

In Search of the Missing Narrative: Children of Polish Deportees in Great Britain

Julia Devlin, Center for Flight and Migration, Germany

Abstract

The trauma of forced migration is not only detrimental for the victims themselves, but can overcast subsequent generations as well. This article examines the role of the family narrative in the case of Polish deportees and their descendants. Drawing upon Aleida and Jan Assmann's concepts of communicative and cultural memory, I address how the development of self-construction and identity of the second generation was impeded by their parents' difficulties to verbalize a traumatic past. I argue that aside from the communicative memory, the cultural memory of this group was affected as well as their experiences of victimization were politically and socially not recognized.

Keywords: biographical reconstruction; communicative memory; cultural memory; family narrative; forced migration

Publication Type: research article

Introduction

igration challenges the traditional notion of communicative and cultural memory as a supportive source of identity. Migrants are faced with the challenge of trying to retain their memories to stay connected to their cultures of origin, while at the same time trying to fit into the society in which they have relocated. If the migration was not voluntary, trauma can make it all the more difficult for the stories of an individual's or a family's past to be handed down to the next generation.

My research rests at the nexus of historical migration studies and memory studies. It seeks to understand how the forced migration of Polish citizens during World War II affected family narrative, and thus communicative memory, in that community.

The Power of the Narrative

DOI: 10.33137/ijidi.v4i2.34029

Merriam Webster Dictionary defines narrative as "a) something that is narrated [...]; b) a way of presenting or understanding a situation or series of events that reflects and promotes a particular point of view or set of values." Narratives reach beyond the mere account of an event, and because of this, scholars of various academic backgrounds have relied on them for insight into the human experience. Psychologists were among the first to explore this field (Boder, 1949; Sarbin, 1986; Bruner, 1990; Linde, 1993), but those from other disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, education, literature, and history, have turned their attention to narratives as well. By constructing narratives, people make sense of personal experiences. Baumeister and Newman (1994) pointed out that "constructing stories can thus be understood as one mode of, or one phase in, the process of making sense of one's experiences" (p. 677), and



according to Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992),

Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one's life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned. It is this formative—and sometimes deformative—power of life stories that makes them important. (p.1; see also Welzer, 2002)

Life stories are formative not only for an individual, but for group identity as well. In the case of families, psychologists stress the significance of informal communication for the construction of a shared past. As studies conducted at Emory University have shown, family narratives are fundamental to the holistic development of children (Fivush, 2008; Fivush, 2011; Bohanek et al., 2009). Psychologists examined the relationship between family narrative interaction style when reminiscing and the sense of self of preadolescents, and found that:

Narratives provide understanding, evaluation, and perspective on the events of our lives. Through narrative interactions about the shared past, parents help shape children's understanding of who they were, who they are now, and presumably who they will be in the future, both as individuals and as members of the family. Thus, although family communication and interaction in other contexts and settings is clearly important, the role of family narratives may be particularly critical for children's developing sense of self. (Bohanek et al., 2006, p. 50)

Narrative and Memory

DOI: 10.33137/ijidi.v4i2.34029

The family narrative is a medium of communicative memory. In the 1920s, French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992) noted that the central role of memory is the construction of identity and the sense of self. Jan and Aleida Assmann took this pioneering work further, focusing on the distinction between communicative memory and cultural memory (Assmann, 2008; Assmann, 2016). Communicative memory refers to memories shared between the members of a (smaller) social group. It requires personal interaction, is limited to the recent past, spans three to four generations, and focuses on the autobiographical and the personal. The most important medium for conveying these memories is informal verbal communication such as that which is practiced in regular family life. According to Jan Assmann (2008), cultural memory "is a form of collective memory, in the sense that it is shared by a number of people and that it conveys to these people a collective, that is, cultural, identity" (p. 111). Cultural memory is formed through a symbolic heritage that can be embodied in enduring media such as texts, monuments, or museums, as well as through symbolic rituals, celebrations, or music. These media function as mnemonic triggers; they initiate meaning. Cultural memory transcends generations—it can span decades, centuries, or even, as in the case of religions, millennia.

Both communicative and cultural memory are important for identity formation. They enable the construction of a narrative picture of the past, and through this, the development of a personal image and identity; at the same time, they can affirm membership in a particular cultural group.

Memory in the Context of Forced Migration

The processes of both communicative and cultural memory are affected by forced migration. In the case of voluntary migration, there are frequently narratives about the country of origin, the process of separation from that country, and the process of relocation (e.g., conversation about



the motivation to leave and discussion of the benefits or disadvantages), but in the case of forced migration, there tend to be few narratives, as communicative memory is disrupted by the experience of trauma (Assmann, 2011.

Furthermore, victims of forced migration tend to be passive victims. Aleida Assmann differentiates between active victimhood and passive victimhood. Active victimhood can turn the trauma of persecution into a heroic, meaningful sacrifice, while passive victimhood is characterized by powerlessness, and does not offer the possibility to prepare for a fight or to resist. Thus, the trauma does not enter active memory easily, as it cannot be integrated into a positive individual or collective self-image (Assmann, 2016). It may take time before it is recognized and articulated in the private or societal sphere, if that happens at all.

But a trauma can only become part of communicative or cultural memory when it is articulated. Which form of memory—cultural or communicative—the victimization experience of a group will be codified into depends on whether the group succeeds in organizing itself as a community of solidarity and develop an intergenerational form of commemoration (Assmann, 2016, p. 73).

The effects of forced migration on the intergenerational form of commemoration have been the subject of several studies. Elizabeth Colson's pioneering work *The Social Consequences of Resettlement* (1971) investigated the effects of the forced relocation of the Gwembe Tonga in Zambia. Peter Loizos explored, with a focus on how memory works, how forcibly displaced peoples of the Ottoman Empire and the early Turkish Republic managed their past. He coined the term "half-life or relocation" to describe the idea that memories resonate long after traumatic events have occurred (Loizos, 1999). Jo Laycock investigated the narratives of repatriated Armenians in the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide (Laycock, 2016). Vasso Stelaku examined how generations of Greeks expelled from Cappadocia pass on a memory of their former homelands (Stelaku, 2003). The case of collective memory in two small communities in the Polish-Ukrainian borderland that suffered ethnic cleansing, displacement, and forced relocation has been investigated by Anna Wylegała (2019).

Over the last 15 years, ample research has been done on the interrupted communication between generations in the context of the forced migration of ethnic Germans during and after World War II (Janus, 2006; Radebold et al., 2008; Kitzmann, 2011; Reddemann, 2018; Meyer, 2020). In my research, I will focus on the experience of the forcibly displaced Poles from the Eastern borderlands. The late social anthropologist Keith Sword explored the historical events surrounding these deportations in his Polish Migration Project. His work focused on the historical aspects and ethnic identity of second- or "half-" generation Poles (Sword et al., 1989; Sword, 1994, 1996).

A Polish Odyssey

DOI: 10.33137/ijidi.v4i2.34029

In 1940 and 1941, the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) deported thousands of Polish citizens from Eastern Poland—the Kresy—to the interior of the Soviet Union, mainly to Siberia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. One conservative estimate gives the number of deported citizens as 320,000 (Ciesielski et al., 2002, p. 33), while other authors speak of 1.5 million people (Lane, 2004, p. 79). Many of the deportees did not survive the journey, and many others died due to the harsh conditions of their exile (Devlin, 2014, p. 19).

In 1941, after Nazi Germany attacked its former ally, the remaining Kresy were released as a



consequence of the Sikorski-Majski Agreement. More than 110,000 Poles were evacuated to Persia via the Caspian Sea; men fit for the military joined the war effort in support of the Allies, while 34,000 civilians were sent to refugee camps in Africa and India. After the war, these camps were closed, and most of the refugees emigrated to the U.S., Canada, Great Britain, and Australia, while a small group of orphans was allowed to settle in New Zealand in 1944. Most of the Poles who had fought alongside the Allies settled in Great Britain, where they were granted assistance (Knox & Kushner, 1999, pp. 217-240).

The Poles who had stayed behind in the Soviet Union were repatriated to Poland after the war. Some of them opted for further migration, as they were familiar with the conditions they would be facing under Communism. Moreover, their prewar homes no longer existed, since the Kresy borderlands had been incorporated into the Belarussian, Lithuanian, and Ukrainian Soviet republics (Sword, 1994).

Method

Research Objectives and Questions

With this research, I extend the scholarship on transgenerational transmission of trauma and the formation of communicative and cultural memory in the survivors of the 1940/41 deportations from the Polish Kresy borderlands. I explore how the trauma of deportation and the ensuing ordeals influenced the second generation, focusing on intra-family communication. More specifically, I ask:

- RQ 1: How is the family narrative affected in the aftermath of forced migration?
- RQ 2: How did children of deportation make up for missing information about their parents' lives?
- RQ 3: What role does information play in the process of identity formation?

Research Approach

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In-Depth Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted during February and March of 2019 to gather information narratives from four children of deportation survivors: three women and one man (N=4). These respondents were chosen because they covered a wide age range, having been born between 1946 and the early 1960s. Their mothers or fathers also covered several age groups—some had been teenagers, others young adults, and another, a small child when they were deported. Participants were located at a Polish community center in London during an annual event commemorating the deportations, which began in February 1940, during the second World War.

The method used was a narrative, semi-structured interview administered in two sessions, based on the concept developed by Schütze (2008) and Rosenthal (2018). The first interview lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours and was structured by the interviewee, with a set of guideline questions as stimuli. The interviewee was asked to describe the biography of the deported parent and their family life in England. The questions centered on the experiences of the deported person and aspects of Polish identity in exile, the knowledge the grown child had about their Polish-deportee



parent, and how this knowledge had been transmitted.

The second session took place on the following day, after a review of the first interview. It took in the form of a reflective inquiry session in which the interviewer asked questions about ideas that had been mentioned the day before, or that had not been mentioned but were of interest to the researcher (Rosenthal, 2018, p. 133). The second interview was slightly shorter, lasting between 1 and 1.5 hours.

All volunteers received a letter explaining the aim and method of the study. It contained an assurance that the interviews would be anonymized and then transcribed, after which the recordings would be deleted. The data were stored according to the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (General Data Protection Regulation, 2016). Participants agreed to the interviews being audio recorded and to the use of anonymized quotes in publications. All participants were of legal age. Their names have been changed as per their request.

Interview data were coded in a line-by-line analysis, according to the grounded theory first outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and further developed by Charmaz (2006). These qualitative codes provide "an analytical handle to develop abstract ideas for interpreting each segment of data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 45). Data were screened for patterns in intergenerational communication behavior among deportation survivors and their children. This resulted in information about how the family narrative was perceived and ways in which the second generation coped with missing information. The examination of the data and the coding process was facilitated by MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software.

Documentary Analysis

I triangulated the interview data with a documentary analysis of archival documents from the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum, the National Archives (London), published autobiographical records, and testimonies from internet forums. Some survivors published their memoirs in the decades after their deportation, once they were economically and socially secure enough to reengage with their past (e.g., Anders, 1949; Hautzig, 1968; Skwarko, 1974; Teczarowska, 1985; Waydenfeld, 1999; Adamczyk, 2004, Protassewicz, 2019). Since then, a range of publications by the children and grandchildren of survivors has explored "concealed" family pasts and investigated the life courses of their parents and grandparents (Zajączkowski, 2010; Urbikas, 2016). For example, Krystyna Mew has edited her father's wartime journals (Herzbaum, 2010). On a complementary website, she has related more about her father's and her family's life, and how the discovery of the journals set in motion a search for more information that motivated an actual journey to the physical sites of her father's imprisonment in Russia and military deployment in Italy (Mew, 2012). Matthew Kelly embarked on a similar journey, following in the footsteps of his grandmother and great-grandmother (Kelly, 2010), as did filmmaker Jonathan Kołodziej Durand (Durand, 2018).

Discussions, reminiscences, and information exchanges between second-generation Poles abound in internet forums. 1 These resources also provide insight into the second generation's ongoing search for information.



Exploring the Preterite

My father died when I was ten years old. As I was growing up, I became aware of the existence of some journals which he had written during the war. My mother didn't seem to want to delve too deeply into what was in them [...]. When she died in 2002, I inherited the journals. The journals had been lying in an old leather suitcase for nearly 60 years. (Herzbaum, 2010, p. 239)

This story of Krystyna, the daughter of a deportation survivor, is a story told by many children of Polish deportees. One or both of their parents arrive in Great Britain after the war, marry, and start a family. The children—the second generation—grow up in British surroundings. They tend to master life's challenges quite well; for the most part, they conform, get jobs, and start families of their own. This second generation, however, feel they must cope with their parents' emotional distance, inexplicable behavior, and family secrets. Only when they reach a particular age or stage of life—such as when they are nearing retirement, when their children leave home, or when a parent dies—do they begin to investigate their parents' biographies and piece together the family's history.

Celina, the daughter of a deported Pole, shared a typical story on an internet site dedicated to the Polish resettlement camps for demobilized Polish soldiers in Great Britain:

I don't think I am alone as a child of a displaced Pole, in not previously knowing or understanding just how cruel, inhuman, and tragic their experiences must have been. My Father was incapable of sharing with us what happened to him, calmly, coherently or in any detail. He did, however, make sure that we were left in no doubt about the evils of Hitler and particularly Stalin, or the anger he felt towards the British. I didn't until recently, fully understand why. The internet sites dedicated to DP camps and the wider aspects of WWII history, have gone a long way to providing many missing pieces for me. I just wish I had known a long time ago. (Debińska, n.d.)

Looking Forward, Omitting the Past

Children of deportation survivors frequently report that the parent who lived through the trauma of deportation would talk very little about the past. Research participant "Aga" (name changed) described this phenomenon, saying it was "because they were survivors, and survivors don't live in the past" (Interview 1, Aga, March 2019, Great Britain). Aga was born in the mid-1940s. As young adults, her parents were taken to Arkhangel'sk in the Arctic circle during the first wave of deportations in February of 1940. They had just recently married. Aga was asked during her interview if she knew any details of her parents' experiences of deportation and exile. At first, she stated that she had not been told anything about it, but after she was asked specifically about her parents' journey, she remembered two details about their journey in the cattle car:

They said, in the train/I don't know if it was in the train, if they died at night, the bodies weren't removed until the morning. And also, as you relieved yourself, the hole in the bottom of the train. They talked about that. That's all I know about the journey. Those two years in Arkhangel'sk and I only know what, a few words really of what happened. (Interview 1, Aga, March 2019, Great Britain)

Isa's (name changed) father had been deported at the age of 20, had survived the mass executions



at Katyn, had been sent to the Arctic circle for slave labor, and had ended up joining the 2nd Polish corps (part of the British 8th Army) to fight in the battle at Monte Cassino. He was demobilized in England, where he met Isa's mother, married, and raised a family. Isa was born in the early 1950s.

Isa reported that she just accepted her father's silence, attributing it as much to his trauma as to a behavior perceived as typically male in his generation. It was clear from her interview that Isa had a good relationship with her father and that she admired him for his resilience and his intelligence. She had collected some information about her father by doing research (mainly over the internet), connecting with people who knew him, and traveling to the town in Poland where he had lived before the war. She had also actively encouraged her children to ask their grandfather about his past.

Both Aga's and Isa's stories reveal an acceptance of the fact they had not known more about the life of their Polish parent(s) while those parents were alive, which is common among second generation Poles.

Artistic Approaches to a Strained Relationship

More complex is the case of research participant Gosia (name changed), who reported that her relationship with her late mother had been extremely difficult. Gosia was born to Polish parents in England in the 1960s. While she described her father as calm, she characterized her mother as unbalanced and aggressive.

Both Gosia's mother and father had a background of forced migration, and they both came to England after the war. As a teenager, her father was deported from Western Poland to Nazi Germany for forced labor. After liberation, he lived in North Germany in a displaced persons camp, and later emigrated to England.

Her mother, who came from the Kresy, was deported to Siberia when she was three years old, with her mother, an older brother, and a younger sister. The family's father, Gosia's grandfather, had been arrested by the NKVD, and his whereabouts were unknown to his family. Gosia's grandmother and her aunt both succumbed to tuberculosis in Siberia. When Gosia described the upbringing of her orphaned mother and uncle, she said that they were "just brought up by whoever was there." After the war, Gosia's mother was repatriated to Poland and placed in an orphanage.

During Gosia's interview, she seemed to surmise quite a bit about her parents' lives, often using phrases such as, "I think," "I guess," "I don't know," and "I'm not sure." Gosia's description of how her mother had come to Great Britain also contained a lot of guesswork:

My mother went to the UK because the Red Cross International Tracing Service contacted her and said, "We found your father. He's not dead. He's alive." So I guess she would've then started saving money, or he sent money over I imagine, because he was working in a mine. He must've done that because she wouldn't have/I think she was working as a teacher, but he must've sent some money because there were no such things as cheap flights then or coaches. She would've/I think she would've got a plane over probably, or maybe a ship. I don't know, actually. Maybe a ship. (Interview 1, Gosia, February 2019, Great Britain)



During the interview, Gosia appeared to be astonished at how little she knew. Considering that in the immediate postwar years, traveling from Poland to England could be considered an extraordinary journey, and that the circumstances—a reunion with a father who had been believed to be dead—would have been extremely emotional, the event received surprisingly little mention in the family narrative. When asked if her mother had any memories of Siberia, Gosia responded in the negative:

She said not. She said not, but I find that hard to believe because I remember things when I was that/well, maybe she didn't remember things from three, four, five years old, but I certainly remember lots of things from when I was seven and eight and nine. So I really/I never really/she was quite dismissive of it. She would always say that she didn't remember. And she said that there's nothing to tell. There was nothing there. There was nothing there but wolfs [sic] and snow. That's all she would say. (Interview 1, Gosia, February 2019, Great Britain)

Later, however, she remembered having been told one story about her mother's life in Siberia:

And it was a story that my mother told me. It was about the only story she told me that she once stole some carrots with her brother, and they hid them under their pillow. So I thought, "Oh, they had pillows. That's strange." Anyway, her mom found these carrots, and she told them off. She said, "Don't ever do that again because, if you do and I get caught, I'll get thrown into the prison, and that'll be the end of you." So that is the most complete story that I have. (Interview 1, Gosia, February 2019, Great Britain)

Gosia's grandfather had been deported separately from his wife and children, and he later joined the 2nd Polish Corps, the Anders' Army. Gosia presumed he worked in a mine in the Gulag. When she was asked for more details about the mine, Gosia admitted, "I don't really know. In a way, I've sort of made up my own history to fill in the bits I don't know" (Interview 1, Gosia, February 2019, Great Britain).

A child of a deportation survivor "filling in the bits" by herself instead of relying on a functioning family narrative developed through conversation with her parents demonstrates a need that goes beyond a mere desire for information. Furthermore, the grudge Gosia bore against her mother for not being able to remember anything, which she interpreted as a deliberate denial, was remarkable:

Whilst I don't want this Polish/this part of Polish history to be forgotten, I don't want to dwell in the misery of it either because I don't think it's good for me because I felt I lived my mother's misery all my life. (Interview 1, Gosia, February 2019, Great Britain)

Gosia went on to relate how her mother's misery was the cause of estrangement between members of the family:

And my/this is probably the saddest thing that I'll tell you. My parents never knew me. They never knew me. And in some ways, I didn't know them because I think my mother had too much pain. She/her need was so great; we could never meet her need. (Interview 1, Gosia, February 2019, Great Britain)

Gosia's mother was not able to develop a healthy parent-child relationship with her daughter as a consequence of her having been deported, orphaned, and abandoned. The formation of a family



narrative of a redemptive character could not take place, as the mother could not or would not remember anything about her time in Siberia. As Aleida Assmann states, "The workings of memory are sporadic, fractured, and enervated under the impact of trauma" (2011, p. 8). At the same time, she clearly suffered, and so did Gosia.

Ellen Sydney Fine observed the phenomenon of "absent memory" in second-generation Holocaust survivors:

They are haunted by the world that has vanished; a large gap exists in their history, and they desire to bridge this gap, to be informed about what occurred, to know something about members of their family who perished. However, they feel frustrated by the impotence of incomprehension; the past eludes and excludes them. (Fine, 1988, p. 42)

Fine was referring to writers, but Gosia found a similar strategy to "bridge the gap" and gain a sense of agency. Whereas most other participants use a cognitive, knowledge-based approach to fill in the missing information, she employs art. She writes books, designs animated films, and performs standup comedy in which she explores her difficult relationship with her mother, always returning to the deportation experience.

Discussion and Implications

Forced migration is a traumatic experience that can cast a shadow over subsequent generations. Victims are placed in a passive, powerless role. Thus, they cannot integrate their sufferings into a positive self-image, as Aleida Assmann (2016) observed:

It often happens that a traumatic experience will only be represented and socially recognized belatedly, often decades or even centuries after the historical event. Only then can it become a part of a collective or cultural memory. Whether or not the group experience of victimization takes on the form of a collective and cultural memory also depends upon whether the group affected succeeds in organizing itself as a collective and whether it develops commemorative forms that can span generations. In the absence of such symbolic memorial forms, it can also happen that the psychic wounds of trauma are unconsciously passed on to subsequent generations. (p. 57)

In a similar vein, Loizos (1999) spoke of "half-lives of dislocations" to "suggest power which goes on being active for many years but slowly loses force." He observed that the duration of half-lives depended on how "memories of past wrongs and emergent identities were managed, both by the groups themselves, and by the political influences to which they were exposed" (p. 238). The ability to cope with forced migration, however, could be encouraged by a supportive environment:

But how they manage their pasts does not only depend on their own personal social constructions, but is greatly influenced both by the political attention they receive in their new situations, and the recognition—or lack of it—accorded by those associated, directly or distantly, with their original losses. (Loizos, 1999, p. 260)

Loizos points to both communicative and cultural memory. In the case of the deported Poles, neither the former nor the latter could thrive. The trauma of being victimized affected how deportation survivors communicated about their past. This was especially detrimental to the



children of these survivors, as they depended on their parents' communicative skills for their emotional well-being and identity development. The formation of life narratives that describe a redemptive character, thereby shaping communicative memory, can create a positive connection with the next generation. If, as in the case of forced migration, the trauma is too difficult to verbalize, the awareness of selfhood might be hindered.

A collective memory could not develop either. The recognition Loizos speaks of, a supportive environment, was clearly missing. Their experience of victimization was not accorded political recognition. Their homeland was lost when the Eastern Polish Kresy were ceded to the Soviet Union in the Yalta agreement. Their share in the Allied victory over Nazi Germany was not acknowledged, and the Polish armed forces were not invited to take part in the 1946 victory parade. The Government of the Republic of Poland in exile, legitimate representatives of the prewar Republic, was no longer recognized, and the deportations were never mentioned in postwar Poland. It was not possible to create what Aleida Assmann (2016) calls the "victim memory" (p. 59).

Not only was the communicative memory of the exiled Poles hampered by individual experience, but their cultural memory was also affected. For the second generation, this has meant a gap in their identity construction, which has left them with a desperate need to piece the puzzle together in an attempt to fill the void and to regain control of traumatic events.

This points to the importance of access to information. All interview participants were well-read on the history of Poland and the Soviet Union during World War II. They had read autobiographies of survivors. They agreed that the wealth of information available in the internet was a great help, and they frequently consulted the websites connected with the deportations. Virtual museums providing databases with video-recorded survivor testimonies where memories were voiced and kept alive were extremely popular with some participants. Other children of deportees were active in social forums where they exchanged information, looked for missing relatives, and found and administered encouragement.

This amassing of knowledge had a reassuring effect, as it gave participants a sense of agency. Moreover, it had a reconciliatory effect, as it made the participants feel closer to their deported parents and enabled them to understand their erratic behavior. Finally, it had the effect of allowing them to feel part of a community of fate and triggered identity formation. For example, they experienced the often-mentioned "pride of being Polish" as a collective memory of Polish deportation survivors took shape.

Forced migrations are still taking place in all parts of the world, caused by natural disasters, war, ethnic cleansing or other types of persecutions. The findings point to the importance of researching and documenting these experiences and providing information—professional, fact-based, non-judgmental, and easily accessible—about what has happened. Cultural and memory institutions such as libraries and museums can recognize and represent traumatic experience and provide a supportive structure for cultural memory (in oral history projects, for example), thus encouraging communication and breaking the cycle of silence that can be so detrimental for migrants, their families, and generations to come.



Endnote

1 For examples, see: https://kresy-siberia.org/museum/discussion/, https://www.facebook.com/groups/KresySiberiaGroup, and http://www.polishresettlementcampsintheuk.co.uk/.

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Julia Devlin (julia.devlin@ku.de) is executive director of the interdisciplinary Center for Flight and Migration at Catholic University Eichstätt-Ingolstadt. She is a historian with a focus on voluntary and forced migration with a particular interest in transgenerational transmission of trauma and the relevance of memory in diasporic communities. She studied Eastern European History, Modern History, History of Art and Slavistics at School of Slavonic and East European Studies London, Moskovskij Linguistic University Moscow and Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich, where she earned her PhD in 2002. Julia Devlin has taught a wide range of graduate courses at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich and Catholic University of Eichstätt, including aspects of cultural and architectural history and memory studies. Besides she is involved in programs for refugee education. She is a regular author with Bayerischer Rundfunk, the Bavarian Broadcast Company.

