

THE PASSENGER

A Reflective Paper

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Of novels about the Holocaust there seems to be no end. But most are focused on the period after the Second World War began and after the “Final Solution” had officially been decided upon. That is, most Holocaust novels are focused in one way or another on the concentration and/or the death camps. They also reflect on the experiences of areas other than Germany itself – in Poland, France, Russia or Czechoslovakia, for example. An additional few deal with the Jewish experience in Germany itself but again usually on the persecution of the diminishing Jewish community remaining in Germany after the Anschluss of Austria and the outbreak of war. Given this context, the book before us is an exception; it is less about the Holocaust, *per se*, and more about the ending of Jewish life in Germany before the Holocaust formally began. It should be remembered at this point that the manuscript for this story was written in the immediate wake of Kristallnacht (Nov 9-10, 1938), and this is the time in which the story itself takes place, so the Holocaust had not yet even been fully conceived or developed. It may also be worth remembering that it was written while Boschwitz himself was in exile from Germany; he and his mother having fled in 1935. So he drafted this manuscript while on the run, either in Luxembourg or in Belgium. In other words, he was not exactly an eye witness to what he was writing about, although he was not an entirely detached observer either. It might be said that the story was in some sense kind of autobiographical without being an autobiography.

In “the Passenger” we meet one Otto Silbermann who is living in Nazi-ruled Germany in the more or less immediate wake of the November pogrom, AKA “Kristallnacht”, of 1938. It also seems that, although Mr Silbermann is aware that there has been mounting anti-Jew activity in Germany, he has been largely spared direct experience. But then, as the novel begins, it all hits him like a ton of bricks within a few days. By the middle of this relatively short novel, Mr Silbermann has lost his business, been forced by a friend, a Mr Findler, to sell his real estate for a ridiculously low price, was compelled to flee his home and wife, and has become a wanderer trying to figure out how to get out of Germany with his life and with whatever money he has gathered in cash from selling out his business to his partner, Mr. Becker. The entire weight of the Nazi regime has coming crashing down on him in one fell swoop. As he himself says at one point, “I can sense how closely death is nipping at my heels. It’s just a matter of being faster. If I stop, I’ll go under, I’ll sink into the mire. I simply have to run, run, run.” (*The Passenger: A Novel* by Ulrich Boschwitz, trans by Philip Boehm, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 2021, p.146)

On the one level, then, this is the story of one man, a Jew, who has become a fugitive in Nazi Germany prior to WWII. He thus embodies the German Jewish fate of become a stateless wanderer, a sort of real-life embodiment of the medieval legendary “Wandering Jew”. As Silbermann notes to

himself, "I am no longer in Germany. / I am in trains that run through Germany" (p. 148). Or to put it in other terms, he was in Germany but no longer of Germany. But in any event, the story is at this one level, the story of the suppression of the Jews remaining in Germany in the years leading up to the outbreak of World War II.

On another level, the novel provides us with various encounters along the way that provide occasions for conversations about what is going on and what options might be open for the remaining Jews. So the novel is not only a description of a physical journey of someone on the run, but is also a description of the inner journey of such a fugitive, of one discovering he is very much in, but not of, his home country. How does one begin to make sense of one's predicament? In addition to these let's say public discourses, the novel offers also a look into the private inner ruminations of Mr. Silbermann on how one is to think through the situation in which he now finds himself. As he notes to himself when in Dortmund, "I can't weaken, not when I'm this close to the goal. Because not only am I trying to escape, I'm also running a race against despair." (p. 128). He is then a passenger not only in an outer sense, but in an inner sense as well.

On a third level, the train ride, or really the train rides, offer an occasion for Mr. Silbermann to engage with a variety of other people who inhabit Nazi Germany in diverse ways. This includes not only his business partner Mr. Becker and his erstwhile friend, Mr. Findler, before his journeys, but also a fellow passenger Robert Lilienfeld, a young car driver, Franz, who smuggled him to the Belgian border, a young woman on the Berlin train, and so on. In each case, but especially on the trains when he meets with strangers, are scenes when Mr. Silbermann tries to tease out whether his conversation partner is a Jew, a Nazi, or just a German. What we have in the novel's narrative, then, is a patchwork of Mr. Silbermann's thoughts and reflections at times articulated internally as he contemplates his situation, and at other times articulated through his interlocutions with others. In some ways all these conversations are the same because the situation – a Jew trying to escape 1938 Germany – is that same. But we do get different angles and perspectives in each scene. It is like a kaleidoscope that resolves into a coherent picture.

Besides trains, one very constant theme is money, in particular the money that Mr. Silbermann is dragging around in his suitcase. On the one hand, money is a perfectly reasonable thing to have when fleeing. This is especially so given that he has no access to banks. On the other, in the context of this novel, it surely represents something more. Maybe a hint in that direction is when Mr. Silbermann says to himself as he awaits the Dortmund-Aachen train, "'Why should a person commit suicide when he's carrying a briefcase full of life?'" (p. 144) Later, as he disembarked and discovered that his suitcase, and its cash, was gone, he thought, "...Silbermann realized beyond all doubt that he'd been dealt a decisive blow, that along with his money he'd been robbed of his ability to resist, his one point of support." (p. 225) That is, the money is hope for the future, and without such money and hope, his life dissolves into random meaninglessness. It may or may not thus be relevant that his name is "Silbermann". In short, the suitcase full of money is his lifeline, his chance for survival, his hope for a future. When the briefcase is lost, Silbermann becomes more and more befuddled and disordered. The question then becomes what is left when we lose everything material? Recall that at this point, he suddenly returns to his wrecked apartment, he goes to the police and rants about injustice and finally he tries to find his brief

conversation partner one Ursula Angelhof. Perhaps Boschwitz is suggesting that the only thing we can cling to beyond money and hope is human companionship. I don't know of any other way to account for his sudden pursuit of Ms Angelhof.

The last chapter is his call out to his intended German readership, that is those Germans who will return Germany and its culture to what it should be. He is in a jail cell, with a cellmate who is somewhat insane, and in a jail that seems more like an insane asylum. His cellmate, Schwarz, had stolen a handbag and upon his arrest had acted the lunatic. Now Schwarz is incarcerated awaiting sterilization, a technique the Nazis did indeed use to get rid of criminal elements in their society. The final scene in the book ends on an ironic note. Schwartz has just once again pleaded in vain not to be sterilized.

"The trusty grinned and shut the door. Schwartz paced up and down the cell. Then we went to the door and started drumming.

"Jews out!" he shouted, "Jews out!"

His shouting was picked up by other insane inmates, and soon there were dozens of jumbled voices shouting: "Jews out! Jews out!"

Finally, Silbermann protests that he just wants to get out and on a train to somewhere, anywhere, "I see what you're up to," said Schwartz, convinced. "Come on and let's shout together: Jews out..."

So yes, the inmates, even those harmed by the system, take over the asylum.

And maybe in the final irony, the insane inmates want Jews out, but the Jews, who want out, can't get out because the very insane who want them out have locked them in. In fact, everyone is locked in the insane asylum that Germany is becoming. Maybe Boschwitz is saying all Germans have become Schwarz, maybe even Silbermann himself.

And we all know what comes next.

QUESTIONS

1. The book takes place after the November Pogrom, but before the Anschluss of Austria and the beginning of World War II. Given the time of its events, should this book be categorized as Holocaust literature.
2. Train travel is the spine of this novel. But why train travel? Is travelling around a sort of striving for freedom, as in "Lincoln Highway"?
3. What does the briefcase full of money represent – hope, life, honor, true German-ness or something else?
4. The book was very quickly translated into English and then published in the United States and Great Britain. Who do you think was Boschwitz's intended audience and why?
5. In the end, was Otto Silbermann a believable character? Did you find his inner dialogue convincing?
6. BONUS QUESTION: Who or what does Ursula Angelhof represent?