

Holocaust Fiction with a Twist: Christians Imagining Jews in the Shoah

Mark Stover
California State University, Northridge

Abstract

Over the past 25 years, evangelical Christian authors have written dozens of popular novels across a spectrum of genres that have one theme in common: Jewish characters interacting with Christians during and after the Holocaust. In this paper, I will describe and analyze the works of multiple Christian authors who have written fictional narratives that imagine Jewish characters in a variety of situations related to the Shoah. Many of these books contain what are often referred to as "conversion narratives." I will critique these narratives and will address such questions as intended audience, the legitimacy of writing from an outsider's perspective, and the controversial nature of writing about religious conversion.

Introduction

I begin this paper by quoting from Yaakov Ariel, who has written a great deal about the nature of evangelical Christian attitudes toward Jews:

"One must conclude that the evangelical attitudes toward the Jewish people and their activities on the Jews' behalf derive first and foremost from their evangelical messianic hope, which in its turn represents an entire worldview, conservative and reactive in nature. The evangelicals' pro-Israel attitude and their keen concern for the physical well-being of Jews derive from their beliefs about the function of the Jews in the advancement of history toward the arrival of the Lord. ... Evangelical Christians cannot, therefore, be described as philosemites. Their support of Jewish causes represent an attempt to promote their own agenda and their opinions on Jews have not always been flattering. Similarly, the evangelical understanding that Jews are in need of the Gospel and that without accepting Christianity they are morally and spiritually deprived derives from basic evangelical theological premises. Evangelicals, in the last analysis, are neither philosemites nor antisemites." (Ariel, 2002, p. 42).

With that statement, which I believe to be accurate, as a starting point, we should talk about why evangelical Christians might write fiction about Jews in the Holocaust. There may be other reasons, but I would posit that the five primary goals for Christian Holocaust fiction are as follows:

- A creative way to express concern for persecuted Jews
- A theodicy: a philosophical argument for the existence of God that takes into account the problem of evil, specifically the evil of the Shoah.
- An indirect way to communicate the Christian message of salvation to Jews, with the hope that Jews might convert to Christianity

- Drawing again on Yaakov Ariel (2001), a fourth reason is that these novels are a way for evangelical Christians to distance themselves from the nominally Christian Nazis and to reassure themselves that true Christians had nothing to do with the Holocaust, but in fact resisted it.
- Proceeding out of the previous point is Reason # 5: True Christians will by their lives and actions lead Jews to conversion by modeling Christ's love and self-sacrifice. While these narratives contain many philosophical and theological arguments for becoming a Christian, they also include just as many descriptions of Christian characters who provide ostensibly compelling examples of the ideal Christian life.

Scope of the Study

I included evangelical Christian fiction that took place during World War II and contained significant Jewish characters. I also included fiction that took place after the Holocaust but featured Jewish characters who were survivors. All books were published between 1987 and 2010.

Publishers

The books in my study were published by mainstream evangelical publishers including Bethany House (publishing by far the largest number of books in this genre), Moody Press, Tyndale House, and Baker Books, as well as some smaller Christian publishing houses.

Christian Holocaust Novels

Tricia Goyer wrote a trilogy of Holocaust Christian novels published by Moody Press in the early to mid 2000s. The first was *From Dust and Ashes: A Story of Liberation*, where Josef (an Austrian-American Jew and an American G.I.) is a Jewish character in this book about the aftermath of the Holocaust. Another character is Lelia, a Jewish teenager who was hidden by Poles (and raised as a Christian) during the war but captured near the end of the war. Several Jewish characters convert to the Christian faith, as eventually do Josef and Lelia. They fall in love and have a "traditional Jewish wedding" with a rabbi and chuppah, although strangely the wedding is held in a church in Germany.

In *Night Song: A Story of Sacrifice*, Goyer writes of the fictional Jakub Hanauer, a Jewish inmate and member of the prisoner-led orchestra at the Mauthausen concentration camp during World War II. Alexi Horky, the prisoner-conductor, is a Christian of Jewish heritage who tells Jakub,

"Their faith is a little different from mine. I believe that the Messiah has already come in Jesus Christ." Jakub sucked in a breath. "You are Christian? But isn't that what the

Nazis believe -- in Jesus?" Alexi shook his head. "They say they do, but their actions show otherwise. Jesus asks His followers to love God and love their neighbors as themselves. All neighbors of every race and religion." (p. 425).

"Alexi smiled. "I see that look on your face. I understand these things are sometimes hard to understand. Ah, Jakub, faith is believing that Good will triumph over Evil -- in this dark hour and those still to come. I may not live to see it, but I trust that it will happen." (p. 427).

The book ends without an explicit conversion experience for Jakub, although he expresses deep gratitude for his friend Alexi.

In the third book of the trilogy, *Arms of Deliverance: A Story of Promise*, Goyer writes about Katrine (born Rebecca Lodz), a young and unmarried (and pregnant) Czech Jew who is trying (successfully, since she looks German with blonde hair and fair skin) to pass as an Aryan during World War II. No conversion is explicitly described but she is influenced by the love of a kindly Catholic nun and she clearly has a deep faith in God.

Robert Elmer authored a series of young adult novels in the 1990s and 2000s about the Shoah and its aftermath, featuring a Jewish boy named Dov Zalinski, a Holocaust survivor, who is searching for his parents in post World War II Palestine. Some of the titles of these novels include *Brother Enemy*, *Freedom Trap*, *Peace Rebel*, *Refugee Treasure*, and *Touch the Sky*. The series culminates with Zalinski and some of the other Jewish characters converting to Christianity. In the final book of the series, the author includes an epilogue directed to the reader that is explicit in its proselytizing.

Here is an excerpt that demonstrates both the “Yiddishkeit” of the Dov Zalinski character as well as his questioning of God in the face of profound evil:

"But why was he saying this prayer? He couldn't remember ever praying before, not on his own. Well, maybe when he was a little boy, back when he'd lived with his imma and abba and big brother, Natan, on Gensia Street in Warsaw... He might have prayed back then. Back then, it made sense to him. Since the war, though, he'd forgotten how to pray. Or even whom to pray to. And after what he'd seen in the Nazi camps -- well, he didn't ever want to think about that part of his life again. Again the ancient prayer tumbled off his tongue. To his surprise, after a couple of minutes the kids joined in. "Shehech'eyanu," they said. Here was a language they all understood. "V'kimanu v'higgi'yanu lazman ha'zeh." (p. 54).

Lynn Austin is the author of *While We're Far Apart*, published by Bethany House in 2010. The story deals with two characters, a young woman (Penny Goodrich) and an older man (Jacob Mendel) whose lives intersect during World War II. Jacob Mendel is an Orthodox Jew,

who is bitter toward God because his wife has recently died and whose son and daughter-in-law are trapped in Europe during Hitler's war against the Jews. Penny is not Jewish, but her life intersects with members of the Jewish community in a variety of ways that are not unusual given that this is Brooklyn during the 1940s.

The book covers themes like anti-Semitism, Jewish-Christian relations, young love, closed adoptions, family secrets, and alienation. The Jewish characters in this book (including Jacob Mendel) are by and large treated with respect and dignity. They are not perfect, but then again neither are the Christian characters. Unlike many of the novels analyzed in my paper, there are no evangelical characters who engage in long and successful theological disputations with Jews. There are no "Apostle Paul" types of Jews who begin the book as antagonists toward Christianity and end it as converts to the Christian religion. In other words, the novel is not proselytizing propaganda by the author. Austin's work is the rare evangelical-oriented book about Jews and Christians that doesn't denigrate in any way Jews or Judaism. (I should note that Austin wrote a book several years ago about Israelis, entitled *Wings of Refuge*, where Jews convert to Christianity in droves, so I won't let her entirely off the hook).

One of the most prolific and best-selling evangelical Christian writers of our time is **Bodie Thoene**. Mrs. Thoene has a special concern for Jews and Israel, and many of her books are filled with Jews or Jewish converts to Christianity. Like many of the authors in this paper, she has written both "ancient history" biblical-era fiction and 20th century fiction. Unlike most of the other authors in this study, she has crossover appeal and has been published by both Christian publishing houses and secular publishers.

Holocaust era books written by Ms. Thoene, most published by Bethany House in the 1980s and 1990s, include *Danzig Passage*, *The Key to Zion*, *Munich Signature*, *A Light in Zion*, *Prague Counterpoint*, *The Return to Zion*, and *Warsaw Requiem*.

What follows is a representative conversation from one of Thoene's books that deals with the theme of the problem of evil:

"If there is a God, then why has He allowed it [the Holocaust] to happen?" [David responds]: "... God didn't do this terrible thing. Men did. Men who did not acknowledge God. Or accept Him." "Well, what about all the people who claimed to know God and yet turned their backs while millions were herded into the camps? What about the high and mighty church?" "The church is an organization. Made up of men. And a whole lot of people hide out there, but it doesn't mean they know the Lord." (p. 146).

As might be expected, Thoene's Holocaust books contain many fictional narratives of Jews converting to Christianity.

In the 19th century, most conversionist novels were published in Great Britain. In the 20th and 21st century, most are published in the United States. All of the authors discussed in this paper are American except for one, Kerstin Sheldrake.

In *My Servant Caleb: A Jewish Boy, a Gentile Girl, a World at War*, published by Monarch Books in 2004, German-born and U.K. resident **Kerstin Sheldrake** has written the story of a Jewish man (Caleb Levine) and a Christian woman (Lady Celia) who fall in love in England during World War II.

We are told by the narrator that at some point in the past "Caleb's parents and sisters had converted to Christianity" (p. 30). Caleb remains an observant Jew but bitter toward (though not estranged from) his parents and the Jewish community that ostracized him and his family.

There is a great deal of British anti-Semitism described in the book, along with German anti-Jewishness that leads to the Holocaust. After many adventures, including marital problems, persecution by British fascists and German Nazis, and fighting in the War of Independence in Palestine, Caleb finally becomes a Christian.

Caleb's conversion at the end of the story is fairly predictable and in many ways it is reminiscent of Bodie Thoene's series of historical fiction, although there is more emphasis on "remaining a Jew" after conversion than Thoene usually allows.

Wheaton, Illinois-based evangelical publisher Tyndale House published **Michael Phillips'** *The Eleventh Hour* in 1993. Part of the "Secret of the Rose" series, this Holocaust era book is ostensibly a romance novel, but it contains several major Jewish characters, including a rabbi, all on the run from the Nazis, hidden and assisted by Christians in an underground network. There is a great deal of Jewish-Christian "interfaith dialogue" that takes place in the book. When the Nazis finally come, the baron gives up his life to save the lives of his family and his Jewish friends, thus leading the Jewish characters to consider the claims of Christianity on a more practical level. Here is a quote that illustrates the author's belief that modeling Christian love and self-sacrifice is just as powerful a conversionary tool as argumentation:

"The profundity of the [baron's] Christian faith spoke louder and more forcefully with every passing day. The rabbi had never been able to forget the words from the baron's mouth about Christianity completing and bringing to fulfillment what the law of Judaism had begun. The words had struck him at the time. When combined with the growing

significance of the baron's action within his memory, a deep truth began to break through upon the learned rabbi: The baron's very life validated his conviction as to the truth of his Christian testimony." (p. 497).

"... the truth [of Christianity] was suddenly authenticated more powerfully than anything he had seen come out of the Jewish law in all his years. Sacrifice of a technical sort was intrinsic to the Jewish system. But not the willing sacrifice of one laying himself down for another. What the baron had done was unheard of. The rabbi had never seen anything like it..... Suddenly everything he had heard and thought he believed, everything he had read and written and spoken about the man Jesus whom Christians called the Christ -- every word had to be seen in an altogether changed light! He had seen a man live the very servanthood of which Jesus spoke, to the very point of laying down his life for his friends." (p. 498).

Michael Phillips published his second and third installments of "The Secret of the Rose" trilogy in 1994, entitled *A Rose Remembered* and *Escape to Freedom*. Most of the events in these adventurous and suspense-filled books take place in 1961-1962. Many Jewish characters are included in this novel, including several Holocaust survivors. Like the other books in this series, this novel imagines a secret network of Jews (and some Christians) called "The Rose" and also a secret plot by Communists in the Soviet Union and throughout Eastern Europe (including East Germany) to kill Jews and Christians.

Self-doubt always strikes the unbelieving Jews in these novels before the "light shines into their hearts." In the end, most of the Jews become Christians. As is usual for evangelical conversionary stories, this novel generally treats Jews as unfulfilled in their religion.

In 2005, **Gilbert Morris**, a prolific Christian author, wrote a "love story" with Jews and evangelical Christians as protagonists. *The Unlikely Allies*, published by Bethany House, includes events from 1938-1940 amidst the Nazi invasion of Norway.

Rachel Mindel is the primary character, a young Jewish woman from Czechoslovakia, and the plot has her falling in love with a German soldier who she meets in Paris.

One Jewish character states that

"I can't reconcile the love that I see in people like you and so many of the Norwegians and the hatred I see in some others. So many of you are risking your lives, but there are others who are killing our people by the thousands, and yet they call themselves Christians. Carefully, Mallory said, "Not everyone who calls himself a Christian is actually a follower of Jesus." (p. 219).

It turns out that Rachel dies in a concentration camp, but not before becoming a Christian. As a personal aside, I would note that there is only one thing worse than the fictional depiction of a deathbed conversion to Christianity, and that is a deathbed conversion in a Nazi concentration camp.

In 2006, Morris authored another Holocaust novel entitled *The Hesitant Hero*, again published by Bethany House. Three French Jewish orphans are featured in this book, which is set during the beginning of World War II.

Some representative quotes:

"My people have been hurt by Christians," Rochelle put in. "That's true," Jolie said carefully. "Terrible things have been done in the name of religion, but Jesus wasn't responsible for that. He said we were to love our enemies." Jolie goes on to explain to Rochelle and the others that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, and how this fulfills Old Testament prophecy. She continues to speak to the children this way throughout the book.

Antoine says: "I don't know why the Germans want to kill all the gypsies and all the Jews. What's the matter with those Germans?" "It's not all of them," Jolie said quietly. "There are many good Christian Germans, but they got the wrong man in as leader. And the Germans have a bad habit of listening to strong men no matter who they are."

Unlike the previous book by Morris mentioned earlier, there are no conversions in this book, although the children's faith in God is strengthened by their experience of being rescued and having Jolie pray with them and take care of them.

The heroine of *A Legion of Honor* (written by **David Horton** and published by Victor Books in 1995), Isabelle Karmazin, is a secular French Jew in 1942 who is fleeing the Nazis.

At the end of the book, Isabelle does not become a Christian, but she develops a new appreciation for the religious faith of the Christians who took care of her before she escaped into Switzerland.

David Horton's sequel to *Legion of Honor*, entitled *The Sign of the Cross: a Novel*, was published by Victor Books in 1997. Our heroine is again Isabelle Karmazin, but other Jewish characters also appear in this book, including the Levy children, love interest for Isabelle named Michael Dreyfus, and a Catholic nun at the convent "Our Lady of Zion." (In fact all of the nuns who work in this convent were born Jewish but converted to Catholicism).

As in the previous book, Isabelle again agonizes over how a righteous and all-powerful God can allow so much evil in the world.

Isabelle is influenced in a positive way by the Boussant family, who are French Protestant Christians. Even in the face of tragedy *"their faith in a loving God remained firm. In fact, it had been that faith that had driven them to give her shelter, in spite of the danger. They spoke of their God -- and to Him -- as if He were some kind of all-wise friend. And it seemed so natural for them. How she had wished it were that easy for her."* (p. 99). Isabelle is also influenced by the de Rocher family, who are Swiss Protestant Christians.

At the end of the book, Isabelle converts to Christianity, symbolized by her wearing a small gold cross around her neck. *"Isabelle, noticing that [Marcel] was staring at it, took the cross in her fingers and carefully touched it to her lips. "A gift from Justine," she murmured, "to commemorate something else I decided." And then she smiled. "It's why I'm not running away anymore."* (p. 350).

She also decides to marry Marcel, a French Protestant Christian, as opposed to the other man who had shown an interest in her, Michael Dreyfus.

It is not totally unexpected that in yet another evangelical Christian novel, a Jew converts to Christianity. Even Michael Dreyfus' rejection of Christianity is somewhat predictable, since even in fiction not all Jews will accept Christ, just the good ones. The evil Catholic named Malfaire is also a recurring type of character in conversionary Christian fiction. There always has to be a villain, and in these kinds of books the villain is often a "false Christian" who can be contrasted with the "good Christians." The only surprise in this book is that there are some good Catholics (the nuns), but they are different than most Catholics like Malfaire since they are really converted Jews. And of course the real heroes in the story are the Protestant Christians who lead the heroine to Christ.

In 2005, Westbow Press published **Ted Dekker's** novel *Obsessed*, the story of Stephen Friedman who discovers in middle age that he is the child of Holocaust survivors. He begins his quest for the "Stones of David" which are supposed to be the five actual stones that David used to kill Goliath. Also looking for the stones is the evil Roth Braun, a serial killer (he murders Jewish women, drinks their blood, and is obsessed with the occult) who is the son of the commandant of the concentration camp where Friedman's parents were imprisoned.

A messianic Jew who is a survivor of the Sobibor concentration camp, along with other Jewish characters, is also introduced into the novel.

Chapter 5 takes place in 1944. Jews from Hungary are headed toward a concentration camp in Poland, called "Torun." We are introduced to two Jewish inmates, Ruth and Martha,

one of whom turns out to be Stephen's mother. We are also introduced to the cruel commandant of the camp, Gerhard Braun, and his 13 year old son, Roth Braun. Every other chapter or so brings us back to the concentration camp, where the Germans demonstrate cruelty and the Jews demonstrate hope, heroics, and survival skills. Both Martha and Ruth express deep faith in God in the midst of the horrors of the concentration camp.

There are no explicit conversions in this book, although both Stephen and a Jewish friend speak of the love of God late in the novel. Somehow, Stephen has gone from being an atheist to being a believer in God, although there is no sign of any conversion to Christianity. At a critical point in the book, Stephen thinks to himself: *"He owed his every breath to another Jew.... He was alive because someone else had died to give him life."* (p. 276). This seems to be the turning point in Stephen's faith crisis and also a metaphor for the Christian message.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to address three points:

- The intended audience of these novels
- the legitimacy of writing from an outsider's perspective
- the controversial nature of writing about religious conversion to another religion

First, what is the intended audience of these novels? While it is clear that evangelical publishers and authors are generally "preaching to the choir," it is also clear that the authors of these books hope to have them fall into the hands of Jewish readers. Secular bookstores stock these books, public libraries keep them on the shelves, and Christians may give these novels as gifts to their Jewish friends. From the authors' perspective, Christian Holocaust fiction demonstrates to Jews the love and concern of evangelicals, and may even lead to conversion.

Second, is it legitimate to write from an outsider's perspective, as the authors of these Holocaust novels have done in envisioning the perspectives of Jewish characters? Of course, all authors must do this to a certain degree, and so on that basis the question is probably moot. However, writing about such a sensitive topic as Jews surviving (or not surviving) the Holocaust requires a certain amount of nuance and finesse, as well as knowledge about a different subculture. While some evangelical authors probably succeed at this, in my opinion many do not and come across as ham-handed, obnoxious, agenda-driven, and insensitive.

Third, how does a Christian author write about fictional conversions of Jews to Christianity without sacrificing literary integrity and without proselytizing? This must be a difficult issue for an evangelical author to grapple with, since proselytizing is clearly an integral part of evangelical Christianity, yet at the same time, no one, whether Christian or Jew, enjoys reading a preachy, agenda-driven book. Again, I would say that of the 38 novels that I looked at for this paper,

some took the high ground and avoided any hint of proselytizing, and indeed were enjoyable to read even for a non-Christian. However, many failed at this and came across as simply vehicles for an evangelical conversionary agenda. Whatever their religious persuasion, readers should applaud when evangelical authors offer nuanced and complicated characters, especially if the “predictable conversion” fails to materialize. There is nothing inherently wrong with Christian authors writing about the Holocaust. However, by the same token readers should probably be offended by conversionary sermons disguised as literature, and this offense is intensified by the creation of fictional Jewish survivors of the Shoah who blithely change their religion when confronted by facile argumentation and the “loving Christian” motif. Such writing should be seen for what it really is: theological proselytizing, pulp fiction with an agenda, but certainly not literature.

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Appendix

Evangelical Christian Holocaust Novels

1987-2010

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