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Commentary

Family History and Searching for Hidden Trauma—A Personal Commentary

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Abstract: Background: Searching family history is now popular through increased internet access coinciding with a need for understanding identity. Prior unresolved war trauma can help explain impacts on subsequent generations and the need to search for family narrative, particularly in refugee families. This paper explores the search for trauma narratives through personal family history research, with links to community groups. Method: The author's own Polish family history research provides examples of trauma and loss from World War II in Poland. This is supplemented by quotes from an existing interview study of second-generation Poles to amplify themes and indicate their wider community relevance.

Keywords: family tree; war trauma; attachment; identity; immigration; forgetting; emotional geography

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1. Introduction

Searching for family histories seems to have increased in recent years, in part, because of the ease of accessing materials through the internet (Nicolson 2017). It mirrors an increased need for understanding familial and national identity for refugee or immigrant groups and the diaspora more generally (Brubaker 2005). This has led to the rise in companies aiding these searches (e.g., ancestry.com) and the popularity of television programmes in the UK such as the BBC's 'Who do you think you are?', exploring the family background of celebrities through documentation, historical context, and visiting places of significance. This programme often highlights collective trauma events of the last century or earlier, for example, the Holocaust (through the family stories of Robert Rinder or Helena Bonham Carter), the Partition of India (with Anita Rani), or the slave trade (with Ainsley Herriott), all these issues having social relevance today. The historical events are examined in terms of how they impacted family members at the time and their impacts for subsequent generations, including the one seeking the story. Thus, family history has evolved from simply documenting family tree members by name and date of birth/death to a more social, historical, and psychological approach, investigating family members in context and linking their stories to specific places and historical events (Nelson 2008). Often these stories include trauma-related themes.

Relatedly, an impact of 'emotional geography' (Gregory 2011) or attachment to place is invoked with the question of 'where is considered home?' given the movement of populations and diasporas (e.g., from Eastern Europe, India, or the Caribbean to the UK). This tie to places abroad can affect the social identity of the generation who first migrated, undertaking sometimes hazardous journeys and often finding adversity on arrival (e.g., racism, poverty, language, and cultural difficulties). It also can affect the second generation born in the new country in understanding family narrative, particularly those about trauma, loss, and relocation. Thus, the historical becomes personal and contemporary. It seems these individual stories strike a chord with connected communities and the larger population in gaining a greater understanding of our current ethnic populations and our recent history. This has made personal family history research into a communal and, at

times, global affair. Family members can now be tracked across countries and continents (through document archives, internet, or DNA searches) and sites of family origin and possible sites of trauma events visited so that descendants can have empathy with their forebears' experience.

Genealogy embraces the interdisciplinary interests of academics who adapt traditional methods to fit this relatively new enterprise (Zerubavel 2011). From history, it borrows archival scrutiny of documentation of early family members—birth and death certificates, names on commemorative monuments, recipients of gallantry medals, etc. Historians would also be familiar with diary and informal handwritten biographical accounts and the use of photographs or family paintings to elicit information (Paperno 2004). From immigration studies emerge survey methods (e.g., census data), records of ship passenger lists, and interviews of those who settle in a new country (White 2011). Qualitative methods of data collection from psychology, such as interviews, are often combined with formal documents (e.g., case notes) for triangulation of information in pluralistic approaches (Frost and Nolas 2013). Psychologists aim to look at personal emotional impacts of past experiences, for example, immigrant journeys, including those incurred through war, separation, and loss, to seek understanding of clinical issues. Given that emotional impacts can sometimes cross generations, learning of earlier generation's trauma experiences may inform family dynamics, attachment attitudes, and impacts on children (Braga et al. 2012). Understanding both the experiences and the processes of transmission can help with understanding risk, resilience, and recovery in relation to mental health issues.

Collating family narratives can also be considered part of a therapeutic approach. In narrative therapy, for example, the aim is for the client to tell and retell their family history until a level of clarity and understanding is reached (Semmler and Williams 2000). Whilst not generally seeking external validation, the client and therapist together see how particular themes and experiences influence the client's perceptions, emotions, or behaviour. This can illuminate whether the issues to be resolved are those experienced by parents rather than the client directly, through impacts on communication, family attachment, and parental mental health (Braga et al. 2012). Even when a disorder such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) ensues, a detailed revisiting of traumatic events can release the hidden emotion if undertaken in a time and place of safety (van der Kolk 2015). By uncovering and resolving the initial traumatic experience, individuals may need to construct a narrative to communicate and work through the associated emotions. This may be aided through constructing family histories of prior events and, where relevant, linking these to historical events for confirmation. Thus, searching for family history can increase well-being and a sense of identity and belonging. This may be enhanced through recontacting lost family members or through community groups to develop communicative memory (Devlin 2020).

A pertinent question is 'why?' people seek to research their family trees and narrative, and 'for whom?' they are doing it. Many in midlife seek to pass narratives of family history onto their children to aid a sense of identity (Freedman 2015). In addition, a concern for remembrance of little-known historical events which affected the family can be a motive. When searching for commonly held political events, these family histories can also create a community narrative about traumatic events, including those of war and deportation. I consider here the impact of traumatic experiences linked to war and political events in the past and how it can affect the task of family history research and the impacts on survivors, families, and affected communities. For example, a recent study of PTSD in Poland among older-aged WWII survivors showed rates of 35%, compared to the 2% or so expected in the general population (Lis-Turlejska et al. 2018). This was despite being assessed some 70 years after the events of war trauma occurred and was more prominent where there was a lack of social acknowledgement of the experience (Rzeszutek et al. 2020). Thus, the impacts of trauma on first-generation survivors can be lifelong, with implications that recognising their stories might be a helpful intervention.

When trauma is unresolved, it can lead to many impacts including re-experiencing of the event and hypervigilance (e.g., through nightmares and flashbacks), as well as avoidance of thinking about it (even amnesia for some events), as in PTSD. This can affect other family members, such as children, when it is witnessed in the domestic arena (Zasiekina 2020). Whilst some unresolved trauma involves an inability to talk about the events, in traumatic bereavement, individuals often want to talk repeatedly about the lost person to search and yearn for reminders (Samuel 2020), although some aspects of remembering and interpreting the loss may also be impaired. Elements of blame—of self or close others—can make other relationships more toxic.

Events related to war trauma include a range of experiences involving various threats to life, involving the self, close others, and the community. In addition to *traumatic loss* (through violent bereavement or enforced separation or deportation), it encompasses *danger* associated with violence and threat of death, *entrapment* associated with enforced captivity, *deprivation* associated with starvation, and lack of shelter or enforced transportation. War trauma is thus not a single experience and often occurs over months or years. Communities and individuals may experience different levels of proximity to danger and varying 'doses' of trauma with implications for severity of clinical disorder arising across the lifespan (Felitti et al. 1998). There can also be issues of later continued traumatic stress experiences (Pat-Horenczyk and Schiff 2019; Wolmer et al. 2015) in both the first, second, and even third generations which may prolong impacts. Family history searches may be an informal way of individuals resolving their family trauma and, at times, gaining support from joining groups with similar experiences. Hopefully, this can lead to resolution and accompanying higher levels of well-being (Samuel 2020).

Understanding events of past trauma more fully may help resolve some of the impacts and issues raised in day-to-day family life. For example, the traumatised person's responses such as catastrophising over brief separations or exaggerated perceptions of neighbourhood danger and community mistrust, and fear of not having enough food may transmit to children growing up (Zasiekina 2020). Impacts may appear differently in the children or grandchildren of war survivors (Sigal et al. 1988) and include behavioural problems and problems in forming relationships (Fossion et al. 2003). This may be accompanied by an acute awareness of parental burden (Letzter-Pouw et al. 2014) as well as difficulties over a sense of identity and belonging (Cohn and Morrison 2018). Additional difficulties may be found in attachment and relationships, given the lack of a secure base (Bowlby 1988). Conversely, many individuals and families show resilience. This may be because the trauma becomes resolved in the first generation or due to resilience factors having a protective effect on subsequent family members (Bonanno 2004). Both aspects will be explored here.

2. Materials and Methods

The method employed was to collate all relevant family documents (specifically letters, diaries, and official documents) related to particular individual experiences, set these against the historical backdrop on a local level, and examine family members' responses and behaviours in relation to psychological themes. The experience of key family members described is mapped here through their letters which provide context, personal experience, and emotional response. I consider the history–psychology link in more depth as an explication of person–environment context and refugee experience.

In this paper, my focus is narrowed to my grandmother Maria, including her reaction to both her daughter-in-law Myszka's experience and her enforced separation from her only son (my father) during WWII. Emergent themes identified in relation to traumatic events include 'hidden trauma', 'remembrance/forgetting', and 'subterfuge/secrecy'. These link psychological themes to historical and political ones and speak to issues of processing trauma and traumatic loss, disclosure of events, barriers to such disclosure, and commemorating the past. I specifically consider traumatic experiences of WWII, together with internal and external barriers to disclosing trauma, which research shows can increase the

risk of clinical disorders such as PTSD (see, for example, clinical approaches through van der Kolk's work as well as trauma therapy, as espoused by Judith Herman). Throughout this paper, the distinction is made between traumatic events/exposure and traumatic impacts/disorder—following DSM 5 definitions (APA 2013). Exposure to trauma is to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violation. Exposure includes direct experience, witnessing the event in person or learning of the event to a close person, or exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event. This includes the experience of war. Impacts of trauma, in contrast, include emotional response, symptoms such as PTSD, and unresolved trauma related to fragmented recall or inability to disclose the experience.

Another more general theme identified is 'emotional geography' which is about attachment to a place where we call home and a sense of belonging. This speaks to our sense of identity and is relevant to those deported or refugee and the feelings of dislocation which can impact future generations. This relates to the second element of the method which extends the single-family case study to include quoted experience from other WWII Polish families in UK second-generation interviews (White and Goodwin 2019). This set of 28 interviews was originally arranged by themes, and those relevant to this analysis include 'parents, grandparents, and trauma' and 'long lost family in Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine'. Many of the interviewees had parents who were forcibly deported by Russian troops from Poland in February 1940 to Siberian labour camps in ethnic cleansing (Davies 2015). They lived in inhumane conditions until release, after Russia joined the allies when they were sent on long journeys for refuge in British Commonwealth countries across three continents. These stories are not widely known (Devlin 2020). Their inclusion here is to provide some direct interview quotes which resonate with the themes identified to indicate potentially unresolved trauma from events not publicly acknowledged. They also serve to broaden the range of the single case study to a community group.

3. Results

3.1. My Family Story Outline

My grandmother Maria, my father's first wife Myszka, and my father Jurek were living in Warsaw at the outbreak of WWII, my father having married Myszka a year earlier. Warsaw was badly bombed under invasion and suffered harsh Nazi occupation for the next five years. Whilst this affected all the local population, it was the harshest for the many Jews of the city (and those transported in from other areas and countries, of around half a million people), who were restricted to a small, overcrowded ghetto area (equivalent to 10 city blocks). They suffered multiple deprivations and, ultimately, death either through being sent to concentration camps or through the harsh suppression of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising in 1943 (Ringelblum 2015). This was the first of two civilian uprisings; the second in 1944 was also harshly suppressed. My grandmother in Warsaw lived through the occupation in her own home, unaware of Myszka's secret activities for the Polish Resistance. Myszka was caught and sent to Auschwitz where she died a year later. I have some of her story from her wartime letters to my father and my grandmother's letters to my father after the war and more from her nephew in Poland who made sudden contact recently. My father's close cousin Staś was also conscripted into Polish forces at the start of the war but disappeared in the first months of occupation. Several years later, after the war, his death in the massacre of 20,000 Polish officers in 1940 at Katyn was known by the families involved. However, responsibility for the massacre was delayed for nearly 50 years.

My father, newly conscripted into the Polish army in 1939, was ordered to make his way to France to join the allied forces. He came to England in 1943, was recruited by Special Operations Executive (SOE), Churchill's 'secret army' (Crowdy 2016), and trained as a paratrooper to be dropped behind enemy lines in Warsaw to aid the Uprising in August 1944. At the last minute, this plan was countermanded by Churchill, and Warsaw faced the destruction of German troops and then occupation by Soviet Russia (Davies 2004).

This information is taken from my mother's notes of discussion with my father, as well as from photographs and official documents. A sad corollary was that on VE day celebrations 1945, Poles were forbidden from being represented in UK commemoration, under Russian pressure. They were viewed by Russians as deserting their country in order to fight with British forces (fulfilled with great heroism and as the largest foreign fighting force against fascism). My parents met on VE day in an English midland town, my English mother smitten by the sad but handsome Pole who felt unable to join in the celebrations.

3.2. My Grandmother's Traumatic Experience

My grandmother Maria's experience of traumatic events during the war in Poland is first revealed in her letters to my father in England some months after the war in 1946. This was the first she knew of his survival, having last heard from him in France in 1942, and she made an official search in January 1946 to alleviate her 'torment of uncertainty', as evidenced by the following letter:

> *Dear Sir,*
>
> *I would earnestly like to ask you if could let me know whether you have any news about the fate of my son, Jerzy Tadeusz Czechowski, born 16 October 1913. The last communication I had from him was on 10 August 1942. In Spring 1943, thanks to your information, I knew that he was alive and well, since then there has been no news. Please forgive me if I am causing you any inconvenience, even more so that you yourself are suffering, but the torments of uncertainty, which I am undergoing because of the lack of information about my only son, may explain my boldness. I will be everlastingly grateful for any, even the most trivial, information. I thank you in anticipation.* (Bifulco 2017, p. 170) (Page numbers of the letters below are also from this reference).

Maria managed to make contact with her son Jurek in February 1946, and they make contact after nearly four years of silence and her 'terror and despair'.

> *My dearest son, my dearest Jurek*
>
> *I'm beginning my letter with your words: today I lived through the most beautiful day of my life. For nearly four years I have not had a single word from you. I will not dwell on the years of German occupation because there aren't enough words of terror and despair, but all that was as nothing compared to the two months of August and September in 1944. On 1st October after capitulation, those who were left alive had to wander away looking for somewhere to live. I spent half a year in a village 25km from Krakow. On 23rd March 1945 I returned to Warsaw which was in ruins. By some miracle our house survived although it was very badly damaged, without a roof, but it could be used. Of course, I left with only the clothes I was wearing and returned to completely nothing.* (p. 171)

She writes later that year (April 1946) about her living conditions.

> *I live in just one room, the one facing the street. The rest of the dwelling has been taken over by the family of a minor railway official. It consists of five people who even before my return, took over the whole part of the house that had not been devastated. I had to repair the room facing the street, that had been ruined during the Uprising, before I could move in on 8th July 1945. For three months I had to take advantage of the hospitality of neighbours. You probably know that your flat was plundered in 1939 and the furniture was sold. Not even the smallest keepsake was left. Whereas my flat was robbed of everything after the Warsaw Uprising. So we are both very poor.* (p. 172)

My grandmother is also the one who had to update my father by letter of family losses.

> *Myszka, your wife, was sent to Auschwitz in October 1943 and from that time there has been no news of her. From our closer family, Leszek, Mirek's brother, died in action in 1939 and Uncle Janek's two sons Włodek and Jurek were shot in the forest. Also, no signs*

> *of life from Staś, the son of Aunt Julia and Walek. The rest of the family are alive and managing somehow.* (p. 171)

Maria has the courage to tell Jurek of Myszka's fate in a later letter in May 1946.

> *Jurek my dear, I didn't want to add to your troubles, so I didn't tell you the whole truth straight away. Myszka is no longer alive. I received her death certificate from Auschwitz. She died on 10 January 1944. She stopped coming to see me about one and a half years before this and cut off any contact with our whole family.* (p. 173)

The bearing of such bad news is in itself vicarious trauma, both for the giver and receiver of the information. I do not know how my father received this news or how painful it was for my grandmother to write it. However, it is not easy to disclose by means of a slow postal system nor yet to receive news of loss similarly by letter.

My grandmother writes about her own health also in May 1946.

> *As for my hearing, there is probably no hope of a cure. Firstly because of the cold in unheated apartments (seven winters already) I had chronic catarrh in my ears and finally I lost my hearing during the Uprising when I was hit by a so called 'szafa'. The worst thing under the sun. It is a missile of compressed air. This was the only thing I was afraid of during the war and of getting into the hands of the Germans.*
>
> *My hair is now completely grey and I wear horn-rimmed spectacles. You probably wouldn't recognise me, in addition I've become a cry baby, like a child.* (p. 173)

This latter comment is the only one in her letters about her own state of mind and her distress and anxiety. She is generally optimistic, buoyed up by a strong religious faith and good support from her sister-in-law and niece. She writes to Jurek as follows:

> *I would so like to write and write about many things at length. I ask but one thing of you, my dear son: be of good cheer, believe in Providence, throw yourself completely on God's mercy and it will lead you to a happy ending. For the whole year, every day, a Mass is celebrated for your good intentions and not a day passes without my praying for you. I hope that by the end of this year we can be together.* (p. 171)

Thus, despite describing her traumatic events, she also shows she is able to retain optimism, gratitude, and faith. This, together with support from close family members who similarly survived in Warsaw, seems to have sustained her. My father also seems to have been resilient after the war, having the benefits of a loving marriage and family and a safe place to settle in the UK despite some practical hardships. My grandmother joined the family in the UK in 1958, four years before she died, having already contracted cancer and at a time when restrictions on travel were eased. My father was unable to return to Poland due to the Cold War restrictions, and his next visit was in 1965 for a family holiday, 25 years after leaving and a first family reunion. My sisters and I were brought up in the English Midlands amidst an active Polish community.

I do not recall my grandmother ever speaking of her war experiences in the household when she came to England in 1958. Neither do I have evidence that she was *unable* to speak of them. She did not display any mental health issues although physically she remained deaf, and the cancer that killed her was already spreading by the time she came to live with us.

Her traumatic events comprised violent losses of those close to her and enforced separations with no knowledge of survival, the experience of bombing leading to deafness, physical hardship regarding food and heating, as well as the hostile occupation of her city, heightened during the Warsaw Uprising which started in her street. In addition, she became a refugee for some months, being forced to evacuate the city and taking no belongings. This would also have been true for the rest of the city population. In terms of the impact of trauma, her letters show she is able to outline some of her experience in writing, showing practical coping and retaining close contact with family nearby. She also holds onto her religious faith. Even though she says she has become fearful, there is no obvious indication of either PTSD or depression. This indicates likely resilience.

The traumatic events my grandmother experienced seem not to have transmitted generationally even though she lived her final years with her son and grandchildren. Of course, this was more than 10 years after the end of the war, and it is possible that this time period allowed for some trauma resolution. I am aware of no mental health difficulties for her when she came to England, nor in the second generation of the family. When trauma is argued to transmit across generations, this is usually evidenced by substantial relating problems (Shamtoub 2013) and negative world assumptions (Bachem et al. 2019). These do not seem to have been present in my family among the second generation who have had long-term marriages, raised children successfully, and had productive careers. It also needs to be acknowledged that traumatic experience does not necessarily transmit, for example, some studies of Holocaust survivors showing no effects relative to peers (Van Ijzendoorn et al. 2003) and others showing a positive role for resilience factors such as positive family communication (Giladi and Bell 2013). Resilience to trauma has been identified as the more usual response, although this is less for 'corrosive environments' which are long lasting (Bonanno 2004) and also for war trauma (Kessler et al. 2017). The sort of resilience which is relevant is loving family, stable temperaments, social support, and strong community and religious ties (Fonagy et al. 1994). It was also notable that my grandmother had a happy and settled childhood, this occurring at a time of relative political peace pre-WWI. Yet, she had experienced prior trauma as an adult, through WWI in which her young husband fought with the allied Russian troops, and the Germans occupied Warsaw prior to armistice. She lived through the Russian Revolution of 1917 when, with her army officer husband and infant son, she had to urgently escape to Romania, and through the Polish–Bolshevik war in 1920 during which fighting reached the gates of Warsaw and in which her husband died, aged 33. Thus, she and her young son would have been exposed to six years of war, but she seems to have survived this with little evidence of long-term impacts of trauma. The concept of 'steeling' may apply whereby individuals learn survival skills through prior testing (Rutter 1985). This is therefore a positive message about surviving trauma.

However, this was not always the case with other people whose parents had experiences of war trauma. The issue of war trauma and its impacts was explored in the Invisible Poles study in the second-generation interviews (White and Goodwin 2019) (page numbers of quotes below refer to this document). This provides examples of those who experienced impacts of trauma in their parents. Adelaide describes her own family history, discoveries which helped explain her father's PTSD as follows:

> *My father died thirty-four years ago, and six years ago I started my research. And the first thing I did was get his documents from the Ministry of Defense. Then, of course, I found out where he came from—I looked it up on the map, and I asked the Red Cross to look for his family, because he said they were all gone. And I did a lot of reading about that, you know, the history around there, and learned a great deal about those people's experience. And I understand very much why he was . . . He had post-traumatic stress disorder. You know, like many older Polish people who've been through those experiences do. And after three years the Red Cross found his family. Well, what was left of his family.* (White and Goodwin 2019, pp. 26–27)

A few of those interviewed also identified impacts of trauma in their parents, which were undiagnosed and untreated due, in part, to the barriers on disclosure as showing 'weakness'. Natalie says the following:

> *Post-traumatic stress is post-traumatic stress. Whatever the stress was, and the trauma. It's somehow not even acknowledged. My mum suffered from a mental breakdown . . . It's more than just a stiff upper lip, because, deep inside, they are crying out themselves. But we must not let that be shown, because it would be a weakness.* (White and Goodwin 2019, p. 33)

These quotes support the research evidence of trauma having long-term effects on clinical disorders and show the barriers to seeking help. Resolving traumatic experiences

relates to both recalling and the ability to disclose events. Barriers to this can be both psychological and environmental. These are further discussed.

3.3. Remembering Trauma

Remembering traumatic experiences can be problematic for survivors. Responses such as PTSD involve a combination of over-remembering (such as in flashbacks and nightmares) and amnesia for the events (avoidance of thinking about the trauma and blocking of thoughts and feelings) (APA 2013). There are complex reasons for individuals being unable to recall or disclose trauma, these being both psychological and physiological (van der Kolk 2015). Reports of silence in survivors of WWII regarding their traumatic experience are common, as described by their children (Letzter-Pouw et al. 2014). Brief factual reports may be provided but not detailed accounts of what happened with associated feelings. It is argued that such disclosure can only occur when the individual feels truly safe—yet those with unresolved trauma never feel this safety even when their new circumstances are benign (van der Kolk 2015).

Accounts of parents being unable to discuss their war trauma are given by the next generation in relation to the WWII experience. Natalia (White and Goodwin 2019) states the following:

> *You don't know the secrets that a lot of these people kept. There's been research done on the children of Holocaust survivors. Surely there must be some on the children of people who survived the Stalinist regime? My grandparents died en route- coming out of Siberia—and their daughter, my aunty, had to bury them where they fell. That's not a very pleasant thing to do for a person who is a teenager . . . that must be awful at whatever age you are. And thinking where are you going to end up, or are you going to end up anywhere? Where's your next meal going to be?* (White and Goodwin 2019, p. 32)

This was echoed by Adelaide as follows:

> *My father never talked about his background, like many of them don't. He was very secretive. He told us his family in Poland were all gone. I went in 2016 for the first time and found he had a wife in Poland and a son, my half-brother. They were no longer alive sadly. But my nephew is there . . . they are so happy that I found them. It's been wonderful to connect I feel a strong connection . . . I feel a blood connection with them in Ukraine.* (White and Goodwin 2019, p. 43)

Iza reports that others do not necessarily want to hear about the trauma.

> *I suppose that's left me with [a view that] the less war the better. Appreciating that people don't just survive, they have things that go on. All the relatives that didn't survive but also the impact on the next generation. Some of the reading I've done, I've liked it where you read what the people my generation have been saying . . . And I thought it was very interesting, watching the story being told in Poland. Because people don't necessarily want to hear it again. I want to hear it. But some of my generation think 'Not again. It's too much.' Not in a horrible way, but it's very heavy, and they've heard it, whereas I haven't. So, you can see, some of them are just like, 'Now we're here,' they're saying, 'Now we're in the EU and why are we still talking about that?'* (White and Goodwin 2019, p. 35)

There are of course many events that occur in a war which are later hidden and which would be uncomfortable to hear. Psychologists can consider how being unable to disclose traumatic events affects the individual and their families. Researching family history can open doors on such events for individuals and increase understanding of family members' behaviour.

3.4. Forgetting, Secrecy, and Subterfuge

Family members are often in ignorance of events of war trauma through external barriers to disclosure. As already described, my grandmother lived through the Warsaw

Uprising and five years under the German occupation of Poland with its reign of terror. There was in fact widespread and secret resistance in Poland at the time, which curtailed individuals speaking to each other about clandestine activities, as well as lack of information about family members killed or separated and fighting abroad. The Home Army in Poland had the largest European resistance to the Nazis under occupation, with a large portion of the population involved (Bor-Komorowski 2010). This was highly organised and highly secret, with individuals risking their lives to take part, including children and adolescents. Families would not necessarily know if members were involved. Secrecy ensured the safety of others but precluded any family discussion of events which can also curtail the resolution of fear and trauma (Karski [1944] 2012). Often family members disappeared suddenly—either killed or imprisoned or sent to concentration camps for their activities.

My grandmother would not have known about her daughter-in-law Myszka's activities even though they were in close contact. Myszka worked in a Red Cross hospital but was secretly a liaison worker for the Polish resistance. Historical analysis now shows the life expectancy of a liaison worker, most of whom were women, was 3 months during the occupation of Poland (Davies 2004). Myszka's role was uncovered during a random roundup of civilians by German soldiers. She was arrested, imprisoned, and sent to Auschwitz where she died a year later. Family members did not know of this until after the war, as already described. I only recently heard the details of Myszka's wartime activity when her nephew in Poland, who I had never met, emailed my sister unexpectedly with the following account:

> *She was involved in the Resistance. In her work with the Red Cross she managed to get into contact with Jurek. In 1942, at a łapanki [random round-up] she was stopped with false documents and carrying false papers. She was transferred to the Gestapo and sent to the Pawiak prison. Because our family was wealthy (before the war we owned a sugar factory) we tried to pay for her freedom. There was no chance, because she was considered public enemy of the Reich No. 1, and a political prisoner. The only thing was to commute the death penalty to being sent to the concentration camp in Auschwitz. She was sent to the camp at the end of August 1942.* (Bifulco 2017, p. 115)

Thus, throughout the war, the fate of many close family members was unknown which curtailed personal or official mourning. This too can contribute to unresolved trauma and long-lasting psychological effects on survivors (Samuel 2020).

Events might also be hidden for family reasons. I only learned as a young adult about Myszka and the fact that my father had been married before the war in Poland. He subsequently met and married my mother after the war in England. His first marriage was kept secret from us as children on the pretext that it would be too confusing for us but likely due to my mother's jealous nature. I was able to find out a lot about Myszka from her letters sent to my father during the war, which had been carefully preserved and now newly translated. My grandmother had also preserved the German death certificate issued at Auschwitz. My research indicated that Myszka was a vibrant, funny, energetic young woman who wrote lively letters to my father in France during wartime, making light of the awful conditions in Warsaw under the Nazis. We have copies of the photographs she had sent to him in France. However, no mention was made by her of her activities as a secret liaison worker in the Polish home army. It seemed sad to me that the family did not honour her memory and talk about her in the family. Similar to other deaths in concentration camps, there is no grave or personal memorial to her.

Silence about wartime trauma can be due to enforced secrecy, as required sometimes in war, but also due to selected secrecy agreed in families for more emotional reasons. In my family, it does not seem to have had a deleterious effect on family life, but I suspect it was hard for my father not to acknowledge her, and as children, I think we would have liked to have known.

3.5. Public Forgetting

There is another side to the forgetting of traumatic events, which is also external to the individual, involving the ability of society more generally to speak of community traumatic events. This can be politically motivated and can relate to a lack of social acknowledgement of trauma which can result in worse psychological outcomes on a community scale (Lis-Turlejska et al. 2018). At certain times, the state can suppress open discussion of events either for reasons of ideology or expediency or due to state secrets legislation. This occurred in the Cold War with suppression of historical WWII information during Stalinist times and later. Certain events were deemed never to have happened. I will describe one here which affected my family—the massacre at Katyn, Russia.

This massacre of over 20,000 Polish officers, now officially recognised as a war atrocity committed by the Soviets in 1940, was only finally acknowledged by President Gorbachev with the fall of communism. It then became public knowledge that the order for the killings was signed in 1940 by Stalin. The massacre occurred in April 1940 when Russia had secretly signed their non-aggression pact with Hitler, an alliance downplayed in their subsequent fight against German fascism (Maresch 2010). Responsibility for the Katyn massacre was officially denied in the Soviet Union, despite an official UN investigation involving international scientists, which took place when the mass burial site was first uncovered by the advancing German army in 1943. There was substantial evidence of the likely Soviet perpetrators, fully documented in UN and Red Cross reports. There were also eyewitnesses—both locals and Poles who escaped (Karski [1944] 2012).

The coverup of Katyn even extended to the Western world. Fear of Stalin in the 1950s meant that Poles in the UK (around 200,000, who, as combatants, could not return to Poland without reprisals) were not allowed to speak openly about the massacre and its perpetrators, nor to erect a commemorative monument in central London. The UK government did, however, allow a monument to be raised in a small cemetery in West London, local to where many Poles lived at that time. However, they were instructed by both the British and Soviet governments to add no details to the wording of the monument inferring culpability to avoid a diplomatic incident. The Poles therefore simply engraved the black monolith as 'Katyn 1940'. Even this caused some official outrage since, given the time and place, it implicated Russian involvement. Katyn could not be openly discussed in Poland under Soviet control. This lack of social acknowledgement and barriers to mourning and remembrance must have affected families of officers killed in the massacre, both in the short term through not knowing of the deaths and longer term through lack of public acknowledgement and discussion. My father's cousin Staś suffered that fate; we now know he was shot in the back of the head in the Katyn forest on his 25th birthday. My father always believed it to be a Russian atrocity—given he had met eyewitnesses in England. I was therefore brought up knowing about Katyn, but Staś's mother Julia and the family did not learn of his death until some seven years later, as evidenced by my grandmother's account of family members lost in April 1946. Not knowing the outcome of loss is a factor in chronic and unresolved mourning—imagining the person might be alive or in pain or distress is a constant barrier to being able to accept a loss as final (Samuel 2020).

The cause of the Katyn massacre was not officially recognised until 1989, many years after Julia's death. She did not live to see the new Polish republic raise monuments and a recent museum to the dead at Katyn, as well as create an internet archive with photographs of each man lost with his name and date of birth. This would have been true for the families of all those killed. These names are also now listed in metal or stone in churches and cemeteries in Warsaw. This provides a highly individualised approach to remembrance. I have visited these and seen the name of Staś (Stanislaw Leinweber) accurately listed. His picture, familiar from our mantelpiece during my childhood growing up, is the same now shown on the internet. It is noted that such personalised information could not have been collated in previous decades before the internet or while the iron curtain was still in place. Sometimes, a time delay gives a greater chance of collecting and displaying information to provide further knowledge of family events.

Issues surrounding remembering and processing war trauma are complex and will vary by individual and family but with some processes hindered by lack of social and political acknowledgement. Yet, these can change over time with restrictions and secrecy lifted so that over generations people can finally have trauma acknowledged. This makes an ongoing search for family history capable of finding new facts over subsequent decades.

3.6. Emotional Geography and Belonging

Distances can be measured differently in relation to emotional geography where far-away places may be experienced as close because of emotional and family ties (Rubinstein and Parmelee 1992). Attachment involves the 'holding in mind' of the attachment figure and this may also extend to places of emotional importance. Therefore, a place considered to be home may be held as a close event even though difficult or even impossible to visit. These barriers are amplified when the place lost is also linked to a lost time when conditions were different. This can lead to a sense of yearning for a lost home.

In terms of the Polish WWII experience, many of the Poles who were deported from their homes in eastern Poland by Soviet troops found these were later annexed into Lithuania, Belarus, or Ukraine. My own family's original home in eastern Poland is now in Belarus. For family history, this can complicate the finding of family documents and may create further barriers of language and borders as countries can become more or less distant depending on politics and transport opportunities. When I was a child, Poland was considered far away from the UK. This was due to travel times (36 h by train) and because, at times, during the Cold War, visiting there was impossible. Later in the 1960s, when visits were possible, there was a substantial red tape with visas and other documentation required, together with the obstacle of armed soldiers monitoring the borders from West to East Germany, with long queues, all cars being searched, and great nervousness in case of stowaways or contraband being seized. It was at that time virtually impossible to make phone calls to Poland, all correspondence being by letters, and these being prone to censorship and with slow progress to delivery. Therefore, Poland was effectively distant. Now it takes two hours airplane travel from Heathrow, close to my home in West London, to Warsaw. Until recently, we were in the same European Union with freedom of travel for work or leisure. Warsaw can easily be visited for a weekend holiday and other parts of Poland are now popular holiday destinations for the British and other Europeans.

Attachment to place ideally conveys a sense of a safe haven (Hernández et al. 2007). For many, it will be the place where they live or were born, and individuals can have more than one such home without feelings of dissonance. However, for others when their home is a foreign country where their parents or grandparents were born and where they cannot easily return it can set up a sense of yearning. This may be for a geographic location, but also of a time prior to trauma experienced and recognised as unreachable. Thus, for immigrants and refugees, 'home' may be a country far away, which, for second and subsequent generations, may be one never visited.

The second-generation WWII family survivors interviewed talked about home and family in Poland and their parents' attachment to (or indeed fear of) their original homes. Aniela speaks of her parents first going home as follows:

> (First visit to Poland 1974): *Mum and Dad desperately wanted to see all of it . . . . And they took them to the places they were born, in the Ukraine . . . so they went to see the places where they would have grown up in. Mum was desperately wanting to see that. I think she had to do that. Its a form of closure almost, she's been to see her birthplace. They have no documents, no birth certificates or anything.* (White and Goodwin 2019, p. 29)

This is echoed by Adelaide.

> *Poland was a place of danger . . . my father created it as a place of danger . . . And I was afraid of it. I didn't get to Poland until 2006. I went to Warsaw and Krakow . . . what a wonderful place. I was amazed at how young the population was because I only knew old Polish people.* (White and Goodwin 2019, p. 49)

The question of belonging in a country can depend on the level of integration of immigrant communities, as well as with second and third generations accepting the new country as home.

Although the first WWII generation is now being lost due to age, documenting the long-term impacts of trauma on families and succeeding generations is important for understanding the ongoing mental health and well-being of populations in relation to historical events. Survivors of war trauma commonly have difficulties communicating their experience (van der Kolk 2015); therefore, later family members may only have a basic idea of what occurred yet still suffer from impacts. Sharing narratives in some form among this group may be of important benefit for resilience and well-being (Fivush and Zaman 2011). Refugee populations who have additional negative experiences on arrival may also exhibit suspiciousness of services in their new country and therefore have barriers to help-seeking.

Natalia makes the connection between current refugees and her parents' experience and speaks of atonement.

> *When you see Syria and the atrocities now, you think that could be my parents, that could be my family. And the idea that some of the places there's fighting now, they are actually the places where they were given succour. They were looked after. The Kazhak women were seen as wonderful. My Dad went through Persia, Iran . . . .but the war is still there and people still living in horrific circumstances. I suppose that's the humanitarian aspect of me wanting to know more. And, of course, somehow atone for what my parents went through.* (White and Goodwin 2019, p. 32)

4. Conclusions

The information provided here about personal family history has been selected to illuminate issues related to experiences of war trauma in families. The focus has been on whether such experience can be openly discussed, with barriers including psychological ones related to posttraumatic response, political ones including denial of atrocities, and secrecy including subterfuge during war or events hidden under state secrets legislation. These all relate to experiences undisclosed at the time, or even for some duration of time, but which can be later discovered in family research connected to historical analysis. It is generally recognised that the impact of traumatic events is lessened when people are able to talk about the trauma, receive social acknowledgement, and complete family narratives of loss and danger (Herman 1992; Lis-Turlejska et al. 2018).

A key message is that exposure to war trauma does not always lead to disorder and is not necessarily transmitted across generations and that emotional survival and resilience are common. The key distinction to be made is of traumatic events (which can be personal or public) and impacts of trauma which are personal and psychological, although potentially experienced by communities. Many more individuals experience traumatic events in their lifetime than experience disorders such as PTSD, implying some degree of resilience is to be expected. However, there may be other impacts of trauma for war survivors, including those surrounding attachment insecurity negative worldviews and other common disorders such as depression or anxiety. However, even where these are present, we do not necessarily know how to attribute such impacts; for example, an individual who lives through war may also have experienced early life abuse in his/her family creating vulnerability. This alone or the combination with adult war trauma may have a 'dose' effect on the disorder (Felitti et al. 1998). Alternatively, someone surviving war trauma may later suffer other personal trauma through bereavement or violent attack in peacetime, making attribution of causal connection to disorder complex.

Not all family research will necessarily be as positive as mine in showing resilience or indeed in finding a wealth of relevant information. My contact with Polish Jewish Holocaust survivors in the UK suggests the desire for searching their history is hampered by the extermination of all family members, their lack of knowledge or connection to their pre-war homes, and their lingering distrust of countries where genocide occurred. For

them, meaningful narratives may also lie in the communicative memory of their generation of survivors and publicly archived materials (Devlin 2020).

The effort of tracing a family narrative and learning of the lives of our parents, grandparents, and beyond can give a sense of completeness, enhanced identity, and produce unexpected links to present life. For example, tracing talents or professional interests across generations (many writers in my family) or finding relatives who look alike through shared DNA (the son of my second cousin who looks like my father), or visiting streets and seeing houses, where family lived over a hundred years ago, can bring deep sense of connection to people and places. It is a lengthy and absorbing task to undertake family history research but can lead to finding treasure as well as trauma.

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