
Where We Come From: The Role of Place in Family Memory

Belinda Castles

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Abstract

In the cellar of the Duisburg metalworkers' union on 2 May 1933, four trade unionists, one of them my great-grandfather, were beaten and shot by Nazis. Outside the cellar is a row of square iron chairs, a memorial. For me, this is a place of ghostly presence, a threshold between the violent past and the present. It is a place that contains memory: family memory and collective memory. It contains my history, and that of my children. This article, centred on personal experiences, will explore the role of place and memory in informing my creative work, a novel based on my grandparents' lives. It will draw on Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer's memoir of Czernowitz, *Ghosts of Home*, in particular a visit to the crossroads at which Hirsch's parents made a decision that saved them from transportation to the Nazi death camps. For those who come after, who inhabit the complexities of what Hirsch has called "postmemory", being in such places can be at once disturbing and enriching, infused as they are with the contingency of survival or death. What do these sites contain? How do they inform what Hirsch and Spitzer call our "myths of origin"? Via Georges Perec's notion of "fictive memory", I will suggest that place engenders "potential memory", a kind of memory linked to memorial, fuelled by imagination and solidarity.

Keywords: postmemory, memorial, fictive memory, points of memory, potential memory, family history, Marianne Hirsch, Nazi Germany, Georges Perec, Duisburg, stolpersteine

Points of memory

In March 2008, I travelled from my home in Australia to Duisburg in the Ruhr region of Germany to research a piece of family history, the murder by the Nazis of my great-grandfather, union secretary, Johann Schlösser, in the cellar of his offices. I was researching a novel based on my grandparents' lives: my grandfather and Johann's son, anti-Nazi activist Heinz Schlösser, was forced to flee Germany on the day of his father's murder. I was interested in uncovering information that the family might not previously have known. I also wanted, like so many others descended from Europeans of that era, to be in the place where this event had happened, and in doing so, to somehow draw closer to the source of my own history.

A German cousin and I had arranged to meet a union secretary who had written about the history of trade unionism in the town. He had covered, in particular, the 1933 murder by the SchutzStaffel (SS) and Sturm Abteilung (SA) group now known as die Maiverbrecher, or the May Criminals. As we talked in the meeting room of the metalworkers' union, he spoke of the murdered men in a familiar, affectionate tone, although he was too young to have known them. He then showed us various plaques and memorials in the building, and we went out into the rain to begin a walk to some more places he felt would be of interest.

Before I describe these places I will refer to a phrase Hirsch and Spitzer use in *Ghosts of Home*: "points of memory". The phrase, used they explain instead of Pierre Nora's *lieux de memoire*, describes those "remnants that we think of as testimonial objects", saying that they serve as "'points of memory' opening small windows to the past."¹ I find this term apposite, in its emphasis on the idea of opening, although it is used here in relation to archives, photographs, and objects rather than place. The places we visited in Duisburg provided openings through which to see out of the present into the past, and through which the past might enter the present. They were windows into my family's history and the city into the former life of a place. Being in them brought us closer to a sense of connection with family memory.

Hirsch and Spitzer emphasise the fragmentary nature of our access to the past. This image of "small windows" captures for me the idea of glimpses, flashes, something vivid but partial, a story whose beginnings and endings are not known. We cannot therefore understand what we see without imagining its contingent details, its context.

Some of these places were already memorialised. Outside the contemporary union building, our guide showed us the first of the public memorials, a group of coffin-like sculptures, representing the bodies of the murdered unionists. They were constructed partly of copper, made to degrade in weather, and to identify the work of the men with metal. Their shape, huge metal containers for murdered men, was unnerving and poignant.

Figure 1. Coffins.



We walked along the river to a bridge. Our guide stopped us at its middle point. It had begun to rain heavily. My cousin and I huddled under his umbrella while the union secretary stood, talking in the rain. This was a modern bridge, he told us, but the old one had been in the same place. He pointed to the road beneath our feet. Our great-grandfather, Johann, had stood here. Then he pointed out a street on the other side of the river, to a building a little way along it. That was where the metalworkers' union used to be. He told us that Johann stood here and saw that the SS and SA were going into his office and made the decision to go to the police. That was the day, the secretary said, that the police had gone over to the Nazis.

"This," he said, "is where your family left your home. Now you have all gone around the world." He asked my cousin for a word in English and it turned out to be the same as the German: "diaspora". He pointed to the road. "Your diaspora begins." Then he walked us along to where the original union building of my great-grandfather's days had stood, under which the men had been murdered in the cellar. On the pavement outside was a memorial, a row of four square metal chairs, each of them facing a concrete wall.

Figure 2. Chairs.



He explained the symbolism to my German cousin, who translated for me. The place of work, where the chairs sit, is also a prison. The chairs symbolise the men too, and their square shape represents the strength of the union. Then he said a word that I could not understand, but which they both spent some time making sure I grasped. This sculpture was meant as a *stolperstein*, a stumbling block, something that is literally placed in your path, so that you stumble over it, so that you do not forget.

As they explained this to me, a cyclist dismounted his bicycle, as he could not ride past us and the memorial without going onto the road. He watched us as he passed, and when he was clear of the chairs, he mounted and went on his way.

Figure 3. Close-up: chairs.



I did not at that time understand the more specific use since the 1990s of the word “*stolperstein*”. It is the name for the little copper-coated plaques, the size of a cobblestone, laid in the streets of European towns to memorialise a single deported and murdered victim of the Nazis, showing where they lived or worked. It usually

gives the name and birthday of the person taken, and the dates of their deportation and murder.

Figure 4. Stolpersteine.



There are thousands of these little objects throughout the countries from which people were taken, and they resemble the Duisburg memorials in their appeal to imagine. Cultural historian, Joseph Pearson, writes in his blog, *The Berlin Memory*: *It is not what is written [on the stolpersteine] which intrigues, because the inscription is insufficient to conjure a person. It is the emptiness, void, lack of information, the maw of the forgotten, which gives the monuments their power and lifts them from the banality of a statistic. And yet from the inscription, the stumbler can infer the horror.*²

There is more representative information in my great-grandfather's memorial than in these little plaques. However, Pearson's reflections on "void" and "lack" and the power they generate suggests for me the role of imagination in the impact of these *in situ* memorials. We would walk past these places, where the murdered people lived and worked, but someone is asking us to stop, to stumble, to mark the place from which they have vanished, to *imagine* we remember them. The effect of these places has a creative source. They are a communication, a point in space that marks a point in time, the break between before and after death and exile. What I felt in that place was not a haunting created by a supernatural presence. Someone had cut out a little window, a point of memory, and I had travelled there to peer through it. They were showing me something, and I was seeing, even if I was not seeing the thing as it was.

We looked at the chairs, as we jostled under the umbrella. My phone was vibrating in my bag. My husband was calling, over and over again. As my phone slipped around in my bag it had been dialling numbers in Australia; he was ringing

to ask me to make it stop. Beneath our feet was the cellar where the men were beaten and shot. I knew from my grandmother's memoirs that my grandfather, Heinz, was in a building across the street from his father's office when the SS and SA entered, that he saw his father go in, and that he himself fled. I looked behind me. It was not these buildings in which he had hidden, as they had all been constructed after the war. The previous night my grandfather's cousin had dropped us at our hotel, at the edge of a vast, empty square, saying, "I walked along here as a child in 1945 with your great-grandmother, my Tante Auguste. The destruction was terrible. Everything was gone."

Nothing here was as it had been in 1933. Almost all of the buildings in Duisburg have been replaced in the years since the bombings. Yet my eye was drawn to the gap at ground level, the airway to the space beneath the building, the space, although probably reconfigured, in which he was killed. What was it like to live in those flats? Was this not an ill-favoured, haunted place? Perhaps not, perhaps it was just a block of flats. However, here was this reminder, the stumbling block. It would take long familiarity or concerted effort to avoid the history of this place. People like this union secretary watching us in the rain had made sure of it.

I wondered: if there was a way to go into that cellar, would I? It was right there—I would only be here once. Yet I could barely look at even the wall of the flats that stand in the place of the union building, and there was a weighted feeling being there. The cellar, so close by, although changed physically from the day of the murders, seemed to emit its darkness. The memorials had done their work, had fuelled the imagination in a way that elicited a disturbed awe for this site of death and departure.

Contained memory

What did I find by going to that place outside the cellar? What did it give me, for the memorial I was making, my novel? What is in such a place, for someone who goes looking? The word that comes most readily about the effect of that place is "haunted". It was to do with the layers of time, the psychic presence of a number of different events, happening in their own temporal space and yet colliding, clashing, happening now. I felt the moment of Johann being taken from his family and colleagues, I imagined as much of the struggle as I could bear. His son waiting in the building across the street. At the same time, my phone was ringing, calling me insistently back to the present, to the needs of my own daily existence. The cyclist dismounting as he moved through this space, the evidence of residents in the flat above the cellar: their lace curtains, a huge vase of flowers.

Another temporal reality made itself felt: the day-to-day existence of my ancestral family, my grandfather, my great-grandparents, the siblings, the children, walking up and down these streets, going about their ordinary lives, my walk among the memorials and special places intersecting and tracing their daily footsteps.

In Sigmund Freud's terms, here is the place where the homely or *heimlich*—my great-grandfather's place of work, my ancestral hometown in which the most ordinary of actions were carried out—becomes unhomely or *unheimlich*, uncanny, haunting. It is as our guide described the chairs and the walls in front of them: the place of work has become a place of imprisonment. And the chairs are empty.

Ghosts of home

Marianne Hirsch's work on what she terms "postmemory" situates the responses of those who come after to the fragments of our ancestors' lives. She uses the term largely in reference to the form of memory carried by the children of Holocaust survivors. She writes:

... the power of mourning and memory, and the depth of the rift dividing their parents' lives, impart to them something that is akin to memory. Searching for a term that would convey its temporal and qualitative difference from survivor memory, I have chosen to call this secondary, or second-generation, memory 'postmemory'.³

She writes too that this is:

... a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation.⁴

This "imaginative investment and creation" describes my own encounters with the places, papers, and objects of my grandparents' lives. That familial connection that stokes the longing to know what life was like feeds the imagination, makes the mind run on beyond what can be told, seen, or known.

In *Ghosts of Home*, Hirsch has explored with her husband, Leo Spitzer, the role of "imaginative investment" in her own visits with her parents to their hometown, Czernowitz, as it was known before World War II. She describes a moment in which they stand literally at a crossroads, the place at which her parents made a decision to go back to the ghetto, rather than to the transports, a decision to which Hirsch and her parents owe their lives:

Suddenly, as we talked and listened, the barricades and rows of soldiers became visible. And as we walked about this landscape of memory, the streets became animated with the presence of people from that past: long-lost relatives, friends, neighbors ... ghosts emerging from the shadows between the buildings, conjured up by recall and narration, by our being here, by our presence and witness.⁵

Here are "ghosts", but also the clear sense of the authors' own presence imaginatively populating this "landscape of memory". Her guides were her parents; mine were the union secretary (keeper of the union's memory) and my grandmother's writings. There were also the artists and officials whose work placed the chairs on the street. Ghosts are those people our guides have encouraged us to imagine, who they have introduced us to by bringing us here.

They are the people seen through the little windows opened up at the “points of memory”, who have come through into our space now and walked among us. They crowd the pavement, all those present in one place as the layers of the city’s time collapse.

There is much missing when we look through the small windows. For me, writing fiction is the way to remember what I never knew. Hirsch writes of her journey into her parents’ past: “Glimpses, snapshots, innuendos—maps to nowhere. These are the legacies of their flight, and it is no surprise that their paucity leads to some amount of mythification.”⁶ She goes on to talk about two anecdotes of luck and survival, calling them “myths of origin”.

In my own case absence leads me to fill in the gaps with fictive remembrance. Mysteries, the blood of fiction, are created in such loaded places. The cellar that we did not enter is a void at the centre of the novel I am writing, a chasm from which the surviving characters keep their distance in case they are pulled towards it and inside. It is a place the narrator must return to, knowing she cannot look away forever, that she is compelled to remember. This cellar has generated its own myths of origin.

Fictive memory

To be haunted by a place is an active relationship—I have animated this piece of pavement with my family memories. This relationship is productive and generative. It is reciprocal too. I have animated this place and it has animated the present, for me at least, through my creative work. The experience of reading fiction is for me at its richest when the prose appears to be the revelation of a memory. Sometimes, for a moment, I forget that the fiction I am reading is an artifice. The process of writing fiction can feel like this too. When I write fluently it feels as though I am writing something I remember. The imaginary streets of my ancestors’ Duisburg have become absorbed into something like a memory.

The term “fictive memory”, used by Georges Perec, might describe some of the qualities of such a memory. He used this term in relation to a film he planned to make with Robert Bober about Ellis Island where immigrants, many Jewish, were processed until 1940.⁷ He says that fictive memory is “a memory that might have belonged to me”.⁸ Because Perec and Bober were Jews who lived through World War II, the history of the place might have been their history. Perec told an interviewer “it’s a work about memory and a memory that concerns us, although it’s not ours, but is ... adjacent to ours”.⁹ He wrote that Ellis Island, as “the very place of exile, that is, the place of the absence of place, the place of dispersal”, fascinated him “as if it were inscribed somewhere in a life story that might have been mine, formed part of a probable autobiography, a potential memory”.¹⁰

Writers who imagine potential memories and possible journeys, who make a symbolic return to the point of no actual return, carry the sense that “it might have

been me”. These potential memories are concentrated around place, which might as Perec says be imagined as negative space: “a place of dispersal”, or a place from which people disappear. In my family history the place that emits a charge is the place where my great-grandfather was murdered and my grandfather fled, the streets of the family’s home turned into points of exile.

Duisburg is not only a point of disappearance. To imagine that moment I had also to see it as the place where my ancestors lived and worked. My fictive memory, in the shape of my novel, is generated in part by the energy at that point, but it also remembers the place of home, that might have been my hometown but for the disaster of Nazism. So I imagine my grandfather, later banished, walking these streets through childhood, returning from World War I, carrying his son on his shoulders, visiting his father at work.

Figure 5. Warehouse.



When I came back to my photos of my visit to Duisburg I found that there was a place that had spoken to my imagination that was not the point of disappearance, a place seemingly unrelated. It was a surprise to see this factory, or warehouse, again. It was a striking building I photographed as we walked around Duisburg, perhaps because it suggested a vibrant industrial past for the town. I had forgotten about it, and yet in the novel it is an important place. Without remembering the real place as I wrote, a whole narrative strand came into being, of a childhood spent watching a factory being built towards the sky, of its role as a meeting place for anti-Nazis, and its dock as a smuggling point for weapons of resistance. Going to Duisburg provided the source, the imaginative connection, for me to a town that has been reduced to rubble and built over since my grandfather left.

What was missing, out of sight beyond the little window frames, has pushed itself into my fictive imaginings to form new myths of origin, of daily life, not just disappearances.

Memorial, place, and solidarity

These resonances of place, the places one returns to in order to imagine family memory, stem from a family's need for memorial. Eva Hoffman writes: *Perhaps remembering the dead is the very opposite of gratuitous violence ... a gratuitous act of retrieval of meaning from oblivion ... the meaning of being human would be diminished if we could not hold those who have died in our minds, if we could not sustain a symbolic relationship to them.*¹¹

Returning to family places, to points of exile, is a stage in this symbolic relationship, a family ritual that may or may not precede the making of more tangible memorials. It is its own form of "retrieval of meaning".

To return to Perec, his fictive memory, made from the place of exile of thousands, Ellis Island, is an act of reaching towards kin. He writes of his sense, rooted in exile, of: *... being different ... from 'my own kin'. I don't speak the language that my parents spoke, I don't share any of the memories they may have had. Something that was theirs, which made them who they were, their history, their culture, their creed, their hope, was not handed down to me.*¹²

Perec projects a memory, he reaches towards his "kin" from whom he is exiled. He makes an inheritance out of loss, retrieving meaning from place. The continuities of family have been broken irreparably. His act of memory, of affiliation with the migrant Jews of America, is fuelled by loss of language, history, and culture. In Ellis Island he seeks "the actual image of this point of no return, the consciousness of this radical fracture".¹³ He searches for roots that have been ripped out. His familial past has been obliterated and yet he makes his own kind of memory.

In his fictive memory, Perec makes a figurative voyage to the point that marks the separation from past and kin. A writer who creates potential memories and possible journeys, who makes a symbolic return to the point of no actual return, works in part from the sense that "it might have been me". This is writing against erasure, knowing recovery is not possible. The impossibility of recovery, one might read in Perec's fictive memory, is the fuel of memory. In absence he seeks meaning. He ends his essay: *... by coming close to this abandoned island ... I fancy that at moments I have succeeded in giving resonance to some of the words that are for me inexorably attached to the very name of Jew: journey, expectation, hope, uncertainty, difference, memory, and to those two weak, unlocatable, unstable, fugitive concepts whose fitful light reflects from one on to the other: Native Land and Promised Land.*¹⁴

Like Perec's efforts to "give resonance" to the haunting lexicon of a ruptured past by "coming close" to that island, a return to the point of dispersal is in itself an act of memorial, a family ritual of imaginative memory and solidarity.

Endnotes

¹Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), xix.

²Joseph Pearson, “Nazi Victims and Stumbling Blocks to Memory,” accessed June 28, 2011, <http://needleberlin.com/2010/08/23/nazi-victims-and-stumbling-blocks-to-memory/>

³Marianne Hirsch, “Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile,” *Poetics Today* 17 (1996), 662.

⁴Hirsch, “Past Lives,” 659.

⁵Hirsch and Spitzer, *Ghosts*, 138.

⁶Hirsch and Spitzer, *Ghosts*, 154.

⁷Robert Bober and Georges Perec, *Recit's d'Ellis Island* (Paris: Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, 1980).

⁸Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Places* (London: Penguin, 1999), 129.

⁹Perec, *Species of Spaces*, 129.

¹⁰Perec, *Species of Spaces*, 136.

¹¹Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 160-61.

¹²Perec, *Species of Spaces*, 136.

¹³Perec, *Species of Spaces*, 136.

¹⁴Perec, *Species of Spaces*, 137-38.

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Biographical note

Belinda Castles is a doctoral candidate in Creative Writing with the Writing and Society Research Group at the University of Western Sydney. Her thesis is a novel about the lives of her grandparents and an exegesis exploring fiction as a form of memory. She has completed an MA in Novel Writing at the University of Manchester and previously published two novels, the most recent of which, *The River Baptists*, won the *Australian/Vogel Literary Award*. In 2008 she was named one of the *Sydney Morning Herald's* Best Young Novelists. Her latest novel will be published by Allen and Unwin in 2012.

Email: bcastles@iinet.net.au