PROJECT REPORTS

"Aliens in the Community" and "Enemies of the State": Intergenerational Structures of Action and Memory in Families of Stigmatised Victims of National Socialism in Austria and Germany

Maria Pohn-Lauggas, Sarah Könecke, and Miriam Schäfer

Principal investigator: Prof. Dr Maria Pohn-Lauggas

Project coordination: Dr Miriam Schäfer

Researchers: Sarah Könecke, M.A.

Former team members: Friederike von Ass, MA; Victoria Taboada Gómez, MA; Björn Dauven, MA; Janne Biermann, BA

Cooperation partners: Dr Andreas Kranebitter (Documenationcentre of Austrian Resistance)

Duration of the project: 2021-2025

Funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), No. 442960441

Our research project came to an end a few weeks ago, and we would like to take this opportunity to provide a brief insight into the project and its results.

Our project started with questions about family memories and intergenerational consequences of the persecution of groupings of Nazi victims who continued to be stigmatised after 1945. We were interested in the descendants of people who were persecuted on the basis of socio-racist categorisations or were labelled as "enemies of the state". Their persecution can be understood as embedded in the National Socialist ideology of the so-called "Volksgemeinschaft" (people's community), from which socially devalued, marginalised fringe groups and opponents were excluded. Specifi-cally, our study concerned descendants of people persecuted as so-called "professional criminals" and "asocials," men persecuted for being homosexual, Wehrmacht deserters, and those persecuted as Jehovah's Witnesses.

The persecution of the so-called "professional criminals" and "asocials" was aimed at social position and class belonging. The people grouped under this label were accused of being "work-shy", "morally or sexually degenerate" and delinquent (Ayaß 2009). Jehovah's Witnesses were persecuted by the Nazis, among other things because of their partial rejection of state authority. In many cases, for example, they refused to perform military service or to participate in elections (Garbe 2008). People who were persecuted as Wehrmacht deserters evaded the military in various ways or went into hiding before they could be drafted. They were branded as "traitors" and often sentenced to death by summary courts, but many of them were also sent to so-called penal battalions or were made to perform forced labour (Pirker/Kramer

2018). Those men accused of being homosexuals were persecuted because of their alleged or actual homosexuality. Even though homosexuality was already considered a crimi-nal offence in Germany and Austria before National Socialism there was a significant intensification of persecution practices (from prison sentences to death penalty, internment in concentration camps and forced castration) (Jellonek/Lautmann 2002). What all these groupings have in common is that they were socially stigmatised not only in the National Socialist era, but also before and after it. They continued to be socially marginalised or persecuted under criminal law after 1945.

One aim of the project was to investigate how the structuring of intergenerational transmission processes and family memories is influenced by the absence of we-groups, such as associations of Nazi victims and survivors, which means that there are no collective memories to which descendants can refer in their devotion to the past. The experiences of these groupings did not become part of the national memory in Germany and Austria and thus remain invisible in public remembrance. Reasons for this can be found in denial discourses, in the ongoing stigmatisation of the victims (after 1945) (Kranebitter/Lieske 2022), and, not least, in the fact that there has been no collective fight for recognition of victimised and persecuted persons in organised groups. Similar tendencies can be observed in the social sciences and humanities, where for decades the focus of multi-generational research has been on Jewish families and the families of Nazi perpetrators.

In light of this situation, we investigated the impact of stigmatisation and lack of visibility on intergenerational and biographical structures of action and memory structures among the descendants. With this approach, we also wanted to fill an existing gap in multi-generational research in the social sciences and humanities.

In spring 2021, we began our research under the impact of the Covid pandemic. The first year was marked by interviews having to be cancelled or postponed due to restrictions and (suspected cases of) Covid infections among interviewees and staff. Particular caution was exercised as we conducted interviews with people who were in some cases very elderly and had pre-existing conditions and therefore required special protection. Some interviews were also conducted online; however, this was only possible to a limited extent, especially with older interviewees. Due to the very painful family histories, we tried to conduct interviews in person. By the end of the project, we conducted interviews with 46 people from 21 families. Our sample consists of families from Germany and Austria in which relatives were persecuted as "community aliens" and "enemies of the state". Family members from at least two generations were interviewed. The grouping of those persecuted as homosexuals was an exception. Access was extremely difficult due to the massive taboo surrounding this issue. We decided to include in the sample those cases in which we were only able to interview one generation.

To gain access to the field, we worked with concentration camp memorial sites, remembrance initiatives, networks of descendants, individual activists and the public relations office of the German Jehovah's Witnesses. For reasons of research ethics, we also included families whose Nazi categorisation did not fit into the originally

planned groupings in order to avoid reproducing experiences of exclusion and stigmatisation. We had not planned to include families of persons persecuted as "asocial". Partly due to the fact that, in the year before the project began, those persecuted as "asocial" and "professional criminals" were recognised as victims of the Nazis by the German Bundestag, and activists from this initiative helped to make our project known, families from both groupings contacted us. Due to research ethics concerns, it was also important not to reproduce the categorisations of the Nazi system in our re-search.

Methodologically, we pursued a multi-method research design. Biographical-narrative interviews and biographical case reconstructions (Rosenthal 2024) formed the core of our approach. These were linked to family sculptures – originate from family therapy (Rosenthal 2010: 9ff) –, which we used to reconstruct relationships of closeness and distance, lines of conflict and orders of loyalty within the families. In order to include (inter)generational themes and questions in the analysis, we also carried out genogram analyses in all cases. Parallel to the interviews, we conducted discourse analyses on the media reception of recognition processes and the political thematisation of memory by the groupings, and contrasted these discourses with the family narratives. In order to be able to grasp gaps, missing knowledge and forgetting in the families, we also carried out extensive, source-critical historical (archive) research.

In all persecuted groupings, we encountered a high degree of scepticism towards re-search as a "public" institution, which was reflected in the desire for detailed preliminary discussions about the process, goals and motivation of the researchers. Our interviews with descendants of Jehovah's Witnesses proved particularly challenging, as they were characterised by controlled speech, meta-comments on the interview process and attempts at proselytising that were sometimes perceived as oppressive.

We will present an overview of our results concerning three central questions of the project: first, the structures of family memories in the various persecuted groupings, then intergenerational patterns of action and biographical processing, and finally the limited effects of public recognition and remembrance policies for these families.

Structures of family memories

The descendants of people persecuted as "professional criminals" and "asocials" hardly ever remember their persecuted relative as part of a collective of Nazi victims. The persecution is rarely remembered as socio-racist persecution, because for them it is closely linked to the social shame they feel due to the (formerly) sub-proletarian living conditions of their family. The question of their own "guilt" in the persecution and the suspicion that they themselves were perpetrators are central issues for the descendants. The family dialogue is dominated by derogatory and socio-racist constructions of "anti-social behaviour" and "criminality". This reveals an unbroken continuity in the attribution of these characteristics at the everyday level. These attributions are closely linked to patterns of interpretation involving hereditary biological traits. As a result, the victims often play no role in the public discourse on Nazi victims

as well as in their own family histories. This is particularly the case in families where there are both Nazi perpetrators and Nazi victims.

Jehovah's Witnesses show an almost opposite pattern. They were included in the sample for contrast, as unlike the other groupings, they have a strong we-group and thus a collective memory. Nevertheless, like the other groupings, they are a marginalised group in the public discourse on memory. Our findings show that the we-group and its collective memory are relevant to both the structures of action and the structures of memory within families. We reconstructed that, over several generations, a process of closure towards the 'outside world' takes place within families, in which the balance between 'we' and 'I' shifts in favour of 'we'. Talking about oneself and family history then takes place exclusively in reference to the 'we' group. Our most important finding for this persecuted group corresponds with the shift in the 'we-I' balance (Elias 2010): family memory merges into the collective memory of the religious community. This also means that the family history of persecution is absorbed into collective memory. Personal and family suffering and violence are hardly ever discussed, even in the context of a group that was affected by massive persecution, as persecution usually affected the entire family. Part of the family memory in these families is steadfastness: the determination not to deny one's faith and one's belonging to the religious community even under conditions of persecution and death threats. Steadfastness is an important aspect of the discourse within the community to this day, particularly in light of the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in other countries.

The we-groups that emerged in the lesbian and gay movement from the 1970s onwards have developed a collective (counter-)memory in which the persecution of homosexual men under National Socialism is remembered and active remembrance work is carried out. However, the descendants in our sample do not belong to a victims' and survivors' association, nor do they feel that they belong to an LGBTIQ group, or only marginally so. In these families of persecuted homosexual men, the memories of the descendants are highly ambivalent, as the positive narratives of the LGBTIQ community clash with their own (traumatic) experiences (with their persecuted relative). The descendants, especially 'direct' descendants such as children and grandchildren, struggle, among other things, with questions of their own existence and how they have become what they are against a background of (self-)denial and suppression with regard to the sexual orientation of their fathers and grandfathers.

There is a clear difference between German and Austrian cases when it comes to the descendants of Wehrmacht deserters: in Germany, an idealising discourse on desertion within the peace movement has led to more positive interpretations, while in many Austrian families, silence and the idea of deserters as "cowards" still dominate today. Knowledge of the "betrayal" of the deserters structures family secrets. Those who know who committed the betrayal and those who do not know constitute family relationships and the communicative family memory. In particular, the stigmatisation as "cowards" that continued after 1945 triggered social shame among the children and grandchildren, which has an impact on the family dialogue and the communicative memory of the family: desertion is not discussed and silence domi-

nates in the family dialogue. The late state recognition as victims of Nazi military justice (in Austria in 2005) is latently negotiated in the family dialogue, namely with the question of whether one is "allowed" to be proud at all.

Intergenerational structures for action and processing

Our findings at this level differ depending on the respective persecuted groupings, just as the family memories are contextualised within the different collective memories of these groupings. However, the findings at the level of intergenerational action structures are partly "at odds" with the Nazi categorisations. What is relevant here is which intergenerational experiences need to be processed; in our cases, we reconstructed three typical intergenerational experiences: shame, guilt or violence and devaluation.

In our sample, we have families in which the persecution itself was associated with shame and marginalisation. It is therefore not surprising that experiences of shame and stigmatisation have been passed on intergenerationally and (must) be processed. These are primarily families of people persecuted as “asocials”, “criminals” or as homosexual men, in which the Nazi persecution and the experiences of the descend-ants are strongly structured by social or moral shame. The descendants deal with the experience of shame and ongoing stigmatisation by distancing themselves either from their milieu of origin or through distancing within the family system in order to either overcome the stigma of social positioning or to separate themselves from the shameful part of the family.

Another experience that must be processed intergenerationally is that of guilt. In our cases, guilt has an intergenerational effect where there is a strong we-group, as we observed this empirically in the Jehovah's Witness families in our sample. On the one hand, these are families in which non-steadfastness (such as participation in the Second World War as a Wehrmacht soldier) during the Nazi era must be concealed. On the other hand, this affects families who have suffered massive losses and grief, and who are processing survivor’s guilt. In the first case, we see 'over-integration' in the we-group as a processing pattern; in the second case, guilt is processed by intergenerational delegation of the task of remembering.

Finally, violence and devaluation become visible as central dimensions of intergenerational experiences. Family relationships are structured by violence and devaluation emanating from the persecuted relatives. In our sample, we find this primarily in families of deserters and men who were persecuted for being homosexual. In these cases, the power of discourses is particularly evident: depending on which discursive elements are taken up and how they can be integrated biographically, the descendants are either enabled or prevented from processing their own experiences of suffering. For example, the idealising discourse spread by the peace movement in respect of deserters makes it very difficult for some descendants to talk about family relationships marked by violence and devaluation. At the same time, depending on how it fits biographically, it enables others to acknowledge the suffering endured by the deserters and to talk about their own experiences of violence.

The impact of collective memories and public discourses

A key finding is that where there is no collective counter-memory within the respective grouping, the interviewees struggle to find a narrative, because patterns of interpretation are hardly offered by public discourse to which they cannot refer to. Research shows that the joint creation of a narrative is a core component of the research relationship with descendants of stigmatised victim groups. The situation is somewhat different in the case of Jehovah's Witnesses, where the strong collective memory structures the interviews and limits biographical openness. Discourse analyses of the debates in the German Bundestag and of state recognition of marginalised victim groups show a shift towards more contextualised and differentiated interpretations. However, for the families of those persecuted as "professional criminals" and "asocials", this recognition has had only a limited impact so far, as traditional pejorative, socio-racist and eugenic patterns of interpretation persist in everyday family life, and questions of personal guilt or "fallibility" remain central. As pointed out above with regard to the families of deserters and men persecuted for being homosexual, public discourses that value and recognise persecution clearly have an impact on families. However, this does not necessarily lead to increased engagement with their family history on the part of the descendants, especially when it makes it more difficult to discuss painful experiences within the family.

Literature

Ayaß, Wolfgang (2009): Schwarze und grüne Winkel. Die nationalsozialistische Verfolgung von »Asozialen« und »Kriminellen« – Ein Überblick über die Forschungsgeschichte. In: KZ Gedenkstätte Neuengamme (Eds.): Ausgegrenzt. »Asoziale« und »Kriminelle« im nationalsozialistischen Lagersystem, Bremen: Edition Temmen, 16-30.

Elias, Norbert (2010 [1987]): The society of individuals. The collected works of Norb-ert Elias, vol. 10, edited Robert van Krieken. Dublin: University College Dublin Press.

Garbe, Detlef (2008): Between Resistance and martyrdom. Jehovah's Witnesses in the Third Reich. Transl. by Dagmar G. Grimm. Madison, Wisconsin: Univ. of Wiscon-sin Press.

Jellonnek, Burkhard/Lautmann, Rüdiger (Eds.) (2002): Nationalsozialistischer Terror gegen Homosexuelle. Verdrängt und ungesühnt. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh.

Kranebitter, Andreas/Lieske, Dagmar (2022): Die zweite Stigmatisierung. »Asoziale« und »Berufsverbrecher« als NS-Opfer in Westdeutschland und in Österreich nach 1945. In: Beßmann,Alyn/Eschebach, Insa/von Wrochem, Oliver (Eds.): NS-Verfolgte nach der Befreiung. Ausgrenzungserfahrung und Neubeginn. Göttingen: Wallstein, 203-219.

Pirker, Peter/Kramer, Johannes (2018): From Traitors to Role Models? Rehabilitation and Memorialization of Wehrmacht Deserters in Austria. In: Narvselius, Eleonora/Grinchenko, Gelinada (Eds.): Traitors, Collaborators and Deserters in Contemporary European Politics of Memory. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 59–85.

Rosenthal, Gabriele (2024 [1995]): Experienced Life and Narrated Life Story. Gestalt and Structure of Biographical Self-Presentations. Frankfurt a.M./New York: Campus.

Rosenthal, Gabriele (Ed.) (2010 [1998]): The Holocaust in Three Generations. Fami-lies of Victims and Perpetrators of the Nazi-Regime. 2. Ed. Opladen u. Famington Hills: Barbara Budrich Publishers.

Published results of the project

Schäfer, Miriam/Könecke, Sarah (2026): „Da wird er einfach als Verbrecher dargestellt und das war er nicht" – Deutungsprozesse von Nachkommen im Kontext marginalisierter NS-Verfolgungserfahrungen. In: Soziale Problem 37 (1) (forthcoming).

Pohn-Lauggas, Maria/Schäfer, Miriam (2026): Remembering and Forgetting in Biographical and Intergenerational Research. A multi-method approach. In: Rosenthal, Gabriele/Becker, Johannes/Pohn-Lauggas, Maria/Worm, Arne (Eds.): Handbook for Biographical Research Methods. Elgar Verlag (forthcoming).

Schäfer, Miriam (2025): Das vermeintliche Scheitern von narrativen Interviews. Zum Erkenntnispotenzial von Interviewdynamiken. In: BIOS 37 (1-2), 118-137 (https://doi.org/10.3224/bios.v37i1-2.04).

Pohn-Lauggas, Maria/Schäfer, Miriam (2023): Soziale Bedingungen von Erinnern und Vergessen: Biographische und intergenerationale Dynamiken. In: BIOS 36 (1), 50-70 (https://doi.org/10.3224/bios.v36i1.04).

Könecke, Sarah (2024): »Ihr Ansehen soll nicht beschmutzt werden«. Erinnerungsstrukturen in Familien von als »asozial« verfolgten Frauen. In: Gaida, Oliver/Šišić, Alyn (Eds.): Im Zugriff von Fürsorge und Polizei. Erfahrungen sozialrassistischer Verfolgung im Nationalsozialismus. Beiträge zur Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Verfolgung, Bd. 5. Wallstein-Verlag, 179-188.

Pohn-Lauggas, Maria (2023): „Dass Angst auch sein darf": Desertion, innerfamiliale Gewalt und ihr Zusammenwirken in der Konstitution familialer Gedächtnisse. In: von Lingen, Kerstin/Pirker, Peter (Ed.): Deserteure der Wehrmacht und der Waffen SS. Entziehungsformen, Solidarität, Verfolgung. Brill Schöningh, 319-326.

Pohn-Lauggas, Maria (2023): Erinnerung braucht Bedingungen. Scham- und Schuldabwehr im Familiengedächtnis von stigmatisierten NS-Opfergruppierungen. In: Gegen Vergessen – Für Demokratie (114), 4-5.

Pohn-Lauggas, Maria (2023): Vermittlung und Gedächtnis. Zur biographischen und intergenerationalen Weitergabe des Nicht-Erzählten. In: Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften 17 (2), 49-62 (https://doi.org/ 10.14361/zfk-2023-170205).

Schäfer, Miriam/Pohn-Lauggas, Maria/Kranebitter, Andreas (2023): Als ›asozial‹ und ›kriminell‹ verfolgt, als ›Penner‹ und ›Verbrecher‹ erinnert: Zu den Auswirkungen tradierter Stigmatisierung auf Erinnerung und intergenerationale Handlungsstrukturen. In: Psychologie und Gesellschaftskritik 47 No. 185/186 (1/2), 35-56.

Pohn-Lauggas, Maria/Kranebitter, Andreas (2022): „Meine mundlmäßige Familie". Zur Präsenz des Subproletarischen in Erinnerungen und Familienstrukturen von NS-Opfern. In: zeitgeschichte 49 (4), 573-598.