

MINNA MUHLEN-SCHULTE

Vergangenheitsbewältigung: struggle to come to terms with the past

I was born in Sydney in 1985 and I grew up there with a vague sense of my German heritage and the silences around it. I knew my grandfather, Achim Muhlen-Schulte, had disappeared and I was aware of the mark his absence left on my family. I remember Anzac Days at school where I told my friends' grandparents that my German grandfather had also served, and watching faces fall as they realised he did not fight for Australia. And I remember a scratchy, old, grey wool blanket amongst the family bed linen that I was told my grandfather had sent back from the war.

But it wasn't until January 1997 that I was fully aware of the story of Achim. My dad decided to retrace his father's last footsteps, over 50 years after Achim's disappearance on the Eastern Front. Two of my brothers joined him on a train that wound its way through south-west Poland, near the Vistula River. Outside it was -30 degrees, one of Europe's coldest winters since January 1945. Inside the train carriage, my Dad was asleep, slumped against the window pane, but my teenage brothers were awake laughing and drinking. Rustling inside his bag for more snacks, my youngest brother inadvertently pulled out Achim's last letter. Their high spirits were dampened as they looked out at a landscape obliterated by ice and snow and read:

11 Jan. 1945

Dicke Luft! Ivan greift an [The air is thick! Ivan is attacking].

Worked through the night, luggage is packed. Heavy artillery fire. Morale is good.

All my love, always your own Achim.¹

This letter, scrawled on a piece of lined paper, hole punched in the left margin, is held in State Library Victoria's Manuscripts collection. It is the last news of my grandfather who disappeared somewhere between the Polish towns of Kielce and Glogow, four months before World War II ended in Europe. Some 20 years later, when asked about their 1997 train journey, all three men in my family contradict or omit each other's memories. There is even dispute about whether they had copies of the letters with them, which casts doubt over this version of the story and its dramatic climax. My brothers claim that Dad was asleep, but Dad is adamant he was awake. Dad's return to Germany, for the first time in decades, was prompted by one of my brothers having gone on a high school exchange to a small town near Strasbourg. In a strange synchronicity, this town was just an hour from where Dad had been evacuated during the war. This journey was the first time that he had gone in search of his father.

It is hard to reconstruct the experiences of an individual over 70 years later, especially a grandfather, with whom there is a shared family lore, mythology and memory. It is harder still to understand the significance of his death among the deaths of the estimated 30 million people who died on the Eastern Front during World War II.² This toll includes Russian and German civilians and most of the Holocaust sites – from extermination camps, to pogroms, death marches and ghettos throughout Eastern Europe. The impact of Achim's story, like the stories of most families that came into contact with the apocalyptic Eastern Front, ricochets beyond Europe and through the generations. Memories of Achim are refracted through different lights depending on which family member describes him. Each time his story is told it prompts a series of questions and a hunt for information to somehow reconcile this past. Above all the questions *What did he believe? How much of the Nazi doctrine was he persuaded by?* sits uncomfortably with his descendants as an unwanted inheritance that is starkly disconnected from Australia's Anzac tradition. Our family, it seems, is frozen with the unpalatable history that Germany began to confront as a nation in the 1960s. The German language even made room for the seemingly endless word, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* ('struggle to come to terms with the past' or its contrary twin meaning 'to wrestle into submission'), to explain the collective guilt of a generation who questioned their parents' wartime actions.

Of course, the other half of this story belongs to the woman who received my grandfather's letters, my grandmother Muriel. She was an Australian, a foreigner in Germany (known as an *Ausländer*) and connected to the Allied side of World War II. When Muriel married Achim she had to renounce her then British citizenship (prior to 1948 all Commonwealth citizens were British), after which she moved to the 'Fatherland' on the eve of World War II. After Achim's disappearance, she was required to negotiate her re-entry to Australia and become a naturalised citizen again. Her story typifies the complexity of national identity, especially in wartime. National allegiance becomes blurred by personal relationships with the 'enemy'. Muriel's memoir is attached to Achim's letters in the State Library Victoria collection and is riddled with the tensions between memory and history.

Memory, silence and the German community in postwar Melbourne

In 1945, after receiving Achim's last letter, Muriel waited out the rest of the war near the Swiss-German border, hoping for a sign of life from him. In 1946, when no news came, she travelled back to Australia on a journey that mirrored the passage of tens of thousands of refugees, including many Germans, who left war-ravaged Europe for Australia.

Despite news of the horrific reports of the events at Auschwitz reaching Australian shores, anti-Semitic sentiment was widespread in Australia³ at that time and public opinion polls from 1948 ranked Jewish refugees as the second-least desirable after black migrants.⁴ Two years earlier, immigration minister Arthur Calwell described 'The prevailing anti-alienism [as] a form of racial prejudice ... almost indistinguishable from Nazism'.⁵ In contrast, over just a few years, Germans had transformed from 'enemy aliens' into the most desirable migrant for Australia, ranked second only to the British. The arrival of Germans increased five-fold in Victoria from the end of the war until 1961, when 39,291 postwar arrivals were counted in the census.⁶ This influx of displaced persons included not only the persecuted but the perpetrators of that persecution, including hundreds of Nazi collaborators, which was revealed publicly when ASIO (Australian Security Intelligence Organisation) files were declassified during the 1980s.⁷ War criminals were able to live with anonymity in Prime Minister Robert Menzies's postwar Australia, which looked to defend itself against the 'red peril' of Communist sympathisers, rather than bring to justice those who were responsible for wartime atrocities.⁸

Amidst this influx, however, were German migrants who were neither war criminals or Holocaust survivors, but who had a more ambivalent relationship with the Nazi regime. Different facets of their experience and their own

accounts cast them variously as complicit, bystanders, victims or dissidents, but all of them carried their memories with them to Australia. In the following generation, a complex community emerged in Melbourne that intertwined the lives of Holocaust survivors, former German internees from the Australian internment camp at Tatura, German Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe veterans. My part-German father, for instance, married a Jewish woman whose parents fled Vienna in 1930s and they became friends with the children of families that were broken up during internment in camps in Australia.⁹ These individuals' accounts detail different experiences of war and how those memories fade or change in relation to the bigger narrative of World War II in an Allied nation. The records left behind give us some insight but are also marked by silences that reveal as much as the memories they commit to paper.

The reasons why individuals construct accounts in retrospect or edit the events they witness are complex, as is the silence about the Holocaust that pervades many accounts. Part of their construction is based on the relationship of individual memory to a bigger collective memory that either reinforces their story or sets it off balance.¹⁰ The time in which they are interviewed or write about their experience is predominantly later in life, when they attempt to pull together a coherent narrative for their family or the public record. For some, the narrative has to absolve what they might have known, for others it is a story that wrestles with the feelings of shame arising from now knowing the full horror of the Holocaust that clashes with the pride and excitement they had as young adults coming of age during a fascist regime. For instance, Peter Alexander Mehrrens, a former Luftwaffe pilot who moved to Melbourne in 1954, was 82 years of age when he wrote an autobiography, and he did so only once his wife died. He declares that:

For the first time, I am revealing my actual life, as to leave a legacy behind, one, which my wife, Anneliese all my family tried to hush up, because of the great hatred of German officers after the war, and the unfortunate consequences we had to suffer.¹¹

Mehrrens engages in minimal reflection on his role in the war, and descriptions of his realisation of the murder of Jewish citizens clash with bizarre passages describing his excitement at meeting Nazi elites such as Eva Braun. But he clearly decided, for the better part of 50 years, to erase his past and remain silent.

Back in Germany, the past was only slowly disinterred until the 1960s when high-ranking officials in the West German Government were exposed as former Nazis and there was an explosion of literature, film and theatre

that tackled the past and recorded Jewish survivor testimony that confronted the public with the details of the Holocaust. But, for my grandmother, who went on to live amongst the wider postwar German–Australian community in Melbourne, there was a silence that was not only specific to Germans but common to many survivors of World War II. Historian Jay Winter defines different types of silence in postwar communities, including some which are ‘liturgical’, meaning a silence constructed around sacred themes of ‘loss, mourning, sacrifice and redemption’¹² and strongly linked to people’s need to not speak about violence and death but to grieve on their own. But Winter also explores the idea of ‘political silence’, where people choose not to speak and rather ‘to suspend or truncate open conflict over the meaning and/or justification of violence’.¹³ The effect is that:

Groups of people construct scripts which omit, correct and occasionally lie about the past. Repeated frequently enough, these scripts become formulaic ... Consensual silence is one way in which people construct the mythical stories they need to live with.¹⁴

The desire to assimilate into Australia, to ‘hush up’ the past and to fit in also allowed for the creation of ‘mythical stories’, like my grandmother’s autobiography that glossed over the past. Recently, however, the realms of private and family memory have spilled over into the public and started to chip away at the silences built up over 60 years. The rise of family memory is a trend that some historians have noted, particularly in the German public realm, has the danger to represent the ‘triumph of the private over the public, of emotion over enlightenment, and of uncritical empathy over pedagogy’.¹⁵ I am acutely aware of the danger of ‘uncritical empathy’ when examining the lives of these German–Australians, particularly my own family, and I’m aware of the limitations of empathy. How much do I really have in common with them as a descendant? What do I really understand or know about how they viewed Nazi Germany? My moral revulsion towards the Holocaust makes it hard to understand the actions taken by my grandparents, and the choices they made, and this creates a ‘tendency to look down upon those stuck in predicaments we ourselves might not have resolved in any morally superior manner’.¹⁶ This article is my attempt to breakdown the silence in my grandparents’ accounts and examine my own struggle to come to terms with this past.

Muriel Muhlen-Schulte’s ‘A biography of Hans Joachim Muhlen-Schulte’

Attached to Achim’s 52 letters in State Library Victoria’s Manuscripts collection is ‘A biography of Hans Joachim Muhlen-Schulte’. Written by



Top left: Achim Muhlen-Schulte, Muriel and their son Michel, c. 1942. Author's collection

Top right: Achim, c. 1932, aboard the *Baradine* from Australia to Germany after his marriage to Muriel. Author's collection

Above left: Muriel, Achim and Hilde Albrecht (the family housekeeper in Berlin) c. 1930s. Author's collection

Above right: Muriel, c. 1930s. Author's collection

my then 81-year-old grandmother in 1989, the text is more a memoir than biography. It was her decision to donate the letters in 1988 and she obviously wanted her side of the story included in the collection. Printed on lavender paper, the biography has the qualities of a coming-of-age adventure or the romance of a Mills & Boon novel. It is narrated in the third person and is full of factual errors and deliberately dramatic flourishes that are pure fantasy. It is interesting, however, to examine why it was written in this way and what my grandmother wanted remembered. It is also an insight into how she tried to tie together her personal and national identity as she married a German and then left Melbourne for Berlin to live under the Third Reich. Her opening description of how she met Achim Muhlen-Schulte is the first hint that she is an unreliable narrator:

It was during February 1926, that a tall, slim girl who had just had her 18th birthday knocked on the door of the Gloria Light Company, Collins Street, Melbourne. It was immediately opened by a tall blond young man with dark brown eyes, who was evidently on the way out ... he held the door open for her to enter. Then he went on his way. But in that moment he said to himself 'that is the girl I'm going to marry'.¹⁷

Photos show Achim with a distinctly brown crop of hair, but Muriel's description of his blond hair adds a golden tinge to their first encounter.

Achim arrived in Melbourne in the late 1920s as a young X-ray engineer. His name, Joachim, was shortened by Australians to Achim and then to 'Bob'. He arrived at a strange point in Australian-German relations as, just a few years earlier, the *Enemy Aliens Act* prohibited Australia's former World War I enemies – Turks, Austrians, Hungarians, Bulgarians and Germans – from entering the country. They were classed in the same category as 'epileptics, idiots and criminals'.¹⁸ But, by 1925, restrictions on immigration had eased and the wave of anti-German sentiment that swept through Australia during World War I retreated, shifting the landscape in its wake. With the rise to power of Adolph Hitler in 1933, there was optimism in some Australian press reports that the Nazi party would repair international relations and act as a bulwark against the threat of Communism.¹⁹ Muriel nonetheless sensationalised her marriage to Achim, which may reflect something of the personal tension she felt in her social and familial circles at the time:

It was decided that ... [Achim and Muriel] would marry and travel by ship to Germany. This was, of course, a decidedly venturesome project, which met with some antagonism by well-meaning, but anti-German Australians

about the lot of German women ... 'Kinder, Kirches, Kueche' (children, church, cooking!)

Before leaving Muriel's British passport had to be surrendered at the German consulate, and she received a German passport in accordance with the law at that time. So the *Baradine* sailed from Melbourne with two German subjects on board. The Melbourne *Sun* printed a paragraph 'Australian girl weds German'. It was an unusual event in Melbourne of those days.²⁰

I have not found the article to which Muriel refers, only a general notice of their wedding,²¹ but perhaps she magnified the incident into a headline in her memory. After travelling back to Australia in c. 1933, photos of social activities in the Victorian countryside show Achim and Muriel with other German Australians and are unambiguous in revealing the participants' support of the Nazi Party. Muriel was photographed under a waterfall giving the Nazi salute as well as sitting amidst a picnic beneath the swastika flag hanging overhead and, later, there are photos of my dad in Berlin as a three-year old dressed neatly in a Hitler Youth uniform.

I have not found any reference to my grandparents in the surveillance records in the National Archives of Australia in Canberra, but these documents trace the establishment of Nazi Party bases within Australia and only a handful of official members are recorded. Unofficially, however, there were many more supporters through affiliated sports and social clubs and some who were drawn into the movement.²² Historian Emily Turner-Graham has documented the effect of Australian-German propaganda publications such as *Die Brucke*, which promulgated values that were seen to define true German identity. While historian David Bird's recent book, *Nazi Dreamtime*, has traced Australian-born writers, academics, politicians and ordinary travellers to Nazi Germany who were filled with admiration for the Nazi regime and its vision. This included Prime Minister Robert Menzies after his visit in 1938. Bird claims that 'They came; they saw; they were conquered, or at least were impressed. Few Australian visitors to Nazi Germany before September 1939 failed to fit this description'.²³ While Muriel was undoubtedly swept up in the glamour of Berlin, as evidenced by entries in the social pages of various Australian newspapers ('Berlin is a woman's paradise of cheap and beautiful hats, according to Mrs. Muehlen-Schulte'),²⁴ there is a conspicuous silence in her memoir about her or Achim's views of the Nazi Party. Her confused and erroneous rationale for why they returned again to Germany in 1938 related that Achim had been offered a position in the German X-ray firm Sanitas to build the business in Buenos Aires and they went via Berlin to say goodbye to

his family. In the dramatic twist of Muriel's memoir, the ship the *Santa Rose* was to sail from Germany on 3 September but, because war was declared the same day, they were trapped and the ship sailed without them:

Strange to say, although there had been murmurs and mutterings about an impending war, no one in Germany had believed such a thing could really happen. In that moment not only were the personal lives of Achim and Muriel shattered, but those of the whole wide world. There was everything to say ... but it seemed there was nothing one could say ...

Of course the voyage to Buenos Aires for next day had to be cancelled. In any event, Achim had not been naturalized in Australia, and no German could leave the country.²⁵

It appears here that my grandmother has run the years 1938 and 1939 together as one in her memory, as evidenced by her having the outbreak of war commencing a year earlier but on the correct day and month. This could have been a simple typing mistake. Muriel may, however, have attempted to gloss over inconvenient dates to explain away their reasons for returning to Nazi Germany, especially because it is clear from other family accounts that Achim's family unambiguously supported the regime. Furthermore her own memoir and other sources, including photo albums and her Australian-German friend Vera Bockmann's autobiography, *Full Circle: An Australian in Berlin* (1986), place Achim and Muriel in Berlin from mid-1938. Muriel is also wrong about the *Santa Rose*, which was an American passenger liner that never sailed from Germany to South America. Finally Achim's status as an enemy alien in Australia would have made naturalisation impossible and Muriel had to forfeit her British citizenship to marry him, which further calls into question her version of events.

By the time the boycott and violence against Jewish business owners culminated in the pogrom of Kristallnacht in November 1938 in Germany, Muriel and Achim were settled in Berlin. Muriel's subsequent silence about such events is marked. What makes Muriel's omissions even more glaring is Bockmann's vivid account of prewar Berlin, where she lived at the same time as Muriel and Achim, and in close contact with them. She describes Kristallnacht, albeit 40 years later:

By lunch-time the greater part of the devastation had been completed, the looting accomplished. But after school the Hitler youth still found things to do ... What I noted most of all was the shocked and stunned look on

people's faces. This had been the elegant Kurfurstendamm – their beloved boulevard – and now? What was happening?²⁶

In 1994, my brother interviewed Hilde Albrecht, a housekeeper who lived with the German branch of the family from the 1930s to 1960s. She also remembered Kristallnacht and Achim's father, Georg Muhlen-Schulte, and his specific reaction to the violence:

Yes, that was very sudden. Well, that happened quite unexpectedly. The Kristallnacht. Right here in Berlin. That was dreadful ... [Georg] drove into the city and, well, then we still lived in Tempelhof, right? And well, I know that he drove into the city and returned totally horrified, he did not understand that, no.²⁷

These accounts offer a window into Muriel's and Achim's time in Berlin and a peripheral perspective of events that their own records do not reveal. The role of ordinary Germans who witnessed these violent anti-Semitic events and their passive response is still hotly contested.²⁸ Was their inaction born of the material comfort the Nazi regime delivered making 'average Germans ... unscrupulous profiteers and passive recipients of bribes'?²⁹ Or was it because the sheer terror exercised by the regime silenced ordinary people from speaking out? Historian Richard J Evans argues:

Unless one realises the true dimensions of the terror exercised by the regime, which increased massively as the war went on and reached extraordinary heights towards its end, it is difficult if not impossible to understand the reaction of ordinary Germans to the deportation and murder of the Jews.³⁰

While numerous historical works probe these questions and examine the German nation, on a personal scale and as a family, we also question Achim's and Muriel's response. In Muriel's memoir, only one passage references the persecution and murder of the Jewish population in Poland:

Only once did Muriel ever see Achim cry. That was when he came back from Poland with news of the ill-treatment of the Jews by his countrymen. He could not grasp it. He was depressed for days.³¹

There is something disingenuous about this memory, partly due to the jolting, non-sequitur way in which Muriel introduces it into her narrative, and partly because it closely mirrors the text in Vera Bockmann's autobiography, which was published three years earlier and written about her husband, Otto Bockmann. I think Muriel excised mention of her political views because she was conscious of writing and living amidst an established Jewish community

with many Holocaust survivors in the Melbourne suburbs of St Kilda, Toorak and Caulfield. Also, family oral tradition recalls that Muriel still expressed anti-Semitic views late life, which exposes the memoir once more as a narrative that she constructed for a specific public audience or as a legacy piece for her family.

Poorly written as it is, the memoir is an interesting text because, despite its omissions, it occupies the space between Muriel's Australian past and present, and the German interlude. It traverses her identity as it shifts between degrees of being Australian to German to Australian again. Living in Nazi Germany she refers to herself in her memoir as 'Ausländer', and Achim refers to her as British but also, officially, as *Reichsdeutsche* (German of the Reich) by marriage. The conclusion of her memoir bears no mention of returning as a widow in 1946 and having to reapply to become a citizen in Australia, but this is documented in the National Archives of Australia.³² The narrative is pinned together by an adventure story in which Muriel revels in the novelty of being a suburban Melbourne girl abroad in Berlin in 1930s, suffers the grief of losing Achim and responds to the need to extricate herself from the darker parts of this history.

The features of Muriel's memoir (and some of Achim's letters) are consistent with what Konrad Jarausch and Michael Geyer identify as the trope of 'survival stories' written by Germans about their war lives:

the hapless people caught up in such events can describe them, but they do not question their own responsibility for them. Instead, these life histories tend to be told in a reactive fashion, representing irrational forces beyond one's control, which allows individuals the role of merely coping, trying to muddle through, or hoodwinking fate.³³

Letters from Hans Joachim Muhlen-Schulte (Achim) to his wife Muriel, 1944-45

Towards the end of 1943, Achim moved the family from Berlin to Markkirch, then a German-occupied town in France (now known as Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines), because his radiology firm was relocated to the border of France after the Berlin office was bombed.³⁴ In September 1944, however, Achim was sent into the army as punishment by the Ortsgruppenleiter (head Nazi official for a small town) for allowing his employees to stop working and return to their families in the face of Allied forces entering France. In her memoir, Muriel describes his actions as punishable because they were an affront to Nazi economic policy that was summed up in propaganda slogans such as the rail industry's 'all wheels must run for victory' (*Räder müssen rollen für den Sieg*).

Having not served for the whole war, however, Achim's forced enlistment was more likely a result of the disintegration of the Eastern Front and the need for more men. One month later, Hitler conscripted all men aged from 13 to 60 into a People's Militia (*Volkssturm*)³⁵ in a last ditch attempt to defend Germany's borders, which were besieged by the approach of Allied and Soviet forces. Muriel had to move with their two children away from Markkirch and, on 9 September, Achim wrote to her:

My own dearest Heart,

It was the hardest thing in the world to leave you there in a strange city with no home to go back to. This is the first real parting we've had since we were married. The first time that I have to leave you entirely to your own resources without being able to help in anyway. But I believe you'll stick it out and fight your way through if not for your own sake then at least for the sake of the kiddies and for me.³⁶

Between September 1944 and January 1945, Achim wrote 52 letters in English to Muriel and two letters in German to their son Michel. Achim perceptively observes the conditions of the Wehrmacht and appears sensitive and receptive to other people's moods and his own:

There are lots of disagreeable aspects to this sort of life, particularly when one is 36 and has been accustomed to a life carefully ordered by a loving wife. Here the recruit is just the lowest dog, is yelled at if he makes a slip, mostly because the matter in question hasn't yet been explained. Still, the whole business is like a narcotic, you don't think and mustn't think except of the matter in hand. Then you have to repeat parrot fashion exactly what you are told.³⁷

There is also humour, including a playful description of his army dormitory, comparing the less savoury:

aromas dispersed by seventy unwashed men in a comparatively small room where the windows are shut ... The smells are associated with a concert of trumpet blasts in all variations from bass notes to the high 'C.' The background to this music is supplied by the chorus of snorers.³⁸

And a philosophical outlook about the inevitability of his position:

Certainly, yours is again the hardest part. You are entirely left to your own devices, have to fend for yourself and our kiddies ... I have nothing to decide, no responsibility, but I'm tied hand and foot, have no longer any

say in shaping my life. I'm now a tiny cog in a machine which rolls on in an inexorable rhythm, and I just got to keep on moving round in the narrow rigid path provided for me without the slightest deviation of my own free will allowed.³⁹

There is silence in his accounts, too, despite the fact that his letters appear to be largely uncensored and include criticism of other parts of the Third Reich, including his description of the Ortsgruppenleiter who reported him as a 'narrow-minded pig-headed bumptious fool'.⁴⁰ He is in Poland in late 1944 and does not refer to having witnessed any persecution of Jewish communities; this may also be because by this stage, the deportation since 1942 of ghettos to extermination camps, which led to the murder of two million Polish Jews, was well advanced and Achim may not have seen evidence of deportations that were already completed.⁴¹ As Richard Evans notes, however, from 1942 onwards 'with two-thirds or more of the thirteen million German men under arms engaged on the Eastern Front, reports spread rapidly, and before the end of the year most Germans knew full well what was going on there'.⁴² It is also clear that, from late 1942, BBC broadcasts frequently spoke of the gas chambers and it is believed that up to 15 million Germans listened in secret to these reports every day. Family oral tradition records that Achim let Muriel listen to the BBC as long as she hid with the radio in the wardrobe. Hilde Albrecht also recounted in 1994 her memories of Jewish women being taken away from the Siemens factory where she worked:

Hilde: That must have been in 1942.

Interviewer (Roark Muhlen-Schulte): '42?

Hilde: '42. And I know that for this reason: the Vienna SS – my female colleagues told me that, the women, the German women who worked at Siemens – they, the Vienna SS came and took away the Jewish women who also worked at Siemens. Arrested. And I was actually quite good friends with two of these women and they said it was terrible. How they came and ... and arrested the poor women there and ... they did not know where they would be taken.⁴³

While Achim never refers to anything do with the Holocaust he describes occupying Polish homes and threatening farmers with his German uniform to get hold of food. This becomes a source of conflict in his letters to Muriel:

A propos my telling you of what we have to do to supplement our rations you imply that I'm going to the dogs in every possible way. That one really annoyed me. I'm not going to the dogs and don't intend to ... If we have to

3.

leave anything till I come or leave because when I come I
 bring plenty more in. I think you ought to divide your potato
 reserves so that they are spread evenly over the next three months
 and let the farmer take care of itself. In spring and summer
 you'll get plenty of fresh vegetables round your way, and quite
 early in the year too, and you can manage a lot less.
 12. 1. 45

Dickie hugs! Seven guests in. Worked through the night,
 luggage or packed. Heavy walking for. Shimmering get.

All my love
 always, your own
 Achim.

Achim Muhlen-Schulte's last letter to his wife, 12 January 1945 (detail), Muhlen-Schulte Letters, Manuscripts Collection MS F Box 3294/1 & 2

solve the food problem in a somewhat unorthodox way it's because it's the only way possible here, it doesn't mean that I'll go on pinching potatoes for the rest of my life instead of buying them at the green grocer's again.⁴⁴

In other contrasting accounts, Achim describes friendly Polish men and women looking after him when he is hurt and the sounds of Polish children reminding him of his own toddlers. Perhaps these exchanges represent kindness between people in desperate situations, but they are also undoubtedly shaped by his power as an occupying German soldier. They are also framed in stark relief against preceding years of genocidal terror brought by the Germans into Poland.

As Achim was moved further east and closer to the front, the letters record how the war between Nazi Germany and the Allies becomes, on a personal scale, a tussle of national allegiance and identity between Muriel and Achim. Muriel was not coping by herself in the border town and does not share Achim's view of the war:

For the first five years of this war we've had a better life than most people, now we've got to put up with what others had to go through years ago and ever since ... you've got to stop complaining and feeling sorry for yourself. Where is your British sense of humour which is supposed to carry your race through even the most awkward and unpleasant situations. Has it really evaporated under the stress of the last couple of months?⁴⁵

Then I could only hope your compatriots across the channel are equally near giving up the ghost so that they are liable to crack up some day with the help of V2 and the other Waffen still to come.

... Sweetheart, I'm sorry I had to rouse you up again once more, but I simply can't let you go on like that ... [the] climax will be decided in the next six or nine months and [it] is by no means certain that good old Deutschland will kick the bucket. And don't write me off already! I don't intend to let the Bolshies get me.

Achim's castigation of Muriel for not believing in a Nazi German victory is linked to their support of the regime but also his inextricable hope that, through the triumph of the Third Reich, he will survive the war and see his family again. As Richard Evans notes, many Germans by 1944 'fought on not because they believed in victory but because they saw no alternative'.⁴⁶ Achim's letters are mingled with bewilderment and anger at being caught up in the machinery of war he can't control. But he can control the narrative he tells his wife and his son.

A 'narrative truth'⁴⁷ is shaped for my grandparents both during the war and, crucially, for my grandmother in Australia after World War II. The motives for why they recategorise and redefine their story is partly due to the pressure of a collective narrative bearing down on them as they write (fascism for Achim and postwar Allied victory for Muriel) and partly their desire for a legacy that their family will remember and exonerate them by.

Achim's silence is perhaps the most tantalising and literal. We can't ever know exactly what he exactly saw or heard in Poland in the last months of the war. As vivid as his letters are, they are still self-censored – we can assume largely for Muriel's benefit. And his disappearance abruptly cuts his story short. The thread of his story was not picked up again until 1973 when Muriel was able to obtain a German Red Cross report. The report describes how men of his unit died in the retreat from the advancing Soviet army that the German intelligence mistakenly estimated would outnumber them by three men to one. In fact the ratio was five Russian soldiers to one German soldier.⁴⁸

A large number of soldiers of the 17th Tank Division [are] missing. For many, there is existing evidence that they died in action. Others, however, met their death in the heavily snowed-in forested regions as well as while crossing the Pilica [River], without having been noticed even by their fellow soldiers close-by.⁴⁹

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to recognise the complexity of Achim's and Muriel's experience and the ways in which their identity was moulded by the extremity of war and politicised in its aftermath. Their testimony and memory, even when distorted, offers a window into how people wrestled with their experience, especially as a dual national, like my grandmother in postwar Australia.

On a personal level, writing this article has also acted as a way to shape their silence into something tangible. It opens up a conversation about how to talk about the memories of Australians descended from the 'other side' of World War II. Their records remain silent because of events that overtook them; or silence was used to conceal what they witnessed, or did or didn't do; or silence helped to ameliorate guilt and to create a narrative about their lives that they and their family could live with. As part of a younger generation that looks back on this past with the benefit of some 70 years, I can examine patterns and see that 'silence, like memory and forgetting, has a life history ... and can be transformed into its opposite ...'.⁵⁰ I can ask why they wrote their accounts as they did. What is the significance of their story amongst some 30 million others who perished or were murdered on the Eastern Front? Is there a way to move beyond moralising their position and explore instead the tensions between memory and history, and the motives embedded in people's narratives and understand them that way? These are some of the questions I've tried to unpick in examining my grandparents' accounts of Nazi Germany and our family's struggle to come to terms with the past.

It also has revealed the way in which the power of memory within families can perpetually return to the present. Even as a 79-year-old, my dad still wrestles with this history and still has nightmares about the fate of his father. There is no easy way to reconcile the violent scale of this history, even with a personal link to it. There is no way to be at ease with this history, and nor should there be.

In 1997, when Dad caught that train through the south-western part of Poland, between Warsaw and Krakow, he says he wasn't asleep but vividly remembers staring intently out the window trying to imagine the scale of the Vistula–Oder Offensive on 12 January 1945 along the Weichsel River. The barren, flat landscape, obliterated by ice and snow, hid any landmarks from view. And the speed of rail travel obscured the distance between locations. But for Dad, this journey was the closest he felt he would get to finding his father, Achim.