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A transnational writer

1 The shadow of history lurks behind Helga Schneider's 2001 memoir *Lasciami andare, madre!* (*Let Me Go*), a text that illustrates the oblivion regarding the suffering and grief of the Germans that W. G. Sebald in *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (*On the Natural History of Destruction*) and Gunther Grass's "Ich erinnere mich..."[1] disclosed after many years from the end of World War II. The openness of Sebald's and Grass's autobiographical narratives have in time created a space in which legacies of perpetration could be exposed after years of denial. Subsequently, a spate of *Familienromane* or *Generationenromane* responded to the earlier texts of the so-called *Väterliteratur* and commented upon "the history of engagement (and non-engagement) with Germany's legacy of perpetration"[2] by unveiling how shame and guilt were feelings actively repressed in the effort to resume an ordinary life. While such repression is often witnessed in many survivors of the Shoah, similarly to that observed in war survivors, the added psychological layer these works expose is the emotional hardship of coping with the "loving attachment"[3] that narrators feel for their relatives, usually fathers, as men's historical role in Nazi politics was officially and juridically recognized.

2 Schneider's contribution to the transnational literary dialogue between Italian and German cultures certainly goes beyond her intimate narrative of the abnormality of

her life as the daughter of a female *Schutzstaffel* (SS) volunteer, and elicits ontological as well as ethical questions. Marked by the same theme of the mother-daughter conflict as Helena Janeczek's *Lezioni di tenebra*[4], analyzed by Cristina Mauceri among others[5], *Let Me Go* unveils Schneider's personal experience as the daughter of an *Ausseherin*. The legacy of the mother's acts haunts the daughter and defines her life, from rejecting her motherland, moving to Italy in 1963, and burying her mother tongue[6], to privileging the use of Italian[7]. Schneider's detachment from the memory of a woman who literally disappeared from her life is paralleled only by her geographical displacement. Schneider's emotional response about her anguished relationship with her family's past[8] differs from both contemporary German and Austrian narratives of other children and from those of transnational (exophonic) writers living in Italy, such as Helena Janeczek and Edith Bruck. In a sense, we might infer that Schneider's position as a transnational writer adds capital value to *Väterliteratur* studies and moves into the genre of *Familienromane* as she probes the normative notion of familial relations when mothers, rather than fathers, become politically involved whilst living outside the society that generated both a historical extremity like the Holocaust and her family of provenance.

3 This paper analyzes the ways in which the intricate array of emotions between a mother and a daughter composing *Let Me Go* problematizes clichés of forgiveness. Hate and forgiveness, trust and mistrust, fear and disgust, guilt and loyalty weigh upon this memoir, and these emotional couplings could easily fit into Thomas Medicus's definition of women's writing of the Holocaust and Nazi Germany as an *Archiv der Gefühle*[9]: an archive of feelings[10]. But the moral extremity of the Holocaust also elicits ethical questions about the granting of forgiveness for offences that are considered unforgivable: abandoning one's own children and working in a camp for the Nazi *social project* of annihilation of the Jews. In fact, despite the explicit statement Schneider makes of having forgiven her mother, the text appears to tell us otherwise. My argument is that she entrusts her text with the task of problematizing her explicit declaration of forgiveness in order to finally tell the truth about her silenced family history. *Let Me Go* reveals the power of literature to probe the evidence of implicit and explicit expressions of forgiveness. As Donna Jingdan Yang and Melody M. Chao state: "[a]lthough both expressions intend to restore the relationship between the victim and the offender, explicit forgiveness conveys more opposition and confronts the wrongdoing more directly relative to implicit forgiveness"[11].

4 Schneider stresses features of her mother's personality in what I call a careful manipulation of our own reading of Traudi's actions, in order to probe her own impossibility of working through the trauma of both roles played out by Traudi in life, namely (a) a failed one as a mother and (b) a highly successful one as an individual fighting for her Nazi beliefs. It is my argument that the readers' involvement in the textual reception is steered by Schneider's display of evidence with which she probes her mother's culpability *just as hers* at forgiving her and solicits our questioning of clichés on the propension to forgiveness of children, especially female. Her interpretation of the events in *Let Me Go* seeks our active participation at probing private facts that we consider to be forgivable. Berel Lang's works on forgiveness[12] partly compose my theoretical framework in my examination of how the moral fabric of *Let Me Go* rests not upon forgiveness *per se*, but, rather, against the background of the contextualized and pragmatic situation elicited by the Jewish Holocaust/Shoah (along much the same lines as Primo Levi's statements on forgiveness). *Let Me Go*

problematizes all morality clichés while laying bare the long-lasting consequences of a mother's misdeeds that force a daughter, with the tool of her writing, to challenge what would otherwise be a right moral action for a daughter: to forgive. At the end of our reading, we are left with the impression that Helga is asking us to absolve *her* for her inability to forgive Traudi's crimes against humanity. The skillfully organized range of rhetorical techniques that compose the text confirms Schneider's skills as a writer laying bare the power of words to expose the basest moral sins: from interior monologues expressing her constant doubt to the incorporation of authentic historical evidence from the Simon Wiesenthal Center, she leads a veritable trial against her mother while stating that she has forgiven her. *Let Me Go* acts as a fictional courtroom in which Schneider stages her family silenced drama, with us readers as its jurors.

Emotional displacement: children of war criminals

5 *Let Me Go* describes writer Helga Schneider's second and last encounter in 1998 with her mother, Traudi. This meeting was unexpected as Schneider, after their traumatic meeting in 1971, was unyielding in her decision never to see her mother again. However, upon a request in 1998 from Traudi's only friend, Gisela Freihorst[13], things change. Helga meets up in Vienna with her cousin Eva, the daughter of Margarete, Helga's paternal aunt, who arrives from Berlin to provide her with psychological support. The chronotope is fixed in Vienna over two hours on Tuesday, October 6, 1998, but its flashbacks shift between three specific years that marked Schneider's existence: 1941, 1971, 1998. Nineteen forty-one was the year in which Traudi left her family to enroll in the SS; 1971 is when Helga brings her 5-year old son Renzo to visit her mother in Vienna; and 1998 is the time of her last visit to Traudi, who subsequently dies three years later.

6 Incessant questions to her mother are accompanied by Schneider's own reflections and flashbacks, actualized in interior monologues that incorporate the historical information that the writer acquired over the years, both on her mother's work in the camp and on documented Nazi atrocities. The lack of a real dialogue between the two women is enhanced by the pace of the questions and answers. After a lifetime spent apart, it is apparent how each woman's subjective narrative about the other's destiny runs in parallel and is never set to meet. For example, to cope with her loss, Traudi speaks of a daughter who died quite young (Helga), while the daughter virtually buried her mother after their 1971 meeting[14]. Flashbacks to Helga's mother's abusive behavior[15] mesh with three key elements shadowing the text: Helga's expectations at reconciliation prior to their final meeting; Traudi perceived as a Scheherazade of Nazism, as she recounts parts of her job in the camps to keep her daughter from leaving; and the last one concerning the impossibility of true forgiveness. Through this deeply layered narrative, the daughter traces a partial account of Traudi's life that chronicles her marriage and the abandonment of her family to follow Hitler's cause, while making conjectures on her complete loneliness and isolation after the Nuremberg trial. Traudi's public historical role and testimony – a position enhanced by the 1946 trial and by the names of historical figures presented not as distant ones but as individuals with whom she entertained work relations (Rudolph Hoess and Adolf Eichmann) – assumes even graver consequences for the daughter who feels the moral burden of her mother's crimes.

7 The hybridity of Schneider's works manifests a quality that cannot be reduced to the intersection of registers and languages or to the interspersing of fiction with non-fiction. Rather, its peculiarity lies in the author's layered experiential testimony of her geographical and familial displacement. Hybridity in *Let Me Go* lies more markedly in the careful incorporation of quotes from non-fictional works like *Die Waffen-SS* edited by Wolfgang Schneider[16], survivor Eugen Kogon's 1946 *Der SS-Staat: Das System der deutschen Konzentrationzlager* (also used by Primo Levi) and perpetrator Rudolph Hoess's memoirs. These quotes create a path for the references that Schneider read in order to make sense of her mother's experience and to try to contextualize it. After her reading of Hoess's memoirs, in which the war criminal boasts of his efficient methods and optimization of the elimination process, she "found [herself] thinking once more, with a mixture of dismay and disbelief, about the grandiloquence of [her mother's] account of things"[17]. Rather than triggering empathy in her daughter, Traudi's answers prompt the textual discharge of information that Schneider acquired. All the information collected over the years confirms her abandonment and casts an indelible cloud over Helga's family and its legacy. But, as we know, this is only one aspect of Schneider's story. Not only was she abandoned, but she was discarded in the name of an ideology that bears the guilt of millions of innocent victims, upon whom a second war was unofficially declared: an undeclared war, the one against the Jews that, as her memories in *Io, piccola ospite del Führer* demonstrate, was of general knowledge in Germany and Austria, even to the child she was at the time. Traudi "was only one of thousands and thousands of women who had allowed themselves to be swept along by the Nazis"[18]. As Francesco Ardolino states, this book is the "implacable account of a dialogue already doomed from the start"[19] that grapples with the concept of "distance, of the irreconcilable fracture with a childhood world that has revealed itself to be crowded with monsters"[20]. Her naïve expectations of a good meeting with her mother soon give way to despair, and dealing with her mother seems, once again, an unmanageable ordeal:

> I feel as though I'm at the center of a stage, the involuntary protagonist of an inferior melodrama. The scene strikes me as vulgar and absurd. *Nothing is like I imagined it.* I wish I was somewhere else; I wish I'd never come here. This woman, my mother, doesn't deserve the trouble I have taken; she's not worthy of my good intentions.[21]

8 In these four lines, Schneider reveals the ethical burden that weighs upon her in the act of retelling. "Nothing is like I imagined" incapsulates the quandary of the grotesque meeting. The ethical predicament of retelling a story becomes even more burdensome when the protagonists of lacerating family dynamics meet. "Nothing is like I imagined" makes all her previous hopes of reconciliation, all her "good intentions", rather useless.

9 In this respect, Schneider's position is quite dissimilar to that of Albert Speer's daughter[22], Margret Nissen, and other German children writers of the *Generationenromane*. A life of privileges afforded to Nissen, despite her father's role in Nazism, reflects the broad coalition of silence about the Nazi past. As Luhmann stresses, Nissen did not want to know the details of her father's actions, thus practicing what Shoshana Felman calls "the passion for ignorance"[23] which resounds in Nissen's quote: "When all is said and done, I will need to continue to distinguish between a *historical* and a *private father*; only then can I live with my memory of him (222)"[24]. Emotional responses to the responsibility of parents come to the fore as confused reflections deny and expose them at once in a contradictory yet human array of

feelings. The point of dissonance between Schneider's writing and the memoirs of other German children, like Nissen, perhaps lies here. Unlike those who remained in their Fatherland, who were stigmatized for the past of their fathers but were nevertheless integrated into the societal fabric of postwar Germany, Schneider does not experience the conflicting feelings of attachment and shame for her war-criminal parent. Unlike Nissen, Schneider cannot avail herself of living with Traudi after the war and her time in jail. Schneider's memoir cannot follow the same narrative and emotional path as Nissen's, as Traudi's desertion from her family constitutes a veritable trope of a private, yet indelible inhuman stain[25] that prevents Schneider from having the luxury of choosing, as Nissen does, between "the historical" and "the public" figure of her parent. While Nissen's strategy is one of negation that obliterates Speer's *historical* role of perpetrator in order to favor his private one as her father in her memoir, triggering what Luhmann assimilates to her "active refusal to know"[26], Schneider cannot afford such privilege because Traudi's identity is not split into a loving mother and a terrible public figure. Furthermore, the simultaneous act of explaining and refusing to understand what triggered her mother's actions betrays a physical distance in the daughter that other German children did not disclose in their narratives. Unlike them, Schneider never lived with her mother, with the exception of her first four years (apparently not marked either by good memories). The biological bonding was not healed by time spent together after the war: by a time in which wounds could be mended. Nothing, including Traudi's old age, could save the "private" Traudi in Helga's eyes. She is a war criminal whose private crime against her family generated – as in a horrific ripple effect – those committed against all dismembered families of the Holocaust. Unquestionably, and despite her reiterated physical resemblance with her mother, Helga feels closer to the victims than to Traudi. Schneider's role of indirect witness is created due to her own mother's proactive participation in the Nazi *Endlösung* (Final Solution), but is also something she has *chosen* for herself.

Unmet expectations

10 The physical description of her body's reaction to the sight of her mother, "[a]ll of a sudden [she] feel[s] a visceral, biological anxiety at the sight of this simulacrum of [her] own future senility"[27], keeps eliciting the absurd reality of having spent only four years with her mother. The daughter wonders, in fact, "[d]id I really live with my mother for four years? With my biological mother, the one who brought me into the world? With a real mother, even if she was too busy to be one?"[28]. The private elements of her childhood compose a dreadful fairy tale and are concerned with the theme of an abandoned child, of her abusive stepmother, Ursula, of confinement (twice) in a children's institution, her intense loneliness, her own genealogy "interrupted" because of her mother's shameful role. Her mother's absent role in the family in turn produced the ripple effect of not only depriving Helga of a mother, but of depriving her own son, Renzo (who accompanied her for the 1971 visit) of a grandmother. Readers experience the daughter's conjectures, expectations and hopes about this harrowing meeting: a dreadful reunion back in 1971[29] that appears to be still grounded on a normative idea of motherhood in terms of caregiving and protection that her mother fails to meet. Interior monologues, such as "Twenty-seven years have passed since we last met. Will there be anything to salvage? Surely there's something we can do – even if it's only to

try to understand, to forgive, to attempt to forge an appallingly belated relationship between mother and daughter, however flimsy it might be"[30], or "Perhaps we'll finally be able to talk like a mother and daughter who haven't seen each other for twenty-seven years – who have not spoken to each other for a lifetime"[31] suggest Helga's unattainable expectations.

11 This second meeting adopts tones of a deposition that the daughter is imposing upon her mother. "Excitement" and "impatience" at the idea of meeting with her, "[b]ecause *in spite of everything*, you are still my mother"[32] are soon replaced by the feeling of powerlessness in front of this "in spite of everything" that, for the daughter, is too much to bear. Addressing her mother in her interior monologue, Helga is afraid to hear again Traudi's tones of ill-disguised pride for having been a member of the Nazis: "as happened in 1971, you want to talk only about yourself and your past, so gratifying to make yourself heard after the collapse of Nazism, as though you had been simply erased ?"[33]. Before her mother's entrance onto the novelistic stage of *Let Me Go*, the daughter anticipates the possible topics of their imminent meeting, giving in to "[c]uriosity, hope, and a kind of dark attraction"[34]. The possibility that her mother will talk in flattering terms about Nazism, just like during their reunion in 1971, simply frightens her. Each meeting triggers the initial trauma regarding a private matter, shuttered by a public event such as totalitarian Germany[35] that her mother treasured as her successful past of "model worker" for "that factory of horrors"[36].

12 A letter plays an intermediairy role for the two women. Sent by Traudi's only friend, Gisela Freihorst, the letter invites Schneider to go and visit her mother because of her frail condition. An official document that Helga regrets having opened – "I could have avoided all this by ignoring the letter"[37] – the "disgusting pink envelope"[38] from Frau Freihorst is a reminder of a reality that Helga has tried to put aside for twenty-seven years. As in the case of Edith Bruck's 2004 *Lettera da Francoforte* (Letter from Frankfurt)[39], a letter holds the power to remind protagonists of a past they want forgotten, and of a past that pretends to have forgotten them. What she hoped for, a virtual death of her mother, is dismantled by a real envelope, whose infinitely light weight paradoxically carries the burden of her mother's life still manifesting the shame of the daughter: "I regret replying so diligently to the call of a stranger; I should have ignored it, I tell myself; I should have let things drift along as they have for the last thirty years. I was too hasty in deciding to leave"[40]. The letter is evidence that, contrary to the daughter's unconscious wish, her mother is still alive: "And I had been fooling myself all along. That letter in its disgusting pink envelope dragged me out of my cozy conviction that my mother was dead and that I would never again have to confront torments and pain on her account"[41]. The physical evidence of her mother's existence – the letter – disturbs the daughter from her willing oblivion that she even had a mother, from her comfort zone, something she toiled to achieve.

A Nazi Scheherazade

13 Traudi is alive. Helga will withstand her narrations of the past horrors as clever Traudi realizes that it is the sole way for her to keep her daughter from leaving. Like a grotesque Nazi Scheherazade, Traudi will talk and respond to her daughter's questions in order to let Helga stay. Traudi's opportunistic trait is exposed[42]. But so is Helga's; she does not hesitate to blackmail her mother with promises of "yellow roses" if she goes

on talking about her role in the camps. After all, we know directly from Helga that this is “the failed story of a mother and a daughter. A non-story”[43]. Traudi recounts parts of her public life (her job in Sachsenhausen, Ravensbrück, and Auschwitz-Birkenau)[44] in order to keep her daughter from leaving; the form of compensation she requires from Helga is to have her addressed with the word *Mutti*, a synecdoche for the elements making up the social construction of motherhood, in terms of a caring and devoted person. Helga’s few memories of her mother, however, match none of the stereotypical Western ideas of motherly behavior. The compensation consists of an unrepentant *Mutti* recounting her wrongs to her daughter who has studied it all already. The tension between the categories concerning the private and public sphere are evident: the mother is a mother for whom the term of endearment *Mutti* (Mom) sounds grotesque, and the conversation-deposition reveals the daughter’s impossibility to find a linguistic referent for the feelings she should feel for her mother. Yet, in a rather morbid way, she wants to hear from Traudi’s own voice about what she did. As Traudi answers all of Helga’s questions, it becomes apparent that her feelings are not concerned with regret for the evil committed. After a long quote from one of Hoess’ messages to Berlin, Schneider ponders that “[i]t’s a terrible thought, those little children being separated from their mothers to be sent on their own to the gas chambers. An unbearable thought: that my mother was involved in all that”[45].

14 Though her tension and inner conflict are made evident by quick recordings of her state of mind such as “I feel a terrible, lacerating rift within me – between the instinctive attraction for my own blood and the irrevocable rejection of what you have been, of what you still are”[46], the morbid feeling that her mother’s retelling of the horrors has the effect of revealing the weight of ethics. Should she give in to a tardive form of affection (“Should I be ashamed if [...] my instinct as a daughter gets the better of morality, of history, of justice and humanity?”)[47] or should she relinquish any notion of morality? This sentence is perhaps one of the most problematic of the memoir and compels us to a moral reply. As the Publisher’s Note reads[48], the author’s mother’s public role as *Ausseherin* in the camps has been publicly acknowledged through the Nuremberg trial and her subsequent sentence abbreviated for her opportunistic willingness to collaborate with the magistrates. The facts are known, and a quick note reveals Traudi’s criminal past. In Schneider’s text, on the other hand, the ineluctable evidence of Traudi’s guilt is enmeshed with several statements in which the daughter claims to have forgiven her. In reality, she keeps amassing an oppressive body of evidence to expose Traudi’s guilt: from the intimate account of the abnormality of her behavior prior to her volunteering for the medical experiments on female prisoners she attended in the camps, to her bundle of jewels belonging to Jewish women still in her possession. To this end, I argue that the rhetorical figure of repetition takes on greater relevance as a convincing strategy to bring readers to the writer’s side: the writer emphasizes several times Traudi’s *choosing* of a political cause different from that which concerned women and Nazi reproductive politics. The rhetorical choice of repetition proves to be effective, for it convinces readers of the damage suffered by Helga for Traudi’s betrayal of her duties as a mother, coupled with the lack of any signs of repentance for her crimes to a collectivity that is no longer there to demand justice.

15 “Let me go” are three simple words that define a sense of attachment, but a suffocating one for a daughter who wants to regain her freedom from the trauma of a difficult childhood and her mother’s absence. Absence causes grief because of the denial of

emotions to be fulfilled. Existence appears in its deformity when *e*-motions, defying the etymology of the word, do not find space for a "movement from and to" other individuals. In this book, the three words stress how the consequences of a failed matrilineal genealogy, of an absence, still haunt the adult daughter. For reasons that we can easily understand, the abandoned child has never come to terms with the fact that her mother abandoned her and her brother. To be the daughter of an ex-Nazi, the plight partly lies in that tiny "ex", as the mother never expresses regret for her past activities.

16 Against the backdrop of World War II, a disintegrated family and millions of innocents sent to crematoria, this mother-daughter relationship reveals the traits of a much larger moral discussion. As the daughter tries to come to terms for the last time with the woman who gave her life, but did not perform the role of mother for her, we stand before this failed couple and wait for a moral sentence to be pronounced. The display of emotions is so compelling that it makes us wonder about the actual authorial intentions behind this text. There are two perspectives here, the first being the daughter's realization that her mother rejected the social role of being a mother because it was a limitation that she refused for herself as an individual committed to the Nazi cause. At the same time, we see Schneider's conundrum in considering the moral limitations of seeing herself playing the role of the daughter. Is Schneider confessing, then, not only her mother's own emotional failures, but hers as well? In my view, not only clichés about morality but also clichés of forgiveness loom large in this memoir. A woman is viewed as more forgiving than a man, a child has the moral duty to forgive her parents: this is what is normatively expected when discussing forgiveness[49].

17 Her mother's decision to leave her family behind in order to follow her political ideals molded her entire life, as she never tried to reconstruct her broken family or to get in touch with her children. As historiographical studies on women in Nazi Germany maintain, a vast number of women were actively involved in the racial *Weltanschauung*. Traudi's choice and commitment to the Nazi racial war by volunteering in the camps and assisting with the annihilation process did not constitute an unusual fact. Leaving the children behind for a *just cause* seemed a different but no less significant task that Hitler required of men and women alike. However, as Rebecca Neal explains in *German Women and the Holocaust,* though for men wanting power *while* having a family was considered a normal course of existence, for women this constituted a sin against nature as against Nazi culture, as the reproductive role was paramount, just like in any totalitarian power[50]. Yet, statistics show that the proactive involvement of women in annihilation politics was hypocritically allowed and encouraged in the name of the doctrine of racial discrimination at the core of Nazi politics[51]. When one ponders over the result of women's involvement, the hypocrisy of Nazi culture is unveiled. At the same time, it also allowed for women's agency.

The private, the public, and the question of hate: a private trial

18 Despite the appearance of a private memoir, despite the *mise en scène* of a meeting which will remain within private walls, a private space between mother and daughter is non-extant as even private words cannot be used at ease. The two do not meet alone in

a private space, such as either's house, but in a *Seniorenheim* where Traudi was moved due to her delicate health. The time of their encounter is defined within approximately two hours after which each will return to their separate lives, dispelling the idea of an ever-possible bond or tie between two genetically linked individuals. There was and is no intimacy between them. During their meeting, Schneider invokes a "motherly caress", painfully aware of her own act of lying. A physical gesture of affection implies a sense of proximity – a possible *rapprochement* – that has never been present between mother and daughter. And when distance between the two lessens, it is disgust which takes over all other feelings. Helga's disgust is corporeal, "[m]y stomach leaps into my throat"[52]; or "She's too close to me – she's making me feel uneasy. And disgusted, I would have to admit. I can smell her breath, the slightly acid breath of an old woman" [53]; again, "[a] thought flashes through my head. That something of this woman lives within me, in my genes. I'm repelled, disgusted, but she's already clamoring for my attention again"[54].

19 The feeling of disgust exists in the proximity of hate; it is ubiquitous and yet denied. Indeed, the epigraph leaves no ambiguities: "The feeling of hatred has always been strange to me. – Rudolph Hoess, camp commandant of the Auschwitz death camp". The moral clichés[55] on the duty to execute orders, the same ones Adolf Eichmann used during his trial, are the same as those guiding Hoess's memoirs cited in the body of Schneider's *Let Me Go*. Hoess's frigid statement placed as an epigraph to Schneider's memoir reminds of a duty that deals not with hatred but with the need to perform orders in the firm belief of the necessity of the *Reinigung,* the ethnic cleansing that Nazi Germany felt so impelling for the process of purification of their race[56]. What is striking is not Hoess's statement – something we have been used to read as justification in all moral questioning of Nazi criminals – but that such a statement is chosen to open a narrative about a daughter's private encounter with her own mother. Traudi is, however, a particular mother who actually knew the now historical figure of Hoess. It is in this detail that the knot between the public and the private becomes difficult to untangle. Hoess was Traudi's boss and she would regularly visit his home. She knew his family. Her commitment to the cause was total, just like Hoess's, and her ties to him seem stronger than the ones to her daughter:

> "I didn't come up with the Final Solution," she replies, on the defensive, "I was only obeying orders. I had to stay loyal to my oath, and an oath is sacred. And I'll tell you something else, and it doesn't matter whether you believe me or whether you don't. Among my comrades in the SS I knew people who were intelligent, cultured, responsible, excellent family men like Rudolph Hoess... men of honor, unforgettable men..."[57]

20 The daughter questions her, "Why did you take an oath when you knew you had two children to raise?" [...] I wanted to! I wanted to be accepted"[58]. Sadly, the oath Traudi made to the Führer was more binding and stronger than the one she made to her family.

21 Is hatred, along with disgust, a feeling Schneider holds against her mother? Schneider's reiteration of such question to herself compels us to do the same. Surely, in broken relations, hate is part of the equation. In this case, however, not even hate is possible. In one of her interior monologues, she begs Traudi: "Make me hate you, Mother! Make me hate you. That would be the best solution. Say something vile about the Jews who were under your guard in Birkenau, those Jews you used to order about with the power to determine whether they lived or died"[59]. Questions keep on crowding the text: "Were

you really an inflexible Nazi, Mother, or did you say all those horrendous things to help me hate you? I look at her trusting eyes, reflected in mine, and think: No, I don't hate her. It's just that I don't love her"[60].

22 In Helga's heart, there is neither place for love nor hate because the latter is a form of commodity, something that, as Sara Ahmed argues, "is accumulated over time"[61]. Ahmed notes how "affect does not reside in an object of sign, but is an effect of the circulation between objects and signs (= the accumulation of affective value). Signs increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more signs circulate, the more affective they become"[62]. Helga's lifelong separation from her mother does not allow for any circulation of signs because the terms for which such circulation would be possible could not exist (instead, Schneider has strong negative feelings against her stepmother with whom she actually lived). Helga's physical separation from her mother has not allowed for any circulation of signs that would encompass "an intense feeling of againstness"[63]. Proximity, or lack thereof, is an element that also defines the existence of hatred for Primo Levi. Hatred, Levi argues, is "personal, directed toward a person, a name, or a face, whereas our persecutors at the time had neither face nor name, as you can understand from these pages: they were remote, invisible, inaccessible"[64]. For him, the survivor cannot hate his persecutors because of their inaccessibility. It is a matter of distance: how much distance can you take from what is hurting you, physically and psychologically?[65] In his Appendix to *If This Is a Man*, Levi states:

> I believe in reason and discussion as supreme tools of progress, and so I place justice before hatred. For that very reason, in writing this book, I deliberately assumed the calm and sober language of the witness, not the lament of the victim or the anger of the avenger: I thought that my word would be more credible and useful the more objective it appeared and the less impassioned it sounded; only in that way does the witness in court fulfill his function, which is to prepare the ground for the judge. It is you who are the judges.[66]

23 Levi considers his readers to be "the judges" of his testimonial writing[67]. *Let Me Go* offers a different scenario because, unlike Levi, who did not know his perpetrators, Schneider's biological ties to her mother/perpetrator cannot allow for a "calm and sober language of the witness"[68]. *Let Me Go* becomes a historical document since its *publication,* as the word itself expresses, allows us to deal with its content in terms of a double trial that can no longer be left private: one to an unapologetic mother and one to a daughter deprived of either love or hatred for her mother and torn, all life long, about the moral duty of forgiveness towards her. While not explicitly called upon as Levi does in his accounts of the camps, we readers are nevertheless asked to answer for Traudi's maternal instincts and performance, and are called to be "the judges" of a private and yet *public* trial that, in order to reach a verdict after some fifty years, stages this "inferior melodrama", as Schneider calls it[69]. Moral judgment does not abandon Helga as, in fact, we read not only the transcription of the trial but also the narrator's comments on the different stages of her "inferior melodrama". The mother shows no remorse or even interest for her grandchild, Renzo, as Schneider recorded after their 1971 meeting: "You were still perfectly content with your past, about what you had been, about that efficient factory of horrors where you had been a model worker. [...] The mother who had never gone in search of me, and who was now ignoring my son, sitting alone in the living room with a coloring book"[70]. This passage challenges the

statement recorded when Frau Freihorst leaves Helga alone in her mother's bedroom in her Vienna apartment on the day before the 1998 meeting:

> Had I perhaps failed in my role as a daughter? Wasn't it *my duty* to understand, to forgive? I repressed a curious impulse to lie down on my mother's bed. Had I forgiven her?
> To my great surprise, the answer was *yes*. I had forgiven her the hurt she had done to us, to her husband, to her children. But as for all the other things she was guilty of, only her victims had the right to condemn or forgive.[71]

24 Time here is crucial, as this anguished answer comes prior to Helga's final meeting with Traudi and a drop of hope in its outcome still filters through such words: it is an answer still colored by the moral cliché that compels children to forgive the wrongs of their parents. Feelings of forgiveness can be motivated by the temporal distance of their last meeting twenty-seven years ago. Often children say they forgive their parents, as Berel Lang notes, in an effort to clear minds and feelings of anger and resentment that weigh upon them, and also because intuitively they know that being unforgiving can be as morally wrong as the sins committed by their parents. At the end of the 1998 meeting, however, the daughter seems to ask for *our* forgiveness as she realizes she is unable either to love, to hate, or, in my view, even to forgive her mother. The recording of her mother's cunning mind even at such an old age, or the mentioning of the SS uniform that Helga finds still perfectly kept in her mother's closet, expose the daughter's own oscillation at settling for compassion, or for a refusal to give in to moral clichés. As judges of this stage trial, we sense such unconscious refusal throughout the text and suspend our belief in her actual process of forgiveness.

Forgiveness

25 Forgiving takes time to accomplish. Lang provides us with a conventional definition of forgiveness: "someone who has harmed another person recognizes the harm as a wrong for which he is responsible and acknowledges this to the person wronged; he apologizes for having been responsible for the wrong, offering assurance of his intention to avoid repeating the wrong – and then asks the person who had been wronged to forgive him. At that point, the person who suffered the wrong has the choice of forgiving the person responsible or of refusing to"[72]. The case against forgiveness implies a commitment to justice and a rejection of forgetting the crimes committed. In actuality, Traudi's instinct seems to never give in to morality and justice, otherwise a different ending would have resulted from such an encounter, were those two concepts present. To cancel her resentment and ignore past injuries for the sake of their present peace of mind seems to leave morality out of the picture. Forgiveness is a gift that is offered to others – the offended to the offender – and is given without denying the reality and moral gravity of the offense. In another article on forgiveness, and drawing from Simon Wiesenthal's autobiographical example of forgiveness to a dying SS officer Karl in *The Sunflower* (an episode that triggered Wiesenthal's inquiry on the subject) Lang lays out two notions of forgiveness that he considers as utterly inconsistent with each other. The first belief requires that the wrongdoer ask for forgiveness to the person or group that has been harmed. In this case, "only the person or group harmed can grant" forgiveness[73]. In other words, this first conception implies the notion of choice that a wronged person or group has. The second notion implies the bestowing of forgiveness "without any acknowledgment of wrongdoing or request for

forgiveness [...] [which] can be granted by someone other than the person who has been wronged"[74]. The second notion "emphasizes the value of clearing the moral slate removing the sting of wrongdoing and resentment"[75]. In *Let Me Go*, the daughter *feels* she is the agent of wrongdoing for her inability to extend her forgiveness to her mother for all the people who died because of her involvement in the Jewish genocide. Only her victims hold such a right.

26 Moral extremity reveals its importance in the discussion of forgiveness despite the fact that an extreme situation might leave readers/jury behind. Helga's personal case might afford her mother the first type of forgiveness Lang lays forth, while the second appears unavoidable because of Traudi's public role. Even establishing such quick parallels between Lang's two types of forgiveness and the way Schneider uses them, we have yet to deal with an important detail: forgiveness is something Traudi did not ask her daughter for throughout the text. She did not repent for her acts and she did not atone. As Lang notes, "[t]he acknowledgment of having done wrong also represents a confession of limitation: he or she has not only suffered finitude, they have also recognized it – an awareness that, in human terms, remains an essential element of self-knowledge"[76] Traudi's refusal of working through the facts of her life results in her lack of self-knowledge. She does not recognize the atrocities committed in the name of her beliefs. Her beliefs, it should be noted, are not steeped in the past but emerge with a dreadful precision in the way she retells her memories. An old woman, Traudi seems to be using only her long-term memory. Traudi relates facts of the past with such clarity that her functionalist statements of obedience and necessity to follow orders (only later followed by her open admission of hatred for the Jews) make it impossible to think that any meditation over the years could have rehumanized her after the *Härteausbildung*. Thus, she lives in a world where forgiveness is not a moral obligation because she is still de-humanized even in the presence of some momentary weakness and frailty, chiefly due to her age. Unaware of her human limits, Traudi keeps living in the past. And in that past, that she remembers so vividly, she left all her victims who can no longer grant any forgiveness.

27 Her daughter Helga's professed personal forgiveness of her mother's behavior reveals an opacity that needs to be problematized, as it seems to merge both notions of forgiveness elucidated by Lang. Levi's notion of forgiveness (Lang's first) appears more as a gift to those who grant it to others rather than a gift to those who are forgiven. "Forgiveness", Lang notes, "is then a moral bonus, a gratuity – something that cannot be assumed beforehand but that by a combination of conscience and circumstance may, if we are fortunate in what we do (perhaps also in what we don't do), become part of the moral setting in which we act"[77]. Forgiveness, he tells us, when placed within an extreme context like the deliberate genocide of the Jews in the Holocaust – a social act in itself – can hardly exist as a moral judgement. On her part, Helga's mother acts upon what Lang calls a "moral cliché", a moral claim for a conduct that, in her case, has clearly taken the place of thinking. Aside from her convictions, Traudi never repents because she considers her wrongs as orders, as they were part of her job. Abandoning the "ease of habit" of her convictions (which was for her an alibi for her wrongs) is an act that Traudi cannot perform. Traudi's wrongs remain acts determined by clichés and by the conviction that the *Rassenkrieg* was a necessity. What Helga is trying to extract from her mother, then, is the manifestation of a remorse and a sense of repentance that she cannot deliver. As a corollary of her conviction, Traudi's private dealings with

her child cannot be revisited. The two characters involved in this impossible dialogue re-tell each their worn-out part, something they have each rehearsed in their mind during their life apart.

28 In her examination of Schneider's memoirs, Mary Honan approaches Jacques Derrida's concepts of hospitality and forgiveness and maintains that the daughter grants the gift of forgiveness to her mother. Honan's textual evidence of Schneider's forgiveness is based on the following passage: "[s]hould I be ashamed if, every now and again, instinct, my instinct as a daughter gets the better of morality, of history, of justice and humanity?"[78]. Honan considers her visit in terms of a "tacit gesture of hospitality, their reconciliation being conditional on her mother showing remorse for her actions or on Helga being able eventually to forgive her mother's Nazi atrocities"[79]. Further, she notes that "for Derrida, dialogue is the beginning of a gesture of forgiveness and hospitality towards the other"[80].

29 My own reading of forgiveness of Schneider's *archive of feelings* is at odds with Honan's conceptual conclusions for several reasons. My analysis of the syntax and grammar connecting the words of the very sentence used by Honan to probe her statement support the opposite of what she writes. While Schneider brings in a notion of shame for her willingness to forgive, she also uses a conditional mode ("should I be ashamed") as an indirect question, while she stresses the intermittency of her wish to forgive. It is only "every now and again", in fact, that Helga's instinct gives in to forgiveness and her filial instincts reveal their unease at sustaining judgment for her mother's doing. Her reasoning about her momentary empathy is not a set value precisely because it is brief and transient. The intermittence of that "every now and then" metaphorizes the heartbeats that pulse blood into Schneider's veins. Unlike her mother, she reveals her humanity through and through and shows how her body participates in her psychological anguish. Body and soul are not separated but parts of an individual who, put under a condition of stress, tends to respond to stress with bodily reactions. Big words such as "reconciliation" are of little use here as the daughter does not try to hide her corporeal disgust for the proximity with the body of her mother.

30 The text tells us of each woman's narrative about the other that, no matter how many times the other tries to dispel, re-emerges in all its vehemence. The historical record and private evidence highlight that there is nothing the daughter can do to put her mother in a different light and there is no possibility of reconciliation because the daughter does not fall prey to another moral cliché about forgiving children (especially female children). In all its possibility, that conditional mode "should I" does not warrant an actual giving in to filial instincts or, for that matter, to any forgiveness. "Every now and then" is simply not enough to define a path toward reconciliation.

31 My second point of contention with Honan's approach regards the fact that Derrida's discussion of the gift of forgiveness does not situate the act of the gift within the context of a moral extremity, such as the Holocaust. The notion of forgetfulness claimed by Derrida for the true gift is never part of Schneider's emotional archive. The gift for Derrida "is the *condition* of forgetting" but can hardly take place within a family[81]. If familial bonds pre-exist, the gift cannot be handed on as it can only be given to those who are others from us. The gift seems unlikely to be extended to war criminals who are also your mother and is eventually more prone to be bestowed upon others from the community. *Let Me Go* deconstructs the luxury of forgiveness. It shows how forgiveness can hardly be assumed and bestowed upon somebody, even if this act

would put the forgiver in a better moral position. It is not only because the wrongdoer did not ask for forgiveness and showed no repentance that we are not convinced of Schneider's moral commitment to forgiveness. It is the text itself that presents her internal debate, problematizes it, and then concludes it with an inconsistent take on the moral matter of forgiveness. The gift, then, is not quite there, as the *munus* does not just imply a mechanical act of giving and receiving. Emotions play a paramount role in this double act. Moreover, on a discursive level, what takes place between mother and daughter can hardly be considered a dialogue, at least in the way in which Derrida considers this to be the beginning of a gesture of forgiveness. Mother and daughter are not in dialogue; their utterances are modeled after a trial in which the victim interrogates the perpetrator, but the latter does not recede from any of the actions committed that placed her in that role. And the victim feels guilty for doing precisely this. The two narratives follow parallel lines that never quite meet, even in the present of the 1998 meeting. It is simply too late.

32 As part of our moral repertoire of clichés, our reading of this memoir cannot but scrutinize how Schneider places forgiveness in her archive of feelings, recalling what Levi states: "No, I have forgiven none of the guilty, nor am I disposed now or in the future to forgive any of them, unless they can demonstrate (in deeds: not in words, and not too late) that they are aware of the crimes and errors of fascism, ours and other nations' and are determined to condemn them, to uproot them from their own conscience and that of others. [...] but an enemy who repents has ceased to be an enemy"[82]. Levi, like Schneider, hates no one, but also cannot forgive his perpetrators. It is also too late for Traudi's act of atonement. The process of *Härteausbildung* (dehumanization) and insensitivity to human suffering that she underwent left a permanent mark on her system of emotions. *Her* archive of feelings still contemplates hatred for the Jews and oblivion for her daughter's grief. While pleading her innocence ("I am innocent. I am not guilty. I obeyed orders like everyone else. Everyone obeyed order")[83], Traudi will contradict herself and spell out her hate for the Jews, each and every one of them: "'Yes, my little *Mausi*, I hated those cursed Jews. A horrible race, believe me. Pfui. [...] Hating the Jews was an unavoidable duty for a member of the SS, you understand?' She is trying to explain the inexplicable"[84]. Her current statement counters any possible justification that she brought forth concerning her *Härteausbildung*. Her sense of hatred was put at the disposal of Nazi politics, and it was only in this way that she could perform what she was ordered to do. Yet, there could still have been a chance. As Levi states: "I am willing to follow the Jewish and Christian commandment to forgive my enemy; but an enemy who repents has ceased to be an enemy"[85]. A witness who displays what Levi calls experiential memory, Traudi will offer her daughter the reminiscence of things she lived in the camps[86], but there is not one hint of grief or remorse for the immensity of her crimes. As Helga sarcastically tells her mother: "Historical testimony is precious, whatever its source"[87]. In the end, Traudi will still unwaveringly defend her familial conduct as part of her participation in Nazi politics.

33 Helga will never receive that longed-for caress[88], a longing that betrays all her sorrow for her mother's absent figure. What her memoir does, however, is to connect all the pieces of their separate fraught lives[89]. While Helga does not "want to make her the gift of [her]confusion and fall back on one of those stories that have recently crowded into [her] mind"[90], she nevertheless publicly constructs the story of her mother by her questions and by bestowing on her the responsibility of being a witness, in the

daughter's memoir, of her own misdeeds. The gift of forgiveness reveals not only its impossibility to be extended to the mother, but its futility at the end of a life in which a woman could not come to terms with her misdeeds. What Helga wants to extricate from Traudi will emerge only at the end of this private and public trial of a received and endured evil that fully explains the title *Let Me Go*.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.
See Susanne Luhmann's discussion of these powerful testimonies in her "Gender and generations of difficult knowledge: recent responses to familial legacies of Nazi perpetration", *Women in German Yearbook*, vol. XXV, 2009, pp. 174-198.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 178.

4. H. Janeczek defines her relationship with her mother in "Idee della madre", in D. Brogi, T. de Rogatis, C. Franco *et al.* eds., *Nel nome della madre: ripensare figure della maternità*, Bracciano, Del Vecchio, 2017, p. 157-174.

5. On this topic, see C. Mauceri's "Writing outside the borders: personal experience and history in the works of Helga Schneider and Helena Janeczek", in S. Scarparo and R. Wilson eds., *Across Genres, Generations and Borders: Italian Women Writing Lives*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 2004, pp. 140-151. C. Mauceri discusses quite convincingly the difference between the two authors' treatment of the mother-daughter conflict. See my chapter on her work in S. Lucamante, *Forging Shoah Memories: Italian Women Writers, Jewish Identity, and the Holocaust*, New York, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 201-239.

6. Schneider remembers meeting a compatriot who addressed her in German. Her reaction was immediate: "[i]t took me only a few phrases for me to realize that I could no longer speak my own language fluently and correctly. I was stunned. It was like discovering that I had painlessly lost a limb", H. Schneider, *Let Me Go*, trans. S. Whiteside, New York, Walker & Co., 2004 (orig. *Lasciami andare, madre*, Milan, Adelphi, 2001), p. 134.

7. "Coming to Italy I wanted to leave everything behind. It was like creating a new life for me. What I wrote in the last book is very true: after some time that I was in Italy I tried to do without my mother tongue. I turned to the Italian language with an incredible passion and then, being of Slavic blood (my Bohemian grandmother, half-Ukrainian grandfather, Viennese parents) I have a great talent for languages. I was determined to learn Italian soon and to write well, I am committed", H. Schneider, "Il coraggio di tagliare le lungaggini", in D. Bregola, *Da qui verso casa*, Rome, Edizioni interculturali, 2002, pp. 46-57, p. 55. Schneider's point of view mirrors the terms by which Chantal Wright defines exophonic writers: "exophonic writers are not bilingual in the sense that they grew up speaking two languages, and indeed do not necessarily

achieve the type of spoken fluency associated with the term 'bilingualism'", C. Wright, *Literary Translation*, London, New York, Routledge, 2016, p. 3.

8. S. Luhmann elaborates the special attachment of daughters to their fathers in her article "Gender and generations of difficult knowledge...", *op. cit*.

9. Daughters project an image for themselves as the ones persecuted, almost victims of their fathers' doing. In the case of Schneider, the role of the perpetrator pertains to her mother.

10. T. Medicus, "Im Archiv der Gefühle: Tätertöchter, der aktuelle 'Familienroman' und die deutsche Vergangenheit", *Mittelweg 36*, vol. XV, no. 3, 2006, pp. 2-15.

11. D. J. Yao and M. M. Chao, "When forgiveness signals power: effects of forgiveness expression and forgiver gender", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol. XLV, no. 2, 2019, pp. 310-324, p. 311.

12. I draw from B. Lang, "Reliving or revoking the past: two views of forgiveness", in Id., *The Future of the Holocaust: Between History and Memory*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1999, pp. 129-141, p. 136; Id., "Moral clichés (or, how *not* to teach ethics)", *Teaching Philosophy*, vol. XXV, no. 3, 2002, pp. 247-250, and Id., "Reconciliation: not retribution, not justice, perhaps not even forgiveness", *The Monist*, vol. XCII, no. 4, 2009, pp. 604-619.

13. H. Schneider, *Let Me Go, op. cit.*, p. 30. Aware of the disruption such a letter might create in Schneider's life, Frau Freihorst herself asks Schneider for her forgiveness.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

15. The emblematic episode Schneider refers to as the "Kremmen nightmare" (*Let Me Go*, *op. cit.*, p. 100), a period in which the mother would constantly abuse her and her brother Peter by locking them up in closets, imprisoning them in a fishing net (*ibid.*, p. 99), keeping them in the darkness (*ibid.*, p. 100). The abuses left an indelible mark on the children who since then suffered from claustrophobia. A diffused feeling of hate toward her mother's gratuitous cruelty transpires in Schneider's recollections.

16. *Ibid.*, note 1, p. 9.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

19. F. Ardolino, "Helga Schneider: la ferita aperta della scrittura", *Quaderns d'Italià*, vol. VII, 2002, pp. 151-156, p. 152.

20. *Loc. cit.*

21. H. Schneider, *Let Me Go, op. cit.*, p. 44 (emphasis added).

22. S. Luhmann speaks extensively about Speer's daughter memoir *Sind Sie die Tochter Speer* as a fitting example of "conflicted emotional bonds" present in women-authored *Generationenromane* (S. Luhmann, "Gender and generations of difficult knowledge...", *op. cit.*, pp. 177-185).

23. S. Felman, "Psychoanalysis and education: teaching terminable and interminable", in Id., *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1987, pp. 69-98, p. 79, quoted in S. Luhmann, "Gender and generations of difficult knowledge...", *op. cit.*, p. 183.

24. S. Luhmann, "Gender and generations of difficult knowledge...", *op. cit.*, p. 183 (emphasis added).

25. H. Schneider, *Let Me Go*, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-123.

26. S. Luhmann, "Gender and generations of difficult knowledge...", *op. cit.*, p. 183.

27. H. Schneider, *Let Me Go*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

29. "It was very difficult to address the issue because the encounter with my mother led me to a real panic attack. I had to resort to anxiolytics because it was shocking and traumatic. Terrible. Since I last saw her, 27 years passed and seeing the physical collapse was so frightening: psychologically violent. [...] Luckily, I passed this moment. With anxiolytics I could not write and I wanted to be the mistress of my mind", H. Schneider, "Il coraggio di tagliare le lungaggini", in D. Bregola, *Da qui verso casa*, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

30. H. Schneider, *Let Me Go*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 2 (emphasis added).

33. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

34. *Loc. cit.*

35. "One of the features of the Nazi state was its totalitarian tendency to wipe out the boundaries between public and private life and to politicise every aspect of the individual's existence", C. Gupta, "Politics of gender: women in Nazi Germany", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. XXVI, no. 17, 1991, pp. 40-48, p. 46.

36. H. Schneider, *Let Me Go*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

39. E. Bruck, *Lettera da Francoforte*, Milan, Mondadori, 2004.

40. H. Schneider, *Let Me Go*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

41. *Loc. cit.*

42. Schneider states that "sentenced to six years in prison by the Nuremberg court, my mother has spent only two in jail because she collaborated with the investigators denouncing her killing companions. Besides, she's also an opportunist. Do you know how the dossier of the Wiesenthal Center which has always been looking for Nazi criminals calls her? Liar, fanatical, treacherous. She has even collaborated in the experiments on human guinea pigs, in Ravensbrück" (in F. Ardolino, "Helga Schneider: la ferita aperta della scrittura", *op. cit.*, p. 152).

43. H. Schneider, *Let Me Go*, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

48. "Helga Schneider's mother was sentenced by an Allied jury to serve a six-year prison term for minor war crimes and for having been a member of the SS. Since she cooperated fully with the investigating commission, she ultimately served a reduced sentence. Dossiers that document her work as an SS guard are on file in various archives, including the Wiesenthal Center in Vienna and Auschwitz. The visit

chronicled in this book took place in 1998. It was the last time Helga Schneider would see her mother, who died in 2001", *ibid.*, p. 167.

49. For an analysis of gendered uses of forgiveness, see D. J. Yao and M. M. Chao, "When forgiveness signals power...", *op. cit.*

50. R. Neal, *German Women and the Holocaust*, Manchester, Manchester Centre for Political Thought, 1998.

51. Toward the end of the war, women from age 17 to age 45 were involved in work related to the *Totalkrieg*. For a conventional reading of women's role in Nazi Germany, see C. Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1987.

52. H. Schneider, *Let Me Go*, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

55. B. Lang, "Moral clichés (or, how *not* to teach ethics)", *op. cit.*, p. 247.

56. Hannah Arendt deals with the banality of evil in the famous reports on the Eichmann's trial, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil,* New York, Penguin Books, 2006. Very touching also is her discussion of the banality of evil in "A daughter of our people: a response to Gershom Scholem", July 24, 1963, in H. Arendt, *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, P. Baehr ed., London, Penguin Books, 2000, pp. 391-396.

57. H. Schneider, *Let Me Go*, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

58. *Loc cit.*

59. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

60. *Ibid.* p. 164.

61. S. Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 45.

62. *Loc. cit.*

63. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

64. P. Levi, "Appendix" to *If This Is a Man*, trans. S. Woolf, in Id., *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, A. Goldstein ed., New York, Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015, vol. I, p. 168.

65. *Loc. cit.*

66. *Ibid.*, p. 169.

67. *Loc. cit.* (emphasis added).

68. *Loc. cit.*

69. H. Schneider, *Let Me Go*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 55 (original emphasis).

72. B. Lang, "Reconciliation: not retribution, not justice, perhaps not even forgiveness", *op. cit.*, p. 611.

73. Id., "Reliving or revoking the past: two views of forgiveness", in Id., *The Future of the Holocaust...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 129-141, p. 136.

74. *Loc. cit.*

75. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

78. H. Schneider, *Let Me Go*, *op. cit.*, pp. 160-161.

79. M. Honan, *The Literary Representation of World War II Childhood: Interrogating the Concept of Hospitality*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017, p. 168.

80. *Loc. cit.*

81. J. Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. P. Kamuf, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 17 (original emphasis).

82. P. Levi, "Appendix", in Id., *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 169.

83. H. Schneider, *Let Me Go*, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

84. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

85. P. Levi, "Appendix", in Id., *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 169.

86. Drawing from Tzvetan Todorov's theories in *Les abus de la mémoire*, Paris, Arléa, 2015, Marco Belpoliti writes that Levi practiced the *memoria esemplare* (as a witness interested in the pedagogical aspect of his act of remembrance and memory as a practice of justice) rather than the *memoria letterale*. M. Belpoliti, *Primo Levi*, Milan, Mondadori, 1998, p. 121. Levi does not sacralize memory but makes it functional in the search for justice.

87. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

88. Lack of physical affection such as caring touch harks back to Helga's childhood. She remembers caressing a little child in the children's hospice that her stepmother put her in, in Eden, near Oranienburg: "We would caress our arms starting from the wrist all the way to the shoulders and vice versa. [...] It was a substitute for the caresses no one gave us" ("[*c*]*i accarezzavamo le braccia iniziando dal polso e procedendo in su fino alla spalla, e viceversa* [...] *era un surrogato per le carezze che nessuno ci dava*"), H. Schneider, *Io, piccola ospite del Führer*, Turin, Einaudi, p. 74.

89. "Does the course of every life allow itself be looked upon in the end like a design that has a meaning?", A. Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. P. A. Kottman, London, New York, Routledge, 2000, p. 1. Partly playing with its title, I drew many of my own queries on Schneider's narrations of relatives from Cavarero's study on storytelling.

90. H. Schneider, *Let Me Go*, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

ABSTRACTS

Helga Schneider's *Let me go* reveals the ethical burden that an author invariably feels in the retelling of private events. Often, literary representations of lacerating family dynamics expose the role of history in the rupture of intimate ties between their members. Narratives juxtapose the private aspects of the family story with the public events that partly shaped such dynamics.

In *Let me go*, Schneider lays bare such intersections, and makes visible the impact of history upon her own existence. She is an indirect witness to the Holocaust, a position due to her own mother's proactive participation in the project of *Endlösung* of the Jews of Europe. A larger sense of morality involving her role in the killing of innocent ones takes over any possible attempt the daughter might pursue at making amends for her old mother. As the memoir is a *published* body of writing, readers are involved as jury in the written stage of another *public* trial to an unapologetic war criminal, Traudi Schneider. The daughter Helga decrees the fate of her protagonist's reception by probing her culpability with terrible evidences. In this trial, fiction is crueler than reality as facts are sustained by ineluctable proofs of her guilt for which there can't be forgiveness.

Laisse-moi partir, mère de Helga Schneider révèle le poids éthique qu'un auteur ressent invariablement quand il raconte des événements de sa vie privée. Souvent, les représentations littéraires d'une dynamique familiale déchirante révèlent le rôle de l'histoire dans la rupture des liens d'intimité entre les membres de cette famille. Les récits juxtaposent les aspects privés de l'histoire familiale aux événements publics qui ont en partie façonné ces dynamique. Dans *Laisse-moi partir, mère* Schneider met à nu de telles intersections, élimine la possibilité de recourir à la fiction dans son récit et rend visible l'impact de l'histoire sur sa propre existence. Elle est un témoin indirect de la Shoah, une position due à la participation volontaire de sa propre mère à la « Solution finale de la question juive ». Un sens plus large de la morale, prenant en compte le rôle de sa mère dans le meurtre de personnes innocentes, remplace toute tentative possible de se faire pardonner pour les fautes de sa vieille mère. En tant que corpus de textes *publiés*, le *memoir* fait de ses lecteurs les jurés appelés à évaluer le texte d'un procès *public* contre une criminelle de guerre impénitente, Traudi Schneider. Sa fille Helga décrète le destin de la réception de sa protagoniste en portant des preuves terribles de sa culpabilité. Dans ce procès, la fiction est plus cruelle que la réalité, parce que les faits sont soutenus par des preuves irréfutables d'une culpabilité pour laquelle il ne peut y avoir de pardon.

Lasciami andare, madre di Helga Schneider rivela il peso etico che un autore prova invariabilmente nel raccontare il suo privato. Spesso, le rappresentazioni letterarie di una dinamica familiare lacerante rivelano il ruolo della storia nella rottura dei legami intimi tra i loro membri. Le narrazioni affiancano gli aspetti privati della storia familiare agli avvenimenti pubblici che in parte hanno plasmato tali dinamiche. In *Lasciami andare, madre* Schneider mette a nudo tali intersezioni, elimina la possibilità di finzione nel suo atto di raccontare e rende visibile l'impatto della storia sulla propria esistenza. È una testimone indiretta della Shoah, una posizione dovuta all'intraprendente partecipazione di sua madre alla *Endlösung* degli ebrei d'Europa. Un senso più ampio di moralità, che comprende il ruolo della madre nell'assassinio di innocenti, prende il sopravvento su ogni possibile tentativo della figlia di farsi perdonare per le colpe della vecchia madre. In quanto il *memoir* è un corpus di scritti editi, i lettori sono coinvolti come giurati a valutare il testo scritto di un processo pubblico contro un'impenitente criminale di guerra, Traudi Schneider. La figlia Helga decreta il destino della ricezione della protagonista esaminandone la colpevolezza con prove terribili. In questo processo la finzione è più crudele della realtà perché i fatti sono sostenuti da prove inconfutabili di una colpevolezza per la quale non è possibile il perdono.

INDEX

Mots-clés: pardon, honte, culpabilité, mère-fille, sentiments
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