

**OBITUARY**

**Respected author wrote about her early life in Nazi Germany**

JAMES CULLINGHAM

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Marguerite Andersen was a celebrated and highly respected writer whose work was distinguished by her quest for social justice and women's rights, and included ruminations about her early life in Germany as the Nazis established their grip on that country. Based in Toronto for the latter part of her career, Ms. Andersen chose to write in French and was part of the Franco-Ontarian literary community.



Marguerite Andersen taught in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where her daughter was born.  
COURTESY OF THE FAMILY

She was a feminist and sometimes wrote about the difficult choices women make in the workplace and at home. As an academic, she worked on feminist history and theory as well as literature.

“Rebel discourse proves to be difficult,” she wrote in an essay for *Paroles rebelles*, a 1992 collection that she helped edit. “It is exhilarating, yes, madly necessary, but also exhausting due to its repetition by necessity and its infrequent successes. ... Without doubt that’s why feminism knows its waves, hollow periods and periods of high energy. No one can incessantly struggle. Repose for the warrior woman is indispensable.”

In francophone literary circles, Ms. Andersen is considered a leading female exponent of autofiction, that’s to say writing that is rooted in the writer’s lived experience, but buttressed and embellished by imagination to achieve universality.

“It is a literature of combat and courage,” said Quebec author, broadcaster and journalist Claudia Larochelle, often practiced by women and looked down upon until writers like Ms. Andersen achieve critical success. Ms. Andersen’s experiences as a mother, an academic and world traveller figure in her work, which is never strictly autobiographical.

Ms. Andersen died in Toronto on Oct. 1, two weeks shy of her 98th birthday. “She did not suffer,” her daughter, Tinnish Andersen, said.

Ms. Andersen carried her origins with her throughout her life. She was born Margret Bohner in Magdeburg, Germany, on Oct. 15, 1924 (later changing the spelling to Marguerite). Her father, Theodor Bohner, was an academic and a writer. He, his wife, Martha, and their children fled Nazi Germany for England prior to the outbreak of the Second World War.

As the poet Paul Savoie, her friend, remarked, she was always cognizant of having begun life in the Nazi era and felt a sense of guilt by association, feelings that arose frequently in her work.

Buchenwald from the collection *Les Crus de l’Esplanade* is an example. In this superb short story Andersen talks of a woman who decides to visit the site of a Nazi internment camp. She writes, “Barbed wire. Cattle cars. German shepherds. Gas chambers and crematorium furnaces. Images of goose-stepping marches, my head is about to explode.

“Is it simply because I was still very young during the Nazi era, that I did not become a torturer? What prevents me from the horrors that I too could commit? I carry the crime within me, that of others, the possibility of my own.”

In *Le Figurier sur le toit* a Trillium Award-winning book that Mr. Savoie considers her finest, Ms. Andersen re-created an episode from her childhood in which a young girl returns to her Berlin home with a Nazi symbol given to her by someone in the street. She is severely reprimanded by her anti-fascist father.

“She was forever marked by the history of Nazi Germany, she carried it with her,” Mr. Savoie said.

Ms. Andersen studied literature and cinematography in Paris and Berlin. She completed a doctorate in French literature at the University of Montreal. She taught at several universities in Africa, Canada and the United States. For several years Ms. Andersen was the head of the French Studies Department at the University of Guelph. She was awarded honorary doctorates by Laurentian University in Sudbury and Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax. In 2016, she became a member of the Order of Canada.

Her daughter, Tinnish, a lawyer, was born in Ethiopia where Ms. Andersen was teaching at the time. “Tinnish” means “just a little bit ... take it easy” in Amharic – a fitting moniker in that Tinnish was born premature.

Mother and daughter resumed living together in Toronto in recent years overlooking Lake Ontario in downtown Toronto. Tinnish remembers enjoying sunrises and sunsets over the lake with her mother, sometimes listening to Ethiopian music.

“Some people say ‘you must feel you wasted your life living with your elderly mother.’ I have no regrets. She was my best friend. She never appeared old to me,” Tinnish said. “She had a public persona and a private persona. We had moments we laughed so hard together that we could barely stand it!” The mother and daughter communicated with each other using their own *mélange* of English, French and German.

Ms. Andersen explored the experience of motherhood in *La Mauvaise mère*, another Trillium Award-winning effort, which was translated into English. Of it she told Radio-Canada in 2020, “The title is a bit ironic because the mother is actually a good mother. The job of a mother is very hard, and it takes a lot of time. What happens in the life of a woman is very important. One has to recognize that.

Ms. Larochelle met Ms. Andersen in preparation for an interview about *La Mauvaise mère* in 2013 at the Salon du Livre in Montreal. Ms. Larochelle was eight months pregnant at the time and feeling stressed about the imminent arrival of her first child. She was very touched by the assurances Ms. Andersen offered her about motherhood. “Here was a woman from another era who was also very modern. She gave women like me a sense of permission to live outside convention,” Ms. Larochelle said.

“She was feminist, but did not attack men,” Mr. Savoie said. “She was a woman with a serious gaze, but a generous heart.”

Ms. Andersen might have written equally well in German or English. Writing in French was a conscious choice that perhaps helped distance her from her German past. Ms. Larochelle is grateful. “I consider it a great gift,” that Ms. Andersen wrote in French. “She chose the most difficult route. I am moved and touched by her choice.”

One of her principal editors, Denise Truax of Éditions Prise de parole in Sudbury, said that there are interesting anomalies in Ms. Andersen’s work such as the placement of adverbs that sometimes follows German rules of grammar rather than the French ones. “We would discuss it and decide to leave it as is,” Ms. Truax said. “It was part of her style.”

Mr. Savoie remains a great admirer of Ms. Andersen’s oeuvre. “The style is direct and sparse without unnecessary words.” Ms. Truax said of Ms. Andersen’s incisive short stories: “One can imagine her sitting at a table in a café observing people. With an economy of words she establishes a character’s humanity.”



Marguerite Andersen never stopped being devoted to the French language.  
COURTESY OF THE FAMILY

There's no question of Ms. Andersen's devotion to the French language and to Franco-Ontarian writers. She was active in many professional associations and worked closely with other writers in a salon-like arrangement often held at her home. "There was always something of the teacher in her," Ms. truax said.

Mr. Savoie added, “She helped a lot of writers. She was frank, demanding but empathetic.” Up until the final weeks of her life, Marguerite Andersen was still conducting French lessons on Zoom for a small number of devoted students.

Prior to Ms. Andersen’s death, Tinnish says, she had already planned a birthday celebration with champagne for her friends and French students.

Ms. Andersen leaves her daughter, Tinnish, from her marriage with Gottlieb Andersen; sons, Marcel and Christian Nouvet, from her marriage with Jean Nouvet; nine grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.