



DISPLACED FAMILIES, DISPERSED MEMORIES

Edited by Johanna Leinonen, Seija Jalagin, Outi Kähäri,
Ilmari Leppihalme, Hanna-Leena Määttä & Elina Turjanmaa

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Family, Memory, and Displacement

Introduction

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This anthology¹ explores memory work and mnemonic practices of families dispersed by war, conflicts, repression, occupation, or forced migration. Forced displacement of individuals and families is currently on the rise globally, driven by increasingly protracted conflicts and

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ongoing societal and political instability. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2023), the number of forced migrants—including refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons—continues to rise each year. In Europe, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has led to one of the largest displacement crises in recent history, forcing millions to flee across borders and displacing many more within the country. In Gaza, the ongoing war has led to an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, displacing the vast majority of the population, causing devastating loss of life, and dismantling family networks through violence, siege, and repeated displacement. At the same time, in countries like the United States, escalating deportations and an increasingly volatile political climate have torn families apart, particularly affecting migrant communities already living in conditions of uncertainty, such as undocumented migrants. As such, the experiences of displacement and family separation remain deeply urgent issues, calling for scholarly attention to how these ruptures are remembered, narrated, and transmitted across generations.

The growth in the number of forcibly displaced people has been accompanied by an increasing amount of scholarship on different forms of forced migration. This research has been predominantly social scientific, and the focus has often been on contemporary issues of refugee protection and resettlement (see Leinonen et al. 2025). Historical perspectives have been marginally present. Historian Philip Marfleet noted as early as 2007 that “there is a dual problem of disinterest among historians in refugee matters and an aversion among specialists in forced migration vis-à-vis history” (Marfleet 2007, 136). Even though Marfleet wrote this more than 15 years ago, there is still a clear need for historically informed research that examines the long traces of war and conflicts, and the concomitant forced migration and family separation, not only among those who experienced them personally but also their descendants. Fortunately, there is a growing interest among migration scholars to better understand the intergenerational repercussions of collective memories related to traumatic pasts in diasporic communities (Müller-Suleymanova 2024). The purpose of this book is to contribute to bridging the gap between social scientific and historical research on forced migration by exploring how events such as war, conflict, and persecution, and the associated forced migration, influence family reminiscence and well-being across

generations. This analysis will be brought into dialogue with research on contemporary experiences of displacement and family separation.

Family Memories in Displacement: Key Concepts

Scholars have shown that the fate of family members is at the heart of family memories and histories regarding past conflicts, persecution, and forced migration, as the basic functions of family—protection, safety, intimacy, cultural survival—are challenged or made impossible in such circumstances (e.g., Dellios 2018; Kandasamy 2018). This book examines how different generations relay, reconcile, contest, or suppress such family histories and memories, and, therefore, how lived histories of conflicts, displacement, and family separation may have carryover effects into subsequent generations. The questions explored include: What kinds of affective, emotional, and embodied legacies do these memories—whether shared or silenced—carry over generations? How are the fragmented memories of conflicts and displacement transcribed into narrative and textual forms? What kinds of mnemonic practices and acts of resistance (Hirsch 2019) do different generations employ to reconcile with intergenerational silences and past injustices, in particular, when memory politics and national memory culture(s) push for forgetting, or buttress certain memory narratives while suppressing others?

As this book centers on family as a memory collective and on family memories, it is important to specify what family itself signifies. In his seminal work *A World of Their Own Making: Myth, Ritual, and the Quest for Family Values* (1997), John R. Gillis distinguishes between the family we *live with* and the family we *live by*. While we might wish these were the same, they often are not. The family we live with—our actual, everyday family—may be fragmented, impermanent, and marked by self-interest, competition, divisiveness (Gillis 1997, xv–xvi). The family we live by is symbolic and imagined—a cultural ideal shaped by myth, ritual, and image-making. This ideal family never lets us down, always offers protection and nurturing, and includes not only the living but also the dead, the unborn, or even fictionalized ancestors. It extends across time and space and affects today's interpretations of family history. Rituals, holidays, family photographs, and storytelling are some of the cultural practices through which this ideal is constructed (Gillis 2001).

The studies in this volume demonstrate that the family we live by is also fragile and vulnerable. They show how the meaning and value of family are continuously reworked through inter- and transgenerational memory. The studies also present different forms and understandings of what family is when subjected to violent upheavals and dispersion. As Henkes (2012, 178; italics in the original) puts it, it is “*through the imagination* that family is given its powerful meaning of a ‘safe’ haven.” More recently, many studies on families have emphasized the meaning of increasing diversity in family structures. Following memory scholar Radmila Švaříčková Slabáková (2021, 12), we see that—from the perspective of family memory—contemporary family relationships are formed primarily by emotional ties between individuals belonging to the family rather than by blood ties. However, we also understand that there are new prospects for the family memory formed by blood ties due to the increased commercial DNA testing, which creates new social networks based on genetically shared family roots (Vähä-Savo et al. 2023).

Families play an essential role in shaping individual and collective identities. We are reflecting who we are in relation to others through communication and historical narration within the family (Fivush et al. 2010). Sharing family stories contributes to our understanding of ourselves, creates bonds between family members, and can be highly meaningful as such (Fivush 2011). In a broader perspective, family stories that are told, hidden, or silenced across generations are also affecting our self-understanding by connecting—or sometimes cutting off—our personal life trajectories to wider historical events and processes (Achugar 2016). In other words, key stories and experiences shared in the family shape an individual’s historical consciousness, their awareness of the past (Achugar 2016; Slabáková 2021).

Following Halbwachs (1992) and Erll (2011a), we understand family memory as a form of collective memory that is constituted, transmitted, and produced through communication and interaction between family members. Family memory and intergenerational reminiscence have not been debated in theoretical discussions in detail until recently (Achugar 2016; Mitroui 2018; Slabáková 2021), even though collective family memory as a theoretical concept was introduced by Halbwachs as early as the 1920s (see Halbwachs 1992). Slabáková (2021) has underlined that family memory is an essential analytical tool for research areas such as intergenerational memory transmission

and migration, transnational and national memories, and collective and individual identities. These aspects have more recently gained attention in historical family studies in a special issue in the *Journal of Family History* (Barclay and Koefoed 2021) and in memory studies (e.g., Kähäri 2024). Memory scholars have also called for a more optimistic and future-oriented approach to studying intergenerational memory (Erll 2017; Rigney 2018) in addition to affective trauma transmission (Hirsch 2012).

Memory studies approach remembering as a cultural, social, and political phenomenon and as an active process in which events and experiences are articulated into socially communicable forms, such as narratives, rituals, or literature (e.g., Erll 2011a; Erll and Nünning 2006; Erll and Rigney 2009). The transmission of family memory often takes the form of storytelling related to everyday family rituals and meaning-making, for instance in reunions, hobbies, and bedtime rituals, as well as during meals and religious customs (Slabáková 2021, 12). Family memory is intergenerational and plural: It is not an archive of family history but an ongoing and active process (Favart-Jardon 2002). In addition to oral and embodied practices, literature can play an important role in how memory—particularly in the context of displacement—is processed, shaped, and communicated. Literature can be seen as a form of “creative remembering” (see, e.g., Ross and Buehler 1994) that operates across individual, cultural, and collective levels. It does not merely reflect memory but actively constructs and mediates it through symbolic, narrative, and imaginative means (Erll 2011a). As such, literature becomes a cultural medium through which family memories—especially those silenced or marginalized—can find expression and resonance beyond the private sphere (see also Assmann 2008; Felski 2008).

Moreover, family memory mediates between individuals’ autobiographical memory and national sites of collective memory (Erll 2011a, 2011b). Family memory thus offers an important nexus to study how memory in general, as Michael Rothberg (2009, 12) says, “captures simultaneously the individual, embodied, and lived side and the collective, social, and constructed side of our relations to the past.” Family memory as a collective memory is reconstructed and reshaped in communication between family members and, therefore, historical consciousness “lives” in social interaction. It is noteworthy that family memory of displaced families often takes place in a diasporic context

and constitutes a minority family memory in a nation-state context. For memory scholars, it is essential to pay attention to family memory's meanings and interpretations related to various power positions and other social dynamics (Muti 2021). Some recent studies on traumatic family memories among minorities, for instance, have identified gendered patterns of memory sharing (Muti 2021; Kähäri 2023; Muti and Gürpınar 2023). Moreover, the privacy of these family memories in diasporas has often been related to the lack of societal and historical recognition of both women's experiences and the subsequent generations' transnational family memories (Kähäri 2023, 178).

In recent years, family memory and intergenerational memory have also been connected to mobility across borders. The concept of transnational memory has been introduced to enable simultaneous analysis of the “material presence of borders” and the travel of memories across these borders (De Cesari and Rigney 2014). One form of transnational memory is multidirectional memory, which underlines how collective memories and histories are not separate and they do not compete with one another but influence one another. Past experiences are reflected in relation to other communities' memories, which brings new aspects into memory work and adds to the multidirectionality and dialogue of memories (Rothberg 2009). Palmberger and Tošić (2016, 3) emphasize the need to study how memories and mnemonic agency are formed in the “living presence of the past” in everyday life of mobile people, thus placing memory research into the context of migration, transnationalism, and multisitedness. According to Palmberger and Tošić (2016), people do not reflect on their lives as “before” and “after” (migration) but, instead, their memory work contains complex, everyday negotiations with the temporalities of the past, present, and future within and between generations. Memory is thus understood as more flexible and fluid as it travels, circulates, and migrates through mobility routes of world citizens (Bond et al. 2017). In the digital age, family memories may be transnationally produced, preserved, and transferred via different platforms on the internet. Thus, activities related to memory are more persistent and diverse than before (*ibid.*).

Taken together, the chapters included in this volume illustrate how political ruptures such as war and conflicts can have long-lasting effects on family memories—even decades after the period of rupture has ended. The broad scope of the book, covering different historical contexts from the early 20th century to the present, brings out how

various national and transnational circumstances and memory cultures influence memory processes and practices within families and across generations. In terms of geographical scope, the book spans regions from South Asia to Europe, the United States and Mexico, and the post-Soviet space, while addressing diverse temporal frames, including the aftermath of the Indian partition, World War II, the Cold War era, and contemporary forced migration and displacement. By doing so, the book expands the predominant focus of memory studies on post-World War II European memory communities. Although the chapters draw on a wide range of disciplinary approaches—including history, sociology, social psychology, literary studies, cultural studies, and cultural anthropology—and methods such as narrative and thematic interviews, surveys, ethnography, autoethnography, and literary analysis, they are united by shared theoretical frameworks in memory studies. This convergence suggests that memory studies offers a generative conceptual ground for interdisciplinary inquiry into the enduring impacts of conflict, persecution, and forced migration on families. Through zeroing in on family memory, the chapters flesh out the intimate dimension and long traces of tumultuous political and societal events that are taking place in different parts of the world even today. The fact that staying connected and engaging in activism or acts of solidarity are taking new forms through social media calls for further research on questions of family separation and forced migration.

Themes of the Book

The book focuses on three interconnected themes that illustrate the political, cultural, social, national, linguistic, religious, and mental boundaries, as well as interconnections of family reminiscence. The first theme and part of the book addresses *silences and embodied memories and practices* in the transmission of memories. Family memories in the context of war and persecution are often silenced for traumatic reasons. Both sharing and listening to painful memories can be difficult. Memories are often disunified and fragmented, and sometimes intentionally “forgotten” (Connerton 2008), as silence can be a strategy for protection and survival. Family stories can also be left untold for societal reasons (Siim 2016) or for other social, political, or practical purposes (Connerton 2008).

However, although silences concerning families' pasts are not necessarily verbally communicated, they may be interacted through embodied practices (Narvaez 2006; Harris 2020; Hirsch 2012). Hirsch (2012, 34) has stated in her famous work on "postmemory" that memories in families can be transmitted through "the language of the body." Her research on Holocaust descendants has described how the unspoken parental traumas have been dealt with and reframed in the second generation's artwork. By using the concept of postmemory, Hirsch (2012, 5) describes how the second generation's emotionally strong bond to their parents' past experiences is formed through the pictures, images, stories, and imagination. Harris (2020, 74) has described intergenerational trauma to be "a world to which language has no access," meaning that even pondering or talking about traumatic memories may be so difficult that families must find unusual ways to deal with the past. Thus, (grand)children of survivors often have to process unreachable "self-enclosed, self-referential trauma" and imagine the past that is never completely comprehensible (*ibid.*, 74). Traumatic family memories can take forms of symptoms or feelings that have basis in the body (*ibid.*, 74). For this reason, memory scholars have begun to pay more attention to memory's experiential and affective qualities (Sumartojo 2019) and embodied manifestations (Kähäri and Turjanmaa 2025), such as forms of dancing, as alternative ways of remembering and talking about the past (Giese and Keightley 2024). By looking, sensing, and feeling the immaterial levels of memory, researchers have developed new methods of sensory ethnography (Drozdowski and Birdsall 2019; Giese and Keightley 2024). These methods are also essential in the attempt to profoundly understand family memory, reflected not only in family stories but also in nonverbal hints, bodily interaction, and silence.

The chapters in the first part of the volume explore how silences, embodied experiences, and sensory memories shape the transmission of family memory in the context of forced migration, war, and displacement. Drawing on oral histories, archival letters, autoethnography, and material memory, the contributions reveal how affective and often unspoken dimensions of memory persist across generations, even when traumatic events remain unnamed. Silences within families are not merely absences but sites of transmission, where trauma may resurface through gestures, emotions, objects, and embodied responses. Sensory and material engagements—such as inherited letters or a wartime trunk—may become powerful mediators of memory

when words fall short. Together, the chapters highlight how family memory is not only narrated but also lived and felt, with affective residues that can influence identity, solidarity, and belonging. These works deepen our understanding of how memory lives beyond language and how marginalized or silenced histories endure through intimate, sensory, and relational practices across time and place.

While the first part foregrounds the bodily, affective, and often silenced dimensions of traumatic memories, these themes resonate beyond it. In fact, it is important to note that the concept of post-memory cuts across the entire volume. Each chapter, in its own way, addresses how family memories—both verbal and nonverbal—are shaped, transmitted, and reimagined across generations. In this sense, postmemory forms one of the central conceptual threads uniting the diverse approaches in this anthology.

The second theme focuses on *trauma and resilience*, exploring how traumatic events in family history are reminisced, narrated, and coped with by individuals, families, and communities. As memories travel across national borders and communities, and between autobiographical and collective memory (Erl 2011b, 15), an individual's coping with a traumatic family past occurs within a nexus of different forms of reminiscence. The chapters in the second part of the volume cover past and contemporary wars and family dispersal, seeking to understand how remembering—writing, reading, talking, and being silent—relates to making sense of traumatic events. The definition of individual psychological trauma refers to an exposure “to actual threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence” that can be direct or indirect (APA 2013, 271). Direct exposure means firsthand traumatic experiences or witnessing traumatic events, whereas indirect trauma is caused by learning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a close family member or close friend (APA 2013, 271). Research has also emphasized the collective nature of trauma, using terms like historical trauma to describe its accumulation and social dimension, linking it to one's societal position as a member of cultural, racial, or ethnic group (Evans-Campbell 2008), and cultural trauma to underscore how traumatic events can disrupt the social cohesion and shared meaning within a group (Eyerman 2019).

Trauma transmission across generations has been extensively studied in the interdisciplinary field of family memory. The effects of family dispersal and other war-related traumatic experiences have been

shown to transmit through verbal and nonverbal communication within families. The family-level effects of parental trauma, such as poor family communication as well as parents' diminished emotional availability and their lowered mental health, have been demonstrated to affect the mental health of displaced persons' children and grandchildren (Flanagan et al. 2020; Giladi and Bell 2013). Parental recollection of traumatic past events has been found to support their descendants' mental health. For example, a study on intergenerational communication of past wars and displacement in Palestinian families emphasizes that the way in which traumatic events are intergenerationally shared contributes to children's mental health (Dalgaard et al. 2019).

Memory work and disclosing of traumatic events can also be done to cherish the memory of those who are gone, to share one's own history, and to claim justice (Këllezi et al. 2024; Roper and Duffett 2018). These acts exemplify the forms of family resilience, family behavior, and reminiscence that help families cope with past atrocities and current adversities (see also Ungar 2016, 20). Resilience is often primarily looked at as an individual's ability to cope with the traumatic events in the family's past. However, resilience can also be experienced as something that is embedded in family practices and survival, being "inherited" from parents (Denov et al. 2019). In addition to individual sense-making, remembering connects generations and (re)creates collective memory. Remembering can thus both be a sign of and create resilience (see also Garde-Hansen et al. 2017). Finally, defining resilience only as a response to trauma, crisis, and disaster, without considering how power relationships contribute to adverse and repressive ongoing circumstances, is inadequate to describe the transformative aspect of resilience (Serrano-García 2020).

The chapters included in this second part of the volume examine how individuals and families experience, process, and narrate trauma in the context of displacement, and how these narratives can foster resilience across generations. Focusing on different geographical, historical, and narrative contexts—from Finnish and Soviet Karelian forced migrants and Ingrian descendants to deported mothers in Mexico, war survivors in Ukraine, and refugees in Denmark—the chapters explore how traumatic experiences are remembered, silenced, and transformed through family memory, storytelling, and cultural expression. Together, the contributions show how memory work becomes a tool for making sense of disruption, grief, absence of familial and

national narration, and dislocation. Resilience occurs in active reminiscence and collective action among displaced persons and their descendants, and the persistence of parents or grandparents can be a resource among descendants (Giladi and Bell 2013; Lev-Wiesel 2007). Resilience emerges not as denial of trauma but as the capacity to reframe suffering through connection, narrative, and acts of care. The chapters challenge one-dimensional portrayals of displaced persons as passive victims, highlighting instead their agency, emotional complexity, and the intergenerational work of healing and meaning-making.

The third theme explores *counter-memories* that are formed along with and against dominant memory narratives. Counter-narratives are narratives that diversify, challenge, and disrupt master narratives (Bamberg 2004, 359–61; Eiranen et al. 2022, 3–4; Laanes and Meretoja 2021, 6–7). Counter-memory can be understood as a social and political practice of memory formation that, for example, can resist official and hegemonic discourses or established forms of memory culture that may marginalize or erase certain perspectives, experiences, or events. In this sense, the concept traces back to Michel Foucault's work on power relations, discourse, and knowledge. As Foucault (1996/1971) proposed, counter-memory involves a way of re-remembering and reinterpreting history from silenced or alternative perspectives in relation to official historical narratives. Counter-memory is closely tied to Foucault's analysis of institutions such as prisons, hospitals, and asylums, where he observed how certain groups resisted and challenged disciplinary power through various forms of resistance and counter-discourse (e.g., Medina 2011; Minarova-Banjac 2018). Counter-narrativist memory and remembrance has been explored in the context of both national and transnational contexts but also in the relationship between activism and memory (Rigney 2018; Salmi-Niklander et al. 2022). In addition, some researchers have focused on counter-memory by looking at resistance practices from the perspective of postmemory (e.g., Kazanova 2021) and postmemorial work (Kähäri 2024). Berthold Molden (2016), for his part, has focused on politics of memory and history in societies and analyses the relationship between dominant master narratives, opposing counter-memories, and the silent majorities whose experiences of the past and historical memories are not often articulated in public and thus heard.

In the field of memory studies, Rigney (2005) has written about how the concept of memory has evolved within cultural memory studies to

encompass not only the dominant or official narratives of the past but also the counter-narratives that emerge from marginalized or excluded groups. Rigney suggests that the traditional understanding of memory has expanded beyond mere recollection of past events or experiences. Instead, it now includes a broader range of mnemonic practices and discourses that shape how societies remember and engage with the past. She argues that, in practice, the term memory has become synonymous with counter-memory and counter-history, “defined in opposition to hegemonic views of the past and associated with groups who have been ‘left out,’ as it were, of mainstream history” (Rigney 2005, 13). By this, she underscores the importance of including the voices and experiences of marginalized groups in discussions about collective memory. This shift expands the scope of memory studies to encompass a more diverse range of perspectives and narratives.

The chapters in this part examine how counter-memories of (forced) migration and displacement emerge through individual and family memory, revealing their potential to challenge dominant historical narratives. Drawing from literary, testimonial, and activist contexts across Finland, the United States, and Turkey, the contributions explore how alternative memories—often grounded in intergenerational, embodied, or affective experiences—question official histories and open space for marginalized voices. In different ways, the chapters show how family memory acts as a site of both continuity and contestation, where personal narratives are shaped by and resist collective silences. Through literary autofiction, *testimonios*, and memory activism, these counter-memories destabilize hegemonic narratives by foregrounding loss, resilience, and political agency. Together, the chapters demonstrate that counter-memory is not only retrospective but also forward-looking, shaping identity, belonging, and possibilities for justice in the present and the future.

Together, the three parts of this book offer a nuanced understanding of how family memories are formed, sustained, embodied, and transmitted across generations. While each part focuses on distinct themes, several overarching ideas connect the chapters.

Collectively, they demonstrate that family memory is not limited to verbal communication but also emerges through embodied, affective, and silenced practices, as well as through relational acts such as storytelling, cultural expression, solidarity, and activism. Many contributions highlight the active role of descendants in interpreting past

displacements and engaging in collective efforts to seek retrospective justice and public recognition.

Moreover, the chapters illustrate the power of memory work in fostering both resilience and a continuity of trauma, and in challenging dominant or hegemonic narratives. Across the chapters, trauma is not only a topic of analysis but also a structuring force in the ways personal and collective memory interact, persist, and evolve across generations. The family emerges as a site of both vulnerability and resilience, where experiences of war and displacement may be accumulated and transmitted across generations. Silences within family memory are not merely gaps but active forces that may shape identity, emotional inheritance, and intergenerational relationships. Looking ahead, family memory may play a pivotal role in bringing difficult or suppressed histories into public discourse. Recent research in family history has revealed its potential to question and reshape national memory (Barclay and Koefoed 2021), as well as historical scholarship (Kähäri 2023)—especially when connected to entangled transnational and transcultural histories. In an era of increased voluntary and forced migration, family memories have become more mobile and globally interconnected than ever before.

Book Chapters

The first part of this book, “Silences and Sensory Memories,” includes four chapters that examine how memories and silences regarding powerful events of the past influence families’ memory work across generations. Using ethnographic methods, **Aiswarya Sanath** ([Chapter 1](#)) studies memories of the Indian partition of 1947 across three generations, addressing gaps and silences in family memories but also the transmission of memories through nonverbal communication, embodied practices, and affectivity. **Kristiina Korjonen-Kuusipuro’s** chapter ([Chapter 2](#)) employs an autoethnographic approach to explore affective and embodied memories attached to material objects passed down through generations, in her case through the story of a trunk inherited from her grandmother who was displaced from the region of Karelia in Finland in 1944. **Ilari Taskinen** ([Chapter 3](#)) examines the introductory sections of World War II letter anthologies, as well as the cover letters submitted by donors to archives, revealing how the memories attached to wartime correspondence evolve across generations and, in

turn, reshape the meanings families associate with the war. **Viktorija L. A. Čeginskas's** autoethnographic study ([Chapter 4](#)) inquires into the affective legacy of war and displacement through the concept of rememory (De Nardi 2020), denoting the intergenerational transmission of powerful, even traumatic memories through, for example, narratives, nonverbal communication, behaviors, and silences.

The six chapters included in the second part, “Trauma and Resilience,” examine the role of trauma in the (non)transmission of memories, as well as people’s capacity to persevere and relay memories even in adverse circumstances. **Johanna Leinonen** and **Seija Jalagin** ([Chapter 5](#)) explore childhood memories of World War II displacement from Finnish and Soviet Karelia to Finland through the concept of the displacement journey. Drawing on oral histories and written narratives, they show that journey memories are fundamentally family memories, in which emotional support and vulnerability are deeply intertwined. **Veronica Monte’s** and **Erika Busse’s** ethnographic study ([Chapter 6](#)) examines the coping practices and resilience of Mexican mothers who have been separated from their children due to deportation from the United States. Through their feminist ethnographic fieldwork, they explore how these women use *testimonios* to memorialize their separation and to express their love and fight for reunification with their children, shedding light on the role of family and collective memory in their emotional resilience and struggle for justice. **Elina Turjanmaa** and **Outi Kähäri** ([Chapter 7](#)) employ qualitative and quantitative methods (biographic interviews and survey data) to investigate how intergenerational silences—in their case, displaced Ingrian parents’ avoidance of disclosing their ethnic background—connect with the descendants’ sense of coherence, that is, their ability to see the world as ordered and manageable. **Rashmi Singla** and **Berta Vishnivetz** ([Chapter 8](#)) also explore trauma and resilience, in their case through a story of an Afghan refugee woman in Denmark, highlighting how both trauma and resilience are not only born out of past forced migration but also out of the experiences of exclusion and inclusion in Danish society. **Iryna Tarku** ([Chapter 9](#)) discusses the role of creative writing in coping with trauma through her analysis of two novels that portray the Donbas war in Ukraine and connect the protagonists’ war experiences with the echoes of the 20th-century atrocities of Soviet terror and the Holocaust. Drawing on a survey conducted at art and history exhibitions on forced migration, **Seija Jalagin** and

Ilmari Leppihalme ([Chapter 10](#)) explore what visitors' displacement narratives reveal about family memory and its intergenerational significance, as well as how these personal memories connect to national and transnational understandings of forced migration and displacement.

The third part, "Counter-memories," consists of three chapters that inquire into the mnemonic practices of dispersed families conducted along with and against dominant memory narratives. **Hanna-Leena Määttä** and **Ilmari Leppihalme** ([Chapter 11](#)) analyze the multilayered memory and child's experience of war and forced migration in autofictional novels of Finnish Karelian diasporic authors Eeva Kilpi and Anu Kaipainen. The novels not only interpret but also reinterpret the past and construct a cultural counter-memory that responds to the national memory and master narratives of World War II and forced displacement during their time of publication. **Heidy Sarabia** and **Laura Zaragoza** ([Chapter 12](#)) examine the experiences of legally vulnerable young people (the beneficiaries of DACA, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program) in the United States, particularly those under threat of deportation, and how they use *testimonios* to assert their sense of belonging while challenging antimigrant narratives that intensified during Trump's presidency (the study was conducted during his first presidency in 2017–2021). Sarabia and Zaragoza highlight how these youth draw on memories of migration and family sacrifice to counter the hostile political environment, reframe their legal vulnerability, and make claims for their place in the USA. **Öndercan Muti** and **Cihan Erdal** ([Chapter 13](#)) discuss Armenian youth activism and political coalition-building in contemporary Turkey. They show how the Armenian genocide and its legacy in Turkey move between denial and counter-memory, which also have consequences on the identities and political commitments among youth.

Notes

- 1 The following research projects have made the publishing of this anthology possible: “Refugee Journeys: Narratives of Forced Mobilities” (Research Council of Finland (RCF), decision numbers 344707 and 317751), “Postmemory of Family Separation: An Intergenerational Perspective” (RCF, decision numbers 344527 and 325243), and “Recognition and Belonging: Forced Migrations, Troubled Histories and Memory Cultures” (RCF, decision number 310855).

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PART I

Silences and Sensory Memories

CHAPTER 1

Situating the Past in the Present

Family Memories and Postmemories of the Indian Partition

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Abstract

The 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent was a defining moment in the history of modern South Asia. It marked the end of British colonial rule and led to the creation of the independent nations of India and Pakistan, resulting in irreparable disruptions to individual, familial, and collective identities across the region. This chapter examines the memories and postmemories of partition among first-, second-, and third-generation family members, revealing the varied affective and experiential differences across generations. It further explores silences, gaps, fissures, and forms of aphasia in the intergenerational transmission of partition memories within the family unit. The chapter argues that survivors and their descendants often express repressed

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memories through cultural representations and affective embodied practices such as food, plays, and dance. To address these concerns, the chapter draws from the theoretical frameworks of memory studies, particularly postmemory and family memory, and uses ethnographic methods among partition survivor families.

Introduction

It was only after the riots started that people began to recognize that Independence had come, Partition had occurred, India and Pakistan had been established,” said Rashiduddin Khan, a Muslim whose family had owned a shop in the plush market of Connaught Place in 1947. “To tell you the truth, it was only in the bloodshed of partition that ordinary people saw the shape of independence. (Pandey 2001, 226)

The partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 and the subsequent forming of the two nation-states of India and Pakistan from the clutches of the British colonial powers were marked by mass migration and violent death of 100,000 to 500,000 people (Menon and Bhasin 1998, 35). The calamitous event has indelibly marked the private and public memorial landscape of the country, and its reverberation can even be found in personal relations and social tensions. By its 75th year, the event had gradually transfigured into an exhaustive repository for meaning-making, metaphors, identity construction, and conceptions of ethnic violence in South Asia and the South Asian diaspora. The official historiography surrounding the event propagates the “two-nations” theory¹ and has consequently analyzed the ramifications of the event, the demand for a separate Muslim homeland, and the chronology of the events. The “historian’s histories” (Pandey 2001, 189) have often repeatedly constructed a convoluted grammar of elisions and omissions around the event, often foregrounding the triumphant nationalist narrative of Indian independence and silencing the multitude of marginalized perspectives that reveal anecdotes of (often gendered) violence and suffering. These erasures, omissions, and elisions embedded in the nationalist histories of the Indian partition have silenced what Urvashi Butalia (1998, 7) calls the “human dimensions” of the calamitous event. Subsequently, as a response to this intended erasure, the subaltern historiography² heralded by the memory enterprise zeroed in on the individual and collective

memories of the partition survivors. This body of literature offers an alternative historiography to the watershed event, a widening focus to include the multitudinous histories of women, Dalits, and children, revealing the event's gendered, classist, and casteist nature.³ It relies upon a vast methodological approach and draws on oral histories, diaries, testimonials, survivors' microhistories, journal entries, government documents, reports of fact-finding committees, and Constituent Legislative Assembly debates.⁴

The intended erasure, elisions, and omissions seen in the official narratives of the Indian partition can also be discerned in the testimonies of the partition survivors. However, the reasons are different, and the origins of the selective erasure and silencing in the testimonials of the survivors can be traced back to the contours of the trauma theory.⁵ In *Life and Words: Violence and Descent into the Ordinary*, Veena Das (1996, 84) observes a "non-narrative" frequently encountered in oral narratives of women survivors of the Indian partition.⁶ The complex notions of shame, trauma, and guilt drive the survivor further to repress the violent memories, even in family circles and private spheres of communication. Instead, they foreground the anecdotes of resettlement and success of the partition survivors in postpartition India. Dhooleka S. Raj's (2000) comprehensive work on the three generations of Punjabi Hindu partition survivors in Delhi reveals how the repressed memories manifest themselves in the identity production of second- and third-generational survivors. She contends that the deliberate forgetting of the memories by the first-generational survivors creates ignorance in the succeeding generations (*ibid.*, 32).

In the scholarly works anchored upon oral historical accounts of the partition survivors and their families, the second- and third-generational survivors often reveal to the ethnographers that they are hearing these violent testimonials for the first time. So how do these repressed memories display themselves in family relations? To address this, this chapter proposes to comprehend the nature of silences in the transmission of family memories and the ways in which the survivors negate these silences. Additionally, the research attempts to understand the fissures in the postmemories of the second- and third-generational partition survivors and how the repressed memories of the survivors display as cultural practices, behaviors, and affective embodied performances in the first and successive generations.

In order to sufficiently address the questions raised here, the chapter borrows the theoretical framework provided by the epistemological field of memory studies, particularly the concept of postmemory and family memories. Family memories are one form of collective memory, and the framework of the family is one structure through which different collective memories are created, shaped, and disseminated (Halbwachs 1992, 38). During daily interactions with each other and through varied lived practices, family members participate in an immediate dialogue through which the transmission of memories and social values perpetually occurs (Rosenthal 2010). However, these narratorial dialogues are embedded with the silences and omissions. The unsayable effects transform the dissemination of intergenerational memories, and the unsayable becomes more pronounced in limit-case events like the Holocaust and the Indian partition. Subsequently, Marianne Hirsch (2008) has postulated in *The Generation of Postmemory* that the unsayable is often filled by imagination and creativity and thus it forms the foundation of postmemories for the succeeding generations. Hirsch characterizes postmemory as “the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (Hirsch 2008, 103). She argues that postmemory cannot be designated as a process or a method as it constitutes “inter and trans-generational transmission” and it is sustained by “stories, images, and behaviours” (ibid., 106). Maria Rice Bellamy (2015), in her work *Bridges to Memory: Postmemory in Contemporary Ethnic American Women’s Fiction*, asserts that postmemorial creations of second- and third-generational survivors of traumatic events advance through three stages: 1) inheriting the trauma, 2) acknowledging and adopting the trauma, 3) narrating the trauma in a manner in which you can distinguish the patterns of the trauma from the self.

The arguments set forth in the chapter are drawn upon analysis of oral histories collected from 20 partition survivor families in India, settled in Bangalore, Chennai, Delhi, Rajasthan, and Mumbai, over a span of two years. The testimonials recorded are from first-generation, second-generation, and third-generation partition survivors, with ages ranging from 26 to 92. The interviews were often conducted in a semistructured fashion at the interviewee’s home and the interviewees were selected with a snowball sampling method. Initial contacts were

identified through personal networks and establishing contact with local leaders of communities that had experienced violence and migration. The interviews were primarily conducted in Hindi and translated into English, with attention to retaining the emotional and cultural nuances of the original narratives.

In many cases, the group interviews revealed the contentious nature of the event in consideration, with family members loudly opposing each other's views and perspectives. The arguments often stemmed from systematic erasure of memories over the years, and subsequently traumatic memories were also often reformulated within the familial structure to maintain the dignity and honor of the family. To encounter these lived histories meant unavoidably entering a world built with the intricate structure of trauma, suffering, resurgence, and revival.

To ethically navigate these sensitive and emotionally charged terrains, this research has adopted strict measures to ensure the confidentiality and privacy of some participants, in accordance with their expressed wishes for anonymity. Pseudonyms have been used throughout the chapter to protect the anonymity of the interviewees. Any identifying details that could potentially reveal the participants' identities, such as names, specific locations, or personal affiliations, have been altered or omitted. The methodology employed here is therefore as much about empathetic witnessing as it is about scholarly inquiry, seeking to honor the layered affective dimensions of partition memory while remaining critically aware of the ethical responsibilities entailed in documenting such narratives.

Tangible Silence: Creation and Dispersal of Traumatic Memories

Stories rarely exist in a vacuum; they arbitrate between places, corners, and people, often leaving ineffable wounds on the mental landscape of many. Narang, a towering 87-year-old first-generational partition survivor residing in Bangalore, is vigorously involved in his community's social and political activities, often delivering lectures and seminars about Punjabi customs and traditions. However, at his home, his daughter informs me that he never reveals his memories of partition, and when asked about the event of 1947 that ripped the family from their ancestral home, he will merely recount the chronology and political consequences of the event, details that can be easily accessible found

in public archives and memorials. So, when invited to his bungalow in Richmond Town for tea on a cold December evening, I thought he would provide me with an official comprehensive chronology of events without relaying his family memories of the Indian partition. Nonetheless, the anecdote that unfolded in his drawing room was rooted with many affective significations, emotions, and a startling image of blood splattered in a few mangoes. He remembers:

Few miles from my house flowed a small river, it was a place for children ... we learned to swim there, all of us, my cousins and friends ... There was also a mango tree in the courtyard near the river, a few of my happiest memories of my childhood are connected to these mangoes. The courtyard was also a mute witness to one of the tragic moments of childhood. When we heard the news of Partition, we were actually at the riverside eating those mangoes, a friend came and told us that his family might be moving to India soon to live with his uncle. None of us knew the enormity of what was happening then ... Soon after that we returned home and in the days following it we saw a lot of riots in the village and the neighborhood area. One day a few of my friends along with my cousins were sitting at the riverside enjoying those mangoes and talking to each other. And barely few yards away from where we were sitting we saw a mob of attackers chasing a man. This man was terrified and he was screaming and running everywhere. And we got scared by this time, some ran to the nearby home but few of us decided to hide near the bushes. So we sat there without making any sound. And from there, we saw this mob stabbing the man. It's a sight that I will never forget. His blood was spilled all over the place and a few drops spilled on the mangoes that we had thrown away ... It was horrible ... For me, still the mango is laced with that blood and I still do not eat the fruit, even here in Bangalore. When I see mangoes, even to this date I get reminded of the blood stained ones in my hometown. Perhaps this is the only story that my family knows about partition, that too because of my continual reluctance and uneasiness associated with mangoes. It's tough to explain that, you know?

As Narang's reminiscences reflect, fragments of partition memories were often transmitted in families through behaviors, and the silences and fissures in the memory transmissions can often be discerned through these unintentional behaviors of the survivors. When asked about his reluctance to share his memories regarding partition with

his immediate family, Narang said that it emerged from his innate need to survive in the host country. The impulse to survive in a postpartition India took precedence over his desire to share memories with his children. However, the desire for survival in the new country deprived the refugees of the possibility of indulging in mourning and grief. As a result, these memories came in the form of aberrant behaviors—in the case of Narang, it is his reluctance to eat mangoes. Forgetting memories and their subsequent repression should be reckoned as a coping mechanism implemented by Narang and other refugees like him to adapt to the ever-changing polity and social atmosphere of independent India. However, these gaps in the transference of family memories have led to an inexact storehouse of collective memories of the Indian partition in the social and contemporary discourses, making it malleable for manipulation by different political agents.

What engulfs us when we enter Prema's bedroom is an overwhelming presence of Sindh-related objects and articles. Prema sits amid it, guarding her kingdom with warm smiles and even an affectionate demeanor. Her short stature betrays the cogent events and stories that she has lived through gracefully. Prema, my first respondent and fellow interlocutor in my further interactions in the neighborhood, is an 85-year-old partition victim who sought to recover the loss she had endured in the course of the partition by hoarding trinkets that reminded her of her lost home (Sindh) in her host locale. These include calendars, souvenirs, and minor artifacts, including a marble idol of Jhuelal (a Sindhi god, also known as Varuna). Pooja, her daughter-in-law, observed:

Maa [mother] collects many things. Objects from Sindh that someone has given to her, Sindh-related texts ... she used to tell me that I often complain about her hoarding habit because I never knew the pain of losing objects in a second.

The material loss she had suffered had left such an everlasting scar on her emotional landscape that its resonance could even be found in her conduct and comportment. The violence of partition demonstrates itself in myriad forms and manners. As Anjali Gera Roy (2020, 43) argues,

Intangible violence in the context of Partition may be defined as the breakdown of the known and the normal that followed from the loss

of life, property, relationships and home and displacement. Displacement may be defined as a generalized feeling of unhomeliness caused through being uprooted in an unfamiliar region. At a specific level, it is translated as the loss of privilege and status, language and culture and of a familiar world; relegation to an outsider status; and the pressure to assimilate into the host culture.

Prema tries to cope with the intangible violence of losing her maternal home by hoarding material objects in her bedroom as she does not want to experience precarity and loss again. Hoarding material objects becomes a mechanism through which memory transmission occurs and the fissures in the process reduce markedly. Instead of verbally articulating the agony of losing one's ancestral homeland, Prema attempted to articulate it nonverbally through everyday practices and behaviors like holding on to objects that carry traces of her lost home. Among my ethnographic interactions, I have met survivors who are scared of the sound of a running train even seventy years after the occurrence of the event. Another survivor described how he has held on to the trade language used by his community in prepartition Sindh, in present-day India, where the language is not practiced daily. Another 80-year-old narrated how she had tried to emulate the structure of her ancestral home while building a new home in Delhi. All these embodied behaviors detailed here aid in the dissemination of memories in the family network, and these behaviors are pathways of slippages in the dispersal of memories.

In the Malhotra household, the contours of fading partition memories were sketched on an old, tattered piece of paper during a family gathering in Dubai by the patriarch of the family. Malhotra Saab was born into an affluent Punjabi Hindu family in Attock. His drawings of his ancestral home and the neighborhoods are commonly designated by social scientists, historians, and urban geographers as mental maps or cognitive maps. Phillip Sarre (1972, 16) astutely defines *mental maps* as "a model of the environment which is built up over time in the individual's brain." They are not factual representations of places; on the contrary, the mental maps are often colored by subjective interpretations, disruptions, and judgments of the person indulging in sketching the map. Additionally, they provide the viewer with a sense of a person's continual interaction with an environment.

In the case of the partition survivors, the rudimentary sketches often allow the succeeding generations to possess a sense of their ancestral homeland, and these maps should be considered the last vestiges of shared collective memories. In all the abovementioned articulations, home is not just a physical space but it can be imaginatively created and poetically excavated. Such a home can be rescued from material loss and it trails with its inhabitants to places and shores afar. For Malhotra Saab, the traumatic memories of losing his relatives and witnessing looting during the partition of 1947 were subdued by an idyllic yearning for his lost home and childhood and are redundantly marked by emotions of longing, love, and care. The arbitrary borders constructed by the government and their notions of citizenship and nationalism are atrophied by the survivor's unabated imagining of his lost home. Malhotra remembers the time when he had sketched the mental map:

We were in Dubai for a family function, the wedding of someone's daughter. Moreover, when my generation gathers, we sometimes talk about the homes that were lost and our old country. We do not talk about all these to our children; I do not think they understand the intensity of what we have gone through. Anyway, while we were talking about our house at the Campbellpur Attock and our time there, we started sketching this [pointing toward the paper]. And when I forgot, my siblings and cousins filled in the necessary details. Here you can see the Arya Samaj, the cantonment area, the ground nearby, and the boy's school where we all did our primary schooling. *Wahaan jaa nahi sakte magar yeh toh hain na* [We can't go there but we have this with us].

In this context, the silence and the elisions in the transmission of memories are mitigated and mediated by mental maps. Malhotra Saab's family were unaware of the torment and loss he had endured while migrating to India from Campbellpur, but they had a replica of the lost ancestral home. From Malhotra Saab's enduring testimonial, it is evident that he found comfort in sharing memories with other partition survivors but was quite reluctant to do so with his children and grandchildren. These crevices in the dispersal of memories led to an identity crisis in the second generation, with them being aware of only the pain he had to undergo to resurrect a livelihood in India while being entirely oblivious to the lost cultural world left in Pakistan. Sketches such as these helped them in bridging the gaps and assisted

the first-generational survivors in healing, providing them with a therapeutic effect.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note how women mediated with the traumatic memories in their homes. As Urvashi Butalia (1998, 3), a feminist activist-historian who reclaimed the forgotten annals of women's history of the Indian partition, states in her resonating work *The Other Side of Silence*, "there was also widespread sexual savagery: about 75,000 women are thought to have been abducted and raped by men of religions different from their own." The watershed moment engendered in its wake two forms of gender-based violence in the subcontinent: 1) the rape and abduction of women by men from the other religious group and 2) the honor killing of women and the persuasion to commit mass suicide by family members. Both these acts of violence unambiguously reveal that, during partition, women's bodies were considered a political battleground in which hypermasculine performative nationalism was enacted triumphantly. Partition had also ruptured women's relationships with selves, one another, their kin, community, and nation. So how do these memories reveal in patriarchal family relationships and in a gendered environment?

As M., a retired 87-year-old, recalled the memories of her train journey from Lahore to Delhi, escaping from the violent riots that had engulfed the city, she actively reminisced about all the details of that journey, including the relatives who had traveled with her, details of the carriage in which she traveled, and her life at the relief camps in Delhi. Yet found it challenging to narrate how she almost escaped from a mob of attackers who were trying to sexually assault her on her way to the railway station. It was shrouded in a grammar of elisions and erosions, and her voice trailed off to silence. As Veena Das (2006) points out in *Life and Words: Violence and Descent into the Ordinary*, women recollected the event by adopting metaphors and hyperbolic language; however, they withheld from articulating particulars of the incident.

[T]his code of silence protected women who had been brought back to their families or who had been married by stretching norms of kinship and affinity since the violation of their bodies was never made public. Rather than bearing witness to the disorder that they had been subjected to, the metaphor that they used was of a woman drinking the poison and keeping it within her. (Das 2006, 84)

The “code of silence” evocatively transpired to the succeeding generations, where the families never talked about the horrors they had encountered during 1947. Consequently, the second generation never resorted to being aware of the particularities of the violent events that occurred to their family members. Subsequently, they dwelled in length on the general details of the event. The mention of the direct bodily violence suffered by the family members never becomes a part of their shared memories. However, the zone of silence practiced by women survivors while engaging in traumatic memories can also be seen in male partition survivors’ behaviors, as partition remains as a morbid specter that haunts the margins of everyday conversations. Accordingly, the male survivors attempted to rescue their progeny from the violent specifics of their ordeal by repressing their memories to the abyss of their subconscious. However, in certain circumstances these memories did spill over into their consciousnesses, exhibiting themselves in rare moments. B. Mirchandani, a 60-year-old residing in Bangalore—a city that has benefited from India’s dominance over software technology—still explained how her late father had repressed traumatic memories of the *batwara* (the Hindi word for partition), only to be haunted by it in his final days. She noted:

I recall this particular incident. My father, when he had an operation, he was around 78. During his recovery from anaesthesia, he recalled things from Sindh, and he returned to those days. And the trauma of partition might have been so blocked in the conscious mind. Because suddenly, he started shouting and said, “Hari, Hari, has she crossed...”? He wondered whether Hari [his wife] and my brothers, who came later, had crossed the border during the partition.

As Ms. Mirchandani noted, her father had never recounted any of the traumatic memories of partition to her or the other family members; the convoluted framework of shame and guilt had often been an obstacle to the sharing of memories within the familial network. The silences and the consequent practices and behaviors formed out of them influence the subjectivities of the family members knowingly or unknowingly (see [Chapter 7](#)). For instance, the repressed memories of her father and the abrupt slippage of it in the hospital bed made Ms. Mirchandani take notice of the family memories regarding partition. Today, she chronicles and records the fading memories of the partition survivors in the family.

Performing Postmemories: Contours of the Memorial Legacy of Partition

It is often the obligation of the descendants of survivors of a catastrophic event like partition to make sense of the event, while the survivors who encountered the direct violence struggle to live with the memories. The creative work that the second generation produces—art, memoirs, photographs, and even performances—are molded by the dissociations and disruptions internalized by living in close vicinity to the ones who have witnessed a calamitous event. How does the nonverbal significations of memory transmission (signs, behaviors, and practices) affect the postmemorial work produced by the descendants? How do the descendants grapple with being (un)aware of the traumatic memories of their predecessors? Hirsch details in *The Generation of Postmemory*:

Postmemorial work, I want to suggest, strives to *reactivate* and *reembody* more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression. Thus less-directly affected participants can become engaged in the generation of postmemory, which can thus persist even after all participants and even their familial descendants are gone. (Hirsch 2008, 111)

In Kiran's unpublished short story set in early 2000s Delhi, partition does not remain as a mere background for plot advancement. It is not an emplotment technique adopted by the author but it is a living, breathing event that shapes every character of the story and their lived histories and destinies. Kiran, a leading professor in an acclaimed Indian university, is the descendant of a partition survivor. Kiran's father, Yash, was born in Shikarpur and was 20 years old when partition occurred, but he was a young army trainee residing in Indore for his military training when the violent riots engulfed the city. Since he was residing in Indore, a region of the Indian subcontinent that was not directly affected by the event, he did not witness any violent events related to partition. During partition, the family decided to migrate to Delhi, and their postcard informing Yash of the decision to migrate to India got lost, and Yash was therefore not aware of his family's whereabouts for two whole years. After two years, Yash decided to search for his missing mother and two brothers. He visited village after village,

asking everyone that he met about his siblings and mother. Finally, the locals informed him of a refugee family residing in a small one-bedroom house in a village near Delhi. Yash's eventual reunion with his mother was marked by moments of longing, relief, and immense love.

While describing to me these events, which were the foundational moments of his father's life, Kiran said that the traumatic memories of being separated from his family had significantly altered Yash's life and perceptions. In Kiran's postmemorial work based on his father's memories of partition, the imaginative retelling of the separation becomes an anchor through which the perpetual agony of partition is narrated, and, as Marianne Hirsch explains, the specificities of the details are provided by memories that are already archived in established public memorials of the Indian partition. Kiran had gone through all three stages of postmemorial creations as postulated by Bellamy, and he explained his motivation behind penning the story:

My father never described this event to me in detail, but it was present in all the conversations; since it was an event that had altered our family, it was always there in the background. Most of my scholarly and creative works are based on this trauma. I think it has somehow affected my life too, even though I have not encountered violence or felt the pain of separation. My father always believed that we should all remain close to each other, as in the family. I think he wants his family close because he knows the pain of not knowing where they are at such a young age. Anyway, when I wrote this short story, I felt this event should be the central episode in it ... This way I can relieve myself a bit of it from my memories.

Holocaust photographs “are the fragmentary remnants that shape the cultural work of postmemory,” details Hirsch in *The Generation of Postmemory* (Hirsch 2008, 116); similarly, photographs of families that were severed across the two borders during partition narrate a story that signifies a lost home and a lost cultural world. Advani's family album begins with a photograph of a mother adorning a white salwar and smiling calmly at the camera while holding her one-year-old son in her hands inside their ancestral home. Even though it is a simple photograph depicting the bond shared with the mother and the children, it speaks volumes about loss: loss of selves, community, sights, sounds, tastes, and senses familiar to them. In other words, the photographs loudly exhibit what has been lost or the absence. The family

photo represents a world that is lost due to partition. The one-year-old will never get to experience his ancestral home and the senses and sights surrounding its structure. As Advani put forward, “this is the only way in which I can access the house that I was born into.” How does the second and succeeding generation view the picture mentioned here and others similar to it? It evokes an intense emotional and affective experience in the viewer by which the photograph does not just represent the event with its multitude of attributes but produces affect and emotions. Through the gaze that transpires spatial and temporal planes, the viewers cannot just perceive the structure of the house in front of them. However, they can embody the bodily sensation of standing inside the house wearing a salwar on a sultry summer morning. The photographs in their entirety “have been mobilized to do for the second generation, in particular, ranges from the indexical to the symbolic” (Hirsch 2008, 116).

Creation, circulation, and transmission of the postmemories of partition can also be seen in the ways in which families create semblances of the cultural markers of their ancestral lands in the new country. In the Batta household, family recipes of *tandooris*, *saags*, and *halwas* played an important role in reconstructing the prepartition home in the host locale. These recipes were often found in old notebooks, neatly written down, with the papers announcing the stains and colors of the kitchen. And they were carefully handed down from one generation to another. These cuisines acted as active passageways to their lost homes. In the Lamba household, however, the family attempted to transpire postmemories through *bhajans* and *geets*, articulating the loss of a glorious world. These songs, metonymically and metaphorically sung by the female members of the family, helped them in healing the fissures in cultural memory and also in the construction of collective identity in the host city. The displaced here constructed a world of loss through myriad cultural representations and signifiers like food, songs, and dance. As Srdja Pavlovic proposes in “Memory for Breakfast,” the displaced construct an “intimacy of exile” (Pavlovic 2011, 45), a universe born out of the shared experience of loss.

Public postmemorial work is embedded within the social and collective formations in postpartition India. Many scholarly and creative works produced in the seven decades following the partition have been written down by the descendants of partition survivors. These engaging intellectual works are their ways of making sense of the traumatic

memories of their parents. Another manner in which the memories of their lost homes are transmitted to the succeeding generation is the ways in which the survivors named their new places in the new country. The refugees designate names in such a way that they can perpetually engage with their lost homeland and transmit these lived narratives to the succeeding generations. Parvesh Batra's ancestors in Bahawalnagar were into textile garments, a business that before partition had made them travel from Persia to the corners of the subcontinent. So when the Batra family migrated to India after partition it was natural for them to name their new textile business in Chennai "Bahawalnagar Stores." Many refugee colonies like the Multan Nagar in Delhi and the Sindhi colony in Bangalore are not only vestiges of a lost mnemonic world but are active passages through which the survivors commemorate their origins, thus challenging the borders erupted by the nation-states of India and Pakistan. The commemorative practices, customs, and traditions maintained by the communities living here dismantle the arbitrary borders drawn in August 1947 and create an organic sustenance of lost homes.

Conclusion

The multiplicities of diverse narratives analyzed here attest to the certitude that a momentous calamity like the event of 1947, the Indian partition, plays a significant role in the formation of individual and collective identities. The silences and pronounced erosions that occur in the transmission of traumatic family memories unveil themselves through slippages and fissures. They are later discovered in the manner of disparate embodied practices and behaviors among partition survivors. Furthermore, the postmemorial work of descendants of partition survivors can be discerned in the form of creative, scholarly works, photographs, and even the naming of places. However, the silences embedded within the framework of family memories of the survivors make it conducive to the manipulation of political agents. In the contemporary political discourses of the Indian subcontinent, the attempt to weaponize the traumatic memories concerning the Indian partition by right-wing factions within the country has led to further marginalization of minorities.

Notes

- 1 The two-nation theory is an ideology that envisaged two separate nations for Hindus and Muslims within the Indian subcontinent with separate polities. Syed Ahmad Khan, often considered the father of Muslim nationalism in South Asia, was the first to propagate the idea. The ideology later became the compelling force that drove the need for a separate homeland for Muslims. During the moment of decolonization and the transfer of powers, the Indian state chose to remain a secular nation. The genesis of many conflicts that surround the nation-states of India and Pakistan, including the Kashmir issue, can be traced back to this particular notion of religious nationalism.
- 2 The call for a “history from beneath” approach to the Indian Partition can be seen in Gyanendra Pandey’s resonating and influential work, *Remembering Partition: Violence Nationalism and History in India* (2001).
- 3 Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin, through *Recovery, Rupture and Resistance: Indian State and the Abduction of Women during Partition* (1993), endeavor to draw up on the mangled social histories of time by documenting the oral testimonials of women who experienced destitution and gendered violence during the event. In *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) through a comprehensive mapping of the microhistories of partition survivors, Urvashi Butalia attempts to offer an alternative to the national historiography related to the event, an alternative that centers the myriad personal and human realities of the event. She then furthers her argument by examining the silence and intentional gap embedded in the testimonials of the survivors and strives to analyze what these silences convey about the brutal dimensions of the event.
- 4 Another response from the academicians and historians that gained momentum in the years following the event was to point toward the traumatic dimensions of the bifurcation and “express its descriptions in terms of ‘madness’, its unspeakable horror, incomprehensibility, its singularity, its limit-case status as something that cannot be adequately represented or narrated” (Chakraborty 2014, 42). The new scholarship has considered the long and continual afterlife of Indian partition in selves, communities, and regions. The regional studies of the event successfully brought forth the microhistories from locales that were directly or indirectly affected by the bifurcation (Chakraborty 2004; Ilahi 2003; Saikia 2016; Sulehria 2019; Van Schendel 2001). The central archetypal figure of the dislocated minority—from both sides of the Radcliffe Line—variously categorized and defined as *mujahirs*, *sharanarathi*, and *udbastu*, has captured the public and academic imagination and discourses surrounding the event for decades (Sen 2018; Zamindar 2010) The event has also engendered new ways of understanding the refugee diasporas created by the Indian partition, and these works have therefore analyzed the various complex themes that are ever present in the narratives regarding partition. These themes that the scholars analyze include lost homes, construction of violence, and severed families.
- 5 Several trauma scholars have demonstrated the inarticulation or incomprehensibility surrounding survivor narratives of rather painful traumatic events. Cathy Caruth’s exposition on trauma is deeply indebted to the deconstructionist works of Shoshana Feman, Jacques Derrida, and Paul De Man. Caruth’s most annotated statement on the definition of trauma is situated in the introduction

of her most lionized work, *Trauma Explorations in Memory* (1995). She commences the decades-long academic intrigue and curiosity on the field of trauma theory and its various framework by defining trauma in this way: “in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated fully at that time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it” (Caruth 1995, 11).

- 6 Veena Das (2006, 84) observes a “non-narrative” frequently encountered in oral narratives of women survivors of the Indian partition: “What becomes the non-narrative of this violence is what is unsayable within the forms of everyday life ... it is because the range and the scale of the human that is tested and defined and extended in the disputations proper to everyday life move through the unimaginable violence of the Partition into forms of life that are seen as not belonging to life proper.”

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CHAPTER 2

Knowing with a Trunk

Elaborating Transgenerational Human-Material Entanglements

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Abstract

In this chapter, I scrutinize the affectual and embodied nature of memory and remembering by focusing on a transgenerational human-material entanglement. Based on autoethnographic observations, I explore an entanglement of affects, sensory experiences, and memories evoked by a trunk in which my father's mother stored her belongings when she was evacuated from the Karelian Isthmus after World War II. Inspired by new materialistic and postqualitative thinking, I investigate how knowing-with-materialities can enhance our understanding of memory and remembering. I conclude that transgenerational human-material entanglements can be contradictory and blurry not only because of fragmented narratives and the meaning of the object but also because of contradictory affects related to these entanglements.

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Introduction

Things have affective power, and this power can be examined in entanglements of material objects, places, institutions, bodies, fragments, experiences, and affects that are thrown together in a situation, rather than form an orderly hierarchy (Löfgren 2016; MacLure 2013). The material world is indeed diverse and relational, and material objects are ontologically entangled in our lives (Bennett 2010). These human–material entanglements are in turn connected to memory, remembering, and belonging. Many items we possess have a specific meaning, often hard to describe and verbalize, partly because of the embodied nature of these processes (Korjonen-Kuusipuro and Kuusisto 2019; Löfgren 2016). Furthermore, these items are not always “on display” at our homes, but this does not diminish their importance or their power in human lives.

To explore the connection of memory and matter, I scrutinize the affectual and embodied nature of memory and remembering in human–material entanglements. Theoretically, I am inspired by new materialistic and postqualitative thinking, particularly the process of knowing-with-materialities (e.g., Barad 2003; Rautio 2014; St. Pierre et al. 2016), which highlights the entangled nature of reality. Understanding these two streams of thought enhances our knowledge of matter’s role in memory and remembering and thus adds understanding of the traumatic displacements of our past. My argument thus draws on autoethnographic observations: I explore an entanglement of affects, sensory experiences and memories evoked by a trunk in which my father’s mother, Ida (1886–1967), stored her belongings when she was evacuated from the Karelian Isthmus after World War II.

After World War II, more than 400,000 Finnish Karelians lost their homes when the Karelian Isthmus, located in southeast Finland, was ceded to the Soviet Union in the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty (see also Chapters 5 and 11). Karelians, two of whom being my grandmother and my father, were evacuated to other parts of Finland. My grandmother kept her belongings in the trunk during the evacuation journey. The trunk came into my father’s (1925–2019) and mother’s (b. 1930) possession in 1949, and from 2012 onwards it has belonged to me. The value of the trunk is immense: It is the only thing I have that has ever belonged to my grandmother.

I also make a methodological contribution: By drawing on autoethnography, I examine how fragmented, nonverbal, sometimes even silenced sensory, affective, and kinaesthetic human–material entanglements can be studied and the means there are to capture these ambiguities and affective experiences when there seem to be no words present or a coherent narrative (see also Kuusisto-Arponen and Savolainen 2016). I elaborate on the role imagination plays in this process as well.¹

When I first sat behind my computer to start writing the chapter, I felt apprehensive. I was going to write down an emotional family history. While the analysis did not scare me, I did not quite know what kind of reactions (both mentally and physically) it might raise in me. Despite the unknown, I decided to write on because I saw this as one way of preserving the trunk and my history and that of my family.

From Verbalized Narratives to Multisensorial Entanglements

During the last two decades there has been a growing interest toward the affective and the material in the humanities and social sciences. These “turns” have modified our understanding of how we know what we know. Despite this interest, our knowing still greatly relies on narratives based on language, or written documents that often seem to function as keys for our experiences. We are used to thinking that humans have a tendency to create narratives (Hardy 1968) and that narratives expressed in words are fundamental parts of human experience and memories. Memory involves knowledge, repertoires of stories and scripts, implicit memory, bodily aspects, and forgetting, and it is said to have “a storied nature” (Hua 2009). Yet, even with the power that narratives have been granted, there is still a knowledge gap in the ways that descendants adopt family narratives in their own life histories and identities (Green and Luscombe 2019).

My theoretical lens to study the interplay of matter, memory, and affects draws on cultural memory studies, cultural affect studies, and new materialistic understanding of human–material relations. Our experiences, including remembering and forgetting, are dynamic processes that are multilinear and even fuzzy. Cultural geographer Tamara West (2014) defines memory as something that is constantly negotiated and renegotiated through actions, interactions, and reactions. If we understand memory as something that is in constant motion, both

its genesis and existence occur through movement (Erll 2011). Individual and collective memories are also different from public accounts of the past, which always involves public reinterpretation (Hua 2009), and narrated memories are only one part of memory work. Tangible objects support individual memories and narratives but their meanings are dependent on the memories attached to them (Koskinen-Koivisto et al. 2024; Kuusisto and Savolainen 2016). Also, in building collective identities, particular material objects such as flags, maps and paintings have important roles; Karelians who visit each other are well aware of the meanings of these everyday items (Sireni 2016, 2020). However, making interpretations based on our material relations is not easy. Historian Tiina Männistö-Funk (2016, 58) points out that it is easier to examine the meanings that previous generations have given to material objects than the immanent meaning of objects in past moments. Remembering is only one side of a coin: What is just as important is what is forgotten and why (West 2014).

In addition to stories and narratives, memories consist of affects and embodied experiences. I understand *affects*, the nonverbal and nonconscious dimensions of our experiences, simultaneously individual, social, and cultural: We feel affects in our bodies and affects become emotions through discourses in cultural meaning-making processes (Blackman and Venn 2010). Therefore, we need to look at affects as affective practices or affective patterns, as Margaret Wetherell (2012) asserts. Affective patterns can be found in oral storytelling and personal narratives. Ethnologist Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto (2022) argues that the sensory and material parts of oral storytelling function as keys for rendering complex affective experiences and form an important part of negotiating the meaning of difficult experiences and emotions when shaping generations and individuals' lives. At the same time, affective experiences are very hard to describe in words. They are often expressed in phrases like "I have this feeling" or "I have that something" or can be seen only in gestures or other bodily reactions (see, for example, Kajander and Koskinen-Koivisto 2021; Korjonen-Kuusipuro and Kuusisto-Arponen 2017). This highlights the role of the body as a site of memory (also Giese and Keightley 2024). Embodied memories are not only perceived subjective experiences; they are also collective (see also [Chapter 1](#)). Embodied collective memories can become visible, for example, in family gatherings and rituals (see also Kuusisto and Korjonen-Kuusipuro 2025).

Affective, embodied memories and materiality are interwoven, and things have affective power in producing memories and shaping and triggering them, as well as linking people together (Povrzanović Frykman 2024). The entanglements of different temporal, generational, and spatial layers with matter have been examined and redefined by the new materialistic approach. In my study, it has been useful for the analysis to look at the entanglements with the trunk as co-becoming, which refers to the relationality of all beings (both human and nonhuman), things, places, affects, institutions, processes, and so on (Bawaka Country et al. 2016; Rautio 2014). The new materialistic approach questions the ontology of ethnographic observation: How is it formed, who (or what) are part of ethnographic knowledge making processes, and how are researchers connected to the field they study (Leppänen and Tiainen 2016, 28–29)? These have also been guiding questions in my research.

In this chapter, I use the term “entanglement” instead of the more widely prevalent “assemblage.” I lean on the interpretation of Wetherell (2012), who argues that assemblages are more static in nature. Focusing on entanglements stresses the fluidity and the move from “knowing about the world towards knowing with the world” (Barad 2007, as cited in Rautio 2014). In this kind of knowing, the lines between people and things blur and shift. This is because our sociomaterial lives form emotionally complex stories that are entanglements of affects, experiences, and different imaginations (see also Christou 2011, 249–52). It is this kind of knowing that has challenged me to look more deeply into the ways we understand our own family histories and memories and the role of material in them.

Combining Autoethnography, Intimate Ethnography, and Sensory Ethnography

My research draws on autoethnography, which gives me as a researcher an opportunity to systematically analyze my own experiences and affects and develop a way of understanding these and setting them in wider contexts (see also Ellis et al. 2011; Lancaster 2011; for an autoethnographic approach, see also [Chapter 4](#)). Here, autoethnography is a valid means to search for the intimate meanings of the trunk and, for example, to understand touch (Paterson 2009) and make sense through hands (Groth 2017). Autoethnography is an embodied,

creative, untamed, and rebellious way of knowing and a way of being in the world because it shows both struggle and passion and demands intimacy and courage. For a researcher, it grants the possibility to research, understand, and write about embodied affects. Compared to a more traditional way of doing ethnography, autoethnography makes it possible to deeper understand the sometimes-conflicting affects and narratives that people would not be prepared to share with researchers. Thus, autoethnography also sets demands for the reader on how to care, feel, and empathize (see also Behar 1996; Ellis and Bochner 2006, 433).

Autoethnography requires affectivity and the presence of emotions (Behar 1996), and the stickiness of affects is evident (Ahmed 2010). In my case, for example, sadness, loss, and mourning of the previous generations as well as their difficult emotions are present. The presence of emotions makes a researcher vulnerable, but the vulnerability may also stem from uncertainties concerning the justification of the research and critiques of the method. Sociologist Leon Anderson (2006), for example, criticizes the emotional and affective approach with which the epistemological paradigm of autoethnography is embedded. He refers to the “close conjunction with postmodern sensitivities” and is concerned with the consequences that autoethnography can have for other traditions of social inquiry. Anderson (2006) also argues that in analytic autoethnography the researcher needs to be a full and visible member in the research group or setting and in published texts. Furthermore, the researcher needs to aim at improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena.

Even though I mainly use autoethnography to understand affective patterns, I also scrutinize the memories of my family members. Thus, my study also benefits from intimate ethnography, an approach developed by anthropologists Alisse Waterston and Barbara Rylko-Bauer (2006) to study family stories, which they view as theoretically, politically, and anthropologically relevant. Intimate ethnography focuses on someone with whom the ethnographer has or has had a close personal relationship (Waterston 2019). In my case these partners are my family members: my late grandmother, my late father, my mother, and my siblings. While I have never met my grandmother, she is an essential part of the process of knowing with the trunk, and in this way is closer than an outsider would have been. Similarly, in autoethnography, intimacy

acts as a mode of caring, and it should not be used as a vehicle to produce distanced theorizing (Ellis and Bochner 2006, 433).

To highlight the affective and embodied nature of (auto)ethnographic practice, I combine my approach with sensory ethnography (Pink 2009), which sets the body in the center and underlines the embodied engagement that is embedded in multisensory experience and expression (Drysdale and Wong 2019). Even though autoethnography *an sich* is affective and sensory, the method developed by Sarah Pink (2009) emphasizes the systematic analyzing and understanding of embodied knowledge.

Accordingly, when doing this research, I relied on my senses and sensations. I sat down beside the trunk, sensed, thought, and wrote with it. I repeatedly opened the lid, touched the wood both on the inside and outside, and smelled the trunk's scent. I carried it and tried to recall my own memories of it. I photographed the trunk but also searched for old photographs from my family albums, wrote down my own experiences and memories, short fragments of stories, and glimpses of embodied experiences and moments I recalled. I asked my family members whether they remember anything about the trunk and also wrote these memories down as short stories. Thus, my research material forms a collage of written memories, stories, photographs, and short videos. Imagination has also been important. Ethnologists Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto and Tytti Lehtovaara (2020, 32) note that writing about sensory experiences requires "a specialized and creative vocabulary" and we need ways to communicate how we feel and how emotions and senses connect with the past. I have given several presentations where I talked about the trunk and discussed it with my colleagues. As such, the trunk has started "to glow" (MacLure 2013) and the words of Sherry Turkle (2007, 5)—"[w]e think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with"—became obvious. Nevertheless, writing about my own sensory experiences, affects, and human-material relations across time in English has been a complicated task, and I have also pondered my own role and the dilemma of my own voice as a privileged source of knowledge (see Vu 2018). From a scientific viewpoint, understanding the processes of knowing-with and becoming-with the trunk, experimenting with other voices and bringing different kinds of sensory and affective experiences together has not been simple. Instead of just reflecting, I have tried to follow the path set by Chau Vu (2018, 80), who describes knowing as dependent

on the coming together of things, places, and feelings, as well as on language (also Mellander and Wiszmeg 2016, 99). Being able to touch the trunk has been very important, because “through our sense of touch, we feel the material and its properties, its potential and its agency” (Groth 2017, xi).

Affective Transgenerational Human–Material Entanglements

I gently touch the surface of the trunk and feel the sharp metal parts that hold the wooden trunk together. This immediately takes me back to my childhood: I used to sit on the trunk, and these same metal parts used to rip my clothes. Slowly I open the lid and sense the heaviness of it. I look inside and very cautiously touch the old wallpaper inside of the trunk. I look at the side locker and discover some writing which is nearly faded away, but I can feel the text with my fingertips. I sense the strong smell, and suddenly a very strong sense of sadness fills my body. I shut the lid and sit on it. I have a vague memory where I am a little girl, and the trunk is in the corner of our TV room. I am not sure if this memory is real or not. (Personal notes, March 2020)

The trunk is the beginning. It is made of wood but it has some metal parts. It has a lock and two metal handles, one on each side. The color of the trunk is greenish blue, but under the first layer of paint there is another layer of reddish paint. The trunk is very simple and rough, but the more aesthetically pleasing part can be seen inside the trunk, which is covered by wallpaper with a leaflike decoration ([Figure 2.1](#)). At the bottom of the trunk is a piece of wallpaper from the 1980s that has orange and yellow flowers. The trunk is heavy and almost impossible for one person to carry, and it smells moldy. There is a small locker inside the trunk. The trunk is approximately 65 centimeters wide, 45 centimeters high, and 45 centimeters deep, and it weighs about 20 kilograms.

The importance of the trunk is contradictory because it is both treasure and trash. Its smell reveals that the wood has molded and invisible organisms live in the wood. The paint is peeling off and the wallpaper decoration on the inside is flaking. The metal pieces that hold the trunk together are rusty and their shape is no longer the original. Clearly, the process of decay is ongoing but partly invisible; the



Figure 2.1: A trunk in which the author’s grandmother stored her belongings when she was evacuated from Karelia at the end of World War II. The trunk differs from other memory objects, for example photographs, because it can be explored with all senses and it is possible to feel the knowledge embedded both in the trunk and in the objects inside of it (see also Kurki 2020; Paterson 2009). Photo: Kristiina Korjonen-Kuusipuro.

trunk is slowly falling apart. This decay emphasizes the fact that things are under constant change, and they are “just stages in the process of transformation of matter” (Hodder 2012, 4–5). Furthermore, this exemplifies the asymmetrical nature of human–thing entanglements and the fact that there is always something more to them than just humans and objects (Hodder 2014, 19).

Several times I have wondered if the trunk is worth repairing but I do not have the answer. My sense of smell tells me that the molding has been going on for decades and it would be easy to say no. Yet, on the one hand, the trunk seems priceless, and it is the only thing I have left



Figure 2.2: Detail of writings inside the trunk that has been passed on in the author's family. The writing inside the trunk has nearly faded away. There are also some other pencil marks and drawings. This may have been made by me or some other child in our family. Photo: Kristiina Korjonen-Kuusipuro.

that clearly connects me to my Karelian heritage. On the other hand, I respect the trunk's own life, which is by no means connected to the meanings humans have given to the material. As such, I see the decay as an elementary and natural part of the lifecycle of a material object. The trunk can also be seen as cherished clutter—an object connected to past generations and one's own childhood, yet without a specific place in the home and difficult to part with (about different kinds of clutter, see Kajander and Koskinen-Koivisto 2023; Turkle 2007).

I do not have much knowledge about the history of the trunk. There are no written documents about my grandmother's journey or earlier life. I do not know when the trunk was built, who built it, or if it existed before the evacuation. Inside the lid of the small locker within the trunk is vague, almost vanished Russian writing ([Figure 2.2](#)). I ask my colleague to translate it for me. Surprisingly, it seems to be the

name of a carpenter's workshop and an address that can be found even today in St. Petersburg. This is all we know, but if we use our imagination we can ponder if this is the place where the trunk was made. To my knowledge my grandmother did not visit St. Petersburg, but maybe some of her or my grandfather's relatives did. Maybe they bought the trunk for my grandmother. Or maybe a visiting salesman came to sell goods in Kurkijoki, where they lived. Or maybe my grandmother bought the trunk from someone she knew.

The first memory regarding the trunk was told by my father and recently repeated by my sister: When my grandmother was evacuated from Kurkijoki, the trunk was lost along the way. It was missing for a few months but eventually it was returned to my grandmother. For some reason my grandmother decided to give the trunk to my newly-wed parents in 1949. My mother explained:

It was just after the war, and we had just gotten married. Grandmother Ida gave the trunk to us. She also gave us some furniture. The trunk was full of beautiful pieces of fabrics and other stuff. I remember there was a huge bag of raisins. I still remember how good the raisins tasted because they were still rare after the war. It was a true treasure chest – that's what I called it. Grandmother never wanted to have the trunk back, so it stayed with us. (M. K. 2020/2022)

My sister remembered the trunk from the mid-1950s, when my grandmother lived with the family:

Of course, I remember [the trunk]. It was placed upstairs in our house, not in her room, because it was really small, but just outside of it, in the hallway. I remember that Grandmother had her wedding dress in the trunk. The dress was made of handwoven wool and it was lilac. I remember touching the skirt. Grandmother always wore that skirt on Sundays when she went to church. There were also some other clothes and sometimes even dried fruits. (L. K. 2022)

There is a fracture in this story. My mother told me that my grandmother had already given the trunk to her and my father in 1949. In my sister's story my grandmother still had her belongings in it in the mid-1950s. Both narratives may be right, because it would be only natural that after my grandmother moved in with my father and mother she still used the trunk for her possessions. This, however, does not come up in any other stories. I am so much younger that I never lived in that

house, so all I have are these fragments of narratives. Thus, when doing autoethnographic research on my grandmother's trunk and thinking of my own transgenerational sociomaterial relations, it became evident that memories are not always based on coherent narratives but rather very fragmented stories, sometimes only a few sentences or just affective silent moments. This kind of knowledge production is typical to intimate ethnography (Waterston 2019), and the demand for coherence in narratives can indeed be seen as a construct of research, or even as an illusion (e.g., Hoskins 1998, 6). Even though the coherent narrative of the trunk is all but missing, it evokes plenty of emotions that are hard to describe in words.

The trunk has been part of my own material reality all my life. I have a vague memory of the trunk inside of our house when I was a child but I do not really know if this is true. My first clear memory is from our garage, where I used to go and open the trunk and look through the things that were inside of it: old newspapers, forks and spoons, and some things that used to belong to my grandmother. Later, when I was at school, the trunk was used as storage for my schoolbooks. These books were still there when the trunk came into my possession in 2012. Entanglement with the trunk emphasizes the meaning of childhood memories, and the fact children seem to incorporate more-than-human elements into their everyday doing and being (Kuusisto and Savolainen 2016).

Even though I do not remember the trunk ever being inside of our house, I argue that it was an important family artifact, a material object that possesses affective power, even though it is not a "happy object" (Ahmed 2010), nor has it always been on display or continuously present (for more on absent objects, see, e.g., Čeginskas 2024). For my father, it was important because it was one of the few items he had by which to remember his mother, with whom he was very close. For my grandmother and my father, the trunk was connected to their difficult memories of losing their home. Maybe the reason why my grandmother wanted to give the trunk away in the first place was that it stood as a testimony of her past experiences (see also Kajander and Koskinen-Koivisto 2023). However, it was probably my mother who did not want the trunk to be inside, because it was not an object that had aesthetic value. On the contrary, the roughness of the trunk may have highlighted the poorer background of my father and the sometimes-uneasy relationship with the mother-in-law.

Indeed, one may duly ask what kinds of material objects are cherished and why. Anthropologist Janet Hoskins (1998, 7–8) calls personally meaningful possessions biographical objects. A biographical object has different levels. For instance, at the temporal level, the object grows old. The object may become worn and fall to pieces even during its owner’s lifespan. At the spatial level, meanwhile, the biographical object limits the concrete space of its owner. For example, the trunk as a large and heavy object requires space and placing it demands careful considerations. There are also connections between material objects and identities. Anthropologist Daniel Miller (2008, 286) writes that “people exist in and through their material presence.” He underlines that objects can tell us more about the nature of relationships than people can. Especially intimate objects, such as clothes, jewelry, and porcelain dishes, are often endowed with the qualities of persons. Very often biographical objects are also affective objects:

things that operate with materials [to gain] their emotive qualities through participation within either the unusual, spectacular, dramatic event, or conversely, the ordinary, routinized, habitual activities of everyday life. Affective objects are simultaneously transient and pre-existent, they can be seen as generational, present, momentary, enduring, repetitive, frozen or as anticipated. (Conlin Casella and Woodward 2014, 104–5)

The trunk is certainly important to me. I received the trunk in 2012. My mother and father were moving to a smaller flat and my father asked if I could take the trunk. I immediately said yes, even though I knew we could not have it inside our house because of the mold. I emptied the trunk, going through my old schoolbooks when I found them inside it. Because of its size, it was difficult to transfer it to our home, and my sister kept it for me for a couple of years. When I finally got it home, I placed the trunk in a children’s playhouse and forgot it there for years. Every time I looked at it, I remembered the promise I had made to my father: I will take it. When my father died in 2019, the meaning of the trunk increased: I felt it was the only concrete thing I had left from my father’s side of the family. The trunk is an example of autobiographical materiality, which entails sensory elements, and carries meanings and stories that in turn constitute identities (De Nardi 2016; Kajander and Koskinen-Koivisto 2021; Koskinen-Koivisto et al. 2024).

Human–Material Belongings

It is 2020. When I carry the trunk outside, it feels heavy. I imagine it is full of flowerpots and other gardening stuff, but when I open it, it is totally empty. Only a spider has gone inside, then died in its own web. Seeing the spider web slowly moving in the wind, I feel overwhelming sadness, and this feeling is very embodied: breathing feels difficult, and I need to sit down for a while. On top of all the sadness is the death of my father just a few months before. I start crying. I cry for a while, but then I start thinking that there is more to this sadness, something very difficult to grasp, impossible to put into words. When I look inside the trunk more closely, I see a piece of wallpaper at the bottom that was in my room when I was a child. This feels like a message from the previous owners. What are they trying to say? Are they saying to me this is also your trunk, you are one of us, you belong to this family, you carry on our histories, you tell our stories? (Personal notes, February 2020)

The trunk is not a typical family treasure. It is not only a personally meaningful object but an object that has been “traveling” with our family for decades. The trunk is not a material object that displays a moment when my family relations were closest to the “ideal,” nor is it an object that recalls the family’s happiest moments (Ahmed 2010; Green and Luscombe 2019, 648). On the contrary, the trunk represents a very traumatic turning point in my family’s past, as it both symbolizes and carries collective and cultural meanings of a trauma, the forced displacement of the Karelians, and thus supports the diaspora narrative of the Karelian community (Grünthal and Korjonen-Kuusipuro 2020). The trunk is a transgenerational object that carries meanings, memories, and identities of individuals from three different generations across spaces, places, and times (see also Povrzanović Frykman 2024, 20–21; on the material-affective entanglements in family memory, see [Chapter 11](#)).

Knowing with the trunk has made me think about the Karelian community and my Karelian heritage and identity, which highlights the power of autoethnography—knowing from the inside. The evacuation and resettling of Karelians and other evacuees after World War II were full of traumatic experiences, and there are still silences attached to these events (see also [Chapters 5](#), [10](#), and [11](#)). There are two strong narratives of displacement: The first, the national narration, focuses

on the loss of national territory and the second, the collective Karelian surviving narrative, stresses the ceded home area and the strength of the Karelian community. This second narration is twofold. On the one hand it stresses the unity of “we displaced Karelians” but at the same time the collective identity strategy defines Karelian people as part of the larger “we” category, that is, the Finnish nation (Korjonen-Kuusipuro and Kuusisto-Arponen 2017). Many people with Karelian heritage have heard stories all their lives (e.g., Seitsonen 2024) but, for me, belonging to the Karelian community came as a surprise when I was about ten years old. I was at school and my teacher asked me if I could tell something about my family’s Karelian background to the whole class. I can still remember my feeling of total astonishment: I did not have a clue what my teacher was talking about. I went home looking like a question mark, and it was only then that my father explained to me what the teacher had meant. I assume the silence around this issue was not deliberate but I remember already wondering why they had not told me anything before. The reason could have been that it was an issue my family members did not think about anymore or that they thought was unnecessary to explain. Or maybe someone had explained it but I had not listened, or I had forgotten it. My siblings are 14 to 18 years older than me, and they knew the whole family history because my grandmother had lived with the family when they were children. After I was born, these stories were not told by anyone anymore. During my childhood, the collective narrations of the Karelian community did not give space for personal or family memories to be discussed publicly, and in my family there were no practices connected to memorializing Karelia. It has only been since the 1990s that more personal memorizing and family stories became a more public and accepted part of Karelian memory culture (Korjonen-Kuusipuro and Kuusisto-Arponen 2017). Interestingly, when I have now talked about the trunk in public, I have heard stories of similar trunks and similar kinds of Karelian belongings.

The often-used concept to describe second-generation experiences is postmemory, developed by Marianne Hirsch (2008). Postmemory describes the relationship of the next generation with the traumatic experiences of the preceding generation that were transmitted to them in such a way that they constitute memories. Silences have a key role in transmission of intergenerational memories (also Leksana 2023), and forced displacements are such a traumatic experience that they are

often surrounded by socially produced silences (Korjonen-Kuusipuro and Kuusisto-Arponen 2017; Winter 2010)—which are very typical in the Finnish context. In my family, traumatic experiences were not talked about with me at all when I was younger. The silence—or silences—was broken after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, when it became possible to visit our lost Karelian home again. From this incident onwards, Karelia and my family history in Karelia were very much talked about and old homes were visited regularly. During this time, the trunk and my grandmother's other belongings also became more visible and discussed. In a way, these material items framed the narratives of our family. Material objects from Karelia triggered our thinking and helped the understanding and adoption of a Karelian identity (see also Green and Luscombe 2019).

Narratives and stories of difficult issues are not only told by words. The short excerpt from my personal notes above illustrates the sensory and affective experiences in the processes of knowing with the trunk. The smell, the heaviness and sitting on the trunk recall many memories, including the place in Karelia that my parents, my siblings, and I visited in 2015. This journey to our roots evoked many memories from the past but it also emphasized how remembering is connected to places, bodily encounters, and material objects (Korjonen-Kuusipuro and Kuusisto-Arponen 2017).

In the process of knowing with the trunk, temporal layers are mixed. Cultural geographer Sarah De Nardi (2020) argues that to explore the complex afterlives of things we need to examine their presence and absence in our perception, because things that have a difficult past may be absent and present at the same time. I have recognized this absence and presence with the trunk too. The trunk has been present in my family for all my life, but at the same time it has been absent—hidden in the garage, in a storage room, or in a children's playhouse. My research has made it present and visible again, and at the same time it has increased my multisensorial understanding of forced displacements and my own sense of belonging. It is this belonging I have tried to capture in [Figure 2.3](#).



Figure 2.3: A collage of photographs and the trunk illustrates the nature of transgenerational affective materiality. The collage combines all three owners of the trunk together: my grandmother Ida, my father as a young soldier, and myself as a shadow taking the photograph. My twofold role is highlighted by the camera. I am a member of the family but also a researcher doing autoethnographic research. Photo: Kristiina Korjonen-Kuusipuro.

Conclusion

This chapter—about the entanglement with my grandmother’s trunk, in which she stored her belongings when she was evacuated from Kurkijoki, Finnish Karelia, after World War II—emphasizes the role of material in shaping and reshaping, constructing and reconstructing family memory. The trunk as a material object crystallizes the moment when people must pack their belongings and leave their home permanently.

Opening the process of knowing-with-materialities, this case study enlightens the active role of material in family memories as well as the meaning-making process of different generations. The material itself transforms over the years, and this transformation or circulation is a natural part of the cycle of human-thing co-becomings and layers to remembering are added by family members of different generations. During the study the trunk became an item I can think about family history with, and thinking with the trunk has been an affective and embodied experience. In a way it has broken my heart, but it has also comforted me, giving me a chance to think and talk about my family history with other family members, and also remember our loved ones who have already passed away.

Besides the most evident function of the trunk (to store and carry items during travel), my aim has been to investigate its more invisible meanings such as the connection to individual and collective identities. I have shown how knowing with the trunk evokes and sustains the memory of the forced displacement of the Karelians. It not only affirms my grandmother’s journey and her personal loss but also my father’s and my own belonging to the Karelian community, as well as the presence of a diasporic identity, which in our case is strongly shaped by discontinuities and the violent rupturing of place relations.

The methodological value of the study is based on the combination of autoethnography, intimate ethnography, and sensory ethnography. By utilizing these methods I was able to scrutinize the embodied side of human-material entanglements and family memory. Writing this chapter has thus been a highly personal and affective task. I agree with anthropologist Ruth Behar (1996, 19), who acknowledges that writing vulnerably can reveal something unpredictable; it feels like opening Pandora’s box. In my case, this meant, for example, thinking about how memories may expose power relations within the family, that is,

whose memories are worth telling and listening to. This points us to how human–material entanglements are at the same time abstract and conceptual but in the form of material elements they are also very concrete. The importance of the trunk is not just personal but also cultural as it carries cultural freight in the European imagination in relation to migration. Trunks have also other cultural uses: They may have been used to store the trousseau, which the bride prepared before marriage.

Conceptually, I have come to better understand the nature of the processes and academic concepts of knowing-with and becoming-with. The two concepts have enhanced the understanding of the relations between material objects, affects, body, memory, and remembering. My study also enhances the concept of autobiographical materiality, which ties together past and present experiences. The trunk is an example of contradictory affective object, which is an important container of material objects, memories, emotions, embodied experiences, silences, childhood memories, and family history, as well as continuities and discontinuities of belongings. Transgenerational human–material entanglements can be contradictory and blurry, not only because of fragmented narratives and the meaning of the object but also because of contradictory affects related to these entanglements across different generations, times, and spaces.

While this entanglement in my family has been in a continuous state of “coming into being” by thinking with the trunk, human and nonhuman beings, texts, discourses, affects, and sensory experiences have opened new avenues to consider the role of materiality in memory and remembering. In these kinds of entanglement, the idea of strict black/white relationships is absent: “there is no fixed dividing line between ‘self’ and ‘other,’ ‘past’ and ‘present’ and ‘future,’ ‘here’ and ‘now,’ ‘cause’ and ‘effect’” (Barad 2010, 264–65). The agency of material objects triggers these relationships falling to pieces. In educational scientist Maggie MacLure’s (2013, 661) words, “agency feels distributed and undecidable, as if we have chosen something that has chosen us.”

Notes

- 1 My research was part of SENSOMEMO research project (“Material and Sensory Memories: Explorations on Autobiographical Materiality”) carried out in the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, 2020–2024 and funded by the Research Council of Finland (grant number 334247).

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CHAPTER 3

Conveyors of Intimate War

Letters in the Intergenerational Transition of World War II Memories in Finland

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Abstract

In this chapter, I examine how Finnish families have remembered World War II through letters written during the war. The war generation kept their letters hidden out of fear of evoking painful memories and due to the difficulty of expressing personal war experiences in the social and cultural context of the postwar era. After the passing of the war generation, letters have become key mementos in family remembrance. Their children have been eager to read them and have compiled them into dozens of anthologies. These anthologies primarily contain letters from romantically attached couples, typically parents of the editors. The war generation's children relate to letters differently than their parents did. Unlike the war generation, they do not read letters as testimonies of hardship but instead connect them to romanticized memo-

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ries of their parents, shaping a more positive memory of the war. The analysis illustrates how family sentiments shape the memory of war.

Introduction

Families pass on memories through narratives. They get together and talk themselves a shared history. Some memories, however, are not easy to articulate. People can bear troublesome or traumatic memories that are avoided or outright silenced in family settings (Hirsch 2012). One of these difficult topics is war, with its suffering and distressing experiences (Ben-Ze'ev et al. 2010). The difficulty of talking about war in families has become a topical issue in Finland, particularly in the last few decades, when the generation that fought in World War II has passed away. As direct links to the war have been severed, historians have turned their focus onto its memory, and several studies have, indeed, confirmed the notion that private war experiences were rarely discussed between generations in postwar Finland (Ahonen 1998; Rantala 2011a, 2011b; Torsti 2011, 2012).

In this chapter, I show that, even if war was not spoken directly in families, its memory was still transmitted in many families through wartime letters. I examine how the war generation preserved their wartime messages as cherished mementos of their experiences and how letters later handed down the family memory of war to new generations. At the same time, I analyze the limitations of letters to convey the memory of the war: In letters the war generation and their children see a very different war.

My material consists of published letter anthologies and letters donated to an archive. The archived letters are from the war letter collection of Tampere University Folklife Archives, compiled since the 1970s through a public gathering of over 80,000 private letters from World War II Finland (Rasila 1984; Taskinen 2021, 375–84). I have also analyzed 50 edited books of wartime correspondence. This is a very popular genre of biographical literature, with over 200 such collections published in Finland after the war, according to the Finna database of the National Library of Finland. In my reading of this material, I concentrate on the introductory sections of letter books and cover letters that donors donated to the archive with their wartime writing. I ask what kind of commemorative meaning letters have had for the war

generation and their children and how letters have been used to transmit the memory of the war.

My analysis touches the family memory of the war from several angles but, even though its central premise is about overcoming silence, I need to emphasize that I say little about trauma or dealing with truly shattering experiences. This is due to the nature of letters as vehicles for everyday communication. Soldiers and civilians wrote letters during the war to stay in touch with their loved ones. Writing was frequent and married couples wrote to each other typically every two days, if not daily. The importance of correspondence was in the regular keeping of touch, which made the actual writing, dialogue, secondary and often mundane. Painful experiences were also typically avoided to prevent causing anxiety for the recipient. Letters reflect the everyday life of the war, not its cruelties (Taskinen 2015, 2024).

The dominant public memory of the war has also remained largely positive owing to Finland's relatively fortunate fate and its significance for Finnish nationalism. The nation was attacked by the Soviet Union in late 1939, leading to the three-month-long Winter War, during which Finland narrowly escaped invasion and the loss of its independence. In the summer of 1941, Finland joined Germany in invading the Soviet Union, and hostilities continued until the autumn of 1944, when Finland disengaged from Germany and signed an armistice with the Soviet Union. This was followed by a small-scale war against the former ally Germany. Between 1939 and 1945 the wars took 96,000 Finns' lives and 430,000 people lost their homes in the regions ceded to the Soviet Union. However, unlike all other Eastern European nations, Finland was never occupied, retained its independence, and suffered only minor (2,000) civilian casualties (Kivimäki 2019, 280–83). As such, the prevailing public memory of the war has been positive. The war has been celebrated as a highlight in Finnish history that served to secure the freedom of the nation (Kivimäki 2012a; Raivo 2004).

My analysis instead examines the family memory of war from the following perspectives. First, family memory is connected to cultural and collective identities (Shore and Kauko 2018). The use of letters throughout the decades reflects the changing image of the war in Finnish culture. Second, family memory is tied to life courses (De Saint Laurent and Zittoun 2018). The opportunity to recount the war through letters became possible only after the war generation and their children were of an appropriate age and, specifically, when the war generation

had itself passed away. Lastly, my analysis concerns the medium of memory transmission, the letter. Their emotional intimacy, a quality making them such attractive mementos today for the children of the war generation, is also their weakness: It made them too sensitive to be shared when their writers were still alive and clouds the distressing and conflicting experiences lived through by the wartime people.

War Generation: Letters as Counter-narratives of War

In the autumn of 1944, Finland and the Soviet Union signed an armistice and hundreds of thousands of Finnish men returned home to their loved ones. This also meant the end of historically prolific letter-writing. The two world wars were historically a time of frequent letter-writing in the countries embroiled in the conflict, and in Finland over a billion deliveries were carried by the field post between 1939 and 1944 (Taskinen 2024, 31). Yet the letters themselves were not lost. Millions of messages that were once avidly awaited, read, and cherished remained in families around the country. It is, of course, impossible to calculate how many letters survived to its aftermath, but if we speculate that one in ten did so—not an unfeasible number, in my view, knowing their immense emotional value—this would have meant that 100 million wartime messages lay in boxes, lockers, and attics around the country. In addition to being invaluable private testimonies of the war and its experience in families, this vast availability has made letters important in the commemoration of the war. They have been present in thousands of Finnish families as their only available firsthand accounts of the war in its aftermath.

The postwar history of letters begins from the war generation's hands. After the war the writers and recipients of the letters themselves had letters in their homes, and they typically also held on to them for several decades until the writers' passing. The huge importance that letters had for this generation during the war is well covered. For close family members separated by the war and in the uncertainty of never seeing each other again, letters were lifelines of relationships and, in the gravest meaning, signs confirming that that a loved one was still alive (Hagelstam 2014; Hanna 2006; Roper 2009; Taskinen 2024). What memories and meanings did letters carry for this generation after the war?

These sentiments can be explored in the letters donated by members of the war generation to Tampere University Folklife Archives in the 1970s and the 1980s. Along with their letters, many donors sent cover letters describing the background and meaning of their correspondence. These messages tell about the lasting significance of letters, which is seen already in the efforts to preserve them. One woman, for example, described how she had carried the letters with her “other treasures,” like watches, rings, and photos, to safety in her only bag when forced to leave her home under threat of the Soviet onslaught during the war, while another described how she had kept letters safe when moving house several times, even if getting rid of them would have been much easier.¹ The possibility of the destruction of letters haunted people’s minds. One woman told how she had tried to dispose of her letters several times but could not bear to do so: “It felt as if something very valuable would have been destroyed, gone forever. A piece of the history of the nation, a fragment of two people’s lives.”²

Letters arouse great emotions in their writers and recipients decades after their writing. Many people described letters as recalling to mind their past experiences and giving them comfort; as one woman who had lost her husband in the war put it, “sometimes when longing overcomes me, I read a few letters ... then I can get consolation in my loneliness.”³ The importance of letters for the war generation arose from this personal connection. Letters were artifacts of their own lives, linking them to their past experiences and loved ones who in many cases had died in the war or in the decades thereafter. As has also been noted in other countries involved in the world wars, letters were particularly important for those who had lost a son or husband in the war (Winter 2006, 104–10).

What made letters valuable for the war generation in the 1970s and 1980s, however, was not only their ability to connect their readers to their memories. It was also that they presented a particular truth about the war, the experience of a common man’s hardship. When describing their letters, only a few donors portrayed the war as a meaningful experience. Much more common were stories about wartime losses and postwar struggles, like the failure of the Finnish government to provide support for injured veterans. When handing over his stack of letters to Annikki Lumme, who was compiling them for a publication, one veteran bluntly stated that “[a]ll we got out of it was a decrepit

body and bitter mind” (Lumme 1975). Donors commonly linked their harrowing experiences to letters, viewing them as evidence of their suffering. They thought that the study of letters would reveal “the agony of ordinary people,” as one woman put it, for which many donors expressed their gratitude.⁴

These bitter sentiments imply that many ordinary people contrasted their letters with the public history of the war (see also [Chapter 11](#)). During this period the war was studied and remembered predominantly as a collective political-military endeavor in which national leaders and military detachments played the leading roles. The private experiences of ordinary people had a decidedly minor role in the historical writing and imaginary of the war. They were almost totally ignored in the scholarly works, and, although soldiers’ frontline heroics were narrated in war novels, their emotional experiences and private relations—and the civilian realm in general—were also completely overlooked in fiction (Kivimäki 2012b, 9–20).

It pointedly describes the nonexistent position of ordinary experiences in the history of war in this period that even the initiators of the war letter gathering of the Folklife Archives did not initially have a clear idea about the research potential of letters. A few years after the start of the collection, Viljo Rasila, a professor of history, wrote that at first he “did not have a clear idea how these letters could be used in research” (Rasila 1984, 23). Remarkably, it took nearly three decades before scholars began to study the collection.

In this cultural environment letters represented a counter-narrative. They portrayed a story that opposed the dominant collective narrative of the time, in this case the national framework of war remembrance. Letters were thus hardly only a private matter; they were viewed through social lenses and stories told outside family circles (Lueg et al. 2020). The donors’ stories of fallen and injured family members suggest that this social meaning was particularly important for those whose lives were particularly harshly hit by the war. These people probably also often represented the political left, which did not wholeheartedly subscribe to the patriotic-conservative rhetoric that dominated the public remembrance of the war and glorified the wartime sacrifices of the Finnish people.

The prevalence of women among the letter donors indicates that letters were also especially valuable mementos for them. This indicates women’s traditionally central role in the transmitting of family

memories (Ahonen 1998, 87; Rantala 2011a, 501), but also their decidedly neglected role in the commemoration of the war. Private war experiences were totally marginalized in the remembrance of the war in these decades, but the soldiers at least had veterans' associations, communities, and publications, like the hugely popular *Kansa taisteli* magazine, to share their frontline anecdotes, unlike women, who lacked companions to discuss shared experiences in private circles (Kivimäki and Männistö 2016, 170). Donating letters to the archive was in this respect comparable to sending one's reminiscences and other autobiographical texts to archives, a practice popular with women; it was meant to unravel and preserve life stories ignored in public accounts of history. Letters offered them a place in history (Latvala 2001, 13).

Concealed Letters

Despite the great value of letters for the war generation, they did not commonly share them with their children or, for that matter, anyone else during their lifetimes. The members of the war generation very rarely published their letters in anthologies, and this was particularly uncommon before the 1990s, when only three men did so (Jäntti 1983; Nygård 1985; Puntila 1972). Nor do the letter anthologies assembled by soldiers' children in later decades or archived letter collections indicate that letters were read in families during this period. On the contrary, they suggest that the war generation kept letters firmly away from their children, who rarely even knew about their existence during their youth. They found out about them most often only after their parents' passing (Äyräpää 1985, 7; Eskola 2001, 10; Tuomisto 2012, 43).

Why did families keep silent on letters? One obvious reason was that many soldiers and their family members did not want to recall any of their wartime experiences in the first place, be it by talking or through letters. They had often faced such painful experiences that reliving them could be distressing even decades after the war (Malinen and Tamminen 2017, 36; Kujala 2007, 24–25). This wish to forget the war was particularly prevalent in the first postwar decades, which was a time when people fed up with years of austerity were reluctant to recount their war memories but instead intent upon forgetting their hardships by concentrating their efforts on work and the future (Kivimäki 2015, 302–3; Nevala and Hytönen 2015, 171–72). Sharing war narratives across generations in families at this point would have

been altogether strange because the offspring of the war generation were still mostly young children. As one editor of his father's letters recalls him saying when sharing war stories with other men, "these things are not for small boys" (Marttinen 2003, 5).

But what about later, when soldiers' children were adults and could be told even grim memories? One reason was that the postwar generation was not interested in listening to their parents' stories. Even more, the messages that the war generation donated to the Folklife Archives in the 1970s and the 1980s suggest that their children were often ill-disposed toward their letters and memories. One woman plainly stated that "young people just laugh at the letters," while another woman revealed that her children did not believe her stories about the war. When the family was together recalling wartime memories, the children said that "there was no such a thing" as the war she remembered.⁵

These accounts seem to refer to the memory conflicts of the 1960s and the 1970s in Finland. During these decades, radical left-wing socialism gained popularity among Finnish youth, which took a critical stance on the patriotic interpretations of the war. Swayed by the Soviet narratives, the young radicals called out Finnish wartime leaders and their cooperation with Nazi Germany, claiming that Finland was not a victim but a culpable protagonist of the conflict. The memory conflict opened up a chasm between youth and the war generation, who commemorated the war in various organizations (Tuominen 1991).

The narratives of young people ridiculing letters indicate that the generational memory clashes also reached Finnish homes and private families. Nonetheless, it is probable that, rather than strictly opposing the memory of the war, most young people simply did not care about it. In the 1970s and 1980s, the children of the war generation were living their early adulthood and intent upon building their own lives. In this stage of life, they had neither the time nor the inclination to delve into their parents' past. This obvious indifference emerges in the stories of those who did know about their parents' letters. A woman who edited her parents' letters into a book recalled that she had known that the letters were stored in a box in her parents' house but that she did not pay any attention to them for decades. Nor, regrettably, could she help her father to record his war memories in his old age. When the father once indirectly proposed this to her, she dodged the request as she was a mother of three and the wife of a man who traveled a lot

owing to his work: “I already lack time for many things that I would like to do” (Kuokkanen 2013, 7).

Letters themselves were also an uneasy medium to transmit memories between living generations. After all, they were not just any scribble about wartime experiences but private communication between close family members that contained decidedly sensitive self-revelations and emotions that they rarely disclosed in everyday lives (Vaizey 2010, 79). One former soldier recalled these challenges when donating letters to the archive. Even in 1976, the war was for him still “a delicate issue” that he thought needed more time to become a communicable matter, while he pointed out that even a frivolous letter was still “a message between two people.”⁶ The reluctance to reveal one’s deepest sentiments led many wartime writers to wish their letters to be destroyed or to be read only after their passing (Gröndstrand 1995, 8; Hänninen 2019, 9; Kiuru 2007, 3).

Memories from Beyond the Grave

The silence on war letters has been broken in the past few decades. Since the 1990s, war letters have become important parts of the public commemoration of the war and vital links in its familial memory.

The prime evidence of the increased use of war letters in the commemoration of the war is their widespread publication. Anthologies containing war letters were not produced at all in the immediate post-war decades and only a few were published in the 1970s and the 1980s. However, from the 1990s onwards these have become extremely common. According to the Finna database, 182 war letter anthologies were published in Finland between 1990 and 2020. This number does not include those presumably much more numerous books, booklets, and transcriptions that were not assigned an ISBN and only circulate in families, some of which have ended up in the Folklife Archives.⁷ The publication of letter anthologies has been constantly increasing to this day. While the number of published letter anthologies in the 1990s was 27, in the 2000s it was 58 and it grew to 85 in the 2010s.⁸

It is certain that one of the reasons for the increased interest in war letters is the changing cultural and political landscape. The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, which made leaning on and worrying about Soviet sentiments unattractive and unnecessary when discussing the war. In the liberated atmosphere that has been called a neopatriotic

turn, the Finnish history of World War II was idealized as a triumph of national unity and commemorated much more openly than in the past. Simultaneously with the neopatriotism and increasingly in the 2000s, the history of war also became more diverse. Women, civilians, private experiences, and war letters themselves that were previously exempt from the imaginary of the war were integrated into the academic writing and popular memory (Hagelstam 2014; Kempainen 2007; Kinnunen and Kivimäki 2018; Tikka et al. 2015).

This changing cultural environment has undoubtedly contributed to the burgeoning interest and, in particular, the commercial publication of war letters. The positive environment to express one's experiences was probably part of the reason why some members of the war generation published their wartime letters after keeping them hidden away for half a century in the 1990s and early 2000s (Kanninen 2001; Kemiläinen 2001; Villa 2006). It also encouraged some members of the war generation to give their letters to their children in their declining years. For example, Elina Hytönen, an editor of her parents' wartime letters, reports that her mother in her old age gave her daughter a stack of letters with a note "Elina—Get to know your mother!" and to her brother, Antti, a stack with a message "Antti—Read history!" Opening the packages after their mother's death, they found that Elina's stack contained her mother's correspondence with her parents and husband from the prewar period, while her brother received their parents' wartime letters (Hytönen 2009, 9).

However, the most important reason for the recent exploration of letters is that this has been a period in which war letters have changed hands. War letter anthologies of the past few decades invariably start with the same narrative: The parents have died and the children have found a box of letters among their belongings. This has led to an exploration of the parents' past and to the compiling of a book. The gathering of these family stories of war by the children of the war generation is the main cause for the upsurge of war letter anthologies in the last three decades. Unlike their parents, the postwar generation has not hesitated to take letters into their hands and transcribe them in order to share their stories in families and even with a wider audience.

The passing of the war generation was a major catalyst for the family commemoration of war letters. One reason for this was specifically the experience of losing a parent. As studies have shown, the death of parent is an event that often encourages a child to look back and

investigate their life and youth (Malinen and Tamminen 2017, 400). The newly rekindled interest in one's parents' past comes up in many letters, coupled with regret about their ignorance at a time when it would have been possible to discuss their family history with their parents (Heikkinen 1995, 5; Hytönen 2009, 9). It also helped that the hectic years of soldiers' children were now over—they had raised their children, retired, and had time on their hands.

The main reason why letters started to be of interest only after the death of their writers was still that the war generation had kept them secret during their lives. Nonetheless, this does not mean that they did not want to bequeath letters to their offspring. On the contrary, they often seem to have wished that, once they were gone, the letters would be specifically passed on to their children. Some said this directly to their children. In a letter anthology of her parent's wartime correspondence compiled in 2007, one woman recalls that, over 50 years before, as a small child, she had already seen her father store the letters in the attic of their home. When she had asked to see the letters, her father had plainly stated that "You can read these once we [parents] are dead" (Kiuru 2007, 3). Parents might also give their children subtle clues about the significance of their letters. Two editors of letters report that, although their parents' correspondence was never read in the family when their parents were alive, they always knew about their existence. The letters were taken along every time they moved house, and from time to time their father "gently" reminded his children about the current location of the letters (Haapaniemi and Nordman 2020, 10).

Some wartime writers had also transcribed letters even if they did not share them with their offspring. Reading her mother's diary after her passing, it was revealed to one woman that the mother had made two long trips to Spain after the death of her husband to write out their wartime correspondence. Before her own passing, she had placed the transcribed letters on the top shelf of her desk, where they were found at her funeral (Kiuru 2007, 4). Meanwhile one war veteran had enrolled in an academy in his eighties to learn to use a personal computer in order to commit his wartime reminiscences to posterity. After his death his daughter opened his laptop and found dozens of files containing her father's memoirs as well as letters that, during his last days in terminal care, he had transcribed and annotated together with his son-in-law (Niemelä and Oikari 2017, 5).

But, even without handing over or organizing letters, the witnesses to the war may have wanted to hand down letters to the next generation. Soldiers' children typically thought that the preservation of the letters had not been an accident. They thought that their parents had valued them highly and wished them to be read by their children once they were gone. As a woman who edited her parents' letters into a book contemplated over the well-preserved messages, "I believe that my parents wanted to remain to their children, grandchildren and following generations a piece of the history of our country, a narrative of love and a beautiful example" (Tunturi et al. 2009, 7).

The act of preserving letters was a choice and, indeed, entailed considerable effort. Holding on to letters for decades and moving them from one place to another required work, and it would have been easier to throw them away. The fact that so many saved their letters indicates that, although confiding their intimate history might have been difficult when alive, the war generation wished their story to be eventually told. It could be that the very intimacy of letters, the thing preventing their revelation when alive, was the reason why the war generation wished to pass them on. In wartime messages people had exposed their most genuine side, their inner self that was difficult to reveal later during mundane life.

The Transformed Meaning of Letters

War letters have received a new life in the hands of the postwar generation. Papers that were stored in attics for half a century are now eagerly read, commemorated, and contextualized in families in numerous ways. In addition to reading letters, many have transcribed them for easier shareability, while some have written summaries of their contents. The most diligent have compiled them into published or self-printed books. These publications focus on letters but they are not limited to their transcriptions. Books of letters are fundamentally small biographies and family stories. They begin by describing their writer's background, follow them to their wartime correspondence, and end with their stories in later life. In between letters, there is supplementary material like photographs, newspaper cuttings, and commentaries, some of which are based on correspondents' own recollections. Many editors have also studied the national and military history of the war. They have put letters into a wider context with research literature, and

some have even gone to archives to study letter writers' wartime trajectories from the military records.

The producing of letter anthologies was often a shared communal effort by several family members. Many publications were put together jointly by siblings—soldiers' daughters and sons—and their children regularly assisted them in the work. An intriguing example of a collective effort is the organization of the correspondence of a childless wartime couple conducted by the wife's sister's children and grandchildren. They divided their aunt's and uncle's 1,668 letters and postcards between four families, where they read and wrote down the main topics of each letter. This joint effort on the part of several families and generations produced a near-daily chronicle of the couple's wartime experiences and took, according to their calculations, a total of 230 hours of collective work.⁹

As can be sensed from the content of the letter books, the meaning of letters for the postwar generations is not the same as it was for the correspondents themselves. First, at the heart of them is the memory of people. Memories of husbands and sons were of course an important reason to preserve letters for those mothers and wives of the war generation who had lost their loved ones in the war. Yet this meaning is central in letter books. They have been compiled by the children of the war generation to commemorate their mothers and fathers after their passing. Letters have been an exploration of one's parents' youth and lives that, quite often, were unknown or unfamiliar before; as one woman put it, "Letters gave me an opportunity to see the FATHER and MOTHER behind the masks" (Gröndstrand 1995, 7).

Second, letter books are about their editors, the children of the war generation. They commemorate their parents' lives but they also use letters to understand their own experiences. This incentive was most important for those beleaguered by the war, such as those who lost their fathers and those evacuated as war children to Sweden. One of them writes how she had previously felt that her childhood was "all in pieces" and buried experiences and emotions: "Sometimes I have felt as if I did not even exist at all then." Reading her parents' correspondence encouraged her to finally face her "war child self" and gratify her need to understand "what I experienced" (Hytönen 2009, 10, 370).

All this is to say that the link between letters and the memory of the war is different and, indeed, less important, for the postwar generation than it was for their parents. A major reason why war plays a

notable role in the letter books is because it was often the only period from which the war generation had left behind autobiographical texts and these were, thus, the only path to childhood memories for their children. Nevertheless, war is still of course an important part of letter books. A powerful reason why the children of the war generation have compiled their parents' letters into collections is that they feel letters cover an essential part of the history of the war. This perspective is superficially the same as the one advocated by the war generation, the experience of ordinary people. Letter books do not just narrate "factual lists of historical research" but "the sentiments of that time as authentic opinions of the contemporary people," as put by Kalevi Heikkinen (Heikkinen 1998, 7).

Yet, even if the postwar generation shares their parents' perspective on the letters, their interpretation of them is different. They do not juxtapose letters against the national narrative and its celebration of the unity and achievements of the Finnish nation, nor do they ponder the injustices that people faced in the war. This is already apparent in looking at the intimacy of letters commemorated by soldiers' children. Similarly, as noted by Margaretta Jolly (2005) on the British letter books of World War II, the letters commemorated by the Finnish people are not representative of wartime experiences. They cover selected parts of it, presenting the war as a unified and mythologized endeavor, be it about national, familial, or communal narrative. In the Finnish letter books of the last few decades, this imagined unity is especially the relationship of writers. Letter books mostly present happy stories, people facing separation and anxiety but eventually getting through their struggles with perseverance and the power of love. Tragic stories of broken relationships and postwar predicaments are absent from letter books for the obvious reason that they have not been deemed worthy of commemoration even if these relationships have left behind offspring.

Even if some adversities are part of letter books, and the war as a whole is of course typically presented in them as a pervasive strain, letter book editors do not contrast them with the collective, patriotic narrative of the war. Rather, they present their letters as a part of it. For the children of the war generation, their parents' wartime struggles are experiences to be remembered and celebrated, heroic sacrifices that guaranteed the freedom of the Finnish nation and the prosperity of their offspring. As one man writes, his incentive to edit his parents'

letters was to remind future generations about their indebtedness to the war generation, without whom “we would be living in miserable Soviet Finland.” He felt that his duty was to pass this story on to his children, grandchildren, and the memory of the nation (Heikkinen 1998, 5–6). The war generation and their children saw the relationship of letters and the public memory of the war from this perspective in a very different light. When the war generation saw letters representing different perspectives and truths about the war than those in the public memory, for their children the difference is merely in the perspective.

These changing attitudes toward letters highlight generational differences in the memory of the war. Clearly, as the eager compiling of letter books shows, war is very important for the children of the war generation. This also came up in Pilvi Torsti’s study of Finnish people’s historical identities conducted in the early 2010s. It revealed that even those Finns born in the late 1940s and the 1950s named the war as one of their key life events (Torsti 2012, 66–67). Nonetheless, the postwar generation seems to have a less intimate and worrisome relationship to wartime experiences. While the war generation preferred to keep their letters and memories secret to protect their offspring and perhaps also themselves, the postwar generation does not hesitate to take up letters or discuss their experiences.

Letters also tell about the blurred relationship of private and public memories of the war. A reason why the postwar generation does not emphasize this difference in the same way as their parents is perhaps that this line no longer exists in the public commemoration of the war. The private experiences of common people and groups previously silenced, such as women and civilians, have been firmly integrated into it as well as into historical research in the past few decades. Yet the absence of conflicting memories may also indicate that they have been forgotten. The postwar generation’s wish to link their parents’ stories to the collective narrative may indicate that they are influenced by the neopatriotic memory turn of the 1990s, in which the romanticized narrative of the Finnish people’s collective heroics became the dominant interpretation of the war. Torsti has found evidence that this positive view is supported particularly by the children of the war generation. Its members, for example, support the notion that Finnish people survived the war without great traumas and downplay cooperation between Finland and Nazi Germany more than the younger generations do (Torsti 2012, 139–40). It may be that soldiers’ grandchildren, who are

more critical of the patriotic narrative of the war, would also interpret letters differently, finding from them, for example, evidence of mental disorders that are a topical issue of their generation. Although soldiers' children and grandchildren look at the war and perhaps also at letters from a different perspective, they both display the same process. For the postwar generation, the war is becoming a cultural memory that is no longer linked to direct experiences (Tepora 2017), much like what has already happened with the Finnish Civil War of 1918 (Jokipii and Liski 2022, 284).

Conclusion

Letters have offered an extraordinary opportunity for the children of the Finnish World War II generation to explore their parents' past. No other events in history have left behind such massive amounts of autobiographical texts of ordinary people than the two world wars. The commemorative meaning of letters has changed as they have been transferred from the war generation to their children. For the soldiers and civilians who took part in the war, letters were a reminder of their personal experiences and suffering. Their children, who did not witness the war firsthand, read letters more positively from a collective angle as mementos of deeds that ensured the survival of the Finnish nation. For them, letters are, above all, memories of their parents.

The commemorative use of letters illustrates how the memory of historical events, such as war, is influenced and shaped by family sentiments. The perspective of war has always been secondary in letters for families. During the war they were already a safe zone of intimacy in which people escaped their fears. The horrendous side of the war is fundamentally absent from their pages. In the face of the war, letters represent good and humane relationships and love, which sustained people cast into unimaginable circumstances. The meaning of letters is today likewise in people. They tell about youth, feelings, and thoughts of fathers, mothers, and grandparents—now gone, greatly missed loved ones—and it just happens to be that these artifacts of their lives are from a time of war. In this sense, letters have been poor conveyors of war experiences. More than altering people's conceptions, they have been objects against which people reflect their assumptions, be they private or cultural. But the commemoration of these people is a worthy

endeavor even if letters do not cover the multilayered and complex reality of experiences behind their pages.

Looking at the numbers of letter anthologies produced, letters are right now commemorated more than ever before. This is connected to the life courses of the children of the war generation. They are now retired and looking back on their own as well as their parents' lives. It is plausible to presume that, when this generation in its turn gives way to coming generations, the interest in letters will decline. Letters have already lost their direct connection to wartime experiences, and when their links to their writers are also severed their significance will diminish.

Notes

- 1 Tampere University Folklife Archives (Kper), wartime letter collection (SAK)/175; 173.
- 2 Kper, SAK/413.
- 3 Kper, SAK/270.
- 4 Kper, SAK/228; 42.
- 5 Kper, SAK/222; 432.
- 6 Kper, SAK/214.
- 7 See e.g., Kper, SAK/480; 503; 538.
- 8 The data was collected using search terms “kirje” (letter) and “sota” (war). The data only includes letter anthologies of Finnish people in World War II and excludes academic works and fictional publications. I thank research assistant Katariina Eskola for conducting the base work for the database.
- 9 Kper, SAK/480.

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CHAPTER 4

Baltic Family Memory, Entangled Histories, and the Question of Solidarity

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Abstract

In this chapter, I examine the entanglement of (past and present) histories, experiences and memories in the context of the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022. The invasion of Ukraine connects to European history of World War II and the Cold War and is intertwined with my personal family history. I am the daughter and granddaughter of Baltic refugees of World War II and grew up with stories of displacement, war, and past injustice. Using an autoethnographic approach, I reveal how family memories can unexpectedly resurface in other contexts, evoking empathy and solidarity within the confines of cultural memory. I argue that family memory is a powerful imaginative and affective resource that helps us interpret current experiences and events in light of the past, and vice versa. This chapter further shows how different memories can interact with and shape each other.

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Introduction

The idea for this chapter started with my personal life: I wondered about my strong reaction when Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022. In the first weeks of the war, I experienced a rapid series of emotions: I felt shocked, horrified, upset, empathetic, and angry. I was not alone in condemning the war and sensing solidarity with the Ukrainian people. It seemed that many Europeans cared more about Ukrainian refugees than non-European refugees. Racism, xenophobia, and indifference shaped this differing reception of refugees, from inside and outside Europe, but this explanation felt too “easy.” Another aspect was the geographical proximity of Ukraine as a direct neighbor to several EU member states, which influenced the perception of the current war as a threat to Europe’s peace, security, and stability (Krastev and Leonard 2022). After 1945 the emerging European Community promoted a new value discourse of peace, reconciliation, democracy, and human rights to overcome the legacy of violent conflicts in the past. Although other violent conflicts have taken place in Europe since World War II (e.g., the Yugoslav Wars 1991–2001), they were commonly perceived as local and marginal to the stability and security of Europe. In 2022, we were again as close to war between NATO countries and Russia as during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, with the potential to unleash World War III. However, this did not explain my emotions and flashbacks to family stories of the past intermingling with the present situation in Ukraine. As I began to pay attention to my emotions, thoughts, and sensory feelings to understand how my reaction to the invasion connected to solidarity, I kept returning to my family history.

The invasion of Ukraine taps into Europe’s history of both World War II and the Cold War. It brings to the surface old fears and repressed memories of Russia’s historical domination of the region (see also [Chapter 3](#)). Although the chosen date of the Russian attack on Ukraine may have been a coincidence, intended to distract the international public during the Olympic Games, it also happened to mark the anniversary of the Estonian Declaration of Independence in 1918. I am the daughter and granddaughter of Baltic refugees of World War II and grew up in a mixed and multilingual Estonian–Lithuanian family in Sweden and Germany. I did not personally experience the trauma of totalitarianism, war, occupation, and forced dislocation but knowledge of it was

transmitted to me by the (un)told stories and fragmented memories of my parents, grandparents, and other Baltic exiles. Although set in a different time and place, the contemporary war in Ukraine unfolds against the backdrop of these memories and touches me more personally. Like a *déjà vu*, it bears uncanny similarities to Baltic experiences and intensifies an uneasy feeling that the Baltic states could fall victim to Russia's geopolitical expansionism at any time, repeating the history that had shaped the lives of my (grand)parents and ultimately my own.

In this chapter, I discuss the interconnection between my family history and my personal response to the war in Ukraine in the broader context of cultural memory. The purpose is to explore what family memory “does” to the next generation(s) who have no personal recollection of past events, not least to evoke solidarity and empathy in contemporary Europe. I draw on autoethnographic approaches to engage with my thoughts and emotions on my family history as part of Baltic (exile) memory culture (for an autoethnographic approach, see also [Chapter 4](#)). Since the 1950s, Baltic exiles have published numerous memoirs and history books dealing with firsthand experiences of those who fled their countries in the 1940s (see Taagepera 2009; Tamm 2016). After 1990, scholars gained interest in the memories of Baltic deportees and post-Soviet life stories (see, e.g., Kirss 2005; Kirss et al. 2004). More recently, the scholarly focus has shifted to post-1990 transnational mobility and labor migration patterns among Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians (e.g., Genelytė 2018; King and Lulle 2015). I am not aware of any scholarly works specifically exploring how memories of totalitarianism, displacement, and exile affect the subsequent generations of Baltic refugees who, like me, were born after 1945 and grew up in the West.

In this chapter, I focus on family memory associated with feelings and knowledge rather than memories of concrete events, stories, dialogues and encounters or photographs and other tangible mementos that serve to enhance memory. I perceive family memories as contextual and affective memories that arise in situations where one's own and acquired memory, past experiences, and their rememory intersect. Family memory can be understood as an affective mnemonic practice between generations that “lives in everyday interaction and communication” (Assmann 2008, 110). It helps to establish and strengthen individual and collective identity positions and practices through social relationships. The stories and memories of past

generations communicate the cognitive and sociocultural bases of societal norms and values that “help us to encode and recall events” (Erl 2011a, 308) and gain understanding of how and why things happen(ed) (see also Assmann 2008, 111; Rigney 2018). Through selective remembering and forgetting, stories embedded in family history provide an interpretive framework to transmit and create intended historical continuities and canonical narratives in the present (see Erl 2011a, 308). Rather than a “faithful” recollection, family memory transmits affective interpretations of the past that bring symbolic meaning to the present and future (see Erl 2011a, 306–7). Even though family stories are a legacy of the past, it is important to acknowledge that “what is told and remembered is often done so to serve the present and future” (Barnwell 2019, 398). Subsequent generations in a family “are not passive recipients of past memories or family histories but actively reconstruct these stories within the contested and shifting political determinants of the present” (Barnwell 2019, 402).

In the following, I first introduce the data and method and then my family history. Next, I show how my family memory resurfaces through rememory and imagination before addressing the relationship between affective family memories and solidarity. Finally, I reveal how the contemporary war in Ukraine and Baltic past experiences represent marginalized history in Europe and interconnect through shared histories and memories.

Data and Reading of Family Memory as Contextualized Rememory

Memory does not need to be contained in a specific story, object, or encounter but often connects layers and elements in an associative way. Sometimes memory is only a feeling with a powerful effect on the individual. My family memory of displacement and exile includes fragments of conversations I had with my parents and grandmother many years ago as well as stories and anecdotes featuring them. It contains memories describing the peculiar political atmosphere during the Cold War that revealed itself in my childhood memories of the Lithuanian and Estonian exile communities and even include memories of my father’s work at the US-financed Radio Free Europe/Liberty.¹ My family memory builds on knowledge about the national histories of the Baltic countries, which I learned at home, within exile communities

or from reading contemporary history as a student and scholar. All these elements, fragments and (untold) stories evoke memories of specific people, episodes, times, and experiences or connect to the fleeting memory of an affective atmosphere or gesture hard to capture in words. Thus, family memory is a combination of individual and collective memories, as well as affect, feelings, and imagination. Despite some missing bits, like an unfinished puzzle, these memories help me to perceive my family story as part of a larger Baltic and European history.

Personal and collective histories shape one's understanding of the past. Family memory is not merely a collection of individual memories but a complex mix of personal experiences, emotions, and imaginations that are situated in a larger historical context. Hirsch's (1997, 2008) concept of postmemory and Rothberg's (2009) concept of multidirectional memory underscore that memory is an ongoing, active process shaped by contemporary factors. Both concepts address how memories can interact and influence each other across generations and groups and foster empathy and dialogue between different histories of violence and suffering without diminishing the uniqueness of each group's experiences. While postmemory focuses on the intergenerational transmission of trauma and its emotional resonance over time through imagination and projection via stories, images, and behaviors (Hirsch 2008, 106–7), multidirectional memory expands on this point by showing how personal memories interact with broader historical and political narratives, thus enabling a dynamic and evolving understanding of the past (Rothberg 2009). Both concepts recognize that memories of trauma can transcend individual or national boundaries. These concepts inform my investigation into the potential and limitations of family memory in evoking solidarity and empathy with others.

In addition, I draw on the notion of rememory to explore the power of family memory, including its potential and limits for evoking solidarity and empathy in a contemporary context. Family memory is linked to processes of rememory, in which past experiences and acquired memories reemerge and constitute “world-making and world-changing moments” (De Nardi 2020, 456, 448). Rememory is acquired memory that is “made up of the interactions of a myriad of factors and imaginaries, past and present” (De Nardi 2020, 459), which need not be traumatic. It refers to the “resurfacing of past and present embodiments, emotions, experiences and attitudes commingling in an

individual's presence in the world and framing perception in the present" (De Nardi 2020, 448). The concept of rememory highlights the embodied effects of family memory on the individual, exploring what family memory does to the subsequent generations and how it can serve as a key factor in evoking empathy and solidarity outside one's own kin, national, cultural, or ethnic group. Unlike memory, which is based on direct experience, rememory involves associations between the past, present and future that allow for shared, reexperienced, and affectively invested recollections. For subsequent generations, rememory can manifest as an intense embodied experience, like a moment of *déjà vu*, that can unexpectedly reanimate family memory passed down through stories, images and emotions (see De Nardi 2020, 456, 457). These moments can create a deep connection between generations that allow individuals to resense and reexperience memories and connect with past traumas or other emotional events, even if they were not directly involved.

I examine my contextual and multilayered memories autoethnographically, taking inspiration from (analytical) autoethnography (Anderson 2004; Ellis et al. 2011) and critical family history (Barnwell 2019; Sleeter 2016). This approach serves primarily to sharpen my reflexive stance and engage more deeply with the layers of experiences, emotions, and memories evoked by the war against Ukraine. Both approaches are complementary in that they regard family memory as grounding a person in the larger sociocultural and historical experience through social relationships and interactions. They acknowledge the relevance of personal and subjective experiences for understanding and interpreting memories as "a living, intergenerational negotiation with various presents, rather than a prized heirloom that is passed from one generation to the next unchanged" (Barnwell 2019, 403).

My analysis is based on a contextual and affective reading of entangled and layered memories that combine family history, emic knowledge of the Baltic exile, and personal feelings. First, I wrote down what feelings I experienced during the first days of the war against Ukraine and how these emotions connected to my family history. I also paid attention to associations between my family memories and Baltic history that were evoked by the events in Ukraine and how my reactions compared to those of my friends, family, and colleagues, noting the differences and similarities. I then created thematic "clouds" on a piece of paper and drew arrows between them to highlight and visualize

connections between different topics, such as memory, family history, war (in Ukraine), Baltic history, Europe, Russia, and feelings. This process enabled me to systematically and thematically analyze my interconnected memories, feelings, and experiences. It helped me organize my thoughts and associations and visually map their relationships (see Čeginskas 2024).

My approach acknowledges and embraces subjectivity as a resource to gain insight into the role of family memory and its recall in the broader context of social relationship, history, and power. A focus on family history has the potential to unsettle cultural memory by drawing attention to what is forgotten or remembered across generations, and why, through the analysis of personal accounts (see Sleeter 2016, 13). An emic perspective can provide insights into how our memory constructions and family history relate to broader social, cultural, and historical contexts and politics (see Barnwell 2019, 399; Ellis et al. 2011, 276). My approach to family history as part of a broader Baltic exile memory goes beyond nostalgia or idealization of the past to explore how memories constitute an interpretative framework for power relations and marginalization. It raises important questions about who has a right to memory in history, whose memories become marginalized, and how this affects subsequent generations (see Delanty 2017; Macdonald 2013).

My Family History of Displacement and Exile

In the autumn of 1944, my mother, Ebba (1931–1995), and her parents escaped Estonia across the Baltic Sea to Sweden, while the journey of my father, Kajetonas Julius (1927–2011), led him from Lithuania to Germany. The experience of exile marked our whole family. Although diaspora is becoming the more common term,² exile captures the specific identity and condition of my family and other Baltic refugees. Exile is forced dispossession and expulsion, not by choice but by political circumstances with no or only limited possibilities for return (Hackl 2017, 57).

The exile identity of the adult generation of Estonian refugees like my grandparents “Nänna” (1904–2000) and “Abbapapa” (1893–1968) was strongly impacted by spatial dislocation from their homeland and loss of home. My grandparents’ escape did not imply a fairy-tale ending but changed their social and political status: from wealthy,

upper-middle-class, respected Estonian citizens with a well-furnished home and fulfilling work to poor, dispossessed refugees and eternal strangers in Sweden who never really felt at home again. Whenever I asked Nänna about her life in Estonia, she soon exclaimed: “First came the Russians, then the Germans and later the Bolsheviks! They took everything – my home, my country, my language! I have nothing left! I don’t want to talk about this anymore!” Nänna’s unwillingness to remember her past made a lasting impression on me as a child, even though I did not yet understand how memories of prewar Estonia brought back memories of major family tragedies, including my uncle’s deportation to Siberia.

My parents met as students at the University of Strasbourg in the early 1950s. They both felt a strong moral and political obligation to fight for the independence of their occupied home countries. My father joined exile Lithuanian cultural and political organizations and joint Baltic committees (on these organizations, see L’Hommedieu 2012), while my mother became the breadwinner. Unlike my grandparents who changed status from Tsarist subjects to Estonian citizens and then refugees, my parents chose to stay strangers and exiles, to remain Estonian and Lithuanian. My father traveled on a stateless document until 1992, refusing to become a citizen of another state. While my mother applied for Swedish citizenship for herself and my siblings for pragmatic reasons in the 1960s, emotional reasons played a role when she applied for an Estonian passport after Estonia regained independence. My parents felt European because they strongly supported the political idea of an emerging Europe but they were also Europeans because Estonia and Lithuania were part of Europe—not of the Soviet Union. Teaching us children their languages, cultures, and histories and taking us to demonstrations and exile cultural activities was another way for my parents to resist the political *fait accompli*. My mother used to say that she had raised my siblings and me to become Lithuanian and Estonian activists. Resistance was envisioned as generational work as most Baltic exiles doubted they would see their countries free during their lifetime. It rooted us into the community of exiles, with collective memories and experiences of political injustice, forced displacement, and loss of national independence.

Affective Family Rememory and Solidarity

I used to listen to my (grand)parents' memories with great interest but primarily as stories about the past, without critical reflection. While many things remain unclear about their actual experiences during the war, their escape and exile, my (grand)parents managed to convey their past experiences through silences and embodied ways of remembering that held as much meaning as the stories they told me. When I saw media images of the overcrowded trains transporting Ukrainian refugees to the West and the destruction following the Russian bombing, I immediately thought about my parents' stories of World War II. My father had told me that on his escape to the West his train was attacked and stopped by fighter bombers, forcing all passengers to flee to the adjacent forest for protection. He did not need to go into details for me to understand the emotional dimension of his specific experience: I could read it in his facial expression and the way he talked. Like when my grandmother cut short her stories by bitterly referring to the "Russians, Germans, and Bolsheviks" who had come one after another and taken everything from her and by extension from us: our home, country, language, and history. It brought back memories of how my mother looked when she retold stories of witnessed violence and cruelty during the war. In these moments she told me more about her experiences than the story itself, by transferring a feeling or sense of an atmosphere I could "see" but not fully relate to.

Imagination offered a complementary resource to my family memory by expanding knowledge and enabling an interpretation of contemporary experiences in light of past memories, and vice versa (Erll 2011b). I had my (grand)parents' stories as well as their silent, embodied memories in mind when watching and reading the reports about Ukraine, which made me transfer both the affective quality and the knowledge embedded in the exile Baltic memories to the Ukrainian context. I associated the images of Ukrainian refugees with the emergence of a new exile community, and I wondered if they were bound to reexperience the same as we did during the Cold War, as if the attack in February 2022 had unleashed a repetition of past events. I was moved by TV images showing Ukrainian children because I projected my own experiences onto them. I thought that it was just a matter of time until the first structures of cultural diaspora were put in place, to teach and preserve Ukrainian history, culture, and language

abroad, as I remembered from my Lithuanian Saturday school. The images of Ukrainian children evoked a strong personal sympathy for their future, which I imagined to be similar to my past.

Family memory is charged with emotion and meaning and can resonate far beyond the emotions and feelings inherent in the narrated stories and memories. In the *Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014), Sara Ahmed analyses the role of emotions for the accumulation of affective value that emerges from repeated cultural and personal exchanges. Her framework of stickiness helps to explain how memories can circulate between people and across generations and thereby “impress” people (see Ahmed 2014, 4, 92). The affective stickiness of family memory depends on the intensity of the memories when we recall them. It emphasizes certain stories, views, and interpretations of the past over others, which can play a role in developing new solidarities and acknowledging parallels and similarities between otherwise unrelated histories (see also Reulecke 2008, 123). Hence, when I see images of the war against Ukraine, I also feel upset about the Russian attack on behalf of my parents and grandparents; their experience renders the contemporary war personally closer than other conflicts.

The news of the war triggered a process of rememory of my family memories, which stimulated my imagination and affective connections and allowed memories and associations to move between the past and present (see Čeginskas 2024; De Nardi 2020; see also [Chapter 11](#)). It helped me to visualize my parents’ and grandparents’ experiences of war and displacement in a modern context, which became reflected in the despair, confusion, terror, and exhaustion that marked the faces of Ukrainian refugees. The media produced a testimony and illustration that rendered my family’s fragmented memories more vivid and relatable through the images and accounts of others. Thus, the war in Ukraine offered a context in which I could imagine my parents’ and grandparents’ unique experiences and fill their memories and stories with new perspectives and meanings to which I could better relate. The media coverage encouraged me to “travel” back and forth between the stories of my family’s past and the present war in Ukraine in my imagination (see Erll 2011b, 11). The experiences of my parents and grandparents were no longer isolated memories or representative of Baltic history but entered into a dialogue with current Ukrainian experiences. The media reports now gave a sense of what it must have been like then and brought new understandings of those memories that

added depth and affective quality to the Ukrainian experiences (see Gray 2013, 88–89, 94). While this strengthened my connectivity with my (grand)parents, the media coverage enabled me to interpret the war in Ukraine through the lens of my family history.

Notions of solidarity and empathy commonly develop on the perception of familiarity in social and cultural relationships. Kinship ties and shared memories, everyday practices, and common norms and values allow individuals to imagine a sense of communality based on mutual concern and commitment (see Kendall et al. 2009, 47, 151). Practices of solidarity and of putting oneself in others' shoes inevitably relate to the past but what memories stick and what connections are experienced most intensely impacts the development of solidarity (see Ahmed 2014, 54). Family memory gives an affective testimonial status to the past and establishes sociocultural frames and a position from which people can act intentionally: by learning from the past, sensing responsibility for others, and eventually producing empathy, solidarity, and understanding (see Erll 2011b, 5). The experiences of my family in the past and Ukrainians in the present become entangled through interconnected histories, associations, and interpretations, and enter into dialogue (see Kendall et al. 2009, 157; Rothberg 2009).

While I am not in the position of Ukrainian refugees, I recognize their experiences in the current war through the memories of my parents and grandparents. My family's war-related traumatic experiences no longer reflect an isolated family memory or the memory of Baltic refugees of World War II. Rather, I perceive the war in Ukraine from the perspective of someone whose family had similar, but of course not the same, experiences (see Rothberg 2009). This sense of implication awakens my sympathy, understanding, and concern for the experiences of Ukrainians today. In this regard, family memory can be considered as an affective factor to develop empathy and solidarity with people who are otherwise unrelated by kinship, history, or cultural bonds, or disconnected through time and space.

Like memory, solidarity is confined to specific frames of interpretations, expectations, and contexts that reproduce certain norms, values, and practices that reinforce the dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion (Kendall et al. 2009, 8, 47). The norms and values shape uneven expectations of connectivity and communality that govern social relationships and facilitate notions of tolerance, concern, and empathy (or their lack) through ongoing exchanges and encounters (see Kendall et

al. 2009, 8, 98). This reveals that the capacity of memory to evoke solidarity is limited to sharing relatable past experiences. Hence, family memory runs the risk of transferring a narrow interpretation of who is (not) entitled to receive solidarity based on the specific expectations and sociocultural frames transmitted by the stories of past generations.

Interconnected Past and Present

The Ukrainian experiences today resonate with my parents' and grandparents' past experiences of loss, violence, forced displacement, and exile. According to the UNHCR (2023), one third of Ukraine's total population has been displaced by the war so far. An estimated 5.9 million Ukrainians are internally displaced, while more than 8 million people have left Ukraine for neighboring countries. The Russian invasion has created Europe's largest refugee crisis since World War II, with an estimated 17.6 million people in Ukraine in need of humanitarian assistance.

My family history must be understood in the context of the Baltic collective memory of foreign invasion, totalitarian regimes, political oppression, and injustice during and after World War II. My parents and grandparents belonged to the approximately 300,000 Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians who fled the approaching Red Army and Soviet annexation of their home countries in autumn 1944. The secret protocol of the German–Soviet Non-Aggression (“Molotov–Ribbentrop”) Pact of August 23, 1939, divided Central and Eastern Europe (including Finland) into two spheres of influence between the two totalitarian regimes. This led to three subsequent occupations of the Baltic states: in 1940–1941 by Soviet Russia, in 1941–1944 by Nazi Germany, and from 1944 again by the Soviet Union. The alternating German and Soviet occupations and military conflicts resulted in the loss of over 20 percent of the total prewar population in the Baltic states. The first mass deportations took place in June 1941, when approximately 45,000 people were sent to labor camps in distant parts of the Soviet Union. Families were separated and many died of exhaustion, hunger, and disease. The second Soviet invasion, in autumn 1944, led to a mass exodus of Baltic people to Western European countries. The Yalta Conference (February 4–11, 1945) was seen by the Baltic peoples as a moral and political betrayal by the Western powers: Postwar self-government, as enshrined in the Atlantic Charter of 1941, did not apply

to the Baltic states, and made it impossible for Baltic refugees to return. Consequently, larger exile communities were established in Germany, Sweden, the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia, and South America. The Baltic states were the only invaded countries whose independence was not restored directly after 1945 but only in 1991 and 1992 (see, e.g., Perchoc 2019; Snyder 2010; Taylor 2020).

After 1945, the Holocaust became a cornerstone in Western memory discourse, symbolizing the shared experiences of war and suffering, while the Soviet Russian memory discourse focuses on the Red Army's glorious resistance against the German fascist regime (see Kucia 2016; Macdonald 2013, 190). East Central Europeans (including Baltic and Ukrainian peoples) had specific memories of both totalitarian regimes during and after World War II that became reduced to a marginal memory elsewhere in Europe (see Mälksoo 2009). Although these experiences shaped the lives of those who stayed, fled, or were deported in equal measure, they do not figure in the two dominant (but divergent) Western and Soviet Russian memory discourses. Any memory of Baltic (and Ukrainian) identities and histories was suppressed during Soviet rule in these countries by imposing the Russian language, introducing a new narrative of the past, destroying prewar national symbols and sites, and encouraging mass immigration from Russia and other Soviet countries. The unwillingness of the Russian authorities to acknowledge other interpretations becomes visible in the approach to the Soviet past. Although ethnic Russians also suffered in the Soviet system, no official memorials of the victims of the Red Army or the Stalinist purges exist to this date in Russia. Memorial, an independent human rights organization founded by known Russian political dissidents to preserve the memory of victims of political repression and totalitarian regimes, was closed and liquidated as a legal entity on April 5, 2022, following government pressure.

Like the Baltic states and Finland, Ukraine declared independence following the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917 but was forced in 1921 to become part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The Ukrainian people experienced a greater number of victims than the Balts in the 20th century in the great famine Holodomor (1931–32) and purges in the early years of Stalin's regime, the alternating annexations and exploitations by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, the enslavement and killing of the civil population during World War II, the denial of independence, forced displacement and the establishment

of a large exile community abroad, and finally the 1986 nuclear catastrophe of Chernobyl (see Snyder 2010). While the Federal Republic of Germany has officially broken with its National Socialist past, the Russian Federation continues to affirm its historical links with the Tsarist Empire and taps into the Soviet discourse of liberation from fascist rule to justify the current war (see kremlin.ru 2022; Rice-Oxley 2022; Veidlinger 2022). This is where the contemporary discursive framing of the war against Ukraine intersects with my family memory, which is intertwined with the Baltic struggle for independence and sovereignty, and where the past and present become entangled.

The memories of both Ukrainians and Balts play a marginal role in the memory cultures of Western Europe and (Soviet) Russia. After World War II, Ukrainian and Baltic interests and histories were considered insignificant to the geopolitical interests of the greater powers. Growing up in Western Europe, I regularly needed to explain who Estonians and Lithuanians were, where the Baltic states were situated, and how our family came to live outside these countries. As a child, I was surprised to learn that for most Westerners my parents' home countries had ceased to exist. However, many Baltic families continued to transmit private stories of the "golden age of independence" and memories of family separation, suffering, and resistance to challenge the officially mandated interpretations of the past in both their home and host countries during the Cold War (see Perchoc 2019, 682–83; Taylor 2020). The contemporary Ukrainian struggle against the Russian invasion and their courage and determination to win the war remind me of stories about the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian struggle against Sovietization and occupation. The same discourse of heroism that is applied to the Ukrainians today was used about the (futile) efforts of armed resistance in the Baltic states that continued until the mid-1950s. While largely unnoticed by the Western public, it was commemorated in Baltic homes and exile circles and reinforced the collective narrative of Baltic victimhood, forgotten in an international geopolitical power game (see, e.g., Tamm 2016).

The attack on Ukraine is connected to Russia's history of colonization in the Tsarist and Soviet eras (see Annus 2012). Both are primarily a history of a millennium of Russian national statehood, conquest, and Russification of the annexed peoples and countries. Russian colonization tied in with the collective narrative of historical struggle for freedom and national independence based on experiences with

foreign conquest and domination in the Baltic countries, a theme first promoted during the national awakening in the 19th century (see Kasekamp 2010; Perchoc 2019; Tamm 2016). In the current war, the Ukrainians have taken to calling the Russian invaders “Orcs” (based on J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy) and “Rashids” (a combination of the words Russian and fascists) to underline their experiences of violence, destruction, and inhumanity (see MacLachlan 2022). I cannot relate directly to these experiences; they remain too remote from my own reality. However, the meanings of these terms in the Ukrainian context are immediately understandable to me. We used to speak in similar ways in the Baltic exile communities, referring to Russians as “aggressors” and speaking of the “barbaric,” “inhumane,” or “hideous” practices of the Soviet regime, the Red Army, and the secret service KGB. My parents referred to the Russian history of “imperialism” and “chauvinism,” by which they meant domination, forceful integration, and Russification. Their understanding of the past was widely shared through historical publications in the Baltic exile communities (see Annus 2012; Taagepera 2009; Tamm 2016).

In exile circles, memories and stories of the past served to contrast the experience of prewar independence, democracy, and rule of law in the Baltic countries with Russia’s (alleged) lack of experience and understanding of “core European values” resulting from the seamless transition from Tsarist to Soviet oppression. Generations of Baltic (exile) families were instilled with a sense of moral superiority over the Soviet system (Annus 2012, 26) and with the moral obligation to continue the struggle for our countries’ freedom. The exile communities’ historiography and culture of remembering idealized prewar national independence emphasized their countries’ historical and cultural ties to Western Europe and resistance against the Soviet system (see, e.g., Taagepera 2009; Tamm 2016). The establishment of authoritarian regimes in the three Baltic countries under Päts (Estonia), Ulmanis (Latvia), and Smetona (Lithuania) in the 1930s and the treatment of marginalized minority groups were conveniently forgotten, and only the golden times of economic prosperity, personal well-being, and national independence remembered (on the authoritarian shift in the Baltic states, see Kasekamp 2010, 106–12; Taylor 2020).

The experience of the present and past are interrelated in that the present tends to distort our recollection of the past, while the past shapes our experience of the present (Connerton 1989, 2; Macdonald

2013). This makes it impossible to objectively separate our perception of past and present, as in the relation between my family memories and the current war in Ukraine. My family history cannot be viewed isolated from the national histories of the Baltic countries and their relation to Russian and European history. It connects to similar narratives of struggle against the Soviet regime in Ukrainian, Belarusian, and other exile communities. Likewise, the contemporary war against Ukraine is situated in a European context that entangles multiple individual and collective memories, histories, and identities in a very complex way (Delanty 2017; Rothberg 2009).

I perceive an interconnection between the contemporary war in Ukraine and the past experiences of the Baltic people, based on interconnected narratives of falling victim to geopolitical expansion and colonialism across time and space. This perception neither diminishes the current suffering of Ukrainians nor makes the Baltic and my family's past experiences more meaningful. Rather, it allows me to place the current conflict in a context to which I can better relate through my family memories (see Hirsch 2008; Rothberg 2009). My family memory is connected to specific histories and structures that interact with other memories and experiences. In light of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the emotions and (un)told stories passed down through my family allowed me to recognize historical and social parallels between the Ukrainian and Baltic experiences (see Hirsch 2019; Rothberg 2009). Family memory stimulates imagination, fostering connections and enabling the recognition of analogies between the experiences of different individuals and groups. The stories and silences within family memory provide knowledge about past events, shaping interpretive frameworks that help subsequent generations (not to) feel solidarity with others (see Hirsch 2019).

Family memory sparks imagination and associations between diverse experiences and memories of different individuals and groups. The stories and silences embedded in family memory can convey knowledge about past events, shaping social and cultural interpretive frameworks that foster solidarity between generations and with other groups (see Hirsch 2019). Family memory not only emphasizes the complex and emotional connections between generations but also illustrates how memories can influence each other across contexts and times, emphasizing the multidirectionality of memory (Rothberg 2009). The discrepancy of memories of the past unfolding in the Baltic

case can be transferred and applied to other contexts that address the relationship between marginalized and dominant memories. This approach cultivates empathy and understanding for the traumatic experiences of others without appropriating their experiences or elevating the significance of our own group's suffering (Hirsch 2019, 173, 174).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined my family memories of forced displacement and exile that suddenly and unexpectedly resurfaced as flashbacks in the context of the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022, reinforcing my solidarity with the Ukrainian people. While the Ukrainian war and my Baltic family history are different stories, they are linked through processes of rememory (De Nardi 2020) that weave a complex web of histories, memories, associations, imaginations, and affect. I experienced the rememory of my family history as embodied moments that enlivened my (grand)parents' memories and past experiences while simultaneously connecting them to other stories, experiences, people, places, and times. Thus, family memories can act as emotional and dynamic catalysts (Čeginskas 2024) that allow imagination, affective intergenerational connections, and stories to move between the past and present in interaction with other memories, associations, experiences, and feelings (see De Nardi 2020, 457; Hirsch 2008; Rothberg 2009). The contextualization of my family memory within Baltic history embeds me in national interpretations of the past that continue to be relevant (to me) in the present. In the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this connection helps me perceive historical, social, and structural analogies between otherwise disparate experiences and histories that can play a role in the development (or lack) of solidarity in social relationships.

Russia's military attack on Ukraine has evoked European solidarity with the Ukrainian people for various reasons, rooted in different approaches: the (Western) European value discourse of peace, dialogue, and stability, a cosmopolitan sense of solidarity and humanitarian aid, and shared memories and past experiences in a specific East Central European context. Russia's war against Ukraine can be interpreted as a contemporary "memory war" (Mälksoo 2018, 531), in which conflicting interpretations of current events are based on divergent (Western,

Russian, and East Central European) memories of the past. Past Baltic and contemporary Ukrainian experiences of war, oppression, and forced displacement, then, can be understood in the context of dominant and “liminal” memory cultures in post-1945 Europe (see Mällsoo 2009, 67). They concern the struggle of marginalized communities of memory for a broader recognition of their specific experiences and memories at European and international levels.

Family memory can address things that are invisible, yet important and resonant through affects and feelings (Barnwell 2019; Sleeter 2016). It is acquired memory contextualized by cultural memory. Research into family memory can be fruitful for reflecting on the “memorability” (Rigney 2018, 243) of certain discourses of the past and their intergenerational transfer in rememory. Some memories stay while others are forgotten and, where memory fails, imagination often takes over. A subjective and reflexive approach sensitizes us to specific narratives, discourses, and imaginaries underlying national histories and power relations. Case studies in family history help uncover how power relations and normative cultural memory have been shaped by social relationships in the present (Barnwell 2019, 398). Their comparison allows us to examine how societies transmit specific memory discourses through intergenerational remembering, forgetting, and silence. A focus on family histories raises awareness of how these practices impact the struggles to make marginalized memories and histories recognized in broader memory contexts, and how past experiences remain relevant in the present by creating and challenging (canonical) narratives (Erll 2011a).

Family memory is an interesting place to start to explore marginal memories, and from there to discuss historical power relations, experiences of difficult history (Macdonald 2013) and what constitutes the “European” cultural memory complex. According to De Nardi (2020, 458), rememory “may usefully probe into events that scarred memory without tangible remnants in the present but that emerge nevertheless through perception.” A focus on family history therefore allows us to probe dominant memory cultures, to identify power relationships, and to reveal cultural and social bases of memory practices and specific images of the past that affect solidarity. This approach makes it possible to explore how the past is interpreted and remembered in families and which stories are forgotten or marginalized to make the past “tella-ble” on a national and transnational (European) level.

Russia's military attack evoked solidarity within a European value discourse of peace and international security among people who have no family history of war, violence, and forced displacement. However, these experiences are characterized by "qualitatively different situations and predicaments" (Malkki 1995, 496) that have their origin in distinct historical, political, and social causes and create diverse emotional and intensities of experience and with chosen others. Family memory is a powerful resource of imagination and affect within specific historical, sociocultural, and political frames that can be used to perceive an entanglement of histories and connect multidirectional memories (Delanty 2017; Rothberg 2009). The interplay of cultural memory and family memory explains the emotional and affective impact of these memories on the subsequent generations (see also Hirsch 1997). In my case, solidarity with Ukrainians is based on the recognition of parallels with my (grand)parents' past experiences and memories, and on the marginalized position of both perspectives in public discussions and debates in Europe. Family rememory can evoke empathy and (transnational) solidarity but often only within the framework and boundaries set by cultural memory. It can but need not construct solidarity outside one's own family, national, or interest groups. Instead, it can travel without effect or become misused in shaping exclusionary memory (Erl 2011b, 15; see also Assmann 2008, 111; Kendall et al. 2009, 47). The affective legacy of family stories, which anchors the individual in the past and in a specific social context, limits the transfer of solidarity to all groups in the present. Acts of solidarity can "disappear at those moments when exchange becomes difficult or derogated" (Kendall et al. 2009, 98), which happens to affective intergenerational memory over time (Assmann 2008, 111). Thus, solidarity requires meaningful personal encounters, knowledge, and continuous reflection on the perspectives of others to overcome sociocultural biases and mnemonic confinements that shape our social relationships and practices.

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Notes

- 1 During the Cold War, RFE/RL broadcasted to Soviet satellite countries in East Central Europe and the Balkans (RFE), and to the Soviet Union, including the Baltic states, Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia (RL) (see hoover.org).
- 2 On the scholarly and public development of the terms exile and diaspora, see e.g. Hackl 2017.

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PART II

Trauma and Resilience

CHAPTER 5

Journeys of Displacement Childhood, Family, and Memory in Wartime Karelia

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Abstract

This chapter examines how Finnish Karelian evacuees and Soviet Karelian refugees remember their World War II displacement journeys, with a focus on the central role of family and care. Drawing on oral histories and written narratives, we argue that displacement journeys are remembered not only as a physical dislocation but as emotionally and socially embedded experiences. Memories of vulnerability, resilience, and embodied sensations—such as cold, fear, and fatigue—are deeply intertwined with recollections of familial presence and care. Despite different legal and political statuses (evacuees versus refugees),

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both groups' memories emphasize the journey as a formative rupture in childhood and family life. These memories are shaped by intergenerational storytelling and are often revisited in later life as part of a broader process of meaning-making. Ultimately, we conceptualize the journey as a temporal, social, and narrative structure through which displaced individuals understand their own and their family's experiences of war, loss, and survival.

Introduction

This chapter examines memories of displacement journeys during World War II, focusing on Finnish citizens who resided in the region of Karelia until it was ceded to the Soviet Union at the end of the war, and Soviet Karelians who lived in Russian Karelia and were Soviet citizens but had close links to Finland. Based on first-person narratives, we explore how both groups of Karelians remembered their displacement journey at the level of family and other care relations, and how displacement affected their familial roles. We argue that for these Karelians, journey memory is, fundamentally, family memory, shaped by social and embodied experiences and centered on the roles, care, and emotional support provided by family members during displacement. For those who experienced the war as children, memories of displacement and movement are inseparable from the presence—or absence—of familial figures who offered safety amid chaos. Embodied memories, such as feelings of pain, cold, and exhaustion, were intertwined with memories of vulnerability, support, and solidarity. In narrating the journey, individuals not only recounted their own experiences but also made sense of displacement through the remembered and imagined experiences of parents, siblings, or other caregivers.

In our chapter, we refer to the displaced Finnish Karelians as “evacuees,” as they were citizens evacuated by the Finnish government, and the Soviet Karelians as “refugees,” as in Finland they were regarded as foreigners, that is, noncitizens. This distinction is necessary, as the conditions for displacement were different for evacuees and refugees. While the Karelian evacuees' journeys were population transfers organized by the Finnish state, refugees from Soviet Karelia left the Soviet Union by their own decision to follow the retreating Finnish army at the end of the war. This difference in the way in which the journeys were institutionally organized necessarily influenced the

experiences of journeying and settling in the new place. At the same time, as we show in this chapter, at the level of experience, there were commonalities, too, particularly with regard to the meaning of family in the journey memories.

Karelia—or, rather, several Karelian regions—lies on both sides of the border between Finland and Russia. It has often been labeled as an area between the East and the West, highlighting the linguistic, religious, political, and cultural differences between Europe and Russia. The state border has been moved on several occasions since the 14th century but until the 1920s it remained mostly open for people to move and interact across. Living in the border area, the Karelian population has been subjected to violent conflicts and forced migration in different time periods (Kokkonen 2012). During World War II, most Karelians on both sides of the border were forced to leave their home region twice. The first time, in 1939–1940, after the war between Finland and the Soviet Union broke out, 410,000 Finnish Karelians were evacuated. At the same time, the Soviet Karelians who lived in the border region were evacuated eastward. In the summer of 1941, a new war began, when Finland and Germany attacked the Soviet Union and crossed Finland's eastern border as part of Operation Barbarossa. The Finnish army occupied the region that was earlier ceded to the Soviet Union and advanced to occupy parts of Soviet Karelia. Around 85,000 people lived under Finnish occupation until the end of the war in 1944, whereas in other parts of Soviet Karelia 500,000 people were evacuated to Komi and Siberia (Nikulina and Kiseleva 2007). After 1941, 70 percent of the evacuated Finnish Karelians returned to their home region but they were forced to leave for the second and final time in 1944 (see, e.g., Danielsbacka et al. 2020). Soviet Karelians, namely ethnic Karelians and other nationalities but not Russians, could choose whether to stay in their home places or leave for Finland. Altogether, 2,800 people crossed the border with the Finnish troops (Hyttiä 2008, 313; Laine 1982, 357). After a few weeks in Finland, several hundred of them returned to the Soviet Union.

These were significant population displacements in World War II Finland. Karelian evacuees alone represented about 11 percent of the whole population. The extent to which these displacements have been publicly commemorated in Finland varies considerably by group. Karelian evacuations have figured prominently in the public remembrance of World War II. Evacuated Karelians were active in founding

associations, events, newsletters and papers, and other media through which they could share the memories of the lost home. The evacuation journey has been a central feature in these community memory forums, and it plays a central role in the “great Karelian narrative” of settlement and adaptation (Kuusisto-Arponen 2008, 2009). In the case of Soviet Karelian refugees in Finland, there is no public memory culture regarding their World War II experiences, including their displacement journeys. For fear of becoming repatriated to the Soviet Union under the demands of the Allied Control Commission in Finland (1944–1947), some sought asylum in Sweden, while others tried to resettle in Finland on the quiet (Jalagin 2021a, 2021b). Despite their shared origins, thousands of refugees from East Karelia (i.e., Russian Karelia) to Finland in 1918–1922 and the World War II Soviet Karelians never formed a cohesive community but instead sought to integrate and blend into the population of Finland. During the Cold War years, keeping a low profile served their political and social position best.

These differences in the collective memory culture (Koskinen-Koivisto and Seitsonen 2019) of displacement also affected family remembrance. Karelian evacuees developed a rich narrative tradition, particularly concerning their evacuation journeys, through which individual evacuees could recount individual and family memories. By contrast, refugees from Soviet Karelia did not share a similar tradition. Regardless of these differences, the postwar national narrative generally emphasized survival, rebuilding, and perseverance, while difficult and often traumatic memories of war and displacement were silenced within families (e.g., Laurén and Malinen 2021; Näre and Kirves 2007). It was not until the late 20th century, in the post-Cold War era, that the more intimate side of the war experience started to become publicly discussed. In recent years, scholars have increasingly examined the emotional and sensory memories of individuals and families regarding World War II and the related displacements, including evacuations from Karelia (see, e.g., Kivimäki 2013; Korjonen-Kuusipuro and Kuusisto-Arponen 2012; Koskinen-Koivisto and Seitsonen 2019; Kuusisto-Arponen 2009, 2014; Kuusisto-Arponen and Savolainen 2016; Näre and Kirves 2007; Savolainen 2015). As it became more acceptable to openly acknowledge the lasting and often intergenerational emotional impact of wartime experiences, many individuals have, later in life,

sought to make sense of the disruptive changes they endured in childhood.

In our study, too, the narrators experienced war and displacement as children but shared their memories in written or oral form later in life (see also [Chapter 11](#)). As we examine these recollections, it is important to recognize that memories of wartime displacement, though rooted in early lived experience, are shaped and reshaped over the decades through both personal reflection and collective frameworks. Family storytelling, in particular, plays a central role in this process, and, for Karelian evacuees, community and public remembrance have also contributed to the ways these memories are narrated. The journey narratives that emerge appear to blend episodic memory—the vivid, sensory recall of specific events—with autobiographical memory, in which individuals interpret these events as part of their evolving life stories. Fivush (2011) distinguishes episodic memory as recounting “what happened,” while autobiographical memory asks “what happened to me?” In this autobiographical mode, subjectivity is formed in dialogue with the surrounding sociocultural environment, including family dynamics and public discourse. Thus, when narrators revisit the dramatic turning points of their lives, such as forced migration, they also reflect on broader questions of meaning, including why certain memories are preserved or silenced (see Latvala and Laurén 2013, 251–52).

The sensory richness of childhood recollections—sounds, smells, feelings—often stems from their anchoring in episodic memory, yet these details are rarely recalled in isolation. Rather, they are frequently embedded within family narratives that have circulated over time and shaped the emotional tone and meaning of early experiences. Memorizing such disruptive childhood experiences as state violence and forced displacement is closely tied to the family as the central frame of reference in the narrators’ lives. Their individual recollections are thus inseparable from what the entire family lived through during the war, and intergenerational exchanges both support and shape what is remembered. The fact that many have found ways to narrate these memories only in old age reflects, on the one hand, a personal need to integrate the significance of war and displacement into a coherent life story (see also Eastmond 2007) and, on the other, the capacity gained through lived experience to confront and articulate past events. At the same time, the shifting political atmosphere of the post–Cold

War decades opened new space for expressing individual wartime memories—particularly those that had previously been marginalized or silenced. In sum, the narratives analyzed in this chapter are not simply accounts of the past but mediated reconstructions, shaped by the interplay of episodic recall, autobiographical meaning-making, and the influence of family, community, and public memory—or the absence thereof.

Conceptualizing Displacement Journeys

We build our analysis around the concept of the displacement journey. Rather than viewing displacement solely as spatial dislocation, we conceptualize the journey multidimensionally: as a temporal turning point that reorganizes a person's experience of time (see Ramsay and Askland 2022); as a socially embedded process, especially shaped through familial and other care relationships; and as a narrative device that helps individuals make sense of past traumatic experiences. This broad understanding reflects how journeys are lived, remembered, and narrated, and allows us to analyze them as layered phenomena.

Indeed, the growing body of scholarship on migration journeys has highlighted the complexity of this term. While the journey is commonly used to denote physical and geographic movement across different terrains and landscapes, regions and countries, and material and immaterial borders (Lindholm 2020; Arizpe 2021), scholars have also noted the difficulty—often impossibility—of defining the exact starting and ending points of a migration journey. Rather, journeys are typically fragmented, protracted, circuitous, and often repeated. In many cases, they extend across generations—for instance, families stuck in refugee camps or transit countries for years. Many children are born in these in-between spaces, which raises the question: Where (and when) does the journey begin and where does it end? As Dossa and Golubovic (2019, 172) aptly note, “[t]he journey is never as simple as from ‘there’ to ‘here.’”

For this reason, we adopt a broad understanding of the journey. The journey often becomes a temporal rupture, requiring individuals to reorient and restructure their relationship to the past, present, and future. Importantly, following Mainwaring and Brigden (2016), we view this rupture as a socially experienced and constructed phenomenon, with implications for family relations and roles. In her study

of spatial trauma among Finnish and British war children, Kuusisto-Arponen (2014) similarly underscores the significance of social and familial relationships in how displaced children experienced, coped with, and later remembered wartime evacuation. Building on this, we consider journey memory as, essentially, family memory—of how family members cared for one another during socially shared displacement. Childhood memories of safety amid wartime violence often centered on the presence and cohesion of the family. Moreover, journeys are embodied experiences—walking for days, feeling cold, pain, and sickness. Remembering these bodily sensations also revives memories of those who provided relief and care: people who offered food, shelter, comfort, and transportation. In this light, suffering is never remembered solely through the body; it is interwoven with memories of care, solidarity, and vulnerability.

Finally, we understand the journey as a narrative strategy through which individuals make sense of past trauma, particularly when displacement is remembered and recounted later in life. In this sense, remembering the journey becomes a medium through which individuals attempt to make sense of their displacement not only from their own perspective but also through the imagined or remembered experiences of their family members. This meaning-making function of the journey is well supported in literature. Eastmond (2007, 251, referencing Turner 1986) notes that formative and transformative experiences frequently “evoke the need for meaning.” Dossa and Golubovic (2019, 174) similarly argue that displacement “seems to demand narrative, as people attempt to communicate their suffering and give meaning to it.” Kaytaz (2016) emphasizes that the journey serves as a narrative framework through which displaced individuals interpret hardship, suffering, and survival. In many cases, it also takes on a metaphorical dimension, offering a way to reflect on one’s life course and key turning points.

Our analysis is divided into two components. First, building on our understanding of the journey as a temporal rupture, we examine how the narrators described their childhood before the war. This shows how for the narrators, displacement marked the end of their childhood and a stark contrast against the communal memories of the prewar years. Thus, the journey was not only a physical journey toward an unknown destination but also a breach that ended communal life in Karelia. Second, we examine memories of physical journey-making

in more detail, focusing on the journey as constituted by familial and other care relationships, and as occasionally transforming gendered familial responsibilities. In the journey memories, family members, or, in their absence, other care-giving figures were the obvious and only safety net during the traumatic events.

Research Material

The chapter is based on first-person narratives of evacuees and refugees. The analysis of evacuation journeys is based on interviews conducted with Karelian evacuees in 2019–2020 by Johanna Leinonen. Altogether, she interviewed 20 Karelians (11 men and nine women); one of the interviews with Karelians was conducted with a married couple. All the interviewees lived in southern or southwest Finland. The interviews lasted two to four hours each. The interview format was a mix of narrative and semistructured interviews: First, Leinonen asked the participants to freely recount their journey experience as they remembered it. The interviewees could choose the starting point for their narrative and talk about their memories with only a little guidance from the interviewee. Leinonen made notes during the narration, and after the interviewee reached an endpoint to their story, she asked clarifying questions following a thematic list made by her prior to the interviews. As is common in narrative interviews, there was variation in how extensively the interviewee was willing or able to narrate their journey without input from the researcher. Some talked for a long time, even hours; some reached their end point quite soon or clearly needed the researcher to ask questions or comment along the way.

The refugee narratives by former Soviet Karelians who fled to Finland in 1944 consist of unpublished written recollections, books, and interviews. They were collected or published between 1995 and 2021, thus stemming from the post-Cold War decades when the Soviet Union no longer posed a threat to its former citizens now living in Finland.

The written recollections, analyzed by Seija Jalagin, include two narratives that originate from the writing competition “East Karelian forced migration,” organized by the Archive of Traditional and Contemporary Culture of the Finnish Literature Society in 1995–1996 (referred to here as SKS KRA Pakolaisuus). Most writers who participated in the competition recollected their family’s forced migration to

Finland in the 1920s and a few narrators still lived in Russia. Only two narratives describe the flight from Soviet Karelia to Finland in 1944. The first comprises six pages of poems and 16 handwritten pages depicting the refugee journey and settlement in Finland by Valde, a man born in 1931, and the second has six typed pages by a woman, Aino, born in 1927. The extensive collections in the SKS archives in general signify how ordinary people “participate in the unofficial historiography” by writing about their past experiences (Latvala and Laurén 2013, 252).

In addition, two published books were included in the analysis of Soviet Karelians’ experiences. The first of them, *Nikolaista Niiloksi* (2001), is a 79-page memoir by Niilo Peksujeff (b. 1932) that details his childhood in Soviet Karelia and the journey to Finland. The title refers to how his identity transformed during the war, as his first name, Nikolai, was translated to the Finnish name Niilo by Finnish teachers working for the occupation regime in Soviet Karelia. The second book, *Karhujen tarina* (Dalberg 2019), is a collective memoir by seven siblings, four sisters and three brothers (born between 1926 and 1943) of the Karhu family. Their narratives were collected in the early 2000s by one of the sisters and edited into publication by a younger relative. Each sibling’s story is presented in a chapter of its own. Although the reminiscences resonate with the age of the narrator at the time of the events—life in Soviet Karelia in the 1930s, the World War II years, and the flight to Finland—the siblings had clearly shared their individual memories and thus constructed a more holistic narrative of the family’s experiences. The Karhu siblings’ narratives have an unfiltered quality, and they record events, places, and individuals in a rather straightforward style, for example when they depict their mother as strict and insensitive and recollect some sensitive family issues from later decades.

The interview material pertaining to Soviet Karelians contains five and a half hours of audio recordings, typed in verbatim, of Vasselei (a pseudonym chosen by the interviewee himself), born in 1935. Jalagin interviewed Vasselei four times in 2021. In most sessions, he reminisced the events of the war years in his occupied home village aged six to nine, as well as the journey to and relocation in Finland. During the interviews, he regularly brought up how he has tried to position his memories within broader historical events found in books and archival materials, while at the same time contesting their generalizing

and Finland-centered interpretation of what happened in the occupied Soviet Karelia.

Oral and written narratives as primary sources differ in some respects, but they also share important features. In interviews, the researcher is present as a listener—an interactive partner who receives and responds to the narrator. In contrast, written narratives are more self-directed, with an unknown and distant (though not entirely absent) reader. In writing competitions, narrators often respond to prompts or themes provided by the collecting organization, in a manner similar to how interviewees respond to a researcher's questions and guidance (Vehkalahti and Jouhki 2022). Published memoirs and autobiographies, while constructed by the authors themselves, are not separate from the culturally and temporally bound narrative and literary conventions. These texts may also have been shaped by others—editors, readers, or commentators—even if their influence remains invisible. The sources we analyze in this chapter were created across different times and through various methods. Yet at their core they share a common feature: elderly individuals recounting their childhood refugee journeys. Whether through autobiographical writing, participation in research, or contributions to unofficial historiography, these narratives reflect a desire to share personal experiences with the broader public.

The Social and Sensory Fabric of Prewar Karelia

In this section, we examine how the temporal rupture described above disrupted the social and familial fabric of everyday life for children in Karelia. We show that the rupture caused by the war was not simply about the geographical movement but about the disintegration of a familiar world—one in which family and community provided temporal stability and belonging. In the narratives, particularly the oral ones, the life in childhood in prewar Karelia was described through embodied memories of communal life in villages. The war signified the beginning of years of instability and uncertainty.

What emerges strongly from the narratives is the sense of loss of a shared social world. In prewar Karelia, most narrators had family members and other relatives living in the same village or in nearby villages. Unlike the very detailed memories of traumatic moments during the actual flight as the war started, discussed in the next section, prewar memories rarely contained key characters. Instead, what seeps

through is a strong sense of community. In many cases, memories can be characterized as nostalgic—indeed, in the case of Karelian evacuees, scholars have noted that reminiscence about “lost Karelia” tends to be characterized by “backward-looking nostalgia” (Häyrynen 2012, 12). However, following Dossa and Golubovic (2019, 175), it is important to not bypass the romanticized narratives of lost Karelia as no more than nostalgia—this “would be to overlook the work they perform.” For example, Feldman (2006) notes in her study of Palestinian refugees in Gaza how nostalgic memories regarding their lost home village signaled the importance of the sense of security in refugees’ contemporary lives, characterized by different forms of insecurity. Importantly, at the heart of the memories of the home village was a deep sense of community and the security that came from its familiarity and the predictable rhythms of agrarian life—especially when contrasted with the social and cultural upheaval caused by displacement. As Feldman (2006, 20) writes, “[a]s much as land and property, then, what was lost in the loss of home was society and community, the security of relations with neighbors.”

Examples of communal memories of childhood Karelia (see Fingerroos 2010) can be found in both Karelian evacuees’ and refugees’ memories. These kinds of memories often highlight the intergenerational rhythms of everyday life, where children’s activities were embedded in the routines of family. For example, in the narrative by Soviet Karelian Niilo (Peksujeff 2001, 6), memories of agrarian life in the home village are shaped by shared family chores—harvesting, hunting, berry and mushroom picking, and fishing—carried out with members of the extended family, sometimes with his brothers and uncles, at other times with the grandmother. Fishing in particular is often recalled. This was both an amusing and empowering activity because it gave children the opportunity to participate in the feeding of the family:

I got to go on lots of fishing trips too – and we seldom came back empty handed! Our grandma was an eager fisher and with my eldest brother Teppo we could follow her and row the boat ... The shore where the saunas were was our most favorite place in the summer; we splashed about, swam, and made a racket day on end, when we felt like it. You can only guess how many stones we threw into the water from the shore.

Karelian evacuee Hilja shared many memories of her childhood in Karelia, often recalling a wide circle of family members—parents, grandparents, siblings, cousins, and aunts. One such memory centered on her cousin and grandmother:

And another memory was that there was a really heavy thunderstorm. And it was such that there was an awful lot of pollen ... We had our cousin Terttu ... visiting us. And then we were, well now let's go swimming. And when we went into that pollen-filled water, we got this terrible rash. And then grandma said that nothing would help except treating it with unsalted butter, so the kids won't scratch themselves raw. And grandma churned butter. And with that unsalted butter she treated us, because of course it itched terribly.

This excerpt highlights both the memory of the grandmother's care—using traditional methods like butter to soothe an itch—and the sensory richness of childhood recollection. Memory scholars have noted that childhood memories are often deeply sensory and grounded in familial and communal contexts (e.g., Sebba 1991). It is thus unsurprising that, in recollections of prewar Karelia, memories of family and sensory experiences are closely intertwined. Research also suggests that childhood reminiscence tends to acquire a nostalgic or “golden hue” over time (Makkonen 2005). However, this nostalgic tone, and the sense of the community, may be especially pronounced in war-time memories, where the stability of prewar childhood is cast in sharp contrast to the disruption and dislocation brought by war. For example, Olga, a Karelian evacuee, described her childhood in Karelia as follows: “It was a happy period in life. After that, it was just drifting around, here and there. One must be satisfied to have a roof over the head ... [They were] the seven happiest years of my life.” Olga's quote highlights the contrast between the stability of the prewar years and the sense of “just drifting around” after the war—a kind of long-standing temporal and spatial dislocation.

The quotes above illustrate that, alongside the sense of community, narrators often recalled their prewar childhood through vivid sensory memories anchored in the natural environment. These elements were not just passive backdrops but active components of the remembered social world, intertwined with familial routines, seasonal practices, and community life. In this way, the natural environment also signified prewar stability—just as relational ties grounded children in

their social world, the presence of nature anchored them in a temporal rhythm that preceded the war. These recollections helped sustain a remembered sense of home that was both physical and social. The intertwining of memories rooted in both social and environmental contexts is evident, for example, in Tilda's narrative:

Tilda: During summer, I can say that all the children were there by the sea. Frolicking there. There was a swarm of us.

Johanna (author): Children of the village?

Tilda: Yes. It was a lovely time ... The sea – no lake is going to beat the feeling of the sea ... In the fall, too. Our house was a couple of hundred meters from the seashore. The roaring of the sea, it is so magnificent, you could hear it inside [the house].

As is evident in Tilda's quote, childhood memories were closely linked to the natural environment where the children lived, played, and toiled. The focus on natural objects and familiar environments amplified the sense of cyclicity, predictability, and timelessness of childhood memories: Trees, rocks, and bodies of water (the sea, rivers) largely stayed in place despite the war events. One cannot find a similar focus on natural objects in the wartime and postwar memories. In childhood memories, nature represented continuity in loss and change. Indeed, many narrators pointed out how they looked for familiar landmarks when returning to Karelia during the trench war period, or when visiting the lost villages for the first time in the 1990s, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This is also evident in Hilma's interview:

Hilma: Just when you left towards Johannes [the home village], there was a small skerry that I always remember so well. See, I would so much like to go and see these [things] that I remember.

Johanna (author): It is curious that often these kinds of natural landmarks, birches and skerries, are stuck in our minds.

Hilma: Sometimes some might say that I can't remember much from that time, but I can't understand that, since I remember so much ever since I was small. Of course ... I remember that we roamed around a lot with friends there.

Hilma's interview points to the importance of landmarks as objects of memory but also to how these memories were so vivid because they

were constructed through children's playing and roaming together in nature. Again, the community and the natural environment intrinsically intertwine in the memories. Saimi's interview, quoted below, encapsulates how it was precisely because the evacuees were forced to leave their home village that the landscapes of their childhood environment were so vividly burned into many narrators' memory:

[W]hen we rowed the boat back from the dance site ... I still remember how beautiful everything was in my eyes, because we knew that we had to leave again ... The home shore and ... the islands and ... And yes, we cried, of course.

Saimi is describing the second departure from Karelia in 1944, which was in many evacuees' memories less chaotic than the first one, since families knew to expect the departure and were more prepared for it, and the narrators were also already older. Saimi, 14 years at that time, had just spent the night dancing with her friends (so that her shoes, made of paper, fell apart), knowing that they had to leave the next day. The memory of the carefree dancing with friends was an important one for her, repeated multiple times during the interview, as displacement and many other tragic events in her life colored the memories of the time after the war.

Memories of the postwar period rarely carried the same communal tenor as prewar memories, even though Karelian evacuees from the same municipality were often resettled in the same region of Finland. This was due to government policy, which aimed to keep residents of a given municipality together by allocating new land to replace lost homesteads in Karelia and other evacuated areas (Danielsbacka et al. 2020; Waris et al. 1952, 51, 56–57, 65–74). While Karelian evacuees were active in establishing associations in the postwar years, often based on their municipality of origin, in our narratives these postwar communal activities did not take a similar emotional tone or embodied content as the community life during the childhood years in Karelia (see also Koskinen-Koivisto and Seitsonen 2019; Kuusisto-Arponen and Savolainen 2016). This reflects the sensory nature of childhood recollection but it also suggests that the childhood sense of security was rooted not only in place but in the experience of belonging to a close-knit community—something that displacement irreversibly disrupted. After the war, many families dealt silently with the emotional weight of war, loss, and displacement.

Dislocated Families on the Move

Prewar childhood memories already anticipated the radical change in the social makeup of the lives of the evacuees and refugees that was to come. In this section, we focus on narratives of the journey-making as the war started, which foreground the roles and experiences of family members and the narrators' emotional and practical dependence on them or other providers of care. These journeys were deeply social and embodied experiences, where care, vulnerability, and shifting familial responsibilities shaped how displacement was lived and later remembered. We show how family ties—and, in their absence, bonds with other caregivers—were both the primary safety net and a framework through which the trauma of displacement was navigated. At the same time, the journey itself occasionally reconfigured family roles along gendered and generational lines.

When Karelian evacuees left their home villages for the first time in 1939 or 1940, they did not know that it was for good—unlike in the second departure in 1944. In addition, in 1939–1940, the departure was often quick, done without proper packing or knowledge about where the families were headed to. Families left most of their possessions in their homes, and often all family members left around the same time—excluding those who were on the battlefield or otherwise engaged in war-related responsibilities.

The outbreak of war in 1939 took people by surprise on both sides of the border. Evacuees' and refugees' memories of the first flight from Karelia were often blurry and chaotic, as many were very young at the time and adults had refrained from sharing details about the war situation with children (see also Näre and Kirves 2007). Since the narrators were small children at the time, their memories largely focused on the people who cared for them along the way. In addition, the memory of the hurried departure left a lasting impression on many. For example, Silja, a Karelian evacuee, reminisced about the family's departure, with grandmother staying behind for the time being:

Grandpa had harnessed the horse and drove it up to the steps. And then, when we were getting into the sleigh, this little sister of mine—just two weeks shy of turning two—said, because there was a gusty wind and snow was whirling around, and these words have stayed in my mind: “Take me home, the wind’s in my eyes.” Grandma was standing on the steps, [she] had wrapped her apron around her arms like this. And what

stuck in the child's memory was grandma's expression. She tried to hold back her tears, but of course, she started crying. Then we left.

Silja's quote shows how the separation from her grandmother—and particularly the expression on her grandmother's face—left a lasting impression on the young girl, along with her little sister's discomfort in the blizzardy winter weather. These sensory memories were closely intertwined with the emotional reactions of family members during the departure.

In the Karelian refugee narratives as well, farewells emerge as emotionally pivotal moments that divided the villagers into those who were leaving and those who decided to remain in the home village. Saying goodbye to neighbors, friends, and relatives signified the dispersion of communities and families. Aino recalls the tears and crying during the farewells when “some were again forced to leave their homes” (SKS KRA Pakolaisuus, Lähde, Aino 398–403, 1995–96). In some cases, three generations left together, but the departure nonetheless separated the extended family, as grandparents, aunts, or uncles on either parent's side might stay behind. Niilo (Peksujeff 2001, 74–75) writes about how confusing the family separation was to him:

After the cattle crew had left, the rest of the villagers packed their things into the trucks. My feelings on that departure day were mixed because it was difficult to say goodbye to relatives and friends. At the last minute my grandmother ... suddenly decided to stay ... It was so confusing, but all we could do was to take down her things. Then began the farewells: among those leaving were grandma's two children and the grandchildren of three – almost 20 people.

Niilo's grandmother decided to stay in hope of meeting her youngest daughter, who had been sentenced to prison before the war. Grandmother's husband, Niilo's grandfather, had died during the Russian Civil War in 1920, her daughter had been imprisoned, and in 1941 her son, Niilo's father, was killed by Soviet partisans.

At the moment of departure, all her suppressed feelings broke out since not leaving would be the only way to meet her youngest child again ... We youngsters did not quite understand why grandmother was not joining us. Her sudden decision made our feelings even more confused ... There were no traces of joy in the faces of those saying goodbye to us. All the elderly were slumped with tears, a sight that I have been

unable to forget since. There were many good mates. Would we ever meet again? Fortunately, an ignorant youngster has no ability to react so profoundly. (Peksujeff 2001, 74–75)

While being chaotic, the journey memories also typically contained detailed descriptions of events, such as dangers faced on the way. Memories of bombings of evacuee trains (see [Figure 5.1](#)), falling ill, or worrying about family members taking separate routes appear as traumatic, chaotic, flashbulb-like memories with vivid sensory content—typical of recollections of traumatic events (Crespo and Fernández-Lansac 2016). Uncertainty of what lay ahead, and the hazards faced during the journey, pushed families to stay together, often with others from the original home place.

The significance of sensorial memories, and how they were tied in with memories of or concern for family members, are reflected in the interview with Leija. She was four years old at the time of the first departure from Finnish Karelia in 1939, and the whole family—parents and five sisters—fled together from their home. In the interview, she spoke about her concern for her older sister. An important memory object in her reminiscence regarding the journey was the sister’s hat, for example at a moment when the family had to hide on a snowbank to avoid the bombers flying overhead:

She [the sister] was wearing a red hat on her head, and I was pulling it away, so that it would not be visible to the planes. Somehow, I knew that it could be visible to the plane. We were there in the snowbank until we dared to go back to the train ... There were so many people there, and I was always afraid for my sister.

Leija remembers that she was scared in the train but her mother’s presence calmed her down: “I remember that it was completely dark, and I was scared, but I got to be in my mother’s arms, so that was good of course.” Leija’s narrative concerning the beginning of the journey illuminates how the journey memory was essentially a memory of the family and their care for each other during the socially experienced displacement. In the chaotic moment of the bombers flying over, one of her primary memories was the care for the sister, even though Leija was only four years old at the time.

Similarly, Soviet Karelian Valde’s account of the family’s escape highlights the importance of human connection and care in the midst



Figure 5.1: Karelian evacuees in Vilppula, Finland, June 23, 1941. Most evacuees traveled by train, usually in a car made for transporting cattle. The figure also features a Lotta (see endnote 1). Source: SA-Kuva (sa-kuva.fi). Published under the CC BY 4.0 license.

of hardship. During the journey, his mother and the four children were given a ride in two Finnish army trucks. Valde, then 13 years old, became feverish and lost consciousness. He was taken to a field hospital, where two doctors, a nurse, and a military captain cared for him. Fifty years later, his narrative contains visual details of the doctors: their military ranks and white, unbuttoned coats. Since this and the next field hospital were both evacuated, the boy's operation was postponed and he was reunited with his mother and siblings. Before the next leg of the journey, the train was attacked by fighter planes

and people rushed to the forest, where “the Lottas¹ ... gave us children buns and red lemonade.” En route the train was again attacked and the boy, “in pain and exhausted,” refused to leave, so his mother slapped him. Feeling upset, he hid in the woods until he heard his mother crying and returned (SKS KRA Pakolaisuus, Larinmaa, Valde 20–41, 1995–96). Chaotic events on the journey formed a story full of flash-bulb memories.

Dramatic events also dominate Vieno’s recollection of the family’s evacuation journey to the eastern parts of Soviet Karelia in 1939. Vieno was the youngest in the family and only two years old at the time, but could recall small episodic moments from the journey, intertwined with details that were passed down by other family members. In fact, all five Karhu siblings tell the same core story, each with individual emphases (Iro/Irja, Liisa, Vasselei/Vilho, Sulo and Svetlana/Vieno Karhu in Dalberg 2019, 73–74, 131, 171). Their sensory memories record the extreme cold in the back of a truck and the sickness caused by carbon monoxide in wood-/gas-powered vehicles. Unlike some other recollections we analyze in this chapter, Vieno’s narrative does not really contain feelings of safety but is a story of fear and anxiety that dramatic events during the journey highlight:

We were told that we need to flee the Finns and quickly, they are evil, they will kill and even eat [us], particularly children ... There were some items and a baby in the sledge, and the baby died of starvation and diseases during the journey. I was on top of the load ... holding a green one litre enamel mug. It had been filled with sour cream, for making butter of course, but I could lick it with my fingers to kill time and hunger, too ... I don’t remember much else but a huge cackle, uproar, and a deep feeling of distress, so that fear overtook me, and I remember that I cried. (Vieno Karhu in Dalberg 2019, 171)

During the journeys, unexpected events sometimes separated family members, leading to new social encounters. Researchers have noted how common experiences of temporary or long-term family separation—or even the loss of family members—are in forced migration, especially in contexts of war and conflict (Autti and Intonen 2022; Hii-tola et al. 2023). The narratives analyzed here highlight how, in chaotic situations, key caregivers often emerged—whether family members or others—emphasizing that care roles could shift, and that adults outside the family could temporarily provide children with a sense of safety.

An example of a stranger becoming the central caring figure in a journey narrative is found in the account of Timo, a Karelian evacuee who was seven years old during the bombing of the Simola railway station in June 1944. This attack by Russians killed 142 people, half of whom were civilians. Timo recollected how a Lotta took care of him, as he was separated from his mother and brother during the bombing and its aftermath. When the bombers hit the train, everyone tried to flee to the forest. As Timo later learned, his mother and brother were seriously injured and taken to a hospital in Lahti; the mother survived but the brother did not—a key experience in Timo’s life. Lotta named Eva took Timo, then unaware of his family members’ whereabouts, to Helsinki:

I ... did not know anything about my mother when this Eva took me to Helsinki [and thought] that she will meet my mother and brother there. But it didn’t go like that. I don’t have any recollections of how long I was in Helsinki with her.

Timo had vivid memories of the sounds and sights during the bombing, but no clear sense of how long he stayed at Eva’s home in Helsinki. Eva attempted to locate Timo’s relatives by placing an ad in a newspaper, using the limited information he could recall—just his aunt’s first name and hometown. Eventually, the ad reached his relatives, and Timo was sent to them in southwest Finland, this time traveling alone by train. During the journey, a kind conductor looked after the young boy—an experience Timo remembered clearly.

In contrast to Karelian evacuees, who were typically accommodated in private homes after fleeing from Karelia, refugees from Soviet Karelia rarely described encounters with local Finns during their journeys. Such interactions generally emerged only after the refugees had settled. However, journey memories do mention Finns who assisted refugees along the way as part of their wartime duties—most often military officers and soldiers managing the evacuations, such as “[c]ommander of our village,” “regional commander,” “familiar soldiers,” the corporal-driver of the lorry, who “was a kind man,” and the Lottas were named as those who accompanied the fleeing civilians. An Orthodox priest who blessed the refugees and held services was also named as a great source of consolation and security (SKS KRA Pakolaisuus, Larinmaa, Valde 20–41, 1995–96). In general, the journey narratives of Soviet Karelian refugees convey trust in and dependence on the reliability of

the Finnish troops and occupation authorities, particularly those with whom the Karelians had become acquainted during the war years.

As these examples illustrate, strangers occasionally stepped in as caregivers when families were separated. However, journeys were not marked solely by communal support; evacuees and refugees also encountered social hierarchies and discrimination—both along the way and in the communities where they settled. Leija, for example, notes how the family with whom the evacuees stayed in southwest Finland were “lovely people”—but, simultaneously, she observed hierarchies, as the children were not allowed to “bother the downstairs people [the host family].” Similarly, Kari recollected how the mother in the house where his family—his mother and eight children—stayed did not want to give the children any milk to drink:

Kari: Well then one morning that matron [*emäntä*] was like, she was like angry at us, she did not approve [them being there] ... She put everything [all milk] through the milk separator, and we didn't get any. But the master [*isäntä*] noticed this, and he [said] sternly to this matron that do not do this for a second time. This family with children must get milk.

While adults—both kin and strangers—often provided care during the journey, the narratives also reveal how children, in the absence of adult support, took on new responsibilities amid wartime upheaval. At times, adults in the family were occupied elsewhere or not at full strength, which forced children and youth to take on greater burdens. It is also worth noting that many evacuees had grown into adolescence by the time of the second evacuation in 1944. Thus, many had more responsibilities during this journey. For example, both girls and boys were assigned the task of walking the cattle from the home villages. Cows were vital for feeding the family and the milk could also be used for buying other food (e.g., Peksujeff 2001, 73). In practice, this meant that children walked with livestock for long periods alone or with a group of other youngsters. Despite being hard work, this gave many a sense of purpose and responsibility. Such a transformation of roles could empower young people in two ways: It increased their self-worth and respect and gave them a new role in the community by becoming an adult (Denov et al. 2019; Hampshire et al. 2008). Or, as Helmi, a Karelian evacuee, summarized, “one had to grow up quickly.”

BenEzer and Zetter (2015) have noted that the refugee journey can represent a “liminal zone” in which social norms—as well as gender and family roles—may be disrupted. Such journeys often heighten vulnerability in various ways (Gerard and Pickering 2013; Nardone and Correa-Velez 2016). At the same time, Griffiths (2014) suggests that this kind of temporal liminality also holds the potential for “transformative *rites de passage*.” In other words, displacement can create a time outside the normal rhythms of life—one that reshapes an individual’s role within their family, community, or society. As some of the narratives illustrate, the temporal rupture of the journey may have opened space not only for disruption, but also for transformation and even personal growth.

For example, in 1944, Helmi—then 14 years old—had already walked seven cows to a location near Seinäjoki in Finland, while her parents were still on their way. She was staying with a local family and regularly checked the deliveries at the nearby train station. One day, she noticed that her family’s belongings had arrived. She went to ask the master of the family whether they could help her retrieve the possessions. The man declined, saying that everyone was occupied with harvesting, “but if you manage with a horse by yourself, harness the horse and you can bring the things [in their house].” This is exactly what she did:

And then I hauled the [items] into the carriage using laths ... Potatoes, sacks of grain [etc.] ... I did multiple trips in a day ... Then I walked to the manor house ... and found our sheep there, as they had tags in their necks. So, I recognized them. So, I went to talk to the master again, that “now I have found the sheep, what should I do to them?” ... Well, the master said, “You can use the horse. Go and get the sheep and bring them to our sheep.” He harnessed the horse and a girl from the neighbor’s house helped me, and us girls retrieved the sheep ... So, I had gathered the cows and the sheep when ... my dad came. And the potatoes and grain under a roof.

Helmi took on the big responsibility of taking care of the family’s animals, food, and other necessities, all while she was only a teenager. The experience she shared was clearly an empowering one for her: “Even though I am touting myself, I don’t think the girls of that age today could do all this. It is very rare that anyone can do this.”

Similar to Helmi, the Karhu siblings' narrative illustrates how children actively participated in managing both the physical and emotional burdens of the journey, identifying closely with the suffering of the animals they were tasked with caring for. The Karhu siblings described the suffering of the cows almost as if to mirror the hardships experienced by young boys and girls who cared for them (Dalberg 2019, 46):

[A]nimals were unaccustomed to dirt roads and their cloven hooves began to bleed on the long march. Pieces of cloth had to be rolled around them ... Walking barefoot and with very little to eat for 250 kilometers with the animals was quite an effort and an achievement.

Vasselei reminisced about the flight that he made at the age of nine with his mother and brothers from the home village in Soviet Karelia. It took two weeks to walk 300 kilometers:

It was a long, hard journey. We stayed the night where we could, some slept in barns. For there was the army and so many people journeying, and Jerrys. The military transport went ahead ... It was a cold autumn. Then we arrived in Oulu and handed over the cattle ... a few days later we were taken by train to the internment camp in Alapitkä.

Vasselei's account further highlights the physical endurance and adaptability expected of children during displacement—walking hundreds of kilometers in harsh conditions.

The upheaval of war and displacement also restructured traditional gender roles within families. Helmi's experience, above, illustrates how girls could step into new roles during the war, taking on responsibilities that went beyond the traditional gendered divisions of labor. In some cases, young women took on a more active role in deciding about the future of the family, particularly when the father was deceased. The eldest daughter of a Soviet Karelian family, who had worked at the Finnish military headquarters, demanded that her mother and all six children flee to Finland, even if it meant leaving the paternal grandparents behind. With an uncle already in Finland as a war prisoner, the extended family, including the maternal grandmother and another uncle's family, chose to seek refuge together. Similarly, seven unmarried young women from the same village left for Finland, fearing violent reprisals for their perceived collaboration with the Finnish occupation (see [Figure 5.2](#)) (SKS KRA Pakolaisuus, Larinmaa, Valde 20–41, 1995–96).



Figure 5.2: Karelian women in Soviet Karelia in June 1944, when the Finnish army began its pull-out from the area. The original text in the photo by a Finnish military photographer says that “Our lot is leaving the village and the Karelians remain in their homes, except for the few girls and youngsters who have voluntarily left for Finland.” Source: SA-Kuva (sa-kuva.fi). Published under the CC BY 4.0 license.

This and other similar cases reflect how Stalin’s terror and the upheavals of World War II had already caused dispersion in many families, and this disruption was reflected in shifting family dynamics during displacement. Especially in the absence of the father, widowed mothers were often more inclined to go against the traditional patriarchal family system of Russian Karelia (Polla 2004) and receptive to their children’s input when deciding about the future.

Conclusion

The abrupt end of childhood for the narrators, marked by the onset of war and the flight from Karelia, has shaped the way they remember and reflect on their early years. For many, these memories of childhood provide a grounding sense of emotional security. They evoke a sense of security rooted in family life and the familiarity of their home villages. Olga, a Karelian evacuee who was seven when her family first fled Karelia, offers this reflection: “Sometimes I have heard someone saying that they would not like to go back [to Karelia]. But if I were younger, I would go, if an opportunity arose. There are those beloved sandy beaches and everything.”

For Karelian evacuees and Soviet Karelian refugees, the wartime events that led to their displacement were not only defined by the immediate hardships they faced, but also by the profound ways in which their movements were shaped by wartime conditions and political decisions beyond their control. Yet the narratives reveal how individuals navigated these circumstances with varying degrees of agency and acceptance (see also [Chapter 8](#)). Niilo’s (Peksujeff 2001, 76) memoir of his journey at age 12 shows the emotional turning point that displacement could represent: “There no longer was any hurry in my journey; I had a somewhat steady mind, feeling dependent on destiny. Everything that laid ahead was new and unfamiliar.”

As BenEzer and Zetter (2015) argue, the experience of the journey and its impact is often mediated by the age at which it occurs. The journey is not just a passage across physical spaces but a profound divide between life in the original and a new home. Memories of the original home often focus on specific episodes from childhood, while the majority of life has been spent in the new home—first in exile, and later settling with family, attending school, and incorporating into new communities and social systems. At their core, childhood years and the memories associated with them are closely tied to a person’s early connection with their “first” family and their position in relation to the adults around them. Often, childhood memories of safety during violent wartime events or the refugee journey are linked to the sense that one’s family was together and protected.

However, forced migration also carried with it the embodied trauma of losing the family home, a central space of intimacy and security (e.g., Salih 2017). Without a place of their own, families were

vulnerable to separation and various other insecurities. These losses were deeply felt by children, who, when reflecting on their lives in old age, often look back not only on their own experiences but also on those of their parents and grandparents. Having lived long lives themselves, they could relate to the experiences and memories of their parents and grandparents.

These memories also reveal a desire to make sense of personal histories outside of formal historical or political narratives. Rather than situating their experiences within the broader frameworks of World War II or refugee movements, the narrators focus on how these events shaped their families and intimate relationships. Concerning Karelian evacuees, this is due, first, to the fact that their fate during and after World War II is widely known and, second, to their active efforts in collecting and recounting individual and communal stories—often village by village—including accounts of return visits to lost homes, which began in the 1990s. The memory boom that emerged in the post-Cold War decades, which emphasized previously unheard wartime experiences of various groups, paved the way for changes in public memory culture in Finland and beyond (Kinnunen and Jokisipilä 2012). As a result, a shift from grand national narratives toward individual stories—also within cultural heritage institutions—has generated public interest and created space for connecting a constantly growing number of personal accounts, which now form a new, often unofficial layer of historiography on the war and its consequences. In contrast, former Soviet Karelians in Finland (as well as post-1917 refugees from Russia) form a rather scattered and largely invisible minority, who have so far been unable to see their own experiences reflected in general historical narratives in Finland. However, the memory boom has also encouraged former Russian Karelians to collect and publish their individual, familial, and local histories.

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Notes

- 1 Lotta Svärd was a Finnish voluntary auxiliary paramilitary organization for women during World War II. Women serving in the organization were called “Lottas.”

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CHAPTER 6

The Trauma of Family Separation and Resilience Practices

The Case of Deported Women in Tijuana, Mexico

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Abstract

This chapter examines the use of *testimonios* by a group of deported mothers called Dreamers Moms, located in Tijuana, Mexico. Drawing on ongoing feminist ethnographic fieldwork consisting of face-to-face and open-ended virtual interviews conducted since 2019, we argue that by using *testimonios* members of the organization not only make sense of what happened to them but also achieve two goals. First, they memorialize their family separation due to deportation and their physical absence from their children's lives. Second, through

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these *testimonios* these women show their love for their children by memorializing their fight to return to the USA to be reunited. Thus, this study expands the literature on *testimonios*, going beyond their use as a tool of resistance by subaltern individuals to shed light on their use as a tool for constructing these women's personal and family memories about their fight for reunification.

Introduction

I spent many months of depression until one day I asked God to give me a sign about what I should do with my life and what I should do to cope with this great pain, and that is how I started this group, Deported Mothers. (Yolanda Varona)

The opening quote is from Yolanda Varona (hereafter Varona), a deported mother and founder of Dreamers Moms USA–Tijuana (subsequently DM). After living 16 years in the USA, Varona was deported to Mexico in December 2010, leaving behind two teenagers—ages 15 and 18—in California. After three years of grappling with the traumatic experience of being deported and consequently separated from her family, in May 2014 Varona decided to create a space of *encuentro* (encounter) where deported women like her could meet and support each other. As time passed, this space became a civil society organization for deported mothers in Tijuana, which afforded these women the opportunity to develop a sense of collective identity. Today, DM's goal is twofold: first, to support deported mothers who qualify to legally return to the USA to reunite with their families and, second, to make visible the impact that family separation due to deportation has on migrant families.

It is estimated that between 2003 and 2013 about 3.7 million people were removed from the USA (by the Department for Homeland Security), of whom 91 percent were from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras (Suárez 2016). In 2012, it was estimated that, out of the about 416,000 immigrants who were removed that year, women accounted for 10.6 percent (Simanski and Sapp 2013, as cited in París-Pombo and Peláez-Rodríguez 2016). Although the number of deported women is thus smaller than that of their male counterparts, their removal from the USA is detrimental to these women and their families. According to the Mexican Immigration Institute, out of the

170 deported people who entered Tijuana daily in 2013, 9 percent were women (Peláez-Rodríguez 2016). In her study of deported mothers living in Tijuana, Peláez-Rodríguez (2016) found that most were mothers who had left children behind in the USA, leading these women to experience either a family separation or a dissolution of their families.

Drawing on ongoing feminist ethnographic fieldwork consisting of face-to-face and open-ended virtual interviews, which began in January 2019, we examine the use of *testimonios* (testimonies) of members of Dreamers Moms as a tool to build their family and collective memory. The main argument in this chapter is that by using *testimonios* not only do these women make sense of what happened to them but they also achieve two goals. First, they memorialize their family separation due to deportation and their physical absence in their children's lives. Second, more importantly, through *testimonios* these women show their love to their children by memorializing their fight to return to the USA to be reunited with them again. Thus, the guiding questions for this chapter are: What is the process these women experienced that allowed them to create their *testimonios*? How does the use of *testimonios* serve to build these women's family and collective memory? What are the structure and purpose of these *testimonios*? Finally, and related to the theme of this volume, through the analysis of these women's *testimonios* our study sheds light on how, despite experiencing a painful and traumatic event such as deportation and their consequent family separation, these women embark on a journey to preserve their family memory. In so doing, these mothers find a sense of life that becomes a source of hope to not give up in their search to return to their families.

We begin our discussion by introducing Tijuana to briefly shed light on how the historical pressure of migration ebbs and flows has shaped this border city. Subsequently, we present the theoretical foundations that sustain our work and the methodological strategy we undertook for this study. Throughout our examination of the *testimonios* of members of Dreamers Moms, we seek to expand the literature on the intersection between transnational motherhood and deportation as cultural trauma in general and, particularly, in utilizing these *testimonios* as a showcase we contribute to the literature on testimonies as a tool in constructing memory. In the empirical section, we articulate key findings and their implications. We conclude with a discussion of our findings.

Context

Tijuana is a city located on the USA–Mexico border along the coastline of the Pacific Ocean. It is part of the San Diego–Tijuana urban corridor. It is the largest, highly industrialized and most populated Mexican border city; its history has been shaped by two main phenomena: migration and the transborder lives of its inhabitants. Since the last two decades of the 20th century, not only Tijuana but all of the USA–Mexico border has witnessed a drastic transformation of US border politics. This transformation consisted of a series of biopolitical practices, such as the steady securitization of the border and the implementation of a series of punitive migration policies, “the production of illegality” (De Genova 2002) of unauthorized migrant people living in the USA, and the creation of a deportation machine (Goodman 2020).

During the Obama administrations (2008–2016), about 2.2 million people were deported. More than 90 percent of deported Latin American immigrant people arrived at Mexico’s northern border cities (París-Pombo and Montes 2021), Tijuana being “the main point of return for deported Mexicans, many of whom are men, over the age of 18 and not from Tijuana” (Galhardi 2022, 2). Once in Tijuana, deported people either wait in the city with the hope of returning to the USA, some return to their communities of origin, and many other deportees settle down in Tijuana to remain close to their families left behind in the USA. By staying in Tijuana, these families engage in what Acosta (2019) refers to as transborder family arrangements. These are a series of economic and social arrangements seeking to maintain family bonds despite physical separation due to deportation.

Life is not easy for deported people who stay in Tijuana. Stigmatization, xenophobia, anti-immigrant sentiments, invisibility and the systematic negligence of the Mexican state are common challenges deported people endure. Moreover, once in Tijuana, many Mexican deportees face an ongoing sense of having lost not only their homes but also their familial and intimate bonds. All this is made worse for deported women. With a lack of family support, deported women in Tijuana are an easy target to experience more gender-based violence than their local female counterparts, who might call on family and community support. Despite the dire living conditions for deportees, Tijuana is also a city with many civil society organizations (CSOs)

providing services to deportees, immigrants in transit, or asylum seekers who stay in Tijuana. DM is part of this robust network of CSOs.

Theoretical Discussion

The need for disenfranchised individuals to speak up is evident (Ahmed and Stacey 2001). DM members are such individuals. They were unauthorized, racialized, working-class Mexican mothers in the USA who endured the traumatic compounded experiences of being forcefully removed from the country and separated from their USA-based children. Thus, speaking up is a way for DM members to share their truth and, at the same time, claim justice. Following the Latin American tradition, DM members employ *testimonios* to tell and disseminate their stories. Through their *testimonios*, these mothers craft the family and collective memory of their deportation for themselves, family members, and other families undergoing deportation. Accordingly, we contribute to our understanding of various forms locate our research at the intersection of transnational motherhood, deportation as cultural trauma, and *testimonio* as memory work.

Before their unexpected physical removal from the USA, unauthorized migrants were constantly reminded of their illegality (Gonzales and Chavez 2012) and deportability (De Genova 2002). Despite that, unauthorized individuals continue their lives by maintaining a routine that gives them a sense of stability (Gonzales 2016). This tenuous stability is broken when individuals are apprehended and subsequently deported. While most deportees are men, there are also mothers whose strong ties to the USA are their children left behind (see also [Chapter 12](#)). Our research aims to contribute to making mothers' deportation experiences visible and how they represent themselves and remain connected to their children.

The sudden nature of deportation disturbed the routines mothers had set up for their families, and any preparation was insufficient to endure separation. To continue mothering from afar, what emerges is a form of transnational motherhood different from the one outlined by Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997), who found that Latin American migrant mothers resignify their role as mothers by combining the caregiver and provider roles. Once deported, mothers experience what Peláez-Rodríguez (2016) calls symbolic dislocation, that is, the separation from their children, which makes them feel not at home in Mexico

as they cannot take care of their offspring. Thus, this dislocation makes these women lose one central part of their lives, motherhood. Disarmed by deportation, mothers seek to reconstruct how they can show their care and love for their children. Research indicates that mothers with limited or no resources resort to their moral identities as good mothers by expressing emotional devotion to their children (Lavee and Benjamin 2016). In the case of DM members, they overcome the inability to take care of their children through speaking up about the trauma of deportation.

Deportation is also a trauma-inducing experience at the individual (Lovato 2019) and collective levels (Nikolko 2018). At the collective level, trauma is the representation of the pain affecting the “core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity,” [and as a] “threat to their sense of who they are, where they come from, and where they want to go” (Alexander 2004, 10). That is a cultural trauma. Furthermore, “these traumas arise from shocks to the routines or the taken for granted” (Onwuachi-Willig 2016, 335). Thus, forced removal shattered all deported mothers’ everyday routines with their children before deportation. More importantly, though, DM members represent deportation as bursting their core identity as mothers. Thereby we argue that this representation of deportation can lead to cultural trauma.

Trauma may paralyze individuals initially, leading them to be silent, self-medicate, and abandon themselves. At the same time, however, trauma can be a source for creating community (Erikson 1995, cited in Onwuachi-Willig 2016), forming a collective identity, and changing their circumstances through collective action (see also [Chapter 13](#)). Thus, speaking up is one way to denounce family separation, taking the form of *testimonios*. *Testimonio* as a tool originated in Latin America in the 1960s (Armstrong 2010), when subaltern subjects who witnessed traumatic events were moved to tell the story (Yúdice 2004), mostly hidden by dominant groups (Yúdice 1992) to challenge dominant structures (Dulfano 2017). Jelin (2002) theorizes that *testimonios* become a way by which individuals face the loss and accept that what is lost will never return; still, it is important to tell their truth to make sense of the trauma experienced. Also, sharing one’s *testimonio* could be therapeutic to one’s self-narrative (Moran et al. 2012). In doing so, *testimonios* become the memory of the horrors experienced. Further, Jelin (2002) suggests that “*testimonio* as a construction of memories implies multiple voices, the movement of multiple ‘truths’ and silences”

(2002, 15, our translation). These silences could be aspects yet to be processed, a tool to keep distance between the narrator and the audience, or a way to protect narrator's intimacy. Furthermore, the plural I, then, serves as a synthesis of the collective experiences. Moreover, the dialogue between the one narrating their story and the one who listens (audience) empathically helps in the construction of the *testimonios*. As the audience, we are invited to be with rather than identify with the narrator. Finally, and like other forms of narratives, *testimonios* have the following parts: a plot, actors in the sequence of events, and an audience (Polleta et al. 2011).

Data and Methods

To investigate DM's *testimonios*, we conducted ethnographic research that began in 2019 and continued with in-person fieldwork in 2020. To sustain our relationship with DM in the context of the sanitary crisis, we switched our work from participant observation to digital ethnography. The transition was seamless for the mothers as they were all familiar with using video platforms to connect with their children in the USA.

As feminist ethnographers (Ackerly and True 2010) from marginalized communities—we are both immigrants and scholars of color—in the USA, we strived to make women's experiences visible, specifically how DM members represent the piercing effects of separation and how they memorialized that through *testimonios*. Thus, the first step was to build trust and be in accompaniment, which “entails an *emotional* positioning and that emotions, rather than their denial through an expectation of ‘objectivity,’ produces more honest and ethical research” (Abrego 2024, 4). Accordingly, our fieldwork involved accompanying DM members in their activist work (e.g., San Ysidro Port of Entry and Playas de Tijuana) and spending time with them. Altogether, we conducted seven in-person, in-depth interviews and five follow-up online interviews. We supplemented our data by conducting four semistructured interviews with staff members working at organizations that serve the migrant community in Tijuana. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, and with the interviewees' permission the conversations were voice-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Each interview lasted from one to two hours.

In addition, we have analyzed the information posted on the organization's Facebook account and classified over 200 news media reports, and examined 32 short documentaries and interviews with DM members. We also drew on the women's photo albums and their collection of newspaper clippings reporting their activism, along with the organization's digital database of their work. Furthermore, as part of their activism, DM members produced printed materials that were products of the workshops they participated in in Tijuana or on which Mexican and foreign artists collaborated. In this chapter, we analyze two such products, the bedtime storybooks (2015), and videos for the Humanizing Deportation project (<http://humanizandoladeportacion.ucdavis.edu/en/about-the-project>, 2018), which are exemplars of DM's *testimonios*.

Our analytical strategy was to identify the storyline of their lives and current work. We read the interviews and artifacts separately and conducted open coding. Next, we developed a coding schema and carried out focused coding together. We identified the main thread of their narrative (or plot), the sequence of events, its organization, the aspects taken for granted, the ones holding power in the narrative and those silences, the main actors in each story, and the audience of *testimonios*.

From a Space of *Encuentro* and *Acompañamiento* to a Place of Political Action

To understand what DM as an organization means for its members, it is necessary to delve into the journey of what a deported mother faces not only once she arrives in Tijuana but, perhaps more importantly, the process of dehumanization (Bosworth 2005) these women experience during their time at a detention center. For some scholars, it is at these centers where migrants' bodies are subjugated to extended forms of state power, social control, and punishment (Bosworth 2014; Fassin 2005, as cited in Gómez Cervantes et al. 2017). Some studies on detention centers point out that both women and men at these centers suffer from depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts (Campesi 2015), while at the same time detainees experience uncertainty about what their futures hold, which, in the case of those with families, also brings anguish and desperation by thinking about what will happen to their children if they end up being deported.

In addition to these feelings, studies show that detained individuals report experiencing humiliation and being stripped of their dignity and basic human rights (Becerra et al. 2022) during their time at those centers, as Varona vividly corroborates in the following quote:

Look, after having been in a big room with only a cement bench and some bathrooms that only covered you up to the waist, and when you were in the bathroom, all the other women were there watching if you peed or pooped because everything can be seen. It was like something humiliating; it was ... for me, it was a shock; for me, it was a massive violation of human rights, of my dignity, of the dignity of all the women in there. (Interview in January 2020)

In one of his most prominent works on human interactions, Goffman (1961) argues that inmates in such institutions—prisons, boarding schools, asylums and the military, to mention a few—“are typically stripped of their former self-conception and subjected to a series of ‘abasements, degradations, humiliations, and profanations of self’ by staff, including mental or physical forms of coercion to get and keep them under their control” (as cited in Gómez Cervantes et al. 2017, 274). Moreover, drawing from Foucault’s (1977) concept of “docile bodies,” which produce obedience and conformity in those disciplined bodies in institutions, such as prisons and mental hospitals, in detention centers, detainees experience a sense of disorientation that exacerbates once they are expelled from those centers. This was the case for Varona once she was deported to Tijuana:

I realized that they had taken me out of the detention center but that, at that moment, they were sending me to a place where I was going to serve a sentence of, I don’t know how many years. They sent me to a border that I was afraid of, and suddenly I found myself without any acquaintance in a strange place for me. I did not know what to do, the only thing I did was go around in a circle, and I looked in all directions, but in circles in the same place. It was something very strange because I did not want to move. I kept walking in circles. Many people approached me; they were all men. I’m talking about ten years ago. One told me, “Do you want to go to a hotel to rest?” Another said, “Do you want me to invite you for a coffee?” Another told me, “Do you want to cross [the border]?” “Do you want a phone?” They bombarded me. They harassed me when I was deported. The other women who were

deported took their way, and they all left. I was the only one who stayed standing at the border. Why? I don't know. (Interview in January 2020)

In addition to the feelings of bewilderment and shock, many deportees endure other challenges, including a lack of economic resources, no place to stay, and, for some lack of Spanish language skills to communicate to seek help. Above all, deportees experience being seen by local people as mistrustful individuals, which, as many studies have documented (Albicker and Velasco 2016; Brotherton 2018), is translated into a deep-seated stigmatization toward deportees. In an interview with Esther, a Mexican immigrant who, after living 22 years in the USA, was deported in 2011, she described, with a sense of disappointment, how it was for her those first days after her deportation:

The hardest part was getting people to believe in me. Because ... as one arrives, well, you arrive poor, without money, without clothes, with nothing. So, people don't believe in us [deportees]. People think you're a felon. They think you're going to rob them, so that was the most difficult thing: winning over people, getting closer to people, and for people to see me with good eyes, no longer afraid, not with ... fear. That they would not feel as if I would rob them, that I would do something bad to them, because that's how they look at you at first. That's how they look at you, really. That's how they look at you. So, that was the hardest thing at the beginning. (Interview in January 2020)

For those with family, particularly mothers, living separated from their children is experienced as an unbearable sense of desperation and anguish. Our findings reveal how living separated from their children instilled in deported mothers, in the words of Emma—a deported mother who lived 12 years and six months separated from her three children—a sense of semi-insanity. Some women interviewed for this study shared how, upon their deportation, they took either induced-sleep pills or alcohol as palliatives to cope with the intense emotional pain of being separated from their children. For Varona, the memories of those first weeks after her deportation are blurred, as the following quote illustrates:

My daughter sent me the aid to the border, and I went with Ana [a friend who lived in Tijuana]. I tell you that there are things about my deportation that I don't remember. Nor what I did when I entered her house, nor how the first night was, nor how many nights were, there

are many parts that left my head, no ... I don't know what happened. And I'm talking about months; by God I swear I don't know what happened! I don't know what I was doing, I don't know what I was thinking, I don't know, I don't know anything. Many months passed until I reacted. (Interview in January 2020)

While Varona spent several weeks trying to bury her emotional pain of being separated from her children by sleeping all day and barely eating, other deported mothers try to cross the USA–Mexico border clandestinely in search of going back to their families in the USA even when by so doing they risk not only their lives but also apprehension and serving detention time again. Other women decide to go back to their communities of origin to get some support while deciding what to do, and many more, as in the case of Emma, decide to settle in Tijuana to keep their families together.

For those deported mothers who decide to stay in Tijuana, isolation, loneliness, and a sense of numbness are the most recurrent feelings they experience. In her study of deported women in Tijuana, Peláez-Rodriguez asserts that, for these women, arriving in Tijuana “could represent the temporal or definite loss of all their most intimate and significant bonds: their work, their income and above all, their family” (2016, 7). It is in this dire context that the existence of an organization such as DM becomes not only meaningful but, above all, crucial for the physical and emotional survival of its members, as the following quote describes:

I spent many days in depression. One day, when I ran my fingers through my hair and realized that I had a tangled ball of hair, I realized that something was wrong with me. At that moment, I asked God to give me a sign of what I should do with my life and what I should do to cope with this profound pain. The following day, I searched the web and found a group called Dreamer Moms, a group of mothers of DREAMers in the US. I contacted the group and talked with a woman I spoke with about my situation. She said, “woman, get organized, there are more women like you, stop crying, do something and get up, you can't be like this.” (Interview in January 2020)

This was how DM was born, out of a deported mother's desperation and her search of finding a way out of the pain and frustration of being

separated from her family. In the beginning, there were a few women who gathered in public spaces, but later:

There were times when there were more than thirty people, thirty-five people gathered, women with their children ... It was something I did not expect, and that is how the women began to arrive; they called by phone, and we began to meet. For four years, we met every Thursday, every Thursday; it became a custom that we all wanted to be together. Aside from gathering, we served *cafecito* [coffee], *galletitas* [cookies], we talked, and we told each other our story; we were a support group at first, and then volunteers began to arrive. (Varona's interview in January 2020)

From an academic perspective, we could describe the gathering of these women as an open, unstructured group therapy type of activity, perhaps a group gathering with therapeutic outcomes. However, this reading would not do justice to understanding the process that these women experienced when they went from creating a space of *encuentro* (encounter) to a place of *acompañamiento* (accompaniment), then to a space of political actions. The space of *encuentro* was when, in the beginning, these women gathered not only to share physical space but, more importantly, to be in the company of other women who shared the same histories of deportation. By doing so, these women built a space of trust where, for some women, their presence alongside their initial silence—that there is no need to ask about what happened as it was implicitly understood that all who were there had been deported—was the way to accompany everyone who joined that space. This was the case with Esther. When asked why she became part of DM, she did not hesitate to answer that she liked to feel understood without having to say or explain anything. For Esther, being in that space of *encuentro*, knowing that all women there were deported mothers like her, made her feel in the company, where there was no need for words to explain what they had gone through. In this sense, the silence was a form of acknowledgment and mutual understanding of the difficult moment of loss each deported mother could be experiencing.

As time passed, these women developed a level of collective trust that allowed them to begin making sense of what had happened to them and, more importantly, to process their way of narrating their histories of deportation. Time was necessary to distance themselves to begin narrating traumatic events. Thus, in this space of *encuentro*,

these women began to organize and develop a narrative arch of their deportation. Specifically, the DM members began using *testimonios* as a tool to narrate the cultural trauma—that is, the experience of enduring collective horrific events which forever disrupt people’s consciousness and identity. By narrating the unspeakable horror, people’s *testimonios* serve as an act of justice and a construction of collective memory (Jelin 2002) to ensure such horrendous episodes do not occur again. In the case of DM, through their *testimonios*, these women began constructing their personal, family, and collective memories of the unbearable emotional pain of their separation. By listening to each other’s deportation *testimonios*, these women moved from living their experiences as an isolated event and began to realize that what they went through was part of the larger social phenomenon of migration. Feminist scholars have documented that spaces where marginalized communities support each other by voicing their experiences (Montes and París-Pombo 2019) have the possibility of becoming spaces and places of consciousness awakening (e.g. Montes 2022).

This consciousness awakening was key in transitioning from a space of *acompañamiento* to a space of political action. Specifically, the process of becoming political actors began when these women identified a common experience of family separation due to deportation and the deep emotional pain installed in all family members involved. Thus, these women began using their *testimonios* to make visible an unjust migration system, but more importantly, in the words of Emma: “What I want is that no other family experienced the pain my family and I have lived due to my deportation. I do not want more children to grow up without their mom.”

Mothers’ *Testimonios* and Collective and Family Memories

DM use different formats to disseminate their *testimonios* to the public. What follows are two that exemplify how mothers have mobilized to speak up and share their *testimonios*. These are the bedtime story-books (2015), which highlight their relationship with their children, and their spoken word in the segment for the Humanizing Deportation project (2018) that presents their role as activists. The two formats depict DM’s process of understanding, appropriating, and narrating their stories individually and in collaboration. First, we describe the

context of the specific artifact, then we present the main thread of their narrative (or plot), the sequence of events, the main actors in each story, and the audience of the *testimonio* (and how it may influence the mother's *testimonio*).

The Bedtime Story Books

This project brought out deported parents' relationship with their children and was a product of the collaboration with a local group and USA-based teachers. Early in the organization's life, as Varona shared with us during our interviews, DM reached out to other organizations in Tijuana to work collaboratively. DM tapped into projects such as the Bedtime Stories by Deported Parents workshop. The workshop was organized and facilitated by Edward M. Olivos (University of Oregon) and Sophia Sobko (University of California Berkeley). The facilitators met with parents weekly throughout 2015 to write autobiographical bedtime stories for therapeutic purposes and to find a way to connect with their children (Discussion Guide n.d.). Part of the work involved parents providing feedback to each other and contributing to illustrating the books in some cases.

DM produced three books, authored by Yolanda Varona, Emma Sánchez de Paulsen, and Monserrat Galvan Godoy. The books follow a similar presentation and structure. The cover displayed the title and an illustration of the mother (as a firefly, fairy, or lioness) looking at their children from afar. On the inside cover is the book's dedication to their children, which is a testament to their love and care for their children, impregnated with the sorrow and frustration of being separated. In her book, Varona details:

This book is dedicated to the love of my life, they are my children and grandchildren [here she lists their names] I will keep DREAMING until the miracle of love allows us to be reunited again. The dividing line or the wall between the two countries will never terminate the love we have for each other.

Monserrat Galvan writes about the truncated care and loves for her daughters and the pain that ensues:

With love, [I dedicate] this book to my daughters [here she lists their names] I want to tell you that despite the [physical] distance between us,

you have always been in my heart. I have never stopped thinking of you.
You are the driving force to fight for you every day.

Regarding the plot, the stories start with a glimpse of the main character's life before deportation. The characters vary depending on each mother. For Varona, she represents herself as a firefly, Monserrat is a lioness, and Emma chooses to write the book from her youngest son's perspective in the form of an elf. The emphasis of this section is on the happy setting and the characters of the story.

The turning point is the image of an evil or dark shadow—Immigration and Customs Enforcement—that snatches the mom from the happy place—the USA—and expels her to the sad place—Tijuana—with a tall wall that makes it impossible to go back. The separation sinks the mother into deep sadness and loneliness. Once the mother realizes she is not alone, all mothers fight to reunite with their children in a happy place. The togetherness brings the mothers the power to continue their work despite the deep sorrow that will only dissipate when they reunite with their children. The characters in each story are the mother, her children, the evil, and the group of friends—DM members. At the end of the book is the reiteration of the mothers' love for their children, which will never diminish, and they dream of the day they all will be together.

The stories are intimate accounts of mothers' experiences in simple language drawing on allegories. They all write in Spanish. Each book becomes a *testimonio* of deportation and family separation, but, most importantly, it presents the mother's despair due to the impossibility of being physically next to her children. The books become a tool for sharing their experience with their children (even if their children are grown-ups); the books appeal to their kids' childhood when deportation happened. If anything, sharing and incorporating suggestions among parents participating in this writing project allowed mothers to find the appropriate language to communicate their experience in clear and straightforward language. Also, it allowed mothers to develop a political narrative of their struggle because these books were going to be shared with schoolteachers in the USA, to make visible the issue of deportation and family separation.

Further, the narrative goes from time and place of happiness, followed by a sudden moment of sorrow and disorientation, and culminates with the power of the collective. Varona's storybook is a great example to show this plot.

Place of happiness:

Mama Firefly loved happily with her two children. Shooting Stars Paulina and Alberto ... They were very happy, until one day, when an enormous Black Stain came to take Mama Firefly away.

Moment of disorientations:

The Black Stain swallowed anyone who didn't have permission to live in the Happiest City in the World ... The Black Stain punished Mama Firefly by dropping her into the Saddest City in the World.

Power of the collective:

Every day, the Black Stain dropped more and more fireflies into the Saddest City in the World. Mama Firefly gathered together with all the other fireflies to shine as brightly as possible hoping [her children] and the other children could see their light from the other side of the Wall. The fireflies did this to help each other.

Every portion of the plot highlights that it is about their children: the moment of contentment is because they are with their children; the moment of sadness is because they are away from their children. It ends with the organization's role as a catapult to work toward reunification in the USA and to make their struggle visible.

TV Interviews/Documentaries

DM's political activism has attracted the interest of local and international media outlets. As a result, about 200 interviews and documentaries have been produced by teams from China to Denmark and the USA, among others. One such documentary is DM's *testimonio* for the project Humanizing Deportation. This is a free-access, community-based digital storytelling project launched by the University of California, Davis, that chronicles the effects of migration policies on migrants. As of 2023, the project comprises over 400 digital stories. For our analysis, this project encourages participants to share their stories how they want, which afforded DM members' voices to be widely heard on their terms. One story is a short video about DM USA/Tijuana A.C. The story starts with Varona's experience of deportation.

My name is Yolanda Varona Palacios. I am the director and founder of DMs USA/Tijuana A.C. DMs International as we are known.

While we hear Varona introducing herself, the video shows a picture of her wearing the emblematic DM pink T-shirt and holding a placard during one of the demonstrations at the San Ysidro Port of Entry.

After introducing herself, she states she arrived in the USA 28 years ago. She and her two little kids entered the USA holding tourist visas. She indicates that she decided to stay for the opportunities the country offers her children. She highlights the importance of being a law-abiding visitor, and it is only because of her children that she decided to break the law; it is because of the love she has for her children that they overstayed their visas. She gives us an example: “[M]y son wanted to sing in English, so I wanted him to fulfil his dream.” In this way, she already established that what she does is for her children, something she has always done.

Near the three-minute mark of the seven minutes and 52 seconds of the video, Varona shares the organization’s history. They came together to support one another and ask for reunification because their children make them wake up every morning despite the “constant loss” they experience. Thereby, she and the other mothers want to shed light on the human consequence of deportation. In this sense, these mothers’ *testimonios* search to appeal to US policymakers so that they should consider the people and the lives the laws are destroying. Deported mothers feel they are half-mothers because they have missed years of their children’s lives owing to deportation. Despite the sorrow and sadness, as a collective, DM members support one another to continue fighting and preventing any of them from falling into isolation, drugs, or prostitution to self-medicate to alleviate the agony. Instead, as a group, they want to show their children all mothers’ love for them. Varona also very carefully highlights that she is a law-abiding person, and everything she has done is for her children as the good mother she is. This is also related to the work DM does that is promoting legal reunification in the USA.

We hear Varona’s voice narrating her story in Spanish, along with closed captioning in English. First, when describing her hopes and dreams centered upon her children when she migrated to the USA, the images are the pages of the bedtime storybook she wrote. The moment when she describes her detention, the images are of detention centers,

the border, and barbed-wired places. Then the narration moves into DM and describes all the activities they have done as a collective.

The *testimonios* start with a moment of hope and happiness, followed by the shock of deportation and suffering and ends with hope again. The latter is a collective hope and support that DM brings to the mothers to fight for reunification with their kids in the USA. In this plot, the narrative focuses on the suffering, the sacrifice, and the importance of caring for their child face-to-face. In their *testimonios*, even though it is Varona's, she is keen on pointing out that she is not alone in this. Ultimately, the organization is the way for them to accomplish reunification. Comparing this to the bedtime story books, the plots are very similar as both follow the same sequence of events: hope, trauma, and hope again. However, the focus is on the work of DM members as activists.

Further, projects like Humanizing Deportation and interviews conducted by journalists have become outlets for DM members to speak up and share their experiences of deportation and family separation. In doing so, these outlets are the vehicles for mothers to share their *testimonios*, which is both individual and collective; the "I" refers to the collective "I" of deported mothers. Even though their lives in the USA and deportation are different, they all share the affliction of being away from those they want to care for and nurture.

In sum, these two formats broadcast mothers' *testimonios* for themselves, for their families, and beyond borders. Combining the two formats, DM members have used their *testimonios* to reach a larger audience, to express their pain of living so close and far from their children. While the artifacts analyzed in this section are for others, this is also a way for mothers to share what they are going through with their children and the memories of the cultural trauma that it is to be deported and separated from their children. Ultimately, sharing their *testimonios* and being sought out by researchers and journalists validate what they have to say, which empowers DM members in their work to the public but also themselves and their families. *Testimonios*, thus, are the tool for DM members to construct and reconstruct their memory of deportation and family separation.

Conclusion

We have examined the work of DM members. First, we analyzed how the creation of DM as a space of *encuentro* and *acompañamiento* allowed these women to process their histories of deportation and how, by doing so, they began their transformation into political actors. Second, we examined how the telling of their stories of deportation in the private space that these women created in their weekly meetings led to the formation of *testimonios* as a tool to construct their family and collective memory. Therefore, by using these *testimonios*, DM join the public space in Tijuana, where dozens of CSOs are working to shed light on the living conditions, struggles, and strategies that different migrant groups develop to cope with the challenges that living in a border city such as Tijuana entail. By looking at the interplay between transnational motherhood and deportation as cultural trauma, our work contributes in the following ways to shed light on how *testimonios* serve deported mothers to construct their families' memories.

First, by investigating the significance of a space of *encuentro* and *acompañamiento* that DM as an organization provide to deported women in Tijuana, we shed light on the role that family and collective memory play in reconstructing the dislocated lives that deportation brings to deportees in general and, particularly, to deported mothers. In a complicated border town such as Tijuana, where stigmatization and distrust of deportees prevail, self-managed collectives such as DM allow deportees to access a space of trust, emotional empathy, and, above all, as other solidarity-led collectives have shown (Montes and París-Pombo 2019), allow to develop a social-political project based on the redefinition of values over stigmatization.

As the women interviewed for this project reported, the sense of not needing to explain what it is like to be deported allows these women to carefully and at their pace process the cultural trauma of deportation and the consequent family separation. In this regard, such space was significant not only because it was the first step to start making sense of what had happened to them through narrating their own stories of deportation but, more importantly, it was in this space that these women developed their praxis of *acompañamiento*. As our interviews highlighted, this *acompañamiento* occurred by coming together and by sharing, for the first time, an emotional space where these women felt understood without having to explain what happened. It was through

that silence that these women began their process of organizing and constructing the narrative of their own stories of deportation. More importantly, it was a space where they realized they were not alone. Specifically, it is in this space where these women find a sense of collective struggle and begin sharing their *testimonios* as a tool to construct their personal, family, and collective memory.

Second, we argue that using these *testimonios* accomplishes three main goals. First, as they have been used in cases of state violence and horrific practices of genocide, Dreamers Moms use *testimonios* to narrate their deportation and the consequent family separation, which, as discussed in this chapter, represents an example of cultural trauma. Following Onwuachi-Willig's (2016) discussion of cultural trauma, a deportation is an event that disrupts all aspects of the lives of the people who experience it, leaving irreparable marks in the memory and subjectivity not only of those who live it but also of their close ones. As the interviews for this project showed, for these mothers separated from their children, deportation has been lived as a deep and unbearable emotional pain. In this sense, deportation is just the beginning of a downward spiral of suffering to which these women are subjugated once they are detained and wait to be deported. For each of these women, such experience materializes in frustration, desperation, anguish, loss, depression, and, as Emma mentions, a sense of insanity.

It is precisely this traumatic experience of deportation and the subsequent family separation that leaves indelible marks upon each of these women's consciousness, marking, therefore, their memories of this time forever. In this sense, the *testimonios* accomplish their second goal: memorialization of the family separation that these mothers and their children endured. Through their *testimonios*, these women memorialize their absence in the lives of their children left behind in the United States and the pain that stems from it. As Peláez-Rodríguez (2016) elaborates in her study of deported mothers in Tijuana, once deportation happens, mothers separated from their children experience a symbolic dislocation where physical separation makes these women not feel at home and, therefore, long to reunite with their children so that they could take care of them. Since being with their children was impossible, participating in creative projects like the bedtime story workshop allowed these mothers to find a way to testify to their love for their children. In this sense, their *testimonios* become a tool to symbolically relocate themselves in their roles as mothers.

Their love is not only manifested in the stories in those books; above all, it is in the stories that these mothers tell of their personal and collective struggle to return to be with their children. A common theme in each book is the promise of one day being together again. In that sense, the bedtime stories are *testimonios* that not only narrate their stories of deportation but also, above all, testify the struggle that these mothers undertake to legally return to the United States to get back together with their families. Therefore, the third goal that these *testimonios* accomplish is to show the struggles of these women to return to be with their children. For these mothers, it is crucial that their children know that they are fighting tirelessly to go back to being with them and care for them.

Finally, this study's theoretical contribution revolves around bringing *testimonios* as tool subaltern groups use (Yúdice 1992) in the context of deportation in two ways: to memorialize deportation and denounce it; and by memorializing mothers' absence from their children's lives during the separation. Ultimately, the *testimonios* allow us to identify deportation as a traumatic event at the individual level and as a cultural trauma experience as a collective.

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CHAPTER 7

Hidden Family History and Sense of Coherence among Second- and Third-Generation Displaced Ingrians

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Abstract

The societal and political circumstances of dispersed families can significantly limit their ability to reminisce about family history. This study examines the role of scarce family reminiscence in the sense of coherence among descendants of Ingrian Finns who were transferred from the area of the Soviet Union occupied by the German armed forces to Finland in 1943–1944. After World War II, Ingrians who were Soviet citizens were seen as “traitors” by Soviet authorities, faced discrimination in Finland, and feared deportation. By analyzing biographical interviews ($N = 29$) and survey data ($N = 156$) collected from children and grandchildren of displaced Ingrians, this study explores

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how avoiding discussions about an Ingrian family background affects the sense of coherence of displaced Ingrians' descendants in Finland today. The analyzed cases from the interview data portray how the descendants understand their parents' silence, the absence of family history, and how they build their sense of coherence in this context.

Introduction

A large body of research has recognized the intergenerational consequences of persecution, forced displacement, and family dispersal for the mental health of descendants of displaced persons (Fazel et al. 2012). The long shadows of needing to flee and the losses sustained can in some cases reach even the grandchildren of displaced persons (Giladi and Bell 2013). The essential mechanisms of intergenerational trauma transmission are related to the quality of the parent–child relationship, which can suffer owing to factors such as poor family communication, dysfunctional parenting practices, and insecure attachment (Flanagan et al. 2020). In this study, we focus on the role of family reminiscence—or the avoidance of it—in transmitting traumatic family pasts.

Family memory is characterized by communication between children and their parents, constituting an intergenerational collective memory (Erll 2011, 306). Family memory typically includes shared family stories. Family stories, defined as narratives about one's parents and ancestors, create specific “frames” for defining oneself in relation to others in the family (Fivush et al. 2010). Indeed, psychological studies have described sharing lived experiences as a highly meaningful act that supports identity development and emotional well-being (Fivush 2011, 575). In the context of family, reminiscing also strengthens the social connectedness between family members contributing to family's ability to cope with stressors and changes (Fosson et al. 2015, 49).

Studies on intergenerational trauma transmission have found that parents' ability to cope with and share their war-related, often traumatic, memories within the family has an effect on their children's mental well-being (Dalgaard and Montgomery 2015; Montgomery 2004). Parental trauma exposure can affect descendants' ability to cope with stress and have adverse effects on their mental health (Bezo and Maggi 2015; Sangalang and Vang 2017), especially when the trauma exposure has been damaging to a parent's own mental health (Flanagan

et al. 2020). Other studies focusing on resilience have emphasized individual- and family-level resources in recovering from war-related traumatic experiences (Borwick et al. 2013; Siriwardhana et al. 2014).

In addition to showing how war-related experiences are connected with psychological symptoms, there is a need to look more closely at the mechanisms of the intergenerational transmission of trauma in specific societal and community contexts (Fazel et al. 2012; Siriwardhana et al. 2014). Furthermore, there is a lack of research on the intergenerational transmission of traumatic experiences related to forced displacement and family dispersal between the children and grandchildren of those who experienced these events (i.e., between the second and third generations of displaced persons). This study contributes to filling these gaps by examining the relationship between scarce family reminiscence and mental well-being in displaced Ingrian families who stayed in Finland after World War II.

We argue that knowing one's family history may be particularly important in the context of forced displacement. We propose that the concept of sense of coherence, referring to our tendency to see the world as predictable and manageable (Antonovsky and Sagy 1986), is vital for better understanding the intergenerational transmission of traumatic experiences in the context of forced displacement and unspoken trauma. We then examine how parents' avoidance of discussing their Ingrian background is related to a sense of coherence among second- and third-generation Ingrians living in Finland today and how the descendants of forcibly displaced Ingrians have aimed to increase their sense of coherence in the context of silenced family histories.

Sense of coherence can be defined as "a person's capacity to respond to stressful situations" (Eriksson and Lindström 2011, 35). Reflecting our tendency to perceive our inner and outer worlds as ordered, predictable, and manageable (Antonovsky and Sagy 1986), a strong sense of coherence implies a good level of individual resources to manage stressors. Sense of coherence thus entails the idea that things are more easily manageable when they are somewhat coherent and predictable (Eriksson and Lindström 2011, 35). Comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness form the three dimensions of sense of coherence (Eriksson and Lindström 2011). Comprehensibility refers to the cognitive, manageability to the behavioral, and meaningfulness to the motivational dimension of sense of coherence. These dimensions,

however, are highly intertwined (Eriksson and Mittelmark 2017), and a sense of coherence is understood in this study as a whole comprising these three elements. A relatively stable sense of coherence can be damaged in the unpredictable and insecure context of forced migration and related traumatic events (Fosson et al. 2014). A low sense of coherence further sensitizes individuals to other highly stressful or traumatic experiences (Fosson et al. 2014).

There are a few studies that have addressed the role of sense of coherence in transferring parents' traumatic experiences to their children. A connection between parental and adult offspring's sense of coherence was found in a study on Lithuanian families exposed to political violence during World War II and under communist rule (Kazlauskas et al. 2017). It has also been shown that trauma experienced by the first generation disturbs family relationships and communication, which, in turn, decreases sense of coherence in the second generation (Han 2006).

Our research participants are children or grandchildren of Ingrians who were subjected to ethnic persecution and displacement in the Soviet Union in the first half of the 20th century. Because of their ethnicity, Ingrians were often considered "traitors" from the perspective of Soviet authorities. At the end of the 1930s, the state authorities executed a large proportion of Ingrian men regarded as untrustworthy (Lahti-Argutina 2001). Many Ingrian families were deported as *kulaks* to the Russian peripheries (Matley 1979). In addition to the Soviet deportations, 63,000 Ingrians were displaced from their homes and transferred to Finland via German-occupied areas at the end of World War II. These population transfers were carried out by Finnish and German authorities in 1943–1944, during a period when Finland fought against the Soviet Union alongside Nazi Germany. A great majority of these people were either forced to return or voluntarily returned to the Soviet Union in the following years (Flink 2010).

At the beginning of World War II, Finland was home to several different ethnic minorities, such as Jews, Tatars, and Roma (Harjula et al. 2021). The events that took place during and after World War II significantly increased minority communities, such as Soviet Karelians, Veps, and Ingrians including Ingrian Finns, Votic people, and Izhorians in Finnish society. In Finnish historiography, the postwar period in Finland is often understood as the "years of danger," referring to political and social insecurity alongside the communist regime controlling

the implementation of the peace treaty in Finland. This had a negative impact on some minorities' security and status in Finland as well, specifically to those who still were Soviet citizens. While the case of over 400,000 Karelians evacuated from the areas ceded to the Soviet Union to Finland was incorporated into national narratives of Finland, the Ingrians, for instance, were not included in these public stories.

After the war, the Allied Control Commission and the Finnish State Police monitored the fulfillment of the conditions of the Paris Peace Treaty and the Moscow Armistice. Their officers sought out Ingrians and persuaded them to return to the Soviet Union. The legal position of the Ingrians who stayed in Finland remained unclear for decades after the war (Flink 2010). In Finland, the presence of Ingrians, being Soviet citizens, was politically disconcerting. Discrimination against people of Soviet origin was also common in postwar Finland. The societal and political context created insecurity, uncertainty, and fear in Ingrian communities, whose family histories were often marked by traumatic pasts, heavy losses, and the unpredictability of the future (Kähäri 2021). In this context, recalling the family members and life left behind in the Soviet Union was difficult, even undesirable in Ingrian families.

Ingrian immigrant parents often have kept quiet about their family history for societal reasons and for the sake of preserving a stable family life (Siim 2016). Without the intergenerational transmission of family stories, the history of forcibly displaced Ingrian families has frequently remained unclear or even fully unknown to the following generations born in Finland. Mariana Achugar (2016, 2) has used the term "sense of self as a historical being" to describe the connection between personal trajectories, identity development, and larger historical processes. In the sociohistorical and political circumstances of postwar Finland, this connection has been at risk of remaining thin among the descendants of displaced Ingrians.

Recent studies on family reminiscence of traumatic events experienced by parents emphasize the ways that past events are discussed within the family (Dalgaard and Montgomery 2015). The second generation's well-being can be supported by communicating trauma-related experiences to children in a careful, age-appropriate manner (Dalgaard and Montgomery 2015). Moreover, a parent's choice to be silent does not necessarily have a negative impact on family members' well-being. However, parents' avoidance of talking about family

history can harm children's ability to develop good self-esteem and self-understanding in the context of familial history (Fivush 2008).

Based on previous studies, we assume that Ingrian families' sense of coherence—the tendency to see one's surrounding environment as predictable and understandable—has been diminished in the face of persecution and uncertainty. For our survey data analysis, we hypothesize that there is a relationship between the second generation's sense of coherence and that of their children, the third generation. Concerning family reminiscence, we expect parents' avoidance of talking about their Ingrian background to be related to a lower sense of coherence among second- and third-generation Ingrians. Furthermore, in the analysis of biographical interviews, we explore the ways descendants of Ingrians have tried to improve their sense of coherence in the context of unspoken family histories.

Data and Methods

This multimethod study is built on an analysis of survey data and biographical interviews. For the survey data, we tracked second- and third-generation Ingrians based on the *List of Soviet Citizens in Finland in 1955*. Home addresses of the children and grandchildren of the listed Ingrians were retrieved from Finland's Digital and Population Data Services Agency. We defined each person's generational status based on their birth year. In the case of several parent–child pairs within the same family, we randomly selected participants, prioritizing mother–daughter dyads for research purposes beyond the scope of this chapter.

We collected the survey data in Finland, using paper and online questionnaires, in May–July 2021. We sent the questionnaires to the children (second generation, $n = 474$) and grandchildren (third generation, $n = 474$) of displaced Ingrians. The response rate was 59 percent among the second generation and 44 percent among the third generation. The survey data consists of 156 parent–child dyads made up of children and grandchildren of Ingrians who were displaced during World War II. Most of the dyads are mother–daughter dyads ($n = 95$, 61 percent), which were preferred in the sampling. The data also includes 25 mother–son dyads (16 percent), 15 father–daughter dyads (9 percent), 20 father–son dyads (13 percent), and one father–other

Table 7.1: Descriptive statistics by generation

	Second generation, <i>n</i> = 150–156	Third generation, <i>n</i> = 150–156
Age, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	65.7 (10.0)	37.2 (13.0)
Gender, <i>n</i> (%)		
Female	119 (76)	110 (70)
Male	37 (24)	45 (29)
Other	0	1 (1)
Education, <i>n</i> (%)		
Primary education or less (≤ 9 years)	29 (19)	8 (5)
Secondary education	87 (57)	61 (41)
Higher education	37 (24)	81 (54)
Sense of coherence (SOC), <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	48.7 (8.4)	46.7 (8.4)
Parents avoided talking about Ingrian background (Yes), <i>n</i> (%)*	74 (59.2)	30 (27.5)

*Values of dichotomous (yes/no) variable, $n = 125$ in the second generation and $n = 109$ in the third generation.

Note: *M* (*SD*) = Mean (Standard deviation)

dyad (1 percent). The descriptive statistics of the sample by generation are shown in [Table 7.1](#).

The interview data analyzed in this study is part of a larger set of biographical data ($N = 29$) collected in 2019–2021 mainly via Zoom in Finland, Sweden, and Estonia. From the perspective of forced migration, all of the interviewees are second- and third-generation Ingrians. We included the second- and third-generation interviewees born in Finland ($N = 14$) in this study. We identified and selected the cases that were highly informative (Emmel 2013) and illustrative of the biographical interview data in relation to our research topic. Finally, we chose two cases for closer analysis to give a detailed insight into intergenerational communication about families' Ingrian background and experiences related to sense of coherence in the context of scarce family reminiscence.

Data Analysis

We measured sense of coherence among survey respondents with a validated sense of coherence scale (Antonovsky 1987; Eriksson and Mittelmark 2017). The scale consists of 13 items, each assessed on a five-point Likert scale, exploring how respondents had experienced their life (e.g., “Has it happened in the past that you were surprised by the behavior of people you thought you know well?” “Do you have the feeling that you are being treated unfairly?”). Parents’ avoidance of talking about the family’s Ingrian background was measured by asking whether participants thought that their parents had avoided talking about the family’s Ingrian background and related issues. The answer options were “yes, often,” “yes, sometimes,” “no,” “cannot say,” and “does not concern me.” We combined the “yes, often” and “yes, sometimes” answers to indicate positive statements and excluded the “cannot say” and “does not concern me” responses from the analysis. We used the Pearson correlation coefficient to test the relationships between the variables, and box plots to explore the distribution of the sense of coherence scores between those who felt that their parents had avoided talking about their Ingrian past and those who did not.

We analyzed the interviews by combining narrative methods (Riessman 2008) and thematic analysis (Ruusuvauro et al. 2010). We aimed to understand the lives of the interviewees as a whole by concentrating on two cases and their life courses (Riessman 2008). Thus, we read, coded, and analyzed the stories of these two interviewees, focusing on stories that were related to family relationships and were meaningful for the interviewees. We paid specific attention to the experiences related to family communication and reminiscence indicating a weak or strong sense of coherence. Experiences of a weak sense of coherence included, for example, stories that indicated incomprehension of families or described the unpredictability of parental behavior. A strong sense of coherence was inferred from, for example, stories describing how the interviewee better understood events in their family history after learning about the history of the Ingrians.

Results

Analysis of the Survey Data

As expected, parents' avoidance of talking about Ingrian family history was related to a weaker sense of coherence among both second-generation Ingrians ($r(154) = -.23, p < .05$), and third-generation Ingrians ($r(154) = -.24, p < .05$). The distribution of sense of coherence scores between avoidant and nonavoidant communication is shown in the box plot in [Figure 7.1](#). There were more respondents with a weaker sense of coherence among those who thought their parents avoided talking about their Ingrian background than there were among those who did not.

High levels of sense of coherence in the second generation were connected with high levels of sense of coherence in the third generation ($r(154) = .32, p < .01$). Thus, low parental sense of coherence and the perception that parents avoided talking about their Ingrian past were both found to be related to the next generation's sense of coherence. Next, we analyze how family reminiscence and sense of coherence are portrayed in the interviews of second- and third-generation Ingrians.

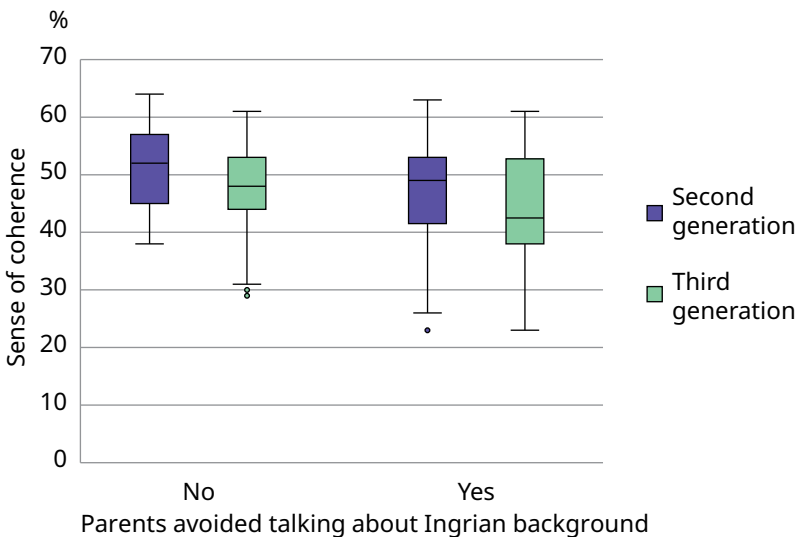


Figure 7.1: Box plot of sense of coherence by perceived parental communication and generation

*Case 1. Juho: From Silence to the Reconstruction of
Family History*

Juho is a middle-aged man born to a Finnish mother and an Ingrian father in Finland in the 1960s. His father and his father's sister were transported to Finland as children during World War II. Juho's paternal grandmother died during the refugee journey, which was an extremely traumatic event for Juho's father. Juho was an only child but later found out that he had a half-brother from his father's previous marriage.

As we looked at the narratives of Juho's family history, we paid particular attention to his stories about silence on family issues. Specifically, in his childhood and adolescence, Juho found it difficult to understand the history of the family and his own place in it without knowledge about his father's life. His father's past had not been discussed within the family. In general, the interview was marked by Juho's incomprehension of his parents' decision to keep quiet about past events in their family history. As Juho did not know about his father's background in the early stages of his life, it was highly difficult for him to understand some family events and cross-border family relationships. When Juho was a teenager, the incomprehensibility of his family's relationships culminated when his Soviet relatives came to visit:

And we had these—just a moment—maybe in the 70s, some incomprehensible (*käsittämättömiä*) relatives came here to Finland. Not so [many], one or two came. They came from the Soviet Union, and they just visited here. I was a bit surprised. Later, I found out that my father originated from there. It was not until—well, his sister, meaning my aunt, from her, from her I have found this out really. My father died in 1999.

Juho was confused about the “incomprehensible relatives” from the Soviet Union who suddenly appeared at their door. Within the family, there were several ambiguous issues related to family relationships. For instance, the couple whom Juho had believed to be his biological grandparents were in fact the people with whom his father and aunt had been placed after arriving in Finland. Being orphans, the children had been placed with a foster family on a Finnish farm. Juho discovered this part of his family's story when he was a teenager. As another example, in Juho's early adulthood, his father and aunt took him on a

journey to their homestead in the Soviet Union. The purpose of the trip was unclear to Juho, and he was surprised when they suddenly met relatives during the journey. Juho recalled the trip as highly emotional for the adults but the family history remained vague for him. In the interview, Juho presented these events as examples of the silence in his family regarding his father's background. The silence made him feel weird, and he often used the words "odd" and "strange" when describing his family life and communication in his childhood family.

Juho also noticed that, unlike his friends' families, his own family did not have any shared traditions, as he described in his stories of the traditions of "ordinary families." The lack of shared family traditions and scarce contacts with relatives made it difficult for him to feel that he belonged to his family. His parents' passivity culminated in stories underlining the ambiguity caused by the absence of family history:

There was no clear direction. Somehow, somehow, I pity him [my father], too. I don't know. But when you think about the life experiences he went through with his sister, it is incomprehensible and terrible. But of course, I understand. It is a miracle that he survived so well after all. However, our family then ... I don't know. Probably, it was the history that was missing, and the continuity. When everything was kept in secrecy and so on, I was floating through life, too.

Juho felt that the silence and gloomy atmosphere at home made it more difficult to manage his own life. In Juho's interpretation, the war "changed everything"; "the sense of community" was lost, and all that remained was a family with no history. Juho's understanding of daily life in Ingria before the war was based mainly on his aunt's reminiscences. His own imagined reminiscence highlighted the meaning of reciprocal help and family responsibilities.

I suppose that there [in Ingria], they had relatives in the neighborhood. [Back] then, I suppose that the sense of community was strong in the village. Everyone helped each other. It was their— So, it is like the opposite of my childhood. Here, I think, communities have been forgotten and we have become just individuals. And there was always— If there was a sense of community. Our relatives now, we don't keep in touch at all. Was it, then, that one war could change all that?

Later in life, Juho was eager to construct new meanings for his family without history. He recorded extensive narratives of family history as told by his aunt. He also read books about the history of the Ingrians. In his narrative of his Ingrian roots, Juho also emphasized joyful moments and the prewar community life of his Ingrian family. Becoming familiar with Ingrian history helped him deeply comprehend historical events and allowed him to position his father within them. Thus, Juho's understanding of his father's past increased over time and had a major impact on Juho as well. Moreover, Juho began to empathize with his father's silence, which he now connected to the fear of being returned to the Soviet Union and an unwillingness to "advertise" his Soviet past in Finland:

But probably at the time when they were here in Finland, well of course, there was the fear that now we'll get deported. So, it was a bit necessary to be silent about the past and one's background. I suppose that it has been like that afterwards, too. And after all, we haven't had this kind of freedom for long. Probably, from the 60s to the 70s ... it wasn't beneficial to advertise your own past. I suppose [they had] this kind of a reason.

Juho interpreted his father's silence as a necessity in the political circumstances of the time. In Juho's interpretation, there were several aspects of his father's personal history as an Ingrian that silenced him. One was his father's traumatic loss of his mother during the journey. His uncertain legal position, fear of deportation, and discrimination in postwar Finland were also reasons Juho felt his father avoided talking about his Ingrian background.

Understanding the family history inspired Juho to reactivate and recreate cross-border family relationships. He mentioned that he is nowadays "very much" in contact with his second cousin, who lives in Estonia. He also considered it important to continue his father's tradition of lighting a candle for his parents on All Saint's Day, for instance. Thus, Juho's recreation of transnational family relationships and intergenerational reminiscence practices made his family history more meaningful and manageable, as a part of his own past and present.

To conclude, Juho's key experiences related to his weak sense of coherence were, in his own words, "oddness" and "apathy" in his childhood family life, which he described as an "unbelievable mess." After experiencing this familial mess, he later endeavored to make his life

more manageable in various ways. The case illustrates how the incomprehensible may become comprehensible and how creating new meanings within a family history may influence an individual's life orientation, indicating a positive change in one's sense of coherence.

Case 2. Kaisa: Finding Balance through Family Identification

Kaisa, a university student from Finland, was born to a single mother, in her own words an “only parent,” in the 1980s. Her life course was rather fragmented, with constantly changing social environments, as the family, which also included two brothers, moved often from one place to another. Kaisa belongs to a visible minority, which, in addition to other factors concerning her family history and family life, had an impact on her identity development in her childhood and youth.

Kaisa's key experience affecting her sense of coherence was her constant concern about her mother, who was a “restless” person. In Kaisa's interpretation of the transmission of intergenerational trauma, her grandfather, who was transferred to Finland during World War II when he was about 20 years old, had caused instability in the family during her mother's childhood. However, although her grandfather was a frightening and unstable parent for her mother, he was a warm, supportive, and fatherly figure for Kaisa. In Kaisa's narrative, the behavior of her grandfather was related to both silence and trauma and had an enormous impact not only on Kaisa's mother but also on Kaisa, who was close to them both.

Kaisa knew something about her grandfather's past because she had interviewed him as an adult. For example, she learned that her grandfather had been used as a forced laborer by the German armed forces. As a teenager during World War II, he was forced to collect the bones of dead bodies in the German-occupied area. In Kaisa's interpretation, these kinds of experiences were traumatic to her grandfather and influenced family life as well. Kaisa thought that her mother's restlessness was caused by her grandfather's inability to make his children feel safe. Her grandfather had been a violent father who often lost self-control:

My mother experienced physical discipline as a child, in a negative way. Not only the physical pain, the mental wounds are deeper, and my mother suffered from those a lot, I bet. However, it was my grandfather's unstable mood that my mother and my uncle often discussed. My

grandfather's personality was so short-tempered, and they always had to be alert because they never knew his state of mind. And I suppose it was the war and the horror he saw that had an impact on his low self-control.

The verbal and physical violence in her mother's childhood family caused stress, fear, and tension. Owing to her mother's experiences, Kaisa herself also experienced insecurity and restlessness in her childhood family:

I have always been torn away from my roots. I am like a plant that never rooted well anywhere. Then you grow, in a way, in too many directions. And that makes me a bit restless and a certain kind of wanderer.

Kaisa was bullied in school and felt that it was because she was always the new girl in town and visibly different in the Finnish countryside where she lived. These negative experiences and constantly moving created difficulties for Kaisa in managing the physical and social environments of her childhood, hence contributing to her low sense of coherence. In her experiences as an outsider, she could strongly relate to the discrimination her grandfather faced in both the Soviet Union and Finland. Later in life, Kaisa went to therapy to get help for the anxiety caused by her life experiences, and she also found a religious community where she felt socially accepted. She emphasized that she was no longer "an angry and suffering person."

In describing the cumulative effects of the stressors in her life, Kaisa referred to her grandfather's life, which she felt had included similar experiences. Although Kaisa knew something about the family's past, she was highly uncertain of her grandfather's true feelings and thoughts about the past and felt that he "put on a brave face." Kaisa's grandfather strove to control his family history by destroying some materials and keeping emotional family memories to himself. Her grandfather had burned his mother's poems and "bottled up" agonizing issues and feelings concerning the past. In Kaisa's interpretation, keeping emotional family-related issues to himself had made her grandfather ill:

If you just keep things bottled up as my grandfather did, you'll get sick. I assume that my grandfather got Alzheimer's disease because of this. Of course, there can be genetic reasons, too. However, if you just keep things and difficult feelings to yourself, you'll get sick, you'll get symptoms.

The family's past played a significant role in Kaisa's life. As was the case with Juho, Kaisa was eager to learn more about the family history and sought out information about the past by interviewing her grandfather and investigating Ingrian population transfers at the National Archives of Finland. She also visited the area her grandfather originated from in Russia. The 2020 exhibition *Ingrians—the Forgotten Finns* at the National Museum of Finland was extremely important for her. Learning more about the history of the Ingrian community allowed Kaisa to reframe the events of her own family history and to attach new meanings to them. Understanding herself as a part of the family helped Kaisa find balance in her personal life, too:

Although I do not identify as Ingrian, I know it is part of my history. And I know that my grandfather strongly identified as Ingrian, and it is my inheritance.

These kinds of statement reflect the strong empathy Kaisa felt toward her grandfather and his lived experiences. She had a deeply emotional relationship to her grandfather's life story. Kaisa also constantly compared her own difficulties in life to her grandfather's experiences as an outsider in Finnish society. The family's Ingrian history, constructed through the interpreted and partly imagined experiences of her grandfather, was important to Kaisa, although she did not consider herself an "Ingrian."

Despite his failings, Kaisa's grandfather was the family "repository," highlighting the centrality of his personality and the significance of his experiences for the family. Investigating the family history was ultimately a kind of a resource for Kaisa in managing her life. She stated that, before, she had tried to solve her problems by traveling and getting away, but she later realized that "finding her inner roots" was essential for experiencing peace in life.

"Finding peace" after finding her inner roots illustrates how Kaisa improved her sense of coherence in a social context she had first experienced as restless and unpredictable. From a wider perspective, the meaningfulness of family history was reflected in Kaisa's stories of being a witness to the intergenerational effects of traumatic experiences. She found it important to deal with these issues so they would not be transferred further to her own relationships.

Conclusion

Our analyses of survey data and biographical interviews complement each other, suggesting that a low sense of coherence can be transmitted from the second to the third generation, a connection previously found between the first and second generations (Kazlauskas et al. 2017). Our results also show that knowledge about events in the family's past supports descendants' sense of coherence, which, in turn, has been shown to positively affect one's mental health (Braun-Lewensohn et al. 2011; Fossion et al. 2015).

The survey results show that the second generation were more likely to feel their parents had been silent about their Ingrian past than the third generation were. This indicates an information gap between those who had experienced forced displacement firsthand and their children. Repressed reminiscence or unwillingness of parents to revisit the painful events of the past was also visible in the interview data when second-generation Ingrians discussed how their parents communicated about their past. In addition to traumatic experiences, there are many other reasons why war-related family reminiscence could be scarce in Ingrian families. There are, for example, individual- and family-level differences in how family stories are shared. In the case of family reminiscence between the second and third generations, it may also be that there is just not much to tell, as was found in a study on World War I commemoration among British and German descendants (Roper and Duffett 2018). Moreover, the societal and political context, including uncertainty regarding the family's legal position and negative attitudes toward Russians and Soviet citizens in postwar Finland, hampered Soviet-era family reminiscence.

Our case studies depict how descendants of Ingrians have aspired to understand their family histories and to reject the impact of silence and trauma in their families' pasts. Juho accomplished this by exploring individual and communal family histories and building emotional ties with members of his extended family, even those he had never met himself. By increasing his knowledge and self-understanding, Juho was able to strengthen his sense of coherence and feel better. By linking his own experiences to the more general history of the Ingrians, he became more aware of himself as a historical being (Achugar 2016, 2) positioned in the known historical continuum. His concrete practices of reminiscing, such as lighting a candle in remembrance of

his biological grandparents he never met, can also be interpreted as a sense of responsibility for preserving his father's memories and honoring the traumatic losses of his father's childhood. Such a sense of responsibility has been found to motivate people to commemorate in similar contexts (Roper and Duffett 2018, 83).

Kaisa used her family history as a resource in a similar way. As the grandchild of a displaced Ingrian, Kaisa witnessed the intergenerational transmission of her grandfather's harsh experiences through her mother's struggles, which in turn affected Kaisa's life. Kaisa's own relationship with her grandfather was mainly close and warm. When struggling herself, Kaisa was comforted by her grandfather's wartime struggles and his experiences of being an outsider in Finnish society. The third generation's deep emotional connection to the forced displacement and traumatic experiences of their grandparents has been found in other studies as well (Lev-Wiesel 2007; see also [Chapter 1](#)).

In addition to family reminiscence, it is evident that several other factors contribute to a sense of coherence among second- and third-generation Ingrians. The two cases analyzed in this study both entail several events in the interviewees' personal and family histories that may have affected their ability to view their worlds as meaningful, predictable, and manageable. Research has shown that for those with a low sense of coherence, such as Juho and Kaisa in their childhood, an accumulation of stressors can be especially burdensome (Fossion et al. 2014). At the same time, efforts to create a sense of generational continuity and connectedness can help family members to cope with past traumatic events (Danieli et al. 2016; see also [Chapter 9](#)). Our findings support this position, which held true even in the third generation of displaced Ingrians, as Kaisa's case shows. Finally, our results add to the literature on mental health and family reminiscence of war and displacement by suggesting that scarce family reminiscence contributes to weakened sense of coherence among descendants. Their way of coping with their family's history by gathering more information about the past and actively trying to make sense of the victimized past of their parents or grandparents not only increased their knowledge of what has happened but also constructed a sense of continuity and a somehow coherent narrative of their own past.

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CHAPTER 8

Reflections on Displaced Positionality and Families

Trauma and Resilience

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Abstract

This chapter explores trauma and resilience as interrelated processes, moving away from pathologizing perspectives. Impact of forced displacement on diverse levels and the Danish restrictive laws exerting pressure, dehumanizing and devaluing the displaced persons' sense of belonging, are delineated. We ask how some traumatized displaced persons overcome dehumanization and build dignified lives, and what factors are involved in the process of resilience. We present a case study of a young Afghan woman, Nadia, who migrated with her family from Afghanistan to Denmark in the 1990s, and a follow-up two

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decades later. We analyze the case study through diverse theoretical perspectives and empirical studies. Nadia is described as a human being, avoiding stereotypes of both a “helpless victim” and a “super survivor.” We discuss how displacement, trauma, and resilience involve intergenerational memories, and how, through long-term supportive interaction with the surroundings, suffering can be transformed into competencies to construct a dignified life.

Introduction

In the Danish context, the government leads a restrictive strategy toward migrants. Denmark is characterized by egalitarian principles, a national welfare policy (the Scandinavian welfare model), and a dominant discourse of homogeneity. However, in the past decades, these characteristics have changed (Overland et al. 2014). The relative gender and economic equality egalitarianism is being challenged by increasing gaps between the different socioeconomic groups; “the state cradle to grave tax-supported welfare system” is under pressure, especially after the welfare cuts in 2015. The public rhetoric of Danish homogeneity sits uneasily alongside historical and regional differentiation and social class during this age of globalization and is one of the paradoxes related to Danishness (Jenkins 2011; Singla 2017). Ethnic homogeneity is declining, as reflected in the current demographic data—16.3 percent of the population consists of migrants, and 10.4 percent with non-Western backgrounds, out of a total population of 5.99 million (Statistics Denmark 2025). This population diversity exists along with the official lack of recognition of Denmark as a multiethnic and multicultural society.

Despite the growing diversity in Denmark, the country’s perception as a homogeneous society persists in both political and academic discourse (Jørgensen 2012; MIPEX 2025). This view ignores the long-term presence of migrants in Danish institutions and organizations. The fact that many act on this constructed image of homogeneity allows and encourages attitudes of intolerance, discrimination, and xenophobia from the majority ethnic Danish population. Migrants’ activities may often be (mis)interpreted as contravening the average Danish norms of “civilized behavior,” which can be extra stress to the already vulnerable families (Jørgensen 2012, 213). Migrants are coerced into the new culture under immigration laws that aim to

“integrate” them, barely including their culture of origin (Jørgensen 2012, 215). In this context, refugees and migrants are exposed to regulations that dehumanize them and disregard their rights, history, and sense of belonging (Cyrulnik 2002, 65). The Danish welfare and health care systems overlook the actors’ ordeal and the consequences of these rules on migrants’ everyday lives (Jørgensen 2012, 219). Overall, the migration practices in Denmark leave some migrants in a state of ongoing socioemotional insecurity, where the need to maintain connections with their culture of origin is overlooked. However, some can create and maintain a connection with their country of origin (Singla and Sriram 2022).

We focus on the following questions: How can displaced people overcome dehumanization and build dignified lives? What factors are involved in the process of resilience among traumatized displaced families? When illustrating these processes through a case study, Nadia (Singla 2004, 2008), we present her as a human being with agency, avoiding the stereotypes of both a “helpless victim” and a “super survivor.” We also draw on understanding the narratives through other empirical sources, testimonies from literature, and theoretical perspectives. We start by overviewing the central theoretical discussions informing our analysis, focusing on uprootedness, trauma, and resilience. After explaining our data and methods, we move to the analysis of Nadia’s narratives. In the discussion, we return to the questions set out above.

Uprootedness, Trauma, Silenced Memories, and Adaptation

Migration is a transition that implies and demands continued family reorganization at different stages (Skytte 1999, 105). Given these conditions, the family as a system must adjust to the new surroundings, as each member must learn to navigate in several contexts, such as school, job, social organizations, and relations in the society of origin. The constant coping with demands and challenges from the host society can be overwhelming and sometimes unmanageable. As the process of adjustment requires effort to learn new habits, language, and the rules of the new culture, each family member may face moments of crisis to incorporate new values, languages, schedules, and symbols into their everyday life (Angel and Hjern 2008, 76; Berry 2011, 282).

Moreover, displacement, following the UN definition, refers to the forced movement of people from their homes or habitual places of residence due to various factors such as conflict, violence, natural disasters, and more. Leder (2016, 2) adds that this may lead to an existential state of uprootedness. In these circumstances, uprooted people may experience loss, disorientation in space and time, and vulnerability. Persons' affective and social encounters can restore their sense of belonging or reinforce the feeling of being outsiders. Hannah Arendt (2000) and Eva Hoffman (1989) highlight the feeling of being outsiders, living with a permanent sense of insecurity.

The demands placed on family members by the Danish social and health care systems constitute a coercive social environment with a risk of dehumanizing the immigrants (Angel and Hjern 2008). In addition, discriminatory attitudes within the host society may lead to frustration, family conflicts, and feeling like an "eternal outsider" (Jørgensen 2012, 213). These demands and attitudes hinder meaningful interpersonal interactions between migrant families and the host society. However, migration to Denmark offers opportunities for many to achieve educational goals and experience the recognition of women's rights in a democratic society with a relatively high level of formal gender equality. Despite the ongoing sense of insecurity and the continuous search for belonging, some migrants have found a place in the new society, expressing themselves through art, academic, or technical studies. At the same time, there is a contestation of the "unrooted" metaphor, which reflects the mobility and agency of human beings.

A displaced family and its members may have been exposed to traumatic experiences before leaving the country of origin, during the journey toward the host country, or during the adaptation period to the new country. Each member may cope with these experiences differently. Many refugees coming to Denmark are frequently diagnosed as traumatized. Asylum seekers who endure long waits for decisions on their cases often experience deteriorating health, with a high rate of physical and psychological breakdown, retraumatizing, and suicide. Restrictive integration rules may burden already vulnerable families (Refugees 2022). The host society generally remains silent about the historical events leading to the present status of uprooted migrants. They evolve into a no-person's-land in which the memories of the past are not legitimated by collective public recognition in the host country. Thus, recollecting, remembering, and reelaborating those memories

may remain an exclusively private affair. Silence and, even more so, the official silence of the state, are harmful because they delegitimize private and personal history (Cyrulnik 2012, 211).

Trauma generates broken memories, not necessarily broken lives, and in exile, broken histories are exacerbated (van der Kolk et al. 2007, 5). Traumatization leaves traces in the brain but these are reversible. At the same time, memories are stories of the surroundings, a subjective, intimate “synthesis” of interactions. When we tell our past, we rebuild it, which may lead to transformation depending on who listens. Cyrulnik (2016, 190) and Barreto (2008, 101) describe the consequences of being unable to tell one’s story when one’s fragmented memories emerge suddenly and unexpectedly. These situations may generate inner turmoil filled with sensations and images, making it difficult, if not impossible—to articulate them. One feels wordless, paralyzed.

The disconnection from history is particularly devastating for the children of immigrants whose parents have suffered persecution, imprisonment, or torture as they lack direct access to their parents’ cultural roots (see also [Chapter 7](#)). “My parents tell me little about their pre-war life ... as if the war erased not only the literal world in which they lived but also its relevance to their new conditions,” recalls Hoffman (1989, 8). Parents’ silence about their early history and past traumatic events is a way to protect children from this burdensome past and to provide a peaceful environment favorable for successful integration. However, by remaining silent, the parents may exacerbate the rift, interrupting genealogical continuity by not ensuring the transmission of the family saga (Barreto 2008, 207). This description of silenced memories provides a behavioral clue to the person’s inner world, where denial may create a sense of emptiness. While it may help the individual’s immediate suffering, it also prevents them from building a meaningful life (Cyrulnik 2002, 65). We must point out that this situation has changed in the last decades in Denmark. Nowadays, many professionals and communities invite traumatized and displaced people to tell their stories and express themselves in different ways.

Resilience in Context

“We all have some broken glasses in our souls that hurt and make us bleed. When I write, I feel I can pull some of those broken glasses out of me. By putting them on paper, they do not hurt me anymore” (Galeano

2015, 12, translation by Berta Vishnivetz). This statement illustrates the possible healing effect of an intervention, such as writing down the hurting aspects, thereby contributing to resistance.

Resilience constitutes a process whereby what, how, or who we are at a given time must be knitted and healed in interaction with the affective, socioecological environment (Barreto 2008, 100–102; Cyrulnik 2016, 184). We underline that trauma and resilience are longitudinal processes (van der Kolk et al. 2007, 428–36). We mentioned earlier how trauma leaves imprints in the brain, but they are reversible (Cyrulnik 2012, 105) as the human brain has the capacity for plasticity and can restore function at the physiological level (Kandel et al. 1991, 1004). Memories of family and a person's interactions with the surroundings must be reconstructed through narrative, performances, art, and creating and recreating stories from one's memories. In this way, the person expresses the ordeal of impressions by speaking them out. Marquez (2014, 2) states: "We need to narrate our story to make sense of the world, to construct our life."

One way to recover from loss and trauma is through transformation of trauma. To process and heal from traumatic experiences, spaces may be created by a context of health care professionals where emotions can be expressed. Both Barreto (2008, 101) and Cyrulnik (2002, 110) underline the human capacity to transform suffering into competencies. Barreto (2008, 102) illustrates this: "What was your wound? What is your pearl? The suffering I have experienced encourages me to restore what I live now. In this way, my pain becomes a source of competences."

Thus, Cyrulnik (2016, 152) and Barreto (2008, 105) highlight agency as a fundamental aspect of the human capacity to move from broken, silenced memories toward a "human," dignified life, transforming wounds into capabilities. From the moment we can speak out about trauma through speech, art, performance, and storytelling, we begin to regain control over the shock and emotion that overwhelmed us. In performing and representing the tragedy, we can work out the feeling provoked by the crisis. Observing and understanding those who endured trauma and moved on to reconstruct their life can reveal how they looked back to the scars of their past and had the courage, the resources, and the support to see their past from another perspective, making it possible to move on (Cyrulnik 2002, 187). As Cyrulnik (2002, 164) notes, "[m]igrants, whose family, the social structure has

been broken can become creators of their life, restoring their humanity by revalidating their neglected memories, if they get access to a space to speak out, to perform.” This chapter’s case study explores a young Afghan woman’s experiences, difficulties, and agency, illustrating how resilience can develop despite frequent challenges and hostilities in her interactions with Danish society and her extended family.

Method and Data

Nadia’s case study is drawn from qualitative research that constituted a doctoral thesis (Singla 2000, 2004) and a subsequent follow-up post-doctoral study (Singla 2008) by the first author. In this chapter, the data is analyzed from a radically different perspective. The second author has primarily contributed to the chapter through the theoretical and empirical perspectives in the first part, as well as the overall structure, discussions, and conclusions of the chapter. While the doctoral thesis was about youth relationships, particularly ethnicity and psychosocial intervention (Singla 2000, 2004), the postdoctoral study explored life trajectories and diasporic identities (Singla 2008). The empirical research was conducted in line with the ethical standards of Nordic psychologists by the relevant psychological associations (Nordic Ethical Code for Psychologists, n.d.). Some aspects of Nadia’s life situation were altered in these sources to assure anonymity, thus making her unidentifiable. Thus, the case study builds on these sources while applying different analytical lenses to generate new knowledge.

The in-depth interview with Nadia was one of the 14 interviews conducted with ethnic minority and ethnic majority young people aged 16 to 25 years from 1994 to 1998 (Singla 2004). Nadia was reached through a psychologist at her educational institution, as she met the study criteria and willingly agreed to participate in the interview (see Singla 2004, 142). For the follow-up interviews in 2004, she was contacted by a letter as her address had been saved from the first interview and she had agreed to be contacted later. This follow-up interview, eight years on, covered additional themes besides the family and social network relationships discussed in the first interview. In our analysis, we focused, among other themes, on the changes in Nadia’s family relationship, couple dynamics, social network, and broad societal context as significant transformations occurred between the two interviews (Singla 2008).

In this chapter, we conduct a thematic interpretive analysis of Nadia's case study through the systematic interplay between her narrative and a theoretical review of memory, trauma, and resilience, both contextualized within Denmark. In our current analysis, we avoid portraying the participants as victims or heroes, which may trivialize the physical, emotional, and psychological pain of living under harsh material conditions, and include the joyous feelings that are a part of human existence (Kleinman and Copp 1993). We aim to cast light on everyday life and intergenerational dynamics related to the lived histories of conflicts and displacement.

Methodologically, using a single case study of a person's experience as the basis for primary analysis and secondary narratives has both strengths and limitations. The first-person voice adds nuances and depth to the phenomenon (Shultz-Jørgensen 1989); moreover, a single case study plays a crucial role in the development of knowledge (Flyvbjerg 2006). However, the findings are not representative as the specific context and individual experience shapes them.

Nadia's Narrative: Exclusions, Conflicts, and Negotiations

Nadia and her family of nine were displaced from Afghanistan. They arrived in Denmark in 1991, when she was 12, with two older and four younger siblings and parents. Initially, Nadia struggled within the Danish education system, later got a part-time job, lived out contradictions, and faced exclusion but enjoyed support from the host society and family in some life domains. She managed to build a life in Denmark, maintaining transnational contact with her extended family in her country of origin and other countries.

Nadia's family could be categorized as middle class in Afghanistan as her father had his own business and her mother was a homemaker. Her father was the primary earner and the decision-maker, along with her mother. Unrest and war led to the decision to leave their country, and their journey was long and complicated. They stayed in a refugee camp in Pakistan, where the family went through traumatic experiences, but they managed to remain together despite external and internal conflicts. After the initial years of struggling to adapt to living in Denmark, Nadia's father managed to own a grocery store and her mother got a job to secure economic support, as demanded by the

Danish social system. During the initial interview, Nadia was residing with her parents and siblings and was engaged to a distant cousin she had chosen despite resistance from the parents and in-laws. She was studying in the first year of a business college course and had a part-time job in a local supermarket. Her major challenges included conflicts with her father, experiences of exclusion in the educational institution, and abuse by a male family member during childhood in her country of origin. She had six months of clinical psychological intervention, which centered on sexual abuse she had experienced in her country of origin. However, this experience was barely mentioned in the research interview conducted by the first author, illustrating her silence over a traumatic memory.

In the initial interview in early youth, Nadia hardly mentioned her experiences in her country of origin and had few memories of pubertal transformation, but she attached importance to the family dynamics and the subjective sense of responsibility related to her four younger siblings.

There were no significant changes until I fell in love ... I felt that I had almost become an adult. My father and others were working. Maybe this is just my situation. My two older sisters were also at work, and I was at school. I had to look after the younger ones. I felt a lot of responsibility for my younger siblings when I was at home. I had to manage many things. (Singla 2004, 196)

At the same time, she showed an in-depth understanding of the harsh realities of everyday life for her family surviving in Danish society in the mid-1990s. The initial conditions of being a refugee family in Denmark created tensions between the generations—her narrative points to the family system's positional and functional changes. However, Nadia lamented the current family situation, in which household duties and responsibilities highly demanded her time. She recollected the hardships experienced by her mother through the formulation “been through a lot,” implying the harrowing past. Her narrative reflected earlier memories of family togetherness when her mother was a full-time homemaker and not working outside the home. Her father owned a grocery store, which required long working hours, implying limited family time.

We are growing apart from each other in a way, and we are not so much together now ... We know that we should be together; there should be family life. My mother is forced to go to work; otherwise, she would not get money from the authorities ... every day until three p.m., and she has seven children. She has been through a lot. (Singla 2004, 201)

The family shared a reciprocal understanding through their ethnic minority status and the need to shuffle family members' tasks and functions. Nadia was also aware of her privileged position with a part-time job at the perfume counter in a department store, as it was more difficult for young males, such as her fiancé, to find a job. We interpret that Nadia points to ethnicity intersecting with ethnic minority-related stigma and significant gender-based exclusion, as it was more difficult for male ethnic minority youth to get a part-time job.

Getting jobs, etc., is easy for them—the young Danes. My fiancé has applied for many jobs, and also his friends have. They are Danish, and they get the jobs ... Society has more room for them than it has for young immigrants. We are denounced as criminals. (Singla 2004, 243)

She also commented on discriminatory experiences at her workplace in her interaction with some Danish customers who preferred to deal with her ethnic Danish colleagues, which generated pain and sadness at being excluded: “We will talk to one of our own ... they just refuse to talk to me ... it hurts” (Singla 2004, 248).

When asked about her response, Nadia explained that she discussed the issues with her family. Their strategy was to add nuances to her perception of interactions with Danes, categorizing them positively and negatively and not ruminating on this matter. This strategy is analyzed as her chosen coping strategy when dealing with painful racist experiences. Although Nadia did not use direct action to resist racial discrimination, talking with the family members is still a constructive way of facing such experiences, which resonates with the advice by experts that racism should not be met with silence (Arenas and Singla 1995; Ben-Jelloun 1998; Røgilds 1995). Such sharing contributes to mobilizing resilience in everyday life. “I talked to my mother and some of my siblings. Well, they said there are good and bad Danes ... Forget it” (Singla 2004, 249).

Nadia also articulated her feelings of loneliness in the business school she attended, during teaching, and in her free time. This

narrative illustrates some hardships during the adaptation process, mentioned in the earlier section on uprootedness and challenges in adaptation in this chapter, as she was rarely involved in her Danish peers' social activities and this underlined her sense of isolation concerning her classmates. "People go out to eat at restaurants and McDonald's. I do not have anybody with whom I can attend birthday parties or class parties" (Singla 2004, 228).

She also mentioned her conflictual relationship with her parents, especially her father, regarding her intimate relationship and engagement with her distant cousin. It represented a rebellion against her father, who had arranged her engagement with another cousin (which she broke off), and his adherence to traditional norms. Her persistence in cohabiting with the family confirms the significance of family ties despite the conflicts related to the collective memories of struggling together, both in the past and present. Still, she insisted on living with the family: "I never thought of leaving the family. My father said, 'Tell her not to come back.' But I know he says this when he is annoyed and hurt. I only think of leaving the family when I get married and not before" (Singla 2004, 202).

Nadia's narratives of her interaction with the host society led to understanding the conflicts as not only connected to the minority-majority ethnic relations but also connected to her intimate relationship with her fiancé and his family. He worked in the domain of filmmaking, experiencing challenges in the creative branch, which added a layer of the couple and in-laws' family dynamic to the oversimplified discourse about racial discrimination.

At the same time, Nadia displayed agency by developing her resilience by coping with study-related tasks in the Danish high school educational system, where sociability was the prioritized form of group assignments (Singla 2004, 228).

Ongoing Resilience and Transformation of Family and Other Social Bonds

At the time of the follow-up study (Singla 2008), Nadia was married to the cousin with whom she chose to be engaged in 1998. She was training to become a schoolteacher and had a job as a substitute teacher in a private Danish school. Along with her husband, she resided near her parental home, met her parents and younger siblings almost daily for a

short time, and spent longer with them on the weekends. She regarded her relationship with her parents as positive in that phase of life. Her narrative about the couple's formation revealed her determination and agency. Nadia stated: "His family would not approve of the engagement, and mine would not either. However, we would get married. We were engaged for four years. We got married, and the family had to come along. Gradually, my family started to accept this, but his family would not accept it" (Singla 2008, 113).

The young couple managed the wedding economics themselves, inviting the large extended family member and their networks, with 400 guests, demonstrating the complex balance between their autonomy and acceptance of their marriage decision by extended family and the significant members of the network, including the coethnics. This event also illustrated the reconstruction of "*rites de passage*" in the transnational context for the young generation despite the temporal and spatial distance from the country of origin. The continued importance of intergenerational transmission of such practices and their transformations is highlighted through Nadia's description of the wedding. Celebrating their life's significant events underlines sharing such rituals through parental memory narratives, diasporic connections, and films, art, and music for Nadia and her husband. A wedding ceremony with collective rituals, family traditions, and pageantry confirms the celebratory memories. This practice of "grand weddings" in many parts of the world, especially South Asia, is conspicuous by its absence in Danish society's wedding patterns, where usually fewer people (50–100) participate.

Nadia underlined her positive relationship with her parents at the time but, alas, not with her in-laws. She had decided to live geographically close to her family but was ambivalent as she aired plans to move further from the family as well. Nadia highlighted her current harmonious relationship with her parents, positioning herself as an understanding daughter who had gained insights into many issues surrounding them. The wedding celebration implies that sharing past events and memories fosters a reciprocal strengthening of their bond. She rejoiced in her husband's and her parents' positive relationship and enhanced reciprocal understanding in contrast to the initial interview. "It is very good now. They have started understanding many issues, and I also understand many now. They understand many issues they could not understand at that time [the initial study]" (Singla 2008, 120).

She highlighted the positive changes in her father. She described his relatively harmonious bond with the young generation, Nadia, and her siblings, which she underlined in contrast with his rigid attitude earlier (in the original interview). This narrative depicts a change in the family's power dynamics, allowing more decision-making for the young generation in negotiations with the parental generation in diverse life domains.

Diasporic intergenerational family ties remained significant, as Nadia and her siblings were sensitive to their mother's attachment to their family, including their maternal grandmother in Afghanistan. They collectively contributed to the expenditure on the flight ticket, thus overcoming the economic helping their mother overcome the financial constraints. Nadia's narrative illustrates the long-term significance of her mother's memories and attachment to her own mother/Nadia's maternal grandmother, as well as the current bonds with family members in Afghanistan. This narrative reflects how filial piety—a set of moral norms, values, and practices of respect and caring for one's parents—overcomes generational and socioeconomic restraints through joint sibling responsibility. She said, “We [siblings] are saving, all of us, so that she can visit her mother and her family. She has not seen her mother for the past five years ... in September, and there is enough money so that she can travel to Afghanistan” (Singla 2008, 120).

We interpret this collective sharing of responsibility related to her mother's memories as an illustration of how memories and mnemonic agency are formed in the “living presence of the past” (Palmberger and Tošić 2016, 3).

Nadia's narrative casts light on the changes in her educational and job-related trajectory, highlighting the salience of other societal bonds, such as institution-based supportive contacts intersecting with her agency, reflecting her resilience. In contrast to her feelings of loneliness and exclusion articulated in the initial interview (Singla 2004), she had a sizable Danish network and bright future job prospects as by the time of the follow-up interview she had got a job as a substitute teacher in an elite private Danish school. An offer of teacher training while working there became a pivotal turning point for Nadia. She expressed her joy about her situation:

Personally, I have had a great personal development regarding myself, my self-confidence ... My way of thinking and horizon changed because I got another circle of friends and other people who mean a lot and have helped me. It is delightful, lovely for me ... A friend from the school, who is Danish. Then I have 5–6 who are much older than myself, about 57–58 ... all Danish. (Singla 2008, 171)

The changes in Nadia's life trajectory, especially regarding family and interethnic relationships, illustrate the continued significance of intergenerational relations and friendship bonds across ethnic, national, and age boundaries, as these are important factors in developing resilience. Her narrative creates a counter-discourse to the negative, problematic, and sometimes pathological, "hopeless" discourses about traumatized, displaced people and families, as well as the polarization across ethnic borders, which depicts ethnic minority youth as "doomed" to develop ethnicity-based parallel social worlds without cross-ethnic ties (Mørck 2007).

Conclusion: Becoming Human Despite the Blows of Fate

Through her first-person narratives, Nadia and her family's case study points to a nuanced understanding of resilience—becoming human despite the blows of fate. Rather than a one-sided, narrow focus on negative, distressing memories and exclusion processes, cementing the portrayal of the displaced persons as poor, helpless victims, her case reveals the restitution of humanity through the reinterpretation of memories and the creation of new ones. Nadia was aware of the ongoing experiences of exclusion and discrimination at the workplace and educational institutions. She dealt with them constructively through interaction with the family, her intimate partner, and later through a supportive personal network. Her case reveals both harsh memories of her mother "having been through a lot" and the celebratory, happy memories of a "grand wedding," which included family members across generations and her extensive network. While her follow-up narrative (almost 15 years after the family's arrival in Denmark) reveals how her friendships across the ethnic and age borders provided support, she continued to have close contact with her family, including positive intergenerational relations. Maintaining a good relationship

with parents was also found in a Finnish study, in which emotions of gratitude and indebtedness toward parents are experienced by migrant youth, regardless of their ethnic background (Turjanmaa and Jasin-skaja-Lahti 2020).

Furthermore, the narrative reveals that Nadia could tell her family about the negative experiences of exclusion at the workplace and develop constructive coping strategies. These dynamics show Nadia's agency and ability to adapt to harsh life events with flexibility and creativity through courage, resources, and the support of others. She constantly interacted with the past and present affective socioecological environment, resonating with the description by Cyrulnik (2002, 114).

Nadia and her siblings' initiative to contribute economically to their mother's visit to their country of origin illustrates the significance of reorganizing their lives to maintain their intimate bonds and construct a dignified life, recalling new layers of meaning across generations and cultures, an important factor in resilience. The story of Nadia and her family reveals the hidden significance of unknown actors in everyday life. Nadia and her siblings transformed suffering, adversity, and challenges into celebrations that construct new forms of coexistence amid generations and cultures.

The broader implications of this case study, which has a longitudinal perspective with two waves of data collection over eight years, are reflected in our reply to the questions: How can displaced people reconstruct a dignified life in the host society despite harsh context conditions? What are the factors involved in the process of resilience among traumatized displaced families? Listening to their life stories and recognizing and validating their history can transform traumatic experiences and memories into a capacity to heal and restore human dignity in countries of resettlement despite the wounds and difficulties faced. Simultaneously, despite conflicts, we must include the complex emotions involved in intergenerational relationships, such as the youth's gratitude and indebtedness to the parental generation. Furthermore, pragmatic actions such as creating concrete educational and job opportunities by focusing on resources within minority ethnic families and networks and by meeting them as fellow human beings where there is a symmetrical, reciprocal perception of each other as human beings, not just passive victims, helpless refugees, are also answers to the questions raised above.

Cyrulnik (2012, 189) emphasizes the time perspective and interactions with the social surroundings, highlighting the context's importance and how it may encourage or hinder resilience. In Nadja's story, we witness how she could surmount the challenges of unfavorable contextual conditions with the support of her family, intimate partner, and network. We have described the impact of displacement, which exposes a family and its members to several challenges. Despite harrowing experiences, many families cope successfully, illustrating that suffering can be transformed into resilience (Cyurulnik 2002, 110). In Denmark, there is a tendency among professionals in health and social care systems to focus on estrangement, stress, and trauma, undervaluing the migrants' capacity to adjust to the host society, thus viewing all migrants as potential patients (Personal communication with therapists at the Oasis center for the rehabilitation of traumatized refugees, Denmark, November 23, 2022). This narrative reflects the situation in the broader Nordic context, as overlooking resources and stigmatization also occur in other countries such as Finland (Leinonen 2017).

Furthermore, displaced and wounded people are often subjected to many other negative characterizations, such as being powerless victims. An array of institutions and voluntary agencies focus on their losses and vulnerabilities, often turning them into clients, as illustrated by Nadia's mother's situation. At the same time, displaced people also have some opportunities, especially in the educational domain. Nadia's story shows that she chose to act, using her resources to adjust and profit from the possibilities the Danish system offers migrants despite the barriers she had to surmount. She had the strength to move on to construct a dignified life in Denmark.

It is necessary to take a nuanced perspective on the dynamics of trauma and resilience of displaced people and families. This approach moves away from the oversimplified image of the victims embedded in power structures within social help and health services, which often reflect Western, narrow, and negative stereotypes about migration, uprootedness, and their consequences. These stereotypes, in turn, have implications for services offered to displaced people and families. We must collectively consider ways to restore and humanize with dignity, recognizing humanity in others. We end this chapter with Cyurulnik's (2002, 188) words of hope: "Then we will change our view of misfortune and suffering; we will look for the wonder."

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CHAPTER 9

Donbas War Prose as a Medium of Family Memory

(Dis)continuity and Resilience in *Mondegreen* and *Amadoka*

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Abstract

This chapter investigates the aspects of (dis)continuity and resilience in Ukrainian war prose since 2014. The novels *Mondegreen: Songs about Death and Love* (2019) by Volodymyr Rafeyenko and *Amadoka* (2020) by Sofia Andrukhovych draw parallels between the current Russian–Ukrainian war and past atrocities, such as Soviet terror and the Holocaust. Family memories prefigure one’s self-identification and can correct grand narratives (Erlil 2011; Hirsch 2002, 2012). The stories of the Habinsky and the Kryvodyak families in *Mondegreen* and *Amadoka* represent alternative perspectives on victims, perpetrators, and “implicated subjects” (Rothberg 2019). Simultaneously, such stories

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contribute to the “small acts of repair” (Hirsch and Spitzer 2022). Although it is difficult to overcome (dis)continuity and (dis)belonging, awareness and the ability to speak about uncomfortable experiences are important aspects of developing resilience because these are the first steps to regaining agency.

Introduction

This chapter investigates the aspects of (dis)continuity and resilience in Ukrainian prose about the war in Donbas, implementing the theoretical framework of memory, trauma, and resilience studies. The novels *Mondegreen: Songs about Death and Love* (2019) by Volodymyr Rafeyenko and *Amadoka* (2020) by Sofia Andrukhovych draw parallels between the war in Eastern Ukraine and past atrocities, such as Soviet terror and the Holocaust. *Mondegreen* tells the story of Haba Habinsky—an internally displaced person (IDP), who moves from Donbas to Kyiv (like Volodymyr Rafeyenko himself), learns the Ukrainian language, meets supernatural creatures from Ukrainian folklore, and suddenly reveals his grandfather’s terrifying story. *Amadoka* tells the story of the Kryvodyak family, haunted by memories of the Holocaust and Soviet repression, whose youngest member, Bohdan, decides to escape to the war in Donbas and eventually loses his memory.

In this chapter, I discuss what happens when individual and collective memories of political violence are not properly communicated within a family and a society, when the symbolic order is disrupted. My study is focused on the interrelations between sociocultural frameworks (Basseler 2019; Erll 2011), postmemory (Hirsch 2012), and “small acts of repair” (Hirsch and Spitzer 2022). Memories of political violence in the 20th century that were silenced by the Soviet officials and not communicated properly by the post-Soviet governments are remediated in contemporary Ukrainian prose. My analysis shows that the repressed and distorted reminiscences of the past appear in the form of supernatural creatures, which can be interpreted as elements of “magical historicism” or “post-Soviet hauntology” (Etkind 2013). As the postgenerations of Soviet terror and the Holocaust survivors are faced with new atrocities, Ukrainian writers aim to restore intergenerational continuity. However, the search for coherence is sometimes followed by the uncomfortable realization of discontinuity

and disbelonging (see also [Chapter 7](#)). This includes shedding light on the complicated phenomenon of the “implicated subjects” (Rothberg 2019) who do not participate in violence directly but still benefit from the dominant regimes. On the one hand, Donbas war literature is aimed at bearing witness to brutality and injustice. On the other hand, artistic interpretations of traumatic events might provide alternative views and contribute to healing.

Frameworks of Memory, Trauma, and Resilience in Donbas War Prose

Family has a specific place in cultural memory. Astrid Erll (2011) underlines that official narratives and family memory are intertwined. Deriving from Maurice Halbwachs’s theory of social frameworks of memory (*cadres sociaux*), Erll notes that family as a mnemonic community plays a special role in forming individual perception:

It is through interaction and communication with our fellow humans that we acquire knowledge about ... collective concepts of time and space, and ways of thinking and experiencing. Because we participate in a collective symbolic order, we can discern, interpret, and remember past events ... Family members are the people who usually constitute the first, and often most important, social frameworks for a child. And family life is arguably one of the main sites where sociocultural schemata are acquired. (Erll 2011, 305)

Hence, one’s interpretation of the self and the world around is strongly influenced by existing beliefs within one’s family and society, even if one is not aware of these mechanisms. Family memories exhibit not only informative but also normative and self-identifying functions. At the same time, by representing alternative views, family stories can undermine and correct the grand narratives (see also [Chapters 11](#) and [12](#)). Such grassroots narratives are crucial for understanding how complex social and political phenomena are. For example, in the war context, these might be the stories of IDPs, refugees, deportees, or soldiers’ relatives, whose voices are usually not represented in the official discourse. Therefore, the analysis of family frameworks in Donbas war literature can highlight multiple perspectives, including those of marginalized groups.¹

This chapter argues (Tarku 2023a, 2023b) that the unprocessed legacy of the Soviet period prefigured the war in Donbas and the following full-scale Russian invasion. For example, Aleida Assmann (2013) and Alexander Etkind (2013) compare the dynamics of memory politics in Europe and in (post)Soviet countries. Scholars emphasize that Soviet officials stayed silent about the crimes of Stalin's regime. When these countries regained independence, the memories of Soviet oppression became crucial for national self-identification and therefore central for post-Soviet literatures. Memories about the atrocities of the 20th century were preserved in family stories and in underground literature (*samizdat*) until the collapse of the USSR: "The memory of Stalinism and Soviet occupation that formed the core of the national narratives of the new states claimed political independence after the collapse of communism. These memories had also been well preserved in a state of latency through longer periods of political repression" (Assmann 2013, 30). Nevertheless, the former Soviet states Ukraine and Russia never experienced transitional justice (e.g., Lezina 2021; Nuzov 2017). Even after the fall of the Soviet Union, Ukrainian politicians continued to produce fragmented and contested mnemonic narratives about the Holocaust (e.g., Hrynevych and Magocsi 2016), the Soviet terror (e.g., Kasianov 2018), and Ukrainian nationalists (e.g., Shevel 2016). Simultaneously, in Russian politics, the heroization of Stalin and the cult of victory in the "Great Patriotic War" outshone the memory of the victims of Stalin's repressions (e.g., Assmann 2018; Marwick 2012; Tumarkin 2003), thus "normalizing" the violence and enabling its repetition (for example, internal repressions against activists and external aggression in Chechnya, Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Donbas, and Syria).

An awareness of the historical events and the complicated and contested political discourses is needed for better understanding the contemporary social frameworks of the war in Donbas and the subsequent full-scale Russian invasion. In the literary texts I analyze, intergenerational dynamics and (non)transmission of memories are not central to the plot; they are revealed parallel to the main plotline (Tarku 2023b, 211). The stories of the Habinsky and Kryvodyak families are fragmented and rather tend toward fiction, dreams, and fairy tales. Nevertheless, they highlight the unsolved problems and haunting memories of the repressed pasts. At the same time, unlike the official narratives, "counter-memories" (Foucault 1977; see Chapters [11](#), [12](#), and [13](#)) of

past atrocities could be circulated and preserved in the survivors' families—in the form of stories, legends, and even fairy tales. For example, in *Mondegreen* and *Amadoka*, such (un)spoken memories affect all family members and cause anxiety and alienation. Because relatives are afraid or unwilling to share their stories, repressed traumas start to haunt the survivors and their descendants. The relatives who do not know much about each other appear to be strangers. Only the war helps them to achieve mutual understanding. Therefore, memories of violence within a family can contribute to fostering controversial feelings of (dis)continuity and (dis)belonging.

And yet personal stories can constitute “small acts of repair” and establish links between individuals and groups. Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer (2022) use the example of the Jewish-Romanian author Sonja Jaslowitz and other writers and artists who lived in camps and ghettos and for whom creativity was a way of resisting dehumanization and transcending everyday injustice. Despite Sonja Jaslowitz's tragic life story, Hirsch and Spitzer suggest reading her poems in a key of solidarity and “reparative reading” that resists heroization or redemption and remains open to alternative views. Therefore, individual stories might provide perspectives beyond common attitudes and official interpretations:

Each individual story helps to shape a larger history by providing it with detail, depth, and nuance, and, in turn, each story is enhanced and given broader meaning through its contextualization within a larger historical matrix. Postgenerations haunted by stories that have not been worked through still find that they owe the victims this act of attentive listening, as well as this work of historical repair. (Hirsch and Spitzer 2022, 44)

However, in the Ukrainian context, postgenerations of the Holocaust and Soviet terror survivors are forced to relive the horrors of their ancestors in the 21st century. In many cases, family members did not know about their relatives' violent past (or acted like they did not know, the narrator of *Mondegreen* would say) and faced the uncomfortable truth about their (grand)parents only on the edge of losing their own lives. Therefore, the need to narrate and to listen through the gaps of history became crucial for (self)reflection and (self)identification among contemporary Ukrainian authors.

The idea of “reparative reading” brings us to the concept of “resilience”²—the ability to “bounce back” and to maintain a positive

outlook after experiencing trauma (APA n.d.)—that developed in psychology and traveled to cultural studies. Michael Basseler (2019) suggests that the fields of cultural and literary studies can provide insights into the healing power of narrative meaning-making. According to Basseler, resilience narratives “typically present fairly coherent stories in which not the traumatic event or its dissociative repercussions, but the overcoming of trauma and a positive outlook take center stage” (Basseler 2019, 28). Even though resilience can be referred to as “anti-destiny” (Cyrulnik 2009a), it is also influenced by *cadres sociaux* within certain cultures and communities. Depending on the available culture-specific genre conventions and cognitive models, different kinds of resilience narratives will be shaped (Basseler 2019, 30). Hence, the ability to develop coping mechanisms is prefigured by existing sociocultural schemata within smaller and larger communities. For example, the psychiatrist Boris Cyrulnik underlines the role of family frames in coping with life-threatening situations: “It is the whole family unit that suffers or pulls through, that either survives the psychotrauma or is overwhelmed by it” (Cyrulnik 2009b, 158). On the one hand, it is worth analyzing the intergenerational dynamics and the mechanisms of (non)coping on the family level. On the other hand, however, we should be aware of the limitations of applying concepts from psychology in literary and cultural studies because it can lead to simplification of multifaceted phenomena: “care should be taken to avoid making grandiose claims for the relevance and utility of even a maximally pluralized and diversified trauma theory” (Bond and Craps 2020, 142).

In the following sections, using the examples of the novels *Mondegreen* (2019) by Volodymyr Rafeyenko and *Amadoka* (2020) by Sofia Andrukhovych,³ I analyze which role the (dis)continuity of individual, family, and cultural memory plays in comprehending the connections between the past and the present political violence. The study is based on the results of my dissertation project devoted to the combat (diaries and memoirs by former soldiers like Valeria Burlakova, Valery Ananiev, Valery Puzik, and Vlad Sord) and noncombat prose (novels by Serhiy Zhadan, Tamara Horikha Zernia, Volodymyr Rafeyenko, Sofia Andrukhovych, etc.) about the war in Donbas as a means of working through trauma. Thus, *Mondegreen* and *Amadoka* should be perceived as integral parts of the bigger phenomenon of contemporary Ukrainian war literature.

(Non)transmission of Memories About War and Forced Migration in *Mondegreen* by Volodymyr Rafeyenko

Volodymyr Rafeyenko was born in Donetsk in 1969. He lived in Donetsk and used to write novels in Russian. When the war in Donbas broke out, the author moved from his hometown, settled near Kyiv, and decided to transform his experience into a novel in Ukrainian language. In February 2022, Rafeyenko and his wife had to leave their home once again because the village was occupied by the Russian army. Individual experiences of war, injustice, and forced migration are reflected in the books *The Length of Days* (2017; in Russian), *Mondegreen: Songs about Death and Love* (2019; in Ukrainian) and *Petrichor* (2023; in Ukrainian). Although the texts are based on real events, they are written in the key of magical realism, (self)irony, and (self)reflective metafiction. Volodymyr Rafeyenko thus bears witness to the reality—and the incomprehensibility—of the war and provides a unique testimony about the attitudes of IDPs and victims of war (Tarku 2023b, 210). Even though Haba Habinsky—the main character in *Mondegreen*—is also an IDP who moved to Kyiv, like Rafeyenko himself, the literary text implies a certain distance between the author and his characters. Haba discovers that his grandfather Oleksy witnessed the execution of his parents by the Bolsheviks and ran away from his hometown. Therefore, the novel provides a mixture of testimony and fiction, reality and dream, logic and insanity—emphasizing that the line between those two is very thin.

In this chapter, I argue that *Mondegreen* uses elements such as self-irony, magical realism, and dream narratives to represent the psychological consequences of dislocation and inherited trauma. Here, self-irony functions as a narrative strategy that allows the protagonist to resist victimhood by critically engaging both with personal trauma and collective myths through humor and absurdity. Rafeyenko employs dreamlike sequences—such as those featuring the Mare’s Head—not only as elements of magical realism but also as metaphors for repressed trauma, fragmented memory, and the haunting legacy of Soviet-era repression. These sequences are deeply intertwined with intergenerational memory, particularly through Haba’s nightmares about his grandfather’s persecution during the early Soviet period. Rafeyenko blurs the boundaries between reality and dream, past and present,

to show how trauma resurfaces in distorted forms, echoing Etkind's (2013) concept of "post-Soviet hauntology."

First, the story of Haba Habinsky can be read in the key of (self) irony (Tarku 2023b, 210) because Volodymyr Rafeyenko reflects on his own experience of displacement from Donetsk to Kyiv and on the stigmatization of IDPs as "not really Ukrainian" Russian speakers or "connected to Russia" in mass media and among Ukrainian people. One of the clearest expressions of self-irony in *Mondegreen* is Haba's desperate attempts to fit in in Kyiv. He learns the Ukrainian language and reads and recites Taras Shevchenko and other national poets. Nevertheless, the character experiences alienation between himself and the locals: "Intelligent people do not want to communicate with me because I always say the wrong thing at the wrong time and with the wrong emotions" (Rafeyenko 2019, 132). Haba often meets characters who point out his "otherness"—the "exotic" nature of a displaced person: "An IDP, one can recognize! Our people are slow and cautious because of the ancient atmosphere of this city. But you ... are different. Like a newborn" (Rafeyenko 2019, 47). In the novel, the differences between "Eastern," "Western," and "other" Ukrainians are mocked for their artificiality. However, they refer to real public debates and stereotypes.⁴ In *Mondegreen*, Haba is aware of such attitudes, and even more, he notices the tensions between the official narratives and the actual situation: "Junta positioned itself as Ukrainian but many people in the capital spoke Russian. The well-known Schrödinger's paradox was that Ukraine exists but nobody can see it. It is dead and alive at the same time, like our Mother Nature or the Ukrainian statehood itself" (Rafeyenko 2019, 21). Therefore, the narrator playfully deconstructs, first, Ukrainian narratives about people from Donbas as "lazy" and "suspicious" Russian speakers and, second, the Russian propaganda narratives about all Ukrainians as "Junta" and "Nazis."

(Self)irony can be interpreted as the unwillingness to accept victimhood. Haba's companions in Kyiv suggest that he should visit a psychiatrist because displaced persons presumably have mental issues. However, the mask of insanity can be interpreted as an excuse for telling the uncomfortable truth and criticizing the existing societal order. For example, the narrator in *Mondegreen* is aware of the attitudes of Ukrainian politicians who decided to frame the events in Donbas as the "ATO" (Anti-Terrorist Operation) instead of calling them "war":

Haba could never understand what it means, this ATO. Maybe, “authentic types of observation”? But what does it have to do with the war in the East? With the merciless death that gathers lives like a harvest? ... If it is really about some observation, why is there this constant pain that ... squeezes from your brain ... the reality itself? (Rafeyenko 2019, 57)

Therefore, sincerity and social criticism in *Mondegreen* are framed as “insanity” because the individual knowledge conflicts with the grand narratives.

It seems that Haba’s only friend is his teacher of the Ukrainian language—the Mare’s Head, a fairy-tale character. Haba remembers this character from the “horrible times of his childhood” (Rafeyenko 2019, 24) when his grandmother, who spoke a mixture of Ukrainian and Russian (*surzhyk*), used to tell him fairy tales. On the one hand, Ukrainian was the language of folklore characters—such as a nightingale, a mouse, a cock, and a wonderful worm (a creature from Donbas folklore⁵ that eats children’s ears)—who used to speak to little Haba. On the other hand, the learning process brought about the monstrous creatures from Haba’s childhood: “With him, with this worm, Habinsky was forced to communicate on a regular basis now” (Rafeyenko 2019, 17). The change of everyday language mixes up Haba’s identities and triggers uncomfortable feelings—connected to the horrifying family memories. The supernatural creatures from the “horrible times of the childhood” can be interpreted as examples of the magical realism in the novel. However, Haba does not seem to be afraid of these characters; they become part of his complicated everyday life (Tarku 2023b, 211). I interpret these characters in terms of Alexander Etkind’s concepts of “magical historicism” or “post-Soviet hauntology” (2013)—as signs of repressed traumas, connected to the terror of the Soviet times. Interpreting the Freudian idea of the “uncanny,” Etkind claims:

Freud asserts that whatever (and Solzhenitsyn would add, whoever) is repressed returns in distorted, fragmented, or monstrous form. The postcatastrophic memory carries within itself elements of the uncanny – the familiar and the forgotten, the restored and the unrecognized, the never-experienced and the well-masticated. (Etkind 2013, 220)

This metaphor implies that, despite the absence of justice, everything hidden will be revealed—even if in a distorted form. The folklore characters in *Mondegreen*—the reminiscences of Haba’s childhood—and

the ghosts of the deceased relatives are thus connected to the family memories of repression. Furthermore, the fairy-tale monsters testify to the long repression of Ukrainian cultural memory itself (Tarku 2023b, 212).

The main character often dreams about his grandfather Oleksy's childhood. These dreams are actually nightmares—they show family memories of persecution and forced migration. In comparison to the whole structure of the novel, the story about relatives is rather short, but it brings about important ideas, such as the continuity of violence in the 20th and 21st centuries (Tarku 2023b, 213). Unlike many other episodes, the execution scene is described very realistically—the parents Yehor and Oleksandra were caught by the Bolsheviks and convicted as alleged *kurkuls*⁶ in the village of Kushchi in February 1922 (shortly before the Soviet Union was officially established). The locals watched the execution and threw the dead bodies into the river, and some of the drunk bystanders set the house on fire. The narrator points out the role of the neighbors—and even family members—as “implicated subjects” (Rothberg 2019) in this terror: “People were supposed to see what might happen to the enemies of the Soviet government (*well, not real enemies, Yehor's brother became a Soviet navy general after the war*)” (Rafeyenko 2019, 101, italics in the original). *Mondegreen* suggests that relations between victims, perpetrators, and bystanders in the context of mass violence are very complicated, because these actors constantly change their roles: One day they are the persecutors; the next they are the persecuted. Such an interpretation goes beyond the victim–perpetrator dichotomy and has the potential to correct national narratives that range between heroization and victimization.

Yehor's and Oleksandra's children were forced to watch everything. The execution scene was carved into their memory: “Oleksy wanted to scream but he was afraid to scare his small brother, so he held himself; when they started to shoot the parents, Oleksy bit his left hand (and damaged a vein, so, especially in cold weather, his hand would ache until his death)” (Rafeyenko 2019, 102). Afterwards, the narrator reveals the future destinies of the children: Lida moved to the Far East and started a family in Korea; Mariana disappeared on the way to Kyiv; Lesia lived in Romania and moved to the USA; Oleksy and his brother Ivan had such a strong bond that they spent the rest of their days together. The traumatic experience of the execution thus influenced the rest of their lives. Oleksy's wounded hand that painfully

reminded him of the past might be interpreted as a metaphor for the psychological wound that never healed. At the same time, Lida's and Lesia's emigration and disconnection from the family might be interpreted as an attempt to escape from the horrible memories and to start their lives all over again.

An old monk, Markus the Pilgrim (Markus Prochanyyn), saves the children from death. He mentions that God gave him a few additional months to live in order to help the little siblings and to prepare them for the long journey to Kyiv. He warns that everyone must stay silent for reasons of safety: "Never tell anyone the truth about your parents ... And forever forget your surname if you still have not done so" (Rafeyenko 2019, 157). Thus, silence was crucial for survival (Tarku 2023b, 213). However, this finally led to the nontransmission of memories from Oleksy to his (grand)children and resulted in a disconnection between family members and a disconnection of the family story.

In Haba's dream, his own parents also see the execution of their relatives. However, the narrator emphasizes that the parents represent a different generation: "*They were born a whole era after these events and never knew – or never wanted to know – about this shooting*" (Rafeyenko 2019, 105, italics in the original). Suddenly, everything turns out to be a theater play, the murdered relatives get up from the ground, and Oleksy finally tells his (grand)children the truth about his past. In real life, the grandfather never had a chance to tell his story because of the special "Canon of Not-Knowing": "It was important not to know, even if you knew it exactly ... to follow the Canon of Not-Knowing" (Rafeyenko 2019, 99). The narrator reveals that the Habinsky family also followed this canon: "The destiny of the relatives from the mother's side – this is what, in the Soviet times and, frankly speaking, even later, was very important not to know" (Rafeyenko 2019, 100). Consequently, with the outbreak of the Donbas war, the "Canon of Not-Knowing" encouraged Haba's parents to believe Russian propaganda and to stay in the city Z—creating another circle of discontinuity within the family (Tarku 2023b, 215).

At last, the Mare's Head visits Haba and wants to tell him a fairy tale about children. When Haba asks, "Which children?" the Head replies, "The oldest Lida is six. Twins Mariana and Lesia are five. Two brothers – Oleksy and Ivan – stayed together for the rest of their days" (Rafeyenko 2019, 152). The repetition of the said phrase about siblings in the chapter about the execution creates connections between

the main character, his relatives, and the supernatural creatures. The narrator mentions that the head of the mare helped the children to survive because, once in a while, it brought them bread and milk. And, as Markus said to the children, there would always be good people on their way and God would help them because “he loves all the travellers and all the migrants of all centuries, and all the pilgrims of all religions” (Rafeyenko 2019, 158). In this way, the faith in something supernatural and transcendental helps to find meaning in suffering (Tarku 2023b, 213).

At the end of the novel, all events turn out to be a product of Haba’s traumatized mind. Haba finds himself at the cinema and when he returns home his wife Snavduliya calms him down by singing a lullaby. At night, the character hears a doorbell ringing and feels that “if he opens the door, he will never fall asleep again; and if he does not, he will never wake up” (Rafeyenko 2019, 190). At last, he opens the door and sees five little children standing on the porch. The journey—or the pilgrimage—of the displaced persons Haba and Oleksy ends, revealing connections between different generations of terror and war survivors (Tarku 2023b, 217).

In *Mondegreen*, empathy, sincerity, and self-reflection help to bridge the intergenerational gaps. Reconciling with his grandfather’s past and accepting his own experience of war allow Haba Habinsky to achieve a certain coherence (on the role of coherence see also [Chapter 7](#)). After realizing who his relatives were and what happened to them, Haba finally wakes up and regains his agency. The ability to talk about forced migration and marginalization, to counter hegemonic narratives about victims of war and terror—and the ultimate act of speech itself—should be underlined in the first place (Tarku 2023b, 217). However, it seems impossible to overcome the fragmented thinking and perception. The awareness of uncomfortable feelings of (dis)continuity and (dis)belonging should thus be perceived as part of the long healing process.

Stories of Implication and (Dis)continuity in *Amadoka* by Sofia Andrukhovych

Sofia Andrukhovych was born in Ivano-Frankivsk in Western Ukraine in 1982 and thus represents a different perspective to Rafeyenko. In her books, Andrukhovych explores the region, especially the legacy of the

Austro-Hungarian Empire (for example, in *Felix Austria* 2014). Her novel *Amadoka*, however, goes beyond local history and reflects on the “multidirectionality of memory” (Rothberg 2009; see also Chapters 4 and 10) in Ukraine (Tarku 2023a, 54). *Amadoka* connects fictionalized individual and family stories about the Holocaust, Stalin’s repressions (including the Executed Renaissance (Lavrinenko 1959)—the generation of Ukrainian intellectuals imprisoned in the Gulags and killed en masse during the Great Purge of 1937–1938—as well as deportations of members of the Insurgent Army), and the war in Donbas (or, as it was referred to in *Mondegreen*, the “ATO”). The main plotline is built around the story of an archive worker, Romana, who pretends to be the wife of the amnesiac veteran Bohdan Kryvodyak. Another plotline recounts the experiences of Bohdan’s relatives during the Nazi occupation of Western Ukraine. Moreover, the reader gets to know a fictionalized biography of the Ukrainian writer and secret agent Victor Petrov-Domontovych. In the novel, Bohdan’s individual amnesia symbolizes the “cultural amnesia” in Ukraine (Tarku 2023a, 54). *Amadoka* thus also approaches the topics of (dis)continuity and (dis)belonging in the aftermath of political violence.

This section unfolds as follows. I begin by showing how Bohdan’s decision to deposit his family albums in an archive frames the album as both a mnemonic device and site of repression. I then analyze his grandmother Ulyana’s wartime recollections, reading the novel’s intergenerational testimonies and gaps—the “Canon of Not-Knowing”—against theories of postmemory and implicated subjecthood. A third section interprets the legend of the vanished Lake Amadoka as a metaphor for submerged histories, linking ecological disappearance to the erasure and piecemeal recovery of traumatic pasts. Finally, I examine the novel’s unexpected identity swap and open-ended conclusion to demonstrate how *Amadoka* confronts readers with the ethical limits of remembering in an age of posttruth.

At the beginning of the novel, Romana gets to know Bohdan as he brings his family albums to the archive. Bohdan explains that this decision was caused by the complicated stories of his grandmother and her sisters:

Since his childhood, Bohdan was tied up to these three ancient women who, instead of telling him fairy tales, used to tell their horrible life stories. These photos illustrate ... personal destinies, love that could

change the world and death that was always around. Sometimes, he wanted to eat all these pictures in order not to remember every detail – so he decided to bring them to the archive. (Andrukhovych 2020, 39)

Romana and Bohdan have a short affair, during which he tells her lots of details about himself and his relatives. Haunted by his family story, Bohdan decides that the military service in Donbas could help him to escape: “He wanted to get farther away from the place that reminded of his family’s catastrophes, of numerous unhealed tragedies that, at last, lead him to the real war zone” (Andrukhovych 2020, 173). Bohdan disappears. After a while, Romana finds on the internet a picture of a former soldier with a disfigured face who suffers from amnesia. She believes that it is Bohdan and decides to help him get his memory back.

Before that, Romana pretends to be a cleaning service worker and establishes an acquaintanceship with Bohdan’s father, a professor of plastic surgery. Father and son have a conflicting relationship and do not communicate with each other. At some point, the professor begins to trust Romana and tells her intimate stories about the Kryvodyak family. He reveals his mother, Ulyana’s, secret, which he thinks was the reason for her emotional coldness: “After the end of the world, her existence became a horrible mistake ... I knew it exactly from the first years of my life: my mother was not supposed to exist even before my birth, therefore, my birth was not supposed to happen, it was a mistake” (Andrukhovych 2020, 73). Romana comprehends that Bohdan’s grandmother Ulyana was so overwhelmed by something that she tried to commit suicide. When Romana asks about the reason, the professor replies: “She could not cope with the war ... There used to be things nobody could bear. There still are such unbearable things” (Andrukhovych 2020, 74). In this way, the character points out the continuity of violence in the past and in the present and its damaging impact on individuals and communities.

Romana brings the man she assumes to be Bohdan to the village where his grandmother Ulyana and her sisters live. However, the relatives do not believe that it is actually Bohdan, even though his face is disfigured and scarred. Meanwhile, another plotline about the Nazi occupation of Western Ukraine unfolds. Expecting her death, grandmother Ulyana recollects her adolescence, overshadowed by extreme violence, and the two men she loved and lost: her Jewish friend Pinhas

and a member of the Insurgent Army, Matvy Kryvodyak. Furthermore, the elderly sisters talk about their father, Vasyl, and whether he collaborated with the Nazis.

It is not clear if Vasyl participated in the execution of Pinhas's father, Avel. The narrator mentions that all family members, including Bohdan, always tried to find a meaningful explanation for Vasyl joining the Nazi police: "He was a kind man. But, like any mortal person, he was weak. He was afraid for his life. Fear is a normal human trait" (Andrukhovych 2020, 276). Everyone knew exactly that Vasyl's decision was wrong but they acted like they did not know (or, as the narrator of *Mondegreen* would say, they followed their own "Canon of Not-Knowing"): "Grandmother Ulyana said that her father only dug the grave ... Could it be true that he murdered Avel? Or was he implicated not because of shooting in a direct sense but because of digging the grave and escorting the man to the execution place?" (Andrukhovych 2020, 279). After Avel's death, Vasyl began to hide Jewish people, including Pinhas, in his house. Therefore, older relatives tended to avoid uncomfortable memories, while younger family members sought explanations: "They didn't answer some questions. Didn't want to. And you thought of how many things they actually forgot, because they couldn't remember, how many things they didn't see because they were not able to, how many memories they replaced" (Andrukhovych 2020, 274). This passage illustrates a metareflection about the nature of memory as the narrator realizes that the elderly women mixed up or made up some stories because they just could not follow their father everywhere. Eventually, secrets result in a distortion of memory and in distancing between family members.

Ulyana and her sisters remember the times of excessive bloodshed and changing political power. During World War II, representatives of different groups were caught up in the turmoil of violence in Western Ukraine—Ukrainians, Poles, Jews, the Nazis, and the Soviets. Those who survived the Nazis were later deported by the Soviets. The sisters assume that deportation saved some people from execution: "Many of those who were deported to Siberia – separated from their children and starved – survived. Not only Poles and Ukrainians managed to survive there but also many Jews. If they hadn't been deported, they would lie in mass graves on Fedora" (Andrukhovych 2020, 262). The women finally reveal Ulyana's greatest secret and the meaning of "the

end of the world.” When local collaborators finally found Pinhas, Ulyana decided to kill him with her own hands, so he would not be tortured. Ever since, the woman has been tormented by her memories and her guilt.

In the stories about World War II, family photo archives play an integral role. Remarkably, there are no visual illustrations in the novel—instead, the photos are described with words, such as “Photo: family dinner” (Andrukhovych 2020, 240), “Photo: three women that look alike are smiling and hugging each other” (Andrukhovych 2020, 377), “Photo: the sound of a rabbit being killed by a wolf” (422). Marianne Hirsch (2002) emphasizes that family photos illustrate the frameworks and attitudes inside these mnemonic communities. While a photograph is perceived as a material trace of the past, it is also important to analyze what lies behind the constructed image:

Contemporary writers, artists ... have used family photographs in their work, going beyond their conventional and opaque surfaces to expose the complicated stories of familial relation – the passion and rivalries, the tensions, anxieties, and problems that have, for the most part, remained on the edges or outside the family album. (Hirsch 2002, 7)

In this sense, the family album in *Amadoka* reveals the complicated stories of the Kryvodyak family together with the mixed feelings of love, despair, hope, fear, (dis)continuity, and (dis)belonging.

Another bonding element is the story of Lake Amadoka that Pinhas tells Ulyana. According to the legend, somewhere between Wolyn and Podillia, there used to be the biggest lake in Europe. However, it disappeared for unknown reasons. Pinhas showed Ulyana the place where, according to maps from the 16th and 17th centuries, Amadoka was supposed to be: “The lake was used as protection from the enemies and as a border between lands; it was so big that it was impossible to see the opposite bank. This lake got lost, it doesn’t exist anymore, says Pinhas and his eyes are shining against the sun” (Andrukhovych 2020, 234). Amadoka hence symbolizes scattered and dispersed memories of the atrocities of the 20th century that exist on the edge between truth and fiction. Silencing and forgetting are inevitably interrelated with the repetition of violence in the present because the haunting repressed memories caused Bohdan’s anxiety and forced him to go to the war. Therefore, several generations of the disconnected family became caught up in tragedies and catastrophes.

The final plot twist leaves the reader confused. At the beginning of the novel, the psychiatrist Slonova draws Romana's attention to the fact that Bohdan—a man from a Ukrainian-speaking family—speaks Russian. Later, the veteran mentions that, maybe, he does not want to regain his memory: “What if I don't want to remember? ... What if I was a bad person – a criminal, a raper, a killer? What if I ran away from my life to the war, and never wanted to come back?” (Andrukhovych 2020, 166). At the end of the novel, the alleged Bohdan suddenly regains his memory and realizes that he is not Bohdan but Victor—a separatist from Mariupol and a descendant of the NKVD official Krasovsky. Meanwhile, the real Bohdan recovers from trauma and reconciles with his family on his own. At last, Romana's illusions collapse and everyone leaves her behind. This twist deliberately goes beyond the reader's expectations.

In the end, the reader is confronted with mixed and uncomfortable feelings. In such a way, Sofia Andrukhovych provokes a discussion about uses and limitations of memory in the age of posttruth (Tarku 2023a, 55). Nevertheless, *Amadoka* highlights memories of different marginalized groups and points out the impact of the recurring political violence. Like in *Mondegreen*, it is still difficult to reach complete coherence, so the first steps should include the ability to speak about various experiences and to tolerate uncomfortable feelings that emerge along the way.

Conclusion

The analyzed novels *Mondegreen* and *Amadoka* illustrate how difficult-to-narrate experiences are (re)mediated in literature (see also [Chapter 11](#)). On the one hand, stories are prefigured by sociocultural schemata. On the other hand, if such schemata are inefficient because of silencing and forgetting, they can be (re)invented in fictionalized stories. These stories focus on individuals and require a mode of reading that goes beyond common expectations and thus enables “small acts of repair” (Hirsch and Spitzer 2022). In *Mondegreen*, stereotypes about displaced persons and victims of war are reconsidered in the key of (self)irony. Moreover, the stories of Haba Habinsky and his grandfather Oleksy reveal that empathy can help overcome victimhood and alienation. The opportunity to talk about experiences of vulnerability and to listen to each other's stories of trauma facilitates

mutual understanding. *Amadoka* resonates with *Mondegreen* in the way it reverberates difficult pasts and highlights the complex relations between victims, perpetrators, and “implicated subjects.” Simultaneously, both novels include a metareflection on memory itself. Even though it is difficult to overcome (dis)continuity and (dis)belonging, awareness and the ability to speak about uncomfortable experiences are important aspects of developing resilience because these are the first steps to regaining agency (see also [Chapter 7](#)). When grand narratives are questioned and reframed, there is a new space for reconsideration and meaning- and identity-making. Artistic interpretations can shift common perceptions and contribute to changes on individual and collective levels. Especially in (post)conflict societies, this shift is much needed because it could show the way out of oblivion, traumatic repetition, and disconnection.

Notes

- 1 For further analysis of the family frameworks of the Russian–Ukrainian war, see Tarku 2023a; 2023b.
- 2 Resilience and narrative meaning-making are central for my study of Ukrainian Donbas war prose (Tarku 2023a; 2023b).
- 3 An English translation of *Mondegreen* and a German translation of *Amadoka* are available. In this chapter, I use my own translations from Ukrainian.
- 4 For example, the “acts of othering” in Ukrainian public discussions are analyzed in Portnov 2016.
- 5 *Mondegreen* demonstrates high awareness of Donbas mythology and contributes to its development by creating new interpretations of common images. For example, the following quotation refers to the Donbas symbols of apricots and coal mines: “First of all, it’s the apricot, the queen of the fruit trees in Eastern Ukraine, that..] fills the whole universe with the bittersweet smell..]. Secondly, these are coal, chemical industry and metallurgy that..] add the smell of death and hopelessness to the smell of the apricot” (Rafeyenko 2019, 81).
- 6 Russian *kulaks*, Ukrainian *kurkuli*—wealthy villagers and alleged “class enemies” (e.g., Yekelchuk 2015; Applebaum 2017).

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CHAPTER 10

Touching Trails

Museum Exhibitions, Family Memories, and Forced Displacement

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Abstract

This chapter examines audience responses to exhibitions addressing both historical and contemporary experiences of forced migration. The historical and art exhibitions, held in 2020 at two city museums in Finland, emerged from a collaborative effort among researchers, artists, and museum professionals. Drawing on visitor survey data, the chapter analyzes emotional reactions and the ways in which individuals relate these exhibitions to their own familial histories of forced displacement. Brief narrative responses reveal how the often traumatic legacies of World War II continue to be transmitted through family

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narratives. Museums provide a multisensory environment where emotions can surface, and memories are collectively negotiated and conveyed. These familial recollections are also reinterpreted in relation to national narratives of displacement and ongoing global migration crises. Positioned as institutions of epistemic authority, museums contribute to building resilience by facilitating the collective processing of difficult and contested histories within a comparative framework. In doing so museums possess the potential to serve as spaces of transformative learning and to foster broader societal dialogue.

Introduction

Well, here I am weeping and sniffing as if I myself had to leave my home. The feeling runs in our DNA.

This is how one visitor described her impressions in an exhibition about forced migrations. The event was one of parallel art and historical exhibitions organized by a group of researchers and artists in 2020. The exhibitions, *Displaced: Archaeology of Forced Migration* and *Displaced: In Homeland and in Foreign Lands*, stemmed from our research project on the memories of forced migration and resettlement during and after World War II in Finland.

This chapter explores how researchers and artists can utilize museums to mediate research-based knowledge to audiences about emotionally charged and politicized topics such as forced migration, and what audience's responses are to their attempt. As members of the research team that developed the exhibitions, we analyze in this chapter the survey collected among visitors, most of whom included references to family histories containing displacement and dispersion. Following the original survey questions, we focus on two themes: What do the visitors' emotional responses and displacement narratives tell of family memory and its intra- and intergenerational effects? In what ways is family memory of forced displacement entangled with national, transnational, and global historical narratives?

In the following, we first describe the research frameworks, the exhibitions and the survey, which are followed by three sections of qualitative survey analyses. The first section discusses the emotional reactions conveyed by the visitors, where attention is paid to how historical narratives provoked ideas about displacement in our own

time. The second section focuses on relations between family memory, national history, and transnational history in visitor responses, and the third section analyses responses from one family whose four members, from three different generations, took the survey individually and thus offer a view into intergenerational memory work. The chapter ends with a discussion about museums as spaces that serve the audience a preset theme in a multisensory way and provide a space for cognitive and emotional experiencing and an opportunity to reflect on, in this case, agonizing family memories with other family members. We argue that museums could be more widely used to display research-based knowledge to how difficult heritage in particular reverberates to contemporary individuals and families and the memory communities they belong to. As authoritative heritage institutions and public spaces, museums have potential to enhance societal dialogue.

Research Frameworks

Our theoretical approach is grounded in memory studies, with particular attention to how memory is shaped and circulated within families. Drawing on the work of Halbwachs (1992) and Erll (2011), we examine family memory as a socially embedded process that takes form through shared practices of remembering. It unfolds within intergenerational relationships and can be expressed not only through spoken narratives but also through nonverbal, affective, and embodied means—especially in relation to experiences that are difficult to articulate, such as violence and forced migration.

Communication of family memories may also conjoin verbalized narratives and reticence. Family conversations trigger the construction and consolidation of memories and link family members of different generations together as an interpretative group that connects the past, the present, and the future. Resulting from and in parallel to the intra-familial interaction, the memories are processed by individual family members in different ways and in different settings. For example, those representing the younger generation are not passive recipients of their (grand)parents' discourses of the past but may actively work to understand them as part of the wider discourses that they access through learning about the past at school and in peer-conversations. Family history that is recalled as a narrative containing historical facts and/or personal memories is also in dynamic relation to history in general as

its temporal framework (see also [Chapter 6](#)). If family history as narrated memories does not seem to find a place or explanation within the general historical discourses or conflicts with them, it is thus negotiated in relation to other interpretive communities (Achugar 2016, 47–48).

Family memory typically revolves around events that changed individual life courses and thus often contains references to the material and sensory elements in their past. As our study shows, the materiality and multisensory nature of museum exhibitions has power to refresh particularly the emotional aspects of family memory. Exhibitions are carefully designed settings where art or historical artifacts, photographs and texts create spaces where the visitors may delve into aesthetics and knowledge on display. Depending on one hand on the topic and the chosen ethos of display and, on the other, on the receptiveness, or “tuning” of the individual visitor, exhibitions enable both cognitive and emotional effects and concomitant learning (Smith 2021, 177). For researchers who participate in designing exhibitions, museums offer opportunities to engage and influence the public beyond the textual forms of research work.

As we show in this chapter, seeking experientiality does not mean only staying in comfort zones but being open to different kinds of sensations, such as exploration of personal memories (Filene 2021, 372–73). While learning and recreation are typically assumed as reasons why people visit museums, Smith (2021, 2, 4) emphasizes that there is more at play, and in fact people choose to go to museums and heritage sites “to feel and to be emotional” and that they may use these emotions “to justify, inform or sometimes challenge the meanings people bring with them.” And because visitors are not passive recipients but have agency, they participate in meaning-making (Smith 2021, 3–4). Having interviewed thousands of visitors to museums exhibiting contested histories, Smith (2010, 195) shows that, for those who design exhibitions as well as for the visitors, museums are “‘contact zones’, in which contemporary and historical meanings are negotiated and mediated.” It has also been suggested that museums are “‘safe places’ in which to explore risky subjects,” indicating that museums are apolitical but, as Smith’s research demonstrates, for some visitors this is not the case (Smith 2010, 195; Smith 2021, 9–11). Recent research on museums as cultural heritage organizations indicates that there has in the past decades been “a massive turn ... towards what is sometimes called dark,

dissonant, difficult or negative heritage – and in particular, to histories that disrupt heroic historical national images” (Macdonald 2008, 58; see also Thomas 2021).

In general, historical museums are considered authoritative heritage institutions. Various forms of heritage “are part of the cultural tools drawn both upon to remember the past and define the meanings that the past has for the present” (Smith 2010, 195). State and other public museums typically mediate a contemporary consensus of national or local history, and the audience may consider their output a reliable version of the past. In addition to being hegemonic fields that validate the value and significance of tangible and intangible heritage, museums have the pedagogical goal of transmitting these validated narratives to the public (Robbins et al. 2021, 11). Today, they should be accessible and appealing to all groups in society, enhance cultural diversity, equality, and transcultural dialogues, and serve the internationalization of cultural heritage work (Mattila 2018, 12–14; on equity and cultural diversity in Finnish museum policy, see Rastas et al. 2021, 38–39). Following the idea of promoting transcultural dialogues and deconstructing state-centered interpretations of the past, the exhibitions under scrutiny here aimed to picture forced migrations and displacement as transnational and diachronic.

As a familiar phenomenon from contemporary media and in many cases also from national histories, forced migrations are today highly politicized. They come in many forms (see IOM n.d.) but typically violent conflicts are the main reason why people flee their home country or become internally displaced. Forced displacement may last long and it often involves traumatic loss of home and family and friends (e.g., Gatrell 2019) and an extended process of resettlement. Frank and Reinisch (2017) have called European refugee history between 1919 and 1959 a “forty-year crisis.” The forced migration history of Finland during and after the world wars is a rather typical example of this period. Russian revolutions and the Civil War in 1917–1922 drove at least 1 million people to neighboring countries; more than 40,000 came to Finland, which had a population of 3.3 million at the time. Following the Finnish Civil War in 1918, around 10,000 Finnish Reds fled to Russia, and another 15,000 later moved there illegally. World War II drove 430,000 Finns (10 percent of the population) from their homes, first in 1939–1940 and again in 1944 after the southeastern border area of Karelia and some regions in the north were ceded to the Soviet

Union (e.g., Fingerroos 2012). During the war years, 80,000 so-called war children were taken to safety in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark (Junila 2012, 216–17). When the war between Finland and the Soviet Union ended in September 1944, German troops (some 200,000 soldiers), former allies of Finland, had to be expelled in two weeks. This led to an armed conflict known as the Lapland War—and to the evacuation of 146,000 people to Sweden and elsewhere in Finland (Ursin 1980, 31–32).

Researchers have covered the main lines of forced migration history in Finland during and after World War II, starting from the regions lost or destroyed, the numbers of forced migrants and their resettlement, and the national memory culture. Along with interest in the social and cultural history of war, diverse groups have found their way into studies. Over the years, Finnish museums have produced several historical exhibitions about forced displacements related to World War II. These mostly temporary displays in provincial museums have served as a national commemoration and as a means of presenting the experiences and contributions of the displaced groups in their new homes.

Displaced: Exhibitions by a Collaborative of Artists and Researchers

Cooperation between our research team and a group of artists stemmed from realizing that artists and human scientists often work on the same topical issues but seldom together. We began to explore how artists and scholars could contribute to each other's work by crossing the boundaries of artistic and scientific work. The researchers shared their research material (archival records, interviews, and selected passages from novels), as well as their own texts with the artists. Conversely, the artists used this material, their own readings, and some interviews to create new works of art for the exhibitions.

When the artworks started to take shape, we centered on the ethos of the exhibition. Did we see forced migrants primarily as passive victims? Should we focus more on their agency? Since most of the researchers and artists involved have forced displacement in their own family histories, discussions about research ethics and our own position vis-à-vis the topic helped us make more conscious choices for the exhibitions.

The dual exhibitions took place in the city museum of Oulu in northwestern Finland and in the city museum of Lappeenranta in southeastern Finland. In Oulu, they stayed open only for two weeks until the Covid-19 pandemic forced them to close. The Oulu Museum of Art then broadcasted a 20-minute video of the art exhibition on their YouTube channel for two months. In Lappeenranta the exhibitions were open from June till October 2020.

The art exhibition consisted of paintings, drawings, sculpture installations, video art, and a work combining poems and sounds by a total of eight artists and three students of film editing, as well as text panels by the researchers ([Figure 10.1](#)). The text panels that accompanied the artworks placed the forced migration of 20th-century Finland into a larger European and global context. They also contained



Figure 10.1: Opening of the exhibition *Displaced: Archaeology of Forced Migration* at the Oulu Museum of Art, February 2020. Paintings by Antero Kahila (from left, *Sulo*, *Aino*, *Rauha*, and *Sauli*, 2019) are part of a multidisciplinary art project with a sound and poetry installation by musician-poet Kirsi Poutanen. On the floor is the installation *Cold Soil* by Heli Ryhänen. Photo: Seija Jalagin.

information about the internally displaced Finns of World War II (*evakot*, “evacuees,” as they are commonly called in Finnish); East Karelian and Ingrian refugees from Russia to Finland in the 1920s, and their second forced migration to Sweden after World War II; the Lapland evacuees in 1944–1945; and the more recent forced migrants to Finland from different parts of the world.

The researchers also wrote a script for the historical exhibition, with emphasis on personal and collective experiences of forced migration and displacement. The historical exhibitions included numerous historical photographs and we also obtained items from individual and our own family collections in addition to those selected by the museum curators, who designed the final display ([Figure 10.2](#)). Unexpectedly, our own experiences of the pandemic filtered into the design. Forced into lockdown, we worked on the script online, unable to meet in person. During these sessions we realized that it had been standard



Figure 10.2: The history exhibition *Displaced: In Homeland and in Foreign Lands* (2020) in Lappeenranta portrayed the experiences of forced migrants in World War II-era Finland, among others. Photo: Tuomas Nokelainen, Museums of Lappeenranta. Published with permission.

practice to place forced migrants in quarantine after border-crossing, and we therefore included such stories in the script, which probably also resonated with the audiences' contemporary experiences.

Outline of the Survey

As the exhibitions took place during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 we were unable to interview exhibition visitors. Within the four and a half months that the exhibitions were open, around 11,500 people visited them, 4,000 in Oulu and 7,500 in Lappeenranta. Most visitors were Finnish speakers. We offered the survey on paper and online, in Finnish and in English in the museums but without observing their acts of responding. Visitors were informed that the answers would be used anonymously by the research group. The survey consisted of two open questions: 1) "What kind of impressions and feelings did the exhibition evoke?" 2) "Do you or your family have experiences of forced migration? Could you briefly describe where you/they left and where you/they moved? When did this occur?" The questions focused on the visitors' emotional responses then and there, and on their experience of personal or transgenerational displacement. Despite the questions' different temporal dimensions, they intertwine in the responses. The impressions and feelings evoked by the exhibitions activated memories of displacement, and telling about the displacement histories, in turn, stirred up emotions in the present.

The survey data consists of altogether 100 responses; 92 percent of them are from exhibitions in Lappeenranta ([Table 10.1](#); in Oulu, a clear majority visited the art exhibition but did not take the survey). Foregrounding the synergistic, cognitive-emotional impact of the parallel exhibitions, one visitor summed up her experiences as follows:

Great combination to approach the topic: the means of art and knowledge in photographs, texts, items. The works of art were deeply touching, they aroused emotions, and information put everything in context. It enabled deeper experience and understanding of migration, evacuations and forced displacement. (Woman, b. 1952)

Of the respondents, 95 percent used the paper form to record immediate impressions while still at the museum. Women formed two thirds of the respondents (63/100), while nine respondents did not specify their gender and no one answered "other." Five people answered in English;

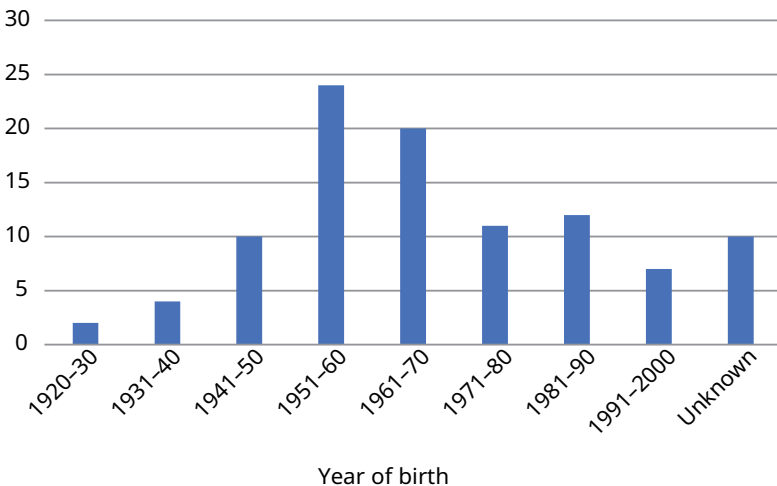
Table 10.1: Visitors' responses to the survey by exhibition

	Art exhibition	Historical exhibition	Art and historical exhibition	Not specified	Total number of visitor responses
Oulu	8	—	—	—	8
Lappeenranta	9	46	35	2	92
Total	17	46	35	2	100

they lived in Finland or in a country other than that of their origin (e.g., Columbia, Bangladesh, and Germany). Most of the responses were given by people whose family history involved forced migration.

The oldest respondents were born in 1927 and 1928, and four others were also more than 80 years of age. The youngest respondent was born in 2000 but, as [Figure 10.3](#) shows, more than half of the respondents were 50 years of age or older. The survey includes several responses from members of the same family, which gives the opportunity to study transgenerational elements in family histories.

Owing to the rather low response rate, it is difficult to say anything conclusive about the overall reactions of the audience. The numbers of

**Figure 10.3:** Survey respondents by birth year

visitors of course testify to the interest in the exhibitions. The written feedback from those who chose to take the survey encourages us to make their voices heard.

Emotional Impressions

“Compelling,” “impressive,” and “gets under the skin” were some of the phrases visitors use to describe their impressions of the exhibitions. Some considered it important to tell the histories of forced displacement so that they would not be forgotten. One visitor captured it as follows: “This theme should be discussed more [because] anyone of us might become a ‘refugee’ or a ‘migrant’” (woman, b. 1962). This and similar comments recall what Sharon Macdonald (2008, 60) has said about tourism to Nuremberg: “Visiting a heritage site about such a terrible history [is] part of this work of being vigilant – it was a kind of morally sensitizing process. It [puts] people on self-watch.” Correspondingly, empathy toward forced migrants – and disapproval of those who are indifferent to their agony – appears as an act to recheck one’s own moral stance.

While the historical exhibition focused on World War II Finland, it also presented contemporary refugees. This was criticized by some respondents, which we analyze in the next section. Critical comments were a minority, though, which may indicate that others who were irritated did not bother to share their thoughts. Compared to the more positive responses, the visitors who disagreed refrained from using emotional language but instead stated their opinion briefly and referred to historical facts.

In general, emotions were described in two ways—through emotion words and on-site emotional reactions—in a similar manner that visitors studied by Bozoğlu (2019, 55–60) in two Turkish museums did, even though he did not ask how they felt. Following Rob Boddice’s (2017, 14) example, we take emotion words in the survey as first-person statements that have face value (see also Bozoğlu 2019, 58–59). The visitors used such emotion words as “sadness,” “joy,” “shocking,” “melancholy,” “anxiety,” “bitterness,” and “hate.” Some felt sad over the loss of family homes and regarded hardships as “our own history.” Bitterness and hatred were expressed against the “Russkies” (in Finnish *ryssä*, a derogatory form of “Russian”), thus dehumanizing the

wartime enemy—and echoing the historically strong anti-Russian and anti-Soviet attitude in Finland (Karemaa 1998; Vihavainen 2013).

Several respondents, however, expanded beyond the story of national ruination and felt personal sadness, anxiety, and hopelessness because forced displacement “affects such a huge number of people in the world,” as one woman wrote (b. 1986). For the same reason others felt annoyed, helpless, and ashamed. One visitor put it as follows: “Finns have so little empathy for contemporary refugees; it’s as if we have forgotten part of our own history” (man, b. 1972). Clearly, this is something that the war in Ukraine since 2022, and the consequent will to help Ukrainian refugees, has changed, although there are racialized notions about how Europeans are keen to help only white fellow Europeans (Drażkiewicz 2023). The plea for empathy contained feelings of respect for people who endure and survive. A foreign visitor reflected on the heated anti-immigrant and racist discourses in present-day Finland and Europe and had

an unpleasant feeling that talking honestly about the past (or even current migration situation) is only left to a small number of people and the majority is circling around the fear of the other. (Woman, b. 1990, with family history of forced displacement in Russia and in Germany)

Emotions were also articulated as embodied reactions. The visitor whose words of “weeping and sniffing as if I myself had to leave my home” that we cited at the beginning of the chapter referred to the transgenerational legacy of displacement in her family. Her expressions resemble what Marianne Hirsch (2012, 3–6) has termed postmemory, the inherited personal and cultural trauma of descendants of Holocaust survivors. Without personal experiences of such traumatic events the descendants nonetheless grew up with “stories, image, and behaviors” transmitted by their parents. It is unlikely that in our survey material postmemory appears in the Hirschian way, that is, that it was transmitted “so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right” (Hirsch 2012, 5). Instead, the emotional alignments in the survey indicate a sense of collective history, a past shared intergenerationally within families and by groups who lost their homes in World War II. This way, as Hirsch (2012, 5) says, “events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present.”

In addition to agonizing emotional reactions like sadness and anger, some visitors had laughed at the humorous stories in the exhibition,

thus recognizing the diversity and situatedness of wartime experiences. On the other hand, some laconic responses may tell of conscientious objection to being exposed to the feelings that the exhibitions might evoke.

Despite the respondents' varied reactions, some patterns were more typical of certain generational groups. The eldest respondents, born in 1928–1939 and with personal wartime experiences, did not express feelings as openly as the generation of their children (born in the 1950s–1970s). The personal reflections of the younger generation may echo the trauma of the forced migration of their parents or grandparents. Experiences have been transferred in family narratives or, conversely, they have been transmitted as “heavy silence,” in an unarticulated and nonverbal form the family members feel but have not handled together (Zerubavel 2010, 33, 37). According to Ville Kivimäki (2018), such silence may be forced but it can also be a resource or a way to protect oneself (see also [Chapter 1](#)). Analyzing postwar Finland, Kivimäki positions the psychic consequences of wartime violence in the sphere of “deep silence” (Löfström 2015, 121), something that “is not significantly present in the social and cultural system and does not thus become a question of whether to talk about it or keep silent” (Kivimäki 2018, 37). Sadness, anxiety, depression, and shame were not recognized as posttraumatic stress disorder, even if people did recognize their relation to war. Furthermore, the emotional regime of postwar Finland may have contained self-discipline regarding what kind of emotions could be expressed. Anti-Russian attitudes had to find more private ways of expression because they would have been considered anti-Soviet and therefore politically risky (Kivimäki 2018, 36–38).

In the survey, the manner in which the middle-aged respondents voiced feelings in relation to their family history may indicate recent developments in the emotional regime. Those born before the 1980s experienced the end of the Cold War and the following neopatriotic reflexive processing of World War II (Kinnunen and Jokisipilä 2012). They were also exposed to the “affective turn” that moved emotions to the center of many public discourses in fiction, film, reality television, and social media, for instance. Likewise, identity politics has gained more weight and justified public expressions of individual emotions (Clough and Halley 2007; Koivunen 2010).

The answers of the youngest respondents were marked by global concern. Their emotional distance from World War II allows them to observe the forced displacement in the exhibitions as historical narratives and artistic expressions. They are by no means indifferent to generational experiences and are also sensitive to how difficult experiences may appear as embodied memories. A young woman (b. 1995) visited the exhibitions in Lappeenranta with her grandmother and wrote: “[T]he exhibition caused anxiety in her [the grandmother]. It came too close.”

By virtue of their multisensory materiality, historical exhibitions are a powerful medium for narrating the past. While texts provide critical knowledge, authentic photographs, artifacts, excerpts from oral history, metaphorically rich works of art, poems, and sounds illustrate the lived reality. As one visitor commented, “[t]he fates of real people are touching” (woman, b. 1941). Everyday items such as bicycles, suitcases, home keys, china, and toys were testimonies to refugee journeys. Some objects were on loan from private people who could tell the history and route of a specific object and who had carried it along. As Clifford has said (in his study about objects of indigenous peoples in museums), if the object evokes memories, it “must include feelings of loss and struggle; but it must also include access to powerful continuity and connection” (Clifford 1997, 193). In our material, a young woman wrote about the loss and continuity mediated by material legacy in her own family (see also Chapters [1](#) and [2](#)):

I inherited a set of furniture from my grandmother that came along in the evacuation ride. It is probably the most refined thing that I own ...

The items related to family history are most touching. (Woman, b. 1991)

The exhibition items demonstrate the power of *emotional objects*, meaning that “the using, seeing and remembering triggers an evident emotional reaction in people,” as Heini Hakosalo (2016, 167–68) has defined the term. Since emotional objects are time- and place-specific and relational, “their emotional charge emerges in relation to other objects and people.” In museums, items are placed in narrative context with photographs, texts, and sounds. Furthermore, the possibility to experience an exhibition together with others reflects and reinforces the objects’ shared cultural meanings.

The reactions evoked by the personal items also attest to what activists Annalisa D’Ancona and Giacomo Sferlazzo have said about “objects as agents with energy” (Horsti 2018, 179–81). Objects have the power to testify to the events that they stem from or to people whose life they remind us of. Since 2005 D’Ancona and Sferlazzo have been collecting items that were left in deserted boats by migrants crossing the Mediterranean on their way to Europe. Later, the hundreds of deaths and stories of the migrants became a regular topic and imagery in the European news (Horsti 2018, 179–81).

Ulla Savolainen (2015, 72–73, 366), in her study of the written memories of forced migration of World War II in Finland, interprets embodied memories, material evidence, sources, places, and named historical details as “sites of memory” anchoring the present to the past, referring to Pierre Nora’s concept *lieu de mémoire* for conceptualizing heritage (e.g., de Cesari 2012; Stanković 2014; Wróblewska 2019). The visitors’ reflections investigated in this chapter demonstrate museums as sites of memory, as anchors for personal reminiscing and new vantage points. Intensive materiality is what makes a museum, as Mieke Bal (1999, 189) says, “a site where reflection can take place, about memories that are not always sweet, but always relevant for the present.” Bal writes about art museums, whereas our survey shows that memories are revived in art and historical museums alike; both create sites for reflecting on a variety of experiences. In the Oulu Museum of Art a female visitor (b. 1972) enjoyed the solitude and “encountered herself as a ‘refugee,’” even though she herself or her family had no forced migration history. Instead, she referred to the death of her husband and feelings of being completely lost. Full of unarticulated meanings, art has the potential to generate associations between seemingly different experiences and memories and to create space for reflecting on one’s emotional processes.

Here it would be natural to talk about a specific aesthetic experience that differs from practical and conceptual experience. Aesthetic experience produces preconceptual, intuitive, immediate, holistic and epiphanic knowledge that might significantly deepen and enlarge our understanding of the world (e.g., Pizzolante et al. 2024). One visitor who answered the survey twice first described an immediate, overwhelming experience of being deeply touched: “tangible affect in heart

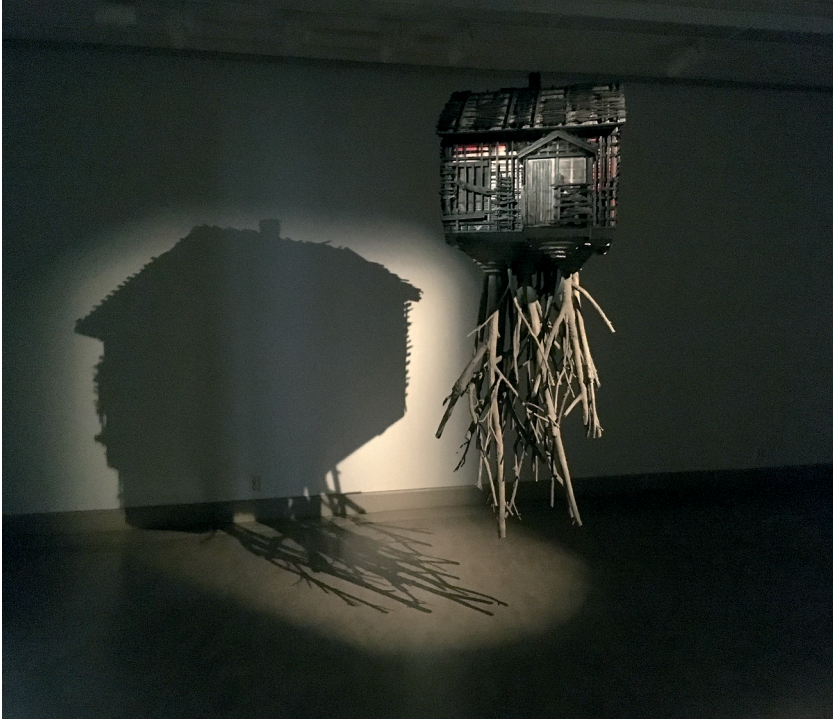


Figure 10.4: Installation *Pulled into the Flow of Time* (2019–2020) by Anssi Taulu at the exhibition *Displaced: Archaeology of Forced Migration* at Lappeenranta Museum of Art, 2020. Photo: Hanna-Leena Määttä.

and soul.” The next day she reflected on the interaction of the two exhibitions:

I got information from the historical exhibition: the impact of forced displacement is transferred more heavily to younger generations, particularly when the lost homeland cannot be reached for decades. A deep sense about my roots – the invisible – materialized as I looked at the abandoned house with strong roots in the art museum. The invisible became visible, the incomprehensible became comprehensible. (Woman, b. 1955)

The works of art, such as a house hanging in the air with roots not touching the ground as shown in [Figure 10.4](#) and a video triptych with three screens displaying wartime photographs and film clips,

materialized in a symbolic or metaphorical form something that may have been—and may still be—difficult to verbalize and confront but that is emotionally unavoidable when one is subjected to it. Smith (2021, 242–43) has talked about intergenerational and emotional connection through “imagined conversations” with absent family members and, while the excerpts above do not explicate moments of sharing memories with one’s family members they point to the potential of museums and exhibitions as spaces where visitors can connect with the events that caused family trauma and to process its generational meaning in order to come to terms with it.

Even when strolling in the museum silently or alone, visitors are invited to connect with a collective of shared or parallel individual and family histories. In fact, the emotional reactions analyzed in this chapter indicate that, while museums can be sites for grieving individually, people may also find it consoling when the source of grief is set into wider temporal, geographical, and cultural contexts. Nevertheless, controversial reactions may derive from the fact that people are used to provincial (and national) museums and heritage sites focusing on “our history,” that they expect them primarily to illustrate national heritage. This bears resemblance to museal silence, which resonates with the familial silences discussed above. Museums do not innately avoid difficult topics; instead, they may spotlight the silences in society. As Elizabeth Crooke (2001) has noted in her research on museums and the contested history of violence and national polarization in Northern Ireland, it may be wise to “accept that time must pass before the ability to represent certain aspects of the past will emerge.” Jay Winter has talked about a 70-year time span that is needed to surpass amnesia, and that this surpassing is possible only by grandparents and grandchildren together over the heads of the generation in between (Kalaycı 2009, 34–35).

Our study demonstrates the ongoing renegotiation of cultural memory: Older national narratives (Karelian evacuees as a particular group) and more recent strands of European or global memory culture collide and intersect. The polyphonic and contradicting views that appear in the survey imply that the established national discourse may be opening toward a more transnational memory culture. The generations that have no firsthand experiences of World War II may feel a need to, on the one hand, remember but, on the other, critically reflect on their familial and national legacy of war and displacement. This

reflection entails setting individual and national experiences into context with similar phenomena in the contemporary world. Currently, the determination of the Finnish people to help Ukrainian refugees in various ways since 2022 (Alho et al. 2023) demonstrates vividly such change, but—equally important—it also underscores the enduring intensity of memories surrounding the forced migrations of World War II.

Crooke (2001, 136) also suggests that museums could be sites where objects—and art, we would add—can be used to “trigger discussion and learning” (also Thomas 2021), particularly now that museums in EU countries are reconfiguring their agenda to explore “European identity” (Wróblewska 2019). Illustrative of the complexities of this identity work is that, despite being in many ways post-Western, “the EU-AHD [authoritative heritage discourse] seems to still privilege the Western European experience when defining European heritage, leaving Eastern European experiences in a liminal position” (Turunen 2019, 206). Our study on forced migrations in Finnish history points out that setting nationally established topics into larger transnational frameworks triggered contradictory reactions that stem as much from people’s previous knowledge and attitudes as from their biographical backgrounds.

Family Histories of Forced Displacement

More than half of the respondents mentioned family history in the ceded Karelian region. Others referred to their family’s evacuations from other regions or to relatives taken to Sweden as war children. The responses in English involved persecution of minorities and armed conflicts in Europe and elsewhere.

The survey question about personal or family history invited respondents to give a simple account of geographical transitions, times, and places. However, a number of respondents told more than a bare story, often highlighting painful transgenerationally shared memories or single events that had crystallized into a symbolic image of forced displacement. In their fairly short answers the survey respondents utilized some of the narrative forms that Savolainen (2015, 105–38) identified in the written narratives of Finnish evacuees who described their childhood reminiscences. She distinguishes three kinds of narratives: matter- and event-oriented narratives, internally reflective narratives,

and narratives that employ fictional means. Each has different goals; matter- and event-oriented narration strives for persuasiveness, whereas internal reflection has a therapeutic function, and fictionally oriented narration seeks to find broader, symbolic meanings for forced displacement. The responses contain mentions of both painful silence and oft-repeated stories, indicating that the narratives have been utilized as a means of recollecting a time, a place, a community, and way of life that has been lost. One woman (b. 1969) recollected that “[a]ll my life I’ve heard stories of displacement, even travelled to Russia to find the foundations of my grandmother’s home.” Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 thousands of Finns have visited their former homesteads in Russian Karelia. These trips were another intergenerational method of transmitting family history (Fingerroos and Savolainen 2018, 159–61; Raninen-Siiskonen 1999, 234, 253–54). Painful silence could be related to the longtime burden of displacement. One visitor recorded her own and her husband’s family stories, explaining how descendants may end up coping with trauma in more than one family line:

My mother and my grandparents were forced migrants, as were my other grandmother and her siblings ... My spouse’s father became a war child at the age of four, which still haunts our family, even though I never met him. (He committed suicide at the age of 40.) (Woman, b. 1967)

The burden of family history could also emerge as a sense of detachment and rootlessness—as if being an evacuee had become a lifelong condition. Some respondents explained that their own expat assignments abroad were related to the displacement history of their family as a pattern of leaving home time and again. Consequently, they considered home not as a place but as a sense of home.

In general, negative family memories in the survey speak of two things. Fear, loss, shame, and ill-treatment are drastic experiences that easily become long-lasting memories. The most traumatic are “too difficult to reminisce, yet impossible to forget,” as Ulla-Maija Peltonen (2003, 9) has concluded about Finnish recollections of the Civil War of 1918. Negative experiences echo feelings of lost agency and dignity:

Fairly often we reminisce about the time of evacuation [in my husband’s family]. My father-in-law has talked about living “in the corners” and

how the host family had drawn a line on the floor that the evacuees were not allowed to cross. (Woman, b. 1969)

According to Smith (2021, 250) museums and heritage sites of all genres were commonly used for intergenerational communication, as places to develop or cement collective memories, which “relied not simply on the storytelling of older family members but also required the generation of emotional responses.” In our survey respondents frequently told about the stories mediated by older relatives that were then revived by the exhibitions and further bolstered the familial identities circling around World War II and forced displacement.

According to Kristiina Korjonen-Kuusipuro and Anna-Kaisa Kuusisto, in the Karelian recollecting of displacement three “narrative frames are joined together.” The national narrative foregrounds the integration of the displaced Karelians and the enormous national effort required for resettlement. In this context, the national discourse also emphasizes the human and economic sacrifices required to preserve the sovereignty of Finland. The ceded Karelia especially symbolizes that sacrifice. In official discourse the loss of Karelia remained a geopolitically sensitive issue. The communal narrative of the displaced Karelians, in turn, reinforces identity politics, preserving and reproducing a kind of imagined Karelian diasporic community, based on nostalgic longing for Karelia. On the other hand, the communal narrative also emphasizes survival and “us Karelians” as a unified group that has always been part of the wider “we Finns.” Finally, the bodily narrative refers to unintegrated silences that are hidden in the body. This corporeal narrative can be very vague and symptomatic and thus difficult to verbalize, and it may even escape all signifying. Analyzing such narration requires special sensitivity and is methodologically challenging (Korjonen-Kuusipuro and Kuusisto-Arponen 2017, 5-6; Kuusisto-Arponen 2009, 175-78). In the context of the affective turn of the 21st century, Korjonen-Kuusipuro and Kuusisto (2017, 5) highlight that in the Karelian identity policy “the corporeality of forced migration and the transmission of emotional memories to the younger generations may well have become more central in the memory work” (see also [Chapter 11](#)).

It seems that both the national and communal discourses of Karelian displacement are visible in the annoyed survey responses about our choice to place Finnish World War II evacuees and contemporary

(foreign) refugees side by side in the exhibition. Two men (born in the 1930s) commented that “the Syrian and the Iraqi do not belong to the exhibition” and that “it is wrong to lump together our own (Finnish) citizens who were forced to leave their homes and those who left their home country voluntarily!” These comments imply that the exhibition display offended their understanding of history, the unique situation and status of Finnish evacuees as representatives of the rather canonized national narrative. The reactions resemble what Smith (2021, 254) calls “inherited privilege,” which, like the postmemory or “inherited trauma” theorized by Marianne Hirsch, becomes “constitutive of individual memory and identity and can be seamlessly transmitted through the acts of visiting certain types of museums and heritage sites.” By positing the Finnish displacement history in transnational historical and contemporary contexts the *Displaced* exhibitions challenged the above-discussed respondent’s inherited privilege of a unique familial and national narrative of sacrifice and suffering. The two visitors’ annoyed comments also seem to imply that becoming a refugee results from choice and, as in this case it concerned a Syrian man, the whole issue also became implicitly racialized. The categories that define the status of the displaced—formed during the war or in the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention—are so well known that they dictate assumptions about even complex displacements. For displaced people, as Crawley and Skleparis (2017) emphasize, categories are not just descriptive; they are tools of power that are effectively used to distinguish, divide, and discriminate people on the move. Simplifying and rigid dichotomies do not catch the varied economic, political, social, and environmental drivers of displacement (also Banko et al. 2022).

The survey implies that many had not regarded the forced migration of Finns as part of the wider European displacement of World War II. However, a few respondents referred to a transnational dimension beyond the national narrative—this may signal a transnational turn that “challenges bounded views on national belonging” and “fosters a rethinking and reconfiguring of national memories in the context of transnational connectedness,” as Assmann (2014, 546) says.

Transgenerational Tragedy

In the following, we discuss the displacement story of one Karelian family. Four members of this family, a 92-year-old father (b. 1928),

his two daughters (b. 1957 and 1961) and a granddaughter (b. 1982), visited the exhibitions in Lappeenranta. Each answered the survey separately, telling a shocking core story: The (grand)father's childhood family broke up during an evacuation journey in 1940. They were bombed at a railway station. Both parents died, leaving nine children, aged between two months and 17 years, orphaned and under the care of their grandmother. They returned home in 1941, when Finnish and German troops occupied Karelia, only to leave again in 1944, this time for good. The siblings were put in different places and the family split permanently.

All four family members tell the same core story but their verbalizations differ in tone and length. The father starts in a matter-of-fact way, carefully reporting the displacement events but soon exclamation marks appear and transform the narrated tone into an affective one – as if he is protesting the unfairness of life:

Reception was poor. Who wanted such a bunch of bother. A grandmother in addition to us! We children were distributed all over Uusimaa [province]! In '44, I was home only for three weeks before I had to take another evacuation journey. With a horse at the age of 14! At first to work as a hired man in a farmhouse. Doing all the heavy farm work.

His younger daughter sums up the same story very briefly and also mentions incidentally her mother's displacement journey. Her sister narrates the father's family history more extensively. She also elaborates on her mother's story. Then she brings up a comparison with contemporary refugees by talking about her own volunteer work at an asylum center. Her narrative has a very emotional tone. She tells of being moved almost to tears several times in the exhibitions. The granddaughter, for her part, holds to bare facts and tells the family history very concisely; further, she considers it important that the story of the Syrian man is included in the exhibition.

It seems that the father and the younger daughter try to suppress the emotional charge of their family history. The father, however, fails and the remembrance causes an affective wound to bleed in his narration. The elder daughter's story is emotionally more open, as she uses humor to balance the transgenerational tragedy. She talks about her maternal Karelian grandmother as

my idol for her optimism. She never disparaged anyone as a “Russky” but instead said that the ordinary Russian people were not to blame for the war any more than the Finns, but it was “those militant lords”, and grandma welcomed newcomers warmly. She even taught the four Somali women she invited for a visit to make pancakes.

It appears as if the elder daughter has also sought to both follow the grandmother’s example and mobilize the affective force of the inherited trauma into her volunteer work among asylum seekers.

While the daughters present the two strands of forced migration as part of their unified family history, the strands nevertheless differ in a fundamental way. Whereas their maternal grandmother is a source of empathy and capability in setting the war and its atrocities in a wider frame, the father’s family story is dominated by tragedy. Coupled with the forced migration and the loss of home, the sudden death of the parents and the disintegration of the family form a story of a traumatic experience that has been passed on transgenerationally. The daughters and the granddaughter (and likely also other family members) have adopted a shared experience (Kivimäki 2019, 24–25) of the father’s tragedy, which they handle in their own idiosyncratic ways. The museum visit of the man, his daughters, and the granddaughter, as well as visits of some others who recalled their families’ displacement history in the survey, tells of how museums become sites of “familial ‘theatres of memory’” (as cited in Smith 2021, 242) where family values and memories are transmitted and, as our study shows, these “acts of intergenerational communication were always intensely embodied and imaginative” (Smith 2021, 244).

Conclusion

The survey material studied in this chapter demonstrates that forced migration, displacement, and family separation have been such transforming experiences that they have been passed on in families as personal narratives. The members of younger generations were usually familiar with the core story of their (grand)parents’ forced displacement history. Some also recorded the emotional marks of these events in their (grand)parents as well as their coping methods.

With the exhibitions that presented forced migration and displacement from the point of view of personal and group experiences,

museums created a multisensory space that enabled the surfacing of visitors' difficult, and in some cases unconscious, emotions related to their family history. The second- and third-generation descendants of those who had experienced forced displacement reflected on their own feelings of sorrow and anger toward the injustices that their (grand) parents went through during and after World War II. In some cases, the exhibitions gave family members an opportunity to come back to and reflect on the painful memories, and in others to identify the distress that they still cause.

While accepting that the survey analyzed in this chapter gives only limited access to visitors' family histories and to the memory work that they shape, we argue that, even in short narrative form, memory has the "ability to produce reality, action, and affect." Through stories of their family histories people "give continuity to their existence" but also "express the shared and public aspects of identities" (van Huis et al. 2019, 9). "The museums in this sense become opportunities or outlets for people to engage in affective 'work' connected to historical memory" (Bozoğlu 2019, 184). As our analysis shows, memory and heritage can also involve "battlefields of border-making and border-crossing, constituted first and foremost by regimes of practices" (van Huis et al. 2019, 6) because memory communities are simultaneously also emotional communities (Bozoğlu 2019, 182). Michael Rothberg (2009, 3–5) offers a complementary perspective by arguing that memory is multidirectional, meaning that memories of different groups can resonate with one another and support and illuminate each other in parallel. Remembering is not a zero-sum game but can enable solidarities across cultural and national boundaries—though such solidarities do not always emerge. In this sense, museums may serve as spaces that open up possibilities for multidirectional memory work, which not only supplements established narratives but also brings to light alternative, often marginalized experiences. This kind of memory work can foster connection but it can also expose tensions and boundaries around whose memories are recognized as equally worthy heritage. In the context of our exhibitions, visitors' memory work similarly reflected negotiations over belonging, recognition, and the value attributed to different histories. While some visitors viewed their own family's nationally framed experiences of forced displacement as separate from those of foreigners and other national histories, others recognized the universal significance of such experiences and appreciated how the *Displaced*

exhibitions offered a welcome alternative to standardized narratives of World War II in Finland—an opening that also invited reflection on the realities of contemporary global refugee movements.

Finally, we argue that forced migration and displacement as difficult and contested heritage can be transmitted and negotiated to and by the audience in art and historical museums in a way that not only offers space to reflect on individual and family memories but also helps bring forward diverse viewpoints on how personal and collective histories entangle. With their epistemic authority, museums also serve as spaces for building resilience, since they allow for processing difficult memories in a collective and often comparative framework. Furthermore, acknowledging the active agency of visitors, museums have potential to be sites of transformative learning and development of the self in relation to one's own memory community and the memory communities of others.

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PART III

Counter-memories

CHAPTER 11

Childhood Experiences of War as a Counter-memory in Karelian Diasporic Literature

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Abstract

This chapter explores childhood experiences of war and forced displacement as cultural counter-memories in the autofictional novels of Finnish Karelian authors Eeva Kilpi and Anu Kaipainen. Combining literary and cultural memory studies, it analyzes how personal and intergenerational memories of World War II trauma are conveyed through embodied and affective experiences of war, intertwined with family memories and emotions transmitted from earlier conflicts. These novels challenge dominant national memory by foregrounding silenced or marginalized perspectives—particularly those of women and children—and by transforming traumatic legacies into subjective

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and emotional literary forms. The chapter argues that the novels contribute to Karelian diasporic literature and offer a literary space for negotiating both personal and collective memory. As acts of cultural remembrance and critique, the novels not only reinterpret personal histories but also contribute to broader cultural understandings of war, displacement, and the legacy of intergenerational trauma.

Introduction

This chapter, oriented toward literary research and cultural memory studies, examines childhood memories of war and forced displacement in autofictional novels written by Finnish Karelian authors Eeva Kilpi (b. 1928) and Anu Kaipainen (1933–2009). Both experienced World War II and forced migration as children, which had a profound impact on their lives and literary production. Many of their novels from the 1960s to the 2000s address themes such as the trauma of war, forced displacement, the loss of home, and the disintegration of childhood family.

World War II shattered many childhoods: Hundreds of thousands of children all over Europe encountered various forms of chaos, disruption, and destruction. Children were victims of bombings and partisan attacks, and some were taken as prisoners by enemy forces (Venken and Röger 2015; see also Näre et al. 2007). During and after World War II, an estimated 40 million civilians were displaced as a result of the war (Gatrell 2007). In Finland, at least 615,000 Finnish citizens experienced forced migration, both within Finland and to Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, owing to three separate wars (Junila 2012, 229; Tuominen 2015, 44). The largest group of migrants was Karelian evacuees, and the majority of all displaced persons in Finland were children (see also Chapters 2 and 5).

In their later years, Kaipainen and Kilpi shifted from fiction to autofictional prose, rewriting the story of displacement using autobiographical and subjective memory, verbalizing the dramatic wartime memories that sometimes manifested as vague bodily symptoms and affective sensations (see also [Chapter 9](#)). Kilpi's autobiographical trilogy with autofictional characteristics, which reflects childhood and youth during wartime, was published at the turn of the 1990s: *Talvisodan aika. Lapsuusmuistelmia* (The Time of the Winter War, 1989), *Välirauha, ikävöinnin aika* (Interim Peace, The Time for Longing,

1990), and *Jatkosodan aika* (Continuation War, 1993). The novels were later published together in a collection titled *Muistojen aika* (The Time of Memories, 1998). Kaipainen released her final book, an autofictional novel titled *Vihreiksi poltetut puut* (Trees Burnt to Green), in 2007.¹ The literary works by Kilpi and Kaipainen, which serve as the research material for this chapter, depict displacement through the first-person lens of an elderly narrator's retrospective and subjective recollections, highlighting the child's perspective and the lifelong impacts of war and forced migration. At a meta level, these autofictional novels provide profound portrayals of the complex and ambivalent terrain of traumatic memory.

In both authors' works, the family functions as the child's primary social framework within which the child experiences war and forced migration (see also [Chapter 5](#)). The child's experience and memories are also gathered with family memories, particularly the mother's traumatic memories. We approach the individual memory depicted in the novels as part of communicative and social family memory (Assmann 2010). Family memory occupies a space between autobiographical memory and collective memory, encompassing both intrafamilial and intergenerational memories (Shore and Kauko 2017, 85). In the novels, memory takes on autofictional characteristics, with narrative and linguistic strategies heightened.

This chapter explores how traumatic and embodied memories are narrated and how the reminiscing adult narrator imbues meaning into her childhood experiences and memories. We analyze the layered nature of autofictional memory and reminiscing narrative strategies in the novels, drawing on Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory (2008, 2012), which refers to the intergenerational transmission of traumatic affective memories, and memory and French studies scholar Max Silverman's concept of palimpsestic memory (2013), which pertains to memory construction through the layering of different temporal memories.

Our methodological approach involves a context-oriented and thematic reading within the framework of postclassical narratology, focusing on textual features, meanings, and interpretations. This type of reading, produced in the dynamics of interpretation generated by close reading the novels with the theoretical frameworks identified, is characterized by a strive toward dialogic and contextual synthesis, which can also be described as an analytical-descriptive research

approach (e.g., Nünning 2003). First, we will open aspects of auto-fictional memory and the experiential nature of literature. Next, we will contextualize the novels by Kilpi and Kaipainen to illustrate how they are interconnected with memory cultures of Karelian people and national memory cultures of World War II in Finland. After that, we will analyze first the transmission of childhood experience in reminiscent first-person narration and second the multilayered memory of childhood experience and traumatic memory at the onset of the Winter War of World War II in novels by both Kilpi and Kaipainen.

We argue that, in depicting the child's experience of war and forced migration, the novels not only interpret but also reinterpret the past. At the same time, they construct a cultural counter-memory that responds to the national memory and master narratives of World War II and forced displacement prevalent at the time of their publication. As cultural memory scholar Ann Rigney (2005) maintains, although "memory" is often assumed to reflect dominant narratives, in practice the concept has frequently been used to highlight perspectives that challenge official histories—thereby aligning with what has been termed counter-memory, which privileges voices omitted from mainstream history. By "national memory" and "master narrative" we refer to the dominant culture of remembrance of World War II in Finland, which in the 1990s was shaped by a neopatriotic interpretation that emphasized Finland's exceptionalism,² its male-centrism, and the highlighting of experiences framed as national. These emphases were particularly evident within the sphere of public and mainstream remembrance (Kinnunen and Jokisipilä 2012; Kivimäki 2013).

In Finland, as in many European countries, the legacy of World War II has been shaped by silences. For decades, war trauma was often privatized within families, while national memory focused on narratives of survival and resilience (Näre 2017, 4; Kivimäki 2013). Only since the 2000s has research in Finland increasingly addressed the emotional legacy of World War II and the child's perspective, expanding beyond the male-dominated war history of earlier decades. The focus of historiography on the male sphere of action during wars began to be criticized in Finland during the 1990s in the so-called new war history, in which interest shifted to topics of social and cultural history, but it was not until the 2000s that a more systematic study of World War II's emotional heritage began to include the perspective of children (e.g., Autti 2025; Kinnunen and Kivimäki 2006, 10; 2018; Korppi-Tommola

2008; Koskinen-Koivisto and Seitsonen 2019; Kuusisto-Arponen and Savolainen 2016; Malinen and Tamminen 2017; Määttä 2023; Näre et al. 2007; Savolainen 2015, 2017). The multilayered nature of war memory and trauma has only recently gained more sustained scholarly attention in the Finnish context (Kinnunen and Kivimäki 2018).

Autofictional Memory and the Experiential Nature of Literature

Literary narratives, and especially trauma fiction, play a key role in shaping and mediating cultural memory related to World War II. They often provide alternatives to institutional historiography through individual and sometimes marginal perspectives (Jytälä 2022, 11; see also Korhonen 2013; Erll 2011). The concept of memory in literature is multifaceted, as argued by cultural memory scholars Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (2006). First, memory in literature encompasses the intertextuality of literature and genre (the memory of literature) “[b]ut it also extends to the phenomena of ‘genre memories’, which shape individual remembering, and ‘memory genres’ (such as historical novel, memoirs or biography), which shape cultural remembering” (ibid., 13). Second, memory in literature refers to the representation of memory within literary texts (memory in literature), and, third, literature is also a medium of cultural memory, referring to the mediality of literary texts in the formation and transformation of cultural memory (Erll and Nünning 2006). All these dimensions of literary memory are present in the novels of Eeva Kilpi and Anu Kaipainen, which also contribute to a broader genre of literature depicting and reflecting on war and evacuation, as illustrated in the following chapter.

In a broad sense, autobiographies and autofictions are a form of life writing, which is an inclusive term encompassing many forms of narrative and emphasizing the continuity of life and survivors’ stories after trauma (Effe and Lawlor 2022; Kurvet-Käosaar 2020). Closely related genres include memoir and autobiography, with memoir differing “chiefly in the degree of emphasis placed on external events,” while autobiography presents writers as ordinary persons primarily focused on themselves as subject matter (Britannica n.d.).

Autofiction, on the other hand, occupies a space between the fictive novel and autobiography, disturbing the boundaries of both forms. According to literary scholars Effe and Lawlor (2022, 1), the definition

of autofiction has emphasized “one or more of the following characteristics, all of which can characterize autofictional texts but none of which is unique or defining: a combination of real and invented elements; onomastic correspondence between author and character or narrator; and stylistic and linguistic experimentation.” Traditionally, the emphasis in the definition of autofiction has been on the onomastic correspondence between the author and a character or a narrator, but recently the definition of autofiction has expanded, and research has focused on autofictional strategies used in various works, rather than precisely defining the genre (Effe and Lawlor 2022). Recently, the more flexible term “autofictional” has been used, which is seen as an inherent element of autobiographical writing, indicating its potential to manifest in various forms and levels (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2022).

Astrid Erll (2011) emphasizes that literature differs from oral histories and memory narratives in that it conveys experiences, memories, and emotions through symbolic, textual, narrative, and imaginative means. In literature, words form an artistically organized whole that becomes a publicly accessible work. Therefore, literature has a social aspect: It is a form of communication where the text involves both an author and a reader. Literature appeals to the senses and facilitates emotional engagement—it is emotionally impactful and affective (e.g., Felski 2008).

Narratologist Monika Fludernik (1996, 2003) argues that describing human experience is the central feature of narrative texts, which she terms “experientiality.” She defines narrativity in relation to the experiential or emotional aspect of events and the retrospective evaluative charge. Fludernik illustrates this with a childhood story, where the narrator’s father collapses upon realizing his inability to save the family’s animals from a burning barn. This story is an important childhood memory for the narrator. According to Fludernik, the crucial aspect of the story is the horrifying moment when the family notices the barn fire from the car. This moment is also the core of the experience, which manifests in the collapsing father’s reaction. For the narrator, who was a child during these events, the experientiality of the story originates not from the events themselves but from their emotional significance and the retrospective evaluation of these events. Fludernik explains that events become tellable precisely because they also hold emotional significance for the narrator (Fludernik 2003).

Experience, however, does not always lend itself to being told as a story. According to Maria Mäkelä (2006), literature's relationship to experientiality lies in revealing the gap between experiencing and narrating. Researchers of autobiographical writing, such as Celia Hunt (2000, 2) and Liz Stanley (1992, 67), suggest that through fiction an author may get closer to the "truth" of their own life than they would in a more direct, truth-seeking autobiographical narrative, which often constructs an idealized rather than "real" self. In this case, the "truth" of one's life must be sought more in the strong and conflicting emotions and attitudes that emerge in fictional narration in relation to depicted events, rather than in the events themselves. The author's "authentic" experience in fiction is evident in the processing of these complex emotions and the endeavor to clarify them.

In this chapter, literature is understood as both a narrative and a cultural mode of memory that enables the reworking of personal and collective traumatic memories of war and displacement. The autofictional mode in particular offers a way to articulate affective, bodily, and silenced memories—those that resist easy verbalization or have been marginalized in public memory discourse. As such, literature becomes a dialogic space where memory is not only preserved but also critically reshaped across generations. In the context of family memory, autofiction allows for the expression and transmission of intergenerational experiences and emotions, bridging the gap between private familial remembrance and broader cultural memory. It thus offers a unique means to explore how families process, reimagine, and pass on difficult legacies of war and displacement.

Karelian Diasporic Literature as a Memorial Form in Finland

Born in 1928, Eeva Kilpi was 11 years old when World War II broke out and her childhood family was forced to leave their home in Hii-tola, located in Karelia on territory ceded to the Soviet Union in 1944. Kilpi's trilogy *Muistojen aika* depicts the reflective reminiscences of the narrator—an elderly woman in the narrative present—tracing the journey from childhood to youth amid war, evacuations, and repeated relocations. Anu Kaipainen also has roots in ceded Karelia, in Muolaa on the Karelian Isthmus. She has identified World War II and forced displacement as key experiences shaping her life (Kaipainen 1991,

63) but these themes are autobiographically explored in her literary works only from the 1980s onwards. The novel *Vihreiksi poltetut puut* tells the story of an aged first-person narrator and her childhood self, recounting the shattering of childhood by war and the difficult journey of evacuation toward adulthood and, ultimately, toward becoming a writer.

The novels under study are conscious of genre traditions related to both autobiographical and autofictional strategies, as well as Karelian diasporic literature. At the same time, they contribute to the cultural memory of war, evacuation, and Karelian diaspora. The literature depicting World War II and evacuations has had several functions, including therapeutic ones, in emotionally processing wars in Finland, and has also played an important role in postwar national memory culture as well as in the collective memory and identity work of Karelian evacuees (see Arminen 2019; Fingerroos 2012; Kinnunen and Jokisipilä 2012; Kuusisto-Arponen 2012; Martikainen 2013, 10–20; Savolainen 2015).

Postwar evacuee literature—here referred to as Karelian diasporic literature—has been characterized by its personal nature, as many authors have experienced evacuation firsthand (Fingerroos 2012; Pelvo 2013, 53). In addition to the Karelian survival narrative, the literature has emphasized the Karelian diaspora—the loss of homeland in Karelia and its nostalgic portrayal—although the experiences of Lapland evacuees are increasingly represented in literature as well (Fingerroos 2012; Määttä 2023; Pelvo 2013). A recurring theme has been community displacement and scattering. The Karelian evacuees and memory culture have been recently examined from a diasporic perspective (Fingerroos and Savolainen 2018; Grünthal and Korjonen-Kuusipuro 2021; Määttä 2023; Savolainen 2015). According to Outi Fingerroos and Ulla Savolainen (2018), Karelian community and memory culture have been based on collective experiences of evacuation and loss of home. The migration and resettlement of Karelian evacuees to different parts of Finland are diasporic and transnational in nature: As a result of forced displacement, Karelian migrants live away from their homeland, which is located outside the current Finnish state borders, in Russia (*ibid.*; see also Brah 1996).

The novels under study can also be seen as part of the international memory boom, which, according to Ulla Savolainen (2018, 57), involved a new interest in the role of collective and individual memory

in shaping the present and future of societies. Changes also occurred in World War II memory culture, following the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, which prompted a need to reinterpret the past and the events of World War II. In the 1990s, the liberation of public discourse about the lost Karelia behind the new border, as well as reminiscing homeland trips, brought to the surface forgotten and suppressed memories and activated new forms of cultural memory processes and memory work (Fingerroos 2012). The painful and traumatic memories and experiences of war and evacuation demanded to be processed and recognized in new ways. Anna-Kaisa Kuusisto-Arponen and Kristiina Korjonen-Kuusipuro have categorized three types of reminiscing narratives of migrant Karelians: The national narrative emphasizes integration and Finnishness, the communal narrative pursues Karelian identity politics, survival, and nostalgic longing, and the bodily narrative refers to repressed and silenced emotional memories that are hidden in the body and remain unintegrated. Recently, the embodied dimensions of forced migration and the transmission of emotional memories to younger generations have come to the forefront of remembrance (Korjonen-Kuusipuro and Kuusisto-Arponen 2017, 5–6; see also Kuusisto-Arponen 2009, 551–53; Chapters [2](#) and [10](#)).

Our interpretation is that the phases and narratives of Karelian, national, and global memory culture have been reflected in evacuee literature and its shifts in focus. At the same time, Karelian diasporic novels written and published during different periods illustrate how individual and collective memories intertwine in Karelian diasporic literature and demonstrate how memories are expressive indicators of the current needs and interests of the remembering individual or group (see Erll 2011, 8). For example, Kaipainen has rewritten her personal evacuation story in several literary works since the 1980s, employing various generic and narrative techniques at different times. Her evacuation trilogy published in the 1980s can be interpreted as part of the communal narrative of displaced Karelians focusing on survival narrative and nostalgic longing for Karelia, while her novel *Vihreiksi poltetut puut*, the second object of our analysis, reflects the bodily narrative phase in Karelian remembrance. Similarly, Kilpi has addressed the evacuation theme in earlier fictional novels, but in her trilogy (the second object of this study), published between 1989 and 1993, she rewrites the topic through autofictional means and personal recollection. While the trilogy includes elements of all three narrative

types, the communal and especially the bodily narratives are particularly prominent.

The novels by Kilpi and Kaipainen examined here were published at a time when Karelian diasporic literature began to delve more deeply into personal reminiscence, presenting transnational, multilocal perspectives and deconstructing official historical narratives (Nissilä and Rantonen 2013; Pelvo 2013). Both Kilpi's trilogy and Kaipainen's novel emphasize the child's perspective, corporeality, and the affective and intergenerational emotional legacy of war, themes that were still on the margins of public memory and narratives at the time of the publication of Kilpi's trilogy in the late 1980s. Evacuee literature has depicted the experiences of forced migration more broadly than how they have been dealt with in national memory or historiography (Määttä 2023). Overall, it is through literature that wars and memories from the lost territories of Karelia have been addressed within the realm of public memory at a time when it has been politically challenging owing to Finland's relationship with the Soviet Union (Kinnunen 2017, 109; see also Fingerroos 2012, 505). At the same time, these novels under analysis exemplify a direction in trauma representation and traumatic memory culture that extends beyond World War II in fiction, a trend that has become more prevalent in Finland since the 2000s (Jytälä 2022).

Autofictional Reminiscence and Childhood Emotional Memories

Eeva Kilpi's trilogy *Muistojen aika* and Anu Kaipainen's novel *Vihreiksi poltetut puut* are literary works in which, alongside the Karelian survival story familiar from earlier Karelian diasporic literature, there is now the child's experience of war, and associated traumas and the topography of emotional memories stemming from childhood. In these novels, war is a key experience. On the one hand, it is a traumatic threshold that permanently affects the child's life: There is life before and after the war. On the other hand, it is a force that compels leaving home, drives one into displacement, defines one as a refugee, and disrupts one's life permanently. The perspective on war and refugee experiences in the novels is retrospective, viewed from a temporal distance through the narration and memories of an aging narrator. Despite the stylistic and narrative differences between the novels under study, they

share common features in terms of narration and depiction of childhood emotional memories.

At the level of story, both authors depict the basic narrative of displacement: The war begins, the family is forced to evacuate to another location among strangers, and, after the war, the family remains in diaspora. In the novels under analysis, the story is presented through first-person narration. The novels feature onomastic correspondence, meaning that the narrator shares the author's name, and these autofictional narrators operate on the border between autobiography and fiction, recalling and depicting events experienced by the authors themselves. For both writers, the traumatic experience of war has also been the starting point for their authorship. The novels can also be read on one level as the growth story of the author. Therefore, the autobiographical nature creates the autofictionality of the novels, reflected in their genre and narration. The first-person narrator of Kilpi's trilogy *Muistojen aika*, now an aging woman, was 11 years old on the eve of the Winter War of World War II. In Anu Kaipainen's novel *Vihreiksi poltetut puut*, there is also an aging first-person narrator in the narrative present, unpacking and processing the story of her childhood pierced by war. The narrator, like the author Kaipainen, was six years old when the war began. Literary researcher Nanny Jolma (2021, 30) presents four criteria for reminiscent first-person narration, all of which can be recognized in Kilpi's and Kaipainen's novels: the first-person narrator character, the narrator's retrospective approach to narrating their life, self-reflexivity, and immersive episodes of past experiences.

In the novels of Kilpi and Kaipainen, levels of telling, remembering, and experiencing are present. The narration is constructed with a dual narrator, as the present-tense first-person reminiscence gradually slides into the past and into the child's perspective, with the child at times taking over as narrator. The narrative that immerses past experiences is divided further into three age stages in Kaipainen's novel *Vihreiksi poltetut puut*. The perspective of the narrative present and reminiscence belongs to the understanding adult narrator, writer Anu, who tries to connect with the emotional memories of her childhood self and articulate them. The earliest of the narrative voices belongs to the experiencer of events, Little Annu, the child who cannot yet verbalize everything she experiences but organizes things incomprehensible for a child's mind through fairy tales and fantasy, or transfers them into her emotional memory. Between these two speaks the teenage Aune,

whose poetry notebooks and diaries are occasionally quoted verbatim. The narrative perspective may change within a sentence, as sometimes the narrator speaks in the first person and then shifts to third person: “*I look back once more, Annu looks and I see as if a dream ribbon*” (Kaipainen 2007, 75; emphasis ours).

The first-person narrative of reminiscence in these works is characterized by multilayered temporality and the overlapping and intermingling of perspectives between children and adults. While events unfold in a timeless present for the child self, the retrospective gaze of the adult narrator is defined by the effort to understand what was experienced. Decades after the end of the war, the adult narrator of Kilpi’s trilogy describes how the war marked the end of childhood and left lifelong scars: “I grew from 11 to 17 years old in those years. Not an insignificant age. That piece of me is still incapacitated, cut off, scabbed, dead” (Kilpi 1993, 128). Research on oral memory studies has highlighted how the retrospective reminiscence of childhood experiences results in a blend of children’s and adults’ perspectives: The narrated experiences are always reinterpreted within the framework of later and present experiences and knowledge (Savolainen 2017).

Both novels under analysis depict the process of remembering and reminiscing and the attempt to access a child’s experiences and memories. In Kilpi’s trilogy, memory seeks to draw a connection between emotions experienced as a child and those still felt as an adult—emotional memories—and thus builds a connection between past and inner child. The narrator describes relying on an emotion in her reminiscence: “This is at least the right thing to assume in retrospect, based on that feeling that I still recognise as the same from fifty years ago. Emotion is also a memory” (Kilpi 1989, 163). However, a central feature of the process of remembering is the instability and difficulty of memory, as articulated by the narrator of Kilpi’s trilogy:

Memories turn out to be capricious when approached. They seem firm and clear at first, but when you start to touch them, they are suddenly fragile and brittle as plants in an old herbarium; Parts of them fall out, they become translucent like ghosts, and they reflect each other, making it difficult to place them at the right time and place. (Kilpi 1989, 15–16)

The narrators of the novels also frequently question what is remembered, pondering whether everything happened as they present it, as in Kaipainen’s novel: “Or have I imagined them [my parents] like

that? Or Anu Kaipainen has imagined! And herself - just as much as she dared! Childhood is one's own conception, but in narration, fiction" (Kaipainen 2007, 40). Memory research understands that remembering never captures true past experiences, as memories are not objective images of past observations or reality but rather subjective, selective, and variable reconstructions always in relation to the moment of remembering and the broader context (Erlil 2011). What becomes essential in reminiscence is the meanings that the reminiscient narrator assigns to past events and experiences, and how she interprets them from the perspective of her entire life at the narrative present. In this process, the "I" and the past are shaped, as depicted and repeatedly narrated in the novels of Kilpi and Kaipainen.

The forgetfulness represented in the novels can also be interpreted as part of the manifestation of psychological trauma. The difficulty of remembering and the distressing memories and emotions are typical features of trauma fiction and are related to the processing of traumatic memory culture (Jytilä 2022, 11). Despite the narrator's attempts, the reminiscing first-person narrative cannot access all memories because the child's mind has protected itself by forgetting events. For example, the narrator in Kilpi's trilogy does not remember the very moment of leaving as an evacuee and cannot explain why the experience is forgotten: "Instead of this one departure, I see many departures, echoing through each other and entangling like figures in a negative exposed multiple times ... Every attempt to break this forgetfulness produces indescribable angst" (Kilpi 1989, 47–48). The wartime experiences as a child are perceived from the perspective of the adult narrator as a large wall that had to be overcome to pave the way to life and memories. This illustrates how remembering and forgetting are two different sides or processes of the same thing, memory, and how forgetting is a prerequisite for remembering (Erlil 2011, 8).

From a rhetorical perspective, Kilpi's and Kaipainen's novels under study appeal to the senses and facilitate immersion and empathy into traumatic memories, particularly through the description of affective and bodily experiences and memories. They affect the reader through the emotions of the reminiscing first-person narrator and the reader's own experiences (Lyytikäinen 2016). In Kaipainen's *Vihreiksi poltetut puut*, bodily sensations are listened to in the narration: "Little Annu, me as a child, cannot yet convert her thoughts into words, but my body memory carries them one emotion at a time to me" (Kaipainen 2007,

84). This is how a child's immediate, sensory relationship with reality is sought, and the narration indeed contains a lot of childlike imagery, where the world is perceived bodily, for example in the church, where "candles melt like snot" (Kaipainen 2007, 37), and the evacuee train waiting at the station "burps and farts" (Kaipainen 2007, 86).

In particular, bodily experiences are seen to enhance the experiential nature of texts: According to Fludernik (2003), a narrative text is experiential if it uses schemas related to corporeality, presents the subject as speaking or conscious, or otherwise highlights the emotional significance of events. The affectivity and bodily nature of memories are indeed a central part of the depiction of traumatic memory and muted memories in the books under analysis—and strong sensory, bodily, and affective elements also appear in memory studies concerning childhood traumatic experiences (Koskinen-Koivisto and Seitsonen 2019, 26). In the narration of both Kilpi's trilogy and Kaipainen's novel, the traumatic memory of the child is constructed in a multi-layered way, as the child's experience and memory of the onset of war intertwine with the family's intergenerational emotional memories, as we demonstrate in the following chapters.

Family as a Frame of Childhood Memory in the Trilogy *Muistojen aika* by Eeva Kilpi

There will be war.

Dad says these familiar words one day in a completely new tone when we are sitting around the kitchen table eating or just about to eat. He says them to Mom as if we children weren't present at all, as if we didn't need to be cared for, or as if just listening means we don't understand anything. (Kilpi 1989, 11)

Thus begins *Talvisodan aika*. *Lapsuusmuistelmia*, the first novel of Kilpi's trilogy *Muistojen aika*. The depicted memory is connected to the moment when the narrator, as an 11-year-old child, hears about the start of the war—the narrator recalls it being September 1, the day that Germany attacked Poland. The very first pages of the novel exhibit characteristic elements of the entire trilogy. The narrative reminiscence immerses the reader in the child's experience and focuses the narrative through the child: The child listens attentively and sensitively

to the tones of the parents' voices and recognizes that this time the discussion about the start of the war is different from before. Right at the beginning of the trilogy, the individual memory also becomes part of the family memory, as the scene is etched into a classic family memory setting of the narrator's childhood family gathered around the kitchen table, eating and conversing. The family's emotional, social, and communicative connection is indeed a central place where the narrator's personal war memories are constructed—and had already been constructed before the depicted scene, as the trilogy suggests. According to Assmann (2010, 40–44), who distinguishes between individual, communicative, political, and cultural memory, family memory is an obvious form of communicative memory: Stories and memories are passed down within a family.

The description of the mealtime memory at the beginning is intertwined with a recurring theme throughout the series depicting the wavering of memory, as the immersed narrator struggles to recall: "Was it father who said it or mother? Who spoke first, who responded? I don't remember, but I do remember the words and the tone of voice and how they hit me, even though I had heard talk of the war's arrival for almost my entire young life" (Kilpi 1989, 11). Thus, from the outset, the novel problematizes remembering. The adult narrator is no longer sure, in the narrative present, which parent uttered the words about the start of the war but remembers how the words "hit" her. To the child's mind, the war is "the most awful and dreadful thing imaginable" (*ibid.*), so terrifying that the words feel like a blow to the child. Even though the exact situation is no longer remembered clearly, the narrator remembers and feels the words about the start of the war in her body. The fear of war is also, as the narrator recalls, condensed into certain war-related words and images, such as "Bessarabia has been occupied," which still evokes a somatic reaction in the narrative present, causing a "painful" or "anxious" feeling (Kilpi 1989, 16).

In the trilogy, the fear of war is depicted as a profound emotion that the child lived with even before the war began, something with which the child has been entirely left alone. The narrator's only defense against the war and self-soothing is to "pray fervently" amid play and chores. Prayer as a form of child agency helps her momentarily forget the fear, after which she can resume playing "even though her stomach aches" (Kilpi 1989, 12). Once, the mother finds her kneeling in prayer in the bedroom. The narrator hopes that the memory would end with

the mother taking her in her arms or suggesting praying together, but instead the mother remains standing “at the threshold of the adult world,” hand on the door handle, unable to comfort her child.

The beginning of the war and the associated emotions unfold in the novel as a multilayered memory. The fear of war is not just a personal experience for the child but a transgenerational one, as her mother, now 86 years old in the narrative present, experienced the onset of World War I as a child. The narrator describes asking her mother about her memories and feelings related to the start of World War I. The narrator depicts the old mother remembering something, but, similarly to her own memories, her mother’s recollections are fused together, making it difficult to distinguish and place them in the correct contexts. Her mother’s mind is “clogged,” until suddenly a vivid memory emerges from a time when she was exactly the same age—11 years old—as the narrator was when the Winter War of World War II broke out, creating a striking parallel between their experiences:

She had gone to get the newspaper from the mailbox, pushing her little brother in the tall baby carriage, the family’s eighth child, whom she had to “likottaa [babysit].” She opens the newspaper under a big birch tree and sees, printed across the front page in large black letters: GREAT WORLD WAR BEGINS.

– I started crying terribly, says the mother. – I threw myself on the grass and cried and prayed. (Kilpi 1989, 23)

Thus, within the narrator’s childhood war memory, an almost identical version of the mother’s war memory is constructed, revealing the layered and intergenerational nature of memories and trauma. In due course, the child’s experience of the war’s onset had also been profoundly frightening for the mother, and she, too, could only cry and pray. The depicted memory of the mother illustrates from a new perspective how the child’s individual memory is embedded in the novel as part of social family memory, carrying not only the firsthand experience but also intergenerational memories and emotional transitions. Later, in the third part of the trilogy *Jatkosodan aika*, during the Continuation War of World War II, the narrator revisits the atmosphere induced by the threat of war and remarks on recalling the atmosphere vividly, having already experienced it many times in her young life (Kilpi 1993, 21). By this point, the reader is aware of the mother’s

war memory and understands that the atmosphere of impending war reflects how the mother's personal childhood war trauma contributed to shaping the prevailing atmosphere of threat and fear of war within the narrator's family. We interpret the nested relationship between daughter and mother memories, and the affective connection and similarity between memories, as a version of postmemory. According to Hirsch (2008), postmemory refers to the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic memories and experiences that occurred before their birth but were transmitted to them so profoundly that they seem to form their own genuine memories. Memories of significant and often traumatic historical events are mediated through stories, images, and behaviors passed down within families or communities (see Chapters 4 and 7).

The analysis of Kilpi's trilogy (as well as the analysis Kaipainen's novel discussed in the following section) within the framework of family memory shows that wars do not begin at a zero point in terms of memory and experience but rather, from the perspective of emotions and experience, the onset of war also has a previous history. The trilogy indicates that there may be previous traumatic experiences of family members, such as parents' experiences from earlier wars or conflicts, which have been passed down to the next generation within the family and which affect how a child experiences the onset of war. In the more recent history of World War II, Finland had experienced the Civil War in 1918 and Europe had experienced World War I from 1914 to 1918, so many of the adult generation during World War II had memories of other wars as children or young people. Thus, the preceding wartime experiences of earlier generations have functioned as postmemories, as atmospheres of emotional transmissions and fears, as evidenced by the works we are studying. In Kilpi's trilogy, the onset of war is already a traumatic experience for a child, not just as events during the war but also as memories and fear of war transmitted by the mother have affected the sensitive child and intensified the experience of the war's onset. In an author interview, author Eeva Kilpi describes experiencing war for the first time as a child before the start of World War II. Even though it was then a time of peace, traumatic memories of the civil war of Finland were repeated in her mother's stories, thus coloring the child's mind with war and its fear (Majander 2017).

The narrator describes how the sense of the threat of war and the feeling of horror rise as bodily sensations even later in her adulthood:

“[T]here is a feeling as if the throat were slowly being strangled and perhaps breathing indeed becomes difficult” (Kilpi 1993, 21). The traumatic memories of war trigger a physical reaction for the adult narrator even in the narrative present when reading papers and war diaries in the War Archives: “[S]weat breaks out, and the eyes begin to blur. Sometimes there are shivers. Then numbness. One becomes accustomed. The child within me falls silent” (Kilpi 1993, 66). Studies show that, on the one hand, childhood, imagination, and play protected children in the midst of war events, but, on the other hand, experiencing war and displacement as a child left traumatic and bodily traces that war survivors carried throughout their lives (Autti 2025). In Kilpi’s trilogy, the narrator describes how during the Winter War of World War II her own “childhoodness, the internal unity of a child” (Kilpi 1993, 269) still protected her, as back then she lived “in the childhood world of experience and imagination as my refuge” (ibid.). The narrator feels damaged during adolescence in the Continuation War of World War II, when she realizes that nothing will return to normal. There is no return home; home has been lost again, now permanently.

Throughout the trilogy *Muistojen aika*, a central trace left by war emerges as the profound trauma of losing home experienced as a child and recounted through the memories of the adult narrator. The loss of home permeates the child’s entire life and feels like a state of displacement, akin to diaspora, throughout adulthood. According to Ulla Savolainen (2015), who has studied narrative strategies in memoirs of Karelian evacuees, a key feature of the model narratives of Karelian diaspora is the longing for the lost home and homeland, akin to diasporic discourse. In Kilpi’s trilogy, this yearning begins immediately with the first evacuation journey and accompanies every step and every word, in which it is concealed (Kilpi 1990, 172). In the trilogy, the trauma of losing home is also closely linked to forgetfulness. The narrator explains that it is only through the process of writing and remembering in the trilogy that she understands that the difficulty in remembering things, the lifelong sense of yearning and diaspora, and the associated melancholy are explained by the fact that the childhood evacuation journey continued throughout her life and that there was never a return home: “It dawns on me only as I write this, that I never got home. That is the explanation for my forgetfulness, the absence from my mind’s archives of the experience of returning home” (Kilpi 1993, 144).

Intergenerational Affective Assemblage in *Vihreiksi poltetut puut* by Anu Kaipainen

“The war has started,” Father said.

I was speechless with horror. It had come, what the adults had feared. What they had chattered over my head. They had come like a flock of birds of prey, with a wild roar. Father and the others had talked about such things, as if I hadn’t heard. (Kaipainen 2007, 46)

On the frosty morning of November 30, 1939—the day the Winter War began—Russian fighter planes fire on the home village of the narrator’s childhood self, Little Annu in Kaipainen’s *Vihreiksi poltetut puut*, as they fly to bomb Viipuri,³ Karelia’s largest city, where Annu’s mother has just left for errands. Father tells Annu that war has broken out and the family must evacuate. Six-year-old Annu does not understand the concepts of war and evacuation, but experiences the atmosphere very intensely through her body: “I didn’t dare even to breathe” and “odd feeling thickened inside and it was difficult to breathe,” “throat choked,” “fear moved in the bottom of the stomach” (Kaipainen 2007, 46–50). Annu’s embodied experience of war and the burning of her childhood home and familiar surroundings is so intense, traumatic, and overwhelming that she cannot integrate it. Instead, during the evacuation journey she externalizes it into a terrifying figure associated with the scary fairy tales and ghost stories she has heard:

It had black nails like a blacksmith. It was black itself too ... It absorbed me completely into itself or itself into me, and I began to be it or it me ... It had lapels, lodges, and claws, it grabbed with them, squeezed and did not speak ... And somehow I realized it will always follow me. I didn’t know, I didn’t guess it was a war through me ... I named it Black. (Kaipainen 2007, 100–101)

Annu’s childhood is interrupted by war and the loss of her home—just as they once interrupted her mother’s, 20 years earlier. The experiences and memories of both mother and Annu reflect upon each other in a way that could be described as palimpsestic. Max Silverman (2013, 3–4) illustrates with the conceptual metaphor of “palimpsestic memory” the layers and interactions of different times, places, and contexts in traumatic remembering. Silverman emphasizes that such a palimpsestic presence of the past, its translucency, and its impact on remembering

do not unfold as is and immediately, but gradually, partially, and interpreted—this orients the following analysis of traumatic postmemory in Kaipainen’s *Vihreiksi poltetut puut*.

On the day the Winter War broke out, the mother witnesses the bombing of her hometown, Viipuri, which activates a traumatic family memory from the Finnish Civil War experienced about 20 years earlier. The Finnish Civil War in 1918 was a violent conflict between the leftist “Reds” and the bourgeois “Whites,” ending in the victory of the Whites and harsh reprisals. The violence and aftermath of 1918 are considered Finland’s greatest national trauma and, even on a European scale, a brutal and bloody conflict (with around 38,000 deaths) that continues to affect Finnish cultural memory with various divisions and interpretations, stirring strong emotions (see, e.g., Fingerroos 2021; Tepora and Roselius 2014). The mother’s childhood family was bourgeois, and her father, a “neutral White” (Kaipainen 2007, 33) civil servant, was mistakenly arrested by the Whites and died in harsh prison conditions owing to untreated diabetes. He was later “pardoned” posthumously, but the stigma of being a traitor remained.

The mother used to tell Annu about her childhood in Viipuri while resting in bed, where she spent long periods due to a rare blood disease—her blood did not clot normally, and her periods caused prolonged bleeding. As she opened up her memories, the mother simultaneously sewed a cross-stitch embroidery depicting Viipuri Castle: “Mother stitches threads together and hums. Annu notices her longing, it attaches to the child” (Kaipainen 2007, 17). Such cross-stitch embroideries were typically women’s handicrafts made on premade bases with different-colored threads according to instructions. Old cross-stitch works depicting Viipuri Castle are cherished keepsakes and “memory enhancers” in Karelian diaspora families (see Raninen-Siiskonen 1999; Sireni 2021). However, the mother stitches the sky above Viipuri Castle differently, in dark tones, because she ran out of blue thread. (After the Russian attack, she claims to have sewn threatening black clouds in the picture because she saw them in a dream and interpreted them as a sign of war.) The mother’s cross-stitch work materializes a piece of micro and family history as well as the underacknowledged women’s culture. In the structure of Kaipainen’s autofictional novel, it becomes an important palimpsestic metaphor for memory and remembrance. (On the material-affective entanglements in family memory, see Chapters [1](#), [2](#), and [10](#).)

During family gatherings, Annu hears additional details about her grandfather's death, and the narrator's creative imagination pieces together fragments of family memory to form a whole picture—for example, by visualizing a sort of widescreen cinematic view of Grandpa's funeral in Viipuri and then zooming in on the youngest sister of the mother: "A small funeral procession leaves the morgue, passes by the infectious diseases hospital, its window showing the youngest three-year-old daughter with scarlet fever and diphtheria contracted from the hospital" (Kaipainen 2007, 34). The precise and empathetic dramatization of the funeral memory, which the narrator has not personally experienced, demonstrates how the narrator actively participates in the transmission of traumatic family memory and even emotionally intensifies it from her own perspective. As Hirsch (2012, 5) puts it, "postmemory's connection to the past is ... actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation."

The mother's childhood family found the circumstances of the father's death so shameful that they moved from Viipuri to Central Finland. In a way, it was the mother's first forced displacement. In another context, during an interview conducted by a psychoanalyst, Kaipainen further elaborates on this and reveals that her mother's latent shame and anger could express themselves explosively; for example, once she unexpectedly smashed a picture of Carl Gustaf Mannerheim—the commander-in-chief of the White Army—that was hanging on the wall (Siltala 1981–1982, 2). The tragic death of the grandfather was an emotionally charged family memory, and Annu knows "not to talk about it to anyone" (Kaipainen 2007, 62). However, silence paradoxically only accentuates the silenced matter—it becomes a "heavy silence" (Zerubavel 2010, 33, 37; see also [Chapter 10](#)). Such dense silence surrounds the grandfather's death, manifesting as an oppressive atmosphere in social situations that may erupt suddenly and violently—the thunderclouds in the mother's cross-stitch work also represent this charged atmosphere. These narratives, motifs, and behaviors within the family form the emotional-historical background in which Annu grows up and upon which her own memories of war and evacuation are built.

The dark family memory of the mother "pierces through" the narrator's own war memories in *Vihreiksi poltetut puut*: "The misery of Grandpa's death and the war pierced me like a knife through bread" (Kaipainen 2007, 212). Piercing and bleeding are part of the trauma vocabulary and recur frequently in the text. The mother's blood

disorder metaphorically represents the traumatic wound contained within the family memory, which seems to bleed across generations (see Hirsch 2012, 34), and the mother's disease is also actually inherited by the narrator. Similarly, the narrator mentions that Grandpa's diabetes is inherited not only by herself but also by one of her sons. "Genes carry merrily," she grimly remarks (Kaipainen 2007, 21). This genetic lineage underscores the embodied nature of familial postmemory. Recent findings in neuroscience even suggest the possibility that trauma could be genetically inherited by the next generation and predispose descendants to various illnesses (Bond and Craps 2020, 86-87; Hirsch 2019, 172).

After mother leaves for Viipuri on the day the Winter War begins, Annu feels increasing worry: "Mother won't die, will she? What's a bomb like? Does it fall on your head?" (Kaipainen 2007, 49). Annu's concern is valid: The bus her mother travels on comes under enemy fire, but she makes it home safely. She is in shock and keeps repeating that she saw Viipuri burning. Annu notices her mother has peed in her pants. In this situation, father sends Annu to deliver a message to the neighbors while the parents pack. Annu's message contains affectively charged information—"Viipuri is burning!"—and an order to evacuate. Outside, Annu notices that the wintry sky is "different" after the fighter planes: "I looked at the sky. From its edge came a continuous rumble like thunder in diarrhea. Through the clouds, thin, sinuous lines of lightning could still be seen" (Kaipainen 2007, 62). The child narrator's subjective observation of lightning-like streaks in the November frosty sky and the far-off roar of cannons are distantly but recognizably analogous to the ominous thunderous sky in the mother's cross-stitch picture. As a narrative solution, this palimpsestic overlap of two visions implicitly brings forth the presence of previous, traumatic family history and thus subtly intertwines the experiences and memories of the mother and daughter. Later, the mother experiences the destruction of her hometown once again with Annu as they stand on the evacuee train at Viipuri station, when the city is bombed again: "Mother counted bomb blasts, which house got hit, kept babbling: home got hit, girls' school, she listed. County hospital. They mustn't hit Viipuri Castle, she said" (Kaipainen 2007, 93). The adult narrator knows the mother has "lost something for the second time, something she had already lost before" (Kaipainen 2007, 93).

In Karelian memory culture, certain landmarks in Viipuri have crystallized into topoi, which metonymically express Karelia and Karelianness as well as the emotions and meanings associated with them. Examples of such topoi include Monrepos Park, the Round Tower, and above all Viipuri Castle. They are “sites of memory” (Nora 1996), material points of reference for remembering (Fingerroos 2021; Grünthal and Korjonen-Kuusipuro 2021; Turtola 2016). The significance of Viipuri Castle as a site of memory is demonstrated by the fact that the mother takes with her on the evacuation journey the cross-stitch picture she made of Viipuri Castle and hangs it on the wall in the places where they stay during the evacuation and finally in their new home. In the narrative present, the reminiscing adult narrator mentions that the desktop background of her computer is Viipuri Castle, “which I always start from” (Kaipainen 2007, 62). In this way, the mother and daughter share the image of Viipuri Castle as a multifaceted site of memory, where the fortress, as a collective symbol of Karelia and as the nation’s — or, even more broadly, the “West’s” — frontline defense against the “East” (Kivimäki and Tepora 2009, 292–95; Tepora 2023), becomes intertwined with a dark, blackened family memory (and counter-memory) infused with fear, shame, humiliation, and anger.

In *Vihreiksi poltetut puut*, the autobiographical and intergenerational affective entanglement, illustrated by Annu’s imagined Black, is unraveled from the present of the reminiscing adult narrator through the means of fiction. Retelling this early vulnerability becomes the motivation for authorship in the novel: “Could it really be that I could, through language, turn the war-ravaged forest green again?” (Kaipainen 2007, 9), the narrator asks on the opening pages of the book.

Conclusion: Child’s Experience as a Counter-memory

The first bombing of her hometown, as recalled by the narrator of Kilpi’s trilogy, was remembered since childhood to have occurred on the second day of the Winter War, while later historical accounts in written works mention the bombing happening a day earlier. The process of recalling and writing the trilogy led the narrator to delve into archival documents and war diaries, confirming from their pages the correct date, which was wrong in the reference books but right in the memory of the child’s experience. The narrator remarks that, valuing book

knowledge, she had tried to erase the childhood experience from her mind: “I thought I was wrong because I was a child then. But that was not the case. The child remembered correctly and counted correctly, and the experience was sufficient for her” (Kilpi 1989, 45).

In this chapter, we have examined the childhood memories of World War II and forced displacement as portrayed in the autofictional novels of Finnish Karelian authors Eeva Kilpi and Anu Kaipainen. We have analyzed the transmission and significance of childhood experience in autobiographical and autofictional narrative, as well as the layered nature of childhood traumatic memory. The novels’ objects of study depict an autobiographical process wherein the narrator verbalizes and imbues literary meaning into dramatic and traumatic childhood experiences from the present moment of narration. Memories are depicted through the perspectives of both a child and an aged narrator, which can also be viewed as a political and deconstructive approach. By employing distinct narrative strategies and utilizing autofictional literature as a form of memorialization, Kaipainen and Kilpi not only portray their personal memories and memory work related to war and displacement but also present counter-memories and counter-narratives to the dominant narrative of World War II and forced migration in Finland. Here, counter-memory refers to alternative memories that often emerge from marginalized groups historically subjected to silence, encompassing memories that have been overlooked from national narratives.

The objects of study, Kilpi’s and Kaipainen’s novels, bring forth experiences and perspectives that were not yet recognized within the framework of official memory and war history at the time of their publication in Finland. First, the books feature women as narrators and experiencers of war: The authors themselves are women, and the reminiscing narrators in the works are women. Second, the works focus on the child’s perspective and experience. The child is represented as an active experiencer and agent, not merely a bystander or victim of war; the child is also a creative actor who engages in play and imagination during the war, with experiences containing empowering and emancipatory dimensions. In the novels, the traumatic childhood experience of war and evacuation highlights the bodily and affective nature of traumatic experiences and the layering of memories. Family transgenerational memories from previous wars also become intertwined with the childhood war experience and memories. Examining the novels

within the context of family memory demonstrates that war and displacement experiences are not just individual experiences but embedded with transgenerational emotions, memories, and silences that trace back to earlier wars and conflicts. Additionally, the novels show that the childhood experience accompanies individuals throughout their lives and colors their experiences, even as memory assigns meaning to experiences and reinterprets events in different stages of life.

One of the central findings of this chapter is that childhood memories of war depicted in the novels are not formed in isolation but deeply embedded within family memory and shaped by postmemorial affect. In both Kaipainen's and Kilpi's novels, the child's experience of World War II is intertwined with emotional legacies of earlier conflicts—such as the Finnish Civil War and World War I—as conveyed by the parent generation. These memories are transmitted not only through storytelling but also through bodily reactions, silences, and shared emotional atmospheres, aligning closely with what Marianne Hirsch has described as postmemory. This layered and affective entanglement highlights the necessity of approaching family memory as temporally complex and emotionally accumulative. When studying childhood experiences of war, it is therefore crucial to recognize that the memory being formed or narrated may already be embedded with inherited, emotionally charged recollections from earlier historical ruptures. These embedded layers underscore the importance of analyzing memory as a relational, intergenerational, and historically situated phenomenon. This analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between family memory and postmemory within literary contexts, showing how autofictional narratives can make intergenerational memory processes visible, affective, and narratively meaningful.

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Notes

- 1 As the works have not been translated into English, all quotations in this article are the authors' own translations.
- 2 World War II and the associated migration have been framed within a national perspective in Finland: even the names of the wars of World War II—Winter War, Continuation War, and Lapland War—represent Finnish uniqueness. In the national narrative, evacuees have also been particularized: initially, terms like displaced population, Karelian evacuees, war evacuees, and migrants were used, but eventually the term *evakko* (evacuee) became established (Kanervo et al. 2018, 8). In Finnish research, terms such as displaced population and evacuees have been predominantly used. Evacuees have not been defined as refugees because the situation of the displaced population was deemed different from the definition of a refugee as outlined in the Geneva Refugee Convention, which refers to a person needing protection owing to political, religious, racial, or similar persecution or fear in their home country (Raninen-Siiskonen 1999; Savolainen 2015).
- 3 Viipuri (now Vyborg, in present-day Russia) was a major Finnish city until it was ceded to the Soviet Union after World War II.

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CHAPTER 12

Disrupted Memories of Migration

Remembering a Blurred Past in the Context of an Uncertain Future

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Abstract

This chapter explores the experiences of undocumented migrant youths in the United States. Drawing on *testimonios* published in the *New York Times*, the chapter makes three arguments. First, it shows how migrant youths use processes of social memories to frame their migratory experiences. Then the chapter highlights how the politicized memories of migrant youths become a form of resilience as they reflect on their incorporation in the USA. Finally, it concludes by showing how these youths draw from their past to project into their uncertain future during the first Trump administration in the USA. Ultimately,

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we argue, memory serves to ground and mobilize youths by providing a solid sense of fearlessness based on their willingness to continue fighting for more rights in the USA.

Introduction

When children migrate young, they often have few, if any, memories of the place where they were born, which can result in experiencing a disconnect from their countries of origin (Mendez-Pounds et al. 2018). For these children, migration memories and stories (why and how they moved) are often the stories told by their parents or relatives; hence, sharing these migration stories within the family becomes a social process by which “society [in the form of families] and social peers are required for individuals to remember, since they provide the ‘social framework’ or logic for recalling an event [such as emigrating], and the imagination of a group [to make sense of such event]” (Glynn 2012, 8–9). In the new country, these young migrants are often acculturated as natives (since they learn the language fast and tend to fully embrace the new culture), but legal status can complicate their belonging in the new country of residence. Negrón-Gonzales, for example, has highlighted the gap between legal (judicial) and lived (subjective) identities among these young migrants (2014). In addition, racial otherness can also become a barrier to full incorporation (Ngai 2014). In this chapter we focus on the *testimonios* shared in 2016 by young migrants with DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, a program enacted under the Obama administration in the United States), when Donald Trump first became elected president, to show how these youths made sense of this historical moment. In particular, we analyze *testimonios* (N = 116) that were shared publicly in the *New York Times*, to explore how these youths deploy their memories of migration to and integration in the United States in the context of a very hostile political context (Massey and Sanchez 2010). We show how these *testimonios* serve as counter-memories that disrupt dominant discourse by highlighting histories that have been overlooked (Bamberg 2004; Eiranen et al. 2022; Laanes and Meretoja 2021).

In 2012, the DACA program was first announced by President Obama as an executive order that granted protection from deportation and provided a renewable work permit to undocumented immigrants who arrived in the United States as children. Since DACA was an

executive order and not a law, it was not meant to be permanent, making undocumented children occupy a gray area between unauthorized and semilegal status (Schmid 2013). The benefits that DACA brought to those who benefited from this program are well documented; these benefits include higher earnings, access to driver's licenses, adequate health care, and banking, among others (Gonzales et al. 2014). In addition, having work permits meant that many of the previously unavailable jobs were now available to these youths (Negrón-Gonzales 2014). However, the precariousness of this program became evident during the 2016 presidential campaign, when Republican candidate Donald Trump promised to terminate DACA. In August 2016, for example, he said:

We will immediately terminate President Obama's two illegal executive amnesties, in which he defied federal law and the constitution to give amnesty to approximately 5 million illegal immigrants. (Trump, cited in Reilly 2017)

As promised, in September 2017, the Trump administration announced that the DACA program would be rescinded. Since then, the case has been litigated in the courts, and the future of DACA recipients remains in limbo. As of August 2022, the Department of Homeland Security was continuing to renew DACA applications but was not able to enroll new migrants into the program owing to a 2021 court injunction (DHS 2022). Scholars have documented the complicated context of DACA (Alulema 2019; Gonzales et al. 2019; Rabin 2020), and we build on this body of literature by showing how youths deployed memories to respond to the election of Trump in 2017, and the threat posed to DACA by the new administration.

This chapter addresses three key findings regarding how memories are deployed by these youths to make sense of their uncertain legal future in the United States, given that the newly elected president campaigned on promises to terminate the DACA program—which would leave these youths in legal limbo in the USA (Rabin 2020). First, youths with DACA are often referred to as DACAdmented because they are in a legal limbo. They are not documented (do not have permanent legal or citizenship status) and yet they enjoy some legal benefits such as the right to employment and are protected from deportations. But, given the temporary nature of the program and the challenges to it, this remains a precarious legal status (Rabin 2020). In addition, these

youths are also referred to as DREAMers. This term comes from the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act), a failed bill introduced in the US Congress in 2001 to provide a pathway for legalization for youths who entered the USA as minors and who either pursued an education or the military (Barron 2011). Scholars have written extensively about the narrative around (Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales 2020) and activism of DREAMers (Nicholls 2013). We found that DACAdmented youths deploy social memories of migrations (the why and how they moved to the United States); that is, while they might not remember exactly the moment of migration (many were babies when they came to the USA), they still know the circumstances of emigration through family narratives. Hence, it is within the family that these social memories of migration are shared. In their testimonies, DACA youths deploy these familial memories of migration as a way to explicitly connect their own experiences with those of their parents. While the mainstream media troupe of a DREAMer emphasizes “personal sense of identification as American” (Caminero-Santangelo 2019, 29), these youths deploy the “process of remembering, recollecting, repetition, and narration” (Rosińska 2020, 38) to remember a past that includes the sacrifices of their parents. Second, as pointed out by Glynn, memories are political (2012, 9) and reflect ways in which migrants are incorporated into social groups, national society, and the state (2012, 10). Hence, in their *testimonios*, these youths deploy memories of resilience in the context of legal vulnerability, and highlight their paths of exceptionalism and achievement in the USA. That is, in a hostile context where they do not have access to all the rights citizens have (such as identification, jobs, or universities), they highlight their work ethic and achievements in education as a counter-narrative to the anti-immigrant and hostile environment created by Trump—who often equated migrants with crime and abuse. By using counter-memories to (re)tell their story of overcoming obstacles, they look “to the past for the hidden histories excluded from dominant narratives” (Lipsitz 1997, 213). That is, they contextualize their exceptionalism and achievement in the context of legal vulnerability and, hence, provide a “revision of existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past” (Lipsitz 1997, 213) that challenges individualism and highlights family sacrifice. Finally, as Rosińska argues, memories are not linear, as “[m]nemonic time would not be linear, but rather a circular mixing and overlapping of the past, the present, and

the future” (2020, 38). Hence, these youths reflect on their past to make sense of their future in the USA and make claims of belonging in the context of a very traumatic moment (Trump’s election) and their legal vulnerability in the United States (Ellis 2021; Martinez Rosas 2020; Offidani-Bertrand 2023; Valdivia 2020).

In sum, this chapter highlights the uniqueness of DACAmented youths. First, unlike their adult migrant peers, who tend to project their memories to the past, these youths use processes of social memories to frame their migratory experiences. Second, their politicized memories become a form of resilience as they reflect on their incorporation in the USA. Finally, these youths look into their past to project into their uncertain future a sense of belonging that challenges notions of what memory, place, and nostalgia mean for these migrants, as more than just holding on to the past (Massey 1995).

Theorizing Memory, Youths, and US American Identity

This chapter engages with and intersects three bodies of literature: migration and memory, memory and experiences among 1.5-generation immigrant youths, and the role of memory in identity development in the context of legal vulnerability.

Memory and Migration

Scholars of migration and memory have in the past often examined the experiences of first-generation migrants who move to a new place as adults. This focus has resulted in highlighting the role that melancholy plays in how memories are (re)constructed. Rosińska, for example, argues that “the sense of estrangement, sadness, and loss, and the want of meaning in life” are typical traits of the migration experience (2020, 36). Hence, for adult migrants, a sense of loss (of identity, place, family, etc.) is key to understanding memory within this population. For them, loss and melancholy are very much part of also their “process of remembering, recollecting, repetition, and narration” (Rosińska 2020, 38). But the process of memory is very different for children who leave their country of origin young and might not have concrete or stable memories of their homeland. In addition, vulnerable legal status, which might prevent these youths from fully integrating into their new

country of residence, plays a very important role in how memories are developed by migrant youths.

Some scholars have also explored the experiences of generations removed from the direct experiences. For example, Hirsch has explored the narratives and works of writers and artists who have been producing artworks, films, novels, and memoirs, or hybrid “postmemoirs” about the Holocaust (2008, 4), which she calls “postmemory,” and argues that “these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and effectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (Hirsch 2008, 5). Borrowing from this theorizing, other scholars have used “postmemory,” linking the memory of migration among the children and grandchildren of immigrants, as “a narrated family memory, re/created by the 2nd and 3rd generation in the intersection of collective and autobiographical memories” (Leinonen et al. 2023). Yet the 1.5 generation is unique since they might not have direct, clear, or concrete memories of the migration experience or the homeland; they might have “postmemory” based on the narratives transmitted through family; and yet legal status might prevent them from fully incorporating into the new host society. Hence, how the experience of legal exclusion among the 1.5 generation shapes memories has been less explored in scholarly works.

Memory and the Experiences of the 1.5 Generation

Rumbaut (2004) distinguishes the 1.5 generation from the first and second generations by referring to the 1.5 generation as migrants born in another country but who arrived in the host country as children (between six and 12 years of age). Thus, these migrants often received most of their schooling and cultural and social formation in the host society and not in their homeland (Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Rumbaut 2004). The experiences of these young migrants in the USA are unique because they are often incorporated into US society via schools as opposed to the labor market, which is how adult immigrants incorporate, and these different contexts in turn shape their identities, sense of belonging, and the way they view their legal status (Abrego 2011). Another unique characteristic of the 1.5 generation is that, depending on their age at migration, they may not have many memories of their migration journey and their lives prior to that point; hence, they might not be able to recall their lives in their homeland, family members, and

friends left behind. Much like the second generation, they might have “postmemories” (Leinonen et al. 2023). Often, the memories of the migrants who leave their homeland as children are recounted by parents or adults. Scholars have documented how 1.5-generation migrants often do not remember their migration journeys; however, few have explored how these youths juxtapose their own sense of migration against that of their parents.

Memory and Identity Development in the Context of Legal Vulnerability

Members of the 1.5 generation also tend to become acculturated in the same ways that natives do and, in many ways, feel just as US American (Méndez-Pounds et al. 2018) but, for undocumented migrants, this sense of national belonging is complicated by lack of legal status (Gonzales and Chavez 2012). In fact, Gonzales documented the way in which migrants who arrive as children to the USA must actually “learn to become illegal” (Gonzales 2011). This process is described by Gonzales as the process “whereby undocumented youth confront legal limitations and their implications and engage in a process of retooling and reorienting themselves for new adult lives” (Gonzales 2011, 666), as they learn to navigate the world as undocumented adults. This experience distinguishes the experiences of migrants in important ways. For example, Abrego (2011) found that, while fear (of deportation) among coworkers shaped the experiences of undocumented first-generation migrants in the US labor market, shame (in school settings) among peers shaped the experiences of 1.5-generation undocumented migrants in school settings.

Yet, recent work has highlighted the way new narratives, mobilizations, and frameworks have been developed by undocumented immigrant youths to make sense of their experiences. Since 2001, when youths mobilized to support the passing of the DREAM Act, these migrant youths have become known as DREAMers in popular discourse. Their relentless efforts are illustrated by the fact that since 2001, when the first bill was introduced, 11 versions of the bill have been introduced in Congress (AIC 2021), and various states, like California, have passed their own state-wide DREAM Acts, and framings such as “undocumented and unafraid” have become popular repertoires among these immigrant youths (Muñoz 2016). In addition,

scholars have documented the unique experiences of these youths in getting integrated in the USA as Americans but not legally (Perez and Solorzano 2009), and thus having to learn to become illegal (Gonzales 2011). Yet, as Glynn and Kleist argue, memories determine “belonging and the ensuing relationship between migrants and their receiving society, by influencing politics of migrants, and by structuring the political debate about belonging and migration” (2012, 10). But less research has explored the process by which these youths utilize memories as political tools to become resilient and narrate their own identities as exceptional and dreamers.

Methods

This chapter draws data from public *testimonios* posted in the *New York Times* (NYT) in the wake of the election of Donald Trump in 2016. In 2016, the NYT editorial board openly called for DACAmented youths to submit and share their stories; they explained: “We’re featuring stories from young immigrants who were spared from deportation and permitted to work during the Obama administration.” From January 14 to February 14, 2017, we read and downloaded a total of 112 of these *testimonios* publicly posted on the NYT website. We conducted deductive coding, by reading the data and coding themes as they emerged from the *testimonios*. First, we coded the data in terms of five general themes (general issues around undocumented status, negative consequences of legal status, DACA-related issues, USA as home, and other issues). Then we recoded within these themes. For example, under the USA as home theme, we had 12 codes such as home, American, American dream, benefits to US society, and so on. In this chapter, we draw from three codes related to memory: data coded as memories of migration, becoming exceptional, and future uncertainties. *Testimonios* are important because, as Benmayor and Skotnes argue, “personal testimony speaks precisely to how im/migrant subjects constantly build, reinvent, synthesize, or even collage identities from multiple sources, often lacing them with deep ambivalence” (1994, 15). Hence, this chapter draws from these *testimonios* to highlight both the common patterns that emerged, as well as the ambivalence embedded in the memories of these migrant youths.

Findings

The findings are organized in three sections. First, we show how DACAmented youths deploy social memories (Creet 2011) of migrations, building on the narratives shared within families and communities, as a way to explicitly connect their own experiences with those of their parents. We argue that these social memories are a response to the often-individualized focus on DREAMers by the media. Second, we illustrate how these youths deploy these social memories as political memories (Glynn and Kleist 2012) and as a form of resilience. We highlight that they politicize their memories by highlighting how legal status shaped their paths of belonging in the USA. In other words, by highlighting their exceptionalism in the USA, they are deploying a counter-narrative to the anti-immigrant and hostile environment in the wake of the election of Donald Trump. Finally, we highlight how these youths deploy their social and political memories to reflect on their future in the USA. We argue that these social and political memories are used to express their legal vulnerability in the United States in the context of Trump's election but also make claims of belonging to the nation-state.

Family at the Core: Social Memories of Migration

According to Creet and Kitzmann, “migration rather than location is the condition of memory between times, places, generations, and media, from individuals to communities and vice versa, movement is what produces memory” (2011, 9). For youths who migrate as children, the way memories of migration are produced become a very social process by which “individual memory is the product of collective memory” (ibid., 7–8). In other words, the concrete memories of migration might be blurry for these youths who were too young to remember the migration experience, but the social memories created and recreated with their parents and family members keep the meaning of what it means to be a migrant alive. In addition, legal exclusion also serves to contextualize the meaning of migration for these youths, who resist separating their experiences of movement from those of their parents.

In fact, in their *testimonios* published by the NYT, DACAdmented youths deployed social memories of migrations, that is, why and how they moved to the United States, that explicitly connected their migrations to those of their parents. Hence, we argue, DACAdmented youths often expressed that they understood why parents had migrated; understanding their parents' sacrifice was a common way to think and talk about their own migratory experience—by centering their parents' experiences as central to their own migration experience, and as a way to honor their parents' sacrifices.

For example, Kenia,¹ from El Salvador, living in Des Moines, Iowa, shared her memories of the migration experience:

My parents made the tough decision of leaving everything behind to take their three children out of harm's way. The five of us walked for three days across the border. I was 11 years old, my brother was 8, and little sister was 6. My body was tired, at times I felt like I could no longer walk, however, I didn't want to show my exhaustion because I could see that this was already hard enough for our parents to see us go through. (Kenia, NYT 2017)

Kenia's memories of migration are intimately tied with her parents' role in such migration, also recounting how her father cried as he apologized to her and her siblings for being undocumented in the USA. She recounted: "With tears forming around his tired eyes he said, 'I'm sorry I brought you to this country to be undocumented. I'm sorry I failed you.' That was the first time I saw my father genuinely cry because of our lack of legal status. This happened during my junior year in high school" (Kenia). Kenia's memories of coming to the USA and everyday life experiences there highlight the importance of the parents' own experiences in that country.

Similarly, Fernando, who was a construction superintendent living in Newark, explained how he was young and did not understand the consequences of the migratory journey then, but can appreciate his parents' decision now:

I came to America in the late 90s, my parents took the decision to come to this country to give me a chance, I was 12 years old, and at the time, I couldn't grasp how important and vital this decision was for my life. (Fernando, NYT 2017)

Given that most of these youths came to the USA as children, their migration stories and memories are intimately tied to their parents' decisions to migrate. But, rather than blaming their parents, they are thankful for the sacrifices their parents made.

In addition, some of these sacrifices of the migration process included family separation. As Deyanira, a migrant from Mexico who was living in Austin, Texas, explained, family reunification often meant being together but also at a high cost due to legal barriers to migrate legally:

I was born in San Luis Potosi, Mexico. My parents decided early on that they wanted their children to grow up in better environments than the ones they grew up in. They migrated to the United States of America when I was very young so that they could work endlessly and send money back home to Mexico. At the age of five, I migrated along with my sister. I was excited about my family being united once again despite the adversity we face. (Deyanira, NYT 2017)

As Deyanira shows, some of her memories of the process of migration were not her own, as she was "very young" to remember before the age of five. But by highlighting her parents she demonstrates how social memories of migration are kept alive through the recounting of what that process was like in her family.

Finally, while stories were diverse about how and why youths came to the USA, most youths acknowledged their parents' actions were brave and admirable. For example, Julyanna, who came to the USA at the age of 11 from Brazil, and was living in Memphis Tennessee, explained how her parents gave up everything to provide a future for their children.

I came to the United States for the first time when I was 11 years old. My younger sister was brought to St. Jude children's Research Hospital with Leukemia. We came back 3 years later for her checkup and we found out she had relapsed. My dad was afraid of trying to change our expiring tourist visa in case we had to go back to Brazil and my sister would not be able to receive treatment. My sister is now a cancer survivor and would not have been if we had gone back to Brazil. My family left everything behind to save her and give us a better life. (Julyanna, NYT 2017)

Unlike adult migrants, who can recount concrete memories of the how and why they migrate, youths who migrate as children, like Julyanna,

must rely on the social memories shared within the family to understand the reasons and circumstances of the migration process.

In sum, in telling their stories of migration, DACAmented youths deployed social memories of migrations where their parents were central actors. By explicitly connecting their own experiences of migration with those of their parents, and highlighting their parents' sacrifice, we argue, youths are deploying counter-memories. That is, they are looking "to the past for the hidden histories excluded from dominant narratives . . . by supplying new perspectives about the past" (Lipsitz 1997, 213). These counter-memories, we argue, that explicitly incorporated their parents' sacrifices can be understood as a response to the often-individualized focus of DREAMers by the media that often shed light on extraordinary immigrant youths, while also vilifying their parents as culpable for the legal woes of their children (Bishop 2018).

Social Memory as Political Memory and Counter-memory

As Glynn and Kleist argue, social memories are political, which they call "memory politics," since they involve "public reference to the past" (2012, 9) that actively "construct belonging [by] determin[ing] who and how someone maybe be included in a group, a society, a nation, or a polity" (2012, 9). DACA youths, in their *testimonios*, referenced their parents not only as key in shaping their migration story but also as key motivational factors that allowed them to succeed in school and thus become exceptional. While scholars have criticized DREAMer activists for using narratives of exceptionalism and vulnerability (Oliviero 2021), we argue that these narratives of exceptionalism are also counter-memories and counter-narratives to the anti-immigrant and hostile environment created by Trump in the media. For example, Deyanira explained how being undocumented motivated her to excel in school:

Although being undocumented has been my toughest struggle here in the United States, it has shaped me to highly appreciate education and encourage my younger siblings to excel in their studies in order to pursue a career. (Deyanira, NYT 2017)

According to Oliviero, "The DREAM legislation acronym itself was strategically chosen by movement leaders explicitly because of its invocation of the American Dream and exceptionalism" (2021, 58), which became problematic because this narrative pitted them against

their parents. The implicit comparison was that they were “good” and “exceptional,” while their parents were “bad” and “criminal.” What we found, in line with what Heredia (2015) also argues, was that youths deployed their politicized memories of how they had excelled in school as a way to challenge stereotypes about undocumented immigration. Hence, they shared how they had to become exceptional in light of their legal status. As Heredia (2015) argues, they harnessed and leveraged their exceptionality to challenge immigrant stereotypes and as a way to defend against migrant policing and control in the USA. In other words, these youths had to become exceptional in school in order to survive a system meant to drown them. For example, Fernando explained how education was the path for him to become successful:

My name is Fernando, a California resident who came to this country at the age of six after my parents decided to leave everything behind with the hopes of giving my brother and I a better life. The United States is the only country I've known. Although learning a new language and living in a new world took a while to get used to, the United States became my home and my country forever. Education gave me the tools and the dream to one day graduate from college and my dream became a reality in the spring of 2012 as I graduated with a Bachelors of Fine Arts degree from Cal State University in Fullerton. (Fernando)

In addition, education was seen not only as a way to overcome the obstacle created by their legal conundrum but also as a way to further honor their parents' sacrifices. Jay, who lived in Houston, Texas, for example, explained how education allowed him to fulfill the promise he made to his parents:

I've been here for as long as I could remember. I have two younger siblings who are US citizens. When I was 11, I made a promise to my parents that I will do everything in my power to make sure that my siblings have good lives. And I am not an oath breaker. I started working at my uncle's restaurant at a young age in order to save money for college. I never knew I was undocumented until I want to get my driver's license. I started to think that all the AP classes, straight A's, community involvement etc. would mean nothing because I would be deported. Most importantly my siblings were still very young and I would lose the ability to support and care for them and the rest of my family. But I

wasn't going to give up. I saved up enough money and borrowed from a relative to pay for my first year of college in 2011, but I still worried about being able to my second, third and fourth year. (Jay, NYT 2017)

Many DACA youths, in fact, became exceptional and excelled in school as a way to counteract the negative consequences of being undocumented, like not having as many opportunities as their documented peers. Claudia, who was born in Mexico and lived in Pharr, Texas, for example, saw education as a way out of poverty and, also, as a way to help her parents:

I was born in Mexico but America has been my home since I was 7 years old. The Pledge of Allegiance and the Star Spangled Banner are now the hymns of my soul and my existence. Red, white, and blue are my colors. Growing up in a family of six kids on a gardener's salary of \$10,000, my ultimate dream was to go college and one day help my family out of poverty. I longed to see the day when my father did not have to mow lawns or sell trinkets at flea markets to make ends meet. Motivated by my parents and the struggles we faced, at a young age I made school my priority and worked hard to make my family proud. Despite fearing I could never go to college after finding out I was undocumented my junior year in high school, I got accepted to the University of Texas-Pan American and received scholarships for my academic merits in 2012. (Claudia, NYT 2017)

In sum, these youths deployed counter-memories that challenged what it means to be part of US society as undocumented immigrants. They highlighted their paths of exceptionalism in the USA as counter-memories and counter-narratives to the anti-immigrant and hostile environment. Like other scholars have found, these youths defined themselves in ways that allowed them to “locate and support each other, organize, and advocate for assistance and rights” (Seif 2016, 33). These youths used their counter-memories to highlight the multitude of barriers they faced as undocumented immigrants. By highlighting how they overcame challenges, the politicized memories of these migrant youths also challenged dominant ideas about undocumented migrants.

*Memories and Belonging in the Context of an Uncertain
Future*

In the context of the election of Trump, and the foreseeable ending of the DACA program, youths were understandably feeling vulnerable. The threat of the elimination of the DACA program, and thereby legal rights (such as work permits) and protections (from deportations), was very real. Hence, in their *testimonios*, youths reflected on their future in the USA and explained both their sense of vulnerability and uncertainty, while also making strong claims of belonging. Unlike their adult migrant counterparts, who often express melancholy, that is, “the sense of estrangement, sadness, and loss, and the want of meaning in life” (Rosińska 2020, 36), these youths experienced what Chu found in the children of Asian immigrants: “radical melancholy,” whereby they transferred their “attachments to an ideal inclusion in the new [country]” (2019, 25).

In their *testimonios*, these DACAmented young migrants expressed both a sense of fearfulness and fearlessness in the wake of the Trump election. Many, like Sofia, expressed fearfulness about the future of DACA and what that would mean and used her *testimonio* to ask for more opportunities for herself and those in similar circumstances:

I know DACA can be taken away. I won't be able to drive to my college, or work to pay off my college tuition. My scholarship will be terminated. I will be deported and eventually, left with nothing to live for. I pray for an opportunity and to stop feeling like there isn't any room for me here.
(Sofia, NYT 2017)

Other scholars, like Valdivia (2020), have also documented the heightened vulnerability experienced by DACAmented youths after the election of Trump. Yet, because many of these youths had been socialized in the USA and were exposed to the narratives about being “Americans without papers” (Mendez-Pounds et al. 2018), they also saw the USA as their home. Most of the DACA youths who shared their *testimonios* in the NYT were not activists, and yet they expressed a strong sense of belonging as DREAMers in the USA. Most of the youths expressed a sense of belonging in the USA and fearlessness in the face of uncertainty. Erika, who lived in Dallas, Texas, for example, shared how transformative DACA had been, as well as how she was “no longer afraid”:

My DACA permit has also allowed me the opportunity to work for my school's college radio station and access jobs that build towards my career. DACA has helped me be on my way to being the first one in my family to graduate from college and while I am unsure about what lies ahead once Donald Trump takes office, I am no longer afraid. (Erika, NYT 2017)

Through the DACA program, youths had gained access to new jobs, higher earnings, driver's licenses, health care, and banking (Gonzales 2014) but also created new forms of mobilization and activism among migrant youths (Flores 2016), including a sense of fearlessness (Mena Robles and Gomberg-Muñoz 2016).

Dennis, like Erika, also shared how DACA had changed many things. For one, DACA provided opportunities but also a way forward to fight for more rights and privileges:

When I obtained my masters in school counseling, the DACA act was announced. I was finally able to live a normal life and “catch up” to my peers. Now I work in a high school that I truly enjoy. Unfortunately, once again I have to worry about my future. The lost of DACA could mean that I could lose my job and career. But this time it will be different, I am not the man from 8 years ago. I am not afraid. This time I will fight for what I love and keep working with my students no matter what happens. (Dennis, NYT 2017)

As Dennis pointed out, DACA changed the lives of undocumented migrant youths radically and, as Muñoz (2015) highlights in her book, identifying as “undocumented and unafraid” can also be utilized by migrant youths as an educational and political tool to challenge unjust policies and practices. Blanca, for example, explicitly called for the community to mobilize to create the changes needed:

In a time in which uncertainty of the future of DACA looms overhead. The time is now for our communities to relinquish their fears and use them to empower us for what the uphill battle that lies ahead. To not become distraught and give up hope, but instead become engaged and alter our future. (Blanca, NYT 2017)

In a radical shift from calling for citizenship rights, some, like Ciriac, actually called for human rights. Naming her experience as a human—not as a productive worker or obedient citizen but as a human who

deserves “the opportunity to live without the threat of deportation”—is an example of a truly radical shift in the narrative of DREAMers:

The current anti-immigrant rhetoric has produced fear in my community because the promises President Elected Donald Trump made during his campaign can now be materialized into action. His plan to remove the DACA program would mean that I would not be able to work as a college access mentor at my local high school in Salt Lake City. I work with a broad range of students, most of which will be the first in their families to attend college. Removing DACA would mean I would not be able to empower and help the students I have worked with all year find the resources they need to be successful in college. Regardless of the work that I do, I am not defined by a job. My freedom to live in this country should not be defined solely by my labor. I am human, and I too deserve the opportunity to live without the threat of deportation looming over me. I will graduate this spring from the University of Utah and will continue fighting for my community. Though we face uncertainty, we are here, and here to stay. (Ciriac Alvarez Valle, NYT 2017)

Other scholars, like Cristina Beltran, have also documented the ways DREAMer activists are also in the vanguard, “putting forward critiques of US policies regarding immigration, globalization, civic membership, and political engagement; these critiques are irreverent, audacious, and unapologetic” (2020, 81). Ciriac is a great example of that vanguard.

In sum, we found that DACA youths reflected on their future in the USA and made claims of belonging there, a country they view as their home; while the Trump election highlights their legal vulnerability in the USA, they still feel like they belong. They simultaneously acknowledged their legal vulnerability in the United States and expressed fear, but many also expressed fearlessness, and proposed radical counter-narratives focused on human rights to express their sense of belonging in the USA.

Conclusion

The memories of migration work differently for adults and for children. While adults might have concrete memories of their homeland and have a sense of melancholy for the life they left behind (Rosińska 2020), children often do not have concrete memories of

their homeland and rely on social memory to make sense of their migration trajectory and experiences (Glynn and Kleist 2012). Moreover, for undocumented migrants, legal exclusion and a hostile context shape how migrants develop feelings of belonging and attachment in the new country (Massey and Sanchez 2010). This chapter has shown how DACAmented youths develop memories of migrations in the context of their families, and how centering their families is a way to explicitly connect their own experiences with those of their parents. We, like Mendez-Pounds et al., found that deploying “family sacrifices for a better life” (Mendez-Pounds et al. 2018, 448), was a recurring theme DACAmented youths used to describe their social memories of migration. DACA youths are very aware of the role their parents played in bringing them to this country, which they often frame as a brave sacrifice and, we argue, challenge media portrayals of migrant youths as radically different than their parents, and thus youths challenged narratives of being assimilated, driven, and US-educated unlike the adult migrants (Lauby 2016). In addition, we have also shown how these DACAmented youths politicized social memories as a way to challenge the anti-immigrant and hostile environment they were facing with the election of Trump, who had threatened to end the DACA program. Hence, we argue, these youths framed themselves as exceptional in order to show how hard they have worked to support their family and gain respect in the USA, not only for themselves but for their entire families. By doing so, they used their counter-memories to reclaim and challenge stereotypes and to resist hegemonic memory frameworks. Finally, by highlighting how these youths reflect on their future in the USA and how they make claims of belonging there in the context of Trump’s election, we have shown how a very traumatic event (Garcini et al. 2022) can simultaneously spark a raw sense of legal vulnerability as well as a solid sense of fearlessness based on their willingness to continue fighting for more rights in the USA.

Notes

- 1 In this chapter, we use the names that youth used to post their stories in the *New York Times*. We only use first names. Information shared by the youth in their *testimonios* is also included.

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CHAPTER 13

Breaking the “Pact of Silence”

Armenian Youth Activism and Coalition-Building in Contemporary Turkey

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Abstract

This chapter examines the collective political orientations of young Armenians in Turkey since 2007, focusing on how youth-led activist groups have built and sustained alliances with civil society and diverse political communities in Turkey and beyond. The significance of their political mobilization lies in its foundation in memory activism, particularly in response to the state’s ongoing denialist approach to Armenian history and the Armenian Genocide. We argue that, despite recent setbacks under authoritarianism, younger generations of Armenians in Turkey have solidified a new shared political orientation—not

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only concerning the Armenian Genocide but also on broader issues such as ecology, gender, minority rights, and social justice. Finally, by closely examining the interplay between memory activism and family memory, this chapter highlights the hybridization of Armenian and family identity and the growing influence of transnational family and activist networks.

Introduction

Just days after the 2015 centennial commemorations of the Armenian Genocide, Nor Zartonk, an Armenian political youth organization in Istanbul, urgently called for solidarity and support on social media. An orphanage constructed by the Armenian Protestant Church in 1962, intended to host orphans and children from deprived Armenian families in Asia Minor, was under threat of demolition by a construction company aiming to build luxury villas. Once an unobtrusive piece of land acquired by the Armenian Church, Camp Armen and its small green surroundings were confiscated by the Turkish Republic in 1987 based on a 1936 bill preventing minority foundations from acquiring property. Since then, Armenian community representatives have taken legal action in various ways, resulting in the orphanage building being left abandoned owing to legal obstacles. However, young Armenian activists were able to garner widespread attention and support from Armenian and non-Armenian audiences, particularly after images of orphans and children working to green the area circulated on social and print media. Following a persistent summer-long occupation of the abandoned building and its backyard, these activists successfully halted the demolition.

In this chapter, we examine the collective political orientations of young Armenians in Turkey since 2007, who successfully led this act of disobedience, in which they received widespread support by non-Armenian feminists, LGBTIQ+ rights groups, environmentalists, soccer fans, leftist initiatives, and religious and ethnic minority organizations. We specifically discuss how youth-led activist groups were able to build and sustain alliances with civil society and diverse political communities. The chapter mainly posits that the significance of their political mobilization lies in its foundation, primarily centered on memory activism, especially given the prevalent denialist approach to history. This is evident in Turkey, where the calls by broader Armenian

society for the recognition of past crimes and more recent injustices were violently silenced. Based on two field research and in-depth interviews done in 2015 and 2022, we argue that younger generations of Armenians in Turkey, despite the more recent setbacks under authoritarianism, solidify a new shared political orientation toward issues related to the Armenian Genocide as well as ecology, gender, minority rights, and social justice.

A special focus is on the interplay between memory activism and family memory, since the political mobilization and subjectivities of Armenian youth have been shaping both family memory and the public memory of the Armenian Genocide. With selected examples, our analysis demonstrates how family memory and national memory intertwine and influence the individual and collective identity (Barclay and Koefoed 2021; Slabáková 2021). Furthermore, the particular case of Armenian youth activism in Turkey serves to illustrate two crucial directions in the interplay of memory and activism (Erdal 2025; Gutman and Wüstenberg 2023; Rigney 2018; see also [Chapter 12](#)) by addressing 1) how activists remember, retell, and commemorate the past and 2) how memory influences the political strategies and perspectives of activists.

In fact, memory played a significant role when Camp Armen activists achieved success: Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink, a prominent figure in the memories of both Armenian and non-Armenian communities in Turkey, was one of the children involved in the construction of this building and met his future wife at a summer camp there. His assassination in 2007 provoked widespread shock and anger, with tens of thousands of people attending Dink’s funeral. The public closely followed the trial process, and every year, on January 19, thousands gather in front of the headquarters of *Agos*, the Turkish-Armenian newspaper that Dink headed, to commemorate him. The assassination of Dink triggered public discussions about the history and current state of state violence and systematic discrimination against Armenians and religious minorities in Turkey, including the long-denied Armenian Genocide (Muti 2023; Türkmen-Derrişođlu 2013). Importantly, our research with young Armenians in 2015 and 2022 showcases the *living* impact of youth-led memory activism ignited by the movement that unexpectedly emerged in response to Dink’s assassination, and its recontouring of family and public memories throughout the 2010s and 2020s.

Between Denial and Counter-memory: Armenian Genocide and Its Legacy in Turkey

During World War I, the majority of the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire was compelled to leave their historical homeland, constituting almost half of the Christian population in the multireligious empire. Armenians primarily resided in cities and rural areas of the eastern part of modern Turkey. Many were killed during mass deportations orchestrated by Ottoman authorities, while others perished in concentration camps in Syrian deserts owing to unbearable conditions (Akçam 2012; Bloxham and Göçek 2008; Polatel and Üngör 2011). Today, most diaspora Armenians (in Europe, South America, North America, or Australia) and Armenians in Turkey trace their roots to victims and survivors of the systematic killings of Ottoman Armenian citizens. The shared experience of genocide survivors has forged a collective memory, resembling a “Myth of Beginning” for diaspora Armenians, connecting their origin story to this historical event (Abrahamian 2005).

However, in Turkey, the political memory of the Armenian Genocide is marked by the denial of the loss and trauma experienced by Armenians during and after World War I, and reminders and traces of mass violence, as well as social and cultural Armenian heritage, are erased or suppressed in public space (Üngör 2014). While Turkish officials have altered the narrative of the genocide and denialist strategies since the founding of the Turkish Republic (Dixon 2018), generations of Armenians remained living under the repeated threat of violence and were deprived of means to represent and claim their losses in the wider public space. Yet individual and collective efforts by Armenian, Kurdish, and Turkish activists to commemorate and acknowledge the genocide persisted. In other words, a “counter-memory” in the Foucauldian (1980) sense was painstakingly constructed by these activists, serving as a resistance against the destruction of the historical truth about the Genocide and challenging the nation-state-inflicted, official narratives of Armenian history (see also [Chapter 9](#)).

A significant shift occurred after the assassination of Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink, breaking the long-standing silence about the genocide in the mainstream society. Dink’s assassination in 2007 led to unexpected changes, fostering new networks of trust among various social movements, including Armenian and Kurdish

and Turkish political organizations, human rights advocates, and LGBTIQ+ and environmental activists (Galip 2020). This broad network of political and social actors manifested itself against Turkey’s official memory politics, with activists organizing commemorations of the Armenian Genocide in different cities and demanding its official recognition and historical justice (Özbek 2016). For the Armenian community in Turkey and the diaspora, Hrant Dink’s murder was perceived as another episode in a series of suffering and injustices predating the genocide. Nevertheless, Dink’s assassination became a historically significant event, unexpectedly and profoundly catalyzing the political activism of Armenian youth and fostering the formation of political belonging and shared political perspectives among them. Characterizing the political mobilization and engagement of the youthful Armenians after this crucial event, researchers in Turkey have referred to them as the “the generation of 19th of January,” pointing out the date of the assassination and commemorations of Dink with a wide range of participation (Firat et al. 2017a; Yücel 2019).

To better understand the meaning of Dink’s assassination and the legacy of the Armenian Genocide for this age group, the Association for the Study of Sociology of Memory and Culture in Istanbul conducted semistructured interviews with younger Armenians throughout the year 2015. More than half of the 22 interview partners were under the age of 25, which means they were under 18 or young adults when the Turkish-Armenian journalist was killed. The research elaborates the interplay between national and family memory as well as the generational effect on family memory. It demonstrates that Dink’s murder was a defining sociohistorical event for this age group, forming and developing common emotions, ideas, and political goals (Firat et al. 2017b). Accordingly, their memory activism highlights the convergence of generation and collective memory, binding a group of people together based on shared information, emotionality, and positioning toward the past (Schuman and Corning 2012).

Furthermore, our study explores and indicates that their political subjectivities have emerged and been reconfigured centrally around memory narratives. These narratives encompass transmitted knowledge or lived experiences related to historical events, particularly Hrant Dink’s assassination, the Armenian Genocide, and the resistance against the demolition of Camp Armen, among others. Through their politicization, young Armenians began bringing contemporary

sociopolitical demands to the forefront, in addition to their calls for historical justice, including the recognition of the Armenian Genocide.

Through self-organized cultural and political groupings, Armenian youths in Turkey emerged as intersectional actors in the public-political domain (Papazian 2017), actively engaging in diverse fields of social justice struggle such as ecological, feminist, and LGBTIQ+ rights movements, as well as student activism. The interconnections among Armenian, Turkish, and Kurdish youth, along with other pro-democracy groups, were significantly strengthened. Hrant Dink's assassination and the coalition-building that followed, including mass protests at his funeral, commemorations on Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day, and resistance to the eventual demolition of Camp Armen in 2015, played a key role in shaping a new political identity among Armenian and non-Armenian youth in Turkey. In other words, Dink's assassination and the solidaristic-coalitional spaces created by the Armenian community and the democratic opposition afterward helped forge and solidify a new shared political orientation among younger activists toward issues related to the Armenian Genocide, the nation-state, identity, memory, and justice.

Indeed, January 19, 2007—the date of Dink's assassination—condensed and recontoured the patterns of remembrance of the genocide. In postgenocide Turkey, successive Armenian generations experienced loss and violence in various forms, from forced migration to special heavy tax policies on non-Muslims and work camps during World War II, to pogroms against non-Muslim minorities in the 1950s and 1960s, and political and economic pressure after the military coups of 1971 and 1980. Accordingly, the trauma of violence has been kept alive by crucial events, with every generation undergoing overwhelming political ruptures without the trauma of earlier generations being publicly acknowledged and reflected. Nevertheless, for the Armenian age cohort born around 1990, the assassination of Dink became a reference point, a direct experience binding them and their memories together. Dink's commemorations on January 19 in front of the *Agos* building—the headquarters of the Armenian weekly newspaper edited by Dink, where he was shot—hold symbolic meaning for this generational unit (Mannheim 1952), serving as a site of memory for both the assassination and the genocide. Dink's murder was seen by many younger Armenians as a continuation of the political violence and discrimination experienced by Armenians since the genocide. Consequently,

they began attending or coorganizing commemorations of the Armenian Genocide in Istanbul after this date (Firat et al. 2017a).

Moreover, the memory activism of Armenian youth in Turkey led to the concurrent reshaping of family memory and intergenerational relationships. As they observed the younger generation becoming politicized and engaging in coalitional spaces with diverse political groups to address the historical and contemporary injustices, older generations of Armenians were also encouraged for more and open dialogue with younger family members regarding the unspoken pages of their family histories. In some cases, parents were encouraged to participate in these commemorations and public events on the history and current state of Armenians in Turkey by their children’s active political engagement and memory activism (Bellek ve Kültür Sosyolojisi Derneği 2017). Prior to Hrant Dink’s assassination, in the overwhelming denialist habitus in Turkey, storytelling served as the sole means of communicating the loss experienced by previous generations to younger generations in Istanbul families (Bilal 2006). However, “traditional” forms of storytelling, like lullabies, were gradually replaced by digital records or technologies, and violent ruptures in modern Turkish history further marginalized Armenian family memories. In many Armenian households, family stories of the Armenian Genocide were not directly shared but “overheard” by younger generations as children when parents and grandparents whispered about “certain past events” (Firat et al. 2017a). The silence about the family past was interpreted by younger generations as a strategy employed by their families to protect them, as explained by Anush,¹ a university student from Istanbul:

Well ... I don’t know, maybe it is spoken of in many Armenian families, but not in ours ... When I ask, still, the elders from both sides, they don’t want to talk about it in detail. Only my grandma said once, “My mother escaped to Sinop, carried on her mother’s back.” She tells only this, nothing detailed. I think this is because, maybe still, they are, the elders are afraid that we will say something in public and get ourselves in trouble.

Our recent research, conducted under the Istanbul Youth Research Center in 2022 with the support of the Hrant Dink Foundation, demonstrates that the changes in family and collective memories of the Armenian Genocide after 2007 are still intact. In-depth interviews with 12 Armenians and eight non-Armenians born between 1992 and 1999 (aged between 23 and 30) reveal that the political appearance of

Armenian and non-Armenian youth demanding justice for Hrant Dink contributed to a turning point to break the “pact of silence” among the Armenian community and families in Turkey. On one hand, many Armenians remained insecure and uneasy after the assassination of Dink which justified their concerns about refraining family members from talking about the (family) past and living their Armenian identity freely in the public spaces (Nor Zartonk 2007). On the other hand, a visible body of Armenian society, including elderly people, claimed their identity and became socially conscious and outspoken.

“During my childhood, [the Genocide] was not spoken about much, because my family, they were afraid, even inside the house.” Varsenig (age 29) was in the second school when the older age group of Armenians in Istanbul were forming novel political and cultural structures and building alliances with diverse political groups. “There were times when it was conveyed through whispers, you know, and things were mostly left unspoken.” Her parents were born in a small Armenian village in Anatolia. However, like many other Armenian families, her grandparents had to leave their village and move to Istanbul, where they felt safer with the presence of a bigger Armenian community. Her grandmother used to warn her mom, “Don’t call me mama [mom in Armenian] outside.’ Her parents warned her, naturally out of fear.” She grew up conscious of the fear felt by older family members and could witness certain changes in her parents’ attitudes: “Before Hrant Dink was killed, that fear was always there. Still, they used to warn me, like, ‘be careful,’ ‘don’t reveal your [Armenian] identity too much,’ and so on. After Hrant Dink, they opened up a bit.”

The scholarship on family memory analyzes how stories of the family past are reconsidered and restructured as part of national memory and history (Švaříčková Slabáková 2021). In fact, both the storyteller and audience challenge and negotiate the meaning of the family stories as well as roles of and power dynamics among family members in shaping their stories (Baddeley and Singer 2010). After the mass violence events, however, communication patterns in families vary as some families live a *pact of silence* and others recall oftentimes violent stories in the company of the children, or they change based on the subject (Fischer 2015). In some Armenian families, activism of younger generations allowed a dialogue between generations where family members could integrate personal experiences into the family memory and exchange (and contest) values, emotions and lessons

about the past and present. In this process, the activism of younger generations has shaped the collective memory and identity (parents joining the commemorations of the Armenian Genocide and other political demonstrations or “opening up a bit”) as well as the family memory and identity.

Traces of Recent Memories: Youth Activism in Turkey in the State of Emergency

Over the past two decades, youth activism in Turkey has consistently posed challenges to the systems of inequality and oppression, adopting an intersectional framework that moves beyond “single-axis thinking” (Erdal 2022, 2025; May 2015). Collective efforts by young people, spanning student movements, memory activism, and youth-led environmental initiatives, have developed political agendas for social change. Importantly, their methods of fostering coalitional politics have addressed a multitude of power vectors and structural pathways of injustices, including racism, sexism, ageism, the commodification of public spaces, and neoliberal urban governance.² Armenian youth, from the post-2007 context to the widespread Gezi Park protests³ to the Camp Armen movement, have emerged as significant intersectional actors in this vibrant landscape of activism. They actively participated in and shaped democratic politics, taking part in and leading ecological, feminist, and LGBTIQ+ rights movements, as well as memory activism.

However, the political trajectory of the “January 19 generation,” persisting between 2007 and 2015, underwent a dramatic shift after 2016 owing to the changing political climate in the country. The mid-2010s marked a turning point for every avenue of democratic alternatives as the Erdoğan government aggressively steered toward authoritarianism (Düzgüt and Keyman 2017; Tuğal 2016). This shift gained momentum after the youth-led Gezi Park protests in 2013. The Erdoğan government strategically instrumentalized the widespread protests as a “divide and rule” tool, framing the youth engaged in the Gezi movement as a perceived threat to Erdoğan’s vision of a “pious youth” through discursive means (Lüküslü 2016). The years following 2013 witnessed a notable erosion of freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, along with academic autonomy. The failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016, became a crucial threshold, leading to

the suppression of democratic actors and the intensification and consolidation of Erdoğan's authoritarian rule (Yılmaz and Turner 2019). The repressive political environment, entwined with media suppression and the weakening of judicial independence, exacerbated by a worsening economic crisis, compelled numerous young citizens to explore alternative avenues (Freedom House Special 2023; Istanbul Youth Research Centre 2023; Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2023). Evidently, it is becoming increasingly challenging for youth to view Turkey as a place to realize a sense of agency and selfhood.

Our in-depth interviews with a total of 20 young Armenian, Turkish, and Kurdish interviewees with diverse religious, sexual, and political identities demonstrate that, despite the challenging conditions of democratic political life in Turkey, political Armenian youth exhibited the ability to sustain their shared intersectional political identity and subjectivities. However, street-based actions, including protests and demonstrations, were no longer typical aspects of everyday life for young Armenians as well as for Turkish and Kurdish political youth. Given this shift experienced as of the late 2010s, their capacity to continue engaging in collective action and shared thinking about social change partly depended on institutionalized spheres where youth agents could express their political voice. These included political platforms such as Nor Zartonk and civil society organizations such as the Hrant Dink Foundation and Anadolu Kültür. These institutions effectively served as spaces for political imagination and coalition-building between Armenian youth and other diverse actors committed to fostering a multicultural, peaceful society and advocating for social and historical justice. Nevertheless, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020 emerged as another symbolic threshold for the political engagement of young Armenians. Our study highlights the alarming impact of this war on the political agency of Armenian youth as well as the coalition-building spaces developed by the January 19 generation in Turkey.

The Artsakh War, the Nexus of Multiple Traumas, and the Loneliness of Armenian Youth

Nagorno-Karabakh, a contested mountainous region in the South Caucasus, has been a focal point of two major conflicts and intermittent clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan for over three decades.

Since the 2020 war, Turkey has extended military and political support to Azerbaijan, leading to increased isolation of Armenians in Turkey. Concurrently, the Lemkin Institute for the Prevention of Genocide, named after Raphael Lemkin, the coiner of the term “genocide,” has characterized the language employed by Azerbaijani authorities and state-controlled media as “genocidal.” This has drawn the attention of international organizations to the atrocities committed by Azerbaijani soldiers. Notably, Mustafa Destici, chairman of the far-right Great Unity Party, a constituent of the People’s Alliance alongside the ruling Justice and Development Party and Nationalist Action Party, has overtly threatened to erase Armenia “from history and geography.”

Considering the memory of past mass or targeted violence events, the clear genocidal language and threats against Armenia and Armenians on social media and news have instilled fear and insecurity among Armenians in Turkey during the war. The in-depth interviews with younger Armenians who participated in our study in 2022 manifest how strong their sense of a secure and peaceful existence in Turkey was weakened owing to the lack of empathy among the democratic opposition for the pain and trauma inflicted by the war on the Armenian community in Turkey. Simultaneously, endeavors toward coalition-building between Armenian youth and the democratic public opposition in Turkey suffered severe setbacks during the war. The pervasive sentiment in Turkish society that it is a party to the 2020 war and the ongoing conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, with general support for Azerbaijan, has instilled significant fear and anxiety among Armenian youth in Turkey. The display of Azerbaijani flags in neighborhoods where Armenian migrant workers and Armenians from Turkey reside, along with verbal assaults targeted at Armenians, has profoundly and adversely affected the Armenian community. Ararat, a 23-year-old Armenian from Istanbul, elucidated how the prevailing sense of alienation among Armenians has rekindled past traumas:

There was certainly unease about that, not just for me personally but more so for Armenians living in those neighborhoods, and it saddened me. Because these are well-known places, including Bakırköy, Kurtuluş, Yeşilköy, Feriköy, Samatya, and so on. People are aware; these are somewhat stigmatized places. Even if their neighbors are Armenian, there was a fear that, due to being labeled, Armenians might face repercussions. Armenians were again in a state of unease.

The enduring transmitted trauma stemming from historical landscapes of mass violence against Armenians in Turkey, entwined with the apprehension of potential recurrence, intensifies sentiments of abandonment and frustration among Armenian youth. Ararat, actively engaged in activism since 2016 within an increasingly authoritarian political regime, articulates this emotion as a persistent reminder that they continue to be relegated to the status of the “Other”—or in Ararat’s terms “Other of the Other.” More precisely, younger Armenians perceive themselves being othered even by their allies (e.g., Turkish and Kurdish activists) who also endure the historical and structural mechanisms of marginalization and exclusion. The young Armenians in our study consistently conveyed their disappointment and frustration in response to the lack of empathic understanding and connection from both their non-Armenian friend circles and activist communities. This political phenomenon framed as “activist youth loneliness” (Erdal 2025)⁴ signifies a dramatic erosion of trust and confidence in others as allies.

The erosion of young people’s sense of belonging and vision of democratic citizenship in Turkey, compounded by the depiction of Armenians as the “enemy” or the “other,” prompts Armenian youth to fall into a danger of becoming despondent about the capacity of coalitional spaces of politics and activism. Zakar (28 years old) characterized this risk of loneliness as stemming from his “feeling like hostages in [their] own country rather than true citizens of this land.” Zakar, working at an art institution, did not identify himself as an activist but a political young individual who feels belonged to the January 19 generation. He highlighted the impact of Hrant Dink’s assassination on his and his family’s political orientation and recalls his engagement in the Camp Armen Resistance proudly, where he participated with his girlfriend. Every January 19, they partake in the commemoration of Hrant Dink’s murder. Regarding the war in 2020, he expressed deep disappointment in his non-Armenian friends:

I saw statements from many of my friends on their social media accounts, like “We stand with Azerbaijan, down with Armenians” ... Every day when I log into Instagram, maybe just to distract myself, I see people, with whom I shared so much for years, writing such things, and it really affects you. I mean, when you write these notes, didn’t you ever think about the things you shared with me, and yet you can write “down

with Armenians”? ... Thus, one tends to be more introverted. With my friends from Armenian schools, maybe we’ve become even closer ... A border was drawn in the heart. You understand again what we should and shouldn’t talk about [with non-Armenians], even if you like them. Such boundaries have been drawn in my mind.

The majority of Armenian youth involved in our study expressed a recurring sentiment: They were not surprised by the widespread participation of Turkish society in anti-Armenian hate. What proved disappointing or disheartening for them was the apparent silence and apathy of those who politically and emotionally sided with them over the last decade, including Turkish and Kurdish activist friends and social media friends. “The way people in Turkey seemed to be happy about the war and people dying at the age of 17, 18 ... The language in the news ... I don’t know, something inside me broke,” said Talin, 28 years old, who became part of activist networks as a young student and started working for a civil society organization after her graduation. She was mostly surprised by the silence or disinterest in her social circle, consisting of activists and human rights defenders, and felt left alone by non-Armenian friends and activists:

It felt very silent to me ... A lot of people staying silent ... Many of my friends didn’t post anything like “stop the war” on social media, I didn’t see a single message. That silence really bothered me ... I talked to my [Turkish, Kurdish] colleagues at work because I thought we were on the same page, but we weren’t on the same page ... Because at home, I was experiencing something different emotionally; at work, however, everything seemed normal. These are people with whom I thought shared the same concerns, spoke for the same purpose, and struggled alongside me.

The sense of loneliness experienced by young Armenians in Turkey poses a challenge to the collective memory and foundations of the January 19 Coalition, initially established among Armenian, Turkish, and Kurdish youth, along with other democratic plural actors in the public-political sphere. The observed silence among democratic political actors in Turkey, including leftists and democrats, intellectuals, and civil society leaders, hindered a politics of solidarity. We argue that what Talin, Zakar, Ararat, and other young people narrated about the affective realms of their experiences during the war moves beyond a

mere sense of isolation, presenting crucial implications for their intersectional political agency. The pronounced lack of empathy toward the suffering and pain of Armenian youth during the Nagorno-Karabakh (or Artsakh, in Armenian) War, particularly intertwined with the fermenting of the collective memory of the Genocide, raises the potential threat of loneliness. This political phenomenon reflects the extent to which Armenian youth living in Turkey grapple with disappointment and distrust toward those who were once perceived as allies, thereby challenging their confidence in the possibilities of coalitional politics. The loneliness experienced by Talin and others, albeit temporary, signals not just a decrease in their investment in memory activism or solidaristic action but rather a risk of the suspension of their intersectional orientation and openness toward activism and the world of others.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to emphasize that the diminishing of coalitional strength among the January 19 generation does not result in a total paralysis of the shared political belonging of Armenian youth. We contend that two specific dynamics play a role in preventing the potential immobilization of political Armenian youth. First, the risk of loneliness they experience prompts them to turn primarily to their Armenian community and friends in Turkey and/or the diaspora, orienting their civic, political, and affective investments toward their own identity groups and institutionalized collective grounds of the Armenian minority in the country, as well as fortifying their transnational ties through engagement with relatives, friends, and cultural and political initiatives in the diaspora. Thereby, they maintain spaces of solidarity and pursue strategies to respond to issues limiting their political agency and memory activism. Second, the accounts of young Armenians indicate that they retain a collective memory of the coalition-building efforts that emerged in response to Hrant Dink's murder in 2007 and other historical injustices over the last decade. For instance, Talin, while sharing her deep disappointment after the war in 2020, notably stated: "Seeing people at the April 24th commemorations or that crowd on January 19th ... That crowd was the only reason Armenians stayed in Turkey after Hrant Dink was killed. Seeing that crowd still today encourages us to stay here." For Talin and other young Armenians who participated in the study, the January 19 Coalition continues to shape their political dispositions, relationship with Turkey, and aspirations for a democratic future.

Grassroots Commemorations and Alternative Memory Sites: Binding and Forming Generations

Undoubtedly, the annual commemorations on January 19 play an indispensable role in establishing emotional and political connections among diverse activists, movements, and generations. A majority of Armenian and non-Armenian interviewees comprehend the symbolic and emotional value of this day as a crucial element of their political mobilization and identity formation. This highlights how memory activism remains to nurture the potential for various actors to construct alternative narratives of the past, paving the way for a peaceful coexistence of diverse perspectives on a just future (Muti 2023). The relational and affective bonds built through memory narratives of January 19 underscore the importance of activist networks, physical spaces—such as the *Agos* building—and emotions, including shock and anger following the assassination. Additionally, recollections of solidarity, cooperation, and collective action play a crucial role in shaping social movements, as demonstrated in prior research (Arenas 2015; Bosco 2006; Clough 2012).

As a result, January 19 has emerged as a symbolic landmark for the establishment of counter-memory for youth and civil society actors—a day to commemorate Hrant Dink as an activist for minority and human rights, a journalist, and an opportunity to come to terms with past state crimes, human rights violations, and seek justice for a diversity of targeted groups and individuals. Past (state) crimes and organized violence against ethnic and religious minorities, which contest official memory politics and continue to be denied by official institutions, are actively remembered and retold in the present by civil society actors and participants of Dink’s annual commemoration through speeches, slogans, and banners. The gathering in front of the Turkish-Armenian newspaper *Agos* on January 19 persists in serving as an open space for alternative memories that challenge official narratives of the past, shaping collective and public memories. It is a day of commemorative rituals conveying strong messages of (historical) justice, involving street activism (e.g., changing the name of the street close by to his house to “Hrant Dink Street”) and fostering solidaristic spaces of acting-thinking-and-feeling among citizens and activists of different generations. Various social struggles and movements, both past and present, can be mobilized to form this significant counter-memory

space in continuity. For younger Armenians in Turkey, deprived of any institutional or formal accumulation of memory and access to public space to share their stories as a community, “unofficial” memory sites like Hrant Dink, the date of his assassination, January 19, and commemorations organized by civil society actors on the official day of Remembrance of the Armenian Genocide function as safe zones for commemoration. These sites also serve as platforms to convey messages to the wider public and seek to build communicative and solidarity bonds with the majority society.

The youth participants in our study, comprising Armenians, Turks, and Kurds, consistently narrated January 19 as a turning point in their political engagement. The several narratives surrounding this historical event and individual biographies of youth underscore the significance of Hrant Dink’s assassination and the subsequent memorial ceremonies and marches as a pivotal foundational event. Agit (age 26), now a queer activist, vividly recalled the day when, at the age of 11 or 12, they first learned about Armenians in Turkey in the aftermath of Dink’s assassination. The news volume was turned up and their father froze in shock while their mother beat her knees with sorrow. This moment marked Agit’s realization that “there are other people and other lives.” Raised in a smaller city with a majority Kurdish population, Agit later discovered that, even within their own family, there were unique stories. Their great-aunt on their mother’s side was an “eccentric” individual, speaking Kurdish in a distinct manner, using non-Kurdish words that made it sometimes impossible even for Agit to understand her. She was leading a rather private life with unconventional rituals and traditions. Unlike others in the village, she never got married or had children and almost secluded herself from the rest of the community. The enigmatic aunt would be an important figure for Agit in their coming years.

Through LGBTIQ+ organizations, Agit connected with Armenians of their age and Nor Zartonk. Years later, as a young queer activist participating in the Camp Armen movement, Agit delved deeper into their family history. When Agit informed their mother about staying in the camp to protest its demolition, the explanation about the Armenian orphanage where Hrant Dink grew up sparked concern in her. Agit’s mother, initially worried about the potential police intervention, eventually disclosed the family’s Armenian ancestry and their integration into Kurdish households during and after the genocide. Agit’s

mother was apprehensive about being visible at the demonstration owing to the perceived risks associated with their Armenian heritage. Agit, upon learning about their family’s Armenian history, began to connect the dots between their parent’s worries, their reaction to Hrant Dink’s murder, and the stories of the “eccentric” great-aunt.

Subsequently, Agit visited their great-aunt, this time acknowledging her as the “Armenian aunt who stayed true to herself.” This encounter unveiled more family stories and provided nuanced details about narratives they thought they knew. Strengthening bonds with Armenian friends, Agit learned other stories related to the Armenian Genocide and gained more knowledge about it, as well as massacres against Kurds decades after. Much like the changes in the transmission of family memory following Dink’s assassination and the political mobilization of Armenian youth, Agit’s intersectional activism evoked a rupture in the narration of family stories and heritage. The accounts of Agit, Varsenig, and other young Armenians evince that the coalition-building in the post-2007 context not only played a pivotal role in shaping a new political identity among youth but also exerted an influence on family memories. This influence manifested by breaking the “pact of silence” prevalent in many families concerning their links to the Armenian Genocide and heritage. In essence, Hrant Dink’s assassination and the solidaristic-coalitional spaces, serving as alternative memory sites established by the Armenian community and the democratic opposition in the country, subsequently facilitated the formation and solidification of a new shared political orientation among the Armenian youth regarding issues related to the past (whether public or private), present, and future in terms of social and historical justice. As a consequence, these developments brought about a shift in intergenerational dynamics within the Armenian community, moving from a focus on “silence” to fostering dialogue and interaction within family memories.

Future of the January 19 Generation(s): A Transnational and Hybrid Orientation toward Armenian Identity and Politics

“We have comrades living in Europe, members of Nor Zartonk in the diaspora, or those who participated in projects related to Armenia.” Ararat had been a member of the youth-led Armenian political

organization Nor Zartonk since his high school years. He participated in the commemorations of Hrant Dink as a teenager, where he met other Armenian and non-Armenian activists—“That was the first political gathering I attended, in 2014.” After that he got involved in more activist meetings, protests, commemorations, and political groups. He valued Nor Zartonk’s transnational ties by highlighting its “extensive communication with Armenians worldwide, from Argentina to the United States, Canada, Greece, France.” The organization’s transnational ties and engagement are not limited with the Armenian diaspora, he added; “they also interact with the global left.”

That is why he remained part of this youth political organization: the intersectional politicization and mobilization, contributing to the preservation of a shared political orientation that transcends traditional boundaries and incorporates the aspects of transnationality into youth activism. He also reflected on his journey to Portugal in 2017, where he served as the representative of Nor Zartonk for a civil society initiative to establish the Armenian version of Wikipedia. He underscored the continuity of his connections he made there with activists from Greece and Lebanon during their shared time in Portugal. While emphasizing the importance of preserving a sense of belonging to the Armenian identity, Ararat simultaneously underscored the development of transnational bonds as an inherent dimension of their activism. In a nutshell, Ararat provides an excellent example for the direction of Armenian youth activism: reflexive and transnational engagement with Armenian identity and transnational political involvement.

“I frequently visit Armenia and stay there for a long term, since I have family there.” Talin maintained her transnational kinship ties by meeting family members mainly in Armenia: “I have family in the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium—mainly in Europe but also in Russia. We schedule trips to Armenia and meet there. We are in contact.” She grew up aware of her transnational family ties: Some of them left Turkey as migrant workers but in most part her family spread to different countries “after 1915,” after the genocide.

When did I become aware of it? When did I become interested in the genocide? After Hrant Dink. I don’t know exactly when I learned about it, the topic was always there – despite the silence in my family. But after his assassination, when I was in secondary school, it became a politically important issue for me.

For Talin and many other Armenians of her age, the assassination and commemorations of Hrant Dink became a turning point shaping the family memory and collective memory of the Armenian Genocide. Moreover, the family memory and legacy of the Armenian Genocide are constituent parts of the transnational family identity which is negotiated by younger Turkish-Armenians as well as other family members in diverse national political and social contexts. Indeed, despite the risk of loneliness they experienced after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, family stories of loss and survival during the genocide gain new meanings explaining the politics of past and present. Concurrently, the narratives of Armenian youth, including their self-identification and stories of politicization in the aftermath of Dink’s assassination, uncover the occurrence of transnational hybridization. While presenting an ongoing process of negotiation of Armenian identity and a reflexive effort in exploring the complexity of their own cultural, ethnic, religious, and political identities, young Armenians consistently refrain from a static and exclusive stance toward an “other” or a “stranger” (Werbner 1997). They repeatedly express a positionality in alignment with Stuart Hall’s (1993) concept of cultural identity, one that “lives with and through, not despite, *difference*; by hybridity.” More recent studies highlight the heterogeneity in diaspora communities and hybridization of Armenian families, which criticizes theoretical construction of Armenian communities and identity as unchanging, homogeneous, and passive (Kasbarian 2022; Nalbantian 2019).

As Agit’s family story and individual biography portray, the experience of Armenian youth cannot be framed by the preservation of the distinct identity as an unchanged and ratified essence but rather by heterogeneity and diversity as their identities are more and more hybrid. Growing up in a Kurdish family, they learned about their family past in reference to differing cultural and political settings and new or updated stories. They adapted their experiences as part of diverse political collectives into their family and individual identities. “Activism engenders a new form of activism,” as Agit explained their political mobilization as a Kurdish and Armenian queer activist today, as the process of hybridization marks their political and individual identities.

Concluding Remarks

Our study, drawing on the narratives of Armenian and non-Armenian youth about their coalitional experiences in the post-2007 context and the repressive post-2016 environment, contributes to a deeper understanding of youth-led memory activism today and the political conditions that threaten its intersectional foundations. This chapter has demonstrated that the rise of authoritarianism in Turkey since 2016 and geopolitical developments, particularly the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, have profoundly impacted the coalitional presence and capacity of the January 19 generation.

More importantly, our study has argued that, despite the resurgence of anti-Armenian sentiment during the 2020 war and the sense of loneliness experienced by Armenian youth, these factors have not led to an embrace of nationalist discourse or a complete paralysis of their generational-intersectional politics. Instead, we have shown that they actively engage with Dink's political legacy, continuously recalling and retelling the coalition formed after his assassination. The collective remembrance of Hrant Dink's legacy and the solidaristic-coalitional spaces created by the January 19 generation have empowered young Armenians to sustain a steadfast commitment to challenging multilayered and complex avenues of inequality and injustice. As illustrated in Ararat's and others' narratives, those identifying with the January 19 generation demonstrate the capacity to reimagine their relationship with Armenian identity and politics creatively, pursuing collective political goals and strategies for justice and equality.

Moreover, our study sheds light on how Armenian youth's memory activism has reshaped their parents' orientations toward political action, extending their pursuit of justice beyond Armenian-specific concerns. It has also highlighted the hybridization of Armenian and family identity and the increasing influence of transnational family and activist networks. Notably, our study underscores the need for further research on the role of transnational frameworks and other histories in reshaping and transmitting the family memory of the Armenian Genocide—both in Turkey and across various Armenian communities.

Finally, this chapter has emphasized the importance of examining the interplay between memory activism and family memory, particularly in the face of state-inflicted violence, authoritarianism, and shifting geopolitical realities. Understanding how these entangled forces

shape intergenerational memory transmission remains critical to grasping the evolving landscape of activism.

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Notes

- 1 In order to protect their privacy or anonymity, all participants cited in this article are given pseudonyms.
- 2 Take, for example, Nor Zartonk’s self-description of their organization, which begins as follows: “Nor Zartonk (New Awakening); It is the self-organization of the Armenian people. Starting from the Turkey Armenians, it strives for the equal, free, and fraternal coexistence of the peoples of Turkey and the world” (in Turkish: “Nor Zartonk (Yeni Uyanış); Ermeni halkının öz örgütlülüğüdür. Türkiye Ermenilerinden yola çıkarak, Türkiye ve dünya halklarının eşit, özgür ve kardeşçe yaşamaları için mücadele eder”). <https://web.archive.org/web/20250806083214/https://www.norzartonk.org/nor-zartonk/>.
- 3 On May 28, 2013, protests against Gezi Park’s demolition in Taksim, Istanbul, initially centered on environmental concerns. Escalating as a result of police violence by May 31, the May–June 2013 demonstrations spurred peaceful protests across Turkey, triggered by government plans for Gezi Park. Young people were at the forefront of the Gezi movement with the presence of plural others.
- 4 We argue that the Arendtian concept of loneliness (Arendt 1994; Schaap 2021) as a political phenomenon helps explain how young Armenians’ narratives about the Artsakh War—interwoven with memories of multiple traumas—challenge the coalitional spaces where their individual and collective identities have thrived. The danger of loneliness (Erdal 2025) becomes even more pronounced for Armenian youth as they experience symbolic violence, bear witness to family stories of loss, and endure the emotional consequences of an ongoing war. This results in an increased risk of paralysis of trust—not only in themselves but, more importantly, in their confidence in others as potential allies. Consequently, this can impede the cultivation of creativity in their political agency and their capacity for world-building practices in the medium and long term. For a more in-depth theoretical exploration of activist youth loneliness within an Arendtian framework, see Erdal 2025.

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