

Children of the émigrés. The impact of persecution in family memory

Philipp Mettaufer, Institute for Jewish History in Austria

There is still no comprehensive study on the psychological impact and trans-generational long-term consequences of the holocaust for descendants of exiled Austrians. This is quite astonishing, given the manifold international research activities in Germany, in the USA and in Israel since the 1990ies.

“I think this ‘lateness’ is related to the subject itself: Nobody likes to dig where there might be skeletons in the closet, where the involvement of one’s own parents’ or grandparents’ generation in a dictatorship with monstrous consequences might become apparent,” is the telling formula used by the German oral historian Alexander von Plato.

The majority of studies and publications so far focuses mainly on descendants of survivors of ghettos and concentration camps, while for the children and grandchildren of emigrants, scientific research is largely lacking. Faced with the Shoa, many studies neglect the traumatising consequences of flight and displacement, although their psychological importance cannot be doubted. Even before the deportations, the living conditions of the Jewish population were characterized by massive deterioration and mental stress. The dissolution of a familiar environment, the destruction of one’s economic existence, the sudden disappearance of relatives and friends by far exceeded everyday stresses. Torn from their familiar socio-cultural milieu, suffering from constant separation anxiety, the affected individuals lived in an atmosphere of tension, fear and terror.

For the most part, those who survived the Shoa and displacement were the last generation of their family. With the formation of new families, the generation count began anew: They became the “first generation”. For these people, the birth of their children was a pivotal event in their post-war lives; their children created a foundation for shaping a life-affirming environment and gave meaning to a new beginning. Parental assignments and expectations towards the children were extensive. They were to form a bridge to life and be a symbol of victory over the persecutors, annul traumatic experiences and replace the victims.

Valerie Kosinetz de Heller, born in Vienna in 1919, forced to flee to Buenos Aires in 1938, in an interview:

“And that for years, I did not want a child, because I thought our race had already been through enough. That it would be better if it wasn’t there any more. For twenty years, I did

not want one. And then I had a son after all. He is everything I have now. Even though he isn't with me. And I am living here all alone. [...]

I thought I cannot do this to a child, to bring a Jewish child into the world. There already are far too many. They are killing us anyway. And my husband sympathized with me. He said: 'If you don't want to, then don't.' And later I wanted to, but it didn't work immediately. But fifteen years had already passed by then, and I started to think: I still would like to have a child, right. Then it didn't work as quickly as that. I was 39 years old when my son was born. I think I had the easiest pregnancy one can have. Everybody told me: 'At your age, too!' I was the happiest person ever. Everybody told me I had never looked as well as I did at that time. Until the last moment I went swimming. I had a parto sin dolor [a pain-free birth]"

Alongside the parents' joy and devotion, a number of stresses and constraints can develop for the children of survivors and exiled individuals, although it seems nearly impossible to reduce the consequences of persecution to one common denominator. Above all, there is one term informing the research literature on trans-generational long-term consequences: posttraumatic stress disorder.

One notable exception is a social-psychiatric study by the Israeli research group round Abraham Sagi-Schwartz, which concludes that no transmission of traumata between generations had occurred. Three generations of families with a history of persecution were contrasted to a comparison group with no such family history. The result was that, although the first generation of holocaust survivors showed significantly higher rates of suffering from unresolved separation anxiety and traumata, there was no more significant difference between their daughters.

In this study, however, only grandmothers, their daughters and granddaughters were part of the sample, while male family members were not included in the study. This means that the family structure was not taken into account, the influence of fathers or intra-familial delegations were not considered. Here, further gender-focussed examinations would allow for interesting insights.

One of the prevailing sentiments that is evident in nearly all family histories of exiles is the feeling of "never arriving", of "eternal emigration", of uprooting. Eva Hacker, born in Traun near Linz in 1925 and forced to emigrate to Argentina in 1938, who returned to Austria via Italy and Israel in the 1960ies, states the following in an interview:

"I always was clear on this towards my son, what we are here. He has his papers in order, he could leave for Argentina at any time, if one was persecuted; something I think very unlikely.

But he would have this opportunity, if there was some mishap here, politically. And for a long, long time, I've had no roots here. But I have air roots, and I planted them here, but if need be, I can take them out any time and put them down somewhere else. Without any unhappiness.”

Her brother in law, Jorge Hacker, director and dramaturg in Buenos Aires, who was exiled from the “Ostmark” at the age of six, expresses a similar sentiment in his interview. He feels his Austrian passport is a “counter-insurance”, as it enables him to leave Argentina at any time, without a visa. Although he says he hopes not to have to go through a “second emigration”, he “however had already warmed to the thought”, in particular during the Argentinian military dictatorship of 1976 to 1983.

Quote: “For if we descendants of the victims of the Nazi period have something in common, then it is the nearly sacred duty to flee in time this time, the next time. The fear of missing the moment when we may still save ourselves, of not recognizing it, is the greatest and maybe even the only fear we have [...] Flight is therefore the most important subject of my life,” writes Peter Sichrovsky in his autobiographical reflections. Sichrovsky was born the son of re-migrated parents in Vienna in 1947, and was a member of the European Parliament for the FPÖ – the Austrian Freedom Party – from 1996 to 2004.

This fear becomes manifest in different phantasies and behaviour patterns. “While one dreams of having as many nationalities as possible, the other collects suitcases; many refrain from buying property in Germany or in Austria, others classify their non-Jewish friends according to whether they can imagine being hidden by them or not.”

Whether persecution can result in lasting psychological impairment with a long-term effect or not was for a long time a contentious issue, or was hardly taken into account, which in turn had to do with the “compensation procedure”. Ernst Kretschmer, for example, one of the leading German psychiatrists before, during and after the Nazi period, was active as a consultant in “compensation proceedings” since the 1950ies. In addition to that, he was a co-founder of the Lindau Psychotherapy Weeks, the largest further training event for psychotherapy in the German-speaking world.

Regarding one victim of persecution by the Nazi regime, Kretschmer attested that there were no neuroses relating to persecution, as “the balancing ability of the organism in cases of serious psychological trauma” was unlimited. Although the court rejected Kretschmer’s opinion, the compensation office sent out the report as a template for all relevant authorities, and it thus found its way into legal comments. Only as late as the 1960ies, the term “survivor

syndrome,” coined by the German-American psychiatrist William Niederland, was established. The concept of “survivors’ guilt” describes the “sense of guilt” for having escaped oneself, while others had to die.

With regard to the following generations, psychoanalysts now speak of a “child of survivors complex,” describing a range of disorders in the fields of conflict processing, autonomy, separation, individuation, formation of self and identity as well as problems in coping with feelings of guilt and aggression.

Besides these psychological delegations, questions of social, cultural and linguistic integration into the society of the country into which they were born are fundamental issues for the children of refugees. Hilde Spiel, a Viennese-born writer who re-migrated from London, expresses this complex by saying that the “disease of exile” seems to be “hereditary”. A question that still has to be asked is whether a “re-migration” is the “cure” for this “sickness” (all in quotes).

In my research project “Uprooted? Forced emigration in family memory”, I interviewed descendants of those Jewish Austrians who were able to emigrate to Argentina. Pivotal issues and key concepts of guilt, as well as understanding of guilt or sense of guilt, the role of the victim and who is entitled to it, forgiving, compensation and reconciliation were raised every time, without me having explicitly asked about them.

Surprisingly, my Jewish interviewees often embarked on a paradoxical discourse of exculpation, defending Austrian National Socialists or saying that “many Austrians were forced into the Party”. We may assume that I, as a third-generation member of the “perpetrators’ society”, helped subconsciously trigger this apology and defence in a situation of transference or countertransference. Also, the reflexive association of the Nazi period with the crimes of the last Argentinian military dictatorship, during which 30,000 opposition members were murdered, led to a critical weighting of the possibilities of resistance and refusal in an authoritarian regime.

Tomás Klein, born to Austrian parents in Buenos Aires in 1941, says in the interview that we conducted in Spanish:

“Today, it is painful for me to think back to these things. What has happened, happened. I don’t say that nothing has happened! But to me it is much more important to ask for forgiveness. Forgiveness not only means to apologize to someone who has harmed me, but has a meaning for all of humanity [...] I don’t want to stay stuck in anger. I know that this only causes further harm and never helps. The only thing that helps is to learn to help and to

understand that the world has to choose a different path. Don't stay put, another year and another victim, more dead bodies, six million, huh, you understand? I don't want to start a lament: '*Let's not forget the concentration camps!*' [German in the original] I don't want to forget, but I also want to forgive."

Different family members often share the burden of the family history and assume different roles. The grandchildren's generation has a particular significance, as it can establish an unprejudiced approach because of the growing temporal and emotional distance. While, for example, one grandchild particularly identifies with Judaism, but is otherwise completely integrated into the Spanish-speaking Argentinian society, another may uphold the German-language heritage of the family, study the language, participate in a students' exchange with Austria or travel to Germany, while a third distances himself completely from the family and these issues.

Summing up, we can establish: Also for the generations born after 1945, there is no putting the past behind them; the family history of persecution, the Shoa, have a lasting impact, even though the knowledge of historical events decreases in the following generations, and the views on history and on Austria become increasingly vague. The Nazi history, however, remains part of their present.