

## Transgenerational Trauma and Family Memory? The Legacy of Sudeten German Expulsion after World War II

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The forced displacement of the Sudeten Germans represents a crucial moment in the history of the Czechoslovakia after World War II, it was the largest migration wave in the history of the Czech lands. The experience of losing one's home through forced migration gave rise to what is known as the "fate-bound community" of Sudeten Germans. In the aftermath of the war, particularly from the perspective of Western countries, this community forged a shared collective identity and culture of remembrance. While considerable attention has been devoted to the communicative and cultural memory of the so-called "generation of experience", less focus has been placed on subsequent generations and the transgenerational transmission of traumatic experiences. In this study, we delve into the concept of "postmemory" (Hirsch, 2012) and explore how families and generations of grandchildren perceive and process what can be termed "chosen trauma" (Volkan, 2001). The study is based on biographic and semi-structured interviews conducted with 11 participants, all of whom are descendants of displaced Sudeten Germans. The findings suggest that the repercussions of ancestral trauma are transmitted to the grandchildren's generation primarily via a succession of dominant emotional responses and affects, rather than through comprehensive understanding of the ancestral history.

*Key words:* postmemory, trauma, family, grandchildren, narrative, affect, emotions, forced migration, Sudeten Germans, Czech lands

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## Introduction

In 2003, the esteemed Leipzig Book Fair was pervaded by the theme of *Flucht und Vertreibung* (Flight and Expulsion). The German author and literary critic, Volker Hage, referred to this significant European book industry event as *Die Enkel wollen es wissen* (The Grandchildren Want to Know, 16 March 2003) in his essay published in *Der Spiegel* (Hage, 2003). This was succeeded by the release of several novels wherein emerging authors seized the opportunity to reconcile with the loss of their ancestral home through literary compositions (for an overview of these book titles, see Schliephake, 2013). Set against an autobiographical canvas, these generations of postmemory untangled familial mysteries and interpreted in their unique manner the wartime and post-war experiences of their grandparents (see Jabłkowska, 2021), who discovered their “new home” in Germany following the Second World War as a consequence of the flight, expulsion, and relocation from Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>1</sup> It is evident that in this context, fiction assumes a dual pivotal role – it serves as a medium for the visceral transcendence of inherited trauma for individuals or close-knit family environments, whilst simultaneously acting as a catalyst for a wider societal discourse about the marginalized past (cf. also Schliephake, 2013).<sup>2</sup>

The interplay of remembering and forgetting the *Flucht und Vertreibung* was intricately linked with the recollection of the Holocaust in the society of West Germany. As the atrocities of Nazi Germany were increasingly remembered from the 1960s onwards, the public discourse on German post-war grievances was deemed politically incorrect to an increasing extent (for further details, see Hirsch, 2013). The politics of oblivion underwent a metamorphosis around 2000. Aleida Assmann (2016: 6) positions the inception of a wider societal interest in *Flucht und Vertreibung* within an interpretive framework of generational renewal and elucidates it by the need of the second generation to reconcile with their parents’ traumatic past and to fill in the blank spaces of family history. Concurrently, Assman associates it with the process of reunification in Germany, which is, furthermore, undergoing a substantial transformation into an

- 1 Almost three million people of German origin (“Sudeten Germans”) were forcibly displaced from Czechoslovakia after Second World War, only 200,000 of these inhabitants were allowed to stay in the country. The majority of Sudeten Germans were resettled in what became West Germany, the majority were placed in Bavaria (see Ahonen, 2003). The unfavorable post-war conditions in Germany affected the status of the expellees, who were rejected and marginalized by the local population in the early years after their arrival in Germany (see Kossert, 2008).
- 2 Similarly, in the Czech Republic, literature has played a substantial role in augmenting interest in the forced displacement of the German population from Czechoslovakia. With her 2009 novel *Vyhnání Gerty Schnirch* (The Expulsion of Gerta Schnirch), the emerging writer Kateřina Tučková managed to bring the subject of early post-war violence and forced migration, which bore political ramifications, into the broader public consciousness. However, within the context of this study, it is imperative to note that the author’s interest is not autobiographical, and the narrative is fictional (Tučková, 2009). This underscores the generally significant role of subsequent generations as crucial

immigrant society.<sup>3</sup> This created a platform for the discussion of the nation's intricate history and memory, and presented an opportunity to incorporate the memory of overlooked or suppressed groups into the national narrative.

In this study, we delve into postmemory at the familial microlevel, endeavouring to ascertain the pertinence of this concept for members of the third generation, the generation of grandchildren. If we commence from the premise that the expulsion from Czechoslovakia following the Second World War constitutes a trauma for the first generation, the generation of experience, and that the generation of grandchildren can be conceptualized as the generation of postmemory, then we posit that the historical events in question can influence the lives of these descendants, despite nearly 80 years having elapsed since the events. Specifically, within the context of family succession, these are the grandchildren of individuals born during the interwar and wartime periods. We pose the following questions: How and to what extent do they relate to their grandparents' traumatic past/experiences? In what manners and through what means was the past recalled within the families? Alternatively, how do they internalize it into their lives – insights, values, and attitudes? It is crucial to consider that we posed these questions to individuals who belong to the generation standing on the brink of the “floating gap” (Vansina, 1985), i.e., they represent the last generation that has the opportunity to hear stories about the events in question from direct witnesses before the definitive transition from communicative memory to formalized, institutionalized, and culturally sustained memory occurs. It is thus imperative to examine who constitutes this liminal generation of grandchildren and whether it is invariably feasible to utilize the concept of postmemory, as defined by Hirsch (2012).

Our paper is divided into five parts – the theoretical introduction is followed by a description of the sample of respondents and the data that we then use in the two parts in which we analyze and interpret the empirical material. Finally, a summary is included in which we return to the main research questions.

## Generations, Family Memory, and Trauma

The generational facet appears to be pivotal in the realm of memory alteration. Marianne Hirsch (2012) introduced the influential notion of “postmemory” to

agents of cultural memory alteration in the realm of the traumatic past, without the necessity for an autobiographical or familial connection (cf. Kreisslová, 2016).

- 3 Both historical occurrences and experiences were introduced into the discourse on the migration crisis in 2015/2016, and subsequently became arguments advocating for a more liberal migration and asylum policy in Germany. Within the context of historical culpability and responsibility for Nazi atrocities, the act of assisting refugees is portrayed as a moral duty and evidence of adherence to human rights. The tangible experience of forced migration has evolved into a prerequisite and argument for fostering sensitivity towards individuals undergoing analogous situations, and as evidence that Germany is capable of managing the wave of immigration. Nevertheless, a more comprehensive analysis of how *Flucht und Vertreibung* has influenced the discourse of contemporary German migration policy remains absent.

comprehend the unique relationship of the descendant generation to the traumatic history of their ancestors. The author posits a potential transference of the “memory” of those who endured mass traumatic and catastrophic events, either as victims or perpetrators, to the generation after. In her study of the second generation of Shoa survivors, she has demonstrated how ensuing generations “remember” incidents that they did not directly experience, but which are transmitted across generations through narratives, photographs, artefacts, or the language of the body. This engenders a memory devoid of “one’s own memories”, which are not, however, passively inherited from the preceding generation. According to Hirsch, postmemory is a dynamic process of internalization and reinterpretation of “inherited trauma” that profoundly influences an individual’s identity – it has the potential to mould their values, beliefs, or visions for the future.

For the objectives of this study, which centres on familial remembrance, the bifurcation of transmission structures, which Hirsch (2012: 36) has termed “familial” and “affiliative postmemory”, is of paramount importance. Affiliative postmemory is understood as intragenerational horizontal transmission within a generation of contemporaries (akin to Mannheim’s concept of generation – Mannheim, 1928), whereas familial postmemory is intergenerational and transpires through vertical transmission between generations within families. Simultaneously, Astrid Erll (2011: 310) highlights that family and familial remembrance have frequently been overlooked in memory studies in favour of the study of national memory. Nonetheless, Erll regards family memory as a significant corrective to national memory and deems its study to be indispensable. Citing the work of Claudia Lenz and Harald Welzer (2007), she has demonstrated how the contents and meanings of family memories can diverge from institutionalized, official memory, primarily because they are significantly influenced by “family loyalties and emotional ties” (Erll, 2011: 315). She perceives research on family memory to be a complex and inherently interdisciplinary process, as different strata of memory interact within this fundamental social framework, which she categorizes as “organic-autobiographical” (personal memories), “interactive-familial” (memories shared within the family), “institutionalized-national” and “mass mediated-transnational memory”. However, the relationships between the different levels are not seamless; instead, there exist disparities and discrepancies between the individual and collective manners in which events are remembered and interpreted (Erll, 2011: 315).

In the context of familial postmemory, it is imperative to consider the premise that the traumatic experiences of ancestors have significantly influenced family memory. Maruška Svašek (2002) contemplates the trauma associated with *Flucht und Vertreibung* through the prism of Vamik Volkan’s concept of “chosen trauma”. Volkan (2001) defines this as the mental representation of a past traumatic event “during which the large group suffered loss and/or experienced helplessness, shame and humiliation in a conflict with another large group” (Volkan, 2001: 87). Such groups “choose” how they mythologize the events in question to bolster group cohesion and

distinction. Transgenerational transmission is vital to the preservation of trauma, which Volkan situates in the context of the unfinished grieving process of the generation that experienced it, which is unable “to mourn losses of people, land or prestige”. Conflict and unresolved emotions are thus passed on to subsequent generations and shape their behaviour and attitudes (Volkan, 2001: 87). Contemporary ethnographic research on the intergenerational transmission of memories of traumatic events within families considers the theme of “silence”, in addition to questions of what is told or untold about the “complicated legacy” of ancestors, and how and through what means. Carol A. Kidron (2009) underscores that the silence she has studied in the families of Holocaust survivors cannot be attributed “solely” to efforts to evade and conceal traumatic experience or to “repressive forgetting” (see Assmann 2010 for the term), as was the traditional explanation. According to the author, it is far from being merely the “absence of presence of the past” (Kidron, 2009: 5) and its disregard by the descendants; rather, within the intimate family setting, it reveals a non-verbally articulated presence and tacit knowledge of the traumatic past integrated into everyday life through specific interactions, practices, rituals, gestures, emotional attachments, or objects. We, too, endeavour to account for manifestations of tacit memory in our empirical material, although we can only do so based on what has been told or left untold.

## Data Generation: Methodological Approach and Narrator Sample

The foundation of our article lies in the data collected from 2016 to 2018 during our research on three-generation families. This research was part of a project aimed at understanding the transgenerational transmission of narratives concerning post-World War II migration movements (see Kreisslová, Nosková, Pavlásek, 2019 and 2023 for the project’s primary outcomes).<sup>4</sup> The eldest generation, often referred to as the generation of experience, had personally undergone forced displacement from the Czech lands to Germany as children and adolescents between 1945 and 1946. As part of the oral history project, we also recorded interviews with the second and third generations. In this study, our focus narrows down to interviews with 11 grandchildren, comprising five women and six men from nine families. In two of these families, two

4 Our analysis is based on biographic and semi-structured interviews with three-generation families of forcibly displaced Germans that were collected in Germany in 2017 and 2018 during the project “Mechanism and strategies of generational transmission of family memory in the selected social groups” supported by the Czech Science Foundation. During the project we collected and analysed biographic and semi-structured interviews with three generation families of forcibly displaced Germans. These two types of interviews we use also in our study. The research was conducted under the highest ethical standards, we the authors respected and respect the ethical rules set out in the Codes of ethics of the Czech Academy of Sciences and the Czech Ethnological Society. All interviews together with the corresponding informed consents are stored in the collections of the Institute of Ethnology of the Czech Academy of Sciences.

siblings participated in the interviews. The age range of these grandchildren at the time of the interviews was 18–36 years. To further specify, among the women, two were under 20 years old, and three were around 35 years old.<sup>5</sup> Among the men, three were under 20, and three were around 30. The narrators primarily hailed from Hesse, though some were from Bavaria or resided in Berlin. These federal states were also the locations where our research was conducted. All interviews took place either in the narrators' homes or in their grandparents' homes. The interviews were conducted in German by the two authors of the study. The duration of the interviews varied, with the shortest being less than half an hour and the longest approximately an hour and a half.<sup>6</sup> The interviews commenced with an inquiry into the interviewees' life stories. Given their age, these were typically addressed swiftly. The remainder of the interview was loosely structured, primarily focusing on family narratives about generational experiences, the mechanisms, strategies, and mediums of their transmission, and the grandchildren's perspectives on their grandparents' life stories. The research concentrated on stories related to *Flucht und Vertreibung*, but the interviewers did not categorize this migration as a trauma.

Before proceeding to the analysis and interpretation of the generated data, it is crucial to consider the broad age range of the narrators. Despite this, all individuals can be classified as belonging to the grandchild generation. This classification is linked to the fact that the grandparents' generation members were born within approximately 15 years of each other (the oldest in 1926 and the youngest in 1942). It also relates to gender – male generations/successions are typically broader in time than female ones, as women tended to have children earlier than men.

Our research is primarily narrative-based, and thus, our findings are solely derived from the information shared during the interviews. The narrativist perspective focuses on the biography of the narrator. By biography, or auto/biography, we understand a specific “narrative product”, the essence of which is the life narrative of an individual, including interpretations of socio-historical conditions on the one hand and the inner psychological development of the subject on the other (Picard, 2014: 179). To work with biographical/narrative interviews, it is necessary to understand the narrated reality. The individual never tells stories only for himself/herself, but as a member of a certain group/s and society.<sup>7</sup> By reporting on his/her life, he/she reports to the listener on the accepted attitudes values and norms in the past and present and thus contributes significantly to their sharing and transmission, to the maintenance of the social world.

5 The broad age spectrum of the generations is further substantiated by Susanne Greiter's (2014) categorization of the intergenerational safeguarding and conveyance of memories related to *Flucht und Vertreibung*. The third generation encompasses individuals born in the 1970s. Consequently, for our eldest narrators, we have advanced by a decade.

6 Radmila Švaříčková Slabáková (2020: 195) also highlights the relative brevity of interviews with the youngest generation, based on her research into multigenerational memories of the Second World War.

7 We consider the family as a specific communicative community with a shared identity and memory.

We work with the accounts of the grandchildren, which we cannot corroborate through participant observation. Our analysis centres on the reflection of the theme of *Flucht und Vertreibung* in our narrators' narratives, even when they describe behaviours or practices. In this study, we bifurcate the empirical section into two chapters. The first chapter focuses on the transmission of the "matter" (facts, plotlines about forced migration or the grandparents' lives), and the second chapter delves into the construction of affects and emotions. We deem these two components as the most significant in the narratives. However, this does not imply that there are no other areas mentioned in the narratives related to the topic of *Flucht und Vertreibung* that could facilitate the transmission of trauma. The descriptions of facts and plots are often interwoven with the descriptions of emotions; they are inseparable in the narratives, although we separate them here for analytical purposes.

### From Ignorance Through Mosaic Fragments to Black-and-White Film

The theme of *Flucht und Vertreibung* emerged as a central aspect of memory within the generation of experience, as evidenced by the interviews we conducted with its members (Kreisslová, Nosková, Pavlásek, 2019: 177). The details of the departure mode and journey were often elaborated. However, this is no longer the case for the grandchild generation. Their knowledge of the "matter", i.e., the content of family memory, such as "who migrated where and when, their circumstances, and their possessions" (Spalová, 2013: Paragraph 6), i.e., facts about the expulsion process, the circumstances leading to it, and its aftermath, was generally limited, with a few exceptions.<sup>8</sup> This broad statement, however, has several nuances. Certain recurring themes or topoi can be identified within the interviews. A common part of the narrative for all the grandchildren (and sometimes the only part) was the description of the haste, the abrupt change, the forced and violent nature of the action, and the overall uncertainty. If additional information is provided, it usually pertains to the small amount of luggage that the forcibly displaced individuals could carry with them: "You can't even imagine today. Just as [my grandmother] tells it, people arrive with guns, you pack two suitcases, and then you leave, clueless about where to go, how to go on, without any basic means of existence."<sup>9</sup>

8 It is insightful to draw a comparison with Švaříčková Slabáková's study (2020) in this context. Both our research and hers underscore the loss of the matter and the emphasis on emotions in the youngest generation's recollections. This is particularly evident in her research on generational memories of the Second World War (2020: 204). However, the interpretation of suffering diverges in our interviews. The grandchildren we interviewed do not recount suffering in a general sense. Instead, they project it onto the experiences of their grandparents (or great-grandparents), essentially personalizing the suffering to their own families.

9 Interview with grandson (born 1989) conducted by S. K. on 14 July 2017 in Hesse.



Details about the actual transportation process, specifically that the grandparents were transported to Germany in overcrowded freight trains with basic needs neglected, were mentioned by fewer than half of the interviewees. One narrator recounted:

*... they were then expelled. As I said, everyone had to hastily pack their belongings, taking only the essentials. The hygiene conditions on the train, I would say, were not up to standard. And they didn't even know where they were going, they were just on the train, and nobody said anything to them about where they were going. Eventually, there were only 10 or 11 persons, families left. Initially, they had nothing, my grandfather had to look after the children, look after his siblings, and yes, it was a difficult time.*<sup>10</sup>

The quoted passage also encapsulates the repercussions of forced migration, which imposes a significant burden on older family members (including children), who often become pillars of stability and support. The challenging circumstances faced by ancestors upon their arrival in Germany were a recurring theme in the interviews. The difficult beginnings and the struggle to establish a new life as “unwanted arrivals” (Lehmann, 1991) form the second most common topoi in the grandchildren’s narratives. The theme of “quickness” reappears here, but this time in the context of striving to achieve independence and establish a stable environment as swiftly as possible. One narrator shared:

*But there's always a difference between choosing it [to help migrants] on your own terms and having it forced upon you. That's why, from what we [the grandchildren] heard, many people were taken in, but they just didn't feel at ease. Imagine having a large, prosperous farm, and then suddenly you're given just a room and a bed, where you might have to share with others because there's no other choice. That, of course, had a profound impact on the family. My grandmother, for instance, told me that the urge to leave as quickly as possible and establish her own home was incredibly powerful...*<sup>11</sup>

Forced migration is thematized in the interviews within both the family history context and a broader historical framework. The experiences of flight and expulsion as historical events are partly conveyed through the grandparents’ experiences, and partly shaped by other sources such as school lessons, documentary films, or accounts from other forcibly displaced individuals or the parents of the interviewed grandchildren. However, none of the grandchildren’s generation mentioned literary works that address the topic of expulsion. According to the interviewees, this topic

10 Interview with grandson (born 1998) conducted by S. K. on 7 October 2017 in Hesse.

11 Interview with grandson (born 1985) conducted by S. K. on 10 February 2018 in Hesse.



is somewhat marginal in school education, primarily mentioned as a consequence of the Second World War. The dominant theme is “German guilt” and the horrors of the Second World War inflicted by the Nazi regime, not only in Germany but also in the occupied territories. Within this context, the grandchildren embed their grandparents’ experiences of flight and expulsion. They develop a variety of narratives that justify and exonerate their ancestors, often pointing to their grandparents’ young age during the Second World War and the expulsion, their lack of political awareness at the time, or their ancestors’ apolitical nature. Historical realities are mythologized, simplified, and skewed to portray ancestors as victims or heroes (cf. Welzer, Moller, Tschuggnall, 2008). For instance, there is the notion of the “Sudetenland” as an area historically belonging to Germany (compared to Silesian Prussia), referred to as “Sudeten Germany” (*Sudetendeutschland*). One narrator shared, “Before that it was all Germany and then the Czechs came, I don’t know exactly, they wanted to take it and then it all went in quick succession, now I say, now you have maybe two hours, you have to pack everything and then go on the train, and they didn’t even know where they were going...”<sup>12</sup>

Images of ancestors as victims are transmitted across generations, serving a dual purpose. Within families, they can act as a therapeutic tool for reconciling with a painful past (the grandchildren referred to the expulsion as a traumatic experience). In a broader social context, they are utilized to negotiate and assert the victim’s position in a grand historical narrative centred on “German guilt” (i.e., grandparents also have the right to be recognized as victims of historical events). However, the grandchildren do not resonate with the prevalent and long-endorsed political views of the exile unions (*Landsmannschaften*) regarding the “right to the homeland”. They are either not well-versed in these views or they explicitly dissociate themselves from them. More than half of the interviewees are unaware of the so-called Beneš Decrees – a document that is well-known to the generation of experience.

The “absence” of knowledge about the “matter” was acknowledged and even apologized for by some of the grandchildren. This could be attributed to the focus of our research, where all participants were aware that we were interested in the stories of grandparents passed down within their families. However, the grandchildren may also have felt a sense of pressure due to the unfulfilled expectations of their grandparents/parents regarding the preservation of family memory. Consequently, during the interview, some expressed a personal commitment to learning more about their family history in the future (e.g., from family chronicles). In this context, whether or not the grandparents had documented their history became significantly relevant: “My grandfather doesn’t have a collection or... anything he’s written down. [...] I know it from my wife, her grandfather, now he’s not doing very well health-wise either, but before that he wrote a lot of things down, drew a family tree. Who came

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12 Interview with grandson (born 1998) conducted by S. K. on 7 October 2017 in Hesse.

from where. Then you have something in your hand, if you're ever more interested in it, then you can look. But we don't have something like that."<sup>13</sup> Thus, the grandchildren desire the "matter", or more precisely, the act of writing down the family history serves as a "safeguard"<sup>14</sup> against forgetting, fostering conditions for family loyalty. In this case, remembering is perceived as a commitment (Spalová, 2013: Paragraph 15).

Those grandchildren, particularly those whose grandparents were part of the earlier-born group, who had a deeper understanding of their grandparents' life trajectories, provided more detailed accounts of their grandparents' lives in Czechoslovakia and their experiences in Germany following forced displacement. However, for some of the younger grandchildren, the two stages seemed to blend together, with the temporal separation (before 1945 and after 1945 or 1946) merging. The younger grandchildren, i.e., those in their early 20s, appeared to have minimal specific knowledge about their grandparents' lives. This could be due to their interest being limited to certain stages of their grandparents' lives. For instance, one grandchild, who had little knowledge about the expulsion of part of his family due to his lack of interest in it, enjoyed conversing with his grandfather about his experiences as a soldier in the Second World War. He stated, "It was probably the most thrilling thing for me as a 16 or 17-year-old to imagine my grandfather being sent to the front at that age, and him telling the craziest stories about it".<sup>15</sup> Comparing his own life with that of his grandfather, who was the same age as he was during the war, sparked his interest in this part of his past, fostering a sense of loyalty towards it.

Interestingly, even among the older interviewees, there was a representative who was largely unaware of her grandparents' life stories, despite her grandparents' active involvement in various organizations for the forcibly displaced and her own participation in some of these activities. Conversely, we found individuals among the oldest narrators from the grandchildren's generation who could be termed as "guardians" of family memory. They viewed possessing detailed knowledge as their moral obligation and a testament to their loyalty. One granddaughter, who had substantial knowledge of her grandmother's history, likened her memories of her grandmother's life in Czechoslovakia to a "black-and-white film that I can always play in my head",<sup>16</sup> a testament to the depth of her knowledge. Other interviewees, a pair of siblings, referred to their family's past as a legacy, stating, "So, we are

13 Interview with grandson (born 1986) conducted by J. N. on 12 November 2017 in Hesse.

14 Interview with grandson (born 1999) conducted by J. N. on 25 November 2017 in Berlin. Some narrators even cast their parents in the role of a "safeguard", or "guardians of history", attributing them with a deeper understanding of historical events. This viewpoint is probably shaped by the intimate emotional connection and temporal proximity their parents have with their own parents, as revealed in our interviews. In essence, grandchildren believe that their parents maintain a stronger bond, both emotionally and temporally, with their own parents, thereby possessing a greater knowledge of their familial history.

15 Interview with grandson (born 1999) conducted by J. N. on 25 November 2017 in Berlin.

16 Interview with granddaughter (born 1983) conducted by J. N. on 22 August 2017 in Bavaria.

fortunate to have received a wealth of information and attention due to our family's interest and involvement in this heritage."<sup>17</sup> These interviews revealed a crucial aspect of family dynamics and transmission, i.e., family memory is not passively received but actively constructed and preserved through the concerted efforts of family members, as highlighted by Erll (2011: 306). The creation of family memory is an interactive practice that necessitates not only the readiness of the oldest generation to share their stories but also the willingness of the youngest generation to listen, ask questions, explore, and shape history. This active role of the two grandchildren demonstrated that information transmission is not unidirectional. Media and modern technology can play a significant role in preserving and updating family memory, bringing the "lost homeland" into the homes of the displaced: "And at some point, you come to understand that you can make the most of the opportunities that are available today. You realize that you're a facilitator, that the first generation can also connect with what's possible today through us, thanks to technology. You grasp that even without traveling 500 kilometres, you can gather impressions right from where you are."<sup>18</sup> This suggests that the transmission of family memory is not linear; it can be a process of mutual learning (cf. Kreisslová, Nosková, Pavlásek, 2019: 369). The role of grandchildren can be innovative – they have the ability to reshape family stories and adapt them to contemporary values and norms. Through their access to modern technologies, they also contribute to the preservation of family memory by digitizing family photographs and documents.

### From Emotional Resonance to Values and Moral Lessons

Research confirms that memories with strong emotional resonance are more likely to be retained in both individual and communicative (familial) memory (Welzer, 2008: 125–151). Our study reveals that for the latest generation of postmemory, standing on the brink of the floating gap, it is not the factual details that persist in the narrative context of *Flucht und Vertreibung*. Instead, it is primarily the affect and emotion that endure. The remnants of the grandparents' traumatic past that persist in the studied generation are predominantly emotions, rather than detailed knowledge of specific events and experiences. Even when grandchildren were informed about these events, they often did not retain them in their memory, or at least did not communicate them to us as researchers. This partial forgetting can be attributed to the grandchildren's different relationship to the past, to the "matter", compared to their grandparents. For instance, when a grandfather elaborates on the names of his childhood friends and neighbours, the grandchildren often disengage. They usually connect emotionally mainly with their direct relatives and their history,

17 Interview with grandson (born 1985) conducted by S. K. on 10 February 2018 in Hesse.

18 Interview with grandson (born 1985) conducted by S. K. on 10 February 2018 in Hesse.

because as one participant put it, “I have access to the whole history only through my grandfather [...] I am interested in his history, not the history of his cousins.”<sup>19</sup>

The grandchildren described the forced migration and the subsequent circumstances in Germany as challenging times. They associated these experiences primarily with feelings of powerlessness, a loss of control over their own fate, sensations of insecurity and instability, loss of property, scarce resources, marginalization, and rejection. In some instances, the narratives also touched upon the loss or death of relatives, which were among the most emotionally intense situations depicted: “What my great-grandmother didn’t tell me was that she had to leave her parents behind [in the Czech Republic]. That was, for my grandmother, as she often told me, simply the most dreadful thing. They had to say goodbye and leave. Later, when they were in Vienna, they read in a newspaper that [my grandmother’s] grandfather had died on a pile of straw and was completely filthy. I believe that’s something she can’t forget.”<sup>20</sup>

Several interviewees drew a distinction between the experiences of their grandparents and great-grandparents, the latter having “truly lost everything”. The intensity of loss was perceived to be greater for the great-grandparents, as the grandparents were children or teenagers at the time, and thus the loss may not have been as emotionally significant for them: “The impact it had on my great-grandparents, who truly lost everything, was different for my grandparents. When you’re 14, you likely don’t have the same sense of ownership as someone in their 30s, 40s, 50s. It’s difficult to measure, but those emotions still echo somehow.”<sup>21</sup> They explicitly discuss the emotional imprints that are passed down in the family and the grandchildren’s inability to fully comprehend the complex past of their ancestors.

However, the statement that their grandparents endured a difficult fate carries more than just a historical account. It also serves as a testament to their resilience and strength, their ability to overcome adversity. Within families, these images and the emotions they evoke can serve to lionize ancestors, reinforcing a sense of pride, belonging, and mutual support. One manifestation of respect and deep empathy for grandparents can be a reluctance to probe too deeply into the past, which is perceived as an emotional burden and a reopening of old wounds: “It’s also a bit of a distancing... that somehow you protect your grandmother from it, that you don’t want to dig too deep. That’s how I felt. It’s not just fond memories, how can you even ask about that? Out of respect, I didn’t want to hear it again...”<sup>22</sup> Thus, the absence of questioning or the silence surrounding traumatic events perpetuates the traumatic past in families, even without words, as described by Kidron (2009). One granddaughter mentioned that she primarily heard happy stories from her grandmother, arguing that this was

19 Interview with grandson (born 1999) conducted by J. N. on 25 November 2017 in Berlin.

20 Interview with granddaughter (born 1983) conducted by J. N. on 22 August 2018 in Bavaria.

21 Interview with grandson (born 1985) conducted by S. K. on 10 February 2018 in Hesse.

22 Interview with grandson (born 1989) conducted by S. K. on 14 July 2017 in Hesse.

a generation with a positive outlook precisely because of their negative experiences.<sup>23</sup> Various artifacts reminiscent of the grandparents' "lost home" also serve as silent witnesses to the past within families. These are objects rescued from transport, such as porcelain, glassware, a sewing machine, or a few black and white family photographs, which are imbued with strong symbolic and emotional significance. These singularized objects become family heirlooms (Kopytoff, 1986).<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the imagery associated with *Flucht und Vertreibung* in the minds of the grandchildren's generation is twofold. On one hand, it evokes feelings of loss, pain, and nostalgia. On the other hand, it generates notions and values about the physical and psychological resilience and adaptability of their ancestors. This dichotomy is exemplified in the story of a grandmother who survived expulsion while heavily pregnant. The grandson portrays this situation as a miracle, reflecting on the transmission of trauma and stress from mother to child (his father). He expresses his admiration and respect for the strength and determination of his ancestors:

*...she had to endure expulsion while heavily pregnant. Even there, there are some very distressing stories, which in retrospect, one can say that it's essentially a miracle that [my father] was born at all. That he survived these hardships that he was already experiencing in the womb in some way, that my grandmother had to endure during pregnancy. And that's a testament to me again of how resilient people must have been, those who went through that back then. The 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, that was a time, I don't think you can compare it to the present day.*<sup>25</sup>

It is noteworthy that the grandson situates his ancestors' story within a broader historical context, a period characterized by war, forced migration, and challenging integration. In doing so, he juxtaposes the past with the present, which he deems "incomparable". The experiences of the ancestors in the past are difficult for the current generation to comprehend and envision. In another interview, we gleaned that the current generation is perceived as "too soft" and "too whiny" and would likely struggle to confront the challenges endured by their grandparents' generation. The resilience of previous generations is also embedded in their manner of recounting the past, which, according to the narrator, they do not overdramatize: "[Today] people complain too much, it was probably much worse than what [grandparents] are actually telling now."<sup>26</sup>

The critique of the current generation simultaneously embodies a respect for the ancestors and their resilience, as well as an endeavour to learn from the past – "from that horror".<sup>27</sup> Even though the stories of previous generations are not reproduced in

23 Interview with granddaughter (born 1981) conducted by S. K. on 2 December 2017 in Hesse.

24 This was discussed in detail in another study (Kreisslová, Nosková, 2019).

25 Interview with grandson (born 1985) conducted by S. K. on 10 February 2018 in Hesse.

26 Interview with granddaughter (born 1981) conducted by S. K. on 2 December 2017 in Hesse.

27 Interview with granddaughter (born 1981) conducted by S. K. on 10 February 2018 in Hesse.

detail by the grandchildren's generation, these narratives indicate the presence of a traumatic past within families. Learning from a complex heritage ideally serves as a means to shape a better future, as one granddaughter passionately expressed towards the end of our conversation: "As future generations, we should learn from this, and we should strive to coexist harmoniously and endeavour to preserve and uphold this peace in which we are now privileged to live."<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

In our research, we delved into the family memory as it exists and is constructed within the grandchildren's generation. This generation is relatively rare examined in postmemory research. To us, family memory is what is remembered, or what was recollected in our presence (see Spalová, 2013: Paragraph 17). In our research, we focused on familial postmemory (Hirsch, 2012: 36). At the same time, we note that the subject of our analysis was an interview, so we cannot examine postmemory in the breadth as defined by Marianne Hirsch, who also observes, for example, the transmission of trauma through body language; respectively, we cannot examine the nonverbally articulated presence of the traumatic past through interactions, practices, rituals, gestures, as Carol Kidron (2009) has done. We can only evidence the possible silencing of trauma from narratives of silence. We employed Marianne Hirsch's notion of postmemory to investigate the manner in which the traumatic events linked to *Flucht und Vertreibung*, which profoundly influenced the lives of the grandparents, are mirrored in the recollections of their grandchildren.

In the memories of the grandchildren of Sudeten Germans certain recurring thematic patterns (*topoi*) occurs while speaking about (very often traumatic) experiences of their grandparents. Key themes are the rapid and often violent departure from their homes, accompanied by uncertainty about the future, the description of difficult beginnings after arriving in Germany, where the expellees were often marginalized and rejected, and a strong emotional charge associated with feelings of loss and helplessness. The memories told by the grandchildren frequently emphasize emotional experiences and traumas, while detailed knowledge of historical events is often suppressed or simplified. This phenomenon indicates our crucial insight that transgenerational trauma is primarily transmitted through emotional bonds to ancestors and strong affective responses.

Our contention is that the younger generation's understanding of their ancestors' traumatic history is not solely derived from familial narratives, photographs, and artefacts. Instead, it is primarily transmitted through a spectrum of affects and emotions that prevail, rather than an exhaustive comprehension of their ancestors'

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with granddaughter (born 1981) conducted by S. K. on 10 February 2018 in Hesse.

narratives. On one side, loss, pain, and existential threat are portrayed as outcomes of external circumstances beyond the ancestors' control. Conversely, personal and generational attributes associated with strength, resilience, and adaptability inspire feelings of pride, admiration, inspiration, and enlightenment in the narrators. These sentiments act as vital wellsprings of empathy and loyalty within the intergenerational family sphere. Specifically, as highlighted by Greiter (2019: 18), the family constitutes an "emotional network" that fosters solidarity and mutual assistance, elements that are essential for maintaining family cohesion.

Even though the "matter" is absent, the presence of an ancestral traumatic past can be deduced from the interviews. The dominant intergenerational distortions and the absence of detailed knowledge about ancestral life stories have been supplanted by narratives that are either general or simplistic. Despite their simplicity, these narratives carry a potent emotional charge. These emotions serve as a robust bond to the ancestors, fostering a sense of connection to the family's past that transcends the necessity to know the precise details of historical events. Thus, postmemory in narratives manifests itself primarily in the transmission of emotions. The question remains whether the youngest members of the grandchildren's generation who mostly know fewer facts ("matter") from their grandparents' traumatic experiences, will actively explore their ancestral past ("matter") later in life, similar to the authors of the *Flucht und Vertreibung* fiction, who were between 30 and 50 years old at the time of writing. Although these youngest interviewees stand on the brink of the floating gap, which may account for their distance and unawareness of the details of the family narrative, it may also be a phase in their lives, which might diminish their need to delve deeper into their family history. The past of their grandparents may seem remote and irrelevant to their everyday lives. It might only be at a later, more mature stage in life that it becomes clear whether the trauma experienced by their grandparents is also perceived as "their" trauma, a characteristic common to the postmemory generation. Interestingly, during the interviews, they reflected on this delayed interest, recognising the importance of preserving family memory for future generations and expressing a dedication to learning more about their ancestors' past in the future.

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