

## My Mother's Face

### Remembering Mothers in the Holocaust Testimony of Francine Christophe and Cordelia Edvardson

*When we listen for mothers' voices of the Holocaust no one answers. Mothers and young children were among the first groups sent en masse to the gas chambers: mothers because of their ability to reproduce more unwanted Jewish offspring, young children because they were thought to be too weak to do physical labor for the Reich. Thus, the testimony of the Holocaust is largely a testimony written by those who were adolescents in the camps and managed to survive. This paper aims to recover voices of lost mothers of the Holocaust through a study of the work of two daughters: Francine Christophe and Cordelia Edvardson. Bound via stories of motherhood in extremis and maternal subjectivity in its complexities and contradictions, their work dislodges idealized expectations and assumptions about motherhood. We see motherhood as a position of mutuality as mother and daughter mother each other in Christophe's account; mother as seducer and betrayer. These representations invite a reconsideration of mothering outside familiar biological, familial, and social conventions, when mothers and their children are not seen as human beings. Too, the paper considers the role of language in recreating the lost mother and in mothering the self.*

My mother  
she was hands, a face  
They made our mothers strip in front of us

Here mothers are no longer mothers to their children.  
—Charlotte Delbo (1995)

*Forced into cattle cars. Squeezed into squalid barracks.  
Marched into showers raining with Zyklon B.  
Thrown into mass graves.*

*Somewhere a child is crying. "Mutti!" "Maman!" "Mama!"  
No one answers.*

When we listen for mothers' voices of the Holocaust, no one answers. Mothers of young children were among the first groups of people systematically sent to the gas chambers: mothers, because they were reduced again to the traditional reproductive role; children, because they were not strong enough to haul rocks, dig ditches or do other dirty work for the Reich.<sup>1</sup> The first-hand witnessing of the Holocaust is largely a witnessing by children who came to the camps as adolescents and survived.<sup>2</sup> Joan Ringelheim (1993), one of the first scholars to study gender and the Holocaust, has written that mothers' experiences of pregnancy, birth, and death in the camps constitute a specific legacy of suffering. She notes that sexism left women especially vulnerable to abuses of their sexuality and maternal responsibilities: to rape, murder of their children, the necessity of killing their own or other women's babies, forced abortion, and other forms of exploitation (375). In the foreword to Liana Millu's (1986) memoir, *Smoke over Birkenau*, Primo Levi noted that the presence of the smoking crematoria right in the middle of the women's camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau was an undeniable, omnipresent reminder of the death of children.

This paper aims to recover images of lost mothers of the Holocaust through a study of the work of two daughters, Francine Christophe and Cordelia Edvardson. Bound by stories of motherhood *in extremis*, maternal subjectivity in its many complexities and contradictions, and the persistent desire for the mother's face, their work dislodges idealized expectations and assumptions about motherhood. We see mother as role model and mentor in Christophe's account, juxtaposed against mother as seductress and betrayer in Edvardson's. Marcelle Christophe, Francine's mother, embodies Adrienne Rich's concept of "courageous mothering," in which the mother refuses to be a victim, establishing a strong female identity that nurtures both herself and her daughter (O'Reilly and Abbey, 2000: 9). That feminist mothering could occur in a concentration camp is astonishing. Elisabeth Langgasser, Edvardson's mother, is a paragon of narcissism, intent on saving herself, even if it means sacrificing her child. Edvardson's longing for connection with a nurturing maternal figure is embodied in the dedication of her book to her three mothers—one biological and two non-biological "othermothers."<sup>3</sup> These two very different autobiographical accounts invite a reconsideration of mothering outside familiar biological, familial, and social conventions, in a time and place where neither mothers nor children were seen as human beings. The italicized passages in the paper inscribe my maternal identification with these texts and responses of protest and outrage. Faced with the loss or displacement of the mother, the daughter may seek to recreate herself through language. Critic Bella Brodzki (1988) constructs the mother as the origin of both language and love: "As the child's first significant Other, the mother engenders subjectivity through language; she is the primary source of speech and love" (245). Janet Burstein also affirms this

connection between language and love: “Mothers’ voices can empower daughters by showing them how to articulate themselves as subjects” (O’Reilly, 2004: 42). Such theories rupture constructions of the mother as voiceless and silent. Too, these theories explain one of the powerful motivating forces in women’s autobiographies —to simultaneously recreate the lost or absent mother and recreate the self through writing. Thus, women’s memoirs of the Holocaust serve the dual purpose of reclaiming a seriously traumatized subjectivity and giving voice to the absent mother, a thematics of reparenting.<sup>4</sup>

Francine Christophe’s (2000) memoir, *From a World Apart: A Little Girl in the Concentration Camps*, is a first-person narrative written in the present tense in a child’s voice. Francine Christophe is six years old in August 1939 when her story begins. The fairy tale beginning of the memoir, with its image of a happy family enjoying their holiday at the beach, is quickly shattered when Christophe’s father is called to serve in the French army. With the surrender of France to Germany, the father is taken prisoner of war. Conditions rapidly deteriorate for French Jews, who must register their identities with the local *bureau de police*. When Christophe’s mother, Marcelle, is asked why she bothers to register with such a non-Jewish sounding surname, she replies that she has always obeyed the law. Marcelle Christophe, *une bonne citoyenne* whose uncles had been decorated in the Great War, could have no way of knowing what horrors were in store for her as a consequence of her loyalty, a patriotism that was quite common among non-observant European Jews, who saw themselves as nationals first, Jews second. By the time Marcelle decides to flee the family home in Paris for the Unoccupied Zone, it is too late. She and Francine are arrested at the border, where authorities’ suspicions are aroused by their fake identity cards. Thus begin a series of arrivals and departures that take Francine and her mother first to prison and then to different camps: Pithiviers, Beaune-le-Roland, Drancy, and, eventually, the dreaded Bergen-Belsen.

Consumed by the passion to bear witness, Francine started keeping a journal of her wartime experiences at the age of twelve, in 1945. Unlike the young Anne Frank, who died of typhus at Bergen-Belsen, Francine survived to document the horror she had witnessed (Francine and her mother were prisoners at Belsen during the same period as Anne and her sister, Margot, but the two families did not meet). Christophe’s memoir, based on her post-war journal and written in 1967, was completed in a few weeks. The childlike prose and voice of the memoir are shockingly juxtaposed against descriptions that are far from innocent, including narratives of beatings, suicide, and death by starvation. Too, the use of the present tense conveys the perspective and urgency of a child more effectively than the distanced retrospective past tense.

In the beginning of the memoir Francine uses humor to underscore the feeling in Paris that this is a “*drole de guerre*,” a play on words meaning both a funny and phony war, the pun being a device of which children (and adults) are uncommonly fond. Francine narrates a joke she has overheard that captures this spirit of *drole de guerre*: “Two ladies are talking. ‘Oh! My dear, I make an

amazing chocolate cake.' 'Do give me the recipe.' 'Well, I don't use any chocolate, flour, eggs, sugar, or butter....' 'And is it good?' 'No!'" (12). Amusement rapidly gives way to terror as more and more arrests are made, property is confiscated, and Jews are forced to wear the yellow star. Posters appear in the *metro* and the streets portraying Jews with pointed chins, evil eyes, thick lips, hooked noses, clawed hands. Francine's family is not religious—they celebrate Christmas with a tree—and through these images she learns to see herself as monstrous: "I have learned that I am Jewish, that I am a monster, and that I must hide myself."

Francine's insistence that a terrible mistake has been made, that she is French, not Jewish, occurs again and again, ironically reinforced when the Jewish children from Eastern Europe whom she meets in the camps tell her she is not really Jewish because she doesn't speak Yiddish. The yellow star becomes a sign of race when other signifiers such as surname and hair color fail. At the *Gare de l'Est* on the way to Bergen-Belsen, Francine says to Marcelle, "Oh Mother! How I wish I could tear this star off. I don't want people looking at me like that anymore. Make these people go away. I am not an animal." The fragility of national identity and the arbitrariness of social constructions of race are underscored when Uncle Charles, Francine's grandmother's second husband, a Catholic who is a close friend of *Marechal* Petain, goes to visit the *Marechal* to plead for the release of Marcelle and Francine. "This is about a mother and her child," he tells the *Marechal*, invoking what he assumes will be regarded as an iconic relationship that transcends considerations of race. "Bah, Jews" (42), says the *Marechal*, and the two are not freed.

Francine is a compassionate witness who is keenly attuned to other children and their suffering. At Drancy she writes, "The herds of children filing by! Heads shaved, hollow cheeks, sometimes in rags, sometimes tied together with rope. Generally children of Central European Jews, automatically separated from their parents.... We ask them their names, their ages, and they don't reply. Beaten dogs, stunned, they have forgotten everything." This description leads Francine to reflect that animals such as the sheep and cows that wander free in the fields are treated better than these children. She identifies with these children and notices that their arms are scratched where their mothers gripped them as they were taken from them. Animal metaphors (a device also employed by Frederick Douglass [1982] in his autobiography) resonate frequently as Francine struggles to retain her humanity while she is starving: "I'm turning into an animal who thinks only of its empty stomach" (54).

The blurring of the line between childhood and adulthood in the camps is another recurrent motif because children in the camps are subjected to the same brutality as adults. Of Beaune-le Roland, Francine writes, "Since I no longer know what good times really are, I blossom, I skip ... and I take under my protection several children who have lost their parents." She says, "At Drancy I forgot my age. Very old, very young" (53). Francine's ability to nurture orphaned children enables her to emulate her mother, who is beloved

by other prisoners for the kindnesses she shows them as barracks supervisor. Some of these women send cards to Marcelle, even write her poetry: “She can empty bins and ladle soup/Impose silence when to bed we troop/Command and bring us light relief.... Even make our wardens pleased/And yet remain our chief” (39). They praise Marcelle’s kindness in a letter signed by 60 women. Francine is influenced by her mother’s generosity, stamina, and resourcefulness. Marcelle’s work as a nurse and supervisor takes her away from Francine during the day, and the little girl is left to fend for herself. We hear her anguish when Francine complains that she is only ten years old and wants her mother to herself.

In May 1944 mother and daughter are deported to the infamous Bergen-Belsen, where Anne Frank and her sister Margot die of typhus during the terrible winter of 1945. Thus far, Marcelle and Francine have been shielded by the protections of the Geneva Convention because they are related to a prisoner of war. Their heads have not been shaved. They are allowed to keep their luggage and wear street clothing instead of prisoners’ uniforms. They travel to Belsen third-class rather than by cattle car. But at Belsen they lose their protected status.

Upon arrival, mother and daughter try to sustain themselves and their creativity. Madame Christophe reads a children’s book written by her husband to a group of youngsters. Francine befriends a Dutch girl in spite of the language barrier that divides them. She learns some Yiddish from an Eastern European woman. But these efforts fade in the overwhelming struggle to survive.

*The stench of burning flesh. Dysentery, the draining of the bowels. Beatings. Typhus. So many lice that Francine’s head must be shaved. Freezing outside during morning roll calls. Corpses everywhere. A constant hunger, so fierce the women fight each other for bread to give to their children. Francine’s chest caves in, her bones stick out, and her stomach swells. In the barracks, a mother and daughter are being eaten alive by lice. A group of women try to rescue them, but it is too late, the mother dies. The women hear that in the men’s camp, the prisoners eat one of their dead.*

For Francine, the hunger and terror is so great she becomes angry at Marcelle. She reminds her mother every day she is hungry, so that Marcelle will not forget: “Mother, do you hear?” We do not hear the mother’s voice in reply, for what is there to say? This is Bergen-Belsen: “Dead bodies lie in every corner. The crematorium chimney smokes all the time” (84). Francine imagines she will escape by climbing inside her mother’s womb, the archetypal place of safety and protection.

How to survive? Marcelle finds a yellow enamel basin that she and Francine use for washing, eating, and relieving themselves. A Dutch man sees the bowl and attacks Marcelle. His wife explains that this is their basin and they want it back. Linguistic and social class differences threaten to derail diplomacy, but then Marcelle offers the couple some sugar in exchange for the bowl, which she desperately wants because it allows her and Francine to wash and relieve themselves in a place other than the barracks corner—prisoners are not al-

lowed to leave the barracks at night to use the latrine—such being the hygiene of Bergen-Belsen. Another survival strategy: the women imagine themselves eating croissants and drinking coffee in Paris, an example of Viktor Frankl's theory that the prisoners' capacity to imagine the past or the future helped keep hope alive. A small miracle: a baby is born in the Belsen hospital and Marcelle goes to visit the mother, bringing her a special gift—bit of chocolate she has saved. Such gestures, that nurture relationships and community, prevent the women from becoming *Musulman*, the term used in the camps to describe the walking dead—those who can no longer take care of themselves—who will soon be selected for the gas chambers.<sup>5</sup>

With the Russians advancing, Belsen is evacuated; prisoners are either shot or loaded on trains that are on their way to being blown up by explosives. Marcelle leaves her train to gather some grasses to eat and does not have the strength to return—another prisoner drags her aboard. Francine at first does not know her mother has boarded a different car and cries out that she cannot live without her mother, a *cri de coeur* telling her personal truth. The train, liberated by the Russians before it reaches its destination, a mined bridge, is abandoned, and, although Marcelle nearly dies of typhus in a Russian hospital, mother and daughter survive.

*From a World Apart* explores the hell of camp life through the eyes of a child who sees everything and forgets nothing. The conventional maternal role is expanded when the daughter becomes mother to her own mother. For example, Marcelle asks Francine whether she should trade her wedding band for more food for the two of them, and Francine tells her not to, saying Marcelle must keep the ring as a reminder of her marriage, an act of empathy and altruism unusual in someone so young. Francine becomes a woman at the age of twelve, having learned the responsibilities of mothering at an age when most girls are worried about their appearance and boyfriends. Clearly, the mutuality between mother and daughter, where both nurture one another, is critical to their survival.

Cordelia Edvardson's (1997) memoir, *Burned Child Seeks the Fire*, explores complex and painful contradictions of race, family, and identity. Born in 1929 to Elisabeth Langgasser, who was the daughter of a Catholic mother and a Jewish father, Cordelia is Jewish according to the 1935 Nuremberg Laws, while her mother Elisabeth is *mischlinge*, mixed race. The Nuremberg Laws defined a Jew as someone with three Jewish grandparents, whereas someone with two Jewish grandparents was classified as *mischlinge*.<sup>6</sup> Thus, according to the Nazis, mother and daughter belonged to different races at a moment when racial categorization determined whether you lived or died. Cordelia, who was born out of wedlock after Elisabeth had an affair with a married Jewish man, bears the double stigmas of illegitimacy and Jewishness, marking her as the embodiment of her mother's sexual transgression and a member of a despised race.

A sensitive child, Cordelia knows she is different from the rest of her

family. She writes, “The girl had of course always known that something was wrong with her. She wasn’t like the others. There was a mystery about her, a sinful, shameful, dark secret” (3). Her sense of alienation is evident in her use of the third person, “the girl,” to describe herself rather than the conventional first person of memoir. References to fairy tales (“Rumpelstiltskin,” “The Little Match Girl”), Greek myth (Ariadne and Persephone) and the New Testament (Christ’s suffering on the Cross) inscribe Cordelia’s attempts to make sense of her otherness. Raised as a Catholic by her grandmother, who lives with her and her mother, Cordelia speaks of her outcast status in the family by referring to Christ’s stigmata, believing she has been chosen to suffer for her family’s sins.

Sexuality and shame are conflated throughout Cordelia’s early childhood. Elisabeth is described as a seductress who alternately woos or ignores her daughter. Wishing to obliterate the family’s shameful Jewish ancestry, Elisabeth attempts to ingratiate herself with the echelons of Nazi society, taking Cordelia to a wedding where the bride’s father is a high-ranking SS officer. The elaborate wedding feast, with its fairy tale motifs celebrating courtship and marriage, is at once a scene of endangerment and enchantment so terrifying to the child Cordelia that she soils her pants. She asks herself what Elisabeth could have been thinking in taking her to such an event: “Was it the half-conscious, magical idea of protecting the daughter by leading her directly into the wolf’s den?” (32). Elisabeth also sends Cordelia to spend a summer holiday with a couple who are ardent Nazis and who call Cordelia a “filthy Jewish brat” when they discover she has been playing games of sexual exploration with one of their sons. Cordelia’s suspicions that Elisabeth lives in her own elaborate fantasy world are as close to an explanation of the mother’s disturbing behavior as we get.

Cordelia is desperate to connect to the provocative, enigmatic Elisabeth. Language becomes the vehicle through which Cordelia tries to establish this connection, signified through multiple references to fairy tales. The text opens by invoking an inverted fairy tale: “The girl knew she was the opposite of a princess; a dark, pudgy, mean, defiant little brat that didn’t live in an enchanted garden but in a dark apartment in Berlin-Siemenstadt.” Her mother is a writer and storyteller, and, for the young Cordelia, language and writing come to symbolize her desire for union with her mother: “The word became flesh in the fairy tales her mother told ... even in the chapters from her next novel the mother read to her four- to five-year-old daughter.... Later on, the girl found confirmation of this experience: that one can, literally, be nourished and sustained by the words of a poem” (8). The writing of the memoir is a maternal act that fuses memory, language, and love, evidenced in the dedication to three mothers—one biological (Elisabeth) and two “other mothers,” the women who nursed Cordelia back to life after Auschwitz.

As the noose begins to tighten for Jews in Germany, Elisabeth marries in a last-ditch attempt to legitimate herself and Cordelia. For her savior Elisabeth

chooses a man of irreproachable origins, a tall, blond, blue-eyed man whose Aryan looks and impeccable bloodline will hopefully redeem the family from the taint of Jewishness. Elisabeth and her new husband enjoy painting themselves in make-up and cross-dressing in courtiers' clothing, casting Cordelia as a page in their eroticized costume dramas. But the new husband's unsullied blood cannot save Cordelia. She is made to leave secondary school because she cannot show the *Ariernachweis*, the required proof of Aryan background, and attends a segregated school for Jews. She is dismissed from the Catholic Girls' Club, of which she has been an active member. Eventually, she is forced to wear the *Judenstern*, the yellow star, and to live with strangers, apart from her family.

The desperate Elisabeth arranges for Cordelia to be adopted by a married couple from Spain who work as servants for an elderly Bavarian aristocrat. But the authorities summon mother and daughter to Gestapo headquarters, saying the adoption is illegal and also treasonous, and, if Cordelia is not deported to the camps, her mother will be prosecuted for her crimes. Cordelia looks at Elisabeth's eyes, filled with "wordless, helpless pain," and writes that she had never felt closer to her mother. She offers herself to the Gestapo, and, in doing so, saves her mother's life.

*Once upon a time there was a little Jewish girl named Cordelia. Dark-haired, sad-eyed, she bore the signs of shame for all to see, much to the dismay of her mother. One day a band of wolves heard there was Jewish blood to be had nearby. They circled the family's cottage (the "squirrel nest," in the mother's words), demanding to be fed. Cordelia's mother tried to keep them at bay but ultimately allows them to kidnap her daughter, since the wolves must satisfy their quota of blood.*

Cordelia is sent to Auschwitz, where she seeks maternal protection from other young women. She befriends Elsa, who wears the black triangle of "an anti-social," a non-Jew who has been arrested for a crime, in this case prostitution. Elsa's bunkmate is jealous of her attentions to Cordelia. One Sunday, the two young women join forces and encourage Cordelia to approach Maria Mandel, the camp commandant, who strolls the grounds on weekends accompanied by her German shepherds, to ask for something to eat. As soon as Cordelia nears Mandel she realizes she has been set up. But it's too late to turn back, so Cordelia tells Mandel she is hungry. Surprisingly, Mandel laughs and tells Cordelia to go to the supply room, but the terrified girl runs straight for her barracks. Later she hears that Mandel enjoys turning her dogs on stray prisoners and watching while they chase them up against the electrified fence.

Cordelia survives the terror of Auschwitz and is sent to Stockholm to recover. In Stockholm she begins to experience a lifting of the fog of Auschwitz, where "(she) moved among the gray faces of the prisoners, their gray rags, the gray water-gruel and the gray bread." Auschwitz is a nightmare in gray and black, the "mute gray silence" and the "gray fog of nothingness" juxtaposed against Mengele's "impeccable black uniform and shining black boots." Cordelia's



journey back from the dead is imagined as a rebirth, complete with “amniotic fluid [flowing] unobstructed...” (91). She is reborn amidst the shocking contrast between the world of the living—restaurants, shops, fine food—and the dead—the night and fog of Auschwitz, writing, “I am here! I, who was full of lice and scabies and gnawed on raw potato skins, I, who didn’t even have a tin bowl to eat from because someone stole it from me, I am here!” (90). But in Stockholm, Cordelia must give birth to herself, though she is not alone.

Cordelia’s recovery is assisted by another survivor, a woman from Berlin she meets in a Swedish hospital, a psychotherapist: “She was a woman who had never given birth to children but who became the mother of many to whom she had given new birth: a woman endowed with the clear-sighted strength of a Jewish mother, but unsentimental and not at all prone to foster dependence in others.” This “othermother” revises the biological maternal text, positioning motherhood as work that involves caring and empowerment. By including a dedication to her own children, Cordelia acknowledges herself as a mother. She arranges a religious conversion for her children to become Swedish Jews. She journeys to Israel as a journalist during the Yom Kippur War and sees a wounded soldier who becomes a symbol of all the lost sons of war. The narrative ends with the words, “I am!”—a reference to the name God reveals to Moses in the Book of Exodus 3:14, naming herself a biblical matriarch, one of the mothers of Israel. Cordelia’s reclamation and redefinition of the maternal—seen in her bond with othermothers, her own empowered motherhood, and her self-definition as a mother of Israel—is especially important in the face of Elisabeth’s overweening narcissism. For, unbelievably, after the war is over, Elisabeth writes to Cordelia and asks her whether she will help Elisabeth with her next novel, which is about Auschwitz, by reading what Elisabeth has written and providing feedback about its accuracy and verisimilitude.

Taken together, the testimonies of Christophe and Edvardson map new maternal texts. Their insistence on motherhood as dynamic rather than static, complex and contradictory rather than monolithic and monochromatic, active rather than passive, socially mediated rather than biologically determined, demands that we shift the figure of the mother from its altar of iconic beatitude to a place where the wishes and desires of mothers can be expressed, where their voices can be heard.

*At the gates of Auschwitz stands a little girl.  
In her hand is a crumpled piece of paper, a photograph of her mother’s face.  
The little girl waits. She will wait forever.*

<sup>1</sup>Gisela Bok (1993) notes that the Nazis used women’s childbearing abilities to achieve their racist goals: “the surest method of birth control is death, and Jewish women were targeted accordingly” (162).

<sup>2</sup>Accounts vary as to how old children needed to be to be deemed strong enough for physical labor. Liana Millu (1986) tells the story of an eight-year-old boy in Auschwitz who survived the selection and was put to work. Ruth Kluger (2001) describes a selection during which she was required to give her age (12) and was selected for the gas chambers. At her mother's urging, she went through the selection line again and this time told the commandant she was 15. Thus her mother's ingenuity and resistance saved her life.

<sup>3</sup>"Othermothering" is defined as "acceptance of responsibility for a child not one's own." See O'Reilly (2004: 5).

<sup>4</sup>Rachel Blau DuPlessis (1985) describes reparenting as an artistic collaboration between mother and daughter in which the daughter enters a more dominant art form (poem, not garden) in order to make prominent the work both have achieved (94).

<sup>5</sup>Myrna Goldenberg (1995) notes that often women's socialization skills in the home helped them survive: "Women and girls found that this socialization, which included sewing and food preparation, provided avenues for survival that usually was unavailable to men and boys" (95). The recreation of home and family is a recurrent theme in Liana Millu's memoir, where she describes how the women in Birkenau light candles to celebrate Hanukkah.

<sup>6</sup>The *mischlinge* were a problematic category for the Nazis because of their mixed race status—part Jewish, part German. They seem to have encountered varying fates, depending on the amount of anti-Semitism in their communities. For an account of a *mischlinge* child who ended up in the camps, see Ursula Pawel's (2000) memoir.

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