Identity Construction in a Post-War Context: Social, Political, and Cultural Memory in Uwe Timm’s Am Beispiel Meines Bruders

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Abstract

With the close of the Second World War came the need for Germans to confront their past and collective identity as a nation. However, this process was delayed due to a variety of reasons, among them the traumatic experiences shared by many German civilians and the unfavorable atmosphere created by the partition of Germany and the Cold War. Finally, those of the 1968 “student generation” began to confront openly and directly the atrocities committed by the Third Reich, the collective silence or suppression on the part of German people, and the question of memorialization, remembrance, and history. One such member of this generation was Uwe Timm, who in 2003 published Am Beispiel Meines Bruders, an investigation into his family’s history and problematic relationship to the past.

This paper will endeavor to evaluate the complications associated with an upbringing antithetical to one’s own beliefs, and in light of the research behind collective memory encapsulated in Aleida Assmann’s Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit, how such immersion can hinder one’s self-identification. The following is a close reading of Timm’s text with special attention devoted to Timm’s identity formation, writing process, and effort to bear witness on behalf of his family. The unique social, political, and cultural milieu into which Timm was born necessitated this effort of articulation and reclamation of his family’s legacy.
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This thesis is dedicated to my family.
Introduction

In Uwe Timm’s *Am Beispiel Meines Bruders*, Timm begins with the first experience he can remember, a family encounter during which his brother, sixteen years his senior, surprises him after coming home from the front: “Erhoben werden—Lachen, Jubel, eine unbändige Freude—diese Empfindung begleitet die Erinnerung an ein Erlebnis, ein Bild, das erste, das sich mir eingeprägt hat, mit ihm beginnt für mich das Wissen von mir selbst, das Gedächtnis.”¹ In this first sentence, Timm subtly sets forth the underlying premise of his work, that is, the intimate investigation into his family, and the contributing factors that played a formative role in shaping his identity. While seemingly a straightforward task, his efforts, delayed by decades, are rife with complexities stemming from his strained, ambivalent relationship with his family and general attitude toward his country’s past.

Indeed, Timm’s family history dominates most of the text; continually shifting focus from his siblings to his parents and back again. In the title alone, Timm betrays the influence his brother’s absence had on his own identity formation. On the example of his brother, Karl-Heinz, Timm attempts to reconcile his own feelings and identity in a post-war context where polarized attitudes towards the War and German heritage reign. The seminal line of Timm’s text, “Und erst mit dem Entschluss, über den Bruder, also auch über mich, zu schreiben, das Erinnern zuzulassen, war ich befreit, dem dort Festgeschriebenen nachzugehen,” notes the personal importance of his writing process and its potential implications for Timm’s identity, which is inextricably linked to his brother’s.² These familial relationships would not be so important were they not as

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² Ibid., 17.
intimately intertwined in Timm’s sense of self, but as Aleida Assmann explains in her book *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*, the process of memory formation is not only an individual endeavor, but rather one which is informed by the various “Wir-Gruppen,” to which one subscribes or into which one is involuntarily introduced.

Assmann’s work provides an excellent frame with which to differentiate, categorize, and evaluate methods of memory formation, especially as they relate to forming one’s identity and conception of self. In her introduction she states, “Jedes ‘Ich’ ist verknüpft mit einem ‘Wir,’ von dem es wichtige Grundlagen seiner eigenen Identität bezieht,” immediately denoting the importance of one’s associations in regards to their individual identity.³ The *Wir-Gruppen* Assmann discusses include voluntary membership into associations, clubs, and unions, in addition to those over which one has no control such as family, ethnicity, gender, and generation.⁴ By applying such an understanding to *Am Beispiel Meines Bruders*, one can begin to divulge the intricacies of Timm’s identity formation within the familial, political, and cultural context of postwar Germany.

In addition to identifying, categorizing, and evaluating the various *Wir-Gruppen* to which Timm and his family subscribes, this paper seeks to provide a close reading of *Am Beispiel Meines Bruders* that sheds light on the intricate ways in which these groups are presented and at odds with one another. In order to illustrate this, it is first necessary to give an overview of Assmann’s critique of collective memory and her theories regarding the appropriation of collective experiences by the individual in the pursuit of identification. Then, keeping Assmann’s identification framework in mind, a close reading of *Am Beispiel Meines Bruders* will reveal how such an understanding of

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³ Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*, 21.
⁴ Ibid., 22.
memory, association, and individuality manifests itself in the text. This paper will argue that Timm’s text is an illustration of the consequences multiple, competing associations can have on an individual’s sense of self. Thirdly, Timm’s writing process will be examined as an expression of his complicated identity—as Assmann’s theoretical framework put into practice. Finally, the conclusion will be drawn that only through an investigation into his family’s narrative and relationship to the past could Timm have found his unique place within his familial, generational, and national lineage.

Understanding the Collective and the Individual

In Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit, Assmann introduces the aforementioned concept of Wir-Gruppen as a means to better articulate what has been termed “collective memory.” In addition to the individual memories accumulated over the course of one’s life, Assmann delves into the categorization and transference mechanisms of social, political, and cultural memory, as they relate to identity construction. Critics of collective memory often focus on personal memories’ uniqueness and singularity, but, as Assmann explains, our Gedächtnisse are not strictly composed of our own individual memories. Indeed, she claims, “Das individuelle Gedächtnis... ist das dynamische Medium subjektiver Erfahrungsverarbeitung.” ⁵ Rather than a composition of solely individual experiences, memory is influenced continuously by how one contemplates their experiences and the experiences of others, with which one may so thoroughly identify as to constitute a near-personal memory of its own. The collective’s effect on the individual’s development is central to Assmann, although the notion of collective memory may need some reworking. She herself believes that the term

⁵ Aleida Assmann, Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit, 25.
“collective memory” is too vague, but thinks nonetheless that it can be a truly useful concept if its scope is narrowed. In order to categorize different types of collective memory, Assmann divides experiences temporally, into distinct yet overlapping Zeithorizonte, and qualitatively, into discrete subsections of the collective, such as social, political, and cultural memory.

Zeithorizonte

The idea underpinning the Zeithorizont is that one’s memory extends beyond the scope of his or her own individual existence. No one grows up in a vacuum, and through the relationships and understanding one develops with people from earlier or later generations, an individual becomes sensitive to the key events that shaped them. As members of families, clubs, unions, societies, nations, races, etc., people around the world have shared memorable experiences with one another in the past, and will continue to do so in the future. The question here is, how can an individual temporally separated from a formative event, not only be deeply impacted by it, but also identify with it so strongly as to suggest that they have a memory of it themselves? Assmann states that “durch Mitgliedschaft in diesen Wir-Gruppen [Kulturen, Religionsgemeinschaften, Nationen] nimmt das Individuum noch ganz andere Zeitdimensionen in sich auf.”6 The potential for such a transmission is best observed in the case of the family, which constitutes perhaps the most impactful and thus important Wir-Gruppe with which Assmann deals.

The family unit is extremely significant in any discussion involving an individual’s identity formation, and even more so here, because it encompasses so many

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6 Aleida Assmann, Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit, 22.
shared experiences and facilitates the transmission of generational memory. Interaction between children, grandchildren, parents, and grandparents presents a unique opportunity for storytelling, which has the power to be formative in terms of how the recipients see themselves within their family’s shared history. Assmann terms the culmination of these exchanges of seminal information across family generations “Drei-Generation-Gedächtnis,” which is “ein existentieller Horizont für persönliche Erinnerungen und entscheidend für die eigene Orientierung in der Zeit.” Just as she develops the importance of generational communication, however, Assmann calls into question its primary effect on the individual.

In doing so, Assmann outlines how intergenerational communication of past experiences can either solidify or complicate this Orientierung of an individual. Citing sociologist Heinz Bude, she describes how one’s own generational experiences and ideas associated with them may come into conflict with those of their forefathers or successors. Because one will almost always identify most strongly with his or her own generation’s ideals, the introduction of a competing Weltanschauung may present an insurmountable lack of understanding between successive generations’ constituents. In the post-war German context, in which Timm came of age, this generational conflict was palpable.

Categorization of Kollektive Gedächtnisse

In addition to laying the foundation of Zeithorizonte, Assmann delves into the notion of collective memory with the intention to break it into its more manageable and

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8 Ibid., 27.
operational parts. Despite the criticism “collective memory” has faced, she defends its worth, to an extent. Assmann primarily targets its vagueness, and sets out to specify the subcategories of the collective that are more valuable when dealing with memories tied to identity construction. Her replacements range from social and political, to cultural memory, which while embodying a collective spirit, are each unique in their content.

Beginning with the merits of social memory, Assmann expands on her discussion of familial generations with the introduction of the more general *Altersgruppen*, which each “entwickelt ihren eigenen Zugang zur Vergangenheit und lässt sich ihre Perspektive nicht durch die vorangehende Generation vorgeben.”9 This reinterpretation of each subsequent generation, usually separated by about three decades, has certain wide-ranging consequences for society. “Die Dynamik im Gedächtnis einer Gesellschaft wird also wesentlich durch den Wechsel der Generationen bestimmt. Mit jedem Generationswechsel... verschiebt sich das Erinnerungsprofil einer Gesellschaft merklich.”10 How an entire generation conceives its shared past will determine how its constituents ultimately view their role in the present, while initiating an evolution toward their imagined future. In order to set themselves on the path toward this consensual future, the generation in question will necessarily have to communicate the reasons behind its assessment.

Communication, Assmann explains, is the essential component of social memory’s transference mechanism, or *Träger*—that which literally carries a given memory into posterity. The success or failure of communication determines whether or not one generation’s interpretation of the past remains in the public’s consciousness for

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9 Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*, 27.
10 Ibid., 27.
decades to come. Despite the success a generation attains, however, social memory comes with an expiration date. “Charakteristisch für das soziale Gedächtnis ist sein begrenzter Zeithorizont... Obwohl es sich auch auf Medien wie Bücher, Photoalben und Tagebuchaufzeichnungen stützt, vermögen diese doch die Spanne des lebendigen Gedächtnisses nicht zu erweitern.”

Books, photo albums, and journals, while important carriers of memory in and of themselves, require communicative mediators in order to constitute living social memory. Verbal interactions within and between *Altersgruppen* keep a given social memory alive, but only so long as they remain in public discourse. “Der Zeithorizont des sozialen Gedächtnisses,” Assmann explains, “ist über diese Spanne der lebendigen Interaktion und Kommunikation, die maximal auf drei bis vier Generationen ausgedehnt werden kann, nicht verlängerbar.”

Once the immediacy of one generation’s social understanding expires, such memories cease to be relevant within public discourses and will consequently be returned to the *materielle Träger* from which they were given life.

Assmann follows her discussion of social memory with one of remembrance that is markedly political in nature. Primarily dealing with national memory as the prime example of politicized memory, she begins first by differentiating the social from the political:

Im Gegensatz zum vielstimmigen sozialen Gedächtnis, das ein Gedächtnis ‘von unten’ ist und sich im Wechsel der Generationen immer wieder auflöst, ist das auf überlebenszeitliche Dauer angelegte nationale Gedächtnis eine sehr viel einheitlichere Konstruktion, die in politischen Institutionen verankert ist und ‘von oben’ auf die Gesellschaft einwirkt.

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12 Ibid., 28.
13 Ibid., 37.
Over the course of this extended lifespan, political memory serves as a benchmark in which new generations may ground their experience. It allows for a referential approach to one’s understanding of the present, and in part determines the frames through which individuals will construct their own identities. Relying on the groundbreaking work of Ernest Renan, the influential French scholar of the late 19th century, Assmann reconstructs the emergence of a new train of thought in opposition to the notions of nationhood that prevailed in the Romantic era. Renan’s contention, namely that “a nation is a soul,” seems to fall back into Romanticism’s patterns, however, Assmann’s interpretation is that “mit seiner Betonung einer kollektive ‘Seele’ stellt Renan der Nation als einer Willensgemeinschaft die Nation als eine Erfahrungsgemeinschaft an die Seite.”\(^{14}\) Instead of viewing the nation as purely a historical object, Renan sought to tie the ideas of historiography and identification together—“Geschichte mit den Augen der Identität zu sehen...”\(^{15}\) Through this identification lens, history becomes myth, and myth becomes the bedrock of a nation’s understanding of itself.

The *Mythisierung* of history is par for the course in any nation, which nearly all venture to construct or embellish a national legend surrounding their founding or the values they purport to embody. For Assmann, this process seems to be politically inclined. Political memory in this vein takes on an agenda to persuade a nation’s constituents of their own exceptionalism.\(^{16}\) Interpreted in this fashion, nations erect monuments, memorials, and other sites commemorating the events that support their desired narrative, while allowing disagreeable ones to fade into the background. Take the

\(^{14}\) Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*, 38-9.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 39.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 40.
United States for example, which has long promoted an idea of American exceptionalism, justifying its reach across the globe as a quasi-divine right to democratize the world and shape it in its image. By removing historical events from their original context and climate, those seeking to distort or embellish the facts are able to present the masses with easily recognizable and widely applicable sentiments, with which they identify and perpetuate. Assmann links this practice of passing on national myths to the fulfillment of their function: “Wie lange sie weitergegeben werden, hängt davon ab, ob sie gebraucht werden, d.h., ob sie dem gewünschten Selbstbild der Gruppe und ihren Zielen entsprechen oder nicht.” What is most important, however, is to understand how individuals try to interpret these myths mit den Augen der Identität.

The transformation of national histories into myths is followed by an effort on the part of the individual to make sense of those myths and relate them to oneself. Assmann terms this process affektive Aneignung, and explains, “Mythos in diesem Sinne ist eine fundierende Geschichte, die nicht durch Historisierung vergeht, sondern mit einer andauernden Bedeutung ausgestattet wird, die die Vergangenheit in der Gegenwart einer Gesellschaft präsent hält und ihr eine Orientierungskraft für die Zukunft abgewinnt.” Understanding this process is key if one should get at the heart of Assmann’s discussion. Like Renan before her, Assmann seeks to illuminate the intricacies of the collective’s impact on the individual, and the appropriation of collective experiences is the cornerstone of that mission.

17 Aleida Assmann, Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit, 40.
18 Ibid., 40.
19 Ibid., 40.
Just as important as those appropriated memories, however, are those that are not. For Nietzsche, Renan, and Assmann, the process of forgetting is just as essential to the formation of a nation’s desired narrative, and consequentially, an individual’s conception of self. Renan speaks to forgetting’s fundamental contribution to a nation’s creation, and in so doing suggests progress in the academic, fact-driven realm of history often poses a threat to the nation. In many cases, what a given society forgets, or seeks to forget, can shape that society’s narrative drastically more than the emphasis placed on a favorable, positive national memory. The conspicuous absence of unsavory events in the national consciousness endorses a society’s sense of exceptionalism, and reinforces its right to continue down its preferred course without the need for self-reflection. Forgetting becomes a means to shape the political memory of a society into its own self-image, perpetuating a potentially ahistorical interpretation of the past for generations to come.

Where the act of forgetting continues its ultimately necessary yet complicated function is in the realm of cultural memory, Assmann’s final subsection of collective memory. Just as forgetting can be a political strategy, so too can it be a cultural weapon: “Vergessen ist nicht nur die unvermeidliche Begleiterscheinung eines quasinaturalen Lebens, Wachens und Sich-Erneuerns, sondern auch eine gezielte kulturelle Strategie.” In order to enshrine that which is not to be forgotten, and to exclude that which is, cultural institutions become critically important. These institutions, including museums, archives, and libraries constitute the materielle Träger of cultural memory, and remain fixed in a society’s consciousness indefinitely. Because the content of these institutions

20 Aleida Assmann, Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit, 42.
21 Ibid., 52.
22 Ibid., 54.
is so vast and varied, Assmann believes a further reduction is necessary in order to work with the subject more concisely. In narrowing her focus, Assmann distinguishes between *Speicher-* and *Funktionsgedächtnis*.

The justification for this distinction rests on Assmann’s formulation of cultural memory, which “entsteht nicht nur im Nachhinein durch Einsammeln und Konservieren, sondern auch zielstrebig als Auswahl einer Botschaft und Sammlung eines Erbes für die Nachwelt einer unbestimmten Zukunft.” Cultural memory is not solely oriented towards the past, but rather takes into account the conveyance of a shared cultural heritage that will be projected into the future. The *Speicher-* and *Funktionsgedächtnis* of cultural memory ebb and flow in complimentary fashion, the former providing a stockpile of latent memory awaiting the operational force of the latter. The *Funktionsgedächtnis* is characterized by a rigorous process of selection and insertion into a public’s consciousness, while the *Speichergedächtnis* allows for this re-contextualization by serving as the archive from which notable cultural memories are culled. Simply put, the *Speichergedächtnis* archives, while the *Funktionsgedächtnis* canonizes:


Canonization in this sense simultaneously cements an artifact’s place in a society’s consciousness while also continuously revitalizing its relation to the present by virtue of continuous engagement and affirmation. When this process is stalled or falls out of use,

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23 Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*, 55.
24 Ibid., 55.
25 Ibid., 56.
these cultural texts and images are at risk of slipping back into Speichergedächtnis. However, this risk is mitigated by the fact that this transference is a two-way street, the Speichergedächtnis only being the precondition on which certain artifacts may be operationalized. In light of this back-and-forth, cultural memory is relatively fluid and is subject to change with the times; however, its broad foundation of stored memory constitutes stable bedrock on which cultural memory rests.

No matter the relative stability, Träger, or means of re-articulation, what should be clear at this point is that Assmann is correct in validating the premise of collective memory. Although vague in and of itself, when broken down into its constituent parts, it can prove a useful concept when interpreting the pressures at work on an individual during processes of self-identification. Few will deny that countless memories have a collective nature, however, Assmann makes this relationship functional by dividing this phenomenon into social, political, and cultural components that each uniquely embody historical or ahistorical events, stories, images, and texts; and to lesser or greater extents make them available to a receptive public. In the following discussion of Uwe Timm’s Am Beispiel Meines Bruders, one will see how these notions of collective memory manifest themselves in a post-war German context, and specifically in the process of delayed self-identification simultaneously at odds with and in accordance with collective understandings of memory.

Uwe Timm’s Gedächtnishorizont

In Timm’s case, he occupies a unique “Gedächtnishorizont,” which associates him with a particular and troubling familial history, generational divide, political consciousness, and trans-generational responsibility. Assmann describes a
Gedächtnishorizont as the culmination of one’s Wir-Gruppen within their respective time frames, rooting one’s experience in a long line of events that predate their own existence and/or agency. Identity is a palimpsest, begun before one is born and constantly being amended thereafter; an overlay of generational, familial, personal, social, and cultural memories woven into a lattice demanding reflection. Timm’s process of reflection leads him to confront his Gedächtnishorizont directly, and in the process critically evaluate his familial relationships. “Sich ihnen schreibend anzunähern, ist der Versuch, das bloß Behaltene in Erinnerung aufzulösen, sich neu zu finden.” Only through opening this discourse with the past can Timm make sense of the man he has become. A substantial part of this journey for Timm, and for the reader, lies in categorizing the Wir-Gruppen to which Timm is party.

**Family Ties**

For starters, it is clear that his family exercises a significant amount of influence over Timm. Despite his brother’s absence, “abwesend und doch anwesend hat er mich durch meine Kindheit begleitet, in der Trauer der Mutter, den Zweifeln des Vaters, den Andeutungen zwischen den Eltern.” His parents’ admiration of Karl-Heinz, and the reasons behind their admiration, in large part defined how Timm viewed his own relationship with his mother and father. Assmann explains how one’s youth is perhaps the most formative period in one’s life:

Dass Individuen im Alter von 12 bis 25 Jahren für lebensprägende Erfahrungen besonders aufnahmefähig sind, und dass das, was in diesem

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26 Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*, 23.
28 Ibid., 8.
Zeitraum erlebt werde, für die gesamte Persönlichkeitsentwicklung eines Menschen bestimmend bleibt.29

It is not only Timm’s upbringing with his parents that holds the most sway over his identity, but also those first several years separated from them in early adulthood, forging his own path through school and navigating the real world. As a member of the fledgling student generation in post-war Germany, he was forced to reconcile the attitudes of his parents’ generation with his own.

A Father’s Expectations

Timm’s father, Hans, a military man through and through, is with whom Timm comes into conflict most frequently due to their vastly different Weltanschauungen. Timm’s first memory associated with his father, “Ein fremder Mann in Uniform liegt eines Tages im Bett meiner Mutter,” takes an Oedipal tone that sets the stage for their life-long disapproval of each other.30 A member of the Freikorps and Luftwaffe, Hans identified heavily with the German military and the myths surrounding it, evidenced by many photographs. “Es war ein Leben, das wohl viele der Achtzehn-, Neunzehnjährigen führen wollten: Abenteuer, Kameradschaft, frische Luft, Schnaps und Frauen, vor allem keine geregelte Arbeit—das spricht aus den Fotos.”31

Assmann devotes a good deal of her attention to the myths surrounding a shared national memory and how they root the experience of a given generation in a particular point in time. Perhaps nowhere else were national myths more important than in Hitler’s Third Reich, an imagined empire almost entirely resting on the assumption of Aryan

29 Aleida Assmann, Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit, 26.
31 Ibid., 21.
superiority and the creation of an inferior “other.” Assmann’s assessment of national myths focuses on how the *Mythisierung* process disassociates key events from their historical contexts and conditions, reducing them to idolized symbols that can be re-contextualized to fit a convincing narrative.\(^32\) By rooting a present generation’s experiences in a cohesive and persuasive narrative, a nation may project its idea of an imagined community into the past and future, with potentially disastrous consequences:

Das mytho-motorische Potential der gemeinsamen nationalen Geschichtserinnerung liegt in eben dieser zeitlichen Orientierung: sie stiftet Sinn, indem sie die Gegenwart als Zwischenstufe einer motivierenden, Vergangenheit und Zukunft übergreifenden Erzählung ausweist.\(^33\)

Although Timm notes that his father never joined the Nazi Party as they were too “raubaukenhaft” for him, he believes nevertheless that Hans had been convinced of his own superiority over the course of his years in the military.\(^34\)

This sense of superiority was betrayed by his father’s professional decline in the years following the war, and served as a negative stimulus between father and son. Timm witnessed Hans’ transition from a proud, independent, charismatic businessman into an insecure shell of his former self. His mother was also cognizant of this character flaw, but went out of her way to avoid confrontation: “Die Mutter sah diese Schwäche und versuchte sie auszugleichen, ohne ihn je in Gesellschaft bloßzustellen, nicht einmal durch ein Verziehen des Mundes oder der Augenbrauen.”\(^35\) The unconditional surrender of Germany struck at Hans’ core, whose world was to be turned upside down. Hans’ clinging to an anachronistic authoritarian mentality only made his professional decline

\(^32\) Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*, 40.
\(^33\) Ibid., 42.
\(^35\) Ibid., 45.
more destructive, as he was incredibly sensitive to how society viewed him externally. Caught in a profession he loathed, he continued to carry on his furrier business only to remain independent, a condition he valued above all others. “Auch der Vater hasste das Geschäft, es war ein notwendiges Übel. Aber er war selbstständig. Selbständigkeit, das war wichtig. Das war der Rest eines herrschaftlichen Gefühls.”36 Timm’s father experienced internal difficulties reconciling the social upheaval of post-war Germany with his sense of manhood and German heritage.

In order to maintain a semblance of his former self, Hans clung to his outdated notions, much to the frustration of his youngest son. From an early age, Timm registered a dislike of what he saw as his father’s arbitrary rules and restrictions governing what one could and couldn’t do under his watch. Once Timm was older, he attributed such behavior to Hans’ generation, which had lost their former predominance within society: “Die Kommandogewalt hatte sie im öffentlichen Leben verloren, und so konnten sie nur noch zu Hause, in den vier Wänden, herumkommandieren.”37 Reeling from the changing social and economic climate in Germany and loss of his favorite son, Hans was forced back into himself. His inability to express himself emotionally was partially self-imposed, stemming from his militaristic notions of manhood and outward appearances. At one point Timm reminisces on the only time he witnessed his father succumb to his emotions: “Ein Junge weint nicht. Das war nicht nur ein Weinen um den toten Sohn, es war etwas Sprachloses, was sich in Tränen auflöste.”38 Growing up beneath the cloud of

37 Ibid., 69.
38 Ibid., 102.
his father’s regrets, suppressed emotions, and strict regime, Timm’s questions about his brother would go largely unanswered.

**A Mother’s Boy**

Another impediment in the way of Timm’s familial clarity and understanding was his mother. Timm’s parents had a fascinating dynamic, each seemingly the other’s foil. She came from a markedly different social background, growing up with a prosperous family, and had to make several concessions concerning her quality of life when marrying Hans. Most importantly, Timm’s mother was firmly opposed to the military and the pathology she thought it fostered: “Gegen das, was sich mit dem Militär verband, den Drill, das Kriegsspiel und den Krieg, hatte die Mutter eine tiefe Abneigung—nicht erst seit dem Tod des Sohnes...”\(^3^9\) Timm concedes that the military nevertheless fascinated her, which might explain the attraction towards Hans. Under the strict division of powers which his father imposed, Timm, “den Nachgeborenen, den Nachkömmling,” was firmly under her purview.\(^4^0\) As a consequence, Timm certainly identified more with his mother throughout his childhood. Her politics, while jaded, reflected her desire to remain at peace, both in her private and civil life, and keep extreme-right politicians out of power.\(^4^1\)

This sentiment to prevent conservative, authoritarian figures from power was strongly reinforced by the loss of her eldest son, whom she thought had been taken advantage of.

These qualities indicate a stark departure from Hans’ *Wir-Gruppen*, which in many cases came into direct conflict with his wife’s. Having observed their relationship from a young age and being subject to their diverging perspectives on the most formative


\(^{40}\) Ibid., 46.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 46.
events of their lives, Timm was not inducted into a cohesive family narrative. Hans’ obvious distaste for his son, rooted in his assumption that Timm would not be able to live up to the idealized portrait of Karl-Heinz, factored strongly into Timm’s rejection of his father’s mentality and partial adoption of his mother’s. Their competing understandings of their eldest son’s death illustrate this divide clearly. While both of Timm’s parents continued to ask hypothetical questions regarding Karl-Heinz’s passing, their focus was distinctly different. “Ausgesprochen und besprochen haben sie: Was wäre gewesen, wenn er sich nicht zur SS gemeldet hätte.”

Timm’s mother’s questions usually stopped there, focusing on the initial decision to enlist in the Wehrmacht—an act overwhelmingly supported by his father. Whereas this loss consumed Hans, his mother was more able to direct her emotions towards several outlets:

Mein Eindruck, heute, aus der Erinnerung, ist, dass der Vater stärker unter dem Verlust gelitten hat als die Mutter... ihre Empörung fand ein Subjekt, die Mistbande, womit sie die Nazis meinte, womit sie aber auch die Militärs meinte, womit sie die da oben meinte, die Politik machten, die herrschten.

His mother took more careful stock of the postwar situation and was closer to the mark in her placement of blame than Hans, who sought to blame those who had lost the war for the Germans. Despite their competing views on and reactions to the subject of their son’s death, both of Timm’s parents identified as victims of the war, of a fate that was out of their hands.

**Parental Identification**

43 Ibid., 77.
The family’s identification with World War II’s victims, absent any self-reflection on their part as perpetrators, generally categorizes the *Wir-Gruppe* into which Timm was born, and which he would later confront. This appropriation of experience on the part of Timm’s family begins with his father’s ideas surrounding the war, and while it is softened through his mother and brother’s interpretations, it persists as the defining narrative that Timm inherits. As Assmann explains that through the “Verschränkung der Generationen verschränken sich auch deren Erfahrungen, Erzählungen und Schicksale.”

In confronting this shared family narrative, Timm first had to take stock of its pervasiveness. In so doing, he recollects statements his parents made in regards to their ill fortune:

> Die formelhafte Zusammenfassung der Eltern für das Geschehen war der Schicksalschlag... Den Jungen verloren und das Heim, das war einer der Sätze, mit denen man sich dem Nachdenken über die Gründe entzog... Fürchterlich war eben alles, schon weil man selbst Opfer geworden war, Opfer eines unerklärlichen kollektiven Schicksals.

By attributing their experience to a collective and national sentiment, that average German citizens had been taken advantage of and had endured tremendous suffering in their own right, Timm’s parents circumvented any reflection involving accountability. In writing his autobiographical reflection, Timm sought to bridge the gap between his family’s sense of victimhood and their failure to bear witness, while not diminishing the real suffering that Germans underwent. He relativizes the experiences, citing Primo Levi’s experience in a concentration camp with his brother’s on the Russian front: “Diese [Levi’s] tiefe Verlassenheit, die aus dem Wissen erwächst, nicht mehr erinnert zu

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44 Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*, 22.
werden. *Nun liebe Mutsch will ich schließen, schreibe mir bald wieder.*" In his letters, Timm’s brother often lamented on the damage being done back home, but never with a moment’s pause to think about his own role in the war. Levi was not afforded the luxury of sharing his thoughts with anyone—his abandonment was total. The absurdity of the comparison is clear, and something that Timm discovers in several of his brother’s letters and journal entries.

A Faceless Brother

Karl-Heinz, despite softening his father’s worldview, was cut from the same cloth. Taking into account his dissatisfaction with his time in the Hitler Youth, its safe to say that he was more ambivalent towards the military than his father. However, growing up in a turbulent time and being influenced by his father and country’s overwhelming nationalism, Karl-Heinz nevertheless enlisted in the Waffen SS. His military service is not in fact what unsettles Timm most, but rather the mechanical way in which his brother recorded his experiences. Karl-Heinz’s field journal is marked by a conspicuous lack of detail and personal reflection. Originally a document that Timm undoubtedly thought had great potential for elucidating his brother’s identity, he becomes haunted by the question that it might conceal more than it lays bare: “In dem Tagebuch des Bruders findet sich keine ausdrückliche Tötungsrechtfertigung, keine Ideologie, wie sie in dem weltanschaulichen Unterricht der SS vorgetragen wurde. Es ist der *normale* Blick auf den Kriegsalltag.” The banality of his brother’s entries normalizes acts of war in disconcerting fashion, and precludes Timm’s process of identification with him.

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46 Ibid., 94.
Timm’s problem of identification, with his mother, with his father, and most importantly perhaps with his brother is at the core of his work. Despite his efforts to compose a more comprehensive image of his brother’s personality and place within his troubled family, Timm is ultimately unable to assure himself of any one conclusion, and it remains an open question. One can glean this from the text, as Karl-Heinz remains a faceless figure throughout, and with the exception of his letters is often being spoken for. “Er selbst, sein Leben, spricht nur aus den wenigen erhaltenen Briefen und aus dem Tagebuch. Das ist die festgeschriebene Erinnerung.”47 His legacy is perpetuated by documents that reveal and obscure in equal parts. Timm only considers one letter written home to contain an indication that he questioned the prevailing national myths of his time: “Es gibt... nur einen Hinweis, der diesen Mythos von der anständigen, tapferen Waffen-SS, der später von den Kameradschaftsverbänden verbreitet, aber auch zu Hause von den Eltern gepflegt wurde, in Frage stellt.”48 The indication is provided by the description of a Ukrainian town, which was happy to see Karl-Heinz’s unit arrive, and his playful thought, and then complete rejection of the notion, that he might bring one of the Ukrainian women home.

Early in the text Timm relays a dream he has often had to the reader, describing how a faceless man, whom he knows is his brother, tries to force his way into Timm’s apartment. Timm, resisting with all his might, eventually succeeds, but is left with what the reader may assume is Karl-Heinz’s war-torn jacket in his arms.49 This reoccurring dream encapsulates Timm’s apprehension over his brotherly inquiry. Although it is a

48 Ibid., 91.
49 Ibid., 10.
subject that forcefully demands his attention, delving into Karl-Heinz presents the nearly existential question of culpability. And, in the absence of the definitive answers he sought, which was the subject of substantial ambivalence that caused him to postpone his writing, Timm was left with the baggage and residue of his brother’s involvement in World War II—however *regular* it may have been. This sense of familial baggage is transmitted through several additional dreams, all involving some Karl-Heinz-like presence, which pursue Timm just as fiercely has he does the past.

**Hanne Lore**

Despite the dearth of information concerning Karl-Heinz’s personality and ideology, Timm is able to collect some more insightful fragments from the curious capsule that is his sister, Hanne Lore. Hanne Lore, like Timm, was unappreciated relative to Karl-Heinz in her parents’ eyes. However, while this led Timm to become critical of his father, Hanne Lore maintained an unquestioning reverence of Hans, imagined though it may be. This becomes clear when Timm recalls his sister’s hospital stays, first for her colostomy and later for her recovery following a stroke. When referencing the operation, she claims, “Er hätte es nicht zugelassen. Er hat sich immer um mich gekümmert...” to which Timm responds, “Sie wollte es so sehen, und ich sagte, ja und vielleicht.”50 In the second instance, while lamenting on her ill fortune, Timm comments, “Nicht, dass sie gesagt hätte, es sei allein die Schuld des Vaters gewesen.”51 Her reluctance to view her father critically seems to be a weakness in Timm’s eyes, and one that has precluded her happiness.

51 Ibid., 142.
Timm’s further description of his sister’s later life, however, indicates that it may be his own reluctance to let go of his father’s weighty ghost that has contributed to his difficulty in working through his past. Up until this point, when his elderly sister had found a man whom she could love fully, their relationship had been mediated through their father’s eyes: “Und wenn ich das Foto sehe, wie sie dasteht, die Haare im Wind, mit einem kühnen Lächeln, ist sie nicht vergleichbar mit der Schwester, die ich bis dahin gekannt und mit den Augen des Vaters gesehen hatte.”\(^{52}\) Hanne Lore had finally escaped their father’s expectations and judgment, and as a result had found peace. Timm himself finds no such conclusion, but the reader can expect he is well on his way.

**Breakdown of Timm’s Gedächtnishorizont**

The breakdown of Assmann’s *Drei-Generationen-Gedächtnis* concept in the face of Timm’s induction into the competing *Wir-Gruppe* that is the student generation contributes to his confused self-identification. On the one hand he is the product of a family that felt it had fallen victim to the war and its aftereffects, while on the other he clearly sees the insensitivity and blindness of such a claim. “Die Vätergeneration, die Tätergeneration, lebte vom Erzählen oder vom Verschweigen.”\(^{53}\) Hans certainly stems from the latter of the two, and therefore left his living son with countless questions unanswered. Assmann comments on this silence and how traumatic experiences can skip a generation before being dealt with directly: “Der Generationswechsel ist von großer Bedeutung für den Wandel und die Erneuerung des Gedächtnisses einer Gesellschaft und spielt gerade auch bei der späten Verarbeitung traumatischer oder beschämender


\(^{53}\) Ibid., 101.
Erinnerungen eine große Rolle.” The heavy lifting is left to Timm and so many others in his generation who came out of their family circles groping for another perspective after being kept in the dark.

When discussing *Wir-Gruppen* and the effect they have on individuals’ identity formation, Assmann does not shy away from the potential for conflict between different groups’ competing ideologies. Indeed, she regards such conflict as a distinct possibility: “Auf diesen vier Ebenen [Individuen, soziale Gruppen, politische Kollektive und Kulturen] entstehen Identitäten mit einer jeweils anderen Bedeutung, Verbindlichkeit und Reichweite, die sich gegenseitig keineswegs ausschließen, unter Umständen aber miteinander in erhebliche Spannung treten können.” This tension deeply manifests itself in Timm’s identity. While most enjoy a personal narrative that can be self-affirming and grounding, Timm has no common reference point with which to reconcile the ideology he was exposed to as a child and the one he grew into as an adult.

Despite his rejection of Hans’ *Weltanschauung*, family’s notion of victimhood, and his disapproval of Karl-Heinz’s reluctance to bear witness, Timm was nevertheless personally impacted by these attitudes. As Assmann explains:

Die Herkunfts familie, die Ethnie das Geschlecht und die Jahrgangsgruppe dagegen, in die wir hineingeboren sind, lassen sich (in aller Regel) lebenslänglich nicht ändern und machen deshalb einen existentiellen Hinter-Grund aus, den wir zwar sehr unterschiedlich gestalten, über den wir aber grundsätzlich nicht verfügen können.

The loss of Karl-Heinz strengthened the influence of Timm’s *Herkunfts familie*, which in turn heightened the stunning impact of his subsequent orientation within the maturing

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54 Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*, 27.
55 Ibid., 59.
56 Ibid., 22.
*Jahrgangsgruppe* of the student generation. In order to understand how Timm began to make sense of these conflicting fundamental identities, it is first necessary to tease out elements of his personal narrative from the text, and then register the importance of the writing process in his effort to distill and digest his family’s past.

**Piecing Together Timm’s History**

*Am Beispiel Meines Bruders* primarily provides a glimpse into Timm’s family life and the milieu in which he came of age, while passages on his own life’s course are relatively scant. The reader receives fragmented memories and short anecdotes, but the picture of Timm is anything but comprehensive. The scarcity is telling when one considers the notion that Timm himself may not have the clearest idea of who he is, or who he *ought* to be. In light of his family and nation’s past, he is caught between competing ideologies and affinities, to which he is simultaneously drawn, but not without rigorous introspection. Timm’s text is an exercise in finding his place amongst his family and generation’s extremes, sorting through the various people whom those around him have wanted him to become, but ultimately leaves his identity unresolved. Much more pronounced are the lives of his mother, father, brother, and sister, whose stories he cannot separate from his own. Their identities are inextricably linked, and writing about one means necessarily writing about the others.

While most everyone is influenced and impacted by one’s family, and for many this is a daily exercise, Timm’s very own name is a literal embodiment of his father and brother. His full name is Uwe Hans Heinz Timm, which serves as a constant reminder of Hans and Karl-Heinz’s troubling legacies. Going beyond the simple and usual sharing of a family name, Timm’s official societal identity is deeply intertwined with the patriarch
of his family, who he thought questioned his identity. After his brother’s passing, Timm reminisces on outings with his mother and father in the Lüneburger Heide, which left him deeply uncomfortable with where he stood within his family:

Die Erinnerung daran ist Lähmung, eine Lähmung beim Atmen, eine Lähmung beim Denken, eine Lähmung der Erinnerung. Und noch etwas, oft wurde auf diesen Sonntagsausflügen von ihm geredet... und hatte es sich nur mir so eingeprägt, weil es immer auch ein Reden, zumal wenn es sich nicht an mich richtete, war, das mich in Frage stellte? Es war auch ein Infragestellen des Lebens beider, der Eltern. Was wäre, wenn.57

Within this family context dominated by hypotheticals, Timm was unsure of how his parents thought of their youngest child. He was so affected by this train of thought that he likened it to a sense of total paralysis.

This sense of paralysis manifests itself in what the reader may rightly consider Timm’s stunted personal development. In general he identifies himself in other’s terms because, one can postulate, he is unsure of the words that would accurately describe him. In their stead he frequently describes himself as der Junge, and reverts to other’s modifiers: “Der ängstliche Junge.”58 This vagueness of character is important for two reasons: (1) it exposes Timm’s early thoughts regarding his personal meaninglessness; and (2) it confirms Hanne Lore’s feeling of insignificance in the eyes of her parents. In an effort to give himself meaning, Timm remembers interpreting his surroundings self-referentially: “Tatsächlich war es für den Jungen ein Zusammenflechten von Gehörtem und Gesehenem, um sich selbst und den Dingen eine ganz eigene Bedeutung zu geben.”59

The text itself is a testament to this process of assigning objects, events, and persons their corresponding meaning.

58 Ibid., 58.
59 Ibid., 58.
Personally underdeveloped as a result of his tumultuous upbringing and complicated family history, Timm searched for answers wherever he could find them. On one occasion he asks his sister what he was like as a child and admits, “Solange man diese Frage noch beantwortet bekommen kann, ist man immer noch ein Kind.”\(^\text{60}\) The eloquent, thoughtful Timm the reader gleans from the prose belies his inner struggle with his identity. Making sense of the past in light of his generation’s refurbished Weltanschauung proves more difficult than he could have anticipated.

His induction into this student generation was a complicated affair in and of itself, predicated on both the repudiation of his father’s generation and Timm’s affinity for joining collectives—a remnant of Hans’ personality. Timm’s opposition to his father was shared widely amongst his peers:

\[\text{Die tiefe Empfänglichkeit für die amerikanischen Lebensformen, für Film, Literatur, Musik, Kleidung, dieser Siegeszug hatte seine Ursache darin, dass die Väter nicht nur militärisch, sondern auch mit ihren Wertvorstellungen, mit ihrer Lebensform bedingungslos kapituliert hatten.}\]^\(^\text{61}\)

Timm’s identification with the anti-authoritarian movement is understandable given his upbringing and experience interacting with his father, however, this upbringing may also have laid the foundation for his desire to feel involved in a movement. This he admits when discussing his brief tenure as a member of the Communist Party: “…diese Bewunderung [für communists who had resisted fascism] hatte ihren Beweggrund auch in den von dem Vater eingeforderten \textit{alten} Tugenden: Stetigkeit, Pflichterfüllung, Mut, die bei diesen Kämpfern verbindlich waren. Und so schloss ich mich ihnen an.”\(^\text{62}\)

\(^{60}\) Uwe Timm, \textit{Am Beispiel Meines Bruders}, 55.
\(^{61}\) Ibid., 68.
\(^{62}\) Ibid., 55.
he might, Timm cannot divorce himself from his father’s influence. *Uwe Hans Heinz.* For illustrations sake it may also be helpful to consider the example of the Red Army Faction, a radical outgrowth of the student generation, which at once promoted an extreme leftist and militaristic agenda. The means were seen to justify their ends, but the RAF’s reversion to tactics to which they were purportedly opposed was contradictory. Separating himself from his father’s penetrating and durable expectations, like his sister was finally able to do, is a tall order, and one that Timm is working on to this day: “Noch immer arbeite ich—ja, arbeite—an seinen Wünschen.”63 His writing process is a step in this direction; a therapeutic exercise in excavation and articulation.

**The Writing Process**

In order to undertake this enormous task of confronting his convoluted past, Timm set out to reconstruct his brother’s life and rearticulate his family’s stories with the help of his familial archive, verbal accounts, and available historical records. Although much of what would have shed light on his father was destroyed in the firebombing of Hamburg, several significant artifacts remain. Amongst the documents that survived the war were Karl-Heinz’s field journal, which serves as a focal point for much of Timm’s work, and several family photo albums. Alongside these material manifestations of experiences are the oral histories passed down from parent to child, and because of Timm’s age disparity, from sister to brother. These small glimpses of the Timm family’s past are contextualized with available historical documentation, which illustrate the sharp cultural, political, and social divides present in the war and post-war’s settings. With

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these sources in tow, Timm began the arduous and often fractured process of working through his past and finding his place amongst his shared collectives.

The product of this effort is neither memoir nor autobiography, but rather an autobiographical reflection on the course of his brother’s life, contextualized by his family and nation’s respective histories. It is something of an Erinnerungsbuch, but one that is markedly shaped by Timm’s critical interpretation of his family’s past and reluctance to bear witness. As aforementioned, passages on Timm’s own life are relatively scarce, and most of what the reader learns of the author is to be gleaned from interactions with or descriptions of his relatives. The title Am Beispiel Meines Bruders serves not only as a reminder of the person Hans wanted Timm to become, but also connotes Karl-Heinz’s exemplary status for many of his peers who saw the war as a patriotic and national calling. In order to confront this idealized portrait of “Der tapfere Junge,” Timm must reconstruct as best he can his brother’s story and ground it in an extended narrative of parental blindness.64

This process of revisiting his family’s potentially dark past was characterized by hesitation, silence, and personal hardship. “Mehrmals habe ich den Versuch gemacht, über den Bruder zu schreiben. Aber es blieb jedes Mal bei dem Versuch.”65 Timm’s hesitation largely stemmed from the fear that he might find something terrible if he pushed any further than other members of his family had. Early in the text, Timm relays a memory he has of his mother, who would read him fairy tales from the Grimm Brothers before bed. The fairy tale he remembers in particular, Bluebeard, reinforces the notion that some doors are best left shut, lest one stumble upon something they never wished to

64 Uwe Timm, Am Beispiel Meines Bruders, 58.
65 Ibid., 8.
see. Because of the obstructing silence his parents fostered within their household, Timm was forced to question whether or not there were skeletons in his family’s closet.

His parents’ collective reluctance to speak to certain aspects of the war and his brother’s fate was pervasive and had consequences for Timm’s own orientation in the post-war years. Their partial blindness and unwillingness to recognize unfavorable truths was so utterly conspicuous growing up that Timm would self-censor his queries, knowing the answers he would receive: “Tote soll man ruhen lassen.”66 As Assmann explains, the individuelle Gedächtnis is heavily mediated through one’s interactions with others, and would be malformed without the linguistic articulation of personal experience: “Das Gedächtnis als Zusammenhalt unserer Erinnerungen wächst also ähnlich wie die Sprache von außen in den Menschen hinein, und es steht außer Frage, dass die Sprache auch seine wichtigste Stütze ist.”67 The process of memory formation naturally begins with an experience, but what is ultimately remembered is framed by how that event is discussed. Because individuals consistently look to their memories in order to affirm the idea they have of themselves, having an underdeveloped or fraught trove of memories could reasonably lead to insecurities concerning one’s personal identity.

In order to combat his self-confessed inhibited growth, Timm sought to articulate finally what his family had failed to bring into the open. His journey back through his memories, his past, and his brother’s experiences especially is one of both catharsis and paralysis. On the one hand Timm is finally granted access to a side of his family that he never felt welcome to enter, and has the opportunity to perhaps retroactively take responsibility and bear witness on behalf of those who did not. On the other, he remains

67 Aleida Assmann, Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit, 25.
haunted by the possibility that his brother may have been complicit in or committed atrocities that were so common on the eastern front. The entry, “Brückenkopf über den Donez. 75m raucht Iwan Zigaretten, ein Fressen für mein MG,” thoroughly unnerves Timm, causing him to close his brother’s journal.68 However, he presses on: “Und erst mit dem Entschluss, über den Bruder, also auch über mich, zu schreiben, das Erinnern zuzulassen, war ich befreit, dem dort Festgeschriebenen nachzugehen.”69 This statement is important for two reasons: (1) it confirms Assmann’s account above that individual identities are dependent upon one’s close relationships; and (2) it acknowledges the hitherto neglected capacity of memory to contextualize historical events.

Historicization of Memory

Since its inception as an academic concept, history has sought to differentiate itself from the more subjective and personalized field of memory studies. Assmann claims that this trend was reversed after the Holocaust: “Erinnerung und Gedächtnis waren die Widersacher des wissenschaftliche Historikers. Das hat sich in der Nachgeschichte des Holocaust entscheidend verändert.”70 The singular experiences that survivors of the Holocaust had lived through cannot be reduced to cold facts, but must be appreciated in a more comprehensive way, taking stock of the personal and emotional components that would otherwise be ignored. In addition, unique situations such as genocide render usually reliable archival documents useless for one seeking to gain insight into an event.71 Such was the case with government documents that survived the

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69 Ibid., 17.
70 Aleida Assmann, Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit, 47.
71 Ibid., 48.
Third Reich’s purge of evidence in its final weeks of existence, and is the case with Karl-Heinz’s field journal. “Könnte mit Läusejagd nicht auch etwas ganz anderes gemeint sein, nicht einfach das Entlausen der Uniform?” Timm is forced to ask this question on more than one occasion due to his brother’s barebones style of recording, which simultaneously provides his personal perspective and self-censoring of events, precluding the reader’s attempt at definitive interpretation.

Where archival documents fail the public, memory is able to fill the subsequent void. Indeed, Assmann highlights the symbiotic relationship between historiography and memory studies when she states, “Die historische Forschung ist angewiesen auf das Gedächtnis für Bedeutung und Wertorientierung, das Gedächtnis ist angewiesen auf historische Forschung für Verifikation und Korrektur.” During a time when many German authors felt uncomfortable using a language that had been thoroughly utilized to conceal a murderous bureaucracy, the Wertorientierung testimonial accounts can provide were extremely valuable. “In den Akten, Berichten, Büchern der Zeit finden sich immer neue Abkürzungen, unverständliche, rätselhafte Buchstaben, meist in Versalien, hinter denen sich die hierarchischen Ordnungen verbergen und zugleich offenbaren, als bürokratische Drohung.” In addition, the inclusion of memory into a historical dialogue emphasizes certain human aspects of an event that may enhance its later reception. By placing an emphasis on the emotional and uniquely individual dimensions of an event, by underscoring the personal reflexivity of history as a method of remembrance, and by

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73 Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*, 51.
accentuating any potential ethnic connections to an experience, memory greatly enhances the perspective history can deliver.\textsuperscript{75}

This depth of perspective can be invaluable to a people when one accounts for the ability of societies to purposefully shape their narrative and public remembrance agenda. In her discussion concerning the beginnings of historiography, Assmann concedes that it was influenced by the concept of \textit{Vergangenheitspolitik}, which utilized popular memory to produce a like-minded political community that served the interests of a society’s leadership.\textsuperscript{76} The politics of memory, forgetting, and history are far from extinct today. Politicians, academics, and researchers are subject to biases and agendas that often color their opinions and skew their focus when representing or retelling events or experiences. One need only think of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C., which simultaneously emphasizes the loss of American lives and ignores the memory of the much more substantial casualties suffered by Vietnam’s civilian population. Equally as important as the emphasis placed on certain self-serving aspects of history is its consequence; that is, the subsequent marginalization and forgetting of an opposing interpretation. “Vergessen ist nicht nur die unvermeidliche Begleiterscheinung eines quasinaturalen Lebens, Wachsens und Sich-Erneuerns, sondern auch eine gezielte kulturelle Strategie.”\textsuperscript{77}

\textit{Bearing Witness}

As a member of Germany’s student generation and of a family in which Hans was patriarch, Timm was very sensitive to societal elites’ ability to frame narratives of the

\textsuperscript{75} Aleida Assmann, \textit{Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit}, 50.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 44.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 52.
past in a light that they did not deserve, and became increasingly aware of the importance of bearing witness. He shares with the reader one personal example involving targeted forgetting within his household: “Das war mein Großvater, von dem alle Bilder vernichtet wurden. Eine Bildzerstörung. Über ihn wurde nicht gesprochen. Er sollte vergessen werden. Die Strafe durch Nichterinnern, Nichterwähnung.”78 In a societally formative event’s retelling, especially when this understanding is multiplied and disseminated, one can simultaneously reach a large audience and obscure key details in order to save face or shift blame retroactively. Because of the possibility to mislead and obfuscate, Timm values memory’s ability to morally ground a subject in the historicization process, if an individual is willing to honestly share their perspective. Assmann believes in this capacity of historical recording as well, namely, “dass es... eine dritte Funktion der Geschichtsschreibung gibt, die wir die ‚moralische’ nennen können. Sie hat etwas mit Zeugnis, Gewissen und Rechenschaft ablegen zu tun.”79

Witnessing and retelling are invaluable exercises to the historian, despite the fact that these processes often suffer delegitimation by their very hand. “Die Gefahr, glättend zu erzählen. Erinnerung, sprich. Nur von heute aus gesehen sind es Kausalketten, die alles einordnen und fasslich machen.”80 As was already noted, Timm is deeply troubled by his family’s inability to share their perspective of the past and present honestly. If only their memories could speak for themselves, free of self-censorship and partial blindness, then the window of opportunity for misinformation would begin to close. Bearing witness openly and honestly is a way to combat the instrumentalization of history.

78 Uwe Timm, Am Beispiel Meines Bruders, 49.
79 Aleida Assmann, Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit, 50.
This is an additional goal of Timm’s work—to bear witness on behalf of those who would not:

Das Nichtwissen, das Nichtwissenwollen, der Mutter, des Vaters, des Bruders, was sie hätten wissen können, wissen müssen, in der Bedeutung von wissen, nach der althochdeutschen Wurzel, wizzan: erblicken, sehen. Sie haben nicht gewusst, weil sie nicht sehen wollten, weil sie wegsahen. Daher bekommt das immer wieder Behauptete seine Berechtigung: Das haben wir nicht gewusst—man hatte es nicht sehen wollen, man hatte weggesehen.81

This cumulative condemnation of his family’s collective inability to witness comes at the end of the text, underscoring its importance. Absent from this pointed criticism is his sister, but the reader may assume that Timm also believes she was ignorant of or blind to the dangers of their father’s authoritarian tendencies. Any explanation on their part, any attempt to make sense of the war and question its outcome Timm viewed as an obstruction of the truth: “Kein Versuch der Erklärung. Wie auch kein Schreiben, kein Satz hilft, im Sinne von Herleitung, Einordnung, Verstehen, sondern nur dieses—Notwehr gegen das Vorgefundene.”82 Timm’s work is not a defense of what was found, but rather lays it bare and communicates his and his family’s experience during decades fraught with social, political, and cultural change.

Timm’s act of delayed communication, of breathing life into his family’s story, is exactly that about which Assmann speaks when broaching the subject of Speicher- and Funktionsgedächtnis. Timm reaches back into the latent stockpile that is the Speichergedächtnis and makes it newly functional and contemporary. Among other sources, forgotten photographs, the bureaucratic misstep that is his brother’s journal, and archival military documents left behind by the Third Reich are contextualized within

82 Ibid., 62.
Timm’s present condition and nuanced understanding of a complex familial and national past. Timm does his part in Assmann’s memory-selection process, bringing to light the objects and stories he inherited with an eye not towards absolution, but rather awareness and acceptance.

Conclusion

Such is the power and success of Timm’s autobiographical reflection. It takes a trove of hitherto unavailable family documents, *materielle Träger*, which had previously perpetuated the problematic understandings of their proprietors, and inserts them into his present context through a lens of responsibility and posthumous reconciliation. His brother’s story, taken into account with his parents’ sympathies, shaped Timm’s early years and many thereafter, serving at first as a point of identification and later as a subject of repudiation. As a young man Timm saw through his father’s veiled authoritarian tendencies and willful ignorance of the Germany in which he lived. So too did he note the passivity of his mother in the face of such a dogmatic mindset, despite her personal opposition to the extreme right. Hanne Lore’s unwavering reverence of their father despite his cold treatment served as an example for Timm as the tales people tell themselves to avoid confrontation. His brother’s reluctance to record events on the eastern front as they happened betrayed Karl-Heinz’s inability to engage in or willful suppression of self-reflection when it was arguably needed most.

Subjected to war and unspeakable suffering, Timm’s family decided not to bear witness, passing the project’s burden to their youngest, yet most capable. Timm’s dual membership in a family headed by one of the *Vätergeneration* and in the more self-reflective student generation uniquely positioned him to approach this undertaking with
an informed, albeit convoluted perspective. He essentially picks up where his brother left off, with the last entry of his journal—the only one that went undated—an irregular “Notiz, sorgfältig, in einer runderen Schrift und mit einem deutlicheren Druck des Bleistifts: Hiermit schließe ich mein Tagebuch, da ich für unsinnig halte, über so grausame Dinge wie sie manchmal geschehen, Buch zu führen.”\(^{83}\) This final note at once indicates a sense of awareness and perishes the thought, intentionally precluding any opportunity to witness.

This partial blindness necessitates Timm’s investigation into his family’s narrative, and therefore his own, which simultaneously satisfies Assmann’s understanding of social, political, and cultural memory’s relationship to the individual. Each *Wir-Gruppe* to which Timm is party somehow shapes his understanding and identity, often pulling him in competing directions and advertising various opposing *Weltanschauungen*. The intricacies of his identity formation are secondary to his familial excavation and articulation, but are nonetheless important because they indicate the unique circumstances surrounding Timm’s development.

Furthermore, this act of delayed articulation finally presents Timm with the opportunity to canonize his nuanced understanding of the past in a contemporary German context, overwriting that of his parents’ generation. The former inaccessibility of several important veins of memory and experience, which his parents generated either out of traumatic suppression or willful negligence, stunted Timm’s individual sense of orientation during many of the most formative years of his life. Assmann’s assessment of the *individuelle Gedächtnis* demonstrates that one’s memories, and therefore conception

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of self, are mediated through communication and interaction with others. Only through the articulation and partial reconstruction of his brother and family’s narratives, and thus his own, could Timm settle on a coherent position within his complex inheritance of unprocessed experiences.

Timm’s utilization of personal memory, anecdotes, and oral histories does not take away from the historical underpinnings of his extended reflection, but rather bears witness on behalf of those who chose to turn a blind eye. Just as Assmann values the use of memory to morally ground and remind history of its humanity, Timm’s text serves as an indispensable document and testament to the importance of self-reflection and the articulation of personal experience. In *Am Beispiel Meines Bruders*, Timm reflects on and communicates an unsettling upbringing, his parents’ willful ignorance, and brother’s partial blindness likely in the face of atrocities, thus fulfilling his primary goal above all others: *Wenigstens das—Zeugnis ablegen.*

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Bibliography

