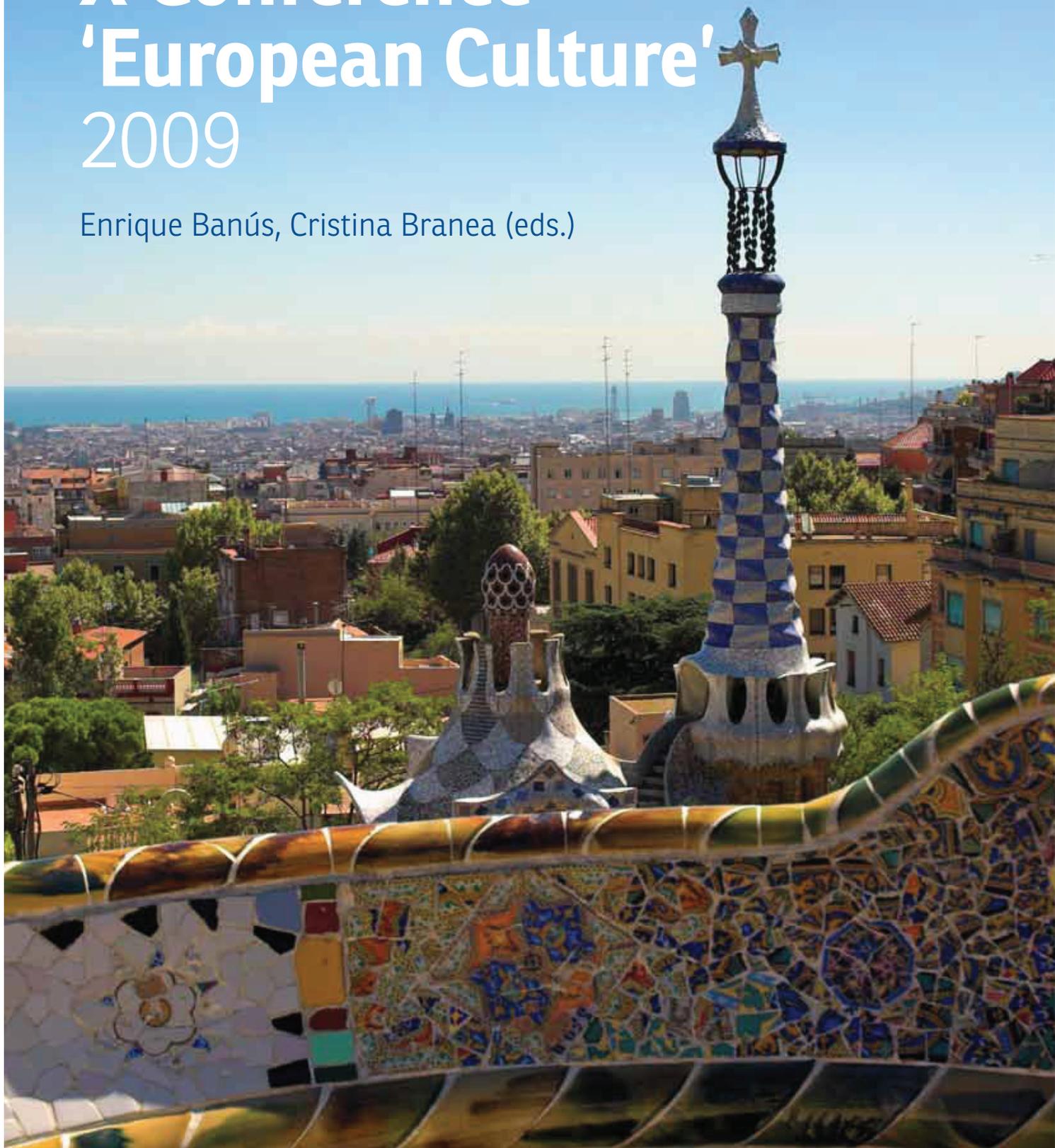


X Conference 'European Culture' 2009

Enrique Banús, Cristina Branea (eds.)



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An Unresolved Memory: Post-Holocaust Generations and the Question of Identity

Anabela V. Simões*

*Our generation, we were all born with a blue number in our arm.*¹
(Rabinovici 2004, 219)

*Oh, I have had enough of this bloody past that pulls us into an abyss,
that we, you and I, are not responsible for.*
(Koneffke 2004, 302)

The singularity of the Holocaust

In his 1980 essay “Significance of the Holocaust”, Raul Hilberg, known historian and Jewish survivor, asked his readers if we would not be happier if he could demonstrate that all Nazi perpetrators were, after all, insane people. This possibility of a false happiness would be, however, immediately after withdrawn, as Hilberg concludes that the events that occurred in Germany from 1933 until 1945, orchestrated and carried out by educated men, go far beyond human understanding; Hilberg continues, arguing that we all must accept the fact that men, in that moment of our history, lost control over social institutions, bureaucratic structures and over technology (Levi and Rothberg 2003, 82).

In fact, the images that cross our minds every time the word *Auschwitz* is mentioned are images filled with brutality and cruelty, which inevitably lead to feelings of perplexity and inability to grasp how in the 20th century such barbarity could actually have happened, particularly in the heart of the civilized western Judaic-Christian society. In effect, the twelve years of Nazi dictatorship led to massive physical, psychological and moral devastation and, ultimately, it represents the most violent and hostile action of human kind against itself ever known in the history of the Modern Era. The destruction that the Nazi victims were subjected to retains a sense of singularity that no other historical event has had so far and, at the present time, it is still a topic that reaches and moves not only individuals that were directly involved, but also unrelated subjects in general. D.G. Myers conveys a probable explanation for this attitude, considering that

the Holocaust was an enormity unprecedented and perhaps even unique in human history. [...] The enormity lies not in the numbers that were killed, nor in the ‘racial’ identity of the victims, but in the objective of final, total extermination. [...] Because its objectives were finality and totality, the Holocaust stands as a possible challenge to everything in existence (Myers 1999, 270).

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¹ The author of this essay is responsible for all translations from German into English.

This singularity is also associated with the fact that the Shoah could actually be considered an “autonomous genocide category” (Stone 2004, 46), which distinguishes itself from rudimentary, primitive and traditional genocides, where passion, emotion and thrill apparently move the spirit of the perpetrators. In the case of the Nazi genocide violence there was no rage, fury or emotions involved; according to numerous reports, the destruction of human beings occurred as a consequence of a bureaucratic process, in a calm, industrial environment. In the end, death became a stage of an industrial process. Moreover, in his essay *Lanzmann's Shoah: Here is no why*, historian Domick LaCapra also contributes to the question of the unique character of the Holocaust, suggesting that its singularity is fundamentally due to

the conjunction of a technological framework and all that is associated with it in the Nazi context (including racial ‘science’, eugenics, and medicalization based on purity of blood) with the return of a repressed – seemingly out of place or *unheimlich* – sacrificialism in the attempt to cleanse (or purify) the *Volksgemeinschaft* and fulfill the leader’s will by getting rid of Jews as polluting, dangerous, phobic (or ritually impure) objects (LaCapra 1997, 268).

On the whole, because of its distinctiveness, probably because it defies the limits of reason itself, this moment of Germany’s history has become the central event of the last decades and, in the 21st century, it continues to be a persistent study object that moves contemporary thought and motivates countless studies that constantly emerge from the scientific community all over the world. Regardless of the great variety of approaches and the different disciplinary perspectives – namely in areas such as History, Philosophy, Psychology or Literature – the singularity of this event remains undoubtedly undisputed.

In Germany the crimes perpetrated during the Nazi regime have been precipitating intense public discussions. This process of examining the past started immediately in 1945 with the Nurnberg Trials and carried on in the sixties, firstly, when former SS Lieutenant Colonel Adolf Eichmann was captured and convicted to death in Israel (1961), and shortly after, when the criminals of the most emblematic concentration camp were judged in the Auschwitz Trials (1963-1965). On a more social level, the broadcasting of Marvin Chomsky’s TV-series *The Holocaust* (1979) also played an important role as far as a broader consciousness of this past is concerned.

It is called *Verganheitsbewältigung* this process of confrontation and attempt to integrate and overcome the nation’s National-Socialist past, a process that would continue throughout the eighties with the Historians’ Debate (1986), whose main issue was the singularity, the exceptional character of the Holocaust vs. a demand for its normalization. It restarted in the nineties as a consequence of the controversial book written by the North-American second-generation Jewish historian Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996), where it was argued that the Holocaust happened in Germany because Germans are endogenously an anti-Semitic social group, who perceived the massacre of millions as a “national project”. While Goldhagen’s study found significant acceptance amongst the public in general, the academic community, especially in Germany, considered it a deficient analysis, filled with inaccuracies. Raul Hilberg, for example, considered it lacked factual content and logical rigour and many other scholars criticised its aesthetics of violence, emphatic language and style, its “pornographic” approach and excess of emotional identification through forms of insensitivity, shock and voyeurism.

Two years later, the confrontation with the past was again under the spotlight when prominent German writer Martin Walser affirmed during a public speech that the media had been instrumentalizing Auschwitz and that normalization should be claimed; as a response to those statements, the President of the Jewish Community, Ignatz Bubis, accused Walser of intellectual nationalism and concealed anti-Semitism. Later on, the

inauguration of the Berlin Holocaust Memorial, in 2005, was again the motivation for a series of disputes and discussions. It was accused of being the “monumentalization of shame” and even considered an attempt of Germany’s self-redemption for the perpetrated crimes. Despite the initial conciliatory intention, this discussion proved in the end that the Holocaust is still a neuralgic spot and that the German national-socialist past is far from being resolved (Simões 2009, 62-72).

This extensive on-going debate has been happening in Germany; in spite of the geographical proximity and the common history, in Austria the National-Socialist past has not been treated the same way. In reality, Austrian authorities banned that episode from their historical conscience for a long period of time and kept the seven years of collaboration with the Nazi regime under the false myth that Austrians were also victims:

Unlike Germany’s near obsession with its Nazi past, Austria’s relationship to its wartime history has remained decorously submerged, politely out of sight. Indeed, the post war identity of Austria had been based upon the self-serving myth that the country was Hitler’s first victim (Young 1999, 7).

It would only be in the aftermath of the “Waldheim affair”, in 1986, that the crystallized official narrative that Austria was Hitler’s first victim started to be problematized. In actual fact, the acknowledgement that elected President Kurt Waldheim had been an SS Officer during the National-Socialist regime generated a major political scandal. Furthermore, this confrontation with the past and Waldheim’s public assumption that he had only “fulfilled his duty” led to an in-depth reflection about Austria’s co-participation in the Nazi crimes and moved a group of young Austrian intellectuals towards political and social participation. For example, Robert Schindel, Robert Menasse, Ruth Beckermann or Doron Rabinovici are some of the most renowned contemporary Jewish authors who supported this discussion and broke the silence about anti-Semitism in Austria.

Representing the past

Over six decades have passed since the end of WWII. Nevertheless, circumstances or facts related to those specific years are still being represented in various forms, not only in academic studies or literary representations, especially autobiographies and autobiographical novels, but also cinematographically. As a matter of fact, since the highly-praised *Schilder’s list* (1993), *Life is beautiful* (1998) or *The Pianist* (2002), the list of acknowledged films that depict circumstances of this particular past has become quite considerable. *Gebürtig* (2002), *The Downfall: Hitler and the End of the Third Reich* (2004), *Stauffenberg. Operation Valkyrie* (2004), *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* (2005), *The Counterfeiters* (2007) or *A Woman in Berlin* (2008) are some of the most recent European productions that bring to light a continuous tendency to revisit Germany’s national past. Moreover, a significant number of related motion pictures with worldwide distribution, namely *The reader*, *The boy with striped pyjamas*, *Valkyrie*, *Good, Defiance*, *Inglorious bastards* or *Adam resurrected*, has premiered during 2008-2009 as well. Curiously the first four mentioned titles are representations that, in opposition to the mainstream of the previous decades, do not exclusively focus on Jewish victims or circumstances but, instead, try to depict the perspective of Germans involved or contemporary of that same period.

As far as literary representation is concerned, this propensity to recover the past is also quite evident. Particularly from the nineties onwards, this historical period became representation object and core theme for many first generation authors who, through the process of writing, tried to come to terms with the past. Simultaneously, a younger

generation of authors also reached the public's as well as the critics' attention to a specific reality intrinsically related to that of the survivors: the reality of the following generations, that is to say, those individuals who did not experience the Nazi genocide violence, but had to form their identities in the shadow of such a severe past. As a matter of fact, these circumstances indicate that in the nineties - the decade of globalization, end of Socialism, Germany's reunification and mass culture - the *Leitmotiv* of war has definitely not reached an end. Actually, a certain "memory or remembrance culture" has occupied a central position in society's actions and intentions; it is clear there has been a tendency to preserve all places and traces of memory, a trend that, according to my point of view, extends itself until the present.

This younger generation of writers I mentioned have both Jewish and non-Jewish background and come from Germany and Austria as well. Katja Behrens (1942), Ruth Beckermann (1943), Robert Schindel (1944), W.G. Sebald (1944-2001), Bernhard Schlink (1944), Viola Roggenkamp (1948), Barbara Honigmann (1949), Esther Dischereit (1952), Robert Menasse (1954), Jan Koneffke (1960), Doron Rabinovici (1961), Tanja Langer (1962), Marcel Beyer (1965) or Katharina Hacker (1967) are some of the most distinguished names.

From the number of authors who present their views and interpretations of that particular moment of history in their literary representations, and some of them in their political activism and social interventionism, we shall conclude that the Holocaust must play an important role in the way these individuals perceive themselves and relate to the surrounding social and cultural contexts they act in. The National-Socialist past must stand, therefore, somewhere in an enhanced location of their identity map. To comprehend or to agree with this we have to understand the mechanism of identity constitution and the importance of memories – personal, familiar and historical – in the process of identity formation. Though in a very plain, succinct way, I will try next to point at some of the features of this process.

Identity and memory

Especially during the last two decades a growing number of specialists from different disciplines and methodological approaches have developed various theories that describe and explain how identity is formed. The different interpretations and variations over the years imply it is a complex and not easily definable concept. Even so we could concisely try to define 'identity' as the response to three concrete questions:

1. *Who am I?*, in the sense of how I perceive myself, of the conscience that I have of myself as an individual;
2. *Where do I belong?*, meaning the different contexts or places where I am a social actor and the places I feel specially bonded with;
3. *How do I integrate myself?*, that is to say, how do I interact with others in the different contexts I act?

The answers to these interrogations point at three essential elements: in order to form a subject's identity it is required ability to self-representation, a social and cultural context and, finally, social interaction. As identity is the result of interconnections between the personal and collective dimensions inherent to each individual, we shall conclude it is formed upon a bi-dimensional basis in a dialectic process in which the first component (personal) is always developed in the presence of the second (collective), i.e. the platform that will provide an interaction and communication field where the subject will act, relate and share identifications or, in opposition, deviate from what he/she does not identify with.

In today's world the concept of identity has been adjusting itself to a new reality that constantly evolves and mutates as a result of continuous structural and institutional changes. Contradicting the solipsistic conception of Enlightenment theories, a subject's identity is no longer unified and stable, self-centred and parted from social context. In opposition, it is undefined and decentralized. It is the result of new life forms that inhibit individuals to have a fixed, essential and permanent identity. In the presence of contemporary social diversity and therefore having to simultaneously act in different cultural systems, each individual may integrate multiple identity constellations, some even contradictory, which are continuously formed and transformed. Finally, in a context of continuous exchanges, an environment where originally steady borders are easily permeable to outer influences, modern subjects inevitably experience a great variety of developments and metamorphosis or even feel different identifications over the course of their lives.

The concept of identity also relates to the notion of "being identical", which means, sharing with others a set of characteristics such as language, customs and traditions, landscapes, myths, monuments or heroic characters, etc. These features are shared cultural elements and, as a result, they are distinctive attributes of a subject's collective identity. In conjunction with all these aspects, our memory - our historical or collective memory - also plays an important role as far as the question of identity is concerned, in the sense that it is the awareness of a specific past or the identification with a distinctive national history that grant each individual a sense of belonging to a community. In other words and paraphrasing William J. Booth in his book *Communities of Memory. On Witness, Identity, and Justice*, collective memory consists of varied forms in which a community is tied to its past. It involves the storing up of the interpretative work of the several generations as part of the self-understanding of the community (traditions), the debts and responsibilities that it carries as a continuous body (justice), its institutions and constitution, its explicit memorial activities, and it also involves the imperceptible absorption of memory into the civic habits of a social group (Booth 2006, 21).

In fact, the question of memory and the way it relates to the past has been one of the most central topics in contemporary reflection. The study of memory as a collective phenomenon was first developed by Maurice Halbwachs in his 1925 book *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*. Here the French sociologist refuted the biologist trend defended by his contemporaries and suggested that memory was not merely the result of individual processes but, instead, the outcome of social interactions. Afterwards, in the posthumously published book *La mémoire collective* (1950), Halbwachs would take his social memory theory to a collective memory level and would argue that memory was also the result of shared knowledge transmitted from generation to generation within each social group. Some decades after, the concept of collective memory would reach again considerable attention and visibility, particularly due to the important 3 volume oeuvre *Les lieux de mémoire*, edited by Pierre Nora (1984-1994), and due to Germany's Egyptologist Jan Assmann who, in the thorough study *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (1992), would provide further reflection about the question of identity and the importance of social interactions and of the different types of memory in the progress of identity processes.

From a Cognitive Sciences point of view, memory is the mechanism that detains organic competences to operate brain functions that serve as platform for knowledge acquisition. Through this mechanism the human brain can perform several tasks such as codify, store and retrieve all kinds of information and knowledge we use on our daily routines. Nonetheless, from a psychological and sociological perspective memory detains another important function which is absolutely related to identity constitution. It is memory that enables each subject to narrate his own story, i.e., to draw a line that connects the several stages he has undergone and then reach self-understanding. This

organized construction of the different situations one has experienced, allows the individual to attain a sense of continuity, integration and coherence, which are fundamental in one's identity formation. Narration is, therefore, the key element in the process of self-representation, that is to say, each subject needs to know where he comes from, what were the particular circumstances that have moulded him and turned him into the individual he is in the present, with his preferences, identifications and demarcations. Being aware of this, this subject can look into the future and project himself there; in the end, this continuous, connecting thread will provide balance and stability.

On the other hand, it is not only experienced events that play a key role in a subject's identity formation. In fact, occurrences or facts prior to the subject's birth may also integrate one's identity. These past events can be transmitted either through the process of "communicative memory" - when the knowledge of those events is inter-generationally passed on, which happens every time elder family members describe what they have actually witnessed or been involved in -, or through the process of "cultural memory", which happens when events are learnt through symbolic means such as material representations (books, films, images, libraries, museums, etc) or symbolic practices (traditions, celebrations, rituals, etc) (Assmann 1999, 50-52; Assmann 2006, 51-58).

Secondary memories

The last paragraph leads us to the generations that were born after WWII. These subjects are individuals that do not really bear a true memory of that historical event but, in its place, detain a kind of secondary memory, an intermediated, second-hand memory which, indirectly, also belongs to them. Referring himself to post-Holocaust artists, American academic James E. Young considers this is a generation that has been building an image of the past essentially upon what he calls a "received history", which he describes as follows:

[Their] experience of the past is photographs, films, books, testimonies a mediated experience, the afterlife of memory represented in history's after-images: the impressions retained in the mind's eye of a vivid sensation long after the original, external cause has been removed (Young 2000, 3-4).

Sharing this same point of view, German scholars Jens Birkmeyer and Cornelia Blasberg, reinforce in their book *Erinnern des Holocaust? Eine neue Generation sucht Antworten*, that the act of remembering or recalling is something that, actually, only witnesses/real bearers of that memory can do. Nonetheless the generations born after 1945, who have access to this memory through the memories of others, are also bearers of this memory, because this is a memory that, due to its singularity, should be perceived as global, as universal. The representation of the past by post-Holocaust generations led to a new category of memory introduced by Marianne Hirsch in her 1997 book *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*. The new terminological suggestion would thus be "postmemory", which is a very particular form of memory where the connection of the subject to his object would be mediated by others, by the real memory bearers. The narration is elaborated not having as foundation the recalling of events lived or witnessed by its author, but instead this narrative process demands an investment on imagination and creation. Moreover, "postmemory" characterizes the experience of those who grew up dominated by the storytelling of circumstances that occurred prior to their birth and these stories are, in reality, the stories of the former generation (frequently their parents, their primary identifiers), to whom those traumatic events were never understood, nor overcome.

These circumstances direct us to the transgenerational effects of the Holocaust, which are plentifully documented, for example, in several studies conducted by Martin S. Bergmann in the United States or Dan Bar-On in Israel, just to quote two examples. As traumatic grieves are hard to mourn for those who are primarily afflicted, Holocaust experiences may be unwittingly transmitted across generations. Parental Holocaust traumas, which included, as we all are aware of, multiple separations, losses of family and friends, humiliations and feelings of powerlessness and helplessness, were in a vast number of cases transferred to the survivors' offspring. And this trauma was transmitted in such a powerful way, that some children of survivors showed symptoms that would only be expected from individuals that experienced the Holocaust themselves.

The prevalence of the perception that the Holocaust is an unwanted inheritance that exclusively weighs over the 2nd Jewish generation is, however, a misconception. There is another reality that is well supported in various studies that demonstrate the "psychological symmetry" there is between the children of survivors and the children of perpetrators.² In fact, the awareness of the barbarity committed by their fathers led to feelings of guilt, shame, fear and depression that would be often translated into profound psychosomatic pain and other psychological disorders. In the end, both these groups are heirs of an overwhelmingly violent past, they are both repositories of the same historical memory.³

This symmetric profile, this parallelism one can establish between these two groups (which, obviously, is radically opposite to the moral asymmetry of the first generation), does not contradict, though, the relationship typology between Germans and Jews analyzed by sociologist Dan Diner:

Since Auschwitz [...] one can indeed speak about a "German-Jewish symbiosis". Of course, it is a negative one: for both Germans as well as for Jews, the result of mass annihilation has become the starting point for the self-understanding. It is a kind of contradictory mutuality, whether they want or not, for Germans as well as Jews have been linked to one another anew through this event. Such a negative symbiosis, constituted by the Nazis, will stamp the relationship of each group to itself, and above all, each group to another for generations to come (Diner 1986, 243).

What Diner described as "negative symbioses" – that is to say, the circumstance of sharing the same event, but in opposite fields – still persists despite some analogies one can find in the profiles of post-Holocaust generations. Corroborating the theory that the Holocaust is an absolutely transgenerational far-reaching event and that neither Jews nor Germans can relate to their own memory without relating to the other's as well, second generation Jewish writer Barbara Honigmann recognizes that her generation indeed lives within that antagonistic relationship, which she describes as follows:

Germans do not know anymore what Jews are, they only know that a terrible history lies there between them, and every time a Jew emerged, reminded them of this history, which still hurts and gets on their nerves. Hypersensitivity, which seemed intolerable to me, then both, the Jews and the Germans, feel rather bad in this encounter, they place impossible demands to each other, but they cannot leave each other alone as well [...] It seems to me sometimes, it is *that*, the so often invoked German-Jewish symbiosis, this impossibility to get way from each other, because Germans and Jews became a pair in Auschwitz, that not even death can take apart (Honigmann 1999, 15).

² See, for instance, Bar-on 2004; Brenner 2000; Coleman 1995; Hardtmann 1995.

³ For detailed analysis about the intergenerational transfer of trauma and the question of moral guilt among second-generation Germans, see, for instance, Simões 2009, 51-104.

This idea of uneasiness and anxiety, this feeling that the Holocaust is, first and foremost, an unresolved memory, is also expressed in one interview given by Jan Koneffke, a third generation German writer. According to Koneffke's point of view – which is a non-Jewish perspective – his generation still has a lot to say about this particular past, especially because there are still a lot of misunderstandings, sadness and also rage that need to be verbalized:

In Germany one does not speak unfoundedly of the recent German history as an “ungone past”, a time which still influences and haunts with its horrors the life of the following generations. [...] The circumstance that many authors from my generation are writing about Germany from the 30's and 40's is related to the fact that the past has not gone away. That there still is so much material; that the descendants of the generation of victims and perpetrators still have enough to tell. [...] One could say it is not yet resolved. It is not resolved. There is still enough lack of understanding, grief, perhaps still rage, emotions that are not yet resolved (Simões 2009, 450).

Conclusions

I would like to turn now to the two epigraphs I have selected to open this article. In *Ohnehin*, the second novel of Austrian Jewish writer and historian Doron Rabinovici, we find the first statement, which corresponds to the feelings of second generation Jews. And, in the novel *Eine Liebe am Tiber*, from German author Jan Koneffke, we find the point of view of non-Jewish individuals regarding the same historical past. The fact that Jewish second generation individuals consider that they were metaphorically born with the same number tattooed on their parents arm during the Nazi persecution and the circumstance that non-Jews bemoan a past which they were not responsible for, but drag them into desperation, are just two statements (among so many other examples we can find in Literature) that unveil the transgenerational effects of the Holocaust and demonstrate how a non-experienced event, passed on through communicative and symbolic means, actually affects and influences an individual's perception of himself and the others.

After confronting these two perspectives one feels urged to reflect on the difficult and controversial argument about who the injured party actually is. If, on the one hand, second generation Jews claim they are the only ones mostly afflicted, because they had to grow and form their identities in the shadow of a problematic past that shattered their progenitors' lives; on the other hand, the sons and daughters of the Nazi generation have been writing their personal narratives in a context with the longest process of overcoming an earlier event, a past that has convicted them to an unbearable moral guilt and continuous judgments for actions that preceded their birth.

An analysis of multiple Psychology reports, an evaluation of several statements enunciated by different subjects this generation⁴, and the examination of several fictional narratives⁵ -which are consistent with the pragmatic, more objective data first mentioned - allow me to draw following conclusions:

⁴ The carried out interviews may be consulted in Simões 2009, 433-461.

⁵ Beyer, Marcel: *Flughunde*, Frankfurt am Main 1995; Beyer, Marcel: *Spione*, Frankfurt am Main 2000; Biller, Maxim: “Auschwitz sehen und sterben”, in: *Tempojahre*, München, 1992, 115-131; Hacker, Katharina: *Der Bademeister*, Frankfurt am Main 2000; Hacker, Katharina: *Eine Art Liebe*, Frankfurt am Main 2003; Honigmann, Barbara: “Selbstporträt als Jüdin”, in: *Damals, Dann und Danach*, München, 1999, 11-38; Koneffke, Jan: *Paul Schatz im Uhrenkasten*, Köln 2000; Koneffke, Jan: *Eine Liebe am Tiber*, Köln 2000; Langer, Tanja: *Der Morphinist oder die Barbarin bin ich*, Hamburg 2002; Roggenkamp, Viola: *Familienleben*, Zürich-Hamburg 2004; Rabinovici, Doron: *Papinik. Stories*, Frankfurt am Main 1994; Rabinovici, Doron: *Suche nach M.*, Frankfurt am Main 1997; Rabinovici, Doron: *Ohnehin*, Frankfurt am Main 2004; Schindel, Robert: *Gebürtig*, Frankfurt am Main 1992.

1. The set of key-words that is usually associated with the Jewish post-war context (namely, trauma and memory, inheritance, silence, guilt, debt, burden of the past, etc.), should indeed be extended to non-Jewish individuals who struggle with the same question of the Nazi past;
2. The Holocaust should be assumed as a fundamental element in individual and collective memory of all second generation Germans and Austrians, regardless if they are Jews or non-Jews. The truth, so it seems to me, is that the Holocaust, or the postmemory of the Holocaust, occupies an absolutely central position in the process of these generations' identity constitution and, therefore, in the way they compose their own narratives and interact within the social context(s) they perform.

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