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Re-narrations: How pasts change in conversational remembering

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Abstract
Research on social memory phenomena is confronted with the problem that social memory has neither a substrate in the sense of a remembering subject nor a central organ of an operating memory in the sense of a human brain. As a consequence, social memory exclusively exists *between* subjects and not *within* them, its form of existence consists of communication. In its first part, the article presents examples of family conversations that show that family memory does not serve as storage for memories, but rather serves as a catalyst for the most different elements of the past to be specifically combined by the involved persons. On the basis of a replication of Bartlett's classical experiment on remembering and re-narrating, the second part of the article demonstrates that the acquisition and transmission of imaginations of the past follows patterns that are specific to the respective generation. This leads to theoretical remarks on the constitutive viscosity of social memory.

Key words
communicative unconscious, social memory, re-narrations

In contrast to those fields of memory research that are concerned with the memory of the individual person, research on social memory phenomena is confronted with the peculiar problem that social memory has neither a substrate in the sense of a remembering subject nor a central organ of an operating memory in the sense of a human brain. As a consequence, social memory exclusively exists *between* subjects and not *within* them; its form of existence consists of communication.

Accordingly, findings such as the fact that family memory consists of highly controversial, inconsistent and incoherent stories, on whose courses and contents not even the family itself agrees, are not surprising at all (Welzer et al., 2002; Shore, 2008). As Angela Keppler (1994) has already shown in a study on familial dialogues, processes of conversational remembering (Middleton and Edwards, 1990) have the function to confirm that the social group exists and functions. The respective story and the contents that are being dealt with in those repetitive acts of memory communications take up a secondary position towards the relational function of communicating about the past.

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Nevertheless, such communications provide for the persons involved multilayered data and imaginations about pasts, and this especially because stories communicated on a personal basis – for example the war experiences of a grandfather – have a different and, above all, emotional sound, in contrast to data on the past that are mediated through history lessons or documentary films. Whilst the latter mainly deal with historical facts and their normative contextualization, communication in memory communities mainly transfers the emotional frames for the interpretation of narratives and images of the past.

Acquisitions and applications of pasts always follow the needs and demands of the present, and in this way individuals as well as memory communities always choose those aspects from the endless inventory of existing historical narratives and images that make the most sense for them in the real time of narrating and listening. Thus, stories that are remembered and re-narrated by every single member of a family from the complete inventory of familial stories of the past are always different from those that would be told by a different member of the family. This becomes especially apparent when familial communication is compared to stories re-narrated by members of the family from different generations when on their own.

The first part of this article will include some examples on this issue that show that family memory does not serve as storage for memories, but rather serves as a catalyst for most different elements of the past to be specifically combined by the involved persons – in such a way that it makes sense to them.

On the basis of a replication of Bartlett's (1997[1932]) classical experiment, the second part will demonstrate that this type of acquisition and transmission of imaginations of the past follows a certain pattern that is specific to the respective generation, even when it is not about families remembering something meaningful from the past, but rather groups thrown together by coincidence, belonging to the same generation and reproducing a memory narration that stems from a different generation.

Making Sense of History: How Stories Change in Transmission Through the Generations

Research on re-narrations and research on the transmission of historical consciousness in intergenerational communications both deal with the question how human beings interpret and narrate biographical events. In our survey on the transmission of historical consciousness related to the national socialist past (Welzer et al., 2002) it has become clear that the stories that are told by grandmothers and grandfathers experience considerable changes along the way, especially at the evaluative level. Such a reformatting of heard and narrated stories follows familial loyalty on the one hand and generational and individual needs for meaning on the other: one wants to, for example, tell a 'good story' about one's own grandfather, measured against current norms, since the family's past plays an important role for the creation of one's own identity. This becomes difficult if the important relative has committed a crime that would be morally highly condemnable from the point of view of the grandchild. It is exactly this that has been demonstrated by the study: when knowledge of a National Socialist (NS) past is pronounced and the judgement about the past is morally clearly negative, members of the generation of grandchildren fabricate stories in which their own grandparents act in a morally upright, dissident way and show moral courage, although the stories from the NS past narrated by the grandparents themselves suggest something quite different.

The narration of stories from the biographical past of other persons thus follows a specific need for meaning of the recipients of those stories, and one can see with those stories that have been passed on how the memory cultural frame determines the individual historical need for meaning on

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the one hand and the form of narration on the other; how they lead to the fact that the narrative elements of the stories are accordingly shaped and adjusted, especially regarding their plots, their political and moral messages, their interpretations of the present and the norms of a respective memory culture. This has been shown for inter-generational communications from different perspectives (Lehmann, 1989; Lehmann, 1993; Welzer et al., 1997; Welzer et al., 2002; Moller, 2003; Jensen, 2004) – thus, communicative situations concerning stories in which the historical events converge with familial biographical events, where there is inevitably a personal involvement related to the identity of the narrator and the re-narrator of the story.

The research project Transmitting Historical Consciousness dealt with family communication about the Nazi period in the Federal Republic of Germany. For this study, 40 Western and Eastern German families were interviewed within the context of one-family discussions and separate interviews with at least one representative each of the eyewitness, children and grandchildren generations in the family. The design of the study was quite simple: the members of the eyewitness generation were asked about their biographical experience during the period after 1933; then their children and grandchildren were asked what they had heard from their parents and grandparents about the period after 1933. A family discussion was introduced by a brief video comprised of amateur films from the period of the Third Reich.[1]

Contrary to the widespread notion that grandparents and parents do not tell their children and grandchildren problematic wartime stories – especially ones that highlight their participation in Nazi crimes – some of the interviewees do tell about their experiences during the war in ways that show them as perpetrators. This does not lead, however, to dismay in their listeners, to conflicts or even to embarrassing situations. It leads to nothing at all. It is as though such tales were not heard by the family members present. Apparently, ties of family loyalty do not permit a father or grandfather to appear as one who killed people a few decades earlier. The images formed about the beloved relative through socialization and time spent together is retroactively applied to the earlier period of their life as well, before their offspring, who are now listening and later will themselves pass on the wartime stories, were born. This ignoring of perpetrator stories occurs accidentally, as if automatically – the tape recorder records the stories, but the family's memory does not. In other words, wartime memories are preserved in the family's lore as stories that can be reshaped according to the idealized vision that succeeding generations have of the eyewitness who is telling them. And so they are remembered and retold.

Moving through the generations, stories can become so altered that in the end they have undergone a complete change of meaning. This reconfiguration generally functions to turn grandparents into people who always possessed moral integrity, according to today's standards and normative appraisal. This reformulation of stories is undertaken precisely because, in interviews, most members of the children's and grandchildren's generations exhibit no doubt at all that Nazism was a criminal system and the Holocaust an unparalleled crime. This assessment of the Nazi past – the standard fare of history lessons, the media and the official German culture of commemoration – breaks down under the resulting questioning of the role played by one's own grandparents during the period; it even evokes the subjective need to assign one's grandfather or grandmother the role of the 'good' German in everyday life under the Nazis. Thus emerges the paradoxical result of successful education about the Nazi past: the more comprehensive the knowledge about war crimes, persecution and extermination, the stronger is the need to develop stories to reconcile the crimes of 'the Nazis' or 'the Germans', and the moral integrity of parents or grandparents.

This dual function can only be fulfilled by stories that show one's relatives as human beings who perhaps cautiously, but also courageously, defied contemporary norms and worked against the system in their practical behaviour, even if, given their party membership and functions, they

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were anything but opponents of the system. The eyewitnesses appear in the retellings of their descendants to be inconspicuous resistance fighters, smart enough to blend in from the outside, but when push came to shove, ready to help victims of persecution, hide Jews or carry out small acts of resistance.

In the discussion with the Grubitsch family history, Sieglinde Grubitsch,[2] born in 1907, relates:

> But our Doctor Weinberg was a Jew, and his wife was a teacher; we protected them; they could live until the end.

To this strong statement, which implies nothing less than the grandparents having saved the Weinberg family from deportation (without, however, specifying what 'protection' consisted of and what was meant by the family 'could live until the end'), the grandson, Erich Grubitsch, Jr, born in 1962, asks a follow-up question: 'Apropos, how did you protect them?' Whether this question resonated with scepticism or was merely a desire for more detail is not clear. The answer:

> Well, because we never bothered them. We never felt bothered by them, and they didn't disturb us. We didn't, like those patriots, say, 'There are Jews here, we don't want anything to do with them.' Or, 'Take them away!'

Held up next to the statement about 'protecting' the Jewish family, this explanation is sobering in its narrowness. Sieglinde Grubitsch tells first of not 'bothering' the Jewish family – a remarkable description, since before she had spoken empathically of 'our Doctor Weinberg'. The 'protection' extended to the Weinberg family, it turns out, consisted merely in the Grubitsch family not denouncing them, as 'the patriots' might have done. They simply didn't do anything – and this was, from her perspective, worth mentioning, if not an act of resistance.

In the individual interview, Erich Grubitsch, Jr, then says:

> It was a totalitarian regime. Who knows what we would have done? ... On the other hand, they supposedly rescued a couple of Jews. That has to be acknowledged, that – OK, we can't understand everything today – but at least they tried, or actually managed to do it.

The grandson's formulation that his grandparents 'supposedly' rescued 'a couple of Jews' retains some scepticism; at the same time, the triggering statement, which claimed nothing more than the failure to denounce, now leads to an acknowledgment that 'at least they tried, or actually managed to do it'. The desire to find moral integrity – or, even better, oppositional behaviour – on the part of the grandparents leads the offspring to ignore the actual content of the original tale. After all, the fact that they did not feel 'bothered' by the Jewish family is not something to be especially proud of, but rather raises the question of why suddenly the Jewish neighbours should have been considered a 'bother' – especially when the father was the Grubitsch's family doctor. Ignoring the problematic aspects, the grandchild leaves open the question of whether the grandparents actually 'saved' the doctor's family or just 'tried' to. In either case, they would have done something that deserves acknowledgment under present-day normative standards.

By this mode of reshaping the grandparents' narratives the stories become better and better from generation to generation. This phenomenon of 'cumulative heroization' appeared in 26 of the 40 families interviewed – that is, in two-thirds of all cases. Heroizing stories made up roughly 15 percent of all stories told in the interviews and family discussions; stories of forebears'

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victimization accounted for around 50 percent; thus two-thirds of all the stories were about family members from the eyewitness generation or their relatives who were either victims of the Nazi past and/or heroes of everyday resistance.

Like her 65-year-old son Bernd Hoffmann, 91-year-old Elli Krug insists, in the individual interview and in the family discussion, that she did not know what a concentration camp was until the end of the war, though she lived close to the Bergen-Belsen camp. Later, however, former inmates of the camp passed through her village, and Mrs Krug was forced by the British occupiers to make her home available to them – which clearly displeased her:

> The Jews were the worst afterwards. They really harassed us ... They sat there and made us serve them, and then they didn't want, we had this big hayloft, they slept there, overnight. … The Jews and Russians, I always made sure that I didn't get them. They were really disgusting, you know? And then I always stood down in the street, in front of the gate, and when they said 'Quarters', I said, 'No, everything's full!' If the Jews … came, I said, 'It's all full of Russians, you can come in with me!' … And when the Russians came, then I said the same thing, that there were Jews here or something like that.

Frau Krug still tells how she was able to avoid giving quarters to 'Jews' and 'Russians' through trickery, while the attributes she uses ('the worst', 'disgusting') indicate a clear anti-Semitic or racist attitude even today. The fact that she is speaking about accommodating prisoners who had survived the nearby Bergen-Belsen concentration camp is not an issue to her at all. The main theme of her story is the burden that she herself took on by providing accommodation and her clever technique for keeping the 'Jews' and the 'Russians' out of her home.

The son also relates that people did not know about the camps until the end of the war. But he tells a story that he heard from his deceased wife. She had worked on an estate near Bergen-Belsen and heard there that the owner hid escapees from the camp. Bernd Hoffmann calls this person 'the grandma':

> She [his wife] was on a farm in Belsen for a year. They came right by there. The grandma hid some of them, and then they sat in a wooden box. And then they [the SS-men] got around, searching everywhere: 'He must be here …' They would have shot the grandma immediately. She put a hotpot on top of it, with boiling potatoes, on the wooden box, so they wouldn't get them.

The 26-year-old granddaughter, Silvia Hoffmann, now tells her version of what her own grandmother did:

> Once she told some story I thought was really interesting, that our village was on the road to Bergen-Belsen, and that she hid someone who escaped from one of those transports, and in a really interesting way in some grain box with straw sticking out, and she really hid them. And then people came and looked in her farmyard and she kept quiet, and I think, that's a little thing that I really give her a lot of credit for.

In this story, elements are pieced together that were mentioned in her grandmother's and father's separate stories: The 'road to Bergen-Belsen', a stout-hearted woman, the box, even the haystack has left a mark on the granddaughter's story, in the form of straw. But the narrative matrix in which the actors now appear points to a new message: an unfamiliar grandmother is adopted, wooden boxes and all, and the straw becomes a dramatic element in a tale of how her own grandmother tricked the persecutors. In this way, the granddaughter creates her own image of a good grandmother, which was present neither in her grandmother's nor her father's stories.

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Cumulative heroization happens rapidly and simply. The generalized image of a respected grandmother or grandfather seems to provide the framework in which any point of reference suggested by stories can be expanded into a 'good story'. As in the case of Silvia Hoffmann, the results can be a stripping away of the problematic implications of the true tale; plots are rearranged so as to reduce the nuanced, ambivalent, often troubling tales by the eyewitnesses to a morally clean attitude on the part of the protagonists – a clearly positive one. The tendency to heroize the grandparents' generation shows the strong effects, never to be underestimated, of ties of loyalty to loved ones on historical consciousness and the retrospective construction of the past.

Re-Narrations after Bartlett

Yet how about the re-narration of stories that do not feature this dimension of identity, but are related to a historical period such as the immediately after the Second World War, with which re-narrators of the current generation of grandchildren are confronted in manifold ways: in school, in the media and in families? It would certainly be interesting to analyse how, for example, memory cultural, national and generational schemata influence the reproduction of those stories and what the specificity of those influences in turn reveals about the mediation of societal master narratives into individual needs for meaning and interpretation patterns.

The classic analysis of re-narrations was provided by Frederic Bartlett some 75 years ago. In the most famous of his experiments, British students of Bartlett were provided with an exotic story that they had to read and then re-narrate. Thereby, two experimental settings were implemented: within the first setting the persons were asked to tell the story somebody else, and this person again was supposed to tell it a third person, etc. – a version of the children's game Chinese Whispers, but with more complex content. Bartlett named this procedure 'serial reproduction'. Within the second setting, the same test person was requested at time intervals to tell the story anew ('repeated reproduction'). The story itself was named 'The War of the Ghosts' and emanated from the research material of the anthropologist Franz Boas. It was a form of fairy tale that was told in a North American Indian tribe, and the plot of the story clearly deviated from the fairy tales known in the occidental tradition. The names (such as 'Egulac'), objects (such as canoes) and actors (for example ghosts) in the story were unknown and unfamiliar to the reader as the whole plot, too.

Bartlett noted significant divergences even on the following day in the case of the repeated reproduction of the original story; the re-narrations became shorter, more modern and according to western criteria, more logical (Bartlett, 1997[1932]: 66). These changes maintained the same direction, when the test persons were asked, years later, to re-narrate 'The War of the Ghosts' again. In sum, the analysis demonstrated a clear bias of the remembering persons to endow the story with their own meaning – which Bartlett called 'rationalisation': over time, an increasing aggregation of the narrated material became apparent, which followed the principle 'effort after meaning'. Bartlett concluded that available cultural schemata coin the perception and therefore the memory to such an extent that foreign aspects become one's own aspects in a subtle and unnoticed way. That is, the story was disrobed of its surprising, weird and illogical aspects and, at the same time, features (names, objects) were imported into the story that corresponded with the cultural schemata of the narrator (1997[1932]: 86). The canoes became boats, names were omitted or changed into less unusual ones, even the weather in which the story took place became more British. Only when the re-narration reached an adequate stereotypical form did it hardly change in subsequent re-narrations. In short, the remembering persons levelled the story towards a standard format and thereby changed it from an foreign story to one of their own. Bartlett's general conclusion was that this tendency of making something domestic, which undoubtedly follows a cultural pattern, is a

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powerful factor in all procedures of perception and repetition (1997[1932]: 89) and that, even more general, the exact repetition of perceived, heard and seen aspects is the exception and not the rule (1997[1932]: 61, 93).

Similar effects became apparent in the procedure of serial reproduction: the story was also shortened, intensified, imported and rationalized.

Bartlett used a narration from a foreign culture that he presented to western test persons. Stories that are told about the time of 'Third Reich' in Germany also contain elements of foreignness: they report experiences from a different epoch, from a different society with different standards of morality. These reports are always interpreted by members of the follow-up generation on the basis of their experiences of their own culture and time.

We can see now that the realization of need for meaning that is applied to texts does not always follow the creation of stringency and the import of logic, contrary to Bartlett's experiments. However, it must be said here that, whilst communicating and thereby experiencing things that we are able to remember later on, we always act against the background of memory communities, whose societal and cultural schemata form the current situation related to perception and action, as well as the later reproduction – and usually without us being aware of it.

The present study[3] is based on a modification of Bartlett's serial reproduction, was evaluated with using qualitative content analysis (cf. Mayring 1994, 2000, 2001).

A narrative by the sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf (1995[1932]) was chosen for the exploration of serial reproduction. This initial narration comes from a speech given on the occasion of the 50th centenary of the end of the war:

> That it came to an end, we could not only see with the approaching artillery barrage, but also from the fact that the respectable women in the house next door, who recently had important visitors from the Schutzstaffel, placed white bed sheets in front of their windows. At the same time (though we found out later) the Prussian and upright officer from the First World War shot his wife and then himself.
>
> Then the first Soviet soldiers came up the Süntelsteig, two young officers from Leningrad who could speak German and made us hope. Yet the hope did not last very long. A few hours later we used the wire scissors to cut holes in the garden fences so that the women could escape when Soviet soldiers demanded entrance at the front door. There was fear all over and arbitrariness dominated. A Soviet soldier on a horse saw a sobbing woman whose bike was taken away by another soldier; he felt sorry for the woman and gave his horse to the helpless woman.
>
> Some made for the shops in the underground station Onkel Toms Hütte whose owner had escaped. Nearly everything was plundered; I was just on my own in the bookstore and picked half a dozen Rütten and Löhningen volumes with romantic lyric from the shelves, which I still own today – if this is the correct word for stolen commodity …
>
> Rumours emerged without anybody knowing their origin. My friend and I followed them into a SS-warehouse where we loaded half a hundredweight of raw meat in a wooden barrow and dragged it home where my mother cooked it in the copper in the cellar so that we could keep it longer.' (Dahrendorf, 1995: 11–12)

What happens when this story is reproduced by German university students? Generally, it is noteworthy, and this is consistent with Bartlett's findings, that memory units that the re-narrators can tie up to according to their own realm of experience, do not raise a lot of difficulties. The

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connection, for example, that hope emerged because the young officers from Leningrad spoke German, possibly reflects an experience from everyday life in certain situations of foreignness that most of the problems can be solved when in the first instance a linguistic possibility for understanding is established. Our test persons did not have a lot of problems repeating those elements of the narration. Difficulties emerged with the memory units that seemed, in regard to the proximity of experience and also the plausibility of re-narration, to be more distant, such as the story about the wire scissors used by the 'we-group' of the first-person narrator Dahrendorf 'to cut holes in the garden fence'. A serial reproduction of this can look like the following:

> And then there was something about … took the secateurs and cut the trees so that the women could run.

Or something like the following:

> And then great holes were cut into the fences in front of the house, some knife so that the people could get out of the house, practically could flee.

Or like the following:

> Yes, the Red Army also came and went through the fence, and … no … rubbish. They went into the house and entered the house and plundered there and apparently the people, I believe, fled and through the fence in which holes had been cut. It must have been quite a big fence.

With reference to the first example, it is interesting that the reproduction follows its own plausibility as soon as an element of the narration is remembered differently: the wire scissors turned into secateurs, which are consequentially used to cut something in the garden. The original plot of the initial narration, namely that this action is aimed at rescuing the women, nonetheless remains the same. The second example shows a re-narrator who makes an effort to fulfil the challenge to remember, but does not make an effort to remain plausible: the front door where the soldiers in Dahrendorf's history demanded entrance turns into 'fences in front of the house', semantically misdirected, the wire scissors become a knife and the reproduced narration is generally slightly confusing. The third example illustrates an explicit process of making sense. The story is no longer set in a potentially threatening environment, but rather becomes real history: the 'Red Army', which was not mentioned in the initial narration, 'plundered', the inhabitants 'fled'. The remainder that is not plausible is accomplished with rather helpless, yet clearly constructive thoughts: 'It must have been quite a big fence.'

In inter-generational dialogues we have often found these concretions of originally only potentially dangerous situations (cf. Welzer et al., 2002: 81–2) – such substantializations evidently serve the purpose of placing the person who sympathizes with the narrator in a condition of the greatest danger and utmost proof, whilst the part of the aggressors seems to be even more brutal and ruthless. It is remarkable that, in the reproduction of the Dahrendorf-story, the role of the Soviet soldiers is especially negatively schematized. One could speak of the incubation of stereotypes in the reproduction, as it can also be found in the inter-generational dialogue.

The following example of a serial change in reproduction demonstrates an interference of the semantic content of the initial narration and memory cultural patterns of meaning as they have been standardized in the Federal Republic of Germany:

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> And then er …, he went into a bookstore ... and there he got some romantic literature that he still has up to today, whereby he thinks, whether he can keep this at all, since it is stolen from all the Jews. (Reproduction 1)

> And then he goes to another bookstore and buys romance novels and he still has them today and he does not want to say whether he has bought them or stolen them. (Reproduction 2)

> And then he finally bought some books, and those books, he reportedly still owns them, and he makes a secret of it, what is up with the books, whether they are stolen or forbidden, or whatsoever … (Reproduction 3)

The dubious acquisition of the books becomes problematic in the reproduction by members of the generation of grandchildren, because the books originally belong to 'all the Jews' – evidently, contemporary discussions about restitution interfere with elements of a memory narration that does not belong here. In the second reproduction, the opaque connection of the origin of the books only emerges in the form that the narrator 'does not want to say' whether they have been bought or stolen, which is the reason within the third reproduction for 'a secret' about the books – and here it seems as though the moral perspective, which was centred on the origin of the books as Jewish property, is removed from the first to the third reproduction and then somehow disperses in a general unearthly realm.

That a mystic aspect is connected to the stolen books is also demonstrated by the following example, which particularly shows the constructive, here almost epic, character of serial reproduction and does not require any further annotation:

> And he still has these books, yes, as memory, although they are stolen somehow then. (Reproduction 1)

> And, somewhere a step was made, then it was said that the author who wrote this story crawled into a corner, namely in a room in his house and did not do anything anymore, did not leave the house, but only read lyric … books … So, and he kept them until his end and somehow spent the evening of his life this way. (Reproduction 2)

> It is about the author who then aside from this book somehow retreated into his house and then only read and wrote lyric books until his end. Er, yes, this until his end. (Reproduction 3)

Below is one final example of the unrelenting activity of making sense that coins serial reproduction:

> Er, …together with a friend we ran to a warehouse of the Schutzstaffel und wanted to take some meat there. Er, my mother then cooked it in a great pot in the cellar so that we could keep it longer. (Reproduction 1)

> On the way they passed such a store of the Schutzstaffel, and my mother took some meat with her so that we could cook it in the evening. (Reproduction 2)

> We passed this store, my mother quickly wants to get some meat. (Reproduction 3)

Here, the act of plundering is gradually normalized to a behavioural pattern that is consistent with the ordinary realm of experience of the reproducers: you go shopping and because you do not have

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a lot of time, you quickly rush into the next store and buy the things that are absolutely necessary. The warehouse of the Schutzstaffel becomes a SS-store and finally an ordinary department store – the whole story is littered with aspects of everyday life and the horizon of meaning is classified in a natural present.

A short resumé illustrates the features of reproduction outlined by Bartlett: the story is 'modernized', and equipped with a structure that is compatible with the need for meaning of the present. The story is thus 'adopted', in a very concrete sense and made domestic. The re-narration as a constructive act is, however, not an individual achievement, but follows memory cultural norms, schemata and images that seem to have a life of their own that exceeds the personal because they also occur in re-narrations and are, even in an further version, represented, when they were originally not or only existed in a softer form.

Stereotypes

The initial narration example above picks up a prevalent narration pattern about the Soviet soldiers: 'The Russians' are those one had to fear, who one hid from or fled. Niethammer (1991) has pointed to the fact the 'Russians' hardly appear as victims of the NS tyranny in the memories of the Germans. They were those who one 'rightly' feared, which is again and again confirmed by the narrations (cf. Welzer et. al., 2002: 141). 'The Russians' are naturally associated with pillages, murder, rape, etc.

The initial narration itself is ambiguous and corresponds with the prevalent division of 'good and bad Russians' found in reports of contemporary witnesses. On the one hand, there is the type of Soviet soldier who demands bicycles and women and who is shown as primitive. In contrast, there is the civilized officer who speaks German and who detests and prohibits the excesses of his comrades. Both types are applied in the initial narration in manifold ways. The two German-speaking officers from Leningrad and the Soviet soldier who donates his horse to a (German) woman whose bicycle has been stolen conform with the rather positive image of a Russian. The other side of the coin is the Soviet soldier who demands entrance at the front door and the (Soviet) soldier who steals a bike.

Within the category of 'invasion of Soviet soldiers', 12 participants in the present study reported on the invasion of the Soviet army (basic category: hope) in a rather neutral way, 26 participants picked up the ambiguity of the initial narration and 13 persons reported solely negatively on the invasion of the Soviet soldiers. This is, amongst other things, expressed in the way the memory sequences are detached from the context of the pillage: 'The Russians invaded and pillaged.' Or, as the following example shows, it refers to a general stereotype that does not occur in the initial narration: 'Russians have invaded, have mistreated and abused women and children.'

Another 11 participants did not report negatively on the Soviet soldiers. Moreover, three types of positive demonstration can be distinguished:

1. In the first model, the first part of the memory unit, the stealing of the bicycle, is left out so that only the positive message remains: 'A Russian soldier rides his horse, meets a woman and donates his horse to her.'
2. In the second model, the actor is de-concretized: 'A woman, whose bicycle had been stolen by someone, was given a horse by a Russian soldier because he felt sorry for her.'
3. The third model presents the Soviet soldiers, contrary to their description in the initial narration, as sympathetic, sometimes helpful actors: 'Yes … then the, the inhabitants of the

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village have, er, gained hope because a few soldiers from the Soviet army came around. And I believe the Germans said that everything is OK.'

On closer examination it becomes clear that such positive statements were only made by students (eight participants) with an Eastern European background. This coincidental finding once more affirms the part that memory-cultural determinants play in the creation of meaning in the re-narrations.

Conclusion

In summarizing the findings of our exploration on serial reproduction, the following four features become apparent:

1. Problematic, ambiguous content is left out in the re-narration: the content that can hardly be connected to the image with re-narrator's own we-group is often not remembered.
2. The re-narrations are de- and recontextualized: Stories within the re-narrations are taken away from the frame of the NS-time and afterwards interpreted against the background of the re-narrator's own experience in the present.
3. The stories are intermixed with others and connected to new logical formations: similar stories are often mixed with each other, for example, when actors are described in similar or comparable situations.
4. Stereotypical images lead to blurred re-narrations: established stereotypes lead to re-narrations that can oppose the original narrations in a positive or negative way.

Altogether, it becomes clear that the reproduction is strongly determined by cultural and intergenerational need for meaning and routines to develop the meaning of the re-narrators. This largely corresponds with Bartlett's findings and is, one could say dismissively, not very surprising. However, we argue that the replication of Bartlett's surveys within the field of research on re-narration and research on transmission of historical consciousness is profitable, because the surveys demonstrate that narrative construction and reproduction is an obstinate procedure that cannot be solely understood as a cognitive operation.

When the past and history are the subject of a communicative practice, it is obviously not just a matter of transfer of narrative and, in terms of content, embellishments that can be combined in different ways, but rather also a matter of the organizational structure of this combination that defines in advance which role the actors can perform at all and how their experiences are to be valued. For this reason, situational circumstances, causalities, procedures, etc. are remembered in a way that 'makes sense' for the listeners and re-narrators. Therefore, both individual and collective life stories are constantly overwritten in light of new experiences and needs, and especially under conditions of new frames of meaning from the present. One could say that every present, every generation, every epoch creates the past that has, in functional terms, the highest value in terms of their focusing on the future. With a memory that always remembers the same things in the same way this would not be possible.

The constitutive viscosity of social memory also means that perception, interpretation and acting apparently always consider many more factors than are consciously accessible. It is a 'communicative unconscious' that combines these sources and that is principally based on more 'knowledge' than the individual is actually aware of. The viscosity of the narrations of the past,

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conducted in social groups, becomes apparent in the situation of conversational remembering, where contradictions, inconsistencies, violations of the unity of time and space, etc. continuously occur, without this irritating the fiction that a common story was remembered and narrated here (Welzer et al., 2002). And it is also revealed when elements of a family history are completely differently narrated in individual interviews by the respective members of the generations. Narrations of memory are never transmitted, but rather constitute an occasion for an endless line of re-narrations that are constantly reformatted according to generational needs and frames of interpretation.

Notes

1 A total of 182 interviews and family discussions were conducted. The material was transcribed and evaluated through a combination of hermeneutic analysis of individual cases and computer-supported qualitative content analysis.
2 All interviewee names are pseudonyms.
3 The method used is as follows: the investigator reads a short story about the end of the war in Berlin to the participants. Immediately afterwards they are asked to re-narrate the story to another person, who then tells the story to a third person, etc. The last person in the chain tapes their version in the presence of a listener. Every participant has additionally written the story down. Chains of three re-narrations emerge that are available in oral form as well as written form. Additionally, the participants note socio-demographic information such as age and gender on their survey cards. The recording is carried out by the participants themselves. The investigator is not present at the reproduction. The oral and written re-narrations are transliterated. The sample for the present study comprised 78 participants, of whom 78.2 percent (61) persons were women and 21.8 percent (17) were men. On average, they were 27 years old at the time of the survey. Fifty-four participants were students and 24 were employees. Altogether, there were 132 transliterated texts, wherefore 78 were written (w) and 54 oral (o) reproductions. The study was conducted by Torsten Koch, who contributed also to the interpretation of the data of the text that follows (cf. Koch & Welzer 2004).

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