
CREATIVITY IN THE MIDST OF CRUELTY:
A CONVERSATION WITH GEORGE BRADY AND MICHAEL A. MEYER
ABOUT LIFE IN TEREZÍN AND THE TASKS OF THE HOLOCAUST

This interview was conducted on April 27th, 2006, following the Taft Lecture by George Brady: *"We Were Children Just the Same: The Story of a Youth Journal in the Terezín Concentration Camp"* which took place in the Max Kade Center, Department of German Studies, University of Cincinnati.

Professor Michael A. Meyer was born in Berlin, Germany and brought to the United States as a small child in 1941. He received his B.A. (with highest honors) from UCLA, his B.H.L. from Hebrew Union College, Los Angeles, and his Ph.D. from HUC in Cincinnati. Since 1967 he has been on the faculty of HUC, Cincinnati, where he currently serves as the Adolph S. Ochs Professor of Jewish History. Professor Meyer's most recent book is *Jewish Identity in the Modern World*, 1990. His major work is *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*, 1988, which won the National Jewish Book Award in the area of Jewish history. Prof. Meyer's articles and reviews in the field of modern Jewish intellectual and religious history number close to two hundred. His current project is editing and contributing to a four-volume history of the German Jews since the seventeenth century currently being published in English, German, and Hebrew.

George Brady lived an ordinary life in interwar Czechoslovakia until March, 1939, when Nazi Germany took over control of Bohemia and Moravia, both comprising the western part (except for the largely German-inhabited Sudetenland, which was annexed by Germany in September/October 1938). After that, his family, who was Jewish, encountered increasing restrictions and persecution by the German occupiers. By the year 1942, George's parents had been separated from their children and sent to prisons and concentration camps. They would perish in Auschwitz before the end of the Second World War. George and Hana stayed with an aunt and uncle (the uncle was not Jewish, and thus the couple was a "privileged" mixed-marriage, and not subject to deportation) for a short time, until they, too, were deported to Theresienstadt, a ghetto-camp not far from Prague, Czechoslovakia, where they would remain until 1944, when they were sent in separate

convoys to the dreaded work and death camp of Auschwitz. Although Hana did not survive, George did, and after finding his immediate family dead, he eventually immigrated to Canada. By using plumbing, the trade he learned in Theresienstadt, George set up a plumbing business with another Holocaust survivor in early 1951, when he moved to Toronto where he now resides. George later married and became a father to three sons, and much later to a daughter named Lara Hana.

FOCUS: Somewhere I read that you did not speak about your personal story because nobody asked the right questions. When I went to the website, which is dedicated to *Hana's Suitcase* and the memory of your family, I stumbled across the "questions & answers section" on the website <http://www.hanassuitcase.ca> which lists questions children have asked you. I noticed your reaction after the lecture today, when at first, none of the adults in the audience wanted to ask you a question. You seemed somewhat amused about that. You even said: "Whenever I speak in front of children, there are always so many questions." I also noted that the questions the children asked on the website are rather direct. Were those the kind of questions that finally enabled you or made you want to talk? (e.g. What was Auschwitz like? How did you feel about your parents' death? How did you find out that Hana didn't survive? Do you hate the German people?)

GEORGE BRADY: No, it's just that if you know my nature, I rather tell happy stories than the sad ones. I did not want to burden my children with my fate, so when they asked about my tattoo number, I told them it's my telephone number, so they thought I was dumber than they thought I am. I told them some but I never went into the sordid details; but then, when the book *Hana's Suitcase* appeared, I was sucked into it. From then on, I tried to answer questions as best as I could. I am not a philosopher, so if you have a philosophical question, you have to ask my friend here, Prof. Meyer.

FOCUS: Students and teachers have read *Hana's Suitcase*. But that's not all. Your sister has inspired them in various ways. A group of students wrote a song about her, there is now a theater play, there are TV programs etc. Do you have a personal favorite project?

GB: I would not say I have a favorite. But I have to say that I am very lucky that the story has been told by very talented people. In 1993, the book *We are Children Just the Same* got the medal for best book on the Holocaust. When Karen Levine made the radio interview, it received first prize in New York as the best interview in the historical category. The book *Hana's Suitcase* has received over a dozen awards. Then Joe Schlessinger, Jet Belgraver, and Avi Lev made a television program *Hana's Suitcase: An Odyssey of Hope*, and again it got the Gemini award. Most recently, Emil Sher (playwright) created the play *Hana's Suitcase*. After a successful debut in Toronto, it is poised to start a tour in Western Canada. The American premiere will be in January 2007 in St Louis. So, whenever somebody gets involved, I just tell them that it has to be the best or nothing!

FOCUS: You were born in Berlin and came to the US as a small child in 1941. I was wondering what it was like to grow up as a child of emigrants and to what extent your (German) background has influenced and informed your professional career?

MICHAEL A. MEYER: In some respects I feel the way survivors feel. My life is a gift; having not fallen victim to the Holocaust, I owe something to my fellow human beings. My life is not entirely my own. Consequently, my interest in the survival of the Jewish people and my becoming a historian of the Jews. I have always felt that Germany is a part of my background. When I came to the USA at the age of three and a half and grew up in Los Angeles, German was my first language. And one of my most traumatic experiences was being sent to a nursery in L.A. where all the children were speaking a foreign language that I could not understand. But under those circumstances and at the age of three and a half, I learned English very quickly. My grandmother, who came from one of those typical middle-class bourgeois, "gutbürgerlich" families, believed that I should not only learn "klavierspielen" but also that I should retain my German so that one day I could read Goethe and Schiller whom she still believed to be the most important authors that one could possibly read. And so she continued to speak German to me, and in that way, I was able to retain some knowledge of the German language, even though my parents desperately tried to

learn English as quickly as possible. Of course, they spoke English with an accent. Later when I attended UCLA, I decided to study German literature and took a wonderful year-long-course on Goethe's *Faust*, Part I and Part II. But later I mainly studied history. In order to explore my own roots, I focused on German-Jewish history.

FOCUS: While you, Mr Brady have only fairly recently begun to share your personal story, Prof. Meyer has written and talked about what it means to be Jewish quite extensively for the past 40 years. Would you agree that your involvement is marked by a 50 year-long silence and a decade-long outspokenness about what it means to be Jewish respectively? If yes, what does this contrast mean to you? If not, why do you disagree?

MM: Well, here one has to distinguish very much George's experience from mine. George went through the camps - and he has to speak for himself - but to speak about that has to be a great pain and a great trauma. I escaped as a small child and consequently it is easier for me to talk about it. My memories of Germany are virtually non-existent. What does a three and a half year old after all remember? And when I wrote about what it means to be Jewish, I was writing about it largely as a historian, trying to discover in my own scholarly work what were the origins of modern Jewish identity, a subject that has occupied me throughout my scholarly career. But I was not dealing with my own story. I was dealing with Moses Mendelssohn and other leading Jewish intellectuals and it is much easier to tell others' stories than to tell your own, particularly if your own story has some very painful elements in it.

GB: I agree, we have a very different background, different upbringings, right? I was always a Czech of Jewish religion. I am now a Canadian of Jewish religion, so it was never of prime importance to me to be Jewish. Both my parents were Jewish, my first wife was Protestant, my second wife is Catholic, one son's family is Catholic, one is Protestant, the one in California is Buddhist. You know, for me religion did not matter, it is more important for me now that I feel that I have a certain obligation to ensure that the boys who were exceptionally talented and

who did not make it are remembered and their memory is kept alive. The same goes for my family, and that includes Hana.

FOCUS: How does Mr. Brady's story fit into your academic interests?

MM: I am a historian of the Jews, and therefore every story about a Jew that is related to his or her being Jewish, whether that's a matter of self-designation or being designated as such from the outside, is of interest to me. I have written more about the 19th century than about the 20th century, but I am also interested in Jewish experiences during the Nazi period. I have been particularly interested in the stories of German Jews during the 1930s and what it meant to them to be so highly integrated into German society and suddenly to be removed from that society and to be thrown back to a Jewishness which in their cases - and I gather also in George's case - was not really that significant to them since they did not have an extensive Jewish education, for example. But it became a determining factor in their lives because they were defined as Jews by the Nazis.

FOCUS: *We Are Children Just the Same* and *Hana's Suitcase* are also books about you. Could you reflect on what both works reveal about you? In each case, how did your involvement influence the outcome of the books?

GB: First of all, I don't think those books are about me. I am partly responsible for having them published. I wrote a few articles while in Terezin but they were certainly not comparable to the quality of the articles, poems and art some of the other boys submitted. Quite a few of the articles refer to me by my Czech name, Jirka (or Jiri). After the war, Kurt Kotouc and I compiled a list of the boys who had been in our room. I am responsible for that. I felt that somebody had to do it and these guys were so talented that they deserve to be remembered.

As far as *Hana's Suitcase*, it was Fumiko Ishioka who found me. Afterwards more strange things happened. Karen Levine phoned me one day to ask me whether I would do an interview, and I said, "you don't know how lucky you are because Fumiko is coming tomorrow," and so we both made the interview that week.

Both books reveal not so much about myself but more importantly, a lot about human character and heroism in challenging times. Hana and I (and most of the boys) had very regular childhoods. In Terezín, we were very lucky to have the wonderful Professor Eisinger who forced to see beyond our troubles. He encouraged us to create our own government in the room, create the newspaper etc. Hana also had a very gifted art teacher, Friedl Dicker Brandeis who also wanted to take the children past the ghetto rules.

Fumiko is a modern day hero to me because she has chosen to take a horrific historical tragedy and use it as a tool to change our future. She also encourages children to learn more about each other to overcome differences and promote tolerance. That she has been able to use my sister's story is a pleasant surprise.

FOCUS: What do these books mean to a scholar like yourself?

MM: *Hana's Suitcase* is simply a very attractive story because of its improbability, because of the suspense it creates. On the other hand, *We Are Children Just the Same* has broader historical importance. It tells us something about the nature of life in Terezín and the experience of thousands of Jews there. And about the creativity in the midst of cruelty - that is an important chapter of Holocaust history.

FOCUS: As “bear Brady” you wrote a brief report on the “District heating” for *We Are Children Just the Same*. In the end, you write: “That is the end of my report. I hope you have understood everything.”

This ending made me think. Browsing through *We Are Children Just the Same*, the reader learns about life in Terezín, but there is no way that we will ever really understand what it was like to be there. I think your contribution is different from the other boys'. It is fairly technical, it almost reads like a school project report or like technical instructions. You said after the lecture that you are a bit embarrassed when you look at this text today. Why?

GB: I was never a talented writer plus I did not have any schooling. On top of that, all the boys were still being taught in secret. I,

being a plumbing apprentice, was not. I was working the whole day and only participated in the journal in the evening. So, I had to a certain degree a disadvantage and secondly writing was just not my talent. The piece is very naive. I suspect that they included my article to make sure that I would help them to publish the book. (laughs) I have never considered myself a literary talent.

MM: How did you get the nick name “bear”?

GB: I got a second nick-name and it was “chladnokrevny kun” which means “cold-blooded horse.” Because we were doing district heating and sometimes we were installing pipes very high up, crossing from one building to another and I was working in these dangerous places, so they considered that. The “bear” probably because I moved slowly, I don’t remember. There are many things I have forgotten; if I had not found my diary, which is also not a literary accomplishment, most of all, I wrote about food and soccer. But there are gems in there, you know, like meeting H. K. Frank, the highest Gestapo man in the Protectorate. He wanted to see what books we were reading and while in our room commented that there are still too many Jews in the city (subsequently, 20 000 Jews were sent to Auschwitz). I forgot those things. I forgot that I participated in the propaganda film created by Hitler *The Führer gives the Jews a City*. I also forgot that I saw *Brundibar*. I realize that what we remember are significant things. And the rest is gone. Otherwise you would have to be a giant computer. If I ask you what you did ten years ago, what the color of your suitcase was, you would probably also not remember.

Very often, I remember or learn new things about our story. In Hana’s story, we learned about the suitcase Fumiko received. In 1962, a schoolmate of Hana’s went to Auschwitz. She saw the pile of suitcases and saw Hana’s. She asked to take a picture of it. She took a photo which she sent me years later. In 1997, I went with my daughter, Lara Hana, to Auschwitz but we could not find the suitcase. When Lara was in Cincinnati a few years ago, she was looking at the original photo and the photo of the suitcase Fumiko had received. She noticed that the handle was differently placed in each photo. She told me and I said “Don’t

be ridiculous!” But then I looked at it and there was no question, it was not the original suitcase. So, I did not know how to tell Fumiko, I did not want to offend her. Finally, Fumiko and I went to Auschwitz to find out what was going on. The director told us that in 1982, a number of suitcases had been sent to England for a traveling exhibition, and in 1984, while it was being stored in a warehouse in Birmingham, some Neo-Nazis had set fire to it. And fortunately, as we realized later, they created a replica. We are so grateful that they created a replica because without it, Hana’s story would not have come to light. The Auschwitz museum was very apologetic about the clerical error that had not brought this to Fumiko’s attention.

FOCUS: I have asked this question in another interview, but I’d like to ask you as well: In her latest book *After Such Knowledge* (2005), Eva Hofmann writes: “The story of the second generation is, above all, a strong example of an internalized past, of the way in which atrocity literally reverberates through the minds and lives of subsequent generations. That is the way the story is usually told: as personal, affective, intricately psychological. But the Holocaust past, aside from being a profound personal legacy, is also *a task*. It demands something from us, an understanding that is larger than just ourselves, that moves beyond the private vicissitudes of the inner life.” (103, my emphasis) Do you agree that the Holocaust is a task, and if yes, what is *your* task?

MM: Yes, I definitely agree that the Holocaust is a task. It is a task especially for Jews, but also for everyone. We Jews lost one third of our people in the Holocaust. Our numbers today are still not anywhere near where they were before the Holocaust. Therefore for Jews the task is that of survival. But there is also the broader task which Jews share with everyone. That is the task of learning the lesson, of relating the Holocaust to the inhumanities of our times and seeking to prevent or put an end to them. But I would say that, especially for the Jews – and most of especially for those Jews most closely related to it – it is more than a task: it is an obligation.

GB: I would have to agree for the most part. During the Holocaust, my task was to survive and be able to share my testimony of the horrible things that the Nazis did. After the war, I felt that I had

a responsibility to move on and live a life that would make my parents proud (at least not embarrassed!). Since then and at the urging of my children and the amazing growth of Hana's impact on children, I have realized that I need to share my memories as an example of the ultimate lapse of humanity. We need to teach our children about tolerance, respect for each other and the importance of justice. Based on the success of the story and its impact around the world, children relate to Hana in an approachable way for the very necessary lessons of the Holocaust.

FOCUS: Thank you both very much for the interview.

The interview was conducted by Julia K. Baker