

# Conversations about Mother: Mnemonic Strategies for Narrating Survival in (Post-) War Germany

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## Abstract

This article explores the strong correlations between mnemonic strategies and mnemonic triggers within family narratives. Families form narrative collectives with their own codes of narrative evocation. One sentence, even only one word, might open up a bundle of memories shared by all immediate kin. Such sharing can, however, be practised and interpreted differently by each family member; stories are also utilised strategically to bond with one family member and sideline another. Given the specific German context of this analysis, its stories and mnemonic devices demonstrate strategies of collective and individual dissociation and victimisation. They also lead us to better understand how very normal, average Germans might have tried to live a decent life with Christian and left-leaning political values, while having no techniques, post 1945, for articulating or reflecting on either trauma or National Socialism and their lasting impact on their nation. As with most other families, the war and post-war period was dominated by memories of struggle and collective grief. Survival narratives use emplotments that can be traced through generations of grandparents, parents, and grandchildren. Exploring such transgenerational conversations enables us to widen the perspective from transgenerational trauma towards a framework of compassion and narrative agency.

## Foreword

This paper will explore narrative anchoring strategies that can be utilised to enable a German refugee family to talk about war, survival, and resettlement in the west. This exploration takes place from Aotearoa New Zealand, where I have lived and worked for close to two decades. This has made me into a scholar of German origin who researches migration and narratives with a New Zealand perspective. It has changed my positionality, as I now listen to my family memories from a distance. The contribution I seek to make is of an anthropologist interested in narrative analysis and is ethnographic in its conception.

After World War Two, many refugees, as well as their descendants, encountered ongoing difficulties in attaching themselves to place. They had trouble settling down, feeling truly at home at certain locations. A longing to feel at home, yet an inability to truly newly settle, led to a series of migrations after deportation and flight. In my own research on Germans in New Zealand, I interviewed a raft of post-war immigrants from the former Eastern territories who had first resettled in West Germany and eventually migrated to New Zealand, and also Australia.<sup>1</sup> This has led to a multiplicity of published autobiographies of these migrants, mainly written by women,<sup>2</sup> some of which I have analysed in relation to this sense of unsettledness.<sup>3</sup> Similar migration patterns have been identified for Canada and the US.<sup>4</sup> These patterns extend to the children of refugees, who often were born here and returned to Europe, or were born in West Germany and emigrated from there. I and one of my brothers also keep experiencing that sense of longing for place while simultaneously feeling unsettled. Migrating to New Zealand and encountering a multicultural society that places a very high value on genealogy and on knowing and acknowledging your whakapapa has finally enabled me to address my own

troubled family story. I, in essence, had to accept that memories travel; but this travelling reshapes traumatic memories into a sense of recollection that allows for interrogation.<sup>5</sup> Exploring my positionality as a migrant scholar researching migration and as an academic writing about narratives has finally made it possible to come to terms with what I thought was left behind in the shadows.<sup>6</sup> Living in a place such as Aotearoa New Zealand demands the articulation of ‘where do I come from?’; such articulation has brought me full circle as a person, as a sister and daughter, and also as a migrant.

## Introduction

*When my father died, my mother gifted their old manual coffee grinder to the local museum. She told us that this was important, but we never really understood why.*

Mnemonic techniques are memorising strategies that humans use to retrieve and activate memory. They assist us to use information already stored in long-term memory to make memorisation an easier task. These techniques are often employed subconsciously, and they can be manipulated and steered to guide people’s mnemonic transfer systems. In the framework of this special issue on family memory, I am exploring how mnemonic devices are used to store and narrate information, and also to structure and package them for storytelling. I do not determine, however, that they are consciously developed as such; rather, they are developed and used in ways that align such strategies to everyday storytelling about personal memories relating to family history. I will explore how mnemonic strategies are deployed by my own siblings and myself to enable us to talk “about mother” [*über Mutter*]. I will also analyse how my mother used retrieval cues and narrative mnemonic strategies to silence some stories and to keep others alive. Such enabling happens subconsciously and has been shaped and routinised over decades; so too have the silences and gaps in such narrations been developed or simply kept secret. Certain narrative shapes are used to express and hint at trauma and emotional damage, but also resilience and adventure. I will explore the role of mnemonic techniques as they appear in storytelling and memorising family.

This article has three sections that build sequentially. The first short section briefly introduces my family, to give the necessary framework for my argument. The second section introduces and discusses some mnemonic strategies that are used to narrate family history, strategies that are employed to tell stories as an adult to an adult but also to tell stories as an adult but with the eyes and narrative devices of a child.<sup>7</sup> The third section explores some findings around mnemonic strategies and narrative encoding, beginning with a discussion of how narrative strategies allow families to talk about and to rethink traumatic events without necessarily labelling them as traumatic. Consequently, we have to ask some questions about the current overarching paradigms of trauma narratives as underlying analytical devices. Should we maybe follow our interviewees, who seldom speak of trauma, and therefore explore narrative patterns that allow for more variety in storytelling about haunting times? Does looking through the glass of mnemonic strategies open up the conversation to categories of survival, resilience, overcoming hardship, and simply living through? After all, not everything that was dramatic, life threatening, sad, and extremely difficult gets shaped as trauma. Having said that, at the same time, many traumatic experiences are shaping the behavioural patterns and anxieties of generations to come. These became visible to me over the course of this project. Yet deep listening to long-developed family narratives, I suggest, can also lead us to a broader conceptualisation of family (post-) war stories. Such narratives also serve as reassurance of the

living, as well as an expression of pride and bravery, of incredible resilience, and of a deep sense of humour and collectivity and, finally, also of trauma.<sup>8</sup>

This also leads to the discovery of the special difficulties in family memory in the post-war German context. The prevailing analysis so far has been that the one major narrative indicator is that of dissociation. This means that, over the past generations, Germans have maintained a collective narrative of shame and guilt about the holocaust while simultaneously minimising, or dissociating themselves from, any personal involvement by their own family members in active guilt. While the nation as a whole is held responsible, individual family members' involvement is watered down. Studies such as *Grandpa wasn't a Nazi* demonstrated the development of mnemonic strategies that allow the split between collective and individual memory.<sup>9</sup> There is a strong tendency to lock Germans into a collective framework of responsibility that remains emotionally paralysed by processing guilt and shame as a nation while denying one's own family involvement in this very specific sense of collectivity. This is, however, changing, through the memory work that German journalists and academics such as myself are doing. By facing and tracing such emplotments, we are allowing for more complex memory work that views such strategies as part of human story work. By gaining a fuller and more multifaceted picture of our families, we are providing for the possibility of a deeper level of empathy. Mnemonic dissociation strategies can be replaced by mnemonic work that shifts and replaces emplotments as well as silences. As Maria Tumarkin has shown, such analysis may even help us finally to remember our grandparents with love.<sup>10</sup> This is not because they become nicer people as a result of this process; it is because we reach a deeper understanding of their communications with us. Their silences, their body language, their stories, and their mnemonic techniques become something that we can trace and analyse. Moreover, that alone helps to lift the darkness, the fog of memory, and the sense of entrapment that comes with traumatic, blocked, and dissociated mnemonic transitivity.<sup>11</sup>

### **About Mother and Us**

*"Mother was a person who always made do with what she had; she was really resourceful"*<sup>12</sup>

Anna Bönisch, nee Spiller, was born in 1918 and grew up in the rural area of Upper Silesia. She was the fourth of five children in a Catholic family, and her parents ran a small but successful business trading agricultural produce. Shortly after the outbreak of war, she married our father, Max, on Boxing Day 1939. Such marriages were often rushed affairs, to ensure that young women were at least entitled to a soldier's widow's pension should the spouse not survive the war. Just five months later, in May 1940, Max was conscripted, and they would only see each other for very short intervals until July 1945. Joining the army, he left her pregnant with twins, only one of whom was born alive. She barely survived the birth; having been allowed a short parental leave, our father found her in the mortuary, given up for dead, and brought her back to life. Four years later, in March 1945, my mother, eight months pregnant, and my four-year-old sister Monika fled the approaching Red Army, crossing the border into Bohemia. They tried to reach Bavaria, heading first towards Prague (now Czech Republic). Eventually, they were forced to return to Silesia by the American forces. All in all, they walked about 800 kilometres in three months. They survived the trek, the severe starvation, and the birth of my mother's first son, Franz, but the baby starved to death on the trek—a death that left deep emotional scars on both mother and daughter. In August 1946, my parents and some surviving members of my father's extended family were deported from their hometown in Upper Silesia, eventually resettling in the Lower Saxony township where I would

be born, their fifth and youngest surviving child of eight. At the time of deportation, my mother was yet again pregnant with my brother Max, who was born shortly after arrival in the West.

Preceding the deportation was a period of life-threatening and traumatic events that had lasting and tragic mental consequences on my parents' well-being. While my mother and sister fled to Bohemia, my father searched for them during the bombing of Dresden, where his battalion had encamped. He then became one of the soldiers imprisoned in Auschwitz by Soviet forces to "clean up" and bear witness to the holocaust. On being released, he weighed 45 kg and had lost all his teeth, but eventually managed to walk home. My mother survived the trek and managed to return to her hometown; but the months of flight, starvation, and grief for her baby son Franz, and the year-long period of Russian and Polish occupation with all its brutal incidents, would lead to lifelong post-traumatic stress symptoms that occupied her dreams and shaped her personality. Following the deportation came a period of extreme poverty, grief, and anxiety, and of suffering all the well-known prejudice and othering of refugees. The twelve million refugees streaming into West Germany were generally not made welcome and they intensified the problems of an already-stretched occupation administration. My family got allotted one room, plus another room later on, without running water, kitchen, or bathroom, in which they had to live for 10 years. After that time, they were able to move into an apartment. My mother died in 2011, surviving my father by 25 years.

In many ways, we were and are a very normal German refugee family. What encouraged me to write this family-memory piece, therefore, was not only that I needed to come to terms with our specific history; after all, there are many others like us. Rather, it was that sense of that normality, combined with a rather unique set of oral-history resources that encouraged me to do some very deep listening, only made possible in a private family setting. In September 2018, my siblings and I decided that we really should start talking about our family, especially about mother. They asked me to facilitate a day of storytelling, which four of us five siblings attended, and I followed that up with a long phone conversation with my brother Herbert, who could not attend that day. These conversations, in which we recounted many memories of the whole family story, circled around our mother as the central person of the family narrative. My father remained, as he has always appeared to us, as the ever there but rather opaque person who was and wasn't present.

The idea behind this day-long conversation was to find out how each of us remembers and narrates family. As we are all about five years apart in age, I assumed that we would have very different shapes of our collective Bönisch-ness. What I did not anticipate was the richness of mnemonic devices deployed to narrate that family history. An added, special tool was gifted to me during this research: I was given a transcript of a long interview with our mother conducted in 1995 by a young PhD student working on the life stories of women from the small Upper Silesian town in which my parents lived before deportation.<sup>13</sup> Listening to both the children and the mother recounting events that are central to our collective and emotional identity inspired me to explore the mnemonic strategies at play in these conversations. In this way, I have been able to contrast the children's view of the impact of war with my mother's narrative starting in March 1940 and ending in 1960. This period roughly covers her core narrative and it also covers the birth dates of all her children, dead and alive. The narrative sequence of these births also demonstrates a series of mnemonic choices; many of these were known to some of us, yet not to all of us. While listening, I was painfully aware that I was the youngest and weakest chain in that string of stories and memories. A lot of it was news to me and,

consequently, demanded some very painful re-stitching of my own version of the most decisive period in my family's life.

### **A Family Sample of Narrative Encoding and Mnemonic Strategies**

This section focuses on some of the most striking mnemonic techniques used in narrative encoding: efficient storage and retrieval, spatial and sensory “paintings,” hauntings and humour, and strategic silences. All of these appear in each of the examples, but to different degrees.

Here I will present some distilled versions and quotes from these examples. When my mother or my siblings talked about certain family memories, they often referred to similar events or situations but, while my mother talked as an adult and a caregiver, my siblings expressed a child's or teenager's view with another set of agencies or restrictions. As adults, however, they are now able to add different interpretations to some of our mother's emplotments.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Efficient Storage and Retrieval: The One-Sentence Storage Technique*

One sentence that was part of our mother's repertoire of mnemonic retrievals was that “*Die Polen war'n schlimmer als die Russen*” [The Poles were worse than the Russians].<sup>15</sup> Whenever Poland came up in the news, or in any other context, she would exclaim that sentence forcefully, often followed by ‘*Stimmt doch*’ [It's true]. This sentence reverberates in our family even now, standing for a host of visual images and stories encapsulated in that one sentence as a powerful and effective mnemonic device. It stands for men in uniform with guns, brutality, rapes, killings, disempowerment, hunger, terror, anxiety, and displacement.

In her interview, my mother speaks at some length about the period of occupation in Upper Silesia. In March 1945, the Red Army pushed into Silesia, which was later on handed over to Polish occupation forces. Until deportation in September 1946, Upper Silesians were basically prisoners in their own homes. It is very clear that this period and the one immediately preceding it (Franz's birth and death on the trek) have to count as the most traumatic of her life. Her narratives are full of angst, of dramatic fear, of humiliation, and of recollections of brutal treatment. The populace lived in a lawless and defenceless vacuum where rape, imprisonment, and murder were common and plundering of food and cattle was relentless. Mother's stories and examples come out in a close-to-breathless narrative stream, culminating in the exclamation she so often made to us children: the Poles were worse than the Russians! She would have nightmares of being hunted, beaten, and robbed for decades to come.

Her narratives showed no awareness of the larger political context; that Poles and Russians had suffered terribly under German occupation, that the winner takes it all, that this was retribution as well as occupation. It is also fascinating that she made that enduring judgement about ‘the Poles’ while also being a faithful, committed Catholic; there is no recognition that the Soviets were officially atheists, the Poles Catholic like herself. She knew, of course, but terror and grief led to her dissociating religious perceptions from the period of occupation. Her stories also contain some well-known patterns of victimisation narratives: that our maternal grandmother had always been good to the Polish and Russian “workers” (men who were forced to work for German farmers and in factories), that they had always fed them well, “and now they turn against us, steal the last bit of food in the house.” The period ends with her describing her endless relief at being able to join a deportation train to West Germany: “we could not wait to get out, just get away.”



My oldest sister remembers this period as well, but from a child's point of view. The below quote is from our recorded "Sibling story telling day" in September 2018. It is, however, obvious that she cannot distinguish between the Russian and Polish occupations forces. She vividly remembers our grandmother protecting young women on their small farm:

Oma did always hide the young women from the whole neighbourhood. She had that barn with an earth cellar where she kept turnips and potatoes and the women would come and climb down the ladder really fast. And then, that was exciting and really good fun, Oma and I would throw down hay bales, a lot of them until that cellar looked really full. And when they [soldiers] would be gone we would have to get all these hay bales up and out again and I liked that. And Oma Spiller also could speak perfect Polish and she could talk to the soldiers; she could talk herself out of stuff.<sup>16</sup>

Monika has traumatic memories of the first flight to Bohemia, of soldiers with guns, bombings, corpses on the wayside, life-threatening starvation, and her brother Franz's corpse being laid up on a heap of other bodies. Despite being only four-and-a-half years old, she remembers herself in that period as an accomplice and partner of my mother's. The first memory of the hay barn is connected to her grandmother's ability to speak Polish, the memories of walking the trek are clearly connected to Russian Army battalions, yet in her memory she does not make these distinctions. They are made by our mother, not her.

My brother Max then took charge of the conversation, adding the historical context, the collective memory that is missing in my mother's narrative: "Well, Silesia was evacuated after the Russians took that big chunk of Poland in the East; and then the Russians gave Silesia to Poland. The first huge deportation was east of the river Oder, and then the Poles said, the Germans have to go, because the Eastern Poles needed to be where the Germans still were. And the Poles went about it in a really radical way. Mama always said..." Monika interrupts: "The Poles were worse than the Russians!" (exactly imitating mother's shouting). Max intervened: "Well, the Russians had won the war, but they knew they would return home, so they behaved a bit more generous I guess."<sup>17</sup>

Max's perspective is that of an informed adult, but he also has a personal connection to the time of deportation/evacuation. By the time my parents and Monika left their hometown, my mother was eight months pregnant with him. The family lore is that the time of occupation and all the horror and anxiety, the stress and starvation, the beatings, "went into the baby." Max was born a few weeks after arrival in the West and was a "cry child." He was described as an incredibly unhappy, difficult, and angst-ridden baby who had to be constantly carried around and calmed. He is also described as a wild child, always up to mischief, a street kid, and consequently constantly punished for misbehaviour. In my mother's eyes, the Poles were to blame for the difficult time she had with this baby and child.

The mnemonic device, the one sentence trigger, is used in different ways. My mother used it on a very personal level to narrate trauma and hate. The way she told these stories fits with interpretations of dissociating the personal from the political history, the individual memory from the collective. The sentence about the Poles being worse than the Russians serves as a general and encompassing statement that is utilised to talk about personal suffering, but also to foreground victimisation. These stories also contain alleviation of collective guilt: Oma did protect young women from rape, Opa left the National Socialist (Nazi) Party or NSDAP

because of his Catholic faith, Papa never joined the party and was quietly oppositional.<sup>18</sup> As my brother Max, and also us younger siblings, try to open up a wider set of historical arguments, we get a sense of the complicated and messy techniques that were used to make sense of personal tragedy in the midst of an overwhelming burden of guilt, regret, shame, and national responsibility for what happened in World War Two. Roger Frie defines this compartmentalised form of storytelling as the “memory gap,” arguing that “in order to address a traumatic history there must be a context in which talk about the past can be generated and supported”; he asks, “what happens when this context does not exist, when a nation’s perspective on its past is characterized by a form of collective dissociation?”<sup>19</sup> It is also telling that we, the children, prefer to include the story of Franz’s birth and death in our family narrative but leave out the period of occupation between March 1945 and August 1946. How do you reconcile your mother’s terror and hate with a politically justified period of retribution resulting in the division of Germany? Mother’s memories do not align, they even jar, with official national-memory politics. They are like narrative matter out of place; they are stories in a no-go zone. Our, the children’s, emplotment strategies leave that difficult period fairly blank for good reason: we prefer the narrative to start again with the story of the “journey” to the West.

*Working with Laughter: “The Communist Train”*

The story of the “communist train” serves as a very different but equally effective mnemonic device to evoke the family memory of deportation and an eventual resettlement in Lower Saxony. The travel story to safety is part of every refugee family’s memory toolbox. Departure and arrival frame the travel narrative that sits in between. Most German refugees had a dramatic and traumatic memory of treks from East to West. Fleeing the Red Army in February and March 1945 was no less than life threatening, and nearly all families had to suffer losses, brutality, hunger, and horror. So did my mother, when she fled the Russian Army into Bohemia at that time. Her memories, and those of my oldest sister, define much of the memory work for our family. Yet the story of how the family was finally deported in August 1946 is part of more light-hearted family lore.

In July 1946, the occupation forces organised the expulsion of Germans from Upper Silesia; most people had to walk the roughly 700 kilometres, maybe pushing a bike or a small trolley with some belongings, many of which would be lost to theft or used for life-saving bartering. In our small township, however, the small surviving group of Communist Party members were offered a train compartment to travel to East Germany. As the communists had not enough surviving members to fill the carriage, they invited carefully chosen non-Nazi families to join them. Hence, my father was invited to bring his small family for the ride. They were able to pack essential belongings, such as clothing, duvets, flour and some other items, and to travel by train. My mother told it for us like this:

The wagon had these huge banners, “Long live the Soviet Union!” and stuff; it was made obvious that this was the communist train. But when we finally came close to the border of the Russian sector, suddenly all these banners were gone. And Max P., their leader, said: “We are not stupid; we are all going to the West with you guys.” So, we all went to Lower Saxony together. And I always said: “I’d rather be a communist for a week than walk all the way to the West!”

This punch line was always followed by laughter and giggling, and the repetition of some of the funniest elements, such as “and when I looked, suddenly all banners were gone.” The

narrative foregrounds humour and luck; it lacks the strong victimisation element that is present in so many other recollections. The mnemonic strategy is the re-evocation of the “lucky escape” in surprisingly good conditions. In my mother’s interview, however, the story is remembered with much darker undertones, the train travel full of unexpected and frightening hold ups, the arrival in Lower Saxony the opposite of welcoming. And yet, the humour carried the travel story and still does today. There are also some elements of dissociation. The story frames my parents as having stood on the right side of the political spectrum: only non-Nazis were invited to join. They travelled with some close relatives, they were among friends, among non-contaminated Germans. In our family conversations the story was usually embedded in extensive discussions of kin relationships.<sup>20</sup> Who was invited to join, which family members and friends ended up together in the small Lower Saxony town? The train journey is part of a genealogical reassurance narrative that branches out into a wider complex of enduring Silesian networks. In addition, this is also followed by recollections of finding new kin, the people who offered my parents the one small room they would live in for the first 10 years; how these landlords would become Oma and Opa to my siblings and would offer friendship and connections while other refugees suffered continuing hardship and open hostility.

The evocation of the “communist train” provides relief from many of the other dark and haunting incidents that make up our family’s (post-) war reservoir of stories. This mnemonic strategy is one of careful political placement, of connection and lucky escape.

#### *Speaking Silences, Telling Stories: Coffee and Cigarettes*

If there is one word that goes right through our family memory it is cigarettes. My father was a smoker, eventually a chain smoker. We grew up with smoke around us; it was rare to see him without a cigarette in his hand. He would sit in the kitchen grinding coffee beans with our small wooden coffee grinder; he would sit with his tools repairing shoes; he would garden, all while smoking. But cigarettes would also trigger memories of my mother labelling them as currency. Cigarettes were both a signifier for trading essential items and a reminder about father’s selfish habits. Coffee, however, was not, so to speak, full of stories. It therefore came as a surprise to me when I read the transcript of my mother’s interview with my colleague Heinke Kalinke. When she was asked what she bought with her first hard post-war currency she talked about coffee in a way that spoke to me of the silences that also make up our family history. The retrieval cue for the story about coffee was offered by the interviewer. It brought out a story about coffee that none of us remembers. It also finally explains the gifting of the coffee grinder to the local museum in our Lower Saxony hometown.

After the war, around 1948 or 1949, things got slightly easier. The family was given a second room to occupy, and in September 1948 every German person got a one-off payout of the new currency, the Deutsche mark; 40 marks for the head of family and 20 marks for each additional person. My parents would have received 100 D-mark in hard currency. Finally, two years after deportation, they could buy a few essentials:

Interviewer: What did you buy with your first money?

Mother: What did we buy from our head money? [*Kopfgeld?*] A small stove, so that we could cook a little for ourselves. So that we did not have to walk across to the landlords all the time, for every jug of hot water. And we bought the first ground coffee. From time to time, I really crave a cup of coffee. They [the landlords] did not know about it! (laughs). They were nice, of course they were, but they might have, they might have said “what do they need to drink coffee for, if they have nothing, not



even the most necessary stuff.” Bit by bit I bought things, like cloth pegs, and we had our allotment for cigarettes, even for women. I saved mine up and swapped them for things; like a broom, so that I did not always have to borrow. My husband was angry about it, he had to queue for the cigarettes and else; and I said, he should be grateful that he could smoke his share of his cigarettes!”<sup>21</sup>

This version of the story of my family’s living condition after deportation is well-known to all of us, except for one addition: my mother never mentioned the purchase of the coffee grounds to any of us; she only shared this with the interviewer.

This fascinated me and also gave me a lot of food for thought. The stories of these immensely difficult first years were always structured by the incredible efforts made to ensure survival, to get enough food and heating material for the long winter, to survive hunger or cold. The juxtaposition in this story was always made by reference to my father’s smoking (wasting essential currency) and his desire to spend time with and inviting his friends, therefore driving my mother and sister and baby Max out of the one room, where they lived, for their gatherings.

My mother mentioning coffee as a luxury item that she allowed herself, feels like finally shining a stream of sunlight into her hard existence. I can now picture her having a cup of coffee, sitting down for a break, enjoying herself in the privacy of her own tiny room, and even being warm as she had prepared that coffee on her very own stove.

Amidst the dire living conditions, my mother finally managed to have a small, short, joyful, and sensual reprieve. I had never heard that story of the “coffee in solitude”; what made her share it with the young PhD student who interviewed her? It is a revelation to me that she chose to do something for herself, not for the children, the grandmother, or her husband. Picturing her in that crowded room, sitting on furniture that was not hers, drinking out of a cup lent to her, enjoying that little bit of luxury and hope somehow makes me love her even more, gives me a deeper and fuller understanding of her as a woman. These moments of resilience are so hidden away, only revealed to a stranger, and neither remembered by nor shared with her eldest children. And still clearly, she had vivid memories of this cup of coffee, enjoying it, and defending the purchasing decision against her spouse. The story is well narrated, the retrieval cue (what did you buy with your first money?) worked seamlessly. Even if this cup of coffee did not feature in our family lore, the memory expressed is intense.

The story has some other interesting elements to it. To begin with, this first purchase of ground coffee was a closely guarded secret that she needed to hide from her kind-hearted landlords. I assume she was right not to reveal the luxury of coffee to these generous and warmhearted hosts who also stood as ersatz kin to her children. We are all aware how beneficiaries are treated even today; people in dire need are not supposed to waste money on nonessential items. But this is also a story that she did not share with her children, despite sharing many other stories of these difficult years. Were we also not to wonder about a “wasteful habit”? In the context of all her children having been diagnosed as malnourished by the family doctor, that would make sense. The story also included a stab towards her husband, our father. He kept his cigarettes and smoked them; he complained about her using her own rations to barter for necessary household items. In her and my eldest sister’s stories my father always appeared as a shadow figure who did not fulfil the role of the family provider. He smoked, later he drank, he liked to hang out with his friends, he disappointed. That his enjoyment in being able to smoke was

quietly balanced by her purchasing ground coffee was not part of a narrative conveyed to us children. Stories about father, and therefore about cigarettes, were carefully crafted, even manipulated to ensure our love and empathy for her and our slight contempt for him, it seems.

The post-war family narratives that we carry and evoke are characterised by hauntings: hunger and cold dominate the memories, closely followed by recollections of discrimination and hostility. Everything was about survival. I asked my siblings if they remember our parents talking about the war, the Nazi time, the holocaust. The answer was: “No. All we ever talked about was how to get something to eat, and how to steal coal to survive the winters. Everything was about staying alive.” My mother had vivid memories of discrimination, of being labelled as the unwelcome stranger, being labelled as less German than the locals: “The care packets from the US were always distributed in church; but the refugees had to take what was left over. We always came last, even in church.”<sup>22</sup> Again, we see an effective victimisation narrative at play, one that is counterbalanced by strong memories of Silesian collectivity and mutual support. Memories of the men stealing coal at the railways, our mother sharing soup with refugees walking past her home, taking in a sick female friend. Mnemonic cues in this set of narratives include names of close relatives and friends. Bartering, stealing, and organising are collective memories of trusted mates. And yet, there is this stored-away moment of that cup of coffee.

#### *Spatial and Sensory “Paintings”: Moving to our Road*

‘Moving to our road’ is yet another mnemonic marker of huge significance. After 10 years, my parents would move one more time, this time into a brand new apartment block built for public servants of the post office. By that time, my mother had three children and was pregnant with her fourth. The following story has been retold countless times, this version again taken from the interview my mother gave in 1995:

“The most enraging thing! After ten years in that [one room], he [our father] comes home one day and says: ‘They [the post office administration] offered us one of the new apartments, but I said we don’t need one!’ (she shouts). Well, that was a moment where I really lost it!

Interviewer is incredulous: “You still lived there? After ten years?”

“Yes, I told him, that he did not need to come home the next day unless he would go back and ask for the apartment. They were sponsored by the state with 3000 mark; under the condition they offer it to refugees; otherwise we would have never got it!”

Interviewer: Is it **this** apartment? [she is incredulous, as it is a small, two-bedroom place]

“Yes, we lived here ever since, 38 years. We lived here with seven people!”

Interviewer: This is insane!

The reaction of the interviewer is telling; she cannot believe that it took 10 years to escape living quarters of the most primitive kind, no running water, no toilet, no kitchen, children sharing beds; she then has trouble believing that a family with five children (and visiting grandmothers) could have lived in such a small apartment. My mother, however, described the move as if living in a luxury hotel. She loved that place, she loved having a kitchen, a bathroom, a washing machine, even a small backyard vegetable garden. “Imagine! A lease for life, that nobody could take away from us!” One of my brothers described it as living in a campervan; but when questioned, he and my oldest sister admitted that it was indeed a huge step up, even for the children.

Interesting again is the role assigned to our father in this story. He is the one who appears as selfish, even thoughtless, and unaware of the stressful and embarrassing living conditions. He has to be coerced into signing up for the modern apartment. Just as in the “cigarette story,” he is depicted as detached from care for the family, like an absent-minded flatmate. “Moving to our road” can be read as a carefully used mnemonic strategy by our mother to express a number of very important messages to us and, in this instance, to the interviewer. She had finally returned to an orderly and mildly comfortable life. She again depicts herself as the carer and guide of the family fate. “Our road” is the departure point for her children’s careers and futures. Furthermore, it is a safe place, an anchor point that assured stability. The hauntings and anxieties would revert only to nightmares, daytime was for the living. Despite a level of continuing hardship, poverty was now relative. Victimisation was past, there was food on the table; even if the children were malnourished, they would not die. Life in “our road” was worth living. After that final move, memories tended to be more benign; life slowly became manageable—until I came along, but that is another story altogether.

#### *An Analysis of Deeper Listening: The Agentive Siblings of Trauma*

In this article I have tried to follow mnemonic strategies and stories for survival. With the help of my mother and my siblings I was enabled to do some very deep listening—over and over again. Slowly, some of these narrative patterns and strategies became visible to me; so many stories started to make sense. These memory patterns emerged while I was coming to terms with a family history that happened without me, yet most of these stories were also part of me. As Maria Turmakin describes it, there are parts of our mnemonic traditions where “I was not the author of my memories, not even their keeper, but merely their unwitting host.”<sup>23</sup> These stories were like an undercurrent (*Grundrauschen*) in my life as the youngest child that needed to be brought to the surface to be viewed and touched.<sup>24</sup> There is no denying that all of us siblings are affected by transgenerational trauma: we have deep anxieties about being lost, not being cared for, being attacked, disempowered, or abandoned. We carry all the symptoms of a generation of children whose parents’ deeply damaged selves affected their ability to live their lives with just a healthy level of fear and empathy.<sup>25</sup>

Yet this project of continuous deep listening to both text and each other has started something new. Mnemonic markers, such as sentences and words, opened up new stories, new interpretations, and a deeper sense of connection together with new mental processes of interpreting emplotment.<sup>26</sup> The renewed energy that comes with listening and uncovering carries with it a new sense of sadness for our parents; but it also gives them a humanity that allows for a deeper connection and an understanding of adults for adults. Lifting the fog of silence, of a paralysing sense of living with historical vulnerability and shame, may help us to become better children. Through examining mnemonic and narrative strategies, we start seeing possibilities of overcoming dissociation. If we accept, for example, that victimisation narratives were simply devices to live with the unliveable, then we can make these ghosts, these unbearable images of perpetrators, into ancestors. As Astrid Erll so aptly puts it, “memory fundamentally means movement: traffic between individual and collective levels of remembering,”<sup>27</sup> and it is this movement that permits the making of new and more appropriate connections with the past. By setting our parent generation back into the historical context that made them into what they became, we gain a different understanding of their personalities, their survival narratives, and their development of very strategic emplotments.

Through my mother's mnemonic markers we were guided into a certain way of remembering family. That served her well. She could be—and needed to be—sure that we would see her as our protector, our guardian and carer; she ensured that father remained in the shadows. We were not meant to remember a man who also was deeply damaged by the war, who saw unspeakable horrors, who never could regain the love of the young wife he had hardly got to know before the war broke him. We could not remember the man who worked and earned money, who managed a huge garden plot, who stole coal for us and helped all his children to build their first homes. He was pushed aside to ensure that our love was directed towards her. We would come to see her and our sister Monika as the parental team that ensured their and our survival. This new agency of remembering differently goes beyond simply tracing trauma narratives: it allows for laughter, sadness, compassion, and a new relationship with family memory. That agency also helps us to trace such memories for what they also are: kinship relations that we need to continue to explore.<sup>28</sup>

### Acknowledgements

The project of talking about our family is one that all five of us, the Bönisch siblings, do together. Monika, Max, Herbert, and Anne chose me as facilitator and author, but the stories are shared, and so are our conversations about mother.

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<sup>1</sup> Brigitte Bönisch-Brednich, *Keeping a Low Profile. An Oral History of German Immigration to New Zealand* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Erika Kohler, *Lost Years* (Glebe, Australia: Book House at Wild & Woolley, 2000); Helga Tiscenko, *Strawberries with the Führer: A Journey from the Third Reich to New Zealand* (Christchurch: Shoal Bay Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Brigitte Bönisch-Brednich, "The Story of my Life: Analyse von Motivation, Struktur und Schreibstrategien in neuseeländischen Immigrantenaufzeichnungen," in *Leben-Erzählen. Beiträge zur Erzähl- und Biographieforschung*, ed. Thomas Hengartner and Brigitta Schmidt-Lauber, (Berlin and Hamburg: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2005), 231–48.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Freund, *Aufbrüche nach dem Zusammenbruch. Die Deutsche Nordamerika-Auswanderung nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Göttingen: V&H unipress, 2004); Pascal Maeder, "Germans into Europeans: Expellees in Postwar Canada," in *Beyond the Nation? Immigrants' Local Lives in Transnational Cultures*, ed. Alexander Freund (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 227–46.

<sup>5</sup> Astrid Erll, "Travelling Memory," in "Transcultural Memory," ed. Rick Crownshaw, special issue, *Parallax* 17, no. 4 (2011): 15; Clara Han and Andrew Brandel, "Genres of Witnessing: Narrative, Violence, Generations," *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* (2019), 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2019.1630466>

<sup>6</sup> Many children of World War Two survivors describe a sense of shadows or of a dense mist covering their childhood memories. They remain at best opaque, at worst frightening or haunting, traumatic shapes that have a ghostlike quality (see Matthias Lohre, *Das Erbe der Kriegsenkel. Was das*

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*Schweigen der Eltern mit uns macht* [München: Penguin Verlag, 2018]; Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2010]).

<sup>7</sup> Han and Brandel, “Genres of Witnessing.”

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Prager, “Danger and Deformation. A Social Theory of Trauma Part I: Contemporary Theory and Healthy Selves,” *American Imago* 68, no. 3 (2011): 425–48; Doris Brothers, “Traumatic Attachments: Intergenerational Trauma, Dissociation, and the Analytic Relationship,” *International Journal of Psychoanalytic Self Psychology* 9, no. 1 (2014): 3–15.

<sup>9</sup> Harald Welzer, *Grandpa wasn't a Nazi: The Holocaust in German Family Remembrance* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Maria Tumarkin, “Crumbs of Memory: Tracing the ‘More-Than-Representational’ in Family Memory,” *Memory Studies* 6, no. 3 (2013): 318.

<sup>11</sup> Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 6; Lotte Meinert and Lone Grøn, “‘It runs in the Family’: Exploring Contagious Kinship Connections,” *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* (2019): 2.

<sup>12</sup> Anne Bönisch, second-youngest child, sibling storytelling day, September 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Heinke M. Kalinke, *Die Frauen von Zülz / Biala. Lebensgeschichten dies- und jenseits der deutsch-polnischen Grenze (1920-1995)* (Marburg: N.G. Elwert Verlag, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> Astri(d) Erll, “Locating Family in Cultural Memory Studies,” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 42, no. 3 (2011): 306.

<sup>15</sup> The “one sentence trigger” analysis or the “one word” trigger below are related to Sherry Ortner’s thoughts about “key symbols” in anthropological analysis. See Sherry B. Ortner, “On Key Symbols,” *American Anthropologist*, new series 75, no. 5 (1973): 1338–46; also Silke Meyer, “Was heißt Erzählen? Die Narrationsanalyse als hermeneutische Methode in der Europäischen Ethnologie,” *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 110:2 (2014): 243–267.

<sup>16</sup> Recording of sibling storytelling day, 9 September 2018; translated from German.

<sup>17</sup> Elder brother, recording of sibling storytelling day, 9 September 2018.

<sup>18</sup> These justifications and victimisation narratives are part of our family lore but cannot be included here.

<sup>19</sup> Roger Frie, *Not in My Family: German Memory and Responsibility After the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press 2017); also Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* (New York: Columbia University Press 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Erll, “Locating Family,” 306.

<sup>21</sup> Anna Bönisch, interview by Heinke Kalinke, 1995.

<sup>22</sup> Anna Bönisch, interview by Heinke Kalinke, 1995.

<sup>23</sup> Turmakin, “Crumbs of Memory,” 311.

<sup>24</sup> Ira Spieker and Uta Bretschneider, “Verortungen, Generationelle Konstruktionen von ‘Heimat’ im biografischen Erzählen,” in *Verordnete Nachbarschaften. Transformationsprozesse im deutsch-polnisch-tschechischen Grenzraum seit dem Zweiten Weltkrieged*, ed. Uta Bretschneider, Sönke Friedreich, and Ira Spieker (Dresden: Thelem, 2016), 133.

<sup>25</sup> Brothers, “Traumatic Attachments”; Prager “Danger and Deformation 1”; Jeffrey Prager, “Danger and Deformation. A Social Theory of Trauma Part II: Disrupting the Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma, Recovering Humanity, and Repairing Generations.” *American Imago* 72, no. 2 (2015), 133–55.

<sup>26</sup> Zerubavel *Time Maps*, 13.

<sup>27</sup> Astrid Erll, “Travelling Memory,” 15.

<sup>28</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis Coser (Chicago and New York: Harper and Row, 1992), 63.