

*'IT IS NOT YET RESOLVED':*

POSTMEMORIES OF THE THIRD REICH

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**Abstract:**

This essay offers a reflection on the concepts of identity and personal narrative, a line of argument that is closely interlaced with a subject's capacity to self-representation. As self-representation is necessarily composed upon remembrance processes, the question of memory as a collective phenomenon that directly influences identity mechanisms becomes an emergent topic. Bearing this objective in mind, I shall point at the different types of memory and will argue that not only experienced memories play a key role in this process; intermediated, received narratives from the past, memories transmitted either symbolically or by elder members of the group or, what has been meanwhile termed "postmemory", also influence the development of an individual's identity map. I shall link these issues to the generations of individuals that were born in the aftermath of Germany's National-Socialist dictatorship, particularly by focusing on the literary representations and personal perspectives of contemporary German and Austrian writers, whose texts represent the concepts of trauma, identity and (post)memory in central Europe's historical, political and social context.

**Key words:** Identity, Postmemory, National-Socialism, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*

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*The past casts its shadow over the present, and it continues to affect us,  
and even more forcefully, when one tries to repress or silence it.*

Uwe von Seltmann

Holocausts, Shoah, Jewish genocide or Auschwitz, these are different designations used to allude to the hideous crimes perpetrated during the nazi regime, that hecatomb that according to the viewpoint of many has become the central event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In point of fact, the images of violence that are associated with this historic event are images that inescapably produce feelings of bewilderment and lead to the inevitable question of how such barbarity could have happened, particularly in the heart of the civilized western Judaic-Christian society. The reality is that the nazi genocide violence retains a sense of singularity that no other historical event has had so far and presently it is still a topic that impresses not only individuals that were directly involved, but also unrelated subjects in general. D.G. Myers conveys a plausible reason for this, 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 (1999: 270).

Historian Dominick LaCapra contributes to the question of the unique character of the Holocaust as well, 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 (1997: 268).

Moreover, Dan Stone analyses too the question of the technological means involved in the extermination process and affirms that the singularity of the Holocaust resides in the circumstance that it can be evaluated as an "autonomous genocide category" (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. Ultimately death became a stage of an industrial process.

The undisputed singularity of this event is quite probably the cause for a juridical and public prolonged discourse that has been occurring in Germany. This process of scrutinizing the past commenced in 1945 with the Nurnberg Trials and progressed in the 1960s, firstly, when former SS officer Adolf Eichmann was captured and convicted to death in Israel (1961), shortly after, when the criminals of the most emblematic concentration camp were judged in the Auschwitz Trials (1963-1965) and, finally, when during the 1968 contestation movements, the younger generation inquired their parents about their participation and guilt for the nazi crimes. 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.

This process of confrontation and attempt to integrate and overcome the nation's National-Socialist past, conventionally known as *Verganheitsbewältigung*, is a process that would continue throughout the eighties with the Historians Debate (1986), which was essentially centred on the argument whether the discourse on the Holocaust should be normalized and

handled as any other historic event. It restarted in the 1990s as a consequence of the controversial book written by second-generation Jewish historian Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996), where it was argued that the Holocaust happened precisely in Germany because Germans are an anti-Semitic social group who perceived the massacre of millions as a “national project”. Two years later, the confrontation with the past was again under debate 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 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.

Despite the geographical proximity and their common history, this pattern of continuous re-examination of the past did not occur in Austria though. In reality, Austrian authorities suppressed 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 finally started to be questioned. In actual fact, the acknowledgement that elected President Kurt Waldheim had been an SS officer during the NS regime generated a major political scandal. This confrontation with the past and Waldheim’s public assumption that he had only “fulfilled his duty” would then finally lead to the reflection and public discussion about Austria’s co-participation in the nazi crimes and moved a group of younger Austrian intellectuals towards political and social engagement. Robert Schindel, Robert Menasse, Ruth Beckermann and Doron Rabinovici, amongst others, are some of the most renowned contemporary Jewish authors who supported this discussion and broke the silence about anti-Semitism in Austria.

### **Representations of the Holocaust**

The systematic persecution of the Jewish people and other targeted groups occurred already over six decades ago, nonetheless the circumstances or facts related to those specific years have been a perdurable object of analysis and representation, not only in academic studies or literary texts - especially autobiographies and autobiographical novels written by first generation authors who, through the process of writing, tried to come to terms with the past - but also in terms of cinematic rendering<sup>2</sup>. Concomitantly a younger

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<sup>2</sup> Since the highly acclaimed *Schindler’s list* (1993), *Life is beautiful* (1998) or *The Pianist* (2002), the record of films that depict circumstances of this particular past has become extensive. *Gebürtig* (2002), *The Downfall* (2004), *Stauffenberg. Operation Valkyrie* (2004), *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* (2005), *The Counterfeiters* (2007) or *A Woman in Berlin* (2008) are recent European productions that reveal a continuous tendency to revisit Germany’s national past. There is also a significant list of very recent films with worldwide distribution that relate to same historical moment as well: *The reader*, *The boy with striped pajamas*, *Valkyrie*, *Good*, *Defiance*, *Inglorious basterds* and *Adam resurrected*, all released in 2009. Curiously the first four titles are representations that - in opposition to what has been done in the last decades

generation has been approaching this topic as well, especially by representing a specific reality intrinsically related to that of the survivors: the reality of the second generation, a generation of individuals who did not experience the nazi genocide violence, but who had to form their identities under the shadow of such a brutal past.

I propose we turn now to the epigraph I chose to commence this essay. It was taken from a book entitled *Schweigen die Täter, reden die Enkel*<sup>3</sup>, which was composed by Austrian political scientist Claudia Brunner and German journalist and writer Uwe von Seltmann. In their autobiographical account both give voice to the feelings of the descendents of the generation that participated in the nazi regime, feelings that, despite the time that has elapsed, are still dominated by that particular past.

Herein the authors describe the search for an unknown past that has been handled as a taboo and therefore kept in silence within the family realm, but that has been somehow omnipresent in the course of everybody's lives. Brunner acknowledges that the normalization of the discourse about the nazi crimes is far from being a possibility, because even if the wounds of the past may be healed, the remaining scars are still very present and continue to agitate the spirit of those who carry them (2004: 8). As Brunner explains, these scars lead to phantom pain sensations, i.e. the perception that there are sensations in a limb that has been amputated, in this case, the metaphor for a pain that is felt, despite the fact that there is no apparently reasonable basis for it. This incomprehension, this inability to grasp the cause of overwhelming feelings may be related to the wall silence that has been imposed throughout the years: the nazi generation didn't assume their participation in the activities that occurred during the war to their offspring,

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- do not focus on Jewish victims or circumstances, but instead try to depict the perspective of Germans involved or contemporary of that same period.

<sup>3</sup> ["The criminals silence, the grandchildren come forward"]

and these to their own children too, who were simply left fantasizing about the ghosts of the past. Brunner refers to her grand-uncle Alois Brunner, former nazi officer, Adolf Eichman's right hand man and figure she describes as the "absent present", as the one who seems not to exist or never to have existed, but who has always haunted the everyday lives of every family member (*idem*: 10). Seltmann is the grandson of the former officer Lothar von Seltmann and assumes as well he is the first one to break the silence about the family background. He feels guilty and responsible for that past and believes he has mission which is, essentially, to unveil the actions of an offender (*idem*: 12).

While conducting research for the writing of their book, Brunner and Seltmann soon acknowledged that their feelings were not to be interpreted at a merely individual level, or restricted to a residual number of subjects; it was an inexorable fact that many other individuals of their generation also perceived the NS past as an event that was still very present in their lives and that there was a clear pattern of common feelings of shame and guilt:

When we talk, the others also begin suddenly to talk – grandchildren that want to know what their grandmothers and grandfathers have done, sons and daughters that are ashamed by the actions of their mothers and fathers and cannot overcome their feelings of guilt. One thing is quite clear to us: moral guilt is not passed on, but the psychic, moral and social consequences of their silence still damage the following generations. The past extends itself up until the present, continues to affect us, either if it suits you or not. (*idem*: 12-13)

This account, as I shall demonstrate next, is only one among many fictional and non-fictional representations of the after-effects of the events that occurred during the twelve years of national-socialist dictatorship. This generation of writers 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 reputed names.

Considering the number of authors who present their views and interpretations of that particular moment of history in their narratives, 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 Holocaust must occupy, therefore, an elevated position within their identity map. To comprehend or to acknowledge this requires the understanding of the mechanism of identity constitution and the recognition of the importance of memories – personal, familiar and historical – in the process of identity formation. Before aligning further considerations on the specificities of the so-called second generation, whose identity has been profoundly shaped by what has been designated as “postmemory”, I shall outline some thoughts on the topic of identity.

### **Some thoughts on the concept of identity**

With its different readings and variations over the time, the topic of identity must before all else be perceived as an elaborated and not straightforwardly definable concept. Despite these complexities I shall propose here a plain definition, constructed upon the response to three concrete questions: i) ‘Who am I?’, in the sense of how I perceive myself, of the conscience that I have of myself as an individual; ii) ‘Where do I belong?’, meaning the different contexts or places where I am a social actor and the places I feel specially bonded with; iii) ‘How do I integrate myself?’, i.e., how do I interact with others in the different contexts I act? The answers to these interrogations imply 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. These last two elements point at the fact that individuals are formed upon the variety of relationships they establish with others, in accordance with a dialectic process through which they are, simultaneously, issuers and recipients of a set of axiologies, senses and symbols expressed in a certain culture. This conscience of social belonging, attained through the act of sharing common symbols, leads to the constitution of a collective identity that is transmitted and perpetuated across different generations of individuals. These symbols (language, religion, ethnicity, etc.) embody a collection of symbolic and identifying elements which assume themselves as differentiating characteristics created to symbolize a group, a society or a nation with the purpose of nourishing a sense of unity and community and stimulating the feeling of belonging to a collective entity (Schnapper 2007: 9).

In the face 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. In other words, in a context of continuous exchanges, an environment where originally steady borders are easily permeable to extern influences, modern subjects inevitably experience many metamorphoses or feel different identifications over the course of their lives. And this is a circumstance that unquestionably corroborates my previous thought that identity is indeed a complex topic, which should be, first and foremost, perceived as a plural and dynamic concept (Ramalho and Ribeiro 2001: 472). The idea of plurality and even fragmentation does not invalidate though the absolute need for a sense of continuity. By establishing a structured relation between the several temporalities, i.e. by interconnecting past, present and future in a coherent fashion, each individual guarantees a sense of continuity and consistency, on the one hand in his personal history and, on the other hand, in the history

of the community where he finds the fundamentals of his identity. Having this in consideration, some studies consider that identity is based upon a set of three specific concepts - continuity, connection and space and time permanency - which, once articulated, determine a subject's personal identity. In this sense identity formation is perceived as the outcome of i) psychological and physical continuity or permanence in time, ii) a coherent correlation of the several moments or episodes of our life and iii) the ability to locate oneself in a certain place and specific time (Castañera 2005: 42). Ramalho and Ribeiro also add that identity is a discursive concept (2001:472), precisely because the interconnection of those elements allows the writing of personal narratives which, once put together, constitute the subject's self-definition.

It is memory that enables subjects to narrate their own story, i.e., to draw a line that connects the several stages they have 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 molded him and turned him into the individual he is at the present time, 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 personal narrative. 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).

### **The Holocaust: a “received history”, a “postmemory”**

Second-generation subjects are individuals that do not really bear a true memory of the Holocaust but instead they 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 (2000: 3-4).

Sharing this same viewpoint, German scholars Jens Birkmeyer and Cornelia Blasberg consider that the act of remembering or recalling is something that, actually, only real bearers of that memory can do. Nonetheless, the post-1945 generations, 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 (2006: 12). In fact, the representation of the past by post-Holocaust generations led to a new category of memory introduced by Marianne Hirsch, the so-called “postmemory”, which “describes 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).

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 and Dan Bar-On, amongst others. 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 perception that the Holocaust is a powerful inheritance that exclusively weighs over the second 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.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the awareness of the barbarity committed by their progenitors led to feelings of guilt, shame, fear and depression that would be often translated into profound psychosomatic pain and other psychological disorders. In fact, Israeli psychologist Bar-On registered that whereas the children of the victims identified with their parents and understood their pain and silence, many nazi descendents had to deal with a misadjusted identification model and form their identities within a family framework composed upon a pattern of negative attitudes with severe implications on these subject’s psychological development (1994: 47). In the end, both these groups are heirs of an overwhelmingly violent past, they are both repositories of the same historical memory.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Bar-on 2004; Brenner 2000; Coleman 1995; Hardtmann 1995.

### **An unresolved past**

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 neutralize the fact that both groups stand, in reality, at diametrically opposite poles. This German-Jewish relationship indeed retains a special character; as Saul Friedländer explains, on the one hand these individuals are pushed to antipodal positions by their postmemories, on the other hand, the specific nature of these memories makes them share essential interdependences and assume a common ground:

On a symbolic level [...] one may speak of a Jewish memory of Auschwitz and of a German one. Although the incompatibility between these two memories may be growing, they are helplessly interwoven in what has been called a “negative symbiosis” [...] Any re-elaboration of one memory directly impinges on the other; any neutralization casts an overall shadow of oblivion. Neither Jews nor Germans can relate their own memory without relating to the other’s as well. (1987: 9-10)

This particular position, of being simultaneously close and distant, has been analysed by German historian Dan Diner and described as “negative symbioses” – i.e., the circumstance of sharing the same event, but in opposite fields:

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. (1986: 243)

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 each other, 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 away from each other, because Germans and Jews became a pair in Auschwitz, that not even death can take apart (1999: 15).

This idea of uneasiness and anxiety, this feeling that the Holocaust is, above all, an unresolved memory, is also expressed in an interview given to me by German writer Jan Koneffke. According to Koneffke's perspective – 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 30s and 40s is related to the fact that the past has not gone away. That there still is so much material; that the descendents 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)

As far as individual and collective identities of this specific group of individuals are concerned, that “ungone past” is indeed a significant issue. The national-socialist period, or the postmemory of that stage of Germany’s history, occupies an absolutely central position in the process of these generations’ identitary constitution and, therefore, in the way they perceive the world and represent themselves. On the whole, the thread that connects the different moments that constitute an individuals’ biography gains its function not in the moment the subject initiates his interaction with the world but, in this concrete situation, it rather departs from a past that, as a result of its uniqueness, spreads its shadow far beyond the time it ceased and still bewilders the generations that, despite the inexistence of an empirical bond, cannot avoid feeling it is also part of who they are.

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