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Fragmented histories and belonging:  
Intergenerational memories and experiences of Germans  
from the former Soviet Union in contemporary Germany

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Thesis submitted to obtain the degree of P.h.D. in Sociology

November 2017

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

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Katharina Eist

This empirical study is based on qualitative interviews with three generations of ethnic German families, who migrated to Germany after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The grandparents in these families lived in German settlements until their expulsion to the far East of the SU. Their children grew up in these places of exile in the shadow of their parents' histories, striving to become model Soviet citizens in an effort to escape the stigma associated with their parents' fate. The grandchildren in these families were youngsters at the time of migration to Germany. This thesis explores experiences around migration, post-migration life and integration. It examines these experiences through a framework of (post)-Soviet and German cultural memory, investigating, on the one hand, how in both societies public memory (or the lack thereof), along with social discourses and state policies, have shaped, framed and homogenised this group; and, on the other hand, how memory and the forgetting of the repression of the grandparents shape identity, belonging and intergenerational dynamics today. The memory of the persecution leads people to frame their migration to Germany in terms of homecoming. This homecoming narrative is, however, extremely contentious. Not only has the adoption of this narrative created a hierarchy of migrants, leading to an unequal immigrant society, the idea also exerts social and self-imposed pressures to be perceived as 'authentically German'. Especially younger interviewees often conceal their background by 'passing' for 'real Germans'. These young people appear to follow in the footsteps of the 'generation of parents' who concealed their German backgrounds in the SU. This cross-generational concealing and the underlying shame are often unaddressed. There are still many silences, and very little dialogue across the generations about their traumatic history. All of these aspects make it difficult, particularly for the young, to recognise their complex and diasporic identity.

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## Preface: An intimate introduction

Ask my Russian mother about her family history and she would not be able to tell you anything except that she's heard that on her mother's side, they might have been Ukrainian. 'But we did not talk about these things,' she tells me. In the 1970s when my mother was growing up, it was no longer dangerous to ask certain questions about one's family history, but people still hushed, whispered, and brushed things under the carpet. Almost every Soviet family, especially after the mass Stalinist repression, had some secret, something to hide, a 'skeleton in the closet' as my interviewee Alyona (b.1985) put it. The list seems endless: be it that one of your relatives had been expelled, branded an 'enemy of the people' or a 'kulak', or considered a political enemy on religious, aristocratic or even ethnic grounds. In my mother's family, it was my grandmother's mental illness that was the stigma. This is however a different story, although also part of my history. And, although this thesis is about ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union who migrated to Germany after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, many of these people were of mixed ancestry, with both German and non-German ethnic heritage, especially in the younger generations. With the migration, the German histories were elevated, pushing the other family histories into oblivion and irrelevancy. Of course, what happened to the German family members impacted the family dynamics greatly but what becomes clear in the interviews that I conducted is that the 'other half' of the family history (in the case of mixed marriages) is just as fragmented and unknown, which has had no less significant consequences for, and across, the generations.





Unknown family (c. 1948). From the archives of Memorial. Book front of Orlando Figes (2007)

What is so extraordinary about the Soviet Union is that a whole society, including the most intimate social relations within it, was shaped by the Stalinist repression. In extreme examples, family ties were severed and contact to the ‘black sheep’ was cut. The picture above conveys this in an arresting, symbolic way, giving a rare insight into the private lives of families and how these pressures were dealt with. Historian Irina Sherbakova (2000) writes that the history of the Gulag is a history without pictures. She explains that we are used to looking at gruesome pictures to comprehend atrocities - however in the Soviet Union very few such images exist. Relatedly, Olga Shevchenko (2014) writes about the absence of an established canon of visual representation of the Soviet repression and argues that it is this absence that can serve as a counter-memory<sup>1</sup>. In the absence of visual evidence, private family archives become even more important. My fieldwork confirms this absence of photographs. Elderly people I interviewed were lucky if they had at least one photograph of their loved ones. Partly it was that everything was lost in the war and deportations, but sometimes people themselves destroyed

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<sup>1</sup> Sariskova and Shevchenko write that in the absence of an established canon of visual representations of the Soviet repressions, family albums are a hope against sanitised history, as they offer a different reality and these inconsistencies can trigger more questions and interest. They write: “Browsing through the family album, children may not be looking for this kind of knowledge. Yet the tangible evidence of the suffering in the lines of a relative's face on his return from the camps, or the physical barrenness of a home's interior may be hard to reconcile with the largely sanitised, or outright celebratory representations of the Soviet past (...)” (2014:151). Photography in this way can recreate the day-to-day reality under Stalinism, a missing father, the reality of labour camps, poverty and exile. This way photo-albums as they further argue, can serve as counter-memory to the “gloss of official state history” and even awaken interest in the family past by “triggering complex and often semi-conscious identification and fantasies (...)” (ibid).

photographs or documents out of fear. When I tracked down my grandmother's lost sister in Germany, I asked her for family photographs as she was the eldest in the family and could escape deportation. She told me that she had torn them all up.

It's paradoxical that while this is my personal framing of the project, I use an unknown photograph from a famous book cover to symbolise the stresses on Soviet families. Yet my 'borrowing' this image to represent an aspect of Soviet repression is something that post-Soviet citizens began to do subconsciously. When the Soviet Union collapsed, there was a real boom in talk about the repressions, in the post-Soviet society, whereas before people only hushed and whispered. Interestingly, while there was much talk, there was little memory. Khubova et al. write (2005) that people began incorporating other people's memories, borrowing them to understand their own fates in the absence of personal knowledge and documentation.

The Stalinist years created a way of life in which speaking was dangerous, and anything could be deemed to be confidential, even the most trivial things were sometimes hidden. People learned that not to speak and not to ask was the safest option. It created an atmosphere in which people did not ask unnecessary questions, where one knew the boundaries of personal talk. Today, this is still visible in the ways people speak about their lives, how they present themselves and their family history and how they talk without revealing too much. This has profound consequences for family dialogue and remembering itself, which is also reflected in my fieldwork. I found this Soviet legacy in my own family and in the group I researched.

Encouraged by my supervisor to start from my personal history and to write from experience in order to trace my own inheritance and investments in this project, I found that I produced a lot of writing that was on the surface, that tried to grasp something about my own family history and that of my research participants. However, I could not gauge the impact of these histories on myself and others because I followed the internalised rules of protecting violent histories, once interpreted as shameful. These mechanisms, to present oneself and one's family

history in a ‘respectable way’ are still visible in the generations who were socialised in the Soviet Union and are also present in the young generations that I interviewed, those who were socialised in Germany. These mechanisms, and the history behind them, will consequently loom large in this thesis, owing both to their impact on participants in the study and to their effects on my (and other researchers’) ability to gather and analyse research material.

It is important to note that it is not that people do not speak personally. They could say a lot and yet reveal little. Often what could seem very personal, especially when one interprets what is said from one’s own cultural context, would actually not be personal at all. The personal and the impersonal can be reversed.

This is something that also surprises researchers. Gabriele Rosenthal who conducted an important comprehensive three-generational study with Russian-Germans in Germany as well as the former Soviet republics, found it surprising that ethnic Germans socialised in the Soviet Union talked very openly about alcoholism in the family, while being secretive about other things. In the Soviet Union, alcoholism was often the ‘only’ cure in a society in which there were ‘no problems’. So while the problem of alcoholism was repressed in public discourse, it was part of the experience of many families across all social classes and thus not necessarily deemed a source of personal shame.

Throughout this thesis I will often draw on Rosenthal’s findings while contrasting her work with my research, as at times there is a disjuncture between our projects. While Rosenthal’s project has been of great importance to the framing of this thesis, it is as if we are looking at two sides of the same coin. Rosenthal et al. team were often my companions in thought and they provided a critical opportunity for me to think with but also against them. I do so by treating their work as conversational openings, and reply to them with my own perspective based on my diverging findings. In doing so, I offer a different way of seeing the same social phenomena that they describe.

In my own family, despite the negative legacy that I began to piece together and put into words, thinking back, I found my parents only told me good things about

the Soviet Union. From the perspective of being migrants to Germany who struggled to make ends meet, the Soviet Union seemed idyllic. I have come to appreciate that in order to understand this generation's experience fully, the Soviet experience has to be understood in its full complexity. To them, living in the Soviet Union was not only a negative experience.

Given the well-known repression of the Soviet regime, this is difficult to understand and convey, but despite everything, many people believed in the Soviet idea. My parents talked about the shortages and the queuing, which I myself remember vividly, but somehow they never talked about what happened to either side of the family in such a way that would lead them to reflect on the systematic violence used against different sections of the population. They never acknowledged or spoke of the long-term effects, which were definitely visible in our family. Neither did they betray awareness that our destinies were still governed by what happened long ago.

When I was born in 1985 in Kazakhstan, Soviet memory began to crumble: no one knew it then but the Union of the Soviet people was about to collapse. Something shifted, and people began to re-identify with their family histories and ethnicity, which had been pushed aside by the notion of the Soviet person. Kazakhstan was particularly multi-ethnic, made up of many peoples who were forcibly resettled during the Stalin years. They had lived side by side as Soviet citizens but when the Soviet ideology began to lose its meaning, people looked back to their ancestral pasts for clues about where they had come from and who they might yet become.

On my father's side, the family is German and this history was now significant because it allowed us to migrate to Germany. But the emergence of this opportunity did not mean that we thought about the impact of this history. Quite the opposite. We felt the migration to Germany brought us to the 'moment', or rather into the future, finding, like many migrants solace in narratives of progress. This left no time or energy to reflect about the past. It was partly this project that allowed me to recover my parents' and grandparents' histories. By interviewing

other parents and grandparents and by engaging with historical material, I could put their fates against a larger backdrop and begin to understand why things are the way they are.

Like many of my interviewees, I mostly grew up with my grandparents, as my parents were busy with work and study. My grandparents loved me very much and they gave all they could, but I felt that they were carrying something heavy within. There was so much sadness in my grandfather that I tried to 'fix' as a child. Growing up, I did not understand its origin or what exactly had happened but I felt it. My grandmother told me stories about the deportation but of course I did not know what the deportation was, nor what it really meant. Something else is also significant and is the reason why I began with the Soviet context. For those in my generation, it was not always the case that our parents or grandparents purposefully withheld information from us in an attempt to shield or protect us from certain knowledge. Often they themselves did not know exactly why things had happened, or why things had been done to them. This is still the case today: I often heard from grandparents in the interviews that they were not traitors; that they did not know who Hitler was. They could never articulate their fears and traumas either, because it was forbidden to talk about anything compromising the Soviet Union.

Because of this absence of knowledge on my part and on the part of people from whom I might have expected to be able to learn more, my first steps in this project were a writing-down, a re-membering of what I knew and could find out, before I could think about the impact of these histories. I looked for images of the places my grandparents talked about in order to make them more real.

My grandparents lived in German settlements in the Soviet Union before WWII and were deported to special settlements (internment camps) in Siberia and Kazakhstan in 1941. I will soon go through the history of these deportations and their rationale, but, briefly described, Stalin feared the German population would change sides in the war with Nazi Germany and consequently acted to pre-empt the treason expected from this part of the population. My grandmother's family members were scattered across different internment camps and labour army

divisions. About my grandmother's father I heard conflicting stories, either that he died in the 'dekulakisation' in the 1930s, or from a lung infection. Her sister Emma died of hunger at the age of 15 in a labour camp. I only found this out because I found my grandmother's lost sister in Germany. I am not even sure whether my grandmother ever knew what happened to her sister Emma and refrained from telling me. I do know my grandmother's mother died as a result of the deportation, but not where or how. My grandmother had named me after her to keep the memory alive.

My grandparents met and stayed in Kazakhstan even after the ban restricting freedom of movement was lifted in 1956, as they were still banned from returning to the German settlements where they had lived before the war. Home had always been the Volga Republic for my grandmother, of which she often spoke to me, even though she never went back there.

About my grandfather's family past, I know almost nothing, except that he was born in Tbilisi. His father was in the Gulag and, when he finally returned, he was no longer the same. He was a broken man, usually sitting quietly at the kitchen table, my father remembers. In the 1990s when people began to talk about their pasts and reveal secrets, my great-grandmother told my grandfather on her deathbed that he was given to her as an infant so that he would survive, and that she took him so that she would not be drafted into the labour army. She had kept this secret for 50 years. Who gave him to her is not known. It seems that my grandfather's biological family had thought that, as the German Wehrmacht advanced into the Caucasus, he would be safer among Germans. I had little chance to talk to my grandparents about their histories because I migrated in 1993 to Germany at the age of 8 with my parents. My grandparents, as mentioned above, had come to Germany too but had quickly realised that it was not their 'homeland' after all and returned to Kazakhstan.

Having arrived in Germany, I grew up with the knowledge that I was German and I managed, unlike my parents, to be perceived as German. Despite this, I felt conflicted about the idea that I was 'just German'. I always felt also Russian and Russian was our family language. I have a Russian mother and felt that I also

carry a Russian history, which, I knew even less about than about the German part of my family. It only became clear to me doing this project that I felt my Russian history somehow disappearing because I was German. It was as though one could not be both.

I had not been thinking about pressures of assimilation but I felt their impact. My way of dealing with this pressure of feeling constricted in my sense of identity manifested itself in a wish to move abroad. In this respect, I ‘chose’ a different strategy to the many young women and men from my generation that I interviewed, who as we shall come to see in the coming chapters, responded to this pressure differently: by trying very hard to succeed in ‘passing as German’.

Many people in my generation hid their family background. They were ashamed to speak Russian publicly and they were ashamed to be considered Russians. I remember vividly how my childhood friend Nina (b. 1985)<sup>2</sup>, for example, did not allow me to say we were Russians on social occasions with our German friends. She often instructed me in what not to say about her family to new boyfriends. It was a fine line. Being ‘Russian’ and everything that was associated with Russia, was seen as something negative, something to be hidden. This always perplexed me.

I often tried to speak to Nina about everyday issues that we experienced and when I asked her why she does not want other people to know about her family or where she was born, she had no response except that this was how she wanted it. It was as if she carried around a secret and I wondered why the secrecy was necessary. Of course I understood that she had grown tired of certain prejudices or disadvantages that she faced as a result of her background. Yet, by German society’s standards, Nina was ‘successfully integrated’. She had good grades in school, spoke perfect German, had just secured an apprenticeship in a prestigious company, had many friends and even a ‘native German’ boyfriend. In other words, at least outwardly, Nina led a life not too dissimilar to her German peers; and yet she still felt insecure.

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2 All names and other identifying details have been changed in order to protect the privacy of individuals.

While her peers learned other languages to better their employment prospects, Nina, who spoke Russian, never used it to her advantage. For example, when she applied for an apprenticeship that had business with Russia, Nina did not write in her CV that she spoke Russian, even though this would surely have helped her secure the placement. On the contrary, she saw her knowledge of Russian more as a liability than an asset. I asked myself whether she felt that she had what she had, and was where she was, precisely *because* she hid her background. Did she feel that if people around her were to know the truth they would treat her differently? At the time, I had not yet understood that there were many pressures on the young generations to act in such a manner, pressures from within the family, and without in the wider society, to assume an exclusively German identity. These pressures stood alongside other pressures and burdens resulting from their family histories.

After going abroad immediately after high school graduation, and having spent a year in the United States, I began a sociology degree in the UK. One day, while a student, my grandmother's history suddenly made itself felt again, this time from a Marxist theory book I had to read for a class in politics. The book included a poem on the Stalinist repression. The exact wording and its author are no longer clear in my mind. All I remember is that the poem describes a person hiding wheat-filled barrels in the grounds so that they would not be confiscated and, there in South East London, my grandmother's stories of her childhood flooded into my room.

I realised I carried with me a fragment of her history but without a context – I remembered she had once told me about hiding wheat barrels at night and how her mother dressed her in many layers, putting one skirt on top of the other. Reading the poem, I understood what had happened to my grandmother's family and that what she had often told me had a name: it was the collectivisation and the liquidation of the 'kulaks' as a class. I was only a little child when grandmother told me these stories of her childhood.



I subsequently realised that I did not know anything about my grandparents and their lives. This realisation prompted me to plan a trip to Kazakhstan to interview my grandmother for my Bachelors dissertation in 2009. She, however, died suddenly and unexpectedly before I could arrive. This dissertation grew from the desire to know about a past that was foreign to me, but which was also part of me. The spatial distance between my grandparents and myself, between Germany and Kazakhstan, complicated our once very close relationship. I think that it was precisely this distance that also awakened an interest in these histories because I was unable to ask questions. As it was no longer possible to ask my grandmother, I began to speak to others, to anyone willing to speak to me about their life and experiences.

As this personal introduction has hopefully uncovered, I was drawn into this project by the unknown in my and others' personal and familial histories, things that were difficult to think about, formed through inherited customs, memories and ideas that were transmitted in intimate and distant relationships. Throughout the next chapters, I will continue to draw on the personal and at times interweave my narratives with those of my interviewees. I do so, however, sparingly and only at times where I feel that my 'insider' perspective might provide a better understanding of otherwise difficult-to-grasp social and psychological phenomena.

## Chapter 1.

### Russian-Germans past and present: Historical overview, context of repatriation and introduction to the field of study.

#### Introduction

This thesis is about three generations of ethnic Germans, known in Germany as *Russlanddeutsche Spätaussiedler*, Russian-German ‘late-resettlers’. This is a group of people who as German descendants were able to migrate to Germany under a policy of return after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The ‘generation of grandparents’ in these families lived in German settlements until being deported under Stalin's rule into internment camps in Siberia and Kazakhstan; their children – the ‘generation of parents’ grew up in these places of exile as Russian-speaking Soviet citizens; their children in turn – the ‘generation of grandchildren’ are growing up in Germany as German citizens.

Drawing primarily on in-depth interviews, this thesis investigates experiences of migration, post-migration life and integration especially of the younger generation those who came with their families as children or teenagers from either Kazakhstan or Russia from the 1990s onwards. It explores these experiences through a framework of (post)-Soviet and German cultural memory. In particular, I look at the young generation's experiences of integration as a form of ‘passing’, exploring not only their everyday struggles, but also the multifaceted reasons behind this strained assimilation. To do this, this thesis not only ventures into different topics, discourses, historical times and countries, it also brings together a multiplicity of stories from different families, generations and individuals. In this respect, this thesis has a multigenerational view as it explores the impact of burdensome histories and experiences across generations. However, while all three generations will be drawn on, the goal was not to have them all feature

equally. Rather, the older generations' experiences are explored in order to provide depth to the experiences and problems of the younger generations. This exploration of the younger generation's problems and their relationship to the older generations will bring up discussion of cultural and family memory, trauma, silences and shame as well as repatriation and the contentious idea of homecoming.

As we shall come to see throughout this chapter, there are several names for this group of people. Legal terminology defines them as *Aussiedler*, re-settlers or as *Spätaussiedler*, which literary translates as late-resettlers or late-repatriates. Next to the official terminology, there are also terms that are used by majority society and the people themselves. These different terms are all not without their problems. For example the designation 'Soviet Germans' denotes a degree of ideological association with the Soviet Union (Mukhina, 2007:4). The colloquial term 'Russian-Germans', is also problematic as according to Rosenthal and Stephan, not only does this term bear a history of russification, it is also misleading as it homogenises this large and diverse group of people. Nonetheless as the authors argue, this term is employed in public debates, academic writing and the media. To remedy this problem, Rosenthal and Stephan propose that it is more appropriate to refer to this group as 'ethnic Germans' from the former Soviet Union (2011:16).

Convinced initially by their valid critique, I too adopted 'ethnic' in order to be able to contrast German and ethnic German, much to the constant confusion of my British-educated colleagues at conferences. This is because particularly within the sphere of British sociology, the term 'ethnic' has long been problematised as it can be so easily substituted as a marker of supposedly biological categories, and thus covertly reproduce racialised essentialism (Back & Solomon, 2000; Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1992; Gilroy, 1987). This thesis is written from within a British sociological perspective, however I write about a group of people who have for several centuries marked themselves out on religious and ethnic grounds, and who have been 'ethnicised' by the legal policies of the former Soviet Union and Germany, which, particularly in the case of the former, operated upon very

different understandings of ‘ethnicity’ and ‘nationality’ from Western liberal democracies as we shall come to see further down.

Sociologist Les Back (2007) points out that as researchers we are often obsessed with squeezing lived life into categories in order to be able to manage the complexity of it. Accordingly, I struggle to find the right name for this group, and in this endeavour I am not alone. In fact, as this thesis will highlight, my interviewees grapple with this as well. All of these terms have their limits when describing lived reality, but each of these designations also points to some aspect of one’s experience. Often I found that my interviewees employed different terms depending on context and we will see how varied, complex and individual these processes of identification are. Thus some embrace the term *Ruslanddeutsche*, while others find it fails to define them. Some people call themselves *Aussiedler*, but others again associate this terminology with discrimination. Some people see themselves as Baptist-Germans, *Platt-Germans* or as simply as Germans, all depending on the circumstances in which they find themselves. Historian Irina Mukhina makes this point in her book *The Germans of the Soviet Union* when she writes that Russian-Germans often display a “relational identity”, or “an identity based on circumstances” (2007:148). She writes that depending on who is inquiring, Russian-Germans vary their answers of who they are (ibid).

Throughout this thesis I use all of these terms, but most often, refer to these people as Russian-Germans. As fellow Russian-German writer Lydia Klötzel (1999:15) points out, the terminology of *Ruslanddeutsche* expresses a double identification with the Russian and German cultures and languages and it is in this sense that I employ the term. Though this term is problematic, it nonetheless, and more than other terms, describes the diasporised hybrid character of this group. Olga Kurilo stresses that despite the many studies about Russian-Germans which point towards a culturally hybrid identity they are often exclusively discussed as either ‘Russian’ or ‘German’ in both Russian and German societies (2015:55). She writes that this has not least to do “with a lack of understanding of cultural complexity” (2015:15).<sup>3</sup> In the coming chapters, I will be advocating for a

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<sup>3</sup> Author's translation

diasporic or hybrid<sup>4</sup> understanding and representation of this group. I will argue for a more inclusive, historically-informed and complex understanding of their history, repatriation and identity. A diasporic understanding where people can be homecomers in a multicultural Germany and have a transnational or hybrid identity: be of German descent and have a Soviet history.

To understand the cultural complexity of this group, this thesis begins by going through the history of these diverse groups of people, followed by a discussion of the legal policies that have homogenised and ethnised them in the past. This chapter will then explore ethnic Germans' repatriation in the context of Soviet and German history, ending with a discussion about the not unproblematic idea of repatriation and how it created a hierarchy of belonging among the different immigrant groups in contemporary Germany. Lastly, this chapter will map out the coming chapters.

### Diverse historical trajectories

Russian-Germans were not a cohesive group to begin with. Only after the deportation(s) of the different Germanic groups to the far East of the Soviet Union, and thus their inevitable intermingling, did these different groups begin to understand themselves as a cohesive group with a shared identity based on hardship and discrimination (Mukhina, 2007:151). Ethnic Germans came from different parts of Western and Central Europe at different times, from diverse social backgrounds, to different places in Tsarist Russia and for various reasons. In the case of Baltic Germans, they were absorbed into the expanding Russian Empire rather than migrating there (ibid:14). There were Germans who worked and lived in Russian courts as early as the 17th Century. These were especially the Moscow and St. Petersburg Germans. Then there were Germans who came as free farmers in response to an invitation from Catherine the Great, whose Manifesto issued in 1776 granted many privileges to Germans and other peoples in Europe (Eisfeld, 1992). Germans were not the only group to take up the invitation, though

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4 As Iyall Smith argues that “[h]ybridity encompasses partial identities, multiple roles, and pluralistic selves” (2008:5). I will come back to discussions of diaspora and hybridity in Chapter Four and Five as well as in the Conclusion to this thesis, where I will discuss in greater detail how these terms might benefit discussions of identity among Russian-Germans.

they were the most numerous. They settled on the Volga, in the Ukraine and Crimea, in the Caucasus and also migrated in smaller numbers to Central Asia and Siberia.

These groups of Germans played different roles economically as well as culturally. But all groups quickly adapted themselves to the society and were among the most literate, educated and economically established groups in the Russian Empire as well as later in the first years of the Soviet Union (Mukhina, 2007:100). However, Germans never assimilated (at least not before WWII) fully into the Soviet-Russian society. They maintained a fair amount of independence in terms of their language, culture and education of the younger generations. Furthermore, Germans always had a complicated relationship with Tsarist Russia and later the Soviet Union: sometimes the state acted in their favour, but they were also discriminated against. In WWI, for example, thousands of them were sent into the East as a punitive measure by the Tsar (ibid:35).

After the October Revolution, Lenin propagated a policy referred to as *korenizatsiya*, meaning nativisation, to promote ethnic minorities' cultural and educational independence (Slezkine, 1994). This was part of the Soviet nationality policy, which I will be exploring further down. So in the 1920s national territories were assigned to many ethnic minorities. Ethnic Germans were among the beneficiaries and in 1924, Germans established eight independent *rayons*, districts, as well as the Socialist Soviet Republic of the Volga Germans (ASSR), with the capital town of Engels, near Saratov (Eisfeld, 1992). However, this cultural flourishing did not last long, especially after Stalin's seizure of power in the 1930s. A russification policy came into place and Germans as well as other ethnic minorities saw the gradual restrictions of their rights. With Stalin's *dekulakisation* (expropriation of the *kulaks*) and collectivisation programs, famines followed which affected large parts of the Soviet Union, including ethnic German areas. In the Great Purges of 1937 and 1938, many Germans were shot or sent to Gulags and 'special settlements' in the distant East. The final blow came after

Nazi-Germany's attack on the Soviet Union in 1941 when Stalin drafted the first completely ethnically motivated deportations to Siberia, Kazakhstan and other parts of the East.

### **Deportations of ethnic minorities in WWII**

Deportation, which can be viewed as a specific form of political repression (Polian, 2004:2), is a term which is not used by Russian-Germans who experienced this forced removal themselves; they would most often refer to that chapter in their lives as *vyselenye* – as the expelled ones. Deportation is a term more likely to be employed by the younger generations, who were socialised in Germany, when they speak about their family history.

How to properly name the events which affected different ethnic minorities and other 'punished peoples' between 1919 and the 1950s is also pondered within the academic literature. In *Against their will: The history and geography of forced migration in the USSR* Pavel Polian writes that the term 'deportation' refers to an act of expelling or banishing an alien from a country. Yet, he stresses, the banished minorities, including the ethnic Germans, were not aliens and nor were they expelled beyond the border of the SU. He explains that even now the terminology in this field is not clearly defined and not agreed upon (2004:1)<sup>5</sup>. He refers to these events as forced migrations, as these can be defined as a state-organised resettlement either of citizens or foreigners by coercive methods. From the lack of a fully satisfactory definition, Irina Mukhina, proposes to use terms such as "deportation", "exile" and "forced migration" (2007:5). I follow Mukhina and often speak of 'deportation' as well as 'exile' especially because this comes closest to how my informants understand these events.

More than six million people were forcibly removed from their homes and brought, under horrendous conditions, to so-called *spetsposilenie*, special

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<sup>5</sup> Pavel Polian's (2004) work on forced migrations provides a detailed and important geo-historical overview of forced migrations under Stalin. His study explains the various waves of deportations and their causes and the inter-related factors, economic, political and geo-political. He looks at the effects of the deportations from a geographical perspective, pointing out that these deportations played a big part in the economic mobilization in the Soviet Union.

settlements in the far East of the Soviet Union. In these special settlements, the *spetsposelentsy*, or ‘special settlers’, as they were referred to, were to begin a new life. However the Soviet reality was that they found themselves in barren lands. Historian Lynne Viola refers to these special settlements as the “unknown Gulag”, arguing that they were the very foundation of Stalin’s Gulag system. Viola writes that these settlements were designated for *kulaks* - Stalin’s first victims, who were sent there in the liquidation processes in the 1930s before the ethnic minorities (2007:10). There were very many deportations, motivated by different factors, including economic and class-based tensions or political and ethnic issues. Targets included kulaks, ‘enemies of the people’, and ‘punished peoples’ – Germans were among many other ethnic minority<sup>6</sup> groups punished through deportation (Polian, 2004).

### **Ethnic German Deportation(s)**

In 1939 almost 1.5 million Germans people lived in the USSR. 860 thousand in Russia, 400 thousand in the Ukraine, 92 thousand in Kazakhstan, 32 thousand in Azerbaijan and 20 thousand in Georgia. 1.2 million were subjected to deportation (Polian, 2004:126). There were several waves of deportations of ethnic Germans to several parts of the Soviet Union. In 1941 the preventative deportations, as they are also referred to, took place. They were not regarded by the authorities as a punishment but were premised on the fact that the deportees had the same ethnic background as the enemy. Germans were the first nationality to be deported for such reasons. The later so-called ‘punished people’ were accused of treason<sup>7</sup>, not so much because they were perceived to have already committed treason, but because Stalin wanted to foreclose any opportunity for them to do so (ibid:124). This accusation burned itself deep into the consciousness of the elder generation of my interviewees; even today, they still emphasise their innocence, insisting that they were not spies for the Nazis.

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6 Many other ethnic minorities were exiled by the Stalinist policies. They included: Crimean Tatars; Chechens; Iranians; Ingushes; Balkars; Karachai; Kalmyks; Koreans and others.

7 To be more accurate the ‘preventative deportations’ were not even a punishment for potential treason but for ‘having the same ethnic background of a foreign nation that is at war or may join the war on the enemy side’ (Bugay in Polian, 2004:125).



In June 1941, the first to be exiled were the Crimean Germans, followed by the deportation of the Volga Germans and the termination of the Volga German Republic. Next were the deportations in 1942 of Germans from 43 districts as well as the deportation of Germans from the Caucasus. In the same year, all German men were demobilised from the Red Army, after which followed the mobilisation of all men aged 17-50 to the *trudarmija*, labour army. The age barrier was then lowered and women, except those who were pregnant or had a child under the age of 3, were also mobilised into the labour army (Mukhina, 2007:47). Families were torn apart. Men and women were mobilised into different labour armies, often leaving children with no one to look after them. Around 316,000 Germans served in labour camps (Stricker, 2000, Krieger, 2007, Pohl, 1999). At the end of the war followed the 'repatriations' of Soviet citizens from the West. These were Germans, who were not deported because the occupying German forces were already in the territory (such as the Western part of the Ukraine and some parts of the Caucasus) where these Germans lived. Then followed the 'peaceful deportations', meaning after WWII, which carried on well into the 1950s. Germans from the Kaliningrad area, as well as Baltic Germans who were not deported during the War years were also sent into the special settlements in the East (Muhkina, 2007:52).

### **In the Special Settlements Regimes**

After weeks and months on freight trains, the deportees found themselves in sheer chaos. The poor planning of the Soviet government meant that there was a lack of housing, medicine, food or appropriate winter clothing. As there were no jobs for the deportees, people could not earn any money to help themselves. Interviewees often tell that they depended on what the local people would give them. Some interviewees told me about stealing from the potato and beet fields and others would beg for work on the small farms of the local community. As the deportation(s) of 1941 took place in the early autumn months, by the time they reached their destinations in Siberia and Kazakhstan, winter had set in and the deported had nowhere to go as there was no provisioned shelter. The first housing were *zemlyanki* (dug-outs), old barracks, or assignments within the already overcrowded homes of local people. Owing to the poor conditions, malnutrition and disease, the death rates were very high.

The majority of deported people were ascribed the status of special-settlers, which implied their strict subjugation under administrative units called *komendatura* in their places of residence. This ascription was for life, which meant that people were never allowed to return to the places where they had been born and raised, but also that they were not allowed to move freely anywhere except in their assigned territory. The consequences for not complying were severe. My interviewee Amalia Schmitt (b.1938) told me how as a child, she always lived in fear to cross by accident into territory where they were not allowed to go. Her mother told her that she would go to jail if Amalia played on the wrong side and so Amalia was paralysed by fear, not wanting to play at all. These administrative units were the official form of control over the settlers and held detailed records on every aspect of the settlers' lives. There were also unofficial forms of control, including informers and agents who were often recruited from within the deported communities as well as the local native population, who were not subjected to the special settlements regime (Mukhina, 2007:85). This experience deeply ingrained itself into the ethnic German collective imagination. Upon migration to Germany, the experiences of not being able to move (again) reopened old wounds for this generation, as we shall come to see.

These special settlements regimes were not intended to be “ethnicity specific”, writes Mukhina, however owing to the time of the deportation, as well as the high numbers of deportees, these regimes became “ethnically dominated” (2007:83). This does not mean, however, that families lived together. On the contrary, families were torn apart and subject to different administrative units. Whether families could remain together often depended on the goodwill of the local authorities. Families were only able to reunite after the relaxation of the special settlement regime in 1953/54. The prohibition to return to their places of birth was, however, never overturned. While President Yeltsin made promises to restore the Volga Republic, in the chaos of the Soviet collapse in the 1990s, the Volga Republic could not be restored again.

The question whether such mistreatment was intentional and thus could be considered genocide on the part of the Soviet government has since occupied academic writing in this field. The first publications to appear on this topic such as Robert Conquest's *The nation killer* (1960) and Alexander Nekrich's, *The punished people* (1978) suggested that it was indeed an intentional measure of Stalinist politics. However, Mukhina argues that newly available archival material suggests that even though hunger, disease and death were a daily reality for the settlers, the deportation and resettlement were not an intentional genocide designed to eliminate whole peoples. In fact, she asserts that many documents show that the regime even tried to accommodate settlers and provide for them, often at the expense of the local people (2007:58). What becomes clear in the studies of historians who had access to newly opened archives, including that of Polian (2004) and Mukhina (2007), is the Soviet regime's disregard for people no matter what their ethnicity. Their poor planning of the deportations and general negligence, as well as the lack of material goods owing to the war efforts, caused death and misery.

The deportations and the special settlements regime had tremendous effects on ethnic Germans in many respects. Germans lost many of their elder generations as well as their intellectuals and religious leaders. Because so many people perished, the language, traditions and religious beliefs were no longer passed on to younger generations. The harsh restrictions with regards to movement, school and work placements, as well as the restriction on speaking German in public, meant that Germans transformed from one of the best educated groups of people in the Soviet Union before the deportation to one of the least educated groups by the 1990s (Mukhina, 2007:95, Krieger, 2007). Mukhina sums it up, writing "the deportations were not only horror stories with short-term implications and sky-high death rates but they were also policies that had many long-term consequences, especially for ethnic identity alteration among the deported people" (2007:2).

### **Ethnic Germans living under occupation**

The history of ethnic Germans is one of victimhood as well as one of complicity in genocide. The German population that lived in Eastern Ukraine, whom Stalin

did not deport as the occupying forces had already reached these territories, were recruited into the German forces. Currently very little historical data exists on these Germans. Around 350,000 Germans lived under the occupying forces (Fleischhauer & Pinkus, 1986:100). Doris L. Bergen (1994:570) explains that Hitler used the “trapped *Volksdeutsche*” outside the Reich as an ideological pretext to attack Eastern Europe and that, in fact, the concept of *Volksdeutsche* exacerbated existing anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe. Fleischhauer and Pinkus explain that in the beginning, Hitler was not highly concerned about Germans in the USSR and Nazi Germany’s knowledge about these Germans was rather superficial. However, once Russian-Germans émigrés began a campaign for their ‘*Brüder in Not*’<sup>8</sup> in Stalinist Russia, Hitler incorporated them into his plans of *Osterweiterung* (1986:95). Soon these Germans were under Himmler’s division and a list of four categories was drawn up to distinguish between their levels of German blood and ‘consciousness’ and determine their status and employment.<sup>9</sup> Fleischhauer and Pinkus write that when the first less indoctrinated German forces arrived in Western Ukraine, they were greeted with traditional bread and salt by Germans as well as Ukrainians and other peoples, as all believed that an end to Stalinist rule had come. However this attitude changed drastically when the first SS troops arrived and the people gained a greater understanding of the Nazis’ intentions (1986:94).

When the Germans occupied the Soviet territories, a military administration was initially put in place before a civil administration took over. Shortly after that the *Einsatzgruppen* and *Sicherheitspolizei* carried out the murder of Jews, commissars, aliens and partisans. At the same time, they registered ethnic Germans to ensure their privileged status. They then appointed a German mayor, who was supposed to recruit men between the ages of 18-45 to form the so-called *Selbstschutz*. The *Selbstschutz* received its initial military training from the

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8 Brothers in plight

9 The categories were: 1) racially German with German consciousness; 2) racially German without German consciousness but who could be re-germanised; 3) people with predominantly German blood but who had to undergo a *Wiedereindeutschungsverfahren* and would get a temporary German pass, after surveillance and 10 years they could receive German citizenship and 4) Germans that were unable to be germanised any more or who were unwilling to become German. Members of this group were often sent to concentration camps or shot (Fleischhauer and Pinkus 1986:96).

*Einsatzkommando* and was tasked with the protection of local Germans from partisan activity and Romanian soldiers (ibid:97). They were further charged with searching for communists, escapees and partisans and purging the settlements and their surroundings of Jewish residents. The ethnic Germans in the *Selbstschutz* were often the translators between the *Einsatzkommando* and the Jewish people. Fleischhauer and Pinkus write that the *Einsatzkommando* carried out the shootings and that sometimes local Germans volunteered to participate. There are also reported incidents of ethnic Germans refusing to carry out shootings in their local communities and some mild protests were reported in the German communities (ibid:98). After weeks in these places, the *Einsatzkommando* would move further East and leave these communities in a “state of trauma” (ibid:99).

As the German troops retreated from the advancing Red Army, they took the Germans, approximately 350,000 individuals, along with them through the ‘*Warthegau*’ in Poland and eventually to German territory (Fleischhauer & Pinkus, 1986:101). In Germany upon arrival these Germans received German citizenship and thus legally do not count as ‘*Aussiedler*’, something that some families only learned post migration to Germany. They thus did not benefit from the compensation payments that other Russian-Germans had, but, on the other hand, were not restricted in their initial choice of settlement. When the Red Army reached Berlin in 1945, they immediately rounded up these Germans and at least 200,000 of them were put on freight trains and ‘repatriated’ back to the Soviet Union. My elderly interviewees recall that they were tricked into the belief that they would return to their villages, however these ‘repatriates’ were instead sent, just as other ethnic Germans had been previously, to the special settlements in the far East. People tried to escape their fate by going into hiding and some of them managed to emigrate to Canada and South America (ibid:102).

### **Fragmented memory: Ethnic Germans living under German occupation**

Gabriele Rosenthal et al. critically examined the academic literature concerning the history of ethnic Germans and came to the conclusion that this part of the history is being purposely forgotten. They argue that while many Germans with this family history and their offspring portray themselves today as victims of the

Stalinist regime, their history is also one of participation in genocide and crimes against humanity under the occupying forces (2011:69). Also in some of my interviews with the 'generation of parents' in families<sup>10</sup> with this history, I found that this history is seriously downplayed or evaded as a topic. An extreme illustration of this was my interviewee Elvira Specht (b.1941) who first brushed over in her narration her father's involvement with the German army and when I specifically asked for details, still not telling me anything about her father, replied that the German soldiers were very nice to children and patted them on the head. Among the 'generation of grandchildren', I found that this knowledge of (family) memory is practically non-existent. However in one case, with my interviewee Lena (b. 1986), her great-grandfather's German army conscription served as a proof that the family was indeed German. Lena did not quite understand what it really 'meant' that one's family lived under Nazi occupation and did not see her family as part of the perpetrator legacy, which is often the case when interviewing German descendants (Rosenthal, 1997; Welzer et al., 2012).

I remember when I just started my research how shocked I was when I found out about this part of history. Recently I looked over old notes of mine and found a paper that I had read several years ago which mentioned ethnic Germans' involvement with Nazi forces in Eastern Ukraine. In the margin I had written: *'Could this really be? Need to check'*. I was astonished. I had never heard of this spoken within the Russian-German community. That some Germans served in the German army and might have participated in the atrocities that took place in Eastern Europe was also shocking to my interviewees of the 'generation of grandchildren' when I brought it up in our interviews. It is 'so shocking' because the dominant discourse positions Russian-Germans as victims. After I told my interviewee Alyona about this history in our interview, she commented: *'That is just so contrary to our identity as victims, totally. To be honest, I have never heard of this, this is so embarrassing'*. That it is important to the young people to 'know the facts', is informed by the dominant Holocaust memory discourse in Germany, which my interviewees usually do not take on as part of their family history<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> I only interviewed grandchildren and children in these families and not people who were drafted themselves into the German army.

<sup>11</sup> Initially I planned to include a chapter on what it means for the young generations to negotiate their identity with regards to the NS-past. I decided against it as I did not explore this topic deeply

Illustrating how important these questions become for these young people, Alyona, having told me in the interview that she does not know in which part of the Ukraine her grandparents lived, called her mother while I was out of the room. When I came back Alyona put her mother on speaker phone and she told us about the history of the grandparents and that they were deported by Stalin.

That it was also very important to Lidia (b.1991) to establish her family's innocence is reflected in an email she sent me months after our interview. During the interview Lidia had told me that when her grandfather was a young man, he went to Germany with the *Wehrmacht*, but that she did not know any more details about it. Similar to Alyona, in the interview, Lidia wanted to know more and kept asking me for details. Several weeks after the interview, I received an email from Lidia stating that '*by the way, I pressed my father for more information and my grandfather was definitely not in the SS*'. That this particular history is so fragmented and little known in comparison for example to Germany is because the Holocaust was a highly taboo-laden topic until the *glasnost* period (Dobroszycki & Gurock, 1993; Himka & Michlic, 2013). That Jewish people were targeted for extermination by Nazi-Germany was not discussed as such, instead they were presented as another causality in the *Great Patriotic War*, as WWII was known in the Soviet Union. Ethnic Germans who fought on Germany's side kept quiet about their involvement. In Germany, their involvement is not widely acknowledged, as any such discussion would seriously undermine the admission rationale in the first place that posits ethnic Germans as victims and not as perpetrators.

### **Rehabilitation and relative stability until disintegration of SU**

After Stalin's death, Germans were rehabilitated from their collective punishment. However they had to campaign for it themselves and they did not receive any official apology. When the special regimes were dissolved, it was simply stated

enough in the interviews. Nonetheless in many interviews with the young generations as well as with interviewees whose family members served in the German army, NS-history came up naturally. What I found interesting and thus think deserves more attention in future research is how although young women and men were eager to present themselves as 'German only', as soon as our conversation touched the topic of the NS-past and the Holocaust, young people distanced themselves in their narrations from this part of German history by referring to their own family's victimhood. These findings diverge from some of the research with other children of immigrants in Germany. This research shows that many immigrant children feel excluded from NS debates in Germany and would like to take part in these discussions (See Viola Georgi, 2003; 2004).

that the Soviet Union no longer needed to maintain this kind of regulation. Polian writes that this wording shows that the government still believed in the righteousness and legitimacy of their actions in the past (2004:183). With the abolition of the 'settlement regime', normality started to set in during the 1960s and 1970s. The younger generations, those not born under the *komendatura*, began to see their places of birth, which were places of exile for their parents and grandparents, as their homes. They began to integrate, speak Russian as their mother tongue and unlike their parents, marry outside the German group. As a result of the high percentage of intermarriages, today approximately 40 percent of young people in Russian-German families have a non-ethnic German parent (Dietz, 2003). Though it was still difficult to gain a higher education in the SU, increasingly more Germans of the younger generations were able to achieve academic success and receive a university education. This period of relative stability lasted until the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

### Looking at repatriation and repatriate identity

With the decline of the Soviet Union hundreds of thousands of ethnic Germans began to migrate each year to Germany. There are around 4.5 million people that count as ethnic German re-settlers in Germany (Dietz, 1999). They constitute the largest immigrant group in Germany, followed by approximately 2.5 million people of Turkish origin. Whereas previously ethnic Germans came predominantly from Poland, Hungary and Romania, from the 1990s over 2.5 million people came from Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (Dietz, 2003). The migration of ethnic Germans is specific in the sense that it consists of people who are legally seen as Germans but did not have German citizenship. As we shall come to see shortly, the repatriation of ethnic Germans began after WWII, as Germany saw itself obliged to give a home to the many Germanic groups expelled from Eastern Europe because of their German ethnicity.

### **Repatriation in international perspective**

Although repatriation as a form of migration has been of interest to the social sciences since the 1970s, it has as yet not resulted in a systematic approach to the



topic. Not only do different countries employ different terms to refer to this phenomenon, also in academic discourse, terminologies can differ. Scanning the wide-ranging academic literature, Olga Zeveleva writes that repatriation can be called “co-ethnic migration” “return migration” or “ethnic return migration” (2014:809). Usually, she comments, it is post-conflict countries that implement repatriation programs for refugees or prisoners of war. Additionally, however, many countries that are not experiencing periods of unrest have included repatriation programs in their broader migration policy agendas (ibid). She mentions that there are approximately 40 countries that can be considered to have implemented repatriation legislation. These include Germany, Greece, France, Ireland, Japan, Poland, Russia, Kazakhstan, Israel and India, among others (ibid: 808).

The most prominent example of diasporic return is that of Jews who have come to Israel since WWII, with the largest group coming from the former Soviet Union, almost 800 000 people (Remmenick, 2003; Münz & Ohliger, 2003). In Western Europe ethnic German descendants from Eastern Europe compose the largest group of ethnic return migrants. Other countries in Europe such as Spain, Greece, Italy, Hungary and Poland have received much smaller populations from Latin America and Eastern Europe (Capo Zmegac, 2005; Skrentny et al. 2009). After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, 2.8 million ethnic Russians living in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics migrated back to Russia (see Pilkington, 1998). In East Asia almost one million Japanese and Korean descendants from Latin America and Eastern Europe have return-migrated (Tsuda, 2013).

Comparative work on ethnic returns include an ambitious study by Skrentny et al. (2007) which compares repatriation policies as practised by states in Europe and repatriation as practised by states in Asia. The study concludes that while Asian governments implement repatriation policies to reach economic goals, in European states (as well as Israel) return migrations are supported by an ethnic protection or ethnic affinity rationale based on the historical connection of these countries to their diasporic people. The former is especially the case with Israel

and Germany (Tsuda, 2013:176; Münz & Ohliger, 2003; Koppenfels, 2002a:107). I will look at the specific characteristics of Germany's repatriation of ethnic Germans further down. In other countries such as Spain, Greece, Hungary and Russia immigration policies are based exclusively on an ethnic affinity rationale with diasporic descendant being included as part of a greater ethnic nation beyond state borders (Tsuda, 2013). These repatriation initiatives are based on the “essentialized assumption that these descendants of former emigrants, despite being born and raised abroad, would be culturally similar to the host populace because of their shared bloodline” (Tsuda, 2013:175). A recent volume with the title *Diasporic Homecomings: Ethnic return migration in comparative perspective*, edited by Takeyuki Tsuda (2009), presents several chapters on repatriation in comparative perspective. The book’s unifying focus lies in the marginalisation of repatriates in their ‘homelands’. This is because although repatriates are often given citizenship of the country they ‘return to’ based on ethnic relations, studies show that they often encounter difficulties with integration into these societies and are perceived by the local population as foreign (Capo Zmegac, 2005) or as a migrant group (Römling, 2004; Hess 2011; Skrentny et al. 2007:104; Tsuda, 2013).

Several scholars have also addressed repatriation flows in the context of post-Soviet nation-building processes. Timothy Heleniak characterises the Soviet Union as “a complex system of ethnic homelands”, which set the stage for post-Soviet migration patterns dominated by flows of migrants ‘returning home’ to states both within and external to the former Soviet Union (Heleniak in Zeveleva, 2014:810). Thus alone from the dissolved SU, as we have seen above, several ethnic minorities' migrations such as that of Germans, Greeks (Voutira, 2011; King & Christou, 2010) Jews (Remennick, 1998; Elias, 2008) and Russians (Pilkington, 1998; Flynn, 2004) took place under the framework of 'return'. These flows were triggered not only by economic causes and familial ties, but by repatriation policies developed by the nation states. Hilary Pilkington, in her book *Migration, displacement and identity in post-Soviet Russia*, writes that the study of these policy formulations provides fertile ground for the study of primordial conceptions of nation and homeland (1998:186).

Let us look more closely at how the Soviet Union created a primordial category of ethnic nationality, not only ethnicising its population by spreading the belief that ethnicity was an inherent and crucially important characteristic of all individuals, but also creating ethnic homelands which ultimately set the stage for post-Soviet migrations. Historian Terry Martin explains that although the Soviet government never planned on doing it, in effect it propagated the belief that nationality was the single most important aspect of all individuals (2001:449). He stresses that after 1933, the importance of people (*narod*) and nationality over class can be even be seen in a transition from class-based to ethnicity-based deportations, from the persecution of class enemies, to enemies of the people (*ibid*).

What is interesting and particularly relevant for this study is the fact that the Soviet conception of nationality and the persecution of these nationalities have in turn influenced other countries in their repatriation formulation. In the case of Germany it has even led to an ethnicization of its own citizenship law (v. Koppenfels, 2002a:103, Levy, 2003). Amanda von Koppenfels for example draws this link when she argues that two key events played a role in the ethnicizing of German citizenship. It was the 1941 deportations by Stalin and the expelling of Germans at the end of WWII from Eastern Europe on the basis of ethnicity. She argues that it was these events that played a large part in the inclusion of ethnicity *per se* in laws affecting West German citizenship. She writes that since the expulsions and deportations were entirely based on ethnicity, it was only logical that the reacting German law should be based upon ethnicity as well (2002:103). This link between Soviet conceptions of ethnic nationality and German nationality law and repatriation policies is rarely made. First let us go through the Soviet attempts to create a unique category of national ethnicity and then turn to Germany's repatriation policy of ethnic Germans.

### **‘Ethnic nationality’ in the Soviet Union**

Nationality as we know it today in Western European countries emerged from a long, drawn-out process of state-formation which, through the formalisation and

universalisation of the criteria for membership on principles of citizenship, crystallised diverse ethnic groups into a monolithic national identity (Seligman, 1992). In *'After the USSR: Ethnicity, nationalism and politics in the commonwealth of independent states'* Anatoly Khazanov argues that in the Soviet case, the Bolshevik revolution interrupted this process of nation-state formation. The national policy that was then introduced became purely administrative and very contradictory. Contradictory because, as Tim Heleniak points out, the Soviets tried to combine policies of a 'melting pot', of assimilation and diasporisation at the same time (2000:172). Soviet power in effect created ethno-territorial federalism and institutionalised ethnic nationality. They did this by connecting nationality with territory, linking ethnic status with ethno-territorial autonomy. As a result, the Soviets did not break down the barriers between ethnicity and nation (Kazhanov, 1995:18). Instead they created a political hierarchy of ethnic groups and subdivided all peoples of the USSR into three groups: *natsia* (the most consolidated peoples), *national'nost* (underdeveloped nations) and *narodnost* (ethnic groups of even lower order) (ibid).

Khazanov illustrates this latter point by stating that the situation resembled a *matrioshka* doll – in which successively smaller figures are hidden inside larger ones. In a similar way, titular nations in union republics had more advantages than peoples in autonomous republics, and these had in turn more advantages than people in autonomous regions, not to speak of even smaller entities such as autonomous districts and so forth (1995:18). At the bottom of this hierarchy were the dispersed nationalities and other 'punished peoples' (ibid), among them the Germans, who as we have seen above, had their own autonomous republic and districts, which were then dissolved under Stalin. As a result they had no administrative representation and no institution to defend their rights.

Khazanov also argues that the Soviet conception of nationality was essentially primordialist in so far as it was based on descent. Despite not having explicit racial criteria, nationality was not a matter of free choice and it could not be changed or married into (1995:16). From the 1930s until the collapse of the Soviet Union, nationality was based on parental identification. It was inherited and was

not only written into the birth certificate, but also noted in the infamous fifth paragraph of the internal Soviet passport. Only at the age of 16 and only if one was born into a mixed marriage was it possible to choose one's nationality (ibid). Rogers Brubaker emphasises that ethnic nationality or *national'nost* was not only a statistical category, or a unit of social accounting employed in social surveys, it was moreover an "ascriptive legal category and a key element of an individual's legal status recorded in almost all bureaucratic encounters and official transactions" (1996:31). This meant that ethnic nationality shaped life opportunities because it was needed in almost all important situations of life, for example when applying for university or for employment (ibid). It could be negative or positive, positive if one belonged to a titular nationality, as there were preferential treatment policies, and negative if one belonged to the 'punished peoples'.

This policy of affirmative action turned nationality, as Terry Martin writes, into social capital or a curse (2001:449). Martin stresses that the message the empire sent was crystal clear, namely that nationality is one of the most important attributes and it became second-nature to label people nationally (ibid). Historian Stephen Lovell notes that as a result of labelling people nationally, Soviet people were acutely aware of ethnic differences and did not want to trade them for a purely civic notion of nationality (2009:116). He exemplifies his argument by pointing out that when in the 1990s the newly independent government of Russia wanted to abandon the compulsory ethnic designation in the passport, this measure met strong opposition, particularly from minority groups, whose life had been entirely shaped by their ethnicity (ibid). Accordingly, also to my interviewees who were socialised in the Soviet Union, their German nationality was a central aspect of identity. As a social researcher, educated to be sensitive to the potential of ethnic discourses to draw racialised boundaries, I had to be cautious not to dismantle too readily these notions without understanding how important they were for people. Otherwise I could have missed how ethnic return migrants could feel particularly estranged and disillusioned compared to other immigrants when they experienced ethnic rejection in their host countries (Tsuda, 2013:180). There will be more about this in the coming chapters.

Now that we have seen how the Soviet government created ethnic nationality and ethnicized its population, let us engage with the German context. Because of WWII, the German government formulated its own policies with which to administer the inclusion of ethnic Germans, who were not nationals of Germany but were dispersed outside of its new borders.

### **Ethnic German repatriation post-Cold War**

As we have seen above, officially Germany's admission of ethnic Germans from Central and Eastern Europe was based on an ethnic protection rationale. However, in public opinion, including among some of my interviewees as we will hear in the coming chapters, there is a belief that that this repatriation was entirely based on ethnicity. Yet, contrary to this “popular opinion”, as von Koppenfels writes, “the basis for acceptance as an *Aussiedler* in Germany is not ethnicity per se, but rather it is *Vertreibungsdruck* arising as a result of German ethnicity” (2002a:107). Thus people who were applying must have suffered ethnically motivated discrimination. She emphasises that the difference between ethnicity and ethnicity-based discrimination is a crucial one to understand (*ibid*). Indeed it is important to trace how this confusion could come about, since, it will help to understand the changing reception and incorporation of ethnic Germans in post-Cold War Germany, something I will discuss in the next chapter. Secondly, this understanding also allows ethnic Germans to formulate belonging through a diasporic connection, rather than through outdated ideas of 'Germanness' and sameness – as is currently happening; or even worse: through a language of *Heimat* and 'belonging by blood'. For a long time, *Aussiedler* have employed notions of *Heimat* in their politics and claims to homeland (Mandel, 2008:315). While I will sensitively consider such claims in the coming chapters, they are problematic and unsustainable. Not only are they politically not viable in a changing multicultural Germany, they are also counterproductive to Russian-Germans themselves as the coming chapters will unfold.

If we want to understand ethnic Germans' repatriation fully, we need to look at how it changed post-Cold War. Münz and Ohliger in *Diasporas and ethnic*

*migrants in twentieth-century Europe: A comparative perspective* a study examining Israel's and Germany's repatriations, write that while officially the Federal Republic of Germany supported the admission of ethnic Germans because of historical and moral obligations, since their discrimination had been tied to Nazi-expansion into those territories; there were other, less openly discussed reasons:

the fact that all co-ethnics who profited from these provisions came from communist countries legitimized this admission not only as co-ethnic solidarity and duty linked to the consequences of the country's Nazi past, but also from the logic of the Cold War, a period during which some preferential treatment was given to almost everyone who managed to escape from the 'Soviet bloc'. (2003:13)

Also von Koppenfels makes this point when she writes that the ethnic German repatriations were ideologically conceived and that the category of the *Aussiedler* is an ideological construction of the Cold War, created in an effort to 'rescue' the ethnic Germans under Communist domination and give them a home in West Germany (2002b:19). Thus for the period from the end of WWII until the end of the Cold War, ethnic Germans were an integral part of West-Germany's self-perception of helping the dominated Germans in Eastern Europe. Or, as Regina Römheld puts it, it was a way for Germany to present itself as a national refuge for the persecuted 'compatriots' (2004:199). Koppenfels further argues that welcoming ethnic Germans from the East was a symbolic act, as it was never imagined that hundred of thousands of people would come with the end of the Cold War. When they did, Germany increasingly began to limit these migrations (2002b:19).

Daniel Levy argues that indeed it was the new circumstances of WWII and the Cold War that were institutionalised in the citizenship law, not a pre-existing understanding of 'Germanness'. Levy explains that after WWII Germany adopted a descent-based citizenship legislation that had its roots in the 1913 Law on Citizenship, but now also included ethnic German refugees who were stateless or citizens of other states. Levy argues that a legislation change which based citizenship on *jus sanguinis* is surprising, given that Germany was a newly

established liberal democracy. Drawing on Brubaker, he argues that it is partly true that Germany has a strong ethno-cultural tradition of imagining the nation, but he stresses that it was not simply a one-to one adoption of the 1913 Law. Instead it was driven by social policy and political calculations shaped in the circumstances of the post-war period. He explains that, since only a generous interpretation of the German citizenship law could provide a legal equality between expelled Germans citizens, expelled ethnic Germans and the German resident population (2003:293), so a provisional constitution was established for the refugees from the former Eastern provinces and expelled ethnic Germans, and this was later extended to *Aussiedler* in 1953 in the repatriation law *Bundesvertriebenengesetz*, short BVFG. Levy stresses that one important consideration was of a political nature. The reproduction of an ethno-cultural understanding of nationhood was instrumental in sustaining West Germany's claim to embody Germany's unity, despite its actual loss of Eastern territories to the USSR, Poland and to another sovereign German state.

The BVFG law grants *Aussiedler* and their non-ethnic German spouses German citizenship shortly upon arrival. Up until the 1950s ethnic Germans coming from Central and Eastern Europe were categorized as *Heimatvertriebene*, expellees. From the 1950s onwards they were classified as *Aussiedler*. Since 1993, the *Kriegsfolgenbereinigungsgesetz* (literally translated as 'Act of Cleaning-up the Consequences of War') has re-established conditions for *Aussiedler* status and ethnic Germans are conceived of as *Spätaussiedler*. As of today a *Spätaussiedler* is someone born after the 31st of December 1923 for whom the following are true:

- 1) he/she is descended from a German citizen or an ethnic German.
- 2) his/her parent(s) or other relatives have passed on confirming characteristics such as language, upbringing and...
- 3) the person declared himself/herself as German up until he/she left German settlements, or belonged to the German nationality according to the laws in his/her country of origin.<sup>12</sup>

Since these latest changes not every ethnic German is entitled to immigration and citizenship. Yet this was not always so, as up until the break-up of the Soviet Union, it was fairly easy to receive *Aussiedler* status. Until the 1970s ethnically

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12 An online version can be found here: <http://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/bvfg/index.html>



based discrimination was taken for granted and *Aussiedler* was indeed a collective term for ethnic Germans. This meant that ethnic discrimination and ethnicity were basically the same thing. However in post-Cold War, subjective acknowledgement required now certain objective characteristics such as descent, upbringing, culture or religious practices (von Koppenfels, 2002a: 107). Up until the 1970s this was interpreted rather loosely. Additionally, the German government began to introduce restrictions<sup>13</sup>, such as lengthy application procedures starting in migrants' countries of residence and a language test that families had to pass. There were also grounds for not receiving this status. For example, if one had aided a totalitarian or national socialist government, or if one had high-ranking political or professional careers in the Soviet system. Also people who were born after 1992 may no longer apply for immigration themselves, but can still come as family members (von Koppenfels, 2002b:23). With this latest change, Germany ended in effect an ethnicity-based repatriation.

### **Repatriation created hierarchies of belonging**

In a recent compilation *Migration, memory and diversity. Germany from 1945 to the present*, editor Cornelia Wilhelm writes that the Cold War political claims enforced the traditional ethnocultural definition of Germanness, as well as a commitment to a 'single German nationhood', which facilitated the legal inclusion of expellees, ethnic Germans, and refugees from the GDR. However such a self-image prevented Germany from confronting its social reality as a rising economic power that depended on foreign labour (2017:2). She writes that while economic success required labour force from abroad, the possibility of integration of this labour force was rejected (ibid). Wilhelm elaborates that basically up until the 1990s every German party failed to effectively address migration as a social reality (ibid). Even worse, in the 1980s, at the peak of these debates the CDU under Kohl developed a scheme to support a broad return migration of so-called 'guest workers', promising financial rewards to those who were willing to relocate after long term residency (Wilhelm, 2017:2). Germany's leadership proclaimed openly that Germany is not a 'country of immigration'.

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<sup>13</sup> Up until 2014 this law included some restrictions (*Optionspflicht*) regarding dual citizenship. It stated that naturalised young people need to choose between their parents' citizenship and German citizenship at the age of 23. In April of 2014, the grand coalition of SPD and CDU removed the much criticised restrictions and agreed upon the right of dual citizenship for second-generation children who had been born in Germany to immigrant parents.

Yet statistics reveal a different picture: between 1950s and 1994, 80% of West-Germany's increase in population resulted from migration, altogether 12 million people, excluding the millions of ethnic German expellees who came to Germany after WWII (Klusmeyer & Papademetriou, 2013:xii). Initially post-war immigration to West Germany had been driven by *Übersiedler*, East-German refugees from the GDR, ethnic Germans expellees and *Aussiedler*. Their numbers were enormous, however immediate access to citizenship with generous state support, and favourable economic conditions in the 1950s and 1960s allowed for a successful integration (Schirmer, 2017:233). With the economic boom, labour migrations from Italy, Spain, Greece, Turkey and the former Yugoslavia, based on the 'guest worker' programme took place. As these people stayed on, they transformed from 'guest workers' to residents (ibid). Germany was undoubtedly a 'country of immigration' but refused to portray itself as such. In fact the German government avoided a language of immigration altogether by creating convenient labels of "return", "resettlement" and "quota refugees" (Mandel, 2008:322). Schirmer writes that throughout the postwar period the characteristic traits of German immigration policy on immigration had been absence, denial and the mantra that Germany was not a 'country of immigration'. This remained until the 1980s, at the right of the political spectrum (2017:239).

Within the German multicultural, as Römhild writes, *Aussiedler* were officially privileged Eastern immigrants. As from day one they were granted full German citizenship rights and were provided with specific integration assistance programs such as language courses or professional development training (2004:199). But, as Römhild writes further, this "privileged Spätaussiedler status of being entitled to equal claims has fostered feelings of envy and competition not only among the 'native Germans', but also among long-term resident non-Germans who still have to struggle for being politically and socially accepted as co-citizens" (ibid:200). While as we have seen, the Cold War strengthened ethno-cultural understandings of Germanness, the end of the Cold War and German unification provided opportunities to depart from exclusive, and ethnocultural definitions of citizenship and identity (Wilhelm, 2017:2; Kaya, 2017:65; Schirmer, 2017:242). Schirmer writes that by the mid-1990s all major parties were advocating citizenship reform, even CDU-CSU admitted that a positive right to naturalisation was unavoidable

(2017:243). Finally, in 1999 a citizenship and naturalisation reform was passed. Now non-European immigrant children born in Germany could claim German citizenship with some restrictions. This law marked a significant departure from a descent-based to a civic rights-based understanding of citizenship and belonging (ibid). Since the first population census following the new migration law in 2005, *Aussiedler* have been included in the group of persons with a *Migrationshintergrund*<sup>14</sup>, migration background (Kaya, 2017:71). As discussed above, before that they had been considered not only in public and political debates, but also statistically as returnees, resettlers or homecomers. With these changes, as Asiye Kaya argues, “they have returned to the public memory with their migration and integration experiences” (ibid).

However, the years of unequal treatment of the different groups in terms of citizenship and residency rights meant that these groups experienced different consequences (ibid:65). Today ethnic Germans are seen to have 'melted' into German society when compared to non-European immigrants and their offspring who have been living in Germany for decades (ibid:70). The *Datenreport* of 2013 indicates that ethnic Germans earn more on average than the Turkish population, are much better integrated into the educational system and have lower unemployment rates (ibid). This success is often explained by the privileged role the repatriation played (ibid). What is often not seen or discussed in such comparative studies is the fact that the repatriation not only came with privileges, but also with impossible expectations and extreme assimilation pressures. To exemplify what this thesis will later explore in-depth, let us look briefly at my interviewee Igor (b. 1976) and his dramatic description of his integration.

### **Restricting repatriate identity**

Igor, who came at the age of 18 with his mother and sister from Kazakhstan, began to stress how atypical he is among the Russian-Germans the moment we sat down for the interview. He warned me that the interview will be ‘*very trying*’ for

<sup>14</sup> *Migrationshintergrund* is not an unproblematic statistical category which accounts for the ‘foreign population’ in Germany. It has undergone several changes throughout the past years. It is a broad term encompassing immigrants as well as those born in Germany and German citizens who are descendants of immigrants after 1949. The category now also includes (*Spät*)-*Aussiedler* (<https://www.bamf.de>).

me, since I could not learn anything about this group from our conversation, because Igor believed that he is *'not a typical Aussiedler'*, that he is *'very far from a typical Russian-German'*. What Igor did not realise is how often I came across this type of response in the course of my fieldwork. Igor explained that he wanted to *'become German'* the moment they set foot in Germany and when I asked what this meant for him, he replied in a serious tone that becoming German *'was only possibly with violence'*, that he had to *'kill everything else'*. In other words, to interviewees like Igor, integration meant the loss of their former identity, while the preservation of it would have meant the impossibility of becoming German.

It was this tension, which fascinated me and was an initial way into this thesis. As I investigated these experiences, I began to see how Russian-Germans' restricted sense of identity was a mirror of an inner conflict and a state of confusion about their identity and belonging. As the above discussion demonstrated, between the Soviet Union and Germany, this group of people has not only been several times displaced, uprooted, excluded, ostracised, privileged vis-a-vis other groups, ethnised and de-ethnised, assimilated, positioned and imagined. Their latest social identity as *'resettlers'* or *'repatriates'* despite the many privileges it comes with: most importantly, the legal and social inclusion as well as citizenship, is also very restricting. It shapes a sense of belonging, people's identities, relationships to other Russian-Germans and the native population. It also determines what can or cannot be claimed about one's past publicly (Faist, 2003). Given the decade-long repression of almost all aspects of life in the Soviet Union (as the next chapter will discuss) the resulting intergenerational dynamics of trauma and a lack of dialogue present in these families about their pasts, questions of identity constitute a real problem for many people. As such, this thesis draws the connections between the legal, academic and political discourses, societal demands, historical burdens, intergenerational dynamics of trauma, silences and patterns of shame in order to add to the knowledge of Russian-Germans in contemporary Germany.

## Mapping the Chapters

The chapters are built on each other, with each chapter revealing an additional facet of a larger story: the interrelations of memory and forgetting of deportation

and exile, migration and integration experiences. The first three chapters of this thesis discuss these interrelations in terms of history, memory, theory and methodology. The final chapters present the interview and fieldwork material in the context of different problems, concepts and points of view: ideas of homecoming, assimilation and passing as well as issues of shame, secrets and intergenerational trauma.

Chapter Two starts by looking at the fragmentary character of recollection among Russian-Germans. I will discuss how Russian-Germans despite having very diverse histories, tend to present their histories in an homogeneous way. I will discuss the reasons behind this, drawing not only on theoretical understandings of 'cultural memory' studies, but also on the different periods in Soviet history and how it was, most of the time, impossible to remember violent histories. Going through these different periods, we will better appreciate how Russian-Germans migrated from a society with a particular memory culture, in which speaking about their tragedies was never fully possible, into a land with a memory culture where, as ethnic Germans, they were expected to fit certain predefined conceptions. I will investigate these discourses and chart their changes throughout the decades. This thorough engagement with both memory cultures is important as background information for the coming chapters, as it is often outside of people's awareness that they have been shaped by them. We will also see, that while the engagement with the NS-past and in particular with the Holocaust has produced a language to understand the after-effects of the past, the Gulag experience has not produced a similar understanding. I will look at literatures that help in making sense of the Soviet experience and will discuss their ideas' applicability and their limits when trying to understand Russian-Germans' experiences today.

In Chapter Three, I will discuss the methodology behind this project. I will interrogate the assumptions made around knowledge production, examine the methods I have employed, and self-reflexively explore the notion of 'insider' research. Having the same background as my interviewees, I was often considered an 'insider' and this positionality comes with advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, to be an 'insider' helped in having a more private

and intimate engagement with this group. On the other hand, especially with young people, I was also perceived as a 'threat' to their 'presentable histories'. The 'insider/outsider' question has been a problematic topic in the social sciences. 'Insider research' is either hailed as the answer to get authentic research results, or dismissed for having blind spots on certain issues. I will explore all these questions and comment on what my insider status meant for me in doing research with Russian-Germans.

Chapter Four will explore the migration experience of my interviewees. While these people's histories are diverse and multi-faceted, often this complexity is simplified by the notion of 'homecoming'. This narrative is very problematic as it positions this group in German society in ambivalent ways. I will discuss how in German public and academic discourse homecoming in connection with this group was increasingly problematised, something that had a profound impact on my interviewees' lives. I will make the case that the story of homecoming is important to understand people's claims of belonging and thus should not be entirely dismissed even if one agrees that the concept is analytically suspect and anathema in political discourse, since it is a means to understand these people's experience of migration. While not being completely dismissive of this homecoming narrative, I am critical of it, in part because of the effects on the people who adopted it. For it not only conceals negative migration experiences in all generations but also sweeps under the carpet the common reality of having multiple homes and multifaceted histories. These discussions will set the stage for the coming chapters, which will illustrate and reinforce the point that, while the homecoming narrative brings its adopters many privileges, it comes with tremendous pressures.

Chapter Five continues where Chapter Four ends. It will show what it means, particularly for the 'generation of grandchildren', to assimilate given that they see themselves as 'German homecomers'. I will look at how, in order to be perceived as German, young women felt that they could not be perceived as Russian, or even Russian-German. I will look closely at the ways they try not to 'stand out' as Russian-Germans and how instead they try to 'pass' for German, concealing any

connection to Russia or its culture. I will illustrate these ideas with examples from my fieldwork where interviewees were not conscious of their attempts to mask aspects of their background that could be perceived as non-German. I will show how even in the interviews themselves they made efforts to ‘distance’ themselves from the Russian-German label. I will also, however, discuss interviews in which certain young women were more reflective about ‘passing’ and its problems. These particular interviews will provide greater insight into the everyday pressures that young people feel.

While Chapter Five explores the social, and internal, demands behind assimilation in Germany, Chapter Six, will look at how many Russian-German families were already sensitive to pressures of assimilation, given their histories in the Soviet Union. My interviews revealed that in the Soviet Union some members of the ‘generation of parents’ similar to their children concealed their backgrounds and tried to assimilate into Soviet society. I found that parents were embarrassed by their parents’ low status and poverty. In order to compensate, they tried very hard to become as Soviet as possible and concealed their German roots. Having arrived in Germany and having experienced a social decline, they began behaving according to patterns reaching back into their childhoods. I will explore the effects of this on family dynamics. Specifically, I will look at how young people seem to unconsciously follow in their parent’s footsteps.

While my interviews demonstrate the parallels in experiences between the generations in terms of concealing and feelings of inferiority and shame, my research shows that there is barely any awareness about these parallels in the families themselves. The irony is that, post-migration, it is the Soviet rather than the German background that is taboo. This, at least, is what came out of the interviews with the Rosenthal et al. interviews. I will, however, compare our methodologies and interview material in order to explain the disparity in our research results, since, in my interviews, the Soviet past was not always a taboo subject. I arrive at the conclusion that the negative discussions of Soviet socialism in German society prevent people from avowing a Socialist past in public. I argue that this can only perpetuate the concealing and shame uncovered through my

research and prevent young people from understanding their burdensome histories.

Finally, in Chapter Seven, I will turn to the ways that the histories of deportation and repression are remembered and talked about in Russian-German homes today. We will see how difficult it is for all generations to speak about the past not only to me as a researcher, but also at home to each other. I will look at the reasons why recognising the impact of the past is so difficult for Russian-Germans and will explore how this has not least to do with a Soviet socialisation and living in a culture of fear and conformity. Yet, while it was difficult at times to engage interviewees in reflective discussions during the interviews, I found that moments when the ‘tape was off’, offered greater insights into how painful this past still remains, how affected the different generations are and how remembering is seen as something which can still be a source of hurt. Drawing on the work of the ‘second generation’ in Holocaust survivor families, I will mark parallels between this second generation and my interviewees. I will try to show how a state of ambivalence seems to be at the heart of these families’ communication about the past, with the different generations wanting and not wanting to speak about this difficult chapter in their family history.



## Chapter 2.

# Memory Matters?! Russian-Germans between (post) Soviet and German cultural memory.

### Introduction

In the previous chapter I discussed the different historical trajectories of ethnic Germans. This chapter will show how the Soviet repression, along with the way it was impossible to remember these histories publicly, bears its marks on family memory. Russian-Germans' family memory was shaped by Soviet culture, yet since their migration to Germany they no longer belong to the post-Soviet Republics but to Germany and their fates in the Soviet Union are interpreted from within a German perspective on history.

I will begin this chapter, by comparing (post)-Soviet Russia and Germany in their cultural memory practices. This comparison will not only highlight the striking difference in the way the NS-past and the Soviet repression are remembered in these societies. The reason for this comparison, however, is not just to show how different they are; in the way the Holocaust, for example, produced a language to comprehend the after-effects of violence but the Gulag did not, or how Germany made the crimes of the past an integral part of its public life and memory culture, but post-Soviet Russia did not. While the comparison is interesting in itself, it is also important in the context of this study because Russian-Germans migrated from a Soviet memory culture, which had not dealt with its crimes, including that of its treatment of ethnic minorities. This explains partly the fragmentary memory and knowledge of these histories as well as the silences in these families. To show exactly how it affected family memory and narrations thereof, I will discuss presently the Rosenthal et al. three-generational research project which brought out the complexities of collective memory, the fragmentary character of recollection and the impact of the Soviet past on this group.

I will then turn to the question how we can understand the impact of repression, of Gulag incarceration, deportations as well as repeated displacements. Also here, the Holocaust aftermath has produced a framework for how to understand the experience of violence, which has become a template for interpretation in other cases. In the West, particularly with the traumatising experiences of WWII and the Holocaust, researchers, survivors and descendants of these survivors began to formulate ideas about how to understand the intergenerational legacies and family dynamics. Memory studies, along with trauma theory was formulated, putting forward 'tools' for how to attend to these questions. Memory studies, a theoretical approach consisting of an intersection of many disciplines will be helpful to understand the intergenerational impact of these violent histories.

The Soviet experiences of the Gulag did not inform these new developments in memory studies. This is so, not only because the Soviet Union was separated from many outside influences, but also because the history of the repression was itself repressed for most of the existence of the Soviet Union. As a result, researchers (Watson, 1994; Merridale, 2000; Khubova et al., 2005, Tumarkin, 2009; 2013) who study Soviet experiences found that these experiences cannot be understood to the same extent with the 'tools' that have been developed in the West. It seems that the roots of silence were different because, unlike in the West, the silence was politically enforced for over 70 years. The injustices suffered consequently only existed in the private minds of the individuals and were often not even shared within families. Instead, an official Soviet narrative provided a different interpretation of past violence. While the Soviet experience differs in many respects (and it will be important in this thesis to highlight these differences), I will argue that it is nonetheless useful to look at it through the lens of memory studies and to apply formulations derived from the 'second generation' in Holocaust survivor families. The aim of this chapter is to discuss all these literatures, their applicability and their limits in efforts to illuminate Russian-Germans' experiences and family dynamics.

## Cultural memory in (post)-Soviet Russia versus Germany

Whereas in Germany the past is treated as a responsibility, in today's Russia<sup>15</sup> as Anne Applebaum writes in *Gulag: A history of the Soviet camps* "the past is a bad dream to be forgotten or a whispered rumour to be ignored. Like a great, unopened Pandora's box, it lies in wait for the next generation" (2003:512). This contrasts with Germany where the crimes of the past are constantly reinterpreted, the meaning of that past for every generation measured anew. From the philosophical conclusions of the Frankfurt school, to the drawing up of the Human Rights declaration, the Holocaust has served as a reminder and a lesson. The late Svetlana Boym observed that "the experience of Auschwitz profoundly influenced western political philosophy of the twentieth century, but the experience of the Soviet Gulag did not" (2008:343). Similarly, oral historian Jehanne Gheith points to this discrepancy, when she ponders:

Why does the Holocaust preoccupy the Western imagination and why does the Gulag barely inhabit it? How is it possible that serious books on trauma, historical tragedy, and memory in the twentieth century barely mention the Gulag in which some 10 – 20 million people died and whose effects continue to be far-reaching? (cited in Tumarkin, 2009:4)

In Western societies, the Holocaust has influenced profoundly the cultural domain and has provided a language to understand psycho-social effects of atrocities, even in subsequent generations. The same cannot be said of the experience of the Gulag. Whereas in the West, across different academic subjects, sentiments are voiced about a "memory boom", Russians complain of "historical amnesia" (Etkind, 2009:182). In the West, we no longer doubt the crimes, nor attempt to establish any longer who may or may not count as a victim. We try rather to establish whether trauma can or should be representable or whether the Holocaust can or should be appropriated for cultural representations of other traumatic histories. The Soviet past is not amenable to such discussions. Post-soviet Russia still battles with questions like 'how many were killed?', 'where are the mass graves?' or 'who may or may not count as a victim?'.

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<sup>15</sup> I refer specifically to Russia as ethnic Germans understand themselves as part of a (Soviet)-Russian culture, even if they migrated from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and so on, instead of speaking of the whole Soviet bloc. The Soviet past is treated very differently in the former Soviet Republics. For an excellent volume comparing these two regimes see *Stalinism and Nazism: History and memory compared* (Rousso & Golsan, 1999)

For historical-cultural reasons, this *Geschichtsaufarbeitung* - a process of working through the past - is not easy for Russia, writes Tim McDaniel in the *Agony of the Russian idea*. By drawing on Russian semiotician and cultural historian Yuri Lotman, he explains that Russian culture, unlike the culture of the West, embodies a logic of binaries, something individuals and groups take on subconsciously, that conceptualises social life in terms of sets of alternatives that admit no compromise (1996:17). Such polar oppositions are for example: charity versus justice; love versus law; personal morality versus state law, as well as holiness versus politics (ibid). McDaniel explains that these tensions go back to ancient civilisations such as the Greeks. But in Russia, he contends, this binary thinking leads to a radical annihilation of the past. He writes the “past is regarded not as the foundation of organic growth, but as the source of error that must be completely destroyed” (ibid). Let us now turn to the different periods in Soviet history and see how indeed, the political elites tried to end discussions about the crimes of the past. We will thereby see how it was impossible, then possible, then again impossible, to remember the repressions and will therefore understand better in which memory culture the different generations in Russian-German families were socialised.

**From Khrushchev thaw (1956 to 1964) to Brezhnev’s censorship (1964-1981)**  
“[T]he Soviet Union is perhaps the most remarkable case of all: a society, probably unique in the whole world, where remembering has been dangerous at least since the 1920s” (Khubova, et al., 2005:89). Yet, there were times in Soviet history, when the crimes of the past (including Stalinist crimes) were addressed fairly openly. For example this was the case in the Khrushchev thaw and in the Gorbachev years. However these early discussions under Khrushchev were always shaped by political elites and they were never aimed at questioning and weakening the Party itself.

After Stalin’s death in 1953, Khrushchev and the party faced a dilemma with regards to how to deal with Stalinist repression. It was a time in which people started campaigning for prisoners’ rehabilitation, and there were still millions in the Gulags, under the *komendatura* or in ‘internal exile’. For Khrushchev it was impossible to call for an inquiry into the crimes seeing as no party member was innocent, all having participated in the purges themselves, writes Kathleen Smith

in *Remembering Stalin's victims: Popular memory and the end of the USSR* (1996:20). As a result, Stalin's crimes were addressed but downplayed both in terms of numbers and significance. In the now famous 'secret speech' addressed to the CPSU members at the 20th Congress in 1956, Khrushchev denounced Stalin's personality cult. This denunciation was a clear party line and allowed for a short period of liberalisation, which effected a public discussion of Stalinist crimes on a cultural level (ibid). However while issues of the crimes were discussed and memoirs of Gulag returnees began to be published, it was always only the individual fates that could be discussed. Khrushchev feared that the institutional explanations of the terror would destabilise the Party. He consequently placed the responsibility for the crimes only on a few individuals.

As a result, while it can be argued that the Soviet Union experienced a real dissident culture during the Khrushchev thaw, it also needs to be stressed that this was only really lived by the 'intellectuals'; in particular those of the metropolitan cities like Moscow and Leningrad (today's St Petersburg). The socialist empire was very large. By the time 'news' reached other parts of the USSR, it was sometimes no longer current. In other words, while Stalinism and its terror were addressed quite openly in magazines such as '*Ogonek*' and '*Novy Mir*' and while memoirs about the repressive times were sent to the publishing houses, in other parts of the USSR, Stalin's victims not only still lived in fear of speaking out but also faced real disadvantages, often being ostracised and avoided (Smith, 1996).

The liberalisation process under Khrushchev was not always seen as a positive move. Pro-Stalinists feared that all the talk about the past would not only destabilise the party, but would be a threat to Socialism itself (Smith, 1996). Dina Sprechler (1982) discusses how especially in 1961-1962 when the so-called historical revisionists<sup>16</sup> received space in cultural publications, the party started to

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<sup>16</sup> See Sprechler (1982) for an interesting discussion about how the literary world of the 1950s and 1960s responded to the new liberalisation of the Khrushchev thaw. Sprechler shows that only in 1961-62 was it really possible to address Stalin and his legacy directly without the need to veil it in ambiguous language. She identifies five ways of engaging critically with Stalin's legacy in the Khrushchev years, but it is what she terms historical revisionism, which is particularly interesting. She explains that these were works that dealt with the past, yet had immediate political consequences for the political culture of that time. It was precisely this form of critique that the Party censored. Thus for example Solzhenitsyn's book *A day in Ivan Ivanovich's Life* was published but Vasily Grossman's *Forever Flowing* could not be printed. This was because Grossman questioned also the individual within the state and this was perceived as threatening, but

draw a line under the past as the Party alone wanted to interpret Socialism. Khrushchev himself subsequently returned to the idea that to discuss the past was dangerous and only encouraged sensationalism.

After Khrushchev's ousting in 1964 and with Brezhnev's succession, a gradual reversal of de-stalinisation took place, rehabilitation stopped and pro-Stalinist voices became louder with frequent calls for an end to the negative discussions of his legacy (Smith, 1998:39). While not in power, Brezhnev supported the anti-Stalinist movements, yet as soon as he came to power he clamped down on the media, literature, film and the arts. He began to rebuild Stalin's reputation as a hero of the war and of industrialisation. The late 1960s to 1980s became known as the stagnation years in which discussions of the past ceased to exist. As people struggled to meet their domestic needs, there was little energy left to devote oneself to questions of truth, justice and Stalinist terror (ibid).

#### **Gorbachev years (1985-1991)**

It was the stagnation decades, not Stalinist terror, that inspired Gorbachev to reform. However, once the Pandora box had been opened under *glasnost* and *perestroika*, critical talk about Stalinism returned. Gorbachev's role in all of this was initially reserved (despite his own family history). He could not imagine that Stalinism would be of interest to the new generations and up until 1988 he remained quiet about Soviet crimes and believed that too much digging into them would destabilise the Party (Smith, 1996). Yet in the Gorbachev era, unlike during Khrushchev times, the Soviet Union experienced a gradual civic empowerment through a general liberalisation in which the Party no longer controlled discussions about the past.

To discuss the period of *perestroika* and how (Soviet)-Russian society spoke of the past, indeed to speak of memory and justice in Russia at all, is not possible without mentioning civic society *Memorial*, which to this day deals with questions of historical justice in the Soviet Union. *Memorial's* formation was possible under the new Gorbachev government as it allowed civil unions to form, which previously had been strictly prohibited. Initially there were debating clubs formed

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Solzhenitsyn did not probe the roots of Stalinism and was thus approved.

by ex-political prisoners who demanded symbolic and financial recognition for Stalin's victims. These movements grew quickly into mass movements, branching out across the Soviet Union, inspiring or even splintering into other movements like the ethnic German movement of *Wiedergeburt* (Schmalz, 1996), which demanded rehabilitation of ethnic Germans and campaigned for an autonomous Republic of the Volga Germans in the Saratov region.

During *perestroika*, with the influence of *Memorial*, the past was once more on the agenda. Stalinist repressions featured in literary discussions and cultural representations of the crimes such as the film *Repentance*, which was approved by Gorbachev for screening, were shown across the Soviet Union (Smith, 1996). The past's atrocities were interpreted imaginatively and artistically. Lists of purge victims were compiled, exhibitions toured and authors were printed who had been forbidden under Khrushchev, such as Vasily Grossman. And for the first time, victims of Stalin's rule began to open up about the past even to family members (Bertaux et al., 2004).

Yet Gorbachev fought too many battles and as the social system crumbled, people began worrying about the future and an end to talks of the past was demanded. While in the West Gorbachev is perceived as a liberation hero, at that time in the USSR, Gorbachev and his reformers were eyed suspiciously as people did not trust that the reforms would lead to positive outcomes, since in their daily lives people experienced the opposite of what was promised (Applebaum, 2003:508). Separatist and nationalist movements swept the USSR and market liberalisation meant sudden poverty for the majority of society. As a result, discussions of Stalin's crimes and the legacy of the repression seemed to disappear with the Soviet Union itself (ibid).

The consequence was that a historical working-through is not part of public life and it is not of much concern to the majority of the young generations. To this day, academics working on the Soviet past (Etkind, 2013; Applebaum, 2003; Tumarkin, 2009; Figes, 2007; Boym, 2001) agree that Soviet crimes were never dealt with properly and there was never a full recognition of the crimes, neither in terms of compensation nor symbolically. There was no official mourning for the

victims, no prosecutions, no symbolic denunciation of perpetrators. All efforts to ‘reconcile’ with the past were initiatives of NGOs like *Memorial* and private citizens who were digging up the crimes of the past to create public awareness. Even if people were rehabilitated (ca. 4.5 million out of 20 to 30 million) there was never a real drive for reconciliation, but simply a desire to be done with history (Etkind, 2004:42). “This unfinished business”, writes Alexander Etkind, “is one of the reasons for the obsessive return of history in contemporary Russian culture and politics” (ibid). It is ‘this unfinished business’ with which Russian-Germans migrated and today they are no longer part of that story and that society. Their historical reckoning with the Soviet Union ended with the migration to Germany.

### **NS memory, ‘German victimhood’ and the role of ethnic Germans throughout the post-War period**

Since the end of WWII, different generations in Germany have had changing interpretations of the NS-past and every new generation defines the meaning of this past anew on a political and private level. This relationship to the NS-past as Jeffrey Olick writes in *The politics of regret: On collective memory and historical responsibility* “(...) has long been the standard for evaluating German political activity” (...) (2007:38). Domestic discussions of ethical and moral questions are shaped by the past’s crimes<sup>17</sup>. Olick argues that “[f]rom the immediate postwar period to the present, powerful images of the Nazi past have shaped West Germany” (2007:37). He adds that “[v]irtually every institutional arrangement and substantive policy is a response, in some sense, to Germany’s memory of those fateful years” (ibid). Also the admission of expellees and *Aussiedler*, along with discussion over reparations and compensations, was influenced by the memory of the NS-past.

In the previous chapter I looked at how the expulsions and deportations of ethnic Germans along with the Cold War had a direct influence on German citizenship and repatriation law. Ethnic Germans also played a key role in the shaping of German cultural memory, which was used for nation-building purposes. Because

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<sup>17</sup> See Jeffrey Olick (2007) for a discussion of how the Nazi past determines Germany’s attitude to many ethical, moral and political questions. He names for example debates around euthanasia, stem cell research, questions of participation in the UN as well as NATO activities.



of the NS-past and the memory of the Holocaust, since the 1970s, it has been a controversial matter to discuss Germans' wartime suffering<sup>18</sup>. Ethnic Germans' fates were used in order to broach this once taboo subject. Moeller (2001) argues that in particular West Germans by focusing on the experiences of the German POWs and expellees from the East could avoid facing up to Germany's crimes. A similar point is made by Samuel Salzborn who explains that flight and expulsion were an important means for Germans to represent themselves as a nation of victims (2007:96). He argues that ethnic Germans' fates were appropriated throughout the decades in order to build a collective identity as victims (ibid).

Daniel Levy comments that ethnic Germans have indeed "played a key, but underappreciated, role in the history of (West) Germany" (2003:289). However the nature of this role has changed throughout the post-War period and particularly with the end of the Cold War when German society began a gradual process of reinventing its understanding of 'Germanness'. Writing about this reinvention, Cornelia Wilhelm states that there are signs that Germany has departed from "older – and at times racist, exclusive, and ethnocultural – definitions of citizenship and identity" (Wilhelm, 2017:1). She argues that these changes have several reasons, such as demographic and political challenges, "but they have also resulted from changing concepts of 'history' 'memory' and 'the nation', which have allowed the Germans to reinvent themselves in a post-national age" (ibid). Let us look at this gradual change, what role ethnic Germans played throughout the different periods and what these changes mean for ethnic Germans themselves.

Levy examined the different shifts in the representation of ethnic Germans and discovered that Germany underwent three phases after WWII, which determined the way they were incorporated into the national fabric. He writes that German

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<sup>18</sup> Helmut Schmitz argues that that there was a taboo to speak of Germans as victims is itself contentious. Drawing on Moeller & Frei, he discusses how their research shows that in fact there is little evidence to show that there was a general silence about German suffering in the post-war period, rather it was a myth that there was a taboo to speak about Germans as victims (2007:9). Schmitz also cites Aleida Assmann, who in turn stresses that expellees were so visible in the first two decades after the war, that they have in fact homogenised the entire discourse on victimhood (ibid:11). In a similar vein, Levy and Sznajder (2005) write that German memory culture was shaped by the notion of a competing victimhood, which focused on German losses rather than the crimes against Jews.

national identity was shaped in three historical junctures, during which the place of ethnic Germans in the articulation of ethno-cultural nationhood was transformed. He examined official-political, institutional-legislative and public-cultural spheres in which political discourses about ethnic Germans took place. These three historical junctures are: the 'Post-War period', 'Détente & New Political Culture' and the 'Post-Cold War'.

Levy argues that in the post-War period, German ethno-national self-understanding remained intact. After the war, for Germany it was important to salvage aspects of German nationhood not tainted by National Socialism. Ethnic Germans were a link here, because rather than focusing on the crimes committed during WWII, Germany could portray itself as a nation of victims. He argues that the expulsion of ethnic Germans from the former German territories served as a collective claim for this victim status because “[e]thnic Germans were the primary carrier of this ethno-cultural notion” (2003:292). In the Détente period of the 1960s, Levy writes, the second historical shift occurred under chancellor Brandt’s reconciliatory *Ostpolitik*. The first generation to be born after the war began to distance themselves from their parents’ NS-histories and a discrediting of the ethno-cultural theme began. He writes that the onset of the 68-revolt against the older generations was also a revolt against the ethno-cultural understanding of Germanness because it was associated with National Socialism. Levy writes that what happened as a result was a

re-evaluation of Germany’s national past, resulting in public and official representations that increasingly associated expellee organisations and, by extension, ethno-cultural nationhood, with out-dated traditions, historical revisionism or even the legacies of the Nazi past. (2003:294)

He argues that ethno-cultural ideas were increasingly weakened and now had significance at the fringes of political discourse. So when the post-Cold War period set in, Levy observes, the reception of ethnic Germans happened against the background of a highly politicised debate about immigration (ibid). I have alluded to this debate in the previous chapter. In other words, Russian-Germans migrated at a time when, on the one hand, old ethnicity-based ideologies were in place, which indeed enabled their migration to Germany; on the other hand, a new

liberal Germany was on the rise, challenging these notions and demanding multicultural tolerance and cosmopolitanism as a way of life.

Levy writes that around this time official ethno-cultural rhetoric about ethnic Germans was replaced by social and economic references and their integration was increasingly situated within a broader debate about immigration (ibid:294). He stresses that realising that ethno-cultural appeals were not sufficient to generate public support for the integration of ethnic Germans, the government put more emphasis on the economic contribution of ethnic German immigrants. Levy argues that the majority of people showed little interest in ethno-cultural considerations and ethnic Germans were no longer perceived as ‘true Germans’ but as Poles, Russians or Romanians (ibid:295). Official ethno-cultural references were minimised and “the expansive approach toward these fellow ethnic Germans was replaced with restrictive legislation” (ibid). He adds that, whereas before there had been an objective of ‘positive discrimination’ for ethnic Germans, after the Cold War, the laws were framed in the context of ‘social envy’ precluding preferential treatment for ethnic Germans in the absence of a grand narrative of suffering (ibid). Similarly, Rainer Strobl points out that “[w]ith changes in the political landscape, the use of the fate of the Russian-Germans in the Soviet Union as a decisive reason to allow migrants to return to Germany was increasingly put into question” (2006:89)<sup>19</sup>. This stripping away of the historical-responsibility rationale had consequences. As we have seen above, these people’s histories were never properly discussed as part of a historical ‘working-through’ in the Soviet Union. So neither in Germany were these histories any longer of interest to a German public, which perceived these people as immigrants to Germany, unconnected to Germany’s NS-expansion in Eastern Europe.

So in effect what happened, and this is often not understood in the social sciences discourse, in the wider public and among Russian-Germans themselves, is that, while they migrated into a culture that had increasingly begun to dismantle its ethno-cultural notions, the legal infrastructure, including the bureaucracy and the social services that were administering these people, were based on just such an ethno-historical understanding that was being questioned by the culture at large. In

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<sup>19</sup> Author’s translation

other words, while politically and publicly the ethno-cultural repatriation was increasingly challenged, at the same time, it was enacted, for example through expectations and practices of complete assimilation. Regina Römhild describes this double positioning:

Russian-Germans find themselves clamped into an ambiguous process of 'double ethnicization' in Germany. On the one hand, they are distinguished and highlighted against other immigrants by way of being 'Germanized' in accordance with a standardized traditionalist image of Germanness. On the other hand, they are Easternized by conceiving of them as another subdivision of Russian refugees from post-socialism, thus reintegrating the Russian-Germans into the general pool of eastern European immigrants. From this perspective, they are often considered not suitable and a further threat in the competitive labour market (...). The ambivalence of being Germanized and Easternized at the same time is the initial experience of Russian-German immigrants when entering German society. (2004:200)

What Römhild puts forward is a very crucial understanding of the often unrecognised nature of integration that Russian-Germans underwent in Germany. This contradictory experience had tremendous effects on them, as we shall come to see throughout the chapters. Now that we have seen how the memory discourses operated in both societies, let us turn to the important research results of Rosenthal et al. team (2011) and explore how the two memory cultures have affected how people remember and narrate their histories today to social researchers.

### Homogenised collective memory

Gabriele Rosenthal is a pioneer of the biographical-narrative methodology (1995; 2004). She has published influential studies using this method, including on the trans-generational consequences of the Holocaust in Nazi perpetrator families and Shoah victim families (1998; 2002). Employing this methodology, Rosenthal et al. (2009a; 2009b; 2010; 2011) examined how the collective and family history affect Russian-Germans today. The team was interested in the interplay between the experienced past, the constructions of this past, the establishing of collective memories in the different groupings and the concrete memory practices in the present. Especially in light of the migration to Germany, they wanted to see how particularly young people in these families deal with the multiple re-writings of their family history (Rosenthal & Stephan, 2011:23).

Interestingly, the researchers found that among the different families interviewed, certain histories were elevated, while some were purposefully forgotten. They could also show the Soviet influence on family memory and how the ‘rewriting’ of these histories has implications for people today. Interviewing almost a hundred individuals in Germany, as well as remaining ethnic Germans in the former Soviet republics, the team concluded that particularly the group that migrated to Germany adheres to a ‘homogenised collective we-group image’. Moreover, this ‘homogenised collective memory’ is constructed from a limited number of orally transmitted sources, a very fragmentary family history and a damaged cultural memory (2010:166). As we have seen in the previous chapter, the historical trajectories of ethnic Germans were very diverse. However when the research team interviewed people, particularly the younger generations, they tended to present their family history in a stereotypical manner with the following elements:

- Part one: We were invited in 1762/63 by Catherine the Great to go to Russia.
- Part two: Almost all Russian-Germans lived until 1941 in the European regions of the Soviet Union.
- Part three: In 1941 almost all Russian-Germans were deported into the Asian parts of the SU and men and sometimes women were conscripted into the ‘Trudarmee’ (labour army)
- Part four: Until we left for Germany we were often discriminated against in the Soviet Union. (2011:59)<sup>20</sup>

The researchers point out that while this version was presented to them by the younger generations, the grandparents in these families refused in their narrations to adhere to it, if their histories told a different story. They argue that this construction of family memory serves especially the younger generations, since they need it for their own sense of belonging (ibid). People whom I interviewed would normally not present their histories in the above manner. However when I specifically asked whether my interviewees could tell me the collective history of Russian-Germans, then people did recount it in the way Rosenthal et al. have encountered. Let us look at a lengthy interview passage from my interview with Alyona. As Rosenthal et al. have pointed out, people’s narration of their histories is often based on a very damaged cultural memory and a fragmentary oral

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<sup>20</sup> Author’s translation

tradition. This can be seen in Alyona's recounting. As we go through her narrative, we will see the temporal jumps Alyona makes. They show that only very little information was actually transmitted and available to her about the different periods she talks about. It starts with the manifesto of 1763, then follows a gap until Stalin's seizure of power in the 1920s, then she mentions the deportations starting in 1941, followed by the relaxation of the *komendatura* in 1956, followed by the migration to Germany after the collapse of the Soviet Union. She recounts this history as follows:

*Catherine the Great...because she was German...she invited many Germans to come to Russia. Many were lucky and ended up in St. Petersburg as craftsmen, others had to secure the borders ... and so Russlanddeutsche, I mean Germans came...because they were so poor and they received a lot of privileges: their own schools, their own land, they were allowed to speak their own language and have religious freedom and so many came. And I think many were relatively well-off, although in the beginning it was hard. And then...I don't know what happened then....and then Stalin came to power and he deported many ethnic minorities...and then they were in the work camps. Then there was this law that they were not allowed to move. And in 1956 it was relaxed. Yes, and Germany. And that is how we as Aussiedler had the privilege to come to Germany.*

Alyona's own family history corresponds with the homogeneous collective history as her grandparents were deported from Crimea and Ukraine and met in the labour army. After the relaxation of the ban to move freely, following Stalin's death, her grandparents moved from Kazakhstan to Russia. But when I asked Alyona for details, such as where her grandfather had lived in the Ukraine and told her about the occupation of Ukraine by the German army, Alyona was surprised. If we recall from the previous chapter, it was this surprise that prompted her to call her mother to enquire about her grandfather's history. We can thus see how fragile this collective historical construction is and how easy it is to confuse young people with questions, which can be a major source of insecurity as we shall come to see in Chapter Five.

The collective history recounted by Alyona, is commonly referred to as the history of the *Russlanddeutsche* by the interviewees in the Rosenthal et al. study but it also "corresponds with the perceptions of the 'Russlanddeutsche' not only in the public discourse in the Federal Republic Germany but also in the social sciences

discourse” (Rosenthal, 2010:167)<sup>21</sup>. Interestingly, interviewees in the Rosenthal study not only referred to this history as their own, but they grappled with this construction throughout the interviews. In some cases they aligned their history to it, or were confused by their fragments if they did not fit the homogenised narrative (Rosenthal et al., 2011:63). In other words, the way people related their histories to the research team is by presenting it in the above manner, no matter whether their own family history corresponded with it or not.

### **Diverse histories and their legacies**

Despite the fragmentary knowledge of their interviewees, the Rosenthal team was able to reconstruct five different historical trajectories. I have already discussed these in the previous chapter. However it is useful to look at them again, especially because Rosenthal et al. could establish certain patterns in the family dynamics according to these different trajectories. In other words, the intergenerational influences vary in these families depending on their historical experiences during WWII. While with my much smaller sample of interviewees, I did not group people together according to these different histories; I did use this analysis to better understand the experiences of my interviewees.

- 1) labour camp and exile
- 2) migrated already before 1941 to the Eastern parts of the SU;
- 3) Lived under German occupation since 1941 in certain parts of the SU;
- 4) migration to the German Reich and ‘repatriation’ to the special settlements;
- 5) not deported from the European regions or were able to return there earlier against the law. (2011: 64)<sup>22</sup>

The researchers show that in families of group 1) where ‘labour camp and deportation’ featured, this past dominated the presentation of family history. The experience of the grandparents in these families dictated the construction of the family history and gave the grandparents a notable recognition. Yet, while the middle generations instrumentalised the past of their parents’ in order to apply for migration to Germany, the researchers found that this generation also feared an emotional encounter with these traumatic histories. This fear is reflected in the extreme difficulties the research team faced when trying to recruit people of this

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21 Author’s translation

22 Author’s translation

generation for an interview. They argue that in this respect, the family dynamics are similar to Shoah survivors and their descendants (2011:65).

In families of group 2) 'migration before 1941 to Asian parts of the SU', the researchers found that people either migrated to these regions from the Volga or the Caucasus for economic or religious reasons or people were deported there in the de-kulakisation processes of the 1920s. The researchers found that especially in this group the middle generations as well as the younger generations had a tendency to present their family history according to the homogenised we-group image (2011:65).

In families of group 3) 'Lived under German occupation' and in families of group 4) 'migrated to the German Reich', are families whose grandparents lived under German occupation and have possibly identified with Nazi-Germany. This group of people were deported in the years 1944-1945 when the Red Army forcibly 'repatriated' them, drafting them into Gulag divisions in the far East. In the Soviet Union they had to deny and hide their involvement with Nazi-Germany. Yet traces were left, which can be recognised, "if", as Rosenthal et al. write "one pays attention to them" (2011:68). They further argue that that this group has not 'worked through' the immense influence of the past on the present (ibid). There are also some similarities to Nazi-perpetrator families' dialogues, for example in the way members of this group emphasised their own suffering and avoided addressing the active involvement of the grandparents or parents with the German troops (ibid:69). In families of group 5) 'not deported or returned against the law' this group of people were unknown to the research team as there is no academic literature available on this group. They discovered this group in their fieldwork in the Ukraine. The researchers speculate that these people were not deported most likely because some families were multi-ethnic, or because these people had social contacts that helped them to avoid this fate (ibid:70).

### **Reconstructed histories as obstacles to open family dialogue**

The researchers argue that the homogenised version of the history is in part a consequence of having lived in a totalitarian state. However, the we-group image also serves a purpose, namely for the "construction of a collective, exclusive



status of victimhood” (Rosenthal, 2010:167). That is why individuals omit compromising aspects of the collective history that would paint a different, less sympathetic picture (ibid). On top, new re-writings and eradications of family history are performed upon arrival in Germany. Particularly the middle generations withheld information about their identification with the political system of the SU, the choice of a Russian nationality in the passport and the disavowal of German family roots (ibid:166).

Rosenthal explains that this re-writing is partly due to the application process to Germany itself as people were explicitly asked in the documentation whether they had been politically active, or had identified with the political system of the Soviet Union. It also has to do with a generally negative attitude towards the Soviet Union in German society (ibid; see also Darieva, 2006). This ‘re-writing’, as Rosenthal et al. stress, had immense consequences. It not only influenced present constructions of belonging but also hindered an open dialogue within the families. They argue that since people only concentrate on the homogenised parts of the collective memory, it hinders a 'working through' of their own suffering. Certain aspects, which did not fit this collective picture of the past, were not spoken of and concealed from the researchers (2011:60). In spite of this, these censored elements nevertheless come through in the narratives. Rosenthal et al. argue that these omissions are very problematic, especially for young people who were born and socialised to some extent in the Soviet Union. For them this disavowal conflicts with their memories of their parents in the Soviet Union. The researchers stress that the vagueness and inconsistencies which are caused by the multiple re-writings and the eradication of certain parts of family history along with the family dialogue coloured by the myth of victimhood with a suppression of crucial parts of collective and family history (together with the family secrets that lie behind it) influence very strongly the family and biographical trajectories and dynamics in ethnic German families (ibid:21).

They further argue that this homogenised collective memory is upheld through collective social control over how family memory can be presented to the researchers. This became apparent in the extreme difficulty they experienced trying to recruit several members from within one family, the ‘second generation’

or people within families whose history diverged from the collective image. The researchers argue that the construction of the homogenised we-picture is not transmitted to the young generations in such a way – but is demanded from the elder generations, which at times led to conflicts between the different family members in how they represented family history (ibid:123). They explain that when elderly interviewees stumble over inconsistencies in their own family narrative, the younger family members who are present during the interviews, try to elicit family narrations that fit the homogenised we-picture (ibid).

They discuss interesting instances where family members intervened to give a presentable account of the family history. I will briefly speak about one such account as my fieldwork experience was at times different from that of the Rosenthal et al. experience. Indeed from my own fieldwork experience it is difficult to imagine that grandchildren would interfere in their grandparents' stories in such a way. The researchers describe a situation in which the grandchild gave his grandfather instructions on how to continue with the family history. Part of this family had already migrated to Kazakhstan before the mass deportation, and even though the grandfather was conscripted into the labour army, his own narrative was not about suffering. It was instead the grandson who was interested in that particular part of the grandfather's story (Rosenthal and Stephan, 2011:124). After the grandfather finishes his narration, ending with his retirement he wonders what else to say. At this point, the grandson interjects: 'labour army'. The grandfather then says the date when he had been conscripted into the labour army. The grandfather falls silent again, at this point, the grandson becomes impatient, knocks on the table and says “say what you had to do in the labour army (...) what you did in the labour army or how one felt there as a German” (ibid)<sup>23</sup>

In my fieldwork, grandchildren sat quietly when their grandparents spoke about their pasts and at times asked them questions. From my own experience and from knowledge of the post-migration experiences of many similar people, I would argue that young people feel protective of their parents and grandparents. It is likely that the grandchildren anticipated what the researchers might want to hear

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23 Author's translation

and answered for, or prompted, the grandparents. This would fit with the common experience of grandchildren who have helped older family members in bureaucratic situations, such as visits to job centres. Grandchildren have even helped parents and grandparents with the admission process or other legal questions. Thus speaking on behalf of family members to people of authority was not uncommon for the younger generation. This insight raises important methodological considerations.

Because of this, I am cautious about the conclusions they draw from this context about family memory practices. The researchers underestimate their role in the research encounter and the influence of their methodological approach and overlook certain practices, such as those I just mentioned, present within families. Their conclusion, therefore, that the way ethnic German families currently practise family memory involves adhering to a ‘homogenised collective memory’ is only partially borne out by my research. My fieldwork findings suggest there is possibly a difference between how collective memory is performed in public contexts and how memory is shared in the family and privately. Private family memory is a lot more uncertain and fragmented and it expresses much more ambivalence about the past. The last aspect was especially salient among the younger generations.

These differences in the fieldwork experiences show the ways histories are shared and not shared, known and not known, in different contexts. What is said or not said, what is presented and what is not, depend very much on the research encounter. These differences helped me formulate ideas about what memory means and the different ‘memories’ that we came across in the fieldwork. Thus, let me engage more deeply with concepts of ‘memory’ and how it can be useful in studying people’s experiences. I will now take a closer look at the theory of memory studies, which emerged in the 1980s<sup>24</sup> and which often underlies projects studying the intergenerational impact of traumatic histories.

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24 There is a debate within the field whether ‘memory studies’ can already count as a disciplinary field in its own right. However, with its own journals, Masters degrees and courses with own reading lists, it seems that it is only a question of time before it will be fully recognised as a field in its own right.

## Memory studies: An interdisciplinary approach

Since I frame this project within cultural memory studies, which pushes the boundaries of traditional sociological thought, it is important to understand in what ways memory studies can help sociologists in their efforts to understand traumatic histories and intergenerational memory phenomena.

Because memory studies is a “nonparadigmatic, transdisciplinary, centerless enterprise” (Olick & Robbins, 1998:10), voices within the academy began to call for a critical engagement with this discipline (Antze & Lambek, 1996; Berliner, 2005; 2013; Radstone, 2008; Merridale, 2010) in order to better understand what it can actually achieve. In the last decade, compilations and handbooks have come out defining and delineating memory studies, including the different systems of memory, such as individual versus collective, social vs. cultural, public vs. private (Erll, 2008, 2011; Radstone & Hodgkins, 2003; 2005; Radstone & Schwarz, 2010; Bal et al., 1999). In an important compilation, *Regimes of memory*, the editors Radstone and Hodgkin, write that their move to try to delineate memory “runs counter to the main tendencies within contemporary studies, where under the impact of post-structuralism and postmodernism, the major focus has been on memory’s capacity to destabilise the authority of the ‘grand narratives’ (...)” (2003:10). While this is one of the strengths of memory studies, namely to be able to work in multi-disciplinary ways, some authors have argued that the blurring of lines between memory and history (Watson, 1994:8) memory and culture<sup>25</sup> (Berliner, 2005) and memory and experience (Erll, 2011) is not unproblematic. A decade after his first call for a critical engagement with memory, David Berliner (2012), while stressing that the intersection of several disciplines would allow for important reconciliations, not only between the different disciplines, but also between the continuous and discontinuous, the persistent and the mutable, the universal and particular, and between past, present and future, finds that the notion of memory lacks conceptual clarity (ibid). Additionally, there is a tendency to use

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25 Culture as a concept is an invention by anthropology and is a cornerstone of anthropological investigation (Chang, 2016:15ff). Lila Abu-Lughod writes that culture is the true object of anthropological inquiry. She explains that “culture is important to anthropology because the anthropological distinction between self and other rests on it” (2006:157). She argues that “culture is the essential tool for making other” and that as a discourse that “elaborates on the meaning of culture in order to account for, explain, and understand cultural difference, anthropology also helps construct, produce, and maintain it” (ibid). If memory is used synonymously with culture, the entire discipline of anthropology is at risk of losing its identity.

concepts interchangeably not only in different disciplines, but also across different language cultures<sup>26</sup>, which can easily lead to confusion. Karin Till however provides a useful summary of the different modes within this discipline. She explains that:

memory-studies scholars are interested more generally in the creation, mediation, transmission and circulation of memory through space and time, two broad approaches, rooted in social science and in humanities, have emerged to theorize individual and social memory. (2006:331)

Studies in the social sciences “have tended to examine how stories about the past shape and are shaped by narratives, traditions and rituals, focusing on how individual memory was mediated by social interactions” by using oral, social and everyday histories and interpreting them with the help of sociology and ethnography (ibid:331). In the humanities, on the other hand, “models of psyche became central to understand how memory is mediated and transmitted, both individually and socially” (ibid). These models are informed by psychoanalytic, literary and performance theories. While the social sciences approach concentrates on social interaction as the mediation and transmission of the past, in the humanities approach 'affect' became an integral part of these studies (Tumarkin, 2011).

While two decades ago, there were clear distinctions between the humanities (Bal et al., 1999;) and the social science approaches (Antze & Lambeck, 1996; Assmann, 1992, Fentress & Wickham, 1992; Misztal, 2003) today this distinction is no longer so clear cut, with both approaches taking insights from each other (Till, 2006). I will argue that both approaches are useful in understanding experiences, memory transmission and family dynamics in Russian-German families. I will consequently discuss both approaches to highlight how something can be learned from narratives, that is, from what and how something is told, with the social sciences approach, and how some things cannot be so easily understood

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26 Till (2006) explains that Jan and Aleida Assmann work under the concept of ‘cultural memory studies’ *Kulturwissenschaften* in Germany. Actually their work fits more within the traditions of social memory studies. This point is also made by Marianne Hirsch who writes that, whereas, in Anglo-American academia, cultural memory is used to denote “social memory of a specific group or a subculture” (2008:110), in continental studies, influenced by Jan and Aleida Assmann, ‘cultural memory’ is used to denote “an institutionalised, hegemonic, archival memory” (ibid).

through the narratives alone, since they cannot, or at least not straightforwardly, be articulated, as the humanities approach stresses.

### **Social memory: Learning from ‘what is said’**

Thinking of individuals' memory in terms of its being constituted through social interaction has a long tradition. It started with Maurice Halbwachs, a French sociologist and student of Durkheim. He wrote his theory of *la memoire collective* “not only beyond philosophy but against psychology” (Olick & Robbins, 1998:109), that is, against Freud who believed that painful memories never leave the mind, but are repressed and thus stored. Halbwachs rejected this Freudian, psychological view.

As a follower of Durkheim, memory was to him, just as consciousness was to Durkheim, social, rather than psychological in nature. Halbwachs argued that “(...) it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognise, and localise their memories” (1992:38). In consequence, Halbwachs proposed that it is impossible for individuals to remember in any coherent and persistent fashion outside of their group contexts (Olick & Robbins, 1998:109). What this means is that the process of memory is conditioned by the social framework. But what are social frameworks? On the most basic level, it is the people around us, who make up different groups to which we belong (kinship, work, class affiliations, or even the nation). Thus the memories we have are different memories of the groups to which we belong. These groups can range from small groups like family, friends, work or school, to wider and more abstract groups such as ethnic groups, social classes or even nations. Halbwachs's writings on cultural remembering were mostly ignored immediately after WWII, and only became popular from the 1980s onwards. Today, as Astrid Erll (2011) claims, almost no theoretical model, which engages with the cultural dimension of remembering, exists without drawing on Halbwachs's work.

Halbwachs's theory does indeed explain a lot about the ‘state’ of memory among Russian-Germans. The strength of this formulation lies in its emphasis on how individuals need social frameworks to remember. It is thus helpful in explaining the fragmentary state of memory among Russian-Germans, whose 200-year

history was obliterated under Stalin's reign. It helps explain how Russian-Germans suffered such a profound loss of memory, how they were able to lose touch with their histories. Since everything was destroyed (institutions, traditions, language and ancestral knowledge), and the group dispersed, which hindered remembering together socially, it provides an explanation of why today people have such confused and patchy collective and family memories, something less easy to explain on a model of memory that leaves this social and institutional aspect of remembering out of the account.

A downside to Halbwachs's model, however, is that the contribution of the individual is minimal in his theory, since the structure-agent dimension is always defined hierarchically, in that memory "grows into us from outside" as Jan Assmann has put it (2006:1). Already Halbwachs's contemporaries, such as Bloch, accused Halbwachs of "an unacceptable collectivisation of individual, psychological phenomena" (Erl, 2011:14). Even today, notwithstanding Halbwachs's popularity, particularly in constructivist theories of memory, he doesn't escape this criticism. In an oft-quoted passage, Fentress and Whickham argue that Halbwachs leaves the individual "a sort of automaton, passively obeying the interiorized collective will" (1992:x).

Gabriele Rosenthal also criticises abandoning the individual for the collective. She writes that "individuals do not just simply take on any collective memories, but those that are more relevant for them, they interpret them and in this way establish unique configurations" (2010:161) <sup>27</sup>. To her, family memory, while still a model of collective memory, involves individual members sharing different experiences, which they bring into the family, and through collective practice transform the past into a collective memory. While giving the individual more power, this view is also not without problems. If individuals can decide which memories to take on, and which to leave aside, what about those (traumatic) memories that are taken on unwillingly? And, what happens to denied and silenced memories because one lived in a totalitarian society? Rosenthal explains these phenomena by reaching for psycho-social explanations, as I will discuss shortly.

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<sup>27</sup> Author's translation

Jan Assmann (1998) and Aleida Assmann are the two leading experts of collective memory currently in Germany and their refinement of Halbwachs's theory of collective memory is mentioned in the same breath as Halbwachs himself. This is because their extension of Halbwachs's theory partly solved his theory's shortcomings, such as the agent-structure dimension, as well as Halbwachs's rigid distinction between *memoire*, the living embodied memory, and *histoire*, which he envisioned as 'dead memory'. Jan and Aleida Assmann, while maintaining links with Halbwachs, introduced two new concepts: cultural memory and communicative memory.

Communicative memory approximates Halbwachs's collective memory. It has a limited temporal horizon and it is based entirely on everyday communication. It is not supported by any institutions of learning, transmission, and interpretation. It is also not cultivated by specialists or celebrated on special occasions. It is neither formalised nor stabilised by any forms of material symbolisation. Rather it lives in everyday interaction and communication and, for this very reason, it has only a limited time horizon, which normally reaches no farther back than eighty years, the time span of three interacting generations (Assmann, 2008:111).

Cultural memory on the other hand "(...) unlike communicative memory, exists also in disembodied form and requires institutions of preservation and reembodyment" (ibid). According to Jan Assmann, cultural memory is characterised by its distance from the everyday. It needs specialists to continue the transmission. The family unit as a site of transmission of communicative memory is very important to Jan Assmann. In his view social memory is transmitted to the next generations via embodied experience. Cultural memory, on the other hand, is no longer transmitted through embodied practice, but only in symbolic ways.

Rosenthal (2010) argues that there are serious problems with having such a strict divide between cultural and communicative memory, as in reality these two merge, particularly in the age of media where cultural memory infiltrates communicative memory. Yet there is a much stronger argument against their theory in the case of studying people whose histories originate in authoritarian societies. Their theory is ill equipped to study totalitarian societies, as they assume



an uninterrupted process of transmission and do not take into account secrecy, lies and deception, which permeate families in these societies. In the Soviet Union, communicative and cultural memory were greatly at odds. While cultural memory was destroyed and replaced with an official grand narrative, communicative memory was often a counter-memory to these falsehoods propagated as truths (Shevchenko & Sariksova, 2014). It is for this reason that personal accounts of history from individuals of such societies are so compelling (Bertaux et al., 2004). But these counter-memories, as Bertaux et al. explain, were only selectively transmitted to the next generations (ibid). So communicative memory also broke down in a culture in which speaking was dangerous not only to oneself but to one's family and friends, as any information could be used for denunciation. Therefore, as Bertaux et al. explain in *On living through Soviet Russia*, a significant part of family memory was obscured because of the need for secrecy (2004:7).

For our discussion this means that the 'normal' succession of generations of 80-100 years (as Assmann, drawing on Vasina argues), in which personal memory is usually transmitted whether orally or in traditions no longer applies. Marianne Hirsch also found Assmann's typology of memory wanting, unable to explain the ruptured nature of memory when she writes "[b]oth communicative memory and institutionalized cultural memory would be severely impaired by traumatic experience. They would be compromised as well by the erasures of record, such as those perpetrated by totalitarian regimes" (2012:33). The question then is what happens to memory in such circumstances. Does memory simply cease to exist? And if not, what kind of memories can persist and in what form. This is where insights from trauma studies can be of use.

### **Cultural memory and trauma studies: Focusing on the untellable**

Studies that are (loosely) located within the social science tradition have difficulties in explaining meditations on the past, which are not representable. To them the past is only that which is constructed in the present or which could be reconstructed by analysing narratives. This model prevents them from considering meditations on the past that might not be articulable. Yet what happens if there are certain things that cannot be told? If memory cannot be verbalised, either because

it was repressed, or because as in the Soviet Union it was suppressed for decades? Indeed, complicating the matter, what to do if, as in the Soviet context, people's stories are overlaid with secrets, myths and even other people's memories? Similarly, Bertaux et al. wonder whether in Soviet Russia where "both secrecy and deception had been so pervasive, can memories have any validity at all?" (2004:7). Also Rubi S. Watson in *Memory, history and opposition: Under state socialism* writes that in societies "where unofficial histories are seditious and the photographer's airbrush is an effective tool of historical annihilation, the production and survival of unsanctioned memories must be problematical" (1994:7). She stresses, however, that, although we need to recognise the difficulties around memory under state socialism, we cannot "eschew the realm of memory" altogether because, for those who are "concerned with unorthodox transmissions of unapproved pasts, memory is a word that is too precious to be abandoned" (ibid:8).

Historian of modern Russia Orlando Figes, fully aware of the difficulties conducting oral history research with former Soviet citizens because of the pervasive presence of myths and ideologies (Figes, 2007:xxxv), suggests a way out. He argues that, with reflective questions, one can peel away those layers of myth-making and public memory to get to the direct memory (2008). As I will discuss in Chapter Seven, I also found myths running through my interviewees' accounts. Be it that the sister of Valery Chkalov saved the mother from a camp<sup>28</sup> or that Hitler personally bombed the train tracks so that Germans would not be deported, such myths made it into people's memories. Orlando Figes' advice on how to get to the direct memories by asking reflective questions offers one way, however it is not always possible to spot these myths, ideologies and silences during interviews. In Chapter Seven, I will give an example where I was unable to spot the myth and to uncover the direct memory that hid behind it. Not being able to turn back time, I found it useful to think about the ways one might understand what these lies, deceptions, confusions and ideological colourings can reveal

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28 This was told to me by my interviewee Amalia Schmitt when she told me how for an exchange of a warm jacket the sister of pilot and hero of the Soviet Union Valery Chkalov released her mother from the labour army sometime in the period 1941-45. We will see in Chapter Seven that her daughter Tatiana tells me also of a miraculous saving of the grandmother. Tatiana places this saving pre-Revolution, but in her story it is not the sister of Valery Chkalov, but Nadezhda Krupskaya who saves the grandmother.

about the person despite their falsity. Les Back, writing in a different context, argues that one should treat “interview accounts as moral tales that are interesting regardless of whether they are lies or simply wrong”, adding that the “shape of a lie reveals something interesting about the teller's moral universe” (2007:164).

Methodologies that draw on a psycho-social tradition, I found equally useful in helping uncover memories that were repressed either because painful or dangerous to acknowledge. For cultural memory is better equipped to account for the ruptures and silences. Drawing on a diverse range of theories ranging from psychoanalytic to feminist writings, literary and artistic work, this tradition can help draw out that which is usually muted. It focuses the attention on the inequitable relations and difficult stories that are hiding in silences.

Marianne Hirsch writes that although some strands of theory suggest that the founding fathers of memory studies are Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora and Michel Foucault, this was not her genealogy (2012:16). She explains that she came to cultural memory because of feminist and psychoanalytic writings such as those of Freud, Melanie Klein, Shoshana Felman and Cathy Caruth. This feminist memory work, as Hirsch argues, unlike the strand of theory that has its roots in Halbwachs that I described above, “offer[s] a means to uncover and to restore experiences and life stories that might otherwise remain absent from the historical archive” (ibid). She adds that, on this conception, “‘memory’ offer[s] a means to account for the power structures animating forgetting, oblivion, and erasure” (2012:16). In *Memory and gender* (2017) Selma Leydesdorff writes in a similar vein, arguing that feminist ideas of memory can be a lens through which to look at counter-memories and omitted memories.

Presently, I will explore the two strands that Hirsch describes as her genealogy. For one strand, its insights stem from literary critics (Cathy Caruth, 1995, 1996; Shoshana Felman, 1995), trauma historians and theorists (Leys, 2010; Tal, 1996) and (clinical) psychologists (Laub, 1995; Van der Kolk, 2003). The other strand of trauma theory encompasses Holocaust survivor writings and memoirs, autobiographical insights and psychoanalytic work from the ‘second generation’ within Holocaust survivor families (Hoffmann, 2004; Karpf, 1996; Wardi, 1992

Hirsch, 2012; Bar-on, 1995). However, this divide is merely an analytical one as in reality the distinctions are less clear, this is simply to show the different influences that gave birth to trauma theory.

Hodgkins and Radstone write that trauma theory “(...) has become an explanatory apparatus through which to apprehend and analyse the past; partly through the frame of the individual memory, but also through a more general set of arguments about representation, what could be said, what could be remembered and how” (2006:6). Theorists in different fields agree that trauma studies had an enormous influence on the way we interpret our social world today, In fact, trauma has become a dominant cultural formation for western societies (Luckhurst, 2013; Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). It has created an important ‘tool’ to explore the depth of the after-effects of violence and it has provided memory studies with a framework to understand more deeply and beyond what can be articulated in speech or narrative.

### **Trauma insights from literary critics**

The theoretical insight of trauma studies is that (...) “if something terrible happens, memory goes into crisis. Something cannot be thought, it is closed to memory, because the psychic wound inflicted by the event was intolerable. Thus, the notion of trauma complicated referentially by interposing the disruption of memory between the event and its representation” (Hodkins & Radstone, 2003:4). Hodgkins and Radstone thus argue that “[a]t the heart of the idea of traumatic memory (...) is the idea of unrepresentability” (ibid). Most important to understand is that “[t]raumatic events in the past have a persistent presence, which explains why this presence is usually discussed in terms of memory – as traumatic memory” (Bal, 1999:viii). Since the overwhelming event triggers (often delayed) repeated and intrusive images and thoughts, hallucinations, dreams, or behaviour associated with that event (Caruth, 1995:4), Cathy Caruth writes that “the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time” (ibid:9). Trauma is thus, inaccessible and resistant to full theoretical analysis and understanding (ibid:10). However, Ruth Leys (2010) and others (Kannsteiner, 2004) criticise Caruth and van der Kolk (on whose work Caruth draws heavily)

for seeing trauma as an external event that befalls the individual and leaves a literal imprint, lodged in the brain, as a traumatic system and thus defies representation. Leys argues that such beliefs have helped solidify the powerful idea in the humanities that trauma, particularly the trauma of the Holocaust is a fundamental crisis for historical representation (2010:16). This unrepresentability goes hand in hand with questioning whether trauma can be understood through story. Cathy Caruth proposes that trauma can indeed be understood through story. She argues that fragmented memory pieces when put into a coherent narrative can help make sense of the original traumatic event. But she also recognises that narrative memory is a danger to the “impossibility of a comprehensible story” (1995:154). She stresses the idea that the drive for coherence can simplify the act, as traumatic events cannot be related in simple speech. Thus Caruth argues for a different mode of transmission of the truth of these events. She argues that we need a method that can also convey the non-understandable (1995:155).

### **Trauma insights from the ‘second generation’**

The reflections of the 'second generation', especially of a psycho-social nature, which emerged from the late 1980s, became known as the thoughts of the ‘second generation’, not only because they related to the experiences of certain people of a certain generation but also because these individuals who grew up in ‘survivor families’ felt that they had something in common. Eva Hofmann provides a way to understand the ‘second generation’ when she writes that the

character of this grouping can be defined (...) not so much on geography, or circumstances as on sets of meanings, symbols, even literary fictions that it has in common and that enable its members to recognise and converse with each other with a sense of mutual belonging (...). The reference points through which we communicate and recognise each other have to do with our location in the dark topography of the Shoah and with the stages of a long and difficult reckoning – with our parents’ past and its deep impact on us; with our obligations to that past, and the conclusions we can derive from it for the present. (2004:29)

This generation grew up with parents who did not wish to share their threatening knowledge with their children. They wanted to protect them from it. They often communicated to their children that the history of the Holocaust ends with them. They were told that they had nothing to do with this horrible past and ought to grow up free from it. There was a ‘wall’ to that history, and that is why Eva

Hoffman (2004) writes that the first generation's writings came from memory, while the second generation's writings were *about* memory.

The silences and the fragmentary knowledge of the past that these parents transmitted were very burdensome (Hoffman, 2004; Karpf, 1996; Hirsch, 2012). Dina Wardi (1992) in her work *Memorial candles: Children of the Holocaust* shows, for example, how a child was often chosen subconsciously in Holocaust survivor families to carry the painful memory in families. These children were often also given the names of those who perished. That is why she calls them 'memorial candles', since they are bound to the Holocaust history by their families. Marianne Hirsch (1997; 2012) famously described the effects of the parents' Holocaust experiences as growing up with post-memory.<sup>29</sup> It was the traumatic memory of the Holocaust that so many parents repressed, but despite that it appeared in the 'second generation'. In short, trauma did not only affect the immediate generation, but was transmitted to the next generations. Anne Karpf (1996) discusses in her memoir *The war after: Living with the Holocaust* how such deep trauma can also show itself physically for example in a skin condition such as eczema. She writes that skin is receptive to subconscious trauma and the eczema from which she suffered, was her "unconscious self (...) trying to articulate its distress" (1996:96). She describes how she grew up in a time where memory of the Holocaust was entirely repressed. And yet the family secrets found a way to express themselves through her illness. These children of the 'second generation' often identified, or even "over-identified" (Hirsch, 2012:15) with their parents' pain. Issues of guilt and shame were a common experience, often because they felt that they could not protect their parents and because they felt that they had had it easier in life. They faced a difficult task to carry the parents' burden and at the same time to become independent and to have a life of their own (Hofmann, 2004). They often felt that their experiences, or problems in life, seemed trivial compared to the heaviness of their parents' fates.

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<sup>29</sup> Hirsch points out that this phenomenon has been variously termed by different theorists as 'inherited memory', 'belated memory', 'prosthetic memory', 'received history' or 'haunting legacy' (2012:3).

The second generation's contribution is of interest in this study as their experiences help in seeing and explaining the family dynamics in Russian-German families. Other authors (Rosenthal et al., 2011; Merridale, 2000; Gheith, 2007) have made comparisons between the Soviet and Holocaust 'second generation', establishing parallels and differences. However, despite certain parallels, Catherine Merridale is sceptical of applying the notion of trauma, so common in Holocaust studies, in the context of the Soviet Union, as I will discuss presently. This is in part because the trauma language, as it has developed in the Western context, has some drawbacks outside of its specific cultural-historical background. In Western societies we often focus on narrative work and some theorists (Felman & Laub, 1992; Herman, 1992; Rosenthal, 1993; Bal et al., 1999) even suggest that trauma when verbalised and brought into narrative can be integrated and healed.

### **Trauma and the Soviet experience**

Yet, as oral historian Jehanne Gheith explains because in the West the "most powerful ways of understanding trauma centre around narrative", she stresses, "we have had a hard time interpreting the Soviet and post-Soviet experience, a hard time seeing the non-narrative as powerful" (2007:161). Gheith shows in her work with Soviet citizens that they found other ways of dealing with loss than in verbal recovery. Drawing from Russian cultural theorist Irina Paperno's work on the Soviet experience, Gheith argues that the terms "testimony and trauma" insofar as they imply a therapeutic recollection as well as concepts such as "mastering the past" do not work in the Soviet Union (2007:162; see also Paperno, 2002). Instead she found that non-narrative, relational ways of remembering were common among her interviewees. Gheith explains that because people could not speak about their pain, they found other creative ways to care for the original hurt. She tells a story of a Gulag survivor naming his dog Stalin. He would give him orders but at the same time care for him and in this way he also cared about his own hurt (ibid).

These discussions on the specificity of Soviet experience indicate the difficulty of straightforwardly applying concepts and tools from social and cultural memory studies in this study. Social studies of memory tend to only engage with meditations on the past that are symbolic, which limits their applicability to

repressive societies; whereas, cultural memory studies, while they can help with the non-representational aspect of transmission, focus on trauma theory, about which we have just seen there are legitimate questions concerning its use in the Soviet context.

There are various cultural and historical reasons for why the trauma model developed in Western scholarship doesn't seem to fit the Soviet Union. Historian Catherine Merridale (2010), for example, is sceptical of the application of trauma and trans-generational trauma theory in the context of the Soviet and is stunned by the popularity that trauma and memory studies began to enjoy in the past decades. In her insightful work *Night and stone: Death and memory in Russia*, Merridale explains that she found no evidence for trauma and did not see any signs of the transmittance of trauma to the offspring (2000:331). Instead she found that people were surprised to discover that they shared some kind of memory, namely a story of concealment and a tale of guilt (ibid).

If we cannot account for the Soviet experience in the language of trauma, how else can the Soviet experience be grasped and represented? There is no simple answer because researchers are still in the process of making sense of the Soviet experience. Merridale looked at the trauma phenomenon through a lens of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and could not see any evidence of it. However, she argues that that does not mean that people were not traumatised, only that possibly people found other ways to cope (ibid). Despite the limitations of Western memory studies in the Soviet context, I nevertheless believe that in order to be able to understand the Soviet experience, in particular that of Russian-German families it is helpful to follow the path paved by memory and trauma studies.

Initially I too had reservations about the applicability of trauma theory, which led me to search for alternatives. However, the longer my fieldwork lasted and the more time I spent not only listening to my respondents but observing how they communicate in their families about the past, the more I began to see many parallels to the literature coming from the 'second generation'.



In the introduction to *Beyond invisible walls*, a compilation exploring the legacy of Soviet trauma, psychologists Lindon and Lifton give an evocative description about the signs of Soviet trauma. They explain that the reason why they chose the title for their book is because this is how they perceived the stories of Soviet subjects who experienced trauma. When learning about these people an image of invisible walls recurred in two forms: of walls, which “unconsciously preserve outmoded ways of adaptation” as well as walls, which “maintain silence between generations” (2001:2). The first wall, they write, represents the enduring personality traits and unconscious emotional defences reinforced during the Communist era, the second wall divides an older generation from their children because parents deceived their children in order to protect them (ibid).

While researchers struggle to characterise how exactly the Soviet legacy diverges from Western understandings of traumatic histories and find it difficult to find a “vocabulary that captures the elaborate and subtle forms of repression and subversion – of compliance and resistance – that are so characteristic of state socialism” (Watson, 1994:2), Lindon and Lifton propose that there are two sides to the intergenerational dynamics in Soviet families. They write that through this double exposure we can gain “a remarkable experiential look into the culturally specific trauma of the Soviet era (...)” (ibid). The latter dynamic of silence between the generations is widely written about in Holocaust survivor families, something, which has been discussed above. There is a second layer of which the researchers speak. They explain that an intrusive ideology, which was destructive to the autonomy and growth of the individual, has also left its mark on people (ibid). In the coming chapters, I will show the presence of both of these ‘walls’.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I discussed two different cultures that deal with their pasts in very different ways: Germany and the (post)-Soviet Union. I first turned to the Soviet Union and showed how the past was up until the *perestroika* era rarely and never adequately addressed. I then argued that just as post-Soviet society began to open up about past atrocities, ethnic Germans migrated to Germany. In Germany, the

memory of the country's crimes is of great significance. Tied to this cultural memory are also discourses of German wartime suffering, including that of expellees, *Aussiedler* and *Spätaussiedler*. I engaged with this cultural memory in order to understand the complicated relationship between memory of the NS-past, the Holocaust, how German suffering is discussed in German culture and, by extension, how ethnic Germans' fates have been framed, interpreted and even appropriated since WWII.

The silence about the past in the Soviet Union and the demand for a particular type of history in Germany, influenced the way people seem to narrate their histories, as we have seen in the detailed discussions of the Rosenthal et al. research project. However, as the next chapter will draw out in more detail, while Rosenthal et al. and I agree on the historical influences and the ways that the past determines present constructions of belonging, we had different experiences in our fieldwork and consequently reached different conclusions about the extent and nature of these influences. In the following chapter, I will draw out these differences more by comparing and contrasting our methodologies in researching this group.

Having described these differing memory cultures, in this chapter, I positioned my study within a strand of theory of cultural memory studies and explained that while I also dealt with 'traumatic' family histories, to understand these histories the 'trauma model' as it has been developed in the West has to be applied carefully and critically in order not to miss crucial differences. These differences between study subjects in the West (e.g. the 'second generation' in Holocaust survivor families) and those from the Soviet Union are due in part to the nature of the societies. Trauma discourse was developed in liberal societies, while the Socialist experience produced other dynamics. However, while these differences need to be addressed, these formulations are nonetheless helpful, because I found that some people in my fieldwork, those generations socialised in Germany, turn to these discourses of their own accord in order to understand themselves and their family legacies.

## Chapter 3.

### Between strained and intimate encounters: Doing research with Russian-Germans.

#### Introduction

In teaching the observer to pay attention to the “taken-for-granted everyday behaviors that “hide in plain view”” as Miller et al. (2005:113) put it, it was partly my sociological training which sensitised me to look closer at the experiences of hiding and concealing of one's family background in the Russian-German community. Wanting to understand the social and psychological processes behind it, I decided to speak to other young Russian-German women about these issues. But, as I began to ask former friends and acquaintances from school, they declined to be interviewed. Even when people agreed to talk to me, they seemed to dread the interview and postponed it; others cancelled only to agree again and then cancelled last minute. I was avoided on several occasions and I often felt as though my requests for interviews were deemed impertinent.

After having finally recruited the first young women, they told me in the interviews that they do not speak about the past with their families and that they do not know much about their family's fate in the Soviet Union. Despite the prominent public image of Russian-Germans as victims of Stalinist repressions, which as the previous chapter discussed, was appropriated to make larger claims about German victimhood; in my interviews, young people did not use these publicly available tropes to speak about their histories. In fact, only a few people knew about Stalinist repression and how it affected their families. In an attempt to understand this fragmented memory and how it shaped young people's sense of identity, I began to situate this project within memory research as questions of cultural memory and historical trauma seemed relevant to explain the family dynamics and communication about the past in these families.

I also decided to branch out and incorporate the ‘generation of parents’ and the ‘generation of grandparents’ into the study. Because of this focus on different

generations and their connections, I will discuss in this chapter what exactly constitutes generational consciousness. The purpose of interviewing older generations was from the beginning to get a greater understanding of the problems younger generations face. Yet in order to fully understand their experiences, I needed to engage with how Soviet socialisation and everyday life in the Soviet space shaped identity, memory and narrative. I also needed to understand the limits of narrative research with Russian-Germans despite its being considered an apt tool for exploring memory (Baronian et al., 2007).

Initially, when I did not know that grandparents had to be asked for interviews by their grandchildren or children, recruiting this generation was not easy either. Often people told me that they did not wish to think about things which they tried to forget. Others told me that they do not remember anything. A few times they hung up the phone mid-call. Once I got a phone number for a woman from a relative of hers to arrange a meeting. The relative had informed her that I would call and when I did, the woman knew the reasons for my calling. We had been speaking for a while, when suddenly the phone went dead. When I called back, being uncertain about what happened, in a frosty voice she told me never to call her again.

These scenes were very different to how we usually see Russian-Germans depicted in documentaries on German TV: where women in pretty flower headscarves standing in their front gardens, invite the reporters into their houses. Offering *chai* and telling the film crew stories of deportations, work camp and exile; singing and praying in old German dialects. This was not my experience; indeed recruiting individuals for interviews turned out to be a challenging undertaking.

Somewhat thrown by these initial difficulties, I began to look for advice in scholarship on Russian-Germans, but with few exceptions (Dil, 2007; Neufeld, 2007; Kiel, 2009) most of the literature had not been conducted by Russian-German researchers and barely any literature spoke about the difficulties of finding research subjects. The only other researchers who explicitly mentioned similar difficulties, were the Rosenthal et al. team. In fact, as a result of their

immense problems to recruit people, they began to interpret this difficulty as a finding itself and asked “who will be able to motivate people and with which methods, who consistently cancel interviews” (2011:32)<sup>30</sup>.

In contrast to the Rosenthal team, I did not pursue people if they declined to be interviewed. While I tried to convince people to speak to me, when they showed the slightest apprehension I respected that. What I did not understand at the time is that I was not only a researcher, but also an ‘insider’ and part of this group. The ‘insider’ status meant that I internalised the logic to accept the social boundaries, or carefully “created fences” around these painful memories, as Veena Das calls them in her fieldwork (2007:11). In other words, in similar ways to my interviewees, who grew up in Soviet-socialised families, I learned *not* to ask unnecessary questions, to keep a distance and respect boundaries around secrets, silences and taboos.

Lofland and Lofland write that “as sociologists, we ‘make problematic’ in our research matters that are problematic in our lives” (cited in Coffey, 1999:6). They argue that although some of the best work in the social sciences is often grounded in the biography of its creator, such linkages are usually unacknowledged, since “the norms of scholarship do not require that researchers bare their souls, only their procedures” (ibid). Over the course of this chapter and this thesis more generally, I will be attending also to my own experiences. I will acknowledge the research interests and show how they link to my biography. Moreover, I will discuss the complexities and ambiguities of my inside-outside status and show how it influenced my epistemic position. I will be arguing that reflexive-feminist teachings help to understand the impositions of one’s positionality and so by attending to my own experiences, my relationships to the people I meet, and observing my research process, I will show how I am positioned in relationships of intimacy and distance within the community I am studying. For wanting to speak and not wanting to, revealing oneself in some circumstances and concealing oneself in others, what to say and to whom, is a characteristic of doing research with Russian-German interviewees. It is one of strained and intimate encounters.

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30 Author’s translation

First, however, I will explore in detail the generational and gendered experiences of my interviewees. I will then proceed to show how I framed this project. I will discuss feminist ethnographic inquiry, how it helps to understand this ‘insider’ status, which in turn helps understanding one's “choice of topic”, “acquisition of data” as well as “interpretation” (Altorki & El Sohl, 1988:10). Then I will discuss why it is important to expand beyond narrative research when interviewing Russian-Germans and what researchers need to do in order to discourage interviewees from producing homogeneous stories, stories that they think researchers want to hear.

### Generational and gendered experiences

In four years: from late 2009 to July 2014, I conducted qualitative, in-depth interviews with 25 individuals of the ‘generation of grandchildren’ as well as two or three generations in eight families. 15 young people as well as five families feature in this thesis directly. I interviewed people in villages in the vicinity of Aschaffenburg in Bavaria – where I grew up. I also travelled to Darmstadt, Cologne, Frankfurt am Main, Augsburg, Berlin, Düsseldorf and Duisburg to interview individuals and families. I also participated in memorials and conferences organised by Russian-German associations, including a five-day workshop in which young people interviewed survivors of the deportation, followed by a commemoration of the 70<sup>th</sup> year since the deportation of Russian-Germans by Stalin - held at the *Konrad-Adenauer-Sifting* in Berlin in 2011.

During my fieldwork, I spent time with interviewees in their homes. Several times I stayed over for many days interviewing close and extended family members. We shared meals and tea times. I also interviewed individuals in hotel rooms while attending conferences. I travelled throughout Germany with some of my interviewees to interview their relatives. These discussions in cars and trains were different from the more formal interviews that I conducted. I went with interviewees to family gatherings, family reunions and on walks while interviewing them. Once I accompanied a friend and interviewee to the cemetery of her grandparents and we had a thoughtful conversation about life, death and memory, sitting on a bench overlooking the graves of her grandparents.

As I progressed into my research, I additionally approached the student organisation of the *Landsmannschaft der Deutschen aus Russland* – an ethnic German association and asked them to send out a call. Through them I met my interviewees Konstantin and Tamara, who were both very active in the organisation in their respective cities. I also spoke to other immigrants about their experiences in Germany, including Russian-Jews who came as *Kontingentenflüchtlinge*, quota refugees to Germany at approximately the same time as Russian-Germans. I spoke to Turkish-German friends, descendants of the so-called *Gastarbeiter*, ‘guest workers’ about their experiences growing up as second-generation immigrants. I also talked to Polish and Romanian ethnic Germans who came either after WWII or in the early 1990s. While their stories do not feature directly, they informed my understanding of migrant experiences in past and present Germany. Now, let us explore in detail the different generations that were interviewed. I will look at their generational consciousness and then proceed to discuss questions around gender and how it impacted my interviewees as well as the interviewing process.

### **Generational consciousness**

Like ‘class’, the concept of ‘generation’ is a vast generalisation. Karl Mannheim’s formulations (1952/2000) have deeply impacted sociological work on generational consciousness. To Mannheim, besides class, it was people’s generational location, which determined their knowledge of the world. Just as class can be thought of as a location shared by people in the economic and power structure of a society, so “the unity of generations is constituted essentially by a similarity of location of a number of individuals in a social whole” (ibid:290). Within a generation, Mannheim distinguished generational units, which according to him, answer to common historical constellations in different ways. The mere fact that people are born at the same time and share their youth, adulthood and old age does not in itself produce similarity of location, rather what creates it is that individuals are “exposed to the same phase of the collective process” and that “they are in a position to experience the same events (...) and (...) these experiences impinge upon similarly ‘stratified consciousness’” (ibid:297). In other words, what is generation-forming is not merely sharing a similar age, but also collective historical experiences.

The most important insight we can take from Mannheim's formulation is that what exactly constitutes a generation is always an empirical question; it is not simply the case that one can say that a generation begins every decade or so. Instead, one needs to look at the concrete social and historical circumstances and how these have shaped different individuals. We can see these insights more clearly, when applied to the interviewees of this study. Although the respondents might be only few years apart in age, their experiences can differ greatly. Drawing on Mannheim's work, Rosenthal and Stephan (2009a) have established the historical generational succession of Russian-German interviewees and their analysis is useful for grouping people together according to their individual and collective formative experiences. First, let us look at the 'generation of grandparents', followed by parents and grandchildren.

#### **'Generation of grandparents'**

In the two previous chapters I have already described in detail the historical trajectories of this generation. What is helpful at this point, is to highlight that the people I interviewed in this generation often saw the collectivisation and deportations through the eyes of children or youngsters, since they were all born between 1926 and 1941. Almost all of my interviewees as well as those of my interviewees' grandparents lost at least one parent to the Gulag, repressions, or became orphans in WWII. I found that those grandparents who had no parents any more had to become adults themselves early in life and those grandparents who still had parents after the deportations were to some extent shielded from the harsh realities to which the former were exposed. I also discovered that grandparents, especially those who were children in WWII (born around 1935-41), concealed their Germanness and felt ashamed of being German.

Rosenthal and Stephan likewise distinguish between those who were adults in the collective punishment phase of 1941, usually born 1920-1925, and those who were children in that phase, usually born between 1930-1945 (2009a:165-166). While all the grandparents I interviewed were children or youngsters, the grandparents/parents of my interviewees however were both: adults and youngsters during WWII. Those grandparents who were adults however were no



longer alive. Rosenthal et al. found that the older among them were able to look back on a 'normal life' before the collective punishment. They were inclined to look back nostalgically to their old lives in the German settlements and they hoped that they would be able to return to normality after exile. They were also more able to come terms with their collective punishment and they could more easily distance themselves from the collective condemnation than those who were torn away from the certainties of daily life as small children (ibid). In the interviews with those who were children, their interviews showed traces of early traumatisation, similar to those known from cases of children who survived the Holocaust. Rosenthal and Stephan point out that they showed symptoms of dissociation which showed up in the interviews in the extremely emotionless way in which traumatic situations were recounted (ibid).

### **'Generation of parents'**

In the 'generation of parents' Rosenthal and Stephan distinguish between parents, typically born between 1945 and 1958, for whom social mobility was possible albeit under very difficult circumstances and those, typically born between 1962 and 1970, for whom social mobility was possible under easier social conditions (2009a:166). I interviewed parents in both these groups and the parents of my interviewees also come from both groups. It helps to keep in mind that what the previous chapters discussed in terms of the changes and shifts in the Soviet Union are mirrored in these generations. The parents born earlier experienced severe discrimination and some of them concealed their German background if possible. The parents born later grew up in a freer society and were no longer targeted for their backgrounds. Rosenthal et al. argue that these two groups have in common that as children of outsiders they were very focused on pursuing successful careers and were often very effective in their efforts to climb the social ladder. They write that it is characteristic of their biographies that already in their childhood and youth this generation tried to integrate into the Soviet system (ibid). As explored in the previous chapter, this identification with Soviet socialism today is concealed by this generation in the interviews. I will dedicate a large part of Chapter Six as well as part of Chapter Seven to the experiences of the 'generation of parents' and discuss how these experiences in turn influence the younger generations.

### **‘Generation of grandchildren’**

In the generation of grandchildren, Rosenthal & Stephan distinguish between those who were socialised in the Soviet Union, typically born between the years of 1973 and 1980, those whose childhood and youth took place in the migration phase, typically born between 1984 and 1990 (2009a:165-67). I interviewed both young women and men who came of age in the former Soviet republics and in Germany. However, I focus on the group of people who were children or youngsters during the migration phase and who were socialised and schooled in Germany. My interviewees all migrated from either Russia or Kazakhstan and once in Germany, only a few of them grew up in big cities; the majority lived in villages and small towns across West Germany. Some of my interviewees are ethnically German on both sides; others were also partly Russian as well as of other nationalities, such as Tatar, Ossetian, Kazakh and Ukrainian. The younger participants among the ‘generation of grandchildren’ had few memories of their former places of birth and they spoke about their migration to Germany as an adventure. They also grew up with the story of homecoming and mentioned homecoming as a migration motivation more often than did the older among them.

Rosenthal and Stephan write that in their research young Russian-Germans tended to present themselves between “strained assimilation” and “provocative disassociation” (2011:18). They explain that while members of the latter group define themselves as purposely Russian and retreat into Russian culture and language or other multi-ethnic alternative worlds, the former group of young people act in the opposite way. They by contrast are “trying with some difficulties to act ordinary. With the consequence that they do not wish to be recognised as Russian-German” (ibid). They found that these young people try “to speak without a recognisable accent and hide in some life contexts their origin” (ibid)<sup>31</sup>.

The group of people who ‘distance’ themselves from a German ascription received considerable attention in the last two decades from media and social research. Often exaggerated media reports portrayed these people as not being able to integrate into German society. It seemed that particularly young men had immense difficulties, often falling into a world of unemployment, drugs and violence<sup>32</sup>.

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31 Author’s translation

32 Although media often painted an exaggerated picture in the mid 1990s to early 2000, drug and

Consequently, from the mid 1990s, a large body of academic literature (Hilkes & Dietz, 1994; Dietz & Roll, 1998; Strobl et al., 1999; Zinn-Thomas, 2006; Luff, 2000; Bade & Oltmer, 2003; Vogelgesang, 2008, Silbereisen et al., 2016) was dedicated to questions dealing with integration problems and looking at whether these young people live between worlds, belonging fully to neither .

As we have seen throughout the previous chapters, the past of Russian-Germans comprises many histories, of different origins and positions and many forms of multiethnic life. In Germany this group of people find themselves living alongside diverse immigrant groups who created vibrant communities. More than two decades after migration, like other groups, Russian-Germans managed to form a wide range of businesses, various services, organisations, an active Russian-speaking media and transnational economic and social connections. And yet, as it sometimes happens with ‘return migrants’ (Capo Zmegac, 2005; Tsuda, 2003; 2013:182-184) some Russian-Germans within this larger group have difficulties to claim a transnational identity, not least because the nation state incorporating them, wanted to eradicate differences (Capo Zmegac, 2005:209).

As a result people seem to acculturate in opposite ways by either withdrawing into enclaved communities and subcultures resisting attempts by mainstream society to assimilate them; or they display a strained assimilation because they find it impossible to claim a multi-cultural and complex identity. In this thesis I concentrate on the latter group. I wanted to explore this ‘strained assimilation’, in order to understand what led people to conceal their backgrounds, ‘pass’ for German and ‘distance’ themselves from their Russian-German peers. So, the study, in part represents a certain group of people among Russian-Germans at a particular moment in German society. Let me briefly make a few more remarks about this group and contrast them with people whom I have interviewed, but mostly excluded from this study. I hope that by explaining the contrast, it will be clearer upon which particular experiences I draw.

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alcohol abuse among young Russian-Germans should not be underestimated. It is in fact a serious problem among some families and, it could be argued, has to do with intergenerational passing on of trauma (See Dil, 2007).

Although my thesis is informed by the older informants' stories (that is, those who came to adulthood in the Soviet Union), I have excluded them because their experiences differed markedly from those of people a few years younger and hence according to Mannheim's criteria, they belong to a different generation. These older interviewees among the grandchildren were not schooled in Germany but entered into the work force or work-related apprenticeships. Some of them married young and had children shortly after arrival. In some cases this meant that when I interviewed them, their children were in some respects closer in age and generational experience to the young people whose interviews I did include than they were. They consequently seemed closer to the younger members within the 'generation of parents' in that they also spoke German with a Russian accent, which made hiding their background an impossibility. In fact, most of the people I spoke to were not concerned with 'passing' for German and had Russian-speaking partners and circles of friends.

This group had to leave behind friends, school, family and some of them reported that they did not want to move to Germany. In the 1990s some research suggested that this generation could be thought of as the 'brought along generation' (Roll, 1997). Although this group is part of the 'generation of grandchildren', they had different opportunities in German society. This was connected to the fact that they were part of the *perestroika* or post-*perestroika* generation and were thus socialised in a transitional society (Slepzow & Rewenko, 1993:155). The collapse of the Soviet Union and the societal crisis, as Slepzow and Rewenko point out are clearly mirrored in these generations' ideas, values and orientation (ibid). They grew up in times when socialist values lost credibility and state authority was in question. Thus, it was not surprising that a group of young men I interviewed reported that they had problems with authority at their work places and got into many fights.

### **Issues of gender: Interviewing men and women**

I found that young men's accounts differed from the women in the interviews owing in part to the different attitudes toward authority and deference before societal norms. Men seemed to feel that they needed to prove themselves and they

also used violence and force to do so; not a few mentioned fighting and violence when they had just arrived. Rainer Strobl writes that especially young Russian-German males were “not by a few Germans seen as threatening and associated with various forms of defiance and delinquency” (2006:89)<sup>33</sup>. Undoubtedly, such attitudes towards the different genders impacted real-life opportunities. Some of my analysis suggests further that gender indeed seemed to play a role in the experience of migration, with especially men finding it difficult to feel a sense of belonging in German society.

Young people reported that their brothers and particularly their fathers faced tremendous difficulties to feel accepted and keep their ‘role as a man’ in the family. As we shall come to see in coming chapters, the ‘generation of parents’ often experienced downward mobility, unable to work in their former professions. This was especially difficult for men. Rebecca Kay in her work *Men in Contemporary Russia: The fallen heroes of post-Soviet change* (2006) explains that work had intrinsic value for male identity and self-esteem in the Soviet Union. Not to be able to find appropriate work, or to provide for the family was seen as shameful and beneath a man's dignity. To cope with this stress, some fathers in my interviewees' families turned to alcohol. A few interviewees mentioned alcohol problems with regards to their fathers, however not one interviewee talked about this in connection with their mothers.

I also found whereas endogamy was often possible for Russian-German women, Russian-German males did not have similar opportunities for upward mobility through dating or marriage. Women in my interviews were seen and have often described themselves as nurturers and carers in their families. Rebecca Kay (2007) argues that in the Soviet space, the ‘cult of motherhood’ was prevalent and this meant that childrearing and care were often seen as female duties only. At the same time, the women interviewed were not stereotypical housewives either.

In *Reproducing Gender: Politics, publics, and everyday life after Socialism*, Gal and Klingman clarify the gender relations in the Soviet space pointing out that

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33 For a good overview of how Russian-Germans and Turkish-German male youths were perceived and treated in the early-mid 1990s in German society (see Kaya, 2017).

“the ideological and social structural arrangement of state socialism produced a markedly different relation between the state, men and women than is commonly found in classical liberal parliamentary systems” (2000:6). They explain that women were more dependent on the paternal state than on individual men in socialist countries and that these countries were often characterised by contradictory goals in their policies towards women “they wanted workers as well as mothers, token leaders as well as quiescent typists” (ibid).

These varied demands are reflected in the biographies of the women interviewed. I found that women were dependent and independent; carers and nurtures; hard workers and often those who held the families together, emotionally and financially. This was true of the women of the 'generation of parents', who after migration to Germany found themselves heaped with new responsibilities as a result of the men not being able to cope with the loss of their identity. It was also true for the women in the 'generation of grandparents', who in the midst of deportation and exile, forced labour and poverty brought up a family, often without the help of men. In *No more Heroines: Russia, women and the market* Bridger, Kay and Pinnick (1996:1) comment that not the fictional Soviet propaganda poster women, but the millions of ordinary women of the war-generation, those who faced repression and persecution, were the genuine heroines of the Soviet space (ibid). They write that in those dire circumstances they displayed real stoicism, endurance and a will to survive (ibid). The stories that were conveyed to me by children and grandchildren about their grandmothers/mothers indeed often invoked heroic images, describing their strength, courage and ingenuity. As we shall come to see, these descriptions make it difficult to think of one's family members as victims.

Interestingly, I also found that women were often the carriers of family memory and tradition, even the family memory of their husbands and close and extended families. Gender can indeed determine the way in which the family history and thus the migration is remembered and narrated (Leydesdorff, 2017). When interviewed together with their husbands, women often knew their husbands' histories in greater detail than they did. Given that women were the keepers of family memory it is not surprising that Dorothee Wierling found in her research

that it was often women in Russian-German families who initiated the migration to Germany (2004:213).

In the coming chapters, I will touch upon issues of gender differences as they run through my interviewees' families; this study however particularly draws on women's experiences and often also on the relationship dynamics between daughters and mothers. Consequently this study features only a few men. I found that men were more difficult to recruit and less willing to be vulnerable and open in the interviews than were women. There were a few exceptions, but usually men gave short answers to my questions and it was difficult to engage them to speak about their feelings.

I found it easier to gain access to women's stories. They were easier to recruit and more willing to think about certain issues and share their experiences. I began this chapter by describing how difficult it was at times to recruit women of my own generation, but once I had it was easier to establish an empathetic, reciprocal rapport with them (Oakley, 1981). The initial recruitment challenges were ironically partly connected, as I will discuss next, with my insider position. Let us engage with what this 'inside' means and how we can understand its ambiguous significance.

### Framework of the project

Initially, I wanted to concentrate on in-depth interviews only. I believed this method of research was particularly suitable as I intended to learn about people's family history, memory and migration experiences (Byrne, 2004). Moreover, following a feminist tradition, I wanted to use interviews in such a way as to give interviewees a voice to speak about their experiences in their own words (Oakley, 1981). However, the close proximity to some of my interviewees and the blurred lines between being a researcher and a friend or fellow Russian-German pushed me to think through my approach further. Was I a friend or a researcher when I spoke to friends or my parent's friends about my research and they told me something that I noted down afterwards? Who was I when I sat on the bench with my friend Nina at the cemetery? Equally, was she my respondent? And how would she feel if she were to know that, to me, our conversations had always an

additional meaning? I was of course already implicated in the ‘research field’ and while I wrote about my encounters, observations and what people told me, it was difficult to negotiate the ways in which my biography and this research were interwoven.

### **Ethnographically inspired**

I began to see that ethnography is not only deeply personal (Campbell & Lasiter, 2014:5) but that it arises out of an “unambiguous consideration of one’s own experiences, positions, and subjectivities as they meet the experiences, positions, and subjectivities of others” (ibid). Campbell and Lasiter further argue that ethnography is a relationship-based practice which demands assessment of one’s own assumptions as one learns about people through “co-experience and shared dialogue” (2014:5). Ethnography also bears “resemblance to the routine ways in which people make sense of the world in everyday life” (Wolcott, 1999:43). This was precisely what I was doing intuitively, being on the ‘inside’, trying to interpret people’s behaviour and words through both and formal informal conversations (McCall & Simmons, 1969:1).

The late ethnographer, Harry Wolcott argued in *Ethnography: A way of seeing* that ethnography had long left the tent of anthropology (today it goes by many names: ‘participant observation research’, ‘field study’, ‘descriptive research’). The set of activities common to all of these methods is fieldwork as a research approach and it allows one to embrace multiple techniques to gather data (1999:44), something that I was doing. However, Wolcott also calls on researchers to distinguish between doing ethnography<sup>34</sup> and borrowing ethnographic techniques (*ibid*:41-42). He argued that the latter, a more modest way to describe one’s research, is more appropriate when the link is essentially about methodology rather than the claim that the finished product should be judged by ethnographic standards (*ibid*). Following this advice, I do not position this thesis as an ethnography, rather as ethnographically inspired in order to highlight the complexity of my research

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34 Ethnographic research has some identifying features. For example part of ethnographic research is the use of “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) where previous theory one brings to the field should play little role. The theory should arise from the field not vice versa. Ethnography is also usually open-ended and always evolving and it does not start with a particular focus or predetermined observations. Ethnography also tries to understand cultural phenomena in relation to the whole context.



experience and my mixed-method approach in researching Russian-German families and individuals.

### **'Insider' research**

Fieldwork is usually defined through “spatial practice of travel and dwelling” (Clifford, 1997:76), to a place often away from home (Collins & Gallinat, 2013:8). However, as it has become clear by now, when I travelled to research Russian-Germans, in a sense I also travelled back home. I needed to problematise this positionality and understand deeper the blurred lines between the ‘field’ and myself. I thus began to engage with what it means to speak as an ‘insider’ researcher or what in feminist ethnographic research became known as a ‘halfie identity’ (Narayan, 1993; Abu-Lughod, 1991; 1993; Behar, 2003). Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod defines halfie ethnographers as “people whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education or parentage” (2006:153). She explains that 'halfie' ethnographers face problems not “just because they position themselves with reference to two communities but because when they present the Other they are presenting themselves” (ibid:156). Drawing on the work of Narayan and Abu-Lughod, Ruth Behar writes that halfie ethnographers are dealing with the paradoxes of partial 'insiderhood' (2003:368).

Whereas in anthropology it is more common to speak about this research positionality as indigenous/native, halfie ethnography, or as ethnography at home (Jackson, 1987), in sociology it is more common to refer to it as insider or diasporic research. All of these terms do not amount to exactly the same thing (Collins & Gallinat, 2013), but they describe similar positions and all were borne out of a similar moment<sup>35</sup>. They have grown out of a paradigm shift from positivist to interpretive research, the crisis of representation in feminism, anthropology and the social sciences (Collins & Gallinat, 2013; Behar & Gordon, 1995; Denzin and Lincoln, 1998; 2005; Stoelzer & Yuval-Davies, 2002).

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35 See (Collins and Gallinat, 2013) for a detailed historical overview of the reflexive turn in the social sciences and anthropology. Collins and Gallinat call on researchers to distinguish between the ethics of using oneself as a resource and carrying out ethnographic research at home (ibid:10). They argue that although these practices certainly overlap, they are also distinctive. The difference, they argue, is in perspective. Those who describe themselves and are described by other as ‘insiders’ are able to draw on direct personal experience. Whereas ethnographers at home do not and cannot always make such claims (ibid).

Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis (2002) write that sociology has been shifted in recent years by the challenges posed to positivist models of objective universal truth. At the same time, the discipline of anthropology, which has ethnography as its central method, changed its character, influenced by post-colonial studies, feminist studies and the post-modern turn (Collins & Gallinat, 2013). Collins and Gallinat write that from the 1970s on, ethnographers came to the realisation that they had to “confront the uncomfortable fact that they were always already implicated in ‘the field’; that they were, inevitably, constructing what they came to re-present” (ibid:3). In other words, scholars began to question the insistence on neutrality, arguing for the need to attend to the social conditions of knowledge production (Webster 2008) and how the researcher's identity shapes positioned truths (Abu-Lughod, 1991:142).

Particularly feminist scholars (Behar 1995; 1991; Jagger, 1989:153) began to question rigid distinctions between the theoretical and personal, between the descriptive and analytical, between thought and experience, between theories and observations and between facts and values. They argued that these distinctions create disconnected interpretations, which make it difficult to draw deeper connections between the researcher’s personal experience and the participants in the study (Behar, 1996). However, halfie ethnographers, as Abu-Lughod stresses, cannot easily avoid all of these issues for they are all connected to the researcher's positionality. In an oft quoted passage Abu-Lughod writes: “Standing on shifting ground makes it clear that every view is a view from somewhere and every act of speaking a speaking from somewhere” (2006:155). Where am I speaking from?

#### **‘Inside’ position shapes interests and methods**

The idea for this thesis was, of course, borne out from my own biography; my own questions and confusions within a fragmented community. The questions I ask and the types of answers I received or did *not* receive, had to do with my positionality: not only my insider status, but also my particular gendered and generational standing within this community. So, rather, as ethnographic methodology puts forward (Geertz, 1973) to let theory emerge out of the field, I came to the field with particular questions and at times highly informed by theory (for example trauma theory).

My rationale was thus not to study people but rather to open up a dialogue about difficult subjects. I was painfully aware how much was not talked about and had not been shared for generations within the group. As indicated in the preface to this thesis, I had wanted to speak to my own grandmother about many issues, only for her to die unexpectedly at the start of my research. Her death affected the trajectory this research took because suddenly, I had a sense of ‘urgency’ that young people should hear, what their grandparents had to tell. I began to invite young people to sit with me in the interviews with their grandparents or parents and occasionally I brought together whole families.

Inviting different generations to be interviewed together is a very different method from just interviewing individuals. I had created ‘spaces for storytelling and listening across generations’. In this way I not only used storytelling as content for analysis but storytelling as a means to bring together generations to speak and listen. I was hoping in this way to produce what Alison Landsberg calls a “transferential space” (2004:113). These are spaces in which “people are invited to enter into experiential relationships with events through which they themselves did not live” (ibid). She adds, that through such spaces “people may gain access to a range of processual, sensually, immersed knowledge that would be difficult to acquire by purely cognitive means” (ibid). My hope was that these interviews would become ‘points of inquiry’ between the generations. In the coming chapters, we will see such moments unfold, and how ambivalent some of my respondents felt about them.

If we remember from the previous chapter, Rosenthal et al. (2011) also at times found themselves interviewing different generation together. However, it seems we had very different experiences and consequently reached divergent conclusions as a result of these encounters. This is why these moments became very important to me, since they helped me to contextualise the Rosenthal et al. research results better. I saw very different interactions in the families from those described by the research team. These encounters became vital to the project because they offered the opportunity to learn something about my interviewees’ lives beyond methods of qualitative interviews and narrative research. At the same time, it was an

opportunity to witness how the different generations communicated with one another in situations better approximating how it might have been without the researcher present.

I began to see the contradictions, or better, the mechanisms of ‘trauma talk’ (Schwab, 2010; Wajnryb, 2001). In *Haunting legacies: Violent histories and transgenerational trauma*, Gabriele Schwab explains these mechanisms when she comments that “old people often tell stories about trauma. Yet, in these stories, trauma is often curiously contained” (2010:42), because words and images can in fact seal over violent ruptures and wounds rather than expose them (ibid). Young people can feel that there are secrets and taboos against speaking, but also that grandparents have shared ‘too much’ with them. Grandparents, on the other hand, can feel the desire to speak and yet simultaneously feel the impossibility to convey what they have been through, to feel that they have been heard.

#### **Ambiguities of being an ‘insider’**

Although I consciously positioned this work as part of an ‘insider’ tradition, at the same time, this positionality was not without issues for me. In my own attempts to ‘succeed’ in Germany society, I found myself distant from Russian-German networks in ways similar to some of my interviewees, as we shall come to see. I did not have many Russian-German friends or a wider network of people whom I could ask for interviews. Reflecting more on this, I found it was also why I had chosen to research these issues: it gave me a ‘reason’ to have a closer relationship with the people of my background and with this subject.

Considering myself as an ‘insider’ in fact compelled me to think of myself as more part of this community than I really was. As a result, it made it difficult to recognise not only the ambiguous insider-outsider position I found myself in, but also to which stories I was drawn and for which reasons. On my research path, I often met and was drawn to young people who like myself have found themselves outside of Russian-German networks and who live on this blurred inside-outside spectrum themselves, being connected to Russian-Germans through their parents and grandparents, but otherwise living almost incognito, passing for ‘Germans’.

Indeed, defining the researcher's position as 'insider' or 'outsider' can be notoriously difficult. And the relative advantages or disadvantages of either position are disputable. While shared insider status has advantages especially with groups that are marginalised (Tewksbury and Gagne, 1997) since it allows for shared understanding of culture (Merriam et al., 2001; Narayan, 1993), it comes with its own set of problems. Not only does one need to constantly justify one's position in comparison to non-halfie ethnographers, as Ruth Behar (1996) points out. It is also true that one cannot always identify issues that would stand out to a researcher coming to the group for the first time or manage the distance between researcher and group member.

The 'insider-outsider' position is a delicate balance that requires understanding of the different layers. In my case this meant that at times, when I was perceived an 'insider', I was seen as threat to 'constructed histories'. People were worried that I would be able to 'detect' their performance of Germanness as my interviewee Alyona, will explain in Chapter Five. On other occasions, I was a friend or co-ethnic who needed help. This was voiced by my interviewee Konstantin who wanted to help me with his interview '*to write a good thesis*'. At other times, people wanted to share their own thoughts and reflect about certain issues which they were at that time going through. This was the case with my interviewees Nina, Alyona, Flora and Tamara. However, on many occasions I was also seen as not quite part of the group and this might have been the reason why some people declined to be interviewed. In a conversation with my interviewees Julia and Valentina, towards the end, they told me that they were surprised that I was interested in Russian-Germans, because back in school they thought of me as '*quite Germans*'. This reading of me, might have prevented some prospective interviewees, whom I had approached, from speaking to me.

To the 'generation of grandparents' and 'generation of parents', I was often a friend of their grandchildren/children and they treated me as a member of the 'younger generation'. This in turn meant that at times I was seen as someone who needed to be 'protected', as we shall come to hear in Chapter Seven. The downside was that this very closeness to the family might have prevented them from telling me everything. Rather than seeing me as a peer who would

understand their personal issues, they saw me as a young woman without much experience to understand their lives and might have feared that I would not have the discretion to keep certain details confidential, given that I was on friendly terms with their relatives.

The 'insider' status also came with obligations, as the interview with Friedrich Lehl showed. Friedrich was very concerned that I write about the suffering of Germans and asked me what I intended to do with the interviews. He instructed me to write that '*Germans have suffered*' and not to '*shame Germans*'. Such instructions can be experienced as burdensome because as a researcher with this background one has already an inherited loyalty as well as a felt sense of the need to protect the elder generations. Such expectations can be an obstacle to writing about the problems within the group. It can also mean that one might not want to discuss difficult relationships, mental health issues, drug and alcohol problems and histories that are secret or interpreted as shameful. This problem of 'protection' is also known in Holocaust survivor families. Shulamit Reinharz, for example, writes that it was taboo to write critical perspectives of Jewish families (2013:xi). She explains that the pain of the Holocaust was so deep that children wanted to protect their parents and this kept many from admitting that these families "were less than perfect" (ibid).

Given all these complications and difficulties around 'insider' status, I do not wish to offer a 'methodology of insiderhood'. In fact a complete 'insider' status can be a myth (Clifford, 1997; Narayan, 1993). However, I want to show how my shared background with my interviewees allowed at times to have an access to what I call 'private memory'. This, as I will explore next, has to do with the nature of Soviet socialisation and the way people reveal themselves to outsiders.

### **Inside-outside: Access to private memory**

As the previous chapter explored, one of the characteristics of memory culture in the Soviet Union is the way people remember often in insular ways: holding private counter-memories (Boym, 2001:61; Rosenthal, 2010, 2016; Todorova, Dimou & Troebst, 2014). Gabriele Rosenthal stresses this point when she writes that

a distinctive characteristic of the remembering practice prevalent in the erstwhile Soviet Union, as in other very authoritarian states, is the dividing line between public and private remembrance and principally the partitioning of the practice of remembering into diverse we-groups of outsiders vis-à-vis the public discourse. (2016:42)

This is a crucial observation, for this divide between public and private is something that still shapes this group's memory practice today. The contrast between my and Rosenthal's research results is evidence of just this divide. While I find the findings of the Rosenthal et al. team helpful and used them to guide my own analysis, I can also see that my positionality in the field produced different interviews and consequently new observations. Their positionality brought out how histories are presented and performed in a certain way. I will discuss later how I came across this tendency in my fieldwork too. This public performance seems to have two reasons: firstly, the Soviet context in which people were careful about how they spoke in official settings, something that still bears traces; and secondly, Germany's official admission policy for ethnic Germans.

My research suggests that there is still a divide between the way people present their histories (collective memory) before researchers and revelations of a more difficult to access, raw, confused private memory experienced in more intimate encounters. I argue then that our findings are complementary and, when combined, provide a powerful look into Russian-Germans' family memory practices, family dynamics and dialogue. While the public collective memory of the ethnic Germans presents a coherent story of victimhood and discrimination, rather than tales of complicity in genocide during WWII or ideological identification with the Soviet Union among members of the middle generations and at times a public disavowal of their German background; private family memory is not narrated in such a way.

These differences emerged partly from our different methodological and theoretical approaches: while Rosenthal et al. learn through biographical-narrative interviews and reconstructed memory practices from narratives, I learned through narratives but also through trying to build relationships within the community, relationships that allowed at times for a different means of access to people and

their internal worlds. As a result and owing, in part, to the biographical-narrative method itself, namely to let people recount their life history with little input from the researcher, as I will explore shortly, the researchers not only ‘encountered’ but in fact reproduced stereotypical and standard narrative histories. Thus I believe that biographical interviews are limited because rather than questioning the Soviet and homogenised history and trying to elicit more sincere, thought-out responses, in the way I tried to do, this method can in fact encourage reproduction of stereotypes.

I will briefly engage with this method and its theoretical underpinnings particularly because I engage with the research results of the Rosenthal team throughout the coming chapters. Then I will turn to a discussion about how I conducted my interviews and what I had to do in order for people not to produce homogeneous stories.

## Conducting interviews and analysing data

### **Narrative research and Soviet socialised families**

The central idea behind biographical interviews is that during the course of life, individuals collect varied experiences into a coherent narrative and the stories people tell are linked to these experiences. The link to the past gives us the possibility to do research on the past history and the development of today’s self out of the present perspective. Against this background, it is central to this type of research to try to assess the difference between ‘experienced life history’ and ‘narrated life story’ in order to show how people’s current self-description is determined by past experiences.

The first step of a biographical interview involves a recounting of one’s life story by the interviewee with minimal interruptions, while the researcher takes notes. Further questions for clarification are only asked in stage two of the interview (which can be the next day). Only then in the third part of the interview, may the researcher ask questions that had been prepared beforehand (Rosenthal, 2004:51-55). This method of interviewing has the ability to extract long narrations, to see how the protagonists make sense of their own lives and how they shape their life



experiences and give meaning to them without much interference by the researcher.

Rosenthal explains that when people enter into long narrations, they get closer to the experienced past since they digress from the narrative story of these events (2006:3). In this way, she argues we not only have the opportunity to see how people 'make sense' of their experience in the present and try to 'rationalise' it with the knowledge of today, but in fact how the person at that time experienced and thought about these experiences without the knowledge of the present. An important factor is to prevent uncontrollable effects on the interviewee's process of remembering and self-presentation. Thus the interviewer is not interrupted and issues that are discovered in the interview are not discussed until stage three. This way the interviewee has space to emphasise what is important for him/herself and to structure the narration on his/her own terms. Gabriele Rosenthal herself seems to realise the limitations of this method when doing research with Russian-Germans for she writes that what distinguishes Russian-Germans from other groups on which she has used this method is that

many interviewees do not allow an extended narration and recollection process to happen. Many times the narratives are exemplifying narratives that add plausibility to a line of argument. In spite of repeated narrative questions in an attempt to elicit more detailed accounts, surprisingly little is mentioned with respect to family history. It appears that very little can be told. Instead, collectively shared stereotypical accounts pertaining to certain elements of the family history are presented (...). (2006:4)<sup>36</sup>

This is also what I discovered fairly early on into my research, which propelled me to change my approach. I discovered that doing interviews with parents and grandparents required an invitation and a demonstration that you were really interested in them before people were willing to open up. It also required a dialogue-form of interview rather than a free narration. At times I needed even to challenge interviewees' thoughts and impressions as well as double-check claims in order to elicit more revealing answers. These techniques consequently became part of the methodological approach toward interviewing in later research.

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36 Author's translation

### **Interviewing grandparents and parents**

I found that especially with the elder generations narrative or biographical interviews could be problematic because remembering for them was often a difficult process. As the previous chapter explored, because of the nature of the Soviet society, in which speaking was not only next to impossible but even dangerous, in which ‘truth was lie’ and ‘lie was truth’ for such a long time, people had difficulties to narrate their stories. Daniel Betraux, a pioneer in the biographical method himself, writes the following about speaking to former Soviet citizens:

In politically comfortable Western democracies, telling stories about yourself is commonplace and the currency of everyday conversation as well as the essence of relationship between intimates. This is not so in Russia (...) and these habits die slowly. (2004:7)

As a result, he writes, “people often do not speak in an interview in the way that they would in private conversation” (ibid:8). Also Orlando Figes explains that because it was so difficult for people to narrate their memories, he needed to develop techniques “to get people to think more reflectively about their lives” (2010:662). Both Betraux and Figes write that trust is essential, with Orlando Figes stressing that it took many visits before precious documents were handed over (ibid). Historian Irina Sherbakova points out from her experience interviewing people who were touched by Stalin's terror that these people did not speak of their lives in a linear form, but spoke of “separate, little episodes” which often could not “be integrated into a total picture”. (2000:54). Similarly Khubova et al. who collected oral histories after the collapse of the Soviet Union realised that the memory of the repressions was “still uncomprehended, uninterpreted, unmitigated” and thus “[c]onsciousness it seems was as confused in the past itself as now it seems in memory” (1992:100).

I found confirmation of these difficulties in some of my interviews, especially with the older people among the grandparents, those born in the 1920s. Their memories were also contradictory, confused and at times layered with Soviet myths. Raised with the Soviet need for secrecy, people were always on guard. I do not believe that my interviewees were ‘afraid’ to speak. However, they were

socialised into silence and thus for them to speak freely without help turned out to be difficult. It was difficult to access their stories and many people simply stayed in the present, speaking about everyday life, their illnesses or their grandchildren. I needed to ask detailed questions and enquire about photographs, documents or objects in their houses, in order to be able to learn something about their past lives.

### **Encountering ‘performances’ of Germanness**

While elderly people needed care, attention as well as encouragement and assistance in telling their story, with the ‘generation of parents’ and grandchildren I found that dialogue was important. Instead of not enquiring straight away about issues brought up during narration, as the biographical method has it, I found that it was important to make the study interactive and to convert the interview into a dialogue, in certain cases even presenting the research results to my interviewees and considering their agreements/disagreements. I began to do this the more I learned that if you do not do this, people tend to present themselves in ways that they thought were expected of them.

Fialkova and Yelenevskaya (2007:16) write that interviewing Russian-Jews in Israel they found that for their respondents it was an issue to express “correct ideas” rather than sincere views. Similarly Bertaux et al. (2004:9) write that doing interviews with former Soviet citizens can be difficult, because people tend to present officially accepted opinions. They explain that this is because in the Soviet Union, people used to have totally different biographies to hand, each of which could be presented as needed. These biographies could be different in terms, not only, of facts selected but even of the character of representation or the interpretation of an event.

Bertaux et al. tell of an interesting example they came across. A German team of researchers conducted interviews with Russians in post-Soviet Russia and when the same people were later interviewed again this time by Russians, the answers differed. Noticing this difference, the Russian team enquired what they had told the German research team, to which one man responded that he had told them “what was needed” (*Tak kak nado*) (ibid:9). Bertaux et al. conclude that getting

“authentic views” from people is often not easy, which is why it is important to either belong to people’s circle of friends and acquaintances or to be introduced by someone they trust (*ibid*). Also Fialkova and Yelenfskaya explain that it was important to have the same background as their respondents, as well as to discuss with their research participants their interests, insights and motivations and to make the interviews a dialogue between equal partners (2007:16).

Russian-Germans only received *Aussiedler* status if they had particular stories and, as such, people recount their histories in such a way as to prove their German belonging. I have come across this numerous times in my fieldwork in how people try to authenticate and validate themselves as Germans. It needed a particular presence and engagement with them to ‘cut through’ these performances. Otherwise, it is not atypical that one sees people perform what they think is a ‘presentable identity’.

Sometimes interviewees said it straight out; whereas, at other times, this ‘identity’ was only implicitly communicated to me. My interviewee Emma (b. 1945) wanted to signal to me how different she was not only by speaking in the first half an hour in German to me (although she spoke perfect German, she switched into Russian when she invited me to drink tea and then the conversation was solely in Russian) she also complained right away about other Russian-Germans’ unwillingness to integrate, calling it a ‘*sad matter*’. We talked for a long time first about what she was not doing and how she was not behaving in comparison to other Russian-Germans and then what she was doing that Russian-Germans don’t ‘*even consider*’, which involved activities such as travelling and sightseeing small towns in Germany, going skiing and participating in politics. These ‘performances’ were not always connected to a need to present an image of being German. As we shall come to see in the coming chapters, in the ‘generation of parents’ a ‘successful’ identity is what many people had already built for themselves in the Soviet Union in order to keep shame at bay as the children of repressed parents.

As I wanted to speak about unexplored layers with my interviewees, their difficulties and problems pre and post-migration, I tried to delve into their Soviet past and what it meant for them to grow up as Germans in Soviet society and how

they had tried to fit in. I wanted to know what they thought about socialism then and how they think about it now as well as how the migration had impacted and changed them. Achieving this required a different atmosphere in which people felt they could open up and I had to learn ways to create that atmosphere. It was not always possible and the interview with Emma above was one such occasion. Only later did I realise how much I could have explored with her.

Now that we have seen how I conducted interviews with the elder generations, let me explore next how I interviewed young people. I needed to draw on insights from feminist scholarship on epistemology and methodology and to tap into my own feelings and experiences in order to assist my interviewees in telling me about their feelings and experiences.

### **Employing insights from feminist scholarship**

A central theme in feminist scholarship is the recognition of the emotional dimension of the research process as well as the advocacy of making use of reflexive insights and writing. Feminist methodology calls on researchers not only to acknowledge the affective dimension of research but also to recognise that emotions serve as a source of insight (Jagger, 1989; Fonow & Cook, 1991:9). This also entails a “willingness to address what happens when the research act evokes negative [feelings]” (ibid:11). For feminist scholars, emotions have a particular value because they allow us to see the world in a less partial and distorted manner. In *The virtue of feminist rationality* Debrah Heikes writes that while emotions certainly are a difficult subject, they affect “our ways of knowing” (2012:106).

Feminist theory then asks the knowledge producer to be aware of how emotions affect understanding of the world and how they reflect a reality that is both subjective and highly socialised (ibid). Quoting Alison Jagger, Heikes contends that this is the reason why theoretical writing needs to be self-reflexive and needs “(...) to focus not only on the outer world but also on ourselves and our relation to that world, to examine critically our social location, our actions, our values, our perceptions, and our emotions” (cited in Heikes, 2012:106). Les Back argues similarly for a reflexive sociology, while at the same time warning of the dangers of “too much reflexivity”, where “listening to others becomes irrelevant because

[one] knows the culture from inside” (2007:159). Back encourages us to ask ourselves why writers’ subjectivity and experience might be useful, adding that “experiential knowledge is (...) an interpretive device” (ibid). Salzman stresses in a related manner that the mere mentioning of some reflexive or biographical data about oneself or the Other does not in itself generate knowledge or cultural analysis (2002:808). Consequently, “we cannot privilege our impressions as authoritative, even under such an impressive label as "reflexivity"; rather, we must measure our ideas against people's lives” (2002:808).

Ruth Behar in her book *The vulnerable observer* (1997) addresses this problem of linking one's personal experience in such a way as to generate insights that would otherwise not be possible. She argues that “efforts at self-revelation flop not because the personal voice has been used, but because it has been poorly used, leaving unscrutinised the connection, intellectual and emotional, between the observer and the observed” (ibid:14). She argues that not “anything personal goes”, but that the “exposure of the self who is also a spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn’t otherwise get to” (ibid).

I used my own experiences not only in the writing process, but also in order to relate better to my interviewees. I hoped that by explaining to interviewees how I dealt with issues, pressures and family experiences, this would help them to open up too. In other words, I used myself as a tool *during* the interview process. Ethnographer, Carolyn Ellis (2004:72) suggests that this is indeed a powerful way one can use one's own subjectivity in the research process. Writing in the *The ethnographic I* she encourages researchers to position their story in such a way as to assist others in telling theirs (ibid).

To do this, I did reflexive ethnographic work, aiming to be critically aware of how the ‘common sense’ notions that we use to shape meanings and relationships carry certain assumptions. The tracing of the roots and histories of these assumptions can help bring to the fore the complex and unspoken inheritances we often take for granted (Seidler, 2010:xi). Thus, rather than, as Susan Krieger puts it, viewing my self in the research process, as a ‘contaminant (...) something to be separated out, neutralised, minimised, standardised and controlled’ (cited in Kohler

Riessman, 2015:221), integral to my methodology was to make myself and my interests apparent, both to myself and to my interviewees.

Drawing on feminist insights on the affective nature of research (Reinharz, 1992, 2010; Harding, 2004; Oakley, 1981; Gilligan, 1993; Jagger, 1989; 2014), I began to tap into my own feelings and worries and this helped me to gain better insight into the feelings, worries and actions of my interviewees. It helped me to understand at a deeper level my research encounters and see more clearly the anxieties people had around family history and being 'questioned' about their identity. I began to see that young women's act of pretence linked in complex ways to issues of fear of exposure, the putting in jeopardy of what they had thought was a secure 'German identity'. They feared that if people found out, they would be rejected. So they learned to automatically conceal their Russian-German heritage, unless they felt that it was safe to reveal it.

Speaking to the elder generations showed that this could be traced back to a feeling that they had carried within them in the Soviet Union. This reaction became automatic, a part of a process of self-policing that one was barely aware of. As a result they were disconnected from their experiences. I understood that I had to become extra sensitive in the way I approached people and spoke to them in the interviews. I began consequently to shift methodologically from wanting to 'study' people to provide young people, including myself, with spaces for reflection and dialogue. I also began to think of the interviews as 'consciousness-raising', using myself as a tool in the encounter.

### **Uses of Reflexivity: Consciousness-raising interviews**

Particularly feminist scholars have presented reflexivity as a central epistemological device in social research (Fonow & Cook, 1991). Cook and Fonow write that reflexivity seen from a feminist perspective is a source of insight and it is one of the major themes in feminist scholarships<sup>37</sup> on methodology and epistemology (1991:2). One of the ways that reflexivity can be used is in 'consciousness-raising' (1991:3), which describes the process that through

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<sup>37</sup> Fonow and Cook (1991: 1-2) have identified four central themes running through 'second wave' scholarship on epistemology and methodology. They are: 1) reflexivity, 2) an action orientation 3) attention to the affective components of the research process 4) and the use of the situation at hand.

speaking with each other in a research process the researcher and researched can become self-aware of previously-hidden experiences and themes (ibid).

With some young people I succeeded in speaking very intimately about certain issues. I recall how with Tamara, Alyona and Flora I had many ‘click-moments’ and these generated insight (Fonow & Cook, 1991:4) for the stories I tell. I remember how Tamara, very surprised, said to me, that she was so happy that for the first time she was meeting someone with whom she could speak about these issues. She was happy to see that these questions and issues were not only her own ‘acts of imagination’<sup>38</sup>. When I asked what she meant, she replied. ‘*Well that these things are real, that someone even does a PhD on it*’. I presume she was expressing the thought that so much was silenced for so long, it seemed unusual that someone felt just like her. It seemed that our encounter validated our experiences as real (Jaggar, 1989; Oakly, 1981). As I began to see more clearly why people did not want to be interviewed about issues that they tried to hide and answer questions about histories that they felt they did not know I began to incorporate many reflective questions with regards to people’s fears about the interview.

Before I conclude, let me briefly explain how I analysed the interviews, my observations and fieldwork material. I was guided by an ethnographic and feminist approach to data analysis, for it was important to me to validate research results also with and through my interviewees.

### **Analysis**

I looked for similarities and contrasts, commonalities woven through the literature, the interviews, my fieldwork notes and my personal writing. I had a file for each family and individual. Within these files I had ‘reflection notes’ and a written analysis of the interview, which I wrote after several readings of the interview. Initially I transcribed the interviews from Russian or German and then translated them into English. Usually I went back either to the recordings to hear the people in their own words, or I used the original transcription to see themes emerge. I did what Kohler Rissman (2008:53) calls thematic narrative analysis,

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<sup>38</sup> In German she said *Gespinst*, which is difficult to translate into English. It could mean a cocoon or a web.



which is a process that separates interviews, data, fieldwork observations and other writing into thematic fragments. These fragments are then analysed across the sample and one's data. I also wrote extensive summaries of the interviews and compared these summaries across the interviews.

While some ethnographers analyse their data using methods such as triangulation, cross checking and other processes to bolster validity and reliability, I relied on ethnography's aims at understanding, namely through a process of 'saturation' (Campbell & Lasiter, 2014:118). Saturation is a subjective way of establishing that no new 'data' will dramatically change one's research results. This is however not the same as saying that no such 'data' exists. In this sense, saturation is always imperfect, as it only requires the researcher to be subjectively confident about the research results. To help me firm up this process, and because it was important to me to know whether my interviewees agreed or disagreed with my findings, I sometimes used my interviewees to validate my research conclusions. On several occasions I sent out chapters to them to receive feedback. On other occasions, I spoke to them in the interviews about research conclusions that I had derived from other people in order to use their responses as further evidence for or against the conclusions.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed the framework of this research project. I began by discussing whom I interviewed, why I interviewed different generations and why at times I also brought together generations to speak about family history. I explored how the the proximity to some of my interviewees and my uncertainty about my position in the field, pushed me to embed this project in an ethnographic tradition. In particular, I turned to feminist-reflexive ethnography, which often goes by the name of halfie-ethnography, in order to understand deeply the complications that result from 'insider' research.

I also looked at what it means to do research with Russian-German individuals who were socialised in the Soviet Union and explored how challenging this can be due to the Soviet socialisation. I suggested that narrative interviews can be a

hindrance to explore issues that they have tried to hide in the past. Instead I argued that dialogue is more important especially dialogue in which one lets interviewees know what one is interested in and why.

I then described how, because of the challenge to recruit and to interview young people, I was pushed towards a feminist approach. Rather than studying people, I began to give them and myself the opportunity to discuss and validate experiences, explore feelings and insecurities in the interviews. So, instead of wanting to “eliminate” these difficulties, I tried to understand their origins and address these in the interview encounter. I used a mixed-method approach, employing a variety of methods to gather data. I also drew here on feminist understandings of using ‘the situation at hand’ and not following formulas. It was important to be creative and responsive to the requirements of the field. Feminist insights helped me to recognise my difficulties, taught me how to work through them and gave encouragement to be creative and use one’s intuition as a tool.

In the next chapter I will look at the migration experiences of my interviewees and show how many people that I encountered framed their migrations to Germany in a language of homecoming, which, as we will see, is not unproblematic.

## Chapter 4.

*'For my grandparents this has always been their Heimat'.*  
Painful homecoming and the personal, historical  
and academic struggles around the homecoming  
narrative.

### Introduction

Nina: *'This was always said. For my grandparents this has always been their Heimat even though they did not know it properly'.*

Nina's mother: *'It was very difficult in the beginning, we did not know anything, we were so lost and yes, then we also had this personal tragedy'.*

The personal tragedy to which Nina's mother refers when she tells me about her family's migration experience and Nina's declaration that it was her grandparents' homeland to which they migrated are intimately connected. However, to write about this connection has not been easy. They rarely speak about what happened when they arrived in Germany in the mid 1990s and the only reason I know is because I am friends with Nina. Migrating to Germany was difficult and painful for all families I interviewed. Leaving family, friends and careers behind and beginning a new life is never easy. Yet migration held another source of hurt and disappointment for some of the Russian-German families, including Nina's that I interviewed: the lack of recognition of the importance of their ethnic and cultural ties to German culture and language, and ultimately to Germany itself.

With the end of the Cold War, the former Soviet bloc experienced an ethnic-national revival and ethnic Germans began to formulate an "ideology of return", not only expressing a "homing desire" but also the desire for a homeland (Brah, 1996:16). As we have seen in the previous chapters, the German government conceived of this migration as a 'return migration', a conception partly grounded in co-ethnicity and partly in a sense of moral duty (de Tinguy, 2004), with the idea of compensation at the centre of its policy of repatriation (Ronge, 1997; Dietz, 1998; Münz & Ohliger, 2003). However with the end of the Cold War and unification, Germany gradually began to question its ethno-national conceptions

of belonging and identity (Levy, 2003; Wilhelm, 2017:3; Schirmer, 2017:243) and this had direct effects on how ethnic Germans were received and perceived.

Nira Yuval-Davies makes a helpful distinction when she calls for a differentiation between “belonging” and “a politics of belonging” (2011:10). Belonging, she writes, is a personal and emotional process, a feeling of home, where we belong. It is about recognition and inclusion. The politics of belonging, on the other hand, is about the powerful discourses that shape, justify and condition this belonging. It is about the maintenance and reproduction of limits to belonging. Russian-Germans saw themselves belonging to Germany as homecomers based on their histories of ethnic discrimination, but they migrated at a time when Germany began a process of delineating boundaries to this homecoming, in fact questioning this homecoming repatriation. It is this tension between ‘belonging’ and a ‘politics of belonging’ that is at the centre of this chapter. I will discuss this through the example of several individuals and families, particularly Nina’s family and their disappointments upon migration. Yet we can only understand this disappointment, if we take people’s avowals that they are homecomers seriously, closely examining their emotional investment in this idea. While this is the central story of this chapter, I will also attend critically to this narrative or ideology of homecoming, which functions as a collective myth, providing meaning to one’s migration (Safran, 1991; Cohen, 1997), yet also a source of pressure, as this and the coming chapters will show.

Increasingly, the contentious notion of homecoming is given little weight, not only in the discourse of the majority society in relation to this group, but also in academic discourse. While I am sympathetic to utterances of homecoming given the history of these people, I am also critical of this language because the insistence on it, especially (though by no means exclusively) for the younger generations, can be problematic in these families, as it does not allow people to speak about their painful experiences, thus making it difficult to recognise the pressures this narrative exerts, namely to be perceived as ‘authentic Germans’. This is particularly the case when this homecoming is thought of as an idyllic and simplified notion based on ‘sameness’ and a homogenising understanding of Russian-Germans’ history, denying their complex history and identity. This

simplified version of homecoming is partly a product of the naivety of the homecomers, who expected to be welcomed with open arms (Kiel, 2009) but it is also a product of the “romantic ideology” driving the official admissions policy (Senders, 2002).

I will begin with my interviewees of the different generations and their stories of homecoming: the stories they initially offer and the multilayered experiences that at times are concealed by this narrative. I will discuss how contentious this homecoming narrative has become, look at how it began to be formulated in the Soviet Union and then trace its trajectory in the German context. Here, I will discuss briefly how, after shifts in German rhetoric regarding migrants from the former Soviet Union, the idea of homecoming began to be increasingly questioned in public and academic discourse. Lastly, I will pick up the migration experience of Nina’s family and show how the discussed changes and shifts impacted their lives.

### Three generations’ motivations of 'coming home'

My interviewees of the young generation often repeated what Nina said above, namely that their grandparents wanted to return to their *Heimat* and that this is the reason why their families migrated to Germany. Young people told me that their parents or grandparents told them that they were returning to the country of their forefathers. Alyona, for example, tells me that it was her grandparents’ ‘dream’ to go to Germany. Her grandparents were of a generation who were adults during the repressions and who had families who were killed in the repressions or died in the deportation. After they met under the *komendatura*, they longed to be able to ‘return’ to a normal life, which to them was only possible in Germany. They often spoke of migration to Germany, even at a time when it was not possible. By the time the Soviet Union collapsed, Alyona’s grandparents had died, but her mother passed this wish of migration on to her.

Tamara, on the other hand, says in the interview that her grandparents continue to tell their grandchildren the story of their homecoming. She comments: *‘They just wanted to come home since they were Germans. They’ve always stood by their Germanness and were always the Germans in Kazakhstan, in order to be able to*

*leave one day for home*'. Flora also tells me that her grandparents considered Germany their homeland and campaigned for their right to leave the Soviet Union from the 1970s on. Konstantin tells how his father even compares the ethnic Germans' migration to Germany to Jews returning to the 'Promised Land'. To his father, Konstantin says, *'it is the same as the return of the Israeli or Hebrew people to Israel. They see it as their genesis, as their ancestral place, only them and no one else. And my father sees it similarly, to him, he returns home, in a nationalistic sense.* For Lena, whose ancestors settled several centuries ago in the Russian Empire, it is as though her family were mere visitors to the Soviet Union when she tells me that she does not consider herself to be Russian-German because her *'relatives lived abroad for a while*'. Rather, she describes herself as *'entirely German*'.

Indeed, this narrative of homecoming, which, put simply, suggests the family had always belonged to Germany and had always intended to return there, is very prevalent in the interviews that I conducted with people of my own generation. According to them, moving to Germany was not simply a migration, to them it was the return to their true ancestral home. They described their families' intentions in a very emotional language, reflective of what their parents and grandparents handed down to them. They imagined Germany to be a 'safe place' and a 'welcoming home' after decades in exile.

### **Idyllic homecoming conceals negative migration experiences**

Yet this homecoming narrative is problematic for all generations involved. That for many interviewees migrating to Germany was difficult and the cause of many losses, is the other story, often untold, even within the family. Beneath this layer, the narrative that one returned home, lie so many painful experiences that echo the tragic history of these people. This insistence that one is a homecomer blankets over complex feelings about migration, belonging and home. Yet in the interviews that I conducted, especially with people whom I did not know previously, it is this idyllic story that is initially told. A 'digging deeper', or a close relationship as was the case with Nina, was necessary to reveal the other layers to this story of homecoming. Truly feeling at home also means to be able to criticise and to express negative emotions, to feel the safety to voice one's disappointments

(Yuval-Davies, 2011:10). As migrants this can be difficult, as many wish to show appreciation for their opportunities and so are careful in what they can say or admit, even to themselves.

However, I also met people who were reflective about their experiences, recognising what they had lost in the migration. This was the case with Tamara and Alyona. When a friend introduced me to Alyona as a potential interviewee at a concert, she immediately agreed to an interview, telling me right there on the dance floor that her migration was traumatic and horrible and that she had only recently begun to put this into words. *'I'll tell you all about it'*, she said and so some months later we began the conversation from where it had ended that evening. Alyona's narrative below about how she felt about the migration to Germany, perhaps illustrates best how this idyllic homecoming can be misleading.

*It was my grandparents' dream to go to Germany, somehow to go back because they felt German and they felt a real connection, they conserved the language and everything. But for me it was really difficult because I lost my father in this way and that was really, really difficult for me. First I did not know what it meant but when we were at the airport and he stood behind the glass panel and cried and I've never seen him cry before. That was so so sad for me and very horrible.*

While Alyona had never known her grandparents, as her family followed their dream of migration, she was also forced to leave behind her mother's partner whom Alyona considered to be her father. He is of ethnic Greek origin and in the post-Soviet atmosphere of ethnic revival, he felt an urge to move to Greece to begin a new life. To this day this loss is something that Alyona has difficulties dealing with. It has also propelled her to travel back to Russia and to Georgia, where her step-father was originally from, to seek understanding.

Alyona is not the only one whose migration experience was difficult. Similarly to her Tamara tells me that it was her grandfather's wish to go to Germany. Tamara had also lost her father, partly because of migration pressures. I did two interviews with Tamara. In the first interview she only told me that her father died tragically and I did not dare to ask how. It was in the second interview that she revealed

how, adding that she usually does not speak about her father because it is such a tragic story.

*As a young man he was in Afghanistan in the war when he was in the Russian military. But he came back completely broken. It is not known whether he had war wounds (...) or maybe because they were just generally so drugged up and what he experienced there. Anyway he had a psychic meltdown. He became schizophrenic and he killed himself. But no one knows whether it was intended. It was on the day of my grandfather's leaving party because they left for Germany (...). We think he did not want any of this, because he did not want to go with us. Because he did not want to be a burden.*

Tamara's father seemed to suffer from PTSD, having coming back from the war in Afghanistan, deeply traumatised. As Tamara's close and extended family went ahead and put forward their documents to the German authorities, he committed suicide after a farewell party for Tamara's grandparents, leaving Tamara's mother a widow with two children and postponing their migration by a year. These are dramatic stories that reveal a different dimension to the migration: of family rifts, separations and loss and are a stark contrast to the idyllic, 'happy-end' story of homecoming that interviewees initially offer. In the coming chapters, we will hear more from Alyona and particularly Tamara as she begins to peel the layers, trying to understand the pressures in her life, taking account of the losses and starting a dialogue with her mother and grandparents about their experiences and the family past.

### **Homecoming for parents and grandparents**

For the parents and grandparents too this homecoming was less than straightforward. For the 'generation of parents', this narrative of homecoming, at least in the version that they have always wanted to migrate to their ancestral home, is problematic because it is often not truthful to their experiences. My interviews with them show that unlike their parents (the 'generation of grandparents'), they despite many difficulties had positive experiences, were integrated and felt content living in the Soviet Union up until its collapse. This is also reflected in what Alyona conveys to me about her mother and how she felt about moving to Germany when she herself was a youngster in the 1970s. While, as we have heard, it was her grandparents' dream to go to Germany, when Alyona's grandfather broached the subject repeatedly throughout the 1970s to his



then young daughters, they told him, '*Under no circumstances do we want to go to Germany.*' But with Russia's becoming unstable 20 years later, Alyona's step-father, began urging Alyona's mother to move to Germany for a better future. It was particularly sad for Alyona's mother to have to leave her partner but she could not really protest, Alyona tells me. '*This was also the time when in Russia no one got their wages, so I think the decision was easy for my mother*'.

Although Konstantin's father told him about the promised return, there were more pressing reasons to leave Kazakhstan. Similarly to Alyona, Konstantin tells me about the precarious situation in the 1990s and how village life was transformed: '*Most Germans moved away, Kazakh people moved in instead, and they [his parents] did not want to see all of that change, this must have been the first impetus; to move somewhere else (...) this was a time when Russia became very unsafe, and this was also the motive for my parents' going*'. While Konstantin's grandparents already moved to Germany in 1988, his parents who had successful careers, initially did not want to leave but did so '*for me and my sister*', Konstantin explains.

When I ask Nina whether her mother also thought that she was migrating to her homeland, she tells me: '*My mother did not know much about it, just from grandmother, and the stories*'. Nina's mother's story and how she feels about Germany fade into the background, '*She never said anything about that*'. This is a recurring theme within these families, that while the grandparents' histories became important again, since they are the source of the German connection, the parents' Soviet histories, became less important. In the Soviet Union, it was the other way around: the young dismissed their parents' histories, for they were a danger to the ideal of the Soviet citizen. This is why Gabriele Rosenthal, as explored elsewhere, surmises that ethnic Germans have difficulties belonging. It is precisely because of these reinterpretations of their past that do not allow people to stay true to their actual lived experience (2006:4). In other words, the handing down of the homecoming narrative, for someone who had seen the Soviet Union as their home, causes confusion to one's own and the younger generation's sense of identity. In my interviews with the 'generation of parents', people did not always feel the need to portray themselves as exclusively homecomers. Other

reasons for migration crystallised quickly: from economic turmoil and rising nationalism, to better opportunities and the future of the coming generations. Even helping one's children avoid being drafted into the army was mentioned.

For the grandparents too, as my interviews have shown, 'home', and where one sees one's home, is a complicated matter. When issues about home and belonging came up, the grandparents' answers differed. For some, a dream came true with the move to Germany; for others, Germany did not turn out to be the home that they longed for. In the interviews, grandparents would usually speak enthusiastically about their German villages, their German schools and the churches that they attended, followed by the harrowing events that then unfolded in those villages. Some grandparents, such as Tamara's, Lena's and Lidia's, were taken along with the retreating *Wehrmacht* at the end of the war to Germany and lived there either with German families or in transitional camps until the Soviet army 'repatriated' them back to the Soviet Union. Lena's grandmother, Anna Klebe, who was then a little girl, told me how she and her mother desperately tried everything possible to stay in Germany. But they could not escape the fate of deportation to a special camp in the Urals. Unsurprisingly to these grandparents, Germany has a different significance than to those from their generation who had never been to Germany.

While some grandparents said they longed to see the homes from which they were deported and were not able to return, Friedrich Lehl (b.1928) looked puzzled when I asked whether he would like to see his childhood village again, from which he was deported at the age of 14. In confusion, he asked me whether I meant the Ukraine, and when I said yes, he replied almost pragmatically, '*No, but why? There are no Germans any more*'. Others again remember that the desire to go back to the previous settlements was strong, particularly among the old people, as my interviewee Amalia Schmitt remembers. Amalia Schmitt is of the 'generation of grandparents', but she was a little girl in the deportations and remembers the adult generation in her narrative below:

*Everyone wanted to go back to the Volga and I remember when we lived in the Omsk region, grannies (babulki) sat together and I sat on their lap and they sang: 'Jetzt reise ich aus Sibirien nach meiner Mutter Haus'<sup>39</sup>. I remember those words. And so they sat crying and singing.*

As Amalia was a young woman by the time her family wanted to return to the Volga, she formed an attachment to Siberia where they were exiled and only knew the Volga Republic from stories. She tells me that she did not want to leave Siberia as she feared that they would not be welcome in their former places as the new residents feared for their houses that once belonged to the Germans. She also remembers how people, who returned to their German settlements against the law, were put on trains and sent back by the authorities and so returning to the Volga scared and saddened her *'I was already 16, and I cried when we arrived. Of course, us young people we cried'*.

If we attend closely to narratives of parents and grandparents, we see that they tell different stories of belonging and 'home'. What also transpires, is that people were more or less connected to a German culture, religion and language with the connection's being expressed most strongly by the oldest. Writing on the notion of 'home', Ulf Hannerz says it is a contrastive concept, and feeling, because one often only really thinks about home, when one is away from it (2002:218). As a result, the meaning of home ranges from deep rootedness in a specific place to an imagined affiliation with a distant locale where one envisions a future (ibid). To many Germans, Germany was exactly this 'imagined affiliation' that offered visions of a better future, especially, as we shall come to see shortly, when the collapsed Soviet Union offered no visions any more. During Soviet times, migration was not on people's mind and grandparents and parents told me that they never thought it possible that one day they might move to Germany, as it was a real impossibility for Soviet citizens to think of moving to the West. Others told me that they also did not desire this move as Alyona had. Similarly, Lidia tells me about her father's intention to migrate. *'While the Soviet Union still functioned,'* she says, *'I don't think it was on the table for my father to think about moving to Germany and he did not want it'*.

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<sup>39</sup> Now I am going to travel from Siberia to my mother's house/homeland.

### **Ethnic revival in the Soviet bloc**

When I asked people why they decided to move anyway, Amalia Schmitt's answer revealed another dimension to this story. She replied: *'I don't know...for a long time I did not want to go but then I felt as though I was pulled by a thread'*. What was that 'pulling thread' that Amalia felt? Similarly, others also told me that they did not want to migrate at first but then did so anyway. It is important to understand that in many cases these were not necessarily individual considerations, but that ethnic and cultural ties began to play again an important role. As Rosenthal et al. note:

The onset of the migration waves at the end of the 1980s developed into a self-perpetuating dynamic (...). The more Germans left the post-Soviet states, the more the remaining Germans found themselves in an outsider position. Thus for the remaining Germans the option of immigration was almost pushed upon them, or became a necessity because remaining in the post-Soviet states meant becoming a dwindling minority with dwindling social support networks. (2011:48)<sup>40</sup>

As explored in the previous chapters, when the Soviet Union collapsed, nationalistic sentiments arose as old forms of identity and belonging lost meaning. As the physical borders shifted, many peoples began moving with them; at the same time, national, religious and ethnic pasts became important again. For Germans in the collapsed Soviet Union, it meant that national self-confidence resurfaced among all generations, having previously been confined to the grandparents. In my interviews, while elderly Russian-Germans reconstructed their biographical accounts with a focus on ethnic discrimination, in the accounts of the parents, the crucial point was not so much the past collective trauma of deportation, but rather the ethnic revival in the post-Soviet states that served for redefinitions in ethnic terms.

As talk of national autonomy resurfaced in post-Soviet public discourse, this ethnic redefinition led the German minority to self-organise for example in the *Wiedergeburt* movement, which campaigned for the restoration of the Volga Republic. This campaigning gave people hope, even to the young. Their Soviet home had imploded and so people were looking for alternatives. In my own

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<sup>40</sup> Author's translation

family I remember, my father, who was previously not much engaged with the German community, joined *Wiedergeburt*. He began to study German intensely and wanted to move away from Kazakhstan. When then president of Russia Boris Yeltsin could not keep his promise to restore the Volga Republic, the slogan ‘*Zurück in die Heimat*’<sup>41</sup> spread across the German community. With no hope any more for ethnic autonomy in Russia, people formed local groups to support each other in collecting documents and in filling out applications.

Writing about diasporic return migrants, Tsuda explains that because these peoples have often lost a direct connection to the country to which they hope to return, their ties therefore to “their ethnic homeland are based on an imagined, nostalgic, ethnic affinity to an ancestral country which most have never visited” (2013:174). He discusses how diasporic descendants often imagine their ancestral homeland in idealised, romantic and mythical ways and how, when these idealised and nostalgic images are challenged upon migration, these people become often “culturally alienated immigrant minorities whose members are strangers in their ethnic homeland” (ibid:178). As a result, these supposed homecomings often turn into ambivalent and painful experiences (Capo Zmegac, 2005; de Tinguy, 2003). Let us look at how this was also true for Russian-Germans.

### Shifts in public and academic perception and discourse

#### **From homecomers to (trans)-migrants?**

While the Soviet space experienced a reawakening of national consciousness, the liberal factions in German society began to question Germany's ethno-cultural ways of defining identity and belonging. As discussed in the previous chapters, the ways ethnic Germans were perceived, administered and received in the post-Cold War period changed considerably, as a result of these larger changes within German society. As we have seen, the German government shifted its policies around both the acceptance and integration of ethnic Germans, introducing more restrictions on who might or might not count as *Aussiedler* (von Koppenfels, 2002a:102). What resulted was that different understandings of Germanness clashed. On the one side, ethnic Germans and their history as an ethnic minority, and on the other side the German nation state which was undergoing important

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41 This can be translated as 'Let us go back to the Homeland'

changes in how it defined belonging and citizenship, with the gradual adoption of a more liberal outlook. For ethnic Germans, on the other hand, their ethnicity was significant both as a source of past hurt and an important resource for their repatriation (Münz & Ohliger, 2003). Yet they migrated into a German society when in “everyday public discourse, the legitimacy and the truthfulness of claiming rights of belonging by way of a remote German ancestry are heavily contested” (Römhild, 2003:200). This put ethnic Germans in an uncertain position. Römhild explains their situation by contrasting them with other immigrant communities in Germany. She explains that, while other immigrants such as the 'guest workers' were able to claim belonging through a transnational and multicultural understanding and in this way challenged the internal and external borders of the nation-state, the Russian-Germans, while recognising the legitimacy of these claims (since these immigrants had a longer history of positioning themselves in Germany), could “only demand for belonging by way of ethnic communality” (2003:204).

So while ethnic Germans, and the elder generations in particular, prided themselves on their ethnicity, in post Cold War Germany, to use ethno-national references and concepts such as *Heimat* or to define belonging by blood seemed backward and even proscribed in scientific research as Michael Schönhuth (2006) points out. These shifts were thus also reflected in academia. Whereas “until the 1980s the immigration of Aussiedler went on almost unnoticed” (Strobl, 2006:88)<sup>42</sup>, with the post-Cold war re-settlers, this was no longer the case. Researchers began to agree (Roll & Dietz, 1998; Dietz, 1999; Kaiser & Ipsen-Peitzmeier, 2006) that the migrant mentality was different, that they no longer saw themselves as exclusively German, that they were too assimilated into the Soviet culture, and migrated with too few German language skills to be able to integrate smoothly. Strobl began to observe that “[t]he tendency to generally explain problems of immigrant groups with integration deficits, increasingly began to appear towards [ethnic German] Aussiedler” (2006:89)<sup>43</sup>. As integration became a challenge with so many migrants coming each year, social researchers (Kaiser, 2006; Hess, 2008; Münz and Ohliger, 2003) began to propose that in order to

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42 Author's translation

43 Author's translation

make these people's problems visible, one had to drop the formerly used concept of homecoming because this supposedly preferential status the concept prescribed did not help. Markus Kaiser, editor of an essay collection exploring ethnic Germans' post-migration situation in Germany with regards to belonging and integration, writes that "Russian-Germans, thus are no longer 'homecomers', but transmigrants<sup>44</sup>, who belong to a trans-local community whose networks extend across Germany and their country of origin" (2006: 35)<sup>45</sup>.

In order to be able to account for this complexity in belonging of ethnic migrants from the former Soviet Union, Münz and Ohliger thus advocate the use of analytic concepts from diaspora studies. They argue that because of the socio-economic problems of integration of ethnic immigrants as well as the scepticism and even hostility of the native-born population towards these immigrants, it is useful to operate with notions of in-betweenness (2003:47). This is an important point and I agree that concepts from diaspora studies such as 'hybridity' or 'in-betweenness' are useful in describing the social reality of Russian-Germans. They could also help young people, in particular, not to feel the need, as my interviewee Lena describes, 'to be this or that' or 'to 'be pushed somewhere'. Concepts from diaspora studies can function as tools to better understand the predicament of ethnic German migrants because, as James Clifford writes, "decentered, lateral connections may be as important as those formed around a teleology of origin/return. And shared ongoing history of displacement, suffering, adaptation, or resistance may be as important as a specific origin" (1997: 250). This is precisely this group's experience and the narratives with which I began this chapter speak directly to repeated displacement and uprootedness and participants' changing views about where they feel they belong. So in this way, concepts of diaspora, or "diaspora space" in Avitar Brah's words, "offer[s] a critique of fixed origins, while taking account of a homing desire, which is not the same thing as a desire for a homeland" (1996:16), the latter of which she defines as an "ideology

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44 Traditionally, sociologists understood migrants and immigrants to be persons who leave a nation-state and experience the difficult acculturation processes of assimilation. However with globalisation and mass-migration, sociologists began to re-think the importance of the nation-state and territoriality. The term 'transmigration' is particularly attributed to work of Glick Schiller (1994), and describes the social reality of people who are mobile and thus form multiple social relations.

45 Author's translation

of a return” (1996:180). Yet though these concepts are undoubtedly helpful in describing the social reality and identity conflicts of ethnic German migrants, they also have limits and it is important to discuss why this is so. What has to be stressed is that many people that I interviewed and encountered feel that they cannot claim a position of multi-locality, across geographical, cultural or psychic boundaries (Brah, 1996:193). Instead they insist that they are homecomers. Let us first look at an incident that occurred during my fieldwork where this sentiment was powerfully asserted and then explore the difficulties around such claims.

***‘No one wants to be a bridge’: Difficulties in translocal belonging***

It was a strange choice by the organising committee of the Russian-German association to invite a German social scientist that usually speaks at academic conferences to address ethnic Germans about issues of integration on their 70-year commemoration of the deportation, held at the *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung* centre in Berlin in 2011. From his point of view as a social researcher, he did not say anything controversial. He presented the arguments that I have just discussed, namely that to see ethnic Germans as homecomers is problematic, as this glosses over the fact that they face, like other immigrant groups residing in Germany, real structural problems. He invoked the bridge metaphor, arguing that people have multiple connections and should instead be seen as cultural hybrids. Yet to the hundreds of people in the auditorium it was as though he had personally questioned their motivations for immigrating and some people started to boo him. An elderly woman jumped up, shouting something along the lines of: *‘No one wants to be a bridge when all people do is trample all over them.’* *‘We are Heimkehrer’*, she exclaimed, *‘whether you like it or not’*. People cheered and clapped, while the social scientist shook his head, looking out of place.

On the surface, it seems that people live what sociologists call multicultural or translocal lives, in that they have multiple belongings, speak several languages, interact in cross country networks. Nonetheless, as Rosenthal and Stephan also observe, many of these people cannot easily define themselves through a trans-local belonging (2011:14). This is what the social scientist missed when addressing the group at the conference. He tried to convey to the audience that their post-migration situations were more complex than the ‘homecoming’



narrative allowed and could not be adequately described as a smooth integration based on co-ethnicity and ‘sameness’. Yet, some people resist such suggestions and have difficulties describing themselves in trans-local ways. Tsuda, writing exactly about this difficulty among ethnic return migrants, explains why this might be the case:

Since most ethnic return migrants feel their ancestral heritage is denied by their negative reception in their homelands, few develop multiple transnational attachments to both their countries of birth and those of ethnic origin but come to identify more exclusively as nationals from a foreign country or claim a more authentic ethno-national identity (...). The sense of shared descent and bloodline that initially created transnational ethnic attachments across borders between diasporic descendants and their homeland populaces is overridden by the stark national cultural differences that emerge when these co-ethnics actually meet (...). This is an example of how transnational mobility ironically creates a renewal of nationalist attachments instead of producing transnational hybrid identification across national borders. (2013:183)

There are additional reasons, other than issues around marginality that help to explain why Russian-Germans insist on framing themselves as homecomers. Marginality certainly does inform people’s identification as homecomers, as we can hear in the words of the conference-goer quoted above when she asserts her refusal to be trampled over. However, many of my participants, particularly of the elder generations insist on framing their experiences with the homecoming narrative because they feel their history of hardship disappears if they are no longer seen as homecomers.

I therefore suggest that despite the difficulties that homecoming and repatriation pose, they also need to be seen as important concepts to apply in order to explain and understand the predicaments of these immigrants. As Long and Oxfield observe, “returns reflect particular, historical, social and personal contexts” and so the concepts these people themselves use (regardless of their analytical failings) can help us to understand these migration trajectories from within “people’s own system of meaning’ because “people themselves use, embellish and understand [them]” (2004:3). To dismiss people’s articulation of themselves as homecomers and their migrations as returns and to overlook their difficulties in relating to a trans-local migrant identity has tremendous consequences for our understanding

of these migration and integration experiences. Rejecting them out of hand, we will not only fail to understand the subjective meaning people attach to these notions, but also importantly, as explored in Chapter Two, we will not see the ambiguous double ethnicisation process Russian-Germans have undergone since arriving in Germany (Römhild, 2004:200). We would therefore miss the complex process of how they were simultaneously ‘Germanized’ in accordance with a standardised traditionalist image of Germanness since officially this migration was conceived as a return (ibid; see also Senders, 2002:91), but also overlook how they were ‘Easternized’ by positioning them as another subdivision of refugees from post-socialism (ibid).

The absence of understanding in the wider society, but also increasingly (but for different reasons) in academic discourse of why people consider themselves homecomers became a source of hurt, as I will presently discuss. Primarily through the example of Nina’s family, I will explore the difficulties that some people faced in Germany upon migration. Here, the sense of history and importance of ethnicity come to the fore. We will see how the migration ripped open old wounds inflicted through deportation, marginality, homelessness and exile. In the minds of the migrants who had already gone through so much in life, it was as though history were repeating itself as they found themselves ostracised, pushed to the margins and unheard. It is much easier to appreciate this fully if we take homecoming and how it shaped people's expectations seriously.

### Resurfacing past hurts

Now I will attend to Nina’s migration experience, which propelled me in the first place to investigate the different aspects of homecoming. Thinking about Nina’s family, I felt intuitively that there was an unarticulated discrepancy, a tension to this homecoming. From a young age, their experience had a profound emotional impact on me and at the back of my mind I had always wanted to understand why things happened the way they had. But it needed first an engagement with the political and academic discourses with regards to ethnic Germans and an understanding of its shifts, along with an understanding of what homecoming really meant to the migrants themselves, before I could understand what happened when Nina’s family arrived in Germany in the mid 1990s.

At that time, Nina, age eight, her mother and her grandparents migrated to Germany from Kazakhstan, planning to join relatives who had been already settled in the northern part of the country. It was Nina's grandparents who wanted to move to Germany and begged their daughter to come along with Nina. Nina's mother was hesitant at first, as she had a successful career as an architect, but eventually gave in as every one in her close and extended family began to leave Kazakhstan. Nina's mother hoped that she could continue with her work from Germany and would be able to travel to Kazakhstan to take on commissions. The family were full of hope and excitement. They saved up their money, sold everything they owned and started to practise German intensely. But the moment they arrived in Germany, things started to go wrong. They found out that, despite what they were told, they could not be placed near their relatives, as *Aussiedler* had no right to choose their own residence<sup>46</sup>. Instead Nina's family was placed in a small town in Bavaria, all four cramped into a small room in the cellar of an old hotel. The hotel owner, who received money for each person he could house, sought to maximise his profit by squeezing in as many people as possible. It was dark, damp, dirty and many people living there complained about the situation. Nina's family tried to get out, but were told that they would lose all rights to benefits. The situation was difficult as Nina's mother recollects in the entry to this chapter: no one explained anything; they had difficulty with the language; they faced continual bureaucratic denial of their wishes; they did not know anything and felt lost. From that period, Nina only remembers that there was '*so much paper work to be done*' and that she was always '*dragged along*' to the different offices.

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46 von Koppenfels provides a detailed analysis of how Russian-Germans were restricted in their movement by the Residence Assignment Act - WoZuG of 1989. It was the first law affecting ethnic *Aussiedler* and called for the even distribution of *Aussiedler* within West Germany according to a quota system; each Land receiving a percentage based upon area and population. The Länder were responsible for distributing the *Aussiedler* evenly within each Land. When the quota was filled for the year, it was no longer required to accept any more people (2002b:20). Initially valid for three years, this law was intended to lessen the impact of *Aussiedler* migration on any particular *Bundesland* because *Aussiedler* migration had concentrated in Lower Saxony, Nord-rhine-Westphalia, Baden Württemberg and Bavaria owing to family-determined network migration and higher likelihood of employment. She stresses that the *WoZuG* did not take into account the negative impact that this law would have on *Aussiedler* integration, concentrating instead on the good of the state and 'native' Germans. The *WoZuG* was revised in successive versions but the changes were not made in the interests of the people (2002b:21).

It was a temporary situation, as the name *Übergangsheim*, literally ‘transitional housing’, suggests, but for Nina’s grandfather especially it was unexpectedly difficult. He became desperate, feeling trapped in a situation he had no control over. He began to complain more and more about wanting to go back. But they had nothing to return to. Before they were free<sup>47</sup> to leave the temporary housing situation they had to sort out their papers, wait for their citizenship approval and complete their re-training and language courses. For Nina’s grandfather this situation was unbearable. He felt that they had made a mistake. The family tried to reason with him, but nothing helped, and he got worse and worse. One day he attempted to take his life but was prevented. The family panicked. They did not know what to do and to whom to turn. A few days after the first attempt, Nina’s grandfather committed suicide in the cheap hotel in which they had been housed.

Such despair is difficult to comprehend at first. As we have seen, from the perspective of the ‘homeland’, this was a ‘privileged migration’. Compared to other immigrants in German society, ethnic Germans had it in many respects easier. People were not only provided with everything essential, they also received benefits and pensions, language and re-training courses as well as citizenship shortly upon arrival. The initial housing situation was only temporary and the ‘generation of grandparents’, including Nina’s grandparents, had experienced far worse things.

Nina’s grandfather (1925) was born in a German village in Eastern Ukraine. His family house was expropriated when he was a youngster, the father taken to the Gulag and the rest of the family deported to Kazakhstan. Nina’s grandmother (b.1927) was born to a family originally from Danzig, today Gdansk, who bought land in Crimea. Her family home was also expropriated, the father and brothers taken to the labour army and she and her mother deported to Kazakhstan. This is where the grandparents met and fell in love, but marrying was not easy as they were both under the *komendatura* - the formal control system. They had to beg for the approval of their commandant. Eventually he allowed it, but Nina’s grandmother could never change her family name, in order not to confuse the

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<sup>47</sup> *Aussiedler* were able to move away from the temporary camps in which they were placed but they risked the rights to benefits and social provisions.

numbers, they were told cynically. This stayed with her for a long time for she wrote about it in the late 1970s in her biography, which Nina, Nina's mother and I read together one evening in their home. I will come back to this evening in Chapter Seven where we will see how difficult it is for families such as Nina's to come to know these histories.

After the relaxation of the *komendatura* in 1956 Nina's grandparents made a home in Kazakhstan and adopted Nina's mother from a young overwhelmed German woman in their village. Both grandparents, however, liked to talk about their previous settlements and Nina's grandmother, in particular, yearned to see Crimea again. After the rehabilitation in the 1970s, the grandparents visited Crimea, but did not dare to visit the grandmother's old house. As mentioned before, people were warned not to return to their former settlements and especially not to visit their former houses, as these were now in the hands of other people.

There is a beautiful photograph of the grandparents standing on the beach in Crimea in swimsuits smiling happily. When I was growing up, I rarely saw Nina's grandmother smile. As young girls, Nina and I used to cycle around the village in which we lived. We often passed by the cemetery, waving to her, as she tended to the grave of Nina's grandfather. In my memory, the grandfather's absence was always a heavy presence in their home. With the death of the grandfather, the grandmother's life 'stopped' too. She would cry that she wanted to return to Kazakhstan and when Nina and her mother conceded to her wish, she would say that she had nothing to return to. The family never moved anywhere, as they intended, since the grandmother wanted to be close to her husband's grave. Nina's mother gave up her dream to practise architecture again, as she took on the responsibility of caring for her mother. Even though she did get a life-time opportunity from her former employer to participate in the building of the presidential palace in Astana, after everything that had happened she was no longer properly practising and going to Kazakhstan no longer felt realistic. Reflecting on the situation, Nina thinks that the reason why her grandparents suffered is not only the initial living situation but also because her grandparents always thought of themselves as Germans and when they were not recognised as such in Germany, it was a big shock to them.

“The term cultural shock”, writes Somaia-Carter

involves the loss of social and professional status, of family, friends and familiar environment. These losses, when unacknowledged by the receiving community, whether through lack of interest, racism or ignorance, further demeans and complicates migrants or refugees’ experience’. (2003:1)

In the case of repatriates or ethnic return migrants this shock can be profound because of their prior strong identifications with the country of return. This was the experience in Nina’s family who believed that they had left so much behind in Kazakhstan but in their surrounding, people did not recognise this. In the Soviet Union they tried to uphold their German heritage as much possible: they secretly christened their daughter and Nina; celebrated German festivities such as Christmas and Easter, and stayed connected to relatives in Germany despite the difficulties. Every little thing that arrived from Germany - a letter, a card, photographs of German relatives, even some candy wrappers - were neatly framed in a photo album. Yet when they arrived in Germany, no one cared about their efforts to remain in touch with all things German. To the contrary, people doubted that they were German. *‘They had to affirm themselves as Germans all the time. In Russia they were the bloody [scheiss] Germans and now in Germany they are the [scheiss] bloody Russians,’* Nina tells me, adding that, *‘Many don’t get why we’re really here. They don’t have a clue about history and don’t understand the significance of why we are here in the first place’.*

For families like Nina’s, there is an important historical component to their migration that is often not seen in the wider society. For the elder generations to be doubted in their German identity was very upsetting, especially as they suffered because of their ethnicity in the Soviet Union, and nonetheless tried to preserve their Germanness. What I had to learn to appreciate while conducting my research is that people’s ethnicity played a significant part in their lives, no matter whether they lived in tight-knit German villages or among other groups in the Soviet Union. It even played a role in instances where people were seemingly assimilated. As I have already stressed elsewhere, in Soviet society ethnicity often determined life chances. Thus, we must recognise that ethnicity, as Münz and Ohliger write, is an important factor for most migrants. However ethnic return

migrants differ from other migrants for whom ethnicity is a factor, because for them ethnicity played a big role prior to immigration (2003:15). While labour migrants are often turned into an ethnic minority through the process of immigration and as such their ethnicity is differently marked in everyday life, “[f]or ethnic migrants, ethnicity is the crucial resource and social capital to draw on if emigration to the ‘mother country’ is intended to be achieved” (ibid).

Ethnic Germans hoped to be welcomed as compatriots, on a par with ‘native Germans’. However, as Römhild writes, in “everyday life, the late repatriates are perceived as aliens rather than Germans” and the “willingness of the German public to accept them as compatriots has greatly decreased as their numbers have grown” (2003:200). Tsuda explains that diasporic returnees often feel much more socially alienated and estranged than other immigrants because their stronger, earlier ethnic affiliation and identification with the homeland causes them to expect an ethnic homecoming. However, when it does “not materialise and they are confronted by social exclusion instead, they feel more estranged and disillusioned than other immigrants who do not arrive with such ethnic expectations” (2013:180). He writes that “ironically therefore, the immigrant group that is most ethnically related to the host society can often experience the most social alienation” (ibid).

The ‘generation of grandparents’ rebuilt their lives from nothing in the Soviet Union after the deportations. To find themselves again in a position of exclusion and alienation felt like being thrown back into the past. Memories resurfaced and old hurts opened up. To some it seemed that a system of control was back in place that administered every aspect of one’s life, though, of course it was nothing compared with the Soviet regime. Migration is a vulnerable, unpredictable time, in which past traumas can easily resurface (Varchevker, 2013; Bhugra & Gupta, 2011). Family trauma therapist, Arturo Varchevker, writes in *Enduring migration through the life cycle* that

[a]n external movement like a migration will mobilise a mental or emotional reaction and so it is necessary to consider the internal movement. They are inextricably intertwined in the mind of the migrant. (...) The question of to what extent the individual was organized or disorganized

before the migration is therefore relevant. Was the migration forced, voluntary, a positive move, a search for new developments, an omnipotent change – or a running away? (2013:xvi)

What Varchevker argues is that life-changing and abrupt events such as a migration will not only affect the migrant externally, but will also impact them internally, creating profound emotional uncertainty. It is a very fragile moment. To address these issues is important because, as Varchevker further explains, these matters will activate conscious and unconscious wishes and fantasies which will affect how the individual will reorganise his life in the new circumstances – or in fact fail to do so and feel blocked in some form of emotional or internal exile. Such a state will “include an incapacity to use one’s own resources and a lack of basic internalised experiences to help address the anxieties aroused by the significant losses and uncertainties activated by the new situation” (ibid).

As discussed above, every generation and every family had their own reasons for deciding to move to Germany. But for many grandparents such as Nina’s there was an important other factor: namely their experiences in childhood, the loss of their homes as well as their German culture and language were part of the desire to move. They felt German despite the fact that, as Nina puts it at the beginning of this chapter, they knew very little about Germany. Thus, the returning home rationale was in some families deeply invested in, because it held out the hope of aiding in the repair of the hurts of the past and the lifting of the past’s burdens. This is often an unconscious motivation to which I will come back in Chapter Six.

Of course, I don’t wish to paint a bleak picture. I have met and spoken to grandparents who had very positive experiences and were grateful for the opportunity to migrate to Germany. This chapter is telling a different story though. There were also grandparents, including my own, placed in the same hotel as Nina’s grandparents, who became unrecognisable. Both my grandparents had experienced far worse things than the hotel in which they were housed, but they begged my father every day to be taken out as soon as possible. My father went through a bureaucratic nightmare to get them out of there. But even that did not help. My grandparents could not be reasoned with and returned to Kazakhstan within 6 months of migration, foregoing their right to German citizenship. The



larger picture is that the ‘generation of grandparents’ lost their homes: be it in the Volga, Ukraine or Crimea, they lost their German language and culture during the War and coming to Germany would not change this. Given also the political changes in Germany towards ethnic Germans, it meant that, again, these people felt unwelcome, and that their history of hardship was being erased from public memory. During my fieldwork I attended an organised event where ethnic Germans talked about their life histories. One elderly man told the audience how terrible the first years were after migration because all the memories of his childhood came back, triggered by the barbed wire that was surrounding their temporary camp, a former army base that now housed ethnic Germans. Tamara also tells me what her grandfather really felt like but did not tell anyone.

*My grandfather wanted to go back the very first day. He said that when we were in those camps, we only had one little room for a whole family. And my grandfather then later said that he felt thrown back into the War years when they were deported. They were in Germany, they were also in such prison camps (...) and he felt very emotional and so thrown back into the time of the prison camp and he just thought, I come home but I am treated like someone who committed a crime. He really did not like that.*

My interviewees reported that little thought was given to who they were and why they had come to Germany with Tamara telling me about her teachers who were clueless about Russian-Germans: ‘*I also do not understand why the teachers were so clueless about these children and what an ethnic German re-settler child is and where they land when they arrive, stuff like that*’. The reasons why there was so little knowledge about these people is because, as I discussed in Chapter Two, all talk about Germany’s responsibility towards them had vanished from the public sphere. As the sense of historical and moral obligations stemming from the War evaporated from public discourse, these people were seen as ‘Eastern immigrants’ and this public image clashed with the ideas these people had of themselves.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I looked at the personal, historical and academic struggles around the notion of homecoming. First I discussed that, indeed, to the young generations, even if they are aware of other factors that might have urged their families to

migrate to Germany, almost all interviewees of that generation told me that they migrated to Germany because of their grandparents, who wanted to live as Germans in Germany. I then proceeded to show, that this ‘homecoming narrative’ can obscure the complexity of their own, their parents’ and their grandparents’ experiences, especially when it is presented in an idyllic manner. By discussing the grandparents’ stories about home and belonging and their experiences, I also showed how this generation conveyed their attachments to Germany to their children and grandchildren, who then felt a sense of belonging to Germany on the grounds of these histories. This connection especially began to play a more important role after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

I then discussed that the language of homecoming through which my interviewees described their migrations was increasingly problematised in the German context. In the political-public sphere, and also in academia, this language was no longer used to describe this group’s migration. I argued that the social reality of ethnic Germans became more complex and that, as many researchers dealing with these migrants from the Soviet Union have observed, to speak of a homecoming became very difficult. This was to some extent because such a notion also implies an easy integration based on ‘sameness’. Under these circumstances, academia no longer saw these migrants as homecomers but as cultural hybrids or transmigrants with multiple connections and complex feelings of belonging. I showed that some of my interviewees resist such a language, insisting that they are homecomers. I suggested that, because of social exclusion, their historical experience and also because of a double ethnicisation process through which many have gone, they had difficulties relating to a translocal or multicultural ascription.

I then looked at how particularly the ‘generations of grandparents’ suffered from a failure of recognition of their Germanness. Young people told me repeatedly that their grandparents preserved their German heritage as much as they could, but now in Germany people did not accept them as Germans and this was very painful for them. I suggested there was a clash of different visions of Germanness. For the ethnic Germans, their Germanness was very important; their ethnicity had played a definitive role in their lives and had also been a source of hurt in the past. In spite of the difficulty, people had tried to preserve their cultural heritage. The fact

that it did not mean much in the society they migrated to resulted in profound confusion and pain.

And yet, while I am sympathetic to stories of homecoming and do believe that abandoning this concept altogether would create difficulties to understand the subjective experiences of people's integration difficulties, I am also critical of this concept. Not only, as have previous chapters discussed, has this privileged repatriation created a hierarchy of belonging and has fostered feelings of envy in the host society, this narrative is also counterproductive to Russian-Germans themselves. While it might serve the elder generations, to the young people, who are often the products of multi-ethnic families, this homecoming narrative comes with many problems and pressures. While young people's sense of identity and belonging are based on their grandparents' and parents' stories of belonging, they need to recognise that they have inherited a complexity of experiences and loyalties which the homecoming narrative often obscures. In the next chapter this is precisely what I am going to look at. I will discuss how the homecoming narrative creates pressures to become, as Lena put it, 'entirely German' and can lead to a sense of inadequacy and even denial of a complex family history.

## Chapter 5.

*'Everyone thinks I am German and it needs to stay like that'*.  
Germanised Russian-Germans and difficulties with  
assimilation.

### Introduction

I know Julia (b.1988) and Valentina (b.1985) from school. One evening I ran into Valentina at a local bar in the Bavarian village where we went to school. I had just started my fieldwork and was excited to do my first interviews. We chatted about what we were doing at the time and I told her about my research, asking her if she was willing to be interviewed. She gave me her phone number to talk about it. When I called the next day, Valentina was hesitant but appeared to agree. Julia, however, sounded sceptical. Speaking for both of them, Julia said she was not sure *'what there is to talk about'* and, in any case, did not think they were *'the right people for the interview'*, because as she stressed they are *'quite German'*. Having hung up, I was not surprised that Julia emphasised how German they were, but I was surprised that she felt that her German identity meant that she could not say anything about her experiences as a Russian-German. When we were younger, Julia and Valentina both had Russian-German boyfriends and spent their time in school with predominately Russian-German friends. They spoke a mix of Russian and German with each other and often went to a well-known Russian Disco where the Russian-speaking youths of our area met. In the interview, to which the two agreed in the end, they told me that they now only go out with German men and only go to German places. They no longer go to the Russian Disco neither do they see their former friends from school.

Something changed in the years that I had not seen Julia and Valentina. As I progressed further into my research, interviewing more women about their

migration experiences, I understood that the way they reacted and spoke to me about their struggles reflected a common experience among young people who wanted to do well in their new society. Similar to other women who feature in this chapter, Julia and Valentina were in the process of assimilating and so tried to 'pass' for German, which meant that they did not want to be perceived as Russian-Germans.

In this chapter, I will discuss what 'passing' as German means for the young people I interviewed. For Julia it seemed that this emphasis on 'Germanness' led her to feel that she did not have anything to say about the experience of being Russian-German because she felt she needed to speak as a German. Other young women felt that in order to be accepted and fully valued in society, they needed to hide their 'Russianness'. They felt that they could not be both German and Russian-German. As a result they emphasised in the interviews that they were 'entirely German', or 'German by blood' or 'only German'. In other words, they were not Russian and did not want to be associated with anything Russian or Russian-German. To not be seen as Russian-German required them to distance themselves from their complex identity and to relinquish markers of that identity, such as speaking Russian, wearing certain clothes and going to certain places. This was a means for them to distance themselves from stereotypical negative ascriptions of 'Russianness' as well as from lower social-class positions they had been assigned by society. Yet they not only rejected these now undesirable aspects of their identity but also distanced themselves from fellow Russian-Germans.

I will argue that this is problematic, as it leaves these young women with fewer resources to cope with the realities of migration. Furthermore, understanding the intricacies and entanglements of their heritage is often necessary to make sense of their migration to Germany in the first place, as my interviewee Tamara stressed. Some women, such as Tamara, began to realise that, as a result of assimilation, they lost their connection to Russian culture and language. This loss propelled them to look for ways to reconnect with these aspects of their heritage by, for example, travelling to Russia, joining a Russian-German association or re-learning the Russian language. This helped them, as they described it to me, to adopt and avow a more multifaceted identity.

I will start this chapter by arguing that while migration literature is helpful in illuminating the processes that these women went through, there are pressures to assimilate commonly left out of this literature that were important motivations for the women discussed in this chapter. In the previous chapter, I discussed how young people often reiterate the homecoming narrative that was handed down to them by their parents and grandparents and how this can conceal the negative experiences of migration. In this chapter, I will explore how the reiteration of these narratives exerts pressure upon my young interviewees to take on the role of ‘authentic Germans’. While they felt that their status as Germans was tied to history, at the same time, as we will see, these young people felt, and feel uncertain about these histories and this ‘not knowing’ is an additional pressure.

### Assimilation: From the general to the particular

Psychotherapist Carmen Monteflores writes that from the perspective of the psyche, the core issue of assimilation is survival. Assimilation promotes a strengthening of external skills, such as speech, mannerisms and dress, with learning the language of the dominant group being of particular importance. However this focus on the external, can also lead to a profound sense of self-betrayal, loss and disconnection (1986:76). This is precisely the story I am going to unfold in this chapter. In their narratives, the young women tell me how they try to look, sound and act like ‘authentic Germans’ but in this process they also lose connection to everything Russian-German. Before turning to these stories let us explore the reasons why it can be so difficult for young women to assert a complex identity.

There are many motivations behind assimilation. Let me start from a general view. These young women’s assimilation strategies can partly be explained by the age at which they migrated to Germany. Because the age at which a person becomes a migrant is very important to the way they adapt to a society. To be different is especially challenging for young children. As Rumbraut observes: “Perhaps at no stage of the life are assimilative processes more intensely experienced, assimilative outcomes more sharply exhibited, than during the formative years of

adolescence” (1999:177). Using perspectives from psycho-social literature on migration, the young women’s behaviour can thus be understood as to some extent “over-adaptation, becoming more ‘normal’ than normal, not to stand out from the crowd” (Kelley-Laine, 2004:7). This is part of the process which every immigrant goes through in a new country. Immigrants are faced with a new way of relating to themselves through “acute self-observation” (ibid:7), becoming “natural anthropologist[s], decoding or, more pertinently, sensing, the overt and subliminal differences in [their] world” (Hoffman, 2004:61). Grinberg & Grinberg write in their now classical study ‘*Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Migration and Exile*’ that immigrants often disassociate from their home countries and try to “negate anxiety and guilt feelings that are nearly inevitable in every experience of migration” (1989:9).

### **Acculturation: The different ways of integration**

We can understand assimilation processes even better if we look at them through the lens of ‘acculturation theory’ (Berry, 1997; Sam & Berry, 2010; Sam, 2006). Acculturation is a process of cultural and psychological change, which results when different cultures meet. Adaptation is closely related to acculturation; that is, there is a relationship between how individuals acculturate and how well they adapt. Berry and Sam, authoritative figures in this field, have identified four strategies of acculturation: assimilation, separation, integration and marginalisation. They explain that people who integrate (that is, people who engage with their heritage culture and the larger society) are better adapted socially and psychologically than those who acculturate by orientating themselves to one or the other culture (by assimilation or separation), or neither culture (marginalisation) (2010:476).

For the last three decades their theory has been extensively used in the social sciences in the US and Europe. Acculturation theory in its different variants is also widely used in German sociological scholarship to explain Russian-Germans’ identity and integration processes (Boll, 1995; Strobl, et al. 1999; Silbereisen et al., 1999; Retterath, 2006; Brüß, 2006; Savoskul, 2006). This research suggests that among the Russian-Germans all four ‘acculturation types’ exist (Strobl et al., 1999; Savoskul, 2006: 212-215, Kiel, 2015). In her research, Maria Savoskul

found that people who felt they didn't properly belong to either culture (and were thus marginalised in Berry and Sam's terminology) are most common and face the most struggles integrating within German society (2006:215). Strobl et al. (1999) state that the presence of all four 'acculturation types' among Russian-Germans is surprising. However, given that Russian-Germans are in fact a very heterogeneous group with very diverse historical experiences, as we have seen in the previous chapters, it is to be expected that they also acculturate in diverse ways.

With the rise of diaspora studies, acculturation theory has been criticised for advancing a universal model of acculturation (Bhatia & Ram, 2004; 2009) and overlooking the presence of the bicultural identities of migrants already upon migration (Birman et al., 2010). Indeed this is a valid criticism and one that also applies to the Russian-German case. Many Russian-Germans, particularly of the young generation, come from diverse, multi-ethnic families and already were bicultural in their places of birth. Thus diaspora studies can in fact be better equipped to account for identity formation, sense of belonging and integration processes especially of repatriate immigrants.

In any case, one of acculturation theory's strengths is to show how the acculturation process is shaped by the social structure of the host-society (Berry & Sam, 2010:478). In fact, as Berry & Sam stress, acculturation is very much dependent on the host society and their attitudes and policies towards migration. They make a distinction between what they refer to as 'melting-pot settler-societies', such as the United States or Australia, which have a long history of settling people and 'exclusionary non-settler societies', such as France or Germany, where "immigration is regarded as a necessity aimed at assisting less privileged people" (2010:478). Integration, they found, is more common in settler than non settler-societies, thus underlining that the way a host-society regards immigration has a lot to do with how people adjust.

As we have seen in the previous chapters, German society has long failed to understand diversity and cultural difference as positive features of their society, even though migration has been a central element of Germany's social and economic reality (Wilhelm, 2017:1) for many decades. While German government



proclaimed that it is not a country of immigration (Brubaker, 1994; Bade, 2004), in public discussions and social discourses assimilation was, as Strobl et al. pointed out in the 1990s “mostly judged unproblematic” (1999:5). In fact, as they continue, assimilation<sup>48</sup> often fitted ideas of integration and only marginalisation was viewed as a problem (ibid). Roll and Dietz (1998) point out that it was in the interest of the German state to assimilate rather than to integrate this group, a fact tied up with the original repatriation rationale. That is why Thomas Faist, for example, believes that the admission policy itself created a predicament for ethnic Germans. Writing about Polish *Aussiedler*, he asserts that, on “the one hand, their German descent and traditions have enabled them to immigrate to Germany. On the other hand, this legitimation for immigration prevents them from claiming a ‘Polish’ past, which is also part of their story.” As a result, he adds, “Aussiedler publicly cannot lay claim to an alternative identity different from ‘Germanness’, which could prevent over-adaptation” (2003:215). This means, he continues, “that unlike other immigrants, these homecomers have no chance to resort to their pasts, their traditions, in order to cope with the present and future in the country of migration” (ibid).

What is interesting about Faist’s observation is that he argues that *Aussiedler* cannot ‘publicly lay claim’ to their complex pasts. Yet my interviews show that these pressures to assume ‘authentic Germanness’ go beyond a mere public performance of ‘Germanness’. As we will see shortly with the young women, these pressures run through and are enacted by the whole family. Also, Ruth Mandel writes about the compulsion to assimilate that is imposed upon this group of people. Comparing two groups that migrated from the Soviet Union to Germany, Jews and ethnic Germans, she writes:

The Russian Jews and the *Aussiedler*, then are each forced to mimic and assume an ascribed identity, to conform to a fixed, projected stereotype set

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48 Historically, as Roger Brubaker (1994:8) argues, assimilation, in the sense of a deliberate policy of making similar, has not been part of Germany's political tradition, as it has, for example, in France. Writing in the 1990s, Brubaker argued that instead of an effective and legitimate tradition of assimilation, Germany had an uncertain relationship with ethno-cultural others, showing three different faces: 1) benignly differentialist, 2) harshly assimilationist and 3) invidiously dissimilationist (1994:177). I believe this provides further insight into why, being ethnic Germans, my interviewees have felt they needed to assimilate, as they fell under category 2: harshly assimilationist. This harsh assimilationist culture can be seen in the name changes (referred to later in this chapter) that some of my respondents underwent.

by their German sponsors. The Russian Jews are encouraged to resemble past representation, adapting themselves to projected German memories of Germany's pre-war Jews. Aussiedler are meant to conform to representations of authentic Germans. Ultimately, the shock of dissimilarity, of difference, is repressed, as the state attempts to mould these groups into the ideal Jew and German, in the attempt to achieve the desired identities. (2008:321)

Mandel's observations are important as she recognises not only the pressure to assimilate but the pressure to assume a predefined identity, of not being 'just Germans', but 'authentic Germans'. These types of expectation have direct consequences for young people's lives. Most notably, my interviewees feel that in order to be seen as fully German, they cannot be Russian-German. Nina, for example, tells me in the interview that in the past, she got very upset and angry when people doubted that she was German. *'So when I was 12, 13, 14, I was always like: I am not a Russian! I am not a Russian! But now I really don't care about it.'* Also a conversation with Lena shows that she wants to be seen as only German.

*K: What do you tell others?*

*Lena: Then I say German.*

*K: Are you just German?*

*Lena: I see myself as entirely German.*

*K: What about the word Russlanddeutsche?*

*Lena: Russlanddeutsche are, for me, people who are mixed with Russians.*

*K: Mixed German and Russian?*

*Lena: Exactly. There are many people who are platt-German<sup>49</sup> and married Russians. For myself, my blood, I'd say now I am German. The others are not.*

This belonging to Germany is articulated with such vehemence because, as I will show throughout the chapter, these young women encounter constant doubts from those who question why they believe that they are Germans. As Stefan Senders insightfully points out, this doubt is widespread in the majority society and exists in academia. In describing the efforts of the welfare organisations that work with ethnic Germans to convince the public that these Germans, are indeed Germans, he writes:

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<sup>49</sup> Plautdietsch or Plattdeutsch is a Lower German dialect with Dutch elements (Siemens, 2012). It is particularly spoken by Mennonite Germans in North and South America as well as among Mennonite Germans from the former Soviet Union.

Posters declaring that ‘Aussiedler are German!’ (Aussiedler sind Deutsche!) can be seen all over the Marienfelde refugee camp, standing both as a declaration and an injunction. In situ, however, the poster only reasserts the omnipresence of suspicion and deceit (...) That there is disagreement over the reality of Aussiedler identity claims will come as no surprise, certainly most English-language publications that refer to Aussiedler repatriation do so in a heavily and strictly ironic tone, taken in the context of Germany’s exclusionary policies, Aussiedler claims to German identity are assumed *prima facie* to be bogus. (2002:98)

As a result of such doubts, my interviewees are even more eager to present their identity as ‘authentically German’. What comes out in the interviews, is that to my interviews their Germanness is not derived from a legal status. Strikingly, not one of them spoke about German citizenship as a legal identity in their interviews. To them, their Germanness is rooted in history - despite the fact that many of them do not know the history.

#### **‘History proves it’: Claims to Germanness**

Given this context of doubt about their status in the wider society, for some, the interview situation is just another instance where they have to recycle the narratives produced for the sake of those who doubt them. They feel they have to self-authenticate that they are ‘really German’ by referencing history. When I interviewed Lena, one of the first interviews I conducted, I was not sensitive enough to see how difficult it was for her to see herself as Russian-German. Lena was born into a German family in Siberia and her first language was ‘*Platt-German*’; she learned Russian only once she began attending kindergarten outside of the German village in which she grew up. It was only after I interviewed Lena’s grandmother that I understood the significance that Germany held for the family. Lena herself did not know that her grandmother went along as a child with the retreating *Wehrmacht* to Germany, from where the family had been deported into a special settlement at the end of WWII. Lena’s great-grandmother and grandmother had tried desperately to stay in Germany and her grandmother described the deportation by the Red army as very violent, commenting that they were herded like cattle onto trains. The village that Lena and her family had lived in before they migrated was inhabited solely by *Plattdeutsch*-speaking Germans. It is therefore not surprising that in the interview Lena made a distinction between

Russian-Germans who, according to her, are 'mixed' and those Germans who had lived a more reclusive life and had been able to retain their German language skills, as was the case in her family. In retrospect, I see how Lena perhaps thought that I too was doubting her claims to a German identity because I responded by pointing out that her family had also lived for a long time in Russia and asked whether that meant that she was 'entirely German'. She responded immediately, saying that her great-grandfather was in the German army, thus asserting her connection to Germany.

*Lena: But my great-grandfather, I think he was in the SS. He was in the war for Germany.*

*K: How come?*

*Lena: Maybe the family was split, or only a part of us was over there. I don't know. I know only that I was told that grandfather was for Germany in the war...I can't tell you anything airtight though. Because when I speak with my grandmother, to be honest I have never really spoken to her about it. I only get fragments out.*

Michael Schoenhuth's observed from his interviews with ethnic Germans that he, as a 'native German', was often seen as a representative of the official admissions committee instead of as a social researcher. He felt that his interviewees always tried to prove their Germanness and concluded:

In the context in which one has to prove Germanness and in which one's belonging to the collectivity of Germans is constantly questioned, frequent emphasis on possessing a German identity is one way out of this. For these people it is not only about enforcing an identity claim, it is also about resisting a social categorisation that entails potential stigmatisation (...) [thus] every piece of information that is given about oneself or one's family is presented in such a way so as to have a value for German belonging. (2006:230)<sup>50</sup>

In this case, Lena's great-grandfather's serving in the German army constitutes exactly this kind of value for Lena; it serves as evidence that she is 'entirely German'. Young people often told me in the interviews that they bring up history to justify that they are Germans because as Nina tells me '*they* [people in host society] *don't believe in anything I say anyway, but history proves it.*' These young people, then, are in a difficult situation in which they need to prove they are 'authentic Germans' with references to history, but they only know this history in

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<sup>50</sup>Author's translation

fragments. As a result, they produce fragmented historical narratives in their efforts to validate themselves as Germans. Indeed, the majority society expects that as Germans, they should know where their ancestors came from in Germany. Other Germans do not always understand the Soviet context and why Russian-Germans only have ‘fragments’ of knowledge, as Lena states above, or why young people might have inhibitions about asking certain questions in the family as I will discuss in Chapter Seven. Ordinary Germans therefore lack sensitivity and understanding when asking questions about people's background, which only further inhibits young people from answering honestly not only about what they know but also about what they do not know.

This expectation about knowing one's family history comes out in a story Valentina tells me about her boss. At work he repeatedly asked her where her ancestors were from in Germany and she did not have an answer: ‘*He kept asking and I did not know and [my boss] told me: Listen, are you not interested in that!*’ Valentina told me she felt ‘stupid’ for not knowing and after he asked her several times, she decided to ask her parents. Similarly Tamara admits feeling ‘stupid’ when confronted with questions. She tells me:

*And if someone asks you, ‘So what are you actually, are you Russian?’ ‘No.’ ‘Yes, but you’re from Russia.’ ‘Yes, but I’m not Russian.’ But then you have to at least be able to explain why you’re not Russian. Otherwise, you’re always the stupid one. You always feel like an idiot, because you yourself don’t know why you’re a German. And that is just such a stupid feeling. I think when you then can say that and this. And the people then say, ‘Yes, that makes sense somehow.’ Then you really have a different grounding compared to when you’re neither a German nor a Russian.*

Tamara goes on to say that this is especially problematic because ‘*with us the problem is that we’re supposedly at home. We cannot go anywhere else, we cannot look for a home elsewhere, because we are already at home and no one understands that, not even we ourselves.*’ Tamara’s point that neither people in majority society nor young ethnic Germans themselves understand why Germany is supposedly their home is critical. Already in the 1990s, Barbara Dietz and Heike Roll wrote that the young people in Russian-German families “have no access to their own history” (1998:22). It is therefore, they stress, “important to take the fragmentary character that this ‘Germanness’ for these young people has

and to give them the opportunity to put these fragments into the context of their migration” (ibid:52)<sup>51</sup>. The researchers believe that young ethnic Germans’ sense of belonging to Germany is constructed on a fragmented understanding of history as they know very little about the history of Russian-Germans, why their grandparents were stigmatised as fascists in the Soviet Union or why they were deported for example (ibid). But this also means, they continue, that “many Russian-German migrants do not know that their right to migrate to Germany has very specific historical reasons. To know these reasons and to critically engage with them is very important for their new life in Germany” (ibid).

Roll and Dietz are indeed correct that young ethnic Germans’ sense of identity is constructed on a very fragmentary knowledge of history. Dialogue and engagement with history are therefore necessary to help them make sense of their complex inheritances. Yet, what we also have to be clear about is that there is not ‘a history’ that these young people can simply acquire by asking. Firstly, as will be discussed in chapter Six and Seven, there are still many inhibitions around talking about family history, and, secondly, grandparents and parents also have a very fragmented understanding of these histories. Thus what we have to recognise is precisely that this incoherence, these ruptures and contradictions are themselves part of these people’s histories.

Stuart Hall, reflecting on the experience of diasporic people, writes that the history of every enforced diaspora is characterised by the experience of fragmentation and dispersal (1990:224). As such, every diaspora community will try to search for a more beautiful vision of themselves before the distortion (Davies, 2004:185), a fact reflected in the idyllic homecoming myth discussed in the previous chapter. According to Hall this striving, however, should not be about the discovery of a genuine history. Rather he emphasises this reclamation of the past should be a creative process. It is an imaginative act of discovery that gives an imaginary coherence to a broken and fragmentary sense of identity (ibid). Moreover, whereas the search for an authentic subjectivity calls for continuities with the past, Hall calls for a way of formulating identity by understanding the discontinuities with the past (1990:225). Only then, he argues, can the traumatic character of the

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<sup>51</sup>Author's translation

dispersion be understood (ibid). However I believe before any creative, or imaginative reclamation of the past can take place, one needs to understand the difficulties that one faces, to name these and acknowledge them before being able to formulate how to ‘come to terms’ with this history and with these pressures. As such I am turning to the young women to see how these pressures manifest themselves.

### Young women and ‘passing’

All the young women featured in this chapter at some point in their lives did not wish to be seen as Russian or Russian-German and struggled to be perceived as ‘real Germans’. In thinking about how to illuminate the lives and the struggles of the young women that I interviewed, ‘passing’ as a heuristic device has been helpful. Philosopher Claudia Mills provides a basic definition of ‘passing’ as a phenomenon in which an individual presents him or herself to be other than who one really is. The genealogy of ‘passing’ lies with racial studies in the United States. It emerged especially out of (autobiographical) literature describing the complexities of life on racial dividing lines, particularly with regard to people of mixed African-American heritage who felt they needed to ‘pass’ for white to escape racism and segregation. It was then increasingly adopted in scholarship on immigrant groups in the US. In this context, ‘passing’ is often talked of as ‘ethnic flight’ or assimilation<sup>52</sup> (De Vos, 1992). The concept of ‘passing’ was also developed theoretically in gender and queer studies.

Even though ‘passing’ and assimilation are often used interchangeably, they are not exactly the same. ‘Passing’ is in fact part of assimilation. As Monteflores points out, assimilation always requires some degree of ‘passing’ and as such it is a primary technique of assimilation (1986:77). Similarly, Sarah Ahmed describes ‘passing’ as a “technique that is exclusive and exclusionary – it is not available to all subjects – as it depends on the relation between subject and structures of identification where the subject sees itself, or is seen by others, as not quite fitting” (1999:101). ‘Passing’ is full of subtleties and indeed, as Ahmed notes, it is

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<sup>52</sup> As racism made it impossible for black people to assimilate into a white American society, their only strategy to be part of white society was thus to ‘pass’ for white if they were able to do so. In this sense, ‘passing’ was often discussed in connection with race, while assimilation was reserved for white ethnic groups (Rockquemore et al., 2008:12).

not available to everyone. In German society very few immigrants have this 'technique' available to them and the Russian-German women certainly have an advantage over other immigrants in this respect owing to their names and appearance. But also in their case, a slight accent or difference in dress can easily make them conspicuous, making 'passing' impossible, as we shall come to see.

In her discussion of 'passing', Mills asserts that it happens "either through direct lying about race, gender, religion or sexual orientation, or through trying to act or to be more like those in the favoured group" (1999:25). The young women I interviewed have not talked about instances in which they lied directly about their identity. Furthermore when my interviewees say that they are Germans, they do not feel that they are lying, because, to them, they have always been Germans. Rather, the instances I am describing are subtle. It is in the moments when young people say that they are 'only' or 'just' German that they attempt to 'pass' for German and feel that they are not telling the whole truth about their identity. Often they attempt a form of 'passive passing', which Tsuda describes as an individual attempting to hide their background, but without directly lying about it if they are questioned (2003:342). 'Passing' is in this sense achieved through silence about one's background (Daniel, 1992).

It is helpful to illuminate how young women use 'passing' as a mechanism for assimilation and control of social situations (Gilman, 1999) to escape marginalisation and class positioning. It is also important to highlight that 'passing' can also be a form of agency (Daniel, 1992) in social instances in which young women chose consciously to 'pass' in order to achieve desired outcomes. Yet 'passing' has its drawbacks. As Sarah Ahmed (Ahmed, 1999:89) points out, theories of 'passing' are often discussed solely as a transgression of dominant power, while not attending to the losses of social or familial security it can entail. Following Ahmed, I would argue that transgression is not enough for identity formation.

I can theoretically agree that 'passing' does not necessarily need to be seen as a negative phenomenon. It can indeed be understood as a positive means of dealing with a multicultural identity (Nakashima, 1992). For my interviewees, it can



indeed be a resource to 'pass' for German when it is to one's advantage. I also recognise that in the lives of these young women, 'passing' for German could help them to succeed. This success is also noted by Gabriele Rosenthal when she writes that "in comparison to other groups of immigrants, [ethnic Germans] belong to the established [immigrant groups], especially if they speak German well, have had higher education and if they succeed in not being identified as re-settlers" (2011:37).

While it is true that my interviewees are 'successful' in their social and educational achievements, success is only one side to this story, as this 'passing' comes with great pressures and loss. As Doucet and Suarez-Orozo put it, "while ethnic flight is a form of adaptation that can be adaptive, in terms of "making it" by the mainstream society standards, it frequently comes at a significant social and emotional cost" (2006:181).

### **Burdensome 'passing' and denial**

'Passing' can be experienced, for example, as burdensome, especially in the case of women who are of mixed ethnicity. To illustrate this point, let us look at a story Valentina and Julia relate of a city break in Berlin they took with Julia's cousin Margarita. After spending the evening in a nightclub, the young women took a train. It was a typical multi-cultural setting and the passengers were of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Some young men started chatting to Valentina and Julia, asking them where they were from. In this situation and coming from a small town, they were outside their comfort zone, and wanted to end the conversation as Valentina relates.

*We were in the metro...and there were only foreigners, really mixed. Turkish people, black people, Polish people and so on. And we stood there and we didn't say a word. And then a guy asked us where we are from and we said from there and there and he said, 'But you guys are not real Germans.' And Margarita was like: 'Yes we are.' She wanted to avoid trouble in case there might be Nazis or something you never know, she didn't want any problems, so she said: 'Yes we are'. And then they said, 'No you're not, you're Polish or Russian'. And then we said: 'No', and they said: 'Well maybe you are, but your parents aren't real Germans,' and Margarita said: 'Yes they are.' And then he said, 'I don't believe that.'*

We see in this story how ambiguous their experience of German identity can be. While they stress they are ‘real Germans’, in their social interactions this claim often does not have validity. What I also want to highlight in this story is how differently Julia and Valentina experience this situation. Julia and Julia’s cousin are both ethnically German. Valentina, however, is also ethnically Russian on her mother’s side. While Julia tells me that she did not feel conflicted because she feels that she and her parents are ‘real Germans’, for Valentina this situation posed a problem. While Margarita insisted that that they were German, Valentina remained silent. She tells me that it was difficult for her to deny that she is Russian: *‘If the same happened not on holiday, if I was asked, I would say that I’m German. But if they asked for my background, and said, ‘No, I can hear that you’re not a real German’ then I would say, Yes I’m Russian and I was born in Kazakhstan.’* Perhaps the reason Valentina evokes the potential presence of ‘Nazis’ reflects a need to justify her silence to herself and to feel that she had not betrayed her Russian side. It is often the case that racial/ethnic ‘passing’ comes with an emotional burden in terms of feelings of betrayal or even shame for renouncing one’s family heritage (Suarez-Orozo, 2006). Such a burden was distinctly evident among the young women among my interviewees that were also of an ethnicity other than German.

It is these young women in my sample who began to feel conflicted about their identity and to reflect about it. This was the case with Tamara, Ina and Alyona. They told of concealing their background as something they did in the past. In the interviews they were reflective about how harmful it was to negate certain aspects of their identity. Some also began to speak about it with others. Ina tells me how she opened up to her circle of friends about this pressure to assimilate and realised that others felt the same. The Russian name of one of her friends is Igor. Though his parents and friends call him by his Russian name, the German government changed his name to ‘Gregor’<sup>53</sup> in his legal documents. As Ina began to open up

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53 Germanising Russian names was a standard practice of the German state in issuing documents to ethnic Germans. Parents were either advised to give their children German names in order to ease integration or sometimes the names were changed by the state without asking the parents’ permission. This was one of the strategies to assimilate people. Russian-German photographer Eugen Litwinow, whose Russian name is Evgenij deals with these issues in his book and video project. His interesting project can be found at <http://www.eugenlitwinow.com> (accessed 21.07.2015).

about how she felt, he told her that he felt ashamed about his name because in the past he denied his Russian name. At the time of the interview, Ina encouraged him in his wish to go through the long bureaucratic process of legally changing his name back to its original Russian 'Igor'.

While some young women were reflective about hiding and 'passing', for other women such as Nina, Julia, Valentina and Lena it was important to emphasise their German identity and the interview became at times a performance of 'Germanness'. In giving me an account of themselves, they presented who they wanted to be and how they wanted to be seen by stating continuously who they were not and what they did not do, or what they did not eat, wear or how they did not look. This performance spoke volumes about the problems they faced.

In her famous study on working-class women, Beverly Skeggs discovered that the way women spoke to her about their identity could be described as a form of '(dis)identification.' Disidentifications were performed through speech, clothes and presentation of self. Similar to my participants, the women in her study stressed how they *did not want* to be perceived. Skeggs showed that cultural and social positioning generated denial and dissimulation (1997:75). Although Skeggs's study is set in a different context, 1980s in Britain with working-class women, the young women I discuss in this chapter used similar mechanisms to shift their cultural positioning as Russian-Germans as did the women in Skeggs's study with their working-class position. The similarities are striking but not surprising for by distancing themselves from their position as Russian-Germans, young women also distanced themselves from the lower-class position that they and their families found themselves in after the migration to Germany. In the interviews, it is especially Alyona who brings up issues of class. She tells me how popular her mother was in the Soviet Union and that she had many social contacts<sup>54</sup> but that, as soon as they arrived in Germany, '*the whole social background just disappeared, the family and the friends*'. Alyona goes on to describe how her

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<sup>54</sup> Officially there were no classes in the Soviet Union and people did not think of themselves as belonging to 'classes'. Nonetheless there was a hierarchy in terms of power. Unlike in the West money was not power as money could not buy things. It was *blat*, a form of bartering of favours through social relations that 'got things' (Ledeneva, 1998). That is why Alyona mentions that her mother was popular and had many social relationships, as this was the key to 'success' and 'wealth' in the Soviet Union (Bertaux et al., 2005).

perceived social position made her feel about her Russian side:

*I felt like a total outsider. I just wanted to be like everyone else, just not to stand out, but with my name that is impossible. When I say my name is Alyona and immediately it's like 'where is your name from?' And I just felt that to be Russian, to be a re-settler or late-resettler is something bad and also socially, in a very subtle way you were assigned a particular class belonging. As a child I really felt that.*

Class features heavily in my study but similar to the Skeggs study it is often implicit. However, what becomes clear is that young women try to emulate a middle-class look, which they identify as looking 'German'.

**'Girls don't look like that': How not to look, to look 'German'**

Julia and Valentina did not wish to be interviewed separately and thus their interview had its limits: it's not clear whether they really think certain things or whether the presence of the other influenced their responses. At times it seemed that Julia, especially, tried to 'show' me how German she was while Valentina tried to qualify Julia's statements. This performance is put further into context when, at the end of our interview, they tell me that they were surprised that I would be interested in the experiences of Russian-Germans, because they always thought of me as 'very German'. Perhaps they wanted to show that they, too, are to be considered German contrary to how they were seen back in school. Sometimes as the two spoke to each other, it provided a glimpse into their daily experiences and how they negotiate this 'Germanness'. Julia, for example, tells me that *'we only hang out with Germans'* to which Valentina adds, *'Up until three years ago, we only were with Russians and now our girlfriends are Russians, but boys are all Germans'*.

When I ask Valentina why they do not do not hang out with Russian-German boys, she becomes vague but says: *'Hmm, well...I just don't like it, all the drinking and their appearance alone. That's why I already warned my parents that I will be with a German'*. Alcohol is one of the negative ascriptions of Russian-Germans from which these women try to distance themselves. Another negative ascription is that Russian women are 'dolled up' and thus the women try to cultivate an appearance far from this stereotype. With subtle observation of the majority society and other Russian-Germans, these young women try to socially position

themselves as Germans through a certain style of clothing. As ‘passing’ means to be successful at concealing (Harrison, 2013), it is not surprising that they feel pride when they are taken for ‘native German’, as illustrated in our conversation below:

*Julia: I’m proud when others say, ‘I wouldn’t have thought you’re from there’. They say that ‘First of all, you can’t hear it in your pronunciation because many have an accent in their speech but with you, you can’t hear it at all. ‘And your appearance [isn’t like the others],’ many say that too. You can tell those who come from Russia, you can see it in their things, their clothes I would say. In their demeanour alone.*

*K: Do you try to avoid looking like them then?*

*Julia: If I avoid that, no. Everyone has their style, my style rather goes into the [Valentian/Julia: laugh]*

*Valentina: What do you mean, your Converse?*

*Julia: Yes, well, more the sporty, the funky. And those who come from Russia, they’re more elegant and a bit more fancy. High heels, for example. I personally very rarely wear them because that’s not me. Yes, but when you look at the women here in Germany, they all walk around in flats and stuff like that and Russian women, they walk around in high heels.*

It seems that Julia’s converse shoes are a running gag between Valentina and Julia, as they both laugh when they begin to speak about them. Socially, fashion can be used to signal certain aspects of self and the young women try to emulate a respectable middle-class look to show that they are Germans. Converse shoes in the past decade had become part of mainstream pop-culture. Brym & Lie argue that while in the late 1990s, Britney Spears was the leading fashion icon of middle-class girls, wearing wide belts, glitter purses and showing a bare midriff, by the early 2000s, Avril Lavigne was the new star. In contrast to Britney Spears, she wore converse, washed-out T-shirts and baggy trousers. Her look became the anti-feminine, anti-glam look that many middle-class girls began to emulate (2013:22). In my sample, Julia and Alyona tried to position themselves as anti-feminine, Julia with her converse shoes, Alyona with her baggy trousers. These items the girls identified as part of ‘looking German’. Other women also spoke about how they recognise other Russian-Germans by their make-up and demeanour. ‘Passing’ for German, consequently involved for these women a rejection of the stereotypical notion of Russian femininity: of looking neat, high heels, fancy clothes, dresses, long nails and make-up.

Even out of the public eye, at home, certain cultural ways are changed as part of the assimilation effort. When Julia tries to convince me that she is indeed German and that she has ‘no connection to Russia anymore’, I ask about her about her home life and food culture. She immediately responds, ‘*No we only cook German food*’. Julia also stresses that her parents ‘*speak Russian with each other, but to us [siblings], always in German*’. Nina and Lena similarly stress that at home no Russian food is cooked any more and the language spoken at home with their parents is not Russian. These internalised prohibitions and regulations of what one can or cannot do, eat, wear or speak are deeply rooted, as a conversation with Alyona shows. As I have already pointed out, at the time of the interview Alyona was reflective about the process of ‘passing’. She was aware of how she forbade herself certain things, such as speaking Russian or socialising with other Russian-Germans. Yet in this passage we also see that she still tries not to be perceived as Russian.

*A: I don't want to be all girly (Tussi) somehow, as you can see I'm not really dressed in a Russian way.*

*K: How does someone dress in a Russian way?*

*Alyona: Well you know, fancy and stuff.*

*K: Do you think so?*

*Alyona: Yes, totally. Hello?!*

*K: So you wouldn't wear that? Someone else told me once that a Russian would not wear Converse.*

*Alyona: No she would not. No, not a Russian girl.*

*K: Do you think?*

*Alyona: Yes I think so. I can still remember when I started to wear baggy pants and my family almost had a nervous breakdown because girls don't look like that, girls look neat...*

Initially I planned to write two chapters: one dealing with young women’s ‘passing’ and another chapter addressing women who were reflective about these processes. Yet on looking closer, I saw that these lines are blurry. There is no before and after. In other words, while some women were more open about how they were hiding that they are Russian-Germans, in their daily lives they are still uncertain how to present themselves, as we have just seen with Alyona and questions of dress style. Ina also tells me that she shushes her mother if she speaks Russian when they are on public transport in order not to draw attention. This is the same Ina who, in the story above, encourages her friend to change his name back to its Russian version. I find it therefore even more illuminating to have all

of these stories in one chapter and to show how some women's reflections help to shed light on what the other women go through and why.

### **Distancing from other Russian-Germans**

'Passing' for German requires not only cultivating a certain appearance, but, for some of the young people, it also means not socialising with other Russian-Germans. In Valentina's and Julia's case this led to animosity with their former Russian-German friends. When we begin to speak about people that we knew from school - people whom Julia and Valentina had stopped seeing - they tell me that these former friends refer to them in derogatory ways because they go out with German men. This tension illustrates how hard it is for these young women to manoeuvre between two worlds that they feel must be kept separate. This theme of 'ethnic betrayal' reverberates through literature on other migrant groups (Doucet & Suarez-Orozco, 2006; De Vos; 1992 Tsuda, 2003). People are ostracised and accused of acting like 'ass-kissers' (Tsuda, 2003) or 'acting white', being called 'coconuts' 'bananas' or 'Oreos' (that is white inside and brown, yellow or black on the outside) (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). It also shows that there is often a tension between the assimilationists and the separatists in the group, according to the taxonomy offered by acculturation theory.

Alyona reflects that while it would have made her life easier to have had Russian friends *'back then when it was so super difficult for me in primary school'*, however, she felt it was necessary to keep a distance from other Russian-Germans, though she notes that this *'sounds so asocial.'* *'Otherwise,'* she says, *'I would not have become somebody'*. While Alyona does not elaborate how other Russian-Germans could have prevented her from becoming a 'somebody', it seems that the mere association with Russian-Germans presented an obstacle to becoming this someone.

None of the young women, however, speak about avoiding Russian-Germans in a tactical way, all stress that either they did not have other Russian-Germans around them or that they simply did not like their behaviour, as Valentina commented above. It is clear that they wanted to insulate themselves from the stereotypes that majority society has about Russian-Germans, and particularly Russian-German

men. Yet despite assertions that they weren't around other Russian-Germans, through the stories they tell it becomes clear that they knew 'where to find them'. Alyona refers to the 'parking-space Russians'<sup>55</sup>, *Parkplatz-Russen* and Nina to the 'youth-club Russians', *Jugendhaus-Russen*, while Valentina and Julia distance themselves from Russians who go to the Russian Disco. Alyona tells me that today she looks at it differently: *'I think now that everything is good for me, I wouldn't have a problem [hanging out with other Russian-Germans]. But I think back then in that phase, there were these 'parking-space Russians' and potentially I could have been associated with them and I just rather wanted to belong to the Germans'*. As mentioned above, not everyone is able to 'pass' easily for German and not everyone is as eager to do so as the young women in this chapter. The fact that people feel a need for 'passing' in the first place, however, indicates their belief in the impossibility of a diasporic belonging.

This may not always be a problem for people who can practise assimilation successfully. But this social demand for assimilation in cases where people are unable to do so, coupled with despair of diasporic belonging, can push people to withdraw into enclaved immigrant communities in which they can interact primarily amongst themselves (Tsuda, 2013:180). That is, the absence of diasporic understandings of belonging with social pressures to assimilate can lead to separatism. These ethnic communities are often seen in a pejorative manner by the host society, which helps in turning them into stigmatised and marginalised subcultures. It is these stigmatised subcultures from which the young women distance themselves in the above narratives.

Doucet and Suarez-Orozco explain that assimilation-oriented people are often "alienated from their less-acculturated peers; they may have less in common or may even feel they are somewhat superior to them" (2006:179). Acculturated, as we have seen above, to these women means to look German, eat German food, speak German without an accent and to socialise with Germans. These criteria can destroy close friendships as the following excerpt shows.

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<sup>55</sup> Referring to them as that because they used to hang out on parking lots/ in the youth club in their town.



*Valentina: Look, Natascha for example, she'd never have a German boyfriend, and that's also a reason why she doesn't hang out with us any longer. In the beginning she was with us when we were with Germans, but she didn't feel comfortable and then she stopped coming out with us.*

*K: Why did she not feel comfortable, did she say?*

*Julia: She just doesn't know it any other way.*

*Valentina: And they only speak Russian to each other, you know Nadja, Larissa, Natalia, Nikolai.*

*K: But in school she spoke German well.*

*Valentina: Well I mean she talks German to her work colleagues, but she'd never say, 'I'll go into a German club in Frankfurt.'*

*Julia: They only go to the Russian disco.*

I noticed this 'distancing' from others fairly early in my fieldwork. It was a common experience in the young people's lives, in that they felt that they needed to avoid other Russian-Germans, or if not avoid, then at least not speak with them about their common background. This seems to me to be another reason why it was difficult for me to recruit young people for interviews. Realising this, I began to incorporate questions into the interviews with regard to this topic, as I wanted to see whether they noticed these issues of distance, hesitation and reticence and how they dealt with them.

### **Recognising 'passing' and the fear of being seen through**

I spoke about my difficulty in recruiting people with Alyona as in the week of our interview another participant had cancelled several times. As a result, this issue was particularly on my mind. This topic led into a more general discussion about how young people in our generation distance themselves from each other rather than looking for support from each other to cope with migration. I speculate that this is possibly at the root of my difficulties in finding participants, to which Alyona replies:

*I wonder about it myself, whether it has always been like that. I do think there was distance to others. It's like you constructed something that you yourself are not somehow and then you meet someone who could break through that. With us two now it is not like that, but I remember that feeling from earlier times.*

*K: Can you describe that? I find that interesting.*

*Alyona: Well, it's like you constructed an identity, I mean really actively constructed a German identity, and then someone can just see through that and can destroy all that Germanness.*

*K: Because they -*

*Alyona: Do exactly the same and know the same.*

*K: So that they see through the mechanisms.*

*Alyona: Yes, but I can see through them too. I mean show me 10 people and I'll show you the Russian.*

On the one hand, this anxiety of being 'seen through', of having their 'Germanness' scrutinised, would explain my difficulties in the fieldwork. On the other hand, however, this is not only a methodological problem, as for the same reasons young people keep a distance from each other. Nina for example tells me of a situation at work where she recognised another Russian-German by her name and when she approached her, the young woman told her that no one knew she was a Russian-German and that Nina needed to stay quiet about it. After that the young woman avoided Nina and they never spoke again. Tamara also relates a similar situation.

*Tamara: I had that with one girl, we spoke and I said to her, 'Could it be...is it possible...?' And she replied immediately, 'Do not dare to tell anyone here. No one knows here. Everyone thinks I am German and it needs to stay like that.'*

*K: She said it like that?*

*Tamara: Yes, and that was such a shock for me because I was in that phase where I was so happy to finally be able to say, 'I am Russlanddeutsch, this is how it is' and some say, 'Wow'. And so I thought everyone would be happy if I asked if they are Russlanddeutsch. But she says 'do not dare to say anything, no one knows here and no one needs to know' kind of thing. I think that is really difficult, I don't know.*

And so some of the interviews that I conducted, as well as the long-term relationships that I have with people, clearly show that 'passing' for German, or in Alyona's words to be 'someone that you yourself are not', is very difficult to live with and sustain for the duration of one's lifetime. George De Vos observes that "[s]ince passing is usually effected through self-conscious manipulation of behaviour, it requires maintaining a facade. To the degree that the facade is not part of oneself...sooner or later [people] find it psychologically more tolerable to drop the facade" (2006:22). This observation is reflected in Tamara's assertion that she was finally happy to say that she is Russian-German, but she nevertheless had to realise that not everyone feels the same way about being recognised.

### Costs of assimilation and perceiving this loss

As I have shown through these stories, my interviewees almost live 'double lives', which they carefully separate and this comes with benefits as well as costs. What

comes out particularly with Nina is that in 'one life' she is a child of migrants who has the worries of migrants; in the 'other life' she is trying to be 'like everyone else'. This can be very difficult at times, because the family dynamics can be burdensome for some of the young people that I interviewed, yet they have no other migrant friends with whom to share their worries. This is the case with Nina. Her family had many financial worries, which she felt she could not talk about with any one. She could not speak to her family because she did not wish to upset them further and, perhaps more troubling, Nina could not talk to her best friends. She has known them since they were in primary school but, as they are 'native Germans', she felt they would not 'understand'. Her two best friends are from well-to-do, rural middle-class families and were about to inherit their grandparents' houses, a topic which had dominated their recent discussions when they went out. Nina faced the opposite problem as her parents could not pay the mortgage on their house any more, and she listened quietly to their talk but did not say anything, while her friends had no idea what was going on.

*K: You can't talk to them about it?*

*Nina: No. They don't know what financial problems are, since day one that we have known each other. Well, I mean of course, they sometimes say, 'I just got paid and have nothing left', but it's not like they're dying or anything... And with [her boyfriend] it's exactly the same.*

*K: It's more like lack of money sometimes but it's never about actual survival?*

*Nina: Yes, exactly that. I mean my mother didn't get any commissions... and we just could not pay for any of it any more. And then they took on another mortgage for it, but that wasn't a sure thing. And I just thought, 'Oh my god, with my salary I cannot save them.'*

If we examine Nina's life situation it becomes clear that even as a 'well-doer', that is someone who has a good education, a well-paid job, and a partner and friends who are middle-class, she nonetheless cannot entirely shake off the problems connected to being a child of migrants. And while she is among her friends she feels she cannot talk to them about her 'other life'. Yet it is clear that Nina has a 'need to talk' about her problems, as in fact our whole interview centred on her family problems. This is one of the major costs of 'ethnic alienation': Nina has no other migrant friends with whom to share things, yet lives, at least in part, a migrant life.

### **Acknowledging one's loss**

There are other costs resulting from assimilation, which, as I have already alluded to, were voiced by women who are of mixed ethnicity and in particular by Tamara and Alyona. Tamara tells me that, in their efforts to assimilate, the family stopped their tradition of singing Russian folk-songs. Tamara and her siblings only had German friends and lost contact with the Russian-speaking community altogether. *'And so we lost Russian and only later people said, 'Oh what a shame that you don't speak any Russian any more.'* Alyona similarly told me that she was upset about losing her Russian language skills and both women have travelled to Russia in the past few years to reconnect with Russian culture and language.

Shortly before our interview, Alyona had completed an internship at an NGO in Georgia, which she undertook as part of her MA in International Politics. The last time I heard from her, she had travelled back to Russia to work there. Tamara also wanted to reconnect with other Russian-Germans and Russian culture because, as she describes it: *'I thought, something is missing, but what is it that is missing? And then I started to go to this association.'* She also began to take her mother along to these meetings at the Russian community centre and slowly they introduced Russian culture back into their lives, which was not easy to begin with. Tamara tells me that her mother *'needed a long time to find her way back and wholeheartedly, and without a bad consciousness, sing a Russian song'*. Tamara and her mother travelled together to Russia and on this journey they began to speak Russian with each other again. As she recounts below, when they returned, Tamara and her extended family also began to speak Russian:

*My cousins and I have started to speak Russian with each other again, so that is a start somehow, so that it was also okay with the parents that we spoke Russian again. We didn't have to hit ourselves on the mouth any more for trying to explain something in Russian. And then, I think this was just a necessary process somehow to first settle here and then to take on what we had already somewhere in the rucksack and then to go even one step further and to ask questions about the family past, and why it actually is that we're German.*

What Tamara describes in this part of her interview can be seen as a process of confrontation with her otherness, which began when she perceived that something was missing in her life and that she no longer wanted to 'pass' for German.

Alongside ‘passing’, confrontation is another strategy to deal with one’s difference. Confrontation, as Carmen Monteflores notes, “requires an acknowledgement to ourselves of who we are” (1986:78). She writes that it is a profound, transformative and self-affirmative process used by members of rejected groups to come to terms with who they are. There are several elements that mediate this transformation: firstly a recognition that one is not alone with one’s difference; secondly, an acceptance of the sadness about one’s previous rejection, and that of others, of significant parts of ourselves; thirdly a recasting of the past and a reclaiming of one’s origins and history; and lastly some public acknowledgement of one’s new awareness (ibid). This is how Tamara described this process. She began to perceive a loss of a significant part of herself about which she was sad. She then began to look for reconnection with her Russian heritage and began attending Russian-German events, thus connecting with other Russian-Germans and realising that she was not alone in the issues she faced. She then began to call herself Russian-German and told others about her background, thus transforming something previously deemed shameful into a resource. Tamara became very engaged in the Russian-German association. She was even elected to the board of the association and began organising different cultural events dealing with Russian-Germans’ history.

### Conclusion: Towards a diasporic identity?

In this chapter, I explored how a policy of repatriation and a story of homecoming created pressures for my interviewees to assimilate and lay aside their complex backgrounds. They felt that they could not be both Russian-German and German and as such tried to ‘pass’ for German to increase their opportunities in society. Academically and professionally, many of them succeeded, but this came with sacrifices as they lost friendships, cut ties to other Russian-Germans, distanced themselves from their culture and stopped speaking their mother tongue.

I showed how difficult it could be for the women I interviewed to assert a complex identity. It seems that for ‘entirely German’ women to identify as Russian or even Russian-German is more difficult. Undoubtedly this points to the limits of the identification category *Russian-German* itself. Other categories, such as *Aussiedler* or *Spätaussiedler*, also have limits. They have negative connotations

and people do not wish to define themselves in such ways. Lena, for example, told me that she cannot identify as Russian-German and instead sees herself as ‘entirely German’. At the same time, when Lena and I speak about a multicultural identity, she also tells me the following:

*I'd love to describe myself as [cosmopolitan]. Because it has become too often too tiring to say I'm something specific. And then you're pushed somewhere. You're from somewhere and so you have to say something, but if I didn't have to say anything then I wouldn't. Then I'd say I live on this earth, we're all the same and that's it. I find that quite tiring to have to belong to one country.*

What Lena's statements illustrate is that there is a social pressure to choose between identities rather than an allowance for fluidity and multiplicity. We see that she also wants to claim this but simultaneously cannot, and this was precisely what I explored in this chapter. I wanted to examine why it is that young women feel that they cannot be both Russian-German and German and have come to see that the underlying reasons lie in a too narrowly construed idea of repatriation and homecoming. Ethnic Germans came to Germany under a privileged repatriation policy partly based on co-ethnicity. Yet there were certain ideas attached to this ‘co-ethnicity’, namely a too narrow understanding of these people's histories and an assumption that, because of this co-ethnicity, they would and should assimilate quickly. As a result, the young women felt that they needed to portray themselves as ‘authentic Germans’ and often cited historical reasons to uphold this image.

They experienced questions about their background, however, with particular uneasiness, because these questions often encapsulate a social pressure to strip away the complexity leaving them either Russian or German. Furthermore, they are pressured to bolster their claims to a German identity with a history that they feel they do not know. It was Tamara who explained how unpleasant it is not to know why one is a German, or why one is not a Russian. It was also Tamara who told me that in order to understand one's complex identity and cultural heritage, it is important to understand the history behind it and that one is positioned in certain ways in society and has to struggle against certain ascriptions, rather than being defined by them. As we have just seen with Tamara's experiences of reconnection with her Russian heritage, the ‘something’ that she had been missing

resulted in her beginning to call herself Russian-German and this helped her to understand and accept herself. In this sense I believe Tamara uses Russian-German as a term that can express her diasporic identity.

In conclusion to this discussion, an allowance for diasporic identity would perhaps help these young people to relieve the pressures of being subject to a definite national and ethnic self-conception. For diasporic conceptions of identity allow for the recognition of partial identities and pluralistic selves. A diasporic identity would help the young women accept their different loyalties and inheritances and move away from the struggle to present themselves as ‘authentic Germans’.

Yet I also want to stress that it is important to distinguish between people themselves striving for ‘authenticity’ because they feel fragmented and uncertain about themselves and a social and societal demand for such authenticity, as these instances require different strategies. In this chapter, my aim was to show that there are certain social expectations of fitting the role of ‘authentic Germans’ that many of my participants have internalised. To be authentically German, for these young women, implies expectations about how they look, sound and behave. But it also comes with pressures to ‘know one’s history’ and why one claims a German identity. I argued, here and elsewhere, that there are limits to the understanding of these histories and for many people they simply aren’t possible to ‘know’.

Drawing on Stuart Hall’s formulations, I argued that it is precisely these ruptures that need recognition rather than a striving to acquire or recover a coherent and integral history. I do not mean to suggest that young people should not ask questions at home in order to fill gaps in understanding, quite the opposite. I believe a dialogue is needed in the families and recognition of difficult pasts and the pressures that result from them. But this dialogue should not happen because one needs material as part of efforts to convince majority society of one's authentic Germanness. I believe before any creative or imaginative reclamation of the past can take place, one needs to understand the difficulties that one faces. I learned this from my interviewee Tamara, who talked me through this process.

While in this chapter I discussed the social expectations that compel assimilation, in the next chapter, I will be exploring how these pressures trigger within these families old patterns of behaviour related to Soviet socialisation. Thus I will turn to the family and their experiences in the Soviet Union and I will show how young people follow their parents' footsteps in their concealment strategies; for they too were hiding their background in order to escape their marginal situation in the Soviet Union. I will look more closely at family dynamics and discuss how these repeated concealments and denials in fact reveal intergenerational patterns of shame. This discussion will reveal how difficult it is to break with these patterns, given the migrant realities. At the same time, I will look at the experiences of the 'generation of parents' and how they have influenced their children. This will require an examination of how they, in turn, were influenced growing up with parents who had been deported and how the past of their own parents shaped them.



## Chapter 6.

*'She always wanted to be nothing but Russian and I wanted to be nothing but German. Just not to stand out'.*

Exploring habits of concealing 'shameful histories' pre and post-migration.

### Introduction

In this chapter I will begin to examine how the parents' Soviet experiences, paired with their post-migration experiences of downward mobility, led them to encourage their children to assimilate. This chapter consequently situates the problems young people face, introduced in the previous chapter, in greater detail, as I look at the problems from the perspective of the family, discussing where their readiness for assimilation originates and what seems to motivate it.

In the previous chapter, I argued that ethnic Germans faced pressures to assimilate, take on a German identity and put aside their Soviet histories. This chapter will tell the story of how many Russian-German families were sensitive to this kind of social pressure, given their Soviet family histories of coercive assimilation in the SU, displacements, marginalisation and constant movement across both physical and social borders. I found that, in re-appropriating belonging and a desire for certain social positions, behaviours that were once 'useful' to the 'generation of parents' began to re-emerge after migration to Germany. Parents passed on to their children their own ways of coping that they had adopted in the Soviet Union in order to succeed as the children of repressed parents.

What will emerge from this discussion, if one bears the previous chapter in mind, is how for several generations many Russian-German families felt the need to conceal their family origin and that these repeated concealments seem to stem from latent shame within the families. While it is outside the scope of this chapter to delve deeply into the theory of shame, I wish nevertheless to open up a discussion directed towards a legacy of shame, secrecy and silence in some of my

interviewees' families. I will briefly examine shame, which is passed on inter-generationally and not only leads young people to conceal their identities but leads to entire families aspiring to 'become German' in an effort to foreclose shame and escape their histories of repression, histories that were deemed shameful in the Soviet Union.

Often the acts of concealment and feelings of shame are not acknowledged or talked about. As we shall come to see, the post-migration situation, as Gabriele Rosenthal et al. contend, brought new pressures that could hinder dialogue within these families. As discussed in previous chapters, the researchers found that the 'generation of parents' in particular concealed many aspects of their biographies during the interviews, including their former Soviet identification (2009a:167). This new 'rewriting' of the family history, they suggest, precludes open dialogue (2011:19).

The post-migration situation undeniably poses new dangers for dialogue; not only because people are overwhelmed with their migrant realities, but also because the idyllic notion of homecoming comes with social and self-imposed pressures to lay aside one's multifaceted history, as discussed earlier. Unlike the Rosenthal et al. team, however, my fieldwork shows that while parents are indeed not especially reflective about their concealing and assimilation strategies, it is not the Soviet identification which they try to conceal and of which they feel ashamed.

I will show how the unacknowledged past coupled with the post-migration difficulties shape family dynamics and reinforce assimilation strategies. I will further argue that, in some families that I interviewed, there are parallels in experience between the different generations with regards to concealing their family background and will briefly attend to the question of whether these concealing strategies reveal underlying, inherited patterns of shame. I will look at current research that, like my work, describes these concealing strategies and that also makes the argument that post-migration families also seek to conceal their Soviet identification. I will critically engage with this position by providing counter-examples, drawing out how negative attitudes to the Soviet past among the broader public influence the ways in which people narrate their histories.

Lastly, I will argue that if young people want to understand the role of concealing in their lives and family histories, they need to engage with all aspects of their family histories and resist social pressures to repudiate the Soviet past, given the danger that this might only perpetuate shame.

### Family life in Russian-German families post-migration

#### **Burdensome effects of parents' social decline**

Lidia's family migrated in 1993 from Russia to Germany, when Lidia (b.1991) was a toddler. Upon arrival, her father spoke rudimentary German, which he had learned from his grandmother. However, her mother, who is of mixed Russian and Ossetian heritage, '*felt thrown into cold water*' because Lidia's father, stressed by the new situation, told her that she needed to do everything - the official paperwork and her language and retraining courses - by herself. With two children to look after on top, she was simply overwhelmed. Besides the language difficulties, the father's inability to find employment and to provide for the family caused many problems. While Lidia's mother found work in her former profession as a nurse, the father could no longer work in his profession as an engineer. He did a governmental re-training course to work in an old people's home, but failed his exams. After eight years of unemployment, he now works as an assistant in an old people's home. A decade after the family arrived in Germany, Lidia's parents separated and her mother remarried a German man. The divorce had an immense impact on Lidia's father. Now in his 50s, he lives a reclusive life and, except for some contacts at work, he has few social connections. Lidia constantly worries about him and takes care of him by trying to motivate him; however she also lives far away and cannot attend to him as much as she would like.

Lidia's story of familial tensions after migration is not uncommon among my interviewees. Several young people's family situations can be described as burdensome and often the stories resemble each other, telling of sudden and unexpected social declines, unemployment, financial problems and difficulties in finding a foothold in German society. These problems built up pressures within the families that led to divorce. In my sample it is often the fathers who had most trouble adjusting, even if they were the German family members and could already speak some German before migration. My fieldwork seems to suggest that

migration and social and economic marginalisation are experienced differently by men and women, with men having greater difficulties to feel accepted in Germany. This is not a unique experience. For example, in their research among Mexican-American men, Frago and Kashubek (2000) found that men are more stressed by their new environment than women, which they connect to difficulties in expressing emotions and masculine issues with authority and power. Furthermore, my findings suggest that the processes of migration and settling for Russian-German men can entail experiences of emasculation (Maher, 2006; Hibbins & Peace, 2009) and that these experiences can place heavy strain on the family (Hibbins & Peace, 2009:5) This is because, as Hibbins and Peace point out in *Migrant Men: Critical studies of masculinities and the migration experience*, the pressures on men to be the breadwinners and to maintain their authority in the family while facing multiple systemic barriers “can hinder their ability to realise their expected roles as ‘men’” (ibid). As discussed in the previous chapters, the gender divide in the Soviet space was markedly different. Men took great pride in their work and not being able to provide for the family was felt as very shameful. These experiences led some men to retreat into a Russian-speaking community, to feel resentful towards the new society and to isolate themselves, as some interviewees discuss below. For the children, on the other hand, the parents’ social decline often meant their having to become the *de facto* caretakers of the family.

This is not unusual; studies of immigrant families show that children tend to act as “cultural brokers on behalf of the family”, a process which comes with a reversal of roles between children and parents, generational power switches and responsibility taking (Chuang & Parke, 2011:276). This is not necessarily to be viewed negatively, for studies also document that these difficulties help young people to develop skills: from cultural and social awareness to linguistic skills (Faulstich Orellana, 2003). This point finds confirmation in my interviewees. While they face many problems at home, the young people I interviewed had achieved a great deal for themselves. However, research also suggests that this double burden can cause individuals to feel overwhelmed, stressed and frustrated (Burial et al., 2006) and this too is corroborated by my interviews. The family burdens are indeed very heavy for some young people to carry. Not only do they have to juggle their own lives, which, as the previous chapter showed, is not

always an easy undertaking, but these young people also often have to take responsibility for their parents.

Such is the situation in Ina's family. Ina's post-migration family life is so burdensome for her that when we started talking about her parents in the interview, she burst out crying, telling me that she has '*to control everything.*' Before the interview, Ina tells me that '*something terrible happened again*' that led her to have a serious talk with her parents for the first time. '*This time I will not help them,*' she tells me, '*I will not, on top of everything, organise the divorce and get social housing.*'

Ina is part Tatar on her mother's side and German on her father's side. Her family migrated from Kazakhstan in 1994, when she was seven, because of the '*sudden poverty*' in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. '*I remember we had nothing in the fridge,*' she tells me. In Germany, however, '*the real problems began*'. She tells me that sometimes she looks at pictures of her parents in Kazakhstan and on them '*they seem happy there; they smile*'. She tells me that she does not know what has happened to them since. Since migrating to Germany, Ina's father is on disability benefits. Her mother, a former seamstress, now works as a cleaning lady in private homes. The father has no social contacts and constantly worries that his wife will leave him. He is controlling and does not let her go out socially without quarrelling. Ina is torn. On the one hand, she wants her mother to leave her father but she also knows that her '*father will start drinking*' if she should leave. Ina is married and has a family of her own but she still regularly manages her parents' emotional and financial problems.

### **Interlude: Reflecting about the past in turbulent times**

Before discussing further how the parents' social decline post-migration impacts their children and encourages past ways of coping through concealment and assimilation, I want to stay for a moment with Ina's family experience. With Ina's family in particular we can see how the past still very much shapes the family dynamics today. I wish to show how difficult the post-migration situation is for the family and especially for Ina and how these difficulties in turn impede a dialogue in the family about the past. Rosenthal and Stephan write that one of

their central findings was that the current problems and insecurities among the group have to do not so much with the precarious life situations post-migration per se, but rather with family history and dynamics, as well as the collective discourses and predetermined ways of handling one's familial and collective history (2011:19).

While I agree with this finding, I would also contend that we should not underestimate the post-migration difficulties for they not only exacerbated pre-existing problems but also encourage past ways of coping. We can see how this plays out in families such as Ina's. The current problems that the family faces seem to overshadow Ina's attempts to reflect on and make a connection to the past. As we will see, Ina senses that there are silences and secrets that she tries to broach, but her attempts lead nowhere. This is problematic, as this chapter will argue, for dialogue about the past is critical to breaking the cycles of concealment and shame.

When I raised questions about family history in the interview with Ina, in relation to her parents and her grandparents, it was difficult for her to think about these issues. Given the turbulence to which she alluded but about which she did not wish to speak, it seemed difficult for her to answer questions about family history. I later found out that one day before our interview, Ina's mother had attacked the father with a knife and her little brother had called the immediate family for help. Unsurprisingly, Ina was distraught in the interview. Though I did not know what had happened, I sensed that she was preoccupied with something else. To my questions about family history, Ina tells me that the family does not talk much about the past and as such she has little information about either the German or Tartar side of her family. Ina tells me that she was very close to her Tatar grandmother, who looked after her when she was little. She first tells me that her Tatar grandfather died in WWII, but backtracks, saying '*or possibly in an accident, I think*'. Ina makes hints that her Tatar family was also deported, but adds she has no information about that. Tatars, specifically the Crimean Tatars, had also been accused of collaboration with Nazi-Germany during the occupation of Crimea and in 1944 they were deported to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan (Williams, 2001). Many Tatars also fought in the Red Army and were

discharged in a similar fashion to ethnic Germans and sent to labour camps in Siberia and the Urals (Williams, 2011:391).

A story Ina relates to me suggests that indeed her grandfather was in the Red Army. She tells me how her mother now works for a former *Wehrmacht* soldier who as a young man fought in Russia during WWII. Ina tells me that although her mother likes him very much, she does not like his stories about the war. Once, when he told her another war story, she came home from work saying, '*My father would turn in his grave if he knew that I am cleaning the floors of those he fought.*' When I enquire further in the interview about her Tatar grandparents' history, Ina says she cannot tell me much. From the fragments Ina relates about her Tatar side, it seems that Ina's mother was alienated from Tatar culture and tried to conceal her Tatar background during Soviet times. Ina tells me that her mother did not like her complexion or her dark hair and used to colour it blonde.

Ina knows almost as little about her German side. Her grandmother is still alive and lives nearby, but Ina tells me that they don't speak very much. Ina says they are not close and mentions that she has to address her grandmother formally, which is an old practice that has survived among some ethnic German communities. Ina tells me that her grandmother is very religious to which she cannot relate. Ina does not know where her grandmother was born, but knows that she was deported. She first tells me that it was to Siberia, but then says she is not sure. She knows even less about her German grandfather. She thinks that he was in the labour army but is unsure even about that. She tells me he drank heavily and that her grandmother brought the children up mostly by herself.

The trans-generational impact of the past is particularly evident in Ina's family. It is obvious that there were many taboos, on both sides of her family, against speaking about what had happened. This can be seen in the confusing parts she relates to me, the silences about the past and the religious, cultural and ethnic alienation of her parents from their family backgrounds. Rosenthal and Stephan speak insightfully about these problems in Russian-German families:

The interaction between public discourse and family dialogue about the past of Germans in the Soviet Union is characterised by an immense prohibition to speak about certain things, as well as by the fact that in the different historical phases, constant rewritings of the collective, family and one's own historical past took place. Because of the changing historical conditions, Germans in the Soviet Union, like many other Soviet citizens, were time and again coerced to rewrite their family and life history according to the dominant collective discourses, and were coerced into concealing certain parts of familial and collective history. (2011: 20)<sup>56</sup>

In Ina's family the migration to Germany seems to have only amplified existing problems, alienating the parents further from the wider society and each other, in part thanks to their place on the fringes of German society. Depression, alcoholism and violence also seem to have been present. It would be naïve to say that a dialogue would solve the problems in Ina's family. But it certainly does not help that there is no dialogue at all and I believe that especially for Ina it would be helpful to be able to make a connection between the family history and the problems the family currently faces. Ina herself tries sometimes to start a dialogue, especially when her mother tells the family that '*no one understands her*' and that her '*life was very difficult*'.

In this context, Ina relates a situation that occurred several months prior to our interview, in which long-lost relatives called her mother. '*She had to sit down after that*', Ina comments. The people on the phone said '*something about how they were separated in the war*'. Ina tells me that her mother is '*very closed, she does not speak about the past*'. She thinks that her mother is troubled by something but, in the past, when she tried to ask her questions, her mothers would say '*Let's not talk about that.*' Ina says that she always worries about her parents, but does not really know how they could be helped.

### **Outsider position encourages past ways of coping**

Similar to Ina, although not to the same extent, other interviewees also worry about their parents, many of whom seem to struggle intensely since migration. As we have heard in the previous chapter, at the time of our interview, Nina was worried about not being able to support her parents with their mortgage payments. Lena was likewise preoccupied with her parents' problems in our interview. When Lena's father lost his job and the family could no longer pay for their house, she

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<sup>56</sup> Author's translation



had to step in. Konstantin had similar concerns for his parents, in particular with regards to their reclusive lives in Germany.

Konstantin tells me that unlike other family members his parents never leave the house except for work and never participate in anything in their community. He tells me that he constantly tries to motivate them to go out more and often speaks to them about their antisocial behaviour. Like other interviewees, Konstantin tells me how different his parents were in Kazakhstan. They had a big circle of friends and if not at work, they were always doing something. He tells me that in Germany this changed dramatically. Konstantin thinks this is partly to do with the fact that his parents could not work in their former professions. His mother, formerly a teacher, works in a nursing home, and his father, formerly director of a company, does manual labour. This was a blow to their self-esteem, especially his father's, Konstantin recounts. He became very resentful of German society because he was not recognised as German, and Konstantin worries that his resentments '*border on xenophobia*' towards other immigrants because, in his view, they are seen as '*more German than he is*'.

As I have already mentioned throughout the previous chapters, my interviewees' parents became marginalised in Germany, being often seen as 'Russian immigrants' and not 'real Germans', and this compelled many to act even more German. To some extent, this generation became voiceless after migration: in a literal sense in terms of German language skills, but also because their Soviet histories were now, in a post-Cold War unified Germany, deemed discredited and obsolete. They could no longer work in their professions and their degrees were often downgraded or not recognised<sup>57</sup>. This is the reason why Rosenthal et al. write that for Russian-Germans the period after migration can be described "as a phase that was characterised by an unexpected social decline, discrimination and

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<sup>57</sup> Up until few years ago, the recognition of foreign professional and academic achievement had been highly fragmented in Germany (OECD, 2013:149). As a result, the foreign-born population tended to be underemployed and encountered difficulties integrating into the German labour market. According to the OECD, in 2007 the foreign-born working population in low-skilled occupations was four times higher in comparison to the native-born population (2012:66). To counter these trends, in 2012 Germany passed the *Anerkennungsgesetz* or 'Recognition Act', a law to improve the recognition of foreign diplomas and professions (ibid).

considerable economic difficulties. They became outsiders but at the same time tried to win back the status of the established” (2011: 49)<sup>58</sup>.

Being once again positioned as outsiders, while trying to win back their status, as Rosenthal et al. so aptly put it, meant that, in some of my interviewees’ families, the parents began to behave in ways reminiscent of their behaviour in the Soviet Union. As we shall see shortly, they began to revert back to their old methods of coping, assimilation and concealment, and encouraged their children to do the same. Their social decline meant that they now put all their hopes and aspirations onto their children. A point that also Wierling makes, when she writes that “[f]or the youngest generation the migration means a shove into adulthood, an early adoption of responsibility and a duty to fulfil wishes which their families have insinuated” (2004:211)<sup>59</sup>. Parents began to encourage their children to do well in school, pointing to their own downward mobility in an effort to push their children to do better. ‘*If you don’t want to clean floors like me, then you will have to work hard in school,*’ Ina’s mother used to tell her. In Nina’s and Vera’s families, more or less the same comments were made.

Vera tells me that her mother, who had ‘*no idea how the school system worked*’, nevertheless went to her school and campaigned for her to be transferred to a *Gymnasium*. This was very challenging for Vera, as she struggled with German, although she was good at maths. Going to the *Gymnasium* meant losing her Russian-German friends, a loss made even more difficult by the fact that her parents simultaneously moved out of the Russian-speaking community into a small village with no Russian-speaking children. Vera’s mother encouraged Vera to concentrate on school instead and to have high goals. What transpires from the interview is that Vera struggled to find belonging in school and so tried to compensate for her feelings of inadequacy with good grades. When I try to elicit more information about these school experiences, Vera becomes uncomfortable, telling me curtly, ‘*I don’t know, I mean I was there to learn something not to understand my classmates and what they think of me.*’ Distancing can be a way of diminishing sensitivity to other people’s reactions (Lemma, 2003) and Vera’s

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58 Author's translation

59 Author's translation

school and adolescence can be characterised in this way. Academically, however, Vera excelled and achieved all the goals she had set herself. She went to university and at the time of interview had just been awarded her PhD. While proud and happy, she also seemed exhausted from a life driven by goals:

*I've finished my studies. I have worked. I followed the career path. And now that I've finished the PhD, I just realised that I cannot go on like this any more. I cannot follow any more plans, any more goals (...). So I thought to myself I can no longer go on like this. I just want to go by my feelings. And that's what I am going to do now.*

In the previous chapter, I discussed how some of my interviewees internalised the pressure to perform well and that this also meant, among other things, distancing themselves from other Russian-German children and not speaking Russian either in public or at home. As Vera's interview shows, this also meant often the suppression of one's own wishes and feelings. Though not necessarily a conscious act, many young people tried very hard to make their parents proud and compensate for their social decline. A conversation with Alyona illustrates this. When we touch on the topic of the 'generation of parents', Alyona tells me that, as the young generation, 'we have to compensate for them' and explains that, while her mother did not push her to do well, she felt an inner pressure to prove her worth to people through achievement:

*The pressure came from within. Because I could not belong, it was very important for me to have good grades. Out of spite, kind of, 'Okay then, you super-clever Germans'. To be better spurred me on for some time and it had a lot to do with the fact that we came from Russia. I think good grades would not have been that important to me otherwise and to be so super-good in school, if I had not felt from outside that we were not equal to the others.*

As we saw in the previous chapter, Alyona goes on to tell me that, because she and her mother struggled in the beginning, she wanted to succeed despite these difficulties and that this also meant that she did not want to be recognised as Russian. Alyona then makes an interesting remark in passing. She tells me that many decades ago, when her mother grew up in the Soviet Union in a small Russian town, she felt the same way about her German background. Alyona's mother wanted to be Russian, have a Russian name and not to stick out as

German. Perhaps this is the reason why she chose a Russian name for her daughter in the hope that her child could escape the discrimination with which she had been confronted in her youth thanks to her German name. In a small town in Germany, however, it was now the Russian name that marked Alyona out. Alyona tells me that her mother had concealed that she was German because

*It was horrible to be German, one was automatically a Fascist, one was always the bad one. That's what Mama told me. It is so funny but it is the opposite with me and Mama. She always wanted to be nothing but Russian and I wanted to be nothing but German. Just not to stand out.*

As Alyona perceived being Russian as negative, she did not wish to speak Russian any more and she cautioned her mother against revealing that they are Russians in public: *'I also told mama on the street - do not speak Russian to me'*. Her mother accepted her wishes, since she knew herself what it was like to fear ostracism. For she had felt the same as a child in the Soviet Union.

Other interviewees speak of these reversed roles across the generations. While they had hid their German background in the Soviet Union, the parents now tried to conceal their Soviet or Russian backgrounds in Germany and encouraged their children to do the same. Exactly the same pattern occurred between Vera and her mother, as well as Ina and her mother, even though, as we saw above, Ina's mother is not German but Tatar. This suggests that the problem exists more generally among persecuted minorities in the Soviet Union.

Tamara tells me further that her mother had done everything to 'become Soviet'. She had joined the different youth sections of the Party, had been a good student and felt *'grateful to be given all the opportunities'*, although she was *'from a working class family'*. She had a great interest in languages and studied English to become a teacher. After arriving in Germany in 1993, Tamara's mother began to conceal that they came from Russia. Like other parents, Tamara's mother stopped speaking Russian to her children and even to the wider family. Tamara describes these early years in Germany as 'germanising': *'We tried as soon and as much as possible to 'germanise' [einzudeutschen] ourselves.'* Tamara explains that, in Kazakhstan, her family had had only a vague idea of what it meant to be German but they thought that *'all of a sudden they have to turn the lever and have to...and*

*are only allowed to be German. The only problem was they did not know how being German works. But in any case without Russian.'* Tamara tells me that her mother wanted to be 'as German as possible'. Not only did she not allow herself to speak Russian, she also hushed Tamara for speaking Russian in public. 'My mother then said – *pssh, speak German, don't speak Russian! That's not good because people look at us strangely. And she also forbade speaking Russian to herself, and only now does she get it that she forbade herself.'* In the previous chapter we saw how young women tried to 'pass' for German and did not want to be recognised as Russian-Germans and I explored how the social environment demanded this kind of assimilation. With families like Tamara's we can also see how this social pressure to assimilate post-migration often brought to light former tendencies to assimilate and to overcome outsider positions through achievement and suppression of difference. Fathers and mothers wanted their children to do well and fell back on behaviours that had once helped them to manage their outsider status.

## Patterns of concealment and the role of shame

### **Parralles between generations**

My interviews clearly show that parents did not have it easy in the Soviet Union. Depending on when they were born, they faced stigmatisation for being German, which was sometimes mild but which could also be more severe depending on the circumstances. While, as Nelly Elias writes, in the Soviet Union, ethnic minorities were coerced into assimilation and expected to abandon their culture of origin, at the same time, the "nationality category was meticulously retained in the Soviet passport, enabling the government to track and discriminate minorities in higher education and professional advancement" (2008:22). Given this discrimination, many Russian-Germans tried to either conceal that they were Germans or, if it was possible, thanks to a Russian parent, took Russian nationality in their passports.

While it emerged in my fieldwork that parents told their children about this discrimination and their difficulties, I found that they were not reflective in their families nor with me in the interviews about 'what it took' to succeed regardless. This is in contrast to some of the young women such as Tamara, Alyona and Ina, who, as I explored in the previous chapter, began to think about the impact their

concealing had had on them. With the 'generation of parents' this was often not the case. In other words, I have not come across parents who were similarly reflective about their concealing experiences or who consciously spoke about being shamed for being German and its impact on them.

Nonetheless, at times I could see glimpses of what it meant for them, though this was more buried in the interviews. Larisa (b. 1962) is a good example of this. She began by telling me the story of being a successful woman in the Soviet Union, of a career as a doctor and of a happy family life with her husband and children. She also told me how her parents were deported and had to do forced labour and how difficult it was growing up in poverty in Kazakhstan. She told me that because of this hard life she had to succeed early at everything. Larisa did not reflect on what this involved, but gathering together the fragments makes the consequences visible. Similar to the process I described as 'passing' in the previous chapter, Larisa also distanced herself from her German background, German peers and her mother's religious faith. After finishing school, she moved away to a big city and married a Russian man; she had almost no contact with other Germans, except for her relatives. She tells me that she forgot how to speak German, even though her parents only spoke German to her when she was a child, and thus had many language difficulties upon arrival in Germany. While Larisa was recounting to me how difficult life had been when she was young, she compared herself to her younger sister. She asserted that, in contrast to her sister, she learned to be strong and could not understand why her sister always '*whines*' about their difficult childhood and '*tells everyone her life story*'. '*Why*', Larisa exclaims almost in a protest '*do you have to reveal your weakness? You have to do the opposite, you have to always position yourself higher than you are.*'

For individuals such as Larisa, who have an internalised sense of inadequacy, association with their own fragility is not a benign experience (Danielian & Gianotti, 2012:38). As such, these individuals may attempt to bypass encounters in which they feel vulnerable and inadequate and like to present themselves as 'on top of things'. It seems that in order to avoid a feeling of inferiority and shame as a child of parents who were repressed, deported and poor, Larisa strived to conceal her family situation - her 'weakness' as she calls it - and to present herself

as a 'strong woman'. Alexander (b.1967) also tells me about his family's poverty. His parents had been deported and were forced to labour from an early age and were, as a result, illiterate. He described a scene in which, as a young boy, he was embarrassed when his mother came to school and could not sign papers. During the interview, it transpired that, while he never concealed that he was German, since he grew up in a tight-knit German community, in school he claimed that his father and mother were doctors and lawyers because he was ashamed of their low status.

As we can hear from the accounts above, some members of the 'generation of parents', like their children, experienced their family heritage and circumstances as embarrassing and tried to conceal them. In some families I found these dynamics even in the interviews with the grandparents. This was the case with grandparents who were children during WWII and came of age in an anti-German atmosphere. Amalia Schmitt and Lena's grandmother, Anna Klebe, told me how, when they were youngsters, they had been ashamed to be recognised as Germans. Anna commented: *'As a young girl, I felt such shame when Russian children came to visit and mama spoke German. So I always said, "Don't speak German in front of the other children."'* Amalia's granddaughter Kristina (b.1996) has never concealed that she is Russian-German and told me that it was *'quite cool to be Russian'*, as she grew up in a city and has many multicultural friendships. On the other hand, as we have seen in the previous chapter, Anna's granddaughter Lena, who grew up in a small village in Bavaria a decade earlier than Kristina, wanted to be perceived as *'entirely German'*.

Looking at the different generations, then, I find striking the many parallels between the parents' experiences and their children's despite the very different social environments in which they grew up. Rosenthal et al. support this view, when they write that the ways in which young people try to find belonging follow "a very similar pattern of behaviour to their parents who, in the Soviet Union, renounced their German background for an advancement in their careers" (2011:18).<sup>60</sup> Similar to my findings, the research team found that if parents

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60 Author's translation

concealed their backgrounds in the past in the Soviet Union, their children were likely to do the same in Germany.

While I looked at young people who are ‘successful’ in German society and tried to make apparent the patterns in their family dynamics, in other Russian-German families, certain patterns exist only in other forms. Russian-German social worker, Olga Dil, who conducted research as part of an anti-drugs project, working with young Russian-Germans suffering from heroine addiction, shows the presence of intergenerational patterns in these families, which, as she stresses, are often invisible to the families. She comments that one of the biggest problems is that the parents of the heroin-dependent young *Aussiedler* don’t see a connection between the sickness of their children and their own drinking behaviour; between the integration difficulties of the younger generation in Germany and their own experienced alienation and discrimination in the Soviet Union; between their own suppressed and forgotten traumatisations and the disappointments, fear and frustration of their own children (2007:31).

What becomes apparent is that, despite some research showing the burdensome intergenerational family dynamics owing to trauma and repression, there is no deep engagement with these issues in current research on Russian-Germans. Yet there is much to be looked at. As the discussions above have shown, the different generations experienced their family origin as a deficiency, feeling devalued and rejected by their societies. While my interviewees compensated for potential sources of stigmatisation, inferiority, and shame by reaching high standards (Nathanson, 1992), other families - the ones that Dil (2007) interviewed, faced similar experiences but coped differently, often turning to drugs or alcohol. What these families have in common is that they are often not aware of how they pass on their own coping mechanisms to the next generation. In fact, as the next chapter will show, some people I interviewed are very disconnected from their experiences. Although I saw how burdensome the effects of the past are, it was difficult to explore this with my interviewees and some issues, such as the presence of shame, I only began to see once I finished the fieldwork.



### **Cycle of shame and concealing**

During my fieldwork the topic of shame almost never came up directly, although symptoms of shame and behaviours to cover it were everywhere. Psychotherapist Christina Sanderson makes the point that while shame can be difficult to explore because it is painful and hard to articulate, often hidden away from self and others, simultaneously it can be “an omnipresent elephant in the room” (2015:20). Occasionally as we have seen above, individuals such as Anna Klebe, Larisa and Alexander told me of the shame or embarrassment they felt when they were younger. Some young people told me about how their parents were ashamed that they did not speak German well upon arrival. Others told me that they were ashamed of their parents’ ‘Russianness’, or their speaking Russian to them in public.

These were small episodes of shame, however I never talked to my interviewees about a deeper sense of shame, which seems to lie underneath the concealing, passing and assimilation. It was only when I began to realise that there were parallels between the generations’ experiences that it dawned on me that these concealing patterns point to something larger. I looked more closely into concealing and found that indeed concealing can be an expression of deeper, underlying emotions such as shame<sup>61</sup> (Lewis, 1995; Gilbert, 1998). As such, concealing, hiding and covering up can be seen as behaviours to mask shame (Gilbert, 1998:4). Yet what is so problematic is that while indeed ‘passing’ and assimilation can be seen as attempts to circumvent shame, they tend to produce even more shame (Barreta & Ellmers, 2009:284). Before exploring how shame can be passed on inter-generationally, I want to stress that it is difficult to come to well-grounded conclusions about underlying shame in these families through my fieldwork material. This is because, as already highlighted, not only is it difficult to explore shame, but, in order to firmly establish such patterns, longitudinal studies featuring in-depth interviews with several family members are required (Cross, 2013). While I was drawn to examine the concealing and assimilation

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<sup>61</sup> Shame theory is rooted in different schools and traditions, from psychoanalysis to anthropology and sociology. At the level of theory, whether shame is an emotion or affect is a point that currently divides much of the scholarship (Probyn, 2005:4). In the context of this chapter, I use the concept of shame much more broadly such as feeling inferior, flawed and inadequate and thus covering/avoiding it with behaviors such as hiding, concealing and denying (Gilbert, 1998:4).

strategies in my interviews, at the time I was not attuned to their intergenerational characteristics or their underlying causes and, thus, did not explore these issues explicitly with my interviewees.

The transmission of family patterns is something that has been examined in family studies<sup>62</sup>, in which researchers have tried to establish how “the behaviour and attitudes of children are shaped by their entire genealogy” (Cross, 2013:171). Drawing on intergenerational family theorists, Williams and Bray explain that patterns are developed through a process of projection at an unconscious emotional level within the family. They point out that such processes of transmission occur through communication, overt and covert expectations which are translated into behavioural patterns and which are then reinforced in the family and adopted by family members (1988: 35). Family therapists Fossum and Mason write that patterns of shame are passed down across the generations through unarticulated secrets, mysteries and myths over time (1986: 44). More recently Sanderson has written in a similar vein:

Secrets and silences are powerful incubators of shame, which can be transmitted across generations. The wounds of historical shame are typically inherited subconsciously and yet weave their way into the psyche of future generations. (2015: 51)

In the following chapter, I will explore the themes of myth and silence in the families and will show how painful these silences remain, as well as how ambivalent families feel in engaging with them. I will discuss how difficult it was for parents to reflect on the impact of their own parents’ past on them and thus how difficult it is also for the ‘generation of grandchildren’ to live with these many unresolved issues.

We could see this above in Ina’s family. There are silences, and her mother’s allusions. There are untold, un-reflected and unacknowledged experiences, common to the ‘generation of parents’, the effects of which then are seen in young

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62 Different theorists use different terminology for the transmission of patterns: from multigenerational transmission and family projection (Bowen, 1978), to intergenerational transmission analysis (Lieberman, 1978) to legacy (Boszomenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973). Each theorist and his or her respective school stress a different aspect of such transmissions.

people's behaviours. This is problematic because, as Gilbert writes, "[w]hen social shame is never discussed, it cannot be worked through or repaired" (1998:24). Similarly, Stephen Pattison writes that "attempts to avoid and circumvent shame ensure that shame is unaddressed and perpetuated" (2000: 106). Also, Elspeth Probyn writes that shame always produces effects, small or large, individual or collective and this "shame demands acknowledgement" (2005: xii). She suggests that shame is not negative in itself, and that it can even be self-transforming,<sup>63</sup> but only when it is seen for what it is (ibid). Communication about the past in the family is an important component to break cycles of shame and concealing. As such, at least from a theoretical perspective, there is the possibility that individuals and families might break with these patterns and that a first step in this process could be acknowledging familial experiences through dialogue.

I can only stress that awareness of experiences and discussions about them in the families are important. Though the roots of shame and concealing lie in the Soviet past, the key here is to understand that it is not the Soviet identification, (political) career, participation in certain organisations, or one's former beliefs that are shameful - a misunderstanding I will be exploring next. This can be true for some members of the 'generation of parents' but it cannot be a general reading of that generation's experience. Feelings of inadequacy and shame seem to originate, as my discussions have shown above, from the repressions, mistreatment and marginalisation of minorities in Soviet society. Yet I fear that if German society and academia continue to view the Soviet past only negatively and from one side, Russian-Germans will internalise these views and discourses and once again repudiate, or in Rosenthal et al.'s terminology, 'rewrite' their past, attempting to erase their former histories. Indeed, their research suggests that this process is already underway.

### 'Discredited' Soviet family history and the perpetuation of shame

This 'rewriting' became apparent to the researchers as members of the 'generation of parents' were evasive in interviews about certain aspects of their pasts,

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<sup>63</sup> In her work *From Guilt to Shame, Auschwitz and After*, Ruth Leys asserts that in Western thought on emotions, there has been a transition from survivor guilt to shame, because shame is seen as a more productive, or at least neutral, force (2007:7).

attempting to hide their once positive identification with the Soviet Union and to understate their involvement with its state apparatus (Rosenthal et al., 2011:59). Instead, interviewees emphasised their families' histories of discrimination owing to their German ethnicity. As argued in chapter Two, the researchers conclude that this generation's post-migration biographical 'rewriting' is very problematic for family dynamics and dialogue (ibid:19). This is because parents' positive identification with the Soviet Union and participation in political organisations are negated and omitted, which confuses children's perceptions of their family's history (ibid). In other words, while in the Soviet Union the 'generation of parents' felt it to be shameful to have a German background and a history of repression, from which they desperately tried to distance themselves through assimilation and success, now post-migration in German society, it is precisely their assimilation to, and success in, Soviet society that is viewed as problematic.

The researchers infer that because interviewees did not speak openly or positively to them about their Soviet beliefs or affiliations, they must have identified with the Soviet Union for opportunistic reasons. However, such a reading is problematic because there are implicit understandings of the Soviet past that underlie it, of which the researchers seem unaware. In *Everything was forever until it was no more: The last Soviet generation* anthropologist Alexei Yurchak identifies a common discourse in which socialism is viewed as being "based on a complex web of immoralities" (2005: 8). He further argues that "much of the academic and journalistic writing about Soviet socialism and post-Soviet transformation is built on assumptions that socialism was 'bad' 'immoral' and 'imposed', and/or was experienced as such by Soviet people" (2003:482). This one-sided view, he argues, misses the "internal paradox of life under socialism", namely that for many socialism "as a system of human values and as a reality of "normal life"... was not necessarily equivalent to "the state" or "ideology"; indeed, living socialism to them often meant something quite different from the official interpretations provided by the state rhetoric" (2005:8). This insight is important in speaking with former Soviet citizens to avoid simplifying their complex life histories with interpretations of 'opportunism'. This is what Gabriele Rosenthal et al. write:

In this context, one could think that the system-supporting activities of the

Germans that we have interviewed stemmed from a certain opportunism, which were tactically and in a conscious manner directed toward fitting into the political system of the Soviet Union with the goal of manoeuvring out of the outsider situation in which they found themselves after WWII. (2011:47)<sup>64</sup>

To their surprise, however, they found that it seems people not only acted from opportunistic motivations but also sincerely believed in Soviet socialism (ibid). The researchers' confusion is understandable: given the discrimination that families experienced it seems logical to conclude that there should be a contradiction between being an 'outsider' and a victim of Soviet crimes and yet believing in Soviet ideals. But this seeming discrepancy runs through many family histories, and not only among Russian-Germans, even as far back as the 'generations of grandparents'. This is, for example, the case in Lidia's and Vera's families. Despite the fact that both their grandparents were repressed and deported, they both entered into the party and defended Communism. In Vera's case, the grandfather defended even Stalin after migrating to Germany. She tells me almost in disbelief in the interview, *'It's weird [grandfather]...said quite often that he actually thinks what Stalin did was good; Yes, he said that!'* Grandfathers, such as Lidia's and Vera's, voiced support for the party or even Stalin because people often internalised socialist values even when they themselves suffered under socialism. This paradox is unsurprising for researchers working with the history of the Gulag, for this history shows, as Irina Sherbakova writes, that "both the victims as well as their oppressors believed in the same ideology and ironically did whatever they did, for the party, for socialism and for Stalin" (1992:106).

It is important to understand the nature of Soviet identification in the different generations and not to misinterpret the legacies in these families today as false consciousness or contradictions, as the Rosenthal et al. team seem to do. As I will discuss in more detail later, Rosenthal and her team see a young man's attempts to hold on to Soviet things as a contradiction of his portrayal of his family as victims. I believe that being sensitive to the complex nature of Soviet identification and its legacy will help in understanding that people can change their former views and hold contrasting ideas about their pasts at the same time, as we shall see shortly in

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the case of Tamara's mother. More nuanced discourses might also allow young people to engage with all aspects of their family histories, without their having to feel ashamed of them or obliged to automatically repudiate them as discredited and obsolete because that is how they are seen in Germany today. A negative and misinformed view of the Soviet past seems to be the primary reason why in the public sphere (e.g. in interviews with researchers) Russian-Germans seem to shy away from speaking about their former beliefs and identifications. My interviews show, however, that at home parents and grandparents often speak openly and even fondly about their socialist histories and memories.

### **Speaking about the parents' Soviet identification**

While Alyona, similar to some other interviewees, describes her mother as apolitical with little interest in Soviet politics, other parents were more engaged in their youths. Tamara tells me about her mother and aunt:

*They talk so much about their youth, my mother and her sister. They were the two eldest and they were total Pioneers [Soviet youth organisation]... they were the group leaders and so committed...they were so euphoric and did so many things in the school.*

Vera tells me that in discussion with her father about the Soviet past, he said that while he was not very much engaged with politics, her mother, by contrast, 'faithfully moved with every step of the system'. I found that, while some parents no longer speak of the meaning of the past to their children, with Alyona, telling me that 'the Soviet past is not reflected upon at all at home', in other families, the Soviet system is not only constantly compared to German society, as Nina and Tamara report to me, but the past is also questioned in light of the newer information available in Germany. Nina tells me that her mother always compares the role of women as well as the welfare system in both societies. Meanwhile Tamara tells me how her mother sees the Soviet past now:

*She still says today, she is always so shocked when she sees history documentaries. Then she always says, 'Why did we not realise that? We saw everything through rose-coloured glasses and everything was always great.' All the negative sides, all the -I call it now- genocide, or all the displacements she did not see somehow.*

As Tamara was interested in her mother's experience, she began writing a thesis about the Soviet schooling system and speaking with her mother about her

experiences, challenging some of her views, asking, for example, why she did not see the negative side of the Soviet Union. When Tamara asked her mother about her former identification, her mother replied that

*[The Soviet identification] was not a problem because she could not have known anything. 'I could not widen my horizon, there was no way. I was not given that possibility' (...). So the most important thing was to somehow develop with the possibilities that were there in the village. There was nothing else, apart from the Pioneers. And they really spent half of their youth in school and it was a very nice experience and it was fun...she always says, 'I did not know everything was so bad. I really believed that we were the most happy children in the world.'*

Konstantin also tells me that his father talked to him many times about the meaning of his Party membership. He relates that while his father identified with socialism, the party membership was not really important to him but only served career purposes.

*They did everything that one had to do to not have difficulties, or rather to have a quiet life (...) You had to be in the party. I mean, first of all, my father could not be in a leading position if he were not in the party. I mean to be in the party was an obligatory thing but the party was not really important to him. It was a practical thing, not to be so hung up on the little things. It was something that had to be done. But I know how some people see that differently. I know that.*

It is interesting that Konstantin seemed to anticipate in his response that one might see his father's membership in the party critically. When I ask about this, he tells me that on occasion he has talked about the issue in his circle of 'politically minded' friends, and they could not understand his feelings about it. Konstantin tells me that people who grew up in Germany do not understand the Soviet context and that, in his view, it was indeed possible to be in the party for career purposes and not to have believed in everything the party stood for. While this can be read as opportunistic behaviour, Konstantin seems to argue against such a reading of his father's party membership. Rather, he emphasises that his father identified with socialism but did not think much of the party. Konstantin goes on to tell me that his father was very critical and explained to him '*not to believe everything*' he was taught at school and to '*read between the lines*' in history school books.

This might initially be read as highly cynical or, indeed, as opportunistic behaviour. However, Yurchak, who analysed exactly such phenomena, namely how it was possible that people could condemn the party system of which they were a part, writes that “contrary to party claims, many Soviet people, especially the younger generations, creatively reinterpreted the meaning of the ideological symbols, de-ideologizing static dogmas and rendering communist values meaningful on their own terms” (2003:504). He goes on: this act of “reinterpretation of meaning...cannot be reduced to resistance, opportunism, or dissimulation; indeed, it allowed many Soviet people to continue to adhere to Communist ideals and to see themselves as good Soviet citizens” (ibid). Konstantin, if we remember from the previous chapters, was 14 years old when he moved with his parents from Kazakhstan and has memories of his own. He thus understands the Soviet context himself and can contextualise his parent’s views. It seems his own memories and understanding, as well as his open discussions with his father about these matters, have made Konstantin immune to the pressures to read his parents’ histories as discredited, which only reinforces the importance of open dialogue to avoid feelings of shame. This, as we shall come to see shortly, is not the case for all young people.

### **Social pressure to ‘leave behind’ the Soviet past**

The contrast between Rosenthal et al.’s conclusion and what young people tell me above about their parents, shows once more, how there is a private and public remembering among this group. Rosenthal et al. write that also after

(...) migrating there are elements of one’s own life story, which are considered to be discreditable such as identification with the political system of the Soviet Union, participation in political organisations, the entry of Russian nationality on a passport, or even the disavowal of German family background. (2010:166)<sup>65</sup>.

Elsewhere, Rosenthal and Viola Stephan write that “there is the danger for the families and especially for the descendants that today there are discreditable elements of the family past, such as a pro-socialist attitudes and denial or rejection of ties to ethnic Germans” (2009a:178).<sup>66</sup> Saying however, that there are “elements of one’s own life story considered to be discreditable” leaves much unexplained -

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65 Author's translation

66 Author's translation



in both instances the researchers write in the passive voice, making it difficult to discern who exactly views these elements as discreditable. I make this point not to be pedantic about sentence construction, but to point out that the researcher is not a neutral observer in describing social reality. In a different article, the researchers write that it is the expectations and the anti-Soviet attitudes in the general public that lead people to be silent about their Soviet identification and explain why in their interviews this generation avoided speaking about their Soviet pasts (2011:25). This is a key observation that needs to be emphasised more; for, indeed, there is a social expectation that, as ethnic Germans, these families need to put aside their histories and ‘become German’ as I have explored throughout the previous chapters. This has also been observed by Dietz and Hilkes:

Most native-born Germans expect Aussiedler [re-settlers] to learn German and to adapt to the new social and cultural surroundings because of their supposed German ethnicity, rejecting their Russian background as negative or ‘second class’. (1994:277)<sup>67</sup>

Members of the ‘generations of parents’ with whom I spoke did not behave in the interviews as they did with the Rosenthal et al. team. Perhaps they did not feel they needed to put aside their histories as ‘second class’ and were more open with regards to their Soviet identification. They were not evasive about their careers or their Soviet identification. People spoke nostalgically of their successful careers, their responsibilities, their social status. Some spoke about their changing views, stressing as Larisa did, for example, that after migrating to Germany her understanding of the Soviet Union and what she had learned in school ‘*is now on its head*’. In my experience, the ‘generation of parents’ were at times easier to recruit than the children. As such, I became curious as to why there was this discrepancy in our research findings and I realised that what and how something is said or revealed also depends very much on the interview context. People, as I have discussed, can be careful in how they express themselves and the interview method of biographical interviews amplifies these problems. If I, as a researcher, sit as a ‘neutral listener’, silent about my interests, trying to ‘catch out’ people’s identifications, then what I will hear, especially from this group, is exactly what they think is expected from them and will consequently give a ‘presentable story’.

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<sup>67</sup> Author's translation

I could see this with some young people who thought that they needed to give me a presentable story about their parents' pasts. They seemed to be sensitive to how their family's history might be seen and interpreted in the wider society and tried to distance their parents from it. Lidia, for example, tells me that her parents '*were not too entangled*' with the Soviet Union. Similarly, Vera tries to distance her parents from this 'discredited' history. When I ask her to tell me about what her mother thinks of the Soviet past today, she tells me that her parents '*have nothing to do with it any more*'; to them, she says, '*the Soviet past has died, so to speak*'. 'Oh really', I reply. Vera pauses for some time and then, surprisingly, says:

*No, no, that's actually not right. That's actually only my view, that's my interpretation. That is not true. At home they are still that. They watch Russian TV. They follow that. They know more about politics there and what happens in Russia than here in Germany.*

Both women's grandparents as well as Vera's mother had been politically affiliated with the Soviet Union, as other parents discussed in this chapter had been. While Tamara and Konstantin are able to read their parents' careers and ties from the context of Soviet history, for other young people, such as Vera, this was more difficult.

The way researchers read and reproduce one-sided views of late socialism does not help in working out these complexities. As noted above, Rosenthal et al. suggest there is a contradiction in some Russian-Germans' relationship to their families' Soviet pasts. The research team describe one situation to which I will briefly attend.

One of the researchers, Viola Stephan, accompanied a grandson to the grave of his grandfather. She had herself interviewed the grandfather previously and wanted to pay her respects. When it starts to rain, Stephan notices that the grandson puts on his red jacket with the inscription 'CCCR' (Russian for USSR). Rosenthal and Stephan write about this encounter: "Contrary to the established we-image and public-image it seemed that [the grandson] did not seem to see a contradiction between, on the one hand, disclosing a Soviet identification with his red jacket and, on the other, speaking of the grandfather's suffering as a German" (2011:

139). They add that “it needs to be considered that the grandfather himself identified with the political and social system of the Soviet Union” (ibid).

Again, I can only stress that there is misunderstanding in such an analysis, which stems from a conception of the Soviet Union as unchanged for 70 years. For while the grandfather identified with a system that had caused his own suffering, the grandson’s identification, which he symbolises by wearing a red ‘CCCR’ jacket, is not necessarily with the same system under which his grandfather had suffered. I have learned this not only from the scholarly literature but from my interviewees who made such distinctions. For example, Alexander, who grew up in the 1970s and 80s tells me his views on the Soviet Union:

*My Soviet Union was very different to the one my parents lived in. If I had gone through what they did, I’d say something else now. But this was not my experience (...) I mean there are so many different aspects to it, well, of course, with the knowledge about it now, I mean today I look back differently you know. We in the periphery we did not know anything, we lived in our own little world.*

‘But what do you mean you did not know anything?’ I ask him. ‘You knew about your parents under Stalin.’ To which he replies:

*Yes, but look, my mother experienced all the repressions but always said, ‘Don’t talk about things of which you don’t know anything,’ when we spoke about Stalin. To me Stalin was a historical figure, he did not mean anything to me. I grew up in a Soviet Union where basically anything could be said and done, I mean, not everything but almost.*

As Alexander describes here, the Soviet Union in which he grew up was different from the one in which his parents had suffered. His comments illustrate that to understand the attitudes of different generations of Russian-Germans, it is necessary to conceive of the Soviet experience in different phases, rather than flattening its history into one period of terror and suppression. This approach does more justice to those who really did live in terror under Stalin’s regime and those who lived in late socialism and felt far removed from the repression.

As Yurchak argues, for this period of late socialism, which spanned from the late 1950s until its collapse, we need a language that can capture the negative as well as the positive values, one “that does not reduce the description of Socialist reality

to dichotomies of the official and the unofficial, the state and the people, and of moral judgements shaped by the Cold war ideologies” (2005:9). Rather, a language is needed which can show the realities of the “actually existing socialism where control, coercion, alienation, fear, and moral quandaries were irreducibly mixed with ideals, communal ethics, dignity, creativity, and care for the future” (2005:10). Such a reading would help in more sensitively examining parents’ experiences and investigating these legacies in their complexity.

In this light, younger generations’ holding on to Soviet things might be seen as a means through which they try to work out their loyalties to different and multifaceted histories. Understanding and acknowledging such loyalties in no way contradicts attempts to understand their family’s victimhood under Stalin at the same time. The late anthropologist Daphne Berdahl, who studied the phenomenon of ‘*Ostalgie*’ in former East-Germans’ consumption of East-German products, writes that ‘*Ostalgie*’ practices reveal a highly complicated relationship between personal histories, disadvantage, dispossession and the betrayal of promises (2010:59). She contends that “these practices thus not only reflect and constitute important identity transformations in a period of intense social discord, but also reveal the politics, ambiguities, and paradoxes of memory, nostalgia, and resistance, all of which are linked to the paths, diversions, and multiple meanings of East German things” (ibid). I would argue that this applies to the Soviet past in these families. Of course, when this past is burdened, to engage in such endeavours is not unproblematic, as Berdahl points out in *(N)Ostalgie for the present: Memory, longing, and East German things*:

Indeed, one of the principal criticisms of *Ostalgie* is that it provides a means of eliding questions of complicity, responsibility, and accountability in relation to a burdened GDR past – it ‘neglects,’ as one newspaper account put it, ‘the necessary *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* [mastering of the past]’. (1999:205)

This is possibly what Rosenthal and Stephan try to point out when they interpret the young man’s identification with the USSR, which he symbolised by wearing a ‘CCCR’ jacket, as something that might hinder his ability to understand his family legacy properly. However, as Berdahl also points out, the past is not something that can be mastered. Rather she describes historical memory “as an on-going

process of understanding, negotiation, and contestation” (ibid). She thus stresses that Ostalgic practices “reflect and constitute struggles over the control and appropriation of historical knowledge, shared memories, and personal recollections” and argues that to belittle such attempts can be read as a hegemonic process to silence certain visions of the past and present (ibid). If young generations growing up in Germany internalise stereotypical thinking about the Soviet Union, seeing it only as a regime of repression, then they will not be able to understand their parents and their family histories properly. They will not understand the ambivalent legacies they have inherited and consequently will not understand where their shame really originates nor how to expunge it.

## Conclusion

I began this chapter looking at the post-migration situations in some of my interviewees’ families. I showed how difficult the struggles in some of them are and, in particular, how heavy the burden can be for the younger generation who not only deal with their parents’ marginalisation but also feel they must compensate for their parents’ social marginalisation. Discussing Ina’s situation, I showed how the family’s history of repressions and trauma, coupled with the family’s experience of social marginalisation, influence the different family members and how difficult it is for Ina to speak openly with her parents. I argued that the influence of the post-migration struggles on family dialogue should not be underestimated. For, while family history and dynamics, as well as predetermined discourses, do matter, the social marginalisation and outsider status not only overshadowed attempts to open dialogue, but also brought forth old patterns of behaviour that had been adopted in the Soviet Union as coping mechanisms.

It consequently became important to look back on the parents’ sovietisation and experiences in the Soviet Union, in order to delineate the legacies that the young have inherited. I argued that, although young people might only vaguely be aware of it, they follow in the footsteps of their parents in hiding and concealing their backgrounds. By delving into the experiences of the ‘generation of parents’, I tried to show that, similarly to their children, some parents (and even grandparents) had previously experienced their family backgrounds as deficient and were ashamed of their Germanness as well as their low status. I argued that parents are often not

very reflective about this and that this constitutes a problem for the children. For these unexamined experiences, secrets and silences show up again as shame that needs to be concealed by the younger generation. I pointed out that while intergenerational patterns of shame seem to be present, this needs to be explored in detail through further research. My findings have their limits as I was not aware of shame during fieldwork. In fact, because the experiences were so well buried in the interviews, it took me a while to recognise shame's presence.

However, what was not buried or concealed, at least in the interviews that I conducted, was the parents' Soviet histories: what they did, what they believed and what they think today. This stands in stark contrast to the experience of the Rosenthal et al. team who seem to have encountered very different behaviour from the 'generation of parents'. While they are right to point out that there are new, post-migration dangers for family dialogue and dynamics, precisely because of new practices of concealing and 'rewritings' of family histories, it is also vitally important to stress how narrow understandings of the Soviet pasts in German public and academic discourses lead people to be silent about their pasts. The contrast between Rosenthal et al.'s conclusion and my fieldwork results shows that what is portrayed in public is not necessarily what people speak about at home. The logical conclusion is, therefore, not that the Soviet past is not talked about because people are ashamed of their former identification, but rather that it is a reaction to how people think their past is viewed. A critical question arises from this comparison: what will happen to a family memory that seems to be at odds with how it is presented and communicated to the public? Will one version override the other at some point, or can these versions co-exist simultaneously and for how long? Perhaps only time will tell, but given the history of shame, concealing and assimilation behaviours in this group's experience, the cycle is likely to go on.

I believe the way the Soviet past is currently viewed only adds to this pressure and urge to leave behind one's histories. In this context, I engaged with discourses about the Soviet pasts that implicitly conceptualise the Soviet experience as negative, showing how such problematic assumptions lead to mistaken readings of how people relate their former histories. In fact, my interviewees of the

‘generation of grandchildren’ who were to some extent socialised in the Soviet Union resist such a reading of their parents’ pasts, as Konstantin showed.

To understand the parents’ sovietisation should help the younger generation to see how difficult this transition from Soviet to German really was for them. The ‘generation of parents’ saw themselves as Soviet citizens, and internalised Soviet logic, even about the deportations and repressions, as we shall come to see in the next chapter where I will look at how Russian-Germans speak in the family about the repressions and the grandparents’ histories. We will see how difficult it is for them to break with their socialisation.

If this chapter showed that the Soviet legacy to the three generations of Russian Germans is one of shame and concealment, the next chapter will show that it is also one of oblivion and ambivalence.

## Chapter 7.

*'I can't ask, so grandpa how was it in Russia!'* How families speak about painful memories.

### Introduction

In this chapter I will look at how Russian-German families remember the repression and deportation of the 'generation of grandparents': how they reflected about these experiences with me as a researcher, but also how the different generations speak about them as a family. What emerged from my fieldwork is how difficult it is today for the descendants to speak about the past not only in their families, but also in the interviews that I conducted. When interviewing especially younger generations, I found there is an air of oblivion about the past and a very profound separateness and dislocation from their histories.

The roots lie in a culture of enforced silence in which speaking about and sharing one's pain was practically impossible. This silence was internalised, transmitted in the family and normalised. With the passing decades it turned, as I will discuss shortly, into oblivion, making it hard for people to recognise its effects on them. In other words, there are historical-cultural reasons not only why Soviet-socialised families know very little about their family histories, but also why it is difficult for them to recognise and speak about the continuing effects of the past on their lives. On top, as also explored in the previous chapter, it seems that the parents' past identification with the Soviet Union and its ideology makes this process of assessing the impact even more difficult for them.

These historical-cultural reasons, as will become clearer, also help explain why Western understandings about the after-effects of traumatic histories must be applied with circumspection in analysing Russian-Germans' experiences. This is because if we only look at this legacy through the 'presence of trans-generational



trauma', we might miss the profound oblivion and separateness from family history and the reasons behind it. We will thus also miss the full picture why it is so difficult for people to speak about their histories. Jehanne Gheith explains:

A series of historical and cultural factors have combined so that many of the ways that Russians experience and deal with the Gulag are sharply different from what most Western readers expect from stories of trauma; an emphasis on the non-narrative is one of these. This emphasis came into being for historical reasons. (2007:161)

Similarly Maria Tumarkin highlights the non-narrative aspect of remembering in Soviet families, when she writes:

I have come to see that in the Soviet Union the majority of memories of traumatic events were not captured in narrative but remained a kind of raw psychic material channelled and performed through people's bodies, habits (conscious and unconscious), behaviours and attitudes. (2009:8)

This explains why exploring the after-effects of the past with Russian-Germans through interviews can also be a problem of methodology. If one is interested in understanding how Russian-Germans have been impacted by these histories then interviews – in which people have to narrate their feelings about them, are not necessarily the best way. Through my fieldwork I found that, while it can be difficult to engage interviewees in a dialogue about the past and its impact, moments when the 'tape was off' as well as close relationships with some of my respondents offered at times more insights into people's inner worlds. These insights surprisingly point, despite many differences, to similarities with work concerning the 'second generation' in Holocaust survivor families.

Drawing on this scholarly literature, the second part of this chapter will show how a legacy of silence and ambivalence shapes intergenerational dynamics and communication in my interviewees' families. I will describe moments in my fieldwork when I experienced how silences affect the different generations and how heavy the past can still be for many. In fact, we will see how 'dangerous' people perceive remembering and how ambivalent both the 'generation of parents' and young people are in engaging with their histories. This discussion will also show how the lack of engagement of the 'generation of parents' with their parents'

histories influences the younger generation and how they become the ones who might feel obliged to deal with the impact of the past.

What will emerge is how through the language of oblivion and ambivalence that we might come closest to understanding the legacy of Soviet repression in these families today, perhaps more so than in the language of trans-generational trauma; although, as I will discuss with two examples, trauma vocabulary might become increasingly more important to younger generations who, no longer influenced by Soviet culture and socialisation, are looking to understand their inheritances. But before I arrive at these points, let me start with my initial attempts to engage my interviewees in speaking about their family histories, what these encounters tell us and then proceed to show how prolonged relationships as well as moments when the ‘tape was off’ allowed for different insights. It is these latter insights that helped me to look back and reinterpret some of my interviews through an understanding of ambivalence. In this way we can see how my younger interviewees are deeply polarised and are at the same time interested, concerned and yet reluctant to engage with their family histories.

#### Legacy of oblivion: *“A silence that does not know its name”*

Throughout the previous chapters, I have discussed how many of my younger interviewees were reluctant to commit to an interview and even though I tried to communicate that I wished to create a space of sharing and trust, young people felt uneasy with the prospect of speaking about their histories which they felt they did not know. They told me that they felt ‘uncertain’, ‘stupid’ or even ‘embarrassed’ for not knowing certain aspects. Indeed, my interviewees seemed to have very little information about their histories and in some cases the painful experience of deportation was deeply buried in these reflections. Anton of the ‘generation of grandchildren’, for example, when telling me about how his grandparents ended up in Kazakhstan, jumped over the time of the deportation entirely and narrated that his grandparents ‘*moved*’ there. To my question whether Anton ever speaks about the past with his grandparents, he replied that his grandfather ‘*always talks about the past*’ and that he has heard his stories ‘*many times*’. Yet while Anton thought this way, like many of my interviewees, he knew very little about what had happened to them. He knew of course that they did not

‘move’ to Kazakhstan but had been deported there. Yet it was as if Anton lacked a language to tell me about this and the more I asked for details, the longer his silences lasted. In the second part of this chapter we will hear more from Anton’s family and see how his grandparents’ experiences of deportation from Ukraine still affect his parents very much, though I would not have known any of this, if I had also not met his family and spent time with them outside of the interview context.

Realising that my interviewees had very little information about their family histories and felt uncomfortable talking about them, I began, as already pointed out in Chapter Three, to interview other generations to better understand what is known and not known, what is talked about and what is not and why. At the same time, I began incorporating introspective and reflective questions into my interviews. I no longer tried so much to elicit narrations about the family history but attempted rather to see how my interviewees thought about the impact of repressions and deportations; how they as grandchildren and children thought about the internal impact and the emotional intricacies of growing up in their families. Yet this too was not easy for my interviewees. With few exceptions such as Tamara and Flora in the ‘generation of grandchildren’, from whom we will hear later, many of my interviewees did not see anything unusual in their families.

### **Speaking about the after-effects of the past**

When I asked young people about signs of trauma in their families wondering whether they perceived their grandparents as traumatised by what they had experienced, Vera replied that she did not think of her grandparents as such. I tried to unpack my question by saying that I wondered whether the repression under Communism and the deportations of the grandparents might have impacted our families, including us, to which Vera responded as I have already quoted in the previous chapter, that her grandfather in fact believed in Communism and Stalin. I am not sure how Vera meant this, but it seems her reply suggested that believing in Communism and trauma did not fit together. When I broached the subject again and introduced trans-generational trauma insights into our conversation, wanting to know whether the deportation left a mark on her parents or herself, Vera’s answer here, was something that I came across with other interviewees:

*K: Do you think that the past left traces, I mean the persecution and expulsion?*

*Vera: traces? No, I don't know.*

*K: I mean do you think that what happened to your grandparents influenced your parents or yourself somehow?*

*Vera: in what way influenced?*

*K: well I mean maybe there are things that they don't wish to talk about? Things like 'oh we did not talk about these things' when you ask them something.*

*Vera: Yes exactly, that is exactly what my father would say that he doesn't remember and then I think well that's possible, but then you cannot just forget things, I mean he was there.*

When I enquire about Vera's comment about her father, she tells me that she noticed that especially her father is secretive about the past. While, as explored in the previous chapter, it is common to tell the children about discrimination, parents can be nonetheless secretive about their feelings and this is no different with Vera's father. In the interview I sense that this secrecy affects her and when I ask about it, she shrugs, but adds that she bought a book about the Soviet army as she thought that perhaps her father's silences might have to do with the notorious Soviet army discipline. After reading the book, Vera tried to initiate a conversation but it did not lead anywhere. Vera added that she has to think more about trauma. '*Perhaps it is possible*', she said, but '*as a scientist*' (Vera holds a PhD in natural sciences), she does not know '*much about trauma*'. '*It is not ruled out*', she said, followed by a long silence and this is where we left the conversation about symptoms of trauma in her family.

In the 'generation of parents' and 'generation of grandparents' people never used the term 'trauma', or thought and described themselves as 'traumatised'. While I did not pursue 'questions of trauma' with the grandparents, as it was more than clear how they were affected, with the 'generation of parents' I did try to talk about the effects of the past on them. But also here, except for one parent telling me in passing about '*all the grief in our DNA*', parents similar to the 'generation of grandchildren' rarely talked about burdensome legacies, silences or overwhelming emotions of their own accord.

This was curious. Informed by work on trans-generational trauma particularly from the 'second generation' in Holocaust survivor families, I expected some

tangible presence of memory of the traumatic events, a post-memory, which Marianne Hirsch describes as “a structure of inter-generational and trans-generational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience” (2012:6). As already discussed in detail in Chapter Two, the ‘second generation’s’ writings describe post-memory as a very powerful and emotional, even overwhelming connection to their parents’ histories, something which can even overtake one’s own life and can be experienced as a burden. In my interviews however, there seemed to be no traumatic recall and no such powerful connection to the past. And when I tried to engage people in a reflective way, it seemed that my interviewees did not quite understand what I was after. Here are two excerpts from conversations with members of the ‘generation of parents’ that illustrate this clearly. Previously Alexander told me that both his parents were deported, his uncles and aunts sent to the labour army. Some of them never returned. Alexander grew up in the shadow of this past: he told me that although he knew about the camp, it was never addressed directly. So I begin to ask Alexander how this might have shaped him.

*K: And how were you affected by your parents’ experiences?*

*Alexander: how was I affected...Hmm (long pause)*

*K: Did you perhaps feel a burden?*

*Alexander: I don’t understand what you mean by a burden.*

*K. Or maybe there were things perhaps you wanted to know or talk about and could not with your parents? Before you told me that there were things you did not speak about such as the camp.*

*Alexander: Yes, I can explain it on a very basic level. Let’s say, when a person is trapped in some situation in which he cannot change anything and you had to conform, to surrender and you couldn’t do anything, then you are just being broken (...). I think this is universal that we have this sense of dignity and when this is trampled on we’re alerted but if you don’t have a possibility to do anything about it, then sooner or later you’ll die from inside. From always swallowing it. And when the war ends and you swallowed it all, you will never tell anyone. You want yourself to forget, not even to think of telling others.*

In this conversation Alexander goes on to explain to me why he thinks that survivors of the Gulag did not speak. In several more paragraphs he tells me of the crushing effect of the loss of agency and dignity and its effects on identity. Yet what stood out to me is how difficult it seemed for Alexander to think about this in connection to himself. Every time I tried to bring it back to him, asking him what this meant for his life, he replied thoughtfully yet always remained abstract in his

attempts to speak about the silences in his family. For Tatiana (b. 1964), daughter of Amalia Schmitt, it was no less difficult to relate to these types of questions. Similarly to Vera and Alexander above, Tatiana asked me what I meant by impact, adding:

*You see I was born in 1964, after all that. I mean there was fear, why were they silent, why did they not speak about anything? I know that they were scared and lived in fear. I know that. Grandmother once told me that they had even no right to harvest their own field. There was nothing to eat. That was after the Revolution, before the war, they went to their fields to harvest and someone told on them and so she went to jail. But, as my grandmother was very skilled, she wrote a letter to Krupskaya and she released her from jail.*

I asked Tatiana about the impact of the repression and deportation on herself and she responded that her ancestors lived in fear, which is why they did not dare to speak. Yet, by starting her reply with the fact that she was born after these repressive times, she spoke as though these silences and fear ended with the previous generations and had not affected her. I will shortly come back to Tatiana and say a few more words about why she curiously weaves Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin's wife, into her story and explore what this might tell us about how former Soviet citizens remember and speak about Soviet trauma. But first let us explore why questions of trans-generational trauma seem so alien to Soviet socialised families.

### **Soviet silence: Historical-cultural dimensions**

During my initial interviewing period, answers like those by Vera, Alexander or Tatiana puzzled me. I wondered: were my interviewees really not touched by trauma, did my interviewees really not experience their parents and grandparents as traumatised? Had I perhaps projected a set of meanings derived from a particular catastrophe, onto another group without justification, I asked myself. Maybe it was simply a matter of unfamiliar terminology with which I tried to explore the after-effects of the Soviet repression. Or could it be as Catherine Merridale ponders "that notions of psychological trauma are genuinely irrelevant to Russian minds, as foreign as the imported machinery that seizes up and fails in a Siberian winter?" (cited in Tumarkin, 2013:221).

While it might seem that questions of trauma are irrelevant, in fact some of my interviewees themselves suggested it above, as the previous discussion and this chapter will show: burdensome legacies of silences, shame, fear and pain are not absent in Russian-German families. However, there is deep unawareness about them. This has not least to do with a culture of enforced silence as well as Soviet socialisation with which particularly the ‘generation of parents’ identified. Catherine Merridale is thus onto something when she writes how out of place Western understandings of the after-effects of violence seem when applied to the Soviet context. She writes that she arrived at the conclusion that it is right to be critical of the application of trauma theory as well as trans-generational trauma to Soviet citizens, since she found no evidence of it in her interviews. While, as she contends, suffering is universal, trauma is culturally specific<sup>68</sup> and thus how people deal with the consequent issues depends on many other factors. She explains that her interviewees saw themselves as children of the repressed, victims of the totalitarian system “as the bearers of their parents’ standard, but not as people with injuries of their own” (2000:331). This point comes out well in both responses by Alexander and Tatiana above who speak about the victimhood of their parents and grandparents but do not speak about themselves in the same train of thought. When Merridale asked her interviewees why trans-generational trauma seems not to apply to them, people offered their explanations and she reasons that it was another instance of Soviet collectivism; as the nuclear family was often missing, grandparents took charge of children and the Soviet child was from an early age in the school clubs, the young communists, the brigades and the pioneer camps. As such Merridale concludes:

The opportunity for a parent’s secret pain to be transmitted, by words or in long silences, was nearly always limited. The opportunities for children to nurse and discuss their fears and phobias, too, were curtailed by the ethos of the group. (ibid)

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68 This view that trauma is indeed culturally specific is increasingly argued in academic discussions. Veena Das for example argues that the model of “trauma and witnessing that has been bequeathed to us from Holocaust studies cannot be simply transported to other contexts in which violence is embedded into different patterns of sociality” (2007:33). In *Postcolonial witnessing: Trauma out of bounds*, Stef Craps writes that trauma theory is in need of reshaping and resituating because it needs to take account of the specific social-historical contexts in which trauma narratives are produced (2013:5). Craps argues that though trauma concepts are often considered to be a single, uniform and universal phenomenon, the concept of psychological trauma developed out of the history of Western modernity (ibid:1) dealing with Euro-American experiences of industrialisation, gender relations and modern warfare (ibid:3).

Here Merridale draws on ‘second generation’ literature, arguing that in the Soviet case, the transmission of pain and fear through speech or silence was on some level blocked by collectivist culture. Also Maria Tumarkin brings our attention to the difference between the Holocaust and Soviet legacy, stressing that in fact we have to look closer at silence itself in the Soviet case as this difference between the two legacies seems to stem from the roots and nature of the silence. She writes:

Silence which is consciously chosen by parents to protect their children from the dire and tangible consequences of knowing something undesirable about family history is not the same as silence which functions as, primarily, a reflection of deep fear or shame. (2009:7)

This Soviet silence, Tumarkin continues, is different “if not entirely extraneous, to silence as an outright psychic repression” (ibid). In other words, unlike the Holocaust survivor households, silence in Soviet families was often not only a psychological mechanism to protect the psyche and the descendants from painful or shameful knowledge. Tumarkin contends that it “was an externally imposed existential condition and, in no uncertain terms, a matter of life and death (...)” (ibid). Silence was politically and socially enforced and as such “[c]owed and silenced, the majority of Stalin’s victims stoically suppressed traumatic memories<sup>69</sup> and emotions”, explains Orlando Figes and adds that “[i]t was Stalin’s lasting achievement to create a whole society in which stoicism and passivity were social norms” (2007:607). Yet also this silence has effects on the family as Tumarkin further explains:

Of course, when silence is externally imposed it does not mean that it will not become deeply internalised. The external coercion of the State mutates into cultural codes of silence and it becomes a cultural ‘given’. The cultural codes then become internalised as conscious or unconscious self-censorship. Silence becomes embodied, transmitted through family and normalised. (2009:7)

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69 In one of the last stories ‘*Chief of political control*’ of *Kolyma Tales* (1994), Varlam Shalamov provides a fictionalised but nonetheless very insightful way to understand why people suppressed their emotions in the Gulag even when they were encouraged to speak. He relates a scene when after Stalin’s death a new era had begun and a ‘chief of political control’ came to the hospital ward to investigate ‘traumatism’. He was not interested in physical trauma from work or frostbites but in psychological trauma from inflicted beatings and physical torture by their foreman. Although as, Shalamov puts it, nearly all of the people in their cots were suffering from this kind of trauma, no one said a word about their psychological trauma. He writes that in a time when speaking was dangerous and trust unheard of, no one dared to speak of psychological trauma.



It became a “life-time habit of silence” (Merridale, 2000:22) and to more differentiate this all-pervading silence, Olga Shevchenko and Oksana Sariksova stress that in the Soviet context there ought to be a distinction between “silence” and “oblivion”, because, as they contend, silence “presupposes an element of self-awareness and recognition of absence, [while] oblivion suggests a silence that does not know its name, an absence so thoroughly naturalised that it becomes unnoticed (...)” (2014:165). Relatedly, Gabriele Rosenthal writes (2010) that even though societal, institutional, group-specific as well as family-specific internalised rules determine what, how and when something can or cannot be talked about among Russian-Germans, these rules and the strong memory regulation are out of people’s awareness. In short, today people don’t know that they do not know nor why they do not know.

This decade-long enforced silence and the absence of a wider social framework to speak about experiences of repression, deportations, exile and Gulag, produced of course a different kind of legacy for the descendants. Thus in *Our parents weren't dissidents: The multiple legacies of the Gulag*, Jehanne Gheith compares the Soviet and Holocaust legacies through commentary on Marianne Hirsch’s work on post-memory. She writes that while post-memory, as Hirsch defined it, describes the experience of those growing up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, also

(...) the children of the Gulag were certainly “shaped” in this way, they were, more often than not, shaped by the absence of narrative rather than its presence. Thus, these children were filling in a different kind of evacuation than were those of parents who survived the Holocaust. (2011:5)

As such, she stresses, “one of the biggest differences between Holocaust post-memory and Gulag post-memory is that for the children of those exiled and executed in the Gulag memories had to be made in the absence of narrative and in the absence of information” (2011:29). Yet we have to be clear here, if we study the ‘second generation’ literature carefully, what emerges is that also in Holocaust survivor homes, at the time when the Holocaust consciousness was inchoate and the events of genocide not clearly separate from WWII there was no concrete information, nor narratives about the past, as Arele Stein explains in *Reluctant witnesses: Survivors, their children, and the rise of Holocaust consciousness*

(2014:5). Similarly, Eva Hoffman writes that the legacy her parents passed on was not a mastered past (2004:34). She grew up with a chaos of emotions and incoherent narratives (ibid:9). However, I think what Gheith importantly points us toward is how, unlike in the Gulag aftermath, the inheritors of the Holocaust legacy as Stein puts it, could become from the 1980s onwards the “coaxers and facilitators of their parents’ stories and eventually producers of Holocaust stories themselves” (2014:5). This as she argues, became possible, facilitated by the openings in the culture that challenged silences, overturned taboos and blurred the public and the private (ibid). This was of course, a very different environment from the one in which the ethnic German ‘second generation’ grew up.

I have explored this already in Chapter Two. While in the West a culture emerged that turned to questions of the after-effects of WWII, taking trauma seriously<sup>70</sup>, in the Soviet case, except for *Memorial* and committed individuals, (post)-Soviet society hardly grappled with ‘how many were killed’ let alone questioned how the past shaped the younger generations. For generations, no one was interested in these experiences; there was no culture that had created instruments and tools as well as a vocabulary to bring to the fore how a culture of silencing, fear, conformity and censorship shaped the internal lives and the social fabric of generations. In this culture it was not possible to question the past and its effects on the psyche. This is a point that Marianne Hirsch seems to make. Hirsch, who grew up in a Holocaust survivor household in Romania in her youth and migrated as a youngster to the United States, describes how her migration out of a particular memory culture allowed for a different engagement with her parents’ past. She writes she could not interpret her post-memories in Romania at first and they were not visual to begin with, that “(...) it was only much later, after leaving Romania and the censored history to which my age-mates and I were exposed there, that I saw images of what I had until then only conjured in my imagination” (2012:4, my italics). The Soviet inheritance was a culture with a censored history. People internalised this censorship, thereby limiting how much they could reflect on the

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70 Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtmann explored in their book *The empire of trauma* the historical shifts in Western thought on trauma. They trace how trauma shifted from a 'suspect condition', tarred illegitimate, in the 1970s and 1980s to one that is recognised as a legitimate status in contemporary society (2009:5).

tragedies that befell their families. For generations people lived by tacit rules not to ask unnecessary questions, to keep a distance to others and their affairs and this has long-lasting effects stretching into the younger generations today. It still affects the ways in which people can remember and communicate in their families and deal with their family histories. Thus, it is not surprising that while the family experiences can be permeated by silences, secrets, depression and shame, even violence and alcoholism as I have seen in some families, simultaneously people struggled to make a connection between these phenomena and terrible events long passed.

### **Comforting speaking in difficult times**

Of course, in Soviet culture people found other ways to sooth their sorrows. Merridale, for example points out that Soviet citizens who learned to remain silent about their fates, also learned to tell their stories in ways that comforted them, rather than distressed them (2000:17) and this is also how we can interpret Tatiana's mentioning of Nadezhda Kruspakaya saving her grandmother from jail above. I had talked to Tatiana about what it meant to her to remember these painful histories and while she mentioned the fear and the silences in her family, she also responded in ways that suggested that her family had 'mastered' their hardship, that they had survived despite all the difficulties by incorporating a popular Soviet myth of Nadezhda Krupskaya coming to the defence of thieving peasants (Weesson, 1978:18) into their family remembrance. Tatiana's narrative not only confirms Gheith's point about memories made in the absence of information (and the ways the coming generations had to fill this void with different memories), this myth also reveals how people in great difficulty invented help from heroic figures and strengthened their protagonists in times when they were powerless. This cultural remnant of projecting strength in difficult times, I found also in other interviews. If we remember in the previous chapter Larisa thought it important not to show weakness. When I decided to go through the interviews and look for descriptions of grandparents and parents, young people described their family members as: happy people whose fate one could not see; as people who did not dwell on the past; as hard-working, pragmatic and accepting.

Even remaining silent and not talking about one's fate could be seen as a positive aspect, a coping mechanism. It is not surprising then that grandchildren respect their elders' silences, as we will come to see in the last part of this chapter. This is a cultural trait that also shows up in literary work. While Ruth Wajnryb, a member of the 'second generation' in a Holocaust survivor family writes in *Silence: How tragedy shapes talk* that her research into silences is also about "the pathology of silence" (2001:25), Herta Müller, Nobel prize winner for literature and member of the 'middle generation' in an ethnic German family from Romania talks in her work about how she views her mother's silences as a strength. Müller finds that "[r]emembering can also destroy" adding that, "[i]t is always said that speaking about something will make things easier or it will resolve something, but it is also the other way around"<sup>71</sup>. Here Müller speaks specifically about how she learned this truth from her mother who was deported into a Soviet labour camp and who dealt with her fate through silence. She says about her mother:

She never talked about [her Gulag incarceration]. What an internal strength. Silence is also an inner strength. Silence is not only negative. It is always thought that if one speaks about something, that it will solve a problem. I do not believe in that. I believe that silence can have the same effect, it can also protect. Everyone has to decide for themselves what protects in speaking and what protects in silence.<sup>72</sup>

Müller's thoughts on how silence operated in her family are useful, because her experiences are drawn from living in an ethnic German community under a Communist regime in Romania, which parallels how Russian-Germans lived. This discussion about silence and not speaking is helpful as background because it enables us to understand in the last part of this chapter, why some of my interviewees do not wish to disturb their grandparents' silences.

### **(Soviet) cultural remnants**

There were other cultural ways that might have helped in alleviating people's pain: a Russian folklore tradition of believing in fate and hardship, a collectivist culture and Soviet ideology with a different sense of justice in which one's own suffering was seen to have served a greater purpose. Orlando Figes insightfully

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71 Herta Müller (2013) Author's translation

72 Herta Müller (2012) Author's translation.

explains that the Soviet narrative offered a different type of consolation because it assured the victims that their sacrifices served collective goals (2007:637). He stresses that the idea of a common Soviet purpose was not a propaganda myth, but that it had in fact really “helped people to come to terms with their suffering by giving them a sense that their lives were validated by the part they had played in the struggle for the Soviet ideal” (ibid). All these factors might have helped different generations deal with and accept their fate. Perhaps this was what Vera suggested above when she mentioned that her grandfather believed in Communist ideology. Also Alexander displayed this sort of acceptance when he told me why he thought that the Soviet regime considered it necessary to deport the local German population. He did so with no resentment in his voice, but simply told me that it was ‘evident’ that the Germans would be exiled as soon as the War broke out, otherwise they would have fought on the German side. This justification was invented and in fact Alexander’s own family members fought in the Red Army, but I could also see that to some extent this ‘explanation’ somehow helped Alexander to believe that ethnic Germans were not a targeted group but were simply a casualty of the War.

This identification with the Soviet narrative is also the reason why in the previous chapter, I argued that in order to fully understand the family dynamics, the Soviet past needs to be part of the family dialogues. This is because many people within the ‘generation of parents’ identified with the Soviet Union and did not think of themselves as ‘victims’, at least not until its collapse<sup>73</sup>.

Rosenthal et al. write that this generation’s identification with the Soviet Union can serve as a blind spot on certain issues. She found that in her interviews particularly members of the middle generations did not address the suffering of the 1920s and 1930s caused by the dekulakisation and the famines. She explains

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73 Nurit Schleifman, editor of *Russia at crossroads*, a volume looking at how the disintegration of the SU brought about the emergence of suppressed memories of minority groups, writes that while memory used to play a unifying factor during Soviet times, today she argues, “the meaning of Russia’s past, or rather its narrative, is in a process of continuous deconstruction, reshaping and negotiation (...)” (2013:3). In fact memory in post-Soviet Russia today, she explains, has become even a divisive force, with different nationalities remembering different histories as well as different past hurts (ibid).

that not only was it a taboo to talk about these issues in public, this omission by their interviewees can be seen against the backdrop of an identification with the Soviet Union (2011:59). In other words, it is the parents' former Soviet identification that makes it challenging for them to assess the impact of the Soviet crimes against their families. A good example of this is Tamara's mother. If we remember in the previous chapter, Tamara's mother told her daughter that as she was growing up, she did not see the 'negative side' of the Soviet Union, including the displacements. This is of course puzzling to the young generation who were socialised in Germany. Interviewees such as Tamara wondered how their parents could not have 'seen' this, given that they grew up in families that were deported. I believe these are good examples of how people internalised the Soviet logic, including the logic of their own family's deportations, as had Alexander above.

This does not mean that members of the 'generation of parents' are not affected by their parents' experiences, quite the opposite. As I will discuss next, the past is still very much a sore subject in these families, despite what interviews might suggest. In fact if we look closer, we will see that for the descendants, the Soviet legacy is not only one of oblivion, an unrecognised silence, but, similar to Holocaust survivor families, also one of painful ambivalence. Yet to see and understand how these ambivalences play out in the lives' of my interviewees, required intimate contact as well as close relationships to some of my respondents. I felt the impact of these histories in interaction with the different family members, often drinking tea after an interview when the recorder was off. Before turning to these encounters, which I call 'encounters beyond narratives' let me say a few words about what I mean by a legacy of ambivalence.

### Ambivalent legacy: Drawing from 'encounters beyond narrative'

Broadly speaking, ambivalence<sup>74</sup> as Andrew Weigert (1991:21) writes in *Mixed*

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<sup>74</sup> Ambivalence can be confusing as it is used differently in a variety of fields. In the social sciences it is written about as a social structure, which generates ambivalence (Merton, 1976) and which is a key feature of the modern social order (Baumann, 1991). There is a psychoanalytic theme of ambivalence, largely shaped by clinical literature going back to Freud and his contemporaries who saw ambivalence as an unavoidable part of mental development (Weigert, 1991). It was later picked up and developed by Melanie Klein, who saw it resulting in infancy because of the coexistence of love and hate for the mother (Pillemer & Sutor, 2005:6). Ambivalence can arouse anxiety because one has the feeling that one cannot reconcile these opposite feelings and

*emotions: Certain steps toward understanding ambivalence* describes the simultaneous presence of opposing feelings or emotions towards a particular object, subject or situation. Such a psychological state can arouse anxiety and fear because one has the feeling that one cannot reconcile these contradictory emotions and feels pulled into different directions. While ambivalence is often used synonymously with conflict, in fact, psychological phenomena such as conflict or defences can be expressions of ambivalence. Ambivalence is a powerful heuristic tool in illuminating how descendants of families with traumatic histories often grow up with an internal state of conflict (Berger, 1997; Lassner, 2008), something which writings of the 'second generation' in Holocaust survivor families have demonstrated. Marianne Hirsch for example writes that “an ambivalent intensity” characterises the Holocaust post-memory (2012:6) and in *Inherited memory and the ethics of ventriloquism* Lori Hope Levkovitz writes that “the most powerful aspect of the [Holocaust] legacy may be ambivalence”, the painful mix of emotions children of survivors have grown up with (2001:228). This painful mix of emotions, which pulls people in different directions, is also present in Russian-German families. Indeed, as the encounters will show, ambivalence is at the heart of young people's, along with their parents', relationship to their family history and memory and shapes the communication about the past in these families. We will see how they are eager and reluctant to open up and learn more about this difficult chapter in their lives. They want to know and not know their histories, they want to speak and not speak about them. They ‘come closer’, only to ‘pull away’. I will look at two encounters in two families: Anton’s and Nina’s. In the first discussion we will see how an attentive and sustained connection throughout the years with this family reveals the presence of ambivalence from which both mother and daughter try to protect themselves. In the second encounter we will see how my interview of the grandfather triggered painful memories and emotions.

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when this conflict cannot be tolerated the mind tries to drive the conflict into the subconscious in an effort to find relief. This can lead to repression, denial and splitting (Auchincloss & Samberg, 2012). In the context of this chapter I use a broad understanding of ambivalence and highlight the coexistence of opposing feelings towards family memory.

### **‘Dangerous’ memory**

One autumn day, Nina’s mother called me to tell me that she had arranged an interview with her friend’s grandmother who had spent 14 years in a labour camp and who wanted to tell me about her life. Nina’s mother decided to spend the day with her friend and so drove Nina, Nina’s little sister and myself to her friend’s house where four generations lived under one roof. While they all had tea and the children played, Nina and I interviewed the grandmother in the family. After the interview, we all had a meal and everyone had something to tell: what it was like for the grandparents and parents to live in the Soviet Union, what it was like migrating and how people were doing today in Germany.

This sitting together and speaking about histories seems to have triggered something in Nina’s mother, for on the way back, in the car, she began enquiring about what the grandmother had told us. We spoke a little about the grandmother’s difficult life, when Nina’s mother suddenly announced that at home she would take out her then recently deceased mother’s documents and photographs. ‘*It even contains an autobiography*’, in which she writes ‘*about all this*’, Nina’s mother said. Nina could not believe it, she was so surprised that an autobiography of her grandmother existed and got very excited, asking her mother how she had never heard about it. ‘*I thought you did*’, her mother replied. ‘*It’s in the house*’.

We sat together well past midnight, pouring over the rich collection of photographs and documents of Nina’s grandmother and as I was leaving the house, Nina’s mother stood in the doorway, warning me to be ‘*careful not to be dragged in by this history*’. This warning was so earnest; I could tell from her concerned voice that she really meant it. She said something along the lines that she understood that I needed this information for my research, but I should not ‘*let these histories get too close to me*’. This was such an important moment in my fieldwork. I noted her words down when I left their house, without fully understanding their significance. From time to time I remembered them especially when reading through the research of Rosenthal et al., realising that Nina’s mother’s concern contrasted starkly with Rosenthal’s research conclusions. As discussed in previous chapters, the research team argued in their book, *How*



*Russlanddeutsche families tell themselves their history*<sup>75</sup>, that people tell themselves a standardised, homogeneous history coloured by a myth of victimhood (2011:59). They argued that especially among those families whose grandparents were deported and served in the labour army, these histories were given particular attention in the family narrative (2011:65).

From my fieldwork, I realised that memory about the deportation and the repressions of the grandparents are rarely a topic of conversation. In the case of Nina's mother we could even see that this memory had threatening aspects. I felt that Nina's mother sensed a danger when speaking about these histories and as a result felt that I needed to be 'warned' so that I could distance myself from them. This feeling of 'danger' can be interpreted in two ways; on the one hand, as a danger to the psyche, for traumatic recall can overwhelm people with emotions with which they feel they cannot cope, on the other hand, as explored above, in the Soviet case, for generations people were taught that to speak about these histories, as something threatening to their very existence.

As already explored in the previous chapters, there is a division between private and public remembrance. The homogeneous history described by Rosenthal et al. is not necessarily a story that is told in the private realm of the family. It seems that people can recount their histories to justify their belonging and status as homecomers but when it comes to remembering this painful history privately, people are uncertain whether or not to engage, to think, to talk and to share memories about it. This can be seen by the fact that Nina, before I began to be interested in their family history, did not know of the folders of documents, which contained her grandmother's autobiography.

Looking through the photographs, I had the feeling that Nina's mother wanted to share and engage with her mother's documents, but she also wanted to close the folders as soon as possible and piled them up neatly next to the table, to be taken away as soon as we were done. In this way, Nina's mother's behaviour and the warnings not to let these histories get 'too close' can be seen as defences, subconscious strategies to manage painful feelings (Holmes, 2015), including her

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<sup>75</sup> Author's translation

own ambivalent feelings about her parents' fates. Nina was also conflicted about whether she wanted to look through her grandparent's documents and to hear her grandmother in her own words as Nina's mother read from the autobiography, which was still in its white Soviet folder with the Russian inscription '*For the Descendants*'. As Nina's mother read about the 'forceful expulsion', in which Nina's grandmother referred to the deportation from Crimea, Nina repeatedly left the room. She would get some juice for us, then some tea and so it went on. One time when she came back into the living room, while her mother was still reading, Nina asked '*what else*' her '*Omi*' writes, before quickly announcing I should probably take photographs of the documents and left to get the camera. I remember how back then, when I was not very attuned to this behaviour, it did not make sense to me that just a few hours before in the car Nina had been so excited about her grandmother's autobiography, whereas now she was barely present when it was read out. This ambivalence followed Nina throughout the years: Nina liked to accompany me, suggested eagerly whom else I should interview in her family and organised potential interviewees. But as we took our road trips together across Germany to interview relatives, Nina never spoke about how she felt doing all of this. In fact, we never spoke about anything that we had been told in interviews. She never enquired about anything and when I told her something she would listen, add a few sentences and move on to a different topic.

With time, I understood how Nina similar to her mother wanted to hear stories but, in order not to feel sad and overwhelmed by them, she tried not to be present during their recital. It was as if, through me, she was engaged on some level but at the same time, had the safety to retreat and not be 'too close' to them. Perhaps not in actual words, but in unconscious ways for example by hiding away her mother's documents and photographs in her bedroom wardrobe in a big box underneath stacks of blankets. In other words, by placing them where they were impossible for Nina to find, her mother had signalled to Nina that these histories were 'dangerous', that they could still harm and that if Nina wanted a life of her own, she needed distance.

Some years after the above evening, Nina called me to tell me that she had begun to assemble a photo-album from her grandmother's photographs that she had

inherited. She compiled these photographs chronologically: starting in Crimea, then Kazakhstan and lastly Germany. Doing this, Nina realised that she had many questions. She told me that she wished she had started this when her grandmother had been alive, as she does not recognise the places and people in the photographs and when she asked her mother, she could not tell her. With great insight, Ruth Wajnryb, writes that she had all these personal questions about her parents' Holocaust experiences, all of a sudden and with a bold clarity, but exactly when both her parents died. Yet this was no coincidence, she stresses but "(...) was precisely because there was no one to ask" (2001:24). It is possible that Nina felt similarly. For to ask questions about the past is a difficult thing to do in these families, as many grandchildren stressed in conversations that I will discuss presently. In fact, both generations, parents and grandchildren, have difficulties to ask their elders about their pasts. It seems that they want to know but that they also seem to feel that they cannot ask these questions themselves, as the next example shows.

### **Painful silences in families**

I interviewed Friedrich Lehl, the grandfather of Anton from whom we heard in the beginning of this chapter when he visited London with his cousin Nina. Some months after this visit he had arranged an interview with his grandfather for me. I came from London and Nina came by train from Bavaria. Over the weekend we stayed with Anton's family and after the interview with the grandfather, I also had a chance to speak to Anton's parents.

Anton's grandfather lived through the Ukrainian famine. In the 1930s, considered to be kulaks, they were dispossessed of everything they ever owned. Their house was taken away and the family was for some time homeless. In 1941 they were deported, the young Friedrich sent to the labour army, which he miraculously escaped because the convoy heading to the camp left before his arrival. He was let go and allowed to join his mother in the special settlement camp near Almaty, Kazakhstan. Friedrich's mother died shortly after the deportation. Friedrich's father was imprisoned in the Gulag already in the early 1930s where he eventually died, something that Friedrich only had confirmed through documents found when applying to come to Germany. He got the documents out for us, pointing at them

and firmly stressing that his father was innocent, as though we listeners doubted that. Here is an excerpt from my field notes, which I drafted upon returning to London.

‘When we were done with the interview Nina, Anton and I went two floors back up to the flat where Anton and his parents live. They live close together so that Anton’s mother can take care of her parents. Anton’s mother had just returned from work and prepared lunch for us. She opened the door and the first thing she said was: *‘So Katia, could grandfather tell you many things?’*

‘Yes’ he told us so much,’ I replied. *‘Oh yes, he has a good memory, he can tell you so many things’*, she said. We went into the kitchen, where Anton’s father was sitting, he had just got up from a night shift as a baker and was peeling potatoes on a little stool by the window. Anton’s mother was putting aubergine slices into hot oil *‘What did he tell you?’*, she asked me. The table was covered with different foods. Anton was quiet, sitting next to me at the table; Nina was busy with setting the table. Possibly triggered by the sight of the food, I said *‘he told us about hunger’*. The story of dying horses at the cemetery that people ate, which the grandfather told us earlier stayed in my mind. *‘Could you understand him well?’* Anton’s mother asked. ‘He is very articulate and remembers so much and very detailed, sometimes Anton helped me when he did not hear me well, I said. *‘When they arrived in Kazakhstan they had to steal frozen potatoes from the ground, but mama could not do it. She did not tell me, other people told me this’*, she said standing with the back to us at the stove. When she turned I saw how tears ran down her cheeks, which she was wiping off with her apron. Anton’s father began to speak about his parents: *‘They dropped them off in the middle of nowhere in Kazakhstan with nothing’*. His father wandered around from yurt to yurt eating frozen grass, going to the Kazakh villagers asking for work and begging for food. *‘Do you know what yurts are’*, he asked us. We nodded. *‘The Kazakh had nothing either, they were poor too’*. *‘You see, they did not speak to us’*, Anton’s mother added, *‘we have heard it all from other people’*.

In the morning when interviewing the grandfather, I asked whether he talked to his family about what happened back then. ‘And do you tell your grandchildren?’ I asked the grandfather in the interview. *‘They, they are too busy. They do not want to hear that’* he replied. ‘And your children, did you tell them?’ I asked again. *‘The children, they understand it all anyway’*, he said.

In contrast with many of my interviews, this encounter shows the impact of these silences in the family; it shows how painful it is for the parents to hear and talk about their parents’ experiences and how deeply affected they are by them. We can also see from both discussions, Nina’s and Anton’s, that a narrative of the grandparents’ history is not part of the family dialogue. They as children grew up

with hearsay and that is why she ‘uses’ us to find out what her father had said. It also becomes clear that there are occasions when it is easier to tell a ‘neutral face’ about experiences than to address them in the family. The encounter in Anton’s family shows how the generations do not actually speak to each other and a dialogue does not take place. Instead, the desire yet inability to speak and to listen is present. Similarly in Holocaust survivor households, as Ruth Wajnryb writes, the communication about the past is shaped by “two kinds of conflicted energy” (2001:32). She explains that on the one hand, the survivors want to tell but simultaneously suppress telling, and their children want to know but also fear to find out (ibid). Equally, Marianne Hirsch (2002:221) writes that the relationship between the first and the second generation is characterised by curiosity, desire and ambivalence in wanting to know their parents’ knowledge of the Holocaust.

### **Additional intergenerational impact**

Yet interestingly while ambivalence might be described as an unpleasant, emotional, even a painful and inescapable state, Hirsch sees it also as a creative force in dealing with traumatic histories (see also Lasser, 2008:116). She makes a similar point to Arele Stein above, when she writes that it was this ambivalent relationship towards the Holocaust history that encouraged so much writing and artistic engagement with it by children in these families (1997:22). Ambivalence in this sense is not something that has to be ‘fixed’ or ‘overcome’, it is part of these histories and the creative engagement helped some people within the ‘second generation’ to deal with their legacies.

However, as explored above, members of the ‘generation of parents’ did not have such opportunities to engage with their histories. Also Rosenthal & Stephan point this out, when they write that in the case of ethnic Germans and generally Soviet citizens “there is almost no public discourse about the trans-generational consequences of this past, compared with the discourse of the Shoah or the concept of ‘the second generation’” (2010:176). They write that “the second generation in these [ethnic German] families is not helped in the process of dealing with suffering” (ibid). While both generations as I have explored above are ambivalent in engaging with their traumatic histories, the inability of the ‘generation of parents’ to deal with their parents’ pasts has an additional

intergenerational impact for the ‘generation of grandchildren’. Since the ‘generation of parents’ are often unaware of their ambivalence in engaging with their parents’ traumatic experiences as well as their inherited grief, and are unsure and confused about its impact on themselves, the ‘generation of grandchildren’ inherited all these unresolved issues and mixed messages of previous generations and are too uncertain ‘what to do with this past’. This has the effect that the ‘generation of grandchildren’ can feel an obligation to deal with issues of the past. In other words, it is the ‘generation of grandchildren’ in Russian-German families that have to open up the dialogue if they want to understand their legacies, engage with their family histories and find meaning for them and their families. In my sample, Flora and Tamara made this remark to me. Tamara told me that it was up to her to open up a dialogue about the burdensome legacy in her family. Tamara was initially shy to tell me how she feels about what is happening in her family as she was concerned that her views ‘*might sound too esoteric*’, but with my encouragement, we had this conversation:

*Tamara: I have sometimes the feeling that the feeling is passed on in silence and that one carries this fear within until one really understands where this fear comes from and starts to talk about it. With my grandparents for example, they’ve always lived in fear but they never spoke about it. But one day I started to talk about issues and my mother one day started to open up about things that she constantly has fears but she does not know where they come from. Or whether it has something to do with the migration and the whole new situation or whatever. But it was already as a child like that (...).*

*K: and do you have fears?*

*Tamara: Not any more. But I had these moments when it was impossible to order things and why I could not dare to do certain things and I felt obstacles in my life that stood like walls. And I could not break through and I had the feeling that everything around me was walled up and I did not know what I am doing and I actually think that this is the inheritance from the expulsion.*

Here Tamara tells me how she began to acknowledge the influences of the past on her and her mother. This happened for Tamara because, as explored in the previous chapters, she began attending different migrant network groups in which discussions about what it means to have a traumatic history were discussed at length. She began to see parallels to other persecuted minorities and tells me that once she began to speak about her experiences with her family, her mother too began acknowledging her difficulties, which in turn helped Tamara to understand and trace some things to their roots. She tells me how her mother began to

differentiate her fears, asking herself the question whether these fears were connected to the migration, realising rather that she felt them already as a child. This helped Tamara to see that she felt obstacles in her life and that this all began with the expulsion.

Flora described similar processes in her family yet she was even clearer about how the non-engagement by her parents with the past influences her. Flora has a difficult family background and the trans-generational consequences of the past are very visible in her family. Flora grew up in a large Baptist ethnic-German religious family<sup>76</sup>. The family and the wider community in which she grew up were abusive and the role of women was very restricted. Flora's father worked as a community priest and was very patriarchal in respect of his wife and children. As Flora came of age, she could no longer tolerate this and began questioning these restricting beliefs in her environment. As she began to speak up, her community and family shunned her and Flora decided to move to London to work as a nanny, leaving her Baptist community behind. Not long after that, her parents divorced and to this day Flora has very little contact with her family. As Flora left the Baptist community, it became very important for her to understand what she was leaving behind and why things were the way they were. She tells me:

*No one talks about anything, there are many taboos and I just find it very difficult. And it is such a shame because I realised that to understand who one is, means also to know one's family history and what one has inherited (...)I just think why are things not talked about. I understand that the generation of my parents and grandparents they live with the motto to forget it all. But for me it is not about forgetting, for me it is about coming to terms with things. That's possibly not the easiest thing to do. To forget is the path of least resistance, to go and close the door hmmm...to grow is to begin to talk about things and because they [grandparents and parents] have not dealt with things themselves, because they have not learnt how to deal with things but because they think from fear that is why they think they can simply close a door but that is not how it works, because it always comes back.*

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<sup>76</sup> It is outside the scope of this chapter to discuss these communities in detail. Baptist Germans are a separate group within the Russian-German group because they segregated themselves in order to be able to preserve their religious identities. There are good studies on these communities (Lösse, 2011; Neufeld, 2007). Indeed what Flora relates about religious suppression is a problem that is largely not seen in German society. This is due in part to the fact that Russian-Germans are seen as a homogeneous group, a perspective that overlooks the problems these communities face today.

In the interview, Flora had a real need to talk about issues that occupied her mind. I did not have to ask Flora many questions, the sentences just flowed out of her. She was informed by a lot of psychological literature on abuse and violence in repressive countries and religious groups and was well aware of the issues in her family. She tells me that the past became important to her because she wanted to understand the violence in her family and religious community. She also realised that neither her grandparents nor parents had dealt with their experiences and that this not dealing with whatever they had tried to escape was transmitted to the next generation and that it was she who needed to break the cycle.

As discussed, the burden or responsibility to ‘work through’ or ‘come to terms with things’ as Flora phrased it, might lie with the ‘generation of grandchildren’, who might have, unlike their parents, the ability and opportunity to ask questions and open up dialogues in their families. But this is not easy. This is because the social and family demands to assume a German identity and to leave behind one’s history, as the previous chapters discussed, intensify the ambivalence. That is, because young people want to be accepted as Germans, they have another reason to feel reluctant to speak about and know their histories. Eva Hoffman makes this point, how the migration can influence the need to know one's past, when she writes, “(...) there was one large additional factor that complicated dealings with the past and delayed a direct confrontation with the Holocaust inheritance: emigration” (2004:77). Also Tamara speaks of this double-burden to me when she tells me that it took her family many years before they could broach a dialogue within the family because everyone was so busy:

*My mother and I, we realised that we needed 10 years to work out where we had landed (...). We're now here as Germans in Germany and that is okay too. Now we can also start with other things and one has eyes and ears again. Because everyone was somehow busy with themselves, we had to build something and to have our little house and our little place and now there is this space and no one has to put all their energy into finding out what to do. (...) You cannot simultaneously work through the past, because you're spending all your energy in the here and now to be able to settle. It just needed 10 years in our case.*

And so young people are conflicted and pulled in several directions. On the one hand, they are pulled by their own desires to know more and to speak about their



histories. On the other hand, they are pulled in the opposite direction from fear of finding something out about one's family past that they will have to deal with in a time when they have enough to manage already. Another pull is the societal and at times familial expectation to assimilate and to see oneself as 'German' and thus not to engage with one's complex history.

My young interviewees are not necessarily aware of these contrasting demands, but simultaneously some were very clear in their responses that they cannot ask about the past, as I will discuss next. These findings contrast with the research results of Gabriele Rosenthal et al. (2011:65), who argue, after the 'Holocaust model', putting forward that similarly to Holocaust survivor families, while the 'second generation' are ambivalent about encounters with their parents' histories, it is the 'generation of grandchildren' in Russian-German families that want to engage with their grandparents' experiences. While as we have seen this was true for Tamara and Flora, other young people told me decisively that they do not want to ask questions. Particularly, Julia and Konstantin voiced this.

### **Inhibitions to ask questions**

When Julia told me in the interview that her grandfather is still alive and lives around the corner I asked her whether she ever speaks to him about his experiences. Julia was adamant that there was no need to do that.

*K: And do you speak with [your grandfather] about the past?*

*Julia: No.*

*K: why not*

*Julia: Hhm, why not...(long pause)*

*K: Are you interested in his past?*

*Julia: In the past of my grandfather? If I am honest, no.*

Wondering about what then seemed to me a defensive attitude in her responses, I questioned further, looking for clues in the relationship with her grandfather.

*K: Do you have a good relationship with your grandfather?*

*Julia: With my grandfather, yes, a very good relationship. But I think to myself, why should I rake up my grandfather's past (...) I mean I can't ask so grandpa how was it in Russia and what did you get up to there?*

Grandchildren might not know why they do not speak about the past with their grandparents, but Julia as well as Konstantin said they do not ask questions

because they do not want to hurt their grandparents. In their accounts there is almost a refusal to do so. In Julia's case this was particularly striking because she did not have any information about her grandparents' histories: whether or not they were deported; where they had lived before the War; or where her parents were born. At the same time, she knew she could not ask about painful experiences.

In many of my interviewees' families I found there was a close bond between grandparents and grandchildren and this may help explain why grandchildren do not wish to bring up painful memories of hunger, deportation and exile. It is possible that relational proximity threatens to overwhelm them and collapse the necessary distance to their own lives (Stumm, 2010:351). Some members of the 'second generation' in Holocaust survivor families speak of this dilemma. Bettina Stumm for example describes this problem in Anne Karpf's memoir. Karpf relates how as a child she had difficulties to negotiate this generational proximity and distance to her parents' past and struggled with over-identification with their experiences (2010:351). These issues of 'generation proximity' and 'needing distance' seem to me to be present also in some Russian-German grandparents-grandchildren relationships. This is perhaps at first surprising because they are not as implicated in their grandparents' lives as the 'generation of parents'. However, given that grandparents played a vital role in the upbringing of the grandchildren and some grandmothers in fact 'mothered' their grandchildren, this bond is perhaps as strong as the parental bond. Lüscher and Hoff (2013:47) write that unlike some research suggesting that the grandparent-grandchild relationship is less prone to ambivalent tensions than the parent-child relationship, they found that the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren could also entail ambivalence particularly when grandparents assumed a parental role (2013:47).

Especially in rural regions of the Soviet Union retired grandparents often played a part in child rearing (Kelly, 2007) and many of my interviewees such as Vera, Anton, Tamara, Lena, Konstantin and Julia had a very tight relationship with their grandparents and were partly raised by them as they often lived together or at least in the same village in the Soviet Union. Nina for example, just like myself grew up entirely with her grandparents until migration to Germany. In other

interviewees' lives, grandparents played an important role in their upbringing after migration. This was the case with Julia who was raised in the first years in Germany by her grandparents, as her parents were busy with language and retraining courses. I therefore believe Julia when she tells me that she cannot ask her grandfather to tell her about his past. What she expresses is that she feels a barrier must be maintained. She also fears that if she crosses that barrier, then she will hurt her grandfather as the following quote indicates:

*As I said before, why should I ask my grandfather about his past since I know I might hurt him and for the same reason I don't ask him about grandmother. Of course I would like to know things (...). I would like to go to my grandfather to tell him to show me the pictures of grandmother and so on (...) but to stir up the past again. I don't want that.*

Some grandchildren feel that to talk about the past is not appropriate, that this history belongs to their grandparents and they even feel inhibitions to approach them. This is something that Konstantin expresses, when he tells me that 'ultimately this is my grandparents' history even if it still affects me'. Konstantin tells me that he does not wish to hurt his grandparents but he goes even further than Julia. He stresses that to hurt his grandparents is to hurt himself. Here is an excerpt from our conversation:

*Konstantin: I don't know, I have the feeling, hmm, to ask about a time when people suffered, that when they themselves do not want to tell about it, well I feel always so very uncomfortable in that situation and so I think it is better to ask someone who is close to that time but who did not experience the horrible situation.*

*K: Did you have the feeling that your grandparents did not want to speak about things?*

*Konstantin: hmm...(long pause). They would probably tell me things, but I have inhibitions to remind them (...). I have this inhibition, a reservation that I would not want to remind them of that time. If they talked about it themselves, I would not have a problem to listen to it, in fact I would really like to hear it. It is almost, well how should I say ... (long pause) it is not that it is unpleasant, but it hurts me almost. Even if this is already exaggerated to say, but somehow in some way it does.*

What Julia and Konstantin both describe is the difficulty in asking questions. Both say that they would like to ask and to hear certain things but feel they cannot ask. Psychologist Aaron Hass writes in his now classic study *In the shadow of the Holocaust: The second generation*, interviewing the middle generations in Holocaust survivor households that nearly half of his respondents did not know

much about their parents' histories. He explains that partly this was due to the parents' silences but also because children chose not to probe:

They feared inflicting further pain on their parents. They were apprehensive of their ability to cope with their own feelings of fear, guilt or rage, which might be exacerbated by clear revelations as opposed to vague references or intimations already heard and observed. (1996:78)

While Julia told me in the interview that no one talks about the past in her family, neither her grandparents nor her parents, Konstantin tells me that in his family it is the father with whom he can speak about the past. He tells me that his father is a passionate historian with an interest in history since his teens, whose love for history Konstantin inherited. So in the interview we end up talking about the value of history and whether we as descendants have a responsibility to find out what happened to our ancestors. While I explain to him that I felt this 'urgency' when my grandparents died to find everything out, Konstantin's view is that the truth is painful and that he does not wish to hurt his grandparents and himself by finding out.

When I ask Konstantin to tell me about what happened to his grandparents, he tells me that both his maternal and paternal grandparents were deported. He tells me that one grandparent was deported twice, but he does not know the details. From the fragments he conveys to me it seems that Konstantin's great-grandparents along with their children were dekulakised and sent to Kazakhstan already before the big waves of deportations but somehow could return to their previous German settlements from where they were deported again with the onset of WWII. There were also references to hunger and the famine, and it is no surprise that specifically about hunger Konstantin does not wish to talk with his grandparents as this excerpt shows:

*Roughly, I know what happened and I think I don't want to hear it in detail. I've heard some things and these have already scared me off as a child (...). As always in conversations about the past, every person drifts off, and so one gets to hear things, that one did not ask a question about. And so there were things that I did not have to hear really (...). They are unpleasant memories, when people describe how people had to suffer, or that one had to suffer from hunger a lot and so on and so forth (long pause).*

Konstantin is very active in the Russian-German association in Bavaria and I interviewed him only a couple of days after the 70th year remembrance day of the deportation of the Russian-Germans for which the Russian-German association organised ceremonies across Germany. I attended a memorial ceremony in Berlin and some days later when I travelled to Bavaria to interview Konstantin, I asked him if he attended the memorial, to which Konstantin replied *'I went to the memorial, but I did not say anything about it in the family, I don't think that one wants to remember that willingly I think. I don't know'*.

While this memorial was organised to remember the deportation of the grandparents and while his own grandparents had been deported, he did not talk to them about it. I was surprised by that, because it shows that Konstantin has an interest in this past and he commemorates in a public space with others, including many people who experienced the deportations, but he did not wish to remind his grandparents. At the time of interview, Konstantin's revelation puzzled me: Why would he listen to strangers' stories and not ask his own grandparents I wondered. But having spent some time with my interviewees over the years and having written about ambivalences, seeing how difficult the past still is for families, I understood that it is not surprising that Konstantin attended a public memorial but does not speak to his grandparents.

In this way, Konstantin does not have to deal with the history personally but still cares about it. Again Aaron Hass's (1996:78) insights are helpful when he observes that some children asked other survivors about the past while refraining from directly approaching their parents. In this way they could satisfy their need to know while avoiding the prospect of asking their parents. Konstantin adds that the grandparents and great-grandparents *'had a very difficult life'*, of which they do not wish to be reminded. Especially his grandmothers, he thinks, would have *'very much liked to forget it all'*. And while Konstantin respects these wishes, he also seems to have a need to be close to these histories, a sign of his ambivalence.

## Conclusion:

This chapter grew out of my confusion when I began asking different generations about the impact their family history had had on them and found that they were

startled by these kinds of questions. My interviewees reported that there was no trauma in their families and that they did not think of their family members as traumatised. I was also confused by how resolute some of my interviewees were in not wanting to have any dialogue about the past in their families. I began asking my interviewees to be conscious of the silences in their families because I realised how little they knew and rather than having them reproduce these silences, I wanted to see whether speaking about the impact might be more fruitful. However, this too was problematic, because if people had not thought about issues of silences nor how they had been affected, then also these questions did not lead anywhere. These discussions only resonated with some interviewees such as Flora and Tamara who had thought about many of these issues before meeting me. It was telling however how Tamara at first did not want to tell me for fear of sounding 'esoteric' what she had observed and only when I encouraged her, did she begin to tell me about apparent trans-generational trauma in her family. I believe this is telling because it shows how little questions of trauma and trans-generational transmission of trauma are discussed in relation to Russian-Germans.

I remember how I thought that I had perhaps wrong expectations for my fieldwork; for, I had prepared myself with literature on trauma and specifically trans-generational trauma. Yet interviewing my respondents I could not find much evidence for it in their experiences. I began searching for research dealing with the Soviet aftermath and found that indeed there are differences in how people dealt with traumatic experiences and memories in the West and in the Soviet Union. The Soviets had their own way of coping and for a time I thought Holocaust insights did not fit the accounts of my interviewees. I saw a difference between the legacies and first I thought that while the Soviet legacy could be described as one of profound separateness, the Holocaust aftermath seemed to me, through an engagement with the work of the 'second generation', one of overwhelming closeness. The 'second generation' described their struggles as an over-identification with their parents' histories and spoke of how they grew up with narratives that preceded their births. In Soviet families I found that my interviewees simply did not speak in this kind of language. An image of the 'void' came to my mind. It was as if there were nothing there. There were many silences and 'I don't know' in the interviews. I thought that Shevchenko's and Sariksova's

characterisation of silence as oblivion captured this well. The idea is that there is a silence, but it does not have a name because it is not recognised. A real void, an empty space, was left where true information about the atrocities should have been present. We have seen it with Friedrich Lehl. He was well into his 60s when for the first time he had confirmed that his father had indeed died in the Gulag. People had no information, or they had misinformation and hearsay. And people as we have seen also filled these empty spaces with other people's memories or myths, as we saw with my interviewee Tatiana.

Yet of course, just like in Russian-German families, there was also very little communication about the past between the generations in Holocaust survivor homes and only some people, those whose books are available to us today, wanted to deal with this past. Thus, perhaps the biggest difference, as I explored in this chapter, is that, unlike the 'second generation', ethnic Germans grew up in a very different environment. What was different is how from the 1980s on, in the West, there was a public call for a narrative about the Holocaust and a cultural openness towards questions of past atrocities. This was never the case in the Soviet Union. In the Soviet Union, a different memory culture was present one with a unifying narrative and Soviet ideology. These historical-cultural reasons have to be taken into account because they produced a different way of dealing with pain and silences. First of all, this silence was, as we have heard above, a matter of life and death. It was not just that grandparents did not want to speak about anything. It was risky to speak. We saw its remnants expressed in Nina's mother who 'warned' me not to 'come' too close to these histories. For Soviet families survival meant concealing their feelings, opinions, their heritage, sometimes even to their own family members. The silence was all pervading, it was internalised and normalised and it is still present in the way people find it so difficult to speak about what happened.

However, the longer my fieldwork lasted and the more time I spent with some families thinking about the issues I write about, the more I began to see another dimension and the work by the 'second generation' began to resonate. I began to hear my respondents differently and this changed my relationship with the Holocaust material and scholarship. I began to realise that, while speaking in

interviews was difficult, given that it required to some extent earlier reflection and pre-prepared narratives about certain things; in moments 'in between' when there was no pressure to 'tell', I began to observe how difficult in fact this history is for my interviewees. I saw many parallels in the way the generations have difficulties speaking with each other and also why some of my interviewees expressed that they did not want to ask questions. I described these moments as 'beyond narrative' by which I meant to emphasise just how different these insights from those gleaned from interviews. It was also these moments that helped me to engage on a deeper level with my interviews. I began to see how ambivalent my interviewees were to engage with their family histories. I realised how little my interviewees actually speak with each other about their histories, as a result of this ambivalence. So while there might be this collective, homogenous we-image that Russian-Germans know and present publicly, in the family home, there is barely any communication about the past at all.



## Conclusion:

### A call for a more complex and diasporic understanding of Russian-Germans.

As I was finishing this thesis, Germany admitted over a million people in a short period of time mostly from war-torn Syria. Suddenly newspapers put ethnic German *Aussiedler* on the front pages again. German society remembered that, around 25 years ago, it had done something similar, admitting millions of ethnic Germans to Germany. In the midst of all these new debates, I received news of a Facebook post from one of my interviewees in which many Russian-Germans of my generation commented on a local newspaper report. This article compared Russian-German and Syrian migrations, referring to Russian-Germans as refugees. In the thread I received, the respondents voiced their disappointment: writing that they were not refugees, but had come to Germany because their families considered it their *Heimat*.

Russian-German journalist Viktoria Morasch picked up the theme again in 2016 in the prestigious weekly *‘Die Zeit’*. In her essay *Arrived: In the 1990s, we Russian-Germans were seen as criminal drunks. Today we are exemplarily integrated. How was this possible?*<sup>77</sup>, Morasch, who was two years old when migrating to Germany in the 1990s, wondered whether the successful integration of Russian-Germans was possible because they had not been forced to come, but had wanted it, in order to come home. Here, Morasch, herself a member of the ‘generation of grandchildren’, again claims homecoming for her generation. With these statements, Morasch shows that the young generations in Russian-Germans families publicly employ this notoriously problematic notion to claim belonging to Germany, thereby bringing my discussions of homecoming in this thesis into relevance once more.

In her piece, Morasch discusses what my interviewees shared with me too. She begins her narrative with her mother and how often she speaks about Germanness.

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<sup>77</sup> Viktoria Morasch, (2016) <http://www.zeit.de/2016/16/russlanddeutsche-kasachstan-integration-sowjetunion-aussiedler/seite-1> [Accessed 01.07.2016]. Author’s translation

She tells how 25 years ago she wanted, just like the mothers of my respondents who featured in Chapter Six, to assimilate as quickly as possible so that her children would not have to feel ashamed for being different. Tamara had insightfully termed this process as germanising oneself (*'sich eindeutschen'*). She described it as a process that required a relinquishing of any connection to the (Soviet)-Russian culture, language and memory. She said it happened abruptly, almost automatically and without much awareness. Only later, when the damage was done, she told me, did her family begin to realise that they had severed an important connection to the past, and to the self.

Morasch continues her narrative with her brothers, who were older than her when migrating and who had a tougher time in school, even being bullied and beaten up for being different while teachers looked on, failing to intervene. Here Morasch brings out what I only briefly touched on in this thesis: namely that men and women often had different migration experiences. What my research brought out, though, is that men found the migration and subsequent attempts at integration much more difficult than women. Of course, both women and men had their own set of challenges, but men in particular seemed to suffer from the loss of identity and often only made things worse by turning to alcohol or isolating themselves socially. I explored briefly that this had something to do with societal and personal expectations about the male role and how Russian-German men, socialised in the Soviet Union, experienced the loss of meaningful work as a crisis of masculinity. I have not however produced a comparative study contrasting gender experiences, although this would indeed be an interesting subject for further research.

### **The origin of this thesis**

I focused on young women's experiences, women who were roughly the same age as Morasch's brothers when they arrived in Germany. My thesis explored their experiences of growing up as *Aussiedler* children. This research journey began, indeed, from a simple observation: that young Russian-German women, with whom I grew up and went to school, often hid that they were Russian-Germans. The women's hiding their Russian-German origin was often subtle and difficult to mark without insider knowledge of the group. This concealing, as I have explored, has its roots in the Soviet past when parents and even grandparents concealed their

backgrounds. The wish to find out why, intensified by the experience that many people did not wish to participate in this project, propelled me to investigate and to recognise layers of unexplored experiences, experiences silenced and repressed, socially and psychologically, for decades.

### **Cultural and political shifts in Germany**

In the Soviet Union, Germans were forcefully separated not only from their land, culture, religion and language but also from their families and histories. In Germany, after migration, where these migrants collectively embroidered their history with stories of homecoming in order to encourage each other to move, they found themselves in a culture that *also* asked them to 'leave behind' their histories. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and reunification, Germany underwent one of the biggest transformations since WWII. Part of this unification process involved questioning the East German past, rejecting and discrediting its Soviet influence. It was a time of great changes: socially, politically and also in conceptions of belonging and citizenship.

Beginning with the 1968 cultural revolution and particularly with the end of the Cold War, liberals in German society began questioning Germany's limited ethnocultural conception of belonging. While ethnic Germans rediscovered, with the liberalisation period in the post-Soviet space, their old traditions, language and ties to German culture, their arguments for belonging to Germany through concepts such as blood and stories of relatives who fought for Nazi-Germany in the war (as witnessed with my interviewee Lena) were seen as outdated or even taboo. Germany was in a process of transforming its self-image from a nation of guilt to a nation of responsibility (Schmitz, 2007:5). The liberal voices were calling for a more multicultural understanding of belonging and an admission that Germany was a country of immigration, despite what many conservatives claimed.

*Aussiedlers'* claims of belonging constituted a problem for these more liberal understandings of citizenship; for their only claim to belong was based on a notion of ethnic communality that was now suspect. This is why, following von Koppenfels (2002a), I think it important to understand the precise reasons why

ethnic Germans were admitted to Germany, and that it was not only because of ethnic ties. As I have discussed in Chapter One, up until the late 1970s, German bureaucrats admitting *Aussiedler*, regarded ethnicity and ethnic discrimination as the same thing. However, from the late 1970s, and particularly with the end of the Cold War, this began to change. From then on, ethnic Germans had to demonstrate a history of discrimination in order to receive *Aussiedler* status. It is this understanding then, that might help Russian-Germans to claim belonging through a diasporic connection, but without resorting any longer to essentialist claims of sameness.

### **Contradictory positioning of *Aussiedler***

I showed how, once in Germany, arrivals went through a double process of ethnicisation. The bureaucracy that administered *Aussiedler* repatriation was based on a romantic notion of Germanness that stipulated in effect what kind of histories people ought to have (without their fully knowing them, nor how people had been affected by these histories) to be granted *Aussiedler* status. This bureaucratic apparatus at times even practised outdated assimilation practices such as name changes: from mild alterations of Russian names to make their pronunciation in German easier to more radically renaming people entirely, as was discussed in relation to Igor in Chapter Five. Despite these attempts at forced assimilation, people were still seen as migrants or refugees from post-socialism by many in the wider society. It is precisely this image that young people protested against in the Facebook post above. The result was that, on the one hand, the whole ‘social infrastructure’ including the admissions process practised harsh assimilation on the assumption that these were co-ethnic homecomers who favoured complete assimilation, and, on the other, people were encouraged to become transmigrants in a post-modern, multicultural society.

I have argued that especially the grandparents suffered from these contradictory approaches to the new arrivals. They were particularly upset by the lack of recognition of their German ties. Victor Seidler, drawing on Gramsci’s work and feminist theory writes that in coming to terms with “who we are”, we have to acknowledge at a felt and experiential level “where we have come from” (1994:176). He argues that histories “have a weight, which make them

unavoidable. It does not mean that we have to remain restricted and trapped by them, but it gives identities a moral weight that post-modern discussions of identities as “free floating’ can rarely appreciate” (ibid). He continues, stressing that peoples “who have been rendered invisible within the dominant narratives of modernity and who have endured marginalisation and devaluation of their histories and cultures, stand in a different relationship to the promises of post-modernity” (1994:177). He stresses that these people “might be less prepared to think of identities in such free-floating terms since this becomes yet another way in which they are marginalised” (ibid). Of course, it makes it difficult to recognise “where one comes from” if the host society at large knows very little about these new arrivals, what they have gone through and why they view themselves as homecomers to Germany. I have shown how there was little understanding of their traumatic history and consequently no realisation that separating them from their family networks or placing them into reception camps with strict limitations on movement would open old wounds.

### **The contentious concept of homecoming**

In her essay *'Kopfwort und Herzwort'* Herta Müller describes this lack of understanding in the German public with regards to the destitution that National Socialism caused in Eastern Europe and how this destitution still shapes people's lives to this day. She describes how she learned to see for herself that Germany still could not deal with the experience of exile even though it had forced so many into it, when she arrived in the late 1980s. Drawing on her own migration experience as an ethnic German political refugee from Communist Romania she was placed into a temporary camp built on the premises of the National Socialist headquarters in Nuremberg, where she would stare at the grey blocks, asking herself the questions:

'Why was the temporary camp built here. Why are people who are distraught from dictatorships, of all places forced there? Did no one think about the neighbourhood? Should people, who after political persecution know all registers of fear, and finally arrive here, should they be able to grasp relief here, I asked myself. Is Germany not ashamed, to present us newcomers with this monstrous neighbourhood as the first abode? (...) In 1987 I got to feel how Germany, which forced hundred of thousands into exile, still did not wish to have anything to do with the word and experience of exile.<sup>78</sup>

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78 Herta Müller (2013b). Author's translation

What Müller describes is how in the early 1990s Germany only timidly confronted its responsibility for the NS past in its enormity. Earlier, in the 1980s, a controversial debate known as the *Historikerstreit* had erupted, resulting in discussions such as whether in fact Germany had dealt enough with its historical responsibility for the Nazi crimes. Ironically, it was only with the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the scope of these crimes came to light, that the measure of these crimes could be taken. Müller argues that Germany then, was far from attending to questions of exile, and also today, there is no place in Germany where exile and displacement caused by National Socialism are discussed and brought together so that modern Germans might understand the consequences of the Nazi period for all the peoples involved. Importantly, Müller specifically talks about all the people that fled Germany before the war who had lost their homes. She argues that the term *Heimatvertriebene* (people forced from their homes) should not only be reserved for people from the Eastern territories but should be extended to all those whom Nazi-Germany made homeless, either directly or indirectly.

What I want to bring out with this brief historical overview is that it is not only for the welcoming society or social researcher to decide whether or not homecoming is a viable concept. We saw homecoming from the perspective of my interviewees and from the academic point of view and how it was treated publicly and politically over decades. We can see that this concept has a history of its own and its use among Russian-Germans to describe their belonging has to be taken into account. So rather than relinquishing this concept altogether, we need to broaden our understanding of it and extend its use to people who want to claim it as their own, as Müller indicated above.

This thesis has shown the hold this and related concepts have on the Russian-German imagination. I showed how the increasing problematisation of homecoming in public and academic discourses failed to take people's feelings into account, something that had enormous consequences for their lives and for their sense of belonging to Germany post-migration. People had constructed their migrations on a conception of 'homecoming and return' in the Soviet Union, and sincerely believed themselves to be homecomers. On top, for many families, the

tragedy of their history was contained in the homecoming narrative. Homecoming defined their history and gave purpose to their migration. Indeed, as we saw, many would possibly not have migrated at all, had they not had this self-understanding. Others used the idea of homecoming to sustain them during difficult times post-migration when they experienced a dramatic social decline that put the wisdom of their choice to migrate in question.

Yet, having advocated for not relinquishing homecoming altogether since it is important to understand people's subjective experiences and motivations to migrate, I have also voiced my criticisms of this notion. I did not plan to write about homecoming. I did so only because this theme was so prevalent in my interviews and during fieldwork more generally. In my own family, Germany was never spoken of as our *Heimat*, and even after migration, my grandparents and my parents had their difficulties in making Germany their home. My grandparents returned back to Kazakhstan and my father followed me to Britain. My initial writings on homecoming were highly critical and so was my stance towards it in the first interviews that I conducted. I questioned people's claims to be homecomers. I wondered for example in my interview with Lena, how she could claim her family are homecomers, when they lived for centuries in Russia. Lena did not enter into this discussion, since she was so set on showing me *how German* she was. With time, I began to listen to people differently and I saw that the notion of homecoming had indeed shaped their experiences and that to deny or argue this in the interviews was counterproductive. However, I remain critical of it, for reasons I have explored in this thesis.

In a multicultural Germany in which the Chancellor, Merkel, admitted that multiculturalism had been a failure, this conception created an unequal society, allowing only ethnic returnees to claim belonging. It even created envy and hostility in the wider society which had been undergoing a period of relative economic decline and high unemployment. People believed that Russian-Germans received everything for free: houses, furniture and benefits. In the interviews, I conducted, many respondents felt they needed to justify themselves as a result. Tamara told me that her family members often had a sense of needing to explain themselves to the public. She tells me:

*You know there are Russian-Germans here who buy a big car, build a house. But people do not see that these people actually never go out anywhere, do not go on holiday, never do anything, and live for the first five years in one little room and save every penny so that they can build a house; no one knows it...People think we get some unbelievable sum because we can built a house after five years. But they don't know that people are building these houses themselves with their own hands. My mother and my grandfather built our house stone by stone.*

The privileged repatriation not only produced envy, it also produced pressures to assimilate. People felt the need to fit in and be successful in the new society, because of the expectations that resulted from their considering themselves, and, their being considered, repatriates. We saw this above from the writer Viktoria Morasch, when she described her mother's efforts to 'germanise' herself as soon as possible. What Morasch did not mention, however, were the effects of this germanising on her.

My younger interviewees, like Morasch, were children at migration and were especially sensitive and receptive to social pressures to assimilate. We saw in Chapter Five how these expectations affected their behaviour. The message they learned from the environment, both familial and social, was that if they wanted to be fully accepted, they had to be 'German only'. As a result, when I interviewed them, they performed precisely what they thought being 'German' meant; namely to be 'entirely German' and not to demonstrate characteristics, even superficial ones, that might suggest a Russian influence. I explored how this was not only a social expectation, but a pressure coming from within the family. It was argued that the history of repeated displacement and forceful assimilation in the Soviet Union left their marks: the slightest pressure to act like everyone else was received and the act dutifully performed by the whole family.

### **Diasporic understanding of Russian-Germans**

To remedy this situation, I argue therefore for a more diasporic understanding of homecoming, one that acknowledges people's feelings of a historical connection to Germany but that does not ask migrants to assimilate and abandon their multi-faceted pasts and loyalties to their countries of birth. *Aussiedler*, particularly, the younger generations as we have seen, are often the products of multi-ethnic



families. And these essentialist discourses and ways of positioning them, do not allow for them to claim a more complex identity. If we remember, my interviewees themselves wished they had had other descriptive tools at hand to speak about themselves.

A way to provide them with those descriptive tools might be to borrow concepts from diaspora and hybridity<sup>79</sup> scholarship. Cultural hybridity refers to the ways in which identities are not erased or assimilated but rather elements of several cultures are incorporated to create new hybrid cultures and identities. Global and local influences can interact to create distinct hybrid identities (Iyall Smith, 2008:3). In the past, it was common to find hybrid identity discussions in the context of post-colonial studies (Bhabha, 1995; Young, 1995; Hall, 1990; Gilroy, 1993) where it was often discussed as an outcome of oppression and a way of negotiating a fragile identity (Iyall Smith, 2008:5). Within a globalised world, discussions of hybridity have taken on new meaning (*ibid*) thanks in part to voluntary immigration and greater mixing of peoples and cultures. As a result, today these terms are used often in a positive sense; that is, in a way that is not simply a reaction to, or defence against, negative ascriptions (Baronian et al., 2007).

Concepts from diaspora studies such as hybridity, in-betweenness, double-orientation or double-consciousness (Baronian et al., 2007:9) are currently only sporadically (Kurilo, 2015; Münz and Ohliger, 2003) used to describe Russian-Germans' identity problems. The scholarship is therefore limited with relevant concepts used in a rather loose fashion. As a consequence, whether or not hybridity or diasporic identity fit people's experiences is highly debatable.

Additionally, while such terms are indeed often used in celebratory ways, discourses of hybridity and diaspora have also been criticised (Brennan, 2001; Butler, 2001; Fludernik, 2003). Timothy Brennan, for example, argues that the fascination with hybrid and diasporic cultures tends to obscure the fact that people do not wish to identify as diasporic (2001:674). Others, such as Monika Fludernik,

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<sup>79</sup> For a detailed genealogy of the term hybridity (see Young, 1995); while for a detailed discussion about how hybridity and diaspora link to discussions of multiculturalism, see (Fludernik, 2003)

call on researchers to distinguish between hybridity and diaspora and how they link to concepts of multiculturalism. She argues that these terms are often used in a rather utopian manner (ibid). She points out that in fact the purpose of diaspora concepts is to resolve the inherent problem of the individualistic design of the hybridity concept and that both diaspora and hybridity are answers to the tensions and contradictions present in the policies of multiculturalism (2003:xxiv). These are important debates to have and future research needs to attend to these questions when addressing Russian-Germans. However, it is often the case that claims to a diasporic identity need to come from within the group themselves (Tölöyan, 2003). Part of this thesis then, sees itself as attempting to do just that.

### **Further contributions of this thesis**

This thesis is not only a reflection on Russian-Germans' sense of identity and how this self-understanding has influenced their experiences of migration and post-migration life, but also a contribution to the literature on the legacy and historical working-through of the Stalinist, and more broadly Soviet, past and how it is experienced in these families today. My research has shown that 'working-through the past' can be possible. Perhaps more on an individual level rather than on a collective. We know from discussions about the GDR past, how difficult a process it has been for East-Germans to work through their pasts. Russian-Germans are in a similar position. Communication in families cannot be understood as a one-way street and transmission is not a "unilineal process" but a "multi-directional process" (2005:ix). In other words, family memory is not handed down from top to bottom. The interest of the young in their own legacies through enquiries about parents' and grandparents' experiences plays a large role in this transmission. Therefore, as I discussed in Chapter Seven and as we have seen in Holocaust studies, it is as though the responsibility for working through the burdensome histories lies often with the children or grandchildren. It is often up to them to open up dialogue in their families. This is owed in part to their privileged position, both in terms of their more secure lives in Germany and their relative distance from the history.

As my interviewee Tamara said, after a decade of 'germanising' themselves, the family began to look into their rucksack to see what resources they had brought

with them. She realised that they had brought with them many useful tools and strategies besides many deep and unexplored problems. What this suggests is that the Soviet influence was not entirely negative. The ability to conceal one's background, to assimilate quickly through disciplined suppression of shameful elements, helped the new arrivals, at least in the younger generation, to do well in their new environments, to become educated and enjoy rewarding careers.

These positive aspects, however, should not overshadow the negative effects of the legacy of silence, concealing and feelings of inadequacy with which Russian-Germans migrated. Unfortunately, there is still little scholarship that explores these problems. I would therefore call for more psycho-social research, longitudinal studies, intergenerational and feminist-inspired consciousness-raising work, to help people acknowledge the burdensome histories that they not only carry but pass on. I believe more research is needed to better understand this group and that any research findings need to be disseminated, not only to the Russian-Germans themselves, but to whoever works with Russian-Germans, be they pedagogues, social workers or teachers. Following feminist scholar Alison Jaggar (1989:170), I believe that informed discourse and therapeutic interventions can be co-constitutive. Feminists have long argued that critical social theories are indispensable psychotherapeutic tools because they provide insights necessary for a full understanding of our emotional constitution. Indeed, critical social theories show how the reconstruction of knowledge is inseparable from the reconstruction of ourselves.

This thesis is at the same time a contribution to literature on the Soviet experience. Looked at from one angle, I found, as with other studies, that the Soviet experience is associated with: intergenerational incomprehension, silences, unaddressed shame, alcohol problems, depression and even domestic violence. Looked at from another angle, I found people said many positive things about their lives in the Soviet Union. To complicate things still further it was often the same people who spoke of the good and the bad. They said, on the one hand, it was awful, that they were discriminated against and lived in poverty.

But, on the other hand, they said in the same breath they had a great time. They said education and medicine were free, that there was no fear, that one could advance in school and do anything one liked. Housing was bad, but it was free. One of my interviewees summed up this complexity when he said to me that *‘if one said the Soviet experience was good, and the other said it was the worst thing in the world, it does not mean that one of them is lying.’* My concern in writing about the Soviet experience, especially in the case of the parent generation, was to bring out how ambivalent people feel about the Soviet Union and their experiences within it.

Rosenthal's study suggests that these people today hide, and are ashamed of, their former identifications, viewing them as negative. I have argued that this is not straightforwardly the case. I argued that this might be the case in official, public settings (such as cases like Rosenthal's interviews, where she seems to have been viewed as a representative of the German state), which leave little room for explorations of conflicted, ambiguous feelings. For in private, or at least in more intimate conversations with people, I heard them discuss their experiences, identifications and feelings towards the Soviet Union differently. I speculated that the interviewees' reluctance to speak at all positively of the Soviet Union before other social researchers might have something to do with negative stereotypes about the Soviet Union and Socialism present in Germany and in the West more generally.

### **Final words**

In conclusion, I would say I have produced an overview of ‘problems’, perhaps posing more new questions than providing answers to old ones. Gabriele Rosenthal and her team played a central role in this study. Their work helped me see certain issues more clearly. But I also saw that their work and their methodological approach had limitations. As the above example shows, there were some important facts that were overlooked. And in some cases, I argued, their conclusions or puzzlement about certain behaviours (e.g. the man's wearing USSR apparel) resulted from their lack of an ‘insider’ perspective. This in no way invalidates the work that has been done or many of the conclusions reached. The conclusion is only that an ‘insider’ perspective is needed to complement the

'outsider' perspective. Combined, our conclusions provide a comprehensive depiction of the current problems in Russian-German families and give a clear roadmap for future research.

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