

# **The Shaping of German-Canadian Family Memory of World War II and the Holocaust**

**by**

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## Ethics Statement



The author, whose name appears on the title page of this work, has obtained, for the research described in this work, either:

- a. human research ethics approval from the Simon Fraser University Office of Research Ethics

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines how German-Canadian immigrant families have addressed and remembered the Holocaust. Using a generational perspective, it is based on interviews with ten second- and third-generation German-Canadians who were born between 1950-1975. Their families emigrated from Germany in the first two decades after World War II. The questions this thesis seeks to explore are: How were memories of perpetration, the Nazi past and the Holocaust communicated within families? What information was or was not talked about? Did growing up in Canada shape how families remember their German past? How are the patterns in the stories of second- and third-generation German-Canadians similar to or different from Germans in Germany? Thematic narrative analysis was employed and demonstrated patterns in victim discourse, silence and avoidance in the interviewees' narratives. The findings from this research project can be used to inform Holocaust and genocide education curricula and psychological interventions with German-Canadians.

**Keywords:** German-Canadian, memory transmission, Holocaust, guilt, post-war immigration

## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my grandmother, Hella Schäftlein (1937-2015). Your passion for history inspired my interest in German family memories. I wish I could listen to your stories again.

## **Acknowledgements**

This project would not have been possible without the ten individuals who volunteered their time to be interviewed and share their family memories. I am grateful for their support of this project and being able to share their stories and insights in this thesis.

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# **Chapter 1. Post-war Germans' Collective Memory and Memory Transmission**

This thesis is based on interviews with ten second- and third-generation German-Canadians who were born in Canada between 1950-1975 and whose families immigrated from Germany in the first two decades after the end of World War II. The goal of this project was to learn how German-Canadian immigrant families confronted the Holocaust. How were memories of perpetration in relation to the Nazi past and the Holocaust communicated within German-Canadian families? What kind of information was or was not talked about? Did growing up in Canada affect how family members talked about their family's German past and involvement in the Nazi era? How are the patterns found in the stories of second- and third-generation German-Canadians similar to or different from second- and third-generation Germans in Germany? These questions were explored through the use of narrative analysis and the findings of the study were related to the patterns identified and described in relevant literature on the topic.

Previous research on post-war German-Canadians and their families was focused on immigration, German-Canadian immigrant identity, oral history accounts of three-generational interviews on the grandparents' past and therefore this study fills a gap in the knowledge by looking at how family memories of the Holocaust are shared and remembered by members of the second- and third-generation. This thesis seeks to explore how the descendants of German-Canadian immigrants remember the stories of their grandparents and parents' experiences during and after the war and how this affected how the post-war generations talk about and commemorate the Holocaust.

In this first chapter, I summarize the literature on memory transmission within cultures and families, and factors that affect it. More specifically, I will examine how the German public has dealt with or avoided the past, and relate these patterns in German memory transmission to feelings of guilt and shame and the German national identity. I will then conclude by presenting a rationale for the continued responsibility to remember.

The concepts included in this chapter form the theoretical foundation for this thesis and provide the context for a deeper understanding the themes found in the narratives of German-Canadians.

In chapter two I review the relevant literature on post-war German-Canadians and the themes surrounding confronting the Holocaust that I found in the analysis of the interviews in more detail. This chapter also introduces the methodology and rationale of the current study. I discuss some of the findings and beliefs about German-Canadians that this research study was based on and how the literature on post-war Germans and German-Canadians informed the research question and design of this thesis. I outline post-war German immigrants' motivation to assimilate, potentially to leave behind the negative German past and its relation to the memories that were transmitted in this invisible ethnic group. Despite some theorists questioning the idea of a distinct German ethnic identity, I suggest that speaking and/or understanding the German language and maintaining certain traditions are characteristics of German-Canadians. Therefore, I used this criterion.

In chapter three I provide the research context and research design background. I outline how thematic narrative analysis lends itself well to the study and analysis of family memories and emphasize the importance of researcher reflexivity by describing my own story and how it has affected and shaped my understanding of the German collective silence. Finally, I introduce the research participants' biography for the reader to get a background on the interviewees.

Chapter four of this thesis describe the findings and relate the findings to previous research and theories. I also discuss what interviewees did and did not talk about in their reflections. I explore how families describe their experiences during immigration and in Germany during and after the war, how families confronted the Holocaust and if German-Canadians describe a sense of burden due to the legacy of the Holocaust. Many of the stories remembered about the families' immigration and life in Germany during the war show avoidance by focusing on the "good German", "heroization" and German victim roles rather than confronting the question of German responsibility. All but one of the ten individuals interviewed shared family stories from the war that were focused on the German suffering.

The fifth chapter of this thesis discusses the general themes identified in the interviews and addresses German-Canadians' responsibility to remember the Holocaust. Potential implications for Holocaust education and as well as suggestions for future directions for research on post-war German-Canadian immigrants are included.

## **Research Rationale - Opa Wasn't a Nazi**

The foundation for this project was largely the book *Opa war kein Nazi* (Opa wasn't a Nazi) published in 2002 by Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller and Karoline Tschuggnall that summarizes the findings of their seminal research study *Transmitting Historical Awareness*. This study consisted of interviews with 40 German families and 142 individuals. The researchers investigated the processes of communicative memory and how families discuss and remember National Socialism (NS) and the Holocaust. Members across the post-war generations, from the first generation, the eyewitnesses, up to the fourth generation, the great-grandchildren, were interviewed about their family stories and memories. The authors' analysis of 2535 stories and comparison of the stories across members of the same family and different generations revealed systematic patterns in what was and was not remembered (p. 13).

Most notably, they found a pronounced "heroization" and stories of resistance described by the younger generation that did not reflect the eyewitnesses' stories, particularly in the case of stories of perpetration (p. 78). This study shed light on the interactions between historical knowledge, Holocaust education, and family memories, and how the younger generations tend to remember their grandparents' stories about the Holocaust in a way that absolves their family and themselves from potential guilt (p. 206). This is particularly apparent as with every younger generation the stories became more positive and at times perpetrators become victims (p. 7). The authors compare these effects during the intergenerational transmission of memory to the children's game of "telephone" where the message often gets distorted as a result of individuals' interpretations, misunderstandings and unconscious motivations, which Welzer et al. called *reframing* (p. 81). Reframing included victim discourse, rationalization, distancing, fascination and feeling overwhelmed (p. 81). Within the general theme of victim discourse was also a tendency to appropriate the language of the victims of the

Holocaust to describe the experience of members of the perpetrator and bystander group, which the authors termed *Wechselrahmung* or *changing frames* (p. 82).

To complement their qualitative findings with quantitative data, the authors added the results of a large, representative survey conducted in June 2002 where Germans were asked about their parents' and grandparents' views and actions during the Nazi period (p. 246). 49% indicated that their relatives felt very negative towards the Holocaust and national socialism and only a total of 6% thought they had a positive opinion on national socialism. Only 1% thought it was possible that one of their relatives had been directly involved with the Nazi crimes, while 26% thought their family members helped someone who was targeted by the Nazis (p. 247). 65% believed their relatives suffered a lot during the war and 13% thought their family members had actively resisted the Nazi regime. Among the age group of (15-29 year olds), 13% thought their relatives had actively resisted the Nazi regime and only 3% thought it was possible their grandparents had been directly involved in the Nazi crimes (p. 247). Interestingly, the more educated respondents were, the more positive their assessment of their family members' innocence was (p. 246). The low estimates of 1 to 3% are particularly interesting because about 10% of the population were involved with the Nazi party which translates to about 11<sup>1</sup> to 12 million<sup>2</sup> Germans having been involved in the Nazi regime by virtue of belonging to the Nazi party and about 0.9 million<sup>2</sup> in its paramilitary organizations (Bundersarchiv, 2013)<sup>2</sup>.

The findings from *Opa war kein Nazi* highlight how past events are recalled and reshaped in the present and how patterns in memory transmission provide insight into how societies and groups view themselves or would like to be viewed (Proske, 2012, p. 42). These patterns were used in this thesis as framework to understand the narratives of German-Canadian immigrants and to compare their stories and the themes that emerge from the memories with those reported in *Opa war kein Nazi*. Given the representative survey results described by Welzer et al. (2002), similar responses were

<sup>1</sup> Fehlauer, 2010, p. 27. This paper is based on the same records cited on the Bundesarchiv website but states that the American troops gave 11 million membership cards of former NSDAP members to the Berlin Document Centre.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bundesarchiv.de/benutzung/zeitbezug/nationalsozialismus/00299/index.html> en

expected by the interviewees included in the research project this thesis is based on. The remainder of this chapter will review relevant literature that forms the foundation and context for the narratives analyzed in chapter four. I will first describe how families pass on their memories to the next generations and I outline how generations can be understood from a cultural perspective. I then outline the literature on post-war Germans' memory reconstruction in the form of heroization, victim discourse, focusing on the "others" and rationalization or normalization. Finally, I summarize literature on the common experience of guilt and shame in relation to the German past and briefly discuss the responsibility to commemorate the Holocaust.

## **Literature review - Collective Memory: Cultural and Personal Dimensions of Memory**

Memory and the process of memory transmission are the ways in which individuals and groups of humans create their cultural identity and pass it on to the next generation through culture rather than biology (Assman, 1988, p. 126)<sup>3</sup>. From this cultural perspective, cultural memory and communicative memory are the means of memory transmission within cultures and between generations and their content highlights how individuals and groups make sense of the past in the present (Dresler-Hawke, 2005, p. 136). In this section I will provide an overview of definitions and concepts in the area of collective memory.

The concept of *cultural memory* can be defined as:

A collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation. (Assman, 1988, p. 126)

Assman's definition of cultural memory is based on Halbwachs' theories on memory transmission and describes it as the mechanism societies use to communicate

<sup>3</sup> Assman, 1988, p. 126: 'According to Nietzsche, while in the world of animals genetic programs guarantee the survival of find a the species, humans must find means by which to maintain their nature consistently through generations.'

their cultural symbols, behaviours and way of life across generations. This transmission occurs through interaction with others and the social environment. Assman (1988) further elaborates on this definition:

Cultural memory is characterized by its distance to the everyday. Distance from the everyday (transcendence) marks the temporal horizon. Cultural memory has its fixed point; its horizon does not change with the passing of time. These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance). (Assman, 1988, p. 129).

According to Assman's definition, cultural memory is the way societies pass on their identity, through cultural practices and cultural symbols. Unlike communicative memory, cultural memory has fixed points that anchor it to certain events which shape how events are understood. Suleiman (2002) has argued that the Holocaust was one such event that shaped how those affected understood and experienced their world after (p. 280). Erll (2011) defines cultural memory as "how the 'past' is created and recreated within sociocultural context" (p. 303). This includes individual memory and the cultural memories of whole social groups and can be differentiated as collected memories on the individual level and collective memories on the social level. The term cultural memory encompasses how a group defines its identity, constructs memories of the past in relation to contemporary contexts and the culturally transmitted linguistic patterns, customs and rituals (Assman, 1988, p. 128). Cultural memory relies on official bearers of cultural memory for its transmission and continuously re-negotiates its self-image and identity.

Unlike cultural memory, which is the overarching meta-framework for understanding that individuals in a culture use to pass on values and beliefs to its members, communicative memory is "based entirely on everyday conversations" (Assman, 1988, p. 126). Assman (1988) defines *communicative memory* as follows:

The concept of 'communicative memory' includes those varieties of collective memory that are based exclusively on everyday communications. These varieties, which M. Halbwachs gathered and analyzed under the concept of collective memory, constitute the field of oral history. Everyday communication is characterized by a high degree of non-specialization, reciprocity of roles, thematic instability, and disorganization. Typically, it takes place between partners who can change roles. . . . Through this manner of communication, each

individual composes a memory which, as Halbwachs has shown, is (a) socially mediated and (b) relates to a group. Every individual memory constitutes itself in communication with others. (Assman, 1988, p. 126)

Communicative or narrative memory consists of everyday conversations including unspoken beliefs, behaviours and assumptions that are passed on through the contact with other individuals of the same memory community, who are expected to understand the content of even fragmented memories based on assumed shared beliefs. The memories are shaped by each participant in the conversation and through this exchange as members interpret and re-interpret memories based on their understanding at the time of narrating, recalling or hearing the memory. Families are the primary transmitters of communicative memory, which is anchored in time through cultural memory (Assman, 1988, p. 127). An individual is usually a member of several memory groups and their degree of identification and loyalty to each group determines how much of the collective memory they internalize (Erll, 2011). According to Erll (2011), family memory is a particular type of collective memory as families form a unique memory community:

Family memory is a typical inter-generational memory: a kind of collective memory that is constituted through ongoing social interaction and communication between children, parents and grandparents. Through the repeated recall of the family's past—usually via oral stories which are told at family get-togethers—those who did not experience past events first hand can also share in the memory. In this way an exchange of 'living memory' takes place between eyewitnesses and descendants. Inter-generational memory thus goes back as far as the oldest members of the social group can remember either their own experiences or stories that they heard from their elders. (Erll, 2011, p. 306)

Family memories are the way families share their collective identity as social group through conversation. Erll (2011) further describes this important characteristic of family memories:

Family memories, just like any other individual and collective memory, are constructs. They may ring 'true', but they are never accurate 'representation' of past events. Family memories amalgamate what are taken to elements from the past with perspectives, knowledge, and desires (p. 307)

These family memories are not static and contain individual and inter-generational memories, a dynamic negotiation of memories between eyewitnesses and descendants. The oldest member of the family marks the foundation or origin of the



inter-generational memory. A memory community and its communicative memory are believed to span 80 years or three to four generations and as such the third- and fourth-generations mark a turning point in whether concepts, rituals and beliefs contained within the communicative memory of one generation will be passed on to the next (Assman, 1988, p. 127). In the case of post-war generations, the eyewitness or contemporary witness generation is the foundation for current family memories of World War II and the Holocaust (Hirsch, 2008, p. 104). As members of this generation are passing away, so does their knowledge and experience of the original events and while the memories live on in the next generations, they may also take on a life of their own. This constructive nature of family memories may explain some of the findings by Welzer, Moller and Tschuggnal (2002), where family memories became increasingly more positive across generations and at times stories had changed completely by the youngest generation (p. 7). Tschuggnal and Welzer (2002) describe construction of the memories in their transmission across generations as follows:

Most of the time, memories are re-created when passed on. ... The members of the younger generations, children, grandchildren and interviewers alike, do not simply repeat the stories told to them. Rather, these stories are altered, sometimes even taking on completely new meanings. (p. 131)

As memories are recalled and retold by members of a family, their content and meaning changes, not only because the cultural narrative surrounding it may have changed, but also due to different emotional needs and differences in the individuals' understanding as a result of experience (Tschuggnal & Welzer, 2002, p. 132; Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010, p. 1104).

The following definition of collective memory offered by Frie (2014) describes the characteristics and common conceptions about collective memory:

Personal memories are often assumed to be entirely unique and private. But just as the individual mind can never be fully separated from its social surround, personal memory is always related to the cultural contexts in which it unfolds. What I know or do not know, what I remember or forget, occurs in the interplay of cultural norms, social organization, and family dynamics. This process of remembering, in other words, is dependent upon the memory practices of the social and cultural groups to which one belongs. (p. 650)

Frie's description highlights that both individual and collective memory consist of the interplay of cultural and communicative memory. This explanation of collective memory captures the collaborative constructive memory process on a societal or group level that aligns closely with the assumptions about cultural memory this thesis is based on. The characteristics outlined above provide the framework for understanding the dynamics of memory transmission at play when families discuss their past. The complex interplay of cultural and collective memory is further complicated by immigration where in addition to the German cultural memory there may be influences by the Canadian culture, particularly in member of the younger generations raised in Canada.

## **The Concept of Generations**

In the context of intergenerational memory transmission, the concept of "generations" takes on a central theme as the memories are transmitted between generations by members of different generations, who are each shaped by the collective and cultural memory of their time. But how does one define a generation? Is it not just the succession of great-grandparents, grandparents, parents and children? One of the most-cited works on generation theory is Mannheim's *The Problem of Generations* (1928) in which he compares different theories on the concept of *generation* and finally arrives at the following definition of historical generations:

The social phenomenon 'generation' represents nothing more than a particular kind of identity of location, embracing related age-groups embedded in a historical-social process. (Mannheim, 1928, p. 292)

Members of a generation are in a similar age group, identified with a certain identity related to where they grew up and similar events they were exposed to. Mannheim's theory "emphasized the experiential and phenomenological aspects of generational belonging" (Suleiman, 2002, p. 279). There is some disagreement about the number of years a generation spans but a commonly accepted number is 30 years (Mannheim, 1928, p.278, p. 301). Moreover, Mannheim (1928) recognizes that within each generation there are multiple generation units:

The generation unit represents a much more concrete bond than the actual generation as such. Youth experiencing the same concrete historical problems

may be said to be part of the same actual generation; while those groups within the same actual generation which work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways, constitute separate generation units. (p. 304)

Generation units describe the way individuals within a generation understand the events around them. Generation units represent one's identity and membership in certain groups, different worldviews and political views within the same generation groups (Mannheim, 1928, p. 306). Membership in a certain generation unit may determine how individuals of a generation experience and make sense of the same events but arrive at different conclusions. However, generations and generation units do not exist in isolation and instead generations overlap, usually with the youngest and the intermediate generation having the most contact (Mannheim, 1928, p. 306). Mannheim (1928) describes the interaction between generations as a bidirectional student-teacher relationship:

The teacher-pupil relationship is not as between one representative of 'consciousness in general' and another, but as between one possible subjective centre of vital orientation and another subsequent one. This tension appears incapable of solution except for one compensating factor: not only does the teacher educate his pupil, but the pupil educates his teacher too. Generations are in a state of constant interaction. (p. 301)

Since multiple generations co-exist and form an “uninterrupted generation series” (p. 301), they influence and learn from each other. This is how they share, learn and reinterpret collective memories. According to the definitions offered above, presence during certain events and experiences and shared attitudes are seen as defining factors of a generation. This suggests that there are “social generations” in addition to the genealogical family generations one would track on a family tree. These social generations become particularly relevant when considering the question of survivors, victims, perpetrators, bystanders and followers in the context of World War II (Suleiman, 2002, p. 280).

When looking at the concept of generations from a narrative perspective, Weigel (2002) concludes that the year 1945 had such a strong effect that the word generation has taken on a new meaning:

Thus, since 1945, a 'generation' has become a category of memory, with a genealogy anchored in the unconscious. Although the generation as a traditional, historico-philosophical term marks the intersection of the continuum and the division into time periods, the figure of the transgenerational incorporates within itself both, break and genealogy. No more is it a break within genealogy, but rather it is the notion of a propagated break in civilization and its consequences or heritage. (p. 266)

This definition highlights the profound effect of the Holocaust and that generations due to their ongoing nature are continuously affected and it suggests that a "generation" in the context of memory marks a unique memory community.

Ritscher (2001) further explains how the concept of the interconnection of generations binds generations of Germans together in their responsibility:

They connect us with the actions and experiences of previous generations and also with the invisible participants of the current social system, in which we ourselves take part. Through this interconnection within contexts that lie beyond conscious and nameable current events and decisions, there results a personal responsibility for sequences of actions, of which individual parts have also occurred without our direct involvement. (p. 109) [my translation]

Ritscher's reflection of the role of generations highlights that the legacy of one generation does not end when they are no longer present but that it is deeply woven into the society, culture and identity of individuals and have an influence without one's personal awareness.

**Post-Holocaust generations.** The Holocaust was a point in human history that has defined not only the generations that experienced it but also those who followed (Rosenthal & Völter, 1998, p. 5; Van Alphen, 2006, p. 475; Weigel, 2002, p. 269). Weigel (2002) states:

After World War II and the Shoah, a chronology was established in which history was counted in generations and also recounted, or told, by members of those generations. (p. 264)

The traumatic events of the Holocaust have shaped and affected the generations since and the generations that follow are counted from the perspective of the Holocaust. This counting of generations, however, is not as straightforward as it may seem as generations do not follow a neat and orderly succession of "every 30 years starting from"

but instead they are “interlinked” (Weigel, 2002, p. 272). In addition to the generation of the survivors, the perpetrators and the followers, there are also those who were alive during the war but were too young to be part of it, known as generation 1.5 (Suleiman, 2002). And then there are the generations that were born after the Holocaust who continue to feel and experience the after-effects of the Holocaust (Lenz, Levin & Seeberg, 2013, p. 14). The terms first, second, third and fourth generation imply continuity between the post-war generations and speak to the memories that get passed on from one generation to the next (Van Alphen, 2006, p. 476).

**The war generation.** The first generation is the generation that was direct witness or participant of the war, Nazi Germany or the Holocaust. These were adults or young adults who were developmentally mature enough to understand the impact and meaning of the Nazi ideology and had to make choices in relation to the Nazi regime (Suleiman, 2002, p. 282). The timeline used in *Opa war kein Nazi* was 1906-1933 (Welzer et al., 2002, p. 212). Proske (2012) characterized this generation as: “the generation of the perpetrators and bystanders, which in the two decades after 1945 tried to gloss over the crimes in silence” (p. 43). This generation’s dealing with the past has been found to exhibit a systematic omission of information about their relationship to the Nazi years and the Holocaust and as such marks the beginning of the silence and unprocessed experiences and memories that were passed onto the next generation (Fuchs, Krüger & Gobodo-Madikizela, 2013, p. 136).

**The second generation.** The second post-war generation is the generation of the “children of the war” (Heinlein, 2011, p. 118). Welzer et al. (2002) included in this category individuals born between 1934 and 1967 as the children of parents who were adults during the war (p. 213). This generation generally comprises the children of war-generation Germans and has often seen their parents engage in silence in response to the past and consequently adopted a similar tradition of silence also often referred to as “the double-wall of silence” (Bar-On, 1989, p. 245). Rosenthal and Völter (1998) described the second generation’s experience as follows:

Even the enormous energy that members of the so-called (19)68 generation brought to the discussion on antifascism in West Germany could not prevent them from unconsciously submitting to the same rules, in spite of their effort to seriously examine fascism, criticize the continuities between the ‘Third Reich’

and post-war society and to squarely face their parents' generation with its complicity with the Nazis. (p. 9)

Although they are sometimes described as the generation that started the conversation on the confrontation with National Socialism during the 1968 student rebellion (Proske, 2012, p. 44), they still internalized the trauma from the war and the guilt, shame and, at times, anger without having been direct witnesses of the Nazi time (Fuchs et al., 2013, p. 138). Fuchs et al. (2013) describe the effect this emotional baggage likely had on the next generation as follows:

Because resolution often proves to be impossible under such circumstances, the second generation is almost certain to have exposed their children to the sense of underlying anxiety that results from the near constant need to defend against the threat of confrontation with a tainted family history. (p. 138)

Fuchs et al. (2013) identify an “underlying anxiety” of potential family involvement and allude to the use of psychological defenses to avoid this confrontation. Based on this assessment and the silence in the previous two generations, it is likely that the third generation is still affected.

**The third generation.** The third generation is the generation of the grandchildren of Germans who were adults or young adults during the war (Fuchs et al., 2013, p. 138). In their research study Welzer et al. (2002) included members of this generation born between 1954-1985 (p. 213). Other timeframes defined in the literature range from 1962-1970 and 1965-1980 (Hohenlohe-Bartenstein, 2011, p. 99). Frie (2012) characterized the “third generation” as follows:

The so-called third generation of Germans, born in the 1960s and 1970s, continues to be shaped by what their parents (the second generation) saw and what their grandparents (the first generation) did. With the distance of time, there also is less willingness to define German identity in terms of the past and a growing desire, particularly among the fourth generation, to look to the future. (p. 209)

This generation was exposed to an increased amount of education and information about the Holocaust in schools and in the public discourse and it has been found that this generation has a more distant and abstract relationship with the Holocaust and the war period than the previous generations (Proske, 2012, p. 59;

Welzer, 2005, p. 310). However, Fuchs et al. (2013) in their study with third-generation Germans found evidence that “post-war generation Germans involved in this research project do, indeed, continue to experience significant adverse emotional effects in relation to Germany’s role during WWII” (p. 155). Liu and Dresler-Hawke (2006) described an interesting shift from a focus on the Nazi crimes and the Holocaust for the first and second generation to a reflection on the German identity and the resulting sense of responsibility in the “third generation” (p. 134). Some argue that the question of personal guilt no longer applies to this generation as they were not directly involved but it is not a question of personal guilt but instead it is a question of identity and the responsibility to remember (Liu & Dresler-Hawke, 2006, p. 134; Proske, 2012, p. 43). This moral responsibility includes commemorating the victims of the Holocaust and ensuring that the knowledge and memories are not lost or pushed aside and overwritten by victim discourse (Proske, 2012, p. 45).

## **(Re)construction: Tales of Heroes, Victims and the “Others”**

Family memories are by nature constructive and get continuously reworked to account for new information, understanding and changing discourse on a social level (Assman, 188, p. 136). When retelling stories between generations, gaps in knowledge appear either due to omission or forgetting and these gaps are then frequently filled in by the younger generation with their current understanding of the events and motivated by a desire to maintain personal and family integrity (Welzer, 2005, p. 8). Some of these gaps are created by a speech behavior Welzer et al. (2002) called “empty talking”, most commonly encountered in the statement “I/we/they didn’t know”. *Empty talking* can be identified based on the following description:

Actors, generally the perpetrators, remain shapeless, while historical events are described in outline form, so what is being talked about remains unclear, the events seemingly harmless. (Welzer et al, 2002, p. 24)

Such “empty talking” leaves room for interpretation and misunderstanding and can significantly change the content of family memories across generations. How specifically do these constructive processes alter family memories of the Holocaust and World War II? When looking at patterns in memory construction across generations,

researchers have identified a common tendency towards *heroization*, a desire to present family members as “good Germans” and victim discourse emphasizing a notion of “we suffered, too” (Bar-On, 1989; Bar-On & Gaon, 1991, p. 80; Welzer et al., 2002; Welzer, 2001, p. 57). In addition, rationalization and normalization as well as focusing on the “Others” are common responses that have been observed in post-war generations of Germans and those of German heritage ever since researchers have started collecting family memories of non-Jewish Germans who were members of the perpetrator and bystander group. Halbwachs (1941/1992) also described this desire to represent oneself favourably when recalling memories:

Society from time to time obligates people not just to reproduce in thought previous events of their lives, but also to touch them up, to shorten them, or to complete them so that, however convinced we are that our memories are exact, we give them a prestige that reality did not possess. (Halbwachs & Coser, 1992, p. 51)

While the extent to which this reconstruction is conscious is unclear, the patterns in the memories of German families show that this process is quite common and likely motivated by a desire to distance the self from the Holocaust and feelings of guilt and shame that would result from such a connection (Liu & Dresler-Hawke, 2006, p. 134; Welzer et al., 2002, p. 13). Accepting their parents’ or grandparents’ guilt by acknowledging their direct or indirect involvement with the perpetrator group could have consequences on the individual’s self-perception and identity and could bring up feelings of intergenerational guilt. Perceiving family members as having defied the Nazi regime allows for a continued belief that the own family members were innocent and therefore it is possible to conclude that one does not need to feel responsible.

The next section will outline seven of the common narratives found in the family memories of German post-war families. Most of the terms and concepts stem from Welzer et al. (2002) in their representative study, which compared the often vague and fragmented memories of the eyewitness generation with the version the children and grandchildren told of the same stories and their grandparents’ life in Germany during the Nazi period.

**Heroization.** Welzer (2005) describes *heroization* or *cumulative heroization* as “the phenomenon of history becoming ameliorated from generation to generation” (p. 9).



This includes the tendency to present family members as having resisted the Nazi regime in some ways, presenting them as victims of the war or focusing on the “good” Germans, who did not know about the Holocaust or had no choice but to be bystanders (Welzer et al., 2002, p. 52). More specifically, Welzer (2005) found that “stories were about family members from the eyewitness generation (or their relatives) who were either victims of the Nazi past and/or heroes of everyday resistance” (p. 9). These stories become richer and more detailed when recounted by the second and third generation, often with a focus on family members’ bravely resisting the Nazi regime in one way or another. Welzer (2005) summarized the process and reasons for cumulative heroization as follows:

Cumulative heroization occurs rapidly and simply. A generalized image of a respected grandmother or grandfather provides a framework in which any point of reference suggested by family stories can be expanded into a ‘good story.’ ... Plots become rearranged to reshape the nuanced, ambivalent, often troubling tales by the eyewitnesses into a morally clear attitude on the part of the protagonists— a clearly positive one. The tendency to heroize the grandparents’ generation shows the never-to-be-underestimated strong effects of ties of loyalty to loved ones on historical awareness and the retrospective construction of the past. (p. 11)

Welzer et al. (2002) conclude that cumulative heroization serves the purpose of maintaining positive family ties. In addition, it seems to allow for emotional distancing by disassociating the family members and, by extension, the self from the Nazi past. Dresler-Hawke (2005) suggests that this heroization may have the purpose of maintaining a positive national identity by allowing younger generations to identify with those who resisted rather than having to face the reality that the large majority took a passive role (p.135). This focus in the public discourse on Germans who resisted the Nazi regime rather than the role of Germans as perpetrators and bystanders was supported by the German government in an attempt to create a stable national identity not defined by the German perpetrators but instead by its commitment to antifascism (Frie, 2014, p. 651; Rosenthal & Völter, 1998, p. 10). It is possible that this resistance discourse has largely contributed to this cumulative heroization that seems to withstand even knowledge of facts that contradict such family memories.

While Welzer et al. (2002) acknowledge that cumulative heroization may indicate a positive attitude of young Germans towards resistance and anti-fascism, it is

problematic as it does not reflect the facts the majority of the German population did not resist and instead participated or were bystanders (Dresler-Hawke, 2005, p. 135). If one went by the number of post-war Germans who, according to the survey summarized by Welzer et al. (2002), reported being aware of their family members' involvement, then only one percent of the population would have been involved in the Nazi crimes and the estimates decrease with each younger generation (p. 247). Official estimates are that about 10% of the population or about 11 to 12 million Germans were involved in the Nazi party and about 0.9 million in its paramilitary organizations (Das Bundersarchiv, 2013; Fehlbauer, 2010, p. 27). More specifically, Welzer (2001) emphasizes the concerns with such a focus on resistance:

What is becoming lost is the awareness that it was possible, in a civilized twentieth-century society, with the active participation of the overwhelming majority of a well-educated population, to exclude a part of this same population from the universe of obligations, to see them as harmful and 'worthless,' to look on while they were deported, and to accept their extermination. (p. 17)

Welzer emphasizes the fact that a selective focus on positive examples does not address the problem of the bystander and allows for distancing from the responsibility to remember. Moreover, cumulative heroization creates an imaginary divide between the "good" Germans and the Nazis that does not reflect the large percentage of the population that did not resist (Dresler-Hawke, 2005, p. 135).

**The "good" Germans and the "others"**. As described above, cumulative heroization allows for the distinction between the 'Nazis' and the "good" Germans' who resisted the Nazi regime or were unable to resist due to the risk to their own life. Welzer (2001) characterizes these narratives in family memories as narratives that represent relatives as having defied the Nazi regime in some way (p. 11). The "good" German may have been directly involved, but is maintained to not have known or to not have committed any crimes, particularly later in the generational sequence of family memories. Rosenthal and Völter (1998) call these memories "family myths" as they describe unlikely beliefs that families at times hold on to in an attempt to maintain the belief of their family members' innocence:

In non-Jewish German families one increasingly comes across the myth of the 'clean' soldier who, in the midst of injustice, succeeded in helping enemy civilians

or even in treating prisoners of war with respect and a sense of justice. This belief corresponds to the longstanding social myth of the 'clean' Wehrmacht, whose members, unlike those of the SS, supposedly did not participate in dishonorable criminal activities. (p. 7)

The belief that a family member was innocent and not directly involved allows families to continue to view the members of the contemporary witness generation as individuals with moral integrity.

The focus on the "Nazis" as others allows for emotional distancing from the Holocaust and the Nazi crimes because members of the younger generation can see themselves as the children of the resistance and members of the older generation are remembered as having resisted the Nazi regime (Dresler-Hawke, 2005, p. 135). Welzer et al. (2002) described the shared meaning and assumptions in conversations that come with terms and stereotypes such as the "Russians", the "Americans", the "Jews", "the Germans" and "the Nazis" that are passed on through the family discourse and the media (p. 161). The references to characteristics describing members of the different groups are similar across narratives in different families and it is assumed that the listener will fill in the necessary descriptors and assumptions, even without them being explicitly stated by the narrator. The empty talking described earlier exhibits a considerable reliance on such stereotypes of the "other" and is often encountered in response to the question of their awareness of concentration camps during World War II. The denial of such awareness is often accepted unquestioningly by younger generations, likely due to the same motivation to uphold a positive image of family members.

Welzer (2001) summarized the relationship between the "Germans" and the "Nazis" in narratives of German families as follows:

Cumulative heroization, however, has a very different significance for the historical image of Nazism and the Holocaust. It represents a restoration of the belief, thought to be long uprooted, that 'the Nazis' and 'the Germans' were two different groups; thus it follows that 'the Germans' can be seen to have been seduced, abused, and robbed of their youth, and they can see themselves as victims of Nazism. (p. 17)

This differentiation between the two groups within the Third Reich may have been perceived as permission to view the good Germans as victims and may lay the foundation for victim discourse even in relation to the perpetrator and bystander group.

**Victim discourse.** In the first decade following World War II, German victim discourse was common and accepted within German society (Levy & Sznajder, 2005, p. 10). During this time, Levy and Sznajder (2005) describe that victim discourse was practiced also at a political level on the basis of comparing the experiences of the expellees at the hand of the Red Army and the Allies to the crimes committed by the Nazis (p. 11).

The 1968 student revolution challenged and changed this victim discourse:

This generation shifted public memories from German victims to victims of Germans. Overall, social memories of expulsion were gradually replaced by historical memories of a generalized conception of German responsibility for both the war and the Holocaust. The accusation that the war generation had refused to recognize its role as perpetrators and to commemorate the fate of its victims would become the dominant official narrative of remembrance. (Levy & Sznajder, 2005, p. 13)

For decades following the student revolution victim discourse by Germans was discouraged but in the last two decades since the 1990s researchers have noticed an increased amount and social acceptability of victim discourse in German families and the German public when discussing World War II (Frie, 2014, p. 657; Langenbacher, 2010, p. 43; Levy & Sznajder, 2005, p. 2; Olick, 1998, p. 565; Piwoni, 2013, p. 3). In the large-scale survey from 2002 summarized in Welzer et al. (2002) it was found that almost two-thirds of the third-generation Germans who completed the survey endorse statements suggesting that their grandparents suffered a lot during the war, which suggests that victim discourse is a common occurrence (p. 247). The tendency of younger generations and eyewitness generations to present themselves and their family members as victims is problematic as it shifts the conversation away from the victims of the Holocaust and from efforts for commemoration (Frie, 2014, p. 652; Hirsch, 2008, p. 104). In addition, such victim discourse may have the effect of equalizing the suffering of the victims of the Holocaust and the perpetrator and bystander group and a resulting decreased effort to commemorate the victims of the crimes committed by the Nazi regime (Frie, 2014, p.

653; Olick, 1998, p. 565). Interestingly, this victim discourse is particularly pronounced in families with direct involvement in the Nazi regime (Rosenthal & Völter, 1998, p. 6).

This focus on the German victims suggests that focusing on the suffering of the perpetrators emphasizes their human side. Indeed, Bar-On and Gaon (1991) in their interviews with the children of perpetrators found that many engaged in victim discourse as way of avoiding the discussion of the Holocaust and their parents' involvement and due to an inability to distinguish between the own suffering and that of others (p. 80). The statement "we suffered too" was encountered regularly and is believed to signify a defensive reaction (Bar-On & Gaon, 1991, p. 80)

A particularly peculiar pattern within victim discourse that Welzer et al. (2002) identified was what they termed *Wechselrahmung* or *changing frames*, which describes the appropriation of terminology generally used to describe the experience of the victims and survivors of the Holocaust and applying it to the description of the population of perpetrators and bystanders (p. 82). This reframing can be seen in the discussion of the expelled, escapees and refugees as victims of *ethnic cleansing*, of which the Holocaust is presented as the most extreme example (Levy & Sznajder, 2005, p. 2). Moeller (1996) quotes a survey by a large German newspaper from 1995 where in response to the question of whether the expulsion of the Germans from the East was just as great a crime against humanity as the Holocaust 36 percent of all Germans and 40 percent of those over sixty-five answered 'yes'" (p. 1009). Moeller concludes that while Germans acknowledged the crimes committed in the Holocaust, they were more concerned with their own victims (p. 1010). The example of expelled in particular highlights the concerns with comparing the Holocaust to other genocides or crimes against humanity and thereby risking normalizing the events (Levy & Sznajder, 2005, p. 3). Levy and Sznajder's statement that "national memories tend to privilege their own victims" (2005, p. 19) describes this tendency in the population to focus more on the own victims than the victims of their victims.

An example that further highlights the difficulty with victim discourse on the side of the perpetrators and bystanders is the victim discourse that was accepted and practiced even during the Nazi trials. Von Kellenbach (2003) found that even when describing the unspeakable crimes they committed, the perpetrators used language that

was cold, passive and indifferent and presented the murderers as victims without any evidence of empathy for the true victims of the Holocaust (pp. 316-317). She suggests that the legal language used in the trials for German war criminals and the emphasis on objectivity in the court proceedings “risks the continued dehumanization of the victims” (p. 317). Von Kellenbach (2003) cites the following conclusion reached by the Frankfurt court in 1973 after the Nazi trials:

All of them without distinction have been seduced to their crimes and caught in profound human guilt by an unscrupulous regime that glorified battle, hardness, and unconditional commitment, and that looked down with contempt on all stirring of conscience as softness and betrayal. Ultimately they have become victims of an inhuman time, during which they took it upon themselves to deny their conscience.<sup>4</sup> (Von Kellenbach, 2003, p. 318) [my translation]

She explains the issue with permitting the victim stance taken by the perpetrators and legitimated by the courts as follows:

Once one accepts that the perpetrators were forced by the state to do violence to their conscience as they committed mass murder, the path opens towards leniency. By neglecting the actual violence committed on Jewish bodies, the courts allowed the violence done to German minds to move to the foreground. (Von Kellenbach, 2003, p. 319)

This example shows the extent to which the victim discourse was practiced and accepted in Germany for over two decades following World War II and how it allowed perpetrators and bystanders to avoid facing the reality of the crimes committed.

Heinlein (2011) argues that the trauma experienced particularly by the children of the war continues to affect families and has to be considered to understand dynamics and to increase unity in Europe and yet there is a an absence of such discourse within Europe (pp. 118-119). He suggests that the German victim discourse needs to be recognized as part of the European and global memory community rather than perceived as opposing narratives (p. 123). Heinlein (2011) recognizes that German children of the war are rarely considered as victims and their experience may need to be described using different terminology:

<sup>4</sup> Source cited in: Von Kellenbach, 2003, p. 318: 4 Ks 1/71 LG Frankfurt, Verdict (2 November 1973), Hess. Hauptstaatsarchiv, vol. 60,p. 249.

Traumatized children of the war are rarely seen as perpetrator and to the focus on the traumatic consequences of the Second World War and the role of the perpetrators and bystanders of National Socialism. They are easily missed as victims who were traumatized through their own actions or inactions. From a critical-sociological perspective, it may be necessary to consider if the term 'trauma', though useful in clinical work, is an appropriate term to represent the German suffering in the future European memory culture. The idea is not to invalidate the war children's subjectively experienced suffering but instead to encourage a much needed public reflection and discussion of the German suffering as a result of the war, not solely from a clinical perspective (Heinlein, 2011, pp. 124-125) [my translation]

Heinlein emphasizes the need to acknowledge the German suffering as a result of Nazi Germany's actions and the effects on the children of the war and the younger generations because of the war and also the role of Germany in the Holocaust.

Indeed it is important to acknowledge the difficult experience of losing family members and the traumas of the war that has affected many families in Europe and how this affected them when they were growing up (Kansteiner, 2004, p. 108). It is not so much a question of whether or not non-Jewish German families of the perpetrator and bystander group have suffered losses and pain but instead how they have balanced the commemorating of the victims of the Holocaust and the survivors' ongoing pain and trauma. Kansteiner (2004) offers the following explanation to understand German victim discourse:

Judging by their collective memories of the Second World War the postwar generations in Germany seemed to have recovered relatively quickly from the war trauma of their parents and grandparents. ... The stories of victimhood and heroism attest to the very normal dynamics of collective identity construction, which in the case of contemporary Germany display a perhaps politically disturbing but a psychologically 'honest' distance from the history of the Final Solution. (p. 111)

This suggests German victim discourse can be seen as normative response suggesting a coming to terms with trauma, however, Kansteiner also acknowledges the challenging political connotations when Germans talk about their victims before or rather than about the victims of the Holocaust.

Levy and Sznadier (2005) describe the difficulty with contextualizing victimhood in the context of the Holocaust:

We are not supposed to distinguish between the respective sufferings of groups and every attempt to privilege one group over another is met with strong resistance. However, leveling the field of suffering, also has unintended consequences, as it challenges existing beliefs about who the perpetrators and who the victims ... Hence, the question about commemorating German victims remains a charged issue, for it has always contained the potential to come at the expense of a full recognition of the deeds perpetrated by Germans during World War II. Accordingly, every time German victimhood is thematized, it is accompanied by the insistence that it is not intended to relativize Germany's role as perpetrator. (pp. 19-20)

By comparing events without further acknowledging the important differences between the events and their outcome the lines between roles become blurred.

**Relativization: intellectualization, rationalization and normalization.** As described in the previous section, when comparing genocides and crimes with the Holocaust it suggests that they are comparable and as a result such comparison relativizes the Holocaust. *Normalization, intellectualization, relativization and rationalization* fall in the category of cognitive defenses that have the effect of events appearing less serious or “understandable” given certain circumstances. Bar-On (1991) refers to such normalizing discourse as “undermining talk” as it seems to attempt to undermine extreme atrocities by explaining them away (p. 86). It is not surprising that a focus entirely on rational elements and explanations could lead to certain emotional elements being disregarded as a result of cognitive defenses.

Bowins (2004) differentiates between intellectualization and rationalization in his description of cognitive defense mechanisms:

Intellectualization largely transforms events into a nonemotional experience through the overuse of conscious thought processes. Rationalization makes unacceptable attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours more palatable by providing a socially acceptable meaning. (p. 9)

He believes these cognitive or neurotic defenses represent an attempt to deal with stress, with denial being the strongest defense mechanism as “denial can entirely negate conscious awareness of an unacceptable intrapsychic state (p. 11). Bowins (2004) further describes the relationship between stress and cognitive defense mechanisms as follows:



In general, the greater the degree of cognitive distortion, the less adaptive the defense, largely because more extensive cognitive distortions progressively reduce conscious awareness and, consequently, limit efforts to improve adverse states. ... The greater the internally or externally generated stress, the more extensive the cognitive distortion to compensate. (Bowins, 2004, p. 11)

Bowins also describes the positive attributional bias that may be at play when individuals blame the system and the context of Nazi Germany for the atrocities committed while maintaining that their own family members were innocent, good Germans (p. 12). The concern with rationalization is that it focuses on seemingly objective explanations and the emotional response or processing is not emphasized but instead focusing only on the cognitive processing of an event only allows for emotional distancing (Parens, 2004, p. 37). Holocaust perpetrators, when retelling their stories, often do so in a manner that is cold and showing little empathy for the victims (Von Kallenbach, 2003, p. 310). Monroe (2008) describes that in German perpetrator and bystander groups guilt and responsibility were often avoided on the basis of “not knowing” and not having had a choice or having felt unable to change anything (p. 718). These examples suggest that intellectualization and rationalization hinder deeper emotional processing.

Another common concern with intellectualization and rationalization is the relativization of the Nazi period and the Holocaust either by comparing it to other genocides or, at its most extreme expression, Holocaust denial. Finney (1998) in the article *Ethics, Historical Relativism and Holocaust Denial* distinguishes between two forms of relativism:

Epistemic relativism, the notion that all beliefs are socially-grounded and all knowledge thus historically contingent, should not be confused with judgmental relativism, the notion that all statements are equally valid. (p. 361)

Epistemic relativism also recognizes the social construction of historical understanding but requires scientific evidence to support and accept views. Finney further argues that only a historical understanding that recognizes the subjective and location-specific factors at work and as result “the only ethical position is one which acknowledges - indeed, celebrates - the relativity inherent in historical explanation” (p. 360). However, a common concern with taking a position of historical relativism is that it opens the door for conspiracy theories and misinformation, particularly with the

increased availability of information on the Internet (Finney, 1998, p. 363). The author recognizes that relativism may legitimize views on the Holocaust that may try to compare it other genocides and can open the door for Holocaust denial but suggests that the only way to combat denial is by looking at the ideology behind it:

Understanding the ideological positioning of Holocaust deniers is crucial if they are to be effectively combated. Denial is such a 'big lie' – involves buying into such a monstrous conspiracy theory - that it cannot be sustained (in the case of those deniers who sincerely believe what they profess) without a supporting ideological apparatus of anti-Semitism and fascism. (Finney, 1998, p. 365)

Finney (1998) concludes that the dangers of relativism can be combatted by focusing on the ethical implications of the Holocaust and its denial:

Shifting the focus onto ideology not only unmask the agenda of the deniers, but also permits us to make a virtue of the specific convictions which inform our own agendas. After all, who wants to be objective about the Holocaust? We think the Holocaust is important not as a result of some detached, scholarly inquiry but because of an emotional and intellectual abhorrence of racism, violence and genocide and because we passionately believe in the ethical imperative 'never again'. (p. 367)

Due to its ongoing effects and significance in political and personal relationships, an objective treatment of the Holocaust is not desirable.

A strong focus on relativizing factors and comparisons of the Holocaust as “one example of crimes against humanity” risks normalization and a resulting denial of responsibility. One example of such normalization often described in the literature is the historian debate on the continued significance of the Holocaust in Germany in the 1980s. Frie (2012) argues that the “historian debate was attempt to normalize the past but should be viewed critically as it serves as attempt to avert intergenerational responsibility” (p. 207). When the Holocaust is treated as one of many examples of genocides and the lack of commemoration and acknowledgement of genocides committed by other countries are emphasized in reflections on commemoration, it may be easier for individuals to reject responsibility.

In reflecting on attempts at normalization in Germany with the historian debates and political efforts to normalize the German past in the 1980s, Olick (1998) offers the following perspective on how it was received:

Normalization in the 1980s -in both senses- failed as much as it succeeded. Relativization failed not because the idea was new but because it was pursued more openly and aggressively than before and because Kohl insisted that other countries participate. Domestically, it was widely appreciated. The problem was to get the rest of the world to accept the claim that Germany was normal. (Olick, 1998, p. 554)

Olick suggests that while Germans may have welcomed the normalization as long as global memories of the Germans as perpetrators are alive and well, normalization may not become widespread, at least in the international understanding.

This normalization is also apparent in stories of children of perpetrators who describe their upbringing and family life as “very normal” despite their fathers’ involvement in the Nazi past (Bar-On, 1989, p. 425). Bar-On (2001) calls this phenomenon “paradoxical morality” and emphasizes the role of forgetting in normalizing the past (p. 128). Furthermore, Bar-On (2001) offers the following distinction on “normality” in his discussion on different perpetrator and bystander groups and behaviours during World War Two:

Both victims and victimizers may wish to normalize their lives during and after the victimization, though for very different reasons. The victims want to maintain their own human image in spite of the physical suffering, the humiliation, and the dehumanization inflicted upon them. The perpetrators want to maintain their own image as moral human beings, in spite of the bestial atrocities they have committed. Bystanders tend to buy normalization for normalcy, as this frees them from the moral dilemmas of their own troublesome inaction in the victimization process. (p. 130)

Historical explanations of the events of the Holocaust and the Nazi regime without any reflection on their meaning may not lead to an increased sense of responsibility to remember but instead allows for emotional distancing by focusing on a cognitive explanation for why and how it happened.

Relativization and presenting family members as “good Germans” may be unintended side effects of Holocaust education. Tschuggnal and Welzer (2002) found that while the younger generations often have a considerable amount of factual knowledge about the war and the Holocaust, this knowledge may not translate to the personal realm and younger generations often do not challenge family stories that contradict the facts they were taught in school (p. 143). This may go so far as potentially

unconsciously distorting stories of perpetration to avoid association with these dark chapters in German history (Bar-On, 1989, p. 439; Welzer et al., 2002, p. 82). Some have argued that the extensive confrontation with the Holocaust in history classes, the school curriculum and the media has created a desire in individuals to distance themselves and their family and memory community from the events by presenting the involvement of their relatives in heroic terms or as having resisted the Nazi propaganda and regime (Welzer et al., 2002; Welzer, 2005). The nation-wide educational initiatives to encourage the German population's dealing with the past or "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" had been believed to be effective in increasing the German population's knowledge about World War II and the Holocaust but the tendencies towards distortions and denial identified in interviews and in the literature challenge the assumption that increased knowledge necessarily leads to increased commitment to dealing with the past and commemorate the victims of the Holocaust.

## **Silence, Avoidance, Guilt and Shame**

The German post-war population's dealing with the past was marked by silence as a means of avoidance and it has been suggested that this silence not only allowed to suppress feelings of guilt and shame but also was a result of these emotions (Kansteiner, 2004, p. 109). Interestingly, generations who were not directly involved in the war continue to show signs of guilt and shame as a result of intergenerational transmission of memories (Heinlein, 2011, p. 114). Adorno (1977) described this lack of processing of the past as follows:

It is known that the past in Germany has not been processed in many circles, particularly not in the circles of the so-called incorrigibles, if one was to call them that. It is often referred to the so-called guilt complex, often with the association that this was only created through the concept of the German collective guilt. Without a doubt there is a lot of neuroticism in the relationship with the past: gestures of defensiveness in areas where one was not attacked; strong affect in areas that barely justify it; lack of affect towards the more serious; not rarely a repression of the known and half-known. (p. 555) [my translation]

Adorno outlines common responses to confrontation with the past that often show a considerable amount of resistance through active defensiveness or silence and strong responses that indicate a lack of processing of the past. Often descriptions of

perpetrators of their actions seem to lack empathy for the victims or acknowledgement of responsibility, at times taking on a victim stance themselves rather than reflecting on their own role in the events (von Kellenbach, 2003, p. 310).

Interestingly, similar kinds of behaviours and experiences continue to be seen in younger generations despite their temporal distance to the events and lack of personal involvement and some have suggested that it allows for distancing from feelings of guilt and shame (Fuchs et al., 2013, p. 155; Welzer et al, 2002). Parens (2009) further differentiates the two types of silence: “a tortured, mournful silence on the part of the victims; a guilt and shame-driven silence on the part of the perpetrators” (p. 33). Descendants of the German perpetrator and follower groups as well as children and grandchildren of Jewish survivors show patterns of silence, guilt and shame although the underlying reasons are different (Rosenthal & Völter, 1998, p. 9; Suleiman, 2002, p. 287). Kansteiner (2004), in describing patterns of silence, differentiates between the different underlying emotional responses by members of these respective groups:

In contrast to the victims, the perpetrators would have been primarily traumatized not by physical and psychological pain suffered during the Holocaust but by overwhelming feelings of guilt and shame constructed and experienced after the fact. (p. 109)

Kansteiner emphasizes that the silence in the perpetrator group is caused by the feelings of guilt and shame in members of the perpetrator and bystander group, as a result of the war. According to this example, their silence was a means of avoiding the past and confrontation with these negative feelings. Rosenthal and Völter (1998) suggest that silence and motivated forgetting were practiced extensively on different levels of the population:

In West Germany widespread silence had institutionalized itself on the topic of Nazi crimes and what prevailed was the myth of the innocent populace which unsuspectingly followed Nazism. This enabled perpetrators responsible for the crimes of Nazism to be freed of charges and the collective majority of Germans could mutually reassure themselves that they had seen or heard nothing concerning the persecution of Jews and other persecuted people until 1945. (p. 9)

Silence facilitates avoidance and what is not named does not have to be discussed as it is not identified. Levin (2013) summarizes the possible results of

breaking the silence as follows:

By verbalizing such experiences, one is forced to interact with the feelings. The feelings around the experience have been latent, but by highlighting it, they then become manifest. As long as it is hidden it potentially contains more than one meaning. (p. 719)

Given this ability of silence to allow for avoidance, it raises the question of guilt and responsibility despite absence of knowledge or discussion of events, particularly among younger generations. In the context of generations, some theorists have argued that the question of guilt does not apply to the second and third generation as they are far removed from the events and did not actively participate, however this neglects the continued responsibility to remember, particularly because the suffering it has caused continues to have effects (Frie, 2012; Parens, 2009; Piwoni, 2013). Weigel (2002) describes the nature of the guilt inherited by younger generations:

On the side of the descendants of the collective of perpetrators, the return of guilt inherited from the parents evokes the notion of Erbsünde, the original sin. In this case, however, the responsibility of the descendants is not derived directly from war events, but rather is related indirectly to the historical guilt from the war and the Final Solution. (p. 269)

Weigel identifies the origin of the feelings of guilt in younger generations as not being due to personal involvement as perpetrator and bystander but instead the continued effects of the Holocaust. For further considerations on the question of responsibility in the younger post-war generations, Dresler-Hawke (2005) outlines the relationship between collective memory and national identity:

German national identity is not only a set of characteristics but it is also a set of processes in which a nation develops from historical experiences in which its collective past, collective memory and collective recollection act as sources of orientation in identity and self-image. (p. 145)

Due to the challenging history of Germany, post-war Germans have at times been diagnosed by some researchers as having an “unstable national identity” (Brown, 2014, p. 440; Olick, 1998, p. 550). Heinlein (2011) suggest that the experience of the children of the war and their silence have largely contributed to this “unstable national identity”:

The traumatized generation of the children of the war have not only shaped the German culture all these years in a 'quiet, silent way' but also passed on their unconscious anxiety to the next generation. Due to this it is not surprising that the traces of traumas that uncover their book and bring to awareness, not only to be found in political action but also the undecided position of Germans towards their own nation: 'German angst and their unstable national identity feed into each other'. (p. 114)

It is possible that the silence resulting from an inability of the generation that was too young to process the events of the war has contributed to the difficulty of post-war Germans to come to terms with the past. However, it may be difficult to determine what this German national identity would look like, also given the percentage of ethnic-German expellees and refugees that had to move to Germany following the war (Moses, 2007, p. 94). Frie (2012) argues that "there is, in fact, no singular German identity in Germany today. As German society becomes increasingly multicultural, neither is there political agreement about what defines 'German'" (p. 210). This diversity indicates the need for an open discussion and acknowledgement of these difficult emotions of guilt and shame and their silencing processes in order to facilitate the formation of a stable German national identity.

As Liu and Dresler-Hawke (2006) suggested, the feelings of shame are a result of being associated with the Nazi time and it has been suggested that the degree to which individuals feel this shame by association is based on how strongly they self-identify as Germans (p. 150). A benefit of collective shame identified by the authors was that participants reported increased readiness to deal with the past and consider the need for young generations to continue to take responsibility by commemorating the past (Liu & Dresler-Hawke, 2006, p. 149). Indeed, the question should not be one in terms of personal responsibility due to family involvement but rather the responsibility to remember is an ethical one, a moral obligation to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust (Frie, 2012, p. 211). This becomes particularly interesting in the context of the current study as the individuals interviewed grew up in a different society and the level of shame they may experience may depend on how strongly they self-identify with their German heritage.

## Responsibility to Remember

The question of responsibility goes beyond a question of inherited guilt or German guilt due to war crimes at the hand of Germans and the Nazi regime, rather it is a question of moral obligation to remember those who died during the Holocaust (Frie, 2012; Poole, 2008). The focus on guilt as a factor of having been born before, during or after the war neglects that memory is not static and that the family members of those who died during the Holocaust continue to experience pain as a result of it and will for generations to come as the pain does not stop in the generation of the eyewitnesses (Kaslow, 1999; Parens, 2009; Ritscher, 2001; Suleiman, 2002). Ritscher (2001) states that historical evidence of continuous generational guilt can already be found in biblical texts:

The idea of a generation-connecting chain of transmission of traditions and responsibility is at least as old as the Jewish-Christian culture. In the Lutheran translation of Moses 2,34 we can for example read: 'He who saves grace, in a thousand members and forgives misdeeds, transgression and sin, in front of which no one is innocent; the sins of the fathers follow the children and children of children until the third or fourth member'. (p. 109) [my translation]

This quote highlights that the idea of continuous generations goes back thousands of years and it is interesting that the third or fourth generation are identified as the limit. As I outlined in the previous sections, evidence of feelings of guilt and shame as well as silence to facilitate forgetting has been found in post-war generations of children of the members of the perpetrator and bystander groups. Parens (2009) further describes the idea of ongoing responsibility on the side of the perpetrator as result of ongoing trauma as a result of the war (p. 37).

Given this trauma experienced by victims and survivors of the Holocaust and their family members, what is the role of younger generations of Germans and their descendants in commemorating the crimes? Proske (2012) offers the following conclusion on their responsibility to remember:

Dealing with guilt and responsibility represents the key for understanding changes in the culture of presumes continuity in the generational sequence, one that constitutes itself through the criterion of national affiliation. It is therefore expected of the grandchildren's and great-grandchildren's generations that they take responsibility for the crimes committed in the name of Germany, because



they, as members of the succeeding state of the Third Reich, stand in continuity with crimes that cannot easily be dispensed with. (Proske, 2012, pp. 45)

Proske argues that by being part of the German community and, by extension, the nation that committed these crimes against the Jewish population, young Germans continue to have a responsibility to commemorate the past and its victims.

As opposed to theoretical views on the continuity of generations, many members of the post-war generations do not feel personally responsible as for decades the German population avoided confrontation with the Holocaust by engaging in collective silence, so they are not aware of family connections since they were never acknowledged or talked about even after public education efforts to counter-act the legacy of silence (Frie, 2012, p. 211). Frie (2012) describes how Germany approached the question of responsibility and the Nazi past during the decade following the war:

For many Germans, growing up and living in Germany among other Germans in the decades right after the World War II made it possible to avoid the Nazi past. Because blame was apportioned to the leaders of National Socialism, who were tried at Nuremberg in the late 1940s, the majority of the population could remain silent about their role in the horrors of the past. Indeed, the Allied prosecution of individual Nazi perpetrators reinforced the view that German guilt was not a collective responsibility. (p. 211)

Even though, understandably, Germans want to reject the legacy of the Nazi past and the resulting responsibility, it is part of the German history and identity which results in a collective responsibility to not forget, to remember the victims of the Holocaust and to ensure that it never happens again, beyond the German borders.

## **Conclusion**

Intergenerational memory transmission of and through family narratives is the mechanism by which cultural and collective memory is maintained and passed on from one generation to the next. As in the game of telephone, each generation makes sense of the information in the context of their surroundings, reality, and understanding, and as such memories get transformed on a constant basis. The mechanism of memory transmission highlights how family affects identity formation and perpetuates cultural legacies. Due to the psychological need of members of each generation to feel positive

association towards their own and their family heritage, memory research has found systematic patterns in family memories that show progressively more positive description of family involvement in the war and Holocaust, likely in an unconscious attempt to absolve themselves and their family members of guilt and maintain the family's integrity.

Systematic silence or avoidance of certain topics related to the Holocaust and feelings of guilt and shame have been reported and identified in members of the generation alive during and born after the Holocaust. It is believed that these behaviours and experiences are transmitted silently through family memories and how they are told. Psychological perspectives on family memory, German silence and the Holocaust describe the tendency to distance the self from the events in order to push away guilt. The continued commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust and the (German) responsibility to remember cannot fall victim to the legacy of silence. Achieving a stable national identity that is able to present and maintain a balanced approach to discussing the Holocaust and the war is important in ensuring that silence does not take over.

## **Chapter 2. German Immigrants in Canada**

This chapter provides an overview of literature and information on German immigrants in Canada, describes the role of language in ethnic identity and looks at what kinds of patterns can be observed in the transmission of the German language between generations of German-Canadian immigrants. I will discuss how these patterns of language transmission relate to silence and avoidance of the German past and how it contributes to the intergenerational transmission of guilt and shame. A brief overview is provided on current available literature on German-Canadians in the context of family memory. This chapter provides the background for chapter four where the ten interviews collected for this thesis are analyzed according to the themes of German-Canadian identity, avoidance, silence and guilt and shame.

### **Germans in Canada**

In the two decades following World War II (WWII), between 270,000-400,000 Germans immigrated to Canada (Freund, 2006, p. 134; Gump, 1989, p. 8). Most settled on the East Coast of Canada, at times forming German communities that maintained stronger German traditions and language and around 30,000 made their way over to Vancouver, BC (Driedger & Hengstenberg, 1986, p. 90; Schulze & Heffner, 2003, p. 142). In the 2011 census, 26,935 people living in Vancouver identified German as their mother tongue (Statistics Canada, 2011). Overall, 409,200 people living in Canada identified German as their mother tongue during the 2011 census<sup>5</sup>, indicating that just over 1.2% of the population grew up speaking German. When looking at the immigration status of those who speak German as mother tongue in Canada, a total of 366,960 people were recorded of whom 159,380 were born in Canada and 201,095 were

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/demo11c-eng.htm>

immigrants<sup>6</sup>. For the 2011 census Statistics Canada defined the term *immigrant* as follows:

'Immigrant' refers to a person who is or has ever been a landed immigrant/permanent resident. This person has been granted the right to live in Canada permanently by immigration authorities. Some immigrants have resided in Canada for a number of years, while others have arrived recently. Some immigrants are Canadian citizens, while others are not. Most immigrants are born outside Canada, but a small number are born in Canada. (Statistics Canada, 2011)

Non-immigrants are individuals who have Canadian citizenship by birth (Statistics Canada, 2011). Most relevant for this study was the fact that 171,660 reported having moved to Canada before 1971. However, it is unclear from these numbers how many were first-, second- or third-generation Germans or how many were part of German communities that have maintained the language tradition for centuries.

When counting immigrant generations, the term 'generation status' is used to describe the generational succession of generations. As defined by Statistics Canada:

This term 'generation status' refers to whether a person or their parents were born in Canada. Specifically, the data identify whether people are first, second or third generation or more in Canada. ... First generation refers to people who were born outside Canada. ... Second generation includes individuals who were born in Canada and had at least one parent born outside Canada. ... Third generation or more refers to people who are born in Canada with both parents born in Canada. (Statistics Canada, 2016)

Of the 366,960 individuals who identified German as their mother tongue in the 2011 census, 210,720 were members of the first generation, 94,950 were second generation and 61,920 were third-generation<sup>7</sup>. These numbers not only provide insight into which generation most German-speakers in Canada belong to but it also highlights that about only about 30% of third-generation German-Canadians, the population of interest in this study, learned German as their first language.

<sup>6</sup> Statistics Canada, 2011 National Household Survey, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 99-010-X2011033.

<sup>7</sup> Statistics Canada, 2011 National Household Survey, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 99-010-X2011034.

A closer look at the composition of German post-war immigrants reveals that

One-third were refugees from Eastern Europe and the former German territories east of the rivers Oder and Neisse, and two-thirds were from rural regions and urban centres in the four Zones of Occupation and the later West and East Germany. One-third were single men and women, while the rest came in family groups. Most had been born in the interwar years, but there were also substantial minorities of younger and older Germans. (Freund, 2006, p. 135)

Some were *Volksdeutsche*, ethnic Germans or Austrians who lived in German-speaking language communities outside of Germany (Freund, 2006, p. 135). Many of them were expellees or deportees from Eastern Europe, others were refugees who escaped the Soviet regime and still others had been evacuated from cities in Germany that were destroyed by the war. Another group were *Reichsdeutsche*, native Germans or Germans from Germany who had lived in the “Reich” and had held a German passport since 1937 (Dailey-O’Cain & Liebscher, 2011, p. 317).

After the war, 12 million ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe had to be resettled or integrated into German society (Demshuk, 2006, p. 384). Displaced persons were individuals who had to leave their home because of the actions of Nazi Germany, whereas expellees (“Vertriebene”) had to resettle due to changes in boundaries and other developments such as military actions and expellees were integrated into Germany within its new post-war boundaries. Refugees were non-German individuals who fled their country on the basis of ethnic, political or religious reasons and displaced persons were included in this category if they did not want to be reintegrated into Germany. Under the UN definition ‘refugees’ were only non-Germans who were displaced due to the German war efforts but expellees were to be integrated into Germany (Rystad, 1989, p. 8). Many of the refugees and displaced persons were Jewish survivors. This expulsion or escape of ethnic Germans from Eastern-European countries is at times referred to as “ethnic cleansing”, although it should be noted that this concept is different from the euthanasia practiced by Nazi Germany (Levy & Sznajder, 2005, p. 2).

Once refugees and expellees arrived in Germany, there was a struggle to find housing for the expellees, who did not want to move to Germany and often resented their new home and the political government of their home country for expelling them

from their home or “Heimat” (Hughes, 2016, p. 30). European countries and North America struggled to develop immigration policies and quotas to accommodate displaced persons who were unable to stay in Germany, Eastern Europe or Europe (Rystad, 1989, p. 8).

Many Volksdeutsche did not feel welcome in Germany and were not helped to feel welcome by the Reichsdeutsche who made it known that they were not welcome in Germany (Demshuk, 2006, p. 384). In addition, there was a housing shortage as larger cities had been destroyed by the war and even the smaller villages they were sent to did not have available housing (Demshuk, 2006, p. 385). This went so far that expellees and refugees were housed in former concentration camp barracks across Germany (Demshuk, 2006, p. 385). A majority of expellees were sent to Bavaria where housing and resources were lacking (Demshuk, 2006, p. 385; Melendy, 2005, p. 108). In Dachau this led to a revolt of expellees in Dachau in 1948 after a hunger strike fuelled by victim discourse under a pro-Nazi expellee leader, who at times referred to the refugee camp which was built next to the concentration camp as “Bavarian Siberia” (Melendy, 2005, p. 118).

Given this difficult start in Germany, it is not surprising that many expellees left for other countries and talked frequently and with nostalgia of their home, their “Heimat”, which was not Germany and where many had been spared the experiences and destruction of the war (Hughes, 2016, p. 32). Issues with attaining German citizenship, lack of housing and being openly made to feel like unwelcome strangers added to the experience of victimization and led to what might have been the start of the victimization discourse that is now becoming more prevalent in Germany (Demshuk, 2006, p. 393). This discrimination led many to hold on to their ethnic German identity with pride in the face of the rejection and discrimination by many Reichsdeutsche.

Given expellees’, escapees’ and refugees’ frequent exposure to traumatic experiences during the war and having to leave their home, German expellee and deportee groups have been found to engage in a considerable amount of victim discourse, which frequently distracted from commemorating the victims of the Holocaust (Demshuck, 2006, p. 392; Melendy, 2005, p. 107).

The distinction between ethnic Germans and Germans from Germany becomes relevant when considering the impact ethnic origin had on how German immigrants from different parts of Eastern Europe and Germany were perceived by others:

The language and culture one grew up in is far from irrelevant in the construction of an immigrant identity, but it is difficult if not impossible for immigrants to put aside the aspects of their precise place of origin, especially when it comes to legal matters such as citizenship. A German speaker who immigrated to Canada from Romania comes with different cultural baggage and is therefore likely to be perceived differently from a German speaker who immigrated from Germany - and not just by fellow members of the German-speaking community, but by Canadian-born Canadians as well. (Dailey-O'Cain & Liebscher, 2011, p. 317)

In their 2011 research study on members of these two groups conducted in Canada, Dailey-O'Cain and Liebscher translated the terms due to their problematic connotation (p. 318). A less loaded translation are the terms "Germans from speech islands" for *Volksdeutsche* and "Germans from Germany" for *Reichsdeutsche* (Dailey-O'Cain & Liebscher, 2011, p. 317). Given the diversity of German post-war immigrants to Canada, the role of language will be explored next as it provides insight into how language relates to ethnic identity.

## Language as Marker of Ethnic Identity

The concept of a unique German-Canadian identity has been questioned by some on the basis of their relative absence within the greater Canadian culture as a cohesive ethnic group (Paul, 2005)<sup>8</sup>. Fought (2006) has written extensively on the question of language and ethnicity and defined *ethnic identity* as "membership in an ethnic group" and *an ethnic group* as "a group whose members are perceived by themselves and/or others to share a unique set of cultural and historical commonalities, particularly in contrast with other groups that adjoin them in physical or social space" (p. 220). This definition may be more readily accepted with members of visible minorities, especially since white Europeans tend to not see themselves as ethnic, in parts because of the association with race and ethnicity (p. 114). Indeed some may question the

<sup>8</sup> Paul, 2005, pp. 30-34. This literature review summarized a number of definitions and opinions of researchers on the topic of German Canadians.

existence of a white ethnicity but Fought has a clear answer to that: “there is no such thing as lack of ethnicity” (p. 112). So then what are the markers of ethnicity? The definition of ethnicity tends to be seen on a continuum and can encompass a number of factors such as food, customs, dress and, most importantly, language (p. 14). The relationship between language and ethnic identity is such that language marks the belonging of an individual to a distinct ethnic group but at the same time language also helps shape it (p. 8). Ethnicity is defined as a continuum and how “ethnic” a person is will often be defined by the social context. Language is an indicator of two processes: assimilation to a dominant ethnic group and belonging to an ethnic identity (p. 27). Germans are rarely seen as distinct ethnic group, which some researchers believe to be due to their rapid rate of assimilation (Massa & Weinfeld, 2009, p. 21). This social context is important for the shaping of how the social group views themselves and is viewed by other ethnic groups:

Even if we begin with the quite reasonable (to social scientists, at least) assumption that whiteness is a constructed ethnicity, like all ethnicities, how it is constructed must be viewed in the context of ideologies about dominant ethnic groups. (Fought, 2006, p. 113)

This suggests that the social context in Canada, using the assumption that the dominant ethnic group when many Germans immigrated during the post-war period was primarily English-speaking Anglo-Saxons, plays a role in whether German-Canadians are seen as German or Canadian. According to Bassler (1990) even though Germans have been in Canada for over 345 years, in English-Canada they are rarely mentioned as part of Canadian culture and if they are, they are presented in stereotypical terms or as foreigners in Canada (p. 38). Interestingly, it is believed that up to 15% of the population in Canada between World War I and World War II was of German origin and yet in the literature they are almost absent (Bassler, 1990, p. 41). Bassler (1990) believes that one reason why they were not strongly represented even on census forms was because they made up a German mosaic of different German ethnic groups and identified as coming from a specific region they grew up in, rather than Germany, Austria or Switzerland as countries (p. 42). In addition, it is likely that this lack of reporting German heritage is due to the enemy alien status Germans had during the world war that made those who already lived in Canada want to blend in and “pass” as Canadian in order to not stand out (Bassler, 1990, p. 43). It is possible that German-Canadians



engaged in silence to hide their German identity when public sentiments towards Germans became quite negative during the world wars.

In terms of ethnic identity and how the individual perceives their own ethnicity, how strongly they identify with the ethnicity tends to depend on whether they maintain the language or not (Fought, 2006, p. 27). A common way of identifying language trends and maintenance patterns is by comparing official census data on mother tongue and home language to get a sense of how much the language is being used (Driedger & Hengstenberg, 1986, p. 94). As Gump (1989) found in her research on German post-war immigrants in Vancouver, when looking at the 1971 Vancouver census, 50 percent of German-born children ages five to nine were reported to not speak German at home, only about 30% of youth ages 15 to 19, 25% of young adults ages 20 to 24 and only about 30% of adults past the age of 30 continued to speak German in their home (p. 118). Even more interesting was that of the 30,860 foreign-born Germans, only 33% spoke German at home and 66% spoke English (p. 120). And of the 58,820 Canadian-born Germans 18% had German as their mother tongue and only 4% spoke German in the home (p. 120). Similar language patterns have been observed in the 2001 census in Kitchener that traditionally had a large German population (Schulze & Heffner, 2003, p. 143). During the 2001 census only 4% of those who had German as first language spoke German at home (Schulze & Heffner, 2003, p. 152). The 2011 Census showed that there were 26,925 individuals living in Vancouver who indicated their mother tongue was German and of those 3,485 said they spoke primarily German in the home, which suggests a slightly increased language maintenance rate of 13% compared to the 4% in 1971 found by Gump (Statistics Canada, 2011).

These high rates of language assimilation may have contributed to the idea that German-Canadians are not a unique ethnicity as not being able to speak the distinct language of one's ethnic group often makes others question if one is actually part of it (Fought, 2006, p. 30). Others have suggested that particularly because of this language assimilation, being able to understand German should be included in the definition as many German-Canadians grew up speaking and hearing German but may have lost the language when they started school and it became too difficult to maintain both languages (Schulze & Heffner, 2003, p. 145). According to Schulze and Heffner (2003) language assimilation may have been seen as a necessity by some expellees who

believed they had to leave their home because they did not assimilate enough with the dominant ethnic group (Schulze & Heffner, 2003, p. 144). The belief that being able to speak English will increase their children's success in the new country seems to motivate a lot of German immigrants to focus on English rather than teaching German in the home (Schulze & Heffner, 2003, p. 151). For post-war German immigrants the German language may have seemed of little value in a country where the majority speaks English and German relatives were far away. It has been found that those in more closed communities like German-Mennonites, who make up the largest population of German-speakers in Canada, maintained a stronger German language tradition (Driedger & Hengstenberg, 1986, p. 90).

## **German-Canadian Identities**

Some researchers have questioned the existence of a unique German ethnic group as German-Canadians are rarely identified as a distinct ethnic group and are instead characteristic for their rapid rate of assimilation, including a loss of the German language in younger generations (Gumpp, 1989, p. 119; Massa & Weinfeld, 2009, p. 21; Paul, 2005, p. 27; Schulze & Heffner, 2003, p. 143). Paul (2005) summarized the definitions and opinions on the German-Canadian or German Canadian ethnic identity as follows:

While these theorists have differing views on the definition of the German-Canadian identity, it is clear a German Canadian identity does exist in one form or another. For Richter (1983), the German Canadian group includes persons who speak the language (or at least understand it) and who interact with others from the same background. For Zimmer (1998), the German Canadian group includes those who have immigrated from Germany and who continue to identify with the culture that they brought with them to Canada - despite this perpetuation of an archaic cultural notions. Lindner (1998) cited German Canadians as a product of the merging between two cultures. Isajiw (1998) states that the German Canadian identity is that of a submerged one - with German-Canadians trying to over identify with being Canadian. Regardless of the differing definitions, it is clear that a German Canadian identity does indeed exist and is, in fact, affected deeply by the stigma associated with being German. (Paul, 2005, p. 34)

Paul's summary of definitions highlights that there is indeed such a thing as a German-Canadian identity and language, be it speaking the language or understanding it, is the best marker to determine membership in the group. Paul also addresses the

apparent presence of a negative association with being German. Some have argued that labeling distinct ethnic groups such as German-Canadians that are part of the larger Canadian identity is problematic as it groups together a diverse group of individuals and implies that they are different from other Canadians (Paul, 2005, pp. 30-34). However, within the group of German-Canadians, there are enough similarities to identify them as unique group on the basis of language. Although labeling can indeed be problematic, the intention of doing so for the purposes of this paper is not to isolate or exclude German-Canadians from the greater Canadian culture, especially those that have been living in Canada for decades prior to WWII (Bassler, 1990, p. 39). One might wonder if part of the desire not to be labeled is due to wanting to hide from the stigma that can come with a German heritage due to memories of WWII on both the German and the Canadian side (Bassler, 1990, p. 42).

This thesis focuses on post World War Two German immigrants and their descendants. German immigrants are often characterized by their eagerness to assimilate potentially due to confrontation with guilt and shame as triggered by the association of German with Nazi Germany (Massa & Weinfeld, 2009, p. 21). Initially post-war immigrants often struggled to find their place in Canadian society and were confronted with their heritage and stereotypes on a regular basis, causing a desire to assimilate quickly in an effort to camouflage (Bassler, 1990, p. 42; Massa & Weinfeld, 2009, p. 21). Some ways in which this was achieved was by marrying Canadians, speaking only English at home and taking on Canadian citizenship (Freund, 2002, p. 55). Many children of German-Canadians are not taught German and individuals tend to identify more with their Canadian identity than their German identity (Prokop, 2008, p. 14), even within more closed Mennonite communities (Schulze & Heffner, 2003, p. 143). As summarized in Prokop's 2008 Forum Deutsch Report 16.1 on language maintenance, most post war German-Canadians identify as Canadian first:

In a 1976 study, O'Bryan et al. found that members of the first generation of German immigrants were quick to call themselves 'Canadian': 35% of a selected sample of immigrants from German-speaking countries described themselves as 'Canadian,' another 49% saw themselves as 'German-Canadians' or 'Canadians of German origin,' and only 10% still thought of themselves as 'German.' ... An overwhelming 68% of second-generation ethnic Germans labelled themselves 'Canadian,' and 15% 'German-Canadian' or 'Canadian of German origin.' Among the third-generation ethnic Germans, the percentage describing themselves as

Canadians rose to 80%; in this sample, the number of those who saw themselves as 'German' was essentially zero. (Prokop, 2008, p. 14)

As these numbers suggest, few German immigrants, particularly in the second and third generation, held on to their German ethnic identity and instead were motivated to become "Canadian". Combined with the rapid rates of language loss, it is not surprising that some researchers have noted the virtual absence of a German-Canadian ethnic identity in Canada, at least in the Canadian cultural discourse (Bassler, 1990, p. 39). Assimilation through fluency in English, attaining North American citizenship and camouflaging of the German history surrounding WWII and the Holocaust is related to the idea of a collective silence, as leaving behind the German ethnic identity by becoming Canadians allows for avoidance from being identified as German (Freund, 2002, p. 55).

## **Dealing with the Past Abroad: Immigration as Avoidance?**

An interesting question that arises in the context of immigration is how families go about the process of dealing with the German past or "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" in the absence of normative German societal pressures (Freund, 2002, p. 51). This dealing with the past entails an "individual and collective coming to terms with past or not coming to terms with the past by deflecting, neutralizing, repressing" (Freund, 2002, p. 51). In Germany, this not coming to terms with the past resulted in decades of silence about the Holocaust (Bar-On, 1989, p. 437; Frie, 2012, p. 201; Langenbacher, 2010, p. 43, Parens, 2009, pp. 31-34). It is notable that this collective silence was common on a societal level until about 1970 in Germany when the first initiatives to support and ensure the dealing with the past were started (Frie, 2012, p. 211; Langenbacher, 2010, p. 43). It is believed that the current culture around the discussion and education about the Holocaust resulted from the protests of the 1968 student revolts (Proske, 2012, p. 41). Families who moved abroad before this time may not have received the information and tools that those who remained in Germany were given and were on their own to deal with their country's difficult past (Freund, 2006, p. 153). This may explain why Germans who emigrated to North America before the 1970s tend to show similar patterns of silence, although they were confronted by others more often and could not engage in a collective silence beyond their own circles (Freund, 2004, p. 109). Even if, or potentially

because, it was never addressed openly, the silence does not cease to have an effect despite the migration as silence does not need to be taught directly and its existence does not preclude a transmission of psychological effects of the past:

When trying to describe silence in the migration processes, one often talks about something unlike the elephant as it has no shape. But similar to the elephant, the silencing processes are omnipresent. Sometimes they are communicated through small fragments, remarks or even jokes. Other times they come through just by facial expressions. In other times again they are present through the absence and not understandable intervals between stories. Memories, being painful or not, do not cease to exist. They can easily take on a life of their own, beyond the control of the individual. (Levine, 2013, p. 716)

Around the 1970s that there was increased discourse on the Holocaust in North America, which led to an increase in confrontation for German immigrants as they were often referred to as Nazis (Freund, 2006, p. 139). While living abroad put German immigrants in a position where they were confronted directly about the Nazi past through members of the Canadian population, they often resorted to silence as a means of avoiding the negative associations (Freund, 2006, p. 153). Freund (2002) described common experiences as immigrants in a different country where Germans suddenly were confronted with the past in new ways and it was not always their choice whether they could remain silent:

The difference between Germans' 'Vergangenheitsbewältigung' in Germany and in North America is an issue of power relations. In Germany, Germans were insiders; they belonged to the nation and defined themselves in opposition to the Other, the 'foreigners'. In North America, however, they were (at least at first) outsider and themselves defined as the Other. The relations of power were reversed and this included the power to speak about the past. (Freund, 2002, p. 53)

While Germans in North America were often exposed to comments and direct confrontation with their past, Germans in Germany were able to remain silent or take on a victim stance more easily without being challenged on it. Freund (2004) summarized common reactions to the confrontation with the Nazi past initiated by others:

Such confrontations threatened their identity and frustrated them, because they did not know how to respond. But instead of taking responsibility for education themselves about the past and thus enter public discourse on WWII and the Holocaust, they rejected the discourse and withdrew to claims of ignorance and innocence. (Freund, 2004, p. 113)

Similar to German families in Germany, in families living abroad the topic was treated with silence, idealization and pushing guilt away on the basis of not knowing and having been too young. One could argue that the confrontation and dealing with the German past and responsibility would have been an opportunity for healing, however, the defensiveness in response to the confrontation is not surprising:

'Healing' does not work when imposed, and internal motivation is crucial for success. Urge for a change must come from 'inside' and should not be forced on from 'outside,' because unwanted rapid changes can lead to tensions and result in defensive reactions. (Droždek, 2010, p. 14)

Unlike unwanted confrontation by being called a Nazi or feelings of shame evoked by perpetrator-centered television programs, an effective form of healing for both sides can be through the contact of members of the perpetrator group and the survivor group (Parens, 2009, p. 38). Particularly when it comes to meeting Holocaust survivors and their children, while Germans who stayed in Germany rarely have the opportunity meet Jews, those living in North America had the opportunity for healing through positive interactions with Jewish coworkers, employers and community members (Freund, 2002, p. 56).

It is unclear if immigration gives opportunity to distance oneself from the past or if confrontation is inevitable as many immigrants, especially right after the war, faced a lot of discrimination and often resorted to victim discourse (Massa & Weinfeld, 2009, p. 21). These experiences of confrontation may explain the tendency to abandon the German heritage and language, blend in and try to camouflage so that one is not "discovered". Indeed many interviews with German-Canadians and those of German heritage show that this background is often experienced as shameful (Freund, 2004; Frie, 2012, p. 215; Parens, 2009, p. 35). It seems that rather than confronting the German past, many German immigrants chose to hide through assimilation, which may have served as escape from the negative public associations and perceptions of Germans (Massa & Weinfeld, 2009, p. 21). When families immigrate to a new country, the focus for many years is on assimilating, building a new life and finding a community, although low pressures to assimilate and maintaining an ethnic identity have been found to be important for successful integration into a new culture (Phinney et al., 2001, p. 493). As past research on German-Canadians has found, German post-war immigrants show

increased efforts to assimilate, often motivated by a desire to leave behind the German past, particularly when they found themselves struggling with being discriminated against in their new country due to the events of the Second World War and the Holocaust (Freund, 2002, p. 52; Massa & Weinfeld, 2009, p. 21). Frie (2012) described a possible effect of the low language maintenance on second- and third-generation German Canadians:

Low language retention levels have been linked to the prejudices faced by many Germans in the decades immediately after World War II. When language is no longer the primary vehicle for the communication of culture, then the importance of social practice, cultural celebrations, and their symbols, take on added significance. For second- and third-generation German immigrants, these symbolic markers are introductions to the culture that their parents or grandparents left behind—symbols that are tied to a sense of ‘Heimweh’ (nostalgia) and ‘Heimat’ (homeland), enduring themes in German culture. (Frie, 2012, p. 210)

Frie (2012) notes that this increased effort to assimilate may have had the effect of decreased “opportunities for self-reflection, memory, and responsibility among and between generations of German immigrants may have been limited or even lost” (p. 211). German-Canadians’ perceived pressure to assimilate may have led to the loss of ethnic cultural identity and practices seen in the second and third generation of German-Canadians who often do not speak German and have little ongoing connection to their cultural heritage (Prokop, 2008, p. 14). However, this loss of language does not necessarily result in a loss of connection with the culture and instead cultural and ethnic symbols and emotional concepts and characteristics of German culture may have persisted where language may have been lost.

## **Conclusion**

Second- and third-generation German-Canadians are a unique cultural and ethnic identity who, as some may argue, are rapidly disappearing due to their high rates of assimilation and loss of the German language, the most commonly accepted marker of a diverse German ethnic identity. The German post-war immigrant experience was marked by difficulty due to the status of Germans during World War II and this experience has affected the German immigrant identity, likely leading to accelerated

rates of assimilation and language loss. German immigrants' increased confrontation with the Holocaust due to being identified as member of the perpetrator group may have led to efforts to deal with the past that included silence, avoidance and escape. There is little research on how German-Canadian families have talked about the Holocaust and their family members' experiences during the war.



## **Chapter 3. Research Design, Data Collection and Data Analysis**

In this chapter I will introduce the research project that was conducted for this thesis and some important considerations with narrative research and thematic analysis. In addition, the importance of reflexivity is outlined and I describe my family memories as part of my efforts for reflexivity. I will introduce the research participants to provide a background for chapter four, which will present the themes described by participants in more detail.

### **The Current Study**

The current study looks at how family memories of the Holocaust are shaped and maintained by members of the second and third generation of German-Canadian immigrants in Canada. I seek to explore how the descendants of German-Canadian immigrants remember the stories of their grandparents and parents' experiences during and after the war and how this affected how the post-war generations talk about and commemorate the Holocaust. More specifically, I intend to highlight their unique story and potential need to come to terms with the legacy of silence passed down from the first generation that lived through World War II and moved to Canada prior to being exposed to increased societal efforts of dealing with the past in Germany.

Previous research on post-war German-Canadians and their families explored details of immigration and the experience of specific groups but no research has looked at how members of the second and third generation when interviewed by themselves discuss the Holocaust and memories of immigration (Freund, 1994, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2009; Gump, 1989; Leochko, 2009; Paul, 2005). Second- and third-generation German-Canadians as individual groups have received little attention in the Canadian literature and the lack of knowledge about their experience of growing up with the

heritage of the German cultural and family memory marks a gap (Freund, 2002, p. 51). In addition, there has been limited research on third-generation Germans and even less on third-generation German-Canadians (Fuchs et al., 2013, p. 135). According to Assman (1988) three to four generations mark the boundary of the family memory of a memory community (p. 127), which is why the third generation was chosen as the original focus of this study, however this was expanded to the second generation as many participants had self-identified as third-generation when I contacted them but were actually second-generation due to their parents' age. The degree to which the third generation has asked the previous generation about the Holocaust and talks about the Third Reich with the next generation, in particular if they have children, likely determines how much knowledge gets transmitted to the next generation and the generations that follow. As such, the third generation marks an important point for continued commemoration of family memories and the Holocaust or the risk of decreased awareness and personal connection with the Holocaust (Hirsch, 2008, p. 104).

This research study addresses a gap in the knowledge about German-Canadian post-war immigrant generations' family memories of the Holocaust and the war period and seeks to identify characteristics in memory transmission in second- and third-generation German-Canadians. The findings in this study may provide insight to the needs of German-Canadian clients seeking therapy and the experience of German-Canadian therapists when working with clients of Jewish or German background (Frie, 2012, p. 207; Ritscher, 2001, p. 125). In addition, the themes found may inform Holocaust education in general and targeted education programs with German-Canadians, more specifically.

## **Narrative Research Methodology**

Narrative research methodology seeks to describe and understand research participants' subjective experience within their unique social context from social constructivist perspective rather than an objective "truth" as defined by the researcher's pre-imposed framework (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998, p. 2; Moen, 2006, p. 2). Lieblich et al. (1998) regard the subjective nature of human experience as fundamental part of the narrative research assumption:

Narrative research ... differs significantly from its positivistic counterpart in its underlying assumptions that there is neither a single, absolute truth in human reality nor one correct reading or interpretation of a text. The narrative approach advocates pluralism, relativism, and subjectivity. Nonetheless, we believe that researchers are responsible for providing a systematic and coherent rationale for their choice of methods as well as a clear exposition of the selected processes that have produced their results. (Lieblich et al, 1998, p. 2)

Although narrative research views “truth” as subjective and context-dependent, this does not mean that everything is relative and strong and sound research methodology should still be a focus for narrative researchers. The recognition of the constructive and context-dependent nature of human experience and memory is a strength of qualitative research and an aspect that is difficult to capture using quantitative research methods (Law, 2004, p. 6). Moen (2006) offers further insight into the need to view the narrative as embedded in its context:

A narrative is a story that tells a sequence of events that is significant for the narrator or her or his audience. To repeat, when narratives are looked on within the framework of sociocultural theory, we have to remember the interlinking between the individual and her or his context. (Moen, 2006, p. 4)

The need to understand the significance and meaning of events as perceived by the individual is particularly relevant in the context of this study due to how strongly memories might have been shaped by generational as well as cultural effects. When asking third-generation German-Canadians about their family memories, it is important to recognize that these narratives will be by nature subjective and will contain some narratives whose facts closely align with historical events and others that have been shaped by memories, experiences and how the individual relates to their German heritage (Fuchs et al., 2013, p. 154). Lieblich et al. (1998) identified narrative research as ideal research methodology to understand and explore identity positioning:

Life stories, when properly used, may provide researchers with a key to discovering identity and understanding it—both in its ‘real’ or ‘historical’ core, and as a narrative construction. ... Notwithstanding the debates about its factual grounding, informative value, or linkage to personal identity, the life story constructs and transmits individual and cultural meanings. People are meaning-generating organisms; they construct their identities and self-narratives from building blocks available in their common culture, above and beyond their individual experience. (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 8)

While life stories may not represent an objective “truth” they do contain information about how the individual describes and perceives their own identity and relevant narratives. As memories and identity are by nature constructive and constructed, the question of their factual truth is secondary to the meaning it has for the individual. For this study, since I only interviewed individual members of a family, it was not possible to compare how stories change within each family and to determine how memories changed and indeed that was not the focus. Instead I was interested in learning more about what families did and did not talk about when it comes to the topic of the Holocaust and how it affected how much individuals report feeling guilt and shame about their German heritage and German-Canadian identity.

Research on family memory often uses oral history accounts and narrative analysis to draw themes from family narratives and to learn about the participants’ lived experiences from their own perspective (Assman, 1988, p. 127, Freund, 2006, p. 133; Josselson, McAdams & Lieblich, 2003, p. 260). Narrative research is ideally suited to the study of human experience and the stories they tell about these experiences (Josselson, 2007, p. 537; Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 5; Moen, 2006, p. 2). Moreover, narrative inquiry is not only a research method but also a framework for the research process, purpose and assumptions (Moen, 2006, p. 2). Narratives contain multiple meanings and experiences that are a result of factors in the individual’s development, cultural context and personal context (Moen, 2006). Stories organize these experiences into personally meaningful episodes that contain a multitude of conscious and unconscious parallel memories and give insight into how individuals construct their identity. By allowing participants to tell their story, the researcher is able to get a sense of these experiences from the perspective of the participant and how they make sense of their identity (Josselson, 2013, p. 22). Stories need to be understood in light of the context in which they are told as well as factors that may affect their interpretation and recall and how the narrator and their experience are situated within their socio-cultural environment.

## Reflexivity

As outlined above, narrative research does not assume objectivity of research participants, including the researcher, and instead views qualitative researchers as active participants in the research process, who come into the research setting with their own ideas, hopes and biases (Josselson, 2007, p. 547). In fact, some may say the researcher is the instrument of narrative research (Josselson, 2013, p. 97). Josselson (2007) highlights the need for reflection in narrative research as a result of the researcher's ethical responsibility for research integrity (p. 537)

The qualitative researcher has to be highly aware of the subjective experience of the participants and the researcher's role as agent in the research process as the interview is an interaction between researcher and interviewee (Finlay, 2016, p. 1). In order to recognize the influence of the researcher on the participant and research process, it is essential for the qualitative researcher to engage in reflexivity (Fox & Allan, 2014, p. 103). Josselson (2013) describes *reflexivity* as follows:

Reflexivity involves an attempt to recognize your own assumptions or preconceived ideas about the person or narratives that you are about to encounter. The effort is to create an open, receptive mind that can receive the impact of the participant's experience, and this involves clearing out whatever preexisting thoughts or attitudes may be cluttering the listening path. (Josselson, 2013, p. 34)

As active agent in the research process, it is essential that researchers reflect on their personal biases as they may affect the research relationship and the participant and, as a result, the content of the narratives the interviewee may be willing to share. Finlay (2016) describes reflexivity as follows:

With reflexivity, researchers examine and deconstruct the way their research knowledge is created. They evaluate how they might be contingently implicated in their research by examining how their background, assumptions, positioning, behavior, and subjectivity might impact on the research process and vice versa. (Finlay, 2016, p. 1)

While factors such as ethnicity, language and gender, may or may not be in the conscious awareness of participants, it is important to recognize their potential influence

of the interviewee-interviewer relationship. Individuals involved in a qualitative research conversation are engaging in a relationship to which they bring their own, subjective experience. The ethical dimension of reflexivity demand that the researcher makes an effort to reflect on and highlight personal biases or experiences that could have influenced their interpretation or responses (Finlay, 2016, p. 2; Fox & Allan, 2014, p. 110). In addition, how the researcher is perceived by the participant and responds to the stories affects how much or how little the participants may be willing to share. It is important, however, to be mindful of over-emphasizing reflexivity rather than focusing on the experience of the research participant and the research question (Fox & Allan, 2014, p. 104; Josselson, 2013, p. 22). The research relationship poses particular challenges for the researcher due to their dual role as researcher and a participant in the research process (Josselson, 2007, p. 538).

In my role as researcher in this research project, I have at times found myself caught between wanting to emphasize my gratitude for the participants' volunteering their stories and presenting their insights and at the same time identifying areas where participants did not show reflection and awareness without being overly critical. As a fourth-generation German, I am aware of strong feelings of intergenerational guilt, that are triggered any time the topic of the Holocaust comes up or even when I have to identify as German in certain contexts. I am unsure of the origins of this emotional response as I was never encouraged to take on this intergenerational guilt but I assume it is due to a general avoidance of the topic when I was growing up. Potential for bias such as the example of my background required me to engage in reflexivity. Throughout the course of the study, I was mindful not to impose my views, made an effort not to be influenced by the literature I had read on the German-Canadian experience and chose to not share my opinion or surprise in response to statements to avoid biasing my participants' stories (Josselson, 2007, p. 546). Josselson (2007) in her article *The Ethical Attitude in Narrative Research* states "the interviewer must refrain from overt and subtle judgment about the participant's life" (p. 547) and I have based my decision to remain as neutral as possible on this notion.

Self-reflexivity, mindfulness of one's biases and a willingness to examine one's beliefs and behaviours allow a researcher to maintain an effective researcher stance and ensure that they tell their participants' story, not their own. Given my significant personal

history as German living in Canada and a historical need for increased self-reflexivity in the research area of German family memory, I found it important to include my own experience throughout this thesis and how I attempted to address potential biases (Fuchs et al., 2013, p. 152). By engaging in self-reflexivity, researchers can use their own experience as a tool for research, monitoring their effect on the interview process and during data analysis and to evaluate the quality of insights.

**Reflecting on my family memories.** In order to give my readers a sense of my own family memories and how much the average German might know and also as an exercise in reflexivity and to experience what I asked my participants to do, I included the stories and knowledge I have of my own family's involvement in the NS past. This exercise highlighted how difficult it is to retell these stories outside of the family conversation and provides a comparison for what a German who grew up in Germany might know compared to a German-Canadian who grew up in Canada and who may have had fewer opportunities to speak with relatives about the Nazi past.

I spent the first 18 years of my life living in Germany in a town about 35 minutes outside of Munich and 20 minutes South-East of Dachau. I do not remember if I knew much factual information about the Holocaust until I learned about it in grade 6 when I was 12 years old. My parents (born 1967 and 1968) occasionally talked about their great-grandparents involvement during the war and my grandmother (Hella, born 1937) talked a lot about her experiences during the war growing up, almost entirely with a focus on the German civilian victims, bombings, escape and the suffering what came with the war and its end.

My mother does not remember exactly when she started telling me about the Holocaust but believes it was between the ages of 6 to 10 and I did not ask my parents or grandparents any questions about the Holocaust until I learned about it in more detail in school when I was 15. I knew growing up that my parents had purposely chosen the name "Sara" due to its Hebrew origin and in an effort to commemorate that Jewish women were forced to change their names to Sarah in 1939 but I don't think I was aware of the extent of the Nazi crimes when I was a child. My parents and grandparents on my father's side (Ludwig, born 1929, and Thea, born 1940) discouraged any display of national pride and were very clear with my sister and I that they did not tolerate bullying,

racism, discriminating against others or any form of cruelty against other people or animals “because of what happened in Germany during World War II”. I accepted this as sufficient answer and knew it had to do with the Holocaust but did not know details as my family thought it would be too traumatizing to learn about it at a young age and they would tell me when I was older. It is unclear if they themselves found it too traumatizing or when they thought I would be old enough but overall the topic of the Holocaust was rarely discussed in family discussions.

In grade 9, when I was 15, my class visited the Dachau concentration camp for the first time and I remember feeling overwhelmed by feelings of guilt and shame for having grown up in the country of perpetrators and bystanders who perpetrated and allowed this genocide to happen. Despite having lived so close, my family never took my sister and I to the concentration camp, although they had told us that there was one close by. I began asking more questions after this visit and because my class had read a lot of literature on the Holocaust and Nazi Germany, so I became curious about my family’s involvement. However, the stories my grandparents, who were children during the war, volunteered were always about the civilian’s suffering, particularly my two grandmothers whose families had to escape.

While I felt ashamed for having grown up in the country where so many innocent lives were taken and so much suffering was caused in the most inhumane and horrific ways, I was shocked at my classmates’ rejection of responsibility to remember the Holocaust and having to learn about it for two years and asking during classroom discussions why our generation should still feel responsible for a crime they were not part of. This position has been voiced by previous generations already but has been noted more commonly in the literature and newspaper articles on the younger post-Holocaust generations in the past two decades. I have always disagreed with this position because I believe there is moral obligation to remember the events of the Holocaust that were too tragic and too important as a reminder for the world to never forget. Indeed I do not believe young Germans should have to feel shameful and guilty and instead the term “collective regret” might be more accessible and lacks the heavy emotional burden that comes with words such as responsibility, guilt and shame (Imhoff et al., 2012). However, Germany and Germans, including those of German heritage,



have an important role and responsibility in ensuring that the Holocaust is remembered so that it never happens again.

Like many others in my generation, I have little actual knowledge about my family's involvement although I started asking questions around the age of 15 and my parents have asked their parents and grandparents. My parents who are members of the third generation told me that particularly the generation of my great-grandparents, while not necessarily all supporters of the Nazi regime, was very racist and discriminated against everyone but non-ethnic Germans. Particularly my great-grandmother from Peterswald in Sudetendeutschland had an irrational dislike for individuals from the Czech Republic as she blamed them for having to escape to Germany.

The stories my grandmothers volunteered were those of having to escape, the suffering and being victims during the war. Thea (born 1940) talked about the Vertreibung (displacement) from Sudetendeutschland immediately after the war with her mother but they would speak in their dialect from the Peterswald area. Even though my great-grandmother (Hilde, born 1918) was alive until I was 25 and would have been able to answer my questions, it never occurred to me to ask her. My knowledge is limited to the fact that she was a secretary for a small accounting firm during the war and the family was comfortable until they had to escape. My grandmother told me Hilde was not particularly happy when her husband returned from Siberia. Thinking back to why I never asked her, I almost felt it would be disrespectful to ask her about the Holocaust because my grandmother would get very upset talking about it so I could only imagine how difficult it must have been for her. However, in reflecting on it now, I don't know if it was because I didn't want to know or because my parents had told me that she had shared some views that they described as pro-Nazi and holding anti-Semitic views, so I already had a sense of what she might say. Thea had a very difficult relationship with her estranged father who was a POW and returned from Siberia when she was 10. His return brought a lot of conflict within the family which led her to leave home at the age of 18 to move to Sweden where she met my grandfather. She continues to get very emotional when she speaks of her childhood after having to escape Peterswald and her father's return. My father only met his grandfather as a child. By then his grandfather had experienced a stroke and was dependent on others for his care. My father described him as a very nice and gentle person, which is quite different from my grandparents'

description of him as a 'rude and selfish person' but show similar patterns as identified in the research, whereby the younger generation rejects the notion of their family members as perpetrators (Welzer et al., 2002).

My maternal grandmother (Hella, born 1937) also often talked about escaping from Osnabrueck but I do not remember why her family had to flee other than realizing that this must have been a traumatic experience for her as she re-told the same stories at every family gathering, even when no one asked. I was surprised about some of the details my mother told me about Hella's family when I asked her while writing this thesis. One example was a text message that stated that she believes neither of her grandparents joined the Nazi party but she thinks her grandfather likely knew about the Holocaust as he was a radio operator during the war. It seems unlikely that he could have been a radio operator during the war without being a member of the Nazi party but I assume this is the story she was told by her mother who may not have wanted to accept her parents' potential involvement.

Hella's husband and my maternal grandfather (G., born 1932) lost his father and brother during the war. He wrote a family chronicle around the time I started to learn about the Holocaust and had a whole section of pictures from his parents and family members during the war and in their uniforms that seemed to glorify their participating in the Nazi party. The making of the chronicle was around the same time when he went to local National Democratic Party (an extreme right wing party in Germany) meeting one evening during a family visit which led to an argument between G. and I, as I was outraged that he would support right-wing views. I have avoided conversations with him since, which has been easy due to the distance from Vancouver to Germany and never asked what he or his family knew because I was afraid of what it would unveil. My mother in a recent communication told me that her paternal grandmother (G.'s mother of Dutch origin) was a member of the NS-Frauenschaft (the National Socialist Women's League). Her maternal great-aunt, only known to me as "Tante Ilse" (born 1910 was pro-Nazi until her death in the early 2000s. This surprised me as I only knew her from stories about her being a teacher and an emphasis on the fact that she was educated, hardworking and never married after a heartbreak in her 20s.

When I had to interview my grandparents for a school project at the age of 15, my paternal grandfather (Ludwig, born 1929) said he was a member of a division of the Hitler Jugend because he wanted to work with engines and go skiing but when he volunteered to fight in the war he was sent home by the doctor because he was only 15 and the doctor knew the war was almost over. This story is often told in my family as an example of how my grandfather was lucky and got away with not having to go to the war as a result of this “brave” doctor, who defied the Nazi regime by admitting that the war was almost over and refusing to send a youth to the war. My grandfather insists that the group he was part of did not talk about the Nazi ideologies and he would have left if they had. He describes himself as very left on the political spectrum and does not endorse any racist views but denies having been aware of the concentration camps. Of his parents I know they had a farm and therefore his father did not have to fight in the war and he had four sisters who to my knowledge also were not involved directly in the war or worked for the Nazis but likely were members of the Bund Deutscher Mädel (BDM) (League of German Girls). Despite this knowledge I have never thought of my Opa as a Nazi or even the potential of him having been part of anything related to the Nazi past as he is such a warm, supportive and genuinely nice person. This is a common response seen in conversations with individuals from my generation. However, it is clear that he would have fought in the war as a soldier under the Nazi regime had the doctor not sent him home and as such he was a follower.

Overall, in my family the stories of resentment and trauma of the forced displacement were more prominent than admission of German guilt or knowledge of the concentration camps and the Holocaust. While writing this thesis, it became quite clear to me that I had never really asked the difficult questions. I was satisfied with knowing a few pieces of information that alluded to some of my family members’ past and knowledge but the picture is fragmented and the whole first generation is missing from my knowledge and memory. I was surprised when I realized that I grew up in Germany and was unaware of much of its perpetrator history until I was 15 and continue to have limited knowledge of my own family history, although this is not uncommon for individuals from my generation. My story highlights how much is lost over the course of a few generations and why even more may be lost through immigration. It is possible that more opportunities for these conversations would have come up had I stayed in

Germany but seeing how little information seemed sufficient to me prior to completing this thesis suggests that I might not have asked.

For a long time I was hoping that someone in my family was Jewish because I thought it would change how I felt about being German. Now, having lived in Canada for a decade, I can pass as Canadian and most assume I am second-generation or was very young when I moved to Canada. While I still speak German and have family in Germany, I have made a conscious effort to lose my “German-ness” and do not cook German food or seek out opportunities to connect with Germans outside my family. This project was the first time in almost ten years that I contacted and connected with members of the German community in Vancouver. The only tradition I have maintained is celebrating Christmas on December 24<sup>th</sup>. I have often felt relieved when someone refers to me as “European” rather than “German”. Despite my best attempts to become more Canadian and embracing a European identity, when I visited Dachau in 2014, ten years after the first visit, I expected that potentially the distance, new perspectives and being ten years older would have changed how I felt but the feelings of inherited guilt and shame for what happened during the Holocaust in Germany at the hand of Germans were unchanged. This experience suggested that it was something that was deeply rooted in my identity and that sparked my interest in pursuing this research topic as I realize on a rational level that I am not responsible for the events but somehow with having this German heritage, a sense of “original sin” prevailed and I started to wonder if German-Canadians who grew up in Canada also showed similar emotional reactions and patterns of inherited shame and guilt.

## **Research Design**

In order to gain a better understanding of participants’ lived experience narrative methodology using in-depth semi-structured interviews followed by thematic narrative analysis were chosen for this thesis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell et al., 2007, p. 240; Josselson et al., 2003, p. 6; Riessman, 2005, p. 2).

A commonly used research framework in collective memory research is oral history, where participants tell their story without interruption (Freund, 2006, p. 134).

Freund (2006) adapted the traditional format of oral history described by Alexander von Plato in 1992<sup>9</sup> into two parts: part one consists of the participant telling their story uninterrupted and part two consists of specific questions (p. 134). The idea here is to allow participants to tell their story uninterrupted during part one. For the purposes of this study, I started out by inviting participants to share what they knew about their family history and their experiences of growing up as German-Canadian. This open-ended first part of the interview was followed by seven structured questions that were posed to all participants to allow for comparison. Occasional open-ended, unstructured follow-up questions were asked to get more specific details and to ensure that I fully understood the content of the story or memory. However, I chose not to challenge my interviewees when their stories were contradictory as I wanted them to tell the story how they normally would. Huberman and Miles (2002) support such uninterrupted narrating of stories by participants rather than very structured questioning:

Precisely because they are essential meaning-making structures, narratives must be preserved, not fractured, by investigators, who must respect respondents' ways of constructing meaning and analyze how it is accomplished. (p. 5)

Allowing participants to tell their story freely without influencing them through questions preserves and captures more accurately how they would normally be retelling their family memories. In addition, I wanted to see how much information interviewees would volunteer knowing that I was German and an uninterrupted conversation seemed to mimic a common family discussion more closely, particularly since this research project was not an intervention to challenge constructed family memories.

As mentioned above, the interviews consisted of two steps: the first part of the interview was an open invitation to participants to tell me about their experience growing up German-Canadian. Most participants spent about ten to twenty minutes narrating their life and their family's life in Canada and Germany before moving into the semi-structured section of the interview. In order to compare across participants and themes identified in the literature, a semi-structured interview protocol with seven set questions was developed and all participants were asked these questions in addition to open-

<sup>9</sup> Alexander von Plato, 'Aspects of Recent Oral History in Germany', in *International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories 1: Memory and Totalitarianism* (1992), pp. 192–196.

ended follow-up questions intended to get more details and help understand connections (see Appendix A). Participants were asked to reflect on their experience of growing up in a German-Canadian family, share any relevant memories concerning the family's involvement in the war and the Holocaust and how they relate to their family history, heritage and community.

## **Thematic (Narrative) Analysis**

The research methodologies of narrative or thematic analysis lend themselves well to analyzing personal experiences and narratives such as the ones collected for this research project (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell et al., 2007, p. 240; Josselson et al., 2003, p. 6; Riessman, 2005, p. 2). Riessman (2005) describes thematic analysis as follows:

The thematic approach is useful for theorising across a number of cases – finding common thematic elements across research participants and the events they report. A typology can be constructed to elaborate a developing theory. Because interest lies in the content of speech, analysts interpret what is said by focusing on the meaning that any competent user of the language would find in a story. Language is viewed as a resource, not a topic of investigation. (p. 2)

As the goal of this research project was to find commonalities in the narratives across participants and in relation to the literature on post-war Germans in Germany, thematic analysis presented as the optimal choice. In order to gain a greater understanding of what participants said and did not say as part of the legacy of silence, the data was analyzed using thematic and narrative analysis by classifying and sorting the participants' individual statements and accounts into categories derived from their statements and overall summary themes. These themes were then compared across participants and to previous research findings identified in the literature. For this research project the data was analyzed using thematic narrative analysis as described in Braun and Clarke (2006). Based on the interview transcripts, the texts were analyzed using the qualitative research software NVivo 11. I coded for themes by first extracting units of meaning that were sorted into categories with titles close to the original text and then themes that identified the overall content and phenomenon described in the category (Gibbs, 2012, p. 38).

The initial focus was just one the question that directly asked about how families talked about the Holocaust. I found that coding and viewing the texts as independent parts did not sufficiently capture the meaning communicated by the participants. Furthermore, as part of the research question, I also wanted to compare the stories and insights shared by my participants with previous research and literature findings and therefore I went back and recoded the transcripts, this time sorting units of meaning into categories and then into pre-defined themes from the literature on German post-war generations' dealing with the past and German identity. The initial approach of focusing on the Holocaust question turned out to omit much of the meaning communicated throughout the transcript and therefore for the second round of coding, the whole transcript was coded.

The narratives were coded and sorted according to the following themes:

**Table 1. Overview of coding categories and frequencies**

Coding Categories	Number of Participants who Mentioned Theme
Immigrant identity	9
Victims: immigration	9
Victims: Germany	9
Rationalization	9
Perpetrators	5
Holocaust: silence	9

## Sample and Recruitment

Participants were individuals who identified as German-Canadians born between 1950-1975 residing in the Lower Mainland of the Greater Vancouver area in British Columbia whose parents moved to Canada in the two decades following World War II. After Ethics approval was obtained from the SFU Review Ethics Boards, participants were recruited from sites such as the German-Canadian Care Home, a blog post on the German-Canadian Business Association blog, the West Coast German News Website,

an ad posted on craigslist, a poster posted at the Alpenclub in Vancouver and a German meetup group meeting. All private organizations were contacted for permission to recruit from their sites prior to the start of participant recruitment. No permission was needed from craigslist, as it is a free, publicly accessible online classifieds platform.

Ethics approval was obtained from the Simon Fraser University Research Ethics Board (REB) in May 2016 and participant recruitment commenced one month after the approval letter was received. The themes and categories identified through the narrative thematic analysis of the transcripts were reviewed by my senior supervisor.

The interviews took place over the course of three months starting in June 2016 until August 2016. A total of eleven German-Canadians born between 1950 and 1975 were interviewed and one interview was omitted because the individual was one participant's husband and did not fall within the age range specified, which left ten participants and interviews for the final analysis. One participant (Linda) contacted me via email and was referred by another participant. All individuals interested in participating contacted me via email in response to my poster or my craigslist posting as one of the main requirements was that the prospective participant self-identified as German-Canadian. I interpreted their contacting me in response to recruitment posters looking for "German-Canadians" as identifying sufficiently with this identity, which was one of the inclusion criteria. I then called interested individuals or emailed to confirm the year they were born in and their generation status in regards to German post-war generation and immigrant generation.

While the sample represented "average" German-Canadians, none of which from families with significant perpetration histories, it was a self-selective sample of individuals who were prepared and motivated to talk about their family memories. In addition, self-identification as German-Canadian was used as an inclusion criterion for this study selected due to the limited ethnic characteristics commonly seen in second- and third-generation German-Canadians, potentially due to increased efforts for assimilation.

The interviews were conducted in a public space such as a public library, quiet coffee shop or a park or in their home. Audio-recordings were only started after the research participants reviewed and signed the consent form and gave permission to



record the interview. They were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any point and were given the option of being sent a copy of the final PDF document. Participation was entirely voluntary and they did not receive remuneration for participating. The interviews lasted between 35 and 95 minutes and were audio-recorded and I transcribed them within a week of recording. Most interviews were conducted in English but the two interviews conducted at a coffee shop (Peter, Emma) were in German as per participant preference and to ensure that other customers at the coffee shop were less likely to listen to and understand the content of the conversation.

All digital data was stored on a secure, password-protected USB and computer that were locked in a secure location in my home office space. Audio-recordings were deleted within one week after transcription. Only my senior supervisor and I had access to the digital research documents.

All identifying information including references to workplaces and professions were removed and names used are pseudonyms chosen by me. One participant left it to me to use the name "islander girl" or to change it but I found it easier to have first names for my participants, so I changed it to Katja.

## **The Interviewees**

All ten participants included were second-generation immigrant German-Canadians who were born in Canada between 1950 and 1975. Their German post-war generation status was defined by their parents' or grandparents' age during the period of National Socialism in Germany. According to this generational status, four members were second-generation Germans (their parents were participants and witnesses to the Nazi era) and six were members of the third-generation Germans (their grandparents were participants and witnesses to the Nazi era). The participants are presented in the order in which they were interviewed, starting with the first interviewee.

**Table 2. Overview of participants<sup>10</sup>**

Name	Family Moved to Canada	Born	Immigrant Generation	Holocaust Generation	German Parents/Grandparents
Jutta	1952	1951*	2	2	Father Ukrainian, mother German
Rita	1953	1956	2	2	Both parents German
Linda	1956	1950*	2	2	Mother German, Father from Sudetenland
Peter	1956	1960	2	2	Both parents German
Michael	1962	1973	2	3	German mother, Dutch father
Fritz	1955	1965	2	3	Both parents German
Wolf	1970	1975	2	3	Both parents German
Natascha	1960	1967	2	3	Mother Russian, father German
Emma	1956 (mother), 1961 (father)	1970	2	3	Both parents German
Islander girl/Katja	1951	1974	2	3	Both parents German-speaking Mennonites

**Jutta.** She was the first participant who was interviewed. Jutta was born in 1951 to ethnic German parents born in Ukraine. Her father had stayed in Ukraine until he was expelled and her mother's family had moved to Germany when her mother was nine years old. Jutta is a member of the second generation both in her immigrant status and generation-unit in relation to the Holocaust. Jutta is very involved with the German community and is married to a German man who had immigrated to Vancouver in the early 1980s. During the interview Jutta was very open in talking about her father's and grandfather's involvement in the Holocaust and described her ancestors as Nazis. She was the only participant who openly admitted that her family members were Nazis. While

<sup>10</sup> \* These participants were born outside of Canada but came to Canada as infants or young children under the age of 10.

she described feeling “great discomfort when the topic of the Holocaust comes up” she also maintains a sense of pride in her German heritage and notes that her mother was a “proud German” who had encouraged all her children to marry Germans. Jutta taught her children German and lived in Germany for a few years.

**Rita.** She was born in Canada in 1956 to German parents. Her father had fought during the war and was suffering from PTSD, which made him very difficult to get along with and dependent on alcohol. She is a second-generation immigrant and also second-generation German-Canadian. Rita is married to a man who grew up in Germany and moved to Canada as an adult but identifies as German-Canadian. Rita is trying to maintain her cultural heritage and describes German music as the strongest connection her parents gave her to the culture and language. She spends a lot of time trying to understand what happened during the Holocaust and how it happened. During the interview, she described that there is still a lot of pain in members of the third generation and openly spoke about her difficult childhood and her father’s substance use. Rita did not teach her children from her first marriage German but they are interested in learning.

**Linda.** Linda was born in 1950 as the only daughter of German parents who immigrated to Canada in 1956 and Linda followed at the age of 6 after having lived with her grandparents in Munich while her parents moved to Sweden and then Canada. As a second-generation immigrant and of second-generation German heritage, she identifies as Canadian and feels resentment towards her German origins. She is not aware of any parental involvement in the Nazi regime but identified her grandfather as someone who did not support the Nazis while her father’s brother was a concentration camp official. Linda stopped speaking German from the age of ten and now at times speaks German with her parents who have dementia. Linda shared a number of stories about her tumultuous arrival in Canada and is not interested in maintaining her cultural heritage after negative experiences with racist views expressed by members of the Vancouver German club when she attended events in her 30s. Linda did not teach her children German.

**Peter.** This participant was born in 1960 and is a second-generation German-Canadian whose parents were both German and immigrated in 1956. His father was a

decorated soldier during the war but Peter described him as very liberal, left-wing individual who defied authority. Peter stated he was not aware of his family members' involvement in the Holocaust but knew of his mother's traumatic experience living in a Christian orphanage in Germany. Peter maintains his German heritage by speaking German and visiting relatives in Germany on a yearly basis. He does not have children.

**Michael.** He was born in 1973 to a German mother and a Danish father who immigrated to Canada in the early 1960s. Michael's German grandfather, uncle and mother's cousin were involved with the Nazi regime. His father, who was named Adolf by his Danish parents, was very interested in the Holocaust and was disappointed to learn of his wife's father's involvement with the Nazi party. Michael has strong connections with his cultural heritage and seeks to maintain a balanced view of the Nazi past while recognizing the reality of the crimes and victims. He does not have children.

**Fritz.** This participant was born in 1965 and is a second-generation Canadian and third-generation German. He described feeling lost between the two cultures and having resented his family for moving to Canada. His father was a member of the Hitler youth and Fritz has a strong interest in the Nazi past and shared reflections on the German nature and his request that his wife not tell friends about his heritage as it often leads to comments about the Nazi time. His family members were aware of the existence of concentration camps but most of his family members were not active participants of the Nazi regime. He maintains his cultural heritage by purchasing German products and following the Germans news but feels that Germans struggle to feel proud of their heritage. He does not have children.

**Wolf.** Wolf is a third-generation German and second-generation Canadian who was born in 1975 and whose parents immigrated to Canada in 1970. He describes that he was raised to be proud of his heritage and while he is unaware of any family involvement, his mother made a point of teaching her children a balanced view of the Nazi past as she was worried about them feeling bad. From playing cards with his father and his friends Wolf got a sense that only those directly involved knew about the Holocaust. Wolf maintains his cultural heritage by speaking German and playing cards

with his father and his father's German friends regularly. He does not have children but plans to teach his future children German.

**Natascha.** This participant is a third-generation German and second-generation Canadian born in 1967 and whose parents immigrated to Canada in the 1960s. Natascha's family travelled a lot in her early years and her mother was Russian but made a point of maintaining her children's German heritage. Natscha's father passed away when she was 19 and she does not have contact with her mother, so she is not aware of any family involvement as the topic was never discussed or brought up in the family. Natascha recently started joining German language clubs, loves German food staples such as Sauerkraut and speaks German with her sister's young children. She did not teach her children German.

**Emma.** Emma was born in 1970 and is a second-generation German-Canadian and third-generation post-war German. She is very involved in the German community and has been teaching German for many years. She is currently compiling a family chronicle and is relieved to know that none of her family members were involved in the Holocaust. Emma is particularly interested in the trauma associated with the war and having to confront the Holocaust. She maintains a strong connection to her German heritage and the German community and her children were raised speaking English and German.

**Katja.** A German-Canadian Mennonite and mother of two who was born in 1974 and is a second-generation German-Canadian and third-generation post-war German. She identifies as daughter of German-speaking Mennonites and is currently compiling a family chronicle which sparked her interest in her German heritage and participating in this research project. Katja's family did not talk about the Holocaust and she described that their equivalent was family members being sent to Siberia. She does not speak German and did therefore not teach her children German but has memories related to learning songs and stories in German from her grandfather.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter provided an overview of the current study, the research design, recruitment and rationale for how narrative research methodology was chosen and how it lends itself well to the study of third-generation German-Canadians' family memories. It was intended to provide the necessary context and give readers' a sense of how the texts and stories that are described in detail in the next chapter were collected and analyzed. The findings are presented according to the themes that emerged from the text and were aligned with previous literature on post-war Germans and German-Canadian post-war immigrants.

The next chapter will present and discuss the results from the thematic narrative analysis of the ten interviews included in this thesis. Chapter four focuses on how participants narrated their family memories of immigrating to Canada and the life of their parents or grandparents in Germany prior to moving to Canada. It highlights findings on how participants talked about the perpetrators in their family and the Holocaust. In chapter five, I explore and connect the findings from the analysis with relevant literature on the themes identified in the narratives and suggest future directions for research as well as potential implications for Holocaust education and other education programs on genocides.

## **Chapter 4. Talking About Immigration, the Nazi Past and the Holocaust**

This chapter explores how second- and third-generation German-Canadians narrate their knowledge of family involvement and describe family memories of the Holocaust. I examine how interviewees discuss the role of Germans during World War II to understand how German-Canadian families confronted or avoided the legacy of the Holocaust. In addition, I highlight evidence of feelings of guilt and shame and how it affects German-Canadians' understanding of their own heritage and the view of Germans as victims or perpetrators. How did German-Canadian families talk about the Holocaust and their family involvement and what is absent from their discussion? Are Germans described as victims of the war or do they challenge the victim narrative commonly found in post-war Germans' stories? Another important question I sought to address in this study is how and if German-Canadians commemorate the victims of the Holocaust. How has immigration affected how families talked about the role of Germans in the war and the Holocaust?

The first section will examine stories of immigration shared by participants, followed by an analysis of stories that focus on the legacy of silence. The second section discusses perpetrator stories, relativization through a focus on historical and rational explanations of World War II and the Holocaust and silence described and exhibited by participants.

### **Immigration Stories: Re(construction) and Avoidance**

Immigrating to a different country can provide an escape or an increased confrontation with one's cultural heritage. For German-Canadians, the motivation behind immigration after the war was often to leave behind their previous life in Germany, a promise of better career opportunities and freedom in Canada (Freund,

2006). Those who had family or friends in Canada were able to connect with a community of German-Canadians and support each other in the face of discrimination (Bassler, 1990). Others found themselves without a community of family and friends to rely on and struggled to make a living when first arriving. Whereas in Germany since the end of the 1960s there have been public efforts to encourage a dealing with the past (“Vergangenheitsbewältigung”) on a national level, the Canadian education about the war and the Holocaust was focused on Germans as the perpetrators (Bassler, 1990; Massa & Weinfeld, 2009). This may have caused German immigrants to try to escape the association with the previous enemy alien status by assimilating so much that they have been described as invisible and silent in the literature. Rather than confronting the past and the role of Nazi Germany and the population in the Holocaust, the narrative that was adopted was often a victim stance and rejection of responsibility or rejection of the German culture (Dembling, 2011; Frie, 2012). It is possible that the struggle of adapting to life in a new country took up so much time and energy of parents that discussions of the family’s past and the Holocaust did not come up much. This next section explores how second- and third-generation German-Canadians describe their family’s experiences as children of immigrants in Canada. How did post-war German-Canadian families relate stories about their new life in Canada and how are these stories remembered by their children?

**Difficult first years.** This section looks at how post-war German-Canadian families described their immigrant experience to their children by looking at the memories and stories related by members of the second and third generation of post-war German immigrants. Of the ten interviewees included in this analysis, seven described experiences and memories that were coded as “suffering with immigration”. A few selected quotes and their interpretation are described below. The guiding question was: how did first generation post-war German parents describe the early years and how are these experiences interpreted by the generation of their children?

Emma’s story describes her parents’ early years in Canada and the difference in their experience:

My parents met at church. At that time churches were community centres. He didn’t find a position for a long time. That was in 1961, so not even 20 years after



the war, so the memories were still strong. My mom came as enemy alien. My dad had a lot of difficulty finding work. He had a strong accent so it was difficult for him.

Emma emphasizes that her father still struggled to find work almost 20 years after the war in the early 1960s and points out that he had a strong accent which indicates that she believes his struggles were due to his clear German heritage and the “enemy alien” status of Germans during World War II (Massa & Weinfeld, 2009). It has been noted in the literature that Germans were indeed facing a noticeable degree of discrimination and it took until the early 1980s for Germans to become reintegrated into the larger Canadian society (Bassler, 1990).

Peter’s story highlights both the struggle he faced as young German immigrant child and also his father’s difficulty in finding work:

So that my parents could get married, I had to be catholic and went to a catholic school. The kids were 90% Italian and I didn’t even know the word but I was constantly called Nazi. With only 7 or 8 years of age I asked my parents what it meant and I only know that these kids learned it from their parents. From then on I was always called Nazi and was beaten up. That was my childhood. And that went on. As soon as one heard the accent, one was called a Nazi, an outsider.

We lived in Prince George for a year and there wasn’t enough work. We collected wood and then took the train to Toronto. My dad was looking for work and also didn’t find any there, so we moved to Ottawa. We had a hard time finding an apartment and finally found one. The owner was Polish but also Jewish. I think the first year we had a hard time buying beds. We were very poor. I went to school, always being beaten up. There was also a time where my dad and I went to go look for work. I can remember a situation where my dad was being verbally abused so badly. The foreman was like ‘Get the fuck out of here, we don’t hire Krauts’.

Peter describes his suffering as a child at a school with mostly Italian children and being targeted due to being German. At the same time his father was experiencing a lot of adversity and discrimination trying to find work. Despite this considerable amount of adversity, Peter has maintained a connection to his German heritage. It is noticeable in the story that in the context of German-Canadian immigration the Italians have become the “others” and perpetrators. Another interesting piece of information is that the apartment where the rejected German family finally found shelter and settled was owned

by a Jewish man. Peter later brings up that his mother could not handle how difficult life was in Canada and went back to Germany in 1978 and his father followed in the 1980s.

Fritz describes his fathers' experience finding work as challenging:

There were a lot of factories in Toronto, so that's where my dad worked. But in the 70s a lot of them were bankrupt and he got laid off so he went back to school and became a plumber and worked for 5 years. This was before credit cards, so you never knew when the groceries would come in. My dad had to unlearn his British accent because when he applied for jobs because he still had his German passport and when he applied for jobs they'd say he was a Nazi who was a British spy. My dad had his businesses but he always struggled but he had to work twice as hard, so he always had a hate.

I was actually really angry at my parents because there was a lot of economic hardship and I heard a lot of Germans were going back and I wondered why we couldn't go back. I grew up with a lot of it, of 'why did I come here?'

Fritz' story describes his father's struggling to find work throughout his time in Canada, even when he retired. The fact that he emphasizes that his father felt hatred and regret for having moved to Canada sheds light to why Fritz resented his parents for not moving back and why he reported feeling like a lost generation and not knowing where he belonged even though he grew up in Canada. Fritz was likely exposed to a lot of discussion of the "good old days" due to the adversities his family faced in Canada. This narrative provides the context for some of the stories and statements Fritz shared later on in the interview on his discussion of the Holocaust, the German victim role and his theories.

The stories outlined in this section highlight the common threads of hunger, discrimination in school and employment and the suffering of the post-war immigrants remembered by the children of post-war immigrants. It is interesting to note that these stories paint an image of a post-war experience of immigrant German-Canadians that was similar to conditions during the war and even shows parallels with the discrimination Jewish people faced in Germany. The suffering and victimization experienced and remembered by interviewees is a form of avoidance of guilt and shows evidence of reframing or Wechselrahmung where the victim roles get switched and the language often found in accounts of Jewish Holocaust survivors is applied to the German group (Welzer et al., 2002). It is also noticeable that none of the stories attempt to compare the

experience to what it might have been like in Germany, which suggests that the assumption is that it would have been easier. Given that Germans were considered enemy aliens for many years during the war and indeed were tolerated but not welcome for decades following the war, it is entirely possible that the discrimination in the workplace against Germans was indeed noticeable (Bassler, 1990).

**The German suffering and the Russians.** To further explore the concept of *Wechselrahmung* or reframing in the narratives, this next section will focus on the stories shared by participants about their family's life in Germany during and after the war. The stories were coded for evidence of the German as victim role and direct reference comparing the experience of Germans during the war to those of the Jewish community and other victims of the Holocaust. Nine of the ten interviewees shared stories that exhibited this theme and Natascha was the only one who did not talk about her family memories in a way that presented the Germans as victims as she had very few family memories. Interestingly many of the narratives contained references to the Russians in perpetrator roles, again highlighting how the question of guilt is avoided through reframing.

Linda tells the following details in response to the question what her family had told her about her parents' experience during the war:

He [her father] was part of the Sudeten Germans in Czech Republic in a place that was then called Igelau. His family had a huge piece of land, they were quite wealthy, his brothers all went to university. When the war started the Nazis came in, took over, looted everything they could find, set up concentration camps. Their reign of terror, really. Even though my dad was German he was an *Ausländer* [a foreigner], so therefore he didn't count. So they got treated just as the regular populous was treated. They were used as messengers, their produce was used. He then developed a phobia which didn't surface until he was about 80 years old when he developed PTSD. This phobia is of the Nazis coming, killing people, slicing and dicing them, smoking their meat and then selling it on the market. And this then surfaced in the hospital years and years later until he was in the hospital and he thought he was in a death camp. Obviously that was very traumatic. After the Germans, the Russians came through and they raped my dad's slightly older sister to death. And then the other females in the family, they managed to escape to Austria. After the Russians came through, the Czechs came in and had everyone leave. My dad's father had throat cancer and he died in a ditch along the way. They didn't have any money, so they didn't have any food. My dad was encouraged by his family members to give himself up to the Russians so at least

he'd get food and that's what he did so at 13 he ended up in a Russian concentration camp.

Linda's detailed story contains numerous examples of suffering and describes many aspects of her father's experiences during the war. These traumatic events during the war caused a delayed PTSD that she did not become aware of until he was 80 years old. Although her father had experienced a number of traumatic events in relation to the war, it is not clear what the origin of his distressing fear is. She refers to her father having been sent to a Russian concentration camp when he was only 13 years old, where he may have been exposed to a lot of trauma. The Russians were mentioned several times in this story and take on the role of the perpetrator while the German civilians in Linda's family were the victims of multiple traumas during the war. This tendency for the Russians to be presented as the true perpetrators during the war has been described in the literature on reframing (Dembling, 2011; Welzer et al., 2002).

In Fritz' story the "Others", specifically the "Poles" and the "Russians", take on a central perpetrator role:

My family moved to an area in Alsace-Lorraine and then Poland but never inter-married, in parts because they were protestant. My mother's family had an embroidery business. They had a huge farm and I've started the process of getting it back because it was confiscated. In the second world war, 1943, the poles killed half of my family. When the Russians were coming, 12 hours before they took one horse and a wagon and made the trek to Osnabrück. My grandfather on my mom's side was already put in the German army, he was captured in Northern Italy in 1940 until 1949 he was a POW. They didn't know until 1946 if he was alive or not. Another male relative developed meningitis and died. My mom developed rheumatic heart and they said to keep her because she might die but my grandma didn't want to risk it because the Russians did ethnic cleansing. I don't know, I wasn't there but I heard the Germans at least if you followed the rules they didn't do the ethnic cleansing.

Fritz story contains a lot of references to acts of perpetration and threat experienced on the hands of the Russians. It is interesting to note that he differentiates between the ethnic cleansing conducted by the Germans and the Russians based on the fact that the Germans did not do it if one followed the rules. It is unclear what these rules would have been but a clear Russian perpetrator role emerges from the story.

Peter described his mother's experience as a child during the war, which shows a different kind of German suffering and perpetrator group:

The kids were then brought to an orphanage. There were nuns and priests; as you can imagine there were a lot of beatings and molestation. My mother always suffered under that. Germany struggles with the reconciliation. The kids were so afraid, they often peed in their beds and the nuns knew about it and sometimes came in at night. And the reason why I am telling this is because my mom also beat me up. With a stick with four edges and that's how she learned it as a child and so that's what she did too. She just couldn't really continue with some stories, she started shaking even when she was already 70 years old. And the reason why they were initially sent there was because there was food and it was supposed to be a bomb-free zone.

Peter's story describes his mother's suffering as a child who was brought to a German orphanage to keep her safe during the war but instead she suffered considerable psychological trauma that she let out on her son, putting him through the same suffering she endured during the war. Despite the beating he described his mother as excellent nurse, although she was too nervous and did not have the strength to be a mother.

Emma offers the following perspective on the fact that the German population had to watch the footage of the concentration camps and damage of the war:

And they all had to watch those movies after the war and many were completely shocked and traumatized. I mean that's not right either. Many also worked against it. And what could one have realistically done?

Emma question the benefit of the German population having had to watch the footage the allies had shot of the concentration camps because she believes that it was quite traumatizing and many were innocent and were trying to help. She accepts the common response that the German population did not have much choice. While Emma recognizes that the images were difficult to watch, the statement displays reframing of the German as victim stance to the point where she questions that the population should have been made to watch the footage of the suffering the Nazi regime caused.

**All "good" Germans?** Within in the concept of reframing and changing frames, a tendency to present Germans as the "good" Germans and every day heroes who tried to help the victims of the Holocaust has been described in the research.

“Heroization” is the tendency for family memories to become increasingly more positive over time and across generations (Welzer, 2005, p. 9). This includes discourse focused on the presentation of family members as having resisted the Nazi regime, a focus on them as victims of the war or only discussing the “good” Germans, who did not know about the Holocaust or who were unable to resist the Nazis as that would have endangered their own life (Welzer et al., 2002, p. 52). In the representative study that was the foundation for the book *Opa war kein Nazi* by Welzer et al. (2002) this was particularly noticeable in the third and fourth generation. Although the current study is by no means representative as I only had ten interviewees, a similar heroization was apparent in the stories.

Emma adds the following thoughts on the German victims of the war:

I feel as though I need to defend Germany. If I don't then who will? And should we really say the whole country is bad? There were so many people living there, it not possible that they were all bad. There were a few that were bad. If I found out that my grandpa participated, then that would be a different story. I think it was easier for me because nobody participated directly. The fact that my grandpa had flat feet was ideal.

Emma states that she feels responsible for ensuring that Germany does not constantly get represented as bad and questions the rhetoric that displays all Germans as perpetrators as only a few were involved. Indeed it is true that not the whole German population was involved but Hitler was elected by a majority of people and about 12 million joined the Nazi party<sup>11</sup> (Das Bundesarchiv, 2013). Interestingly, within the same statement Emma qualifies that her position is based on the fact that she has no knowledge of direct family participation, which implies she might not support the same position if she knew her family was directly involved. This is in line with the idea of heroization and changing frames as it creates distance between the individual and the Holocaust and makes it easier to dismiss the ongoing need for commemoration on the basis of no personal and family responsibility (Welzer et al., 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Exact numbers of how many Germans actively supported Hitler are unknown, however, a commonly used indicator is the number of members of the NSDAP, the Nazi party, which was 12 million by 1945.  
[https://www.bundesarchiv.de/oeffentlichkeitsarbeit/bilder\\_dokumente/00757/index-18.html.de](https://www.bundesarchiv.de/oeffentlichkeitsarbeit/bilder_dokumente/00757/index-18.html.de)

Peter's story describes how his father, who was 17 when he became a soldier, resisted the German authority while being a German soldier:

My dad wasn't big on authority. One time he wounded a Russian soldier and brought him to the Russian line and another guy wanted to pull his gun and my dad pulled his and said: 'If you do that you can lie down next to him'.

Peter's story, which reads like a scene from a movie, describes his father as defying authority by not giving in to common practice of killing the wounded enemy soldier and standing up for the Russian soldier he had just shot. This statement was immediately followed by:

I'm sure I would find my father's things in Poland. His iron cross of first order and his uniform were all buried. My dad told me all that.

As a listener I found it interesting that Peter described his father, who he earlier introduced as authority-defying Marxist, as resisting the Nazi authority yet his father was a decorated German soldier. It would seem that a soldier who did not agree with the Nazi regime would not fight to kill others and maybe would stand out as a troublemaker who does not follow the orders he is given as opposed to a loyal soldier who is recognized for his bravery and war contributions. Peter's story highlights the unquestioning acceptance of the "Good German" narrative and heroization that often occurs as stories are shared between members of different generations where neither generation wants to admit guilt.

Fritz shared the following stories about his family's life in Germany:

They had a good life. They had housing provided, they had a car, they had the food stamps. It was a private party but of course like the story of Hugo Boss, who started in Germany and then his company went bankrupt but before he provided all the uniforms to the Nazis. My father and his sister would go after school with the pockets full of boiled potatoes and would throw it over the fence for the workers. They got ration cards for whiskey but my grandpa didn't really drink so he'd trade it for potatoes.

My grandmother until 44 took my dad still to a Jewish ear doctor because Jewish doctors until 45 were still in practice if they were 50% or less Jewish. My grandma was kind of a trailblazer in terms of he's a good doctor and she didn't care if the doctor had 4 ears or what not.

Fritz describes several stories of the small, everyday acts of resistance in his family. His grandfather traded the alcohol he got through his job for potatoes which the children then threw over the fence for workers. Fritz does not specify if it was the fence of a concentration camp or work camp but as a listener that was the meaning I understood. In addition to that his grandmother defied the Nazi regime by secretly taking the children to a Jewish doctor until the very end. Fritz even calls his grandmother a trailblazer, emphasizing her progressive view and conscious act of resistance. The detail of the doctor having to be 50% or less Jewish and still being in practice until 1945 makes one wonder why her taking the kids until 1944 made her a trailblazer but highlights that this story is told with the intention of distancing the self from the Nazi association.

Michael's story about his grandfathers during the war provides an example of a "follower story":

My grandmother passed away earlier. He [grandfather] had a lady he lived with but they weren't married. She was a stepmother essentially. They had a 'Abnahme' where the older generation stayed. I know a bit more through her. He didn't have to go to the war because he had a farm and he was quite a good equestrian. He also had a good name in the cattle industry. I had read a document from 1947 that my uncle gave me and it was an 'Entnazifizierungsfragebogen' [denazification questionnaire] he claimed on that that because of his interest in horses he had joined the SA and the party and he was later on in Russia and Ukraine. He was a friendly person and social and not hateful one but certainly at the time. I don't know what he knew but I am very convinced that he does not have blood on his hands. My dad was very shocked after he had just married my mom and he saw a photo of him in a SA uniform and he asked a lot of family members and they said 'he was a Mitläufer' [a fellow traveller, follower]. And he was eventually a Truppenleiter [troop leader] but that's all I know.

Michael describes how his father was shocked to find out about Michael's grandfather's involvement as troop leader after he married Michael's mother but was assured by family members that grandpa was a follower. Michael learned a bit about his grandfather from his grandfather's partner later on in life after the grandfather died and insists that he did not commit war crimes as he was only a fellow traveller, albeit one that was a leader in one of the SA troops. Generally the followers are considered indirect supporters of the Nazi agenda but have not directly contributed to the Nazi crimes (Monroe, 2008). The family's assessment of his grandfather as a nice, social fellow traveller is a common narrative found among members of the post-war generations



when describing any involvement of their family members. One may wonder how Michael's mother felt about her father's position as SA troop leader and Michael's story suggests there might have been a considerable amount of silence as Michael's father did not know about her father's role during World War II until he saw a photo of him in his uniform. Michael also stated in the interview about his mother that "now she's getting older she is sharing more stories. I have not heard as many from her when I was a child but far too many from my father". This statement that she is only talking about it more now that she is getting older may be due to increased emotional distance from her father.

This first section of chapter four explored how German-Canadians describe their families' experiences with immigration and in Germany during and after the war, how families confronted the Holocaust and if German-Canadians describe a sense of burden due to the legacy of the Holocaust.

The next section takes a closer look at the legacy of silence and the extent to which silence and avoidance were present or absent in the narratives. It begins with an in-depth analysis of an unexpected and unusual family memory I encountered during my first interview.

## **Where are the Perpetrators?**

When I began the interview process, I did not know what to expect in regards to how much my interviewees would tell me about what they or their families knew. I was prepared to hear a lot of victim stories, maybe the occasional view I did not share, and mostly claims that nobody in their family knew anything about the Holocaust or could possibly have been involved in the Nazi crimes. I wondered if I would hear anything at all about the Nazi past. And if I did, what was I to do with the information? How would I respond? It is believed up to 12 million Germans were involved in the Nazi regime by virtue of belonging to the Nazi party and its paramilitary organizations (Bundersarchiv, 2013; Fehlbauer, 2010, p. 27)<sup>12</sup>. Many more were passive supporters. Of those officially

<sup>12</sup><https://www.bundesarchiv.de/benutzung/zeitbezug/nationalsozialismus/00299/index.html.en>

involved, just over a third ever had to testify about their involvement and received consequences such as being arrested and losing their employment if they were working in the public service sector (Freund, 2006, p. 137). Yet when asked in a survey only about 1% of second- and third-generation Germans thought their family members had been directly involved (Welzer et al., 2002, p. 247).

According to these numbers the likelihood that I would have an interviewee with a significant Nazi family history was less than ten percent. As an interviewer my objective was to let my participants tell their story as they chose to. In other words, I did not plan to probe for a lot of details. I also considered the issue of potentially upsetting my participants if I insisted on asking questions about something that might be a painful family memory or that I would make them feel ashamed or defensive if I asked a lot of questions. My stance was to remain as neutral as possible and only ask questions to clarify details if I was unable to follow their story.

My first interviewee was Jutta who was born in May 1951 in Germany. She was the second oldest of the ten interviewees and her mother and father with her maternal grandmother and uncle had immigrated to Canada in January 1952 when she was still an infant. Jutta was a warm, friendly and welcoming woman who invited me into her home on a Sunday afternoon in June 2016. The family, Jutta, her husband Bert, her son and his girlfriend, who were around my age, had just come back from church and were having lunch before Jutta and I started the interview. During the lunch, the conversation was mostly about life in Germany because they asked me why I chose to research German-Canadians and when I told them I was from a town near Munich we realized that Jutta's husband and I were both from Bavaria. Jutta asked me to talk a bit more about my project and said not enough people talked about the German past and casually referred to her father and her husbands' father as Nazis. She added that her father talked about the Holocaust when he was drunk but Jutta did not mention anything specific. I did not really know how to respond to or interpret the comments about Nazi family members but none of the family members showed any reaction to the statement, so I tried to hide my surprise. For a moment I was worried I had found myself in the home of someone with very right-wing views because her statements did not show any shame or rejection of this connection. since we were essentially strangers who had mostly communicated about the logistics of setting up the interview, I did not know what

her views were. It is possible that knowing I was German made Jutta feel more comfortable and prompted her to identify her family members as Nazis, knowing that I would understand due to the shared German heritage. Interestingly, I had never heard anyone refer to a family member openly as Nazi or admit that someone from the eyewitness, bystander and perpetrator generation had knowledge of the Holocaust, so I knew I had to ask more questions once the actual interview started. I was unsure if she would continue to speak so openly once the audio-recorder was running and how much I should probe before it would make her uncomfortable. Knowing how uncomfortable I and most Germans I know felt when questioned about their family's involvement in the Holocaust, I was aware that I needed to be mindful of how I asked for details.

The next few excerpts were taken from the beginning and the middle of the interview and I included my questions to show how much or how little I actually asked. In response to reading the interview question: "Has your family shared memories or stories about your parents or grandparents' lives in Germany during or immediately after World War II?" Jutta offered the following comment:

J: Yeah, my father would share stories about Auschwitz. I'll tell you one minute they'd praise Hitler, which now as senior citizen is just crazy. My grandpa was a Nazi, Bert's dad was a Nazi. They never actually talked about what they actually did. Bert's father, the kids asked him once, 'so did you ever shoot anybody?' and he said 'No'. And of course that wasn't true. I saw documentaries on TV of some officer that still denied everything even though they had all the proof. They had photos, they had witnesses. They just didn't want to admit it.

Jutta had the interview questions in front of her during the interview as she had asked for a copy, so she was reading them and answering the questions one by one and I did not get a chance to ask questions about her father's Holocaust stories immediately after she mentioned them again. After about twenty minutes of talking about her life as German-Canadian immigrant, I decided to bring the conversation back to what her father had shared about the Holocaust. I was expecting he might have seen or known about a concentration camp. Here is Jutta's recollection of what her parents had talked about:

S: Coming back to the question about the Nazi past and who would bring it up. You mentioned earlier your dad would bring up Auschwitz.

J: [hesitating] Yeah, you could even hear them justifying some things like that Hitler approved doing away with people with handicaps, whether they were

physical or mental. Yeah, they would even in some cases say it was the right thing to do. But it didn't go beyond that. And now we're talking about doctor assisted suicide, so I don't know, has it come around? But now that it's legal I guess it's okay. But yeah, I guess with consent.

S: And you mentioned in our conversation earlier, your dad would bring up Auschwitz.

J: Yeah, but not with us, just with my mother. So all I know is what I overheard. So he buried the bodies and he was deathly afraid of the thunderstorms. He had the number on his arm, I know his name is in the logbook of Auschwitz but that's all I can tell you.

S: Did he ever talk to the kids about it?

J: No, no just my mother because her dad was a guard there, too, for a short time and he asked to be relieved of his duties. And that was another, 'oh, we love Hitler thing', because he was released from his duties.

S: That seems quite lucky he got out.

J: Yeah, I would think so. But he [the grandfather] did get shot by the partisans after but that was unrelated. Um, I've never been interested in visiting those museums like Dachau and Auschwitz. I mean, I remember when we got our first TV when we were 7 or 8 and it was hosted by Ronald Reagan. One reason why we know so much is because the Germans documented everything so well. So this show, I remember it was Sunday from 7.30 to 8, so we watched that every Sunday and my dad was like 'I remember that'. We'd see the camps and the prisoners, he was maybe obsessed with his own past more than some of us. Just the thought, how come, he outlived it in other words. I mean the man was broken. He was 28 when he married my mom. Just a boy.

[Jutta is looking at the questions and moving on to next interview question: Have you ever felt discomfort about your German past?] Yeah, I do feel a great discomfort when the Nazi past and the Holocaust comes up. Especially with the eyewitnesses, when they talk. Did you see the movie 'the boy with the striped pajamas'?

[Brief moment of silence] But as we sit here, I am proud of my German heritage and culture, I worked for a German firm for a long time and they're of German heritage. And I remember my boss said, once the baby boomers, the skilled labour is gone, there won't be any more skilled labour.

When I heard Jutta's story I did not know how to make sense of it. I found it horrifying and confusing at the same time. I had never met anybody who admitted that their family was directly involved in the Holocaust. Here I was in my first interview, having just read in the book *Opa war kein Nazi* that individuals with a significant

perpetrator history had been purposely left out of the study because it raised too many potential issues<sup>13</sup> and my first participant had two family members who were guards at Auschwitz. I knew at the time on some level that what had just been told was important and that I should have asked a whole range of questions but I did not even know where to begin or how to interpret what I had just heard. Was Jutta really the daughter and granddaughter of perpetrators, who were directly involved in the Holocaust by working as guards at a concentration camp? I was unsure how to respond in a way that communicated my acceptance of her while asking more about her father and grandfather's histories. The story about her grandfather having been released of his duties as concentration camp guard after a letter was sent to Hitler, which Jutta had described earlier in the interview, also seemed difficult to believe. It does indicate, however, that Jutta grew up with pro-Nazi messaging as she referred twice in the interview to what she called "We love Hitler" statements by her family members.

Jutta's description that her father was a guard but had a number tattooed on his arm and his name in the logbook was confusing. Was she mixing up prisoners at Auschwitz with the guards? Jutta had clearly said her father was a guard at Auschwitz yet she spoke of him and his experience as though he was a prisoner. I wondered for a long time if I had misunderstood her and her father was actually a prisoner who was forced to bury the dead. But if that was true, how could he possibly have shared pro-euthanasia and pro-Nazi views and been married to a self-proclaimed "proud German" woman whose father was an Auschwitz guard? Was it even possible to survive the Holocaust but then support the idea that people with disabilities should be killed? Maybe Jutta had misunderstood her parents when she overheard them talking about it as a child and because she never asked her father directly, this narrative is what happened to the family memory. During the interview Jutta had clearly identified herself as German-Canadian and her father as Ukrainian and did not say he was a victim of the Holocaust but instead she had referred to her family members as Nazis and that her family at times even praised Hitler. She clearly differentiated that her father and grandfather had been guards at Auschwitz when she said that her father would tell her mother stories "because her dad was a guard there, too". When looking over the transcript months

<sup>13</sup> Welzer et al., 2002. *Opa war kein Nazi*. p. 14

later, this little word, the “too” added at the end of the statement that her grandfather was a guard at Auschwitz, was the only clear admission that her father also was a member of the perpetrator group who was directly involved in the Holocaust. During the interview it was clear that her father was a guard at Auschwitz, yet, when I was looking over the transcript all other examples sounded as though her father may have been a prisoner. As such, her narrative seems to be a clear, yet extreme example of reframing or *Wechselrahmung* as she borrows so extensively from the vocabulary used to describe the experiences of the Jewish victims that it becomes unclear if her father was a victim or a perpetrator (Welzer et al., 2002, p. 82). I was unsure if the contradictions in Jutta’s story were due to her not wanting to know more about the German history or if she chose to hold on to her own version of history despite the inconsistencies. Did she learn about the Holocaust in school or is all her knowledge from movies, her parents’ stories and the documentaries she watched as a child? Moreover, was it possible that her confusion was it a result of how much or how little Holocaust education she received in school? It was apparent from her attempts to change the subject that discussing the topic was difficult for her.

I wondered if Jutta knew the implications of her father’s and grandfather’s involvement in the Holocaust as concentration camp guards and if she had only told me because both men had died a long time ago. I assumed her father had died as she did not mention him much throughout the interview and said her mother left him when Jutta was seven but it is possible that her not talking about him was another example of emotional distancing. How did her father immigrate to Canada without ever having to face any trial as war criminal? How was he able to live a “normal” family life and raise children who are in turn able to live “normal” lives?

Jutta’s story seems to have parallels with the recent trial in Germany of the former Auschwitz concentration camp guard and bookkeeper, Oscar Gröning. Though he did not actively participate in the killing of Jewish prisoners, Gröning admitted his guilt and received a prison sentence at the age of 94 due to his role as accessory in the

murder of 300,000 innocent victims as bookkeeper at Auschwitz<sup>14</sup>. This happened after revisions to the German criminal law<sup>15</sup> following the Demjanjuk trial and I wondered whether Jutta's father or grandfather would have been considered accessories to murder for having worked as guards at Auschwitz (Snyder, 2016, p. 165). Based on the decision on Gröning's case, there is a good chance they would have been. Maybe immigration for her dad was truly an escape.

Looking back, if this had been my last interview, I would have asked Jutta a lot of questions. I would have wanted to know if she had ever asked her mother to confirm that what she had heard as a child was true. I was curious how she came to terms with this history, how old she was when she first understood what it meant and if she had told her children about it. I would have wanted to know how she felt about her father now and if it affected their relationship when she was growing up. Did she know how he understood his role in the Holocaust? I would have asked more details about how long he was a guard at Auschwitz and what she knew her grandfather did as a guard at the concentration camp. How did her mother and grandmother come to terms with their husbands' past? I would have asked her if she had ever spoken to her father directly about the Holocaust and if she felt guilt or shame on behalf of his involvement. However, rather than asking more questions, I did what I had learned to do growing up, which was to accept what I was told even if the story seemed contradictory and let my interviewee move away from what I believed was an equally uncomfortable situation for us both. I understood her statements of "I only know what I overheard" and "that's all I can tell you" as indicators that she did not want to talk about the details any further. Nor did I want to make her feel upset or uncomfortable by pushing for more information than she was willing to offer. I can now see that I engaged in what Bar-On (1989) termed "the double wall of silence", where I sensed that Jutta did not want to talk and I did not know how to respond to what I might hear, so I resorted to silence (p. 34). Maybe if I had contacted Jutta for another interview, I would have asked more questions but at the time I was so surprised and unsure about what she had told me, that I was unable to collect my

<sup>14</sup> The Guardian. Former Auschwitz guard Oskar Gröning jailed over mass murder. 15 July 2015 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/15/auschwitz-guard-oskar-groening-jailed-over-mass-murder>

thoughts and ask the kind of questions that may have helped me to better understand Jutta's story. After this first interview I was not sure what to expect of the other interviews. Would I hear similar stories? How should I respond to them? It turned out that Jutta was the only one to speak openly about her family's direct involvement in the Holocaust and her narratives contained all the themes and patterns that I found across the family memories included in this thesis.

## **Making Sense of Jutta's Family Memories**

Jutta's story highlights how quickly reframing can distort stories. Reframing occurs when language historically used to describe the experience of Holocaust victims is applied to the bystander and perpetrator group (Welzer et al., 2002, p. 82). If Jutta's father really was a guard at Auschwitz, she added many elements that are usually associated with the horrific treatment of the concentration camp inmates, making it sound as though her father was the victim even though he was a participant in the perpetrator group. The fact that he would not have had a number tattooed on his arm if he was a guard does not seem to exist in Jutta's family memory and unless he signed off on the logbook his name would also likely not be in it either. In addition, Jutta states that her father buried the dead but again this would not have occurred unless it was during the liberation as otherwise inmates were forced to bury the victims as part of the never-ending Nazi terror efforts. Jutta later describes how her father was "obsessed with his past" and wondered why he "outlived it". Again, the reference to his surviving the experience of having been involved in the Holocaust appropriates the languages of the victims and survivors. At the same time, this statement might have been in relation to the fact that Jutta's grandfather, who was also a concentration camp guard, was shot by the partisans and the reference was not to surviving the time at the concentration camp but instead not having been shot or killed during the war. This appropriation of language is concerning as it shifts the focus from the true victims onto those who engage in victim discourse (Welzer et al., 2002, p. 82). Considering the fact that many Jewish survivor families also engage in silence about the Holocaust due to the incredible pain and suffering these conversations bring up, this is a particularly worrisome trend as it may lead to the appropriated victim discourse on the German victims overpowering the



conversation and commemoration of the documented victims of the Holocaust (Frie, 2014, p. 652; Hirsch, 2008, p. 104).

Indeed Jutta's story, despite being a story about her father's role as perpetrator in the Holocaust, contains considerable amounts of victim discourse. Universal victim discourse is based on the idea that the tragedies of the war made everyone a victim (Levy & Sznajder, 2005, p. 4). More specifically, it involves the presentation of the members of the German population that were not victims of the Holocaust using language that describes them as victims either of the bombings, the expulsion or otherwise due to the effects of the war. This trend is quite concerning as it normalizes the crimes committed against the Jewish population. Levy and Sznajder (2005) distinguish between the idea of particular victims and universal victims and point out an important reason why there might be so few perpetrator stories in the literature:

Under the particular system, there can be no victim without a perpetrator, and, conversely, to call someone a victim is instantly to accuse someone else of being a perpetrator. In this view, there are deserving and undeserving victims. Particularism concentrates on the aggressors and justifies war and revenge as the means by which victims cease to be victims and become aggressors, thereby achieving justice. For the universal conception, where the ultimate goal is the creation of a world without war, the concentration on perpetrators undercuts the whole idea of victim consciousness. All victims are deserving. This has been evident not only in the debates about the suffering of the German expellees, but also in the recent renewed attention to the memory of German suffering resulting from the Allied bombing campaign. (Levy & Sznajder, 2005, p. 5)

Universal victim narrative assumes that everyone is a victim of the war and therefore there are no perpetrators to hold accountable, to study and to learn from in order to prevent reoccurrence of the crimes (Adorno, 1966, p. 7; Schweber, 2006, p. 50). In Jutta's story the admission the description of what her father did at Auschwitz is immediately followed by a reference to the psychological damage he had suffered from his work as he was now deathly afraid of thunderstorms. Jutta does not elaborate on how this fear impacted his life and where it came from but it seems as though the intention is to communicate that he suffered permanent psychological damage. Jutta also states about her father that "the man was broken", again suggesting permanent psychological damage from his past. Since both of Jutta's parents were expellees, a group that has been noted to engage in more victim discourse, it is possible that she may have been exposed to a lot of victim discourse when she was growing up (Levy &

Sznaider, 2005, p. 11). Another possible explanation is that the reference to the psychological effects on her father is intended to humanize him and to show how his conscience was affected from having been a guard at a concentration camp (Bar-On, 1989).

Jutta's story also shows evidence of normalizing. When describing her parents' approving of the Nazi's killing of people with disabilities or involuntary euthanasia, she follows it with the statement "and now we're talking about doctor assisted suicide, so I don't know has it come around? But now that it's legal I guess it's okay." She quickly adds "But yeah, I guess with consent", likely to soften her statement, potentially realizing that the Nazi crimes were most definitely not committed with the victims' consent. Normalization in the context of Nazi crimes and the Holocaust is unfortunately a common occurrence that can be intended to highlight that humanity has not learned since and from the Holocaust but risks reducing the moral impact and responsibility to remember that would come with acknowledging that the Holocaust was unique in its horror and suffering caused (Levy & Sznaider, 2005, p. 3). I would argue that the Holocaust should not be compared to other crimes against humanity particularly because of the risk of trivializing that comes with such comparisons.

Jutta's statements also address the question of feelings of guilt or shame due to the German heritage in connection with the Holocaust. She describes feeling discomfort when the topic of the Holocaust comes up and specifies that this happens particularly when hearing eyewitness accounts and then refers to the movie "the boy in the striped pajamas". After this statement she sits in a brief moment of silence, potentially reflecting on what she had just said or to indicate that the movie reminded her of her own situation or her father's. She does not address why she feels discomfort or elaborate on the feeling. I expected that she would describe feeling ashamed of her German heritage given her father's and grandfather's involvement but instead she avoids the topic by reaffirming that she is proud of her German heritage. Surprisingly, reinforcing her pride in her German background seemed comforting for Jutta when she was confronted with her family's involvement in the Holocaust and may have been looking for a way to avoid the negative feelings. It is possible that Jutta noticed feeling guilty or ashamed and listing her German connections and what she thought was positive about the German vocational training reassured her that there were positive sides to the German heritage.

Unlike most other participants who engaged in avoidance by retelling theories and stories from history class and documentaries, Jutta's avoidance was most apparent in her changing of topics, frequently to TV shows and movies. Despite my initial plan to remain a more passive receiver of information, I asked Jutta twice about what her father had said about Auschwitz before she gave more information after mentioning it earlier in the interview. Jutta responded each time with small amounts of information that were immediately followed by a change in subject or focus. The admission that her father was a guard at Auschwitz was followed by a clear statement that she did not know anything else, which seemed to indicate she did not want me to ask again. Another possible form of avoidance Jutta described was that she did not go to see a concentration camp when she lived in Germany after high school until 1974 or during her regular visits to Germany. I wondered if that was because she would not be able to bear the feelings of guilt it would bring up. By not seeing or hearing about the concentration camps and being presented with information that might challenge some of the family memories she has, she may be avoiding having to confront the Holocaust and her family involvement. Another way avoidance can manifest itself is through "empty talking" which Welzer et al. (2002) described as vague, fragmented and contradictory stories that are common within families when talking about the Holocaust, their family involvement and what was known (p. 24).

Jutta talked about her family memories related to the Holocaust but still showed some silence in her stories. She stated her grandfather and her husband's father, who she described as Nazis, "never actually talked about what they actually did", although it seems that her father did talk about the Holocaust since Jutta overheard it. She also states that her father confirmed images of Auschwitz in documentaries but it seems that he did not talk about what he did and based on Jutta's recollections it is unclear how he felt about his involvement. When he was pointing out places at Auschwitz, did he do so in boasting way or did he feel ashamed and wanted his children to know it was true? Jutta says she never asked her father about the Holocaust although Jutta's children asked her husband's father, who was a soldier during the war, if he had killed anyone. Children and grandchildren of Holocaust perpetrators often do not recall their family members' talking about how they felt about what they did because of the "double wall of silence" (Bar-On, 1989, p. 437). One of the reasons why I did not push for more answers at the time was because I did not want Jutta's defensive wall to go up by questioning her

but as a result I was left wondering what actually happened in this fragmented family memory. It is likely that a combination of silence and possibly empty talking that Jutta overheard as a child led to her fragmented and contradictory recollection of her father's involvement. The most apparent silence in Jutta's narratives is the silence about her own experience. She described the memories completely matter-of-fact and only once confirmed that she felt "discomfort" about her German heritage, repeating the wording in the interview question. Bar-On (1989) has suggested that this lack of emotional reaction to a parent's involvement in the Holocaust is common in children and grandchildren of perpetrators and may be a sign of suppressed moral conflict (p. 439).

This story highlights the continued need to talk about these family memories and to challenge inconsistencies. Admittedly, I did not ask important questions I should have brought up that day but this example seems to highlight some of the common dynamics and challenges that come with discussing the Holocaust. Another important lesson is that by allowing the silence to continue I also did not give Jutta a chance to confront her family history. Admittedly, that was not my intention going into the interview as I wanted to get a sense of how German-Canadians recalled their family memories without shaping their recollection through my questions. However, this experience could have been an opportunity for Jutta to reflect on the contradictions in her family memories and it would have been great to have had an opportunity to follow up with her. It is possible that if I could ask Jutta again, she may not recall telling the stories and may even feel a sense of embarrassment about what she said (Mero-Jaffe, 2015, p. 240). This may be due to the nature of narrative interviewing as well as the characteristics of memory, especially when motivated forgetting may be involved.

Jutta's family memories stood out from the ten interviews, not only because she was the only one who identified direct family involvement but also because her memories as the daughter and granddaughter of perpetrators exhibited so much reframing, that the perpetrator became the victim. The next section presents other examples of possible family involvement in the Holocaust narrated by interviewees that show similar patterns of normalizing and silence but the family connection is more distant than Jutta's. While the stories contained references to perpetrators, none reported involvement of an immediate family member.

## Who Else Knew?

Emma's grandfather was from Bessarabia and was exempt from having to fight in the war due to having flat feet but worked in the Reichswerke Hermann Göring, the heavy industry factories that provided the steel for the war. This story is one of witnessing perpetration:

My grandpa once saw how the Jews were lined up and shot and he said the 'Germany will pay for this'. He didn't even know what Germany was, because Bessarabia changed so much.

Emma shares a brief story about her grandfather having seen a traumatic act of perpetration against Jewish people but the story does not include any details why her grandfather was there to observe the event and what his role was. It seems as though the statement that Germany will have to pay for these deeds is added to indicate that Emma's grandfather was not a Nazi supporter and again to distance him from the event. This story reminded me of an example in Bar-On's article *The Children of Perpetrators* where a man whose father drove trains in East Prussia insists that they were ammunition trains but told his son decades later that he saw prisoners being lined up and shot (Bar-On, 1989, p. 432). Emma's story raises similar questions of why her grandfather was there and what his role was although Emma seems to engage in distancing when she states that her grandfather knew already at the time that it was something morally wrong that Germany will have to pay for.

Fritz's grandmother, a tax collector and educated vegetarian who made her own moonshine, had uncles who worked in the concentration camp administration. This is how he answered my question on whether his family had ever talked about the Holocaust:

Yes, on father's side they were tax collectors. They grew up very Bohemian, didn't go to Church, spoke Esperanto, became vegetarians. They made this really strong, illegal alcohol and sold it. Very well educated as well. She [the grandmother] spoke several languages. Amazing for a woman. Her brothers as well. Their uncles were sea captains and were actually in the concentration camps in South Africa in the First World War. And then during the second world war worked in the camps, in administration and they would always tell her that the camps in South Africa were actually worse than the camps in Germany. Not a lot of people know that. I talk to my cousins in Germany about it and there of

course you can't say that maybe it wasn't that bad and maybe there were people who were trying to make things better, like Schindler actually trying to get things better. So my family never saw the roundups but they knew about it. It wasn't like the pictures you see though.

It is interesting to note that the admission that Fritz' uncles were concentration camp administrators in Germany is immediately followed by a statement that the camps in Germany were not as bad as the ones in other South Africa. Fritz claims that while his family never saw concentration camps they knew about them and could confirm that it was not like in the pictures. The fact that if they had never seen camps, despite his story of his father throwing potatoes over the concentration camp fence, as Fritz told in interview, they would not actually have been able to comment on whether or not it was like in the pictures is not questioned by him. Instead it is accepted as evidence that it was indeed not as bad as in South Africa, which may be an attempt to normalize the German perpetrator history (Finney, 1998, p. 365).

It is possible that Fritz is repeating the story he was told by his grandmother who may not have wanted to be associated with Nazi Germany as it is impossible for him to know or be able to compare between different genocides that happened before his time. He does not question the parts of his family memory that are contradictory and Fritz may in fact have added the statement "It wasn't like the pictures though" as a defense against the feelings of guilt that may come with association with the German perpetrator group. He implies in the same statement that he talks to his German cousins about the camps not having been so bad but they do not seem to be sharing his idea as he notes that one cannot say that in Germany. This either suggests that the German cousins want to say the same things but are not able to because it is socially (and legally) unacceptable to deny the Holocaust or Fritz is implying that they do not agree with his views because they were raised to believe they were unacceptable. Fritz attempts at normalizing are commonly seen in children and grandchildren of perpetrators and seemed to have elements of denial (Bar-On, 1989, p. 425).

## **Explaining Away the Perpetrators**

The examples above show that interviewees who had any family members who knew of the Holocaust felt a strong need to distance themselves and their family

members from the involvement in the Holocaust by relativizing the contents of the stories or emphasizing that their relative was a “good” German, which serves to distance oneself and family members from potential guilt (Dresler-Hawke, 2005, p. 135; Welzer et al., 2002, p. 52). Another common form of avoidance of guilt exhibited by interviewees was a focus on theoretical explanations for world war two, the Holocaust and why it all happened. This falls within the realm of rationalization, a cognitive psychology concept, where individuals focus on a rational, theoretical or seemingly logical explanation to distance themselves from events, experiences or responsibility (Bowins, 2004, p. 12). By describing the reasons from an objective meta-perspective and engaging in retrospective moral rationalization the individual can distance themselves from the event (Monroe, 2008, p. 718). While education about and knowledge of the larger political context of the Nazi regime is essential to understand how the Holocaust happened, it is important to balance this with acknowledgement and awareness of the reality of the Nazi crimes and the lessons that should be drawn from this past (Adorno, 1966, p. 3).

Rita offers the following explanation of the circumstances and reasons for how the Nazis came to power that her mother had provided:

My mom would say more and I was always the type of person who has to know why. Why did this happen? How could? My husband also says, Germany is the nation of poets and philosophers, Denker und Dichter, how could a country known for its philosophy change so quickly? And my mom, too, all she could say was her stories and even Americans say that WW2 started 1919 because the reperations were so severe. They say it affected the young men so much because it took away their pride and their manhood. They felt just so inferior and Hitler came along and said: ‘What are you doing there in the ditch with that shovel? You’re a son of Wagner. Get out of there!’

As far as Hitler, my mom was a child and came from a family of 6. Her dad had a drinking problem, her mom was always very poor and she grew vegetables but they were always hungry. She remembers they used to sleep on straw mattresses and when Hitler came they all of a sudden each had a mattress, they had a real house, they could go on a family holiday and all of a sudden there was a car in the driveway. Everyone loved Hitler because the rest of the world was going through a depression. She said it all happened very fast. Before they even knew it, rights were taken away, the media was taken over and everything changed before people even had a chance to say anything. That’s that. I’m just telling what they told me. For the war, in the beginning everyone thought the war would be over quickly and of course they’d win. Back then there was no internet so all the had was the radio and that was highly biased propaganda. The way my dad put it: they pulled the young men from the potato fields, were given guns and

told to fight for their fatherland and most of them died in the same fields 'never having known the love of a good woman'. I wanna cry just thinking about it. They were so young and of course they just did what they were told. Most of them died of starvation, were sent off to Russia.

Rita has asked her mother about the war and wants to understand what factors led to it. The explanation of the depressing circumstances and hope offered but then events quickly turning on people seems logical and presents the German as initially hopeful victim of the Nazi propaganda. The fact that there were individuals who warned against Hitler is not part of this explanation. Rita goes into great detail explaining the experiences she had heard and learned about, seemingly in an attempt to understand what happened and how it affected the individuals involved.

Wolf, whose family had moved to Vancouver in the early 1970s and whose mother made an effort to tell her children about the German perspective describes how and what he learned about the Holocaust and World War II:

I've always been interested in history so I've asked and talked to my parents about it. My mom has always made a point to show a balanced view because she didn't want us to be ashamed of our heritage. She didn't want the literature to make us feel bad. It wasn't inaccurate but it was the stuff you don't learn about in the books because they are written by the winners.

My mom was a very educated person and very well read, so she used a lot of what we learned to give a balanced view, like the example of refugees being bombed by the allies in Dresden. And the fact that all other countries in Europe also didn't take in Jewish people. It's a horrible thing of human beings being shunned like that. So she just kind of showed how brutal everybody was. I just learned the other day that Germany just stopped paying reparations for WW1. And what started that? Alliances and nationalism.

It is interesting that Wolf states that the reason why his mother wanted her children to have a balanced view is because she did not want her children to feel bad, which implies she was aware of the feelings of guilt and shame that often come with a German heritage. The example of the Dresden bombing is a popular one that has actually been questioned in recent years due to poor visibility and planes not actually being able to see people among the dust (Welzer et al., 2002, p. 195). What stands out is that the theoretical discussions did not include a conversation about responsibility to remember or acknowledgement of the German guilt for the events Holocaust during the time of the Nazi regime.



## **(Not) Talking about the Holocaust**

For decades and to this day, the topic of the Holocaust is often met with silence in German families. It has been described in the literature that German families frequently do not talk about the Holocaust and if they do, there is no discussion or admission of family involvement (Rosenthal & Völter, 1998, p. 9). This silence allows for predominant narratives of the German victims, particularly in the younger generation, as they do not see any reason to feel responsible since to their knowledge none of their family members were involved. The fact that it may just never have been talked about is a question few dare to ask, even during the 1960s student movement that saw a push for increased discussion of the legacy of the Holocaust on a societal level yet not on a personal level (Proske, 2012, p. 44). When younger generations are not aware of family connections to the Holocaust or the question of German guilt and responsibility is denied in families, it is easier for them to push the topic aside and claim it no longer affects them. At times families think they talked about it but when probed it turns out it was mostly 'empty talking', where family members give vague responses, hint at involvement but leave it so general that by the next generation the meaning has already changed and the gaps in the stories are filled in with details that absolve family members of guilt (Welzer et al., 2002). In the interviews nine of ten interviewees showed evidence of silence in their responses. Only Jutta, who directly addressed her family association, talked about her family involvement but also stated that her father did not talk about what he did. My intention in the analysis of these statements is not to blame or demonize Germans or to question the suffering that was experienced by civilians and the victims of the war, but merely to expose the legacy of silence and emphasize the continued significance and importance of commemorating the Holocaust. As I highlighted in my own story, it is all too common and easy to accept and propagate the legacy of silence by assuming that because it was not talked about there was no family involvement or accepting empty statements as having addressed the difficult questions.

Rita shares what her family told her about the Holocaust:

I know the big question is going to come because everyone in my generation asks this question: 'How did you not know about the Holocaust? How did you not know?'. I am sure everyone wiggles in their seats. I asked my parents both about this. She said in Bremen there were Jews throughout the war and she said there

was so much commotion and so much hunger near the end that nobody noticed that there... And then my dad brought up a good point that during the 2nd world war when all the Japanese were taken from their homes in Steveston and their property was sold for next to nothing and their boats were sold, how come nobody noticed? But they all said that they really didn't notice.

Rita's parents said that it was such a tumultuous time that the disappearance of their Jewish neighbours was not noticed. Her father, who was a radio operator during the war and signed up when he was 17, refused to talk about his experiences. When asked about whether her father talked about it, she gave the following response:

No, he just drank himself to oblivion. He didn't really talk about it, no. All I know is he couldn't stand being around screaming children. All I know is he was on a ship in the North Sea with civilians on it and the ship had been hit and he survived but he could hear screaming children and after this he could not stand being around children. Even the normal fussing, he had to leave the room. We had a very strange childhood because of my dad's drinking. I'm sure I'm not the only one. In my generation, when you're a child who grew up in the 70s a lot of the parents drank heavily. I guess now they take drugs or pop pills.

The statement "he didn't really talk about it" is immediately followed by a change in topic to the psychological damage her father experienced. The focus on the personally relevant narratives is due to the strong emotional context that comes with the suffering expressed by family members which is much closer to the individual than the suffering experienced by the victims of the Holocaust at the hand of the Nazi regime (Levy & Sznajder, 2005, p. 19). It is possible that the topic of the Holocaust is quite difficult for Rita to talk about as she immediately changes the topic to something she feels more comfortable discussing, despite her experience of her father's drinking was also very challenging for her. It is interesting to note that she chooses to discuss her father's alcoholism rather than the Holocaust, the Holocaust being a topic that would theoretically be more emotionally distant for her than her experiences as the child of a father who turned to alcohol to manage his difficult his experiences during the war. Her father's drinking also raises questions of what memories and knowledge he did not want to talk about but may have been trying to drown by "drinking himself to oblivion" as Rita stated. Bar-On (1989) suggested that excessive drinking may be considered an indicator of psychological breakdown as a result of people experiencing conflicts of morality as a result of participating in Nazi Germany's war and crimes against humanity (p. 431).

Emma offers the following story about her family members' knowledge of the Holocaust:

Many people I know for years had the pictures of Germany on the old map. My parents didn't participate in the Holocaust, they were children. My grandma, who wasn't in Germany always cried when the topic came up, she was that traumatized and didn't want to talk about it and others didn't want to talk about it either and I didn't really dare to ask them. I do have a good conscience because they didn't really participate. And besides many of the camps weren't even in Germany. They were mostly in Poland.

Emma admits that she never really asked because her parents were still children and her grandmother showed such a strong emotional response to the topic of the war, that she did not want to upset her further. Emma's statement that she has a good conscience about the topic because her family did not participate highlights that because of the silence she concluded that there were no stories. This statement ties back to her earlier reflection that if she knew that one of her family members participated she would feel differently about the need to discuss the Holocaust but since she was told her grandfather did not take part in the Nazi efforts due to his flat feet, she feels comfortable defending the "good" Germans. Another interesting point is Emma's emphasis on the fact that Emma believes that most of the concentration camps were in Poland and that somehow the camps not being on German grounds reduced the German responsibility, even though the camps were built by the Nazi regime in Poland after invading Poland. This defense seems similar to the popular "Hitler wasn't even German, he was Austrian" that can often be heard in reference to the idea that it might have been something inherently bad in Germans that caused the Holocaust and describing Hitler as Austrian facilitates the pushing away the Nazi association and guilt. It is likely that Emma's statement implies a similar rejection of guilt.

Emma adds another example to emphasize her position that many Germans were innocent:

When I was in grade 12 my teacher invited two students from Israel to speak to the class. They were telling us they learned how to use guns and that their grandmother said that the only good German was a dead German. I stood up and said: 'I was born 25 years after the war and I have nothing to do with this and want nothing to do with it. I wouldn't even hurt a fly. Why are you so angry with someone like me?' How much longer do we have to pay for what happened? And

I believe it was a smaller group who was so brutal and the rest only did it because they were afraid. I mean they didn't really have a choice. Would you really stand up and resist? What would you really do?

This story indicates that Emma found it difficult to hear or talk about the Holocaust as an adolescent and exhibited a response of rejection of guilt commonly found in the literature, particularly in the third and fourth generation (Welzer et al., 2002). Her story suggests that she would prefer if the Holocaust was not talked about in the way it is in schools. She does not address how hearing about the Holocaust affected her other than her response to the statement 'the only good German is a dead German', a statement that was not uncommon in the allies' anti-German propaganda. Emma raises an important point that it is easy for people to assume that they would have resisted and she addresses the strong bystander effect observed during the Nazi regime (Monroe, 2008). It is true that there is a tendency to want to believe one would have resisted and not conformed with regime and overcome the bystander effect, however, the evidence shows that few people did and still do not on a daily basis (Vernon, 2016).

Linda remembers that her family also did not talk much about the Holocaust but had some distant family involvement:

One of my dad's brothers, the one who had a degree, was a concentration camp official. No one talks about that, especially his children and the older generation. One time I took my children to Europe and Dachau and my aunts and uncles all said 'No, it's all a lie'. The younger ones all said, 'enough is enough. Let's use the space to build something new'. It was very hard to hear for me to hear.

Linda's story tells about how the family connection of a brother who was involved in the administration of a concentration camp approaches the topic with silence and denial. She describes finding the rejection of guilt on the side of her German family members difficult to hear. It is concerning that her relatives in Germany seem to deny the Holocaust and the position of the younger generation Linda described is not surprising given this family background and silence. Again, the third generation is described as exhibiting a position of desire to move on and escape the discussion of the Nazi past also found in *Opa war kein Nazi* (Welzer et al., 2002).

Katja tells about her family's not talking about the Holocaust due to their different context living in a Mennonite colony in Ukraine:

My family never talked about the Holocaust. When Schindler's list and all that came out I asked a lot of questions. We had our own version of the Holocaust and that was Siberia. And that was worse, working land that was not workable. A lot of people on my family tree were sent to exile. You'd end up in Siberia in harsh winters... My mom was very good at explaining things in a way I understood because I have a very emotional brain. Other than explaining about Anne Frank she didn't tell me much. My father didn't want to talk about it because he didn't remember it. Tante would sometimes talk about it but not much. But no, our family didn't really talk about the Holocaust. Schindler's list... I didn't even watch it. I don't even know why. I have seen other ones, like the book girl one. I do see a lot of movies about the war.

Katja's family did not talk about the German Holocaust but instead in their context of German-Mennonites in Ukraine, Siberia was described as the equivalent or worse, seemingly relativizing the Holocaust. She does not elaborate why her family members were sent to Siberia and the fact that the only states that her aunt talked about it but no details suggests that there might have been a lot of 'empty talking' (Welzer et al., 2002, p. 24). It is interesting that she relates the topic to movies such as Schindler's list and refers back to it to switch the topic which not only shows avoidance but also that she is potentially sensing her own avoidance during the interview.

Wolf shares the following theory on who knew about the Holocaust:

I don't know about the concentration camps. I actually play cards with my dad and a lot of his buddies and the feeling I get is that everything was kept on such a need-to-know basis. Like unless you were high up in the military, you didn't know. I think they were too scared to challenge anything. You couldn't challenge anything. Some may or may not have had an inkling of what was going on but you didn't dare say anything because then you were next. Early on in Hitler's reign, everything was great but then later on a lot of people disagreed but couldn't really do anything.

Wolf, despite describing himself as being very interested in history, initially states that he believes only a few military officials knew about the Holocaust and if people did know they were too scared to challenge what was happening. He then states that even if people knew they didn't say anything because they were worried they would be told on and end up in a concentration camp themselves. This statement implies that there were people who did know but deliberately kept quiet and took on a bystander role because they were afraid of being pulled into the events. This then moved into a lot of people disagreeing but not being able to stand up for what is right because of fear. Wolf's

description shows a high level of abstraction and tries to be objective, which removes blame from the civilians by focusing on the fact that they either did not know or if they did know there was nothing they could have done because it would have meant being targeted themselves (Dresler-Hawke, 2005, p. 135; Frie, 2014, p. 653). The defense of “there was nothing we could have done” is a common way of avoiding guilt and responsibility (Welzer et al., 2002).

Peter reflects on how the topic is discussed in Germany:

I can't remember that we ever talked about the Holocaust or the Nazi period. But that was never really a topic in my family. That's not unusual but it's a shame. That was the same in Germany at that time, only since the 70s. When I go to Germany now, and that's twice a year, there's every night 2 hours on the Nazi period on TV. Generally Germans are so open but that they don't talk about.

Peter's family did not really talk about the Holocaust despite his father having been a left-wing authority defying Marxist. Peter is aware of the legacy of silence in Germany and notes that despite the ongoing education and media coverage since the 1970s, people still do not talk about the Holocaust openly. This observation has been described in the literature on family memories, German national identity and any literature relating to how Germans dealt with the Holocaust and highlights the importance of continued discussion and education as many Germans would prefer to remain silent until it is all forgotten (Rosenthal & Völter, 1998, p. 9; Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010, p. 1104).

Natascha offers the perspective of a third-generation German-Canadian whose family did not talk about the Holocaust:

No, I never asked my family. I was 19 when my dad died. I'm sure that kinda stuff might have come up if I had been older and had my own kids. Had he lived I probably would have gone into business with him. Lots of conversations were probably missed and I have not talked to my mother since the funeral. I have never talked to my aunt about it. It would be interesting to know but you know, we're so far removed from it here. It doesn't impact our lives, so I've never thought to ask about it. You don't just really ask about that like 'Hey, how about that Holocaust?'

Natascha believes that there might have been more opportunities to talk about the Holocaust was her father still alive but at the same time admits that she never asked.

Her statement that she grew up so far removed from the Holocaust and Germany that it did not impact her life, so there was no reason to think about it. This reflection is followed by a statement that it is a difficult topic to talk about and implies that the discussion may not have been encouraged in her family and despite being so far removed from it she still felt as though it was not something one talked about. Without realizing it, Natascha is describing a prime example of the double wall of silence and cultural notions of what one does and does not talk about. Victim discourse is acceptable but confronting each other about family secrets is not a topic one talks about. Natascha's statements reflect that the legacy of silence is still present three generations later and despite growing up several thousands of kilometers of land and water between her and Germany. She realizes that the Holocaust is a topic her German family would rather not talk about even though this may have never been stated directly (Parens, 2009, p. 33).

## **Negative Feelings Because of the German Past?**

The legacy of silence is believed to be in parts caused by feelings of guilt and shame for the events of the Holocaust and also an inability to mourn due to the challenging balance between commemorating the victims of the Holocaust and the victims of the war (Kansteiner, 2004, p. 109). Feelings of guilt and shame in relation to the German heritage because of the association with the Holocaust are reported and exhibited by Germans even if their families did not talk about the events which emphasizes that these emotions are often transmitted between generations without having to be acknowledge or in the conscious awareness of the individual family members (Dresler-Hawke & Liu, 2006, p. 135).

Instead they are implied in the stories and combined with the cultural narratives on the role of Germans in the horrific crimes committed by the Nazis. Feelings of guilt and shame are transmitted across generations and young generations inherit their parents' and grandparents' feelings of guilt:

The sins of the father reverberate for generations to come. It is unavoidable; the burden of guilt and shame is the child of a perpetrator's albatross – even as many of them defend against it by rationalizing their identifications with their perpetrator-fathers. We cannot be unsympathetic to them, these children who by

virtue of their fathers' murders become victims to nearly un-resolvable guilt and shame. (Parens, 2009, p. 39)

These feelings need to be acknowledged to prevent the natural reaction of wanting to distance oneself from source and forget what happened, which would undermine efforts at commemorating the victims of the Holocaust (Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010, p. 1104). The following section highlights statements of participants indicating feelings of guilt and shame directly in relation to the Holocaust. It should be noted that in the interviews the question of discomfort about the German past followed a question on what families had talked about in relation to the Holocaust, so is it possible that this was on the forefront of their mind when answering the question. However, some participants mentioned these statements in a different context and brought up the references to guilt and shame on their own.

Rita shares a reflection on why she does feel uncomfortable about her German heritage and wonders why she feels responsible for something that happened before she was born:

Yeah, it makes me a bit uncomfortable, even now. I say, look, I was born in 1957, 12 years after the war was over and I didn't do it, I didn't do it. I had nothing to do with it. I think what makes people uncomfortable, I'll be very honest, is if that evil back then if it's inherent in us. I think most intelligent people would stop and think, it's something my parents or grandparents did but is it something inherent in the German, the evilness?

Do modern day Turks feel bad because of what happened 100 years ago? No, they don't even think about it, so then why am I not dwelling on it but why does the German psyche seem to obsess on it?

Rita describes that she has noticed that Germans seem to worry that it is something inherently bad in German culture that has caused the Holocaust and the continued guilt and shame about the events of World War II. I have myself heard these questions asked about Germans or if I thought that Germans were inherently evil and I believe this question stems from the idea that language and culture shape personality and perception.

Emma, in reflecting on being German-Canadian, states that she had to accept the negative associations that come with a German heritage:



I have always defended myself; I see that there are very nice, very sweet Germans. I try to be as neutral as I can. Some people write things like: 'Why did I have to be German?'

I've had to accept it all my life and immerse myself in the Holocaust, the post-war period, my family to understand it. It wasn't just the Germans who didn't treat the Jews well. One can't get away from it. One also represents Germany.

Although Emma does not directly state feeling guilt or shame, she does identify that other Germans have seen the heritage as a burden and describes how she has dealt with the burden of the German past. Despite her best attempts to remain neutral, it seems that Emma has a strong need to normalize the events by pointing out that anti-Semitism was widespread in Europe during the first half of the century. This still implies avoidance as she diverts the focus away from the question of the German guilt.

Fritz states the following about his relationship with his heritage, during the first part of his interview while describing what it was like growing up German-Canadian:

I tell my wife never to introduce myself as a German-Canadian. She'll call me her German boy because of my build. I'd rather be introduced as Austrian because I'm not proud of it. I hide. This is how sensitive it can get. My wife had her friends who are Lesbians stay over and she blurted out that my dad had lived during the war in Germany and Phillipinos are not history minded and immediately they said so your dad was a Nazi. And they were like, you know they persecuted gays and lesbians and transgender people. I don't even think there were transgender people back then. And there were gays and lesbians in Berlin for two hundred years part of the theatre scene already. And so that hurts when people make those comments and that's why I tell my wife not to tell anybody that I am German.

Fritz clearly describes feeling ashamed of his heritage due to the connection with the Holocaust and would rather be called Austrian. He goes so far as to ask his wife not to introduce him as German-Canadian. It is possible that this shame explains some of Fritz statements and theories included in this analysis that presented positions that were at times rather controversial that may serve the purpose of minimizing the German guilt and responsibility and create a safe distance (Dresler-Hawke & Liu, 2006, p. 135).

Natascha whose German family connection and recall of family memories was among the weakest of all the interviewees and who had the fewest family memories of all still shared the following reflection on her heritage:

Once in a while, you kinda wonder what other people think about German people. Like not everybody is like that but yeah my dad was of the age around that time. I know I've had just very vague thoughts like that because some people do have some negative feelings because of the whole Nazi thing. I don't recall anything specific but I know that over the years I have occasionally thought, 'oh, what do they think because I am German'. You know, like maybe my parents have some kind of connection. It's not been a really big thing but the thought has crossed my mind on occasion because Germany was so negative and all.

Natascha describes a vague fear of being rejected due to the negative German heritage and a possible family connection she may not be aware of. Although the focus of her narrative is on other people potentially having negative feelings towards her due to "the whole Nazi thing", she also reflects that she worries about it due to the possibility of there being a family connection, even if she is not aware of it. Natascha grew up in Vancouver in the 1970s and 80s where there was little discrimination against Germans although in the rest of Canada some anti-German sentiments were still present but less pronounced as in previous decades (Gumpp, 1989, p. 136; Massa & Weinfeld, 2009, p. 126). Her statements speak to the transmission of guilt and shame in silence and through the culture and society one is part of and how these feelings would contribute to continued silence and desire to escape the negative associations with Nazi Germany. Parens' (2009) writings directly relate to Natascha's experience and those of the other interviewees described in this section:

Society's judgments against the perpetrators have followed them for the rest of their lives, even to this day 60 years later, as much as the chosen trauma has the survivors. And as has happened to the victims, the judgment against the perpetrators has gone well beyond the perpetrators themselves afflicting their families, their children, and from what can be discerned to date will continue for generations to follow. (Parens, 2009, p. 37).

Natascha identifies a sense of the inherited guilt that comes with her German heritage and her experience speaks to how these feelings of guilt and shame are silently transmitted across generations, even when there is little connection to the German culture and the individual is fully immersed in Canadian culture. This supports the idea that the effects of intergenerational memory patterns in the form of silence, guilt and shame are still present in German-Canadians in the second and third post-war generation.

## Conclusion

The stories in this chapter narrate a number of examples of victim discourse in the family memories of German-Canadians' immigration to Canada and their family members' lives in Germany. Many of the stories remembered by participants about their family's immigration and life in Germany during the war show avoidance by focusing on the good German, heroization and German victim roles rather than confronting the question of German responsibility. All but one of the ten individuals interviewed shared family stories from the war that were focused on the German suffering. It is possible that this victim discourse originates from a defensive reaction to confrontation with the Nazi past abroad or negative sentiments towards German immigrants in the first few decades after the war. It is important to acknowledge that the question participants were asked was what kinds of stories their family members had told them about the war, so they were prompted to share the family memories related to the war, however, when paired with avoidance of the topic of the Holocaust, this focus on the victim stance may lead to reduced efforts and interest in commemorating the victims as the focus shifts from the victims of the Holocaust to the victims of the destruction of the war.

In addition, avoidance and silence when speaking about the German perpetrator group and the Holocaust were found in narratives of German-Canadians, particularly when it came to the question of family involvement or bystander status. The narratives contained little mention of perpetrator stories and if a story suggested involvement of family members in the perpetration a statement emphasizing the innocence of the family member followed immediately, particularly in members of the third generation (Michael, Emma, Fritz). This relates to the tendency found in the literature of the younger generation reconstructing narratives into stories that imply that family members who were actively involved in the party or even the Holocaust actually resisted the Nazi regime in one way or another, potentially in order to distance the self from the associations with the Nazi past that might come with admission of family involvement.

## Chapter 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The themes common to the narratives analyzed in this thesis suggest that temporal and geographical distance to Germany did not eliminate the legacy of silence or facilitate the process of dealing with the past in the members of the post-war generations of German-Canadians interviewed for this thesis. The most prominent themes that emerged in the interviews were victim discourse focused on the German suffering and immigration, narratives of good Germans as well as evidence of avoidance, silence, guilt and shame. A similar tendency towards silence and wanting to forget about the German population's role in the Holocaust that has been observed in second- and third-generation Germans was also predominant in the stories remembered by the German-Canadian interviewed for this thesis.

Despite the confrontation with the German past experienced by German immigrants through the media or being called a Nazi by others, this may not have lead to a reflection on the question of responsibility but instead may have increased their victim discourse and avoidance. Indeed an absence of statements addressing the German perpetrators and the responsibility to commemorate the Holocaust was apparent in participants' narratives with interviewees focusing on the German victim role and three even questioned why Germans should still feel and be held responsible for what happened. The most striking perpetrator story was Jutta's family memory, which contained a number of contradictions and gaps and highlighted the reframing and good German perspective that was common to the majority of the narratives. It is plausible that being able to fall back on the Canadian half of the dual identity facilitates such avoidance when memories or discussions of the German perpetrators feel threatening to the personal identity.

Overall, the themes identified in the interview analysis suggest that German-Canadians born to post-war German parents may engage in similar amounts of avoidance of the past as Germans in Germany due to the potential negative implications

of the German perpetrator history on the individual's identity as German-Canadian. It is possible that the children of the German immigrant parents interviewed may not have dealt with the past abroad and these members of the post-war generations inherited their parents' and grandparents' legacy of silence about the Holocaust. Along with a synthesis of the themes common to the narratives, this final chapter will explore implications for second- and third-generation post-war German-Canadians' responsibility to remember the Holocaust, ideas for addressing the legacy of silence and considerations for Holocaust education.

## **Victim Discourse**

Victim discourse describing the parents' and grandparents' challenging life during and after the war and when immigrating to Canada was found in the narratives of all ten interviewees. The stories about the experiences growing up in Canada shared by interviewees highlight common threads of hunger, discrimination in school and employment and the suffering of the post-war immigrants remembered by the children of post-war immigrants. It is interesting that these stories seem to paint an image of a post-war experience of immigrant German-Canadians that was similar to conditions during the war in Germany with numerous references to hunger and uncertainty and even shows parallels with the discrimination Jewish people faced in Germany. The suffering and victimization experienced and remembered by interviewees may be a form of avoidance of feelings of guilt about the German past (Frie, 2014, p. 653; Olick, 1998, p. 565).

Some stories showed evidence of reframing or Wechselrahmung where the victim roles get switched and the language often found in accounts of Jewish Holocaust survivors is applied to the German perpetrator and bystander group (Welzer et al., 2002, p. 82). Since Germans were considered enemy aliens during the war and indeed were tolerated but not welcomed by many in the Canadian population for decades following the war, it is possible that the discrimination in the workplace against Germans was occurring for a while (Bassler, 1990). In the context of this research project and its associated questions these immigration narratives also provide a background for understanding the silence about the Holocaust described and exhibited by most

participants in this study as the difficult start in Canada likely occupied much of their conversations, thoughts and emotional energy.

Rather than promoting reflection, confrontation with the German past abroad may have reinforced a victim discourse or a desire to focus on narratives of good Germans in order to distance the self from the perpetrator history and associations and their identity as German-Canadians. It is possible that admission of German guilt would raise questions in regards to the personal sense of responsibility and ability to feel proud of their heritage, which most of the participants maintained a connection with, and was therefore avoided by focusing on objective explanations or silence. Another consideration regarding the victim discourse observed in this project is that six of the ten interviewees (Jutta, Linda, Emma, Fritz, Katja, Natascha) were from refugee or expellee families who had to escape or were expelled either from Eastern Europe or the Berlin wall. The expellee and refugee groups have shown significant amounts of victim discourse throughout the post-war period and their open discussion of their suffering brought on by the escape and the war may have laid the foundation for the victim discourse commonly practiced in Germany (Melendy, 2005).

Avoidance and silence when speaking about the German perpetrator group and the Holocaust was apparent in the narratives of the German-Canadians interviewed for this thesis, particularly when it came to the question of family involvement or bystander status. The narratives contained little mention of perpetrator stories and if a story suggested involvement of family members, a statement emphasizing the innocence of the family member followed immediately, particularly in members of the third generation (Michael, Emma, Fritz). These good German narratives resembled the (re)constructing tendencies described in the literature where family memories recalled by younger generations tend to portray family members as having resisted the Nazi regime or having been innocent despite evidence that may suggest otherwise (Rosenthal & Völter, 1998; Welzer et al., 2002). Some have argued that victim discourse is an indicator of normative processing of traumatic experiences. It is likely that victim stories are told with the unconscious intention of distancing oneself from the associations with the Nazi past that may otherwise burden an individual as a result of an admission of family involvement (Welzer et al., 2002).

## Rationalization

Another common means of avoidance of the past is the tendency towards rationalization through theoretical explanations that was apparent in the narratives. Rationalization, relativization, normalization and intellectualization are all forms of cognitive avoidance that focus on seemingly objective explanations while the emotional processing is not emphasized, which allows for emotional distancing (Parens, 2004, p. 37). While it is important to consider and understand the context of the historical events, this rationalization provides an escape from the emotional charge of family connections with the Holocaust (Bar-On, 1989; Monroe, 2008; Parens, 2009; Waller, 1996). It is particularly noticeable that interviewees, despite their knowledge of historical theories about World War II, do not express questioning of the content of the family memories that they recall during the interviews. Participants exhibit a confrontation with the Holocaust mostly on the theoretical level and show considerably less discussion of actual family memories or the role of Germans in the Holocaust. Even when stories of perpetration were recalled, they were immediately dismissed or explained from a theoretical perspective, potentially to absolve family members of the guilt that goes hand in hand with such involvement (Welzer et al., 2002). These explanations focused on the German public as victims of a totalitarian system or good people trapped in a bad political environment who were forced to cooperate. It is possible that interviewees engaged in victim discourse, focus on the good German and rationalization as a defense against attacks on their sense of stability in their personal identity as most did identify with and maintain some connection with their German identity. As von Kellenbach (2003) reflected:

Surely most people want to think of themselves as essentially 'good,' hence the seemingly irresistible desire to deny and minimize evil in our midst, and the tendency to project it outward onto someone else. And the closer one feels to the evildoer, the stronger the temptation of denial, since the emotional and social costs of admission and acknowledgement become almost unbearable. (p. 307)

Admitting that a family member actively participated in the Nazi crimes would present a threat to the individual's identity by having to face the fact that someone close to them was involved in crimes against humanity and intellectualization allows for denial.

Although many of the interviewees were familiar with theoretical explanations and perspectives on the war and Nazi Germany, their knowledge about it did not seem to affect how they felt about their heritage as most reported having a positive relationship with their heritage. Three mentioned a desire to hide their dual national identity or wondering what others thought of them due to being German. One wondered if the Holocaust meant there was something inherently evil in German culture. I interpreted this reliance on theoretical explanations in relation to the Holocaust and their German heritage to signify avoidance as the rationalization allows the narrator to distance themselves from the emotional content of stories and instead focuses on cognitive or objective explanations for why it happened (Monroe, 2008; Waller, 1996). Interviewees' focus on theoretical explanations such as the factors that led to the rise of the Nazi regime, allows for responsibility to be diffused and factors external to the individual and their family members are emphasized as cause for the events and results of the Holocaust. Again these patterns suggest that German-Canadians may avoid taking responsibility for the Nazi crimes due to the effect it might have on their ability to feel proud of their dual German-Canadian identity (Dresler-Hawke, 2005).

## **Silence**

In the interviews, silence was expressed through what was not said, through statements that family members did not talk about the war or what they knew. Most interviewees either stated that they did not ask or suggested they did ask but were told that their parents or grandparents did not know. When reading between the lines it becomes clear that, similarly to my own story, the interviewees had not asked for more details or challenged inconsistencies in stories, potentially to avoid facing the possibility of family involvement. By denying that family members knew or were involved, the question of guilt and responsibility can be avoided. When the question of guilt did come up in the interviews, it was challenged on the basis of being far away in Canada or having been born after the war. Despite this insistence on the distance to the Holocaust, many interviewees engaged in silence on the topic of the Holocaust and reported feelings of guilt and shame in relation to the German heritage.

One may wonder how these feelings of guilt and shame are transmitted between



generations if the topic truly is met with such considerable silence? Interestingly, it is specifically through the legacy of silence that these patterns of guilt and shame are carried forward to the next generation and distortions such as heroization and reframing occur (Rosenthal & Völter, 1998; Welzer, 2005). Levin (2013) quotes other theorists who have described silence as the “elephant in the room” and outlines the transmission of its unspoken presence:

Similar to the elephant, the silencing processes are omnipresent. Sometimes they are communicated through small fragments, remarks or even jokes. Other times they come through just by facial expressions. In other times again they are present through the absence and not understandable intervals between stories. Memories, being painful or not, do not cease to exist. They can easily take on a life of their own, beyond the control of the individual. ... The Holocaust is such an invisible elephant—shaping personal lives, relationships and processes by its very real but also unapproachable presence. (p. 716)

The transmission of feelings of guilt and shame as a result of silence occurs without family members’ awareness or active discussion of these experiences but it is transmitted in silence by what is and is not said, how family members respond to topics and questions and how stories are told. The silence is enabled by the individual and their social context, often with the intention of protecting themselves from the negative emotions that come with talking about and acknowledging the difficult stories (Frie, 2014, p. 661; Levine, 2013, p. 720; Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010, p. 1117). At times the omission of content is motivated by avoidance of the question of responsibility or by shame (Levin, 2013, p. 720; Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010, p. 1104). At other times silence is intended to create space for reflection and commemoration (Levin, 2013, p. 718). In the case of the Holocaust, the collective silence has been likened more to collective forgetting, an attempt to escape the guilt and shame that comes with the question of responsibility for the Holocaust (Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010, p. 1104). The learning of patterns of silence occurs through model learning where children and family members mimic the behaviours that are modeled to them by the individuals around them and in the case of memories, within their memory community (Levin, 2013, p. 719).

Due to the legacy of silence, when families do confront the memories of the war and the Holocaust, they tend to deal with their own, personal past and not the Nazi past on a cultural level, which makes it easier to defer the question of responsibility onto the

authority of the Nazi regime and the dealing with the past onto authorities such as schools and public education efforts (Dresler-Hawke, 2005; Frie, 2012).

## **Responsibility to Remember**

Across the interviews, there was little evidence of reflection on the question of responsibility to remember and commemorate the Holocaust and instead there is a focus on the victim narrative. At times this position is expressed as resentment towards the guilt that some feel is imposed on the post-war German public in the form of ritualized shame (Brown, 2014; Imhoff et al., 2012). It is important that German-Canadians and young generations of Germans recognize a moral responsibility to remember the victims of the Holocaust and to ensure that an accurate representation of the events is upheld. This should be practiced not due to feelings of guilt or shame for their heritage but from a humanistic perspective, on the basis of a moral and ethical responsibility to not allow the events to be forgotten or distorted due to silence. As Habermas (1987) points out, the Holocaust has implications for all of humanity:

On some level Auschwitz became the signature of a whole age and it affects us all. Something happened here, that until then no one even considered possible. Here a deep layer of solidarity between all aspects of humanity was affected; until then the integrity of this deep layer was assumed to be in place despite all the evidence of brutality in world history. (p. 63) [my translation]

The responsibility to remember the Holocaust and recognize its ongoing effects and significance reach far beyond the generation of perpetrators and bystanders that was present when it took place and efforts need to be made to ensure it never happens again.

In spite of and potentially particularly because of the temporal and geographical distance of post-war generations of German-Canadians to Germany and the German past, it is easy to claim that the Holocaust does not affect them. They may take the position that they do not have personal or family guilt and should not be expected to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust from the perspective of a member of the German perpetrator group as they were born in Canada to Germans without known

perpetrator history. Bar-On (2001) differentiates between the legal and moral dimensions of responsibility:

Perhaps some of us tend to confuse the legal perspective with the psychosocial and moral ones. From the latter perspectives, the single victimizers could not inflict evil on the victims without the silent (sometimes even quite active) support of many who stand by. (Bar-On, 2001, p. 131)

Silence or avoidance of the topic of family involvement in the Holocaust does not signify the absence of responsibility, particularly because the passive stance most Germans took during the Nazi regime allowed the Holocaust to happen. Feeling a sense of responsibility for the suffering inflicted on millions of people by members of one's cultural community should not have been based purely on whether one's own family was involved but from a human perspective in recognizing the need to never forget (Brown, 2014; Gryglewski, 2010, p. 41). Most interviewees identified at least partially as German, were raised in and maintained some of the German culture and language taught by their post-war German parents and therefore the legacy of silence and the Holocaust is part of their identity and so is the responsibility to remember.

## **Suggestions to Address the Legacy of Silence**

The patterns found in German-Canadians' family memories can serve as an example to learn from the challenges of Germany in commemorating the past by permitting a collective silence through blaming the political structure, allowing a discourse of resistance and a focus on theories of factors that allowed for the Holocaust to happen (Dresler-Hawke, 2005, pp. 134-135). The findings of this thesis suggest that patterns of silence and avoidance persist over time even in the face of immigration and increased history education and led to distortions of facts that may reduce the effectiveness of efforts to commemorate the Holocaust or other crimes against humanity. Indeed it may be necessary that German post-war families need to start confronting the Holocaust in an open and honest manner by challenging a sole focus on victim discourse when commemorating their own family members who died or their parents and grandparents' difficult experiences. It may be beneficial to openly discuss feelings of guilt and shame that may have been transmitted between generations or latent shame could have been triggered by Holocaust education that presented the German perpetrator role without

giving opportunities to students to reflect on the effects of these association on their own identity and responsibility to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust.

German-Canadians who have reflected on and accepted this responsibility and how silence affected them may be in an ideal positions be leaders in their own communities to ensure an open discussion and conversation about their difficult heritage of the crimes committed by members of their nation of origin. This can help allow individuals to confront, process and express their feelings of guilt and shame by starting the conversation rather than contributing to avoidance and silence and help break the cycle of silence, guilt and shame. I take the example of my own silence in the interviews, despite some of it having been in an effort to not bias the recollection of their family memories, as an illustration for the potential need to develop tools and resources to facilitate such conversations in a safe and skilled manner. This is where practitioners in the fields of education, psychology, counselling and psychotherapy can support the efforts by providing expertise in developing culturally sensitive and relevant resources and their application (Drozdek, 2010; Parens, 2009).

This need for leadership in commemoration efforts is also relevant in the context of German-Canadians having the dual ethical responsibility to remember the German Holocaust as well as the legacy of the Residential Schools in Canada as they are members of both cultural groups and both events continue to cause and will cause significant suffering and pain to the victims across generations (Kirmayer et al., 2014, p. 300). This need to take responsibility to commemorate applies particularly to those born in the second- and third-generation who grew up during a time where residential schools were still in operation across the country. German-Canadians can use their own experience with the legacy of silence either in their own family or community as a basis to provide leadership and help Canadians embark on their own journey into the dark side of their national history as part of efforts towards truth and reconciliation in Canada.

Commemoration programs designed to facilitate processing of a difficult cultural past may include the following ingredients for collective and individual healing summarized by Drozdek (2010):

On both individual and collective levels, one uses a metaphor of a feeling body suffering from infected wounds that must be reopened and cleansed through truth telling. Crucial ingredients seem to be the same in individual and collective 'healing'—safety, trust, recognition, regaining feelings of effectiveness and control over existence, transparency of motives and interventions, empathy, engagement, authenticity, mutual respect, positive identity, positive bonding with the other, regaining of self-respect, and sincerity. (p. 14)

Among these ingredients, sincerity seems to be of particular importance in acknowledging one's feelings about the German heritage and feelings of guilt and shame for the Holocaust and to maintain "truth telling" efforts to counter silencing processes (Schwan, 1998).

## **Implications for Holocaust Education**

What is the role of education in ensuring this "truth telling"? The majority of the participants in this study shared theories and historical perspectives on the Nazi era and World War Two period, what caused it and how the events unfolded, yet this did not address the silence in families and there seemed to be a lack of emotional processing. It seems that the focus on historical knowledge and theories may serve the purpose of emotional distancing by giving rational, contextualized explanations for why the Holocaust and Nazi Germany happened (Bowins, 2004). Understanding the political context and facts is an important aspect of Holocaust education but still allows for escape from the emotional sphere that involves talking about the millions of people who were perpetrators and bystanders. For those with a German background whose families lived in Germany during the Nazi period, this raises the question of our family members' role and behavior during the war. As was apparent in the study and survey conducted by Welzer et al., Germans continue to engage in victim discourse and silence. Most of the stories collected for this thesis also exhibited a considerable amount of victim discourse and there were few statements addressing the role of Germany and Germans in the Holocaust and instead the descriptions of Germans were mostly as good Germans. Yet the lessons of the Holocaust are about so much more than the question of guilt but instead it is about commemoration, moral education and civil action (Proske, 2014). In his address to the German public on the concerning state of Holocaust education in

Germany in 1966 the philosopher Theodor Adorno identified what he described as the ultimate goal of moral education:

Every debate about the ideals of education is trivial and inconsequential compared to this single ideal: never again Auschwitz. It was the barbarism all education strives against. One speaks of the threat of a relapse into barbarism. But it is not a threat—Auschwitz was this relapse, and barbarism continues as long as the fundamental conditions that favoured that relapse continue largely unchanged. (Adorno, 1966, p. 1)

Adorno further specifies the role of education in changing those fundamental conditions:

When I speak of education after Auschwitz, then, I mean two areas: first children's education, especially in early childhood; then general enlightenment that provides an intellectual, cultural, and social climate in which a recurrence would no longer be possible, a climate, therefore, in which the motives that led to the horror would become relatively conscious. (Adorno, 1966, p. 3)

Schools play an essential role in addressing those fundamental conditions through moral education or Holocaust education. History lessons are part of the cultural memory that provides the knowledge foundation that is needed to engage in commemoration (Proske, 2012, p. 41; Gryglewski, 2010, p. 43). The goals of moral education and the pedagogy of memory are to learn about anti-racism, human rights and democracy and to reinforce the "forbiddance to forget" (Proske, 2012, pp. 41-43). It is important that classrooms are mindful of inclusion and exclusion when talking about the Holocaust, and always define the 'we' in statements as humanity or people living in a certain country if it is a more specific context. This ensures that children do not feel excluded and decide it does not affect them since they are not included in the definition. The importance of this awareness becomes apparent when one puts the issue in the context of communicative memory:

Classroom discourses on the meanings of the Holocaust are part of the communicative memory of the society and conflicts around the adequate remembrance in the face of generational and migration-related differences cannot be precluded. (Proske, 2012, pp. 46)

Classrooms are an essential venue for engaging in the communication about the Holocaust that may not occur in the home and to emphasize the importance for members of all cultures to hold each other responsible to never forget. This where

expectations for collective memory narratives, or how to ideally talk about the Holocaust, and civic emotion, or how to ideally feel about the Holocaust, as a member of a certain nation are communicated, which is particularly important to make explicit in a multicultural context, where the baseline assumptions may be different (Brown, 2014, p. 426).

Due to the challenging nature of Holocaust education as well as the responsibility of keeping the memories alive in honour of the victims, it is important that educators enter the discussion of the Holocaust from a perspective of moral education (Lindquist, 2006; Lindquist, 2007; Meseth & Proske, 2010). Holocaust education tends to be most effective in supporting anti-racism education and active citizenship when it has a clear focus on moral education and provides opportunities for reflection, discussion and skill-building on how to respond in the face of racism (Carrington & Short, 1997, p. 278).

At times an excessive focus on factual information and shocking images can result in “Holocaust fatigue” in students (Schweber, 2006). This is often the result of superficial or ineffective treatment of the material that leaves students feeling frustrated or overwhelmed and does not facilitate deeper understanding (Lindquist, 2007; Schweber, 2006). A consequence of this is students’ disengaging, not participating or being unable to draw meaning from the material (Lindquist, 2007; Meseth & Proske, 2010; Schweber, 2006). It is also important to note that that youth of German background may feel defensive around the topic of the Holocaust due to the feelings of guilt and shame that are commonly observed in research on how Germans relate to the Holocaust (Rothe, 2012; Welzer, 2008). This defense needs to be addressed in order to allow students to take away the moral education lessons that need to be drawn from the events of the Holocaust. Teachers of German history often interpret the resistance as lack of interest but it may be beneficial to view it as learned response to a difficult subject matter, in particular when it can challenge one’s identity (Rothe, 2012). Teachers can facilitate addressing one’s family history past by openly discussing feelings of resistance, creating an emotionally safe environment and ensuring that material presented is developmentally appropriate by choosing only material that the teacher is able to place in a historical context, discuss effectively and confront themselves (Lindquist, 2006). Balancing commemoration and Holocaust education can be challenging for teachers but the responsibility to remember requires that one can express and acknowledge regret for

the events and empathy for the victims of the Holocaust and recognize the responsibility to remember without shifting the focus onto the German victims.

Education about the war and the Holocaust are important and efforts need to be made to not allow the suffering caused by the Holocaust and the lessons learned from it to be forgotten, however, contextualizing the events through a focus on theory allows individuals to distance themselves emotionally, which facilitates forgetting (Frie, 2014, p. 653; Welzer et al., 2002). When the Nazi regime is blamed, the focus is shifted away from the individual and their family members and they may no longer feel responsible to remember (Dresler-Hawke, 2005, p. 135; Frie, 2014, p. 653). This can also happen when individuals are taught exclusively didactic information about the Holocaust without emphasis and opportunity deeper reflection through moral education and moral responsibility (Schweber, 2006, p. 50). In a multicultural context, specifically in an immigration context, commemoration on the basis of personal responsibility may be difficult to teach as individuals will likely reject arguments of personal responsibility as they will not have any personal connection. This is where it becomes particularly important to emphasize fundamental lessons in moral education that can be drawn from the Holocaust and Nazi Germany and that apply to humanity at large. To avoid contributing to a feeling that human rights violations occur elsewhere and the Holocaust is just one example (Gryglewski, 2010, p. 43), other genocides should be discussed in a separate unit and educators should break down the different types of crimes so not to reduce the impact and lessons to be taken away from each of them. As such, it may be beneficial to teach the history of Canadian residential schools and colonialization in the context of ongoing structural violence rather than lumping it together with examples of genocides and mass murders, particularly due to the ongoing impacts and cross-generational effects (Kirmayer et al., 2014, p. 301).

Education has a fundamental role in the commemoration of the Holocaust victims and prevention of genocides through moral education that focuses on eliminating the underlying factors that have led to the Holocaust.



## Conclusions

The themes common to the narratives of the German-Canadians interviewed for this thesis suggest that patterns of silence, silencing and associated feelings of guilt and shame found in post-war Germans in Germany have persisted into the second and third generation of post-war German-Canadians. Such silence and avoidance through a focus on German victim discourse is problematic as it shifts the discussion away from the victims of the Holocaust and may lead to forgetting. Efforts need to be made to increase efforts for commemoration and acceptance of the role of the German war-generation population in the Holocaust. Continued commemoration can be accomplished through educational efforts, both in schools and German organizations, where the topic can be discussed with groups from a moral education perspective. Some may raise the point that German civilians did experience a lot of trauma as well and it is important that Germans also mourn the loss and suffering of their loved ones, but this victim discourse should not overshadow the discussion of the ongoing pain experienced by the victims of the Holocaust and their children and grandchildren.

An open and critical family discussion of the family memories of World War II and the Holocaust allows for healing in the group of the perpetrators, bystanders and the victims of the Holocaust and by critically analyzing and correcting distorted family memories, continued memory or new memories will be more factually accurate and are more likely to do justice to the victims (Blustein, 2008, p. 180). Most of all, it is important, that just as is the case with silence, parents, policy makers and teachers model the balanced acknowledgement of the different traumas experienced by different groups, but not at expense of forgetting the victims of the Holocaust but instead with a conscious effort to commemorate.

Due to the small sample size, the conclusions drawn from the interviews included in this thesis reflect the subjective experience of my ten interviewees and may not reflect the diverse experiences and family backgrounds of the larger population of post-war second- and third-generation German-Canadian immigrants. However, the patterns found can still provide insight and directions for future research. Potential areas for further research could be a comparison of the family memories of ethnic Germans and Germans from Germany. In addition, it would be interesting to see if taking a more active

stance as researcher where inaccurate information is pointed out or challenged during the interview would lead to increased or decreased reflection upon follow-up. Furthermore, it may be interesting to pilot and assess the effectiveness of a group where German-Canadians come together to talk about their family memories and feelings of guilt and shame due to their heritage or family involvement in the Holocaust. As post-war German-Canadians are currently at the three to four generation marker of the average cycle of family memories identified by Assman (1988), it will be interesting to see what happens to the family memories and German-Canadian identity in the fourth and fifth generation of post-war German-Canadian immigrants.

In order to not allow this dark chapter in the German past to become a secret that is hidden within collective silence or permit the horrors of the Holocaust to be trivialized, it is imperative that Germans living in Canada and German-Canadians continue to discuss, commemorate and remember their Nazi heritage and challenge the victim discourse when it overpowers and overshadows the discussion of the victims of the Holocaust. It is important to find a way to form a German-Canadian identity that is able to acknowledge the reality of the Holocaust, particularly the role Germans played in perpetrating this dark chapter in human history, and to recognize the continued suffering this legacy has caused for those who lost loved ones a result of the Holocaust.

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# Appendix A.

## Interview Questions

### Interview Questions

SFU Study ID: 2016s0162

1. What was it like to grow up as a German-Canadian in Canada? How do you feel about your German heritage?
2. What kinds of stories has your family shared about immigrating to Canada?
3. Has your family shared memories or stories about your parents or grandparents' lives in Germany during or immediately after WWII? If so, what kind of memories did they share? Did these memories have a particular theme or themes?
4. Has the topic the Nazi past and the Holocaust ever come up in family discussions? If yes, when is it most likely to come up? Who brings it up and how is it talked about? Can you recall any specific memories or family interactions around this topic?
5. Have you ever felt discomfort about your German family background when the topic of the Nazi past and the Holocaust comes up in social situations? Can you recall any specific examples?
6. How do other people respond to your German-Canadian heritage? Has your perspective on your German family background changed at all over time?
7. What are some things you do to keep your German-Canadian heritage alive, if any? Do you think German-Canadians are more or less likely than other immigrant groups to maintain their cultural links to the past?