

**Mahlendorf, Ursula. *The Shame of Survival: Working Through a Nazi Childhood*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State UP, 2009. 376 pp. ISBN 978-0-271-03447-8 cloth, \$29.95.**

**Reviewed for Women in German by Caroline Schaumann**

While we are fortunate to be able to read the memoirs of those victimized by National Socialism, which give testimony to exceptional stories of survival, it is still rare to find autobiographical reflections by those who used to call themselves Nazis. Ursula Mahlendorf's *The Shame of Survival* is such a text, its title hinting at the hauntingly shameful quality of having lived through Nazi Germany as a supporter and benefactor of the regime. From her enthusiasm for the Nazi regime during her childhood in Silesia to the experience of World War II followed by defeat, expulsion, and resettlement in West Germany to her departure for graduate studies in the United States, Mahlendorf recalls a life shaped by transformation, disruption, and displacement. Each of these junctions—that Mahlendorf calls “physical, emotional, and intellectual dislocations” (5)—not only changed her present outlook but also reshaped her previous memories in a new context. Yet Mahlendorf's unswerving autobiographical narrator unflinchingly owns up to her past. In a welcome addition and essential complement to semi-fictional investigations of the Nazi past such as Christa Wolf's, Mahlendorf does not distance herself from her childhood self but admits “that girl still lives in me. She is part of my identity” (7).

Born on Black Thursday in 1929, the unthinkable global economic crisis greatly affected the world Mahlendorf was born into and would have to grow up in. Her mother had admittedly tried to abort her since the family did not have the money to raise another child. Her father became unemployed when the family's plumbing business, which had struggled throughout the 1920s, went bankrupt in 1933 simply because people could not afford plumbing. Looking to the far right in search of a better life, he joined the Nazi party as early as 1932 and applied for acceptance into the ranks of the SS shortly thereafter. His premature death from kidney failure in 1935 deprived the family of a breadwinner. Feeling unwanted and disadvantaged, Mahlendorf developed an unusual sensibility to both class and gender discrimination, which shaped both her life under the Nazis and, later, her career as a scholar.

Mahlendorf's keen observations as a young girl and nuanced commentary as an adult make her text an outstanding contribution and much-needed complement to the existing body of literature on Nazi Germany. She convincingly illustrates that she was initially drawn to the Hitler youth organizations since they promised lower and middle class girls opportunities denied in their own families: she herself was not allowed to attend middle school since she was not supposed to be more educated than her brother. Yet this promise turned out to be an illusion, and instead of intellectual growth, she learned marching, singing, and following authoritarian orders. Her text, though, goes beyond such broad generalizations of National Socialism; oddly enough, it was at the Nazi-infiltrated Teacher Seminary, a school designed to train the Reich's future grammar teachers, that Mahlendorf found an unconventional teacher and free-thinking mentor, one who undermined Nazi ideology by introducing the fourteen-year old to literature and the value of humanism.

Mahlendorf's coming of age, then, went hand in hand with her rejection of Nazi ideology, which in turn formed the foundation for her adoption of feminist, pacifist, and democratic beliefs. Amidst the chaos in her defeated, Polish-occupied hometown, Mahlendorf realized the enduring value of knowledge and begged her mother to hire a former Nazi for private lessons in math and science, utilizing once again Nazi schooling for her own purpose. In those days, Mahlendorf recited poetry to combat her fear while illegally delivering medical supplies to doctors and nurses in the area. Indeed, the processes of learning and education are the book's main themes threading

through the narrator's life. As an expellee in West Germany, Mahlendorf's stubbornness and persistence gained her admittance into a high school in nearby Bremen, and it was there that she comprehended the full consequences of Hitler's war. Later, while studying literature at the University of Tübingen, Mahlendorf knew she had found her intellectual home, though she continued to battle discrimination as a refugee and a woman, conscious of the fact that a university career in Germany was at best unlikely. Her indefatigable desire for learning thus brought her to the United States, first as a scholarship student at Pembroke College, and then as a graduate student and teaching assistant at Brown University. *The Shame of Survival* does not conclude with Mahlendorf's successful career in the United States, however, but in a moving epilogue details the painful aftermath of her life in Germany from an attempted suicide to psychoanalytic treatment to volunteer work at a nursery school.

Mahlendorf conceived her memoir in 2001 when she was teaching students in a freshman seminar who relied on the Internet for information on Nazi Germany, information, not surprisingly, that was filled with gross clichés and overdrawn caricatures. Aiming to provide her students with a text that allowed them to understand and connect with her story, *The Shame of Survival* emphasizes, in equal parts, her elation over living in Nazi Germany, fear of and apathy toward the last months of the war, the horrors of the Russian invasion, the shame of defeat, the chaos of expulsion, the disorientation in postwar Germany, and the traumatic consequences of these experiences felt in the United States. Each chapter also includes relevant historical background information aimed at contextualizing the individual story within a wider socio-political framework. The comprehensive scope, attention to detail, and historical context make *The Shame of Survival* an invaluable resource and an accessible text ideally suited to class use and discussions on an array of themes surrounding Nazi Germany. Beyond that, told with its penetrating honesty and ruthless candor, the book enriches our understanding of Mahlendorf's particular experience in Nazi Germany in unexpected and astonishing ways.

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