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an excerpt of

My Franziska, Charlotte Salomon, and the Decision Not to Be: Suicide Before, During, and After the Holocaust

SHE must have been thirty-four years old when she left her four-year-old daughter—her nine-year-old son was at school—to go into another room in the spacious apartment she shared with her doctor husband. How did she gain access to his gun or the skill to use it?

My maternal grandmother is only a photograph, sepia tinted and in profile: her name is Franziska, a foreign sound with a somewhat sinister hiss. The black hair—impossible to tell if it was curly, frizzy, or straight—might be swept into a hidden bun at the nape or simply combed away from her face. One can glimpse a lace collar on the back of a blouse or dress, some embroidery at the sleeve's shoulder. Dark like me, Franziska smiles slightly with her lips closed, maybe (as I do) to cover crooked teeth; she has posed half hidden, with her face partly turned away. There is something glamorous, something mysterious about this head shot: was it produced as a publicity photograph, or did she perhaps want to accentuate how elusive she will always remain? I can see in her intent eye my mother, whose very first memory revolves around the feeling of being extremely cold, of being seated on a hard, chilly surface—a marble tabletop or dresser—probably by a nanny or *Fräulein*, and hearing the gunshot with which Franziska ended her life.

My mother, four years old in a small town near Nuremberg at the moment of her mother's suicide in 1919, and now ninety-two in the humidity-drenched heat of August in the American Midwest, tells me stories over Chinese food in a strip-mall restaurant: about what an accomplished pianist Franziska was and

how upset she must have been at having to submit to an arranged marriage, for she had fallen in love with another musician, maybe an accompanist; about the fate of this boyfriend or lover, who had killed himself before Franziska put the gun to her head; about one of Franziska's sisters, a gifted painter who had killed herself because—the logic falters here—she had been born with a bad heart; about Franziska helping to roll bandages after her husband had been called to service far away; about his return, when it became clear to him that recurrent stays at sanitariums had failed to cure Franziska's despondency—not a surprise since she was treated with the so-called “rest cure” of food, and more food, followed by sleeping pills; about how my grandmother must have found her staid husband uncongenial, or perhaps suffered from depression over a lost career despite (or because of) the loving dependence of her two children.

Notwithstanding the Bloomington restaurant's inadequate air conditioning and the steaming platter of Happy Family—my mother's habitual and telling choice—we are back in Germany, right after World War I. The year was 1918, when my grandfather returned from a long stint at the front with the German army, where he may or may not have acquired the gun. Less than two decades later in 1933, he would ask the Nazis at the apartment door to wait—they had come to “search,” which meant they could plant incriminating evidence—and he saved the family from instant deportation by quickly donning his long-stored uniform, complete with helmet, to exhibit his staunch nationalism. Fourteen years later, in 1947, he would take his own life by slitting his wrists and neck in a Brooklyn bathtub—presumably to keep the mess to a minimum, though “blood was everywhere,” my mother sighs, “on the floor, on the wall. . . .”

. . . With her hunger for music, her domestic rebellion, and her destructive rage, Franziska was my personal madwoman in the attic. In an unspoken and inchoate manner, her story shaped my efforts to comprehend how women in the not-so-distant past have coped with having their creativity systematically repressed. The writing and teaching I undertook in academia grew out of an American education in British literary history, so only later did I glimpse the connections between European Franziska, so long dead, and my sustained and sustaining commitment to feminist scholarship. . . .

Although I did not consciously think of Franziska while collaborating with Sandra Gilbert on *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), I did deliberate on my family's history when my later scholarship turned toward Holocaust studies. Only recently, though, have I explored the responses of Jewish women trapped in the "final solution" to see whether or how their meditations might clarify my grandparents' final decisions. Because the spectacle of *Selbstmord* took center stage in the living theater enacted during the rise of the Third Reich, my meager knowledge of my two grandmothers sent me to the books of those educated Jewish women who wrote about voluntary death during catastrophic moments "between the acts," as Virginia Woolf termed the interregnum of the world wars. In 1919, when Franziska shot herself, the French philosopher Simone Weil was ten years old, the Dutch diarist Etty Hillesum was five, and the German painter Charlotte Salomon was two. Exceptional in different ways, all three died young in 1943, . . . —Weil at thirty-four in an English sanitarium, Hillesum at twenty-nine and Salomon at twenty-six, both in Auschwitz. All three addressed the urgency and meaning of the decision not to be. Their work, I hoped, would illuminate the psychological pull and ethical stakes of my grandmothers' final acts. The historian Darcy Buerkle quotes a Zionist newspaper decrying a "virtual epidemic" in suicides among Jewish women during the years of the Weimar Republic (1918–33), and perhaps this epidemic inflected a later phenomenon during the Shoah—namely, vigorous meditations on the right to die. . . .