Memory Work of the Generation *After*: Making Sense of Grandparents' Pasts

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Introduction

The memory of life under the former regime, such as the Soviet period of 1944–1990 in Lithuania, raises numerous questions for those who did not experience this past directly yet are exposed to or already make memory-related policies. One could point out, for instance, the recent implementation of the so-called "Desovietization law" of December 2022[1] that, while banning official display and promotion of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, fuels public debates about the Soviet past. Academic literature showcases two approaches to the "new" generation raised and socialized after transformative regime changes or historical turning points. On the one hand, there is a hope of *change for a better, more nuanced relationship to the complicated past.* The profile of the nation's memory changes when younger generations come into being.[2] However, the content and direction of this "change" is not necessarily explicit. On the other hand, there is the hope of *continuity and transmission.* As previous generations experienced turbulent times and difficult historical circumstances, there are certain narratives that their descendants – generation of "confessions"[3] – are expected to embrace and transmit further.

1 Office of the Parliament of Lithuania, "Seimas," lines 1–5.

2 Nikžentaitis, *Valstybė*, 223.

3 Aleida Assmann introduces this term to point at the communicative relationship between the older generation that experienced various (disturbing) historical events and their predecessors who listen to their stories – "confessions." Assmann, *Shadows*, 164.

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What was my family member's relationship with the Soviet system? Were they victims of repressive policies or those who complied and lived well? Those were the questions people raised after the transformative regime change in Lithuania. They require *memory work*[4] – a symbolic process to deal with the family members' pasts. Reflections of the close ones' experiences also outline today's dominant moral categories, or, in other words, socially acceptable frameworks to present the former regime. In their memory work, grandchildren symbolically link and try to reconcile diverse meanings of the Soviet past from *collective*[5] and *communicative*[6] memory realms. The respective concepts will be presented in the following part of this article.

Scholars paid much more attention to other generations, such as the Estonian *doorstep generation* (coming of age in the late 1980s),[7] German *Wendekinder* (coming of age around the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989)[8] or Lithuanian generations born and raised in the Soviet period.[9] Research presented in this article focuses on understanding the Soviet period within the generation born shortly before or a few years after the transformative shift. In our case, the date of March 11, 1990, symbolically marks the shift towards a democratic state. Yet what constitutes this particular "memory" generation that was so close to the period of the former regime? Concerning the concept of *generation*, this article employs a Wittgensteinian perception of "family resemblance."[10] Generation *after* constitutes a group of different values, attitudes, preferences, which also varies in terms of age. However, two necessary attributes, or conditions, unite them as a symbolic group. First, their socio-political formation took place after 1990 with exposure to particular collective memory media,

4 Kuhn, *Family*, 61–68.
5 Olick, "Collective Memory," 338–341.
6 Assmann, "Communicative," 22.
7 Nugin, *Generation*, 100–122.
8 Heß, "Was bleibt," 71–87.
9 Šutinienė, "Tarp socializmo," 7–28.
10 Wennerberg, "The Concept," 107.

such as museums, monuments, memorials and memorial days commemorating the recent Soviet past and its victims. Second, it is the particular genealogical proclivity of their families: close relatives who experienced World War II and the Post-war (grandparents or great-grandparents), and parents who were born and raised during the Soviet regime and could share their memories.

The article is based on the doctoral dissertation defended at Vilnius University in 2022. Qualitative data was generated during family conversations conducted in 2018–2020 with 16 Lithuanian families of three family generations. The qualitative interpretive study did not aim at representativeness: the goal was to extract memory work strategies and add more knowledge on principles that guide understanding of the complicated past.

1. Memory, Family, Generation and the State

It is the official (collective) memory that enables the past to meet the current needs of the large collectivity – the state.[11] As a potential source of knowledge about this particular past, it also outlines a moral framework to evaluate the past events, their participants and historical processes. In the Lithuanian case, it primarily defines the former Soviet regime as occupational and repressive. Those meanings stem from and are reinforced by official memory policies, monuments, plaques, memorial days (black ribbons attached to Lithuanian flags commemorating victims of terror and deportations), memorials honoring the victims of the regime and freedom fighters, institutions such as the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights in Vilnius) and other memory media.[12] On the other hand, the term *communicative memory* applies to the realm of memories in a family. According to Jan Assmann, it encompasses about 80 years, thus, memories of three generations. Communicative memory encompasses what

[11] Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural," 98–99.
[12] Erll, *Memory*, 113–143.

people remember and can discuss in their daily lives.[13] As Harald Welzer and Claudia Lenz noted, family is a genuine instance for a communicative memory to circulate; it is a place where family generations reflect on the meaning of the past and assign to it certain value.[14] Furthermore, it has a deeply personal dimension: while inheriting the parents and grandparents' memories, we inherit the identity of *who we are* and where we come from.[15] Family conversations about the past, shared stories and silences constitute a particular identity background for younger generations to build their self-understanding. However, families might share specific traditions of what stories are *worth* transmitting further, especially concerning difficult historical circumstances such as wars, regime transformations, state repressions and other.

Generation is a widely debated term, referring to the theories by the sociologist Karl Mannheim.[16] Different generations experience the present differently; their formative years add a footprint on their socio-political profile and the ways they interpret social, political and cultural worlds. Ernst Bloch refers to this difference as "the non-contemporaneity of contemporaneous."[17] Concerning conceptual complicities, in this article, generation primarily refers to *generations in families*, namely grandparents, great-grandparents, parents and grandchildren. However, the term *generation after* carefully applies as well: particular conditions form them as a particular "community of memory," understood as a group of people whose "memory" (understanding) of the past regime shares symbolic attributes outlined in the following parts of the article.

Family is an arena where its members construct, share and contest different narratives of the past.[18] Individuals, their close

13 Assmann, "Re-framing," 41–42.
14 Welzer and Lenz, *Opa*, 15.
15 Barclay and Koefoed, "Family, Memory," 3–12.
16 Mannheim, *The Sociological*, 276–298.
17 Bloch, "Non-synchronism," 22–38.
18 Welzer and Lenz, *Opa*, 1–15.

ties and mutual relationships constitute family as a social group. Its members share loyalty and closeness; however, as Jan Lohl[19] notes, loyalty does not necessarily come from warm emotional attachment. Traumatic experiences of being repressed, deported or prosecuted leave traces within the intra-family relationships and impact what is shared, talked about, or silenced about the conflicted past.[20] There is a wide range of experiences between the rather extreme categories of perpetrators and direct victims, especially within the context of a repressive regime, and they find their unique way into family members' narratives about the complicated past.

Family members construct their narratives about the past based on their recalled experiences and currently dominant collective memory-level meanings. In other words, not only grandchildren without the Soviet experience interpret and make sense of their family stories, so do older generations. As Kenneth Gergen notes, while constructing their life stories, people often employ particular demarcation lines, emphasize certain turning points that lead to the "valuable endpoint" that could be the highest career achievement or other.[21] This article also assumes that grandparents construct their life stories vis-a-vis their grandchildren in a way that educates, transmits certain values and positions their life in a particular way, also taken into account the dominant collective-level meanings.

2. Analyzing Memory Work

Memory work of this particular generation requires interpreting, contrasting or putting together different meanings and making sense of their family members' pasts. Remembering-in-process took place during family conversations where the oldest gener-

19 Lohl, "Totally Average," 33–49.
20 Vaskelienė et al., "Komunikacija," 91–104.
21 Gergen, "Mind," 451–472.

ations narrated their life story, the parents' generation shared their memories of life in the Soviet period, and the third generation was present. On a separate occasion, grandchildren were asked to re-narrate the grandparents' story and answer semi-structured interview questions. This approach involves *narration* and *re-narration* that partially originate in Frederic Bartlett's psychology works[22] and were later applied by Welzer and his colleagues[23] researching German family memory of the Nazi past. This holds a premise that after listening to the original story and later being asked to recall it, people re-narrate it in a specific way. Re-narration's scope and structure often reflects the current cultural, political and social norms. In other words, in case of memory research, re-narration empowers researcher's interpretation of interaction between collective and communicative level memory.

16 Lithuanian families involved in this research differed in their members' occupations, places of birth, current geographical locations and, most importantly, their narrated Soviet-period experiences. Being homogenous in terms of ethnicity (ethnic Lithuanians), they presented a range of professional and social paths of the two oldest family generations. Among the oldest interlocutors there were cadres or their spouses of Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist party and the Council of Ministers (2), managers at research institutes (2), head of a division in a medical institution (1), doctors (1), school principal (1), teacher (1), spouses of collective farm's chairmen (2), member of regional-level authority structures (1), factory worker (1), collective farm worker (1) service sector workers (2) and a lawyer (1). Members of the parents' generation also varied in their professions and age (birth dates ranged from 1951 until 1970).

Grandchildren's dates of birth varied from 1983 (experience of Soviet pre-school and primary education) until 2001. In terms of education, the majority had a university education or were seeking one; one had obtained a secondary education, and two

22 Bartlett, *Remembering*, 5–10.

23 Welzer, "Re-narrations," 7–10.

were about to finish high school. Education might restrict the group's heterogeneity, pointing at a potentially higher knowledge of history. However, analysis of their narratives demonstrated a rather limited knowledge of historical facts. Apart from education, other socio-demographical characteristics were considered, particularly the place of birth and the acquiring of a secondary education. Exposure to collective memory media, such as museums, memorials or monuments, differs in small villages and large cities. While pupils from larger towns have more chances to visit state museums, regions often offer access to remains of the collective farms or local memorials to the fallen anti-Soviet partisans. Thus, regarding this specific exposure, the grandchildren's group is rather heterogenous.

Family conversations were organized and attended with "ethnographic sensibility"[24] noticing tone, gestures, mimics, photos, postcards or other artefacts shared during conversations. Furthermore, the location of the conversation was also taken into consideration: different inner family dynamics based on relationships between different generations, including economic ones, might have an impact on older generations' narratives and grandchildren's re-narrations. All family members signed informed consent forms for this research and agreed upon recording. Grandparents' life stories, parents' share of their memories and the family conversations that followed usually lasted about 2–2.5 hours, whereas grandchildren's re-narrations and semi-structured interviews mostly took 1–1,5 hours.

Interpretive analysis of narrations and re-narrations represented the logic of abduction and was generally based on inference to the best explanation.[25] Interpretation process focused on elements of a particular narrative and later moved to the broader context of a particular family's web of narratives. Based on those

[24] Pader, "Seeing," 194–208.
[25] Mackonis, "Geriausio," 151–152.

two contexts, formulation of several hypotheses to explain why a particular element/theme was emphasized or not mentioned followed. The most plausible was selected as the "right" one. The interpretive analysis identified themes/thematic blocs in each family conversation while moving from the particular case to the universal picture and vice versa, thus following the basic steps of the hermeneutical circle. Assuming that silence is inherent to memory, interpretation of what was unsaid and why took into account Charles Stone's[26] suggestion and analyzed the potential motives of the *unsaid:* intentional or random silence. With regard to the *unsaid,* collective-level memory, meanings were taken into account, and several hypotheses were carefully tested with regard to family members' motivations to emphasize or silence certain aspects of each other's stories. Finally, the researcher's positionality also had to be reflected – she represents this particular memory generation of interest, and this affects her interpretations. Some aspects of the grandparents' or parents' stories could have been misunderstood. Elderly interlocutors also could have considered the researcher's younger age while constructing their narratives (for instance, adding more explanations, avoiding particular wording that could not be understood by someone who did not live in the Soviet period). On the other hand, the researcher shares a common vocabulary with the generation-in-focus.

3. Memory Work Strategies

The above-mentioned interpretation steps extracted several memory work strategies that metaphorically assist grandchildren in combining meanings from communicative and collective-level memory and thus make sense of their family members' pasts. The register of the strategies could be vaster. However, current interpretive tools and range of qualitative material from family conversations result in the following set.

[26] Stone et al., "Toward," 39.

3.1. Adding New Meaning

This memory work strategy applies when the third generation wants to see their grandparents as those *who did not comply* with the regime, at least to some extent. An image of a family member who resisted or at least did not approve of the Soviet system represents how family generations interpret the *protest.* Family conversations reveal the need for the image of non-compliance; family generations, however, put different emphasis on what it meant; danger of repressions is linked to the time periods when their intensity lowered. A family where the grandmother was a member of regional-level governing structures in the 1960s narrate:

> Grandmother: *I used to go to the church in Kaunas. But we could not reveal that.*
>
> Mother*: After Christmas Eve, the next day, parents would say: "Just don't say to anyone at school that we had Christmas Eve dinner." There was such a fear.*
>
> Grandson*: Well, there were deportations. One could get the ticket...* (Family from Lazdijai district)

Another way to add a new meaning to grandparents' stories is to assign motives of resistance and non-compliance to everyday situations, especially to the so-called shifty practices. Scholars tend not to attach the meaning of resistance to those illegal practices – as Nerija Putinaitė claims they should be seen as actions conditioned and closely guarded by the Soviet system.[27] The following excerpt reveals how grandmother and grandson discuss shifty practices in her work life:

> Grandson: *Based on the stamps on our dishes, I could say that many of them are from there* (canteen – explanation by the author[28]).

[27] Putinaitė, *Nenutrūkusi*, 2007.

[28] Any further explanations/clarifications of the interview quotes made by the author are given in the brackets.

Grandma*: Well, you know, I exchanged them. Listen, I did not have any plates here, only old ones. And we received so many in out canteen (*"užvežė" in Lithuanian). *I got along very well with the manager of the canteen. I say, "Can I exchange?" He says, "Yes, just bring me those from your home; I need to maintain the number."*

Grandson*: Well, they say that Soviet times were bad.*

Grandma*: I brought my old plates and exchanged them.* (Family from Ignalina district)

Grandson later in the one-to-one interview*: Well, I feel from grandma's story about her work and everyday life in the "combination economy", constantly […] She also told about her "combination" yesterday. Everyone was melting in the same pot, knew how to solve everything very stealthily […] A very resistant, hardened person. One goes with the flow and survives.* (Grandchild, 35 years, Vilnius)

Grandchildren expand the meaning of *non-compliance*. For instance, while re-narrating grandpa's life story, granddaughter sees his risky, unusual hobbies as an example of non-compliant behavior. In contrast, grandpa emphasizes his good connections that enabled those hobbies:

And I already built a house on [...] street, a cooperative house, and I was the chairman of its community. I don't know, they may have taken into account my personality. Well, they say, "Build it and I will teach you how to fly the plane." This business was for me. I did not fly much, but still.

Not everyone managed to produce all this technology and amuse themselves every weekend. Flying, swimming, what else – well, he was very openly against the Soviet (regime). *It is strange that he was not deported or something.* (Grandchild, 27 years, Vilnius)

3.2. Justification

The *justification* strategy applies when family members recall "uncomfortable" experiences, achievements and stances. Current collective-level meanings constitute this particular "uncomfortability." High career achievements, as well as positively narrated aspects of life under the Soviet regime, together with cur-

rent positive attitudes, encourage grandchildren to *justify* why and how their close ones managed to have a *good* life.

Renaming grandparents' work positions helps grandchildren to *justify* their higher status. Chairing collective farms is referred to as "public service," and grandma's membership of the commission recruiting for KGB becomes "work for the Ministry of Interior". When exposed to successful stories, the younger generation emphasizes their close ones' moral values and talents and explicit or implicit attempts to *change or outplay* the wrong system.

> *He* (grandpa, chairman of a collective farm) *knew very well that potatoes would not grow if you planted them this way. So he planted only the front like that and then the rest normally, in furrows. When inspectors checked, they were satisfied. And he also said that in his collective farm corn did not grow well. So he planted corn on the outside and potatoes in the middle of the fields...* (Grandchild, 33 years, Vilnius)

The notion of *inevitability* helps to see grandparents' choices in the light of collective-level meanings of resistance:

> *When my grandma lived and actively worked and studied, no one could imagine that things could be different. There was no need to oppose the system, for no one thought that something would change.* (Grandchild, 28 years, Šiauliai district)

Consequently, when exposed to grandparents' narratives about social security, housing and stability, the younger generation at least partially questions the collective-level meanings of the repressive regime. Granddaughter reflects on different experiences of her own family, namely grandpa's career in the governing structures, including the Council of Ministers, and the prosecution of grandma's father:

> *Well, it may be easier for my grandpa that my great-grandfather, who was deported, was not angry, he reconciled with his fate. Maybe there was naturally this attitude in the family – it happened, it passed, it was not so extremely bad. We probably think that it was unbearably bad. It depends on how one actually sees this situation.* (Grandchild, 33 years, Vilnius)

3.3. Hyperbolization

Older family members' narratives about fear, danger or suffering during various periods of the Soviet past get particular attention from the grandchildren. While re-narrating about diverse negative experiences, they additionally emphasize the fear, pain or desperation. Meanings from both collective and communicative levels reinforce one another. For instance, the granddaughter re-narrates her grandma's deportation story and adds yet more extreme examples of her experiences:

> *We went to beg for food when we were brought there. All three of us went, we used to go to the commander because our storehouse was locked. Like prisoners, the same.* (Grandparent, 82 years, Alytus district)

> *In order to get some energy, they used to take a handful of salt and drink it with a glass of water. Their only food.* (Grandchild, 31 years, Vilnius)

Grandparents' stories encourage grandchildren to expand the meaning of suffering/difficulties to a wider range of experiences in the former regime:

> *Deportees often emphasize that they were deported, they care about Lithuania. But those other people also faced difficulties. No palaces, no joy. There is a great division. Deportees have this victimhood syndrome; of course, they experienced horrible things. [...] But it diminishes other experiences of those who stayed here. No one talks about this.* (Grandchild, 35 years, Vilnius)

A rather positive tone of grandad's work experiences and career path during the Soviet period tends to get additional reminders about the *bad times* by his granddaughter:

> *Well, in my life, I was lucky to be surrounded by decent people. I was not terrorized in my work, to the contrary, I received advice.* (Grandparent, 82 years, Vilnius)

> *Others reported horror. And grandpa recall that time – well, not that it was not – of course, it was horrible. But his studies were good, good environment, later good employers, good employees.* (Grandchild, 20 years, Vilnius)

3.4. Maneuvering Between the Meanings: Emphasis or Silence

This thematic field is rather broad: it encompasses images of Soviet security structures, spying and reporting, and mutual distrust within the Sovietized society. Grandparents often imply awareness of colleagues who "reported" or "spied" on the co-workers. Narratives on early Post-war years often refer to interrogations family members were forced into, or were aware of. About later periods, family conversations also involve references to encounters with the "KGB" in one way or another:

> *He* (spouse) *somehow withstood, did not join. But he had a card. KGB something, reserve list, something, I don't know.* (Parent, 61 years, Lazdijai district)

> *Back then, I think, those with higher education were on the reserve lists.*

Collective-level meanings link abstract images of security structures to perpetratorship and responsibility for a nation's suffering; for instance, the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights located in the former "KGB building" (Gestapo headquarters in 1941–1944) represents this link. Moreover, public debates on (unfinished) lustration and mysterious "KGB lists"[29] constitute an atmosphere of *not knowing how to evaluate* family narratives that mention any of those themes. It results in maneuvering between meanings, switching emphases and rather abstract wording of the third family generation.

3.5. Seeking to Understand

The strategy of *understanding* (or trying to understand) applies when heroic collective-level images of partisans during the anti-Soviet partisan war of 1944–1953 confront diverse meanings

[29] Girnius, "KGB," 4–5.

of living during the Postwar in communicative memory. Oldest family members recall encounters with the partisans and carefully evaluate those experiences, often referring to the collective-level meanings of heroic fight for freedom. Complicated memories of the fight where the frontline was so close to home result in frequent silences. Underlying issues of *being on the right side* confront their grandchildren and encourage reflection on their family members' stances: what did it mean to be scared of partisans? What did it mean to recall brutality instead of the sacrifice of *forest brothers*? Who did the family members support?

> *When we saw our neighbors killed, we reacted differently. There was a time when we were looking forward to the end of this fight. They* (the partisans) *were brutal towards the end, at the beginning, it was different.* (Grandparent, 90 years, Šiauliai district)

> *I think the circumstances in that district were really complicated. There were killings and robberies. As grandma told us, people in the country-side suffered more, they had to feed the partisans. People went to the forest... It is not so self-explanatory.* (Grandchild, 28 years, Šiauliai district)

Grandchildren retrospectively add to grandparents' stories the element of awareness of the *cause* of the fight:

> *They left one cow and one horse […]. They took the grain, put it into their cart. They told us to stay quiet as fishes for a day.* (Grandparent, 79 years, Vilnius)

> *Partisans took their cows and horses. And it is not that my grandma is angry with those partisans. She understood that it was crucial. Some people are angry; they have a right to be angry.* (Grandchild, 27 years, Vilnius)

Understanding enables one to solve those complicated mnemonic challenges raised by confronting meanings. It opens up room for painful experiences of the *local people* whose support to the partisans often led to their suffering. Heroic image of a freedom fight confronts everyday struggles in the *forest* and allows for *understanding* the tactics of the partisans, including threatening the *locals*. Furthermore, it promotes a more diverse

picture of the Post-war, outlining human complicities, sacrifices, and the pain of not being able to reflect upon extreme experiences until 1990.

Conclusions

The complicated task to align family-level and dominant narratives from collective memory media encourages the grandchildren generation to understand, explain, and justify rather than fundamentally question or seek to change the way life under the former regime is officially represented. While aware of its Soviet past, the state offers limited meanings. Collective memory media foremostly represent the painful beginning of the occupation with immediate repressions and then switches to the events *at the end*, eventually leading to freedom and independence. The in-between range of experiences rather remains in the symbolic margins. Thus, understanding of the past of this generation *after* forms under restricted conditions and, as qualitative interpretive research demonstrates, requires various memory work strategies. *Justification applies*, among other instances, to make sense of the family member's higher social status obtained during the Soviet period. *Understanding* applies when reflecting on the anti-Soviet partisan war. Grandchildren tend to *add a new meaning to a grandparents' story* to present their family members as those who *did not comply* or *resisted the former system*. Narratives about confrontations with the security structures require *maneuvering between different meanings*. Finally, *hyperbolization* applies to stress the family member's experiences of fear, danger, or, to underline their negative attitudes towards the experiences in the Soviet past.

The urge to justify those grandparents' experiences that represent a *good, comfortable life* under the former regime put grandchildren in a complicated situation. They face difficulties in identifying with the family narratives and, consequently, to collective-level narratives as well. Ignorance of some elements of

the family members' past complicates the *transmission* of stories at both levels, family and the state. Identification with one's *roots* as well as with the state-level narratives remains restricted. On the contrary, grandchildren's memory work strategies emphasize sacrifice and unconditional striving for freedom when grandparents mention deportations to Siberia or other experiences of repression. In this case, family and state-level narratives support and strengthen each other.

Memory work strategies of *justification, understanding, adding a new meaning, maneuvering between different meanings, and hyperbolization* showcase the complicities of remembrance in the state after the transformative regime change. They add knowledge on how (un)coming to terms with the complicated past takes place. Recent memory policy developments, fueled by the geopolitical challenges in the region (ongoing war in Ukraine), demonstrate a tendency to strengthen collective-level meanings of suffering from the Soviet regime. Thus, transmitting more positive memories of the Soviet past (and a more critical approach to it), one could assume, will be even more restricted.

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