

Losses, Artefacts and Feelings

Young Europeans sharing their family stories

By Constanze Jaiser

„It is important to know how these children experienced stress. I have a cousin who lives in our house with her mother and grandmother. They live in our house because of the war in the Donetsk region for about six months. She is 8 years old and she often screams in a dream, because she has bad dreams. I want to know more to help the girl to go through the horrors she remembers.“

This quote from an application letter of Anna, a young student from central Ukraine, proves how highly topical the Körber Foundation project “Children of War in Europe” is. All the more, as we received an email from Anna two days before our first “live”-meeting in Berlin. While helping her injured uncle in the Donetsk region, whose house and belongings were destroyed, she was stuck at a checkpoint for a week, and couldn’t get her visa in time. Totally sorrowful, she wrote, she couldn’t make it to Berlin.

Of course the Ukrainian case is specific in Europe, and Anna is not a little child anymore, nevertheless it shows how young people can be infected by war conflicts and how they struggle with the feelings, which emerge from armed conflicts. A lot of applications showed that many of these young Europeans have to tell stories of their own family history: related to the Second World War, revealing also post-war conflicts, and even some from the so-called Ex-Yugoslavia area could label themselves as “children of war”. In what follows, I would like to share some impressions and insights from the first day of our one-week-seminar in Berlin, where we started with a workshop on family history.

Artefacts

All of the 18 participants of the cooperation project between Körber Foundation (Hamburg) and the Agency of Historic, Civil and Media Education (Berlin) brought a family artefact to the seminar: Love letters, a poetry and a dictionary book, a ring, a brick stone, a Nazi lighter (a gift from an SS-officer to the then 12-year-old grandfather of a Serbian participant), food coupons and other documents as well as family photos,

related to WW II. But we heard also the story behind iron wedding rings of Finish great grandparents, who were children in WW I, and a false note, perfectly drawn by the then 14-year-old grandfather of a Spanish participant in order to pay for food during the Spanish Civil War.

The assignment

Initially the task was to share in partner interviews the stories behind these objects. The participants were asked to build bi-national tandems. Subsequently the team met with another pair.

Now then, the one who had listened to the story behind one artefact summarized it for the group. The idea behind was, rather than a second run-through of telling the artefact's story, an already more distant narrative perspective would happen. Besides, it fostered a further stepping out of the private family memory to a more public space.

Eventually there was the task to create a poster together that included an attempt to reflect similarities and differences; personal and general aspects of the topic “children of war”, the group might have in common. (The idea basically comes from my dear colleague Björn Krondorfer, with whom I had the pleasure to facilitate four-week-programs on the Holocaust; about intercultural encounters and the role of family history see e.g. here)

LINK <http://lernen-aus-der-geschichte.de/International/content/12232>

Losses

Coming together from different countries, these groups of two and later of four compared various children of war in Europe, who were part of their families. Also the scope of action and responsibilities of people, being involved either in persecution or in helping or rescuing those children came into focus. As a matter of course, more questions were discussed, for instance how families were dealing (differently or similar) with their stories; what the participants think and feel about the narrated events; and what according to their opinion are the challenges in Europe, especially considering the competitions and struggles on divided and conflicting memories, but also issues of refugees, of Roma, or of modern atrocities on children.

In various ways, the losses the children and youngsters in their families had suffered came into view, but at the same time a mixture of feelings: feelings the grandchildren

picked from their family member's mouth or just imagined while listening to their stories; yet also their own feelings while seeing war and losses through the eyes of a child. Let me quote a few statements from the poster presentation:

Stefan (Austria) summarizes: *“Both men [from his grand-aunt and from Agnija’s great-grandmother, CJ] didn’t come home. It’s about a heartbreaking unhappy love.”*

Jani (Finland): *“Four words or key elements we found in common in our family stories: fatherlessness, resistance, survival and ideology.”*

Milena (Serbia): *“The picture shows my grandmother, her little sister, her little brother and their mother, it was taken just hours before the first bombing [...] the Ustashe captured the family, but my grandmother and her younger sister escaped to the forest. On the way, the little sister was shot. My grandmother managed it to the forest, where she joined the partisan movement. She was 16 years old.”*

Fotini (Greece): *“My grandpa became a partisan after the Nazis and Greek traitors had murdered his brother. He fled to the mountains for a year [to the partisans, CJ]. After the war Anti-partisan forces gained power and forced my grandfather to join them, but he couldn’t fight against his friends. So he ate 4 Kilos of raw coffee in order to become sick. Which happened, 220 heartbeats, almost a heart disease, so he didn’t have to fight.”*

Tomasz (Poland): *“This brick belonged to a shed placed near my grandfather’s house. [...] When the Germans moved back from the front because of the Russian Army his whole village was destroyed. The house was from wood, so there were no remains anymore. This brick was the only remain.”*

Oldrich (Poland): *“I brought the birth certification of my grandfather. He was 6 years old, they were an eight-members family, when they were sent to Siberia by the Soviets. One pair of shoes for the whole family ... He lost his whole childhood. After the Potsdam Conference in 1947 they came back, but not to their house, they were expelled to Western Poland. He was 12. He was given a false date of birth, two years younger, so he could attend school. His whole life he celebrated this wrong birthday.”*

Rasa (Lithuania): *“I brought the last photo of my grandfather’s family [...] His older sister managed to escape to the United States, two older brothers joined the partisan groups, all the others were deported to Siberia, except from my grandfather, who was 13 or 14 years old back then. He was not at home that evening, and when he came*

back, his neighbours told him. So he was homeless, like an orphan, and survived in hiding. His parents died in Siberia.”

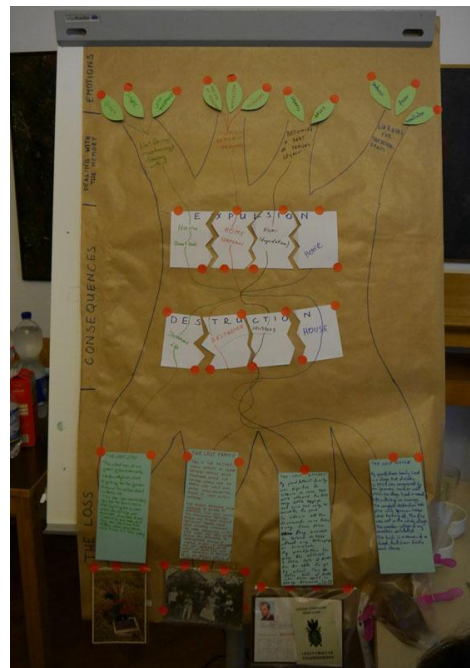
Ruth (Austria): *“The photo of the gravestone shows the story of a lost life. The oldest son of my great-grandparents [...] was forced to the front and fought for the German Army at the Northern front. He died in March 1945, a few weeks before the war ended. This loss was particularly sad for the family as he died fighting for a war which couldn’t be won anymore. Everybody knew that it would be over soon, and they were convinced that Stefan would come back, which turned out to be wrong.”*

Feelings

The tree painted on the poster by the last four students quoted here symbolizes not only the loss (bottom) and the consequences (middle), but also the emotions which were provoked by these events (top). Feelings of shame in the Austrian family were mentioned, feelings of humiliation and sorrow by those from Poland and Lithuania; yet from the grandchildren's side sadness, injustice and compassion for the grandparents.

The participants became a strong interactive group during these hours spending with family artefacts and sharing the stories behind them. One could observe confidence and empathy growing. And yes, sometimes I thought it would be worth to work more on the trans-generational transmission of feelings and trauma as well as on the importance of mentalization. For some it was hard to scratch beneath the surface of anecdotes or family legends, others were very aware of non-spoken feelings or critical questions, they were never asked in their family. For instance, when it comes down to name feelings, it was remarkable, that no participant assumed hate and anger, neither in the soul of the family member nor in his or her own.

Participating in military actions, e.g. in partisan groups, was understood as a mere resistance, not as a (indispensable) execution of violence, which causes traumatic



Tree of family artefacts, made by 4 participants. Source: Agency for Education.

experiences in children's lives, too. Being deported to Siberia meant predominantly sitting in the cold and starving as a family entity. The question for example, if this kind of life destroyed caring behaviour towards the children, was not asked, as if this could be understood as a disloyal attack against the collective family memory.

On the other hand, questions towards the complex grey zone of collaboration with the Nazi regime or critical questions towards the own post-war society were raised occasionally in the tandem researches.

But taken as a whole, I think the students began to realize, that they all possessed an emotional comprehension of the continual powerful effects of Second World War and war atrocities in general, a kind of knowledge, that initially seemed to have nothing to do with the cognitive and analytical dimensions of that history acquired in schools and universities. It became obvious that intercultural encounters provide the chance of exploring memories and working through them in order to understand their meanings instead of being overwhelmed by emotional affects or indeed manipulated by official historiography.