What words could possibly evoke fear in people? German words that are linked to the experiences of Holocaust survivors and that have remained painfully lodged in their memory, whether their mother tongue was German or not. They were carried to new countries and into new languages. My paper rests on responses gleaned from interviews and conversations with Jewish survivors. The focus is on their experiences, reflections, and feelings regarding the German language during the war years. In addition, I am relying on published witness accounts and scholarly works that have dealt with memory and language matters. In my conclusion, I shall focus briefly on how select post-war German artists and Germans in general deal with a mother tongue that was once a language of genocide.

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In most cases, survivors have had difficulty verbalizing the emotional connection to their language memories because of the once fundamental threat to life that they represented. As one study on racism and antisemitism states:

Underlying all other fears, the fear of annihilation and genocide is least accessible to consciousness or discussion. Based on historical events, which some have experienced within their own or their parents’ lifetimes, women of color and Jewish women carry the knowledge of unspeakable evil perpetrated against their own people. They know that the unthinkable has happened and can happen again (Josefowitz Siege 1995:296).

This fear is very real but can easily become generalized or even exaggerated in the present. It is nearly impossible to convey to others. Some survivors can only express it in art. This paper will make an effort to illuminate the facts behind those terms that generate such fear by investigating the historical context and revealing often hidden linguistic meanings. I shall contextualize a few representative words that today are still used in Holocaust-related topics in their connotative form. The fact that survivors use them without reflection has brought me to my research of so called Nazi German. I coauthored the reference work Nazi Deutsch/Nazi German: An English Lexicon of the Language of the Third Reich (Michael and Doerr 2002). Being a native of Germany, the dark past of my mother tongue became more horrid when I saw the impact of it on the victimized people. Their psychological connection epitomizes the cruelty in deception that characterizes much of that language. For example, Umsiedlung, Umschlagplatz, Selektion, and Sonderbehandlung concealed the steps to the Nazi genocide. The seemingly enigmatic term Muselman(n) and the word Jude (Jew) spelled death. To those not familiar with the Nazi context, many of the words in question seem ordinary, which they were. For example, Umsiedlung means “resettlement.” But when the Nazi government used it to refer to the removal of the Jews, first from Germany and then from other homelands, the word became ambiguous. What was unstated, was the plan to transport all the deportees to their deaths in Poland. Thus, to the victims, the use of a neutral term conveyed a false reality. In fact it gave them a sense of hope for some kind of a future life. As one survivor says, Umsiedlung is to him the worst German word (Steve Stege, personal communication, 2005).

Umschlagplatz is another term that can trigger frightening memories. It means “railway switching yard” but during the Holocaust, it came to stand for the collecting point of the Jews for deportation. For those with first-hand experience, this German word signified desperation, the loss of hope, violence, even murder on the spot. At the former Warsaw Ghetto today, a monument commemorates the transportations to the death camp at Treblinka. It resembles a railroad freight car, and the German name Umschlagplatz is etched into the stone. For survivors, who experienced this place, this word alone is able to capture the “antechamber of death” (Rymkiewicz 1994:47). It is untranslatable in its unique German sound and because of the horrific meaning behind it.
The same holds true for *Selektion* (Selection). Survivors remember what it stood for at Auschwitz (and other concentration camps). It meant to be selected for immediate murder or slave-like work until the next selection. The SS conducted them with clubs, guns, and barking dogs. We have become familiar with such historic images: At the end of the transports, at the camps’ arrival ramps, the people were waved by the SS to the left or right, i.e., to live or to die. Most of them were at first unaware what this selection meant. Survivors’ most painful memories are those of having family members, very often women with young children, seen marched off (to their deaths by gassing).
In most cases, the Nazi regime decreed the use of such words, as well as their replacements. For example, Umsiedlung was changed to Evakuierung (evacuation) when the German officials discussed the final destruction of Jewish life in Eastern Europe in 1941. Such terms functioned as codes to obfuscate the truth also in internal documents. “Special treatment” (Sonderbehandlung) and its abbreviation S.B. is such an encoded term. It was often used in the concentration camps, and as many of the records show, one page of a top-secret file could conceal the meaning of “execution,” while the second page could reveal it. The document available to me shows that a Russian P.O.W. was sent to “protective custody” for having committed “race defilement” (Rassenschande). He had violated the Nazis’ race laws by allegedly having had an affair with a German woman. Sonderbehandlung was therefore requested for him. The next page, issued a few days later, states the exact time, to the minute, of his execution (Exekution). These victims cannot tell their stories, but the surviving documents have become their testimony (Secret State Police [Gestapo] 1944; Security Headquarters of the Reich 1944).
The two words Kapo and Muselman(n) are of different origin and would remain linguistic enigmas without explanation, as they epitomized the two extreme positions and conditions of the prisoners in concentration camps. They are part of a special language created largely by the inmates of Auschwitz that reflected the multilingual concentrationary universe. Survivor Primo Levi calls this “camp jargon” “skeletal, howled, studded with obscenities and imprecations” (1986:76). It was a ghastly byproduct of the man-made catastrophe that a Polish linguist has explored. In Wörter aus der Hölle (Words from Hell) she traces the origins of such word formations (Wesełowska 1998:98–140). Kapo is said to have derived from the Italian capo, meaning head or chief. The reason behind the appellation of Muselman, literally “the Muslim,” differs. Wrapped in rags of blankets from head to toe and swaying back and forth, this figure was said to have resembled a praying Muslim. It is also linked to Europe’s belief that Muslims adhered to Kismet, or destiny. But in the camp, the fatalism of the prisoners was quite different.

In the camp hierarchy, Kapo was a “privileged” inmate on whom the SS had bestowed special powers over the other prisoners. Survivors recount how they often acted with impunity and would single out the most defenseless, such as the Muselman. This person had reached a state of oblivion due to hunger, disease, and maltreatment. Survivor Vera Meisels describes: “They...[had] lost any interest in life, became apathetic, and usually died after few days” (email to author, 17 March 2004). Another witness writes more personally, “We all dreaded this state of absolute wretchedness, and we all hoped that death, if avoidable, would take us before we suffered the same fate” (Schiff 1996:56). There was a feminine form, Muselweib, with Weib being a pejorative term in German for woman (Frau). Either
way, this figure represented the nadir of existence, where all spiritual will and physical strength had been extinguished. While still living, the individual had been robbed of what constitutes human life and transformed into a creature “too empty to really suffer” (Patterson 2006:149).

Artist Vera Meisels has been haunted by this image since her survival from Auschwitz. Decades later, she immortalized, in a poem, woodcut, and a wooden statue, those who perished abjectly and were forgotten. She recreated them as reminders that their voices had been silenced and their memories of a life lived wiped out. However, there is a triple irony at work in her artistic rendition. First, Meisels made this figure now visible to the world, while the actual people who served as its “models” all perished. Second, the Muselman(n) as sculpture has been freed of its abject characteristics for which he was derided and abused. Filth, putrid smell, and skin sores have vanished, and we are left with an image of its opposite, of a cleansed body encased in Lucite. Lastly, the figure as a piece of art exudes an esthetic, albeit sad, beauty that may be typical of a work of art but that we may not wish to associate with the Holocaust. Nevertheless, Meissels’ Muselman(n) is a reminder of that feared state before death in the concentration camps.

There are other examples of powerful and lasting negative associations with the German language. They demonstrate the psychological intensity involved when survivors or their offspring either verbalize or creatively act out the trauma of the past. Strictly speaking, it is not just remembering, but reliving it mentally, often through words that bear the emotional
force. Children of Holocaust survivors can suffer from second-generation trauma. This after-effect is apparent in the work of contemporary artist Ruth Liberman who spent her formative years in postwar Germany. Thus, her first language is German. Yet, her artwork, a unique fusion of text and photography, displays a violent confrontation with hated German words. At a shooting range, they are riddled with bullets. Liberman’s work parallels the past impact of words with the present impact of the bullet and thus forces our thoughts to the actual murder of her people. It seems that she assumes control, where her parents had none. Only in her case, agency lies in the symbolic act of murdering the German language.10

*Word Shot* is the appropriate title of Liberman’s perhaps never-to-be-completed “work-in-progress.” She states, “I have a whole list of [German] words I despise, and I intend to shoot them all” (letter to author, 7 May 2003). Next on her “hit list” is Jude (Jew), for her, the “most evil” German word. This heavily burdened term became the demonic opposite of “German” during the Nazi era. The many entries in the Lexicon of the Third Reich Language referring directly or indirectly to it, underscore this fact. For example, the emblem of segregation, the “Jew star” (*Judenstern*), made the status of Jews as “other” or “subhuman” (*Untermensch*) publicly visible.11 In addition to this yellow sign, the Germans insisted on the written word *Jude* in mocking Hebrew script. Especially for a great number of German Jews, who were German first and Jewish second, if at all, this stigmatisation was too much to bear. Many accounts refer to these memories. University professor Viktor Klemperer, who survived in hiding in Germany with the help of his non-Jewish wife, recalls being addresses as “the Jew Klemperer” (“*der Jude Klemperer*”) and for him, the “worst day…in the twelve years of hell“ was when he was forced to wear the official marking to which he referred as “the yellow rag with the black imprint: ‘Jew.’” (“*der gelbe Lappen mit dem schwarzen Aufdruck: ‘Jude’”*) (Klemperer 1996:103).
To draw attention to the profound loss of everything that makes a person whole, survivor and poet Paul Celan defiantly used the German language of his parents’ murderers, his mother tongue, when he wrote the powerful line of his famous poem, “Death Fuge,” “Death is a master from Germany.” Despite his anguish, he would not to be robbed of his language, too. But, he felt, the German language “had to pass through … the thousand darknesses of deathbringing talk” (Celan 1986:34). Not being able to bear his survival, he committed suicide in 1970 (Felstiner 1995).

Memories of such deeply-felt injustice and social rejection will only disappear with the death of the people who have harboured them a lifetime. But not before appearing one last time, forcefully and frighteningly, as early memories often surface with much clarity at the end of one’s life. The boundaries between then and now become even more blurred. However, the Nazis’ language, as it was experienced, will remain present in written accounts. There, the reader’s eye is immediately drawn to those words in italics—German words—that most Germans wish had never been uttered, if for the only reason as not to haunt them now in print, where they stand as ineradicable witnesses.

It seems natural to ask, what happened to these words in Germany that were used to violate others or carried deceptive double and triple meanings? As is expected, some have been forgotten, and many are used again in normal speech. Others have become taboo, such as Endlösung, and terms with ambiguous meanings have sometimes functioned as a linguistic façade for the genocide. For instance, since “resettlement” had both a neutral denotative and deceptive connotative meaning, it was easy to rely on the literal meaning of “relocation.” Because people were actually being moved, albeit through forced deportations, one could choose to see the sinister disappearance of a Jewish neighbour or the many trains filled with Jews from other countries and rolling to the east, simply as resettlement. This reliance on the innocuous meaning of this and other terms allowed many a perpetrator and bystander to plead ignorance or innocence after the war. Also, the majority of ordinary Germans did not verbalize Holocaust-related recollections.

The post-war Germans who inherited the Nazi legacy first had to break the silence of their parents. Learning about the Holocaust and how it has shaken the core of Western civilization, contemporary artists and writers challenge their fellow-Germans to face history. The painter Anselm Kiefer, for instance, incorporates the line from Celan’s poetry, “Your ashen hair, Shulamit.” The application of ash and hair directly onto the canvas refers to the death and burning of many a young Jewish woman. He wants his German viewers to consider the side of the victims (Kligerman 2001).

Likewise, the writer W.G. Sebald’s realistic fiction is informed by Germany’s destructive past and its post-Holocaust insistence on Germans as victims. His sensitive portraits of survivors, refugees, or orphaned Jewish children tell of their shattered lives (Sebald 1996; 2002). These two representative German voices demonstrate an ongoing engagement that is also centered in their identity as Germans. Facing the fact that during the Third Reich, the German language was used in the name of a deadly ideology that caused physical and psychological wounding, they demonstrate the interconnectedness of history, language,
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and memory. The same connection, but from a different perspective, is reflected in the post-trauma suffering of survivors. Their past experiences and profound human calamity form the nexus in which their fear is located. Imbedded in the historical context, it can be triggered by memories of the German language of the past, sometimes by just one word.

Notes
2. This reference work provides the historical context of the German language, explains the meanings of words and abbreviations, and provides their translations. All further references under Nazi German Lexicon (Michael and Doerr 2002:263).
3. The full quote reads, “So I realized that the German of the Lager (camp)—skeletal, howled, studded with obscenities and imprecations—was only vaguely related to the precise, austere language of my chemistry books, or the melodious, refined German of Heine’s poetry” (Levi 1986:76).
4. Schmuckstück (“piece of jewelry”), an ironic term, was also used for women in the camps. See Nazi German Lexicon.
6. This is “memory, time, and meaning,” and with the obliteration of memory, the individual loses his “link to the immemorial” (Patterson 2006:152, 153).
7. The Muselmann conjures up the memory of those who lost even their own story, their birth, death, and time (Patterson 2006:152). Post-Holocaust philosophers, such as Primo Levi, perceive this “nonbeing” to be the Nazis’ creation and the embodiment of “all the evil of our time” (Patterson 2006:149).
8. For a contrary view, see (Kaplan 2007).
9. Image reproduced with the permission of the artist. For another depiction, see Vera Meisels’ volume of poetry, Terezin’s Firefly (2001:8–9).
10. Image reproduced with permission of the artist. “‘Word Shot’ demonstrates that a bullet hole may better denote a word’s power than, say, bold or italics” (Liberman 2002).
11. For example, Jewish individuals were addressed as Jude X (Jew X [so-and-so]), buildings to which German Jews had been resettled before deportation, were called Judenhäuser (Jew Houses). See Nazi German Lexicon, 222–230.
12. I thank Professor Gary Evans, historian and author, for historical and other suggestions.
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