

Mother of all Memory

The Loss of Mother and the Search for Self in Writing by American Children of Holocaust Survivors

*This essay offers a reading of two recent works by descendants of Jewish holocaust survivors, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Thane Rosenbaum's *Second Hand Smoke*, suggesting that the mother figures in these works play a crucial role in the authors' attempt to express anxiety about genealogy, inheritance and memory. These mothers are presented as deeply flawed parents, expressed primarily in their inability to nurture. Their lives are shrouded in mystery, as the trauma of the holocaust has obscured the memory of their earlier lives. These mothers of the second generation present a radical departure from the stereotypical over-nurturing, boundariless "Jewish Mother" of earlier American Jewish fiction in that these survivor-mothers are largely defined by their inability to nurture and by their marked detachment from their sons. I suggest that the quest to locate the "lost" or "damaged" mother, to recover her story, represents the authors' attempt to reclaim his own fragmented history. That the sons' quest for identity and self-knowledge is pursued through the matriline plays on a powerful motif in the traditional understanding of the maternal role in the genealogical transmission of Jewish identity. Though patriarchal in many respects, classical Jewish tradition traces Jewish ancestry matrilineally. Paradoxically, although the mothers in these texts cannot "mother" in the ways Jewish mothers stereotypically perform that role, they nonetheless continue to represent the biologically-driven, genealogical and inherited connection to the Jewish past.*

Children of holocaust survivors are heirs to their parents' trauma. Haunted by images of atrocity, photographs of murdered relatives, and the knowledge that their orphaned parents witnessed unspeakable evil, these modern-day "Children of Job" as Alan Berger has referred to them (Berger, 1997), are inheritors of an unimaginable family history.

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survivors, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1991) and Thane Rosenbaum's *Second Hand Smoke* (2000). I suggest that the mother figures in these works play a crucial role in the authors' attempt to express anxiety about genealogy, inheritance and memory. These mothers are presented as deeply flawed parents, expressed primarily in their inability to nurture. Their lives are shrouded in mystery: Anja Spiegelman's life is obscured by her suicide and destroyed diaries, and the life of Mila Katz by her fanatical commitment to secrecy about her past. These mothers of the second generation present a radical departure from the stereotypical over-nurturing, boundariless "Jewish Mother" of earlier American Jewish fiction¹ in that these survivor-mothers are largely defined by their inability to nurture and by their marked detachment from their sons. I suggest that the quest to locate the "lost" or "damaged" mother, to recover her story, represents the authors' attempt to reclaim their own fragmented history. That the sons' quest for identity and self-knowledge is pursued through the matriline plays on a powerful motif in the traditional understanding of the maternal role in the genealogical transmission of Jewish identity. Though patriarchal in many respects, classical Jewish tradition traces Jewish ancestry matrilineally. Paradoxically, although the mothers in these texts cannot "mother" in the ways Jewish mothers stereotypically perform that role, they nonetheless continue to represent the biologically-driven, genealogical and inherited connection to the Jewish past.

The second volume of Art Spiegelman's acclaimed *Maus* opens with a dialogue between Art and his wife in which the writer expresses anxiety about recording his father's story.

... I know this is insane, but I somehow wish I had been in Auschwitz *with* my parents so I could really know what they lived through!... I guess it's *some* kind of guilt about having had an easier life than they did ... sigh ... I feel so inadequate trying to reconstruct a reality that was worse than my darkest dreams. (Spiegelman, 1991: 14, 16).

Spiegelman's (1991) fantasy about being in a concentration camp with his parents so that he could know their suffering first hand speaks volumes about the peculiar dilemma of second-generation witnesses to the holocaust. Spiegelman shares his parents' legacy, but at the same time does not share it—his creative imagination can only take him so far in recovering his parents' past, which he conflates with his own.

Novelist Thane Rosenbaum opens his semi-autobiographical *Second Hand Smoke* with a similar, though more darkly expressed sentiment. Introducing the novel's protagonist, Duncan Katz, Rosenbaum writes:

He was a child of trauma. Not of love, or happiness, or exceptional wealth. Just trauma. And nightmare, too... Splintered, disembodied memories that once belonged to them were now his alone, as though

their two lives couldn't exhaust the outrage. The pain lived on as a family heirloom of unknown origins. What he saw he couldn't exactly identify; what he remembered was not something he actually ever knew. It was all interior—like a prison, like a cage. (2000: 1)

While Spiegelman wishes he were confined in Auschwitz with his parents, Rosenbaum asserts that in effect, he was—that the painful legacy of the *Shoah* is a prison that transcends generations.

Painfully aware of the odds against their birth, second-generation writers like Spiegelman and Rosenbaum are compelled to bear witness—to tell their family's story and to preserve the memory of the *Shoah*. This story is their inheritance. But, how to bear witness to events one did not experience? As Melvin Jules Bukiet writes in his recent anthology of writings by descendents of survivors, "It's our job to tell the story, to cry, 'Never Forget!' despite the fact that we can't remember a thing" (2002: 16). "Memory," he writes, "is the mantra of all the institutions that reckon with the Holocaust, but memory is an inaccurate term. For anyone who wasn't *there*, on either side of the barbed wire, Jew or German, thinking about the Holocaust is really an act of the imagination. All we know is how little we know" (Bukiet, 2002: 17).

The last decades of the twentieth century saw a proliferation of such creative imaginings by second-generation survivors in America, writers whose Jewish, European-born parents survived the Nazi concentration camps of World War II to rebuild their lives and raise families in the United States. While Holocaust memoirs like those of Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi have become standard classics of Jewish literature, narratives voiced by the children of survivors in this second generation of Holocaust literature now bring new and important issues to the fore. Struggling to tell stories deemed unspeakable by the first generation, and unknowable by the second, second-generation literature attempts to recover a past it paradoxically knows both intimately and not at all.²

While psychological profiles of the "2-G"³ have appeared since the 1970's, many of which pathologized the "child of survivor" syndrome, scholars are beginning to turn their attention to critical analysis of the emerging genre of creative works by this second generation.⁴ Comparative work analyzing literature by second-generation Jewish and second-generation German survivors is also an important trend, only now in its infancy.

Maus

Maus is perhaps the best-known work by a second-generation writer. Written in the style of a comic book, the narrative self-consciously moves back and forth between the "present" in which Arty records his father's story of his life before and during the war, and the "past" as Spiegelman (1991) puts his father's story into pictures. The work is ostensibly the story of Vladek Spiegelman, separated from his wife, Anja, during the war and reunited afterward in

Stockholm. While Vladek's story of survival frames the narrative of the book, Arty's relationship with his aging father and his pressing need to record his story also provides significant dramatic tension.

However, it is the unavailability of Anja's story, along with Arty's anxiety about recording it, which haunts both volumes of the work. Anja's suicide is mentioned in passing in the opening sequence of chapter one; her history of mental illness is later established in Vladek's description of her hospitalization for severe post-partum depression after the birth of their first child, before the war. The fullest description of Anja's suicide comes in the 4-page, unnumbered insert in volume 1, entitled "Prisoner on the Hell Planet", excerpted from Spiegelman's earlier work, in which the author recounts the events surrounding his mother's death. Spiegelman is depicted in prison garb—not unlike that worn by concentration camp victims. The sequence is a powerful depiction of the guilt and anger he feels as a result of his mother's death. In the sequence, Anja is pictured as depressed and pathetic—needing affirmation of her son's love late at night. With dark, heavy eyes, wearing a bathrobe that she clenches tightly closed across her breasts, symbolically withholding their nurturing power, she enters Arty's room asking, "You ... still ... love ... me ... don't you?" In response, Arty turns away, "resentful of the way she tightened the umbilical cord" (so that he is strangled, rather than nourished by it), and Anja walks out and closes the door.

The sequence concludes:

Well Mom if you're listening.... Congratulations! You've committed the perfect crime.... You put me here (in prison) shorted all my circuits...cut my nerve endings..and crossed my wires!... You MURDERED me mommy, and you left me here to take the rap!!!
(Spiegelman, 1991: 4 of un-numbered insert)

Arty is left imprisoned by his guilt and his rage, and his mother is depicted as a murderer. Instead of giving him life, she gives death and imposes a death sentence. The roles of prisoner/murderer are played out through a powerful inversion—Arty takes his parents' place as victim, and his mother is the perpetrator, positioned alongside the Nazis. But, Arty is also complicit with the perpetrator here, left to "take the rap" for his mother's homicide/suicide. We also learn in this sequence that Arty spent three years in a mental hospital—establishing a further identification with his mother's own history of mental illness.

Having expressed rage toward his mother, Arty also charges his father with murder when he discovers that Vladek has destroyed his mother's diaries containing her memories of the war. As Amy Hungerford has noted in her essay on Holocaust theory in, *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, though Vladek has not actually killed anyone, his destruction of Anja's record of her experiences at Auschwitz is somehow equivalent to the kinds of destruction that took

place at Auschwitz: as she says, the destruction of the representation is equal to the destruction of a person (Hungerford, 1999: 102). The destruction of Anja's diaries renders her voice mute—her past, her story is unknowable, like the story of so many of those who did not survive the war.⁵

Although Art's project unfolds as the writing of history, recording Vladek's authoritative testimony of his experiences during the Holocaust, the books are ironically haunted by a lack of knowledge of what happened: the mystery of what happened to lost relatives, to those who did not survive. This absence is symbolized by his mother's absence—the maternal voice is utterly silenced in this narrative as a result of the diaries' destruction. This absence drives Art's thirst to know, and yet the experience is unknowable precisely because so many voices have been silenced. Anja's suicide is a mystery in the same order. Her diaries burned, her voice silenced, Art will never know her. In this sense, she represents all the victims, and thus all that Art cannot know about his family history, powerfully represented as feminine. This pronounced absence is profoundly present throughout the work, and although the narrative centers around the father-son relationship, it is the mother-son relationship that is the true source of dramatic tension.

Second Hand Smoke

Rosenbaum's *Second Hand Smoke* (2000), is the story of Mila Katz. In many respects, Duncan Katz' quest to uncover his mother's hidden past in the course of the narrative is also a quest to know the self. Although both of his parents survived the holocaust, Rosenbaum's story is wholly unconcerned with Duncan's father, Yankee Katz, and instead focuses on Mila who, as Rosenbaum writes, "would not, could not mother." Here, it is Duncan's father who is curiously silent, as Rosenbaum brings to life a formidable woman in the character of Mila. Her inability to nurture is established immediately. After the opening section of the prologue in which Duncan is designated a child of "trauma" (as opposed to a child of human beings or of "woman"), Rosenbaum writes, "Without the workings of a will or a bequest, he had received an inheritance that he would rather have done without, the kind of legacy he'd just as soon give back. But it doesn't work that way. What his parents gave him, he couldn't pass off on someone else. He couldn't even explain or understand what it was that he had" (2000: 1). This passage speaks to the impotency of Duncan's legacy. His parents symbolically castrate him, in effect render him infertile and unable to pass on his inherited genealogy, conditioning him to embody the most abominable Jewish sin—that of childlessness.

The imagery of inadequate mothering continues in the first chapter of the book. In describing his relationship with Mila, Duncan says,

It wasn't so much that the maternal bond had been severed, but rather that the fibers had never quite taken hold. It was as though Mila had delivered him into this world, and once that was done, once the

umbilical cord went the way of fluids and placenta and all the other lifeless litter of birth—there was nothing linking them together other than the coincidence of a common address. (Rosenbaum, 2000: 20)

Duncan denies the biological ties that connect him to his mother—and nonetheless, his entire quest for self is traced through his mother's life. Mila raised Duncan to be tough—a black belt in karate—so that he would have the survival skills necessary to confront any challenge. Secrecy was the prized value in their household, and no friend or companion was allowed to get too close, lest too much be revealed. Mila even managed to conceal her own past from her family, never telling Duncan about Isaac, the half-brother she abandoned in Poland, and never discussing the details of her own lost adolescence. Although Duncan manages to separate himself from the damaged and loveless family that raised him, he becomes a professional hunter of Nazi war criminals, carrying much of Mila's rage with him into the world.

The use of visceral, genealogical symbolism is also present in the narrative of Duncan's circumcision, also in the opening chapter of the book. Here, Rosenbaum employs important Jewish symbols to make a point about his parents inability to fulfill their roles. At Duncan's *bris*, Mila insists that her baby be deprived the soothing elixir of a few drops of wine, saying, "he won't need it" and "I want him to feel it." It is worthwhile to note the irony that *mila* is actually the hebrew word for "circumcision." After the ritual, Mila cannot hold her baby close to comfort him, and carries him away at arm's distance from her body, her head turned from him in disgust. "Beads of blood dripped from his circumcised penis as if he were a stone cherub in a Florentine fountain...the mark of Duncan's manhood and the fresh bond with his God there for all to see" (Rosenbaum, 2000: 16).

This rite of circumcision that opens the novel calls attention to the role genealogy and inheritance play in the narrative as a whole. In it, the covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people is inscribed on the male penis as a sign of fertility, virility and continuity. The *bris* is a traditional ritual that affirms and reinforces patrilineage (Jay, 1995; Hoffman, 1996). According to Jewish tradition, it is a father who is obligated to circumcise his son, although in most communities this obligation is discharged to a *mohel*, one who performs Jewish ritual circumcision. But, in Rosenbaum's story, instead of Yankee, it is Mila who takes the leading role in Duncan's *bris*, wanting him to feel the pain of the incision in order to build strength of character and transmit to him an American, rather than a Jewish, variety of masculinity.

At the *bris*, Mila is haunted by memories of Isaac, the baby we later learn she abandoned in Poland after a different type of ritual bloodshed. In an excruciating scene toward the end of the book, Rosenbaum describes Mila's last encounter with her first son before abandoning him in Poland as she tattoos her Auschwitz identification number on his tiny arm—a physical marker of his heritage. Mila transmitted the legacy of the *shoah* to her first son

in this brutal, cruel act, etching the numbers into his skin in an act that positions her alongside the Nazis guilty of this same crime. Those numbers had become her identity and this was the legacy she chose to leave with her abandoned son, much in the way circumcision initiates a baby boy into the Jewish people with an act of bloodshed once enacted upon the father and then on the next generation.

The juxtaposition of these images is striking: the *bris*, a Jewish ritual in which the father establishes kinship with his son by inscribing the mark of God's covenant on the skin of his penis, is a rite of passage concerned with genealogy and inheritance of tradition. When Mila inscribes her mark on her first born, she makes a very different statement about genealogy and inheritance, one that inverts the parental roles of mother/father and links her young son forever to her pain through this violent inscription in the flesh. Further, that Mila herself builds an association between Duncan's *bris* and Isaac's blood, suggests that Rosenbaum, too, wants us to see these ritual moments as inversions of the traditional Jewish rite. But, what sort of covenant is enacted here? What legacy does Mila transmit to her newborn sons? The inheritance she passes on seems to be one of pain.

The opening line of Chapter 2 announces, "A Jewish Mother was about to die. Cancer, what else? Another life claimed, a victory for the forces of an underachieving anatomy" (Rosenbaum, 2000: 17). When Mila dies of cancer, her secrets begin to unravel and Duncan begins to piece together fragments of his mother's life. Once the silence is in part broken, Duncan realizes just how little he knows about his own family history. He then begins a passionate search for information about her life, especially the child she abandoned in Poland—his half-brother—shortly after the war. As he returns to Eastern Europe, Duncan's journey into Poland parallels Mila's journey out, as if Duncan returns to Poland to reclaim what his mother left behind.

Like Anja Spiegelman's silence, Mila's secrecy symbolizes all that is unknown about the *Shoah*. Duncan is deprived of his own history and his quest to know his mother's story—to uncover her hidden past—is a quest to know the self, to achieve what Alan Berger has termed a "*tikkun atzmi*" reparation, restoration of the broken self. In the case of both women, their mothering is called into question even before the trauma of Nazi persecution damaged their lives. The birth of Anja's first child resulted in her treatment for post-partum depression, establishing her as a woman whose ability to mother was compromised early on. Mila's first experience of childbirth culminates in the cold acts of mutilation and abandonment as she asserts her own need for survival over those of her child. In both cases, these mothers fail to demonstrate the level of self-sacrifice associated with the stereotypical "Jewish Mother." And yet, these deeply flawed mothers hold the weight of their sons' Jewish identities, linking them, for better or for worse, to their inherited past.

In many respects, this situation resembles the dilemma faced by real Jewish women in the post-enlightenment period in both Europe and the United

States. Charged with the duty of anchoring the Jewish home and serving as the primary transmitter of Jewish cultural values, the Jewish mother was a pivotal figure in stereotypes of “The Jewish Family” that developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Hyman, 1989, 1995). And yet, without access to traditional Jewish education, what kind of legacy could Jewish women pass on to their children? Paula Hyman has discussed at length the evidence that Jewish women bore the blame for the perceived loss of Jewish identity that came along with Jews’ assimilation into western culture. Increased assimilation was traced to the Jewish mother’s failure to transmit a sturdy identity to her children. Her work points to the various ways in which negative stereotyping of Jewish women in various forms of literature and popular culture might be read as expressions of this anxiety.

Indeed, both Anja and Mila are the symbolic anchors of their respective families. And yet, their ability to play this role is paradoxically compromised by their innate unavailability as mothers and lack of access to basic nurturing skills. Nonetheless, this unavailability embodies the dramatic tension that drives each son to pursue his Jewish past. In this respect, the complex portrayal of mothers in these two works by second-generation holocaust survivors expresses a very particular tension. On the one hand, these depictions seem to up-end typical mother stereotypes found in American Jewish literature. And yet, on the other hand, like those earlier stereotypes, these works use the mother figure to express anxiety about the genealogical transmission of Jewish identity after the holocaust—in particular, the painful gap between voices of the survivors and their progeny.

¹Many contemporary theorists have studied the portrayal of Jewish mothers in fiction by both male and female authors. Among them are, Sara Pesce (2000); Lois Lyles (1999); Elvira Grözinger, (1998); Ruth Ginsburg (1997); Janet Handler Burstein (1994); Todd Pitock (1995); Anita Norich (1996); Susanne Klingenstein (1992); Barbara Frey Waxman (1988); Ruth Adler (1987, 1977); G. Rothbell (1986); Erika Duncan (1983); Jacqueline A. Mintz (1978).

²A recent review essay in *The New Republic* critiqued this particular motif in the writing of second generation holocaust survivors. Ruth Franklin (2004) writes, “Driven by ambition or envy or narcissism, a number of the children of survivors... have constructed elaborate literary fictions that serve to elevate their own childhood traumas above and even beyond the sufferings of their parents”(31).

³This is a popular “nickname” for second-generation Holocaust survivors. Bukiet (2002) seems to be the first to coin its use in writing.

⁴There is a growing scholarship on literature of second-generation Holocaust survivors. See also, Helen Epstein (1998); Catherine Hezer (2002); Marianne Hirsch (1997); Eva Hoffman (2004); Sophia Lehmann (1998); Michelle A. Friedman (2004).

⁵On the motif of muteness, see Sara R. Horowitz (1997).

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