



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“At the end Vera saw Antonin looking seriously at the fort.

‘So serious after such a triumph?’ she asked.

‘I’m thinking how funny it is to be happy at a time like this.’

‘What better time is there to be happy?’

He looked at her and he knew the truth.”

-From *The Last Butterfly* by Michael Jacot, after Antonin performs for Jewish children in a concentration camp; quoted in *Laughter in Hell*, by Steve Lipman

I recently read a collection of stories called *When Schlemiel Went to Warsaw and Other Stories*, by Isaac Bashevis Singer. It is a combination of stories written by Singer and stories he remembered being told. True to my recent reading habits, this is a children’s book – in fact, it is a Newbury Honor book. But it is – like many children’s books – well worth reading for adults.

The stories are humorous and some of them really made me laugh. My favorite is “Shrewd Todie and Lyzer the Miser,” in which Lyzer’s greed costs him dearly. These stories reminded me of a workshop on humor I attended several years ago. In the course of that day, authors and storytellers discussed the use of humor and tried to analyze what makes something funny.

This is a challenging task, since there are so many different kinds of humor - a funny story for one person can leave another simply bemused. I know I have told stories I

found so amusing I could hardly communicate them without stopping to laugh along the way – only to have my audience stare at me in pity or disbelief.

But it was an interesting day and one presenter in particular left a lasting impression on me. This man, whose name I have forgotten, described the use of humor in concentration camps and in Jewish communities. He also told us a humorous story about an older Jewish couple during World War II. I will never forget that story – which was very funny – or the way it made me examine the use of laughter in situations as grim as those experienced during that war.

Since the Singer book reminded me about this particular story, I decided to see if I could find a record of it somewhere. I searched the Internet and a few databases, and finally found a possible source through LinkPlus - that wonderful resource which allows

public libraries access to university and college library book collection. This book, by Steve Lipman, is called *Laughter in Hell: The Use of Humor during the Holocaust*, and it turned out to be just what I was looking for.

Not only does it have the story I was seeking, but also many other stories and jokes, all put into an historical perspective. It is a funny, sad, poignant, and thorough look at history and humor, from the beginning of the war to the years following it. There are jokes and stories about Hitler, Goebbels, Goering and others, as well as insight into the daily lives of Jews during that time. As Lipman says: “Jews wielded language as a weapon from the first days of Hitler’s rule until his defeat in a Berlin bunker – in jokes, puns, rhymes, and word-play” (page 141).

It is fascinating to juxtapose this book with some of the children’s literature that is pop-

ular today. The Lemony Snicket books, which are full of catastrophes, and the Roald Dahl books, in which imperfect people meet perfect ends, seem to exert the same kind of power. Bad things happen to good and bad people, and finding the humor in that truism helps readers and listeners of all ages cope with the uncontrollable.