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Digital trauma processing in social media groups: Transgenerational Holocaust trauma on Facebook

This is tough. It took my breath away.

The first Hungarian to apologize for the crimes of his/her grandfather.

(Facebook group post, Commenter '7')

This is not a website of tales. These are the dreadful stories of the dead.

(Facebook group post, Commenter '3')

How does the framework of a social media group influence the ways in which people communicate about a collective historical trauma? What is the impact of digital and social media on trauma processing on the individual and on the collective and transgenerational levels? How does sharing of memories of traumas on social media help unblock avenues to the past, and how does it contribute to the processing of collective historical traumas and consequently to the mobilisation of memories, modernisation and the transformation of identities?

The ways of remembering and memory practices changed because of the digital environment as a mediating framework, and online communities such as blogs and social media groups provide a radically new space for both individual and collective trauma processing. There are several Facebook groups that deal with memories of the Holocaust. In this chapter, I analyse and compare two Hungarian groups, “The Holocaust and My Family” and “The Descendants of the Victims and Survivors of the Holocaust”, looking at why these groups are especially suitable for facilitating historical trauma processing. I will also show how the concepts of trauma and trauma processing themselves are changing in the digital age, related to how the practice of sharing posts and comments on social media gains more importance and thus counteracts the element of silence, which was considered the most important element of trauma on several levels.

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Following the emergence of the concept of digital memories, the perception of trauma changed within cultural trauma studies. The now classic, at the time pioneering works of cultural trauma studies were published in the 1990s, after Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was classified in 1980 by the American Psychiatric Association.¹ Research fell back on early twentieth-century concepts of hysteria and combat neurosis (Freud, Janet)² and on neuro-biological studies that analysed the state of the brain in the moments of trauma and over the long term in order to identify enduring effects (van der Kolk and van der Hart³). Cultural and historically oriented trauma studies examined testimonies collected for the growing Holocaust archives for research on collective memory. Notions and ideas such as “postmemory” (Marianne Hirsch⁴), “re-traumatization” (Jörn Rüsen⁵), and the possibility of transmitting trauma by reading (Felman and Laub⁶) induced a boom of cultural trauma studies in the 2000s, prompting gender-oriented studies and interpretations of testimonies and life-writing (Henke⁷). The field of (digital) memory studies has also become a site of increasing research, and, especially in Europe, this development coincided with a growing academic interest in the recent history of Eastern Europe. The volume *Save As . . . Digital Memories*⁸ launched digital memory studies as a new scholarly field that takes the influence of new media into account, particularly memory mediation and mobile forms of memory. The collection *Memory, Conflict and New Media: Web Wars in Post-Socialist States*⁹ further expanded the field by examining post-totalitarian digital

1 American Psychiatric Association, ed., *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, (Washington: American Psychological Press, 1980).

2 Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (London: Pandora, 1992).

3 Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma,” in *Trauma. Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 158–182.

4 Marianne Hirsch, “Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14(1) (2001): 5–37.

5 Jörn Rüsen, “Trauma and Mourning in Historical Thinking,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in History and Archaeology* 1(1) (2004): 31–43.

6 Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

7 Suzette A Henke, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women’s Life-Writing* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000).

8 Joanne Garde-Hansen, Andrew Hoskins and Anna Reading, ed., *Save As . . . Digital Memories* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009); Motti Neiger, Oren Meyers and Eyal Zandberg, ed., *On Media Memory: Collective Memory in a New Media Age* (New York: Palgrave, 2011).

9 Ellen Rutten, Julie Fedor and Vera Zvereva, ed., *Memory, Conflict and New Media: Web Wars in Post-Socialist States* (London–New York: Routledge, 2013); Ellen Rutten, “Why Digital Memory

memory politics and practices, highlighting their differences from Western European approaches: the former tend to counteract official practices of forgetting the traumatic past in post-socialist states.

The earlier version of this chapter was written as part of my research project entitled “Trauma Studies in the Digital Age: The Impact of Social Media on Trauma Processing in Life Narratives and Trauma Literature: The Case of Hungary”, which introduced, defined and developed the new field of digital trauma studies, investigating the impact of social media on trauma processing. One of the initial hypotheses included the concept of “frozen currents” or “blocked avenues”, metaphors which referred to unresolved collective traumas, a series of events in the twentieth century (in the context of Hungary: World War One and the Trianon Peace Treaty, World War Two and the Holocaust, the totalitarian dictatorship and the socialist regime and its fall) which hindered modernisation.¹⁰ I argued that there are social forces that can be mobilised to aid further efforts to overcome traumatic retellings of the historical memory of the twentieth century.

To map the impact of the digital environment and digital media on understandings of trauma, I examined the role of silence, one of the central concepts of cultural trauma studies. The three phases of recovery from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as generally defined in the psychological field since the 1990s based on the work of Judith Herman are the following: 1. reconstituting the survivor’s feeling of security; 2. reconstructing the trauma narrative; 3. reestablishing the relationships of the survivor and integrating them into the community.¹¹ Before the digital age, the second phase was of interest for literary and cultural trauma studies, which tended to focus on interpretations of texts produced during trauma processing and recovery and the investigation of (adequate) reading strategies. The digital era brought the third phase into greater prominence in the public sphere, with instant responses and, hence, dialogue made possible through social media. The practice of sharing traumatic experiences online (in blogs, social networking groups) and reacting to them (in comments and chats) eliminates the element of silence thought to be inherent in trauma, on the one hand, as its basic characteristic feature (meaning the survivor is unable to speak about it) and, on

Wars Should Not Overlook Eastern Europe’s Web Wars,” in *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe*, ed. Uilleam Blacker, Aleksandr Etkind and Julie Fedor, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 219–231.

¹⁰ Anna Menyhért, “The Image of ‘Maimed Hungary’ in 20th Century Cultural Memory and the 21st Century Consequences of an Unresolved Collective Trauma: The Impact of the Treaty of Trianon,” *Environment, Space, Place* 8(2) (2016): 69–97.

¹¹ Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (London: Pandora, 1992).

the other, as a cause of secondary traumatising, when others do not or are not able to listen to the survivor, and even on a third level as an official oppressive or tabooing practice (by, for example, a totalitarian regime). As silence has been considered a crucial element in most definitions of trauma, this change in focus had the potential to redefine trauma in connection with practices of sharing in digital media (see Figure 1).

In contrast with the earlier conception of trauma as fixed in time and space, unspeakable and beyond representation and mediation, trauma in the digital age is considered multiply configured and represented, multidimensional, diverse and shared in the digital space.¹²

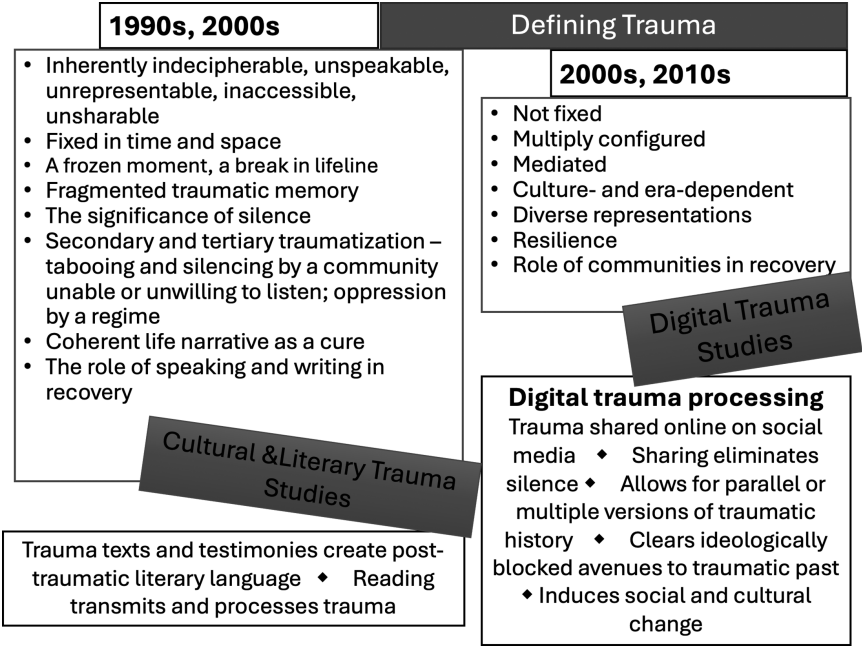


Figure 1: Definitions of trauma 1990–2020 (© Anna Menyhért).

The study of Central European societies can offer specific insights for understanding digitally mediated trauma processing due to their historical experiences with

¹² Paul Arthur, "Trauma Online: Public Exposure of Personal Grief and Suffering," *Traumatology* 15(4) (2009): 65–75; Paul Arthur, "Memory and Commemoration in the Digital Present," in *Contemporary Approaches to Literary Trauma Theory*, ed. Michelle Balaev, 152–175 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

totalitarian regimes. These regimes repeatedly perpetuated top-down narratives or enforced silence about traumatic historical events. Hungary stands out by having the largest Jewish population in Central Europe, primarily concentrated in Budapest, where a substantial Jewish community was retained despite attempts at eradication.

The convergence of democratisation and digitalisation in Hungary and Central Europe brought about a shift in memory practices. The accessibility and reach of digital platforms democratised the dissemination of historical trauma narratives, enabling diverse voices to contribute to collective memory and to challenge hegemonic narratives. Because of the change in the ways in which trauma is perceived in the digital age, digitally mediated trauma processing could be a way to “thaw” “frozen currents” or at least to allow the existence of parallel or multiple versions of traumatic history: official, rigid versions, determined by oppressive ideologies of the past and present, as opposed to other versions, created by communities, civil society, and artists. The latter versions are versatile, mobile, emotionally active, and capable of prompting responses that encourage and facilitate the processing of traumas.

One still current example is The Living Memorial on Budapest’s Liberty Square, a collection of letters, photographs, books, personal effects which belonged to victims of the Holocaust in Hungary, and an array of other items. The memorial is a poignant response to, and quiet rebuke of, a monument erected hastily by the state in 2014, and its creation was organised through a Facebook group by protesters.

The Hungarian government made 2014 an official Holocaust memorial year. Disagreements, disputes, debates and protests surrounded the government’s controversial commemoration plans. The official monument is a statue of an eagle swooping down on a statue of the archangel Gabriel. The eagle represents Germany and the archangel Gabriel represents Hungary. The implication of the official monument is that Hungary was a victim of the German occupation in March 1944, rather than an accomplice of Nazi Germany, both in the war effort against the Soviet Union and in the deportation of Hungarian Jewry.¹³ The monument was erected un-announced

¹³ Éva Kovács, “The Hungarian-Holocaust Memorial Year 2014. Some Remarks,” *S:IMON Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation* 4(2) (2017): 109–121, accessed 20 December 2023, <https://simon.vwi.ac.at/index.php/simon/article/view/93/87>; Kovács, Henriett and Mindler-Steiner, Ursula K. “Hungary and the Distortion of Holocaust History: The Hungarian Holocaust Memorial Year 2014.” *Politics in Central Europe* 11, no. 2 (2015): 49–72. <https://doi.org/10.1515/pce-2015-0010>.

after prolonged protests, as if in a night raid, on 20 July 2014,¹⁴ and it was followed by the creation of the Living Memorial through a Facebook group (among other ways of connection between the organisers). This example shows how trauma processing through online support groups can open previously closed paths to the frozen past which other media – like a monument – would continue to block by official, ideological means.¹⁵

Another predecessor of the groups I am going to discuss below was the Facebook page of the Open Society Archives project entitled “Yellow Star Houses”, which attracted 4,000 people in the first three days of its existence in 2014. It recalled an event in which 2,000 apartment buildings were marked with a yellow star in June 1944 in Budapest and Jewish people were gathered and forced to make their residences in these buildings. Within the framework of the “Yellow Star Houses” project, around 1,600 of these buildings were marked with a yellow star sticker in 2014 and a map with background material was made available online.¹⁶ People started to comment on the project’s Facebook page and then the Holocaust Facebook groups were set up – as the group settings were more suitable for interactive communication as a page.

Over the course of the 2010s, several other Facebook groups were created as forums for sharing memories of the Holocaust in Hungary and in other countries (see Table 1). Characteristic examples include the groups named “The Holocaust and My Family”, “The Descendants of the Victims and Survivors of the Holocaust”, and “Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors”. I joined two groups initially out of personal interest, namely, “The Holocaust and My Family” and “The Descendants of the Victims and Survivors of the Holocaust”, but I soon realised their importance in connection with my research. I sensed that potential new insights could be gained from observing these groups, so I took the role of a “digital participant observer”, i.e., an anthropologist doing digital fieldwork.¹⁷

14 Randolph Braham, “Hungary: The Assault on the Historical Memory of the Holocaust,” in *The Holocaust in Hungary: Seventy Years Later*, ed. Randolph L. Braham and András Kovács (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016), 261–309.

15 Mykola Makhortykh and Anna Menyhért, “Keeping the Past from Freezing: Augmented Reality and Memories in the Public Space,” in *De-Commemoration: Removing Statues and Renaming Places*, ed. Sarah Gensburger and Jenny Wüstenberg (New York: Berghan Books, 2023), 355–367, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781805391081-039>.

16 Gabriella Ivacs, “Digital Trauma Archives: The Yellow Star Houses project,” in *Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies*, ed. Anna Lisa Tota and Trever Hagen (London: Routledge, 2016), 205–218.

17 Annette Markham, “Fieldwork in Social Media: What Would Malinowski Do?” *Journal of Qualitative Communication Research* 2(4) (2013): 434–446.

Table 1: Holocaust-themed Facebook groups.¹⁸

NAME	MEMBERS (December 2023)	LANGUAGE	FB-GROUP TYPE	SET-UP DATE
The Holocaust and My Family	8443	HU	public	2 February 2014
The Descendants of the Victims and Survivors of the Holocaust	7494	HU	private / closed	25 January 2013
The Living Memorial	1864	HU	private / closed	23 March 2014
2G: Second Generation Children of Holocaust Survivors	5383	ENG	private / closed	29 May 2013
3GNY: A NYC-Based Organization for Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors	1809	ENG	public	21 March 2007
Family Holocaust Stories, Videotapes and Documentaries	58867	ENG	private / closed	3 March 2021
Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors	5267	ENG	private / closed	28 October 2006
Holocaust Survivors and Descendants	7664	ENG	private / closed	22 June 2018
Untold Stories of the Holocaust and Nazi Germany	6828	ENG	private / closed	15 August 2017
Holocaust Book Reviews Discussions	4305	HU	public	16 April 2015

Online support groups are powerful examples of the connecting capacity of social media. The experiences I gained as a member of these groups are very important

¹⁸ There are many very small (20 to 100 members) and small (a few hundred members) groups all over the world, not listed here, such as groups of survivors at a given location, or for a certain sub-topic (recipes, books). At earlier stages of my research I made note of several other larger groups that do not exist on Facebook any more: The Roma Holocaust and My Family (HU, A roma holokausz és a családom); Holocaust and Genocide Online Reading Group (ENG). Additionally, there are many Facebook pages run by institutions, or of individual books or projects on similar topics.

to me. By participating, I was able to read previously unshared family stories and see pictures of lost family members of people in the group and pictures of family documents, including false identity cards. I have seen how group members were able to connect with one another by discovering connections to a shared past which had hitherto been unknown to them. They established links to the family members or acquaintances of the same victims through posts and comments. Connections were often built upon spaces and locations which had been shared by victims. Among these were ordinary places such as hometowns and streets, but it was mostly Holocaust locations: ghettos, labour camps, the yellow star houses of Budapest, deportation collection points, deportation routes, train stations and concentration camps including locations within them, and then the locations on the way back for the survivors: displaced persons camps and the stages of the journeys home.

It was poignant, sad and moving to understand the continuous contradiction between the in-a-normal-case happy feeling of recognition and the realisation that this recognition is about places of traumatic memories. It was emotionally difficult to watch people use ordinary measures to establish connections when in fact what had prompted them to do so was the deaths and murders of their loved ones. The ordinary question “did your relative go to that school too?” was replaced by “was your relative deported from that town too?” It was equally moving to see that the establishment of contacts could provide comfort in such cases too, as well as the development of the new relationships, and the recognition of a shared fate through the discovered locations which could alleviate the isolation of the victims’ descendants. Members of the groups felt supported in their shared search for links based on evocations of memories of those who “have not returned” (a phrase frequently used to refer to those who were deported to and perished in concentration camps).

These processes are the steps of sharing, connecting and thus processing the trauma. Those who add comments to the given post, and even those who only read the posts and comments but do not add anything themselves can all be part of the processing. The burden of sharing the trauma – the mediated, vicarious traumatization – is reduced by the awareness of community support. In these groups, in the specific environment of Facebook, spaces have been created where loss and trauma can be shared in the manner and extent provided by social media via posts and comments. As a result, communities were formed, the development of which could not take place in the physical space during the past decades due to the silence surrounding the collective trauma and affecting several generations and also due to the physical distance separating the members. It is interesting how important the memories of physical, geological places are for es-

tablishing contact in the virtual space, as if such memories could help balancing out the lack of non-virtual contact.

The two Facebook groups in question seemed very similar at first glance, especially because their memberships overlap. However, although members discuss the same themes, and intersections or parallels occur even on the individual narrative level, there are significant differences between the groups, which are, interestingly, related to the differences between Facebook group-types (public, closed, secret) and their rules for privacy and activities: the platform determines communication.

Facebook, the most visited social media site in the world with its roughly three billion monthly active users (in the fourth quarter of 2023),¹⁹ has provided the digital era with many concepts, practices and functions that have not remained within the boundaries of a digital medium but have had an influence on our non-digital lives. Liking, friending and unfriending have gathered weight in the identity formation processes of digital/post-digital generations, as has the constant urge to share information about ourselves and gain approval as measured by the number of likes we have received.²⁰ The Facebook lifestyle expects members to post and share in order to have more eye-catching material on their timelines, with life stories organised in a linear way. This expectation often clashes with the needs for privacy protection, and data protection rules, not least because sharing is also a marketing tool for Facebook as well as a tool for gaining political power for various political actors and interest groups. Companies and individuals with Facebook pages are willing to pay to get more likes and shares, whereas other companies employ people to constantly like ads on several devices and from fake profiles so that they could demonstrate a higher level of interest in the ads. Commercially or politically aimed sharing and sharing private information and sensitive data within a supportive Facebook group constitute the two far ends of the sharing scale, with many variants within the world of social media.

Consequently, for any research on the role of sharing within social media groups in trauma processing, it is interesting to consider the extent to which the Facebook framework can determine the nature of interaction within the groups. The main difference between the types of Facebook groups, due to their different privacy settings, is that in the case of public groups anyone can see what members post, and not only on Facebook, but also in other browsers, whereas in the

19 “Number of monthly active Facebook users worldwide as of 3rd quarter 2023,” Statista.com, accessed 30th November 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>.

20 José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

case of private (earlier called closed) groups only members can see the posts and any other mention of the stories posted in the group.²¹ The name and description of a private group, as well as the number of its members and the names of the administrators are visible to anyone on Facebook. It is only possible to find a private group on Facebook.

The second difference is that anyone can join a public group or be added or invited by a member, whereas to join a private group one needs to be added upon request or be invited by an administrator. In the case of both public and private groups, anyone can see the group's name, its description, its tags and the list of the members, and anyone can find it via search. (The third type of Facebook group is secret groups, which cannot be seen, noticed, or visited without an invitation from the administrators or without knowing an URL. Membership, furthermore, requires an invitation from a member and the approval of an administrator, and only current and former members can see the group's name, description and tags or find it in search. Finally, only current members can see other members and read posts and stories about the group.)²² Thus public Facebook group members are aware of the fact that their posts might reach anyone. Private Facebook group members allow only other group members to see what they post.

With reference to the area of social media research ethics in a humanities context, posts posted in private Facebook groups constitute sensitive data which need privacy protection, whereas posts in public Facebook groups belong more to the domain of copyright issues, thus different types of Facebook groups need different research approaches with regards to copyright and protection of personal data.²³ Consequently, in the course of my research, I cite posts that were posted in private groups only anonymously and with the explicit and informed consent of the members.

The Hungarian-language Facebook group called "The Holocaust and my Family"²⁴ is a public group that has approximately 8,400 members. It had around 4,000 members soon after it was created in 2014, 5,500 members in 2015, 6,000 in 2016, 7,000 in 2017, 8,000 in 2019. This group was founded by Mátyás Eörsi in 2014, and Zsuzsa Hetényi joined him as an administrator soon after. The description of

21 Facebook's settings page, accessed 30 November 2023 <https://www.facebook.com/help/220336891328465>.

22 According to privacy settings of Facebook as of 30 November 2023.

23 Marie-Laure Ryan, Lori Emerson and Benjamin Robertson, ed., *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Digital Media* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2013); Leanne Townsend and Clair Wallace, *Social Media Research: A Guide to Ethics* (The University of Aberdeen, 2016), accessed 30 November 2023, https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_487729_smxx.pdf.

24 "A Holokauszt és a családom," accessed 30 November 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/holokauszt.csaladom/>. All translations from the Hungarian are my own.

the group refers to the impact of the political situation on community remembrance practices as follows:

[T]hanks to' the memory politics of the government, more and more stories are coming to light that had been kept in silence or remained a family secret until now, and they should not be forgotten.

The choice of the group type within Facebook's framework, i.e., that this group is a public one, had several implications. In the description of the group, the founding administrator clearly states the reasons for their decision, which are connected to their long-term aims with respect to the legacy of the Holocaust in Hungary:

This is going to be a public group. We have made this decision after long debates. Although we understand fears, we opted for the public group because one of our aims is to break with the culture of silence.

Our parents and grandparents tried to hide their Jewishness, did not talk about their sufferings, and we could and still can see what this attitude had led to. We cannot accept that the descendants of victims keep their silence whereas the descendants of perpetrators are loud. That is why we will not change our minds about the public nature of this group. We understand those who are unwilling to participate because of this, and we are sorry. If they wish, they can have me post their stories anonymously.

The openness of the public group determines ways of communication within the group: the general atmosphere among members, their rules, and the group's outputs that do not remain within the digital sphere. This group has clearly set rules of referencing and quoting which are basically the same as academic citation methods, in accordance with copyright law.

On 22 April 2015, administrator Zsuzsa Hetényi posted the group's rules concerning the practice of citing posts and she informed group members that she had previously consulted Artisjus, the Hungarian copyright agency/collecting society and asked for a legal recommendation about quoting from the group. She indicated that Artisjus advised the group that the texts posted in a public Facebook group have a status like the legal and copyright status of a book. Copyright and authors' rights of posts and comments belong to their authors and to the administrators as editors. Consequently, one needs the consent of the authors to publish these materials partially or fully. However, short excerpts of the posts can be freely cited for research purposes with an appropriate reference method: referring to the name of the author of the post, the date it was posted and the Facebook group, in this case "Hetényi and Eörsi, eds., 'The Holocaust and My Family'".

The group reached out to the general non-digital public in several ways: they organised a Marathon reading in Central Theatre in Budapest on 13 May 2014, during which guests were able to enter anytime to listen to stories, light a candle

and remember, as well as a Remembrance Day on 4 May 2014, in Budapest's Rubach Sebestyén Street Synagogue, with readings based on the posts.

Saving the posts outside Facebook and archiving stories that had not been made public before or had been kept secret within families, the members of which had not talked about their past and their Jewish roots became one of the most important goals of the group very early after its creation. On 10 February 2014, Kriszta Bíró posted the question: "SOMEONE is archiving what is going on here, aren't they?" It turned out that arrangements had already been made, and several members, led by academic György C. Kálmán, had already started saving data from the posts into archives.²⁵

A collection of selected posts and comments were published, together with essays analysing the group and its impact on Holocaust memory in Hungary, in a book entitled *The Holocaust and My Family*.²⁶ The editors grouped selected posts in thematic blocks in nine chapters representing the most common topics. The chapters are entitled "Survivors", "Second Generation", "Grandchildren", "Jews in Rural Hungary", "Jews in Budapest", "Women", "Mixed Families", "Gentiles" and "Rescuers". An introductory chapter, serving as a kind of motto, entitled "The 70th Anniversary – If Only Zuckerberg Knew", consists of a post followed by a long thread of comments. (In a somewhat paradoxical way, the last chapter actually endorses the narrative embodied by the Memorial to the Victims of the German Occupation on Liberty Square, as it suggests that the Holocaust in Hungary only started after the occupation of the country by the Wehrmacht in March 1944. It thus ignores the massacre of Kamianets-Podilskyi in August 1941 during which approximately 23,600 Jews were killed. While for the members of the Facebook group 2014 certainly marked the 70th anniversary of the Holocaust, it needs to be highlighted that antisemitic atrocities in Hungary had started before the German occupation of the country.²⁷)

This thread is a characteristic example of the way in which digital media / social media allows for new ways of communication, and calls attention to the impact Facebook can have on collective ways of processing trauma by establishing contacts and networks and furthering recognition. It is also significant that the thread begins with an anecdote which serves as a focal point for a whole web of interconnected ideas, associations and memories. Vera Surányi posted a story

25 György C. Kálmán, "A Holokauszt-csoport mint Facebook-esemény [A Holocaust-group as a Facebook-event]," in *A Holokauszt és a családom* [The Holocaust and my family], ed. Katalin Fenyves and Marianne Szalay (Budapest: Park, 2015), 13–21.

26 Katalin Fenyves, and Marianne Szalay, ed., *A Holokauszt és a családom* [The Holocaust and my family] (Budapest: Park, 2015).

27 I would like to thank Thomas Cooper for this observation.

about a Jewish doctor, who, after having returned to his hometown from Theresienstadt, is called to see a patient in his home. To the patient's anxious relatives he says, "Don't worry, he will recover, but the bed he is lying in is mine". Another member of the group, István Békés, recognised the doctor in the anecdote as his father. Békés' family members noticed the post and commented on it. Then the discussion continued about "lost and found" pieces of furniture. Then, people who had lived in the same neighbourhood as children exchanged posts about how these furniture cases were connected to the silence about the Holocaust and the taboos on Jewish identities. András J. Surányi added that while he did not know about his family being Jewish, he knew his friend's family was a Jewish family. They then mentioned a famous actor who also lived in the same neighbourhood as a child. He was the son of a housekeeper family and has by now become a prominent theatre director and a radical right-wing personality. This is how the topic, which had prompted comments which were not devoid of innuendo (housekeepers of big blocks of flats were in many instances connected to the Arrow Cross party in 1944 and/or were notorious for taking belongings left behind by Jewish people when they were taken to the ghettos or the concentration camps), arrived at the issue of the 70th anniversary of the Holocaust and, in connection with that, the topic of the current political situation in Hungary. The thread ends with a comment by Eszter Babarczy, who says "this is the most wonderful comment thread I have ever read, if only Zuckerberg knew".

The whole thread is not published in the book, i.e., on Facebook it continues after Babarczy's comment. It can be looked up in the group (it was posted on 20 March 2014, and it has 136 comments).²⁸ The associations and interconnections continue and develop new sub-threads, such as the topic of the varying extents to which members of different social classes were attached to furniture, and how it was easier for families who belonged to certain social classes, such as the intelligentsia, to leave their belongings behind and escape, "carrying" their main capital, i.e., their knowledge and experience, with them. A commenter named Balázs Láng has suggested that such comment threads form a new genre, the "comment-novel", similar to the epistolary novel; then literary works are mentioned which are in some way connected to the topic of returning from the camps; then writers who died in the Holocaust are remembered; then the topic of whether Jews can be recognised by their "Jewish" appearance, or whether a Jewish person can know if someone else is also Jewish because of some kind of subtle connection to a shared past. This post is a characteristic example of the associative-wandering-

²⁸ Although the administrators paused the group on 28 March 2023, all the contents can still be accessed.

multi-focused manner of communication through comments in a social media group, with sharing as a key element in digital trauma processing.

The group became significantly less active after the publication of the book and the events connected to it (such as the Marathon reading). It seems that it fulfilled its aim. The administrators decided to pause the group in March 2023, while its content is still fully accessible.

In a sense, the activities and the achievements of this group are pointing outside the group and towards the closure of an era: the era of silence surrounding the Holocaust in Hungary, as it was expressed in the initial description of the group cited above. The “Holocaust and My Family” Facebook group works essentially from the digital toward/back to(?) the non-digital linking achievements gained in the virtual space to the physical space and reality. Katalin Fenyves, the editor of the book *The Holocaust and My Family*, characterised it as an “imprint of collective memory”, and a narrative of “the common history of a community”.²⁹ This group talks about the past and links memories to the present to create a community and a space for it, in which it becomes possible to tell a story. In turn, telling the story makes it possible to acknowledge and process the traumatic past within the Jewish community and raise awareness among the larger non-Jewish public. The community seems to have been ready for the emergence of such a platform.

One of the questions that can be asked is how people as members of an online community remember and evoke the memory of historical trauma, and how they remember the stories behind the trauma that might or might not have been passed on to them. According to Aleida Assmann, “remembering trauma evolves between the extremes of keeping the wound open on the one hand and looking for closure on the other”.³⁰ She differentiates between four ways of “dealing with the traumatic past,” among which “remembering in order to forget” describes best the Facebook group “The Holocaust and My Family”: remembering in such cases is a “therapeutic tool to cleanse, to purge, to heal, to reconcile”. Assmann links this practice to transitions from dictatorship to democracy in a South African context on a state level, stressing that the confrontation with traumatic history has the specific goal of “creat[ing] a shared moral consensus”.³¹ A similar

29 Dóra Ónody-Molnár, “A holokauszt és a családom – a kollektív emlékezet könyves lenyomata [The Holocaust and My Family – The Imprint of Collective Memory in a Book],” www.zsido.com, 17 November 2015, accessed 30 November 2023, <https://zsido.com/holokauszt-es-csaladom-kollektiv-emlekezet-konyves-lenyomata/>.

30 Aleida Assmann, “From Collective Violence to a Common Future: Four Models For Dealing With the Traumatic Past,” in *Justice and Memory: Confronting Traumatic Pasts. An International Comparison*, ed. Ruth Wodack, Gertraud Auer and Borea d’Olmo (Vienna: Passagen, 2009), 31–48, 39–40.

31 Assmann, “From Collective Violence to a Common Future,” 37, 39, 40.

goal of working through the legacy of silence is present in the Facebook group “The Holocaust and My Family”. In this digital community, remembering is a tool with which to mobilise memories to build a host forum, a platform which makes it possible to share memories. The group aims to further the sharing of memories within the community and form a shared communal identity. The name of the group, which includes the word “family”, is expressive of the intention to deal with the past on a family/community memory level. This is a gesture of inclusion via family history, accepting macro history via micro-history, to gain access to the micro-histories of others to interlink members and develop a network which can collectively approach a past which had been closed off from them by silence and tabooing. The result is a multi-perspective, multi-centered, shared story with common elements as nodal points which is easier to access and accept for the members of the community. This story offers the reassurance of understanding, which may help victims of trauma find some closure to the painful past and further efforts to work through trauma. The decrease in the level of activity after the publication of the book of the stories collected from the posts confirms the hypothesis that the group was heading for a certain closure, and the outcome of this quest found form in a book which represents the community, overcomes transgenerational taboos and addresses the public.

In the group, “The Descendants of the Victims and Survivors of the Holocaust”³² the main tendencies and the general atmosphere are different. It is a private (earlier called closed) group with nearly 7,500 members (the group’s size gradually grew between 2015 and 2023, with 2,400 members in 2015, 3,700 in 2016, and 6,300 in 2022). In this group, disagreements, debates, emotionally loaded posts, comments, and even outbursts are more common and frequently the disagreements concern the group itself: its way of working and its rules, the position and role of members within the group and the ways in which they interact.

As opposed to the other group, this group does not have the clear-cut aim of framing, telling and interlinking stories of families. It is more concerned with individual and transgenerational identity issues: the identity of the members as descendants of Holocaust victims and survivors, the problems raised by their legacies and identity on the group level. While “The Holocaust and My Family” collects stories and shares them publicly, and thus deals with the past so as to free the present from its long-term negative impact by incorporating the stories as finalised by the multi-perspective narration, the “The Descendants of the Victims and Survivors of the Holocaust” focuses on the present as defined by the past and on the ways in

32 “A holokausztt áldozatainak és túlélőinek utódai,” accessed 23 November 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/holokauszttmasodikesharmadikgen>.

which traumas have shaped present identities. According to the description of the group, it deals with

everything about our mothers/fathers/grandparents in this topic, and the related individual or social second-generation and third-generation traumas, the ways in which they find form, and consequences.

This group does not provide rules for referencing and citing posts. As it is a private group, keeping in mind the necessity of informed consent and the protection of privacy and sensitive data, I talked to one of the administrators on the phone about my research aims, and we agreed that I would seek the consent of the group members to analyse and quote their posts and comments anonymously. I posted a request for consent, described my research, provided contact information and promised to contact individually the members whose posts I intended to cite, but who would not have given their consent in a comment to my post. Many people indicated in their comments that they welcomed my research, and some of them asked to be informed as to which of their comments I would use. When analysing specific comments, I refer to group members by numbers, and I do not give the dates of the posts to ensure the protection of sensitive data. I refer to each commenter as “(s)he”, “her/ him”, and “their” so as not to reveal their gender. The original posts were in Hungarian. All translations and paraphrases are mine. Some of the posts have since been deleted from the group.³³

With regards to reconnecting to the offline mode of relations, as opposed to the public readings organized by the other group, members of this group meet informally and focus on personal connections. On the level of the social media framework, the private/closed Facebook group is a good fit for this purpose, as well as for the main theme of the group, which seems to be sharing in connection with inclusion and exclusion and group identity. The theme is observable as a general ambivalence and in the oscillation between the need for secrecy and the need for publicity. It is also pertinent to the one specific – and not typical – story thread, the confession of the grandchild of a perpetrator, which I will analyse in detail.

The question of “who has a place in the group” was raised several times by Member 3. (S)he wished to have recommendations for new commenters, adding that everyone was welcome, but (s)he was somewhat mistrustful. Secondly, as the level of distrust grew, (s)he expressed discomfort over many members “disappearing”, and (s)he asked new members to indicate in their posts why they had

³³ Raw data collected from the posts is archived according to the Data Management Plan of my research project. It can be shared upon request, after careful consideration of individual queries and only for research purposes.

joined the group. As (s)he explained, “I wouldn’t like some people being interested in our stories in order to read crime stories”. It is interesting to note the use of the word “disappear” in this context: pointing, on the one hand, to unfamiliarity with the workings of an online group, where members come and go, are active or remain passive as they wish, and may well be “fakes”, i.e., people who have been dishonest (possibly entirely so) in their profiles. On the other hand, the increasing anxiety in the posts derives from the traumatic memories of past persecutions which are being triggered by the insecurity felt at not being able to control who has access to members’ painful and sensitive stories. Such anxieties were mentioned in the introductory description of the other group “The Holocaust and My Family”, which opted to be public, regardless of these kinds of fears. It seems that even the framework of the private group is problematic with respect to fears deriving from the long-term impact of past traumas. Consequently, when Commenter 3 posted for the third time about the wish to identify members, the issue of the potential clash of the religious identity of posting members and silent onlookers came up and, even though the remark is tinted with self-reflexive, self-doubting tones, the strong sense of feeling threatened connected to victim/survivor versus group identity based on religious differences is unmistakable:

Maybe I am a maniac, but I am asking yet again our Christian friends who joined us to explain why they are with us. We have revealed many things about ourselves, but don’t know anything about those who are not survivors or descendants. I am interested!

As a reaction to this post, many members introduced themselves, but only a fraction of the whole membership. Some people were offended. They did not wish to be checked up on, as they felt that this kind of inquiry constituted an unwelcome inspection which a Jewish community against segregation and racism in particular should not practice. Thus, debates followed, with some people leaving the group and later returning, including the original poster.

The “us” and “them” dichotomy, which is part of universal identity formation processes, is also linked to the legacies of the traumatic past in Hungary. Group identities are often shaped by “chosen traumas” (Vamik Volkan³⁴) and the legacies of traumatic experiences in society.³⁵ The “us” and “them” dichotomy is prevalent in everyday identity discourses, in which members of the out-group (“them”) are

³⁴ Vamik Volkan, “Transgenerational Transmissions and Chosen Traumas: An Aspect of Large-Group Identity,” *Group Analysis* 34(1) (2001): 79–97.

³⁵ István Bibó, “Eltorzult magyar alkat, zsákutcás magyar történelem” [Distorted Hungarian disposition, dead-end Hungarian history], in István Bibó, *Összegyűjtött munkái* [Collected works I.] (Bern: Európai Protestáns Magyar Szabadegyetem, 1981), 255–286.

often presented as unaccountable or unknown aliens or hostile and even vindictive strangers. The everyday pervasiveness of this societal attitude is also reflected in the preferred tendency to rely on personal contacts through societal interactions, in order to remain within the boundaries of the in-group (“us”). The Facebook group discussed above represents these kinds of identification processes: the acceptance of new members – i.e., allowing them to become one of “us” – is being done via personal recommendations, according to a decision made by the group administrators almost two years after the issue was first raised.

The theme of inclusion and exclusion was central to the instance when a grandchild of a perpetrator confessed in the group (Commenter 1). In fact, (s)he had done so in the other group, “The Holocaust and My Family”, some months earlier, in a comment on somebody else’s post about why people kept silent during the Holocaust and why they were silent later. (S)he said that (s)he felt guilty and responsible. That group accepted the confession calmly and offered encouragement. Commenter 1 mentioned that (s)he would understand if (s)he were to be excluded from the group, but others said that exclusion was not a solution, and they thanked him/her for his/her confession. In the group “The Descendants of the Victims and Survivors of the Holocaust” the same confession generated different, emotionally loaded reactions. The confession was as follows:

I am not the descendant of victims or survivors. I am the grandchild of a perpetrator: my grandfather took part in the deportation of Jews from Pécs. As an officer, he was supposed to bring food to the around 5,000 Jews huddled together in the Lakits barrack. He did not do so, he sold the food instead. Because of what he did, some of the people waiting in the barrack did not survive the transport: they starved to death. Among the victims there were four children. After the war he was not called to account, he lost his captaincy only due to his activities in 1956. He died of a stroke in 1967.

His death was not peaceful: somebody shuffled a Bible to him and hid a plastic skeleton dummy in the pages. I remember only this, I was 8 years old at the time. My mother died when I was 37. That’s when I got his letters. That’s when I learned who my grandfather really was.

Obviously I won’t be able to ask for forgiveness for unforgiveable sins. I only would like the souls of murderers and victims to rest in peace until the Last Judgement. And if you now have me excluded from this group I will understand.

In an interesting remark added later as a comment to the original post, the poster mentions the group “The Holocaust and My Family” in the context of inclusion-exclusion. The person posting suggests that the person who posted the confession must have been “removed” from “The Holocaust and My Family”. Later, however, in another comment, the poster confirms that the person who made the confession is still a member of “The Holocaust and My Family”.

The confession of the original poster was followed by a long discussion consisting of hundreds of comments which touched on many dimensions of the long-term impact of transgenerational Holocaust trauma. I will cite a few examples as part of this case study focusing on the themes of sharing the burden of the past, inclusion-exclusion, and group identity. (Phrases referring to the themes are underlined.)

Well, there is no forgiveness and no peace between murderers and victims in any way. I will not sign such a peace treaty at the expense of the victims, and I don't agree with it at all. I reject even the intention of mentioning innocent victims together with hangmen. Thus, if you want to get into this group with this intention then you are not in the right place. My victims will never reunite with the souls of hangmen, not even via the mediation of the holy spirit. (Commenter 2)

Hi! Gosh! I never would have thought that I would read such a text and that someone would dare [post it] and, moreover, to this group! For a minute I was dumb . . . I am also a grandchild, although my gran survived, but her little boy did not! He starved. It is difficult to speak, to write anything as a reply to your post, there isn't a single day when I don't think of that little boy, and those awful people who did that to my family. But, as we know, it is never too late, I wouldn't say that you have a place in our group, but the fact that someone has told this story is something. Everyone will be punished in their own way sooner or later, just like your grandfather before his death. (Commenter 5)

[The poster] is obviously not responsible for the sins of his/her grandfather. I appreciate that (s)he doesn't want to excuse and falsify the past! (Our present government is not responsible for the sins of the Horthy regime. So they should not falsify the past either . . .) [The poster] has this heavy bequest from his/her ancestors: the guilt that (s)he should not be feeling. We have a different inheritance: the inheritance of suffering and painful absence. And here we meet at this point, in this place, in virtual space. And the descendants can see the human being in the other from both sides. (What [The poster's] grandfather did not see, did not sense.) It is an unsettling, strange situation . . . (Commenter 6)

This is tough. It took my breath away. The first Hungarian to apologize for the crimes of his/her grandfather. (Commenter 7)

I am greeting the first Hungarian convert shakenly but with pleasure and with the respect that courage deserves. I am requesting her/him to stay, to endure patiently and without anger if (s)he is attacked here. There isn't anybody else whom those in deep pain could stone. We, who are able to do so, can be friends. (Commenter 8)

I understand this, but I state clearly that we are here only because of our own dead, not for others, and we do not wish to allow perpetrators to get close to them even in their death. (Commenter 2)

If you exclude him/her, I will understand, but I will leave the group as well. Nobody is born to be a sinner. I shouldn't be explaining this to Jewish people. (Commenter 8)

Perpetrators are victims as well, if someone doesn't understand this, they shouldn't engage in this subject. (Commenter 9)

The original poster offered the following response in a second post:

I asked to join this group to learn about the wrongs suffered by the descendants of victims. Many say that I am not responsible for the deeds of my grandfather. I don't agree. [. . .] I carried this burden from 1996 till last year, that is, for 18 years. And I did not talk about it. [. . .] I am responsible, and my children are responsible, and my grandchildren will be, too. (Commenter 1)

This thread of posts shows how online support groups secondary predominantly work on resolving trauma on the secondary/tertiary level, i.e., trauma which originally was the consequence of the failure to recognize or acknowledge the sufferings of victims and survivors, including non-emphatic reactions of individuals at the time, as well as the silence and tabooing of the decades of the communist era. Historical trauma did not conclude in collective processing. Rather, it was pushed back to the individual level, with everyone carrying their own burden and passing it on as a legacy of post-traumatic symptoms, guilt, mourning and loneliness to their offspring. But this unintentional bequeathal included not only the descendants of victims, but also the descendants of perpetrators, witnesses and bystanders. As time passes, boundaries of identities become less clear-cut, resulting in the “trans-generational intersections of identities”, which is a new term I have coined referring to the processes of identity changes and identity intersections related to the roles traditionally listed in the so-called trauma grid (victim, perpetrator, bystander, collaborator).³⁶ Several studies – and also the thread of posts above – show that the descendants of perpetrators are also affected by traumatization.³⁷ In one of the comments in the above cited thread of posts a commenter draws attention to the digital sphere as a meeting place. In this case, the group takes one step further: they meet and integrate a descendant of a perpetrator into the carrier group of the collective trauma.

Sharing traumatic experiences online in a support group means that there are others “present” and “listening”, i.e., the second and third stages of recovery (reconstruction of the trauma narrative, reintegration in a community)³⁸ can be reached at the same time. A study by Michaelle Indian Rachel and Grieve pub-

³⁶ David Read Johnson and Hadar Lubin, *Principles and Techniques of Trauma-Centered Psychotherapy* (Washington: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2015), 119.

³⁷ Ellen Rosenthal, ed., *The Holocaust in Three Generations* (London: Cassell, 1998); Dan Bar-On, *Legacy of Silence: Encounters with Children of the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

³⁸ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*.

lished in 2014 shows that “socially anxious individuals” prefer online support groups to face-to-face meetings.³⁹ One of the reasons for this, in addition to the opportunity to remain anonymous and the ability to withdraw anytime from contact without consequences, is that there is usually a large number of people “around”, and thus in all (mathematical) likelihood posts will be met with at least some emphatic responses. Those unable to comment on or recognise the traumas of the other will remain silent, but this will not be noticeable online, thus their silence will not become un-recognition, and it will not constitute a wall of indifference or lead to secondary traumatisation (although the lack of secondary traumatisation might be considered illusory, as keeping silent might be a way of shirking the ethical call to respond and thus allowing the silent party to avoid either confronting or denying the trauma of the other).

In an article about the transformation of Jewish identity in Hungary in relation to the “strategy of silence” over the Holocaust and Jewish roots and identity practiced by survivors and the remaining Jewish community in communist Hungary, the authors, Ferenc Erős, Éva Kovács and Júlia Vajda cite a respondent who remembers his father, a survivor, as “not existing inside”. The respondent felt the burden of inherited trauma in the “inhibitions within internal family life”. “In a certain sense”, the respondent commented, “this made my family dead”.⁴⁰

It is a common practice in online support groups, especially private / closed and secret Facebook groups, to call the group a “family” or a “hive” (“mamahives” are very common), and members often come to regard the group as an extended family. As we have seen in the examples of the Facebook groups discussed here, in a certain sense online group communication can function as a substitute for lost “internal” family life. The group “The Holocaust and My Family” enables its members to accept their family as/even though they are lost. By sharing their loss, they become members of a new, digital family of people who have suffered a loss, and this fact becomes part of their identity. The concept of family is reinterpreted in this process, so that in its new sense it can become the receptive environment for recognition of transgenerational intersections of identities, enabling dialogue among the descendants of the different groups affected by the trauma of the past.

39 Michelle Indian and Rachel Grieve, “When Facebook is Easier Than Face-to-Face: Social Support Derived from Facebook in Socially Anxious Individuals,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 59 (2014): 102–106.

40 Ferenc Erős, Júlia Vajda and Éva Kovács, “Intergenerational Responses to Social and Political Changes: Transformation of Jewish Identity in Hungary,” in *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma*, ed. Yael Danieli (New York: Plenum Press, 1998), 315–324, 319.

One of the members in the group “The Descendants of the Victims and Survivors of the Holocaust” sent me a private message welcoming my research, because (s)he felt that (s)he cannot process the trauma related to her Holocaust survivor grandparents, whom (s)he did not even know. When (s)he attempts to confront this trauma, (s)he only becomes upset and cries repeatedly, even though (s)he is a member of several groups. Further research is needed to investigate whether the digital environment can offer solutions to such problems, and whether trauma processing in online support groups on the collective level can be directed back to the individual level.

The Hungarian groups I analysed here differ from similar, Holocaust-themed English-language groups, which I have also been following for some years. There can be several reasons for this, among them the political situation in Hungary, the traumatic past specific to the region with its layers of frozen currents and the readiness of the Jewish community to work on trauma processing via storytelling at the time of finding the right platform, an online forum. The directions of trauma processing led to both towards a closure with creating a shared, multi-focused narrative and towards debates about identity issues impacted by transgenerational intersections. As opposed to the Hungarian groups, the various English-language groups are more neutral, with looser connections between members. The feelings of urgency and the sense of readiness for the moment of sharing is missing, as well as any tensions. Some groups are linked to institutions that take on the management of the online memory practices about the Holocaust,⁴¹ others are very small, with 20–100 members. On the other hand, some of the English language groups seem more permanent and stable, with an ongoing, steady flow of activities. It will be interesting to see how long these groups will last, and what directions they will take, especially with the appearance of other social media platforms that also have Holocaust-themed posts and activities, such as TikTok, Reddit, or Instagram, where the topic is discussed in completely different tones. Holocaust denial often intersperses the comments, the safety of the space of a private Facebook group is completely missing, and the interaction is happening in the online public sphere.⁴²

⁴¹ Eva Pfanzelter, “Performing the Holocaust on Social Networks: Digitality, Transcultural Memory and New Forms of Narrating,” *Kultura Popularna* 51(1) (2017): 136–151, <https://doi.org/10.5604/01.3001.0010.4081>; Victoria Grace Walden, “What is ‘Virtual Holocaust Memory,’” *Memory Studies* 15(4) (2019): 621–633, <https://doi.org/10.1177/175069801988871>; Stefania Manca, “Digital Memory in the Post-Witness Era: How Holocaust Museums Use Social Media as New Memory Ecologies,” *Information* 12 (1) (2021): 1–17, DOI:10.3390/info12010031.

⁴² For example, on Reddit, a 2016 (by now archived) thread with 1,600 comments features under the title “Guy thinks he is a Holocaust survivor because his grandma survived the Holocaust”

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which puts the issue of intergenerational trauma into popular register and slang. Among the comments there are many that relativise the issue, but several others reflect on the topics of, among others, historical trauma, traumatic legacy, slavery. https://www.reddit.com/r/facepalm/comments/fl9fuy/guy_thinks_he_is_a_holocaust_survivor_because_his/.

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