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## Holocaust Mothers and Daughters

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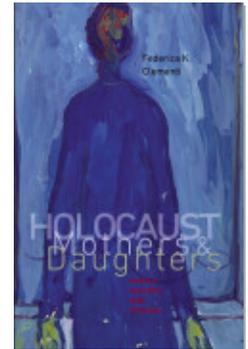
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## CHAPTER 2

# LUPUS IN FABULA

## The End of the Fairy Tale in Ruth Klüger's Mother-Daughter Shoah Plot

All great storytellers have in common the freedom with which they move up and down the rungs of their experience as on a ladder. A ladder extending downward to the interior of the earth and disappearing into the clouds is the image for a collective experience to which even the deepest shock of every individual experience, death, constitutes no impediment or barrier.

 **WALTER BENJAMIN**, *Illuminations*

In the summer of 1943, the Dutch intellectual Etty Hillesum wrote a letter to Han Wegerif and other friends from her temporary imprisonment in Westerbork, noting: “One should be able to write fairy tales here.” Referring to the misery and human squalor in that place, she added: “One would have to be a very great poet indeed to describe them; perhaps in about ten years I might get somewhat near it.”<sup>1</sup> Hillesum could not have known what we who have lived to look back at those barbaric times are well aware of: For one thing, she would be murdered in Auschwitz four months later, at the age of twenty-nine, and would not live the extra ten years she assumed it would take her to find the right words to describe the circumstances of that grotesque place. For another, she didn’t know that poets and other artists would attempt to represent the irrepresentability of such horrors and the twilight of morality by using a mode of narration not dissimilar from that of fairy tales. As Hillesum realized, although it sounded strange, “if you wanted to convey something of Westerbork life [and by extension of life in the camps] you could do it best in that form.”<sup>2</sup> Fairy tales possess a special language so psychically powerful that since time immemorial societies have used them to channel with particular efficacy messages from the dark abysses of our human subconscious, as well as to make sense of the past or express their ethos. Through repetition, the value of these stories is reinforced in time, and the messages they contain gain in cultural power. Residing as they do at the intersection of personal psychology and culture, fairy tales partake of the formation of both.<sup>3</sup> They influence the psychology of the child and the adult

alike as much as they reflect and represent it; they are a cultural product inalienably connected to the context from which they arose; and they end up shaping, as all art does, the identikit of a culture. Individual fantasy and collective imagination lock eyes in search of reciprocal legitimization on the magical and untrustworthy terrain of folk and fairy mythology. In his seminal *When Dreams Come True*, Jack Zipes explains that “both the oral and the literary forms of the fairy tale are grounded in history: they emanate from specific struggles to humanize bestial and barbaric forces, which have terrorized our minds and communities in concrete ways, threatening to destroy free will and human compassion. The fairy tale sets out to conquer this concrete terror through metaphors.”<sup>4</sup> Shoah memoirs, which are also grounded in history, set out to conquer this terror in much the same way: via a metaphorical (mimetic) retelling of each survivor’s story. Even the Shoah teller is at bottom a storyteller. And history retold has the potential to become myth, while myth has the power to keep history—or, better, its lessons—alive.

Walter Benjamin once wrote: “The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale.”<sup>5</sup> Just as myths and folk stories are organized around recognizable structures that give form to their dark content, preexisting structures and time-tested narrative devices can, through language and imagery, help the Shoah teller write about that which resists expression. For example, in *Night*, Elie Wiesel is able to reconstruct the scenes of his youth just before the apocalyptic climax (the deportations to the camps) by tapping into an old Yiddish storytelling repertoire of legendary topoi. He gives us characters such as Moishe the Beadle, a figure who is at once the fool and the savant of the village of Sighet, Wiesel’s home *shtetl*, and a Chagallesque *luftmensch* who has witnessed what others do not even begin to suspect—the Nazis committing mass murder in the East—and is not believed when he warns the village. The disbelieving crowds, the *schlemiel* who is *no fool*, the pious mother, and the *tzaddik* father are the stock characters that populate the universe of this fable. The description of the nights the child Eliezer spends with Moishe the Beadle, his spiritual mentor, in the candle-lit *shtibl*, decoding the secrets of the Zohar until dawn, are drenched in the atmosphere that is born out of the Yiddish literary tradition of S. Ansky, Sholem Asch, Mendele Mocher Sforim, Der Nister, and others. As in the mythical and *shtetl* literary tradition, the cycle of life—or rather, here, the cycle of death—is inextricably linked with the cycles of nature in *Night*. “Spring 1944,” we read. “Splendid news from the Russian Front . . . The trees were in bloom. It was a year like so many others, with its spring, its engagements, its weddings, and its births.” But of course, instead, it turns into

a season of death, arrests, deportations, and crimes. It was springtime, it was Passover: "The weather was sublime. My mother was busy in the kitchen."<sup>6</sup> The Jews of Sighet had been already relocated to the ghetto, where, regardless of the impending doom, a couple of weeks before Shavuot, they could still enjoy a carefree stroll.<sup>7</sup> The expulsion from the prewar paradise will happen on Shabbat: the Jewish day of rest and joy turns into a day of frantic packing and tears. To describe the hecatomb (the deportation, the journey in the cattle cars, the arrival at the camp), the narrator repeatedly uses the image of the night, symbolically enshrouding everything in the darkness that had fallen over the Jews' lives. We are told of a crazed woman on the train to Auschwitz, a Jewish Cassandra, who has visions of their destinies ahead: "Fire! I see a fire! I see a fire!"<sup>8</sup> Thus *Night* brings into post-Shoah literature echoes of those three main submetaphors on which, according to Dan Miron, Hebrew and Yiddish *shtetl* literature have traditionally stood: exodus, pseudomessianic visits, and fire.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike folk tales and old yarns, however, the Shoah is not an instructive source yielding positive messages, and when a happy ending does occur (as when a victim survives), it cannot be inscribed within the fairy-tale framework of the triumph of good over evil. Yet Hillesum was right: there are many ways in which the techniques of fairy tales can be applied to the retelling of an experience as unlike a fairy tale as Auschwitz. Both folk tales and Shoah memoirs rely on the ability of the human mind to perceive what is read or heard as unreal (either too fantastical or too horrible to comprehend) but not necessarily untrue. We perceive a folk tale as something abstract yet also "part of our own experience," as Cristina Bacchilega writes.<sup>10</sup> Using a similar strategy from folk tales, but under the sign of tragedy, a Shoah memoir demands of the reader a suspension of disbelief. In particular, Shoah memoirs that focus on the childhood years of the writer share certain characteristics with the plot patterns of traditional fairy tales. The memoirs reflect on life from a vanished personal and collective past and show its connection to the present and the future, drawing its trajectories in terms of a continuum. Like the folk tales analyzed by Vladimir Propp,<sup>11</sup> the Shoah narrative also has plots with functions that differ from story to story, but within the same story there are several plot paths that rarely reach their end with the resolution of one single crisis. Northrop Frye reminds us that a central characteristic of folk tales is their abstract story patterns.<sup>12</sup> The arbitrariness and implausibility of the events of the Holocaust force its stories toward such abstraction, enshrouding most Shoah tales in a disturbing aura of unworldliness, as if they were suspended in an ahistorical moment, a sort of vacuum sealed off from this world. The fact that many Holocaust memoirs begin at the time of deportation and end around the time of liberation from the

camps further contributes to these narrations' aura of atemporality by bracketing off the experience from what came before and after it.

The world of a fairy tale is insular, perfectly self-contained. Once good has triumphed over evil, things remain frozen in time, happy from then on. War memoirs, and childhood war memoirs in particular, are often told in this self-contained way. When a Shoah story is retold so as to exclude the life of the protagonist(s) before and after the war, it runs the risk of creating the false impression that the protagonist's life has reached an optimum stage (survival) and that he or she can go on living happily ever after. However, studies on post-traumatic stress disorder, along with the suicide rate among survivors and other psychopathologies arising in genocide escapees, show the opposite to be true. For the survivor, the Shoah story does not end with the liberation from the death camps. He or she never shakes free from the trauma. Auschwitz didn't just end.

In this chapter, I examine Ruth Klüger's *Still Alive*, a memoir illustrating the experience of a mother and daughter surviving Auschwitz together.<sup>13</sup> This text explicitly addresses the complex question of how to tell a child's story of survival without making it sound like a fairy-tale triumph of good over evil, even though such a structure could handle the events with narrative efficiency. I propose we look at how, from the perspective of the Shoah teller herself, particularly one who revisits her childhood, the structure of fairy tales can help make (at least narrative) sense of the unimaginable. It helps to tell the unspeakable. If we take the way in which fairy tales tackle the ambiguities of identity, the perception of reality, the formation of a self, the unconscious and its symbolic language, and the moral division between right and wrong, it becomes apparent how compatible the Shoah story is with the fairy-tale plot: a good and innocent child is born in an inimical world; she has to undergo exceptional trials; and in the end, aided by her own ingenuity, providential intermediaries, or luck, she prevails and becomes a new person, the successful and individuated adult. After all, as Bruno Bettelheim once said, "like Snow White, each child in his development must repeat the history of man, real or imagined."<sup>14</sup> However, I will show how Klüger uses her own memories as a Shoah child and Auschwitz survivor to demonstrate the pernicious allure of such a narrative. Furthermore, I will explore how, through her personal story as reflected in the mirror of her memoir, Klüger exposes the numerous myths that have shaped her psyche since childhood—including the film *Snow White*, from which, as we will see, she learns a very dramatic life lesson; the Viennese legend of Drunken August that she knew from her schooldays; the antisemitic tales depicting an infectious Other that surrounded her as a child; and Jewish stories about bitter herbs and the parting of the sea, which were also part of the repertoire of tales she grew up with.

Though Klüger warns us that there is no solace to be found in the fairy-tale ending of her autobiographical journey, the narrated conflicts (pivotal in the girl's identity formation) follow and repeat a universal pattern from which millennia of folk stories about human impulses have drawn their material.

We have been trained by our Western literary tradition—from Augustine's foundational *Confessions* onward—to expect from autobiographies truths that are recognizable and undisputable. The reader hopes to learn something from them, to gain some sort of illumination. We perceive autobiographies as transparent reflections of the self: they are mirrors that reflect an author and his or her life, as well as a version of the world of which we ourselves are a part. We look into an autobiography in order to see our own image integrated into the larger human picture. Canonic autobiographies, which Sidonie Smith rightly calls the androcentric genre par excellence,<sup>15</sup> establish the speaker as a universal model in whom readers can see their own foibles and tribulations and in whose triumphs they recognize an ideal to strive for. In their influential text on women's autobiographies, Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck explain:

“The (masculine) tradition of autobiography . . . had taken as its first premise the mirroring capacity of the autobiographer: his universality, his representativeness, his role as spokesman for the community. But only a critical ideology that reifies a unified, transcendent self can expect to see in the mirror of autobiography a self whose depths can be plumbed, whose heart can be discovered, and whose essence can be definitively known. No mirror of her era, the female autobiographer takes as a given that selfhood is mediated: her invisibility results from her lack of a tradition, her marginality in male-dominated culture, her fragmentation—social and political as well as psychic.”<sup>16</sup>

Klüger's awareness of the social and historical construction of the autobiographical self makes her text a particularly compelling postmodern work of memory. In this Shoah autobiography, the first-person narrator posits herself as precisely the opposite of an exemplary universal model; on the contrary, the uniqueness of her experience and its anti-exemplarity puts into question the viability of Shoah autobiography itself. Just as Shoah memoirs disable the work of autobiography (the work of constructing a coherent self), so do they disable the work of fairy tales (the work of imparting clear lessons and happy endings) while still functioning like fairy tales.<sup>17</sup> As I will show, Klüger questions the authority of her text, the faithfulness of the reflection produced by the mirror of memory. Since I began this chapter by talking about fairy tales, any association between fairy tales and mirrors inevitably conjures up the story of Snow

White,<sup>18</sup> which is central to my discussion of Klüger's memoir. More than any other fairy tale, Snow White's story represents the conflict in a mother-daughter relationship that is defined and limited, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar famously decreed, by that "transparent enclosure" into which, as women in a fiercely patriarchal world, they "both have been locked: a magic looking glass, an enchanted and enchanting glass coffin."<sup>19</sup> I would therefore argue that if autobiographies are metaphorically thought of as mirrors, then they are in fact "enchanted" mirrors that do not simply reflect the truth as a fixed, frozen, objective state but that answer differently depending on who's interrogating them, and that reflect different images depending on which subject is looking into their surface. These are mirrors that allow us to look not only backward but also forward and inward. I argue that Klüger's most important contribution to the genre is her questioning the veracity, and hence the authority, of this powerful mirror. In doing so, I highlight two important issues raised by this text: whose purposes do its reflections serve, and what role does patriarchy play in the way Klüger frames her mother-daughter story?

Although Zipes remains the scholar who more than anybody else over the last few decades has helped us understand how magic spells are formulated and sustained in culture through fairy tales, my study is also greatly informed by the feminist approach to the genre proposed by Bacchilega in her seminal *Postmodern Fairly Tales*. Discussing the cultural construct of women, Bacchilega takes the example of Snow White, who is artfully constructed as a "natural woman," and this construction encourages "thinking of her and other stereotypical heroines in pre-cultural, unchangeable terms. By showcasing 'women' and making them disappear at the same time, the fairy tale . . . transforms us/them into man-made constructs of 'Woman.'"<sup>20</sup> I will use this position as the backdrop for my inquiry into Shoah autobiography: if autobiography is a genre or mirror with its own mechanisms or magic spells, it too can make essentialized categories such as Woman and Victim disappear. Klüger intuits this danger and in response tries to break the spell by writing a memoir in which she continuously shifts frames of reference and undercuts the reliability of all speakers, including the authoritative voice of the writer who is holding the mirror to her past. This chapter maintains that, although Klüger's autobiography is a Shoah memoir (and therefore simultaneously the least fantastic and most unimaginable of stories), it can be read as a feminist and postmodern fairy tale that rearticulates the repetition implied in performative discourse and unearths the "unexploited or forgotten possibilities"<sup>21</sup> in the repetition of a known story such as the Holocaust.

Furthermore, what Klüger's memoir makes evident is the fact that the un-

imaginable happens in fairy tales, as it does, surprisingly often—for better and for worse—in history as well.

### **GROWING UP AUSTRIAN**

Mitteleuropa: a single word, ambitious and imposing, used to describe an entire era and a seemingly limitless place, a luxuriant cultural atmosphere and a stagnant political climate. It is a German word, but it incontestably belongs to Austria. It conjures up images of a fossilized mammoth of an empire, an empire whose ruling classes were erased by history and that was defunct long before it actually came to an end. Mitteleuropa, or Central Europe, was an assortment of nations clustered around the Danube and its tributaries like leaves on the branches of an ancient tree: Hungary, Romania, Bohemia, Slovakia, Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia and the remaining Balkan states, Bulgaria, Moravia, Ruthenia, Galicia, Trentino, and many more territories, villages, and towns with ever-changing names and borders. These were all part of the extended imperial family—its rebellious children incessantly defying Austria's *patria potestas*. In *The Man without Qualities*—the famous novel set at the end of Emperor Franz Josef's reign and just before World War I—Robert Musil erected a nonpareil monument to the decrepitude—moral and political, social and historical—of the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy, comically referred to as the Land of Kakania from the abbreviation *k. und k.*, for *kaiserlich* (imperial) and *königlich* (royal). *Kakania* was an endless maze of bureaucratic passages, the deterministic yet disconnected algorithm on which each citizen depended and through which each existed. Its center was Vienna: a modern and decadent hub brimming with cafés, operettas, public gardens, private gardens, salons, and royal courts that Sigmund Freud, one of its most famous sons, loved to fiercely hate. Vienna, *à juste titre*, was also the capital station of sordid sexual affairs and suicides.

By the time Ruth Klüger was born in 1931, the whole of Mitteleuropa had imploded, collapsing like a house of cards and leading to a dramatically rearranged geopolitical situation in Europe. Former satellite entities were now independent, self-determining nations experiencing varying degrees of social and political turmoil after the destabilizing earthquake that was World War I. Of course there was still a Central Europe, but the Mitteleuropa of Arthur Schnitzler, Franz Kafka, Gustav Klimt, and Gustav Mahler had disappeared. However, its *mitteleuropäische* atmosphere stubbornly lingered on, especially in Vienna. The Austro-Hungarian Empire died: but not the effervescent culture it had always fostered. Local folklore played an important role in connecting the new cultural climate to the previous era, and such folklore is a particularly vivid element of Klüger's memories of growing up in Austria. The illusory stability created

through a folk (or *volkish*) continuity with the past exists as an ironic backdrop to Klüger's recollections: "Vienna was settled early by the Romans and has had a vibrant history, embellished by folklore . . . The Danube, the surrounding mountains, and even ordinary houses in the city . . . are crawling with supernatural creatures, whose stories found their way into our school books."<sup>22</sup> There is no overstating the influence of these children's stories and of the Austro-German folk tradition on a girl born within that Germanic culture that, more than any other, "has incorporated folk and fairy tales in its literary socialization process so that they play a most formative role in cultivating aesthetic taste and value systems."<sup>23</sup> In their nineteenth-century literary incarnations, fairy tales served not only to socialize the young but also to nurture the nation-building ideals of the middle class, especially in Prussia and Austria-Hungary.

Another famous Viennese, the psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim, had grown up hearing such fantastic stories about his ancestors from his parents that he admitted to having often blurred fantasy and reality. These tales "were significant parts of our family's oral history," he recalled, and "I am sure they made such a deep impression on me at an early age because they contained so many elements of another literary tradition with which I was quite familiar: that of fairy tales . . . For me as a child, it was not their [his grandparents'] true stories which lent veracity to the many fairy tales I knew but the fairy tales that convinced me of the truth of my grandfathers' stories."<sup>24</sup>

In her memoir, Milena Roth recalls two separate introductions to the world of fairy tales: first, the German tradition passed on by her mother while Milena was growing up in Prague; and second, a British tradition she encountered once she arrived in England with a few thousand other Jewish children from the Kindertransport rescue operation. Roth suggests that the children's books she was exposed to in the two countries seeded in her young subconscious two very different imaginative fields. The Grimm brothers wrote eerie and uncanny stories, but the English tales—about Peter Rabbit, Mr. Bultitude and his son Dick's comical exchange of bodies, and the anti-Napoleonic adventures of Marryat's retired Royal Navy captain—were far less burdened by dark undertones and sinister imagery.<sup>25</sup> In Klüger's tragic biography, there is room only for the Germanic folk tales of her Austrian childhood. By the time she reached safety in America, she was too old for the cheerier Anglo-Saxon tales: Auschwitz, which only a few years earlier had imprisoned a child, had released a broken individual who was chronologically still very young but who had none of her childhood innocence left.

About her early years spent in Vienna, Klüger says: "I had been very receptive to a nascent patriotism, and I loved all of my city's old stories. There was

the river nymph in the Danube and the monstrous Viennese basilisk, which could kill you with a glance. There was the defeat of the Turks” (Still Alive, 41). Alongside these mythical creatures were quasi-superhuman figures such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, not only “Germany’s greatest poet but also . . . traditionally invoked as a role model for all kinds of conduct” (Still Alive, 56). Less worthy personages also ascended to a grandiose status, as in the case of the authoritarian interwar chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss, father of Austrian Fascism and the *Ständestaat* regime: “We were meant to become good, patriotic little Austrians, and so in first grade we learned a song celebrating the martyrdom of Chancellor Dollfuss . . . murdered by a Nazi, one fascist in effect killing another fascist” (Still Alive, 40). The border between legend and history blurs in the mind of a child, and it takes later revisions to dismantle the mythology these men had created about themselves. In hindsight, the Shoah throws a deforming or reinforming shadow over everything Klüger knew from before Auschwitz, and only from the distance afforded to her by time is the adult narrator able to reassign new meaning to old, crystallized tales: “Even better was the story about Drunken August, who lived at the time of the Great Plague and wasn’t scared but got drunk every night after entertaining the crowd with his bagpipe. One night when he was tumbling home, he fell into an open grave, full of corpses. He slept until morning and crawled out of this deadly ditch bright-eyed and not infected. A possible patron saint of the deported who returned, indestructible, lovable, and a little contemptible in the view of those who never got close to the plague of our time. But Jews have no patron saints” (Still Alive, 41–42). Unlike the battle for Vienna in 1683, whose ferocity was quickly buried under a blanket of triumphalism for the victory of the cross over the crescent, and whose token was the recipe of the delicious croissant taken from the Turks just before they were repelled from the gates of Christian Europe, the Jewish war story has no fairy-tale twist, no feel-good ending, no monumental pastry. And yet despite its utter sterility and hopelessness, it compels those who returned from the living graveyards of the *Konzentrationslager* to speak. The same hindsight that allows Klüger to look on those formative Austrian mythologies with new eyes also allows her to reevaluate those family values that were so fundamental in the national self-understanding and society-building process of the prewar era. Despite the frivolity and coquettishness with which the Belle Époque had spiced lifestyles and culture in the big cities, the bourgeoisie was still clinging to an idyllic, sober, corseted idea of itself. And at the very center of this unrealistic ideal was a family model that required homogeneity and internal coherence, stable gender roles and rigidly defined hierarchies. Yet Klüger’s text gives us a more complex, and subversive, picture of turn-of-the-century family life—not

homogeneous, coherent, or stable, and with gender roles sometimes reversed and hierarchies ignored whenever possible.

The Klügers belonged to the Viennese upper middle class. Unlike Edith Bruck and Sarah Kofman, who hailed from poor Jewish Orthodox environments, Klüger came from an assimilated Mitteleuropean family that, blessed by the Haskalah and Viennese cultural and social enlightenment, comfortably lived by the *maskil* poet Judah Leib Gordon's motto: "Be a man in the streets and a Jew at home."<sup>26</sup> A closer look into their household reveals a not entirely *gemütlich* family style. Ruth Klüger's mother, Alma, the figure around which *Still Alive* revolves, had been divorced. She had always wanted to live in Vienna, the great capital that was less provincial than her native Prague. She took the initiative of moving there, divorcing her husband and taking with her Schorschi, her only son. In Vienna, Alma married Viktor Klüger, a well-known and respected gynecologist, with whom she had one child, Ruth.<sup>27</sup> During a summer vacation, Schorschi was sent to visit his father, who—taking advantage of this opportunity—obtained custody of the child and refused to return him to his mother. The two never saw each other again. During the war, Schorschi was deported and murdered in Riga.

After the *Anschluss*, which incorporated a willing Austria into the quickly forming Hitlerian empire, and the *Kristallnacht* pogroms of 1938, which in turn were followed by massive arrests of Jewish men, it was concluded that it would be best for Viktor to flee Austria and organize his family's rescue once he was in a safer place.<sup>28</sup> Tragically, the plan failed. Viktor first crossed the border into Italy, and from there he passed into southern France, where he was captured and sent east to his death. Based on Viktor's strategy, we learn that in the early days of the genocide, people still thought it reasonable to assume that women, children, and the elderly would remain unharmed: "Because the Jews believed that only men were in real danger, they responded with gender-specific plans to protect and save their men."<sup>29</sup> Marion Kaplan points out that following the "November Pogrom, in a strange twist of fortune, the men interred in concentration camps were released only upon showing proof of their ability to leave Germany immediately. Families—mostly wives and mothers—strained every resource to provide the documentation to free these men and send them on their way while some of the women remained behind . . . Even as women feared for their men, they believed that they themselves would be spared serious harm by the Nazis."<sup>30</sup> As a consequence of such miscalculations, Alma was left alone in Vienna to care for her daughter, aged mother-in-law, and other elderly family members (who did not survive the war). Eventually, Klüger and her mother were arrested and taken to Theresienstadt; they were later sent to Auschwitz and then other camps, which they survived. While they were in Christianstadt,

an orphaned girl, Susi, became Ruth's best friend and a permanent member of the family ("whom I still call my sister," Klüger says [*Still Alive*, 123]). Thanks to Klüger's courage and initiative, the three of them were able to escape from Gross-Rosen in February 1945. Sustained and guided by Alma's strength and resourcefulness, they all managed to reach New York and build new lives. Alma remarried several times, and she helped her two daughters get the all-important academic degrees necessary in postwar America to have careers, attain independence, and achieve integration.

*Still Alive* opens with these words: "Their secret was death, not sex. That's what the grown-ups were talking about, sitting up late around the table" (15). Interestingly, these two concepts, sex and death—the very muses of human outer (art) and inner (subconscious) worlds for Freud—are recognized by Bettelheim, Carl Jung, Erich Fromm, and Mercea Eliade as the underlying psychological concerns allegorically imbedded in and metaphorically thematized by all folk tales and myths. Klüger's autobiography marshals these two opposite yet complementary concepts to tell the story of a daughter and her mother, a story of sex (and the larger gender systems it reflects) and death (loss, abjection, and victimization). Bettelheim, who often wrote about his hometown, psychoanalyzing its nature as if it were an ailing patient on his couch, observed: "In this unique Viennese culture, the strongest inner powers were thanatos and eros, death and sex . . . Viennese culture liked to explore these psychological complexities and embodied them in its creations."<sup>31</sup> Klüger's *Still Alive* is here to tell us about this culture's creative and destructive tendencies.

### **THE WICKED (JEWISH) MOTHER**

Traditional fairy tales are articulated around fixed structures. They often start by succinctly describing the setting of the story and then quickly transition to the conflict that will sustain the plot's momentum through trials and perils to a resolution and a moral. Similarly, *Still Alive* opens by setting up the scene for the reader and then abruptly turns to the conflict that forms the core of the story. Contrary to expectations, this conflict is not the deportation to or arrival at a concentration camp; rather, it occurs before Auschwitz in the life of a girl in Vienna in the late 1930s. The opening conflict is shaped by the presence of the Nazis but centers on the mother and affects the girl's early perception of maternal figures. Now eight years old, Ruth has one wish: to see *Snow White*.<sup>32</sup> But the Nuremberg Laws banned Jews from all public spaces, including movie theaters, so the girl kvetches about the unfairness of anti-Jewish legislations until, exasperated by her complaints, her mother suggests that she ignore the laws and simply go see the film:

[My] mother proposed that I should leave her alone and just go and forget about what was permitted and what wasn't.

I hesitated a bit at this unexpected go-ahead, for it was a Sunday, we were known in the neighborhood, and to go to a movie right there in broad daylight was a kind of dare. My mother couldn't accept the absurdity of blatant discrimination. She assured me that no one would care who sat in an audience of children. I shouldn't think I was that important, and I should stop being a coward, because she [mother] was never a coward, not even when she was my age. So of course I went, not only for the movie, but to prove myself. (*Still Alive*, 46)

The challenge the mother throws out to her daughter pushes the girl into action. Little does she know that Ruth is about to learn her own lesson from the Snow White story.

The cinema is full of enemies, both on-screen and off. Ruth shrewdly purchases a ticket for one of the best loge seats, hoping not to meet anybody she knows there and perhaps thinking that the sophisticated people in the loge would not make a fuss over her being in the theater. The scheme fails: a nineteen-year-old girl and her enthusiastically Nazified siblings immediately spot the Jew in the audience. This mob is only referred to as "the children of the local baker," and their anonymity produces both an oddly humorous effect and a fairy-tale-like atmosphere. In fairy tales, the characters' namelessness points to the general validity of the experience undergone by the hero and integrates their presence into the mythical story of good versus evil. As Bettelheim notes, anonymity is of great importance in fairy tales because it makes "clear that [the story] tells about everyman, people very much like us . . . If names appear [in fairy tales], it is quite clear that these are not proper names, but general or descriptive ones."<sup>33</sup> For over an hour, Klüger tells us, she could focus only on the threatening presence of the baker's children and the power they held over her life. In agony, her mind begins to confuse the movie with her own nightmarish reality: "The wicked queen of the film merged with my neighbor, her fairy-tale malice a poor imitation of the real thing, and it was I, and no innocent princess, who was lost in the woods, offered poisoned apples, and in fear of glass coffins" (*Still Alive*, 46). Her guilt doubly exposed—for having broken a law and for being Jewish—the girl makes sense of the inexplicable events by projecting the movie's plot onto her reality. Like Snow White, who had unwittingly defied the queen by surpassing her in beauty, this Viennese girl had also broken an unfair law (the prohibition) and defied her enemies. In addition, she was Other—Jewish—and would be condemned to death. An interesting

subconscious manipulation makes the writer assign to the narrated girl a fear of glass coffins that Snow White cannot have.

Although a sophisticated cultural capital like Vienna is far removed from the world of fairy tales, the absurdity of a world that fashions itself according to an unbending, willful morality that is in fact immoral reveals surprising similarities with those magical realms. In order to get across the uncanniness of a reality that seems to have lost all sense, Klüger ingeniously returns to a childhood memory that involves a fairy tale. The feeling of total disbelief in the horror that was slowly unfolding is often mentioned by Holocaust victims, who look back at the years before the outbreak of war and report a continued inability to understand not so much why (an unanswerable question) but how it could have happened, and specifically how it could have happened to them. It is as if the victims fell into a gap between objective and subjective reality, a horrendous vacuum we could think of as *skepsis*: an abyss in which all assumptions about oneself vis-à-vis the outside world are no longer viable. The prewar years—with their growing restrictions on people’s lives, the worsening of antisemitic threats, the bellicose public speeches of various dictators, and so on—were ones of total madness, yet people lived through them under the pretense of sanity. The Jews, even those as young as Klüger, had to relearn how to live; they had to adapt to their suddenly shifted place in the world and quickly understand the new rules to play by. The changes were implemented steadily yet in a piecemeal fashion over the course of a year and a half; they were incremental and unpredictable, not to mention totally nonsensical. One could be shopping at a jeweler’s on Kärtnerstrasse (Vienna’s most chic boulevard) on Monday but find oneself banned from it on Tuesday. One day, a Jewish child could go to school and expect to sing the national anthem and Christmas carols with other children in class; the following day, those same Christian friends would stop talking to the child, refuse to come to his or her birthday party, and yell anti-Jewish epithets on the street. This was particularly confusing and shocking for two categories of people: utterly assimilated Jews in sophisticated urban settings and children. In *My Knees Were Jumping*, a documentary film about the Kindertransport rescue operation,<sup>34</sup> Erika Estis, one of the interviewees, talks about an antisemitic jingle that children sang on the street when she passed by. After flawlessly reciting it by heart in German, Estis lowers her voice, looks down, and pensively says, almost as if to herself: “These were my friends.” After over half a century, it is still incomprehensible to her how the same kids who played with her the day before the *Anschluss* could despise her and publicly harass her the day after it.

The new logic to which the victims were forced to quickly adjust created a schizophrenic split between personal and public reality and between subjective

and objective truth. To a certain extent, violence always infantilizes its victims: it is possible, therefore, to turn to certain aspects of child psychology to uncover the effects of abuse and trauma on the adults. The adult whose daily reality has undergone drastic and life-threatening changes must learn to renegotiate his or her position in the larger social universe. In a way, the adult becomes a childlike figure, afraid of committing a mistake in a game whose rules are not entirely revealed to him or her and whose logic is impossible to understand. Klüger consciously labors to define and represent this *skepsis*: the impossibility a child faces in grasping his or her revolutionized circumstances. Survivors-witnesses experienced this split not only during the events but also when they revisit those days of impotence and ignorance. “Why didn’t I get up and walk out?” Klüger retrospectively wonders about the incident in the movie theater, and answers herself: “Perhaps in order not to face my mother, or because any move might attract attention” (*Still Alive*, 46). The psyche of the young girl naturally draws a connection between the evil characters in the *Snow White* film and the evil characters in Nazi Vienna, but on further reflection, she also begins to see that the narcissistic queen of the movie and her mother might have something in common, too. The wicked queen who lures Snow White into eating the poisoned apple merges with the narrator’s mother, who had dared the young child to defy laws that even adults felt compelled to obey. A child might learn a positive lesson about friendship (through the seven dwarves), love (through the valiant prince) or triumph (through the revenge against the stepmother) from Snow White, but Ruth leaves the movie theater having learned only what it means to be rejected as Other and to mistrust her mother—two lessons also discreetly woven into the fabric of the story. The girl is thus initiated into the tragedy that often arises when private life and history collide. A chasm has opened up, and the girl has learned to recognize how things stand for the Jews in the real world and how things stand for her in relation to her mother, the “wicked queen”—who, in telling her to defy the law and enter the cinema, put her in harm’s way. If every fairy tale represents a rite of passage, as Mercea Eliade suggests,<sup>35</sup> then the afternoon at the movie theater represents for the little girl an initiatory scenario, one quickly transferred from the imaginative plane of the film onto the historical plane: “I had found out, for myself and by myself, how things stood between us and the Nazis and had paid for knowledge with the coin of pain . . . I had had the feeling of deadly danger, and this feeling didn’t leave me but escalated until it was justified. Without having to think it through, from now on I was ahead of the grown-ups” (*Still Alive*, 47).

The enabler of this terrifying rite of passage is the mother: “I got the impression that I shouldn’t trust my mother, that she had only bad advice for me” (*Still*

Alive, 48). Folk tales often turn mother figures into stepmothers who impede the full realization of the fair heroine and provide the plot with its necessary peripe-  
teia and conflict. The young girl must feel unjustly treated, misunderstood, or unappreciated by her mother. Mirroring a child's psychic life, fairy tales often hinge on the development and resolution of conflicts between the young and their parents—between sons and fathers or daughters and mothers. A child has to escape the family and explore the relational dynamics of the outside world (in school with friends, in a sympathetic adult world separate from the home). Social adjustment and individuation, according to this arc, would therefore be the positive outcome of the conflict with the mother. The assumption that a war with the mother is necessary for the daughter to reach her potential is of course extremely problematic, and the case in question is rendered even more complex because of the historical circumstances. The child of our story runs away from a wicked mother only to encounter a far more wicked world outside the house. Everything, from possessions to psyches and lives, is destroyed in genocide: childhood itself is shattered. Geoffrey Hartman's statement that "before Auschwitz we were children in our imagination of evil; after Auschwitz we are no longer children"<sup>36</sup> is valid for the survivors as well as for the subsequent generations of this story's listeners. J. R. R. Tolkien assigned to fantasy three positive functions, recovery, escape, and consolation; Bettelheim added a fourth and negative one, threat.<sup>37</sup> The automatic behaviors that sustain a child's imaginative and psychic world, and that are echoed by folk tales, are short-circuited by the Shoah circumstances. There is a concrete, not imaginary, threat imperiling the physical life of the Shoah child, and the anxiety that arises from the clash between inner psychic conflicts and outside material threats plants seeds of resentment toward humanity (in Klüger's case, toward the mother), leading to feelings of anger, confusion, depression, and frailty. The child's world is regulated by a basic principle of justice: good is rewarded, evil punished. G. K. Chesterton idealistically said that "children are innocent and love justice, while most of us are wicked and naturally prefer mercy."<sup>38</sup> But what if justice is turned on its head? What if the child inhabits a reality in which any logical connection between crime and punishment is lost; in which one is punished for no comprehensible reason; and in which, apart from the historical cataclysms, one must also deal with a domestic reality that appears to defy the comforting assumptions that mothers are good, the home is a haven, fathers are protective and strong, and adults know best?

In revisiting the years that preceded Auschwitz, Klüger depicts a mother who is absent and dismissive of many of the child's concerns and fears, which makes her, to the daughter's eye, a kind of wicked queen. The "familiar look"

in her mother's eyes, we are told, is "rigid, vacuous," and heralds an impending explosion of "accumulated anxiety and rage" (*Still Alive*, 49–50). The daughter feels lost, alone, and helpless when confronted by this gaze. The psychoanalyst Caroline Eliacheff and the sociologist Nathalie Heinich describe this type of mother as "more woman than mother," one who feels the urge to compete with her daughter and whose commitment to her own life outweighs her commitment to her offspring: "The 'more woman' type figures as the 'bad mother': she is mostly absent, indifferent, and loves poorly. The girl can . . . love herself in her mother's stead, but at least she will be able to complain about it and even turn her impossible love into hate."<sup>39</sup> *Still Alive* spews forth a good measure of this daughterly hate. An unexpressed accusation seems to linger in the air: my mother didn't care about my survival. Can the subconscious desire of such a "more woman than mother" to kill the daughter spill over into conscious reality? The grown-up narrator knows the answer to this question, but the child's sense of self, as well as her perception of the world and her mother, was marred by painful doubt. The adult narrator's knowledge is juxtaposed against the young girl's (Oedipal) blindness.

The girl also believes that the wicked mother has maliciously schemed to separate her from her father (who, as we recall, left her behind in his escape from Austria):

There had been talk that he [father] could take me on his passport. I had forgotten or repressed that idea, but decades later my mother confirmed it. "Viktor had you on his passport and wanted to take you." So why didn't he? Either she didn't want to let me go, or he didn't want to have me along . . . And then I wasn't even permitted to come along to the station . . . Maybe my mother was afraid he and I would leave together at the last moment. Instead I was in bed . . . where one had to go if anything exciting happened. And I thought with tears of resentment how they'd refused all my wishes—even simple, modest wishes they had rejected—and I never knew beforehand when they'd say no. (*Still Alive*, 37)

Unlike the adult narrator who knows she is in the dark as far as her ability to make sense of other people's decisions from over half a century earlier, the narrated child has no doubt about her interpretation of the facts: to the child it is incontrovertible that her father must have wanted to take her along, but the mother must have forbidden it. Indeed, as Bettelheim has pointed out in another context, "this is what the oedipal and adolescent girl wishes to believe about her father: that even though he does as the mother bids him, he would side with his daughter if he were free to, tricking the mother as he did so."<sup>40</sup> The

narrator and the reader understand this abandonment scene differently from its protagonist because they are endowed with a historical hindsight that looks back on events and demystifies them. As Nancy K. Miller points out about such autobiographical demystification, the reader is “a partner in crime” of the autobiographical subject;<sup>41</sup> the reader is the necessary Other whose detached presence helps effect a synthesis among the various historical and compositional truths of the text. Alma, not the “wicked mother” but the loving and clever one, did not want to let go of her daughter: she already made the mistake once of letting a child, Schorschi, slip out from under her control, and as a consequence she lost him forever. This time she made sure that her daughter remained alive, under her protection.

Both the mother and the outside world wear a two-sided mask, and it is impossible for the child to predict which face—the good one or the evil one—she is going to see from one moment to the next. One day Klüger is riding the subway alone, and a man offers an orange to the little Jewish girl with the yellow star sewn on her coat: a small act of compassion by yet another nameless character. But if anonymity in fairy tales serves a universalizing purpose, here it produces the opposite effect. This stranger is not everyman: kindness toward a Jew is the exception, not the rule, in Nazified Vienna. Furthermore, this stranger’s kindness elicits an outraged reaction from Alma. When she hears of the incident, she accuses her daughter of being a shameless beggar, of having no dignity, and she feels only disdain, and no sympathy, for the difficult position in which Klüger had found herself. By accepting the gift, she debased herself in the mother’s eyes, but had she refused it and thus made a fuss over the man’s unsolicited charity, she would have risked condemning him to arrest for breaking the law that forbade Aryans from interacting with a Jew: “I was helpless before this moral double bind: my mother’s disapproval, the stranger’s goodwill” (*Still Alive*, 50).

Another conflict between mother and daughter arises from Alma’s disapproval of Klüger’s love of poetry. The mother repeatedly discourages Ruth’s artistic ambitions, and even after Klüger becomes a professor and a writer, she is acutely aware that her mother “considered my career an embarrassment” (*Still Alive*, 210). Klüger is not alone among the girls of her generation to report that a daughter’s artistic ambitions were likely to be thwarted by tyrannical parents, other family members, or someone else wielding influence in their lives. This resistance is a recurring theme in all the texts examined in *Holocaust Mothers and Daughters*, and it is widespread in the literature and experience of young women from that era in general.<sup>42</sup> For instance, in her multilayered memoir, *Sophie Freud* (Sigmund Freud’s granddaughter) repeatedly highlights the sad stories

of women such as her maternal grandmother, Ida Drucker, a phenomenally talented performer whose singing career was never allowed to take off because of her father's stern opposition to it.<sup>43</sup> Apparently critics raved about her public performances, and the prestigious Staatsoper in Berlin was ready to welcome her. Ida's father, however, devised a plan that would thwart his daughter's artistic ambition; he married her off to the first Jewish suitor who came along, Leopold Drucker—who followed in his father-in-law's footsteps and forbade his talented and beautiful wife to ever pursue a singing career. Ida died in a concentration camp. Just as her grandmother's singing career had been cut short by an unfeeling father and husband, so Sophie's desire to pursue an academic career in the humanities was unbendingly opposed by her own mother, who used a variety of tactics—such as vetoing the idea, fainting, and becoming hysterical—to prevent it and ultimately succeeded.

Alma Klüger also shows characteristics of another “mother typology,” or what Eliacheff and Heinich define as the “failing mother” (*mère défaillante*),<sup>44</sup> who alternates among various personae: guardian angel (whose presence ensures that as long as she is around, her daughter shall never fear for her life), girlfriend and accomplice, or irresponsible little girl (who provokes a response of exaggerated seriousness and responsibility on the part of the daughter, who suddenly sees herself as her mother's mother or protector). In discussing what Heinz Kohut calls “the injured self,”<sup>45</sup> Jerrold Post explains that often the rejection “by cold and ungiving mothers” is one of the causes of the “injury” that damages the child's sense of self. He adds: “A special form of rejection is overprotection by the intrusive narcissistic mother. She cannot let her child individuate because she sees him as an extension of herself. Her own sense of perfection seems to depend on her child's perfection.”<sup>46</sup> To the various forms that the “bad mother” type can take, Alma adds the extra pungent shibboleth of the “Jewish mother” archetype: a paranoid, jealous, and intrusive mother who cripples her children's psyche and whose mothering is smothering. Klüger sketches a portrait of a Jewish mother that is in keeping with the stereotypical image evoked in so much of Jewish comedy: “[She] tortured me with her anxieties. She alluded to the suicide attempts of unnamed women; she talked about fatal illnesses and the imagined destination of the ever more frequent transports of deportees . . . When I came home to our cramped quarters from a rare outing with other Jewish kids, happy and exhausted from running around in the open air, she'd paint the specter of deadly pneumonia, which I was very likely to have caught, she said. She persuaded me that I had flat feet (I don't) . . .” (*Still Alive*, 54). But the one time Klüger becomes seriously ill, Alma doesn't pay any attention to her daughter's agony (*Still Alive*, 56). In addition, Alma responds to the crazy

historical circumstances in a curious way: “My mother turned superstitious and regularly frequented a fortune-teller . . . She talked about a miracle-working rabbi who had been an ancestor of hers and whose spirit protected the family in times of need” (*Still Alive*, 56). Odd though her strategy may have been, it’s not altogether inexplicable that for Alma, magic, superstition, and mysticism begin to look like perfectly reasonable options once reality becomes so irrational. Many European Jews such as Alma were the neurotic products of a millennia-long oppression, and to them the Holocaust provided not a motivation for, but a confirmation of, their worst fears. On the one hand, the narrator sees herself as the product of this crippling Jewish psychic genealogy, thus inserting herself, her mother, and her whole family into the larger discourse on the European Jew as endemically sick, inadequate, agonizing, and thus partly responsible for his or her tragic fate. On the other hand, she challenges this view by providing a broader context. Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz hits on an important issue when she points out that “fuzzy boundaries between the self, family and community can be a sign of Jewish health.”<sup>47</sup> Paradoxically, the mother’s paranoid mistrust, fearful guardedness, and invasive possessiveness prove to be a healthy answer amid the unhealthiest of historical circumstances.

Riffing on Lessing’s phrase, “there are things which must cause you to lose your reason or you have none to lose,”<sup>48</sup> the Viennese existential psychoanalyst and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl illustrates the surprisingly self-preserving powers of the human mind vis-à-vis the unexpected and the unbearable: “An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior.”<sup>49</sup> This is clarified once Klüger and her mother arrive in Auschwitz: the Jewish mother’s disturbed ego turns out to be quite an asset in the disturbing reality of the death camps because the troubling surroundings now reflect the mother’s troubled mind, which had handicapped her in the “normal” circumstances before Auschwitz. Once in the camps, the young daughter finally sees the world through her mother’s eyes. When the disturbed outside matches the mother’s disturbed inside, the daughter realizes that her mother, constantly fearing the arrival of some imminent threat, had been right all along. That is, it is the adult, writing daughter who realizes this; the young girl could not have possibly arrived at any such illuminating insight amid the all-obscuring horror of Auschwitz. Auschwitz was no location for enlightenment, *Bildung*, or self-improvement.

Not much is revealed about the torments of their months in the camps.<sup>50</sup> What Klüger chooses to describe instead are touching flashbacks of a network of nurturing female support and an astounding motherly heroism that preserves her daughter’s life and that of Susi, the orphaned girl. In the camps, the mother applies the same technique she had used in Vienna to push her daughter to go

to the movie theater, daring her to defy the terrifying Nazi authorities. But now, the “wicked queen” does so to save “Snow White,” not to put her in harm’s way. When faced with the last, fatal *Selektion*, the mother’s unsentimental reaction, triggered by desperation, saves the girl’s life. Not without a touch of Jewish humor, the tragic moment is described as follows:

Two ss men conducted the selection . . . He condemned me as if I had stolen my life and had no right to keep it . . . We [mother and I] stood on the street between the two rows of barracks and argued. She tried to persuade me that I should try a second time, with the other ss man in the other line, and claim that I was fifteen . . . “You are a coward,” she said half desperately, half contemptuously, and added, “I wasn’t ever a coward.” So what could I do but go in a second time . . . I had proved to my mother that I wasn’t chicken . . . I had won an extension on life. (*Still Alive*, 104–8)

The patches of memory sewn together by the daughter compose a portrait of a mother who is both victim and victimizer, innocent and guilty. Alma’s presence in her daughter’s life is both life-saving and life-threatening, salvific and condemnatory. Made abnormally harsh, paranoid, and tyrannical by the school of life, this mother is also logical, loving, and eager to defy the odds which oppressive sociopolitical systems set against women, and against this mother and daughter specifically.

In Kafka’s short masterpiece *In the Penal Colony*, an utterly unjust justice system delivers its sentence by writing it on the flesh of the condemned citizen, who eventually dies under the torture of this etching. In a way, Alma is a mother whose mind and body bear the marks, like the prisoner in Kafka’s story, of the sentence that patriarchal society has carved on her. However, as I hope to show, although patriarchy’s text is being written over the female experience, and although patriarchal violence scars the female body, Klüger and her mother cooperate to weave their own alternative, intersubjective story, of which *Still Alive* is one expression.

### **FAILING FATHERS**

In the dominant tradition of Western fairy tales, fathers are more weak than wicked, and children must contend instead with malicious older women (usually stepmothers or witches). In his remarkable study of French baroque *contes de fées*, Lewis Seifert notices that “most fathers play only a marginal role at best” and that “the marginality and, even, absence of fathers is in sharp contrast, and perhaps inversely proportional to their symbolic importance.”<sup>51</sup> Moreover, fathers in *contes de fées* are rarely classified as either “good” or “bad” as mothers

regularly are, and, most important, “wayward fathers come around in the end whereas ‘evil’ stepmothers can never be redeemed.”<sup>52</sup> Klüger, Kofman, Bruck, and Frank all seem to confirm that in the child’s understanding of reality, the idyllic love between her and her father is disrupted and imperiled by the appearance of the mother, who figures as a stepmother or intruder. In Klüger’s case, the mother intrudes upon her daughter’s relationship with her German nanny in Vienna, with her girlfriends once they are in America, and, crucially, with her father as well: “My father came home with the new currency [the German one that replaced the Austrian currency] and showed it to me . . . My father explained the value of the new money and imitated the weird pronunciation of the invaders. In brief, we had fun. My mother indicated that this was scandalously childish behavior in desperate times. I didn’t understand what she meant and wondered if she was right . . . or if she was being a spoilsport” (*Still Alive*, 29).

Not unlike the “failing father” we encountered in the childhood story of Edith Bruck, Viktor Klüger is also depicted as powerless in the world—albeit tyrannical at home—and as the object of the daughter’s complete adoration. Klüger describes him as “a person of absolute and yet phony authority, a tyrant with great charisma who was no last resort, for he didn’t return” (*Still Alive*, 37). Klüger can find no resolution to her doubts stemming from the ambivalence of a father who, to her younger self, seemed to oscillate between obeying the mother’s law and defying it: to help her “kill” the rival daughter or save her. Her relationship with her father is an unfinished and unresolved business, as she explains (*Still Alive*, 33). The following passage describes a central episode that captures the ambivalence and sorrow that still surround the daughter’s memory of her father:

There was a big luncheon, lots of family, and I had been allowed to invite my best friend to show her my newly released father [he had just returned from a temporary internment in Buchenwald]. He was talking, and everyone was listening to him; he was the center of attention, and I wanted to be noticed by him, contact him, probably be reassured about the abrupt changes in our lives. All it got me was a thrashing such as I had never had before, in front of my wide-eyed friend—the humiliation of it!—and being banished from the family table. To this day I don’t know why or how I made him so mad, and to this day I would like to know and make up for it. But that was not to be: it’s my last impression of him, forever connected with terror, violence, injustice, and the deep regret of having been misunderstood. Again these incorrigible memories. (*Still Alive*, 36)

The child could not understand what happened, and the adult writer could find it out only through her mother’s help; Klüger needs parental validation of

her own memories. However, experience seems to have taught Klüger that people can't be always trusted ("they themselves [the adults] lied without batting an eyelash, even about drastic matters" [(*Still Alive*, 36)] and that her mother in particular uses "language for manipulation, not to express an opinion or state a fact. What sounded like a fact might be a lie" (*Still Alive*, 197). Klüger's motto becomes "honor the dead, but mistrust the living" (*Still Alive*, 151).

Without further help from the outside world to correct or adjust the unreliable (as much as "incorrigible") memories she has of her father, Klüger is left with the picture of a fun yet unjust father, a powerful head of the family yet a powerless father without good choices (leave the daughter behind or drag her with him to their death?). In fact, she realizes how little she knows of her father. One day, the adult daughter discovers the details of how men in the gas chambers were found dead lying on top of the weakest victims, women and children who didn't have enough strength to crawl upward for a last breath of air. Klüger succinctly distills her traumatic discovery in this vision: "I see my father as an authoritative figure in the life of a small girl. That he ended up in a cramped room, naked, swallowing poison gas . . . makes all these memories singularly insignificant . . . There is a gap between knowledge and memory, and I can't bridge it" (*Still Alive*, 33). This passage was already used in Klüger's reflections on her father's life and death in *weiter leben: Eine Jugend*, originally published in Germany in 1992 (see the introduction) and from which *Still Alive* derives. As Klüger was translating this particular section into English for *Still Alive*, she received an e-mail message from a Frenchwoman who had read *weiter leben* and wanted to inform her that she had the list of deportees' names for Transport 73, the one that had carried Viktor Klüger out of Drancy to his death. It turned out that, contrary to what Klüger had believed all her life, her father did not die in Auschwitz's gas chambers but on that transport headed to the Baltic States. She reacts to this new knowledge thusly: "Now my mental furniture has to be rearranged . . . How did he die then? I know so little about who he was, and now I don't even know this final, inalterable fact. These stories have no end" (*Still Alive*, 40). The survivor's crammed mind has to rearrange its contents time and again, and even after such labor, certain images will never fit together. There are only composite truths, the narrated self and the narrator each composing its own arrangement.

Interestingly, while mothers are either good or wicked in fairy tales, fathers are frequently presented as either good or simply unsuccessful. Bettelheim describes the latter type as "weak" and therefore useless to his children.<sup>53</sup> His psychoanalytical interpretation matches up almost too neatly with his analysis of other weak fathers from the historical (specifically Jewish) context, on whom

he delivers an infamously severe judgment. He sees the (male) European Jew as having internalized the surrounding antisemitic hatred, which, according to him, explains the Jew's failure to survive Auschwitz and to save his family. At one point the target of Bettelheim's fiery darts is Otto Frank, whom he faults for the family's demise.<sup>54</sup> In doing so, Bettelheim, like others before him, dangerously categorizes the Jewish male as being either good (the resistance fighter) or bad (the sheepish father).<sup>55</sup> In summarizing Bettelheim's move, which ultimately works to discredit Anne Frank's legacy in view of her father's guilt, Sander Gilman remarks that the bad Jew (Otto Frank) invalidates all testimony and condemns "the speaking witness as the lying witness."<sup>56</sup> Bettelheim's accusation is constantly challenged and refuted by memoirs such as Klüger's that force us to confront the full complexity of what we call identity (and the way oppression affects this identity). These memoirs reexamine the role of personal agency in the worst of circumstances—an agency that Bettelheim's concept of the completely dehumanized victim rules out—and the concrete obstacles of the early twentieth-century patriarchal world that foreclosed chances of success, especially for women.

Writing from postwar America, Bettelheim was nostalgic for the notion of the father as absolute and uncontested master of the home (or castle) and as the victorious hero of history. As we will see, this vision predictably affected Bettelheim's reading of fairy tales as well. He considered the modern father's ego to have been mortally wounded by contemporary culture. Unfortunately, in his idealized tale of a phallogocentric *domus*, Bettelheim disregarded history. If successful fathers are those who guarantee a "family's physical existence and . . . its emotional well-being,"<sup>57</sup> what of those fathers who failed at this task when confronted by a well-organized war waged against them by a perfectly civilized, patriarchal society of which they themselves had been a part? And what of those other men, Nazis and victimizers, who were excellent fathers and husbands in their own homes?

Bettelheim claims that a child's sense of "greatness" derives exclusively from the example provided by the father: a father who toils, who is in charge, who reads Scripture to an enthralled family. Daydreaming, the expression of a child's playful psyche, is spurred on by what the child sees his father doing, according to Bettelheim: "The ideal 'doing together' shows the child the validity of his daydreams of future greatness because, while he dreamed them, something real was achieved by his father."<sup>58</sup> Needless to say, Bettelheim's daydreaming child is a boy. Although the role of the mother is that of an emotional nurturer, the role of the father, according to this vision, remains "to protect against the outside world and to teach how to meet this world successfully . . . We all need

both: someone [the mother] who always takes our side and sees things our way, no matter what: and also someone [the father] who, though definitely on our side, can be relied on to give us sound advice even if it goes against our wishes, who responds to our needs by seeing them in a broader perspective.”<sup>59</sup> The women writers I consider in the present book did not experience such universal fathers in their lives—no fairy-tale king, no righteous knight, and no infallible God the Father.

This vein of masculinist rhetoric used by Bettelheim was still predominant in the 1940s and 1950s, and it was the kind of rhetoric that Klüger and her mother encountered in America after they left Europe. Some Jews like Bettelheim, who had made it to the United States before the war or in time not to witness the worst, patronized these newcomers<sup>60</sup> and tried to push them back into roles that had lost all credibility, to push them into a social identity (“to play lady” as Klüger puts it [*Still Alive*, 141]) that had proved useless if not deleterious just a few years earlier and whose pernicious vacuity had been revealed. Once in New York, Klüger and her mother had to face the petty pretentiousness and the emotional, as well as economic, stinginess of those family members and friends who had made it to America before the war. These earlier immigrants dreaded their female relatives’ presence because it was a reminder of their own guilt and responsibility toward those left behind to die. Because in her family “the women had survived, not the men,” Klüger explains, those who made it through were not worth enough to repay the Jewish world for its immeasurable loss, and “that meant that the more valuable human beings [men] had lost their lives” (*Still Alive*, 184).

The young immigrant girl, Ruth, seeks traces of her father in all the men from the Old World she encounters in America; she thinks that they all have his voice. “Viennese male voices resemble each other,” Klüger writes (*Still Alive*, 201). Their Austrian accent is Klüger’s version of the Proustian madeleines. But the Austrian-German accent of her father that she initially hears everywhere will gradually be forgotten. What finally pushes the father’s “voice” out of the girl’s head is not the passage of time but the association she quickly draws between that idealized paternal voice of her childhood and the disheartening behavior of the surrounding male world. Klüger cannot find any warmth or support from the male world before or after the war, and she clearly associates the violence of the Shoah with male power.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, to trace in another man’s voice the lost presence of the dead father would be a sentimental act, and in her *Weltanschauung*, the sentimental is a lie and thus banned from Klüger’s remembrance of things past. Like Bruck, Klüger refuses to sentimentalize life, that of the living or the dead. She refuses to fit the role of the good Jewish girl for the sake of

America's optimistic, future-oriented society, or for the past-oriented Jewish world "which reduces its daughters to helpmeets of men and circumscribes their spiritual life within the confines of domestic functions" (*Still Alive*, 30), or for a religion that forbids a woman—that forbids her—to say kaddish for her father.

The end of the Holocaust does not mark the end of her suffering; *Still Alive* forcefully reminds us of the cost of survival. Klüger experiences tremendously painful feelings of rejection in America from those whom she thought would be able to take the place of her father: "Today I understand (though still not fully) that these men [Jewish male refugees who had spent the war years in America] had their own agenda . . . the Jewish catastrophe was mainly and merely a re-sounding humiliation to them" (*Still Alive*, 187). Through the nexus between death and gender systems that underpins the structure of her narrative, Klüger reveals the double bind in which female survivors found themselves, guilty for having survived yet still struggling against an oppressive gender system.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Klüger entertains thoughts of suicide. "I wondered whether I could make myself drown in a river like the Hudson . . . And so I stumbled through days of psychic imbalance with suicidal thoughts, talking to my ghosts" (*Still Alive*, 191), writes Klüger about her safe days in America, where death, like a mythical siren, enticed her more than once. The annals of twentieth-century Jewish history are full of people who chose suicide as a remedy for a psychically (if not physically) intolerable life: Walter Benjamin, Paul Celan, Jean Améry, Robert Maxwell, Stefan Zweig and his wife Lotte, Arthur Koestler and his wife Cynthia, Jerzy Kosinski, Piotr Rawicz, Primo Levi, the "assisted" death of Sigmund Freud in London, and Sarah Kofman. Even Alma Klüger attempted, unsuccessfully, to take her life while in New York. The list is long, and I will end here with one last significant name: Bruno Bettelheim, who asphyxiated himself with a plastic bag in 1990.

#### **BROTHERS AND SISTERS : THE UGLY DUCKLING SYNDROME**

There are several sets of motifs regarding siblings in the folk-tale tradition. For instance, sisters often figure as wicked stepsisters, and brothers often figure as the (incestuous) allies of younger sisters. Sibling rivalry is a recurrent theme, in which the "lesser" (usually youngest) child—who symbolizes the successful integration of id, ego, and superego—triumphs in the end. This is the so-called ugly-duckling scenario and is often imbedded in the bildungsroman narrative (which *Still Alive* partially adopts). Bettelheim interprets this scenario as follows: "A small child, bright though he may be, feels himself stupid and inadequate when confronted with the complexity of the world which surrounds him. Every-

body seems to know so much more than he, and to be so much more capable.”<sup>62</sup> Is such an arc applicable to *Still Alive*? Klüger had a half-brother, Schorschi, to whom she was very attached—a “first role model,” she calls him (*Still Alive*, 28). Although brief, her acquaintance with this older role model left a lasting impression on her. Yet in the reconstruction of her family picture, Klüger does not fail to include the book-perfect scenario of sibling rivalry played out around her relationship with Schorschi—not the real brother brutally murdered by the Nazis, but his ghost. At one point, Klüger asks her mother, “Whom do you like better, him [Schorschi] or me?” and suffers the consequences of such puerile curiosity when, in response, Alma blatantly voices her preference: “Schorschi, because I have known him longer.” Klüger laments that “sixty years later . . . I still hear her say it” (*Still Alive*, 29). The unspeakable way in which Schorschi’s life ended leaves a deep wound on both Alma’s and Klüger’s psyches. Once again, this memoir highlights how the Shoah experience twists the meaning of every archetypal situation for the child who triumphs over genocide. Implicitly, *Still Alive* seems to ask how one can reconcile one’s rivalry with a sibling for the mother’s love when the sibling in question was murdered in a concentration camp. Not surprisingly, this issue often comes up in the autobiographical works of second-generation authors. In his graphic postwar memoir, *Maus*, Art Spiegelman talks about his brother, whom he never knew: Richieu was killed by the Nazis at the age of six. His photograph hangs in their parents’ bedroom, and Artie, the narrator, says: “The photo never threw tantrums or got in any kind of trouble . . . it was an ideal kid, and I was a pain in the ass. I couldn’t compete.”<sup>63</sup> Like Vladek and Anja, Spiegelman’s parents, Klüger’s mother mourned the loss of her son all her life: “And suddenly she’d say to me: ‘You can’t know this, but I think of him [Schorschi] every day.’ She never asked whether I thought of him, whether he meant something to me. And I confess, I was so suspicious that I mistrusted the full extent of her grief and speculated to what extent she was playacting. Perhaps I was simply jealous of her greater right to mourn him” (*Still Alive*, 80). Long after the war, Alma keeps bringing up Schorschi’s memory as a devastatingly effective way to hurt her daughter: “If it hadn’t been for you, I would have saved him [Schorschi]” (*Still Alive*, 29). We are faced with the perfect archetype of the wicked queen tormenting a Snow White-like daughter. However, we must ask ourselves whether this is the child’s or the adult’s perspective that has disturbingly cast the story in these fabulistic terms.

Another fairy-tale motif operative in *Still Alive* is that of the mother who favors her legitimate children over her stepchildren. This plays out through Alma’s relation to Susi, the daughter she had “adopted” at Christianstadt but whom, after the war, she treated with some cruelty. Klüger tells us: “Susi always thought that

my mother saved her life . . . For us, Susi [during the internment days] was not only a presence, she was important . . . Without us she would have remained isolated; with us she was part of a family, and thus valuable . . .” But Klüger then punctures this feel-good story. “Dear reader,” she warns us, “don’t wax sentimental. We are a family, which means we are like other families, only perhaps a bit worse. In later years my mother often rejected the woman [Susi] whom she had once treated as her own child,” to the point where she wouldn’t allow Susi to enter her home (*Still Alive*, 123). Alma, as paranoid as ever, was apparently terrified that Susi, who by then was an accomplished psychiatric nurse, was scheming to have her institutionalized. But this fear passed with time, and in old age Alma became reconciled with Susi (who had patiently waited for Alma’s fear of her to fade) and accepted her again. However, Alma’s panic-stricken and irrational reactions at the mention or sight of Susi had a terrible emotional effect on Klüger, who considered Susi an older sister and found herself caught between love and loyalty toward Susi and the insane demands of her psychologically damaged mother. In the world of fairy tales, the wicked queen’s presence brings about a trial that leads the child to self-confidence, differentiation, and a discovery of her or his independence and strength, but the archetype kick starts no such journey for the girl in *Still Alive*. The child and young adult reconstructed in the text might have found solace and pleasure in the fairy tales she read, but their allegedly universal lessons, the adult author tells us, do not apply to her particular story, at times even clash with lessons she learns from her own tragic history. Schorschi’s story resists being reduced to a category of the imagination; Susi was not a wicked stepsister, but a beloved one with whom Klüger shared a terrible past in which they had united to defeat death. In reworking the sibling-rivalry scenario, Klüger does not allow us to take our attention away from the tyranny of patriarchal hegemonic structures. The fairy tale’s principle is that an a priori combination of biological and divine design has chosen some people to emerge, survive, and triumph over everyone else. In *Still Alive*, the narrated self is well aware of her “ugly duckling” status, both in her own family and in the broader society. “Therefore,” explains Klüger, “this is not the story of a Holocaust victim, and becomes less and less so as it nears the end. I was with them [the murdered ones, her brother among them] when they were alive, but now we are separated. I write in their memory, and yet my account unavoidably turns into some kind of triumph of life” (*Still Alive*, 138).

Bettelheim reproaches Hans Christian Andersen for the pessimism of his classic story *The Ugly Duckling*. Bettelheim objects to the undeserving character of the hero in Andersen’s story, who relies on fate and a measure of predestination for redemption or salvation. What bothers Bettelheim is that the ugly

duckling will turn into a majestic swan without having had to accomplish anything. Calling this a “depressive world-view,” he claims that a child’s “chance for success in life is not to grow into a being of a different nature as the duckling grows into a swan, but to acquire better qualities and to do better than others expect, being of the same nature as his parents and siblings . . . that he must do something to achieve his superiority.”<sup>64</sup> Despite Bettelheim’s objections to the tale, its nontriumphalist tone offers a suitable model for a Shoah child’s desires and expectations. For a child whose survival or triumph owes so much to chance and indeed fate—as a Shoah child would know—the tale’s “depressive world-view” resonates strongly. Bettelheim also underestimates a child’s desire to grow into a different breed—or to be born under the star of a less threatening identity, for instance. Klüger’s narrated self fantasizes about escaping her sense of smallness through an ugly duckling–like transformation. Referring to her first years in America, she writes: “I felt inferior, saw myself through the eyes of others, and there were times when it seemed that instead of having been liberated, I had crawled away like a cockroach from the exterminator . . . I would have liked to be a man, and preferably not a Jew” (*Still Alive*, 185). This wish projects a metaphorical desire for individuation and separation as much as the desire to escape from a culture that is oppressive and repressive. For her younger self, indeed, it would have been providential to morph into a royal swan, as happens to the ugly duckling in Andersen’s story.

Far from feeling victorious (or “superior”) for having survived when her brother did not, Klüger makes two things clear. First, her survival cannot be equated to a fairy-tale triumph because the deaths of millions, including her brother, afflicted the survivors with a sense of guilt or muteness, opening an unbridgeable gulf that will forever prevent the successful integration of the individual and collective id, ego, and superego. And second, her feelings of inadequacy were neither natural or neutral: they were caused by people who refused to sympathize with her situation, take her pain seriously, or simply listen to her. One of these people, Klüger explains, is Dr. Lazi Fessler, an old friend of her father in Vienna who resumed practicing psychiatry in New York after escaping, and whom Alma had secretly hoped to marry. Klüger is brought to Fessler by her mother, who hopes to get expert help for her difficult daughter. During the first visit “he had snapped at me,” Klüger remembers, “perhaps because I had tried to take part in the conversation instead of just smiling sweetly” (*Still Alive*, 186). Fessler takes every chance to reprimand the girl, we are told, and keeps addressing her with the distancing *Sie*, the formal address in German, rather than *du*, the informal “you,” which Klüger “would have taken . . . as a sign of goodwill to the sixteen-year-old daughter of his murdered friend” (*Still Alive*,

187). Fessler apparently did not particularly believe in post-traumatic disorders and was therefore of no help to the girl. Klüger traces her feelings of inadequacy back to other people as well. For instance, there is her rich Austrian uncle, the new American living on Long Island, who looks down on her and her mother as the needy, broken relatives from the Old World. Furthermore, back in Vienna there is a great-uncle who, had Ruth been a boy, “would have treated me differently, that I was sure of. Boys had to study . . . But girls did not need that” (*Still Alive*, 50). Klüger also remarks that these people are products of a society and culture that values the male child over the female, but she finds Americans no different: “Our circle [of American friends and family] took due notice [of my behavior] and disapproved . . . Had I been a boy, no one would have minded my long, lonely, nightly walks through Manhattan or the fact that a couple of years later I hitch-hiked with a few other girls to Canada . . . In a girl such self-assertive conduct was unforgivable” (*Still Alive*, 175–76).

Klüger has many memories of gender-specific double standards on which to draw. For example, she remembers how the wonderful Jewish holidays, which one is supposed to look back on nostalgically, in fact segregate rather than include women: “Passover is an imaginative feast and appealed to a little girl who loved poetry . . . But in truth, it is all these good things for men and children, and scarcely for women” (*Still Alive*, 44). Even the visionary father of Israel, a son of *fin de siècle* Vienna, did not have a broad enough vision to include women in his otherwise accurate predictions of the Jewish future: “Even Theodor Herzl, the founder of political Zionism and our hero and guru, who hailed from my part of the world, believed that it was the duty of Jewish wives to be especially supportive of their husbands, because only men had to put up with anti-Semitism” (*Still Alive*, 72). And in the family, the son is the ultimate Jewish boon: her father “aborted a child of his own, which would have been a boy, my mother says, and he was ‘sad for days’” (*Still Alive*, 35). Of course, had there been such a small baby in the family, even a boy, none of them would have survived their arrival in Auschwitz, because Mengele had specifically ordered that pregnant women and women with small children be gassed right away.

The narrator of this memoir leads us through her dystopian fairy tale, delivering unexpected twists to various archetypal staples. Bacchilega warns us that a fairy tale “reflects and conforms to the way things ‘truly’ are, the way our lives are ‘truly’ lived. As with all mirrors, though, refraction and the shaping presence of a frame mediate the fairy tale’s reflection.”<sup>65</sup> So Klüger’s story—bounded by death, the Shoah, and patriarchal gender roles—reflects the true state of things while opening up the narrative to the possibility of revolt and gender disidentification. By recognizing and showcasing the process of identity

production through the speaking mirror of her memoir, Klüger uncovers the forces that mold identity and impel agency. As Judith Butler puts it, understanding identity as an effect “means that it is neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary.”<sup>66</sup> Klüger seems to embrace this same understanding. She conceives of identity as arising from the compulsive reflection of mother and daughter. But because the reflection is also controlled and regulated by the forces of patriarchy, she reframes her story so as to reflect what the archetypal universals fail to show. The artifice behind identity making, gender systems, familial dynamics, and intrafamilial power structures reveals itself in the mirror of this reflective autobiography, and no one is exonerated for his or her contribution to the injurious effects of these processes and structures.

### **CONCLUSIONS : DISENCHANTING THE MIRROR, DISPELLING THE MOTHER**

Bettelheim fabricates an unconvincing explanation for the rare appearance of bad fathers in fairy tales, arguing that because the father is not as present as the mother in the home, the boy’s imagination can minimize the father’s importance in its psychic struggles. Hence, Bettelheim deduces, “the father who blocks the boy’s oedipal desires is not seen as an evil figure within the home or split into two figures, one good and one bad, as the mother often is. Instead, the oedipal boy projects his frustrations and anxieties onto a giant, monster, or dragon.”<sup>67</sup> However, Bettelheim claims that a girl’s imagination takes a different route, splitting the mother into two competing forces (good and bad) and thus allowing her to save the father, whose ineffectuality can be blamed not on him but on higher powers—such as the stepmother’s influence or dark magic. Thus, I conclude, the boy, by recasting his Oedipal grudge onto ogres and monsters, can save the real father while the girl is incapable of saving the mother through such imaginative rerouting; instead, she sacrifices the mother and still manages to free the father from all responsibility. Bettelheim, who misses this central implication, goes on to optimistically report that “both oedipal girls and boys, thanks to the fairy tale, can have the best of two worlds: they can fully enjoy oedipal satisfactions in fantasy and keep good relations to both parents in reality.”<sup>68</sup> But this is not the case. The boy is able to have the best of both worlds because by projecting his hatred for the father onto external forces, he secures the domestic world in which he will be king. However, the girl shatters the domestic idyll, is deprived of the good mother, and fights for the love of an ineffectual father against the powers of an evil woman. The girl has no place to stay or go back to.

“A girl can love her mother more,” Bettelheim postulates, “because she puts

out all her anger at the mother-competitor, who gets what she deserves—as Snow White’s step-mother is forced to put on ‘red-hot shoes, and dance until she dropped dead’ . . . The boy can love his real father even better after having gotten out all his anger at him through a fantasy of destroying the dragon or the bad giant.”<sup>69</sup> Yet, in truth, fairy tales produce a less joyous aftermath: a scene emptied of the mother’s presence. Bad fathers either don’t exist or are redeemed, but mothers are lost for good; the bad mother is slain, and the good mother is already dead before the story begins. Exeunt mothers. The girl remains alone with her prince, or a king, or maybe a brother: does she no longer need women, then? Not surprisingly, female bonding is rarely the stuff of traditional fairy tales.<sup>70</sup> On the contrary. *Still Alive*, which I have been arguing reworks the fairy-tale pattern to retell the most unfairy-tale-like story, casts female friendship as the most important factor in the narrator’s life and survival. The mother’s influence and the bonds of female friendships are what made this heroine’s triumph possible. Klüger concludes: “I had spent my life among women, and this didn’t change in New York. In my family, in the camps, and even after the war, men had been at the periphery of my life. It was true that from that periphery they called the shots because they had the power, and my mother never ceased to assure me that a woman needed to marry someone who’d provide for her. But her own example was different” (*Still Alive*, 179). This inflexible, paranoid, and difficult (“bad”) mother, so concerned with pleasing male expectations, had extricated herself from an unfulfilling marriage, left her hometown, “a rather unusual step in those days” (*Still Alive*, 27), and aborted an unwanted pregnancy. On the one hand, Klüger emphasizes the crippling faults of her mother; on the other hand, she admits that her own strength, subversiveness, and feminism were inspired by her mother’s example.

Because Klüger recognizes all of these complex aspects that make up her and her mother’s past, a past extending well beyond the frame of Auschwitz, the end of the war does not signal the end of her book. Only one of the text’s four sections concerns itself strictly with the experience in the camps. Klüger’s war with her mother continues beyond Auschwitz, and so does her war with a world that wants to forget the atrocity and imposes its own dastardly denial on the survivors as well. The moral core of fairy tales, myths, and even biblical stories is found in the final administration of justice (be it *reddere rationem* or *lex talionis*). But this reckoning had to be brushed aside in Klüger’s tale of survival because of the demands of postwar realpolitik. Survivors could not hope for justice—how could justice be measured or delivered? Instead, they had to content themselves with having a new chance at reentering society, often one that had not particularly objected to seeing them disappear en masse. America promised

a future, though only in exchange for deleting the past. Klüger's Long Island parvenu aunt advises the young girl to "erase from [her] memory everything that happened in Europe," an absurd proposition for a camp survivor: "I thought, she wants me to get rid of the only thing that I own for sure: my life, that is, the years I have lived" (*Still Alive*, 177). Although Alma edits her birth record to take six years off her life and erase a period she refuses to recognize as hers, her daughter, for whom those six years represented a third of her life, refuses to disown that experience. Klüger writes: "She [mother] forced me into little girl dresses for which I was too grown-up and too plump . . . My mother consistently pretended to be six years younger than she really was. Six years is the length of World War II. Perhaps she didn't want to have aged in those years. She pretended that the Nazi years had washed over me, as if, being a child, I hadn't been quite conscious of what was happening" (*Still Alive*, 180).

In America, Klüger's conflicts with her mother reemerge. The larger human narrative of which the two of them are constructed discourses slowly forms again after the war, as the world tries to reestablish its old hierarchal structures. On the one hand, the postwar world demands amnesia as much as universal amnesty (so that the victimizers as well as the victims can be reintegrated into the normal flow of life, and all wrongs can expediently be set aside); it is imperative to rebuild and move on. On the other hand, in an attempt to find a mental (national, historical) place for the victims, the collective imaginary quickly devises a stock image by which to categorize the six million dead, rendering them a depersonalized group. Many war memoirs by Jewish women seem to indicate this same resistance on the part of the first-person narrator to being lumped into the ossifying, one-dimensional role of victim, the innocent persecuted heroine who is frozen in time. Such unidimensionality serves the interests of a society that strenuously resists complexity, and subsuming women into larger undifferentiated categories makes them magically disappear. Klüger recognizes that despite her mother's courage and intermittent defiance of cultural and societal demands, Alma's transformative power is constantly checked by pre- and post-Shoah society, a society of totalizing categories that holds onto its masculine language, that puts "the shame of the victim into the service of the victimizer" (*Still Alive*, 159), and whose standards of normality have been unmasked as a fraud by Auschwitz. Once in America, Alma, a woman who had taught her daughter to fiercely reject "the role of passive victim who could be comforted with small demonstrations of kindness" (*Still Alive*, 49), assumes that very role. Her priority is now to survive in her new reality, put herself under the protection of a husband, and guarantee a future to her daughter—and these goals require that she play along with a new (or, rather, quite old) set of rules.

It is impossible for Klüger, or for the reader of the retrospective analysis of her life, to miss the extent to which this mother is framed by the patriarchal context. As Bacchilega observes, every magic mirror is always framed. The frame of our text's mirror is that of patriarchy: a patriarchal Kultur that gestated and unleashed an evil progeny, that of the Nazis and their antihuman ideology. To transpose this in the Snow White context, this frame limits what the mother in the patriarchal mirror says and does; in fact, as we know from the fairy tale, the mirror even commands mother and daughter to rival each other. The stepmother and Snow White keep seeing each other as rivals, though as allies they'd be capable of surviving the worst the male-dominated world could throw at them.

As psychoanalysis reveals and fairy tales illustrate, a daughter's path to adulthood requires the sacrifice of a/the mother. This model apparently leaves no room for the mother in the postchildhood life story (or survival story) of a daughter. It is a model in stark contrast to the experience of Klüger and many other female survivors. Borrowing from Bacchilega's poignant observation regarding the mirroring effects in Snow White,<sup>71</sup> I argue that an autobiography's traditional narrative strategy of mirroring—in particular of mirroring its relation to truth and personal or collective history—freezes the heroine looking into this mirror (and being seen through it) and turns her in a permanently one-sided, immobile image. Klüger ingeniously devises a way to thaw the frozen image in the picture and expose the artifice of memoir writing. Memoirs dramatize the construction of the self, even when the Shoah has a large role in this construction. "Construction is not opposed to agency," Butler explains. "It is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible. The critical task for feminism is not to establish a point of view outside of constructed identities . . . The critical task is, rather, to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them."<sup>72</sup> *Still Alive's* task seems to be to show the life of this particular survivor in the mirror, while working to expose its mechanisms from within. The unification of the child's self, Lacan teaches us, happens through a mirror,<sup>73</sup> but that unified self is undone when it searches for its reflection in the distorting mirror of Klüger's text.

The shattering of glass mirrors and crystal coffins that we find in fairy tales translates to a renunciation of wholeness, a choice of fragmentation and multi-layeredness, and to a breaking of the spell under which women, as well as survivors, are paralyzed. This sense of breaking free is evident not only in *Still Alive*

but also in Klüger's first memoir, *weiter leben*. Pascale Bos comments on Klüger's choice to return to Germany and use its language for her memoir: "By writing in German and publishing in German," Klüger reveals in the first memoir "the subversive function of its critical discourse as it seeks to undo the repetitive patterns of reification that Klüger experienced as a Jewish woman both during and after the war."<sup>74</sup>

Klüger strategically constructs a narrative that makes safe the importance of what is told while at the same time disintegrating the frames within which the truth about the Shoah, gender, and power relations is generally held or reflected. And what better way to exemplify this reflection than by metaphorically turning her memoir into a talking mirror that can both reveal and distort the truth? Klüger uses her narrative as a mirror that forces her as well as the reader to ask personal and historical questions. What comes back in answer is the process of mirroring itself. Contrary to what the wicked queen in *Snow White* believes, the enchanted mirror does not always tell the truth. Or better yet, there is never just one single truth emerging from the mirror's reflections, and it is precisely this multiplicity of reflections that ends up shattering the mirror's authority. As in Greek tragedy, the speaking chorus shatters the power of the oracle. Klüger inserts her own version of such a disruptive choral voice into her text as well: she uses (and, when necessary, questions) the point of view of her mother, her friends (who intervene through e-mail messages, phone calls, conversations, and so forth) and the *auctoritas* of history books. We can think of these voices as the kind of chorality that H el ene Cixous calls "peuplement" (peopling).<sup>75</sup> In interrogating the mirror of memory, Klüger is never in thrall to one single voice. The symbolic order of the father (the voice of history) is disordered by the appearance of the unrepressed and heterogeneous utterances of a woman's memory, utterances that refuse to provide univocal and homogeneous answers to her questions. Her strategy of *peuplement*, which allows her to marshal history without "abandoning all authority to history," reveals, as Michael Rothberg points out in his compelling analysis of Klüger's German memoir, "the necessary heterogeneity of both experiences and the modes or sources through which they come to be represented."<sup>76</sup> Paraphrasing Bacchilega on postmodern fairy tales,<sup>77</sup> I claim that postmodern autobiography—with its multiplicity of contrapuntal voices—holds its own mirror up to the sanitizing mirror of history (personal and communal) and, in so doing, shatters it and exposes its duplicity. The autobiography as mirror does not remain unchanged. Bacchilega writes that "while this play of reflection, refraction, and framing might produce ideologically 'destructive,' 'constructive' and 'subversive' effects, the self-reflexive mirrors are themselves questioned and transformed."<sup>78</sup> The fairy tale of the wicked

queen thus emerges as a far more complex, differentiated, and ambiguous story than the one shaped by the univocal voice of patriarchy. The Snow White-type mirror speaks with the voice of patriarchy, and its truth is a lie rooted in its failure to incorporate otherness.

Indeed, it is the patriarchal mirror itself that shows the queen her murderous path. Bettelheim's reading of Snow White places the spotlight on the girl, the maiden in distress who is not necessarily the central figure of the tale. On the contrary, the central figure appears to be Snow White's antagonist, the queen, who is more than merely a foil who allows the protagonist to reveal her heroic nature. After all, it is the queen who has power, narrative centrality, and—most important—a defined quest. She is threatened, and she reacts to the threat by setting in motion the plot of the story. But it is in the mirror that this threat is formulated; moreover, the threat is formulated in language. In fact, the particular mirror the queen interrogates is blind, not reflecting images, but—like an oracle—answering questions. A message is conveyed to the queen through the voice of the mirror, which is masculine. Bettelheim's analysis of Snow White suggests that the mirror "seems to speak the voice of a daughter rather than that of a mother."<sup>79</sup> This is arguable. In the German tale, it is syntax itself that forces the teller to use the masculine personal pronoun to refer to the mirror, because in German the word *Spiegel* (mirror) is masculine. Disney's animated film gives the mirror a male voice, though whether this stemmed from its creator's knowledge of German grammar or a sense that the mirror represented a patriarchal voice is anyone's guess. Cleverly, Zipes's masterful translation of the Grimm brothers' text avoids the use of any pronoun at all for the mirror, repeating the noun "mirror" throughout the story.<sup>80</sup>

In addition to the complicated roles of the queen and the mirror, the dwarves are also used to interrogate gender in this fairy tale. *Pace* Bettelheim, the dwarves do not so much represent a failed sexuality as indispensable tools in the mechanics of gendering. During the latency years of Snow White's adolescence, they represent and support the sexual order that she is being prepared to enter. In return for their protection, the dwarves ask Snow White to clean, cook, and tidy the house for them. Gilbert and Gubar point out that "her life with them is an important part of her education in submissive femininity."<sup>81</sup> She is being domesticated and readied for her subservient role to her savior, the prince. The message? A girl who is obedient and domestic is also safe. The mirror and the dwarves work for the same masculine order.

This is how Bettelheim explains the opening of the Grimm brothers' tale: "Snow White's mother pricking her finger so that three drops of red blood fall upon the snow" means that "sexual innocence, whiteness, is contrasted

with sexual desire, symbolized by the red blood,” and in this way, the story “prepare[s] the child to accept what is otherwise a most upsetting event: sexual bleeding, as in menstruation and later in intercourse when the hymen is broken. Listening to the first few sentences of ‘Snow White,’ the child learns that a small amount of bleeding . . . is a precondition for conception, because only after this bleeding is the child born.”<sup>82</sup> What the child instinctively learns instead, I believe, is that her birth demands the blood of her mother—in fact, her mother’s death. Furthermore, I want to stress that the purity in question is not only Snow White’s; the snow’s whiteness reflects the purity of the unborn child’s mother, too. At this prematernal stage, the mother is still the good mother. And good mothers are pure (virginal, “white”) and without daughters yet. Metaphorically, the daughter in this story is created out of the mother’s spilled blood (possibly a Christian metaphor for maternal self-sacrifice), and this image is quickly literalized by the death of the good mother. This tangential reading allows us to glimpse the frame through which the story of Snow White must be read. Bettelheim omits to mention the third element in the constitution of Snow White: the black frame. The Grimms’ story explains that the good queen wishes her child to display the whiteness of the snow, the redness of her blood, and also the blackness of the window frame in her chamber. The wish is granted: Snow White has black hair, and her story is framed before she is even born.

After she is born, her mother dies—a history Snow White shares with the most illustrious daughters of fairy tales. Because they are born, their biological mothers, who are good mothers, die, to be replaced by new (bad) mothers. The wicked queen has no room to evolve. The good one will never disappoint or worsen; the bad one will never better or redeem herself. The world of fairy tales does not allow for ambiguities. When a story centers on the battle between women (fair young maidens and wicked older female figures), only men, particularly fathers, are allowed to be ambiguous characters. A king who rules unobstructed over the immense fairy tale kingdom is no match for his wife’s unalloyed evil and her desire to annihilate another woman—or is he?

Feminist readings of the story of Snow White particularly condemn the ending, in which the heroine is asleep and must wait for a man to come along and awaken her. But, I ask, what does she learn on awakening? That as long as the queen is alive, she—Snow White—is not safe? That a mirror has been speaking her name? That a mirror has marked her for death? Shouldn’t she shatter the mirror, rather than kill the queen, for the plot to be resolved successfully? Snow White can not see that the wicked stepmother is also in a kind of sleep from which she needs be awakened. Mirrors, Bacchilega observes, are “desire containers,” and “folk and fairy tales are ideologically variable desire

machines”; breaking their spell means exposing “that magic which seeks to conceal the struggling interests which produce it.”<sup>83</sup> Klüger’s autobiographical text produces its particular effect by thematizing the conflict between the normative function of the Shoah autobiography and the subversive function of woman’s autobiography.<sup>84</sup> The way in which Klüger makes sure not to reproduce any magic is to expose the mechanics of textual production. “*Weiter leben*’s unique quality,” writes Bos, “lies precisely in the fact that the narrative turns a critical eye toward itself. It self-consciously deconstructs its own testimony and the psychological, historical, and literary discourses that have surrounded this kind of literature for the last twenty-five years.”<sup>85</sup> The same is applicable to *Still Alive*, which furthers *weiter leben*’s deconstruction of memory by referring to and even amending the previous memoir, creating a parallel version of it.

Klüger’s uses of narrative enchantments help deconstruct the mirror’s frame by critically focusing on it; thus, as the reader progresses through the text, she encounters a constantly shifting portrait and is made aware of the mirroring process at work in this text. Klüger’s understanding of Snow White hits on an important point: the queen and Snow White both fight for their right to remain in the king’s castle.<sup>86</sup> The king’s presence is no longer necessary to the development of the fairy tale’s plot. The mirror, I believe, can be understood as a reflection of the king’s phallic desire, which causes the queen to panic because she knows that such a narrative necessitates her death.

In *Still Alive*, mother and daughter each see themselves mirrored in the other’s life: entangled in a common trauma, with each one’s story incomplete without the other’s. “I was a stage prop, her property, at most a minor figure in her drama,” says the daughter (*Still Alive*, 180), while the mother’s counteraccusation reveals a different perspective: “You have always run away from me” (*Still Alive*, 181). The dialogue between mother and daughter is like a threaded needle piercing a cloth and forming different patterns on both sides. Throughout their fraught life together, both the mother and the daughter prevail at different times. For instance, the mother determines that they will go to America rather than Palestine; the daughter decides for everybody that it is time to escape the labor camp, and later she decides to go to graduate school in California, as far as possible from New York and her mother. *Still Alive* tries to mend the injured self by allowing it to recover the moments in the text of the daughter’s prepubertal, teenage, and adult resistance to her mother and to patriarchal society at large, which is there to frame and limit the possibilities of a different mother-daughter encounter.

Klüger’s memoir is always open to the possibility of variants, not only in the multiplicity of voices that join the narrator’s *I* but also in its double ending. The

memoir could have easily been concluded with the scene that describes Ruth leaving New York and her distraught mother behind:

When I left New York, everything was in a heap and a jumble at my mother's place . . . It was late summer, and the heat was something, the external disorder a mirror image of inner chaos. I hardly knew what to take along. My friends were there and helped me pack, and my mother was desperate. She was aware that I wouldn't come back.

So this is the end of the story, the hit-and-run end, the living room with my stuff on the floor, my bad conscience . . . and the disappointment of my mother . . . After I left, she read my papers, discarded my correspondence, got rid of my books. At the end of the story there was a vacuum, in the rooms, in the people. At the end there was my betrayal: I had become Shylock's Jessica, abandoning an unloved parent. (*Still Alive*, 202)

Klüger's betrayal finds its antecedent in the betrayal of another girl: Shylock's Jessica, the daughter of the maligned Jew. Luce Irigaray asks her own mother, "And when I leave, is it not the perpetuation of your exile?"<sup>87</sup> Does Jessica's betrayal of Shylock perpetuate his exile? Shylock had naively thought that he had found a new home and stability, a safe place where his power could be restored; he demanded justice and what was due to him; instead, the daughter, in league with his enemies, snatched all his certainties away from him. Klüger's mother, perhaps feeling similarly betrayed, reacts to this loss, to the new chaos of her daughterless life, with a suicide attempt.

By the time she is composing *Still Alive*, however, Klüger knows that this is not the end of her story. After all, a daughter can return to her mother, and a mother doesn't have to simply vanish. Klüger adds a different epilogue to her new memoir, devoted to the story of Alma's death. Oddly, it is with this epilogue that Klüger finally allows a note of triumph to enter her autobiography, a triumph that she locates not in having survived Auschwitz but rather in the peaceful, civilized death of her mother far from Auschwitz. Alma's last gift to her daughter is exactly this sense of victory over the annihilating degradation of genocide. "I felt a sense of triumph," Klüger writes, "because this [mother's] had been a human death, because she had survived and outlived the evil times" (*Still Alive*, 211). As in so many myths and tales, victory goes hand in hand with death.

Alma's slide toward death begins with a worsening psychological illness (her paranoia), followed by senile dementia that makes the now aged lady regress into her Czech youth. Paradoxically, in the end Alma turns into a child herself, and Klüger looks after her like a mother; their roles have been reversed. By the end of her almost century-long life, Alma's face—as Klüger points out in a

nod, perhaps, to the fairy tales that play so central a role in her memoir—is as wrinkled as that of a witch (*Still Alive*, 213), and her eyes are greatly weakened, perhaps like those of the wicked lady in the tale of Hansel and Gretel. Yet Alma has one last love in her life: Klüger’s granddaughter, Isabela, who in return is very attached to her wizened great-grandmother. Every time Alma sees Isabela, she enthusiastically and proudly exclaims “Ein Wunderkind!” (a wonder child) (*Still Alive*, 213). The text opens as a young girl, Ruth, experiences the death of her grandmother’s parrot in Vienna, the prelude to a childhood full of tragic deaths. It ends with a four-year-old girl in America, Isabela, facing her first encounter with death when her great-grandmother’s cat dies and preparing to lose her great-grandmother, too. The story comes full circle.

By the last page of her memoir, Klüger has succeeded in redefining the “latency period” in the life of a Shoah survivor: the Auschwitz parenthesis. But Auschwitz, Klüger’s work implies, is no latency period: the concentration camp is not a kind of glass coffin in which life is frozen until the spell is broken, the coffin cracks, and a few lucky ones are allowed to return home. This representation would lead us to the triumphalist deduction that those who made it back were rewarded—with life—for qualities others lacked. Klüger doesn’t deny that after Auschwitz, the girl represented in her memoir was necessarily a different human being than the one who entered Auschwitz. Klüger admits that when she wants to say something noticeable about herself she says she was in Auschwitz, despite being all too aware that she is not “from” Auschwitz, she is from Vienna.<sup>88</sup> Auschwitz profoundly and irrevocably affected her, but it did not make her—because genocide is a force of destruction, and it births nothing positive; it only creates death and trauma. The sections of the memoir that follow its treatment of the death camps are there to warn us against the sentimental notion that Auschwitz has any transformative power, that one enters it a child and emerges from its horrors a grown-up who has learned some of life’s fundamental lessons, like in a Dickensian coming-of-age novel. *Still Alive* does not allow for this sort of developmental arc, or indeed any kind of soothing catharsis. Its epilogue thus allows the memoirist to push her biography far beyond the hellish gates of Auschwitz. After recording the catastrophe, she concludes with the memory of her mother dying in her bed, surrounded by the love of a great-granddaughter and her own daughter, signs of a rehumanized life now visible in this female family chain.

The image of this life-affirming bond is best exemplified by a photograph Klüger finds in her mother’s house the day of her burial. It is a happy photograph of Alma gleefully rubbing noses with the four-year-old Isabela. Photographs are frozen images of time and space. But unlike the Auschwitz glass

coffin, the photograph Klüger holds in her hands is a safe place of suspension, one that does not undercut sanity and humanity but rather restores both.

Holding this photograph, which frames and fixes in time and space the physical and spiritual connection between great-granddaughter and great-grandmother, the narrator stands between two generations of women and witnesses their reciprocal recognition: “On one side, the child whose mind hadn’t reached maturity, on the other, the old adult who had once lost a teenage son to anonymous murderers” (*Still Alive*, 214; emphasis added to stress that “anonymity,” discussed above, comes back in the end). Presence seems to have triumphed over absence, but presence, like memory, can be illusory (if consoling). It can never quite be pinned down. In the end, life is translated into a series of losses and growing emptiness: the autobiographical I undoes life as it pronounces it. Isabela and her great-grandmother are each other’s asymmetrical replication, each knowing only the here and now in the artifice of the photograph’s reflection. Affinity, not identity, connects them. And Klüger, the seasoned professor of Germanic philology, knows that “affinity,” in the elective culture of Goethe, still magically conjures up echoes of passionate resistance and great rebellions to come.

Klüger looks at this image of two women, one born at the beginning of the twentieth century and the other born at its end, and concludes her memoir by noticing that in the photograph, the “present . . . miraculously stood still for [Alma and Isabela], time frozen in space and space made human. Perhaps redeemed” (*Still Alive*, 214). Then, contrary to what fairy tales teach us, wicked mothers are redeemable too.

The scripted phrase that ends all fairy tales and that children know by heart in their native tongues (“And they lived happily ever after”) in German is: “Und wenn sie nicht gestorben sind, so leben sie noch heute” (and if they haven’t died, they are still living today)—or if they survive, they get to tell their story and proclaim that they are “still alive.”

For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.

 **WALTER BENJAMIN**, *Illuminations*