap, a metaphorical *reductio ad absurdum* to convert "dirty" Jews into an agent of cleanliness (as in attempting to make Germany "Judenrein," clean of Jews, which has been linked with Germany's anal erotic national character).<sup>6</sup> The poignant *Diary of Anne Frank* had a dramatic effect on many contemporary Germans who refused to believe right wing assertions that the diary was a fake. The joke seems to suggest that the child should not play with Anne Frank. In other words, the dead should be allowed to rest in peace. Perhaps there is also an implication that the younger generation should not play with the products of Nazi Germany—even though the joke cycle itself does represent a form of play with such products.

The condensation of Anne Frank, by boiling the body, into a bar of soap suggests one of the principal themes of these jokes, namely, the reduction (literally) of masses of Jews. Germans after the war were confronted with the grim picture of the Holocaust either through reports in the press or forced visits to concentration camps. In these jokes, such images do not appear. Rather we find only the

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6. See Alan Dundes, "Life is Like A Chicken Coop Ladder: A Study of German National Character Through Folklore," *Journal of Psychoanalytic Anthropology* 4 (1981): 265–364.

“condensed” Jew who fits into the ash tray or who is reduced into the form of a piece of soap. There is irony insofar as Granny, like most Germans, favors cleanliness, but in this instance she orders the child *not* to touch the soap. We have the “clean” Granny, the representative of the Nazi generation who killed and condensed Jews, wishing to repress all that “dirty” part of history.

- (8) Two [Jewish] children are sitting on top of a roof near a chimney. A passerby asks, “What are you doing up there?”  
 “We are waiting for our parents.”<sup>7</sup>
- (9) A Jew is walking down the street carrying a gas container with a pipe connecting it to his mouth. A passerby asks, “What are you doing?” “I’m addicted.”

There may be an allusion here to a conventional German idiom which serves to show the “smallness” of some adversary: “Den rauch ich in der Pfeife” (“I will smoke him in my pipe”). In any case, the problem of guilt is resolved through an insidious form of projection: the Jews wanted to be gassed; they liked it! We shall see the same device in the next two texts. Through repression and projection, the joketeller and his audience can pretend that it is not “our” guilt; the Jews wanted such treatment.

- (10) Why did so many Jews go to Auschwitz? The fare was free.
- (11) Was ist der Traum eines Juden?  
 What is a Jew’s dream?  
 Ein Fensterplatz im Hochofen.  
 A window-seat in a high oven.<sup>8</sup>

7. Texts 8, 9, and 10 were collected directly in English translation from Dr. Vera Bendt in Berlin in April, 1982. We are indebted to Dr. Bendt for calling our attention to the Auschwitz joke cycle in the first place.

8. This text was also sent to us by Utz Jeggle from Tübingen. Oven jokes are also found in the United States and Sweden. A text collected from a Jewish young man from Los Angeles in 1981: What’s the difference between a Jew and a pizza? A pizza doesn’t scream when it is put in the oven. The Swedish version: What is the difference between a Jew and a bun? The Jew screams when he is pushed into the oven. Another Swedish text asks: What was Hitler’s worst shock? When he got the gas bill. In an English text collected in Leeds in 1973, we find the same theme: How do you get a Jew in a telephone [booth]? Throw a ha’penny in. How do you get him out? Shout gas. See Sandra McCosh, *Children’s Humour* (London, 1976), p. 227, #723. For a brief discussion of the idea that a German “urge towards self-obliteration may be defended against by, for example, ascribing it to the Jew—that is, it is the Jew who craves death, not I”—see Stanley Rosenman, “The American Nazi and the Wandering Jew,” *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 39 (1979): 363–368 (esp. 364–365).

A new scapegoat has been added to the German repertoire: the Turk. The influx of Turkish migrant workers in Germany and elsewhere in Europe has inspired an extensive cycle of anti-Turkish jokes.<sup>9</sup> One might think that the Turk could replace the Jew as the butt of jokes, but texts reveal that the Jew remains. In the present context, it is worth remarking how Jews and Turks are treated in the same joke.

- (12) Ein Türke und ein Jude springen vom Haus. Wer ist schneller unten?

A Turk and a Jew fall from a house. Who falls down faster?

Der Türke ist aus Scheisse, der Jude aus Asche, also ist der Türke schneller.

The Turk is shit, the Jew is ashes, so the Turk lands first.

In this parody of Galileo's experiment at the Tower of Pisa, the Turk is ahead of the Jew because the Jew has already been destroyed. The point is that the Turk is yet to be exterminated. The Turks, like so many immigrants to a country before them, are invariably asked to do the most menial or *dirty* work. The German's depiction of an undesirable in terms of feces reflects a more general scatological tendency in German culture. We find a similar anti-Turkish sentiment in the following text:

- (13) Ein Deutscher, ein Türke und ein Jude stehen vor der Entbindungstation des Krankenhauses und warten darauf, ihre neugeborenen Kinder sehen zu können. Da kommt die Krankenschwester heraus und gesteht, dass sie die drei Kinder verwechselt hat und nicht mehr weiss, welches Baby zu welchem Vater gehört. Der Deutsche sagt: "Lassen Sie mich mal fünf Minuten allein mit denen." Er geht rein und kommt nach ein paar Minuten wieder heraus und verteilt mit grosser Bestimmtheit die Kinder: "Das ist deins, das gehört mir, . . ." usw. Die Krankenschwester will unbedingt wissen, wie er das gemacht hat. Erst sagt der Deutsche: "Das kann ich nicht sagen," aber sie drängt immer weiter und so erzählt er

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9. For a sample of the discussion of the impact of Turkish workers in Germany, see "Die Türkei und die Türken in Deutschland," which constitutes the entire issue of *Der Bürger im Staat* 32(3) (September 1982): 165-200. For several representative texts of anti-Turkish jokes, 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. Only three texts out of two dozen actually recorded are reported.

schliesslich: "Ich bin reingegangen, habe den Arm gehoben und 'Heil Hitler' gerufen. Meiner ist sofort stramm gestanden und hat wiedergegrüsst. Der Jude hat sich in die Windeln geschissen und der Türke hat es weggeputzt."

A German, a Jew and a Turk are waiting in the clinic to see their new-born babies. A nurse comes and tells them that their children have been mixed up and they do not know which baby belongs to which father. The German says: "Let me be in there undisturbed for five minutes." He goes in and comes back a couple of minutes later and with great certainty says: "This is your child, this is mine, . . ." etc. The nurse wants to know how he has done this. At first, the German says: "That I cannot say." But she presses him further and finally he tells: "I went in, raised my arm and shouted, 'Heil Hitler.' Immediately, my son lifted his arm and returned the same greeting. The Jew shit in his swaddling clothes and the Turk cleaned it up."

The mixing up of the children may reflect the German's continuing concern with racial purity. No "good German" would want to have a child with tainted blood, for example, Jewish or Turkish blood. The German's reluctance to tell the nurse how he succeeded in identifying the racial stock of each baby suggests that he realizes that racist ideology is unpopular. Still, in the end he does admit that he uses the Hitler salute to distinguish the true German from the inferior races. The joke implies that the Jewish baby is so frightened by seeing the dreaded Nazi salute that he "shits in his pants," a common metaphor in German folklore. The modern twist is that the Turk, low man in terms of social status, is identified by his cleaning up after the "dirty" Jew.

- (14) In KZ Dachau spielen die Türken gegen die Juden Fussball.  
Wer gewinnt?

In the Dachau concentration camp, the Turks and the Jews play soccer. Who wins?

Die Juden—Sie haben Heimvorteil.

The Jews—They have the home field advantage.

It is surely of significance that the German hatred of Turkish migrant workers is expressed in jokes which also include Jews. It is as if to say that when the Germans want to hate any group, they tend to do so in comparison with the longstanding hatred of the Jews. This is certainly explicit in the following joking question.



- (15) Was unterscheidet die Türken von den Juden?

What is the difference between Turks and Jews?

Die Juden haben es schon hinter sich, die Türken haben es noch vor sich.

The Jews have behind them what the Turks have now before them [mass murder].<sup>10</sup>

These jokes suggest that German anti-Semitism is alive and well. There seems to be little evidence of remorse in these texts. Only the reference to leaving Anne Frank alone hints at any compassion for all the millions of victims of Nazi death camps. The unchanging consistency of anti-Semitism is manifested in a joke which finds Hitler in hell:

- (16) Hitler hat jahrzehntelang in der Hölle geschmort, zur Busse für seine Taten. Schliesslich ist er gereinigt und kommt in den Himmel. Gott fragt ihn: "Nun, Adolf, was würdest du tun, wenn du jetzt wieder auf die Erde zurück könntest?" Hitler darauf: "Na, Juden vergasen!" Verärgert schickt Gott ihn für weitere drei Jahre in die Hölle—Als er zurückkommt, stellt Gott ihm wieder dieselbe Frage: "Was würdest du tun?" "Juden vergasen." Wieder geht er für drei Jahre in die Hölle. Als er zurückkommt fragt Gott das dritte Mal: "Was würdest du jetzt tun, wenn du auf die Erde zurückkönnstest, Adolf?" Hitler hat sich die ganze Sache überlegt und sagt: "Ich würde schöne Autobahnen bauen. . . ." Da fragt Gott zurück: "Und wohin würdest du die Bahnen bauen?" Hitler: "Vor allem eine, von Prag direkt nach Auschwitz."

Hitler has been burning in hell for dozens of years for all his sins. Finally he is cleansed and he enters heaven. God asks him: "What would you do if you could return to earth, Adolf?" Hitler answers: "I would gas Jews!" Angrily, God sends him back to hell for three more years. When Hitler returns to heaven, God asks him again the same question: "What would you do?" However, Hitler says: "Gas the Jews." Again Hitler is sent back to hell for three years. When he comes back, God asks him a third time: "What would you do if you could return to earth?" Hitler has thought over the whole thing and says: "I would build some beautiful highways. . . ." God asks then: "To what places would you build these highways?" Answers Hitler: "Directly from Prague to Auschwitz."

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10. This text is cited in Albrecht, p. 220, and it also appeared in "Nutten und Bastarde erschlagen wir," *Der Spiegel* 27 (5 Juli 1982) where it was reported as a wall graffito, which suggests just how widespread this particular joke is in contemporary Germany.

This joke was heard in Bavaria from a bus driver who told it to amuse tourists on his bus. The joke contains a common argument, namely that Hitler was right in some of the things he did such as building good highways (something of importance to a professional bus driver surely!). The highways were in fact built largely to facilitate the transportation of German war machinery. The joke also shows the virulence of Hitler's anti-Semitism (and perhaps German anti-Semitism generally) is such that not even the horrors of hell could change it. For the Holocaust was a hell, and that hell has not wiped out all traces of anti-Semitism in contemporary Germany. The premise in the initial portion of the joke that Hitler had suffered enough in hell to cleanse himself so as to be allowed possible entrance into heaven is itself worthy of notice. The question is whether there is enough penance in the world to allow a Hitler to go to heaven. Of course, the joke clearly states that Hitler was not at all affected by his stay in hell—he remained the vicious anti-Semite he was in life. That may be a good sign for modern Germany, that is, the recognition of the evils of anti-Semitism. On the other hand, the very existence of the Auschwitz joke cycle may not be much of a harbinger of healthier attitudes. It is somewhat alarming to realize that an idiom such as “bis zur Vergassung” (to be gassed, to be at the point of gasification) is in common use in contemporary Germany, referring to someone carrying out an action to the point of extinction or utter futility.<sup>11</sup>

Jews in Germany were treated not as humans but as a dirty problem to be solved or eliminated. Jokes also dehumanize and may be employed to make light of a serious problem. Auschwitz is a problem for the conscience of modern Germany, and that is no doubt why Auschwitz jokes exist and circulate. It is not easy to make light of Auschwitz and the travesty of human decency that occurred there. At least the Auschwitz joke cycle indicates that Germans, or at any rate some Germans, are admitting that the tragic events of Auschwitz did happen. For many years during and after the war, countless “good” Germans claimed either that they knew nothing

11. We are indebted to anthropologist Uli Linke for reminding us of the prevalence of this metaphor. Folklorist Lutz Röhrich claims the idiom is older than Naziism and Auschwitz, deriving originally from the language of chemists and physicists. See his *Lexikon der sprichwörtlichen Redensarten* (Freiburg, 1977), p. 1108. For the anti-Semitic implications of the expression, see Peter Schütt, ‘Der Mohr hat seine Schuldigkeit getan . . .’ *Gibt es Rassismus in der Bundesrepublik? Eine Streitschrift* (Dortmund, 1981), p. 25. For a more general discussion of anti-Semitism in modern Germany, see also Alphonse Silbermann, *Sind wir Antisemiten?* (Köln, 1982).

of the atrocities of the death-camps or that they never happened at all, that they were the fabrications of Allied propaganda campaigns. In this context, the Auschwitz jokes would at least seem to be an admission that the horrors of the death camps are a reality that has to be faced. But the reality is so ghastly, so terrible, so frightful that it is difficult to confront. This is surely another reason why these jokes are recounted. They allow the joketeller and his audience to admit that Auschwitz is a part of German history—ironic that the name Auschwitz includes “Au” (“ow” as in pain), “schwitz” (sweat), and “witz” (joke). While it could conceivably be a healthy sign for Germans to admit the historical reality of Auschwitz, it is at the same time disturbing to think that the recognition of the grim reality has not ended centuries of anti-Semitic sentiments in Germany.

It is difficult to ascertain just how old and how widespread these Auschwitz jokes are in Germany. We can testify that they are not easy to collect; and to date, German folklorists have not reported them. Still, a revealing couplet from a poem entitled “Auschwitz” by Ulrich Otto Berger, published in 1966, suggests that these jokes have been around for some years:

Der Volksmund weiss heute zu erzählen  
mehr als einen Witz über Auschwitz.

The folk speech of today knows how to tell  
more than one joke about Auschwitz.<sup>12</sup>

Even when modern jokes are about Turks, Auschwitz may function as a metaphor for total annihilation.

- (17) Ein mit Türken vollbesetzter Zug fährt in Istanbul ab—und kommt in Frankfurt leer an. Warum?

A train full of Turks leaves Istanbul—and comes to Frankfurt empty. Why?

Er fuhr über Auschwitz.

It went via Auschwitz.<sup>13</sup>

As long as such jokes are told, the evil of Auschwitz will remain in the consciousness of Germans. They may seem a sorry and inade-

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12. See Peter Hamm, ed., *Aussichten* (München, 1966), p. 263. We thank Professor Wolfgang Mieder of the University of Vermont for calling our attention to this poetic allusion to Auschwitz jokes.

13. This text was reported by Albrecht, op. cit.

quate memorial for all the poor, wretched souls who perished at Auschwitz, but when one realizes that comedy and tragedy are two sides of the same coin, we can perhaps understand why some contemporary Germans might need to resort to the mechanism of humor, albeit sick humor, to try to come to terms with the unimaginable and unthinkable horrors that did occur at Auschwitz.

*University of California  
Berkeley, California*