

The Poetics of Postmemory: The Afterlife of Memory in the Wake of War and Flight

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Abstract. Focusing on postmemory, the memories of the third generation of Estonian refugees in Sweden today, tracing remnants of family tales in the aftermath of World War Two and the flight from Estonia to Sweden in 1944, this paper analysis the concept of ‘afterness’ in memory work and the role of imagination in rendering memories legible and visible. Framed as witnesses of the master narrative of history, a narrative focusing the chain of events, establishing the has-been of this after, these family tales are constantly confronted with the demands of truth seeking. Yet the life of postmemories in the aftermath of devastating events is often a puzzle of fragmented memory traces that requires an imaginative investment in order to interweave different layers of memory and fragments into a tale of postmemory’s life with an after. Placing the lived experience of the afterness between life and imagination, postmemories witness history as a Benjaminian living act of recognition of the has-been in the on-going while disputing the testimony they are bearing witness to by using imagination, an act of playfulness, despite the event. A poetics of the afterness, of postmemory’s lingering between fact and fantasy, bringing the lived experience to the fore through the ambivalences added by memory’s being with an after.

Keywords: afterness; postmemory; sensorial itineraries; memory poetics; embodied memory; materiality; Estonia; World War Two

Prologue

In her classic work *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2012) Marianne Hirsch refers to the memories of those growing up in the wake of devastating events during childhood as “post-memory”, signifying: “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and

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behaviours among which they grew up.” (Hirsch 2012: 5) As a sense of the has-been, an image of the no-longer, elusive yet lingering, memory has been considered a double movement, both preserving something already lost and making it present. (Sá Cavalcante Schuback 2017) Hence memory per definition is an after in itself, an after emerging out of its continuous being lost. How then can the afterness of this after be defined? What is the *post* of postmemory? What kind of tale does its living with an after, its state of in-betweenness, tell in the context of war and flight?

More than 80 years have passed since the “great escape” from Estonia to among other countries Sweden, in the autumn of 1944, during World War Two (Andræ 2004). Today, the memories of the flight are in the main carried by a third generation, who have lived and sensed the previous generations’ experiences of the War and the flight, sometimes explicit, at other times buried in silences. A tale of fragments emerging from the remaining, from the recounted and the mapped, but also from absences and silences, a post-memory’s puzzling of past experiences as well as a tale of one’s own experience of a life with this past. Remembering in this afterness, in the wake of a life with others’ memories, gives rise to memory work that is not born out of a direct relationship with the event, but which nevertheless encapsulates an experience of it. (Richter 2011; Tamm 2015: 11) It reflects the on-going life of memories with the War and the flight today. Focusing on these postmemories, the third generation’s memories of the flight from Estonia to Sweden in 1944 and the poetics² evoked by their movement between the present and the absent, fact and fiction, this paper analyses afterness as a concept in memory work and the role of imagination in making memory as experience legible and visible. I suggest that the playfulness of the poetics in postmemories of devastating events such as the escape from Estonia is not only a given component of memory work, but also a necessary condition that allows postmemory as experience to speak up, letting the presence of absence to emerge. (Blejmar 2016: 19–21; Hirsch 2012: 5)

In the following, I will analyse a series of ethnographic conversations and memory walks with Oskar, tracing memories of his grandmother Virve’s escape to Sweden in 1944 and her life in Estonia before the escape. The memory tales analysed here were collected in Sweden and Estonia during 2010–2013 for my doctoral thesis on memories of the War and the flight from Estonia. For several

² Poetics is here understood as “an interplay of voices, of positioned utterances” as James Clifford defined cultural poetics in *Writing Culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography*. (J. Clifford & G. E. Marcus eds. 1986:12) with an emphasize on the interplay and the movement in-between different modes, such as reality and imagination, and between different actants including materiality. See also further on poetics as the aesthetics of memory, including fiction: Lindbladh J. ed., 2008:5f.

years, I accompanied the research participants on their memory wanderings, both in past reminiscences and in the landscapes that had been the setting for their memories in Estonia and Sweden, in order to gain a better understanding of how memories returned and were expressed, how the fragments were pieced together to reflect a memory experience and how they were intertwined with the memories of others. The paper is thus based on a revised version of parts of my thesis *Minnesspår: Hågkomstens rum och rörelse i skuggan av flykt* (Memory Traces: The Space and Movement of Memory in the Shadow of Flight, 2017).

I take my starting point in a phenomenological understanding of memory as a lived and on-going experience of the past in the present. (Casey 2000; Trigg 2012) The focus of the analysis is not on how memories represent a particular history, but rather on how memory practices encapsulate an embodied and lived experience of the historical by interweaving different layers of time and space, and by using different forms of memory expression. Furthermore, I consider memory work as an encounter and interplay between different actants, some of which are referred to as memory traces in this text, both in the sense of material, visual, narrative and spatial traces and fragments, and as on-going or past experiences, which are used as traces of memory during the act of remembrance and which co-constitute the spatio-temporality of memory. (Adjam 2017; Napolitano 2015) Taking my departure from a posthumanistic understanding, actants in this text are considered both human and more-than-human, hence materiality, both in the sense of artefacts and topographies, has sometimes been given its own position in the analysis and is described in terms of how it directs memory experience, rather than being a passive object to human acts. (Bennett 2010: 33) The oscillation of memory experience between these different actants and modes, between the present and the absent, between fact and fantasy, is what I refer to as the poetics of memory. (Adjam 2017: 56–60; Clifford & James 1986: 12) In order to capture this poetics of postmemory I have used a combination of phenomenological and ethnographic approaches, using the “itineraries of the senses” as method, combining a journey alongside the research participants’ memory paths with sensorial wanderings in that place or through artefacts, reflected in thick descriptions of the field combined with visual and sensorial elements. (Castillejo-Cuéllar 2023; Pink 2009)

The paper focuses specifically on the roles of materiality and place as memory traces and how they encapsulate different modes of memory, creating a movement between them and thereby generating a poetics of memory. In the section titled “Granny, Mayakovsky and President Päts”, the role of materiality is highlighted as part of memory work, while “The Archaeology of Tracing”

focuses primarily on memory place³ and its role in postmemory's tracing in the wake of a past flight. The analysis concludes with "The Poetics of Postmemory" and reflections on afterness as a concept in postmemory and the role of playfulness and poetics in this concept.

Granny, Mayakovsky and President Päts

"Last night we played a little game with friends. We dressed up and recited a poem by Mayakovsky under a friend's window. So it got a bit late."⁴ Oskar apologises for being tired. It's Sunday afternoon. We are standing in front of a shelf with Oskar's "treasures" in his student dorm. The poet Mayakovsky stands here as well, accompanied by a portrait of President Päts.⁵ Next to them is granny Virve, smiling from a modest frame. With flowers framing her hat and a bouquet of lilacs and roses in her hand. "Isn't she beautiful? She died just six months after the photo was taken." In front of them, Oskar's treasures are lined up: a ceramic shard, a rusty key, another couple of ceramic shards and a small porcelain doll, the size of a thimble. "That was the real find", Oskar holds up the little doll. "I could hardly believe it myself when I found it." The findings are from granny Virve's family farm in Estonia. Oskar has been back there many times. The old farmhouse is long gone. But Oskar has been digging in the ground, and finds there have been.

We look at old photographs. Two girls in front of a porch. Ornate woodwork swirls around the porch and frills around the girls' white dresses, their hair in curls, dazzling white in the summer light. "That's granny Virve. It's in front of the farmhouse. When I found the porcelain doll, I imagined how they might have played with it back then. The photo must have been taken some time in the 1920s", Oskar says dreamily. I feel the doll in my hand while looking at the picture.

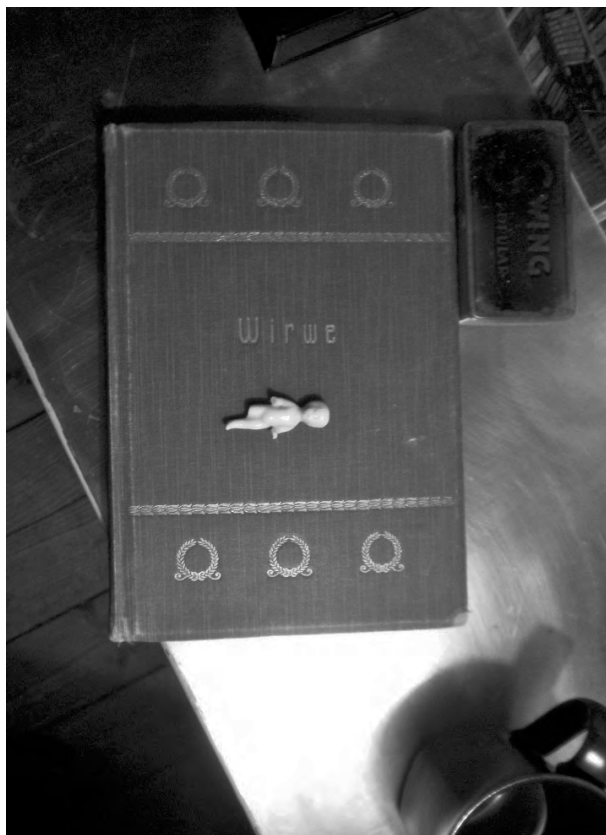
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"A porridge doll", I write to Oskar some time later. "It's a porridge doll", a friend, an expert in antiques, had explained as she squinted at the picture of the porcelain doll. "People used to hide them in porridge at Christmas, and

³ Memory place is based on Edward Casey's term "place memory", which is understood as a memory space that brings together and intertwines different layers of time, materiality, spatiality and representations into a memory's being with the past (Casey 1996: 36–37).

⁴ Observation record and interview with Oskar, 9 February 2011, Sweden.

⁵ Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893–1930), Russian futurist poet. Konstantin Päts (1874–1956), President of Estonia from 1938–1940.



Virve's diary and the porridge doll. Photograph © Maryam Adjam.

whoever found it would be happily married in the future. Like an almond in porridge. It's probably from the 1920s or 30s."

"That's really interesting!" replies Oskar. "I've never really thought about what this little figure actually is, but now that I know, it makes it even more valuable."⁶

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Two years after the Sunday evening when we held the porridge doll under the watchful eyes of granny, Mayakovsky and President Päts, we are on our way to Virve's family farm in Estonia. The farm that was occupied by the military and destroyed under heavy artillery fire in 1944.

⁶ E-mail correspondence with Oskar, Feb-Mars 2011.

I used to rebuild her home in my memory, asking about every item, whether it came from Estonia, whether it was from over there. That way I could picture it clearly. For me, those things became extra meaningful. They were like parts of a fairy tale house that you had to imagine. Like the porcelain shards I dug up. I took them to her and asked if she remembered anything, if she remembered the pattern, perhaps they had been part of a dinner service the family had back then. But she didn't remember anything, not those things in particular anyway.⁷

The summer sun is scorching. The fields lie ploughed, framing the farm. "I used to search here in the middle of the field", Oskar points out. The oak trees still stand in front of a farmhouse that is no longer, and beneath them, it is said, six fallen Forest Brothers lie buried.⁸ "They're everywhere. The whole area was a battlefield, so they're buried all over the place", Oskar explains. Granny Virve almost never spoke about the war and her escape. What she remembered was her happy childhood and her fairy tale homes, the farmhouse in the countryside and the flat in the city.⁹ And this is where Oskar searches for memory traces, on a farm that no longer exists, among oak trees that frame the absence.

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Oskar searches. He searches for the lost ones. Mayakovsky, President Päts and Granny. A Russian poet, an Estonian president and a grandmother. We look at their pictures and they look back at us. Oskar searches for the displaced ones. The displaced seek each other out. A poet beyond mercy, a president perished in captivity and exile; and a granny expelled from the porridge doll's farm.¹⁰ Like ambivalences summarised, they stand side by side, each alone in the political aura that history has assigned them, and united in the wake of its devastation. All neatly lined up in front of the findings: fragments of another life.

Oskar reads Mayakovsky's poems, granny Virve's diaries and President Pät's memoirs. Together we feel the rough edges left by the torn out pages of granny's diary. We look at her picture while holding the porridge doll in our hands. The porridge doll that she could have had in her mouth almost a century ago. A

⁷ Walk-around interview with Oskar, 21 August 2013, Estonia.

⁸ The Forest Brothers, or Metsavennad in Estonian, were armed resistance groups in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania that fought against Soviet rule during the Soviet occupation of the Baltic States, during and after World War Two.

⁹ Interview with Oskar, 22 August 2013, Estonia.

¹⁰ Vladimir Mayakovsky had fallen out of favour with the Soviet regime by the end of his life and committed suicide in 1930. Konstantin Päts was deported with his family from Estonia in July 1940, after the first Soviet occupation of Estonia. He died later in a mental hospital in Kalinin Oblast in 1956, still in custody. Virve fled Estonia during the second Soviet occupation of the country in autumn 1944.

porridge doll, which Oskar did not know was a porridge doll. Only a find buried in the soil of a farm lost.

Materiality as physical sensation can extend to encompass the lived and embodied experience of memory. (Frykman 2012: 106) Artefacts can act as extensions of a being with the past, carrying with them a memory's sense of a childhood home. (Benjamin 1999b: 691) As a memory trace lining Oskar's path when following in the footsteps of his grandmother's memories, the porridge doll becomes an extension of his memory's being with hers. It encapsulates Virve's dreams of a fairy tale house before and beyond a war. Buried in the earth, where every now and then a soldier might be buried as well, the doll also carries the experience of a war and the loss of the same house. It intertwines the sense of the fragility of a porcelain doll with the earth it has been buried in.

The porridge doll carries the ambiguous. It intertwines the fairy tale and the nightmare, a childhood home and the devastation of a war, but it also carries the sense of touch and the lack of it. Granny Virve didn't remember these particular fragments. In the hope of recognition, Oskar had asked her about them over and over again. The porridge doll was a later find. It was only after his grandmother's death that it made itself known.¹¹ The sense of the touch that Oskar was looking for never materialised. Neither the porridge doll nor the pottery shards carry the burden of proof. Neither of them is a souvenir from Virve's memories. None of them is direct witnesses to a specific event in her life. Nevertheless, they capture a touch of the earth. It is only in the ground of the farm that Oskar searches, in its soil and where the house once stood.¹² A find from a fairy tale world, buried in a war cemetery, placed between granny, Mayakovsky and Päts on a shelf decades later. The porridge doll embodies a state of in-betweenness, rather than a memory of a concrete event. Placed between different representations, different layers of time, between the concreteness of the soil and the absence of granny's touch, it senses a memory of the in-betweens. It is this interstice that postmemory takes as its starting point, between the life of the first generation with memories of a past and the third generation's experience of a life with an after. An afterness that bears traces of a being with a past, that offers an ambiguous tale of fragments, where the could-have-been leads the way.

"Remembering with" those traces that no longer bear an obvious connection to specific memories, "bringing into legibility" ambiguous impressions of materialities requires a process of displacement of things, argues Caitlin DeSilvey. (DeSilvey 2007: 416) A doll the size of an almond, belonging in a

¹¹ Interview with Oskar, 9 February 2011.

¹² Memory walk and interview with Oskar, 23 August 2013.

plate of porridge on Christmas Eve, is now placed on a shelf between Oskar's gaze and mine, between granny's, Mayakovsky's and Pät's. Only through its emplacement in this state of in-betweenness does the porridge doll become legible, allowing us to sense both a before and an after, interweaving granny Virve's memories of the farm with Oskar's search for her memories. Walter Benjamin points out that "remembrance must not be proceed in a manner of a narrative or still less that of a report, but must [...] assay its spade in ever-new places, and in the old ones delve to ever-deeper layers". Memory work is an on-going act of digging and returning to the findings, where "[f]ruitless searching is as much a part of this as succeeding". (Benjamin 1999a: 611) In remembrance as process, the afterlife of objects and fragments is preceded by a constant loss of their previous context of meaning, which both renders their history legible and enables recognition of one's own memory experience in them. The historical afterlife of the artefacts can only arise in this gap and through the new constellations into which they are inserted. (Gilloch 2001: 4) Constantly shifting perspectives in the viewing of materialities, looking closer and from afar, relocating and displacing, enables a reading of their encapsulated sensations and memories. The movement between materialities and memories is thus double-edged. The objects act as links to the memory experience in remembrance's search for traces. At the same time, the artefacts carry their own memories and their own sense of touch, which can be rendered legible and included in the on-going experience of memory.

Oskar searches for shards. Shards that, despite the absence of Virve's touch, link his memories with hers. He allows his own memories to meet those of his grandmother through the artefacts. His search for memories assembles fragments, using them to constantly refocus his gaze, directing his experience towards his grandmother Virve's memories, letting them become extensions of both his own and Virve's experiences. But at the same time, there is an awareness in Oskar's recollections that these objects don't have a direct relationship with Virve's memory experiences. His memories emphasise this ambivalence by blurring the image, by placing the shards and the porridge doll in between Virve, Päs and Mayakovsky, between different gazes and shifting contexts. The artefacts' assigned context thus becomes this space of ambivalence, one that emphasises the complexity of the different layers of memory that it interweaves and moves between. The shards' disjointed glimpses of past lives are joined together into new constellations by postmemory's searching and tracing. In this new assemblage, they both encapsulate their past experiences and open the way for memory to read new experiences into them. As Caitlin DeSilvey emphasises: "Associative pathways link these physical fragments into plausible alignments, a might-have-been that

refuses closure and yet makes visible otherwise illegible scrapes of text, fabric, metal, bone.” (DeSilvey 2007: 409)

The randomness and the playfulness of associations leads the way in Oskar’s search for, and joining of, the different fragments that connect his own memories with Virve’s recollections of the past. The re-contextualisation of the fragments that the associations’ playfulness renders possible, opens up for a reading of Oskar’s memories in Virves, allowing Oskar’s experience of what could-have-been to go hand in hand with Virve’s experience of what has-been. It reflects a life in the afterness, a life with an experience of the flight and the War, of what has been, but also of a could-have-been and its open ending. (Adjam 2017: 187–195) By interweaving the shards with his own experiences through the playful compositions of the findings that chance has offered, Oskar’s remembrance emphasises an own experience of being-with as a state of in-betweenness.¹³ By relocating, dislocating and unsettling fragments, through displacements in time and space, postmemory’s searching and tracing carves out a room of its own, encapsulating its experience of a life in the in-between, of a journey of its own along the traces.

The Archaeology of Tracing¹⁴

Two gateposts surrounded by white wooden fences lead the way into the garden.¹⁵ The sun shines through the crowns of the huge chestnut trees and fills the lawn with dappled light. Here and there, the stone-lined path can be glimpsed beneath layers of earth. The path leads from the gateposts through the small entrance garden to an absent front door, replaced by a high metal fence. On the other side of the fence, a football pitch spreads out. Two teams of schoolboys are busy with their match. The house, to which the path once led, is gone. What remains are the gateposts and the small garden at the front, still neatly enclosed and surrounded by its wooden fence. A garden that no longer belongs, either in the urban space of pavements lined with blocks of flats that surround it, or in the sports ground that has replaced the absent house.

Oskar and I are standing in the shade of the trees on a street in the centre of a city in Estonia where Virve once lived. The traffic drowns us out and the wide pavement is empty. In the letters from the 1950s that remain after Virve,

¹³ For being-with (Mitsein) as an extension of being see Heidegger 1993: 155–158.

¹⁴ Archaeology in this context refers to Walter Benjamin’s previously mentioned concept of remembrance and his notion of memory work as a continuous search. Benjamin 1999a: 611.

¹⁵ Memory walk and interview with Oskar, 23 August 2013, Estonia.

she recollects how she returns in her dreams to this garden and to the sister and father that she had left behind. Only after a while will I come to think of the garden in her dreams. What Oskar wanted to show me are the gateposts. This is why we are here. Granny Virve had told him about them and the company emblem that was carved into them. "I don't think anyone else knows the emblem is there. You can hardly see it", says Oskar. As I run my fingers over the stone, I can trace the relief under the layers of lichen. I try to decipher the carving: "A rising sun?" Oskar shakes his head. "No, two intersecting ears of rye", he explains, "and then the company logo [behind them]. I've seen it before in a magazine, otherwise it's hard to see. It was the company my grandmother's father worked for. They lived here during winter, but in the summers they moved out to the family farm." Oskar doesn't know exactly when the family moved here or when the house was lost. He tries to work it out from the facts he knows:

In the 1910s they lived on the other side of the river. That I know. The name of that street has changed now. But then later, in the second half of the 1920s some time, they must have moved to this side one winter. That's all I know. This was a wooden house I think. Dark coloured. I have a couple of pictures of it. We can see them later.

I recall the dream Virve has mentioned in her letters. "Is this the same house that Virve remembers in her dream, when she dreams of her sister and father?" I ask. "Yes, I suppose so", Oskar replies and wonders if the neighbouring house could be from that time: "The question is whether it was built after their house was destroyed, or whether it was already there. I don't know. It doesn't look that old, but it doesn't look like it's from the Stalin era either." We try to guess the age of the building by dating the architectural features, the doors and windows, but soon give up. "The windows are dreadful, they've been replaced, don't suit the building" Oskar concludes, "but it must have been the neighbouring house at the time. Their house was blown up or burned down sometime during the war. Whether it was during the first Soviet occupation or later, I don't know. In any case, it was before they fled Estonia, because granny remembered it being gone. I think their last residence [before the flight] was again the apartment on the other side of the river. Because that was their first and last apartment in the city."

"Was it in this garden that she saw the Zeppelin, [the one she talks about in the letter]?" I ask. "No, it was in the countryside", Oskar replies and we both look up. "You can barely see the sky here, it's so overgrown", I ponder further, "do you think the trees have been here since then?" Oskar thinks for a moment. "When you look at the pictures, you see that ... What if these are the same

trees you see in the pictures? I've never even been in here", says Oskar, a little surprised, and steps into the garden. "I've only looked from the outside." He walks around among the trees. We wonder if any of them could be from that time. The maple is fast-growing, so it is dismissed. But the chestnut and linden trees seem to be symmetrically positioned on either side of the gateposts and in regular intervals along the fence, so they might be. "Seventy years has passed", Oskar sighs and starts scraping off the soil, looking for traces. "I'd like to search around here too, for shards and such. They must be here as well."



The gateposts. Photograph © Maryam Adjam.

The stones that used to line the path from the gateposts to the missing front door appear one by one as the layers of earth are scraped away. "Here's something", Oskar says, picking up a shapeless piece of metal, "well, I have so

much scrap iron from the farm already”, he adds, laughing. He compares the piece of metal with the iron fittings attached to the gateposts. The metal piece looks too “rough”, he muses “not as compact as old iron”.

On the back of the gateposts facing the garden, someone has painted large crosses with green paint. “They look like tombstones. Even the emblem is painted on!” says Oskar, running his fingers over the paint. “Maybe they’ve been trying to figure out what it is?” I suggest. “No, only we know”, he emphasises. We start to speculate whether some of the former residents of the house might also have known about the company logo. Most of them probably worked at the company, but Oskar is not sure: “There must be something about it in memm’s¹⁶ memoirs... It could be some workmates perhaps, but none of our relatives. Except for that old man in the picture that I found at the antiquarian bookshop earlier. I think it was his family [who lived here], that he lived here, now that I think about it.” On our way to the gateposts, Oskar and I had passed an antiquarian bookshop. There, our hunt for old books had been accompanied by anecdotes about famous and unknown authors from the city, interspersed with fragments of memories of various relatives. By chance, among a stack of old photographs, Oskar had found a picture of a distant relative, who now turned out to have been one of the inhabitants of the house.

We leave the small garden and continue the tour around the neighbourhood. Behind the football pitch, there is a large building. I wonder if it could be a school. “I don’t know. I know that next to their house was a boys’ school. That’s right, exactly! The guy in the picture from the bookshop, I think he was the headmaster of that boys’ school,” Oskar says, again a bit surprised. But could this really be the same school? The speculation continues as we walk towards the city.

Searching widely with an open mind, Oskar follows the traces of his grandmother Virve’s memories. Like with a puzzle, he looks for the pieces, for fragments of memories that his grandmother has talked or written about, and for material traces in the places that once were her home. Sometimes the pieces fall into place. At other times they leave yawning gaps behind. Imagination fills in the gaps. Oskar tries to guess, confronts different assumptions and theories with the place, well aware that the guesses can never turn into concrete pieces of the puzzle. Nevertheless, the guesswork accompanies us throughout the walk, expanding the fragments of memory, giving them concrete forms and bringing entire scenes to life. From a collection of random traces, a home is conjured up, using an assembly of concrete forms and memory lines, albeit fragmented. The traces are joined together: the gateposts, their being marked with the company

¹⁶ Informal term for granny.

emblem, the company employees as neighbours, the neighbour who turns out to have been the headmaster of the school and the school still standing behind the house. The missing house takes shape against a backdrop of the gateposts, the garden, the neighbours and the school, framing the presence of its absence. It is reloaded with Virve's dreams and her memories of its destruction, it is filled with everyday life, with neighbours, with the possible glimpse of a Zeppelin above these trees or perhaps above the oaks on the farm.

Oskar's revisits to granny Virve's memory places do not correspond to his own experience of a past in the house in the city or on the family farm in the countryside. Rather, he walks the middle ground between Virve's memories, the traces they might have left behind, and his own experiences of walking along the paths made by these memory traces. Marianne Hirsch notes: "Post-memory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its objects or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation." (Hirsch 1997: 22)

Postmemory is primarily the result of the playfulness of the imagination, rather than of one's own recollections of a specific event. The memory place that Oskar thus conjures up consists as much of the assembled memory fragments and material traces as it does of the playful composition of these fragments by the guesswork that creates a context for them. (Adjam 2017: 34–41; Casey 2000: 186f) Oskar's journey along Virve's memory traces is an extension of the memory place by imagination that intertwines both the material traces left and erased and the recollections of past experience. The imagination seeks Virve's lived memory experience of the place and its significance, but also expands it, sometimes with new hypotheses and at other times with new shards that may or may not be meaningful.

These evoked and imagined details always carry an undertone of uncertainty, of a present that emphasises the gap to the has-been. When we visit the site, 70 years have passed since Virve was there. The trees might have been replaced by new ones, traces with others. The uncertainty not only concerns the possible changes in the material remnants, but above all their relationship to Virve's experience of them. Virve might have passed the neighbouring house on her way home, or there might have been a completely different house in its place. She might have sat in the shade of these trees, or others. As Dylan Trigg notes, in memory's search for old places and returns to past experiences, recollections are constantly confronted with different variations of memory. (Trigg 2012: 69f) In the encounter with a past that takes concrete form during revisits, we are reminded of the lived dimension of the memory experience, which is often different from our conceptions and expectations of the same. The differences between these two variations of memory, the envisioned

and the lived, become tangible through these confrontations. Trigg further emphasises:

Difference is felt in the flesh when the preserved past misaligns with our pre-given expectations of the past. In this way, memory thrives on incongruities, disruption, and estrangement. [...] Forcing itself into the present, we come into contact with the felt reality of the past, a past that has less to do with a 'representation' of memory and more to do with the revival of an already-experienced moment in time. (Trigg 2012: 69)

By revisiting the places that formed part of Virve's memories, Oskar confronts different variations of his own and her memories with each other. Through his encounter with the place, he allows his own memory of Virve's recollections to meet and engage in a dialogue with her memories. The concreteness of place also accentuates the distinction between Virve's memories as static snapshots of the past and as lived and embodied experiences of and in the past. The revisits hence concretise the memory place, allowing it to rematerialise into tangible forms, embodying, in Trigg's words, "the felt reality of the past", and becoming a reminder that Virve's memories were grounded in lived experiences. The revisits underline a gap between these different variations, emphasising the difference between running one's fingers over an engraved emblem on a gatepost, the memory of the same gatepost as retold by Virve, and Oskar's memory of her recollection. Through the revisits, these different layers of memory are intertwined into a whole.

This movement between the various expressions and experiences of memory is of an ambivalent nature. At the same time as the revisit emphasises the distinctions, and thus concretises the lived experience, it is permeated by uncertainty about the accuracy of the interpretations and the reliability of the traces as witnesses. The uncertainty evokes an awareness of the variations and hence emphasises the gaps between them. Uncertainty combines awareness with a constant blurring of vision, an on-going questioning and changing of focus. Nothing can be established as a 'true' fact, and we keep wandering from one trace to another. Amira Bojadzija-Dan argues that reading and sensing the other's memory experience, which she refers to as "sense memory", is only possible if the experiences lose some of their accuracy. (Bojadzija-Dan 2011: 199) Sense memory, she emphasises, requires ambiguity in order to allow recognition. When the significance of the singularity of experience is emphasised, and thus the differences between experiences are underlined too clearly, recognition is made more difficult. In other words, postmemory's recognition of a previous generation's memories requires a certain amount of vagueness, a blurring of vision.

During Oskar's and my memory walk this ambivalent movement of memory appears in the constantly added uncertainty. We walk in Virve's footsteps, but we are both 'blind' to varying degrees. We can never fully grasp Virve's lived experience of this specific place or the memory place evoked in her recollections. Uncertainty thus takes on an ambivalent role, emphasising the distinction between the different experiences and forms of memory, but also the ambiguity of the depicted memory experiences and traces. In doing so, it also makes recognition possible and paves the way for a reading and sensing of the other's memory. The ambiguity, added to the dialogue between the two experiences, allows Oskar's present experience to read and recognise certain elements of Virve's memory place without being hindered by a clearly contextual, emotional or temporal barrier of differences.

It is through this ambiguity of the in-betweens that the two experiences can be interwoven into a "we" and correspond through a memory trace. We are standing in front of the gateposts with an engraved company emblem, the contours of which also give tangibility to the memory experience. Granny Virve had recounted the memory of a house, of these gateposts and their engraved emblem. She had recalled the memory of a house lost to her, and the experience of that loss. In front of the gateposts, Oskar emphasises that there is no longer anyone who knows, "only we", about this engraved emblem and the memory of it. A "we" that includes those who have not yet lost the memory of this trace. The experience of the loss of a memory is sensed and interwoven through the trace, with the memory of a loss. Through its being in-between, concrete yet abstract, the trace allows recognition, enabling Oskar to sense his experience of loss in Virve's memory of the same.

In and through the in-betweens, postmemory wanders and tells a tale of its life with an afterness, of its lived experience of a life with the memories of others, and of the entanglement of these experiences with those of the predecessors. It touches on and combines abstraction and concretion, ambivalence and knowledge, in a constant movement that continues in searching, dreaming, imagining and revisiting. Through a being-with-an-after, Oskar's search continues an on-going life with the past that adds new layers of memory to the place, that reads off the sense of loss in the wake of a war and a flight and further adds its own experience of a life with this loss, an experience of a life as a "shimmering movement in-between" different layers of memory, a life of *after* memory (Sá Cavalcante Schuback 2017: 186).

The Poetics of Postmemory

Framed as witnesses of the master narrative of history, a narrative preoccupied with the chain of events, with establishing the has-been of the after, family memory tales of devastating events are constantly confronted with the demands of truth-telling and truth-seeking.¹⁷ (White 1973; David 2020) In the Estonian context, where certain memories of the War and the flight had for decades during the Soviet occupation been excluded from official history, it became particularly important to shed light on these experiences by collecting memory tales from those periods. (Kirss & Kivimäe 2009; Kõresaar 2004; Kõresaar 2011; Kõresaar, Lauk & Kuutma 2009) As a result, these memories were also increasingly assigned the role of witnesses and sources of oral history, with an emphasis on their representations of the historical events. However, in accordance with Carlo Ginzburg, I would argue that there is no clear distinction between fact and fiction in oral history, let alone when it comes to life stories and their role in memory work in general and in postmemory in particular (Ginzburg 2012). Ginzburg summarises the distinction between the historical and the poetic as: “Historians, Aristoteles tells us (Poetics 51b) speak of what has been, (of the true, of the real world); and poets, of what might have been (of the possible).” (Ginzburg 2012: 6)

Postmemories, I would argue, combine these two worlds. They speak on the memory experience’s behalf, both as what has-been and what might-have-been. Memory tales rather tend actively to use the playfulness of relating to fiction and imagination, to illustrate the lived experience of historical events, hence the poetics of postmemory needs to be taken into account when analysing its memory work. (Blejmar 2016: 34; Ginzburg 2012: 2; Skultans 1998: 47–48) By placing the experience between the lived and the variations of the possible, between life and fantasy, memory tales witness a lived history as an act of recognition of the has-been in the on-going. (Benjamin 2003: 382) Postmemories of devastating events underline an experience of the urgency and imminence of the historical event, but at the same time dispute the testimony they are bearing witness to by using imagination, an act of playfulness despite the event. (Blejmar 2016: 8) In the memory work of the “generation after”, as Marianne Hirsch describes the second and third generations, the active use of imagination is both significant and necessary to render legible memories of the previous generations, as well as to enable a representation of one’s own experience. (Hirsch 2012: 5; Blejmar 2016: 60) The life of postmemories in the

¹⁷ Master narrative signifies, as in Heyden White’s (1973) understanding, a dominant story of the historical past that shapes collective understandings of certain historical events.

aftermath of devastating events is often a puzzle of fragmented memory traces, requiring an imaginative investment in order to interweave different layers of memory and assemble the fragments into a tale of postmemory's life with an after. A tale in which the imagination is given as much say as the available fragments of fact.

Furthermore, postmemory reflects an experience other than that of the first generation. The experience of postmemory is rooted in an afterness, where what has-been often goes hand in hand with what might-have-been, where variations on the possible are as likely as the 'actual', where the outcome of an escape could have been different. This is reflected in postmemory's positioning of the memory experience between the actual and the possible, between life and fiction. It constitutes postmemory's poetics, a constant oscillation between different modes and expressions. This doesn't indicate that postmemory is less 'truthful'. Rather, by moving between various settings and various 'truths', the poetics of postmemory captures an experience of what remains as "a shimmering go-between" between different layers of memory (Sá Cavalcante Schuback 2017: 186) A poetic of the afterness that brings the experience to the fore through the ambiguities added by memory's being with an after.

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Interviews

- Interview with Oskar and observation record, 9 February 2011, Sweden.
- Interview with Oskar and observation record, 22–23 August 2013, Estonia.
- E-mail correspondence with Oskar, February–March 2011.

Illustrations

- Image 1: Virve's diary and the porridge doll. Sweden. 9 February 2011. Photo by the author.
- Image 2: The gateposts. Estonia. 23 August 2013. Photo by the author.