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Neustadt a.d. Aisch¹

Marla Elisabeth Heid

When I was eight years old, my grandfather Friedel passed away. Having spent only very limited time with him, I preserved my memory of his character. He was a kind and caring individual, loved by his family and friends. I grew older with this recollection in my mind, the photographs of him, the books he read, the paintings he created. He was an artist. His works are hanging on my mother's walls, watercolors on paper of broad landscapes, oil and gouache paintings of still life, drawings, and prints. All his artworks are securely collected in a folder my mother holds on to. Over the years his paintings and his books about art inspired me. The physical remains of his existence—an archive of various paintings, drawings, and photographs—provided information that persists. My mental archive, on the other hand, is something I invented for myself, my memory of his persona and the stories I've been told. It provides me information whenever I need it: I carry this mental memory like a hard drive and access it whenever I call for it.

A short while ago I visited my grandmother. The table was set; like always, she had prepared coffee and cake. Two plates, two cups, and a folder were placed on the table. I asked her about the folder, what it was. She told me she found it in her basement while she was looking for something else. She told me it contained documents from my grandfather, that they were interesting to look at. All these documents collected carefully in this folder. She said he kept every little piece of paper, always. The documents were organized by date, latest on top. The first couple ones were about his pension, his health insurance claims, his work accomplishments, all the way back to the 1950s when he received his degree from art school. The certificates and references from his professors confirming his talent, praising his pleasant work ethic. Below those documents was a thin red booklet, no bigger than a passport. It had

a golden swastika on it. Many documents like that appeared on the following pages. I instantly felt a discomfort, anxiety, about what was going to come. When I asked my grandmother again about the documents, she replied with bare vapidness in her voice. My grandfather was a member of the SS.

The end of World War II in Europe in 1945 through to the surrender of the German Wehrmacht symbolized the first attempt to eradicate National Socialism in Germany. Almost sixty million people died because of the war and Nazi rule. In the German language the term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* describes the nation's public confrontation with a problematic period in its late history. In Germany, it especially references the examination of National Socialism. The concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, literally translated as "to overcome the past" or "coming to terms with such," remains an integral part of the present political and social discourse and a necessity to cope with the atrocities committed by the Nazis.

However, the composition of the terms *past* and *overcome* seems to be a contradiction in terms. The past cannot be undone; therefore, it can't be overcome. It needs to be worked through. Theodor W. Adorno, in his 1959 essay *The Meaning of Working through the Past*, critically analyzes the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in German society and the ongoing approach of coming to terms with the Nazi past. This concept of working through the past, however, requires explication, as it is easily expressed as "a formulation, a modish slogan that has become highly suspect during the last years."² In this usage, "working through the past" does not mean seriously working on the past, that is, through a lucid consciousness breaking its power to fascinate. On the contrary, its intention is to close the books on the past and, if possible, even remove it from memory."³ Nevertheless, for Adorno the past will have been worked through only when the causes of what happened then have been eliminated.⁴ Such elimination, however, requires effort.

Considering the present political situation in Germany and growing right-wing nationalism, the elimination of these causes has not been achieved yet and might never be. Politicians deny the Holocaust, spread racist, antisemitic, and homophobic views, and condemn democratic values. Working through the past means to constantly remember, question the then and now, and generate a responsible memory. Yet creating a method to address this memory and acknowledge National Socialism over the course of Germany's history provokes tensions between public and private abilities to process the past, between general or collective and particular or individual memory, and between the different narratives associated with these forms.⁵ General or collective memory is constructed and established in the public sphere: official forms of remembrance, such as memorial sites and commemorative events, and, rarely, legal disputes and political-programmatic speeches. The particular or individual, on the other hand, exists within traditions, family narratives, and

stories, and the depiction of individual experiences from reports of the parents' or grandparents' generation. The subjective image of history, in which real history is merged with fictional interpretation, frequently has the intention of washing one's own biography clean. With this intention to suppress, forget, or conceal the actions that were made in the past, how can we find certainty in the narratives created?

Uncovering my grandfather's involvement with the SS and the revelation of his uncharted past was emotionally onerous and confusing. Trying to unfold a life I thought I knew was a dreadful experience. I only knew this life through the fragmented memory in my mind, the stories I heard, the photographs, the books, and the paintings on the wall. The documents my grandmother shared with me depicted a different person, someone I had never met before.

When approaching one's own buried past, Walter Benjamin says, "one must conduct oneself like a man digging. Above all, one must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil."⁶ The leitmotif for Benjamin's theory is that what matters and is valuable in history does not necessarily exist in the monumental and the permanent. Rather, it exists in the small, the repressed, and the submerged, which can be accessed and revived only through memory.

Reconstructing my grandfather's past unveiled a world I unconsciously rejected, a memory I never developed. Guided by a certain kind of naivety, I excluded myself, my family, and my relatives from the unpleasantness of the past, before recognizing this history among us. I was unable to understand the life someone had and the decisions someone made; I was unable to find the answers I might be searching for; I was unable to begin a conversation with the person in question—how is one apt to evaluate the situation if this person is represented by a subjective memory and a collection of detrimental documents, unveiling a different truth?

With reluctance, restive conversations about truth, memory, and history evolved between me and my grandmother and between me and my mother. We addressed the ambiguity of my grandfather's life. The conscious choice my grandmother and other relatives took to protect themselves and my grandfather, to not say out loud what this family's past had looked like, shows how present the German history still is, and how it has not been worked through.

These conversations brought to light what only a few were aware of. I felt emotionally torn between my grandmother's and my mother's contrasting memories, the documents, and my perception. The long silence about this matter between me and my mother, between me and my grandmother, and maybe most important between my mother and my grandmother epitomizes the sensitivity and complexity of the subject. The resurgence of a past life and the

unsettling and unexpected dialogue it initiated created multiple potentially unresolvable questions and, on a personal as well as a collective level, demonstrated the urgency to assimilate and test the past, which needs to be comprehended for the purpose of a personal and collective *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.

I documented the conversations between me and my grandmother and me and my mother in a three-channel audio-visual installation. The piece is named *Neustadt a.d. Aisch*, after the birthplace of my grandfather. The materials used in this work include original documents from my grandfather's archive, photos, written texts, journal entries, literature, interviews, and conversations.

Immersing myself in the material on such a personal level, I realized how uncomfortable it made me feel. My grandmother, not finding the right words to describe her feelings; my mother, denying the facts that were introduced to her. Very quickly these conversations turned into blaming one another. Talking about National Socialism in the private realm remains taboo.

Using the same visuals with different audio tracks, I establish two narratives around the same topic, attempting to reassess and discuss the past. The audio is transmitted over two sets of headphones, randomly selectable by the viewer. Not only must the viewer choose which audio to begin with, but listening to just one conversation may not be adequate to convey the truth. The installation addresses an inner conflict rather than uncovering facts. It negotiates the ongoing process of emotional confrontations with the past and the present, truth and denial.

After discovering the archive, I asked myself whether I wanted to have this conversation with my family or if it was just too painful to try to work through this past. I felt emotionally conflicted. I was torn between moving on quietly or commencing the examination of the story. It was a hurtful process for everyone involved, a shameful experience, one that I would rather keep hidden. Once it is out, it feels like contracting a disease, something I can't just wash out with pills. It leaves scars. But I decided that this conversation was an inevitable one. It was necessary for many reasons, for the past and for the future. Engaging with a controversial, intricate history of the individual speaks to the collective trauma remaining in German society. The experience of admitting and confessing to this predicament is shared by many German families. This commonality could be used to work through the past, rather than leaving these histories unresolved in isolation.

The examination of the past determines our future. Remembering historical catastrophes challenges us to not get lulled into self-assurance, for memory is a contested space. Looking at the histories and archives prompts us to discover and reflect on what these stories and objects can offer to us in the present. Taking advantage of archivist methods to question the politics of memory and its relation to individual or particular and collective or general minds and use them as the medium to rehabilitate the present is imperative.

Amid the current dynamic generated by right-wing and nationalistic narratives, spaces of memory must be preserved and reassessed. Freedom and democratic structures are not given at any point and need to be secured invariably. Rightist thinking and a progressing polarization of today's German society constitute an existing threat to democratic values. Therefore, we need to remember before there can be a new beginning. Memory is the caretaker of the past; the new beginning is the opening of the future. Memory relies on continuity, while the new beginning relies on rupture. The task of a saving memory is not only to save from oblivion what was once said but also to give voice to what is not said, what is hidden, displaced, kept secret.

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Notes

¹ The three-channel audio-visual installation can be viewed at <https://escholarship.org/uc/refract>.

² Theodor W. Adorno, "The Meaning of Working through the Past," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, translated by Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 89.

³ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁵ Samuel Salzborn, *Kollektive Unschuld: Die Abwehr der Shoah im deutschen Erinnern* (Leipzig: Hentrich & Hentrich, 2020), 11.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, "Excavation and Memory," in *Selected Writings, 1927–1934*, edited by Marcus Paul Bullock, Michael William Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, translated by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 576.