



DE GRUYTER
OPEN

DOI: 10.1515/llce-2016-0013

Cultural Memory in the Novel *Unterstadt* by Ivana Šojat-Kučić

Jakov Sabljic

University of Osijek, Croatia
jsabljic@ffos.hr

Tina Varga Oswald

University of Osijek, Croatia
tvarga@ffos.hr

Abstract

Unterstadt (2009) by Ivana Šojat-Kučić can serve as an example of a literary and artistic intervention in the process of cultural oblivion. It is a novel that has won numerous literary awards in Croatia for its innovativeness. For the first time, it tells a story in which minority culture members themselves narrate about their ideologically suppressed family memory in order to imaginatively (re)construct the past, considering the needs of re-examining the destiny of a bourgeois family of German ancestry in the town of Osijek. Themes such as reminiscence, remembering and raising awareness of the town space are a textual polygon for telling the story as a family saga about the destiny of women in four generations – great-grandmother, grandmother, mother, and daughter. Remembering and reminiscence are considered as social and cultural constructs that arise out of mutual interaction between the members of a specific family and community. Thereunto, the role of remembering and forgetting in the process of establishing historical events, female identity and the town's toponymy as cultural/material objects should be determined, and vice versa, the role of culture-moulded objects in memory formation should be defined. There are three methodological approaches or perspectives to the reading of the novel. First, the historiographic layer of the novel is analysed, followed by the analysis of the town as a physical givenness and a cultural construct – a point of intersection of different identities, but also as an area of trauma. The issue of oblivion and reminiscence of the German national minority in the context of specifically female history is tackled as the third perspective. The novel *Unterstadt*

is an example of a text presenting the mechanism of official remembering and forgetting and re-creation of the past by using the discursive act of narrating human fates conditioned by great historical events.

Keywords

cultural memory, historiographic fiction, contemporary Croatian novel, Ivana Šojat-Kučić

I

Ivana Šojat-Kučić (born in 1971) is a contemporary Croatian author, translator and editor of plays performed in the Croatian National Theatre in Osijek. She published collections of short stories titled *Kao pas* (2006), *Mjesečari* (2008) and *Ruke Azazelove* (2011), a collection of essays *I past će sve maske* (2006), collections of poetry *Hiperbole* (2000), *Uznesenja* (2003), *Utvare* (2005) and *Sofija plaštovima mete samoću* (2009), and novels *Šamšiel* (2002), *Unterstadt* (2009), *Ničiji sinovi* (2012) and *Jom Kipur* (2014). She is also a translator from French and English. She has translated the books by Amélie Nothomb, Roland Barthes, Raymond Carver, Gao Xingjian, Pat Barker, Nuruddin Farah, Alice Sebold, Moussa Nabati, Luc Besson and Paul Auster to name a few.

She has been awarded a number of national literary awards: the novel *Šamšiel* was awarded the *Charter for Success* (2002), the novel *Unterstadt* won the *Vladimir Nazor Award for Literature* (2010), the *Ksaver Sandor Gjalski Award* for the best novel (2010), the *Fran Galović Award* for best prose dealing with local history (2010) and the *Josip and Ivan Kozarac Award* for the book of the year (2010).

Following a number of literary awards, positive reviews and a wide readership, the novel *Unterstadt* was dramatized and directed by Zlatko Sviben, Nives Madunić Barišić and Bojana Marotti in 2012. The play has also received several awards, such as the *Audience Award* for the best play, the *Croatian Actors' Guild Award* for the best overall play and the *Croatian Actors' Guild Award* for the best accomplishment in directing.

In the novel *Unterstadt*, Ivana Šojat Kučić tells an intimate story of an Osijek bourgeois family of German descent spanning the whole twentieth century. She describes the fate of four generations of women – great grandmother, grandmother, mother and daughter – intertwined with massive social, ideological and political upheavals. In portraying the dark side of the family history, the novel reveals various facets of the official history. It focuses on a family of Danube Germans, who were detained in camps by the Partisans and the members of the Communist regime after World War II, specifically from May 1945 to the early 1947, in which many of them were killed. The equalization of the condemnation of crimes committed by the members of two totalitarian regimes, Nazism and Communism, has awakened public interest, because it has demystified the stereotyped difference between the winners and losers in a war, that is, between the Partisans and the Germans. To be specific, collective

culpability for Nazi crimes was unfairly ascribed to all Danube Germans. In addition, the portrayed urban historiography of Osijek under the Austro-Hungarian Empire, along with typical, yet almost forgotten *Esseker* terms and phrases, have nostalgically sensitized the readership and reminded them of the Middle-European cultural and social milieu to which they have belonged ever since.

In the 19th and 20th century Osijek (Esseg/Eszék) saw a rapid economic, cultural, and urban development as a true central European town, largely owing to German immigrants who, being mostly craftsmen and artisans, contributed to the progress of the region as early as in the period immediately following the liberation from the Turks in the seventeenth century. However, in the midst of the Second World War the Germans became unsuitable. This resulted in many of the indigenous people of Osijek, the so-called *Essekers*, vanishing in camps after the war, or being expelled as enemies of the people and forced to leave all their possessions to Partisans.

‘The history and destiny of Croatian and Yugoslav Danube Germans at the end of and in the aftermath of World War II was inseparably, exclusively and one-sidedly associated with the fall of the Third Reich, as was the destiny of Germans in the East and Southeast of Europe. As a result of hostilities, the majority of Croatian Danube Germans left or were expelled from their homes in the last stages of World War II and went mainly to Austria and Germany, where they welcomed its ending. The members of the German minority in Yugoslavia were deprived of all their ethnic/national and civic rights by the communist authorities, and their property was confiscated. The Yugoslav authorities took a firm stand against the return of the exiled ethnic Germans (*folksdojčeri*) during the war and the immediate post-war period. Moreover, the Yugoslav communist authorities adopted a decision to expel the remaining ethnic Germans from Yugoslavia. Only the ethnic Germans who were able to prove their participation in the Partisan movement or their or support for it did not fall victim to the collective reprisal. The others were subjected to the confiscation of property and expulsion or deportation to the camps.’ (Geiger, 2012, p. 393)

It is precisely the memory of the trauma, its articulation and the resulting catharsis among the victims that offer the humane guiding principle which makes *Unterstadt* by Ivana Šojat Kuči a contemporary and current, politically unbiased novel, as it realistically describes inter-ethnic relationships in all their complexity.

II

The novel begins with the narration by Katarina Pavković, who is working in Zagreb as a fine art restorer. When Jozefina, a family friend, informs Katarina that her mother is on her deathbed, she travels by train to Osijek. The framework story of the novel is Katarina’s stay in her native town, her mother’s burial, the selling of the house and her

conversations with Jozefina. Katarina left her home at the age of eighteen. She lost her boyfriend Slaven in the Croatian War of Independence in the early nineties of the twentieth century, and the child she aborted is haunting her as well. Katarina's stay in Osijek passes in the reminiscence of her family history, partly deriving from her memory of her grandmother's stories. Katarina discovers family photographs. Her grandmother Klara was born in 1918, and her parents were Viktorija and Rudolf Meier. Besides her, they had a son Adolf and a daughter Greta, while the daughter Alojzija died. With disordered mind, owing to the war on the Galician front, Rudolf took to drinking and entertainment with casual women. Viktorija's story is intertwined with the story of her daughter Klara. Klara married Peter Schneider, with whom she had a son Anthony and a daughter Katarina. Klara's brother Adolf introduced Peter to Nazism, and he himself went to war on the Nazi side. Viktorija, Klara and her children, and Jozefina with her daughter and mother ended up in a concentration camp. Klara's newborn daughter Elza and Jozephina's daughter Terezija both died in the camp. Upon their release from the camp, Viktorija and Klara were allowed to move in into a single room because their whole house was occupied by Marko, a settler from Kordun. Greta was killed as a Partisan, and Klara was left on her own with her remaining daughter Marija. Katarina's mother Marija married Stjepan Pavković in order to survive the years in the aftermath of World War II. The novel ends with Katarina's disclosure of family secrets and the creation of a continuous story of her life without repressed and suppressed events.

III

Although the process of remembering and forgetting is tackled in the novel *Unterstadt* within the textual limits of fictional reality, the analysis and interpretation are nevertheless focused on objects and material actions that are forged in the memory as tools of its revival, modification or erasure. Therefore, the diegetic paradigm is exhausted in the creation of history not only in the fictional (re)production, because literature is 'culture's memory, not as a simple recording device but as a body of commemorative actions' (Lachmann, 2004, p. 172).

Remembering and the memories of the Osijek Germans are considered at the point of intersection of each individual existence of the four female characters. They are considered in the natural environment of their immediate and extended families, as well as in social and cultural relations with a wider socio-economic community, and in the imposed environment of a camp and social class degradation. It is necessary to identify the role of remembering and forgetting in the perception of major historical events and from the perspective of parallel family microhistories with particular emphasis on the role of women and the special characteristics of their identities. Furthermore, it is necessary to illustrate how the space, the toponymy of a town or a family house as a site of interpersonal communication, function as cultural/material objects in the memory.

Especially with regard to the trauma passed through generations, and, vice versa, to define the role of such culturally shaped objects in creating memories.

A family saga as a genre presents an effective way of a literary discussion about the creation of memories with the help of human relationships and involvement of different generations of one family in a broader social framework. By structuring alternating perspectives, which is carried out from the viewpoint of the members of one family of Danube Germans, various forms of remembering and memory are juxtaposed and opposed, while the focus is on the issue of cultural amnesia. In this way, different versions of memory and counter-memory are put in correlation and they create a specific perspective in the fictional structuring of the controversial period in the history of the Danube Germans. At the same time, the novel does not deal with an official reconstruction of history, but with a sort of a lower perspective – that of ordinary people: their desires, aspirations and temptations, and their everyday life. It is the family issues that, with the help of semantization of space and time that become a metaphor of remembering and forgetting, make *Unterstadt* the catalyst text (Rigney, 2008, p. 351), or a literary work engaged in historical and cultural discussions. It also points at the controversial or suppressed historical periods, which is particularly evident in the exploration of ways in which a literary work can function as a fiction of memory.

In analysing the novel *Unterstadt*, three methodological perspectives need to be distinguished. The first is used to analyze the historiographic layer, that is, the effect of macrohistory, such as the First World War, the Second World War and the Croatian War of Independence on the spiritual and material values of the Danube Germans. And conversely, a microhistory of a German family embodied in cultural heritage is described, whereas the intimate story about the heritage becomes a parallel history that competes with official historiography. The town as a physical givenness and a cultural construct – an intersection of different identities, but also a place of trauma resulting from the exodus of Germans – is analyzed in the second perspective. The streets, the houses or heirlooms become valuable memorabilia that are retroactively inscribed in the family history and bear their inherent meanings. The third perspective puts into focus the issue of oblivion and the memories of the Germans in the context of a specifically female history, while photographs and decorative items prominently appear as objects that affect memory and that are incorporated in the collective/individual family memory in a special way.

IV

At the first level of interpretation, it is a novel of history and its changes in which certain historical events are re-interpreted, such as the Battle of Galicia, the Second World War, the controversial issues of the exodus of Germans after the Second World War, and the Croatian War of Independence. However, they are not re-interpreted through the lens of the great and official history, but through that of intimate

experience of primarily male members of the Meier, Schneider and Steiner families, whose fates are directly associated with the events of the war. The discrepancy between the macrohistory and the small life stories which it affects is often insurmountable, which is why its pathogenic effects are most prominent in the novel. After returning from Galicia, Rudolf Meier ended his life by hanging himself in the closet, Peter Schneider was 'swallowed by the darkness', that is, shot by the burst of rounds of a firing squad after the Second World War, while Stjepan Steiner, having survived the camp, died of cancer bearing someone else's last name, Pavković.

Owing to the patriarchal structure of the family relationship in the novel, gender polarization and the relationship between history and family life shape the mechanisms of memory by means of cultural amnesia and collective family memory. On the one hand, all three generations of the German family tend to ignore the historical circumstances by nurturing cultural amnesia. Viktorija found employment because Rudolf was too traumatized by war, Klara remained silent before the indifferent Peter, while Marija married a 'sold' man by the name of Stjepan Pavković. On the other hand, the homogeneity of the three generations of the German family supports the cultural memory. The strengthening of national awareness and cultural traditions is exemplified by everyday rituals and activities, material and spiritual heritage of the German language and cuisine. Some of the physical and spiritual imperatives imposed on the family members are the following: a house filled with elegant German-style furniture, 'Mum's museum-like exhibition of crystal ware kitsch' (Šojat-Kučič, 2009, p. 46) for Easter and Christmas, 'a sofa cluttered with various embroidered, crocheted and fluffy cushions' (Šojat-Kučič, 2009, p. 56), silky upholstery fabric, photographs arranged everywhere, curtains, covers and tablecloths, 'the polished giant' (Šojat-Kučič, 2009, p. 52) of a three-door wardrobe passed down from one generation to the other, and so forth. The tradition of giving Germanic names is also inherited as well as forms of address among family members, various dishes on the table, such as floating islands, cabbage and noodles, lard pastry, and vegetable stew.

As a contrast to the material and spiritual values of the German family, the Tito's bust, which Marija and Stjepan Pavković' (former Steiner) daughter Katarina buys on a school trip because of the suppressed family history affected by the cultural amnesia, possesses a distinct symbolic value for the macrohistory. There is also the ceremony of Katarina's admission to Tito's Pioneer Movement and the oath she recites loudly in the living room, the viewing of the partisan film *Kozara* and so on. Due to the trauma experienced by Germans at the end of the Second World War, when the majority of indigenous German population were expelled from Osijek, and some individuals like Pavković stayed, the need arose to cover up and deny the past as well as to flee from the truth. The role of collective family memory comes to the foreground only later as Katarina returns to her hometown Osijek after the Croatian War of Independence and discovers her true origin in a conversation with a family friend Jozefina Bittner. This is

the reason why Katarina returns and ‘completes’ the cultural memory, and connects the recollections in order to be able to accept her own cultural and material heritage and the family tradition in its entirety. Thanks to the family cultural memory, a solution to the enigma of the official history is offered, because ‘history remembers material things, it keeps only the legacy of the builders. Not because the world is good at the core, but because destroyers leave nothing behind’ (Šojat-Kučić, 2009, p. 303).

At the second level of interpretation, it is a novel of the town of Osijek as a point of intersection of German and other peoples, and as a commemorative site of national exodus as a result of which the cultural memory of parks, squares, streets and houses only later gets its true meaning. The cultural memory is not only associated with space, but also with time. The year of 1945 was an important milestone for Germans, or rather the whole period around that time that was marked by the attempts of their expulsion from Osijek. The years marking the beginning of the First and the Second World War were also decisive moments of their traumatic war experience. The town of Osijek is turned into a place of trauma, a place which the members of the German family are closely attached to and which symbolically represents the entire Central European area of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Upon their release from the camp in 1947, the only survivors, Viktorija, Klara and Marija, were allowed to move in only into one room of their former home. Jozefina was left with only a pigsty, while newcomers from Kordun were settled in the German homes. After the end of the Croatian War of Independence in 1999, Katarina returns to Osijek, where she is greeted by Jozefina, the witness of her family's history. Jozefina reinterprets the cultural memory of the town from the perspective of a German. Katarina's return to Osijek should be viewed as a certain initiation rite through which she finds her own origin, symbolized by her original place of residence, the sacred family place. The perception of the appearance of the town itself – its streets, squares, buildings and public areas – plays a crucial role in raising Katarina's awareness of her identity: ‘All around Western Europe, in the civilized world, people organize conferences on the Secession (Art Nouveau), the Secession facades are preserved as a national treasure and here they are falling down on people passing by! (...) It is terrible: the two-century old, proud homes of the former Lower Town craftsmen, merchants, lawyers, doctors, professors, the warm homes of people thanks to whom Essek, although geographically ‘in the middle of nowhere’, has actually always been a part of the ‘Central European’ spirit, were now falling apart before your eyes.’ (Šojat-Kučić, 2009, p. 217).

The semantization of space in the novel is evident in the interpretation of the significance of the town's architecture. The suppression of the memory of a strong German influence is equated with the lack of care for the preservation of cultural heritage which becomes despised cultural legacy. In addition, the space can be read as a metaphor for the memories of the trauma with the recurring contrast we-they as a

contrast between the old derelict buildings and the newly constructed buildings lacking the consciousness of urban architecture:

‘Like a rounded stone, misery hit me bluntly right in the middle of the forehead. Not a uniform, unanimous misery, but the misery of houses that are rotting away so that someone, most probably, one day, can buy a plot instead of the house, a burial place to raise another transgress kitsch, a grandiose arrogance of the newly rich. The grotesque creations of yellow and red façades bricks are crammed in between the old souls of derelict bricks, with plaster lions at the entrance to a tiny courtyard, with poor, tacky imitations of Doric columns in front of the door and ornate theatre-like curtains. I felt the urge to shout, to wake people up, but few passers-by were already staring at me as if I was a crazy woman, a patient from the nearby psychiatry ward. (Šojat-Kučić, 2009, p. 218)

The economic and cultural development of Osijek, as well as the cultural memory upon which Katarina builds her own identity, is neglected after the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. More precisely, upon the arrival of the Partisans and the establishment of a new social order, the Art Nouveau architecture was either neglected or nationalized. A gap was created between the Danube Germans and the culture defined by an ideological regime. The world-renowned theatre premieres were replaced by ideologized films featuring war themes. The novel also points out that the erasure of the ‘Central-European’ spirit was further evident in the changes of street names. In place of Schulhoff, Reisner, Kaiser or Reinitz, new signs bearing the names of the Partisan heroes were placed on the Art Nouveau buildings.

Although the establishment of democracy after the Croatian War of Independence has raised awareness of the original tradition, history and culture of the town of Osijek, capitalism has led to the privatization of Art Nouveau buildings and to the inadequate protection of their original appearance. In revealing a new meaning of the topography of Osijek, for which Jozefina’s word of mouth had an indirect but crucial importance, Katarina makes sense of the integrity of her own identity that is based on German ancestry. Curiously enough, before her departure to Zagreb, Katarina purchases ‘a pretty Art Nouveau frame’ for a family photo of her grandmother Klara’ (Šojat-Kučić, 2009, p. 393).

At the third level of interpretation, the novel *Unterstadt* represents a type of memory fiction in which the issues of remembering and forgetting of one nation are discussed through the prism of ‘female’ history – great grandmother Viktorija, grandmother Klara, mother Marija, granddaughter Katarina and family friend Jozefina. The novel is a sample of the narrative development of mimesis of memory. It is a literary work that does not imitate the existing versions of memory, but produces, in the act of discourse, that very past which they purport to describe (Neumann, 2008, p. 334). Therefore, it is necessary to determine the narrative procedures in the analyzed novel as a literary text

in which memory is prominently thematized. As far as the structuring of time categories goes, it functions in a form that represents the way the memory works. Past stories and events are told in the present because there is a need to resolve the problem of authenticity of one's own identity and to achieve a temporal continuity of the group to which one belongs through the reconstruction of the common conventions, behaviour and actions. Consequently, analepsis is the main narrative technique used, that is, a constant switch from the narrative present of great-granddaughter Katarina and family friend Jozefina to their own immediate and more distant family history, spanning over one century. It is an imaginative (re)construction in which recollections are used to fill the emptied zones in the memory of Danube Germans brought on by family amnesia. As a result, mostly unknown prehistories are shaped, which govern the actions and reactions of other protagonists from the background, whereas the explanation of their origin and heritage makes their actions, thoughts and aspirations clearer.

In addition to homodiegetic narration evident in Katarina's telling about herself and others within the framework story, there is also a heterodiegetic narration in the form of an unnamed third person omniscient narrator that tells about the fate of other female characters. The role of such intertwining of perspectives is to emphasize Katarina's search for her own identity, that is, getting to know herself, the last descendant of the family, by the help of its unknown past. The other female characters are narrated without strict chronological sequence, which leads to overlapping of various time plans and detecting the similarities in the fates of these women. This serves as a basis for the establishment of a collective memory of the German family, whose version of history is finally told, albeit fictionally, and that version does not correspond to a generally adopted history, legitimized by the politics of the official winner.

However, the finally told microhistory does not only compete with the official history but it also contradicts the family story which actually does not even exist owing to a forcibly nurtured cultural amnesia. Its causes should be searched for in the fear for their own existence, on account of which German names were 'slavenized' or the Germans would take on Slavic last names. The cultural assimilation in the novel is exemplified by Katarina's father Stjepan, raised by the Pavković family, who gave him their last name after his parents had been shot by a firing squad in the camp. Such a model of social mimicry is further supported by the socio-economic causes. We learn, namely, that Marija married Stjepan in order to look after her materially and morally degraded family, and to gain security herself by taking the Pavković last name. There is also physical memory that is worth discussing, as we learn that all women in the family suffered the tragedy of losing a child and inherited certain fears. For instance, Greta's fear of dead people caused by the trauma of seeing her father's corpse is also evident in Katarina's running away from funerals and deceased persons.

In attempting to get rid of imposed oblivion and to resolve any consequential trauma, the effects of which are passed on from one generation to the other, the family photos

play a prominent role. They feature Katarina's grandmother with her family, Katarina with her mother and grandmother, Katarina's parents as a married couple and her father Stjepan with his parents. The photographs play the role of some material intermediary of the past between those in front of the lens and those who keep those photographs as heirlooms. Katarina's observing of family photos becomes an act of utmost importance to her symbolic connection with her roots, her original ethnicity and her memory. These photographs act as triggers that encourage the storytelling about a history that is censored intentionally. By observing herself and others in the perfect tense, the relationship between remembering and forgetting is thematized and the distance between the observer and her past, or her ancestors, diminished:

'I finally removed all photographs that had been probably for years hidden in shoeboxes under mom's bed and took them upstairs into grandma's room. I had the impression that they really belonged there. Having at first leafed through them carefully, I realized that they were literally thrown randomly into boxes, in no particular order, so I decided to simply scatter them onto the floorboards in front of the window. I was overcome by a strange feeling of stepping clumsily into the darkness and falling through a rift in time, back to when I was five or six years old. (...) I stare at the faces which, because of the counterpoint of only two colours, black and white, and their shades, seem to me as if they are peeping out from the gloom, as if they had opened the door to the dark hallways, as if behind them the darkness is billowing into my light, from which I observe them.' (Šojat-Kučić, 2009, pp. 168–169)

The photographs in the novel are objects of special importance to the family history and have the status of not only the testimony from the private sphere of existence, but also the status of a fictitious historiographic document. These are not actual images integrated into the text, but fictitious prose images whose content is described in the text, and serve as important links between the framework story and the story of the past. Family photos in the novel are used as a means for Katarina to fill in the gaps in her autobiographical and family narrative in order to find in these rifts, by reconstructing memories, a space of her own resistance to her family's (self)imposed ideology of oblivion (Hirsch 1997, 192). Given that official history cannot acknowledge certain events, the viewing of photographs in the novel serves to interpret the correlation between private memory of a particular social group, that is the Germans, and history. This is done in order to show what the history has neglected based on the ideologically instructed dyadic division of we-they. Due to the variability of memory and the above mentioned relations of power, the photographs take on the features of an authentic personal testimony of strong impact. Their descriptions constitute the narrative analepsis used to consider the stories and events from the past, in the present. The photographs establish a sense of community and cultural identification which includes the blending of different periods in several generations and a sort of communication

with thus revived family members. For instance, Katarina describes her father's family photo from her childhood memory perspective:

'I stared for a long time at the woman who was sitting on a wooden, almost rustic chair as if something was pinching her. She was wearing a white blouse, turned yellow in the photograph due to moisture or darkness, a lace ornamented blouse collar high up along her delicate neck. She had sparkling, bright eyes, the colour of which I could not seem to figure out (...) Then I looked at the child in white lace stained by time, the round child's head, and somewhat lighter, I guess chestnut locks of hair that wiggled in waves below a white, probably silk cap. Finally, I looked at the man who was standing upright next to his wife, who, as if in fear, put his left hand on to the right shoulder of the woman stiffened in her chair. I stared into his face, and he stared back at me in equal measure staring unwaveringly from his musty, ancient and rigid times. God, I thought, this man looks just like my dad ... (...) I turned the photo and I saw 'Agata and Jozef Steiner' written in pencil on the back. In the right hand corner, on the back of the photo, the year '1943' was written by a trembling hand, in a different handwriting and a slightly oily pencil.' (Šojat-Kučič, 2009, pp. 118-119)

The father takes the accidentally discovered photograph away from Katarina and speaks about it just before he dies. Thereby he gives her a sense of family continuity by raising awareness of the past and establishing the we-identity. This leads to a sort of counter-memory which challenges the hegemonic understanding of culture and history. Thus the descriptions of family photos serve as solid reference points used to manifest the common forms of symbolic behaviour and relatedness in accordance with the theory of Roland Barthes.

The picture of Virgin Mary that Katarina's grandmother leaves to her has a similar meaning. In the Conservation Institute it was discovered that the back of the picture was hiding a devotional prayer of her grandmother for all the dead in the family. In Katarina's hands that particular object indicates the past connected with the present, as it helps the family members memorize the family history and creates a sense of togetherness and tradition.

The family house in Osijek to which Katarina returns also gets symbolic connotations. It marks the place of confrontation with the past and of catharsis experienced after a painful process of self-knowledge with the help of biographies of other female characters, who all become some sort of doubles to one another. The similarities and overlapping of women's fates is also noticeable in the objects as traces of history, such as photographs. Specifically, the repetition of the same patterns of gender memory is particularly prominent, because networks of related views are recognized on the basis of description of such photographs. They create the so called family's view, which is transferred through generations and which connects all members of the family, so that a family photo becomes a mirror of gender truth (Barthes, 2006, p. 128).

In addition to photographs, there are other memorabilia in the house that elicit memories or bring new and unexpected insights. Among them is a tuft of a child's hair which, as Katarina soon learns, belonged to her deceased brother Filip, who was kept secret from her. Apart from the house, there is also the shed in which young Katarina finds objects and photographs belonging to her father's German family about which he only tells her just before he dies: 'I dropped the photograph and the box fell off my lap with its contents spilling out on the floor. Frantically, I looked at hairpins, a piece of white silk ribbon, papers, a picture of a saint with a palm branch in his hand, a photo of a man in a military uniform, of a boy in a sailor suit, scattered all over the grimy dirt floor.' (Šojat-Kučič, 2009, p. 120)

Other significant descriptions are those of grandmother Klara's insanity and her conversations with the ghosts, as well as the dreams in which female characters are dreaming about their men, most of whom disappeared in the war. Paradoxically enough, the ghosts as immaterial entities are signs of personal trauma. Specifically, the unresolved past in the form of ghosts appears in the memories of the loved ones and influences them, while that same history, in fact, re-materializes in the reality, on which it has a decisive, and primarily pathogenic effect.

'Although I was afraid of grandma, I was drawn to her in the attic by intense curiosity, just like in moronic horror movies, and the curiosity was additionally and abundantly fed by the fact that mom was scared of grandma's insanity much more than I was. I was afraid of the dead who, according to my grandmother's stories, were staggering around the room, and my mother was afraid of the truth about those dead. It was obvious.' (Šojat-Kučič, 2009, p. 222)

The appearance of literary ghosts in the novel *Unterstadt* is a reflection of bridging the gap between the past and the present, the individually suppressed and collectively imposed definition of the individual. In other words, in facing the model of 'oneself', which failed to become assimilated in the context of the communist ideology, and the model of 'the other' as the victim of cultural aggression aimed at the Danube Germans, the literary ghosts, 'the colourless transparent ghosts grandmother talked about before her death, who, as she said, kept wandering before her eyes all day long before her death' (Šojat-Kučič, 2009, p. 127) indicate the return of the repressed and the externalization of internalized terror.

Furthermore, Slaven, who was killed in the Croatian War of Independence and is represented as a dreamed spirit of the past, is a sign of Katarina's personal trauma caused by unfortunate historical circumstances of the war in Croatia that started in 1991. Katarina presents the darker socio-economic circumstances of the war by directing her objections to the dead Slaven. She does it in order to emphasize her unhappiness with injustice that caused her own realization of becoming a wife and a mother being interrupted by war, and with the futility of Slaven's death while defending his

homeland, Among other things, war profiteering relativised the spiritual values of the heroic dying of soldiers:

‘While you were charging the tanks with your little rifle fighting against injustice, while you were fighting for the so-called centuries-old Croatian dream, they started their privatization business, engaged in the higher levels of thievery, fled to defend us from the banks of the Rhine and Main, from all kinds of refugee centres! Are you at all aware now what a fool you’ve been? Huh? Are you? They amassed wealth shamelessly, and you fell honourably! Is that sneaky?! Phew!’ (Šojat-Kučič, 2009, p. 232)

In addition to the ghosts as non-material entities in the process of recollection of the past, some objects, such as grandma’s prayer book, her hairpin with a glass butterfly, or her rose-patterned cushions, have an extremely sentimental value as well. The material heritage also evokes a sense of connectedness and continuity, such as the three-door wardrobe passed over from one generation to the other, along with figurines and crystalware. Besides, these objects are reminiscent of the deceased people and their subconscious obsessions. For instance, mother Marija leaves curtains behind in many unexpected places around the house, which, together with a plastic tablecloth that never reveals the true appearance of the table, symbolize her introversion, constant silence and a lifestyle characterized by keeping secrets to oneself.

The olfactory sensitivity of female characters is on more than one occasion associated with remembering a particular person, place or event, due to the physiological background of memorizing. For instance, grandma’s hand smelling of ground coffee; the scent of hyacinth; Jozefina’s association of the first encounter with Greta with the scent of linden trees and Greta’s cigarette smoke; the smell of the river; Klara’s inhalation of the mixture of Peter’s sharp cologne, ink and menthol candy. All these examples are evidence of physical memory. In order to achieve it, the body is first excited by some activity in the material realm, the senses are roused, and, finally, excitations are integrated as signs, symbols or internal images of things that have now become part of perception and emotional experience (Barrett, 2013, p. 65).

The novel also deals with the variability of the process of remembering, conscious or unconscious selectivity in remembering facts and events, self-deception and manipulation while emphasizing or suppressing them. The history of Katarina’s mother Marija, who hides old photographs and grandmother’s and father’s things from her daughter, plays a decisive role in covering the family’s political unsuitability. In this context, the comparison of the houses with silos (Šojat-Kučič, 2009, p. 219), in which the belongings of the dead are stored is worth mentioning, or that of the family house with a sarcophagus (Šojat-Kučič, 2009, p. 285), in which family secrets are conserved. Memory erased by the removal of items that serve as evidence of this memory points to the performative power of the material sphere that functions as a silo or sarcophagus, or as a keeper of the memories that can be evoked when in contact with the active subject

in the research and in the discovery of meaning and function of particular objects, that is, in placing them in the right context of macro or micro history.

Another issue that is evident in the novel *Unterstadt* is the cancellation of opposition between the material and immaterial, organic and inorganic, and sensory and non-sensory. This pronounced egalitarianism fits perfectly into the theoretical consideration, according to which there is no movement of dead matter outside of a human or in opposition to him. Instead, the world and life are approached to as constantly active processes of materialization, of which embodied humans are an integral part (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 8). This is especially evident in attributing inanimate characteristics to humans. For example, Katarina's mother reduces people to dirty, ugly machines (Šojat-Kučič, 2009, p. 168), Viktorija makes noises 'as an inflatable floating mattress that no one will take to the seaside anymore' (Šojat-Kučič, 2009, p. 371), at one point Jozefina resembles a 'plastic coat hanger' (Šojat-Kučič, 2009, p. 197), her ear looks 'like a satellite dish' (Šojat-Kučič, 2009, p. 331), and so forth. Conversely, there is also pronounced anthropomorphism of the world, so that the town is a stubborn (Šojat-Kučič, 2009, p. 11) and unkempt old man (Šojat-Kučič, 2009, p. 58), old town houses have the skin that peels off them as that of old people with low back pain (Šojat-Kučič, 2009, p. 217). Such metaphorical expressions suggest the interaction and overlapping of zones of organic and inorganic world, and mark, in accordance with new vitalism, a solid connection between people and the inanimate world in which they are immersed and which is immersed in them.

The significance of the female body in the novel should also be addressed. There is a recurring subordinate position of women in family photos: the man is standing above the woman and placing his hand upon her as if she were his property. In the context of male-female relationships, Greta's character occupies a prominent place. Greta is the epitome of an emancipated, headstrong, Europeanised young woman in a provincial atmosphere who does not conform to the traditional position of women in a patriarchal and petty bourgeois milieu. However, although Greta joins the Partisans, her post-war fate is typical of the Slavonian destiny of Danube Germans. It is tragic and upsetting because immediately after the war, on her way back from visiting her family in the Valpovo camp she gets raped and murdered under mysterious circumstances (Geiger, 2012, p. 392). Greta's masculine behaviour, which extends beyond her appearance and clothing, is further intensified by her using the objects considered inappropriate and prohibited for women to use. Such objects in the novel bear a subversive meaning in the context of sex and gender. For instance, the record player that Viktorija takes away from her rebellious daughter Greta and breaks into pieces, as it is considered inappropriate for a girl to own one, is the 'work of the devil'. There is also menswear that Greta wears, and the cigarette holder that she so shamelessly uses.

The cultural amnesia in the novel is of dual nature because it applies not only to the Danube Germans as a whole, but also to the repressed memory of mothers and

daughters, to their functioning in terms of family roles and their relationships with men and the (im)possibility of their emancipation. It is a sort of gender sanctioning because, in the novel, the memory keepers, with the traditional role of oral narrators, are prominent women who are double marginalized – they are members of the German ethnic minority and they are female.

The conflict between the outer, socially and politically conditioned world and the inner world of a family is also reflected in the gender roles. The role of a woman is not reduced to chores, and women are identified with typically female decorative fetishes as well. In the case of men, the material is reflected in the struggle for bare survival in the war: ‘All their lives women just bear children, do the chores and collect porcelain figurines’, he ran his hand over the glass cabinet with Viktica’s figurines. ‘The whole menagerie, pastoral images! God forbid! As if this were life! As if life were such! They don’t know what the trenches are, what it’s like when the bastard cannon ball flies between your eyebrows! They consider it mischief!’ (Šojat-Kučič, 2009, pp. 94-95)

The gender polarization in the family is further emphasized by the ideological divisions that are reflected as a paradigm in the relationship between the true bearers of official history - Adolf and Greta, a brother and a sister. They end up on opposite sides: he joins the Nazis, and she joins the Partisans:

‘(...) I’m solid! I’m not a cheap wannabe theatre actress, a feeble whore no one wants to marry. I am not a shabby old maid. Oh, no, my brother, your namesake, the elf with the funny moustache gave you a magic formula.’ Greta stood up and began waving her hands. ‘You are no longer trash, you’re no longer a transparent little repulsive worm, but an Übermensch! The crazed maniac just snapped his fingers - snap! – and somehow, somewhere from the underground, suddenly only super humans crawled out.’ (Šojat-Kučič, 2009, p. 72)

In addition to the ideological divisions, there are multiple conflicts between the male and the female gender in the novel, amplified by social, national and religious beliefs such as the following relationships: Rudolf-Viktorija (soldier-housewife), Adolf-Greta (Nazi-Partisan), Peter-Rebeka, a family friend, (German-Jew), Slaven-Katarina (soldier-restorer), Stjepan-Marija (traitor to his people-betrayer of her own family).

V

The novel *Unterstadt* by Ivana Šojat-Kučič proves the thesis that memory and history need not entirely coincide. It is, therefore, the task of the memory to question the so-called official history. The novel deals with the cultural memory of the Danube Germans as a group deprived of their cultural, political and social status, although they represent a minority that remained registered in the history of the town, thus completing its multicultural image. The analysis of the novel has revealed the opposition of two cultural programmes, one of which focuses on the imposed cultural amnesia, and the other on the need to remember through the mediation of oral traditions for fear of

forgetting and in order to prove one's own authenticity. According to Ann Rigney, literary texts may differ with respect to the role associated with the textualization of memory. Relay stations are texts through which standardized forms of memories are circulated without analysing them critically (Rigney, 2008, p. 350). Stabilizers are texts through which the existing forms of memory are emphasized, which confirms their status as easily remembered cultural patterns for later recollections (Rigney, 2008, p. 350). Catalysts are understood as texts that draw attention to new or neglected topics in order to enhance memory associated with them (Rigney, 2008, p. 351). Objects of recollection are literary texts that, although they are not working as media of remembrance, still can trigger a recollection of certain culture groups (Rigney, 2008, p. 351). Finally, calibrators are revisions of canonical literary texts in the form of rewriting or revising through which the forms of memory created in canonical texts are analysed critically (Rigney, 2008, p. 351). The described mechanisms of memory and forgetting classify the novel *Unterstadt* into the so-called corpus of catalytic texts. Although they do not present a reliable point of reference in the constitution of memory owing to their fictional character, they do play a significant role in emphasizing the topics that are forgotten and kept secret. This enables the examination of historical controversies and creates a space for the promotion of the idea of tolerance, further discussion, and thematization of remembering and memory on the basis of material evidence in a particular culture group. According to Birgit Neumann, the privilege of fictional texts is to integrate separated memory versions (Neumann, 2008, pp. 338–339), that is, in the context of the analyzed novel, memory and forgetting. Such integration points at the importance of the forgotten versions of memory, enables the exploration of memorized or forgotten entities, and tabooed topics such as traumas of the past and neglected controversial events. Furthermore, it constitutes a counter-memory 'thereby challenging the hegemonic memory culture' (Neumann, 2008, p. 339), which is sought to be critically examined in the analysed novel.

The analytical approach to the novel *Unterstadt* by Ivana Šojat-Kučić focuses on the historiographic layer, the semantization of space and time and the specificity of female history. The results of the analysis reveal a mutual conditionality of material and non-material realms of existence, everyday life and socio-economic framework, family heritage and individual identity. In addition, this type of analysis permits a different view of the nature of *objects of the history*, that is, of the mechanism of (non)historical memory, material dispossession of the 'defeated' party, communist indoctrination of the pioneers' oath and the contents of films, of the objects of ideological significance in living rooms, and so forth. The discussion about the issue of forgetting and remembering of the Germans in the specific context of female history also reveals the nature of the *historicity of objects*, that is, how objects as material evidence of microhistory, such as photographs and decorative items, affect the memory that includes them, in a particular way, in the collective/individual family memory.

References

- Assmann, J. (2005). *Kulturno pamćenje: Pismo, sjećanje i politički identitet u ranim visokim kulturama*. Zenica: Vrijeme.
- Barthes, R. (2006). *Svijetla komora: Bilješka o fotografiji*. Zagreb: Antibarbarus.
- Coole, D. & Frost, S. (2010). Introducing the New Materialisms. *New Materialism: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, edited by Diana Coole & Samantha Frost, 1–43. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- Geiger, V. (2012). Tematiziranje povijesti njemačke manjine u suvremenoj hrvatskoj književnosti (u povodu romana Unterstadt I. Šojat-Kuči). *Scrinia Slavonica* 12, 385–394.
- Hirsch, M. (1997). *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Lachmann, R. (2004). Cultural Memory and the Role of Literature. *European Review* 2, 165–178.
- Neumann, B. The Literary Representation of Memory. *Media and Cultural Memory*, edited by Astrid Erll & Ansgar Nünning, 333–343. Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008.
- Rigney, A. (2008). The Dynamics of Remembrance: texts between monumentality and morphing. *Media and Cultural Memory*, edited by Astrid Erll & Ansgar Nünning, 151–161. Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Šojat-Kuči, I. (2009). *Unterstadt*. Zagreb: Fraktura, 2009.

Contact

Jakov Sabljčić, PhD.

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

University of Osijek, Lorenza Jäger 9, HR – 31000 Osijek

Croatia

jsabljic@ffos.hr

Tina Varga, PhD,

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,

University of Osijek, Lorenza Jäger 9, HR – 31000 Osijek

Croatia

tvarga@ffos.hr