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Holocaust Mothers and Daughters

Federica K. Clementi

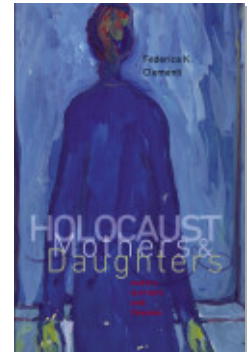
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FOREWORD

Shulamit Reinharz

Immediately after World War II, published writing about the Holocaust (in Hebrew, *Shoah*) was scarce. But as time passed, a multitude of analyses and personal testimonies appeared, creating a virtual flood of attempts to document, bear witness, and understand the Shoah. This first transition—from relative silence to an ocean of writing—became a sea change for Holocaust studies.

A second sea change, as documented by the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute (HBI), occurred in the 1990s when researchers began to ask questions about Jews and gender within the Holocaust context. A new flood of literature ensued, with works by Judith Baumel, Lenore Weitzman, Dalia Ofer, Rochelle Sidel and many others. In 2010, the HBI published *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust*, edited by Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Sidel. It was that anthology, I believe, that initiated serious discussion of a new incendiary topic: the sexual violation of Jewish women during the Holocaust.

Prior to that book's publication, the notion of Jewish women being raped by Nazis, for example, was unmentioned and nearly preposterous. After all, Nazis portrayed Jewish women as disgusting, dirty characters. Sexual congress with them, therefore, would debilitate the glorious Aryan race. The notion that not only Nazis but also Jewish men and gentile rescuers might rape Jewish girls and women was also unthinkable. And yet, Hedgepeth and Sidel produced incontrovertible documentation that such crimes did actually occur, repeatedly. In fact, Hedgepeth and Sidel demonstrated that accounts of rape were part of Jewish women's taped testimonies in various survivor collections, and yet somehow this material was not recognized, named or analyzed.

It is possible that 2013 will be seen as another sea change in Holocaust research. With the publication of this new book, Federica K. Clementi's *Holocaust Mothers and Daughters: Family, History, and Trauma*, we are now able to recognize, name, and analyze yet another dimension of the Holocaust experience: the mother-daughter relationship. Until now, writing harsh critical perspectives on relationships within the Jewish family was taboo. The pain of Holocaust memories and survivors' children's desires to protect parents who were victimized

kept many from admitting that some (all?) families were less than perfect. And even if a survivor knew that, as human beings, their parents had flaws, their children were not going to be the ones to announce that fact. Clementi's book may be the first to question the idealization of the Jewish mother-daughter relationship during and after the War.

Using a psychoanalytic lens to view Jewish children's development under Nazi rule, Clementi explains that because girls' adolescence is always fraught with ambivalence, hostility, hatred, and rebellion, we will find these emotions in mother-daughter relations during and after the Holocaust. Clementi uses the term "compulsory enmity" to describe this classic Freudian dualism. As she writes, "[T]he Shoah does not allow for [an] exception to the psychic script that demands the mother-daughter story end in conflict." This strong statement declares that not even Holocaust forces before, during, and after those years were sufficiently powerful to destroy normal patterns of psychosexual development.

Clementi develops this monumental idea by a close reading of six memoirs, recounted in six major chapters, each one devoted to a different memoir/diary writer and representing a different facet of the mother-daughter relationship. While Clementi's theoretical orientation is deeply psychoanalytic, she does not limit herself to psychoanalytic theory. In fact, in the introduction to the book, she explains that her first chapters "are interpreted primarily through the analytic lens of philosophy and child psychology." Indeed, her mastery of these fields and their literatures is impressive and profound, as she carries out a truly interdisciplinary treatment of each memoir.

Clementi situates the final three chapters of her book in cultural history. In these she discusses memoirs of Kindertransport refugees, second-generation daughters, and artists who perished in the Holocaust. Clementi invokes the HBI's mission when she places her work at the intersection of Jews and gender on an international scale. She draws heavily on survivor accounts written in languages other than English or Hebrew, including Italian, German, and French. Her doing so may remind readers that English speakers have written much of what they have read about the Holocaust.

Clementi parses the mother-daughter experience into six categories, thereby revealing underlying differences and emphases. Thus, memoirs can be divided into those that describe

- (1) dying in Auschwitz with the mother;
- (2) witnessing the mother's death in Auschwitz;
- (3) surviving Auschwitz with the mother;
- (4) surviving in hiding with the mother;

- (5) mothers and women organizing the children's rescue abroad; and
- (6) being born to mother-survivors.

In parallel, the material on which the book is based consists of six memoirs likely to be unfamiliar to the English reading audience (except for the Anne Frank diary). Along with a straightforward presentation of the gist of the text, Clementi submits each of these memoirs to intense and sophisticated literary criticism.

The first memoir is by Edith Bruck, a Hungarian-born, Italian-language writer and poet. The second, by Ruth Klüger, illuminates the dynamics of a mother and daughter who survived Auschwitz together. Another chapter deals with the case of children in hiding with their mother, both of whom are being mothered in turn by a rescuing non-Jewish family. Illustrating this dynamic is Sarah Kofman's complex story of her life that includes her biological mother as well as a "second mother—the Christian woman who saved her life." For Sarah, one woman becomes the representation of death, while the other, (ironically named) Mémé, becomes the strong, life-sustaining mother. A taxing ambivalence grows from these roots: daughters who both love and hate their mothers; who want both to grow up and stay little; who want both to remain childless and become parents; who want both to remember and forget; and who want both to embrace feminism and to hide in the seductive/destructive arms of patriarchy.

The fourth memoir, Milena Roth's *Lifesaving Letters*, recounting her experiences as a child survivor brought to England on the Kindertransport, displays the classic time lag between the experience of the Holocaust and the ability to write about it. This chapter is an example of the generalization that it "took almost half a century for the children to overcome their survivor's guilt and begin to tell their experiences" (with some exceptions). Clementi claims that because of this gulf, "the plight of these children did not figure as part of the Holocaust story." In the fifth chapter, Clementi reaches forward into the second generation and deals with children of survivors, drawing on Helena Janeczek's *Lessons of Darkness* (published in Italian). Born in Munich after the war, Janeczek lives today in Italy where she has become a "successful writer and intellectual literary figure."

As Clementi tells us, her book ends, "almost counterintuitively, with the case of Anne Frank." Frank's iconic work "epitomizes many of the themes that emerge from the [other] mother-daughter models." Clementi was compelled to include the now ubiquitous memoir because, as she writes, Anne Frank is first and foremost a rebellious daughter, "a brilliant young writer who is struggling to overcome her adolescent conflict with her mother while at the same time

striving to survive a most brutal attack against her own person, her family, and hence the very same mother against whom she struggles.” In the Anne Frank chapter, as in others, Clementi reestablishes an understanding of the meaning of writing memoirs for each of these women (including the girl, Anne). Writing, Clementi claims, expresses and creates an abiding ironic contradiction. Anne both rebels against her mother and tries to help her survive; she allows her to die and keeps her alive in the perpetually reread memoir. This ironic contradiction is embodied in the act of writing about one’s experience in the Holocaust. It is like the contradiction writing Amalek’s name so that one can cross it out. As Clementi points out, “the act of writing or producing any art in times of extreme, life-threatening circumstances [is] a courageous strategy for psychic, ideological, moral and even physical resistance to annihilation.” By recording these events, each woman forces us to re-enter them in endless perpetuity. Thus, we might conclude that both psychosexual development and artistic creation are processes that are affected by, but not inevitably crushed by the Holocaust.

Clementi explains in the chapters described above, in concert with a detailed opening chapter, such highly charged and challenging concepts as the literary apostrophe, postmemory, and traumatic realism, among others. She is particularly interested in *apostrophe*, a term that refers to an author’s act of addressing someone even if that “someone” is an inanimate object or idea. An *apostrophe* shows us an author in conversation or declamation with a third party, the addressee.

Federica K. Clementi’s skill in this volume rests on her ability to apply highly sophisticated theory to illuminate women’s memoirs, while also introducing surprisingly simple concrete ideas. Examples are her study of Anne Frank’s use of humor as well as Janeczek’s references to food (and food control, as in anorexia) and language (the continuous switching of languages). Clementi also introduces frequently overlooked frameworks in Holocaust literature, such as class, religiosity, and patriarchy. Nazism, she reminds us, includes many things, one of which is a male-dominated conception of history. With this in mind, she argues, we must reach the conclusion that the Holocaust is part of “a history of oppression rather than a freak explosion of bottled-up political sentiments and resentments.” Clementi’s fresh eye allows her to see in these women’s memoirs “a strong distrust of those patriarchal tenets that sustain the Western sociocultural system.”

Although strongly feminist in her analysis, Clementi takes an essentialist cultural view concerning the psychological differences between men and women, a difference she sees confirmed in the work of such Holocaust historians as

Marion Kaplan and Judith Baumel. She points out that Primo Levi reinforced this vision when he wrote, “I felt guilty of being a man because men had built Auschwitz.”

Gender difference is not, however, the major analytic tool of *Holocaust Mothers and Daughters*. After all, Clementi does not offer a comparative analysis of men’s and women’s thoughts, reactions and experiences during the Holocaust. Rather, her book can be thought of as extending Mary Catherine Bateson’s *Composing a Life*; it puts an end to being ignored. In so doing, Clementi’s emphasis on women’s writing against patriarchy produces an ironic and abiding dilemma: “How can one attack patriarchy without attacking the Jewish father?”

Every account of the Holocaust, every Jewish family’s dinner table discussion, every book, tells a unique story about this unfathomable crime. It is the task of the researcher to find commonalities, patterns, and differences among the unique parts. Federica K. Clementi has done that task admirably, using the tools of literary criticism, feminism, and psychoanalysis to find the essential tropes, the key phenomena that shaped her authors’ very beings. Clementi’s analysis enhances our understanding of the myriad personal testimonies that survivors continue to tell, like the one told to me by a grandmother on a kibbutz 30 years ago. This woman wanted me to know that she had stood in line with her mother at Auschwitz, shuffling forward toward Mengele. A soldier shoved her mother to the left to die, while she, the daughter, was able to go to the right and work, at least temporarily. At the split second of separation, the mother squeezed her daughter’s arm gently. For the daughter, this squeeze was at once a kiss, a life lesson, a goodbye—a promise that her mother would always somehow be with her. The squeeze sustained this woman throughout her life, she told me. Her relationship with her mother was frozen in time.

