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“Hooray, I am a *Kriegsenkel!*” -
Transgenerational Transmission of
World War II Experiences in Germany



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Cover image: *Familienbild*, (family portrait), 2007, oil on paper,
kindly provided by Martin Schiffel

Statement of Authorship

I, Lina Birgit Jakob, hereby certify that I am the sole author of this thesis.

Signed _____

Date _____

Abstract

For decades talking about the wartime suffering of the German majority population was felt to be a moral taboo. Out of shame about the inconceivable crimes Germans had committed in the name of the 'Third Reich', suffering of Germans was largely excluded from public discourses and psychotherapeutic practices. Recently, however, the topic has moved into public focus, and questions about the long-term psychological impact of WWII on the eyewitness generation and their families are being raised.

My PhD focuses on the generation of the '*Kriegsenkel*' - the 'grandchildren of war'. Although born in the 1960 and '70s people who identify as *Kriegsenkel* feel that through processes of transgenerational transmission, war experiences were passed on to them by their families and underlie many of their emotional problems, from depression, anxiety and burnout to relationship break-ups and career problems. *Kriegsenkel* now meet across the country in self-help groups, workshops and Internet fora, sharing personal stories and discussing ways to overcome their emotional inheritance. Common psychological symptoms and consequences are extracted from *Kriegsenkel* life histories collected in popular books, contributed to special websites, and continuously negotiated in closed Facebook-groups.

Drawing on more than 80 in-depth biographical interviews and on participant observation undertaken in 2012/13 in Berlin, I argue that through this process of 'sharing and comparing', driven by therapy-experienced participants themselves, a cluster of symptoms for a new psychological profile as sufferers of transmitted war trauma is slowly being assembled and associated by them with a *Kriegsenkel* identity.

I show that this new identity is constructed, explored and performed within the framework of Western ‘therapy culture’ (Furedi 2004). Sociologists have critiqued therapy culture as cultivating vulnerability and victimhood and as promoting political disengagement and narcissistic self-concern. Looking from the subjective experiences of ‘consumers’ of therapy and self-help culture, I argue that that they also create meaning for emotional problems and offer therapeutic interventions, often seen as the only hope for a better and healthier future.

In the second part of my thesis, I delve more deeply into individual life histories of the *Kriegsenkel* generation. I explore how mainstreamed concepts of transgenerational transmission form the backbone of my participants’ autobiographical accounts, and what they often find to be a convincing explanation of their emotional suffering. I examine the strengths and weaknesses of common models of transmission in helping individuals to make sense of and address their problems. Lastly, I call for a broadening of these models in a number of ways to better capture the subjective experiences of descendants of families impacted by war and violence.

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Introduction

I. Grandpa Jupp and the blind spots in the family history

On 25 April 2011, I stumbled into the ANZAC¹ parade in Sydney, something I had never really considered watching before - even after becoming an Australian citizen in 2007. There they were, hundreds of veterans of all the recent and not so recent wars Australia had participated in, proudly marching past a cheering crowd. They were mostly men, of all ages, some in uniforms, their chests decorated with medals, grouped behind the banner of their respective army units. The younger ones had recently returned from assignments in Iraq or Afghanistan; the older ones, WWII, Korea and Vietnam veterans, were on crutches or in wheelchairs pushed along by their families, still smiling and shaking hands all around. There were groups of army nurses on vans waving at the spectators, and classes of school children playing the national anthem with brass instruments and bagpipes, enticing the crowd to sing along.

Witnessing this celebration of patriotism and war, I felt extremely uncomfortable. In my mind I cannot associate war with anything else than senseless violence, death and destruction. How could this be such a cheerful event? What struck me the most were the young people - the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of veterans - who took part in the parade. Many of them were carrying photos and wearing the medals of their ancestors, their youthful faces lit up with pride. I could not help but wonder what it would have been like for me, as a little girl, to proudly march in a German parade commemorating WWII, carrying a photo of my grandfather in the

¹ ANZAC (the acronym stands for Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) Day is the annual day of commemoration for Australian (and New Zealand) soldiers who served and died in wars, conflicts, and peacekeeping operations since WWI.
<http://www.awm.gov.au/commemoration/anzac-day/> [Accessed 10 August 2015].

uniform of the German *Wehrmacht*, my chest decorated with the Iron Cross Second Class he received in 1941 for bravery in the battle against the Soviet Union.

For me, as for many Germans of my generation, this is unthinkable. There were no parades – of course. Walking the streets like that in the city where I grew up, people would have called me a Neo-Nazi or a Holocaust denier.



My grandfather Jupp in 1941

When Nazi Germany unconditionally surrendered on 8 May 1945, it left scenes of utter devastation: between 48-70² million people were dead worldwide, more than half of them civilians, many dying of war related diseases and famine. This May it was 70 years since the end of the war. The last war criminals were being tracked down and put on trial, and the last remaining survivors were travelling to Auschwitz and other concentration camps to commemorate the 6 million lives lost in the Holocaust. At least three generations have gone by since Germans invaded the countries of their European neighbours, and for much of the past seven decades the population has tried to come to terms with the unspeakable crimes that were committed in the name of the Third Reich. Books and documentaries about war and the Holocaust have shaped how past, current and – most likely – future generations of Germans feel about themselves, their families and their national identity. Clearly, commemorating the past, family traditions and transgenerational transmission means something very different in the

² See <http://warchronicle.com/numbers/WWII/deaths.htm>. Numbers vary from source to source.

German context. The fact that our grandfathers participated in WWII for us is not a source of pride and inspiration but an enduring legacy of shame.

I have been interested in my family history all my life. Stories from the war were a topic in my conversations with all four grandparents, but particularly with my mother's father, Josef Schaefer, (called 'Jupp'), who, in spite of the fact that he was a heavy smoker in his earlier life and a heavy drinker in his later years, lived until he was almost 100 years old. Jupp was a soldier in Hitler's *Wehrmacht*, stationed first in France and later sent east when Germany declared war on the Soviet Union in 1941. He survived the Russian winters and harsh conditions in the prisoner-of-war (POW) camp and came home - skinny and defeated – one day in May 1948, nearly 10 years after he had left.

My grandfather told stories from his time in the camp, how they rolled cigarettes with *Pravda* paper, recited Goethe in improvised poetry clubs, and struggled to survive on thin vegetable soup and stale bread.



My grandmother Hilde taking my mother and my uncle to the bomb shelter in 1943

My grandmother willingly talked about everyday life during WWII, how she had to get up most nights to take the children to the bomb shelter, about her fear that she would never see her husband again, and how she managed to feed the family after the collapse of the Nazi regime by stealing

potatoes and coals. All in all, I was confident that I knew quite a lot about my family's experiences during the war. Somehow I did not notice the gaps, in particular that there were almost no stories about my grandfather's time as an active soldier.

Around 2009, my father told me about a conversation he had had with my grandfather shortly before his death. It was late at night and my grandfather, like most nights, was drinking. Somehow the conversation turned to the war, and Jupp confessed that all his life he had felt guilty about the fact that when he was a radio operator with the *Wehrmacht* in Russia, he was sent away from his military unit on several occasions, and each time there was an attack by the Soviet army shortly thereafter, wounding or killing all of his comrades who had stayed behind.

This is of course a second-hand story, but when I heard it from my father, I was nevertheless stunned. What my grandfather had shared sounded much like 'survivor's guilt' (Niederland 1968) to me, a psychological phenomenon that I had only ever heard about in relationship to the Holocaust. Was it possible, I started to ask myself, that my grandfather had not just been a Nazi and a perpetrator of WWII, but that he - at the same time - had also been traumatised by his war experience? It dawned on me that I had missed something crucial in our many conversations. More and more questions arose. If he was in fact traumatised, how did this impact on his life and that of his family? What about all the other Germans of that generation and their experiences of active combat, or the civilians who lived through bombardment and forced displacement? What about their children and grandchildren? Could it be that sense of heaviness that I had observed so often in Germans of my generation was not only the result of a collective legacy of guilt and shame for the crimes committed during WWII as I had always assumed, but also due to the fact that some of the traumatic experiences of our grandparents and parents were transmitted to us? Why had none of this ever occurred to me before?

The scarce results of an initial literature search on the topic led me to believe that I was not the only person who had blocked out this aspect of her family history. Even psychologists and psychoanalysts were publicly rubbing their eyes, asking themselves how it was possible that the war had been absent from their private practices for most of the post-war years.

This thesis is the result of my personal quest as well as my intellectual desire to explore these issues in depth.

My initial research question read: Was there a transgenerational transmission of (traumatic) WWII experiences in German families, and if so, how did this affect the younger generations' attitudes, beliefs and emotional health?

In early 2012, after having lived abroad for twenty years, I travelled to Berlin; keen to explore this topic with other Germans my age. By the time I got there, a small group of people had started to ask similar questions. They called themselves *Kriegsenkel* - grandchildren of war – and they became my core group of participants.

2. The emergence of the 'war children' (Kriegskinder) and the 'war grandchildren' (Kriegsenkel) topic

The Kriegskinder - the war children (born between 1930-1945)

In 2005 German psychoanalysts, psychologists and historians organised a convention in Frankfurt/Main devoted to the topic of 'war childhoods'. The event put the spotlight on a generation, born between 1930 and 1945 who lived through WWII as children or teenagers. Around 600 people attended to discuss findings from recent research and psychotherapeutic practices and to share their personal stories - many of them for the first time.

Most Germans who are now seniors had been confronted with violence, loss, death and destruction at a very young age. They had spent nights in bomb shelters during air raids, fearing for their own life and that of their families, sometimes finding their homes destroyed as they returned in the morning. Many had lost their father or an older brother in the war or had waited years for them to return from a POW camp after 1945. Others had to flee with their families

from their homes in Eastern Europe, carrying their few belongings in bags, and after a long and dangerous journey arriving in Germany as unwelcome refugees.

For most of the post-war years Germans tried to put those memories behind them. They worked hard to rebuild the country. Houses were reconstructed from the rubble, businesses re-opened. Many established successful careers enabled by the 'economic miracle' of the 1960s in West Germany, or contributed to building a new, socialist society in the Eastern part of the country. As the result of the war and the occupation by Allied and Soviet forces, Germany had been divided into two states, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR). A wall, erected in 1961, stretched right across the country and surrounded Berlin, restricting movement, in particular from East to West. On either side, people put all their effort into providing their children with the stability and financial security that they themselves had missed out on. Many of them were trying to forget the past, not wanting to be reminded of the pain and the shame attached to it.

In the late 1990s psychoanalysts and psychotherapists noticed increasing incidences of burnout, depression, flashbacks and anxiety disorders among their elderly patients, who were close to or past retirement age when they first sought help for psychological symptoms. Hartmut Radebold, a psychoanalyst of the same generation, came to the conclusion that the cause of these disorders could be related to their childhood experiences of war. Behind the façade of these lives often characterised by 'pathological normalcy' (*'Pathologische Normalität'*, Radebold 2000) he detected the psychological imprint WWII had left behind. From 2000 he published his findings.³

It was around this time that Germans started to publicly reflect on a possible long-term impact of traumatic war experiences on the majority population.

³ See Radebold (2000; 2004; 2005; 2008).

Until then, as I will discuss in detail in Chapter 2, talking about their wartime suffering was largely felt as a moral taboo. Out of shame about the inconceivable crimes Germans had committed in the name of the Third Reich, suffering remained excluded from public discourses. It also did not feature much as a topic in psychotherapeutic practices (Ermann 2007; Heimannsberg and Schmidt 1992; Radebold 2012). Radebold estimates that about a third of all Germans who were children or teenagers during WWII would be classified as traumatised according to present psychological standards; in the case of another third he believes the war had a defining impact on the person's biography, while about 40% are said to have survived it more or less unharmed (Radebold 2012).

These war children are the parents of my participants, the mothers and fathers of my generation.

How growing up with them affected the generation of the *Kriegsenkel* - the war grandchildren, was the question raised in a subsequent wave of psychological exploration, starting from around 2008. It is also the focus of my thesis.

The Kriegsenkel – the war grandchildren (born between 1955-1975)

The *Kriegsenkel* I met in Berlin did not have an awareness of any emotional issues related to the war as they were growing up, in part because their parents and grandparents did not tend to volunteer many of their memories. Born predominantly in the 1960s and '70s, they were mostly raised in outwardly stable and financially secure middle-class families. The children seemed to have everything they needed; they were going to school and often went on to complete a tertiary education. Yet, looking back, many among my participants said they had sensed that there was something 'not quite right' in these idyllic homes, without having been able to put a clear name to this perception. Joy and laughter seemed to be missing and there was often a sense of sadness around the mother or father, sometimes both. Depression was frequently named as the

dominant mood, a lack of levity and happiness that seemed to jar with the outward display of ordinariness and stability. Their parents (and often grandparents) seemed to be carrying an emotional burden; they showed behaviours and had reactions that the children could not understand or contextualise. Mothers in particular were often described as cold and emotionally withdrawn with little empathy for the children's 'small' everyday problems. 'Stop whingeing, you don't know how lucky you are,' was a common response. Some fathers were aggressive or violent when something interrupted their fixed routines, or they scared their families with unpredictable outbursts. In 2012, one of my participants, Boris still vividly remembered how, when he was about 6 years old, his father suddenly jumped up during one particularly harmonious family dinner, ripped the table cloth, all the food and dishes from the table, and yelled, 'This is what an air-raid feels like,' at his mortified family.

When I was talking to people of my age in Berlin about their own lives, I was struck by the level of discontent and emotional suffering that dominated so many of our conversations. I had expected the considerations of the long-term impact of WWII to be on the sombre side, but a significant number of my interview partners brought with them a painful atmosphere of loneliness, depression and frustration, which tended to follow me home and linger around in my apartment for a few days.

Many felt that an indistinct sense of malaise overshadowed their lives, for which there seemed to be no convincing explanation up until that point. They had grown up in times of peace and stability, and mostly without financial worries. '*Uns geht es doch gut*' (loosely translatable as 'but we are doing so well') was an often-repeated statement, implying that one should be happy and content, and it is surprising and disappointing that they were not. Many felt stuck in their careers or were constantly changing jobs and apartments; others were struggling in their relationships with partners, friends and parents. There was Andrea, the social worker, who had to take two years off work because of severe burnout, and Anja whose panic attacks

prevented her from leaving the house to take her son swimming. There was Karoline who had fallen into despair after a number of relationship breakups and Martin, the talented artist, unable to ramp up the courage to put together an exhibition with his paintings. There was Boris whose father had been unable to control his violent outbursts and who was now struggling to manage his own, and Katarina who still felt so enmeshed with her depressed mother that she found it difficult to build her own independent life. Many had previously accessed psychotherapy, but their emotional suffering had not subsided.

While these could be viewed as quite generic psychological issues pervasive in many Western societies, a few years earlier two books with life histories of Germans from this particular generation had been published (Bode 2009; Ustorf 2008). Both portray Germans in their 40s and 50s who suffer from a broad range of psychological problems, which the authors explain as being a direct consequence of their parents' (and sometimes grandparents') war experiences. The main claim, which is already embedded in the definition of the term *Kriegsenkel*, is that by growing up in these families, unresolved war experiences were passed down to this generation through processes of transgenerational transmission and were responsible for many of their mental health problems. These books were ground-breaking in that they brought the question of a possible transgenerational impact of WWII into the public arena for the first time. At some point, about half of my participants had come across or had heard about them through newspaper articles. In every case, this created a big and often extremely emotional 'Eureka moment'; an intuitive 'click' as the link between their own problems and the war was established. The books provided my participants and others like them with an explanation and a framework for their previously indistinct sense of suffering. Here is an example, which typifies the core causal structure underlying the life histories told in these two books, as well as in many of my interviews:

My parents had to flee with my grandparents from Eastern Prussia when the Russians came. What they had to experience or witness but could not work through, I, as the grandchild, now have to carry around as a 'burden'. It took many years before I came to this realisation, but today I understand better, why I am how I am, and why I react how I react. Never in my dreams would I have expected that those kinds of unresolved issues can be 'inherited', passed down from generation to generation.⁴

Since 2010, a small war grandchildren movement has gained momentum. Interested people now meet in self-managed support groups that have formed in many German cities. Designated websites⁵ and Facebook groups provide information and networking opportunities and allow the sharing of life history. A number of therapists have also become interested in the phenomenon and offer weekend-long workshops and individual therapy sessions to alleviate the problems resulting from a perceived transgenerational transmission of war trauma. My thesis will explore in detail how the *Kriegsenkel* frame and address their emotional struggles felt to be the result of a war that they had not experienced themselves.

Interestingly, while some of my participants who were part of this scene strongly identified with their newly found *Kriegsenkel* identity, attributing a broad range of emotional issues to their family history, others outside of it found that the war only had a marginal impact on their lives, while others again could not relate to the topic at all. This division was, most surprisingly, also seen between siblings, who grew up with the same parents and grandparents yet did not share their brother or sister's perception of the dominant impact of WWII on their family life. Also, there were clear indications that the *Kriegsenkel* topic resonated much more strongly with Germans who were born and raised in West Germany, than with East Germans.

⁴ Posted in a closed Facebook group on 28 February 2013, with permission of the author.

⁵ www.kriegsenkel.de and www.forumkriegsenkel.de.

These observations led me to re-phrase my initial research question. Instead of asking whether there was a transgenerational transmission of WWII experiences, I now asked questions like: Why do some Germans of this generation explain their emotional suffering this way, while others do not or not to the same extent? How do they feel the impact of WWII on their lives? How do they conceptualise processes of transgenerational transmission and why? What does being a *Kriegsenkel* mean to them and how do they deal with their inherited emotional burden?

3. Theoretical framework and contribution

Public interest in the *Kriegsenkel* generation has steadily increased in Germany since I started my PhD in 2011. However, only a limited number of academic works have been published so far. Research from disciplines such as sociology (Völter 2008; Zinnecker 2008), history and psychohistory (Knoch and Kurth 2012) provide some insights, but the majority of contributions is by psychoanalysts and psychotherapists sharing their impressions from working with patients of the *Kriegsenkel* generation. Bettina Alberti's (2010) book is probably the most comprehensive so far. Other authors focus on a particular aspect such as the transgenerational influence of flight and expulsion (von Friesen 2000; 2012; von Stein 2008); on the long term impact of Nazi perpetratorship and ideology (Moré 2012; Müller-Hohagen 2003, 2005); on problems with individuation and separation from the parents (Bachofen 2012), on psychosomatic symptoms in the *Kriegsenkel* generation (Müller 2012), or on the particular situation in East Germany (Froese 2009; Mitzscherlich 2012; Moré 2012; Seidler 2009). One interesting project of an interdisciplinary team of researchers at the University of Hamburg (Lamparter, Wiegand-Grefe, and Wierling 2013) brings together historians, psychologists, psychoanalysts and medical doctors to investigate the impact of the bombardment of the city in July 1943, known as the 'Firestorm of Hamburg'. Their extensive qualitative and quantitative research, which stretches from psychometric assessments to psychoanalytical interviews and oral history

accounts, includes members of the eyewitness generation, as well as their children and grandchildren.

These studies provide valuable background for my research and I will draw on their findings in individual chapters. However, as they are situated predominantly in the realm of psychology or psychoanalysis, certain assumptions about processes of transgenerational transmission are accepted *a priori* as 'shared truth' (Fassin and Rechtman 2009:2). They tend to focus on describing the impact of such transmission and the psychological symptoms displayed by the younger generation, without questioning these assumptions.

As an anthropologist, I take a different route. My research aims to capture perceptions and narratives of transgenerational transmission of WWII-related experiences from the subjective standpoint of the *Kriegsenkel*. In that it takes a step back and explores how certain perceptions of transmission are formed. To do so, it also includes the roles of psychological models of transmission as way to explain how and why my participants understand their emotional suffering in this particular way.

My thesis furthermore includes not only members of this generation who are emotionally struggling and accessing therapy. While people who had no issue with their family history tended to be less interested in talking to me, I do include the stories of some that felt only marginally affected by their family history, or who provided positive examples of how their family dealt with and communicated their WWII experiences (see in particular Chapter 2).

To my knowledge this is the first systematic research about the German *Kriegsenkel* movement as a social phenomenon and the first anthropological study capturing the lived experiences of transgenerational transmission in families belonging to the perpetrator nation(s) of WWII.

Understanding ‘transmission’ - from ‘psy’ sciences to anthropological narratives

How traumatic events such as war, genocide or mass loss and violence impact on the generations born after the event has been explored in the last decades across a number of different disciplines such as memory studies (Hirsch 1996, 2001, 2008; Hirsch and Spitzer 2006), anthropology (Argenti and Schramm 2010; Crapanzano 2011; Feuchtwang 2011; Kidron 2003, 2009a, 2009b, 2012), neurobiology and epigenetics (Yehuda 2006; Yehuda et al. 1998; Yehuda and Bierer 2007).

Diverse approaches offer different explanations as to why and how experiences are passed on between parents (or grandparents) and children and how they may affect the offspring. Marianne Hirsch’s (2008:106–7) concept of post-memory for example describes the relationship “that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.” Researchers such as Rachel Yehuda (Yehuda 2006; Yehuda et al. 1998; Yehuda and Bierer 2007) explore how vulnerability to post-traumatic stress can also be passed down biologically from one generation to the next, resulting in a significantly higher likelihood of developing PTSD in children of traumatised parents if these are confronted with a stressful event.

Historians Bertaux and Thompson (1993) on the other hand have a less ‘pathologizing’ view on processes of transgenerational transmission. They (Bertaux and Thompson 1993:1) state that ‘transmission between generations is as old as humanity itself’ and claim that family therapists have underestimated the ‘normality’ (ibid: 8) of the processes they describe, focusing mainly on their negative consequences. Argenti and Schramm (2010) present a collection of anthropological study that focus on the intergenerational transmission of the

memory of violence – many of them exploring the issues without the recourse to trauma.

While transgenerational transmission of experiences of war and violence can be conceptualised in these ways, the body of knowledge that informed, crucially shaped and structured *Kriegsenkel* narratives is grounded in the so-called ‘psy sciences’ (Rose 1998): psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis. Their theories, concepts and approaches determine how *Kriegsenkel* understand themselves, their families and their emotional suffering and how they address their psychological issues.

Today it is widely accepted that war can traumatise the people who experience and witness it; the victims and even the perpetrators (Fassin and Rechtman 2009). As one of the foundations of the psychoanalytical tradition, the concept of trauma as a scar of the mind rather than a mere physical wound - repressed and inscribed in the unconscious, as it is too painful for the psyche to experience – is today a widely accepted concept.⁶ Anthropologists Fassin and Rechtman (2009:1) note, “Trauma has become a major signifier of our age. It is our normal means of relating present suffering to past violence.” Since the 1980s, psychological trauma symptoms are collected under the label ‘Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder’ (PTSD) and have been included in the third edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) (1980). This labelling and documenting made trauma into an official medical condition with clearly defined symptoms such as recurrent, intrusive memories, nightmares or painful flashbacks; hyper-alertness, numbness etc. Therapeutic interventions, and most commonly what is referred to as the

⁶ For a genealogy of the trauma concept see Leys (2000), for critical discussion see (Hacking 1995; Young 1996), for a brief history of psychoanalysis see (Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Hacking 1995).

'talking cure' (Illouz 2008:12), are suggested to integrate traumatic memories into the psyche and to alleviate symptoms.

In a nutshell, the common understanding is that trauma suffered in extreme situations such as war, conflict and mass violence, if not addressed and worked through by the eyewitness generation, may be passed down to offspring, impacting on the descendants' mental, emotional or physical health. The often cited 'conspiracy of silence' (Danieli 1998b:4) between the survivors and the societies they live in is perceived as impeding the process of mourning and psychological integration of trauma. It is furthermore often claimed that the chain of transgenerational transmission can only be broken if the person to whom trauma has been passed on gains an insight into these influences on their life, and is able to work through them and remove them from their psyche (Volkan, Ast, and Greer 2002).

From an anthropological perspective I engage with concepts of transgenerational transmission in two main ways in the context of my case study of the German *Kriegsenkel*.

Firstly, I explore them as the foundation of a collective *Kriegsenkel* identity. The understanding that traumatic experiences impact on the offspring of the eyewitness generation(s) lies at the heart of what it means to be a grandchild of war and is already firmly enshrined in the very meaning of the term. My work will show in detail how an identity as sufferers of transmitted war trauma is built and fleshed out around this basic assumption.

I will also situate the construction, performance and management of *Kriegsenkel* identities more broadly into the framework of Western 'therapy culture' (Furedi 2004) and the predominantly negative assessment of the influence of the 'psy sciences' (Rose 1998) on modern Western societies. From an anthropological perspective, I ground my contribution to this debate in the subjective experiences

of my participants who are deeply embedded and invested in the contemporary therapy culture. Based on my observations, I suggest a more nuanced and ultimately more positive reading of the impact of therapeutic discourses on the everyday 'management of subjectivity' (Furedi 2004:22).

Secondly, I analyse the role of models of transgenerational transmission in the life histories of individual members of the *Kriegsenkel* generation, treating them not as diagnostic tools but as narratives. I explore how mainstreamed psychological concepts of transmission provide the backbone of my participants' autobiographical accounts and a convincing explanation for their emotional suffering. I examine the strengths and weaknesses of common models of transmission in helping individuals to make sense of and address their problems. Finally, I call for a broadening of these analytical categories to better capture the subjective experiences of descendants of families impacted by war and violence.

In the following section, I outline these two lines of argument and the theoretical contribution of my thesis in more detail.

Kriegsenkel identities and therapy culture

The first part of my exploration describes and analyses the construction, performance and management of *Kriegsenkel* identities in the context of psychological concepts of transgenerational transmission and the norms, assumptions and techniques of the so-called Western 'therapy culture' (Furedi 2004) more broadly.

I start in Chapter 4 by drawing together the basic resources, self-definitions and practices of the recent *Kriegsenkel* movement. Driven by the shared conviction that WWII trauma was transmitted to their generation, *Kriegsenkel* now meet in self-help groups, workshops and weekend seminars to talk about their personal stories and to compare their psychological difficulties. Common psychological

symptoms are extracted from *Kriegsenkel* life histories collected in popular books, contributed to special websites, and reproduced in Facebook-groups. Through this process of ‘sharing and comparing’, a cluster of symptoms for a new psychological profile is slowly being assembled and associated with a *Kriegsenkel* identity.

The causal logic is similar to that of other ‘second generations’, in particular that of descendants of Holocaust survivors, in that historical trauma is seen as the root of current issues, as shown by anthropologist Carol Kidron (2003).

However, the general situation of the German *Kriegsenkel* is different, because their emotional problems are (yet) to constitute a recognised ‘condition’. Their practices and motivation are in this sense more comparable with those of sufferers from other controversial conditions. Kristin Barker (2002) studied the case of fibromyalgia sufferers, where self-help groups and books allowed individuals to contextualise and legitimise their suffering in the absence of an official (medical or psychiatric) diagnosis. I understand *Kriegsenkel* activities as driven by the desire to prove that their emotional distress is ‘real’, in a context that does not yet have a ready-made psychological framework and where claims of German victimhood are still contested in the public sphere.

Also, unlike in other cases of ‘second generations’ such as descendants of families of Holocaust survivors (Danieli 1998b; Kellermann 2001a, 2008; Kidron 2003) and families affected by WWII in other countries (Aarts 1998; Lindt 1998; Op den Velde 1998), this process of negotiating common symptoms is not driven by psychiatrists and psychotherapists, but rather in self-managed support groups and internet platforms organised by volunteer activists.

Having analysed the role of narratives of transgenerational transmission as the cornerstone of an emerging psychological *Kriegsenkel* profile, in Chapter 5, I take a step back to show that the entire *Kriegsenkel* identity is firmly embedded

in the framework of Western therapy culture. I draw in particular on Eva Illouz's work (2008) to show how war grandchildren identities are constructed, explored, performed and managed in accordance with the norms of therapeutic discourses and self-help culture: From the fact that my interviewees identified their emotional issues as rooted in their childhood family and that their autobiographical accounts were woven together with psychological concepts of transgenerational transmission, to the practices of confirming *Kriegsenkel* identities in self-help groups and discussion fora and addressing their issues by choosing from a broad range of therapeutic tools. Even the goals of becoming 'emotionally healthy' and 'self-actualised', understood as individual aspirations, are ultimately prescribed by therapeutic discourses (Illouz 2008:172). I will argue that a familiarity with therapeutic concepts is a key factor that explains why some people understand their emotional problems as related to the family's war trauma, whereas others (including many East Germans) do not.

Lastly, my German case study contributes to the broader discussion around therapeutic culture.

Stretching over the last five decades, the debate has been dominated by sociologists with an overwhelmingly negative view of the influence of the 'therapeutic persuasion' (Illouz 2008) on modern life and concepts of selfhood. There is a broad consensus that what has been subsumed under various labels, such as 'therapeutics' (Rose 1998), 'therapeutic ethos', 'therapeutic culture', 'therapeutic worldview' (Furedi 2004), 'therapeutic gospel' (Moskowitz 2001) or 'therapeutic persuasion' (Illouz 2008) has exerted an unparalleled influence on the modern Western societies. What these terms also express is that psychological thinking has transcended the relationship between an individual and a therapist, and has spilled over into almost every aspect of private and public life.

Frank Furedi (2004:84) explains that the influence of psychoanalysis initially, and later psychology more broadly, rose steadily over the course of the 20th century to become a significant feature of Anglo-American mainstream culture. Eva Illouz (2008) adds that today, not only has a large portion of the entire US population consulted a therapist at some stage in their lives, but even more importantly, psychological thinking has been institutionalised in many different social spheres, including corporations, the mass media, schools and the army. It is now relayed in a wide array of settings from confessional talk shows and self-help books, magazine advice columns and support groups to school curricula, prisoner rehabilitation, and social welfare programs (Illouz 2008; Rose 1998). Illouz explains the 'triumph of the therapeutic' (Rieff 1966) with the fact that psychology offers tools and technologies to help people deal with the challenges and complexities of modern life, most noticeably in the workplace and in the family.

Authors like Phillip Rieff (1966), Philip Cushman (1990) and Christopher Lasch (1991) bemoan the rapid social changes of modernity, which, in their view, have led to a demise of traditional frameworks and allowed for the ascendancy of therapeutic culture. With the decline of religious authority, 'therapy as the new faith' (Moskowitz 2001) is now said to fill a need that was once addressed by religion, with psychological experts taking over the roles once played by spiritual guides.

The rise of counselling and therapy culture has been critiqued as fostering moral collapse (Furedi 2004; Lasch 1991; Rieff 1966), as encouraging an extreme individualism and a 'narcissistic over occupation with the self' (Lasch 1991:XV). The modern, individualised self has been labelled as empty and severed from tradition and communal relationships (Cushman 1990; Furedi 2004), as socially disengaged and withdrawing into the private sphere, losing sight of the larger public good (Moskowitz 2001). Arguing against this last point, Eli Zaretsky

(2005:3) - one of the few (at least partly) positive voices - points to the great influence that psychoanalysis has had as a 'force of human emancipation', in particular on the political movement of the 1960s in the US and later the feminist and gay liberation movement in the 1970s.

Some authors claim that, rather than alleviating emotional suffering, therapeutic culture ends up creating or perpetuating the pain it is trying to cure, either by fostering a culture of emotional vulnerability and victimhood vis-à-vis the challenges of modern life (Furedi 2004); by insisting on a self-contained individualism and thereby favouring a further weakening of interpersonal and community relations that had caused the problem in the first place

(Cushman 1990); or by setting vague benchmarks of emotional health, self-actualisation, and happiness against which the individual invariably finds themselves falling short (Illouz 2008). Lastly, one of the most influential critiques comes from Michel Foucault (1995) and his followers (Chriss 1999; Donzelot 1979; Lasch 1991; Rose 1990, 1997, 1998), who expose the therapeutic discourse as a practice of government and an insidious form of social control. Power is not necessarily exerted by authoritarian suppression, but through an alignment between government interests and the desires of the individual for autonomy and emancipation, which makes them susceptible to being managed and disciplined (Rose 1998).

While these studies largely focus on Anglo-Saxon countries, first and foremost the US,⁷ their concepts and critiques can also be transferred to Germany, at least to the segment of society the *Kriegsenkel* represent: middle-class, well educated and predominantly female, often found to constitute the core clientele of counselling practices and consumers of self-help literature and support groups (Illouz 2008; Irvine 1999; McLeod and Wright 2009).

⁷ The exceptions are Foucault (1995); Rose (1990, 1997, 1998).

However, the authors that comment on therapeutic culture tend to present broad narratives of social and cultural change rather than taking into account the subjective experiences of the people who are the clients and consumers of self-help books and counselling. A recent book by Timothy Aubry and Trish Travis (eds.) promises to ‘rethink therapeutic culture’, and while its contributors indeed present a more positive analysis of its multi-faceted influence, their assessment also neglects the perspective of the therapeutic subject (Aubry and Travis 2015). Drawing on research with marginalized women in Australia, sociologists Julie McLeod and Katie Wright (2009) are among the exceptions to demand closer attention to the different ways in which these narratives and practices are mobilised and performed by certain social groups.

From an anthropological perspective, I heed McLeod and Wright’s (2009) call and aim to understand the subjective experiences of the German *Kriegsenkel* and their engagement with the therapeutic culture they grew up in. In doing so, I am less interested in some aspects of therapeutic culture, such as the practices of power and self-surveillance of the Foucaultian School or the demise of traditional cultural frameworks and organised religion. Instead I will discuss two phenomena seen as consequences of the influence of therapeutic culture: the perceived lack of social and political engagement and ‘narcissistic self concern’ (Moskowitz 2001) and the enshrining of an all-encompassing sense of vulnerability and victimhood into the understanding of the modern self and its life challenges.

The first argument is that therapeutic culture’s framing of issues as personal and private discourages social and political action. Eva Moskowitz (2001) for example, believes that with most of the attention today on private life and the family, people have become blind to the larger public good. As my exploration of a typical *Kriegsenkel* ‘journey’ will show in Chapter 5, being a victim of transmitted WWII trauma is indeed understood as a personal problem, to be

traced back to the childhood family and to be addressed in private therapy or explored with groups of peers. While this could be viewed as social disengagement, I argue that one consideration which has been overlooked so far is that framing issues as psychological rather than social or political is also a way to address problems in an environment where the topics in question are still considered politically sensitive. Self-help groups provide a protected space, where emotional suffering can be explored without fear of criticism.

The second point I will take up in detail in Chapter 5 is the claim that rather than ‘empowering’ individuals to withstand the challenges of modern life, therapy culture promotes narratives of suffering, victimhood and disease. Sociologists like Furedi (2004) and Illouz (2008) claim that people are instructed to see themselves as victims of their upbringing rather than as self-determined agents in control of their lives. I concur with this view to a degree. Many among my participants very much portrayed themselves as emotional casualties of their dysfunctional families. Yet at the same time therapy culture also provides the tools to understand and overcome suffering, and for many the exploration of their *Kriegsenkel* identities was experienced as unequivocally positive. I will argue that the influence of Western therapy culture on the individual cannot be adequately characterized as merely fostering vulnerability and as eroding self-reliance, but simultaneously as providing analytical tools and resources to overcome emotional damage and instill hope for a better future.

A broader approach to transgenerational transmission

Questions about the transgenerational transmission of trauma were first raised in relation to families of Holocaust survivors. In the late 1960s children of survivors started to seek psychological treatment in Canada and later in the US and Israel (Danieli 1998b). By 2000, over 500 studies had already been

published on the long-term impact of the Holocaust (Kellermann 2008).⁸ While a large proportion of this research shows how the psychological trauma of the parents was passed down to the younger generations,⁹ it is generally accepted that, as a group, children of Holocaust survivors are not more prone to psychopathology than the rest of the population of their respective countries (Felsen 1998; Kellermann 2008; Solomon 1998). They do, however, share a common psychological profile (Danieli 2007; Felsen 1998; Kellermann 2001a; Solomon 1998), sometimes subsumed under the label ‘child of survivors complex’ (Felsen 1998:49), and those who suffer, suffer more deeply than their peers (Danieli 2007).

Kellerman (2008:263) points to a clinical subgroup of descendants who were afflicted with severe ‘Second Generation Syndrome’. Identified symptoms include a predisposition to develop PTSD, difficulties separating from the parents, personality disorders or neurotic conflicts, bouts of anxiety and depression during times of crisis, and an impaired occupational, social and emotional functioning. In both the US (Stein 2009) and Israel (Kidron 2003) descendants themselves have also gathered around an identity as ‘second generation Holocaust survivors’ with a sense of shared psychological difficulties.

Building on the research on Holocaust survivors and their families, investigations into the transgenerational effects of trauma were extended to a broad range of other contexts, including war, genocide, repressive regimes, suppression of indigenous populations, domestic violence and infectious diseases.¹⁰

⁸ For literature reviews see for example Brähler et al. (2011); Felsen (1998); Sigal and Weinfeld (1989); Solomon (1998), Steinberg (1989).

⁹ For example Auerhahn and Laub (1998); Bar-On (1995); Bar-On et al. (1998); Kestenberg and Brenner (1996).

¹⁰ See Danieli (1998a) for a large collection of articles across these topics; also Altounian (1990); Dickson-Gómez (2002).

Despite continuing failure to provide evidence for a pathological ‘second generation syndrome’ (Op den Velde 1998:147), clinical studies and empirical research based on accounts by mental health practitioners reported a range of complaints and symptoms, frequently observed in patients from families who have lived through war and violence, including offspring of Vietnam veterans in the US (Rosenheck and Nathan 1985; 1998), children of Dutch WWII war sailors and civilian resistance fighters (Op den Velde 1998), families of Dutch collaborators with the Nazi regime (Lindt 1998) and offspring of WWII survivors from the Dutch East Indies (Aarts 1998).

As mentioned above, research on the transgenerational impact of WWII on the non-Jewish population in Germany is only just starting to emerge, but psychoanalysts and psychotherapists have observed certain issues commonly found in members of the *Kriegsenkel* generation, including a deep seated sense of loneliness, a depressed world view, problems with self-worth (Alberti 2010), difficulties with separation and individuation from parents (Bachofen 2012), an insecure sense of identity and higher levels of anxiety (Lamparter and Holstein 2013).

Explanations of how exactly traumatic experiences are transmitted from generation to generation and how their impact can be assessed diverge depending on the respective (sub-) discipline. Psychoanalytical concepts, for example, claim that traumatic experiences that could not be worked through by the survivor generation are unconsciously passed on to the next, while sociocultural and socialisation approaches emphasise the conscious and direct influence parents have on their children (Kellermann 2001b). Psychometric assessments measure the occurrences of symptoms of transmitted PTSD; while biological and epigenetic models trace the physical changes that trauma leaves behind not only in the eyewitness generation but also their offspring.

While trauma and its damaging influence across generations is generally accepted as fact (von Issendorff 2013) there are many critical voices from a range of disciplines, questioning some of the basic approaches and assumptions around which the concepts are built. Von Issendorf (2013) for example points out that as the original events often lie far back in the past and the eyewitness generation has rarely sought psychological help, retroactive assessments of traumatic impact and of what was transmitted are difficult per se. In addition, a transmission of traumatic experiences to the following generation can be impacted and overlaid by a great number of other biographical and psychological factors, so that symptoms cannot be cleanly observed and attributed in isolation.

Concepts of transgenerational transmission of trauma have been also been critiqued for their 'uni-directionality' (Brähler et al. 2011; Völter 2008) as overly deterministic and disempowering (Summerfield 1996) and as pathologizing people as victims of a past that they did not actually experience themselves (Kidron 2012). Approaches to trauma and PTSD more broadly were criticised by anthropologists as Eurocentric, inappropriately imposing Western approaches to healing rather than accounting for the multitude of ways in which different cultures respond to extreme violence and suffering (see Argenti and Schramm 2010; Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Kidron 2012), and as collapsing the moral distinctions between victims and perpetrators (Leys 2000).

Carol Kidron (2012) noted that apart from her own research (Kidron 2003, 2009a, 2012) there has been almost no ethnographic work to date assessing the impact of concepts of transmitted PTSD and how descendants themselves understand and apply these ideas to explain their emotional legacy. In many ways, my research follows in her footsteps. Based on her research with second-generation Holocaust survivors in Israel and offspring of survivors of the Cambodian genocide living in Canada, Kidron questions the validity of

dominant concepts of transmitted PTSD across cultures. Participants in both countries reject the idea of transgenerationally transmitted PTSD, and she describes alternative forms of non-pathological responses to the parents' traumatic past and to familial silence (Kidron 2009a, 2012).

Many German *Kriegsenkel* on the other hand - firmly embedded in Western psychological discourses - very much understand themselves as victims of an inherited emotional legacy. While concepts of transmitted trauma may be critiqued in the academic realm, many of the German *Kriegsenkel* I interviewed uncritically accepted as 'scientific truth' that unresolved traumatic or difficult experiences stretching back to WWII were transmitted to them by their families and that this transmission was an important, if not the main, source of their current psychological difficulties. However, on a closer look, many aspects of the stories shared did not seem to neatly fit into the narrow conceptualizations of common models of transgenerational transmission. Rather than questioning the validity of the concepts of transmitted PTSD as such, my thesis thus argues for a broadening of the analytical lens and categories in order to better capture the lived experiences of descendants of families impacted by war.

Firstly, during my interviews, it became clear that familial transmission relating to WWII cannot be compartmentalized into 'traumatic' and 'non traumatic' content, as the boundaries are fluid. As a defining time in their life, WWII had in many cases shaped the older generations' behaviours, attitudes and values, to which the children were exposed when growing up. From my participants' stories, I would challenge the underlying assumptions of the psychological models that only unresolved traumatic experiences are passed on. Children from families where the parents and grandparents were perceived to be traumatised did seem to suffer more as a result, but even those who said that they were the 'lucky ones', surviving WWII without much loss and damage, still passed on their experiences and worldview to their offspring.

Secondly, it seems that traumatic experiences are not neatly handed down from generation to generation, as is implied in particular by psychoanalytical models. My cases show that the grandparents often had an important and direct influence on their grandchildren's life, and this needs to be taken into account when assessing the impact of past traumatic events.¹¹

Thirdly, it was not just elements of victims' trauma that appeared in my German participants' life histories, but also aspects of perpetratorship. Victimhood and perpetratorship are often found in the same family (and sometimes even in the same person of the eyewitness generation), and across generations clear distinctions between transmitted pain and loss and aspects of guilt and shame are hard to draw. This would also apply to many other conflicts, in particular more recent intra-state ones, where the lines between victimhood and perpetratorship tend to be blurry.

Lastly, while my participants conceptualized 'transgenerational transmission of war experiences' exclusively with what was actively transmitted - as an unwelcome emotional burden, - much of what transpired from their narratives pointed to things that were *not* passed on to them by their families because of the war. The many silences and secrets for example prevented the *Kriegsenkel* from feeling part of a continuous family line, where stories, traditions and experiences were passed on from generation to generation. Many complained about 'cold' mothers and emotionally detached fathers who, presumably traumatised by their war experience, were incapable of providing emotional nurturing and support to their offspring. A broad range of psychological problems was also attributed to a lack of attachment to a *Heimat* (homeland)

¹¹ It is a sad fact, that many psychological models do not seem include the extended family in their observations of the dynamic, as they were based on work with descendants from Holocaust survivor families, where many family members had been murdered in the concentration camps.

due to a family history of flight and expulsion, ranging from feelings of homelessness and loss to frequent job changes and an inability to commit to a home, a partner or to having children. It was my impression that, while not always neatly separable, there was as much disappointment around these absences in transmission (or rather, as I will argue in Chapter 7, these transmissions of absence) as there was around feelings of depression, anxiety and guilt assumed to have been passed down by the family. I thus believe that these gaps and absences warrant more exploration in their own right than common models of transmission account for.

In summary, based on my German case study focused on the subjective experiences of people growing up in families impacted by war and violence, I argue for the adoption of a broader perspective to adequately capture the characteristics mentioned above, aiming to present, as Derek Summerfield (1996:377) demands, a “more richly textured understanding of the range of responses to war and atrocity, and how these might be traced across decades and generations in a particular society.”

Lastly, a note on terminology. In spite of some critiques against the concept of ‘transgenerational transmission’ discussed above, I will nevertheless use it as my key term. It not only facilitates widespread, shared understanding of the topic, but is also exactly how most of my participants understood the process - as a mechanical, largely unconscious and uni-directional imprinting from their parents and grandparents over which they had no control.

Although often used synonymously in the literature, I will use ‘transgenerational’ (‘across generations’) rather than ‘intergenerational’ (‘between generations’) transmission, which seems more appropriate for my case study.¹²

To allow for the inclusion of the aspects of non-traumatic content as well as aspects of perpetratorship, I will speak of transgenerational transmission of WWII ‘experiences’. Under ‘experiences’ I loosely subsume memories, emotions, beliefs, attitudes and behaviour related to and shaped by having lived through WWII. Since ample time has passed since the original events, I am not referring to experiences as raw and current, but rather to the person’s adaptation to them over the course of their lives, the ex-post ordering and re-construction of events and memories that happen somewhere along the fluid continuum between past and present (Throop 2003).

4. Thesis outline

My thesis falls in to three main parts.

The first part (Chapters 1-3) provides information about my fieldwork and research methodology and positions the recent emergence of the *Kriegsenkel* movement in the context of Germany’s public and private narratives about WWII.

Chapter I: Fieldwork Description & Methodological Considerations introduces my fieldwork site and participants and describes my data collection process of conducting in-depth life history interviews and participant observation. It explores the methodological challenges that this kind of research entails, where the main events have occurred in the past and cannot be captured and verified

¹² For definitions of transgenerational and intergenerational see <http://www.yourdictionary.com>.

through direct observations. Using Ian Hacking's (1995) concept, I will argue that while my participants were 're-writing the past' in the interview process, drawing together different kinds of memories, information, observations and intuitions about the family history, and superimposing contemporary ideas of trauma and transmission of trauma on past experiences, their re-constructed life histories were nevertheless experienced as more coherent and meaningful than previous versions, as they were able to explain some of the idiosyncrasies of their upbringing and resulting emotional suffering.

Chapter 2: Of 'Mastering' and 'Silencing' the Past – Public Narratives about WWII and National Socialism in Germany since 1945 traces how Germany attempted to publicly come to terms with its responsibility for the Nazi war crimes and the Holocaust on the one hand, and their own losses and civilian wartime suffering on the other. I will show how, as West Germany considered its responsibility for the crimes committed by the Nazi Regime, and East Germany focused on building a better socialist future rather than on dwelling on the past, most aspects of wartime suffering were excluded from the culture of public commemoration in both parts of the country, in particular in the 1970s and '80s when my participants attended history lessons at school. In the early 2000s the moral taboo was lifted and Germans started to consider the long-term psychological impact of the war on the eyewitness generation – the war children – and their descendants – the war grandchildren.

Chapter 3: "Why do you have to dig around in the Past?" – Communication about WWII in German Families turns its focus to the space of the families that the *Kriegsenkel* generation grew up in. It systematically maps the whole spectrum of communication about WWII - from almost complete silence to incessant talking - and shows how public silences around wartime suffering were often compounded by silences in the private sphere. Taboos, denials and an unwillingness to share painful and shameful memories created an atmosphere of

secrecy and suppression that left the *Kriegsenkel* generation without a clear sense of the familial past, a family dynamic in which they however often played an active role. I will conclude by arguing that overlapping layers of silences, gaps and blind spots can help explain why the traumatic impact of WWII on German families went largely unnoticed for more than 60 years and why the topic was later taken up with such emotional intensity.

Part two of my thesis (Chapters 4 and 5) traces and explores the recent emergence of *Kriegsenkel* movement as a social phenomenon.

Chapter 4: Better 'sick' than 'strange' - The War Grandchildren Movement and the Desire to Legitimize Suffering outlines the short history, self-understanding and range of activities of the *Kriegsenkel* scene and argues that its core function is to contextualise and validate emotional distress. I contend that in a situation where research on the transgenerational impact of WWII for Germany and related psychotherapeutic practices are only just starting to emerge, the *Kriegsenkel* are de facto 'diagnosing' themselves as sufferers of transmitted war trauma. To explore and further confirm this new identity, they now meet across the country in self-help groups, workshops and Internet fora, sharing personal stories and comparing psychological difficulties among peers. Through these practices a cluster of symptoms for a new psychological profile is slowly being assembled. At some point, the war grandchildren may well lobby for formal recognition and request specialised therapy to alleviate the symptoms associated with a '*Kriegsenkel* syndrome'.

Chapter 5: "Hooray, I am a *Kriegsenkel*!" - Suffering and Liberation in the Age of Therapy discusses the construction of *Kriegsenkel* identities in the context of the debate around 'Western Therapy culture'. The chapter follows Kerstin's *Kriegsenkel* journey and draws out elements common to the broader experience of the group. I will show how war grandchildren construct, explore, perform and

manage their newly found identity entirely within the framework of contemporary Western ‘therapy culture’, which has long been critiqued by sociologists for cultivating vulnerability and victimhood and as promoting political disengagement and narcissistic self-concern. Looking from the subjective experiences of consumers of therapy and self-help culture, I argue these discourses on the other hand also create meaning for emotional problems, help break through social isolation, and offer therapeutic interventions, often seen as the only hope for a happier and healthier future.

Part three (Chapters 6 and 7) then delves deeper into individual *Kriegsenkel* life histories and explores narratives of transmission of war experience from their subjective perspectives.

Chapter 6: Accounts of Transmission (I) - The Invisible Wounds of War is built around the life histories of Anja and Juliane who both feel the traumatic impact of the war on their families and on themselves - bombardment, fear and chaos in one case, and rape and sexual violence in the other. I will discuss common psychological models with which my participants frame their accounts of transgenerational transmission and point to their respective strengths and weaknesses in explaining and addressing the subjective experiences of growing up in families affected by war. Finally, I conclude that basic concepts from the recently emerged field of affect theory could alleviate some of the shortcomings and drawbacks of these traditional models.

Chapter 7: Accounts of Transmission (II) – The Losses and the Shame of War traces the role of absences in narratives of transgenerational transmission, using the example of three different *Kriegsenkel* life histories. Charlotte story explores how her family’s loss of *Heimat* (homeland) impacted on her life, leaving a gap where her attachment to home was expected to be. Paula and Rainer are both struggling in their different ways with the legacy of being the descendants of

high-ranking Nazi perpetrators, who still play a big role in their life, in spite of the fact that their grandfathers are no longer physically with them. I will show how absences are socially constructed and intensely relational, and how people are able to exert agency over them, either by actively attempting to bridge the gap and reconnect with what was lost or by consciously breaking with the familial transmission and widening the distance between the generations. Given the crucial role that absences play in subjective accounts of transgenerational transmission of war experiences I will stress that they warrant an exploration in their own right.

Finally, the Conclusions provide a summary of my main findings, identify some areas for further research, and raise some questions about the relevance of the German case study for the exploration of the transgenerational impact of war and violence in other contexts.

5. An ‘Anthropologisation’ of suffering? – On Germans as victims

Before launching into the subject matter I would like to express one final caveat, which is of personal importance to me. In this thesis I will talk extensively about German wartime suffering. Almost all of the stories told are those of descendants of families commonly labelled as ‘perpetrators’, ‘supporters’ or ‘bystanders’ of the Nazi Regime (see Levine and Hogg 2009:307-8 for a discussion of these terms), as these wartime experiences of the German majority population lie at the heart of the *Kriegsenkel* movement and the most recent narratives of transgenerational transmission of WWII. However, writing about the suffering of a nation that was directly responsible for the Holocaust is still a sensitive issue. German researchers from the various disciplines publishing on the topic are still careful to stress that their work is in no way intended to minimise

the immense suffering inflicted by the Germans on their victims (for example Knoch and Kurth 2012; Kuwert and Freyberger 2007).

Much opening has happened in Germany in the last ten years, but some critics remain suspicious of this recent shift in public attention. Jewish-German journalist Henryk M. Broder said in an interview:

Everything the Germans had to go through during the war and after the war was mere discomfort compared with what the Nazis did to their victims...In a world in which everyone wants to be a victim even the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the perpetrators want to stand on the right side of history. (Crossland 2008)

Historian Dan Diner (2003) criticises public debates and media representations of German experiences during WWII as a 'de-historicisation' in favour of an 'anthropologisation of suffering' (*Anthropologisierung des Leidens*). He warns against the tendency to portray German wartime suffering as merely a human experience in the most general sense, thereby stripping it of its moral and political context and pushing aside the historical circumstances and responsibilities that caused their suffering in the first place.

While conceding that it is important to allow for a more open approach to WWII history where personal memories and individual stories can be shared, Tanja Dückers (2012), author of the well-known novel "*Himmelskörper*" (written from the perspective of the grandchildren generation) is also troubled by the move towards a mainly psychological line of exploration. This, in her view, loses its moral compass: "My generation has a certain historical distance but that does not mean that it is all the same and that we live in a space completely free of moral judgments...I don't believe that everything just dissolved in a cosy 'psycho nirvana', that really bothers me," she concludes.

I believe that these are valid concerns. As a German brought up and socialised in the public culture of commemoration of my time, I share much of the uneasiness around the topic, and having my PhD research perceived as an attempt to exonerate Germans of their crimes would go entirely against my personal convictions. However, I also believe that all stories need to be told if we really want to come to terms with and 'master the past' - as individuals and as a society more broadly. That includes the painful and shameful ones. When talking to Germans of the *Kriegsenkel* generation, it was obvious that many still felt impacted by a war that ended almost 70 years ago and that their family's silence was seen as a contributing factor to their suffering.

Historian Michael Rothberg (2009:3) critiques the idea that the public sphere is a scarce resource, where different collective memories compete for pre-eminence in a 'zero-sum-struggle' for recognition, and in which the memories of one group invariably block out that of others. I believe that today - 70 years after the end of WWII - it is possible to paint a more multi-faceted picture of the German past, in which Germans committed unspeakable acts of violence *and* suffered enormous losses - without creating false equations and without one set of memories cancelling out or diminishing the other.

Chapter I Fieldwork Description & Methodological Considerations

Before I launch into my topic, I would like to lay out how I collected and considered the material on which I base my analysis. In order to do this, the practicalities of my fieldwork and my methodology need to be considered simultaneously as they are closely interlinked.

This chapter starts with a discussion of the conventional distinctions made between generations and how I apply them related to the topic of my thesis. Generations have been distinguished on the one hand as biological sequences, but more importantly for my purposes, can also be differentiated sociologically, with special consideration in this case for the diverse relationships that Germans of the different generations had to WWII. While the first generation had direct and often difficult memories of the war and its aftermath, subsequent ones felt its impact only indirectly through growing up in these families. Yet, the defining characteristic of people who identify as *Kriegsenkel* is that they understand their own lives as having been substantially shaped by the events of WWII - through processes of transgenerational transmission.

The *Kriegsenkel* constitute the core group of my participants, and this chapter continues by giving a detailed overview of their profiles, my recruitment methods and the interview process, as well as other my methods of data collection, such as participant observation. The second half of the chapter presents a discussion of the methodological challenges and their implications for my thesis, in particular issues around the fluidity and unreliability of memory and the re-interpretation of the past from the standpoint of the present. I will discuss Ian Hacking's (1995) concepts of 'retro-active re-descriptions' in this context. I will argue that the emergence of the *Kriegsenkel* topic and the re-

writing of life histories are structured around recent ideas about trauma and transmission of trauma, which did not exist (or were not widely used) at the time the original events took place. While this needs to be considered a 're-writing of the past' (Hacking 1995) the newly constructed narrative was subjectively felt to be a particularly good fit. Psychological knowledge and therapeutic culture provided the framework, concepts and the vocabulary to convincingly draw together childhood memories, discordant parental behaviours, and experiences of emotional suffering into a coherent narrative.

I. Fieldwork description

My field site

I conducted my fieldwork in Berlin, between January and December 2012, and again in July and August 2013. I chose Berlin, because at the time it was home to the only active (albeit small) *Kriegsenkel* scene in the country, with people meeting in various formats to talk about their often newly discovered family history and the after-effects of growing up with parents impacted by WWII. Secondly, being a city of 3.5 million, Berlin promised to give me access to interviewees of diverse backgrounds including those who grew up on either side of the wall. However, as I am focusing on a sociological generation of people from a certain age group who were subject to similar historical influences and who therefore to some extent have similar defining experiences when growing up (Mannheim 1928), my fieldwork site was not limited to Berlin as a physical location.

My participants: terminology, selection and profile

Three *biological* generations are relevant for my thesis: the grandparents, born around 1900, who experienced the war as adults and - in the case of the

grandfathers - often as active soldiers; the parents, born roughly between 1930 and 1945, who lived through WWII as children or teenagers; and their children, born between 1955 and 1975.

When researching the long term impact of National Socialism and WWII, it has sometimes become practice to sequence descendants of the German majority population in the same way as Holocaust survivors as 'first, 'second' and 'third generation'.¹³ According to this system, my participants would be 'second generation' as they were born into families who had direct experiences of the war. However, as Völter (2008) points out, this classification is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it does not distinguish between parents and grandparents, who would both be considered 'first generation', and secondly because using the same terminology for the German majority population as for Holocaust survivors could be seen to imply that the suffering is comparable and as minimising the Holocaust (see also von Friesen 2012). Therefore, I will rely on the vocabulary of *familial* generations instead.

In addition, I also use 'generation' in Karl Mannheim's (1928) *sociological* sense of the term. The two main generational descriptors used in my research are the 'war children' and 'war grandchildren'. The first group is that of the *Kriegskinder*, the 'war children' - Germans born roughly between 1930 and 1945. Age brackets vary slightly between different researchers,¹⁴ but the most important criterion to attribute this label to them is that they were children or young teenagers at the time of the war and (for males) had not yet been drafted into the *Wehrmacht*. My participants are the children of these 'war children',

¹³ For example Lamparter, Wiegand-Grefe, et al. (2013); von Friesen (2012); Wachsmuth (2012).

¹⁴ For example Knoch and Kurth (2012); Radebold (2004); Radebold, Bohleber, and Zinnecker (2008).

born roughly between 1955-75,¹⁵ now called ‘war grandchildren’ or *Kriegsenkel*.

Both terms, *Kriegskinder* and *Kriegsenkel* are now well established in the German public and I will use them in my thesis, in spite of the fact that they are not without complication and controversy.

The concept of war children for example was criticised as a recently imposed ‘ex-post construct’ (Weisbrod 2005:6)¹⁶ and as a politically motivated attempt to re-claim a status as innocent victims for Germans because of their youth at the time (Wierling 2010). Welzer (2008) furthermore points out that rather than being a homogenous sociological age group, the generation of the war children covers a range of widely diverging experiences, which cannot neatly be subsumed under the same category. It stretches from children who were too young to remember 1945, to those who might recall nights in bomb shelters with their mothers, to those already entering puberty at that time and who may have been active in the Hitler Youth or as *Flakhelfer* (anti-aircraft helpers).¹⁷

Moving to the next generation adds another layer of complexity. Unlike *Kriegskinder* (war children), which only signifies a certain age bracket, the term *Kriegsenkel* (war grandchildren) comes with an additional layer of meaning. It not only implies that their parents shared a particular historical experience, but also that this experience had a particular influence on their children. As I will

¹⁵ Again, the age bracket varies slightly between researchers: for example Bode (2009) defines war grandchildren as born between 1965-75. Alberti (2010) includes people born in the 1950s and 1960s in this generation. For my research I will apply Ustorff’s (2008) age bracket of people born between 1955 and 1975 as the one best suited for my participant group. To be called a *Kriegsenkel*, more important than their age is the age of the parents during the war (they need to have been children or teenagers).

¹⁶ Weisbrod’s criticism is in relation to what he calls (but does not further define) as the *Kriegsjugend Generation* (War Youth generation), which may be slightly older, but the same criticism would also apply to the concept of the ‘war children’.

¹⁷ Gabriele Rosenthal (1997, 1998a) suggested a break down of the years 1922 and 1945 into three cohorts - the ‘Hitler Youth’ (1922-30); the ‘children of the Third Reich’ (1930-1938/39); and the ‘war children’ (1939-45) as a way to capture their different experiences.

describe in detail in Chapter 4, calling oneself a *Kriegsenkel* comes with a very specific claim that unresolved war experiences have been transmitted by one's family and have impacted negatively on one's life and emotional health. Only a certain number of my participants accepted the term when talking about their life histories. Some were unfamiliar with it, a few rejected it for its implied victimhood, while for others, being a war grandchild had become an important part of their newly found sense of identity and belonging, which was clearly demarcated from and sometimes fiercely protected against other generations. Some researchers speak of 'children of the war children' (for example Knoch et al. 2012) to avoid the issues with the term *Kriegsenkel*, which I find unwieldy. I will thus use both, war children and war grandchildren (both in English and in German) throughout my thesis, as I believe that they capture the lens through which my research looks at the individual biography and family history in relationship to WWII.

During my time in Berlin in 2012/13, I conducted a total of 97 interviews with 67 people. The majority of my interviewees - 45 - belonged to the generation of the *Kriegsenkel* in the strict sense of the definition. For comparison, I also included seven people of the same age whose fathers had been drafted into the *Wehrmacht* towards the end of the war, and two people where one or both parents were born after 1945.¹⁸ These 54 people constitute my core participants. In addition, I also had numerous conversations with book authors, journalists, therapists and other healers interested in the topic, as well as with the organisers of the *Kriegsenkel* support groups and websites.

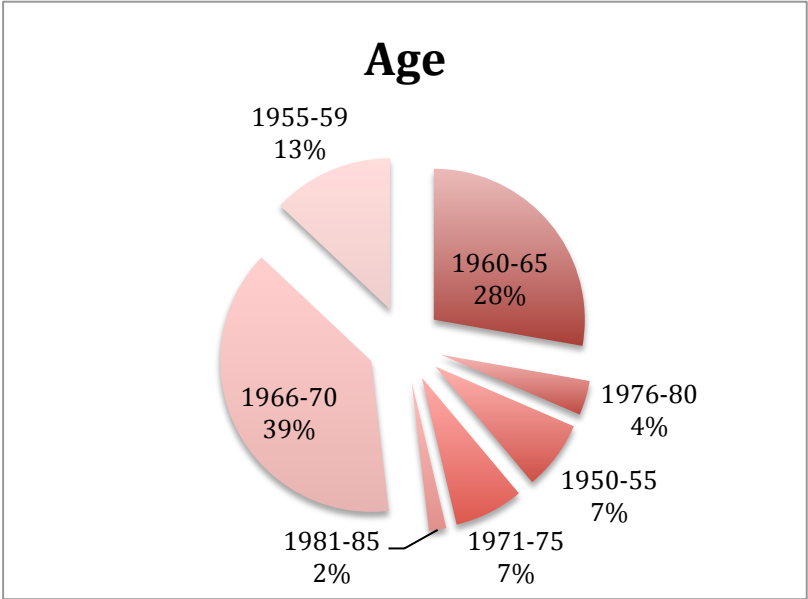
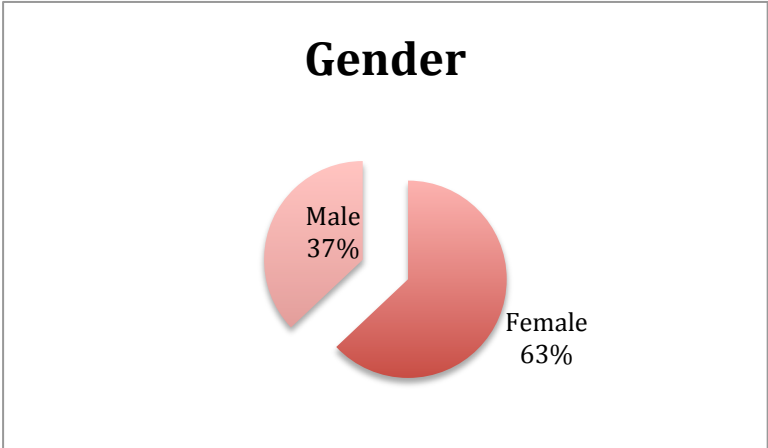
Around half my core participants were recruited through the two *Kriegsenkel* information websites¹⁹, which allowed me to post my project information. The other half came through personal networks and 'snowballing' (Madden 2010).

¹⁸ I will point out where these differ from the main group (if at all) in my chapters.

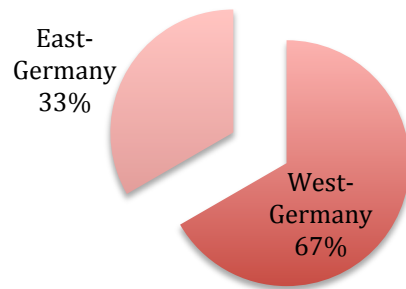
¹⁹ www.forumkriegsenkel.com and www.kriegsenkel.de.

The first contact was almost always through email, either by me sending out my information and asking whether someone was interested in an interview, or by people contacting me via the above-mentioned *Kriegsenkel* websites.

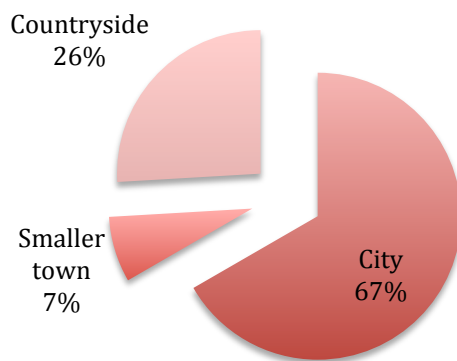
Below is a rough statistical overview of my core participants.



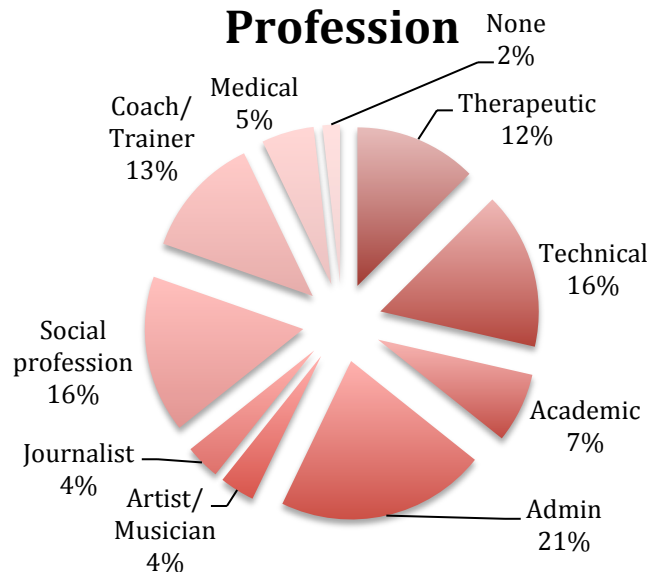
Place of birth



Place of childhood years



Profession



As a group my participants could be described as predominantly well-educated, professionals in their 40s and 50s, and more likely to be female. A few of their grandparents had been actively involved with the Nazi regime, while most (to their grandchildren's knowledge) belonged to the group of the so-called 'bystanders' (Levine and Hogg 2009:63–65), neither actively supporting nor actively resisting the Hitler regime. Two people from families of victims of the Third Reich also participated (the story of one of them, Kerstin, will be told in Chapter 5). My most prominent interview partner was a former restaurant owner from Southern Germany, who started his email to me by saying: "My name is Rainer Höß, my grandfather was Rudolf Höß, the commander of Auschwitz, would you like to talk to me?"

The selection of my participants was guided by people's interest in exploring the topic with me and is by no means is a representative sample of the German population of that age group. I did make a special effort to encourage people from the Eastern part of the country to participate, as I was keen to see whether their experiences differed from those of their Western counterparts. Their life histories were strangely excluded from both Bode's (2009) and Ustorf's (2008) *Kriegsenkel* books.²⁰

The interviews

Everyone who lived in or around Berlin, I interviewed face-to-face. Crisscrossing the city by tram, subway and bus, I met Germans of my age over coffee and cake, breakfast or brezels in coffee shops, restaurants and beer gardens, leaving a lively ambience of people chatting, babies screaming and coffee cups clattering on my

²⁰ Sabine Bode made a comment at the conference in Göttingen regarding the matter, saying that, as a West German author, she did not include East German *Kriegsenkel* biographies in her book, as she would not be able to understand and relate to them well enough to represent them adequately. In Ann-Ev Ustorf's case, I had the impression that she largely included people in her book that she knew personally, which happened to be all West Germans.

recordings, that I later listened to with shameless nostalgia when working on my transcriptions. These were all people I had never met before, and I was nervous every time I left home to meet another stranger at a street corner in some part of town. “It’s a bit like going on a blind date,” one woman reported thinking as she stood outside a coffee shop in Kreuzberg, smoking and looking for someone who might fit my description.

There were different reasons why people volunteered for my project, which they often openly stated. Some had been interested in their familial history for most of their lives and were keen to share their experiences and frustrations regarding their attempts to break through their family’s silence. Many others had only recently discovered the topic through the *Kriegsenkel* books or an article in the media, and wanted to explore in more depth how WWII still impacted on them today.

Most interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours, with follow-up meetings often going for longer. In most cases, I recorded our conversation with the person’s consent, but when someone was uncomfortable with the voice recorder, I took notes instead.

I conducted the biographical interviews in a semi-structured and thematic format, with open-ended questions, roughly following a list of topics I tried to cover with each person, in particular during the first meeting. After capturing some basic demographic information, I kept the conversations as natural and fluid as possible, often changing the order, questions and follow-up questions depending on the person’s responses. I would typically ask about the family history, how the family was perceived as having adapted to and communicated about the war, and whether the person felt an impact of the war on their own lives and if so, how. I furthermore asked about people’s attitudes towards their German identity, history lessons at school, as well as whether (and how) they

had come across the *Kriegsenkel* topic. (The interview structure and sample questions can be found in the Appendix).

In most cases, I was able to build up a rapport very quickly and it was possible to discuss very personal and often emotionally charged questions without long lead-up times. What definitely helped, and was often explicitly mentioned, was that I was considered an ‘insider’, a person of the same generation with a similar family history, which created a space of shared understanding and empathy. At the same time, I was also seen as an ‘outsider’, a student from an Australian university, writing and eventually publishing predominantly in English. Many of my interview partners stated that this made it easier to talk freely (and often negatively) about their families, as there was not much of a chance that they would ever come across my work. With people I got to know better, I shared more about my own family history and the conversations often turned into a process of joint exploration and discovery.

Interviewing people who were born in East Germany took a little more effort, because we did not have a shared experience of growing up (as I was born in West Germany). I was surprised to find how different the two parts of the country still were, more than twenty years after reunification, and how tangible the differences in mentality and language still were. People who grew up in the GDR still tend to feel inferior to their Western counterparts, and my innocent question ‘where were you born?’ turned out to be quite charged in some cases. It was a bit harder to find ‘*Ossies*’ (‘Easterners’) for my interviews, and I had to rely more heavily on personal contacts and snowballing to encourage participation.

In addition to face-to-face encounters, I conducted 17 interviews over the phone or on Skype with people living in other parts of Germany, who had emailed me and were keen to participate.

At the end of the interview, I would ask whether I could be in touch again if I had more questions, and everyone agreed. I would also often follow up with an email with a list of resources (books, articles, contact details of historical archives, etc.) tailored to the person's interests as a way of thanking my participants and 'giving something back'.

Some participants also volunteered additional materials, such as personal blogs, photos of their artwork, life histories they had written, interviews they had given or conducted, transcripts of family constellation sessions etc. I also collected newspaper articles, TV and Radio documentaries related to my topic as well as life histories shared anonymously on one *Kriegsenkel* website.

I stayed in touch and met more regularly with around a dozen people, first in 2012 and then again in 2013, and we often communicated by email in between catch-ups. I was thus able to track their exploration of the topic over around 18 months, which proved to be extremely fascinating, seeing their attitudes and stories evolve and change over time.

I also made an effort to convince the brothers and sisters of my interview partners to participate, which turned out to be quite difficult. It is often mentioned that only ever one sibling is interested in the family history and tries to break through the prevailing taboos to talk about a difficult past, and I found this to be accurate. In the end, eight siblings from six different families agreed to an interview. Although limited in scope, these conversations ended up being very informative, often leaving me with the feeling that the siblings were talking about completely different families. Unlike their brothers and sister, most felt that there was no transmission of WWII experiences to them. Others who declined to meet with me voiced similar opinions.

Participant observation and deeper immersion

Due to the nature of my research questions, my fieldwork focused strongly on interviews to capture life histories. However, I applied more traditional ethnographic methods of participant observation (Madden 2010) as I took part in the activities of Berlin's *Kriegsenkel* scene, attending meetings of the different support groups that existed at that time, and accompanying my participants to public lectures and *Kriegsenkel* seminars etc.

I furthermore tried out a number of therapeutic interventions that people had mentioned during our conversations. I talked about my own family in sessions with a psychotherapist and a naturopath, and confronted my grandparents' wartime past in a day of family constellations.²¹ I consulted historical archives to find out more their history and convinced my parents to accompany me on my first ever trip to Poland where my father and my grandparents were born, in search of the 'lost home' my grandmother had always talked about when I was little. All of this gave me something to share and discuss with the participants that I had become close to.

As I became more and more part of the 'movement', the boundaries between interviewing and friendship became blurry, for me as much as for my interview partners. To make sure it was clear that I was also still 'at work' and not just catching up for a coffee, I kept the voice recorder on at all times. Nevertheless, keeping healthy boundaries became harder. Many people I met were more than happy to repeatedly discuss and explore their emotional issues with an interested listener, and in quite a few cases I felt an underlying expectation akin to a

²¹ Family Constellations is an alternative therapeutic method, developed by German psychotherapist Bert Hellinger in the 1990s. It claims to reveal family secrets and family dynamics that span multiple generations and help resolve their negative effects. It relies on what is called 'the knowing field', an esoteric energy, to bring hidden information to light and foster healing. See <http://familyconstellations.com.au/fc-explained/> [Accessed 20 August 2015].

relationship with a therapist. Their questions revealed the hope that I would be able to provide some clues as to how to resolve their problems, which was overstretching my abilities and role as a researcher and sometimes left me helpless and exhausted. In some cases the only solution was to leave longer gaps between meetings.

Back in Australia, I transcribed and coded all 97 interviews, often summarising and paraphrasing longer responses and passages. My participants' quotes used in this thesis are translated from German and edited to enhance readability. Names are changed to protect the anonymity of my interview partners, except in the case of Martin Schiffel and Rainer Höß, who explicitly wished that their real names be used. German and other foreign words are written in italics. All translations from German, including from books and websites, are mine unless stated otherwise.

2. Methodological issues and considerations

During the interviews, we often covered a participant's whole life span from their childhood and adolescence to the present day. We talked about their family's ordeals and shared memories of WWII, how the parents and grandparents dealt with and communicated their war experiences, and how this impacted on them during childhood and as an adult.

In this process of re-telling and analysing the family history, complex and diverse layers of memories were drawn together to explain current emotional struggles. Some were participants' recollections of direct observations of their family's behaviour, closer to the present or retrieved further back from their childhood and adolescent past. The main point of reference to which everything linked back however - WWII – lay well before the time of their birth, and they had no first hand memories of the events felt to have had a major impact on the family.

All accounts of these are at least second hand narrations of memories, some stories being even more steps removed, where the grandparents' war experiences had been retold by the parents at some point in time. In many cases there was no openly shared information, and what may have happened to the family during the war could only be sensed and inferred. I was often surprised that my participants seamlessly integrated in to their narratives information about their family history they had learned from historical archives (which could be viewed as somewhat 'factual') as well as what they found out during family constellations workshops or sessions with a hypnotherapist (probably more 'speculative').

This meant that at the point of each interview, my participants shared narratives that were a complex, richly textured, multi-layered matrix of memories varying in temporality and factuality, which led to a number of methodological challenges and considerations for my research.

Firstly, while some of my data was captured through the classical anthropological method of participant observation (Madden 2010) my analysis is most heavily based on interviews told solely from the subjective perspective of the individual. Given that much of what they referred to occurred in the past, it was not verifiable through direct observation.

Secondly, by its very nature, human memory is a rather unreliable source of information about past events. Historian Aleida Assmann (2006a) explains that biographical memories tend to be unstable, fragmented, disjointed and incomplete, which is multiplied in the case of the *Kriegsenkel* as many of the memories feeding into their life histories were not even their own.

Thirdly, anthropologist Paul Connerton (2008) states that forgetting is an integral part of the process of remembering. The often lamented silence of the eyewitness generation – maybe born out of a desire to actively forget past events

that were reminders of the shame and humiliation of the German defeat and the Nazi war crimes - left large gaps in the memories that were passed on to the next generations. Much of what my participants shared about their family history rested on what they sensed, inferred and suspected rather than what they were told or had learned directly. A substantial part of my material were interpretations of what my participants understood to be the attitudes, emotional and behaviours of their parents felt to be the consequence of what happened to them during the war. In many ways, what was not shared about the past was as important as what was remembered and actively passed on - often more so.

However, while the fluidity and vagueness of my participants' stories about the past sometimes surprised me, it is not my main concern to elicit an elusive historic truth. It is a widely acknowledged fact in memory studies that an unfiltered account of historic events does not exist, and that "the past is mediated by, rather than directly reflected in personal memory" (Radstone 2005:135). "We do not reproduce in memory sequences of events that we have experienced," Ian Hacking (1995:247) writes, "instead we rearrange and modify elements that we remember into something that makes sense, or at times it has just enough structure to be puzzling or even incoherent. We touch-up, supplement, delete, combine, interpret, and shade." This process of remembering is impacted by a number of factors including the prevailing conventions of remembering and the person's social context, beliefs and aspirations (Freemann 2010). Anthropologists Argenti and Schramm (2010) add that narrative memory tends to introduce revisions to the original events to make them amenable to the person's psyche and to the social life of the community in which the retelling takes place. Sociologist Harald Welzer and his colleagues (Tschuggnall and Welzer 2002; Welzer, Moller, and Tschuggnall 2002) demonstrated the on-going re-interpretation and re-construction of the past in

German family conversations about WWII. Stories about the war were often told and re-told around the dinner table and in this process constantly re-written. Children and grandchildren heard and memorised these stories quite differently depending on their own understanding, interests and personal circumstances. Tschuggnall and Welzer (2002:12 using Jan Assmann's terminology) conclude that 'communicative memory', does not have any fixed points, but is continuously written and re-written, told and received in as many different versions as there are participants in the conversation - even though all family members would claim to remember the same facts. Ultimately, the unreliability of personal and familial recollections and the gaps in memory and transgenerational transmission constitute an important part of my analysis, as it is often the very lack of information about the family's past that contributed to my participants' emotional struggles.

In his well-known book *Re-writing the Soul*, philosopher Ian Hacking (1995) takes the point about the fluidity of memories a step further to say that in some sense the past itself is indeterminate, because it is constantly revised and re-written from the standpoint of the present, imposing new ideas and concepts onto past events that did not exist at the time when they took place. Hacking cites concepts of 'child abuse' as one such example, a moral judgement that – looking back in history – is now applied to certain situations (like an older man marrying a 14-year old girl), which were deemed acceptable in the social environment of the era (Hacking 1995:242). Labelling this relationship as 'child abuse' on the basis of today's norms means imposing 'retroactive re-descriptions' (Hacking 1995:241) as the person did not act intentionally 'under this description' at the time. According to Hacking these re-descriptions are truths that people now assert *about* the past, but they may not have been true *in* the past. The older man did not act with the particular intention to 'abuse' the girl, because he did not consider his action to be reprehensible at the time.

Hacking (1995) shows in the context of multiple personality disorder, the main focus of his book, how memories of childhood abuse and trauma, recovered from the unconscious with the help of a therapist, are re-interpreted in the present, and how life histories are reorganised and repopulated from this new perspective. The person's biography is re-written in accordance with this new structure of cause and consequences, and new ideas and new ways of feeling are attached to past memories and events, which are now interpreted to be at the root of their psychological difficulties. Hacking (1995:94) concludes that while the person may believe that these past events caused their illness, they are in fact re-descriptions of the past, caused by and constructed in, the present.

Hacking's concept of 'retroactive re-descriptions' (Hacking 1995:241) is very relevant for my research. In the case of my German participants psychological concepts of 'trauma' and 'transmission of trauma' were imposed on the past from today's point of view. In fact they provided the very backbone to the narrative structure of many of my interviews, as my participants considered whether their family had been traumatised by the war and how those traumatic experiences impacted on their own lives across the generations. However, Hacking's concept only refers to intentional actions 'under a description', which can be applied to the processes of transmitting trauma (the parents and grandparents did not *intend* to pass on their trauma at the time), but which does not fit neatly with trauma itself, as it is a reaction to events rather than an intentional action. There is, however, value in expanding Hacking's theory of 'retroactive re-descriptions' to ideas of trauma, because the claim that the past is re-written with new ideas from the present, still holds up.

While today trauma is an accepted term to express the long-term scarring of the psyche following catastrophic events (Fassin and Rechtman 2009), Germans who experienced the war directly typically did not conceive of themselves as traumatised at the time and many still do not today (Ermann 2007). The

common understanding was that 'war was just what happened to everyone' (Radebold 2008:49), and that people would get over it with time. Historian Svenja Goltermann (2010) claims that trauma was not widely used as a concept at the time in Germany, not even by psychiatrists. She presents a fascinating analysis of 450 medical files of returned *Wehrmacht* soldiers who - often pressured by relatives who could not cope with their erratic behaviour - had sought help from a psychiatrist in the late 1940s and 1950s. While many patients reported extreme anxiety, unsettledness and a sense of guilt and fear of punishment because they killed other human beings, their doctors viewed this as a passing state of mind, which they expected to disappear after a few weeks or months. Goltermann (2010) shows that psychiatrists shared a widely held belief that a mental illness could not be triggered by external events, provided there was no physical damage, and that if a war veteran remained troubled longer term, it was only a reflection of bad character.

Yet, while the Germans of the war generation did not think of themselves as traumatised, they did on the other hand experience intense pain, fear and suffering. German seniors still say today that the worst experiences of their life time happened during the war (Glaesmer et al. 2010; Möller and Lamparter 2013), and many grandfathers I heard of were showing other sign of distress in the forms of alcoholism, emotional withdrawal or outbursts of violence, all of which would today be assessed under the PTSD label. While experientially similar, they did not have the concept of trauma available to them to talk about their pain and they did not have the idea that trauma needed to be addressed and worked through as psychologists claim today.

The idea that traumatic experience can be transmitted to the next generation is also a relatively new concept. While the transgenerational impact of WWII, and particularly the Holocaust, has been studied in the USA and in Israel since the late 1960s (Danieli 1998b), this line of enquiry has emerged in German

academic circles only very recently in regards to the non-Jewish majority population (see Radebold, Bohleber, and Zinnecker 2008) and reached a wider mainstream audience only after the publication of Ustorf's (2008) and Bode's (2009) books. My participants' parents and grandparents were thus not only unable to conceive of themselves as traumatised, they also did not have the knowledge or awareness that trauma can be transmitted across generations. While the *Kriegsenkel* furthermore might have felt that their parents were sad or depressed or less caring and supportive than they would have wished them to be, my participants did not have the perception that traces of war trauma were passed on to them when they were little. All these ideas are very recent and mean that in 2012 my participants were 're-writing' their life history from an interpretative standpoint that was not available as they were growing up. These were in deed new descriptions imposed on past events, new ideas that were providing a new template to 're-emplot' (Kidron 2003) life histories which would have been told differently only a few years ago.

Based on my German case study, I thus concur with Hacking's (1995) concepts of 're-writing the past'. Many of my participants had only recently come to understand the impact the war had on their family and themselves, and they had previously attributed their emotional problems to other causes.

Yet, while they were only in 2012 looking back on their lives and their families through this lens, they had often felt since childhood that something was wrong with their families, their behaviour, reactions and emotions, but they had not been able to put their finger on it. The extreme emotional reaction to discovering the *Kriegsenkel* topic is an indication that the concept of trauma and transmitted trauma latched on to this indistinct perception, which could only now be articulated within a new psychological framework. Rather than being an isolated occurrence, this 'Eureka' moment was repeatedly described as a sense of a 'veil being suddenly lifted from one's eyes and seeing clearly for the first time',

and it is a consistent and defining feature of the *Kriegsenkel* movement. Again and again, members of this generation pointed to this one moment where their ‘eyes were opened’ and - seeing clearly for the first time - they re-wrote their biography. I will show that this embodied knowing, unearthed, conceptualized and ‘objectified’ within this the framework and terminology of psychology and therapeutic culture, enabled the crafting of a particularly convincing narrative to explain experiences of emotional suffering, which made this version of a ‘re-written’ past subjectively more powerful than previous ones.

A last point to consider regarding the re-construction of the past from the standpoint of the present is the fact that memories and connections between events are also always re-created in the interview process itself – with an active role played by the interviewer. Mary-Jo Maynes and her colleagues (Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2008:100) draw attention to the fact that life-histories are a ‘joint production’ between the interviewee and the interviewer. My questions and the pre-selected topics encouraged my participants to look back on their life through the lens of their family’s war experiences, and framed to an extent what was discussed and which events were omitted as irrelevant. Our conversations often stimulated particular memories and brought new connections between them into focus. In fact, the very opportunity to look at their lives from a new perspective is what made this research relevant to the people I was working with and was often the explicitly stated reason they were keen to be interviewed in the first place. Many expressed excitement after a meeting when they felt they had found new pieces they could now meaningfully fit into in the recreated jigsaw puzzle of their biography.

Considering all of the points above, it is this multi-faceted matrix of memories and re-interpretations of past events woven together in the interview that create the material on which I base my analysis. While not to be considered a true, objective reflection of how a person experienced an event *in the past*, it is the

subjective presentation of a person's life history at the moment of the 'dialogic event of the interview' (Kidron 2009a, Supplement B, p.3). I thus accept it as true for the person at that particular point in time.²² The fact that a substantial number of people who shared a similar upbringing in post-war Germany now account for their psychological issues in similar ways (not just my interview partners, but also the growing number of people who now identify as *Kriegsenkel* more generally) furthermore adds weight to the subjective 'truth' of individual stories, and gives them a wider collective relevance and validity.

Charlotte Linde (1993) points out that our memories need to be woven into a coherent fabric of a life, which is based on a causal relationship between events and a sense of continuity. Life histories are constructed and re-constructed, driven by our desire to comprehend our life as 'coherent, as making sense, as the history of a proper person' (Linde 1993:17). A life history remains an 'open unit' (Linde 1993:27) that is undergoing constant revisions to accommodate new experiences and understandings of what our life means, without ever reaching a final version.

For many members of the *Kriegsenkel* generation, the process of re-evaluating and re-writing their lives was experienced as beneficial and comforting. It was striking that in every case, the product of the reconstruction was seen as a more coherent and 'truer' version of their biography, better able to account for and integrate some of the previously incomprehensible emotions and childhood memories and feelings of 'oddness' I their family's behaviour and their own emotional issues.

Rather than constituting methodological weaknesses, I thus believe that the issues around the fluidity and unreliability of memory and the re-constructions

²² This also extends to repeated interviews, where a slightly different story would be crafted in each conversation.

of the past events provide fascinating analytical tools for anthropologists to help unpack some of the complexities that are involved when talking to people about their life history.

Chapter 2 Of ‘Mastering’ and ‘Silencing’ the Past - Public narratives about WWII and National Socialism in Germany since 1945

I. Introduction

In March 2012, a group of Germans, mostly in their 40s and 50s, got together in the picturesque university town of Göttingen for a two-day workshop entitled *The children of the war children and the long term impact of the Nazi terror*. On the surface, the meeting - organised by the little known Association for Psychohistory and Political Psychology (*Gesellschaft für Psychohistorie und Politische Psychologie*) – appeared to be just another inconspicuous academic conference on a slightly convoluted topic.²³

However, it turned out to be surprising in a number of ways. Firstly, there was the attendance. The annual meeting of the association usually attracts around 30-40 people, mainly its core membership. This time, 170 people - the majority from the general public – registered, exceeding not only all expectations but also the logistical capacity of the organisers and their venue. People had to be put on waiting lists and quite a few who decided to try their luck were literally turned away at the door. In the end, 130 bodies were squeezed into the conference facilities at the Göttingen observatory.

Secondly, there were the reactions from the audience. What I had expected to be a rather cerebral exchange about the long-term impact of WWII on German society unfolded into a highly emotional and interactive event. Papers delivered

²³ The conference proceedings were published in Knoch et al. (2012).

mainly by psychoanalysts and psychotherapists on topics like *Emotional rubble* – *the post-war generation overshadowed by the trauma of war*, or *Idyllic worlds* – *how the war grandchildren unconsciously give up their own lives* were interspersed with life histories presented by members of the *Kriegsenkel* generation themselves.

The speakers vividly outlined what it meant to be raised by families who had experienced WWII first-hand. The grandparents' generation had been adults at the time, active soldiers or women trying to get their family through the war on their own. The parents' generation had witnessed the war and its aftermath as children or teenagers. Neither of these may have talked much about their memories as the *Kriegsenkel* were growing up, and the past might have been of little overt importance in daily family life.

However, in recent years, the waiting rooms of the psychotherapists presenting at the conference had started to fill up with middle-aged Germans, who – in spite of the fact that they had grown up in times of peace, stability and (mostly) prosperity – were struggling to find their path in life. They were facing emotional problems like depression, anxiety or a general sense of hopelessness and not belonging, and had difficulties with separating from their parents and with developing stable relationships and successful careers. For many of these issues, there did not seem to be a satisfying explanation in the clients' own lives, and the psychologists were starting to look for potential reasons further back in their family history.

Would it be possible, they were now asking, that the parents and grandparents had been traumatised or at least damaged by what they had witnessed or experienced in the war? Had the bombardment of German cities, the nights spent in bomb shelters, the death of family members, and the loss of homes and belongings, left much bigger psychological scars in these generations than previously suspected? And had these scars and the 'emotional rubble' (Alberti

2010) - pushed aside by the intense effort of economic reconstruction after 1945 and buried under a sense of guilt and shame about the crimes that Germans had committed - impacted not only on the mental health of the first generation(s), but also on the emotional well-being of their children and grandchildren? Had some of this damage and trauma unconsciously and inadvertently been passed down, and could this be an explanation for the psychological problems of the war grandchildren?

The speakers at the conference were painting a rather depressing picture in response to these questions: that of a generation of Germans, raised by parents who were frugal and hard working, who had rebuilt their lives from the ruins and had focused all their attention on providing financial security for their children, but who had been emotionally absent - unable to show, understand or provide warmth and emotions. Of mothers, who told their children to eat everything on their plate and to stop whingeing about their 'little' problems. Of unpredictable fathers, who could lose their temper if something threatened their painstakingly safeguarded emotional stability and daily routines. Of children who were feeling responsible for their emotionally fragile parents, unable to build their own independent lives, and of quiet grandparents, shrouded by an impenetrable veil of silence about the past. All of this together had created an atmosphere of foggy heaviness and a lack of joy, hanging over many of the otherwise picture-perfect German family homes of the 1960s, '70s and '80s.

The audience listened in teary silence as their own childhood families were revived in front of their inner eyes. Question times were dominated by expressions of relief and empathy by the audience, and by sharing of their own stories. Again and again someone would stand up and with a voice choked up with emotions say something like: "I have never ever looked at myself and my family in this way before. But now, finally, I understand why my parents behaved the way they did and why I have been emotionally struggling all my life, always

feeling that there was something wrong with me. For first time, I don't feel alone anymore," and 130 people were clapping in support.

Sunday afternoon, on the train back to Berlin, exhausted and overwhelmed by the intensity of the past two days, I pondered what I had just witnessed. One thing seemed clear: what had made this event so emotional was that for the audience the topic felt very recent or even completely new. It obviously provided a fresh and different lens, through which the members of the *Kriegsenkel* generation were looking back at their lives, and also at those of their parents and grandparents. While many felt that the war had always been there, as a shadow, in the background, its impact had somehow been blocked from full view for all this time. They had not been able to grasp it.

Having grown up in Germany, it was intuitively clear to me why people were so surprised about the sudden discovery of the connection between WWII, their families and their own emotional issues. It was grounded in how the *Kriegsenkel* had related to WWII up until that moment: either as a historical event that had little or no connection with their own lives or - more commonly - as a national and familial legacy of perpetratorship, guilt and shame. That their families had also suffered and may have been traumatised by what they had experienced and witnessed during WWII, and that this emotional damage was passed on to the next generation had never been a consideration before.

I believe three main factors contributed to this situation. Firstly, the culture of commemoration that the *Kriegsenkel* were socialised in and that, for different ideological reasons in either part of the country, had largely excluded the wartime suffering of the German population from their public discourses. Secondly, the communication within families about the war, where the intergenerational dynamic was dominated by denials, accusations and silences, had left the *Kriegsenkel* with only patchy knowledge about what had happened to their families during the war. Lastly, the only recent popularisation of

psychological knowledge about the multi-generational impact of war and violence, which, as I will show later, is a vital element enabling and encouraging the construction of *Kriegsenkel* life histories.

Chapters 2 and 3 set the scene for my overall research topic, providing the broader historical and social framework for the exploration of the subjective experiences of transgenerational transmission of war experiences, which will follow.

These chapters put the *Kriegsenkel* movement into the context of public and private narratives about National Socialism and WWII. I will attempt to illuminate some of the complexities caused by the shifting layers of highlighting and silencing certain aspects of the past that have surrounded public and private memories of the war. I will later argue that how the war was officially remembered in Germany over the course of the past 70 years also contributed to the silences, gaps, conflicts and disappointments between the generations.

The culture of commemoration of a country – the way a nation remembers, describes and relates to its past – can be perceived in public policies and political debates, memorials and museums, rituals of commemoration of historical events, as well as in Radio and TV programs (Moller 2003).

The construction of any national history is invariably a selective representation of the past, emphasising certain aspects or events while simultaneously omitting and ‘silencing’ (Trouillot 1995) others. Ashplant, Dawson and Roper (2000:7) point out that the commemoration of war is often construed as fundamentally political, as a key element for the state “for binding its citizens into a collective national identity.” What makes the German case complicated in this regard is the fact Germany had started the war and was directly responsible for enormous loss of human life internationally. This meant that there was no victory and no heroes to celebrate (although East Germany did, as I will show), and both German states had to find a way to relate to and break with the past. In addition,

the public mourning of Germany's own losses, which, according to Ashplant et al (2000), is seen as the psychological significance of public commemorations of war, morally had to take a large step back behind the responsibility the crimes committed, and at times it disappeared almost entirely from public view. Even a mere few years ago, journalist Sabine Bode (2006:271) still suggested that the most dignified way to publicly mourn the German WWII losses was for the population to gather the night before 8 May and stand in silence, because all too often local politicians were still scrambling to find the appropriate words to say. Using anthropologist Paul Connerton's (2008) 'seven types of forgetting', I will try to unlock the different and often contradictory ways in which Germans publicly talked about WWII and National Socialism, tracing as the core elements perpetratorship and responsibility for the Holocaust on the one hand and the wartime suffering of the civilian population on the other.

While in the first years after the war, both parts of the country tended to portray the population as having been led astray by Hitler, public memory in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) radically shifted in the late 1960s.

Following my participants' memories of growing up and going to school in the 1970s and '80s, I will show that while East Germany proclaimed a total break with the National Socialist past, public discourses, TV programs and history classes in West Germany relayed a strong sense of collective responsibility for the crimes of the Nazi regime. I will argue that in spite of their differences, public narratives at that time were constructed in a way that excluded most aspects of civilian wartime suffering in both parts of the country.

Lastly, I will outline how in the early 2000s the topic of German wartime suffering (re)-emerged in the public sphere, when more diverse considerations of the war became acceptable. I will set the emergence of the war grandchildren movement and its precursor, the war children movement, in the context of this recent opening.

2. From the 'desire to forget' and 'humiliated silence' and to the singularity of the Holocaust - The war in West German public discourses before 1990

As a direct result of the war and the defeat of the Hitler regime in May 1945, Germany was occupied by Allied and Soviet forces, and in 1949 two separate states were founded - the German Federal Republic in the West (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR), ruled by the Socialist Unity Party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* - SED), in the East. Until Germany's re-unification in 1990, the two states had their very different ways of coming to terms with and 'mastering the past' ('*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*', Herf 1997:8).

The post war years: the 'desire to forget' and 'humiliated silence'

From the late 1940s to the mid 1960s, as it focused strongly on rebuilding the country, the West German government acknowledged responsibility for the war and committed to reparations to the Jewish victims and the state of Israel. In 1945-46, Allied tribunals sentenced many of the most prominent members of the political, military and economic leadership of the Nazi regime at the Nuremberg trials.

At the same time, public policy, commemoration and the media also drew attention to two groups of Germans that were experiencing the consequences of the lost war – the around 12-14 million Germans expelled from Central and Eastern European countries and the approximately 1.5-2 million soldiers thought to be held in Russian POW camps. Mass organisations representing veterans and expellees (*Vertriebenenverbände*) emerged as political actors in this first post-war period, influencing government policy to consider in their interests (Moeller 1996).

While lip service was paid to the great suffering inflicted by Germans and the Nuremberg trials made details about Nazi crimes widely accessible, the Jewish

victims remained largely faceless in the political rhetoric and consciousness of the German people. According to Moeller (1996, 2005, 2006), statistics and numbers representing the deportation and murder of much of the European Jewish population, did not instill as much empathy as the vivid descriptions found in popular movies, memoirs and novels of German women fleeing from the advancing Russians and of brave German soldiers fighting at the Eastern Front - victimised first by the Nazis, and then by the Red Army in POW camps. Historian Ruth Wittlinger (2006) adds that by sentencing a few Nazi leaders, the Nuremberg trials themselves encouraged a view of the past where the German population had been the victims of a criminal group at the top, which had led the German population astray, thereby allowing the majority population to see themselves as Hitler's victims.

There is an interesting parallel to the immediate post-war period in Japan, where Carol Gluck (2003) observed a similar mechanism. At the Tokyo war crime tribunals, responsibility for the Japanese aggression was attributed to a group of militarists to whom the Japanese people - including the emperor himself - had allegedly fallen victim. The attacks on Pearl Harbour were weighed up against the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, resulting in a portrayal of the Japanese as victims rather than as aggressors and perpetrators of WWII.

With the 'Denazification' (*Entnazifizierung*), an unprecedented attempt was made to rid German society of any remnants of National Socialist ideology and expel former Nazis from positions of power (Giordano 1987). However, there always was widespread suspicion that this was predominantly a pro forma activity - condoned by the Allied forces who had an interest in returning Germany to 'normality' as a bulwark against the communist Eastern block - rather than a phase of true repentance and acceptance of responsibility for past

crimes.²⁴ Appalled that only 0.5% of all 6 million denazification proceedings resulted in a 'guilty' or 'very guilty' verdict, writer and publicist Ralph Giordano (1987:90) denounced the widespread denials of their support for Hitler as the war generation's 'second guilt' (*Die Zweite Schuld*). With the Nazis being the 'others', their crimes could be kept at a psychological distance. Growing up I often asked myself where all the thousands of people who had been involved in the deportation and murder of the Jews had disappeared. No one ever spoke of them.

While Giordano (1987) condemns these silences and the desire to forget as an attempt to escape uncomfortable memories and questions about the past, Connerton (2008) has a somewhat more accepting view. He refers to early post-war Germany in his article on 'Seven types of forgetting' as an example of 'prescriptive forgetting' (Connerton 2008:61–62). Connerton argues that in order to restore cohesion to civil society and to re-build the legitimacy of the new West German state, the persecution and punishment of convicted Nazis needed to be turned into a forgotten issue by the early 1950s.

It was the generation of my participants' grandparents who had actively participated in the war and had largely supported the Hitler regime that was affected by the social and political environment of the late 1940s and '50s with its official acceptance of responsibility for the war that only badly covered up the strong desire to forget rather than confront the past. This attitude later became an issue of conflict with the next generation - on a political level with the protest movement of 1968, as I will outline below, and also at the level of the family, as I will explain in detail in Chapter 3.

²⁴ This is demonstrated well by the fact that the denazification documents were commonly referred to as *Persilscheine*, making reference to the well-known washing powder *Persil* and its exceptional 'whitewashing' capacity and ability to produce superior 'cleanliness' (Nowak 2012). The term implied that while a person was cleansed from a stained Nazi past, this constituted a pro forma exoneration often based on phony witnesses, which superficially glossed over a person's true involvement with the Third Reich.

What makes this situation (and the transgenerational dynamic) even more complex, is the fact that this uncomfortable relationship with the Nazi crimes was simultaneously paired with what Connerton (2008:67) calls 'humiliated silence'.

The Allied bombing of German cities had left as many as 600,000 civilians dead and wounded more than 800,000. More than 5 million German soldiers were killed before the shooting stopped, over half of them on the Eastern front (Moeller 2005). Around 12-15 million ethnic Germans were either expelled or had left their homes in Eastern Europe to escape the advancing Red Army in spring 1945, and as many as 2 million may have died from violence, starvation and disease in the process (Naimark 2010). Connerton (2008:68) expresses surprise that for most of the post-war years, almost no one in Germany publicly talked about the bombardment and destruction of German cities, and that "a colossal collective experience was followed by half a century of silence." He sees the 'economic miracle' and the quick reconstruction of the country as a covering up of the past, concealing not only of all visible signs of physical but also of the emotional destruction, and an attempted effacement of painful and shameful memories. While such 'silencing', Connerton (2008:68) concludes, can be seen as a type of repression, it may at the same time be an essential survival strategy.

While public speeches in the post-war period mentioned to some extent the fate of the expellees and the POWs, Moeller (2005) points out that there was little room to acknowledge the mental and physical difficulties of the larger civilian population. Most families were left to their own devices to grieve over lost family members who had returned physically and psychologically damaged after the war or not at all.²⁵ Many Germans also had to privately come to terms with the loss of their homes and livelihoods in the countries where they grew up, and

²⁵ Sönke Wortmann's (2004) movie *Das Wunder von Bern* (*The Miracle of Bern*) gives a good impression of the issues and conflicts that arose when a father suddenly returned to his family after the war and a prolonged imprisonment in a POW camp.

- in the case of many daughters, mothers and grandmothers who had become victims or witnesses of rape – the loss of their physical and emotional health.

Here another parallel to post-war Japan could be drawn. Anthropologist Maya Todeschini (1999) describes how the effect of radiation poisoning on the *hibakusha*, the female survivors of the atomic bombs, was systematically medically downplayed and politically silenced, leaving the sufferers to fend for themselves and psychologically come to terms with their illness and the fear of transmitting their genetic defects to their children.

While in the context of German perpetratorship, ‘humiliated silence’ and a reluctance to mention wartime suffering of the population was deemed appropriate from a moral point of view, psychologists have long pointed to the importance of public recognition of mass trauma to help populations deal with the psychological consequences of war and violence. French psychologist Erika Apfelbaum (quoted in Wajnryb 2001:72) claims that individuals need to construct themselves in a way that links personal and collective memory and that societal silence (in her case in the context of the Holocaust) is harmful for the individual as it de-legitimises their personal history. Catherine Merridale (1996, 1999) conducted interviews in countries of the former Soviet Union, where public mention or commemoration of the massive losses of human life under the communist regime were systematically suppressed. While the Russians Merridale interviewed would share their stories of suffering and hardship with family and friends, they had no way of processing their losses in the context of society at large. “Personal grief had no wider framework, no mirror, in which to observe itself gradually diminishing,” Merridale (1999:75) concludes. According to American psychologist Yael Danieli (1998: 7), an individual’s identity involves a complex interplay of multiple spheres or systems, including the biological and intrapsychic; the interpersonal, familial, social, and communal; the ethnic and cultural; religious and spiritual; the political, national, and international, etc.

Danieli argues, that, for a trauma to be integrated, it must be addressed in all the affected systems - including on the level of society. She stresses the importance of public acknowledgement of the trauma in the form of compensation, restitution, rehabilitation and commemoration for the healing process. Danieli speaks for Holocaust survivors and other groups of victims of gross human rights violations rather than for the much more complex situation of a perpetrator population, yet on a psychological level the argument is transferrable. In particular in the context of the Vietnam veterans (also at least in some parts considered as 'perpetrators'), it is often argued that negative public opinion vis-à-vis the war and a lack of recognition have hindered the returned soldiers' psychological adaptation after the war (for example Lifton 1973).

From the late 1960s to the early 1990s – Holocaust memory and the need to 'master' the past

In the 1960s, with a new generation coming of age, different accounts of the Third Reich and WWII appeared. Younger historians no longer attributed WWII to a small group of Nazis, but explained to be the result of a National Socialist ideology that had been widely supported by the German people. The Nazi war crimes and the Holocaust took centre stage in the public culture of commemoration (Moeller 1996, 2005).

In 1969, Willy Brandt, who had fought the *Wehrmacht* in the Norwegian resistance, became the first social-democratic chancellor after the 1945. His *Ost-Politik* heralded a new era of foreign relations with the Eastern European countries and set the tone for the national memory of the war for the next 30 years. In political speeches, public commemoration and history books, a new version of the German past, in which German suffering and losses were the appropriate price to pay for the pain the nation inflicted on the Jewish and other victims, became the dominant public narrative.

At the same time, the left-wing student movement of 1968 protested against the continuities between the Third Reich and the FRG, claiming that almost the entire bureaucratic, military and political elite of the Nazi regime had found equivalent or better careers in the new state (Giordano 1987). Publicly, as well as at home with their families, they demanded answers from their silent parents about their involvement in the atrocities of WWII and they strongly identified with the victims of the Holocaust (Jureit and Schneider 2010). They were influenced by psychoanalysts Margarete and Alexander Mitscherlich's widely read book *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern: Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens* (*The inability to mourn: principles of collective behaviour*), published in 1967. Using Freudian concepts the authors criticised their fellow Germans for being in denial about their collective and personal responsibility for the crimes committed by the Nazi regime. This psychological mechanism left them incapable of mourning the loss of Hitler, whom they had supported in overwhelming numbers and also of feeling empathy for the millions of victims (Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich 1967).

This so-called 'generation of 68' was born roughly between 1935 and 1950 (Jureit and Schneider 2010:26) and thus overlaps somewhat with the *Kriegskinder* generation. In terms of age, these are the mothers and fathers of my participants. However, only the parents of Charlotte, whose story will be told in Chapter 7, directly belonged to the protest movement. Most others seemed to come from rather conservative middle-class families, where the *Kriegskinder* tended to condone their parents' silence and denials, rather than challenge them. At the end of the 1960s the public focus had clearly shifted, and up until today, the dominant official view of National Socialism and WWII is the one in which the Germans were – if not collectively guilty - certainly collectively accountable for the war and the Holocaust and the guilt and shame attached to it. Public

commemorations strongly stressed the need to remember the past to ensure that history would never repeat itself.

The US TV mini-series 'Holocaust', broadcast in 1979, also contributed to a change in public opinion. Almost half of the population over 14 years watched at least one part of the series. Viewers followed the struggle and suffering of the Weiss family through the war to the concentration camps, turning the victims into "living breathing people, instead of statistics and piles of emaciated corpses" (Moeller 2005: 170, citing Harold Marcuse).

When in the mid 1980s right-wing historians tried to juxtapose the extinction of the European Jews with the mass murders under Stalin in the 'historians' controversy' (*Historikerstreit*) in an attempt to relativise the Holocaust, they were vehemently criticised and marginalised by the vast majority of academic voices that confirmed the historic significance and singularity of Auschwitz.²⁶ Talking about German suffering and claiming victim status was now immediately suspicious, denounced as a denial of responsibility for the crimes committed.

In his famous speech commemorating the 40th anniversary of the end of WWII on 8 May 1985, the then President of the Federal Republic, Richard von Weizsäcker, confirmed that German crimes against humanity must remain at the centre of public memory and commemoration in the future: "All of us, whether guilty or not, whether old or young, must accept the past. We are all affected by its consequences and liable for it. The young and old generations must and can help each other to understand why it is vital to keep alive the memories" (von Weizsäcker 1985). This has since remained the normative framework for German national memory (Assmann 2006b).

²⁶ For a summary of the 'historians' debate' and its different positions see Fischer and Lorenz (2007:238–40).

On the other hand, acknowledging the horrors of what Germans had done and accepting moral responsibility for it, had all but closed off the space in which it was acceptable to publicly discuss German losses (Moeller 1996, 2005).

While historians like Moeller (1996, 2005), Wittlinger (2006) and many contributors to Niven's (2006a) edited volume disagree or do not completely agree (as some evidence of the persistence of the victim narrative can be found at all times), I believe it is appropriate to say that from the late 1960s for a vast number of West Germans, publicly speaking of German victimhood and wartime suffering was considered a categorical moral taboo.

It is somewhat daring to describe West Germany's culture of commemoration from the 1970s to late 1990s and the exclusion of German wartime suffering with Connerton's (2008) concept of 'repressive erasure', which has connotations of totalitarian regimes. Such suppression of open debates about the past was noted for example in relation to the political purges in the Soviet Union under Stalin (Baker and Gippenreiter 1998; Merridale 1999, 2010), the Great Famine of the 1960s in China (Feuchtwang 2011), and the crimes of military Junta in Chile under Pinochet, responsible for the systematic torture, imprisonment and 'disappearance' of tens of thousands of people (Becker and Diaz 1998).

Anthropologist Stephan Feuchtwang (2011) conducted interviews among survivors of the 'Great Leap Forward' of the late 1950s and early 1960s in China, in which tens of millions of people are said to have died of starvation due to natural catastrophes as well as economic mismanagement and political fervour (Dikötter 2011). There is still no official acknowledgement by the Chinese Communist Party of the massive loss of human life and no public commemoration of the victims.

However, considering Connerton's explanations further, I believe there are also quite appropriate for the West-German case. He (Connerton 2008:60) argues that 'repressive erasure' does not have to take violent forms. He gives the

example of an exhibition, in which a master historical narrative is constructed in a certain way that the visitors are expected to internalise and that while highlighting some aspects of history, at the same time neglects or deliberately edits out others.

A number of public scandals have proven over the years that the German population is indeed expected to internalise the officially sanctioned version of the past and that it is in fact quite prescriptive. Striking the wrong chords in a public speech or choosing words carelessly can easily derail or at least tarnish political, academic or intellectual careers. One such example was the affair around Phillip Jenninger's controversial speech in November 1988, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the '*Kristallnacht*' ('The Night of Broken Glass'). Jenninger, then President of the German Parliament, tried to explain the reasons behind the popular support of National Socialism. However, he failed to dissociate himself clearly from the ideas he referred to by calling them 'fascinating', and his monotonous voice was perceived as not carrying enough empathy for the victims. More than 50 members of parliament walked out during the speech in protest, and the ensuing political storm forced Jenninger to resign a few days later, ending his career in politics (Fischer and Lorenz 2007:240—42).

While it remains unclear to what extent the war generation itself internalised this shift in focus toward remembering German perpetratorship and accepting responsibility for the Holocaust, this was the framework in which the *Kriegskinder*, my participants' parents, came of age, and — even more importantly — in which the *Kriegsenkel* were raised. All of this will play a role in the family communication explored in the next chapter.

I would like to change the focus now and hear directly from my participants how they responded to environment they grew up in.

Going to school in West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s — WWII in history lessons

The culture of commemoration of a country can not only be perceived in public policies and political debates, memorials and museums, it also filters into history books and lessons at school, where the aim is to impart knowledge about historical events to the younger generation and to cultivate certain attitudes vis-à-vis their nation's past. History books, according to German studies scholar Rainer Bendick (2001:541), "relay patterns of perceptions and interpretation of the past, that are foundational to a society [...] With their help, the next generation is expected to learn an understanding of history, which correlates with the self-image of the society in which they as adults will one day assume responsibilities."

Most of my participants went to high school in the late 1970s and '80s and what they learned about National Socialism, WWII and the Holocaust largely mirrored the public narratives that were dominant in these decades. Many of my West German interview partners remembered their history lessons quite clearly, although they took place almost 30 years earlier, and they had the impression that National Socialism and the war were talked about a lot in the *Gymnasium*²⁷, which - belonging to the better educated segments of the population - most of them had attended. Many teachers, especially the younger and more left-leaning ones who had received their teachers' training around the time of the international protest movement of 1968, had put in great effort to teach their pupils about the reasons for Hitler's rise to power and about the awfulness of the Holocaust. Students watched documentaries about the liberation of Auschwitz in class or visited concentration camps on school excursions, and the message about the indescribable cruelty Germans had been capable of had hit

²⁷ A form of secondary school, which students attend from the age of 10 to around 19, and which academically prepares students for university.

home. Many people I spoke to felt shocked and overwhelmed by the images they were confronted with, and what they heard from their teachers left a deep imprint on their forming attitudes towards their national identity. Brigitta, one of my participants, put it like this: “In the last few years of school, we only ever talked about the war, and that was when the guilt came. For my sense of identity, this was very dark and gloomy; we were watching all these documentaries, the liberation of Auschwitz etc. When I think back to my history lessons, those images are all I ever see.”

Many participants also read books like *The Diary of Anne Frank* in German literature class, and watched documentaries about WWII or the episodes of the *Holocaust* miniseries on TV at home. Images of emaciated faces behind barbed wire and piles of dead bodies pushed into mass graves by earthmovers are difficult to forget: “Every morning in the shower I have to think that they [the Jews] were gassed,” Eva-Marie said, “and that the Nazis experimented on them with boiling hot and freezing cold water. I think about these things very often, about the physical pain. I must have been 14 or so when I watched the first documentaries, without any forewarning. Before that time, the world was still a good place.”

Not everyone reacted in the same way or shared the same memories of their history lessons. Some people said that WWII was such a constant and repetitive topic at school that they got to a stage of being ‘completely fed up with it’. Others felt that while the war had been dutifully ‘worked through’; it was not really discussed or analysed in depth. Their teachers – often older and of the war generation themselves and uncomfortable with the topic - had avoided moving beyond a dry presentation of historical facts, which failed to reach their students emotionally. Sanna admitted: “History lessons at school were really boring; they did not have anything to do with me at all. You had to read those 15-odd pages

and you had to learn things by heart for the exams, but I can't even recall those facts anymore now.”

A few people said that they could not remember that the war had been a topic at school at all – either because it had not been part of the curriculum, or because they simply had no recollection of it. While the latter explanation is somewhat more likely, given the long time span that has passed and the unreliable nature of human memory, history lessons were indeed not uniform for all schools. In West Germany, responsibility for the education system lies primarily with the ‘*Länder*’, (the states), which each decides its own educational policies and school curricula.²⁸ As my participants went to the *Gymnasium* at different times and in different parts of the country, it is quite possible that in some schools ‘history lessons had stopped at a time just before the war started’, as a few of them claimed.

However, while each person remembered the degree of ‘working through’ the war and the Holocaust at school slightly differently, some aspects of their reports closely resembled each other: the focus always lay on the reasons for Hitler’s rise to power, the factual history of WWII, and the systematic murder of 6 million people in the concentration and extermination camps. The teachers were (sometimes more, sometimes less) personally invested in imparting the message that the past needed to be remembered and that something like the Holocaust should never be allowed to happen again. This narrative carried a moral weight and could not easily be questioned. “I always had the sense that there was no other option than to think of it [the war] as something very bad. You were quasi brainwashed to think like that. That was definitely the right thing to do, but...” (Tom).

²⁸ For an overview of the West-German education system see Baumert et al. (2003).

That other stories about the war were missing from the history lessons went largely unnoticed. Not one person recalled hearing about consequences of the war for the civilian population at school in any detail. Before we were scheduled to meet for our first interview, Nora went on the Internet and looked at photos of her hometown taken in 1945. She could not recall ever have seen images of her city in ruins before: “During *Heimatkunde* [local history and geography] lessons at school, we talked about rocks and things like that, but not about the destruction. Maybe they did not want to burden us kids with these things. But those photos of the destroyed city, I have the sense that I saw them for the first time last week.”²⁹

Leafing through around 50 of the around 100-150 history books that were used in West German schools between 1949 and 2000, historian Bodo von Borries (2004) acknowledges that there is too much diversity to draw any firm conclusions about the content. Nevertheless, he finds that on average WWII took up roughly 20 pages with a separate chapter explaining the persecution of the Jews and the Holocaust. While one textbook used in schools in the 1970s and 1980s did include some information about the bombing of German cities, it excluded information about the expulsions from the East and the violence inflicted by the Red Army in 1944-45. The calculations about German war casualties were ‘rather conservative’ (Borries 2004:403). As in other areas of society, in history books and history lessons the suffering of the German majority population withdrew into the background in the face of the immeasurable pain the Germans had inflicted on their Jewish and other victims.

Many members of this generation, in particular the segment of society that my participants belong to - middle class, well educated - largely accepted and

²⁹ Interviewees of an inter-disciplinary research project on the firestorm of Hamburg also said that the firestorm was rarely mentioned in their history lessons, which focused mainly on National Socialism (Holstein and Lamparter 2013).

subscribed to this version of the past. Strongly focussing on German perpetratorship, the wartime suffering of their families and the population more broadly went largely unnoticed.

3. 'Zero Hour' and the 'Victors of History' -

The war in East German public memory before 1990

In East Germany, public narratives about WWII and National Socialism drastically diverged from those of the West and a different view of the past was relayed to the public. However, while 'victim' and 'perpetrator' binaries were demarcated quite differently, they also ended up with a similar double phenomenon as in the early post war period in the West: an even more pronounced exculpation of the population from the crimes of the Nazi regime on the one hand coupled with a silencing of significant aspects of wartime suffering of the German majority population on the other. Unlike in the West however, the East German government upheld the same view of the past until the fall of the wall in 1989.

The GDR was founded in October 1949, a few months after its West German counterpart. Both states understood themselves as political alternatives to the National Socialist dictatorship, radically breaking with the past. The new government under Walter Ulbricht consisted of members of the former communist party, who – persecuted by the Nazis - had fled to the Soviet Union before the war, and who were now returning from exile as the self-proclaimed 'victors of history' (Danyel 1995a:32). The new political elite understood itself as the heirs of the communist resistance against Hitler, thus directly treading in the footsteps of the victims and *not* the perpetrators of the Nazi regime. National Socialism was interpreted as an expression of fascist class rule, against which the communists had battled. The memory of those who had died in the antifascist resistance took centre stage in commemorative practices (Danyel

1995b). People like Ernst Thälmann, a communist leader, imprisoned by the Nazis and killed in the Buchenwald concentration camp in 1944, were upheld as paragons of virtue to inspire current and future generations. At the end of the induction ceremony for the Young Pioneers, the Communist youth organisation, each child received a red flag symbolically “soaked with the blood of the many victims of the struggle for socialism” (Moeller 2005:155).

With a founding myth constructed around communist martyrdom and the final victory over the Nazi regime, the East German government consequently rejected all political responsibility for Hitler’s rise to power and the crimes committed in the German name. While in no way denying the Holocaust, the Jewish victims were often subsumed under the general term of ‘victims of fascism,’ (Danyel 1995b) and the Holocaust tended to be cited as a particularly cruel expression of fascist terror, without any distinctive significance or singularity.

The end of the war was celebrated as *‘Stunde Null’* (‘Zero Hour’, Moeller 1996:1034); the beginning of a new era with a clean slate, looking towards a brighter, socialist future. As in the West, the focus here too was on economic recovery and on building a new and better society from the ruins. The gaze was firmly fixed on the future, not on dwelling on the past. This meant that - as in the West - people were also expected to come to terms with the physical and emotional damage left by the war largely on their own.

However, as was the case in the Federal Republic immediately after the war, to the general population was also attributed a certain measure of victimhood. According to Sabine Moller (2003:46), the broader population was seen here too as powerless victims of ‘fascist seduction’, who were now given the chance to erase these past mistakes and to contribute to the building of the new Germany. The denazification measures were abandoned even more quickly than in the other part of the country. Ralph Giordano (1987:219) concluded that while in

West Germany the majority of the war generation (at least initially) got away with their denial of responsibility and desire to forget the past, in the GDR the government declared the population to be 'co-victors of WWII' and, per official party decree *a priori* blocked all deeper public debate about the vast support for the National Socialist regime among the population.

The GDR saw itself as the 'better Germany' and firmly pushed the main responsibility for WWII to the West, an alleged 'paradise for war criminals' (Moller 2003:54) where fascism was seen as having lived on beyond 1945. This view safely placed the perpetrators on the other side of the wall and exonerated the East German population from much of the collective guilt and responsibility that was so prominent in the West from the late 1960s. "We really did not work through what happened. It was always the Nazis who started the war, but it was never mentioned that the Nazis might also have been your neighbours. This enthusiasm - millions of people had been ecstatic about Hitler. But suddenly everyone was an anti-fascist," Daniel, one of my East German participants, reflected.

Since the beginning of the 1950s, annual ceremonies were held in Dresden, where American and British bombs had killed 25,000 people in February 1945 and destroyed most of the city. In the spirit of the cold war, the bombing was explained as proof of the aggressiveness of the Western Allies to promote their imperialist interests, to which the civilian population had fallen victim (Niven 2006c).

However, not everyone was granted victim status and there was a strict official 'silencing' of all violence linked to the Soviet Army. The soldiers of the Red Army were presented as having come to East Germany as communist heroes, friends and liberators of the people. German 'expellees' (*Vertriebene*) were labelled more neutrally as 'resettlers' (*Umsiedler*) (Moeller 2005), and in the public speeches of GDR politicians there was complete denial of the fact that it

was the Red Army that had often forced them to leave their homes at the end of the war. Similarly, the rape of German women and girls could also not be mentioned (Niven 2006b). These were not minor issues: around 4 million people had been 'resettled' in East Germany after the war (Moeller 1996) and most of the estimated 1.9 million rapes were attributed to the Red Army (Radebold 2008). In my interviews with East Germans, the 'communist brothers' were frequently referred to with cynicism and palpable anger in the person's voice.

Connerton (2008:60) would probably label both aspects - the rejection of all responsibility for the rise and crimes of the Hitler regime and the official silencing of the violence of the Soviet army - as examples of 'repressive erasures' by the regime of the GDR. While some things were selected to be remembered, others, as in the West, were 'edited out' of the master historical narrative.

While in the Federal Republic questions of how to 'master the past' (Herf 1997) continued to be the topic of public debates, and attitudes towards Third Reich and the Holocaust changed quite radically starting from the late 1960s, in East Germany the interpretations of National Socialism and WWII remained stable throughout its entire history. Historian Sabine Moller claims that the decades from the mid-1950s until the collapse of the GDR in 1989 are often seen as a time of 'calcification' ('*Versteinerung*', Moller 2003:50) of the antifascist culture of commemoration.

However, in contrast to the official culture of commemoration relayed by politicians and the media, a kind of 'counter-memory movement' (Moller 2003:55) took place in the Eastern German literature. Widely read books like Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster* ('Patterns of Childhood', 1976) challenged the

official line and asked critical questions about the true relationship between the population and its support for National Socialism.³⁰

Following the national memory of the GDR, a far more homogenous and continuous image of the past was relayed to the different generations - the grandparents, parents and the *Kriegsenkel* themselves - with fewer conflicts arising from the changes in public discourses. It needs to be said though, that most of my East German interview partners admitted that their families were (illegally) watching West German TV as they were growing up, which presented a different view of the past. To get a better impression what growing in the GDR was like, I would like to change my perspective at this point again, to hear directly from my participants how they related to and interacted with those public discourses, again focussing in particular on high school history lessons.

History lessons - East German style

The education system of the GDR was centrally managed and controlled by the state and thus by the Communist Party. School curricula were uniform across the country; all students were expected to learn the same content. There was only one history book used nationally up to year 10, which was revised approximately every 8 years (Borries 2004). Political socialisation was an integral part of education and of at least equal importance as the transmission of factual knowledge.³¹

It was not surprising that what my East German participants remembered from their history classes mirrored the official narrative about National Socialism and WWII. Students learned about the 'imperialists' who had started the war, the

³⁰ In *Patterns of Childhood* Christa Wolf (1976) travels back to the small town in Poland where she grew up as part of a large family during WWII. The every day life of a typical German family during the war is pieced together from her memories, and she deconstructs the often-repeated myth that the population did not know anything about the Holocaust.

³¹ For an overview of the education system of the GDR see Hettwer (1976).

communist resistance against Hitler, and the ‘liberation from fascist rule’ by the ‘communist heroes’ supported by the Soviet allies and friends. “We were told that it had all been very terrible, but now it was over, the Russians were our friends, they had saved us, and now everything was fine. It did not impress me much, but it did have something comforting, it was good that things had turned out this way.” (Karoline)

Children and teenagers in the East too learned about the horrors of the Holocaust, and the teachers strongly condemned the Nazi crimes. While they were as shocked by the images as their Western counterparts, many felt a certain distance from the crimes committed by their forefathers. On the one hand, this was because history was often taught only in abstract and broad ideological terms without any personal stories the students could relate to. On the other hand, children in the GDR were brought up in the consciousness that they were the heirs of those heroic anti-fascist Germans, who had stood on the ‘right side of history’. “We watched those Russian war movies, where the Germans were always the bad guys, but that had nothing to do with me of course, because I was in the East,” Christiane remembered.

Analysing the content of school history books in both German states Bodo Borries’ (2004) revealed that in the GDR the war took up around 50 pages - many more than in the West. Here, the focus was on the fight between the ‘imperialists’ and the ‘socialists’ and Hitler’s war against the Soviet Union. The exploitation and genocide committed against the Russian people were described in gruelling detail. The main responsibility, however, it was argued, lay with the Nazi regime, the ‘upper class’ and the ‘capitalists’ and not with the German population or the common soldiers (Borries 2004:389).

As a consequence I found that many of my East German participants did not absorb the same sense of shame and responsibility in relation to war and the

Holocaust. Children going to school in the East were often under the impression that all the Nazis had fled to live in the West, and it did not occur to them that their grandparents might have been supporters of the Nazi Party. I had the impression that to this day my East German participants were carrying noticeably less 'collective guilt' as a result. "We knew that the Germans had started the war," Cornelia said, "but the communists were the good guys of course, they were against the Nazis, and they had neither started nor continued the war, and so the question of guilt simply did not exist." For her, and for many others who grew up in the GDR, those issues only came to consciousness after 1989.

While not feeling morally responsible, Cornelia was still emotionally affected by the Holocaust. More routinely than their West German counterparts, East German school children visited concentration camps on school excursions or for working bees to learn about those who had died in the anti-fascist struggle - a struggle that the younger generation was enlisted to continue. Cornelia recalled how as a relatively young child she had visited the Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald concentration camps and had watched documentaries about the Holocaust. As it was for many other teenagers - East and West - the experience was emotionally overwhelming, and the teachers did not provide any emotional support or space for discussion, and Cornelia felt left alone with 'all this horror and all these images'.

As mentioned above, for my East German participants history lessons, documentaries and official speeches were not the only sources of information about the past. Although it was theoretically forbidden, most of them watched West German TV programs at home and thus had access to differing views on the history of WWII. However, I still had the impression that most of the people I spoke to accepted the GDR interpretation of past events to a large extent. My observations, based on the small group of respondents, are not

necessarily supported by broader research. In 1987, a group of researchers from an East German institute in Leipzig anonymously questioned around 2000 East Germans (roughly the same age as my participants) about their views on National Socialism and WWII. They found that some of the responses strikingly contradicted the state-sanctioned narrative about the past as promoted by the schools. The team came to the conclusion that political education of the GDR had been ineffective. Its content had not been internalised nor did it have much credibility in the eyes of the young people (Moller 2003:85–87).

Someone who fits with these findings, but was the exception in my group, was Martin. History lessons at school were too ‘stupid, too black and white’ to convince Martin’s questioning teenage mind. He did not believe the teachers’ claim that all soldiers were fascists and Nazis, because his grandfather had been with the *Wehrmacht* and he - as far as Martin knew – was neither. Martin also had access to other sources of historical information from an early age; his father brought home history books for him to read from the university library. These books, which were printed in the West and not publically available in the GDR, painted a different picture of the war, which Martin found more sophisticated and ultimately more believable.³²

However, there was one particular point where a number of others also questioned the official version of history as presented by their teachers: when it came to the projected image of the Russians as ‘friends’ and ‘liberators’. The vast majority of the rapes and other acts of violence the Red Army had committed at the end of the war happened in the territory that later became the GDR, and the knowledge about them was circulated among friends and family – quietly and behind closed doors. A number of my interview partners had at least some

³² Martin suspected that his father might have had some connections to the East German Ministry for State Security, the ‘*Staatssicherheit*’ (commonly known as the ‘*Stasi*’), which could explain his privileged access to otherwise restricted information.

awareness of what had happened to the women in their neighbourhood or family and found the official image of the virtuous communist heroes confusing at best. However, parents would impart strongly to the children that if these topics were raised, they had to be kept in private and could not be mentioned outside the walls of the family home.

While in the West students could theoretically have questioned the way the WWII was presented in class (though no one I talked to actually did), voicing dissent was more difficult in the East, and the official version could not be challenged without consequences. Andreas recalled that one of his friends had dared to mention that Russian soldiers had raped his grandmother and that the boy had been 'taken away' by the teacher. Anett was absolutely certain that had she raised her hand in history class to ask: "What about all that injustice the Russians have done to us?" her parents would have gotten arrested.

Aspects of German wartime suffering, which did not fit into the dominant narrative, were excluded from East German history classes as much as from West German ones. As in the broader East German community, this mainly concerned topics around the violence of the Red Army and the expulsions from Eastern Europe. Other topics, like the bombing of East German cities towards the end of the war, were not as politically tabooed and silenced. However, the information often remained abstract and intangible. A number of my interview partners confirmed that as they were growing up in the East they had no real awareness of German civilian or military victims. Daniel remembered how around the age of 20 he visited a war cemetery and was stunned by the sudden realisation that "a lot of Germans had perished too, and not just *Wehrmacht* soldiers but many civilians as well. Suddenly it became clear that this was not just a case of the 'bad Nazis' and the 'good Russians', but that this was my own history too."

To summarize, it could be said that at the time the *Kriegsenkel* - East and West - went to school, started to read books and to watch TV in the 1970s and 1980s, what they learned about the war, National Socialism and the Holocaust, was quite uniform and prescriptive in both German states. Looking back from the standpoint of 2012, most of my participants from either side of the wall said that they had largely accepted and internalised the narratives about WWII they were presented with at school. While different messages were relayed in terms of German perpetratorship, both parts of the country were united in that most aspects of German wartime suffering were either excluded from the curriculum altogether or marginalised to an extent that they did not leave any lasting impressions. This did not encourage students to include Germans as victims of war, and most of them, East or West, said that they did not. In my view, this explains some of the surprise about the discovery of the *Kriegsenkel* topic in recent years.

4. The (re)-emergence of wartime suffering in the new millennium

With the collapse of the GDR in 1989, the era of state anti-fascism ended as well, and from 1990 the memory culture of the newly re-unified Germany continued in line with the previously West German concepts without much public debate.

With the beginning of the new millennium, however, a flood of memories of German wartime suffering suddenly appeared in the media, books, movies, and TV documentaries. The main works setting this new trend were Günther Grass's novel *Im Krebsgang* (*Crabwalk*, 2002), which tells the story of the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff, a passenger ship carrying German refugees. 5,000 people lost their lives when a Russian submarine torpedoed the ship in the Baltic Sea.

There were also W.G. Sebald's *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (2001)³³ and Jörg Friedrich's *Der Brand* (*The Fire*, 2002), both turning public attention to the carpet-bombing of German cities and its devastating effect on the population. Lastly, the anonymous diary *Eine Frau in Berlin* (*A woman in Berlin*, 2003) gives a painfully laconic, autobiographical account of the systematic rape of German women by Russian soldiers in occupied Berlin in 1945.

In *Crabwalk*, Grass claims that tales of German wartime suffering like the fate of the Wilhelm Gustloff and by extension the expulsions from Eastern Europe had long been excluded from a mainstream commemorative culture, which allowed Germans only to express collective shame for what the Nazis had done to others, but had left them no space to mourn their own losses. Aleida Assmann (2006) argues that while the exclusion of the victim narrative was never as complete as Grass claimed, the volume and emotional intensity of these accounts and their wide social resonance across different generations were new.

According to Robert Moeller (2005), one major contributing factor was that with the end of the cold war and the German re-unification in 1990, the post-war era had come to a conclusion and the new, less antagonistic international political landscape allowed for a move beyond the entrenched victim-perpetrator dichotomies. Simultaneously, worldwide reconciliation movements and truth commissions were also aiming to transcend these narrow definitions and encourage a process of healing of past violence in countries like South Africa (Wilson 2001), Peru (Laplante and Phenicie 2010) and Chile (Spooner 2011).

It was also a time when the war children were retiring from their professional careers and were starting to look back on their lives. Memories that had previously been pushed aside sometimes re-emerged (often involuntarily) with emotional intensity. Social memory, as Aleida Assmann (2006) notes, follows

³³ Published in English in 1999 as *On the Natural History of Destruction*.

the biological rhythms where one generation is superseded by the next and in the liminal phase, memories can assert themselves with great emphasis. At a time when the last generation of eyewitnesses were about to pass away, personal memories of wartime survival and hardship that had been confined to the space of private conversations were swept into the public sphere and mediated on a large scale.

While the appropriateness to speak of German suffering continued to be debated among historians and intellectuals after 2000 (Diner 2003), there was on the other hand a clear sense that the taboo that had surrounded the topic in previous decades had been lifted. A space had opened up, in which it had become acceptable to publicly discuss the traumatic impact of WWII on the German majority population without invariably being suspected of rejecting responsibility for the Holocaust. For the first time, narratives of Germans as perpetrators and of Germans as victims coexisted in the public sphere – albeit still with a sense of unease and discomfort.

In spite of all the recent talk about German victimhood, Assmann (2006b) emphasises that German national memory continues to be centred around the Holocaust and the historical responsibility for the atrocities of the Nazi regime, “this remains the normative framework, into which all the other memories have to be integrated” (Assmann 2006b:198).

5. The war children and the war grandchildren movements

In the early 2000s Germans also for the first time systematically reflected on a possible long-term impact of traumatic war experiences on the majority population. As mentioned in my introduction, in the late 1990s psychoanalysts and psychotherapists had noticed increasing incidences of burnout, depression, flashbacks, panic attacks and other anxiety disorders among their elderly patients.

These people had been children at the time of WWII and many of them were already in their 60s when they first showed (or sought help for) psychological symptoms. Many had led unremarkable lives until then and were retiring from successful professional careers enabled by the ‘economic miracle’ of the 1960s. Psychoanalyst Hartmut Radebold was the first to come to the conclusion that the experience of war during their childhood may be the cause of the psychic disorders among his predominantly male patients.³⁴

Until that time, the war and National Socialism had also not featured as a topic in many psychotherapeutic practices at all (Ermann 2007; Heimannsberg and Schmidt 1992; Radebold 2012). Psychiatrist Phillip Kuwert, who now offers therapy to Germans seniors suffering from war trauma, commented in 2008: “We’re only now able to examine the suffering and listen to what people here went through without being suspected of trivialising the Holocaust... If I had done this work 20 years ago I would probably have needed a bodyguard” (Crossland 2008). Historians, psychologists, and other social scientists began to investigate the issue of war childhoods - more often than not their own - more broadly, and the growing interest culminated in the 2005 ‘war children-convention’ in Frankfurt/Main, which some 600 people attended to discuss their findings and share personal stories. The meeting attracted wide media attention and, according to Dorothee Wierling (2010), also marked the beginning of the war children’s emergence as a distinctive and recognised generation in Karl Mannheim’s (1928) sense, complemented by public events and the founding of war children associations and Internet platforms.³⁵ A wealth of studies on the topic has since become available.³⁶ The overarching claim is

³⁴ See Radebold (2000, 2004, 2005, 2008).

³⁵ For example associations like *Kriegskind.de* (www.kriegskind.de) or *Kriegskinder für den Frieden* (www.kriegskinder-fuer-den-frieden.de).

³⁶ For example Ermann (2007); Grundmann, Hoffmeister and Knoth (2009); Hondrich (2011); Janus(2006); Radebold (2000, 2004, 2005); Seegers and Reulecke (2009).

that – largely unnoticed until that time – the experiences made during WWII had a major and often defining impact on the person’s entire life.

A few years later, the first popular books about the generation after that were published: Anne Ev-Ustorf’s *Wir Kinder der Kriegskinder: die Generation im Schatten des Krieges* (*We children of the war children: the generation in the shadow of the war*) published in 2008, and Sabine Bode’s *Kriegsenkel: die Erben der vergessenen Generation* (*War grandchildren: the heirs of the forgotten generation*), first published in 2009. Both books feature life histories of the so-called war grandchildren generation – born roughly between 1955-75 to parents and grandparents who experienced the war first hand. The authors portray Germans in their 40s and 50s and their struggles to find a clear direction for their lives and a sense of identity and belonging. They suffer from depression, burnout or anxiety disorders, some feel blocked in their careers, others have a general sense of going through life with the ‘handbrake on’ (Bode 2009:26). Their problems are set in relation to the unresolved war experiences of their families, implied to be at the root of these psychological issues.

Ustorf’s and Bode’s books were the first to raise the topic of the transgenerational impact of the WWII, and a number of newspaper articles³⁷ and Radio programs³⁸ covered the issue while I was in Berlin. As mentioned in the introduction, since 2010, a small war grandchildren movement gained some momentum and interested people now meet in support groups that have formed in many German cities, while websites³⁹ and Facebook groups provide information and networking opportunities. A number of therapists have gathered around the scene, offering weekend workshops and individual therapy

³⁷ For example Hilbk (2012, 2013a, 2013b), Müller (2013), Philip (2011).

³⁸ For example Frey (2012), Wagner (2012).

³⁹ www.kriegsenkel.de and www.forumkriegsenkel.de.

to alleviate the problems resulting from a perceived transgenerational transmission of war experiences.

6. Conclusion – Germany in 2012, the end of all taboos?

The Germany that I encountered in 2012 seemed more relaxed with itself, its history and its national identity than the country I had left 20 years earlier. That summer, Berlin was drowning in a sea of German flags on cars, bicycles, balconies and faces, and hundred of thousands gathered around big public screens to cheer for the German team during the European Soccer Cup. The President of the FRG, Joachim Gauck, said in a newspaper interview that coming generations of Germans will be less burdened by the guilt of their forefathers and that it has now become possible again to feel pride in the country's political achievements (Hildebrandt and Di Lorenzo 2012). Stand-up comedians no longer shy away from impersonating Hitler to mock German tidiness and obsession with rules and regulations, and a store even had a comic book entitled *Hipster Hitler* on display. In September of the same year, Timur Vermes' (2012) published his bestselling satirical novel *Er ist wieder da* (English title: *Look who's back*), which features Adolf Hitler waking up on a park bench in modern day Berlin. He consequently becomes a star on TV and Youtube, while, to everyone's amusement, promoting very much the same ideas as in his last incarnation. All of this, I believe, would have been quite unthinkable two decades ago.

None of the activists of the war grandchildren scene or the authors of the two war grandchildren books I interviewed had been criticised for bringing the topic of transgenerational transmission of war trauma into the public sphere, nor had there been any attempts to instrumentalise their viewpoints to equate non-Jewish German suffering with that of the Holocaust survivors and their descendants.

There were on the other hand also signs that the reluctance to publicly speak about German suffering had not completely subsided, and that the issue of how to ‘correctly’ talk about the war was still emotionally charged. People still tended to choose their words carefully, and there often remained a deeply engrained sense of discomfort. Journalist Merle Hilbk called it a kind of ‘knee-jerk reaction’ that makes people pull away from the subject somewhat automatically.⁴⁰

In addition, while it is now more acceptable to discuss German wartime suffering, the culture of commemoration as such has not changed. In 2010, historian Ulrike Jureit and sociologist Christian Schneider still labelled it as ‘normed remembering’ (*Normiertes Erinnern*), Jureit and Schneider 2010:33), in which the past and in particular the Holocaust have to be remembered in according to a prescriptive formula that is not open for discussion. According to Jureit and Schneider, this way of remembering does not capture the entire range and complexity of experiences during the time of National Socialism and WWII as it still excludes certain aspects of the past, for example the sharing of positive memories that some older people still have of everyday life under National Socialism. Jureit and Schneider (2010) conclude, that the culture of commemoration is still rigid today, with sanctions imposed on those who deviate from the narrowly defined path.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Interview with Merle Hilbk 22.1.2013.

⁴¹ I witnessed one example of such sanctions during my time in Berlin. On 4 April 2012, Günter Grass, one of Germany’s best-known contemporary authors and literary Nobel laureate published his controversial poem *Was gesagt werden muss* (what needs to be said), in which he expresses the moral urge to criticise the German government’s planned export of war submarines to Israel, and his reluctance as a German to speak up in the matter. His choice of words was perceived as anti-Semitic and resulted in a heated public discussion involving both side of the political spectrum. The affair severely damaged Grass’s reputation as a left-wing intellectual and turned him into a *persona non grata* in Israel. Grass’s poem was published in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 4.4.2012. A number of other newspapers had refused to print it. For Grass’ biography see

Also, when I returned to Berlin in summer 2013, large posters with a photo of Auschwitz and the slogan *Late. But not too late! Operation Last Chance* accompanied me on my walks through the boiling hot city. The Simon Wiesenthal Center in Jerusalem was offering rewards of up to 25,000 Euros for any information that would help track down the last surviving war criminals so they could be put on trial before their death.⁴² The posters were a stark reminder that 68 years after the end of WWII, many Holocaust victims were still waiting for the murderers of their families to be brought to justice.

Many of the war grandchildren I met were only slowly adapting to the new openness. They still felt more comfortable to share their family stories in private or in the safe space of the support groups rather than under the scrutiny of the public eye. However, in the more diverse public culture of 2012/13, the space had opened up wide enough to enable my participants to look back on their lives through new eyes, and to allow for experiences of wartime suffering and trauma to be discussed and integrated into their family history. For many it was the first time that they looked at their family from this angle: “It would never have occurred to me that my parents and grandparents were traumatised,” one woman said in a interview with Bremen’s *Weserkurier*, “and that had a lot to do with shame, because they belonged to the generation of the perpetrators.”⁴³

While some of my participants mentioned the long exclusion of German suffering from public discourses in passing, this was accepted as a moral necessity without any complains or openly displayed resentment.⁴⁴

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/242123/Gunter-Grass> [Accessed 20 August 2015].

⁴² See http://www.operationlastchance.org/GERMANY_19-634.html [Accessed 20 August 2015].

⁴³ See Müller (2013).

⁴⁴ As mentioned previously, my participants largely belonged to the well-educated and politically liberal or left-leaning segment of the population, while other groups, including people on the far right of the political spectrum or the Neo Nazis are likely to have very

In summary, in this chapter I traced how Germany officially related to and tried to 'master the past' (Herf 1997) over the past 70 years; how East and West and later the re-united Germany attempted to publicly come to terms with the responsibility for the Nazi war crimes and the Holocaust on the one hand, and their own losses and civilian wartime suffering on the other. I explored the complicated mix of gaps, silences, denials and erasures around both these issues through the different phases of post-war history, with a particular focus on the 1970 and '80s, when my participants were growing up and going to school. I then explained how the taboos around publicly speaking about German wartime suffering were to a significant extent lifted in the early 2000s. I showed how around that time Germans started thinking about the long term psychological consequences of WWII on the different generations and that a space opened up for the emergence of the war children and war grandchildren movements to explore the past anew.

It may not be the end of all taboos, but due to the passage of time and in the changed political situation of a re-united Germany and Europe, many of the silences – from 'humiliated silence', the 'desire to forget', to 'repressive erasure' (Connerton 2008) that have characterised the public debates in Germany at different times in the post-war years, have been revoked or softened.

The last members of the eyewitness generation are encouraged to overcome their 'desire to forget', to break their 'humiliated silence' and share (most of) their memories of WWII and National Socialism in public. While some restriction in the culture of commemoration remains, the 'repressive erasure' of German wartime suffering has lifted.

In the next chapter I will move my focus to the family unit and explore how the intergenerational communication about the war was shaped. Among other things

different attitudes towards the dominant culture of commemoration and the exclusion of war time suffering.

this will show how public silences around German victimhood were compounded by silences in the private realm, with the result that the traumatic impact of the war was often blocked out of consciousness.

Chapter 3 “Why do you have to dig around in the past?” – Communication about WWII in German families

I. Introduction

In my family no one ever talked about the war. My grandfather was at the front and my grandmother was alone at home with three small children. Half of the house was destroyed and they lived in what was left of it. It is just not possible that they did not have anything to talk about. But it was never, never, ever a topic at home. (Holger)

In Chapter 2, I explained how, at the time my participants were growing up, public narratives about WWII encouraged a focus on German perpetratorship and responsibility for the Holocaust (in the West) and on a radical break with the past (in the East), in both cases eclipsing aspects of wartime suffering of the majority population. Chapter 3 now zooms into the private space of the German family. It describes in detail how family narratives about WWII were constructed, and how the public culture of commemoration reinforced and cemented private taboos and silences, creating compounding layers of silences that impacted on the dynamic between the generations.

It is sometimes argued (for example Assmann 2006b; Welzer et al. 2002; Wierling 2010) that in contrast to the dominant public discourses, stories of suffering and hardship were part of everyday conversations in many German families, - even in the years of public ‘silencing’ (Trouillot 1995). This implies that at the time when my informants were growing up, two parallel narratives existed in the public and in the private domain, shaped by distinctly different norms around what could be discussed and what was considered taboo. It also

points to the fact that, on the one hand, the officially prescribed culture of commemoration remained somewhat disconnected from the emotional experiences and interpretations of the war shared within the family unit, and that the family on the other provided an alternative space in which it was permissible to talk about the war in a way that did not conform with the dominant narrative. While this might be true (to some extent as I will show) for those families with a more open culture of communication, on which in particular Welzer et al.'s (2002) work focuses,⁴⁵ my findings suggest that in the majority of German families the war was not much of a topic at the dinner table at all.

Psychiatrist Hartmut Radebold estimates that in 80% of all families the war was 'never talked about' at home, and in the remaining 20% either 'a bit' or 'too much', with parents overwhelming their children with their memories (Radebold 2012). At a first glance, this is in line with the responses I received from my participants, 81% of whom said that their family had remained silent about the war. However, I will show in this chapter that beyond initial appearances, what people were referring to was not complete silence but rather 'not enough talk'.

Rather than dividing families into two distinctive groups of 'those who talked' and 'those who did not', I suggest that there is a *spectrum* of family communication about WWII with varying degrees of silence and sharing. At one end of this spectrum, questions by the younger generation were categorically brushed aside or a few emotionally charged lines were casually dropped into a conversation without further explanation or a limited number of habitually repeated anecdotes of wartime hardship and everyday survival were volunteered. Then there was the middle ground of 'open sharing' about the past, which was

⁴⁵ Welzer et al.'s (2002) claims about the nature of communication about WWII in German families are weakened by the fact that their research only included families where members of all three generations (children, parents and grandparents) were able and willing to share their war stories and memories, which, as I will show, only applies to a small minority of families.

experienced as positive and satisfactory by the younger generation,⁴⁶ before moving further to ‘incessant talking’ at the other end of the scale. All in all, it was clear that from the time the *Kriegsenkel* were growing up until today, for most of them, there was simply not enough information to meet their needs and expectations regarding knowledge about the family history on the one hand and as proof that their family had come to terms with the past on the other.

At the core of this chapter lies a detailed mapping out of the patterns of family communication along this spectrum, seen through the eyes of the *Kriegsenkel* generation. For my description I frequently draw on Ruth Wajnryb’s (2001) book *Silence: How Tragedy Shapes Talk*. Wajnryb, an Australian linguist and daughter of Polish Holocaust survivors, collected and systematised the communication patterns in survivor families from the perspective of the second generation. She comes to a similar conclusion that a binary division into ‘homes with talk, homes without talk’ could not adequately express the complexity of the intergenerational communication, and she too suggests that “Holocaust narrative might be placed on the continuum, from homes where communication was explicit and direct to home is where the past was hermetically sealed off” (Wajnryb 2001:170).

I engage with her concepts and definitions where they apply to my findings. While many of the communication styles, as I will show, are quite similar in Holocaust survivor families and German families who experienced WWII, I suspect that their respective distribution along the spectrum may be different. Wajnryb (2001) does not quantify her findings, but my impressions from her

⁴⁶ The inclusion of these positive examples of ‘open sharing’ in the middle of the continuum sets my research apart from other recent work on the long term impact of WWII, published by German psychologists or psychoanalysts. These - as they are based on case studies of people who sought therapeutic help - focus only on difficulties and negative experiences with the family dynamics and the intergenerational dialogue. See for example Alberti (2010) Bachofen (2012) and Baer and Frick-Baer (2010).

case studies is that more of her participants described their family communication as being close to the 'silent' end of the scale, due to the extreme traumatisation of the Holocaust survivor parents, whereas among my interview partners, making reference to the war in 'obscure remarks' or through sharing of selected 'anecdotes' were the most common responses.

The main purpose of this chapter is to give the reader an impression of how communication about WWII was (and often still is) structured in German families, what was talked about at home and how and what was silenced and why. I will also argue that silences and taboos were not only established by the parents and grandparents, but often accepted and sometimes even reinforced by the younger generation, showing them to be (or have been) active players rather than passive victims in the family dynamic.

I will also show that the public culture of commemoration reached into the private sphere, shaping the dynamic between the generations and substantially impacting on the dialogue. Denial of responsibility from the older generation and judgement and gruelling questions from the younger were not conducive to the establishment of an atmosphere of trust and openness, in which difficult memories of the war could have been shared. Those attitudes also led to the creation of 'blind spots' around experiences of wartime suffering, a topic that often remained absent from conversations or which was blocked from fully entering the younger generation's consciousness.

Chapters 2 and 3 together are setting the scene for my thesis. They explain how Germans – publicly and privately – dealt with the WWII legacy and they outline some of the crucial factors that explain the emergence of the war grandchildren movement in recent years. This chapter is the second step in my exploration of these factors: private gaps and silences around WWII experiences in the family, compounded by the exclusions in the public narratives created overlapping layers of silences especially around issues of wartime suffering.

These gaps help explain why the traumatic impact of WWII on German families went largely unnoticed for more than 60 years and why in this recent phase of public opening, the topic was discovered and taken up with such emotional intensity.

2. From (near complete) silence to incessant talking:

The spectrum of family communication

Three familial generations were typically involved in my participants' accounts of their family conversations about WWII: the grandparents, born around 1900, who experienced the time as adults - the grandmothers mostly as the main carer for the family and the grandfathers generally as soldiers and later as prisoners of war in Russian or Allied POW camps. Secondly there were the parents, who were children or teenagers at the time, and lastly my participants themselves, the grandchildren, born predominantly in the 1960s and 1970s.⁴⁷

After the heavy destruction of the war, life in the 1960s and '70s in both parts of Germany focused on building a better life for current and future generations. In the West, many families were grasping the opportunities the 'economic miracle' presented them with, and all their efforts went into working hard and creating wealth and financial stability. In the East the focus was similarly on work, but – with the economic recovery turning out to be much slower than in the West – also on managing everyday life with scarce material resources. While the physical scars of the war were still visible in many cities across the country, as gaps in cityscapes and overgrowing heaps of rubble, all hopes were set on the future and generally little time was set aside for reflecting on the past.

⁴⁷ The inclusion of the grandparent generation makes my research different from Ruth Wajnryb's (2001), which focuses only on the dynamic between the survivor parents and their children, because in their families the grandparents had perished in the Holocaust.

The dominant family structure of the time was what sociologist Rüdiger Peuckert (2002) calls the '*deutsche Normalfamilie*', a nuclear family with parents and their under-age children living together in the same household. In the West that mostly included the classical role distribution of the father being the main breadwinner and the mother looking after the children (Roopnarine and Gielen 2005), while in East Germany the mothers commonly worked outside the home (Schneider 1994). Almost all of my participants grew up in these nuclear families, only a handful with just one parent after a divorce or the early death of the father. The households typically did not extend beyond two generations, and everyone I talked to lived in separate houses and often in different cities from their grandparents. However, many of them regularly visited at least one set of grandparents or spent their school holidays there. Having all four grandparents close by was the exception, as the war had left gaps in the family, and the German division had torn many families apart and made regular visits difficult.

Initially, the grandparents were often the main source of information about the family past, in particular in situations where the parents were born towards the end of the war and had few memories of their own to share. In the 1980s and 1990s, the grandparents had mostly passed away, the war grandchildren generation finished high school and left home, and opportunities to talk about the family history were limited to occasional visits, Christmas get togethers and other family events.

The different socialisation of each generation often played a role in the dynamic at home, creating tensions and conflict: The grandparents and parents had been raised with Prussian values of strict discipline, obedience, duty and orderliness, later reinforced and complemented by National Socialist ideas of hardness, relentlessness and tenacity, which often made itself felt in their attitudes towards their children. The generation of the *Kriegsenkel* on the other hand grew up

after a major social and political shift had taken place at the end of the 1960s, which saw the emergence of anti-authoritarianism and child-rearing practices that were more respectful of the individual (Reulecke and Strambolis 2008). I will come back to this in Chapter 6.

While the above characteristics applied to most of my participants' families, when it came to the patterns and dynamic of intergenerational communication, no two families were alike. Each one had its own unique way to negotiate the dialogue between the generations, and while I found a number of common styles and patterns, there was diversity in the individual 'mix' for each family. In many cases more than just one communication style was described and often some members of the family were more open than others. The responses of the younger generation to what was shared and what was taboo also differed, as did the perceptions among siblings.

Furthermore, because the timeframe for the discussion with my participants about their family communication spanned a period from their childhood to the present day, the dynamic sometimes changed over time and in accordance with different life cycles. Some of my interviewees had tried to query their parents and grandparents from childhood, but often the interest in the family history had not started before their teenage years, where questions around identity and belonging gained in importance and a phase of intense probing began. Then the topic often withdrew into the background and other concerns – first love, education, starting a career, getting married and having children – took centre stage. In 2012, in the middle of their lives, many of my participants returned to the topic while others were asking questions for the first time. This new or renewed interest was often spurred by the *Kriegsenkel* books, by reflecting back on their life during a 'midlife crisis', or by the questions of their own teenage children about the family past. In some cases, the parents, now in their 70s and 80s, were taking stock at the end of their lives and were a bit more willing to

open up and share memories of their war childhoods with their sons and daughters.

After these general points, I now turn to describe the different styles and patterns of family communication about WWII in more detail, letting my participants speak for themselves as much as possible.

Silence(s)

When I asked my interview partners ‘did your family talk about the war?’ in more than 80% of all cases the answer was a definite ‘*Sie haben geschwiegen*’ – ‘they remained silent’. The way my participants used the German verb ‘*schweigen*’ implied a conscious decision by some or all members of their family not to share certain experiences but to keep them to themselves instead. It was judged to be a deliberate choice to withhold information. Thus, silence was not seen as synonymous with forgetting, nor was it passive, because “the things we are silent about are in fact actively avoided” (Zerubavel 2010, 33).

However, when I probed further, it quickly became clear that the wall of silence was not as impermeable as initially asserted. Even in the case of Holger (quoted at the beginning of this chapter), who was most adamant that there was no conversation about the family history whatsoever, the past still seeped through the cracks as obscure remarks, charged reactions and inexplicable behaviours in his family.

In fact, what my participants were referring to was not a complete absence of any form of communication, but an atmosphere of secrecy, taboos and hushed voices, fragmented stories and disjointed anecdotes, surrounded by a conspicuous lack of willingness to share family stories and respond to questions openly and in ways that my participants would have found satisfactory. ‘Silence’ in the case of my interview partners’ experience simply meant ‘not enough talk’. This is more appropriately captured in English by using the term in its plural

form – ‘silences’ – to express that aspects of the past were excluded from conversation (Winter 2010).

In addition, while most of this chapter describes forms of *verbal* communication, a number of my participants perceived the presence of war in other ways – as an atmosphere in the house, as heaviness, or a fog – which did not rely on words to transmit information, but still constituted a form of communication about the past. (I will come back to this later in the chapter.)

Obscure remarks, throwaway lines and story fragments

A common way to relay information about WWII in German families came in the form of obscure remarks or throwaway lines. About half (48%) of my participants mentioned that their parents or grandparents made sporadic and fragmentary verbal reference to the war, often woven into everyday conversations without any further explanation or a broader context.

Charlotte recalled hearing her grandmothers say, that ‘everything used to be different and better in the past’ and that ‘families had to flee’, but as a child she had no idea what that meant exactly. Later, when she found out more about the family history, she was able to interpret these comments in light of her grandmother’s flight from Czechia and the fact that she had to leave her house and belongings behind to start from scratch as a refugee in Germany in 1945.

Reto recalled the remark in his family that ‘there used to be not enough bread’ which puzzled him and left him feeling that there was more behind the story, something that his parents did not want to say. It was often an underlying emotional charge – clearly perceived behind those short and seemingly unspectacular comments – that made them stand out from the ebb and flow of mundane everyday conversations and burned them into a person’s memory so that they could still easily be recalled in an interview thirty years later. Karoline explained this particularly well:

When my grandma was still alive, she used to rant about the Russians a lot. She must have had some terrible memories, but that all remained very foggy. We never found out what actually happened. But grandma could never understand that we had Russian friends. Every time she heard about that, she got really upset and kept repeating “You just don’t know what happened to us.” These moments stuck in my memory, because she seemed so different from her normal self, and that made me listen very carefully. She used to grumble a lot and I never really paid much attention, but when she ranted about the Russians I knew I had to perk up my ears. Every time same tirades “you don’t know how terrible they are.” But how? – She would not say.

Karoline clearly felt that there was a painful story hidden behind her grandmother’s outbursts, but without a context of a known family or broader German wartime history, she could not make sense of them. According to Wajnryb (2001:175-6), throwaway lines, obscure remarks and cued messages belong to the realm of indirect communication, where meaning is construed to large extent by the listener, who calibrates what they hear against what they know, looking for a fitting interpretation. For Karoline it was not until the 1990s, after the fall of the GDR, when more information about the violence inflicted by Soviet occupying forces became publicly available that she finally found a plausible explanation for her grandmother’s behaviour.

Boris told how his parents only hinted at what he now thinks of as traumatic wartime experiences, providing fragments of stories without ever sharing them in their entirety. His mother would offer glimpses of her childhood memories in short sentences such as “there was an air raid alarm and we went into a tunnel,” but there the story ended. When he asked his father about his time as a 15-year old *Flakhelfer* (anti-aircraft warfare helper) his father would only disclose, “we were stationed in front of the Cologne Cathedral.” Boris could not extract any

more details of how these situations unfolded or how his parents had felt at the time. “It was like an extremely shortened witness statement,” he said to me, his face clearly showing his lifelong frustration. Like Karoline, he also clearly picked up on the atmosphere behind these story fragments; feelings of danger, panic and fear of death lurked behind the silence that his parents fiercely defended all through Boris’ childhood and adult years.

Attempts to probe deeper into the family history were typically brushed off with sentences such as “you children don’t understand,” or “why do you need to dig around in the past?” Elise’s curiosity to know more about what her parents experienced during the war was smothered with the categorical statement “you are much too small to understand these things.” She was amazed that even at 15 or 16, she was still considered ‘too small’ to be trusted with a more detailed response, and at some point, she just stopped asking.

Similar to Wajnryb’s (2001) findings among second generation Holocaust survivors, information about WWII in non-Jewish German families often remained fragmented, patchy and disjointed. Stories were ‘leaking out’ (Wajnryb 2001:178) over time, they were pieced together bit by bit over years of tedious questioning or inferred from obscure remarks and charged reactions. The piecemeal nature of the available information and the remaining gaps meant that in many cases these fragments never amounted to a complete story.

My interviewees expressed a lot of frustration about their family’s unwillingness to share stories from the past. The process of continuous asking was experienced as tiresome and aggravating. Some people felt that family secrets and taboos swallowed up their life-force like ‘black holes’ and prevented them from letting go of the past and focus on their own life.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ The phenomenon of familial taboos acting like ‘black holes’ was also observed by Baer & Frick-Baer (2010).

Dicta and life lessons

Another very common form of referring to the war came in the form of dicta, sayings and 'life lessons'. More than 40% of my participants remembered their parents and grandparents making selective references to past 'times of hardship' when disciplining their children or attempting to impart to them certain moral values and behaviours.

Members of the war generation tended to display certain fixations that showed in every day life. They often compulsively hoarded food and other items like candles in preparation for a possible crisis or they were unable to throw out food even long after its expiry date and frequently forced their children to eat everything on their plate. 'Food cannot be wasted' was the abiding truth in many of the families my participants grew up in. Anna's father used to take half-eaten apples out of the garbage bin and force the children to eat the rest, to teach them a 'you don't know what it means to go hungry'- lesson.

The past was woven into daily family life through those short references, purposely invoked whenever the situation called for it. "We always had to be grateful," Brigitta said, "because we had so much more than they did at the time." Complaints about what parents saw as minor inconveniences of a childhood in times of peace and prosperity were often not tolerated. Most of my interview partners recalled their parents telling them to 'stop whingeing' and get on with whatever was expected of them.

Another set of common and very powerful dicta specific to German families and mentioned by almost half of my participants, revolved around the horrors of war, statements like: '*Nie wieder Krieg*' - 'no more war' and 'war is the worst thing that can happen to people', were repeated over and over again. All through their childhood and adolescence, the *Kriegsenkel* witnessed their parents being terrified of a third world war, from the Cuban missile crisis in the 1960s to the nuclear arms race of the 1980s, and it deeply impacted on their upbringing.

Brigitta is a typical example: she and her siblings were raised in a strictly pacifist spirit, not allowed to play ‘Cowboys and Indians’ or have toy weapons. She vividly remembered her mother’s atypical bout of uncontrolled rage and scolding when she once caught her kids aiming at each other with the neighbour kids’ water guns. The fear of another war shaped the political views of both generations, with many *Kriegsenkel* objecting to joining the *Bundeswehr* (the German Army), which was still compulsory at the time they finished school, and leading to a strong anti-war movement. The mass protest culminated at the time of the first Iraq war in the early 1990s but extended to the US invasion of Iraq in 2002, which 70% of all Germans opposed (Bode 2006:119–122). Peace was imparted as the paramount value by the generation who had witnessed the war, and many *Kriegsenkel* still adhere to this belief today.⁴⁹

Parents and grandparents also tended to make reference to WWII to transmit to their children ‘life lessons’ they learned by surviving those difficult times: ‘You have to cherish what you have and the most important thing you have is your life,’ Stephan’s parents often said. Martina’s grandparents’ philosophy was ‘material things don't matter, only life matters’; Anne’s father stressed the importance of a good education, because ‘no one can take that away from you’, while Charlotte’s family took home from the war that ‘life is a struggle, you can only rely on yourself not on others’.

Some of the lessons families tried to impart were perceived as odd by the younger generation. Reto, for example, remembered that he had to eat a lot of onions as a child, because his grandfather was adamant that onions had saved his eyesight during his years of near starvation in a Russian POW camp. Meanwhile, Jens’s father forced him and his sister to learn a musical instrument in case they

⁴⁹ Holstein and Lamparter (2013) found similarly strong pacifist attitudes in children of Germans who survived the firebombing of Hamburg in 1943.

would lose their livelihood in a future war and needed a skill to make some money.

In the cases above, the reference to the war was direct, deliberate and clearly understood even if the context of the experiences that led to these ‘abiding truths’ were not shared in more detail. Parents and grandparents across cultures use this kind of pedagogy invoking past times of hardship to remind their children of how much more comfortable their life is by comparison and to impart to them the value of the most important things in life. Food almost always plays a central role in this: from Holocaust survivor homes (Wajnryb 2001:), to families of survivors of the Cambodian genocide (Kidron 2009a), and those of Dutch actively fighting the Nazi in the resistance during WWII (Op den Velde 1998). Similar messages were transmitted in families of Japanese Americans who were interned as alleged enemies during WWII (Nagata 1998), and in the ‘whip talk’ (Feuchtwang 2011:96) of Chinese parents who lived through the severe famine of the ‘Great Leap Forward’ in the early 1960s. “Remember the days of starvation,” these older Chinese warned their children when they did not want to finish their meal (Feuchtwang 2011:96).

The above-mentioned case studies do not explicitly mention to what extent the younger generation accepted and internalised these lessons from the past and the moral views transmitted by their families, but the fact that they remember them clearly indicates a degree of internalisation. In the case of my German participants, the younger generation sometimes consciously moved away from these lessons over the course of their lives. Quite a few of my interview partners still needed to have a full fridge to feel secure, but many others did not. Jens, who had just had a new baby when I spoke to him in the summer of 2012, decided that his son would never have to eat everything on his plate and would be encouraged to choose for himself whether he wants to learn a musical instrument – or not.

Anecdotes

Apart from those obscure remarks, throwaway lines, and food-related ‘whip talk’, narratives about WWII in about half (48%) of my participants’ families were restricted to the sharing of a limited number of anecdotes conveying wartime hardship, loss and survival. Grandmothers would tell stories about foraging expeditions to feed the family, of making clothes out of curtains, of packing their belongings on to a horse cart and joining the treks West at the end of the war. Grandfathers shared vignettes of French wine and Russian winters and of almost starving in POW camps. Parents’ memories of their childhood revolved around being woken up in the middle of the night, grabbing their most beloved toys and running to a bomb shelter, of being separated from their parents during ‘*Kinderlandverschickung*’ when city children were evacuated to the countryside, and of playing in the rubble of destroyed houses looking for shrapnel pieces and bullet casings.

These stories were often told casually and without a fixed form or a clear beginning and end, shared on occasions like family gatherings and in particular around Christmas time when ‘one talked about life in general’.

There are a limited number of styles in which these stories are told. There were the ‘adventure stories’, for example, emphasising the family’s resilience, bravery and survival skills. Some parents and grandparents shared their ‘memories of hardship’ in great detail, creating in their audience the impression of entering into the world of the past, where the experiences were still extremely vivid. “My mother and grandmother were very fearful women and when they talked about the war, it was like it was yesterday. I had the sense I was there with them”, Paula said.

Others displayed a conspicuous lack of emotions, telling even the most horrific stories in a matter-of-fact-style of delivery or with non-specific language, which

led away from personal experience ('Every woman had their turn with the soldiers').

In some cases there was a sense of discordance, where the emotions did not seem appropriate for the scenario described. "My mum always said how handsome her father looked in his *Wehrmacht* uniform," Paula remembered, "how shiny his boots were. She always said this with the broadest smile and her eyes were sparkling. She probably really felt like that at the time, but then he died, and all the other emotions, like her pain, you did not get to feel those. She was just beaming with joy when she talked, but that did not fit with the story, because the story was just horrible."

Again similar to Wajnryb's (2001:186) findings among families of Holocaust survivors, the stories the German *Kriegsenkel* heard of wartime events seemed somehow 'laminated, static and unchanging'. They tended to remain the same over the decades, told again and again always using the same words, and the listeners often knew them by heart. Interestingly, some psychologists (Ancharoff et al. 1998; Baer and Frick-Baer 2010) view this kind of ritualistic retelling as yet another form of silence, because the most emotionally challenging or traumatic aspects of an experience would be left out. There often remained a suspicion the stories were 'sanitised' (Wajnryb 2001:208) for the family audience, leaving unexplained gaps with important information missing or people excluded altogether. A few times during my interviews a participant would suddenly pause to say, "I just realised that this story does not make any sense at all, how come I have never noticed this before?"

In summary, it can be said that in a number of my participants' families, a fixed repertoire of anecdotes gave the younger generation an impression of what their parents and grandparents experienced during the war and satisfied their curiosity about the family history - to an extent. However, those vignettes often remained scattered, disjointed and incomplete, without ever providing a full picture.

German historians Vesper and Weber (1991:18) claim that a coherent narrative of the familial past can only be woven once a sufficient number of anecdotes is known, allowing the listeners to thread them together in without too many gaps and contradictions. For most of my interview partners that was not the case. Frustration, helplessness and sadness about this situation clearly came through in many of our conversations, a deep yearning for more knowledge and a sound chronology of past events, which would provide a sense of continuity and allow the *Kriegsenkel* to insert their own life story into the picture of a greater family chronicle.

Tabooed topics

At the beginning of this chapter I mentioned that German researchers (in particular Assmann 2006b; and Welzer et al. 2002) often claim that aspects of wartime suffering, while largely excluded from public narratives, found an alternative space of expression in the private conversations between family members. Based on the examples given above, I agree that certain aspects of personal loss and hardships did indeed have a place in the family communication - at least in those families where anecdotes from WWII were shared. I would argue however, that even in these cases the stories often revolved around a limited range of topics, while others remained firmly taboo - mainly related to the grandparents' involvement in National Socialist ideology, active combat and war crimes, and experiences of sexual violence against the women in the family. Vesper and Weber (1991:68) noticed that family stories tended to be gendered and that what was passed on were often the grandmothers' tales of wartime hardship and everyday survival. The male experience on the other hand generally remained patchy. Their interview partners (who were of the parent generation) knew a few facts about their father's time with the *Wehrmacht* yet what they had witnessed, how they had felt, and what they had participated in remained taboo. The thread was only picked up again once they found themselves in a

POW camp, where the tales of survival suddenly became more colourful and detailed (Vesper and Weber 1991).

This is largely in line with my findings, but with a few exceptions. In the case of my seven interview partners whose fathers had been drafted into the *Wehrmacht* at a very young age, these tended to be much more forthcoming about their experience. One of the possible reasons for their openness could be that because of their age they felt less guilt and shame about their participation.

In addition, while the grandmothers' stories might have been told more freely, this excluded all accounts of sexual violence. The topic of rape, predominantly by Soviet forces, was raised in almost half (43%) of my interviews⁵⁰ - but rarely as a known fact and mostly only hinted at or suspected by the descendants but vehemently denied by the family. A grandmother's story could suddenly be cut short without explanation or drift into general statements such as 'everyone knew what happened to the women in the area', without volunteering any specifics as to who, what, where and when.

When it came to war crimes, the wall of familial silence was always insurmountable. Ludwig knew that his great-grandfather had been part of a police battalion during the war and had been sent 'East', but there the story ended. No one in the family was willing to talk about the role he may have played. Ludwig knew from history books that other police battalions followed the advancing *Wehrmacht* and were often responsible for the execution of Jews, a potential connection that he found deeply troubling, but for which he could not get any confirmation. Not knowing what role a grandfather had played in the war was a common source of anguish among my interviewees, as they filled in the gaps in their knowledge with fantasies about the crimes their forebears might have committed. A lingering sense of guilt and shame remained with the

⁵⁰ I will expand on the topic of sexual violence in Chapter 6.

younger generation in these cases. Thomas, for example, only knew that his grandfather had worked for the railway in Poland from 1943 to 1945. As a teenager he imagined - again and again - how his granddad drove the trains to the extermination camps. He never found out whether that was really the case.

Reasons behind the silences

The exact reasons why the parents and grandparents did not want to share more about their past remained unsaid, and my participants could only guess what lay behind their family's silences. One reason that I heard in almost every interview was they had decided to put all their energy into securing a better economic future. 'The war was terrible, but it is over, let's move on' was their *leitmotif*. The unwillingness to talk was perceived as a rejection of the responsibility that many of the grandparent generation carried for participating in the German aggression, but on the other hand equally as a denial of the traumatic impact of the war experiences itself. In the eyes of many *Kriegsenkel*, their forebears simply refused to confront the past.

A few of my participants felt that their families were too traumatised by what they had witnessed and had no choice but to repress their memories. Anne said her parents needed all their strength to get up in the morning, go to work and raise their kids. In her opinion, there was so much pain buried inside them that they had to keep the past locked away and under control in order to not get swept away by it.

The decision to remain silent about a traumatic war experience was also sometimes viewed as a way of shielding the younger generation from the pain that their loved ones felt. "I don't want to burden you kids with these things," Karoline's mother used to say.

A last but important driver for silence mentioned in my interviews, was a sense of shame and guilt for participating in the war or for supporting the National

Socialist ideology. Marta told me how her mother had recently confessed to her under a flood of tears that as a 14-year old teenager she had joined the League of German Girls (*Bund Deutscher Mädel*) - the Nazi youth organisation out of her own free will. The fact that she had enjoyed the organised activities, the singing, and the camaraderie was something that she was so ashamed of that she had kept it a secret for more than 60 years. I suspect, when it comes to issues of membership in the Nazi party, the witnessed deportation of Jewish neighbours, or the acquisition of their houses and belongings, the sense of shame and the awareness that the younger generation would view their actions as morally reproachable provided an equally strong motivation to remain silent.

Open sharing

While the vast majority of my participants were dissatisfied with the way their parents and grandparents communicated about the past, 20% of them recounted mostly positive experiences. Positioned in the middle of the spectrum of family communication, I would describe 'open sharing' as a style of communication where there was the *perception* that the family talked freely about their experiences without taboos blocking the conversation on certain topics. Wajnryb subsumes this under the category of 'direct communication', which she defines as "one-on-one interactions in which the spoken text itself was an adequate carrier of meaning" (Wajnryb 2001:170).

In these cases, the sharing of stories around the dinner table, at Christmas or in private conversations was remembered as precious moments of emotional closeness, where the younger generation listened with interest to their parents' and grandparents' memories. What sets this apart from the previous section on anecdotes is the permission to ask probing questions and be more proactive in initiating or steering a conversation, rather than having to passively listen to a few repetitive stories from the past.

Martina's story is an example of what so many other *Kriegsenkel* felt was missing in their families. When she was a little girl, Martina used to sit with her maternal grandmother and listen to her talk about the delicatessen store she had had in Dresden before the war, the nights she spent in the bomb shelter with her children and the day they cooked a stray cat to provide food for the family. Her grandfather talked about his time with the *Wehrmacht* in Russia, how he could not understand that German soldiers were looting Russian villages, and how he was injured and able to come home before war was over. Martina listened mesmerised; she wanted to hear the stories again and again, even after she long knew every detail by heart. She had the impression that her myriad of questions were being answered honestly - including the challenging ones. Her grandparents did not hide the fact that they had initially supported Hitler and only changed their minds once the war began. "There were no taboos in our family," she summed up her childhood experiences. Her grandparents' vivid descriptions gave her the feeling of being part of the experiences; they constituted a transfer of historical knowledge that was more memorable and meaningful to her than anything she would later read in history books. Her voice carried warmth and love as she recounted story after story in our interview, details she was now passing on to her own 10-year-old daughter.

On her father's side on the other hand, there were a lot of gaps and missing pieces in the jigsaw puzzle of her family history, including allegations that her paternal grandfather had been commander of a POW camp, but for Martina (as for other participants) 'open sharing' did not necessarily have to extend to the whole family. Having just one side of the family or even one or two family members available to talk to was often enough to satisfy the younger generation's curiosity, to make them feel part of a family lineage and give them a sense of connection to the past.

However, families like Martina's, where there was a perceived atmosphere of openness, often said about themselves that they had been the 'lucky ones', who had suffered less and were less incriminated than other Germans in the war. It is plausible to think that their memories may have been less painful and thus easier to share. There may have been less trauma and guilt, which in many other cases may have been blocking the family communication.

Incessant talking

Moving to the other end of the scale, the frequent sharing of war stories was not always experienced as positive, but as excessive and overwhelming. Five of my participants (9%) remembered that someone in the family talked about the war *incessantly*, unleashing a torrent of words that smothered everything in its path.

Lena used to be proud, because she knew much more about her parents' childhood than her school friends did, but on the other hand she admitted that the war was also omnipresent in the family home. At every family gathering and every time her parents had dinner with friends and the conversation had reached a certain depth after a few glasses of wine, it invariably turned to the war. It was mainly her father who did the talking. In 1941, he had been drafted into the Wehrmacht as a 17-year old adolescent and he described his experiences again and again, always drawing out the same main lesson, 'thank god that the war is over, we need to make sure that it never happens again'.

Andrea had never been told anything about her father's past - until one day, during a train trip, he took her to a quiet compartment and without any forewarning told her his whole story. In April 1945, just about to turn 16, he had been drafted into the *Volkssturm* - the German national militia set up in the last months of the war - to defend Berlin against the advancing Russian army. He was quickly hit by a bullet in the shoulder and was first taken to hospital and then later sent home to his parents. A month later he was arrested and brought

to Buchenwald, a former concentration camp, converted into a Russian POW camp after the German surrender, where he stayed for three years and most of his youth - a time of hunger, humiliation and violence. His account was detailed and relentless, conjuring up images of horrible illnesses and piles of dead bodies. Trapped in the train compartment, Andrea was too shocked to ask any questions. Her father's sudden openness came as a total surprise: "It was like someone had taken the plug out, and everything just started pouring out." After this initial breakthrough, the outpouring continued, again and again.

'Incessant talking' is perceived as an attempt to alleviate the burden of painful war memories by sharing them with close family members or friends. Lena understood her father's behaviour as a form of debriefing for a generation of Germans who were not used to asking for professional help: "It was some sort of Therapy-*Ersatz* for him, but then I was surprised that this therapy never seemed to end. It just went on and on, always the same stories, from a hundred different angles." As much as she empathised with her father, she still felt his constant sharing as an emotional burden, something that diminished her own childhood teenage worries as unimportant and laughable compared to the gravity of her father's war trauma.

In some cases, the younger generation quietly endured the ordeal, like Lena did, whereas others reached a point where they were no longer willing or able to listen. At some stage, Andrea felt so overwhelmed and burdened by the awfulness and sadness of her father's repetitive stories that she asked him to stop. They were too heavy for her to bear, she said.

Among my group of participants, those often repeated stories were more commonly shared by male family members with direct combat experiences, as soldiers, anti-aircraft helpers or members of the *Volkssturm*, and revolved around their memories of endured hardship. Only Sabine, out of all 54 interview

partners, said her grandfather talked at length about the heavy burden of guilt he carried with him since the war.

“He [my grandfather] was difficult. I only knew him as a weird old man. We visited him regularly, but he never really played with us or spent time with us. We had a meal together, and then he would immediately start talking about his war memories. That was the first and only topic ever. . . . He was a soldier, apparently all the way close to Moscow. It was a hard battle, he said, and a lot of friends died next to him, without him being able to do anything about it. They stripped the dead of their boots and broke out their gold teeth. . . . I think it was absolutely terrible for him, but he did it to survive. You could exchange the gold teeth for food. He always came back to that, it was an important point for him, these feelings of guilt. He kept saying again and again, that you had to rob those people, who were lying there, no matter what nationality, of the last little bit they had left. That was very dramatic for him and he told us again and again, always the same story.”

Interestingly, while Sabine’s grandfather was the only case where a family member openly talked about their sense of guilt for participating in the war, this sense of guilt was mainly *vis-à-vis* his dead comrades and rather than around the victims of the German aggression. As alluded to in Chapter 2, Germans of the war generation tended to portray themselves as victims of a war that Hitler had started, rather than the Nazi supporters many of them (at least initially) had been. When talking about their memories, the focus was on their own personal experience of loss and suffering. None of the stories my participants recounted extended to the suffering that Germans had inflicted on their victims. These too remained excluded.

The war is in the house: Communicating without words

Up to this point, my description of the family communication about WWII focused predominantly on *verbal* exchanges about the familial past, some more, others less direct.⁵¹ Yet around a quarter (24%) of my participants described situations where they felt knowledge about the war were passed to them without words, either *in lieu* of direct verbal communication or complementing it. While these experiences could well be placed at the ‘silent’ end of the communication range, I will reserve the spectrum for verbal communication and treat the non-verbal transmission here as a stand-alone communication style in its own right (Kidron 2009a, 2009b; Winter 2010; Zerubavel 2010). Kidron (2009a, 2009b) for example shows how, in Holocaust survivor homes, silent knowing about the parents’ past is transmitted non-verbally within the family, embedded in everyday life and communicated through embodied practices and behaviours, and through engagement with objects from the past.

In my participants’ accounts, the war was sometimes perceived as a kind of ‘presence’ or ‘atmosphere’ in the family home. Some people described a heaviness, a fog, a cloud, or a dome, which had descended on the family, covering everyone under it and creating a sense of isolation, staleness and disconnection from the outside world.⁵² Anne remembered walking home at night as a child looking at the illuminated windows of the neighbouring houses and thinking how different they were from her own, because in them ‘there was peace’. Many people complained about a lack of joy in their family home, where the laughter and lightness of childhood was covered under a thick grey blanket. Elise felt that

⁵¹ I acknowledge that verbal communication always also carries non-verbal elements, as was shown in the examples of ‘obscure remarks’ where my participants felt an emotional charge behind their family’s words.

⁵² Carol Kidron collected similar descriptions in Holocaust survivor families, where the Holocaust could be felt as a non-verbal presence in the survivors’ home, described for example as a “dark cloud hanging over everything” (Kidron 2009b, Location 4163, Kindle version).

there was always something terrible ‘hanging around in the space’ at home. This sort of presence could not necessarily be put into words at the time, yet it was clearly perceived and in hindsight attributed to the unresolved emotions and repressed war memories the family was inadvertently and unconsciously exuding.

In one particularly fascinating case it was the house itself that was seen as holding and communicating the emotional imprints of the past. When I first met Sanna, she told me that she had inherited a marvellous villa near a lake outside Berlin, but that she was struggling to be in the house where she suspected her grandmother had been raped by Russian soldiers stationed there for a few weeks in 1945. Her mother, a child at the time, was adamant that nothing like that had happened, but Sanna strongly sensed that the space in the house told a different story. She could clearly feel her grandmother’s fear, panic and paranoia oozing out from the walls, tangible and present, in spite of the fact that a long time had passed since the actual events. As we were talking about this on a warm and sunny day in 2012, she started to shiver and had to get a blanket before she could continue our conversation. Sanna’s grandmother was taken to a psychiatric hospital in 1946 (suffering from ‘Russian paranoia’ the family was told) never to return home.⁵³

Some participants described other experiences, which they believed were non-verbal and unconscious transmissions of their parents’ and grandparents’ war memories. A few people mentioned having dreams and nightmares featuring firebombing, burning houses and charred bodies, some of which were later confirmed to be representations of actual events that had happened to someone in the family. Other participants had vivid visions of incidents that happened

⁵³ I believe this is similar to what Yael Navaro-Yashin (2009) found in her fieldwork in Turkish-Northern Cyprus, where houses and properties appropriated from the Greek community after the civil war were felt to discharge emotive energies, which were interacting with their (new) owners, and were creating affective spaces of melancholia. There, as in my example, the houses themselves constitute non-human actors in the dynamic.

during the war. Udo kept reliving the same scene over and over again, each time from a different perspective, where Russian soldiers shot his grandfather on his farm in 1946 when he refused to relinquish his liquor supplies to the occupying forces. While his family had told him about his grandfather's violent death, he was adamant that these visions were more than just products of his vivid imagination. They happened involuntarily and seemed to be replays of the past with images and other sensations so real it was as if Udo himself were there.

As an artist, Anja spent years trying to express an indistinct feeling she carried inside, a 'something' that needed to be expressed.⁵⁴ She tested different materials, dissatisfied with each attempt, until one day she produced two 40-kilo concrete models of WWII bomb shelters. When she started questioning her father about his war childhood, which he had previously never talked about, it all started to make sense. Anja was convinced that she had been unconsciously carrying her father's trauma inside her and that it manifested in the form of these bomb shelters.

Most people who reported these kinds of phenomena had no clear explanation of how they came to have such memories, visions or images. Yet, they sensed very clearly that they were not their own but that they were related to experiences that happened long before their birth to someone else in their immediate family.

Asking questions around the processes of transgenerational transmission (in this case the Holocaust), Danieli (1998: 5) states that descendants of Holocaust survivors often reported feeling a 'constant psychological presence' of the Holocaust at home, and that in some cases the children absorbed the experience of their family's suffering by 'osmosis' and without words. Interviewing second generation Holocaust survivors, Carol Kidron (2009b) argues that qualities of

⁵⁴ Anja's story will be told in detail in Chapter 6.

empathy and understanding among family members create a space in which the boundaries between the generations are relaxed and knowledge about the past is passed non-verbally. Along similar lines, psychoanalysts such as Vamik Volkan and his colleagues (Volkan et al. 2002:28) believe that due to the fluidity of ‘psychic borders’ between parents and children during their formative years, parents’ unresolved emotions such as anxiety and depression, as well as their unconscious fantasies, images and memories are passed from one generation to another.

The perfect family communication?

No matter how traumatic, painful or shameful their family’s experiences might have been, 90% of my interviewees said that a direct dialogue about the past was (or would have been) preferable to silence.⁵⁵ There was an underlying concept of the ideal family communication that came through in my participants’ stories, against which they measured their real life experience. Deducting from the negative as well as the positive examples, the ‘ingredients’ of an ideal communication could be summarised as follows:

- Willingness to openly talk about the family’s war experiences, without taboos or defensiveness.
- Openness and responsiveness to the questions of the younger generation while at the same time respecting their boundaries. This means adapting the content of the stories to the children’s age and their active interest.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Here my findings are different from Carol Kidron’s (2009a, 2009b, 2012) who found in her interviews with descendents of Holocaust survivors and of survivors of the Cambodian genocide, that the silence of the family was an accepted and respected way of dealing with the past.

⁵⁶ As mentioned before, in most families there was only one person for whom the family history was of great importance.

- Refraining from abusing the family as therapy-*Ersatz* and overwhelming them with incessant outpouring of grief and pain, which may create a sense that the children are responsible for carrying their family's burden.

As I described in this chapter, most families fell short of this expectation, resulting in frustration and strained relationships between generations for two main reasons. Firstly, the lack of open communication and struggle to obtain information about the family's past had often prevailed since a person's teenage years, leaving a gap in a person's sense of identity. Family stories told and retold around the kitchen table were painfully missed as they transport the knowledge and experiences of one's predecessors. They were hoped to relay a sense of belonging, a continuity of the family's past. For many of my participants, that sense of continuity was missing, leaving a gap in the foundation of their sense of self. "It is like there is nothing that you can stand on," Charlotte concluded. The passing on of stories and life experiences gained during the war was seen as a desirable part of growing up – even though many of those experiences were shameful and/or traumatic.

Secondly, the expectation of 'talk' was also shaped by the norms of the contemporary therapeutic culture, as I will explain in more detail in Chapter 5. Familial silences (but also excessive talk) around a traumatic past was seen as detrimental to the younger generation's mental health as they created the environment in which traumatic experiences were passed on.⁵⁷ The *Kriegsenkel* would have welcomed sharing and respectful openness as a sign that their family had been able to 'confront' and 'work through' the past - both in terms of accepting responsibility for the crimes of the Hitler regime and in addressing the repressed trauma the war had left behind. Familial silence was retrospectively

⁵⁷ See Danieli (1998b); Kellermann (2001b); Lichtmann (1984) on the same topic in relation to Holocaust survivor families.

judged as a proof of failure to achieve this, which, in their view, set the younger generation up to inherit their parents' and grandparents' unresolved issues.

Interestingly, however, what my participants viewed as a personal decision and a 'typically German' way of avoiding the past is a common response to war and violence across cultures. In the last four years, whenever I have mentioned my research to people from around the world - from Ireland, Singapore, Italy, Macedonia, to China and South Africa - the stories I heard tended to be the same, whether the conversation was about WWII, civil war or political violence: parents and grandparents did not talk (much) about their memories. My observations are confirmed by a wealth of psychological and anthropological case studies. Silences - public and private - in the aftermath of war and violence tends to be the norm rather than the exception, and it often takes at least one if not two generations before people start talking about the past. Historian Jay Winter (2010:23) states: "Silences break down when time passes and needs change. As in personal loss, groups of people need time in order to face collective loss or disaster. In many cultures, the initial stage of mourning demands silence."

The hesitation to share their traumatic memories with their children and grandchildren was observed most prominently among Holocaust survivors in Israel (Kidron 2009a, 2009b), Australia (Wajnryb 2001), and the US (Stein 2009), and was often explained by the extreme traumatisation suffered in the concentration camps or driven by a wish to protect the children from the overwhelming pain their loved ones had had to endure. Silences were also reported to dominate in families of World War II survivors from the Dutch East Indies (Aarts 1998), those of Dutch WWII war sailors and resistance fighters (Op den Velde 1998), as well as in families of refugees who had fled to Canada to escape the political violence in Southeast Asia and Central America (Rousseau and Drapeau 1998). Children of Japanese Americans who were

interned by the US government during WWII said that they had fewer than ten conversations with their parents about their internment over their entire life span, with the average length of each conversation being approximately thirty minutes (Nagata 1998:132).

As in Germany, in many other cases the mix of factors of which silences were constructed included an element of shame. The descendants of survivors of the Cambodian genocide of the 1970s living in Canada that Carol Kidron (2009a) interviewed, said that their parents were ashamed of what happened to them, viewing themselves as weak for having endured the political violence. By remaining silent an element of strength was regained, whereas talking would have implied and perpetuated weakness in this cultural context. As was the case for many Germans, for Dutch collaborators with the Nazi regime it was a sense of guilt for the crimes they committed or condoned that prevented them from sharing their stories with their children (Lindt 1998), while some Dutch victims of WWII refrained from talking about their experiences to avoid reliving feelings of powerlessness and humiliation (Op den Velde 1998). Wajnryb (2001:186) noticed that Holocaust survivors who had fought more actively against the Nazis were more open about their wartime experiences than those who had not. For survivors of the Japanese atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 it was the shame of passing on sickness and genetic defects to their offspring that motivated their silence (Tatara 1998), while Chinese survivors of the Great Famine in the early 1960s avoided talking about the gruesome acts of cannibalism that were reported from many rural areas in a desperate attempt to escape starvation (Feuchtwang 2011). Interestingly, a number of older Chinese that Stephan Feuchtwang and his team spoke to tried to share their memories with their children, but in these cases it was the children who did not want to listen. After the political and economic changes following Mao Zedong's death, the younger generation felt that the period of the famine was associated with a past that was not worth dwelling on and that their parents

and grandparents had been foolish to fall for the political enthusiasm that dominated the Maoist era.

Conversely, many members of the younger generation in the above-mentioned studies did suffer from a lack of knowledge about their family's history, like their German counterparts, even if they often accepted the silences imposed on them. The absence of knowledge about their parents' camp years, for example, left some children of Japanese who were interned by the US during WWII to feel sadness and a sense of incompleteness. As one interviewee said, "it felt as if there was a void in my personal history" (Nagata 1998:132).

Could silences be understood and respected as a non-pathological response to mass violence as Kidron (2009a, 2009b, 2012) argued or do they need to be 'broken' as psychologists claim "because what cannot be talked about can also not be put to rest; and if it is not, the wounds continue to fester from generation to generation" (Bettelheim 1985:166)?

Many of my participants emphatically subscribed to the second point of view. Only one person, Hubert, believed that trauma simply wears off with time without requiring talk or therapy. Many others expressed that the 'ideal family communication' about the war would have given them a more secure sense of identity and embeddedness in a family tradition on the one hand, while preventing a passing down of emotional damage related to the war on the other. A double disappointment in both of these aspects of their upbringing explained much of the intense anger and strong judgements against parents and sometimes grandparents that came through in many of my interviews, leading to further deterioration of often already difficult relationships and sometimes a complete cutting of ties.

3. Compounding layers of silence and the emergence of the *Kriegsenkel* topic

Looking at the whole spectrum and the different patterns of family communication around WWII, it is clear that the majority of my participants were dissatisfied with the extent to which their parents and grandparents shared their war memories. They tended to portray themselves as the victims of a dynamic imposed on with their families making the decision of how much they were willing to disclose.

However, as we delved deeper, a more diverse picture emerged. Silences and taboos were not always created or upheld just by older generations, but in many cases at least respected and sometimes reinforced by the *Kriegsenkel* themselves. Many of my interview partners said that they had actively asked questions, trying to challenge and break through the imposed silences - often without much success. Yet, in about a third (34%) of all cases, my participants stated that they felt something akin to an 'invisible wall' around the tabooed topics and had not tried to push beyond it. The reasons I was given as an explanation ranged from fear and tacit acceptance to the wish to protect the parents and to avoid causing them pain.

In addition, not everyone considered the familial silence to be problematic. When I asked her whether she would have liked to have known more about her grandparents' past, Eva-Marie shook her head. She thought that it was a good idea for every generation to deal with their difficult memories themselves, rather than burdening their children and grandchildren. "This way, the stories remain with the people they belong to, and it is good like that," she said.

Nora admitted that her mother would probably have talked more about her war childhood, but that she, Nora, did not encourage her. She simply did not want to listen to her mother lamenting about her lost home in Czechia or feel her bitterness about her experience as an unwelcome refugee in post-war Germany.

These examples support one of the findings from Wajnryb's (2001) interviews: The listener plays a vital role in the intergenerational communication about a difficult or traumatic past. Narratives are constructed in collaboration among all parties, and it is imperative for the process that the listener provides positive feedback and encouragement to enable the sharing. "There needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an *other* – in the position of the one who hears" (Wajnryb 2001:190, emphasis in the original). If this is not given, the flow of sharing often won't happen, and silence prevails.

I concur with German sociologist Jürgen Zinnecker (2008), who found that the younger generation played an important role in how German families adapted to war experiences, either by condoning prevailing silence or by stimulating the debate about their parents' and grandparents' past. Not disregarding the fact that a number of my participants did indeed try to push for a more open communication and failed, the younger generation needs to be perceived as active players in the family dynamic and not merely as the passive victims of their upbringing, which more often than not was how they portrayed themselves.

This argument is further strengthened by the interesting observation that the siblings of my participants often recounted different memories of growing up in the same family and held diverging views of what was shared and what was silenced. While Lena complained that her father talked about his time as a soldier all the time and to an overwhelming extent, her brother Ulrich remembered that the war was only discussed in passing and that the post-war years were a more prominent feature in their parents' stories. While Cornelia felt that her father consciously avoided sharing his painful memories and would not tell her more about his war childhood, her brother Christoph remembered asking a lot of questions and receiving satisfactory answers from both of his parents. In some cases the siblings' accounts of their upbringing resembled each other, while in others I had the impression that they were talking about

completely different families. My findings support Bettina Völter's (2008) claim that siblings often interact with different aspects of their familial past and assume different roles in the intergenerational dialogue.

The see-saw of denial and accusations

One important factor often blocking the communication in German families was the different attitudes of each generation towards the Third Reich and WWII. These impacted upon what older family members shared but also on the type of questions the *Kriegsenkel* asked, particularly as teenagers. As stated, the vast majority of German parents and grandparents did not want to be reminded of the war and the Third Reich, while the younger generation tended to be judgmental and ask gruelling questions about their grandparents' support for the Hitler regime or their knowledge of the deportation of their Jewish neighbours.

“What did you do?” and “what did you know?” and “how could you?” was often asked of the grandparent generation with an openly accusing undertone,⁵⁸ and the response in the majority of cases was a firm denial of any knowledge or active involvement - either by the grandparents directly or by the parents on their behalf. Silence and denial of knowledge or responsibility on the one side, distrust and suspicion on the other were, according to Vesper and Weber (1991:91), so widespread that they almost constitute a cliché of stereotypical ‘family conversations about National Socialism’, ritualistically re-enacted over the years in countless German homes. I believe, due to such dynamics, the necessary atmosphere of willingness to share freely and to listen empathically, which Wajnryb (2001) sees as a prerequisite for a dialogue about an emotionally charged past, could not be established.

⁵⁸ Vesper and Weber (1991) found in their interviews with German families in the late 1980s that the younger generation tended to display a style of questioning and probing that was driven by the intention to provoke and challenge, rather than stemming from a genuine interest in their family's experience.

This conflict between the generations, and the respective position of each generation, were clearly influenced by the public discourses about WWII and National Socialism outlined in Chapter 2. Its attitudes and moral judgements about the past were internalised by the younger generation and rejected by the older, moulding and hardening the family conversations along these fault lines.

Blind spots

I also argue that this calcified dynamic that all parties found themselves trapped in not only blocked the exchange of experiences but also led to the creation of 'blind spots', where certain aspects of the older generations' wartime experiences were played down or overlooked altogether. To my knowledge, this has not been mentioned in the literature before.

In both parts of Germany, the younger generation sometimes blocked out parts of their family's story, because their moral lens prevented them from grasping the full dimension of the family's war trauma. A number of my interviewees said they were struggling to empathise with the hardship their family had endured, because it seemed like a justified retaliation for the pain Germans had inflicted on the Jews and so many other people. Although the family might have talked about their difficult memories, the information did not really 'sink in'. Udo's mother tried to explain to him what it was like for her having to leave her village in a hurry with just a few basic things packed in a suitcase. He listened yet was unable to feel any compassion. "I heard what she said, but it was like there was a wall between what she was talking about and myself," he admitted, "sometimes I would just say to her: 'Look the Germans started the war and we really cannot complain about what happened to us as a result.'"

While Udo's mother had actively tried sharing her painful experiences with her son, in many other cases, the public focus on German perpetratorship led to a situation where the exclusion of wartime suffering from family narratives simply

went unnoticed. The older family members did not mention it, and it did not occur to the younger generation to enquire. Quite a few times in my interviews I heard statements such as “I am surprised that I never asked that question before,” or “how could I have blocked this aspect out completely?” It was only after the taboo in the public sphere was lifted in the early 2000s and accounts of German wartime suffering were flooding the mainstream media that these blind spots were slowly starting to be noticed. Isabelle was one of the *Kriegsenkel* who were realising what they had overlooked:

A while ago, I watched this program on TV about the expulsions from the East. People of my father’s age were being interviewed, and they had all been damaged and were traumatised from the experience. That was the very first time – and looking back now I find that really surprising - that I thought, “oh dear, my father had to flee too”. I had never thought about that before. I was 35 when I thought about it for the very first time! I don’t remember how old I was then I first heard about my father’s flight. But I did not let it sink in, I never thought it through, that is what now surprises me the most.

My chapter clearly shows how - contrary to claims made by German researches such as Assmann (2006a, 2006b), Wierling (2010) and Welzer (Welzer et al. 2002) - the family did not really provide a separate space to talk about the war in ways that did not conform with the dominant public narrative about the war, but that the culture of commemoration reached into the private sphere, creating a strong moral lens through which the family experiences were viewed and filtered. It shaped how stories were shared (or not) on the one side and how they were listened to on the other. Historian Peter Novick (1999) concurs that taboos in the public discourse strongly impact on private narratives, as discussions in private tend to reflect the topics raised in the public domain. Even more so, I have argued above, because they are often coupled with the general

tendency of the eyewitness generation of any war and mass violence to remain silent about their memories.

In Germany, this dynamic created a layer of gaps, silences, and blind spots in the dialogue between the generations and contributed to preventing a more comprehensive picture of a family's war experience from being transmitted and received. Both Udo and Isabelle, whose examples stand for many others, only realised what they had blocked out when the focus of the public discussion shifted. While they both still hold on to their conviction today that what their families endured was a direct and justified consequence of the crimes that Germans had committed, they recently started to listen with more compassion to what their parents had to share.

Silences surrounding the family

There is a third layer of silence that plays a role in this issue and that is the silence surrounding German families. Something that struck me in all my interview partners was that no matter how much or how little they knew about their family history, virtually no one talked about any of it outside the family home as they were growing up. People did not tend to share their quest to get answers from parents and grandparents with their friends, nor did they talk about the experiences and anecdotes that they had heard about. In this regard there is no difference between families who talked about the war at home and those that did not. In both cases the *Kriegsenkel* remained equally silent. Very often, it simply did not occur to them to discuss this part of their family history with their classmates and friends.

As outlined in Chapter 2, many *Kriegsenkel* remembered that Hitler's rise to power; the war and the Holocaust were talked about at school in varying degrees of detail. Yet - confirming what Welzer et al (2002) found in their interviews – those facts about the past remained abstract and impersonal, and hardly anyone

felt that their family history had a place in the larger national narrative. Teachers did not encourage students to make the connection and personal stories were not part of the history lessons - neither in East nor in West German schools. The only exception among my 54 participants was Martina, who said she actively contributed anecdotes she had heard from her grandparents when WWII was discussed at school. In one other case, the sharing of personal experiences happened by accident:

Once our teacher talked to us about the topic of expellees in relationship to WWII, and she said, "Well, this surely does not apply to any of you!" But lo and behold! About half of us children immediately put up our hands, and we all said from where our parents had fled. That was the first time that I realised how broadly we were affected and how many of us there were. I must have been about 12 at the time. (Elise)

German historian Dorothee Wierling (2010) claims that neither schools nor institutions like churches were able to pick up on this disconnect and failed to provide a context in which family stories could have been shared and elaborated. I suspect that as a consequence of this situation, blind spots regarding wartime suffering were fixed further, as there was no broader discussion that could have helped to put the family history into a broader context.

When it came to family conversations, I found no discernable difference between East and West Germans regarding the range of communication styles. Families in both parts of the country tended to talk about their war experience in similar ways, through obscure remarks, life lessons or anecdotes etc., and both equally excluded topics evoking guilt, shame or trauma. Minor differences revolved around memories of flight and expulsion and the violence of the Soviet occupying forces, which were hinted to more reluctantly in East German families, while the younger generation's focus on and intergenerational tensions around

perpetratorship were much more widespread in the West – at least until the collapse of the GDR.

However, when it came to sharing personal experiences with people outside the home, the wall of silence in East Germany had one additional layer. While in the West, without an external stimulus it often simply did not occur to members of the younger generation to talk about their family history with friends or colleagues, in East Germany the rule ‘what happens in the family stays in the family’ was strictly enforced to avoid all possible conflicts between the officially sanctioned version of WWII history and potentially divergent personal experiences.

4. Conclusion

This chapter described in detail how communication in German families about WWII was structured, particularly around the time when my participants were growing up. Only a minority of families were reported to have a culture of communication that the younger generation found satisfactory, where questions could be asked and were answered with perceived sincerity and openness and without overwhelming the listener in the process. In most other families, conversations about the war remained patchy. Taboos, denial and an unwillingness to share painful or shameful memories created an atmosphere of secrecy and suppression that left the *Kriegsenkel* generation without a clear sense of the familial past. However, I also showed that they themselves played an active role in this dynamic, often accepting or reinforcing taboos and silences or preventing more sharing by assuming an attitude of moral judgement and self-righteousness *vis-a-vis* their family’s involvement with the Hitler regime.

This chapter furthermore showed that public narratives about National Socialisms and WWII also shaped the intergenerational dialogue in the private

sphere, impacting on what was shared by the older generation(s) and the type of the questions younger members of the family asked. At the same time, the family unit remained disconnected from its immediate social environment and personal stories did not travel beyond the walls of the family home.

While the gaps and silences in each of these layers were not necessarily fully overlapping (as there was a degree of sharing of wartime suffering in family stories that was largely absent from the public culture of commemoration), the interplay of these different spheres - as well as individual psychological factors and family dynamics - created a complex matrix, through which WWII experiences were expressed or, more often, silenced. I showed that there were layers of silence around both aspects of the war, perpetratorship and wartime suffering. The difference between them, however, is that aspects of perpetratorship and active support for Hitler was something that the *Kriegsenkel* had been largely aware of (in particular in West Germany) as they were growing up, whereas they had not been conscious of the full impact of their family's traumatic war memories. I believe that these blind spots explain the surprise and emotional 'Eureka moment' with which the *Kriegsenkel* generation responded to discovering the topic. After having been blocked from consciousness for most of their lives, due to recent movies, media articles, books and documentaries featuring suffering and hardship during WWII, the long-term emotional impact of WWII on their families and by extension on themselves suddenly moved into full view. The focus on German war trauma inspired my participants to ask new questions and to look at their lives from a new perspective. Their stories, re-told and re-written from this standpoint and with the knowledge of 2012, underscore the fact that any understanding of the past - individual and collective - is fluid, dynamic and constantly open to revisions as the social and political environment changes and new information becomes available.

In some cases the parents were now more inclined to tell stories about their lives during WWII, and there was also a greater willingness by the younger generation to ask questions with non-judgemental openness and empathy. However, in the majority of my participants' families, the dynamic remained unchanged, and conversation continued to be difficult, charged and frustrating.

Chapter 4 Better 'sick' than 'strange' - The War Grandchildren Movement and the Desire to Legitimize Suffering

I. Introduction

I was born in 1956 and for almost 30 years I have tried to find the reasons behind my problems, or rather a way to resolve them. For years and years I have been asking myself, "What is wrong with me? Why am I not in the least able to manage my life?" I was addicted to drugs, have suffered from bulimia and severe depression, and was addicted to prescription medication. I am entirely incapable of having relationships. I can't find a place to settle down and keep moving house, always feeling like an outsider. I can't hold down a job, because I can never stay long enough. [...]

I have done numerous psychotherapies. While I could get my addictions under control, and the bulimia is also not an issue anymore, I still can't live a normal life. I have issues with intimacy and emotions, I am always running away (I am always fleeing!), and somehow I don't know who I am.

Last week I came across *We Children of the War Children* (*Wir Kinder der Kriegskinder*) at our local library. It hit me like a ton of bricks. On the one hand it was a sense of liberation. Finally, finally, I know what is going on with me. On the other hand it was a shock. Since I read the book, my whole life is passing in front of my eyes. Again and again situations with my parents come to mind, which I now see in a different

light. It is scary, and the pain of my parents' suffering almost knocks me over.

My parents were both 'expellees' (*Vertriebene*) from the Sudetenland. They were no longer little children when they had to flee but they still went through so much suffering, that it impacted on them for the rest of their lives. My mother never talked about it. Only in the final weeks before her death, she told me about her flight, but she only touched on it very briefly. I did not understand anything, and I did not ask any questions.

I grew up under a heavy coat of pain and suffering and a longing for the *Heimat* (the homeland). But no one ever even uttered a single word about it. The pain was enveloping us, but was never given a name. [...].

We somehow lived a life shielded away from the 'normal' world outside. We never had any visitors. Everything outside our family was dangerous. We were indoctrinated never to trust a stranger. My parents did not go out at night, not to the theatre, nor to the movies or to visit friends. They did not have any friends. Our life was at home, that is where one was safe. But I did not understand why, and nothing was explained, that was the worst. How could I have known, that war and expulsion were the reasons behind their behaviour and their rules?

I am grateful that I finally found out why I am having such difficulties in my life and why everything was so strange at home. I hope that now I will finally be able to work through all of this. A.W. January 2011⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Shared on <http://www.forumkriegsenkel.de/Lebensgeschichten.htm>. [Accessed 20 August 2015].

This anonymous posting shared in the ‘life histories’ section on one of the *Kriegsenkel* websites captures well what it means to discover the topic and reflect for the first time on how WWII had impacted on the psychological health of their family and by extension their own. A.W. was severely struggling in most aspects of her⁶⁰ life and up until that moment her issues could only partly be resolved through therapy. Then she discovered the *Kriegsenkel* book, which provided a completely new context: WWII and the traumatic imprint their forced migration had left on her parents. She suddenly realised how their war experiences had shaped their life to this day, something she had never considered before. For A. W. making this connection to WWII came as a big revelation that changed the way she saw her psychological illness. Her suffering had a new explanation - transmitted war trauma - and her ‘condition’ had a new name around which her symptoms were gathered: being a *Kriegsenkel*. Making this connection gave her a sense of hope that her severe problems could finally be addressed.

I heard many stories like A.W’s during my fieldwork. Finding the *Kriegsenkel* topic and putting a label on their previously indistinct suffering was a life changing experience that re-structured a person’s history and re-defined their sense of identity. It explained their own and their family’s emotional struggles in a different and more convincing and meaningful way, and put them in the broader context of collective German history. Finally, it relayed hope for a happier and healthier future, which previous attempts at healing had not been able to deliver.

Since my time in Berlin, the number of people identifying as *Kriegsenkel* in Facebook groups and on designated websites has grown steadily. However, when in late March 2015 members of the war grandchildren association uploaded an

⁶⁰ I have assumed that A.W. is a woman.

entry on the term *Kriegsenkel* onto the German Wikipedia site, explaining its origins and giving an overview of activities around the country, a submission was made a few days later demanding that the page be deleted.⁶¹ The requestor and his or her supporters argued that the term was only sporadically used in the German public and was thus lacking in relevance, and that scientific proof for the existence of a *Kriegsenkel* generation did not exist. “Just another self help concept supposed to support people in midlife crisis, who are given the opportunity to blame others (their grandparents) for their problems. If it helps people, fine - but I cannot detect any trace of scientific reception or serious research in the article,” one person writes.⁶² After a week of debate, the proposal was rejected and the entry remained, in spite of the fact that not much further ‘scientific proof’ for the existence of a *Kriegsenkel* phenomenon could be found. The administrators of the site accepted, however, that *Kriegsenkel* has become quite a well-known term and thus warranted an entry.

While this may have been the initiative of a known Wikipedia troublemaker, as some contributors to the exchange suggested, the incident does point to a larger issue: as an increasing number of Germans see the transgenerational impact of WWII as a key to understanding their emotional problems, being a *Kriegsenkel* is not a clearly defined psychological diagnosis or a recognized mental health condition supported by research and related psychotherapeutic experience.

Kriegsenkel are still struggling to have their problems recognised. Their claim that they are suffering from issues that stretch back to WWII is still frequently dismissed as ‘made up’, or, as mentioned above, as just another attempt to blame

⁶¹ See http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Löschkandidaten/30._März_2015. [Accessed 20. August 2015]. As per Wikipedia’s policies, members of the public can request the deletion of a particular entry, which is open for discussion for 7 days after which a Wikipedia administrator decides to delete or retain it based on the arguments brought forward by both sides.

⁶² Ibid.

the family for one's own shortcomings and failures. "*Euch geht es doch gut,*" ("but you are so well-off") my participants' mothers and fathers often said, implying that they should not have any complaints. Or they are brushed off like Martin whose mother ended his attempt at starting a conversation with "But you were not even there, how could you be affected by the war?" Even within the therapeutic community, the topic is not yet unequivocally accepted. A psychology student, who wanted to write her final thesis about transgenerational transmission of WWII trauma in Germany, was dismissed by her professor saying that the topic was 'unscientific' and a product of her imagination.⁶³

In this chapter I will explain that despite a lack of broad public recognition and with psychological research and therapy still catching up after decades of taboos and silences around German wartime suffering, the *Kriegsenkel* themselves are strongly motivated to underscore that their struggles are not just individual, but a tangible psychological burden that is shared by many across their generation. I will argue that the core function of the *Kriegsenkel* movement is to explore, contextualise and validate emotional suffering.

The first part of the chapter continues to lay some of the groundwork for my overall thesis. It gives an overview of the war grandchildren movement and its development from a few support groups in 2010 to an 'emerging social movement'⁶⁴ in 2015. As concepts of transgenerational transmission are at the heart of the *Kriegsenkel* identity, I will then give a brief overview of some of psychological research on the topic and the phenomenon of the 'second generation' conducted in other contexts. I will argue that, in a situation where similar research for Germany and related psychotherapeutic practices are only just starting to emerge, the *Kriegsenkel* are de facto 'diagnosing' themselves as sufferers of transmitted war trauma. To explore and further confirm this new

⁶³ Personal email correspondence, May 2014.

⁶⁴ http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kriegsenkel#cite_note-6 [Accessed 20 August 2015].

identity, they are meeting in self-managed support groups, workshops and weekend seminars to share their personal stories and to compare their own psychological difficulties with those of their peers. They are also extracting common psychological symptoms from *Kriegsenkel* life histories collected in popular books, contributed to special websites, and continuously negotiated in Facebook groups. I argue that through these practices of ‘sharing and comparing’, driven by the participants themselves, a cluster of symptoms for a new psychological profile is slowly being assembled.

In spite of the critique of the psychological profession and its growing tendency to ‘pathologise’ and ‘medicalise’ everyday life (Furedi 2004; Kutchins and Kirk 1997), I will show that there is a strong motivation for the *Kriegsenkel* to frame their struggles as a mental health condition. Being ‘sick’ rather than just ‘strange’ or ‘different’ as they felt before transforms their ‘imagined’ problems into a proper ‘syndrome’. This not only confers legitimacy on their suffering, but it also allows for therapeutic interventions that hold the promise for a happier future. At some point, the war grandchildren may well lobby for formal recognition as sufferers of transmitted war trauma and request specialised therapy to alleviate the symptoms associated with a ‘*Kriegsenkel* syndrome’.

Chapters 4 and 5 are to be read in tandem, as they cover different aspects of the *Kriegsenkel* movement as a social phenomenon. This chapter describes the movement’s activities as a search to legitimise emotional suffering while the following chapter will analyse the *Kriegsenkel* movement and its hope for liberation from the burden of the past in the context of Western ‘therapy culture’ (Furedi 2004). I will show that *Kriegsenkel* identities are constructed, performed and addressed entirely within the parameters of therapeutic discourses and norms.

2. The *Kriegsenkel*-movement: Origins, definitions and activities

As mentioned before, the short history of the German war grandchildren movement begins with the publication of two non-fiction books: Anne Ev-Ustorf's (2008) *Wir Kinder der Kriegskinder: die Generation im Schatten des Krieges* (*We children of the war children: the generation in the shadow of the war*), and Sabine Bode's *Kriegsenkel: die Erben der vergessenen Generation* (*war grandchildren: the heirs of the forgotten generation*) of 2009, bringing the topic of a possible transgenerational impact of WWII on the mental health of the general German population into the public arena for the first time. Interested *Kriegsenkel* are now meeting in support groups or in Internet fora and Facebook groups to discuss their own and their family's issues, and a number of therapists are offering a variety of healing techniques to alleviate the problems perceived as resulting from a transmission of unresolved war experiences. It is worthwhile to map out these different *Kriegsenkel* resources and activities in more detail, as they lay important ground on which my analysis of *Kriegsenkel* life histories and collective practices is built.

Two foundational books

Sabine Bode and Anne-Ev Ustorf's foundational books each comprise a collection of life histories of members of this generation, notably Germans in their 40s and 50s whose parents were children at the time of WWII. The authors depict their interviewees' struggle to find a direction for their lives, relationships and professional careers, as well as a clear sense of identity and belonging. These present challenges and problems are set in direct relation to the unresolved war experiences of their parents and sometimes grandparents, which are seen to be at the root of these issues.

Ann-Ev Ustorf interviewed 12 people her own age, all of them with a family history of flight and expulsion, and all born and raised in West Germany. She

recounts their family history during WWII and describes each person's current emotional challenges. Ustorf (2008) states that her aim is to demonstrate how unresolved war experiences still manifest in the lives of the *Kriegsenkel* today, and she hopes to contribute to a greater understanding, communication and reconciliation between the generations. In some of her portraits, the author draws a direct line from the parents' and grandparents' experiences of flight and expulsion to feelings of homelessness and not belonging or – quite the opposite – to an overly strong attachment to the hometown in the (grand)-children. In another case her interview partner's inferiority complex and strong need for financial security are linked back to his parents' wartime experiences of material loss and lack. Problems with sex and relationships in one interviewee are traced back to experiences of rape of family members during the war. For yet another, his parents' silence and inability to talk about their traumatic war experiences are believed to be the source of his ongoing problems with expressing emotions. It is not clear how much of the claim regarding the link between the past trauma and current emotional problems is based on Ustorf's own interpretation⁶⁵, and how much was actually provided by her respondents themselves, all of whom seemed to have accessed psychotherapy.

Sabine Bode is slightly more cautious in directly linking present emotional issues to past family experiences and she mostly relies on her interviewees to make this connection themselves. Her interest in the topic seemed to have originated from the first groups that she and her husband Georg, a family- and trauma therapist, initiated in late 2007 to discuss how the war affected people across generations.

Her 2009 book has a similar objective as Ustorf's: to draw attention to the long-term impact of the time of National Socialism and war on German families. The 18 portraits she presents are constructed similarly to Ustorf's: a description of

⁶⁵ Both authors are journalists and not psychologists.

the person's family's history during WWII, their past and current relationship with their parents, and their current life challenges. The stories she collected paint a diverse picture of how her interviewees experienced growing up with parents and grandparents damaged by WWII, but many of their issues are similar to those found in Ustorf's (2008) case studies. There is Robert who struggles with relationships until he realises that his grandfather had to watch helplessly as his wife and mother were raped by Russian soldiers at the end of WWII. There is Jürgen, who is unable to fill the void caused by a lack of emotional support and nurturing from his mother, who as a child witnessed the bombardment and destruction of her home town; and there is Andrea, who is convinced that her chronic neck pain is a psychosomatic response to the horrific crimes her grandfather committed as an SS executioner during the war.

Ustorf's book has been reprinted five times to date, and in 2012 had sold around 40,000 copies.⁶⁶ In 2014, Bode's book was available in its 11th hard cover and its 14th paperback edition,⁶⁷ and one source estimates the total number of copies sold at 320,000.⁶⁸ Many of my interview partners had borrowed the books from public libraries or from friends and family, which indicates a potential multiplication of the readership for each copy. Among my participants, Bode's book was by far the more popular, and they would often refer to it to relate their own experiences. Most people identified more strongly with the label '*Kriegsenkel*' (war grandchildren) rather than with Ustorf's title '*Kinder der Kriegskinder*' (children of the war children) to capture the common characteristics of their generation. According to Sabine Bode, the term was coined in the first self help groups that she had organised with her husband. She

⁶⁶ Interview with Anne-Ev Ustorf on 20.11.2012.

⁶⁷ <http://www.klett-cotta.de/buch/Gesellschaft/Kriegsenkel/5760>. [Accessed 20 August 2015].

⁶⁸ See http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Löschkandidaten/30._März_2015. [Accessed 20 August 2015] Confirmation regarding the exact number of copies was not available, neither from the publisher nor the author.

claims the *Kriegsenkel* label stuck as it gave their group members a clear, short and self-explanatory word to describe themselves and to rally around.⁶⁹⁷⁰

Two websites

Following the publication of the *Kriegsenkel* books, two internet sites were set up by volunteers to provide information and networking opportunities for interested members of the public: the more extensive *www.forumkriegsenkel.de* (hereafter *Forumkriegsenkel.de*), founded in late 2009, and *www.kriegsenkel.de* (hereafter *Kriegsenkel.de*), which came into life in 2012 together with an association by the same name.

Both websites offer a definition of the term *Kriegsenkel* (in one case translated into English as ‘grandchildren of war’ and in the other as ‘war descendants’), which closely follow the same line of argument as Ustorf and Bode’s books in regards to underlying concepts of transgenerational transmission of war experiences.

Kriegsenkel.de states:

‘Grandchildren of War’ are people whose parents have witnessed the time of the NS regime and World War II as children or youths and are until now – often in an unrecognized way - standing under the impact of traumatizing experiences. By the so-called ‘transgenerational transfer’ of the effects of trauma, grandchildren of war are affected by their parents’ war experience.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Personal conversation with Sabine Bode on 31.3.2012.

⁷⁰ A third book with *Kriegsenkel* life histories, entitled ‘*Nebelkinder* (children of fog)’ (Schneider and Süß 2015) was published in march 2015, but is not included here as it was not available at the time of my interviews.

⁷¹ www.Kriegsenkel.de (English translation as per website).

Forumkriegsenkel.de explains further:

War-descendents [sic] often may suffer from recurrent psychological blocks, diffuse fears, heavy feelings of guilt or feelings of depression, yet without being able to explain the origin of such experiences. We would like to help those who are interested in learning more about themselves and their family pasts in light of both society and history. We hope to provide a point of departure for grasping these negative legacies, for learning to understand them and, ultimately, for freeing oneself from them.⁷²

People are invited to share their personal stories, poems or artwork anonymously in the 'life histories' section of the site or put an ad on the 'news' page if they wish to network with like-minded people or form support groups in their region. According to Anne Barth, one of the three founding members and now sole manager of the site, *Forumkriegsenkel.de* received around 1700 hits per month in 2012; by May 2015 that number had increased to about 4000.⁷³ The other site, *Kriegsenkel.de* only contains a limited number of books on the topic but gives service providers the opportunity to promote seminars and courses to their *Kriegsenkel* target audience.

In mid 2012, *Forumkriegsenkel.de* published the results of a survey that had invited people to contribute to a list issues they were facing in their current lives, which they felt were directly connected to their family's war experiences. A list of more than 60 'symptoms' or character traits and attributes - not all of them negative - was compiled from the 50-60 contributions to the survey, ranging from personal issues such as:

⁷² www.forumkriegsenkel.de (English translation as per website).

⁷³ Interview with Anne Barth on 17.9.2012 and email correspondence in May 2015.

- sense of homelessness and loneliness
- fear of abandonment
- feelings of guilt
- melancholia
- tendency for depression
- burn-out
- panic attacks
- childlessness
- empathy
- creativity, independence

to issues with their family of origin

- assuming responsibility for parents' needs and emotions
- excessive loyalty to parents
- parents can't show emotions
- lack of role models, i.e fathers,
- physical abuse
- being the black sheep in the family.

and others related to professional and social difficulties, such as:

- frequently moving house or changing cities
- lack of direction in their career
- sense of not moving forward, feeling stuck
- sense of isolation
- tendency to withdraw
- fear of change
- feelings of uncertainty
- ability to create networks
- freedom from ideology, etc.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ For the complete list see <http://www.forumkriegsenkel.de/Studie.htm> [accessed 20 August 2015] and Barth (2012:175–79) In December 2014, after I concluded my

Four Facebook groups

In addition to these websites, war grandchildren also use the Internet to connect with each other through a number of Facebook Groups. I am currently aware of four such groups, but there may be more as membership is by invitation through existing participants only. In August 2015 numbers ranged from 16 (*Kriegsenkel München*), 44 (*Berliner Kriegsnachkommen*) and 241 (*Kriegsenkel Berlin*) to 589 (*Kriegsenkel*) and per group (multiple memberships are common), with numbers growing each week. Members use the space to share their issues and their family stories and comment on those posted by others. The more active groups post multiple times a day and host often lively and controversial discussions. 20-30 responses per post are common. Members also exchange information about books, media articles, Radio and TV documentaries on a daily basis and they promote upcoming events, support group meetings, workshops and seminars.

A number of support groups

Between 15 and 20 war grandchildren support groups have formed in the last few years and are now meeting regularly in larger Germany cities, including Berlin (4 groups), Freiburg, München, Frankfurt, Hamburg and Hannover. One group even meets regularly in Paris, made up of German immigrants with French spouses. The ones I either attended myself or was told about by my informants have between 10 and 20 participants (the majority of them women), and normally meet once a month in a public space like a local community centre. Some groups are open, with a different composition at each meeting; others are closed with a clearly demarcated and stable membership. Some of them tailor the

fieldwork, a 'positive list' was added to the original one, with positive attributes seen as resulting from WWII experiences. In my interviews positive attributes were almost never mentioned.

content of their discussions to their participants' immediate needs and interests, while others have pre-defined topics.

The Berlin *Erzählcafé*, for example, was founded by communication coach Ines Koenen in October 2012. When we discussed her original idea, she said that she simply wanted to give people the opportunity to tell their stories and to establish links with other members of the same generation. Her group is now meeting every month and the format has evolved from ad hoc storytelling to a facilitated discussion around a fixed topic, such as 'war and peace', 'relationships with parents, grandparents or siblings', 'parentification' and 'why do I go through life with the handbrake on?' Ines occasionally invites guest speakers or shows TV documentaries, and since the beginning of 2013 charges a fee (around 8 Euro/AUD 12) for participation. In March 2013 the *Erzählcafé* went on a weekend trip to Dresden tracing the history of the city's total destruction in February 1945. Ines said she enjoys the company of like-minded people and it is not all just doom and gloom for her. "We are a relaxed bunch, and there is a lot of laughter too," she said in an interview with the *Berliner Morgenpost*, "even if many of the topics are very serious" (Keseling 2013).

The main aim of the support groups, which is often made clear in an opening statement by the facilitator, is to give people the opportunity to share their family's history and their own emotional struggles with an empathetic audience. Unlike the second-generation Holocaust survivor groups in the US (Stein 2009) and in Israel (Kidron 2003), the vast majority of them are organised and facilitated by peers and are neither equipped nor intended to replace professional help. For a more thorough 'working through' of emotional problems, participants are encouraged to go elsewhere. Individual group members would, however, commonly discuss healing strategies or recommend books that they found helpful. For many *Kriegsenkel*, this is the first time they discuss their family history in relationship to the war and its traumatic impact outside their

family home. This regularly brings up tears and painful memories but also a sense of connection and comfort.

The support group landscape is dynamic and somewhat unstable. Groups appear, expand, morph from open to closed groups, and sometimes vanish in a relatively short space of time. The first Munich war grandchildren group for example, was founded and very active in 2012, only to disappear again together with their website in early 2013 without explanation. Other groups are struggling to define their purpose once the initial phase of bonding and exchanging of family stories has passed. Yet overall their number is growing steadily. Interestingly, as I will discuss further in Chapter 5, all of them are in the territory of the former West Germany. Six new groups were founded between September and November 2013 alone, and in May 2015 I found at least another seven new meeting locations I had not previously been aware of in the news section of *Forumkriegsenkel.de*.

A couple of therapists

A number of psychoanalysts, psychotherapists and alternative healers cater explicitly to a clientele from the *Kriegsenkel* scene. Their services range from individual therapy and coaching to psychoanalytical group sessions, family constellations⁷⁵, seminars and workshops. People who are interested in addressing their issues in more depth can select from a range of evening and weekend workshops conducted across the country. Sabine Bode offers retreats for small groups to explore individual life histories in the context of the WWII,⁷⁶ and journalist Merle Hilbk conducts creative writing workshops encouraging participants to discover the underlying themes and patterns in their

⁷⁵ <http://www2.hellinger.com/en/home/> [Accessed 1.7.2015].

⁷⁶ <http://www.sabine-bode-koeln.de/seminare.html> [Accessed 1.7.2015].

biography⁷⁷. Psychotherapist Ingrid Meyer-Legrand promises to help with career problems stemming from a family history of flight and expulsion,⁷⁸ and her colleague Gabriele Baring offers family constellation seminars for the war generation and their children.⁷⁹

Monika Weidlich, who works with techniques of deep relaxation and visualisation to address psychological blockages, specifically mentions the ‘war grandchildren phenomenon’ on the list of ‘treatable conditions’ on her website.⁸⁰ When I asked her how she would define this specific group and the corresponding ‘phenomenon’, she responded:

It is not easy to describe the typical war grandchild, but something that is true for all of them is a feeling (acknowledged or repressed) of somehow not being OK, and to feel like an outcast. Some of them distinguish themselves through hard work and successful careers, fulfilling the dreams and expectations of their parents as the only way to get their love and attention. Others are more rebellious and don’t finish their education, they tend to have more ‘broken’ biographies and display their unhappiness in more obvious forms of depression and hopelessness. Both groups have in common that they can’t seem to get a handle on the source of their suffering.⁸¹

When I left Germany at the end of 2012, the scope of the war grandchildren scene did not reach very far beyond their closed circles and self-help groups.

⁷⁷ Interview with Merle Hilbk on 22.I.2013.

⁷⁸ <http://meyer-legrand.eu/immer-noch-auf-der-flucht/> [Accessed 20 August 2015].

⁷⁹ <http://www.gabriele-baring.de/termine.php> [Accessed 20 August 2015].

⁸⁰ See <http://www.synergetik-hannover.de/anwendung.htm> [Accessed 1 August 2015]. As far as I know, Monika Weidlich is the only therapist who uses this term to date.

⁸¹ Interview with Monika Weidlich on 11.6.2012 and personal email correspondence.

When talking to members of the public or even therapists, only a small minority were familiar with the term *Kriegsenkel*. Since then, however, the movement has gained considerable momentum. In particular the nationwide broadcasting of the three-part TV feature film *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* (*Our mothers, our fathers*) in March 2013 added to its exposure. The series portrayed the different trajectories of five friends in their early 20s through the chaos of WWII and their entanglement with the NS ideology.⁸² Around 7 Million Germans watched each night,⁸³ and the series was surrounded by extensive public discussions about the impact of the war, including on the later generations.⁸⁴ Public interest in the *Kriegsenkel* topic continued to increase and peaked in May 2015 around the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII.⁸⁵ Within two months of its publication in March 2015, the third book with war grandchildren life histories, *Nebelkinder* (Schneider and Süß 2015), topped the list of books about the history of WWII sold on Amazon.de.⁸⁶

As more and more Germans are finding their *Kriegsenkel* identities, it is clear by the definitions presented on the war grandchildren websites that this entails more than belonging to a similar age group; it also means sharing a collective psychological burden. The assumption that difficult or traumatic WWII experiences were passed down by parents and grandparents to their children and grandchildren is *a priori* enshrined in the definition of what it means to be a *Kriegsenkel*, including in the name itself.

⁸² See <http://umuv.zdf.de> [Accessed 20 August 2015].

⁸³ See http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unsere_Mütter,_unsere_Väter#Einschaltquoten [Accessed 20 August 2015].

⁸⁴ For example Illner (2013); Michal (2013); Philip (2012); Keseling (2013).

⁸⁵ For example Jetter (2015); Kähler (2015); Phoenix (2015).

⁸⁶ Private email exchange with Joachim Süß of 6 May 2015.

However, while the entire war grandchildren identity is constructed on psychological concepts of transgenerational transmission of trauma, the curious fact is that - as the Wikipedia incident revealed - there is only limited psychological research available to date to back this claim for the German case.⁸⁷ Most of this is very recent and was not available at the time when the first war grandchildren books were published and the first self help groups started to meet. Both Ustorf (2008) and Bode (2009) reference the fact that the body of research on which their presentation of *Kriegsenkel* life histories is built originated from other contexts, in particular from Holocaust survivors and their families.

This next section thus continues on from the introduction, expanding on its overview of the research into the topic of transgenerational transmission of trauma and more specifically the phenomenon of the 'second generation' trauma survivors.

3. Transgenerational transmission of trauma and the phenomenon of the 'second generation'

As mentioned in my introduction, questions about the transgenerational impact of trauma were first raised in relation to families of Holocaust survivors. Over the last forty years, a substantial body of research was put together, examining from a many different perspectives how the pain endured in the Holocaust affected the children and grandchildren of survivors.⁸⁸ Psychologist Yael Danieli (2007:67), explains "massive trauma shapes the internal representation of reality of several generations, becoming an unconscious organizing principle passed on

⁸⁷ For example Alberti (2010); Baer and Frick-Baer (2010); Knoch et al. (2012); Lamparter, Wiegand-Grefe, et al. (2013); von Friesen (2012).

⁸⁸ For literature reviews see for example Brähler et al. (2011); Felsen (1998); Sigal and Weinfeld (1989); Solomon (1998), Steinberg (1989).

by parents and internalized by their children, and constituting the matrix within which normal developmental conflict takes place.”

While in general, research found children of Holocaust survivors are not more prone to psychopathology than the rest of the population of their respective countries (Felsen 1998; Kellermann 2008; Solomon 1998), they are said to be more vulnerable to mental health issues, and those who are adversely affected by their emotional legacy were found to suffer more deeply than their peers (Danieli 2007).

Reviewing the *population-based* (as opposed to *clinical*) studies on children of North American Holocaust survivors, Irit Felsen (1998:57) concludes that while most were found to be functioning within a ‘normal range’, typical characteristics included a higher tendency for depression and anxiety; more difficulty to express emotions, in particular hostile ones; and more intense feelings of guilt, self-criticism and psychosomatic complaints than reported for US citizens from other backgrounds (Felsen 1998). Comparing the mental health of Israeli Holocaust descendants with that of the general population, empirical studies reviewed by Zahava Solomon (1998) found no difference in levels of anxiety, depression and neurosis at the time of the study (although many reported past symptoms), but evidence of higher levels of guilt and self-criticism, lower ego strength and more difficulties in managing aggression. In both countries, the younger generation had difficulties separating from their parents and becoming independent. Parents were often described as enmeshed and overly involved in their children’s lives, while others complained about parental disengagement, emotional inaccessibility and lack of support (Felsen 1998; Solomon 1998).⁸⁹ In their non-clinical study of 98 families of Holocaust

⁸⁹ Felsen (1998) points out that some of these differences - such as a stronger enmeshment with the parents and less focus on independence and self-sufficiency - are not unique to survivor families, but typical of Jewish culture more generally.

survivors and their (female) descendants, Abraham Sagi-Schwartz and his colleagues (Sagi-Schwartz et al. 2003) found on the other hand that in spite of the fact that the survivors were still suffering from the trauma of the Holocaust 50 years later, there was no evidence that their suffering was transmitted to their daughters. They suggested that the survivors successfully protected their family relationships from being influenced by their Holocaust experience.

Based on data from the 2007 Israel National Health Survey, Nathan Kellerman (2008:263) identified a group of descendants who suffer from severe 'Second Generation Syndrome', with symptoms such as a higher predisposition to develop PTSD, difficulties separating from the parents, personality disorders or neurotic conflicts, higher levels of anxiety and depression during times of crisis and a more or less impaired occupational, social and emotional functioning.

The Holocaust experiences of their parents were seen as the source of their children's issues, either through a direct transmission of parental symptoms associated with the 'Survivor Syndrome' (Niederland 1968)⁹⁰ or indirectly because they had grown up with parents whose parenting skills were impaired due to their extreme traumatisation (Felsen 1998).⁹¹

This research with families of Holocaust survivors was the foundation for subsequent investigations into the transgenerational effects of trauma in other contexts, for example the Vietnam war (Ancharoff et al. 1998; Rosenheck and Nathan 1985; 1994), the genocides in Turkey (of Armenians) (Kupelian, Sanentz Kalayjian, and Kassabian 1998; Altounian 1990) and in Cambodia (Kidron 2009a, 2012; Kinzie, Boehnlein, and Sack 1998; Münyas 2008), in

⁹⁰ Symptoms include such as depression, anxiety, feelings of guilt, unresolved mourning, agitation, insomnia, nightmares, problems in regulation of aggression and far reaching somatisation (Niederland 1968).

⁹¹ Kellermann (2001b) notes that more recent research abandons this distinction between direct and indirect transmission because of the perceived difficulty in distinguishing between aetiology and manifestation of transgenerational transmission.

relation to repressive regimes in the Soviet Union (Baker and Gippenreiter 1998) and South America (Becker and Diaz 1998; Edelman, Kordon, and Lagos 1998; Dickson-Gómez 2002) and the repression of indigenous populations (Brave Heart and DeBruyn 1998; Cross 1998; Raphael, Swan, and Martinek 1998).

Clinical studies and empirical research based on accounts by mental health practitioners in a number of different countries reported a range of symptoms that were observed in patients from families who have lived through war and violence, for example:

- Dutch psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers who treated children of WWII war sailors and civilian resistance fighters noticed that their clients' complaints commonly included issues around isolation and authority conflicts, problems with work and relationships, delinquent behaviours and psychosis, as well as separation and identification problems and a reversal of the parent-child role (Op den Velde 1998).
- Drawing on qualitative research on children of Dutch collaborators with the Nazi regime during WWII – until the 1980s a tabooed topic in Dutch society and families - Lindt (1998) found this particular group to commonly shared feelings of anxiety, social insecurity and hyper-alertness, as well as struggles with emotional issues around guilt, suffering, and belonging.
- Aarts (1998) interviewed psychotherapists about their experiences with sons and daughters of WWII survivors from the Dutch East Indies. Many of these patients had sought help in the hope of alleviating problems with separation from their parents, individuation, and autonomy. They were felt to lack in basic trust and had difficulties in regulating or expressing strong emotions. While they often displayed

high levels of occupational functioning, their therapists found these patients more difficult to treat than other clients, both in terms of the intensity and the duration of the treatment (Aarts 1998).

- Rosenheck and Nathan (1985; cited in Ancharoff et al. 1998) described a typical child of a Vietnam veteran suffering from PTSD as prone to a range of symptoms from insomnia, headaches, tearfulness and feelings of helplessness, and attention problems at school to fears of being kidnapped or killed and having fantasies that resembled their father's flashbacks of traumatic situations.

While these studies do not necessarily claim to present an authoritative list of common psychological symptoms, they do point to the existence of a 'second generation' profile - a similar way in which descendants in their respective countries tend to struggle as a result of their parents' trauma. This may also - as in the case of the Dutch collaborators - include aspects of perpetratorship.

Comparable research for the context of the general German population is only just starting to emerge. Bettina Alberti (2010) reported from her psychotherapeutic practice that *Kriegsenkel* often carry a deep seated sense of loneliness, a depressed world view and negative attitudes towards life, a sense of insecurity, and problems with self-worth and emotions. Psychoanalyst Andreas Bachofen (2012) found that his patients of this age group tend to have difficulties with separation and individuation from their parents, and Lamparter and Holstein (2013) paint a picture of descendants of families who lived through the firebombing of Hamburg in 1943 as a group with an insecure sense of identity and often dominated by anxiety. While these are pointing to something akin to a 'second generation' profile also for the German case, these studies are recent and with the exception of Alberti's (2010) book, not widely distributed. Unlike in other contexts, such as the Holocaust, where the findings

of psychological research had spilled into the mainstream public domain creating legitimacy for the suffering of the ‘second generation’ survivors, for the German *Kriegsenkel*, broader public acknowledgement is still an issue, as the Wikipedia debate underscored.

The reason Germany is at least two decades behind many other countries has its source - again - in the public and private silences around German wartime suffering explored in the previous chapters. There is a general consensus among practitioners that until around 2000 the war did not commonly feature as a topic in psychotherapeutic practices (Ermann 2007; Jerouschek 2004; Radebold 2012). Radebold (2012) speaks of ‘therapy without history’, which did not consider the historical context to be of any importance in the treatment of mental illness. Therapists, many of whom were of the *Kriegskinder* generation themselves, did not recognise the damage the war had left in their patients, because they had no awareness of this burden in themselves. “That part of our biography was ignored by an entire analytical generation,” Radebold said in an unpublished interview (Frey 2012), “Quite on the contrary, we learned that it did not have any impact on our development at all...Of course we were also highly identified with the German guilt, so that what we had experienced ourselves took a step back and was not allowed to play a role.” Almost incomprehensibly from today’s point of view, none of the therapists I talked to during my research had previously paid any special attention to WWII when treating Germans of any generation, in spite of the fact that the war constituted a constant presence in the public sphere. Taboos, gaps and blind spots also clearly dominated the realm of psychotherapy.

In the last few years, a number of psychological studies on occurrence of PTSD in German seniors have appeared.⁹² ‘Post-traumatic stress disorder’, with clearly

⁹² For example Brähler et al. (2011); Eichhorn and Kuwert (2011); Glaesmer et al. (2010, 2011); Kuwert, Klauer, and Eichhorn (2010); Spitzer et al. (2011).

defined symptoms and ways to capture them, is now at least theoretically available as an official diagnosis for the *Kriegskinder* generation (although none of my participants' parents had been diagnosed with it). However, there is no equivalent when it comes to their children. Being a *Kriegsenkel* is not a recognised psychological 'disorder' and those who identify as such have no way of 'proving' that their suffering is real.

I believe that as a consequence of the lag in psychological research and therapeutic interventions, *Kriegsenkel* are taking it into their own hands to validate and legitimise their suffering and to underscore that what they are experiencing are not just individual problems but a psychological burden shared by many across their generation. In the self-help groups, Internet fora and Facebook groups, Germans are discussing and comparing emotional problems that they feel are directly linked to growing up in families impacted by WWII. I will argue that through these practices, the war grandchildren are not only de facto diagnosing themselves as sufferers of transmitted war trauma, but that they are also negotiating the 'symptoms' belonging to an emerging *Kriegsenkel* 'condition'. I believe that something akin to a psychological profile as a German 'second generation'⁹³ is currently in the process of being assembled. Unlike other contexts, such as the Holocaust, where the systematic exploration and collection of common symptoms seems to have been driven by psychiatrists and psychotherapists (Danieli 1998b; Kellermann 2001a, 2008; Kidron 2003), this dynamic is happening peer-to-peer without much intervention by the therapeutic profession (at this point).

⁹³ For reasons, which I explained in Chapter 1, the German *Kriegsenkel* do not call themselves 'second generation', yet in terms of psychological research the term is equivalent, they are the children of the eyewitness generation.

Critical voices

While trauma and its damaging consequences across generations is generally accepted as fact (von Issendorff 2013), there are, as I briefly mentioned in the introduction, many critical voices from a range of disciplines, questioning some of the basic terminology, arguments and assumptions the concepts are built around. The more relevant for my research are briefly summarised below.

A common objection to the term 'transgenerational transmission' is that of its implied uni-directionality (Brähler et al. 2011). Historian Bettina Völter (2008) believes that a mechanical understanding of intergenerational dynamics, whereby an isolated element of a person's personality or psyche is passed down leaving a distinct imprint that can be clearly attributed to certain emotions, attitudes and behaviours in the children, does not adequately capture the complexity of the mechanism. In her view, it also involves a two-way process, with the members of the younger generation as active participants in the interaction, as different siblings often absorb different messages and engage with different aspects of their parents' past. Völter (2008: 105) concludes that rather than speaking of 'transgenerational transmission', one should apply the term 'reciprocal production of generational experiences through on-going interactions' (*'wechselseitige Herstellung von Generationserfahrungen in fortlaufenden Interaktionen'*).

Psychiatrist Derek Summerfield (1996) more generally rejects the deterministic view, in which generation after generation simply mechanically inherits psychic damage from its forbears, as disempowering and discounting the ability of people to cope with and overcome the impact of war. Zahava Solomon (1998:80) criticizes the 'pathogenic bias', which in her view underlies most of the traumatology literature, focusing more on mental illness than on mental health, and Carol Kidron (2012) questions whether descendants of trauma

survivors are not being pathologised as victims of a past that they did not actually experience themselves.

Another line of critique against the concept of trauma and PTSD more generally comes from (medical) anthropologists (Argenti and Schramm 2010; Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Kidron 2012) who claim that these are Western psychological framework and concepts of illness, which do not account for the multitude of ways in which different cultures respond to extreme violence and suffering.

Instead they are seen as inappropriately imposing Western approaches to healing on people globally. Proponents of the 'social suffering' approach claim that there is no single way to suffer and perceptions and expressions of pain vary from one individual to the other. Rather than measuring occurrences of standardized symptoms of disease, they demand that individual biography be embedded in their respective social, cultural, historical and political context to find how personal experiences have been influenced and shaped by larger social forces.⁹⁴

Lastly, issues were raised that concepts of trauma collapse the moral distinctions between victims and perpetrators, as the latter may also experience symptoms of PTSD. Ruth Leys (2000:7) is concerned that both groups can be seen as "casualties of an external trauma that causes objective changes in the brain in ways that tend to eliminate the issue of moral meaning and ethical assessment," thus ultimately diminishing the perpetrators' responsibility for the crimes they committed. Although not explicitly stated, this critique may well be extended to include the 'second generation' from perpetrator populations of war and genocide, including Germany.

⁹⁴ For example Das et al. (2002); Kleinman, Das, and Lock (1996a); Das et al. (2000); Kleinman, Das, and Lock (1997).

While concepts of transmitted trauma may be critiqued in the academic realm, many of the German *Kriegsenkel* I interviewed accepted as ‘scientific truth’ that unresolved traumatic or difficult experiences stretching back to WWII were transmitted to them by their families; that this transmission was an important, if not the main, source of their current psychological difficulties; and that this emotional baggage was now their task to ‘work through’ to prevent further damage in the next generation(s). This passing of a mostly abstract emotional damage was understood to be a mechanical and unconscious process that they themselves had no active participation in or control over. In every case, the *Kriegsenkel* understood themselves as helpless victims of their family’s unaddressed psychological scars.

4. Creating legitimacy for suffering: From ‘lucky generation’ to victims of war?

I was often puzzled that when I asked my participants in Berlin “How do you know that you are a *Kriegsenkel* and what does it mean to you?”, people would consistently respond with statements like: “You know, my mother is one of these ‘cold mothers’ that Sabine Bode mentions in her book,” or “Sabine Bode says that *Kriegsenkel* often feel homeless, I also have this sense that I don’t belong”, or “do you remember so and so in the war grandchildren book? They moved house twenty times in the last ten years - that is just like me, I also cannot settle anywhere!” Like A.W. at the beginning of this chapter, people found themselves in the published *Kriegsenkel* life histories, which led to a big ‘Eureka’ moment and a complete re-assessment of one’s own and one’s family history. The fact that people of similar age were struggling in similar ways to oneself was understood as a clear indication that these issues were not just personal but part of a wider phenomenon affecting an entire generation. In particular Bode’s (2009) book seemed to have the status of a kind of unofficial

‘manual’ that many of my interview partners used to diagnose themselves as sufferers of transmitted WWII experiences. Any problems described there were accepted as belonging to a collective *Kriegsenkel* profile. This role of the books is somewhat similar to what Barker (2002) described in the context of the fibromyalgia syndrome self help movement (FMS is a controversial pain disorder). In that case quite a substantial number of self-help guides are describing the ‘condition’ and its possible symptoms (not necessarily the same ones in each book). However, these guides were written for the purpose of sufferers diagnosing themselves and learning how to manage their pain, whereas the *Kriegsenkel* books make no such claims and the role that is now attributed to them would have happened without the intent of the authors.

Some of my *Kriegsenkel* participants made reference to the life histories shared on the *Forumkriegsenkel* website, or they pointed to the list of ‘symptoms’ collected and published there, in spite of the fact that it was originally accompanied by an disclaimer stating that it was a simple compilation of attributes frequently mentioned in the received contributions and should by no means be considered as ‘scientific’ (Barth 2012). In spite of that, one person at the Göttingen conference said that she would print the list and keep it in her wallet as a daily reminder that whenever she felt a certain emotion, it was because she was a war grandchild and not because she was ‘strange’ or ‘different’ as she had assumed before.

I made similar observations in support group meetings and Facebook group discussions; again, people were (and still are) constantly comparing their own issues with those of their peers - in this case in direct exchanges face-to-face or online - to confirm that their difficulties were part of a common *Kriegsenkel* experience. The support groups I attended in 2012 tended to follow a certain pattern. After a first round of introductions (“Hello, my name is Lina, I was born in 1966, my parents were born in 1933 and 1940, and my father’s family

had to leave their home in Poland after the war.”), participants either picked up on some of the issues raised (such as the impact of flight and expulsion) or the group focused on a pre-selected topic. The largest part of the evening was always filled with story telling and relating to each other’s experiences. People would describe their past and current difficulties with their parents and explain these problems as rooted in their parents’ war childhoods. They would then talk about their own issues and set them in relation to their upbringing and to the war. Other participants would contribute their own similar experiences, thus validating the person’s sharing and confirming that their problems were of wider concern to the group.

In the Facebook groups, one member typically starts a discussion by sharing an experience and a question like “It is hard for me to be happy and look forward to things, because I am always worried that something will go terribly wrong and suddenly everything is over. Can anyone relate to this?” A number of people then share their own experiences, linking their current emotions back to the war where their family had lost their home after the German defeat in 1945. Again, the responses confirm to the person that their emotions are ‘valid’ and ‘real’ and that they are more than just individual character traits, oddities or personal flaws, but part of a greater *Kriegsenkel* picture.

Sociologist Frank Furedi (2004) claims that one of the main functions of support groups is to raise awareness on a particular issue. I believe for the German *Kriegsenkel*, this is not the case. I am convinced that the core function of their support groups and all other activities is to explore, validate and contextualise suffering. The self help groups, Facebook discussions, books and websites, as well as public talks, therapeutic workshops and weekend seminars all provide people with ample opportunity to compare their own issues with those of their peers and confirm them as belonging to a common *Kriegsenkel* phenomenon. In this process, previously inexplicable and unconnected aspects of

distress - in A.W.'s case a broad range of symptoms from drug addiction, bulimia, job changes, inability to settle down, problems with relationships - are drawn together under the one label: *Kriegsenkel*. The Wikipedia entry calls this a '*Selbstbezeichnung*' ('self-identification' or 'self labelling'), but I believe it is more than that. Identifying as *Kriegsenkel* is a 'self diagnosis', and it has clear connotations to a mental health condition. In the absence of official psychiatric or psychological assessments, but building on international research embedded in the definitions presented in the books and on the websites, the war grandchildren are de facto diagnosing their families as sufferers of war trauma (or difficult experiences more broadly), and they are diagnosing themselves as victims of transmitted trauma. I furthermore believe that through these practices of 'sharing and comparing' the participants of these exchanges are also slowly fleshing out a psychological profile attached to the *Kriegsenkel* 'diagnosis', negotiating and cementing common attributes and typical emotional difficulties.

An interesting comparison is to the practices that Carol Kidron (2003) described in the context of Israeli support groups for the children of Holocaust survivors. There, a psychologically trained group facilitator helped structure the story telling, carefully pointing to the connection between the group members' current psychological issues and their parents' trauma. Each of the eight group meetings focussed on one particular aspect, defined by the psychological literature as typical for children of Holocaust survivors, such as repression of emotions, difficulties with intimacy, fear of separation from significant others, a symbiotic and overly enmeshed childhood and adult relationship with parents, and failure to separate and individuate (Kidron 2003). Participants, Kidron argues, were thus instructed to understand themselves as a 'second generation' by the facilitator, and they were provided with pre-determined a list of 'symptoms' belonging to this profile.

In Germany a similar structure does not exist (yet). The portraits in the war grandchildren books and the list collated on *Forumkriegsenkel* website offer a significant number of emotional problems and character traits viewed to be the result of transmitted unresolved war experiences. However, while some are mentioned more often than others (a sense of homelessness for example), the list is long, broad and general and there is no final, 'authorised' version. What I observed was an organic rather than a deliberate process of collecting 'symptoms', driven by the war grandchildren's desire to understand and validate their emotional struggles rather than by trained professionals. While indirectly building on research from other countries for their basic premise and relying on the *Kriegsenkel* books for their 'diagnosis', the German war grandchildren are taking things into their own hands to build, construct and cement a framework for their suffering.

5. Better 'sick' than 'strange' - the desire for a diagnosis

Furedi (2004) claims that increasingly it is not professional bodies that are pushing for the introduction of a new medical or psychological disorder, but it is the sufferers themselves who demand an official recognition of their condition. Barker (2002:295) concluded that "a key element in the process of medicalisation is the coming together of sufferers within self-help communities to translate the individual experiences of distress into shared expression of illness."

Previous examples go back as far as 1980, when the official recognition of the category of trauma by the American Psychiatric Association was largely the result of intense lobbying by Vietnam veteran groups and lay activists (supported by mental health workers). They pushed for the inclusion of post-traumatic-stress disorder (PTSD) in the third edition of the Diagnostic

Statistical Manual (1980) to publicly acknowledge the lasting impact of the Vietnam war and to gain access to specialised treatment (Kutchins and Kirk 1997). In more recent cases the sufferers of chronic fatigue syndrome were demanding the provision of funding for medical research to systematise diagnostic markers for their condition, which, it was hoped, would legitimise their symptoms and allow for better treatment (Furedi 2004).

The German *Kriegsenkel* are only in the early stages of this process and as far as I am aware there is no coordinated push to formalise their 'condition' yet. While they feel an immediate and urgent need to validate their problems as part of a broader phenomenon, my sense is that their efforts are first and foremost focused on understanding themselves and on explaining their newly found insights to their friends and family. Their practices show, however, that there is a desire for some sort of diagnosis, even if it is an informal one at first.

According to Furedi (2004:162) the search for a diagnosis can be understood as an attempt to find meaning in confusion. Many *Kriegsenkel* always felt that there was 'something wrong' with them, that they were 'different' and 'strange'. However, they were often told they did not have any reason to complain or that they were just going through a midlife crisis and were trying to blame their families for everything, as in the Wikipedia debate. A.W.'s example represents many others in the sense that she could not get a handle on her whole suite of psychological symptoms until she read Anne-Ev Ustorff's book. "Now I finally, know what is wrong with me," she sighed with relief. Through the *Kriegsenkel* self-diagnosis, previously indistinct malaise of disparate and unconnected symptoms is transformed into a 'real' condition with a clear label.

Having a name for one's illness according to Furedi (2004:180) is an important step towards legitimisation and public recognition. Being re-labelled as 'sick' rather than 'strange' also sheds a new light on past failures and current struggles as it allows the victims to account for their personal setbacks, disappointments

and failure in life. Furedi suspects that this is one of the reasons behind the steadily increasing demand for official diagnoses of emerging conditions.

“Disease explains an individual’s behaviour and even helps confer sense of identity. The medicalisation of everyday life allows individuals to make sense of their predicament and gain moral sympathy” (Furedi 2004:183).

Furedi (2004:97) furthermore picks up on the growing tendency to make disease into an on-going aspect of one’s sense of self, expressed in terms like ‘cancer survivor’ or ‘recovering alcoholic’. Some of my participants were quite aware of these implications and were carefully weighing up the consequence of taking on the *Kriegsenkel* label.

Sitting in her garden during our second meeting in May 2012, Nora pondered:

Saying about myself that I am a *Kriegsenkel* means I am *gestört* (‘damaged’ or ‘crazy’), it has something pathological. At times, when I was a bit more into the topic I did use the term, now I would probably rather say, “I am the daughter of a war child”. That my mother is a war child, that is certain. But to put myself in a position of saying “I am a war grandchild and the war belongs to me”, I would not say that at the moment, but that might very well change again in the future.

Paula felt similar:

“War grandchildren” means all the cruelty and heaviness of the war ends up with me. “Children of war children” means the war is where it belongs, with my parents’ generation. Eventually, you will pass the parcel you are now carrying back to them and they will then pass it back to their parents, and at some point things will get easier. “War grandchildren” for me has something so... hopeless.

Nora and Paula refused to include the word ‘war’ in their self-description, which would enshrine it in their identity and turn them into a victim of their emotional

family legacy for the rest of their lives. They did not doubt, however, that transgenerational transmission was real that the war impacted on their lives in a major way, and that the aim now is to work through and 'hand the parcel back' to where it belongs.

I admit that there is something infinitely more to powerful presenting oneself as a sufferer of transmitted war trauma as opposed to being dismissed as a middle-class 'whinger' complaining that his or her life did not quite turn out the way they had hoped. However, as Irvine (1999) stresses, while narratives of suffering are constructed, suffering itself is always real for the person experiencing it.

How much of it has its indirect causes in the war is a second question, one for which there may not be a definitive answer. I need to point out though, that while people stressed the impact WWII had on their family's and their own mental health, few people would argue that it was the *only* factor that caused their emotional problems, even if an important one.

One can't help but notice, as Barker (2002) also observed for the fibromyalgia self help movement, that through their resources and practices a broad range of disparate symptoms are drawn together under the *Kriegsenkel* label. Many of them are quite generic (depression, burn-out, anxiety etc.⁹⁵) and some are even contradictory. In two different life histories in Ann-Ev Ustorff's (2008) book, the impact of flight in expulsion on the person's life was seen as the need to constantly move house and the inability to settle in one case and in the other as an over-attachment to the person's home and reluctance to move. This begs the question of what would be considered 'normal' (i.e. not impacted by the war).

⁹⁵ Interestingly, the level of depression in the overall population is not higher in Germany than other European countries. It is lower for example than in Switzerland, which was only peripherally affected by WWII. See Ferrari et. al (2013).

It is also important to note that the *Kriegsenkel's* certainty the war played an all-important role in their family life was not shared by their parents or (with very few exceptions) their siblings (I will come back to that in the next chapter).

The fact is that transgenerational transmission is not easy to 'prove', even with psychological assessment techniques. Von Issendorf (2013) points out that while there clearly is something quite distinct about growing up with parents and grandparents with a difficult past, to substantiate the claim that a transmission of traumatic experiences has occurred, two levels of assessment are needed. Firstly, it needs to be established that the older generation was indeed traumatised. However, not every person who witnesses or experiences war, loss and violence reacts in the same way. Some people are more resilient, while others suffer more intensely and more lastingly, depending on a broad range of psychological and environmental factors (Wierling 2013). In many cases, the original incident lies far back in the past, without the eyewitness generation ever having sought psychological help (and diagnoses such as PTSD did not yet exist). This makes a retroactive assessment difficult, as Kitano (1985 cited in Nagata 1998, 135) explains in the context of Japanese Americans interned by the US government during WWII: "The problem of measuring the results of an event that occurred over 40 years ago is complicated by intervening years, a lack of relevant material, a complexity of many interacting variables that affect behaviour, the vagaries of memory, and the near impossibility of reconstructing an event not designed for evaluative purposes." Even if a person is diagnosed with PTSD later in life, it is difficult to ascertain that their current symptoms are related to this specific event (Wierling 2013), and that these manifested during the crucial time when they were raising their children (von Issendorff 2013). Secondly, the mental health problems reported by the children need to have a clear causal relationship with the parents' trauma. However, the transmission of traumatic experiences can be impacted and overlaid by a great

number of other biographical and psychological factors, and symptoms cannot be cleanly observed and attributed in isolation (von Issendorf 2013).

Allies that help strengthen the *Kriegsenkel's* claim come from the emerging field of epigenetics, where recent research was reported in the media (for example Hurley 2013) to have proven that parental trauma is transmitted to the offspring at the level of the genes. This was quoted a few times during my interviews to underscore the point that transmission of trauma is not only real but also inevitable because it 'even changes the genes'. In that sense, being a *Kriegsenkel* is not unlike other forms of biological or 'genetic citizenship' (Lemke, Casper, and Moore 2011:98) where sufferers define their identity and selfhood around an inherited biological illness.

In spite of the fact that there may not be final proof to verify their experience, it remains that for the *Kriegsenkel* the new label provides a coherent framework and a name that they intuitively feel to be a true representation of their suffering. The unofficial diagnosis provided by the books and fleshed out and cemented in the support groups and Internet offers an acknowledgment of their pain and a level of comfort they had been missing.

Yet, I believe there is some unintended irony in this desire for a diagnosis and the *Kriegsenkel's* practices, which may ultimately lead to the creation of a new 'condition'. For a long time, the continuous broadening of categories of mental illness and the constant creation of new disorders and syndromes have been criticised as 'pathologizing' and 'medicalizing' problems of everyday life (Furedi 2004:99). Kutchings and Kirk (1997) bemoan the "growing tendency in our society to medicalise problems that are not medical, to find pathology where there is only pathos and to pretend to understand phenomena by merely giving them a label and a code number." Other authors such as Gaines (1992) or Illouz (2008), are also critical of the rapid expansion of the categories of mental illness, which is seen as driven by financial interests of mental health professionals and

pharmaceutical companies, keen to sell more and more drugs for ever new conditions.

However, in the case of the *Kriegsenkel* their interests are clearly aligned with these ambitions and they are pushing in the same direction. Rather than seeing themselves as victims of an over-reaching mental health system, many war grandchildren would most likely be glad to be categorised, labelled and diagnosed and to be told by a psychologist that their predicament is a (new) mental health condition. However, in my view the main driving force behind the *Kriegsenkel's* desire for a diagnosis is more than just finding meaning in suffering or excusing one's failures and shortcomings. It relates to the fact that with a diagnosis also comes a promise for healing. Unlike being 'strange' or 'different', which is hard to address, a clear diagnosis allows for therapeutic interventions. "I hope that now I will finally be able to work through all of this," A.W. writes at the end of her story.

It seems like in order to go from being 'strange', 'different' and to being 'normal'; one has go through being 'sick' first.

6. Conclusion

This chapter traced the trajectory of the *Kriegsenkel* topic from a small self-help scene to a growing social movement with wider resonance in the German public. This is particularly evident now, in 2015 at the time of the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII, where questions about the long-term impact of the war are frequently asked in the media.

The German war grandchildren are rallying around a common self-definition, which at its heart accepts that unresolved war experiences were passed on to them through processes of transgenerational transmission, and which accord with psychological research from other contexts. Through their various

activities the *Kriegsenkel* are exploring, contextualising and validating their suffering and in the process are slowly assembling a catalogue of common symptoms attached to an emerging, yet still open and fluid, *Kriegsenkel* phenomenon.

All of these processes are still in their infancy, and it was only this year, 2015, that the topic attracted broader public attention. However, as the Wikipedia issues and academic debate in other contexts showed, not everyone accepts its wider relevance and validity. Unlike many other self-help movements, the *Kriegsenkel* have only just begun to organise themselves. Yet, I believe what I witnessed in Berlin in 2012/13 and what I continue to observe from a distance is a fascinating case study of the type of practices through which a new collective identity based around common psychological issues is created more or less from scratch.

At this point, the participants in most of the activities of the scene still seem to be first and foremost focused on exploring their newly found identity for themselves and with each other, and on trying to communicate it to their families (not always successfully). While there is a desire for a diagnosis and for an acknowledgement that their issues are ‘real’, there is, as far as I know, not yet a push for formal recognition of a ‘*Kriegsenkel* syndrome’. This may come at some point the future, but due to the nature of the German health care system, which offers broad and easy access to long-term psychotherapy (more on that in Chapter 5), having a formal diagnostic category may not be necessary. There will, however, surely be more psychological research on the transgenerational impact of the war in Germany, which will underpin and further flesh out the emerging psychological *Kriegsenkel* profile. I am also certain that more and more mainstream psychotherapist and alternative healers will cater to the specific needs of this generation to help alleviate the symptoms associated with being sufferers of transmitted war trauma.

Chapter 5 “Hooray, I am a *Kriegsenkel!*” - Suffering and Liberation in the Age of Therapy

I. Introduction

“When I read Sabine Bode’s book it was as if a veil was suddenly lifted from my eyes.”

“When I read about the ‘project war grandchildren’ in the local newspaper, I immediately felt caught out.”

“*Kriegsenkel!* YES! Finally! That is me!”

This is how members of the war grandchildren generation described the moment when they heard or read the term *Kriegsenkel* for the first time. It often came as a big revelation, as an eye opener. It stopped people in their tracks. While the word may have been previously very unknown, something ‘clicked in’ and started a powerful transformative process. It was the beginning of a journey, during which a person transformed themselves from a middle-aged German with emotional problems into a *Kriegsenkel*. They re-wrote their life history, established a new sense of identity and belonging, and treaded new ways to liberate themselves from the burden of the past.

The last chapter described the *Kriegsenkel* movement more generally: its history, self-understanding and activities as well as the processes and practices that led people to a ‘self diagnosis’ as sufferers of transmitted war trauma and their search for legitimisation. This chapter focuses on how the war grandchildren construct, explore and perform their newly found identity firmly linked into the

cultural framework of contemporary self help and ‘therapy culture’ (Furedi 2004).

There is a broad consensus that what has been subsumed under labels, such as ‘therapeutics’ (Rose 1998), ‘therapeutic ethos’; ‘therapeutic culture’; ‘therapeutic worldview’ (Furedi 2004), ‘therapeutic gospel’ (Moskowitz 2001) or ‘therapeutic persuasion’ (Illouz 2008) has exerted an unparalleled influence on the modern Western societies.⁹⁶

Psychological thinking has transcended the relationship between an individual and a therapist, and has spilled over into almost every aspect of private and public life. The therapeutic discourse “has come to constitute one of the major codes with which to express, shape, and guide selfhood” (Illouz 2008:7). I will show how this plays out in the lives of members of this particular generation who identify as war grandchildren.

The reader will be invited to follow Kerstin’s ‘*Kriegsenkel*-journey’ from her ‘first contact’ in early 2012 until the end of 2013. Using her story as an example, I will draw out and discuss common features that I found in many war grandchildren narratives, all of which are core to constituting a *Kriegsenkel* identity. I will rely in particular on Eva Illouz’s (2008) concepts of the ‘therapeutic self’ to deconstruct my participants’ accounts and to analyse their structure in the context of therapeutic culture.

I will then question how pervasive this new ‘collective identity’ (Stein 2009) is, and why some people identify so strongly with the topic while others - including those who grew up in the same families - do not.

⁹⁶ This is no longer just limited to so-called Western societies as the recent psychology boom in China shows. See Huang (2014).

At the end of the chapter I discuss the literature on therapeutic culture more broadly and offer a contribution to it based on my German case study. The debate around the topic is dominated by sociologists with an overwhelmingly critical view of the influence of the ‘therapeutic persuasion’ (Illouz 2008) on modern life and concepts of selfhood. From an anthropological perspective, grounded in the subjective experiences of individuals who are deeply embedded and invested in the contemporary therapy culture, I will suggest a more nuanced and ultimately more positive reading of its impact on the everyday ‘management of subjectivity’ (Furedi 2004:22).

Now, I invite you to meet Kerstin from East Berlin.

2. ‘Becoming’ a *Kriegsenkel* - Kerstin’s journey

Kerstin was a lively woman in her early 50s, with short brown hair, a broad smile and an even broader Berlin accent. During our first meeting in a popular coffee shop, buzzing with tourists and mothers with prams keen to enjoy a rare sunny afternoon, she kept jumping up to have a quick chat to friends who happened to walk past. Kerstin seemed happy and extraverted, her face lit up when she talked about herself and her training as an actress clearly came through. It was easy to relate to her and we laughed a lot, but every now and then I got the fleeting impression of a false note hidden somewhere in her display of joviality.

Kerstin was born in East Berlin in 1962, a year after the wall, which divided the city for almost thirty years, was built. Her family history was different from most others I heard, because Kerstin came from one of the few families of genuine ‘anti-fascist heroes’ that the GDR was so proud of. Her maternal grandparents were committed communists and had fled to the Soviet Union in

the 1930s when Hitler's helpers started to lock up people with diverging political views.

“When she was 20 or 21, my grandmother emigrated in quite an adventurous fashion through Scandinavia to Moscow, because her husband was a member of the Communist party. He followed her later and they both spent most of their youth in the Soviet Union, both were working and had quite a good life. Then the war started and Stalin ordered all foreigners to leave Moscow, including all Germans. They could not go back to Germany and only had the choice between Siberia and Kazakhstan. My grandmother then decided to move to Siberia.”

Kerstin's mother was born in the Siberian winter of 1942. Her grandfather continued to work for the international communist movement and as part of a partisan group he was parachuted into East Prussia in 1941 and made it all the way west to Berlin, where he was betrayed and captured by the Gestapo - the Nazi's secret police. After that his trace was lost. The rest of the family returned to Germany in 1947, and Kerstin's grandmother married another German communist resistance fighter.

Growing up in the GDR, Kerstin led a privileged life. As a 'victim of fascism', her grandmother received a generous state pension and the family had no material worries. Unlike many others, East or West, Kerstin's family did in fact talk about the war. However, the stories told at the dinner table were tales of male heroism, of clever strategizing, and of fierce battles against the Hitler regime, stories that were re-narrated in schools, archived in GDR history books, and converted into TV programs. What was omitted, publicly and privately, were accounts of the fear her grandparents felt during the years of Stalinist persecution, the hardship they endured during the cold winters in their Siberian exile, or the fact that her grandmother was struggling with depression after the

grandfather's death. Kerstin's mother also suffered from depression, and the relationship with her daughter was tense and often interrupted. "She is one of these 'cold mothers' that are often mentioned in Sabine Bode's book," Kerstin explained to me over pumpkin soup, "someone who keeps her distance, not letting anyone come close. And that has affected my life too, that is also my *leitmotif*, to be alone all the time."

On the surface Kerstin seemed to be managing her life, she was in a stable relationship and she worked in her own business. Yet underneath, she admitted she always felt lost and lonely and although she had friends, she did not feel as if she belonged. She changed careers a few times without ever having the sense that she was using her full potential. Life was simmering, somewhat muffled and low-key. Nothing was terribly wrong, but it was not quite right either.

Over the years, Kerstin had sought help from different therapists, but nothing really changed. She never related her issues back to the war, until one day in 2012, when she came across an article in the local newspaper about the transgenerational impact of WWII.⁹⁷ There she read the word *Kriegsenkel* for the first time and the sudden realisation that they could have been talking about HER, hit her like a ton of bricks. There were other people 'out there' who were struggling with similar issues, and they all came from families affected by war. Kerstin immediately became active. She bought Sabine Bode's books and passed them on to people around her. She discovered the war grandchildren websites. "I found so much of myself in this Internet forum and in the war grandchildren books, and I thought, they don't know me at all, how come they are writing about me? That was a wonderful realisation, and it helped explain so much about me. I wrote a few things down that characterise me, and that now has a name. I gave myself this label: *Kriegsenkel* - great" she beamed.

⁹⁷ The article she is referring to is Hilbk (2012).

Kerstin looked back at her life with completely new eyes and came to new conclusions about her own and her family's emotional difficulties. "I now know that my mother could not act in any other way because she was traumatised," she said. Her previously indistinct sense of suffering had become tangible, it now had a name and a concept - transgenerational transmission of trauma - and she whole-heartedly identified with the *Kriegsenkel* label. She started going to support group meetings and for the first time she felt part of something bigger: a group with a shared fate.

I saw Kerstin often in the months following our first meeting. We went to workshops and support group meetings together, and spent many afternoons in coffee shops exploring her issues with her family. What I found striking in our conversations was the fact that she was adamant that her family was traumatised by what they had experienced in WWII and that this burden was passed on to her, but she found it hard to pin this intuitive knowing onto something specific. What exactly was passed on to her or how she could not say: "Being a *Kriegsenkel* means to me that there was a transgenerational transmission of trauma. Well, I for myself am not traumatised, but I am sure that my mother passed some of it on to me. And so did my grandmother...probably. At least that is what it seems like, but I am not entirely sure," she admitted. However, it simply *felt* right, and she also found so many of her own issues like her feelings of not belonging, not being loved and accepted, her fear of rejection, her job changes and her childlessness - reflected in the life histories of other *Kriegsenkel*.

When I met Kerstin again in August 2013, she was still extremely active in the *Kriegsenkel* scene, attending support group meetings, going to talks and lectures and giving interviews for newspapers. She was also doing sessions with a homeopath, who used hypnosis to help her work through some of her family issues, and she was booked in for family constellations workshop to look more closely at the theme of 'betrayal' that seemed to be lingering in her life, and that

she suspected might go back to her grandfather. Since I had last seen her she had found out that he had been taken to Buchenwald concentration camp after his capture and was shot there in February 1945. The fact that she had managed to find his official death certificate in an historical archive had given her a sense of calm and closure. It also provided her with an explanation for the strange depression that befell her in early February every year, which coincided with the time of her grandfather's violent death.

Kerstin was adamant that becoming a war grandchild and looking at her life and family through that lens helped her more than any other previous therapies. "I gained so much clarity about myself. Now I know why I often feel like I am drifting, without firm ground beneath my feet. I have since become a lot calmer, and I now know why my family is like it is, so disjointed and with those frequent interruptions in contact. I can now accept that. I also have a good network in the support groups to talk to other people who help and understand each other."

Kerstin kept repeating how much of a liberation the entire process had been for her and that she did not feel the heavy 'backpack' anymore that she used to carry around. "*Hurra, ich bin ein Kriegsenkel*" - "Hooray, I am a war grandchild," she emphatically summed up her experience. When I asked her what that entailed, she said "a new sense of identity and a new *Lebensgefühl*" - a new feeling about life in general.

Kerstin - like all of my participants - is unique, yet there are many elements underlying her journey of how she 'became' a war grandchild, and how she attempted to come to terms with her emotional inheritance, that I also found in many other accounts. When you read her story, it is uncanny how much therapeutic thinking and logic threads through her narrative: diagnosing her mother and grandmother as traumatised; accepting that trauma was transmitted

to her and was responsible for her struggles; addressing her issues with different kinds of therapy to work through and heal the past; and achieving a sense of closure in the end. I will show in detail below how a *Kriegsenkel* identity is grounded in the therapeutic culture. Its rules, logic and practices provide the framework in which members of this generation understand, explore, perform and address their emotional suffering. It also offers the techniques that promise to liberate them from the pain of past and thus it provides hope for a better future.

Therapy in Germany and 'therapy culture' more broadly

When talking to my participants, it was clear that most of them were therapy-experienced. Many mentioned that they had accessed counselling at one or more stages in their life and they were well versed in psychological concepts and language that have percolated into mainstream society. Expressions such as 'this problem was delegated to me to work through' or 'my grandparents were not able to properly mourn their losses' would flow into our conversations without an assumed need for explanation.

As already touched on briefly in the last chapter, access to psychotherapy in Germany is broad and comprehensive. Since the late 1960s treatment by psychotherapists or psychiatrists is included in statutory health insurance and since the 1990s the number of psychotherapists has grown exponentially in many German cities (Radebold 2012). The health insurance today covers the costs for three psychotherapeutic methods: analytical psychotherapy, psychodynamic psychotherapy and behaviour therapy. Other forms, such as client-centred therapy and systemic therapy, are recognised but not currently covered (Bundespsychotherapeutenkammer 2012).⁹⁸ People are able to choose

⁹⁸ For more detailed information on each of these therapy forms see the *Paths to Psychotherapy* brochure at <http://www.bptk.de> [Accessed 20 August 2015]

from a range of different mental health professionals, from psychiatric and psychosomatic treatment in hospitals for more serious cases, psychiatrists and psychotherapists in private practice, to psychosocial counselling centres that are usually specialised to focus on particular issues such as pregnancy, parenting, addiction, or trauma (Bundespsychotherapeutenkammer 2012).

In many cases, the demand for counselling exceeds the offer and waiting times of four or more months are average (Walendzik et al. 2010). However, once approved, the insurance will cover the cost for the entire treatment up to a maximum of 160 hours for analytical psychotherapy (and in special cases up to 300 hours); up to 50 hours of psychodynamic psychotherapy (in special cases up to 100 hours); and up to 45 hours of behaviour therapy (in special cases up to 80 hours). In 2011, an average therapy took 46 sessions stretched over 20 months (Best 2012). These numbers refer to one distinct phase of therapy from start to finish and a new contingent of sessions is approved for each new phase. It is difficult to have a comprehensive overview of the use of these services due to the fragmentation of Germany's mental health care system (European Commission 2013), but what this shows is that people who access therapy have quite a long and deep exposure to therapeutic thinking and techniques.

People who are interested in less traditional approaches and are able to cover the costs themselves can also choose from a vast range of therapies offered by alternative health practitioners (*Heilpraktiker für Psychotherapie*) such as hypnotherapy, reincarnation therapy, breath and body work, etc.

However, as mentioned in the introduction, international research has shown that therapeutic culture is much broader than the relationship between a therapist and a patient. Eva Illouz (2008) explains that today, not only has a large portion of the entire US population consulted a therapist at some stage in their lives, but even more importantly, psychological thinking has been

institutionalised in many different social spheres, including corporations, the mass media, schools and the army. Nicholas Rose (1998:34–35) claims that the ‘psy sciences’ have been eager to lend their vocabulary, explanations and judgements to other professions and that the ‘translatability’ of their ideas helped their rapid dissemination into most other areas of society. Psychological thinking is now relayed in a wide array of settings from confessional talk shows and self help books, magazine advice columns and support groups to school curricula, training programs, business consultations, prisoner rehabilitation, social welfare programs and hospitals (Illouz 2008; Rose 1998). It is woven into every aspect of life, shaping the way people think about their relationships and intimacy, how they rate and improve their sense of professional competency, how they conduct social relations and how they understand their emotional problems. Psychology offers tools and technologies to help people deal with the challenges and complexities of modern life (Illouz 2008).

While Illouz’s (2008) and the majority of other studies on therapy culture focus on Anglo-Saxon countries their concepts can also be applied to Germany, at least for the segment of society the *Kriegsenkel* represent: middle-class, well educated, and predominantly female, often found to constitute the core clientele of counselling practices and consumers of self help literature and support groups (Illouz 2008; Irvine 1999; McLeod and Wright 2009).

Illouz (2008) argues that the therapeutic narrative has emerged as the basic schema to construct stories about the self and to assemble the autobiographical discourse. It has come to organise ‘contemporary narratives of selfhood and identity’ (Illouz 2008:155), prescribing the way people tell their life history and explain others’ behaviours. With this in mind, I would like to draw out the common elements from Kerstin’s *Kriegsenkel* and my other participants’ *Kriegsenkel* life histories, and explore each of them in the broader context of the current therapeutic discourses and self-help culture.

3. The *Kriegsenkel* journey

The Malaise

When I talked to my participants it was obvious that many of them were experiencing a general sense of malaise, not all to the same debilitating extent as A.W. from Chapter 4, but to varying degrees of depression, frustration and anxiety. What my participants were trying to grasp and articulate was not the type of all encompassing misery often associated with concepts of ‘human suffering’ or ‘social suffering’ that sociologists (for example Wilkinson 2005) or medical anthropologists (for example Das et al. 2002; Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1996b) refer to. They had not lived in times of large-scale violence, poverty, starvation, or forced migration. My participants grew up in an era of peace and growing prosperity. Most of them had the opportunity to complete a tertiary degree and they were free to choose their profession and life partners. The pain they were feeling was internal, on the level of their emotions, not directly related to the external circumstances. As for Kerstin, something was ‘not right’ with their lives. They did not feel like they fit in. Some struggled with more severe mental and physical symptoms, others were more generally unhappy and unfulfilled. They were stuck in unsatisfying careers that don’t seem to lead anywhere, but were unable to build an alternative future.

There was Martin, the talented artist bored with his day job as an engineer, but unable to make the jump to put together an exhibition of his paintings. There was Andrea, the social worker who had to take almost two years off work because of severe burnout, and there was Karoline, suffering from depression and panic attacks but unable to break free and sell the house where she felt her grandmother was raped during the war.

Many were finding it hard to establish committed relationships. Half of my participants did not have children, which was often mentioned with regret and a

sense of loss (although the reasons are varied). They did not feel at home in Germany, in spite of being born there. They felt as if they were drifting, never quite arriving anywhere, at the same time stuck, unable to 'loosen the handbrake' and get started. In spite of having already hit middle age, they were still waiting for life to begin.

Initially, many found it difficult to articulate their suffering, also because they did not feel entitled to it. In their own account, they had not really experienced any major hardship. "*Uns geht es doch gut*" - (as previously mentioned loosely translatable as "but we are doing so well") was a sentence I heard often, and the sentiment expressed in this statement was "we have everything we need, why are we not happy?" A sense of puzzlement, guilt, and rejection of their experience was relayed in this expression. Sociologist Iain Wilkinson (2005) concedes that while suffering is part of the human condition and thus common to everyone, it is a uniquely personal experience that cannot easily be communicated to others. Even more the case when, as in the case of the *Kriegsenkel*, suffering revolves around a sense of absence or lack that is difficult to grasp. While referring to physical illness, sociologist Arthur Frank (2001:333) offers a definition that fits quite well: "Suffering involves experiencing yourself on the other side of life as it should be, and no thing, no material resource, can bridge that separation."

The 'yoke of the family'

In this situation of indistinct malaise, the *Kriegsenkel* could potentially have considered a number of *external* causes as explanations for their discontent - the job market, lack of suitable life partners, government policies, etc.). Yet every single person I spoke to, Kerstin being no exception, looked *inside* themselves to find the answers to their problems, and then - as a second step - invariably to their families.

Anthropologist Allan Young (1996:246) explains that while states of suffering “variously described as psychological, existential or spiritual” belonged in the realm of philosophy and religion in the past, today (at least in the West) psychobiology and psychiatry have provided a new rhetoric to express these forms of internalised suffering. It was Freud who created a new language to describe, understand and manage the psyche, and he moved the nuclear family into the centre of attention. Parental influences and early childhood traumata are attributed vital importance in explaining all forms of emotional issues in a person’s later life (Illouz 2008).

This explains why my participants looked to their families to identify the source of their anguish. While consideration of her father’s war trauma was new to Anja, whose story will be told in the next chapter, previous attempts to pinpoint the reasons for her depression - her mothers’ early death, maybe sexual abuse somewhere in the female family line - always stayed within the confines of the family system. Nora confessed that before picking up the *Kriegsenkel* topic, she had already churned through ‘legions of therapists,’ and concluded half jokingly, that, “it was all a bit of the same because in the end it always turns out to be your mother’s fault anyway.”

Concepts of trauma and transmission of trauma

In this situation, either directly or indirectly (through newspaper articles) my participants came across one of the war grandchildren books - mostly Sabine Bode’s (2009) - and found some of their own emotional issues reflected in the collected life histories, as explored in the last chapter. What binds the different stories together is the fact they all belong to the same generation - a generation that grew up in families affected by WWII. As was the case for Kerstin, considering a possible connection between their own problems and the war for the first time always came as a big revelation. Something ‘clicked in’ and a

process was initiated during which people were re-thinking, re-evaluating and ultimately re-writing their life histories. While this 'click' often came with an intuitive certainty and embodied knowing a certain degree of knowledge of psychological concepts about trauma and its transgenerational transmission is needed to conceptualise this link to the past. As shown in Chapter 4, the assumption that difficult or traumatic war experiences were handed down by the war generation is assumed in the definition of what it means to be a *Kriegsenkel*. The overwhelming majority of my interview partners - even those who were not familiar with the books and websites - accepted this premise without questioning. As French anthropologists Fassin and Rechtman noted (2009:2), ideas of trauma have become mainstream knowledge in many Western societies, a 'shared truth'.

Trauma has become a major signifier of our age. It is our normal means of relating present suffering to past violence. It is the scar that a tragic event leaves on an individual victim or on a witness - sometimes even on the perpetrator. It is also the collective imprint on a group of a historical experience that may have occurred decades, generations, or even centuries ago (Fassin and Rechtman 2009:XI).

Looking back at their childhood, the war grandchildren now re-interpreted their parents' and grandparents' character traits and behaviours in the light of their war experiences - like Kerstin did with her mother. The sense of lack they felt when growing up, that their immediate family members were emotionally withdrawn, unsupportive, aggressive, violent, depressed or fearful, was now understood to be the result of war trauma (or damage). Trauma, which they would have needed to acknowledge and 'work through' - preferably in therapy. However, because it was extremely rare for Germans of the older generations to seek professional help in dealing with difficult war memories (Ermann 2007),

this unresolved emotional damage - so the logic goes – was passed on to the *Kriegsenkel*.

Underpinned by psychological concepts about trauma and transgenerational transmission, a three-step schema in my participants' narrative starts from the present (*Kriegsenkel's* emotional suffering) and reaches through the parents and sometimes grandparents (impaired parenting and transmission of emotional damage) all the way back to WWII as the causal root (trauma) of the dynamic that is felt to be playing out in their current lives.

Yet, in spite of their intuitive certainty of this connection, many of my interview partners found it hard to describe the inherited emotional burden further. What exactly was transmitted to them, by whom and how, they often could not say. Clearly attributing complex personal problems to a discrete source in the parents' and grandparents' past may be by its very nature a difficult, if not impossible, undertaking. However, I believe that people are also impacted by the gaps in knowledge about their family history due to the prevailing silence. Most of them simply did not know what their family went through in the war and, as a result, could not make direct connections with their own lives.

Nevertheless, as shown in Chapter 4, their previously indistinct sense of emotional suffering now had a name and a concept - '*transgenerationale Weitergabe von Kriegserfahrungen*' ('transgenerational transmission of war experiences') – to frame their experience. In the absence of a psychological or psychiatric diagnosis for their families or themselves, and in the absence of detailed knowledge about the family history, psychological concepts about transmission of trauma acted as a kind of crutch. They objectified the intuitive sense of connection between past traumatic events and current problems and helped bridge the gaps left by familial silence about the past.

Carol Kidron (2003) observed the same type of narrative structure among support groups of children of Holocaust survivors in Israel. During her

fieldwork in the 1990s she found a similar three-step logic in the way group members constructed their emergent identity as second-generation Holocaust survivors. Present psychological issues in the descendants' lives were linked back to the trauma of the Holocaust through memories of being raised by traumatised parents. The same causal sequence (historical trauma - damaged parents – descendants' emotional problems) served as a 'template' (Kidron 2003:521) that enabled group members to re-narrate their life histories as having been constituted by the Holocaust and to make up for the gaps in knowledge they had about their parents' past. At the same time, psychological concepts of transgenerational transmission of PTSD provided the scaffolding holding the template together (Kidron 2003).

For the German *Kriegsenkel* the 'shared truth' (Fassin and Rechtman 2009) and rationale of the therapeutic discourse fused the elements of their indistinct sense of malaise into a coherent and powerful narrative, which provided meaning and a cohesive structure to past life events and current struggles, and which transformed the seemingly unjustified middle-class 'complainer' into a legitimate sufferer and – ultimately – into a victim of war.

However, therapy culture has more to offer than to help explain the source of emotional problems; it also provides techniques and solutions to free the self from the burden of the past, and it relays hope for a happier future.

Looking around for help

The approaches my participants chose to address their issues fall into four categories, all within the framework of self help culture: 'emotional support'; 'working through'; 'creative expression'; and 'filling in the gaps' (with overlaps between each category). People made selections based on their personal preferences and needs, as well as the availability of support structures in their hometown.

Not long after Kerstin diagnosed herself as a *Kriegsenkel*, she started to look around for support. Realising that there were others who share a similar fate, she consulted the designated websites and joined one of the self-help groups in Berlin, longing to connect with her peers. In addition to legitimising suffering as stated in Chapter 4, these groups offer mutual support and emotional comfort. After having felt different and isolated all her life, they gave Kerstin a new sense of belonging and community.

When it came to ‘working through’ on a deeper level, my participants mostly chose from the large range of alternative approaches rather than the traditional ‘talk therapy’ (Illouz 2008). An official ‘*Kriegsenkel* diagnosis’ is not necessary for a referral to counselling; individual symptoms such as depression or anxiety suffice. However, in 2012/13 psychotherapists and psychiatrists were still seen as lacking understanding of the specific issues and concerns of the war grandchildren and thus as unable to offer the appropriate tools and strategies for help.

Kerstin chose a homeopath to help her alleviate her symptoms with natural remedies, and she took sessions with a hypnotherapist to access and release unconscious memories related to the war. Other techniques that were mentioned in my interviews included psycho-kinesiology, bodywork/dancing, physiotherapy, and, in particular, the extremely popular family constellations workshops, dozens of which are offered in Berlin on any given weekend. Founded by German psychotherapist and former priest Bert Hellinger in the 1990s, family constellations are a kind of psychodrama claiming to reveal previously unrecognized dynamics that span multiple generations in a given family, by re-enacting the family system with a group of volunteers.⁹⁹ The stand-ins for the family members interact with each other with the aim to resolve negative impacts and encourage healing and acceptance. Many of my participants,

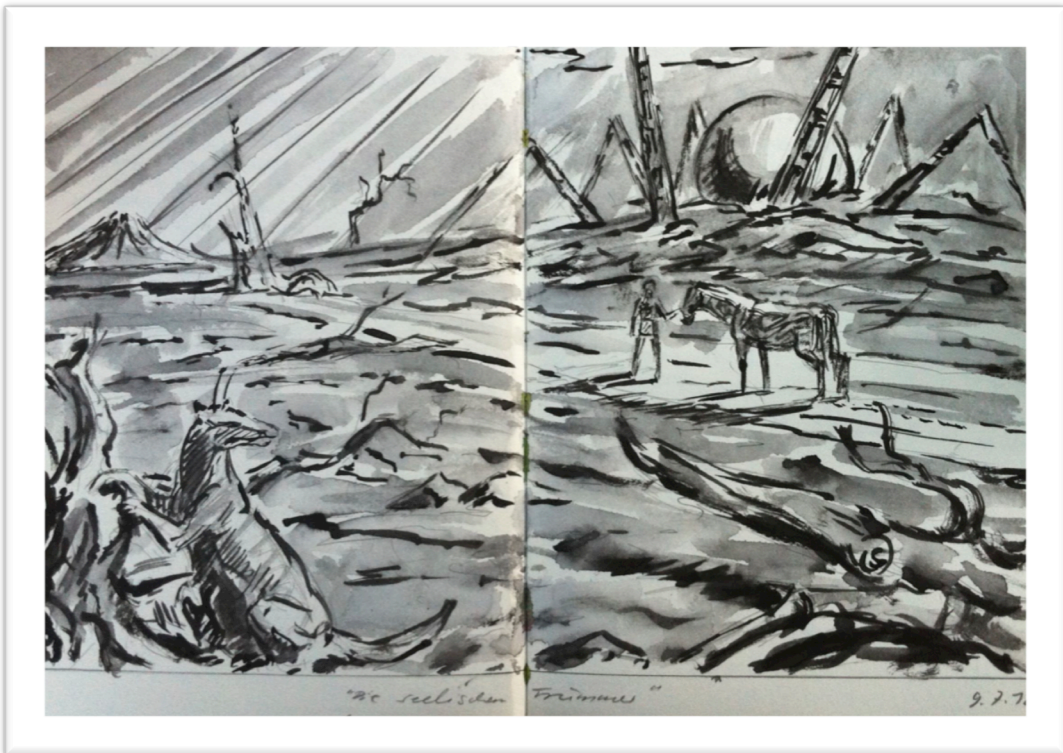
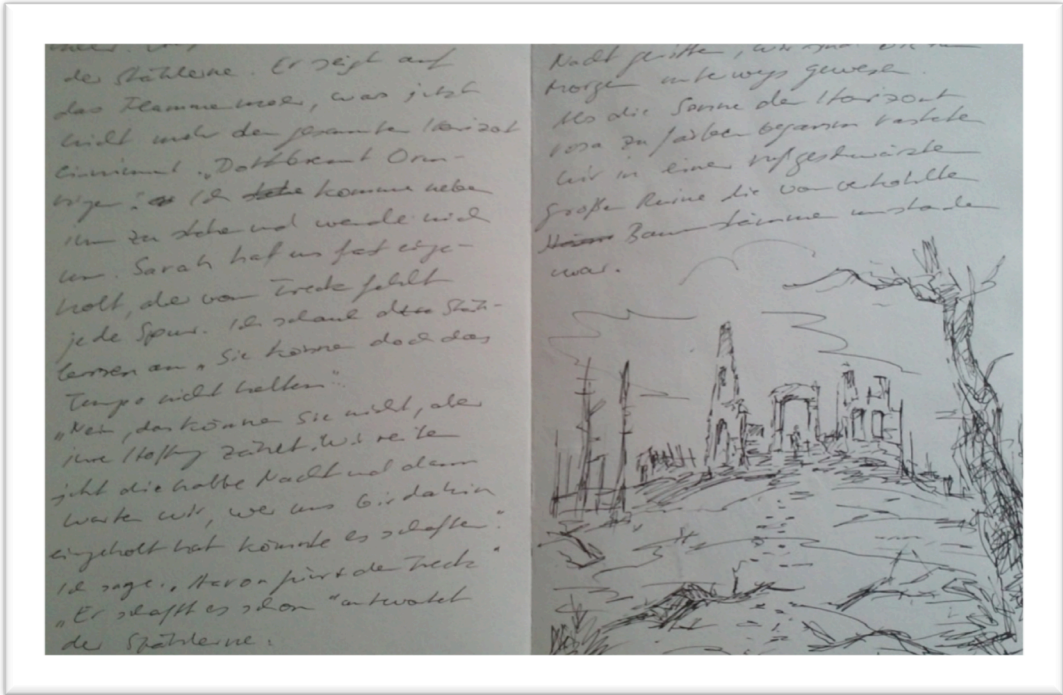
⁹⁹ See www.hellinger.com for more information.

including Kerstin, had participated in these workshops and found them helpful. In one of our conversations, Paula told me that in a recent family constellation workshop she had traced her asthma attacks back to her grandmother's experience of almost suffocating in a bomb shelter during a bomb raid at the time of WWII. Paula said that after that weekend she was able to reduce the dosage of her asthma medication by half.

Other *Kriegsenkel* express and help themselves through their artwork, music or writing. Comedian Rainald Grebe, for example, attributes his own inability to settle anywhere to his mother's flight from Eastern Europe in 1944 in his song *Auf der Flucht* (here best translated as *on the run*) with a great sense of humour¹⁰⁰; Andreas Bohnenstengel uses photography to explore his *Kriegsenkel* identity¹⁰¹; and Anke Jablinski (2012) wrote a book on how rock climbing helped her liberate herself from the war trauma her family had passed on to her. There was also Martin, one of my participants, who wrote convoluted stories, constructed on many temporal levels, that all talked about some kind of war, and illustrated them with beautiful sketches and water colours (see photos on the next page. One of his paintings is also on the cover of my thesis).

¹⁰⁰ See <http://youtu.be/MELex2dhttp://youtu.be/MELex2djA6EjA6E> [Accessed 20 August 2015].

¹⁰¹ See http://kriegsenkel.andreasbohenstengelfotograf.de/?page_id=185 [Accessed 20 August 2015]



“These books are my salvation,” he said to me one night in 2012 as we were waiting for the tram home, “particularly when I feel down.” He had filled 27 of them in the previous years.

A last approach in dealing with the past is the attempt to fill in the informational gaps remaining in their family history. Some consult historical archives, which provide family members with copies of the files they hold from the time of the 3rd Reich, such as membership cards of the Nazi party, court documents regarding trials for war crimes, or documents about movements with the German *Wehrmacht*.¹⁰² Others travel to their family's country of origin to look for a sense of connection with the 'lost home' in the East, or turn to the extended family as a last resort to get more information about the family history. (I will come back to this in detail in Chapter 7.)

The lack of information about the trajectories of one's forebears during WWII due to the family's silence was one of the major reasons why the *Kriegsenkel* found it hard to let go of the past and their attempts to 'fill in the gaps' was one of the key strategies to put it to rest. Kerstin described in vivid details how a clerk led her into the dusty basement of the historical archive and helped her find her grandfather's death certificate. She spoke of the sense of relief, calm and closure she felt when she held a copy of it in her hand, even though the piece of paper confirmed that the Nazis had shot her grandfather as a traitor in Buchenwald in 1945.

In one way or another, everyone active in the *Kriegsenkel* scene who I met in Berlin was trying to 'work through' the past. For some, just reading about the topic or talking to others was enough to find a level of understanding and acceptance. Others tried a number of different therapeutic techniques, including the ones mentioned above as well as extended weekends with Sabine Bode to explore individual trajectories and creative writing workshops to find and express the underlying themes in their lives.

¹⁰² The most frequently accessed archives are the *Bundesarchiv* (<http://www.bundesarchiv.de>) and the *Deutsche Dienststelle (WASt) for the notification of next-of-kin of members of the former German Wehrmacht who were killed in action* (<http://www.dd-wast.de>), which in spite of its name also contains information about returned soldiers.

What always struck me was the hope for a happier future that came through when we talked about this, which at the same time was often coupled with a sense of heaviness and burden. According to the norms of the therapeutic narrative an individual is responsible not only for understanding their problems, but also for self-transformation and self-change and a constant striving towards emotional health (Illouz 2008:in particular 183-186). It was obvious that many of interview partners felt it their 'duty' to resolve the issues from the past because 'no one else in the family was going to do it,' and also to protect their children from a similar fate. They often repeated the idea that the chain of transgenerational transmission can only be broken if the person to whom trauma has been passed is able to work through and remove them from their psyche (Volkan et al. 2002). Most mothers and fathers among my participants felt a heavy sense of guilt for the damage they had already unconsciously done to their children before finding the *Kriegsenkel* topic. However, in spite of these aspects (that no one ever questioned or complained about), actively dealing with the issue of their emotional inheritance was always portrayed as positive and transformative.

Creating meaning, making peace and hoping for a better future

Based on her fieldwork among support groups of 'co-dependents' in the US, Leslie Irvine (1999:3) describes how the 'narrative formula' of co-dependency allows the sufferers to make sense of their lives by providing a clear and coherent sequence to order life events - the 'dysfunctional' childhood family that set them up for co-dependency, the 'unhealthy' relationship(s), the crisis when things fall apart, and then the road to recovery. "They [the support group members she interviewed] put events and situations together to give their experience meaning – for themselves as well as for me. Indeed, narratives are the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful," Irvine (1999:5) concludes. She shows how for people identifying as co-dependent, this discourse provides an

opportunity to integrate their entire life into a ‘more or less coherent assemblage’ or ‘narrative strategy’ (Irvine 1999:5).

All of this is very translatable to *Kriegsenkel* narratives. They allow members of this generation to re-organise their life histories and trace current emotional issues through the family history all the way back to WWII. For most of my interview partners, this ‘narrative strategy’, as a subset of and firmly linked into the broader therapeutic discourse, was extremely meaningful. On the one hand it intuitively just *felt right*, there was often an embodied certainty that the link to the war was real. I furthermore believe this is due to its convincing logic and the coherence of the elements it is constructed with, in particular the ‘truth rule’ (Irvine 1999:85) that unresolved war trauma is passed on by the family. WWII is still seen as the defining time in Germany’s modern history, a time that is constantly referred to and recapitulated in public discourses, reminding Germans of its paramount significance and catastrophic impact. It is not a difficult stretch to understand WWII as the defining event of one’s family history and – through processes of transgenerational transmission – one’s own.

When I visited my key informants again in August 2013 and asked them what their ‘*Kriegsenkel* journey’ had changed for them, this was what they mentioned most often: their own and their family’s story had been re-written and was now ‘making more sense’, something they experienced as reassuring and calming. The war and its emotional legacy had become an integral part of their sense of self and their identity. “If I had to tell somebody about myself now,” Charlotte said, “I would mention that I am a war grandchild and explain how that plays out in my life and where it came from. I would include that in the introduction of myself. It is now part of my understanding of who I am, it is part of my biography.” Martin, who had a cheeky sense of humour that gets a bit lost in translation, added, “being a *Kriegsenkel* means being the child of parents who suffered plenty of damage, a bit more damage than other people. But at least you

get a rough idea of where it all came from and maybe you will even learn how to deal with it.” Most of my core participants said they were more understanding and accepting of themselves and their parents as a result of intensively thinking about the topic, even though the family relationships did not tend to improve. While Kerstin, for example, now had an explanation for her mother’s coldness, she still did not want to see her and be exposed to it.

A second positive outcome of discovering the *Kriegsenkel* narrative was that it offered a new sense of community and belonging that many had previously missed. Many had felt isolated and lonely before, the ‘black sheep’ in their families. Now they found themselves part of a larger collective of people. Breaking through social isolation and providing connection and mutual support is one of the core features of self help movements more broadly, from groups for children of Holocaust survivors (Kidron 2003; Stein 2009), to others formed around a psychological or medical issue such as ‘co-dependency’ (Irvine 1999), bipolar disorder (Martin 2009) or fibromyalgia (Barker 2002). Anne Barth (2012), organiser of the *Forumkriegsenkel*, called it ‘black sheep finding each other’. “If I had to sum it all up, I would say ‘I do belong after all!’” Charlotte said. “I was always different from other people, always felt different, like an outcast, never part of mainstream society. Now after dealing with this topic, I feel like I do belong after all, I belong, to Germany, to my family.” Martin viewed his newly found identity as a kind of ‘secret handshake’ that immediately connected him to other people who were also into the topic. “At least I stopped feeling like an alien now,” he said with the broadest grin, and the last time I saw him he was dating a woman from Southern Germany he had met through the *Forumkriegsenkel* website.

Lastly to the question of whether the promise embedded in the therapeutic culture to liberate the individual from the burden of the past and to enable a happier future held true for my *Kriegsenkel* participants. While not everyone

stated it explicitly, it can be deduced from their current complaints that the prime aspirations of the therapeutic and self help culture of contemporary middle class US society also apply to them: 'emotional health' (here: overcoming depression, anxiety, panic attacks, hopelessness etc.) and 'self realisation' (here: loosening the 'handbrake' and living one's potential, achieving more fulfilling relationships, careers etc.) (Illouz 2008:172).

I would not be able to say with conviction whether my participants were happier and more 'self-realised' in 2013 than they were in 2012, but 18 months may be too short a timeframe to come to firm conclusions. Kerstin did say that she felt a sense of liberation from the 'heavy backpack' she used to carry around, and most others confirmed they were more 'at peace' with themselves as a result of becoming a *Kriegsenkel* and all that it entailed. Anja, who I will introduce in the next chapter, noticed that something that had been blocking her all her life was finally starting to move, and many others expressed a renewed sense of hope for the future.

It needs to be mentioned that for many who now identify as *Kriegsenkel*, this is not the first nor will it most likely be the last 'therapeutic narrative' they connected with. There seem to be 'narrative fashions' (Illouz 2008:174) that people go through. Alice Miller's (1979) *Drama of the gifted child*, or Elaine Aron's (1996) book *The highly sensitive person* were only two of the many previous subjects of interest that were mentioned during my interviews. Each one of these topics had a certain shelf life. Their concepts were each intensely utilised for a while, then, at some point they had exhausted their potential to identify causes of suffering and suggest solutions, and consequently receded into the background. Following some of my participants over 18 months, this progression was uncanny. While at this very moment of writing, new streams of people still share their 'Eureka-moment' and the start of the *Kriegsenkel*-journey on a daily basis in the Facebook groups, the more senior members of the scene were already starting to put the topic to rest by the time I returned to Berlin in

August 2013. They still firmly believed in and identified with the *Kriegsenkel* narrative, but they felt they had fully explored its parameters and the topic had lost some of its urgency. As was the case for Charlotte, it had been ‘digested’ and the result had become part of the person and their biography.

While it may not be the only one, I believe the *Kriegsenkel* narrative is nevertheless particularly powerful and potentially more lasting than others. It enables members of this generation to find plausible reasons for their own and their families’ emotional problems, it offers community and a sense of belonging to a large collective of people of the same age and upbringing, and it offers tools to overcome suffering and promotes hope for a better future. All of these combined I believe were encapsulated in Kerstin's slightly odd exclamation, “Hooray, I am a *Kriegsenkel!*”

4. A new collective identity?

The analysis of the *Kriegsenkel* movement and narratives in Chapters 4 and 5 beg the question, how pervasive this new ‘collective identity’ (Stein 2009), which has formed among certain members of this generation is. According to the Federal German statistical office, there are around 21 million people in Germany today who were born between 1960 and 1975.¹⁰³ Even if one deducts those from migrant backgrounds and others whose parents were not children during WWII, this still leaves millions of people who could potentially identify as *Kriegsenkel*. Yet, while the war grandchildren movement is growing the number of participants even in the most popular Facebook group stands at around 580 to date and would be considered marginal (not everyone likes Facebook of course). This section asks the question and provides some hypotheses as to why

¹⁰³ <http://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1351/umfrage/altersstruktur-der-bevoelkerung-deutschlands/> [Accessed 20 August 2015].

some people 'become' war grandchildren and why others do not (or have not yet).

In one of our conversations I asked Kerstin whether her brother felt the same way about their family history, but she shook her head. "I can't imagine that he would be interested in this," she pondered, although they hadn't talked to each other for a while. Most of my other participants were emphatic (and disappointed) that their siblings did not share their views. A number of my participants' brothers and sisters denied my request for a meeting saying that 'nothing was passed on to them'. All except two of the siblings I was able to meet reiterated this view. My participants tended to pass judgement that their brothers and sisters 'just didn't get it', but it was clear that not everyone of this generation felt affected by the war in the same way.

Also, while most of my interview partners had keen interest in family history in relationship to WWII (often the reason they chose to talk to me), not all of them felt impacted by it *to the same degree*. Many acknowledged that the war had left scars on their parents and grandparents, but did not feel that much damage was passed on to them, or they thought that what was transmitted only had a minor impact on their own lives. Maybe as the result of their upbringing, they needed to have a full fridge or to choose a stable job to feel secure, but these were perceived as minor aspects of their lives. Some with more open family communication, as explained in Chapter 2, even felt a positive impact of the 'life lessons' their family had passed on to them. None of the above talked about the war in the same defining and all-encompassing way, as did Kerstin and the other *Kriegsenkel* I portray in my previous and next chapters. A substantial number of Germans I spoke to casually during my fieldwork felt that the war happened a long time ago and had nothing to do with them whatsoever.

Another interesting observation about this new collective identity is that it seems to have found a much stronger resonance among people who grew up in West

Germany. Looking at the list of war grandchildren support groups more closely, one cannot help but notice that, with the exception of the groups regularly meeting in Berlin, they are all located in the '*Alten Bundesländer*', the 'old states', which prior to the re-unification in 1990 were part of West Germany. None of the thirty portraits in the two war grandchildren books were of people who grew up in the GDR, and psychologist Bettina Alberti shared with me that she was struggling to find a volunteer for an East German case study for her book.¹⁰⁴ Even if one takes into consideration that the East German population is only around one third of that of the West this is still striking.

This is not to say of course that there are no war grandchildren in East Germany. Kerstin and some of the most active members of the Berlin *Kriegsenkel* scene are *Ossies*, and while they were a bit more difficult to find, in the end quite a number of East Germans were happy to meet me for an interview. Still, overall there seems to be a difference in how strongly people respond (or maybe respond publicly) to the ideas of the war grandchildren movement.

So why do some people identify as *Kriegsenkel* whereas others do not?

The first logical explanation is of course exposure. Not every member of this age group is aware of the topic, and many will not yet have had a chance to consider it. The *Kriegsenkel* movement is a relatively recent phenomenon, it is still evolving and its full breadth and penetration is yet to be determined.

Secondly, research shows that even in extremely traumatised families like those of Holocaust survivors, not all offspring are equally affected. While some seem to suffer from their families' inherited problems, others do not seem to require (or access) psychological treatment. Danieli (2007) claims that there are a number of different components impacting on the process, including the extent, time, and duration of the trauma itself; the survivors' survival and adaptation

¹⁰⁴ Personal conversation with Bettina Alberti on 30 March 2012.

strategies; the extent of the 'conspiracy of silence' surrounding the trauma and its aftermath; how the child relates to the parents' trauma; as well as how the parents adapted to life post-war. Nathan Kellermann (2008:263-264) adds other factors found to have aggravated or mitigated the risk for psychological damage in descendants of Holocaust survivors. These include: how close to WWII the children were born; whether they were the first born or the only child; whether both parents were survivors or just one of them; how enmeshed the relations between parents and children were; and whether the Holocaust was talked about too much or too little. In addition, some children were also seen to have developed coping skills that enabled them to withstand the damaging influence of their upbringing. Kellerman (2008:269) suspects that not only trauma was passed on in these cases but - depending on the parents' character traits and attitudes - certain 'survival skills' were also handed down, making some members of the 'second generation' more resilient than their peers. Some of these may also explain the different responses in non-Jewish German families. When it comes to the particular question of why there seem to be fewer East German *Kriegsenkel*, different explanations are possible.

A number of my East German participants explained that many are simply still in the process of working through their more immediate GDR past to be concerned with the more distant topic of the WWII. The contributions to Christoph Seidler and Michael Froese's (2009) edited volume *Traumatisierungen in (Ost)-Deutschland (Traumatization in [East]-Germany)* provide examples from private psychotherapeutic and psychoanalytical practice and show that even in cases where people look back as far as the war to identify the source of their present emotional problems, these memories are often intermingled and overlaid with traumatic experiences incurred under the communist regime. This intermingling was also very clear in my interviews.

My impression was also that East Germans still tended to be less confident to speak up in public and were extremely reluctant join organised activities, which had dominated their childhoods in the socialist society. Marta, born in Dresden (GDR), went to one of the support group meetings in the West German city where she now lived but did not feel comfortable. Everyone else around her was a 'Wessie', she told me, and "they were much more confident and articulate than me and they did all the talking." She never went again. It is thus likely that East German *Kriegsenkel*, while probably overall fewer in numbers, are also less visible than their West German counterparts because they do not participate to the same extent in the support groups and other organised activities.

Interestingly, Historian Dorothee Wierling (2010) made a similar observation for the 'war children movement'. She traced the biographies of the around 50 people actively publishing in the scene and found only three East Germans in this diverse group of historians, psychologists, physicians, journalists, educators and literary scholars. Wierling (2010:112) concluded that, "apparently no 'generation of war children' exists in East Germany in the empathetic sense of self-conscious generation building." She explains this with the fact that concepts of generation played no significant role in the official discourse of the GDR, as categories of class were more important in communist terminology, and that certain aspects of wartime childhood memories (linked to flight and expulsion) were taboo and could not be discussed in public.

While this may be the case for the *Kriegskinder*, I believe that the key reason some people identify as *Kriegsenkel* again comes back to 'therapy culture'. It is clear that some parts of the population have more exposure to (or feel more drawn to) therapy culture than others.

The laws of the GDR prevented private psychotherapists from practising and clinical psychologists were scarce. From the 70s until the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, there were on average 130 psychology students enrolled each year

across four universities, and while numbers have steadily increased since the 1990s, there are still only about half the therapists per capita compared to their Western counterparts (Peikert et al. 2011). East Germans are thus less likely to access therapy and they also spent the first half of their lives with less exposure to the ‘therapeutic worldview’ (Furedi 2004). It always struck me that when I asked, “How do you think the war affected yourself and your family?” East Germans tended to talk about the impact of the war on East German society more generally, rather than on their personal situation, which I attributed to their upbringing in a socialist education system.

When it comes to *Kriegsenkel* profiles more broadly, a recent study by the University of Duisburg/Essen (Walendzik et al. 2010) provides some interesting insights:

- More than 70% of all Germans accessing therapy are female (except in the group of very young patients of 21 years or younger).
- Almost 1/3 of all patients accessing therapy in 2010 were between 41-50 years old. They are by far the largest client group, in spite of the fact that this age bracket only constitutes around 17% of the overall population.
- People accessing therapy tend to be better educated, with almost twice as many patients than the population average having completed at least a year 12 or a tertiary education.
- 40% of all patients were recorded as ‘*Angestellte*’ (salaried employees) and only about 7% as ‘*Arbeiter*’ (working class), although the latter constitute around 20% of the overall population (Walendzik et al. 2010).

It is uncanny that this matches exactly the profile of my participants. Across Western countries the core clientele of counselling practices, consumers of self help literature and support groups is found to be predominantly middle-class, well educated, and female (Illouz 2008; Irvine 1999; McLeod and Wright 2009).

I have shown in this chapter that the *Kriegsenkel* identity is strongly embedded in the therapeutic discourse with its specific logic, vocabulary and ‘truth rules’ (Irvine 1999:85). Outside this framework, the narrative does not hold together (remember Martin’s mother who said “but you were not there, how could you be affected by the war?”). Although access to therapy and self-help culture is extremely broad in Germany, it is clear that some people have (or choose to have) more exposure to it than others.

This does not mean of course that in other segments of the population or in East Germany more generally, transgenerational transmission of trauma did not occur, but it does mean that those among them who are emotionally suffering are less inclined to explain their issues in this way.

5. Conclusion: A discussion about therapy culture and a call for a nuanced assessment

This chapter explored *Kriegsenkel* life histories and their trajectories in the framework of Western therapy culture, arguing that it is within its parameters that the war grandchildren identity is constructed, performed and addressed. To conclude this chapter I would like to link this German case study into the long-standing debate on the topic.

As mentioned in my introduction, Western therapy culture has been the focus of a substantial number of studies in the last five decades, mainly by sociologists.

The overwhelming majority of them are critical of the dominant influence of psychology on Western societies.

Therapy culture has been portrayed as a sign of the demise of traditional communal frameworks (Rieff 1966; Cushman 1990; Lasch 1991) and religious authorities (Moskowitz 2001:1) in modern Western societies, it has been accused of fostering moral collapse (Furedi 2004; Lasch 1991; Rieff 1966) and of encouraging an extreme individualism and ‘narcissistic over-occupation with the self’ (Lasch 1991:XV), social disengagement and withdrawal into the private sphere (Moskowitz 2001).

Therapeutic approaches have been critiqued for creating or perpetuating emotional suffering rather than curing it, by fostering a culture of vulnerability and victimhood vis-à-vis the challenges of modern life (Furedi 2004); by insisting on a self-contained individualism and thereby further weakening interpersonal and community relations (Cushman 1990); or by setting vague and unrealistic benchmarks of emotional health, self-actualisation, and happiness against which individuals invariably find themselves falling short (Illouz 2008). Lastly, Foucault (1995) and his followers (Chriss 1999; Donzelot 1979; Lasch 1991; Rose 1990, 1997, 1998) expose the therapeutic discourse as a practice of government and an insidious form of social control.

However, as also already mentioned before, these predominantly pessimistic and sometimes rather cynical assessments of the influence of therapeutic culture tend to present a broad picture of social and cultural change without than taking into account the subjective experiences of the people who are clients and consumers of self-help books or counselling. Australian sociologists Julie McLeod and Katie Wright (2009) are exceptions in their claim that its impact on everyday life of individuals is more complex and multi-faceted than these blanket approaches account for. Drawing on their research of culturally and

economically marginalized women they demand closer attention to the different ways in which these narratives and practices are mobilised and performed by certain social groups and which effects they are felt to have.

From an anthropological perspective, I would like to contribute to the debate extrapolating from the subjective experiences of the German *Kriegsenkel* and their engagement with the therapeutic culture, in which they grew up. In that I will focus on and discuss two of the phenomena seen as resulting from the influence of therapeutic culture: the perceived lack of social and political engagement and ‘narcissistic self concern’ (Illouz 2008:2); and the enshrining of an all-encompassing sense of vulnerability and victimhood into the understanding of the modern self and its life challenges.

‘Narcissistic self concern’ or safe haven?

One stream of the debate revolves around the perceived narcissistic self-absorption of the modern therapeutic subject and the personalization of social problems.¹⁰⁵ Lasch (1991), for example, laments that since the radical political activities of the 1960s, Americans have withdrawn to purely personal preoccupations and Moskowitz (2001) believes that with most of the attention now on private life and the family, people have become blind to the larger public good. From the 1970s on, therapeutic discourses are largely seen to discourage social and political action, stifle dissent and disguise structural and systematic issues by stressing individual responsibility and alleviation of problems through therapeutic interventions. Moskowitz (2001) and Furedi (2004) are both concerned that by turning the focus inward, problems that used to be perceived as political, economic or educational are today considered emotional and personal, and are addressed as such rather than through social or political change.

¹⁰⁵ In particular Chriss (1999); Cushman (1990); Furedi (2004); Lasch (1991); Moskowitz (2001).

Against this critique, Eva Illouz (2008) points to the influence of therapeutic culture on more recent collective actions in the US. Once ‘psychologized’, Illouz (2008:170) argues, social problems were re-funnelled into the public sphere by social actors promoting narratives of disease and victimhood. Although feminist groups fighting for the rights of victims of child abuse, or Vietnam war veterans requesting official acknowledgement as sufferers of war trauma, may not have been advocating for radical political change, they did nevertheless in her view push for public recognition of issues affecting larger groups of people.

When applying this discussion to the German *Kriegsenkel*, the first position seems more fitting. One of the features of the *Kriegsenkel* movement is its lack of any broader social and political goals. As Kerstin’s ‘journey’ showed, being a victim of transmitted WWII trauma is very much seen as a personal psychological issue, to be traced back to the childhood family and to be addressed in private therapy or explored and performed in self-help groups of peers, that are carefully cordoned off from ‘outsiders’.

When I left Germany at the end of my second visit in August 2013, the scope of the war grandchildren movement had not reached very far beyond the closed circles of self-help groups. All my interview partners who were active in the scene as well as the two authors of the *Kriegsenkel* books confirmed there were no organised attempts to achieve social change, not even - as in the case of the Vietnam veterans – coordinated lobbying for recognition of their own interests (yet). On the contrary, being ‘ideology-free’ and apolitical is one of the character traits listed as typical for the war grandchildren generation,¹⁰⁶ and quite a number of my participants pointed this out to me with a certain pride.

This could be viewed as social disengagement and focus on private concerns and, at least in some interviews and in quite a few support groups meetings, that was

¹⁰⁶ <http://www.forumkriegsenkel.de/Studie.htm> [Accessed 20 August 2015].

definitely my impression. For my participants, who were raised in and strongly internalised the logic, discourses, and practices of the ‘therapeutic mode’ (Stein 2009:48), the aspiration, drive and strategies for change focused on the individual and personal rather than social and political.

However, one consideration that has been overlooked so far is that framing issues as psychological rather than social or political may also be a way of addressing problems in a political environment where the topics in question are still considered sensitive. While individual *Kriegsenkel* now occasionally share their personal stories in newspapers and TV programs, none of my interview partners felt comfortable advocating for public recognition as second-generation victims of a war in which their grandparents had participated. Therapeutic culture and frameworks on the other hand provide a protected space, where emotional suffering can be voiced without fear of repercussion. This perspective should be taken into consideration when assessing the impact of therapeutic culture, as it is likely to be even more acute in other countries, such as China for example, where past, large scale suffering of the population is still a politically sensitive issue.¹⁰⁷

Fostering victimhood or promoting agency?

The second point I would like to take up is, in my view, the most important critique of current therapy culture, claiming that rather than ‘empowering’ individuals it promotes vulnerability, erodes self-reliance (Furedi 2004; Hoff Sommers and Satel 2005), and encourages narratives of suffering, victimhood and disease (Furedi 2004; Illouz 2008). Both Hoff Sommers and Satel’s and Furedi’s books argue that therapeutic approaches are propagating concepts of the modern self as vulnerable, diminished, weak and constantly at risk of being

¹⁰⁷ For an interesting study into the emergence of the ‘psycho-boom’ in contemporary Urban China see Huang (2014).

traumatised or otherwise emotionally damaged. In their view, difficulties that were once accepted as a normal part of life are now being pathologised and medicalised and seen as in need of therapeutic interventions. Furedi (2004:4) shows how mentions of the word 'trauma' have skyrocketed in the British media since the 1980s and how counselling is now offered for every aspect of life seen as potentially damaging to people's emotions; from changing from primary to secondary schools to unemployment, natural disasters and bereavement. Rather than alleviating emotional suffering, Furedi argues that therapy culture encourages people to feel traumatised and depressed, and as early childhood experiences are understood as defining for a person's biography, people are instructed to see themselves as victims of their families and upbringing rather than as self-determined agents in control of their lives. Along the same line, Illouz (2008:184) adds that, "as the therapeutic narrative discusses, labels, and explains predicaments of the self, the self is in turn invited to conceive of itself as ridden with emotional and psychological problems. Far from actually helping manage the contradictions and predicaments of modern identity, the psychological discourse may only deepen them." Because therapeutic discourses are 'contagious' (Illouz 2008:184) the victim status is not confined to those individuals who have directly suffered from a particular event, but also their children and grandchildren who draw on the same therapeutic logic to constitute their identity as sick subjects to be healed. Both authors understand narratives of suffering and psychological illness as socially constructed and Furedi (2004:152) goes as far as speaking of the 'invention' of the second generation Holocaust survivors.

From the standpoint of my German case study, I do not believe that Furedi's (2004) and Hoff Sommers and Satchel's (2005) argument about the ability of past generations to master life's challenges much better than the current ones holds up. While people may have outwardly displayed stoicism and acceptance

of their life challenges, it does not mean that they did not experience suffering and were not traumatised according to modern diagnostic categories. I heard many stories about grandfathers who came home from the war and quietly rebuilt their lives without complaints, but who had lost their *joie de vivre*, spent their evenings drinking, or beat their wives and children, unable to control their bottled up rage, pain and frustration. I sincerely doubt that they were coping as well as these authors would like us to believe. Although Alan Young (1995) questions the construction of PTSD as a psychopathology, he stresses that suffering related to traumatic experiences has always existed.

My participants were clearly experiencing emotional distress and, as Leslie Irvine (1999) points out, therapists did not create the problems people are experiencing, but merely provided a framework and vocabulary for them to identify, explain and express them. Using the case of the introduction of telephone counselling in Australia as an example, Katie Wright (2008) shows that therapeutic strategies respond to real need and to emergent social dilemmas, and have enabled the recognition of pain and suffering previously hidden away in the private domain.

I do on the other hand agree with Furedi (2004), Hoff Sommers and Satel (2005) and Illouz (2008) that having been socialised to understand oneself and one's problems in therapeutic categories encourages a sense of victimhood rather than stressing aspects of resilience and agency. Many among my participants very much portrayed themselves as emotional casualties of their dysfunctional families, and they would subscribe to concepts of the self as vulnerable and constantly at risk of being traumatised. Anger, judgement and resentments against the family of origin dominated not only many of our interviews, but also support group meetings and Facebook exchanges, putting further pressure on often already strained intergenerational relationships.

Yet at the same time therapy culture also provides tools to understand, explore, find meaning in and overcome suffering, which were experienced as effective and empowering. While quite a number of people I met in the field seem to be stuck in their victim role, others were quite clearly feeling more optimistic and more at peace with themselves and their families as a result of their and engagement with their *Kriegsenkel* identity. Wright and McLeod (2009) conclude from their work that the pessimistic assessments of therapy culture tend to ignore the sense of capacity and competence that therapeutic modes can provide. I agree with that. The discovery of the topic and the ensuing ‘journey’ many *Kriegsenkel* went on were experienced as unequivocally positive, providing resources, tools and strategies and instilling a sense of optimism for the future. “In transcending despair through counselling or therapy the self can be restored to its conviction that its is the master of its own existence,” Nicolas Rose (1998:159) writes, and while he would see that as an illusion of autonomy as people are not aware of the powers that influence their desires, this is nevertheless very much how the German *Kriegsenkel* experienced it.

It was clear in my interviews that conceiving of and talking about the self using therapeutic language has become a way of life, so deeply internalised and taken for granted that it almost defies articulation (Illouz 2008). For my participants, there was no alternative framework in which to understand and address their emotional problems. Therapeutic thinking is so ingrained, so close to home, that it remains invisible. I myself was not conscious of it previously. Was this not ‘just how you do things’?

Chapter 6 Accounts of Transmission (I) - The invisible Wounds of War

I. Introduction

While Chapters 4 and 5 were concerned with the broader social characteristics of the emergent *Kriegsenkel* identities, Chapter 6 and 7 delve into my participants' individual narratives more deeply. I will present their life histories as they framed them in 2012/13, and will show in detail how they perceived and understood their current lives as being impacted by events that happened during WWII. For this I will introduce four women and one man: Anja and Juliane in this chapter; Charlotte, Rainer and Paula in the following. I chose these five people because they were among the participants I knew best, and because their stories demonstrate particularly well the points I am trying to make in my analysis. However, I will contextualise their individual accounts to show where and how they represent *Kriegsenkel* life histories more broadly.

Chapter 6 focuses on perceptions of the transgenerational effect of traumatic events that happened to family members during and at the end of the war, in particular the bombardment of German cities and the rape of German women. Chapter 7 will subsequently explore the particular role of absences in the transmission between the generations. The material and immaterial losses incurred as a result of WWII were felt to have left major gaps in the sense of belonging and connection with a homeland and family traditions, while Nazi perpetratorship and war crimes led to breaks in relationships with family members, in particular grandfathers.

This chapter is built around Anja and Juliane, who, in 2012, had recently come to understand their families as suffering from war trauma. In Anja's case it was her father who as a young boy had witnessed terrible scenes of death and destruction, while Juliane was certain that the women in her family had been victims or witnesses of sexual violence when the Russians occupied their village in 1945. Both women felt that these events that happened long before their birth had a crippling effect on their own lives and emotions as their families passed much of their trauma on to them. I will pause telling their stories from time to time, connecting them to those of my other participants and to provide background on topics such as research on war childhoods, National Socialist childrearing practices, and sexual violence during WWII. This information has now become widely available in the German public and was woven into *Kriegsenkel* narratives.

Later I will discuss common models of transgenerational transmission with which my participants framed the connection between their own emotional problems and their family's traumatic memories. In doing that, I will take these as narratives rather than diagnostic tools, and I will discuss their respective strengths and weaknesses in explaining the subjective experiences of growing up in families affected by war. I will also point to some of the implications that these narratives have on the *Kriegsenkel's* understanding of their suffering, their hope for the future and their relationship with their families. At the end of the chapter I will suggest that concepts from the field of affect theory could alleviate some of the shortcomings of the traditional models, so that they may be able to better capture lived experiences of transgenerational transmission.

Carol Kidron (2012) noted that apart from her own research (Kidron 2003, 2009a, 2009b, 2012) to date there has been almost no ethnographic work assessing the impact of concepts of transmitted PTSD and how descendants themselves apply these ideas to explain their emotional legacy. My study follows

in her footsteps. However, Kidron (2009a, 2012), questions the cross-cultural validity of psychological concepts of transmitted PTSD, as they were rejected by participants in her interviews with second-generation Holocaust survivors in Israel and offspring of survivors of the Cambodian genocide living in Canada. My research revealed the contrary: the German *Kriegsenkel* very much understood themselves as sufferers of transmitted war trauma. Rather than contesting the basic concepts of transmitted trauma, the claim I make, based on my case study, is that there is a need to broaden psychological models and approaches to better capture the subjective experiences of descendants, and that there would be a benefit in substituting some of their assumptions with ideas from other fields (such as affect theory).

2. Anja - The abyss without a name

Anja was 46 when I first met her in a Russian Café in East Berlin in September 2012. My first impression of her was that of an open and confident woman with a dark sense of humour. She had long blond hair, a deep, raspy voice, and was very articulate. Anja was a writer and an artist. Her life seemed settled, she was married, she and her husband both worked and they lived in their own house with a garden in a good neighbourhood with their 6-year old son.

Yet, behind the façade of this middle class family life, Anja had had severe psychological problems for more than 20 years. Over coffee and Russian pancakes, she gave me snapshots of her ongoing battles with depression, agoraphobia and panic attacks. She told me about the breakdown she had before moving into her current home from another part of town, during which her legs gave way in the shower and she was unable to walk or eat for three days, crying incessantly. Then there was the heaviness that often caught her first thing in the morning, turning even mundane life tasks into insurmountable feats, leaving her

clueless as to how to get through the day. Anja was struggling in every aspect of her life, her career, her relationship and with being a mother. Just the day before our meeting she had been sitting at home, staring at the wall for three hours, desperately struggling to ramp up the energy to get dressed, pack a bag and take her son to the swimming pool just down the road. “I feel I can’t breathe,” Anja said when I ask her to describe the feeling, “my whole being is compressed into a tiny ball, as small as a marble, but as heavy as lead on my chest. When I get to feel the pain itself it is just a sense of infinite sadness, but I never found any correlation with anything that I experienced in my life.” She had been in therapy and on anti-depressants for most of her adult life without much improvement in her condition.

The heaviness inside

For a number of years, she was searching for an artistic expression of this indistinct sense of leaden heaviness she carried inside. She played around with different materials, but nothing seemed to hit the mark. Only when she began to experiment with concrete things started to fall into place. In the end, Anja produced two 40-kilo models of aboveground bomb shelters. “I remember this feeling when I unpacked the first shelter from its mould. I immediately knew that that was it. I started to cry because I knew that is exactly the form that matches my feeling. I tried to lift it up and realised that I couldn’t really carry it.” She had no idea where they came from, but suddenly there they were, in front of her ‘on the table’. “Oh, how very Freudian,” her therapist said, and they both laughed.



Photo: Christian Siekmeyer, Exile Gallery, Berlin

The next time Anja visited her hometown in Southern Germany she realised that one of the models was an exact replica of the bomb shelter next to her family home, left over from WWII. She was stunned that in spite of its impressive size she had never noticed it before. It had just been part of the landscape of her everyday childhood life.

Both of Anja's parents had been children during the war; her mother died of bowel cancer when Anja was 14. She was peripherally aware of the family history related to WWII, but had never given it much thought. Her father did not talk about his memories (nor anyone else in the family) apart from a few throwaway lines ('It smells like death here') that she later interpreted in this context. It was a taboo, upheld by mutual agreement; her father did not volunteer any stories about the war, and Anja in turn did not ask.

Father and daughter had a difficult relationship, she explained. Being his only child, he adored and spoiled her, but he was never the strong and protective

father she had longed for. Instead of showing her the ropes in life, it seemed that he was always the one in need of emotional care. His daughter was his confidante, the only one he talked to, even after he remarried. Anja admitted that she enjoyed this privileged status, but that she also felt as if she were suffocating. The walls seemed to have hands in the family home, grabbing, strangling and smothering her.

When Anja told her father about the bomb shelters, he just looked at her in silence. It took another three years before one day, she finally said to him: “Why don’t you tell me a bit about the war?” After first stressing that “it really wasn’t so bad,” fragments of a story suddenly trickled out, a story with screaming farm animals, with stables engulfed in flames and dripping with burning fat. “There was nothing I could do,” her father suddenly sobbed before breaking down and starting to cry uncontrollably. “It was like he was back in 1943, there was no more distance, he was a child again,” Anja recalled. “He was trembling and crying, I had never seen him like that before.”

Over the next couple of months, her father told her his worst memories from the war, his ‘top ten’ as Anja called them with her special kind of humour, each episode more horrific than the previous one. There was the story about their hometown being heavily bombarded towards the end of the war, and her father and other children having to help ‘clean up’ after every bomb raid, clearing the streets from debris and dead bodies. Or another one, where her father was trying to find his way home through enemy lines all by himself at the end of the war, making it across the river with the last ferry before the captain sank the boat, the water dense with floating bodies of dead soldiers and civilians. His worst account, however, was from winter 1944/45. Anja’s father was 11 at the time and had gone ice skating with his school friends on a frozen lake near his home, when the group was attacked by low-flying Allied war planes. Everyone ducked for cover to escape the machine gun fire. When the planes finally left and Anja’s father

looked out from behind the bush where he was hiding the ice was soaked with blood. All 11 of his classmates were dead. He was the only survivor.

Although he had never consulted a psychologist, Anja had no doubt in her mind that her father was severely traumatised by what he experienced during WWII. These stories now explained to her why her father could never be the dad she had yearned for. “His emotional development stopped at the age of 11,” she said. “He really never grew up. He could not be the responsible father to take me by the hand and protect me. He just couldn’t.” She also suddenly understood his constant tension and his desperate need for set routines to keep his fears under control. He would always take the same road home, would always eat at the exact same time. She had been aware of these behaviours before, but had never seen them in relation to the war. “I always knew that there was something very wrong with him,” she admitted, “but it was just never a topic, it was always so suppressed. Now I understand why my father is scared when he is in unfamiliar environments and why he always looks for an escape route. Before I just noticed that he was very tense, but those symptoms were so removed from anything concrete that I could not place them anywhere.”

Growing up with ‘damaged’ parents

As previously mentioned, the majority of my participants grew up in German middle-class families, which in the 1960s and 1970s put an enormous effort into creating ‘*Heile Welten*’ (‘idyllic worlds’) with picture-perfect houses and picket fences, carefully mown lawns and cars washed every Saturday. Appearances were paramount and being judged by the neighbours often a major concern. The children were expected to fit into the mould set for them without complaints, doing well at school, being quiet and well behaved, and not causing any disturbance or trouble. ‘Do not make waves’ was the rule.

Andrea’s family is another such typical example: After coming home from a

Russian POW camp, her father found a job, got married and had children. 'Everything is fine now', was the slogan, 'no more war, and no more violence - just working and rebuilding'. Austerity, conscientiousness, order and discipline ruled at home, she pondered, "even a bit more than in other post-war families." Like many of his generation Andrea's father worked hard: He left early in the morning and returned home late at night. Her mother, like many German women in the 1960s raised the children mostly on her own.¹⁰⁸

Yet, behind closed doors, something felt 'off' in these idyllic homes. Joy and laughter seemed to be missing and there was often the sense of a cloud of sadness around the mother or father, sometimes both. Depression was frequently named as the dominant mood, a lack of levity and happiness that seemed to jar with the outward display of ordinariness and stability. As a child Elise thought of this heaviness at home as normal, "but somehow it was also burdensome and troubling. Something was hanging in the air, but I could never really grab hold of it." Many German *Kriegsenkel* described, like Anja, an acute sense that there was something not quite right with their families as they were growing up, without being able to put a name to this perception. Their parents (and often grandparents) seemed to be carrying an emotional burden; they showed behaviours and had reactions that the children did not understand.

When I asked people to describe their parents, 'cold' was another adjective that was used many times in my interviews, a complaint made more frequently against the mothers. They were overall seen as 'functioning', providing for the family as expected of them, but incapable of feeling and expressing emotions. A deeper connection to their children, as well as emotional support and empathy, were missing. "My mother was somehow so far away from me. I could never reach her

¹⁰⁸ This was more common in West Germany, in the East more mothers worked outside the home.

emotionally. When it comes to emotions she just freezes, and then she disappears and is gone.” (Karoline)

Like Anja’s father, parents would often stick to strict daily routines, mainly around work and mealtimes. Some would get upset or even lose control when these habits were interrupted. Robert remembers getting his most severe beating one day after school, because he had not paid enough attention when walking up the stairs and a squeaking floorboard had woken his father up from his ‘sacred’ lunchtime nap. When Ina first got married, her husband would find her hiding behind the couch every evening when he returned home. It took months before she could tell him that ‘coming home from work time’ was the occasion when her father had routinely beaten her if anything had set him off - an untidy room, a toy carelessly lying around, a less than perfect mark at school. While not the norm among the group of people I interviewed, a handful of my participants said they were beaten by their parents or - as in Juliane’ case below - by their grandparents.

The roles were sometimes reversed, as between Anja and her dad, and the children said they were assuming some of the parenting role, mainly in terms of providing emotional care. This sense of responsibility was making it difficult to separate from their families and build independent lives.

Since the early 2000s, these parental behaviours and character traits are grouped and explained under the label ‘war childhoods’. A wealth of information has now become available on this topic in the academic realm¹⁰⁹ and mainstream literature: Entering ‘*Kriegskinder*’ (war children) on www.Amazon.de brings up around 180 book titles, including many autobiographies and family memoirs. The overarching finding is that – largely unnoticed until that time – the

¹⁰⁹ For example Ermann (2007), Grundmann, Hoffmeister and Knoth (2009); Hondrich (2011); Janus (2006); Radebold (2000, 2004, 2005); Seegers and Reulecke (2009).

experiences the *Kriegskinder* had during WWII often had a defining impact on their entire life.

As mentioned in my introduction, many Germans born between 1930 and 1945 were confronted with violence, loss, death and destruction at a very young age. In a survey conducted by the Allensbach Institute in 1952 among young men, 51% had lost family members; 41% had experienced air-raids; 36% had a father or brother who was in a prisoner of war camp; 21% had their houses destroyed by bombs; 21% had to flee or were deported after the war; and 19% had a family member who was disabled (Förster and Beck 2003). Not every child was seen as traumatised by the experience with a range of personal circumstances playing a role in how people were coping, first and foremost being the presence of close family members who could provide a sense of protection in difficult situations (Drost and Lamparter 2013; Möller and Lamparter 2013). Psychoanalyst Hartmut Radebold estimates that about a third of all Germans who were children or teenagers during WWII would be classified as traumatised according to present psychological standards. In the case of another third, he believes the war had a significant and lifelong impact on the person's biography, while about 40% are said to have survived the war more or less unharmed (Radebold 2012). According to my interviews, families who lived in (or were evacuated to) the countryside, with fewer bomb raids and better food supplies, tended to say about themselves that they were the 'lucky ones', who got through this difficult times with fewer losses than many others.

As mentioned briefly in Chapter 4, a number of studies have been conducted on the current prevalence of WWII related post-traumatic stress symptoms in the German war children generation.¹¹⁰ The results vary from study to study, ranging

¹¹⁰ Brähler et al. (2011); Eichhorn and Kuwert (2011); Glaesmer et al. (2010, 2011); Hauffa et al. (2011); Kuwert et al. (2007, 2009); Maercker et al. (2008); Teegen and Meister (2000); Wittekind et al. (2010).

from 3.4% (Maercker et al. 2008);¹¹¹ 7.2% (Glaesmer et al. 2010);¹¹² 10.8% (Kuwert et al. 2007);¹¹³ to 25% (Teegen and Meister 2000).¹¹⁴

While only a smaller proportion of German seniors actually display PTSD symptoms 60 years later, between 20-66% of participants (increasing with age) in the representative survey conducted by Heide Glaesmer and her colleagues (Glaesmer et al. 2010) recalled war related memories, often reported as the most difficult in the person's life. An interdisciplinary project focuses on survivors of the firebombing of Hamburg in July 1943, during which around 35,000 people perished (Lamparter 2013).¹¹⁵ While about 50% of all interviewees said the firebombing was the worst experience of their lives (Möller and Lamparter 2013), most described their current state of mental and physical health as stable. However, they showed slightly elevated scores for anxiety and depression, and 14% reported current PTSD symptoms (Lamparter, Buder, Valeska, et al. 2013). Around a quarter said that they still had nightmares; another quarter reported getting anxious when they smelt smoke, and about half when they heard the sound of an alarm (Drost and Lamparter 2013).

Behind the psychological profile of a hard working generation psychologists now suspect repressed trauma and loss, as well as a defence against feelings of guilt for the crimes committed during the war (Brähler, Decker, and Radebold 2004). 'Pathological normalcy' (*'Pathologische Normalität'*, Radebold 2000) and the

¹¹¹ In this representative study, 3.4% of Germans 60 years of age or older showed the full range of PTSD symptoms.

¹¹² 7.2% of German seniors captured in this large-scale population-based representative survey (which included people with and without traumatic war experiences) reported partial PTSD symptoms at the time of the survey.

¹¹³ This study is based on a smaller sample (93 participants) of seniors born between 1933-45, who had responded to a newspaper ad, and were already aware of the topic.

¹¹⁴ This study captured the prevalence of full (5%) and partial (25%) PTSD symptoms in former German refugees from Eastern Europe.

¹¹⁵ The scenes of destruction after the *Hamburger Feuersturm* are described in impressive and gruelling detail in W.G. Sebald's (2001) *Luftkrieg und Literatur (On the Natural History of Destruction)*.

creation of idyllic homes are now interpreted as coping mechanisms, aimed at keeping the demons of the past at bay. Set routines and well-behaved children were to provide emotional stability to a traumatised parent (or parents) (Bachofen 2012). The act of children taking on the parenting role is now called 'parentification' (Radebold 2012), and the emotional neediness of the parents is seen as the main cause for the *Kriegsenkel's* struggles to become independent (Bachofen 2012).

Underneath the emotional numbness that many of my participants observed in their parents, strong but unresolved emotions such as sadness, desperation, helplessness, grief and shame, as well as anger and aggression are suspected (Radebold 2008, 2012). Due to a lack of empathy and support that they themselves suffered in their childhood, many never developed the ability to relate to their children's needs and concerns, and they often could not provide emotional closeness and stability that they themselves had never experienced (Alberti 2010).

As far as I am aware, none of my participants read the academic literature on 'war childhoods', but they did pick up on the topic in the mainstream media and a few had read Sabine Bode's (2004) book on 'war children'. Like Anja, my interviewees subsequently looked at the emotions, attitudes and behaviours their parents displayed in this light. About a third of my participants explicitly said that they believed that one or both of their parents (and sometimes grandparents) had been traumatised by the war, and most others explained at least some of their family's character traits and behaviours to be the result of WWII.

'The elephant in the room'

During her conversations with her father about his horrific memories, things started to click in for Anja regarding her own psychological problems. It was difficult to pinpoint exactly where the link with her father was, because her own

symptoms differed from his. However, when she heard his stories, she felt a bottomless sense of pain behind his words, an abyss that opened up and swallowed him, which was similar to something she felt somewhere deep down in herself. It was inside her, but it did not feel as if it *belonged* to her. It was pain, panic and sadness beyond words and to a degree that she could not relate to anything that had happened in her own life. “I could only imagine feeling like this if my child died,” she said. “It is a level of embodied pain as a result of something happening to you that cuts into you so deeply, where you have to go through such a dark hole, that you cannot come out on the other side as the same person. You cannot come out whole.”

She admitted that she found it hard distinguish this from the pain she felt when she watched her mother die of bowel cancer. Yet, after years of therapy, there was the clear sense of having hit the core of her issues, of having found the missing link to explain her constant psychological struggles. Anja felt the same sense of ‘click’ that I also heard described by many other people. “Looking back now, I find the thought that only 18 months ago I did not know about this connection completely absurd. I could not see the wood for the trees. It really was the elephant in the room, so much so that I now find myself standing there and thinking ‘how could I not have seen this before? How could I have ignored that so completely?’ That I was missing this tiny yet all-important bit of information? That I only needed this key to be able to understand everything?”

The second time we talked on a beautiful Berlin autumn day, Anja was still frustrated. The same emotional pain that had been coming and going for the past 20 years, was still there and all but immobilised her. She still felt the leaden heaviness, her body exhausted, and she found it very hard to make decisions and realise her professional ambitions. She was also afraid she would pass her problems on to her son. Yet, when we caught up again almost a year later, she immediately struck me as different. She was feeling better, she confirmed, finally

things were starting to move. There had been so many psychological issues in her life, her fears and her depression, her mother's death, and also difficulties with her husband and her career. "It was all so overwhelming; I never knew where to start. There was always this one huge issue blocking me right at the base, and everything else came on top of that. Now that I have finally being able to tackle this, everything else has become manageable."

She was still seeing a therapist, but her mood swings had subsided and she was able to stop taking medication for the first time in 15 years. Anja was reluctant to put down all of her problems to her father's war trauma, yet it was obvious to her that something major had changed in her, that 'a knot was untied' (*'ein Knoten ist geplatzt'*), and that she was finally able to move forward with her life. "I am quite content at the moment, and this is the first time ever," she summed up her situation before we said goodbye.

I have told Anja's story in detail here to give the reader an insight into how a person of the German *Kriegsenkel* generation understands her life and emotional problems. Anja had access to the findings of the war children literature to explain her father's previously inexplicable behaviours, and through the *Kriegsenkel* books, she had become aware of concepts of transgenerational transmission that helped her make the link between her own problems and her father's past. Like for Kerstin from Chapter 5 and many others of her generation, this provided a new meaning for her emotional suffering and enabled her to 'get unstuck'.

Anja's story was also different from others I was told, not only in the sense that she was able to hear directly from her father about the shocking events he had lived through as a little boy, but even more because Anja had a very refined perception of how her own emotional struggles were connected to her father's – as a physical heaviness felt in her body that she expressed through the bomb shelter sculptures, and as an emotional link to the abyss of sadness in her that

resonated with something inside her father. No one else I spoke to was able to feel the connection between their own pain and their family's wartime experiences so clearly.

Occurrences of transgenerational transmission are by their very nature elusive and hard to grasp as they not only happened in the past but also outside a person's conscious perception. Further below I will trace and discuss the different approaches with which researchers, mainly from the 'psy-sciences' (Rose 1998), have tried to explain (or capture) these mysterious processes. Before doing that, I would first like to tell you a second *Kriegsenkel* life history – that of Juliane and her family's secret.

3. Juliane – 'men are pigs'

At the age of 46, Juliane was a single mother who lived with her 4-year-old daughter Mona in a small two-bedroom flat in one of the poorer neighbourhoods of East Berlin. She was twice divorced, unemployed and struggling to manage her life after a long history of depression, panic attacks and a series of abusive relationships.

Juliane was waiting for me in her apartment for our first meeting on a cold, grey Berlin winter day. She made coffee and arranged the pastries I brought on a plate. She seemed happy to see me, pleased that someone took an interest in her. Yet, in spite of her soft features, her dark curly hair and round face, Juliane was a not an easy person to interview. Before we even sat down in her cosy lounge room decorated with children's paintings, she unleashed a tirade of words, an incessant stream of frustration, anger and bitterness about almost everything in her life: her husbands, her unsuccessful job hunting, her friends, her neighbours, and her family - first and foremost her mother. I did not get the chance to ask many

questions. She crafted her story mostly by herself, not just that first time we met, but also the three other times that followed over the course of 2012 and 2013.

Juliane grew up in a small country town in Southern Germany surrounded mainly by women: her mother, her grandmother and two aunts. Her mother had not married her biological father, and Juliane had never met him or the grandparents on that side. Her maternal grandfather had died when she was little. Her family were not *'Alteingesessene'*, not *'locals'* in the region like most of their neighbours, who had long roots in the small community. They had come as refugees from the East after the war, from an area which now belongs to Poland.

With her mother working to support herself and her daughter, Juliane spent a lot of time growing up with her grandmother. She depicted both women as hard, cold and relentless, who raised the girl with frequent beatings and verbal degradation. She remembered a home devoid of warmth, touch, or praise. "Old school," Juliane said laconically. The last time she was beaten up she was already 19. Traces of National Socialist ideology clearly came through when the grandmother ranted against the *'Polacken'* (derogatory term for Polish people) or yelled "Hitler would have sorted you lot out," when she was angry with the girl. "Keep your trap shut and stop whinging, you don't know how lucky you are," was common sentence Juliane heard throughout her childhood.

National Socialist child rearing practices

What Juliane referred to as *'old school'*, points to the harsh style of raising children still commonly found in the older generation at the time. The coldness many parents, and in her case grandparents displayed was not only attributed to experiences of war trauma, but also to the influence of Prussian values of discipline, obedience and duty as well as the National Socialist ideology. First published in 1934, Johanna Haarer's child-rearing *'bible'* *Die Deutsche Mutter und ihr erstes Kind* (*The German mother and her first child*) promoted

National Socialist practices for treating babies and children, which was widely distributed and consulted during the Third Reich – and after (Chamberlain 2004). The book gave clear instructions to German mothers on how to raise the proponents of the future ‘master race’, tempered and hardened for the demands to be made on them in later years, in particular preparing them for war. To prevent attachment, children were separated from their mothers after birth and kept in isolation for the first 24 hours of their lives. Women were encouraged to avoid all ‘unnecessary’ touching, talking to or making eye contact with their babies. According to Haarer, a medical doctor, “The child should be fed, bathed and diapered, but beyond this left alone” (Chamberlain 2004:374). The enforcement of cleanliness, obedience and the drill of order and discipline were paramount; corporal punishment and the withdrawal of affection were encouraged to break the child’s will. Mothers were instructed not to comfort their children when they were crying. They were to remain ‘hard and relentless’ at all times, and not ‘sin’ due to an ‘excess of love or foolishness’ (Chamberlain 2004:374). Unbelievably, the book was reprinted with only minor changes after the war. It remained a standard item in most German households until the 1970s, and was last published in 1996! (Schreiber 2011) While child rearing practices started to become more respectful of the children after 1968, physical and psychological violence (including verbal abuse or degrading punishments) were still quite common at the time when the *Kriegsenkel* were growing up, and only declared to be a punishable offence by law in 2000 (Alberti 2010:122).

‘Männer sind Schweine’ - Men are pigs’

While Juliane mostly remembered her grandmother’s beatings, she also sometimes told the little girl stories from the war. Her grandmother talked about the bomb raids and how they had to share their food with the pigs, and her journey West with her three daughters: Juliane’s two aunts, 12, and 8 at the time and her mother, who was just 4. Her graphic descriptions of fear, threat, hunger

and death scared the little girl, but they were also precious moments when the grandmother gave her the attention she desperately craved.

When I asked Juliane whether she thought some of her family's war experiences were passed on to her, she nodded and gave me a number of examples: Her fear of planes, tanks and sirens that her grandmother had instilled with her vivid stories, her compulsive need to have a full fridge, and her fear of a another war or a catastrophe like the nuclear accident in Fukushima in the previous year.

However, the one aspect of her life that she felt most negatively impacted by the past was in her relations to men.

Juliane had been struggling with relationships all her life. In her teens she looked for love and affection from the Turkish boys in the neighbourhood, saying with a derogatory undertone that "they were the only ones she could score with." She often experienced those encounters as violent and abusive. Juliane described herself as a lonely and insecure teenager; she smoked, drank and took her grandmother's sleeping pills because they made her feel so 'blissfully high'. As she moved to Berlin to go to university later, loneliness and depression hit her harder, and anxiety and panic attacks were added to her list of difficulties.

At some point Juliane got married. Twice. Both men were foreigners she met when travelling overseas. She said she did not love either of them and agreed to the marriages more out of a sense of obligation than affection. She talked about the panic attack she had at the registry office waiting to sign the papers for her second wedding, because it felt so wrong, but she went through with it nevertheless. Both times she was unhappy but unable to stand up for herself. She had three abortions before she got pregnant with Mona.

Her second husband pressured her for sex after the birth of their daughter and was routinely verbally abusive when she did not comply. After one particularly distressing argument with him, Juliane took Mona and moved to a women's

shelter. A counsellor at the centre for victims of domestic violence listened to her story. At one point, out of the blue, she asked Juliane whether someone in her family - maybe her mother or grandmother - may have been raped at the end of WWII, and whether that trauma may have been passed on to her and could explain her problems with men.

Juliane had never considered this before and nothing along those lines was ever mentioned at home. "I always knew that there was something wrong with my family, but I could not put my finger on it. Sure there was the war, but that was so long ago, we talked about it at school, and it was all very terrible, but you kind of block that out when it comes to your own family," she explained during my first visit. Yet in that very moment, she immediately knew that the psychologist was right and the realisation shot through her body like an electric shock. She asked her mother and one aunt who was still alive, but both categorically denied that anything had happened to them or the grandmother.

Nevertheless, after this session with the counsellor, Juliane started to look back at her life and her family history with completely different eyes. Different bits of information stood out from the fabric of the past and she connected the dots in a new way. The fact that one aunt never got married, never wanted a relationship or children, or that the other aunt lost two children and was incapable of relating to the two she eventually had, and later developed cervical cancer. Lastly, her mother and grandmother's coldness and inability to feel emotions struck her. Her mother got pregnant with Juliane from a man she did not love, and openly displayed her physical aversion to the man she later married when Juliane was ten. Juliane picked up strong verbal messages like: '*Männer sind Schweine*' - 'Men are pigs;' 'men are disgusting;' 'sex is disgusting,' 'it is something you have to do, so just shut up, don't move, and let it happen.' That was also the motto she lived by in her own relationships: 'keep still, endure, keep your mouth shut, play dead,' she summarised her approach to sex and intimacy.

Suddenly her own and her family's attitudes, behaviours and life choices took on a new meaning as she linked them back to a possible experience of rape that may have happened 60 years earlier. She had no proof to support this new explanation of her own difficulties, but it made total sense to her - intuitively. Deep down, it simply felt right.

The grandmothers' secrets: Rape and sexual violence at the end of WWII

Juliane's story is not unusual. The topic of rape was mentioned in almost half of all the interviews I conducted. It haunted many family histories, mostly as a suspicion or a rumour - almost never as a known fact. Ludwig was the only one among my 54 participants who heard directly from his grandmother that she was raped when she fled from Silesia in 1945. He was already in his mid twenties at the time she told him about her ordeal under a flood of tears and with a lot of distressing details. She admitted that she developed a strong aversion against Russians and Czechs as a consequence, but said she also understood that it was the Germans who had started the aggression. 'No more war' was the lesson she imparted to her grandson.

It is estimated that around 1.9 million German girls and women were victims of sexual violence at the end of WWII, 1.4 million of them in the former German territories in the East and during forced migration, and at least 100,000 in Berlin alone (Radebold 2008). Most rapes occurred at the hand of soldiers of the Red Army. Rapes by U.S. and French soldiers are also documented, but were far less frequent (Sander and Johr 2008). Approximately 300,000 children were born as a result; the number of abortions is unknown, around 200,000 women are said to have committed suicide (Messerschmidt 2006). Many women kept their experience to themselves after the war; being a victim of sexual violence was felt to be particularly shameful, even more so than other forms of war trauma and talking about it was - and still is - off limits in most German families (Eichhorn

and Kuwert 2011). The fathers and husbands often did not want to know about what happened to their loved one when they returned home. Many may have been ashamed of not being able to protect their wives and daughters, but also because they may have committed similar crimes when rampaging through Russian villages with the *Wehrmacht* (Sander and Johr 2008).

The topic was taboo also in the public domain until 2003, when *A woman in Berlin* was published. The anonymous diary written in between April and June 1945 is a gruellingly detailed depiction of the serial rapes of German women by Soviet occupying forces in Berlin in spring 1945. The book first came out in the US in 1954 and was not published in German until 1959 (by a small Swiss publishing house), but was met with an outcry of protest. Critics were saying that Anonyma was 'besmirching the honour of German women' (Kanon 2005), and the author consequently decreed that her book should not be published again until after her death. In 2003, her re-printed diary brought the topic into the centre of public attention. Many of my participants had read the book or had watched the movie that came out in 2008 under the same name (Färberböck et al. 2008).

A recent psychological study conducted by Eichhorn and Kuwert (2011) concluded that every second woman who was a victim of sexual violence in WWII still showed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder 65 years later, impacting in particular on relationships with family (26%), and friends (15%), but most of all in the realm of intimacy and sex (81%). Among the 27 women who volunteered for the study, three said that they were raped more than 10 times, two more than 20 times, five more than 30 times, and one woman counted an inconceivable 71 times, a horrific fact that the authors leave inexplicably uncommented (Eichhorn and Kuwert 2011:75).

As was the case for the topic of the 'war children', information about sexual violence at the end of WWII is now more widely available in the public domain and this knowledge was woven into the *Kriegsenkel* life histories. It was a frequent consideration in our interviews that someone in the family may have been a victim or witness of rape. Twelve of my participants (9 women, 3 men) were certain that they could feel traces of sexual violence running through the family - showing in their parents' and grandparents' as well as in their own lives. The most common thread was - as in Juliane's family - the prevalence of extremely negative and hostile attitudes towards men. Men were said to be 'worthless', 'useless' and 'incapable of controlling themselves', and daughters were often instructed 'to be very careful' when dating. Karoline said her grandmother only referred to men as '*Kerle*' ('thugs') - including when talking about her own husband and her son-in-law. Karoline herself also had problems with relationships and, in 2012, after a recent separation she suddenly found herself 'almost hating all men' Based on the experiences of her own life, the intensity of these emotions did not seem appropriate to her, but she did not have more than a vague suspicion to rely on. "I can't move forward," she said, "it is a feeling of heaviness and fog, and there is no one I could ask." Sabine's mother always warned her three daughters not to be too trusting with men. Unlike others though, Sabine did not take that advice on board. She remembered being a rebellious teenager who quite enjoyed hanging out with the boys, and that she "really did not understand what mum was going on about".

Martin and Robert both told me that their grandmothers committed suicide by hanging themselves "like the women who were raped by the Russians did" (Martin). While neither of them knew more about their grandmother fate, both men said they had past relationships with women who were rape victims.

Sitting at her kitchen table Sanna traced the topic through her biography: As part of her training to become a psychologist she did several internships, the first one

with an institution that provided psychiatric support for Bosnian women, many of whom had been victims of rape during the civil war in Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Confronted with the victims' stoic silence, their profound sense of shame and deep pain, Sanna started to feel an intuitive connection with her own grandmother, who, as mentioned in Chapter 3, was admitted to a psychiatric hospital in 1946 after Russian soldiers had occupied the family villa after the war. Without it being a conscious decision, Sanna opted to do her next internship in a men's prison, working with a group of convicted rapists. It was an extreme time in her life, she reflected, with intense feelings of hatred up to the point where she started to see a rapist in every man she saw in the street. While she was somewhat aware of her family history at the time, it was only in 2012, that she felt she could clearly see how all these dots - her professional decisions and attitudes towards men connected and linked back to events that she suspected happened in her grandmother's house after the war. Sanna's sister Bettina did not feel the same kind of impact of the past on her own life. However, she admitted that until she was in her mid 20s, she experienced sexual encounters often with a 'certain degree of violence'.

'What the Russians did to us'

In July 2012 Juliane sent me an excited email, saying that she had managed to catch her aunt off guard when she accidentally dropped the words 'what the Russians did to us' into a conversation. That time Juliane was not willing to let it go. She insisted and her aunt told her most of the story: Russian soldiers had come into their village in Eastern Prussia in 1945, storming into a house where women and children were hiding. They grabbed Juliane's 4-year old mother and took her with them, knowing that the grandmother would follow to protect her daughter. Juliane's aunt did not want to give the exact details, but it was clear to Juliane that the soldiers raped her grandmother and that her mother, as a little girl, had been forced to watch.

The next time we met, I asked what her aunt's disclosure meant to her. "I now know why I am so twisted (*'krumm und schief'*)," she responded without hesitation. "I have problems with sex and relationships because my family's trauma was passed on to me. How could I possibly be any different?" She said the knowledge about the past had helped her to make peace with herself and to accept the 'defects' (*'Macken'*) that she carried inside.

Relationships with men were off the table at that point. She was still battling with Mona's father, who did not want to accept the separation, and she shared many stories of his aggressive behaviour. She was certain that she did not want another man to ever touch her again and that she was now at peace with that decision. Juliane considered that her mother was also a victim; incapable of giving love and affection because of her own experience of violence, but their relationship remained strained. Eventually, Juliane cut all ties after one final attempt to get her mother to understand how abusive and neglectful she had been. She could not get through. Mona was in the room and overheard the heated telephone conversation, where her mum cut her off from her grandmother. The little girl was utterly distressed.

Like Anja, Juliane was worried that she could be passing some of her own damage on to her daughter. She admitted that she was struggling to cope with being a single mother and that she herself still had yet has to learn how to be affectionate. She had been seeing a counsellor to help with her parenting skills for some time, hoping to get rid of what she called her 'negative programming'. Yet, under stress messages that she heard when growing up resurfaced and hit Mona. "Stop whinging, you don't know how lucky you are," Juliane heard herself say in times like that.

4. Models of transgenerational transmission - A discussion

Both Anja and Juliane felt a strong connection between their own experiences and their family's WWII past: in Anja's case the heaviness, fear and sadness related to her father's war memories that she also felt inside herself. For Juliane it was a secret history of sexual violence that she believed left her incapable of having fulfilling relations with men. While the two women, and many of my other participants, had an intuitive sense that there was a link between their own pain and events from WWII, they relied on psychological models of transgenerational transmission to frame this perception.

In the following section, I will discuss a number of such models that underlied my participants' life histories. They play a role in my analysis not as diagnostic tools (as they would for a psychiatrist or psychologist), but as narrative backbones that structure *Kriegsenkel* life histories and defined how each person made sense of their familial legacy. These discourses – mainstreamed and simplified - provide the concepts and the vocabulary with which *Kriegsenkel* conceptualise and express their emotional suffering.

I will discuss how each one contributes to explaining the subjective experiences of people growing up in families affected by war; point to their respective strengths and limitations, and later on discuss more broadly the implications they have for a person's understanding of their emotional predicament, their relationship with their family, and their hope for the future. I will suggest changes and additions that, I believe, not only capture their experiences better, but that may also encourage more acceptance and healing between the generations.

Psychoanalytical models of transmission

Probably the most influential model of transgenerational transmission originated in the psychoanalytical tradition. Psychoanalytical theory claims that traumatic

memories that could not be experienced and worked through by the eyewitness generation are unconsciously passed on to the next (Kellermann 2001b). In relation to offspring of Holocaust survivors, Abraham, Torok and Rand (1994) introduced the metaphor of the 'crypt', a psychic space created to wall in unbearable experiences, memories and secrets in a person suffering from trauma. Offspring can inherit these psychic secrets and can manifest symptoms that stem from their forebears' trauma.

Psychiatrist Vamik Volkan (Volkan, Ast, and Greer 2002; Volkan 1996) believes that due to the fluidity of 'psychic borders' between parents and children during their formative years, parents' unresolved emotions such as anxiety and depression, as well as their unconscious perceptions, images and expectations of the external world, are passed from one generation to another.

Transgenerational transmission is when an older person unconsciously externalises his traumatized self onto a developing child's. A child becomes a reservoir for the unwanted, troublesome parts of an older generation....it becomes the child's task to mourn, to reverse the humiliation and feeling of helplessness pertaining to the trauma of his forbears (Volkan 1997).

It is said that the chain of transgenerational transmission can only be broken once the person to whom trauma has been passed on gains an understanding of these influences on their life and is able to work through and to remove them from their psyche. (Volkan et al. 2002).

According to professor for comparative literature Gabriele Schwab (2010) psychoanalysis is the only theory able to trace the unconscious effects of experiences through the generations.

In the case of the *Kriegsenkel* it allows them to explain their issues in relation to WWII even in case where they have no active knowledge of the family history. The past trauma can be inferred through current symptoms, life choices and dreams. Anja was able to interpret the creation of her bomb shelters as a physical manifestation of the heavy burden she had unconsciously inherited from her father, while Sanna could understand her attraction to the theme of rape that played out in her professional choices as consequences of her grandmother's trauma. Psychoanalytic theory also offers one possible explanation to account for the 'Eureka moment' of sudden realisation that so many *Kriegsenkel* described when hearing about the topic for the first time. It could be viewed as bringing into consciousness an unconscious aspect of the past that was passed on from the war generation and had been buried in the psyche of the offspring as a locked away secret.¹¹⁶

On the other side this model is also highly abstract, mechanical and deterministic. Most of my participants imagined a distinct parcel of unresolved war memories, which was 'deposited' into their psyche as they were growing up. The overall process was understood to be unavoidable and somewhat disempowering as summarised by Juliane: "I have problems with sex and relationships because my

¹¹⁶Another possible explanation is provided by the field of memory studies in the concept of 'postmemory' (Hirsch 1996, 2001, 2008; Hirsch and Spitzer 2006). It will be introduced here only in passing as it is not widely known and my participants did not have access to it. Hirsch (2008:106–7, italics in the original) explains: "Postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right." Hirsch (2008) adds that parents can also pass on their bodily and affective connection to a traumatic event to their descendants. This may be able to account for Juliane's strong physical reaction to hearing the psychologist ask her about a possible rape in the family. It seemed like some dormant memory in her body was re-activated, creating a level of embodied certainty that the counsellor was right in her suspicions. Similarly for Anja, she felt a deep affective connection between her own sadness and her father's, and in spite of the fact that the abyss was inside of her; it did not seem to 'belong' to her.

family's trauma was passed on to me, how could I possibly have been any different?"

It also seems that traumatic experiences are not neatly handed down from generation to generation as this model implies. For Juliane and many others, the grandparents played an important role in their lives and it seems that some aspects of the transmitted 'parcel' of unresolved issues were directly passed on from grandparents to grandchildren.

Sociocultural and socialisation models of transmission

While the psychoanalytic approach focuses more on unconscious processes of transmission, sociocultural and socialisation models of transmission emphasise the conscious influence parents have on their children (Kellermann 2001). Experiences of trauma (i.e. the Holocaust) were found to have impacted negatively on survivors' child rearing and parenting skills, creating problems, for example, with attachment and detachment as well as exaggerated worries and anxieties. Children learn by observing and imitating their parents and may take on their behaviours, attitudes and emotional responses to certain situations (Kellermann 2001b). Working with Vietnam veterans, Ancharoff, Munroe, and Fisher (1998:262) speak of a 'traumatised world view', claiming that in this case the fathers' trauma suffered in the Vietnam war permanently shaped their beliefs about themselves and the world, which they in turn imparted to their children.¹¹⁷ Much of how Juliane told her story seemed to follow this logic. She picked up the 'traumatised worldview' from the women around her and the way they spoke about or behaved around men, and she internalised their attitudes and 'life lessons' around sex, love and relationships.

¹¹⁷ See also Dickson-Gómez (2002) for similar findings regarding transgenerational transmission of a traumatised world-view among families of campesinos in the aftermath of the civil war in El Salvador between 1980 and 1992.

This is a common sense approach that acknowledges the impact parents have on their children, and the idea that ‘damaged parents damage their children’ informed many of the life histories I heard. On the other hand it also became clear in my interviews that when it comes to transgenerational transmission of experiences, there does not seem to be a clear demarcation between traumatic and other aspects of transmission, with only the traumatic and unresolved ones impacting on the offspring. *Kriegsenkel* who said about their families that they had adapted quite well after the war also remembered that attitudes and ‘world views’ were passed on to them, and not all of them were perceived as negative and limiting. Martina, whose story was told on Chapter 3, learned from her grandparents that ‘material things don’t matter, only life matters’ and understood this as a valuable reminder to focus on the essential aspects of her life.

Psychometric assessments

Another approach to capturing occurrences of transgenerational transmission (rather than being a model of transmission in its own right) involves psychometric assessments. Symptoms of PTSD in offspring of trauma survivors are measured with questionnaires and are compared with the averages of the overall population. For example, as part of the interdisciplinary project on the transgenerational impact of the firestorm of Hamburg, the children of the eyewitness generation were asked to report on their current emotional state and were found to score slightly higher than their peers on measures of depression, anxiety and somatisation (von Issendorff 2013).

In spite of the difficulties to establish a clear proof of transgenerational transmission of trauma (as outlined in Chapter 4) I believe these assessments are useful in presenting a psychological profile of a group of people and raise public awareness of their issues. The results of the PTSD studies of German seniors cited above for example were picked up and distributed by the media. On the

other hand these studies say little about the subjective experiences of individuals growing up in families affected by war and violence. Approaches to measurement of PTSD have been criticised by anthropologists for being based on short term experiments and brief formal interviews rather than long term observation of populations (Argenti and Schramm 2010) and are suspected to not be sufficiently sensitive to reflect subtle effects of trauma in the offspring trauma. (Steinberg 1995 cited in Solomon 1998).¹¹⁸

Biological models of transmission

Researchers, in particular Rachel Yehuda, explore how vulnerability to post-traumatic stress can also be passed down biologically from one generation to the next (Yehuda 2006; Yehuda et al. 1998; Yehuda and Bierer 2007). Levels of cortisol, a hormone linked to the management of stress, were found to be lower than average in traumatised mothers and also their children. As a result, a child has a significantly higher likelihood of developing PTSD if confronted with a stressful event.

Other studies in the field of epigenetics show that times of starvation, persecution and mass violence can leave molecular scars on a person's DNA, which become part of their genetic scaffolding, and are passed on to their offspring (Hurley 2013). Many of these findings were recently mentioned in the German mainstream media, and, as was the case for the PTSD studies mentioned above, they can play role in validating and objectifying subjective experiences of suffering: "Of course transmission of trauma is real," several of my participants said, "it even changes your genes!"

¹¹⁸ I experienced some of these limitations first hand, when I volunteered for a psychometric study on transmitted WWII trauma with my mother in 2012, in which we each filled out separate questionnaires about our current emotional state, past traumatic events, etc. I am convinced the results showed up as not significant, but the picture may have been quite different had I participated with my father. As only one parent was invited to participate much of my subjective experience of transmitted war experiences was excluded by design.

The approaches outlined above, never explicitly referenced nor found this neatly demarcated in life histories, belonged to the repertoire into which my participants tapped to explain how their parents' and grandparents' war experiences were passed down to them. Relayed directly in counselling sessions (as in Juliane's case) and filtered into mainstream society by the 'therapeutic culture' (Illouz 2008), they provided the basic narrative structure and logic into which recent knowledge of the impact of war childhoods, and information on topics such as sexual violence during the WWII, were integrated.

As detailed in the last chapter, having the analytical tools to explain one's previously inexplicable emotional problems helped many of my participants find meaning in their predicament and feel more at peace with themselves and, at least in some cases, get better. Therapeutic interventions - mainstream and alternative - were chosen to address the issues identified in this process of exploration.

On the other hand, I also argue that these models do 'pathologise', but not only, as Kidron (2012) critiques, the descendants' emotional states (labelling them as sufferers of transmitted PTSD), but the relationship between the generations more broadly. While the task of these approaches is to diagnose mental illness, I believe that as a consequence they lead to imaginations of transgenerational transmission as a compartmentalised process, cordoning off the undesirable, unwanted and ultimately 'sick' aspects from the overall transfer that happens as an integral part of raising children.

Closely following the reasoning of psychological and psychoanalytical narratives, many of my participants believed that unresolved emotional problems are invariably and mechanically passed on to the next generation, and that there would not - and should not have been - such a transmission, had their family been capable of adequately addressing their emotional problems. Therapeutic interventions were chosen and described almost like surgical procedures to

‘extract’ the unwanted familial inheritance, aimed at leaving only the ‘healthy’ parts behind. Juliane used the even more technical terms of getting rid of ‘negative programming’, which imagines the psyche as a computer system from which unwanted content can be successfully deleted. Anja and Juliane both felt it was their duty to target the remnants of a traumatic past in their psyche and break the chain of transmission as the only possible avenue to a better life and as a moral duty to their children.

From my observations in Germany, I would on the other hand contend that the transmission of traumatic experiences stemming from the war should not be considered a separate and distinct entity, but an integral part of the overall transfer of ‘cultural and psychosocial resources’ (Zinnecker 2008:142) that invariably happens between the generations. Memories, behaviours and ‘life lessons’ from the past impacted the younger generation even in cases where the parents and grandparents were not believed to have been traumatised by the war.

I would also question that the transmission of war experiences would have been preventable with the appropriate access to therapy as many of my participants seemed to believe. Anja’s and Juliane’s stories graphically showed how deeply the war impacted on people who lived through it. Furedi (2004:152) claims that “adults who have experienced the trials of war, hunger and death will invariably inflict their insecurities on their family”, which seems to be a more realistic view.

Is there another model?

With these specific and the more general considerations in relation to psychological, psychoanalytical and biological narratives of transmission in mind, I would like to turn to a different approach offered by the currently much-discussed field of affect theory, more specifically Teresa Brennan’s (2004) book *The Transmission of Affect*. I will introduce some of her basic claims and apply them to the *Kriegsenkel* case study.

Most theories from Western psychology and psychoanalysis, according to Brennan (2004), assume that an individual is energetically and emotionally bounded and self-contained. Affect theory on the other hand understands human beings as open systems, constantly interacting with and impacted by other people and the environment around them. “By the transmission of affect, I mean simply that the emotions or affects¹¹⁹ of one person, and the enhancing or depressing energies these affects entail, can enter into another” (Brennan 2004:3). Received affects can either have an enriching (for example affection and warmth) or a depleting impact on a person “when one carries the affective burden of another, either by straightforward transfer or because the other’s anger becomes our depression” (Brennan 2004:6). The affects that the receiver internalises are not entirely the same as the original ones as each side attaches their own thoughts, associations and context to the experience. Brennan (2004) claims that while the transmission of affect is social in origin, its effects can be measured through subtle changes in a person’s physiology, for example on the level of hormones.

As a narrative outside the sphere of the ‘psy-sciences’ (Rose 1998) and thus unencumbered by the task of diagnosing mental illness and devising therapeutic interventions, this approach has some assets to contribute to explaining the lived experiences of transgenerational transmission described by the *Kriegsenkel*. I believe it could furthermore alleviate some of the shortcomings and negative impacts of the models my participants applied.

Firstly, it offers an extremely simple explanation for processes of transmission, in particular when compared to psychoanalytical imaginaries: things just pass

¹¹⁹Brennan (2004:6) states that she sees “no reason to challenge the idea that emotions are basically synonymous with affect” and I follow in her line here, in particular because I do not believe a clear demarcation between the emotions and affect is essential for the point I am trying to make in terms of models of transmission. For a discussion of the distinction between affect and emotions see Massumi (1995); for a critique see Leys (2011).

between people who are in close physical proximity to each other. Many of my participants sensed their parents' and grandparents' emotions even if these were not verbalised, they could feel them 'hanging in the space of the family home' and felt them impacting on their mood and happiness. Living with her father, Anja would have simply picked up on his sadness and fears and through this prolonged exposure, some of these emotions entered her system. While the way she internalised them made her 'symptoms' different from his, they still resonated.

Secondly, according to this model, transgenerational transmission is considered the norm, not the exception. Rather than pathologizing the relationship between parents and children, it would be understood as natural and unavoidable that all affects (enhancing and depleting) flow between family members without the need or possibility of compartmentalising and separating traumatised and 'normal' content.

Thinking this approach further than Brennan (2004) explicitly does would put the individual relationship between family members into the focus. Whether it is a grandparent, a father, or any other close person, what matters is the physical and emotional closeness in order for a transmission to occur, rather than an orderly handing down from generation to generation as in the conventional approaches. In Juliane's case for example, affects around men and relationships would have passed between her mother and her and between her grandmother and her at the same time. Brennan's (2004) model could also account for the different responses among siblings who may have different degrees of emotional closeness and distance to their parents (and grandparents).

Brennan's (2004) theory could furthermore address the criticism of unidirectionality that was brought forward against the traditional psychological and psychoanalytical models of transmission (Brähler et al. 2011; Völter 2008; Zinnecker 2008), by positing that affects flow both ways, from parents to

children and vice versa. However, she still contends that this relationship is not entirely equal and that infants are ‘especially open to the imprint of others’ (Brennan 2004:38). This still makes the children more vulnerable to receiving and internalising their parents’ emotions than the other way round, which matches my participants’ perceptions.

While Brennan’s ideas could, in my view, suggest meaningful changes or additions to the narratives commonly used to conceptualise transgenerational transmission, they would change my participants’ attitudes only to an extent. Under this model they would still perceive themselves as significantly impacted by their parents’ emotions resulting from traumatic war experiences, and they would still have benefitted from a happier and emotionally more balanced family environment as they were growing up. They would continue to be disappointed that their parents were not able to provide them with the necessary positive affect (warmth, care, nurturing or protecting) that they had wished for to be able to become healthy, happy and well-adjusted adults.

However, acknowledging that ‘things just pass between people’ could take away at least some of the judgement vis-à-vis their parents and the implicit expectation that transmission would have realistically been preventable with the appropriate access to therapy. It could also take away some of the heavy task they put on themselves to ‘break the chain’ of transmissions. In place of the mechanistic view that trauma gets handed down indefinitely from generation to generation and needs to be ‘extracted’ to achieve healing, this model would allow for a view that with the passage of time and with each subsequent generation, influences of traumatic memories that go back to the war would naturally be mixed with and diluted by other emotions related to more recent (positive and negative) biographical experiences.

5. Conclusion

This chapter told Juliane's and Anja's stories in detail, showing how they each perceived and explained the effects of their families' war trauma on their life and mental health. It also discussed the strengths and weaknesses of some of the common approaches to transmission, exploring how they enable the construction of meaning around suffering and relay hope for the future while also fostering judgement, compartmentalisation and a pathologization of the relationship between the generations. I suggested alternative approaches from the field of affect theory as a possible remedy for some of these shortcomings.

At the end of my exploration, I believe it still remains that transgenerational transmission of experiences is a mysterious and multi-faceted process, which may ultimately be impossible to adequately capture with just one comprehensive model. Each of the approaches outlined above has their merits to help explain the phenomenon, and they are also not mutually exclusive.

The *Kriegsenkel* I met during my fieldwork were in pain to 'prove' that their intuitive perception that something was passed on to them was 'real' and 'pathological'. Looking from the standpoint of affect theory however, the issue is turned on its head and the question is 'Why would there not be a transmission of experiences?' It might be naïve, but maybe framing and normalising it in this way could not only provide validation and legitimisation for the *Kriegsenkel*'s emotional distress, but could also encourage more understanding and acceptance between the generations.

Chapter 7 Accounts of Transmission (II) - The Losses and the Shame of War

I. Introduction

Up to this point in my thesis I have told and analysed the life histories of German *Kriegsenkel* following their understanding of how WWII was impacting on their lives today. To many of my participants, transgenerational effects of the war meant the handing down of an emotional burden, an unwanted 'parcel' their parents and grandparents had given them, which was now their duty to resolve. Kerstin in Chapter 5 and Juliane and Anja in Chapter 6 were typical examples of this viewpoint, which closely followed the arguments of common psychological discourses.

However, something that puzzled me in my conversations with *Kriegsenkel* was the fact that, as we explored their perceptions in more detail, many of the examples that were brought forward focussed not only on what was transmitted by parents and grandparents, but just as often on a sense of lack or gap. Much of what was causing people pain were things that were *not* passed on by their family or what was more broadly felt to be missing as a result of WWII.

There were many grievances about the silences in the family communication (as explored in Chapter 3), leaving gaps in knowledge about the past, an atmosphere of taboos and secrets that seemed to swallow up life force like black holes. There were the grandfathers who had gone 'missing' at the Eastern Front or who were excluded from family narratives because of their suspected involvement in war crimes. There were feelings of homelessness and lack of attachment stemming from a family history of forced displacement, and there were the many

complaints about the ‘cold mothers’ and their inability to provide nurturance due to an emotional emptiness left by war trauma.

I was fascinated by the sense of power these gaps exuded in my participants’ stories and the affects and imaginations they bound. I started to consider the important role these different forms of absence play in the construction of *Kriegsenkel* suffering and the transgenerational transmission of war experiences more broadly, and I came to the conclusion that they warrant special attention and a deeper exploration in their own right. The psychological and psychoanalytical approaches discussed in Chapter 6 do not separately conceptualise and address gaps and absences in their models of transgenerational transmission of trauma, although they do mention some of the negative impact of secrets and silences and impaired parenting due to trauma.¹²⁰

Complementing rather than contradicting the previous chapter, Chapter 7 will thus explore *Kriegsenkel* life histories from the perspective of absence(s), providing additional insights into the lived experiences of descendants from families affected by war. I will show that what was often narrated as an *absence of transmission* needs in fact to be conceptualised as the *transmission of absence* - a gap, but not a void, because what is missing still has strong affects and imaginations attached.

To follow this thread, I turn to the field of ‘anthropology of absence’. In the introduction to their edited volume *An Anthropology of Absence: Materializations of Transcendence and Loss*, Mikkel Bille and his colleagues (Bille, Hastrup, and Sørensen 2010:4) state that “absences are cultural, physical and social phenomena that powerfully influence people’s conceptualizations of themselves and the world they engage with.” My chapter will provide a case

¹²⁰ For example for example Abraham and Torok 1994, Danieli (1998b); Kellermann (2001b); Lichtmann (1984).

study contributing to this literature by tracing the role of absence in three *Kriegsenkel* life histories. I will build on and expand the definitions provided by Bille et al. (2010), in three aspects.

Firstly, I will show how absences are socially constructed in a particular historical and political environment and how the relationship with what is considered absent may change over time.

Secondly, I will demonstrate what Meyer notes only theoretically, that absences come into existence through relations, which means seeing them “as something performed, textured and materialised through relations and processes” (Meyer 2012:107). All three of my participants wrestle intensely in their own way with what is absent in their lives as a result of WWII, and they set themselves in relationship to the ‘gap’. In this process, I will show how an absence is not a fixed entity, but can be transformed, sometimes morphing from something material into something immaterial or from something immaterial to something that has ‘serious immediacy and presence’ (Sørensen 2010:118) that comes quite close to being material.

Thirdly, many authors stress the agency of absences by saying that they “have or take power, and thereby have important bearing on people’s social, emotional and material lives,” (Bille et al. 2010:4) or that they can “become full participants in the social characterised by their own particular politics and, at times, their own particular emotional and semiotic charge” (Fowles 2010:27). I will also show how on the other hand that people manage to exert agency over what is absent by conceptualising and reconstructing it - and their relationship to it - until both aspects match their needs and desires.

To follow these threads I will introduce Charlotte, Rainer and Paula and their very different ways of experiencing and dealing with what was absent in their lives due to WWII. At the same time I will also present two other topics that

are very pertinent to *Kriegsenkel* narratives: the transgenerational impact of forced displacement and the long-term influence of Nazi perpetratorship.

The first part of the chapter follows the story of Charlotte, who explored the phenomenon of absence in her complicated relationship to ideas around home and belonging. I will trace the dynamic nature of the concept of *Heimat* (homeland) as it travels through time, stretching from the ‘phantom pains’ (Bille et al. 2010:3) and nostalgia for the lost home of the first generation, over a lack of attachment to a place and dismissals of ‘*Heimat* as a dirty word’ in the parent generation, to the search for a reconnection with the ancestral home in the *Kriegsenkel*. I will show how, once Charlotte became aware of what was missing in her life, her desire to close the gap arose and she made great effort to fill the void in her sense of self. In the process, the concept of home was transformed into a presence, while at the same time morphing from a physical place into an immaterial ‘home inside’.

In the second part of the chapter, what is absent due to the war is a family member, a situation made even more complex by the fact that in both stories the absent person was a high-level Nazi perpetrator and war criminal.

There was Rainer, the grandson of Rudolf Höß, the commander of Auschwitz, who was haunted by his grandfather’s crimes and an intense fear that he may have inherited his infamous forebear’s ‘evil genes’. Secondly, there was Paula, the granddaughter of a very high-ranking SS official, who was ashamed of her resemblance to her ‘SS grandpa’, but often found him appearing in her dreams and visions.

Rainer’s and Paula’s lives were significantly defined by the relationship and intense interaction with their absent grandfathers, in both cases constituting a powerful ‘entity-like presence’ (Fowles 2010:25) fleshed out by historical research, family photos and imagination.

Rainer's main desire was to put as much distance between himself and his family and to prove that he was 'not an animal like Rudolf,' and break the chain of transmission of Nazi perpetratorship. Paula on the other hand was starting to perceive the missing connection with her 'SS grandpa' as a gap in her life, which she was cautiously trying to fill without relinquishing her moral stance.

I will trace the role of absence through these three stories, drawing out their characteristics from each one and triangulating them at the end to support my broader theoretical claim with respect to their role in subjective experiences of transgenerational transmission.

I will furthermore show that approaches to 'healing the past' differ depending on whether my participants perceived a transmitted emotional burden as the main cause of their suffering or if the source was the gaps and absences in the transmission between the generation as a result of WWII.

Before I introduce you to Charlotte and her struggles to find a place to call '*Heimat*', a quick note. While there is always a process of selection, synthetisation and interpretation involved when telling and analysing people's life histories, this chapter goes further than previous ones in superimposing my own analysis on what my participants shared with me. While they described their difficulties and emotional explorations, their search for belonging and their issues with being the grandchildren of Nazi criminals, the conceptual lens of 'absences' is entirely mine.

2. Charlotte: "It's like there is nothing you can stand on" - The losses of war

For as long as I can remember, I have been carrying this sense of homelessness inside me, this yearning to arrive. I have travelled half the

world to find this home, this foundation from which the feeling springs:
this is where I am from. (Hilbk 2013a)

Charlotte was sitting two rows in front of me at the *Kriegsenkel* conference in Göttingen in March 2012, and when she turned around and smiled at me, I recognised her immediately. We had been talking on the phone a few weeks earlier and her round face and warm smile matched her lively voice. Born in 1966, Charlotte was buoyant and inquisitive and had a zest for life that made you want to escape on a Pippi Longstocking adventure with her. She had married young, had completed her university education while also raising three children, and now worked as a research assistant and lecturer. We spent the two days and evenings together in the rainy city, attending workshops and talking about our lives, our families, Germany and the war, and we stayed in close contact thereafter.

“People had to flee”

Charlotte’s parents were both born in 1940 and both sides of the family lived as ethnic Germans in Eastern Europe long before Hitler’s armies invaded and occupied most of the countries in the East. Her mother’s family was originally from Estonia. They were a well-off family that spoke German at home, French when entertaining guests and Estonian with the domestic helpers. Her grandparents were not married; Charlotte’s grandfather already had another family he did not want to abandon. In 1939, during the large-scale resettlements following the Hitler-Stalin-Pact,¹²¹ Charlotte’s grandmother was told to pack her belongings, leave her house, friends and life behind, and move West to *Posen* (now Poznan/Poland), where she gave birth to Charlotte’s mother in 1940.

¹²¹ The ‘Hitler-Stalin Pact’ was a German-Soviet Treaty on non-aggression, signed in August 1939, which divided Eastern Europe into German and Soviet spheres of influence. See <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/230972/German-Soviet-Nonaggression-Pact> [Accessed 20 August 2015].

When the Soviet army moved through the region in 1945, pushing Hitler's soldiers back westward; she again had to leave the home she had only just established. Again she packed up and made the journey West, this time with her young daughter. They settled in South Germany, and Charlotte's grandmother rebuilt her life from scratch.

On her father's side, Charlotte's ancestors originated from *Böhmen* (now Cechy in Czechia). Her grandfather was the director of the local electricity company and the family belonged to the local upper class, a privileged status that was further cemented with the German annexation of Bohemia in 1938. In 1945, Charlotte's grandfather was arrested and sent to a Russian POW camp, her grandmother was forced to leave, making the trip West with her two young sons on foot, their belongings reduced to what fitted into a small handcart. They shared the fate of between 12 to 15 million (Naimark 2010) other ethnic Germans, who - after being privileged and often profiting heavily during the years of the Nazi occupation - were no longer welcome in the countries where many had lived for generations. There were long treks of people walking through the snow in the cold winter of 1944/45 from former German territories or countries occupied by Germany during WWII, squeezed into overcrowded trains or attempting to cross the icy Eastern Sea by boat. In many cases Soviet troops were already in earshot when people grabbed their belongings and fled in panic, as Hitler had demanded by threat of death that they 'hold the fort' until the last minute, and the chaotic circumstances of the flight contributed to the trauma of losing the place that people had known as home. Between 470,000 (Radebold 2008) and 2 million (Naimark 2010) people never arrived in Germany, the majority of them women and children. The displacement was often accompanied by traumatising events such as air raids, combat exposure, looting, mass rape and other life-threatening incidents (Kuwert et al. 2009).

During the journey, Charlotte's paternal grandmother fell into despair and considered suicide, but the hope of seeing her husband again kept her alive. Their reunion in 1949 was short-lived however. The grandfather died shortly after his release from a Russian POW camp, his health eroded by the harsh living conditions and exposure to radioactive material. The family first settled in East Germany and then, in 1958, packed up one more time and moved to a town in the Southwest, where Charlotte's parents later met.

Like millions of others, Charlotte's grandmothers both started fresh after the war, they worked hard and focused on their families and the future and spent little time talking about the past. When Charlotte was growing up, she picked up that "everything used to be better in the past," and that "people had to flee," but she could not put those comments into any meaningful context. As she got older she slowly found out a bit about her family history, yet the pictures with which to imagine the past remained few, and they were patchy and disjointed. By choosing to remain silent, Charlotte said, her grandmothers had cut her off from the multitude of stories from another life, from established traditions and customs, and from the vivid descriptions of landscapes, scents and colours related to a place they called '*Heimat*' - homeland. Without hope of ever being able to go back, Charlotte said for her grandmothers the concept of *Heimat* had turned into a fairy tale that had lost all connection with everyday life. It had become an absence.

Philosopher Patrick Furey (1995:1) explains that on a simple level "something is absent because it is not present," before he goes on to say that a "significant detail is that what is absent is figured as something potentially present." Absence and presence are thus closely related, and it is the potentiality of something being present that makes its absent state noticeable and painful. Charlotte's grandmothers did not openly complain about their loss, but quietly sighed references to a 'past in a better place' implied that they, like many others,

experienced what Bille et al. (2010:3) call 'phantom pains'. While commonly used in relation to a missing limb that is still causing pain, in this context phantom pains are defined as "sensing the presence of people, places and things that have been obliterated, lost, missing or missed, or that have not yet materialized." (Ibid) Particularly the grandparent generation were still holding vivid memories of the places where they lived before the war, and were filled with varying degrees of nostalgia and longing for what was now missing in their present lives.

'People just passing through'

For many Germans of the next generation the situation was different. Charlotte's parents, for example, had few of their own memories to share due to their young age at the end of WWII, and their connection to their place of birth was not as strong; the loss and absence less tangible. As far as she could tell, Charlotte's parents did not miss the home they left as young children, but she believed that their experience of forced displacement and the gap it left in their sense of belonging nevertheless played a major role in their lives.

Unlike most of my other participants' families, Charlotte's parents were not into building an ideal middle class family. They were active in the left-wing political movement of 1968,¹²² eager to create a new society from scratch, one that would radically break with all aspects of the past. When other people washed their cars on Saturdays, Charlotte's parents were out protesting against the Vietnam War and German government policies. "My mum had better things to do than sit at

¹²² This refers to a generation of Germans roughly born between 1940-50. Their members protested, among other things, against the continuity between the political, bureaucratic and educational elite of the NS regime and that of the FRG, and some of them, in particular the members of the left wing Baader-Meinhof-group later actively try to destabilize the state with bomb attacks, kidnappings and political assassinations (Assmann 2007).

home and knit,” Charlotte said with tangible sadness in her voice and a sense of longing for the *‘Heile Welt’*, the idyllic home that so many of my participants hated but that she never had. Yet in spite of their different political outlook, Charlotte’s parents resembled those of my other participants in many ways. They too were hard working and functioning without complaints.

When Charlotte was ten, her parents got divorced. In 2012, she attributed much of the failure of their marriage to their war experiences. Neither of them knew how to build committed relationships and nurture a family, she believed, because they themselves did not have a caring family life when they were little. They also did not have any physical roots to rest on in childhood, and the underlying sense of uncertainty and the anticipation of having to pack up again at any given time became part of their emotional make up. Charlotte’s mother later read Sabine Bode’s (2004) book *Kriegskinder*, but did not feel that the war left a lasting imprint on her biography. Her daughter disagreed.

Recent psychological research on German seniors who lived through forced displacement as children supports Charlotte’s view. It shows that many are still affected by their experiences today. In one study from 2006 more than 80% of respondents said the flight was the ‘worst experience of their life’, 40% reported current intrusive flashbacks or nightmares while almost 10% fulfilled the criteria for full PTSD (Fischer, Struwe, and Lemke 2006). Teegen and Meister’s (2000) earlier research found 5% of their respondents reported symptoms of a full PTSD at the time of the study and a further 25% met at least some of the PTSD criteria. A representative household survey found that participants with a history of displacement at the end of WWII were significantly more anxious, and scored lower in aspects of resilience and satisfaction with life than the control group (Kuwert et al. 2009).

Focussing mainly on measurable symptoms, these studies do not necessarily cover the whole range of impacts that WWII may have had on individual biographies. Thinking back to her childhood, Charlotte more than anything remembered an atmosphere of emotional coldness, a ‘certain emptiness’ and lack of connection between her parents and their physical and social environment. “Even today, I would not be able to say where they belong or what place they would call home,” she reflected. “Somehow they remained strangers (*‘Fremde’*), ‘people just passing through’ (*Menschen auf der Durchreise*).”

While Charlotte suspected that the absence in their attachment to a *Heimat* had a much greater impact on their parents than they acknowledged, it was not a gap they consciously perceived, neither as a longing to go back to the old home (which was also for political reasons as I will explain) nor as a void in their lives they were actively trying to fill. The absence of *Heimat* had disappeared from day-to-day consciousness. It turned from what Fuery (1995:2–3) calls a ‘secondary absence’ - as something that could potentially be present - into a ‘primary absence’ that exists without such a relationship.

‘Where do we belong, really?’ - Homelessness across generations

Growing up, any physical link with her family’s *Heimat* was non-existent for Charlotte. She had no first hand experience of the places her ancestors on either side of the family originated from. Few *Kriegsenkel* did, as it was uncommon to visit Eastern European countries in the 1970s and ’80s. The regime of the GDR had imposed travel restrictions on its population for many of the post-war years, and in the West the older generations were not keen to reawaken painful memories and meet the new owners of the houses they once lived in. West German middle class families took their children to Greece, Mallorca and Italy for the summer holidays rather than visit countries behind the ‘iron curtain’ in the East.

In addition, it went all but unnoticed for most of her life that Charlotte not only felt disconnected from her ancestral home, but also did not have any roots in the place where she herself was born - Germany. The city where she grew up felt familiar, but like her parents she too had no emotional attachment to it. She later moved around a lot, changing places and apartments with an ease that she was initially proud of.

However, since reading the *Kriegsenkel* books, her perspective had changed and she started to look upon her lack of attachment with sadness: "Where is my place? Where can I draw strength? Where do I belong? I really don't know."

Charlotte began to perceive a sense of homelessness and lack of rootedness threaded through her own life, playing out as a constant tension running in the background, a restlessness and agitation. "It is like there is nothing to rest on," she told me. "My life was built on a pile of rubble, in spite of the fact that I have not experienced the war myself." Like Anja's infinite sadness and Juliane's negative attitudes towards men, Charlotte's emotions seemed misplaced to her, out of sync with her own experience of having being born and raised in Germany. She put great effort into giving her own children a nurturing and physically anchored home, and she was shocked when her adolescent daughter asked her one day, "Mum, where do we belong, I mean, really?"

The 'Heimat elsewhere'

There is another layer around this experience of absence, which came through a bit more strongly in other life histories than in Charlotte's, and that has to do with the affects - here emotions and atmospheres - that were passed on when their families made reference to their *Heimat*. Growing up, the majority of my participants had some knowledge that their family had come from 'somewhere else', but - as explored in Chapter 2 - it was often not talked about in great detail. Marion was already well into her thirties when, driving around town by

car one day, her father suddenly pointed at a building and said, “Look, that is the place where we lived when we first arrived in Germany.” She had no clue that her father’s family was originally from Russia and not from the local region as she had always assumed. She found out, quite literally, in passing. In most other cases, some basic information about the family’s origins would be known and more could be perceived and read between the lines when parents and grandparents talked about ‘home’.

In German ‘home’ can be expressed by two different words: *Zuhause*, meaning the place where you live, and *Heimat* signifying the place where you are from and to which you have a profound attachment. While *Zuhause*, as a place of residence or house, can be flexible and temporary, *Heimat* has long-term, multigenerational connotations. It is a place firmly rooted in a particular region and linked to the land. According to German anthropologist Herman Bausinger (1980) *Heimat* enables people to experience feelings of security, stability and reliability, it is a place of deep trust. It has a long tradition of being romanticised in literature (*Heimatliteratur*, Pott 1986) and movies (*Heimatfilme*, von Moltke 2005), promoting the idea of an idyllic life close to the land, a world free from the troubles of urbanisation and industrialisation.

When the parents or, more frequently, the grandparents of my participants spoke of *Heimat* they referred to a place they had lost and that they often longed for with palpable sadness and nostalgia. This loss had left a void, which could never be filled by their new home in Germany. Psychoanalyst Guenter Jerouschek described how he grew up in two different homes, one his hometown in Southern Germany and another, a mysterious and imaginary place that his family referred to as ‘*dahoam*’ (‘homeland’ in the regional dialect) (Jerouschek 2004, 94). My own grandmother kept two shoe boxes with treasured photos of her home in Lodz in her wardrobe she had managed to carry with her as part of her few belongings when she came to Germany after the war. Far into my

teenage years I found myself sitting in her kitchen in the afternoons, looking at these pictures with her; one after the other of family members and friends long dead and of places, houses and landscapes she pointed to as 'home'. It was clear from the inconsolable sadness on her face that this place had ceased to exist, and that there was nothing I could do about it.

For most of my participants who picked up on the strong emotions that resonated with the term in family conversations, *Heimat* was 'somewhere else', a home of the past, not the present, desired but unattainable. It also meant *Heimat* for them was not the place, nor could it ever be the place, where they themselves were born and raised.

From absence to 'quasi-presence'

Half of my participants had a background of displacement of either one or both sides of the family at the end of WWII, and feelings of 'homelessness' and 'lack of attachment' are among the first three 'symptoms' listed on the *Kriegsenkel* website as typical signifiers of this generation,¹²³ and always set in direct relationship with a family history of forced migration. Looking back from the standpoint of 2012, Charlotte and many of her generation were now tracing how the absence of home was playing out in their lives, how it influenced their conceptualizations of themselves and their relationship to the world around them.

In my interviews - as well as in the *Kriegsenkel* books, the support- and Facebook groups, - participants attributed a broad range of their current emotions, life choices and behaviours to their family's history of losing their home and coming to Germany as (often unwelcome) refugees. The past was felt to play out through an underlying restlessness and hyper-alertness or a sense of

¹²³ <http://www.forumkriegsenkel.de/Studie.htm> [Accessed 20 August 2015].

impending doom and that ‘everything is suddenly going to end’. Some of my interviewees were reluctant to accumulate material goods, so they could pack up at short notice, or hoarded supplies to feel safe. Many reported the urge to constantly move house or frequently change jobs, finding it difficult to commit and settle down. First and foremost it was felt as a deep sense of drifting, of being lost, unattached, and not belonging, and feelings of loss, grief and sadness, for which there seemed to be no rational explanation.

Through their explorations as part of their ‘*Kriegsenkel* journey’, described in Chapter 5, Charlotte and many others were able to perceive the absence of *Heimat* more clearly for the first time and they started to describe the contours of the ‘missing piece’. In the process *Heimat* turned into what Fuery (1995:2) calls a ‘quasi-presence’ as “bits of the missing presence are fleshed out, embellished, or signifiers are constructed to provide a presence.” Fuery points to the close connection between absence and desire: once the absence of a person, thing or place is made conscious; a strong yearning arises for the gap to be filled. Charlotte’s grandparents had still felt this longing for home, but it was unattainable; her parents had no sense of something missing and politically objected to connecting to the past. Now in the third generation, the desire and longing re-emerged and the search for a sense of *Heimat* began.

Heimat as a ‘dirty word’

Before I take this point further, I would like to introduce the non-German reader to some additional twists and layers of complexity that the concept of *Heimat* holds for people of the *Kriegsenkel* generation, which will also help to explain why its absence went largely unnoticed for so long and why longing for an absent home only appears now with this emotional intensity.

The short answer is that for many of the generation of Charlotte’s parents and even more for the *Kriegsenkel* themselves, *Heimat* has long been a ‘dirty word’.

It was loaded with such negative connotations that striving to fill the void or searching for the 'lost home' was out of the question.

Germans have a complicated and uneasy relationship with the concept. Pott (1986:7) calls the term "soaked in ideology, discredited and glorified" ("*ideologieträchtig, verrufen und glorifiziert*"). While there is a long tradition of positive and romantic connotations mentioned above, for many Germans *Heimat* is an unpleasant reminder of the Nazi propaganda, used in their 'blood-and-soil' ideology to glorify the love for the German motherland and to justify the occupation of neighbouring countries to create more space for the German *Volksgemeinschaft* (ethnic community). This brought the word into so much disrepute that it still evokes strong emotional reactions today.

Indulging in nostalgia for a place that was lost as a direct consequence of the war, which had brought so much pain and suffering, was deemed inappropriate. It strongly reeked of the revisionist tendencies promoted by the '*Vertriebenenverbände*'; the expellees' interest groups, which continued their rhetoric against the post-war Eastern borders well into the 1980s. No one I talked to wanted to be associated with these groups or their politics, perceived to be in the right-wing margins of the political spectrum. To many *Kriegsenkel* it seemed only fair that Germans had to pay the price for the crimes they had committed, supported or condoned, and that the peoples they had subjugated, disowned and killed during the war had sent them packing. The absence of *Heimat*, as the place 'elsewhere', where one's ancestors once lived was felt to be morally justified.

What left many *Kriegsenkel* stuck between a rock and a hard place was the fact that while they could not connect with a sense of *Heimat* from their familial past, they often also could not fill the sense of loss transmitted from their parents and grandparents with a 'new' sense of home in the place where they

themselves were born and raised. The German war crimes made it extremely difficult to establish a positive sense of belonging to the 'fatherland' that was directly responsible for the Holocaust.

When I asked my participants whether they were proud to be German almost every single one shook their head. Daniel even had a physical reaction to the question, his body jerking involuntarily as if I had confronted him with a terrifying proposition. As outlined in detail in Chapter 2, history lessons at school and public commemorations of the Holocaust and the Nazi war crimes instilled a deep sense of shame in many Germans of *Kriegsenkel* generation. A number of them told me that when travelling overseas in their younger years they used to pretend to be from another country, not wanting to admit that they belonged to the nation of the perpetrators of such terrible crimes.

While much has changed in recent years, many *Kriegsenkel* had a difficult relationship with their home country for most of their lives.¹²⁴ A turning point came in 2006, when Germany hosted the Soccer World Cup. Germans cheered on their national team with unprecedented enthusiasm and light-heartedness. Visiting Berlin at the time, I was stunned by the previously unimaginable sight of German flags everywhere: on car mirrors, bicycles, balconies and painted on people's faces. All of my participants experienced this event with a degree of liberation and relief; even though some of them were still cautiously feeling their way into this newly found national enthusiasm. Reto provided me with a beautiful image for this slow transition: when he went to the stadium to cheer on the German team, he was carrying the German flag for the first time in his life, but only in the form of a pair of black-red-and-golden socks and with long pants carefully hiding them from public view.

¹²⁴ Some of the complexities and contradictions around the German national identity are well captured by Dirk Moses' article 'The Non-German German and the German German: Dilemmas of Identity after the Holocaust' (Moses 2007).

While concepts of ‘pride’ and ‘being German’ still don’t easily go together, the consensus among my participants was that now, 70 years after the end WWII, ‘it is OK to be German’. With that also came an opening in the relationship to the idea of home and the ‘permission’ to start searching for a place to call *Heimat*.

Looking for a (re)connection

In the last chapter, I described how transgenerationally transmitted war experiences were perceived as an unwelcome emotional burden warranting therapeutic interventions in an attempt to free the suffering self from the familial inheritance. Here, on the other hand, the chosen path to healing is quite the opposite. With a sense of ‘something missing’ seen as the source of emotional pain, the desire is not to liberate oneself from the past, but to connect to it, to find missing pieces and to fill in the gaps in one’s sense of self.

One obvious way to reconnect with the family history and to trace the elusive ‘home elsewhere’ is to visit the region(s) whence the families originated. In 2012 only a few of my participants had ever been to these places. Some were planning trips, either by themselves or with their families who were now sometimes more willing to undertake this painful journey to their past. *Kriegsenkel* support groups were also starting to organise excursions to Eastern European areas where ethnic Germans once lived.

Charlotte herself journeyed to Czechia in summer 2012, the homeland of her father’s family, hoping that the trip would take her closer to her roots. “I am travelling to the past”, she wrote on her blog, “to Czechia. In my backpack I have the questions that I am taking on my journey: What does my grandparents’ history have to do with me? What does my parents’ history have to do with me? What does my own history have to do with me?”

After arriving in her grandmother's village, Charlotte, her father and his new family searched for a long time before they found the right house. Their map was a faded black and white photograph, which they showed to the locals, gesturing and asking for directions. Finally an old woman nodded her head. "Of course," she said in flawless German, "the *P...-Haus*, turn right just before you get to the station and then it is straight ahead of you."

Too excited to continue the conversation, they jumped back into the car and followed her directions. They indeed found the beautiful old villa, run down and with the paint peeling off, yet Charlotte immediately felt a connection with it. Her family did not own the house anymore - other people have lived there for the past 70 years - but somehow it 'belonged' to her nevertheless. It was the place where her father was born and of which she had photos with her grandparents standing in front. The current owners spoke a bit of English and invited the small group to come inside. Looking around the old rooms Charlotte felt torn between the past and the present. "The physical house was still there - our geographical roots - but its history and trajectory have become something else. How many lives may have since passed through here?" she reflected later. They found other traces from the past - an old brewery her family once owned, the cemetery with some overgrown graves still carrying their name - all relics from a time long gone, yet on some level connected to Charlotte's present life.

When I asked her later what this journey meant to her, she said, "It is good to know where you are from, but there is also a silver layer of tears on my soul, because the pain of the past has not yet been transformed. But I now feel a sense of calm; it gave me certainty that, yes, there was a past, but that this past does not exist anymore."

For Charlotte, the previously absent home, a place without her own images, memories and physical experience, was transformed into a presence she could

feel and connect with. Yet paradoxically, by making the journey to the place that was referred to as *Heimat*, it also ceased to exist. Czechia was her grandmother's home, and while Charlotte felt a strong emotional relationship to it, it was not hers. For her, *Heimat* as a material place became an absence - again. Realising the finality of the loss and once and for all burying her expectation to find a *Heimat* for herself in Czechia was sad, but it also gave Charlotte a sense of closure.

Other *Kriegsenkel* reported different experiences as they visited the places where their families once lived. Some felt a very strong sense of (re)connection with the landscape and vegetation, which did provide a present sense of belonging that they recognised without ever having been there before. Merle Hilbk (2013a) described how during her first trip to Kazakhstan, "something in the atmosphere of decay and pride, melancholy and sudden outbursts of energy felt strangely familiar, touching something inside." "I immediately fell in love with the landscape," another person shared on the *Forumkriegsenkel* website. "People come and go, but the land remains...for years now I have had a bowl in my apartment, filled with the soil from the meadows where once the cows of my ancestors were grazing."¹²⁵

Sabine Marschall (2015:878) calls this kind of travel 'Roots tourism', an umbrella term covering types of travel in search of origins and identity. She explains that these trips can amount to an 'intense, immersive, multisensory experience involving smell, hear and touch, as people attempt to re-experience the past and see to re-discover the signs of their forebears in the landscape.' (ibid:879)

Ana Dragojlovic (2014) describes a similar phenomenon in her research among descendants of Indonesian-Dutch families in the Netherlands, some of whom

¹²⁵ <http://www.forumkriegsenkel.de/Lebensgeschichten.htm> [Accessed 20 August 2015].

experienced a powerful sense of reconnection as they travelled to the country their ancestors had once been forced to leave. Applying Marianne Hirsch's (2008) concept of postmemory, Dragojlovic (2014:12) explains how embodied postmemory of sensuous geographies can be awakened, experienced and integrated, providing a sense of belonging and helping to "forge one's own pathway to an inheritance of loss".

For Charlotte this pathway meant realising what had been absent in her life, mapping and fleshing out the missing connection to a physical *Heimat*, longing and searching for it and then ultimately putting it to rest.

'The home within'

I was looking forward to meeting her again in summer 2013, keen to know how she was travelling on her '*Kriegsenkel*-journey'. She was relaxed and upbeat as we were sitting in two old lounge chairs in a park in East Berlin, sipping coffee. The topic had lost a bit of its urgency over the year. Sorting through the past and perceiving the threads of homelessness running through her family, from her grandparents and parents to herself and even her children, put her biography into a new perspective. "My life now has meaning and coherence that stretches back over a number of generations. The idea that the war and the history of my parents and my ancestors live on inside me is also some sort of treasure. I can feel that too." After realising that there was no physical place that she could call *Heimat*, she said she was now resting on an immaterial home 'inside herself', a sense of continuity and belonging to a family lineage. Stories of people related to her and images of places where her ancestors once lived had become part of the fabric she was able to stitch together, bit by bit, until it became dense enough to hold her. Her life no longer felt as if it were built on a disjointed pile of rubble; the foundation had become more solid. There now was a piece where she fit into

all of this. “If I had to sum it all up,” she said, “I would say, I do belong after all. I have my place in this (his)story.”

Coming back to the characteristics of absence mentioned in the introduction, Charlotte’s and her family’s complex relationship to a homeland illustrated the role of absences as “cultural, physical and social phenomena that powerfully influence people’s conceptualizations of themselves and the world they engage with” (Bille et al. 2010:4). Looking from Charlotte’s perspective, concepts of *Heimat* as an absence significantly shaped, consciously or unconsciously, the lives of all three generations involved. However, adding to Bille et al’s (2010) descriptions, is also clear from her story that absences are constructed in and significantly impacted upon by the political environment of their time, which made the relationship different for each generations.

Charlotte’s grandmothers experienced the loss of their home firsthand and the political situation of post-war Germany left no hope for a return, turning *Heimat* into a absence surrounded by nostalgia, sadness and longing. For Charlotte’s radically left-wing parents, *Heimat* became a ‘dirty word’ as their aim was to cut all physical and ideological ties to a pre-war society. For most of Charlotte’s life the absent home also did not have the potential to be returned into a presence, for political as much as for psychological reasons. However, the recent opening in the political situation and the emergence of more positive attitudes towards *Heimat* and German national identity allowed her search for a reconnection with the ‘lost home’. The social environment of the *Kriegsenkel* scene and its understanding of the transgenerational impact of the loss of *Heimat* in war grandchildren’s lives enabled the awakening of her awareness of the missing attachment.

Secondly, Charlotte’s story shows that “absences exist through relations, and that is what makes them matter” (Meyer 2012:103). It is not the physical place

itself that gave *Heimat* importance in the lives of the three generations, but their respective relations with it, imbued with memories, desires or taboos. Once made conscious, Charlotte established an intense relationship with the missing *Heimat*, tracing it in the past and present and longing for a future where she could relate to it in a way that strengthened her selfhood. It was also clear that the attachment to a place of origin that Charlotte missed was expected to be transmitted by her family, and that instead of a positive attachment to a homeland a sense of gap was passed on to her by her parents and grandmothers.

Lastly while Bille et al (2010:4) stress the agency of absence as “having and taking power,” this is only true to an extent as my case studies (including the next two below) show. The absence of home was initially felt to hold power over Charlotte’s life, but once she became conscious of it, she started to exert agency over what was felt to be missing. Charlotte - and many other *Kriegsenkel* - traced the missing *Heimat* through her own and her family’s biography; she followed her desire and searched for grandparents’ lost home. Once she found it she re-conceptualised the idea of home to meet her psychological needs. Her story shows absences as “dynamic, performed, textured and materialized through relations and processes” (Meyer 2012:103). The presence of a physical *Heimat* was transformed into an immaterial sense of belonging, no longer bound to a location. At the end it was revealed that what she was really looking for was a sense of rootedness and belonging, of ‘feeling at home’ rather than an attachment to the land. Charlotte transformed a material absence into a sense of immaterial presence, a space ‘within herself’ that she called home. Somehow this offered many of the features that Bausinger (1980) associated with *Heimat*: feelings of security, stability and reliability, a place of deep trust.

This last aspect, the exertion of agency over what is absent, also comes through strongly in my next two examples, the stories of Paula’s and Rainer’s intense relationships with their deceased Nazi grandfathers.

3. Rainer and Paula: - The shame of war

Up to this point, my thesis focused largely on WWII experiences such as bombardment, forced displacement and sexual violence, and how these were perceived as having been transmitted down the family line, resulting in an emotional burden or, as in the previous example, a painful feeling of lack and absence in the *Kriegsenkel* generation. This choice was deliberate, because the recent exploration of WWII trauma and its effect on the descendants was felt to provide a powerful new perspective to explain and transform the psychological problems of the war grandchildren. The often sudden realisation of the lasting impact that the wartime suffering and hardship of their families had on Germans born long after the original events lies at the heart of the *Kriegsenkel* identity construction. These experiences therefore took centre stage in my exploration and analysis. However, any attempt to provide a rounded picture of the transgenerational transmission of war experiences also needs to include some reflection on the long-term impact of Nazi perpetratorship.

There were more than 18 million German soldiers in the *Wehrmacht* (Radebold 2008:46), an unknown number of whom, particularly on the Eastern Front, not only participated in active combat but also in the shooting of women and children, the mass executions of Jews and suspected partisans, the looting and burning down of villages, and the displacement and coercion of the local population into forced labour (Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung 2002). An estimated 500,000 German men and women were involved in the expulsion and the systematic murder of the European Jews, yet less than 1,000 were put on trial and convicted for their crimes (Winkler 2014).

Most of my participants had at least one grandfather and often other men in the extended family who had been soldiers in Hitler's army, while some were in the SS or were members of the notorious SS *Sonderkommandos* (special tasks units)

in the occupied Eastern territories. This means that in most German families there is a history not only of loss and wartime suffering but also of perpetratorship.

Unlike the recent focus on war trauma and its transmission, issues around the transgenerational impact of NS ideology and perpetratorship have been explored in some depth since the 1980s,¹²⁶ often describing responses of guilt and shame or denial and avoidance in the younger generation to the crimes of their forebears. Continuing with the development of the analytic concept of absences from the first part of this chapter, I will take a different approach, one that not only captures how transgenerationally transmitted Nazi perpetratorship is seen to impact on *Kriegsenkel's* lives, but that also ventures into an exploration of gaps and absences in family relationships due to a history of perpetratorship and war crimes.

For this I will focus on the life history of Rainer and Paula, both grandchildren of high-ranking Nazi officials. They stand out because of the scale of their grandfathers' crimes (in particular in Rainer's case) and the fact that their family's involvement is well documented. However their responses, reflections and reactions lend themselves to drawing a line to members of their generation more broadly.

When I met them, both Paula and Rainer were spending a substantial part of their time researching the history of the Nazi regime in general and the context of their grandfathers' crimes in particular. Rainer's main desire was to put as much distance between himself and the *Kommandant* of Auschwitz and his 'evil genes', and prove that he was 'not an animal like Rudolf'. Paula on the other

¹²⁶ Some of the better known works include Bar-On (1989); Rosenthal (1998b); Sichrovsky (1987); Heimannsberg and Schmidt (1992); Livingston (2010); Müller-Hohagen (2005); Roberts (1998); Bergmann and Jucovy (1982); Westernhagen (1987); Welzer, Moller, and Tschuggnall (2002); Volkan, Ast, and Greer (2002).

hand was searching for a way to reconnect with the man she had been ashamed of since her teenage years as the ‘evil SS grandpa’.

Much more than is the case with WWII trauma, Nazi perpetratorship is still an extremely sensitive topic in German society today. Paula’s and Rainer’s exploration of their grandfathers’ roles in the Third Reich was inextricably entangled with the larger framework of the public culture of commemoration and its contradictory norms that on the one hand (as Rainer’s story will show) demand a clear distancing from the perpetrator generation(s), while prescribing that the descendants assume a moral responsibility for their forebears’ crimes on the other.¹²⁷

There is probably no other life history that could exemplify the anguish, emotional burden and moral binds of transgenerationally transmitted perpetratorship better than Rainer Höß’s, whose name and genes link him directly to the man he mostly refers to as ‘Rudolf’: Rudolf Höß, from 1940-44 the *Kommandant* of Auschwitz, and his grandfather.

Rainer - ‘Ein Höß weint nicht’ (‘A Höß does not cry’)

There is one question that haunts me to this day: What of him is also in me? Is there a resemblance, an likeness, a genetic inheritance? (Höß 2013:31).

¹²⁷ I would like to remind the reader once again that my participants only represent a certain segment of the German population, a group of predominantly well-educated and probably more left-leaning people, who (as outlined in Chapter 2) were socialised in the culture of commemoration, firmly rejecting the NS ideology and condemning the crimes of the NS regime. While other Germans may of course hold different views as for example Welzer et.al. (2002) showed, there were only very few moments in my interviews where I had the sense that someone was trying to exculpate their family or play down the Nazi crimes more broadly. The stories told here need to be seen in this light.

I had a few restless nights before dialling Rainer's number for the arranged interview, tossing and turning as I was trying to imagine what it must be like to have a convicted mass murderer as a grandfather, a man directly linked to a place like Auschwitz, which like no other stand for the evil human beings are capable of. When he picked up the phone, Rainer's voice was warm and friendly with a strong Southern German accent. I was relieved. He did a lot of the talking in our two-hour conversation; I listened, often holding my breath, but in the end still able to ask the questions I was most curious about. Going back to his story now brings back the spaces of darkness, heaviness and incomprehensibly cold cruelty of the Holocaust that I and many other Germans of my generation have been carrying for much of our lives, casting a shadow of guilt and shame over our otherwise relatively carefree existence.

Rainer Höß, former cook and pastry chef is a public figure, who has devoted his life to educating the German public about his grandfather's crimes. Among other things, he participated in the Israeli-German documentary 'Hitler's children' (Zeevi 2011) featuring five descendants of high-ranking Nazis. In May 2014 Höß appeared in a Swedish TV spot for the election of the EU parliament, campaigning for a 'Nazi-free-Europe' and reminding people to 'never forget to vote' to prevent a re-emergence of national socialism.¹²⁸ He gives talks in schools, accompanies school children on visits to Auschwitz, and in 2013 published a book about his struggles as the grandson of Rudolf Höß (Höß 2013).

Rainer is using his family name as a powerful tool in his activities and public performances, and he explicitly declined my standard offer to disguise his identity. His purpose in life and sense of identity are inextricably linked to his grandfather as the commander of Auschwitz. Without the name his story would lose much of his gravitas. He is not without controversy, and his motives and

¹²⁸ http://youtu.be/KicA_OLNrsW [Accessed 20 August 2015]

integrity have been questioned (Beck 2011), but I listened to his story, as was the case for all other participants, from his perspective. There was also disarming vulnerability in his voice that I somehow chose to trust.

Rainer never met his infamous grandfather, Rudolf Höß, responsible for the systematic murder of around 1.5 million Jews and other victims of the Nazis, was tracked down after the war by a special unit of the British military (Harding 2014), sentenced to death and hanged outside the crematorium in Auschwitz in April 1947 - calm and unapologetic to his last breath. He was 46 when he was executed, the same age as Rainer when I talked to him in 2012.

Rainer's family did not volunteer any information about his grandfather's identity (his mother only found out three years after her wedding through a newspaper article who her father-in-law was) and, when asked, they would tell him that his granddad had died as a 'hero for the fatherland'. They never revoked their commitment to the National Socialist ideology. There are family photos of Rainer's father, Hans-Jürgen, as a little boy, posing with his brother in the garden of the Höß villa in Auschwitz, propped up in the midst of blossoming flowers, a perfectly idyllic scene if it weren't for the chimney of the crematorium clearly visible in the right back corner of the picture. Others show Hans-Jürgen sitting in a toy plane made for the children by concentration camp inmates (Höß 2013). "We had a good life in Auschwitz," Rainer's grandmother continued to say until her death, and that it was 'just a prison'. The fact that she had also reprimanded her children to wash the strawberries they had picked from the garden 'because of the ash' exposed her pretended ignorance as a convenient lie. "This is the family I was born into," Rainer wrote in his autobiography, "sometimes I just want to scream" (Höß 2013:82). To this day most of his family deny that the Holocaust ever happened, in spite of the historical evidence and the fact that they lived directly on site. The outrage in Rainer's voice on the phone revealed how their rejection of responsibility was

still cutting him up inside, even though he had severed all contact with his father and the extended family more than 20 years earlier.

As an adult, Rainer started to obsessively research the Holocaust, collecting as much information as possible to disprove his family's claims, and trying to comprehend and to distance himself from his grandfather's motives.

I never got closer to my grandfather than his uniform on the tailor's dummy. I only know his face from photos, his character through his deeds and his clumsy autobiography. I can despise him mercilessly without it hurting much. Yet since I have become an adult, I have been trying to understand his life. What drove him to kill millions of people? We, his children and grandchildren, have always lived with this dead man. Absent, he was always standing there, right next to us (Höbß 2013:78).

Here, the experience of absence in relationship to WWII and the transmission of experiences in the family were quite different from Charlotte's. For her the absence of *Heimat* went unnoticed in her everyday life due to her family's silences, whereas in Rainer's case, it was always clear that his grandfather was sentenced to death as a result of the war. However, it was the framing of this absence that created discord, because the family distorted the historical role his grandfather had played. Yet similarly to Charlotte's elaborations which sharpened the contours of the missing home, Rainer's investigation turned Rudolf into a 'quasi presence' (Fuery 1995:2) that he related to almost as if the man was still alive. His grandfather was an integral feature of every aspect of Rainer's everyday experience, fleshed out by historical documents, photos, and survivors' stories, and woven together in his imagination. The more Rainer brought his grandfather back to life, the more Rudolf became a spectre that haunted him. Sociologist Avery Gordon (2008:xvi) uses the term 'haunting'

broadly as “one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with.” In this sense, the presence that was haunting Rainer was not just his biological grandfather, but also Rudolf Höß, the historical figure and embodied symbol of the evils of the Holocaust.¹²⁹

Rainer constantly put himself in relationship to his absent grandfather, comparing character traits and habits. Did he get his meticulousness and compulsive orderliness from Rudolf? His strict sense of duty? The way he folded up his clothes before going to bed? That he needed his hair cut short and neat? He even considered Rudolf when tying his shoelaces. “I am spending my life searching for resemblances with my grandfather,” he said to me. His main worry was he might have inherited the Auschwitz commander’s ‘evil genes’. This fear that a disposition to commit heinous crimes is transmitted through the DNA is shared by other descendants of high-ranking Nazi war criminals. Bettina Göring, great-niece of Herman Göring, Hitler’s notorious Reich Marshal, famously opted for sterilisation in order to prevent the ‘Göring genes’ from getting passed on to yet another generation (Lebovic 2012). Monika Hertwig, the daughter of the particularly sadistic commander of the Plaszów concentration camp Amon Goeth, depicted in the movie ‘Schindler’s list’, was worried that she may be a ‘bad seed’ like her father (Livingston, 2010:212) Here, concepts of transgenerational transmission of trauma (as described in the last chapter) and of perpetratorship overlap in the assumed determinism of a genetic inheritance, where character traits are seen as being handed down the family through the DNA.

¹²⁹ I acknowledge that there would be a lot more to explore in relation to the issues of ‘haunting’ from an anthropological perspective, which I cannot pursue at this point in order to focus more narrowly on the concept of absence. For the topic of ‘transgenerational haunting’ see in particular Cho (2008).

A vignette Rainer shared with me shows how great his fear around this biological legacy was. Visiting Auschwitz for the first time in 2010, he met his grandfather's former barber. The old man asked Rainer to walk up and down in front of him and then concluded, "you walk like your grandfather, and you look like your grandfather, you are just a bit taller." After coming home, Rainer locked himself up in a room and was completely unapproachable for his family for 14 days, too distraught to talk.

While on the one hand Rainer was haunted by his grandfather's presence and the threat of their genetic likeness, 'fleshing out the ghost' (Cho 2008) of the *Kommandant* served a purpose - it enabled Rainer to distance himself. Step by step he cut all ties with his father's family, he publicly denounced his grandfather's crimes, and he told his four children that he would rather sacrifice them and die himself than subscribe to the National Socialist ideology should he ever be forced to choose. However, the key moment for him in this respect happened in, of all places, Auschwitz.

When Rainer was interviewed there in 2010 for 'Hitler's children' (Zeevi 2011), he found himself surrounded by a group of Israeli teenagers who stared at him in shock when they heard that he was a descendant of the *Kommandant*. Suddenly, a Holocaust survivor appeared from amongst the group. He walked up to Rainer, put his arms around him and said, "it is not your fault." Both men cried. "At that very moment," Rainer said to me, "I stepped out of the family line."

When he was little, his father used to beat him and his siblings mercilessly when he found them 'whinging about something' as he came home. '*Ein Höß weint nicht*' - 'A Höß does not cry' was the abiding rule and a motto that, as Rainer found out, his grandfather had also raised his own children with. Showing emotions went against the National Socialist ideology of hardness, strength and tenacity. Even at the gallows Rudolf did not divert from this path. In that

moment in Auschwitz Rainer realised, tears rolling down his face, that he was 'not an animal' like his grandfather, that he was able to show emotions, even with everyone, including TV cameras, watching. Rainer stressed how liberating this moment was for or him, to break with this family tradition and prove to himself that he was not a victim of his grandfather's 'evil genes'. "*Ich bin nicht Rudolf*" - "I am not Rudolf," he repeated emphatically a few times.

By wrestling with the absent presence of his grandfather, Rainer felt able to break the line of transgenerational transmission of perpetratorship. However, while the gap that he managed to carve out between himself and Rudolf was experienced as liberating, he remained tightly bound to him in other ways. As someone of his generation, who had internalised and who agreed with the German culture of commemoration, he was committed to remembering the past and to making sure that crimes like the Holocaust would never be repeated - a mission that was particularly binding for him as a direct descendant of one of the worst perpetrators of the Third Reich. Unlike Charlotte, Rainer could not put the past to rest and unlike Anja and Juliane, his liberation from the 'yoke of the family' could only go a certain distance. He accepted this willingly, devoting himself to raising public awareness about the Nazi crimes. "At least in this way, I and the Höß family will leave something positive behind. I can live better with that," he summed up his own way of coming to terms with his family history. He acknowledged that the spectre of Rudolf would haunt him for the rest of his life. "I wake up every morning with the Holocaust and I go to bed every night with the Holocaust," he responded when I asked him that question. After I hung up the phone, his last sentence kept echoing in my head: "In spite of everything I am actually quite a cheerful person."

Paula, whose story I turn to now, agreed with this approach for most of her life, firmly rejecting the 'Nazi side' of her family. In 2012, however, she was starting to question whether this distancing did not come at a price, leaving a gap in the

relationship and in the transmission between the generations that ultimately impacted negatively on her sense of self and identity. Her approach was the absolute exception among my participants, and most people I spoke to would probably not agree with the journey she embarked on.

Paula - 'den Ball flach halten' ('keep your head down')

Like Rainer, Paula used to resolutely distance herself from her father's family and in particular from her grandfather, a very high-ranking SS official, who had known Hitler personally - a fact that half of the family still talked about with a sense of pride, while the other half despised him as an 'opportunistic, drunken Nazi thug'. Her grandfather was convicted by a German court in 1947 for his involvement with the Third Reich and forever banned from practising any profession that would allow him to continue spreading the Nazi ideology among the German population (i.e. lawyer, teacher, pastor, journalist).

Learning about the horrors of the Holocaust at school, Paula was ashamed of the man, whom she referred to as '*der böse Opa*' ('the bad grandpa'), or '*mein SS Opa*' ('my SS grandpa'). She held unpleasant memories of her grandparents scaring her with their strictness and verbal reprimands such as "girls like you belong in a concentration camp," and of her grandmother fiercely brushing her unruly curly hair to a point where she feared her scalp would come off. In their own accounts her family had been treated badly after the war, her father and his siblings were bullied at school as 'Nazi children'. The lesson that they, in Paula's view, took away from this was that 'it is better to keep your head down' ('*den Ball flach halten*'). The same message was also passed on to her; she had internalised and never really challenged it.

After reading the *Kriegsenkel* books, however, Paula started to explore how much her upbringing had prevented her from, 'stepping into her own strength and power'. She attributed her lack of self-confidence to a number of different

factors: the gaps and denials around Nazi perpetratorship, the 'life lessons' ('keep your head down') transmitted by her family, and the history lessons at school which compounded her sense of shame for coming from a perpetrator family.¹³⁰ Paula used words like '*wackelig*' (shaky), '*unsicher*' ('uncertain' or 'insecure') to describe her sense of self, while always adding that that was not the 'real her', that somewhere underneath she was a strong person, a strength she could not accept or express, because 'everything had to be kept under wraps'.

Early in our discussions a new question opened up. Was it possible that her feeling of 'shakiness' was further compounded by the fact that she had deliberately cut herself off from her family, and in particular from her grandfather, because of his involvement with the National Socialist regime, and that this had left a gap in her sense of self and confidence? Paula was a regular participant in shamanistic family constellations workshops, in which, as she told me, the ancestors are viewed as a source of strength, transmitting their support and encouragement to their descendants. She had always felt a particularly close connection to this grandfather, and her family often commented on how much she resembled him: her height and straight posture, her stubbornness, the way she sat and walked. Like Rainer, she had always found these similarities troubling, pushing them as far away from herself as possible. Yet somehow her grandfather's absent presence was always close by, a frequent appearance in her vivid dreams and daytime visions.

Over the course of the 2012, Paula devoted herself to researching her grandfather's history, studying the documents about his trial her father had - much to her surprise - handed over and reading books about the SS. For the first

¹³⁰ This deeply embedded sense of guilt, shame and insecurity was shared by many of my other participants, often described as stemming from a similar mix of denials of responsibility for Nazi crimes by the family, and reinforced by public narratives, TV documentaries and history lessons at school (see Chapter 2).

time, she was trying to look at his involvement through a more open lens, exploring and enquiring rather than condemning him outright. Paula was hoping to create a context for the few stories and fragmented information she had and to fill in the gaps, including in relation to the crimes her grandfather may have committed.

As she was methodically sorting through the past, Paula's absent grandfather was more and more brought back to life with every bit of information she found (although unlike Rainer she had childhood memories of him). He became an 'entity-like presence' (Fowles 2010:25) that she – like Rainer - fleshed out and interacted with. Paula had an extremely rich inner life of vivid, fluid spaces, where the past and the present often merged into one. The war and her 'SS grandpa' were constant features in her visions during this period; she often felt him standing close behind her, his hands on her shoulder – still wearing his SS uniform.

While for Rainer, his intense relationship with his absent grandfather was aimed at creating the greatest possible distance between them; Paula was cautiously looking for a way to generate a sense of continuity between the generations - in spite of her grandfather's perpetratorship. She had started to feel the absence of this connection as undermining her sense of self. Her previous rejection of her grandfather in her view had not allowed her to accept some of the character traits that she had inherited from him – determination, strength, tenacity, willpower, and idealism - because he had put them in the service of the Hitler Regime.

Over the space of the year, things were starting to change for her. She said that was beginning to come to terms with her grandfather's presence and the relationship between them. "After I talked to you, I suddenly had this image of a bathtub, someone pulled the plug, things started flowing again and all the

stagnant water was flushed out,” she said to me. Rather than a haunting ghost, as was the case for Rainer, he turned into a source of strength in her everyday life, often appearing and backing her up in difficult situations.

When I saw Paula again in 2013, her mind was elsewhere, caught up in an unhappy love affair that she talked about with familiar intensity and passion. Asked how she felt more generally, she said that all in all she was more stable, with “more trust in life”.

She said that this was the first time that she ever explored her family history in such a way with an outsider, something she could not have done with a ‘real German’, pointing to the fact that while I am of the same age and similar upbringing, I had been away from Germany for 20 years and was now doing my PhD in Australia. In her eyes this made me less bound by the tight norms of the German culture of commemoration. I did indeed follow Paula’s exploration with as much openness as possible, often admiring her bravery. However, when she said things like “some people were really were just nominally kept on SS membership list without really being active,” or that she could not find any evidence that he had committed any major crimes, I could not help thinking that the grandfather she had brought back to life had moved away from the historical figure and that she was starting to make excuses for him to help her maintain their newly found bond.¹³¹

Yet, it was uncanny how liberating this process was for her, even though it was an extremely delicate undertaking, one that she still felt to be very much taboo. One time, when I turned off the voice recorder after a particularly intense

¹³¹ A similar psychological mechanism was observed by Harald Welzer and his colleagues (Welzer et al. 2002) in their book *Opa war kein Nazi (Grandpa was not a Nazi)*. There the grandchildren were also downplaying their grandparents’ support for the Nazi regime - even if there was clear evidence otherwise - in order to maintain strong and positive family ties.

conversation, she glanced at it and said, “Make sure you don’t lose that or we will both get arrested.” She was half joking, but her comment showed that even if there is more openness in German society today to re-assess the past and WWII, a desire to re-connect with a grandfather who is a known Nazi perpetrator is still perceived to be a long way outside the limits of accepted norms and attitudes. Along similar lines but concerning the previous generation, Kathy Livingston (2010) showed in her case study that sons and daughters of high ranking Nazis as a group lacked permission, social acknowledgment, sympathy and support to grieve for their deceased parents because of the stigma surrounding their fathers’ crimes. This ‘disenfranchisement’ of grief (Livingston, 2010:209) forced them to carry the burden of their loss alone and in silence and diminished their opportunities to mourn and come to terms with their loss.

Rainer’s and Paula’s stories are exceptions, and they dwarfed those of all of my all other participants when it came to Nazi perpetratorship. Yet, there were quite a number of other *Kriegsenkel* who were also haunted by the (suspected) crimes of their grandparents. All of them took Rainer’s approach, trying to distance themselves from their families (to varying degrees).

As explored in Chapter 2, knowledge about the grandparents’ involvement in the Hitler regime was never passed on voluntarily. In an atmosphere of taboos and secrets at home, inklings of perpetratorship were perceived only through the cracks of interrupted conversations, blocked off questions, and of family members present on photos but never openly talked about. To the grandchildren generation, who grew up with a strong awareness of the Holocaust and the Nazi crimes, the unresolved mysteries around a direct involvement of their family had often troubled their imagination since teenage years.

Many *Kriegsenkel*, like Rainer and Paula, were trying to fill in the gaps in their family history by tapping into historical archives or by interviewing their

extended family, yet that rarely yielded satisfactory results. The grandfathers lived on in *Kriegsenkel's* lives as absent presences, embellished by fantasies and unanswered questions about their possible crimes, not clearly outlined enough to allow for a positioning of oneself in the relationship. While for Rainer there was sufficient historical information to bring the absent grandfather back to life, allowing him to distance himself and gain a sense of agency, in many other cases the unformed and haunting absences 'took power' (Bille et al. 2010:4) and left their descendant stuck, fearful and uncertain.

Isabelle found an entry in her grandfather's pay book that he had been part of the *Sonderkommando I9* somewhere in Eastern Europe. As a historian she was very aware that the term meant 'special duties', and often participation in the execution of Jews or partisans, but she could not find any further information about this particular unit, and the uncertainty about what her grandfather did during those unaccounted weeks did not let her rest. "I want to know what kind of a family I am from," she said to me, a sentence I heard a few times. It implies that one would feel the need to take a moral stance and distance oneself from a family of known perpetrators or supporters of the Nazi regime, as Kurt, one particularly angry participant, postulated: "you can't just sit down with these people on a Sunday and play cards and the next day you ask them about the war, and they just tell you some bullshit lies." Taking a moral stance meant cutting oneself off from a potential transmission of Nazi perpetratorship, a conscious choice, often felt as a step towards individuation and separation, as was the case for Rainer.

I return now to the conceptual framework of absence. Charlotte's, Rainer's and Paula's stories demonstrate the vital role that absences play in *Kriegsenkel* accounts of transgenerational transmission of WWII experiences, and that they warrant an exploration in their own right.

Each of the three was wrestling in their own way with something that was absent as a result of WWII (a place in Charlotte's case, a family member in Paula's and Rainer's) yet was still perceived to have a impact on their everyday lives. As I pointed to throughout the chapter, many aspects of their stories, although unique in a multitude of ways, were touched on by others I heard during my time in Berlin.

My case studies support Bille et al's (Bille et al. 2010:4) claim that "absences are cultural, physical and social phenomena that powerfully influence people's conceptualizations of themselves and the world they engage with." Charlotte's lack of attachment to a place called home and the gap she initially detected in her sense of belonging, were felt to directly affect her sense of identity and emotional stability, and Paula's and Rainer's understanding of themselves and the way they acted in their lives was directly linked to their absent grandfathers and a feared inheritance of perpetrator character traits.

Their stories furthermore illustrate Meyer's theoretical claim that absences matter through relations, as "something performed, textured and materialized through relations and processes" (Meyer 2012:103). In all three examples the person entered into an intense relationship with what was felt to be absent. They were all actively tracing and framing it, fleshing out what was missing as the result of WWII until firm contours emerged that allowed them to perceive the missing bit as a 'quasi presence' (Fuery 1995:2). Charlotte's path was through the *Kriegsenkel* movement and its narratives, which enabled her to source and clearly define the gaps in her sense of self and to start searching for a *Heimat*. For Rainer and Paula, it was predominantly historical sources that provided the material that allowed them to 'flesh out the ghost' (Cho 2008) of their grandfathers, a process they both undertook to a great level of depth and detail.

The creation of the ‘quasi presences’ (Fuery 1995:2) that act as ‘stand ins’ for the absent place or person, permitted Charlotte, Rainer and Paula to position themselves in a relationship to what was absent, in a way that met their psychological needs and emotional desires. For Charlotte and Paula that meant relating more closely to what was missing in their lives, in order to close the gap and allow for a sense of continuity and transmission between the generations, which they understood as strengthening their sense of self. For Rainer on the other hand, engaging with ‘Rudolf’ meant moving further and further away from him, to break the family ties and interrupt a possible transmission of perpetratorship. In spite of their different directions, all three ultimately managed to find a relationship, which suited their psychological wants, and that provided and meaning.

Interestingly, it became clear from my examples that the construction of these desires and relations was more important than the physical absence or presence of the place or person itself, which could easily morph from one state to another. While Charlotte was initially looking for a sense of home and attachment to a material place, what she later found and defined as ‘*Heimat*’ in the process was an immaterial sense of belonging inside herself and as part of her family history, which provided her with much of what she was looking for. For Paula and Rainer on the other hand, both grandfathers were fleshed out in their imagination to an extent that they were transformed from something immaterial to something that has ‘serious immediacy and presence’ (Sørensen 2010:118), that came quite close to being material and that they engaged with almost as if the *SS Grandpa* and the *Kommandant* were alive.

In addition to what Bille et al. (2010:4) point to as characteristics of absences, that they “have or take power, and thereby have important bearing on people’s social, emotional and material lives,” my case studies showed that while this may initially be the case, through active engagement people are able to exert agency

over what is absent in a way that is strengthening rather than weakening their subjectivity.

The last point I would like to make to add to the concept of absence is to stress the importance of the social and political environment for the construction, conceptualisation and relationship to what is absent. It was the opening in the political environment of Germany in the early 2000s that allowed Charlotte to start searching for the 'lost home', and the social context of the *Kriegsenkel* movement that helped her define her sense of lack and frame her quest. Paula and Rainer were also affected by the public culture of commemoration, which defined the boundaries for the transformation of their relationship to their grandfather. Rainer strictly stayed within these limits, whereas Paula moved beyond them, very aware of the taboos she was breaking and conducting her exploration more or less in secret.

4. On healing the past

Meyer (2012:103) writes: "Absence comes in various guises. Phantom pains, deceased people, ancestors, destroyed buildings, ghosts, gods, silences ... All these absences can have effects on our lives. They matter." I believe Paula's, Rainer's and Charlotte's stories demonstrated this point. They showed that people and places that are not physically present can nevertheless play an important role in the processes of transgenerational transmission of war experiences, and that they deserve special attention when researching the topic. Even more, as I will briefly argue below, as identifying gaps and absences as a cause of emotional suffering triggers a different range of responses and strategies to alleviate pain.

Many *Kriegsenkel* like Kerstin, Anja and Juliane perceived the familial past predominantly as a transmitted burden. The chosen therapeutic interventions

were aimed at working through the familial legacy to break the chain of transmission and to build happier, more independent and healthier futures for themselves and their children. Rainer also fits into this approach to some extent, although his 'liberation' was restricted by the moral responsibility of carrying the burden of his grandfather's crimes. As described, the tools selected for 'working through' usually range from psychotherapy, self-help groups and specialised seminars and workshops, to more alternative approaches such as family constellations, homeopathy, and bodywork, etc.

For Charlotte and Paula on the other hand, it was the gaps in the family history and in the transmission between the generations that caused them pain and a sense of absence and weakness in their sense of self. Their aim was to fill the void, (re)connect with the past and to feel their lives embedded in a family lineage that stretched back over multiple generations. Many other participants shared this desire (more in line with Charlotte's story as I explained). In this case, rather than making an appointment with a healer or a therapist, *Kriegsenkel* were consulting historical archives, interviewing relatives or travelling to the *Heimat* of their ancestors to create a sense of continuity and belonging. Rather than (just) aligning with the Western 'therapy culture', this endeavour links the *Kriegsenkel* in with the current 'memory boom' and literary wave of family novels in Germany (Assmann 2007) as well as with the tracing and collecting of genealogical information, which, as Dragojlovic (2014) noted, is currently very popular in many countries, including in Australia. While different at first sight, the two strategies for addressing the past are not mutually exclusive, and in fact many of the more active *Kriegsenkel* followed both paths - 'working through' and 'reconnecting' - although one usually more passionately than the other. The aims are the same: to identify, explore and alleviate the causes of emotional suffering, to create meaning for one's life history and to achieve a greater sense of peace, acceptance and happiness.

I have to admit, the life histories I have chosen to tell in more detail were somehow the 'good news stories' (although Rainer's in particular surely does not sound that way), in the sense that these *Kriegsenkel* came to a degree of resolution and closure with the topic. Many others were still somewhere on their *Kriegsenkel* trajectory when I talked to them. Some were just starting their 'journey', excited, shocked and keen to explore every aspect of this newly found issue. Others were stuck in depression, loneliness and hopelessness or were angry with their parents, while others again were finding comfort and camaraderie in the support groups and other activities of the *Kriegsenkel* scene.

Two of my participants found each other along the way. They are my favourite good news story.

Conclusions

Clearing the fog, re-establish the broken connections to our entire history, including the painful aspects, creating and deepening trust; this is how I see the generational task of the [...] *Kriegsenkel*. We should be healers of history (Süss 2015:40).

This dissertation explored the recent emergence of the generational identity of the grandchildren of WWII in Germany. The *Kriegsenkel* feel that trauma and other unresolved war experiences were transmitted to them by their parents and grandparents, who lived through WWII as children or adults. My research followed the construction of this new individual and collective identity formed around the search for an explanation and legitimisation of emotional suffering. The *Kriegsenkel* trace the source of their current psychological issues back to WWII. 'Becoming' a *Kriegsenkel* and re-writing one's life history as a sufferer of transmitted war trauma created a new context and meaning for emotional pain and life challenges, and, at least in some cases, previously therapy-resistant problems could be addressed and alleviated.

My thesis naturally fell into three parts: Chapters 1-3 outlined my methodology and data collection and set the recent emergence of the *Kriegsenkel* movement into the historical context of Germany's public and private narratives about WWII. Chapters 4 and 5 analysed the war grandchildren movement as a social phenomenon and documented the construction of *Kriegsenkel* identities, and Chapter 6 and 7 delved deeper into individual narratives of transgenerational transmission of trauma and perpetratorship. In these conclusions, I will briefly summarise the findings of each of the three parts; advance some more general points and discuss their relevance beyond the German case study. I will also raise questions that would be interesting to investigate further in the future.

Realising the hidden legacy of war

My German interview partners - predominantly well-educated middle class professionals, - often drew different kinds of first-, second- and third-hand memories together as they reconstructed their life histories during our interviews in Berlin in 2012/13, blended with information from historical archives, family constellation workshops and direct observations of their family's behaviour. Superimposed were psychological concepts of trauma and transgenerational transmission of trauma, constituting the narrative backbone that structured the life histories and created new causal connections between past life events. While it could be said in terms of Ian Hacking's (1995) concept that this was a 're-writing of the past', I argued that the newly constructed narrative was subjectively felt to be a particularly good fit, felt to be more coherent and meaningful than previous ones.

I then argued that the gaps and silences in public and private narratives were a key reason why the impact of the war on the broader population had gone largely unnoticed for almost 60 years. As West Germans (at least officially) accepted responsibility for the crimes committed by the Nazi regime and as East Germany focussed on building a socialist future rather than on dwelling on the past, most aspects of wartime suffering of the German majority population were excluded from the culture of public WWII commemoration on both sides of the divided country, in particular in the 1970 and '80 when my participants went to school. It was not until the early 2000s, when there was a sense that the moral taboo around the public discussion of wartime suffering was progressively lifting, that an abundance of eyewitness accounts of the war appeared in books, documentaries and TV programs. Concurrently, Germans also for the first time considered the long-term psychological impact of the war on the eyewitness generation - the war children - and their descendants - the war grandchildren.

The public silences around wartime suffering were compounded by partly overlapping taboos, secrets and gaps in family communication about WWII, ranging from almost complete silence to incessant talking. My interviews revealed the difficulties (and often unwillingness) of the parent and grandparent generation to share their painful and shameful memories in a way that would have satisfied the curiosity of their children and grandchildren. I also showed that rather than being the victims they often portrayed themselves to be, the younger generation in fact played an active role in the intergenerational dialogue. In many cases they were pushing for answers, while in others they were accepting or even reinforcing tabooed subjects, or they were blocking out aspects of the traumatic impact of the war by focusing on their family's suspected support for the Nazi regime. However, overall the dominant impression was that there was 'not enough talk' and that the prevailing secrets and silences had left many *Kriegsenkel* without a clear chronology of the family history or a sense of belonging and identity.

The broader question that remains for me at the end of my thesis is how to appropriately 'master the past' (Herf 1997) in the aftermath of conflict, war and violence, where a population - or today more commonly certain parts of a population - need to come to terms with the atrocities committed, as well as with their traumatic losses. Since across cultures the eyewitness generation tends to remain silent about a difficult past, could this be seen as a non-pathological response to mass violence as Carol Kidron (2009a, 2009b, 2012) argued? Or do silences need to be 'broken' as psychologists demand, "because what cannot be talked about can also not be put to rest; and if it is not, the wounds continue to fester from generation to generation" (Bettelheim 1985:166)? In my view there may not be a simple answer to that.

In the case of Germany after 1945, respect for the millions of victims of the German aggression, including the 6 million European Jews murdered in the

Holocaust, was the context for an extended period of public silencing of the suffering of the German majority population. In my view, at the time this was the only morally acceptable path, even if it meant that some of the war's traumatic impact receded into the background and remained unseen and largely unaddressed. As Henryk M. Broder said, "Everything the Germans had to go through during the war and after the war was mere discomfort compared with what the Nazis did to their victims." (Crossland 2008) Attempting to come to terms with the crimes Germans had committed was the moral imperative.

However, the international landscape has changed since the time of the Nuremberg trials. After the 1980s new instruments, such as Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, have become available to deal with the aftermath of conflicts, civil wars and dictatorial regimes. Although they are not without controversy (see for example Wilson 2001 for the TRC in South Africa), they do seem to offer an opportunity for different voices to be heard and for complex narratives of the recent past to emerge without long delays, including aspects of both perpetratorship and victimhood. This may also positively affect the communication patterns within families. It is clear from my case study that while both spheres can follow slightly different norms, public discourses significantly impact on private communication about the past, by either encouraging or discouraging the sharing of memories.

On the other hand, when it comes to dealing with the reluctance of the eyewitness generation to privately share their experiences with their children and grandchildren, there may not be a general lesson or 'one-size-fits-all' approach. In Kidron's (2009a, 2009b, 2012) case studies there was a level of respect for the decision by survivors of the Holocaust and the Cambodian genocide to remain silent and not to pass on their painful memories (at least not verbally) to their offspring. Few of my interviewees demonstrated this kind of respect for their families.

Raised in the age of therapeutic culture, the *Kriegsenkel* had a clear expectation of what 'healthy talk' would have looked like. They expected open and age-appropriate communication that would have allowed them to learn about all aspects of the family history, without being overwhelmed in the process. In the German case, the 'need to know' was furthermore driven by the desire to position oneself in relationship to a potential family history of Nazi perpetratorship, which made private silence even more unacceptable.

However, it also became apparent in my research that the interest in the past, and the pain related to not knowing about it, only affected certain members of the family, while others - their siblings - did not share the same concerns. I was for example the only one among their 13 grandchildren who kept asking my grandparents about the war, whereas my brothers and cousins would probably not have felt any sense of loss had my grandparents decided to keep their memories to themselves. These individual differences would of course also occur in other countries.

Lastly, drawing on my German case study, familial silence seemed to be more easily accepted in situations where the parents (and grandparents) were perceived as having adapted reasonably well to their war experience and as being able to 'function' as parents. Looking at today's victims of conflict, violence and forced displacement, this points to the importance of having the tools to help come to terms with traumatic experiences - whether through counselling or other, culturally appropriate, approaches. Helping the first generation adjust may also increase the chance for 'healthy talk', where the younger generation is able (if they so desire) to explore their family history without being overwhelmed by 'too much talk' in the process.

I thus don't believe that there is a blanket approach to the question of 'talk' and 'silence' in family communication about the past, but that it depends on individual needs, desires and abilities, to be negotiated in each family.

One crucial ingredient also is, as Ruth Wajnryb (2001) points out, the younger generation's willingness to listen with an empathy and a certain degree of openness. In the case of Germany, it is too late for the grandparent generation, but there may be still the chance for us *Kriegsenkel* to ask our parents - again - to share their memories, this time with more respect, more compassion and more understanding. The result may be different - or not.

Narratives of suffering: The Kriegsenkel identity, therapy culture

The second part of my thesis (Chapters 4 and 5) described and analysed the recent emergence of the *Kriegsenkel* movement as a broader social phenomenon. I gave an overview of its short history, its foundational books, self-understanding and the breadth of its activities. I argued that with psychological research and therapeutic practices still lagging behind due to the taboos around wartime suffering that dominated German society until the early 2000s, the *Kriegsenkel* were taking charge to 'diagnose' themselves as sufferers from transmitted war trauma. I suspected that by connecting with the life histories found in the popular war grandchildren books, and through comparing 'symptoms' with their peers in different face-to-face and online support groups, the war grandchildren were in the process of fleshing out a psychological profile of an emerging '*Kriegsenkel* syndrome'. Behind this attempt to frame their problems as a mental health issue, I saw the desire to contextualise and legitimize their previously indistinct and seemingly unjustified emotional suffering.

I furthermore showed how *Kriegsenkel* identities were constructed, explored, performed and managed entirely within the context of so-called Western 'therapy culture' (Furedi 2004); from the way people identified and understood

their life challenges as emotional problems that could be traced back to their childhood families; and how their life histories were woven and held together by psychological concepts of transgenerational transmission; to the fact that they performed and confirmed these identities in the self-help groups and discussion fora and attempted to overcome their suffering choosing from a broad range of therapeutic approaches and tools.

While much of the sociological literature focuses on the negative consequences of an all-pervasive contemporary therapeutic culture, I suggested that from the perspective of its consumers, a more nuanced evaluation is needed. While I agreed that therapeutic thinking promotes narratives of vulnerability and victimhood by encouraging individuals to understand their psychological suffering to be the result of parental shortcomings, therapeutic culture is on the other hand unequivocally experienced as empowering and liberating. It provides concepts and tools to understand, explore and alleviate the perceived burden of the past. Secondly, while therapy culture does suggest a focus on the private, individualised self and the space of the family and could be understood as discouraging social change, I argued that it is also a way of addressing problems in a environment where public claims for suffering and victimhood are still perceived as politically sensitive. I will come back to this last point below.

When I left Berlin at the end of 2012, the *Kriegsenkel* movement was still small and did not extend far beyond a handful of support groups and Internet platforms. In the last three years it has grown exponentially. There are around 20 groups now meeting regularly across the country, and the topic more frequently features in talk shows, on the radio and in the print media. In particular since May 2015, when the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII brought an increased public focus on the war and its long-term consequences, the term *Kriegsenkel* seems quite broadly known in the German public. As I am

completing my thesis the movement is still gaining momentum, and I can only speculate on its further evolution.

Judging from the increase in visits to the *Forumkriegsenkel* website (from around 1700 in 2012 to 4000 in 2015) and the expanding membership of support groups and Facebook groups, it appears that more and more people identify as *Kriegsenkel* or express an interest in the topic. Yet, overall they remain a relatively small community. With around 21 million Germans in this age group, a membership of 590 in the largest Facebook group can still be considered marginal (even when taking into account that not everyone who may identify as *Kriegsenkel* is interested in becoming active in this form). I don't believe that this is going to dramatically change in the future. Germans of this generation, who frame their emotional problems in this way, will most likely remain a therapeutic subculture.

My research clearly points to the fact that the construction and adoption of a *Kriegsenkel* identity requires more than a family history of war and violence and only tends to happen under certain conditions. The most obvious indication for this is that the new collective identity seems to find substantially less resonance among East Germans of this age group, in spite of the fact that they come from families with very similar historical experiences as their Western counterparts. A number of potential variables that come into play were discussed at the end of Chapter 5 - differential exposure to *Kriegsenkel* books, varying degrees of parental trauma resulting from the war experience, individual differences in responses among siblings etc. The two key factors however, I believe, are the degree of embeddedness in the therapeutic culture and the significance attributed to WWII in public memory. The unequal exposure to therapy culture in the two Germanys and different collective discourses surrounding accountability for the war and the Holocaust may well have altered the enlistment of the trauma profile. This could explain the dissimilar uptake in either part of the country

(which has now been re-united for almost 20 years!), highlighting the importance of discursive macro contexts for the construction of subjective identities (including illness identities) more broadly.

At some point I believe the East German *Kriegsenkel* will participate more strongly than they currently do. I recently noticed attempts on social media to gauge interest for a support group in Dresden, which would be the first group meeting in East Germany (except for the ones in Berlin, which are mixed, but also with a much stronger representation of West Germans).

Although media coverage has increased and has made the war grandchildren's emotional problems more widely known, there are no concerted efforts yet to push for official recognition of the *Kriegsenkel* as sufferers of transmitted war trauma. The establishment of the *Kriegsenkel* websites, and, most recently, the entry on Wikipedia could be a first step in this direction. On the other hand, one driving force to demand acknowledgement of psychological suffering, for example in the case of the Vietnam veterans in the US, is access to compensation and/or counselling and other social services. Neither one applies to the *Kriegsenkel* case. Compensation as victims of a war in which they have not participated and for which the generation of their grandparents had been responsible, is not an option, and, as I explained in Chapter 5, an official diagnosis as sufferers of transmitted war trauma is not required to access counselling. I do, on the other hand, expect that psychotherapists will soon become more aware of the *Kriegsenkel* issues and start catering more specifically to this clientele. This may not necessarily entail devising new therapies but adapting (or re-packaging) existing approaches to suit their needs.

Picking up on one of the critiques against therapeutic culture mentioned above - that it discourages social and political action - I believe the *Kriegsenkel*

movement will most likely continue to frame itself as therapeutic, rather than turning into a movement with broader social or political ambitions.

Nonetheless there is a political dimension to it. It could for example be argued that the culture of commemoration in both German states, and later the re-united Federal Republic, systematically suppressed or discouraged the public mentioning of German wartime suffering and thus produced an environment where the war trauma of the majority population remained hidden and unaddressed. As a result of this ‘conspiracy of silence’ (Danieli 1998), this trauma was then passed on to the next generations. The *Kriegsenkel* could frame their families and themselves as the victims of this political silencing and - as a group - demand recognition of their parents’ and grandparents’ generation as victims of war.

However, most people I talked to in Germany were firmly embedded in the culture of commemoration, and they would be intensely uncomfortable to make any public statement that could put them in the same political corner as those seen as claiming German victimhood to minimize the Holocaust and other Nazi war crimes. Also, as mentioned in Chapter 2, sanctions are still imposed on people diverting from the path of political correctness in the public memory of WWII. Framing one’s problems as psychological avoids having to navigate this ‘minefield’, as Anne-Ev Ustorff put it ¹³² - to an extent. A recent article in the Swiss *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (Plamper 2015), for example, voiced the suspicion that the *Kriegsenkel* topic, disguised as a psychotherapeutic discourse, may bring in claims of German victimhood quasi through the backdoor.

However, demarcating the framework in which the *Kriegsenkel* topic is discussed as therapeutic is not only felt to be the appropriate way of addressing the issues of the modern self, but also, as mentioned above, as providing a

¹³² Interview with Anne Ev-Ustorff on 20.II.2012.

protected environment where they can be raised without fear of public scrutiny and criticism. It would be very interesting to further investigate this phenomenon in the context of other countries, for example in relation to the recent 'psycho boom' in China (Huang 2014), to ascertain whether therapeutic environments there similarly provide a space to address the transgenerational consequences of past political campaigns and violence, which cannot be discussed in public without the fear of repercussions.

Anne-Ev Ustorf expressed to me her disappointment that the *Kriegsenkel* topic is only addressed on an individual psychological level and not seen in a broader social context. After giving examples of the long-term traumatic impact of flight, expulsion and homelessness in her war grandchildren portraits, she deliberately included a chapter in her book that criticised the restrictive policies of the current German government on refugees and asylum seekers. She was hoping that her readers might see the connection to their own family histories and become politically active. However, she said with regret, as far as she could tell, this did not happen.¹³³ In 2012, Sabine Bode also suspected that the topic would not have the potential or critical mass to turn into a mainstream social movement with common goals and ambitions, but she still hoped that this generation of middle-aged Germans would work through their current, more introverted phase of self-discovery and soul-searching to eventually play a more active role in society - even if only on an individual basis.¹³⁴

However, rather than by political ideologies, this generation's desires and goals - 'emotional health' and 'self-realisation' - are also prescribed by the therapeutic culture.¹³⁵ We, the *Kriegsenkel* strive to become healthier, happier and more

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Interview with Sabine Bode on 30.5.2012.

¹³⁵ Illouz is referring specifically to US therapeutic culture, but I think the comment holds true for the German case as well.

fulfilled. We want to be better mothers and fathers, better partners and friends, and we want to have better careers. Paradoxically and somewhat ironically, after all this work of liberating ourselves from the yoke of the family, we may ultimately turn out to be just the kind of well-adjusted, high achieving middle-class sons and daughters our parents had always wanted us to be in the first place.

Making sense of and coming to terms with the past

The third and final part of my thesis (Chapters 6 and 7) focused on the individual life histories of five *Kriegsenkel* and traced in detail how they understood their current lives as impacted by WWII.

Anja and Juliane gave accounts of transgenerational transmission in relationship to traumatic events that happened to their family members during the war, in particular the bombarding of German cities and the rape of German women around 1945, while Charlotte, Paula and Rainer told stories of places and people which were absent as a result of WWII. All five stories were drawn together in 2012/13 from personal memories, family anecdotes and historical information. They were enriched by and held together with knowledge that had recently become more readily available in the German public, including the impact of the war on the generation of their parents, the *Kriegskinder*, the occurrences of rape and sexual violence mainly by Soviet soldiers, and the long-term impact of forced migration.

I discussed some of the common psychological and biological models of transmission of trauma that my participants applied to frame their life histories, and I pointed to their respective strengths and weaknesses in explaining and addressing the subjective experiences of growing up in families affected by war. These models provided a framework and a vocabulary that allowed members of this generation to identify the source of their previously inexplicable suffering.

On the other hand, I also argued that they harbour a deterministic and mechanistic view vis-à-vis processes of transgenerational transmission. In particular, psychoanalytical imaginaries promote a compartmentalisation of the transfer between the generations that happens as an integral part of growing up, by cordoning off and aiming to extract the ‘unhealthy’ and unwanted aspects. Based on the lived experiences of the younger generation, I believe that these cannot be neatly isolated.

More generally, these models promote a pathologization of the relationship between parents and children, encouraging the offspring to understand themselves as victims of their family’s unresolved emotional damage and burdening them with the heavy task of ‘breaking the chain of transmissions’ as the only way to spare future generations a similar fate.

I suggested that concepts from the field of affect theory might be able to alleviate some of the drawbacks of the more traditional psychological narratives. Acknowledging that ‘things just pass between people’ could normalise and understanding of transmission to an extent and relieve the families from some of the judgement held against them. (I acknowledge that it would be unrealistic to think that this could completely resolve the intergenerational conflict, in particular since it involves the emotionally very charged topic of the WWII.)

In place of the mechanistic view that trauma gets handed down indefinitely from generation to generation and needs to be ‘extracted’ to achieve healing, this model would, however, allow for a view that with the passage of time and with each subsequent generation influences of traumatic memories that go back to the war would naturally be mixed with and diluted by other emotions related to more recent (positive and negative) biographical experiences.

Furthermore, I argued that gaps and absences play such an important role in narratives of transgenerational transmission, that they deserve more attention than

common models account for. Using the example of three different *Kriegsenkel* life histories, I showed how the material and immaterial losses incurred as a result of WWII were felt to have left major gaps in the sense of belonging and connection with a homeland and family traditions, while Nazi perpetratorship and war crimes led to breaks in relationships with family members, in particular grandfathers. I showed how people were able to exert agency over these absences, either by actively attempting to bridge the gap and reconnect with what was lost or by consciously breaking with the familial transmission and widen distance between the generations.

The availability of analytical tools and psychological models to explain one's emotional problems allowed for therapeutic interventions, which helped many of my participants to improve their condition. The chosen interventions differed depending on whether the transgenerational impact of the war was perceived as an emotional burden or an absence. While in the first case, approaches were chosen to liberate the person from the familial legacy; in the second case people were attempting to fill in gaps in their sense of belonging and identity. Many of my participants applied both strategies in 'working through' and coming to terms with the past, choosing from a wide range of possible therapeutic and creative approaches.

However, when it comes to the transgenerational impact of Nazi perpetratorship, the choices are much more limited. There does not seem to exist the same idea of 'extracting' an emotional legacy of guilt and shame that many felt to be the result of the familial and collective responsibility for the crimes committed under the National Socialist regime.

Having a known or suspected Nazi perpetrator in the family, one can either take a clear moral and political stance and distance oneself from them, or maintain

the connection, but then one seems to have to gloss over the historical facts regarding their role during the Third Reich.

I would like to come back to the issue I raised at the end of Chapter 6, and ask more generally: Why is there an expectation that there should *not* be a transgenerational transmission of experiences in families where the parent and grandparent generation lived through war or any other situation of conflict and mass loss? Sociologists Bertaux and Thompson (1993:9) suspect that family therapists have underestimated the “normality of the transmission processes which they describe between generations”, and that the family remains the main channel not only for the transmission of language, social standing and religion, but also for social values and aspirations, fears, world views and way of behaving (Bertaux and Thompson 1993:2-3).

To further pursue the question of the inevitability of the passing down of experiences of war and violence, it would be fascinating to expand on the research with siblings beyond what I was able to undertake within the limits of my thesis. Capturing the life histories of all brothers and sisters in a number of families could provide interesting insights into how they each responded to growing up in the same environment and why. Also, I would like to interview Germans of other generations, for example where the parents were born after 1945 and where the connection to WWII would only be through a relationship with the grandparents, and compare their responses to those of my interviewees.

It would furthermore be very interesting to compare *Kriegsenkel* narratives with those of people of the same generation across Europe (or even more broadly). How do Italians, French, or Austrians¹³⁶ of that age group relate to growing up

¹³⁶ There are *Kriegsenkel* in France and in Austria, but my understanding is that these are Germans living in these countries. I met members from the *Kriegsenkel* group in Paris in a support group meeting, for the Austrian *Kriegsenkel* see www.kriegsenkel.at [Accessed 20 August 2015]

in families that lived through WWII? Are there people who explain their current emotional problems in a similar way? If so, how is their relationship with the past constructed in the context of the public culture of commemoration of WWII in their country? Of particular interest would also be interviewing people of the *Kriegsenkel* generation in Japan, one of the German allies in WWII.

I have to admit; at the end of my exploration processes of transgenerational transmission still remain mysterious and elusive. They are hard to notice and difficult to pinpoint, in particular since many observations are constructed retrospectively and with long time lags. They are complex to diagnose even with current psychological assessment tools as transmission does not happen in isolation, but is affected and overlaid by many other biographical influences. However, what remains in my view is the subjective perception of the *Kriegsenkel* themselves, the intuitive and often non-verbal knowing that this explanation for their problems is fitting and making sense. Maybe what matters is not whether every single issue can really be traced back to the war, but that making this connection is helpful to the individual.

Yet, after all the sourcing, exploring and working through that we, as *Kriegsenkel*, have undertaken, is the war really going to end with this generation if we are able to 'break the chain of transmission'? Or do we actually keep it more alive by giving it power over our lives and by enshrining it so deeply and lastingly into our sense of identity? I am not sure what the answer to this question is.

ANZAC day revisited

As I am concluding my thesis, ANZAC day passes by again; this year is the centenary of the battle of Gallipoli in 1915, celebrated with even more public ceremonies and testimonies of military heroism. I am still not any more comfortable with these sentiments than I was four years ago, nor do I ever aim

to be. I do understand now better, however, how strengthening it may be for the descendants to connect to their grandfathers and great-grandfathers as heroes who gave their lives fighting for their country. For us Germans, thinking about our own grandfathers going to war will never be that, but maybe in its place we have a more sober view of how destructive and dehumanising war is.

My own '*Kriegsenkel* journey' was there throughout this entire thesis, sometimes explicit, often in the background, and as I went along more and more mixed with and superseded by other life and family events. I am grateful to my parents for their active interest, love and support, and in particular for my father's courage to make the difficult trip to Poland, the old *Heimat*, with me and my mother. I am thankful to my grandparents for the stories they shared, the few additional things I found out about them along the way, and the many questions that will remain forever unanswered. May they rest in peace.

Over the course of writing this PhD, I learned a lot about my country, about my generation and about the difficult long-term consequences that wars have even on the populations of the perpetrators. I had embarked on the project, hoping - naively probably - that I could in some way make a contribution to my country, helping to heal the wounds of the past. However, now, at the end, I am not certain about that anymore.

Watching the news at night hits home that war is by no means an issue of the past. There are still children today who are attacked by machine gun fire and who have to clear the streets of dead bodies after air-raids, just like Anja's father 70 years ago. There are still people who are forced to leave their homes like Charlotte's grandmothers, girls and women who are raped, and people who try to make their way on shonky boats in desperate hope of reaching a welcoming country. It pains me immensely to think that 70 years from now, another generation of anthropologists will think about how this trauma was passed on to

their children and grandchildren. I hope that after all we have learned from exploring our *Kriegsenkel* identities, we will at some point manage to get over our narcissistic self-concern and try to do something that will make that a little less likely.

Appendix - Interview Structure and Sample Questions

1. Biographical information

- Date of birth, place of birth (East or West-Germany, city or rural area), occupation, date of birth of both parents

2. Family history

- What do you know of your family's history during and immediately after WWII?

3. Family communication about WWII

- Did your parents and/or grandparents talk about their war experiences and to what extent?
- Did you ask questions?
- Did you have a sense of taboos and secrets surrounding the war, and if so, how did you respond to them?

4. Perceived impact of WWII on parents and grandparents

- How did your family deal with their war experiences?
- Do you think they affected your family life and their parenting and if so how?

5. Perceptions and impact of transgenerational transmission

- Do you feel that some of your family's WWII experiences were passed on to you? If so what and how?
- If so, how do you feel this impacted on your life?

6. The social and political environment

- Did you talk about your family history outside the immediate family, with friends etc.?
- What did you learn about WWII at school and when growing up?
- How do you feel about being German? Has this changed over time?

7. The *Kriegsenkel* movement

- Are you familiar with the term *Kriegsenkel* and if so, do you identify with it?
- Have you read the *Kriegsenkel* books?
- If so, how did you come across them?
- Do you participate *Kriegsenkel* activities, such as support groups, Internet discussions etc.?

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