



The Political as the Personal

Postmemory among Descendants of Polish Migrants in Sweden

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This article analyses interviews with descendants of Polish migrants in Sweden using the lens of postmemory. The aim is to show how they narrated growing up with parents and grandparents who recalled traumatic experiences of the occupation of Poland during World War II and of the communist era, and to explore the transgenerational imprints of this recall. A number of less-explored aspects of postmemory are elucidated: postmemory related to less extreme abuse and violence than that experienced by Holocaust survivors; postmemory in both second and third generation; postmemory as narrated by those who grew up in a different country to that in which the trauma of their relatives is rooted; and the lived after-effects of trauma.



After-effects of Trauma

In an interview conducted for a study of different aspects of growing up in Sweden with Polish parents, when asked whether she had any experiences that might differ from her peers with Swedish-born parents, Veronica, a 38-year-old woman raised in Stockholm by her Polish-born mother, responded:

Yes, absolutely! If you ignore the obvious things, such as the language spoken at home, I think I also have an experience... well, I do not have that experience... but because my mother was so scarred by growing up in a dictatorship. Then there are also my grandmother's experiences of escaping during World War II. Well, all these things that I heard about constantly, or at least repeatedly, during my upbringing have become a part of me in some way; they have shaped me.

This article analyses interview narrations on growing up in Sweden with one or two Polish parents in a family in which historical trauma was present in everyday life. Poland has a long tradition of emigration and is today one of the most significant migrant-sending countries in Eastern Europe (Burrell 2011). In Sweden, Poland is the fourth most common country of birth for migrants after Syria, Iraq, and Finland (Statistics Sweden 2020) and yet the narratives of the descendants of Polish migrants have remained largely unheard.¹

Veronica mentioned experiences of the communist era in Poland transmitted by her Polish-born mother as something that differentiated her from her Swedish-majority peers. Similarly, she mentioned her Polish-born grandmothers' transmitted experiences of the occupation of Poland during World War II. Initially, she spoke of these experiences as her own, before correcting herself and acknowledging that they were her mother's and grandmother's experiences that had been transmitted to her. Furthermore, she acknowledged that her family's frequent recall of these experiences has shaped her and that she had somehow internalised their memories. The effects of exposure to the traumatic experiences of previous generations proved to be a common thread running through many of the interviews and this theme is analysed in the present article.

The theoretical lens used in the analysis is the one of postmemory. This is a framework for studying transgenerational transmitted memories of traumas and how subsequent generations relate to these. Attention is therefore not directed

¹ People born in Poland constitute approximately 4.75% (93,000) of the total Swedish population of around 10,000,000. Descendants of Polish migrants in turn constitute almost 3.5% (47,000) of the 1,350,000 persons in Sweden who are native-born with one or two foreign-born parents (Statistics Sweden 2020).

towards the generation that experienced the trauma first-hand, but towards their descendants. The term *postmemory* was coined by Marianne Hirsch to discuss, from a sociological, anthropological perspective rather than a psychological one, “how events that happened in the past have effects that continue into the present” (2012: 5). According to Hirsch, postmemory denotes “the experiences of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated” (1997: 22). Hirsch defines postmemory as “second generation remembrance” (2012: 76), as something that “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 behaviour among which they grew up” (2008: 106).

The introduction of the postmemory lens within memory studies signalled a shift of focus from investigating how collective national memory is represented in monuments, museums, commemorations, and the like, towards memory transference within families (e.g., Tasca 2018). The lens was initially developed to analyse trauma related to the Holocaust and much of the research on the subject has accordingly focused on experiences of the Holocaust (e.g., Harris 2020; Hirsch 2012; Kaplan 2011). However, Hirsch herself encouraged the use of this lens to examine postmemory in other contexts and in recent years, researchers have begun to apply the concept beyond the confines of Holocaust studies (e.g., Burrell 2006; Crosthwaite 2009; Alden 2014; Howe 2014; Serpente 2014). This article contributes to this field by utilising it in a case study of descendants of Polish Catholic migrants to Sweden who grew up with parents and grandparents who had transmitted memories of traumas related to World War II and communist-era Poland.

As pointed out by Hirsch, the prefix *post* signifies not only the “transgenerational act of transfer” but also “the resonant aftereffects of trauma” (2008: 106). Hirsch writes about “those who were there not to live” the historical events in question “but who received its effects, belatedly, through the effects, actions, and symptoms of previous generations” (2002: 73). Exploring the after-effects of Holocaust survivors’ trauma on their children is a main focus of Hirsch’s postmemory project (2012). Postmemory in the sense of the after-effects of trauma are also the focal point of this analysis, because the interviewees highlighted the effects of communist rule in Poland on their parents and also how their mothers and fathers were “scarred” by their own parents’ experiences of World War II. They furthermore emphasized how these after-effects of trauma had “shaped” themselves, as Veronica puts it in her account.

Hirsch uses no specific concept to denote such after-effects of trauma, but rather talks in descriptive terms, such as the “consequences of traumatic recall (...) at a generational remove” (2012: 35). Here, I propose and utilise the concept of *transgenerational imprints* as a label for the formative generational after-effects of trauma. As such, the aim of the present article is to show how descendants of Polish migrants to Sweden narrate growing up with parents and grandparents who recalled traumatic experiences of the occupation of Poland during World War II and of the communist era, and to explore the transgenerational imprints of this recall. What were the emic expressions of traumas narrated by the descendants? What was the use of traumatic recall in their narrations? How did the traumas affect the parents according to the descendants and how did this in turn affect the descendants?

To my knowledge, this is the first analysis of postmemory among the offspring of Polish migrants to Sweden. In addition to providing insight into postmemory in this understudied population, the article also examines several understudied aspects of postmemory. It sheds light on postmemory related to less extreme abuse and violence than that experienced by Holocaust survivors. By tracing the transmission of perceived trauma from both parents *and* grandparents, it illuminates not only second-generation memories (Hirsch 2012: 3), but also third-generation postmemory. Furthermore, it highlights postmemory among people who grew up in a country other than the homeland of their parents and grandparents.

Postmemory studies have often focused on aesthetic strategies, on how transmitted memories are represented in literary works (e.g., Fachinger 2009; Gilbert 2006; Howe 2014; Leichter-Flack 2016; Young 2000) or on what we can learn from photos and documents found in archives (Hirsch 2012: 227ff.). When personal accounts have been examined, they have often consisted of published autobiographies (e.g., Eigler 2021; Bode 2004; Howe 2014). This article, however, analyses a category of material seldom examined within postmemory studies: qualitative interviews, which illuminates everyday experience of transmitted trauma, the meanings ascribed to these traumas and, not least, their lived effects (cf. Kidron 2009).

After discussing the data and methods below, the article is divided into three parts, *Expressions of Trauma*, *The use of Trauma* and *Transgenerational Imprints*, each one focusing on answering one of my three research questions. The main findings of these three sections are summarised and further discussed in *Conclusions*.

Method of Investigation

My analysis is based on in-depth, face-to-face interviews conducted in 2018 as part of a research project broadly exploring experiences of growing up in Sweden as children

of Polish migrants from the Catholic majority group.² The interviews were organised around four themes presented to the interviewees: biography, relationships to different places, plans and experiences of growing up with Polish parents in Sweden.³ Although no direct questions on trauma experienced by previous generations were asked, the theme surfaced when the interviewees talked about growing up with Polish parents in Sweden.

Interviewees self-selected by signing up for an interview after seeing an advertisement for the project (e.g., on Facebook) or by being informed about the project by somebody they knew. After receiving information about the project orally and in writing, 31 persons – 23 women and 8 men – gave their informed consent to be interviewed.

The selection of interviewees formed by this process is not possible to describe in relation to the total population of descendants of Polish migrants in Sweden, as there is no existing statistical or other description of this group. However, all of them grew up in Sweden and all but six in Stockholm, one of the cities where most Polish migrants have settled (Lubińska 2013). At the time of the interviews, they were between 18 and 42 years of age. None were offspring of the many Polish migrants who arrived in Sweden after Poland joined the EU in 2004, who are often circular migrants employed in the construction and cleaning sectors (Bengtsson 2016: 61) and whose offspring have not yet reached adulthood. They are descendants of migrants who settled permanently after arriving from Poland during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s; that is, before or in the first few years after the fall of the communist regime. During this period – particularly in the 1980s but to some extent during the 1990s as well – many highly educated people fled the precarious political and economic situation in Poland (Vigerson 1994: 220; Iglicka 2000: 4ff.). This is reflected in the interview sample, where 26 out of 31 have at least one parent who received a higher education in Poland and even more described their parents as strongly encouraging them to obtain a good education. That said, two-thirds of the parents did not have occupations matching their education in Sweden and thus experienced downward social mobility. Most of the descendants nevertheless strived to be part of the middle class (Runfors 2020).

2 The research project was funded by the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies, 2018–2020, grant 939/3.1.1/2016 (ethical approval by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority, ref. no: 2018/512-31/5).

3 The interviews all lasted between two and four hours and were audio recorded. To ensure anonymity, all interviewees were given pseudonyms in the article. The quotes are extracts from transcriptions of the recordings, translated from Swedish into English, sometimes with minor editing to improve readability. Italics in the quotes indicate emphasis by the interviewee.

Expressions of Trauma

What emic expressions of trauma are displayed in the interviews? As previously noted, the experiences described as traumatic for previous generations by their descendants all relate to two periods in Poland's history. The first is World War II (1939–1945), when Poland was occupied first by the Germans and then by the Soviet Union – a period that cost the lives of six million Poles including almost the entire Jewish population of the country. The second is the era of communist dominance and regime, 1945–1989, during which the Soviet Union set up a communist government in Poland and the Polish People's Republic was established – a period characterised by sweeping social change in the form of industrialisation and urbanisation as well as by repression, social unrest, and economic depression (e.g., Prazmowska 2010).

While the interviewees noted that their parents and grandparents repeatedly mentioned distressing memories of these two periods, the descendants themselves rarely recounted any details of trauma transmitted to them in the family sphere. Like Veronica in the opening quote, they rather just simply mentioned their relatives' perceived traumas in general terms. In fact, the material contains only a few stories detailing the memories of parents and grandparents. What the descendants *did* talk about was the scars left on their parents by trauma, and it was in these accounts that the main information on transmitted memories emerged, as in the interview with Susanna, 40, born to two Polish parents:

My mother was terribly poor. My grandfather was sentenced to prison when he was... I don't really know when, but he was sentenced to ten years in prison. He was released after five years due to the death of Stalin. (...) And then my mother's family became terribly poor. It has affected my mother. Because she is very nervous about money. And my dad has also been affected. So, he also saves money. They both feel that that they must build up a financial buffer. But they overdo it. They have a huge financial buffer. But in their eyes, it can never be big enough. And they are suspicious. Grandfather was sentenced to prison because a neighbour informed on him, so my mother is very suspicious. It happened during her childhood, and it has shaped her. They also talk a lot of politics, and they are very suspicious of politicians and the authorities. (...) They are still a little suspicious. My sister has worked for the [Swedish] authorities all her life, and we've tried to explain to them that in Sweden, there is not...It's not like things are hidden or done in the shadows here. It isn't! There are no shadows. But they don't believe it. (...) But they grew up with it, so I understand them.

Thus, one finding is that descendants discuss their family's traumatic memories not by listing them but by underscoring their after-effects – by depicting them as *moulding* parents and grandparents. For example, when Katarina, 33, who has two Polish parents but grew up with her single mother, describes her parents as distrustful, she links this to the social fabric of communist-era Poland: “They have experienced persecution, having their post intercepted, corruption, that everyone can be bribed, that everyone is trying to frame you and inform on you.” And Susanna, whom we met above, explains that, from her parents' perspective, “trust in society is something that can be your downfall”.

Parents were generally described as thrifty and distrustful – not least towards the authorities and other representatives of society – and also as tenacious and industrious. Above all, the parents were described as living in a state of high anxiety, always ready to sound the alarm and constantly prepared for the worst. And traumatic historical events were highlighted as the background of these personality traits and behaviours.

Regarding *which* memories the parents recalled as traumatic according to the interviewees, the ones related to World War II concerned poverty and general hardship, but also persecution, danger and loss of life. The expression of traumas related to the communist period likewise concerned general hardship, but also surveillance, reporting, general insecurity due to the political situation and imprisonment. These experiences were narrated as traumatic in the sense of being distressing to parents/grandparents by causing misery, suffering, anxiety, insecurity, powerlessness, loss of agency and control. Not only were they narrated as distressing at the time, but also as still deeply affecting the relatives. Although the perceived traumas were related to two different historical periods, in the accounts of the descendants they form narrations on the lingering after-effects of the family's past in the present.

The Use of Trauma

Most descendants seemed to use the interview as an opportunity to reflect on and make sense of their experiences growing up with relatives scarred by trauma. Reflecting on the impact of trauma seemed to be a way to explain and understand the personality traits and behaviour of their parents and grandparents. By explaining relatives' traits and viewpoints in relation to distressing experiences, these traits and viewpoints were made comprehensible to others, including to me as the interviewer. In this regard, the use of trauma might be viewed in relation to the descendants' awareness that the mentioned qualities could cause their parents/grandparents to diverge from persons who had grown up in Swedish majority contexts. As Paulina explained: Poland “has lived

through many different things, [which] have contributed to people being different”. Yet, using trauma as an explanation also seemed to be a way for the descendants to understand their own lives, as these traits were seen not only as something that othered their relatives in the Swedish majority context, but also something that differentiated these relatives from the interviewees themselves. Susanna, whom we met previously, explains:

My parents were born between 1939 and 1941, during the war, so my experiences are completely different. Their first memories are of the war and then they grew up under the communist regime, while I grew up in a very tidy suburb of Stockholm. So, my parents and I have completely different childhoods. (...) What was a normal standard of living in Poland was not something you saw in Sweden. Even the social housing apartment where I grew up, that’s nothing compared to what you saw in Poland. They didn’t have phones, for example. You had to queue up to use a phone. And my cousin told me that someone leaned against a wall and then the whole wall fell down. And that was *normal!* Everything was so scruffy, worn, and dirty. This was not the case in Sweden. Even the poorest areas were clean and well-maintained.

When interviewees used trauma to understand family members, this communicated intimacy in relation to them. At the same time, the differences to which the traumas gave rise also seemed to dissociate interviewees from their parents, as Paulina explains:

Mum grew up in another country, and also in a completely different situation. She grew up in a communist country. It was a completely different situation compared to when I was born in the 1990s in Sweden. It is such a safe country where there has been no war, there have been no difficulties – a country that is among the foremost in the world. That she knows sometimes when we come into conflict with each other. She thinks I’m spoiled! It’s different that I grew up in another country and one that’s better off.

When talking about conflicts with their Polish parents, many interviewees referred to differences related to traumatic experiences, such as when Carolina, 33, who has two Polish parents, talked about the diverging views she and her father have on the risks associated with travelling: “Of course, it’s a sign of how very protective he is towards me, but it’s also about imposing his mindset. They [her Polish-born parents] are sort of suspicious of everything and everyone all the time – thinking that everyone is conspiring against them!”

Traumatic memories were thus not only used to explain relatives' viewpoints and behaviours, but also to process feelings of detachment and alienation that the descendants could feel towards them, as expressed by Veronica when discussing her Polish-born mother:

It's always been a source of...conflict may be the wrong word...but irritation. Sometimes I think that all her talk about what it was like when she was young in Poland is so bloody irrelevant [laughs]. It's like we don't really understand each other. It's not just the generation gap, but all these things like living in a completely different country, living under a dictatorship, the lack of democracy. There's just so much baggage.

Descendants thus used transmitted traumatic memories to process present-day intergenerational relationships and paradoxically, to process *both* feelings of intimacy *and* feelings of detachment. There appear to be at least two layers to this sense of detachment. From the descendants' vantage point – two or three generations removed from the trauma – some of their Polish parents' characteristics and views could be perceived of as somewhat alien. This detachment increased as the descendants were raised in the national and cultural environment of Sweden, where their parents' excessive wariness and overanxiety seemed as inappropriate behaviour with which they were unable to identify.

Transgenerational Imprints

While the previous sections on the expression and use of trauma demonstrate how the descendants described the impact of past trauma on their parents, this section explores the transgenerational imprints this in turn left on the descendants.

My life has been quite marked by the fact that my grandmother's sister passed away in the Second World War. This is a very heavy history that has been looming over the family...or...that my mom has been involved in (...) She often relates back to the Second World War: Who helped Poland? Why didn't anyone help the Poles? When Mom talks about other horrors happening in the world, she often slips into Polish history. And my grandmother – and grandfather when he was alive – they told stories that were totally... It was just a coincidence that they survived. Because they had friends who had been abducted.

Anja, 29, who was raised by her Polish mother, above speaks of her relatives' recollected experiences of World War II as lingering over her and her family in a general sense.

However, interviewees also made frequent mention of more specific experiences that had a lasting impact on their relatives and them in turn. One such experience was poverty, and the subsequent thrift with which parents or grandparents lived as a result, as in this account offered by Jan, 37:

If I think about how my upbringing has influenced me...I think that my mother's background, growing up in a communist country, has made her a little more restrained with how to spend money. This over-consumption... I do not know how to put it ... we were fine, but I may not have had all the stuff my friends had. (---) We purchased second-hand items a lot. It probably had to do with her financial position, but I *also* think that it was coloured by her upbringing in communist Poland.

Many interviewees emphasised that they were brought up not to waste money, food or other resources with reference to their relatives' experiences, as Veronica explains:

In my family, we talk about gratitude for what you obtained here in Sweden, compared to how it was in Poland...and so on. There is a reverence and respect for things. You should take care of your belongings, not throw things away, not waste food. It's the communist era and also connected to my grandmother's side, with the famine and so on. It has been quite strict, and it is sort of considered very bad to live above your means. (...) Sometimes I have even had some conflicts with friends around how to spend money, for example if we have been for an evening out or if we have been traveling. (...) I have not had the opportunity to squander. And when I have had the opportunity, I didn't want to. It's sort of a fundamental value.

During the interview, Veronica compared herself to her middle-class friends from a Swedish majority background; while she views them as more ready to spend money, they in turn view her as overcautious in this respect. In fact, many of the interviewees seemed to have been taught to be frugal and not to be wasteful by the transmission of distressing poverty-related experiences from parents and grandparents.

Other transgenerational imprints include a sense of responsibility and the desire to obtain a good education, two aspects that often merged, as in this account from Teresa, 28, who has two Polish parents:

I guess my biggest hangup is, if I have access to all these opportunities, to study for example, it's always my choice. Then I *must* do it. I have a duty and obligation in my life. My grandmother couldn't even go to school because she was born when the war

broke out. So, I have an obligation to do this, both in relation to the history of my family, but also in relation to everyone else who can't study.

Thrift and striving after an education can be seen as aspects of taking responsibility, making a sense of responsibility a profound transgenerational imprint. Another profound imprint was a sense of insecurity in relation to the surrounding society. This appears to be an after-effect of familial historical trauma and the consequent anxiety, sense of powerlessness, and loss of agency and control, where the anguish felt by previous generations seems to have disrupted their descendants' sense of living in a stable world. It made them not only willing to shoulder responsibility but also anxious and "less laid-back", as Veronica put it: "That feeling of insecurity has really put a stamp on me. Many of my friends have also been able to take on a lot of responsibility, but they have an ease I have not been able to replicate. They are laid-back in a way I cannot be." The determination to obtain a good education can be viewed in relation to this sense of insecurity. It stood out as a way to secure a job and a steady income and as an insurance policy against future insecurity. In fact, all the transgenerational imprints mentioned – thrift, a sense of responsibility, striving for an education – can be viewed as security measures for the future.

Even if the traumatic memories of war and communism that scarred the parents also left transgenerational imprints on the descendants in the form of insecurity, it should, however, be noted that we are not dealing with a general ontological insecurity as discussed by Anthony Giddens (1991) and encountered by everyone living in a late modern and globalised world. Rather, at issue is a particular type of ontological insecurity caused by specific historical, political periods (Botterill, Hopkins & Sanghera 2020). One aspect of this insecurity was an awareness that sociopolitical events may affect one personally. Interviewees thus appeared to have learned that life is inherently insecure in as much as the societal and political situation can shift, and that such shifts furthermore can impact their own personal sphere. As Anja expressed it, the trauma experienced by her mother and grandparents taught her not only that life is insecure, but also fostered an awareness of just "how *fragile* life can be".

This awareness was made abundantly clear when interviewees articulated reactions to the growth of the ethno-nationalist political party the Sweden Democrats (SD) and to the spread of their ideology. When Paulina was asked whether she had encountered any obstacles to realising her life choices, she replied: "You don't really know how things will develop with the Sweden Democrats. While I'm not picked out in the same way as people with dark complexions, you still end up in a special position." Although,

like most of the interviewees, Paulina generally passes as white and Swedish (Runfors 2021a), she voiced a feeling that her position in Swedish society might be changing due to the growth of SD and their ideology. Renata, 28, born to two Polish parents, said she foresaw a future in which she by others might be categorised as an immigrant and as non-Swedish: “Before the Sweden Democrats became big a few years ago I had not really reflected on the fact that I am an immigrant myself...or that I am a second-generation immigrant. Then it struck me: ‘Shit, I’m a second-generation immigrant’. It was like a revelation to me ...”.

The Sweden Democrats have been described as part of the populist radical right movement that has spread across Europe over recent decades (Mudde 2017). The party embraces an ethno-nationalist agenda that aims to strengthen the nation by promoting ethnic homogeneity. In this worldview, immigration is a threat to the majority population, and immigrants are the cause of crime and other social ills (Hellström, Nilsson & Stoltz 2012; Elgenius & Rydgren 2017). Founded in 1988, SD was initially an insignificant party, but by 2010 it had crossed the threshold of 4% of votes needed in order to enter the Riksdag in the general election. By 2018, the year the interviews were conducted, SD had grown into the country’s third largest political party and in the election of 2022, they became second largest. While SD’s policies on immigration and immigrants have long been considered extreme and have frequently been condemned in the mainstream media, they have gradually achieved greater acceptance and, at least in part, have been incorporated into public policy discourse (Ekström, Patrona & Thornborrow 2020). I have analysed the interviewees’ reactions to SD thoroughly elsewhere (Runfors 2022). What I want to highlight here is that the normalisation of ethno-nationalist ideology made them insecure about their own position in Sweden. At the heart of SD policy is the idea of their entitlement to define Swedishness, and by extension to define those they associate with other countries and cultures as un-Swedish and to exclude them (Mulinari & Neergaard 2014). For this reason, many interviewees reacted not only to the growth of SD but also to the apparent increasing preoccupation among Swedes in general with who should and should not be considered Swedish.

Painful memories of war and communism did thus not simply shape the parents. Once transferred, these memories also shaped the descendants, leaving transgenerational imprints such as a sense of responsibility, social insecurity and heightened vigilance for sociopolitical change. This vigilance included an awareness that such change may have a fundamental impact on one’s personal life, just as World War II and the communist takeover of power in Poland impacted the lives of their parents and grandparents.

Conclusions

In this article, the prism of postmemory is turned on a case study of 31 descendants of Polish Catholic migrants to Sweden, revealing underexplored aspects of postmemory such as transmitted trauma related to the World War II occupation and postwar communist era in Poland, postmemory expressed by both second and third generation after the trauma as well as postmemory voiced by descendants of migrants who grew up in a country not associated with the original trauma. By analysing in-depth interviews, the article highlights everyday experiences of transmitted trauma and offers emic accounts of how this trauma is expressed and used. It makes visible lived effects of postmemory: the effects of perceived trauma on the first generation and the transgenerational imprints left on their descendants.

It is often said that the trauma of World War II is expressed and dealt with differently from one country to the next (e.g., Young 1993; Bode 2004). Germany is for example mentioned as a nation where trauma has been silenced by guilt and shame at being “the perpetrator” (e.g., Howe 2014). James Young (1993) adds Poland to the list of nations in which the trauma of World War II was often silenced, in this case due to denial of participation in mass crime against Jews, Roma and homosexuals. However, the interviewees did not describe their parents and grandparents as keeping silent about the traumas they lived through, but as repeatedly speaking about them – as “bleeding history” (c.f. Spiegelman 1987). Instead of denial by silence parents seemed to actively adopt the role of the victim of traumatic events. This mode of expressing and using trauma has sometimes been discussed as a part of a greater Polish master narrative of suffering and as a means of building a Polish national identity (see, e.g., Zarycki & Warczok 2020; Zechenter 2019) and maintaining Polish ethnicity in diaspora (Burrell 2006). Given the above, the way in which the relatives of these interviewees repeatedly gave voice to their trauma from the point of view of the victim might be understood as a distinctly Polish means of expressing and using trauma.

However, expressions and usages of memory change over time, from one generation to the next, and from one context to another (Eigler 2021). While the descendants did not question the traumatic experiences as recalled by their parents and grandparents – and as such unconsciously colluded in the experiential construction of World War II and the communist era as collective, culturally traumatic events in the history of their family and of Poland – they did *not* reproduce the victim discourse of their parents, nor the Polish master narrative of suffering. Nor did they use recollections of trauma to construct a Polish identity. Rather they used historical trauma for a quite different purpose, namely as a framework for *understanding* their Polish parents and grandparents.

Willingness to understand family members and their traumas is often underlined as a characteristic of second- and third-generation postmemory of World War II as expressed in autobiographical and semi-autobiographical texts (e.g., Howe 2014; Eigler 2021). For these interviewees, however, understanding was not a way of coming to terms with relatives' past actions, as is the case in the postmemory of second- and third-generation Germans (Eigler 2021). Rather, it was geared towards making sense of their parents' victim discourse in the present and understanding why they displayed certain viewpoints and character traits that differentiated them in Swedish contexts and indeed from the descendants themselves. The descendants thus processed relationships between generations who came of age not only at different times but also in different national and cultural contexts. Just like the descendants of Chilean and Argentinian migrants in the United Kingdom interviewed by Alejandra Serpente (2014), they voiced postmemory from what one might describe as a position of dual in-betweenness: from the position of the second- and third-generation after the trauma, *and* from the position of coming of age as children of migrants – in this case as children of Polish migrants in Sweden who did not claim to be either Polish or Swedish, but rather "Swedish with Polish affiliation" (Runfors 2021b). Hence, the postmemory expressed by my interviewees was not primarily a "Polish" one.

While Hirsch (2008) describes postmemory among the children of Holocaust survivors as distinct from other kinds of postmemory, since it is often transmitted to the next generation "so deeply and actively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (ibid.: 107), the descendants studied here more often expressed postmemory as various transgenerational imprints left by trauma. The descendants had lived their lives with the lingering after-effects of earlier generational trauma that was present in their homes, not simply as stories but in the form of their parents' behaviour and viewpoints. They voiced the lived experience of growing up with parents who were suspicious, thrifty, tenacious, industrious and, not least, overanxious due to the scars of trauma. Although the traumas studied here are of a different order of magnitude than that experienced during the Holocaust, my analysis has thus revealed many and far-reaching after-effects of these recalled traumas.

As discussed by Kinnvall and Mitzen (2020), anxiety is a general condition or mood defined by lacking a defined object, in contrast to fear that has an object in the sense that one fears something specific. However, the anxiety described here was more than the general ontological insecurity of modernity (Giddens 1991). It was a special type of ontological insecurity caused by specific historical and political periods (Botterill, Hopkins & Sanghera 2020) – as also noted in other studies of the Polish experience (e.g., Burrell 2011). Katarzyna Wolanik Boström (2005) has demonstrated how the

exposure of the private domain to various political upheavals shaped what she calls an *existential vulnerability* among the Poles she interviewed, that is, a way of understanding the world through affect, where human destinies are seen as woven with the dramatic societal space. For many of Wolanik Boström's interviewees, Polish historical trauma made life seem both precarious and fragile. They were acutely aware that their personal lives existed within a much broader context over which they had no control and that, without warning and with disastrous consequences, might invade their personal domain (Wolanik Boström 2005: 76). The behaviour ascribed to Polish parents by the descendants can be seen as the result of a similar conviction regarding the fragility of life when exposed to political circumstances. The parents displayed a mood of anxiety and perspective on life similar to that of Wolanik Boström's (2005) Polish informants, in both cases shaped by specific historical, political events experienced in Poland.

Existential vulnerability might not be typically Polish though. Luisa Tasca (2018), for example, has discussed how Germans traumatised by the events of World War II are similarly troubled by a sense of what she calls existential insecurity, while Daniela Sime (2018) has observed that Central Eastern Europeans are marked by their experiences of living in socialist and post-socialist states in the same way. This suggests that this type of ontological insecurity caused by historical political events may be widespread among those who experienced the traumas of war and communism in Europe.

The narratives analysed here reveal a paradox in that while the descendants expressed feelings of alienation towards their parents' worldviews, they expressed their own anxieties in terms of insecurity and an awareness of the fragility of life. One might conclude that the transmitted traumas created not only a generation gap, but also an intergenerational similitude. Not only history but to some extent existential vulnerability appear to have bled through the generations. While the family is usually viewed as a unit that provides the individual with a basic sense of security (cf. Botterill, Hopkins & Sanghera 2020), for these descendants the family provided lessons in life's insecurities.

The existential vulnerability experienced by the descendants was not a copy of that experienced by their parents but rather a lighter, transformed version. Among other things, it possessed certain attributes that seem to have been developed in response to the trauma of previous generations: a desire for security coupled with thriftiness and the determination to obtain a good education in order to assure a secure social position. Children who grow up with a parent who has survived massive historical trauma generally feel a sense of responsibility and a desire to repair and compensate for the parents' loss (Hirsch 2008). This implies that these aspects of postmemory expressed by these descendants of Polish trauma survivors may be a type of postmemory that

exists more widely among the second and third generations after trauma. Other studies also point in this direction, as for example, Borgström, Goldstein-Kyaga and Graviz (2019) who discuss inherited insecurity among Czech youths as an outcome of previous generations' painful experiences of World War II. Bode (2004) ploughs an adjacent furrow with regard to German second and third generations after the traumas. That said, these interviewees expressed insecurity *despite* the fact that they did not come of age in the country where their parents were traumatised. Growing up in Sweden, a relatively peaceful and secure country untouched by the kind of trauma experienced by their relatives, seems to have made the descendants aware that their inherited insecurity set them apart from their "laid-back" Swedish-majority peers. From this vantage point they were able to consciously reflect on this transgenerational imprint. Some also noted that their sense of insecurity and responsibility united them with other descendants of migrants who came to Sweden bearing memories of war and oppression.

My analysis of postmemory as an after-effect can be pushed even further with the help of the concept of existential vulnerability. Firstly, postmemory as existential vulnerability was imprinted on the life stories of the descendants. It impacted how they lived their lives, their relationships to the present and further the choices they made to secure their futures, such as investing in education to safeguard their positions in Swedish society. Secondly, postmemory as existential vulnerability surfaced as an awareness that personal life took place within a far vaster political context that, without any warning and with disastrous consequences, might invade their personal domain. This had made interviewees subsequently more sensitive to any such possible changes at a sociopolitical level. This was revealed in their reactions to the normalisation of the ethno-nationalist ideology of the Sweden Democrats and the questions it has raised about immigration and who should and should not be considered Swedish. Interviewees already sensed this normalisation in 2018, before researchers had described the development and well before SD had entered the mainstream and had been accepted by nearly all of Sweden's centre-right parties, who have gone so far as to cooperate with them in the new parliament after the 2022 election. One might say that the transgenerational imprint of trauma in the shape of existential vulnerability has transformed these descendants into human seismographs, capable of sensing slow and insidious political change that might have the potential to impact these descendants personally.

This awareness has forced these descendants of migrants to grapple with the idea that they might be pushed into the structural position of a guest or stranger in the society in which they grew up, to whom hospitality is extended and who is expected to show gratitude accordingly (cf. Ahmed 2007: 1640). With the tactile antennas they

had developed due to this postmemory, they not only detected these insidious changes in the political discourse but also anticipated the effects of these changes: intensified everyday exclusionary processes that could change the rules of the game in much the same way as the historical traumas already experienced by the older generations of their families.

The use of the postmemory lens in memory research has been criticised for turning away from exploring the collective political memory of the nation state towards the apolitical study of the intergenerational transmission of personal memory within the family (Tasca 2018). However, this article reveals postmemory to be a form of political memory among the interviewees, rather than simply recounted personal memory. That said, it is not political memory in the sense of memory used to achieve political ends (Huyssen 2000). It is rather an awareness of the political as the personal, in which traumatic family memories are converted into sensitivity to sociopolitical change. In this form, postmemory stands out as something performative and productive, transforming nonspecific anxiety into fear of a specific object, in this case the rise of specific political ideologies and parties. As such, it provides the basis for important life decisions as well as active political standpoints.

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