Ordinary Stories in Extraordinary Times: Marcie Hershman's *Tales of the Master Race*

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Abstract

This paper examines the categories of perpetrators, bystanders and victims as represented among the characters of Marcie Hershman's short story cycle Tales of the Master Race. *The main focus is on the characters of perpetrators, as it is predominantly from their perspectives that Hershman depicts life in a small German town during the Third Reich. The paper aims to explore the social-psychological reasons for the perpetration of evil, be it conformity to authorities or ideological anti-Semitism. It also points to a certain fluidity in the examined categories of the characters, demonstrating the thin borders among them.*

Keywords

Marcie Hershman, short story, perpetrators, bystanders, victims, Third Reich, conformity, anti-Semitism, the Holocaust

Ordinariness amidst Evil

In his case study *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (1992), American historian of the Holocaust Christopher Robert Browning attempted to clarify the reasons why ordinary middle-aged, working-class men from Hamburg turned into active and ardent perpetrators, rounding up and killing thousands of Jews in eastern Poland. In his view, these ordinary men acted out of conformity and obedience to orders under pressure. Simultaneously, Browning points to the undeniable impact of the Nazi ideology that held sway over them and transformed them into zealous killers. An illustrative example of their way of thinking can be seen in the reminiscences of the wife of a certain Lieutenant Brand about an event that happened during a visit to her husband in Poland:

> I was sitting at breakfast one morning with my husband in the garden of our lodgings when an ordinary policeman of my husband's platoon came up to us, stood stiffly at attention, and declared, "Herr Leutnant, I have not yet had breakfast." When my husband looked at him quizzically, he declared further, "I have not yet killed any Jews."[1]

This incident exemplifies the attitude of the German perpetrators toward the other ethnic group, one which was perceived as inferior and thus deprived of its right of existence. The degradation of Jews to a lower status, to worthless beings, made it easier for the Nazis to justify their brutality and rationalize their extreme, abnormal behavior. In his book, Browning comes to the conclusion that "[a] combination of situational factors and ideological overlap that concurred on the enemy status and dehumanization of the victims was sufficient to turn 'ordinary men' into 'willing executioners.'"[2]

1 Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 127.

2 Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, 216.

Hershman's Varied View of the Life in the Third Reich

The metamorphosis of ordinary men into perpetrators is in the focus of Marcie Hershman's book of short stories entitled *Tales of the Master Race* (1991). Although Hershman (born in 1951) is not a child of survivors, her "tales" are written from the perspective of the second generation, responding to the terror that occurred during World War II. As a matter of fact, Hershman's grandmother on her mother's side was affected by the Holocaust, as she lost her sisters, her nieces and her mother. In her conversation with D.G. Kehl and Frank Katz, Hershman disclosed her main motivation for writing the book:

> I realized that all my life I wanted to know who took my great-grandmother away and who saw it happening […] I thought the only way I could understand this question, to find the answer, was to create a town because I believe that each of us sees what happens to one another, even out of the corner of an eye. So I created her neighbors, I set it in Germany instead of Hungary/Czechoslovakia because that is the source of the drama.[3]

Tales of the Master Race can be classified as a short story cycle or a novel in stories, similarly to two works by other representatives of the second generation, *Stories of an Imaginary Childhood* (1992) by Melvin Jules Bukiet and *Elijah Visible* (1996) by Thane Rosenbaum. Analogously to Bukiet's and Rosenbaum's cycles, Hershman's stories are also interconnected, unified by place, time, and recurring interrelated characters. What differentiates Hershman's cycle from the aforementioned books is its narrative perspective; all the stories are narrated in the first person from the viewpoint of perpetrators or bystanders.[4] They are set in the fictional small Bavarian town of Kreiswald between 1939 and 1943, i.e. during the period of the Third Reich when Germany was under the control of the Nazi Party (NSDAP). Each story has a different narrator; however, individual characters move from one story to another, each having a different level of significance in different stories, i.e. a minor character from one story becomes the main character of another story and vice versa. This enabled Hershman to convey the intricate relationships among them. In other words, their personal dramas intersect with each other.

Each story is introduced by a facsimile of a period document such as a warning announcement, a map, a questionnaire, a newspaper article, a diary excerpt, a secret letter, a government directive, etc. These documents prefigure the topics of the stories; for example, the story "The Map" is preceded by the reproduction of the map of the altered borders after Germany's annexation of Poland. In the fashion of Dos Passos, these documents contribute to the authenticity of Hershman's stories and serve "not only to authenticate experience, but through a mounting accumulation of often petty details to foreground the fragmentation and randomness of a mundane reality that makes up the lives and actions of ordinary individuals on the periphery of grand events."[5]

The book's title itself has an obvious ironic meaning, referring to the racist ideology of the ruling party. It points to the behavior of the ordinary citizens of a small town, representing

3 D. G. Kehl, and Frank Katz, "Conversation with Marcie Hershman," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 19 (2000): 63.

4 Concentrating especially on the category of perpetrators, Hershman enriches Holocaust fiction written from this vantage point, represented by such works as Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow* (1991) and *The Book Thief* (2005) by the Australian author Markus Zusak.

5 Froma I. Zeitlin, "Imaginary Tales in the Land of the Perpetrators," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 5, no. 2 (July 2006): 216.

the "master race," though this behavior was a far cry from heroism. Instead, Hershman presents the residents of Kreiswald in all their at times embarrassing banality, as ordinary people, taking pains to go through their routines as well as to follow uncommon orders and the established laws. In so doing, they willingly or unwillingly become perpetrators, or at least accomplices in evil. The complexity of Hershman's characters is expressed in the diversity of their lives and the variety of the narrators, ranging from perpetrators to bystanders and occasionally to victims. This approach corresponds to the author's conceptual attitude to history, which she has expressed as follows: "I hold the theory that history comes from many viewpoints and that the greatest lie we get is that history is one source, one voice."[6] Hershman's perspective explains why her characters are not black and white, and cannot be seen as one-dimensional figures. Although she does not apply the principle of collective guilt for the perpetration of the Holocaust to the German characters, this does not mean that she relativizes the guilt for the atrocities committed by some of them; instead she differentiates different levels of culpability among them.

Depicting the everyday life of the ordinary non-Jewish townspeople of Kreiswald, their daily routines and shared experience, Hershman blurs the borderline between perpetrators and bystanders. In the final stories that chronologically follow the historical course of World War II after the bombing of the town by the Allied forces, even the distinction between bystanders and victims becomes problematic. What connects all these ordinary people is the fact that they live their lives in extraordinary times, each being in some way affected by the Nazi totalitarian regime.

Perpetrators in the Microcosm of the Local Town

For methodological reasons, this study will address individual categories separately, though always with the awareness of certain overlaps between them. The first category to be explored is that of perpetrators as they are represented in Hershman's stories. According to Leonard S. Newman, social-psychological research has shown that "attitudes and behavior are often highly correlated"[7] (46). In his cognitive explanation of perpetrator behavior, he emphasizes the role of historical anti-Semitism, which was a vital factor influencing the genocidal atrocities committed during the Holocaust. In his view, "[t]he claim that active participation in the persecution and massacre of Jews was associated with anti-Semitic feelings and beliefs is clearly plausible."[8] Daniel Jonah Goldhagen writes about "eliminationist antisemitism"[9] which aimed to annihilate the Jewish population completely.

However, this cognitive approach to the behavior of the Nazis explains the perpetration of heinous acts only partially, and this would be insufficient without a social-psychological explanation which emphasizes obedience and conformity as the key determinants of perpetrator behavior.

6 D. G. Kehl and Frank Katz, "Conversation with Marcie Hershman," 64.

7 Leonard S. Newman, "What is a 'Social-Psychological' Account of Perpetrator Behavior?" in *Understanding Genocide: The Social Psychology of the Holocaust*, eds. Leonard S. Newman, and Ralph Erber (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 46.

8 Newman, "What is a 'Social-Psychological' Account of Perpetrator Behavior?," 46.

9 Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

Many perpetrators committed violence because of their adjustment to the regime and compliance with the rules and orders issued by the authorities. They harmed their victims by following the directives of their superiors – which is not to say that these "ordinary men" should be absolved of moral responsibility for what they did. We tend to imagine perpetrators in an abstract way, as strangers, and in the case of the Holocaust as brutal bloodthirsty Nazis – yet, as the controversial tests conducted by the American psychologist Stanley Milgram showed, man's obedience to authority figures can easily transform ordinary people into perpetrators.[10]

In Hershman's stories, the perpetrators are ordinary citizens of Kreiswald. The author shows their conformity, their obedience to directives, their opportunism, but also the fear, passivity and indifference of some of her characters, who, nevertheless, become accomplices in the perpetration of evil. At the same time, she does not ignore the ideological impact of the regime on them and the role of Nazi propaganda in shaping their lives.

The most distinct perpetrator in the microcosm of the town is the character of Rolf Terskan, the commander of the town's police station. He represents a type of willing perpetrator, as he is a committed ideological anti-Semite and a fervent supporter of the regime in the Third Reich. He could be classified as a desk murderer, which is one of the crucial categories of perpetrators. His role is limited to bureaucratic administrative processes which require much paperwork. Having excessive power (which he abuses), he can be characterized as a designer of murders and a dictator on the local level. In the story "The Guillotine," his victims are not Jews, gypsies, homosexuals or mentally ill people, but politically unreliable Germans, i.e. undesirable opponents of the regime whom he has executed by guillotine in the basement of the station. With an awareness of the power he has accumulated, he interferes in the personal lives of the subordinates who carry out his dirty work for him. This is especially clear regarding the narrator and real protagonist of the story, Torgood Stella, whose wife Gerda is seduced by Terskan. In Hershman's words, "Rolf Terskan […] is obviously someone who knows how to manipulate, and his seduction of Gerda was a sort of parallel in my mind to Hitler's seduction of Germany."[11] Terskan's interference in the protagonist's family life makes Stella and his wife dependent on him, and in its final consequences has damaging effects on their marriage.[12]

However, the main conflict between Terskan and Stella is caused by the narrator's rejection of unquestioning obedience towards his commander's demands. He is not convinced that the killings are right, and therefore he does not want to serve as a blind follower of orders. His conflict with

10 Some scholars, however, criticize those studies that place a rather one-sided emphasis on the concept of obedience as the main component of wrongdoing. For example, George R. Mastroianni claims that "'obedience,' is demonstrably unsatisfactory and incomplete as a response to the question, 'Why did the Holocaust happen?'" "Obedience in perspective: Psychology and the Holocaust," *Theory & Psychology* (2015): 9. doi: 10.1177/0959354315608963. Goldhagen deems the performance of loyalty and obedience to be a conventional explanation of perpetrators' mass killings. Dismissing this factor, he claims that their "cruelty […] was almost always voluntaristic, which means that all those who inflicted it took [the] initiative in the brutalizing of Jews," *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, Vintage Books, 378). According to Goldhagen, "[t]he notions that the perpetrators contributed to genocide because they were coerced, because they were unthinking, obedient executors of state orders, because of social and psychological pressure, because of the prospects of personal advancement … can each be demonstrated in quick order to be untenable" (Goldhagen 379).

11 D. G. Kehl and Frank Katz, "Conversation with Marcie Hershman," 67.

12 A similar topic appears in Irwin Shaw's novel *Bread Upon the Waters* (1981).

Terskan actually mirrors the protagonist's change in status from an unwilling perpetrator to a victim, as he is victimized by his superior. He already feels uncomfortable in his position as an officer in the police station whose responsibility is to maintain records of German dissidents sentenced to execution, and he has doubts about the nature of his work. His remorse is heightened by the expansion of his duties when he is forced to leave the comfort of the office and to descend to the basement to measure the size and weight of prisoners' heads before and after their decapitation. Directly witnessing executions traumatizes him, as he is terrified by the morbidity of his task – a task which, as he finds out, was initiated by his commander as a part of pseudoscientific research. His vain efforts to avoid immediate contact with victims results in the deterioration of his mental state, stemming from his feelings of guilt for being an accomplice in crimes.

Stella's increasing resistance to participating in evil develops into his overt revolt against Terskan, which initiates the protagonist's transition from the category of perpetrator to that of victim. For his disobedience, which undermines the legitimacy of Terskan's authority, Stella is transferred from Kreiswald to Passau. In consequence, what was meant as a punishment becomes a relief for Stella, as he now serves in a place where "they had no guillotine."[13] Even Stella's wife / Terskan's mistress becomes a victim when her pregnancy with her lover becomes unwelcome for the commander, who, feeling endangered in his professional career, removes her to exile in Třebíč, a town in Czechoslovakia (her removal is described in the story "The Trespasser"). It is important to add that Hershman in "Guillotine" connects the narrator's symbolic descent to the hell of the police station basement with the gradual loss of innocence of the newly wedded couple as well as the partners' mutual alienation, multiplied by Gerda's marital infidelity in her affair with Terskan. Nevertheless, as the protagonist's revolt shows, moral values are of higher importance for Stella than submission to immoral military authority, even though this comes at the expense of his personal life.[14]

Another character belonging to the category of perpetrators is Walter Gruber, who unwaveringly believes in the superiority of his race and in the rightness of the Nazi ideology. He is the central character of the story "The Shift," set in the turning-point year of 1943, when the German sense of order and precision in Kreiswald is undermined after the town is bombed by the British Royal Air Force. Following the destruction of the police station, the town descends into chaos, and it is Gruber who fills in for the badly wounded commander Terskan and takes over the role of a "real master." He is thrown headlong into many problems that need to be solved, including the rescue of policemen and prisoners from the ruined police station, the need to find appropriate buildings to store secret files and intern prisoners, the evacuation of the residents from these buildings, the recruitment of replacement staff after police officers have lost their lives, et cetera.

Brainwashed by Nazi propaganda, Gruber regards the newly emergent problems as a "temporary disruption"[15]; his optimistic belief in the ultimate restoration of the town's ordered life is shaken neither by the news of the defeat in the Battle of Stalingrad nor by the realization that

13 Marcie Hershman, *Tales of the Master Race* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 33.

14 Recalling the "guillotine" that fell upon his marriage as it killed the executed prisoners, the narrator confesses: "I wanted … to cut the tissue of our marriage so cleanly that our bodies would fall away, separate, and finally lie still" (Hershman 25).

15 Hershman, *Tales of the Master Race*, 202.

"the past didn't mean anything now."[16] Firmly convinced of the vitality of the established system and the return to normalcy, he assumes that the momentary chaos is nothing more than a mere deviation from the seasonal weather:

> The disruption, our three-day thaw, was ending. Thing would be set to rights again. It would be winter when it was supposed to be winter. Spring would come when it was to be spring. There would be summer. The system would hold. All the systems would hold.[17]

As a desk perpetrator, he is trying to maintain continuity with Terskan's command, including giving orders for the execution of prisoners in order to vacate space for new ones. However, Gruber's presumption of "seasonal" temporariness proves to be false. The dusk of Gruber's world is underscored by the author's parallel between the Battle of Stalingrad and the demolition work going on in Kreiswald, along with the motif of the sunset.

As has already been mentioned, the categories of characters affected by the Holocaust sometimes overlap. An example of the fuzzy distinction between perpetrators and bystanders is the mapmaker Felix Breslauer, the protagonist of the story "The Map." Although he does not participate in killing people, he performs evil acts indirectly as an opportunistic profiteer whose business in mapmaking profits from the wartime situation. Depicted as a man pursuing his self-interest by personal enrichment, Breslauer benefits from the shifting borders in Europe by producing new, updated maps. Moreover, he also skillfully takes advantage of the German policy against the Jews, profiting from their affliction after the forced closure of a Jewish printing company. As Zeitlin observes, this character "represents the larger theme of the desire for material gain,"[18] the impetus for the immoral conduct of many perpetrators. The anti-Semitic policies of the Third Reich make it easier for him to justify his unscrupulous behavior. He thus has no problem taking an interest in an auction to buy a vacant apartment left behind by vanished Jews, or with settling in a street where Jewish shops have been forcibly abandoned. Asking Terskan about the decency of the areas within the town, he learns that "[i]t usually takes a man no more than a walk to tell the good, clean neighborhoods from those that need a good cleaning."[19] This is an ironic allusion to the ethnic cleansing of Jews, infamously manifested during Kristallnacht, the "Night of Broken Glass" in 1939. Breslauer belongs among those people who "are forced into a process of 'negotiation' between the private sphere of conscience or self-interest and the public sphere of obligation and compulsion, a negotiation which allows them to rationalize or justify behavior that they know to be exceptional, and for them abnormal."[20]

Breslauer's immorality, devoid of any scruples, is also demonstrated in his private life, in which he maintains a love affair with his landlady, a married woman named Erika Hofflinger whose husband is building a camp at Auschwitz. This adulterous relationship is disrupted by the unexpected return of the landlady's husband Willi in the story "The Folktale," narrated by Erica.

16 Hershman, *Tales of the Master Race*, 193.

17 Hershman, *Tales of the Master Race*, 198.

18 Froma Zeitlin, "Imaginary Tales in the Land of the Perpetrators," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 5, no. 2 (July 2006): 219.

19 Hershman, *Tales of the Master Race*, 71.

20 Richard Overy, "'Ordinary Men', Extraordinary Circumstances: Historians, Social Psychology, and the Holocaust," *Journal of Social Issues* 70, no. 3 (2014): 526, doi: 10.1111/josi.12075.

Surprisingly, the love triangle does not turn into a rivalry, but rather leads to a strangely profitable co-existence in which Felix Breslauer utilizes Willi's connections and experience with forced labor and the enslavement of Slavic workers at the camp. Thanks to Willi's importation of camp laborers, Breslauer is able to expand his printing business, and in this light his mistress' husband becomes an irreplaceable employee of his established company.

Breslauer's absence of guilt can be explained by the fact that he finds support for his immoral acts in the dominant Nazi ideology. As the psychologists Roy B. Baumeister and W. Keith Campell suggest, "[p]erpetrators often acknowledge some wrongdoing but also see extenuating circumstances … and some degree of legitimate justification for some of their actions."[21] Although Breslauer does not partake directly in violence, and in this respect might be regarded as a bystander, his lust for profiting off the suffering at all costs places him close to the perpetrators. If he does not feel any regret for his disgraceful conduct, it is because of his belief in the superiority of the Aryan "master race" and the inferiority of Jews and other ethnic groups and nations, including Slavic people. His contempt for them accords with Willi, who does not consider Slavic forced laborers to be human beings. For him, they are nothing more than "animal-men" and "mules"[22] or "mules from Silesia" ("The Folktale").[23] Both these characters treat Slavs as an inferior race, and thus they do not feel responsibility for their own perpetration of evil, instead perceiving their conduct as natural, with notions of remorse entirely irrelevant.

The title of "The Folktale" is drawn from a Jewish story which functions as a witty allegory of Hitler's plan to create *Lebensraum*, the "living space" for the German nation, a narrative which in the Nazi context served as the ideological foundation for the territorial expansion of the Aryan "master race" into Central and Eastern Europe. The mighty power of the Nazi ideology of racial purity affects even the common, everyday life of children, as depicted in the story "The Tryout," in which it marks the friendship of two children, Petra and Franzel. The victim of the eugenic dimension of this ideology is Franzel Volkmann, who is only half-Aryan, since he is of ethnically mixed descent. Furthermore, the story points to the dangerous effects of the Nazi cult of physical strength and perfection that turns both children into social outsiders, as they are not chosen for the gymnastics team due to their disabilities. Even Petra, the story's narrator, whose racial heredity is "proper," is perceived as a subversive element because she, despite pressure, refuses to conform to the military drill in the German Girls' League – behavior which is regarded as a manifestation of "disloyalty to the Führer."[24]

The Role of Bystanders in Hershman's Stories

As a part of a "grey zone," bystanders formed a specific group of people during the Holocaust. These chance spectators or onlookers were present but not directly involved in violence and oppression.

21 Roy F. Baumeister and W. Keith Campbell, "The Intrinsic Appeal of Evil: Sadism, Sensational Thrills, and Threatened Egotism," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 3, no. 3 (1999): 211.

22 Hershman, *Tales of the Master Race*, 146.

23 Hershman, *Tales of the Master Race*, 156.

24 Hershman, *Tales of the Master Race*, 90.

Many of them remained indifferent to the events for reasons of personal safety, but among them were also people who silently approved of the measures taken by the regime out of conformity, while others risked their lives and attempted to help the persecuted victims.

Hershman presents bystanders in their ordinary roles, both positive and negative. Some of them are passive recipients of the regime's orders, trying not to become involved and attempting to avoid any responsibility. If they are forced to assume responsibility under unexpected circumstances, they become scared, as they sense that their existence is threatened. One of the conformist bystanders is Ernest Gelber, the protagonist of the story "The Parade." Gelber is a leading member of a group of musicians called the Citizens' Band. After the leader of the group suddenly falls ill, the trumpeter Gelber is made to lead the band during the propagandistic parade in Passau to honor "A Day of Appreciation for Our New Land and New Friends." These "new friends" are the result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and the entire event is organized to celebrate the annexation of Poland; this has a strong ideological purpose, which places the indifferent Gelber, who has anxiously refrained from any ardent commitment, in an uncomfortable position. This unexpected increase in responsibility distresses him, since previously he had been one of the many Germans who simply wanted to fit in with the Nazi regime and avoid provoking the authorities. Embracing uniformity, he resembles hundreds of thousands of similar German citizens who were loyal to the Third Reich. He explains his membership in the band with the following words:

> I'd joined the Citizens' Band for, well, the camaraderie, and because I was afraid. All around me our little town was dressed up and shouting – all of Germany was dressed up and shouting. And I stood out because I didn't make one sound at all. I had to find some part, just some sweet little part, in all the excitement. […] I was in tune. I was in uniform. I was a participant. That's it."[25]

The story reflects those ordinary bystanders who, following herd instinct and going with the tide, succumb to the Nazis' propaganda. Absorbed by the elation of the cheering crowd, the story's open end indicates the gregariousness of this population's behavior and the danger of conformity that can easily transform the bystander into a perpetrator.

Hershman's positive representation of bystanders is demonstrated in the story "The Stroke" in which Trude Prudman, the narrator of the story, is recovering from a stroke in a hospital and is horrified by the disappearance of physically and mentally disabled children from the ward. The story is the author's reaction to the Nazi program called Aktion T4, in which the state liquidated incurably ill, physically and mentally disabled citizens via a system of involuntary euthanasia.

The most positive character among Hershman's bystanders is Thea Wennegarten in the story "The Traitor." Unlike the conformist bystanders, she vigorously resists the regime, stealing important files from the bombed police station and supplies from Breslauer's printing works to help her university friends print pamphlets against Nazi policies. This story was modeled on a real resistance group, the White Rose, which was formed by university students who published anti-Nazi pamphlets and were executed. The story's ending shows that the war has fatally affected the lives of all Germans, no matter whether they stood on the side of the victims, bystanders or perpetrators.

25 Hershman, *Tales of the Master Race*, 104.

Indirect Representation of Victims

Unlike in conventional stories about the Holocaust, the events of World War II in Hershman's short story cycle are not represented from the perspective of victims. Victims are depicted only indirectly, often fleetingly in just a few lines. In fact, the terror of the Holocaust is reflected only in the background, on the periphery, and sometimes in the form of allusions. The author's matter-of-fact language contributes to the sense of the ordinariness of these extraordinary cruelties and ubiquitous brutality. In Hershman's stories, there are only terse references to the rounding-up and shooting of Jews, the closure of their shops and confiscation of their property, or the transports to concentration camps; these events are presented as if they were taken for granted. Here are several examples:

> Roundups: "… fifty or sixty people surged around the corner of Frankenstrasse. A strange, ill-matched group. […] Stateless, probably. Jews. Old people and younger, and very young – children, all rounding the corner and spreading into the street without talking" ("The Map").[26]
> Killings: "From outside, a burst of gunfire. Someone began crying out in a desperate repetitive way: *Oh oh oh*. It was a painful sound, an ululation like a cat's" ("The Trespasser").[27]
> Transports: "They [trucks] were loaded with people. In the starry night, I saw blurred faces and, flapping back and forth below these, the yellow blinking of six-pointed stars. Hands waving: the glint of a ring, or fingernail. Jews, not laborers" ("The Folktale").[28]
> Elimination of Jews: "At noon, when we pulled into Passau and parked under the long, flapping banner proclaiming the town center Jew-free, I was faint with dizziness" ("The Parade" 109).[29]

The narrative point of view of perpetrators or bystanders explains why oppressive acts against Jews (and also "undesirable" non-Jewish inhabitants) are seen, due to the Nazis' massive ideological campaign, as a state of normalcy, which is reinforced by Hershman's setting of gruesome events in the context of banal occurrences.

The banality of evil, to use Hannah Arendt's expression, is reflected in the corrupted language which conceals terrible crimes under the mask of euphemisms. Hershman employs euphemisms throughout her stories to highlight the atrocity of the deeds committed by the Nazi regime and to convey her ironic distance from them. Accordingly, she uses the expression "job" for the execution of a prisoner, "body recording" for records of the measurements of beheaded people in "The Guillotine," and "relief" for the involuntary euthanasia of incurably ill and physically or mentally disabled people in "The Stroke." In the story "The Folktale," the word "project" stands for the construction of the death camp at Auschwitz and "network of holding facilities" refers to the site of the camp itself. The author's diction here corresponds to the corrupted language of the Nazi regime, exemplified by the phrase "the Final Solution," the code name covering the plan for the genocidal extermination of the Jewish people.

26 Hershman, *Tales of the Master Race*, 75.

27 Hershman, *Tales of the Master Race*, 138.

28 Hershman, *Tales of the Master Race*, 160.

29 Hershman, *Tales of the Master Race*, 109.

A Probe into Conscience; Conclusion

Hershman's book is framed by two questionnaires. Their questions are addressed to the anonymous citizens of Kreiswald, examining their conscience. The final questionnaire reveals the participation of the townspeople in a massacre of Jews and other undesirable people that took place near Kreiswald before the arrival of the Allies in the town, with some of the victims buried alive. From the way in which the questions are asked, it is evident that the majority of the town's citizens want to avoid answering, and hence avoid responsibility, due to the fracture between the sense of responsibility and their deeds, which is "the most common characteristic of socially organized evil."[30] Perhaps only Thea need not be ashamed to answer the searing questions, but the others show no interest in talking about the past. As Zeitlin notes, "it is the claim of racial superiority, at the heart of the entire National Socialist enterprise, that has undermined the moral fibre of the town and repressed their responses to ethically repugnant behavior."[31] She contends that the questionnaires "reinforce the ethical insufficiency of the characters and, by extension, the entire town."[32]

Marcie Hershman in her short story cycle *Tales of the Master Race* has projected a vivid psychological portrayal of ordinary, average German citizens in a small fictional town in the Third Reich from the perspective of perpetrators and bystanders, while victims are depicted only indirectly. Since she presents the categories of perpetrators, bystanders and victims as fluid, the lines separating them are at times thin. Some characters are willing perpetrators with overwhelming power who inflict evil on their victims out of ideological conviction (for example the commander Terskan in the story "The Guillotine" and Gruber in the story "The Shift"), whereas the other characters represent perpetrators acting under the pressure of obedience and conformity. If these individuals show resistance and make a moral decision to opt out of the killing by disobeying orders of which they disapprove (Stella in "The Guillotine"), they are turned into victims who are punished by the Nazi totalitarian regime. Regarding the category of bystanders, their presentation varies. Some of them are passive, obedient citizens following the orders given by the higher authorities. Although they do not participate in the killing, they are indoctrinated by Nazi ideology and instilled with historical anti-Semitism. A positive view of bystanders is represented by such characters as Trude Prudham ("The Stroke") and especially Thea Wennegarten ("The Traitor"), who becomes engaged in the underground resistance. Liminality between bystander and perpetrator is embodied by Felix Breslauer ("The Map"), whose material motivations however rank him more among the perpetrators. Despite the town's distance from the main sites of the Holocaust and the rather blurred boundary-lines between the various categories of characters, all the ordinary townspeople and their lives, as Hershman shows in her interlocked stories, are affected by the extraordinary events of World War II. In all these stories, Hershman negotiates the reasons for participation in the atrocities and the extent of the characters' culpability – a culpability that may or may not have traumatizing effects, depending on the individuals.

30 Stanly Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 11.

31 Zeitlin, "Imaginary Tales in the Land of the Perpetrators," 223.

32 Zeitlin, "Imaginary Tales in the Land of the Perpetrators," 220.

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