



**Margit Reiter.** *Die Generation danach: Der Nationalsozialismus im Familiengedächtnis.* Wien: StudienVerlag, 2006. 332 S. EUR 29.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-7065-1940-3.



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## Memory and Responsibility in Austria: How the Second Generation Confronts National Socialism

In the last decade or so, the problem of how memories of the crimes of National Socialism are approached within families has been brought out into the open, and children and grandchildren have been encouraged to revisit their families' memory work. Spurred by the boom in biographical publications and television documentaries about prominent Nazi perpetrators, scholars have turned their attention to the intergenerational negotiation of Nazi legacies in "regular" families. In Germany, the work surrounding such a "Familiengedächtnis" now forms a coherent research program that attempts to elucidate the psychological and communicative mechanisms through which concepts of the past, responsibility and persistent Nazi values are continually (re)constructed.[1]

In Austria, the comprehensive public and private confrontation with the Nazi legacy is of more recent origin than in the Federal Republic of Germany. Margit Reiter's excellent volume is an important contribution not only to the field of intergenerational memory, but also to more general scholarship about Austria's reckoning with the past. Reiter focuses her attention on "chil-

dren of perpetrators" (*Kinder der Täter*), the direct descendants of parents implicated to different degrees in the NS regime. Members of this second generation approach memory from an especially interesting vantage point: due to their age they can claim innocence beyond doubt, Helmut Kohl's "Gnade der späten Geburt." But because of their proximity and emotional bond to the perpetrators, their lives are crucially influenced by the continuing effect of National Socialism, both in terms of the responsibility and guilt they feel for their parents' crimes and in terms of norms and speech patterns that their parents have, sometimes unconsciously, imbued in them.

Reiter stresses the interactive nature of familial memory and the active role that the second generation plays in "remembering" its parents' experiences by participating in a "pact of silence" or deciding to break it. She examines the relationships of sons and daughters to their Nazi mothers and fathers, which range from admiration and protective stances or anger or denial to complex combinations of positive sentiments coupled with an explicit rejection of National Socialist values. Crucially, Reiter demonstrates that familial approaches to National Social-

ism were usually not dominated by complete silence, but rather by selective stories that the children had to piece together through wishful thinking, guesses and sometimes research, in order to construct a coherent narrative. The author goes beyond analyzing the individual response patterns of the second generation by embedding her account of family memory in a wider context of societal memory politics. She argues that the longevity of the myth of Austria as “Hitler’s first victim” and the low degree of public sensitivity to Austrians’ culpability can be explained in part by the way the memory of National Socialism was handled within Austrian families. In turn, the public and state-sanctioned discourse of the past long reinforced and supported the denial of individual responsibility.

Reiter’s most important empirical sources are eighteen semi-structured life-history interviews with Austrian “children of perpetrators,” who she handpicked from a larger pool of potential interlocutors. Her sample reflects a relatively even distribution in terms of age, gender, regional origin, educational, social and political background and degree of parental involvement in the Nazi regime. She notes that her goal is not the achievement of generalizable results, but rather an exemplary analysis of second generation responses. Reiter explains that her interviews do not simply tap into and record an already established memory, but are themselves acts of memory construction, in which both interviewee and interviewer partake. Each brings his or her identity and current life situation into the mix. Therefore, interviews never capture completed narratives, but rather snapshots with their own capacities to transform the participants’ understanding of the past. An interview is thus a *lieu de mémoire* of sorts. The information gleaned from the interviews is complemented throughout the work with journalistic, academic, biographical and even literary writings that strengthen Reiter’s arguments. The volume is explicitly aimed at an audience of scholars and interested non-experts and has largely succeeded in finding the appropriate balance between nuanced analysis and readability.

In addition to an explanation of her interview and sampling methodology, the first part of the book incorporates useful clarifications of definitions and a short overview of Austria’s participation in the National Socialist system and its mnemonic legacy after the war. In the next two chapters, Reiter provides a discussion of common patterns of intergenerational memory and the role of family legends as well as “outside” factors that reinforce or challenge family narratives. Throughout the

volume, the author does a superb job of pointing out the subtle, even unconscious, legacies of National Socialism and the psychological burdens that still impact the children of perpetrators. She rejects, however, the idea that descendents of Nazi families are primarily victims and assigns them a large share of responsibility for confronting their parents’ past. The chapter on “irritations,” or outside impulses that challenged family narratives, is important because it helps to set private memory in a broader social and comparative context. Reiter here evaluates events and institutions that prompted the children of perpetrators to break out of the family mold.

The core of the book is made up of two chapters in which Reiter closely examines her interview material, and elaborates on common patterns of reckoning with the family past, by looking at children’s relationships with their Nazi parents and their images. These *Vaterbilder* and *Mutterbilder* denote the images which sons and daughters have of their parents’ role in the family as well as of their stance towards National Socialism and the Holocaust. Reiter finds that the fathers tend to be central to children’s confrontation with their family’s involvement in National Socialism, while mothers are usually protected from direct blame and seen as apolitical. Most interviewees do not specifically imagine their parents as perpetrators, even when evidence to the contrary is available. However, in the context of relationships with fathers in particular, the question of possible crimes committed is often an unspoken presence, a theme upon which Reiter elaborates in a later chapter. Mothers inhabit a pivotal role as the primary communicators of values and memories in their families. Mothers told stories about the war and absent relatives and thereby crucially influenced children’s worldviews, often protecting fathers from accusations and perpetuating family myths that prevented or postponed a reckoning with the past. Reiter continually calls attention to the gendered nature of family memory, both in terms of how perpetrators are interrogated and how children react. For instance, daughters appear more likely to be critical of their mothers than sons, while sons are more willing to indict a father. One of the most important contributions of this book is its scrutiny of the role of women in memory-making and the role of gender in remembering.

The final chapters of the book delve more deeply into the interpretation of the interviews by discussing the unspoken tension between knowing, guessing and not-knowing about parents’ wartime actions. Problematic communicative structures in families usually mean that children have little or only patchy knowledge of their

parents' previous lives—which is the case for mothers even more than for fathers. The few available concrete facts are used to construct a basic framework of memory, which is then filled with interpretations of vague parental narratives or the child's deductions and fantasies. Reiter points out that both cognitive ability and emotional openness are needed to be able to interpret parental stories and set them in proper context. Children hold the crucial role of piecing together the puzzle of family history and are thus pivotal memory actors.

This book is an important new addition to the literature on family memory, as well as a fascinating account of Austrian memory politics. Well-written and argued, it also provides extensive evidence and much food for thought about the interaction between private and public confrontations with National Socialism and the role of mothers, fathers, sons and daughters. The author skillfully intertwines her own empirical research with secondary accounts, literature and political, social, historical and comparative contexts. Reiter also does good job of letting her readers into the research process, explicitly discussing sampling techniques and trade-offs, as well as problems of access and rapport and ambivalences that arose during her interviews, an approach that is rare in scholarly work.

A few points of critique should be mentioned nonetheless. First, both the interview material and the book's organization are evidence of the fact that Reiter's research speaks primarily to relationships between mothers and fathers and their children, rather than a more general family memory. Reiter repeatedly notes how dynamics between siblings or other family members play into the development of remembrance and her conclusion discusses briefly the role of the third generation. A more systematic discussion of family dynamics and mechanisms of transmitting and re-creating memory

in the family setting would have been an even more useful and instructive contribution to the research agenda of "intergenerational memory." Second, though Reiter writes at the outset that her goal is not generalization, she does in effect claim that her findings, which are based on very few interviews, are constitutive of generalizations. Refraining from making such assertions would not have detracted from her insightful analysis. On the flip side, a slightly larger sample would at least have enabled her readers to be more confident that her conclusions are not based on random chance. More interviews would also have necessitated giving less space to interview subjects' direct voices, which might have made the text a smoother read. Finally, Reiter's examination of second-generation responses is at times quite judgmental in tone, though she does acknowledge the difficulty of dealing appropriately with family history. Few interviewees seem to satisfy Reiter's implicit idea of what would constitute an honest confrontation with the past. I do not believe that it is beneficial to a "working through of the past" to deny the children of perpetrators a positive sentiment about their parents on a personal level. Such feelings should be allowed as legitimate, and not necessarily detrimental, to a sincere reckoning with the past. Reiter, without stating it explicitly, seems to have a normative standard against which she evaluates her interviewees' statements and memory work.

#### Note

[1]. See, for instance, Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller and Karoline Tschuggnall, *'Opa war kein Nazi'. Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im deutschen Familiengedächtnis* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Verlag, 2002) and Harald Welzer, Robert Montau and Christine Plaß, *'Was wir für bessere Menschen sind!'. Der Nationalsozialismus im Gespräch zwischen den Generationen* (Tübingen: edition diskord, 1997).

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