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## Holocaust Mothers and Daughters

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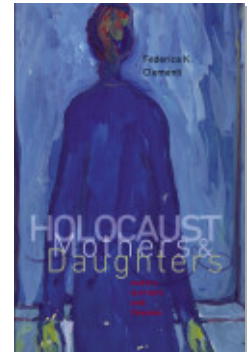
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## CHAPTER 5

# FROM THE THIRD DIASPORA

## Helena Janeczek and the Shoah Second Generation's Disorders

I AM THE WAY INTO THE CITY OF WOE.

I AM THE WAY TO A FORSAKEN PEOPLE.

I AM THE WAY INTO ETERNAL SORROW.

 DANTE ALIGHIERI, *Inferno*, Canto III

So far this book has focused on mothers and daughters who experienced the Holocaust firsthand. But the vortex of pain does not end there, and we can follow its spiraling effects through the complicated relation that postwar children had with their Shoah parents.<sup>1</sup> Although existential, historical, psychological, and geographical rupture is the predicament of the Shoah survivor, the last two and a half decades of work on second-generation testimonies have clearly shown that the children of Shoah victims are not immune to the aftershocks of the trauma experienced by their parents. In fact, it is tempting to say that they are predisposed to an array of symptoms that show the devastating repercussions of genocide. Therefore, this work cannot consider only those women who stared at the abyss of the Holocaust themselves and who testified to the life-affirming bond with their mothers, after surviving the unsurvivable (the Shoah is an experience that one never really “goes beyond,” to return to the meaning of *supervivere*, from which the word “survive” is derived). It must also consider the way in which daughters born in the second half of the twentieth century had to “survive,” to combat not the threat of death but the psychological threat that the Holocaust projected into their lives through their damaged, tormented Shoah mothers. These sons’ and daughters’ psyches show signs of traumatic lesions as well.

The body of autobiographical works by children of Holocaust survivors, especially in the United States, is astonishingly large. The narratives of the postwar generation (whose members have found expression not only in literature but through a wide range of media) stage the persistent problem of how to represent the genocide, as well as implicitly or explicitly articulate the question of how its memory will be preserved in the future, after the few generations

chronologically close to it will have disappeared. Once the living connection with the historical experience thins with the passing of time, and eventually vanishes, under whose custody will this story be preserved and how?<sup>2</sup> It is an anxiety-ridden question, and an urgent one too. “At stake is precisely the ‘guardianship’ of a traumatic personal and generational past with which some of us have a ‘living connection,’ and that past’s passing into history or myth,” writes Marianne Hirsch.<sup>3</sup> The issue of the Holocaust’s aftereffects and representation after the fact generated a rich and influential branch of studies in what Hirsch famously labels “postmemory,”<sup>4</sup> a new term describing “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply, and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right.”<sup>5</sup> Postmemory is not the direct memory represented in survivors’ narratives and testimonies after the war, but the secondhand memory the children of the firsthand witnesses inherited from their parents and their parents’ generation: a mediated memory (“mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation”<sup>6</sup>); a mosaic memory to which many voices, inputs, and filters must contribute. In other words, the second generation narrates memories that are not entirely theirs and that yet are entirely part of their memory.

As Hirsch explains, she arrived at the “postmemory” neologism when she was trying to define a memory she could not have of a past she did not herself experience, but that she knew so well it was imprinted in her mind as if it belonged to her:

Strangely, the streets, buildings, and natural surroundings of Czernowitz [her family’s hometown]—its theaters, restaurants, parks, rivers, and domestic settings, none of which I had ever myself seen, heard, or smelled—figure more strongly in my own childhood memories and imagination than do the sites and scenes of Timisoara, Romania, where I was born, or Bucharest, where I spent my childhood.

Some of these same places, however, were also the sites of my childhood nightmares of persecution, deportation, and terror. When I began to write about my own early memories . . . I needed a special term to refer to the secondary, belated quality of my relationship with times and places that I had never experienced or seen, but which are vivid enough that I feel as though I remember them. My “memory” of Czernowitz, I concluded, is a “post-memory.” Mediated by the stories, images, and behaviors among which I

grew up, it never added up to a complete picture or linear tale. Its power to overshadow my own memories derives precisely from the layers—both positive and negative—that have been passed down to me unintegrated, conflicting, fragmented, dispersed.<sup>7</sup>

Postmemory and its literary derivate, postmemoirs, are concepts that do not exclusively encompass the experience of Holocaust survivors' children. This is clearly laid out in Leslie Morris's essay "Postmemory, Postmemoir," which illustrates how a memory of the Holocaust has ended up permeating the collective imaginary and now "circulates beyond the actual bounds of lived, remembered experience (and beyond the geographical where the 'real' took place), [and] . . . seeps into the imaginary of other cultures (and other geographical spaces) as postmemory and as postmemoir."<sup>8</sup> Morris offers a comparative examination of a diverse group of authors that includes the Shoah victim Sarah Kofman; the German author Wolfgang Koeppen, who is not Jewish; Helen Fremont, who was born in the United States and discovered only in her thirties that her parents (whom she had always known as Catholics) were Jewish Holocaust survivors; the survivor impersonator Benjamin Wilkomirski; and others. Unlike Morris, however, I subsume under the rubrics of postmemory and postmemoir only the mnemonic works of Holocaust-related experiences by authors directly connected to the survivors. In other words, in my work, I refer to postmemory not as the representation of a memory of the Holocaust that springs up through education, cultural awareness, entertainment, and so forth, but rather as the representation of memories directly affected by the Holocaust but after the Holocaust ended: the memory that the postmemoirists have of themselves growing up as children of survivors or young refugees. Postmemory to me is thus full of direct points of contact (including absence) with the Ur-event. Therefore, the resulting postmemoir is a hybrid genre at the interface between a narrator's memory and the Holocaust memories of that narrator's family. Nevertheless, even in my more limited application of the concept, Morris's definition still applies: postmemory is a "memory that cannot be traced back to the Urtext of experience, but rather unfolds as part of an ongoing process of intertextuality, translation, metonymic substitution, and a constant interrogation of the nature of the original."<sup>9</sup> In a way, therefore, postmemoirs are postmodern works par excellence because their modes are predicated on many of the tenets and concerns of the postmodern project: hybridity that works against authorship, uprootedness, meta-identity, narrative pastiche, and so forth. Post-Holocaust, postmodernism, postmemory: they all share a prefix that paradoxically means to stress the beginning of a new historical or intellectual stage rather than the

eclipse of an old one. As Hirsch remarks, “post” never signals the end of the phenomena it modifies by way of prefixing them but, on the contrary, signals (Derrida would probably say “it posts”) their “troubling continuity.”<sup>10</sup> In this chapter, I want to propose an exemplary case of postmemoir: Helena Janeczek’s *Lezioni di tenebra* (Lessons of darkness),<sup>11</sup> a story of exile that exemplifies some of the complexities of second-generation inherited trauma via the projection of the author’s innermost psychological disorders onto the main themes of her memoir, food and language.

Janeczek is the only daughter of Holocaust survivors from Poland. After the war they moved to Germany, where Janeczek was born in 1964. In 1983 she moved to Italy to distance herself from a Shoah mother, whose lingering, in-eradicate fear of the Nazis was not eased by her living in Munich, where she felt she was surrounded by enemies. Only from her self-imposed exile in a new country could Janeczek find the words to narrate the story of her German Jewish postwar upbringing, and she did so not in German but in Italian. Janeczek’s memoir forces us to think about a host of issues: the global (diasporic) subject, the Jewish diaspora, feminine dislocations of identity through mother-daughter stories of survival and escape, and eating disorders as displaced symptoms of traumatic Shoah memory or postmemory. Morris points out: “While there are still memoirs being published that seek to capture history ‘wie es eigentlich gewesen ist,’ there is now a corpus of texts that challenge the very undertaking of writing history (personal and political) and that highlight the difficulties inherent in any attempt at representation of the Holocaust. Thus the discursive space of ‘the Holocaust’ now encompasses texts that explore the uncertainty of authorship, experience, and identity and the slippage not only between national and ethnic identities, but also between fact and fiction, between trauma and recovery, between Jew and non-Jew, and between victim and perpetrator.”<sup>12</sup> Janeczek’s is one of these texts.

Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller write that “mutual imbrication rather than clear opposition between a desire for roots and an embrace of diasporic existence is symptomatic of our post-millennial moment.”<sup>13</sup> However, we must also consider that for the children of Holocaust survivors, and certainly for their parents, diaspora is far more than an intellectual (or bourgeois) posture or theoretical approach. Feelings of alienation from one’s nation, God, and patriarchal authority are intellectual pangs not exclusive to the Jews, and they have emerged as the *forma mentis* of post-Holocaust existence. Indeed, exile could be considered the crux of the postmodern condition. But although our newly acquired transnational sensibility allows us to stake a romantic claim on a piece of the diasporic dream, when the term “diaspora” is applied to communities like

the Jews, the Armenians, or the Palestinians that have experienced diaspora in concretely devastating ways, the concept of exile and diaspora become noticeably less vague and negotiable. There is the existential diaspora that Jews share with the rest of the human community, and there is the diaspora that Jews (and many other dispossessed groups) have known in history and that has forced them in a position of inequality and vulnerability vis-à-vis their surrounding communities.

Exile and diaspora were old tropes in Jewish identity long before Jacques Derrida or Edward Said appropriated and refreshed them in order to critique the insidious ethnocentric discourses of the postwar era (with their corollaries of chauvinism, racism, bellicism, and so forth), thus making these terms universal. Exile happens to single individuals, whereas diasporas happen to entire peoples or communities. Israel—which can designate either one symbolic man (the Jew) and the collectivity (the Jewish people)—is sentenced to both. Diaspora presupposes exile, but the reverse is not necessarily true. Maybe there is a bit of Jewish humor in the fact that the Hebrew term for diaspora, *galut*, originally “referred to the setting of colonies of Jews outside Palestine after the Babylonian exile.”<sup>14</sup> It appears that the original diaspora for the Jews was less focused on wandering than on settling, less on searching for a new home than longing for the old. On the one hand, there is exile—around which the Jewish spirit has constructed a complex and lyrical myth about itself and its cosmic purpose, over which Jews like to brood but on which their national pride as a people stands firmly; on the other hand, there is diaspora, which is chained not to the soul but the soil and is historical, not spiritual, and inflicted politically, not divinely.

Jews have suffered two diasporas in their history, and I claim that the post-Holocaust era can be considered their third and that the authors treated in this book belong to it. Janeczek’s text, and the works of the other women studied here (with the exception of Anne Frank), all speak from this exilic position, first and foremost because none of their parents or they themselves live in Israel but also because of the antisemitic violence and the Nazi eradication of Jews in their home countries that made it impossible for them and their families to “return.”<sup>15</sup> Although far removed from biblical Palestine, the European world had gained for the Jews the status of homeland during the two thousand years that they had been there. Then, in the middle of the so-called progressive twentieth century, Jews found themselves expropriated, their belongings and often their entire villages destroyed, and their families annihilated. They were dispersed once again, and for most of them, there was no hope of ever returning to these scenes. This time they faced a diaspora without return, without messianic hopes—they were

no longer anchored anywhere. Obviously, the third diaspora has very different characteristics from the previous ones which, with the fall of the First and Second Temple, inaugurated a history of stateless wanderings for the Jews. The importance of the events of 586 BCE and 70 CE, when the Babylonians and the Romans, respectively, fought the Israelites, destroyed Jerusalem and its kingdoms, and scattered the Jewish people to the four corners of the Mediterranean world, lies in the fact that the sacred Jewish roots put down in a land divinely sanctioned as their own had been torn up. *Galut* is as much a religious (or mystical) exile as a historical exile from Israel. Despite the lack of comparable spiritual covenants, however, two thousand years of life on the European continent cannot be dismissed as inconsequential. Throughout the centuries, Jews forged deep connections with the various lands of Europe. Although France, Poland, Germany, Hungary, and Italy certainly did not have the same importance as Jerusalem did on the spiritual plane, for many European Jews to lose Paris, Vienna, or Vilna must have been no less painful than bidding farewell to his home for a Judean. However, as we will see with Janeczek's mother, the dream of going back to such prewar cities—especially Eastern European ones like Warsaw—was as unrealistic as a return to the Temple days. The third diaspora reshuffled Jewish geography, and the new dispersion brought many European Jews back to, among other places, Palestine. But however welcome the homecoming, the Shoah survivors' return to Israel is a much less triumphalist narrative than the one imagined by the prophet Ezekiel when he dreamed of God announcing to him that “I will now restore the fortunes of Jacob and take the whole House of Israel back in love . . . I have brought them back from among the peoples . . . They shall know that I the Lord am their God when, having exiled them among the nations, I gather them back into their land” (39:25).

After the war, not all Jews left Europe, although most of those who stayed moved to different towns or countries. And even the few who had not lost their physical homes had nonetheless lost the secure sense of what being home means. According to Pascale Bos, “the Holocaust ended the life of European Jews as it had existed for centuries.” She points out that the cataclysm “brought about [together with the physical destruction of everything] a traumatic shift in identity for surviving European Jews. Particularly the assimilated, middle-class Jews of Western and Central Europe had to confront and redefine their sense of belonging in Europe after 1945 as Jews and citizens.”<sup>16</sup> The manipulation of Holocaust memory that allowed the United States to foster a new brand of communal identity after the war (the American Jew), and which is analyzed by Peter Novick in his controversial *The Holocaust in American Life*,<sup>17</sup> has no equivalent in Europe. The bleak post-Holocaust reconstruction era includes

the notorious Kielce pogrom of 1946, various other postwar antisemitic riots in Eastern Europe, Stalin's antisemitic purges, the "informal" expulsions of the Jews from Soviet Russia, their formal expulsion from Egypt in 1956, the Arab nations' coordinated attack against Israel in 1967, the massacre at the 1972 Munich Olympics, the fatal shooting of adults and children in a Hebrew school in Toulouse in 2012, terroristic attacks on synagogues, and so on. But despite the persistently recurring tragedies, the humanscape of Europe has changed enormously in the last few decades, and diversity is, with great effort, winning out over hostile national impermeability. This transnational reality is Europe's new identity, and in this transformed landscape, the Jews are gaining greater visibility and a voice that is more audible than ever before. The Kindertransport escapee Edith Milton assesses this disparity between the insular world she grew up in and the global society of today, noting that the twenty-first century comfortably inhabits a sort of terra incognita "which is perhaps the New World of our age, the place in which a greater and greater number of us seem to live and to which more and more of us think about moving. With luck, by the next millennium, we will all be there."<sup>18</sup> We could consider ourselves truly lucky if no apocalyptic political event shakes the stability we seem to be achieving, with various hiccups along the way. As Andreas Huyssen remarks about the infinitely more contentious human scenario left behind by 9/11, "when civilizations clash, the space for diasporic thinking, transnational exchange, and cultural hybridity shrinks. Orientalist and occidentalist tropes have a field day, banal anti-American and anti-European stereotypes abound on both sides of the Atlantic, and the metaphysics of civilizations, cultures, and nations takes over yet again."<sup>19</sup>

Edmond Jabès has beautifully written: "Exile had so changed my features . . . that none of my community / Would take me under his roof. For all of them, I was already dead."<sup>20</sup> This lyrical statement painfully yet precisely highlights the two great losses of exile: recognizability and language. Janeczek, the other Jewish memoirists considered in this book, and the many survivors scattered all over the world would probably share Jabès's mournful realization. Quoting "Ashkenazia," a short story by Clive Sinclair, Bryan Chetty notes that "for the post-Holocaust writer . . . an 'imaginary homeland' can not merely be constituted by words alone as Europe is littered with 'fields of wooden skeletons.'"<sup>21</sup> As I hope to show in the following pages, the post-Holocaust writer in Europe no longer owns even a language she can call home.

A theme that often characterizes postmnemonic narratives is that of the trip of return, the second-generational desire, acted on or simply fantasized about, to return to the place of origins—a place that no longer exists. Or rather, the



place exists only in memory, where—freed from the imagination’s bounds of lived experience—it is construed, embellished, destroyed, and transformed. The impossibility to satisfy this desire of return opens up an irreparable wound, which stands as the event horizon beyond the emptiness left behind by the Holocaust, a sort of black hole—both a liminal point of no return and the orbit of Holocaust trauma. Hirsch and Miller indicate the drawbacks of projecting oneself into such an irrecoverable past: “While the idea of postmemory can account for the lure of second-generation ‘return,’ it also underscores the radical distance that separates the past from the present and the risks of projection, appropriation, and over-identification occasioned by second- and third-generation desires and needs.”<sup>22</sup> Janeczek’s *Lezioni* deals with this “radical distance” in surprising ways. As I will show, Janeczek also embarks on a trip of return, not one she initiates but one organized entirely by her mother. As a writer strongly influenced by the postmodern spirit that was so important in Europe in the 1990s, Janeczek ends up using her diasporic condition in generative ways to question her nation’s past, her own present relation with a new country, and her Jewish identity in order to provide a safe space (her heterotopic postmemoir) in which her mother’s suffering and pain can finally be expressed. In the end, Janeczek concludes that any search for home is senseless. Her text is diasporic not because it longs for a home but because it can exist only in a position of homelessness. The text is possible because this daughter has abandoned all illusions of unambiguously belonging, of unambiguous (national, ethnic, or linguistic) identification—including with her mother.

*Lezioni* showcases the situation of foreignness and uprootedness of the Shoah second generation from the perspective of a woman who has chosen emigration not for economic reasons or to flee political oppression, but as the only possible route to witnessing and writing. Like the texts examined previously in this work, *Lezioni* is a double memoir that tells the story of both a daughter’s and a mother’s life. It uses the daughter’s experience as a kind of magic lantern to project the tragic past and psychotic present of an exceptional, though also half-crazed, Holocaust mother. At the center of this memoir lies the story of the two women’s journey back to Auschwitz in 1995, for the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation. Generally, the second-generation children begin to seek out their origins only once they are older and settled in their lives, with careers, families, and defined identities of their own; by then, their Shoah parents are usually already dead. Janeczek’s case is out of the ordinary in that her mother is not only alive but travels with her on this journey of discovery. The trip to Poland sustains the entire text at a narrative, thematic, and structural level. It is both a literal and a metaphorical conduit. It ties the mother and daughter to each

other's past while moving the story and the characters along a trajectory that is both vertical (in time and traumatic memory) and horizontal (in space, passing through actual nations and their borders). The metaphorical and literal presence of borders is accompanied by two other central motifs, food and language, through which Shoah memory is channeled in this text. Food and language are used by Janeczek to explore her relation to her Holocaust mother, her Jewish ancestry, and her identity—or rather her “identity disorder,” which is what Jacques Derrida calls the effect of losing one's clear sense of origins.<sup>23</sup> By focusing on Janeczek's pathogenic relationship with food and on the inability of any single language to denote her identity, I use *Lezioni* and other postmemoirs to explore the uneasy and perplexing exilic state foisted on the members of the Shoah second generation by their parents' experience. It is only in the exilic space of her postmemoir that Janeczek is able to map her identity outside the limiting boundaries of family, nation, and language. The story of this mother and daughter—their ferocious arguments, their painful trip to Poland, and the daughter's retreat to Italy—maps a journey into the depths of each one's dark past in search of unattainable knowledge. It is ultimately also the story of the daughter's successful escape from the past that, growing up, haunted her through the accented voice of a foreign mother who had been made a permanent stranger (both to her daughter and to the surrounding world) by the unknowable Holocaust and the reconfigurations of the third diaspora.

### **KATABATIC JOURNEY: THE TRAUMATIC DESCENT**

Helena Janeczek's mother, née Nina Franziska Lis, was born in 1923 in an assimilated, bourgeois Polish-speaking family. Nina and her family were transferred to the Warsaw Ghetto from Zawiercie, but Nina sensed the mortal danger that lay in wait for those entrapped there and ran away—leaving behind her mother, who was later murdered. Eventually, she was captured and sent to Auschwitz, while her husband managed to survive in hiding, carrying false identity papers, until the end of the war. She and her husband were reunited in 1945, the only survivors from their respective families. At that point, their plan had been to emigrate to the United States, but because the husband had contracted tuberculosis, he was not eligible for a visa. They were already in Germany, in a displaced persons' camp in Bavaria, when they attempted to get their passes to leave Europe, and when their emigration plan failed, they decided to stay put. In Munich, Helena's mother opened a successful Italian-style shoe store called *Italy Ninetta* and passed off her otherwise “suspect” accent as Italian. Necessity had turned this woman into a chameleon capable of adjusting to any situation that life would throw at her, always attempting to be a few steps ahead

of an invisible enemy. A woman constantly on edge, she did not hesitate to lie or deceive in order to insulate herself from danger. It was this paranoia, her fear of being caught or betraying herself—a tragically permanent effect of the war years—that would characterize and damage her relationship with her only daughter, Helena, on whom she tirelessly imposes her impossibly strict lessons for an impossible survival: “you are safe only if you do not commit a mistake.”<sup>24</sup> Eva Hoffman too remembers the “hampering insistence on perfectionism and impeccably correct behavior” hammered into the psyches of survivors’ children by their parents, because “if one wants to survive, one must make no mistakes!”<sup>25</sup> But one never finds out precisely what constitutes a mistake. And as we shall see, Janeczek learns to navigate the mother’s dark labyrinth of dangers, fatal errors, and invisible traps and as a result suffers from post-traumatic symptoms of her own: nightmares, guilt, low self-esteem, depressive states, hyperprotectiveness toward her parents, and recurrent panic attacks. It is at the fringes of this dark maternal territory, one shaped by atrocious memories and a terrifyingly unforeseeable future, that the daughter’s text situates itself.

In 1995 the world paused to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz and the end of World War II. Along with politicians, academics, and other dignitaries—all of whom were spouting grandiose rhetoric—Janeczek’s mother, by then a widow, also decided to mourn the event, although in a less public fashion. She organized a trip back to Poland with a few other survivors who were her friends, and she asked Janeczek to accompany her. For the first time in decades, Nina was to see Poland again: her husband’s native village, Warsaw, and the gas chambers where her mother perished. Janeczek, who thus far had only had a basic knowledge of her parents’ tragic story and who was living in Italy with her husband, let herself be guided by her mother through this terrible odyssey, which she succinctly explains in these terms: “I don’t think my mother ever wanted to entrust me with her story, not even its most bare-boned version. Instead, she decided to go back to Poland, at least once, and I decided to go with her: to see her house, my father’s house, the city” (*Lezioni*, 133). Led by the mother, she enters into a hellish time warp that brings together many loose ends relating to her own past and origins, her broken identity, her problematic relationship with an incomprehensible mother, and her parents’ lives—especially, as we will see, that of her invisible father. Uncannily, the story of mother and daughter seems to trace a full circle: a daughter, Nina, who had to abandon her mother in order to survive the Nazis’ extermination plan, takes a trip with her own daughter, Janeczek, who, in turn, abandons her mother by moving to a different country for the sake of her own psychological survival. Shortly after this trip to Poland, Janeczek felt compelled to write *Lezioni*.

The book's genesis suggests that it will be a sort of travelogue, a genre with a distinguished literary pedigree, but this proves to be only partly true. If anything, it is the book of two journeys taking place on different planes: a geographical visit to Poland occurring on the horizontal plane, and an inner journey into ravaged, excised, and salvaged memories, which we can imagine as following a vertical trajectory into the depths of the mother's and daughter's damaged psyches. This downward trajectory is what connects the text to the eminent literary tradition of the *katabasis*, or journey into the underworld, epitomized by Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. It may be no accident, then, that Janeczek writes her own contemporary version of a *descensus ad inferos* in Italian, Dante's language. The architecture of her physical voyage is not organized as a vertical subterranean structure (like Piranesi's prison) but takes place horizontally, its plane flat like the Ptolemaic universe, through the charming views of everyday downtown Warsaw and the birch-tree-lined fields of Oświęcim. However, the return to the traumatic memory of the Holocaust is often talked about (not only by the survivors) as if it were a descent into an unworldly—indeed, underworldly—place. Trauma itself could be metaphorically imagined as the permanent hell of the mind (an inner world of despair and suffering). Building on Freud's hypothesis that traumatic experience forms an inaccessible space in the mind, Cathy Caruth adds that the space of trauma and the space of memory are not one and the same. In fact, they interfere with each other. Contrary to what one would expect, trauma causes memory to short-circuit. As Caruth explains, "the vivid and precise return of the [traumatic] event appears, as modern researchers point out, to be accompanied by an *amnesia* for the past, a fact . . . referred to by several major writers as a *paradox*."<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, I argue that the visitations of one or the other of those spaces (mnemonic and traumatic)—nightmares, flashbacks, and associations both willed or occasioned by unexpected circumstances, conscious or unconscious—can be treated metaphorically as a series of *katabatic* plunges. The injured mind (which, Freud suspected, is probably trying not to think about the injurious events<sup>27</sup>) plummets into those deep inner chambers in search of a lost unity, a pretraumatic wholeness: a wholeness that is possible only in the realm of the comprehensible, and that therefore is shattered by the utter incomprehensibility of what happened, of what the traumatic space has in store. Trauma, thus conceived of as an inner hell—a place of pain and unmitigable fear of death or injury—recurs continuously and continues to produce deleterious effects and symptoms; the Shoah's second-generation children therefore become the inheritors of the survivors' *eterno dolore*. As Rachel Falconer points out in her extraordinary work on post-war descent narratives, "it is easy to go to Hades by dying, but difficult to cross

over when alive.”<sup>28</sup> The necessity and unbearable difficulty of this continuous crossing over into the space of an intolerable memory is both the permanent condition of the traumatized mind and the inextricable Gordian knot of the second generation’s relationship with the Shoah parents.

Primo Levi famously brought Dante’s *Inferno* to Auschwitz. During his detention in that place of horror, Levi recited, taught, and translated cantos from the poem in order to keep himself from turning into a *Muselmann*—a prisoner who had given up on surviving, the camp’s most horrific figure.<sup>29</sup> Other victims had also drawn this allegorical parallel during their captivity. For example, Etty Hillesum writes in her Westerbork diary: “Really, Dante’s *Inferno* is a comic opera by comparison. ‘Ours is the real hell,’ S. said recently, very simply and drily.”<sup>30</sup> In her journal, Hélène Berr reports a similar allusion made by a friend of hers: “News from dad. He talks of heart-wrenching, unthinkable scenes [in Drancy] . . . Paul says it is Dante’s hell.”<sup>31</sup> Not by chance, the title of Eugen Kogon’s classic report on the daily life of prisoners in Buchenwald is *The Theory and Practice of Hell*, an allusion that recurs repeatedly in the descriptions of the Shoah and its death apparatuses.<sup>32</sup> “The space of the camp . . . can be effectively represented as a series of concentric circles that, like waves, uninterruptedly touch a central nonplace, inhabited by the *Muselmann*,” Giorgio Agamben writes in *Quel che resta di Auschwitz* (Remnants of Auschwitz), a philosophical disquisition on the spatial and mental hell into which Levi was dragged, along with millions of others. The concentric circles, we know, also characterize the structure of Dante’s *Inferno*. “The farthest border of this nonplace is called in the camp jargon *Selektion*,” according to Agamben, but its epicenter is death, the head of the Gorgon no one can face without becoming petrified.<sup>33</sup> The *Muselmann*, Agamben postulates, is the prisoner who has had the misfortune of staring straight into the face of horror and has thus become the most abject of humans.

I would like to highlight this compelling intellection of an architecture of hell and add to it another component: the movement toward this hell that defines the *katabatic* experience. As noted above, in classical narratives, either tragic or comic, *katabasis* is a journey into the underworld. It is undertaken by a protagonist to fulfill a quest, and its characteristic sequence is “a descent, an inversion or turning upside down at a zero point and a return to the surface of some kind.”<sup>34</sup> Classically, one descends into hell; Hades is the underworld, and the Western imaginary can conceive of a journey to it only as a downward movement, a movement that carries the unlucky soul or the heroic explorer in the opposite direction and as far as is imaginable, from heaven. However, twentieth-century hell is no longer the sunken realm traveled to by Dante, Ulysses, Aeneas, or Orpheus; rather, it has eerily moved to the upper world and

is irrevocably among us. Shoah stories of survival, rediscoveries of the past, and trips of return to the places of horror (in second-generation literature, for instance) are all *katabatic* narratives in many ways. However, the experience these narratives refer back to, the historical truth they try to make sense of through a posteriori knowledge, belongs very specifically to Europe. Our ultimate ethical fall is not part of an expository and edifying myth but real history that occurred in the world. Janeczek's memoir thus exemplifies the simultaneous journey down through traumatic memory and across historical, geographic space. Her geographic journey with her mother stretches from Warsaw to Oświęcim, while the psychological and traumatic journey runs from the Warsaw Ghetto to Auschwitz and follows a vertical trajectory deep into the darkness of the inferno of the conscious and subconscious mind.

An uncanny coincidence helps me better explain this mystifying aporia (which literally means, as Sarah Kofman reminds us, “without passage”)<sup>35</sup> between geographical places and the traumatic power those places hold in the post-Shoah mind. Some of the areas where the genocide was carried out had belonged to the Prussian or Austro-Hungarian Empire, and it is not unusual for towns in eastern Poland, western Ukraine, or the former Czechoslovakia to be known by both Slavic and German names. The first time I went to Poland in 1989, a teenager with a governmental summer scholarship on my own quest for a vanished Jewish past, I ventured all alone to get myself a train ticket from Cracow to the most notorious extermination camp, only forty-one miles outside the glorious royal town. It was a place I had been obsessing about for as long as I could remember and now had the opportunity of seeing with my own eyes for the first time. I was shocked when everybody at the station refused, some even aggressively, to sell me a ticket “to Auschwitz.” I ran back to the hostel in tears and utterly shaken, certain that the angry looks and the rude responses were signs of the locals' unvarnished antisemitism. I was young, inexperienced, and facing a nation that was old and inured to the cruelties of history. It turned out that I had inadvertently offended my interlocutors as much as they had offended me. I should have asked for a ticket to Oświęcim. Technically speaking, there is no such town as Auschwitz in Poland. And to most Poles, especially in those days, Auschwitz did not exist.<sup>36</sup>

Oświęcim and Auschwitz are forever separate despite their sameness. The journey into Auschwitz does not happen in Oświęcim, and yet Oświęcim is, geographically and lastingly, where Auschwitz happened. One is in constant danger of getting lost in the labyrinth of these complex personal, national, and universal pasts, and postmemoirs perfectly articulate this danger. All *katabatic* voyagers, Janeczek among them, therefore need a guide who guarantees that the

traveler won't get lost in the unfamiliar map of Hades and, more important, will make it out alive. Janeczek is led through the inferno of her mother's memory by the mother herself. In this case, as I will show, the guide (her mother) is not only the entranceway to the inferno but the inferno itself, its human embodiment. The mother is the territory of trauma, the epicenter of the Shoah's impact and the expression of its lingering aftershocks.

Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer have written compelling works on memorial prostheses and testimonial objects for the Shoah's second generation.<sup>37</sup> As we saw in the case of the former Kindertransport refugees (chapter 4), these relics and photos are important to the Shoah children, who lack any other link to the disappeared past when they undertake their return. Interestingly, in Janeczek's case, the presence of the mother seems to render all these testimonial objects irrelevant. In fact, Janeczek does not talk about photographs or any other concrete object as helping her to conjure up images of her mother's past.<sup>38</sup> The mother herself is the prosthesis of the daughter's postmemory: the daughter's gaze at the traumatic sites aligns itself with the gaze of the mother, not merely in a symbolic sense but in a very literal sense because Nina is there with Janeczek, leading her, interpreting things for her, pointing, explaining, and guiding her vision.

The trip to Poland constitutes the core of this text, yet *Lezioni* is more crucially the story of the impossibility of narrating this journey. This seems to subvert the expectations of the traditional *katabatic* narrative. Falconer lists sixteen recurring features of *katabatic* narratives,<sup>39</sup> whose point of departure is a quest for knowledge, which ultimately is always self-knowledge:

In classical katabasis, the descent to Dis or Hades is about coming to know the self, regaining something or someone lost, or acquiring superhuman powers or knowledge. The descent requires the hero to undergo a series of tests and degradations, culminating in the collapse or dissolution of the hero's sense of selfhood. In the midst of this dissolution comes the infernal revelation, or the sought after power, or the spectre of the beloved. The hero then returns to the overworld, in some cases succeeding, in other cases failing to bring back this buried wisdom, love or power from the underworld . . . In *katabatic* narratives written after 1945, while the descent to Hell still functions as a quest for knowledge . . . the descent occurs within a context which, unlike their classical predecessors, is already understood to be infernal.<sup>40</sup>

Shoah narratives (fictional or autobiographical), as Falconer explains, can be taken as the modern equivalent of the ancient *katabatic* journeys. However, I want to offer the idea that second-generation journeys of discovery (as exem-

plified in the works by Janeczek, Paula Fass, Eva Hoffman, Anne Karpf, Lisa Appignanesi, Martin Lemelman, and many others)<sup>41</sup> fit better than the first generation's narratives in this rubric of modern-day *katabasis*. The metaphor of the survivors fall into the depths of hell when they enter Auschwitz is useful because our language is not equipped to describe such an event and must appeal to the reservoir of words and images that literature has made understandable and familiar to us. However, I suggest that the second generation's exploratory journeys into their parents' past provide an even more exact equivalent of the ancient genre of *katabasis* than do the stories of the firsthand victims. The immediate victims did not voluntarily go on an epistemological journey; rather, it is the survivors' children who, digging into their past, willingly undertake the quest for knowledge. First-generation victims were all alone in navigating everyday uncertainties and horrors; the second-generation travelers always have a guide who will lead them on their journey. They are directed by a parent, they interrogate old relatives, or they travel back to Europe and find guidance from history keepers, curators of Jewish museums, or archivists in the ghostly remnants of once-thriving Jewish communities; they track down elderly survivors in their parents' hometowns; and there are always plenty of Judaica hobbyists to be found in the non-Jewish world. The travelers must rely on helpers to lead them through the maze of fragmentary information, broken links, and insufficient evidence. Most important, unlike the firsthand victims, these second-generation archeologists are guaranteed to return from their journey. In light of all this, I can confidently claim that all second-generation narratives of exploration are indeed *katabatic* in nature, structure, and mode.

The journey on which Janeczek's narrated *I* embarks is also literal, though it has symbolically *katabatic* undertones. Her quest seeks to answer the question, "Who is my mother?" — a question whose answer is the solution to many other riddles, including the riddle of her own identity:

My mother, who reads through to the last page of a Scandinavian novel even when she finds it incredibly boring . . . who could never stand fat people or ugly people, who was always an aesthete, this is the mother I know, the opposite of me, the one who irritates me because I want to be her opposite. But the one who with no money in her pocket fled the ghetto . . . telling her mother, "I'm leaving, I don't want to burn in the ovens!" Who is that one? (*Lezioni*, 13)

Clearly, this particular explorer is on a quest for the truth about her mother, knowing all too well that what she will find could be unbearable. Of the truths sought after by Shoah narratives, Falconer asks: "How do we access this hugely destructive, underworldly truth? Do we descend to it, and if so, how do we return?"



Do we return? Or alternatively, does it come to us; are we dragged down unwillingly?”<sup>42</sup> To enter the inferno, Dante has to pass through a gate displaying an ominous admonition: “Abandon all hope ye who enter here.”<sup>43</sup> As we all know, a gate with a message also marked the entrance into the Auschwitz hell—this one cruelly exhorting its damned to work for their freedom. Hovering between allegory (Dante) and literality (Auschwitz) is Janeczek’s personal entryway into the knowledge of her infernal past, her mother. The portal through which she begins her descent into hell is a terrifying scream in Polish emitted by Nina, who breaks down at the sight of the barracks and crematoria she brought herself and her daughter to: “She cries, fifty years later, in Poland,” Janeczek writes:

She screams of having left “my mother, my mother” alone. She is screaming like an eagle at the museum installation in Auschwitz . . . in front of a display case that exhibits a sample of Zyklon B, she is again a little girl screaming “Mama, Mama!” I loved her then fully and proudly because of that public scene. I love the mother who survived more . . . than the other one who weighs herself on the scale every morning, and I can’t reconcile them. And I know I am dealing with an insoluble mystery; I am aware that I will never know my mother, and that at the same time I know her too well. (*Lezioni*, 13–14)

Because the victim mother does not threaten the daughter, the daughter can love her fully and proudly. The other mother—the survivor who is not dead but present and alive—represents a different, inaccessible, and even hostile territory to the daughter. I will show how this impenetrability is symptomatized in the daughter’s eating disorders and most forcefully expressed in the abusive language that characterizes their bond.

#### **INHERITING AN “OBSCENE GIFT” : A MOTHER’S LESSONS OF DARKNESS**

Janeczek concedes: “I am grateful to my parents for having spared me their reminiscences; I think they were right not to tell anything” (*Lezioni*, 101). However, what Fass, a historian, wrote—“I cannot remember a time when I did not know that my mother and father were survivors”<sup>44</sup>—sounds quite true for Janeczek as well. Fass, seventeen years older than Janeczek, was also born in Germany, and her parents also were Polish camp survivors; in Fass’s case, the parents succeeded in emigrating to the United States. The fathers of these two post-Shoah daughters were both quiet men who didn’t talk about their pasts, a symptom not uncommon in survivors’ households (mothers seem more likely to share their war and prewar memories with their children). However, it is one thing not to be told details about the Shoah past and quite another not to know

about it at all. “The survivor’s child may be intuitively sensitive to the parents’ secrets which are never talked about and yet are somehow sensed,” the British psychoanalyst Dinora Pines points out.<sup>45</sup> Janeczek, for example, says that all her life she had a clear sense of being Jewish and “not quite” German, despite the complete assimilation and secularism of her family. There are two forces pulling the children of the survivors in directions that are overwhelmingly difficult to negotiate, especially when one is young. Although the second-generation child does not know the secrets that shroud the parents’ identity and past, she (or he) does know that every move she makes will be read through that mysterious past: Is she as worthy as the other children who were lost? Is she honoring with her behavior the memory and traditions of multiple lines of victimized relatives she never met? Is she adding more pain to the already martyred souls of her father or mother? Then there is another dilemma that makes it hard for many second-generation children to ever fully possess a home country: on the one hand, all survivors want is for their children to be happy, safe, and prosperous in the free society where they have rebuilt their lives; on the other, because the parents themselves strain to fully belong to these new nations—where they arrived as adults with a heavy burden of pain and with accents, traditions, and social behaviors they retain—their children like them may end up feeling split between fully belonging (a healthy inclusiveness mostly enabled by the school systems) and being foreigners in their country of birth. Appignanesi’s post-memoir records this condition splendidly:

I longed to bury the past and its traces. Above all, I longed to be as ordinary as all my suburban [Canadian] friends. They had nice, bland, bridge-playing, club-going parents. Parents who could speak English in full unaccented sentences. Parents who talked of mundane things, and not of concentration camps and ghettos and anti-Semitic laws and the dead and the missing. Their mothers baked cookies and cakes . . . Their fathers only read the Montréal papers and *Time* magazine and not on top of these a slew of newspapers in strange Hebrew script . . . I rarely brought any friends home and if I did, I made sure they left before my parents returned.<sup>46</sup>

Janeczek sensed that there was something extraordinary in her parents’ past. They were foreigners, while she was a native; they spoke differently from other children’s parents and had different friends. She knew she was Jewish, but that remained more of a veneer than a fully formed identity because the family didn’t practice the religion. It was important for her mother that Janeczek fully belong and “pass” as German, and that she have access to all the advantages the postwar life offered her generation. However, the mother also instilled in

the daughter a contradictory sense of identity. Janeczek was never really free to feel 100 percent German. In fact, when she turned thirteen, her parents began a small-scale Judaization campaign in the hope of steering her away from German boys and encouraging her to embrace her Jewish identity, despite having raised her in a secular, Germanic environment. This is how Janeczek ventriloquizes her mother imparting one of her lessons about “they” and “us”:

We offer coffee at the café; we don't just pay for our own, because we are not Germans. We are hospitable and invite friends to our house and cook an overly abundant meal because we are not Germans. We don't give a monthly allowance to you . . . we do not distinguish between what is “mine” and what is “yours” because we are not Germans. We do not believe that a child who turns eighteen is suddenly an adult. Children are always children, and that's because we are not Germans. (*Lezioni*, 29)

But whether the “we” in the refrain “we are not Germans” includes Janeczek remains an open question. Is “we” the Jews, the Janeczeks, the Polish mother and father? Is the daughter, who was born in Munich and whose first language is German, part of this non-German community of Germans? This scene perfectly stages what Dan Diner famously dubbed the German-Jewish “negative symbiosis,” according to whose sad irony “for both Jews and Germans, whether they like it or not, the aftermath of mass murder has been the starting point for self-understanding—a kind of communality of opposites.”<sup>47</sup> Janeczek's mother and father live in Germany as if in passing—especially Nina, who is a master of camouflage. The basic awareness of where one belongs, an awareness that comes to children through their childhood homes, is missing in Janeczek because her parents are new Germans, old Poles, and fractured Jews; they had lost their families, language, and names before settling in the new nation, and they were already foreigners at home before becoming foreigners in a foreign land. Eventually, the postwar daughter, the Shoah survivors' loyal inheritor, is pushed to make an impossible choice: “I didn't want to become German either. Therefore, I didn't” (*Lezioni*, 31).

Nina is an overbearing mother whose one task is to instill in her only child the ultimate lesson: survive! Trick life (and death), implores Nina, at all costs, even when you think you are not in danger, because danger will come sooner or later. Nina demonstrates an unflagging capacity for transformation and adaptation under which lurks the terror of death, a paranoid fear of being discovered or singled out. In the constant grip of unmitigable fear, Janeczek's mother tries to train her daughter so that she'll always be prepared to resist, and even predict, the blows of chance: “It is fear that teaches you to adapt, to slip away, to

avoid attracting attention” (Lezioni, 91). Although Janeczek does not inherit her mother’s uncanny ability to “slip away,” she undoubtedly learns what fear is. The daughter’s paralyzing fears have nothing to do with escaping the burning Warsaw Ghetto, avoiding the selection in Auschwitz, or passing under the radar of an ss officer on the street. Rather, they derive from her mother’s withering gaze, from the anxiety to succeed in passing for the ideal survivor’s daughter her mother would like her to be. It is from the mother, not the Nazis, that Helena inherits her fears and panic: “I was afraid only of her: of her capacity to root out my flaws, to discover the few forbidden transgressions, the rare lies. I feared her giving me the third degree, her questionings, her control over me, and of course her screaming, those words she would throw at me and her guilty verdicts delivered against me . . . Out of all this came a fear of something without precise contours, a fear of being unworthy of the task of living, the fear of being exactly the vermin she said I was” (Lezioni, 110). Following the strategy of the legendary King Mithridates, who took small doses of poison to build up a resistance to it, Nina tries to inoculate her daughter by administering ever-increasing doses of the Shoah venom, but the intended antidote turns out to be as lethal as the fate it attempts to immunize against. Janeczek ends up absorbing the poison and ingesting the unmanageable trauma of her mother.

It is this poisonous relationship with the omnipotent mother that the daughter is trying to work through in her text. This relationship takes place over shifting territories: geographic (Italy, Germany, and Poland); chronologic (past and present); linguistic (Italian, German, Polish, Yiddish, and Hebrew); psychic (trauma and memory); and that of identity (Jewish, German, mother, daughter). The mother is the meta-territory that encapsulates all others: she is the past and present; she is every language spoken; and she is trauma (both its victim and its source for the daughter). The mother affects the daughter from all these different angles; at the same time, the daughter has access to these various loci only through the mother. Hirsch hints at the sense of separation such a limited access implies when she writes that “Holocaust postmemory . . . attempts to bridge more than just a temporal divide. The children of exiled survivors, although they have not themselves lived through the trauma of banishment and the destruction of home, remain always marginal or exiled, always in the diaspora.”<sup>48</sup> Melvin Jules Bukiet, a second-generation writer, declares: “We have been given an obscene gift . . . It’s our job to tell the story, to cry, ‘Never Forget!’ despite the fact that we can’t remember a thing.”<sup>49</sup> In Janeczek’s case, her mother’s obsession is not merely that her daughter remember but also that she foresee the unforeseeable, as impossible a demand as remember what you don’t.

## FEEDING ONE'S DEAD : EATING AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

We have seen how for Sarah Kofman the direct traumatic experience of the genocide left traces of itself not only in the difficult relationship she had with food but also in the lingering associations she frequently construed (in her writings and psychoanalytical sessions) between her bodily orifices, together with what came in and out of them, and Shoah witnessing. Something very similar happens to Janeczek, who, particularly in her youth, suffers from eating disorders. The connection between childhood victimization and eating disorders has been long established by the psychiatric community. Yet relatively little work has been done in terms of the connection between Shoah-related trauma and food-related pathologies, either in survivors or in the victims' and perpetrators' offspring. One of the few studies on this topic was conducted by a team of Israeli scientists on fifty-five survivors and a matched control group of forty-three other people; the researchers detected no relevant deviations in the eating patterns of the survivors' group.<sup>50</sup> Oddly, Shoah literature seems to present a different picture. Could a relationship exist among Shoah trauma, eating disorders, and writing? Eating—either as underfeeding or overfeeding, as lack or overabundance of food—is a frequent subject of war memoirs and postmemoirs. With war comes hunger. And hunger in World War II killed twenty million people. Most of Europe was famished during those interminable war years. The infamous Hunger Plan, developed by the Reich Minister of Food and Agriculture Herbert Backe, had been put in place in order to guarantee sufficient food supplies for Germany at the expense of the occupied lands, whose residents were to be starved into extinction. As Lizzie Collingham brilliantly illustrates, food was a part of military strategy during the war.<sup>51</sup> Think, for example, of how the effects of the ominously worsening shortage of food permeates every page of Dawid Sierakowiak's desperate Łódź Ghetto diary.<sup>52</sup> On August 8, 1943, Sierakowiak died, probably of tuberculosis, at the age of nineteen. Three months and a half earlier, in his last diary entry, he had written with hope that a friend might procure a job for him at the ghetto's bakery. We don't know whether he ever got that much sought-after job, but by that entry he was already starving, feverish, and so weak that he could hardly stand. Levi said of his days in Auschwitz that they made it impossible to imagine not being hungry: "the *Lager* is hunger: we ourselves are hunger, living hunger."<sup>53</sup> The memories of those who survived (in the concentration camps, in hiding, and in occupied towns) are filled with recollections of desperate hunger that often pushed people to act recklessly to find something to eat for themselves or others in their care. As a reaction, those who came out of the war alive made sure to construct a world of plenty, especially for their children. Second-generation memoirs often touch on the issue of food:

they talk of parents who overfeed children or are overprotective of them, always scared a child might get sick, run into some unpredictable danger outside the home, and so forth. But before I explore further the impact of war deprivation on the way the survivors' generation later obsessed over their children's well-being, safety, and satiation, I want to show how Janeczek herself connects her struggle with her own identity to food, nutrition, and Shoah survival. This is how her postmemoir *Lezioni* begins:

The other night on TV, a woman claimed to be the reincarnation of a girl murdered in a death camp . . . Then an older Jewish lady . . . talked about the concentration camp as an “elevated experience” . . . What I’ve been wanting to know for a while though is whether one can transmit knowledge and experiences not just through the maternal milk but earlier still, through the amniotic fluid or something similar, since my mother, for instance, did not breast-feed me, yet I carry around an ancestral hunger, the hunger of starved people, a hunger she herself doesn’t have anymore . . . When she was little my mother never ate as much as me; she didn’t like anything . . . She says that only the war cured her lack of appetite, and on hearing this, people from her generation who remember the heroism of that hunger give her a look of mutual understanding. She does not specify to them, however, what kind of hunger she suffered, and the sentence “there was no food” can mean different things to different people. She doesn’t tell them that it was by sheer chance or by miracle that she did not starve to death, that she was not killed by asthenia from malnutrition, or murdered by gas. (*Lezioni*, 9–11)

The TV program on reincarnation with which the memoir opens strikes at the heart of Janeczek’s complicated psychological experience. To reincarnate means “to make flesh,” to embody. Hence Janeczek is not only the regeneration of a mother’s life, but she also strives to reincarnate through her self-destructive eating habits (binging) the fleshless (gaunt) body of the Auschwitz survivor, who—like Tantalus in Hades—experiences the torment of eternally inaccessible satisfaction. The mother’s body has come to be inhabited by an insatiable vacuum. The mother’s body is accessible to the child as a source of food, and thus it is no surprise that this particular daughter’s relation to food is a pathological one. It is a long-standing truism that we relate to our mothers through food, and that food has the arcane power of connecting us to our mothers, to carry forth our memory of them. Sadly, this is not true for Holocaust mothers like Nina, who cannot be accessed through food because their own relationship to it has degenerated, has been maimed by experiences of starvation, debasement, and sickness. Hence it is not surprising that we often find illustrations,

at least in Shoah literature, of daughters' pathological relations to both food and mothers.

Janeczek repeatedly makes unambiguous associations between Shoah and eating. She tells us about how she uncontrollably eats any food lying around, good or bad, a practice to which she ascribes her corpulence and that is the target of her mother's harshest criticism. Nina's signals to her daughter are always mixed: she overfeeds Janeczek while also chastising her for being overweight; she dreads persecution while constantly monitoring her daughter to catch her in errors. This alienating confusion is the bread of affliction with which this Holocaust mother nourishes her daughter. In *Lezioni*, food rarely gives satisfaction; rather, it often provokes dissatisfaction and is connected to a negative self-image. The indestructible mother's lingering hunger for life is passed on to the vulnerable daughter in a literalized form: hyperphagia. Janeczek's disorders are tied to her mother's eating dysfunctions. Nina is fixated on thinness and measures every intake very carefully to preserve her refined Old World figure. Her obsession with her own and her daughter's appearance suggests an incurable nostalgia for her prewar life, when social superiority was also showcased through looking and behaving impeccably at all times, both in private and in public. Janeczek writes:

Now that she is old . . . she has regained a strict control over her nutrition . . . She begrudges me the fact that I automatically chow down every piece of bread around even as she pours half of her portion onto my plate . . . We are complete opposites, I think with a mixture of satisfaction and shame for my body and my hunger. All I want to know is whether it's possible that she passed this hunger onto me, her own hunger. So, just as to this day she still gives me half of her schnitzels, her mashed potatoes, half of her pasta entrée—although she often calls me “my butterball”—perhaps she has also passed along the hunger from when she was half-dead in order to overcome that half-death and regain the character, personality, and individual psychology of her prestarvation years. (*Lezioni*, 11–12)

Unlike the Israeli researchers mentioned above, other researchers observed that many survivors do share certain food-related traits and eating habits.<sup>54</sup> One team notes:

Survivors reported that “food controls their lives” . . . This item probably reflects the most characteristic eating problem that survivors still have. During the interview, in fact, many of them told us about persistent and specific thoughts about food and eating. Their most common characteristic was the

position of defence of their food during meals (both arms around the plate and the head lowered). Some described their incapacity to allow someone else, even their partner, to eat something from their plate . . . These attitudes have generally persisted throughout the 51 years since liberation. They do not seem to constitute a problem for survivors; rather, they are a characteristic to which they have adapted and sometimes a form of comfort from bad memories.”<sup>55</sup>

In *Lezioni*, however, it is the daughter who is affected by the insatiable hunger “from” Auschwitz, and her yearning for comfort can find no satisfaction. The mother’s dictatorial management of all aspects of their lives—a side effect of the Shoah terror—extends over food and nutrition; she controls her own and her daughter’s eating habits with austerity, both inflexible and contradictory.

Overeating and overprotectiveness are recurrent symptoms in the households of Shoah survivors and frequent themes of second-generation writers. “My parents experienced the post-war world as cold, both in their bodies and their minds,” writes Karpf. She remembers being permanently swathed in layers as a child due to her parents’ preoccupation with her catching cold: “Cold for them was life outside the home.”<sup>56</sup> This overprotectiveness can cut both ways if the children of vulnerable parents reverse the traditional roles and attempt (or hope) to become their parents’ parents. The post-Shoah children often feel that they are replacing their parents’ murdered parents—replacing the lost love with a new one; sometimes they anxiously try to shelter their parents from any further pain or disappointment in life. Helen Epstein, a post-Shoah daughter, is a prime example of this latter phenomenon. Her mother saw her parents taken to Auschwitz, from which they never returned; she survived labor camps and death camps; and she dealt with the ailments and illnesses that survivors contracted in such places for the rest of her life. As the mother lies dying in a hospital room, Epstein is tormented by irrational thoughts of guilt and remorse: “That night, I lay in my mother’s bed feeling that I had failed to protect her just as she had failed to protect her parents.”<sup>57</sup> Fass reflects: “My childhood was a bed of anxieties, a diet of anxieties, a wardrobe of anxieties. Today, as I worry about my own children, I realize how much of this is a continuation of my upbringing.”<sup>58</sup>

In Janeczek’s memoir, overeating is a sign of the daughter’s desire to penetrate the mother’s past and rectify it; it is the expression of the daughter’s wish to end the mother’s starvation and heal the victim’s pain. If the victim sadistically projects onto her daughter the traumatizing degradation she was subjected to, then the daughter works through this traumatizing abuse by symbolically sacrificing herself (through binge eating) to vindicate the mother. The



daughter's body thus becomes the martyred place where the Shoah comes to life again. Auschwitz happens again on her body: the girl wishes to modify the past by changing her mother's starvation into her satiation—a transformation that should, in Janeczek's mind, restore order to the Shoah chaos. But of course the past cannot be changed, and Janeczek is ridiculed for her weight by the very mother she subconsciously seeks to help by overeating. The Shoah chaos is not dispelled but passed on to the daughter.

Janeczek is helpless in the face of her mother's trauma, and such feelings of impotence are common in members of the Shoah second generation. Karpf explains: "I would have gladly taken over some of my parents' bodily functions—eaten for them, breathed for them. Or, failing this, suffered for them. (But, even here, it wasn't enough: I would never be able to match them in suffering)." <sup>59</sup> Karpf continued to variously somatize her postmnemonic anxieties throughout her childhood and adulthood; as a result, she suffered from neurotic post-traumatic disorders. Tellingly, she once developed eczema that flared up most intensely on the part of her arm that would have been branded by a concentration camp number.

Judith Kestenberg remarks that "parents who had survived starvation continued to worry about feeding their children as if it were a matter of life and death," <sup>60</sup> which may explain food's central role in second-generation memoirs. Food remains one of the oldest Jewish romanticized tropes, a metaphor for a lost paradise of domestic order and ancestral fixity. Yet second-generation women often use food in their writings in strategically antipatriarchal and subversive ways. In women's memoirs, food is the battleground on which young girls fight in their struggle for self-affirmation. We observed this in Edith Bruck's treatment of food in relation to the memory of her dejected mother, and I have expounded above on Sarah Kofman's "queasy stomach," as Kelly Oliver calls it. <sup>61</sup> Another classic example is the Italian Jewish writer, postwar child, and leftist politician Clara Sereni, famous for the way in which she reinterpreted the food trope in *Casalinghitudine* (*Keeping House*). <sup>62</sup> *Casalinghitudine* is a memoir in recipes written by a woman who was anorexic in her youth and who, as a mother, must depend on her own culinary inventiveness to feed her gravely handicapped son, Matteo, who has a very complex relationship with her, the outside world, and food.

Growing up, Sereni found herself reacting to her family's pressures (she is the offspring of a long line of pedigreed Italian Jews) and the masculinist oppression of the outside world (although she was eventually elected to the Italian Parliament, she struggled all her life to be heard as a woman politician) by either refusing or overindulging in food. Her life was marked by a long series of negotiations pertaining to food: she constantly struggled to reconcile her

family's food, regional food, kosher food, Christian food, the kosherized meats of her grandmother, the regional pork sausages and overly fatty condiments of her Christian in-laws, the foods she had to prepare for the political meetings at her house, and the concoctions she had to invent so that her handicapped baby would not suffocate or die of starvation. Yet Sereni unambiguously locates the source of her eating disorders in her relationship with her very famous, powerful, and controlling father, Emilio—specifically, his almost ascetic approach to eating. During the war, Emilio Sereni was tortured by the Nazis, while his brother died in a heroic action against them. In his youth, he had flirted with Jewish mysticism and had, to everybody's shock, turned into a Hasid before becoming an atheist Marxist, embracing politics, and leaving his mark as one of the most important leaders of the Italian Communist Party. When he died, he was buried in the Jewish cemetery of Rome. *Casalinghitudine* does not explicitly mention the members of the Sereni family deported to Auschwitz, the resistance fighters tortured by the Nazi and Fascist police, or the heroism of an aunt who smuggled Jewish survivors into Palestine at war's end. On the contrary, this second-generation daughter chooses to travel back into her past (personal, familial, communal, and national) not through these historical personages' dramatic actions but via the literal and metaphorical vehicle of food. She thus structures her memoir as a recipe journal with everyday female experiences—public and domestic—sprinkled throughout.

Food permeates post-Holocaust children's lives, either as a memory of past starvation or present oversatiation. Appignanesi remembers that when she was a child growing up in Quebec, her survivor parents' friends—escapees and survivors themselves—spent leisurely afternoons in the Old European way: eating, drinking tea, discussing politics, gossiping, talking business, and all in sentences that “would begin in Polish, merge into Yiddish, migrate into French or stumbling English and go back again with no pause for breath.”<sup>63</sup> She describes this unusual group of émigrés as characters out of a Peter Greenaway or Federico Fellini movie:

There were tailors and furriers and accountants and one-time doctors and almost dentists. There was a man with a lined, ugly, pallid face in which intense eyes burned between red rims. There was a tiny woman with pink cherub cheeks and a giggling laugh. There was another with long hair and limbs and languid gestures. She wore rings . . . There was a gnome of a man with a dark mop of hair. When his head was bent next to my father's shiny pate, the thatch looked so like a wig, that it felt as if one quick gesture could achieve a desired transposition. There was a man with twinkling eyes

married to a plump woman who never spoke, but ate unceasingly. Everyone ate—fragrant chicken soup with barley, sour-cream-flecked borscht with a hot potato at its centre, pickled herring buried in onion rings, slabs of boiled beef as thick as the moist bread, pastries filled with cinnamon and raisins or a sugary goo of apple. The ardour with which they ate spoke of an unstoppable hunger as if food were a novelty which might disappear at any moment. So they ate and told stories.<sup>64</sup>

To remind himself of the novelty of their comfort, Appignanesi's father kept a photograph of a woman dying of starvation in the Warsaw Ghetto, where he had also been imprisoned before being deported to even more malign destinations. She reports that from time to time, he would look at the photograph of this anonymous creature, lying down on the ground with enormous eyes, but he never told her who she was: "She was, simply, 'the Ghetto.'"<sup>65</sup> Hunger too can call forth the Ghetto in the same way that the image of the anonymous woman can. Food has the magic power to conjure up lean, tragic days and at the same time ward them off.

If food can act as a powerful apotropaic magic for the survivors, so can children: "There is sometimes a parent-child dynamic at work in which a messianic hope is attached to the child who must enact great deeds to justify prior loss."<sup>66</sup> As if this pressure to restore a past purity to their psychologically ravaged parents were not overwhelming enough, the second-generation Shoah children can also let their parents' trauma negatively affect their relationship with their own children. When Karpf (who, we recall, suffered from various psychosomatic postgenerational symptoms as a child) became a mother, she began to fear that she would pass on to her daughter her sanguinary Shoah inheritance along with her maternal milk. Here is how she recalls the birth of her first baby:

Our baby was due on 1 September 1989—fifty years after the Nazi invasion of Poland. A close friend declared with absolute certainty that it would be born either then or on 3 September (fifty years after the start of World War II) . . . B was duly born on 3 September. Her first weeks dashed each comforting habit and anchor, leaving instead a dark dis-order . . . The split between good and bad was made flesh, in nipples so cracked that a ravine ran through them . . . Yes, there was a physiological cause . . . but also a failure of trust in my ability to mother. When B sicked up milk, there were traces of my blood in it, and I read them as my badness. I couldn't even say the word "milk": whenever it cropped up in a sentence, it amazingly came out as "blood." B cried incessantly—she was hungry—and I fed her incessantly, in pain and flinching . . . In those early months, motherhood struck me as almost wholly a matter of loss.<sup>67</sup>

As diverse as these cases of second-generation daughters' writings are, they all have in common the interweaving of stories of suffering with the literal or symbolic presence of food. One unexpectedly comic and self-deprecating example is the memoir of the television personality S. Hanala Stadner, about overcoming an impossible childhood in the household of two Auschwitz survivors. Issues related to food, bulimia, and self-image distortion abound. "One night Ma's at work and Daddy tries to make me eat a bowl of lima beans. Beans are old-man food, not child chow. But Daddy says I can't leave the table until I finish the bowl. Even for an adult, it's a huge bowl," Stadner remembers. "It's a Jethro Bodine bowl . . . Daddy hands me a spoon big enough to shovel snow and leaves the kitchen . . . The beans sit in the bowl and I sit at the table staring at them. The beans have become the enemy." In Stadner's experience, each of her parents can change from extremely loving to extremely cruel in the blink of an eye, though her mother's transformation is the more terrifying of the two: "Daddy shifting into Monster Man is bad, but not as bad as when Ma morphs." Her mother unthinkingly pours the undiluted poison of her war memories into her daughter's ears; and again, consciously or not, Stadner associates these unpleasant stories with food. As Stadner recalls with black humor (perhaps as a defense against the traumatic experiences described by her mother), "sometimes late at night after Ma comes home from the bakery, we sit at the kitchen table sharing a Danish. I listen to her relive one shocker after another. A Yiddish *Twilight Zone*. Tonight's episode: 'Ma's Choice.'" Stadner's reaction to the violent "Monster Ma," the psychologically unbalanced "Survivor Ma," and "Foreigner Ma"—altogether unfit for the real world—is predictably conflicted: "Oooh, I just hate Ma! But I can't hate her, she's a Holocaust survivor. I must be very bad to be mad at a Holocaust survivor. I bury my fury with food. But salami, saltines and social tea biscuits can't keep the anguish down. I'm getting fat. I'm so disgusted with myself, I eat more. I get fatter and madder."<sup>68</sup>

In migrant narratives, food traditionally fosters bonding and healing. In Janeczek's experience, however, food stands for violence (against oneself and others) rather than mourning, revolt rather than nostalgia.<sup>69</sup> In *Lezioni* food is used to wage an alternately masochistic and sadistic war against the daughter's body. The only exception occurs when mother and daughter travel together through Poland, when food unexpectedly sparks positive (that is, prewar) memories in the mother, who recollects—and the daughter imagines—the tastes of the antebellum order, and peace is momentarily restored. In this episode, food and language come together to recreate a lost history. The Polish names of flavorful dishes, which the daughter connects to the mother's culture and past, separate food from its traumatic associations and allow Janeczek to finally

locate her lost mother. Through those foreign names and flavors, the German-born daughter is able to see a version of her mother that finally makes sense. The myriad fragments of a puzzle that she had never been capable of fitting together now make up a coherent figure: a woman momentarily at home in a country and in a language from which genocide and exile had brutally separated her. Through food and language, the German-born daughter crosses the invisible bridge that leads to her mother: “In her native language, my mother ordered two beers and pierożki [pierogi] filled with cabbage and dry mushroom . . . and when I tasted [them] I rediscovered a flavor from far away, familiar to me . . . [through] the sound of my mother’s language, the taste of those homemade dishes received . . . a deeper truth . . . : here is my mother who speaks Polish to a Polish waiter, who eats pierożki” (*Lezioni*, 134–35). However, these foods and language are still foreign to her—the inherited objects of secondhand mourning and nostalgia, an intangible dowry. Through them, the daughter is able to pierce the curtain of darkness that had always shrouded her mother’s secret past, but this revelation is short-lived and only partially illuminating. Despite everything, her mother remains a dark and unknowable territory. As Janeczek explores her parents’ birth places in Poland, she comments: “I can’t even begin to pretend I know my mother” (*Lezioni*, 129).

How can this daughter retrace her origins if she can’t even rely on a clear picture of her parents’ past? Ephraim Sicher has remarked that by identifying with the victims, second-generation authors symbolically rescue their family members while “also telling the story of their own origins and identity, literally writing themselves into history.”<sup>70</sup> But how can Janeczek “rescue” her mother if she can’t identify with her because her truest identity is buried so deep that it takes a trip to Poland, a once-in-a-lifetime occasion, to get even a glimpse of it? This process of sharing the past between members of the second generation and their parents is what Kestenberg calls “transposition,” a mechanism “used by a person living in the present and in the past.”<sup>71</sup> But I would argue that because that past is only imagined by the second generation, the actual sharing fails, and the children are left with only the symptomatology caused by the parents’ past. Postmemory, therefore, is this symptomatology: a shadow signifier.

In her psychoanalytical practice, Pines once treated a second-generation patient who—identifying completely with her father’s sister, who had been murdered in a concentration camp—revealed to her analyst the following secret about herself: “although she [the patient, Jenny] was living in a student hostel where adequate meals were provided, she crept downstairs every night after lights were out to an outside yard where the dustbins were kept. She rummaged through them for scraps of food, salvaged half-eaten pieces of bread and other

bits which she ate equally stealthily, hidden in the dark.”<sup>72</sup> Jenny’s middle name was her aunt’s, Ilse, and she had been told by her mother about this relative who didn’t make it out of Europe alive; her father had always been completely silent about this and similar Shoah stories. Jenny had moved to Europe at nineteen, the same age when Ilse had been killed, and thus, concludes Pine, Jenny subconsciously and symbolically fulfilled the wish of so many second-generation victims: to pick up their family histories just where they had been brutally interrupted and fantasize the fiction of a continuation. “The second generation’s return to Europe,” Pines comments, “seemed to bring to light aspects of identity that had been previously hidden.”<sup>73</sup> Previously hidden aspects of Janeczek’s problematic, multifaceted identity are indeed revealed during her *katabatic* trip, and she most clearly articulates them through the cardinal tropes of food and language. Food becomes all-important in the memory of the traveler, functioning as a vehicle between outer and inner worlds. It is the various meals, dishes, and flavors tested, more than tasted, in her mother’s company that Janeczek seems most willing and able to focus on as she experiences this tragic and painful journey. She clings to the names of the foods and remembers those foreign, pleasant-sounding words in Polish, Yiddish, or German, turning language and the flavors it evokes into the only safe place from which to weave her tale.

#### **MEIN BARBAR : SPEAKING AFTER THE HOLOCAUST**

Janeczek knows the litany of her mother’s directives by heart: she “still tells me what to wear, how much weight I should lose, that I should quit smoking to have a child; she wants to know where I’ve been and with whom, she instructs me on everything and, speaking about things that concern me, she still says ‘we’” (Lezioni, 189–90). Kestenberg’s psychoanalytical data show that a level of sadism or cruelty can tragically be injected into the relationship between children and parents who suffered from a heightened form of this same cruelty while in the concentration camps.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, Nina’s attacks on her daughter exceed the bounds of normal parental criticism: “someone like you,” she unflatteringly tells Janeczek, “so messy, won’t keep a husband . . . if you keep gorging on bread . . . you’ll look like that 220-pound friend of yours . . . you can’t wear this kind of skirt because it accentuates your giant ass, your ‘yiddisher toches’ . . . don’t dye your hair . . . don’t talk about those things . . . don’t trust those people” (Lezioni, 56).

When Nina is not attacking her daughter’s physique, she is demeaningly criticizing her manners and behavior: “Where did you learn to hold the fork that way? . . . Do you realize that at the table you use your hands instead of a knife . . . ? Mein Barbar” (Lezioni, 190).<sup>75</sup> The phrase *Mein Barbar* (my barbarian) betrays the mother’s

psychological and linguistic background. An assimilated, nonobservant, urban Jew—not a Yiddish-speaking *Ostjude* (the implicitly derogatory term for Eastern European Jews)—Nina still holds onto prewar societal and aesthetic codes. The irony here cannot be missed; this accusation comes from someone who personally witnessed how the impeccable use of fork and knife, as well as an appreciation of Chopin’s music and other fine arts, did not prevent even the most cultured of people from turning into barbarians. Even after the war, it was impossible for a certain class of Jews (Janeczek’s mother among them) to rid themselves of their profound trust and belief in the bourgeois conception of *Kultur*, grounded in the principles of *Bildung* (self-edification through learning and acculturation) and of the Enlightenment, and under whose aegis they had grown up. It was *Bildung* and French rationalism that had promised the Jews a future without ghettos. The fact that the extermination of the Jews was a product of the same urban bourgeois, Illuministic high culture that Jews had waited so long to be admitted into, and to which they rushed to contribute, was an insoluble riddle for post-Shoah Jews. The Jews had to reconstruct a place for themselves within society even after the Shoah. What was the alternative? To surrender the dignity that the perpetrators had either believed was lacking in the Jews or had tried to deprive them of? The fact that the center of Western civilization—Europe—had quickly turned into the center of barbarism was only one absurdity among the many that permeated the genocidal and wartime enterprise. The oppressive nature of society might not have come as an utter surprise to those who were already on its bottom rung: the Eastern European *shtetl* Jews, who lived among peasants who were equally oppressed and powerless. But it did shock many urban Jews, many of whom—utterly assimilated even if not converted to Christianity—looked at their religious heritage as a remnant of old superstitions they were anxious to shed in order to move on (and up) toward a promising future. The second generation’s testimonies help illustrate the different cultural outlooks in the Jewish world before the war. Post-Shoah children inherit impressions of Europe shaped by what their parents told them about it, and these visions vary depending on whether the survivors grew up in large urban settings or in the countryside of Central or Eastern Europe. The survivors from the cities passed on to their children a vision of life in the Old World that was better than what they found in their new environments after emigrating. Those children have been brought up hearing about higher cultural standards and proper behavior that the parents expected their American children to absorb and maintain. The children of rural European Jews have usually heard more negative stories about Europe, including Europe before the war.<sup>76</sup> For many of these children’s parents (although certainly not for everybody), the

Old World was already hellish, and its hardships only peaked during the war years: it was a place where they and generations before them had often known much misery, subjugation, hatred, violence, and persistent inequality. Janeczek, Epstein, and Hoffman belong to the first group—those with survivor parents from cities rather than *shtetlach*. Epstein painstakingly researched her genealogy back to her European great-grandmother, and she was able to discover many particulars that allowed her to connect in a profoundly spiritual way to the Bohemian family's matriarch, Theresa. However, Epstein was disturbed to learn about the stubbornness and blindness of her grandfather, Emil Rabinek, who was unable to get rid of "the Vienna in him, his snobbery, his entitlement and self-centeredness . . . his dismissal of Czech culture and his misreading of his German environment." Despite the worsening conditions for all Jews in the Czech lands during the 1930s, he "continued to believe he was German" and therefore superior (to other Jews) and untouchable.<sup>77</sup> Emil was a convert to Christianity who insisted on baptizing his only daughter, Franci, at birth. He and his wife, a woman from the old ghetto (as he often disparagingly remarked), were gassed immediately after they arrived at Auschwitz.

Janeczek's mother perceptively picks up class distinctions, especially among certain types of Jews. She never gives up the haughtiness of someone who (according to her categorization) comes from a good family. And as she teaches her daughter, you can tell who is from a good family by these clues: "Those who go to Chopin concerts, those who still speak Polish and use it instead of Hebrew or Yiddish, those who do not push their way ahead . . . those who don't raise their voices, those who at the breakfast buffet don't pile up jam, eggs, bacon, desserts and sausages on the same plate until they roll off of it . . . those are from a good family" (*Lezioni*, 138). Epstein recounts an episode that reveals a similar preoccupation with class. After her mother's death, she was invited to give a lecture at the only remaining Jewish Czech organization in the United States. She agonizes over what to wear and what impression she will make on her penetratingly analytical, hyperopinionated listeners—who stand in for her critical mother. When she approaches the podium and looks at the audience, it is as if the whole scene is happening not in New York City but somewhere far away and in a different time:

With their carefully coiffed white and gray hair, in their modest but spotless clothes, the surviving members of the Joseph Popper Lodge looked, in my mother's approving phrase, very "well put together" . . . They wore good but sensible shoes, good but unobtrusive jewelry, little makeup. No flamboyant Zsa Zsas here, no garish redheads . . . These elders of my tribe displayed the



same understated style everywhere their diaspora took them, replicating in California, England, Israel, and Australia the tidy lives they were raised to live in Prague even as they lost their place in its social hierarchy . . . Their intellectual and cultural lives, however, were unaffected by emigration. They . . . made up a loyal audience for piano recitals, chamber music, and symphony concerts, the opera, museums, and lectures.<sup>78</sup>

Second-generation children are frequently anxious about struggling to fit into a picture that no longer exists. It is as if one were to photoshop oneself into a daguerreotype from a century ago. How does one live up to such antiquated, indeed extinct models? Or live up to such heroic parents? “How dare I suffer?” ask the survivors’ children. “What claim do I have to Holocaust pain if I was born after the war? Am I an impostor?” There is no room for these children in Holocaust history, and yet it is profoundly their history, too. They are the belated generation—born late enough not to witness the camps but also too late to save the dead. They have also been called a sandwich generation—that is, they are squeezed between the survivors and the new generation, whose members are completely untouched by the events that now seem to have happened so long ago. (I sometimes wonder whether for my undergraduate students born after 1990, a class on World War II is only as emotionally involving as a course on the Napoleonic campaigns would have been to my generation.) Meanwhile, the survivors’ generation never forgets or lets the second generation forget; for that first generation, the past is not only very near but happening again in little fragments, in sudden little apparitions, every day. Daniel Vogelmann, an Italian Jew from Florence, once simply yet eloquently described the psychological torment of his sandwich-generation position. His Polish refugee father, despite having escaped from Galicia and reached the Swiss border with his first family, did not succeed in avoiding capture and was sent to Auschwitz, where his wife and child were immediately gassed: “My father said little about his camp experience, perhaps to not upset me. And yet something entered silently within me: fear of others? a sense of the absurd? the capriciousness of fate? In a word: from the moment that, in the normal course of events, I should not have been born, what sense did my life make, what should I do to justify it, and, above all, what ought I do to live up to such a father?”<sup>79</sup>

In Janeczek’s case in particular, the demands of the Shoah mother become unendurable precisely because of their absurd premise: Janeczek will inevitably fail to heal her mother’s wounds or to fill the space left open by the absence of all those murdered people in her family. Janeczek ends up accepting the irreversibility of her mother’s loss by escaping to Italy. Finally separated from her

mother, she is able to perform small acts of resistance against the injunction to pass by simply ceasing to try. She stops trying to be free of errors or aristocratic in her comportment; over the phone (and from a safe geographical distance), she yells at her mother that there are no Nazis around now and assures her that even if she forgets to run errands, stays on the couch the whole day in her pajamas smoking cigarettes and eating junk food, she is going to survive. Refusing her mother's obsessive injunction to pass, the daughter struggles painfully not to buckle under the weight of victimhood. The daughter's text is ultimately the device that best resists the impulse to pass. Looking back at herself as a young girl who had not yet mustered the strength to move away, Janeczek confesses to having been defenseless against her mother's verbal abuses: "At that age the idea of doing anything that would displease her was unbearable to me . . . I succumbed to her attacks castigating some sin of mine . . . and that invariably ended with the accusation that I was selfish, a verdict which I usually accepted while begging for forgiveness and crying. But in this manner, I would obtain neither forgiveness nor an end to our quarrel; on the contrary, her violence would increase. It seemed to grow with every word I said and with each tear I cried" (*Lezioni*, 17). The Holocaust has turned the mother's language into an instrument to be used not for communication, but for passing, strategizing one's survival, and controlling one's visibility or invisibility according to necessity. Janeczek's memoir raises the question of whether it is possible to ever escape the language of the mother. The second-generation child is stuck between the revelatory allure of her mother's prewar language—"the sound of my mother's language, the taste of those homemade dishes revealed . . . a deeper truth" (*Lezioni*, 134)—and the horror of her mother's Shoah language—*Mein Barbar!*

The mother uses her multilingual repertoire to constantly either relate to or distance herself from her daughter and the inimical world around her. It is a kind of linguistic shtick—as Janeczek calls it—that both of her parents had to quickly learn for themselves in order to survive and adapt during and after the war: "My mother becomes extraordinarily elegant and Italian, imperturbably answering 'sississississì,' yesyesyesyes, to her clients" (*Lezioni*, 24). Thus in Italy, her business associates think she's German, but in Munich she is assumed to be Italian. (Her real nationality is revealed only in the late 1970s, when she testifies in a war crimes trial against a former SS officer from her hometown of Zawiercie.) She also takes pain to erase nonlinguistic markers of identity: even the Auschwitz number on Nina's arm must go, and she has it removed "as one removes any common tattoo" (*Lezioni*, 25).

Because of the Shoah, the mother is in large part unknowable. Even in moments of mother-daughter intimacy, Janeczek experiences a constant shifting in

this obscure maternal realm that she can't always keep up with. The skill to pass from one accent to another, from one attitude to the next, and between identities is her mother's defining ability—one that results, sadly, in her daughter's confusion, unbearable anxiety, and loss of confidence in herself and the surrounding world. The mother demands an impossible assimilation. "She gets so mad at me. She cannot accept that I won't change, that I wouldn't adapt to her instructions," Janeczek laments (*Lezioni*, 88).

The mother's language is no maternal language to Janeczek; rather, it is an arsenal that Nina uses to launch merciless attacks against Janeczek or gain further leverage over her. "My mother is not satisfied by simply calling me bungler, 'balaganiasz,' in Polish, or in Yiddish 'schnorrer,' beggar, because of the way I dress, or 'Dreckspatz' and 'Fressack' in German when she wants to point out my questionable hygienic standards and excessive appetite, or, with Teutonic solemnity, 'mein Naturkind,' my little savage; she does not simply warn me against the danger that 'man wird dich ausnehmen wie eine Weihnachtsgans,' 'they'll cook your goose,' but she also elaborates on these terms with further commentaries and explanations" (*Lezioni*, 55–56). Depending on the mood of the conversation, the mother may refer to herself as "deine Mutter" (a severe "your mother") or "deine mame" (a sweet "your mom") (*Lezioni*, 56).

Nevertheless, Nina's foreignness is also capable of infusing the daughter's native German with a tender and charming coloratura. After decades in Munich, Nina still mispronounces vowels such as *ö* and *ü* so that the German word for breakfast, "Frühstück," becomes in the mouth of the Polish Jewish mother "Fristick" (*frishtick*), and the preposition "für" (for) is gauchely pronounced "fir." Janeczek writes about these mispronunciations quite movingly: "I remembered that when I was a child in first grade, the teacher explained to me that we write 'für' not 'fir,' and although I had assimilated that lesson, I kept dedicating my drawings for my mother with a 'fir meine Mamma'—with that *i* in homage to her" (*Lezioni*, 71).

In most postmemoirs, when language comes up (as it regularly does), it is in connection to the multilingualism of the parents, a fluency that might either be inaccessible to the children (the "secret" language of the adults) or that, if the children share it, creates a split between the foreign languages one speaks at home and the one spoken with monolingual friends outside the home. In both cases, there is often an element of embarrassment on the part of the post-Shoah generation in its relationship to language(s). *Lezioni* highlights yet another role of language in these memoirs, as the mother's language not only sounds foreign—indeed, comically strange—but also expresses the survivor's frustration, fears, paranoia, and uncontrollable cruelty. It is not only how the

mother says things that Janeczek insists on but what the mother says, and in which language she chooses to say it. The survivor's utterances, which are in no way free of the shackles of the past, constitute a language born out of Shoah memories and indelible impressions.

Mother and daughter fight in German when they are in Italy, and they fight in Italian if they are speaking over the phone between Milan and Munich. During their multilingual logomachy, the mother calls the daughter "Hélena," stressing the first syllable in a menacing Teutonic fashion rather than using the softer Slavic variant, which shifts the emphasis onto the second syllable. The mother also sometimes refers to her daughter in the third person, as if she were absent, by saying "'meine Tochter' doesn't listen to me, my daughter loses everything, my daughter doesn't take care of her mother" (Lezioni, 72). However, their tender moments call for a host of pet names: *Maus* (German: mouse), *Spatz* (German: sparrow), along with their respective diminutives *Mausl* (little mouse) and *Spatzl* (fledgling sparrow); along with *roisele* (Yiddish: little rose), *ketzele* (Yiddish: kitten), *złota rybka* (Polish: little golden fish, or goldfish), *ptaszek* (Polish: little bird), and *lalka* (Polish: doll). The better the two get along, the larger is the daughter's repertoire of loving appellatives as well: mom, mommy, *mamma*, *mame*, *mamele*, *maminka*, *mameshi*, *mameshi kroin*, *matka*, *matusia*, *matuska*, *mamusia*, *mamuniu*—a colorful gradation from English to German to Polish, passing through Italian and lots of Yiddish in between.

The daughter's list, one notes, is marked by the conspicuous absence of the German *Mutti* or *Mutter*. Although German is Janeczek's first language, Polish is her mother tongue, the one that vibrates in her like a familiar lullaby every time she hears those sibilant Slavic words, which she intuitively understands without knowing their meaning. Even Yiddish is a kind of maternal language to her, despite the fact that it was not spoken at home and she knows only certain idiomatic phrases and a few words here and there. Counterintuitively, her most fragile linguistic connection is to German: the language and the country instill in her only a weak *heimat*, partly because of her parents' history. "We are not Germans," says her mother. "Don't date German boys!," Janeczek is told, "because she [her mother] wouldn't have been able to bear it" (Lezioni, 28). And "the utmost reproach, the unappealable verdict from my Judge Mother: 'You behave like a German,' like a 'yecke' [Yekke] . . . Or even 'you talk like a German' and 'you think like a German'" (Lezioni, 30).

Negotiating and rethinking one's relation to the outside non-Jewish world is an ongoing process in the lives of the survivors who did not leave Europe. Settled in the safe, democratic, and rich new Germany, Janeczek's parents struggled with how to let their daughter live a full life that exploited all the advantages

available to her generation, while at the same time alerting her to dangers of her identity that should not be forgotten. Assuaging this tension was probably easier for Shoah parents who brought up their children in North America, and it is understandable that many of them resisted their children's propensity to explore the family's past via a return trip to Europe. Such was the case with Fass, who as a young college graduate won a Fulbright Fellowship to study for a year in Germany and was just about to leave when, paying a visit to her parents, she found her father in a terrible state of emotional disarray. Her strong camp survivor father was suddenly a broken man. "I became aware that my father was withdrawn and seemed to have lost weight and energy. He was clearly deeply troubled," Fass remembers. "I asked my mother if it was related to my plans to spend the year away in Germany. 'Of course,' she said, 'he has been sick about it.' . . . 'Of all places you could have chosen,' my father said, 'why Germany?' He said this calmly and sadly, not in a fit of passion or pique."<sup>80</sup> Fass changed her plans and did not go to Germany at that time.

Delaying, as Fass did, the confrontation with the places of horror, with a country in which echoes of the past could still be heard, is a luxury not available to Janeczek. Her entire childhood took place in Germany. Her parents' decision not to sever all ties to the site of the tragedy by emigrating had an enormous impact on their daughter's life, condemning her to a limbo state in which she was constantly reminded of the past while being unable to redeem it. Therefore, language for Janeczek is yet another exilic space in which she is forever foreign, an impermanent territory, another utopia in which she lacks full citizenship. Hirsch writes that "European Jews of the postwar generation . . . can never catch up with the past; inasmuch as we remember, we remain in a perpetual temporal and spatial exile."<sup>81</sup> To the temporal and spatial ones, the third diaspora adds a linguistic exile as well, and Janeczek powerfully reflects this dislocated language in her text. Beginning with her choice to write in Italian—a foreign language—Janeczek uproots herself by abandoning the original mother tongue and inhabiting the insecurity and susceptibility of borrowed languages.

It is worth taking a longer view and remembering that language has played a large role in the history of Jewish exile. In nineteenth-century antisemitic fantasies, the Germans imagined the Jew to be the supreme corrupter of their language. They created a verb for the "sick" way in which the Jews spoke: *mauscheln*. It was their disagreeable *mauscheln* (according to composer Richard Wagner, a "peculiar 'blubber'") that hindered any attempt of the Jews to pass as authentic Germans.<sup>82</sup> In the post-Shoah dispersion, most of the survivors abandoned their fatherlands and mother tongues and migrated to new countries, carrying with them their "strange" accents, which branded them as foreigners. And thus what

had been a malicious paranoia about the assimilated Jews' inability to speak their mother tongue became the matter-of-fact condition for those who late in life had to adopt a new language. Second-generation Jews often respond to this particular predicament of their parents not with venom but with humor. Art Spiegelman makes sure to reproduce his father's English in a way that captures his quirky mistakes and funny mispronunciations.<sup>83</sup> Stadner transcribes her parents' dialogues in a heavily accented and Yiddish-flavored English that mixes the comic into even the most tragic of tales. "Oy . . . Hanala," begins a typical conversation between young Stadner and her mother, "you know da vay you love babies? Vell . . . I loved my brodder's children like dey vere my own, and because I couldn't save dem, dey got chopped up mit an ax, what can I tell you?"<sup>84</sup>

Without the help of onomatopoeias (a recurrent and accepted tool only in American Jewish humor—though recently it has begun to creep into European humor as well), Janeczek still makes the unspeakability of the Shoah identity appear through the insertion of a multiplicity of tongues, all equally hers and all equally foreign. As Appignanesi beautifully says, "I am all too aware that my parents' past is a narrative in a foreign and forgotten language."<sup>85</sup> Janeczek also has a mother language she doesn't know, and this paradox has no language of its own to be explained to others (*Lezioni*, 76). Her real language, German, offers no asylum; her true mother tongue is one she doesn't speak, and from which she is exiled. She maintains an almost vestigial sense of this language, but because of its origins in the Shoah mother, it is also a language of darkness: poisoned and rooted in death.

According to Sophia Lehmann, "disparate diasporic communities are now faced with the shared struggle of articulating a cultural identity in which history and home reside in language, rather than nation, and in which language itself must be recreated so as to bespeak the specificity of cultural experience."<sup>86</sup> But is language truly a viable possibility for achieving such rootedness? Or does Janeczek persuasively show just how illusory this hope is? Is she hinting at the impossibility of rooting her history and home in either nation or language? *Lezioni* raises the question of what happens when we don't speak the language we are rerooting into? (A concomitant problem is expressed by the question of which home are we to return to if home is lost?) *Lezioni* raises crucial questions about the definition of the mother language or the mother tongue. Polish and Yiddish are merely emotional sounds coming to Janeczek from a lost past, a past that can't be spoken because it is the fundamental experience that erases all experience. The traces of Polish and Yiddish symbolize the desolate territory of the parents' exile: physically expatriated to new countries, the survivors are exiled from their linguistic homeland as well. Very often, the native languages

of survivors are not spoken by their children, and the survivors' multilingualism betrays an enforced nomadism whose linguistic and emotional effects linger. Furthermore, Janeczek's text also seems to suggest that any effort on the part of post-Shoah children to rebuild that linguistic territory is just a lenitive fiction. To hope to leave German in order to migrate to Yiddish or Polish or Hebrew is only to embrace another diasporic state. At the same time, her text alerts us to the fact that we inhabit a linguistic space as if it were a country, and therefore the rupture of exile is experienced in this space as well. Janeczek ends up verbalizing all this in a language (Italian) that is in no way related to her roots: she herself becomes a narrator with a foreign accent.

Furthermore, experience teaches us, we best tell our most intimate stories in the language in which they happened. The stories of Nina's Polish past inhabit the Polish language and can be expressed only through its sounds and words. Therefore, it is not unreasonable that Janeczek equates her inaccessibility to Polish to her inaccessibility to her mother's past. At first the chaos of history seemed to become reified in the chaos of languages heard in Auschwitz. Tadeusz Borowski memorably defined the resulting linguistic bedlam "the crematorium Esperanto."<sup>87</sup> Then, as survivors tell their stories of those years, they are often compelled to repeat words they learned or heard for the first time in the camps in the language in which they were spoken. For Levi, *Wstawać!* (Wake up!) famously became the linguistic equivalent of torture, the call in Polish at dawn that would force the prisoners out of the barracks and back to their pointless, consuming work. For the Italian survivor Liana Millu, the *Lagersprache*, the parlance of the camp, includes the terrifying words *stubowa* (the all-powerful block senior) and *Strafkommando* (or "penal Kommando," perhaps the worst job a prisoner could be sentenced to in the camp): these terms recur almost obsessively in Millu's memoir, and the survivor is compelled to use them in German, never in their Italian translation.<sup>88</sup> But there are also gentle, love-infused words remembered from the prewar years. The survivors' children often pick up some expressions or words from the dead vocabulary of their parents. For example, Epstein was always particularly enthralled with the foreign words that, not incidentally, the mother used to describe herself and her beloved prewar job as a famous dressmaker: *švadlena* (the "common" Czech word for fashion designer, for when business was bad) and *couturière* (the "sophisticated" French version for the same concept, when things looked up).<sup>89</sup>

A shocking revelation for Janeczek in regards to language and its hidden, exiling truths is the discovery that her family name is not, in fact, the name of her family. Janeczek was the Polish name used by her father on his war Kennkarte, the fake Aryan ID under which he hid and which he kept ever after, perhaps

for good luck. Her name, then, is another foreign territory onto which she was arbitrarily cast by the shipwreck of history. Eventually she discovers her father's real surname, but her mother, directly intruding on the daughter's text, forbids her from mentioning it in her memoir: "Don't write your father's name! . . . Delete it" (Lezioni, 69). The mother is omnipresent in this text—including her reactions to the text itself, which Janeczek faithfully reproduces in italics. However, the father is a discreet presence, a shadow, practically absent. His invisibility reflects Janeczek's ignorance of his life and story. Moreover, discovering anything about him after his death makes her feel all the more cheated, powerless, and hurt. The real date of her father's birth, together with his real name, has been obscured. Apart from calling him by his fake name, she had celebrated her father's birthday on the wrong date, and throughout his life, he had patiently let her read him the wrong horoscope every week. Because she discovers these facts the day after his funeral, they remain unreal to her, and this belated truth is now unserviceable. She is unable or unwilling to memorize the new information, and she doesn't know which name to pass on to her son. Her mother's surname, Lis, has also been lost, removed from the records by the rigid German laws according to which a woman must take the husband's family name. Ironically, then, in changing from Lis to Janeczek, her mother was forced once again into a fake identity, another camouflage.

The family life of so many children of survivors is characterized by the presence of secrets. For example, Fass's father also lied all his life about his age. Only on his deathbed he confessed his real date of birth, so that it would be marked correctly on his tombstone. He was six years older than his daughter thought. Had he lied about his age in Chelmno or Auschwitz in order not to be selected for the gas chamber and merely kept up the pretense? His daughter, another second-generation "archeologist," never found out. But when she finally traveled to Europe, she discovered that in the official registers of her father's native city, Łódź, it was recorded that he was born on yet a third date: Had he ended up completely forgetting who he was? Another puzzle, another secret, another area of darkness on which no light would shine. "Of course, his age was only the simplest of his secrets. Much deeper secrets troubled him," Fass writes. "As a child, privy to his business, I thought I knew them all, and as a child with whom they shared their memories, I thought I also shared their past. In fact, all along my relationship with my father was based on subtle deceptions . . . And my knowledge of their past was feeble and incomplete."<sup>90</sup> Fass's father lost his parents, his first wife, and four children in Auschwitz and never recovered from it.

Holocaust fathers are often quiet and more reserved than Holocaust mothers, reclusive, out of reach. Janeczek imputes her father's sad aloofness to the



emasculating experience of surviving in hiding rather than encountering, as his wife did, the very worst the Shoah had to offer: Auschwitz. Here is a rare sketch of this shadowy figure:

Sometimes I think that my father is the one less capable of being well . . . not my mother. When I think about it, this idea seems to be confirmed by his total lack of initiative in every aspect of life: it was not he who made friends, or developed the business, or bought the house, or decided to leave Poland. It was my mother who was the engine of their lives . . . Upon returning home late with mom after a day at the store, my father would flip on the TV to watch the news after dinner, and then he would retire to his favorite couch, an old one in a small room . . . to read the newspaper . . . On that couch with his newspaper, my father was happy . . . For sure, he had a more complex nature than my mother . . . However, I also understand that it was he who did not get over the persecutions . . . he got away too easily . . . For someone like him, proud, combative, it must have been terrible to accept both his good fortune and his impotence . . . I think that it had been worse for the men: failure on top of the catastrophe, their disgrace. (*Lezioni*, 126–28)

From his guilt-ridden perspective, this nameless man suffered from an unjustified inferiority complex for not having seen enough of the Shoah, so he needed to know and hear what had happened to those who faced the catastrophe head-on. Her mother confirms as much: “‘Your father as well’ she told me ‘was always asking me to tell him about the concentration camps, but I always refused to’” (*Lezioni*, 127).

It will take the journey to Poland for Janeczek to discover that Helena was the name of her mother’s mother, the woman left behind in the ghetto by her daughter and gassed in Auschwitz. Janeczek’s numerous middle names all belong to murdered women in her family as well. We encounter again the reincarnation metaphor—the narrator embodying all the past lives of her deceased relatives. Second-generation children often feel that they host Shoah martyrs in their bodies and in their identities.<sup>91</sup> For the survivors, naming children after the Shoah victims was, as Ruth Wajnryb explains, a ritual of “enormous significance. Children were named for dear ones lost. They were born to replace beings who to them were just names.”<sup>92</sup> About the discovery of her name’s origin, Janeczek painfully concludes: “By the time I learned the ‘historical truth’ about that grandmother . . . it was too late for me to be able to connect myself to my mother and to her mother through my name” (*Lezioni*, 21). Once in Poland, the daughter does not see the mother’s past; what she faces is the loss of the mother.

## CONCLUSIONS : LESSONS TO UNLEARN

All returns to the homeland of their parents by members of the second generation are journeys back to the site of acquired memories, where the images, sounds, and landscapes that one has only imagined and conjured up throughout the years finally materialize. Often, to the travelers' surprise, these places do not fit the mental picture they have carried the way a tourist would bring a city map—the contents of the travelers' maps have vanished. No matter how uncannily familiar, these are unknown landscapes. We must ask ourselves how deep can the connection be to such places that, although still physically present, have had the signs of their human past eradicated? Janeczek's trip to Poland is a trip without a fixed point of arrival. For both the mother and the daughter, geographical specificity offers no remedy to their exiles; the landscape they find only echoes the emptiness left behind by history.

Language itself fails to capture the past because, after all, this is a story (trauma) that cannot find its shape in words, because it resists comprehension. For example, the mother's traumatic experience resurfaces with an explosion of pain that is expressed not in words but in sound. The first night at the hotel in Warsaw, Nina begins to scream, an uninterrupted, inconsolable wail (*Lezioni*, 133). Janeczek thus discovers that the transmission of memory is achieved through neither a geographical nor a verbal journey. This elastic tension between memory and geography, language and silence, presence and absence is the most distinguishing trait of her text and constitutes her ultimate discovery.

Maria Mauceri proposes that Janeczek's writing represents a symbolic return to the country of origin and to the mother.<sup>93</sup> Contrary to Mauceri's analysis, I believe that instead it represents the safe territory from which this severely traumatized and scarred daughter can protect herself from both the threatening Holocaust mother and a nation tainted by its past. We are confronted with a literature that stares directly into its own void. It is a memoir without memory, in that the kind of memory the narrator is after—knowledge of her mother's history—is irrecoverable; it is a travelogue without a journey to recount, in that Helena's odyssey is more psychological than physical. Even the memories in this text are only partially the author's, as attested to by the mother's interjections and contributions. Since Janeczek is the rootless daughter who has no recourse to the territoriality of her homeland or her mother language, she settles instead in the exilic space of her writing, much as George Steiner did when he famously claimed the text to be the Jew's—and, by extension, his—true homeland.<sup>94</sup> In his study of the ancient Jewish dispersals, which offers a refreshing portrait of Jews as active participants in and not simply passive victims of the foreign communities in which they lived, Erich Gruen writes:

Diaspora lies deeply rooted in Jewish consciousness . . . At a theoretical level, that experience has been deconstructed from two quite divergent angles. The gloomy approach holds primacy. On this view, diaspora dissolves into *galut*, exile, a bitter and doleful image, offering a bleak vision that leads either to despair or to a remote reverie of restoration. The negative image dominates modern interpretations of the Jewish psyche. Realization of the people's destiny rests in achieving the "Return," the acquisition of a real or mythical homeland. The alternative approach takes a very different route. It seeks refuge in a comforting concept: that Jews require no territorial sanctuary or legitimation. They are "the people of the Book." Their homeland resides in the text.<sup>95</sup>

By text, Gruen means not only the Bible but the entire canon of Jewish cultural production, a "portable Temple," as he calls the heavy yet splendid baggage that Jews carry through history. From the perspective of women, both alternatives—the pessimistic and the optimistic—are fantasies to which they have no recourse: both exclude women. If wandering fathers carry the Torah scrolls on their backs, what do wandering mothers carry? In this "portable Temple," do women, who have greatly contributed to its maintenance and survival, still have to sit apart, far in the back? It would appear that some of the daughters of Israel, such as Janeczek, Klüger, Bruck, and Kofman, have stepped forward from behind the *mechitza*, not to elbow their way toward the center where their brothers and fathers have always stood but rather to leave the temple altogether. "The Book" is a homeland not promised to Janeczek or any other Jewish daughter; in contrast, their own writing and art are the alternative spaces, the no man's land that welcomes these strangers' presence.

Janeczek is finally able to write this liberating text when—in her late twenties and after the journey to Poland—she stops living in the constant survival mode that her Holocaust mother required her to adopt. Writing is where survival is assured, despite the fact that writing emerges from the dark territory of death and defeat, from the Shoah in which no survival is possible. Performing a constant mobility of identity, memory, and narrative diction, *Lezioni* allows no stability, no planting of firm roots. Paradoxically, this diasporic text's (a text properly belonging to the third diaspora) refusal of territoriality is freeing and welcomed rather than estranging. It demands to be left in its exilic state, its *sine qua non*. The Holocaust mother and daughter are located at the extremes of a history of violence that cannot be overcome or mastered through the clarity of language or the comfort of food. Mother and daughter are conjoined at the crossroads of silence, and *Lezioni* attempts a journey into the utopia of preverbal commu-

nication. Janeczek wonders if a mother can pass along her fears “through the amniotic fluid.” It might be true, as Mauceri suggests, that Janeczek intends to connect to her mother through writing her postmemoir, but I believe that she is instead trying to explore whether it is possible to disconnect from a Holocaust mother whose trauma she has been feeding on since the womb.

Consider the case of Eva Hoffman. She faced the challenge of finding a language that could translate her into visibility so that she would be accepted into her new North American environment and by her new friends without erasing the traces of her past: “A true translation proceeds by the motions of understanding and sympathy; it happens by slow increments, sentence by sentence, phrase by phrase.”<sup>96</sup> Hoffman declares: “I am the sum of my languages—the language of my family and childhood, and education and friendship, and love, and the larger, changing world.”<sup>97</sup> Born in 1945 in Poland, she was transplanted to North America when she was old enough in 1959 to remember each moment of the boat trip that brought her family to Canada and away from the country of her happy childhood and trustworthy identity (where she knew who she was and what behavior was expected of her; where she had friends, piano lessons, and familiar streets to walk on). Despite her enormous success in the English-speaking academic and publishing world, and despite her exquisite mastery of written English, Hoffman never quite recovered from the emotional trauma of exile and complete uprooting. She was left with a sad  *tęsknota*, a nostalgia steeped in mourning for the lost object, the womb of her origins, the comforting site of her early life. Hoffman’s parents had survived the war in hiding and had lost their families and friends; they were still in Poland when Eva and her sister were born. In those early years of her childhood in Cracow, she didn’t realize that that soil was saturated in the blood of a poisonous past. “It is Cracow, 1949, I’m four years old, and I don’t know that this happiness is taking place in a country recently destroyed by war, a place where my father has to hustle to get us a bit more than our meager ration of meat and sugar,” Hoffman recalls.<sup>98</sup> It is only later that the knowledge of her family’s past and the shock of exile will evoke in her an inconsolable  *tęsknota*. At least Hoffman has this untranslatable Polish word to express her feeling of uprooted longing. In contrast, Janeczek has lost something that had already disappeared before she could utter it or forge her own relationship to it: her mother’s language and culture. As an adult, Janeczek made an effort to study Polish, approaching Poland and its history the way a scientist looks at a fossil, with love and interest but also from an unbridgeable distance.

Mauceri argues that “as suggested by the word  *leżioni* . . . Janeczek’s book is a  *Bildungsroman*, in which the story of the development of the daughter interweaves

with that of her mother.”<sup>99</sup> On the contrary, I believe the title to be purposely misleading. Let us not forget that these are lessons both of and in darkness (*di tenebra*). The trauma-based *lezioni* dispensed by this mother must be resisted, not absorbed; Janeczek struggles to purge herself of the internalized voice of the Holocaust mother who, though intending to save her daughter, ends up almost asphyxiating her. The ultimate lesson of trauma is one of constant unlearning. The victim’s strategies destroy the normalcy of daily behavior. Janeczek’s mother demonstrates an unwearied capacity for transformation and adaptation spurred on by her paranoid fear of the unforeseeable. Trauma forces the victim to live according to a logic outside of logic, a logic of the underground that is not applicable to the postwar world and whose unintended consequence is to perpetuate the nightmare. The mother survives Auschwitz, and the daughter grows up to be a self-fulfilled, moral, and successful woman not because of but in spite of the Shoah lessons. “The experience of the concentration camps,” Janeczek reiterates “is no experience at all, nothing is learned from it” (*Lezioni*, 12–13). This goes for the firsthand victims as well as for their inheritors. The Shoah, Epstein notes, forced a new identity on both survivors and their children, and yet the “trouble was that while it conferred an identity, it provided no structure, no clue to a way of life.”<sup>100</sup>

*Lezioni* is no *Künstlerroman* either. There is no point of enlightened arrival, no epitasis in this plot, no constructive revelation; any newly acquired knowledge only adds to the picture of darkness and past annihilation. The becoming of the artist, writing itself, is a symptom of the inherited illness that is Shoah memory.

### **AN AFTERTHOUGHT : A SECOND MOTHER**

There is one secret corner that represents the closest approximation to what Janeczek might call home. This special place is nested within the marginal story of Cilly, the daughter of a Wehrmacht pilot killed in action in World War II. Cilly (Cäcile Lahrs) is the Christian German nanny from Bremen introduced at the very end of *Lezioni*. Janeczek surprises the reader by affirming in the final pages of her book that “it was not my mother who brought me up” (*Lezioni*, 191) but the simple, uneducated Cilly, who loves the girl, changes her diapers, gives her milk, and puts her to bed—until Nina dismisses her when Janeczek turns sixteen. In this memoir, Cilly stands as a metonymic figure for Germany and the narrator’s relationship with her native country. To the confused Jewish girl, something about her love for the German nanny feels wrong and fraught with guilt. Only as a mature Jewish woman returning from the Auschwitz tour does Janeczek understand that one can only write, not rewrite, history. At that point, it becomes possible for her to unearth from her own story the figure of another

mother and talk about this alternative figure in a way that will no longer feel like a betrayal of her Holocaust mother.

Janeczek's mother accuses her of having picked up her plodding way of walking from Cilly. "Cilly spoiled you," she claims (Lezioni, 194), referring to her daughter's inelegant carriage. But despite Cilly's childlike handwriting with big, round letters, it was she who corrected Janeczek's homework because "she was the only one who knew German" in the house (Lezioni, 193). Helena received a precious gift from Cilly that more than made up for the latter's clumsiness: "German, her language" (Lezioni, 202).

During their lengthy annual trips to visit friends in Italy, the Janeczeks would bring Cilly along. Although she was always treated as a member of the family by their Italian hosts, and though she eventually began to learn some Italian, Janeczek remembers that Cilly never stopped feeling out of place when she was away from her country: "I think indeed that sometimes she did mention she missed Germany and hinted at the fact that it made her happy to return home" (Lezioni, 195). Unlike the Jewish family that easily adapts and blends in, at home everywhere and therefore nowhere, Cilly has a place in Germany that is unnegotiably her home. She simply belongs. She doesn't need to pass. Her capacity for camouflage is nonexistent; neither her language nor her home harbor ambiguities. "Speak German when Cilly is around [and not Polish]" (Lezioni, 199), Janeczek's parents would remind each other. When Cilly was present, they would also all stand in front of the Christmas tree singing "Stille Nacht" ("Silent Night") and exchange presents "fir mama," "fir papa," and "für Cilly": "We were not Germans, but this could not be said or stressed before Cilly, who, instead, was German" (Lezioni, 199).

When Helena turned sixteen, Cilly was sent away, and the teenager, we are told, very quickly forgets all about this crucial maternal figure from her childhood: "I am not sure whether my erasing all memory of Cilly, which mirrored the erasure of the Jewish victims by the Germans, was somehow the execution of a small collective wish . . . Today I know that I did not forgive Cilly for leaving without ever keeping in touch, and I did not forgive myself for not having been capable of restoring the bond between us, and shame grows side by side with oblivion" (Lezioni, 200). At the fringes of her memoir—that is, only in the closing chapter and last few pages of *Lezioni*—Janeczek reverses oblivion and pays tribute to Cilly, to whom the most touching words of this text are devoted. These final paragraphs are perhaps the closest thing she has to a homecoming, one that brings her back to the only home available to her: the loving and unthreatening Cilly.

A dark history has put too heavy a burden on the shoulders of second-

generation children, setting them up for failure when faced with the impossible psychic demands of an inherited, secondhand trauma. Janeczek grew up with the tormenting notion that she had failed both mothers. She couldn't save her own mother from the past, and to please her she learned to be disloyal to the nanny who loved her, who brought her up like a substitute mother, and to whom she owes her native language, German.

"The second generation is intimately connected to the Holocaust by both a physical and psychic umbilical cord," note Alan and Naomi Berger.<sup>101</sup> And through this impalpable connection, according to Dori Laub and Nanette C. Auerhahn, the second-generation "child echoes what exists in his parents' inner world; his inner reality thereby reveals the indelible marks left by the events of our time. The particular style the child adopts—whether it be acting out, neurotic symptomatology, character traits, artistic expression, or occupational endeavors—is subtly and complexly determined by a myriad of psychological and reality factors."<sup>102</sup> As Irene Kacandes points out, in "no small measure . . . [second-generation writers] become the enabler-cowitnesses for parts of their parents' stories, stories that may or may not have been told in verbal language and yet were nonetheless communicated—some have said 'transmitted'—to the next generation."<sup>103</sup> The work of the survivors' children is therefore fundamental in keeping alive the contours of an absence, in keeping in session an ongoing trial in which the victims' silence must be heard and accepted as damning evidence against injustice. Alan Berger remarks that since second-generation children speak and write as natives, they "make themselves understood in a way unavailable to most of their parents."<sup>104</sup> The case of a writer like Janeczek is all the more interesting because she chooses a language secondary to all parties involved, perhaps because the particularities of language are irrelevant when speaking the translinguistic experience of the Shoah. In *If This Is a Man* Levi attempted to describe the linguistic pandemonium of Auschwitz. In that infernal Babel, all European languages had been stripped of their cultural, humanistic, aesthetic, poetic, and relational content, and what remained was merely a tool for survival. No meaning could be produced out of these languages any longer—only a purely utilitarian tool to steal scraps of time from the clutches of death.<sup>105</sup>

Regarding the rarely discussed role of the reader in shaping Shoah memory, Kacandes writes: "the fact that we readers hold in our hands [a second-generation Shoah book] . . . constitutes proof that, even if they could not undo it, these displaced women eventually displaced trauma with writing, writing from which we can learn if we cowitness to it."<sup>106</sup> Although I agree with Janeczek that the Shoah is not an educational experience and that these are lessons of darkness,

I also agree with Kacandes that the sharing of these traumatic texts can foster cowitnessing and establish co-humanity, a term I am borrowing from Levi. This is how Levi memorably describes the dejected Other, whom we refuse to see for so long until, suddenly, he is clearly delineated in front of our astonished eyes in his full, frail, imperfect, yet undeniable humanity: “a human being in flesh and blood who stands before us, within reach of our providentially myopic senses.” Levi speaks of a providential myopia, meaning that “only saints [are] granted the dreadful gift of pitying the multitudes . . . The rest of us, at best, are left with enough sporadic pity for the single individual, the *Mitmensch*, the co-human.”<sup>107</sup> Yet the primal ethical scene occurs exactly in this encounter with the radical and (Lacan would say) traumatizing face-to-face encounter with the Other. Or, as Emmanuel Lévinas magnificently put it, “the epiphany of face qua face opens humanity.”<sup>108</sup> If Levi speaks of a real visage, a face of flesh and blood, Lévinas’s philosophy places the primordial call of ethics in a disembodied face that is not necessarily a temporal presence but rather the mere evidence, the trace, of something irrepresentable. The cardinal call to ethical responsibility and responsiveness for Lévinas comes from somewhere beyond sheer intersubjective identification. In his face, the Other is disincarnate.<sup>109</sup> It is this encounter with the Other’s face, Lévinas argues, that “opens a primordial discourse whose first word is obligation.”<sup>110</sup> For this creature, this timeless face, with whom we are called to inextricably engage, Levi, the Italian survivor of Auschwitz, coined the term *Mitmensch* (co-human), fittingly drawing on the language of the past enemy to point the way to a future ethics.

My guide and I crossed over and began  
 . . .  
 To ascend into the shining world again.  
 He first, I second, without thought of rest  
 we climbed the dark until we reached the point  
 where a round opening brought in sight the blest  
 and beauteous shining of the Heavenly cars.  
 And we walked out once more beneath the Stars.

 DANTE ALIGHIERI, *Inferno*, Canto XXXIV