

## Some Remarks on the Transnational Memory

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Newcomers arrive in a host country, bringing the story of their history with them. It is like invisible, intangible baggage, often stored with a lot of care that people take with them when leaving their birthplace. In these stories, autobiographical experience intertwines with collective memories; they are like palimpsests in which layers of personality, place of origin and national identity have left their imprints. However, when facing the cultural-historical landscape and traditions of the host country, immigrants are involuntarily reminded of their belonging to the country *of origin* or the *receiving* country, of the degree to which they are involved in or dissociated from the culture of the host country. Under such circumstances, a transnational memory space develops, in which the memory communities of newcomers and the host country interact with each other. Researchers studying the society have only relatively recently started paying attention to the phenomenon of the transnational memory, which can manifest itself in very different ways, ranging from an official national or international apology for harm done in the past to constructing a global memory. No matter how interesting I might find the versatile fields of transnational memory, the goal of the present article is to look at immigrant memory as a manifestation of the transnational memory. I would like to hope that these remarks will inspire readers to think about problems related to the memory of immigrant communities.

Immigrant memory is often tinged with emotional or even solemn hues. It is believed that already in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a medicine student studying Swiss mercenaries concluded that people can take ill with nostalgia or become homesick. This sadness for homeland has created an entire cultural canon, in which nostalgia plays a central role in defining an immigrant's identity. As a memory practice, nostalgia is without a doubt associated not only with loss, because the past and one's birthplace can be a powerful source of inspiration and self-esteem. Moreover, the distance between immigrants and their birthplaces has shrank due to information and communication technologies, which inevitably change the understanding of absence. This *positive nostalgia* is characteristic of stable and self-organising immigrant communities or diasporas. Diasporic memory has a socially mobilising effect, examples of which are not difficult to find. It is impossible to think about the communities of Latvian, Estonian and Lithuanian immigrants that formed in the Western countries (North America, Australia, Europe) after the Second World War from refugees and their offspring without a uniting story about the past and commemorative rituals. However, in the context of refugees, the first to be discussed has to be the diaspora that formed as a result of exile or forced migration, in which memories

about the homeland are still very much alive and immigration is perceived as a traumatic experience.

The distinction between *exile memory* and *diasporic memory* proposed by Thomas Lacroix and Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh allows to achieve a degree of clarity in the context of transnational memory. Exile memory stems from the traditional concept of diaspora and should be seen as a joint representation of the traumatic circumstances (wars, coups-d'état, ethnic cleansing, etc.) that forced a certain group of people to leave their homeland; whereas diasporic memory is not structured by a shared story about the past, it is rather a result of a collective migration trajectory rooted in an awareness of the distinctiveness and minority of the diaspora.<sup>1</sup> Of course, both types of memory are not mutually exclusive; however, sometimes they can promote an internal differentiation within a diaspora, insulating various groups of immigrants. Socioeconomic or ideological considerations can serve as a basis for this. For example, Jews, one of the oldest diasporas in the world, who have been living in Great Britain for centuries and have chosen to assimilate into the local society, had difficulties reaching a consensus with their compatriots who had emigrated from Eastern Europe. The old Jewish diaspora avoided distinctly voicing opinions on the pogroms against Jews in the Tzarist Russia, whereas the new diaspora immediately reacted with public demonstrations.<sup>2</sup>

The more consolidated the memory of an immigrant group, the greater the probability that representations of the diaspora's past will become a resource of political mobilisation with which to challenge the memory regimes of the host country, the homeland and the third country. The Armenian diaspora in France is a textbook case that illustrates a single community's influence on a country's official position regarding the genocide against Armenians carried out in 1915 by the Osman Empire. It is believed that the lack of recognition of the Armenian genocide was one of the symbolic obstacles that hindered the approximation of Turkey and the European Union. Immigrant communities from the Baltic States and the Ukraine could also be mentioned, which have been very active fighters against the Soviet regime, reminding the world's democratic countries about the crimes committed by Stalinism. However, political activity based on transnational memory can also be seen in the relationships between immigrants and distinctly democratic countries. For example, semi-autobiographical novel *So Far from the Bamboo Grove*<sup>3</sup>, by Japanese writer Yoko Kawashima Watkins's, which dealt with the traumatic experiences of the Japanese who were deported from Manchuria and North Korea after the Second World War, was published in South Korea in 2005. For some time the book was practically unnoticed, yet in 2007 it caused a wave of indignation in the American

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<sup>1</sup> Lacroix, T., Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2013) Refugee and Diaspora Memories: The Politics of Remembering and Forgetting. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*. 34(6), p. 687.

<sup>2</sup> Gidley, B. (2013) Diasporic Memory and the Call to Identity: Yiddish Migrants in Early Twentieth Century East London. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*. 34(6), pp. 650–664.

<sup>3</sup> Kawashima Watkins, Y. (2000) *So far from the bamboo grove*. New York: William Morrow.

Korean community, especially among its more educated members. New York and Boston Koreans saw the novel as an attempt of the Japanese to decrease their responsibility for the war crimes committed, as well as an attempt to re-interpret the image of Japan as the aggressor country. Moreover, claims were made that Kawashima Watkins's book was allegedly being used in American schools as study material. This way, the proponents of the Korean diaspora's story about history at least indirectly tried to influence the education policy makers of certain states and promoted the so-called *distanced nationalism* in the American Korean community.<sup>4</sup>

Transnational memory means not only interaction between diasporas and national memory regimes, but also between diasporas and memories of other diasporas living in the host country. It is easier for immigrant communities that share similar experience and stories about the past to create a transnational memory discourse, which, for example, condemns non-democratic regimes of the past and their leaders. It is much more difficult in cases when experiences and memory stories differ. From a general point of view, although transnational memory tends to recognise past pluralism, in the meantime it also protects the interpretation of the past from being completely levelled out. This was highlighted by a case in the USA, when Japanese and Jewish memory discourses were contraposed. Namely, exhibition "American Concentration Camps: Remembering the Japanese American Experience" was opened in New York in 1997. It was dedicated to a programme of mass detention and isolation of American Japanese during the Second World War, when 110,000 Japanese who lived on the West Coast of the USA were interned at special camps. Such a programme, which, in my opinion, still remains an uncomfortable topic of public history, was implemented to allegedly reduce the risk of Japan using its diaspora to destabilise the situation in the USA.<sup>5</sup> However, the exhibition in New York caused displeasure in the local Jewish community, which criticised the use of concentration camps in the title of the exhibition. This also invited larger scale public discussions about the application of Holocaust vocabulary to characterise other seemingly similar historical events. The problem situation that had formed on a symbolic level between the American Japanese and Jewish communities was eventually resolved in a rather rational way: the organisers of the exhibition agreed to clarify the concept of "concentration camp", within the contents of which internment camps were distinguished from extermination camps.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Sk. Lim, J-H. (2014) Victimhood nationalism in the memory of mass dictatorship. In: Walker, B., Lim, J-H., Lambert, P. *Mass Dictatorship and Memory as Ever Present Past*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 40–44.

<sup>5</sup> In 1988, president of the USA Ronald Reagan publicly apologised to the Japanese American community for the detention and mass isolation programme carried out during the Second World War. Every person who had directly suffered due to the programme was paid a compensation of 20,000 dollars.

<sup>6</sup> For more information about this case, see Schiffrin, D. (2001) Language and Public Memorial: 'America's Concentration Camps'. *Discourse and Society*. 12(4), pp. 505–534.

My contemplation has so far focused on immigrant communities that can be physically located, which to a certain extent ties the transnational memory to the culture of a specific host country. However, a lot has changed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Namely, the Internet in general and global social networking media (SNM) specifically have become highly relevant shapers of the transnational memory space. This has also affected the everyday life of immigrants, making researchers studying the society talk more and more often about digital diasporas, for whose participants physical contact is no longer as decisive a precondition for forming a shared identity. Immigrants who engage in discussions about the history of their country of origin or argue with immigrants from other countries about which interpretation of history is more correct can be met on SNM (Facebook, YouTube, Wikipedia). A digital diaspora allows a more individualised approach to transnational memory, yet at the same time retains the ideological settings of the real diaspora that can be physically located, which settings stem from political positioning against “relevant others”, which can be countries of origin, host countries, or other immigrant groups. I saw this phenomenon very distinctly some time ago, when I was studying the reaction of *YouTube* and *Wikipedia* users to the scandalous documentary “The Soviet Story”. Among the most active defenders and criticisers of the film, clearly there were also immigrants whose place of origin was the Baltic States and Russia. The provocative narrative of the film and the charismatic memories encoded in it clearly succeeded in moving the audience.<sup>7</sup>

Although, in general, an immigrant community memory forms from the bottom up, a state can also play a role in the process by promoting the inclusion of immigrants into the society of the host country. On the one hand, in countries in which conflicting diasporic memories cohabit or in which there is a high potential for conflict between various immigrant communities, national institutions must be ready to get involved as intermediaries. For example, the state can allocate premises for establishing an immigrant museum or for displaying exhibitions. Likewise, it can also support biographical studies projects whose aim is to collect and publish immigrant life stories. The biographical approach reveals dimensions of the individual memory. By the way, in countries with a large percentage of immigrants such as the USA, Canada or Australia, immigrant biographies have become a popular genre, which promotes both a sense of inclusion among immigrants and a recognition of diasporic memory. In such cases, it is extremely important for inclusion policy makers to be tolerant and lenient towards those immigrant groups that share traumatic memories and that can be considered victims of forced migration.

In conclusion, we could ask what all that has been discussed above means for Latvia. For several years, experts have been warning us that demographic trends in Latvia indicate an inevitable increase in the percentage of immigrants if we want to ensure a stable development

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<sup>7</sup> Kaprāns, M. (2015) Hegemonic representations of history and digital agency: giving meaning to “The Soviet Story” on SNS. *Memory Studies*. Submitted for publishing.

of the economy. When planning immigrant inclusion policies, the aspect of transnational memory should not be underestimated, as this can enable us in a timely manner to identify major challenges hindering the consolidation of Latvian society. If a significant percentage of immigrants to Latvia in the next decade were to arrive from post-Soviet countries, in which Russian information space is very influential, we have to take into consideration the fact that in Latvia, the number of inhabitants that support a history interpretation pattern characteristic of Russia will increase. Data from the Eurasian Monitor that was presented some years ago clearly indicated that in the countries around the Caspian Sea, from which a number of immigrants might arrive, there predominates an understanding of the Soviet time that significantly differs from that shared by Latvian society.<sup>8</sup> Taking into consideration the fact that the pro-Soviet paradigm, in the framework of which it is believed that Latvia voluntarily joined the USSR,<sup>9</sup> also predominates among the minorities in Latvia, this group of immigrants would only help to strengthen the paradigm, thus even more deepening the division in the society and increasing the pressure on the official memory regime, which since the restoration of independence has remained unchanged in relation to the Soviet period. Policy makers must be ready for such a scenario or a similar one, and in my opinion, this kind of readiness means, first and foremost, developing concrete, immigrant community-oriented memory policy initiatives.

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<sup>8</sup> *Евразийский монитор*. (2009). Восприятие населением и молодежью новых независимых государств истории советского и постсоветского периодов.

*Eurasian Monitor*. (2009). Public Perception of Young People and New Independent States in the History of Soviet and Post-Soviet Periods. Available from: <http://www.eurasiamonitor.org/rus/research/event-162.html>

<sup>9</sup> Kaprāns, M. (2013) Padomju laika sociālās reprezentācijas Latvijas sabiedriskajā domā (2004-2012). *Latvijas Vēstures Institūta Žurnāls*. 87, 102.–138. lpp.

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