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Reflective Practice Research in International Collaboration

Developing Teacher Education in Togetherness

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Chapter 12. A Horse called Hitler: Reflections on the German guilt

Kerstin Bornholdt[1]

Abstract

This article explores the complexities of international academic encounters, challenged and challenging national identities, and the weight of historical collective guilt and responsibility through the author's personal experience at an international conference. As a German academic working in Norway, the author reflects on a controversial performance in which she portrayed a horse named Hitler, ridden by a colleague impersonating Mussolini. This episode serves as a starting point for a reflective research practice, highlighting the persistence of World War II in memory cultures and the struggle to navigate collective guilt. Drawing on theories of collective guilt, historical responsibility, post-generational trauma, and otherness, the article engages with typologies of guilt and attitudes toward historical responsibility, as formulated by Karl Jaspers and more recent scholars. It further examines the concept of historical responsibility through the works of Hannah Arendt, Iris Marion Young, and Michael Rothberg before concluding with a discussion of alterity. Ultimately, the chapter advocates for a nuanced, dialogical approach to historical memory, emphasizing awareness, critical reflection, and ethical engagement in transnational academic communities.

Key words

Historical guilt, German guilt, collective guilt, collective memory, transgenerational trauma, Karl Jaspers, practice research, internationalization

Introduction and background

International encounters are not always easy. Personal and national histories intersect in academic spaces, shaping interactions in complex ways. My case highlights both the challenges and opportunities that internation-

alization presents – how it can disrupt national academic traditions and surface difficult shared histories, but also foster dialogue and new perspectives. Reflecting together in international teams, contributing to this anthology, and sharing insights from our diverse experiences have helped me gain greater clarity. By combining personal narrative with theoretical analysis, this chapter contributes to ongoing (theoretical) discussions about historical guilt and responsibility.

The setting for my experience is a Nordic academic women's history conference. At this time, I was a PhD student employed at a Norwegian university. I participated at the conference with a scientific paper on the history of an international organization. The academic content was organized into thematic sessions, independent of national contexts. The social part of the conference, however, was organized around nationalities: Every Nordic nation should contribute something to the conference's evening programme: a song, a performance, or a sketch. So, from our cross-national all-day thematic groupings, the members living and working in Norway grouped to agree on a common Norwegian social contribution. It was a bit open as to whether we should provide something typical for Norway or related to the conference topic, or just anything entertaining. I took part in the Norwegian group. My work affiliation was Norwegian; my topic was Nordic. However, my citizenship and heritage were German. I was the only one in the Norwegian group without ethnic Norwegian heritage. My status as German and my inherited German history and culture came into focus during group discussions and our contribution to the evening programme, where I was on stage as a horse called Hitler. My case shows obstacles of internationalization, national stereotypes, and shared difficult histories. In this chapter, I discuss how I dealt with this process and, in retrospect, reflect on different struggling identities that were at stake, performed, enforced, and actualized in this international setting and encounter. The reflective research practice proved to be a valuable tool for analysing and comprehending my past emotions and reactions, guiding a way to act and interact in the present and future. I will draw on theories of collective guilt, historical responsibility, and otherness. Hopefully, my case will provide readers with insights into some pitfalls of internationalization and outline ways to overcome these difficulties.

My method is the three-stage framework suggested by Lindseth (2020) and Hansen, Helskog, and Weiss (2022). I will start with describing a specific experience (1), which is an experience of crisis, discrepancy, or something unexpected. I will find words for an experience that made an im-

pression; it was disturbing and difficult to forget (Lindseth, 2017). Putting the experienced event/happening into a narrative makes it possible to analyse and to critically reflect upon. It is a process of retrospective meaning-making about what the narrated experience is about and what is at stake (2), and finally, I will discuss my critical reflection with the help of relevant theory (3). This theoretical discussion will shed new light on my experience, opening up new possibilities for understanding my situation and acting upon it. I hope it will also offer valuable insights to academic colleagues navigating similarly complex (post-)war international encounters.

My specific experience:

In the following paragraph, I will narrate my specific experience. It is a story about what the Norwegian group decided to perform. This is what I remember:

After a long conference day, discussing transnational history and the role of international organizations, the participants gather in national groups. Everybody is tired. What should we perform? A song, maybe. Like last time. Or a sketch? There is a serious lack of enthusiasm. Somehow, the focus turns to me. Another PhD scholar identifies me as German. An idea springs up in her mind: you play Hitler, and he is a horse. I will be Mussolini riding on you. So, I am acting as a horse named Hitler, with another woman riding on my back, impersonating Mussolini. We are galloping into the conference room with more than a hundred delegates seated in it. We climb on the stage: me, the Hitler horse, and the Mussolini rider. A German female PhD student and a Norwegian PhD student riding on her back. We narrate a story about Hitler and Mussolini. A fantasy around historical events. I do not remember what we were narrating or what the others thought or did. Afterwards, another German, living and working in Sweden, who was part of the Swedish group, asked me: What was this? She was startled. Could not believe what she just saw. She was the only one addressing me afterwards. I did not have an answer.

For me, it was one of my most absurd and bizarre experiences inside the academic world so far. It was funny, grotesque, and somehow humiliating at the same time. I am still in wonderment about how this happened. That we did this. Why did we do it? How did we end up with this strange performance about me being a horse called Hitler and Mussolini riding on my back? Initially, I liked the idea of contributing to the social programme as

part of the Norwegian group. It felt good to be part of a collective. It created a sense of belonging. A collective spirit, which I had not often experienced during my socialization as a German citizen growing up in Germany. To perform as a national collective, as "Germans" at an international academic conference, would be rather unlikely to happen. Socialized in the spirit of post-World War II education, nationality was not a category that felt natural or aspiring, not even meaningful to me. For me, academia was – and still is – a world that transcends national and cultural boundaries. I wanted to be a part of an academic community beyond the nation-state. Identifying as European, international, or cosmopolitan was a common form of collective identity construction in the German Federal Republic (Welch & Wittlinger, 2021). My epistemological stance is social constructivism. My academic interest is to trace the making of changing categories, norms, and boundaries: gender, nationality, and scientific disciplines. It is all about questioning essence and ahistorical stability. To identify as an academic cosmopolitan was in alignment with this. Cosmopolitanism is "a term that throughout its long philosophical, aesthetic, and political history has been used to denote cultivated detachment from restrictive forms of identity" (Anderson, 2006, p. 70). My academic contribution to the conference was about a women's international medical organization that was built in the aftermath of World War I. Medical women from all over the world came together at international conferences to share knowledge about women's health and living conditions. They aspired to build a collective supra-national knowledge base to better the living conditions for all women. In the spirit of the Interwar Years internationalization, the goal was to overcome times of war and to build a peaceful future together (although the organization was clearly dominated by some Western nations such as the USA, Great Britain, and France. Illusions/Delusions were present in my case as well. So, how did this performance happen? How did it come to life? In brainstorming, group dynamics unexpectedly turned my German background into a focal point – something to be addressed, if not problematised. Here I was, thinking that I could pass as one of them, but I could not. My Germanness led immediately to Hitler, National Socialism, World War II, the Holocaust, and inevitable collective guilt. Being a German, no matter where I might go and whoever I wanted to be. How could I be so naïve? My otherness was pointed out, my non-inclusiveness in the group of naturalized Norwegians. Nobody protested. Not even myself. I do not know why. Why did we perform a story about two fascists, and why did I agree to play the worst person and

the most difficult German history I can think about? What are the possible emotions and meanings, that time and today?

What is at stake?

What was this? It was absurd, incorrect, funny, devastating, and very serious at the same time. I will suggest some readings:

It was a children's play. An adult playing the horse, and a child riding on her back. Making a joke about Hitler and Mussolini. Making a joke about a German? Politically incorrect, a slightly shocking happening, bringing fascists to the evening programme. In the disguise of play. The revealing and disarming use of humour, satire. Performing a taboo in the guise of play.

It was a historian's fascination with difficult and traumatic history. The ongoing fascination with war and monstrosity.

It was a difficult personal history. Maybe the Mussolini-playing PhD student's relatives were arrested, tortured, or even killed by a German soldier during the German occupation of Norway. Maybe this was not fun at all. It might have been a carnivalesque re-enactment of a difficult (personal) history. For me, it was personal history. My grandparents were soldiers during World War II. They killed people; they were occupying other countries.

It was an honest and, in retrospect, revealing act – making explicit the hidden prejudices and silenced resentments about meeting and interacting with Germans in the present. Being confronted with one of them as a colleague, and even more so, accepting them – me – as one of them/us. I was confronted with my grandparents' past, and, at the same time, I was an academic occupier myself, an intruder in the academic national labor market, in the Norwegian and Nordic collective academic identity. It was the reaction to a changing Norwegian academic world. My presence in the group challenged the traditions of Nordic conferences, comprised of natural citizens of the Nordic countries, born and raised there. I represented a historical change: the internationalization of Norwegian academia. Threatening traditions. Threatening careers, threatening research traditions, threatening communities. Threatened by German migrant academics.

Who are we representing in international contexts and encounters: our individual academic background (so, you are a historian! so, you are a sociologist!)? Our current research topic? Our cultural backgrounds? Are we acting as and are we regarded as cultural, national ambassadors? In this

setting, at that time, I was reduced to my Germanness. From today's perspective, from my secure position as a faculty member of a Norwegian university, I can look back at the event differently, more ambiguously. This was not only something negative happening to me that I silenced for more than a decade. I even forgot about it before the topic of this anthology inspired me to dig into my international experiences. Today, I can see myself as active and strong as well. Firstly, strong in a literal sense: I was able to carry another woman on my back, even running, galloping like a horse. Like a parent, carrying a child. Today, I can even understand the event as a liberating provocation. Making the unspoken explicit. Via a carnivalesque performance. You are a German; we know it, you know it; let's face it. World War II, the German occupation of Norway, is a living memory, a national and personal heritage, and history that still matters a lot in Norway. At least we openly displayed what is going on: addressing and accepting or refusing collective shame and guilt.

One way to retrospectively make sense of my story is that I accepted my historical collective guilt as a German. I acted upon my feeling of responsibility for the German past that I had learned about in school since grade one. Lived experiences are another answer to the question, "Why did you not refuse to play the Hitler horse?" I was simply used to it. It did not come as a surprise. I had been called a Nazi before, in several countries. I have experienced some outspoken accusations, some more subtle in the disguise of jokes and supposedly funny remarks. I accepted playing a horse called Hitler in the past. I accepted and silenced the episode. Do I have a real choice to say, I am not responsible for the deeds of my grandparents, and I do not want to be identified and essentialised as a German?

In the following sections, I will focus on the topic of guilt. I will discuss different theoretical approaches to the question of German guilt, the concept of collective guilt, historical responsibility and otherness. In the resuming discussion, I will critically discuss my academic starting point, the concept of cosmopolitical identities, and the challenges of deconstructing and de-essentialising narratives of national historical identities.

The question of collective guilt

In 1947, shortly after World War II, while the Nuremberg trials were going on, German philosopher Karl Jaspers wrote about distinct ways Germans dealt with guilt and responsibility for the NS crimes II (Jaspers, 1965).

German reactions and attitudes towards World War II and the Holocaust – the acceptance of guilt and responsibility – is a research topic until today. Do the younger generations think and act differently from their grand- and great-grandparents? Or are they the true grandchildren of their grandparents, inheriting a culture, a way of thinking and acting, and a totalitarian mindset? In 2000, Dan Diner wrote that the question of German guilt had become a "moral imperative" after World War II and something that lives on for generations.

What subcutaneous currents within the consciousness of the Germans vis-à-vis Nazism and the murder of the Jews produce such enduring consequences, repeated anew in a decade's cycle? Many of the reactions point to profound layers of feeling that stir the Germans again and again to different degrees of intensity. (Diner, 2000, p. 219)

Diner and others describe these guilt feelings as both collective memory and collective consciousness. The history of World War II and the Holocaust and the questions of guilt and the imperative of responsibility are of importance for the national self-understanding of the German state, people of German heritage, and people living in Germany today (Diner, 2000, p. 219). Karl Jaspers denied that something like a collective consciousness exists. Jaspers stressed individual choices and actions. People might have similar ways of thinking and acting because they communicate with each other; they share thoughts:

The self-analysis of a people in historical reflection and the personal self-analysis of the individual are two different things. But the first can happen only by the way of the second. What individuals accomplish jointly in communication may, if true, become the spreading consciousness of many and then is called national consciousness. Again, we must reject collective thinking as fictitious thinking. Any real metamorphosis occurs through individuals, in the individual, in many individuals, independent of or mutually inspiring one another. (Jaspers, 1965, p. 96)

So, does cross-generational, predetermined collective German guilt make sense? Questions of individual and collective historical guilt have been discussed and re-elaborated by, among others, philosophers Hannah Arendt (2003) and Iris Marion Young (2011), and, more recently, in connection with decolonial theorists, for example, by Rothberg, who introduced the concept of the "implicated subject" (Rothberg, 2019). Collective cultural heritage and its meanings and responsibilities are discussed by Aleida Assmann (2016) and others. I will start to present some selected research contributions, starting from Karl Jaspers in 1946 until 2022.

Karl Jaspers on "The Question of German Guilt"

Psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers held a lecture on German guilt in 1946. A revised version was published as a book called *The Question of German Guilt* (translation from German *Die Schuldfrage*) in 1965 (Jaspers, 1965). In this book, Jaspers described typical attitudes towards the atrocities of the Holocaust and World War II. According to Jaspers, directly after the war, everybody who was still alive was guilty.

The only common denominator may be our nationality which makes all jointly guilty and liable for having let 1933 come to pass without dying. This also unites the outer and inner emigration. (Jaspers, 1965, p. 98)

Jaspers distinguished different kinds of guilt. Firstly, juridical guilt, which applied to those who committed crimes against the law and could be judged by a court. Secondly, political guilt: Every citizen was – and always is – responsible for the actions and policies of their government, whether they have voted for it or not. If you choose to stay in a country and benefit from it, and you do not engage in resistance, you bear responsibility. People are obliged to prevent the state, its head, and politicians from committing crimes. "Ever since European nations have tried and beheaded their monarchs; the task of the people has been to keep their leaders in check. The acts of states are also the acts of persons." (Jaspers, 1965, p. 49)

Thirdly, moral guilt is more encompassing. Every person must ask themselves individually of their own conscience and take responsibility for their choices and actions: Did I act rightly and well? To say one was only following orders, or to state that one did not have a choice, is not a valuable excuse. If an action felt wrong, or if a person knew that he/she should act differently but did not do so, he/she is morally guilty (Jaspers, 1965, pp. 24–26, 45–67; see in addition Lang, 2006, p. 113). Fourthly, there is metaphysical guilt – the guilt of being still alive while others died fighting and resisting.

Thousands in Germany sought, or at least found death in battling the regime, most of them anonymously. We survivors did not seek it. We did not go into the streets when our Jewish friends were led away; we did not scream until we too were destroyed. We preferred to stay alive, on the feeble, if logical, ground that our death could not have helped anyone. We are guilty of being alive. (Jaspers, 1965, p. 66)

Few Germans were legally guilty, and none of the ones born after the war could be legally or politically guilty. It is the sense of being morally

and metaphysically guilty that lives on over generations until today. As Dan Diner puts it, there exists a cross-generational guilt feeling:

It is precisely this sense of guilt without culpability of a legal nature that has produced the cross-generational convulsions accompanying public discourse on Nazism and German mass crimes. These guilt feelings, evoked without individual involvement and even displaced temporally, point back to the specificity of the deed branded into the locus "Auschwitz". (Diner, 2000, p. 220)

Jaspers presented both a typology of guilt and a typology of typical reactions and attitudes towards the atrocities of World War II. Jaspers is clear that accepting guilt is not an easy task. We are quick to accuse and blame others, but we do not want others to accuse us. We do not want to feel guilty.

Our human disposition – in Europe, at least – is such as to make us equally sensitive to blame and quick to blame others. We do not want our toes stepped on, but in our moral judgment of others we get excited easily. This is the consequence of moralistic poisoning. There is generally nothing to which we are so sensitive as to any hint that we are considered guilty. Even if we are guilty, we do not want to let ourselves be told. (Jaspers, 1965, p. 101)

With this very uncomfortable starting point of being accused, which typical reactions and attitudes does Jasper discern from his fellow German citizens?

Jasper presents several explanations and relativization strategies to refuse guilt: "The others did and do wrong as well." Or: "What choices did we have living in a terrorist dictatorship?" Another defence strategy was to mention one's own losses and sufferings that weigh up for the guilt: "I/we have suffered too." This suffering is regarded as a redemption already paid. "How long should we be punished?" Yet another attitude to deal with the accusations of guilt – and a strategy to live with it – is self-abasement and defiance. People embrace guilt and sometimes have an urge to confess and thereby "to enhance his worth by his confession, to eclipse others. His confession of guilt wants to force others to confess. There is a touch of aggressiveness in such confessions." (Jaspers, 1965, p. 101) Jasper links confessing guilt to pride and self-respect. People might say to themselves, "At least we admit it", and this admittance makes us better than others, who do not confess their flaws and wrongdoings (and everybody does wrong) (Jaspers, 1965, p. 102). All these reactions and attitudes are understandable. But according to Jaspers, none of it is an appropriate reaction. I will come

back to Jasper's question of what an acceptable reaction might look like at the end of my article. First, I will examine more contemporary approaches to the question of historical guilt in the wake of Jasper's research.

Recent typologies of German attitudes towards World War II

Katalin Morgan (2017) presents a typology of German student reactions towards the Holocaust in the journal *Holocaust Studies*. In her research, Morgan observed classroom discussions and conducted focus group interviews with students who had been taught about the Holocaust with witness stories of Holocaust survivors. The aim of her study was to find out whether "cultural patterns and mental habits today are perpetuated in members of the next generation and those who teach them about this topic" (Morgan, 2017, p. 457).

Morgan's research aimed at finding whether young Germans today still show similar thinking habits to their Nazi grand- and great-grandparents. The researcher found the patterns she was looking for. Whether they were inherited or communicated, the article does not say, but the author presents consistent "patterns" that she termed as "perverse". Morgan found that "*at least four such thinking patterns could be identified and that some of them could be termed perverse*" (Morgan, 2017, p. 443).

The article defines "perverse" as a deviation from truthfulness (Morgan, 2017, p. 443). One of these perverse thinking patterns was when students and teachers described World War II and the Holocaust as "senseless" and difficult to understand. Especially when students and teachers did not make a further effort to explain. Students and teachers did not discuss how one could actively deal with the past. The second perverse thought pattern Morgan identified was relativising. Students and teachers compared the Holocaust to other historical events, like today's discrimination against immigrants. A third strategy was externalization, which means that respondents thought that the Holocaust was conducted by extreme right-wing people and not ordinary, everyday Germans. In this way, only a few were guilty. Fourthly, students refused to accept responsibility and guilt when confronted with a witness who was not willing to forgive. "The sense of feeling personally attacked when a survivor expresses a prejudice against Germans in general" (Morgan, 2017, p. 457). Some students went into defensive mode. All these attitudes were wrong. But what could be the right attitude?

Morgan highlights some problems related to the guilt question, such as the stigmatizations young Germans still face in international encounters: "The question of guilt, shame, responsibility, and stigmatization as 'Nazis' that German young people continue to experience remains a topic not to be silenced" (Morgan, 2017, p. 457). The author does not offer a solution to this complicated question. Her answer is awareness when teaching about the Holocaust in schools, both in Germany and other countries. Nevertheless, my reading of the article is that the grand- and great-grandchildren still must accept guilt and responsibility for the actions of their dead relatives. My interpretation of this article is that if grandchildren and great-grandchildren want to free themselves from their heritage, or rather, if they do not want to be suspected of having the same inherited cultural thinking and, potentially, acting patterns, they must fully accept responsibility and guilt. They/we/I must accept the singularity of the event. There is no room for relativising, arguing. It is not really an option to just say that it happened a long time ago, to reject responsibility. These are still not accepted answers to give.

In 1922, in the same journal, *Holocaust Studies*, Anke Fiedler addresses a similar question in an article titled "To Remember or Not to Remember – The Germans, National Socialism, and the Holocaust." According to Fiedler, "people are bearers of their country's legacy – irrespective of how they feel about it" (Fiedler, 2022, p. 2).

Fiedler interviewed 265 Germans and identified ideal types of dealing with World War II and the Holocaust. The author connects specific ways of responding to historical guilt to political preferences, class, educational backgrounds, and geography – East Germany and West Germany. Fiedler identifies a political left-wing ideal type who believes that Germany does not do enough to redeem itself for its past and wholly stands for shame and guilt. The opposite type are the ones refusing guilt, wishing an end to remembrance and guilt. This position is closely aligned with right-wing policies; for example, the far-right-wing party AfD (Alternative für Deutschland), which is not an accepted ally to any other political party in Germany so far, because of its stance on past and current immigration policies. To deny the past, to even suggest that something was good in the NS period, or to claim that the past lies behind us still is a deviant position in German politics (Fiedler, 2022, p. 4).

For a young academic milieu, Fiedler identifies the ideal type of the "universalists". According to Fiedler, this is an academic milieu that aims for post-nationalism. Academics, used to travelling and working in interna-

tional contexts, who identify with a culturally diverse Europe, rather than with Germany as a nation-state and cultural unit. According to Fiedler, this type is characterized by pride about the way Germany has dealt with the past, or as she puts it, they "generate new national self-esteem from the (alleged) German learning success of its National Socialist past" (Fiedler, 2022, p. 14). Not only does this narrative generate a positive self-image, but it even leads to thinking that Germans have a special responsibility and role in the world. Having learned to deal successfully with the past, Germans have a responsibility to teach other nations how to overcome nationalism. The motto is: What happened here must not be repeated elsewhere (Fiedler, 2022, p. 14).

Reading this, I feel exposed. Fiedler tells the narrative of me and a lot of my academic colleagues and friends. Probably, I would say something similar. I have been dealing with the past since first grade. I have been confronted with guilt and stigmas and am educated to speak up and to enter critical dialogue. I/my generation must have learned something that others did not. Everywhere we see a naïve (unenlightened) attitude towards nationality that we must question. In this way, accepting German responsibility opens for agency and a positive identity. Reading about the ideal type of the Universalist, I feel exposed and a bit ashamed about this cheap way out of the guilt question.

Confessing guilt, accepting guilt, and deriving pride from guilt are interesting continuations from Jaspers' ideal types until research findings today. Shame, guilt, and pride are interlinked. Raudsepp and Zadora describe this as a paradox. They describe the German attitude towards the past as both collective shame and a "widely shared belief in Germany's extraordinary accomplishments in the arena of memory politics" (Raudsepp & Zadora, 2019, p. 92).

So far, we have established that collective guilt for the past is still an issue in research literature. Different researchers have identified typical attitudes and responses to guilt – none of them seemed to be convincing. In the following, I will have a close look at the concepts of responsibility for the past and how to possibly act on it in the present.

From guilt to responsibility

Hannah Arendt is another philosopher who took up the questions of German guilt. Arendt distinguishes between guilt and responsibility. Guilt can

only apply to individuals and is a juridical term only. According to Arendt, feeling guilt is not a valuable emotion if one has not participated in wrong actions. One is not guilty of the sins of one's father. However, one bears responsibility.

*There is such a thing as responsibility for things one has not done; one can be held liable for them. But there is no such thing as being or feeling guilty for things that happened without oneself actively participating in them. (*Arendt, 2003, p. 147)

What is the difference between guilt and responsibility? Like Jaspers, Arendt did not value sentimental guilt confessions highly. Guilt confessions do not lead to political actions (Arendt, 2003, pp. 29, 148). For Arendt, the individual is the starting point for analysis, but it is important to acknowledge that people must act together for political change.

This vicarious responsibility for things we have not done, this taking upon ourselves the consequences for things we are entirely innocent of, is the price we pay for the fact that we live our lives not by ourselves but among our fellow men, and that the faculty of action, which, after all, is the political faculty par excellence, can be actualized only in one of the many and manifold forms of human community. (Arendt, 2003, pp. 157–158)

Arendt, and in her wake, Iris Marion Young and others like Michael Rothberg, are interested in political actions that lead to change for the present and future. Iris Marion Young stresses that one is responsible for actions in the past if one is benefiting from prior wrongdoings, leading to perpetuated structural injustices. Her example is racial injustice in the US, which is a consequence of slavery (Young, 2011, referred to in Rothberg, 2019, p. 50). Responsibility is understood as political responsibility that must lead to political actions. Michael Rothberg argues in similar ways. His case is colonialization, and he proposes a new term, which is the implicated subject. Rothberg stresses the importance of taking responsibility for the actions of one's ancestors, even though one is not guilty, and one cannot do anything to undo the wrongdoings of the ancestors. The descendants bear a responsibility to the present and future. The answer to historical guilt – to be an implicated subject – is to act together with others for the benefit of many others (Rothberg, 2019, p. 201).

Arendt, Rothberg, and Young obviously have a point – in a juridical sense, the grandchildren do not have guilt and cannot feel guilt. But still, they feel affected emotionally and bear responsibility in the present. The generation of the grandchildren, me included, has been taught about the atrocities of their grandfathers; we have undergone re-education to prevent

us from committing the same atrocities. As such, my generation is taught with the scary possibility that we as well might be capable of repeating the crimes. As I have depicted earlier, one strategy of dealing with this knowledge is denial, another self-hatred. Aleida Assmann ascribes to the younger German generations a perpetrator trauma as a cross-generational collective identity.

As problematic as the concept of perpetrator trauma may be, the issue of a trauma of guilt besetting subsequent generations and potentially leading to reactions ranging from acceptance to denial is unavoidable. The guilt from which the perpetrators had arrogantly distanced themselves is one that the Germans as a nation still have to confront; the crimes of the fathers and the grandfathers have been taken on by their children and grandchildren. (Assmann, 2016, p. 78)

I will delve a bit more into the question of post-generational trauma before I turn again to the importance of responsibility to go beyond self-pity and to act politically for the present and future.

Guilt and cross-generational trauma: the role of education

I have depicted different attitudes of dealing with the guilt question: refusal, confession, self-pity, self-hatred, and even pride in dealing successfully with history. All these seem to be unsatisfactory answers and attitudes. A very striking personal account of living with guilt as a German ancestor is presented by Wagner in an essayistic text from 2006. The essay is called "Nice German Guilt Feelings". The author narrates his personal experience from a West German upbringing, from grade one in the 1970s to adulthood. How much of it is fiction is difficult to tell, but the story strikes a chord. Guilt had become part of the author's identity. He even punished himself during his childhood. He slept on the ground without a warming cushion – the Jews in the concentration camp did not have warm eiderdown blankets, so why should he have? Absurdly, guilt had become somehow comforting for the author. He could miss the feeling of guilt that at some point had vanished from his life. Wagner wrote about his school experiences and about his teacher who taught about World War II and the Holocaust. This is a selection of what he narrated from being 7 years old in the 1970s:

The Rhine Valley outside the classroom window was gradually filling up with corpses. The more I learned, the more pictures I saw, the more atrocities – shoved under my nose by Frau Klingmann (his teacher, my remarks) –

I leafed through, the more I learned about Hitler, the War, and the murder of European Jews – the higher the mountains of bodies rose, towering over the vineyards, pushing up against the Lorelei and over the castles. (Wagner, 2006, p. 766)

I didn't want to tell Frau Klingmann what my grandparents did during the Third Reich; I thought I was too deeply involved myself. And what they did or not do, so I thought, is my responsibility, too; that guilt, so I thought, is something I've inherited, just as their money. My bad conscience weighed like a heavy bedspread on and over me; I had to wear it the whole day. It hung from me like the long, stepped train of a cloak, or like a diver's weight; it was always with me, like a stuffed animal. And I was going to have to deal with it. (Wagner, 2006, p. 767)

Back when I was carrying the load all by myself – that was how it seemed to me – I couldn't come up with a better idea than sleeping on the floor beside my bed. I wasn't cold; guilt had tucked me in. And it was a soft place to lie down. My parent's house, a new, post-war one, had broadloom, of course, wall to wall. (Wagner, 2006, p. 773)

Wagner wrote about childhood in silence – although World War II and the Holocaust were everywhere, he was alone and silenced with the guilt communicated to him during his education. His story touched me. I do not have the same experience of punishing myself. But I grew up having nightmares. Burning cities, my house in flames, I had to flee from it. Were these post-generational traumas inherited from my grandparents, or just the memories of films and documentaries, and literature I had been exposed to as a child? When I was 9 years old, we read a book about a Jewish family in school. In the middle of the night, the Nazis (I do not know who – SS soldiers?) knocked at the door and captured them all, putting them on a train to death camps. Nights weren't safe anymore; the worst could happen in your sleep when you expected it the least. This knocking on doors in the middle of the night. There is no safe space and no safe time. Teaching about World War II and the Holocaust made an impression on the grandchildren. But what do schools do? In an article on the ethics of writing and teaching the Holocaust for children, Kay Epstein, Michael Gray, and Alex Maws address the dilemma of teaching about the topic. On the one hand, the aim is to remember, and on the other hand, to prevent traumatization of the next generations. Teaching should lead to action. To enable the new generation to become actors of societal change. Epstein, Andrews, Gray, and Maws state that we simply do not know the effects of teaching about the Holocaust.

There seems to me to be too little known about what actually happens to children when they read and hear about the Holocaust and see 'horrific images' from it. However, if we expect the results to be the creation of ethical members of society, we simply must analyse what we are doing to young people and why and how this affects them (Epstein, Andrews, Gray, & Maws, 2013, p. 111).

Michael Zembylas is another author who has published on collective guilt and on teaching difficult histories. He asks how

pedagogically productive is the idea of invoking feelings of collective guilt in classrooms. Is it pedagogically fruitful to teach children that they can learn about otherness from considering their own group guilt for crimes committed against others in its name? (Zembylas, 2019, p. 404)

In school, we never talked about how to deal with the feeling of guilt. We did not talk about how we act as Germans when travelling to a country once occupied by Germany. We learned that being part of a silent mass is dangerous; we learned to raise our voices, to discuss and disagree. Teaching dialogue and discussion was a central approach of US re-education policies implemented in German education after 1945 (Goschler, 2020, p. 99). All these educational efforts were meant to make us into democratic citizens in our own country, to avoid a relapse into totalitarianism. But I was not prepared to encounter the past in other countries. I was not prepared for how to engage with others, with descendants of victims. When I was called a Nazi, or when I had to act as being a horse called Hitler, I just went silent. I doubt that the Norwegians at this conference ever had a school lesson about how to deal with Germans, their shared past, and complicated emotions. There do exist shared projects with other countries. For example, common history textbooks for France and Germany. Historians went into dialogue about the difficult past and different national history writing about it. The goal was to write school textbooks that enable multi-perspectivity, working for a common post-conflict society (Korostelina, 2020). There is nothing like this for Norway and Germany. Even though World War II is an important collective memory in Norway, actualized on National Day every year, no need is uttered, neither officially nor privately, to go into dialogue about the difficult shared past. Conflicts are buried – without being dead. We are haunted by its proclaimed absence.

Reflective practice: Transformation and active choices

In my experience and in the process of narrating and analysing it, a lot of emotions were and are at play. I can identify several stages. Firstly, quiet acceptance – I did perform the Hitler horse, and I told only a few people about it. I almost forgot about the episode for a decade. But then, after living in Norway for many years and in a different personal and job environment, I started to feel anger about my experiences. I decided to write about the episode as a form of confrontation. Now, in the process of writing, reading, thinking, and applying theory to my case, I understand that neither reaction do not lead to anything good and constructive. Neither "to take" in a way of self-punishment nor to aggressively go to a counterattack is an adequate approach. Through reflective analysis, what initially seemed like an experience of humiliation transformed into an opportunity to interrogate different theoretical perspectives on historical guilt, responsibility, and post-generational trauma. This demonstrates the potential of reflexive methodologies in revealing hidden dynamics of memory and identity in transnational academic encounters. This process helped unlock a difficult and shameful topic, bring movement to a frozen memory, and create new possibilities for action. Helskog and Weiss (2023) refer to Thorsted and Hansen (2022) in their differentiation between event experience and insight experience. I have learned from the literature I have studied for this chapter. I learned about the revealing pride feeling, a typical way of building a positive national identity: at least we learned something (and you did not). I understood that there was a lot of shame and guilt that we never talked about. There was a striking silence in schools about how to navigate this historical heritage in interpersonal encounters. We had all the information but lacked the tools to act on it. Although Karl Jaspers wrote illuminatingly about this topic quite early. The insight experience has changed how I evaluate the experience today. It paved the way to acknowledge Jaspers' suggestions. For Jaspers, guilt is aligned with freedom. We make choices, and we can make choices. The solution Jaspers is offering, the right attitude beyond self-pity and aggression, is conscious acceptance (Jaspers, 1965, p. 113). To admit vulnerability, to allow sadness, even to grieve. Aleida Assmann wrote that mourning and grief were and still are absent for the perpetrator descendants (Assmann, 2016, p. 87). It is not acceptable or possible to talk about German sufferings without aligning oneself with relativists. It is not acceptable to talk about the burden of living with the knowledge of our ancestors' crimes. What is our burden compared to that of the victims? I can feel sad

about the guilt and the silence around it. We can allow sorrow and grief for ourselves, and then we must go on, a step out of introspection (Jaspers, 1965, pp. 101–102). According to Jaspers, the right way to deal with guilt is "modest resignation" and "unaggressive silence" (Jaspers, 1965, pp. 113–115). Neither sorrow nor anger. Unaggressive silence. What may this be, and how could this lead to action for the present and future?

Meeting the Others: nationalism and cosmopolitanism

I will conclude with some theoretical reflections on possible implications for the future. Jaspers suggested unaggressive silence. I would like to link this with Sharon Todd's take on relational ethics. Referring to Levinas, Todd stresses the importance of listening to the other and acknowledging different lived experiences. It is our responsibility to let the other be in their otherness and to accept alterity (Todd, 2003, p. 2). Responsibility is not about performing something we have learned "as though it were merely a performance of a code, but on the alertness and vigilance we bring to our own response in the context of listening" (Todd, 2003, p. 146). It is active listening, listening that hears the other without comparing to oneself.

I have started my reflection by identifying as a cosmopolitical academic. Something beyond the nation-state and fixed identities that lead to antagonistic relationships with others. This might have been naïve cosmopolitanism (Anderson, 2006, p. 74). It made sense with my local German historical background, but it clashed with a different role of Norwegian university and intellectuals. Naïve cosmopolitanism had led me to universalization and generalization: the assumption that we academics were alike, a class of denationalized intellectuals. Whilst I was perceived as an impersonation of a difficult history, and possibly the impersonation of neoliberal globalization of the academic world. Cosmopolitanism has been criticized for being blind to power imbalances, a project of the privileged Western elite. This goes together with the post-colonial critique of Western universalistic thinking (Kent & Tomsky, 2017; Welch, 2021). Anderson cites Julia Kristeva when pointing out that only strangeness is universal (Anderson, 2006, p. 90). Beyond universalism, cosmopolitanism, and antagonistic national identities, we can think with the concept of alterity. To accept the other, with different experiences and controversial emotions. To understand them in their specific contexts, the position to speak and act from (Berger, 2020). To see the other and listen to them in their otherness – and to allow

oneself to be transformed in the process – is, so far, the most enlightening lesson I have taken from writing and reflecting on my experience. In consequence, we should foster reflective, open-minded dialogical academic spaces where we can work, listen, and think with others in transnational academic communities – just as we did in working on this anthology. This project illustrates how reflective engagement with historical memory can foster deeper awareness in transnational academic spaces, offering a path beyond inherited narratives of guilt and towards meaningful dialogue.

Notes

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