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Family Stories

Between Experience and Myth

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I was born and grew up in Zagreb, Croatia, but I spent my first year at school in Edinburgh, UK. In retrospect, I realise that exactness must have been of great importance to me, as after I returned to Zagreb I was very particular about telling everyone who asked that I had spent nine months in Edinburgh, not a whole year. After some time at home, in a conversation with a classmate about why I was good at English, I was told that I was unusually fluent because I had lived in the UK for nine years! Ever since then I have been intrigued by the fact that other children exaggerated the length of time involved in order to explain my proficiency.

I recently came across similar phenomena in the stories that were told by Bosnian families in Sweden about the 1990s war in Bosnia and Hercegovina (Maček 2016, 2017, 2018). In a project with 20 families

probing the transmission of parents' war experiences to their children, who were born in Sweden, I compared parental stories of war, flight, and getting established in Sweden with their children's stories of the same events. In the transmission of these family stories, some elements were exaggerated and magnified, as in the anecdote from my childhood. In this material, however, other phenomena involved in sharing stories of the significant past emerged. The children's retellings were also characterised by simplification through loss of detail, as well as abstraction through omitting the personal relations, humour, and irony that were characteristic of parental stories and of the accounts of war experiences I collected during my fieldwork in Bosnia during the 1990s (Maček 2009).

In the first part of this article, I give examples from

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family stories of Bosnian war experiences told in Sweden in order to provide an ethnographic ground for the theoretical implications I explore in the second part, where I look at how stories are transformed through retelling in larger social groups. I identify common features of family stories, national narratives, and myths, and show that they all preserve a shared moral content and provide later generations with a sense of their origins through evoking strong emotions, which render the content meaningful.

Telling family stories of Bosnian war experiences in Sweden

Consider a family story in which the United Nations was not helpful in Bosnia and Hercegovina during the war. When I asked eighteen year-old Ida what she knew about her parents' experience of war, she started telling me about the things she knew in short sentences, lining them up after each other: the UN did a bad job, they did not help her parents leave the town and they were responsible for genocide in Srebrenica (Maček 2018). In their own stories about the UN during the war, however, her parents did not mention either Srebrenica or genocide. Rather, each of them told me, separately, about one direct encounter with the UN: when they tried to get a UN permit to leave Sarajevo, they were turned down in a manner that they regarded as insensitive and humiliating. Moreover, on their way home from the UN headquarters they encountered one of the most life-threatening episodes they experienced during the war.

This comparison of the family story of parents who

narrated about their own experiences with that of their daughter, who re-narrated her parents' stories, indicates that the emotional and moral content of the parental version was preserved in the daughter's version: the UN betrayed Bosnian people, and for some this betrayal had lethal consequences. It was a bad job, and it was shocking and morally upsetting (Maček 2018).

In order to preserve the emotional and moral content of the family story, however, Ida had to change the contents in her version. In her eyes, not providing a young couple with a permit to leave a besieged town during a war could not cause the rage and condemnation towards the UN that was present in her parents' account. In Sweden, where children learn about global injustices and the worldwide suffering of refugees, parental rage and condemnation of the UN could be matched only by its responsibility for a genocide (Maček 2018).

Thus, in the daughter's version we see an exaggeration: from responsibility for denying an exit permit to responsibility for a genocide. We also see the loss of all personal details: the parents are not portrayed as individuals with their own will and judgment, but are rather quickly connected to the anonymous Bosnian population of Srebrenica whom the UN failed to protect in 1995. Further, the parents' version was filled with black humour: on their way from the UN headquarters they hitchhiked in order to get away from the massive shelling that had started, only to find themselves in a car with three soldiers who were members of extreme nationalist units whose national allegiance was opposed to their own! The parental version was told with characteristic Sarajevo humour (Maček 2009), while a lack of humour was typical of children's versions.

Children's versions also lose the meaningful relations that are present in the parents' version. The soldiers in the car are altogether missing from Ida's version, as is the parents' socially astute avoidance of identifying themselves in ethnonational terms during this lifesaving, but dangerous, ride. The fact that the soldiers were potentially lethal because social relations had become defined by ethnonational identity is replaced by reference to a genocide, the most extreme and depersonalised outcome of the subtler negotiations across the newly imposed ethnonational divisions that set the parameters of social interactions during the war (Maček 2009).

The loss of personal relations in the children's versions can be also understood as a generalisation and abstraction of their parents' stories. Children's versions are more universal than parental ones, which are very individualised and situated in both time and place. The loss of temporal and spatial context makes children's generalisations and abstractions also easily globalised. For example, Edin consciously hid his feelings of rage and sorrow over the loss of his family home in Bosnia from his children. In the episode below, however, he communicates his feelings to his older son Hugo, aged eight at the time, indirectly through a conversation about the destruction of buildings in Ukraine that they saw on TV while visiting Edin's former hometown in Bosnia in 2014 (Maček 2017).

In this episode we see the globalisation of the personal and local, as well as personalisation and localisation of the global (Maček 2017: 18). When they watched a TV story about the war in Ukraine in 2014, Edin said that he hoped the war would stop soon because it was bad. When Hugo asked why, Edin said

that it was bad because people had to leave their homes, and when Hugo kept asking 'but why?' Edin asked him how he would feel if the war happened where they lived in Sweden. Hugo became worried about this prospect and, both at the time and the next day, asked for his father's reassurance that it would not happen in Sweden. The father used the war in Ukraine as a way of communicating something essential about his own experiences of war in his former hometown to his son: that one of the worst things about war is that people have to leave their homes (which he had also communicated indirectly to his sons in several other ways). At the same time, the son understood the war in Ukraine because the father connected it with their own life in Sweden: 'what if it happened in our place?' The global is understood through the personal, and the personal is communicated through the global. The father is saying something universal about war, although it is based solely on his personal experience of a particular war in a specific place and time.

Edin did not long for his former hometown and had no meaningful relations left there, but after repeated requests from his Swedish wife and his Swedish-born sons he realised that they needed to see where he came from. The parents in this family talked clearly about the importance of understanding one's origins in order to understand one's identity. The children internalised the sense that their father's origin mattered and looked forward to visiting Bosnia with him, almost as a sort of initiation.

Parents' stories of their war experiences inculcated a worldview in their children: take responsibility for your wellbeing yourself; if you look for help you will find it, but do not take it for granted; if you work hard, you can

reach your goals. Many parents related their initial disappointment when the Yugoslav state did not help its citizens when the war broke out. The UN was not helpful either, so most relied on their own resources and social networks (Maček 2009). Ida's father, who was disappointed in the UN, told me that he realised right away that he had to provide all the help he needed by himself. Only after he took things into his own hands did other people become helpful. He drove home this point with a story. He and a colleague invented a small telephone exchange that could be used during the war. It was used by the Sarajevan authorities, and eventually they granted him a permit to leave the besieged town despite being a male of draft age.

Another common viewpoint parents' stories drove home was the importance of quickly overcoming the discrimination they met during their flight from Bosnia and their initial reception in Sweden. Ida's parents did not fret about their rejection by the UN, or about the fact that the mother's first Swedish employer paid her substandard wages and the father encountered a Swedish business that did not want to collaborate with his firm because of his foreign name. When I met them, they were both highly successful professionals who had actively chosen to remain in Sweden although they had attractive offers to move to the UK and the US.

Parents' worldviews were reflected in their children's worldviews. The children were more diligent than many of their Swedish schoolmates, and many told me that their parents taught them to take responsibility for their own lives. Although born and raised in Sweden, they felt different because of their foreign-sounding names and slightly darker complexions. Like their parents, they did not dwell on the discrimination they

encountered. Interestingly, most of them saw their future careers within the cosmopolitan, global arena, rather than in Sweden or in transnational contacts between Sweden and Bosnia. They articulated these visions without much reflection on why they sought such a future, but I interpreted it as a sublimated way of solving the discrimination they were meeting in Sweden (Maček 2016).

Thus, family stories contain meaningful worldviews and morals that explain parents' adverse experiences and their creative strategies for pursuing their goals, while providing the next generation with tools to orient their own lives and conceptualise their own future.

Children often said that they were awed by their parents: they left everything behind them in Bosnia and successfully rebuilt their lives from scratch in a completely new country where they had no social connections and did not know how the system worked. Parents' actions and choices appear exemplary; they are people to look up to and learn from. Children understood their parents' decision to leave Bosnia as an enormous existential, cultural, social, and professional sacrifice, especially as they witnessed the ease with which their parents moved and the warmth that characterised their interactions with others during their annual visits to Bosnia. Their decision to leave their war-torn homeland often attained heroic proportions in their children's eyes, often putting enormous pressure on the children to be as hardworking and successful as their parents (Maček 2016, 2017).

In some children's versions of family stories, a parent could acquire magical abilities. For example, Ida recounted her father's story about one day when he had to walk over a bridge, but 'he had some feeling' and

went back home. The same day, she said, the bridge either exploded or a lot of people were killed on it, she was not quite sure which. In her father's version, when he came to the bridge he had to cross to come home from work, the sniper was shooting, as was often the case there. He decided to wait, as he usually did, until he was left alone. He did not like to run when other people were running, he explained, because when many people run someone will get hit, and with his luck, he thought it would be him. So he waited for a long time, and then he heard a shell fly by and explode. He saw a man killed in front of him.

We can see that Ida's father was aware of the randomness of shooting and death, and in fact thought that 'luck' was not on his side. Instead, he used a rational, almost statistical strategy: when many people run, the sniper will shoot, and somebody will get hit; there is less chance that sniper will shoot at just one person, and there is less chance that a sniper will hit that person.¹ While the father's version of this story was characterised by his lack of any special capacity to shield himself, his awareness of the inherent randomness of death, and his rationalisation as a way of coping with his everyday vulnerability, in his daughter's version a mystical capacity to sense the danger saved him from certain death (see Maček 2018: 21).

The analyses of family stories of Bosnian war experiences have shown that the children's versions of some significant events in their parents' experiences tend to change the content of the story in order to preserve its emotional and moral content in the contemporary context of children's everyday lives in Sweden. In order for the children to comprehend them, the specific facts in these stories become exaggerated, simplified, more

abstract, and globalised. The stories contain a moral view that is transmitted unchanged from parents to children, although it is argued on different grounds in the two generations. Further, the family stories help to constitute the children's identity and are important as the explanation of their origin in the current Swedish context. Parents and the personal characteristics that saved them from the war and enabled them to establish new lives in Sweden figure as role models, often with hero-like qualities attached. In the children's versions of their parents' war experiences, parents may even acquire magical abilities.

Some of these results correspond quite well with other studies of remembering and re-telling over several generations in families (Bartlett 1967 [1932]; Welzer 2010; Bertaux 1994; Norrick 1997), which suggests that this may be a more general process. Other results remind me of the anthropological literature on intergenerational transmission (Kidron 2010, 2015; Feldman 2010; Argenti and Schramm 2010), and in relation to larger public and political settings (Connerton 1989; White 1997, 1999, 2004). At the end of this scaling up of my results, they also parallel anthropological and interdisciplinary analyses of myth (Boas 1996 [1938]; Malinowski 1996 [1954]; Levi-Strauss 1983 [1964], 2005 [1978]). Seeing these connections made me wonder whether the changes that I noticed on the smallest scale in the private context of family stories might be qualitatively related to a more general human tendency to adapt, stylise, abstract and make parables on the societal scale.

How remembering changes the past: social psychological perspectives

In a study of how the Second World War is remembered and re-narrated in contemporary Germany, sociologist and social psychologist Harald Welzer studied family narratives by members of different generations (2010) and drew some parallels with a classic study of remembering by social psychologist Frederic Bartlett (1967 [1932]).

Bartlett made a series of experiments to tease out how an original story may be changed when remembered. The two experiments he conducted that are most similar to intergenerational transmission are 'repeated remembering', where the same story is remembered at different time intervals by the same person, and 'serial remembering', where the same story is narrated by one person to another and then by that person to yet another (Bartlett 1967 [1932]). To summarise Bartlett's findings, he observed a simplification of stories through a loss of detail, which he calls 'abbreviation', abstraction through a loss of individual characteristics, and most significantly, a transformation of the story so it becomes meaningful and recognisable in the cultural context (which he calls the 'cultural schemata') of the person who remembers it (ibid.: 172–74). In order to make sense in the current context of the re-narrator, foreign names and titles are changed to familiar ones, the content becomes more and more conventional, and it stops changing only when it becomes a cultural stereotype. Changes in content and details also occur in order to preserve the general 'impression' that the original story has left on the narrator (ibid.: 176). Bartlett points out that the process

of remembering is 'often based upon an affective attitude', providing it with a 'setting without which it will not be persistently remembered' (ibid.: 94).

Relating his own findings to Bartlett's, Welzer (2010) gives examples of how the stories of the Second World War told in contemporary German families have changed between generations and how the re-narrations of the grandchildren fit their own current context. In the process, details are exaggerated, the story is depersonalised through the loss of individual characteristics and social relations and ultimately reduced to the level of stereotypes, producing a polarisation of characters and their predicaments from ambiguous and mundane to, on the one hand, extreme dangers faced by the people the narrator identifies with, and on the other hand, extreme brutality of the aggressors (ibid.: 12). The moral content of the stories was adapted to the contemporary German context. The overtly anti-Semitic or ambiguous actions of their grandparents were transformed by the grandchildren into heroic and helpful actions toward their Jewish fellow citizens. Welzer also observed a 'mystic', 'almost epic' aspect in re-narrations (ibid.: 13). For example, he had some students re-narrate an account of the end of the war told by sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf. Dahrendorf relates that he found himself in a bookstore during the Soviet soldiers' advance into the city. 'Nearly everything was plundered', and Dahrendorf 'picked half a dozen [...] volumes with romantic lyrics from the shelves', which he called a 'stolen commodity' (ibid.: 11). In the re-narrations of his account, the students mystified his 'picking' of these volumes because, as they explained, he did not want to say whether he had stolen them. While Dahrendorf says that he 'still own[s] the

volumes] today' (ibid.), in re-narration the situation has become epic: the students said that he 'kept them until his end' or 'read and wrote lyric books until his end' (ibid.: 13).

In Welzer's materials, the moral contexts of different generations differed starkly. The grandparents lived during the Nazi period, while the grandchildren grew up with a strong public critique of fascism. Accordingly, the moral values in grandchildren's re-narrations differed from their grandparents'. Nonetheless, the moral content of family protagonists in the stories remained positive in both generations. In the Bosnian families I studied, however, the moral values of pre-war Bosnia, which the parental generation strongly held, corresponded quite well with the public values of contemporary Sweden in which their children were growing up. Given the lack of conflict between past and present, these views could be transmitted intact.

Sociologist Daniel Bertaux (1994) has pointed out that in what he calls 'family legends', the crucial events in a family's history are made meaningful and acceptable, which allows these stories to be integrated, remembered, and passed on. They are a 'mix of fact and fiction'. This meaning-making process in the contemporary context of the family members, that also allows for epic and supernatural modifications of narrated experiences, resembles my own findings, as well as the results of both Bartlett and Welzer. By using the term 'legends' to refer to 'crucial events' in a transgenerational life of a family, Bertaux's reasoning can be connected to a wider societal phenomenon: stories about crucial events experienced by a group, which communicate some of the central values shared by that group that are to be passed on to the coming generations. Moreover,

the term 'legend' points to the existence of a combination of on the one hand realistic elements in a story, in the sense that they could have happened in the past; but on the other hand, miraculous elements also may be included, that is, events that cannot be explained by an everyday rationale but are rather special and may belong to the realm of the spiritual and divine. We have seen an example of this in Ida's ascription of supernatural powers to her father, in her version of how he managed to survive the shooting on the bridge close to his home. In being both possible and miraculous, and in making the past events meaningful and acceptable, legends seem to be related to both experience and myth.

In his article about collaborative nature of family stories, linguist Neal Norrick (1997) remarks that re-telling stories in a family setting 'ratifies group membership' and 'conveys group values'. In the language of anthropology, family stories seem to be part of the foundation of collective identity and sociocultural values.

How societies remember: family stories in a wider political and sociocultural context

In his classic work *How Societies Remember* (1989), Paul Connerton drew attention to the bodily and performative aspects of social memory through studying commemorative ceremonies, which he described as rituals. Ever since, scholars have studied the embodied and emotive aspects of collective remembering, including the contributors to Argenti and Schramm's

edited volume on intergenerational transmission of trauma (2010a). Carol Kidron describes how Cambodian parents in Canada unintentionally passed on their moral values and worldviews to their children (Kidron 2010; Argenti and Schramm 2010b: 26), which is similar to what I found in analysing Bosnian family stories in Sweden.

Kidron's recent work (2015) takes us beyond the family to study the dynamics between family processes and state-run institutions. Like Bartlett, Welzer and myself, she found that it is the emotional content in a story that makes it meaningful, and thus possible to remember. Kidron studied the Israeli state's institutionally orchestrated school trips to Holocaust sites in Poland. Children whose families included Holocaust survivors were encouraged to tell about their relatives' fate. These stories had a strong emotional impact on other youths. Through empathy with their schoolmates' family histories, the children in some sense became its inheritors as well. As the Israeli state is founded on this traumatic history, national identity becomes personally and emotionally meaningful to the next generation. In Argenti and Schramm's edited volume, Jackie Feldman (2010) shows the development of 'identity by proxy' by being at the site of the Holocaust in a ritual of collective commemoration that provides Israel's national symbols with embodied meaning.

Geoffrey White (1997, 1999, 2004) has even more clearly demonstrated the centrality of the emotional content to narratives of national identity that are inculcated by state commemorations of historical events. His analysis of the United States' memorials of Pearl Harbour shows that the nationalisation of personal pasts saturates the national narrative with emotion and

thus makes it meaningful (1999). Not all personal emotions are suitable to becoming nationalised, however; the anger of participants is not present in the contemporary US national narrative (*ibid.*), while that narrative includes strong emotions of pride that were absent from participants' experiences and memories (1997). White argues that national history resembles mythic history: both are built on a sharp disjunction between the old and new world orders, and thus present the myth of origin of the nation and its moral principles. Both also contain a sharp polarisation between co-nationals and the enemy.²

In my own and others' materials on family stories, as well as in analyses of collective and national processes of remembering, the emotional content of the stories is crucial to making them meaningful, and thus ensuring their transmission. Without emotional content, stories are lost. Understandings of where one comes from (origin) and whom one belongs with (identity) are present in both family stories and institutionalised national commemorations. As the distance between the original event and participants in these ceremonies grows, the identification tends to become increasingly polarised: one identifies with the good side in the narrative, and one's ancestors and nation are re-narrated as good, even heroic. Concomitantly, when the stories of participants and eyewitnesses recede into the past, enemies are increasingly portrayed as evil.

Myth: social and cultural anthropological perspectives

Myth, as it has been understood by social anthropologists, is at the greatest increase of scale in these processes of retelling stories to explain origins and construct group identities. Many classic works of anthropology focus on analysing myth in relation to the social and symbolic order. Franz Boas, for example, spoke of myths as expressing 'fundamental views of constitution of the world and its origin', as well as views of human nature embodied in such stories as Adam and Eve (Boas 1996 [1938]: 69–77). He remarked that some myths 'give us the impression of being the results of philosophic thought coupled with deep emotion' (ibid.: 79). In Boas's view myths mirror social life and dominant cultural interests, and are built on the experience of everyday life (ibid.: 82).

This description is also applicable to family stories of the Bosnian war, which are 'built on the experience of everyday life' of the parents and represent the worldviews and moral values of both generations. The emotions are present as a crucial component in the transformation of stories into myths. The family story of 'why we live in Sweden' scales up into an origin myth; incidents in parents' lives scale up into incidents in lives of cultural heroes; wartime is scaled up into a mythical time that is starkly separated from the present; and the experiences of individuals are generalised as valid for humanity.

Bronislaw Malinowski saw myth as not only closely related to moral and social behaviour but also as shaping and even controlling it (1996: 252). On the smaller scale of family stories, it could be said that they connect

the moral values and worldviews of both generations, explaining their past and shaping their future actions.

Claude Levi-Strauss's structural analysis of myth posits that myth orders otherwise arbitrary data, and in this respect resembles science (Levi-Strauss 2005 [1978]). This consideration is especially relevant to war experiences, which seem arbitrary and hard to understand and structure, both while they happen and in memory and narrative. Thus, the mythologizing process that shapes the children's versions of family stories can be seen as a way of organising arbitrary and even chaotic information about their parents' experiences of war, and thus instrumental for understanding their origins, as well as their own orientation in the world. In the similar way, national myths, flourishing especially in times of national crisis, bring order and meaning to events otherwise perceived as chaotic and terrifying (Maček 2009). Levi-Strauss also pointed to the polarisation of opposites in myth: not only good versus evil, but also life versus death and the raw versus the cooked (Levi-Strauss 1983 [1964]). Myth resembles the polarisation that structures national histories, with an in-group of righteous compatriots and an out-group of morally inferior enemies (White 1997). We can see the beginning of this polarisation in family stories when parents' and grandparents' actions are stripped of their moral ambiguity and are turned into heroes (Welzer 2010).

From experience to myth

Myths are stories that tell us how everything came into being, how the world works, how we should understand it, and how we should act. They are shared within soci-

eties and cultures in ways that make them feel relevant to the current moment. Because they arouse strong feelings, they are remembered and passed on.

Collective narratives of national history, often in form of ritualised public commemorations, also explain the origin of the nation and identify a set of national heroes that embody its ideals. They hold relevant messages for the current political moment of the nation and its citizens, and they nationalise private experiences and emotions in a way that makes the national narrative meaningful and memorable.

Family stories are told and shared by at least two generations of family members. They are set in the time before the children were born, in a context that is radically different from the present. They narrate parents' experiences and explain children's origin, as well as expressing worldviews and moral values held by both generations. They guide parents and children in the current moment as well as in their plans for the future. They are remembered and passed on between the generations because they carry a strong emotional charge.

Starting with examples from my own research on family stories about the Bosnian war of the 1990s told in Sweden by parents who fled the war to their Swedish-born children and retold by that generation, and then pointing out the features these family stories share with legends, national narratives and myths, I have proposed that processes of exaggeration, simplification, abstraction, generalisation, globalisation, heroisation, mystification, and polarisation are instrumental in changing a story from parental experiences and intergenerational transmission into collective myths that resonate in wider social and cultural contexts.

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Notes

- 1 This type of statistical logic was a typical way by which Sarajevans coped with their vulnerability and the randomness of death. For example, a middle-aged woman told me during the siege that it was more dangerous to live in New York City than in Sarajevo because more people died in New York because of crime and accidents each day than those who died from sniping and shelling in Sarajevo!
- 2 Ostracism of the 'other' is part and parcel of all war rhetoric, as I have shown in my earlier work on war in Bosnia (Maček 2009).

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