

A Grimm tale

An Israeli scholar has produced a study of the fairy tales of the Grimm Brothers and their connection with German folk heritage, anti-Semitism and nationalism. Dr. Henry Wasserman is interviewed by Sarah Honig.



We all know that the Grimm Brothers were really pretty grim. We all know what happened to Little Red Riding Hood's wolf, to Hansel and Gretel's witch and to a whole host of other despicable villains who peopled our childhood fantasies, courtesy of Jacob Ludwig and Wilhelm Karl. But wait till you hear what happened to the Jew.

His belly wasn't just slit open and filled with heavy stones, nor was he speedily shoved into the lighted oven. No, the old Jew, in a rumpled coat and with a long goat-like beard, was first demonized, then tortured, humiliated and ridiculed, bled and stripped almost naked, then degraded into abject grovelling before a crowd of onlookers and only then, at last, still before the crowd, was he finally led off to get his just deserts on the gallows (though nowhere in the story, unlike the wolf or the witch, had he ever taken a human life). Reminiscent of something?

Dr. Henry Wasserman, who brings us the little-known Grimm fairy tale of *The Jew in the Thistles*, agrees that the Jew was "simply Jeshumanized. Because of the Grimms' manipulation of an all-European folk tale, which originally had no Jewish connection whatever, it became part of Germany's national heritage and became recommended reading material for the young. The Grimms actively improvised and disseminated a tale dripping with anti-Semitism."

It is the Grimms rather than an element of the German mentality which Wasserman blames.

He repeatedly stresses that he wouldn't like us to go so far as to make cause-and-effect connections with the Holocaust or even draw generalized conclusions about German anti-Semitism or about a sadistic streak in the Teutonic character. Wasserman, it should be noted, accuses some Jews and Israelis, especially the "rightists," of "dwelling too much on the past, the Holocaust and the history of anti-Semitism for present political purposes. By depicting the Holocaust as unique, they seek to exonerate the wrongs committed by Israel today."

BE THAT AS IT MAY, Wasserman in a text he has just completed for the Open University dishes up to the Israeli public - even to those who might disagree with his opinions - tantalizing food for thought, which doesn't necessarily back up his controversial opinions. His book, the second in a series on Europe: *Cradle of Nationalism* to be offered as part of a course by the same name next year, focuses on the Grimm Brothers.

Motivated by German nationalism during the first half of the 19th century, they sought to rescue, preserve and pass on what they considered as the German folk heritage. Ironically, despite their deep-seated hostility to France and to "cosmopolitanism," much of what they compiled, rather than being pure expressions of the "German soul," has no less deep French roots, as well as general-European origins.

It all becomes fascinating, according to Wasserman, when we trace the changes the two Grimms made "not only from the original folk tales of their raw material, but even in their own work from edition to edition. These are significant and highly indicative of their objectives."

Wasserman explains that the brothers "so idealized the German past that, in keeping with this idealized nationalist image, they revised and repaired the raw material, till in many cases in effect they produced new creations rather than faithful renditions of folk traditions."

The Grimms' "heavily rewritten and overhauled tales attest to the German conservatism and provincialism of their day in matters of state and sex and even to the tendency towards kitsch in art," Wasserman argues.

BUT DO THEY also point to the darker sides of the German character? Educators for decades have sought to mop up some of the excess blood-and-gore from the popular bedtime (sometimes nightmare-inspiring) tales. After the horrors of World War II, moreover, a school of thought arose which pointed to the Grimm stories (along with macabre German art and Martin Luther's anti-Semitic diatribes) as evincing German character traits. Though perhaps these were not immediately responsible for the Holocaust (Jewish

children, after all, were also reared on the same bedtime fare), they are indicative of the cultural background which could spawn both the artistic and philosophical horrors that led to the Nazi legalized death machine.

Wasserman refers to Louis Snyder (with whom he disagrees) who, in his 1978 *Roots of German Nationalism* (Indiana University Press), draws attention to the Grimms' nationalism and their conviction that their writing springs from "the German soil," to their agrardement of Germanism and emphasis on obedience, discipline, order, authoritarianism, acquiescence in violence, cruelty and bloodshed, xenophobia and virulent anti-Semitism.

"Snyder even quotes Third Reich fans of the Grimms who were grateful to them for helping the German nation realize its potential to preserve and continue its 'ancient culture and its exalted historical mission.' Snyder holds that cruelty is typical of all folk mythology, but that the German tales are outstanding in juxtaposing everyday routine with deathly horrors and sadistically-premeditated torture," Wasserman notes.

He doesn't deny that the list of Grimm horrors is impressive indeed: stepmothers are tossed into boiling oil, a mother-in-law is burned at the stake, Cinderella's step-sisters' eyes are gouged out by birds, an old hag decapitates her stepdaughter, bad mothers are torn to shreds by wild beasts, etc.

"Snyder sees it as a compulsive preoccupation with death and revenge in an almost hysterical atmosphere of fear," Wasserman says, but emphasizes that "what I am against is the notion that there is something rotten in the German soul. Not all SS men were sadists or perverts. Most, like Eichmann, functioned at the executive level and were good family men. There was sadism in the process but not as an expression of their personalities," he contends.

He further claims that the Poles and Hungarians were more anti-Semitic than the Germans and that "paradoxically, the Holocaust was initiated by the nation which was not the most anti-Semitic in Europe. As for Jewish villains, they exist even in the gentler Andersen tales," but agrees that, there, they are hardly as demonic, nor do they come to such blood-curdling ends.

WASSERMAN HIMSELF was born as the Holocaust raged in the Poland of 1943. He was hidden by a Polish family and he and his parents survived the war. Between 1946 and 1950, he lived in Sweden; and, before coming on aliya in 1955, he spent five years in Detroit. Culturally, though, he says, he was reared in a German-speaking environment, as that was the language at home and the language in which he did much of his reading. "Perhaps that is why I am so sensitive to wholesale condemnations of the German

character," he says.

He became an expert on German Jewish history and works for Yad Vashem in compiling the Encyclopedia of Jewish Communities in Germany (*Pinkas Hakehillot*). His fury against "the fetishistic exploitation of the Holocaust by the Jewish views, he says, has nothing to do with his straightforward research. He describes himself as having strong personal and ideological connections with members of Germany's Green Party; had there been an Israeli version of the Greens, he says, he would be in it.

"I am not seeking to clear the German people or their heritage of Jew-hating," Wasserman explains. "I just think that it is scientifically invalid to find a causal relationship between a nation's lore and its behavioural norms. We would do far better to examine more modest questions such as what part did the Grimm brothers play in preserving and perpetuating anti-Semitism, which no doubt did exist in the German heritage."

Here Wasserman accuses the Grimms, in writing *The Jew Among the Thistles*, of not documenting "authentic folklore but rather of creating a brand-new, malevolent tale, legitimized, as it were, by the bogus stamp of antiquity. In fact, the story the Grimms reworked was indeed old, though not exclusively German; and in it the villain is... a Catholic monk, not a Jew! It is the Grimms who introduce the Jewish element. Worse still, Wilhelm Grimm chose to include it in an anthology of the brothers' 50 best tales, thus vastly increasing its circulation. Great power was in fact entrusted in the hands of these preservers of German national culture, who could give it a new embodiment and determine the manner in which so many German children for the first time encountered a Jewish character."

WASSERMAN MAINTAINS that the Grimms' treatment and portrayal of the Jewish villain of their creation is "hardly inadvertent, as can be seen by the comparison of the various editions of their tales." In the seventh, "authoritative," 1857 edition, for instance, the Jew's caricature-like appearance and demeanour are accentuated, down to such details as shrieks of 'oi vey,' which the Germans considered terribly Jewish and terribly ludicrous. Clearly premeditation was at work, Wasserman surmises.

Although the Grimms thought the story merited inclusion in their anthology of best-loved tales, it was hardly ever very popular outside Germany. In my father's old American edition of 70 Grimm tales (Harper & Brothers, 1917), for example, the story was somewhat cleaned-up and the old Jew became just "The Man in the Bush." He was given no ethnic or other identity - this, despite the fact that editor-illustrator Louis Rhead prides himself in the preface on "faithfulness to the original and the retaining the favourite old titles." The caricature of the old Jew was apparently thought too embarrassing even at a period in which the Americans were not overly squeamish themselves about anti-Semitism.

In fact, the tale was often just left out of many anthologies even in Germany of the Weimar Republic. The Nazis, needless to say, gleefully reinstated it for its didactic value to their offspring.

Wasserman sees the Grimms' literary manipulation as significant in the connection between European nationalism and anti-Semitism: "Some national movements invited the Jews to join them through emancipation, others made that conditional on assimilation and yet others made the Jew the scapegoat. Most of the time these tendencies existed side by side, with each occasionally gaining the upper hand. Anti-Semitic incitement at times served specific cultural, social and political purposes.

"So it was in the case of the Grimms, who used to accentuate their patriotism and purist adherence to indigenous medieval German tradition to the point of even writing without capital letters, as was German custom once. Some researchers go so far as to see them as the fathers of the German *volksich* ideology, which ascribed inherent, almost supernatural attributes to the folk and to which later Nazi ideology was closely akin. But, in this case, what they recorded was not German folk heritage. It was the Grimms who made it into heritage."

THE JEW AMONG THE THISTLES

TO CUT A LONG story very short, our hero is an upright, hard-working, kind-hearted servant who gives a dwarf the only three crowns he has. He is rewarded with a magic fiddle that sets all who hear it dancing and unable to stop so long as the music is played. Roaming the countryside, he comes across the Jew who attempts to cheat him. While the old Jew creeps into a bush, the lad takes up his fiddle getting the Jew to spring about in the prickly tangle till

the thorns comb through his beard, rip off his clothes and tear his flesh "so that the blood ran down." The lad walks off with the Jew's purse; but, later, the half-naked, wily Jew goes to the judge and complains he has been robbed.

As our hero is about to be hanged for theft, he starts fiddling again. By the time it's all over, the miserable Jew, prostrate on the ground, wretchedly confesses his villainy and is sent to the gallows himself.

wish = woe
Gewalt =
power;
domination;
authority;
violence