

Katharina Schuchardt

Institute of Saxon History and Cultural Anthropology, Dresden
ORCID 0000-0003-1623-9123

Memories (Un)told – Identity Construction Through Practices of Transgenerational Storytelling

Families have a common past based on experiences gained by one or several family members. Their experiences and memories, as well as the way they are told, play an important role in constituting an identity for the whole family. I became particularly aware of this when I started my fieldwork in the Opole voivodship in 2015, where I was researching the processes of identity constructions and self-ascriptions among the local German minority. In and around Opole live the largest number of people considering themselves to be members of the minority. The redrawing of the German–Polish border after World War Two remains the principal reason why mostly Germans had to flee from regions like Silesia, which belonged to the newly established Polish Republic. The Germans who decided to stay, or had to stay for economic reasons, were now members of a newly established but not officially acknowledged German minority in Poland until 1991. The term member is not exclusively defined as being enrolled in one of the organisations but also includes self-ascription as a German minority – according to German as well as Polish law.¹ There are many minority organisations located in the voivodship and capital of the same name. Although some of these organisations work for German minority groups all over Poland, there is a huge focus on Opole in their daily work. I spent several months on field work and took part in different kinds

¹ Polish law does not distinguish between evidence, such as a German passport, or simply self-ascription.

of events organised by members of the German minority, such as official and private meetings, workshops and social events.²

Doing Identity by Memories – Performative Practices

The concept of identity is not a fixed entity; therefore, the identity is experienced only in “doing identity”³ and becomes apparent in cultural practices – for example in narratives, objects, traditions and in the language. Memories told within families are such markers which influence one’s identity especially during childhood and youth. The individual memory is “a dynamic medium of subjective experience processing”,⁴ which is highly influenced by the family as a community for experiences and the transition of memories,⁵ which have an impact on the processes of self-ascriptions. The “transgenerational transition”⁶ entails that such memories also become a part of the self-image of younger generations who were not involved in historical events like World War Two and socialism, and which is mediated by storytelling between family members. Occasions for storytelling are “en passant”,⁷ stories are told at meetings like birthdays, family parties or during relatives’ visits.⁸ According to the Estonian cultural anthropologist Phila Maria Siim, “stories are not always told as a whole; people may refer only to the main points or phrases of the story they are already familiar with”.⁹ The ways of storytelling can differ a lot, especially with regard to whether positive or negative incidents are told. They are not repeated as often and will only be told in certain contexts, mostly confidentially. Talking about them can also result in silence as a special form of communication. Silence promotes and secures social cohesion and binds individuals to groups¹⁰ and “is not equal to forgetting, but rather refers to the absence of narration”.¹¹ Silence, therefore, is also a special way of

² I got access to my field research by obtaining an internship in one of the organisations of the German minority in Poland. This allowed me to gain an insight into the work of the organisations as well as to get direct contact with members.

³ I. Götz, *Deutsche Identitäten. Die Wiederentdeckung des Nationalen nach 1989*, Böhlau Verlag, Köln et al. 2011.

⁴ A. Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik*, Verlag H.C. Beck, München 2006.

⁵ A. Lehmann, *Reden über Erfahrung. Kulturwissenschaftliche Bewusstseinsanalyse*, w: S. Göttisch, A. Lehmann (red.), *Methoden der Volkskunde. Positionen, Quellen, Arbeitsweisen der Europäischen Ethnologie*, Reimer, Berlin 2007, p. 271–288.

⁶ W. Vitti, *(Trans-)Formationen jüdischer Lebenswelten nach 1989. Eine Ethnografie in zwei slowakischen Städten*, Transcript-Verlag für Kommunikation Kultur und soziale Praxis, Bielefeld 2015.

⁷ A. Keppler, *Soziale Formen individuellen Erinnerns*, w: H. Welzer (ed.), *Das soziale Gedächtnis. Geschichte, Erinnerung, Tradierung*, HIS Verlag, Hamburg 2001, p. 137–159.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ P.M. Siim, *Family Stories untold. Doing Family through Practices of Silence*, in: *Ethnologia Europaea. Journal of European Ethnology* 46/2, *Silence in Cultural Practices*, p. 74–88.

¹⁰ A. Assmann, *Das neue Unbehagen in der Erinnerungskultur. Eine Intervention*, Beck Juristischer Verlag, München 2013.

¹¹ P.M. Siim, *Family Stories untold...*, p. 74–88.

communicating and does not mean non-communication. Although they may not always have been a direct verbal transition, pictures and messages of memories were passed through the silence.

Strategic silence, defined by Aleida Assmann as one of several different types of silence, takes on a special position in view of the specific post-war situation the Opole Germans were faced with: As Germany had caused the war, and was hence responsible for the consequences, talking about personal traumatic experiences from a German perspective became a social taboo in socialist Poland. This influences further generations and their identities as well. Carol Kidron argues that the denial of a violent past often leads to processes of suffering for trauma descendants, which are based on the absence of, for example, “historical accounts of the familial past”.¹² Silence is a type of suppression and indicates a specific way of dealing with experiences. Phila Maria Siim has similar views and calls it a “protective silence”,¹³ because culprits after World War Two remained silent to protect themselves and their children.¹⁴ The socialist regime considered talking about the German time before 1945 as a taboo in Poland and the fate for the remaining Germans in Silesia after World War Two meant a ban on German language and culture and, for Upper Silesia, internment in labour camps in many cases. Talking about ethnic affiliations or relatives living abroad was strictly prohibited and led to problems with the local authorities in daily life. Therefore, the generation born around and shortly after 1945 developed a distinct “culture of silence”¹⁵ in order not to attract attention or get hurt. Their strategic silence can to be understood as an intentional act of creating distance and “an important resource for the construction and protection of identity”.¹⁶ However, this did not stop the transgenerational transition of memories. In 1991, when the political climate changed due to the breakdown of the Soviet Union, Poland acknowledged the existence of the German minority, which it had nearly entirely denied until then. Through growing social acceptance of the topic and due to a changed political climate within the last 30 years, many of the German war victims, especially those near the end of their lives, seized this point in time as a last chance to break their silence.

¹² C. Kidron, *Silent Legacies of Trauma. A Comparative Study of Cambodian Canadian and Israeli Holocaust Trauma Descendants Memory Work*, in: N. Argenti, K. Schramm (ed.), *Remembering Violence. Anthropological Perspective on Intergenerational Transmission*, Berghan Books, New York–Oxford 2010, p. 193–228.

¹³ P.M. Siim, *Family Stories untold. Doing Family through Practices of Silence*, in: *Ethnologia Europaea. Journal of European Ethnology* 46/2, *Silence in Cultural Practices*, p. 74–88.

¹⁴ A. Assmann, *Der lange Schatten...*

¹⁵ P.M. Siim, *Family Stories untold...*, p. 74–88.

¹⁶ A. Assmann, *Das neue Unbehagen in der Erinnerungskultur. Eine Intervention*, C.H. Beck Verlag, München 2013. Extended research was done on storytelling and family’s memories among victims and perpetrators of the Holocaust, i.e. H. Welzer et al. (ed.), ‘Opa war kein Nazi’. *Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis*, 3rd edition, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 2002; G. Rosenthal (ed.), *Der Holocaust im Leben von drei Generationen. Familien von Überlebenden der Shoah und von Nazi-Tätern*, 2nd edition, Psycho-Sozial-Verlag, Gießen 1997.

This indicates that storytelling always has an additional function besides the mere passing of memories and information, because a deeper meaning is hinted at behind the simple words. This will be given indirectly to the listeners and will be negotiated by them and articulated through identity markers. When families meet and talk about personal experiences gained, they do not only talk about individual feelings and experiences, but are passing on personal and subjective perspectives of historical moments influenced by former social, political and cultural attitudes in societies, the habitus of historical persons and historical associations.¹⁷ Memories are never an exact image of historical events through accumulating experiences and are always told from today's perspective.¹⁸ Views and perspectives on certain themes are constantly altered, and thus have an effect on narrating the past. Very often the narration of events is built around somebody or a certain marking point in a biography, which can be of an individual, political or historical nature.¹⁹

A family's memory is, therefore, part of the communicative memory. It is bound by a lifetime frame which includes a period of about 80 to 100 years. The frame shifts forward and takes a new shape with every new generation coming into a family and gets dimmer for the elderly. During this period, up to three generations in a family exist simultaneously, which holds potential for the exchange, negotiation and alteration of information. The coexisting generations thus build a community of narration, memories and experiences through a "procedure of a communicative remembering",²⁰ which must be seen as a performative practice within family circles, whose current "familiar frames"²¹ are made by memories of the past²² and must be negotiated by both the narrator and the listeners. Families of the German minority in Poland remembering the end of World War Two edit this frame to create a distinct German identity. I will show how the younger generation is influenced by family memories and how this influences their identity.

Considering the role of transgenerational storytelling and memories in the process of identity constructions, I start from an open and processual concept of identity, which can be understood as a hinge between the subjective processes of those articulating their identity as well as being influenced by external requirements. Identities continuously evolve and change based on our surrounding cultural contexts, so they can never be considered complete in their process. I also consider that identities are divided into different parts which are formed by different areas of the individual lifeworld through the consolidation of biographical experiences. Therefore, identities cannot be seen as a unity but separated into partial identities, which are connected to certain

¹⁷ H. Welzer, *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis. Eine Theorie der Erinnerung*, C.H. Beck, München 2002.

¹⁸ A. Lehmann, *Reden über Erfahrung*, p. 271–288.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ A. Keppler, *Soziale Formen individuellen Erinnerns*, in: H. Welzer (ed.), *Das soziale Gedächtnis. Geschichte, Erinnerung, Tradierung*, Springer-Verlag GmbH, Hamburg 2001, p. 137–159.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*.

circumstances of one's biography. The combination of these different parts builds the identity but is never fixed but rather fluent.

From my point of view, I will reconstruct individual meanings of belonging only within the young generation which is strongly connected to the memories told by their grandparents and parents. This enables me to articulate a concrete, subjective perspective. At the same time, it allows me to figure out processes within members of the same generation that experienced similar situations, and which can be regarded as typical for members of a certain age group of today's minority.

Research Context and Methodology

The research material for this article is based on field notes from participant observation and interviews conducted with 27 interviewees affiliated with the German minority in 2015. My interviewees belong to the so-called young generation of the minority and were born between the mid-1980s and 1990s. All were born into families whose grandparents were neither forced to leave nor fled from Opole during or after World War Two and also didn't emigrate later on. As the German minority was officially acknowledged under Polish law in 1991, my interviewees belong to the first generation of the minority which had access to German classes in school, to study or work in Germany (also with a German passport) and were able to officially claim themselves as members of the German minority. They are either connected to the German minority by private conviction and /or by participation in their organisations.

Characteristic for the region around Opole is labour migration towards Germany and Austria. During my four months of fieldwork, I did not meet any family whose members all lived entirely in Poland. Very often, large parts of families emigrated during the phase of socialist Poland and only a small core-family consisting of today's grandparents, their children and grandchildren remained. The aunts and uncles of today's young generation live mostly in Germany with their children. In addition, it is quite common for parents, especially for fathers, to commute: working during the week in Germany and spending their weekends at home in Poland. "Families thus become transnational through spatial separation"²³ which leads to a very transnational attitude of the young generation.

I decided to conduct in-depth interviews, for which I set my focus on the biographical reconstructions of the interviewees, the ideas of their own identity, their experiences and interpretations of daily life, in short: the construction of their "life-world".²⁴ The interviews were framed by a thematic format but held openly. Open interviews are initialised by only one question which is supposed to stimulate the interviewees to talk freely about the chosen topic. I initially asked them to tell me about

²³ L. Huttunen, *Emplacement through Family Life. Transformation of Intimate Relations*, in: T. Faist et al. (ed.), *Transnationalisation and Institutional Transformations*, Collected Working Papers from the TRANS-NET Project. Working Paper 87/2010, COMCAD – Center on Migration, Citizenship and Development, VS Verlag, Bielefeld, p. 236–255.

²⁴ M. Spiritova, *Narrative Interviews*, in: C. Bischoff et al. (ed.), *Methoden der Kulturanthropologie*, Verlag UTB GmbH, Bern 2014, p. 117–130.

their belonging to the German minority. The topics mentioned by the interviewees are then an indicator of the relevant points of their lives and allow me to go into detail about them by asking further questions during the interview. The assumption in such an ethnographic approach is that the interviewees will reveal the cultural and discursive forms that enable them to speak about their identities. Only at the end of the interview did I ask about topics which also seemed to be important for me and had not been mentioned so far.

For the analysis of the material, I followed the German social scientist Uwe Flick and his method of open coding. This allows the meanings of individual perspectives to be filtered out. In a further step, the data must be grouped and categorised. At the end, each category consists of different codes, which deal with certain aspects. With further analysis, parts of the material either fit in already existing categories or establish a new one. Within the categories the material has to be distinguished by codes. In the end, it is possible to generate so-called core categories which are filled with codes, which were taken from the interviews. This shows similar phenomena in different persons within the research group, enabling the view on individual meanings which at the same time are also important for all my interviewees.²⁵

It has to be noted that my role in the field was very unusual, especially because of my German origin. Uwe Flicks points out that the conflicting roles of interviewers and interviewees always have an impact on the information told or not,²⁶ as I noticed particularly with regard to the language of the interviews. The question about language did not arise when making contact, because the interviewees made clear that they were excited about meeting a “real German” – as they called it – to speak German with. This point was very interesting due to the open borders in Europe and access to German media through the internet. Sometimes I did not even need to deeply describe my research and the aim of my interview because the interviewees had already agreed to conducting an interview when they heard about my German origin. Although all my interviewees were multilingual, speaking Polish, German and Silesian fluently, the wish to conduct the interview in German shows they want to let people from outside know that they belong to the German minority. Often, I spent time with their small children after the interviews and was asked to only speak German with them due to their bilingual education at home. Fieldwork always means reciprocal roles between the researcher and those being researched and always contains elements of give-and-take. Nevertheless, I anonymised the information to ensure the privacy of my interviews. I do not provide any information about the younger generation which could allow conclusions to be made about their background. Most of my interviewees agreed to

²⁵ As this article is contextualised in the field of European Ethnology, I concentrated my explanation on the specific narrations told during the interview. I unfortunately had no access to the direct situations my interviewees were talking about because they told me in a retrospective way. Therefore, analysis of their gestures cannot be made. Furthermore, my analysis is not made from the perspective of linguistic studies and does not contain analysis of language and stylistic devices.

²⁶ U. Flick, *Qualitative Sozialforschung. Eine Einführung*, 5th edition, Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, Reinbek 2012.

participate in my field research because of the secure anonymisation and, therefore, the names used later on are just randomly chosen.

Memories Between the Nations

Since identification as a member of the German minority is thoroughly framed by the transgenerational transition of memories, narrations of historical events as told by the grandparents played a significant role in all my interviews. The family history relates to certain experiences, which are influenced by political and social events. While the generation of the parents relates to the political circumstances of Soviet Poland, the history of the grandparents concentrates on the time at the end of World War Two. Luisa talked about her grandparents' reminiscences:

They were born in Germany and the village was always German until '45 and the older generation simply identifies itself as German. They were born in Germany, spent their childhood in Germany. They glorify this time and felt good and feel German.

My interviewee talks about a former German Silesia excluding political circumstances like the Nazi regime and the Holocaust. Only the former life in small villages is mentioned as part of the grandparents' daily life before 1945. The stories concentrate on the natural feeling of belonging to Germany. This is contrary to stories after 1945 when the grandparents focus on their personal fate and feelings of unwanted status in the years right after the end of World War Two. My interviewees mentioned that their grandparents, of course, "told a pro-German version at home. That's the way it is."²⁷ In these stories, the grandparents, and especially the women, talk about themselves as victims: "My grandparents were aware of the war and those who stayed here – here was nothing, exploitation because of the Russians turning up, rapes and all kind of that."²⁸ The stories concentrate on the role as victims, in which the grandparents speak about the negative character of the Russians. The focus on the invasion of the Red Army in Upper Silesia in early 1945 is a key moment for my interviewees. Here again the narration is from a German perspective after 1945 which means focusing on personal suffering without asking about the consequences of the war. The war and its consequences are first mentioned when speaking about the invasion of the Red Army after 1945. Therefore, the war comes into the stories after the end of the war, excluding the years before. Without talking further about the circumstances during that time, they expected me to have the same knowledge about the whole situation and expressed a "repertoire of collective knowledge."²⁹ For the German minority, these narratives are part of the so-called "Upper Silesian tragedy", which is highly commemorated by their institutions and official representatives.³⁰ This comprises the fate of Germans who

²⁷ Interview with Hanna on 27 May 2015.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ H. Welzer et al. (ed.), *'Opa war kein Nazi'*.

³⁰ As narratives I mean statements of my interviewees, which give information about temporal, historical and layer-specific dimensions as well as about culture-specific attitudes and beliefs. Narratives can be regarded as already condensed experiences or narrative patterns and therefore

remained in Upper Silesia after World War Two and who were forced to work in labour camps in Upper Silesia in the years right after 1945, while some of them were deported to the Soviet Union. The moving of borders and deportation from Upper Silesia for the remaining Germans builds up a certain way of looking at history and benefits narratives of victimisation, which still circulate within the minority today. These narratives are conveyed to the young generation through storytelling. The members of this generation exchange their family stories, so it obviously becomes an important part of the family's memory. My interviewees not only reproduce their grandparents' stories but also do not reflect German history. The term "the Russians", as it is used by their grandparents, associates the former with all kinds of crimes and destruction.³¹ The fate of the remaining Germans in Upper Silesia was not included in official Polish national discourses until today. The history of the grandparents is, in this context, part of German post-war history, which is opposite to the official history in Poland under the Soviet Union. Myriam remembers the stories of her grandparents:

My grandparents didn't experience very bad but negative experiences with the Polish majority because of the war. They were harassed right after the war and we had a labour camp in the next village, a post-war labour camp and they still remember it.³²

Talking about the labour camps was strictly forbidden during communism and it is part of the traumatising of the generation that had to work there. Marked as perpetrators of the former Nazi regime, they did not have the right to feel as victims, unlike the Poles, until the end of communism. In Poland, they are quite rightly part of the collective memory of perpetrators. The German social scientist Gabriele Rosenthal speaks about the "myth of being a victim"³³ in this context. This means not remembering (willingly or unwillingly) their own role as part of the German collective before 1945 or the role of their own family. The reference back to partial parts of the family history requires an "affiliation to a group of ethnic Germans",³⁴ on which these stories concentrate, even if many people identify themselves as Silesians with German, but not exclusively German, roots. This view leads to problems for the identity of the young generation when these two views of history then clash, for example, in history lessons in school.

The historical focus shifts by looking at the generation of the parents. While the grandparents spoke from the perspective of German post-war history, the parents were raised during the period of socialist Poland. Their family memories are part of the Polish past, not of the German one. My interviewees declared their parents a "lost generation", like Myriam: "My parents speak Polish and they are part of the

provide information about a multitude of individual and subjective instances of meaning and interpretation of their wearers, which are expressed in the narratives on the basis of recurring narrative patterns.

³¹ H. Welzer et al. (ed.), *'Opa war kein Nazi'*.

³² Interview with Myriam on 13 April 2015.

³³ G. Rosenthal et al. (ed.), *Brüchige Zugehörigkeiten. Wie sich Familien von 'Russlanddeutschen' ihre Geschichte erzählen*, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt–New York 2011.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

“lost generation”, which did not learn German.”³⁵ The term “lost generation” is used for those born between the late 1940s until the 1980s. The loss mentioned is about the individual and subjective belonging to the minority as well as about the non-knowledge of the German language. The generation of the parents understands German in many situations but is not able to actively communicate, because the German language was forbidden in Opole until 1989/1990. The transgenerational transition of memories becomes visible again. The grandparents did not live in Germany after 1945 anymore and consider this as a loss. This loss was adapted by my interviewees and the term “lost generation”, used by my interviewees for their parents’ generation, is therefore also an expression of specific narratives circulating within the generation of my interviewees – lost for the German language, lost for natural identity construction as German and lost in continuing the German life in Opole by not being able to live it during childhood.

The communicative memory nowadays is an outcome of a time in which storage options in, for example the German heritage in official books and media in Poland were fewer or not available at all.³⁶ It is also an expression of the circulating communicative memory of the minority that considers the time after World War Two as a gap in their existence. The meaning of “lost” is added in another additional dimension: the loss of historical continuity and of one’s own roots. The lack of official storage media in those times makes the reference to narratives even stronger.³⁷ The gap between silencing experiences and public pressure to avoid certain topics becomes visible between these three generations. The official acknowledgement of the German minority after the fall of socialism makes it possible for grandparents and their grandchildren to officially communicate about the experiences after 1945. Interviewees like Nina gave me topics of repression and oppression as a result of being a member of the German minority in socialist Poland:

Well, I asked them, why it is the way it is? If they didn’t want to learn the language, why did the grandparents not speak German with our parents like they did with us? If that had worked with us, why would it not have been possible one generation earlier? Then it was explained to me that it was banned. One was afraid to use German and [...] I thought that [...] that the plan to eradicate all German, here in Silesia, was partly well done, because the one generation, [...] it does not identify with the German language or the German culture as well as the generation of our grandparents and that is also the problem of the German minority.³⁸

On the one hand, this shows the narratives of being a victim again, which are based on the stories of the generation of the grandparents, on the other hand, it expresses

³⁵ Interview with Myriam on 13 April 2015.

³⁶ N. Pethes, *Kulturwissenschaftliche Gedächtnistheorien. Zur Einführung*, Junius Verlag, Hamburg 2008.

³⁷ Private communication between members of the German minority in socialist Poland and their relatives in Germany has not yet been worked up. Thousands of letters were written between the 1950s and 1970s. This is still a research desideratum.

³⁸ Interview with Nina on 27 March 2015. By talking about today’s minority, Nina means the organisation of the minority as a synonym. During my research I noticed that belonging to the minority was often thought as being enrolled in one of the organisations and did not mean by personal identification. The organisations themselves claim identity as one of their biggest problems and try to reach as many generations as possible using identity topics as a stabilising element.

a cultural loss, which is passed on to today's young generation. The young generation told me about their special emotional connection to their grandparents, built during their childhood. The generation of the grandparents took care of their grandchildren while the parents went out to work. At the end of 1980s and in the 1990s the grandparents were able to talk German to their grandchildren and did so – according to my interviewees – a lot. It created a certain bond between grandparents and grandchildren as they were both able to talk in German and automatically excluded the parents as the “lost generation”. Therefore, the young generation also connect their grandparents with the German heritage in their families and German becomes a heritage-language. The use of the German language on the other side didn't mean talking about the history of the family or region. Due to the silence of the grandparents it has to be asked how much the “lost generation” knew about the family's history? During their childhood and early adulthood, they mostly skipped the process of reflection and today's young generation is enabled to fulfil this role now the political framework gives them the chance to do so.

Practices of Lifting Silence

The memory gap between the generation of grandparents, parents and today's “young generation”, my interviewees, can also be elucidated by analysing who speaks and when they speak about their own family's history. Some of the grandparents died early, so some of my interviewees did not get the chance to properly talk with them about their experiences. My interviewees told me that the “lost generation” does not know much about the stories of the grandparents either and therefore is not able to pass those stories on to them due to it being too late today in some cases. The parents as a “lost generation” had never asked today's grandparent generation, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the grandparents did not talk about their individual fates after 1945 anyway.

The family history offers potential for conflict. This surprised me during my research because looking at the housing situation shows a very intimate situation with mostly three generations living together in one house on different floors. Political caesuras thus separate families emotionally, because today's generation of grandchildren is interested in the stories of their grandparents and can deal with it more openly than the “lost generation”. The example of not telling the family history shown above is only one extreme consequence of experiences and treatment of members of the German minority in socialist Poland.

Moreover, the family history is spread in families nowadays but only under certain circumstances. Karolina told me that she particularly had to ask her grandparents about their past, because they did not want to talk about it at first.

My mother understands (German, K.S.), but she couldn't learn it due to political incorrectness of that time. And...but that was part of the history, which wasn't mentioned at all. I had to ask. One day I thought, ok, here was Germany until 1945 and my grandmother was born here, probably, I thought, she was born in Germany. So, I asked myself and got answers. But it's not like we spoke a lot about it.³⁹

³⁹ Interview with Karolina on 09 April 2015.

Karolina points out the difficulties in reappraising the family history, because her grandparents remained silent for many decades, due to the taboo of narration imposed by socialist Poland. This led to “strong social feelings like shame, blame and loathing”,⁴⁰ which accompanied the general social conditions in socialist Poland. The generation of the grandparents was stuck in a double role as culprits and victims but was only seen as part of the collective of culprits. According to Aleida Assmann, this leads to silence of the victims, which becomes clear by listening to the narratives told by today’s young generation of the minority. The silence becomes an emotional and social trauma,⁴¹ which can only be articulated after many years because of the “repressive pressure of forgetting”.⁴²

The changing historical circumstances and the changes of power of different national groups within the Soviet Union [...] were always connected with huge reinterpretations and rewriting of families’ pasts, which had to fit into the narrative rules of society and other discourses of social contexts. This did not only cause the rewriting of families’ histories and spread myths about the past but also led to the silence and explicit denial of parts of the past of their own family. This influences the dynamic and the paths of every single family member until today.⁴³

These “blind spots” emerging in the family history in such a way are problematic for today’s young generation. Storytelling about the family history is not part of the daily conversation in families and happens mostly when events occur like birthday parties and family gatherings. Emma remembers a conversation at one of her aunt’s birthdays:

I clearly remember that I... some time in elementary school... we were at the birthday party of my aunt, the sister of my grandfather, together with other aunts and uncles and their siblings, and they somehow, talked about the war.⁴⁴

The family builds a safe space, which also creates identity within the community of a family.⁴⁵ This thus created identity does not necessarily mean talking about every part of the family history. Stories are always told from the subjective perspective of their tellers, like the grandparents who define themselves as Germans and connect their personal history to German narratives. This also includes the perspective of German victims concerning flight and expulsion. The number of survivors from the time of World War Two is rapidly decreasing, so the young generation runs out of time to reappraise the past. They must find their own access to these topics, while at the same time being confronted with the illiteracy of their parents as Rebekka told me:

⁴⁰ A. Assmann, *Das neue Unbehagen...*

⁴¹ A. Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*.

⁴² *Ibidem*, s. 100.

⁴³ G. Rosenthal, *Die Biographie im Kontext der Familien- und Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, in: B. Völter et al. (red.), *Biographieforschung im Diskurs*, Springer VS, Wiesbaden 2005, p. 46–64.

⁴⁴ Interview with Emma on 20 May 2015.

⁴⁵ Emma described a private situation in her family. It becomes obvious that certain processes between family members influence the way the story is told. Further research should be done to show how group processes influence the articulation of memories in the concrete field of research.

Well, I don't want the history to get lost, because e.g. my grandmother [...] she always told me fantastic stories, how it used to be at that time when they had to do a runner and I thought it would be a pity if she dies and all of that gets lost and so I recorded her by cell phone. She told about it and I think that, if I have time, I will probably have some memories of my grandmother for my children. I think it's very important to know your own roots.⁴⁶

For Rebekka, her German roots are connected with the history of her grandparents. Furthermore, Rebekka has to negotiate diverse memories because of the nationality of her grandparents during World War Two. Whereas her own grandfather joined the Wehrmacht, her cousin's grandfather joined the Polish Army. In this case, national conflicts are exposed in the same family and members like Rebekka must find a way to include both perspectives in family memories in order to create their own identity. These two grandfathers mentioned above are part of different communicative memories which Rebekka wants to pass on to her own children. She sums it up: "Then we can put up both photographs in our home."⁴⁷

Conflicting Memories

The transnational life of the young generation by way of family storytelling, as well as the narratives given, lead to a certain perception of German–Polish history for the young members of the German minority. It becomes clear with which perspective they were raised. Being confronted with their German roots and surrounded by the possibilities for joining and participating in the German minority as an institution, the young generation gains a certain view of transnationalism: Their German heritage is a natural part of their identity. This perception and knowledge causes confusion when entering official institutions like school. My interviewees made it clear that they were not aware of different narratives when they started attending history lessons in Polish schools, which Emma remembers clearly.

And then I learnt at school, that Germany started World War Two and that the Germans are the evil ones, they waged war. One of my aunts said on this birthday 'Well, but, the Russians [...] some of them were good, some bad. That was different.' And then I thought 'Eh, the Russians? Which Russians? I thought it was the Germans?'. And then I suddenly realised, what's wrong here?⁴⁸

Emma tells me from her individual point of view that she started to think about the national background of her family. The conversation at a family party led to the awareness that her family belongs to "the Germans" that are discussed in her history lessons in school. The narrative at home about the negative role of the Russians after 1945 conflicts with the narrative of the negative role of the Germans, who are marked in school as the perpetrators. This causes confusion for her identity. The Soviet Union was also an aggressor and was subject of discussion in schoolbooks as well.

⁴⁶ Interview with Rebekka on 18 April 2015.

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁸ Interview with Emma on 20 May 2015.

My interviewees, interestingly, didn't mention the role of the Soviet Union in history lessons at school but only in the memories of their grandparents. This is due to the focus on their own identity, in which the role of the Germans came into conflict with different memory spaces. Furthermore, she remembers:

Then Germans are my grandparents, it's my family, it's my grandfather's brother, who was in the Wehrmacht. Those are my grandparents, my grandfather and his siblings and his parents, who fled over the Oder, to another village. But they came back and, at this moment, it became obvious to me that my family has German roots.⁴⁹

Emma started to take an interest in German–Polish history and became aware of the different narratives of Germans in World War Two and the invasion of the Red Army in Upper Silesia. The history lesson becomes the trigger to ask more about her family history. However, this family discussion took place situationally and is linked to the circumstance of the lessons as well as the random conversations within the family. This also makes this process highly situational and it would not have happened to members of the younger generation if their grandparents had already died and the narrative within the family had been consistent with Polish national discourses. For Emma, the narrative on the Russians, which is transported within the family, has been maintained to this day and leads to the distribution of the historical images already described. As with Emma, Hanna also had difficulties at school when it came to history lessons.

So, I went to history lessons for the first time [...] and the best thing is that young Polish kids, in those days, when we went to school, they denied it has been Germany here. [...] Then I asked myself 'Well, who's telling, sorry for that, nonsense. My grandmother or why does the guy, who sits next to me, claim here has never been Germany?' You have to acknowledge it. [...] It changed over time, why do they deny that? And I never got an answer to my question. I am still thinking about it.⁵⁰

Members of minorities, like Hanna, grew up with certain images of history which can compete with the national ones, as is the case in German–Polish history. However, Hanna's multinational approach gives her the opportunity to question different perspectives. Distinguishing between herself and "the others", between both her other family members and the other (Polish) children at school, allows Hanna to question the different narratives and evaluate her own identity. Therefore, she can phrase the difficulties she faces more openly. This is an important point for the family's memory, because the grandparents as "owner" of the narratives from the German perspective never had the chance to do so. However, the young generation is confronted with both perspectives and must find its way to handle it. Being part of more than one narrative results in consequences for their own identity. Therefore, a family's memory is part of the communicative memory of everyday life and is a process of gaining memories rather than simply having ones. Memories do not only exist in families but are also created within them. They change over centuries from generation to generation,

⁴⁹ Ibidem.

⁵⁰ Interview with Hanna on 27 May 2015.

depending on the political and social systems. By being articulated from a Polish as well as from a German perspective, memories and storytelling become powerful in the self-attribution of the young generation. This conceptual shift for the young generation has an impact on the practices of storytelling between the generations. My interviewees sometimes told me that their grandparents only started to talk about their experiences because of their grandchildren's confusion. They were highly irritated about the information given in history lessons in Polish schools and their own German heritage.

The young generation is aware that grandparents also served in the Wehrmacht as Emma told me "The Germans those are my grandparents, it is my family, it is the brother of my grandfather who served in the Wehrmacht"⁵¹ and Hannes "[...] my grandfather stayed in Germany after World War Two, he did not come back to Germany. He was in Poland and served the Wehrmacht and was scared (after the war, K.S.) so he stayed in Germany."⁵² Nevertheless, they do not articulate the role of the culprits within their families which undoubtedly exists. My interviewees are clearly informed about the crime of the Nazis in Poland until 1945 but exclude this part from their stories. This is connected to the work of the organisations run by the German minority which have to create a distinct, connective identity, which serves all generations of the minority. By articulating the role of the victims after 1945 they create a specific space for such memories, which are given to all members. The generation of grandparents clearly articulates their role as victims and not culprits from this point of view. A look into the topics of the organisations also reveals that they are not reappraising the time before 1945 – also revealed by the statement that it had not been a minority at this time. There is basically no official information given by the organisations regarding the role of the Germans as culprits in the region. The young generation which grew up in the 1990s, therefore, had no access to this part of history and got to know it later in school where it conflicted with the memories told in their families. The young generation, on the other hand, cannot ignore this part of the history and feels neither German, as the grandparents and organisations try to claim, nor fully Polish. Due to the different political and social circumstances after 1991, the memories are challenged by asking questions. I will now discuss the identities articulated which result from the material collected.⁵³

Transnational Identities

The questioning of the so-assumed natural identity becomes clear from the narrative about identity told by my interviewees. The clear assignment of one's own identity was understood as a strong need and expressed many times. This provides information about the discourses that take place within the minority and refers to their strong presence. As an example, I will refer to Nina's statement:

⁵¹ Interview with Emma on 20 May 2015.

⁵² Interview with Hannes on 20 March 2015.

⁵³ The transmission of memories and the impact on identity thus plays only one part among others about how identities are constructed.

There is a conflict, who are you? Are you Polish, are you German? Best of all is to say you are Silesian. You're a mixture of both. That's special. You (short break), you're not, you don't have only one identity but are built from two identities. You have something from this culture and a bit from that culture.⁵⁴

Nina's quote refers to the multiple layers of identity constructions. It becomes a game of different possibilities, whose individual parts can increase and decrease, depending on the biographical experiences. The young generation uses it in a positive way by having its own option for this situation. At the same time, they must deal with the idea of a negatively connotated "in between", as becomes clear in the history lesson. The diverse possibilities of a pluralist society are thus reflected in the individual negotiation processes of my interviewees, who give different space to the respective points of reference. At the same time, multiple relocation represents a strategy for dealing with cultural diversity. By orientating themselves towards different cultures at the same time, the young generation is able to deal with the memories circulating in their families, particularly from the grandparents, as well as with the information given from the official, Polish side, for example, in history lessons in schools. It enables the young generation to find their own way of identifying. Nevertheless, this process of negotiating is never ending and must be seen as a selective insight at a certain moment of the biographies of my interviewees. Myriam sums it up:

"And I think every time identity is questioned, something changes in life and therefore in the statement. Therefore, you can pronounce every year a new self-description as Silesian or about your identity."⁵⁵ Nina and Myriam's statements refer to a performative practice, which has no clear perspective and is therefore considered to be extremely fragile. It conflicts with the normative specification of individual membership, because this requires a background in the political concept of the minority, on which my interviewees are oriented. Therefore, the individual reflections appear to be the search for the solution to a problem they are constantly challenged to solve. The question of identity already leads to its mutability in the formulation and is "embedded in complexes of doings and sayings".

Conclusion

Memories have influence on the practices of storytelling in families as well as on the identities created or maintained within them. The generation of grandparents selected what kind of experiences and to whom they wanted to talk about World War Two, if at all. Considering the time directly following World War Two, mainly negative stories are told, focusing on experiences of repression. Caused by the political climate of oppression and taboo, a memorial blank-space for the following generations was created. In this article, I have drawn attention to the stories of the "young generation" within the German minority, who were able to listen to the experiences of their grandparents for the first time. Thus, until now storytelling involves the perspective of

⁵⁴ Interview with Nina on 27 March 2015.

⁵⁵ Interview with Myriam on 13 April 2015.

the generation of grandparents and is spread within families of the German minority. It becomes obvious that the change of political circumstances offered the young generation the possibility of finding out about the history of their grandparents – in contrast to the generation in-between, the “lost generation” that did not have the chance to grow up as part of the minority. From the point of view of communication theories, non-communication gives us insight into matters of past realities and shows how the young generation is influenced by the past in their efforts to be part of today’s German minority. “Cultural silence does not necessarily mean that the events are forgotten.”⁵⁶ Rather, it refers to blank spaces in the collective memory of a highly emotional group. The feelings of mostly negative experiences are transmitted to other members of the family. This is why the young generation did not question the negative role of the Russians and their German heritage, but rather accepted it unquestioned. This leads to conflicts in school when coming into contact with the official historical discourses told in Poland, which are opposite to the ones told at home. Storytelling in my research field also intensifies the connection between the grandparents and grandchildren, but also excludes the “lost generation” once more. Memories can activate and renew storytelling and are not merely a part of their own experiences, but also of other members of the family circle. The identity of today’s young generation is also an in-between state caused by different cultural belonging and biographical experiences. These partly conflict and their identity is a performative practice, highly situational and bound to the narratives within their family and the minority on the one side and their life in Poland with different perspectives on the other.

Abstract

Memories (Un)told – Identity Construction Through Practices of Transgenerational Storytelling

The memories of the end of World War II play a significant role among the German minority in Poland. These memories are not only important for the generation who experienced that time, but they also influence the following generations to whom these memories were passed onto by their families. This article presents the end of World War II from the perspective of the young generation of the German minority in Opole and its surroundings, who were born in the 1980s and 1990s and whose narrative resembles the narrative of German post-war history. Both narratives circulate in family memories, and each generation developed a characteristic approach to the culture of remembrance based on the different political systems after 1945. Therefore, the war generation that grew up in communist Poland, also known as the ‘lost generation’, and the generation of grandchildren living in democratic Poland have to face family memories together. At the same time, it becomes clear how, in what form and whether or not the memories are spoken about and what emotional statements they contain about the time immediately after World War II. The freedom of today’s generation of grandchildren provides access

⁵⁶ P.M. Siim, *Family Stories Untold*, p. 74–88.

to the many years of untold experiences of their grandparents and breaks their silence. This also affects the way a minority identity is created among the young members of the minority and influences their place between a minority and a majority.

Keywords: memory, identity, German minority, Opole, World War II, historical narratives.