Title: Family Matters: Twentieth-Century Jewish Women Remembering Family and/as History

Federica K. Clementi

This course will explore the way in which Jewish women write about their families (especially about their fathers and mothers) and the way in which one’s private story together with the impact of History shapes one’s identity. In order to do so, we will work on the autobiographical writings of European and American twentieth-century authors. As a rich scholarship on the subject has revealed in the last 30 years, women’s narratives and especially autobiographical texts often center on everyday routines and rituals, the minutiae of domestic geographies, and all the daily familial details which are usually removed from traditional historiography. This course hopes to point out how (and by which textual and narrative strategies) the texts selected historicize the domestic, and blend larger universal history and politics in the microcosm of the personal and familiar. Our approach and reading selection will help us see how, through the contribution of women’s “domestic” perspective, the truth of personal history ends up enriching, reevaluating and even questioning the Truth of History.

The course will be structured around three main chronological and thematic clusters. First the writings of those women who wrote before the second world war: works by Anzia Yezierska, Mary Antin, and Nathalie Sarraute will help illustrate the important issues of migration, bilingualism, “old” versus “new” world, and “old generation” versus “new generation” of assimilated (assimilatable) children. Then we will examine Shoah autobiographical literature: war memoirs written by adult writers who were only children during the second world war strongly focuses on the family and offers unique portraits of the dynamics and closeness in particular of the mother-child bond. We will use the autobiographies of Ruth Klüger, Edith Bruck and Sarah Kofman to explore how the grown-up survivor deciphering her own past and personal history musters and cognizes her identity in-progress through the reconstruction of her relationship with her mother. Finally, we will study the works of writers born after the war, daughters of Shoah survivors, and will analyze what new and old issues emerge in their relationships with their parents: How does the Jewish family change after the war (or doesn’t)? How does Feminism affect Jewish women’s relation with their mothers and fathers, themselves, and their Jewish identity? Among the authors treated by this part of the course, we will read Clara Sereni, Eva Hoffman, Yasmina Reza and Esther Dischereit.
**Week I: Introduction.**
What is Jewish Literature?

**Week II-II-IV: Home Away from Home**
Mary Antin
Anzia Yezierska
Nathalie Sarraute

Focus: Emigration; Living in another language (the multilingualism of the Jewish family; issues of accents); Issues of assimilation and family disintegration

**Week V: From Emancipation to Destruction**
Natalia Ginzburg

Focus: Jewish family in the ailing bourgeois world; from Decadence to Fascism to the unexpected end and the reconstruction; Death of the paternal figure; Italian Jewish identity and the place of women in Italian literature and Jewish literature.

**Week VI-VII-VIII: Shoah**
Ruth Klüger
Edith Bruck
Sarah Kofman
Film (to be announced)

Focus: The impossible question of how to bear witness to the “unbearable”; Jewish women during the Shoah; Women’s demythologizing perspectives (or: How to remember without universalizing, essentializing, mythologizing…?)

**Week IX-X-XI-XII: Living and Surviving the 60s**
Eva Hoffman
Clara Sereni
Yasmina Reza
Short stories and excerpts from: Esther Dischereit, Helena Janeczek, Grace Paley

Focus: The post-war rebellious daughter; Impact of feminism on Jewish identity and the relation between Jewish woman and her family/mother; New ideological issues in the post-war era; Rediscovering and sharing one's mother's traumatic past.

**Week XIII: Conclusions**
Film [to be announced]: We will watch together one of the many existing documentary movies on one's Jewish genealogy and family history directed and written by women. Possibly Pearl Gluck’s film *Divan*. 
Tentative Bibliography

Primary Texts:
- Anzia Yezierska, Bread Givers
- Mary Antin, The Promised Land
- Nathalie Sarraute, Childhood
- Natalia Ginzburg, Family Sayings
- Bernice Rubens, When I Grow up
- Clara Sereni, Keeping House
- Eva Hoffman, Lost in Translation
- Sarah Kofman, Rue Ordener, rue Labat
- Ruth Kluger, Still Alive
- (Justine Lévy, The Rendezvous - optional)
- Yasmina Reza, Hammerklavier
- Esther Dischereit, Joemi’s Table (excerpt)
- Grace Paley, Collected Stories (selection)
- Helena Janeczek, Lessons of Darkness (excerpt)

Secondary Sources: [A selection from secondary sources will be collected into a Course Packet for students]
- Gubar, Susan: “Eating the Bread of Affliction” in Critical Condition: Feminism at the Turn of the Century.