

ON FINDING AND FABRICATING: MEMORY AND FAMILY HISTORY IN KATJA PETROWSKAJA'S *VIELLEICHT ESTHER*

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that Katja Petrowskaja's award-winning text, *Vielleicht Esther* (2014), brings a hyper-local concept of family history to the debate on transnational memory. While the text documents the quest of the narrator for lost or forgotten parts of the life stories of family members who perished in the Holocaust, it also takes liberties by consciously moving beyond the conventional limits for narrativising family history. The imaginative techniques the narrator uses in framing and expanding the various stories are rooted in the narratives of transnational Holocaust memory, and the same applies to the narrator's framing of her own experiences during the search. This particular form of interweaving documentation and inventing situates *Vielleicht Esther* within a globalised transnational and trans-generational locus of consciousness which the narrator herself inhabits. The text thus gives voice to the so-called 'third generation of survivors'. As a representative of this generation, the narrator thoughtfully exercises her right to participate in a discussion on the question of whether children or grandchildren of survivors may speak about the effect of the Holocaust on their own lives.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Katja Petrowskajas preisgekrönte Sammlung von Familiengeschichten *Vielleicht Esther* (2014) bereichert, so die These dieses Artikels, die breit geführte Diskussion im Bereich der transnationalen Gedächtnisforschung um das Konzept einer lokal nicht festgelegten Familiengeschichte. Es ist eine Geschichte, die in zahlreichen kulturellen, nationalen und sprachlichen Kontexten um Brüche und Widersprüche herum entsteht, während die Erzählerin ihre Suche nach Spuren vergessener, im Holocaust verschollener oder ermordeter Familienangehörigen beschreibt. Dabei dokumentiert die Erzählerin die Suche einerseits minutiös und benennt die Leerstellen, füllt diese andererseits aber durch die narrativen Muster des transnationalen Holocaustgedächtnisses aus. Es entstehen so hybride Formen des gleichzeitig Ge- und Erfundenen, die sich nicht eindeutig verorten lassen, sondern im transnationalen und transgenerationellen globalen Bewusstsein der 'Generation Postmemory' verankert sind. Darüber hinaus ist *Vielleicht Esther* auch die eindringliche Stimme der nachfolgenden Generationen, die auf ihr Recht verweist, über die Auswirkungen des Holocaust auf das eigene Leben Auskunft geben zu dürfen.

'In Memory We Trust' – the motto of the 2019 'Festival Neue Literatur' in New York – was a compelling theme, and descriptive of the goals that connected the group of authors whose works were introduced at the festival. They were all united, to quote from the press release issued by

‘Deutsches Haus’ at New York University, in their aim to ‘find truths that explain and define their characters and cross borders of time and place to create ageless maps of identity and connection’.¹

This statement encapsulates a topic that is at present widely discussed, and one that encompasses a wide range of interests: a desire for continuity, identity, and connection that traverse borders and generations, and into which an individual can be integrated and absorbed. But can we really trust memory in the way the festival’s theme suggests – with its play on the motto of the United States, ‘In God We Trust’, words also found on the reverse side of the nation’s dollar note? This play on words carries ironic undertones, of course, resonating with the academic discourse on the reliability or unreliability of individual memory that has long found its way into public debate. That the nation’s motto is also to be found on a bank note, moreover, brings into play the construction of collective memory guided by financial interests. And yet there is a longing for trustworthy memories and cross-generational belonging, and this longing is also expressed in the text at the core of this article, Katja Petrowskaja’s award-winning collection of family stories, *Vielleicht Esther* (2014).²

The text not only documents the quest of the narrator for lost or forgotten parts of the life stories of family members who perished in the Holocaust, but it also reflects an author’s freedom not to accept limits in narrativising family history. The imaginative techniques the narrator uses to frame and enlarge the various stories appear to be rooted in the narratives of transnational Holocaust memory, as does the narrator’s framing of her own experiences during her search. The search steers the narrator, who is herself leading a transnational and multilingual life, into a variety of national, cultural, and discursive contexts. Thus, my argument here is that with its particular interweaving of documentation and inventing, *Vielleicht Esther* brings a hyper-local concept of family history to the debate on transnational memory. The novel illustrates a transnational and trans-generational locus of consciousness emerging in a globalised world, which the narrator herself inhabits, and which Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder in their influential work, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, describe as a ‘hybrid formation [...]’ and a part of global culture.³ Sznajder expounds on the concept of collective memory in the age of globalisation, saying ‘dass im Zeitalter der Globalisierung kollektive Erinnerung nicht mehr auf einen

¹ <https://mailchi.mp/nyu.edu/ulfers-foundation-award-honoring-margarethe-von-trotta-dismantling-concepts-and-next-weeks-events-456933?e=6757ff2c50> (accessed 28 December 2020).

² I present a longer and more detailed discussion of *Vielleicht Esther* in my publication *Von Grauen und Glamour: Repräsentationen des Holocaust in den USA und Deutschland*, Heidelberg 2021.

³ Daniel Levy and Nathan Sznajder, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, tr. Assenka Oksiloff, Philadelphia 2006, p. 9.

territorial oder national fixierten Ansatz reduziert werden kann',⁴ while Marianne Hirsch describes this transnational sphere of experience as the state of consciousness of the 'generation of postmemory'.⁵

Positioned in this transnational sphere, *Vielleicht Esther* can be seen as much more than merely an example of the latest trend in German literature, as described by Jan Süselbeck: 'die gefeierten Spitzentitel der aktuellen Mode der Familienromane [scheinen] so etwas wie eine treffende Momentaufnahme derzeitiger deutscher Gedächtnisdiskurse zu liefern [...]'.⁶ While Süselbeck is primarily referring here to novels positioned in the context of the perpetrators, I argue that *Vielleicht Esther* not only introduces a hyper-local concept of family history in its particular way of (re)constructing generational family formations that were destroyed during the Holocaust but also that in so doing, the novel gives voice to the so-called 'third generation of survivors'. Here, we have the voice of a representative of this generation who thoughtfully exercises her right to participate in a discussion on the question of whether the children and grandchildren of survivors have a right to speak about the effect of the Holocaust on their own lives. Some critics have in recent years recognised the value in the literary expressions of the second and third generations of survivors. Esther Jilovsky, for instance, sees the role of the third generation as bridging generation gaps, since members of this generational group are the last to have the privilege of being in direct contact with the first generation. They connect, Jilovsky writes, 'lived memories of the past with people of the future, born after the last eyewitness has passed away'.⁷

Yet often the right to give their generational perspective a voice is denied to the 'second' and also the 'third generation', or their expressions are at least seen as problematic. This critical perspective is well illustrated by Ruth Franklin's comment, in her article 'Identity Theft' (2004), on the literature

⁴ Natan Sznajder: 'Vortrag von Natan Sznajder bei der Tagung der Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung gemeinsam mit dem Zentrum für Antisemitismusforschung der TU Berlin zum Thema "Der Holocaust im transnationalen Gedächtnis"', 12 December 2007; <https://spme.org/boycotts-divestments-sanctions-bds/boycotts-divestments-and-sanctions-bds-news/vortrag-von-natan-sznajder-bei-der-tagung-der-bundeszentrale-fur-politische-bildung-gemeinsam-mit-dem-zentrum-fur-antisemitismusforschung-der-tu-berlin/4300/> (accessed 29 December 2020).

⁵ Aligned with this perspective, Petrowskaja's novel can be seen as an example of the 'transnational turn' that seems to be taking place at present in German-language literature. See Elisabeth Herrmann *et al.* (eds), *Transnationalism in Contemporary German-language Literature*, Rochester 2015. Concerning this turn, Aleida Assmann remarks: 'der Erinnerungsdiskurs wird ein Stück weit aus seiner deutschen Selbstbezüglichkeit herausgelöst und die Frage nach Bedeutung und Zukunft der Erinnerung auch in eine transnationale Perspektive gestellt'; Aleida Assmann, *Das neue Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur: Eine Intervention*, Munich 2013, p. 14. For the concept of 'generation postmemory', see Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*, New York 2012.

⁶ Jan Süselbeck, 'Stimmengewirr: Überlegungen zu Shoah-Repräsentationen in der Literatur des 21. Jahrhunderts', *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Germanistenverbandes*, 55/2 (2008), 172–88 (182).

⁷ Esther Jilovsky, *Remembering the Holocaust: Generations, Witnessing and Place*, London 2015, p. 94.

of the second generation and the question as to whether there is glamour in trauma:

[It is] one of the most disturbing trends in contemporary Jewish literature. Call it neo-Wilkomirski-ism: driven by ambition or envy or narcissism, a number of the children of survivors [...] have constructed elaborate literary fictions that serve to elevate their own childhood traumas above and even beyond the sufferings of their parents. [...] In American life, and in Jewish life too, there is glamour in trauma, and the children cannot resist stealing their parents' spotlight.⁸

Tackling questions that are inherent in this quotation – the demand for authenticity and truth in the representation of historical events, alongside an examination of the structures of memory and generational narrative – there is now multidisciplinary research on the extent to which trauma can be inherited. It asks how and to what degree the descendants of Holocaust survivors are traumatised, and whether and in which ways this body of 'second-hand' knowledge of Holocaust memories can be expressed in their texts. This kind of inquiry has generated new terminology that has gained significant traction in the relevant theoretical debates, such as postmemory, prosthetic or vicarious memory, secondary trauma, and fantasies of witnessing.⁹

Even if we must assume, as Christian Schneider writes, that the second and third generations inevitably suffer from the 'Stigma des Nicht-Authentischen',¹⁰ Petrowskaja turns this stigma into a brilliant act of self-empowerment, as respectful as it is compelling. In doing so, her motto is neither 'in memory we trust', nor 'in imagination we trust' – the standard description of the literary output of the second and third generations – but rather 'in the power of words we trust'. She does not abuse this trust, which is what gives her text its force and beauty. In the following article, I shall aim to position *Vielleicht Esther* within the discursive field of contemporary representations of the Holocaust. I shall, furthermore, investigate the narrative strategies employed in this text and how they serve to build the hyper-local concept of family history as well as to convey the narrator's self-reflection as a member of the third generation.

⁸ Ruth Franklin, 'Identity Theft: True memory, false memory, and the Holocaust', *The New Republic*, 31 May 2004, 31–7 (31).

⁹ See, for instance, Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, Cambridge 1997; Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, New York 2004. James E. Young uses the term 'vicarious memory' in his introduction to James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*, New Haven 2000; Dominick LaCapra discusses the topic within the context of trauma theory and grounds his argument on the concept of 'secondary trauma', see Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Baltimore 2001; Gary Weissman speaks of 'fantasies of witnessing' in *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust*, Ithaca 2004.

¹⁰ Christian Schneider, 'Der Holocaust als Generationsobjekt: Generationengeschichtliche Anmerkungen zu einer deutschen Identitätsproblematik', *Mittelweg* 36, 13/4 (2004), 56–73 (58).

REINVIGORATING ROSES

Katja Petrowskaja belongs to the generation of Jewish authors who, around the turn of the millennium, came to Germany from Russia or, in Petrowskaja's case, from Ukraine, and whose artistic production is bound up with the search for their roots and their identity. In this context, *Vielleicht Esther*, as a post-memorial family history, positions itself within a narrow generational transatlantic dialogue with novels such as Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) and Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love* (2005).¹¹ What creates, carries, comprises, and sustains Jewish tradition and Jewish identity is one of the central questions in this transatlantic literary dialogue, one which is also addressed in *Vielleicht Esther*. This question provides the impetus for the narrator's search for answers in documents, archives, and on-site. In the reconstruction of her quest for traces, the narrator takes the reader on a journey into the fragments of her family history in Ukraine, Russia, Germany, Austria, and the United States, observing quite different contexts and cultural spheres along the way.

During this process, form and content interact closely with each other. The way in which family history is located or invented around absences is reflected in the narrator's description of how she discovers, looks at, and attempts to put together the various pieces, as if they were part of a jigsaw puzzle, and the text itself is made up of individual short stories, vignettes in part, sometimes illustrated with photographs but always allowing pauses for reflection. What are we reading? An autobiography on the one hand, or perhaps, more precisely, a memoir that follows the conventions of the genre, quite obviously attempting an objective reconstruction of the narrator's search, with much attention to detail and other signals of authentication, through which traditional reality effects are achieved. On the other hand, the text foregrounds the narrator's attempts at rendering a subjective process of disentanglement from the personal reality of a family history with its collection of minutiae before the backdrop of official historiography. This process of disentanglement criss-crosses the blank spaces of what has been forgotten, buried, or lost, and it is these blank spaces that are the most productive zones in the sense of the indeterminacy of delivery, as it is termed in reception theory.¹² The text, therefore, on the one hand has a hesitant and halting quality resulting from the many individual stories of various family members that span a panorama of private connections, without, however, adding up to a chronicle. On the other hand, despite these frequent moments of circumspective pausing, the

¹¹ Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), London 2003; Nicole Krauss, *The History of Love*, New York 2005.

¹² The aesthetic theory of effect or reception theory as developed by Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, and Roman Ingarden conceptualises a literary text as a network of zones of indeterminacy that offer different perspectives of interpretation to be realised in the reading process. See Wolfgang Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens: Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung*, 3rd edn, Munich 1990, pp. 267–80.

text is characterised by a dynamic of progress, fuelled by the underlying structure of the quest where each of the pathways pursued requires a cautious, yet persistent, probing of its realities.

Vielleicht Esther treats its intertextual references sparingly – surely in an attempt, typical of the genre, to keep its fictional markers minimal and unobtrusive – despite the numerous references to the family's erudition and textual markers of learnedness. An exception are the references to Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and Gertrude Stein's famous line of poetry, 'a rose is a rose',¹³ two references that are especially significant. They fit directly into the description of the rose garden belonging to the narrator's grandfather, but on another level they reflect the deeper concern of the book: Eco's *The Name of the Rose* has to do with speculation, with guessing at riddles, with the creative capacity of the human mind to decipher and constitute reality, and – ultimately – to construct a coherent narrative out of fragments and hidden signs, and that is also exactly the point of *Vielleicht Esther*.

On the other hand, the radical language experiments of the *avant-garde* writer, Gertrude Stein, examine the connection between speech and identity. In her dictum that a 'rose is a rose is a rose is a rose', Stein plays with the principle of identity, positing that A equals A. Yet she breaks open this assertion; manifold repetition places the certainty of the claim in question, the power of custom is broken, and the claim to identity opened up to new consideration and interpretation. Stein herself stated that through this play of words, the object evoked by the noun, the rose, was reinvigorated: 'Now listen! I'm no fool. I know that in daily life we don't go around saying "is a... is a... is a..." Yes, I'm no fool; but I think that in that line the rose is red for the first time in English poetry for a hundred years.'¹⁴ Stein's poetic principle of wanting to embrace words, so to speak, nouns in particular, for so long and with such ardour that they give up their secrets is conveyed in her own words as follows:

Poetry is concerned with using with abusing, with losing with wanting, with denying with avoiding with adoring with replacing the noun. It is doing that always doing that, doing that and doing nothing but that. Poetry is doing nothing but using losing refusing and pleasing and betraying and caressing nouns.¹⁵

We can thus observe convergence between Stein's rose experiment and the narrator's search for clues. Both Stein's famous repetitions and her

¹³ Umberto Eco, *Der Name der Rose* (1980), tr. Burkhard Kroeber, Munich 1982; emphasis in the Gertrude Stein quotation in the original. See Katja Petrowskaja, *Vielleicht Esther*, Frankfurt a. M. 2014, p. 239. Further references to *Vielleicht Esther* appear in the text with the abbreviation VE.

¹⁴ Gertrude Stein, *Four in America*, intr. Thornton Wilder, New Haven 1947, pp. v–xxvii (vi).

¹⁵ Gertrude Stein, 'Poetry and Grammar', *Look at Me Now and Here I Am: Writings and Lectures 1909–45*, ed. Patricia Meyerowitz, London 1971, pp. 125–47 (p. 138).

affectionate relationship to the noun, as well as the narrator's careful observation and testing of individual words in the multilingual universe of *Vielleicht Esther*, have to do with finding and investigating the connection between language and identity. This connection can only be revealed through the mindful, slowed-down, and almost reverential examination of every single word in order to uncover its secret and make hidden references visible: it becomes a matter of measuring the power of words.

REMAINING AT THE THRESHOLD – THEN COMING ALL THE WAY IN

On her visit to the barracks of the Mauthausen concentration camp, the narrator reflects on the inexpressible experience of suffering, a central theme in the long discussion on the representability or non-representability of the Holocaust: 'Unerträglich könnte man sagen. Es ist unerträglich. Doch für das Unerträgliche gibt es kein Wort. Wenn das Wort es erträgt, dann ist es auch erträglich' (*VE*, p. 247). The linguistic dimension is the only thing that remains, the Holocaust is woven into a web of words that bear it, that must serve for it and that across time have condensed into narratives of transnational memory.

Earlier, the narrator observes that she is unable to use her senses to approach the atrocities in the places where they occurred; on the scene, she is unable to reconstruct the physical dimension of the horror: 'Es müsste doch überall Dreck sein. Ich habe davon gelesen. Der Tod müsste stinken. Aber ich rieche nichts. Ich höre nichts. Ich sehe nur. [...] Wir bleiben auf der Schwelle' (*VE*, p. 247). This observation conveys a central point in the discussion on the representability/non-representability of the Holocaust: the magnitude and immediacy of the horror of the Holocaust remains closed to those who did not experience it. In their attempts to reconstruct the experiences of their forebears, the successive generations remain on the threshold; they can find no way in to the places where the events occurred. What remains, therefore, is the measuring of the capacity of words, the reflection on the impossibility of appropriate representation, and the filling in of gaps with the transnational narratives of Holocaust memory.

In reflecting on the physical dimension of the representability/non-representability of the Holocaust, the relationship between imagination and reality is of central concern, and the text tests these boundaries. At the same time, the fundamental assumption dominating the theoretical discourse – that there is no clear separation between memory and imagination – must apply to the reading of the text. If we assume, moreover, that the one is dependent on the other, and both are inseparably connected as powers of the mind, then the reader is the third party in this alliance, as we experience in reading the text. The qualifying 'vielleicht' of the title serves the central function of giving licence: from the very outset, the

adverb powerfully frames this narrative of memory as only one of many possible versions of the past. Thus, at every step of the quest, it legitimises a pausing, a reassessment of the fragments, and it opens infinite imaginative and interpretative space to those parties involved in the deciphering, including, of course, the person reading the work. The past as 'space', however, is finite, and there are limits to the individual imagination, but these, in turn, are transgressed through the inclusion of transnational memory narratives. The narrator herself experiences precisely this during a walk in Babi Yar: 'Ich höre nichts. Die Vergangenheit schluckt alle Laute der Gegenwart. Es kommt nichts mehr hinzu. Kein Raum mehr für Neues' (VE, p. 186). The very next sentences prove this statement wrong, however, as there is this story, her story, of what had happened in Babi Yar, which she sees as if it were projected on a screen and which, as she supposes, the other people around her cannot see: 'Mir ist, als ob diese Spaziergänger und ich uns auf verschiedenen Leinwänden bewegen. [...] Warum sehen sie nicht, was ich sehe?' (VE, p. 186).

The text quickly establishes the reflective pausing in narrative and memory – it dominates the section in *Vielleicht Esther* titled 'Das Rezept' (VE, p. 30) from the very beginning. Perhaps, to consider one example, it is her late Aunt Lida's Russian recipe for 'jüdischer Kwas' (VE, p. 31) that provides a clue to the construction of Jewish identity in the postnational order, and at the same time hints at how the text establishes its hyper-local concept of family history. The recipe stands for the expression and representation of the utopia of Jewish identity: present and absent at the same time, linguistically elusive, or at least ambiguous, not localised nationally, but rather the last expression of a cultivated Europe: did not the Jews, after all, read everything 'was Europa ausmacht' (VE, p. 31)? Jewish identity is understood here as a repository of knowledge, and accordingly it is obvious, when the narrator goes in search of a 'Restitution des Geistes' (VE, p. 132), that this restitution is not about material possessions or a particular place. Moreover, an identity constructed in such a manner is in the present day, as the narrator establishes, also an 'Internet-Judentum [...]' (VE, p. 52), and therefore by necessity globally infinite, fragmentary and abbreviated, like the recipe. At the same time, the recipe is its last or only vestige. The product 'jüdischer Kwas' is not physically present, it exists only in a virtual, hyper-local sense; the instructions in the recipe merely give hints on how the dish is to be created, always following a basic framework, but also open to individual interpretation. The decisive factor here is the combination of cultural practices and the physical senses. The upholding of Jewish tradition through culinary expression is enabled by the sensory experiences that these traditions evoke, anchoring memories and making it possible for them to be passed on to the next generations. (Jewish) identity is thus constituted by the upholding of traditions, by the preservation, acceptance, and adherence to ritualised practices, by individual action

that is absorbed into the collective – the repeated immersive experience spanning generations.

LAYING CLAIM

Vielleicht Esther appears closely connected to other literary works by third-generation writers from different national backgrounds, who Kirstin Frieden, with a nod to Ulrich Beck, refers to as members of the ‘Generation Global’.¹⁶ What these texts have in common is their desire to investigate the effects of the Holocaust narratives as the central element of Jewish identity.¹⁷ In the formulation of the American historian Peter Novick, ‘The Holocaust as virtually the only common denominator of American Jewish identity in the late twentieth century, has filled a need for a consensual symbol’,¹⁸ and many novels – engaged in a lively transatlantic dialogue – convey a sense that the price for achieving this commonality is very high indeed. It means the end of a Jewish self-understanding on the basis of religious and cultural traditions.

As part of her search for clues, the narrator creates an individual story out of the transnational narratives of Holocaust memory so that the two become indistinguishable. This is particularly striking in the description of her visit to the Auschwitz Memorial, which takes place during her first trip abroad in 1989. She calls the place not by its German, but by its Polish name, Oświęcim, deliberately shying away from the German language. Passing through the gate, her memory ‘machte [...] halt’ (*VE*, p. 58), and at the time of writing, no memory of her visit remains. By this time, though, she has long known what she *could* have seen there (*VE*, p. 60), and has seen images of ‘das ganze Gelände mehrmals [...], oft genug, um es mir ins Gedächtnis einzuprägen’ (*VE*, p. 60). Yet her mind retains nothing of the day of the visit itself and what she experienced there. She has replaced the personal with the public narrative, and this narrative is almost a kind of refuge. It offers asylum from what was individually experienced in Oświęcim, replaced by the transnationally shared horror at the events that occurred at Auschwitz. The collectively shared narrative allows the horror to be relatable – in German, at least – in a generally acknowledged version.

What the narrator recalls in place of her visit to the memorial is a sensual experience that totally captivates her. On the following day of the tour, the group encounters a young priest, and in looking at him she comes close to

¹⁶ Kirstin Frieden, ‘Nach den Familiengeschichten: Wie die Postmemory-Generation den Holocaust medial neu verhandelt’, in *Mediale Transformationen des Holocausts*, ed. Ursula von Keitz und Thomas Weber, Berlin 2013, pp. 275–97 (p. 283).

¹⁷ I have discussed this topic in various publications that deal with American literature, see for example Susanne Rohr, ‘Trauma and Taboo: The Holocaust in Recent American Fiction’, in *Wor(l)ds of Trauma – Canadian and German Perspectives*, ed. Wolfgang Klooss, Münster 2017, pp. 187–99.

¹⁸ Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, Boston 1999, p. 7.

emerging from her numbed memory. She immerses herself in an intense observation of his physicality, as if she were seeing the human body for the first time. It is the corporality of his being that anchors the emotional reaction, for the basal parameters of recognition must be reset in order to hold in forgetfulness that which cannot be permitted to resurface:

Ich kam erst wieder zu mir angesichts des jungen Priesters, den ich wie eine mir und der gesamten Wissenschaft unbekannte Kreatur betrachtete, als wäre er der erste Mensch, den ich sah, als wäre ich gerade aus seiner Rippe herausgekommen, und als könnte er nicht wissen, dass ich von ähnlicher Art sei, nach der Sintflut. (*VE*, p. 59)

It is in this spiritual, though not religious, moment, which comes about through her understanding of Auschwitz as a watershed in humankind, that she is newly created, namely in her recognition of the Other and self-recognition within the Other. In this connection between consciousness and being, furthermore, the narrator assumes a responsibility, in the sense posited by the philosophical phenomenology of Emmanuel Lévinas. She even becomes, as Lévinas calls it, the hostage of the Other:

The responsibility for the Other – which is no accident that befalls a *Subject*, but which precedes his *Being* – did not wait for the freedom that would usher in engagement with the Other. I have done nothing and yet have always been affected: pursued. The Self in its passivity [...] is called: hostage. The word *I* means: *here, see me*, responsible for everything and everyone.¹⁹

So the narrator – in the moment of her self-creation in the Other, her self-recognition in her encounter with the priest – allows herself, to a certain degree, to be taken hostage by him and, at the same time, by history; her *I* now means: responsible for everything, including for continuing to live on after Auschwitz. Or, in the words of Lévinas in the above quotation: ‘I have done nothing and yet have always been affected.’ Imre Kertész, the Hungarian Nobel Laureate in Literature and Auschwitz survivor, provides a similar answer to the question, ‘Wem gehört Auschwitz?’ in his essay of the same title: To the next generation, as long as they lay claim to it.²⁰ And this is also the answer to the narrator’s questions about Babi Yar: ‘Wem gehören diese Opfer? Sind sie Waisen unserer gescheiterten Erinnerung? Oder sind sie alle – unsere?’ (*VE*, p. 191). They are ours, as long as we lay claim to them. This laying-claim (or refusal to do so) can occur in totally different ways, as can be seen in the scope of the literary productions by the following generations. In the above-mentioned creation of an individual narrative out

¹⁹ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Jenseits des Seins oder anders als Sein geschieht*, tr. Thomas Wiemer, Freiburg 1998, p. 253. My translation into English, emphasis in the original.

²⁰ Imre Kertész, ‘Wem gehört Auschwitz? Zu Roberto Benignis Film “Das Leben ist schön”’, tr. Christian Polzin, *Die exilierte Sprache: Essays und Reden*, ed. Imre Kertész, Frankfurt a. M. 2003, pp. 147–55.

of transnationally formed ones, therefore, the situation in which all of the next generations find themselves is also addressed: in their laying-claim (or refusal to do so), they must grapple with the mediated, staged historical event, and thus each time anew, enter the discussion on the authenticity of the sources.

Yet, in *Vielleicht Esther* the pivotal figure of Aunt Lida is silent; she is silent about her Jewishness because she wishes to avoid the position as victim and does not want to be associated with its automatic connection to mass murder. She refuses to be a victim; on the contrary, she follows a path to self-empowerment through the re-appropriation of Jewish cultural practices and a sensual life of Jewish identity. And so she, and the memory of her and a lived Judaism, survives despite everything, and in spite of the fact that 'Sie hat alles verschwiegen' (*VE*, p. 33). Her recipe survives; furthermore, in the directions that Aunt Lida addresses directly to the cook – 'Den Dill sollst du waschen' (*VE*, p. 32) – she leaves behind an effective strategy for creating an identity by converting the virtual into the actual, which in turn feeds continuity. Thus, Aunt Lida's screen of silence proves generationally enriching: In spite of everything, a narrative develops from the non-existent, from what is concealed, from what is – consciously – not shared. Her silence is to a certain degree put into words, and acquires an independent existence as culturally shared knowledge, an illustration of the globalised transnational and trans-generational locus of consciousness which the narrator inhabits.

A structural element of *Vielleicht Esther*, complementing its short chapters and vignette-like form, is the integration of documentary or quasi-documentary material. The photographs integrated into the text are a typical element in the discussion on the Holocaust and the themes of successive generations and their quest to reconstruct their family history.²¹ Frequently, there is a combination of self-authorisation by the chroniclers (as in the divulging of Aunt Lida's recipe in *Vielleicht Esther*), and the attempt at authorisation through documents. So, for instance, *Vielleicht Esther* includes the photograph of a beautiful young woman who presumably is the young Aunt Lida, but this is only suggested, not explicitly stated in the text. The illustration credits resolve this, confirming that this is, in fact, Aunt Lida, and noting in the paratext, in an echo of research

²¹ In the context of discussing the characteristics of the literary works of the third generation, Meike Herrmann mentions two important motives: 'das Fotoalbum und die Reise an die Orte des Geschehens'; Meike Herrmann, 'Spurensuche in der dritten Generation: Erinnerungen an Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust in der jüngsten Literatur', *Repräsentationen des Holocaust im Gedächtnis der Generationen: Zur Gegenwartsbedeutung des Holocaust in Israel und Deutschland*, ed. Margrit Frölich et al., Frankfurt 2004, pp. 139–57 (pp. 143–4). Petrowskaja's text certainly falls under these categories. Pavlina Radia, however, is somewhat critical of these developments and cautions against an 'ecstasy of postmemory' (p. 88); see Pavlina Radia, 'Mobilising Affective Brutality: Death Tourism and the Ecstasy of Postmemory in Contemporary American Culture', *Mobilities, Literature, Culture*, ed. Marian Aguiar et al., Pittsburgh 2019, pp. 87–112 (p. 88).

documentation mode, that the source is the 'Familienarchiv' (VE, p. 285). That is, the picture comes not from a photo album, but from the 'archive', which plays with the scholarly standards of validation and objectivity.

In documenting her sources, her role as narrator – in the sense of Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'postmemorial viewers' (VE, p. 122) – is that of an observer who is aware of the fact that the visual material does not necessarily build trans-generational bridges, but rather marks spatial and temporal distance. This becomes especially clear in a depiction of research the narrator conducts at a late stage of the quest, in the Family Heritage Centre in Warsaw, where a photo of the family's former residence is located. The photo itself is not reproduced in *Vielleicht Esther*, but it is given an ekphrastic description. The narrator describes her impression of the people in the street: 'manche schauen mich an, voller Angst, als ob eine Gefahr von mir ausginge' (VE, p. 109), thus reproducing the gaze of the perpetrator. At the same time, recognising their fear, the narrator makes herself accountable to them, in Lévinas's sense.

The not unproblematic, occasionally precarious status of the source documentation prompts obvious questions concerning the authenticity of the material, its function, and the reliability of the source. These questions have accompanied the scholarly as well as the general social discussion on the history of the Holocaust since its beginnings; they are as unsolvable as they are inextricably bound up with these discourses. What, then, does the photo of Aunt Lida document in *Vielleicht Esther*? The first sentence below the uncaptioned photograph inserted into the text reads, 'Sie hat alles verschwiegen' (VE, p. 33), and the photo illustrates precisely that: it keeps everything to itself because a photo *must* keep everything to itself. Is this Lida? Possibly. And so the validity of the photograph rests precisely on this paradox: it documents the authenticity of its powerlessness, for it represents that which it cannot represent.

The many missing pieces the narrator confronts in the process of situating herself in the narrative(s), and the necessity to constantly keep going in the face of these voids, are conveyed through the book's basic tenor of uncertainty, of not having a home, and of loss. But what is it that is not there? Finding and inventing that which is absent is what drives the narrator's quest; this is the impetus behind the reconstruction of her family history and the inventory of the family archive. Her search is also sustained by a further structural element of the text: the narrator's grappling with language/s. In her deliberate switching back and forth between German and Russian, between translation and back-translation, she covers various linguistic and cultural domains that cross-fertilise and enrich the other, each allowing for new space, hyper-local space and, with it, fresh perspectives and approaches to the object of reflection. Precisely this is clearly demonstrated in the above-mentioned episode focused on Aunt Lida's recipe. On each of the pathways of her quest, this deliberate progression is played out differently, time and again, in her search for

words, names, stories, identities, cultures, pasts: 'Ich hatte das Glück, mich in der Kluft der Sprachen, im Tausch, in der Verwechslung von Rollen und Blickwinkeln zu bewegen', she writes (*VE*, p. 115).

Katja Petrowskaja first learned German as an adult, and the text impresses with her equally wondrous and wonderful probing of its linguistic material in her struggle for expression. As the author stated during a television interview, she deliberately writes in German to appropriate the language of the perpetrators in a gesture of self-empowerment. In writing in German, she said, she 'freed herself to a certain extent from the discussion surrounding victimhood', while at the same time desiring that, by doing so, the German language may no longer appear as the 'Tätersprache'.²² Yet in resorting to German, the narrator departs from the mother tongue to which she belongs in order to continue her life in the cultural universe of this loaded language, fully conscious that it is language that creates her. She writes: 'Wir [she and her brother who is learning Hebrew] bestimmten uns nicht mehr durch die lebenden und die toten Verwandten und ihre Orte, sondern durch unsere Sprachen' (*VE*, p. 78). She turns away from the idea of identity anchored to a particular locality to an emphasis on a linguistic-cultural anchoring of identity.

Viewed semiotically, as the narrator suggests here, we not only *have* language, we *are* language, and therefore we are a constitutive element of cultural narratives. Not only do we relate these narratives, we *embody* them. In the epos of the Holocaust, the individual languages offer a refuge for identity, and so, for example, the narrator's brother, in learning Hebrew, succeeds in recapturing 'die ganze Tradition [...], mitsamt dem verschollenen Wissen vergangener Epochen' (*VE*, p. 78). This linguistic refuge is a powerful rebellion against forgetting. The active process of remembering finds linguistic paths to circumvent the absence of documents and the inconceivability of the crimes committed. Learning German serves yet another function for the narrator: the ultimate impossibility of fully integrating the foreign language in the same way as a mother tongue makes the narrator feel a constant sense of friction between her awareness of herself and her awareness of how she might be perceived by others; her ultimate inability to achieve a total mastery of the language mirrors the unresolvability of her search while simultaneously offering a fitting medium for its representation. If, in this medium of the 'Sprache des Feindes' (*VE*, p. 80), which she describes as her 'Wünschelrute auf der Suche nach den Meinigen' (*VE*, p. 79), a reconstruction of history is finally made possible, 'dann ist wirklich nichts und niemand vergessen' (*VE*, p. 80). So, paradoxically, the only thing that can be depended on is the

²² Katja Petrowskaja, 'Vielleicht Esther – Katja Petrowskaja im Interview', Interview mit Julia Benkert, *LesZeichen*, Red. Daniela Weiland, Bayerischer Rundfunk, BR Fernsehen, Munich, 12 May 2014, 07:12–07:21. My translation.

unreliability of the word and the unreliability of the narrative that claims to vouch for the truth of what is being told. But what does this mean?

The line separating fiction and memory has been examined quite thoroughly and, at least in the fields of literary, cultural, and media studies, has been declared indeterminable or all but indeterminable. It is by now routinely assumed that all memory has aspects that by necessity are constructed or fictionalised, and that this is particularly the case for recorded autobiographies or memoirs. However, the scandal surrounding Benjamin Wilkomirski's invented story of survival²³ shows that an ontological distinction – though difficult to define – must nevertheless be made between memories that are faked and truthful statements, meaning that the idea of a 'pact' between author and readers on the reliability of what is written still exists.²⁴ *Vielleicht Esther* provides the answer, in a sense is even itself the answer to the conundrum: the story of the Holocaust is transported to the (trans)cultural memory of globalisation in a finely calibrated mixture of fiction and truth, with recourse to shared knowledge as well as individual experience and imagination, and is thereby expanded and carried forward. Books such as this bear witness to that which defies witnessing and thus are a powerful medium, enabling us to eavesdrop on history and be party to what is 'whispered' to us, as the author notes. We as readers are invited to share her stance as she asks herself, 'Woher kenne ich diese Geschichte in ihren Einzelheiten? Wo habe ich ihr gelauscht? Wer flüstert uns Geschichten ein, für die es keine Zeugen gibt, und wozu?' (*VE*, p. 221).

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²³ In 1995, the Swiss Bruno Dössekker published his autobiography under the pseudonym Benjamin Wikomirski. There he identifies himself as a survivor of the Holocaust and describes his childhood in a concentration camp. The story was unmasked as fiction in 1998 and caused quite a stir. What is interesting here is that the report was first taken to be authentic because it seamlessly employs those stereotypical narrative procedures of Holocaust representation that by now have become entirely predictable. Benjamin Wilkomirski, *Bruchstücke: Aus einer Kindheit 1939–1948*, Frankfurt a. M. 1995.

²⁴ The concept of the autobiographical pact was developed by Philippe Lejeune. See Philippe Lejeune, 'The Autobiographical Pact', in *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin, tr. Katherine Leary, Minneapolis 1989, pp. 3–39.