

Which Are the Stories that Suit Us Best? The Story of Gad Beck

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When Jewish survivors tell their stories about their life in the national socialist Germany of the 1930s and 40s, who wants to hear their stories and whom do these stories belong to? These are frequent questions raised by the big international oral history projects supported by such renowned institutions as the Leo Baeck Institute in London with archives at the Jewish Museum in Berlin, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, or the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation at the University of South California. Yet, similar questions remain vital even in the smaller private initiatives about Shoah, which are too numerous to count. One such project is *Und Gad ging zu David*, the memoir of Gad Beck (b. 1923), edited by Frank Heibert in 1995. The book has been repeatedly reissued since, as well as translated into English and published as *An Underground Life. Memoirs of a Gay Jew in Nazi Berlin* in 1999.

What is it that makes Beck's story worth listening to today? For me the book shows a perspective to the Shoah that I have been less familiar with, namely that of a young man of a mixed heritage (Beck's father was an Austrian Jew, his mother a Christian), who fell for other boys, and who was able to use both these conditions to survive the war years

in Berlin, from 1943 onwards as a member of the illegal Jewish underground resistance group *Chug Chaluzi*.

The book offers, among other things, a personal step-by-step narrative about the gradually deteriorating situation of the Jewish population in Germany during the Nazi regime. The 10-year-old Beck felt the initial changes in political climate in his Arian school, where he was expelled first from the student row at the daily flag ceremony and later on from the trophy podium, when his sports team won a relay race. The latter event made his parents move their son to a Jewish School instead. The financial situation of the family deteriorated, however, to the extent that the son had to leave school altogether and take up a position as an apprentice in a clothing shop in 1936.

In 1938, when Germany occupied Austria, the Beck family lost its nationality standing as Austrians, and was labelled plain Jewish instead. This meant that they lost their apartment and were forced to move into a "Jewish house". Despite the worsening situation in 1938, when new anti-Jewish laws made it little by little virtually impossible for the Jews to keep up a normal life, some of the Arian relatives of Beck's mother refused to let off the family

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bond all together. Their solidarity kept the family's life at least somehow bearable. Likewise, the private Jewish cultural clubs, run illegally, helped to maintain spirits in an adverse climate.

The political situation of the Jews kept on deteriorating in 1939, when the Jews in Berlin were ordered to take up forced work in factories essential for war faring or in securing food supply for the capital, and radically more so when the systematic deportations of Jews to concentration camps started in 1941. Nevertheless, as Berlin was declared *judenrein*, free of Jews, by the propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels in June 1943, some mixed families of *Geltungsjuden* still lived there, as the Nazi phrase went, like Becks, together with a few Jews who were trying to hide in the underground.

After Beck's lover Manfred Lewin was deported in late 1942 and he, together with his sister and father, barely survived the so called *Fabrik-Aktion* in February 1943, he decided to join a newly founded Jewish youth group *Chug Chaluzi*. The pioneer group was founded as a reaction to *Fabrik-Aktion*, in which forced workers were picked directly from the factories by the Nazis and brought to the Rosenstraße assembly camp to be sent further on to the concentration camps. The young pioneers of *Chug Chaluzi* tried to help Jews who had managed to escape deportations and now sought to hide in Berlin in order to survive. Some of the members, among them Beck, chose to become *Illegale*, illegals, who shuttled the city with falsified papers

and were organizing food supply, clothing, accommodation and papers for those in hiding. Beck succeeded in avoiding the *Gestapo* until early March 1945, when he was arrested together with his friend Zwi Aviram. Both young men managed to survive the imprisonment and were rescued by the Russian army, as it occupied Berlin in April 1945.

Closely intertwined to this story of resistance and survival is also the narrative of Gad Beck's sexuality. His curious and life-affirming attitude to his own sexual desires made it possible for him to appreciate the plentiful same-sex sexual possibilities offered in those exceptional times. Some of his sexual encounters were mutual, others forced, some could be used strategically for survival, and several were for pleasure. Sexuality was admittedly one of the main forces that kept Beck going, gave him strength and hope. Sexual bonds were also vital in knitting networks that were essential for surviving those deadly times. His unapologetic attitude to sex makes the book, no doubt, a captivating read for both gay and queer audiences.

Beck's exceptional openness about his sexual encounters was also one of the issues which brought difficulties for him and his editor some 50 years later, when the memoirs first came out. In the second edition some changes were made to soothe the third parties mentioned, or their outraged relatives. Among these opponents were also those, who harshly questioned the accuracy of the stories presented in Beck's memoirs. This is also something documentary film makers Robin Cackett and Carsten Does took as their

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point of departure in their intriguing documentary about the life of Gad Beck.

In *Die Freiheit des Erzählens*, literally translatable as The Freedom of Narrating, we follow the elderly, yet still witty and lively Gad Beck through guided tours on the streets of Berlin, book lectures in Germany and the US, television talk shows, and join him in repeated discussions with the filmmakers about both the stories he tells and the way he tells them. Also his sister Miriam Rosenberg, his book editor Frank Heibert, theatre director Gilbert Holzgang and some old friends from the resistance get to give their assessment on Beck's art of story telling.

Beck's sister struggles to find words, when asked about the accuracy of her twin brother's account. "By all the fantasy it is the truth – he just knows how to decorate it." Beck, as his editor notes, has also had plenty of possibilities to learn how to present his stories best, since he has a long history in giving guided tours to groups who want to learn from a first hand witness how it was possible to survive the Third Reich as a Jew. This retelling has brought new layers, tones, and emphasis to his stories – whatever he thought the respective audiences knew to appreciate best.

Theatre director Holzgang, who had used original stories of the contemporaries, Beck's among them, to make a play about the events in Rosenstraße, could not verify some of the moving details Beck had used in his version of the events. "If it was not true, it was well made up," was his

acknowledging assessment. One of Beck's former friends, Hans-Oscar Baron Löwenstein de Witt, who sought to get the editor of Beck's memoirs into court, was less friendly in his assessment of one of the key events, Beck's trial to rescue his lover Lewin from the Nazis: "A sentimental story – but not a word is true in it." (see <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/doyourememberwhen/12/12.htm>, pages 12 – 17 for a shortened version of Beck's story).

It is interesting to follow how Beck in his life performances stages the various versions of his life's key events. Some of the stories have a firm choreography to the extent that they can be remixed in the film without missing a beat, others transform according to the audiences to the extent that their point may change to the opposite. We also see how there are stories he resolutely refuses to tell to certain audiences – a closeted gay talk show master is left without an answer to a question about a sexual favour for survival. But it is somewhat difficult also for the elderly Beck and the well-intended younger filmmakers to find common ways to talk about the role of sexuality in his life during the war years. "Had I taken my homosexuality as tragically as you, I'd have hung myself ages ago," he huffs.

These published materials now available, the memoirs and the documentary film, provide the most fascinating food for thought for anyone interested discussing narration, emotions, and intersectionality in oral history. When the elderly Gad Beck is confronted by the filmmakers with the discrepancies of his stories, and his response

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is a rather frustrated “I can no longer know how it was. Pick out the version that suits you the best;” how are we as scholars to deal with the mismatching stories provided here – considering that we, as narrating subjects, necessarily remain opaque even to ourselves, and our stories and their intelligibility depend on respective social relations? Also Gad Beck’s art of story telling raise questions about importance, validity and usefulness of emotions – of both the storyteller’s and the listener’s – in situations in which the factual truth of past events remains forever unknown. Moreover, in both cases the question of intersectionality becomes vital, since the Jewish/gay/male stories will be read in various different ways, depending on the particular audience and its politics. So, which stories would you choose to pick?

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