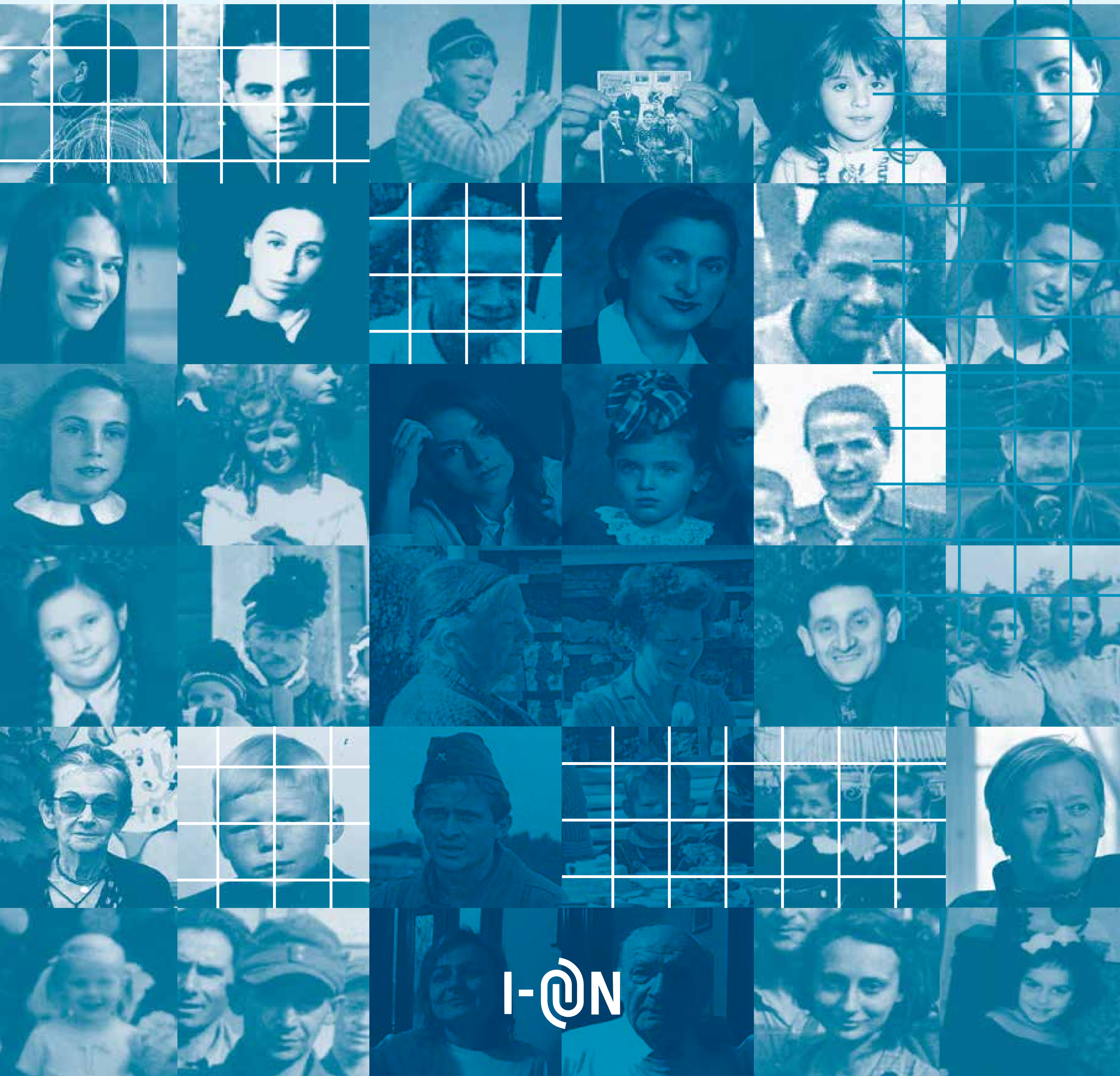
Identity on the Line (I-ON)

Approaches and Reflections



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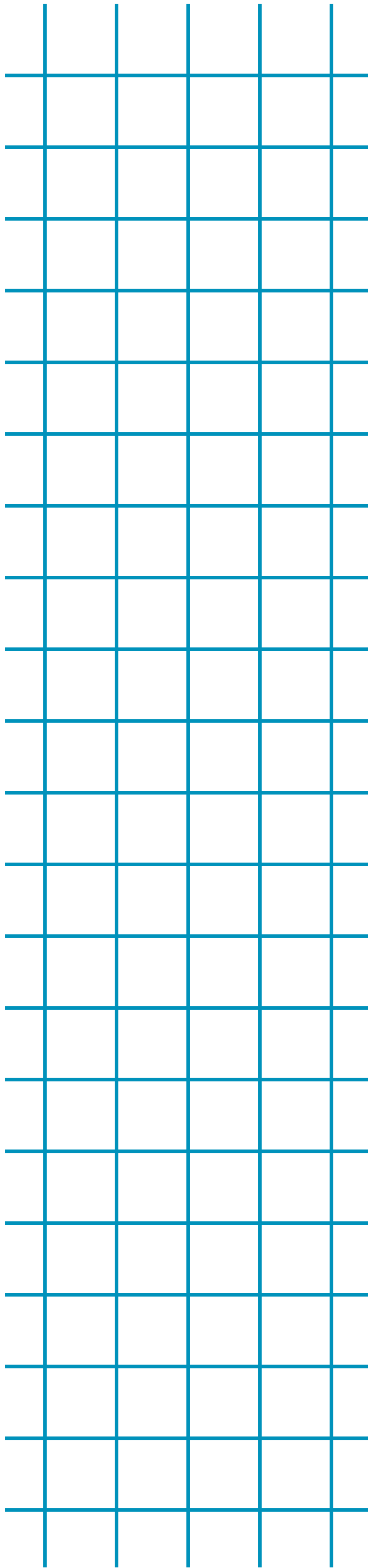


Secrets are Always More Dangerous than Stories, or: How to Shed Light on the Hidden?

Kathrin Pabst, PhD, project leader

Vest-Agder Museum, Norway

Introduction

"Secrets are always more dangerous than stories", said a psychologist to us partners in Identity on the Line, when we were afraid of re-traumatising our informants while asking about their memories of a troubled past. Some of us had reacted strongly to the narratives we had heard and to the feelings our informants had expressed during the interviews. And we were even more afraid of doing harm to the people who showed us their trust by sharing, sometimes for the very first time, their personal stories.

The seven migration processes we were working on simultaneously in seven European countries cover experiences of soldiers and children of war, indigenous people, Greenlanders within Danish society, peoples internally displaced due to war, multi-ethnic inhabitants emigrating and their descendants searching for roots, and a mixed group of migrants collectively deprived of their identities and basic human rights. This involves touching upon many potentially traumatising experiences, which demands a continuous attempt to balance museum employees' ethical obligations towards informants, visitors, and the wider public. Museums are, we believe, institutions responsible for presenting as many facets of historical events as possible, and this includes a diversity of voices and points of view. This includes also those parts of our joint history that are difficult, painful and not generally accepted by the majority or political authorities.

Vital parts of our shared history will remain deficient when first-hand witnesses fail to talk about what they have experienced, particularly when their experiences are not fully compatible with the overall historical record. In such cases, the delicate subtleties in our shared understanding of history will not have the chance to rise to the surface, and the diversity will not be as comprehensive as it, in fact, is. This, in turn, may lead to visitors feeling that they are not seen or understood in the cultural institutions' representation of history, as their views and understanding of the past are not presented. It is for this reason imperative to bring forth the stories that so far have not been told, as they are small but important pieces in the massive puzzle which constitutes our common understanding of the past, pieces that will contribute to a more eloquent and diversified historical narrative.

This online publication, with its eight articles, is written for those who would like to know more about the processes and reflections behind the scenes of the six museums and one university participating in *Identity on the Line.* They are not academic articles but an attempt to provide an easy-to-approach overview of what we did and learnt. The results of our work – seven separate exhibitions about the seven migration processes, seven short films, a joint exhibition, a joint movie, school packages and several scientific articles analysing the findings – can be found in other places, including on our webpage www.i-on.museum. The project started in September 2019 and lasts until August 2023.

This introduction explains the starting point for our work and why we have chosen certain methods and approaches. It offers more information about how we collaborated, what we jointly discovered, the lessons we learnt along the way and what we regard as so important that it will influence us in all new projects of this kind. This is not, however, a best-practice presentation that might function as a toolkit for our colleagues who want to work with similar topics or methods, but rather a sharing of heartfelt experiences. Based on what we have learnt, these would be our recommendations to make the work easier.

The starting point

Migration as physical movement is, as mentioned in our joint exhibition, *"embedded in human nature. The search for food or hope for a better future has been leading people to move since the earliest times. Wars and expulsions force people to leave their homes. Many of these movements demand a lot from migrants. Their lives and health are threatened, their right to self-determination is challenged, and their individual identities become objects of other people's prejudices and actions. […]*

Europe is continuously transforming. All migration processes, even the painful ones, lead to new cultural diversity, which can be seen as a positive force in today's societies. Shared experiences empower the citizens of Europe and help create our joint European identity, one based on the values of all of its people: respect for human dignity and human rights, freedom, equality, and democracy."[1]

This starting point was based, among other things, on the understanding of a clear connection between individual and collective identities: one's personal identity has several components, and among them are an individual and a collective component. The latter is not necessarily geographically determined but rather depends on different factors, which, when combined, create a context where a certain identification takes place. While the individual component is characterised to a large degree by the collective identity of the individual's physical and mental surroundings, the collective identity itself is shaped by a multitude of individual identities.[2]

Thereafter, our starting point was that we, as representatives for cultural history museums and research institutions, have a unique opportunity to collect and display stories and items which shed light on the variety of experiences and living conditions related to historical events. Museums are widely recognised as institutions restoring the past in order to understand the present, and as institutions aiming at presenting as accurate a picture as possible of historical events.[3] They are trusted to present facts and objective truths, and to show a sufficiently broad perspective of links between historical events. Furthermore, the I-ON partners support an approach that more and more museums worldwide publicly proclaim: museums have to work closely together with the communities they represent. They must be agents of change towards more open, inclusive and sustainable societies.[4]

In these processes, it is crucial also to work with parts of the past that were troubled and caused individual and collective pain or even trauma. Here, personal narratives from witnesses can be an effective way to point out the many shades of historical events by presenting a wide variety of experiences and opinions to visitors and a broader public. Personal narratives display feelings that can be recognised, and the recognition of feelings leads to more learning.[5] We believe that it is beneficial for the informants to speak out and to be heard, respected and acknowledged for their personal experiences and feelings. We also believe that it is essential and helpful for the visitors to understand, by reading the personal narratives of the informants, that there are others with similar experiences to what they themselves might have had. And we believe that by sharing untold stories in the right way, museums can contribute to more mutual understanding within local society.[6]

The process of collaborating with informants who share sensitive stories, sometimes for the very first time, and of transforming and after that presenting their narratives for a broader public, involves many ethical considerations. These relate to several factors, the most important being the informants themselves, the museum visitors, and the museum employees. Museum employees are the ones functioning as connecting links between the informants and the public, and in this role, they are both professionals and fellow human beings. The more the content of the personal narratives is sensitive, taboo-related and even traumatic, the more the museum professionals' own feelings might be triggered – and the more these feelings can, in return, affect their professional work. For this reason, working closely together with colleagues and asking for professional help if needed is highly recommended.[7]

Working together & joint approaches

In general, the migration processes the partners work with differ in time, scope and content. The Vest-Agder Museum in Norway takes a closer look at the long-term consequences of the German occupation during World War II. Here, the German occupation of Norway 1940-1945 is regarded as a contemporary migration of approximately 500,000 German soldiers. The House of Knud Rasmussens in Denmark is studying the long-term consequences of the migration from Greenland to Denmark after 1945 and until today. The Ájtte principal museum of Sami culture and special museum for the mountain region in Sweden focuses on the forced migration of Sámi from the North to the South of Sweden. In Poland, the Museum of Central Pomerania works with the population exchange in former German Pomerania after 1945, exemplified by Słupsk. Our partner in Lithuania, the University of Vilnius, concentrates on the long-term consequences of the Holocaust for Lithuanian women. The National Museum of Contemporary History in Slovenia looks at the migration from the former Yugoslav republics to Slovenia after World War II, and the impact of the country's independence in 1991 on the migrants. And last but not least, the Ethnographic Museum of Istria in Croatia focuses on the complex political history of the Istrian peninsula and its multi-ethnic population related to 200,000 emigrants after World War II.

With these differences in mind, we wanted to concentrate on the similarities within experiences of migration, which we expected would be found in all countries, and we were trying to find the best ways to collaborate effectively over time. Early on in the project, the partners decided upon some ground rules for co-operation. We wanted to meet monthly via Zoom, to update each other about individual progress, as well as to discuss joint activities. In addition, we had planned to meet every six months at one of the partner institutions and, thereby, to travel consecutively to all seven countries involved. The latter plan had to be changed due to the pandemic that hit in March 2020, but we managed to change the plans in a way that led to the same outcome: visiting all partner institutions and getting first-hand insights into the surroundings and atmosphere. In the digital and physical meetings, we discussed the content and form of our joint activities, such as lectures, the joint exhibition, films or school packages. Each joint activity was in the hands of a particular partner, while all of us prepared their own local exhibition. Also, we learnt from lectures and webinars that were addressing the needs all partners had at particular times during the work process, starting with a webinar about how to conduct interviews about traumatic experiences in an ethical and professional manner, and ending with a webinar about exhibition spaces and design.

But perhaps most important of all, we continuously shared experiences from the interviews and findings within the material, without mentioning the names of the informants. Several of our partners were personally attached to the work by being the descendant of migrants themselves. These personal attachments led to feelings that were not always easy to handle. The feelings that were expressed by the informants resonated in those of us who are descendants themselves, differently than in others. We took a lot of time to digest what we heard, as it triggered something familiar in us. Some of us started to dream about the concentration camps and wars, and some felt how much they themselves, as descendants of minorities, still were treated differently than others.

To sort out these personal reactions and to make sure that they would not interfere with the contact we had with our informants – the well-being of our informants had to be ensured at any cost – we hired psychologists for several sessions of group counselling. Most of the partners attended all meetings, well aware of the challenges that followed work as ours:

"The nature of sensitive interviewing alone incurs the risk of team member burnout, compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, or other mental health challenges that occur in addition to regular workload – even outside of the context of the continuous stressors involved with a worldwide pandemic."[8]

To be able to compare the results of all the seven interview processes afterwards, we developed and used a semi-structured interview guide that all of us used when talking to the informants, and we carefully designed the order of topics and questions. Not only did we want to know what had happened and how the events had affected the migrants themselves, their children and grandchildren, but we also wanted to find out more about how the relationships between the generations were affected. Which striking behaviours and feelings would each generation report about, transferred behaviours and feelings that one would relate directly to the migration process? Last but not least, it was important for us to empower our informants. That meant ending the interviews with questions about the ultimately positive outcomes of the struggles, including increased strength, resilience, and a better life. All informants were asked to fill out a detailed Letter of Consent, allowing us to use the material collected in digital and physical formats, and all informants were informed about their rights to withdraw the consent at any given time.

The partners approached the informants in different ways, and the interviews varied in duration from 90 minutes to 15 hours. Some partner institutions chose to talk with the informants only once and continue the contact thereafter through E-mail contact, while other partners went back to the informants several times to collect even more information or invited them to help create the exhibition. All partners were aiming at collecting objects or photos related to the stories, and some were more successful than others. In some countries, most of the informants wanted to remain anonymous, while others were able to collect and display video recordings showing the informants' faces and names. Also, the results could vary. Norway, for example, chose to summarise the interviews in short articles written in the first person, many of them signed only with "son/daughter" and the age, while Poland was able to use video recordings of the informants in the exhibition. Sweden had problems finding informants who were willing to contribute, while Slovenia developed workshops for several of their many informants in the aftermath of the interviews. Despite these differences mentioned, the joint methods left us with comprehensive and rich material that allows analysis on several levels.

In total, 164 interviews with three generations were conducted. We collected a vast number of video- and audio recordings, written memories, personal objects, family photos and historical pictures. We produced, in close collaboration with our informants, texts and films that sum up complex personal narratives and place them in relation to historical events. We found visible proof of how even second and third generation migrants are treated today, in the form of pictures of today's graffiti or public documents. Also, we were able to use the information provided to show new layers and aspects of what seven important migration processes in Europe have led to: for individuals, for their descendants, for family relations and for local societies.

Main findings

The experiences and main findings gathered by each of the partners are summed up in the separate exhibitions in each country, a joint film, and the joint physical and digital exhibitions, with the latter being available here: www.identityontheline.eu. To provide information about the work behind the scenes – in the articles to come – some partners have used the same keywords to structure their articles; some preferred to work without headings. Some partners explain in depth the challenges they have encountered, some focus instead on their findings.

If one makes a step back and takes an overall view of the interviews collected, similarities quickly emerge, and it becomes obvious what unites all our 164 informants, regardless of the country they come from, their family background or the specific migration process they have undergone. What is mentioned again and again, first and foremost, are *feelings* related to the experiences, and these feelings are the same, even if the experiences differ in scope, content, time and place.

These feelings express personal attempts to find one's own identity, both in relation to and regardless of the experiences of one's parents and grandparents. They show clearly how one can struggle, even two or three generations further down the line, with adapting to living conditions and local societies, the influence of which has proved to be immense. And these factors can all be found somewhere between five sets of polarities: home and away, belonging and alienation, resilience and vulnerability, silence and openness, injustice and reconciliation. The importance of each of these polarities may differ from one migration process to another, but to some degree they are valid for all.

Each of the polarities was accompanied by the same questions many asked themselves, questions we also display in our joint exhibition. The questions have relevance on a very personal level and implications on a societal level:

Home and away:
What does "home" mean to you? Is it a place or a state of mind? What do you need to feel at home, and how does it feel to be away?

Belonging and alienation:
Who are you, and what makes you, you? Who has the power to define your identity, to make you feel like you belong – or, in turn, like you don't?

Resilience and vulnerability:
What happens if expressing your identity puts you in danger? If the freedom to be who you want to be is taken away? Where do you find the strength to push back?

Silence and openness:
Can silence keep us safe? Suppress shame, fear, pain? Do secrets have long-term consequences? Can openness help us reconnect and accept all the bits and pieces of who we are?

Injustice and reconciliation:
What does injustice mean to you? Have you ever experienced it? How did it feel? Where do you find forgiveness, and how do you build reconciliation?

To summarise, we found that *"we are all constantly moving, voluntarily or unwillingly, physically and emotionally." And that "finding one's identity somewhere between these poles is demanding and requires the ability to constantly change and adjust."* [9] Each aspect and its implications for individuals, families and local societies can be analysed in depth, and several will be in the academic articles to come.

As for the implications of these findings, local societies and political rulers have huge power and thus also the responsibility to welcome migrants in a proper manner. Many of the challenges our informants told us about are directly related to responses and reactions they received from other members of local societies, both at the places they left and places they came to. Political orders and frames obviously had a large impact on their lives, and they often led to harmful reactions from members of local societies. In most cases, good family relations and support within groups or communities were crucial for our informants, and these relations and support could literally increase health and even save lives. This aspect will also be analysed in depth in an academic article.

Some lessons learnt along the way – from us to you

This work is important, and it takes time. We touch upon the core of people's being, and the processes can be tough for all involved. Always set aside more time than originally planned for, since you do not know what you will hear and find. That also means that you have to be flexible and able to adjust at short notice. To share a very personal story can be painful and is often accompanied by an increased understanding of how influential a certain experience has been for oneself. This means that one can react in an unexpected way, for example, by withdrawing from the project. That should always be expected, and it should be clearly communicated in advance which information can or will be used and how.

Our work should be centred around the needs of the informants, and – when possible – we should aim to include those who want to be included in our work. This depends, though, on the degree of anonymity. Migrants are not a homogenous group where members know each other and are open with each other about the challenges they have encountered, but rather individuals who often feel that they are the only ones who have experienced certain challenges. The more personal a story and the more one feels alone with it, the greater the need to remain totally anonymous. This, in turn, means that the museum

will not be able to gather a group of informants to collaborate regarding the outcomes of the project. But also here we have found that there might be more possibilities to open up together than one initially considers, as, for example, our Slovenian partner discovered when inviting the informants to workshops.

The responsibility for clear communication and for following ethical and statutory procedures lies with the museum institutions and, by extension, with us museum professionals. Here, we should also have in mind that it is important who we are and what our personal story is. In all cases, trust, respect and acknowledgement are crucial prerequisites for every contact with informants and visitors, but also our gender, age, personality and former experiences will affect the outcome of the project.

Sensitive and taboo topics have long-term effects and repercussions, of which until now we have been insufficiently aware. On such projects, one should always consider if a psychologist should be a member of the team for the whole duration – or at least available at short notice as backup. It is important to have the possibility to ask for advice and guidance in challenging interview situations that may occur in the course of the process. And it is helpful also for us museum employees, who may need someone to talk to if the interviews turn out to trigger something in ourselves that we did not know was there.

Summing up: "Secrets are always more dangerous than stories"

Vital parts of our common history will remain deficient when first-hand witnesses do not describe what they have experienced, particularly when their experiences are not fully compatible with the prevailing historical record. In such cases, the delicate subtleties in our common understanding of history will not be able to rise to the surface, and diversity will not be what it ought to be. This, in turn, may have the effect that visitors feel they are not seen or understood in the representation of history offered by cultural institutions, as their views and understanding of the past are not presented. It is therefore urgent to bring forth the stories that so far have not been told; small but important pieces in the giant puzzle which constitutes our common understanding of the past; pieces that will contribute to a more eloquent and diversified historical narrative.

In this work, it is essential to remember that some stories are almost too sensitive, too personal and too private to be shared with others. They touch a person's innermost feelings and affect relations with kith and kin. If they are linked to negative feelings like shame, guilt or anger, it is even more difficult to talk about them. Such stories require a transformation which makes it possible to share them with others, and that transformation has several steps, all of which have to be taken with care. In this context, museums as institutions that have credibility in our society and a focus on our common cultural heritage play an important role. When proceeding correctly, a museum may be able to operate as an adaptor and transformer of stories which otherwise, if they remain secret, can reverberate from one generation to another.

Secrets *are* always more dangerous than stories. Not-daring-to-talk, not-being-able-to-talk or – in the end – placing difficult experiences in the past and putting them to rest is a constant struggle that demands continuous attention and effort. Out in the open, articulated as challenges some members of the societies struggle with, experiences and feelings can be looked at, thought about and understood for what they are: parts of our joint history and reactions to those by our fellow human beings. Even if no two people have exactly the same reactions to specific experiences, we can always connect with others through the recognition of feelings.

[1] The joint exhibition is the result of shared input and discussions among all partners in I-ON, summed up and finalised by the Slovenian partner, the National Museum of Contemporary History. The exhibition was opened in Ljubljana, Slovenia 21st of January 2022 and travels through Europe until 2023. The digital exhibition can be found here: www.identityontheline.eu. All material can be found here, free to download and use: www.i-on.museum.

[2] Directorate-General for Research and Innovation. 'The Development of European Identity/Identities: Unfinished Business' (European Commission, 2012) pp.7-14. Retrieved from http://www.mela-project.polimi.it/upl/cms/attach/20120906/175214213_9680.pdf

[3] Kathrin Pabst, *Museum Ethics in Practice* (Norway: Vest-Agder Museum, 2019) pp. 5-41. Retrieved from: https://www.vestagdermuseet.no/english-translation-available-museum-ethics-in-practice/ The publication is the translation of the Norwegian book "Museumsetikk i praksis" (Norway, Museumforlaget, 2016).

[4] Mike Murawski, *Museums as Agents of Change. A Guide to Becoming a Changemaker* (American Alliance of Museums, 2021); Marstine, Bauer & Haines (eds.), *New Directions in Museum Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2013). See also: White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue "Living Together As Equals in Dignity"(Council of Europe Ministers of Foreign Affairs, 2008) retrieved from https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/source/white%20paper_final_revised_en.pdf and Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 'Participatory governance of cultural heritage' (European Commission, 2018) Retrieved from https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/b8837a15-437c-11e8-a9f4-01aa75ed71a1

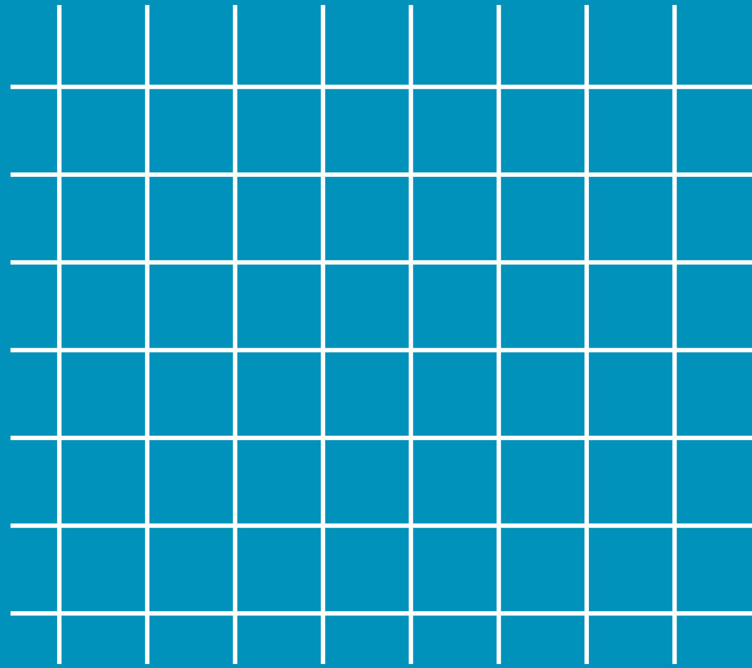
[5] Kathrin Pabst, *Med fokus på de besøkendes følelser. Jo mer disponering, jo mer læring? Nytt Blikk* (Årsskrift fra Stiftelsen Arkivet, 2015), pp. 60-73.

[6] Pabst, *Museum Ethics in Practice,* pp. 5-17

[7] Pabst, *Museum Ethics in Practice.*

[8] Danie Meyer, Project Report: Identity on the Line (unpublished, 2000), p. 1.

[9] Identity on the line (2019-2023) www.identityontheline.eu.



KEEP IT QUIET! FAMILY SECRETS IN THE AFTERMATH OF WORLD WAR II

Long-term consequences of World War II in Norway, and its repercussions within some families.

Kathrin Pabst, PhD, and Gunhild Aaby

Vest-Agder Museum, Norway

VESTAGDERMUSEET

German army soldiers marching in Kristiansand, 1940-1945, Norway.
Photo courtesy of Endre Wrånes.

The project background and starting point

Between 1940 and 1945 some 500,000 German soldiers were temporarily deployed to Norway in order to occupy a country whose population numbered three millions. This implies that in this period one in six of the population could be German, and in certain parts of the country the percentage was even higher. Throughout the five years of occupation, the German troops approached Norwegian society in a number of different ways. They recruited political sympathisers, and they punished their adversaries brutally. They hired Norwegians to build military installations or roads, they fell in love with Norwegian girls, married them and got them pregnant. In 1945, when the occupation was over, the Germans departed. But they left their traces, and more than 75 years later there are still many who struggle with the long-term consequences of what happened during the war.

The condemnation of those who had collaborated with the Germans was extreme, both from the Norwegian authorities and from the local society. Many women who had an affair with a German soldier had their hair cut off publicly and were rejected by their families and the people around them. Many of the children whose father was a German soldier were branded as “German bastards”, and some even hidden away in earmarked institutions. At the same time, other kinds of relations between Norwegians and the occupiers were suppressed in the public debate, such as the large number of profiteering companies and individuals who worked for the Germans and supplied them with the goods and materials they needed.

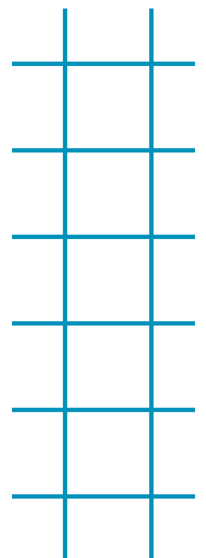
Occupation and everyday life: German soldiers were present in Norwegian villages and towns during the war, and there were many points of contact. Here, German soldiers buy fresh products from a local market trader in Kristiansand. 1940, Norway.

Kept by the Vest-Agder Museum.

Incidents that took place during or after the war often had long-term consequences, regardless of which side one was on. Many of those who fought against the Germans found that life in the aftermath was hard to handle, and even though many members of the resistance were decorated and honoured, there were some who had risked their lives for Norway without feeling that their contribution and sacrifice was properly acknowledged and appreciated.

Even today the history of World War II contributes to forming a people's self-image, their family history and identity. In some families, two to three generations later, it is still challenging to talk about what happened. This is particularly so if family members were on the "wrong side" during the war – those who supported the occupier or fraternised with the foreign troops in a way that could be considered improper or even treacherous.

But even some of those who were on the "right side" had to cope with severe long-term effects of the war, for example after imprisonment and torture. This is what constitutes the core of Vest-Agder Museum's documentation and exhibition project, Untold Stories. Family Secrets after the War: the different personal attempts to handle what happened during the temporary migration of nearly 500,000 German soldiers from 1940 to 1945.[1]



[1] The occupation of Norway has some characteristics which make it possible to use the term "migration" in a wider sense of the word, see Despina Stratigakos, Hitler's Northern Utopia. Building the New Order in Occupied Norway (Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2020).

Impressions from the exhibition *Keep it Quiet!* at the Vest-Agder Museum.

Photo by Gunhild Aaby.

About the work process and contact with the informants[2]

The project was launched in January 2020 with an announcement and advertisement in newspapers and social media. In the advertisement we asked: *"Are you a descendant of a German or of someone who worked for the Germans? What kind of marks has the war left on you and your family?* And: *Which stories are told – and which are suppressed?"* Our premise was that possible family secrets must have been kept secret for some reason, and that it would therefore not be legitimate to ask people directly to share their personal stories. Research from other countries and disciplines indicated that trauma could be involved in many cases, and that this made it particularly challenging to talk about what happened. This was the main reason why we decided to wait and see who contacted us, instead of being more active in finding the informants ourselves. On only one occasion, towards the end of the project, did we approach an informant, knowing that he had gone public with his story before.

After the public advertisement we received several calls and emails from people who wanted to talk to us and become informants. Each of these informants was followed up by a member of the museum's project group, for a one-to-three-hour interview, face-to-face or through the digital platform Zoom. Afterwards, a summary of the interview was written and sent to the informants for comment, correction and finally approval by means of a detailed declaration of consent. Two of our informants chose to write their stories themselves.

As a theoretical starting point for our work we mainly used the German philosopher Axel Honneth's approach to recognition. In his well-known book *Kampf um Anerkennung* from 1992, Honneth establishes a social theory based on the premise that people have a fundamental need to be respected and recognised on three different levels: as a loveable person by the members of his inner circle, as a citizen with well-defined rights from the state, and as an equal member of a group where his unique skills and experiences are held in high esteem.[3] The museum wanted to work on all three levels. We wanted genuine and authentic contact with the informant during and after the interview. It was self-evident and imperative to us that all the legal rights and demands an informant has in his encounter with a public museum would be followed.[4] And we wanted to use the exhibition as a dissemination channel in order to reach a public which could be moved by and made attentive to what the informant had experienced.[5]

Our advertisement in local newspapers and on the museum's Facebook and webpage prompted 31 people to contact us. Among them were women who had relationships with German soldiers, their children and grandchildren, descendants of members of the Norwegian Nazi Party and descendants of German soldiers. Several stories bear witness to traumatic incidents during and after the war which made a lasting impression on the families. 21 gave us permission to recount their stories,[6] most of them under a vow of anonymity.[7]

Social media ads circulated by the Vest-Agder Museum asking volunteers to share their family story. 2020, Norway.

[2] A Norwegian article containing more information about the project and its results is published here: Kathrin Pabst, "Det snakker vi ikke om! Familiehemmeligheter etter krigen": Et blikk på krigens langtidskonsekvenser i et tre-generasjoners perspektiv in *Tid for anerkjennelse. Andre verdenskrig i fortid og i nåtid* ed. Trond Bjerkås, Thomas V. H. Hagen, Gunhild Aaby (Norway: Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2021), p. 79–104. https://doi.org/10.23865/noasp.148.ch4 Licence: CC-BY-NC 4.0. This paragraph represents, like some others, a shortened version of the respective parts of the mentioned article.

[3] Axel Honneth, *Behovet for anerkendelse: En tekstsamling (København:* Hans Reitzel, 2003); Axel Honneth, *Kamp for Anerkendelse: Om de sosiale konfliktenes moralske grammatikk* (Oslo: Pax, 2008); Jean-Philippe Dereanty, *Beyond communication: A critical study of Axel Honneth's social philosophy* (Leiden: Brill 2009), Volume 7; Odin Lysaker, *Sårbar kropp – verdig liv: Anerkjennelseskampers eksistensielle kosmopolitikk* (Oslo: Universitetet i Oslo, 2010).

[4] Axel Honneth and Beate Rössler, *Von Person zu Person: Zur Moralität persönlicher Beziehungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2008). 10: 142. See also Kathrin Pabst, *Mange hensyn å ta – mange behov å avveie. Arbeidet med følsomme tema på museum* (Oslo: Museumsforlaget 2016), 196-198.

[5] Pabst, *Mange hensyn å ta – mange behov å avveie.*

[6] Among the ten informants whom we do not introduce, four withdrew after having spoken with us. One informant experienced his own story as too powerful after having seen it in print and needed time to process it before it could be made public. He withdrew his story and asked the museum for assistance to bring in a psychologist. One informant stated that we had not approached the experiences in the expected manner, and two informants did not wish after all to relate something which they felt to be too personal and close.

[7] Only two employees knew the informants' identity: the interviewer and the writer of this document, i.e. the project leader. When ethical challenges popped up in the process and were discussed in the project group, it was always done in general terms which made it impossible to identify the informant.

Examples from some of the stories we collected

Our informants are men (11) and women (10) from all over the country, aged between 32 and 94. All three generations are represented, with a large majority of members from the second generation. One informant is a first generation representative, which implies that she was an adult who made her own independent choices during the war. Fifteen informants are from the second generation, that is to say they were children of people who were adults during the war, and five informants are third generation members, which means they are grandchildren of people from the first generation. In one case we have had the opportunity to interview three generations from one family. Only three informants came forward under their full name. Five others have authorised us to use their first name; all the rest want to remain anonymous.

The stories we were invited to share have so many different angles and subtleties that it is hard to categorise them. Any attempt will necessarily have to be superficial in the sense that the categorisation will be based on the most prominent aspect of the story, without considering the many subsidiary aspects which make that story unique, and which might have prompted us to categorise in a different way. For the travelling exhibition here in Norway we selected extracts from many of the stories, whereas all the stories in their entirety can be found in a separate publication available at the museum.

Publication containing all the stories collected titled *Keep it Quiet! Family Secrets in the Aftermath of World War II*. 2022, Vest-Agder Museum, Norway.

At the age of twelve, the informant was ashamed when he learnt by coincidence that his father had been a soldier for the Germans in the war. 1954, Norway.

Private collection.

Here you will find eight of the 21 stories translated into English literally, and 13 stories in an abbreviated version.

The following are short examples of what we heard:

A grandchild, age 48, who discovered that her beloved grandfather had a dark past. In addition, she learnt that he had seriously abused his own son, who, in turn, had abused her:

"It was a terrible shock to me when his history from the war was revealed. Working my way through all this material has been an emotional roller coaster for me, an experience which I feel has had a lot of influence on my own life. All the suffering from the past gave my father a painful adolescence, which in turn gave me a painful adolescence, which has now taken me through several years of therapy in an attempt at coming to terms with it."

A son, age 79, of a Norwegian who accepted an offer to enlist and serve with the German occupiers:

"When somebody started talking about the war I fell silent. Everybody could tell what their fathers had done, but not I. So I was a quiet child. Later this feeling of shame changed into restlessness and insecurity. Would anything new pop up? (…) My father was a soldier on the Eastern Front. He was part of the regime which staged the Holocaust in Eastern Europe. There are still things I will not talk about. I have a feeling that what I tell also reveals something about me."

Grandchild, age 32, descendant of members of the Nazi Party:

"I see clear lines going from my grandmother to my mother and to me. My mother used to poke her finger into my back and say "straighten up!" – presumably to conquer her inward shame. My mother justified her action by saying that her mother used to do the same thing to her. To me that is a symbol of transferring shame."

Daughter, age 55, of a German soldier who served in Norway:

"There was something that happened in Norway during the war, something terrible which was going to leave its mark on my father more than anything else. Something so strong that he was never willing to talk about it. Something which traumatised him so profoundly that it affected our entire family, even us four siblings who never experienced the war. In this way, the war somehow became part of our lives too. (…) People who have grown up with a father traumatised by war will know what it is all about, no matter which side of the war he was on."

Bjørn, age 77, son of a German soldier:

"From my early childhood I was instructed not to tell anyone that I came from Germany. In the aftermath I understood that these cover stories were good for me. I've had friends who haven't had such cover stories, and who have ended their lives as grown-ups, shooting themselves because they couldn't cope with it anymore."

Jan Jørg Tomstad, age 67, son of a well-known resistance member:

"My childhood was perhaps a little different from most, and I soon became aware of who my father was. "How lucky you are!" many said. They did not know how hard it was at home. (…) A member of our family once quoted my father as saying: 'The price peace has cost us, is a price our descendants will have to pay in the form of fear and unrest passed on from one generation to another'. There is no doubt he was right in his observation."

Daughter, age 79, of a man who helped the Germans during the war:

"I was told that my father, after the war, was convicted as a traitor because he had worked as a spy for the Germans. This was the first time I heard that story. When I learnt all this I had turned 50. It was horribly painful (…) As long as there is doubt about the truth, it becomes difficult to relate to, reconcile myself with and forgive. But can I really forgive? Guilt, forgiveness and reconciliation, those are difficult ideas and concepts, but he was my father and he was a kind man."

Daughter, age 62, who at the age of 20 happened to learn that her mother had been married to a German soldier, a fact that had never been communicated at home:

"I may seem open and sociable, but at the bottom of my heart I have always been lonely. I was sort of never able to live out my feelings; everything was stifled and hushed up (at home). There was so much under the surface, but no-one dared to touch it; silence was total and all- pervading."

Woman, 94, who was abandoned by her family and local society when she married a German soldier:

"I have thought a lot about the choices I have made over the years, and I know that I was never a German whore. I was a Norwegian woman who fell in love with a German, and he loved me. There is nothing wrong in that, and we did not do anybody any harm. He was the love of my life."

Jan Jørg with his family in the garden, 1955. His father, wearing a uniform, has probably been on a military assignment.

Private collection.

Most important findings

A first analysis of the collected material indicates that at least two aspects play an important role for the long-term consequences of the war for children and grandchildren. The consequences seem to be more severe:

a) if the first-hand witnesses have had painful experiences which they could not or would not share, and

b) if local society acted as a punitive instrument.

Overall, the stories show that silence and concealment have had a major impact on children and grandchildren. The descendants have often been able to perceive that something was withheld, either because the behaviour of their parents or grandparents indirectly revealed this, or because of the reactions they received from their local society. Research confirms how important it is for the development of one's own identity that one knows who or what has had a formative influence on one's life. If one is denied access to all the knowledge required for this process, one could be left feeling alone and not accepted as an autonomous individual.[8]

We also saw that the local society had a major influence on how individuals were able to cope with events during and after the war. The local environment could either accept and support, or punish and exclude. If everyone in the local community knew what had happened and accepted the chosen course of action as understandable, given the challenges the person was up against, the long-term consequences turned out to be very limited. If, on the other hand, it was necessary to handle not only the incidents as such, but also punishment and to some extent social exclusion, the negative consequences, even for descendants, were more intense and to some extent multiplied.

In addition, the material suggests that negative behaviour such as violence and anger, as well as negative feelings like shame, guilt and loneliness might be transferred to the succeeding generations. The less the descendants knew about the reasons for the negative behaviour or feelings of their parents or grandparents, the stronger the negative impact seemed to have been. Several circumstances are likely to play additional roles here, and further studies are required before making clear correlations.

Impressions from the exhibition *Keep it Quiet!* at the Vest-Agder Museum.
Photo by Marius Kolkin.

[8] H.C. Gulløv, *Danmark og kolonierne: Grønland: Den Arktiske Koloni* (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag A/S, 2017).

Intergenerational transfer

In general, our initial findings support research results within disciplines like psychology, epigenetics and neuroscience, which over recent decades have studied so-called *inter- or transgenerational transfer.* The concept refers to the transfer of *"something"* – most often in the form of memories of specific events or experiences – from one generation to another, either within one family or in society as a whole from members of one generation to members of the next. Memories that are transferred may change form and content with the passage of time, and both the memories themselves and the change that can be ascribed to the passage of time depend on a number of external factors, psychological as well as biological, which in turn are unique for each person and each situation.

When traumatic or potentially traumatising experiences form the basis, that is to say incidents which were experienced as life-threatening or negative to such an extent that they have affected someone's life over a long period of time, the transfer may be particularly noticeable.[9] People – and their descendants[10] – who have been exposed to war, flight, genocide, forced migration or totalitarian regimes are among those who are especially exposed to this.

[9] In special fields like psychology, the focus has for a long time been directed at how traumatic incidents may influence people's lives, also many decades after they actually happened, see e.g. Arieh Y. Shalev et al., International Handbook of Human Response to Trauma (New York: Plenum Publishers 2000); Yael Danieli, ed., Intergenerational Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma (New York: Plenum Press 1998); Bessel van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma (New York: Penguin Books 2015); Mark Wolynn, It Didn't Start with You: How Inherited Family Trauma Shapes Who We Are and How to End the Cycle (New York: Penguin Books 2017). See also Rachel Yehuda & Amy Lehrner, 'Intergenerational transmission of trauma effects: Putative role of epigenetic mechanisms', World psychiatry: Official journal of the World Psychiatric Association, 17 no.3 (2018): 243-257. https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20568

[10] See e.g. Sabine Bode, Die vergessene Generation: Die Kriegskinder brechen ihr Schweigen (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2004); Sabine Bode, Kriegsenkel. Die Erben der vergessenen Generation (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 2009); S. Aleksijevitsj, De siste vitnene (Oslo: Kagge Forlag AS 2016); Marie Smith-Solbakken and H.-J. Wallin-Weihe, 'Post-traumatic stress reactions in a long-term and several generation perspectives', Multicultural Studies 1 (2018): 119-141, https://doi.org/10.23734/mcs.2018.1.119.141

Some thoughts upon the theme and the work process

The slogan of Vest-Agder Museum is "*We tell YOUR story*", and this includes difficult, sensitive and taboo narratives which so far have not been told. Such stories have been part of our working schedule over the last fifteen years, and we have gradually established routines for all contact with informants and visitors. Among other things, we organise workshops to prepare for challenging interview situations, always aiming at providing the best possible setting for the informant. In addition, in this particular project we were part of an international collaboration among museums, with partner institutions who were all working on similar themes and used similar methods.[11] We knew very well that both the interview situation and the exhibition could trigger emotions which in turn could provoke strong reactions.[12] The preparations we made were crucial and worked out more or less as we expected. Still, the work process gave us a considerable amount of new insight.

Among other things, four informants withdrew their consent after we carried out the interviews and sent them the transcript of the story for approval. When we asked the reason for this, one of them said quite explicitly that it was not until he read his own story in black and white that he really understood the full extent of the impact the events of the war still have today. The strain and stress were so intense that he asked us to help him find a psychologist so that he could get back on his feet and move on with his life. Two of the others wanted to protect family members they thought would not want their stories to be exposed, not even in an anonymous version. And in the last case, we were told that we had not managed to account for the full complexity and all the repercussions of the war in a sufficiently precise manner.

Even though we had taken a lot of precautions and tried to prepare ourselves as best we could for the interviews and the reproduction of the stories, we were surprised by learning how taboo the war still was within certain families, and to what extent the wall of silence had affected the lives of children and grandchildren in a negative way. That applied not only to the informants, but also to us museum employees involved in the project. The work was much more demanding than we had foreseen. We had dug deep into the subject, discussed different approaches and their possible consequences in plenary sessions and kept in touch with each other without interruption just to make sure we could handle the numerous ethical challenges that popped up during the process. Still, several of us reacted strongly to what we learnt, particularly after the personal contact with the informants, where their feelings came to the surface in such an unambiguous way. Suddenly some of us understood that there were untold stories about the war in our own families, while others were astounded to see how easily the long-term effects of silence and concealment could be projected upon their own lives. As a direct consequence of the new things we learnt, we changed our routines for future work. Among other things, we will always have an arrangement with a psychologist who will be able to provide help for the informants or us, if needed.

[11] The involved employees in the seven partner institutions in the international project *Identity on the Line* (see www.i-on.museum), cooperated to produce an interview-guide which was meant for use in all sub-projects in the seven countries.

[12] Kathrin Pabst, 'Med fokus på de besøkendes følelser. Jo mer disponering, jo mer læring?' *Nytt Blikk (Årsskrift fra Stiftelsen Arkivet* 2015), 60-73; Kathrin Pabst, "The individual's needs versus the needs of a broader public. A short introduction to a central moral challenge that museum employees could face when working with contested, sensitive histories" in *Difficult Issues: Proceedings of the ICPM International conference* 2017, eds. Beate Reifenscheid et al. (Heidelberg: ICOM Deutschland, arthistoricum.net, 2019).

The dissemination of the results

The results of our work were disseminated in several ways: through a travelling exhibition, a comprehensive exhibition catalogue, events and lectures that delved deeper into relevant topics, as well as meetings with school classes and students. Our dissemination strategy aimed to reach a broad audience, raise awareness of the experiences of our informants, and move them emotionally. At the same time, we wanted to protect the informants' anonymity and privacy, as they shared very personal stories. To achieve this, we carefully designed the exhibition to convey both information and emotions.

The Keep it Quiet! exhibition is relatively small in size, designed to allow visitors to feel physically close to the informants. All communication starts with the 21 personal stories, presented through voice displays in one-to-one experiences arranged in six narrow listening chambers. Each chamber is equipped with mirrors on the floor and ceiling, creating a strange effect of infinity, which can be metaphorically interpreted as how generations mirror each other. While sitting in the chamber, visitors can read quotations and view pictures and objects from the informants through a hatch. The exhibition opened at Kristiansand museum in February 2022 and will tour for nearly three years through different locations.

By the end of January, around 10,000 people had already visited the exhibition. According to the audience survey, 92% of those who responded said that the stories presented had touched them. Among those who gave a more detailed answer, several commented on the theme of secrecy and openness in the stories. One male respondent, aged 18 to 35, declared, "Do not keep your difficult stories to yourself!" The transfer of negative emotions, such as guilt and shame, across generations particularly resonated with visitors. "It is so sad that innocent children feel ashamed," said a woman aged 36 to 65, while another in the same age group wrote, "The exhibition shows the inherited suffering, which is the saddest thing."

Several visitors were moved to tears, and many unexpectedly related what they saw and heard to their own family history or the story of someone they knew.

Close to 30 school groups, mostly senior high school students, have participated in sessions at the exhibition with a museum educator. It was immediately apparent that the students were engaged with the personal stories and the emotions that were presented. By exploring the stories of secrets, injustice, and shame, they were able to approach the history of World War II in a new way. One of the museum educators, who also participated in the *Keep it Quiet!* documentation project, summarised her experiences of communicating the exhibition to school groups, saying, *"I am grateful for this exhibition and I want to delve deeper into this history. It's meaningful to tell these stories because they reveal so many layers and different aspects of the war and its aftermath."* (Judith S. Nilsen, Sjølingstad Uldvarefabrik).

Many of the informants have visited the exhibition, but most of them did so in silence and anonymously, avoiding the crowds during the openings. One female informant waited for four months before daring to visit the exhibition. She found it to be an overwhelming personal experience to see the presentation and hear her own story. She was so moved that she started to cry when experiencing her story from the outside. After the visit, she thanked the project team. Another informant stated, *"I am so proud to be part of this exhibition, and it feels like my father is also very proud of me. He died at the age of 62 in 1979, when I was 13. With this opportunity to tell his story, everything came to a kind of 'closure' that he himself could not complete."*

In summary, our goal with this exhibition project was to reach a public that could be moved and made attentive to the experiences of the informants. All the reactions and feedback we have received indicate that we have achieved that goal.

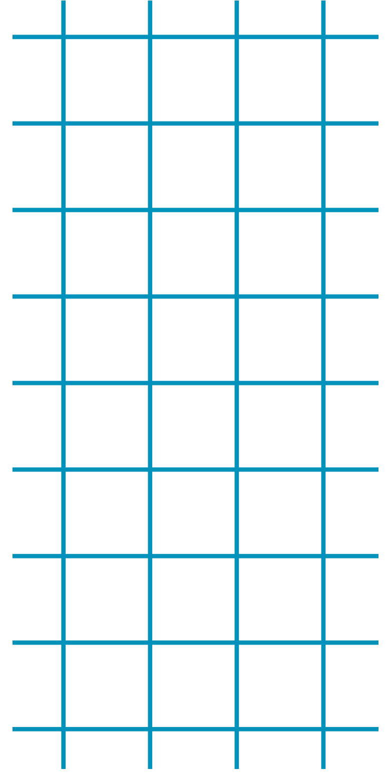


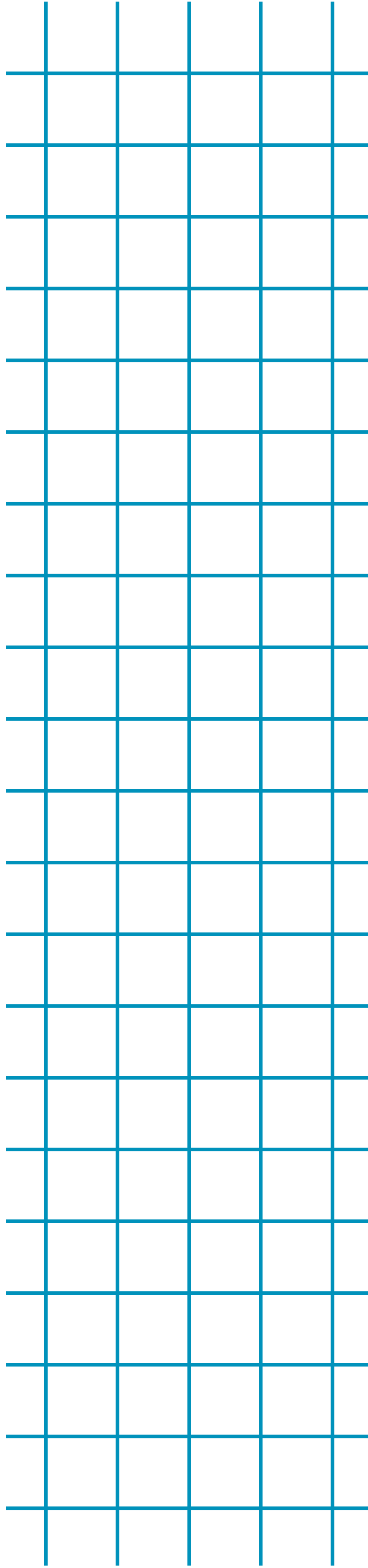
Photo of the exhibition Keep it Quiet! Family Secrets in the Aftermath of World War II at the Vest-Agder Museum, 2022, Norway.

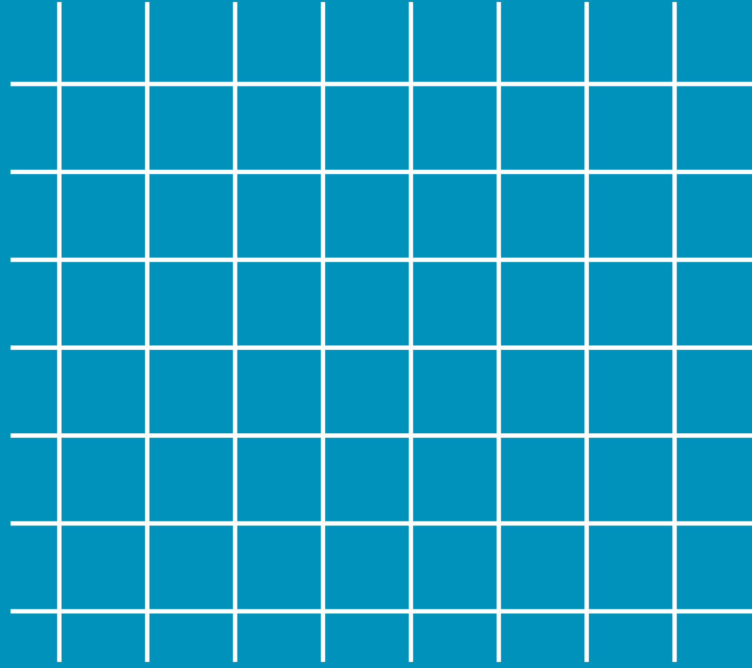
Photo by Arve Lindvig.

Summing up

World War II was a historic catastrophe with complex consequences and repercussions on three different levels: for the development of personal identity for those who were directly exposed to the shock, for the inner life of families, and for the society which saw it happen. In this project we have been in touch with all three levels, even if our focus has been on levels one and two: the impact of the events of the war on children and grandchildren and its significance for family relations.

A lot of research remains to be done in this field. In our view intergenerational transfer has not, up until now, been sufficiently clarified and integrated into the work of museums. Among other things, the importance and transfer of individual trauma within families and collective trauma within societies needs further exploration. Secrecy and concealment are important factors, as well as the role of the local societies. We do not yet know enough about the underlying mechanisms, but we can clearly see that they play an important role and have to be considered when interacting with informants and visitors. In order to understand the organic connections and fully exploit new knowledge, it is vital to side with and learn from disciplines like psychology and neuroscience, both of which have been studying these phenomena over a long period of time.





AMONG GREENLANDERS IN DENMARK

Søren la Cour Jensen, MA, and Ivalo Katrine Birthe Foget Olsvig, MA

The House of Knud Rasmussen, Denmark

INUIT DRUM DANCE WITH SPECTATORS. ALL OF THE WOMEN HAVE CHARACTERISTIC HAIRSTYLES AND ARE WEARING NATIONAL COSTUMES. 1906, EAST GREENLAND.

Photo by William Thalbitzer, kept by the Knud Rasmussen Archive.

The Greenlandic–Danish shared history and relationship

The shared history of the Greenlandic–Danish relationship goes back 300 years. It has almost exclusively involved an unequal balance of power. In 1721, Denmark colonised Greenland and for the next 232 years, Greenland remained a Danish colony, a closed and restricted territory ruled from Copenhagen by the Danish government. During those colonial times, Greenland's population lived in fishing and hunting communities. After WWI, the pressure from the United Nations towards global de-colonisation grew. Through a referendum in 1953, the Danish government changed Greenland's status: no longer a Danish colony, it became a Danish county, which entitled the Greenlandic population to receive full Danish citizenship. In the years that followed, Denmark and Greenland worked together to create the Home Rule law, put in place in 1979. Thirty years later, in 2009, Greenland established self-government, and Greenlanders became recognised as a people in their own right. To this day, Denmark still manages certain areas of responsibility on behalf of Greenland, e.g. defence, security and foreign policy. For this reason, Greenland also has two representatives in the Danish parliament, which consists of 179 members in total. Today, Greenland, together with the Faroe Islands and Denmark, is part of *The Kingdom of Denmark.* Nevertheless, this imbalance in the power relationship over the centuries still has a deep impact on the Danish mentality toward Greenland, and particularly with regard to Greenlandic society and its structure. Today there are many Greenlanders living in Denmark, having moved here because of work, education and/or family relations.[1]

[1] H.C. Gulløv, *Danmark og kolonierne: Grønland: Den Arktiske Koloni* (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag A/S, 2017).

The project and considerations

Our project studies how processes of affiliation are involved in individual identity creation. The social and cultural markers involved can be quite diverse, but noticeable ones included are ethnicity, language and cultural behaviour. In addition, the settings in which processes of identity construction and affiliation or disaffiliation are happening can be diverse, and they include a variety of structural, social and public contexts. These processes are substantial for Greenlanders living in Denmark. Especially since the Danish-driven modernisation of Greenland starting in the late 1950s, and after a number of educational projects by the Danish government aimed towards *Danification* of the Greenland population, the issues of cultural affiliation and identity within the Greenlandic population in Denmark have been significant.[2]

The direct social interaction between Greenlanders and Danes is the most important factor in the construction, challenge and defence of identity for the participants. The project focuses on the interaction between the Greenlanders living in Denmark and the Danish majority, as well as the resulting reactions and feelings. The interactions can be challenging and can often be accompanied by underlying preconceived notions. By documenting and sharing these situations and reactions, the project is designed to create a foundation of better understanding and preparedness for interactions among people of different backgrounds and with different personal stories.

Portrait of Per's (informant) family in Aasiaat (Egedesminde). Year unknown, Greenland.

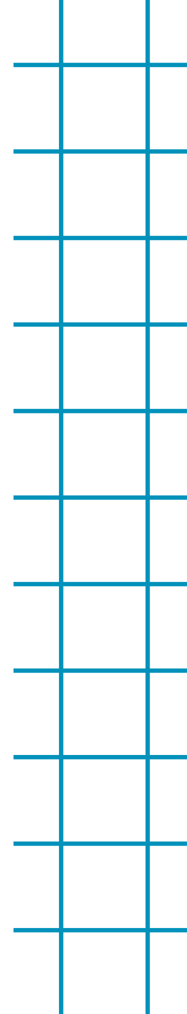
Private collection.

[2] Jens Heinrich, "Forsoningskommissionen og fortiden som koloni," Baggrund, 28 November 2014, https://baggrund.com/2014/11/28/forsoningskommissionen-og-fortiden-som-koloni/

Our participants

The interview process was difficult due to the Covid-19 pandemic. When we reached out to the Greenlandic population in Denmark, 20 people responded, 15 of whom went on to volunteer as participants. The five that declined had different reasons for doing so, either owing to challenging personal situations related to the coronavirus, which made it difficult to cope with the project, or concerns about family or friends.

Out of the group of participants, another four chose to withdraw after they had been interviewed. They were not ready to share their stories because they felt that the pandemic lockdown and other restrictions had emotionally affected, if not altered the situation. Thus, we now have 11 stories from Greenlandic participants in Denmark. Three men and eight women with ages spanning from the early 20s (some did not want to disclose their exact age, to preserve their anonymity) to 81. Due to pandemic restrictions, four of the interviews were conducted via Zoom, but, fortunately, we did manage to complete seven interviews face-to-face.



The interviews

All but one of the participants are of Greenlandic descent and they are mostly living permanently in Denmark. The interviews were directed toward their personal histories, their experiences concerning their affiliation, any prejudice or racism they have encountered, and how these experiences affect their everyday lives. Furthermore, questions about the circumstances or situations in which they feel more Greenlandic, more Greenlandic-Danish or more Danish were essential to understanding the fluid concept of identity.

The framework for the interviews was a shared interview guide for the entire *Identity on the Line* project. The guide was structured as a common questionnaire to enable all partners to make comparative studies of the interviews. The partners jointly constructed this framework at the beginning of the project. Following the outline in the interview guide, we conducted qualitative interviews with our participants.

We conducted the interviews in an environment that was as safe, friendly and cosy as possible. If not on Zoom, we met with the participants in their own homes, which was the preference, or, if the participant wished, at the museum or one of the Greenlandic Houses, as these locations offered a safe and familiar environment. All the interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, reviewed and revised. We then handed the transcripts to the participants for them to read and edit the text, adding and deleting where they saw fit. Eventually, the participants approved the interviews and their further use within the project.

The Greenlandic Houses and The Immigrant Museum

According to official figures from Statistics Denmark, in 2021 there were 16,730 Greenlanders living in Denmark. That said, the figure is difficult to calculate because Greenlanders have Danish citizenship, so when is a *Greenlander* considered a *Greenlander?* One might have a Danish father and a Greenlandic mother, or have been born in Denmark to Greenlandic parents, or born in Greenland to Danish parents. What then defines a Greenlander?

Nevertheless, to reach out to Greenlanders living in Denmark, we collaborated with the Greenlandic Houses in the four major Danish cities: Copenhagen, Aarhus, Odense and Aalborg. These Houses have a number of different functions, and the mainly Greenlandic users see them as places to network, to engage in cultural exchange and social interaction, and to access social, judicial and work-related professional counselling.

Another external partner for the Danish part of the project is The Immigrant Museum. Situated in Farum, close to Copenhagen, it is the only museum in Denmark where 500 years of Danish immigrant history is being researched and exhibited. It places this very current topic of migration and immigration into a historical context, and gives visitors a broader and more nuanced picture of immigration to Denmark. The Immigrant Museum has a very active educational unit and an approach toward schools and teaching projects from which we drew inspiration and practical experience.

The travelling exhibition Among Greenlanders in Denmark at the Greenlandic House in Aarhus. 2022, Denmark.

Photo by House of Knud Rasmussen.

Exhibition detail from the Migration Museum of Denmark. 2022, Denmark.

Photo by House of Knud Rasmussen.

Social media and outreach

The four Greenlandic Houses in Denmark and other social, educational and cultural networks were beneficial to our efforts in reaching out to our participants. We made our project visible on our website, through emails to Greenlandic associations throughout the country, the Facebook pages of the House of Knud Rasmussen and the Greenlandic Houses. We had posters and flyers in all four Greenlandic Houses, and made YouTube videos, which we shared on social media platforms. We reached out to different online groups for Greenlandic people in Denmark, and shared the project within our professional museum networks.

FORSKNINGSPROJEKT SØGER INFORMANTER TIL INTERVIEW OM:

IDENTITET, IDENTITETSSKABELSE OG MIGRATION

Er du grønlænder eller har du grønlandsk baggrund og bor i Danmark? Har du boet i Danmark hele dit liv, er du lige flyttet hertil, eller har du levet her længe? Er du/I flere generationer forbundet til Grønland og lever i Danmark? – så er vi, Knud Rasmussens Hus og EU-projektet *Identity on the Line*, interesseret i at tale med dig og høre din historie

Vi, Knud Rasmussens Hus, er partner i et forskningsprojekt, bestående af seks kulturhistoriske museer og et universitet fordelt i syv europæisk lande, der bringer identitet, identitetsskabelse og migration i fokus. Projektet Identity on the Lines formål er at formidle kulturarv og understøtte en bedre integration i Europa. Knud Rasmussens Hus vil undersøge den grønlandske migration til Danmark fra 1945 og frem til i dag. Projektet søger informanter, der er flyttet fra Grønland til Danmark, måske flyttet frem og tilbage, eller er efterkommere af grønlandske tilflyttere – og som har lyst til at deltage i interviews om netop dette emne. Vi er især interesseret i at interviewe flere fra samme familie, men fra forskellige generationer.

Resultaterne skal bruges til at lave udstillinger, undervisningsmateriale og forskningsartikler om emnet. Det er op til dig, om du er anonym eller ej. Interviewet kommer til at tage alt fra en time til tre timer, alt efter hvor meget vi har at tale om. Vi kommer hen, hvor det er nemmest for dig, ellers har vi lokaler flere steder i landet, hvor vi kan mødes. Det er også muligt at mødes online. Hvis du har lyst, må du gerne medbringe en genstand, en sang, en opskrift eller noget helt andet, som har en bestemt betydning for dig, og som vi kan tage udgangspunkt i. Spørgsmålene kommer f.eks. til at handle om *hvorledes du identificere dig selv? Hvordan det var at flytte til Danmark? Hvordan du lever med både din grønlandske og danske kultur? Hvilke gode og dårlige fordele og/eller fordomme du møder på din vej?*

ER DU INTERESSERET I AT DELTAGE? VIL DU VIDE MERE?
Så kontakt os på mail (skriv dit navn, alder, og bopæl) eller ring på telefonen (man-tors fra kl. 9 til 15) til:
Museumsinspektør Ivalo Katrine Birthe Foget Olsvig: ivalo@indmus.dk / + 45 24 82 41 97 eller
Museumsinspektør Søren la Cour Jensen: slc@indmus.dk / + 45 28 76 03 43

Læs mere på vores hjemmeside: www.knudrasmus.dk eller på projektets hjemmeside: www.i-on.museum

KNUD RASMUSSENS HUS

IDENTITY on the line

Public call issued by the House of Knud Rasmussen inviting people of Greenlandic descent to share their story. 2020, Denmark.

Photo by House of Knud Rasmussen.

The interviews – identity and no-man's-land

Some of the main topics we addressed in the interviews were, of course, identity but also more specific topics such as memories linked to the reasons for moving to Denmark, what actually happened during the process of moving, what it meant to have family ties in both countries, what was perceived as Danish and as Greenlandic, what traditions they uphold, how they were influenced by the Greenlandic and Danish languages, and what significance having a Greenlandic appearance could have when interacting with the Danish majority.

In several interviews, the participants expressed similar feelings of being split between Greenlandic and Danish affiliations.

Naja, a Greenlandic-Danish-Faroese woman:

"When I'm in Denmark, I'm a Greenlander, and when I'm in Greenland, I'm a Dane. And I get hurt every time, because I'm both. You cannot take one or the other out."

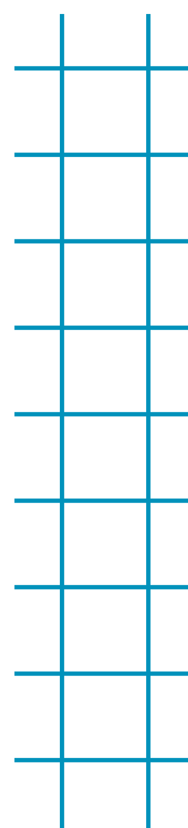
Another participant explained her experiences in this way:

Klara-Sofie Rosing Birkblad, aged 56, a Greenlandic-Danish woman:

"I was the Dane who was not a 'real Dane' and was therefore not a part of Danish communities, but I also had no contact with the Greenlandic community, because I was not a 'real Greenlander' and was not born in Greenland. I was in no-man's-land, and somehow I feel like I've been in that no-man's-land for most of my life."

However, as mentioned above, participants represent a broad and diverse group of ages and personal histories. What they all have in common is their affiliation with Greenland and their experience of standing out and being different from the Danish majority. Identity and affiliation are the most defining aspects of a person's internal and social life. Most people are not confronted with that on a daily basis; their identity is just a part of who they are and the life they lead. For others, it is a constant reminder that they are different from their surroundings, that they stand out or that they are looked upon in a way that is different from the way they see themselves.

The overall impression is that the participants define their identity in different ways, depending on the situation and context. This is not surprising as the participants are a very diverse group and are all in very different stages of their lives. For instance, one is retired after a full work life in both Greenland and Denmark and at the age of 81 is living in Denmark and feeling at home. Another is in her early 30s and has found a way to embrace her Inuit identity through her Inuit tattoos. Yet another talks about how she struggles with a split identity, and the feeling of not being at home anywhere. Nevertheless, even though they find themselves in very different situations in their lives, they still express similar experiences and reflections on their identity and being part of both a Greenlandic and a Danish culture at the same time.



Prejudices, misunderstandings and underlying racism

We asked the participants if they had experienced prejudice in their interactions with the Danish majority population. Some had indeed experienced being judged on the basis of their Greenlandic origin, and being met with ignorance and prejudice. However, this was not always the case; just as many participants reported the opposite. The participants did not face prejudice every day, but everybody had some negative experiences based on stereotypical prejudices about Greenlanders involving things such as drinking, abuse, suicide, inequality and stereotypical assumptions about whether Greenland is a developed country. These negative experiences of Danish prejudices and stereotypes can be seen as micro-aggressions.[3] Some participants experience them frequently; others face them more rarely. A few told us that they hardly even notice things like that. However, there were also examples of participants who had encountered blatant racism.

Self-portrait of Naja Motzfeldt. 2021, Denmark.

Photo by Naja Motzfeldt, Private collection.

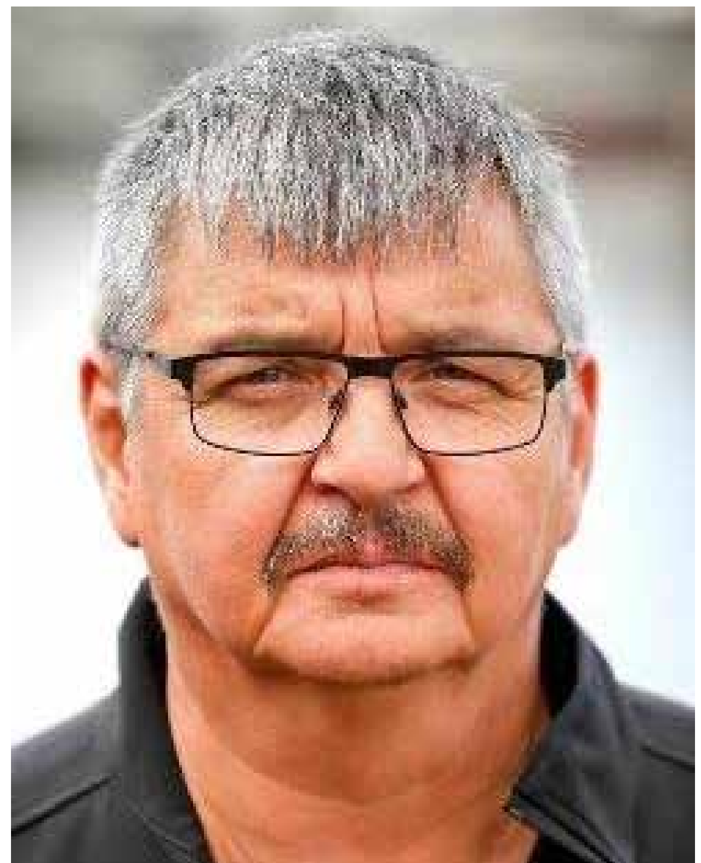
Naja Motzfeldt, age 32, a Greenlandic-Danish woman:

"I once experienced, when we were a bunch of Greenlanders at a gas station in Holbæk, a bunch of skinheads came and [it] was very intimidating. The assistant said that it was not the first time it had happened, so he asked us to stay inside and then he would call the police. Because these skinheads truly wanted to hurt us physically because we were not white. I was really, really scared because I had never experienced it that bad before."

Per, age 63, man of Greenlandic-Danish descent:

"I have not encountered very harsh racism, apart from a few times in workplaces, for example. Some people may have had an axe to grind, and they took it out on me. For example, they called me Snow-Paki. I was called Snow-Paki when I was working at a shipyard, where people were a little rough with each other. That was the jargon at the workplace. People also often aired the prejudice that Greenlanders drink strong beer. These were people I knew, and I began to wonder why they would say such things. Why were they suddenly angry with Greenlanders?"

With this background, many of the participants expressed the need for a project like *Among Greenlanders in Denmark* because it is so important to talk about these problems and to let the Danish majority know about them.



Per's portrait. Year unknown, Denmark.

Private collection.

[3] Andrew Limbong, "Microaggressions are a big deal: How to talk them out and when to walk away," NRP.Org, LifeKit, 8 June 2020, www.npr.org/2020/06/08/872371063/microaggressions-are-a-big-deal-how-to-talk-them-out-and-when-to-walk-away

PHOTO OF NAJA MOTZFELDT'S TATTOOS. 2020, GREENLAND.

Photo by Josepha Lauth Thomsen, edited by Naja Motzfeldt, private collection.

Greenlandic traditions and positive cultural meetings

It is still important to remember that these negative experiences are not predominant. The micro-aggressions coming from ignorance, prejudice and racist perceptions within the Danish majority affect the individual participants very much. Fortunately, the participants also reported many positive encounters between themselves and Danish society as a whole.

An anonymous Greenlandic woman:

"I also have positive meetings, when people are curious about Greenland, and I will be happy to talk about Greenland. It can be really nice. Especially when I meet Danes who actually know something about Greenland and then it is really cool to have conversations with that person."

Kunuunnguaq Marcussen, age 31, a Greenlandic man:

"I meet many who really want to go to Greenland, and also a few who have been to Greenland already and think it is a cool and beautiful country."

Several of our participants keep part of their Greenlandic culture and traditions alive in Denmark. They have Greenlandic food sent from Greenland, do Greenlandic handicrafts, celebrate events with the Greenlandic *Kaffemik* (an open-house celebration with a Greenlandic mind set with many guests, food, cake and coffee[4]), read Greenlandic myths and legends, and speak and sing in the Greenlandic language. As one of our participants put it:

Naja, a Greenlandic-Danish-Faroese woman

"On Christmas Eve, the family mixes both Danish and Greenlandic, and when we walk around the Christmas tree, one half sings in Greenlandic and the other half in Danish. We each express ourselves in the manner we know best, and I think that gives us a nice sense that everything belongs."

[4] Visit Greenland, about 'Kaffemik', https://visitgreenland.com/articles/kaffemik-in-greenland/

Results

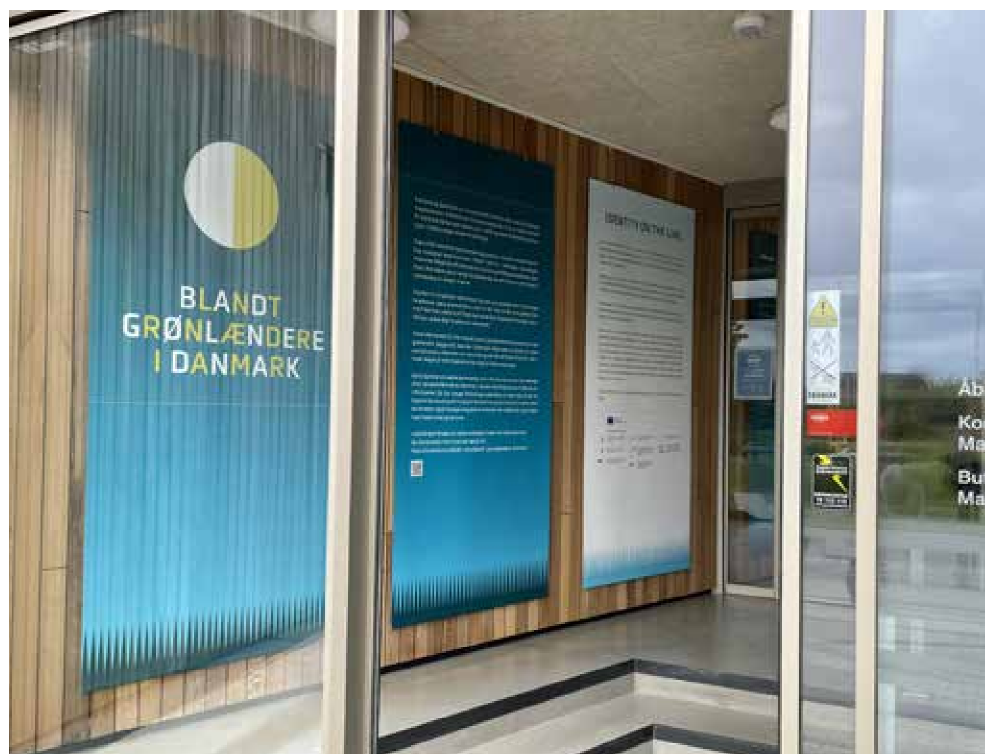
The most striking result of the interviews was the strong desire among our participants to talk about their situation, and how it feels to be a Greenlander in Denmark. By doing so, they wanted help to decrease ignorance about Greenland and Greenlanders in Denmark and among Danes generally. They wish for more focus on the unequal history between Greenland and Denmark, and a focus on the perceived inequality between Greenlanders and Danes. It is important for people within *The Kingdom of Denmark* to recognise this and take responsibility in everyday life. We can do this by reaching out and getting to know each other more profoundly. It is not only the Greenlanders that must learn about Denmark and the Danes, of course; the Danes also have to learn much more about the Greenlanders. This truth applies to all peoples and all cultural meetings.

Through the project, it has become clear that moving from one cultural environment to another does not come without personal challenges and hardships. To move from Greenland to Denmark involves radical changes in personal, social and cultural settings. You will face excessive cultural, environmental and linguistic differences, and there will be both good and bad encounters based on interest and knowledge, but also ignorance, prejudice and sometimes direct, upfront racism.

The findings of the Danish national project are shared through multiple channels, including the exhibition *Among Greenlanders in Denmark,* school packages, and articles. To ensure broad dissemination, we have engaged with relevant institutions and partners in the Danish-Greenlandic community, schools, libraries, and other relevant locations. Our goal is to reach as many people as possible and eventually make the information available throughout the country.

In March 2022, the exhibition debuted at the Danish Immigrant Museum in Farum, just outside of Copenhagen. From there, it travelled to The Greenlandic House in the city of Aarhus, which was a significant test as the primary users of the house are Greenlanders living in Denmark. Despite this challenge, the exhibition was well-received in Aarhus, and subsequently, it has been displayed in the Greenlandic Houses in Copenhagen and Odense, with positive responses from visitors.

The exhibition tour will conclude in the summer of 2023 in Aalborg. Following this, we will offer the exhibition to interested institutions, museums, and libraries throughout Denmark. To date, more than 4,000 visitors have viewed *Among Greenlanders in Denmark.*



Welcome to the Greenlandic House in Aarhus and the Amongst Greenlanders in Denmark exhibition. 2022, Denmark.

Photo by House of Knud Rasmussen

Reflections on the interviewers as part of the narrative and dissemination

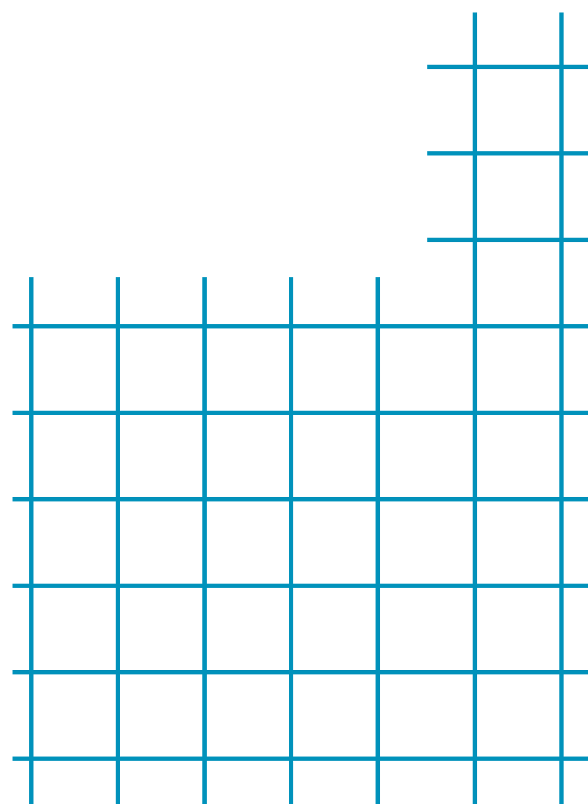
The participants defined their stories, which we have collected, within the framework of the interview guide. However, it is of crucial importance to recognise the role of the person who is interviewing the individual participant. In *Among Greenlanders in Denmark*, we were two curators from the House of Knud Rasmussen conducting the interviews – a female Danish-Greenlander and a male Dane. It is not easy to conclude directly in what way the interviewers affected the interviews and influenced the interaction with the interviewees, but it is important to consider any possible unintentional influence.

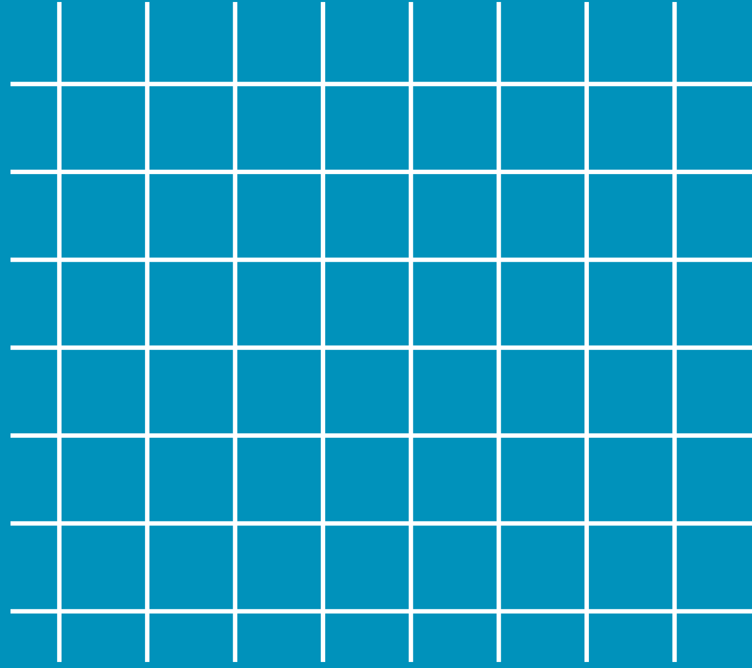
Furthermore, we experienced that the participants removed more negatively charged experiences in Denmark from their stories when they reviewed them. Consequently, we did not present these parts of the narratives. Our interpretation is that the past also affects the participants' present and self-perception. Anthropologist Trond Thuen expresses it like this:

"When listening to informants recollecting past experiences and events, one is struck by the fact that they are acting in the capacity of brokers between a past as they now see it, and some representative of the outside world whose image of their past they are able to construct either partly or totally."[5]

We at the museum are extremely proud of our participants and the courage it took to share their experiences and stories about an issue as personal as their identity and their migration to Denmark. In addition, to our participants – as they say in Greenland: *"Qujanarsuaq"* (Thank you very much).

[5] Thuen Trond, "Recollection of the Past and Categories of the Present: A Comment on the Relationship of Memory and Social Structure," *Acta Borelia* 7, Issue 1 (1990).

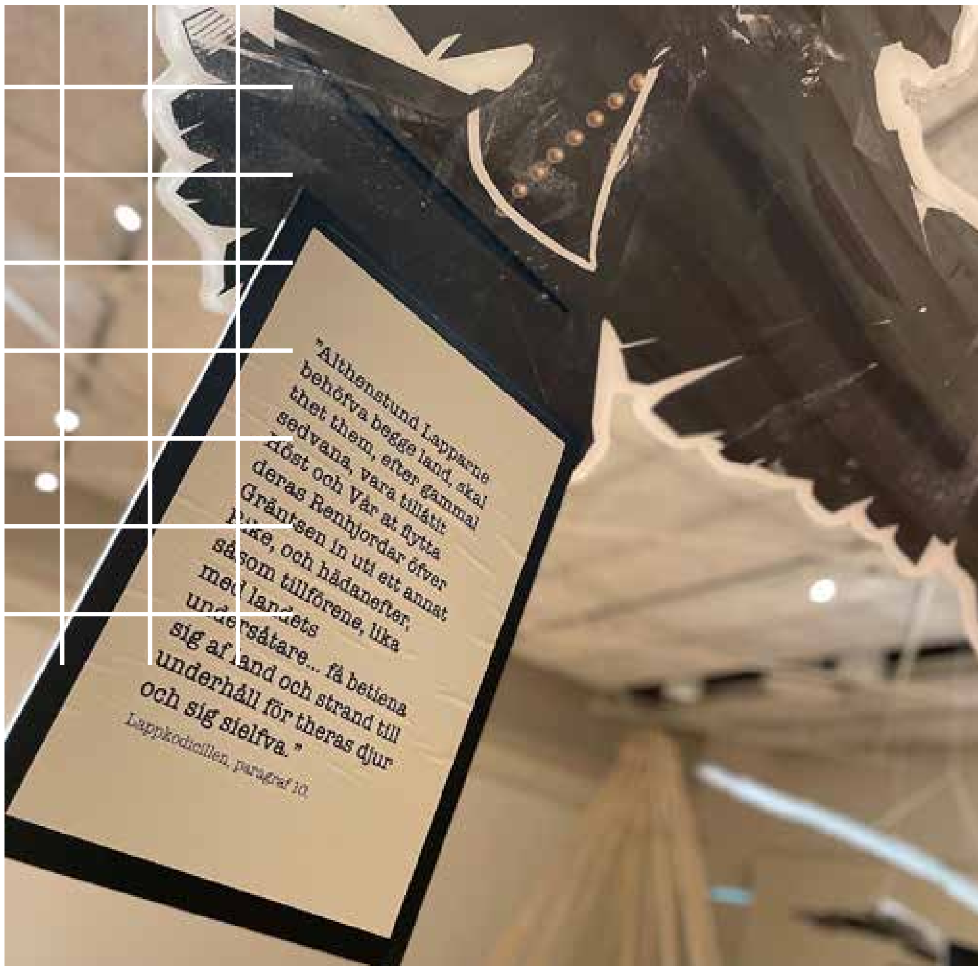




HOW WE CURATED AND BUILT AN EXHIBITION INVOLVING SENSITIVE PERSONAL STORIES

Elina Nygård

Ájtte Swedish Mountain and Sámi Museum, Sweden



A RAVEN DRESSED AS A POLICE OFFICER HOLDING A MESSAGE FROM ABOVE. 2022, SWEDEN.

Photo by Elina Nygård, Ájtte Museum.

Ájtte, Swedish Mountain and Sámi Museum in Jåhkåmåhkke in the north of Sweden wishes to share insights into the process of curating and building exhibitions about a sensitive subject for a minority. The museum opened in 1989 and tells the history of the Sámi people, from the melting of the inland ice until now. Ever since the initial planning of the museum, one perception has been of great importance: Ájtte is a place where we as indigenous Sámi people tell our own story. The exhibition at Ájtte museum plays a role not only as a place where you as a tourist can learn about the indigenous people of Scandinavia (where the common level of knowledge is quite low) but also as a place for building identity for Sámi people searching for their roots and learning about their own history.

Over time, Ájtte museum has earned trust from the Sámi society to communicate the stories in a proper manner, in a Sámi way. This is expressed in different ways: for example, all our texts are written in Sámi as well as other languages. The architecture of the museum derives from a keystone of the Sami culture, a reindeer corral, whose symbolism indicates that we tell our own story. We strive to protect the integrity of the stories and storyteller, and to keep the stories safe for generations to come. This is an ongoing discussion at the museum – how to treat the material with respect. Since we are a small group of people, questions about anonymity are particularly tricky. When too much information is provided in a publication, it is often easy to guess where the information came from.

Historical context

The historical narrative in the museum starts when the inland ice melted 11,000 years ago. When going towards the center of the museum you walk through "The passage of time" where you face people from different generations until the present. You meet hunters, fishers and reindeer herders, and learn that the land and water has fed us through history, right up until now. We lived here in Sápmi, the land of the Sámi people, long before the national borders between Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia existed, and moved with the reindeer between different grazing areas. Water power industry, mining, forestry, and farming, among other interests, have gradually pushed us away over the centuries. The right to land and water is a burning conflict in today's society and the indigenous people's traditional rights are constantly questioned and grazing areas are continuously shrinking. The relatively small Sami reindeer herding communities must do their best with the limited land that is left, and at the same time defend their right to the land against other interests, often initiated by the state or large corporations.

In *Identity on the Line* we focus on a land-loss story that happened a hundred years ago, of which we still feel the consequences. Due to border politics we lost our traditional grazing sites by the Atlantic Ocean. The land was supposed to be used by Norwegian farmers instead. Sweden relocated families and reindeer to areas on the Swedish side of the border to deal with the problem. But other reindeer herders already lived in those areas. They wanted to keep their traditional land, but had to make room for the newcomers. The conflicts that arose then still have an impact today. The grazing lands are decreasing as we speak.

North Sámi boys on their new land by Akkajaur. Year unknown, Sweden.

Photo by Ludwig Wästfelt, kept by Ájtte Museum.

The project and background material

When we were asked to participate in the project *Identity on the Line* we had already been in contact with the journalist Elin Anna Labba, who wanted to cooperate on an exhibition. For years, she had been conducting interviews among her relatives and other north Sámi elders that were forced to move to a new place as children or babies. Many touching stories were shared with her during these interviews. Eventually it became a book *Herrarna satte oss hit* (The High Lords Put Us Here). When it was released her availability to participate in the project changed. The book became a success and she won the August Prize, one of the most prestigious prizes for authors in Sweden. However, she has functioned as a reference and provided guidance throughout the project.

With Elin Anna's book as a foundation we wanted to look at migration from another point of view. What about the people that already lived on the land? What about their thoughts and feelings? Jannie Staffansson started to work on the project together with Elina Nygård. Both Jannie and Elina are connected to reindeer herding and have ties to the forcibly relocated; Elina's family shares the story of being forced to leave the north, and Jannie's family moved to Eajra shortly after others had been forced to leave. Having networks in the north-middle Sápmi and in the south Sápmi provided us with better coverage within the project. It allowed for a wider perspective on the subject and knowledge about other forced relocations that have not been spoken of much.

Among other things, Ájtte maintains a Sámi library and keeps collections, handicrafts, as well as interviews and recordings conducted by a number of people in the past. In the archive, we found old *yoiks* and stories, in Sámi languages and in Swedish. From this vast knowledge base, we collected information for the exhibition.

"For indigenous peoples, it is important that it is our own institutions that tell our own story, to control how to communicate and gather information, so that the process is done in line with our customs. That can only be done by our own people," says Jannie Staffansson.

Project workers Anna-Kajsa Aira, Elin-Anna Labba, Elina Nygård and Jannie Staffanson at the opening of the exhibition *Sielu biedganeapmi/The broken heart*, at Ájtte Museum in Jokkmokk. 2022, Sweden. The Sámi costumes look different depending on where your family comes from.

Photo by Anne-Marit Päiviö.

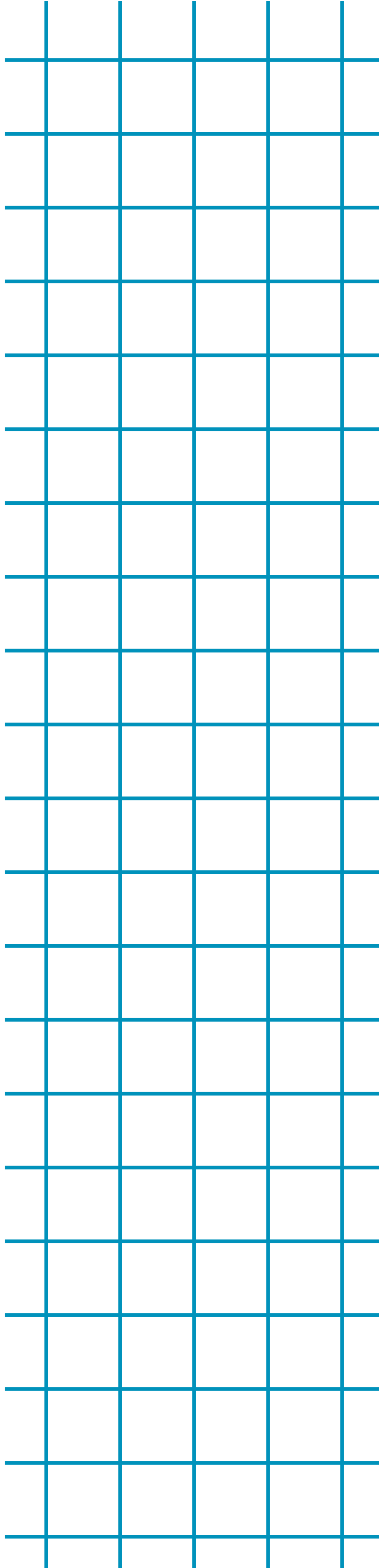
Inherited trauma

Since our foundation for the planned exhibition was to focus on the personal stories, our goal was to open up a process of receiving more stories. Creating a space for untold stories and providing space for people to tell them in their own way, with their own voice. However, there were not many people willing or able to talk about the forced relocation. And even fewer of those Sámi that were already on the lands when the relocated arrived.

Some informants that were hesitating were not sure if they remembered well enough, or knew enough. They said that they themselves may not have experienced the relocation, or were very young when it occurred. Or that they only held fragments of the story, that we were too late conducting the interviews. "The ones that you should have interviewed have passed on already". When we reflect about why, the reason might be that the story is unwritten and scattered in small pieces. Perhaps different informants had different fragments. The story had to be created in common. Some were asked if they would be interviewed in a group of others, which they agreed to. The informants got a transcription of the interview afterwards and the ability to change it or explain further. Then they were asked to meet again and talk further, which some of them did. And even if it was demanding they felt good about doing it. They felt that it was important that the story was told. Before the stories were included in the exhibition they got to hear them and give agreement, as well as to decide if they wanted to be anonymous or not.

We also tried to get younger people to be interviewed and reflect on whether the forced relocation had affected their identity. That was also difficult. Many felt like they had nothing to say because they didn't know enough. The people willing to speak were individuals who had done lots of research on the subject and already reflected on it for many years. Since the topic is connected to the ongoing heated discussion about the right to land and water, perhaps people feel that they need to be sure about the historical facts before they start talking.

To provide more comfort to the informant we wished to let them speak their own language, so we needed different interviewers who spoke different Sámi languages. To share stories of trauma, the informant needs to remember the trauma or stories of the trauma that others have gone through. That is not a pleasant situation and often quite demanding. For us it was important not to put a language barrier on top of that, it is important to be able to express yourself in the language most natural for you. Another ingredient for comfort is drinking coffee. Conducting interviews in a Sámi way involves either being outdoors, around a fire, drinking coffee, or sitting at the informant's kitchen table, drinking coffee. Both involve sharing a safe space where the person can be interviewed.



The form of the exhibition – ideas grown from Sámi artists

What is an exhibition? What can you do with it that you can´t do with a book or a film? First of all, we have a space that we can use to provide an experience for all our senses. We can fill that space with items to strengthen our message, to create an environment filled with things that speak to all our senses. Old things from the museum collections, as well as new things created for the purpose. We can use sounds, different materials at different levels. We can use lights, texts and pictures to build up emotions. Even smells, which is said to be the best sense to bring back memories. When we planned for the exhibition we had some key words in mind: Invisible stories, people's own voices, colonization, decolonization, identity, respect.
In the Sámi culture the traditional place for storytelling is by the fire inside the *gåetie*. And so the center of the exhibition is a fireplace with a display where you can choose stories, both from the archive and newly recorded, and hear people's own voices.

Sound files and written quotes are the foundation of the exhibition. The messages and quotes from people in power come from above. The roof is filled with big ravens, dressed as policemen, holding messages from the king/state/people in power. The inspiration for the birds dressed as police officers comes from a famous north Sámi artist, Britta Marakatt Labba, who embroidered a famous piece about Sámi resistance.

Beneath the ravens there are quotes from the people that were affected by the messages of the ravens. These are printed on transparent showcases with an object connected to the subject inside. This transparent theme is inspired by another famous south Sámi artist, Tomas Colbengtsson, who works with glass. We were inspired by his art and wanted to use his artistic idea as a foundation for the exhibition, since we are talking about making invisible histories visible. Tomas was glad to cooperate with us and we were in contact with him several times during the

An "invisible" sledge filled with food. The quote *"They decide to shop in Giron. In the mining town there are traders and no one knows if there is food where they are going. They harness the reindeer to the empty sleds and shop for flour, coffee, sugar and tar to last the whole year."* is printed on the side. The back of the sledge features a picture from the archives. 2022, Sweden.

Photo by Elina Nygård, Ájtte Museum.

Story listening station (the fireplace). 2022, Sweden.

Photo by Elina Nygård, Ájtte Museum.

process. One of his glass sculptures, a south Sámi woman divided in the middle, can be seen in one of the exhibition showcases. His voice can also be heard in the listening station. Tomas writes in his book *Faamoe* (meaning Strength) from 2019: "In my art, I reflect upon how our colonial heritage has changed our lives and the northern landscape. The same processes and mechanisms that affect indigenous people wherever in the world we are. Perhaps my loss of language is the main reason that I work with glass." Both Britta and Thomas were spoken to at an early stage, while developing the idea for the exhibition. We kept in mind to have artists from different parts of Sápmi represented and also have a painting that I will speak more about further on, made by the Lule Sámi artist Lena Viltok, as well as illustrations for the guide book made by the north sámi artist Leila Nutti.

As a visitor to this exhibition, you start beside a half *gåetie* (Sámi tent), where the structure is made of acrylic tubes, almost invisible traces from the old land. You get an introduction together with the message that you are welcome to share your own story. Then you follow an invisible *raiddu* consisting of sledges which used to be pulled behind reindeer. As soon as you come close to one, Elin Anna Labba's voice starts talking, you hear a quote about the theme in north Sámi language, which also is printed on the sledges translated into Swedish.

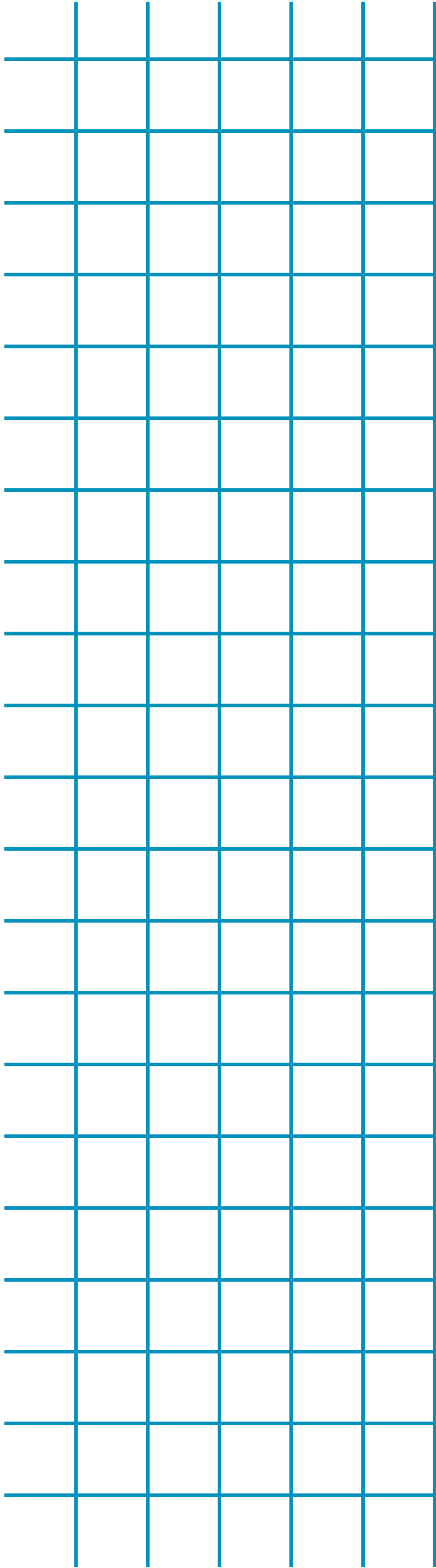
At the end of the *raiddu* you will end up in a visible *gåetie* with a fire in the middle. This is where you shall sit down and listen to the personal stories and reflect on them. Outside this *gåetie* there will be display cases with different themes: Sámi stories from different areas, as well as stories about forced relocations of other indigenous peoples around the world. Above every display case there is a big raven with a message in it claws. Each display case contains an item connected to the story as well as a quote printed on the tube from an individual affected by the relocation. Before leaving, you will see a big colorful painting done specially for the exhibition. The artist Lena Viltok also wrote a poem. It is about the first meeting between two groups of Sámi, inspired by a story found in the museum archive.

Painting *"This is where we meet"* made especially for the exhibition by Lena Viltok.

Photo by Elina Nygård, 2023.

Choosing a language

It is always tricky choosing a language when constructing Sámi exhibitions. In Sweden we have five different Sámi languages, all of which are threatened due to the small number of speakers. Almost all Sámi people in Sweden speak Swedish, since it used to be a colonization strategy to forbid children to speak their native language, even in the Sámi schools. If we chose Swedish as the written language in the exhibition, most people would understand. At the same time, since we wanted to raise up our own language and heritage, which Sámi language should we use? As soon as we chose one it would mean we were not choosing four others. To keep the focus on the subject, we chose to print all the quotes in Swedish in the exhibition and translate them into different Sámi languages (as well as English) in accompanying guide texts.



Reactions

In late 2020, we created a film to present an exhibition that was shown at a digital winter market in February 2021. We received mostly positive feedback from the audience. Visitors commented that it is a good thing we are doing, as people know so little about the subject, and that the exhibition looks beautiful and presents the subject in a sensitive way.

One of our elders expressed sadness at seeing the invisible sledges, stating, *"The Sámi culture has been made invisible for so long, and now that it's finally starting to become visible, you are making it invisible again. I don't like it."* A younger person commented, *"It was so strong and beautiful; I started to cry when I saw it.' Another reflection from a young person was, 'Now I know why I like being by the ocean. I've always longed for the ocean. The first time I arrived at Senja (Norway)… I never felt so at home at any place in the world before. Later on, I found out that this was the place my old relatives left. I didn't know about it then."*

We opened the exhibition in February 2022 and received a lot of positive feedback. In the evaluation, the focus group found it very important and interesting. They thought it was important to talk about the subject. On the other hand, we also had a response from a visitor that thought that we should not focus on this kind of subject, that tensions may arise among different Sámi groups and that it would be better to continue keeping quiet about it, and focus on the future instead.

The global Covid-19 pandemic

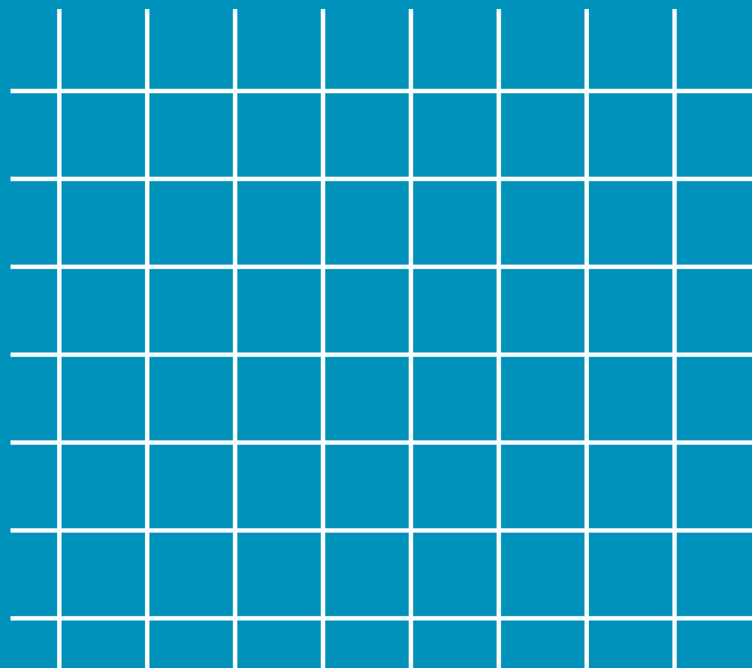
When the obstacle of finding informants was overcome, the world was struck by the pandemic. Since most of our informants are elderly and/or in risk groups we needed to reschedule the meetings. Some of the interviews were performed in the autumn outdoors when distance could be maintained, and some indoors with larger distances. The technical solution of interviewing online was unthinkable with this type of topic. When the interviewing phase was delayed, we searched the museum archives for material. We found some interviews, a few *yoiks*, pieces of stories in many different books and newspaper articles. We ended up postponing our exhibition opening, not only once, but twice. When we finally opened the exhibition at Ájtte Museum, we kept it open almost all year long in 2022. From February to December, the museum was visited by almost 50,000 people. Throughout the year, all Sámi students in Jokkmokk received guided tours, as well as many politicians and cultural workers.

Translations

The stories we gathered were from different areas within Sápmi. In our exhibition we wished to have them translated into the Sámi spoken in that area, which proved to be very difficult.

The Covid-19 pandemic affected us yet again, since some of the translators got ill. Some languages are only spoken by elders in far off communities, and some translators into the smaller languages were overwhelmed by work.

A further challenge is to take the experience this project has given us and apply it to the ongoing process of improving as an institution. We need to ask ourselves what a Sámi way of curating exhibitions might look like in the future and how to best stay true to the role we have as a Sámi museum, and as always, ensure our voices are heard.



WE MET IN SŁUPSK – SETTLERS' STORIES

Instytucja Kultury Samorządu Województwa Pomorskiego

Dorota (Ciecholewska) Hanowska

Museum of Central Pomerania, Poland

The informants at the Museum of Central Pomerania. 2022, Poland.

Post-War Settlement in Słupsk is the contribution of the Museum of Central Pomerania in Słupsk to the international project *Identity on the Line* project, which was carried out under the Creative Europe programme.

Memory blurs the contours of events and the generation who came to Słupsk after the war to begin a new phase of their lives is fading away. There are fewer and fewer people who are able to talk about the personal experiences they underwent during the war and after they arrived in the new location. Before long, the time witnesses will have fallen silent. With this project, we set out to show not only that the settling processes were highly complex and challenging, but also how the coexistence of the people who migrated here took shape. We hope that for young people today, *Post-War Settlement in Słupsk* will offer fascinating information about the post-war pasts of their grandparents. It conveys the ability of the newly arrived Poles and the resident Germans who had so recently been their enemies to live together. The interviews demonstrate how tolerance and humanitarianism were not shattered by the war and that the interviewees and others like them were possessed by neither a spirit of revenge nor a desire to destroy everything German.

The territory assigned to Poland in recompense for the eastern lands lost as a result of the World War II has often been referred to as *Ziemie Odzyskane*, most frequently translated as 'the Recovered Territories' or 'the Regained Lands'. Numerous controversies regarding the settlement of that territory still exist. The *Ziemie Odzyskane* spoken of by the propaganda of the communist People's Republic of Poland was one thing. Some German organisations view the matter differently, while the historical documents held in state archives take yet another stance. Showing a true picture of the past of these lands is necessary not only to their first post-war inhabitants, but also to those who were born here soon after the conflict was over and who feel the need to define their local homeland clearly.

The purpose of the Polish sub-project was thus threefold: to record interviews with people who lived in Słupsk after 1945, as well as with their families and descendants, to evaluate the knowledge we have of them and to disseminate that knowledge. Thanks to their participation in the project, the Museum of Central Pomerania in Słupsk is now able to explore the stories of both people who arrived and stayed here as a result of the World War II, and of those who lived here before that. What brought the newcomers here? What were their reasons for staying? What were the consequences of that decision? What did they bring with them and what did they find in their new home?

During the Potsdam Conference of 17th July to 2nd August 1945, the Soviet Union, the United States of America and the United Kingdom instituted a number of territorial changes. One measure was the redrawing of Poland's borders. Part of this involved transferring a fairly large swathe of former German territory to Poland, offering high value in economic, military and social terms. This was also, in part, a counterbalance to the fact that the Polish state had lost forty-six percent of its pre-war territory to the Soviet Union, which claimed its eastern lands. In return, Poland was recompensed with a total of 101,000 square kilometres of territory to the west and the north. That territory included a great deal of the historical region of Pomerania.

The years from 1945 to 1948 were a time of mass migration on Polish soil. Most of it was forced; the post-war redrawing of the borders resulted in the forcible displacement of Poles from the country's pre-war eastern lands, which were annexed by the Soviet Union, and in the forcible displacement of Germans from the Silesian, Pomeranian and East Prussian territories transferred to Poland. A great many Poles also migrated voluntarily, returning from forced labour, flight abroad, seeking a better place to live, leaving cities, towns and villages destroyed by war, roaming in search of a crust and the chance of making an easier living or simply seeking adventure.

Polish settlers in ruins of Słupsk city centre. 1950-1952, Poland.

Photographer unknown, kept by the Museum of Central Pomerania.

After the end of World War II, settlers from various parts of pre-war Poland thus migrated to Pomerania, including the pre-war German city of Stolp, which became the post-war Polish city of Słupsk. As the authorities at the time viewed it, this influx of Polish people would ensure the economic, cultural and social development of these lands. The migratory flow continued until 1950 and the census taken that year tells us that, at the time, Słupsk had a population of 33,115, of whom 32,026 were migrants and 1,086 had lived in Stolp. The largest group of inhabitants were those who had migrated from Poland's pre-war eastern lands. Those 'Eastern Borderlanders' had been forced to leave the lands which had been their home, but had now been seized by the Soviet Union. The second-largest group of new residents were primarily settlers from other regions in central and southern Poland. A great many of those in search of a new home and work were people who had previously lived in Warsaw and its environs. Their migration was triggered by the lack of prospects in the capital, which had been deliberately laid to waste by the Germans after the Warsaw Uprising of August to October 1944. There were also settlers of Ukrainian origin who had been forcibly displaced by the ethnic conflicts being fought out in south-east Poland. Some of them wound up here as a result of 'Operation Vistula', a programme instigated by the authorities for the removal of ethnic minorities from that region and their resettlement in the north and west. A small group came from forced labour camps, prisoner-of-war camps and concentration camps in other countries. Some were searching for families who had already settled here. Some, who had lost everyone and everything, came because they had decided to start a new life.

The mass expulsion of the German population lasted from 1945 to 1947 and it would be repeated later, in the 1950s as part of a 'family reunification' campaign. In Słupsk, the remaining German families, for whom the city had long been home, were a definite minority. They hung on, enduring a sense of wrong and the collapse of the previous order which had ensued following the defeat of the Third Reich. Nonetheless, in the immediate post-war years of 1945 to 1950, some of the Germans succeeded in assimilating to a greater or lesser extent. Wider contact with the Polish inhabitants began to emerge, including mixed marriages.

One crucial aspect of the project was the development of methods and procedures which would be suitable not only for dealing with sensitive topics and talking to people who had witnessed historical events and were often elderly and vulnerable, but also to give prominence to certain social matters that their stories touched upon. The first stage demanded extraordinary tact in establishing contact with future interviewees. Something

Calm and picturesque view of Słupsk (Stolp). 1930s or 1940s, Poland.

Photographer unknown, kept by the Museum of Central Pomerania.

that proved very helpful in this respect was the experience the museum's research team gained from 2012 to 2018, when they carried out a long series of interviews. The people who took part also provided their assistance, as did the members of the First Residents of Słupsk Club, the Słupsk Social and Cultural Society, the Former Exiles to Siberia Association, and the Friends of Vilnius and Grodno. Wherever possible, family connections were brought into play, making it possible to create a friendly atmosphere for the conversations. In other cases, this was slightly trickier.

From the moment the museum began carrying out interviews, the members of the research team did their very best to win the interviewees' trust and adapt to their requirements, a necessary measure since, as noted earlier, they are usually elderly. The interviewers met them as often as four or five times in order to record an interview or persuade them to be recorded and encourage their recollections. The Covid-19 pandemic made it all much more challenging. It created enormous difficulties when it came to finding people who were willing to meet and made it necessary to arrange repeat visits. As well as face-to-face meetings, interviews were held on the phone, although the pandemic made even that problematic. In general, the researchers often established a close relationship with the people they interviewed and kept in touch with them afterwards.

During the earlier conversations and meetings held from 2012 to 2018, the museum set out to explore interviewing methods, with the trial and error method making a frequent appearance. The researchers also looked into methods of formulating questions and obtaining information about the interviewee from other sources, such as family and close friends. In the case of *Post-War Settlement in Słupsk*, a set of questions prepared jointly by all seven partners of the *Identity on the Line* project was used. Naturally, not all the questions were applicable to this part of the project and its purpose.

Altogether, twenty interviews were carried out. Five of the interviewees were men and the other fifteen were women. In terms of age, two of the men and nine of the women were over eighty,

Informants of different generations at the exhibition *We Met in Słupsk*. 2022, Poland.

two men and one woman were over seventy, three women and one man were over sixty, one woman was over fifty and one woman was over thirty. All their accounts were recollections which mainly told the stories of their lot shortly before, during and after the war; of how they wound up in Słupsk, or of why they stayed here; of where they came from and who they came with; of how their parents made a life here; and of themselves.

At this point, we present six representative examples in the form of extracts from some of the interviews. They stand out from the others in terms of the detail the speakers go into and their lively narration. At the same time, the people telling their stories came from various regions of pre-war Poland and the former German city of Stolp.

Aleksander A. tells of the death of his father, killed by the Soviets in a prisoner-of-war camp for officers in Starobilsk, Ukraine, in 1940. His mother, his brother and he only found out about his father's death after the war. He and his family were sent into exile in Kazakhstan, where they remained until 1945. His grandfather died a tragic death by suicide there, having been very ill and hating to be a burden to his family. Aleksander's childhood passed there and, being too small and frail to work, he just attended school with children of other nationalities. He helped his family to get food, particularly in the summer, exploring the natural world in that part of Kazakhstan and becoming very familiar with it. After the war, when the lands where he and his family had lived were annexed by the Soviet Union, he and his family came to Pomerania and then to Słupsk.

"I lived in the Volhynia region[1]*, in the little town of Kostopol. Kostopol, that was its name. It's in Ukraine now. When I was about seven… maybe I should also say that my family was my parents and my brother. When I was seven, in May, in 1940, when the war was already advanced and the Russians were marauding around, ravaging our country, several Red Army soldiers turned up at our home. And told us to pack. They gave us three or four hours to pack. I remember that my mum had this big basket. And she packed what was most necessary and everything she possibly could into that basket. My father, he'd been called up during… in 1939, he wasn't with us and when Russia… the Russians… the Red Army arrived, he was evacuated as a prisoner of war. And he wound up in a camp in Starobilsk. When we'd packed, we were taken to the railway station and packed into these cattle wagons. It was a kind of troop train. A train made up of loads of these cattle wagons. And it was quite an action, with all these people being packed in, several dozen … quite a number of families to a wagon. Then that journey… it took almost two weeks. Along the way, they added wagons, removed them, there were halts along the way. There were moments when everyone got out of the wagons onto the platform and prepared something for themselves, cooked something. And that's how we arrived in Kazakhstan."*

[1] A region that was part-Polish, part-Ukrainian before the war.

Barbara D. talks about how, as an eleven-year-old, she, her mother and aunt, along with ten other family members, were forcibly sent to Kazakhstan. Her mother's serious illness and her grandfather's burial were profoundly terrible experiences which engraved themselves on her memory. From exile, they made their way to Grodno and, from there, with one bundle of possessions to their name, they came to Słupsk and here, for the very first time, she saw and tasted strawberries and, for her, that was something incredible.

"In fact, my grandparents travelled from Grodno to Gdynia. But when they got off [the train] in Gdynia and went to have a look at the city, they stated that there was nowhere at all to cast anchor. [...] As a result, they decided to go to Szczecin. But along the way, they stopped in Słupsk, cast anchor at the railway station for a few days and, naturally, they wanted to stretch their legs. The people here were mainly from Grodno, that's in Belarus now. They went into the city with several other people. Słupsk was gorgeous. Apart from the fact that the entire old town was in ruins, razed to the ground, apart from that, Słupsk really was beautiful. They used to call it 'little Paris'. [...] And they decided to stay in Słupsk. [...] To start with, they lived on ulica Gdańska, in an apartment building on the right-hand side. It's still there today, it dates back to German times. By all accounts, they walked into a fully furnished flat. [...] It looked as if [the householder] had gone out just an hour before. But afterwards, they had their eye on the little houses on the street. It was actually people from Grodno who settled down on the whole of ulica Gdańska from ulica Racławicka [onwards]."

Ingeborg N., née Gilaschke, recalls streams of German refugees arriving in Słupsk from the regions of Warmia and Mazur in north-east Poland. She remembers the Red Army entering the city and setting fire to houses and apartment buildings; she remembers how the Soviets set everything that was closed against them ablaze. She also speaks of being separated from her father, who was at the front, and of why she stayed in Słupsk after the war.

"I still remember that day so clearly. I went to the German school with my [clay] tablet. Because in those days, you wrote on the tablet with a [slate] stylus. I didn't like going, because Miss Schwedt used to beat me on the hands with a stick for just about any little thing. And I came back home full of myself… "there's no school [today]". Because of these masses of horse-drawn wagons [that had arrived] from Mazur. To us, they were 'Gypsies', they were poor people, because those from the east were already fleeing from their 'liberator' and 'friend'. Anyway, they were directed to that school [...]. I came in and declared that "The Gypsies have taken over the school. Good! I don't have to go to school." That was the only… but it was in March, I think [...] or in February, because they were so huddled among the straw. Thickly clothed. We weren't that warmly dressed here, by then. To me though, it was more a 'gypsy' phenomenon or something of that kind. "Gipsies, gipsies" that's what people used to say. That's what popped into my mind."

Romana W. talks about the pogroms in Volhynia and about how she and her family only survived because her father had built a root cellar under a vegetable patch and everyone, parents and children alike, swore an oath of silence so that no one would find out about it. They went there to sleep at night, approaching along different paths in order to avoid beating a trail, because if that happened, they would be found and slaughtered like so many of their neighbours. After their smallholding went up in flames and they fled to the city of Volodymyr-Volynskyi, they wound up in a labour camp, where they remained until the end of the war. Her family's lot in Słupsk turned out to be an interesting one, too.

"We lived there until 1943. Sadly… Ukrainian nationalists burned down our home. We were hidden in the shelter my father had built in the orchard. It was really camouflaged, there were pumpkins and other climbers planted there. And on that night, when the house was burned down, we were tucked away in that shelter. So, when we woke up in the morning, our house was ablaze and we'd survived. From there, because [father] had brothers in Volodymyr [-Volynskyi], we set off for Volodymyr. Because the Ukrainian nationalists had already started attacking Volodymyr, my parents took a really difficult decision. We simply left for… you could go to a labour camp and we wound up in Koszalin. At a labour camp in Koszalin."

Irena K. also remembers the pogroms in Volhynia and how a Ukrainian neighbour warned her family and emphatically ordered them to flee at once; in doing so, he saved their lives. She continues by recalling how things played out and how she wound up in Słupsk, setting out on a new stage of her life.

"Because we had to flee from that area, because we were in an area where things were happening that were extremely… horrifying, relating to the massacre of Poles by Ukrainians. Thanks to a Ukrainian neighbour, we managed to get away and leave for Lwów[2] *during the night. Then, when we were in Lwów, German air raids began again and we had to flee onwards. We travelled to some relatives. Then to Tarnobrzeg*[3]*. […] [In] our home village, Radziechów, all our neighbours were Ukrainian, in fact, and we got on very well with them. And, quite simply… nothing happened to us physically, which was only because a neighbour, a Ukrainian, came to see us and said, "Listen, they'll be coming for you in two nights' time. Leave, but do it now. Not in two or three hours". And I know… we hired a cart and it was one that wouldn't make anyone think we were leaving."*

Teresa Z., recollects Warsaw in flames during the uprising, a journey on a train under fire and the sorrowful eyes of a German woman leaving the flat in Słupsk where she had lived with her entire family.

"Now I'll tell you about when we arrived in Słupsk and moved into a third-floor flat. There was a German family living there, two older people and a younger person. I don't remember their surname. They lived in one room, I think, or in two. I don't remember now. But we all lived together briefly. When I analyse everything in retrospect, [I can see that] there was no friendship. I mean, if there'd been some children, peers, there would've been different grounds for conversation and living [together]. But there were three adults. And somehow, there was a chilly feeling. There was no cordiality, but then, why would there be? Someone had come and taken over their home. And I remember the moment when they moved out, when they'd packed and were leaving the flat, and the younger person looked around again. I remember that gaze to this day. It was so sad… and I really do understand that… so sad, or reproachful, I don't know how to describe it. And then, well, they left the flat."

The work on editing the material recorded during the interviews was a lengthy task. As the research team listened to them, they were profoundly moved and often found themselves living through the interviewees' experiences together with them and reflecting on the people they are now. During the war or shortly after it, they had been five, six, ten or twelve years old and all their stories are of events seen from the perspective of the children they were then. Many of their recollections are of truly awful things, such as a grandfather's suicide, a mother's serious illness, a railway station during an air raid, the houses in Słupsk set ablaze by the Soviets, the sorrowful eyes of a German woman leaving her flat in Słupsk and so forth. Some are very happy memories, like eating strawberries for the first time ever in Słupsk, the glories of nature explored during the summers in exile in Kazakhstan, tranquillity, playing freely outside and so on. They also talk about what their parents, neighbours and grandparents told them. They recollect exile to Kazakhstan and Siberia in the nineteen forties, the deaths of parents in the prisoner-of-war camps in Starobilsk and Katyn, the deaths of loved ones and a host of other topics; the emotions here, of course, are enormous, but there is no hatred. They are reconciled to their lives and quite a few of them return to the past readily and feelingly. They are very humble and unassuming, with a number of them remarking something along the lines of *"What could I have to say of interest? It's just the way life was back then."* They often express their happiness that someone is hearing about it, even their families, because the stories are the histories of their lives and contribute to the history of us all.

Post-War Settlement in Słupsk provides older and younger people an opportunity to explore the post-war history of this region from the perspective of accounts given by its first settlers, people whose life stories bear the imprint of the sweeping history of the entire nation. Oral history in the form of meeting witnesses

[2] Now Lviv in Ukraine.

[3] A city in south-east Poland

to historical events and talking to them is a superb method of encouraging people to explore the stories of their families, the places they live in and their regions. Crucially, a number of the interviews introduced subsequent generations to family stories they had never heard before because, in many cases, their older relatives deemed their experiences and memories to be 'uninteresting' and 'unimportant'. For listeners, however, they have often served to trigger a fascination with the fates of their families. It has also become clear to many people that handing down this kind of information and talking about past events and what life was like is vital to future generations.

It is these recollections that have enabled the museum to show not only how the migration to the western and northern lands and their subsequent settlement gave rise to the emergence of a new local community rooted in the place where it lives, but also how, set against the backdrop of Polish society, the local identities of Pomerania's inhabitants contain specific elements. Pomeranian society is extremely open to change and very ready to make contact with other inhabitants whose identities feature elements of the regions they originated from. The Polish people who came to these lands were highly diverse. They came from regions with different levels of economic and cultural development; their cultures were varied and they represented a range of traditions, customs and social norms. Indeed, it is this diversity that distinguishes the inhabitants of Słupsk and Pomerania as a whole from Poland's historical lands. The local and regional consciousness here was typical of a post-migratory society. However, it is most often the subsequent generations born here who identify with this land as their local homeland. The project also enabled the research team to explore how the experience of migration affected the lives of entire families and whether or not the vestiges of that experience are important to young residents of the city today.

In addition to both the historical and personal context and to information on living conditions, the political situation and so forth, the researchers gathered the interviewees' individual reflections on their feelings, their sense of belonging and, finally, their identity and relationships with other people.

Objects donated by the informants exhibited at the Museum of Central Pomerania. 2022, Poland.

The team also studied the impact that these factors had on subsequent generations. In addition, the museum collected personal keepsakes connected with the interviewees, using them to create an exhibition.

The opening of the exhibition, the premiere of a film entitled *We Met in Słupsk. Settlers' Stories* and shortened versions of the eighteen interviews took place on 15th July 2021, bringing together all the aspects of that part of the project. More events have since been held, some of them presenting the recorded interviews to a wider public, and some designed as educational activities for children and young people. They have evoked extraordinarily emotional reactions from the participants, who have frequently declared a wish to explore their own family history and talk to their parents and grandparents.

Visitors to the exhibition were invited to complete a questionnaire about their impressions and opinions. The process of collecting the questionnaires was spread over time in order to gather as wide and diverse a range of responses as possible. In total, fifty-four were collected. More women than men visited the exhibition, at eighty and twenty percent, respectively. The largest age group consisted of thirty-six respondents aged from thirty-five to sixty-five. There were ten people aged between eighteen and thirty-five and eight who were over sixty-five.

Did the exhibition and the project feel important and meaningful to them? The responses in the questionnaires contain an answer. What follows are the thoughts of some of the respondents on the project and the exhibition created as part of it.

Robert K. wrote:

"Recording the experiences of people who lived through the drama of forced resettlement or expulsion is necessary and interesting. In this way, we preserve a picture of the dramatic stories of individuals and nations and, at the same time, we can explore the roots of the behaviours and traditions of people we meet in our everyday lives. It is important over time and to efforts to coexist and assimilate. We don't always realise what others have been through. Many a time when I've taken German visitors round the museum, I've seen the astonishment on their faces when I tell them that the Poles who arrived in Pomerania were confronted with the same choices as the Germans who were expelled from the region. I'm talking about giving up their nationality in order to stay in the place they knew as home. I'd say that was a kind of 'perverse' naturalisation…"

Janina C-B. remarked that:

"This needs to be talked about, because not everyone knows where we people of Pomerania came from and why things happened as they did in terms of the fates of those who found their new homes here and those who were forced to leave. People can't be rootless. They need knowledge of their pasts, because without that, a person is nobody."

Renata W. responded by noting that:

"Projects and exhibitions like this are important to preserving the memory of those times and seizing the moment, turning to living witnesses who can tell us what happened, bear witness to it. I think that identifying the city of Słupsk with the city of Stolp is really vital to its history. It's a history that future generations should be familiar with and preserve."

The museum team's findings are universal values which hold true not only for the present-day inhabitants of Pomerania, but also for any society experiencing migration and, at the same time, the hopes and goals of contemporary migrants and the local communities taking them in. Importantly, some of those findings are reflected in the work carried out by the researchers in the partner countries. The Museum of Central Pomerania was also responsible for making the film for the entire project, in line with the scenario compiled by the project partners and using the materials they provided. This included quotations selected from the interviews held in all seven countries. One thing that struck the Słupsk team was how the words of migrants from a range of places, speaking of different moments in history, fit in so well with the historical contexts and experiences of migrants from other countries.

The project has shown how World War II convulsed society, disrupted the political order and shook the foundations of European culture. It has helped the public to understand the difficult post-war social situation and provided a key to explaining disquieting migration processes in the contemporary world.

Several of the interviews became the basis for separate articles which appeared in the Museum of Central Pomerania's bulletin and in the local monthly *Tramway.* The museum team also succeeded in persuading some of the interviewees to put the recollections recorded on video into writing. This also included the written memoirs of a married couple who expressed their desire to take part after an event where the recordings of the interviews were presented, along with the film summing up the *We Met in Słupsk* project. One of the articles set out the successive stages of migration, using excerpts from the interviews to support its thesis. The concept of *Identity on the Line* was also presented on the local television station on a number of occasions. The keepsakes received from local people were shown and so was the opening of a temporary exhibition, during which, the interviewees talked about what had happened to them. The team and others involved in the work talked about *Identity on the Line* on programmes broadcast by local radio stations, as well as in interviews with the local press.

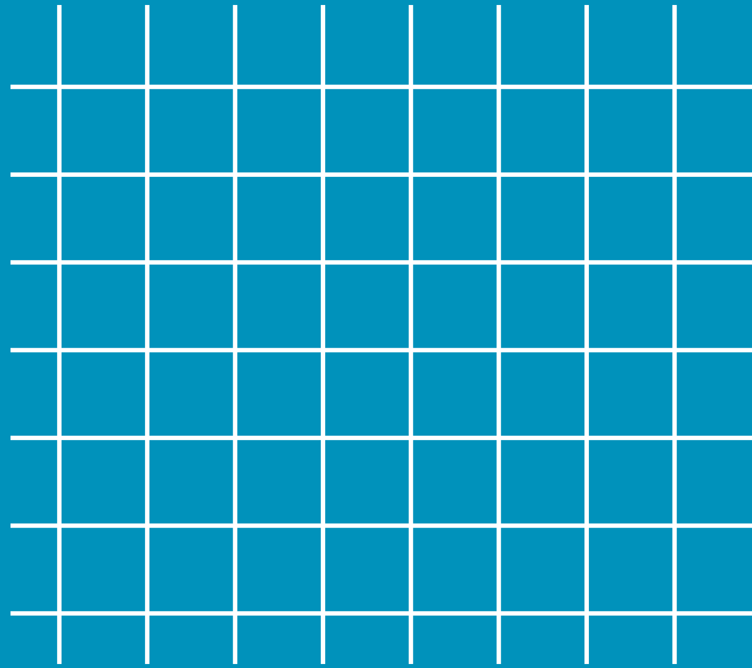
In addition, two online meetings were held for teachers, with the museum staff giving practical demonstrations of how to talk to young people in schools about challenging themes connected with the post-1945 settlement of Słupsk. Furthermore, a space in the museum which is open to the general public houses an

First screening of the film summing up the interviews. 2022, Poland.

exhibition which covers the research carried out not only by the Słupsk team, but also by the other six partners. All of these activities will continue for the duration of the project.

The project is thus ongoing. The Słupsk study has several aims: to collect the largest possible number of recordings with the first settlers, in other words, with new participants; to polish the interviews which have been recorded; and to disseminate knowledge about the interviewees, their stories, the histories of successive generations, the motives underlying their life choices after the end of the war, the consequences of those choices and their assessments as to whether or their decisions had turned out well. Another aspect of importance to the museum is the material side of things. Was the fact that the migrants had to leave so much behind a problem for them? Do they miss their lost possessions? What did they manage to bring with them and keep safe throughout the journey? Were they family mementos? Or random objects grabbed more or less without thinking in the rush caused by the stressful situation. Following that thread further, the research team is also looking at what the settlers received once they arrived in Słupsk. What could they count on as far as the authorities were concerned? What were the homes they were allocated like? What did the displaced German inhabitants leave behind? And what emotions and feelings did the new, unusual situation arouse in them?

The staff of the Museum of Central Pomerania in Słupsk have already discovered a great deal about how the experience of migration affected the lives of entire families. Now they have moved on to studying whether or not those experiences remain significant to the city's youth, the descendants of those first settlers.



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HEALING SOUL WOUNDS: WOMEN DURING THE WAR

Neringa Latvytė, MA

Faculty of Communication of Vilnius University

Exhibition *Healing Soul Wounds:* Women during the War at the Vilnius University. 2022, Lithuania.

Photo by Justinas Auškelis.

The research project conducted by the Faculty of Communication of Vilnius University deals with how the traumatic experiences, wounded past and unspoken memories of women who survived the Holocaust were communicated.

Despite the fact that the Holocaust happened almost 80 years ago, the trauma[1] of the survivors lives on. If the individual can foresee the end of their suffering, he or she has more ability to deal with the trauma. The nature of the Holocaust was such that every day brought undefined life-threatening events during the war and even after, which is why the survivors faced long-term trauma that destroyed their self-defence mechanisms. Research has shown that the aftereffect of trauma prevented the survivors from talking about very personal and sensitive events, as the feeling of shame and guilt at surviving followed them all their life. In most cases, the survivors tried to protect their children from their traumatic experiences by not talking about them. This shows a tremendous effort to normalise their existence by choosing to live a double-life, but also meant that the survivors were not able to properly protect themselves psychologically. Testimonies of Holocaust survivors reveal psychological trauma that causes identity breaches, and also the importance of female solidarity in life-threatening circumstances. After the war ended, it continued in the memories of women and their children until the courage to talk helped them understand their feelings and open up to the world. Sharing feelings encourages others to be open. When we open up, it becomes safer for the other person to talk about personal experiences. Women who nowadays face different kinds of violence that affects a person's identity also often become distant, live in fear, remain alone with their feelings and experiences, and do not expect to receive help – for this reason they do not seek it, thus deepening their internal wounds. Open and empathetic conversation helps to overcome psychological trauma, gives hope and encourages. Research also revealed that nowadays migrant women often face personal dilemmas that lead to fractured identites as well as to closure and detachment in order to keep traumatic experiences to themselves. It assumes that the children and grandchildren of these women will have to live with these silent traumas, which can be healed only by talking about them.

During this research project, which asked the informants to talk about their former, traumatic experiences, we recognised the importance of openness for healing processes – not only for the informants themselves, but also their children and grandchildren. This finding was thereafter disseminated through our local exhibition which is called *Healing Soul Wounds*, through lectures and presentations.

[1] Ruth Reches, *Holokaustą patyrusių asmenų tapatumo išgyvenimas/Holocaust Survivors" Experiences of Identity* (Vilnius: Slinktys, 2020), p. 46.

Historical context

The Holocaust in Lithuania led to the total destruction of Lithuanian and Polish Jews. There were approximately 200,000 Jews living in Lithuania before World War II, and some eighty percent of them were killed during the first six months of the war. In many cases, this meant that more than half of the population in small towns and villages were murdered. After Nazi Germany's attack on Poland on 1 September 1939, Vilnius became a centre for refugees in Eastern Europe and offered a temporary shelter to over 30,000 Polish refugees (among them more than 11,000 Jews) in 1939 to 1940. On 22 June 1941 Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union and Lithuania was occupied within the week. The Red Army withdrew Soviet officials and civilians, many of whom were Jewish. People were already aware of the fate of the Jews in Poland once Nazis had come to occupy it and tried to escape the country. Unfortunately, not all managed to do so. Many were killed during the pogroms initiated by the Nazis and carried out by local collaborators in the first days of the war. The mass killings of Jews were organised by the German SD and German Security Police and conducted by Special Extermination Squads, local police and collaborators, and continued from late June 1941 until July 1944. The Jews who remained alive were herded into the ghettos in the second half of 1941 and endured terrible conditions of imprisonment.

The Jews in the Vilnius, Kaunas and Šiauliai ghettos tried not to give up. The younger Jews in particular joined underground anti-Nazi organisations, seeking to resist with armed force. Despite the huge risks and big losses this seemed to be the most effective manner of resistance. In January 1942, the proclamation *"We will not be led like lambs to the slaughter!"* was announced in the Vilnius ghetto. Plans were developed to escape to the forests of Eastern Lithuania and Western Belarus where anti-fascist partisan groups were active. About 2,000 prisoners of the ghetto underground resistance managed to escape from the ghettos and joined the Soviet partisans in the woods. But there the Jewish partisans suffered constant anti-Semitism from their non-Jewish fellow combatants.

By the beginning of July 1944, a total of 196,000 Jews had been killed in Lithuania. Only up to 9,000 Jews managed to survive the Holocaust. Among them were those who were able to escape to the Soviet Union during the first days of the war or who survived the Nazi concentration camps, or who stayed behind either sheltering among the local population or joining the fight alongside the Soviet partisans or the Red Army.

For many Holocaust survivors it was very difficult to start a new life in a country that had turned into a collection of mass graves of their loved ones. The increasing anti-Semitic policies towards the Jewish community, persecution by the authorities, restrictions of religious and cultural life, and the destruction of their heritage together with the denial of the Holocaust by calling the Jewish victims *"Soviet citizens"*, forced the Jewish community to live under unbearable conditions. Former ghetto prisoners began to build Jewish emigration routes from Lithuania to Poland and further – to Israel. Once the State of Israel was established, the USSR promised to allow all Jews (who wanted) to leave, but when Israel began to turn to the West, the so-called Iron Curtain prevented those still living in Lithuania from leaving. The desire to be repatriated and join their relatives was further intensified by their wish to escape to the free world. The Israeli authorities developed a good system of support for those who were making *aliyah* (repatriating) to Israel, so their integration there was less problematic. *"Finally, home!"* was the most common sentiment amongst the Holocaust survivors and those who were able to start a new life in Israel.

Female residents at the Orthodox Jewish war refugee dormitory having lunch. 1939, Lithuania.

Photo by Boleslowa and Edmund Zdanowscy, kept by the M. K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art.

The project starting point

The young women, former ghetto prisoners, who were able to join the ghetto underground resistance movement, faced a dilemma: to escape the ghetto and fight the Nazis in the woods by joining the Soviet partisan battalions, or to stay and wait to be exterminated. Those women who made "choiceless" choices[2] by joining the Soviet partisans in the woods, faced constant danger and violence there, not only from their enemies but from their fellow combatants. As well remaining silent for decades, seeing the traumatic experience as the price for their survival. The women and young girls who managed to survive the Holocaust being hidden by the local people usually do not talk about the violence they faced during the hiding time. Also the women who were forced to leave the country at the beginning of the war kept silent about the dangers they experienced during the journey and the efforts to hide their Jewish identity. Despite the inhumane conditions in the concentration camps, many female prisoners were trying to protect their own spirituality while trying to survive. What happens when the surrounding environment becomes dangerous and life-threatening? How does that challenge one's identity, and how do individuals integrate such new living conditions and life changes into their life stories? We wanted to answer these questions by interviewing the women who survived the Holocaust and remained in Lithuania or moved to Israel with their families.
People construct identity by telling their stories.[3] Looking back at the past and projecting the future, they create life as a meaningful story in which events are inseparable from one another, showing a continuity or life. Identity is defined as a dynamic, mutable process expressed through the retelling of life stories, and whose content is made up of personal identity (self-assessment, values, goals) and social identity (roles, membership in an ethnic, social and/or religious group) which are judged and change according to changes in the social context. Here, also the untold stories shape the identity of the survivors and have a huge potential to be inherited.

The goal of the project *Healing Soul Wounds* was to collect interviews and to analyse the effect of traumatic events of the Holocaust on the survivors" daily life. In addition, we wanted to have a closer look at how trauma is transmitted from one generation to the next. We found that impossible mourning and wounds of the memory frozen in silence[4] are transmitted from generation to generation, as well as a feeling of guilt due to leaving family members behind in the concentration camps when joining the partisans in the woods. We believe that today, almost 80 years later, the survivors, their children and grandchildren face mainly the same struggles, even if nobody talks about what has happened – not in the public discourse and very often not within the families either.

To tell the story means to put efforts to build a bridge between past and present that would help to connect generations and to heal the soul wounds. The concept of soul wounds was introduced by the psychologist Eduard Duran, who highlighted the transfer of intergenerational trauma and introduced day-to-day tools for healing[5] that include commemorative and narration practices for both personal and communal healing. Many survivors were transformed by their experiences and suffered with symptoms that would now be described as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Surprisingly, in the years that followed, children of survivors were also significantly affected because of learnt biological symptoms of PTSD and traumatic behaviour could be passed directly from one generation to the next via an epigenetic mechanism.[6]
The storytelling-like healing practice includes the need to discover the facts about the survivor himself/herself, about the family and other people, to testify personally what happened, to give some kind of evaluation, the desire to pass the knowledge of the loss to children and grandchildren, and to remember their death. This is a long day-to-day process that includes not only a personal but also a social aspect. The goal of narrating personal stories has a tendency to teach others, preventing intolerance, ignorance and violence, and showing what the consequences of indifference might be. Thus personal stories can help in adding details to the unknown past and can cure society of the prejudices and stereotypes. Willingness to know and to accept the pain of others, empathy and solidarity is required from the society in order to treat psychological wounds which arose from traumatic experiences. The healing process can be considered to be in progress when the story that is shared includes emotions and becomes not only a collection of different facts but a personal evaluation of the events. The wound of trauma may have a scar, but it is no longer open and, metaphorically, bleeding. However, this does not mean the pain will not surface when one tries to share. The process of healing a soul wound is a long term healing procedure full of challenges and setbacks, but in the long run it lets us deal with trauma in a proper way and connects us to reality.

[2] Lawrence Langer,"The Dilemma of Choice in the Death Camps," Centerpoint: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies, 4, no. 1 (1980): 53–59.

[3] Dan P. Mc Adams, "What We Know When We Know a Person," *Journal of Personality* 63, no. 3 (1995), pp.365-396; Dan P. Mc Adams, "The Psychology of Life Stories". *Reviews of General Psychology* 5, no. 2 (2001), pp. 100-122.

[4] Erin McGlothlin, *Second-Generation Holocaust Literature: Legacies of Survival and Perpetration* (Camden House, 2006), p. 8.

[5] Eduardo Duran, *Healing the Soul Wound: Counselling with American Indians and other native peoples* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006).

[6] Rachel Yehuda and Amy Lehrner, "Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma Effects: Putative Role of Epigenetic Mechanisms ". *World Psychiatry* 17 (2018), pp. 243–257.

Exhibition *Healing Soul Wounds: Women during the War* at the Vilnius University. 2022, Lithuania.

Photo by Justinas Auškelis.

The work process and contact with the informants

In total, I was able to conduct 12 interviews with women: two with 99 year-old survivors, eight with daughters and two with grand-daughters of survivors. All the interviews were collected in 2020 and up to mid-2021, with a total of more than forty hours of conversation recorded. In three cases the interviewees did not want to be filmed or even voice recorded, because of the fear of being recognised, and here only notes were taken. Two interviews were filmed and four were conducted via Skype.

Despite the fact that I have been working with the topic of the Holocaust for over 25 years and knew the survivors and their family members very well, it was necessary to prepare psychologically for each interview. In some cases, it was necessary to come back up to four times before it was possible to begin the conversation. This is how the suppressed memory of traumatic experiences was forcing a traumatised person to avoid the confrontation with reality because when you hand your story over to another person, you are no longer in control of it. That vulnerability and lack of control can occur if you are sharing a particularly personal or triggering detail to a close person in confidence or to a barely known person who will amplify your voice on a public platform. To be vulnerable, to tell your story, you do have to let go of the need for control and trust the person you are talking to. I have to admit that in some cases the silence was really difficult to break and I even had tears in my eyes, but in the end when the talking started all previous fears vanished. To talk about the unspoken past, to touch the untouchable was hard, despite the fact that the Holocaust has now been studied for a long time. But still, the emotional load after each of the interviews was so huge that it took a large amount of time after each interview to stabilise my emotions. It was also very important to show empathy, understanding and solidarity with the interviewees, and ensure that the women would not feel negative repercussions after revealing their stories for the first time. The crimes committed against the survivors and their family members who perished, the kinds of violence – physical, verbal, visual, emotional, moral – that were experienced by all survivors, were hard to listen to. In addition, the women"s tremendous efforts to cope with all traumatic experiences, while at the same time trying to protect family members by hiding these stories, had a huge emotional impact on me. I was touched personally as a woman, as a daughter, as a mother, by the subject of silence and women"s traumas. Two online sessions with professional psychologists were provided for all partners of the project to overcome the consequences of indirect trauma that all of the researchers that were collecting interviews had to deal with. This was definitely a very useful practice for the researchers to help them accept all the emotions and the verbal traumatic experiences shared by the survivors and their family members.

The interviews identified emotional tension within the second generation and confusion within the third generation, and revealed very well that traumatic experiences have a long-term tendency to remain. The process of "healing the soul wound by talking" was key to the success of the interviews and showed clearly that empathy and solidarity is required from society in order to treat the psychological wounds arising from traumatic experiences. Healing can be complex, with a lot of moving parts and pieces. But one part of healing our wounds and the wounds of others involves sharing our stories, which include the events of the survivor"s or family member"s whole life, and also makes up part of your emotions, feelings, hopes, fears, traumas, modes of expression, patterns, core values, goals, family, family and friend influences, community, tastes, and your perception. It is very hard and definitely needs a lot of patience, empathy, support and encouragement, and returning to the spoken subject after the suppressed story has been told, but it becomes easier with the increasing courage of the narrator and the interviewer, and this tends to encourage others who are in a trouble to start to look for a solution to the problem.

Fania Yocheles-Brancovskaya, age 99 (Lithuania). A survivor of the Vilnius ghetto and a partisan fighter shows a picture of her family during the interview by the Vilna Gaon Jewish History Museum. 2018, Lithuania.

Photo by Neringa Latvyte, private collection.

Examples from some of the stories we collected

Fania Yocheles-Brancovskaya, aged 99, Holocaust survivor:

"I remember the forest and a long tree trunk; an impressive tall man and a blonde woman were sitting on it. Me and Chaila Šapiro talked about us. The man asked questions. He was Miceika. He asked how we came there, various things. And suddenly he said: 'You girls are so energetic, and willing to fight! I want to take you to my squad.' He mentioned the Adam Mickiewicz Squad. But suddenly the blonde woman said: 'I'm not going to let you have Jewish girls!' We, astonished: 'How can that be?' We were shocked: 'What? Jewish girls are worse than the others? Is that a kind of antisemitism?' […] I said to Chiena [Borovskaya], 'We got out of the ghetto to the partisans, and here we find antisemitism!' And she said to me, 'Calm down.' That [blonde] woman was Albina [Gessia Gleser]. Chiena explained to me: 'You know, the situation in the partisan squads is different. Especially for the girls ... After all, different people have gathered". And Albina knew and understood that the moral attitudes in the Jewish group would be completely different than in the gang of people of various kinds. [...]Many who survived in the ghetto and various [concentration] camps said nothing to their loved ones. Stayed silent for a long time ... couldn't talk. And their children didn't know what they had gone through. And only in recent years did many start coming to Paneriai. And they started talking. Myself to my family – also ... My children were born ... I started telling them from the first day."

Dita Zupowitz-Sperling, aged 99, Holocaust survivor:

"There was the so-called Children's Action that day. What my eyes saw – others did not see. We were told not to leave the house, and not to open the door [but] to keep it unlocked. But I didn't manage. It was near the Nėris River. I had to see what was going on there. I dared to glance through the opened door a little ... It would have been better if I had not ... Because at that moment I saw a German SS soldier standing next to a young woman with a child… They took the children away that day. She was holding her baby, so he unleashed a big German dog – you know – like a wolf. She was so scared – the child fell on the ground. That was the end… He took the child ... It seems that I did not write about it. That's why I'm trying [to speak] about it ... I have to add that I've deleted everything I"d seen. I do not know how. It was deleted without me wanting to do so. [...] I was silent. I never said anything. [...] I wanted to forget everything. Just delete everything. [...] I had to make attempts not to think about it. Yes, I did not write about very difficult situations [...] there is nothing about all this. [...] I described completely different things. [...] Enough, but not everything. Maybe it's good that you're asking because the world needs to know how it was. [...] Even now, it's hard to talk about it."

Fruma Vitkinaitė-Kučinskienė, aged 89, Holocaust survivor:

"[Is there anything you are reluctant to talk about? That you don't talk at all?] During the time of hiding, there were very dangerous situations and things that caused danger ... [...] I experienced very terrible things that I did not tell even to my cousin Gute. I mean in the time of hiding. [Were those things related to violence?] I can't even say. I was just very scared but, yes, the purpose was coercive."

Bella Shirin, aged 76, the daughter of Holocaust survivors:

"And after the death of my mother the Holocaust continued for me. I blamed myself [for my mother's suicide]. Why did I get up later that day? I could have saved her. [...] To speak about talking – I could not talk because I was taught from my childhood – do not tell anybody what is important to you [...] after my mother's death – it wasn't me. It was absolutely a different person. [...] I didn't change. A human being cannot change. I mean I forgot what I was. I became angry and very nervous. I had no patience for anything. It all continued for too long [...] we have to talk about pain, and fear. If there is no one in the family, there are no close people – then I am ready to listen. [...] My purpose is to make it easier for anyone who has a hard time ... To listen. [...] I talk to pupils in schools – that's important. [...] People need to know in order to avoid it all. [...]There was a time when I was told: don't tell anybody what you hear at home. So it was as if everything fell down a well – I told nothing. Even if I wanted to talk ... When we left Lithuania and came to Israel I did not talk openly. I couldn't tell what I was feeling. I couldn't share the most important things. [...] Only after returning to Lithuania in 2016 did I start talking openly."

The daughter of a Holocaust survivor (wished to remain anonymous):

"My mom ran a psychologically difficult marathon of life."

The daughter of a Holocaust survivor (wished to remain anonymous):

"All my life I live with the story of my mother. I am tired of this."

The daughter of a Holocaust survivor (wished to remain anonymous):

"[What did your mother tell you about her traumatic experiences?]. I don't know what to highlight. There are not more important or less important aspects. This is daily life. No. We don't ask [her] because then nervous tension appears."

Judita Gliauberzonaitė, the granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor:

"My grandmother spoke [...], spoke openly about it. She was open-hearted. But it was later when she was an elderly woman. I really doubt that immediately after the war when her kids were little she could talk about it. [...] I did not hear much from my mom about my grandmother's past.
I remember that in my childhood she used to say: 'They killed my family.' I was about five years old when we went to Plungė and Kaušėnai. It was a kind of family trip, and I could not understand at that time why she was crying her eyes out. I had never seen her cry before, but at that time she was weeping loudly. She had such a close relationship with her mother, who was killed in Kaušėnai. My mom was the youngest. Only her brother survived."

Ieva Černevičiūtė, the granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor:

"My grandmother was in a hideout […] While my grandmother was alive, there was no talk about it at all. [...]My daughters started to be interested. They want somehow to know something about it. They are interested in their past, in who their grandparents were. My activities in the community [Kaunas Jewish community] also influenced them. So, from this, their interest came out. […] For my girls this subject is more interesting than for my boys. I don't know why. Maybe other things touch them more. My son who is 20 doesn't want to find out more, he doesn't ask, he is not interested. But for the girls it's somehow interesting. For them it is relevant enough. It's different. You see... In one family but different perceptions. But that is normal. Different people, different interests. My youngest daughter is the most into finding out."

The Covid-19 pandemic

Due to the pandemic and total closure of the country for almost two years, I was not able to conduct almost half of the interviews that were planned to be carried out in Israel in the summer of 2021. The trip to Israel was necessary because some informants were not willing to be interviewed online while sharing very sensitive personal memories and because I was aiming to collect visual material: pictures and objects from personal collections. Also, meetings with the remaining half of the interviewees needed to be rescheduled and rearranged, as many of them were suffering from bad health and were in a risk group. Consequently, the majority of the interviews took place over the phone or via Skype. Personal items and photographs could not be collected. For this reason, the collections of the Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History, the M. K. Čiurlionis Art Museum, and the Archive of Literature and Art were searched, and additional information as well as visual material were gathered as supplements to the research and the local exhibition. Due to the constantly changing restrictions of Covid-19, I had to reorganise the work process several times to adjust to the new rules. Also, the opening of the local exhibition was postponed numerous times.

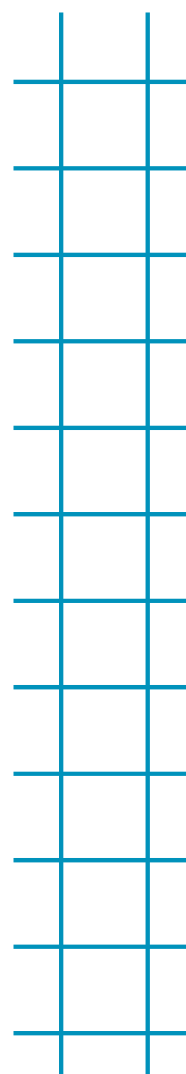
The local exhibition Healing Soul Wounds and dissemination of findings

The local exhibition reveals the dilemmas faced by young women seeking to survive in the brutal conditions of World War II and the Holocaust. The testimonies of the survivors, their daughters and granddaughters, illustrate that soul wounds remain open through several generations. If the traumatic experiences are kept a secret, it feels as if salt is being poured on the wounds, making healing impossible. That it is still difficult to talk about what happened, is demonstrated by the large number of interviewees who wished to remain anonymous, and that even the daughters and granddaughters of the women who faced traumatic experiences are reluctant to talk about past events.

The stories of the women offered in the exhibition, and exposure to the most painful experiences while trying to answer the researchers/my questions, paved the way to reconciliation and the healing of soul wounds. This goes not only for the interviewees, their children and grandchildren, but also for visitors of the exhibition. Stories that were kept secret for decades triggered emotions, and need human solidarity and empathy to understand them. All this is especially important in order to reflect on and understand today's world, and the processes that take place in it. And, after all, people all over the world still have to solve the same dilemmas when trying to survive during a war: Survive or disappear? Fight or hide? Talk or keep quiet? It is difficult to communicate the traumatic stories gathered during the interviews, and the exhibition concept changed several times. Again and again, we asked ourselves if visitors would be ready to hear or read the stories. For now, it has been decided to encourage visitors to reflect and share their thoughts in different ways.

The exhibition, which opened on 8 March 2022, at the Library of Scholarly Communication and Information of Vilnius University and ran until the end of 2022, has been successful in attracting visitors. It has also travelled to six Lithuanian museums and cultural organisations and has been accompanied by a detailed presentation of research, providing a unique opportunity for open discussion. Over 3,000 visitors of different ages have participated in guided tours in Lithuanian and English and attended opening events with discussions. Additionally, visitors were given the opportunity to share their experiences in the visitors' book.

In an active response to the war in Ukraine, visitors brought and installed the Ukrainian flag on one of the panels dedicated to Ukrainian women war refugees. This participatory approach demonstrates the relevance of the exhibition's topic to contemporary issues and highlights the connection between traumatic experiences of the past and present. The stories of Holocaust survivors also encourage active responses towards violence and indifference.



Exhibition *Healing Soul Wounds: Women during the War* at the Vilnius University. 2022, Lithuania.

Photo by Justinas Auškelis.

The most important findings

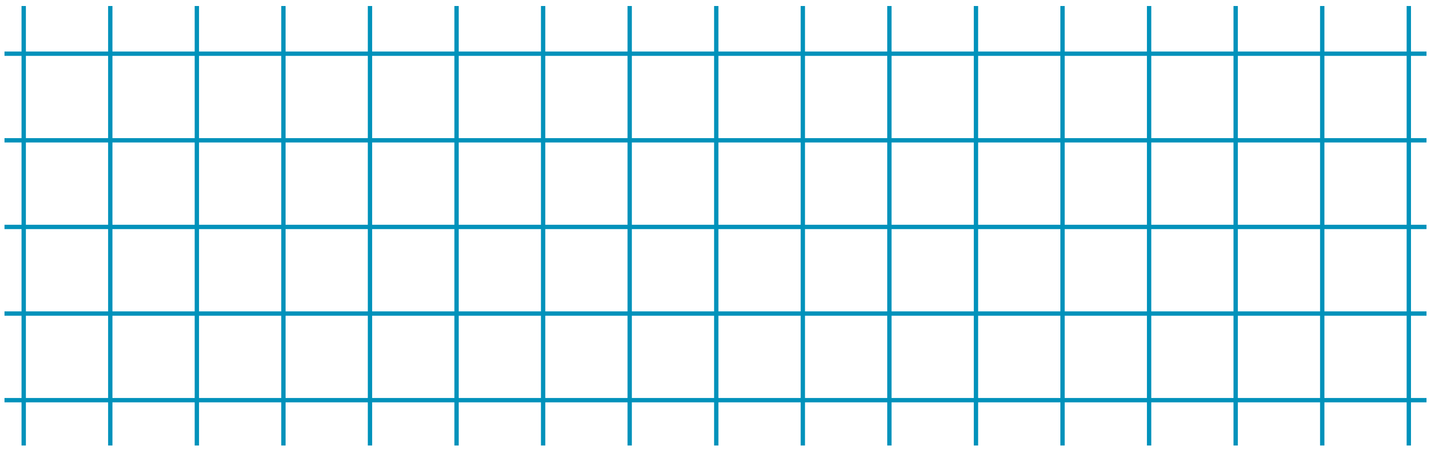
After analysing all the collected material, several challenging aspects were identified. Firstly, we realised that even 77 years after the war ended it is still very difficult for the women survivors to share their personal traumatic experiences because of the fear of being seen as “different” by others and, consequently, not accepted by society. Holocaust survivors often feel lonely, as they do not feel that anyone is really willing or able to listen with empathy, and to ask the right questions in a sensitive way. Secondly, silent memories have a unique tendency to be inherited and leave deep psychological scars for the next generations, and contribute to shaping their behaviour and understanding of themselves. The women of the post-memory generation, the second generation, built up their identity based on the unspoken traumatic past of the mothers, who tried to protect their children by keeping their experiences secret for decades.[7] The mothers, the time witnesses, said that it is very hard to talk about what happened because they felt shame and guilt, and did not want to appear weak in front of their children. But nevertheless, the children of the Holocaust survivors inherit the marks of their parents’ wounds, a signifier of an experience not personally experienced, “the scar without a wound.”[8] Changes seem to appear in the third generation: the unspoken trauma transmitted by their grandmothers to their mothers and later on to them consist of continuity of keeping a secret, but at the same time an interest in knowing the truth and talking about what happened has increased.

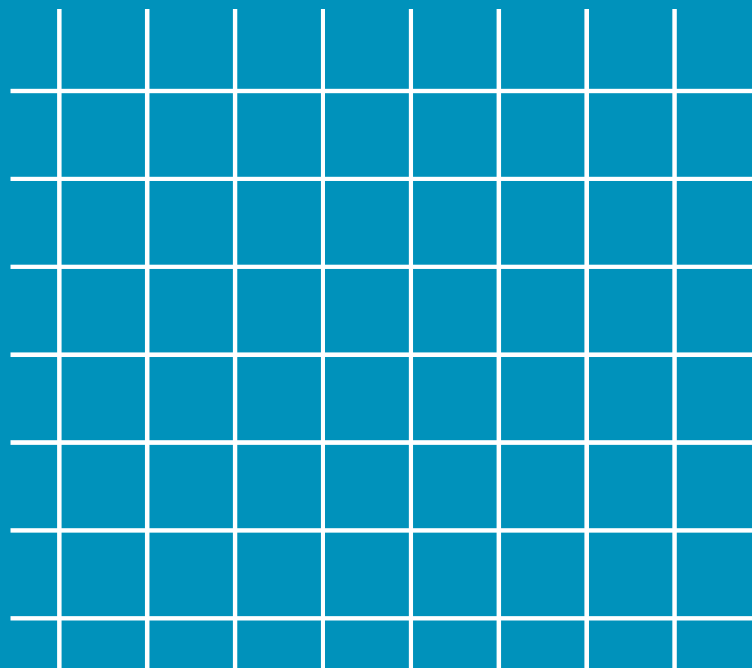
To summarise: What are the main issues to remember in such projects?

The difficult issues one suddenly faces, the consequences of one”s actions, as well as traumatic physical and psychological experiences leave soul wounds that one might be able to suppress, but not heal with silence. Memories can open these wounds again, and fear, shame, uncertainty and stress – even if not expressed in words – can be passed down from generation to generation. The testimonies of Holocaust survivors reveal psychological trauma that causes identity breaches, as well as the importance of female solidarity in life-threatening circumstances. Even after the war, it continued in the memories of women and their children – until they found the courage to talk and finally were able to understand their feelings better. Sharing feelings encourages the openness of others. When we open up, it becomes safer for the other person to talk about personal experiences as well. Open and empathetic conversation helps to overcome psychological traumas, gives hope and encourages. We should talk, listen and hear.

[7] Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (Columbia University Press, 2012).

[8] Efraim Sicher, The Burden of Memory: The Writings of the Post-Holocaust Generation. Breaking Crystal: Writing and Memory after Auschwitz, ed. Efraim Sicher. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), pp. 26-27.





UP YU GO! STORIES OF IDENTITIES ON THE LINE: A SLOVENE CASE STUDY

Muzej novejše in sodobne zgodovine Slovenije

Corinne Brenko, MA, and Urška Purg

National Museum of Contemporary History, Slovenia

MIGRANT WORKERS AT THE LJUBLJANA RAILWAY STATION, 1974, SLOVENIA.

Photo by Svetozar Busić,
kept by the National Museum of Contemporary History.

Introduction

Thirty years after Slovenia's independence from Yugoslavia, the National Museum of Contemporary History of Slovenia started to work with a participatory approach, aiming to shed light on the personal narratives of people who migrated to Slovenia from the other Yugoslav republics between 1945 and 1990.

Even though records are scarce and incomplete, it is estimated that, during the period in question, a total of around 290,000 people were involved in this migration process. A large percentage of those settling down and building a new home in the northernmost republic of the Yugoslav federation gained full Slovenian citizenship upon the country's independence in 1991. Yet, despite having been the subject of numerous academic research projects, the story of this migration process had previously not been presented within a national museum exhibition. This might be partly attributed to the public discourse regarding the "newcomers" which emerged in the years leading up to the dissolution of Yugoslavia and its aftermath. They were increasingly portrayed as a homogeneous "other", often equated with the political and ideological system of Yugoslavia from which the newly independent Slovenia sought to distance itself. Discriminatory treatment, ethnic prejudice, and stereotypes had an undeniable impact on these communities, culminating in the affair of the "Erased", when 25,671 people of non-Slovene origin were erased from the permanent residence record, losing all the rights they had hitherto enjoyed. In recent years, the stigmatisation of individuals and groups with an immigration background is resurfacing in Slovenia and other European countries, contributing to a climate of exclusion and scapegoating. It is therefore not surprising that the migrants themselves (as well as their descendants) were often reticent to share their story publicly, fearful that their own multi-faceted and diverse experiences would be reduced to damaging or trite clichés.

Historical background of the project

In the aftermath of World War II, the so-called second Yugoslavia emerged in Southeast Europe, composed of six socialist republics – Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia (with its two autonomous provinces, Vojvodina and Kosovo). It comprised six nations, three major religious groups (Orthodox Christians – to which most of the Serbs, Montenegrins, and Macedonians belonged; Roman Catholics – mostly Croats and Slovenians; and Muslims – predominantly inhabiting the regions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, south-western Serbia, and the autonomous province of Kosovo and Metohija), and many more nationalities and ethnic groups. Migrations within its borders soon became very common: some were incentivised by the central government, others by budding industrialisation, urbanisation, and post-war rebuilding. Some moved to find employment, others to pursue specialised education, independence, or to fulfil professional requirements. Many followed their partners or joined family members, while others wanted a change of scene or sought new opportunities. Slovenia's immigration pattern was dominated by migrations from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Macedonia.

As Yugoslavia was conceived as a community of equal nations and nationalities, the guiding principle of its post-war inter-ethnic policy was summarised by the slogan "Brotherhood and Unity". The policy prescribed that Yugoslavia's nations and national minorities were equal groups that co-existed peacefully in the federation. In spite of the official doctrine advocated by the Yugoslav leadership and promoted by official state propaganda, national tensions – which were rooted in memories of World War II, as well as in the different perceptions of the character and meaning of the short-lived inter-war Kingdom of Yugoslavia – did not cease to exist. However, it was only in the years leading up to the dissolution of Yugoslavia amid the Yugoslav wars and Slovenia's independence in 1991 that attitudes towards newcomers in Slovenia became increasingly hostile, as they started to be seen as unwanted foreigners or even enemies of the newly formed national state.

Citizenship laws, which were changed and/or passed in the 1990s in all the former Yugoslav republics, were among the leading "legal" mechanisms behind the disintegration of Yugoslavia. At the same time, they deprived or excluded groups of citizens who resided in republics from which they did not originate. On 26 February 1992, 25,671 people of non-Slovenian origin were erased from the permanent residence record, losing all social, civil, and political rights. Frictions also arose within individual communities that were affected by the ideological conflicts and the divisions of the Yugoslav wars that were fought, on and off, for almost a decade. It is estimated that 140,000 people lost their lives in the conflict, among them many relatives, friends and acquaintances of those who had settled in Slovenia. Often, their ancestral homes were destroyed, and once familiar places became theatres of war (and war crimes). Family ties as well as habitual, frequent mobility across the larger area were severed or severely hindered.

A public demonstration drawing attention to the plight of those still waiting for the redress of injustices, seventeen years after erasure from Slovenia's permanent residence record. 2009, Slovenia.

Photo by Tomi Lombar,
kept by the National Museum of Contemporary History / DELO.

It is this we wanted to shed light on with our project *Up YU GO!*. We wanted to take a closer look at the personal consequences for the people involved, and how the changes affected their lives.

The work process

Social theorists claim that 'identity' is crucial to all of us: identity contributes to how individuals and groups perceive and construct society, how they give meaning, and how they (re) act, think, vote, socialise, buy, rejoice, perceive, work, eat, judge or relax. They do so by referring to economic, social, cultural and political conditions, events and expectations, and, while doing so, they affect the economic, the social, the cultural and the political.[1]

As "an increasing number of psychologists argue that people living in modern societies give meaning to their lives by constructing and internalising self-defining stories"[2] identities thus become stories told, imagined, absorbed, and shared. Stories that shape the relationship with our own self, past and present, as well as with our family, and larger communities (as well as relationships among groups/communities). Thus stories can be collected not only as source material for historical research, but also as museum artefacts. As the methodologies of oral history enter museum spaces, they prove particularly valuable in investigating intangible concepts, as well as animating exhibitions for which material artefacts or other assets might be missing.

Among the key ways oral history contributes to our understanding of the past – and the human experience in general – is that it brings to the surface previously hidden, silenced, or suspended voices (otherwise known as "history from below"), and then includes them in the historical record.[3]

Following these principles, the National Museum of Contemporary History of Slovenia collected personal testimonies of people and their descendants who moved from the former Yugoslav republics to settle in Slovenia in the period after World War II. Seven interviewers with different academic training (ethnology and cultural anthropology, history, clinical psychology) identified potential informants within their informal networks and conducted qualitative interviews loosely following *Identity on the Line's* common questionnaire. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. At the same time, the museum issued an open call inviting everyone to share with us their personal or family migration story and their experiences, in any format they wished. We received photographs, objects, audio material and short texts. When we ended the process of collecting stories and objects, we had 42 personal stories. Of those, 11 referred

Collecting interviews. 2021, Slovenia.
Photo by Urška Purg.

[1] Peter Scholliers, ed., *Food, Drink and Identity: Cooking, Eating and Drinking in Europe Since the Middle Ages* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2001), p. 5.

[2] Teresa Bergen, *Transcribing oral History* (New York: Routledge, 2020), p.15.

[3] Andromache Gazi and Irene Nakou, "Oral History in Museum and Education: Where Do We Stand Today?", *MuseumEdu 2 University of Thessaly* (2015), p. 15.

to the first generation, 29 to the second, and 2 to the third. The informants stemmed from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, covering all former Yugoslav republics. At the time the interviews were collected, the older informant was 89 years old, the youngest 17.

The collected material was then analysed and common motifs and themes were identified, which the project team compiled into the first draft of a narratological arc. Relevant issues that would otherwise have been overlooked, such as the Yugoslav wars, were brought to the attention of the project team. Almost all the informants said that although they were only indirectly involved in the conflicts (through relatives and acquaintances), the consequences of the war left a big mark on their lives and influenced the process of self-conception of their own identity. Most also speak of having been stigmatised, stereotyped and discriminated against because of their origin during their lives. In particular, they highlighted first names and surnames – especially those ending in *-ić*. In recent years, they have also noticed an increase in verbal discrimination at work and on social media.

It is telling that 12 of the 42 informants wished to remain anonymous. The reasons were varied: some cited pressure from family members who did not want to be identified or did not want the informant's immigrant background to be publicly exposed. Three informants also withdrew from the project after the interviews had already been conducted. One did not want his name to appear in any museum documentation and consequently refused to sign the contract, even after being assured by museum staff that the document would be placed in a sealed envelope and kept in the archives until the project was completed. One informant, moreover, withdrew from the project after the museum's management changed in February 2021. The guiding principle of respecting the wishes of the community and Article 6.5 of the ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums, which states that "acquisition should be based on a clear and mutual agreement with the owner or informant and not to his detriment", were taken into account. We therefore excluded all the acquired material from our process.

These phenomena highlight the sensitivity of the material and speak to a sense of discomfort with public exposure of an immigrant identity, pointing to a discrepancy between individual and collective values, and at the perceived inconsistencies of the museum as an institution bearing collective values and exerting institutionalised cultural power.

Workshops or: inviting the informants to co-curate an exhibition

At this point, we should keep in mind, as Bernadette T. Lynch has pointed out that, "museums have been complicit in the construction of physical and cultural hierarchies that underpinned racist thought from the Enlightenment until well into the twentieth century, in marked contrast to the inclusionary role that many now seek to fulfil".[4] Furthermore, another issue that is both technical and ethical in nature was identified. How can we process and prepare the textual material provided by contemporary communities to be displayed in a museum exhibition, and in doing so, ensure the principle of respect for human dignity (ICOM Code, Article 6. 7) and, furthermore, preserve the informant's freedom to develop a distinctive voice of their own and encourage manifestation of personal identity (prerogatives protected by the Declaration of Human Rights, Art.19)?

As a means of mitigating unavoidable societal bias, the museum professionals of the National Museum of Contemporary History looked closely at the participatory museum theory posited by Nina Simon (2010), as well as at the theory of museums as social arenas[5] enabling the informants not only to entrust their personal narratives to the museum professionals, but also to actively co-create the exhibition. Thus, the informants themselves were invited to take part in several rounds of consultations and to co- curate the exhibition through a series of experimental and experiential joint creation workshops. With the help of an expert in theatre improvisation and impro pedagogy, the members of the project group, together with the participants, explored the museum, the exhibitions and the elements of storytelling (i.e. the object as a cue for the story, how the story travels from the storyteller to the audience, how the story changes, how it is remembered, and what catches our attention) offering an insight into the exhibition process and how people perceive others' stories. This allowed us to become aware of the fact that participatory projects are not only for museums and participants, but also for all non-active individuals – spectators or visitors.[6] At the same time, we encouraged mutual learning, provided insights into the process of exhibition-making, built mutual trust, empowered the informants by giving them control over their own story and made them aware of the curatorial aspect of the exhibition-making process. The activities encouraged participants to think and discuss in a creative way attitudes, culture, emotions, food, language, memory, reminiscence in relation to the theme of migration and identity, and thus to suggest objects (and other material) that could be included in the exhibition. The informants were thus encouraged to think about objects as bearers of meaning and came up with different suggestions: in the end, they suggested 5 objects and accompanying stories to include in the exhibition.

We experimented with themes, titles, and settings. The tools of improvisational theatre (the so-called Games) brought to the surface memories, emotions, and ideas, which we wrote down according to Crawford's Slip Writing Approach. Together, we then created an "exhibition prototype". In addition, a new working title was proposed, discussed and adopted by the informants. The workshop leaders also actively participated in all the exercises and shared their personal stories with the participants, who then stated that they had gained a strong sense of ambassadorship *("There are at least 20 people ready to see the exhibition, just so you know!"*, one of the informants shared) and a sense of being active joint creators of the exhibition (*"That was great! I don't feel like a museum artefact anymore!"* another told us).

These workshops thus helped foster a sense of belonging with the participants and to build connections between the participants and the museum curators, which laid the groundwork for cooperation that continued throughout the entire exhibition-building process. A basis was thus established for further dissemination of the project and, later, for the exhibition. A close, trust-based, mutually respectful relationship was established between curators and participants, guaranteeing real transparency and openness throughout the process, and ensuring a final product the participants would be proud of. As a result, the participants may also become the advocates of the exhibition, reaching audiences that a museum would not normally be able to reach.

[4] Bernadette T. Lynch,"Neither helpful nor unhelpful – a clear way forward for the useful museum", *Museums and Social Change: Challenging the Unhelpful Museum* (New York: Routledge, 2020), p.13. https://www.academia.edu/43963067/Neither_helpful_nor_unhelpful_a_clear_way_forward_for_the_useful_museum_Dr_Bernadette_Lynch.

[5] Kaja Širok et al., eds., *Integrating a Multicultural Europe: Museums as social arenas* (Vienna: Edition Mono/Monochrom, 2016).

[6] Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010), p. 21.

The informants, the curators and the improv specialist at one of the exhibition co-creation workshops. 2021, Slovenia.

Photo by Urška Purg.

Examples of some cases/stories collected

The migration analysed in our case study happened within the framework of a common country (Yugoslavia) and was therefore understood as a process of internal migration, which informed the experience of the informants. Overall, the migration process as such was not conceived as a traumatic/difficult experience. A shared "Yugoslav identity", which – in many cases superseded the particular and diverse local, national, ethnic, religious, and class identities – appeared to have an equalising effect between the "newcomer" and the "natives" thus resolving identity questions that could have been impacted by a migration experience.

Boris Denič, aged 53, said:

"We never talked about nationalism or asked who's who. We might have asked where someone was from, but that's where it ended. We didn't even talk about faith."

The second generations especially, stressed that they were raised within an ethics and value system that did not tolerate exclusion or nationality-based discrimination. After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the attitude towards the immigrants as well as their sense of personal identity started to shift. Citizenship laws, which deprived or excluded groups of citizens who had their place of residence in republics from which they did not originate, deeply impacted the sense of belonging and personal identity of those who lost the rights enjoyed up to that point.

Dragan Antonijević, aged 58:

"Slovenia, my new country, did not want me. Or, in the uncertainty of a newly formed country, it did not wish me well. And years of complete uncertainty came for me, without any valid documents, health insurance, social or physical security. Grey years, years of struggle. Struggles for survival, struggles for identity. As I lost battle after battle against the almighty bureaucracy for eight years, I was gaining strength, perseverance, love, empathy, softness, and the ability to forgive. Of course, I was not alone. Without the unconditional support and love of parents, sisters and partners, who knows where I would have gone…"

This process of exclusion, however, was not limited to the legal framework, but seeped deep into the fabric of society and influenced, in many ways, the sense of belonging and the self-image of those who managed to settle their status in Slovenia after the country's independence in 1991. At the same time, this process also engendered a generalised feeling of being 'Other' everywhere they went, not belonging anywhere.

Dragica Dobrila, aged 63:

"Overnight, we became strangers, as if we hadn't known each other before. At the time, we also thought we were at home in our hometowns. After so many years, we became strangers everywhere. If I really think about it, I am a foreigner everywhere, in Slovenia, in Croatia, and today also in Serbia."

The informants also experienced pronounced expressions of intolerance and exclusion. Mostly characterised as lower, working class, they were marked with the labels "čefurji" [an offensive term used to describe the inhabitants of Slovenia originating from other regions of former Yugoslavia, or their descendants] and "Jugosi" – words that were used to exclude, differentiate the Yugoslav 'immigrants' from the 'native' Slovenian population. In their own words, every interviewee expressed how they were reminded of not being accepted as fully fledged citizens of Slovenia, and treated as "second class citizens", even if they were born and raised in Slovenia:

Amra Bajrektarević, aged 25:

"These are those small things that are initially not outwardly hurtful, but they pile up over the years. And then it starts to come out. For me it was a feeling of being "less than". And you start asking yourself why you feel inferior."

Almost every interviewee expressed also the difficult period in their lives, when they faced being stereotyped and experienced cultural racism.

Anonymous informant, aged 42:

"Yeah, I didn't want any children, just so they wouldn't be stigmatised. I always had a feeling it would have been different for me if I had a different surname. It's funny that I told (my future husband) on my first date: 'How glad I am that you're not a čefur'. I remember my mother-in-law once telling me to change my name after the wedding to make it sound less Bosnian."

Frictions also arose within individual communities which were affected by the ideological conflicts and the divisions of the Yugoslav wars. In this context, it is worth mentioning that immigrants and their descendants were often indirectly involved in the conflict, either effectively (family members, friends and acquaintances were in imminent danger of violence or hosted refugees in their homes) or materially (family-owned property, etc.). What's more, identities, personal and collective, were weaponised by the battling sides, and the processes of belonging/exclusion became fraught with existential danger, entangled in often contrasting emotions.

Lidija Jularić, aged 41:

"The war affected our lives enormously. Our house was burgled and left in ruins. We stopped visiting Bosnia. Our relatives were expelled at the end of the war. Today, we have almost no relatives in Bosnia."

Alenka Česa, aged 32:

"I would say that after the war some differentiation started to arise. Even if you were born in Slovenia, you would now be identified with it [your national background]. But, basically, how much of this did we kids / teens even understand? Nothing!"

With a family history of migration as a background, the process of forging a personal identity within the newly formed Republic of Slovenia thus became fragmented, pressurised. It was influenced by ideological conflicts and divisions brought to the foreground by the Yugoslav wars, as well as the tendency of the newly-formed Slovenia to form its own national identity.

Boris Denič, aged 54:

"Not that they don't accept me, I am accepted – here as a čefur and there as a Slovene. I am accepted, but for me as such I am not accepted anywhere. Because no one grabs you by the hand and says, you are ours. [...] And then you're somewhere in between. In the end, you ask yourself, well, where do I belong? And so my identity is determined everywhere without me being asked about it. Everywhere they have an opinion about me that I didn't suggest or say. No one ever asked me 'Are you a čefur or a Slovene?'; or on the other hand, "Are you a Slovene or one of us?"

If the first generation's sense of identity and belonging remained somehow fragmented, the second and third generation of immigrants have generally come to recognise Slovenia as their home. They have also reconciled their sense of identity which many identify as changeable. Thus personal identities underwent a process of transformation from one generation to the other: after fragmentation and pressurisation, they finally became fluid and transnational.

Ana Aleksandra Gačić, aged 33:

"I find it very positive that one can be whatever one wants, at the same time. So that you are not weighted down by a national identity."

In general, informants value their immigration background and state that the experience (lived or transferred) has made them more "open", "adaptable", "empathetic", and "flexible".

Lidija Jularić, aged 41:

"Today, I don't see this as a problem anymore, but as something that enriches me. Because of this, I can get along with different people and environments. With migration and unconditional support, my parents gave me a broader perspective".

The most important findings

After tying all of the steps together, we realised how present and relevant this issue, seemingly resolved and concluded after thirty years of independence, still is. Until now, this topic was mostly addressed through the most visible, polarising cases, representing a small percentage of the population, either emphasising stories of extraordinary personal success (politics, sports, music or other types of public performance) or reinforcing the representation of minority groups and stereotypes in conjunction with violent and criminal activities. Focusing on the silent and integrated majority revealed the need for a part of society to voice their opinions and present their struggles and mind-sets, which are usually ignored. This need is obvious, but it is usually overlooked, especially because establishing trust and contacting participants is not always straightforward.

The case study showed that each individual interviewed has a different approach in re-establishing their identity. It also showed what they all emphasised during the interviews – that each individual's identity is extremely diverse, and as a result, they cannot be viewed as a homogeneous group. In addition to the fear of revealing their identity still evident in some interviewees, they have a low level of trust for society, politics, and museums as representatives of cultural organisations. Consequently, all decisions within the project were made in full transparency, in agreement with all participants, and in a participatory way.

Experiencing and going through all of this has been an arduous, gradual and challenging process. At the same time, it was an emotional, touching and beautiful experience. The curators working on this project were fully aware of the fact that it is impossible to begin such a project purely on a rational and emotion-free level. For this reason, regular supervision and discussions took place between the curators throughout the process. To ensure the highest level of professionalism, proficiency, and safety for the participants, curators had to be aware and take care of their human, emotional side. To make this possible, the curators had to be open and honest and establish a safe circle among themselves in order to communicate the difficult topics and struggles on the way. The professional workshop and webinar within *Identity on the Line*, as well as the safe space for all the partners to share all of this simultaneously, were invaluable to the project's integrity.

The primary message of the case study is the value of respecting the life of others and coexisting with them. Despite it being evident that people have migrated for centuries, there is also the fact that people from Europe have migrated for a variety of reasons in the past and today. Immigration often leads to the creation of a collective identity via divisions between "us" and "them." The result of this division may be the creation of a group of invisible and silent people, who are left feeling they do not fit in anywhere, each of them reacting in a way that is familiar to them, disputing stereotypes, and struggling to find their place. In Europe, it is striking how many of the consequences of such processes from the last century are still present and remain unresolved on a collective level. Museums can therefore serve as a safe and respectful forum for dealing with such (often neglected or invisible) issues, presenting a new and noteworthy perspective that may lead to democratic coexistence, a goal we all strive towards.

Up YU Go! Stories about Identities on the Line exhibition reactions and feedback

The end result – the exhibition *Up YU Go! Stories about Identities on the Line* – was received favourably. Using an online questionnaire to collect responses, informants as well as visitors concluded that the exhibit effectively depicted the diversity and plurality of immigrant experiences, including both consistencies and contradictions, as well as aspects of migration that are less well known and underrepresented.

"As a whole, the exhibition seemed cohesive, but there wasn't one picture of individuals, rather each person was represented."

"It's admirable that you managed to put all of this together in a way that is fitting for a museum. There's one connection from beginning to end, regardless of how different we are, hats off."

A poll circulated among the informants showed that the experience had been overwhelmingly positive. They reported satisfaction in having been able to talk and contribute their stories to a topic they felt has long been overlooked.

"You gave us freedom. This is an extremely good way of working, asking us, who the exhibition is about, to give our opinion."

"We really decided together, co-created. This is not usually done."

The *Up YU Go! Stories about Identities on the Line* exhibition at the National Museum of Contemporary of Slovenia in Ljubljana. 2021, Slovenia.
Photo by Sašo Kovačič.

Main challenges & our reflections upon them

As we collected and prepared the local exhibition based on the Slovenian case study, we encountered a number of challenges, many unexpected. Getting in contact with the informants was not easy, and many did not want their story told publicly. The lives of several informants had been marked by incidents of stigmatisation, stereotypes, and discrimination due to their origins. Some wished to retain a certain level of privacy for themselves and for their family members or friends; others did not want their immigrant background to be publicised.

An intangible, yet real challenge arose out of the unexpected Covid-19 pandemic, in addition to the sensitivity of the topic surfacing gradually throughout the process. Because of the restrictions put in place to curb the pandemic, it was challenging for us to interview those who were willing to share their stories in person. Consequently, it made the establishment of trust and a connection between the interviewer and the interviewee more difficult. After an initial stalemate, we were able to interview a number of informants online. Obviously, it was not an ideal situation. We were fortunate to catch an opening during the summer, when we could once again collect stories in person, face-to-face. We used every opportunity to meet with the people online and in person to jointly create the exhibition after learning how to cope with Covid-19. Under the conditions and circumstances mentioned, it was much harder to develop the participatory and open exhibition concept. So, many compromises had to be made. Finding safe and appropriate meeting options, such as Zoom meetings, one-on-one meetings, and small number workshops in more repetitions, was the best way to go.

Having reflected deeply on the stories collected, curators were forced to question the role of the curator and the role of the museum as an institution, an anticipated challenge after taking a decision on the form of the process. By highlighting oral histories in exhibits – large and small – big history becomes personal, and even more so if the stories included involve sharing sensitive, taboo-related information. Incorporating oral histories into museums, however, poses a new set of challenges to both curators and oral historians: How much can curators "curate" the stories shared and interpret them for a larger public? How can we "transform" episodes of a person's life into "museum artefacts" while making sure not to impinge upon the dignity of the informants, preserving their self-narrative and encouraging manifestation of personal identity, while guaranteeing their safety within a public space that has a proven record of being hostile towards them? Curators must also contend with how oral history can be used to challenge official narratives. Do these personal memories complement the exhibition's narrative or complicate it? Furthermore, sometimes oral history is the only way that marginalised communities can be represented and acknowledged in museum spaces. Thus, what can curators do to not only present oral histories, but also to give priority to the stories they reveal, particularly if these narratives do not appear in the museum's artefacts or image collections?

Finally, what is the responsibility of oral historians in developing content for museum exhibitions? Knowing that oral history might become part of a museum exhibit, how should interviewers reframe these conversations? This provides curators and oral historians with an opportunity to collaborate on projects that reveal new information or unique points of view. The practice of oral history should consider not only what museums present, but how they do it as well.[7] Since the purpose of the museum is not to hand out assistance – meaning we should not try to help people or act on their behalf – it only makes sense to create circumstances by which they can do so themselves, building their own abilities. The capability of people is expressed in the phrase 'freedom to choose', where people are free to reach their own conclusions, debate the consequences, and change their lives according to their own preferences.[8]

[7] Amanda Tewes, "Curating Oral History in a Museum Setting", *Update - Berkeley Library (blog), University of California*, 31 July 2018, https://update.lib.berkeley.edu/2018/07/31/curating-oral-history-in-a-museum-setting/..

[8] Lynch, "Neither helpful nor unhelpful – a clear way forward for the useful museum", p.3.

Summarising

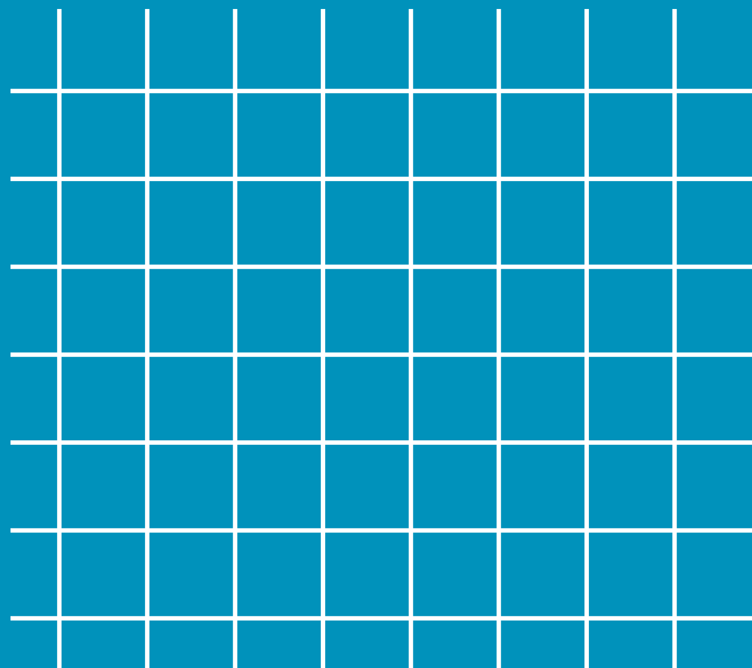
In reviewing the case study, notions of gratitude and a sense of value emerge. The museum's goal of establishing and reinstating its role in the society is a long-term endeavour that will require a long and demanding process in order to deal appropriately with a sensitive subject like this one. It is just one piece of the jigsaw puzzle ensuring respect for human values and human rights within society. Furthermore, it questions not only the role of the museum but also that of the curator, who must encompass different understandings of the topic and the people involved, as well as the unpredictable nature of working once the participatory path is chosen. For the curator, working closely with the informants and their sensitive stories while meeting the standards of contemporary museology requires a great deal of work and energy.

The most important lessons learnt sound very logical and simple, but should not be taken lightly:

- A participatory, interdisciplinary and shared curating approach takes a lot of time and a lot of management.
- People are different and react differently to similar events. None of the reactions should be underestimated or neglected.
- Often, people's stories are the only way a museum can tell the full story of a topic, adding artefacts and supporting documents from the museum depots to present a unified vision of the situation and its multifaceted history in an understandable and interesting way.
- Throughout the entire process, respect, openness, transparency, and sincerity must be guiding principles. By sacrificing one of these for what seems like a shortcut might be too risky for the project, the curator's and museum's reputation, and more importantly, people's safety and trust in museums. A curator or museum that takes on such a project bears a great deal of responsibility.
- The curators should not ignore or skip out on the importance of finding support for their work. In many cases, colleagues in the museum can offer a different view on the situation and provide valuable feedback.
- Museums today must address the current issues in society. This is a necessary function of museums and gives additional meaning to their existence.

Working on this case study and capturing it in an exhibition was an important step for the National Museum of Contemporary History in order to follow its mission and purpose in building the bridge between the institution and societies. There was a feeling of support from the museum's leadership and colleagues, especially in a form of uninvolved experts who offered their feedback on presented stages of work during regular working meetings. The exhibition and the work process was well accepted also by the media, where celebrities and influencers who were among the informants and joint creators played a significant role.

In some ways, migration is intrinsic to human existence – people have been moving since the beginning of time, yet we tend to forget about this over and over again. There exist numerous myths regarding migration in contemporary times. These misconceptions often arise because migrant communities themselves are rarely given space to express their own stories and experiences in public forums. Rather than "speak about", the way forward must necessarily entail the principle of "speaking with". Thus this case study was a step in that direction by the National Museum of Contemporary History and hopefully it is a harbinger of the many more to follow.



"ESULI E RIMASTI" – BUILDING DIALOGUE IN A DIVIDED COMMUNITY

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etno grafski muzej istre
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Informants visiting the local exhibition at the Ethnographic Museum of Istria. 2022, Croatia.

This project, conducted by the Ethnographic Museum of Istria, is about the displacement of part of the Istrian population after World War II and the consequences of that displacement which are still noticeable today. This so-called "Istrian exodus" is most clearly reflected in today's relationship between people and their descendants who left Istria and the ones who stayed behind. The project also addresses and accentuates the social role that museums can play in facilitating communication and understanding among different groups and in raising awareness of the troubled past shaping the reality of today's Europe.

Why was this topic chosen and why is it important to talk about it today?

The Ethnographic Museum of Istria was founded in 1962 as the successor of the short-term People's Museum which had the mission to promote the Slavic origins of Istria. Following the vision of the newly established leadership of the region in the 1990s, supporting its multi-ethnic and culturally diverse community, the museum engaged in critically analysing the many faceted interpretations of the local culture, starting with the 17th century adventurous and often romanticised writings of priests and professional travellers, followed by the Austrian Empire's political project, accentuating the multi-ethnicity of its vast geographical space in order to control and rule it, and finally the selective strategies of Yugoslavia for building a stronger collective identity and proving its Slavic origins. Equipped with a new mission and staff, the museum directed its endeavours towards researching and communicating the diverse elements of the local culture, including both its Italian and Slavic components. In developing its researchers and curators, in the last thirty years the museum staff has collaborated with many ethnic communities, including Montenegrin, Albanian and Roma. Of course, the museum has also always been aware of a significant number of Istrians living outside Istria.

This research orientation led to the 2009 exhibition *Suitcases and Destinies: Istrians Outside of Istria.* Working with different types of migrants leaving Istria since the early 1920s for different reasons, enabled researchers to identify a specific migration process, known as the "Istrian Exodus". This migration process was included in the overall exhibition, but very soon it became clear that it deserved specific attention. This was due to the ongoing communication among the community that left (*esuli*), the those who stayed (*rimasti*), their descendants, and the political powers from both the Italian and Croatian sides who still today often use the tragic events of the aftermath of World War II for political benefit.

As an institution supporting intercultural dialogue, the Ethnographic Museum of Istria realised that the topic of the Istrian exodus is of utmost importance not only to shed light on these events among the citizens who were/are not aware of Istria's tragic past, but also because people from both sides needed a space for dialogue and self-representation which now after 70 years seemed to be achievable. The project *"Esuli e Rimasti": Building Dialogue in a Divided Community* seeks to confront the official historical 'truths' with personal narratives coming from different sides in order to sensitise the public on the personal nature of history[1] and allow us all to empathise with everyone who had to leave or are leaving where their roots are.

[1] The authors understand historical subjectivity as not opposed but in relation to historical objectivity as explained in Susan A. Crane. 'Historical Subjectivity: A Review Essay'. *The Journal of Modern History. Volume 78, Number 2. 2006. 2pp. 434 – 456*

Egidio said:

"My advice to everyone would be to stay where they were born, it's the most beautiful thing. Look at Sergio Endrigo's song 'where the tree was born'… it's something that hurts me and my wife doesn't want me to put this record on because I always cry... Here, it made me shed two tears now."

Leaving Pola/Pula. 1946, nowadays Croatia.

PPMI-47712, kept by the Historical and Maritime Museum of Istria.

Historical background

World War II found Istria under Italian rule as a result of World War II and the break-up of Austria-Hungary, its former ruler. From 1920 until 1943, Italian rule in Istria escalated under the fascist regime. It was characterised by bans, persecution, humiliation and transformations negative for the identity and sustainability of Croatians (and Slovenians) in Istria. Many of them, together with anti-fascist Istrians, emigrated, most often to the former Yugoslavia. It was, in fact, the first major wave of emigration due to totalitarian regimes in the 20th century. The project of the Ethnographic Museum of Istria also focuses on yet another mass exodus, greater in numbers, also referred to as "the big exodus", that happened in the aftermath of World War II.

The mass departure of Italians, accompanied by substantial numbers of Croatians and Slovenians, from Istria and Rijeka after World War II is understood as a particular type of forced or coerced displacement of an indigenous national community from their homeland. The ways in which it was implemented are different from expulsions, but they achieved the same results. The migration did not take place on the basis of bilateral agreements for the exchange of populations, nor following official expulsion actions. However, it was largely implemented through Article 19 of the Peace Treaty of 1947, which greatly favoured Italian citizenship. This right was granted in cases where substantial national minorities were created following a border shift established by a treaty. In the case of the Italians of Istria and Rijeka, the option was an instrument of mass migration, which led to changes and transformations on the Istrian peninsula at the national or ethnic and socio-cultural levels.

The right of option for Italian citizens, which constituted the legal aspect of most of the migratory flow, was provided by the 1947 Peace Treaty ("first options" of 1948), by the agreements for reopening in 1951 ("second options") and the London Memorandum (1954). Over a decade, approximately 200,000-250,000 people residing in the former provinces of Pula and Rijeka opted for Italian citizenship and moved to Italy. The difficulty in quantifying the exodus is linked to the fact that national membership in Istria was very uncertain, which is why it is impossible to establish the original national composition of all the people who left the territory. In addition, those who made use of the right of option, provided by the 1947 Peace Treaty, indicated Italian as their language of use.

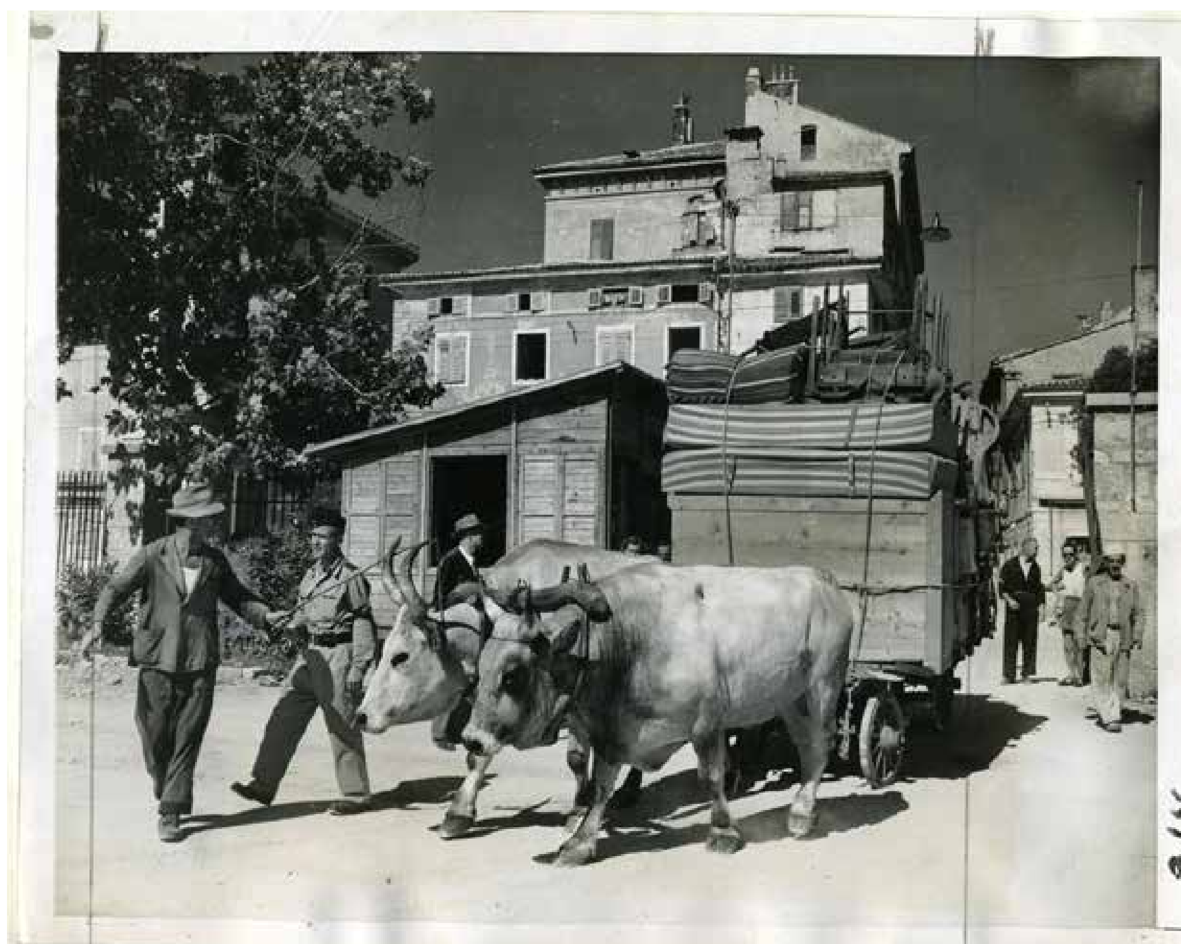
The reasons for the exodus are linked to a whole series of political, ideological, economic, social and cultural aspects. After World War II, Istria and Rijeka experienced the introduction of a communist regime. In addition, since 1945-1946, the political struggle for the annexation of the territories claimed by Yugoslavia (i.e. the whole territory of Venezia Giulia up to the Isonzo/Soča), accompanied by the other strategic objective of socialist revolution, led the Istrian population to divide into two large blocs, in favour of the Yugoslav option or not.

Although the Yugoslav regime's official policy towards the Italians was marked by "Italo-Slavic brotherhood", a vast number of the Italian population, which as a whole perceived itself as the object of persecutory policies aimed at destroying their national identity, chose the Italian citizenship option. Nevertheless, Croatian and Slovenian citizens were also leaving Istria. For the Italian component (understood in all its social articulations), the exodus represented the rejection of the new national hegemony, but also a response to the radical change in economic, social and cultural conditions due to the politics of the new Yugoslav communist regime. On the other hand, for many Croatian and Slovenian citizens, the option represented a possibility to escape the harshness of the communist regime, especially in the economic sector.

The choice to leave the territory, which came on the basis of the right of option, was not a decision free from political constraints, pressures and even violence. The whole period of the first and second options (1948-1951), which coincided with the anti-conformist repression (from 1948), up to the demonstrations against Italy of 1953-1954, were marked by different levels of intimidation, violation of rights and real repression by state structures (secret police and party committees), marked by Stalinist methods such as withdrawal of documents, ration cards, dismissals, evictions, forced recruitment to the Lupogliano-Stallie railway, beatings, imprisonment, torture and disappearances.

The Yugoslav authorities attempted to curb the requests, rejecting thousands, forcing the applicants to stay and live within the framework of the state of Yugoslavia. Many rejections in the later phase were linked to the high numbers of "options" among the Croatian and Slovenian population, the failure of the "unity and brotherhood" policy towards the Italian population, the loss of a real consensus of the population in general, and the need to keep some specific professions within the country. The phenomenon of clandestine escapes is closely related to rejected options. These occurred by sea, particularly from the Kvarner islands, but frequently also by land. People tried to leave Yugoslavia for political reasons (anti-communism, rejection of the option), to avoid military service (three years in the navy), for economic reasons (hunger and poverty) and adventure, and because

of the harshness of the communist authorities. These escapes increased further in 1949 when, at the conclusion of the first options (March 1948), numerous citizens who had not benefited from this right or whose application had been rejected, attempted to flee to Italy, or at least the West, by any means. During illegal expatriation, especially along the demarcation lines between the former Yugoslavian Istrian territory and zone B, some young people even died at the hands of the People's Guards or the secret police. The Italian minority remaining in Istria and Rijeka was and is still institutionally represented by the Union of Italians of Istria and Rijeka.



Using all available transportation to flee the city of Pola/Pula. 1946, nowadays Croatia.

PPMI-58882, kept by the Historical and Maritime Museum of Istria.

The work process: methods used and cooperation developed

The research process was designed from a multidisciplinary perspective, including not only ethnographic methods of semi-structured interviews and participant observation, but was also enriched through close cooperation with the Rovinj History Research Centre and joint creation and interpretation strategies with the subjects of the research as a relatively new approach in social history studies. The collaboration with the centre in Rovinj was extremely important, as this institution was established in 1968 by the Italian Union, the most important non-political entity championing the rights of the Italian minority in Croatia and Slovenia. "The Centre was conceived as a relevant scholarly and research institution, the task of which is to engage in objective processing of facts, customs and events in the area of the complex history of Istria, specifically because of its geo-political situation and the principles of multi-ethnicity and multiculturalism adopted long ago, with an emphasis on the Italian minority."[2] Thus, their role over the last 53 years has actually been to support the Italian community that stayed in Istria, and to research the consequences of the migration, and establish a dialogue with the ones that left.

Although the Istrian Exodus has been researched by many historians and social scientists in the last few decades, and there are many associations and informal groups transmitting the memory of these events, these are mostly done by the Italian side, thus leaving a vast number of Croatian citizens in Istria without any knowledge on what happened to a large number of its citizens after the war. The local Croatian *Identity on the Line* project has the role of facilitating access to information on the historical events connected with the mass migration from Istria after the war to a wider audience, and to open a dialogue between migrants and their descendants with the people who stayed and the ones who are not directly connected to the events but are living their consequences.

Besides the historic background provided by the Rovinj Centre as a result of their long-lasting research, the *Identity on the Line* project foresaw semi-structured interviews with Italians who left and the ones who stayed. We wanted to hear both sides, because, with the years passing, some misunderstandings arose not only between Croatians and Italians from Istria but also among Italians themselves.

An anonymous informant from Rovinj, Croatia, stated that *"they [the Italians who left] don't like us [the Italians who stayed], because we are proof that they didn't have to leave."*

The intention of the project was to collect enough interviews from both sides to show how each personal story is affected by general, national or international political decisions, but at the same time has its own micro-strategies to cope with difficult life events. We planned to conduct the interviews during the first 8 months of 2020 visiting parts of the community in Italy, Belgium and the United States of America, and waiting to meet some who are still visiting Istria during the summer months.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which impeded direct contact, it was challenging to conduct 30 sensitive interviews with people we did not know. The tensions and the fear of infection were too high and even if the digital literacy of the older informants was on an advanced level it proved impossible to conduct interviews on highly sensitive topics with 'strangers' using digital platforms. The informants needed a safe space to talk to people whom they know or at least had some previous contact with. The researchers of the Ethnographic Museum of Istria conducted 10 interviews live in Istria between July and September 2020. For the rest, a specific method was developed, which consisted of training two younger researchers, both part of the community of migrants and Italians in Istria, to conduct the interviews. This proved successful, because what we needed in times when direct contact with informants was lacking, were 'facilitators' who have good relationships with, and are trusted by the informants and their wider community. Significant help was provided by the Association of Italians in Vodnjan/Dignano (Comunità degli Italiani di Dignano).

[2] crsrv.org

Stories collected

The stories collected reflect two sides of the events happening in Istria during the war and its aftermath. This region, with considerable national and cultural diversity, faced marked divisions among its population. The choices that were made were influenced not only by national affiliation but also by ideological and economic factors. Some stayed and others left. Both communities faced specific difficulties as a consequence of their "choice."

Marina Budicin:

"My mom told me that one night she went dancing, there a 'titino' asked her to dance, but she didn't want to because she was there with friends. In the end, the Tito soldier took her to the police station, made her stay there in her cell all night. Who knows what would have happened if she hadn't been released by her brother with a trick. [...] In 1949 they left for Italy and were sent to the Refugee Camp of Servigliano in the Marche region. They all left ... my grandmother, my mom, my aunt and her two children, and my two uncles who went abroad: one is now in Sweden, the other in Canada where as soon as they arrived they quarantined, they had to take language courses to live there. [...]At the beginning in Servigliano it was tough, but over time my mother also got on very well with the locals with whom she had no difficulty in socialising. My grandmother, on the other hand, was then very ill and died in the refugee camp. In fact, she is buried in the cemetery of Ancona."

Lina:

"So I was born in 1936, in 1945 I was 9 years old when the liberation came ... and I remember how on the square near the church everyone …the youth, little girls, played and joked, everything. And all of a sudden after two, at the most three years, I was left alone. The doors of the houses were all closed, I was wondering where they were, where all these people had gone. I remained all alone, I lived right down near the church, I was born there, and my mom and dad stayed at home alone with my grandmother. Their relatives had all gone away, from my father and from his mother's side, uncles, cousins, disappeared … As a child I didn't know what was happening…my mom and dad didn't care about anything, they were farmers, simple farmers. My dad said, well they won't throw me out of the house, I'm staying in Vodnjan. Because he was a peasant, he didn't have a profession and said: 'Where can we go?' …"

The Donorà family at the San Paolo refugee camp in Torino. 1950, Italy.

Luigi Donorà:

"Well ... I was a child, 10-11 years ... when I came away ... and the decision was that in short, according to our family, according to many people who were leaving, ... We went away because it was not possible to live with people of different mentality and their actions…we did not even have the freedom, let's speak openly, we did not even have the freedom to speak, to tell the truth because we felt bad, we were afraid. The fact is that the Italian dignanesi who left were all afraid of ending up in sinkholes, as Marshal Tito had given the order for ethnic cleansing, that is, many people ended up in sinkholes whose only fault was that they were Italian. He prohibited many things, then those who were not obedient would end up in prison or ended tragically in the sinkholes."

Reflections on challenges and most important outcomes

During the period of two years (February 2020-February 2022), marked by the Covid-19 pandemic, which changed everyone's working conditions, the Ethnographic Museum of Istria managed to conduct 30 sensitive interviews with *esuli* (migrants) and *rimasti* (people who stayed, usually of Italian origin), developed an exhibition, participated in the making of a documentary film, organised a seminar and facilitated guided tours covering diverse topics that emerged from the research. This was possible thanks to collaboration with the Rovinj History Research Centre and two facilitators who were part of the community, namely Giulia Cnapich and Marina Paoletić. The biggest challenge was to reach people during the pandemic and afterwards to adapt to the 'new normal'. This means that the numbers of people attending the events had to be lower and digital platforms continued to play a vital role in evaluating our work. Even so, we believe that this situation led to new methodologies and interpretation strategies, confirming that participation and collaboration are crucial in researching sensitive topics. We reached and included our public earlier in the process, this being our biggest and most valuable achievement in disseminating stories and raising awareness meaningfully.

What surprised us somewhat was the very complex relationship between the emigrants and those who stayed. There are different dynamics and qualities of these relationships, which have not been researched so far, because the studies have focused mostly on emigrants. However, those members of the Italian community who did not emigrate found themselves in a gap between suspicions on both sides: the local authorities in the former Yugoslavia, and the emigrants. The latter wondered why they stayed behind, and at the same time they were living proof that one could somehow survive by staying. Today, it seems to us that some members of the remaining Italian community want to close this topic forever and are fed up with the story of the exodus. Yet unresolved issues and untold stories remain a covert source of misunderstanding and frustration.

After the exhibitions were opened, the Ethnographic Museum of Istria conducted two focus group evaluations to assess their impact on visitors and their perceptions of contemporary migration issues. The use of focus groups as an evaluation method proved to be highly effective in understanding how the exhibition and its interpretation strategies influenced visitors and whether they changed preconceptions about migration issues.

Our visitors confirmed that the interpretation strategies, including personal narratives and short citations in combination with artefacts directly connected with the stories, made a strong impact on their visit: *"I really needed it, for example that scarf that woman was mending, that scarf with dots is so impressive to me, that object told me so much; so that this conception of objects and statements, yes!"*

The exhibition also had a revealing effect, provoking feelings of discomfort or even shame in some visitors. However, it also provided an opportunity to rethink and reshape visitors' perceptions of migration and sensitive heritage issues:

"I was thinking that it would be good if someone apologised to all those people who are presented here at the exhibition, that there was a place where we could apologise to them, and I felt the need because I wondered who I had hurt, or my family and my people…Such exhibitions provide an opportunity for someone to think about it. For example, our kindergarten is in the building from which we expelled some Italians, and I constantly had a feeling of discomfort because we are in the private house of someone who was expelled from here."

While many visitors were already sensitised to difficult heritage issues, they still found it important to constantly repeat and talk about these topics, not only to prevent future similar scenarios but also because of their contemporary relevance.

"It encouraged me because now we will meet again with Ukrainian refugees and the exhibition encouraged me to approach them with an open mind because we have no idea what happened to them, the exhibition is very supportive in that sense."

When (re)thinking the role of a museum related to this kind of difficult heritage, we again realised that by sharing private, intimate yet traumatic experiences with museum professionals and by putting them in a wider context of similar testimonies and historical framework, many informants and visitors felt and understood that this is not only their (or their community's) experience and destiny, but a tough phase of life common to many Europeans. And that can be – to a certain degree – a comforting realisation.

"I would add 'It is possible to survive' with all these consequences it is possible to survive, and what I was able to understand from the exhibition is that family support and that of a close circle of people you grow up with, can help you to survive that trauma and move on, and the second thing is that the exhibition is out there and it can be an opportunity for other people to identify themselves 'oh look how many people in all areas of Europe have the same trauma, I'm not alone in this and it is possible to survive."

Visitors at the local exhibition. 2022, Croatia.

Private collection.

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