

Whose story is it anyway?: Collective memory, postmemory, and the use of the subjunctive mood in Katja Petrowskaja's *Vielleicht Esther*, Nora Krug's *Heimat*, and Heather Morris's *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*

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Sophie Ivalee Hawks

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Major Professor
Dr. Necia Chronister

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Abstract

The Holocaust has a complicated and multifaceted history, involving many diverse experiences. It is challenging to convey the true magnitude of the Holocaust properly. The collective memory, which integrates various tropes associated with and often synonymous with the Holocaust, informs the way that this event is remembered and described. This collective memory can be narrow and diminish the multitude of stories and experiences felt by the victims and survivors. Despite these shortcomings, Holocaust media often draws on this collective memory in order to engage a wide audience and guide their understanding of the event. Members of the second and third generations with postmemory of the Holocaust may utilize this collective memory as a mediator for their own exploration of their family histories. Authors writing from the standpoint of postmemory also employ the subjunctive mood as a tool to investigate the multitude of possibilities that may exist within their family history. In this report, I will analyze the role of the collective memory and the subjunctive mood in the novels *Vielleicht Esther* by Katja Petrowskaja and *Heimat* by Nora Krug, in contrast to the popular novel *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* by Heather Morris. This paper considers the various narrative strategies used to explore the legacy of the Holocaust and the impact that the strategies have on how we interpret and understand the Holocaust in the present day.

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Introduction

The legacy and traces of the Holocaust are still visible and palpable today. The traces remain not only physically on European soil, but also are interwoven into European cultures and histories. Whether in memory culture with memorials such as the Stolpersteine¹, or within literary references, or even as a political topic, Europe is forever shaped by the legacy of the Holocaust. However, this legacy is mediated through the frameworks of the present, as Aleida Assmann explains in the article “Limits of Understanding: Generational Identities in Recent German Memory Literature.” Since the cultural memory is affected by the present, it can be altered to serve a purpose or can change depending on what is relevant in the current atmosphere. This can include the emotions of people affected, not only the victims and survivors, but also those with inherited postmemory or a collective memory. Holocaust literature may serve to help understand these emotions and tell stories and perspectives that would have otherwise been lost.

We are now entering the post-survivor era. The people who experienced this event firsthand are dying, as is the opportunity to add primary sources about the Holocaust. Elie Wiesel, author of Holocaust memoir *Night*, asserted that “I believe firmly and profoundly that whoever listens to a witness becomes a witness, so those who hear us, those who read us must continue to bear witness for us. Until now, they’re doing it with us. At a certain point in time, they will do it for all of us” (“Holocaust Encyclopedia”). He argued that it will become the responsibility of the second, third, and further generations to witness the Holocaust after those

¹ Stolpersteine are memorial blocks laid in the sidewalk outside a Holocaust victim’s last freely chosen residence or place of work. (‘Stumbling stones’: a different vision of Holocaust remembrance)

who directly experienced the event are gone. It is important to continue telling stories and witnessing the Holocaust so that it is not lost to history. The emergence of accounts of postmemory and fictionalized accounts has grown in light of this loss. These accounts add to the Holocaust canon of literature, whether they are accurate representations or not. This can become problematic if the general public is engaging with materials that are not historically accurate and depict the Holocaust as anything other than the multidimensional and widespread horror that it was. When these fictionalized accounts are taught in K-12 and university classrooms, they can be viewed as facts and influence the way that students learn about genocide and engage with history.

As I will show in this paper, one way that authors avoid the fictionalization or falsifying of Holocaust stories is to use the subjunctive to narrate the events of the past. The subjunctive is a grammatical mood, that in German is used to express the hypothetical, or what is imagined to be possible. Oftentimes, the second or third generation individuals with postmemory of the Holocaust do not know the whole story of their family history during the Holocaust, and rely on stories, archives, photographs, and connections to piece together the narratives of the victims and survivors in their family. As Katja Petrowskaja states, “Geschichte ist, wenn es plötzlich keine Menschen mehr gibt, die man fragen kann, sondern nur noch Quellen. Ich hatte niemanden mehr, den ich hatte fragen konnte, der sich an diese Zeiten noch erinnern konnte. Was mir blieb: Erinnerungsfetzen, zweifelhafte Notizen und Dokumente in fernen Archiven” (Petrowskaja 30).²The absence of these personal accounts is felt through the gaps in memory and history and

² “History is when there are suddenly no more people left to ask, only sources. I had no one that could remember these times left who I could ask. What was left for me: scraps of memory,

the subsequent generations feel these gaps more profoundly than anyone else. They may decide to create an imagined potential history through the subjunctive mood. This is different from the authors who choose to change elements of the plot despite historical evidence and narrate speculation as though it were fact. This report will discuss the function of the collective memory and the use of the subjunctive voice in *Vielleicht Esther* (2014) by Katja Petrowskaja and *Heimat: Ein deutsches Familienalbum* (2020) by Nora Krug in contrast to strategies used by the more problematic popular novel *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* (2018) by Heather Morris.

Postmemory is defined by Marianne Hirsch 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 by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (Postmemory.net). People may inherit the memories through various mediums from their relatives that experienced the event themselves, which can be considered postmemory. Often in Holocaust studies, postmemory is used in connection to the second and third generation. However it can also apply to those individuals who share a collective postmemory through education or cultural connection to the event. This postmemory can be accessed and interpreted through literature, photography, film, and other mediums. A notable example, and the inspiration behind Marianne Hirsch’s term “postmemory” is the graphic novel *Maus* (1986) by Art Spiegelman. Art (in the novel) is a member of the second generation, with parents who survived the Holocaust, and shares his father’s story from his perspective as a person with postmemory. This creates an interesting perspective on the event itself along with the aftermath and lingering effects felt by the survivor (Vladek) and his family. This perspective can be found in other

ambiguous notes, and documents in distant archives.” [All translations from *Vielleicht Esther* are my own.]

literary works such as the novel *Vielleicht Esther* and the graphic novel *Heimat*, which I will be exploring in this report. I argue that the author-narrators of these works both interact with the collective memory of the Holocaust to understand their own postmemory and utilize the subjunctive mood to give life to stories and possibilities that may otherwise never be told.

Understanding and interacting with postmemory using the collective memory (in *Vielleicht Esther* and *Heimat*)

Collective memory is an important concept in connection to how the Holocaust is represented in literature and other cultural mediums, such as film, museums, and memorials. This collective memory is the body of knowledge a population shares about an event, often learned through experience or education. The collective memory may differ from the actual history of the event, or may only include a small portion or a singular perspective of the event. It can also be affected by social and political pressures of the present. There is a widespread and fairly standardized cultural memory surrounding the Holocaust, and with that comes tropes and cliches that are repeated often in the media surrounding the event. Iconography such as the “Arbeit macht frei” sign at Auschwitz, historical figures such as Dr. Josef Mengele, and objects such as the golden Star of David all are part of the repeated tropes that often surface in depictions of the Holocaust. They have become so synonymous with the Holocaust that when they are not included in Holocaust narrative, general readers may have a hard time believing the story to be true. The inclusion of these tropes may lead to readers trusting it to be “authentic” and historically accurate, as they have previous expectations based on the education and collective knowledge regarding the Holocaust (Hirsh et al). To write a Holocaust novel without these elements would lead to readers questioning the authenticity, based on their limited engagement with the entire complex history of the event. As readers, we revert to these cliches and ways of simplifying in order to try to understand the incomprehensible. We can never truly understand the experience of the Holocaust, because we were not there. The true scope and specific details of an event such as the Holocaust are out of our reach. Thus, authors who are writing Holocaust

narratives, and are not survivors themselves, must employ different techniques to narrate the complex stories and history of this event.

In *Vielleicht Esther*, Katja Petrowskaja interacts with many aspects of the Holocaust collective memory in order to understand her own personal postmemory as a member of the second generation. *Vielleicht Esther* is a narrative comprised of Petrowskaja's attempt to assemble a family story from fragments and research. She explores loose ends in her family tree, such as her grandfather Vasily who disappeared after WWII and reappeared years later, her great-uncle Judas Stern who was sentenced to death after assassinating a German diplomat, and her great-grandmother who presumably died in Kyiv. Petrowskaja explores tropes and repeated icons of the Holocaust such as Auschwitz, memorialization, German guilt, and family loss throughout the novel. She experiences the tropes differently as a direct descendant of victims and survivors from Eastern Europe, Ukraine to be specific. Her interaction with the tropes and the collective Holocaust memory allows her to work through her own postmemory and piece together a more intricate web of knowledge surrounding her family history and European history in general.

The collective memory of the Holocaust is heavily shaped by the media and education describing the event, and therefore there are certain tropes that are so closely associated with the Holocaust that they may even become synonymous with the event itself. An example of this is the site of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. For many people the word "Auschwitz" is a synonym for the Holocaust and may be the only location they associate with the Holocaust. The Holocaust happened across Europe, with over 44,000 concentration camps and ghettos according to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum ("Holocaust Encyclopedia"). There is not one singular perspective of an event this widespread, and the collective memory does not

and cannot possibly cover all the unique experiences and perspectives of those affected. However, it can be useful to engage with certain icons of the Holocaust, such as Auschwitz, in order to understand and comprehend the incomprehensible.

In *Vielleicht Esther*, Petrowskaja explores many facets of the history of the Holocaust, and she includes some of the tropes that are repeated in the collective memory culture. She visited Auschwitz on her first trip outside of the Soviet Union in 1989. In the chapter titled “The gate,” she describes her experience visiting Auschwitz as a tourist and we see her current day perspective on this visit as an individual with Holocaust postmemory. She describes the disconnect between the former concentration camp and the tourism that has taken over this former place of suffering. Sites associated with the Holocaust may employ kitsch as a strategy to give visitors a “level of comfort in the neutralisation of the emotive event” (Stone and Grebener 2021). This can include souvenir shops, feel good stories given center stage to decrease discomfort, and reliance on tropes to make the scope of a tragedy more palatable to the public. This contrast between the real historical suffering of millions of people with the kitsch and dark tourism of Auschwitz reflects how the Holocaust has become something commercialized.

Petrowskaja engages with such a commercialization of the Holocaust memorial during her visit by discussing the morality of the fact that a jewelry store stands just outside of Auschwitz’s gates. “Ich erinnere mich, wie in mir die Begierde, unbedingt etwas kaufen zu müssen, eine Kette zum Beispiel, obwohl ich sie nicht wirklich brauchte, mir der Scham kämpfte, gerade hier, vor diesem Tor, über Geld und Profit nachzudenken” (Petrowskaja 57).³

³ “I remember the desire to have to buy something, a necklace for example, even though I didn't really need it, fought against the shame of thinking about money and profit, especially here in front of this gate.”

Many of the other tourists with her on the trip clamor to purchase Polish silver at a cheap price, completely disregarding the fact that they are outside of one of the largest former concentration camp complexes. Petrowskaja recognizes her positionality in this current moment, as both a part of the tourist group and of a member of the generation of postmemory. These two identities are in tension with one another, and Petrowskaja struggles with how to balance them at this moment. In today's world, Auschwitz is merely a tourist site in a living town. However, in Petrowskaja's postmemory, Auschwitz is a site of loss of life and autonomy. The other people in her tour group may only have the identity as a tourist in Poland, and therefore for them, Auschwitz could merely be a destination to check off their travel itinerary. They would not suffer the moral struggle that Petrowskaja does at the opportunity to purchase silver goods within eyeshot of the famous gate that reads "Arbeit macht frei." She ruminates on the possibilities of how she may end up regretting passing up this opportunity to buy a souvenir, another exercise in the subjunctive that allows her to explore Holocaust memorialization in a variety of ways.

Later in *Vielleicht Esther*, Petrowskaja visits the city of Warsaw in Poland, which notoriously housed a ghetto for Jewish people during the Holocaust. She remarks on how the area that was formerly a ghetto for Jewish people during the Second World War is now a vibrant part of the present-day city. Banks and gyms take up the spaces where her relatives suffered during the Holocaust. This transformation of space is the opposite of the site of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, which remains as it was in 1945. Petrowskaja's postmemory of this location shapes her perception of how the area should look, and therefore creates a dissonance, as her postmemory does not match the current reality of the area. The redevelopment and assimilation of the Warsaw Ghetto into the current city of Warsaw shows how this is not a fixture of the collective memory quite like Auschwitz. This place is not synonymous with the

Holocaust, despite the large impact it had on thousands of people. The current modern state of this location represents the way that the collective memory creates a narrow view of the Holocaust instead of memorializing the way it permeated the entire European continent. Petrowskaja's engagement with these sites and their connection to the collective memory of the Holocaust help her work through her own postmemory and explore the multitude of experiences and memories there are in connection to the Holocaust.

Nora Krug takes a slightly different approach to interacting with tropes in her graphic novel *Heimat: Ein deutsches Familienalbum*. In *Heimat* we see Krug explore what it means to have a German identity after WWII. She integrates various mediums such as illustrations, photographs, flea market finds, records, and family heirlooms to help her understand her identity in connection to her Nazi affiliated relatives, her grandfather Willi and her uncle Franz-Karl. Since the graphic novel is similar to a scrapbook or a family album composed of bits and pieces of memory, identity, and culture, she is able to give us a multimedia approach to the tropes associated with the German culture of the twentieth century. She connects these items not only to the German cultural identity, but also to their relation to Nazi Germany and in some cases, the Holocaust. The cultural items demonstrate a collective memory within the German identity, and can also serve to help her understand her own personal postmemory, as individuals with postmemory may use these objects as a crutch to support and strengthen the vague memories they may inherit from relatives.

One of the items from the so-called "Catalogue of German Things" in *Heimat* is the "Poisonous mushroom" in the third chapter. We see an illustration of a red mushroom with white

polka dots and the caption “Das Pilzesammeln.”⁴ She describes how mushrooms and the act of gathering mushrooms in the woods is connected to Germanic culture within illustrations in children’s books and her own family history, with an anecdote about eating mushrooms after collecting them and through a photograph of her mother on the next page in a mushroom costume (Krug chapter 3 page 13). She connects the collective memory and her own personal memory and postmemory through a single icon or trope of German culture.

The poison mushroom also connects to the theme of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism in Germany. Krug includes a scan of a school assignment done by her uncle Franz-Karl in 1939, who was around thirteen years old at the time, on the tenth and eleventh pages of chapter three. She transcribes his handwriting on page ten, giving us a text version which is easier to read. “Der Jude, ein Giftpilz. Wenn man in den Wald geht und man sieht Pilze, die schön aussehen, meint man, diese wären gut. Aber wenn man sie isst, sind sie giftig und können eine ganze Familie töten. So wie dieser Pilz ist auch der Jude. Wenn man den Juden von Weitem sieht, erkennt man ihn gleich. Er tut schön und schmeichelt einem ins Gesicht. So wie die Giftpilze eine ganze Familie töten kann, so kann der Jude ein ganzes Volk töten” (Krug Chapter 3 Page 10).⁵ This quote is written on lined paper, presumably for a school assignment, as we see red corrections marking grammar mistakes. Karl-Heinz has also doodled the red and white poisonous

⁴ “The mushroom gathering” [All translations from *Heimat: Ein deutsches Familienalbum* are my own.]

⁵ “The Jew, a poisonous mushroom. When you go into the forest and see mushrooms that look good, you think ‘these would be good.’ But when you eat them, they are poisonous and could kill an entire family. The Jew is just like this mushroom. When you see the Jew from afar, you recognize him immediately. He looks good and flatters you. Just like the poisonous mushrooms can kill an entire family, the Jew can kill an entire people.”

mushrooms in the margins of his assignment, anthropomorphizing them with facial features. The text may read as propaganda that he is being fed due to his standing as an “Aryan” German, and it is unclear whether these are words he came up with himself or if the assignment may have been to copy something already written. However, the illustrations of the poisonous mushrooms with faces in the margins suggest that that was something done of Karl-Heinz’s own volition. Children often doodle on their schoolwork, and anti-Semitic propaganda is clearly no exception. The drawing indicates that Karl-Heinz had internalized, and maybe even believed, this story and the association of Jewish people with a dangerous poison.

Another aspect of the cultural memory present in *Heimat* is the education on the Holocaust that Krug received as a German. Education informs a large amount of the collective memory of major historical events, as many people only engage with these events in a classroom context. The education Krug received informs her own personal guilt and feelings of disconnection with German culture. On the fifteenth page of chapter one, Krug describes a class trip that went to multiple concentration camps across France, Germany, and Poland. Krug includes black and white images of her classmates she captured on this trip which appear to be “taped” on the page as if in a scrapbook. One of the captions under a photo of her classmate looking overwhelmed and shocked says “Nach unserem Besuch im Vernichtungslager Birkenau 1994.” (Krug chapter 1 page 13).⁶ The shock and discomfort shown in these images display the emotions felt by German students as they are learning about their country’s negative history. They are witness to the Holocaust through their presence in the places that are left behind. The sentence “Hier lag der Beweis für unsere kollektive Schuld” (Krug chapter 1 page 13)^[108] at the

⁶ “After our visit to the extermination camp Birkenau 1994.”

bottom of this page solidifies the impact this education had on Krug's generation. The collective memory of the Holocaust in Germany is deeply entwined with a feeling of guilt. Regardless of any familial connection to the perpetrators, Germans feel a sense of guilt, often instilled through the education they receive in relation to the Holocaust. This education can include various forms of literature. These different genres have varying degrees of historical accuracy and diversity of perspectives. One of the most widely read genres of Holocaust literature is historical fiction, due to the accessibility of the language and the story-driven nature of these novels. These novels can be good at introducing people to the Holocaust and giving them a general education based on the collective memory and tropes included in the books but may sensationalize certain topics and give readers a narrow idea of the event.

Holocaust misrepresentation (in *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*)

Fiction novels that tell stories about the Holocaust are a popular genre of historical fiction, and one of the most common ways that general audiences interact with the Holocaust. The tension between fiction as an art form and the historical reality of the Holocaust make this literature particularly difficult to write. Novels that include historical events such as the Holocaust can be seen as an educational tool and are even used in schools to assist in the education of such events. People may also seek out these novels on their own to read for enjoyment or to learn outside of school. Historical fiction novels centering the Holocaust are a common choice that appeal to a wide audience.

One of the most popular Holocaust novels from the last decade, and recently released as a limited television series in 2024, *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* by Heather Morris exemplifies a well-known form of Holocaust literature: Based on a True Story. Novels and films bearing this subtitle tend to be regarded by general audiences as historically accurate and taken at face value. However, memories can be inaccurate or manipulated, and the way that the story is told can alter the accuracy of history to cater toward a general audience. Such is the case with *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, which has made its way into the canon of popular historical Holocaust fiction. Copies of *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* can be found in secondhand bookstores and libraries and it is “sold in large shopping malls, alongside candy and chocolate, or you can get discounted copies at the airport before you board your long-haul flight from Australia,” (Hirsch et al) which exposes the general public to a Holocaust narrative, although there may be issues with the way novels like these represent such a complicated event.

The tension between making sure the history and experiences of victims and survivors are told, and the potential trivialization of the Holocaust has been an ongoing debate since the

advent of such novelizations. It is incredibly important to ensure that any story told about the Holocaust is factually correct so that the event is not misrepresented. Touting a fictionalized narrative as the truth can be dangerous when it comes to the way that the public encounters Holocaust media, as not everyone is trained to recognize the difference between a historic record of the event, a work in postmemory, and a story that has been embellished to create a story appealing to a mass audience. It is assumed that the author will do plenty of research to ensure accuracy when they choose to write historical fiction about an event as significant as the Holocaust. This is not always the case, as with *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, written after Heather Morris met with Lali Sokolov, a Slovakian Holocaust survivor who was the tattooist at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, and heard his story. Her novelization is a fictional depiction of the events of Lali Sokolov's life, as told in interviews between Morris and Sokolov over a few years before his death in 2006 ('The Tattooist of Auschwitz' and the History in Historical Fiction). She centers Lali as the main character, and he becomes the hero of this romantic story, which occurs with the setting of the Holocaust in the background.

Lali's story is told in the third person omniscient point of view in the present tense, with Morris including his wife Gita's perspective as the other half of the love story. We as the audience are invited into not just the events of Lali and Gita's lives during the Holocaust but also their innermost thoughts. This creates a tension, as we as non-witnesses are never able to truly know what people may have been thinking while interned in concentration camps like Auschwitz. Writing these thoughts as facts can erase the unknowability of these experiences and appropriating the thoughts of victims who are no longer alive could be crossing a moral boundary. While Morris may have been able to glean information from Lali in the interview process on his thoughts and experiences from this time, she was not able to consult Gita in the

same manner. Gita died before Morris met Lali. Thus, all that remains of Gita's personal memories and experiences are her testimony to the USC Shoah Foundation Visual Archive. Morris chose to focus on Lali's story and personal memories in order to form her novel rather than including information from Gita's testimony.

One of the most glaring inaccuracies in Lali and Morris's version of Gita's story is the number given to her at her arrival at Auschwitz by Lali himself. In the book, her number is said to be 34902, contrary to the fact that this number would not have been given in April of 1942, when Gita entered the camp (Witek-Malicka 3). She testified that her number was 4562, a number that does line up with the historical documents from the time. It is unclear why Morris decided to use Lali's memory of the number over Gita's own testimony and the historical proof, but it does line up with Ruth Kluger's claims that "Wars, and hence the memories of wars, are owned by the male of the species. And fascism is decidedly a male property, whether you were for or against it. Besides, women have no past, or aren't supposed to have one. A man can have an interesting past, a woman only an indecent one" (Kluger 18). In other words, the voices of female victims and survivors get covered up and ignored. Lali's account of his own and of Gita's stories was chosen to be the "powerful true story" (as advertised on the book's cover) that was told. This could be because he was alive and was the one who told the story to Morris, so she may have felt an obligation to him to preserve his specific memory of his experiences. Or perhaps Morris decided to focus on writing a love story centering Lali's heroic actions founded in love that saved Gita to create a more compelling novel for the average reader. Either way, Gita's "true story" and perspective has been lost in this fictionalization.

Morris further changes Gita's story ignoring her testimony to the USC Shoah Foundation, in which she recalls the strength of her female friendships in the camps, her own self-

preservation, and the luck that saved her, recasting her in a passive role where Lali alone saved her (Hirsch et al.). This is not only disrespectful to Gita as an autonomous person and the women who banded together in order to survive, but also problematic as it erases the importance of circumstance and connections that led to many people's survival. In *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, Gita is reduced to the love interest of the titular character, Lali, and is made to be a supporting figure in his story. This may stem from the fact that this novel is based on Lali's own testimony, but that does not make it any less problematic. The trivialization of the Holocaust and the changing of historical facts in *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* could lead to the audience believing things that are simply not true. The nature of this story as a romance could lead to readers interpreting the Holocaust as a much less serious event than it really was. The inclusion of intimate sex scenes between Lali and Gita that would have been impossible in the Auschwitz camp and the interactions between Lali and the camp staff may strengthen these ideas. As Kluger noted, men are allowed to have complicated histories, and women can only have scandalous pasts (Kluger 18). In *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, Lali is depicted as a complicated character and the hero of the story, and Gita is reduced to the object of Lali's desire.

The Tattooist of Auschwitz employs many tropes and icons of the Holocaust collective memory throughout the story. Lali's story lends itself to the use of tropes such as Auschwitz as the main setting, the tattoos that prisoners were forcibly given, and the train cars that people were transported on. These tropes play a crucial role in Lali's real story, and were elements that he experienced according to factual history (Witek-Matricka). However, Morris includes other elements that may not have actually played a role in Lali's story, such as interactions with Joseph Mengele, resistance against the Nazi officers, and forced sexual encounters between female inmates and the Nazi officials. These tropes may serve to strengthen the appearance of

“authenticity” of the story, as their presence often prevents general readers from questioning the validity of the story. I view their use as a way for Morris to interact with the collective memory in what may be considered “imaginative fiction” according to Dr. Anna Hirsch. It is problematic that these inaccuracies are written as fact in this novel, as the reader will then take the story at face value, and form an inaccurate or simplified view of the Holocaust.

Fictionalized versions based on true survivor accounts such as *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* are not the only method of preserving the memory of the Holocaust and those affected in literature in the post-survivor era. Another option that authors including Katja Petrowskaja and Nora Krug have employed is utilizing the subjunctive mood to explore the possible experiences and history their family may have had during the Holocaust. The subjunctive allows the true scope of the Holocaust to be felt, including multiple possibilities and diverse perspectives that may otherwise be lost.

Use of the subjunctive mood as a narrative tool in (in *Vielleicht Esther* and *Heimat*)

Postmemory can be difficult to understand and work through. One way that people may choose to interact with their postmemory is through imagining the various possibilities that could have occurred during this event by using the subjunctive mood. It is also important to consider the positionality of the individual with postmemory, as these individuals were not actually present or witness to the event in the same way that victims, survivors, and perpetrators were. Petrowskaja acknowledges this through her use of hypothetical possibilities in her writing of these potential memories and histories of the relatives she never knew. The use of the subjunctive prevents the appropriation of the past that is not her own, and she is forced to acknowledge that she was not there and did not experience the events firsthand.

In order to combat the misrepresentation or appropriation of Holocaust memory, there has been “an increased popularity of the subjunctive mood and/or subjunctive approaches to history in recent examples of Holocaust writing, tied to speculations about both alternative pasts and unrealized futures” (Lizarazu 2020). There are examples of this on the side of the victims, like in *Vielleicht Esther*, as well as on the side of the perpetrators. Nora Krug employs a similar manner of subjunctivity in her graphic novel *Heimat* to attempt to understand her grandfather’s possible involvements within the Nazi party. It is not possible for many people with familial connections to know the whole story or history of what happened, and that can cause disruptions in family memory and the understanding of the second and third generations of their relatives and history. These individuals may subconsciously construct subjunctive histories for their relatives, whether they realize it or not.

An early example of the subjunctive in *Vielleicht Esther* comes in the chapter “In the Museum” on page 45, where Petrowskaja and her eleven-year-old daughter visit a museum in Berlin. They are viewing a table that shows the Nuremberg Laws, laws enacted in Nazi Germany in 1935 against Jewish people, Romani people, and black people, and the daughter asks, “Wo sind wir hier? Wo sind wir hier in dieser Tabelle, Mama?”⁷ Petrowskaja describes her thought process she had upon hearing this question. “Eigentlich müsse man die Frage nicht im Präsens, sondern im Imperfekt stellen und im Konjunktiv, wo wären wir gewesen, wenn wir damals gelebt hätten, wenn wir in diesem Land gelebt hätten - wenn wir jüdisch gewesen wären und damals hier gelebt hätten” (Petrowskaja 45).⁸ She cannot simply point to a place on the table to describe where they are, because to her, that is impossible. Her daughter views the table and makes the assumption that everyone living and dead must fit into one of the categories presented. Petrowskaja recognizes that they are not represented on this table, as the table represents a specific place and time period (Nazi Germany) that they did not exist in. To assign her daughter and herself a place on this table would be an exercise in the subjunctive, as it would be an imagined reality rather than an actual one. Petrowskaja and her daughter did not themselves feel the effects of these specific laws, and she acknowledges that to place them on the table would be to change history. She prevents herself and her daughter from appropriating the tragedy from the victims through her choice of grammar. However, using the subjunctive to discuss the

⁷ “Where are we here? Where are we here on this table, Mama?”

⁸ “Actually, one must not ask this question in the present tense, but rather in the simple past in the subjunctive. Where would we be, if we had lived there at that time, if we had lived in this country - if we were Jewish and had lived here at that time.”

hypothetical possibilities for them in this situation opens the conversation up to how we can work with the reality of the history of the Holocaust and understand it better.

Another example of the subjunctive being used in *Vielleicht Esther* comes in the form of the titular character herself, Maybe Esther. *Vielleicht Esther* translates to “Maybe Esther” in English, and Petrowskaja chose to refer to her great grandmother as “Maybe Esther,” and not just “Esther” because of the uncertainty associated with her and her story. I will also refer to her as Maybe Esther, as I believe the choice to do so carries the weight of uncertain family history and stories due to the unknowability of the Holocaust, especially, as is the case of Petrowskaja’s family, in the Soviet Union. “Ich glaube, sie hieß Esther, sagte mein Vater. Ja, vielleicht Esther. Ich hatte zwei Großmütter, und eine von ihnen hieß Esther, genau. Wie, vielleicht?, fragte ich empört, du weißt nicht, wie deine Großmutter hieß?” (Petrowskaja 209).⁹ The family is not even certain that the great grandmother’s name was really Esther, only of her existence and of the fact that she remained in Kyiv and was never heard from again. Her true story has been lost, as there are no records, and no family memory, as the family fled Ukraine without her. Questions about Maybe Esther’s fate had not been explored until Petrowskaja, a member of the second generation, started her journey chronicling her family’s history in the Holocaust. The other members of Petrowskaja’s family may not have considered revisiting Maybe Esther’s story because of the trauma and guilt associated, or because of the cultural expectations in the former Soviet Union that did not prioritize memorializing victims of anti-Semitism. For Petrowskaja, uncovering the details of the family history is important as the holes in the family tree are a loss

⁹ “I believe she was called Esther, said my father. Yes, maybe Esther. I had two grandmothers, and one of them was called Esther, exactly. How maybe? I asked indignantly, you don’t know what your grandmother was called?”

that she wants to come to terms with. She does this through archival work, as we see with the story of her great uncle Judas Stern, travel to places such as Auschwitz, Warsaw, and Babi Yar, and through exercises in speculation when there is little to no information to be found. This multifaceted approach that assesses various materials and places is a common method of remembering lost family members in instances such as the Holocaust, and the subjunctive can help to create language that allows people to imagine what could have been. This method is what she uses to tell the story of her great grandmother Maybe Esther.

The inclusion of Maybe Esther's story serves as a way to include all of the people forgotten amongst the millions of victims, and all the stories that were lost and unable to be told. Maybe Esther represents the "almost-lost story," a theory developed in the article "Relocating Yiddish voices: Narrative disfigurement and the "almost-lost" story in Edgar Hilsenrath's Holocaust novel Jossel Wassermanns Heimkehr" by Corey Twitchell in 2023. Since we don't know the full historic truth of Maybe Esther's story during her final hours, the story that Petrowskaja creates for her stands in for historic record and encapsulates the multitude of possibilities that occurred for every unknown victim. The entire chapter is an exercise in speculation, written in a hypothetical mood that explores what Maybe Esther may have done after her family left her in Kyiv. Her story may otherwise never have even been speculated about; hence it is considered an "almost-lost story." Had Petrowskaja not written this chapter and speculated about her, Maybe Esther would be lost to time. Her own grandson, Petrowskaja's father, could not even remember her name for sure, calling her "maybe Esther." The fact that she doesn't have a concrete name makes her the perfect candidate to represent the millions of nameless victims.

The fact that Maybe Esther is a female victim is also important and the implications of her gender are also worth considering. As discussed earlier with *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* with respect to the revisions to Gita's story, female voices seem to be lost more often than their male counterparts. Whether that is through revisions, or their stories being told through the male perspective, such as Gita's, or through the lack of memories and care to preserve their stories, women and their stories are often downplayed or forgotten. I view Maybe Esther as a subjunctive representation of all the women whose stories disappeared into nothing or were revised after the Holocaust. Nothing, not even her name, can be truly known, but she existed and the story that Petrowskaja creates for her signifies that she is important, and her memory has not been completely forgotten.

The potential location of Maybe Esther's demise, Babi Yar, is also a poignant aspect of her story. Babi Yar is a ravine in Kyiv, Ukraine, where over 30,000 Jews were killed over two days in September 1941 ("Holocaust Encyclopedia"). This site has not been recognized in the same way as other Holocaust sites like Auschwitz, and many of the victims remain unidentified and nameless. At the site of Babi Yar, Petrowskaja reflects: "Irgendetwas führt mich hierher, denn ich glaube, dass es keine Fremden gibt, wenn es um Opfer geht. Jeder Mensch hat jemandem hier" (Petrowskaja 184).¹⁰ The scope of this tragedy, and the Holocaust as a whole, is so large that Petrowskaja asserts that everyone has someone amongst the victims, and while she may not mean that literally, I do think that she is correct. Everyone has someone that has been lost to time, their story never able to be told with full accuracy. Maybe Esther represents all of these lost stories. While the factual, historically accurate story of Petrowskaja's great

¹⁰ "Something brings me here, because I believe that there are no strangers when it comes to victims. Everyone has someone here."

grandmother is inaccessible due to the lack of record and familial knowledge, she seeks to reconcile this by giving Maybe Esther, and countless other unknown victims, a story in the subjunctive. Telling Maybe Esther's story in this way, and calling her Maybe Esther, extends her as a figure that everyone can adopt as their connection to this tragedy and help to make the Holocaust a relevant event even in people who may have felt no connection.

As Petrowskaja continues to narrate Maybe Esther's story, she comments on the possibilities she is giving us in the novel. This shows that she is actively working on this imagined history using the subjunctive, rather than simply stating possibilities as facts. "Die Nachbarn müssen ihr geholfen haben, wie sonst?" (Petrowskaja 211).¹¹ This quote is not in the subjunctive mood in German, however I read it as subjunctive, as Petrowskaja is asking a subjunctive question, one that shows that she has thought through this scenario and has come up with only one possibility that makes sense. She knows that she can never actually verify how her great-grandmother got out of her apartment and must therefore rely on imagined possibilities based on facts and realistic expectations for how Maybe Esther may have experienced this event. Her speculation about the likelihood of the neighbors helping Maybe Esther also shows how people may use the subjunctive to shape the narrative into something they can believe happened. For Petrowskaja, it is unbelievable that Maybe Esther could have managed on her own at her age, and therefore her imagined possibility reflects what the living person believes to have been likely. This may be used as a coping mechanism, allowing the family member to better understand the circumstances their relative experienced in a more believable and accessible manner. It can also be used to construct an alternate history that allows for witnessing from the

¹¹ "The neighbors must have helped her, how else?"

perspective of a non-witness. The speculation and rhetorical question leave Maybe Esther's story open and discourage the audience to assume that there is only one possibility.

Nora Krug also explores the subjunctive as a tool to recreate a lost family history in her graphic novel *Heimat*. She explores the familial history of the Holocaust and the Second World War through her maternal grandfather Willi and her paternal uncle Franz-Karl. She uncovers a lot of history in archives, family stories, and in items such as school assignments and photographs. There are not always conclusive narratives about the actions of her relatives, and in these instances, she resorts to hypothesizing about what could have been. In the tenth chapter, titled "Searching for clues," she has created two pages containing multiple panels that display the hypothetical possibilities of what her grandfather may have been doing during Kristallnacht on the ninth and tenth of November 1938 (a nationwide night of coordinated pogroms in Germany).

The first of these pages bears the caption "Auch ohne die Zeitung gelesen zu haben, musste Willi gewusst haben; was in der Nacht vom 9. auf den 10. November 1938, der REICHSKRISTALLNACHT, geschah" (Krug Chapter 10 Page 12).¹² Underneath this caption, there are four panels that show the likely turn of events of that night and the following day in connection to Willi's life and work. The first panel shows the synagogue behind Willi's office on fire with members of the SA and SS watching as it burns. The second shows Willi gazing out of the window in his office at the burning synagogue with the caption "Das Straßenverzeichnis im hinteren Teil des Telefonbuchs von 1938 zeigt, dass sich Willis Büro im ersten Stock befand. Das jüdische Gemeindehaus und die Synagoge direkt dahinter waren von seinem Fenster im

¹² "Even without having to read the newspaper, Willi must have known what had happened on the night of the 9th to the 10th of November 1938, the REICHSKRISTALLNACHT."

zweiten Stock aus gut sichtbar.”¹³ Here Krug is considering the fact that Willi could have potentially viewed this hate crime as it happened, as he had a prime viewing location and something like this would have been hard to ignore if he had been in the office at the time.

In the third panel, we see Willi standing outside of the burnt synagogue with his hand on his hat, something that reads as hopeful thinking that Willi felt sympathy and sadness over the destruction of a Jewish place of worship. The accompanying caption reads “Selbst wenn er nicht in seinem Büro war, als die Synagoge in Brand gesteckt wurde, muss er am nächsten Tag das ausgebrannte Gebäude bemerkt haben.”¹⁴ Krug assumes that this event would have been impossible for Willi not to witness, due to his personal proximity to the location of the synagogue. I read the “he must have noticed the burned out building the next day” as a subjunctive phrase, as it is not known whether he truly saw it or not. The possibility that he did not see it is considered too rare to have been what actually happened.

The fourth and final panel on this page shows Anna, Willi’s wife and Krug’s grandmother, washing the laundry. The caption “und auch wenn Anna an diesem Tag ihre Wäsche per Hand gewaschen hätte, hätte er ihr wahrscheinlich davon erzählt, was er gesehen oder gehört hatte.”¹⁵ In this caption, we see the use of the subjunctive mood to describe what could have happened on the 10th of November 1938. “Hätte” (would have) denotes the

¹³ “The street directory in the back of the 1938 phonebook shows that Willi’s office was on the second floor. The Jewish community center and synagogue directly behind it would have been clearly visible from his third-floor window.”

¹⁴ “Even if he was not in the office while the synagogue was set on fire, he must have noticed the burned out building the next day.”

¹⁵ “and even if Anna had washed their clothes by hand that day, he would probably have told her about what he had seen or heard.”

subjunctive and therefore we know that it is not the historical fact or truth, rather a possibility that is based on the real event and circumstances of Willi and Anna on this day. The possibility of Anna's secondhand witnessing through Willi's story denotes how Anna is also implied in the knowledge and withholding of describing such events. Krug recognizes that it would have been unlikely for Willi (and Anna) to have not witnessed this event, and uses these drawings and the subjunctive to explore the possible ways they would have been witness to Kristallnacht.

Another moment of the subjunctive in *Heimat* comes later in chapter ten on the seventeenth page. Again, Krug is considering the various possibilities of her grandfather's whereabouts on the day after Kristallnacht. The caption at the top of the page reads "Vier schlichte Ziffern. Wo warst du am Morgen des 10. November 1938?" (Krug Chapter 10 Page 17).¹⁶ Underneath this are four panels showing four different images of her grandfather Willi in different locations and possible scenarios. The first shows Willi and another man in a car with the caption "a. Ich war in einem anderen Teil der Stadt."¹⁷ This illustrates the potential that Willi was at work as normal on this day, or perhaps that she is imagining his absolution of guilt related to the burning of the synagogue. This example is different than before, as Krug is showing us the different implications of the various possibilities and how she views her grandparents differently based on the different possible ways they engaged with Kristallnacht.

The second panel shows Willi in bed with his wife checking his temperature by placing her hand on his head and handing him a cup of tea. The caption "b. Ich war zu Hause."¹⁸ is simple, but with the image, gives the impression that Willi was completely innocent and

¹⁶ "Four simple numbers. Where were you on the morning of November 10th 1938?"

¹⁷ "a. I was in another part of the city."

¹⁸ "b. I was at home."

disconnected from the pogrom as well. The visual of him lying ill in bed makes us feel sympathetic for him, which is a slightly unpleasant feeling, as we know that he was a member of the National Socialist party and therefore was on the perpetrator side of history. Krug may have decided to portray him as unwell in this panel to soften the reality of her grandfather's identity, for the audience and also for herself. One aspect of the subjunctive is that it allows the author to write the possibilities they can imagine, and Krug takes advantage of that in order to position her grandfather as someone who had nothing to do with Kristallnacht. Since it is unknown where Willi was, this is a valid possibility that Krug decides to explore.

The bottom two panels paint a slightly different picture of Willi's potential involvement in Kristallnacht. The third panel shows Willi next to the window in his office, with a view of the smoke from the synagogue as it burns. The caption reads "c. Ich war in meinem Büro."¹⁹ This possibility was explored earlier in the chapter, and because it is repeated, perhaps this is what Krug believes to have most likely happened. This positions him as a witness and a bystander to the violence against the Jewish people, rather than being totally innocent or guilty. In the fourth panel, however, he is shown as being complicit in the pogrom, as he is on the street with the other participants including a man who is brandishing a cane next to a man with blood coming from his head, who he presumably hit. This panel is captioned "d. Ich war dabei, als es geschah."²⁰ The text is simple, but combined with the slight smirk on Willi's face in this picture, it shows a more serious possibility; that Willi was a perpetrator of anti-Semitic violence on Kristallnacht. He may not have merely been a witness, and Krug recognizes that in this panel. The option

¹⁹ "c. I was in my office."

²⁰ "d. I was there when it happened."

remains equally possible as him witnessing the pogrom from behind a window, being sick at home, or being in another part of town.

Krug leaves these possibilities open, refusing to choose one of the options as the truth, and instead includes all of them. In doing this, she respects history by acknowledging the various events that could have occurred without choosing one over the other as the “truth.” Maria Roca Lizarazu states in her article “Moments of Possibility. Holocaust Postmemory, Subjunctivity, and Futurity in Katja Petrowskaja’s *Vielleicht Esther* (2014) and Robert Menasse’s *Die Hauptstadt* (2017)” that the “subjunctive approach takes seriously the impossibility (and danger) of an exhaustive take on history or memory, and tries to account for that which has been lost and/or willfully suppressed.” The four options given on this page of *Heimat* demonstrate how Krug decides to utilize the subjunctive to explore the possible histories of Kristallnacht involving her grandparents. She does not simply pick an option that leaves her grandfather innocent, but rather, she acknowledges the possible ways he may have been complicit in anti-Semitism as a member of the National Socialist party. It is important for non-witnesses to leave the possibilities open rather than picking and choosing what they decide history to be, as the past is often remembered in relation to the present.

Conclusion

Holocaust literature is an extremely sensitive genre to write, due to the subject matter and the tension between the art of writing and the importance of representing the Holocaust as accurately as possible in order to preserve the history. There was no singular experience or perspective that can summarize the Holocaust. We may try to consolidate the memory of the Holocaust into a collective memory that is shared amongst the world at large. This collective memory is informed by the education and media consumed by individuals and may include certain icons and tropes as landmarks that help guide our understanding. Literature, both fictional and autobiographical, often includes interactions with these tropes to appeal to a wide audience and help signify the authenticity of the material they are reading. The collective memory is useful in this way but should not be the only representation of the Holocaust.

To combat the misrepresentation of a singular Holocaust experience, authors may use the subjunctive to explore a range of possibilities that could have occurred. One use is to discover lost stories and give a voice to the people who are no longer able to speak or write for themselves. This is especially important for representing the diverse nature of people who were affected by the Holocaust. Another use is for members of the second and third generations with postmemory to be able to work through their postmemory in a productive manner. Imagining possibilities allows them to better understand the unknowability of their family history and potentially come to terms with it. This is true for the descendants of both victims and perpetrators. The subjunctive also prevents the appropriation of the memories and experiences of those who were affected by the Holocaust, as it is merely a speculative act.

Deciding how to best preserve and represent the legacy and memory of the Holocaust is becoming an increasingly urgent problem, as we enter the post-survivor era. There may be a

variety of strategies that can accurately represent the Holocaust from the perspective of non-witnesses. The subjunctive mood may be one of the more effective strategies in Holocaust family memoirs and in Holocaust fiction to detail this event respectfully. It allows for many possible experiences and stories to be told that represent just how many lives were affected and how widespread the Holocaust was. It also prevents the singularity that the collective memory may be promoting. The only people who truly know what happened during the Holocaust and experienced it firsthand are dying, and they are taking their knowledge with them. The responsibility to keep the memory of this event alive now falls on the non-witness.

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