

DIASPORA TRANSITION-THE GERMAN REFUGEE BY BERNARD MALAMUD – INTRODUCTION AND ANALYSIS

Dr. Preeti Oza

St. Andrew's College
University of Mumbai

Ms. Ashmi Sheth

St. Andrew's College
University of Mumbai

Abstract

Malamud emerged as a talented artist, depicting the life of the Jewish poor in New York. His creative works are appreciated for his allegory and mastery in the art of storytelling. Malamud was the son of Jewish grocers and he grew up in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood in Brooklyn. Some argue that this was the reason that he wrote stories "set in small, prisonlike stores of various kinds"

Malamud explores the social realism and ethnic identity in most of his short stories – 'The Jew Bird,' 'Black is my Favorite Color', 'The German Refugee'. Malamud's fictional works also include themes of compassion, redemption, new life, the potential of meaningful suffering and self-sacrifice, all of which can be found in "The German Refugee" "The German Refugee" concludes Bernard Malamud's second collection of short stories, Idiots First (1963). The setting is New York City in the summer of 1939, just before the outbreak of World War II.

INTRODUCTION

One third of the twentieth century triumvirate of Jewish American writers including Saul Bellow (1915-2005) and Philip Roth (1933-2018), Bernard Malamud wrote lovingly and pitifully of American Jews in transition; that is, of the sufferings of immigrants bereft of home, career, income, language, friends, family, and often, faith. Malamud's National Book Award-winning short story collection, *The Magic Barrel* (1959), inspired by Joyce's *Dubliners* and Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, and his Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award Winning novel, *The Fixer* (1966), give voice to the Jewish dispossessed, living as strangers in a strange land. Yet floating above this misery is "an antique spirituality and an antique morality of surpassing beauty and importance, because it is a tie to God himself, [that] lives in the Jews." It is this innate morality in the face of struggle that leads Malamud to see Jews as metaphors for everyman. As Theodore Solotaroff put it in a March 1, 1962 Commentary piece: "Malamud's Jewishness is a type of metaphor ... both for the tragic dimension of anyone's life and for a code of personal morality." (Watts, 2018)

PLOT

'The German Refugee' is a true to life story depicting the struggles of many victims during and after the Second World War. This particular story takes place in the USA Broadway sometime during the Polish Invasion in 1939. The main characters Oscar Gassner and Martin Goldberg show just how difficult those times were for all the refugees and what connection and strength it took to keep them have faith and start a new life. This is one of the most popular stories of Bernard Malamud. The narrator Martin Goldberg explains and describes his efforts and it tends to teach English to German refugees named Oskar Gasser. He required giving a lecture in English about American poet Walt Whitman's relationship to some German poets

The plot of this short story runs into many distinct stories. The first one is Oscar's frustration for a failure to learn English as well as the irony and anguish of the narrator's failure to understand why he is not able to do so. When the narrator is teaching Oscar English language, the German Army begins its summer training of 1939. The narrator is not able to understand his student's deep involvement in Germany's role in the World War.

The narrator is a senior in college he provides tutoring to immigrants for English language learning to make some extra money. Because of the poor economy and social condition of the period of the great depression in America, many students were working part-time. Oscar is much like the other student who is a refugee and wants to study in America but he turns out to be a challenge for the tutor. He comes to America as a lecturer in the college but the thought of delivering the lecture in English makes him nervous. He has left his wife who was badly affected by the depression; he is tired of his life and suffering a lot. It changes into a beautiful friendship between the two men as they continued the English lesson. Even after Oscar had to give up on the lessons, the American still visited Oscar it is placed and tries to help him correct his lecture.

The language barrier is what creates the emotion of a link between Oscar and Martin. He had discussed disappointments, shame, and depression in his own country because of the language barrier he cannot completely talk about his feelings of fear to Martin. Living his gentle wife- the daughter of a virtual anti-Semitic mother behind, Oscar comes to New York and tries to perfect his English so that he can deliver his lectures to the American audience in Germany. The story is in the first person's account of trying to help Oscar and of the friendship- the force between them, as Oscar struggle with his pronunciation and the vagaries of American English.

He tells Martin about his one failed attempt to commit suicide during his initial weeks in America Martin is very kind and compassionate and tries to help Oscar in many ways to write and translate his lectures. Oscar develops a different habit and instead of writing the lecture on every visit, both men sit in silence and experience the hot and sticky month of July to understand each other. The narrator decides to gift a fan for Oscar and that shows the kind of personal Bond he has developed for this refugee.

Oscar had a very troubled life in America and he gets very frequent undercurrent about despair and depression. Because of his mental and physical conditions, he has nightmares about Nazi inflicting tortures on him and sometimes forcing him to look upon causes of people. He also keeps visiting his wife in his dreams where is directed to a cemetery. On the tombstone, he reads another person's name but her blood seeps out of the shadow grave.

Despite his efforts to help Oscar master English so that he can write and deliver a lecture on Walt Whitman in Germany, Martin begins to feel that it is hopeless and a failure. In a last desperate attempt to assist him, Martin sends Oscar some notes he has taken on Leaves of Grass. By this time, the Germans have invaded Poland and the Second World War has begun. He has changed and has come back to life but only to lose everything. Two days after hearing the lecture Martin goes up to Oscar's room and finds a big crowd over there and finds him dead having gassed himself. A week after this tragic event when he was going through Oscar's belonging as his only friend, Martin finds an explanation for the suicide in a letter from his anti-Semitic mother in law. His wife has converted to Judaism and had been seized by the Brownshirts along with other Jews in the apartment building, taken to a Polish border town, and shot in the head. She was then toppled into an open ditch with a naked Jewish man and their wife and children who were Polish gypsies and another countryman.

Barnard Malamud's story is a powerful account of the effect of the Holocaust even on the common and those who manage to escape the direct onslaught of the enemies in Germany. Oscar affected fatally but Martin who is an American and his friend and tutor is also terribly influenced by life events.

On the whole, this is a tragic story where both the characters show how terrible the War can be and how one comes to humanity as a healing Force for all the refugees. Oscar has given up long ago in his life and his faith has least the moment he became refugee he has planned to finish the lecture and kill himself against all odds. Ultimately the language barrier, disbelief inhumanity, and lack of Faith are what have killed Oscar.

Not only is "The German Refugee" a personal story with a tragic ending, but it is based on personal experience. Scraping to make a living during the Depression, Malamud taught English to German-Jewish refugees. Exposure to these now-unemployed, struggling intellectuals made the young writer "suddenly [see] what being born Jewish might mean in the dangerous world of the thirties." Sadly, the narrative is based on Malamud's fifty-five-year-old student, Dr. Friedrich Pinner, an economist and past financial editor of the Berliner Tageblatt, who, all his European clients gone, despaired of beginning again in a new country and with his wife, committed suicide by turning on the gas. As the story's puzzled English tutor and narrator Martin Goldberg comments: "Not everyone drowns in the ocean," and Malamud's ocean is filled with history.

THEMES

Language barrier and Language – the basis of self-identity

The narrator describes how he met the German refugee, Oskar Gassner, in his "disordered cheap hotel room," that was cluttered with clothing, boxes of books, and some paintings. The narrator was sent by his college to teach English to Oskar, a recently arrived refugee in New York. Oskar had found a new job in the Institute for Public Studies in New York and was supposed to give a lecture on "The Literature of the Weimar Republic" in English. As a critic and journalist in Berlin, he had never taught and was terrified of having to speak publicly in English. The story describes the challenges and frustration that Oskar experiences as he struggles to learn English and forget German. It also describes the anguish of a man in his mid-fifties who must completely start over in another country attempting to talk without an accent when giving lectures, a job that is his only source of survival.

Oskar wants to dissociate himself from his roots by learning to speak English and forgetting German. In his attempt to learn English properly and to write a successful lecture Oskar constantly moves between hope and despair. His frustration and hatred towards Germany reflected in the narrator's words: "He cursed the German language. He hated the damned country and the damned people."

The narrator explains the struggles that the loss of language felt like to the refugees:

“Too many of these people, articulate as they were, the great loss was the loss of language—that they could no longer say what was in them to say. They could, of course, manage to communicate, but just to communicate was frustrating.”

The narrator further quotes the words of Karl Otto Alp:

“I felt like a child, or worse often like a moron. I am left with myself unexpressed. What I know, indeed, what I am, becomes to be a burden. My tongue hangs uselessly.”

The story subtly stresses the degree to which an immigrant’s very identity and self-worth are tied up with the ability to communicate in a foreign language. However, in the latter part of the story, the narrator is influenced by the student’s optimism and positive thinking, so that in the end he has almost become “another man” who believes that he has a future. This also directs us to the development of “another” identity as Oskar successfully progresses in polishing his English without an accent.

The narrator describes the difficulty he faced while tutoring the recent refugees as a student, “I had my nerve associating with them, but that’s what a world crisis does for people – they get educated.” Here, the term ‘educated’ emphasizes the importance of English as a language to secure social, cultural, and intellectual identity in America.

Faith and Humanity

To survive in America, Oskar must have faith in his ability to learn and speak English and in his tutor’s ability to teach him. The narrator stresses the difficulties that these acts of the faith pose by describing how difficult it was for a foreign refugee to deal with the loss of language.

Placing Whitman’s belief in humanity’s divine spirit in a story crowded with humanity’s most savage acts certainly challenges one’s faith in God. For Malamud, Whitman’s faith in humanity’s divine spirit and love is our only escape from spiritual exile, that is, loss of faith in God.

While talking about what German poets had embraced from Whitman, the narrator listed down Whitman’s “love of death.” Thus provoked for a response from the narrator, Oskar reveals the ideal he cherishes: humanity. “Then he said, no, it wasn’t the love of death they had got from Whitman – that ran through German poetry – but it was most of all his feelings for *Brudermensch*, his humanity.” At the same time, he also states that this ideal no longer to be found in Germany. “But this does not grow long on German earth,” he said, “and is soon destroyed.” This statement reflects the extent of Oskar’s frustration. He seems to have come to believe that there is a contrast between “humanity” and Germany. Based on his own experiences, Oskar feels that Germany and the Germans have failed him regarding the idea of “*Brudermensch*” – humanity.

According to Oskar, German poets have adopted Whitman’s belief in a unifying love between people. The narrator chooses one quote from Whitman and states, “Oskar reads it as though he believed it” By this statement, he implies that Oskar no longer believes in those words anymore. Yet, it seems that the narrator overestimates the support that Whitman’s poetry gives Oskar. “Warsaw had fallen, but the verses were somehow protective”

He is also astonished that Oskar had left all his possessions to him – Martin Goldberg. Throughout the story, we can trace how the narrator has developed close emotional ties with his student. His relationship with Oskar goes beyond a teacher-student relationship: he takes a human interest in his student and worries about him, to a point that he was sometimes afraid that he was himself becoming melancholy. By leaving his possessions to Martin Goldberg, Oskar wants to express his gratefulness. It showed that he had realized that his young teacher had shown a great deal of “brotherly love” towards him and had maintained an undying faith in his capabilities. Moreover, the gift symbolizes that his teacher had not failed.

Setting

The setting is New York City in the summer of 1939, just before the outbreak of World War II. The story very few changes of place and they contribute to the symbolic effects of the story.

To Malamud, the central metaphor for Jewishness is imprisonment. This imprisonment in Malamud’s fictional world can be in the physical environment like a real prison cell, a grocery store, or anything he feels confined in. It can also lie within one’s self, being confined by one’s incompetence, thus becoming a victim of one’s self as it is seen in the Hebrew writings. Metaphorically this prison becomes an acceptance of life’s limitations and responsibilities. The “disordered cheap hotel room” that was cluttered with clothing, boxes of books, and some paintings.

Symbolism

Language is the most significant cultural symbol in “The German Refugee.” Parallel with history: Malamud works a careful parallel between historical time and Oskar’s experience in New York. Oskar’s progress in New York parallels the dramatic events in Europe in the summer of 1939.

Initially, Oskar is paralyzed by his fear of a new life in America due to his struggle with learning the English language, but Martin’s support helps him to get back his faith in the future. The refugee’s spiritual rebirth is

symbolized by his successful lecture, the delivery of which coincides with the fall of Warsaw, a coincidence that produces a powerful effect in the story.

Seasons

Oskar and the narrator are held throughout the summer by a heatwave that objectifies the refugees' boiling inner life. Spring is the welcome season for Malamud's characters and it is conducive for them to experience salvation and redemption from a spiritually empty life. Oskar can complete his lecture and deliver it successfully. In September, "The weather had changed, and so, slowly, had he." The change of season has changed Oskar's mind, attitude, his efficiency, and thus one witness the influence of seasons in his life.

The narrator also highlights the change in the health and appearance of Oskar as he progresses through his initial days in the stuffy hotel room, "He had difficulty breathing," "His eyes, too, were heavy, a clouded blue. . ." to the cool days of September when he completes writing his lecture – "His blue eyes returned to life and he walked with quick steps, as though to pick up a few for all that he hadn't taken during those long, hot, days he had lain torpid in his room"

Dream

Malamud through the device of dream exposes the inner conflict of Oskar, his agonies, failures, guilt, and also examines his deepest motives and acts. One night Oskar dreams of his wife and this dream reveals his guilt for deserting her. Oskar's dream reveals that he longs for his wife and worries about his destiny. In his dream, she is buried with a strange name – an identity he is not familiar with. When he finally learns about his wife's death, he has to accept with grief that he did not know her at all. Through his mother-in law's letter, he discovers that his wife converted into Judaism after he had left her and was subsequently shot by the Nazis along with other Jews.

In the light of her conversion and death, an old quote from a letter she wrote becomes transparent. The quote, written in German, meant "I have been faithful to you for twenty years" "Faithful" here, thus, reflects her positive attitude towards her husband's Jewish identity. While her husband suspects her of hidden prejudices against Jews, she has developed such close links to his Jewish heritage, that she decides to embrace the Jewish community of fate. Additionally, Oskar has to cope with the fact that it is he, who has possibly been the partner in the marriage who was prejudiced, and that he incorrectly suspected his wife of anti-Jewish notion solely based on her gentile identity. Oskar's failure to judge his wife correctly leads him to commit suicide as he somehow realized that he was indirectly responsible for her death. He seems to be unable to cope with his moral failure as he thinks he has not shown humanity to her wife by rejecting her and moving to America.

In the end, his originally non-Jewish wife who "sacrificed" herself for him appears as the symbol of moral righteousness, whereas the refugee himself comes forth as lacking compassion for other human beings.

Title

The symbolism of the title of the story makes it clear that the German scholar has sought refuge not only from Hitler's holocaust but also from his human responsibility. The final discovery does not appear until the last lines. The guilt-ridden Oskar commits suicide during the fourth week of September, three weeks after the German troops had broken down the rule of law by marching into the Free City of Danzig.

CONCLUSION

For not only is "The German Refugee" a personal story with a tragic ending, but it is based on personal experience. Scraping to make a living during the Depression, Malamud taught English to German-Jewish refugees. Exposure to these now-unemployed, struggling intellectuals made the young writer "suddenly [see] what being born Jewish might mean in the dangerous world of the thirties." Sadly, the narrative is based on Malamud's fifty-five-year-old student, Dr. Friedrich Pinner, an economist and past financial editor of the Berliner Tageblatt, who, all his European clients gone, despaired of beginning again in a new country and with his wife, committed suicide by turning on the gas. As the story's puzzled English tutor and narrator Martin Goldberg comments: "Not everyone drowns in the ocean," and Malamud's ocean is filled with history. (Watts,2018). Malamud's story illustrates how the fate of two people who meet by chance can easily be intertwined. It also highlights how the Holocaust affected even those who managed to escape the direct onslaught of the Nazis (as did Oskar) as well as other people, who were far beyond the direct impact of the Nazi violence. The narrator and the wife of the protagonist illustrate the central philosophical idea of the story: the brotherhood of men.

REFERENCES

Bernard Malamud, "Imaginative Writing and the Jewish Experience" in Talking Horse: Bernard Malamud on Life and Work, eds. Alan Cheuse and Nicholas Delbanco, (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), 188.

Bernard Malamud, *The Stories of Bernard Malamud* (New York: Penguin, 1983), 93.

For a fuller discussion of the loss of language in "The German Refugee" see my "Not True Although Truth: The Holocaust's Legacy in Three Malamud Stories" in *The Magic Worlds of Bernard Malamud*, ed. Evelyn Avery (New York: State University of New York P., 2001), 139-152.

Howe, Irving. "STRANGERS+ AMERICAN JEWISH WRITERS." *Yale Review* 66.4 (1977)

Lasher, Lawrence M. "An Early Version of Malamud's" *The German Refugee* and Other Early Newspaper Sketches." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-) (1993)

Lasher, Lawrence M. "Narrative Strategy in Malamud's" *The German Refugee*." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-) 9.1 (1990)

Malamud, Bernard. *The German Refugee*. Daigaku [s] ha, 1966.

Philip Davis, *Bernard Malamud: A Writer's Life* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), 49.

Robert Solotaroff, *Bernard Malamud: A Study of the Short Fiction*, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989), 82.

Shaw, Martin Urdiales. "The Magic Worlds of Bernard Malamud." (2003)

Zucker, David J. "Malamud as modern Midrash." *Judaism* 43.2 (1994)