

# A Canadian Family Talks About Oma's Life in Nazi Germany: Three-Generational Interviews and Communicative Memory

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*This article describes, explains, and applies the three-generational interview method and the concept of communicative memory to a case study about a Canadian family. Members of three generations were interviewed, both individually and in a group setting, about the Oma's (grandmother) experiences in Nazi Germany. Freund argues that group interviews like this one allow oral historians to gain important insights about the processes through which families construct and negotiate their memories. Communicative memory, Freund demonstrates, helps us understand how family memories emerge from communicative interaction. This approach also allows oral historians to better account for the ways that they may influence the creation of family memories.*

On 25 May 2006, Irma Hiebert sat down at the large, wooden dining room table in her daughter's turn-of-the-century house in Winnipeg's Wolseley neighbourhood to talk about her life in Nazi Germany. Around the table sat her daughter, Nancy Pauls, her granddaughter, Karla Schulz, and I, a stranger to the family. All four participants came to this oral history interview from a specific vantage point of experience: Hiebert, born in Germany in 1919, lived through the Third Reich and was the only "contemporary witness" in the group.<sup>1</sup> Pauls, born in 1959, and Schulz, born in 1985, grew up in Canada. I was born in Germany in 1969 and immigrated to Canada in 2002. Although separated by space, generation, and experience, oral history – the practice of "actively making memories" – brought us together.<sup>2</sup> In particular, I was interested in finding out how this Canadian family "made memories" out of a difficult German past.

Less than half an hour into our conversation, the following discussion about Nazis and German-Canadian identity developed:

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<sup>1</sup> On the concept of the "contemporary witness" in oral history see Alexander von Plato, "Contemporary Witnesses and the Historical Profession: Remembrance, Communicative Transmission, and Collective Memory in Qualitative History," trans. Edith Burley, *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 29 (2009), 1-27.

<sup>2</sup> Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes, "Introduction," in *Oral History and Public Memories*, eds. Hamilton and Shopes (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), vii-xvii, viii.

Pauls: I've heard the stories about the war, and your [Hiebert's] brother, and the Nazis. I've heard them all my life. Then I heard them in school. Then it was different. Then it felt like [...] these are parts of history. [...] And I didn't realize the rest of the world knew about it. [...] Then I was a little embarrassed, about being German.

Hiebert: Oh, I see.

Pauls: I don't-- I didn't feel embarrassed, even though I had a sense that you had a sense of shame about what your country did, and those kinds of things.

Hiebert: Yes, I do.

Pauls: I didn't feel that way but all of a sudden I felt like, I don't think I want everybody to know I'm German [laughs].

Schulz: Well and see, I had the opposite reaction, immediately of being like, "no, I'm German. German people aren't like that. My grandmother was there, she wasn't like that."<sup>3</sup>

This brief exchange hints at the complex ways that families make memories, negotiate history, and construct family stories. It is not characterized by the old handing preserved memories down to the young. Rather, these memories are constructed through communicative interaction. Family lore, memory, and school knowledge interact with one another; often-told stories and convictions provide a scaffold for asking uncomfortable questions, testing new interpretations, and premiering secret feelings. Together family members ever-so-subtly re-arrange their own roles and those of their relatives, much like a group of playwrights meeting over coffee and cake to work on a play. Such re-drafting is informed by individual experiences and collective memories. It is also shaped by the communicative situation, in this case, the oral history interview.<sup>4</sup> At stake, for all *four* participants in this casual yet formal "table talk,"<sup>5</sup> was the need to make sense of a troubling past; understand one's own relationship to this past; and find and secure one's place in society through sharing stories.

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<sup>3</sup> Irma Hiebert, Nancy Pauls, and Karla Schulz, interview by Alexander Freund, Winnipeg, 25 May 2006. All interview recordings and transcripts cited in this article are in the author's possession.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald J. Grele, *Envelopes of Sound. The Art of Oral History*, 2nd rev. and exp. ed. (Chicago, Illinois: Precedent, 1985); Eva McMahan, "A Conversation Analytic Approach to Oral History Interviewing," in *Handbook of Oral History*, eds. Thomas L. Charlton et al. (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Angela Keppler, *Tischgespräche. Über Formen kommunikativer Vergemeinschaftung am Beispiel der Konversation in Familien* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1994).

Beyond personal concerns, I, as a researcher, had professional questions (as much as those could be separated from the personal queries). This interview was part of a larger project; it was a “test” for an interview method; and it was an exploration into a theory of memory. The larger project seeks to document, analyze, and interpret how German-Canadians and German-Americans have dealt with the Nazi past since 1945.<sup>6</sup> The test was of a specific interview method, namely the three-generational family interview. This interview method is linked to the concept of “communicative memory,” which I sought to explore. This article focuses on the latter two concerns. Specifically, the use and usefulness of the three-generational interview method and the concept of communicative memory for studies of family memory.

In the following, I describe and explain the three-generational interview method and the concept of collective memory. After introducing the three interviewees, I outline three of the “foundational family stories” that family members told during our interviews. I then analyze some of the communicative structures shaping the dynamics of the interview and the construction of family memory. I conclude with an assessment of the usefulness of the interview method and the concept of communicative memory for oral history practice. Both the method and the concept, I argue throughout this article, are invaluable for the study of family memory. The stories generated in the group interview do not simply reveal additional information not generated in the one-on-one interviews. Rather they show the family’s communicative interaction in creating and

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<sup>6</sup> The project is based on interviews with several hundred German immigrants and their descendents in North America as well as Jewish North Americans. Publications from this project include Alexander Freund, “Dealing with the Past Abroad: German Immigrants’ *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and Their Relations With Jews in North America Since 1945,” *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 31 (Fall 2002), 51-63; “German Immigrants and the Nazi Past: How Memory Has Shaped Intercultural Relations,” *Inroads. A Journal of Public Opinion* No. 15 (Summer/Fall 2004), 106-117; “‘Where were you während des Kriegs?’ Kriegererzählungen deutscher Migranten in Nordamerika seit 1945,” in *Zeichen des Krieges in Literatur, Film und den Medien, Vol. 1: Nordamerika und Europa*, ed. Christer Petersen (Kiel: Verlag Ludwig, 2004), 31-67; “‘How Come They’re Nice to Me?’ Deutsche und Juden nach dem Holocaust in Nordamerika,” in *Migration und Erinnerung. Reflexionen über Wanderungserfahrungen in Europa und Nordamerika*, ed. Christiane Harzig (Transkulturelle Perspektiven, vol. 4) (Göttingen: v&r unipress 2006), 143-156; “Troubling Memories in Nation-building: World War II-Memories and Germans’ Interethnic Encounters in Canada After 1945,” *Histoire sociale/Social History* 39, 77 (May 2006), 129-155.

negotiating family memories – memories that constituted and were constituted by communicative memory.

### **Three-Generational Interview and Communicative Memory**

My use of the three-generational interview method is inspired in particular by the work of the German social psychologist, Harald Welzer, and his colleagues as well as the earlier work done by German sociologist Gabriele Rosenthal and the late Dan Bar-On, a psychologist from Israel. Over the last quarter century, they have interviewed three generations of Germans in order to understand how they (re-) constructed the Nazi past through storytelling about personal or relatives' experiences in the Third Reich. Next to the traditional one-on-one interviews with individuals, they interviewed families as groups (usually after the individual interviews).<sup>7</sup> Oral history interviews with families are attempts to recreate casual family talks ("table talks") and families' constructions – often *en passant* – of family memories and oral traditions.<sup>8</sup> We must be aware, however, that such group interviews cannot create such a setting, because these group discussions would not happen were it not for the interviewer.

This interview style nevertheless can help us understand how families construct memories. They show us how comfortable or uncomfortable families are when talking about the past. They document families' repertoires of anecdotes and well-rehearsed stories. They shed light on silences, myths, and taboos and on the willingness of families to engage with new and perhaps troubling questions. If families are perceptive and reflective, as the case in this article demonstrates, they may be able to develop a meta-narrative about remembering and storytelling,

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<sup>7</sup> Bar-On and Rosenthal juxtaposed interviews with Germans to interviews with Jewish Holocaust survivors and their children and grandchildren. Gabriele Rosenthal, ed., *The Holocaust in Three Generations: Families of Victims and Perpetrators of the Nazi Regime* (New York: Continuum, 1998); Dan Bar-On, *Legacy of Silence: Encounters With Children of the Third Reich* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Dan Bar-on, *Fear and Hope: Three Generations of the Holocaust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Harald Welzer et al., *Opa war kein Nazi: Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis* (Frankfurt / M. Fischer, 2002); Karoline Tschuggnall and Harald Welzer, "Rewriting Memories: Family Recollections of the National Socialist Past in Germany," *Culture & Psychology* 8, 1 (March 2002), 130-146; Harald Welzer, "Collateral Damage of History Education: National Socialism and the Holocaust in German Family Memory," *Social Research* 75, 1 (Spring 2008), 287-314.

<sup>8</sup> Welzer et al., *Opa war kein Nazi*, 10.

describing in some detail how they learned family anecdotes and what these anecdotes meant to them. The objective of such an approach, then, is to understand how members of different generations are involved in memory construction – an interactive construction beyond the unidirectional “handing down” and “receiving” between the old and the young.

Family or group interviews are usually preceded by extensive life story interviews with members of different generations in one family.<sup>9</sup> In family or group interviews, members of at least two generations are then brought together to talk about the experiences of the oldest generation.<sup>10</sup> Interviewers structure the interview in different ways. Welzer et al. used thirteen different film sequences from the Nazi period to stimulate family discussion about the past.<sup>11</sup> Rosenthal’s approach was informed by family therapy and intended to “open family dialogue.”<sup>12</sup> In my interview with the Hiebert family (as I will call them for short, despite their three different last names), we began by looking at family photographs from the prewar period.

The interviews are partially structured by the questions that interviewers ask. While Rosenthal asked mostly for emotional feedback (“What is it like to participate in this family discussion?” “Can you imagine what your mother may be feeling right now?”), Welzer et al. asked interviewees to elaborate, give examples, and clarify their narratives. Similar to Welzer et al., my questions probed for further details about the family stories (“Do you know how many people your father employed in the factory?” “What do you know about your great grandfather?”) as well as reflections (“Your grandmother lived through some very difficult years in Germany, in the Nazi period. So how did that affect your visits to Germany or how you felt about the places?”).

As I will discuss in the conclusion, some oral historians are skeptical of the family interview method. Most significantly, it must be noted that the vast majority of oral historians have not engaged with this method. Almost all English-language literature about family and generational memory, for example, is based

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<sup>9</sup> On the life story interview method common in German practice, see von Plato, “Contemporary Witnesses.”

<sup>10</sup> This procedure emerges from research conducted in Germany on the generation that “witnessed” the Nazi period, along with their children and grandchildren. This method could also be used to explore how older generations participate in shaping the family memories of younger generations.

<sup>11</sup> Welzer et al., *Opa war kein Nazi*, 213.

<sup>12</sup> Rosenthal, *Der Holocaust*, 14.

on one-on-one interviews, albeit sometimes with members of several generations.<sup>13</sup>

The three-generational interview method is closely linked to the concept of “communicative memory” developed by Jan Assmann and Harald Welzer. We have long left behind the idea of individual memory as a computer-like system of storage and retrieval and instead view memory as a process. Cognitive psychology and neurosciences have helped us better understand how memory works through interactive communication.<sup>14</sup> Yet, when we speak of “collective memory” we often fall back to rather vague descriptions that work mostly in a

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<sup>13</sup> Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Issei, Nisei, Warbride. Three Generations of Japanese American Women in Domestic Service* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Rina Benmayor, et al., “Stories To Live By: Continuity and Change in Three Generations of Puerto Rican Women,” in *The Myths We Live By*, eds. Paul Thompson and Raphael Samuelson (London: Routledge, 1990); Corrine Azen Krause, *Grandmothers, Mothers, and Daughters: Oral Histories of Three Generations of Ethnic American Women* (Boston: Twayne, 1991); Daniel Bertaux and Paul Thompson, eds., *The International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories, Vol. 2: Between Generations. Family Models, Myths, and Memories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Tamara Haraven, “The Search for Generational Memory,” in *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., eds. David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1996), 241-56; Edite Noivo, *Inside Ethnic Families: Three Generations of Portuguese-Canadians* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997); Pamela Sugiman, “Passing Time, Moving Memories: Interpreting Wartime Narratives of Japanese Canadian Women,” *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 36, 73 (2004), 51-79; Sally Alexander, “Do Grandmas Have Husbands?” Generational Memory and Twentieth-Century Women’s Lives,” *Oral History Review* 36, 2 (Summer/Fall 2009), 159-176; Mary Chamberlain, “Diasporic Memories: Community, Individuality, and Creativity – A Life Stories Perspective,” *Oral History Review* 36, 2 (Summer/Fall 2009), 177-187; Daniela Koleva, “Daughters’ Stories: Family Memory and Generational Amnesia,” *Oral History Review* 36, 2 (Summer/Fall 2009), 188-206.

<sup>14</sup> Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1990); Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Donald E. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988); Polkinghorne, “Narrative and Self-Concept,” *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 1, 2&3 (1991), 135-153; Harald Welzer, *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis. Eine Theorie der Erinnerung*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Munich: Beck, 2008).

metaphorical sense.<sup>15</sup> Jan Assmann's intervention takes us a critical step forward in better understanding how collective memory works.

Assmann differentiates collective memory by distinguishing "cultural memory" and "communicative memory."<sup>16</sup> Cultural memory is defined as a society's long-term memory. Communicative memory is the short-term memory that is maintained by the living three to four generations, stretching over a span of some eighty years and continually moving forward in time. Communicative memory "includes those varieties of collective memory that are based exclusively on everyday communications. These varieties, which M[aurice] Halbwachs gathered and analyzed under the concept of collective memory, constitute the field of oral history."<sup>17</sup> Communicative memory is based on the fleeting, unstable, disorganized, unspecialized communication between people who may alternate between the roles of storyteller and listener. Communication among students on the school yard, within the family around the kitchen table, among colleagues at the water cooler, or among strangers in the supermarket are examples of such everyday communication. "Through this manner of communication, each individual composes a memory which, as Halbwachs has shown, is (a) socially mediated and (b) relates to a group."<sup>18</sup> People do not communicate with just anyone, but are connected through group membership, be it the family, a neighbourhood group, a political party, or a nation: "Every individual belongs to numerous such groups and therefore entertains numerous collective self-images and memories."<sup>19</sup>

Harald Welzer has further developed the concept of communicative memory by applying it to the individual and the family. He is particularly interested in how communicative memory is not simply transferred or transmitted from one generation to the next,<sup>20</sup> but how it is continually negotiated and

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<sup>15</sup> Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 6.

<sup>16</sup> Jan Assmann, "Kollektives Gedächtnis und kulturelle Identität," in *Kultur und Gedächtnis*, eds. Jan Assmann and Tonio Hölscher (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1988), 9-19; also see the very literal and thus at times difficult to understand English translation by John Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique* 65 (Spring/Summer 1995), 125-133.

<sup>17</sup> Assmann, "Collective Memory," 126.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> As described, for example, in Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History. A Practical Guide*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 230-1.

constructed, often through stories about the past that engender historical interpretations *en passant*.<sup>21</sup>

In their book *Opa war kein Nazi* [Opa was not a Nazi], Welzer and his colleagues described communicative structures that help explain how families construct memory. Two of those, “interpretive patterns” and “empty speaking” (*leeres Sprechen*) are central to the analysis in this article.<sup>22</sup> I have added the notion of “foundational family stories” and “loss of detail” as two other narrative structures. I explain these concepts later on.

The purpose, then, of my group interview with the Hiebert family was to see communicative memory in action. As in all interviewing, however, I could not be an outside observer. As I will note throughout my analysis, I was a participant in this communicative activity, albeit not as a member of the family group.

## Interviews and Participants

Three members of the Hiebert family are at the centre of this study: Irma Hiebert; her daughter, Nancy Pauls; and her granddaughter, Karla Schulz.

Irma Hiebert (nee Busch) was born in Hamburg in 1919 into a middle-class family. Her mother, Helene (nee Broders, b. 1892), was a housewife, her father, Wilhelm (b. 1895), owned a tool-making factory and a store that sold second-hand hardware. After tenth grade, in 1936, Hiebert worked for seventeen years in her father’s office. The family lived in a large, six-room rental apartment and employed domestic servants. Hiebert explained that she was too old to be in the Hitler Youth, unlike her sister, Leni (b. 1920), and her brother, Willy (b. 1925). Willy died in 1943. Later that year, in July 1943, Allied bombs destroyed the store. The family evacuated its apartment and moved into the grandmother’s mansion on Hamburg’s outskirts. After the war, the father re-built the store and helped the Allies dismantle machinery. Hiebert’s mother died in 1947, and when her father remarried shortly thereafter, Irma’s relationship with him soured. She decided to leave Hamburg. At the age of 34, in 1953, she immigrated to Canada, where she worked as a domestic servant for a Jewish family in Winnipeg until she married a Mennonite man from Winkler, Manitoba, in 1954. He had served in the Canadian air force in England during the war and entered the Netherlands and Germany as part of the occupation force. From 1958 to 1962, they lived at a military base in Germany. Hiebert’s husband died in 2000. They have two daughters, a son, and five grandchildren.

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<sup>21</sup> Harald Welzer, *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis. Eine Theorie der Erinnerung*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Munich: Beck, 2008 [2002]).

<sup>22</sup> Welzer et al., *Opa war kein Nazi*.



Hiebert was among a quarter of a million German immigrants to come to postwar Canada. She was one of 25,000 single German women who intended to work as a maid in a Canadian household. Her experience of working for a Jewish family right after the war was not uncommon for postwar German immigrants. Neither was her experience of marrying shortly after her arrival in Canada.<sup>23</sup>

Nancy Pauls was born in Germany in 1959. After the family's return to Winnipeg, she completed school and became interested in religion. At age eighteen, she married a Mennonite man, and they had a son and a daughter. They separated in 1999. Since high school, Pauls has had various jobs in a day-care, a small business, and a retail setting. In 1980, she was among the founding members of an independent church. She has made her house on Home Street into a home not only for her mother and her children, but also for her extended family and friends. While there have been several studies of postwar German immigrants, we know virtually nothing about their children or grandchildren, and they themselves have produced few textual sources about their experiences of growing up German in Canada.

Karla Schulz was born in Winnipeg in 1985. Her mother is Irma Hiebert's daughter, Jackie; her father, Theodore, is a Mennonite who worked for a credit union. From age six to ten, she lived in New Brunswick, where Hiebert visited her three times. At age fourteen, she moved to Roblin, a small town in Southern Manitoba, where "there was a lot of racism and just general hatred for people who thought they were different. I was already old enough that that really bothered me in a way I wanted to do something about." Her mother told her stories of being called "Kraut" at school, but she herself never experienced anything negative related to her German background. By the time she was eleven, she knew that she was gay and that she could not tell her parents. She confided in her older sister and brother. Eventually, she broke with her parents and after graduating from high school in 2003, she moved in with Hiebert and Pauls's family. Shortly before, Hiebert had taken Schulz on a trip to Germany with Pauls and a number of other

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<sup>23</sup> Alexander Freund, "Identity in Immigration: Self-Conceptualization and Myth in the Narratives of German Immigrant Women in Vancouver, B.C., 1950–1960" (Master's thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1994); Freund, *Aufbrüche nach dem Zusammenbruch. Die deutsche Nordamerika-Auswanderung nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2004); Hans Werner, *Imagined Homes: Soviet German Immigrants in Two Cities* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2007). A good overview of the history of Germans in Canada, with further references, is provided by Gerhard Bassler, "Germans," in *The Encyclopedia of Canada's Peoples* (Toronto: Published for the Multicultural History Society of Ontario by the University of Toronto Press, 1999), online at <http://www.multiculturalcanada.ca/Encyclopedia/A-Z/g1>.

family members. Hiebert took all of her children and grandchildren to Germany at some point in their lives. Schulz was twenty years old at the time of the interview and a student at the University of Winnipeg. The three women are among 2.7 million Canadians (and 109,000 Winnipeggers) who in 2001 identified, at least in part, as German.<sup>24</sup>

Had I been in Canada in 2001, I too would have identified as German. I grew up in Hamburg, spent one of my teenage years in the United States, began university studies in Hamburg and lived in Vancouver, British Columbia, for three years while I completed my M.A. in History. This is where I first became interested in German immigrants and interviewed some of them. From 1995 to 2002, I lived in Germany and later again in the United States; from there I moved to Winnipeg in 2002. Having grown up in a small family and, after age nine, with no relative alive who had lived during the Third Reich as an adult, I had heard only few stories about that time period. I was curious to find out how a three-generational family talked about the Nazi past.

All three women were interviewed individually in 2005 by my research assistant, Angela Thiessen, a German-speaking Mennonite from Winnipeg and then undergraduate student at the University of Winnipeg. I chose to interview all three women as a group in 2006 because they encompassed three generations, including a member of the first generation who had lived through the Third Reich as an adult. Furthermore, they seemed to be willing to speak about the Nazi past. I spent three hours at their home, two of which were recorded. There was immediate rapport, in part because Thiessen had developed a trusting relationship and in part because I am from Irma Hiebert's hometown of Hamburg. This rapport did not diminish even when I asked difficult questions about the family's involvement in the Nazi state.

During the group interview, I let the family reminisce together. If needed, I intervened by directly asking family members for a response to the topic that we were discussing at the moment. As I was conducting the interview, my impression was that Pauls dominated the interview and thus I focused on encouraging Schulz to participate. My initial sense after the interview was that Hiebert had participated more at the beginning of the interview and less so later on, as she seemed to become tired. A rough quantitative analysis shows that the three family

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<sup>24</sup> Statistics Canada, Census 2001, Population by selected ethnic origins, by province and territory (single and multiple responses), <http://www40.statcan.ca/101/cst01/demo26a.htm>, last accessed on 18 March 2010; Statistics Canada, Census 2001, Population by selected ethnic origins, by census metropolitan areas (Winnipeg), <http://www40.statcan.ca/101/cst01/demo27s.htm>, last accessed on 18 March 2010.

members participated equally and that this was a dynamic interview in which all four participants engaged and no one dominated.<sup>25</sup>

### **Foundational Family Stories**

“From countless incidents, families choose a few stories to pass on, the funniest or perhaps the most telling,” S. J. Zeitlin et al. state in *A Celebration of American Family Folklore*.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, in the course of the interviews, several stories about Hiebert’s life in the Third Reich and the postwar period emerged as central in the family’s communicative memory. I call these “foundational family stories,” because they are the foundation on which other stories are built and they act as a foundation for the family unit. The three foundational family stories about the Third Reich were about Hiebert’s brother, Willy; the fate of Hiebert’s homosexual co-worker, Mr. Erjardt; and the bombing of Hamburg. The foundational family stories about the postwar period and Hiebert’s migration centred on Hiebert’s decision to emigrate; getting a job as a maid in a Jewish Canadian home with the help of Jewish German friends; and her marriage to a Mennonite man of peasant background. Thus, all foundational family stories emerged from Hiebert’s experiences rather than those of Pauls or Schulz. Yet, all three participated in selecting and highlighting certain stories. And while all family members believed that they were telling the same story, there were a number of significant differences between those stories. In the following, I focus on the Third Reich stories.

As Ruth Finnegan points out, “[the] explicit crystallization of a family’s shared memories also results from a family history or individual autobiography being written or recorded.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, family memories are not simply formed and frozen at one moment in time and then “performed” over and over again. Rather, their crystallization is always shaped by the communicative situation. This can be the writing of a family history or autobiography, as Finnegan notes, but also a family interview. It is therefore important to remember that these foundational

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<sup>25</sup> Of the 635 statements, Hiebert contributed 226 (36%), Pauls 197 (31%), Schulz 98 (15%) and I 114 (18%). My statements were usually short, thus contributing only 7% of the overall word count in the transcript, while Schulz’s were quite long (25%) and Pauls’s (32%) and Hiebert’s (37%) average.

<sup>26</sup> S. J. Zeitlin, A. J. Kotkin, H.C. Baker, eds., *A Celebration of American Family Folklore* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 2.

<sup>27</sup> Ruth Finnegan, “Family Myths, Memories and Interviewing,” in *Studying Family and Community History: 19th and 20th Centuries. Volume 1: From Family Tree to Family History*, eds. Ruth Finnegan and Michael Drake (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 117-122.

family stories were created in the context of interviews. We heard family stories that were selected from the family's repertoire of anecdotes and rearranged by the narrators. These family stories were, in other words, "crystallizing" as we recorded them.

During the interviews, Pauls and Schulz also described how they had learned the stories. Hence, a meta-narrative about intergenerational storytelling was told.<sup>28</sup>

### **Oma's Brother's Death<sup>29</sup>**

Irma Hiebert began her life story with her brother's death: "I came over to Canada in 1953, because [...] we had a death in our family, my brother died very suddenly. My mother died twelve [sic] years later and then my father married again after ten months. I was working for my father. We just did not get along after that."<sup>30</sup> Hiebert repeated this sequence of events several times throughout the interviews. The brother's death was tightly interwoven with the bombing of Hamburg, the mother's death, the father's remarriage, and her own emigration. The decade 1943-1954 is at the centre of her life story and constituted the major turning point of her life.<sup>31</sup>

In the course of the interview, she revealed further details about the nature and circumstances of Willy's death. The second time she mentioned it, she explained that he had died of a brain hemorrhage. Later, she elaborated:

It was a very severe hemorrhage. But he was arrested by the Nazis. My children tell me sometimes, there was a movie, it is called *Swing Kids*.<sup>32</sup> He had friends, he was still in school, he was sixteen I guess and they liked American music and they had maybe sort of a group, I do not know. I do not remember much of that but they arrested him, maybe some of the other friends too, I guess. Then for three weekends he had to go to jail on the weekend. That was in 1942. And he died in 1943.

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<sup>28</sup> I have edited the quotes from the transcripts for clarity, omitting broken-off words and sentences, reformulations, hesitations, and repetitions unless they add additional meaning for the purpose of this analysis.

<sup>29</sup> For an interview excerpt, see the attached audio clip 1.

<sup>30</sup> Irma Hiebert, interview by Angela Thiessen, Winnipeg, 14 July 2005.

<sup>31</sup> Günter Burkart, "Biographische Übergänge und rationale Entscheidungen," *BIOS. Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung und Oral History* 8, 1 (1995), 59-88.

<sup>32</sup> This is probably a reference to the movie *Swingkids*, dir. Thomas Carter, USA 1993. How films affect memory is discussed by Welzer et al., *Opa war kein Nazi*, ch. 5.

Swing Kids were apolitical bourgeois teenagers, mostly in Hamburg, but also in other German cities, during the Nazi period. They enjoyed listening to Jazz, wearing long hair, dressing loudly, and dancing wildly. They were harassed by the Gestapo and Hitler Youth for being so different from the Nazi ideal of youth.<sup>33</sup> Irma Hiebert continued:

I do not know what they [Nazis] did to him in those three weekends that he was there but maybe they told him: "Do not tell anybody what we did or what happened to you." Maybe that happened. It must be a year after when he had this brain hemorrhage. My oldest daughter Jackie was saying, we talked about it not too long ago, if it had anything to do with it, that they hit him over the head. I do not know why he had the hemorrhage. [...] I do not know if it had anything to do with it but sometimes you just wonder.

In the family interview, Hiebert added: "That was probably a medical reason, you know, I talked to my doctor at that time – maybe his veins were too thin or maybe that was the reason, you know."

Much of Hiebert's story is corroborated by documents in the Hamburg State Archives. In mid-October 1942, Hiebert's brother, Wilhelm Busch, served two weekends in jail for illegally purchasing a revolver. He was sentenced along with twelve other teenagers who had participated in "disseminating obscene literature," theft, illegal trade and sale of coffee, stationary, and firearms. While investigating these offences, the Gestapo also collected information about Swing youth of the groups "Bismarckclub" and "Kaffee-Hag." Busch died from a brain haemorrhage on 30 May 1943 in the Altona Children's Hospital.<sup>34</sup>

How did the next two generations speak about Hiebert's memory? In her individual interview, Pauls did not mention the story.<sup>35</sup> Schulz mentioned it a few times without giving much detail beyond the points that he had been sick, in prison, and in the Hitler Youth, and that he had died.<sup>36</sup> It is only through the family interview that we get a better sense of how they remembered this story. In

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<sup>33</sup> Michael H. Kater, *Different Drummers: Jazz in the Culture of Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), esp. 153-62; "German Swing Youth," <http://www.return2style.de/amiswhei.htm>, last accessed on 13 March 2010.

<sup>34</sup> State Archives of Hamburg, 213-11 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht – Strafsachen, 1663/45; Ulf Bollmann, State Archives of Hamburg, email to author, 17 February 2009.

<sup>35</sup> Nancy Pauls, interview by Angela Thiessen, Winnipeg, 18 August 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Karla Schulz, interview by Angela Thiessen, Winnipeg, 19 August 2005.

the group interview, Pauls and Schulz explained that they had “always known” the story. Schulz said: “You’re a kid and your parents, your mom is talking to your grandmother and you put it together. No one ever sat me down and told me about this, but just over the years I knew he was in jail and I knew that he had been taken in that manner and then that he had died.” Pauls added: “I remember growing up and you hear little pieces and you hear a little bit more of the picture.” Referring to a photograph of Willy which Hiebert kept in her bedroom, the family discussion quoted in the introduction developed.

After Hiebert mentioned that her brother and sister “both had to join that Hitler Youth,” Schulz commented that she always felt “like my family were also victims in this. And the German people were also victims of what happened.” Schulz explained that she did not want to excuse people who ignored what was happening, but that for Hiebert it must have seemed hopeless to do anything against the Nazis. She went on to state that her Oma felt guilty about this: “I didn’t feel like she had carelessly stood by and knew what was happening but just couldn’t be bothered. It wasn’t that way at all. It was just this futile feeling of wanting to change it and wanting it to not be happening.” Pauls then brought up the idea of “balance”: “I feel like the stories you’ve told, Mama, are about trying to balance not saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. You’ve talked about how teachers in school would say to kids, ‘if you hear your parents saying something bad about the Nazis or against Hitler, you have to report your parents.’ That was always kind of a freaky thing.”

Hiebert and Pauls also recounted that the family had received Willy’s military draft papers half a year after his death. Hiebert commented: “My sister and I, we always thought, why did he have to die? And at that point we said, ‘Now we know why he died. He didn’t have to fight for the Nazis.’ I don’t know, it was something we thought. Maybe God thought he’s not going to do that. I don’t know [laughs]. You find something, you think about things like that.” “Well, you do Mama,” Pauls agreed “because I mean, I don’t know your parents well enough to say how they behaved with you children or what they taught you. But I know your sister and I know you. And I cannot conceive that your brother, coming from the same family, would have wanted to fight for the Nazis.”

When I asked her why she was certain about this, Pauls elaborated: “The two most amazing women on the planet, as far I am concerned, would be my mother and my Tante [aunt] Leni. And I mean, she was the same, in that she had incredibly strong, passionate, very articulate feelings about the rights of others and how you respect people no matter where they are from and who they are. This is what God wants us to be doing.” Together with Hiebert, Pauls then described one of her aunt’s visits to Winnipeg. One day, they came across Aborigines protesting in downtown. Her sister, Hiebert recalls, “wanted to join” the protest. “And then I went into an argument with her in German.” Pauls then vividly

described the scene of the two women arguing in German in front of the protest about the situation of Aboriginals in Canada.

At the end of the interview, Schulz summarized Willy's story: "He died, he was not killed by the Nazis but that idea – and that was a familiar story that they felt, her and her sister, almost that there was a reason that he died and this was the reason. And that they were like almost grateful for the death of their brother because it saved him from that."

The three women agreed on the basic facts of Willy's death but ascribed it different meanings and used it in different ways. Despite the importance of her brother's death to her own life, Hiebert's factual recounting is sparse. Yet, if her memory is failing and if she gave more details in earlier years, they are not provided by Pauls and Schulz, who tell the story in their own ways. Hiebert offered a detached description of Willy's death, which could not be clearly ascribed to a medical problem, Nazi brutality, or God's intervention. Throughout the interviews, Hiebert emphasized that "I hate the Nazis until I die," but if her brother's death was any motivation for this hate, it is invisible in her story. Pauls and Schulz used this episode to explain how they had learned family stories, how they were confronted with different interpretations at school, and to offer their own interpretations, depicting their family members as victims of war and Nazi terror and as heroes who fight for tolerance and freedom.

### **The "Gay Man" in Oma's Office<sup>37</sup>**

The story of Herr Erjardt, the "gay man" in Oma's office, played an important role in Schulz's life story. Hiebert did not mention the story in her individual interview. Pauls referenced the story to explain why she believed her grandfather had not supported the Nazis or believed in Nazi ideology: "The fact that there was a man who was a homosexual who worked in my grandfather's factory [sic], and they took him away, and just the horror of that, and just the – there is nothing that you can do. Obviously, my grandfather had no problem with him working there, and him as a person." She described the situation as a "struggle" for her grandfather. While for Pauls, this story was about her grandfather, for Schulz, it was about Oma's values and her own struggles. Schulz was rejected by her parents because of her homosexuality. Her Oma was "upset" about "how my mom could not handle it and how my mom was horrible about it. Oma, she gets really passionate about this because of the Nazis. There was a gay man in their office and he got taken and that sort of thing – horrible, horrible that it happened to her and I would probably prefer if she was a little bit intolerant and had not had to have those experiences."

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<sup>37</sup> For an interview excerpt, see the attached audio clip 2.

In the group interview, Schulz introduced this story. Describing their visit to Hamburg in 2003, the story “came up,” Schulz said, as they were looking for the location of the family store. Later in the interview, Pauls referred to the story to explain how her grandfather had balanced the need to survive and his rejection of the Nazis. Hiebert added further details: “The secret police phoned and wanted to talk to my father and then they did and then they came over. And this young man, he was with us a long time. They believed he was gay. Paragraph 75 [sic], and they remember. Anyway, they came and picked him up and I don’t know what happened later to him.”

The Nazi state prosecuted male homosexuals under the constitution’s paragraph 175, which had been on the books before the Nazi seizure of power, but was made more severe in 1935. Even before then, gay men had been arrested, imprisoned, put in concentration camps, and forcibly castrated. Mr. Erjardt may have been one of the 50,000 men sentenced for “unnatural sex” and identified in concentration camps with a pink triangle. There is, however, no record of him in the Hamburg State Archives.<sup>38</sup>

Schulz and Pauls explained how this experience made Hiebert, and consequently her children and grandchildren, tolerant:

Schulz: Going through that experience made Oma such a person who cared about minorities and who cared about rights for everyone. [...] That was always this really important lesson that she would teach us. [...] That always made me really proud. How much Oma cared about those things and how angry she would still feel and how she always stood up and was not quiet, like, ever in my growing up about issues like that. And didn’t let the fact that she was an old grandmother stop her from wanting to go in the gay pride parade. [...] If she has something she believes in, not being able to stand up for what she believed in, in that time, I think really caused her to teach all of us that we have to treasure our freedom in Canada. [...]

Pauls: It has translated to all of your grandchildren, that sense of tolerance and acceptance of other people, and in a way that you are willing to stand up and fight for.

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<sup>38</sup> After the war, neither the Allies nor the two German governments recognized homosexuals as victims of the Nazis. In fact, Paragraph 175 in its 1935 version continued to be in effect in West Germany until 1969 and in its pre-1935 “milder” form in East Germany until 1968. Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann, *The Racial State. Germany 1933-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 183, 197. See the monument for homosexual victims of Nazi persecution at <http://www.lsvd.de/gedenk-ort/eng-chronicle.htm>.



When asked how they would explain why the Nazis persecuted gays, Schulz and Pauls began a dialogue about different interpretations. Schulz had taken a university course on the politics of racism and drew on this knowledge to argue that “it wasn’t just the Jewish people, it was mentally handicapped people and gypsies and gay people [...], anyone who wasn’t a part of this new race that Hitler was trying to create” was persecuted. Pauls interjected to say that “there is an insanity level to it [...]; bottom line for me it has to do with him [Hitler] being utterly insane. But also there is this sort of mob mentality or where you – everybody kind of gets on this bandwagon that says, we are better than they are and we can make ourselves better somehow, the more we step on them. Which makes me ashamed not so much to be German as to be human.” Schulz explained that she had studied “the roots of fascism” at university, “all the theories, of like, how can you explain this apparently very insane thing. And I don’t think you can just say it was because German people hated Jewish people, it had always been so. Or it was just a mob mentality. I think there is pretty calculated planning and pretty rationalized evil there. I believe there are traces in modernity and all that kind of thing of-- just reading about the factory and how it got turned into, you know, we are going to create profit or we are going to create death.” Pauls then drew the connection to the family and ethnic group experience: “It is something we will all at different points look at differently and perhaps more specifically because it’s a part of our history through Oma. In a way that, if we were Ukrainian or if we were Serbian or something, we would look at the historical things differently. We look at the German things differently.” Schulz agreed: “It has always been really important for me to understand that situation as well as possible because of my own family’s involvement in that.”

Similar to the story about Willy’s death, the three women agreed on the basic facts of Mr. Erjahr’s story, which were scarce and provided solely by Irma Hiebert. Only Pauls and Schulz told the story in different ways and used it for different purposes. For Pauls, it explained her grandfather’s “balancing act” during the Nazi period, whereas Schulz drew on the story to talk about both, homosexuality – an issue of great personal importance to her – and her grandmother’s values – values that she but (and this is only implied) not her parents shared.

### **The Bombing of Hamburg<sup>39</sup>**

The bombing of Hamburg, the destruction of “father’s store,” and the family’s evacuation was a major part of Hiebert’s life story. She first mentioned this sequence of events when asked about her father:

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<sup>39</sup> For an interview excerpt, see the attached audio clip 3.

He had a big hardware store in Hamburg with all kinds of tools. That was destroyed during the war at one time, in 1943, when they really came over to destroy German cities and they really started with Hamburg, I think. [...] Hamburg was burning from one side to the other. There were a lot of people who lost everything. And people died in their basements. And then my father decided – we had a place outside of Hamburg where my grandmother lived. He decided to move out there.

In their one-on-one interviews, Nancy Pauls mentioned the bombing of Hamburg only briefly. Karla Schulz mentioned the bombing when explaining what stories Oma told and how she felt about them: “especially when we were walking around in Hamburg, and Oma – she still gets so upset about everything and she also gets so upset about thinking how her city was destroyed and how parts of her home got bombed, and she knew it had to happen and she knew it need to be stopped what was happening.” She also said that the night the store was hit, Oma “had been in the building but then had left, near misses like that.” She preferred to ask her aunt about the bombing and other stories, Schulz said, because she did not want to upset her grandmother.

In the family interview, Hiebert added further details: the bombing started on a weekend while the family was at her grandmother’s mansion, about thirty kilometres outside of the city. After Schulz once again explained her Oma’s “conflict” about the destruction on the one hand and its necessity to stop the Nazis on the other, Pauls stated that her mother’s generation as well as her own “carry a sense of responsibility and shame for what Germany did during the war.” She saw this as evidence that Germany had changed. Canadians, she said, could not imagine what it was like to live through the war. Pauls mentioned again that she wished she had known her grandfather so that she could “hear from him what it was like for him during the war.” Hiebert responded by describing the store and the factory. Pauls commented that she was “always very amazed” that the factory survived through the war and the occupation. When I asked whether the factory supplied the war industry, the following sequence developed:

Hiebert: Yes, I don’t-- yes, I think maybe he did. Or repaired things like that. This is some kind of a thing to stay alive, sort of.

Pauls: Yes.

Hiebert: Because the Nazis came there too, when the war was started.

What we can do for them, or if not, they will close it. I mean this all these things, you know.

Pauls: Well, that's the kind of thing that would have been expected, I mean. And then they had a fancy car, and they took their fancy car and, you know, things like that.<sup>40</sup>

After Hiebert explained the circumstances about how her parents were forced to sell the car to Nazi "big shots," Pauls and Schulz said that they knew the story. Questioned more about the factory, Hiebert said that some of the workers were drafted into the army and that her father always received replacements through the unemployment office. By the end of the war, one quarter of all workers in Nazi Germany were slaves and forced labourers. Therefore, I asked whether her father also got workers from the Neuengamme concentration camp, which was the main supplier of forced labour in Hamburg:

Freund: So there would have been no workers from like the camp Neuengamme, for example.

Hiebert: No. I don't think so.

Freund: Did you visit Neuengamme in Hamburg, when you were there?

Hiebert: I'll tell you what, I don't even know that there was Neuengamme.

I mean, sure, I know the name, but that was – there were eighty concentration camps. Maybe some people think she's lying, sure she should have known, but I really didn't. A lot of other places, I know a little bit from this friend of my sister, Inge, who was married to Kurt then after. And I know a little bit from her, like about Theresienstadt, you know, from her father. Buchenwald and all these names, Auschwitz, they were absolutely not – I had no idea about them and I never heard about the names until the war was over. You know. Maybe people think, they don't believe that, but it's true, you know.

Freund: Yes.

Schulz: Well there is always this idea that people didn't know because they didn't want to know and because they didn't care. But like I just don't believe that about my grandmother. Like I don't believe that she, like, heard enough to know if she'd been willing to think about it. You know. Like I am sure there were people like that.

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<sup>40</sup> According to a Military Government of Germany questionnaire, filled out by Wilhelm Busch, Busch was not a member of the NSDAP. The only Nazi organization he joined, in 1942, was the Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt (NSV, National Socialist People's Welfare). State Archives of Hamburg, 211-11 Staatskommissar für die Entnazifizierung und Kategorisierung, I (E) 2333.

The bombing was brought up again when I asked them to tell stories about the postwar period and when Hiebert talked about her husband's service in the Canadian air force during the war. He had served in a supply unit in England and so I asked about his involvement in the bombing of Hamburg.

Freund: The crews that he supplied from England, would they have been part of those that bombed Hamburg?

Hiebert: I don't know.

Freund: That's not something that you talked about?

Hiebert: I would not know that.

Pauls: But when you think about it, they could have. It's a little creepy.

The bombing was discussed one last time when we talked about the family's participation in Remembrance Day ceremonies in Canada. All three had ambivalent feelings about these commemorations. While wishing to respect Canadians' need to grieve for the war dead, they found the association with militarism and nationalism troubling. In this discussion, Pauls briefly mentioned the bombing of London – a central story in Canada's collective memory of the Second World War. In response, Hiebert juxtaposed it to the bombing of Dresden, which "wasn't necessary." When Schulz explained, "Well the whole world will kill people to stop you from killing people," Hiebert responded that the bombing of Dresden was "a political thing."

Again, Hiebert provided all the details of the story, sparse as they were, while Pauls and Schulz focused on interpreting it and using it for various purposes. As in the story of Mr. Erjardt, Pauls and Schulz got a few basic facts wrong. For instance, Pauls remembered Mr. Erjardt working in the factory rather than the office and Schulz recalled her Oma barely escaping the bombing when she was actually outside of the city; I will return to these points below.

The three wartime stories described here were paramount in the family interview but played different roles in the individual interviews. The death of Hiebert's brother was important to Hiebert, because it was the beginning of a major turning point in her life that ended with her migration to Canada. It played a very minor role in Pauls's and Schulz's life stories. Herr Erjardt's story was important to Schulz but not to Hiebert or Pauls. The bombing of Hamburg and its consequences was particularly important to Hiebert, much less so to Schulz and Pauls. In the family interview, however, the three women showed that they were well acquainted with the stories (if not necessarily the details) and had interpreted them in certain ways. Hiebert's interpretation was "factual" and "objective." She provided details, albeit sparse. Her descriptions were "thin" rather than "thick." Pauls's and Schulz's telling had few details and a lot of evaluation.

During the interviews, both Pauls and Schulz admitted that they did not ask the very hard questions because they were afraid of the answers. Pauls explained, “You want to ask the questions but sometimes you do not want to know”; Schulz said that she would not ask Oma questions like: “Did you know more than maybe even you allow yourself to remember?” Despite these hesitations, they were open to considering difficult and troubling questions during the interviews.

### **Interpretive Patterns, “Empty Speaking,” and Loss of Detail**

The Hiebert family’s memories about Oma’s life in Nazi Germany were not a random sample of stories recalled from a repertoire of anecdotes. These stories had “crystallized” over the years through repeated reminiscing and telling in ever-changing circumstances. Yet, they were not simply routine performances of fixed stories. Family memories and stories are in constant flux; crystallization is an ongoing process, which continues both inside and outside of the interview space. When we interview a family, we are not simply recording their “finished” stories. Rather, their stories are changed in the course of the interviews. The particular setting of the interview leads to both a new arrangement of stories and variations in them; certain facts may be withheld for instance. The Hiebert family’s stories were told in a specific and unusual manner, in a context in which members decided to share stories with a wider audience and in which a historian elicited further details and reflections. In this situation, the stories were open to changes and diverse interpretations.

Despite this unique communicative situation, some of the underlying narrative structures were not specific to the situation. “Interpretive patterns” and “empty speaking” are two such structures that Welzer and his colleagues identified in interviews with German families.<sup>41</sup> I would add “loss of detail,” a phenomenon described but not theorized by Welzer et al., as another structure that seems pertinent when trying to explain how families work on their communicative memories.

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<sup>41</sup> Welzer et al., *Opa war kein Nazi*.

These narrative structures are functions of “implicit memory.”<sup>42</sup> While explicit memory is the conscious attempt to recall episodes from the past, implicit memory encompasses what we unconsciously remember. Explicit and implicit memories are closely interconnected, because implicit memories “frame” and constitute explicit memories. Statements emerging from implicit memory are formulated “not as memories, but as convictions.”<sup>43</sup> Implicit memory includes “images” (topoi) and contextual arguments (*Deutungsmuster* or interpretive patterns<sup>44</sup>). When German families talk about the Nazi past, Welzer et al. argue that their explicit memories are often framed or guided by images or stereotypes of “the (bad) Russian,” “the (good) American,” “the (rich) Jew,” or “the Germans.” Interpretive patterns are complex arguments such as “Germans and Jews are definitely two different groups of people,” or there was little resistance to the Nazis because “human beings” are easily manipulated,<sup>45</sup> or “one was forced to join the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei); one could not act otherwise because of one’s economic situation or because *everyone* was doing it.”<sup>46</sup> Images and interpretive patterns, even when they are not explicitly mentioned, serve as intergenerational points of reference for family stories. They allow different generations to unconsciously and tacitly agree on some basic assumptions about the past that they traverse in their conversations.<sup>47</sup>

Such tacit assumptions structured the Hiebert family’s discussions about the Nazi past. In the story about her father’s factory supplying the war industry, Hiebert explained that “he did not work for the Nazis. [...] This is some kind of a thing to stay alive.” Pauls agreed: “That’s the kind of thing that would have been expected.” While Hiebert referred to this explanation a few times, for Pauls it was the main interpretative pattern for telling her grandfather’s story. The tacit

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<sup>42</sup> This is based on Welzer et al., *Opa war kein Nazi*, 135. Welzer et al.’s argument rests on the description of implicit memory discussed by Peter Graf and Daniel L. Schacter, “Implicit and Explicit Memory For New Associations in Normal Subjects and Amnesic Patients,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 11 (1985), 501-518; Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching For Memory. The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

<sup>43</sup> Welzer et al., *Opa war kein Nazi*, 136.

<sup>44</sup> On *Deutungsmuster* in discourse analysis, see Reiner Keller, “Analysing Discourse: An Approach From the Sociology of Knowledge,” *Historical Social Research-Historische Sozialforschung* 31, 2 (2006), 223-42.

<sup>45</sup> Welzer et al., *Opa war kein Nazi*, 137.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 136-7.

assumptions guiding this discussion correspond to those Welzer et al. found among German families: “Nazis” and “Germans” were different from each other, and because “the Nazis” were so powerful, “the Germans” could not do anything to stop them.<sup>48</sup>

Hiebert’s and Pauls’s statements are also examples of “empty speaking.” Empty speaking is a means of transferring “inconsistent, contradictory, and nebulous stories” from one generation to the next; this allows listeners to fill them with meaning. This transfer is carried by words such as “they” (leaving it up to listeners to fill “they” with concrete images of actors) or “it” (leaving it up to listeners to fill “it” with concrete images of actions and events). It is unclear what Hiebert and Pauls meant when they talked about “the kind of thing” “that would have been expected” “to stay alive”: How did Hiebert’s father cooperate with the Nazis? What exactly did his factory produce? Who expected him to cooperate? What did “staying alive” mean? Speaking vaguely allows listeners to ascribe the positive intentions and motivations to their family members that they prefer to associate with them. As Welzer et al. noted: “‘Empty speaking’ is a manner of speech that more so than any other shapes intergenerational conversation about the ‘Third Reich’.”<sup>49</sup>

Complementary to empty speaking is a loss of detail in the generational transfer of memory. Hiebert’s stories contained historical details that did not surface in the stories told by subsequent generations. In the story about “the gay man in Oma’s office,” Hiebert knew Mr. Erjardt’s name, remembered the law under which he was prosecuted (and persecuted), and recalled the Gestapo phoning them before making the arrest. This detail was lost in Pauls’s and Schulz’s recounting. This loss of detail, like empty speaking, makes room for new interpretations. Pauls saw the causes of Erjardt’s arrest in Hitler’s insanity and a “mob mentality.” Such views were shaped both by what Jerome Bruner calls folk psychology, popular adaptations of major psychological theories, and by other forms of folk knowledge, in this case early popular historical explanations of the Third Reich as an aberration from the normal course of German history and a catastrophe brought on by a madman.<sup>50</sup> In the telling of the story, Pauls constructed her grandfather, *en passant*, as a helpless victim who despite his “struggle” – another example of empty speaking – could not do anything against the Nazis. And she portrayed him as a hero. He was a good German who was tolerant of homosexuals and successfully saved his family and business without caving in to Nazi demands, at least not too much.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 150-6.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 159-61.

<sup>50</sup> Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*; Bruner, *Actual Minds*; Friedrich Meinecke, *The German Catastrophe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950).

Schulz offered a more advanced interpretation that drew on recent structural explanations of Nazism: it was “calculated planning and pretty rationalized evil” that was a result of modernity rather than some eternal German anti-Semitism. This was perhaps a reference to historians’ rejection of the “Goldhagen thesis” – in his book *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, Daniel Goldhagen argues that Germans’ “eliminationist anti-Semitism” was an enduring part of the German character. Despite Schulz’s school knowledge that the German population at large was implicated in the Nazi atrocities, she exempted her Oma and portrayed her as a victim who suffered through the experience of her co-worker’s arrest, and as a hero who came out of the experience as a fighter for tolerance and freedom, teaching her family “that we have to treasure our freedom in Canada.”

In the telling of such stories, framed as they are by implicit memories, a silent consensus emerges; in the case of interviews, this consensus includes the interviewer. This consensus often prevents people from asking difficult questions. For instance, the fact that the Gestapo called Hiebert’s father before making the arrest did not irritate the listeners, including myself. All simply assumed that first of all, this was a historically plausible scenario and second, that Hiebert’s father could not do anything to help his employee without risking his life or job. Thus, the question of whether Hiebert’s father could have warned Mr. Erjardt of the impending arrest is left unasked.<sup>51</sup>

The study by Welzer et al. demonstrated how children and grandchildren made their (grand-)parents into heroes of resistance and victims of Nazi terror. This was particularly true for children with higher education. They had good school knowledge of what had happened in the Third Reich, but they did not connect this with their own families. Surveys conducted by Welzer et al. support these results.<sup>52</sup> We see similar dynamics in the German-Canadian case. Pauls portrayed her mother (and aunt) as a fighter for tolerance and was “amazed” at her grandfather’s ability to maintain a “balance” between objecting to Nazism and saving his family and business. Schulz similarly portrayed her Oma not only as a victim of war and of the inability to resist Nazism, but also as the person who taught them to be tolerant and to cherish freedom.

The story of Willy’s death is a good example of how the family crafted victim and hero stories through stereotypes, interpretive patterns, and loss of detail. Hiebert offered three explanations for her brother’s death. Pauls and Schulz did not consider the medical explanation (thin veins, according to the doctor). Pauls embraced the religious explanation (God spared Willy from fighting for the

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<sup>51</sup> Welzer et al. found, in many family talks, that “contradictory evidence” seldom led to listener “irritations”, including interviewers. *Opa war kein Nazi*, 151.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*



Nazis). It intimates that Willy's death was that of a martyr. The political explanation (the Gestapo's beating killed Willy) was mentioned only indirectly but throughout all of the interviews. Schulz (and, according to Hiebert, her mother, Jackie) was most convinced: "He died, he was not killed by the Nazis but that idea."

Finally, the story of the bombing of Hamburg demonstrates how the family constructed victims. Germans have seen themselves as victims of the Allied bombing of German cities, and the Hiebert family here is drawing on German collective memory. Schulz described the bombing of Hamburg as a "near miss" for her Oma, even though Hiebert had said that they had been outside of Hamburg on the weekend that the store was hit. Thus, loss of detail leads to a dramatization of the story from the first to the third generation.

To argue that the children and grandchildren of postwar German immigrants, like their cousins in Germany, made the first generation into victims and heroes is not to say that they set out to whitewash their parents' or grandparents' biographies. Remembering and storytelling are means of crafting coherent identities that make sense to oneself and to others. Thus, Pauls, who knew her mother's and aunt's strong anti-Nazi feelings, simply could not conceive of questioning her grandfather's and uncle's image as anti-Nazis.

## Conclusion

Alexander von Plato argues that the family interview method creates artificial family harmony and in turn, leads to systematic misinterpretations.<sup>53</sup> The interview with the Hiebert family proves von Plato right; the family worked towards harmonizing their stories. Empty speaking and loss of detail helped them gloss over irritating details and agree on the best version of the story. But the interview also demonstrates the usefulness of the method if it is used in addition to, rather than instead of, the one-on-one interviews. The family interview added further stories, details, and interpretations and, most importantly, it illuminated the process of communicative memory.

The Hiebert family's foundational stories could be read as family myths: the brother-martyr, the father-hero, the mother/grandmother-victim. Oral historians have used the concept of myth to undermine master narratives and deconstruct basic assumptions of positivist historiography. The concept of myth however, can only describe a story as myth. The concept of communicative memory, on the other hand, seems to be a powerful alternative that explains how stories become myths in intergenerational communication about the past.

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<sup>53</sup> Alexander Freund, "Interview with Alexander von Plato, Grabow, Germany, 8 April 2009," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 29 (2009), part 12, 5:40-13:00.

Communicative memory seems well suited to locate and analyze “the displacements, omissions, and reinterpretations through which myths in personal and collective memory take shape.”<sup>54</sup>

Communicative structures like empty speaking and loss of detail are not a panacea. They have limited explanatory power. They tell us a lot about what is happening when families talk about the past, but they do not tell us everything. Welzer’s analysis, as von Plato argues, glosses over the more critical and reflective aspects of family’s table talk and communicative memory. Family loyalty, even at the unconscious level, is not always as overpowering a force as Welzer et al. implied. Rosenthal, for example, conducts family interviews in order to work through conflicts. She carefully selects which family members to interview in a group, intending to avoid insurmountable conflicts. While there were no open conflicts in the Hiebert family, had other members such as Schulz’s parents been a part of the interview, there may have been greater potential for conflict and disagreement about Mr. Erjahrtdt’s story for instance. Welzer’s analysis also glosses over the connections between school knowledge and family memory. These two are connected and play on each other. Karla Schulz used her university knowledge about Nazism to figure out what role her Oma had had in all of this. She also used it to redirect other family members’ understanding of history, when she pleaded against her aunt’s “insanity” argument.

Despite these criticisms and shortcomings, the three-generational family interview is a powerful tool in the oral historian’s toolbox. Similarly, the concept of communicative memory is an important notion that helps us understand how collective family memory works. Oral historians’ investigations of family memory would benefit from using both of these approaches more frequently.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Thompson and Samuelson, eds. *The Myths We Live By*, 5.

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