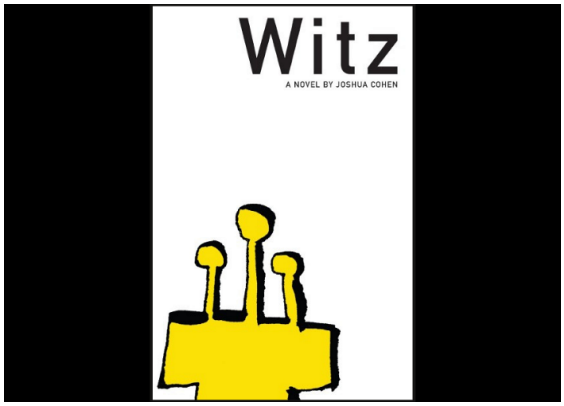
Understanding and Understanding

By *Ulrich Blumenbach*

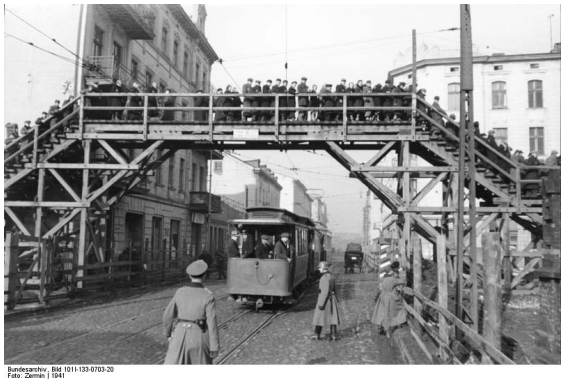
Translated from the German by *Tess Lewis*

During the first corona lockdown last summer, I finished my translation of Joshua Cohen's post-Holocaust novel *Witz*. This satirical novel, published in 2010, concludes with a long deathbed inner monologue by Joseph, the last survivor of Auschwitz. In this prose poem of horror, what passes before Joseph's eyes is the history of the persecution of the Jews from the destruction of the Second Temple, through the medieval crusades and the pogroms in Eastern Europe, to the National Socialist's genocide.



US Cover *Witz*

Joseph's inner monologue is also about the deportation of the Jewish population from the Łódź Ghetto and here I leap from Cohen's novel to my family history. In 1939, Baltic Germans were 'resettled' in Polish territories annexed by Germany as part of the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact. My six-year-old father's family moved from Riga to Łódź, which was then called Litzmannstadt. Every day, on their way to school, my father and his sister passed through the ghetto on the streetcar. As more and more people were deported to extermination camps in 1942, they asked their father about the sudden, eerie emptiness. My grandfather—a staunch Nazi—explained that the residents of the ghetto had been resettled just as they had.



Litzmannstadt streetcar

I was appalled to discover this biographical contact point while working on *Witz*. Having already translated two of Cohen's books, I'd developed a friendship with the author, but never dared tell him of this coincidence. I was afraid of giving the impression that I was drawing a parallel between historical experiences that is more than merely categorically forbidden. In Adorno's words, this is a question of '*Unterschied ums Ganze*' (absolute difference): through resettlement, my ancestors were spared later Stalinist persecution; under the pretext of 'resettlement', Cohen's ancestors were murdered by the Nazis.

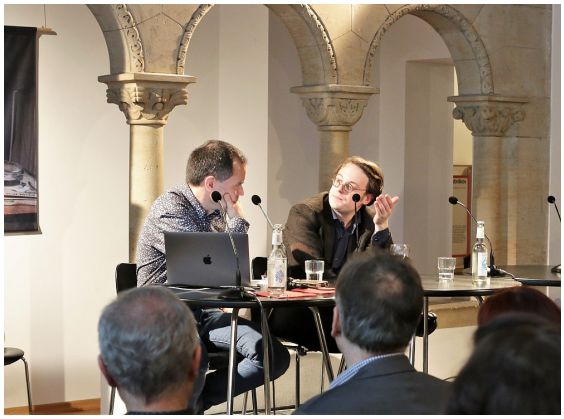
My task as a translator begins with this 'absolute difference'. Because my personality and my identity have been formed from different biographical elements and different historical facts mediated through family history than Joshua Cohen's has, my exacting reading of *Witz* as a translator occasionally entailed painful work on my cultural pre-understanding. In the process of probing the original and reproducing it in German, my cultural preconceptions become clearer to me: I was exposing myself to the terror of something that my family had spoken of all my life and yet was always covered up when they were speaking about it. In translation, this silence gains a voice. As always, everything is concurrent: I was exposing myself to the novel's different cultural world and entering into an endless hermeneutical dialogue with it. Ultimately, all reading expands our perception and knowledge of the world. I read and interpret the work of art from another cultural world—Cohen's thoughts and feelings, his experience and knowledge transformed into a novel—against the horizon of my own cultural pre-understanding. I have to reconstruct the horizon of the original as precisely as possible and at the same time ensure that what was suppressed for decades by my own culture regains its horror. The abyss that separates different experiences has its linguistic reality—this is in some ways the translator's usual balancing act… One passage reads: "They've restedup, washedup, dressedup, they've reported for showers and were shorn. There's last summer's rose attar, perfume stagnant in air—or it's smoke, strangely sweet …" On the narrative level, the passage describes people in New Jersey in 1999 who have dressed up to go to synagogue, but "showers—shorn—smoke" are words that very consciously connote the extermination camps.

Readers of translations need reference points for their pre-knowledge. In *Truth and Method*, the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose concepts and terms I'm using here, calls this process of understanding a "fusion of horizons". For a descendant of perpetrators translating a novel written by a descendant of victims this can, at best, be a regulative idea. Working to fuse horizons is a process of *epistemic* understanding, which Gadamer immediately contrasts with *empathetic* understanding. Empathetic understanding is the attempt to apprehend experiences contained in the literary conceptions of the world that we cannot have in our own lives. Literary texts also

provide and translators convey openings for the emotional understanding of other worlds.

In my view, the recent claims by identity politicians that only members of an oppressed group should be allowed to speak of that group's historical suffering are fallacious. Taken to its logical conclusion, this demand leads to a denial of other groups' capacity for empathy, to a rejection of the possibility for understanding outside the boundaries of any group, and ultimately to the impossibility of all translation: if women can only be translated by women and people of color only by people of color, then Jews can only be translated by Jews and Americans only by Americans. In literature, the elements of a text that offer openings for awareness and solidarity are more important than the elements that determine the identity of the participating speakers.

#Holocaust



Ulrich Blumenbach and Joshua Cohen at LCB © Graham Hains

Ulrich Blumenbach lives as a freelance translator in Basel. He has translated numerous English-language works by authors such as Stephen Fry, James Joyce, Arthur Miller, Raja Rao, Will Self, Joshua Cohen and Tobias Wolff. He was awarded the 2010 Translation Prize of the Leipzig Book Fair for his translation of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*.