

Relating to the Distant Past: Routes of Memory of Women Concentration-Camp Survivors

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Abstract Personal stories and testimonies of survivors of Nazi concentration camps contributed to the construction of the Holocaust and Nazi genocide as a shared European realm of memory. A variety of individual memories of a certain event contribute to the creation of its collective representation which is then accessible for a wider range of people. This article deals with social dimensions of memory and trauma. It focuses on the engagement of individuals in the memory work related to traumatic past, particularly to the experience of Ravensbrück concentration camp. It examines the processes of remembering and meaning-construction in public and private contexts. The objective is to identify the routes of memory and the impacts on memory transmission in different spaces and temporalities. Ethnographic methods were deployed to investigate processes of remembering

in witnesses, women-concentration-camp survivors from various European countries, and the relation to the past familial experience in descendants.

Keywords collective memory, communicative memory, cultural memory, remembering, trauma, survivor, witness, Nazi genocide.

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Introduction

The Holocaust has been referred to as a European paradigmatic realm of memory, a European master narrative, a leitmotif of new thinking about the past of the 20th century, a transnational culture of commemoration (Assmann 2011), a moral category, or an iconic trauma (Sznajder 2011). Originally a historical event and a historical trauma experienced by people, it has become a structural trauma (LaCapra 2001), a history without actors and a specific context. An abstract phenomenon with blurred boundaries between the personal and collective, and the real and the imagined memories, it is a prototype of collective memory. (Sznajder 2011) Yet, there are witnesses still living today. They are the carriers of individual memories of experiences of internment in concentration camps, who practice memory work every day, be it by remembering or forgetting. The testimonies of survivors have significantly affected the shared knowledge of Nazi genocide. Such accounts amassed by interviewing witnesses were believed to provide access to the past experienced by individuals, often from, in official historical narratives, formerly silenced groups. Recently, however, this notion has been challenged by emerging theories on collective memory which assert that autobiographical memories and personal stories from the past are considerably less related to the actual past as they rather reflect the 'now and here' situation of the interview. (Erl 2005) In other words, remembering does not mean to look back and access the past, for it is rather a process of (re)construction influenced by social, spatial and temporal variables.

The Holocaust has drawn the attention of popular culture in the 1980's and more recently also of various scholarship. There has been a mass of research on Nazi genocide in history, oral history, philosophy, ethics, law, sociology, anthropology and other fields. Publicizing testimonies of survivors has been encouraged as well as examining archived official records of Nazi concentration-camp operation. As a result, a popular image of a survivor was created. According to it, he or she is a person with traumatic past rooted in the Second World War. It is an individual who suffered internment in a Nazi concentration or extermination camp and survived. In order to give evidence of the Nazi terror or, more generally, to warn the world against the evil of war and genocide, he or she is urged to speak. It is believed that survivors have testified in public since the end of the war. If they remained silent it was a significant silence, a silence marked by trauma. Such silence is popularly understood as a psychological need to process the traumatic experience. In other words, a survivor is perceived as someone whose motivation to publically speak about his or her experience is intrinsic and immediate, or sometimes postponed because of the inability to express it in words.

Ethnographic engagement with survivors has, however, revealed that there is a breach of time between the experience of the survivors and the commencement of them sharing their memories in public. The invitation to testify

is conducted by a public institution. Thus, one rather becomes a survivor as a response to a social appeal. This article is focused on the engagement of individuals in the memory work related to the traumatic past, particularly to the experience of Ravensbrück concentration camp. The objective is to examine the routes of memory of the survivors and the ways remembering is encouraged, realized and the memory transmitted verbally and non-verbally. I argue that the process of becoming a survivor and adopting the role of a witness, is characterised by plural reflection on the past experience preceding the individual's. Moreover, that occurs with a postponement in time, directing the experience into the distant past. The silence on the side of survivors is generally understood as an expression of the unspeakability of the experience and an evidence of trauma. However, it appears to be a response to more mundane occupations of everyday lives of the individuals and also the perception of the audience's disinterest in survivors' testimonies. One begins to perform a survivor after she is requested to do so. That is also reflected in the memory transmission within the family. Once the survivor is established in the role publically, the descendants engage themselves in the memory work attempting to construct the missing narrative of their familial history. In the interim, the relatives create their own meanings of scattered words, images, and behaviours related to Ravensbrück which they hear, observe and experience in their family lives.

By conducting this investigation, I aim at revealing the processes of remembering and social-memory construction and examining their possible interactions. Since the number of witnesses is decreasing, what will soon remain is the cultural memory materialized in written accounts, film and sound records, museums and memorial sites. At the moment, we might thus be on the verge of seizing the opportunity of observing the relation between communicative and cultural memories related to the experience of deportation to Nazi concentration camps. Also, I attempt to draw attention to the processes which survivors undergo as individuals who, personally involved in the event, have been engaged in the construction of the collective memory of the Holocaust/deportation¹, its transmission and conservation. These agents of memory have often investigated the topic themselves in order to provide a record of the historical event, published the accounts or participated in establishing memorials, often voluntarily, with or without obvious official or institutional assistance. Finally, by including the group of descendants, I seek to uncover the differences in meanings created by memory transmission in

1 I use the term Holocaust to refer to the genocide of the Jews, more specifically to "the Nazi politics of systematic killing of European Jews" between the Kristallnacht in 1938 and the end of WWII in 1945, for it has been rather exclusively used so in literature. (Tarant 2013: 20) I use the expression "deportation" as a denotation for the event of being transported to a Nazi concentration camp. It is more general and inclusive for various groups and individuals. Also, the informants who were labelled as political prisoners in the Nazi concentration camp do not understand the word Holocaust as referential to them. As one of them pointed out, "the Holocaust, it's not us, it's the Jews."

private areas and thus indicate the quality of memory as the reflection of the present rather than the access to the past.

Theoretical background

In the past decades, we have witnessed a memory boom introducing new concepts and terminology in the field of social sciences. Also, the so-called heritage industry, an area of tourism focusing on monuments, memorials and museums, has grown rapidly. The Holocaust and the Nazi genocide played a central role in the memory turn. Erll (2005) explains the transnational topicality of the theme by historical transformative processes (the Shoah, the Cold War, decolonization), changes in technologies and the influence of the media (recording, archiving, film industry), and an intellectual scientific-historic dimension (post-modern philosophy with the idea of the end of history and the end of master narratives). The major shift lies in the perception of memory as society- or group-bound with mutual constitutive powers of the individual and of the group. In my research, I consider the following concepts as the theoretical backgrounds for the analysis of data collected: the general concepts of collective or social memory, communicative and cultural memories.

Social Determination of Memory

According to the pioneer of memory studies Maurice Halbwachs (2009), memory is socially determined. We never remember alone. Memory happens in interaction with others. He writes about the so-called social frameworks of memory which are constructed in the process of socialization. A particular society in which an individual integrates moulds them based on what is communicated, perceived as important and reflected upon. The role of others is significant in the process of our remembering, according to Halbwachs's concept of memory. There are isolated and fragmentary images and feelings related to the past experience in people's minds, which they integrate into a coherent recollection by interacting with others. Thus, individual memory is never strictly individual as it relies on points located outside of it and uses collective tools such as language (Halbwachs 2009). Individual arrange the events, interpret and remember them in the framework of a symbolic collective order we are part of. Therefore, individual memory, referring to the memories of distinct individual people, is a specific combination of forms and contents of a memory compounded by one's memberships to different groups (Erll 2005).

In Halbwachsian notion of memory, there are three variables which interact – a group's past experiences, a group's identity and a group's collective memory. Thus, we anticipate the influence of various social groups on survivors' memory construction. As the informants in the presented research are members of various collectives, from the family, over national and international

associations of survivors (such as *Lagergemeinschaft Ravensbrück* in Austria and the International Ravensbrück Committee) to nation states, I presume that these structures will affect the construction and interpretation of their memories. Additionally, a particular social and temporal context in which recollection occurs is a significant variable.

Communicative and Cultural Memory

Jan and Aleida Assmann contributed to the early research on social memory by adding the categories of communicative and cultural memories. Communicative memory is constructed in everyday interactions. It consists of subjective experiences of the people involved. Therefore, it is time-limited to approximately 80–100 years. It can be characterized by spontaneity and “a high degree of non-specialization, reciprocity of roles, thematic instability and disorganization” (Assman – Czaplicka 1995: 126). In communication and subsequent memory construction, groups conceive their identity and self-image. Cultural memory, on the other hand, is distant from the everyday. It is objectified, fabricated, and even ceremonial. It has fixed points in the past, which are “fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance)” (ibid.: 129). It requires pre-understanding (and often special education) to be interpreted. In the Assmans’ concept, it refers to mythical events of the distant past. Cultural memory is connected with constructing collective identity and its transmission (Erll 2005). However, unlike the communicative memory, it is also accessible for members of out-groups due to its objectification. Assmann and Czaplicka (1995) characterize cultural memory by the concretion of identity, the capacity to reconstruct, formation, organization, obligation, and reflexivity.

The relation between these two categories of memory might be perceived as opposite regarding their liveliness versus steadiness, subjectivity versus objectivity or randomness versus fabrication. The survivors of Ravensbrück (and their descendants) are, however, both, agents of communicative memory and also contributors to cultural memory, as they have been objectified in museums, literature or documentaries.

Methods

The research methods are grounded in the field of ethnography as “an eclectic methodological choice which privileges engaged, contextually rich and nuanced type of qualitative social research” (Falzon 2009: 1). Ethnography provides “an effective methodology to capture the performative and interpersonal moments in which the public and the private join forces to salvage memory on the edge of oblivion” (Kidron 2015: 69) and allows for examining “how memory work is experienced every day” (ibid.: 70).

Various ethnographic methods have been deployed in the research such as participant observation, deep semi-structured interviews and audio-visual methods. These approaches require an effective rapport between the subjects and the researcher, which then provides for an opportunity of, in Geertzian (Geertz 1973) sense, a thick description of the group of rememberers, the practices of commemoration and the processes of remembering itself. The research design is transnational and multi-sited and includes private and public spaces of remembrance in Austria, Catalonia, the Czech Republic, Germany and Italy.

The interview questions were intended to unveil the processes of memory-construction, its commencement, the internal or external encouragement to remember and the meaning struggle in the ones who have direct experience with internment in the concentration camp but whose memories are also formed by various member-groups. They investigate the following. How has the memory of internment in the concentration camp Ravensbrück been communicated verbally and non-verbally by the women-survivors? What were the triggering moments in conscious narrative remembering? How are remembering and commemoration reflected on by the witnesses themselves and their descendants? To what extent do they identify with being survivors or the second or third generation, i. e. exclusive carriers of first-hand experience which forms personal and familial memories?

This article will present the findings of a unit of a more complex research project on the memory of the concentration camp Ravensbrück, mainly based on the analysis of field notes from participant observation of commemorative events, meetings of survivors and reunions of the International Ravensbrück Committee, observations of private spaces of survivors and descendants, and also of vignettes of interviews with ten people (three witnesses and seven descendants, mainly women and one man) conducted in Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany and Italy and Spain between the years 2014 and 2016.

Field and Informants

The informants have been selected by purposive typical-case sampling. They are engaged in public remembering. They have at some point in their lives either referred to their own experiences of the deportation to the concentration camp or spoken about their relative familial histories in public. Also, most of them are members of some survivor association, national or international, related to the concentration camp Ravensbrück.² They have partic-

2 The Nazi concentration camp Ravensbrück opened in May 1939 and was liberated in April 1945, making it one of the very last camps to be reached by the Allies (Helm 2015). The number of women-prisoners reached 130, 000 in the six years of existence of the camp. Political activists, Jewish, Roma and Sinti women, Jehovah's Witnesses, and women labelled as criminals or anti-social were interned there. The memorial was established at the sight in 1959, first as a museum located at the original camp ground displaying artefacts donated by former prisoners.

ipated in national and international commemorative events. They have visited Ravensbrück Memorial, often repeatedly. They are active agents in the transmission of the cultural memory of Ravensbrück concentration camp. Most of them have been engaged in learning personal stories of other prisoners and also factual information relevant to Ravensbrück and their own personal histories.

The group of informants consists predominantly of survivors and their family members. The witnesses, women deported to Ravensbrück, are the bearers of individual experiences who share the following variables, space, time, gender, and experience. They were interned in the Nazi concentration camp Ravensbrück (same space, experience) between the years 1942 and 1945 (same time period). They are all women (same gender). The majority of them were labelled as political prisoners according to the Nazi incarceration system. They differ in nationality and locality after their return. They have all been interviewed by historians, filmmakers, and other professionals and their stories have been recorded and archived. Thus, they have in some form, for example in photographs or videos, become exhibits on display in national or local museums and memorials. The descendants are mainly second-generation (or third-generation) family members. Such sample of informants thus allows for examining both memories, the communicative (everyday, familial remembering) and the cultural (public, objectified remembering arranged by institutions).

The interviewees have been selected mainly from the International Ravensbrück Committee, a non-governmental public association founded in 1948 by former Ravensbrück prisoners, whose members are nowadays also women-family members or women-professionals (historians or ethnologists, for example) delegated from individual European countries. The committee holds annual meetings and participates in national and international commemorative events. The interviews were mostly conducted in the native languages of the informants and then translated into English.

Public Remembering Narrating One's Personal Memories

The survivors have all spoken about their experience of deportation to the concentration camp and their memories of the traumatic past in public. Moreover, their stories have been written, audio or video recorded and published. Consequently, they have been referred to as 'rememberers' ('pamětnice' in the Czech language), 'witnesses of a time period' ('Zeitzeugin' in the German-speaking areas) or 'deportees' ('deportata'/'deportée'/'deportada' in the Romanic-language cultures). They were given these designations as they had commenced to perform in ceremonies of public remembering, usually after decades, even fifty years, of silence.

Being a survivor means to belong to everyone. One becomes an object of shared European cultural memory. Survivors employ their episodic memory to contribute to the construction of the semantic memory of Nazi genocide. A concentration-camp survivor is a protagonist in the collective story of Nazi terror in Europe. She is placed in front of the audience in schools or museums to answer questions such as: How was it in the camp? How did you feel when you returned? What strategies did you develop to survive the concentration camp? She is requested to share her personal experience to provide universal responses to evil. One is not only questioned but also recorded, filmed, photographed and exhibited. "So the director displayed us," commented one survivor, quite naturally, on a visit of a German group to a Czech memorial of Nazi genocide. One performs in commemorative events. Survivors usually sit in the front rows during the gatherings, some of them dressed distinctly. For example, some former prisoners of Ravensbrück often wear a small striped scarf with a red triangle tied on their necks. It is a symbol of their membership to the group of political prisoners. Being a survivor means to deliver authenticity. Witnesses are broadcast on television as authentic voices, the ones who were 'there'. They represent a group of the ones who know how 'it' was, who experienced it and survived and who possibly can teach those who were not there, do not know and want to learn about the Nazi terror. As the moral status of concentration-camp survivors is high nowadays, they are expected to provide an access to the lesson society should learn from the Holocaust.

Having adopted the role, the women-survivors have given a number of talks to adults and the youth. In their performances they have developed various strategies of transmission. When asked how they speak about their experiences from the concentration camp, two Czech survivors replied differently.

*I try not to repeat myself, so every session is different.
I focus on one thing and start. For example, I begin to tell
them about my lager habits, you know. (Jaroslava)³*

One engages in audience-oriented carefully composed storytelling, whereas the other one highlights the lesson from history which the audience should learn.

*I prefer speaking about history rather than personal matters.
For it's such a coincidence what happened. So, I don't speak very
personally. You know, I spent those three years there, I didn't even
have to go to the nursery room. I was just working at the sewing*

3 When including excerpts from interviews or utterances of informants, I refer to them by their first names. Also, I tend to mention their nationality as it is a distinct variable in the heterogeneous group of informants.

machine. I mean I survived it without any bigger harm, so (...) I want people not to forget the history, because it was just terrible in the time of Hitler. Your life could change so much. (Miloslava)

In this utterance, we can observe the prevailing moral imperative to share the 'big' history lived by an individual. The motivation to remember seems to be moral and political (for such events not to be repeated), rather than personal (to heal the wounds caused by the trauma). In reaction to victims of the Holocaust beginning to speak openly about their experiences in 1980's and later, the ethical concept of moral witness was introduced. Aleida Assmann (2012) writes about witness memory which "includes public commemoration and an appeal to future generations" (Assmann 2012: 177). Witnesses gave voice to the ones that perished in the genocide and took part in "the social recognition of historical traumas" (ibid.). The storytelling is structured around the grand historical events and facts and numbers are pointed out. Abstract knowledge takes over memory. We can also read this as a confession that the personal story is not perceived as grave enough to be talked about in public, not full enough of trauma, pain and suffering and therefore not fitting the image of a narrative of a Nazi-concentration-camp survivor. This might therefore be an example of self-regulation when one had learned about other stories and when the socially accepted image of a concentration-camp prisoner is connected with obvious, even visualized, physical and mental suffering. As Alexander (2012) writes "the emotional experience of suffering, while critical, is not primordial; to find a meaning of suffering, it must be framed against background expectations" (Alexander 2012: 3). "It is the social group that constructs the narratives of victims and perpetrators, not the individuals themselves, as "to transform individual suffering into collective trauma is cultural work" (ibid.). By stating that no big damage was done to her in the camp on the one hand and referring to the horrors of the time period and the Nazi regime on the other hand, this survivor confirms that the 'Hitler era' has undergone the process of a *meaning struggle* (Alexander 2004), a *trauma drama* (Eyerman 2004) and thus has been recognised, accepted, and has become part of the discourse in her society. Consequently, it is a cultural trauma anyone in that particular society can relate to, without having personal experience.

Turning to a more personal perspective, the agency of survivors in public testimonies appears to have a curative and empowering effect relevant to their selves. Campbell (1997) draws attention to the "importance of memory to our status as persons and our development as selves" (Campbell 1997: 63). Remembering means constructing one's life story, a self-narrative. "Engagement in memory narratives is also fundamental to maintaining and repairing a sense of self rendered vulnerable through traumatic harm" (ibid.). On the other hand, she argues that there are social aspects which modify the narratives which would be heard as she writes "we can look for much of our cultural respect for rememberers

to be realized in the types of narratives we allow or encourage them to engage in, and in the various narrative positions we allow them to hold.” (ibid.: 61).

Becoming a Survivor

The public transmission of the memory of the past related to the imprisonment in Ravensbrück commenced several decades after the event. The witnesses joined the “*conspiracy of silence* between Holocaust survivors and society” (Peck 1997: 59) which characterized also the lives of Holocaust survivors who emigrated from Europe. All interviewees agreed that for a long time they had not spoken about their past experiences from Ravensbrück with other people, including their family members. They explain the silent period by having focused on other occupations such as work or family. It appears that there had probably been no incentive for a thorough reflection for the women on what they had experienced, which they account for existential reasons. Obviously the concerns with care for victims of traumatic events had not occurred subsequently after the war. For example, one of the interviewed survivors began to work one week after her return to Czechoslovakia, having spent three years in the concentration camp and two months on the so-called ‘death march’, the forced foot march of the deportees after the liberation of the camps.

Another reason the survivors mention to explain their silence is the lack of public attention to the matter, a simple not being asked about the event. As one of the Italian survivors puts it:

*I wanted to talk about it but faced no overt interest,
so I preferred to be quiet. (Mirella)*

Some survivors believe that the silence of people around them had served as protection. A survivor from the Czech Republic remembers her colleagues at work trying to prevent her from re-experiencing the trauma. She says:

When I was working in the health insurance company, my colleagues didn't dare to ask what it had been like in the camp, because they thought they would bring about some sad memory. No one ever asked me how it was. They were not curious about it, so (...) They wanted me to rather forget about it and not re-live it in my mind. (Miloslava)

Eventually, the silence was interrupted. It seems that generally the impulse came from the outside, from the public, as a request for an engagement in political memory work rather than from the inner motivations of the survivors. The informants claim that it was an institution, an association of survivors, a school, a political organisation, which encouraged the deliberate recollection of the deportation.

Two sisters refer to the invitation from German schools to speak about their stories related to Nazi-concentration camp as the triggering moment of verbal (public) remembering. Such regular meetings took place in Germany in the 1990's after the change of political regime and the beginning of the establishment of more open international connections, in Europe. This is an excerpt of a conversation about remembering between the two informants.

Miloslava: *Everybody says that. No one wanted to speak about it before, even in the family.*

Jaroslava: *I didn't want to. Because it was so... You know our Míla didn't want to, in Hradec when she'd come to visit them, they hadn't learned anything from her. Only when I arrived I said something, but not much. You know, people didn't ask. And when they did, like they asked me at work... They noticed that I had a painted cross on the back of my sweater.*

Miloslava: *The first time it was in Germany, really.*

Jaroslava: *For sure.*

Although, as one of the witnesses says, they did not articulate the memory of their experiences from the concentration camp, the connection with the death-world was carried on materialized in a cross painted on the back of the sweater which she was wearing at work. It was the sweater which accompanied the survivor on the death march after the liberation of Ravensbrück. The Nazi painted crosses on the backs of civilian clothes for the prisoners who worked outside the camp in order to distinguish them from civilians. However, the meaning of the cross changed for the informant, it normalized in the after-camp life and, for the survivor, the sweater functioned as a sweater, a mundane garment, she wore to the office.

An Italian deportee confirms the appeal to become a survivor from outside by saying:

It was around 2000's on the insistence of the Association⁴ that I began to tell my experiences at schools. (Mirella)

She referred to something that other Italian informants named *the Italian anomaly*. They explained it as the hardships surrounding public reflection on the era of fascism in Italy, which is postponed in comparison to other countries. For example, the museum of fascism is non-existent, feelings of nostalgia as well as apologetic strategies occur. They believe that the focus on the Second World War is stronger and more information available in other European countries. Obviously, power – of political elites, ethnic groups or

4 By Association she means 'Associazione nazionale ex deportati politici nei campi nazisti' founded in 1968, the Italian national group which unites survivors of Nazi concentration camps and their family members.

mass media – is a significant variable in negotiating what will be remembered and how and what will be forgotten.

Knowing that memory does not provide a direct access to the past, yet is rather reflective of the current state of mind of the person who remembers, we may ask about the relationship between the individual rememberer and the institution in whose political framework and in whose orchestrated scenario the personal memories are pronounced. It could be a public school, as mentioned above, a memorial, a national or local museum which enlists the witnesses to participate in its program. The socio-political reading of collective memory, which highlights the instrumentalization of war memories in service to statecraft, would imply that such educational sessions hegemonically constitute master narratives which are in accordance with the values of current political leadership (Kidron 2015). On the other hand, “the more “psychocultural” perspective might focus on the individual motivations to establish one’s identity, relate to the familial past, re-live emotions and cope with the trauma.

Despite the silence and claimed absence of verbal remembering, most survivors remembered corporally, in habits. One of the survivors have performed the habits learned in the concentration camp, such as walking next to the pavement, or counter-habits to the experienced suffering, such as emptying every plate, in the subsequent years of their lives. One described the unconscious incorporation of traumatic images of the evil world in the camp into her family life as her dreams about the Nazi period signified ill fortune.

It was some kind of intuition...Whenever I dreamt about the SSmen, my children would be ill. (Miloslava)

One of the informants has confronted the trauma by verbalizing it in writing. She has published two books about her past, the second of which to the heaviness of memories already in its title ‘The Memories Still Weigh Down on Me’. She spoke about haunting memories and the recurring inability to sleep before she had put the trauma into words onto the paper. She published the book from her own initiative at the age of ninety. She regards the fifty-year postponement as a common process of dealing with trauma.

Those who returned from the lager, the Jewish children who survived, they were fourteen or so, no one had spoken about it. (...) And everyone, even the Jewish who wrote something about it, a book or something, they began after turning seventy. (Jaroslava)

Later, at the old age, she felt the urge to make sense of her own life, particularly of the time of the traumatic experience.

You're somehow through life, even the civilian one, yeah, and then you tell yourself, well, how long can I still be here? So, I'll write it or I have to tell that somehow to the children. So I began the memoirs. In my eighties, the first book was published and the second one in my nineties. No one had wanted to... Simply, you hadn't wanted to recall it whatsoever. (Jaroslava)

Remembering within the Family

In the preface of a testimony written by her mother, a descendant, born after the Second World War, writes:

"My mother, grandmother and aunt spent three years in a concentration camp. My grandfather was killed. As a child, I had the feeling that we never spoke about anything else at home than what had happened and how it had been there." (Skleničková 2016: 3)

Obviously, the daughter has adopted the identity of a second-generation survivor.

A discrepancy in the memories of the mother and the daughter can be observed here. The mother claims the absence of verbal transmission of the trauma in the family and so did subsequently, in an informal conversation, another second-generation member who grew up in the same household, whereas the daughter appears to have been overwhelmed by it. As Annette Kuhn (2002) in her book of essays on memory 'Family Secrets' explains "remembering takes place for, as much as in, the present". Being aware of that might help us perceive memory "as a position or point of view in the current moment than as an archive or a repository of by-gones" (Kuhn 2002: 128); to understand memory as a constantly changing vantage point of "the places and times through which we individually and collectively have been journeying". For isn't it "only when we look back that we make a certain kind of sense of what we see?" (Kuhn 2002: 128).

Most of the interviewed descendants of survivors joined survivor associations and other memory groups after the 2000's, being at the age of fifty or more. Hence they have voluntarily embraced the traumatic past of family history by engaging in the collective political memory work of the Nazi genocide. Processes of remembering in a group may result in the occurrence of vicarious memory. It is "a concept that refers to strong, personal identifications with historical collective memories that belong to people other than those who experienced them directly" (Climo 1995: 176). Such identification with someone else's memories is often based on emotions, for memories (especially of trauma) evoke powerful feelings in individuals, which subsequently strengthens their connection to a particular group and its heritage and culture. "Through a strong emotional attachment vicarious memory can be passed from one

generation to the next or over many generations as collective memories of people who share common historical identity and the process of its redefinition through time” (ibid.). Vicarious memories often engender the feeling of responsibility to carry on the memory, from the individuals who had directly experienced the event in the past to those who experience it indirectly. Therefore, descendants dedicate themselves to continuing in the memory work their relatives commenced.

In a more psychological perspective, accepting the identity of a descendant may be a reaction to ‘the presence of an absence’, which family members of survivors experience, as Berger (1995) writes about American second-generation Holocaust witnesses. It is the sense and knowledge of the pain and traumatic experience that had happened before they were born lived in the family space where “amnesia takes place of memory” (Berger 1995: 24). Despite the silence and the absence of stories told about the lives of their relatives connected with the genocide, the second and third generations possess their “own images of Holocaust memory” (ibid.) and have participated in their familial memory by observing or simply living with their parents.

Before the survivors began to share their memories related to the traumatic experience in public, they had avoided such deliberate storytelling within the family. The silence is generally understood as the absence of the traumatic period in the familial history which is yet inevitably present. In spite of the non-speaking, other routes of memory transmission occurred in the family, for the descendants of the survivors gained knowledge of what had happened to their mothers. In her ethnographic work with survivors in Israel, Carol Kidron described ‘the silence presence of the Holocaust’, which provides a perspective of silence as a content-carrier (in contrast to the above mentioned ‘absence of presence’) and reveals other meanings of trauma and memories of the ‘death-world’ of the Holocaust created in familial interactions.

The son of an Austrian survivor pointed out the silence of his mother at the very beginning of the interview. It was the message he had prepared to communicate before he was asked questions.

I don't know anything about it directly from my mother. She always tried to protect me, so she never told me about it ... all the horrors that happened there. She didn't talk about it with me at all. I learned that from books in which she had also written ... Or when there was an interview. (Ludwig)

He clearly understood the need for silence and the forbiddance to ask.

She made me feel it very strongly that she couldn't speak about it to me. Not that I would somehow think about it, I felt that I shouldn't (ask). (Ludwig)

Other informants from Spain, a daughter and a niece of deportees confirm similar phenomena.

Most Spanish survivors lived in exile in France when Spain was under Franco's political regime. They joined French survivor associations and participated in commemorative ceremonies in France and Germany.

My mother used to go alone to the commemoration events in Ravensbrück. She was glad when I was invited by the German government in 1975, but never after that had she spoken about taking us - me, my brother, nor my father. It was ... I don't know ... it was something hers, her history. She told us about that but we never accompanied her. Only when I was forty did she want to take me to Ravensbrück. She had gone many times by herself, indeed, but we never spoke about it at home. (Margarita)

In those days too, at the end of the sixties, my aunt was already in the committee of the deported and they did a lot of things. (...) I experienced it when I was in France but when I was here in Spain, nothing. There was nothing. One didn't speak about this topic. One couldn't speak about it. I did live it in the family, but never spoke about it with anyone. (Carme)

Silent Presence of the Holocaust

A major part of knowledge of the Holocaust has been gained from oral or written verbal expressions, such as for example, survivors' testimonies, autobiographies, public speeches or museum talks. On the other hand, the Holocaust, has been referred to as an event beyond words, beyond narrative and beyond representation (Kidron 2009). In most literature, silence is interpreted to confirm the unspeakability of the traumatic past. Ethnography, by contrast, reveals the presence of the trauma in silent practices, person to person, and person to object interactions. Kidron (2009) writes about the Eurocentric psychosocial norm of voice. "The absence of voice is understood as signalling psychopathologized processes of avoidance and repression, especially suspect processes of personal secrecy, or collective processes of political subjugation" (Kidron 2009: 6). Thus well-being is believed to be conditioned by the liberation of voice. Moreover, in this perspective, silence is not understood as a medium of expression, for it does not transmit knowledge.

During her scientific work with family members of Holocaust survivors in Israel, Kidron revealed the lived memory of the traumatic past, "the dynamic, normative, and self-imposed silent presence of the Holocaust death world interwoven in everyday life" (Kidron 2009: 15). This can be illustrated, for example, by the emblematic image of 'the empty plate', a common habit of not leaving any food on the plate, symbolizing the survivors' appreciation

of food as a result of starvation in concentration camps. According to Kidron, domestic silence created “an alternative, nonverbal route through which the emotive and corporeal experience, rather than the recollected cognitive narrative, of the past may be transmitted/communicated” (Kidron 2009: 16).

Lived Remembering

The informants declared some extent of transmission of the memory of Ravensbrück and the knowledge of it without intentional storytelling within the family, which originated in personal interactions. Sharing the space and actions with the survivor allowed for uncovering traces of the past hidden in silence. Images or pieces of language from the death-world emerged in the minds of the descendants as young children. The son of a survivor from Austria said that his first three-syllable word had been Ravens-brück. He explained his knowledge of Ravensbrück by the fact that his mother had been a member of the Austrian Ravensbrück Association (Österreichische Lagergemeinschaft Ravensbrück & FreundInnen) and had participated in its regular meetings. He used to accompany her as a young child and used to be surrounded by ‘Ravensbrückerinnen’, the former women-prisoners. The gatherings were common to him and the women were kind. Therefore, he developed the notion of Ravensbrück as something pleasant. It was his mother’s world and spending time with her co-prisoners created a positive image of the place in the mind of the son. Moreover, in his childish imagination, it was an ordinary sequence of events in life that one is interned in a concentration camp for some time.

In the beginning, when I was small and couldn’t understand it all, I knew she had been in Ravensbrück, she had been in a concentration camp, in Uckermark. And as a child I had the impression that it is normal. One goes to school for some time, one works for some time and one is in a concentration camp for a few years... (Ludwig)

Another pair of interviewees, a mother and daughter from Italy, showed a picture drawn by the five-year-old grandson of the survivor. The obviously naïve drawing depicts a cage with two women behind the bars and a man aiming a gun at them. In the background, there is another scene, a train carrying two women. They both understood the drawing as an evidence of his knowledge that ‘some kind of imprisonment’ had happened to his grandmother and his great grandmother, yet they seemed to be surprised how he could learn about that as it had not been spoken about in the family in his childhood.

While conducting the research, I had the opportunity, and the privilege, to enter the private spaces of the interviewees. Hence, I could observe their living environments and see objects which might bear the memory of the

concentration camp. All witnesses as well as most of the descendants possessed 'the bookshelf'. It appears to be a distinct component of a survivor's household, a bookshelf or a number of them with a range of literature about the Nazi era, genocide and specific histories relative to national contexts or personal stories of former prisoners.⁵ Collecting books relevant to the survivor experience, a postponed quest for knowledge seems to be typical of survivors who have identified with such role. Literature is also referred to as the main source of information about familial history for the descendants.

Some of the survivors have donated objects from the camp to museums, others keep them at home. They can be photographs taken on the death march, letters their relatives received, or the red triangle for prisoner identification preserved in a cupboard in the living room. Kidron (2009) also revealed that the objects from the death-world had been incorporated in the ordinary post-war lives of the survivors. She argues that the objects related to the experience from Nazi concentration camps, which have already become representative images of trauma, loss and suffering (such as piles of worn-out shoes on display in Holocaust museums), might bear other meanings for the survivors in their after-lives as they have become mundane. She illustrates this with an example of a spoon which a survivor brought from Auschwitz. Later as a mother, she fed her daughter with that particular spoon. For the mother the spoon was a symbol of survival, not a memento of the traumatic experience, neither an object of museum. Similarly, a daughter of a German political prisoner recalls that the experience of imprisonment had been a part of the ordinary life of the family, materialized in an object of use. She opens a box with personal things which belonged to her mother: a dress, a pair of glasses, a number of letters, a diary and a small metal pot carefully wrapped in a plastic bag. All the things are neatly placed in the box. As she is taking them out, it is obvious that they are no longer ordinary pieces. Instead, they have become archival and almost sacred material. She explains:

And this pot was in our pot collection naturally, particularly for cooking milk. For a cup of milk, it was, burnt a lot of times because we used it... And my mother used to say: "Give me the pot from Ravensbrück", it was called so. Yes, and then we would cook milk in it and wash it and put to other pots for cooking meat and potatoes. And it was so also when my mother was long time dead. When I moved into this apartment, it was in 1975, a lot of various people helped me. One of them took the box with pots and wanted to clear it out. Then she said: "Such an awful pot, you can throw it away immediately!" And then I said: "Help! That's Ravensbrück!" And she told me: "And what

5 Such bookshelf was also one of the artefacts exhibited in the Jewish Museum in Munich I visited in 2013. The curator's idea was to have the staff chose significant objects related to the Jewish history. The bookshelf was chosen by a grandchild of a Holocaust survivor.

does it have to do with the other pots?" Yes, she was right. I took the pot and created this "Helm"⁶ box, where I store the things... But Ravensbrück had been in a way always present as an object of use, yes and that it's of museum, that was, hm ... It was not through... I could have taken it out and my mother could have, too. (Barbara)

On the contrary, an Austrian informant adopted an object of museum as a personal one. Her house was under reconstruction when I entered it for a meeting to conduct an interview. She lead me into one of the rooms which used to be her son's and then served as an office. There was an enlarged framed black and white photography on the wall. There are three women with tied hair in the foreground bending over a large table, engaged in work with fabric. The space behind them opens into a big hall with other women in the background. The image looks old-fashioned because of the colour, the hair-styles and the dresses which the depicted women are wearing. The informant points to the woman in the centre of the photograph and says it is her grandmother. It is a photograph taken in one of the sewing factories of the concentration camp Ravensbrück where the grandmother died. It was found in the Nazi archives and used for exhibition purposes of the Ravensbrück Memorial. For the granddaughter, however, it is a personal, intimate, memento and she claims it one of the most important objects she possesses.

*It is one of the few things I would take with me
if the house was burning. (Siegrid)*

Although the photograph was taken in the death-world, during slave work and most probably by a Nazi officer, it does not have traumatic connotations for the informant. It is rather a dear item from a family album, a memory of her grandmother she never got to know, an emotional connection with the past generation of the family.

As Halbwachs (2009) points out "we do not forget anything" (Halbwachs 2009: 120). There are no blank spaces in our minds, areas of the past which would be suppressed to the extent that there would be no image for them. Kuhn (2002) refers to the nature of memory as 'phantasmagoria'. "Perhaps memory shares the imagistic quality of unconscious productions like dreams and fantasies" as it "does not operate with the language of logic but with images" (Kuhn 2002: 160). Thus, "considerations, displacements, gaps, non-casual logic and discontinuous scenes" (ibid.) are typical features.

6 Reference to Sarah Helm, a historian and an author of a historical book about Ravensbrück 'If This Is a Woman' with whom the informant has collaborated.

Conclusion

In this article the occurrence of remembering of the past experience of deportation to the concentration camp Ravensbrück in women survivors and their descendants was investigated. A range of interactions of the women in which memory work has taken place has been examined. Radstone (2005) writes that “memory can be social only if it is capable of being transmitted and to be transmitted a memory must first be articulated” (Radstone 2005: 134). All informants have at some point in their lives articulated their memories of the concentration camp, in public commemorative events, audio and video records or in written accounts. The remembering was conducted under the conditions given by some national or international institution. “Public reflexivity takes the form of a performance” (Turner 1979: 465). Interestingly, it is the public performance of witnessing and commemoration which generates individual reflection in survivors as well as their family members. Such reflection is separated from the past experience by approximately five decades. The silence separating the experience from its verbal reconstruction is perceived as a distance between the witnesses and the audience. Despite it, there had been other channels which allowed for memory transmission. There is a prevalence of non-narrated or ‘silent’ memory transmission in the family, which occurred in interactions with persons, objects or as lived in habitual practice. Also, the survivors tend to relate to their past experience in a more structured manner than their family members. As they have adopted the witness identity, they carefully fabricate and even censure their remembering. By contrast, the descendants describe separated images, scenes or feelings when they recollect. Moreover, they seem to have created different, often non-traumatic meanings of the transmitted memories of their ancestors.

Cultural memory of Ravensbrück is constructed upon the memories transmitted by survivors as they were the founders of the first museum on the site as well as the primary collectors of evidence relevant to that particular experience of Nazi terror. Nevertheless, it has been formed and modified over time in a close relation to social, political and ideological demands. Thus, nowadays various themes are included, such as gender or recognition of the commemoration particular groups, which were not necessarily pronounced by witnesses.

As for the motivation to recall, ‘becoming a survivor’ appears to contain a demand grounded in the morals of a certain community to remember, in opposition to forgetting. The moral appeal identified in testimonies of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust may be explained by the fact that memory transmission is a core Jewish value. “Observe and recall” is the appeal to worshippers, which welcomes the Shabbat. There is a moral cultural imperative to commemorate the dead. Also “the responsibility to the memory of one’s parents and ancestors is deeply embedded in Jewish cosmology and praxis” (Kidron

2003: 527). Thus, the Jew is the carrier of the Jewish memory, no matter how distant from the familial or collective event.

Nevertheless, we have observed a similar moral command in non-Jewish witnesses, former political prisoners, as they have been engaged in the political memory work of their national country and later, since the 1990's, of the common European project.

Adversely, more personal motivations such as emotional affiliation or quest for completing a family history/memory occur in descendants. Yet, they have all adopted the identity of agents and successors of the memory work related to the trauma of Nazi era.

Finally, in regard to methodology deployed in approaching individual and social memory, epistemological concerns may occur. Memory is not one, since remembering is (re)constructive and involves "shifting, distortion, reevaluation, reshaping" (Assmann 2011: 19). As Lambek (2009) comments, anthropologists may be "professionally too readily inclined to push informants into putting things into words" (Kidron 2009: 20). The tool of language, for example the terms and notions available to the informants, will thus participate in the reshaping of memory. "In the period between present action and future recall, memory does not wait patiently in its safe house; it has its own energy and is exposed to a process of transformation" (Assmann 2011: 19). Bearing that in mind may encourage methodological choices in researchers which focus on the non-verbal aspects of informants' performances in order to examine memory and remembering in their opacity.

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Vztah k dávné minulosti: přenos paměti žen přeživších koncentrační tábor

Osobní příběhy a svědectví přeživších zakládají obecný Evropský traumatický narativ o nacistických koncentračních táborech. Množství individuálních vzpomínek na určitou událost v minulosti přispívá k vytvoření její reprezentace, která je pak přístupná širší skupině lidí. Tento článek se zabývá sociální dimenzí paměti a traumatu. Na základě teorií o paměti a traumatu jako sociálních konstruktech zkoumá procesy vzpomínání na deportaci

do koncentračního tábora, vytváření kolektivní paměti a tvorby významů ve veřejném a soukromém kontextu. Cílem textu je identifikovat způsoby přenosu paměti a vlivy na něj v různých prostorech a časech. Využitím etnografických metod se článek zaměřuje na procesy vzpomínání u pamětníků, žen z různých evropských zemí, které přežily koncentrační tábor Ravensbrück, a jejich potomků.



Former Polish prisoners at the site of Ravensbrück Memorial. Photo taken by Š. Kadlecová, 2015.



Prisoner number od Italian survivor.
Photo taken by Š. Kadlecová, 2015.