

CHAPTER 5

War Babies

Maria Fleming Tymoczko

*Maria Fleming Tymoczko, a professor of comparative literature, was the first person in her family to go to college. She was born in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1943. When her father shipped off to World War II before she was a year old, she grew up with her mother's Czechoslovakian immigrant mother, sisters, and brothers, in Cleveland. Tymoczko's books include *The Irish "Ulysses"* (1994) and *Translation in a Postcolonial Culture* (1999). This essay was originally published in *Born Into a World at War* (2000), a collection of essays written by members of the Harvard and Radcliffe Class of 1965, reflecting on how their lives were shaped by being children born during World War II.*



[...] **A**s infants, most of us in the Class of 1965 were called “war babies.” We were regarded as somewhat different, marked out as anomalous – precious life springing from death, little lives created and salvaged out of the peril and rubble that were consuming half the world. There weren’t a lot of us and we were cherished accordingly. We were the affirmation of the fecundity and endurance of the species, even in the face of the chaos that wrenched our fathers and mothers apart. We were seen as the epitome of the future for which the fighting was engaged, the hope held in the hearts of all the adults whose lives were being ravaged. We came to awareness of ourselves with the label *war baby* in our ears, with a subliminal sense of the price paid for our lives and our future. That price included sacrifice by those who held us most dear and sometimes the wounding, disabling, or even death of our own relatives. For American war babies those relatives at risk were usually fathers and uncles, though there were some grandfathers involved as well.

World War II brought an early politicization to my life. My family was working-class and none of my grandparents had completed a high school education. My father’s parents were both factory workers, my grandfather having come as a child from Scotland. My father’s mother was from British Isles stock that had been settled in America a long time, long enough at any rate for her great-grandfather to have starved to death in the Confederate prison at Andersonville. As the oldest child of six,

she had a hard life, particularly after her father was killed in an accident working on the railroad. Because of her father's accident, my grandmother dropped out of school at the age of 12 to help support the family. In 1941 the aspirations of my father and his siblings were bounded by the prospects of their own parents' lives – factory work, or bartending, or manual labor of some sort. Or maybe the exotic: in the case of my good-looking Aunt Louise, a stint in the chorus line of the Roxy, the local burlesque house on the national circuit, which she tried for a short time, until her career was cut short by her mother's adamant opposition. Louise retaliated by marrying a minor member of the Mafia, but that's another story.

My mother's family were immigrants from Czechoslovakia, the sort of immigrants who were doing their best to be upwardly mobile. My grandfather was a shoemaker, a small-scale entrepreneur who had dreams of becoming landed gentry in Slovakia by buying land there with profits from his American shops. My maternal grandmother had nowhere to go but up. She was the daughter of peasants who lived in one room in a farm complex owned by a landlord, peasants whose only possessions were household goods and a clutch of geese. Like my father's mother, this grandmother also began to work at the age of 12, when she was sent to the small city nearest her village to be a servant for a rich Hungarian family. It was an experience that made her determined to seek a better life in America, where she aspired to freedom, equality of a rudimentary sort, and flush toilets. [. . .]

My parents met initially in a junior high school in Cleveland, Ohio, and they married in 1942 shortly after Pearl Harbor. My father had graduated from high school but my mother dropped out of tenth grade to marry just after she turned 16. Both were fresh-faced, bright teenagers, with aspirations molded by the Roosevelts and images of stability from the 1930s. My father had led a somewhat wayward and wild youth, which probably was attractive to my mother, who came from a strict and pious Baptist household. She also liked the fact that he was “a real American” – he didn't have the faintest trace of ethnicity.

The 1930s was a very difficult time for people like my parents' families. Survival was the paramount concern and it tightened people's focus on themselves. Both my grandmothers slaved to keep their children alive, one on the assembly lines, the other washing floors. The stories my father told of his youth were not political. They were about living in foster homes so his mother could earn a livelihood, and forays to the library for amusement, and going (with a suitcase of history books) to summer camp for poor children, and hitchhiking cross-country, and minor theft, and local bootlegging. My mother told about wanting to be American, and refusing to speak Slovak, and being angry, and stealing green tomatoes from vines, and yearning for a Shirley Temple doll. World War II shattered that emotional isolationism bred of economic impoverishment.

During the war and afterward, the world became the context of our lives. What happened elsewhere mattered in a new way. It had a connection to us and to our daily doings in Cleveland. All the men of my parents' generation were caught up in the war, except my father's brother Bill, who was a quadriplegic, and my mother's brother Johnny, 13 years old when I was born. My father's older brother Jack joined

the marines and became leader of his platoon by virtue of being able to beat all the other men in the group in hand-to-hand fighting. He had been decathlon champion of his high school and a semi-pro boxer before he joined up. My mother's brother Paul had been in the Civilian Conservation Corps during high school and he joined the army with a band of buddies just after war was declared. I was born in December 1943 and my 19-year-old father enlisted in the army shortly thereafter. Even the men who stayed at home did so because they were part of the war effort. Uncle Joe worked at a foundry in Cleveland, casting parts for bombers, a valuable part of war work that earned him an exemption month after month.

The world became somewhere family members might be sent and, later, after the war was done, it was somewhere uncles or friends or neighbors had been. We learned that what happened elsewhere mattered. It had connection. You couldn't ignore it, because what happened in the world, in politics, might come home, catch your own life up, and change you forever. Because his eyes were so weak, my own father was never shipped out, but he was terrified that he might be during the big buildup before the Normandy landings. So Normandy was close to us. My father might have been there, part of that desperate scramble through the waves, under fire, to gain a beachhead. The Pacific islands were where Uncle Jack was landing with his marines, and, later, the place where he rescued one of his men hit in a Japanese ambush, and, later still, the place he was machine-gunned himself and pulled to safety by his loyal and grateful men. Australia was the place where one uncle had a brief marriage and a war bride who wouldn't return to America with him. Her dark sepia photograph was in our family album, smiling and beautiful, flat and unchanging, but she herself, soft and warm, who had kissed my uncle, was still there, in Australia.

Even as a primary school child, struggling to learn the geography of the housing project I lived in with my parents, and then, as my circles widened, the geography of the neighborhood and the geography of Cleveland, I can remember my father talking to me about events that were happening in the world. Telling me they mattered. Places that were only words to me as a girl – Nuremberg and Korea and Taiwan and Berlin – were a part of our kitchen conversation, had an entitlement on our lives. The family conversations were reinforced at school by the *Weekly Reader*, which included stories about Egypt, the Suez Canal, Israel, India, and Pakistan, as if those places were our backyard and the politics of those countries a matter which even we children should think about. That sense of our lives being played out across the globe, the whole world, set a context for my response to Vietnam and the US presence in Vietnam decades later, a context shared by many of our generation. [. . .]

The war radically altered expectations among the working classes of Cleveland, and I grew up – we all grew up – on the other side of a tectonic shift. Even though women have always worked in my family – as women always do in preindustrial cultures, in peasant cultures, in farming cultures, in poor cultures – a middle-class American ideal had seeped into their consciousnesses in the 1930s, the ideal of women being supported by their husbands and staying home like ladies to keep the house and kids. That's what the young women of my family were earnestly

heading toward, but during the war they learned the pleasures of paid work, pleasures never abandoned afterward.

It happened because the men were at war. Rosie the Riveter has become a sort of national icon, especially in the women's movement, but we forget people like my mother, Annie the Pharmacist's Helper. One day Grandma came home with news from the clinic where she had been and later was again a charwoman, having given up that job for a better-paid position on the munitions assembly lines during the war. One of the doctors had approached her to say, "I need your eldest daughter to come work for me. My pharmacist has been drafted, they're taking every able-bodied man. I need someone to count out the pills and give the people the medicines they need. She's a smart girl and she doesn't have any children to take care of. We need her." Aunt Mary talked it over with her husband, but they came to the conclusion that she shouldn't go to work – he was man enough to support her, and it would be more patriotic for her to continue volunteer war work than take a paid position that someone else might need. But my 19-year-old mother said, "I want to do it."

So Mother became the acting pharmacist and never looked back. She worked her whole life in the medical profession, finally taking exams to become certified as a physician's assistant in the 1970s (along with a lot of Vietnam War vets), and work became one of the most satisfying parts of her life. Many of us have mothers who during the war took over for men at some sort of work, running their husbands' businesses, or driving buses, or working in factories, or being union stewards, like my father's mother. When we were infants, before our conscious memories, we grew up seeing women in the world, at work, managing civilian life. And those women who did so in our own families entered into a sense of self-possession, a sense of entitlement, that lies there at the threshold of our awareness. This public presence of women at work faded out gradually during our childhoods, especially during the 1950s when there was a campaign to get women back in the kitchen, but I'll never forget how much I liked it when the bus driver was a woman and how much I missed those women drivers as they were gradually replaced by men.

Another tectonic shift also predates my conscious memories or my conscious understanding of the order of things, the class shift that happened after the war to working families such as my own as a result of the GI Bill. Many if not most of the members of the Harvard-Radcliffe Class of 1965 have a long family tradition of higher education, some for generations at Harvard itself. For a few of us, however, the entitlement to higher education can be traced directly to the GI Bill, and women who come from such backgrounds, like myself, may be conscious of being the first women of their families to have a college education.

My family's educational expectations shifted radically because of the war. The men who returned from the war all went to college on the GI Bill. They were the direct beneficiaries of that amazing democratization of education that happened in the United States in the late 1940s, that opened up the lives of people who didn't grow up with privilege, and that shifted their careers and class irrevocably. Uncle Jack, the marine, became a civil engineer. Uncle Paul became a math teacher. My father headed himself toward teaching history. And their influence spread to the younger

members of the family as well. My mother's twin siblings, too young to be in the war, were sent to college when the time came, and they too became teachers. College and university educations opened people up in all sorts of other ways as well, and, as a consequence of the war and its aftermath, my cousins and siblings and I inhabit a much larger world than did our parents and grandparents.

I remember my father being in college. His oak desk and typewriter had pride of place in our small public-housing living room. [. . .]

For those of us born in the war, the time during World War II itself gave many of us a rather different psychosexual foundation from those of our older or younger siblings and, indeed, an orientation different from the standard presumed in Western culture and Western psychology. When our fathers went off to war, many of our mothers moved back into their own mothers' homes, bringing their young children along, even giving birth to new children in those homes. As a result, we the children grew up in multigenerational families. In some cases more than one daughter came home, so the family grouping was extended and complex. Sometimes the head of the clan was a grandfather, beloved or tyrannical or both, but often these complex families had female heads of household. This is what happened to me.

My parents were living in Rhode Island when I was born, so I started life in a conventional nuclear family. When I was three months old, my father enlisted in the army and my mother packed up and took me on the train from Providence back to her family in Cleveland. My grandmother had decided this was what should be done and she paid for the train ticket.

My grandmother lived in the central part of Cleveland in a Slovak-Italian ethnic neighborhood on a tiny property that had two houses on it. The "big" house had four small rooms and an unheated attic where the young people slept. Mother and I lived there with Grandma, the young twins Emily and John, and Aunt Bessie, who was just a little older than Mother. There was no central heating, just a kerosene stove in the living room and another stove in the kitchen. The running water in the bathroom was cold, unless you lit the tiny gas heater mounted on the wall. In the little house on the property (three rooms, located four feet behind Grandma's house on the same lot) lived Aunt Mary and Uncle Joe.

Grandma gave up her bedroom so that my mother and I had a place to live. Aunt Emily says she can't remember her mother lying down to sleep for a long time during those years: she'd just rest on the couch. We ate most suppers together, all pell-mell around my grandmother's wooden kitchen table. When I was big enough to graduate from a high chair, I sat squeezed in on the bench behind the table with my teenage Auntie Emily and Uncle Johnny, and sometimes with my mother as well. Everyone was in charge of me, everyone took turns taking care of me, especially while my mother was sick. (She was quite ill with a thyroid problem that kept her bedridden for weeks after we arrived in Cleveland, a problem that ultimately required surgery and then more bed rest). I felt loved by everyone, even my young aunt and uncle who were themselves displaced as the babies of the family by me. We were all crowded together under the rule of my matriarchal grandmother, whom everyone but me called "Mama," living as one household complete with cats and African

violets in a space that probably was little bigger than the dining room of my present house.

In many ways it was a very difficult time for us all, with my mother sick and difficulty getting various kinds of food and other commodities, and anxiety about the safety of the young men of the family who were soldiers. From 1942, when Uncle Paul was shipped to the Pacific theater, he was not seen again until after the war, and for nine of those months he was missing in action separated from his battalion, hiding behind enemy lines in the jungles of Luzon. So there was constant worry.

And yet in other ways the war created a wonderful environment for a baby's first two years, in many ways better than the isolated nuclear family environments of the suburbs that babies born in the 1950s grew up in. It was an environment more typical of an earlier era, when extended families lived together in villages or on multi-generational farms. My family lived in a real neighborhood, where people knew each other and visited together, where people from "the old country" gathered together, speaking their native languages, even as the young were becoming American. I became the baby of more than just a family, recognized and indulged by various friends and neighbors as well. Like many others born in the war, because of my nuclear family's displacement, I was raised by a village, so to speak, in our case a village within a city. For my own life, this was infinitely better and more stable than a childhood spent along with two teenage parents. Those years when Mother was 18 to 20 and I grew from infant to two-and-a-half-year-old toddler were critical for us. Many years later my mother acknowledged that, by taking us in during the war, Grandma had "saved both our lives."

I trace many of my personal strengths to that formative period of living with my extended family, full of loving caretakers and multiple role models. My earliest memories took shape with Mother working and me being watched part of most days by someone else – Auntie Mary, or Grandma, or the twins, Johnny and Emily. There was almost always someone to meet my needs willingly, something interesting going on to watch and listen to, and someone to keep me in line. There was a surfeit of love and words – stories, debates, arguments, quarrels, reading aloud, praying, or singing – in at least three languages, the English and Slovak spoken in our house and the Italian I could hear spoken by our noisy, voluble neighbors, the Costellis, just 15 feet away.

It was an anomalous period when our domestic world, almost devoid of men, was utterly ruled by a hierarchy of women: first Grandma, then Aunt Mary as oldest married sister, then Mother as the one with the child, then Aunt Bessie, then Aunt Emily as the dominant twin. Although any of them could lose her temper and shout, and although my grandmother was strict and straitlaced and uncompromising, I don't remember ever being frightened or terrorized in those early years. I was safe in my grandmother's house. And when my father came back from the war and I began to live for the first time in my remembered life with my parents alone, I was desolate. I felt I had been torn from my real family and sent away for fosterage, away from most of my mothers. Over the years I've wondered whether my feminism – and perhaps the feminism of other women my age – is anchored in the experiences of those formative and preconscious years, when our psyches were being shaped in a

woman's world, where women's love enveloped us, where women worked and ruled, where women felt good about themselves, where women held power by right, where women's ways and bodies were the norm.

One of the darkest sides of being born in the war was that reunion with the men who straggled back from the fighting in '45 and '46 and '47 to shatter our civilian peace. So many of those young soldiers came home damaged, some physically, but more mentally. They came home strangers to their children, strangers to their wives and parents, and strangers to themselves. This is the insight most striking to my women's political group and to others I've talked with who were born in the war: how aware our generation is that many of our own men were damaged in one way or another by the Vietnam War – either by being soldiers in the war or by not being soldiers in it – and how the damage done to the men of our own generation was preceded by the damage done to our fathers and uncles and family friends during World War II. What is different in the two cases, however, is that our own generation can talk about the trauma of the Vietnam War, setting the personal in the context of a political analysis, admitting doubts about war itself. Perhaps we learned to speak from the silence of our fathers, who so often could talk of nothing about the war, could only hold it in, repress the experiences, as they tried to protect their women and children, and themselves. [...]

My father never fulfilled that early promise of being a history teacher. He had a breakdown in his early thirties and was permanently disabled. In 1961 I was one of two students at Radcliffe College on a full scholarship, one of four National Merit Scholars that year to list for father's occupation "unemployed." How the ghosts and skeletons of World War II figured in his breakdown I don't know, but I do know that there was guilt and shame at his own cowardice and fear while he was a soldier, fear strong enough to make him inhale talcum powder so as to damage his lungs, rather than face the possibility of combat duty. Throughout the rest of his 49 short years of life, he never breathed right and he never slept right again.

Looking back, I see our fathers caught in silence. They had won the war. They were heroes. Yet their own experience of themselves was so often one of failure, of having feelings that heroes should not speak about in our culture: terror, cowardice, shirking, disgust, disillusionment, indifference, loathing, nausea, torment. Between the women and the men a terrible gulf grew, the gulf of the unspoken war. I can hear my mother's voice even now, impatient, when my father spoke of the army, spoke of the hardships of being in the army. "It's over, Bob," she seems to repeat in my memory, "the war is done." I can still hear the contempt in her voice when she told me years later how he confessed to her about the talcum powder. Those nightmares of war and the alienation from civilian life that they spawned were in some cases named and acknowledged for the first time when the fiftieth anniversaries of World War II brought the experiences alive again. Even those men who did not serve in the military fared scarcely better than the soldiers. Old enough to serve, but kept at home for industry, they often remained curiously embryonic, failing to realize their manhood. Although many, perhaps most, of the women of my world came out of World

War II stronger, going from strength to strength later in their lives, the men came out battered, further widening that gulf between the sexes in the 1950s. It's hardly a wonder that those of us born in the war – who as “terrible twos” met and first lived with our alienated fathers at the war's end – were not at all happy to find our own generation called to a battlefield that did not even seem just or worthy of sacrifice.

The changes of the United States in the last 50 years are the changes of my family writ large. It is in part from the evolution of countless lower-class families such as my own that we write the palimpsest of the history of America in the last half century. And it is experiences such as those that formed me that separate our younger siblings, the Baby Boomers, from those of us who were born in the war.

Study Questions

- 1 How did Tymoczko's family life change as a result of the strategies her mother chose for coping with her father's absence in World War II?
- 2 How did the war affect the family's class position? How did their educational expectations change as a result of the war?
- 3 Why did Tymoczko's father have such a difficult time adjusting to peacetime?
- 4 Compare the ways that Kesaya Noda's and Maria Tymoczko's identities were shaped by their families' wartime experiences.