

Invisible Woman: Growing up Black in Germany. By Ika Hügel-Marshall. Translated by Elizabeth Gaffney. New York: Continuum International. 2001. \$24.95. ISBN 0-8264-1294-7.

Ika Hügel-Marshall's memoir details the physical and psychological ostracism of a young child just because she was "different" and the prejudices that pursued her into adulthood. Born in 1947 of an African-American soldier (who had returned home) and a German mother, her Bavarian townfolk were as loath to accept her as they had been only a few years earlier to accept Jews. They reviled her as a *Negermischling* (mixed breed), *Mischling* was the official Nazi term to define children of mixed Jewish and "Aryan" blood). Like so many Jewish children during the Nazi era, Ika wished she could "fit in" and did not understand the hatred spewing from her tormentors.

In 1952, about seventeen years after the Nazis' Nuremberg race decrees that in the regime's mania to "protect German blood" had defined Jews and later "Gypsies, Negroes, and their bastards," out of the German people, German social services geared up to deal with the "occupation babies," worrying in particular about the approximately three thousand "of mixed Negro blood." Officials believed these children were "ill suited to the climate here," that they should be relocated to the "homeland of their fathers." Even if these children learned to live like Europeans, they would "always [remain] morally corrupt and of bad character" (p. 21).

A local social worker badgered her mother that Ika would "become emotionally unstable and she'll certainly be considered free game for the men. She'll end up having children out of wedlock, become an alcoholic and God knows what else." This same social worker threatened, "And finally . . . if you can't make the decision for yourself, I'm afraid we'll have to make it for you" (p. 24). Ika's mother let herself be coerced/convinced to put her 5-year-old in an orphanage. By that time, her mother had married a man who showed palpable discomfort with her black child and had had a child with him.

In "God's Little Acre Children's Home," run by the sisters of the Pentecostal Society and the Independent Protestant Association, the other children ostracized her and the sisters punished her mercilessly. Crying for her mother who left without saying goodbye, she was beaten and told, "Stop your endless screaming, you miserable little bastard!" (p. 26). When she could not eat a meal and vomited at the table, she was force-fed her vomit (p. 28). She was regularly beaten and kept in physical isolation in excruciatingly hot or cold rooms. Psychological brutality accompanied the physical cruelty as the sisters whispered that her mother must have been a "primitive person" and that Ika would turn out as "immoral and licentious as the mother" (p. 37). Most horrifying of all, the sisters forced her into an exorcism that left Ika with nightmares for years. It was at the home that she learned self-hatred: "I despised myself in an attempt to make myself more acceptable to them" (p. 56).

Although she did well at school, the sisters never recognized her intelligence, telling her, instead, that “we never expected much from you” and suggesting she transfer to a school for learning-disabled children “where your kind belongs” (p. 31). Her teachers (with one exception whom she treasured) did not acknowledge her intelligence or hard work either: “it’s not what I know or don’t know or even bad behavior that brings me to the teachers’ attention, it’s the color of my skin . . .” (p. 52).

It is no surprise that she suffered from self-hatred (“You’re stupid. Blacks are worthless . . .”), while learning at the same time that “whites are not to be trusted” (p. 32). She had hoped to become a teacher, but the sisters had decided against this. She was sent to a boarding school to learn to work with young children. Not until she was sixteen did she make her first friends, have a few hours of free time, visit a café, go shopping, or experience crushes on boys (p. 62).

After two years of training, she could not get a job, though all her white peers did and there was a shortage of people with her training. She wrote the headmistress of her school in despair, sharing her near-suicidal depression, and asking for help. The response was anger: “You are old enough . . . to have learned to keep yourself together” (p. 63). Still ambitious, Ika managed to improve her credentials and achieve a license in child education and welfare, which allowed her to work in a children’s home in Frankfurt/Main, her first big city. There, she turned the institution upside down, modernizing and humanizing it, while attending the College of Social Work and Pedagogy.

The utterly amazing aspect of this book, and of this life, is that young Ika never gave up (p. 33). Despite depression and despair, she fought the stereotypes others foisted upon her. Did this come from her mother’s and grandmother’s love during her first five years and the all-too-brief summer vacations at home? Did her inner resources, extraordinary intelligence, and well-placed anger pull her through? Later in her life, she also met the American black, feminist, poet-activist Audre Lorde whose friendship strengthened her and whose message — “we must stop seeing ourselves as helpless victims of a racist system” — (p. 111) empowered her. Moreover, she had a dream.

Ika fantasized about her father, about a black family, about belonging. As she grew older, marrying and divorcing, joining the women’s movement and confronting its racism both in Germany and in the U.S., finding love with a woman partner, meeting for the first time (at age 39) other Afro-Germans and forming the Black German Initiative (*Initiative Schwarze Deutsche*), she always thought about her father. Through the intercession of an American friend, Ika finally discovered him in 1993. Her much dreamed of reunion took place soon thereafter and she found warmth and acceptance in his family. All too sadly, her father died the next year, but she had, at least, found her black family: “I found you, and I knew that my survival in a white racist society was not for nothing” (p. 152).

The title of this book, *Invisible Woman*, is taken from Ralph Ellison’s classic.

Invisible Man. In that book, Ellison writes how white Americans, “even when they were polite . . . hardly saw me.” This was Ika Hügel-Marshall’s experience as well: people saw her skin color, not her. Sitting next to her fiancé on the day they registered to marry, the bureaucrat in charge asked her fiancé where his bride-to-be was! This invisibility, the ultimate insult, makes this stunningly intense autobiography all the more poignant — and maddening.

Ika Hügel-Marshall has taken us on an immensely moving journey in search of herself. It is her personal story, but it is also a microcosm of racism in contemporary Germany.

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War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany. By Robert G. Moeller. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2001. Pp. 329. \$45.00. ISBN 0-520-22326-8.

War Stories follows on and continues a trend in scholarship concerning the memory of the era of Nazism and World War II. In place of the juxtaposition of memory and silence, scholars working on both West and East Germany have increasingly focused attention on the multiplicity of memories and the link between memory and the interest of various groups to stress their own particular experiences, real and remembered. The distinctive feature of Moeller’s study is its emphasis on the extent to which West Germans in the 1950s recalled World War II and its immediate aftermath primarily as a period, not of their victimization of others but of their own victimization first by a distant Nazi regime and then, even more so, by the Soviet Union. The work succeeds in making a convincing case that vocal and energetic minorities of “expellees,” that is German refugees from Eastern Europe, German prisoners of war returning from the Soviet Union, some prominent conservative historians and film makers, (some of whom began their careers in Nazi Germany) as well as primarily conservative and conservative-liberal politicians in parliament articulated and found an audience for an apologetic, self-serving, and inaccurate view of the recent past based on German victimization and innocence.

However, Robert Moeller seeks to make the stronger claim that “the past that dominated public discourse in the 1950s was that of German victims who were neither Communists nor Jews” (p. 4) and that “the stories of expellees and POWs in the Soviet Union became the stories of all West Germans . . .” (p. 7). These became “incorporated into the founding myths of the Federal Republic . . .” (p. 172); and that therefore in these years “most West Germans were able to interpret their experience only in absolute moral categories: a