



## Article

# Negotiating Proximity and Distance to Holocaust Memory through Narrativity and Photography in Monika Maron's *Pawels Briefe* (Pavel's Letters) (1999)

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Received: 16 October 2017; Accepted: 3 December 2017; Published: 6 December 2017

**Abstract:** Germany's unification in 1989 triggered a public and literary confrontation with WWII, the Holocaust and the East-West German past. The years following the "Wende" of 1989/90 witnessed an increase in autobiographical family novels that explore how historical events of the twentieth century impacted upon individual and family pasts and continue to do so. Monika Maron, in claiming *Pawels Briefe* (Pavel's Letters) (1999) as a family story/history, rather than novel, raises questions about the ethics of intertwinement between autobiographical memory and family memory, specifically postmemory. By analyzing narrative and photographic engagement, I argue that Maron resists over-identification by engendering critical distance between family memory and autobiographical memory that are both situated in a particular moment of German national memory.

**Keywords:** memory; postmemory; unification; post-1989; GDR memory; Holocaust memory; family novels; generation; autobiography

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"Why now, why only now, why still now" (1)<sup>1</sup> Monika Maron's autobiographical narrator asks herself in *Pawels Briefe* (1999) when she fortuitously discovers a box that had been buried beneath decades of silence and forgetting. The box contains photographs and letters from her Jewish grandfather from the first half of the twentieth century before his death in the Holocaust. Through her family story, Maron contributes to the popularity of family memory literature in the German literary scene in the 1990s and into the 2000s. Maron's narrator in *Pawels Briefe* indicates the opportunistic timing of turning to the family past in the post-unification period by stating that "memories have their time," (1) and that sometimes years, even decades, may pass, the thought crosses our mind periodically:

One day we should take up this matter and remember somebody or something exactly.  
This, I believe, is what happened to me and the story of my grandparents (2).

In *Pawels Briefe*, German unification is the backdrop against which the family story unfolds. After initial celebration of the fall of the Wall in 1989, Germans had to renegotiate two competing historical narratives in which the ideological fault line between East and West Germany dictated the other as culprit for the previous Nazi dictatorship and the crimes committed in its name (Niven 2002, p. 5). East Germany was built on the antifascist myth of German resistance fighters against fascism and, under the influence of Marxism, put forth an economic explanation for Nazi fascism that equated it to capitalism. West Germany, under economic and cultural influence of the Western Allies after the war, framed the Soviet Bloc and its satellite states as the Communist enemy that perpetuated totalitarianism that equaled fascism. These competing histories of the two German

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<sup>1</sup> All translations and their respective pagination refer to Brigitte Goldstein's translation (Maron 2002).

states from 1949 to 1989 had to be reconciled after German unification and are constitutive features of Maron's biography. The turning point of unification is a sieve through which the work of memory flows both ways. On the one hand, the discourses of the post-unification context prompt renewed engagement with the family past in this text. On the other, learning about the time before her birth precipitates candid reflection on her own biography in the post-1989 present.

In the years following German unification in 1990, renewed conversations about the past, along with the gradual passing away of the parent generation, resulted in a proliferation of autobiographical and family novels (Eigler 2005a, p. 12). That is, both public and private negotiations of memory took place and they were by no means mutually exclusive. Indeed, a characteristic of the family novel is the interconnectedness of the individual with family history and national history (Assmann 2006, p. 36).

However, Maron insists on calling *Pawels Briefe* a family story and not a novel (Boll 2002, p. 89). Declaring the text a story imparts a claim to truth that sets it apart from the family novel genre but still does not clarify, for a story can be fiction or non-fiction, or perhaps both at once. To further complicate the matter, the German word "Geschichte" can mean story or *history* (Schaumann 2008, p. 261). Family narratives in the post-1989 period often "deliberately blur the lines between the fictional and autobiographical realms" (Eigler 2005b, p. 16). *Pawels Briefe* is no exception to the extent that the narrator thematizes the malleability of memory against historical traces of the past, such as letters and photographs and against facts pertaining to Maron's biography.

The autobiographical aspect of this work is precisely the point of contention among literary scholars. *Pawels Briefe* received much praise (Eigler 2005a, p. 78) but it was published not too long after the scandal in 1995 in which Maron was revealed to have collaborated with the East German state security known as the "Stasi" (Lee 2002, p. 67), a structure of the East German state that Maron had often criticized (Eigler 2005a, p. 176). Given that Maron's grandfather is a key figure in her reflections on the GDR in *Pawels Briefe*, scholars have suggested that she co-opts her grandfather's story of victimhood in order to construe herself as a victim of Communism and rehabilitate her own image in the post-unification literary scene (Caduff 1999; Detje 1999; Taberner 2001; Plowman 2003). In contrast, Andrew Plowman (2003) highlights Maron's awareness of culpability by investigating the link between autobiography and her ambivalently apologetic and defensive stances in relation to contemporary discourses surrounding her revealed Stasi collaboration.

The political and cultural context of post-unification German no doubt shaped the discourse within the family story and in, turn, reader interpretation of it as apologetic, confessional, or defensive. The reception of *Pawels Briefe* among literary critics illustrates that in a text that purports to truth as a family story, rather than novel, about WWII and the Holocaust, the question of boundaries among individual, family and nation is at stake. In a family story, where does the individual end and the family begin? Where does the nation begin and the individual end? In contrast to Assmann, who uses the term "family history," to describe one of the aspects of the family novel, "family memory" arguably better describes the narrator's engagement in *Pawels Briefe*. Not only does she collect and arrange facts about her family past, as an historian would but she also interprets, arranges in a non-chronological order, includes a variety of voices and implicates herself into the narrative as she repeatedly questions her own choices in approaching the family past. The ideological and cultural construct of family is the prism through which the individual negotiates autobiographical memory. Individual or autobiographical memory entails events explicitly remembered, or not, as something one has "done, seen, felt and thought" at some time in their life (Halbwachs 1980, p. 51).

The three aspects of autobiographical, family and national memory in *Pawels Briefe* form a triple threat to ethical relations. Autobiographical memories are inherently relational (Halbwachs 1980, p. 51) as are their written manifestations, autobiographies (Smith and Watson 2013, p. 72–3). In their very relationality, ethical concerns of the other come to the fore, especially when interconnecting autobiographical memories in the GDR with postmemory of a Holocaust victim's life. In this vein, J.J. Long asks how the imaginative aspects of postmemory can "be policed in order to prevent appropriation or even usurpation of the other's experiences" (Long 2006, p. 150). Autobiographies are

likewise subject to manipulation, in which “Telling oneself about oneself is like making up a story about who and what we are, what’s happened . . . ” (Bruner 2002, p. 64). The intersection of postmemory and autobiographical memory in *Pawels Briefe* is grounded in a particular moment when German national memory was at stake. Debates about if and how to reconcile East and West German national memories into one were in full swing. Some intellectuals assess the reunification as a colonizing venture in which the new Berlin Republic merely reduced East Germany to totalitarianism (Robinson 2002; Cooke 2005) before “absorbing” its provinces into a new dominant political and cultural order (Hell 1997, p. 5). Others, Maron among them, welcomed reunification (Koch 2001, p. 79) and West Germany was the primary model for political and cultural order in the new Germany moving forward. In spite or perhaps because of Maron’s known anticommunist views, she herself became caught in the crosshairs of national memory debates and related discussions on the merits of East German literature when she was discovered as a contact person to the Stasi (Plowman 2003, p. 276).<sup>2</sup>

Against the backdrop of Germany national memory after 1989, bringing postmemory together with autobiographical memory under the banner of victimization not only problematically conflates Nazi Germany with East Germany but it also heightens ethical concerns that Long and others have voiced about the theory of postmemory.<sup>3</sup> In this article, I argue that Maron’s self-reflexive writing and engagement with photography in this text maintains the critical distance necessary for navigating the entwinements of this type of literature that risk unethical appropriation. The text itself is a written construction and a partial family photo album that Maron has crafted and arranged. The “arrangement” is visible in the narrative and visual focalizations<sup>4</sup> present throughout the narrative. Yet, the autobiographical narrator critically examines how her upbringing in East Germany and her markedly anticommunist stance in adulthood influence how she constructs her grandfather’s life, listens to her mother’s stories and revisits her own memories.

## 1. Synopsis of *Pawels Briefe*

*Pawels Briefe* is a four-generation autobiographical family story. The first-person autobiographical narrator, Monika, not only recalls her own memories in the late 1990s but also invokes those preceding her birth after discovering a box of her grandfather’s letters and other official documents from the interwar and war periods. Over the course of the story, we learn that her Jewish grandfather Pawel and her grandmother Josefa, after having disavowed their respective religions, convert as Baptists and emigrate from their Polish town to start a new life in Berlin in the early twentieth century. At the brink of WWII, however, they are deported back to Poland due to Pawel’s Jewish descent, while their children remain in Berlin. Pawel is later sent to the Belchatow ghetto before dying under unknown circumstances in or en route to the Kulmhof concentration camp in Poland. Their daughter Hella, the narrator’s mother, survives the war and experiences afterward what she calls a rebirth (Maron 2002, p. 76). She moves to the Soviet sector of Berlin, officially becomes a member of the Communist party and dedicates herself to building the antifascist East Germany. She marries a Communist functionary who becomes the stepfather Monika despises. After her stepfather’s death, Monika experiences her own rebirth in middle adulthood in which she disavowed the GDR’s antifascist ideology and moved to West Germany. Towards the end of the novel, the narrative becomes increasingly autobiographical, recounting a trip to Poland with her mother and son and her revealed connections to the East German secret police known as the “Stasi.”

<sup>2</sup> See Koch for an in-depth explanation of the “Literaturstreit” (Literature Debate) of the 1990s and of Maron’s involvement with the Stasi.

<sup>3</sup> See (Van Alphen 2006; Weissman 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Gerard Genette theorizes the presence of one or multiple voices as modes of perception: “Internal focalization whether that be fixed (passing through one character), variable (passing through different characters), or multiple (as in epistolary novels, where the same event may be evoked several times according to the point of view of several letter-writing characters)” (Genette 1980, p. 189).

## 2. Slippage between 1.5 and 2nd Generation (Postmemory)

*Pawels Briefe* moves back and forth between autobiographical memory (individual) and postmemory (family), depending on the narrator's own relation to the events and people in question. The war period and its role in her own life marks a point of slippage between first and second generation. The narrator conjures vivid details of air raids during the war but wonders, "Do I really remember this? Or did Hella tell me about it?" (78). Though she is "a war child," (78), she registers distance from the war as something forgotten, perhaps never apprehended in the first place, when she asks, "Where in me did the war remain?" (79). Born in 1941, the narrator experienced WWII in infancy and survived it as a toddler. Given that the narrator was born during the war, she fits into what Susan Suleiman defines as the 1.5 generation as those who were old enough to have been there but too young to remember (Suleiman 2002, p. 277). Suleiman roughly approximates infancy to three years old as a range in which subjects are too young to recollect events (Suleiman 2002, p. 283). The 1.5 generation captures the temporal overlap between the narrator's first years of life and WWII and genocide. However, epistemologically and experientially, the 1.5 generation is similar to the second generation in that neither fully own recollection of these traumatic events. Their only difference is that the former had been there, was merely alive at that point but the latter was not. However, simply having been alive does not make one a witness or a victim of trauma. To witness and to be traumatized presupposes cognitive abilities and schema that develop with age. As sociologist Maurice Halbwachs noted in theorizing individual/autobiographical memory, "we recall nothing of our early childhood because our impressions could not fasten onto any support so long as we were not yet a social being" (Halbwachs 1980, p. 35). Since she was an infant during the war, it is not part of her individual/autobiographical memory. She must therefore engage with the war, especially the Holocaust, in a mediated fashion. Here, I adopt Sigrid Weigel's approach to "generation" as a "cultural pattern for constructing history" (Weigel 2002, p. 265). This takes the understanding of generation beyond the temporal/chronological paradigm that relegates one to a particular generation based on their date of birth (Weigel 2002, p. 264–5).

## 3. Postmemory, the Pre-Fascist Fantasy and New Patterns of Childhood

Among all the family members who play a role in the story, the focus is on Pawel: "my choice of the only forebear from whom I was willing to be descended fell on my grandfather" (2). Pawel's death under unknown circumstances in the Holocaust in summer 1942 occurred when the narrator was alive. This one-year overlap between the last year of Pawel's life and the first year of the narrator's is an important point of departure to build a relationship with him (Eigler 2005a, p. 149). The significance of the small period of overlap is poignantly felt in the wartime letters in which the grandfather mentions the narrator by name: "In almost every letter he remembers me: '... the warmest greetings and kisses to Monika.' '... what wouldn't I give to see her?'" (96). Moments like these, in which "the word 'past' loses all meaning," (96) motivate the narrator in the present to write his life out of the darkness of the Holocaust. Not having experienced what she investigates renders postmemory indispensable to my analysis of how she engages with events before her birth and within the first few years of her life when she lacked the "self-sufficient individual consciousness" (Halbwachs 1980, p. 59) required for autobiographical memory. Marianne Hirsch coined the term "postmemory" to describe the relationship that the "generation after" has to traumatic events that happened before they were born but that affect them nevertheless (Hirsch 2012, p. 5). In trying to reconstruct his life narratively and visually, the narrator, through the framework of postmemory, attempts to create what I call a *pre-fascist fantasy* of Pawel, a term derived from Julia Hell's *Post-Fascist Fantasies*. Hell's project is invested in the conscious and unconscious fantasies that GDR novels narrate from within the "ideological formation based on the family" (Hell 1997, p. 19). In sum, she argues that "[conscious and unconscious fantasies] are *ideological fantasies*: texts that narrate the work of the unconscious and its fantasies in ideology" (19). Through "imaginative investment, projection and creation" (Hirsch 2012, p. 5), the narrator in *Pawels*

*Briefe* reconstructs his life prior to victimization under fascism and extends it into the post-war period by imagining an alternative childhood with him, rather than with her communist mother.

Though attempting to write Pawel's life before the trauma of deportation and extermination, the narrator is still engaging in postmemory work if we apply Barthes' idea of the "punctum" when viewing photographs from the "future anterior" (Barthes 1981). That is, the narrator's knowledge of the traumatic event that happened afterward overlays her reconstruction of his life decades later. For example, when she learns that Pawel had feared entering the basement, she acknowledges that it may seem banal, "But his death, in which his fears found their worst realization, put such events and qualities into a new perspective" (13). It is unclear whether Pawel actually died in a gas chamber but the narrator's general knowledge of gas chambers permeates her interpretation of what, at first glance, appears to be an irrelevant detail about his personality. The narrator creates a pre-fascist biography based on scraps of information that she, as biographer, gathers from a variety of sources. However, to write about someone else also means, whether intentional or not, to write about oneself (Erlil 2009, p. 81). That is, the biographer is somehow visible in the biography of the other that she constructs. In *Pawels Briefe*, the constructed pre-fascist life tells about the narrator's own motivation to connect with him as a paternal figure and to speculate upon an alternative autobiography.

Pawel's absence from Germany's divisive post-war political context invites the narrator to imagine how her post-war life could have been different had Pawel still been alive. Intimate scenes of bonding betray the emotionally-laden motivations behind the narrator's construction of his pre-war and hypothetical post-war life but narratively and visually, these scenes resist integration. For instance, she describes what could have been immediately after the war: "My grandparents would have moved in with us on the fifth floor. Late, we or they would have looked for another flat, close by, so we could visit each other at any time" (74). These images are already bracketed off though their use of the subjunctive. Moreover, they lead to more questions that interrupt this fantasy and stem from knowledge of the future and the instance of narration as an adult: "What would my grandparents have thought of my godless upbringing . . . What would they have said about Hella's new husband?" (74).

The fantasy immediately following is grounded in her vague recollections of the immediate post-war period, as she "pictures" Hella, her aunt and friends around the table in the kitchen of the house that they and the narrator lived in briefly following the war. Even though her grandparents "still fit into this picture," she contrasts their black and white photographs on the wall with their "colourful children and their friends" (75). She animates her grandparents, saying they "sit" among Hella and her friends at the table. However, describing them as black and white invokes their presence as photographs, rather than people, in this image and only reveals the narrator's futile desires to have had them there.

Their black and white images lead to a different, and fictional, scene entirely in which the narrator goes for a walk with Pawel, "lead[s] him along the Schillerpromenade and hear[s] the neighbours greeting him" (75). The scene comes to an abrupt end as, once again, knowledge of what actually transpired, cuts this fantasy short:

My grandfather is friendly with everybody so that the horrors will remain hidden from me. This is what he wrote to his children in the letter that was his testament: 'Never let the child see the hatred, envy and vengefulness in the world. I want her to become a precious human being' (75).

Knowledge of Pawel's horrific death and the letters he wrote from the ghetto are markers of the future used in the present to intervene on imagined scenes in the past.

The narrator gives the scenes of her grandparents in the kitchen as well as the afternoon walk with Pawel in the present tense. Abandoning the subjunctive, the use of present tense in both passages gives the impression of overlap between the time of narration and of childhood. However, in the "subsequent moment," ethical relations are restored, juxtaposing "unconscious desires and phobias [that] assume possession of [her] look" with invocations of knowledge of what occurred (Silverman 1996, p. 173).



The letters he wrote and the circumstances in which he wrote them are employed in the present to create a tension in constructing the family past, namely between what the narrator wishes could have happened and what actually did (not) happen.

While the previous scenes of imagined alternative childhood memories rely on narrative strategies and photographic metaphors to draw Pawel closer yet maintain unbridgeable distance, this works on the visual level, as well, with the use of actual photography. Later in the text, the narrator imagines an intimate scene with her grandfather in the kitchen: “He sits in the kitchen . . . He warms milk for me. Drink the milk, he says” (125). However, the close-up shot of Pawel’s face on the same page resists inclusion into this idyllic scene. Roland Barthes calls the “photographic paradox” that in which there is a “co-existence of two messages, one without a code (the photographic analogue), the other with a code (the . . . treatment, or the ‘writing’ . . . of the photograph)” (Barthes 1977, p. 19). That is, there is the image, on the one hand and its interpretation, on the other. In spite of the referentiality<sup>5</sup> of Pawel’s photograph or proof that he had once existed and “been there” (Barthes 1981), it still refuses narrative framing that would try to contain, integrate and familiarize it among the photographs of the narrator’s childhood in the years after Pawel’s death. The encoding of Pawel’s photograph is speculative, further emphasizing distance, as indicated by the use of subjunctive: “I just cannot imagine that our life would have taken the same course with Pavel as it did without him” (124). Imagining this alternative childhood relies on the “photographic paradox” of documentary evidence of his existence, on the one hand and its speculative encoding or treatment, on the other. Pawel was absent during her childhood but in the family photo album that she constructs as an adult, he *is* there, placed among her childhood photographs. To resist nostalgic and appropriative tendencies in her visions of a different childhood, she marks them as mere speculation by using subjunctive, interspersing “future anterior” knowledge and finally, countering her fantasies with photographs of her actual childhood.

*Pawels Briefe*, as a post-GDR text, uses photography to engender proximity to the pre-fascist paternal narrative that infiltrates alternative fantasies of childhood. At the same time, this serves to construct the maternal GDR narrative based on memories of the narrator’s actual childhood. The narrator thereby acknowledges as part of her past but ultimately distances herself from it. To illustrate, the narrator retrospectively contextualizes the photograph on page 129 that depicts Monika and Hella in 1953. They are sitting closely next to one another, as Hella directs their gaze with her index finger to something outside of the frame. The narrator reframes this seemingly harmonious image of mother and daughter by providing information about the political and social context in which it was taken:

Although I know this and although Hella’s personality and her zest for life shielded her from political fanaticism and moral intolerance, her sensitivity to the suffering and injustices of these decades was inadequate, at least it seems so to me. In her notes, Hella mentions neither the year 1953 nor the year 1956, not a word about the building of the Wall in 1961. And 1968, “the cursed year 1968,” as Hella writes, is not the year of the invasion of Prague but the year of her fear for Karl, who had succumbed to bouts of depression after resigning his official posts (132).

At first glance, the photograph does not necessarily raise any questions other than what the two could be looking at. However, the narrator retrospectively “touches up” this photograph in adulthood by providing historical context that circumnavigates the technicalities of photography (Hirsch 1997, p. 201). She develops “the picture not taken” by pointing out the issues related to the war and to Stalinism that had remained unaddressed in this relationship (Hirsch 1997, p. 201).

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<sup>5</sup> For theory on referentiality, see (Rugg 1997, pp. 9–15). See also (Trachtenberg 1989).

In this photograph Hella directs Monika to look in a certain direction, perhaps to the future or to an object of distraction, which hints at both a previous bond and an interpretive obstacle to us as viewers. Looking together in the same direction connotes a bond but one mediated by a third party, the object of both their gazes. Given that in subsequent years, according to the narrator's recollection, the relationship becomes more tenuous, one may argue that the third constituent that held them together in their vision, literally and figuratively, was the Communist ideology devoted to the future.

The unknown, shared object of the gaze that lies outside the frame has implications for the relationship between narrator and viewer/reader. The viewer/reader is limited to the depiction of Monika and Hella while they, in turn, do not return the look to the camera and thus to subsequent viewers. The unreciprocated gaze directed outside the frame and our not knowing what they are looking at doubly excludes the viewer and withholds contextual information pertinent to the occasion of the photograph itself. The narrator remembers the historical and political context of the photograph, rather than the details immediate to the affective relationship and the occasion for the photograph. Linda Haverty Rugg astutely points out that "photographs disrupt the singularity of the autobiographical pact by pointing to a plurality of selves" (Rugg 1997, p. 13). The narrator detaches not only from her mother but also from the childhood version of herself, as if she is viewing these photographs from another generation entirely and does not recognize herself in them.

While the photographs purport to truth or historical accuracy, Maron's engagement with photographs reveals their constructedness and that of the autobiography. Her narrator uses photographs of Pawel to fit a more desirable vision of her post-war childhood. Pawel's photograph amidst those of Maron's childhood and of Hella's years as an active Communist may seem anachronistic but it gives the impression of desired proximity to the formative years of childhood and sustains attention on Pawel as the central figure. It returns attention to his memory that had long been obscured within and overshadowed by post-war political relations that once bonded mother and daughter and, at the same time, glossed over Jewish extermination on national and personal levels. As Anne Fuchs notes, "affective memory icons ... aid or trigger the narrator's investigations of a historical event that is perceived as a disturbance" (Fuchs 2002, p. 184). The photographic arrangement retraces both the Holocaust and the GDR childhood as disturbances. Photographs, however, can represent disassociation just as much as they can also represent reconciliation or reintegration (Rugg 1997, p. 14). In spite of the distance created between the narrator and an earlier version of herself that had a close relationship with her Communist mother, the mere inclusion of these photographs in the family story shows candor and an open acknowledgement of one's past influences. Photography works in the family story to create a tension between historical accuracy and self-conscious fictionalization. The photographs are evidence that Pawel indeed was a real person but they raise more questions than they answer. The questions set the stage to initiate dialogue between the narrator and her mother and, in addition, prompt reflection on her motivations in the present as an adult.

#### 4. Postmemory and Intergenerational Dialogue

"How can I picture my grandfather as a member of the Communist party?" (37), the narrator asks herself as she grapples with Pawel's political conviction as a Communist and his religious identification as a Baptist. To attempt to answer this question, the work of postmemory, in constructing Pawel's biography, opens up dialogue between the narrator and her mother regarding her mother's memories that preceded or coincided with the narrator's life.

It is “easier” for her to imagine him, for instance, partaking in his Sunday bike tours (38), which explains the placement of the photograph of Pawel with his bike tour group on the next page. However, she includes Hella’s statements as well, even if in the subjunctive to distance herself from them: “Hella says her father felt no contradiction between his communist and religious beliefs. For him, the goals of both were identical” (38).<sup>6</sup> Immediately following, however, the protagonist references an official document of the grandfather’s voluntary withdrawal from the local Baptist community in 1929. Juxtaposing the document with the mother’s insistence that Pawel remained religious, the narrator speculates that “my grandfather did not change his conviction, merely the community in which he wanted to be represented” (38).

The narrative contains multiple flashbacks of ideological conflict between mother and daughter over the post-war decades. This stands in contrast to the photographs of them bonding together in the early years of the GDR. Their dialogues in the post-1989 present animate and give voice to the still figures we otherwise see in the photographs. Their conversations are an unavoidable step in the narrator’s process of writing about Pawel’s life before his tragic death. Delving into the past reopens what Anne Fuchs calls “memory contests” which “edit and advance competing narratives of identity with reference to an historical event perceived as a massive disturbance of a group’s self-image” (Fuchs 2002, p. 184). Maron portrays war and post-war memory as tightly interwoven with political eras of German history, particularly the East German side of the Cold War era and its ways of engaging (or not) with the Nazi past. In sum, East German political discourses generally glossed over the Nazi’s specific targeting of Jews, counting them among all victims of fascism (Herf 1997, p. 160–1). However, while Jews were seen as passive victims of fascism, Communist resistance fighters were distinguished as active fighters against fascism (Pinkert 2012, p. 199, 201).

In the conversations between the narrator and her mother, the family sphere is split between Communist and Anticommunist. The narrator who recalls having declared herself “the victor of history” (88) after the wall fell, questions but does not dismiss, Hella’s point of view. For example, the narrator and Hella come across a letter in which Pawel instructs Hella to show Monika the final letter that her grandmother Josefa wrote before her death, which Hella had failed to do. The narrator attributes Hella’s forgetfulness to the prevailing antifascist ideology in the Soviet sector after the war, part of which had been an optimistic, forward-looking vision to build a new Germany:

I am perplexed by this forgetting, as perplexed as Hella herself. The year 1945 had been a year of rebirth for her, Hella says. A rebirth without parents, a new beginning without a past? Did not only the perpetrators but the victims have to suppress their mourning in order to go on living? . . . And later, when life had gone on; when newspapers were named “New Life”, “New Way”, “New Time” and “New Germany”, when the present had to give way to the future and the past was once and for all overcome, did one’s own past become unimportant as well? (76).

The narrator insinuates a connection between the antifascist myth and forgetting in which the mother perhaps chose ideology over communicative memory regarding the grandparents’ fate during WWII.

Elsewhere in the text, she explicitly quells the potential for intergenerational conflict. When they discuss the pre-war years, the narrator notes her temptation to “doubt the idyll that emerges from Hella’s stories” (31) but ultimately decides to let it be, since “nothing will be said that hasn’t already been said” (42). When she and Hella have differing interpretations as to why Hella’s non-Jewish German boyfriend left her in 1933, the narrator ultimately concludes that “Hella holds sovereignty over

<sup>6</sup> There are two version of subjunctive in the German language. One expresses hypothetical situations, while the other is often used in journalism to convey objectivity and distance from quotes of another person. This second version of the subjunctive (Konjunktiv I), is visible in the original German quote: “Hella sagt, ihr Vater hätte zwischen seinem kommunistischen und seinem religiösen Bekenntnis keinen Widerspruch empfunden, beider Ziele seien ihm identisch gewesen” (Maron 1999, p. 59).



the interpretation of her biography" (52). Thus, still feeling compelled to point out contradictions in the mother's accounts of the past, the narrator does not completely abandon her skepticism but at least shows a willingness to listen to and understand. She avoids "self-righteousness" and, in doing so, reveals the personal biases that inflect her family story (Gilson 2006, p. 73). To be sure, her narrator is in control of framing the voices she includes in the family story, however, the apparent self-reflection at the point of political difference indicates a conciliatory gesture towards her mother and her Communist conviction. This starkly contrasts with the confrontational tone in Maron's earlier works (Schaumann 2008, p. 260), especially the violent fantasies towards the GDR political functionary in her 1991 novel *Stille Zeile Sechs* (*Silent Close No. 6*, 1993). In *Pawels Briefe*, Maron (1991) approaches the past in a more open way, evidenced by the text's heteroglossia<sup>7</sup> that prevents the family story from becoming a "homogeneous story" (Boll 2002, p. 98). In this way, the text balances "epistemological authority" between the generations rather than tipping it in favor of the younger generation, as J.J. Long (2006, p.149) claims. The polyphonic structure is part of a broader trend observable across contemporary works of family memory literature in which authors show a willingness to engage with their parents' stories and a self-reflexive mode of writing that abandons previous self-righteousness characteristic of the '68-er generation (Taberner and Berger 2009; Fuchs 2002; Assmann 2013).<sup>8</sup>

## 5. Postmemory and Autobiographical Memory

Pawel's political identity invites renewed intergenerational dialogue about the past between the narrator and her mother but it also provokes the narrator's reflection upon her own changing political identity in adulthood leading up to the Stasi scandal. The conflicting facets of Pawel's identity introduces a narrative shift from outward dialogue with Hella on page 38 to contemplation of dismissed or repressed parts of the narrator's own life in the subsequent pages: "he became a communist and I simply cannot picture him at a Communist Party gathering. *Or is that I don't want to?*" (39).<sup>9</sup> She critically reflects on her biases towards Pawel's political identification by trying in vain to trace the origins of her own Communist influence:

I don't remember when I learned that he was a party member. [...] Neither do I remember when and how the word "communism" entered my vocabulary as a child (39).

Here, the narrator acknowledges what Judith Butler calls the "opacity" of the self that emerged from the context of war ("Where in me did the war remain?") and the post-war Communist milieu of family and friends (Butler 2005, p. 20). The inability to account for one's beginnings does not, according to Butler, eschew the narrator of ethical responsibility: "subject formation that acknowledges the limits of

<sup>7</sup> Barthes Barthes (1981) chapter "Discourse in the Novel" defines heteroglossia as different types of speech that may enter the novel, such as "authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters," each of which "permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized)" (263).

<sup>8</sup> The so-called "68-er Generation" refers to the student movement in West Germany in the late 60s and 70s that, couched within broader Leftist anti-authoritarian sentiment, questioned parents' culpability and complicity in the Nazi regime. These discourses at large are reflected in the genre of "Väterliteratur" (fathers literature) genre, in which authors born during or after the war portrayed confrontation between autobiographical protagonists and their parents. These same authors have played a particular role in the upswing of family memory literature in the post-unification period. Scholars have noted these authors' more conciliatory approaches in their literary texts from the 1990s into the 2000s. There are considerable reservations in referring to the 68-er Generation in the analysis of *Pawels Briefe* and Monika Maron, given that Maron technically belongs to the first generation (if one adheres to a strictly temporal paradigm), she comes from East Germany and in this text she engages with a family past of victimization, not perpetration, under the Nazi regime. However, as for the generational aspect, I use Sigrid Weigel's symbolic, cultural meaning of generation. Moreover, the typical understanding of 68-ers as associated with West Germany eclipses East German, Czech, Polish and other dissident cultures of the Soviet Union from the purview of post-war cultural movements. See (Meuschel 1992; Ammer 1995; Poppe et al. 1995). Finally, to the extent that Maron accuses her mother of forgetting or repressing the family past in *Pawels Briefe*, she provocatively challenges the assumption of persecuted Jewish woman as victim. Given her Anticommunist stance and her open-minded approach to her Communist mother in *Pawels Briefe*, I count Maron among authors in the post-unification who revisit their family pasts with more empathy.

<sup>9</sup> Emphasis added.

self-knowledge can serve a conception of ethics and, indeed, responsibility" (Butler 2005, p. 19). Butler, in theorizing the limits of self-knowledge, even grants room for fictionalization:

... my narrative begins *in media res*, when many things have already taken place to make me and my story possible in language. I am always recuperating, reconstructing and I am left to fictionalize and fabulate origins I cannot know (Butler 2005, p. 39).

Maron reflects not only the fallibility of autobiographical memory but also its ongoing constructedness: "I can't distinguish between things I really remember and things that exist in my mind, adjusted accordingly to my age and understanding as a reproduction" (114). This is not so much a failure in memory as it is a highly reflexive admittance of human vulnerability and of the tentativeness in constructing an autobiography within the family story as it makes sense to her in this particular moment in time.

Autobiographical work assumes an imagined or existing other that "establishes the scene of address as a primary form of ethical relation rather than a reflexive effort to given account of oneself" (Butler 2005, p. 21). There are arguably at least two "others" addressed in *Pawels Briefe*: the reading public and Pawel as a real but no longer living, other. Focusing on the latter with regards to the intertwinement of postmemory and autobiographical memory, Maron's self-reflexive narrative strategies create the ethical subject that is, according to Long, a precondition for "heteropathic identification" (2006). Revealing the fallibility of one's own memories prevents over-identification with the equally constructed strand of postmemory work in the family story. Originally theorized by Max Scheler, Kaja Silverman explains "heteropathic identification" as a way to "introduce the 'not-me' into my memory reserve" (Silverman 1996, p. 185). Hirsch also employs this term to theorize postmemory, aptly clarifying that heteropathic identification is to "alig[n] the 'not-me' with the 'me' without interiorizing it" (Hirsch 2012, p. 85).<sup>10</sup> Generational distance remains unbridgeable but the threat of political incongruence is overcome and filtered through the process of selection. In the time of narration, the 1990s, what most interests the narrator about Pawel is "what distinguishes him from other people [she] has known" (40), especially given the communist social milieu during both his and her lifetime. She focuses on this imagined difference narratively and visually, with the zoomed-in view of Pawel on the same page, to forge an alliance with her grandfather and overwrite his political affiliation. She constructs a paradoxical commonality through difference:

We, my grandfather and I, because I came after him and only after him, were just a little different, a little impractical but filled with dreams, leaned towards spontaneous ideas, were nervous and a little crazy (40).

She uses their imagined similarity to outweigh the undesirable political difference. She focuses instead on the imagined common ground of being different that "gave [her] support and comfort in [her] quarrels with the adult world" (40–1). Selectivity is therefore a means for continuity in the present. The inset of Pawel's photograph on the same page (41) singles him out as a unique individual from the members of his bicycling group. Moreover, as in the series of childhood pictures, the inset of his photograph emphasizes Pawel as a point of identity orientation for the narrator at a point when, given the pivotal changes in Germany after unification, such identity is questioned. In this part Maron foreshadows what the reader may already know, namely, her collaboration as an informant to the Stasi and the subsequent media scrutiny she experienced.

While this opens the opportunity for misappropriation of postmemory for personal ends, it is important to keep in mind in the preceding passages in which the narrator explores the limits of her knowledge about the "partially irrecoverable" social matrix that shaped who she has become

<sup>10</sup> In his discussion of postmemory, Long points out Hirsch's flawed understanding of heteropathic identification by assuming that the ethical subject is a result of, rather than precursor to, heteropathic identification (150).

(Butler 2005, p. 20). Maron's autobiographical narrator cannot engage with the political aspect of her grandfather's identity without first examining the integral role that Communism played in her own life. Engaging in postmemory work yields to, or at least coincides with, what the narrator sets out to achieve at the very beginning of the story: to "invent meaning" for her own life (3). As we saw in the construction of an alternative childhood that risks too much overlap with the pre-fascist fantasy of Pawel and his hypothetical post-war life, the narrator not only invents autobiographical memories but also critically reflects on them as inventions and explicitly concedes the limits of her own knowledge.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

*Pawels Briefe* is a post-1989 attempt at critically reflecting on multiple conversions and contradictions in the family past and the author's own past. In spite of the implicit truth claim in labeling *Pawels Briefe* a family story, Maron reveals its constructedness on the visual and narrative planes. Memory and writing about memory will change over time and inevitably contain falsehoods and distortions. To the extent that Maron's narrator acknowledges this in *Pawels Briefe*, this text fulfills a similar function to family novels that are fictional or at least more loosely based on the author's life. However, a family story, especially one that is about a Holocaust victim, even if only partially, must be held to higher ethical standards regarding tendencies towards over-identification. Upon closer analysis, Maron's approach to the family story is far from uncritical and monolithic. Even as she focalizes and arranges, the narrator parses out the strands of autobiographical memory, postmemory and national memory by way of self-reflexive narration and photographic engagement. This family story engages autobiographical, family and national memory because its very architecture is contingent upon current political, cultural and interpersonal circumstances, all of which are themselves tentative as they undergo continuous negotiation. The significance of *Pawels Briefe* lies in *how* and *why* someone remembers and, in turn, how the process manifests itself in written form to span across multiple genres and modes of memory. Monika Maron's own past may be contradictory and problematic but *Pawels Briefe* shows her ever-involving, candid reflection on parts of her own past that are situated within a complicated family history of conversions, disavowals and border crossings.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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