

The Politics of Gendered Silence in Ronny Hein's *Krisia's Silence*: Writing Postmemory and Feminist Testimony After the Holocaust

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Abstract

This article examines Krisia's Silence: The Girl Who Was Not on Schindler's List (2021) by Ronny Hein, a memoir that navigates inherited trauma through narrative gaps, familial omissions, and selective testimony. Focusing on the intersections of gendered memory, postwar silence, and feminist life writing, the analysis explores how the memoir frames silence as a strategic response to violence, a form of embodied resistance, and a mode of archival reclamation. Particular attention is paid to the memoir's treatment of domestic instruction, postwar reintegration, and the politics of exclusion within both familial and institutional memory frameworks. Positioned within the tradition of postmemory life writing, Krisia's Silence reveals how silence, when read through the lens of gender and power, can function as a form of ethical testimony. In foregrounding what remains unsaid, the memoir not only resists narrative closure but contributes to feminist historiography by recovering overlooked female experiences from within and beyond the archive.

Keywords: feminist historiography; Holocaust; memory; second generation narratives; textual silence

Introduction

Silence in Holocaust literature functions as a powerful narrative device, one that conveys both the psychological aftermath of trauma and the ethical challenges of representation. Rather than indicating mere absence, silence often serves as a deliberate strategy to communicate the unspeakable dimensions of Holocaust experience. It reflects the emotional and existential complexities of survival, the difficulty of articulating atrocity, and the limitations of language in capturing the enormity of loss. As trauma theorists have long noted, silence operates on multiple levels in such narratives: as an emotional defense, a survival mechanism, a mode of embodied memory, and ultimately, as an ethical commentary on what cannot or should not be spoken. In the realm of life writing, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson observe that autobiographical texts shaped by trauma often bear the marks of "fragmentation, disruption, and silence," revealing how subjectivity itself becomes unstable in the aftermath of inherited violence (Smith and Watson 218). Recent studies have revisited Holocaust family narratives with renewed attention to the ethics, silences, and gendered experiences embedded in intergenerational memory. Tess Scholfield-Peters (2021) explores how third-generation writers engage Holocaust memory ethically, emphasizing transparent narrative voice and informed imaginative reconstruction. Nina Fischer (2018) highlights how postwar migration and national memory cultures shape survivor narratives, particularly when personal testimony enters public discourse in multicultural settings. Similarly, Mor Presiado (2016) analyzes visual art produced by women during the Holocaust,

drawing attention to images of motherhood, gender-based violence, and lost femininity. More recently, Elizabeth Kella (2020) extends Erickson's idea of "emotion work" to second-generation life writing, framing it as a relational labor of witnessing, listening, and holding space for survivors' fragmented stories. In contrast, this article centres a second-generation account as in Ronny Hein's *Krisia's Silence*, which resists closure and foregrounds gendered silence not only as trauma but as narrative structure. It contributes to this ongoing conversation by showing how a son's act of writing reclaims a mother's silence as an ethical and literary form of testimony. While recent scholarship has deepened our understanding of intergenerational Holocaust memory, gendered testimony, and narrative ethics, much of this work has concentrated on either direct survivor memoirs or third-generation reconstructions. In contrast, *Krisia's Silence: The Girl Who Was Not on Schindler's List* (2021), a memoir by Ronny Hein, offers a rare and intimate second-generation perspective. Hein, a prolific writer and publicist, recounts the Holocaust experiences of his mother, Krystyna Hein, who endured six harrowing years under Nazi persecution, including imprisonment at the Płaszów concentration camp under the notoriously brutal command of Amon Göth (37). While other family members secured escape through inclusion on Schindler's List, Krisia and her mother were left behind after an uncle refused to pay for their release. Hein's memoir reconstructs this history not as direct testimony but as a sustained meditation on the gaps, silences, and affective weight inherited through familial memory. His narrative does not seek resolution, but instead positions silence as both a survival mechanism and a resistant literary strategy. This article examines how Hein transforms his mother's silence into narrative form, arguing that gendered and intergenerational silences shaped by trauma, shame, and patriarchal erasure can function not as absence, but as a powerful means of witnessing and historical reconstruction.

Life Narrative and Second-Generation Testimony

In the last two decades, the rise of second-generation Holocaust memoirs has reshaped the field of life writing by complicating traditional models of memory and testimony (Hirsch 2008; Popkin 2003). These texts, written by children of survivors, often grapple with the trauma of a past they did not live but inherit what Marianne Hirsch famously terms as "postmemory". The concept is defined as "the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before" (Hirsch 5). Such narratives foreground the gaps, silences, and ambiguities that characterize both trauma and its transmission. In this juncture, Ronny Hein's memoir *Krisia's Silence: The Girl Who Was Not on Schindler's List* (2021), a memoir of his mother's Holocaust experience, exemplifies this postmemorial mode. Yet the memoir also advances a feminist life writing tradition by foregrounding gendered silences that are imposed by trauma, domestic expectation, and patriarchal control. The ethical and aesthetic challenges of narrating a Holocaust survivor's story from a second-generation perspective lie at the core of *Krisia's Silence*. In life narrative studies, scholars such as Leigh Gilmore, G. Thomas Couser, Julia Watson, and Nancy K. Miller have long examined how life writing complicates conventional notions of authorship, voice, and testimonial authority—particularly when the narrative is mediated through familial relationships. The memoir written by Ronny Hein about his mother Krisia's Holocaust experience is not simply a biographical reconstruction, but a performative negotiation of memory, silence, and narrative inheritance. In this sense, the memoir aligns closely with what life narrative theorists describe as an "autobiographical act" that is both relational and ethically charged (Smith and Watson 2010). As Leigh Gilmore observes in *The Limits of Autobiography* (2001), trauma narratives often involve "testimony without a witness," where the narrator must confront gaps, silences, or unspeakable events that resist coherent narration. This is especially true of second-generation

Holocaust writing, where the act of life writing becomes less about recollecting experience and more about ethically representing the absences left by another. In Hein's case, the maternal trauma is mediated through fragmentary letters, brief oral testimony, and emotional residue. His memoir is shaped not by ownership of the narrative, but by his conscious awareness that it is not fully his to tell. Gilmore argues that this form of writing occupies an unstable space where personal testimony merges with proxy narration, and this instability becomes a site of ethical inquiry rather than narrative failure.

This tension is further theorized by G. Thomas Couser, who introduces the concept of "vicarious narratives," life stories written by one person about the trauma or illness of another, particularly within familial contexts (Couser 2005). Vicarious narratives, while potentially illuminating, risk appropriating the voice of the subject they aim to honor. Hein's memoir navigates this risk with a deep sense of restraint, offering not an authoritative account of Krisia's suffering but an invitation to encounter her silence. The memoir is shaped by what Couser calls "narrative humility"—a deliberate refusal to impose coherence where none exists, and an openness to the opacity of inherited pain. Furthermore, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2019) emphasize that life writing is never the product of a singular, autonomous subject but emerges through relational shuttling between past and present selves. They explain: life narrators "may shuttle between the experiences of an 'Inow' and the histories of its 'Ithen' at multiple points in time; and such shuttling... may expose strange and uncanny disjunctions" (9). In *Krisia's Silence*, Hein's narration similarly oscillates—his present voice reverberates around his mother's earlier, quieter presence. The memoir thus becomes a dialogic space, structured by the tension between what is remembered and what remains unsaid. By doing so, it challenges conventional Holocaust testimonies that privilege clarity, completeness, and linear recovery.

Silence in/as women

Before examining silence as a literary or cultural construct in Holocaust narratives, it is crucial to consider how silence emerges at the complex intersection of gender, trauma, and survival in women's life writing. Silence in this context is not merely the absence of speech but a strategic and embodied response to being excessively seen—scrutinized, objectified, and endangered under a dominant, violent gaze. Feminist theory has long identified this gaze as a vehicle of gendered oppression, one that transforms the female body into a spectacle to be controlled and disciplined. Laura Mulvey's foundational concept of the "male gaze," developed in the context of cinema, remains strikingly applicable in testimonial contexts, where the female survivor must constantly navigate the threat of exposure and retraumatization (Mulvey 1975). In life writing, such silence operates as both a form of protection and a refusal—what Sidonie Smith terms an act of "strategic self-positioning," where the narrating subject withholds, reframes, or omits as a form of narrative control (Smith and Watson 218). In *Krisia's Silence*, Ronny Hein vividly illustrates how the gendered gaze, central to feminist theory, becomes a mechanism of psychological terror and narrative silence in Holocaust experience. As a young Jewish girl imprisoned in Płaszów, Krisia was one of two detainees selected to serve as a domestic laborer in the household of SS-Hauptsturmführer Amon Göth, the notoriously brutal camp commandant. Hein recalls that she was chosen "by Goeth's baton" (40), a symbol of his violent arbitrariness, and assigned to tasks like tidying rooms and fetching bottles, work that placed her constantly within the threatening orbit of Göth's authority. The home, typically a domestic or protective space in women's memoirs, becomes in Krisia's story an inverted site of danger, surveillance, and silence. Her mother's whispered warnings, "Be careful with the bottles! Never drop one in his

presence! Always stay quiet!” (43), function not only as survival instructions but as a maternal transmission of silence. This kind of intergenerational code-switching is central to women’s life writing, particularly in narratives shaped by trauma, where silence becomes a protective practice taught from mother to daughter. As Smith and Watson note, the autobiographical subject in trauma texts often exercises “discursive silencing” as a form of strategic self-protection and agency within oppressive systems (218). In this context, Krisia’s silence under Göth’s gaze is not mere submission but a carefully maintained defense against violence. The memoir further underscores how gender shaped one’s value—and disposability—under Nazi control. Hein writes, “A single flash of fury could have led to the girls’ deaths. There were, of course, plenty of girls to replace them” (40), highlighting how female prisoners were treated as interchangeable and expendable. As Zoë Waxman argues, Holocaust testimony is itself gendered, and women’s accounts must be read with attention to how “the body became the site through which violence and erasure were enacted” (84). *Krisia’s Silence* contributes to this feminist historiography not by offering full disclosure but by documenting the mechanisms of threatened speech—the silences born of terror, embodied memory, and maternal instruction. Jessica Lang’s seminal study, *Textual Silence: Unreadability and the Holocaust* (2017), articulates silence not as absence but as a formal condition of Holocaust life writing. She defines textual silence as a “textual quality or condition of inaccessibility—blankness, illegibility... a kind of silence that is itself read,” akin to a “substantial blank space” that challenges how we engage with narrative meaning (Lang 3). Lang’s framework, while grounded in Holocaust literature, has broad implications for life writing as a genre—especially texts shaped by trauma, fragmentation, and the limits of communicability. Far from signifying narrative failure, such gaps mark what cannot or should not be narrated. In this sense, silence becomes “the central marker of Holocaust texts and serves as a key aspect in realizing their purpose of recalling the Holocaust” (4). *Krisia’s Silence* aligns with this tradition: the narrative is shaped not by testimonial completeness but by disruption, fragmentation, and withheld understanding. Krisia’s omission from *Schindler’s List*—the iconic film and symbolic artifact of Holocaust salvation—makes her both historically invisible and textually peripheral. Ronny Hein’s memoir challenges this absence by telling a story of survival outside the mythos of the List, thereby unsettling conventional Holocaust representation. Nowhere is this struggle more evident than in the stark contrast between Krisia’s public testimony and private voice. Her Shoah Foundation testimony lasts “less than 40 minutes” and “contains no details—no shadow of the detailed prose she had used in the 73 letters she wrote me” (Hein 16). These narrative ellipses her omissions, hesitations, and silences—are not narrative gaps to be “filled” but textual events in themselves. They signal both the limits of memory and the emotional cost of articulation.

Memory, Gaps, and Inherited Silence

Jewish second-generation literature is deeply shaped by what Marianne Hirsch calls postmemory—a form of inherited memory grounded not in lived experience but in affective transmission and fragmented narratives. Alice Bloch (2022) similarly notes that in families of Holocaust survivors, memory is transmitted as both story and silence, and it is precisely within these narrative gaps that identity is negotiated. In *Krisia’s Silence*, Ronny Hein encounters these inherited silences first-hand. He recalls that discussions about the Holocaust were effectively forbidden: “She announced that she did not like to talk about the issue... I would have liked to have asked, but my father forbade discussing issues surrounding the memory of pain” (Hein 16). This moment signals memory not only as a family taboo but also as a structural absence, a legacy of pain passed down through what is left unsaid.

This kind of silence, where knowledge is withheld or distorted, becomes the very material

of second-generation testimony. Rather than offering a complete narrative, Hein's memoir is defined by what is inaccessible, partial, or lost. Jessica Lang (2017) refers to this condition as textual silence: not simply the absence of information, but a narrative feature that registers unreadability, gaps, and ellipses as part of the story itself. Hein's memoir is replete with such moments—for instance, when he reflects on the lack of documentation about his mother's time at Bergen-Belsen: "It is impossible to say how long Krisia stayed at Bergen-Belsen (once again, I come up against a scarcity of information)" (Hein 63). Hein's memoir performs this labor through what Jessica Lang (2017) identifies as the *grammar of second-generation writing*, characterized by narrative hesitations, speculative phrasing, and visible gaps. In one instance, he writes, "Once again there is a huge gap in the story, which I will fill with some of the fragments I heard over the years" (Hein 29). This act of piecing together fragments is not simply restorative—it is *relational*, embodying what Smith and Watson (2010) term a "relational autobiographical act," where the self emerges in dialogue with another's memory. Hein's recursive interruptions, ellipses, and parentheticals reflect the very limits of language that Leigh Gilmore (2001) has shown are fundamental to trauma life writing. In *Krisia's Silence*, these silences become not voids but voices—registering loss, love, and the ethical difficulty of narrating another's pain.

The presence and role of textual silence or unreadability are further problematized in the case of second-generation Holocaust writers. Lang writes, "Second-generation authors attempt to read the silences and gaps of their parents' narratives...to create a text documenting their own stories with their parents' histories is an attempt to acknowledge and define the gaps and silences that serve as the marker of the second generation" (59-61). As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2010) argue, life writing is always relational: the self is shaped through engagement with others, especially in postmemory contexts where the subject's voice is mediated by trauma, silence, and intergenerational affect. Unlike the eyewitness authors, who have had the direct experience of the Holocaust, the second-generation authors seek narratives and documentation contributing to their parents' traumatizing experience, weaving with their imaginations. He writes, "when I see a few elderly people crying at the commemoration of 75 years since the end of the extermination camp at Auschwitz, I realize that telling the story of some of these people is the best I can do" (Epstein 8). Similarly, in *Krisia's Silence* (2021), Ronny Hein embodies this position not as a witness, but as a narrative steward, carefully arranging fragments of memory, correspondence, and testimony to honour a mother who could not (or would not) speak fully for herself.

Gendered Silence as Resistance

Recent feminist life-writing scholarship has drawn attention to the fragmented, partial, and often withheld narratives of women as deliberate acts of resistance and survival. Feminist life-writing studies emphasize how gendered trauma often exceeds available narrative forms. Sidonie Smith (2012) argues that women's autobiographical acts are shaped by "cultural scripts of silence" that both constrain and enable self-representation (58). In Holocaust narratives, this scripting becomes more urgent, as women's voices often emerge through coded gestures, strategic omissions, or embodied expressions of pain. In Hein's *Krisia's Silence*, her silence, passed down as maternal instruction and enacted under a violent patriarchal gaze, exemplifies this pattern. These silences, rather than signalling narrative deficiency, function as strategic responses to trauma, gendered violence, and the politics of memory. Silence, in this context, becomes not an absence of voice but a refusal of imposed forms of articulation. This imperative to remain quiet aligns with longer histories of gendered socialization, where women have been taught to minimize their visibility to survive. In *Krisia's Silence*, this inherited mode of bodily discretion is passed from mother to daughter. Hein reflects, "Little

did she know that she was inculcating a long-lasting silence in the soul of her daughter” (43). Judith Butler’s theorization of performativity (1997) offers further insight into this scene: Krisia’s movements and muteness are not neutral, but socially coded responses to the disciplinary gaze. Her silence becomes an active articulation of agency, both self-protection and refusal. In this, the memoir resonates with what Shoshana Felman (1992) identifies as the “speech act of silence,” where trauma resists direct narration and is instead conveyed through gesture, absence, or formal interruption. Krisia’s silence, especially in the context of her time under Göth, enacts this kind of speech, shaped by what cannot be safely named. Gendered silence in *Krisia’s Silence* extends beyond the realm of trauma and survival to include the devastating intersection of familial betrayal and economic self-interest. Krisia and her mother are subjected not only to the silence imposed by patriarchal violence during the Holocaust but also to a calculated form of postwar exclusion rooted in gender bias and financial self-preservation. This intersection of gender and economic marginalization closely aligns with Silvia Federici’s argument in *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), where she explores how capitalist structures have historically devalued women’s lives by reducing their social worth to reproductive and domestic labor, thus excluding them from systems of property, inheritance, and economic recognition. Hein documents how Krisia’s uncle, Fredek, actively arranged the rescue of selected family members by purchasing their places on Schindler’s list. Yet, his selection was gendered: male relatives were chosen, while Krisia and her mother were deliberately left behind. Hein reflects critically on this act: “Fredek, who, as I recall, turned out to be as bad as the concentration camp commander, used money that was not his to buy people’s freedom. However, only the freedom of people is chosen by him, thus creating a kind of abject ‘Fredek’s List’” (Hein 52). This episode exemplifies how silence is enforced not only through external authority but through intimate kinship networks that prioritize male survival and erase women’s worth. Even after liberation, Krisia and her mother never questioned Fredek’s decision—a silence that reveals the intergenerational and internalized nature of patriarchal deference. Fifty years later, Krisia learned the truth behind their exclusion: “There was nothing to it other than eventually avoiding sharing the remaining valuables with more people” (Hein 54). This chilling admission transforms the silence surrounding their suffering into a reflection of gendered disposability where women are not just forgotten but strategically omitted to serve economic and patriarchal interests.

However, the silence that shapes Krisia’s life does not end with liberation. It extends into the postwar domestic sphere, where trauma becomes something to be quietly managed rather than spoken aloud. This postwar extension of silence, administered not by force but through care, takes root in the very architecture of home. Hein recounts that his father forbade discussions of Krisia’s suffering, believing that “not bringing up his wife’s suffering was a way of easing it” (Hein 13). Though framed as protection, this injunction to silence mirrors broader cultural anxieties around female pain and the social impulse to contain it. “Some people condemned him for this,” the narrator continues, “They said that Krisia should tell everything, to free herself of her past, to exorcise it—if possible.” The silence Krisia is expected to maintain is thus doubly inscribed—first as an act of emotional discretion, then as an obligation to therapeutic confession. Feminist life writing resists this binary. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2010) note, autobiographical texts shaped by trauma often engage in what they term “resistance narratives,” where silence, fragmentation, and affective withholding become strategies of ethical storytelling. In this light, Krisia’s retreat from institutional testimony and her reliance on personal letters may be read not as a failure of voice but as a feminist refusal to commodify pain.

Conclusion

In an interview, Emilia Schindler answered the most debated question: why did the Schindlers

risk their lives to save those thousands of Jews? Her response goes, “For the sake of humanity... Humanity is my principle. I cannot stand injustice” (Blair). Oskar Schindler, the legend himself, also shares a similar opinion: “I hated the brutality, the sadism, and the insanity of Nazism. I just could not stand by and see people destroyed. I did what I could, what I had to do, what my conscience told me I must do. That’s all there is to it. Really, nothing more (Bulow). It is interesting to note that Oskar is the only Nazi buried in the Holy Land of Jerusalem. It is one of Israel’s most visited graves. The gratitude Jews had for him is expressed in his epitaph: The unforgettable rescuer of 1,200 persecuted Jews. The sorrowful march in the final scenes of Spielberg’s movie *Schindler’s List* (1993) is a testament to his unparalleled commitment to the salvation of Jews. In this amateur scene, hundreds of Jewish survivors, in commemoration, visit his cemetery in Jerusalem and place a stone on his grave as part of Jewish tradition (Spielberg 3:05:13-3:08:40). With such standpoints, the study retroactively accepts the significant role Schindler had in the redemption of Jews. Nevertheless, in buying and selling the freedom of Jews, hundreds and thousands of lives, like that of Krisia and her grandmother, are caught up in the cauldron of capitalisation that is often side-lined or silenced. Eliezer Wiesel, an American writer, Holocaust survivor, and Nobel laureate, in his famous Nobel Peace Prize-winning speech, critically comments, “Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere” (Wiesel 10). In this study, Krisia’s silence has been fostered by developing an unintended hierarchy of suffering during the Holocaust, structured by potential elements like time spent in ghettos and concentration camps or survival in hiding. However, it is essential to break the silence that the Holocaust survivors have maintained and narrate their ordeals because it is through progressive research and interrogations that impede modern nations from enacting any megalomaniac reforms and laws. From another perspective, a counter-narrative text is produced that often challenges the dominant mainstream narrative by breaking the long-suppressed silence. Therefore, to silence the Holocaust in any manner would be tantamount to acknowledging the very barbarism of which Auschwitz stands as the horrifying exemplar. The Holocaust, as an unspeakable reality, paradoxically demands speech. Thus, by breaking the silence and integrating women’s studies and their representation into mainstream Holocaust literature, it provides a parallel yet profound understanding of the Holocaust in varied dimensions. At the conclusion, the article quotes Waxman’s assertion that feminist reading and female portrayal of the Holocaust are essential and a means to bring those silences to attention. As Waxman writes; But it is telling—and alarming—that the Jewish people should have been gendered male in most accounts, and that the experience of Jewish men has been regarded as normative by most historians. A feminist history by its very nature challenges these assumptions, insisting that women’s experiences are equally valid, equally important, and equally worthy of study (148).

Thus, the study explores the significance of silence as a fundamental survival mechanism during and after the Holocaust in both literary and gender paradigms. The article’s contribution to discussing Holocaust reconciliation initiatives is equally crucial. The study provides insight not only into the significance of silence within the context of the Holocaust but also into its relevance in the modern epoch, where subaltern voices are silenced.

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