
Luisa Banki

Remembering the Shoah and the Second World War in German Third-Generation Literature¹

TEKSTY DRUGIE 2024, NR 1, S. 70–87

DOI: 10.18318/td.2024.en.1.5 | ORCID: 0000-0002-4150-8922

Literature of the Third Generation

To speak of first-, second- or third-generation authors at all, means to posit the Shoah as the beginning of a new temporal and generational reckoning. In this perspective, the Shoah is an event that, as Vanessa F. Fogel writes in her novel *Sag es mir* [Tell me] (2010), stands “at the beginning of everything, at the beginning of my whole existence.”² This insistence correlates with an understanding of the transgenerational influence of the European Jewish experience of persecution and murder.

Hannah Arendt’s famous dictum in a conversation with Günter Gaus in 1964 continues to hold true:

1 This essay is a slightly modified translation of my article “Erinerte Erfahrung und Erfahrung der Erinnerung. Selbstreflexivität und Erinnerungshandeln bei Vanessa F. Fogel, Channah Trzebiner und Johannes Böhme,” *Yearbook for European Jewish Literature Studies* 10 (2023): 11–26.

2 Vanessa F. Fogel, *Sag es mir*, trans. Katharina Böhmer (Frankfurt/M.: Weissbooks, 2010), 96. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

Luisa Banki – PhD, Lecturer in German Literature at the University of Wuppertal, Germany, and convenor of the Research Network “3G. Positions of the Third Generation after the Second World War and the Shoah in Contemporary Literature and Arts,” funded by the German Research Foundation. Email: banki@uni-wuppertal.de.

Before that we said: Well, one has enemies. That is entirely natural. Why shouldn't a people have enemies? But this was different. It was really as if an abyss had opened. Because we had the idea that amends could somehow be made for everything else, as amends can be made for just about everything at some point in politics. But not for this. *This ought not to have happened*. And I don't mean just the number of victims. I mean the methods, the fabrication of corpses and so on [...]. This should not have happened. Something happened there to which we cannot reconcile ourselves. None of us ever can.³

A first crucial insight is that this “we” of those who cannot reconcile themselves to what happened refers to both the survivors and – as we now know – their descendants. The children and grandchildren of survivors cannot re-present – that is, make present again in their minds – the events of the past through direct remembrance. Yet they can be confronted with inherited “postmemories” that, as Marianne Hirsch has shown, are perpetuated in families through stories, images, objects, and behaviors.⁴ Hirsch developed her concept of postmemory with the second generation in mind, meaning the intergenerational exchange of direct confrontation between survivor-parents and their children. If – as I want to do in the following – we inquire into the specifics of third-generation remembrance, the focus must shift to transgenerational modes of remembering.

My interest here centers on the questions of how the Shoah and Second World War are remembered in German-language literature of the third generation and how literature itself becomes a space of possibility for acts of remembrance. I will discuss three texts: Vanessa F. Fogel's *Sag es mir* [Tell Me] (2010), Channah Trzebiner's *Die Enkelin oder Wie ich zu Pessach die vier Fragen nicht wusste* [The granddaughter or how I didn't know the four questions during Passover] (2013), both of which are narrated from a third-generation Jewish perspective, and Johannes Böhme's *Das Unglück schreitet schnell* [Misfortune moves quickly] (2019), which presents a third-generation non-Jewish German perspective. All three texts are written from the perspectives of autobiographically informed first-person narrators who explicitly present themselves as grandchildren in the generational chain after the Shoah and Second World War. They approach history via their grandparents' life stories and in doing so, explore their ability as descendants to both remember and narrate history.

3 Hannah Arendt, “What Remains? The Language Remains: A Conversation with Günter Gaus,” in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954. Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 1994), 1–23; 13f.

4 Cf. Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

After a brief contextualization of third-generation literature in contemporary memory debates and literary politics, my aim is to identify dominant narrative strategies of third-generation literature in three readings focused on literary practices of remembrance.

Remembrance of the Shoah and Second World War in the Third Generation

The third generation – grandchildren mostly born in the 1970s and 1980s – face specific challenges in their attempts to commemorate the Shoah and Second World War in literature. For the witnesses themselves (retrospectively named the first generation) and – in direct confrontation with their words, or their silence – their children, the central question had been about how to bear witness, remember, and represent National Socialism, the Second World War, and the singularity of the Shoah.⁵ The generation of the grandchildren, however, is confronted with an additional difficulty: an acute awareness of the mediatedness of history. The always precarious relation of remembrance and reconstruction on the one hand, and of narration and construction on the other, is a central concern for the third generation. This generation has only ever been confronted with the historical events in a mediated way, by way of narration or instruction. The third generation's own lived memory or historical context is the time of remembrance, and the act of learning from history must also encompass learning from remembered history.⁶

Relative to the Second World War and the Shoah, the third generation is positioned at the transition to what Jan Assmann called cultural memory.⁷ With increasing distance to the direct conversation with contemporary witnesses – a prerequisite of communicative memory – the process of collective remembering is culturally formed to ensure the transmission of memories and remembered experiences. The third generation finds itself at this point of transition from the immediate to the mediated, from the private to the public, from familial remembering to an institutionalized 'culture of memory.' Its literature inscribes itself into the opening of this transition. Third-generation

5 Cf. e.g. James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

6 Cf. Astrid Messerschmidt, "Aus dem Umgang mit der Geschichte lernen – Ansatzpunkte einer feministischen Kritik der Erinnerung in der dritten Generation nach dem Holocaust," in *Jahrbuch Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung in der Erziehungswissenschaft. Geschlechtertypisierungen im Kontext von Familie und Schule*, ed. Sabine Andresen and Barbara Rendtorff (Leverkusen: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2006), 77–90; 77f.

7 Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (München: C.H. Beck, 1992).

literature should not be understood as the mere reproduction of memories, but rather as the production of acts of memory – as memory or remembrance work in the sense of approaching the past from an emphatically present position:

The use of the term “memory action” is explicitly about the active process of dealing with the past, about “memory work.” In the younger generation and all generations to come, referencing, reflecting, participating (in) the past will only be possible with “conscious efforts,” so that the term “memory work” refers especially to the active, dynamic process and the accompanying more or less strong efforts as well as the fundamental incompleteness of this at times conflictual process.⁸

Third-generation literature explicitly narrates the past from the perspective of those born later. On the one hand, it attempts to preserve the memories and experiences of contemporary witnesses. On the other hand, it always reflects on how and to what extent this is even possible and what part today’s investigators and narrators play in this.⁹ The literature of the third generation is situated amidst a more general proliferation of historical narratives, which Aleida Assmann described as a new memory literature [*neue Erinnerungsliteratur*].¹⁰ Since emerging in the 1990s, this literature has presented “a new surge of remembering and a late response to the violent history of the twentieth century.”¹¹ “New memory literature” represents a “new genre” because in addition to “attention, linguistic ability and imagination as the primary driving forces of literature [...] one’s own experience is added, which becomes the impetus or raw material of literature.”¹²

The special significance of the autobiographical foundation of recent memory literature, which Assmann sees as its genre-defining feature, is explained in the case of third generation literature by the contemporary

8 Kirstin Frieden, *Neuverhandlungen des Holocaust. Mediale Transformationen des Gedächtnisparadigmas* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2014), 19f.

9 Cf. Daniel Fulda and Stephan Jaeger, “Einleitung. Romanhaftes Geschichtserzählen in einer erlebnisorientierten, enthierarchisierten und hybriden Geschichtskultur,” in *Romanhaftes Erzählen von Geschichte. Vergegenwärtigte Vergangenheiten im beginnenden 21. Jahrhundert*, ed. Daniel Fulda and Stephan Jaeger (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019), 1–54; 10.

10 Aleida Assmann, “Wem gehört die Geschichte? Fakten und Fiktionen in der neueren deutschen Erinnerungsliteratur,” *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 36 (1) (2011): 213–225; 216.

11 Assmann, “Wem gehört die Geschichte?,” 216.

12 Ibid.

historical position of the authors: As the “bridging generation,”¹³ that is the last generation that still personally knew survivors of the war and Shoah in adulthood, the third generation considers itself responsible for shaping the transition from the witnesses’ direct remembering to the mediated remembering of future generations. One reaction to this liminal position at the transition from immediacy to mediatedness is a valorization of the direct possibilities of remembering, in particular the direct exchange with members of one’s own family, which are experienced as dwindling, and thus fragile and valuable. In third-generation literature, this manifests itself in the dominance of autobiographical or autofictional approaches to history. In much of second-generation literature, the focus remains on the binary parent-child relationship and on measuring the rupture with – or distinction between – the experiences of child and parent(s). Third generation literature extends its focus to encapsulate other generations, or more precisely: one additional generation, that of the grandparents. It is interested not in ruptures but in continuities. This is why third-generation literature mostly recounts history from a transgenerational perspective, while the narrative situation often evolves around an autobiographical first-person narrator in search of the historical experiences of older family members.¹⁴

Third-generation literature questions the workings of past, present, and possible future transmissions of memories. It focuses on the ways in which history is mediated through stories. This is the meta-perspective inherent to third-generation literature’s confrontations with National Socialism, the World War and the Shoah: the question how historical knowledge can be remembered, narrated, and passed on.¹⁵ The resulting self-reflexivity is – as I will show in my readings of three works that are paradigmatic in that respect – a striking characteristic that unites the otherwise heterogeneous literary works by authors of the third generation. In third-generation literature, the remembered experience and the experience of remembrance become inseparable.

13 Esther Jilovsky, *Remembering the Holocaust. Generations, Witnessing and Place* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 103.

14 Cf. Fulda and Jaeger “Einleitung. Romanhaftes Geschichtserzählen,” 9; who propose the new genre term “autobiographical generational narrative” for this.

15 Cf. Meike Hermann, “Spurensuche in der dritten Generation. Erinnerung an Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust in der jüngsten Literatur,” in *Repräsentationen des Holocaust im Gedächtnis der Generationen. Zur Gegenwartsbedeutung des Holocaust in Israel und Deutschland*, ed. Margit Frölich, Yariv Lapid and Christian Schneider (Frankfurt/M.: Brandes & Apsel, 2004), 139–157; 140.

Vanessa F. Fogel, *Sag es mir* (2010)

Sag es mir [Tell me] by Vanessa Fogel (*1981) was written in English but published only in German translation. First-person narrator Fela shares a number of biographical traits with her author: both born in Germany, but growing up in Israel and the US. The novel recounts the story of this young woman traveling from New York to Poland with her survivor grandfather Mosha to visit the places of his childhood, the sites of persecution, and the concentration camp in which he was incarcerated. This storyline recalls the trope of revisiting the lost old world of Eastern Europe, the root search or heritage trip familiar from American Jewish literature. Interwoven with the story of her journey to Poland, however, are other stories: of Fela's childhood in Israel and of her coming of age, sexual and otherwise in the US; of her memories, associations, and musings on her family; her Jewishness; her being a girl and a woman; and above all, her reflections on the Shoah, the World War and the present possibilities of remembrance.

Fela begins her trip to Poland listening to her grandfather's life-story with the certainty,

that I have heard these things before, that I remember them, from the fragments of stories that he has told me again and again, that have always been present, that have always been the basis of everything.¹⁶

In Poland, she visits the cemetery that houses not only the grave of her grandfather's mother but also "a path full of roots."¹⁷ In tracing these metaphorical roots, she is following her conviction that the Second World War is the war "that stands at the beginning of everything, at the beginning of my whole existence."¹⁸ But where does this conviction and knowledge come from?

For as long as I have been able to think – in a body of the size that one already remembers but has not yet learnt to read and write – I have been watching documentaries on television on Holocaust Remembrance Day.¹⁹

The fact that she has been confronted with Holocaust knowledge in a mediated form since before she was herself literate both corresponds to and goes beyond postmemory experiences because TV-documentaries are a form of

¹⁶ Fogel, *Sag es mir*, 31.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

institutionalized – in the case of the Israeli Yom haShoah also ritualized – remembrance beyond the scope of memories transferred within the family unit. Fela remembers having always already known about the Shoah; she has always lived – in Eva Hoffman’s words – “after such knowledge.”²⁰ And she specifies the source of this knowledge: mediated representations, films (re)presenting history.

She notices the effects this mediated history has on her present when she visits a former concentration camp. On the journey, the real landscape directly in front of her eyes and the mediated, remembered, imagined landscape overlap.

Instead of the landscapes outside, instead of the Polish landscape passing by outside, inner landscapes run before my eyes as if from a film reel that is part of my brain, my memory, my library, my memory.²¹

The real landscape becomes a screen on which Fela projects mediated accounts of that same landscape from films and from her grandfather’s story.

So what does this young protagonist, who defines herself, primarily or even exclusively, as the granddaughter of survivors, do? Exposed to traumatic images as a child, she continues to expose herself to them – and thus to a trauma that is not hers and yet is hers. She is – and this too is made clear by the ritualized moment of her confrontation with the trauma – trapped in a rigidity. She explains her whole existence to herself from something that she neither understands nor describes, but which she sees and which superimposes itself over the perception of her own reality. Only by contrasting these images with a reality – that of her grandfather and of their shared journey in Poland – does this rigid form begin to change. Towards the end of the novel and in the course of a narration of her experiences – meaning through a productive engagement with them – she realizes,

that, having been in Poland, the gravity of the Holocaust has changed its shape within me – almost physically. It has taken the form of something round, of something concrete and finished.²²

In *Sag es mir*, the history of the Shoah is always already mediated history for the granddaughter-narrator. This is why questions of mediation, medial

20 Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge. Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

21 Fogel, *Sag es mir*, 128.

22 *Ibid.*, 277.

representation and the possibilities of passing on historical knowledge are debated again and again. And it is why the self-reflexive thematization of the granddaughter's position as both recipient and possible writer of her grandfather's story runs like a red thread through the book. The grandfather repeatedly wishes to have his memories written down; the first-person narrator doubts she could write this book of memories at all.

His book, I think, the book he wants so badly; could I be his voice? Would Grandpa want me to write down his story if he knew I might upset the order [...]. And if I changed a word or even a sentence, would he still tolerate me as his witness, as an observer when he tells his story or wouldn't he? What truth could I possibly tell and pass on [...].²³

As the thoughts and doubts of the first-person narrator become part of the narrative, a meta-perspective opens up, a moment of self-reflexivity.

Narrative self-reflexivity can also be seen elsewhere in Fogel's auto-fictional novel, as the first-person narrator not only defines herself as the granddaughter of survivors, but explicitly inscribes herself in the generational chain of her family. Fela is named – this is Jewish custom and a familiar motif in Holocaust literature – after her great-aunt, the grandfather's sister who perished. While listening to her grandfather's stories, Fela is particularly interested in the fate of the elder Fela. At one point, she is even convinced that her own life story – in particular an episode during her adolescence when she suffered from an eating disorder – has been determined by the fate of her eponymous ancestor who died of starvation. Between such identification and the recognition of the fact that she knows very little about her great-aunt's life, Fela struggles to find her own position in the family and its history. Eventually, by gradually accepting her grandfather's task of writing his book of memories, she takes her place in the generational chain of her family. On her mother's skeptical remark that she does not need to find a place for herself in every story she hears, Fela thinks:

It is his story, I know that. I hear stories and maybe I don't have to find a place for myself in them, but I have found one [...]. I have found a place for myself in his stories – in his stories of life and death, past and present – and I have also found Fela; and it is a place that is more concrete and real and at the same time more imaginary than any other place, and it is mine and only mine.²⁴

²³ *Ibid.*, 191.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 243.

When Fela sets out on her journey to Poland, she wants to “make herself disappear”²⁵ so as to give space to her grandfather and his stories. At the end of the novel, she wants something different: the granddaughter will pass on her grandfather’s story, but only by telling both the story itself, and the story of how he told her. Paradigmatic for third-generation literature, questions of remembering, mediating, and transmitting history stand at this self-reflexive novel’s core.

Channah Trzebiner, *Die Enkelin oder Wie ich zu Pessach die vier Fragen nicht wusste* (2013)

Self-reflexivity also features prominently in Channah Trzebiner’s (*1981) autobiographical text from 2013 entitled *Die Enkelin oder Wie ich zu Pessach die vier Fragen nicht wusste* [The granddaughter or how I didn’t know the four questions during Passover]. In terms of content, the entire text is a self-reflection by the first-person narrator on her position as a third-generation German Jew after the Shoah. In terms of form, moments of self-reflexivity are visible in the text’s conspicuous multilingualism. In the case of Trzebiner, who was born and raised in Frankfurt am Main, this multilingualism is not the consequence of migration – as it is for so many authors of contemporary German-language Jewish literature who did not learn German as their first language. Rather, it stems from the survival of her Yiddish-speaking grandparents, whose linguistic, historical, and emotional heritage the first-person narrator takes on.

Trzebiner’s narrator describes her childhood as the granddaughter of survivors and her knowledge of being “a substitute for murdered lives.”²⁶ The novel opens with an explicit, albeit conflicted, self-positioning:

I accept who I am. I am happy to be able to do that. For years, I had cut off the connection to my innermost self, making sure that my own feelings had no space. [...] I did this for my loved ones, in order to fill a hole in history, to be a substitute for murdered lives. To make two out of one, to let those who have disappeared live on. How could I have done otherwise. My name is Channah, like my grandmother’s youngest sister.²⁷

The inescapability of her familial position as a “substitute” – already hinted at in the rhetorical question that closes not with a question mark but with

25 Ibid., 62.

26 Channah Trzebiner, *Die Enkelin oder Wie ich zu Pessach die vier Fragen nicht wusste* (Frankfurt/M.: Weissbooks, 2013), 11.

27 Ibid.

a full stop – is connected to the first-person narrator's realisation that she is at once necessary to her family and necessarily overlooked:

When my grandparents looked at me, they must have seen others. My person was not important. I was proof that there had been others. Children, spouses, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters.

How could they have loved me at all costs?

My grandpa said: *Daine hur sind glach zi di hur fin mainem sin.*

What his son's name was before the war, how old he was when, hopping on one leg, he and his heavily pregnant mum were herded into the gas chamber before my grandfather's eyes, I don't know.²⁸

Her life in Germany, as well as the time spent in Israel and the US, is marked by omnipresent, though rarely explicit, memories of (her grandparents' memories of) the Shoah. The novel's central concern is transgenerational traumatization and its impact on the second and especially third generation, represented by the first-person narrator.

The grandparents play a decisive role. After her father's early death, the narrator's grandfather takes over the paternal position within her family unit. In everyday scenes rich in dialogue, the grandfather's speeches are rendered exclusively in transcribed but not translated Yiddish, so that the text is in parts bilingual (wherein Yiddish words and sentences – unlike English ones, for example – are set in italics and thus already emphasized in the typeface).

"Channah, Channale," it sounds through Gottfried-Keller-Straße. My aunt is not calling me, she is shouting for me. Why does everyone have to shout like that? As I walk through the garden, Rahel says, "I didn't know where you were. Where have you been?"

"I'm here," I say. "I'm here with you. Forever, because you would always scream if I were gone."

Grandpa: „*Wi bist di gewein?*“

Me: „*A minite far di tir,*“ um zu atmen, denke ich.

Granpa: „*Me tar nisht loifn a soi fil oif die gassn.*“

Me: „*Iech bin do.*“

Silence. Grandpa stares ahead, Rachel stares ahead. There is utter silence. Why should I always be here for silence, I ask myself. For sitting shiva.²⁹

²⁸ Ibid., 12.

²⁹ Ibid., 52.

The linguistic closeness between German and Yiddish is obvious here. At the same time, however, the differences owed to Hebraic and Slavonic influences and especially to a syntax different from German are accentuated – with potentially alienating effects for a German readership (as a concession to the fact that Yiddish is another language, Trzebiner adds a Yiddish glossary as a translation aid).

On one level, the novel's multilingualism underwrites the authenticity of the characters' way of speaking. But perhaps more significantly, the simultaneity of closeness and distance and similarity and strangeness that is characteristic of the relationship between German and Yiddish itself mirrors the ambivalent relationship between German and Jewish in post-Shoah Germany (this holds true for both the first-person narrator's inner conflict about being both German and Jewish as well as for encounters between non-Jewish and Jewish Germans).

And most importantly, Yiddish metonymically represents the murdered community of Yiddish-speakers. In the novel, it is spoken exclusively by the grandparents and the granddaughter-narrator; it becomes the medium of trauma. By speaking Yiddish as a matter of course despite being born in 1980s Germany, the young narrator takes on her self-professed familial task of "filling a hole in history."³⁰ The incorporation of longer Yiddish dialogues in the novel without commentary or compromise reproduces the confrontation with the trauma and its transgenerational persistence. For all its nameability and approximability, the trauma remains unspeakable and untranslatable.

The matter-of-factness with which the first-person narrator speaks and writes Yiddish, the language of the dead and the living, also illustrates her inescapable attachment to the history of her family's persecution and murder: "I didn't have the choice to say it was too much for me. History is everywhere in our home."³¹ The ubiquity of the history of the Shoah means the presence of loss, of trauma: "It remains an open wound."³² Thus, the granddaughter not only understands it as her task to "fill a hole in history"; by taking on the traumatic legacy, she also takes in the "hole" within herself: "the black hole [...] that exists within me and from time to time demands its attention and threatens to swallow me up."³³

In trying to name her traumatization by naming the trauma of her survivor grandparents, Trzebiner's autobiographical narrator attempts to free

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 224f.

³² *Ibid.*, 239.

³³ *Ibid.*, 115.

herself from her omnipresent “feelings about the Holocaust.”³⁴ This omnipresence is evident in her family shaped by transgenerational traumatization: “Some may think that I am exaggerating at this point, but I simply did not have any temporal or spatial distance to my grandparents, my aunt or my mother in any phase of my life. Their feelings and thoughts have covered me like a second skin.”³⁵ But mediated representations of the Shoah also play an important role here, with Trzebiner reflecting on the various medial forms conveying something of that history. She describes her handling of documentary photo and film materials³⁶ as well as her inevitable association of train journeys with deportation trains: “My brain plays the music from *Schindler’s List* to it.”³⁷

Her awareness of the presence of the history of the Shoah repeatedly clashes with non-Jewish Germans of her generation who avoid or fail to take an interest in their own family histories:

I am always amazed that so many think that their grandparents had nothing to do with the regime of injustice. Most of my non-Jewish friends have never asked their grandparents what they did during the war. I’m not bewildered by this so much because my grandparents were affected, but because my friends simply don’t know who their grandparents are, what they experienced and how they had to adjust after the war. What was on their minds.³⁸

Trzebiner’s autobiographical reflection “on the consequences of the Holocaust”³⁹ also takes into view the third generation of descendants of perpetrators and bystanders of National Socialism. Her book thus undertakes a threefold attempt at understanding: first, at self-understanding that seeks to find words for the “hole” she has internalized as a granddaughter; second, at making her position as the granddaughter of survivors comprehensible to a German-speaking (meaning mostly non-Jewish) reading public; and finally, it attempts to understand the unnamed, undiscussed consequences of the murder for the descendants of the murderers.

34 Ibid., 125.

35 Ibid., 125.

36 Cf. *ibid.*, 138f.

37 Ibid., 125.

38 Ibid., 226.

39 Ibid., 205.

Slowly the world is realizing that the genocide continues to have an effect in the following generations. [...] What about the poor blind youths who are not connected to history at all because they have nothing to do with the victims of the Holocaust. They don't even know that the actual poison of the regime is still affecting them [...]. Poor Germany, it was only liberated in small parts. What remains after such a catastrophe: broken relationships between people. On both sides.⁴⁰

Johannes Böhme, *Das Unglück schreitet schnell* (2019)

Johannes Böhme's (*1987) *Das Unglück schreitet schnell* [Misfortune moves quickly] is the autobiographical examination of a non-Jewish third-generation German of his own family history. It is the grandson's attempt to understand the lives of his grandmother and her first husband during National Socialism and the Second World War. The two were, in Christopher R. Browning's (1992) term, "ordinary Germans": she worked as a secretary, he was a soldier in the Wehrmacht, "an unfanatical National Socialist, a reflexive anti-Semite, an adherent of military virtues, if only because they were the only ones he had internalized."⁴¹

Böhme's book does not tell of an intimate family relationship, but offers a decidedly detached attempt to understand something about the lives of two people: the grandmother Anny with whom the autobiographical narrator was never particularly close and who died when he was 14 years old, and her first husband, the Wehrmacht soldier Hermann Bartens who had died decades before Böhme was born. His most important sources are the letters Bartens sent from the Eastern Front to Anny, which the author retrieved from the proverbial (and in his case, literal) attic long after her death. Other historical sources also play a major role: Böhme, a journalist, presents a meticulously researched book. He describes his painstaking efforts to learn about military history, his travels to present-day Volgograd, where Hermann Bartens disappeared in January 1943, and his attempts to get as accurate a picture as possible of Barten's time and deeds in the Wehrmacht. Throughout, he expresses a deep appreciation and at the same time a deep mistrust of his historical source material:

Anny always had a tendency to lies, half-truths, retouching [...]. Did she really keep all the letters? Did she feel she was the guardian of all his words? Or was she afraid of our judgement of her love? Did she, after all, burn some pages in her oven that tormented her too much or that perhaps allowed conclusions to be

⁴⁰ Ibid., 242f.

⁴¹ Johannes Böhme, *Das Unglück schreitet schnell* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2019), 201.

drawn about certain cruelties or attitudes that were no longer acceptable at least since the 1970s?

And what about Hermann: can I trust his observations? What does he leave out? Where did he spare Anny from overly cruel details?

[...]

There are the official documents, the battle reports and diaries that the infantry division sent to Berlin. There, the war was a movement of forces seen from a great height, a constant advancing, retreating and the bare numbers of dead, missing, captured. A detailed view that cannot answer what is most important.

And the letters I do have trigger their own kind of blindness. I cannot read them. The Sütterlin in which they are written to me is only spikes, curls and loops [...].⁴²

The letters were transcribed – in a remarkable move of transgenerational collaboration to pass on and preserve family knowledge – by Böhme's father.⁴³

Self-reflexivity – introduced by Böhme's treatment of his source materials and his descriptions of his efforts at research and reconstruction – plays a crucial role in this text too. By placing history and family history – the “detailed view” of general history and the details of private stories – in relation to each other, Böhme is equally interested in the preservation and transmission of the testimonies of contemporary witnesses and the question of how his treatment of these very testimonies shapes history in the process of writing. The nodal point of this actualization of the tension between history and story is the first-person narrator.

Böhme's book is explicitly dedicated to examining this tension: he alternates long passages reconstructing Hermann's marches and battles in Eastern Europe with portrayals of his grandmother's everyday life in Germany and descriptions of his own efforts to understand both. However, he does not present his reconstructions and findings (only) as a factual narrative (which also features black-and-white photographs as proof of authenticity). Rather, he interweaves them with reflections on their inherent inescapable uncertainties and, above all, with poeticizing and fictionalizing elements. Intertextual references, allusions, paraphrases and quotations from very different historical, philosophical and literary pre-texts – reports by Wehrmacht soldiers, folk songs, poems, Wittgenstein's diaries and many more – are woven into the text. Typographically detached dialogues of fragmented witness statements are periodically interspersed throughout the text, creating polyphonic, dramatic dialogues. The historical is thus presented in an explicitly poetic way:

⁴² *Ibid.*, 254f.

⁴³ *Cf. ibid.*, 255.

Otto
From afar, the masses of Russians looked like black clouds;
 Karl
The sergeant looked at the wounded man
 Otto
when you aimed into that,
 Karl
and said
 Otto
then so many
 Karl
"Nah, leave that one"
 Otto
fell⁴⁴

By mixing factual and fictionalizing-poeticizing narrative elements, Böhme points to the precarious relationship between historical reconstruction and literary construction. Imagination plays an important role in this self-reflexive approach to history via stories:

Since I have known him, since I have been reading his thoughts, his wishes, hopes, fears, it happens to me that I look at my fellow passengers on the underground and imagine how easy it would be to turn them. That it would not be so difficult to convince them of the usefulness of a steel helmet, of the sense of fighting to the last, of the necessity of an execution.

And I sometimes imagine, without wanting to, being in his place: wearing this uniform [...]. I imagine what fear of death might feel like when an indiscriminate killing machine rages around you. And what it is like to be that machine yourself. It is one of the stranger human characteristics that we do not manage to remain completely with ourselves when someone tells us their life story. That our imagination escapes and goes along no matter where the narrators take us. That we always imagine, at least for a few moments, what it would be like to be like them. We excuse this by saying that it is only our imagination that we are giving away. Something that, so we think at least, we can reclaim at any time with no harm done.⁴⁵

The implied doubts about the harmlessness of the imagination point to an underlying understanding of the power of words and images – from the effects

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 298f.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 202.

of which Böhme, while making use of them himself, does not exclude himself. Through words, images, and the power of his imagination, he approaches the history of the Second World War and the story of a Wehrmacht soldier. And while he had initially wished that soldier to be more interesting – that is, more eloquent and more imaginative⁴⁶ – it is perhaps precisely his ordinariness and banality that make him appear exemplary.

Böhme's autobiographical approach to the lives of his grandmother and her first husband includes a reflection on his own position as a descendant of Nazi Germans. During his research visit to Volgograd, for example, he knows that he is viewed as a descendant of former enemies and accepts the discomfort that comes with this:

The retired Russian major said it when he saw me: 'A really German face.' He had not seen such a German face for a long time. He did not say it, but well, for the sake of completeness: a Stahlhelm visage. I cannot blame him, even if it still makes me uncomfortable at this moment that I write it down. He drew the direct connection that I would have liked to complicate: that my body is in some way a revenant of *them*.⁴⁷

Trzebiner's autobiographical text expressed surprised discomfort at the lack of knowledge among the descendants of perpetrators and bystanders about their own family history.⁴⁸ Böhme's autobiographical book strives for precisely this knowledge and can thus be read as an indirect response. And it is in this sense that we can speak of one literary discourse of the third generation, whose shared foundation is the positioning as grandchildren.

Concluding Remarks

The literature of the third generation, which I have presented here via three very different but paradigmatic texts, opens with a generational inscription that leads from the past into the present and from the stories told in the present directly into history. Precisely because the descendants of perpetrators, bystanders, and victims describe radically different experiences and memories of the Shoah and Second World War, the commonalities of their narrative strategies are all the more striking. First and foremost, the authors explicitly position themselves as grandchildren, and thereby inscribe themselves in the

⁴⁶ Ibid., 201.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 344.

⁴⁸ Cf. Trzebiner, *Die Enkelin*, 226f.

chain of generations “since 1945.” They accept their respective family-historical heritage. This heritage, however, is rarely as clear-cut as it appears with the three authors discussed here. Often, it is complicated by belonging to both Jewish and non-Jewish German families and/or families not from Germany but from countries of the victorious powers.

The self-reflexive consideration of one’s own generational position illustrates just how urgent and inescapable the confrontation with the Shoah remains even in the third generation. In Böhme’s case, this is encountered as the “direct connection”⁴⁹ – uneasily drawn – to the historical legacy of National Socialism; in Trzebiner’s case, the Shoah-survivor grandfather is “the reason why I am the way I am”;⁵⁰ in Fogel’s case, the Shoah stands “at the beginning of my whole existence.”⁵¹ These autobiographical or auto-fictional self-definitions are part of an approach to history rooted in personal family history. The texts are literary acts of remembrance; they are active approaches to the past. The self-reflection and self-positioning as grandchildren open meta-perspectives in thinking about how the Shoah and Second World War can be remembered by those born after, and how (family) historical knowledge can be passed on and renewed in narratives of the present. Thematic self-reflection is linked in the texts with other moments of self-reflexivity: From Fogel’s discussion of the book of memories that the grandfather wants the first-person narrator to write, which is taken almost to the point of *metalepsis*, to Trzebiner’s multilingual text design, to Böhme’s incorporation of intertextual and poeticising elements into his factual reconstruction. Two questions are always at the centre: how can those born later bear witness today to the remembered experiences of the contemporary witnesses, retrospectively referred to as the first generation? And how is the experience of confronting these memories shaped through research and retelling, and how can it itself be shaped through literature?

By thinking through – and literarily working through – the possibilities of the relationship of later generations with the history of the Shoah and Second World War, third generation literature is not only a mirror but rather a motor of generational remembrance. The mediatedness of history, the foundation of all Shoah and World War remembrance in the third generation, is thus brought into focus as the knowledge of the past is necessarily presented together with its transmission: The remembered experience and the experience of remembrance become inseparable.

49 Böhme, *Das Unglück schreitet schnell*, 344.

50 Trzebiner, *Die Enkelin*, 122.

51 Fogel, *Sag es mir*, 96.

Abstract

Luisa Banki

BERGISCHE UNIVERSITÄT WUPPERTAL

Remembering the Shoah and the Second World War in German Third-Generation Literature

In this article, the author examines how the Shoah and Second World War are remembered in German third-generation literature. After contextualising third-generation literature in contemporary debates about *memory*, she offers readings of three paradigmatic works: Vanessa F. Fogel's *Sag es mir* [Tell me] (2010), Channah Trzebiner's *Die Enkelin oder Wie ich zu Pessach die vier Fragen nicht wusste* [The granddaughter or how I didn't know the four questions during Passover] (2013), and Johannes Böhme's *Das Unglück schreitet schnell* [Misfortune moves quickly] (2019). She identifies self-reflexivity as an essential narrative strategy in the writings of third-generation authors. Their self-reflection and self-positioning as grandchildren open meta-perspectives in thinking about the possibilities of remembering the Shoah and the Second World War by succeeding generations. The remembered experience and the experience of remembrance become inseparable.

Keywords

Holocaust/Shoah Literature; Second World War; German Literature; Third Generation; self-reflexivity