

The grandmother in recent Austrian literature: Peter Henisch, *Eine sehr kleine Frau* (2007) and Melitta Breznik, *Das Umstellformat* (2002)

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In this paper I explore two examples of 'Grossmütterliteratur': Peter Henisch's novel *Eine sehr kleine Frau* (2007), and Melitta Breznik's *Das Umstellformat* (2002). Both authors have also written earlier novels, Henisch's *Die kleine Figur meines Vaters* (1980) and Breznik's debut novel *Nachtdienst* (1995) which provide a starting point for comparison of third-generation family novels centred on the narrator's grandmother with the earlier genre of *Väterliteratur*. Henisch's *Eine sehr kleine Frau* tells of the secrecy surrounding the grandmother's Jewish descent, maintained also long after the end of the war; Breznik centres on the fate of the narrator's grandmother who was murdered in the Nazi euthanasia programme. These texts exemplify an emergent trend which takes into account the ever-growing distance from the Nazi period and both present the grandmothers not as victims, but as powerful figures whom the narrators bring back into memory by uncovering family secrets and revealing truth.

Meine Großmutter hat mich gewarnt: "Tote soll man ruhen lassen". [...] Ich weiß jetzt, wie gefährlich es sein kann, die Vergangenheit aufzuwühlen. Es ist ein Irrtum, dass Tote tot sind.<sup>1</sup>

[My grandmother did warn me: "The dead should be left in peace". [...] I know now how dangerous it is to stir up the past. It is a mistake that the dead are dead.]

Kerstin Schneider, *Maries Akte: Ein unglaublicher Kriminalfall*

In many German and Austrian family novels of recent years silence surrounds a family member from at least two generations ago. As Sigrid Weigel notes in *Genealogik: Generation, Tradition und Evolution zwischen Kultur- und Naturwissenschaften*, the generational novel very often turns on a family secret in which

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<sup>1</sup> Kerstin Schneider, *Maries Akte: Ein unglaublicher Kriminalfall* (Frankfurt am Main: Weissbooks, 2008). [Marie's File: An Unbelievable Criminal Case]. To date there is no published English translation. A revised edition by the author, using her married name, includes a chapter on the media and public reaction to the first edition: Kerstin Herrnkind, *Maries Mörder. Die Geschichte einer Spurensuche* (Neumünster: Paranus, 2012). The title was also changed to 'Marie's Murderers: The Story of a Search for Evidence'. This 'search for evidence' is again something that features strongly in autobiographical novels by grandchildren.

the ancestors are entangled.<sup>2</sup> This is especially true of German and Austrian literary history in which the family novel has been a prime vehicle of critical reflection, breaking the silence on National Socialist crimes by giving voice to the feelings of guilt and shame inherited by the first and second post-war German and Austrian generations. The passage of time and the variety of perspectives and of crimes have given rise to sub-genres of the family novel, starting with the *Väterliteratur*, or father novels which came to prominence in the 1970s. As Anne Fuchs points out, ‘the need for tradition and heritage remains an unresolved issue in the first wave of *Väterliteratur*.<sup>3</sup> Such continuing unanswered need explains why new versions of family writing continue to be popular in German literature through into the 1990s and the 2000s: the transgenerational legacy still demands further working through. In recent years, third-generation authors are now writing about their grandparents, giving rise to the literary-historical term *Enkelliteratur* or grandchildren literature. Both *Väter-* and *Enkelliteratur* often work with an autobiographical or fictional first-person narrator, but in father books, the narrator tends to distance him- or herself from the family, whereas continuing ties between generations are often the focus in other sub-genres of the family novel.<sup>4</sup> Sigrid Weigel has used the term ‘telescoping’ for such interlinking of generations through heritage or legacy passed on through the family.<sup>5</sup>

As a generic term *Enkelliteratur* centres the narrating subject and the narrative present, the locus of perception, in contrast to the focus on the object of narration and the past which the terms *Väterliteratur* and *Mütterliteratur*, another such term, highlight. I myself coined the term ‘Großmütterliteratur’ or grandmother literature in an essay about contemporary German short stories by female authors, which also highlighted links and affinities with the genres of *Väter-* and

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<sup>2</sup> Sigrid Weigel, *Genea-Logik: Generation, Tradition und Evolution zwischen Kultur- und Naturwissenschaften* (München: Fink, 2006), in particular the section in chapter four entitled ‘Familiengeheimnisse und Phantombilder – verschüttete Spuren der Geschichte’, 90-93.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Fuchs, ‘The Tinderbox of Memory: Generation and Masculinity in *Väterliteratur* by Christoph Meckel, Uwe Timm, Ulla Hahn, and Dagmar Leupold’, in Anne Fuchs, Mary Cosgrove, Georg Grote, eds., *German Memory Contests: The Quest for Identity in Literature, Film, and Discourse since 1990* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006), 41-65:44.

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion of the difference between the two genres, see Mila Ganeva, ‘From West German *Väterliteratur* to Post-Wall *Enkelliteratur*: The End of the Generation Conflict in Marcel Beyer’s *Spione* and Tanja Dücker’s *Himmelskörper*’, *Seminar* 45/2 (2007), 149-162.

<sup>5</sup> Sigrid Weigel, ‘“Generation” as a Symbolic Form: On the Genealogical Discourse of Memory since 1945’, *The Germanic Review* 77/4 (2002), 264-277:271.

*Mütterliteratur*.<sup>6</sup> The two texts I have chosen to look at here, *Eine sehr kleine Frau* (2007) [*A Very Little Woman*] by Peter Hensch and Melitta Breznik's *Das Umstellformat* (2002) [*The Transfer Format*] can be categorised as grandmother literature.<sup>7</sup> Both centre on a shameful family secret concerning the narrator's grandmother. But in contrast to the typical *Vaterroman*, here the central protagonist, the grandmother, is not guilty of participation or collusion in crime, but rather has suffered under National Socialist criminal policies and the failure of other family members to properly acknowledge and remember what happened. The family members' persistent silence about the true, hidden Jewish identity of the grandmother in Hensch's *Eine sehr kleine Frau* and about the mental illness of the grandmother who fell victim to the Nazi euthanasia programme in Breznik's *Das Umstellformat* is a mode of collusion. In threatening to expunge the memory of the dead, such silence is a kind of symbolic second abuse or murder of a victim. The quotation from Kerstin Schneider's text at the head of this chapter warns of the dangers of bringing the dead back to life in memory. For such remembering is liable to be painful because the grandmothers in both texts are not only threatened or destroyed by a criminal regime but are also subject to the shameful silence of their family and the forgetfulness of later generations. The German expression 'totschweigen' catches something of this second crime of silence and forgetting. In retracing the grandmother's history through the detective work of excavating the truth, the two texts work towards a posthumous restoration of the identity of the dead grandmother by creating a literary memorial before living witnesses, namely the family members within the texts and the public readership of the texts. How far such atonement for silence and forgetting is effective will be for readers to judge.

Where the present-day framework in *Eine sehr kleine Frau* is 2006, Breznik's first-person narrator in *Das Umstellformat* reflects on the past from the perspective of 1998. In both works the narrator does not pass judgement, s/he listens but does not seek to blame, in contrast to the distanced tone of Hensch's earlier work and the predominantly accusatory stance of the *Väterbuch* genre. Both texts share in what

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<sup>6</sup> Petra M. Bagley, 'Granny Knows Best: The Voice of the Granddaughter in "Grossmütterliteratur"' in Heike Bartel, Elizabeth Boa, eds., *Pushing at Boundaries: Approaches to Contemporary German Women Writers from Karen Duve to Jenny Erpenbeck* (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2006), 151-165.

<sup>7</sup> Melitta Breznik, *Das Umstellformat* (München: Luchterhand, 2002). As yet there is no English translation of this book, hence all translations are my own. The book is dedicated to her mother who grew up in the Third Reich and lost her mother.

Susanne Luhmann sees as an interest in 'bridging the emotional distance that guilty family secrets have created between generations. The language is one of reconciliation and of integration.'<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, another point in common is that the search for identity by the later generation through remembering their elders still only occurs after the parent or grandparent has died, resulting in literary obituaries, albeit with an often larger cast of family members partaking in the silencing of the taboo subject-matter. Accordingly, for Henisch and Breznik writing involves delving deep into the family archive: Henisch's grandmother was born 1893 and died aged ninety-five; Breznik's grandmother was born 1896 and died aged forty-seven. Breznik's first-person narrator is a psychiatrist, who has spent three years collecting archival material in order to write her grandmother's story. Though both texts share a reconciliatory tendency in their approach to intergenerational relations, both also probe aspects of the criminal abuses of National Socialist policies, touching on different fields within the larger category of memorial literature: the fate of European Jewry in the case of Henisch's *Eine sehr kleine Frau* and the Nazi euthanasia programme in the case of Breznik's *Das Umstellformat*. Both also published earlier father memoirs which offer a useful foil towards setting the grandmother texts in context and clarifying the different aims of the later texts.

In writing *Eine sehr kleine Frau* in memory of his paternal grandmother, who was indeed short-statured, Peter Henisch addresses the stigmatising of and the silence about a Jewish background within the family. The cover jackets for the various German editions as well as for the English translation illustrate the unmistakable generational ties between Henisch as a baby in the arms of his grandmother and later as a young boy holding her hand as they went on one of their many walks through Vienna. As Linda de Merritt notes: 'For Henisch, questions of identity center on the absence or suppression of a Jewish heritage – within his family the denial of his Jewish ancestry and the Austrian silence concerning the atrocities committed against its once thriving community.'<sup>9</sup> De Merritt is commenting here on Henisch's father book, *Die kleine Figur meines Vaters* [*Negatives of my Father*],

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<sup>8</sup> Susanne Luhmann, 'Gender and the Generations of Difficult Knowledge: Recent Responses to Familial Legacies of Nazi Persecution', *Women in German Yearbook* 25 (2009), 174-198: 175.

<sup>9</sup> Linda C. de Merritt, 'Identity as Schizophrenia: The Autobiography of Peter Henisch', in Nicholas J. Meyerhofer, ed., *The Fiction of the I. Contemporary Austrian Writers and Autobiography* (Riverside, CA: Ariadne, 1999), 61-79: 64.

written just over three decades earlier than *Eine sehr kleine Frau*, but her comment applies equally to the later work.<sup>10</sup> For as De Merrit rightly suggests, Henisch's writing is akin to one continuous text due to the repeated return of the same figures and motifs from his life. The father novel and the later grandmother text are fictionalised autobiographies which draw heavily on Henisch's own memories of his father, Walter Henisch, a prominent war photographer for the National Socialist regime, and of his grandmother whose Jewish identity was hidden by the family even after the end of the war through to her death many years later. Both texts fictionalise the family history, but in different ways. In *Die kleine Figur meines Vaters* the son, an alter ego of the author, is an ostensibly autobiographical narrator but who freely mixes invention and fact. In *Eine sehr kleine Frau*, however, the author introduces a fictional sixty-three-year old, first-person narrator, ironically called Paul Spielmann, who reconstructs the grandmother's story, thus creating a more defined gap between author and narrator than in the earlier work. But unlike the many new young narrators of the third generation, this older grandchild had a very close relationship with the grandmother, in that the author draws on his own experiences and includes his own memories as well as those of his grandmother in the story which his intermediary, the narrator Paul Spielmann, tells:

Bei diesem neuen Buch *Eine sehr kleine Frau* ist es nur – bei aller Rückverbindung zu meinem Roman *Die kleine Figur* – darum gegangen, ein Neues zu machen und nicht ein Gleiches. Ich habe einen anderen Zugang zu dem verwandten Stoff gemacht, und dieser andere Zugang war der, dass ich einen Protagonisten eingeführt habe, durch dessen Bewusstsein die Geschichte gefiltert wird. Dieser Mann heisst nicht zufällig Paul Spielmann. Das ist die Spielfigur, mit der ich arbeite.<sup>11</sup>

[For this new book *A Very Little Woman* it was just about creating a new book and not an identical one – despite the re-connection with *Negatives*. I accessed familiar material in a different way, different in

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<sup>10</sup>The English translation is by Anne Close Ulmer, *Negatives of my Father* (Riverside, CA: Ariadne, 1990). This title emphasises the role of the father as photographer for the Nazis. The 2003 edition (the fourth edition) includes textual reworking plus reprints of a selection of his father's photographs. Walter Henisch's Jewish background is underlined by the inclusion of the Yiddish language, in particular Yiddish jokes.

<sup>11</sup> Volker Kankoreit, 'Zurück zu den familiären Wurzeln', *Deutschlandfunk*, (23 February 2008) <[http://www.deutschlandfunk.de/zurueck-zu-den-familiaeren-wurzeln.700.de.html?dram:article\\_id=83503](http://www.deutschlandfunk.de/zurueck-zu-den-familiaeren-wurzeln.700.de.html?dram:article_id=83503)> (accessed 12 January 2016).

that I introduced a protagonist and it's through his consciousness that the story is filtered. It's not by chance that this character is called Paul Spielmann. This is the character with which I playfully work.]

The playful approach goes along with a warm tone of affection for the grandmother in contrast to the ambiguous mix of fascination and distance between the narrating son and would-be writer from his father, the gifted photographer in the service of the National Socialist regime in the earlier work.

A survey of literary responses to the National Socialist destruction of European Jewry is beyond the scope of this chapter and Henisch's novel in any case stands in only oblique relation to the Holocaust in telling of the survival of a Jewish woman in the sheltering shadow of a family committed to the National Socialist regime. Breznik's novel belongs in a different context: the growing body of work, including historical research, life writing, and fiction, concerned with the Nazi euthanasia programme. Kerstin Schneider's *Maries Akte: Ein unglaublicher Kriminalfall*, quoted at the start of this chapter is a case in point. Schneider ignores the grandmother's advice to let the dead sleep in her memoir about her great aunt, Marie, who suffered from schizophrenia and was killed in the Nazi euthanasia programme as an 'unworthy life'. Or there is the website, created by Sigrid Falkenstein, who in 2003 came across the name of her aunt, Anna Lehnkering, on an online list of Nazi euthanasia victims and began to piece together her story using medical files, family photos, personal letters and interviews with her family. In 1940 Anna Lehnkering became one of the more than 10,000 people murdered at the Grafeneck mental institution in Southern Germany as part of the Nazi euthanasia programme. Four years earlier she had undergone coercive sterilisation after being diagnosed with 'hereditary feeble-mindedness'.<sup>12</sup> Public attention has increased ever since. Ulrike Oeter's commemorative installation, for example, forms part of a permanent exhibition at the museum of the psychiatric clinic of Bedbury-Hau in North-Rhine Westphalia, where Anna had been institutionalised at the age of nineteen. In 2012 Falkenstein published her memoir *Annas Spuren: Ein Opfer der NS-'Euthanasie'* [Traces of Anna: A Victim of Nazi Euthanasia]. In the same year the

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<sup>12</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Susanne C. Knittel, 'Beyond Testimony: Nazi Euthanasia and the Field of Memory Studies', in Rainer Schulze, ed., *The Holocaust in History and Memory 5: Euthanasia Killings. The Treatment of Disabled People in Nazi Germany and Disability since 1945* (2012), 85-101: 85.

German Medical Association issued a formal apology for its role in the mass murder, sterilisation, and medical experiments carried out on Jews and many other groups during the Third Reich.

For the Austrian psychiatrist and author, Melitta Breznik, herself the grandchild of a Nazi euthanasia patient, such an apology was long overdue. She recalls how at the 2010 congress of The German Society of Psychiatry, Psychotherapy and Neurology, she was suddenly moved to tears and overwhelmed by feelings of sorrow, anger and shame when the president acknowledged the responsibility of German psychiatrists for the crimes committed in the name of Nazi medicine and apologised for the suffering that the victims had endured:

Bezogen auf die Situation meiner in der Euthanasie ermordete Grossmutter taucht das Gefühl von Schuld ihrer Kinder und Angehörigen, also meiner Elterngeneration, in Form einer ständig wiederholten Formulierung auf 'Warum haben wir sie nicht vor dem Tod retten können?' Das Gefühl der Schuld ist auf Dauer. [...] Was Grossmutter nach ihrem Tod widerfuhr, ist beispielhaft für das Schweigen der Nachkriegszeit. Hier verbindet sich auf besondere Weise das Thema Schuld und Scham in den Familien.<sup>13</sup>

[With reference to the situation of my grandmother who was murdered by euthanasia, the feeling of guilt experienced by her children and relatives, that is my parents' generation, surfaces in the constantly repeated question "Why couldn't we save her from death?" This feeling of guilt is permanent. [...] What happened to grandmother after her death is exemplary of the silence after the war. The topic of guilt and shame are combined in a particular way in families.]

There has been a notable shift in public reaction and media reception of such memorial literature.<sup>14</sup> Both the crimes committed through the euthanasia programme

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<sup>13</sup> Melitta Breznik, 'Warum haben wir sie nicht retten können?', *Der Standard* (14 January 2012) <<http://derstandard.at/1326466468870/Warum-haben-wir-sie-nicht-retten-koennen>> (accessed 9 January 2016). In 2011 the German parliament decided to grant the victims of Nazi euthanasia equal status to those of other Nazi crimes. See Knittel, 'Beyond Testimony', 88ff.

<sup>14</sup> Hans-Ulrich Dapp's family memoir of his grandmother, *Emma Z: Ein Opfer der Euthanasie*, (Stuttgart: Evangelische Gesellschaft, 1990) for example, is out of print due to the lack of interest at the time.

and the silence around them have been the cause of feelings of guilt and shame among second post-war German and Austrian generations. But now the silence is being broken, as the stories of the victims of Nazi euthanasia, such as Falkenstein's aunt and Breznik's grandmother in *Das Umstellformat*, gain a place within Austrian and German memory discourses. In writing down these stories, the authors laboriously reconstruct factual evidence on the basis of medical files and photos in combination with family memories, often in the form of audio recordings. Such narratives 'colour in' what Breznik refers to as 'ein weißer Fleck in der Familiengeschichte' (46) [a gap in the history of the family]. In tracing their family history, the writers also act as genealogists.<sup>15</sup> The combination of oral and written evidence makes explicit the genealogy of the text, showing up the gap between archival research and the actual writing of the book.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, these authors also have to face up to mental illness in their family and come to terms with the possibility of it being hereditary. As Susanne Knittel points out, there is guilt that the family could not save the victim and guilt at keeping quiet, embarrassment about the stigma of mental illness as well as uncertainty about the actual nature of the illness. The story of mental illness is thus at once deeply personal and part of the history of the nation.<sup>17</sup> For Breznik, this painful mix of emotions is compounded by the fact that she is a practising psychiatrist, who is unable to provide a diagnosis in retrospect, yet who, because of her medical training, is responsible for breaking the silence over the fate of her maternal grandmother, so betraying a family secret.

Like Henisch, Breznik too wrote a father memoir *Nachtdienst [Night Duty]*<sup>18</sup> before portraying her maternal grandmother. In contrast to Henisch, however, her memoir was not about a father engaged or not-engaged in National Socialist crimes. Instead, she dissected her father's life in terms of their relationship in her role as a daughter and as a doctor, later as a pathologist.<sup>19</sup> This 1995 debut novel by a

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<sup>15</sup> For an in-depth explanation of generation and genealogy, see Weigel, *Genea-Logik*.

<sup>16</sup> This is a typical feature of third-generation authors writing about their grandparents, as Ulrike Schmitzer comments on the composition of her text, *Die gestohlene Erinnerung [The Stolen Memory]* (Vienna: Atelier, 2015) about the expulsion of the Danube Swabians. See Ulrike Schmitzer, 'Jeder kann Flüchtling sein', (7 July 2015) <<https://textlicht.wordpress.com/2015/07/07/jeder-kann-fluechtling-sein>> (accessed 12 January 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Knittel, 88.

<sup>18</sup> Translated into English by Roslyn Theobald as *Night Duty* (Hanover, NH: Steerforth, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> For further analysis, see Petra M Bagley, 'Exposing our Fathers: Alzheimer's and Alcoholism in an Austrian Setting', in Gisela Holfter, Marieke Krajenbrink, and Edward Moxon-Browne, eds., *Beziehungen und Identitäten: Österreich, Irland und die Schweiz* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), 241-254.



second-generation daughter is akin to an autopsy, where the writer re-examines her life and family in minutiae, and attempts to comprehend her love for her alcoholic father. The death of the father is the impetus for writing and the therapeutic aspect of articulating the sense of loss continues to be a feature of this father portrait. However, there is no conflict with patriarchal structures and no suggestions that Austrian society is still characterized by a fascist legacy. It is therefore all the more striking that Breznik's portrait of her grandmother, published in 2002, is very much about the National Socialist legacy and its impact on her family.

Breznik constructs her narrative on the basis of her grandmother's medical records, correspondence between her grandfather and the directors of various psychiatric institutions, as well as police reports from when the grandmother was first admitted to a psychiatric institution in 1935. As part of her research, Breznik and her eighty-year-old mother visit the four institutions in Hessen in 1998 where her grandmother was held, and thereafter she records on audio tape her mother's reactions to the trip and memories of her parents. In the same year, the first-person narrator makes a return visit to her host family in Norway, where she had spent a year on a school exchange. The alcoholic father in this Norwegian family turns out to have been a Nazi sympathiser, and in the present-day narrative his wife, suffering from Alzheimer's, is in another kind of institution, while his Austrian 'daughter' is working as a psychiatrist, caring for patients with mental issues. The composition of the story is reminiscent of the style of many of the *Väterbücher*, including Henisch's, in its use of archival sources and individual family memories. Of course, Breznik cannot draw on her own memories of her long-dead grandmother. Most noticeable is that this granddaughter does not pass overt judgement. The voices of her mother and Norwegian 'father' are cited directly in dialogue while we hear indirectly from the grandfather and the doctors of the thirties and forties via letters and medical notes. Breznik herself refers to her text as a 'Bericht' [report]: it reads as a factual account, suggestive of a case study.<sup>20</sup> Through recounting the events of the past and present, she is able to reach out to the grandmother she never knew. She also comes closer to her mother by visiting the various institutions and sharing the experience of the trip.

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<sup>20</sup> Breznik, 'Warum haben wir sie nicht retten können?'

A decade after the publication of *Das Umstellformat* in 2002, when awareness and public acknowledgement of the crimes of the Nazi euthanasia programme were growing, the professional psychiatrist Breznik expressed her anger and shame in public in an article for the Austrian newspaper *Der Standard*.<sup>21</sup> In effect, whereas the tone in Henisch's later text is loving towards the Jewish grandmother who survived compared with his earlier critical father memoir, Breznik moves in an opposite direction: although she passes no explicit judgements, her later text documents horrific official criminality and is more implicitly critical of shameful family secrecy and a Nazi father-figure compared with the relatively reconciliatory tone of her earlier text about an alcoholic father.

Turning now to look in more detail first at Henisch's text, the silence that surrounds certain family ancestors is key to *Eine sehr kleine Frau*. In stark contrast to his father memoir, the portrayal of the grandmother-grandson relationship by the fictional first-person narrator is extremely loving and affectionate and despite the distancing device of the fictional narrator, Paul Spielmann, the line between fact and fiction becomes so blurred that at one point the narrator poses the rhetorical question: 'Neige ich damit dazu, meine Großmutter zu idealisieren?' (214) [Am I tending to idealize my grandmother? (161).]<sup>22</sup> The grandmother is portrayed not only as under threat as someone of Jewish descent, but also as abused within the family: deserted when pregnant by her first husband and then controlled by her second husband, until his demise in the arms of a prostitute on New Year's Eve, 1938, just before Austria's *Anschluss*, she is subject outside of the family to the patriarchal power structures of the Third Reich. Here the oppressed woman's role takes the form of 'schuldlose Schuld' [guiltless guilt].<sup>23</sup> The fact that Marta Prinz (born Glück) is of Jewish descent is kept quiet by the family and regarded as a taboo subject, until Paul Spielmann begins to write the story of his grandmother. Worth noting here is that Henisch had toyed with the title of *Die arisierte Frau* [The Aryanised Woman] which would have immediately drawn attention to the historical context of the family's

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<sup>21</sup> Breznik, 'Warum haben wir sie nicht retten können?'

<sup>22</sup> Peter Henisch, *Eine sehr kleine Frau* (Vienna: Deuticke, 2007), 214 and translated into English by Craig Decker as *A Very Little Woman* (Riverside, CA: Ariadne, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Anna Rutka, 'Es war einmal eine kleine Frau: Genealogische Erkundungen in Peter Henischs Großmutter-Roman *Eine sehr kleine Frau* (2007)', in Joanna Drynda, ed., *Zwischen Aufbegehren und Anpassung: Poetische Figurationen von Generationen und Generationserfahrungen in der österreichischen Literatur* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012), 185-197: 195.

conversion to Catholicism at the start of the early twentieth century, rather than the more personal description, where the grandmother's small stature is clearly inherited by her son, as indicated in the title of Henisch's father memoir. She is also made to feel symbolically small by the power dynamics evident in her second marriage: 'Vielleicht hatte er ja recht. Er war der Mann. Sie war nur eine Frau' (182) [Maybe he was right. He was the man. She was just a woman (138).]

Due to the device of a fictional first-person narrator, Henisch's work reads as a piece of fiction. Paul Spielmann tells us about his grandmother's life in Vienna before and after two world wars, as well as his own upbringing undertaken predominantly by his grandmother, before his sudden departure for America immediately after her funeral twenty years earlier. The fictional narrator regularly incorporates the fairy tale structure of 'once upon a time', reminiscent of a grandmother telling her grandson fairy tales; the first story he remembers her telling is *Sleeping Beauty*. Touches of humour add lightness to the narration, especially various references to how small the grandmother was: when she wanted to see films in the cinema, she would have to take two phone books with her to sit on in order to see the screen. The author could be criticised for making light of the impact of National Socialism on everyday life, but as readers we are encouraged to believe that these are the thoughts of an apparently apolitical, naive grandmother: she hears Hitler's voice on the radio and compares him to a barking dog; she describes the Nazis as too loud and too numerous; she is particularly annoyed when they throw stink bombs into her favourite department store. Such a seemingly (faux)-naive perspective is a characteristic weapon of satire. The humour transforms the grandmother from victim into a survivor with the gift of cunning. The grandson's admiration for the woman's survival skills is evident throughout: she contrived to survive the Third Reich by denying her Jewish ancestry via falsified birth certificates and by sheltering under her second husband's reputation as a National Socialist. By the end of the novel the fictional element reaches a climax in an ironic twist of fate as the grandson discovers an unused one-way plane ticket for Jerusalem made out to his grandmother, a present to herself for her ninety-fifth birthday. Two days before she had passed away after slipping on black ice, so that tragically she never succeeded in making public something that she and her relatives had kept hidden, namely her true identity.

Turning now to *Das Umstellformat*, Breznik accesses public history through the lens of an individual family story which reveals the powerlessness of patients treated by psychiatrists during Nazi rule and the horrific extent of psychiatric abuse. Breznik's grandmother was killed in the decentralised phase of the euthanasia programme. As Susanne Knittel explains, 'After 1941, the killings continued in a decentralised manner, and over 200,000 people were killed by lethal injection or starvation at more than one hundred institutions throughout Germany and Austria'.<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, Breznik gives voice to her grandmother, known only by her initials B.S. from the medical file, in the one word which the author makes ultra-prominent as the title of the memoir: *Das Umstellformat*. Her supposedly schizophrenic grandmother coined and repeatedly used throughout her eight years in psychiatric clinics this otherwise unknown word that appears in no dictionary. To date, no English translation exists and without doubt, translating the title proves a challenge, because even within context the reader is left perplexed. In this way the confusion of the patient facing an incomprehensible world is transferred to the reader faced with an incomprehensible word.

The word first appears in the police files of August 1935, when the thirty-nine-year-old wife and mother of a fifteen-year old girl turns up at the police station and in her moment of madness she describes the mysterious 'Umstellformat' as a pact with the devil from whom she wanted to rescue a childhood friend. By way of extension the word becomes an ominous force that a person has to serve, such as judges, the police, and doctors. And eventually through hypnosis the word is able to lure and ensnare its victims. As the grandmother's mental state deteriorates, the word thus becomes ever more threatening. This one unique word comes to define the grandmother as her key utterance. Its significance is emphasised by its prominence as both the title and as the last word of the story, indeed, the mysterious word lends the grandmother, the seemingly helpless victim, a kind of communicative power over the reader. In her role as psychiatrist, the granddaughter utters the word very slowly to one of her female patients, as she indicates with her hands to wait ten more minutes. As Eva Kuttentberg notes: "Das rätselhafte Wort wird dabei zwei Generationen später zur Brücke zwischen Vergangenheit und Gegenwart,

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<sup>24</sup> Susanne C. Knittel, 'Autobiography, Moral Witnessing and the Disturbing Memory of Nazi Euthanasia', in Stephanie Bird, Mary Fulbrook, Julia Wagner and Christiane Wienand, eds., *Reverberations of Nazi Violence in Germany and Beyond. Disturbing Pasts* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 65-81: 68.

Großmutter und Enkelin beziehungsweise Patientin und Ärztin”.<sup>25</sup> [Thus two generations later this enigmatic word becomes a bridge between the past and the present, grandmother and granddaughter, as well as patient and doctor.] Breznik has suggested that her grandmother was perhaps not really so mad at all, the powerful word conveys her perception of a truth: the tightening grip of Nazi institutions.<sup>26</sup> 'Das Umstellformat', one might say 'conversion code', has undertones of *Gleichschaltung*, the Nazi policy of totalitarian control of all social institutions. She also believes that it is not a coincidence that traditionally clairvoyants are known to have suffered with schizophrenia.<sup>27</sup> The explanation does not answer the problem of translation, of course, especially since the granddaughter adopts the term in her clinic, so that a word which was once associated with a particular historical moment of total disaster could be modernised into a 'transfer form' and so the word itself is transformed for use in a new more hopeful time.

The book jacket for *Das Umstellformat* depicts a faceless woman who looks disorientated and in the text the police and the doctors refer to the woman as Frau B.S., thereby removing her individuality under the guise of confidentiality. The book jacket and the reduction of a name to initials both underline the representative nature of the story which conveys the de-personalisation of victims en masse during the Third Reich. After her death from a supposed heart attack, the remaining family members shroud the dead woman in secrecy, so protecting themselves from the stigma of mental illness. The trigger for the story is the one and only photo that the narrator possesses of her grandmother, taken on the first day she was admitted and dressed in a hospital gown. The photo thus encapsulates the transformation from wife and mother to patient. It makes visible her *Umstellung*, to deploy the grandmother's term. Whilst we the readers see no face, the narrator's mother points out the extent to which her daughter facially resembles her grandmother. On the one hand, the photo remains a private family possession, since it is not put on the cover jacket, on the other hand, the grandmother's story does become public property: the

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<sup>25</sup> Eva Kuttenturg, 'Geschichte, Fallgeschichte und Narratologie: Melitta Brezniks *Das Umstellformat*', *Seminar* 47/5 (2011), 604-623: 617.

<sup>26</sup> Cornelia Niedermeier, 'Aufmerksamkeit als Programm', *Der Standard* (24 February 2003) <<http://derstandard.at/1220972/Aufmerksamkeit-als-Programm>> (accessed 11 January 2017).

<sup>27</sup> *idem*.

personal story of mental illness becomes part of the national story of Austria and Germany.

Where a photo is the trigger for memory work in *Das Umstellformat*, in *Eine sehr kleine Frau*, a piano is the trigger. In this way, both texts self-reflexively emphasise the act of writing through a key object. On his return to Vienna from Maine, where he had been a professor of literature for twenty years, the narrator sees a Bösendorfer grand piano in an antiques' shop. For him the similarity to the piano his grandmother had bought as a retirement gift and then, as he later discovers, sold to buy the plane ticket to Israel, brings back the memories of how he used to sit under the piano listening to her play, hence the novel ends with the adult sitting with his eyes closed under the piano.<sup>28</sup> The motivation to write down his grandmother's story is inspired by the piano and ends twenty years of having no longer wanted to write, while teaching in America. The narrator and the author had both inherited from the grandmother a love of classical music, but perhaps more importantly a passion for literature:<sup>29</sup>

Auf jenen Spaziergängen durch das zerbombte Wien, seine verwilderten Gärten und Parks, erzählte mir die Großmutter so gut wie alles, das sie seit ihrer Jungmädchenzeit gelesen hatte. [...] Es stimmt, diese Großmutter und der Einfluss, den sie auf mich genommen hat, ist schon Teil meines persönlichen Mythos'. Aber im Mythos ist ja alles begründet. Im Mythos, und sei es der persönliche, findet man die Anfänge.<sup>30</sup>

[During those walks through bombed Vienna, its overgrown gardens and parks, grandmother used to tell me all about what she had read

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<sup>28</sup> Henisch may have been familiar with a poem by D.H. Lawrence, entitled 'Piano' (1918), in which the son recalls sitting under the piano whilst his mother sings and plays.

<<http://unix.cc.wmich.edu/~cooneys/poems/dhl.piano.html>> (accessed 16 January 2016).

<sup>29</sup> The grandmother sought escape through fiction, including *Gone with the Wind*, *Jane Eyre* and *Grand Hotel*. Paul Spielmann is likewise escaping reality by writing the book about his grandmother and avoiding the present-day reality of a hospital visit.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Henisch, "'Ich habe meine Gründe": Zum 150. Todestag von Heinrich Heine' (2006), *Peter Henisch. Außenseiter aus Passion. Texte zu Politik, Literatur und Gesellschaft aus vier Jahrzehnten* (Vienna: Sonderzahl, 2013), 159-162. This first appeared in *die Furche*, 16 February 2006. Reference to the walks with his grandmother as well as the historical and political period are mentioned a number of years earlier in a poem by Henisch, entitled *Heldenplatz* [Heroes' Square]: See Peter Henisch, *Zwischen allen Sesseln. Geschichten, Gedichte, Entwürfe, Notizen, Statements 1965-1982* (Vienna: Hannibal 1982), 57ff.

from when she was a young girl. [...] It's true that this grandmother and the influence she had on me is indeed part of my personal myth. But everything is grounded in myth. The beginnings are to be found in myth, and even if it personal].

Attempting to get to the truth is pivotal to both of the texts, the impulse for which is linked to a familiar object, a photograph in *Das Umstellformat*, the piano in *Eine sehr kleine Frau*. In *Eine sehr kleine Frau* the gift of story-telling is passed on from grandmother to grandson and the role of story-teller is reversed, thereby achieving intergenerational closeness.<sup>31</sup> In the case of Breznik's novel, there is an urgency to create a literary memorial before the living family witnesses and their memories are gone for good. The granddaughter inherits her grand-mother's linguistic creation; her unspoken worry is that she has also inherited a propensity for psychological illness. Traditionally, grandmothers are known for their wise comments, one of which the grandson in *Eine sehr kleine Frau* recalls: 'Über Verstorbene soll man nichts Schlechtes reden' (90) [You shouldn't say bad things about the deceased (66)], advice that Henisch did not heed when he wrote his father memoir. Ultimately, the grandchildren make up for the past failings of their families by ensuring through narrative mixing of fact and fiction that their grandmother's story is no longer hidden and ignored:

Die Geschichte wird in lauter kleine Geschichten aufgeteilt. Mal wird das erzählt, mal was anderes. [...] Es ist alles wie ein großes Puzzle. Irgendwann fragt man sich: was war denn da eigentlich los?<sup>32</sup>

[The story is divided into lots of little stories. Sometimes one thing is said, sometimes another. [...] It's all like a big puzzle. At some point you ask yourself: what did actually go on there?]

How to transmit the reality of the Third Reich to later generations, how to turn such enormity into narrative, is a perennial dilemma for historians, writers, film-makers and artists. One way to bring the past alive is to tell little stories about families which seek to reconstruct in detail, based on a mix of historical evidence and personal

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<sup>31</sup> In Henisch's novel *Schwarzer Peter* (2000), the doting grandmother's love for her grandchild expresses itself in her frequent storytelling. She also tries to teach him to play the piano.

<sup>32</sup> Schmitzer, *Die gestohlene Erinnerung*, 181.

memory, what happened to individuals. Such life-writing may draw to a lesser or greater degree on emotional empathy and imaginative invention to supplement material evidence while also reflecting on the changing processes of memory and remembering as witness testimony and communicative memory give way with passing of generations to cultural memory.<sup>33</sup> The two texts discussed here take the path of little stories. Along with seeking to uncover painful truths, both refuse to reduce the grandmothers to the status of victims. Hensch offers a darkly comic account of survival through cunning. Paradoxically, his little grandmother is a powerful embodiment of the will to survive against the odds. Even more strikingly, Breznik's schizophrenic murdered grandmother finds a word that becomes emblematic of a bureaucratic regime. The word, itself mysterious, robs the system of mystery and reduces it to a meaningless formula. This word of a dead grandmother speaks across time, via bureaucratic paperwork, to the living granddaughter who appropriates the word in her own professional practice and spreads it abroad to the reading public.

By way of conclusion, I would like to emphasise the figure of the powerful grandmother in popular tradition by looking back yet again at the quotation heading this chapter with its grandmotherly warning against wakening the dead. It comes from the prologue, entitled 'Der Fluch' [The Curse], to Kerstin Schneider's family narrative, *Maries Akte: Ein unglaublicher Kriminalfall*. This is the title of the e-book. The print version has a different subtitle, *Das Geheimnis einer Familie*. Accordingly, the two versions in English would read as either 'Marie's File: An Unbelievable Criminal Case' or 'Marie's File: The Family Secret'. Both subtitles are applicable to many recent German and Austrian family novels, and certainly to the two I have discussed here. Kerstin Schneider chooses to ignore the advice of her grandmother in her text about two great aunts. Her own great aunt, Marie, suffered from schizophrenia and was killed in the Nazi euthanasia programme as an 'unworthy life'. Two further generations back, Marie's great aunt saw the mother of God in a vision and became venerated by the Catholic church. In folklore St. Anne, mother of

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<sup>33</sup> See Friederike Eigler, *Gedächtnis und Geschichte in Generationenromanen seit der Wende* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2005), in particular chapters one and two for a helpful survey of memory discourse and different theories of communicative and cultural memory. See also Aleida Assmann, *Geschichte im Gedächtnis: Von der individuellen Erfahrung zur öffentlichen Inszenierung* (Munich: Beck, 2007) on the temporal shifts in German memory culture.



the Virgin Mary and grandmother of Jesus, represents the figure of the powerful grandmother. A popular late medieval image of St. Anne was the grouping known in German as Anna Selbdritt. This presents a maternal version of the Trinity: Anne is seated in a position recalling God the Father on his throne, with the young Virgin Mary on her knee, holding the infant Jesus, who is trying to keep hold of a lamb. Leonardo Da Vinci's painting of this trio inspired the German sculptor Nadine Rennert's life size group of three linked naked figures, made of polyester wool, sitting on each other's lap with the child holding the mask of a sheep. The three figures wear the same expressionless mask of white plastic, with the grandmother's hands reaching deep into the back of her daughter, as her hands reach forward into her child. Interviewed in 2009, Rennert explained how Da Vinci's painting had affected her:

I loved how he stapled together three generations, bonding them in a single movement. I wanted to transform this idea into sculpture, to explore the influence of the past, showing how older generations continue to influence us. I also wanted to explore the mystical side of family relationships.<sup>34</sup>

The sculpture works through abstraction to capture the closely-knit family nexus and conveys how the generations cannot or will not let go of each other. The stories Henisch and Breznik tell are not abstract, they are full of historical information about the Nazi past, of familiar details about individual families, of personal memories and reflections on writing. But in refusing to reduce a little Jewish grandmother and murdered grandmother to victims, they too convey the strength of the ties across generations between grandmothers and grandchildren.

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<sup>34</sup> Nadine Rennert was interviewed by Rory MacLean in February 2009 for the Goethe Institut. <<http://www.goethe.de/ins/gb/lp/prj/mtg/men/kun/ren/enindex.htm>> (accessed 4 January 2016).

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