

***Holocaust Mothers and Daughters: Family, History, and Trauma*, Federica K. Clementi (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2013), xviii + 370 pp., hardcover \$85.00, paperback \$40.00, electronic version available.**

In his slim but unforgettable volume *This Way for the Gas Ladies and Gentlemen*, Polish author and journalist Tadeusz Borowski tells the story of a mother arriving in Auschwitz with her small child. She quickly grasps that her only chance of remaining alive is to physically distance herself from her child, as small children and their mothers are sent to their death. “She is young, healthy, good-looking, she wants to live,” writes Borowski. But the child runs after the mother, wailing: “Mama, mama, don’t leave me!” “Pick up your child, woman!” she is told, “It’s not mine, sir, not mine!” she shouts hysterically and runs on, covering her face with her hands. “She wants to hide, she wants to reach those who will not ride the trucks, those who will go on foot, those who will stay alive.” Ultimately, the mother is caught and sent to the truck with her child—to death. “That’s the way to deal with degenerate mothers,” states the SS man overseeing the procedure.¹ The scene is unnatural and disturbing, and goes against all expectations: the mother does not act as mothers are supposed to, but abandons her child during the child’s final moments. After all, mothers are meant to remain with their children no matter what the cost, even to the point of sacrificing their own lives.

How accurate is this biologically or socially contrived expectation, particularly with regard to life-and-death crises? In her poignant and path-breaking volume, Federica K. Clementi probes the mother-daughter relationship in the context of the Holocaust, exploring it through the critical perspective of Jewish family dynamics. Questioning the idealization of the Jewish mother-daughter relationship as it was depicted during and after the war, Clementi uses a psychoanalytic lens to view this often conflictual relationship.

Clementi deconstructs the depiction of the mother-daughter relationship using six memoirs, some less familiar to the English reader than others: Edith Bruck, a Hungarian-born writer and poet who at age 11 witnessed her mother’s murder at Auschwitz; Ruth Klüger, who survived Auschwitz together with her mother; Sarah Kofman who writes about being torn between her mother and the non-Jewish Frenchwoman who saved their lives; Milena Roth, a Kindertransport refugee in England whose British foster mother and savior was a friend of her biological mother (Roth’s mother perished in Auschwitz); Helena Janeczek, a “Second Generation” child who was brought up as a Jew in postwar Germany; and, finally, Anne Frank, who describes in her diary the difficulties of her relationship with her mother during the time when the family was in hiding.

In each section, Clementi expands upon the particular mother-daughter relationship described, analyzing the complexities of what she refers to as the “vortex of pain” within the writer’s Holocaust-related experiences and family relationships. Among the means by which the author probes the narratives is the deconstruction

of what Clementi terms “the hidden patterns in the mother-daughter plot,” particularly during the Holocaust (p. 42). Her goal in exploring this relationship is to better understand the human aspect of Holocaust survival in general, and in particular the plight of mothers and daughters.

To assess the author’s success in this endeavor, we must examine the various literary, textual, and contextual aspects involved. The first test of such a book is its style. This work is easy to read. Clementi’s style is straightforward, and she rarely lapses into the long paragraphs, punctuated by literary jargon, that tend to make works in this field impossible for uninitiated readers to understand. She weaves her narrative by going back and forth between the personal and the general, the individual and the collective, the literary and the historical, fleshing out descriptions and taking the reader along on the adventure of analysis.

The next test is textual coherency. Are there elements that bring the various texts examined in the book together into one coherent narrative? Despite the disparity of experiences portrayed in the various chapters and in the lives of the various protagonists, Clementi finds a number of patterns related to the symbolism of memory objects; the deeper significance of food as more than physical sustenance; the nature of obedience; and the strain of living in the homes of strangers. By exploring these patterns, she melds the six narratives into one coherent text.

The last test is that of retrospection. Are the book’s main thrust and conclusions easily grasped? This is a more difficult question to address, as Clementi does not end with a summarizing chapter. She concludes rather with an epilogue devoted primarily to charting the life of another daughter swept up in the Holocaust—the painter Charlotte Salomon, who perished in Auschwitz. The epilogue addresses a number of the issues arising from the “women’s texts” (to use Clementi’s term) appearing in the book; however it is not a synthesizing conclusion in the traditional sense.

The only possible deficiency of the book, for me, was that the title did not accurately reflect the text. Although it is entitled *Holocaust Mothers and Daughters*, the book is actually a more one-sided examination of “what daughters thought about their mothers, during and after the Holocaust.” Nowhere in the book do we have texts written by mothers, which would give the other side of the picture. We do not hear the mothers’ voices, their feelings, their fears and ways of coping with the tempestuous relationships described by their daughters. Anything said by a mother in any of the pairs is presented in the text by the daughter, from her own viewpoint. In this way, Clementi turns mothers into subjects of, but not vocal participants in, this examination. This limitation consequently reinforces the social and cultural stereotypes of maternal behavior as characterized by sacrifice and selflessness. Borowski’s description of a mother’s entirely human actions in trying to save her own life contradict the expectation of willingness to sacrifice one’s life to die with one’s child. Clementi’s presentation does not afford us a view of this generic “mother” as a human being with normal personal desires or self-preservation instincts. *Holocaust Mothers and*

Daughters might better have been entitled *Holocaust Daughters View Their Mothers*, and one can only hope that the capable author of this volume will take up the challenge and eventually present us with a study showing the other side of the equation.

Note

1. “This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen,” from Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1967). The work was first published in Polish in *Wybór opowiadań* (Poland: PIW, 1959).

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Armenian History and the Question of Genocide, Michael M. Gunter (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2011), xi + 195 pp., hardcover \$110, paperback \$105.00, electronic edition available.

The 100th anniversary of the initiation of the Armenian Genocide offers an opportune time to review Michael Gunter’s latest arguments that the mass deaths that the destruction of most of the Armenian community of the Ottoman Empire did not constitute genocide. The work under review offers neither a re-reading of the now-vast secondary literature nor a fresh study of previously misunderstood or unknown archival documentation (the author seems unequipped linguistically for the latter task). Rather, it offers yet one more return to the argument that Robert Melson aptly criticized as the “provocation thesis.”

This thesis assigns responsibility for the mass deaths to both the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) that then led the Ottoman State, and the Armenian revolutionaries who had been seeking autonomy within the Empire. The latter, in this argument, figure as provocateurs: Armenian radicals and nationalists in thrall to their Russian masters. Indeed, in Gunter’s reading little blame falls to the CUP—it applies rather to the general coarseness of Ottoman governance.

“Without whitewashing what happened to the Armenians,” Gunter promises “an objective analysis of the Turkish point of view on the subject” (p. ix). Rather early on, however, he announces that his study will draw on the writings of Jacques Sémelin, Hovhannes Katchaznoui (first prime minister of independent Armenia, 1918–1919), and K.S. Papazian, whom he rather generously labels a historian. None of these three, however, has in fact produced work that can be used fruitfully to examine the Genocide or its afterlife, although Sémelin, a serious scholar, has written about political manipulation of the issue of genocide in general.

Yet anyone inclined to expect that the present book is an “apology” for Turkey, or even a new contribution to the field of studies denying that there was an Armenian Genocide (for what I consider to be a thoroughly unconvincing recent