COMING BACK HOME: POSTMEMORY IN NOVELS BY ALEXANDER CHUDAKOV, KATJA PETROWSKAJA, AND MARIA STEPANOVA

by

Zhanel Mektepbayeva

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts in

Eurasian Studies

at

NAZARBAYEV UNIVERSITY – SCHOOL OF SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

2023

Abstract

This study explores postmemory as a way of "coming back home" to one's roots and reimagined identity. It is particularly important within the context of the recent turn to prioritizing personal memories over the official, collective memory to process traumatic historical experiences of the 20th century, such as the war, Stalinist purges, and the Holocaust. The thesis presents a comprehensive analysis of three contemporary novels — Alexander Chudakov's *A Gloom Is Cast Upon the Ancient Steps* (*Lozhitsia mgla na starye stupeni*, 2000), Maria Stepanova's *In Memory of Memory* (*Pamiati pamiati*, 2017), and Katja Petrowskaja's *Maybe Esther* (*Vielleicht Esther*, 2014). The study uses the theory of postmemory, developed by Marianne Hirsch, to research how different generations of survivors engage with stories and objects of memory, such as family photographs, letters and archival documents to access the experience of their ancestors. The thesis uses the methods of literary analysis and close reading to discuss, through the question of genre, connections between literature, memory, and the enduring impact of catastrophic historical events on subsequent generations.

Acknowledgements

This thesis is the result of 2 years and 2 degree deferrals, along with the support and knowledge generously shared by many people. I would like to express my gratitude to my advisor, Professor Victoria Thorstensson, for her guidance, kindness, and belief in my academic development. Initially, she served as my official advisor at Nazarbayev University, and her profound impact on my academic journey has persisted, even after her transition to Carleton College in the USA. Furthermore, I am deeply thankful to Professor Nikolay Tsyrempilov, who led the Eurasian Studies program for two years. His understanding and compassion inspired me to apply for a degree deferral when I faced challenges with my mental health that prevented me from completing the thesis on time.

I want to thank my advisors – Professor Yulia Kozitskaya and Professor Mikhail Akulov. Each of them offered valuable comments on my thesis, which helped me see it from different perspectives. Finally, I want to thank the faculty members of the Literature Department and the Creative Writing community at Nazarbayev University for the great experience and their love of literature and writing. I also want to thank the University itself for 8 years of study, life lessons, opportunities, friends, and teachers.

This thesis has been written during the hardest 3 years of my life, and I want to leave a little dedication statement here:

I dedicate this work to my grandmother, Galiya, our Galochka, who passed away a month before I chose to write about postmemory. My grandmother was about her 80s when she passed, the same age as Stepanova's aunt Galya, whose death prompted her to start writing her book, *In Memory of Memory*. And I, just like Stepanova, always strived but never had a chance to save all the memories of her.

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Introduction: The Theory of Postmemory

There is a traditional way of thinking about memory that we use while we grow up and build our general understanding of history. The traditional way is to accept what we learn at school history textbooks as the truth about the past. The traditional way looks at things through a bigger politicized narrative and it is usually used in creating and supporting different ideologies. The contemporary turn in working with memory shifts the emphasis from grand historical narratives and state–sanctions to personal and family narratives and memories. A field of contemporary memory studies, the studies of postmemory embraces this new turn. Postmemory is defined as "the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before — to experiences they "remember" only through the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up."[1] I use the theory of postmemory in this thesis because it is relevant to the contemporary process of "personalization" — a process of using personal memory as a tool to analyze bigger historical experiences. The switch of focus to one's family experience helps to look at the existing material from a completely different side: a side of a personal story.

The studies of collective traumatic experiences are what unite postmemory and memory under the umbrella term "memory studies." Memory studies is a field that studies the use of memory as a tool for remembering the past. It is a multidisciplinary field that is inspired by different theoretical points. Contemporary memory studies are concentrated on three basic modes of remembering. According to the authors of the article "On Agonistic Memory," Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen, the antagonistic mode focuses "on heritage as monumentalism" and a "division of the historical characters into good and evil."[2] The second, cosmopolitan, mode is concentrated on human suffering and human rights violations. Finally, the third mode defined by Bull and Hansen is called agonistic and is identified to have such features as avoiding "pitting *good* against *evil*; remembering

[1] "Postmemory," Postmemory.net, accessed January 3, 2022, https://postmemory.net

[2] Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen, "On agonistic memory," *Memory Studies* 9, no. 4, (201): 390, https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698015615935

the past by relying on the testimonies of both perpetrators and victims, as well as witnesses, bystanders, spies, and traitors; recognizing the important role played by emotions; reconstructing the historical context, socio–political struggles, and individual/collective narratives."[3] In the field of memory studies, postmemory employs the same approaches to analyze historical events, effectively incorporating the principles of agonistic mode of remembering into postmemory studies.

Postmemory serves as a means of self–understanding and a pathway to personal identity. By exploring the history of their family, descendants of the catastrophes discover their connection to their roots and find their way back "home." Authors use postmemory as a way to confront the chaos of their own family history. One of the most influential figures in postmemory studies is Marianne Hirsch, who coined the term in the early 1990s.[4] In her essay, Hirsch argues that to "elucidate the lines of transmission between individual and collective remembrance and to specify how the break–in transmission resulting from traumatic historical events," we require modes of remembrance that "reconnect and reembody an intergenerational memorial fabric that has been severed by catastrophe."[5] Postmemory, as a theory, aims to repair this severed memorial fabric and reshape our perspective of the past.

In her book, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust,* Hirsch identifies a group of authors she refers to as "the generation of postmemory." These authors include Art Spiegelman, W.G. Sebald, Eva Hoffman, Tatana Kellner, Muriel Hasbun, Anne Karpff, Lily Brett, Lorie Novak, David Levinthal, Nancy Spero, and Susan Meiselas. All of these authors have written postmemory texts engaging with the memory of the Holocaust. Hirsch studies postmemory while actively engaging in scholarly dialogue with these authors, who aim to "forge a creative postmemorial aesthetic that reanimates the past without appropriating it."[6] Initially, the theory of postmemory was used in the studies of the memory of the Holocaust, as the book's title

[3] Bull and Hansen, "On agonistic memory," 390.
[4] Postmemory.net, "Postmemory."
[5] Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008):110, https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372–2007–019
[6] Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaus*t, (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2012), 6.

suggests. However, over time, the theory has expanded to include any kind of catastrophic experience that continues to influence future generations.

The theory of postmemory is closely linked to trauma studies, and these titles are sometimes used interchangeably.[7] Rather than focusing on the neuroscientific aspect of their affinities in this thesis, I consider the application of trauma studies in literary analysis. An important review by James Young of Eva Hoffman's book *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust, shows* that some scholars disagree that trauma can be transmitted from one generation to another. For example, Hoffman questions whether individuals want to perceive themselves as traumatized by their own parentage "as having drunk victimhood, so to speak, with one's mother's milk?"[8] And yet, Hoffman supports the theory of postmemory by identifying herself as part of what she calls the "hinge–generation," situated "between experience and memory."[9] Despite criticism, Hirsch's theory remains an important contribution to modern science and a reevaluation of past experiences.

The theme of subsequent generations in postmemory, specifically why they turn to the memory of catastrophic events that befell their relatives, is a compelling aspect of this theory. Hoffman writes about how the formative events of the twentieth century profoundly shaped the biographies of those in the generation of postmemory. These events have the potential to significantly influence their lives, even though they didn't directly witness, endure, or experience them: "but we did not see them, suffer through them, or experience their impact directly. Our relationship to them has been defined by our very 'post–ness' and by the powerful but mediated forms of knowledge that have followed from it."[10] So, the connection of subsequent generations to catastrophic events is

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[7] Samuel O'Donoghue, "Postmemory as Trauma?: Some Theoretical Problems and Their Consequences for Contemporary Literary Criticism," Politika, June 26, 2018, https://www.politika.io/en/notice/postmemory–as–trauma–some–theoretical–problems–and–their–consequences–for–contemporary

[8] James Young, "After Such Knowledge: A Prisoner of Memory," review of *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust*, by Eva Hoffman, *The New York Times*, January 18, 2004.

[9] Young, "After."

[10] Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 25, quoted in Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008) :110.

characterized by the prefix "post." The prefix "post" in postmemory does not remove them from memory; rather, it sets them apart from it due to a generational distance and distinguishes them from history through a profound personal link.[11] In summary, postmemory explores how later generations, characterized by a generational distance and indirect experiences of the past catastrophes, establish a deep personal link with the crucial events of the past.

Materials for the Study

The thesis analyze three different contemporary post–Soviet novels that engage with postmemory: a novel by Alexander Chudakov *A Gloom Is Cast Upon the Ancient Steps* (*Lozhitsia mgla na starye stupeni*, 2000),[12] Maria Stepanova's *In Memory of Memory (Pamiati pamiati, 2017),*[13] and Katja Petrowskaja's *Maybe Esther* (*Vielleicht Esther*, 2014).[14] Each of these novels has received widespread popularity, won numerous awards, and created literary sensations, illustrating the significant interest among the reading public in this topic and the common need to confront both collective and personal traumas of the 20th century. These novels use postmemory as a method tool through which narrators overcome the traumatic experiences of their ancestors and make possible the symbolic "homecoming." The authors of postmemory texts "come back home" to their roots, to their reimagined identity, reconstruct their identity by using specific objects that transmit memory: family photographs, letters, and archival documents.

With each of these novels, different number of years passes between the traumatic experiences of the authors' family members and the times of the writing of these novels. According to the theory of postmemory, it is crucial to distinguish the generations of descendants that come after these catastrophes, as this shapes the way memories are transmitted. Chudakov represents the second generation following the catastrophe, while Stepanova and Petrowskaja belong to the third generation. It's noteworthy that Stepanova's and Petrowskaja's novels belong to the genre in a more

[11] Marianne Hirsch, "Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post–Memory," *Discourse* 15, no. 2 (1992): 9, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41389264.
[12] Aleksandr Chudakov, *Lozhitsia mgla na stare stupeni, (*Moscow: E'ksmo, 2022).
[13] Stepanova, Maria. *In Memory of Memory*. (New York: Directions Publishing, 2017).
[14] Katja Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther:a Family Story,* (New York: Harper, 2018).

contemporary way, incorporating a lot of non–fiction elements, such as memoirs, letters, and family photographs into their narratives. Chudakov's novel, being the earliest of the three, less explicitly belong to the genre of autofiction, though it also plays with the genre and uses an autobiographic protagonist. Additionally, Chudakov's novel explores the trauma of forced migration, while Stepanova's and Petrowskaja's novels directly address the trauma of the Holocaust. Finally, although all three texts were created in the context of post–Soviet literature by Russophone authors, Chudakov and Stepanova write in Russian in Russia, while Petrowskaja, a Ukrainian journalist, penned her novel in German, and published it in Germany.

Despite these differences, these novels offer a good base for a comprehensive analysis of the use of postmemory in literature. Firstly, they turn to the genre of autofiction and employ a sophisticated approach to it. Secondly, all three novels shift from personal memory to collective memory, counter to the direction encouraged by state propaganda, which emphasizes inscribing personal memories into the collective memory. Thirdly, these novels emerge from the authors' efforts to confront their own trauma. The authors turn to memory to revisit and process the trauma experienced by their ancestors. Biographical facts serve as the basis of these novels and are reinterpreted through art: the process of overcoming trauma is done through art. Consequently, these novels offer a fresh perspective on how it is possible to addres the past and historical pain. The shared characteristics of these novels provide a basis for examining the impact of traumatic experiences on subsequent generations, their efforts to forge personal identity out of their family history, and their role in shaping and transforming collective memory. Their differences, on the other hand, allow for an analysis of various generations, distinct histories, and different historical narratives that influence the use of postmemory in literature.

Methodology

Using methods of literary analysis and close reading, this study examines these three contemporary novels about postmemory within the context of theoretical discussions of postmemory, memory and trauma studies, both in contemporary scholarship and in the public discourse (including

editorials, book reviews, podcasts, and more). Literary analysis concerns itself with such topics as genre, character types, and the use of literary language. By delving into these aspects and conducting close readings of excerpts from the novels, this study addresses broader questions regarding postmemory and trauma. Through these analytical methods, it clarifies the connection between literature, memory, and the enduring impact of catastrophic events on subsequent generations.

The Genre of Autofiction as a Way to Speak About Postmemory in Contemporary Literature

All three books that I analyze here are written in the genre of autofiction. The genre combines two inconsistent narrative forms — autobiography and fiction. Though the term is not new and the genre has ancient roots, it is a quite modern way of working with memories. The novelty of the genre is found in the way it departs from nonfiction memory texts like a memoir, autobiographies, etc. Unlike them, it does not claim itself to be true and, instead, embraces its fictional side.

The term autofiction was first coined by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977 and was introduced as a life–writing, in which the author, protagonist, and narrator share an identity.[15] The genre gained its popularity in contemporary literature as a "result of a craving for authenticity in fiction writing and the acknowledgement of the fictionalizing effects of memory and remembrance in every form of life–writing and of the memoir boom that followed in the wake of 1989."[16] This was a time when the Soviet Union started to dissolve, uncovering the traumatic experiences that people had been suffering from for seventy years. So, this genre is connected with the creation of contemporary cultural memory that opposes the uniform official memory that was enforced by the dominant state ideology. The chapter by Dix called "Autofiction, Post–conflict Narratives, and New Memory Cultures" demonstrates the usefulness of autofiction techniques in creating new forms of public memorization.[17] According to him, this affordance is utilized by contemporary postcolonial writers

[15] Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor, ed., *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms (*Springer Nature, 2022), 186.
[16] Anja Tippner, "How It All Turned Out Alright: Autofiction As Memory Form In Irena Douskova′s Novels About Childhood And Youth In Post–1968 Czechoslovakia," *European Journal of Life Writing* 10, (2021): 47.
[17] Hywel Dix, "Autofiction, Post–conflict Narratives, and New Memory Cultures," in *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms,* ed. Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 200.

in post–conflict societies, who use autofictional structures and techniques to forge a form of cultural memory. In his analysis of two primary texts, the author states that this form of cultural memory is simultaneously individual and collective.[18] So, autofiction as a genre can be very useful in working with memory since it may help to create new forms of cultural memory, based on individual narratives. This makes the genre close to the contemporary way of working with memory, which switches the focus to the very personal narrative. Postmemory, too, is being embraced by contemporary writers who work with the genre of autofiction. For example, the idea of having the author, protagonist, and narrator be the same, works to make the writing more personal, not to count an element of suspension that this approach creates. It may also create a sense of a distance to make it easier for the authors to write about their lives, in case of some traumatic writing like the Holocaust, exiles, or the War.

It seems important that, while the three novels that I study belong to the genre of autofiction, they also position themselves in an unusual way in terms of their genre. For example, Chudakov's novel is called "an idyll," although being devoted to the subject of a family's survival through the Stalinist period, it is far from being idyllic in the general understanding of this word. Although the author's own letters and diaries were used as a base for the plot, the novel can be categorized as fiction from the very beginning: from the invented main hero, and to the idyllic chronotope that he creates to make an artistic transformation of his memories. Stepanova's novel is called "a romance," and it is written as a kind of a lyric essay, as non–fiction. And yet, we can see it metaphorically as a journey to self–discovery, a novel of "pat home," which structures the text as a work of fiction. Finally, Petrowskaja's novel has the subtitle "stories," or, in German, "Geschichten." The genre emphasizes simultaneously the literary nature of the novel and its truthfulness, its documentary, non–fictional character.[19] And yet, the book is far from being a short story collection, it is rather a novel with a division into chapters. These unusual genre definitions: "a romance," "an idyl," and "stories,"

[18] Dix, "Autofiction," 200.
[19] Liza Birger, "Vazhnaia kinga," Polka, October 20, 2018, https://polka.academy/materials/808.

underscore the modern perspective of the authors on their memories and the nature of the genre of their texts. By creating fiction from memory, the novels suggest a new way of working with memories, a way that does not present these memories as the truth, and yet it transmits something beyond the truth.

The Structure of the Thesis

My thesis consists of three main chapters; each chapter is dedicated to one novel and the author. My first chapter is about Chudakov and his novel *A Gloom Is Cast Upon the Ancient* Steps. The chapter addresses the complicated issue of the idyll and how it can be understood on many levels in the novel. Also, Chudakov's novel shows how memory transmits to the second generation after the catastrophes and how postmemory affects the life of the second–generation representatives. The second chapter is about Petrowskaja's novel *Maybe Esther*. The chapter explores the Holocaust's historical background, and the problematic nature of the collective memory in the Soviet Union, which created a feeling of "dual world" for the author. The chapter also includes a comparative analysis of the third and the second generations' reactions to the postmemory. The last chapter is about Stepanova's novel *In Memory of Memory*. This chapter explores on the tools that the third generation after the catastrophe is more likely to rely on when "receiving" memory, such as objects and photographs.

All three chapters show how profoundly inherited trauma of catastrophic experiences influences the lives of subsequent generations. Considering Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, I assume that second–generation representatives are more likely to "receive" memories through narrated family stories and life lessons, while third–generation representatives are more likely to rely on objects: photographs, documents, letters, etc. Chapter 2 also shows how postmemory is crucial in understanding the historical context of any catastrophic experience, since it brings more aspects to the official memory. Also, it analyzes such "feature" of postmemory as imagination, stating that it is a common and important consequence of memory transmission. Finally, Chapter 3 discusses the

ethical side of contemporary authors' work on postmemory texts, pointing at possible biases in working with photographs.

Chapter 1

The Idill and The Odyssey: the Questions of Identity in Chudakov's *A Gloom is Cast Upon the Ancient Steps*

Introduction

Alexander Chudakov (1938–2005) is known primarily as a researcher of Chekhov's literary works as well as a publisher, lecturer, and critic. From 1964 Chudakov worked at the Institute of World Literature, taught at Moscow State University, and the Literary Institute, and lectured on Russian literature at European and American universities.[20] Chudakov is one of the leading experts on Chekhov, the author of several books and more than two hundred articles on the history of Russian literature. According to the letters and diary excerpts are given in an appendix of the novel *A Gloom is Cast Upon the Ancient Steps*, Chudakov contemplated writing a novel for more than 40 years, while focusing entirely on his own scholarly work. For example, in September 1956 he wrote: "Maybe, indeed, it would work for me. Actually, I think I could write something. After all, my ability to study the most diverse subjects that have nothing to do with philology should find its application."[21] *A Gloom is Cast Upon the Ancient Steps* is a novel written by Alexander Chudakov in 2000. The novel was shortlisted for the 2001 Russian Booker Prize. It was also awarded the Russian Booker of the Decade prize.[22]

The victory of the novel by Chudakov was a rare case when the presentation of a major literary award did not cause contention and disagreement among writers and critics. According to literary critic Bulkina, the victory of Chudakov's novel is "one of the most indisputable and obvious decisions of the Booker jury in its not an indisputable history."[23] These words were supported by Chudakova, who stated that the first to congratulate her was Lyudmila Ulitskaya, who herself was on

[20] Marietta Chudakova, "Marie'tta Chudakova o muzhe I avtore romana "Lozhitsia mgla na starye stupeni," interview by Alisa Orlova, *Tatyanin den*, April 20, 2012, https://www.taday.ru/text/1539262.html
[21] Chudakov, *Lozhitsia mgla*, 506. All translations are mine.
[22] "Russian Booker Prize," Russian booker, accessed February 5, 2019, https://russianbooker.org
[23] Inna Bulkina, "Istoria vnuka veka," *Znamya*, no. 8 (2012), https://znamlit.ru/publication.php?id=4999.

the shortlist. She said that the jury's choice was fair.[24] The novel was well–recognized: according to the words of representatives of the Vremya publishing house, the circulation of the new edition of the book 5,000 copies, which arrived in Moscow in February 2012, was sold out in three working days.[25]

The novel is set in Chebachinsk, a fictional city that stands for Shuchinsk – a real small town in Northern Kazakhstan. Starting from the 1930s Kazakhstan became a place where political exiles were sent during the Stalinist purges. Northern Kazakhstan is the edge of the empire, which is why Shuchinsk later also becomes a place for war–time evacuations and exile for entire national deportations. This is shown well in the novel, where the main hero remembers the time of the Chechen people's deportations: "Chechens and Ingush were unloaded in the bare steppe, they dug themselves dugouts–holes – Kopai gorod. […] The Chebachins, who had seen the exiles, did not believe the explanations of the NKVD that the Chechens and Ingush all collaborated with the Germans; and at first, the Chebachins treated the special settlers sympathetically, gave them shovels, stretchers, buckets, milk to their children."[26] From the beginning of the 1930s, political exiles began to settle in Chebachinsk as well, later, during the War, a part of the Science Academy was evacuated there. All these created an interesting society in Chebachinsk. In his novel, Chudakov highlights that Anton never did see such a large number of intelligentsia per unit area again.[27]

The paradox of the setting is that a place for punitive exiles appeared to be a beautiful and fertile landscape: "the exiled settlers from the first days were literally shocked: they ended up in a resort–like place; they were surrounded by the Kazakh country: a million hectares of forest, ten lakes, a wonderful climate."[28] If not the horror of the totalitarian regime, the place might be seen even idillic, because of the wonderful climate and the fact that it was a resort–like place with several sanatoriums around. Though Shuchinsk, is a place in Kazakhstan, the narrator states that the number of Kazakhs

[24] Chudakova, Interview.
[25] Chudakova, Interview.
[26] Chudakov, *Lozhitsia mgla*, 40.
[27] Chudakov, *Lozhitsia mgla*, 46.
[28] Chudakov, *Lozhitsia mgla*, 44.

there was extremely small: “Kazakhs with their camels and undersized horses were seen only in the bazaar and – in Stalin's tunics – in the office of the executive committee.”[29] This created a sense of alienation of the city from the outside world, the novel showed a small Russia with a preserved Russian culture somewhere on the edge of the Empire.

Anton’s family moves to Chebachinsk, a small town in northern Kazakhstan voluntarily without waiting for an exile – they rather escaped from the purges in the 1930s. In the city, the Russian intelligentsia, academics, and scientists build an almost utopian life. The novel starts when the adult Anton returns to Chebachisk to say goodbye to his dying grandfather and sort out the problem of inheritance. The trip uncovers his childhood memories and becomes the start of small distinct stories of Anton’s childhood united by the relationship between Anton and his grandfather. The novel narrates the story of Anton, his childhood and youth under the totalitarian regime of the Soviet Union; and his relationships with his grandfather. The novel is about time and memory, identity and generation; it is about family.

In Defense of the Genre: The Autofiction

Chudakov’s novel is autobiographical. The idea to write a novel based on the stories of his childhood came to Chudakov while he was still a student. In his diaries for 1956, when he was a second–year student at Moscow University of the Humanities, he wrote: “try to write the story of a young man of our era, using autobiographical material, but without giving his portrait.”[30] Written in the now–popular genre of autofiction, the novel was one of the first examples of the genre that received a positive response from readers and critics. And yet, there were readers who doubted the form of the novel – its coherence, completeness, and its unity.[31] However, according to Andrei Stepanov, a Russian literary scholar and a literary critic, even those readers assumed that before them,

[29] Chudakov, *Lozhitsia mgla*, 56.
[30] Chudakov, *Lozhitsia mgla*, 505.
[31] Andei Stepanov, “Idilliia vs progress: zametki o proze A. Chudakova,” in *Tynianovskii sbornik: dvenadtsatye, trinadtstye, chetyrnadtsatye Tynianovskii chteniia. Vyp. 13, (*Riga: Vodoloi, 2008), 401.

there was still a novel, because "it would be strange to impose such requirements to memoirs."[32] Autofiction is a genre that combines two narrative forms – autobiography and fiction but it is still far from being a memoir or any other nonfiction memory text. Balina states that the genre of this novel could be described as an autobiographical narration with an invented hero.[33] Indeed, Chudakov's novel features a fictional main character, Anton, while Chudakov himself is the prototype for Anton. Simultaneously, the novel draws inspiration from the author's life, as evidenced by numerous diary entries and letters, that some more recent editions of the novel include as supplement materials. For instance, one of the earliest diary entries from 1956 states:

> Naive belief in everything – 8th – 9th grade, although my grandfather used to say – newspapers – why the cult of personality, life in collective farms (his view), in general.
> He was not a conservative, he recognized positive aspects (nations – equal, industry).
> I (should I write in diary form?) argued with him, tried to prove my point, but there were seeds in my soul.[34]

From this short example, it is evident how Chudakov intended to write a novel about himself and his grandfather, aiming to emphasize the most significant aspects of their personalities he wanted to depict in his work. Of course, not everything in the novel is drawn from the author's life. For instance, according to Chudakov's interview, it is known that some chapters of the novel are almost entirely fictional.

It's also important to note that the genre of autofiction, especially in its modern form, often includes fragments written in a different genre or about something entirely different in meaning. This is most evident in the novels of Stepanova and Petrowskaja, which will be discussed in the following chapters. However, it's crucial to mention that Chudakov's novel also exhibits this characteristic of the autofiction genre. For example, according to Radislav Lapushin, a literature historian, even inside a chapter Chudakov has particular fragments or insertions that could work as independent micro–

[32] Stepanov, "Idilliia," 401.
[33] Marina Balina,"(Auto)Biographical Prose Chapter," in *Russian Literature since 1991*, ed. by Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 196.
[34] Chudakov, *Lozhitsia mgla*, 505.

narratives.[35] The historian states: "these micro–plots branch out from the linear storytelling, causing it to constantly deviate from its course, meander through uncharted territories (thematic, stylistic, and genre–wise), and return to the previously abandoned point with new semantic baggage."[36] Many scholars and literary critics agree with this opinion – they also note the "layering" of the book. For example, Andrei Kuzechkin, an author and critic, states: "It is both a survival manual (literally), a perspective on the history of our country, and a small collection of memories from the Soviet times."[37] The richness of various kinds of information is also an important characteristic of the novel, which can be considered a feature of the genre:

> In his novel, you can discover the history of the prophet Daniel and lions, the names of various lace patterns, the weight of an elephant's ears and how they contribute to its thermoregulation, stories about dogs, songs sung in the Russian provinces, and many other equally interesting pieces of information.[38]

Finally, the novel *A Gloom is Cast Upon the Ancient Steps* plays with the point of view; it uses both the first and the third–person narration. According to Iurii Domanskii's article the use of two different storytelling approaches in this novel is an attempt to combine autobiography and fiction. Through the narrator's use of "I," readers learn a depiction of the hero's memory "as an intricate system of symbols, resembling adventurous or fantastical narratives."[39] And the use of third third–person narration brings a realistic portrayal of the protagonist's direct memories, which leans toward autobiography. In this way, by blending two these narrative styles, Chudakov creates a new genre. Also, the use of two different narration leads to the idea that despite the fact that Anton is the

[35] Radislav Lapushin, "Zhivaia svezhest': K poe'tike romana-idillii A.P. Chudakova 'Lozhitsia mgla na starye stupeni,'" in *Tynianovskii sbornik: dvenadtsatye, trinadtstye, chetyrnadtsatye Tynianovskii chteniia. Vyp. 13,* (Riga: Vodolei, 2008), 385.

[36] Lapushin, "Zhivaia svezhest'," 385.

[37] Andrei Kuzechkin, "Aleksandr Chudakov. 'Lozhitsia mgla na starye stupeni,'" Tsentralizirovannaia bibliotechnaia sistema Kanavinskogo raiona, September 12, 2012, http://book-hall.ru/litsovet/Alexandr_Chudakov_Lozhitsya_Mgla_Na_Starye_Stupeni.

[38] Irina Evladova, "Chadaki Aleksandra Chudakova, ili Skol'ko vesiat ushi slona i kakie pesni poiut v russkoi glubinke," Uchitel'skaia gazeta, July 25, 2012, https://ug.ru/chudaki-aleksandra-chudakova-ili-skolko-vesyat-ushi-slona-i-kakie-pesni-poyut-v-russkoj-glubinke/.

[39] Iurii Domanskii, "Nekotorye osobennosti khudozhestvennogo mira romana 'Lozhitsia mgla na starye stupeni' Aleksandra Chudakova," Novyi filologicheskii vestnik 1, no. 48 (2019): 233, https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/nekotorye-osobennosti-hudozhestvennogo-mira-romana-lozhitsya-mgla-na-starye-stupeni-aleksandra-chudakova/viewer.

prototype of Chudakov, the author also has a voice, and some kind of a more intimate story that he tells readers with trust and deeper engagement. In this case, the "I" may function not only as a narrative voice but also as a means of transmitting the author's own traumatic experiences. In addition, in the novel, one can find features not only of autofiction but also of other genres: a literary confession, a bildungsroman, a historical novel, a regional novel, a Robinsonade, "literature of witnessing," a family chronicle, and even a "poet's prose."[40] As Stepanov suggests we should speak not about the genre of the novel but, rather, about a genre dominant, or to use the language used by the author: a novel–idyll.

Idyll

The idyll was initially a type of short poem that describe rural life and peasantry. Starting from the 18th century with the art of Gesner (Idyll, 1756), idyll as a genre starts to be understood as a lyrical depiction of human beings living in harmony with nature. In the same way as it gained its genre features, it became associated with the past. In his preface, Gesner writes that "I often break out of the city and fly to secluded places where the beauty of nature frees my soul from disgust and those disgusting impressions that drove me out of the city: I am filled with delight, feeling beauty to the fullest extent possible, I am happy like a shepherd of the golden age."[41] Chudakov's choice of idyll is especially interesting since Chudakov's novel does not belong to this category in a general understanding of this word either from the view of literary notion, political or historical situations. And yet, Gesner looks at the genre from the other age, making it a genre of admiration and idealization of the past. Gesner's genre interpretation has a lot to do with the modernity from which he writes about the genre: he makes it a genre of modernity admiring the past. From this view, the choice of the genre predisposes narrating the story about the past. Chudakov's choice of idyll seems justified metaphorically, since in the novel Anton looks admiringly at his childhood years, which are implied to be idyllic.

[40] Stepanov, "Idilliia," 402.

[41] Tatiana Yrchenko, "Zhanr idillii vo vtoroi polovine 18 - nachale 19 v," *Literaturovedcheskii zhurnal* 33, (2013): 59, https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/zhanr-idillii-vo-2-y-polovine-xviii-nachale-xix-v/viewer

So, the idyllic nature of the novel comes out of a feeling of how Anton perceived his childhood. If going away from the literary notion and a general connotation of the word, it is seen that this sense of idyll for Anton was created by his family, mainly by his grandfather: "'idyll' was created by a family nurtured by the Polish noblewoman, a graduate of the Institute of noble girls, and Russian popovich, who graduated from the seminary, but chose the worldly path, – it was created by a grandmother and grandfather of the narrator."[42] The family was able to create a world that according to Komrakov consisted of "idyllic existence in spontaneous unity with nature."[43] Anton perceived it as idyll probably because the created world was too detached and alienated from the outer world: "closed, autonomous world, which does not need anything external, the world where everything is for life, where there is a distinct mythology, there are vague knowledge about the Great Earth and the rare dreams of it."[44] A closed, idyllic world is especially emphasized by the particular behaviors and skills that were in daily use at the Savvins–Stremoukhovs. Anton's memories about his childhood are mostly based on those skills and behaviors which are described with great accuracy, based on a phenomenal memory of the main hero. Though most of the skills become not useful later on, Anton seems to keep them dearly in his memories. It is especially seen in his dialogue with his father who was way less nostalgic and enthusiastic about the period of Anton's childhood:

- Everyone knew everything, they knew that cabbage should not be raised in oak, but in a birch barrel, how to cook soap, how to glue the fabric with egg protein, how to …
- And what came in handy of this? Where will you find a barrel now – anywhere? Why use the protein if there is a glue "Moment"? Out of your habit to remember all kinds of garbage, you suppose to remember the recipe for making soap? As I thought. So what? Do you cook it in your free time?[45]

To sum up, the novel's genre idyll seems to be approved by Anton's impression of his childhood which seems to be a closed world full of craftwork with its own rules and behaviors.

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[42] Andrei Nemzer, "Kak sokhranilas' Rossiia," *Otechestvennye zapiski* 1, no.2 (2002), https://strana-oz.kardonsky.ru/2002/02/961.
[43] Oleg Komrakov, "Zhizn' posle katastrofy," review of *A Gloom is Cast Upon the Ancient Steps*, by Alexandr Chudakov, *Homo Legens*, no. 2-3 (2012), http://homo-legens.ru/2012_2_3/.
[44] Komrakov,"Zhizn' posle."
[45] Chudakov, *Lozhitsia mgla*, 487.

Taking into account the influence of the grandfather on Anton's impression of his childhood, it seems interesting to look at the political dimension of the grandfather's opposition to the world. It may get portrait by considering a political distinction of the early Soviet period in literature. In this context, Bolsheviks would get represented as city people, whereas Menshevik opposition usually gets portrait as resistance in the peasantry. Anton's father as a communist represents the idea of urbanization, civilization, and progress. And in this dichotomy, the grandfather would represent a Menshevik, peasant–based opposition to it. Though the grandfather was never stated to be Menshevik, rather he was an embodiment of an old imperial regime. In the novel, the author highlights this by showing that the grandfather's teaching of Anton was always on a high level, though somehow outdated: "Anton was getting used to it. There were no merchants and manufacturers in the school task and, obviously, around, but there were collective farmers, young people, stakhanovts, and they needed to calculate how many hectares, and not the acres, they sowed and how many tons, not pounds were shipped for a shift."[46] And yet, in the novel, the grandfather, with his craft–work–oriented, more pastoral way of living is opposed to the world of the Soviets, a world of progress that is presented by Anton's father first, and Anton's own life in Moscow later. The grandfather's political opposition was seen in the dialogues between him and Anton's communist father:

> – To die for this power? Why on earth?
> – What does power have to do with it/ – my father was burning. – For the country, for Russia!
> – Let this country first release its prisoners. At the same time, let it send the same number of muzzles that guard them.
> - I considered you a patriot, Leonid Lvovich (the grandfather).[47]

In this way, the grandfather's political opposition combined with agricultural–rural lifestyle represents an idyllic world and is opposed to urbanized, entirely Soviet, and consequently non–idyllic Moscow life – the life of adult Anton.

Talking about the idyllic chronotope, Chudakov chooses to save the idyll paradoxically. He celebrates the idyllic world at different levels by focusing on agricultural labor, childhood, old age,

[46] Chudakov, *Lozhitsia mgla*, 82.
[47] Chudakov, *Lozhitsia mgla*, 50.

and daily life; at the same time, he chooses Russian intelligentsia to conform to the idyllic world's major "features."[48] According to Thorstensson, since the topic of work and family is so prominent in Chudakov's novel, it seems to fit well with the Bakhtinian idyllic chronotope model, by being a combination of the "idyll with a focus on agricultural labor work", the "idyll dealing with craft–work", and the "family idyll" types.[49] However, the author states that in reality, the novel does not fit any of these models since the relationship of the characters in the novel revolves around the relationship between the intelligentsia and 'the people' which is far from being idyllic, but rather stay in a "situation of truce."[50] This means in terms of the Bakhtinian idyllic chronotope, the novel is not quite idyllic since the intelligentsia aspect of the grandfather's figure makes the relationship and the lifestyle even more complicated.

There is an important grandfather's mission in the novel, which is to save intelligentsia and pass on their culture to future generations.[51] At the same time, we can see that while dealing with this mission, the grandfather also does another important thing to Anton – he transmits his personal experience and knowledge. According to Rytova, "compositionally, in the center of the novel, there is an intimate process of the hero–boy entering the circle of knowledge of his ancestors."[52] And since the knowledge transmission is shown chaotically rather than chronologically in the novel, Rytova suggests the process be centralized on "private human–to–human contact", since that is how Anton perceives the experience–transmission process.[53] This means that the role of the grandfather covers the transmission of the heritage in the form of culture, as well as the world outlook that Anton adopted

[48] Victoria Thorstensson, "On the survival of words and things: the task of the intelligentsia in Alexander Chudakov's novel-idyll 'A Gloom is Cast Upon the Ancient Steps,'" *Vestnik Kurganskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta* 3, no. 54 (2019): 44, https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/on-the-survival-of-words-and-things-the-task-of-the-intelligentsia-in-alexander-chudakov-s-novel-idyll-a-gloom-is-cast-upon-the-ancient-steps/viewer.

[49] Thorstensson, "On the Survival of Words and Things," 44.

[50] Thorstensson, "On the Survival of Words and Things," 44.

[51] Thorstensson, "On the Survival of Words and Things," 44.

[52] Tatiana Rytova, "The Motif of Keeping and Sharing Experience in A. Chudakov's *Mist Falls on the Old Stairs* and P. Aleshkovsky's *Fish. The History of a Migration,*" *Vestnik KemGU* 1, no. 53 (2013): 201, https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/motiv-hraneniya-i-peredachi-opyta-v-romanah-a-chudakova-lozhitsya-mgla-na-starye-stupeni-i-p-aleshkovskogo-ryba-istoriya-odnoy-migratsii/viewer.

[53] Rytova, "The Motif of Keeping and Sharing Experience", 201.

while being in close contact: “in this sense, the grandfather became for the hero a true keeper of life experience.” [54] The private contact, that is required for the transmission process also has its threatening aspects. According to Marianne Hirsch, intimate contact creates a risk of living another one’s life instead of their own. Rytova, in her case, supports this by saying that “the hero’s perception, as conveyed by the grandfather, of experiencing life as real and authentic necessitates the constant, daily task of holding within oneself everything that has passed but once belonged to you.”[55] We can see how Anton’s identity is highly connected to the memory he has of his childhood and particularly to the view of his grandfather. The grandfather’s transmitted experience as well as his memory seems to be more realistic than the life around him.

So, this particular piece goes beyond the general genre and introduces a complicated issue of idyll and how it could be understood on many levels: such as in a direct sense, in terms of Bakhtinian models, and in terms of the main hero’s perception. It seems like the idyll works for the novel since it is exactly how Anton perceived his childhood and the world created by his grandfather. Whereas, the grandfather’s intelligentsia aspect drives the novel out of Bakhtinian idyllic chronotope and yet provides the novel with additional meanings such as experience transmission, and transmission of memory.

The Odyssey in Chudakov’s Novel

After receiving a letter from his grandfather, a grown–up Anton returns home to bid farewell to his dying grandfather, who has been weakened by illness. The theme of coming back home after a long journey is a common motif in narratives throughout history. In Anton’s case, the journey serves as a metaphor for his personal growth and development into an independent adult, a phase of life that no longer includes his grandfather. In this section, I analyze Greek sources and the motif of returning home to understand the significance of home and identity for Anton. I also explore the impact of the generational trauma, specifically, the forced relocation and loss of one’s homeland, on Anton.

[54] Rytova, “The Motif of Keeping and Sharing Experience”, 201.
[55] Rytova, “The Motif of Keeping and Sharing Experience”, 202

Home holds a significant and multifaceted meaning in culture and mythology. The concept of home, its literary code, includes its direct physical aspects, but also extends to symbolize identity, nationality, motherland, and a place of safety. Looking back at mythology, there are various ancient Greek epic poems that bring into the conversation one of the earliest home–associated conflicts and introduce its value for the main hero. For example, the Odyssey is a major ancient Greek poem by Homer, narrates the journey of Odysseus, the king of Ithaca, as he takes a journey to return home after the Trojan War. His journey takes ten years and subjects Odysseus to numerous trials, leading to the loss of his comrades and friends.[56] The poem's central themes revolve around home, wandering, and testing. Similarly, Aeneid by Virgil tells the epic story of Aeneas, who loses his initial home after the fall of Troy. The major conflict of this Latin poem is a quest to find another home, a place of safety. They travel to Italia and eventually become the ancestors of the Romans. The notion of returning home or traveling to a search for a new one lies at the core of many literary works. However, in contemporary times, the concept of home has a more metaphorical sense, where losing one's home can imply a loss of history, identity, ideology, and more.

In Chudakov's novel, the concept of "home" holds significant meaning. Initially, it presents a physical house, which takes center stage in the narrative's first few chapters due to an inheritance issue involving Anton's three members of the extended family. However, Anton's return to this home, which triggers childhood flashbacks in the novel, is only temporary. This is because the adult Anton now lives in Moscow and has no intention of claiming the house in Chebachinsk. In fact, Anton does not attach much value to the house, referring to it as "old and decrepit," and questioning its worth: "Though there is a house. But it is old and decrepit. Who needs it?"[57] For Anton, the significance lies elsewhere. He fails to comprehend the obsession with inheritance and expresses the view that it would be more appropriate to leave everything to their grandmother: "Even at the Chebachinsk railway station, Anton asked aunt Tanya: why did grandfather write all the time about some kind of hereditary

[56] Homer, *The odyssey,* (Xist Publishing, 2015).
[57] Chudakov, *Lozhitsia mgla*, 16.

issues? Why doesn't he just bequeath everything to our grandmother?"[58] This quote reveals that Anton treasures something beyond the physical house in this place. When the physical house eventually goes to Anton's cousin Kolya, Anton declines the offer to stay there, stating: "I didn't want to live here: the house already belonged to Kolka."[59] This refusal shows that the house itself has never been Anton's concept of "home."

The history of Anton's family and the context of the novel helps to understand the deeper meaning of home for the main hero. Since by moving to Chebachinsk the Savvins–Stremoukhovs lost their initial home, both physical and emotional, the novel's plot is actually about the way a new home was built. The voluntary moving as a result of Stalinist purges is not different from official exile. So, the loss of a home appears to be a central traumatic experience of the novel, where all family members are trying to create an attachment to something and find their new "home" – the grandfather appeals to Old Russia and Anton's father appeals to the Soviet Union. Finally, there is Anton, who finds his identity and home in the figure of his grandfather. But first of all, the family of the Savvins–Stremoukhovs construct their physical house and lifestyle. Their settling down at the new place is shown by the abundance of life experiences, behavior, skills, and daily routine that the family focuses on:

> We grew and produced everything. For this, the family had the necessary personnel: an agronomist, a carpenter and a saddler (grandfather), an organic chemist (mother), a certified livestock specialist (aunt Larisa), a cook–cook (grandmother), a black cook (aunt Tamara), a mechanic, a lumberjack and a mower (father). We knew how to carpentry, sew, knit, dig, wash, work with a sickle and pitchfork.[60]

The Savvins–Stremoukhovs make their comfortable life around their new house and adobe some new old rules.

In the novel, the house created by the Savvins–Stremoukhovs is opposed to the ideological "house" created by the government. Just as Anton's grandfather builds up a new "home" for the family, the state builds an ideological socialist "home" for everyone. For constructing the image of

[58] Chudakov, *Lozhitsia mgla*, 25.
[59] Chudakov, *Lozhitsia mgla*, 493.
[60] Chudakov, *Lozhitsia mgla*, 121.

the motherland governments transfer an emotional attachment from the small "home" to national–state communities, that is, to the big 'home'. And we can see this ideological "home" working from the example of Anton's father who becomes a huge patriot of the Soviet Union. He, as it seems, do not feel a strong emotional attachment to the small home's rules and behaviors. At least, from his relationship with Anton mentioned before, we can see that he never was nostalgic about the 'home' that they were building inside the family. The grandfather, though, seemed to be against this artificial 'home' since he was building a strong opposing "home" for his family:

> The grandfather knew two worlds. The first one was the world of his youth and maturity. It was tripled simply and clearly: a person worked, respectively, received for his work and could buy housing, a thing, food without lists, coupons, cards, queues. This objective world disappeared, but grandfather learned to recreate its likeness with knowledge, ingenuity and the incredible exertion of his and his family's strength because no revolution can change the laws of the birth and life of things and plants.[61]

On the example of the grandfather, we also can see that a special place in the novel is taken by another big "home" – Russia. It is seen that the resettlement to Kazakhstan and the actual construction of socialism is perceived by the grandfather as the loss not only of his physical home there, inside Russia, but also as the loss of Russia as a whole. He mentions this several times in the novel eventually he mentions it before his death: "they took away the garden, the house, the father, the brothers. They could not take God away, cause the kingdom of God is within us. But they took Russia. And in my last days, I have no Christian feelings for them. Inescapable sin. I can't find forgiveness in my soul."[62] The loss of Russia as a result of the creation of the Soviet Union is the biggest trauma of the grandfather. This can explain his stubborn view against ideology, and his need to transfer his cultural experience to Anton and somehow build up a small Russia inside his small "home". We can see it becoming true since in the novel, the narrator, who is Anton, rarely writes about Chebachinsk or Kazakhstan as a place outside of Russia with its own national character. Instead, he focuses on the place at the edge of the Empire full of Russian exiles. And yet, rarely we can see Kazakhs going around as a short addendum to the picture: "hay was delivered exclusively by

[61] Chudakov, *Lozhitsia mgla*, 500.
[62] Chudakov, *Lozhitsia mgla*, 503.

Kazakhs. They did not know how to mow and did not like it, they hired men from exiled kulak families, powerful mowers. But the Kazakhs, although they were also collective farmers, were allowed to keep individual horses […]"[63]

Anton grows up in his grandfather's idyllic place: temporally and geographically not where the house actually stands but rather in the pre–Revolutionary Russia that the grandfather kept and reproduced for him. Though Anton could not see the value of the particular home, he is attached to his grandfather, who could be Anton's safe place, a person influencing his identity. It is possible to say then, that he had a home in Chebachinsk, in its very metaphorical meaning: through his grandfather. The grandfather actually influences Anton's growth, worldview, and moral values. Anton adopted them sometimes even unconsciously. This is seen from his independent life later, when he had a fight with his roommate Filin on the matter of different political views:

> – And who was sent to the most responsible fronts? – Filin jumped up to Anton. – Tsaritsyn, Warsaw! And ten Stalin blows? What about industrialization, collectivization?
> – And the millions in the camps?[64]

From this conversation, it is seen that Anton was ready for the de–Stalinization process that followed the 20th congress, while for patriots of the Soviet government like Filin, this was a completely unexpected turn that was very hard to accept: "two years later, when everyone returned after reading Khrushchev's report at the Twentieth Congress, Filin, without entering into conversations with anyone, smoked gloomily at the window for a long time, then lay down and hid with a blanket over his head."[65] And there are of course advantages and disadvantages of such a strong connection between Anton and his grandfather, who transmitted to him not only his worldview, but also his trauma. Anton appeared to be not "brainwashed" as his peers, he knew the true history and the cost of the Soviet experiment. Ultimately, when he gets socialized into the "real," Soviet space, he finds his place not as a typical Soviet person but like a dissident. However, at the same time Anton is kind of stuck in the life of his grandfather, and does not live in his own time and space. And this is a very

[63] Chudakov, *Lozhitsia mgla*, 320.
[64] Chudakov, *Lozhitsia mgla*, 386.
[65] Chudakov, *Lozhitsia mgla*, 387.

important consequence that unfortunately covers most of the descendants of the catastrophes. There is an important quote from Hirsch article "The Generation of Postmemory" where she states: "to grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation."[66] And this is what happened to Anton as a descendant of a catastrophe experienced by his grandfather.

Anton perceives his grandfather as a major figure in his life but especially understands it after the grandfather's death: "why did I argue with him when I already understood everything? From a false sense of independence? To convince myself of something? How, probably, the grandfather was upset that his grandson succumbed to Soviet lies. Grandpa, I didn't give up! Can you hear me? I hate, I love the same as you do. You were right about everything!"[67] So, there seems to be a cyclical motion in the novel. It starts with Anton visiting his grandfather and telling his story of childhood and life in general and it eventually ends with Anton going back home again admitting the influence of his grandfather. His first visit introduces the conflict and yet only after his final visit, after the death of his grandfather, we can see Anton returning "home", to his identity, finally realizing what is important for him in his life. I would suggest, therefore, Anton's grandfather to be his "home", while the ending of the book is somehow an odyssey for the main hero.

Anton has a desire to save all the memories that were transmitted to him by his grandfather, his grandfather's metaphorical "home," and pass it on to the next generation. I will discuss this desire to save the transmitted memories in the following chapters in detail when I analyze the feeling of responsibility that subsequent generations have towards the memories they "receive." However, in Chudakov's case, the main character strives to pass on all his gained knowledge and his grandfather's experience to his daughter and, later on, to his granddaughter. His daughter, Dasha, selectively absorbs her father's stories, though sometimes with a hint of criticism. She embraces some knowledge

[66] Hirsch, "The generation," 107.
[67] Chudakov, *Lozhitsia mgla*, 496.

and decisively rejects other: "She said that the older generation isn't always right."[68] And yet, Anton remarks that she still belongs to his generation: "But still, Dasha was a person from my time."[69] However, his granddaughter, who is "behind" him by half a century, just as Anton was, compared to his grandfather, appeared to be from the whole different generation. She no longer needs the world that was passed down to Anton: "The world of my childhood […] it should have been interesting to her, with all its uniqueness. But she didn't need it."[70] With the passing of his grandfather's generation, the era of heroes came to an end. The tragedy of Anton as a representative of the second generation after the disaster, is in the desire to save the transferred memories, and the confrontation with the reality where no one needs these memories anymore. Interestingly, despite the fact that the main character fails to preserve his grandfather's world, or the metaphorical home he built, Chudakov himself succeeded in doing so. And this is a fundamental difference between the author and the protagonist: the author preserved his grandfather's world and immortalized it by writing this novel. And this analysis brings us back to the discussion of the genre, confirming the uniqueness of the genre autofiction that allowed the author to process his traumatic experience through the creation of the novel.

To conclude, this chapter explores the idea of finding a metaphorical "home" for Anton and discusses the genre issues in Chudakov's works. With the genre of this novel, Chudakov creates an idyll, just as Anton's grandfather created an idyll for his grandson, that later became Anton's metaphorical "home." According to Nikita Eliseev, a Russian bibliographer, critic, and writer, Chudakov constructs an artistic representation of an era, "which is not formed by documents or scholarly research."[71] Thus, Chudakov seems to preserve the image of that time and space. However, based on this chapter, it is also clear that Chudakov has captured not only the image of that time but also the image of a person who absorbed the previous experiences of his ancestors and incorporated

[68] Chudakov, *Lozhitsia mgla*, 274.
[69] Chudakov, *Lozhitsia mgla*, 275.
[70] Chudakov, *Lozhitsia mgla*, 276.
[71] Nikita Eliseev, "Aleksandr Chudakov. Lozhitsia mgla na starye stupeni," Novaia Russkaia Kniga 1, (2002), https://magazines.gorky.media/nrk/2002/1/aleksandr-chudakov-lozhitsya-mgla-na-starye-stupeni.html.

that experience into his identity. Additionally, we see that the influence of the grandfather's values and postmemory on Anton appeared to be so strong that it managed to overshadow the ideological propaganda of one of the most influential ideologies of the 20th century.

Chapter 2

Postmemory from the Perspective of the Third Generation: Inherited Trauma in Petrowkaja's *Maybe Esther*

Introduction

Petrowkaja's autofiction *Maybe Esther*, which is the subject of this chapter, is set in more recent times than Chudakov's novel.*Maybe Esther* weaves together her family's history and her quest for self–identity, showcasing the generational experiences of migration, displacement, and the search for belonging. The book's plot follows Petrowskaja as she pieces together her family's past, from her great–grandmother's life in a Jewish quarter in Poland to her grandfather's experiences as a Soviet soldier in World War II. By weaving in historical research and her own opinion, she creates a representation of one family's journey through the events of the 20th century. *Maybe Esther* is a meditation on the importance of family, history, and the search for personal identity.

Chudakov's novel, written in 2000 was based on the notes taken in the 1960s during his student years. Its protagonist, Anton, learned about losing old Russia and "home" directly from his grandfather through family behaviors, skills, and stories. Anton was a representative of the 2nd generation after the catastrophe of the Revolution and the purges and an active participant of the historical events connected to its aftermath. For example, he was a student at the time of the 20th congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. After the congress, the process of de–Stalinization started; Anton saw how public opinion regarding the Stalinist era was changing. Though he might not have been a direct "survivor" of the catastrophe as his grandfather, he still was traumatized by the events connected to the catastrophe that were unfolding before his eyes.

In Petrowskaja's autofiction, the narrator is a representative of the third generation after the collective traumatic experiences, namely the War and the Holocaust, which happened more than 80

years before the book was written. Belonging to the third generation changes the way processes the memory of the trauma. In contrast to Chudakov's narrator, Anton, Petrowskaja's narrator is required to rely on her feelings about the traumatic experience, as well as be content with snippets of overheard conversations – although they were not secret, they were not meant for her child's ears. According to the interview that the author gave to *Radio Liberty*, those conversations mostly happened between her parents – Miron and Svetlana Petrowskij, a literary scholar and a school history teacher[72]. According to Katja Petrowskaja, she always was a witness to those conversations since her parents never kept the family past secret.

As a result, since her childhood, Petrowskaja felt that she belonged to "some kind of a dual world."[73] On the one hand, there was an official facade of the Soviet Union – the collective opinion and patriotism towards the "Motherland." On the other hand, there was the unofficial memory through which the trauma of the Holocaust and World War 2 was transmitted to her by her family and the community. "I do not remember exactly when, in a number of noisy, exaggeratedly cheerful family gatherings, I first caught a feeling of some subtle dissonance," states Petrowskaja's narrator while talking about dangers coming from maintaining family ties with the extended family in the Soviet Union. This is because a bigger family is a bigger threat that some family member might be deemed enemies by the government, putting the rest of the family in peril.[74] In Petrowskaja's book there is a story of Judas Stern, the brother of the narrator's grandfather Semion. In 1932 in Moscow, Judas Stern carried out an assassination attempt against the German ambassador. This assassination, if successful, could have pushed the Soviet Union into a war with Germany almost a decade earlier. After Judas Stern was sentenced to death for shooting this attempt, Semion was forced to quit his government job. As the traitor's brother, he could also become a victim of the persecution. Moreover, since Semion was in a very close relationship with the traitor, he remained under the threat of exile

[72] Katja Petrowskaja,"Kniga Ester," interview by Elena Fanailova and Ivan Trefilov, *Radio Liberty*, October 27, 2021, https://www.svoboda.org/a/kniga–ester/31526173.html.
[73] Petrowskaja, interview.
[74] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 25.

or execution. Being a brother of the state criminal was a serious allegation for that time.[75] The constant fear for himself and his family turned him turn into "the most tightlipped individual in the postwar era," while even a memory of Judas Stern had to be eliminated from the family's memory.[76] Situations like this which were common among the USSR citizens were the reason why, as Petrowskaja says, during the Stalinist era families "dwindled; whole branches of the family were erased from memory, extended families were pared down."[77] The word "dissonance" becomes a leitmotif in the book, reflecting the narrator's feeling of being suspended between two different worlds – the worlds of the official and the unofficial memory in the Soviet Union.

This chapter is going to analyze how trauma is transmitted not to the second but the third generation after the catastrophe. After a brief biographical survey that explains what influenced the author's identity and research interests, I will explore why the genre of the autofiction becomes a suitable medium for talking about the historical events that impacted her family story in the past two centuries. I will analyze some episodes from Petrowskaja's autofiction, that reflect the memory of the Holocaust in the context of the official and the unofficial memory in the Soviet Union and beyond. In my discussion of the transmission of trauma in this chapter, I will argue that memories inherited by the third generation are different than those passed to the second (such as Anton's or Katja's parents). Since members of the third generation have less fear to speak up, they perceive the catastrophe as their vulnerable point, which makes them very sensitive about history. Consequently, the third generation grows up with a strong sense of responsibility towards the need to preserve the memory that is entrusted to them.

Biographical context

Katja Petrowskaja (born 1970) is a writer and a journalist, who was born and grew up in Kiev when it was the capital of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Petrowskaja is a native Russian speaker who married a German national and moved to Germany in the 1990s after the

[75] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 152.
[76] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 127.
[77] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 18.

dissolution of the Soviet Union. She studied literary criticism and Slavic studies at the University of Tartu in Estonia and defended her thesis in Moscow. Petrowskaja worked for *Radio Liberty*, and *Deutsche Welle. S*tarting from 2011, she writes columns for *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntags Zeitung* and works with educational and cultural centers such as the Institute of Jewish Studies.[78] Starting from 1999, Katja Petrowskaja lives in Berlin, Germany.

Petrowskaja's novel *Maybe Esther* first started as a short essay, a story, that was written in 2013 and awarded a prestigious Ingeborg Bachmann Prize.[79] The original story was about Petrowskaja's great–grandmother, whose name might have been Esther. Esther couldn't be evacuated and had to remain in Kiev in August 1941, at the time when Germans invaded the city and committed the atrocities in Babi Yar.[80] In the story, Petrowskaja imagined the way Esther walked on her last day in the Nazi occupied Kiev in 1941 to meet her death. A year after that the story won the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize , the book based on it was written and published by the Suhrkamp Publication House.[81] It became very successful, selling more than 20 000 copies in the first month only.[82] The novel was translated into 20 languages and won several literary prizes, such as the Aspekte–Literaturpreis (2014) that is awarded annually for the best debut novel written in German.[83] *Maybe Esther* was well received, multiple positive reviews came out in *The Times Literary Supplement*, *New York Journal of Books*, *New York Review of Books*, etc.[84] For example, Lara Feigel, an a book review published in the *Guardian* praises Petrowskaja's ability to forge a language out of muteness: "a language quiet enough to enable her to find a way to describe the indescribable events of the last

[78] Gabriele Eckart, "Intermixing German and Russian in Lou Andreas-Salomé's Travelogue *Russland mit Rainer* and Katja Petrowskaja's Autobiographical Narrative *Vielleicht Esther*," *Rocky Mountain Review* 71, no. 2 (2017): 140-145, https://www.jstor.org/stable/90017847.
[79] Liza Birger, "Vazhnaia kniga: 'Kazhetsia Ester" Kati Petrovskoi," Polka Academy, October 20, 2021, https://polka.academy/materials/808.
[80] Babi Yar (ukr. Babyn Iar) is a site in Kiev where mass executions were carried out by Nazi Germany and which I will be discussing later in this chapter.
[81] Birger, "Vazhnaia kniga."
[82] Birger, "Vazhnaia kniga."
[83] Birger, "Vazhnaia kniga."
[84] "Maybe Esther: A Family Story," Harper Academic, accessed August 1, 2023, https://www.harperacademic.com/book/9780062337566/maybe-esther/.

century with more beauty and curiosity than horror."[85] The amount of positive reviews reflect the persistent need among contemporary readers to re–visit the past and comprehend it on a new level, through new genres and narrative techniques.

Maybe Esther is written in a genre of autofiction which has become a popular form for expressing writers' reflections on their family histories in the West, in the last decade, it is now gaining popularity in the post–Soviet space. The book is mostly autobiographical: Petrowkaja uses documentary sources: archival documents, family photographs and stories narrated by her family. And yet, imagination plays a huge role in this genre and in Petrowskaja's book as well. *Maybe Esther* is written in the first–person which makes it sound more intimate. Through the narrator's use of "I," readers are invited into her inner world to share her vulnerability towards the history and her identity. This approach facilitates more trust and a deeper engagement with the narrator's thoughts and emotions. Moreover, the choice of the first–person narrator is pivotal in understanding the author's connection to the narrative. The "I" in Petrowkaja's novel functions not only as a narrative voice but also as a means of transmitting the author's voice, which becomes a part of the story. Finally, the first–person perspective facilitates the exploration of the novel's primary theme – personal story. The use of the first–person perspective grants the narrator an opportunity to engage with her own memory, giving space for an exploration of the nature of historical truth and subjective interpretations.

While the genre of the autofiction and the first–person narration provide an intimate lens through which the story of *Maybe Esther* unfolds, the opening of the novel sets the tone for a metaphorical journey back in time. The book opens with the story of the narrator's setting off on a journey from the Berlin train station to find the truth about her family's past. At the train station, she sees an advertisement for a transportation company which says "BOMBARDIER Willkommen in Berlin."[86] The advertisement reminded her of bombs and the WWII.[87] Later, in her afterword for

[85] Lara Feigel, "Maybe Esther by Katja Petrowskaja review – a family story of 20th–century Europe," review of *Maybe Esther*, by Katja Petrowskaja, *The Guardian*, February 1, 2018.
[86] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 2.
[87] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 6.

Maybe Esther Petrowkaja writes, "how can one be so deaf to words as to place this advertisement bombarding us above our heads, above all our travels."[88] So, the advertisement makes Petrowkaja's trip start in the shadow of the past war. And, in this way, the book frames the protagonist's journey metaphorically as a trip to the past, through the echoes of WW2 bombs, to find out her roots.

The element of crossing borders becomes another central motif in *Maybe Esther.* Since the novel "spans a vast temporal and geographical terrain," the element of border crossing shapes the narrative while we get introduced to the 20th–century's major catastrophes.[89] Petrowskaja's family history is intertwined with the events of the 20th century, from the Russian Revolution, world wars, the Holocaust, and recent political events. This motif of border crossing follows the stories of her family members in their flights, evacuations and voluntary moves in order to survive and save their families. For example, in the story of "maybe" Esther, other family members evacuated from Kiev on the verge of the Nazi occupation, trying to escape from mass executions of the Jews such as those that happened in Babi Yar. Petrowskaja's ancestor, Oziel, who founded a school for blind and mute children in Warsaw, was forced to immigrate to Kiev with his family. And there was also her grandfather Vasiliy, who was relocated from one European POW camp to another until he almost ended up in the Soviet GULAG. The motif of border crossing gives the novel a particular temporal and spatial dimension that reflects the horrors of the long 20th century and reminds us that history shapes the lives of families through generations. Moreover, border crossing symbolizes displacement which mirrors the origins story of Petrowskaja's ancestor, Oziel, who journeyed from Poland to the Soviet Ukraine in order to find safety and establish a new home for his family and the dead–mute children they cared for. In the actual time of the book, the protagonist's journey covers contemporary Russia, Ukraine, Poland, and Germany. While reflecting on the generational experience of migration

[88] Katia Petrovskaia, *Kazhetsia Ester*, (Saint Petersburg: Ivan Limbah, 2021), 299.
Since this chapter is absent in the English version, this is my translation from the Russian version. All translations from this chapter are by me.
[89] Maria Roca Lizarazu, "The Family Tree, the Web, and the Palimpsest: Figures of Postmemory in Katja Petrowskaja's Vielleicht Esther (2014)," *Modern Language Review* 113, no.1 (2018): 168, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5699/modelangrevi.113.1.0168.

and displacement, narrating this journey, she also reflects on her own experience as a Russian–speaking Ukrainian immigrant in Germany.

Thus, through her own crossing of borders and the story of immigration to Germany, Petrowskaja's connects her personal story to that of her family. The narrator's own experience is discussed throughout the book, as she struggles to find a sense of belonging. In the last section of the book Petrowkaja writes: "It is possible that my move to Germany was an accidental escapade, while with this book I tried to explain to myself "why I am here" and "what I am doing here."[90] She continues, "the journey begins at the Berlin train station and ends in Kyiv, at home, and thus the whole story is a kind of return of the prodigal daughter."[91] Petrowskaja's travels to the places connected with her family history are shown through her feeling of displacement and a search for a place to call home.

Another device that Petrowskaja uses in her book *Maybe Esther*, is multilingualism. Multilingualism is employed consistently in the book in the form of various languages and alphabets to convey the nuances of cultural experiences, illustrate the complexity of her family's immigrant journey, and show the emotional aftermath of historical trauma. The narrator moves between Russian, German, and English, sometimes even within the one sentence. This language switch reflects the narrator's own experience as an immigrant and a member of a multilingual family. Petrowskaja grew up speaking both Russian and Ukrainian. I would argue that by using different languages in the book, the author tries to capture her experience and to reflect the experience of multiple migrations in the history of her family. Also, the language switch allows Petrowskaja to convey the uniqueness of her family's history in a more authentic way. For example, certain phrases connected to Jewish culture cannot be translated to another language because they capture specific cultural realia. Consequently, the author keeps them in Hebrew to convey their meaning as precisely as possible. A good example of her using different languages and even different alphabets in one sentence can be found in the

[90] Katia Petrovskaia, *Kazhetsia Ester*, 306.
[91] Katia Petrovskaia, *Kazhetsia Ester*, 299.

following episode. When looking through recipes in her deceased aunt's archive, the protagonist comes across the drink that she has made, a version of kvass. The name of the drink was written with a remark "EBP" which occurred to her to be significant in an unexpected way:

> I stared at this EBP, thinking that the Cyrillic abbreviation could be understood us ЕВРопейский, YEVropeysky, European, or just as easily as ЕВРейский, JEWreysky, Jewish kvass – an innocent utopia of the Russian language and the Urbi et Orbi of my aunt, as though Europe and the Jews were descended from one root, and this recipe and this abbreviation fostered the refreshing hypothesis that all Jews, even those who were no longer Jews at all anymore, were among the last Europeans having, after all, read everything that constitutes Europe.[92]

So, these three letters turned out to be very important for the author since they could be understood as both "European" and "Jewish" – these words start with the same three letters in the Russian language. For the protagonist that is on her journey of analyzing the darkest parts of her family history including the Holocaust, this might be a very strong irony: these three letters seem to suggest that the Jews have the same root as the Europeans, that they are essentially the same. And the kvass might be both "Jewish" and "European," as if there existed no difference between the two. But for Petrowskaja, as well as for her readers, there is, unfortunately, a huge difference between them, since the Jewish culture, just as the recipe, had been almost entirely erased during the Holocaust. Maybe the aunt thought that the recipe could be saved if it were called "a European" kvass? She must have shared the narrator's sense of ambiguity: recording not the full word but just the abbreviation that reads neither "European," nor "Jewish." Could her aunt possibly not write this word fully because she was afraid, hiding, like all Jewish things were in hiding, like the Jewish people who attempted to survive the Holocaust? And the recipe was possibly hidden behind this abbreviation, behind "the Europe," seizing being Jewish, assimilating its identity into a European one. In this sentence we can see how different alphabets and languages interact in one sentence to reflect the author's larger thoughts about the place of her family's tragedy in the context of European history.

In her own journey through languages and alphabets, Petrowskaja, like her aunt, makes some symbolic and unexpected choices. By writing the book in German, which is not her native language,

[92] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 21.

the author takes a chance to re–visit the past through the lens of the other. She attempts to overcome her own "dumbness", which is her decision not to write in Russian language, that I will explain later in this section. Petrowkaja makes a parallel with her ancestor Oziel by stating that "learning German was both an opportunity to write and an acceptance of my own dumbness, and in this sense the tradition of my family, that for almost two centuries was teaching dumb children to speak, has not been interrupted."[93] Rachel Seelig argues that the author decided to write the novel in German because "German reflects her own experience of migration and cultural displacement."[94] In a similar way, Arnaud Schmitt suggests that through the use of German, Petrowskaja gets access to the German experience of dealing with the traumatic memory of the Holocaust – the experience which was not available to her in Russian.[95] In the next section I will discuss how and why the Soviet experience of processing the past was different than the German one.

The use of German also allows Petrowskaja to engage with the European literature of memory. Schmitt writes that *Maybe Esther* is "a text that participates in a contemporary German–language literary culture that is committed to exploring the complexities of German–Jewish relations and to remembering the victims of the Holocaust."[96] By writing in German, Petrowskaja is able to contribute to this cultural dialogue. At the same time, writing in German is also a consequence of the author's unwillingness to write in the Russian language from which, as she is a native Russian speaker from Ukraine, she means to distance herself because of the ongoing war between Ukraine with Russia, which started in 2014, the year her book was published. According to the author: "the very concept of the "Russian language" for the emigrant from Kiev has moved away from the "great and mighty"

[93] Katia Petrovskaia, *Kazhetsia Ester*, 303.
[94] Rachel Seelig, "Writing from the Margins: The German–Language Literary Field and Katja Petrowskaja's Vielleicht Esther (Maybe Esther)," *Monatshefte* 113, no. 1 (2021): 57.
[95] Arnaud Schmitt, "Katja Petrowskaja's Maybe Esther: Memory, History, and the Politics of Family Narratives," in *Transnationalism and Contemporary German–language Literature*, ed. Elisabeth Herrmann, Carrie Smith-Prei, and Stuart Taberner (Camden House, 2019), 132.
[96] Schmitt, "Katya Petrowskaja's Maybe Esther," 132.

in the seven years that have passed since the publication. It has become even more unstable and unrooted because there is a war going on."[97]

Historical Background: The Holocaust

The Holocaust is a massive genocide of European Jews mainly committed by Nazi Germany during World War II. Between 1938 and 1945, the Nazi regime and its allies succeeded in eliminating most of the Jewish population in Europe, almost 6 million.[98] In this section, I will summarize the Holocaust's remembrance and memory politics in the Soviet Union, Germany, and Poland – the countries that are presented in Petrowskaja's book *Maybe Esther*. This discussion is crucial to the understanding of the book, since the Holocaust plays a significant, almost central role in it.

Most of Petrowskaja's family stories are constructed around the Holocaust – all the forced relocations, deaths, and persecutions. Petrowskaja reflects on this tragedy, lamenting how it is often perceived as the sorrow of the "others," even though the full horror of this event is revealed in the fact that the victims of Babi Yar "were not the others; they were, rather, friends from school, kids next door, neighbors, grandmas and uncles, biblical elders and their Soviet grandchildren."[99] Not just the victims, but also the murderers, witnesses, and accomplices leave a significant mark in the memory of the Holocaust. For Petrowskaja, all these roles overlap, creating confusion around which various family stories revolve. So, this part of the chapter brings clarity to the darkest part of the War history and its remembrance.

The world started to process the Holocaust as a historical experience immediately after the war. In the second half of the 20th century, German society faced the necessity of rethinking its historical experience, in order to "come to terms" with its past. In the eyes of many, Germany have developed a healthy democratic culture around the memory of the Holocaust.[100] Thus, the largest

[97] Katia Petrovskaia, *Kazhetsia Ester*, 298
[98] Olga Baranova, "Politics of Memory of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union," *IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conference Proceeding* 34, (2015): 4, https://files.iwm.at/jvfc/34_2_Baranova.pdf
[99] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 164.
[100] Dirk Moses, "The non-German German and the German German: Dilemmas of identity after the Holocaust," New German Critique 34, no. 2 (2007): 45, https://doi.org/10.1215/0094033X-2007-003

memorial to the murdered European Jews known as the Holocaust Memorial was built in Berlin. According to Moses, the significance of this monument is that "states usually erect monuments to their fallen soldiers, not to the victims of these soldiers," as this monument did.[101] Since Germany lost its sovereignty and was divided into two parts, there were two different ways of overcoming that traumatic experience.

In West Germany, the society chose a way of accepting the national guilt and making it a part of the national identity.[102] The process started with the differentiation between perpetrators, bystanders, and victims. The memory of Jewish suffering was included in public commemorative events since the 1950s. According to Herf, Jewish heroism and martyrdom were mentioned in speeches at those events which affected the preservation of the memory of the Holocaust. One of the important speeches regarding the Holocaust victims in German political culture was given by Reuter, a mayor of West Berlin, in 1953, at a memorial during the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto. He said: "As Germans –I speak to you here as well as to my Jewish fellow countrymen as a German – we must not and we cannot forget the disgrace and the shame that took place in our German name."[103] The policy included the removal of the Nazi Party leaders from the leadership positions, trying them as criminals, as well as dissolving the organizations connected to the Nazi regime.

Nazism was investigated and persecuted both in East and West Germany. However, in East Germany, like in the Soviet Union, Nazi crimes against the Jews were not separated from other crimes. Since East Germany became a socialist country, it was understood that its own Nazi past was thus overcome. The attitude towards the commemoration of Jewish suffering became the following: some organizations like "The Victims of Fascism" and some leaders like Franz Dahlem started to stress Jewish suffering, but the commemorative events were just a part of the common narrative, which was "the fight for peace", and, consequently, a part of Soviet criticism of the western

[101] Moses, "The non-German German," 46.
[102] Jeffrey Herf, "Legacies of Divided Memory for German Debates about the Holocaust in the 1990s," German Politics & Society 17, no. 3 (1999): 16, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23737390
[103] Herf, "Legacies of Divided Memory," 16.

politics.[104] The Holocaust was being "forgotten" against the backdrop of late Stalinist anti–Semitism.[105] Following WWII, the Soviet government carried out a series of anti–Semitic campaigns aimed at Jewish intellectuals, artists, and professionals; including arrests, imprisonments, and executions of Jews in 1948.[106] The Soviet government's suppression of the Holocaust memory was part of a broader effort to eradicate Jewish culture and identity. The situation got worse during the anti–cosmopolitan purge in the winter of 1952–1953, when the unified Stalinist version of history was adopted. According to this clear antifascist orthodoxy version, Jewish matters were marginalized at best, while at worst, Jews were becoming "a part of East Germany's imperialist capitalist enemies."[107] One of the important commemorative events dedicated to the Holocaust memory in East Germany took place in Sachsenhausen, in 1961, the year the Berlin Wall was constructed. The German communist and politician, Ulbricht, gave a speech in which he mentioned communists, prisoners of war, and citizens of Europe that were murdered in the camp without specifically mentioning the Jews. Herf argues that it was "a moment of historical triumph and identification with past heroes and victors rather than with history's tragic and unredeemed victims."[108] The experience of East Germany since then and until 1989, the year when Germany was unified, mirrored the experience of the Soviet Union and Poland.

Polish experience is relevant for Petrowskaja's *Maybe Esther* since the narrator's relatives that are described in the book are mostly from Poland. The narrator's main journey also starts from visiting Poland and Polish archives, that were able to provide some important information even despite the current situation with Polish memory politics. In September 1939, with the attack of Nazi Germany on Poland, World War II began. As a result, the country was divided between Germany and the USSR. The war resulted in the death of approximately six million Polish citizens, nearly half of

[104] Herf, "Legacies of Divided Memory," 10.
[105] Ilya Altman, "Pamiat' o Holokoste v sovremennoi Rossii," Dekoder, May 21, 2021, https://www.dekoder.org/ru/dossier/holokost-i-pamyat-o-nem-v-sssr-i-rossii.
[106] Baranova, "Politics of Memory," 4.
[107] Herf, "Legacies of Divided Memory," 11.
[108] Herf, "Legacies of Divided Memory," 15.

them were the Jews. Although, throughout the war, there was an underground resistance to the German occupation, the complicity of many Poles in the Holocaust continues to be a contentious issue.[109] Poland's experience of the Holocaust is unique in the sense that the Polish society is still conflicted about its position in the relation to Jews and Germans.[110] After WWII, Poland became a part of the Eastern Block. Like East Germany, Poland's was also controlled by the Soviet Union, which had more oppressive politics of memory. From 1948 to 1989, owing to censorship restrictions, there was little attention given to the Holocaust in official Polish historiography in the creation of memorials, and in school education.[111] And yet, one of the first state initiatives after the war was the creation of the Jewish Institute of History in 1947 and the opening of the monument to the heroes of the ghetto in Warsaw in 1948.[112] However, until 1989, the discussion of the Holocaust was limited in Poland. The situation with the politics of memory changed in the 1980s, and the topic of the Holocaust started to receive more attention.

There is a canon of the post–war Polish literature that deals with the topic of the Holocaust. According to Grynberg, "a revival of true literature came with the political thaw of the mid 1950's."[113] The revival was marked with a publication of the book *Black Torrent* by Leopold Buczkowski and stories by Rudnicki and Wygodzki. However, the situation worsened once again and was revived later with a publication of a scholarly work *Neighbors* by a Polish–American writer Gross. Published in 2000, the book gave a strong push for the renewed discussion of the Holocaust. *Neighbors* narrates a story that happened in July 1941 in the small town of Jedwabne, where Polish people killed several

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[109] Ivo Miinssen, "Obshchestvo so vseobshei amneziei," Dekoder, 2019,https://www.dekoder.org/ru/article/polsha-osmyslenie-proshlogo-Andrzej-Leder.

[110] Hannah Maischein, "The Historicity of the Witness: The Polish Relationship to Jews and Germans in the Polish Memory Discourse of the Holocaust," in *Jews and Germans in Eastern Europe: Shared and Comparative Histories*, ed. Tobias Grill, (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2008), 215.

[111] "Education on the Holocaust and on Anti-Semitism: An Overview and Analysis of Educational Approaches," *Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights*, (2006): 140, Project OSCE, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/4/18818.pdf

[112] "Education on the Holocaust," Project OSCE, 140.

[113] Henryk Grynberg, "The Holocaust in Polish Literature," Notre Dame English Journal 11, no. 2 (1979): 131, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/40062457.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%2525253A2aa845b1fe6e4f4a47a82b376e68d4df&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1

hundred of their Jew neighbors resulting in the deaths of several hundred Jews. According to Konczal, this book was a catalyst that caused a huge debate and signaled the necessity to revisit the history of Polish–Jewish relations.[114] Many other institutions and scholars started to work with the Holocaust memory and continued to uncover the uncomfortable truth. Similar to what this canon of post–War Polish literature about the Holocaust did during the second part of the 20th century, *Maybe Esther* is trying to expand the discussion to the post–Soviet space now.

In recent years, there have been positive developments in post–Soviet countries, as well as in Poland and Germany, with regards to the Holocaust memory. However, this progress has been threatened by a contemporary rise of Holocaust denial and ultra–right movements. For instance, according to Konczal, Poland started to distort its Holocaust memory significantly since the national–conservative "Law and Justice" party came into power in 2015.[115] This process is a result of the country's discomfort in facing its complicated past; it propagates the three main Polish narratives about the Holocaust: Polish solidarity with Jews, Polish and Jewish shared suffering, and Jewish ingratitude toward the Poles.[116] Furthermore, the Polish government passed legislation that threatens to restrict freedom for those who attempt to connect the country with the Nazi and communist crimes. In 2006, the legislation meant to "protect" the "good name" of Poland was adopted which introduces prison terms up to 3 years for such "crimes."[117] Starting in 2015, the ideological project to "regain the dignity" of the country contributes to the whitewashing of the Holocaust memory.

Due to the Soviet politics of the Holocaust remembrance, not enough is known about the murder of hundreds of thousands of Jews in the territory of the Soviet Union, occupied by Germany and its allies. These crimes have not yet found a place in the global memory of the Holocaust. Outside the academic history, the Jewish genocide is still associated with ghettos and camps where the Jews

[114] Kornelia Kończal, "Politics of innocence: holocaust memory in Poland," *Journal of Genocide Research 24, no.* 2 (2022): 250, https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2021.1968147
[115] Kończal, "Politics of innocence," 251.
[116] Kończal, "Politics of innocence," 251.
[117] Kończal, "Politics of innocence," 252.

of Western Europe and Poland were killed.[118] One of the most important reasons for the suppression of the Holocaust memory in the Soviet Union was the state–sponsored narrative of about the war and its memory. As in East Germany and Poland, which were also subject to the politics of memory of the Soviet Union, the Soviet Union's main narrative about the war emphasized the heroic sacrifices of Soviet soldiers and the victory over Nazi Germany. The Soviet Union tended to downplay the specific targeting of Jews by the Nazis; instead, it presented the war as a battle between two superpowers with a focus on the Soviet Union's military forces that liberated Europe. The memory of the Holocaust with its staggering number of deaths did not fit into the official narration that the Soviet Union tried to portray, because the catastrophe did not align with the image of victorious superpower in World War II.[119] This hushing up of the Holocaust memory was inherited by several post–Soviet countries after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Among all separate instances of the Soviet memory politics regarding the Holocaust, the handling of the Babi Yar massacre is of the paramount importance both to the history of the Holocaust denial and, specifically, to Petrowskaja's book, in which it plays a central role. Babi Yar is a ravine, a site of massacres that was carried out by the Nazi occupation in Kyiv in 1941. Only the first day of the massacres took the lives of 33,771 Jewish people.[120] Just like the Nazi occupants, the Soviet government tried to erase the memory of Babi Yar after the war. For that purpose, the ravine was turned into a dam holding loam pulp which had been pumped from the local brick factories.[121] According to Altman, in February 1944, the official Soviet investigation into the executions at Babi Yar reported about the murder of "peaceful Soviet citizens," not specifically ethnic Jews.[122] Very little was said about the fact that the genocide of the Jews occupied a special place among the Nazi atrocities; the word "Holocaust" itself was not used in the official Soviet narrative. Right after the

[118] "Holocost I pamiat' o nem v SSSR i Rossii," Dossier, Dekoder, https://www.dekoder.org/ru/dossier/holokost-i-pamyat-o-nem-v-sssr-i-rossii
[119] Elena Ivanova, "Konstruirovanie kollektivnoi pamiati o Holokoste v Ukraine," *Ab Imperio* 2, (2004): 373, Project MUSE, https://doi.org/10.1353/imp.2004.0005.
[120] Ivanova, "Konstruirovanie kollektivnoi pamiati," 376.
[121] Ivanova, "Konstruirovanie kollektivnoi pamiati," 376.
[122] Ilya Altman, "Pamiat' o Holokoste."

war, under the influence of the Cold War, Nazi crimes became the subject of huge state propaganda. According to Khapaeva, in the first decades after the war, the war became a unifying experience that was "supposed to reinforce the feeling of community among the Soviet people."[123] The situation improved somehow after Stalin's death but under Brezhnev's leadership and continued cencorship, meaningful change was limited. According to Altman, the significant shit happened during the perestroika years, but even in 1992, when the Holocaust Center was created, the term used in its name was almost unknown.[124]

Babi Yar became one of the most prominent examples of the process of ignoring the Jewish tragedy. The memory of Babi Yar resurfaced only after 1961, during the Thaw, when Yevgeny Yevtushenko wrote a poem "Babi Yar," thus lifting the silent ban on mourning.[125] Like in Poland, the official Soviet ideological paradigm, was challenged from time to time by independent writers. Written before Yevgeny Yevtushenko's famous poem but not published until 1988, Vasily Grossman's novel, *Life and Fate*, directly talks about the Holocaust. Moreover, the book draws parallels between the Soviet and fascist regimes. Grossman's exploration is not limited to the unveiling of the depths of fascist anti–Semitism; he also portrays the daily post–war anti–Semitism within Soviet society. According to Yuriy Bit–Yunan, a literary historian, "from an official point of view, the USSR was an international state. Representatives of all ethnic groups were equal in it. All of them were members of the large family of Soviet peoples. Grossman shows that this is not the case."[126] Grossman positions his narrative directly in contrast to the official Soviet ideology, underlining the role of historical truth. Taking into account the official Soviet narrative, it becomes evident that the Holocaust was studied from time to time only. As a result, a number of "dark spots" were formed in the scholarly literature. And yet, there are a lot of important names who worked on

[123] Dina Khapaeva, "Historical memory in post-Soviet Gothic society," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (2009): 361, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40972149
[124] Ilya Altman, "Pamiat' o Holokoste."
[125] Yevgeny Yevtushenko, "Yevtushenko: Selected Poems," (Penguin UK, 2008).
[126] Yuriy Bit–Yunan, "8 prichin zapreta romana Vasiliia Grossmana 'Zhizn' i sud'ba," Arzamas, https://arzamas.academy/materials/2061

the Holocaust in the territory of the Soviet Union. Those are I. Ehrenburg and V. Grossman, A. A. Galkin, M. I. Semiryaga, A. I. Poltorak, D. E. Melnikov and L. B. Chernaya.[127] These scholars made a significant contribution to the study and documentation of the Holocaust on the territory of the Soviet Union. Their efforts helped increase awareness and understanding of the Holocaust, even despite the limitations in the Soviet historical narrative that existed at the time.

After the fall of the Soviet Union the Holocaust remembrance faced a new kind of obstacle — the post-Soviet identity crisis.[128] Many post–Soviet republics, and especially Russia, faced an acute issue of overcoming the identity vacuum and devise their own politics of memory related to Soviet traumatic history. The collapse of the Union was not entirely a political or social process, it was also a displacement of norms and conventions that worked for many years and influenced the individual and national identity of people: "for several generations, the Soviet past and personal biographies had become indistinguishable, and the disappearance of the Soviet country often implied the obliteration of individual and collective achievements, shared norms of interaction, established bonds of belonging, or familiar daily routines."[129] So, after the collapse, the Soviet identity, based on the Soviet ideological foundation, was no longer a good "building material" for constructing new models of identity. And yet, "silencing" seemed necessary for some societies as a part of the coping mechanism, since there were too many unprocessed traumas associated with unofficial memory. For example, according to Khapaeva, post–Soviet Russian society approaches Soviet history with almost "an anthropologist's distance."[130] This, again, is because Soviet history is an unprocessed trauma, which left a historical vacuum, a "temporal gap" in the post–Soviet imagination, destroying Russians' sense of "historical continuity."[131]

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[127] Kristina Vavilova, "Osnovnye vektory v izuchenii problem Holokosta na covremennom e'tape," *Vestnik Kemerovskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta* 4-2, (2004): 23, https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/osnovnye–vektory–v–izuchenii–problem–holokosta–na–sovremennom–etape

[128] Serguei Alex Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia*, 1st ed. (Cornell University Press, 2009), 1.

[129] Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair*, 1.

[130] Boris Noordenbos, *Post-Soviet literature and the search for a Russian identity*, (Springer, 2016), 30.

[131] Noordenbos, *Post-Soviet literature*, 30.

Not only the post–Soviet society faced difficulties: with the ideological vacuum, the newly established governments lacked legitimacy. So, they have chosen to adopt a political discourse focusing on the positive aspects of the Soviet past. According to Khapaeva, over the last years, the "normalization" of the Soviet past has become the "keystone of official discourse on Russian and Soviet history and has been welcomed by the population."[132] According to Roginsky, both the authorities and the population have found a way to make up for their deficits (identity and legitimacy crises) in the image of Great Russia with strong and positive historical background, in particular, the Stalinist era.[133] In this way, there was and is a tacit agreement with the hushing up of the "unpleasant" memory of the Soviet Union including the Holocaust. Under Putin, strong censorship laws led to the closure of the "Memorial," a prominent human rights organization in Russia dedicated to preserving the memory of the victims of political repression during the Soviet era, documenting human rights abuses, and promoting historical truth and justice. However, the "Memorial" and its activities have faced mounting challenges and pressures from the Russian government in recent years.[134] The present state of memory politics in Russia: repressive state policies on the one hand and the urgent need to preserve the memory of the catastrophic events of the 20th century on the other explain why Petrowskaja's book in the Russian translation became such a phenomenon in contemporary Russian literature.

While this has been the situation with the Holocaust remembrance in Russia, in Ukraine it is completely different. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the first Ukrainian president recognized the partial guilt of the Ukrainian people in the extermination of Jews during the war years.[135] This was a turning point in the formation of a new official memory of the Holocaust. It has been marked by a growing commitment to acknowledging and preserving the memory of the Holocaust. One of the most significant shifts in Ukraine's Holocaust memory policy has been the

[132] Khapaeva, "Historical memory," 361.
[133] Arseny Roginsky, "The Embrace of Stalinism," Open Democracy, December 16, 2008, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/the-embrace-of-stalinism/
[134] "News," Memo.ru, accessed February 28, 2022. https://www.memo.ru/ru-ru/
[135] Ivanova, "Konstruirovanie kollektivnoi pamiati," 376.

critical "revisiting" of history. With the fall of the Soviet Union, Ukraine became open to critical examinations of its past, including the events of the Holocaust. This has led to the increased access to documents, research, and archives related to this period. Also, a huge role is given to public rituals of the Holocaust remembrance in Ukraine. Notably, sites as "Babi Yar" in Kiev became a symbol of remembrance. Babi Yar is a park that finally has monuments to the victims reminding of the atrocities committed during that period. Also, Babi Yar Holocaust Memorial Center is planned to be open in the site in a couple of years. According to Ivanova, since 1991, the anniversary of the Babi Yar tragedy has been celebrated as a nationwide date, and monuments, commemorative signs and plaques appeared in the places of mass executions of Holocaust victims.[136] Moreover, the inscriptions on those places highlight that Jews were exterminated there, and not just "peaceful citizens." There is an episode in the novel, where Petrowskaja's narrator visits the Babi Yar, which is no longer situated in the outskirts, having become a park, surrounded by the city. She wanders around the monument in the park thinking about the ambiguity of her feelings and pictures that she sees:

> Did it happen here? People are out walking, chatting, gesturing with their hands in the sun. I do not hear anything. The past swallows up all the sounds of the present. Nothing more comes along. No room left for anything new. I feel as though these walkers and I are moving on different screens.[137]

We can see from this episode that the narrator's trauma is not allowing her to see what other people can see there: a park, a memorial. She wanders around looking for an appropriate ritual for connecting with history. And this ambiguity in her feelings that result from nor yet fully processed inherited trauma show all the problems of memory politics. Memory rituals have not yet become developed enough in society because of the tough history of the remembrance that is discussed in this section.

Ukraine does actively collaborate with international organizations focused on the Holocaust memory. Partnerships with institutions like the "Holocaust Memorial" and "Yad Vashem" have allowed for the preservation of historical accuracy and the promotion of global awareness about the Holocaust. Despite these positive developments, it is important to recognize that Ukraine's Holocaust

[136] Ivanova, "Konstruirovanie kollektivnoi pamiati," 376.
[137] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 165.

memory policy remains complex based on the reasons similar to those discussed in connection with Poland. In addition to the lasting consequences of the complicated Soviet politics of memory, inherited by Ukraine, contemporary debates also arise. They are particularly related to the problem of the collaborationism during World War II and the role of Ukrainian nationalist groups during that period. Otherwise, Ukraine's Holocaust memory policy has evolved significantly since the end of the Soviet Union.

Dual world conflict

The discussion of the problems of the collective memory in the Soviet Union helps us understand the theme of the "dual world," as it appears in Petrowskaja's *Maybe Esther*. As I have argued above, the main tactic in the politics of memory during and after the Soviet Union was to repress the "unpleasant" memory of Stalinist crimes. This ensured the legitimacy of the state for Stalin (before his death in 1953), and for his successors (after the Thaw). Thus, the level of "silencing" in the politics of memory fluctuated in different periods of the Soviet Union. The situation with the historical truth worsened with the Brezhnev's administration starting from 1964 and through the 1970s and 80s, the formative period of Petrowskaja's Soviet childhood. Brezhnev's times revived a conscious focus on "positive" memory of the Soviet Union, such as victory in WWII and the achievements of the Soviet people in building and rebuilding of its industrial might. The focus on "positive" memory, a common practice in authoritarian states, aimed to construct a historical narrative that reinforced the government's positive self–image while erasing memories that contradicted the official version of common memory. Consequently, this emphasis on selective memory since 1964 created a pervasive sense of dissonance in the minds of Soviet citizens, who found themselves living in a "dual world."

Burdened with the postmemory that is passed to her through the "kitchen conversations," Petrowskaja's narrator grapples with the discrepancy between the inherited trauma of Stalinism and official politics of memory displayed through public rituals of memory. For example, she discovers a sizable group of people who were unfairly erased from the official memory of WWII in the Soviet

Union, and then methodically hidden from the public for many years after. Those people are Soviet POWs, the soldiers who were taken into captivity by the Nazi troops in battle and from the occupied (largely, Ukrainian) territories.[138] Although they were released after the war and returned to their country, Soviet GULAG camps already waited for them.[139] And even if those people were finally released from the GULAG, they were essentially eliminated from Soviet society and the collective rituals of the WWII memory. In Petrowskaja's book, the narrator's grandfather Vasily is one such war prisoner. In 1941 he went off to war, wound up in an encirclement near Kiev and spent 4 years as a POW. When he was returned to the Soviet Union, he was threatened with Soviet camps, but was rescued with a help of one woman. He did not return to his family and lived with that woman in Kiev for 40 years. Only when Petrowkaja turned twelve, he finally made his journey back to his first family.[140] He died one year after the reunion. There is a very important scene in the novel that captures well the elimination of prisoners from society. In the 1980s, the narrator was celebrating Victory Day with her friends who were making special gifts and cards for the veterans. She suddenly understood that her grandfather Vasily was missing among these veterans, the heroes of the war. Petrowskaja writes: "they did not talk about millions of prisoners of war, they did not even mention those people, the word itself was used only in relation to the Germans, who after the war were driven to Kyiv to rebuild the city. Our prisoners of war from the Great Patriotic War were expelled and erased from memory."[141] This happened because Soviet soldiers were prohibited from surrendering to the Germans. Becoming a prisoner of war amounted to treason and was dealt with as such: "who survived in captivity is a traitor, and death is better than betrayal. So, anyone who returned from captivity is a traitor and must be punished."[142] And since the memory politics did not allow traitors to be remembered, they were simply erased from the official memory of the war. However, they could not be erased from the unofficial memory that persisted in their families, like it did in Petrowskaja's.

[138] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 239.
[139] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 239.
[140] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 235.
[141] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 239.
[142] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 239.

The exaggerated role of the WWII as the main and the "only" war in the state–approved version of history had other consequences and produced other feelings of the dissonance for the narrator. In her book, Petrowskaja speaks about the role of the propaganda of the importance of WWII over any other historical experience during the Soviet era. Petrowskaja's childhood years were marked by "another" war, the Afghan war that started in 1979. And yet, the word "war" was only used for WWII, as if other wars did not count. Petrowskaja writes:

> ... but we didn't bother to specify what kind of war that was, we all thought that there was only one war – by mistake, as it turned out – because it was the time of our happy childhood when our state was waging another war, somewhere in the foreign south; a war, as we were told, for our safety, for the freedom of "other" people, a war that, despite everyday combat losses, we were not supposed to notice; and I did not notice it either until I was ten and saw a zinc coffin with the remains of a nineteen–year–old neighbor in front of our high–rise tower building, a guy whom I couldn't recall back then, but I still remember his mother's face.[143]

Even for a child, this official insistence on not "noticing" created a feeling of a dissonance and contributed to the difficulty of reconciling the official memory of other historical events with the stories of her family members. Her postmemory which she, nevertheless, inherited became even more fragmented, contradictory, and traumatizing.

As I have already mentioned, the transmission of memory from the second to the third generation was happening mostly unintentionally, as a result of a deep connection that the second generation after the catastrophe has to the previous generation's remembrances of the past.[144] This creates the impossibility of the second generation after the catastrophe to keep silence in front of their children. Petrowskaja confirms in the interview the importance of "kitchen" conversations for her parents:

> For this generation, it's not just about honor, but, maybe about survival, about liberating yourself from a lie ... It's almost a ritual. What they say about the kitchens, Moscow's, Kyiv's kitchens, and so on: this is really the creation of their own world, their faith, the myth in which people lived, could live with some meanings. And they spared no one, they just lived their lives, but even overheard conversations were killing me.[145]

[143] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 24.
[144] Hirsch, "The generation," 106.
[145] Petrowskaja, "Kniga Ester."

So, the second generation disregarded the rules of the official memory politics in their private space during those "kitchen" conversations. Even if they could not influence the situation on the state level, at least they tried to overcome their state–sanctioned "dumbness" and spoke about the truth inside their homes. In her book Petrowkaja writes that her "parents were talking about the things that the official history silenced, continuously talking about its pain points, as if they were charming a lie."[146] The "kitchen" conversations became the way to keep the memories and to transmit them to the future generations, and, with them, to transmit the traumas. The third, Petrowskaja's, generation could not bear the existence of the dual world: the outer world of the "bright" Soviet reality in which they lived, and the overheard reality that did not officially exist. In the same interview, Petrowskaja complains: "I couldn't stand the Afghan deaths, the knowledge of the repressions, I couldn't stand what they needed to speak up. I started to understand quite early that we live in some kind of a dual world…"[147] Petrowkaja grew to realize that "any family history is an alternative to state ideology, within which it cannot be squeezed in, because in every family there is something that contradicts the 'supreme' myth."[148] To conclude, the second generation confronted official memory politics through intimate "kitchen" conversations, which played a crucial role in preserving truth and passing it to future generations. Petrowskaja's generation, growing up in this contrast between the public Soviet narrative and the hidden reality, realized that there was a conflict between a family history and the state ideology. Their postmemory developed with an understanding that one's family history cannot fit into the state–approved version of history.

"Papa, I see something you don't see"[149]

In the novel, different generations show different involvement in the trauma as well as different attitude towards the history. For example, the narrator's father belongs to the second generation after the catastrophe. His position towards the history is seen from this statement: "I

[146] Katia Petrovskaia, *Kazhetsia Ester*, 301.
[147] Petrowskaja, "Kniga Ester."
[148] Katia Petrovskaia, *Kazhetsia Ester*, 306.
[149] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 139.

always wanted to engage with history, […] but never wanted history to engage with me."[150] By this, he referred to the constant threat that was following those who chose to see the unofficial memory of Stalinism. The fear of that threat made him and his father, the narrator's grandfather Semion, "the most tightlipped individuals."[151] By belonging to the second generation after the catastrophe, the narrator's father lived with a permanent fear of being under a constant surveillance by the government. That fear together with a sense of injustice shaped his attitude towards the history and the trauma suffered by the generation before and inherited by him. The narrator highlights it several times during the novel: "Semion was afraid for his children and of his children, and this fear hung over my gentle, peace–loving father like a sword of Damocles."[152] For example, while looking for the archival documents connected to the trial of Judas Stern, the narrator visited archives in Moscow and Berlin. In the archive of the Foreign Office in Berlin, she has found a photograph of Judas that was taken during the trial. In her thoughts about this photograph, the narrator turns to her father. She says that in Jegudas' (Judas's) eyes she sees her father's fear: "Papa, I also saw your fear for all of us in his eyes."[153] This fear was far–reaching, and, might perhaps, have been the reason why the narrator's father tried to limit the importance of an extended family. I have already stated above, in the Stalinist era, more relatives meant more threat to the family members in case one of them does something wrong in the eyes of the government. And even years later, the narrator's father persisted being cautious by saying that "we don't need relatives to feel connected to the history."[154] By this, he denied the importance of digging into the past for one's roots – a mission that becomes very important for Petrowskaya, which is characteristic for the third generation after the catastrophe. The third generation did not inherit the same intensity of fear which made them more open to try to search for the missing pieces of their history. Petrowskaja's narrator opposes her own attitude towards history

[150] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 159.
[151] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 152.
[152] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 128.
[153] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 140.
[154] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 158.

to the one that her father had, saying that: "I am inclined to gather everything into a sprawling panorama, as though we ourselves were swirling within the wind of rose of the events, if only because of an insane relative from whom we can't learn anything."[155] As a result, a particular attitude towards history was formed by the third generation, the one marked not by fear but by a sense of curiosity.

Another important feeling that the third generation had in relation to history is increased sensitivity. In the novel, the narrator's mother told her a story of Achilles. As a child, he was dipped by his mother into the river that was supposed to give him power of invulnerability. Since she held him by the heel, that heel did not reach the water. Eventually Achilles was killed in one of the wars as a result of an arrow hitting that particular part of his body. According to the narrator, she was also "dipped' into the river of history through her family's story: "my mother bathed me in this story, in the river of immortality."[156] The narrator's story of Achilles is a metaphor of her own attitude towards history and the truth. Since her mother was a historian, and she was growing by being "bathed in" history through the "kitchen" conversations she overheard. As a child, she was afraid of them as if she were suspended, held by the heel. That heel that became her vulnerable spot was a seat of her soul: "my soul *slid into my heels*, as we say in Russian when fear takes over; maybe it's safer for the soul to withdraw into the heels and stay there until the danger is passed."[157] Thus, the fear is also inherited by the third generation from the generations before, but it is not the same fear as her father's fear for his children. Rather, it is more of an inexplicable, unspecific feeling that her soul experienced "in the heel," her only weak spot. It might have been fear for the relatives from the overheard conversations, like her grandmother "maybe" Esther, or fear that the same could happen again to her and her own family? It could also be the fear that those stories would be forgotten if she did not preserve and safeguard them somehow. There is something uncontrollable, almost doomed in her attitude towards history, as if she were indeed held by a heel, not able to resist or fight back. The

[155] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 159.
[156] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 192.
[157] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 224.

metaphor of the Achilles's heal is apt in helping us understand the relation between history and the third generation. History becomes the narrator's vulnerable spot in which both fear and soul coexist.

In her article "The Generation of Postmemory," Hirsch states that starting from 1990s, "memory studies" field was fueled by the works of second or third–generation writers and artists who have been publishing novels, films, memoirs, artworks connected to the catastrophes of the 20th century.[158] This led her to the conclusion that descendants of survivors of massive traumatic events connect so deeply to the previous generation's remembrances that they come to call that connection *memory*. And, consequently, they feel responsible to speak up about, save, and recreate the transmitted trauma.[159] In Petrowskaja's novel, the narrator understands the necessity of her parents to speak up the truth even at home. In her interview, she states that her parents "did not spare" her because they had to speak up the truth or "liberate themselves from a lie" while having those "kitchen conversations."[160] With the trauma, the narrator inherits her responsibility towards the truth as well: "I languished from the feeling of an inheritance with which I couldn't do anything" and "I'm interested in telling this to someone who does not know about it and see what happens."[161] The narrator sets on a journey in an attempt to collect the knowledge since she is responsible for keeping it. Another example of her feeling the responsibility for her inherited memory is connected to the stories that her mother told her about her war experiences. The narrator's mother was telling her stories about the war so often, that at some point "her [the mother's] war became mine [the narrator's]"[162]. This is an example of how responsibility might be inherited through family stories. This shows that if the second generation had a responsibility to speak up the truth, even whisper it, at least at home, the third generation assumes the responsibility to educate about the truth and to spread it. This mission might be connected to the fact that the third generating feels liberated from the direct fear to speak up under which the second generation lived.

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[158] Hirsch, "The Generation," 105.
[159] Hirsch, "The Generation," 105.
[160] Petrowskaja, "Kniga Ester."
[161] Petrowskaja, "Kniga Ester."
[162] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 70.

Though decedents of catastrophes come to call their deep connection to the past *memory*, this memory could not have been transmitted to them directly. Rather, according to Marianne Hirsch, that transmission process happens through stories, photographs, and documents. And, most importantly, it also contains an element of imagination: "postmemory's connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation."[163] This is because the catastrophe is primarily the experience of the first generation, while each generation after has to imagine the details of that particular experience for itself. In postmemory, imagination, not the truth, assumes the central place.

Thus, in one important episode from the novel, a family story held a Ficus plant responsible for the survival of the narrator's father during the evacuation at the time of the WWII. In 1941, a lot of people were evacuating from Kiev and transportation was very scarce. The narrator's grandfather Semion tried to evacuate his family – his wife and two sons. According to the stories that the narrator heard from her father when she was little, the truck was already full with two other families with their baggage and a a large potted Ficus plant. So, in order to make space for his family, Semion pulled the Ficus down to free some space for his son.[164] Later, when the narrator worked on her book, she asked her father to write down this story again but he did not mention the Ficus plant. This was a huge surprise for the narrator, who seemed to *remember* the Ficus plant's place in this story. The plant struck her "as the main character in the history, if not of the world, then of my family. In my version, the ficus saved my father's life."[165] The absence of the Ficus plant from her father's later written version of the story might have meant that the narrator imagined it herself: "I inserted the missing details into the blanks of the street."[166] The narrator's father, in this episode, concluded that "sometimes that pinch of poetry is the very thing that makes memory truth."[167] This is very relatable

[163] Hirsch, "The Generation," 107.
[164] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 192.
[165] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 195.
[166] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 228.
[167] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 229.

to what Maria Stepanova said in her interview with *Kommersant*. According to her, memory, despite all its subjectivity and, in fact, falsity, suddenly becomes the goddess of the new time. We expect some truth from it and an opportunity to plunge into our own past.[168] In *Maybe Esther*, the narrator states that while postmemory may be false, it adds truth to the collective historical experience: "it (postmemory) appeared to arise from the interplay of a feeble imagination and a weak memory. Yet, what better proof can there be of the historical veracity of this incident?"[169] In conclusion, the narrator's exploration of postmemory highlights the interplay between imagination and memory in constructing personal and collective stories. While acknowledging the potential falsity of postmemories, it can contribute to our understanding of historical events through imagination, a crucial tool in the process of the symbolic restoration of justice and the overcoming of personal and collective traumas.

[168] Birger, Liza. "'Pamiati pamiati' Marii Stepanovoi." Blueprint. April 2, 2021. https://theblueprint.ru/culture/paper/pamyati-pamyati-maria-stepanova.
[169] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 205.

Chapter 3

Another House: Objects and Photographs As Postmemory Tools in Maria Stepanova's *In Memory of Memory*

Introduction

This chapter is dedicated to Maria Stepanova's book, *In Memory of Memory* (2017). Stepanova, similarly to Petrowskaja, encounters a common challenge — a desire to reflect on past events and the memories of them, and preserve these memories. This preservation is a result of a strong sense of responsibility felt by the third generation towards both history itself and the memories of their deceased forebears. In her book, Stepanova undertakes the task of writing up her family's history, viewing it as a memorial to her ancestors. This narrative, conceived as a journey through one family's story through the sorrows of the 20th century, confronts the concept of memory. The situation with preserving the memory becomes particularly poignant when considering the passing of those individuals who was able to pass firsthand memories to the author and had direct connections to the historical events, namely her mother and her aunt. The question that emerges is what to do with the fragments of history, and, more interestingly, with tangible objects such as cups, diaries, and photographs.

Maria Stepanova (born in 1972) is a Russian poet, writer, and public intellectual who grew up in the Soviet Union. Stepanova graduated from the Maxim Gorky Literature Institute in 1995.[170] Stepanova's literary career started in 2000s, when her first books of poetry made her famous.[171] She was the founder and editor of the online journal openspace.ru, that is focused on the development of Russian–language art and culture. After 2012, when openspace.ru was closed, she founded the media outlet colta.ru, which is supported by crowdfunding.[172] Colta.ru is the first Russian media source that

[170] Marja Sorvari, "Travelling (Post) Memory: Maria Stepanova's In Memory of Memory," in *Displacement and (Post) memory in Post–Soviet Women's Writing*, (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 131.
[171] "Maria Stepanova 'Lirika, golos,'" Zhurnal Znamia, accessed September 2, 2023, https://znamlit.ru/publication.php?id=3758
[172] Tessa Hadley, "In Memory of Memory by Maria Stepanova: Review – A family history," The Guardian, April 7, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/apr/07/in–memory–of–memory–by–maria–stepanova–review–a–family–history.

employs a crowdfunding system, a funding approach that demonstrates the meaningful impact of community support on developing cultural content and consequently, a significance of the source and people's trust to it.

Stepanova's novel is written in the genre of autofiction; it is a philosophical and documentary narrative, dedicated to the research of her Jewish–Russian family roots, and the cataloging and understanding of the family past. The book was published in 2017 by Novoe Izdatel'stvo. The following year the book received two main Russian literary awards – "Nos"[173] and "Bolshaya Kniga" award for the "best prose in Russian."[174] The book became very successful in Russia and abroad. In 2021 the English translation of the novel by Sasha Dugdale also was shortlisted for the International Booker Prize.[175] The only Russian authors, who were shortlisted for this award before Stepanova were Ulitskaya (2009) and Sorokin (2013).[176] Even in translation, the novel has been well–received and garnered positive reviews from T*he Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, etc.

This chapter provides an overview on Stepanova's novel *In Memory of Memor*y, focusing specifically on the reasons why contemporary authors choose to write about their past and the philosophical side of this question. I will show how, for Stepanova, as a representative of the third generation after the traumatic events of the 20th century, memory is transmitted in differently.

I argue that her generation relies on material objects when talking about memory transmission, such as archival documents, family archives, and photographs. Especially the last category, photographs, considered to be the best ways of transmitting memories of the Holocaust. And yet, in the process of reconstructing the past people have to be aware of possible biases, because

[173] "Literaturnaia premiia NOS," Fond Mikhaila Prokhorova, accessed September 13, 2023, https://www.prokhorovfund.ru/projects/project_archive/detail/literaturnaya–premiya–nos–2018/.
[174] "Pamiati pamiati," Big Book, 2018, accessed October 3, 2023, https://bigbook.ru/knigi/pamyati–pamyati.
[175] "The International Booker Shortlist," The Booker Prizes, April 22, 2021, accessed September 19, 2023, https://thebookerprizes.com/media–centre/press–releases/the–2021–international–booker–shortlist.
[176] Olga Morozova, "Kniga rossiiskoi pisatel'nitsy Marii Stepanovoi voshla v short–list Mezhdunarodnoi Bukerovskoi Premii," Snob, April 23, 2021, https://snob.ru/news/kniga–rossijskoj–pisatelnicy–marii–stepanovoj–voshla–v–short–list–mezhdunarodnoj–bukerovskoj–premii/.

sometimes they tend to think out meaning of photographs trying to make them fit into the context they expect.

The book starts with a story of a death of Stepanova's aunt Galya at the age of 80. Aunt Galya was a sister of Stepanova's father, a sister with whom he was not very close because of some "perceived snubs."[177] As a result, the narrator did not have a chance to form her own relationship with her aunt: they met infrequently, exchanged phone calls, but toward the end the calls also ceased. The significance of aunt Galya for her niece is that she was one of those people who connected her with her family's past and who could tell her the family story in detail. Aunt Galya died surrounded by "layered strata of possessions, objects, and trinkets in the cave of her tiny apartment."[178] After her death, Stepanova's narrator inherited all the objects from the apartment including "countless used notebooks and diaries."[179] She immediately starts reading them looking for something that she calls "the oval shape": ""I sat down at once to read them, in search of stories, explanations: the oval shape of her life."[180] She explains "the oval shape" by saying that "it is what constrains our story, what brings it together into a comprehensible unity."[181] It becomes clear to the reader, that Stepanova's narrator has always had a desire to tell a story of her family, and the diaries become a trigger point for her to finally start writing. And the story that she begins to narrate takes "the oval shape" through her beautiful poetic mediation in prose about the complex nature of memory.

According to Stepanova, she started to mentally compose the book when she was 11 years old – not this particular book, but some kind of comprehensive text about family history, "where everything would be collected, everyone would be mentioned and saved."[182] And yet, initially, in her imagination this text had to be written with a linearity of a traditional story:

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[177] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 10.
[178] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 10.
[179] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 17.
[180] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 14.
[181] Mariya Stepanova, *Pamiati Pamiati* (Moscow: Novoe Izdatel'stvo, 2021), 13. There is no translation of this line in the English version. This is my translation from the original.
[182] Maria Stepanova, "Vspomnit' vsekh. Mariya Stepanova o pamjati, prave na bessmertie i kartoshke s lukom," interview by Yurii Volodarskii, Fokus, February 27, 2018, https://focus.ua/culture/392355

> I meant something like, you know, a linear narrative — a story of searching and discoveries. I'll go here, go there, figure it all out, and describe it. At that time, it seemed to me that most of the gaps and failures in our family history could be easily filled with precise knowledge. However, it turned out that the history is mostly comprised of gaps, and there's really nothing that can be fully found or replenished.[183]

Instead, *In Memory of Memory* is a novel that "assembles the narrative like a puzzle with many missing pieces – from scraps and omissions, untold stories and one–way letters, photographs out of context."[184] The narrative contains family stories as well as author's reflection and commentary. And that is because according to a book review published in the journal Znamia, "the material resists" and does not submit to the author easily: "this is why, in the quest for truth, one has to resort to various sources: libraries, archives, family traditions, and, if fortunate, documents; to look into open graves, into the vacant eyes of their deceased, and to allow them into oneself, if only briefly."[185] Stepanova goes through archival documents, analyses of photographs from her family archive, letters and fragments from diaries, essays, art criticism, literary analyses of other poetic texts, for example Osip Mandelstam's. Stepanova's method is like a scrapbook: "building family portraits tentatively from what fragments she has, filling in around them everything else that feels like part of their world and history – or absorbs her omnivorous interest, or crops up in her reading, or prompts her meditation."[186]

The novel explores the author's personal story while also incorporating to it stories of her ancestors and a tragic story of Jews in the 20th century. The novel ties together such episodes as the instances of anti–Semitism and their impact on her Jewish–Russian family, a story of her great–grandmother Sarra Ginzburg, a revolutionary, a friend of Sverdlov, and a practicing doctor in the early 20th century, and a story of her older cousin's experience and death in the Siege of Leningrad. And all of them, "comprised of gaps," are filled with the author's creative reconstruction instead of "precise knowledge."[187] Maybe she chooses this style because memory texts are always full of false

[183] Stepanova, "Vspomnit' vsekh."
[184] Maria Zakruchenko, "Prikosnoveniye k molchaniyu," review of *Pamiati Pamiati*, by Maria Stepanova, *Zhurnal Znamia*, 2018, https://znamlit.ru/publication.php?id=6923
[185] Zakruchenko, "Prikosnoveniye."
[186] Hadley, "In Memory of Memory."
[187] Stepanova, "Vspomnit' vsekh."

memories and guesses. There is a moment in the novel, that reflects this idea very well. Stepanova writes:

> But although much was unknown or half–known or under a veil of darkness, I thought I knew a few firm facts about my family:
> No one died in the Stalinist purges
> No one perished in the Holocaust
> No one was murdered
> No one was a murderer
> Now this seemed doubtful, or even simply untrue. [188]

This "facts" appeared to be false as she started to deepen into the roots of her family. And as I already mentioned above, her ancestors turned out to be interesting and sometimes even important people for the history. And yet, the memory texts are all somehow depend on the writer's perspective and imagination since history brings more questions than answers. Although the author of *In Memory of Memory* starts with her childhood ambition to create a linear family history, in the process of writing, she ultimately realizes the inherent fragmentation and uncertainties of memories and her family's past.

The Genre: From Memory to Fiction

A novel resists any categorization. Stepanova defines the genre of her book as a "romance", perhaps hinting at the lyric, poetic quality of her prose. And yet, it is an impressive 500 pages–long narrative of the "path," which serves as a the metaphorical organization of the text. This unusual genre definition, "a romance," underscore the modern perspective of the author on her memories and the nature of the genre. By creating fiction from memory, the novel suggest a new way of working with memory: a way that is not about historical accuracy but helps to gain more accurate picture of the past. And yet, this contemporary view on the genre is not always followed by readers. Most of the criticism Stepanova receives, is about the genre. For example, there is a criticism that the book "might have succeeded formally as a collection of essays." Instead, the genre makes a book a bit problematic: "a novel, even a genre–bending one, promises its readers a story—and on this promise,

[188] Stepanova, *In Memory*, 601.

In Memory of Memory doesn't quite deliver."[189] Hadley's review, in this case, criticizes the length of the book as inappropriate either for a novel or for poetry: "prose has its hidden inward logic of limitation, just as poetry does; she says too much, too many times, there's too much clever explication, there are too many words."[190] So while being innovative for some people, the new approach to write an autofiction could be frustrating for others, since people usually expect genres to be strictly categorized as they are:

> Still, readers might observe that the many "Things Not Known," as Stepanova titles a later chapter, have eaten away like moths at the book's narrative fabric, leaving holes at its center. At once, this is the point of the book and its pitfall. Unfinished narratives and truncated histories are loyal to reality, but they also make for a frustrating reading experience.[191]

All these three texts that I am discussing resist easy categorization, with authors embracing unconventional genres to explore autofiction, prompting debates among readers about the balance between innovation and common narrative structure.

Why Do Authors Write About the Past?

In her book, Stepanova tries to answer the question why contemporary authors write a lot about memory lately. According to her interview for *Radio Liberty*, contemporary authors write about past more than about anything else, and she understands them because she is just the like them: "I will never forget how I was once on the jury of a literary prize — and I had to read about 80 prose books as part of my duty. Of which approximately 70 dealt with the past."[192] In her book Stepanova states that there is a new cult on memory that is appearing today: "Tsvetan Todorov talks somewhere about how memory is becoming a new cult, an object of mass veneration."[193] Judging from her various interviews and her reflection form the novel, Stepanova proposes several reasons for this cult. From the interview with Stepanova, we may assume that there is a kind of confusion among public

[189] Stephanie Newman, "In Memory of Memory," review of In Memory of Memory, by Maria Stepanova, *Harvard Review*, 2021, https://www.harvardreview.org/book-review/in-memory-of-memory/
[190] Hadley, "In Memory of Memory."
[191] Newman, "In Memory of Memory."
[192] Mariia Stepanova, "Mariia Stepanova: 'Poezd istorii opiat' v''ezzhaet v temnyi tonnel,'" interview by Andrei Arkhangel'skii, *Radio Liberty*, May 15, 2023, https://www.svoboda.org/a/mariya–stepanova–poezd–istorii–opyatj–vjezzhaet–v–temnyy–tonnel/32408294.html
[193] Stepanova, *In Memory*, 157.

intellectuals, or, as she said, “people who studied history, past, and memory studies.” According to them, people of our generation thought to live in more of a post–catastrophic situation, a kind of bright “future.” And because of that feeling, the only thing they had to do as a generation is to “summarize” the past catastrophes: “to sum up the past, its catastrophes, preserve, remember, not forget, and memorize all that remains. Everything should be orderly, explained, cataloged: monuments built, rituals devised, necessary to bid farewell to history properly.”[194] This feeling made people talk about their past and re–visit it in their writings. Instead, we, as a generation, appeared to stand on the verge of a new catastrophe, which is a war that is going on in Ukraine and more recent the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

The second reason to write about the past, is a fear of future that writers have. Stepanova states that the cult of memory is connected with a complete absence of what was once called the faith in the future: “the future — it’s scary, but the past, it may be frightening too, but at least we know what is there. And it seems safer than the future, because you can learn the rules to avoid getting hit by the next train of history.”[195] And yet, we are there hit by another train of history, which is a war in Ukraine, and the fear of the future seem to push us to talk and write about the past even more, since now the times are dominated with the “dull fear of the unknown.” This idea echoes her thoughts from the novel, where she states: “in comparison with a future we don’t want to inhabit, what has already happened feels domesticated — practically bearable.”[196] So there is a kind of a cycle that appears for the contemporary authors who try to write about their past both because they don’t want to repeat it and because they want to escape the fact that they are already repeating it.

Finally, there is a sense of justice that Stepanova finds important to mention when she reflects on the idea of how preserve the memory. According to her, “we, people, have long existed with a sense of justice implanted in our flesh, and simple justice requires eternal memory for

[194] Stepanova, “Mariia Stepanova.”
[195] Stepanova, “Maria Stepanova.”
[196] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 158.

everyone, for each of us."[197] In her novel, she talks about defeating death as our primary instinct, since death is a primary injustice: "the heart hates injustice, it seeks victory over death, it pushes back against this fundamental injustice."[198] So, for Stepanova, authors write about their dead ones to protect them from oblivion, if they couldn't be protected from death: "this passion for justice, like the obsessive scratching of a rash, tears any system from the inside, forcing us to seek and demand retribution, especially on behalf of the dead — for who will defend them, if not us?"[199] So, for the author, the key of Cristian promise of salvation is in defeating death and saving your departed in history. Talking about the reason why authors write about the past, Stepanova also mentions salvation as a part of a task of contemporary literature: "Perhaps the task of modern prose is to try to reconcile these things at least: to find a way to remember everyone without exception, to talk about the ordinary and the common so that, time after time, everything be made unique, be unlike anything else. As it actually is."[200] She believes that modern writers are quite right to undertake such journeys to the past. We are driven by a growing reverence for memory, a fear of the uncertain future, and a fundamental sense of justice. These forces inspire authors to preserve the past, not only to honor the departed but also to go through the challenges of history.

Silenced Memories

In the previous chapter, I wrote about the difference between the second and the third generation by using examples from Petrowskaja's novel. In this chapter, I want to reflect on the survivors of the catastrophes and the reasons why they did not write about what they were going through. According to Stepanova, the first reason is that there were simply no words to describe their sorrow:

> A person, one of thousands, miraculously returns home from exile, from the camp, to a warm place where old things are still in their places, where you remember this blanket or cup from 1914. This territory of the Soviet norm, with ration cards, queues, with anything – still a

[197] Maria Stepanova,"Ia e'tu knigu pisala vsiu zhizn'," interview by Andrey Arkhangel'skii, *Zhurnal Ogonek,* November 27, 2017, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3473303
[198] Stepanova, *In Memory*, 164.
[199] Stepanova, *In Memory*, 164.
[200] Stepanova, "Vspomnit' vsekh."

> paradise, shaky, barely surviving; how to let in a story about what happened here? […] The changed person with whom this happened tries to pass himself off as his old self, behave as he once did, and continue living.[201]

So, from the one hand there is an internal need to act as if nothing extraordinary had occurred, to reintegrate into the world they once lived, to suppress the memories. For many, it was a coping mechanism, a survival strategy. The horrors and injustices they witnessed were too distressing to convey in words. On the other hand, the oppressive atmosphere of the time played a significant role in their silence. Speaking out against the regime, or even sharing personal experiences that contradicted the state's narrative was dangerous. Stepanova calls it a "regime of memory":

> In order to survive, and this was understood very quickly, one had to dissolve, to merge with the background. Any stories, details, everything that set one apart from the general crowd was unnecessary and drew attention to itself. Even legitimate, government–approved experiences – such as military memories, for example – could only be shared in prearranged forms; stories of victory, frontline jokes, soldier songs about dugout stoves – all of this was permissible. Everything horrifying, unbearable, everything incompatible with life was bracketed off in the name of one's personal and collective mental well–being.[202]

So, the silence became a form of self–preservation, a way to navigate the terrain of Soviet society. The "regime of memory" silenced their narratives, compelling them to fade into the background, relinquishing the role of storyteller to their descendants, who would bear the responsibility of preserving and writing the stories.

Our "Parasitic" Relationship with the Past

And yet, while calling contemporary writers to write about their past, Stepanova also questions the authority and right they have to reflect on the past, since past does not belong to the contemporary generation. "We are not them," she states in her interview. According to the author, when we write about the past, we lie to ourselves by imagining that we are giving them the ability to speak out even if they are not around anymore. But in reality, it is ours and not theirs voices speaking out our and not their perspective:

> To give a voice to those who did not have the chance to speak is impossible. And to believe that we can do it for them is a comforting illusion that may help us cope with the

[201] Stepanova,"Ia e'tu knigu."
[202] Stepanova,"Ia e'tu knigu."

> overwhelming burden of the incompatibility of life's knowledge. However, it ultimately obscures the essence of what happened. These people were killed. They are gone. We cannot speak for them; we are speaking—in their place, without permission, without asking. We do not know what they would have said.[203]

In this way, Stepanova questions the ethics of writing about past of our ancestors, since it might be an illusionary "good deal." In her novel, she calls this to be a very dangerous, almost parasitical attitude: "culture treats the past as a state treats its mineral wealth, mining it for all its worth; this parasitical relationship with the dead is a profitable industry."[204] According to the author, "past lives are endlessly submissive," since they allow us to do whatever we may decide to do with them. She refers to the notebook covers and posters that we use daily, calendars with pictures of dead authors or actors. We never ask them for permission. So, according to Stepanova, past lives "reject no interpretation, endure any amount of humiliation, exist outside the rule of law or any notion of fair play."[205] And the danger of this attitude to their "meekness" is in our ability to "cross the line": "the dead agree to everything we do with them, and with such compliance that it provokes the living to do ever more."[206] This is especially important to understand nowadays when we are becoming more and more fascinated by the past.

Moreover, we are receiving benefits while parasitizing on the past. From the one hand, the books that are written recently dealing with the past seem to be essential for the third generation after the catastrophes, who just like Stepanova feel obligated to preserve their past. On the other hand, it is impossible to deny that the writers do receive benefits such as fame and money for their use of the past. Stepanova questions this as well: "why do we receive compensation for what happened to them, by what right, exactly? We are not them; our existence in the fire of someone else's memory is largely parasitic. Let's, at the very least, be aware of this."[207] Stepanova's reflection on ethics is not a direct critique of postmemory; it is more of a philosophic critique of the uses of memory and, specifically,

[203] Stepanova,"Ia etu knigu."
[204] Stepanova, *In Memory*, 202.
[205] Stepanova, *In Memory*, 202.
[206] Stepanova, *In Memory*, 202.
[207] Stepanova,"Ia etu knigu."

of evoking the deceased in culture: "according to Primo Levi, the worst survived – the best all perished. The place we occupy rightfully belonged to them; all we can hope for is that for some time, we can remember this and behave decently."[208] Stepanova warns about how unfair the process of colonizing the past is, cautioning and instructing contemporary writers to at least not forget about it and to behave with care.

Postmemory And Objects

In her book, Stepanova directly engages with Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory that was discussed earlier in the introduction section. She writes:

> I was reading Marianne Hirsch's classic work, The Generation of Postmemory, as if it were a travel guide to my own head. I knew everything she described immediately and intimately: the ceaseless fascination with one's family's past and the clinical boredom with which I roll my own contemporary world backward to that past, back to them, and feel quite certain, in–my–gut certain, of how it was back then, the streetcar routes, the stockings that sagged around the knees, the music from the loudspeaker.[209]

Stepanova immediately from a "half of a phrase" recognizes the feeling that Hirsch describes while describing the effect of postmemory on the decedents of the catastrophes of the past. In Hirsch's article "The Generation of Postmemory," a significant statement is made regarding the impact of growing up with powerful inherited memories that I already mentioned in Chapter 1. According to Hirsch, being influenced by narratives that existed before one's birth carries the potential of overshadowing one's own experiences with those of a previous generation.[210] The strong feeling of preferring family history to one's own history is one of the central struggles of the author in Stepanova's novel.

So, it seems like Stepanova is well aware of her sensitivity towards the past and the feeling of responsibility that I was mentioning in the second chapter. She writes:

> It is as if it brings some relief to share all these scraps from the past as I remember them, half–wryly, the transfers dirty and rubbed away a good twenty years even before the kitchen was redecorated, and only now reanimated, illuminated again — fat little boy in a sombrero

[208] Stepanova,"Ia etu knigu."
[209] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 148.
[210] Hirsch, "The generation," 107.

> and yellow–green domino mask but with no face behind the mask, a mass of gold curlicues around his head . . .[211]

For her, cataloguing the objects that are "witnesses" of the past is of particular importance. By cataloguing them, she seems to preserve the memories that those objects carry and saves the memories from oblivion: "as if my life's work was to catalog them all. As if that is what I grew up to do."[212]

In the case of Chudakov, the primary tools of transmitting memory were the stories of Anton's grandfather, as well as specific life skills that he learned. Stepanova and Petrowskaja both are representatives of next generation after Chudakov. Instead of relying on stories, they place a strong emphasis on objects that convey memory, particularly on the archives. In Petrowskaya's case, the focus was on archival documents since there were known historical figures in her family, that were not much discussed. Stepanova, on the other hand, had a family archive, providing an abundance of information. There is a good explanation for this: in many cases, narrators (survivors or witnesses of the catastrophes) of the second generation are still alive and convey information themselves, whereas objects hold no particular value because representatives of the second generation were still living among these objects. However, when it comes to the third generation, it often happens that there is no one left to tell the stories. Thus, one must rely on material objects and extract information from them. We see it in Stepanova's novel, where she complains that the initial book should have been written based on the stories of her mother:

> It was already clear that I would one day (when I became that better version of myself) open a special notebook and sit down with my mother, and she would start at the very beginning, and then there would be some meaning to it all — and a system, a family tree, and every cousin and nephew would be in their rightful place, and at the end of it there would be a book.[213]

But this never happened. And Stepanova, just as the majority of her generation was left to sort through archives and "extract" memories from them: "the puzzle was never completed; I was left with the tongue twister of my aunt's names, Sanya, Sonya, Soka, a lot of photographs of the nameless and the

[211] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 41.
[212] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 41.
[213] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 59.

noteless, some ethereal and unattached anecdotes, and the familiar faces of unfamiliar people."[214] So, in place of a memory that she did not have, of an event that she did not witness, her memory should have worked over someone else's story.[215] But when the narrator died and the story disappeared, objects became a main tool of memory transmission for her. Those objects are archival documents, letters, and photographs. And this is something that is common to the third generation writers.

There is also another object that plays a significant role, not for memory transmission but for the author and her book. This object is a tiny white china figurine of a naked little boy with curly hair, approximately three centimeters tall, which the author found at a Moscow flea market. The figurine was a bit chipped, which also made it unique. Ironically, this figure was intentionally designed for packaging purposes, as it was "dirt cheap" and used as loose fill to protect goods from rubbing or denting in the darkness.[216] However, for Stepanova, this little boy appeared to be a metaphor, showing the essence of the novel and serving as its main thesis. Stepanova states:

> My china boy seemed to embody the way no story reaches us without having its heels chipped off or its face scratched away. And how lacunae and gaps are the constant companions of survival, its hidden engine, fueling its acceleration. How only trauma makes individuals — singly and unambiguously us — from the mass product. And yes, finally, the way in which I am the little boy, the product of mass manufacturing and also of the collective catastrophe of the last century, the survivor and unwitting beneficiary, here by some miracle.[217]

This quote holds significance within the novel because it unveils the central theme of memory work – that stories rarely reach us in their entirety. Writers are left to rely on their imagination, and paradoxically, it is postmemory that conveys the truth that cannot be fully understood by adhering to the official narrative and precise numbers. It communicates the very essence of the past. Postmemory shapes our identity, while also underscoring the fragility of our existence on Earth and the fact that it easily might never have happened. This small object, the figurine, serves as a metaphor and simultaneously as the central figure in the novel.

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[214] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 59.
[215] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 37.
[216] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 136.
[217] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 136.

Photographs

In Hirsch's book *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* there is a chapter that tells the story of a photograph of the author's parents in Greater Romania during the war in 1942 or 1943.[218] In the photograph, a young and beautiful couple is seen strolling down the street. The photo was taken by a street photographer. The author writes that it's difficult to determine the complexity of the times from this photograph. In 1942, Chernivtsi became a Romanian city under the control of the fascist Romanian government.[219] That year over half of the citizens were deported or killed and only a small portion were allowed to stay because their presence was necessary for the city's functioning. Among them were Hirsch's parents, who lived under severe restrictions and were required to wear the yellow star, Jewish badge. However, their suffering is not evident in the photograph. On the contrary, the young couple looks vibrant, well–dressed, beautiful, and youthful.[220] The only evident thing was a small spot on the father's jacket. But even after extensive investigations, researchers could not confirm that it was the star. Hirsch uses this story in her book to illustrate that sometimes, in the context of trauma, photographs create evidence that highlights the gap between what we can see and what we know.[221] Nevertheless, according to Hirsch, it's precisely the photograph that becomes the most important means of transmitting memory during the Holocaust.

In her novel, Stepanova also pays huge attention to the photographs. One of her chapters, Chapter 3, is fully dedicated to the description of different photographs that she has found from her family archive. The chapter is called "A Handful of Photographs."[222] Among those listed descriptions of the photographs there are photos of nurses from the hospital where the author's great grandmother Sarra worked. For Stepanova, those photographs deliver the message better than words, they almost

[218] Marianne Hirsch, *Pokolenie postpamiati: pis'mo I vizual'naia kul'tura posle Kholokosta*. (Novoe izdatel'stvo, 2021), 99.
[219] *Hirsch, Pokolenie,* 97.
[220] Hirsch, *Pokolenie,* 95.
[221] Hirsch, *Pokolenie,* 104.
[222] Stepanova, I*n Memory,* 73.

"seduce us with the illusion of economy" of space and time we waste to gather the same information from other tools. But at the same time, photographs do much less than we expect them to do: "what do I have against images? Perhaps it is that they all have the same flaw: euphoric amnesia. They no longer remember what they signify, where they came from, who they are related to, and yet none of this bothers them."[223] This is because the mechanics of photography never intended to preserve the essence.[224] It is more like a preview, that contains less information than it should contain to satisfy the curiosity of the viewer. Stepanova compares photographs of the past with time capsules:

> The project of photography better resembles those time capsules intended for our descendants, or for aliens from outer space, filled with evidence of humanity: an anthology of our greatest moments an attempt to define ourselves through our civilization's crowning achievements — Shakespeare/Mona Lisa/cigar, or penicillin/iPhone/Kalashnikov.[225]

They are not enough, and yet they bring information, and we use them, just like in Hirsch's example, to incorporate what we see into the context that we already have. In this way we may affect the past, change it, since we are always a little bit biased based on the knowledge we know about the context of the photograph. So, the photographs we consider, may be not enough in transmitting memory, even though they are considered as the most important mean of transmitting memory of the Holocaust by Hirsch.

Stepanova comes to an interesting conclusion by contrasting photographs taken in the past, with the ones we take nowadays. In her opinion, in the past the album that kept the photographs was a sort of sketch of one's life: "we look through a family album with a sense of affection — it contains a little, perhaps just what remains."[226] And after digital photography was invented, we no longer have to save the film, which means that we can take as many photos as we want to: "just press the shutter release, even the deleted pictures remain in the computer's long memory."[227] Stepanova states that

[223] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 101.
[224] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 103.
[225] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 103.
[226] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 110.
[227] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 110.

oblivion, the copycat of nonexistence, has a new twin brother: the dead memory of the collector.[228] In fact, she continues, the memory in our electronic devices collects information about every fragment of our day could be easily compared to the absence of information, because though there are millions of photographs, it is hard to imagine anyone who would need to go through all of them: "the printing press keeps turning, but there are no readers left."[229] The author compares all that photographs with piles of garbage: "huge diggers shovel at them, scooping all the waste into their buckets: the underexposed pictures, the duplicates and triplicates, the tail of an out–of–frame dog, a picture of a café ceiling taken by mistake."[230] It seems like though this is a sort of immortality, it is even more terrifying than the oblivion for the author. Since we document almost everything about our lives and at the same time lose the necessity and interest to ever come back to these documentations.

Coming Back Home

In Chapter 2 there is a section talking about imagination as an important part of postmemory when analyzing the family story of Petrowskaja about the Ficus plant. In this section, I want to bring another example of how imagination may bring a sense of recognition of the memories that are not yours. While working on their novels, both writers research the location of the houses of their relatives in archival documents. Luckily, they find these houses and "recognize" them based on the stories they have heard and with the help of their imagination. However, they both learn later that the houses they found were the wrong ones. Episodes like this happened both to Petrowskaja and Stepanova on separate occasions and at different times and consequently was described in their novels.

In Stepanova's novel the house mentioned above was a home of her great grandfather in Saratov.[231] Stepanova's colleague had a directory of Saratov by 1908 with the names and addresses in it. Stepanova immediately found her great grandfather, Mikhail Davidovich Fridman, in the directory. He lived in Saratov 100 years ago on Moscow Street. Since the street was still there, the

[228] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 110.
[229] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 110.
[230] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 110.
[231] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 71.

narrator traveled to Saratov and visited the place: "the house was unrecognizable, but then I'd never seen it before to recognize it."[232] And yet, Stepanova's narrator "recognized" the house. Her imagination conjured non–existent memories making them seem real and the house appeared to be very dear to her:

> Everything was as I'd hoped, perhaps even more so than I'd hoped. I recognized my great–grandfather's yard unhesitatingly. There was no doubt in my mind, even though I'd never seen it or had it described to me.[233]

Stepanova's example presents a strong feeling of recognition described in the studies of postmemory. In her description of this episode, she refers to her feeling as remembering and not imagining:

> But I didn't need souvenirs, I remembered everything beneath the high windows with such a sense of heightened native precision that I seemed to know how it had all been, in this, our, place, how we had lived and why we had left. The yard put its arms around me in an embrace — that's what it was.[234]

About a week later, however, her colleague called her to tell that he mixed up the addresses. The street was the same, but the house numbers were different. Stepanova concluded this section by telling that this is just about everything she knows about memory.[235] In my opinion, this is an example of how biased people may work with new information and the past; they immediately appropriate information based on their expectations without checking it properly.

In Petrowskaja's novel the house was not really a home, but a school for the deaf and mute children, where the father of her grandmother Roza – Ozjel Krzewin workerd as the director. Petrowkaja's narrator travelled to Poland and visited the Zydowski Instytut Historyczny to find a photo of Ulica Ciepla 14, the address of the school. Luckily, she found a photo of the school, and visited the new Ulica Ciepla. And yet, when she called her mother to tell her about this success the house turned out to be a wrong one:

> And then I said, Mama, can you believe it, I found the house, Ulica Ciepla, no, only the photo, and my mother said, Yes, unbelievable, really wonderful, but I'm sorry, I completely forgot that the house number you were looking for was 16 and not 14.[236]

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[232] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 73.
[233] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 73.
[234] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 73.
[235] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 73.
[236] Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, 99.

The quote has a unique style—no regular punctuation and lines aren't emphasized in the dialogue. The author's style reflects the emotional tone of the characters and adds depth to the text. This unconventional style helps convey emotions, such as excitements, interest, disappointment, and even frustration. The absence of standard punctuation makes the conversation feel more immediate, contributing to the theme of overcoming trauma through writing. This little analysis shows that writing style of the author is a distinct tool that adds to the analysis in a significant way.

Stepanova reflects on this coincidence in one of her interviews. She states that hers and Petrowskaja's experiences are incredible and, at the same time, remarkably logical:

> It's as if all stories of return, all attempts to restore something, inevitably culminate in just this way. It's like an absurd joke that instantly puts you (with your hopes of reconnecting with the past) in your place: no one will come back.[237]

This is a wonderful example of how descendants of catastrophes tend to use their imagination to make the picture complete in their minds. They are biased based on the context they know and the knowledge that they expect to receive. In this way they are trying to make new information fit the puzzle they are trying to solve. And, ironically, the pieces that they seem to "remember" sometimes belong to a whole different story.

The metaphor of coming back home is woven throughout all three books. In Chudakov's novel, Anton's grandfather loses home and rebuilds it in a new place. Petrowskaja journeys "home" to her historical homeland in search of her roots and history. The same occurs with Stepanova. This last example of "recognizing" houses is very illustrative – postmemory doesn't necessarily represent truth one hundred percent, but it complements the truth, diluting the official narrative with a less precise, but more personal history. To sum up, the house number may have been entirely different, if speaking metaphorically, but what's more important is the sense of home and a sense of recognition that the authors find when they finish their novels about their roots. Together with the sense of

[237] Stepanova, "Vspomnit' vsekh."

accomplishment, they also find peace in knowing that everything is already written, everyone is "saved," the past is revisited and ordered. Postmemory is at the same time a legacy and a burden, which gives this three authors a chance to "come back home" if they choose to take the journey.

Conclusion

Coming back home is used in this thesis as a metaphor for reclaiming lost connections with one's roots and history. A feeling of returning "home" is achieved when traumatic historical experience is revisited and every participant is "saved", mentioned in history. Reacquiring the lost "home" is a metaphor for overcoming grief that was not overcome by one's ancestors, that was silenced for decades but that never disappeared. This grief is so strong that it was transmitted to subsequent generations in a way that they literally began to "remember" it.

The three chapters of this thesis engage in a dialogue with each other and connections between them illustrate how postmemory functions in contemporary literature. In the first chapter, devoted to the analysis of the novel by Chudakov, I show that the second generation after the catastrophe accepts memory through stories and narratives, as seen in the example of Anton and his grandfather. I also demonstrate how profoundly the inherited trauma affects the life of the main character, his identity, essentially forcing him to live someone else's life. The chapter on Petrowskaja is devoted to the memory of the Holocaust, which constitutes the base of Hirsch's theory of postmemory. Additionally, in this chapter, I show the differences in how postmemory is transmitted to the second and to the third generations: I assume that in most cases the second generation receives memories directly from surviving ancestors, and the third generation often has to work with objects that convey memories, such as archival document, photographs, and letters. In the second chapter, I also discuss how postmemory helps to comprehend history, even considering the fact that a significant role in postmemory is played by imagination. Since the official narrative does not take into account personal histories, only imposing state ideologies, it never provides a true historical view of the events. Postmemory, relying solely on personal histories, makes collective memory more accurate and fair to all its participants. Finally, in the third chapter on Stepanova's book, I raise questions about the ethics of working with postmemory. I discuss the responsibility that writers have towards ancestors and their memory. Lastly, I analyze the use of photography as the primary means of preserving the memory of the Holocaust, and, the drawbacks of relying on this method.

The theory of postmemory is evolving, with more and more scholars entering into the dialogue. Interestingly, the theory initially focused solely on the memory of the Holocaust. Now, according to Hirsch, it has expanded to encompass a broader range of historical experiences.[238] As a result, a broadened reach of postmemory emerges. The term "postmemory" is started to be used beyond the studies of generations and even family: "In the two decades since she first used the term, it has become clear that postmemory is not limited to its applications and implications for the Holocaust, the photograph, and the graphic narrative, where Hirsch began, but is a capacious and portable concept that has impacted thinking about trauma and memory across histories, cultures, forms, and fields."[239] This makes this concept even more valuable for researchers now, because it might be applied to many situations and contexts.

It is important to note that the novels about author's journey back to their roots and in search of a metaphorical "home," also become the novels about processing grief. For example, it feels like through the novel about his grandfather, Chudakov is bidding farewell to his grandfather, who had the greatest impact on his identity. A similar process of processing grief can be felt in the novels of Stepanova and Petrowskaja, suggesting that through writing, they may have undergone a process of not only revisiting their family's historical trauma but also some personal encounters with trauma and grief. I believe that in Stepanova's case, this grief could be related to the death of her mother, which is not directly mentioned but alluded to several times, in passing: "The child born to January 15, 1998, a frosty, radiant day in Moscow and a gray tricklingly damp day in Würzburg — the date of my mother's death — would now be an adult."[240] And also at the very beginning:

> It was already clear that I would one day (when I became that better version of myself) open a special notebook and sit down with my mother, and she would start at the very beginning, and then there would be some meaning to it all — and a system, a family tree, and every cousin and nephew would be in their rightful place, and at the end of it there would be a book. […]
> But I never did ask those questions or set things straight in that way…[241]

[238] Hirsch, "The Generation," 108.
[239] Caroline Kyungah Hong, "Postmemory and the Imaginative Work of Those Who Come After," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly 48*, no 1 (2020): 130.
[240] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 572.
[241] Stepanova, I*n Memory*, 59.

In this quote there is a feeling of a lost opportunity, as if the mother was a conductor between the author's world and the past. Indeed, when a person, whom one could ask everything, passes away there are only objects left that still preserve memory and have something to "say," as it happens in Stepanova's novel. So, personal grief just like the familial trauma may also be overcame while working on postmemory texts, as if incidentally.

When discussing memory, it is crucial to understand that the recent turn towards prioritizing personal memories over official memory to process the traumatic historical experiences comes with its risks. We, as a generation, become responsible for preserving the memory of ours and of past lives, and we also bear the responsibility for truth, which often becomes accessible only with time as ideologies shift. However, we should also know that working with postmemory irresponsibly could cause some harm rather than benefit, because authors are susceptible to biases and sometimes an overly vivid imagination, which is an integral part of postmemory. As I mentioned in the third chapter, as Stepanova puts it, we sometimes indeed "parasitize" on the past, revisiting it too often to free ourselves from personal burdens that we carry. It is essential to approach memory with a full awareness of our responsibility to future generations, to whom we will pass down history. Furthermore, it is important to understand that we can easily predict what literary works will be written in one or two generations, in light of the events happening in the world today. History is full of historical catastrophes, and the experience of overcoming these events takes more than one generation time. Considering the abundance of wars in the 20th century, and now in the 21st century, we must acknowledge that memory has not fulfilled one of its most expected functions: we are not learning from past mistakes. Our children will have to write about their family histories, taking the journey "back home," revisit the family archives of their deceased relatives and work through the traumas what we are living today.

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