

## **Motherhood During and After the Holocaust: Testimonial and Fictional Perspectives**

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Hitler stated that ‘one gestating Jewish mother posed a greater threat [to Aryan purity] than any fighting man’<sup>1</sup> and claimed that ‘every child that a woman brings into the world is a battle [...] for the purity of race.’<sup>2</sup> These pronouncements point to the fact that the Nazis made annihilation of Jewish mothers their strategic objective. However, until recently, mainstream Holocaust historiography paid scant attention to the specificity of the mothers’ experience, instead adopting a gender neutral, not to say male-cantered, position.<sup>2</sup> In other words, historians – including some female ones – assumed that men and women experienced Nazi persecution in essentially the same way. Consequently, they ignored significant challenges presented by uniquely feminine experiences, such as menstruation, amenorrhea and the correlated risk of infertility, pregnancy, and childbirth.<sup>3</sup> Jewish women were also exposed to enforced sterilisation and abortion, and, whether in ghettos, camps, hiding or resistance groups were often victims of sexual assault. Finally, it was equally

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<sup>1</sup> S. Lillian Kremer, *Women’s Holocaust Writing: Memory and Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Pascale Rachel Bos, “Women and the Holocaust: Analysing Gender Difference,” in Elisabeth R. Baer and Myrna Goldenberg (eds.), *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), pp. 25–30 (p. 24).

<sup>3</sup> Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War against the Jews: 1933–1945* (New York: Rinehart and Winston, 1975); Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking, 1963).

as a result of their biological role as child bearers and their socially constructed role as main child carers that Jewish women saw their survival chances drastically reduced. For instance, while in some ghettos, pregnancy was punishable with deportation, arriving in a concentration camp visibly pregnant or accompanied by small children usually meant instant death. For survivors, these experiences caused long-lasting traumas which, in the absence of a context propitious to their articulation, were particularly slow to heal.

Even if the specific predicament of Jewish mothers still occupies a relatively small space in historical studies, it has found its way into literature, both testimonial and fictional. The aim of the present special issue of the *Journal of Holocaust Research* is to explore how mothers have been represented in narratives across languages and cultures. Offering readings of individual texts or favouring a comparative approach, the four articles collated in the present volume address a range of literary texts from a variety of perspectives. They also do so with reference to a wealth of theoretical studies concerning motherhood and, more specifically, the distinctiveness of women's experience of Nazi persecution.

The special issue opens with Carmelle Stephens's critical examination of two testimonies that have by now achieved canonical status: Olga Lengyel's *Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor's True Story of Auschwitz* (1947), first published in French a year earlier as *Souvenirs de l'au-delà*, and Isabella Leitner's *Fragments of Isabella* (1978). Stephens's article begins with the extension to mothers of the observation that iconic images of Jewish children serve to strengthen our sympathy for Holocaust victims through reinforcement of the simplistic Manichean construction of the Nazi genocide in terms of innocent victims and evil perpetrators. Lengyel's memoir achieves this by mobilizing tropes and rhetorical figures, such as the *mater dolorosa*, which recast the Holocaust in metaphysical terms and anticipate the advent of an 'aesthetically and ethically attractive victimology.' Stephens argues that Lengyel's narrative of her experience of killing other women's babies in order to save the mothers, while being a bereaved mother herself, relies on 'the morally inflected symbol of maternal martyrdom.' This helps the author to mitigate her sense of culpability engendered by the misguided and ultimately fatal decisions she took in regard to her family in a world of inverted values. While equally conceived of as a martyr, in *Fragments of Isabella* the mother is additionally cast as a saintly figure attached to the author's nostalgia-imbued vision of her life in pre-war Hungary. As Stephens posits, Leitner's mother is aligned with the ideal of maternal self-sacrifice, which, in Esther Hertzog's

view, may overshadow a critical reception of the Holocaust.<sup>4</sup> This danger is counterbalanced, however, by the capacity of idealised motherhood to heal the trauma resulting from the writer's experience of Auschwitz, where she lost her mother and one of her siblings. Finally, Leitner's glorification of the maternal infuses her concentrationary past with metaphysical meaning and helps her to reposition the Holocaust within the 'meta-narrative of death and rebirth.'

Nathalie Ségeral's article examines two narratives whose protagonists strive to become mothers again in hope of neutralizing 'the de-gendering effects of the Nazi policy that specifically targeted women for their reproductive capabilities.' Ségeral analyses Chava Rosenfarb's short story 'Little Red Bird' (1994), which first appeared in Yiddish as 'Royt feigle,' and Valentine Goby's French 'biofiction' *Kinderzimmer* (2004). The two texts share their preoccupation with the profound trauma resulting from women's wartime loss of children, and with the cathartic/pathological dimensions of motherhood. In contrast to Goby's heroine, who reclaims her life after Ravensbrück by fostering the child of a dead fellow inmate, the central character of Rosenfarb's story, Manya, fantasises about kidnapping an infant from a maternity ward and, in the process fails to care for her dying husband. Ségeral's reading of the two texts draws our attention to the inadequacy of traditional narrative paradigms when it comes to conveying the specifically feminine experience of historical trauma. 'Little Red Bird' and *Kinderzimmer* respond to this inadequacy by, for example, subverting the genre of the fairy tale. Ségeral also detects in Goby's and Rosenfarb's narratives a potential for critiquing institutionalised motherhood as a cultural construct, before discussing their depiction of the traumatic memory of deportation as 'a life-long, unproductive pregnancy.'

The subject of France Grenaudier-Klijn's contribution is Jacqueline Saveria Huré's autobiographically inspired and so far untranslated narrative *Ni sains ni saufs* (1954) [Neither Safe nor Sound]. Structuring her reading of this deportation novel by a nonJewish writer sent to Ravensbrück for resistant work with Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, Grenaudier-Klijn examines the character of Madame Buze, a maternal figure embodying 'the (self)abjecting which characterizes the deportee and her world.' The originality of Grenaudier-Klijn's approach thus stems not only from bringing *Ni sains ni saufs* out of the shadows, but also from applying Kristeva's theory of abjection to *l'univers concentrationnaire*. While Kristeva herself mentions the Shoah only fleetingly

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<sup>4</sup> Esther Hertzog, "Subjugated Motherhood and the Holocaust," *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* 30, no. 1 (2016): pp. 16–34.

in this context, Grenaudier-Klijn figures the camp as an essentially abject place where nothing can remain 'propre'. Since in French the word can mean either 'clean' or 'own,' it implies the dissolution of the border between morality and immorality, order and disorder, or human and animal. The experience of life in the camp is crystallised, for Grenaudier-Klijn, in the maternal that, in Kristeva's theory, is irrevocably tainted with abjection since, to attain its own identity, the (male) subject needs to separate itself from the mother. Animal-like and stupid, Madame Buze is the abject incarnate; it is thus through abjecting this surrogate mother that the novel's protagonist, Florence, recovers her pre-war identity of a sexually attractive woman, even if, once liberated, she falls under the influence of her own and equally abject mother. Without losing sight of Saveria Huré's 'non-compromising pessimism,' Grenaudier-Klijn concludes by praising *Ni sains ni saufs* for simultaneously recasting abjection as inherent to human nature (and not only to the concentrationary universe) and making us forget its powers.

This special issue closes with my own article that, like all the other contributions, addresses the protracted after-effects of women's wartime brutalisation and loss. Written by male writers and placing male survivors centre stage, Art Spiegelman's graphic memoir *Maus* (1980–1999) and Philippe Claudel's *Brodeck* (2007) (originally published in French as *Le Rapport de Brodeck*) appear to marginalize the mother's perspective. Similarly, they seem to reproduce the stereotypical depiction of female victims of Nazi violence as passive, helpless and reliant for their survival on men, while enclosing their female characters within silent and obedient domesticity. By stressing the two narratives' postmodern aura, I argue that *Maus* and *Brodeck* inscribe the motif of female victimhood only to challenge it, even if, determined by their respective autobiographical or fictional contingencies, they do so in different ways. Spiegelman, for example, critiques his father's dismissal of the distinctiveness of his wife's experience of Birkenau, and Vladek's correlated desire to shape Anja's story in accordance with his idealised image of her as a physically and mentally vulnerable woman. Both *Maus* and *Brodeck* also engage in an intertextual dialogue with texts of European culture, such as ancient Greek myths, fairy tales and works of visual art. In so doing, they expose these texts' contribution to the entrenchment of patriarchal social order, which in turn facilitated the Nazis' misogynistic policies, including those directed against Jewish women as (potential) mothers. Indeed, I contend that Spiegelman and Claudel connect the specificity of women's experience of Nazi violence to their ability to bear children. They

equally bring to the fore and implicitly condemn the postwar silencing of the stories of sexual violence and maternal loss, which are unquestionably gendered and which have been dwarfed in both memorial and fictional writings by the dominant male perspective.

Despite their different specific foci, the four articles share their attentiveness to the themes of sexuality, maternal loss, infanticide and the regenerative potential of mothering. They also draw attention to the prominence and power of the traditional understanding of motherhood in our culture. Communicated through religious symbols or secular art, this understanding revolves around maternal love, suffering, self-sacrifice and self-effacement, and generates expectations that women should prioritize their children's welfare over their own. Even though it has recently been challenged by the constructivist understanding of motherhood as an imposed or assumed role, the essentialist conception of motherhood as a woman's destiny and as a primary justification for the woman's existence, is shown to have been largely internalised by women themselves. As the four articles demonstrate, it has also inevitably filtered into literary representations of the lives and death of mothers during the Nazi terror. Furthermore, the articles brought together by this special issue show that, as opposed to narratives addressing the male or even the child's experience of the Shoah, literary representations of Holocaust mothers have so far attracted relatively little scholarly interest. Finally, the four analyses foreground the two-faceted nature of motherhood as represented in Holocaust writing. Namely, in the majority of cases, the woman's ability to bear children reduces her chances of survival. Should she survive, her wartime experience of mothering is shown to have detrimental impact on her physical and mental well-being, rehabilitation and self-fulfilment in the post-war period. Other women, however, benefit from the therapeutic potential of mothering, in the sense that it helps them to overcome their wartime trauma and restores them to society.

#### Notes on contributor

Helena Duffy (MSt Oxon, PhD Oxford Brookes) is Collegium Researcher at the Turku Institute for Advanced Studies in Finland, where she is completing a monograph on literary representations of Jewish mothers during the Holocaust and where she lectures French and Comparative Literature. She is also coordinator of an international study circle operating under the auspices of the Nordic Summer University and dedicated to narrativisations of violence. Prior to her present appointment, Duffy was Teaching Fellow in French and

Comparative Literature at Royal Holloway, University of London, where she also held the highly prestigious Marie Curie Research Fellowship. Duffy had taught French language and culture at other UK universities (Hull, Oxford Brookes), and in Australia (University of Queensland, University of New England), Poland (University of Wrocław) and France (Clermont-Ferrand). She is the author of a recently published monograph, *World War II in Andreï Makine's Historiographic Metafiction* (Brill, 2018) and of more than forty journal articles, book chapters, essays and book reviews. Her publications have appeared in *French Studies*, *French Forum*, *FMLS*, *Modern and Contemporary France*, and *Holocaust Studies*. Her second monograph, *Inventing the Infranovel: The Holocaust in Postmodern French Fiction*, is to be published this year by Legenda. Among her other forthcoming publications is a chapter on Antoine Volodine, to appear later this year in *Contemporary Fiction in French* (Cambridge UP), and a chapter on François Ozon's film *Frantz* (2016), included in a collective volume on the French director's work (Edinburgh UP).