

CHAPTER 1

Refuge or Exile? Searching for a New Home

As the son of recent immigrants, I sensed from a young age that my family and its history were fragmented. It was an inchoate sensation, tinged with sadness, and made more real by photographs that chronicled my parents' journey from afar. During my childhood these images provided me with a means to understand my mother's longing for her family and my father's status as a newcomer in his adopted country. I knew that my parents had left a community and culture behind, perhaps even a place that had once offered them a feeling of belonging. Germany was the location of their early lives and of difficult childhoods shaped by war. I learned of this history through the stories my parents told and the memories they shared. I was aware that their emigration could be connected to the Second World War and its aftermath, but it would take time to unravel the formative events and longer still to grasp their forbidding meaning.

Tales of immigration to the "new world" often focus on untold possibility, ocean crossings that are full of promise. The voyage can appear manifestly different when it is the result of historical trauma, when fleeing for one's life and finding a new home follow the destruction of the old or the loss of all that is familiar. In the wake of the Holocaust and the devastation of war, paths of immigration provided avenues of hope. But for many the memory of traumas in Europe would reach across time and place, connecting the old world with the new and the past with the present.

The legacy of the Third Reich is especially evident in North America. Following the war, the United States and Canada welcomed the highest number of Holocaust survivors outside of Israel. After the horrors they had experienced, these European Jewish refugees often struggled to integrate

into a different culture and North American Jewish communities. They contended with the challenge of new lives amid recollections of unimaginable loss. Families had been torn asunder, whole communities ruthlessly murdered. Those who survived the ghettos and concentration camps had experienced indescribable suffering, death marches, and the devastation of all they once knew. Following the war they lived as refugees in “displaced persons” camps, waiting for a chance to begin anew. Although they would travel halfway around the world, they could not escape traumatic memories that remained imprinted upon them.

In what can only be described as a cruel twist of history, North America also became the terminus for a wave of postwar immigration from Germany, the very nation that was the cause of the terror and trauma that the European Jewish refugees sought to leave behind. The shifting geopolitics of the postwar world meant that the Soviet Union was now the enemy, and Germany had become a friend. Some of the German immigrants were from the generation of perpetrators and bystanders, but most, like my parents, were descendants of the first generation, having been children or young adults during the war. They looked for opportunity abroad following experiences of displacement and dislocation. Some sought to evade history. Others wanted only to forget. All sought shelter from the physical ruin and emotional scarring of the war.

The fact that so few Holocaust survivors remained in Germany and so many Germans chose to live abroad points to the relevance of examining memory and trauma beyond the boundaries of present-day Germany. The two groups of immigrants were linked by a terrible history, a paradoxical connection that captures what Dan Diner (1986) meant by a “negative symbiosis” in German and Jewish life after the Holocaust. The juxtaposition of Holocaust survivors and postwar German immigrants was particularly poignant in Canada. In light of Canada’s comparatively small population at the time, each had a considerable impact on the growth and composition of existing communities.

My discussion begins by examining the immigration narrative of Eva Hoffman and her family, who in 1959 reached Vancouver, the same city to which my parents had immigrated a year earlier. Despite its distance from Europe, Vancouver became a microcosm of the dynamics at work in the formation and maintenance of memory in the decades after the war. I counterpoise Hoffman’s autobiographical account with my own family immigration narrative to illustrate how Holocaust survivors and postwar Germans each sought shelter from the past and the memories they carried with them. That Hoffman’s family and my parents would find their way to Vancouver was not obvious given the social forces of the

time. Canada's staunch anti-Jewish immigration policy and its long war to defeat Germany seemed to work against the arrival of these different groups of Europeans in a decidedly Anglo-Saxon city located on the edge of the Pacific Ocean. As Hoffman says of the city, prior to her family's arrival there: "We only know that Vancouver is very far away" (Hoffman, 1989, p. 99).

Once in Vancouver, Holocaust survivors and postwar German immigrants often lived side by side, leading to interactions that reveal the emotional nature of memory and its intergenerational transmission. The two groups developed inherently related yet radically separate narrative trajectories that were dominated by the struggle to belong. The ability to remember the past and commemorate its traumas came later. The decades following the Second World War were the so-called latency phase of memory, when the Holocaust was often met with outward silence, if not denial. The lack of social discourse about the Holocaust resulted in a generalized avoidance of the past, but it did not lessen the emotional burden of the traumas for affected individuals and their families. It would take more than three decades for Holocaust memories to become part of a common culture of remembrance in both North America and Germany, leading to the establishment of memorials and museums and to sustained reflection on the meaning of trauma.

BETWEEN HOPE AND DESPONDENCY

Many countries refused to provide shelter for Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany and Europe, but Canada did less than most, allowing only 5,000 to enter between 1933 and 1945. Some refugees came before the start of the war, while others were granted temporary permits late in the war. The remaining number, some 2,000 male Jewish Germans, Austrians, and Italians, were sent by Great Britain to Canada in 1940. They had been classified in England as "friendly enemy aliens," but upon arriving in Canada were deemed to be "enemy aliens" and placed in prisoner of war camps. Not only did they endure the emotional pain and indignity of incarceration, they were also forced to live in camps with German prisoners of war.¹ Thus, while the Holocaust was unfolding across Europe, Jewish refugees to Canada were placed on an equal footing with Nazi persecutors by a country that was meant to provide them a safe haven. Canadian authorities were soon informed that they had received innocent refugees, rather than enemy aliens, but it would take until 1943 for all of the interned refugees to find new homes.

The extent of Canada's shameful, discriminatory policy toward Jewish refugees from Europe was revealed by the Canadian historians Irving Abella and Harold Troper. The title of their book, *None Is Too Many*, refers to a statement made by a senior Canadian government official in 1945 when he was asked how many of the refugees would be allowed into Canada after the war. At the time the government of Prime Minister Mackenzie King saw the acceptance of large numbers of Jewish refugees as a threat to Canadian society, and many Canadians viewed them as being "inassimilable."² This prejudicial attitude was fed by anti-Semitic caricatures of European Jews living insular lives in tiny rural villages.³ In fact, Jewish communities in interwar Europe were largely urban and sophisticated. Even when the war ended and the full evidence of the death camps became clear, there was no immediate lifting of immigration barriers.⁴ In 1947, facing mounting pressure from a debate over Canada's role in accepting people displaced by the war, as well as a growing economic need for more immigrants, King finally announced a change in Canadian policy. Once the Canadian government eased immigration regulations and instituted antidiscrimination laws, thousands of Jewish refugees waiting in Europe's displaced persons camps could begin their journey.

From 1947 to 1955 approximately 35,000 Holocaust survivors and their dependents entered Canada, though many more requests were denied.⁵ Their primary destinations were Montreal and Toronto, cities that had the largest and most established Jewish communities in Canada. Vancouver's Jewish community, which had grown in size through diverse immigration in the decades leading up to the war, also welcomed increasing numbers. In 1948 the first groups of Jewish refugees, including orphaned children, arrived in Vancouver. Initially some five hundred documented Holocaust survivors (not including dependents) found their way to Vancouver, and there would be many more who did not self-identify with the community of survivors. Indeed, Holocaust survivors were a highly diverse group, as reflected in their different levels of religiosity, education, and countries of origin. Those who arrived after the war also had different experiences and expectations than those who stayed in Europe and arrived in the late 1950s and 1960s.

In her autobiographical memoir *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, Eva Hoffman (1989) provides a glimpse into a post-Holocaust immigration narrative. She devotes the central part of her memoir to her arrival in Vancouver in 1959. Hoffman's early life took place in Poland. She was born in Cracow in 1945 to parents whose families were murdered in the Holocaust. Hoffman grew up hearing about her parents' harrowing struggle to survive, a legacy of trauma that was passed down to her. Her

parents' survival had depended on the Polish and Ukrainian peasants who were willing to help. They hid first in a forest bunker and then lay concealed in a peasant's attic among the hay bales, cold, shivering, and always hungry. The risk of being caught never diminished and Hoffman's parents were betrayed several times. They ultimately survived because of the courage shown by a few individuals.

When the war ended, the region in which Hoffman's parents lived became part of the Soviet Union, and they fled to the Polish city of Cracow. Hoffman describes her childhood in Cracow in idealistic terms. Their lives were not easy, but they were part of a community of individuals who had also suffered and together created a new life amid the memories of trauma and loss. With the rise of anti-Semitism in Poland, the family was ultimately forced to leave. A contact in Vancouver encouraged them to move to Canada, which was hardly an obvious choice. Most Holocaust survivors preferred to go to Israel or the United States. Canada became the third destination, though its name was already familiar to some by way of a tragic association. In Auschwitz, the Germans had named the warehouse where the belongings of new arrivals were confiscated and sorted "Kanada."

Hoffman's identity, indeed her life history, was marked not only by the events of the Holocaust, but also by the experience of immigration at the age of 13. She arrived in Vancouver in 1959 in a state of utter confusion and desolation at the loss of her childhood home in Cracow, forced to start anew in a foreign language and strange city. Hoffman devotes the second section of her memoir, entitled "Exile," to her time in Vancouver, the period between her idealized portrayal of her childhood in Cracow, "Paradise," and her subsequent emigration to the United States, "The New World," where she pursues the life of a New York intellectual.

Hoffman's arrival in Canada begins in Montreal, following a voyage by ship from Poland. The subsequent train ride to Vancouver introduces her to the natural landscapes for which Canada is known, but which she sees only as "vast, dull and formless" (Hoffman, 1989, p. 100). Even the majestic and rugged mountains in the west are "too forbidding," the result of which is that "they hurt my eyes—they hurt my soul" (Hoffman, 1989, p. 100). For the young Hoffman, the contrast between the familiar world she has left behind and that which is unknown is too vast to comprehend. The eventual arrival in Vancouver is described as "a bit of nowhere" in which "everything is the colour of slate," sheer "bleakness" (Hoffman, 1989, p. 101). Hoffman is describing the soul of the immigrant who has been thrown into a radically unfamiliar environment, whose state of being is characterized by loss and longing for the familiar. Whereas her father looks with optimism to

the possibilities of a new life in this faraway city, Hoffman seems to become the keeper of that which has been lost and left behind.

Hoffman's portrayal of Vancouver is unsettling, and her descriptions of the cityscape and its natural setting are colored by despondency. Her interactions with the Polish-Jewish community in Vancouver cannot replace what she has left behind. She describes Vancouverites as "a different species" who live in houses with interiors that "seem oddly flat, devoid of imagination" (Hoffman, 1989, p. 102). Nor can she identify with Vancouver's natural beauty: "It is the prevailing opinion of humankind that [Vancouver's natural setting] is beautiful, breathtaking. But my soul does not go out to these spectacular sights, which rejected me, because I reject them. . . . [T]hese mountains look like a picture postcard to me, something you look at rather than enter, and on the many cloudy days they enclose Vancouver like gloomy walls" (Hoffman, 1989, p. 134).

The trauma of immigration and emptiness she feels overwhelms her. But there is another dimension to Hoffman's experience that remains unspoken, if not altogether unsayable. Her depiction of Vancouver as a place of "vast emptiness," "silence," and "blankness" coincides with the sense of a memory hole that can afflict the children of Holocaust survivors.⁶ In fact, there is little mention of the Holocaust in Hoffman's memoir, and it appears only toward the end of the book's narrative arc. Hoffman describes visiting her parents after she has moved to the United States. Sitting at the kitchen table, her mother reveals a previously unknown family memory. Hoffman's mother tells a story about how her father's sister and nephew were exposed to the Germans by a man who was attempting to save the lives of his own family. While Hoffman's aunt survived, German soldiers murdered her son. As Hoffman observes:

All this time I have done my father the injustice of not knowing this story, and now I can hardly bear to hear it. . . . Indecent to imagine, indecent not to imagine. Indecent not to say anything to my parents, indecent to say anything at all: pity is too small for this. We stop, and go on to talk about something else, in normal tones. Later, in the upstairs bedroom with the powder pink wallpaper, I see the scene after all, and thinking of its weight on my father's soul, I allow myself to cry. (1989, pp. 252–253)

Hoffman acknowledges the power of these memories to "overshadow everything else, put the light of the world right out" (1989, p. 253). These memories haunt Hoffman, though they are not her own. She has become the inheritor of her parents' traumas, a state of "postmemory" that characterizes her life as a second-generation Holocaust survivor.⁷ Her parents

remain behind in Vancouver, and she returns to a life of optimism in “The New World.” Yet as Hoffman’s later works reveal, there was ultimately no way to escape her parents’ Holocaust memories, which by extension had become her own.⁸

BEGINNINGS

My history and that of my family is profoundly different from Hoffman’s, bound up in Germany’s war of aggression and the perpetration of the Holocaust. At the same time, Hoffman’s narration of a life between two cultures, of inherited memories of trauma and loss, and of the long journey from central Europe to Vancouver, is strangely familiar to me. I am hesitant to make too much of this familiarity lest I be seen as creating equivalence in our experiences. In the wake of the Holocaust any attempt to create equivalency between German and Jewish experiences must be questioned, because it neglects Germany’s moral accountability and effaces its history of perpetration. My concern is to show that the descendants of victims and perpetrators are each forced to contend with legacies of trauma and violence from their respective historical positions. In this sense the losses and dislocations experienced by my parents have shaped the memories I carry with me today.

What I remember is both a reflection of my childhood participation in immigrant German communities in Canada as well as the historical trajectory of the German family to which I belong. I want to provide an account of my family’s history as I have learned it through the stories that were shared and more directly through interactions with family members in Germany when I was a child. My grandparents are no longer alive, and I have become a holder of their memories. These memories, like my own, were formed in particular historical and cultural contexts. The chapters that follow examine those contexts; here I set myself the task of recalling the inherited memories and lived history that constitute my parents’, and by extension my own, immigration narrative.

My father traveled to Vancouver by way of a stormy ocean voyage in a ship full of European immigrants, all hoping to find a new life of promise. His lengthy train journey from Montreal to the west coast was interrupted by a train derailment somewhere in the prairies, the overturned train cars adding yet more days to an already bewildering experience. Upon arriving in Vancouver he was met at the train station by someone from the German community and began the life of an immigrant. Six months later he borrowed one of the large American cars of the time and picked up my

mother from the airport. Together they struggled to learn a new language and, like so many other immigrants, find a sense of belonging in an utterly foreign place.

Given the long and bitter war with Germany, Canadians were understandably wary of German immigration. The anti-German sentiment that swept Canada during the First World War had been quickly reawakened at the start of the Second World War. When the war ended, the revelation of Nazi atrocities strengthened suspicions, making the image of the “bad German” difficult to elude. Canada’s economic need for new immigrants, together with Germany’s changing status in the postwar world, eventually led to the readmission of German nationals in 1950. The pent-up desire among postwar Germans to leave their country created a wave of immigration that totaled almost a quarter million by the early 1960s. Vancouver became a common destination, and eventually there were some 50,000 postwar German immigrants to the city.⁹ Becoming Canadian provided many Germans with a means to escape the past and leave difficult memories behind. For most, the push toward assimilation was strong.

For my father Vancouver was a new and exciting world, the unfamiliar landscape, mountains, and wilderness beckoning to be explored, a welcome solace from the physical and emotional desolation of his childhood years. Vancouver came to symbolize an opening up of future possibility and a demarcation from his past. For my mother the manicured beauty, symmetrical layout, and wealth of the city were disorienting. The disparity between Vancouver and the wartime destruction of Hanover was hard to make sense of. The loss of home and culture gave way to nostalgia, a melancholy longing for that which had been left behind.

The longing for what had been was connected to the wish to return to the relative innocence of the time before the war. I say “relative” because both my parents were born in 1935. Their early childhood spanned the years of the Third Reich, the face of Hitler emblazoned on the stamps my father collected as a child. While they were shielded from the turbulence of the time, it was an illusory refuge from the massive loss of life and destruction to follow. As I gaze at the early black-and-white photographs of their childhood, I can’t help but wonder about the lives of countless Jewish children throughout Europe who would be ruthlessly murdered in the Nazi regime’s reign of terror. The photographs of those children look no different than the photos of my parents. They were killed in concentration camps or executed by gunfire with their families outside towns and villages. Those who survived were sent abroad in the so-called *Kindertransporte*, distraught parents depositing their children on trains destined for safe havens in the desperate hope of keeping them out of the Nazis’ reach. My parents spent

their childhoods seemingly unaware of the plight of their Jewish neighbors. But for my father and mother alike the war would prove formative, resulting in the loss of their childhood homes and the security of family.

Wartime childhoods meant that adolescence occurred in the midst of a ruined cityscape and postwar deprivation. During the first half of the 1950s, before the so-called economic miracle in Germany, the prospect of future opportunity was dim. My parents met during this time while each was completing an apprenticeship in Hanover. My father received a position at the accounting firm to which his father had belonged, while my mother trained as a purchaser in a department store. Attending university in Germany was not an option for them, though the opportunity presented itself later in Canada. My parents worked in the bombed-out center of the city, which was slowly being reconstructed. Together they made a plan to immigrate to Canada, which had become a major destination for postwar Germans searching for a new home. Emigration was motivated by economic need, but was equally defined by the wish for a place free of destruction and reminders of painful childhoods.

My parents' different accounts of immigrant life and the contrast between their impressions of Vancouver are a reflection of their early experiences. Whereas my father said little about the past, my mother openly shared her memories. From a young age I tried to imagine what their lives must have been like as children. What I learned filled me with anxiety. My father was six years old when his own father died in early 1942, killed by shrapnel while fighting on the Russian front south of Moscow. Following his death my father lived with his mother and younger sister in the house provided by the company that had employed my grandfather. However, in 1944 they were suddenly made homeless. A German soldier who was guarding forced laborers discovered my grandmother giving food to a prisoner.¹⁰ In retribution, she lost the job that had enabled her to provide for her children. The family was ordered to leave the house in which my father had grown up, a place associated with his absent father. After a frantic search for housing, the three of them spent the remainder of the war and the immediate postwar period in shared rooms in a neighboring town, where they were watched over by a local Nazi leader. My grandmother sought to make ends meet, and her need for work during the challenging postwar years led her to go wherever she could find it. She took my young aunt with her, while my father went to live with a series of relatives in different parts of the country.

During the war my paternal grandfather's family struggled with loss. My grandfather was the eldest in a family of five children consisting of four boys and one girl, who was the youngest. The family owned a sizable

farm south of Hanover, and although my grandfather had left and became an accountant, the other sons still lived nearby. The four sons were all drafted into the Wehrmacht, or regular German army. To my knowledge, none was a member of the Nazi Party. For my young father, the loss of his own father was compounded by the disappearance of his uncles who had all been an active presence in his early life. Not long after my grandfather was killed, the second eldest brother died on the Russian front, in 1943. The third brother went missing while fighting on the eastern front in 1944 and was presumed dead. There was no further contact with him, though he was actually captured by the Russians and sent to a prisoner of war camp in Siberia, where he spent the next eight years. When he was released in 1953 and made his way back to Germany, he found that his wife had remarried many years earlier. The youngest brother was captured while fighting the British in North Africa and was sent first to England and then to the United States as a prisoner of war. He returned to Germany in 1947. My grandfather's only sister survived the war and gave birth to a child by a Polish forced laborer, with whom she developed a relationship while he was working on the family farm. In the eyes of Nazi authorities who were responsible for maintaining "racial purity," this was an offense punishable by death for both involved.¹¹ When Germany was defeated the Polish laborer was liberated along with other forced laborers in the area and returned to Poland. My father's mother also had two brothers who fought in the war; one lived while the other died of injuries after being drafted from university late in the war.

I know little of the beliefs and activities of my father's uncles during the war. Yet their location on Germany's "eastern front" must give rise to questions about their role in the systematic massacres of the Final Solution. Did they participate in the ghettoization and savage murder of Eastern Europe's Jewish communities or the brutal treatment of the Polish and Russian peoples? Did they know and look away? How could they not have known? Research into the role of Wehrmacht soldiers in the extermination of European Jews has shown that the killings were carried out by soldiers of every rank and service.¹² Given the complicity of the Wehrmacht, what might my own relatives have seen or done? When the war ended, did they experience regret? Did they feel shame or guilt? I can't recall any mention of this dark history during the sporadic family reunions and visits of my childhood. The single memory I have is of my great uncle who was imprisoned in Siberia speaking about his struggle to find enough food to survive. There wasn't any talk of responsibility.

My mother's family shared in the experience of wartime loss. My grandfather survived the war, but his only brother was killed fighting against

the Russians in the Crimea. Both participated in the NSKK before the war. My grandmother's siblings were considerably older and did not participate directly in the war. The destruction of my mother's house in the midst of the war proved the most challenging experience for the family. My mother lived in Hanover and their home was destroyed in 1943. Whereas my father lived south of the city, my mother and her family were more directly affected by the Allied bombing campaign over Hanover. Her memories of the war were shaped by childhood years spent in a bomb shelter.

For my mother, the immediate postwar years were a time of coping with destruction and poverty. My grandfather built a small house out of the wreckage of the original, and together the family sought to move forward, trying to make ends meet. As difficult as their lives were, my mother's decision to leave Hanover for Canada was not easy. Whereas my father's experience of being emotionally and physically uprooted at an early age created a sense of restlessness, for my mother immigration meant leaving a struggling but intact family behind.

My parents were welcomed to Vancouver by the German community, who helped them master their initial sense of disorientation. Much of the German community at the time was organized around a network of German-speaking churches that offered assistance to new arrivals. These churches were in effect social and cultural institutions that provided an organizing structure for Vancouver's burgeoning population of Germans, which expanded exponentially during the 1950s and 1960s. For my parents as for other German immigrants, social life was bound up with the activities of the local German-speaking church and became a central means of remaining connected to their culture. My father found his first employment through a congregation member, which in turn solidified their participation. Church ministers were German nationals who trained in Germany and moved to Canada to lead congregations, a process that lasted until the early 1970s, when German immigration slowed considerably. Sunday morning services were offered in German, but my parents, like many other recent arrivals, chose to attend the English-speaking service as they sought to integrate into Canadian society.

BELONGING

My childhood was thus immersed in an immigrant community that maintained fidelity to German culture and language. My early years were spent in Toronto and its environs, an area known for its high concentration of German immigrants. For my parents the German community provided a

sense of belonging, of *Heimat*, and also, perhaps, a means to lessen their sense of nostalgia, or *Heimweh*. My childhood memories are of a German-speaking home filled with members of the community. Meals were typically German and breakfasts long, sumptuous affairs. My earliest memory is of my parents and their closest friends, like them immigrants from Northern Germany, enjoying a breakfast together, gathered around a food-laden table, engaged in easygoing conversation.

The memory is associated with a sense of belonging, bound up in my mother tongue. It captures a moment in which there was no tension of cultural difference, no clash of language. The narration of my life is a story of two languages and different cultural identities.¹³ I grew up in a home full of German books. I learned to recognize Goethe's name at a young age from the spines of books that sat on shelves high above me. Before I learned to read I had already spent countless hours looking at the illustrated stories of Max and Moritz by Wilhelm Busch. I often wondered what my father would do if I ever behaved anything like the characters in the famous 19th-century fable. It was only later that I became familiar with English children's books, or with Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters, to whom my older sister introduced me through her inexhaustible joy of reading. Indeed, it seemed that my sister singlehandedly brought the English-speaking world into our home, a role often assumed by the eldest child of immigrant families.

In everyday life outside our home my parents were defined by their German accents and by mannerisms that stood out in the distinctly Anglo-Saxon culture of English-speaking Canada at the time. I inevitably embodied some of the struggles my parents experienced as I sought to find my own footing. Learning English proved challenging for me. When I was six years old my parents moved back to Vancouver, the city to which they had originally immigrated. I arrived at my new school midway through the year on a wet and dark day, so typical of Vancouver winters. After I was introduced as the "new student," my teacher began the lesson by writing the word "rhyme" on the board and asking the class what it meant. I sat glued to my chair in a kind of panic, lest I be asked to answer. I didn't have the foggiest idea what the word meant, let alone how to pronounce it. I feared being judged on the basis of my poor grasp of English. I found myself in a school environment that emphasized cultural assimilation and discouraged bilingualism. I wasn't Canadian like the English-speaking children around me, because I didn't speak English particularly well or share their cultural norms. At best I managed.

To be sure, being German was a privileged position, to the degree that it meant being able to blend in with the Caucasian norm of Canadian society at a time when racial prejudice was considerably more pronounced than

it is today. But as a child of German immigrants I was sensitive to other dynamics. It is difficult for me to know exactly when or how this sensitivity began, but I remember learning at a young age that there was a stigma attached to being German. Growing up in Vancouver meant that most of my neighborhood friends were the children or grandchildren of Canadian and British soldiers who had fought the Germans in the Second World War. Canada entered the war on September 10, 1939, a week after Great Britain declared war on Germany. When the war finally ended Vancouver welcomed a large influx of British immigrants, adding to its Anglo-Saxon character. They brought with them memories of the conflict, the German bombing campaign (the Blitz) against British cities, and the long struggle to defeat the Nazis.

After-school play in the neighborhood usually consisted of street hockey or war games. When it was too wet to play hockey outside, we would reenact stories or scenes of movies and television shows that portrayed the Allied defeat of Germany. Inevitably I ended up playing the role of the bad German. My parents' cultural background meant that any protests I made fell on deaf ears. I couldn't escape the historical reality of my past. Whether they were taunts or extensions of the games we played, such terms as *Sieg Heil* and *Achtung* were specifically directed at me. I didn't want to play the bad German, the Kraut, but I had little choice in the matter, and the fact that I had blond hair as a child did not help.

Many years later I worked with a patient who was the grandchild of Holocaust survivors. He described to me the excitement with which his grandparents had welcomed the birth of his younger brother because he had blond hair and blue eyes. For his grandparents, who had survived the concentration camps, his brother's blond coloring meant that he would be safe, that he could hide in plain sight because he looked stereotypically German. His brother might even be able to help the rest of the family in the event of another catastrophe. My own son is blond and blue-eyed, and I experienced a similar reaction from some elderly members of my wife's family on the occasion of a family wedding. They commented on my son's coloring, noting how unusual it was. I remembered being puzzled by their reaction until I thought of my former patient.

The experience of being different in my everyday interactions with friends and schoolmates was especially pronounced during Canada's annual Remembrance Day celebration. The bravery of Canadian soldiers was recounted, and moving stories of their experiences in the war against the Germans were shared. I found myself transfixed by these narratives. Yet at some point I would become aware that the enemy being described was a German soldier, someone who could easily have been my grandfather

or one of my great-uncles. In these moments I fell into a shameful and fearful silence, lest my cultural heritage become obvious to those around me. I wanted to share the pride that other schoolchildren felt in the courage of their grandfathers. Instead I learned to hide my background.¹⁴

My wish for a “good past” and for “good relatives” is part of a collective longing on the part of many Germans, members of a nation that struggles to bear the weight of guilt and shame for the perpetration of the Holocaust. The desire for family members to have been “good Germans” leads to the creation of unfocused and idealized images of relatives. Family narratives that bear little relation to facts are created and sustained in the hope of warding off the Nazi past, a process that appears to have been especially true for postwar German immigrants. They bore the stigma of being German and were confronted with the history of the Nazi past in a way that Germans living in Germany typically were not.

I recall that as a schoolboy in Vancouver I had a schoolmate who was of German descent and whose last name was Rommel. One day this boy shared with a group of children that he was probably related to Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, the famous German Second World War commander. Historical facts would suggest the comment had little basis in truth, but its impact was significant. In contrast to other German officers, Rommel is often placed in a separate camp of Germans, those who opposed Hitler. In war films and in the popular press Rommel is presented as a highly intelligent, if devout, character, someone who ultimately stands up against the tyranny of Hitler and the Nazi regime’s murderousness. The revelation shared by my schoolmate made an impression on us as young boys and became a topic of discussion. I remember some of the English-Canadian boys remarking that it might not be so bad being German if you were related to Rommel. It made me realize how much I hoped for a German relative I could feel good about, someone who had stood up against the Nazis.

I may have learned the negative implications of what being German meant from my interactions with others, but my true sense of discomfort about the past was communicated to me at home. It was my parents who first told me about the horrors perpetrated by the Germans during the Holocaust. I no longer remember the details of what they said or whether I asked any questions in response. Indeed, what I recall today is chiefly their hushed tone, the somber look on their faces, and the overwhelming sense of foreboding I felt. What was being revealed to me was something too horrible to comprehend and, as I came to realize, something that definitively marked my history and theirs. For many years afterward the Holocaust remained for me an amorphous event, marked by a gruesome factual history and beyond articulation. It was a subject surrounded by a

fearful emotional weight that made it difficult if not impossible for me to ask questions.

My confusion at hearing about the connection between my loving grandparents and the gruesome history of the Third Reich was likely a reflection of my parents' own struggle to acknowledge the role their parents had played. How do you comprehend the love you have for your parents in the knowledge that they belonged to the generation that made the Holocaust possible? Looking back, I have no memory of engaging in discussion of the beliefs of my grandparents. It seems that while one door to the Nazi past was opened, the other remained closed. The silence about my grandparents can be understood as a form of intergenerational dissociation, in which some aspects of the past were discussed and others were kept at bay. This dissociative process was equally a reflection of the wider German cultural narrative, one in which collective acknowledgment of guilt and responsibility for the Holocaust was cleanly separated from private family memory of the past.

SHARED TRAUMATIC HISTORY

How do we respond to our inherited memories? What does it mean to share a common traumatic history with others? The connection between our historical formation and how we understand ourselves as individuals is a central theme in Hoffman's later work, which addresses the question of what it means to be a member of "the second generation." In Hoffman's early memoir, *Lost in Translation* (1989), the Holocaust remains largely in the background, unspoken but always present. By contrast, in *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History and the Legacy of the Holocaust*, Hoffman reflects directly on the experience of being a child of Holocaust survivors:

There are so many ways to conceive of our lives, our identities, our stories—to shape memory and biography. It did not occur to me to think of myself as a "child of Holocaust survivors" for many of my adult years. Other threads of causality, influence, development seemed more important; or at least I gave them other names. I think this was true for many of us who grew up in post-Holocaust families and for whom this legacy seemed on the one hand simply normal, and on the other, better not dwelt upon. (2004, p. 27)

Hoffman's discussion points to the way in which we are indelibly shaped by the historical and cultural worlds into which we are born. In the process,