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LITERATURE REVIEW

Recollections of wartime childhood: Contexts of silence and speech

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This paper explores children's opportunities to talk about painful experiences related to the Second World War, drawing on life history interviews with three Norwegian women whose stories illustrate different family backgrounds and war time situations. The goal of the paper is to identify mechanisms that discouraged children from telling anyone about their anxieties and concerns. Some time during midlife a turning point occurred in that the women began to speak more freely about their war traumas. The author discusses how these turning points came about, and what they meant to each person.

Keywords: children, Second World War, silence, communication, life history





Children marked by the Second World War were often silent about painful experiences. Three cases illustrate how silence/the reticence came about and what lack of communication meant to the person. Transitions from silence to speech are analysed using a dialogical perspective on intersubjectivity. The article is a revised version of a paper presented at the Theory Forum Symposium on (pre)verbal intersubjectivity in light of new findings, Norwegian Academy of Science, October 2004.

Those who survived the Second World War and were children at the time have been characterised as the silent generation. The reason for this is their tendency to keep quiet about what they experienced during the war (Bode, 2004). Few systematic studies have been undertaken to explore what it was like to be a child in a country marked or tormented by the war. We do not know much about how children handled painful experiences or what kind of support they received, and little is known about the long-term impact war had on their lives. Over the past 20 years, a few studies and reports have been published about the second generation's war experiences, mostly focusing on Germans. However, also investigated was the condition of second-generation children in Norway and that of the children of Jewish survivors living in Sweden (Bar-On, 1989, Larney, 1994, Nøkleby & Hjeltne 2000, Levin 2001). Subsequently, more studies were conducted in Norway, e.g., one focusing on the children of parents affiliated with the National Socialist Party (Borge, 2002), and another on children whose father was German and the mother Norwegian (Ericsson & Simonsen, 2005).

In the various contributions on the subject, the predominant observation is the duration of the silence surrounding wartime experiences maintained by the affected individuals. This article takes a closer look at communicative barriers identified in a life history study of persons who experienced the German occupation of Norway as children (Wetlesen & Hjort 2006).

Life history approach

From a sociological point of view the purpose of the life history approach is to get a better understanding of social forces, patterns and mechanisms as reflected in individual lives. When those who experienced World War II as children recount their stories as adults, we get a better understanding of how the war period impacted on the young segment of the population at the time, and from a longer time perspective.

The article draws on life history interviews with three women. All were born shortly before, or during, the war, and were in their 50s or 60s when they told their stories. The interviewees were

recruited through informal channels with the purpose of illustrating various wartime situations geographically as well as ideologically. Colleagues and friends proved most helpful in identifying and contacting relevant persons, and nearly everyone I approached agreed to contribute to the study. A few were recruited through the snowballing method. Altogether fifteen women were interviewed.



The research subjects were encouraged to recount what they remembered of early childhood. From this point of departure, the interview moved on to life course transitions such as education, work and family formation. Two interview sessions were conducted with all informants, each lasting about two hours. The interviews were tape-recorded and notes written during the sessions. A summary was produced shortly after each session. A draft of the comprehensive life story was sent to the informant for correction and clarification. Names and other personal information have been altered to protect the anonymity of the interviewees.

The cases presented in the paper have been selected with the purpose of illustrating how war traumas were muted in various situations. The traumas exposed in these cases illustrate the loss of a father; the stigmatization of a child whose parents were members of the National Socialist Party (NSP) as well as the evacuation from a burning Finnmark and the return to extreme poverty at the end of the war.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to make a clinical evaluation of how war traumas among children may be dealt with. My purpose is to contribute to a better understanding of barriers that prevented children from recounting their anxieties and concerns, and what it meant to them to be able to share traumatic experiences related to the war in a later life phase. In the first part of the paper I present the three cases and relate the stories to mechanisms and contexts that lead to silence. Silencing contexts are then discussed from theoretical points of view that focus on family communication and interaction. In the last part I discuss circumstances that encouraged the women to break the silence and recount wartime experiences.

Lillian: Loss of father in the Norwegian merchant marine

Numerous children lost their fathers in the Second World War. One of them was *Lillian*, born in 1938 as the only child in the family. She remembers vividly what happened to her during the war. Demonstrating strong expressive needs as she tells her story, she nevertheless experienced/encountered various communicative barriers as she grew up.



Lillian lived with her mother and maternal grandfather on an island in the southern part of the country. Her father, a sailor in the Norwegian merchant marine, was tragically killed in a torpedo attack early in the war. The daughter, who was only nine months old the last time she saw her father, has no conscious recollection of him. However, she has a clear memory of her mother and maternal grandfather crying and embracing one another as the news of the attack reached them. This was in 1941 and at that time Lillian was three-years-old. Later, no word was spoken of the father, and Lillian asked herself if there was anything wrong or shameful about her father since nobody ever mentioned him. Finally, the child broke the silence and asked her uncle about the father, and her uncle pointed out all his good qualities as a person and sportsman. Since her relatives avoided talking about her father, Lillian was left alone with her imaginative thoughts. In keeping silent, the adults deprived her of information she needed to construct a positive image of her father.

Lillian recounts the story of a life-threatening bombing episode and the recurrent nightmares resonating this experience. She remembers in detail how she, along with her mother and grandfather, fled to seek shelter behind a rock as bombs were dropped close to home. For decades this episode tormented her in nightmares about bombs being dropped on her. Another recurrent dream is about everyone departing, leaving her all alone. In retrospect, Lillian reflects on communicative barriers due to young age: «I had all the experiences but I did not have the words I needed to express myself. As an adult you have a child inside you, but as a child there is no adult voice inside to help you.»

As she grew older and more in command of language, she was confronted with communicative barriers of a different kind. From the elders in the local community, she heard that she was too young to know what had happened during the war. Besides, they had their own stories to tell which were more interesting and spectacular. So she stopped telling her story and kept it to herself.

Turning points

Lillian was in her fifties before she found an opportunity to share her war experiences with sympathetic listeners. The death of her mother was the catalyst for the change. As she was searching through her mother's papers, she became aware of certain procedures that were required of the mother in order to receive the pension to which she was entitled as a war widow. The mother had to specify each item she needed before she received the money. This Lillian found so humiliating that she decided to contact a well known spokesperson for wartime sailors and their families. The

contact resulted in a warm and supportive friendship that gave her an opportunity to tell how she had experienced the loss of her father, the pain she still feels because she has no conscious recollection of him and no grave to visit to honour his memory.



On another occasion, when an historian contacted Lillian and asked her to contribute as a witness regarding the conditions of war sailors' families, she found great relief in talking to sympathetic listeners who would not interrupt or pity her. After having talked to these persons, she found that her bombing nightmares ceased.

In May 1995 Norway celebrated the 50th anniversary of the end of the war. Lillian took part in a memorial service honouring those who perished. She was very upset at the fact that the children of the honoured war victims were not mentioned during the ceremony. She felt left out, as though she had been denied the right to take part in her father's funeral. At one point she was overwhelmed by frightening thoughts and images, which until that moment she perceived as something going on outside of herself, as though it were taking place in a movie. The experience was terrifying and made her feel extremely vulnerable. These events, although painful, were also moments of awakening. Feelings of deception and anger made her write down her story, and in the wake of her writings she was invited to tell her story to schoolchildren, and later to serve as the principal speaker at that year's national independence day festivities. The celebration of the peace anniversary ultimately served her well. Provoked by this occasion, she found new ways of expressing and sharing traumatic wartime experiences.

Siri: Father actively supported the Quisling regime

Children who grew up with parents who supported the Nationalist Socialist Party were often stigmatised and isolated because of their parents' support to the German regime during the occupation of Norway, 1940 - 1945. *Siri*, born in 1943, had several siblings both older and younger than she. Her father, who did well in agriculture, became an ardent member of the Norwegian National Socialist Party at the beginning of the war. During the war, he accepted a position with the local authority in addition to running his farm. Siri's story illustrates how traumatic experiences related to the war contributed to decades of suppressed memories and silence.

For Siri, the difficult period began when she reached school age a number of years after the end of the war. Like many other children of NSP members, she experienced social ostracism and



found herself completely isolated at school. Siri was ignored by her teacher, excluded by the girls in her class, and tormented by the boys on her way home. Nobody said a word about why they treated her so harshly. At the time of her primary education she was neither aware of her father's political position during the war, nor was she able to see the connection between the maltreatment at school and the general animosity and vengefulness exhibited by people toward those considered traitors during the war, often using the children as scapegoats. Siri blamed it all on herself: She was not good enough in ball games; she did not run fast enough and such like. She felt so ashamed that she would not even tell her parents about her setbacks. She would hide in the barn when visitors came to the farm, wishing that she could disappear from the world.

Siri was too young to comprehend her parents' situation and relate it to her isolation in school. Nor did her parents offer their assistance, as they were virtually silent about the war period. As one by one the children in the family reached a certain age, the father attempted to justify his convictions and actions during the war; he tried to convince them that he was right in his political choice. He adhered to the Nazi ideology for the rest of his life, and when Holocaust deniers claimed that the concentrations camps never existed, he denied their existence too. His kind of childrearing may be described as strict and authoritarian, and he had high expectations of his children when it came to their educational performance. Siri did her best to meet her parents' expectations, but even then she did not really feel that they loved her. Siri's mother loved her husband, and saw it as her primary task to support him even when she did not share his views.

Later memories of her post-WWII years at school were seemingly wiped out from her mind. The suppression of these memories made her silent about painful remembrances closely related to the war. Nor did she risk telling friends or colleagues about her family and their activities during the war. The tacit decision to hide and keep silent about the family background characterising children of Nazis has been identified in other studies (Borge, 2002; Eik & Larsen, 1999).

Siri was determined to live and work in another part of the country where she would not immediately be associated with the ideology of her father, an ideology which, from the time of her teenage years she regarded as incompatible with her own Christian belief. In her new surroundings she would take active part in the local church, where she established new contacts and friendships. She was careful not to tell anyone about her parents' political stance during the war, for fear of being rejected. In this way, suppressed memories as well as the stigma attached to her parents' having joined the NSP made her silent about traumas related to the war.

From silence to speech



A turning point in Siri's life occurred when she was in her early 50s. In her job as a schoolteacher she attended a seminar on the bullying among children in school. Her participation in the seminar activated repressed memories about having been bullied as a pupil in elementary school. A little later, Siri was on leave in connection with recuperation from surgery. Under these new circumstances her repressed memories suddenly came back through sights, sounds and smells. She was overwhelmed and frightened by remembrances she had repressed until then. She was often sleepless at night. Her troubled psychological state led her to seek therapeutic talks with the local minister, which lasted a few years. She also found an empathic listener about her past in her husband. Before the crisis became evident, her husband did not volunteer to talk about personal problems, tending to distance himself from Siri's war experiences, which were quite different from his own.

At this point, Siri realised that if she were to go on living, she would need the courage to trust other people and tell her friends and colleagues about her past. She found such an opportunity at work, when the subject of bullying was once more on the agenda, and she volunteered an account about her past. Her transition from silence to speech elicited much help and support from friends and colleagues, but also evoked some negative reactions from the headmaster. Siri, however, has been able to handle the price of coming out as the daughter of NSP members. In the aftermath of the crisis, she felt relieved of a heavy burden. Emotionally, she had reached a state of reconciliation with her father, who died during this critical period in her life. At the time of the interview, she felt unburdened, happier and more optimistic than she had been before the crisis.

Elvira: Loss of father and the burning of home

Towards the end of the war, German troops stationed in northern Norway fled from the advancing Russian Army, torching the western region of Finnmark as part of their scorched earth tactics. People in the region were ordered to evacuate their homes. Mostly the orders were followed, as did *Elvira's* mother and her children. When they returned at the end of the war, they found the burnt remains of all their belongings and possessions; they were reduced to utter destitution.

Elvira was born in 1943. When she was still an infant, her father was killed. His fishing boat hit a mine, killing him and his crew. Elvira grew up with her widowed mother and four elder siblings.

The mother mobilised all her energy in order to create a home for herself and her children, in spite of poverty.



During the evacuation, Elvira and her family were transported for several days in the bottom of a fishing boat, which was packed with people and lacked lighting or adequate toilet facilities. In addition, there was the constant risk of the boat hitting a mine at sea. This was a terrifying experience for everyone, and for little Elvira it remained hidden from consciousness and overt communication for years. Later on, she has related certain symptoms of anxiety linked to this dramatic journey.

Their first home after returning was a barracks that was poorly sheltered from the cold and stormy weather. Snow would gather on their pillows during winter, and their mother used to get up in the middle of the night to awaken the children in order to make sure that they did not freeze to death. As for the school they attended, standards were very low. They lacked qualified teachers as well as basic materials and other resources. At the age of 14, the eldest brother had to begin as a fisherman in order to provide for the family. Elvira and her siblings did household chores from a young age, but they also had time for play and recreation. The tragic loss of the father did not silence Elvira's family. Elvira, however, felt left out when they talked about him, as she was the only one who had no conscious memory of the father.

When Elvira was in her early 20s, she moved to Oslo in order to live closer to her fiancé whom she later married. She adapted well to life in the capital as a wife, a mother and a part-time provider. What she found difficult, however, was recounting to people in Oslo the details of her life in Finnmark in the wake of the scorched earth tactics. She experienced what is known from previous research that traumatised persons risk encountering distrust when they tell their story, as people find it hard to believe what they hear (Herman, 1992). Rather than being accused of lying, Elvira chose to keep silent about the hardships she and her family had experienced during the war and in the ensuing years.

In her 50's, Elvira found a way to express and transform the sadness she always felt about having lost her father before she learned to know him. One day she was walking in the streets of Oslo feeling rather depressed. On an impulse she went to see a fortune-teller she passed on her way. The woman advised Elvira to go to the place where her father had died, and throw a bunch of flowers into the water, saying: «I thank you for being my father». Elvira followed that advice and felt a release. This self-administered ritual gave her an opportunity to close her mourning and transform sadness to feelings of gratitude.

So far I have presented three cases. I shall now reflect upon them from a more theoretical point of view.



Communicative barriers in everyday life

How may the silence of children's war traumas be understood from theoretical points of view? A dialogical perspective on intersubjectivity may prove helpful in understanding how parents and their children relate and communicate. According to this perspective humans are believed to have an inborn potential for pre-verbal, empathic communication as observed in interaction between newborns and caretakers. The dialogical perspective on human communication gains support from observations of newborns who participate in protodialogues of sounds and gestures with a parent or another caring person. This form of early communication is understood as an activation of an inborn companionship space (Bråten, 2000). When children adjust to the expectations of a parent or to another authority person, they behave in correspondence with an interactive *contract* that resides in the dialogical character of the human mind (Hundeide, 2002; Hundeide, 2004). Children may thus be invited to participate in covering up secrets as the parents may set communicative standards in avoiding to share painful experiences.

As described previously, Lillian's mother responded to the tragic death of her husband with silence. Her silence deprived her daughter of learning about her father as she responded to her mother's silence in a similar way. Her mother's silence may be understood as a strategy for covering up her grief about her loss that helped her fulfill daily chores and responsibilities. In sympathy with her mother's feelings, Lillian abstained from asking questions about her father.

According to the dialogical perspective on intersubjectivity, the child will take part in, and co-author, acts and gestures that the parent directs toward the child. The responding person, in this case the child, interacts in supportive ways as if offering her assistance. This manner of dialogical responding is conceived as alter centric participation (Bråten 2000:297 - 298). When a parent remains silent about specific topics or events, the child will mirror or resonate this attitude in her own mind and body, and later on be inclined to act in a similar way.

We may say that Lillian protected her mother's feelings, and also herself, from feelings of pain and guilt were she to make her mother suffer and cry. Young children rely on their parents for comfort and well being, and this very dependency makes it most threatening to see a parent in weak

and vulnerable situations. It has been observed in more recent crises, such as the one in Kosovo, how much children monitor their parents' states of mind, catering to them in hiding their own suffering and problems (Reddeman 2004:283).



In Siri's case, communicative barriers were identified in the family as well as in elementary school. Families carry secrets, and when all members know them, they share certain forms of tacit knowledge that need not necessarily be verbalised. In Siri's case, her parents would know why they were isolated in the local community during and after the war was over, but they did not share this insight with their children. They would know that the majority of the Norwegian population strongly opposed the German occupation, and that a widespread practice was to isolate those who were identified as Nazis, including their children. When the parents avoided talking about the war, they could go on living as if the social ostracism did not exist. This is at least one way of interpreting silence and communicative barriers in Siri's family.

Siri's silence and loss of memory about her traumatic experiences at school may be understood as a response to extreme stigmatization, humiliation and accompanying feelings of guilt and shame. Her reaction may well be understood in terms of George Herbert Mead's perspective on self in relation to significant others, with her school environment serving as a mirror for her perception of self (Mead, 1932). When other school children overlooked her worth, she viewed herself as unworthy. When her parents failed to recognise and show her their love, her self-confidence was too vulnerable to resist the negative projections coming from her school environment, where Siri's teacher and fellow pupils used her as a scapegoat for the wrong-doings of her father. Keeping silent about being left out and bullied prevented every chance she might have had to correct her distorted self-image. Upon finishing elementary school, Siri's silence, as we saw, turned into total oblivion. In her late 50s she reflected upon her forgetting, concluding that it was an effort to flee from her past, a strategy that may be interpreted as a necessary survival mechanism at the time. Siri's example indicates that silence due to repressed memories could be functional as a mastering strategy for children at times when other, and less harmful, alternatives were out of reach.

Authority structure in the family

Verbal sharing of emotions, existential thoughts and concerns between spouses and across generations is a relatively new phenomenon. Verbal sharing conceived as *disclosing intimacy* (Jamieson, 1998:9)

has been stated as an ideal for modern couples (Giddens, 1992) as well as in childrearing (Benjamin 1988; Wetlesen 2000). Yet the extent to which disclosing intimacy is practiced in intimate relations today has been questioned (Jamison, 1998).



Historically, security and emotional support was provided through collective forms of living where family members contributed to the household's survival from an early age. Extended family systems provided all members a secure sense of belonging. Verbal intimacy would be more pronounced in same sex groups than across gender barriers. Only recently have spouses in modern societies moved away from sex-segregated social networks to rely more on each other for companionship and the sharing of thoughts and feelings (Bott, 1957). Even now, however, barriers of communication and mutual understanding are often reported as strains in intimate living. Authority structures were traditionally not conducive to mutual sharing between parents and children, but more openness has evolved as children's psychology is better understood, and ideals and relations between adults and children have become more democratic (Raundalen & Schultz, 2008; Wetlesen, 2004).

Everyday living and disclosing intimacy

Everyday living calls for continuous coping and problem solving, favouring rapid exchange of information and sharing to find solutions to problems of an immediate or practical kind. Mundane activities and work obligations fill most of the day and divert attention from heavier issues of existential importance in families or in friendships. To converse about deep existential problems or explore anxiety-provoking experiences is rarely included in the repertoire of everyday living. In most situations it will be considered out of place to bring up deeply disturbing topics of a personal kind, and those who show an optimistic and happy attitude are most likely to be socially rewarded. In families adults make efforts to make life run smoothly, demonstrating to themselves and others an image of mastering and competence. To confront deep suffering in one's own child may be most threatening to a parent who is mainly responsible and usually overly concerned about the child's wellbeing and safety. Parents may have found comfort in a conviction that young age protects a child from knowing about or understanding war atrocities. Were adults to speak openly to their children about the war, they risk confronting the impossible task of trying to make intelligible to a child, as well as to themselves, acts of violence and destruction that violate our basic assumptions about

life. Their silent attitudes could also express a certain «ownership» of war crisis. In a way, the war belonged to the adults and not to the children - at least not in the same way.



When events of war disrupt the normal order of things, people tend to anchor themselves even more in everyday routines and practical problem solving as a shield against chaos and despair. This is a major conclusion in Larney's life course analysis of how the second generation of Germans described their parents' way of coping during World War II, and the hardships that followed the defeat (Larney, 1994). Silence about war experiences after the defeat is also interpreted as an adaptive strategy. Germans who believed in the Third Reich's promise of a messianic state, adapted to the surrender and the post-war period with silence. By keeping silent about the entire Hitler period, parents broke with the Nazi past (Larney, 1994:200). Parents would tell anecdotes from the war but remained silent about ideological and political issues. Larney further observes that silence about the Nazi epoch also persisted in the next generation, interpreting their silence as behaviour which was learned from their parents. The author makes reservations about the possibility of extending her findings to other countries, or children, in other wars.

Larney is of course right in pointing out the special role and responsibility that Nazi Germany carries for war atrocities. She is probably also right in stating that certain forms of silence might be observed first of all in Germany. Based on other contributions, including my own research, I would, however, argue that the tendency to respond to war losses and destruction with silence stands out as a more general phenomenon. In Denmark, for instance, sons and daughters whose parents were active on the heroic side, offering resistance to the German occupation, report that they were muted about childhood wartime remembrances for decades as a result of their parents' unwillingness to speak (Mellemgaard, 2001).

Contexts for breaking the silence

When the anxiety of war experiences is covered up with silence, it seems that something special must occur before the persons involved will break their silence. In the case of Lillian and Siri, we saw that extraordinary situations arose when they reached midlife. Earlier in the paper I refer to changes from silence to speech as turning points. When, and in what types of situations, did the turning points occur?



Lillian's story illustrates that a turning point could be brought about by life itself, such as the death of her aging mother. In taking care of her mother's belongings she was confronted with the realities of her mother's financial situation as a widow and provider. Lillian's choice to pursue the case brought her in contact with an empathetic listener that created an entirely new situation for sharing war memories. The mother's death in itself, and the action that Lillian took as a result of her new knowledge, certainly diverged from the mundane business of every day life.

In Siri's case, a turning point arose during a period of illness. Prior to the stimulation of her trauma in the course of a stay in hospital, she had worked intensively in a seminar on a topic that bore strong parallels to her own childhood experiences at school. One may say that the seminar situation as well as her illness were events that exempted her from routines and requirements of everyday living. Reviving traumatic episodes, however, disturbed her so much that she found herself in need of therapeutic assistance. This she found in the local minister. Again, an extraordinary context was created with the purpose of bringing relief to her troubled mind, which was overwhelmed by memories locked up and hidden for such a long period of time. Talking to the minister had a spill-over effect on her family, facilitating her ability to share war-related experiences with her husband as well.

Outside her close family Siri was also, as we saw, silent about her family background for fear of being rejected by friends and colleagues due to her parents' affiliation with Nazism during the war. This situation was changed through a special event at work, when bullying again became topical, and Siri volunteered to use her own experiences from primary school as an example.

Situations that opened up for communication and sharing could also result from public rituals. The public celebration of the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, in 1995, when those who had died were honoured, was, as we saw, a turning point in Lillian's life. The event enlivened her, prompting her to communicate widely about war memories. The public celebration resulted in Lillian being accorded the role of a speaker on the war in schools and at other public events. These occasions clearly represented breaks in the routines of everyday life. One may say that the ceremony commemorating the peace brought about unintended consequences in awakening Lillian's critique about the authorities' lack of recognition for her status as the daughter of an honoured wartime sailor. The memorial service provided Lillian with an opportunity to give greater emphasis to her capacity as a contributor and a witness of the war to new generations and less emphasis to her situation as a victim of the war. Another opportunity was created when Lillian served as a witness of life in a war

sailor's family and found an empathic listener in the researcher. In Elvira's case, her visit to a fortune-teller inspired her to create her own private ritual that relieved her feelings of grief and sadness.



In the life stories referred to above, the Second World War stands out as a theme of major significance, casting long shadows later in life. It is noteworthy that the memories of the war as lived realities could be transformed by certain events that took place decades later. Since the turning point tended to occur in midlife, it may be assumed that there was a certain readiness in the person for change and transformation at this particular time. Research on war trauma in adults has shown that painful and frightening war remembrances may be reactivated later in life when the affected persons retire and are less preoccupied by meeting job requirements and other obligations (Eitinger, 1980). When the life course is conceived of as eight stages, according to Erik Erikson (1950), one may say that the women in their midlife were approaching the last age in which integration and reconciliation with one's life stand out as major tasks of personal development. With their children grown, the women had more time available for themselves as well as more mental energy and attention for working on personal issues and life themes. The turning points which led the discussed persons to break their silence about war remembrances, seem to have resulted from specific and extraordinary events, which interacted with a certain readiness to confront childhood experiences and, to some extent, transform them.

Concluding remarks

In the article I have given illustrative examples of how childhood war remembrances have been muted, and shared later in the life course. I have emphasised the inadequacy of the family institution and everyday life for sharing and dealing with deeply felt anxieties and war traumas as well as the potential of relief in special occasions such as ceremonies, rituals and therapeutic settings.

The case stories demonstrate that the language of silence is not imposed only upon those who fall short of being inscribed with honour on the heroic side of the collective and legitimised version of Norwegian war history (Eriksen, 1995). Silence about war atrocities appears to be a rather general phenomenon, a shared experience among children of veterans, among children of German soldiers, children of NSP members as well as among those whose homes were destroyed by scorched-earth tactics.



Is it likely that these observations of long lasting silence could be transferred to others who carried heavy burdens as young children during World War II? Since studies also from other countries report silence as a widespread response to damages and losses among those who were children during the Second World War, it seems likely that similar testimonies of silence would be identified in studies broader in scope. Stories of children who silently carry memories from recent or ongoing conflicts, will, however, not necessarily be repeated. Hopefully parents in our culture today will know more about the value of talking about frightening experiences and painful feelings with their children, while those who were young parents in the Second World War had other ideas and values about how to behave as responsible and caring adults.

The values of ceremonies, rituals and other extraordinary occasions inside or outside family circles should not be ignored. Such occasions may provide opportunities to feel connected to humanity in spite of dehumanising and humiliating experiences also when close relations fail to provide adequate support and understanding. In various ways turning points that induce steps toward further integration and reconciliation on personal and interpersonal levels may arise.

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