

# *My Mother's Voice: Telling Children about the Holocaust*

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• Adrienne Kertzer •

**Résumé:** *L'auteur analyse le rôle des enfants lecteurs/auditeurs dans le tamisage du contenu des récits de la Shoah: à la ferme volonté de l'adulte de ne pas effrayer l'enfant répond, chez celui-ci, la détermination subséquente, et toute aussi forte, de ne pas entendre ce qui peut l'effrayer. Adrienne Kertzer fonde son propos sur la disparité entre le souvenir qu'elle conservait des récits de sa mère et le souvenir plus récent de son fils qui a entendu ces mêmes récits de la bouche de sa grand-mère et qui les a mis par écrit. Ce souvenir altéré des récits de sa mère a profondément modifié sa manière de lire les livres pour la jeunesse consacrés à la Shoah, dont elle met maintenant en doute le message. Elle ne peut plus donner de sens à l'histoire de la survie de sa mère, ce qui ne correspond plus au souvenir originel que celle-ci lui avait laissé.*

**Summary:** *What happens to Holocaust stories when children are the intended readers/listeners? This article draws attention to the role of the child in controlling the meaning of such stories in two possible ways; in the adult's initial narrative decision not to frighten the child, and the child's subsequent and equally powerful determination not to hear what is too frightening. The argument positions itself in the context of the author's memory of listening as a child to her mother's stories and the more recent memory of her eight-year-old son listening to and then writing about his grandmother's story. The memory of her mother's story haunts the way the author now reads children's books on the Holocaust and resists the lessons that she finds there, for the frightening "lesson" she as an adult draws from her mother's story is that there is no logical explanation for her mother's survival. But as a child, that is not what she heard in her mother's voice.*

This is an essay about memory and voice, about how a child makes meaning out of the story her mother tells; this is a story about my mother's voice.<sup>1</sup> It is not her voice who tells the story, for my mother will not speak publicly. Nearly 50 years in Canada, a woman whose ability to speak more than one language may have helped save her life (this reason is as good as

any other — I am looking for a reason — there is no reason), my mother remains embarrassed by her English. When I tell her that I wish to write this essay and need her permission, she agrees so long as I am careful to correct her grammar. She does not want to sound “stupid.” I know objectively that I am old enough to make my own decisions, yet I also know that I will never be old enough to write this essay without her permission. I promise my mother that she will not sound stupid.

My need to write her words, to write as a daughter, sets up an internal dialogue as I address my various anxieties. The word, Holocaust, is itself so intimidating. Not a survivor myself, how dare I write about what I have not witnessed? Even though as a literary critic, a reader of texts, I recognize that the tendency to value “objective” eyewitness accounts (Young 6) of the Holocaust betrays a naïve faith that the eyewitness makes no choices in what she sees and what she is willing and able to put into language, this knowledge is an adult knowledge alien to my child self; the memories I want to explore are those of a child, myself but not myself, one who answers to a different name and listens in another language. The impossibility of restoring speech to that child. Even if I could empower that child to speak again, my scholarly work on the difficulty of hearing mothers’ voices in children’s literature makes me suspicious of daughters who tell/mask/revise their mothers’ stories. Having written on the careful way we control maternal voices in children’s literature, what do I think will happen if I tell my mother’s story?

If that doesn’t stop me, am I not too close to my subject? Helen Epstein, in *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors*, reports studies that suggest the survivor’s pathology is passed on to her children. My instinctive rejection of this idea maybe only confirms its existence. My mother pathological? I can hear her voice in Slovak telling me exactly what she thinks of this idea. And yet Epstein also describes how survivors’ children tend to idealize and protect their parents. While I do not recognize myself or my mother in many of the Epstein interviews, I know that this proves nothing. But then I consider how my relationship with my mother does not fit the classical Freudian story in which daughters inevitably move away from mothers (and even feminists have tended to write as daughters, not as mothers). Perhaps my resistance to the Freudian story about mothers and daughters is itself a product of my mother’s voice and the story she told.

In the end, however, what outweighs my doubts is the recognition that my ambivalence is itself the good daughter’s extension of my mother’s own reluctance to speak, and that if I give in to this reluctance, I will not be able to put to rest a frustrating conversation I began having years ago. When Jim Keegstra first hit the news, I remember holding lengthy imaginary and

absurd conversations with him. "What do you mean the Holocaust never happened? Let me tell you about my mother." Aware of the dangers of a daughter's narrative, knowing that in the end the essay I write will be more my story than hers, I resist my mother's own incredulity that anyone is interested in her experience, and start to write what I remember. What I offer here is not so much the testimony of a Holocaust survivor, as it is the memory of a child who witnessed her survivor/mother speak.

The eldest of three children, I was named Adrienne after a friend of my mother and in recognition of her father murdered five years before in Auschwitz. In my case, the Jewish custom of naming children in honour of dead relatives had to be altered slightly. Had I been a boy, this still would have been the case for her father's name was Adolf, a name for obvious reasons no longer available for Jewish children. The A was a gesture, a partial recognition of a life that had itself been abbreviated, a life whose story I would only very partially and indirectly know (even now I still think of him as my mother's father, not my grandfather). Adrienne in turn was supposedly a safe name in that it was not recognizably a Jewish name. In choosing this name, my mother was following in the tradition of her own parents who had given their three daughters, Marta, Olga, and Magda, names that were considered non-Jewish. Names made no difference to Hitler, but the persistence of this naming strategy is inevitably part of the story I know. Indeed the name, Adrienne, was not a name I used until university; I was Ada, a name that fit better with the Slovak that was my first language. To my parents and siblings, I am still the person who answers to that name.

When I puzzle over my knowledge of her story, my inability to remember a time when I did not know that her father had been murdered, as opposed to my mother's insistence today that she did not want to tell me very much until I was around twelve, I focus on this lost language. When I was three, my parents, realizing that I could not speak English, abruptly switched languages, and I lost the ability to speak Slovak. What I never lost was my passive understanding, and I wonder now how much of what I remember of my mother's story was being spoken around me, not to me. For while my parents now spoke English to me, they continued to speak Slovak to each other. This story of a lost language in which I spied is admittedly my version, not hers; when my father agrees that this might have happened, my mother dismissed this idea.<sup>2</sup> Her memory is that she did not tell me, or anyone else, very much. No one was interested, she says. They didn't want to hear. Nobody believed the stories, so why talk? Why frighten children? Fear was part of the Nazi legacy, the sick jokes like herding my mother and other women into one of the gas chambers at Auschwitz-Birkenau, turning out the lights and then (for some reason, there is no reason) not gassing them. To tell a story like that would have been too frightening.<sup>3</sup>

Her question about the motivation for frightening children resonates and remains with me, for much as I insist that I always knew, I cannot remember being scared. My first memory is of winter; my mother and I are walking on the stone and gravel driveway that circles the Southern Ontario farmhouse we live in. Inside the house, my baby sister is sleeping. Although I can convince myself that I can still hear my mother's voice, I can no longer hear what she is saying. I know that I feel safe. This feeling astonishes me when I now read memoirs by survivors' children or catch myself crying as I read memoirs by survivors themselves. Why do I have no recollection of nightmares provoked by the Holocaust? The childhood nightmares I recall were nearly all provoked by visual images: the face of the Wicked Witch in *The Wizard of Oz*; the recurring nightmare about a nuclear bomb after I watched a TV drama whose title, *Alas Babylon*, I can still recall. Such nightmares may have been substitutes for the really horrific, but what is more apparent is that visual images frightened; my mother's voice protected.<sup>4</sup> In my child's memory, anything she said was tolerable, because the voice demonstrated her magic power; she was a survivor.

Was it the way she as mother and survivor censored her story or my childish, cruel indifference to the deaths of others? Think about the distancing revealed when I write "my mother's father" rather than "grandfather." Had I in my child's necessary egotism decided that since my mother had survived Auschwitz, therefore I was safe? Had I absorbed her need to feel that emigration in 1947 and marriage to my father in 1948 meant that now she too was safe? If today, I read Holocaust fiction, in particular fiction that focuses on mothers and children, with great tension is this because I am now aware of what I refused to imagine when young? Am I afraid that I will find the details my mother's story omits? The more I remember, the more questions I have, and I think that these questions may reveal something about the strategies children themselves set up as a way of making and controlling meaning when they are told stories about the Holocaust. I have no doubt that children, and not just survivors' children, can handle stories about the Holocaust; my question is directed rather to the meaning children construct. What happens to Holocaust stories when children listen to them? For it is not simply a matter of the choices survivors make as they tell their stories; their children too make choices in what they are able to hear.

It is impossible for me to disentangle my mother's voice and my child's interpretation of that voice. Clearly in a different narrative situation, e.g., being videotaped and encouraged to speak in the psychoanalytic context Dori Laub outlines in "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening," my mother would speak differently. Witnesses, Laub reminds us, are always "talking to somebody" (71). But my mother refuses to speak publicly, and I refuse, am unable, to psychoanalyze her narrative. Like many of the survi-

vors' children interviewed by Epstein, my memories are in fragments that cluster around certain key stories. Convinced that I have repressed details, in late June 1996, I phone my mother repeatedly and do not so much interview her as review what I remember. I tell her that I am puzzled by that sense of safety, and think that she must have deliberately decided not to tell me about the really horrific events she witnessed. Horror is comparative, right? I cannot believe I am saying this; she lost her father and nearly all her relatives. I know this, and yet I have decided she censored her own voice? Yes, why else do I only recall her moments of defiance and resistance, moments when she talked back to the Kapos and got away with it, moments when she stole an extra few minutes from work?

A: "What I mean is that you never talked to me about dead people."

O: "I never saw a dead person."

A: "What? I don't believe this. You were in Auschwitz. How could you not see a dead person?"

O: "I didn't look, just like I would never look the soldiers in the eye. We were in horrible barracks but the chimneys were elsewhere. The Polish girls in charge, the Kapos, would threaten us by saying, 'See those chimneys. That's where you'll go.' We didn't believe it. We didn't believe it even there."

In 1938, when Hitler annexed the Sudetenland and proceeded to dismember Czechoslovakia, Nové Zámky, the Slovak town my mother lived in, became part of Hungary. Overnight the family switched to Hungarian, a language she already knew to a certain extent. The three daughters became Christian, but when continuing in school meant having to go to confession, my mother refused. Crying that she could not go to confession, she rebelled and her father let her stay home. Her two sisters finished that year at school, but my mother was 16 and never returned to *gymnasium*.

A: "What did you do to become Christian?"

O: "We became Catholic. We had to go to a priest and say the Lord's Prayer in Latin [here she starts to recite '*Pater Noster*']."

A: "If you could go through that ceremony, why did saying confession bother you? You weren't religious."

O: "I know, but I was Jewish inside. It was a feeling that I had. I just couldn't do it."

Trying to find some work still permissible under anti-Jewish legislation, she eventually became an apprentice seamstress, and it was from the other seamstresses that she first heard Yiddish. In her family, Yiddish was regarded as a language that modern people did not need. The daughters

already knew many other languages; in addition to the Slovak and Hungarian they spoke at home, at school they had studied Latin, French and German. During the war, there were private English lessons: "The woman who gave us the lessons, she died too."

The fact that her Jewish father had become a lawyer, a civil servant employed by the state, was a sign of the liberal possibilities that existed in Czechoslovakia between the Wars. In my memory, my mother recalls walks with her father as he drills her on the Latin she has trouble with; she swims and exercises, and spends time in the sun. The emphasis on physical strength and exposure to the sun is important, for part of my mother's narrative is surviving the endless Auschwitz *zählappell* (roll calls) through her ability to tolerate the sun (she is looking for a reason; I am looking for a reason; there is no reason): "Other people passed out from the sun. They were covered with sores."

In mid-May 1944, my mother, her sisters Marta and Magda, and her parents, were ordered to move first to a ghetto, and then two weeks later to a brick factory. What appeared to be the luck of sitting out the war in the relative safety of Hungary was rapidly to fall apart. Even as signs were apparent that Germany was losing the war, the "final solution" was imposed on Hungarian Jews with a rapidity and efficiency only years of experience can give. The Russian army was approaching from the East, and in the ghetto, listening to an illegal radio, her father heard about the Allied invasion on D Day. My mother never tells me that in May and June 1944, 437,000 Hungarian Jews were deported to Auschwitz where the vast majority were murdered immediately (Hilberg 547).<sup>5</sup> Why frighten a child, and who, child or adult, can imagine the deaths of so many? Instead she tells me that when any of the family complained about conditions in the ghetto (where they slept in one room), or the brick factory (where they slept outside), her father would say, "I wouldn't mind staying here until the end of the war." She tells me that on June 14, 1944, her twenty-second birthday, the family was sent to Auschwitz.

One of the many gaps in my memory of her story is what she did between the first selection and the one two months later. Knowing that Elie Wiesel and other Hungarian Jews deported in 1944 talk in their memoirs about the contemptuous reception they received from the few Auschwitz inmates who had managed to survive years of imprisonment, I ask her now whether this accords with her memory:

O: "The Polish girls, the Kapos, they were so mean, especially to old people [Is she thinking of my grandmother, who at 46 was regarded as old and had lied about her age during the first selection?]. The Polish girls had survived for three years; their parents were dead. They were angry and they blamed us: 'While you were dancing, we were here.'"

A: "What did you say to them?"

O: "Nothing. What could we say? When they learned we could speak Slovak and so could understand them, they weren't so mean. And we were young so that made a difference. Sometimes when they wanted everyone to be quiet in the barracks, they would ask Marta to sing. She could sing opera so beautifully. But she said she was too hungry, so they gave her food, and then she sang."

In my mother's story, the arrival at Auschwitz is the moment that is the worst, for it is the moment when she last saw her father:

O: "We arrived at the station around 4 am. There was screaming, rushing, the S. S. with their rifles and their dogs, the *Arbeit Macht Frei* sign. I saw hanging people."

A.: "What do you mean? You just told me ten minutes ago that you never saw a dead person at Auschwitz."

O: "Oh, I must have forgotten. [She pauses.] Yes, there were dead bodies, hanging people. The bodies were there to scare us."

Has she forgotten this because a mother does not scare a child, even a grey-haired 47-year-old child? Has she forgotten because forgetting was her way to survive? "I didn't look." Or has she forgotten the dead bodies because the real trauma was what happened next?

A: "So this was where you were separated from your father?"

O: "Yes, the men and women were separated. He kissed us all, and looked at us with such sadness. He knew what was going to happen. He had always said he did not want to grow old. He got his wish. He turned to Magda (my mother's younger sister) and said, 'Watch over them.' He knew she was the most capable. He was right."

In my mother's story, her father survived the initial selection, working first at Auschwitz and then in Dachau, but he lost the will to live when a neighbour from Nové Zámky told him that his wife and daughters had been taken away from Auschwitz. Concluding that they were dead, not knowing that they were now working in a factory in the Sudetenland, he no longer cared to live. After the war, a man who had been with him at this time, told the family that in full knowledge of what would happen if he said he was sick and was sent back to Auschwitz, he chose to do this. He was gassed October 25, 1944. My mother even now insists that there was a day that October when she could not stop crying. She is convinced that it was around October 28<sup>th</sup> because that had been a Czech national holiday that the family used to celebrate. When she spoke to her mother later (it was one of the many

days my grandmother was in the infirmary), she learned that my grandmother too had cried all day.<sup>6</sup>

A: "Did you not think about him the rest of the time? I know you say you only cried that one time."

O: "I was always hopeful. I was always an optimist. After the war, I would look out the window waiting for him to return. People did not all come back at once. When I realized that he was not coming back, that is when I got upset because I was so disappointed. That one day I remember crying in the *Lager*, it was a nice day. That made it somehow worse. I was thinking that he was all alone. Not too many were together, three daughters and a mother.<sup>7</sup> It still scares me even now when I get feelings about what will happen to people. I remember crying once on the farm when it was his birthday."

A: "I remember seeing you cry one other time; it was in the summer."

I do not tell her that as a child I also fantasized that my grandfather would suddenly show up, that I too recall obsessively looking out windows. I do not mention that my father jokes that my mother is a *bosorka* (a witch) because she always knows who is about to phone her.

Lawrence L. Langer would call my mother's memory of her father's death a perfect example of "retrospective sentiment" (56), of the way memory constructs an order, shape, and meaning to an experience whose first achievement was the disruption of the prisoner's ability to make meaning. How can she remember what she thought on a certain day when she admits that the arrival at Auschwitz shocked her? The process of selection, followed by the stripping and shaving, the putting on of clothes that had been disinfected but that she still recalls as stained with the blood of former prisoners, seems intended to humiliate and disorder memory and identity. She tells me: "They shaved us all over." How can that statement exist beside the narrative of her father's choice?

Langer reminds us that Auschwitz meant "the death of choice" (67), that the will to live "made no difference to [the] murderers" (55), that all Jews were intended for extermination, that had the Nazis won, no Jews would have survived, that the language of moral choice, of cause and effect, is inappropriate when writing about Auschwitz. Langer insists that "The literature of the Holocaust is not a literature of hope" (157). Nevertheless, these are the words of my mother's story. If these words are not accurate to what she thought in 1944 (how can we ever reconstruct what we actually thought at a certain time?), they are the words that she needed to help her survive after. If the positive attitude she dwells on did not help her survive then, it remains a main component of the story I remember. When my grandmother in Auschwitz would say, "We'll never get out of here," my mother tells me that

she would try to get out of the filthy barracks and look at the sky: "I'd think how nice the sky was. It was the same sky everybody saw. The Nazis could not take that sky away."

Because Langer believes that the inhumanity of Auschwitz requires a new vocabulary, a "vocabulary of annihilation" (68), he is quick to point out how the language of tragic heroism consoles and deceives (92). In the same mode, he contemptuously dismisses Victor Frankl's account of the way he responded during a forced march to the beauty of the Salzburg mountains as "maudlin rhetoric" (236). Langer speaks of the difficulty of "learning to live with a double vision and to speak with two voices — the voice of Auschwitz and the voice of civilization" (28). The story my mother tells me, like children's literature in general about the Holocaust, clearly chooses the voice of civilization, yet the more I as adult talk to my mother, the more I suspect that it was my role as child witness that ensured that the story I heard was the simple, hopeful version. The minimal details of her account, her memory that she did not tell me very much, surely reveals that there are parts of her story that I will never know. One possible reason that she did not like to dwell on her experience was that non-survivors wanted to hear a different, more heroic story:

I remember people talking in Canada that x had saved so many Jews, that x was a hero. What kind of hero? If he got one person off the trains, that meant another had to be sent. When people talked like that, I didn't say anything.

In place of Langer's double vision, I substitute the decision that guided my mother's narrative. Why scare children? The hope that figures so largely in her story may indicate a naïve faith in 1944 that hope would protect her, but it may also reflect a later narrative decision that fear would not damage her children. For at the heart of her story is an ambiguity that we never talk about; the hope that kept her going, the hope that her father would return, was not fulfilled; the very Nazi decision to send the four women away from Auschwitz she herself constructs as contributing to her father's despair. This is not to say that there is any ambiguity about who is guilty of her father's murder; theories about survivor guilt do not apply to her.

So in the way I remember my mother's story, my grandfather remains forever a tragic noble figure, and my aunt, Magda, is still the fairytale heroine, the youngest child, who ensures that the sisters and mother survive. She is the one, who, assigned to the kitchens, steals food for my grandmother. She is the one, who, when they are liberated, is so good-looking (how can anyone be good-looking who has been in Auschwitz?) that she is offered first a motorcycle by Russian soldiers and then a ride on a truck by partisans (as in a comic fairytale, she accepts the latter but only on condition that the parti-

sans also take her mother and two sisters, and then she mentions that there are 20 other prisoners they have to give rides to). She is the one who in August 1944, along with her sister, Marta, during a selection organized by Mengele, sneaks from one line to another, so that the three sisters and my grandmother remain together.

It is essential to the story I remember that Magda and Marta do this, for it gives my mother another reason for explaining her survival. Hence that moment during the selection when her sisters change lines is a moment she incessantly returns to. My mother can no longer recall how many times she saw Mengele, and because she did not know at the time which line was the best line, she is no longer even certain whether she went to the left or the right. In any case in her story there are three lines (she now knows the line she and her mother were placed in was for work; she thinks the line Magda and Marta were initially sent to was for harder work; the other she concludes must have been the line for those who were to be killed). She mentions, but does not dwell on the trauma of walking naked, hands up, in front of Mengele, each of the daughters in turn asking to remain with my grandmother. She adds that during the selection, Mengele was himself struck by Magda's strong appearance and said, "*Das schon ja.*"<sup>8</sup> Spooked by this statement, even though I have heard this story before, I write down her words and ask more questions:

A: "How exactly did Magda and Marta sneak over?"

O: "Remember that we could speak Slovak and this helped us with the Polish Kapos. Slovak was close enough to Polish that the Kapos could talk to us and order us. They gave us jobs distributing food. Magda and Marta pretended to be cleaning dishes and changed lines. When Magda looked to see if she had been observed, the S.S. girl slapped her for looking around."

It was following this selection, that my mother was marched to Birkenau and shut up in the room and not gassed. Was the room a shower, was it a gas chamber? The intentional deception of Nazi language confuses me here. This fact makes as much sense as the fact that the four women were now transported to the Sudetenland to work in a factory in Trutnov. Unable to recall any longer what exactly she did in the factory other than the speed with which she did it, she still remembers that they gave her cabbage and potato for the first meal. There was always the threat that if the women disobeyed or got sick, they would be sent back to Auschwitz, so when my grandmother was sick and in the infirmary, the French prisoner doctor would substitute the names of the three daughters. Tricking and hoping (for liberation and that the Trutnov train station be bombed since the four women slept in another town and had to take the train twice a day [she recalls waving at

airplanes]), the women worked in Trutnov for nine months. Eating everything in order to survive (here too she praises Magda as a leader), imagining the meals they would have when they were free, and then on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1945 waking up and there are not Nazis.

What follows is delirium and an obsession with food. Slowly sneaking out of the barracks, they see defeated German soldiers retreating, soldiers who refuse to share their chicken, and then the Russian soldiers arrive, who open a warehouse and encourage them to eat and rob. Getting sick from overeating. At night, their first night sleeping outside the *Lager*, they hear drunken Russian soldiers banging on the doors; my grandmother, fearing the rape of her daughters, lies on top of one daughter to hide her; another older woman lies on top of another; my mother, left on her own, feeling sick from eating raw eggs, no longer certain whether she is pretending or is really going to vomit, mutters to the Russian soldier looming over her, "zle, zle" (I feel sick, sick). The soldier disappears.

If this episode, like much of my mother's story, were in a children's book, I would dismiss it as incredible, unrealistic, too full of contrived lucky escapes. Clearly a book trying too hard to be a children's version. What differentiates it from a children's book, however, are the gaps, the narrative disorder, the refusal of an overriding explanatory myth or possible moral vision. Unlike the protagonist in Carol Matas's *Daniel's Story*, for example, my mother does not review her past in any coherent way. She sticks mainly to details, creating what Shoshana Felman sees as the different power of description versus explanation (218). Her focus on concrete detail "resists ... any possible canonization of the experience of the Holocaust" (219).

But if we treat my mother's story as a children's book, our narrative expectations for children's literature and the problem of meaning that results become apparent. Immediately we ask what does this story prove. What lesson does it teach about the Holocaust? And here is where I hesitate and admit my impatience with the simplistic Holocaust lessons that often appear in children's books. The very fact that we want to tell children stories about the Holocaust suggests that we think there is a lesson. But what is the lesson we think that they will learn? I have no doubt, based on my own experience, and reinforced as I watched my eight-year-old son in 1992 interview his grandmother, that we can indeed tell children stories about the Holocaust, but I remain ambivalent about the result. My memories caution me that children's need to protect themselves, a need reinforced by the adult storyteller's desire not to recreate in the child listener the fear that the Nazis created in her, may mean that the only way children can and will hear these stories is through strategies that inevitably diminish, distance, and distort. The very need to put a shape, to find a lesson (I am looking for a reason; there is no reason) in my mother's survival distracts me from its random and

absurd aspects. The frightening lesson, that there is no logical explanation for her survival, is something that challenges the narrative expectations of most children's fiction.

Yet if children need to hear stories that emphasize hope and luck (and I am not sure if this is natural or the way children are constructed by our adult desire to protect them), are adults any different? And if no language is appropriate to "the experience of annihilation" (Langer 10), then is children's literature any different from any literature that writes about these events? For if all language is inadequate, as many Holocaust writers say, then ultimately all literature about the Holocaust may be a form of children's literature, trying to describe events with our very limited vocabulary.

Sometimes I think that it is enough that we tell these stories so that they will not be forgotten. When stories are the only way we can know the past, when survivors are now elderly and our ability to hear their voices diminishes even as their memories grow uncertain, when the alternative is Holocaust denial, why am I quibbling over children finding hopeful lessons? I know that Jim Keegstra will not be interested in my mother's story, even as I know that telling it will make no difference to the genocide that I read about every day in the newspaper. I write her story because if the Holocaust was designed to be "*an event without a witness*" (Felman 211), I challenge that definition by listening, by becoming witness to her story.

Elie Wiesel is justified to say that "if the choice is between a trivialization of the event and nothing, I prefer nothing" (158), for his are the unbearable memories of "processions of children walking, walking" (166). But my memories are of my mother's voice as we walk in a circle, and this makes all the difference. Perhaps this is why during a Christmas vacation in 1992 I hear myself say to my son, "Why don't you interview your grandmother?" No longer the child who listens, I become witness to the way my mother tells another child a story about the Holocaust. Despite the differences in our written versions, e.g., my son's greater optimism about the lesson to be learned, his omission of any reference to my grandfather's death, differences that only confirm the extent to which he as child controls the meaning of her story, in our endings we agree. For the three of us know that a children's story, even this kind of story, demands a happy ending. Like Claude Lanzmann, I do not have the right to give this story a happy ending (Felman 241); my mother is the only one who can speak it. So once again, for a moment, I am safe, protected by her voice as she tells me/him a story. It is dawn on a sunny day in mid-May 1945. My mother is riding in an open wagon, listening to French and Italian prisoners of war singing, "O Solo Mio": "That was when I felt free. It was beautiful. I can never forget it."

## Appendix

### *"Six Years of Terror," by Joshua Kertzer*

As I sat with my grandmother in her house, I said, "Olga. Tell me what it was like to be in the Second World War." I took out my notebook and pencil and my grandmother started her story.

#### *Olga's Story*

All the Jews had to go to a certain ghetto of their town. They were required to bring their belongings with them, and so they carried what they could on their backs. From here they were taken somewhere else where they worked in a brick factory. They were required to work in the brick factory during the day. At night time they slept on the ground by a railroad. This continued for two weeks.

On June 14<sup>th</sup>, everyone was squished into a cattle train. There were two buckets. One bucket was for drinking and one bucket was for the toilet. No one could ever use these two buckets, though, because there were just too many people crowded into the cattle car. People were squashed in — there was no room to even sit down. We travelled for three days and three nights like this.

On the fourth morning our train arrived at Auschwitz. The doors opened and we saw daylight for the first time in three days. There were huge dogs — German Shepherds — standing guard, ready to attack, beside the German soldiers who greeted us. The soldiers were carrying whips and shouting at us. "*Wiet! Wiet! Schnell! Jetz!*" (Out! Out! Quick! Now!)

The soldiers separated the men from the women. They asked us our age. If you were between 20 and 45 years old and you were strong, you went to the left to work. If you were a mother or father and were carrying a child, you were sent to a gas chamber where you and your child would be killed. Old people were killed as were young children. What the Germans had left were people who could work. I was one of the people who was strong and would work.

We were gathered together and more German soldiers arrived. They ordered us to take all our clothes off while they watched with their whips in their hands and their dogs at their sides. Next they shaved all our hair from our heads until we were bald. Some more German soldiers then came and gave us lice-bitten, infested clothes. We knew that these clothes had been on our people who had been held captive by these same German soldiers and who were now dead. We were then put into a big barrack. We had to sleep on the floor, but we never got much sleep because we didn't have enough room

to stretch our feet out. At 4:30 a.m. each morning, we were rudely awakened and it was another day of hard work.

Auschwitz was very cold. Each morning the Germans made us stand in a line of five people so they could count us. It took hours. They deliberately counted very slowly just to see if we could endure all the waiting. When this was finished we went to work for the day. At times the sun got so hot at Auschwitz that some people got terrible sores. When the German soldiers discovered that the people had sores, they sent the people with the sores to the gas chamber to be killed.

Six weeks after we arrived at Auschwitz the German soldiers started selecting people for transport. We didn't know where we were going. The selecting was done by Dr. Mengele. We didn't know at that time, but the people who were selected by Dr. Mengele, to be used by him, were used for experimental purposes. The other people were divided into other groups. You could be sent to do hard work, not so hard work, and the gas chambers. The way we were selected was very awful. Each of us had to remove all our clothes and walk completely naked in a line watched by Dr. Mengele. We were selected for a group depending upon how we walked. After this ordeal everyone was ordered into a room which said, "GAS" on it. People were so afraid. People started screaming, they were so afraid. It was all a stupid trick, though. The Germans had tried to kill us by shock. After this we had to dress. Our clothes were different from those we had before. We were transported to Sudetenland to a work camp called Trutnov.

At Trutnov we slept on bunk beds. We got up at 5:00 a.m. and worked in a factory all day. All we ate was stale bread with some horrible soup called Eintopf. The Germans never fed the older people properly, so once I went and stole bread for a week so I could feed my mother. It was fairly dangerous to do this, but my mother was starving. We worked at Trutnov for a year.

On May 9, 1945 there was no wake up call by the Germans. We slept in late. Then someone said, "The Germans are all gone." We didn't know why. The next day the Russians came and freed all of us. They gave my sister a motorcycle, but she didn't know how to ride it so she left it behind. We travelled home on an open wagon. We couldn't believe it, "We were going home!" We were going home with the prisoners of the war who were singing an Italian song "O Solo Mio." The sun was rising and we were free. We had lived and survived Auschwitz and Trutnov and Dr. Mengele.

This is my grandmother's story. This is a story I want to — no I need to — remember. Six million Jews were killed in six years during the Second World War. This was done because one person did not like, or understand Jewish people. It is a story that should never be repeated. No people should ever be subject to such hatred, persecution and death. It is a story that all

people must remember so that this never happens again. It is now my responsibility to keep my grandmother's story alive. But now that you have heard this story, it becomes your responsibility, too. Keep it well and tell it well.<sup>9</sup>

## Notes

- 1 I thank my mother, Olga Haas, for telling me her story. I thank my son, Joshua Kertzer, for teaching me how to write it down.
- 2 My father, George Haas, immigrated to Canada from Czechoslovakia one month before the Second World War began. His story is also a story of ironic luck, the bad luck of injuring his thumb in a train door so that he could not take engineering exams and become the engineer he wanted to be. Going to agricultural college instead likely saved his life and that of the eight Jews who came to Canada with him. As a child I knew nothing of Canada's restrictive immigration policies in the 1930s; the story of my father's thumb was simply a taken-for-granted good luck story. I never dwelled on the "luck" of those who could not emigrate or how frightening the actual date, July 28, 1939, my father entered Canada really was.
- 3 Yet this appalling story appears in the essay my son wrote about his grandmother, an essay based on his interview of her. I include the essay in an appendix, not as an accurate record of my mother's experiences, but as another form of evidence to indicate both how children make sense of Holocaust stories and how my mother spoke once about this event to a specific child. In the face of my mother's uncertainty about what she was willing to say to her daughter in the 1950s is a child's written response to what she was willing to say to him in 1992. The interview took place in December 1992; the essay was subsequently written as a school assignment at University Elementary School, Calgary, Alberta in spring, 1993. One of Joshua's teachers, Pat Clifford, has told me that neither she, nor Sharon Friesen, his other teacher, guided the shaping of his narrative. Except for using the Czech spelling for Trutnov, I have resisted my maternal instinct to alter the essay in any way.
- 4 Even now I find myself very nervous watching Holocaust films, and have, on occasion, phoned my mother the next day as though I am still seeking the magic reassurance of her voice. This visual terror may also explain my fascination with picture books that deal with the Holocaust.
- 5 Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi in charge of the Hungarian transports, was captured in 1960. Was it his capture and subsequent trial and the way this allowed discussion of what happened in the camps that makes my mother now say that she did not talk about Auschwitz until 1961 when I was 12?
- 6 My grandmother, Josephine Fodor, remained in mourning until she died in 1989. She left instructions that on her tombstone, a tombstone my grandfather does not have, be written "Beloved wife of Dr. Adolf Fodor, born December 14, 1886, perished during the Holocaust, October 25, 1944."
- 7 When I read memoirs by other survivors, I catch myself looking for confirmation of my mother's story in narratives that emphasize sisters surviving because they stayed together, e.g., Isabella Leitner's *Fragments of Isabella*.

- 8 In the original draft of this essay, I wrote "Das ist schön ja"; my mother observed after she read the paper that Mengele had not said that Magda was beautiful, but rather, "Das schon ja." I note this as yet another example of the distance between what a child hears and what a mother says.
- 9 Like all stories, "Six Years of Terror" has taken on a life of its own, and has been used by a classmate of Joshua's as source material for her own Holocaust story.

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*Adrienne Kertzer teaches children's literature, maternal narrative, and fiction at the University of Calgary. Since writing this essay in 1996, she has published several articles on Holocaust representation and children's literature, and is now completing a book manuscript, **My Mother's Voice; Children, Literature, and the Holocaust** (forthcoming, Broadview P).*