

From an idyllic life in pre-war Poland to the inferno of the Shoah

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The fictional canvass of prolific novelist Susan Fromberg Schaeffer was not infrequently dominated by women and the female point of view which bristles with daydreams about another world, away from the constant suffering that is a hallmark of her writing. Schaeffer explored and examined familial break-ups and alienation, the struggle to individuate, depression and the power of memory. In the main, her work crossed many genres and historical periods, utilizing the stream of consciousness, among other devices, in rendering the mundane details of her character's complex behaviour and existence. Possessing a wonderful ear for dialogue and setting, she has been praised for her uncanny ability to authentically place the reader at the womb of her literary landscapes.

A National Book Nominee for the *Granite Lady*, twice winner of the O Henry Prize and recipient of the Jan Geske Award for her poem "Edith Levine", her firm grasp on the mechanics of storytelling resulted in the spectator being totally submerged in the manifold ventilations of the time and place she depicted, infusing the fabric of her tales with dense textures.

Falling, her first novel published in 1973, was named by Time magazine as one of the ten best works of the year and was well received by both readers and critics. Woven from various autobiographical elements, the narrative nucleus revolves around Elizabeth Kamen, a neurotic Jewish graduate student in Chicago who sinks into a terrible depression yet manages

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to escape her destructive impulses and triumph over her morose existence. As the plot unfolds, we discover that the heroine's nervous breakdown is linked to a shocking childhood episode that had acutely affected the young girl. Compositionally, the book is marbled with a plethora of incidents and sequences, including Elizabeth's revelatory sessions with a therapist that flesh out her troubled relationship with her mother, and her failed love affairs with men.

Deftly intermingling tragedy and humour, the author seamlessly limns Elizabeth's journey towards her recovery with beautifully realised images that render her healing in poignantly authentic hues. To her credit, Schaeffer honestly deals with Elizabeth's glance at the precipice of suicide, sensitively observing her protagonist's attempt to arrest her falling, while avoiding skirting along the edge of the sentimental and maudlin. In that connection, the horrid treatment by the mother, her punishments and viciousness foreground a real hate that was rarely witnessed in the delineation of the mother daughter dyad.

Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's 1974's Prize winning *Anya*¹ (Edward Lewis Wallant Award and Friends of Literature Award) is a gargantuan opus of incomparable richness and complexity, featuring in its epicentre the recollections of the 52-year-old eponymous heroine now living in the United States. In an early review in the *New York Times*, William Novak praised the novel as representing a, "...new stride towards maturity in Jewish-American writing. The novel looks history in the eye, engaging it with a stubborn fierceness. It is a triumph of realism in art."²

Told in flashback, it is a tale of survival, enrobed in a wide-ranging portraiture of life, partly unfolding within an affluent assimilated Jewish family living in Poland. The main

¹ Susan Fromberg Schaeffer. *Anya*. New York: Macmillan, 1974.

² William Novak. "Jewish history larger than life." *New York Review of Books*, Volume 79 (1974): 36.

storyline takes place before the Second World War, during the 1930's and 1940's and includes the Nazi invasion of Poland, the family's incarceration in the Vilna Ghetto and its attendant horrors, Anya's years in a Labor camp, subsequent rescue, and immigration to America. It is a deeply poignant fictional memoir about confronting pain, about being caught between an irretrievable past and a problematic future. Nestled inside the basic story structure, is a secret treasure house of reflections and feelings threaded within and not quarantined from the narrative.

It is of salience that poet-novelist Schaeffer, who born in New York in 1941 and died in 2011, was neither a survivor nor the daughter of Holocaust survivors, and consequently could not tap the authentic and anguished vein of suffering that other survivor writers can. Imagining a devastating and scorching experience such as the Holocaust, that one has not directly been in, is an enormously difficult enterprise. Yet, as the author observed in her 1995 essay "Good Behaviour", when it came to writing the book, "I felt strongly that I had taken in something very difficult but that it would not impossible."³ In an interview with Charlotte Templin, Schaefer was asked whether she had any reservations of qualms about penning, "a novelistic or "entertaining" book about the Holocaust? Schaeffer explained that:

You want people to be able to get through whatever it is that they are reading. The sections that have to do with the war and the concentration camps don't represent Anya and her world as a particularly rosy one. I doubt anyone reading the book would say, "I would like to have gone through these experiences." What is necessary in a work

³ As cited in Molly Mcquade. (editor). *An Unsentimental Education: Writers and Chicago*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press: 1995: 139.

that has to connect itself to readers is the ability to conjure up the experience, and I don't think that there should be subjects that are off limits. The Holocaust should not be an untouchable subject. That would be the best way to guarantee that nobody ever remembered it.⁴

Later in that interview, the author elaborated on the central aim of the novel:

...What I was trying to do was to make the subject once again available to people. At the time I wrote this book everybody was really fed up with it. When I said I was going to write a book about the Holocaust, a common reaction was, "Not another book about the Holocaust." I understand the feeling people have that this is somehow sacred and therefore shouldn't be touched, but I don't see it that way. There's nothing dangerous if the author writes about the subject truly...I don't think there is anything wrong with trying to describe reality. Whether you succeed in invoking it or not, that is another question, an aesthetic question.⁵

Schaeffer had to rely on painstaking research, interviews with the remnant of the Shoah, and newspaper articles to craft the multitudinous panorama of a now defunct community as well as the concentrationary universe that her novel presents. According to Kremer, Anya is based on the life of Holocaust survivor Anya Savikin Brodman, whose notes and testimony about the three generations of her family, recorded specifically for the author, were integrated into the book.⁶ Novak contends that the work is, "not directly about the

⁴ Charlotte Templin. "An Interview with Susan Fromberg Schaeffer," *The Missouri Review*, 1997, Vol 20 (2): 142-143.

⁵ Templin. "An Interview with Susan Fromberg Schaeffer,": 143.

⁶ Lillian S Kremer. "Susan Fromberg Schaeffer," In Kremer, S. Lillian (ed.). *Holocaust Literature. An Encyclopedia of Writers and Their Work*. Vol. 2. New York: Routledge, 2003: 1096.

Holocaust so much as the period in which the Holocaust occurred, and the personal history with which it intersects.”⁷

According to Mickey Pearlman, one of the operating motifs that informs the Schaeffer diegesis is the commanding force of memory, a seminal preoccupation that is on display, front and centre, in the novel.⁸ Memory in *Anya* becomes a lever through which the lost Jewish world of yore is recreated. Also looming large are dreams, dramatised in a short prologue in which Anya, through a post-war dream in 1973, reveals the book’s coda. Thankfully, Schaeffer avoids raiding the parabolic reservoir of images and gestures in her telling of the extermination of the Jews. Moreover, in dramatising the mother daughter relationship, she resists laying on the sentimentality with a trowel often seen in literary Holocaust representations. In that connection, it is worth quoting Alan Mintz’s apposite observation:

Mrs. Schaeffer’s universalist perspective is the source of two of her novel’s greatest strengths. It allows her, first, to illuminate a neglected and troubling aspect of the Holocaust: the fact that vast numbers of Jews, many more than we like to think in our idealizations of the six million, faced the extermination camps with little idea of why they were there and even less of the role they were being forced to play in a millennial Jewish drama. Secondly, and related, *Anya* successfully avoids the tendency to allegorization which is a kind of hallmark of novels of the Holocaust, especially those by survivors.⁹

Compositionally, the ‘memoir’ is grouped into three cardinal parts— “In History”, “Biblical Times”, and “The Lion’s Den” – showcasing a stylistic approach that suffuses

⁷ Novak. “Jewish history larger than life.”: 36.

⁸ Mickey, Pearlman. “The Power of Memory, Family and Space,” *In American Women Writing Fiction: Memory, Identity, Family Space*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989: 137-146.

⁹ Alan Mintz. “Anya, by Susan Fromberg Schaeffer,” *Commentary*, March 1, 1975: N.P

documentary realism with elaborate flashes of the family saga and which plunges the reader deeply into the lives of the characters whose every move is overhanged by the historical winds sweeping through. And whilst the nucleus narrative pivots around the remarkable figure of Anya Savikin, serving as the axis upon which other events and incidents are limned, interwoven throughout are entire chapters narrating the history, way of life (often in the most acute of detail) and mores of the wealthy Savikin family. Formally, this is achieved by the choice of first person narrative whose intimate view totally immerses the reader as a full partaker.

With almost a filmic eye, the writer depicts the pre-war milieu and the multitude of secondary characters, breathing life into them from their first appearance. From the outset, Anya physically takes us into the family apartment in Vilna, adumbrating a vibrant and colourful backdrop, “I want to be sure that you can see this apartment, that you can picture it so clearly you feel you are walking through it, because it is very far away in time, and it is so easy to think that you know what something looks like, what something is like, and really have no idea at all.”¹⁰ And immediately afterwards, she adds, “If you are going to learn a person’s life, then, like a learning a language, you must start with the little things, the little pictures, the tiny square images, like rooms...”¹¹ To this end, the novel meticulously and vividly describes the particulars of the apartment, taking in the tactile textures of the furniture, the colours of the fabrics and tablecloths, the smell of jam boiling on the old stove, as well as the gentile servants in the Savikin household who share a deep affinity with the children and who figure prominently in the narrative.

¹⁰ Fromberg Schaeffer, 11.

¹¹ Fromberg Schaeffer, 11.

Drenched with metaphors and bristling with detailed and convincing knowledge about pre-war Europe, the novel also depicts the anti-Semitism of the period. In one scene, Jewish girls at the medical faculty are assaulted by a gang of male students from the university fraternity who disfigure and kill some of them. Anya is warned by her father of the impending attack and is saved. It is this pogrom that first stirs the water of faith in the protagonist who during the war, and later in the United States, develops a durable belief in God. This is despite the fact she grows up in a secular family under the tutelage of an atheistic father who saw life in terms of the power of fate, not God.

At heart, *Anya* summons a long vanished Jewish Diaspora, its history and evolution, rendered through a tightly knit clan. Furthermore, the tale homes in on a host of characters, including friends and servants, as well as presenting the daily vignettes, relationships, dishes of foods, rituals, history, values, attitudes, and the beliefs which defined the ambience and character of the family unit.

By rolling into the armoury of depiction accurate language in the dialogue, and exact detail in settings and names, the writer ensures a quality of realism that captures the essence of the period. The novel is overtly Proustian, as the heroine retreats into childhood, her gaze drifting contemplatively over the crumbling shell of the past, carrying the echoes of that which has vanished. At times, the pilgrimage twenty-five years back is underwritten by a lightness of incident and is sublimely whimsical.

It is the intensity of the gaze, particularly on the heroine, that makes her a full-blooded creation. As the story is written in the first-person narrative, with Anya both its narrator and participant, the reader is positioned and co-opted into seeing her world and her fight for

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survival. In essence, the reader is imperceptibly brought to share the values of the protagonist and the viewpoint that the shaping of the plot seeks to present.

As the story opens, the beautiful and intelligent Anya, the second of four children, is about to commence her medical studies. It is noteworthy that her attendance at the university is a milestone for she is one of the first Jewish women to do so. Her upper middle-class Russian family is an exemplar of bourgeois living and of shimmering domestic bliss. Anya spends her summers at chic resorts, and when she reads Hitler's *Mein Kempf* she writes it off as a mere fairy tale. Sometime later, she marries Stajoe, an engineer, and moves to Warsaw, where she is introduced to the bustling cosmopolitan life of boulevards and restaurants. Before long, the Germans invade and the descent into hell begins.

Her scholarly father Boris, a gentle and kind man, is seized while out to borrow a book, and is taken to a public garden to be shot. The newly married Anya, husband and baby daughter Ninka, along with her mother, sister Vera and two brothers, are taken to the Vilna Ghetto. Eventually, her two brothers, sister, sister in law and baby, brother in law and husband are killed. Shaken by rumours that children will soon be executed, Anya bravely smuggles Ninka out of the ghetto and gives her to the Rutkauskus family who are Christians.

How she alone survives the deprivation, the humiliation, the extreme beating, the attempted rape by soldiers, the disease and the cold is a mystery to Anya. On the one hand, there are moments when she figures that she was saved when her family was obliterated because she was lucky. Conversely, at times, she attributes her staying alive to divine protection that she considers fate. In part, Anya survives because she is tough, has blond hair and a non-Jewish, Aryan look. One could venture the observation that it is primarily because of her willingness to take risks, initiate courageous individual action, and her ruthless ability to cope

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with the gut-wrenching bestiality she encounters that she survives. In one vignette, she saves members of her family and a friend hiding in a building with a sure fire, quick conversation with a Polish soldier in which she appeals to his buried sentiments as a parent. In another sequence, she is flogged mercilessly with a whip dipped in water, the pain so severe that she can hardly walk. Back at her bunk, she distances herself from the excruciating pain by concentrating on the letter she sent to Ninka's patrons. And in yet another passage, she avoids selection by coolly sauntering back to the non-death line and hiding.

One of the most consistent touchstones of the narrative is the loving relationship between Anya and her mother Rebecca who tells her daughter, in a stirring moment, that they are living in biblical times, when the living envies the dead. Hand in hand with imbuing the home with unflagging warmth and support, Anya's mother is the driving force, the one that gives her daughter the strength to survive. Plunged into the anarchy of the ghetto, the mother retains an incredible fighting spirit that rejects any deterministic impulses about fate, emphasising instead the notion of responsibility. Incredulously, but sagaciously, she motivates her daughter to continue with the everyday rituals of combing her hair and putting on lipstick, so as not to lose her human image, "A woman must always look her best, especially in the worst circumstances."¹² At the deportation station, before they are to be segregated, never to meet again, the mother cries out, "You will live! You have someone for whom to live!"¹³

And indeed, it is this didactic marker and the desire to reunite with Ninka that sustain and motivate Anya who manages to miraculously escape the cruelty and hellfire of the Kaiserwald concentration camp and retrieve her daughter from an orphanage. Out of chance,

¹² Fromberg Schaeffer, 212.

¹³ Fromberg Schaeffer, 212.

pure luck or divine intervention, Ninka is spared by a German soldier, while her benefactors are murdered.

Needless to say, the road to salvation is a torturous one. The two women trek through Lithuania and Poland, constantly hiding in shelters from the various occupying armies, as the one-time medical student makes a living by cleaning and doing laundry. After the war, mother and daughter return to Poland, only to find a country still seething with hate for the surviving Jews. In Vilna, Anya is confronted with gleaming aggression when she seeks to regain a portion of her family's possessions from the seized apartment in Vilna. Fuelled by her hallmark passion to survive, Anya and Ninka make their way from the displaced persons camp to America, where they settle in New York with Anya's new husband Max, an Auschwitz survivor. It is noteworthy that Anya's first choice is Palestine, but her arrest by the communists puts an end to that plan.

Damaged by the loss of her family, the ghosts of the past loom large. Labelling herself one of the walking dead, she is plagued by depression, claustrophobia and paranoia—quintessential characteristics of the 'survivor syndrome'. In fact, Anya's problems stem from a web of symptomatic conscious and unconscious inhibitions, simmering constantly under the surface. Displaying excessive, unwarranted apprehensions of another persecution, her crippled emotional state includes recurring nightmares and attacks of anxiety. Struggling to adapt to her host society, Anya, who is freighted with guilt for staying alive (she blames herself for not rescuing her parents, brothers and sister), distrusts her own memories of a universe so incongruous with standard human experience, and finds that there is no way she can open a dialogue with Americans, whose background and life journeys are far removed from hers. It is small wonder that she chooses to live and work among other survivors, knowing that sympathy

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can only be found among those who went through the unimaginable horror, and who are caught in between an irretrievable past and a problematic future.

Considering her first years after liberation, it is not surprising that the multiple tasks of adapting to her new society and rebuilding her nexus with Ninka keeps Anya preoccupied with this process and away from dealing with her psychic scars. To be sure, the psychological legacy is a principal theme of the novel as it details the survivor's profusion of terrors. At one point, Anya confesses, "The film which recorded the story of my life was spliced one third through to an irrelevant reel..."¹⁴ Clearly, the Holocaust has imprinted its own stamp on Anya, denying her of the capacity to be redeemed and to enjoy the potential of a new life. It soon becomes evident that America is not always the haven the survivors hoped it would be. On Yom Kippur, to take but one example, the family's dwelling in New York is broken into and cherished photos are stolen, robbing the family of the last vestiges of the past.

The characteristic overprotectiveness which typifies many survivor-child bonds, resurfaces here writ large. Despite her attempts to reconstruct a post Holocaust existence in America (she opens an antique shop when she is unable to resume her medical vocation and work as a nurse), and to provide the maternal love and care Ninka was denied, it seems the relationship is doomed from the start. As Lillian Kremer notes, "Schaeffer is one of the few novelists who have explored the toll of separation on mother and child through both maternal trauma and the child's psychic wounds."¹⁵ Kremer goes on to point out that that relationship between Anya and Ninka is principally undergirded by suffering and separation, "The bond undergoes radical emotional, from hate to love, suspicion to trust, resentment to attachment."

¹⁴ Fromberg Schaeffer, 469-470.

¹⁵ Kremer. "Susan Fromberg Schaeffer," 1094.

Bent on replicating the kind of protection her own mother showered on her, Anya becomes consumed by caring for Ninka, exhibiting a zealous domineering of the teenager who spurns this overprotectiveness. For instance, Anya wants Ninka to integrate into American society, yet insists on never leaving her alone for one second, or demanding she remain with her for company. In seeing Ninka as an extension of herself, as an offshoot, Anya fulfils a basic need for personality and identity that represent all the extinguished lives of the Holocaust. Never does she realise that Ninka's own growth and ability to form her own particular identity is being thwarted.

Moreover, Anya is riven with the fear that Ninka will shun away from becoming a mother herself because of the worries, fear and suffocating love she experienced, and the resentment she feels towards her mother. Traumatized, she aborts a pregnancy believing that the terrors of the Holocaust have rendered her an unfit parent. As Jacqueline A. Mintz sensitively observes, the author "brings us full circle, retracing historically and psychologically the stages contributing to the psyche of the American Jewish mother today. She recreates the Old-World Jewish home, the struggle for survival against insurmountable forces, the plight of the poor immigrant to the United States and the depression of the woman suffocated by her own compulsive mothering."¹⁶

To a large extent, as it has been observed elsewhere, survivor children often have difficulty relating to their parent's permeant survivor syndrome. The fractured communication aside, Ninka is also non-responsive to Anya's recalling of the atrocities she endured during the holocaust (she runs away and hides under the covers, hands clasped over her ears), never

¹⁶ Jacqueline A. Mintz. "The Myth of the Jewish Mothers in Three Jewish, American, Female Writers," *The Centennial Review*, Vol. 22 (3) (Summer 1978): 354.

realising that her unwavering resistance to listen and empathise with the suffering of her mother only heightens the pain. Unsurprisingly, Anya is crushed by Ninka's failure to reciprocate her love. Nonetheless, as to be expected, when Ninka becomes a mother, Anya's suffusive anxiousness about health and nutrition extends to her grandchildren.

It should be stressed that although Anya recognises that children are "false treasures", and that her ideal maternal instinct is not only illusory but in fact smothers her daughter, ultimately, she is unable to move on and rebuild their bond. Significantly, in a pivotal moment, Anya recalls an incident from the ghetto involving two Jewish mothers. Holding up their children, the Gestapo men asked the mothers who were hiding to show themselves. The mothers chose to save themselves and forsake their offspring. Tellingly, Anya does not denounce the mothers for their desertion, recognising that during the inferno of the Holocaust there were no ethical lives. Schaeffer empathically reminds us not to judge those who lived through this 'hell on earth'.

Also inscribed in the text is the personal dimension of the relationship with Judaism that the heroine has. Various actions collectively generate and advance a repeated leitmotif that runs through the narrative, crucial to our understanding the value Jewish tradition has for the heroine. Once Anya reaches the shores of America, she enrolls Ninka in a Yeshiva to ensure she imbibes Jewish culture. Afterwards, when Ninka begins seeing Aristotle, a non-Jewish Greek-American, Anya calls upon those fantastical skills of ingenuity that enabled her to evade the Nazi forces of destruction during the occupation. Dressed as Christian, she offers Aristotle's priest a financial grant to send the confused boy to Greece, thereby preventing his falling in love with a Jewish woman.

Concurrently, she conceals another stratagem to battle the tide of potential assimilation by threatening her daughter. Gathering enough money to pay for a trip to Israel (she puts up her mother's treasured jewellery as collateral), she dispatches Ninka to the Holy land to engage with tangible Jewish existence. It should be noted that Anya's mission to secure Jewish continuity in her family is successful. In the end Ninka marries an Israeli. In this connection, the book does underline the importance of the Jewish state, as we discover that Anya, now and then, wonders whether the Holocaust was the payment for the establishment of Israel.

Invariably, Anya drapes herself with the garb of her memories. Lonely and embittered, she makes a brave decision to psychically re-enter the rooms in the old house in Vilna that she locked away deep down in her soul and attempts to put her feelings on paper. The act of writing operates on several levels. First, while the daughter has little tolerance for her mother's compulsive pathology, paper, as Anya says herself, has patience. Secondly, towards the end, it transpires that in the process of pondering the meaning of life and the emotional/physical cruelty she has suffered (she is riddled with excruciating headaches as a result of a clubbing she received from a camp guard), Anya comes to believe that by sharing her ordeals, the generation after will be able to deduce some meaning and lessons from her telling.

Earlier in the novel, she visits a psychiatrist, seeking his help in stamping out her brooding absorption in the survivorhood past. The therapist, a survivor himself who lost two children in the war, turns down her plea. He explains to Anya that without her Jewish heritage she will be completely stripped and left with nothing. Crucially, he understands the value of the past in guaranteeing the future of the Jewish people. Instead of denying her memory, he encourages the survivor to bear witness and to nurture it, so others can learn from the atrocities.

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