

## Two Faces of Jewish Mothers in the Prose of Irit Amiel and Halina Birenbaum

This article puts forward two images of the Jewish mother in the prose of Amiel and Halina Birenbaum. The author presents the proposition that, despite the differences, the creations are derived from the same source, namely the archetypal mother, being a distinct reflection of the archetype or the non-complex reverse. Birenbaum's glorification of the mother is opposed to Amiel's view of the difficult mother.

### A Woman – A Mother

The position of women in Judaism is often subjected to criticism by liberal circles, especially by feminists. The situation is similar in the field learning. Here, female voices are muffled, leaving a great deal of space for the male experience. This fact is particularly apparent in the field of Holocaust research, where the aspect is no different when it comes to gender. Already by the 1960's, female American and English researchers called for the Holocaust to be looked at from the women's perspective, stressing, in the process, the exaggerated male features assigned to the female experience<sup>1</sup>.

It is hard, however, to deny that life for women in the camps, ghettos or on the *Aryan* side differed fundamentally from the lives of men. It would have been so even if only from physiology – women became pregnant, gave birth, menstruated and were sterilised. Differences are also drawn from the social status of women and men. The Jewish woman mainly looked after the home as a wife and mother. The roles of both genders were evened out due to the War. More than once, other measures were required their lives and the lives of those closest to them. The functioning of those roles cannot be denied. Determined by religion, history and tradition, women were required to meet particular expectations. One of those expectations was to remain a good mother, who had the duty of protecting her children in exceptionally difficult living conditions.

<sup>1</sup> See Tamara Jurewicz, *W poszukiwaniu zrozumienia. Holocaust i gender studies (In Search of Understanding. The Holocaust and Gender Studies)*, [w:] *Kobiety wobec Holocaustu. Historia znacznie później opowiedziana (Women Faced With the Holocaust, A Story Told Much Later)*, Virgo poligrafia, Oświęcim 2011, p. 23.

Amongst the figures of women in Polish-Jewish prose, which arose on the memory canvas of the period of Nazi occupation, we often find the image of the mother as one of the most important creations. The mother holds a special place in the prose of Irit Amiel and Halina Birenbaum. These authors are the most popular and most characteristic representatives of Polish-Jewish literature. They each present a different approach to the literature of memory, different styles and different methods of creating worlds which they wish to present.

Above all, Amiel writes about life in the ghetto and in a new homeland – Israel. Birenbaum, however, particularly depicts the experience of the camps. Amiel works are short stories, which could be called snapshots, because they do not contain cause-effect sequences and, in the main, are portraits (or rather, sketches) of survivors. Birenbaum, however, writes extensively about her own wartime experiences, not subjecting them to any special, literary processing. In the context of these differences, the dissimilarity in the characters introduced by their authors is not surprising. Undeniably, however, the images of the mother in works which I have chosen, despite differences between them, clearly come from the same source, namely the archetypal Israeli first mother. They are the forerunner of a distinct reflection or the non-complex reverse.

I base the above thesis on Karol Gustav Jung's theory of the archetype, which in every expression of human endeavour, particularly in writing, seeks to reveal primitive thought which, until today, forms culture and constitutes the basis of the human mentality. One of the archetypes with the most significant meaning is the Great Mother archetype, the deep-rooted symbol in man of life and death, vitality, fertility and spirituality<sup>2</sup>. The mother is traditionally biblical – the mother of humankind and to her falls the role of establishing the next generation and of caring for it. The mother, with both a biological and spiritual component, is present in almost every mythology and religion, as well as Judaism, in which she takes a special place.

### **The Jewish Mother as an Archetype and Stereotype**

Despite the patriarchal nature of the Jewish religion, a huge role is played by the matriarchs Sarah, Rivkah, Leah and Rachel. They are put forward as models of all virtue, which should be characteristic of a Jewish woman – protective, godly, fertile, wise and beautiful. At every Sabbath, parents recite a blessing over their children which asks that they become similar to their ancestors. The father places his hands on the head of each girl saying, "May God make you similar to Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel and Leah. May his face shine upon you and give you peace"<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> See Z.W. Dudek, *Podstawy psychologii Junga (The Bases of Jung's Psychology)*, Warszawa 2002, p. 166.

<sup>3</sup> Translated from the Hebrew prayer book *Oneg Szabat*, edited by Moniki Krajewskiej, Beit Warszawa b.r.w.

The main role of Jewish women is to give children to the world and to raise them within the religion of the Jews. The matriarch Sarah is held up as a model. Despite her infertility, she was favoured by God with offspring. *Elohim* (God) rewarded Sarah for agreeing to give offspring to Abraham through Hagar the servant. For Jews, the matriarch is a symbol of an alliance with God and the most important are the prophetesses. In accordance with the divine imperative, Abraham was required to listen to her advice: *Listen to whatever Sarah tells you*. (Genesis 21:12), because she knew better. The Jewish woman should be the mainstay of the family and should be a faithful servant of God. But, above all, she must have a great love for her children. Sarah loved her son, Isaac, to such an extent that, despite her acceptance of Hagar's descendant, she was jealous of the fact that Abraham would give Ishmael power over the people of Israel. She did everything possible for her son to become his father's successor<sup>4</sup>.

Sarah's successor, Rivkah, was also a devoted mother, brave and modest. She went against her family's wishes and married Isaac. Her conduct on her wedding day (covering her face with a veil) became an instruction to all Jewish brides. Out of love for her son Jacob, she was able to use a trick so that he, and not his twin brother Esau, would be blessed by their father as his rightful heir. Of course, today, it is possible to debate whether Rivkah was a good mother, favouring one of her children over the other. However, there is no doubt that she risked a great deal, including the immense anger of Isaac, in order to help her beloved child<sup>5</sup>.

Rachel, like the first two matriarchs, was at first infertile. So it is not surprising that she loved Joseph unconditionally, a man for whom she had waited many years. Jewish women are associated, above all, with a desire for motherhood and a suffering when separated from their children. Every year, during Jewish New Year, the following excerpt from the Book of Jeremiah is recited:

Thus says the Lord: A voice is heard in Rama, a lamentation and a bitter weeping. Rachel weeps for her children; she refuses to be comforted, because they are no more.

Thus says the Lord: Keep your voice from lamenting, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your efforts.

The Lord says: they shall return from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future.

The Lord says: your children will return to their own country (Jeremiah 31:15-17)<sup>6</sup>.

In contrast to her sister Rachel, for insufficiently loving her husband, Lea became infertile. Not having beauty nor being acknowledged by Jacob, she became one of the prophetesses and mother of the largest Tribes of Israel – Judah and Levi<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> See Bella Szwarzman-Czarnota, *Cenniejsze niż perły. Portrety kobiet żydowskich*, Wydawnictwo Austeria, Kraków 2010, pp. 46-57.

<sup>5</sup> See też, *Nasze biblijne matki*, „Życie duchowe”, No 60/2009 [http://www.zycie-duchowe.pl/?0960,artykul,Nasze\\_biblijne\\_matki](http://www.zycie-duchowe.pl/?0960,artykul,Nasze_biblijne_matki) [dostęp dnia 10.12.2012]

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

While all these women were prophetesses, motherhood, however, was their greatest service to the Jewish nation. It involved expectation, faith, dedication and often trickery, which would enable their children to have suitable living conditions and be accepted by their countrymen. Little has changed from biblical times regarding the expectations on Jewish mothers. The woman-carer, keeper of the home fires and proponent of a belief in God are archetypes which operate to this day in religious Jewish families. Its deeply engrained presence has led to the appearance of a Jewish mother motif in diaspora culture. The *Yiddishe mama* is nothing more than a motif which, over time, has turned into a stereotype. On one hand, it means an over-protective mother, devoted to her children, sacrificing everything she has for them. On the other hand, it can indicate a nosey woman, intolerant of opposition and involved in every aspect of her children's lives.

The *Yiddishe mama* is a natural consequence of the existence of the ideal Jewish mother archetype. Women, striving for perfection in motherhood and in running a household, often over-interpreted religious commandments, devoting themselves entirely to their roles, frequently leading to exaggeration. It should be stressed that the ideal of a mother, in a liturgical understanding, by the *Yiddishe mama* model. But it did vary from it.

The Jewish mother appeared in numerous anecdotes, jokes, cabaret acts, songs and poems. Mirosław M. Bałut refers to this in an article on the theatrical portrayal of this motif, discerning a patriarchal order within the institution of Jewish motherhood<sup>8</sup>. Women often ran away from that stereotype. They wished to develop themselves and not be reduced to just the concept of "woman" or "mother"<sup>9</sup>.

The above dissertation leads us to the conclusion that the concept of "mother" evolved over time, enriching itself with new expressions and forms of motherhood. The processes of transformation were determined by the history and traditions of the Jewish people. It is not surprising that, following the Holocaust, the biggest tragedy in Jewish history, new features became added to the concept of "mother". Had women become more similar to Sarah, Rivkah and Rachel, or rather to the 19<sup>th</sup> century heroines of Jacob Gordin's dramas – women who are over-protective or blinded? Following the Holocaust, has the mother become sanctified or forgotten? How did their wartime experiences, especially those in the camps, influence the psyche of women?

<sup>8</sup> See Mirosława M. Bałut, „*Es git beser in der Welt... a jidisze mame*" *Postać matki w wybranych utworach Abrahama Goldfadena, Józefa Latejnera, Izydora Żołoterewskiego i Jakuba Gordina* [w:] *Nieme dusze? Kobiety w kulturze jidisz*, pod red. J. Lisek, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 2010, p. 337.

<sup>9</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 364.

## The Sanctified Mother, the Post-Traumatic Mother

Amiel and Birenbaum's mother figures can be divided into two groups – sanctified mothers and those I call "post-traumatic". This is, of course, an oversimplification, but it helps to view the images of the mother in reference to their wartime experiences and in a cultural context. World War II brought an end to many professed values – not so much a complete rejection, but more of a turning-away. Their forerunners, being exponents of those values, were also turned away from, despite efforts to protect them from collapse. In Jewish culture, we can observe a strong attachment to tradition, the same which functions within its role models. The model of the Jewish mother remains unchanged from time immemorial.

The sanctified mother, who represents the biblical ideal, is a strong and just woman, matching her husband's virtues with those of her own, frequently surpassing them. An excellent example of such a glorification of the mother is her figure in Halina Birenbaum's well-known novel *Nadzieja umiera ostatnia* (*Hope Dies Last*). On the novel's very first page, there is a description of the mother, which clearly dominates over the descriptions of the father and the brothers:

Father was a small commercial agent and came from Biała Podlaska. Mother looked after the home and supplemented our modest budget with her crochet work. She came from Żelechów. She was unusually courageous and clever. I loved her and respected her more than other members of the family. Both brothers were still students<sup>10</sup>.

This short description indicates how important the figure of the mother was for the book's heroine. Later, within the pages of the story, she will appear much more frequently than will the father or the brothers who will appear weaker as opposed to the mother, or will be described enigmatically. The mother, not only earns money but, above all, she is characterised with the most desirable personal features – courage and wisdom – attributes about which the Jewish matriarchs could boast. A special resemblance links this figure with the greatest of the matriarchs, Sarah. Sara had a gift for prescience and for making essential decisions for her people. Similarly, Birenbaum presents a similar figure of her mother – a woman who, in the eyes of her teenage daughter, has a gift for prophesying and whose word the girl believed above all else. The following phrases appear repeatedly in the text – mother assured, mother said, I believed mother, mother knew, mother was right, her every word contained the purest truth, and the like. Her mother's opinions and decisions had a definitive character:

Pushed along by hundreds of naked women, at some point I reached the shower rooms. A bath – I thought joyfully [...] Mother was right. They were not going to kill us [...] I wanted to fling myself with joy into my mother's arms in order to show my love and complete trust in everything that she said<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Halina Birenbaum, *Nadzieja umiera ostatnia. Wyprawa w przeszłość* (*Hope Dies Last, an Expedition Into the Past*), Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, Oświęcim 2011, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

Even in the ghetto, her mother took all the binding decisions. She allocated food equitably, shared it with the most poor, initiated risky movements, obtained cleaning material, sought out and organised hiding places for her children.

This was all in contrast to the male members of the family, especially the father, who “only” worked, having the status of a “productive Jew”. In a life-threatening situation, he would not be able to protect those closest to him. He would be stupefied or in a panic:

Father was so upset and horrified that he couldn’t even think about survival. He could only manage to show his pass to the Nazis believing, until the final moment, that thanks to that, we would all be saved. He was afraid. He considered that disobeying the SS-men would only hasten our doom. Mother was different. For that reason, I’ve always clung to her, deeply convinced that she would always find a way for us out of a situation [ . . . ] Father was dazed, whereas she was calm <sup>12</sup>.

One can clearly see that the story’s heroine treats her mother’s opinions seriously, in contrast to her father’s. The novel contains no situation where the father is the decision maker. The heroine seems not to notice the importance of her father’s work, heading for the German factory every morning, despite the hunger and exhaustion. His “faith in his pass” was simply laughed at, in contrast to her mother’s faith in worthwhile and safe work in the East.

Her mother, extremely different to her passive father, was characterised as heroic and decisive. She clearly shows a situation at the *Umschlagplatz*, just prior to transportation to the extermination camp:

Mother gripped my hand and started to move back in the opposite direction. She pulled along Chil, father and me, driving away the policemen, being indifferent to the blows of the clubs [...] My father and brother wanted to go with the others to the train [...] Father tried to defend himself, shielding himself from the clubs with his hands. He tried to dodge them, but he was helpless against the brutal violence; he bent over even further, shrank and, finally, obediently headed to the railway wagons [ . . . ] I saw my father for the last time, slumped and helplessly heading towards the railway wagons under the clubs of the policemen. We, mother and I, managed to break free from the rushing throng<sup>13</sup>.

Her father gave in to helplessness, taking no action which might rescue the family. Only her mother took any heroic action, which involved bribery, pleas, negotiating with the Jewish police – taking all measures possible which would enable her children to return to the ghetto.

In many instances, her mother is described as a saint. The main heroine uses expressions such as: I adored my mother, mother was the most excellent model for me, mother had a miraculous gift, she had an iron will and cold blood, and the like. The novel contains not one instance where it is implied that her mother could not cope with everyday life, hunger, pain or humiliation. She cried only once – not for herself, but over the death of the sister she loved most dearly.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp 35-36.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp 37-38

Her mother died in Auschwitz, separated from her daughter and daughter-in-law. To the very end, she maintained her cheerfulness and calm – the model of a superb carer and friend.

What we are dealing with here is the glorification of a specific figure, but also the other figures that her mother had to replace. Within the texts I have discussed, it is often possible to find images of substitute mothers which arise following the death of the biological mother. In the case of Birenbaum, such a person is her brother's wife, Hela, whom the book's heroine, at first, does not like. Conditions in the camp change the situation. Her sister-in-law becomes her guiding light and her only support:

Only here did I come to know the real character of my sister-in-law and only here did I come to love her. Later, I was ready to make any sacrifice for her. Thanks to her, I was ready to stand up and fight for life in the death camp<sup>14</sup>.

The need for a mother, even not a "real" one, was immense. It resulted from the lack of a sense of security and to maintain known values, such as that of a family. Friends made in the camps have rarely been described as friends or colleagues – they are more often referred to as second mothers, sisters or daughters.

Within Birenbaum's collection of stories, *Wolanie o pamięć* (*Calling Upon Memory*), the mother, as one of the main figures, appears in the work entitled *W jednej nieodwołalnej chwili* (*In One Irrevocable Moment*). Here, we find a connection between the sanctified mother and the *Yiddishe mama* stereotype. Once again, Birenbaum portrays the mother as independent, reducing the father's role to that of maintaining the home. The mother, like the figure in *Nadziei* (*Hope*) ..., was introduced as a lively woman, gushing with cheerfulness, singing and caring about the other members of the household. In defiance of her husband, she arranges a hiding place, in their home, for seven young boys from the "Akiba" Zionist organisation, becoming a second mother to them:

Hilel Zajdel, a member of that group (today, a member of the Israeli parliament), wrote after the War that, thanks to the religious woman, Mrs Pinczuk, their lives were saved at that time...She was like a mother to us<sup>15</sup>.

Strong piety was a feature typical of women brought up within the Orthodox customs and traditions of Judaism and, most often, remained unchanged throughout the War and throughout their lives. With Birenbaum, none of her figures lose their faith under the influence of their wartime experiences. Quite the opposite, it strengthened their faith. Lusja's mother, the main heroine, dedicated her entire energy in order to ensure work for her daughter at a nearby camp. This would have protected the girl from death and would ensure better living conditions for her. Her mother's efforts ended in success - Lusja avoided hunger, but her mother refused food for the sake of her faith and for the love of her children:

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 99.

<sup>15</sup> Halina Birenbaum, *Wolanie o pamięć*, Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka, Oświęcim 1999, p 34.

When food was given to them, she never sat at the table. The food was not kosher... She believed that her faith in the Jewish religion had saved her children from extermination. She became bloated from starvation. Then it came to light and she was not eating anything<sup>16</sup>.

Once again, Birenbaum portrays the archetypal mother – a religious woman, caring and prudent. Thanks to getting her daughter into a labour camp, the girl was the only one of her family to avoid death during the roundups:

Lusia claims that she was saved that day due to the over-protective care of her mother<sup>17</sup>.

Before the War, her mother had displayed over-protective characteristics which, often, annoyed her daughter who was already an adult (Lusia could not free herself of her mother's influence even when she was a student). However, in a war situation, it was to her benefit.

Also, in the story *Dzieje rodziny Pilcer*, the mother appears as a mainstay of religion and Jewish tradition:

The Germans blockaded our home in Chrzanów, as they did with all houses of Jews sent for execution. Our warm home, which mum had looked after and generated an atmosphere of warmth, cheerfulness and encouragement during the hardest years of the War! She celebrated the holidays. With joy, she lit the Shabbat candles. She tried to maintain our Jewish tradition<sup>18</sup>.

Even in stories where the mother figure appears sporadically, she is portrayed as indispensable. In the story *Dzieciństwo Marty (Marta's Childhood)*, the creation of the mother figure does not diverge from what is presented above. The woman hid her daughter in a small room adjacent to a chemist, with Aryan neighbours and in the ghetto, all the while risking her own life. She voluntarily gave her daughter to a family she knew, being aware that she would never see her again. In Birenbaum's prose, to the Jewish mother, the life of the child is of a higher value. Dedication to the family was something obvious and she never wavered from her belief in God and in His justice.

Mothers, in Birenbaum's prose (similar to matriarchs) undertake risky, devious activities, foreseeing all threats, in order to ensure the best living conditions for their children. In Birenbaum's narrative, only they possessed the essential abilities, whereas the fathers either suffered an undignified death or made the wrong choices – those aimed at “only” protecting their personal convictions and dignity (in *Dzieciństwo Marty*, the father refuses the chairmanship of the Jewish Community Council and Jewish Police, which resulted in his rapid execution and his family being left to their own devices). Mothers mentioned in Birenbaum's prose are centred on a sense of safety, a homely atmosphere and piety. A fact supporting the sanctification of the maternal image is that none of them survived the War and that the family home was a magical place to which there was now no return. Birenbaum clearly mythologises the mother figure, while Irit Amiel seems to do the opposite - demythologising, portraying so much of the negative in the characteristics of Jewish mothers, particularly those who survived the War.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., s. 65.



In Amiel's *Holenderska opowieść* (*A Dutch Story*), the figure of the mother is devalued. The Jewish girl's parents gave her into the care of an uncle. The child then found herself within an Aryan family. However, neighbours then denounced her. As a result, the little Dutch girl was imprisoned in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and liberated by the Red Army in Czechoslovakia. The girl's mother found her name on a list of survivors and wanted to collect the child. The heroine of the story did not recognise her mother. Because of her weakened condition, she sent her to a sanatorium in Switzerland. Upon her return, for a second time, she did not recognise her mother:

I remember standing in an empty railway station with my small suitcase, how a strange woman comes up to me saying that she is my mother. I believed her, I had no other choice [...]

1. I know that she was a real globetrotter and she loved shopping. But, at the time when I was small, she chose the resistance movement and not me. Namely, she loved the Netherlands more than me. I only interfered in her heroic activities.
2. "Don't talk rubbish about this choice", Max gets annoyed [...] "After all, it wasn't her fault. The Germans forced people into inhumane choices in hellish situations. Especially the Jews. She was a real heroine."
3. "Not to me", whispers Tymna<sup>19</sup>.

The figure of the mother is portrayed from the perspective of a small, abandoned child. It has no features of sanctity. On the contrary, instead of devotion to her daughter, she devotes herself to her homeland. The child, having returned from one distant trip, is then directly sent on another trip, thereby disrupting the child's recently regained sense of identity. The mother was an active person (called a "globetrotter" by her daughter). She was unable to run a household. There is no positive mention of her. From the child's perspective, she was a weak woman because she had renounced motherhood. That image is contrary to the archetype of a matriarch of Israel, similar to the next image from Amiel's story, *Batia*.

The main character, who survived thanks to the help of Catholic priests, left for Israel, with her husband, after the War. She had three children. At first, she fulfilled the roles of mother, wife and housewife. However, her feelings of satisfaction did not last for long. Her children's crying irritated Batia. It seemed that they were repulsive to her, arousing an outright dislike. She compares them to her peers in the monastery and misses the monastic coolness and the modest life filled with prayer<sup>20</sup>.

Batia, fascinated by the Hari Krishna religion, leaves her family, shaves her head, collects charity for her guru and hands over all her belongings. The woman, leaving her husband and children, also leaves the Jewish God, shattering the image of the perfect Jewish mother which, without success, she had tried to be. Here, the most important archetypal features were turned away from - motherhood/abandonment of children, respect for traditions/leaving the home, Judaism/choosing another religion. Despite her new life situation, the heroine feels a compulsion to return to her roots. However, these attempts prove ineffective. "From time to time, she returns home rather unwillingly to see her children. But, after a few days, she leaves in the night"<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> Irit Amiel, *Podwójny krajobraz*, Prószyński i S-ka, Warszawa 2008, pp. 84-85.

<sup>20</sup> Irit Amiel, *Osmaleni*, Świat literacki, Izabelin 1999, p. 30.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

In the story *Ziwa (Ziva)*, the relationship of the heroine with her mother reminds us of that in the story *Holenderska opowieść (A Dutch Story)*. Here, the mother is also portrayed as “largely absent”:

“Where was she throughout all my orphan years?” she asked in a trembling voice on the verge of hysteria. “Why didn’t she find me at that time, when night after night I was crying out for her? What is she to me now, that strange, old woman, suffering from Parkinson’s disease, who pleads with me over the telephone to call her *mama* and then everything would be okay [ . . . ] Why do I need a mother when I’m already a grandmother myself, and all my life I’ve been an orphan?”<sup>22</sup>

The absent mother does not carry any particular characteristics. She is a silent figure, triggering in her children feelings of anger and sorrow. Not all of Ariel’s mother leave or return too late. In the story *Współczesny splot (A Contemporary Tangle)*, the mother is constantly present in her son’s life. The child, already grown up, is unable to function effectively, since his mother’s wartime experiences excessively impact his everyday life. Boaz, the main character, meets a woman of German origin, who has come to Israel to study. However, her roots become an obstacle to a potential relationship. The first part of story concerns the mother’s conflicting position between love for her son and a desire for his happiness, and a hatred for her past torturers:

And I responded to that with, “My darling, if we’re only talking about me, I’d certainly overcome it. For you, for your happiness, I’m prepared for almost everything. But we’re not talking about me here because, by sheer coincidence, I survived from amongst all those silent millions. Just the opposite – those exhausted, in the eleventh hour of their lives, begged only for us to *never forget and never forgive. And if you manage to walk away in one piece, tell the world the truth about what happened here. Never forgive those crimes unto the last generation.* And now you, you who carry my father’s name, whom they gassed in Treblinka, you want to take, as your wife, a woman of their tribe and to bring into the world children, my grandchildren with their genes, in whose veins flows the blood of the murderers of your grandfather. How is it possible to live with that? You tell me how.”<sup>23</sup>

In the second part of Amiel’s story, the son says:

And yet, somewhere, deep in the corners of my brain, I was afraid of what Noemi, my mother, would say to all this [ . . . ] Once, I even found myself thinking that it would be better if Noemi was no longer here and I’d be free of this black abyss, this burden from her past which was beyond my strength to carry [...] And I deluded myself that these issues had now passed and had already ended a long time ago. For me, for my happiness, Noemi would be prepared for everything – that’s what she always led me to understand<sup>24</sup>.

For his mother, her past and her internalised obligation to those killed turned out to be more important than a happy relationship for her son, whose fiancé, under the influence of Noemi’s disapproval, left the love of her life.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 72-73.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 75-76.

Only in one of Amiel's stories does love for a son overcome post-War trauma. The story *Do trzech razy sztuka* (*Third Time Lucky*) portrays a mother prone to forgiving the nation of her torturers, enabling her son to make his own choices. The mother's wisdom and gentleness draws her closer to the archetype. The main character, bringing home his German business partner, did not expect his mother to welcome this woman with any great composure. Until now, the man's conscience bothered him over his acquaintanceship with the German. Fear and loathing seized him even after shaking hands with Angelica Dunz. His upbringing, to which he had surrendered, was to blame for this. Even toys, pencils or sweets produced in Germany - all this things were thrown away. In her view, his mother was not so radical as his father (He had once forbidden his son to allow a German boy, on international exchange, to stay overnight in their home.) She tried to raise him distant from hate. Her husband's arguments weighed more heavily on her. He had lost his entire family during the War. It was only after his death that the hero's mother invited Ms Dunz to her home:

- a. "This was not our first meeting," said my grey-haired mother. "I remember a group of young SS-men. Amongst them were two girls in Hitler Youth uniforms, who had come in 1942 to visit our orphanage in the Częstochowa Big Ghetto. I stood there, in rags, covered in lice, with my head shaven. I was standing so close that I could see the aversion in the girls' eyes, as though they were looking at disgusting vermin. I remember that look, I don't even know why [...] I met you for the second time in 1946 in Italy, in Genoa. Nazi organisations, and often the Vatican, helped you to move out of Europe to South America. However, American Jews and the *Bricha* Israeli organisation helped us to leave the stained earth of Europe [...]" Shaken to my depths, I kissed my mother on the unconcealed scar of the removed blue number on her forearm<sup>25</sup>.

The woman had forgiven the Germans, knowing that the visitor needed that. Despite knowing about Angelica Dunz for many years, she had managed to accept her son working with that woman, enabling him, in the process, to develop a chain of modern hotels in Israel. Post-War trauma had lost out to motherly love and wisdom. Her son appreciated the gesture which had cost his mother dearly.

The above dissertation leads us to the proposed point about the archetypal source of the view of the Jewish mother. It is clear to see that the image of the sanctified mother appears prior to her death. With Birenbaum, these women fulfil the model of an excellent Jewish mother and, typical of the *Yiddishe mama* stereotype, over-protectiveness appears in life-threatening situations. Mothers who perished are mythologised by the author – their actions defined as heroic, their decisions as infallible.

With Amiel, there is a specific turning away from the archetype – these women still move in the same orbit, but in the opposite direction. They try to be good mothers, but their wartime experiences prove to be an obstacle. Past values become replaced by their mirror image, which attests to those experiences being firmly stuck within the social subconscious, from which there is no possibility of running away. It is only possible to replace them with something opposite – with something resembling the rebelliousness of a child.

The attitude of post-traumatic mothers is, on the one hand, an objection to imposed roles. On the other hand, there are desperate attempts to regain their children – attempts, let us add, connected with an inability to achieve that goal. In the eyes of their children, their mothers are not fulfilling their basic role – their absence is the opposite of the archetypal mother and the *Yiddishe mama*, and their irrational behaviour is the reverse of appropriate decision-making and of the prescient matriarch.

<sup>25</sup> Irit Amiel, *Podwójny krajobraz...*, p. 37-38.

Birenbaum's prose protects a past world from disintegration. Amiel's prose portrays that disintegration. In both cases, however, the reader will detect a skeleton - Jewish tradition and its sources, from which the heroines are unable to escape, often paying the highest price – life (the new Hare Krishna adherent dies in the midst of drug addicts) or the loss of trust of their children (the mother's son in Amiel's *Współczesny splot* who is unable to forgive his mother for her beliefs). The exceptional situation in *Do trzech razy sztuka* only proves the rule – her wartime experiences enrich the image of the Jewish mother with new traits, but do not replace the perpetuating model of the mother, carer and prophetess. The role, which Judaism has imposed upon women is still relevant, despite a disturbance of the course of events caused by wartime trauma.