

TURNING HEROD'S CHILDREN INTO JAKOB'S CHILDREN

Cross-generational perspectives in conceptualizing
memory and history through the perspective
of “being a child”

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Immediately after the end of the Second World War, the Austrian writer Ilse Aichinger, herself a survivor of the Holocaust, conveys both individual and collective trauma by using child protagonists as bearers of ›The Greater Hope‹ in her novel of that title (1948). More than half a century later, the British artist Ruth Rix, the only daughter of Ilse's twin sister Helga, who found refuge in England as part of the Kindertransport, re-collects the fragments of her family's memory. This article investigates the perspective of ‘being a child’ as a condition for the transference of memory.

Gleich nach Kriegsende verfasst Ilse Aichinger, die den Holocaust als Jugendliche in Wien überlebte, ›Die größere Hoffnung‹ (1948). Kinder sind die Protagonisten in diesem Roman, in dem Aichinger das persönliche und das kollektive Trauma zu verarbeiten sucht. Ilse's Zwillingsschwester Helga hingegen war mit einem Kindertransport 1939 nach England entkommen und fand hier eine neue Heimat. Mehr als ein halbes Jahrhundert später gibt ihre noch während des Krieges geborene Tochter, die britische Künstlerin Ruth Rix, den Fragmenten der Familienerinnerung neue Gestalt. Der Aufsatz untersucht, wie die Kinderperspektive die Erinnerungsarbeit prägt.

In the long history of working through Holocaust experiences in literature and film, the prominent role and ethical value of child protagonists was recognized early on. However there is still no systematic survey of the various types of child representation and the way their function has continually shifted over a period of more than seven decades. Considering the history of Holocaust literature in a broader sense, the generational change appears to be of particular interest. Children from the time of the Second World War are now in their late seventies or eighties, or even older. The transference of their memories affects their children and grandchildren too. Being a child of a Holocaust survivor and/or WWII refugee has proved to be deeply formative. One cannot grow out of this condition. It can never be left behind.

'Being the child of someone' is normally considered to be a condition that has to be outstripped while growing up and creating an independent identity based on personal achievement. For the descendant of a Holocaust survivor, however, it often becomes the mainstay of self-definition, a frame of identity building that is difficult to alter or to leave behind. On a personal level, the tracing back of family memory within a traumatizing history thus becomes an important way of working through what cannot be rationally understood. Passing on this memory to the next generation in a transfigured form is something artists are gifted to do. In reconstructing and preserving the singularity of individual human beings, this personal approach may even be a way of trying to overcome ideologies of collective violence and violent collectivity, yet it is the child's perspective which aims at a better future. What I am especially interested in here is the very condition of 'being a child' as a leading paradigm for the aesthetic representation of and working through traumatic experiences – not the image of the suffering child as a prevalent topic in Holocaust representations often bordering on kitsch. 'Being a child' also implies a specific position within the conceptualization of memory and history. Being situated at the threshold between what happened before, and what brought him or her into existence, on the one hand, and what is yet to come, on the other, the child embodies the very idea of history – a concept of reconnecting past and present, and of transforming the present into the future. It is far less its supposed innocence and need for protection that makes the figure of the child so attractive for literature dealing with collective trauma, but rather the fact that its specific position between past and future confers on the child a very particular role and ethical value in aesthetic representations.

In what follows I will paradigmatically consider the case of an Austrian family whose members became subject to the Nuremberg Laws once Nazi rule took over in Austria. While some of them managed to escape via emigration and some survived in Austria, others were ultimately deported and killed. It is the family of the renowned Austrian writer Ilse Aichinger, who was born in Vienna in 1921 and had an identical twin sister called Helga. Their parents were Ludwig Aichinger, an Austrian elementary school teacher from Linz, and his wife of Jewish heritage, Berta Kremer, a doctor and successful amateur composer, from Vienna. The couple divorced in 1927, but the family stayed on good terms until the father's death in 1957. After the 'Anschluss' in March 1938, Berta Aichinger immediately lost her job as a pediatrician with the city of Vienna. The family was later expelled from their flat in Hohlweggasse 1 to a mass accommodation at Este Platz 3 in the same (third) district of the city of Vienna. In May 1942, the grandmother Gisela Kremer and two of her other children, Felix Kremer, an engineer, and Erna Kremer, a pianist, were deported

and most probably met their deaths in Minsk shortly thereafter. Thanks to the help of Berta Aichinger's elder sister Klara, who had managed to emigrate to London in the summer of 1938, one of the twins, Helga, also escaped to England with one of the last children's transports from Vienna only weeks before the outbreak of the Second World War.

Ilse Aichinger remained in Vienna for the sake of her mother, who was not to be deported as long as she had to take care of a minor. They both survived war and persecution in Vienna. Separated at the age of 17, the identical twins experienced the historical catastrophe under significantly different circumstances, the one hiding in Nazi-poisoned Vienna, the other exposed to the challenges of an émigré existence in a foreign country whose language she yet had to acquire, and where she arrived while still a minor. Ilse and Helga eventually became a writer and an artist, respectively. Although the two sisters lived in different places from the moment of their separation, in their work they both constantly refer to the same history, and the testimonies they have delivered are intertwined to a surprising degree. This becomes even more evident when we further consider the artwork of Helga Michie's only daughter, Ruth Rix, who herself became an artist, and who relatively recently began working through the inherited testimonies of her ancestors. I will start with a look at her artwork.

1. Fragments of memory, fragments of history, recollected

The British painter Ruth Rix was born in Leamington Spa in the middle of the Second World War, in the summer of 1942. She has a personal website through which she not only presents her artwork but also in a cautious way reveals aspects of her story/history. I propose to read her website like a text.

Based on a more or less standardized format, Ruth Rix's website is organized under five separate tabs ("Home"; "Work"; "About"; "More about"; "Contact"), whereby the tab "Work" offers six subtabs ("Recent Work"; "Hut", "Figure & Wood"; "Achill Paintings" 2013; "Dzadzu; Vienna Paintings" 1972–1974; "Archive"). The "Home" tab begins by positioning the artist unequivocally within the here and now:

I have a studio in Phoenix Brighton, and I have lived in Brighton since 1988. I have also lived in the Sussex countryside, York, Vienna and London.

At the same time the chronologically backward listing of the stations of her life no less decidedly points to her origin in both "Vienna and London". From two further tabs we learn "About" and "More About" the artist; in both cases a black-and-white landscape image from a historic postcard ›Am Attersee‹ is used for the background (it refers to a happy childhood experience, a summer

holiday spent with her family at the famous lake in Upper Austria), while the other tabs keep to a standard monochrome gray background. The first of the two tabs about the artist offers, in a very reduced way, basic information about her education as an artist, her previous exhibitions, and acknowledgments. The second one (“More About”) focuses on the ‘origins’ of the artist and her artwork. Here Ruth Rix introduces herself explicitly as a child of refugees from Austria. Having being born in England and grown up “in émigré circles in north London” she retains a strong bond with Austria:

My parents fled Vienna at the beginning of the war and met as refugees in England. My early years were spent in émigré circles in north London. I visited family in war-torn Vienna for the first time in 1948, and have revisited the city and the Austrian countryside many times since then. Lived in Vienna 1972–1974.

My family came to England from Vienna during the war, as refugees, and I still have relations there. I have visited Austria regularly since 1948.

Through her family both on her mother’s and her father’s sides, Ruth still has relatives living in Vienna, a city which she herself not only visits on a regular basis, but where she also used to live in the early seventies, working as an artist in the studio of renowned Austrian sculptor Fritz Wotruba (1907–1975). Interestingly enough she does not mention any names here, even though some of her family members are well known among literary circles, at least in Austria and Germany.¹⁾ More striking, however, is the last sentence in this tab of her website:

Much of my work has been influenced by my experiences, and those of my family, in Austria and England.²⁾

At this point the perspective goes beyond her own experiences and deliberately traces back to include the experiences “of my family, in Austria and England”.

¹⁾ Ruth’s father was Walter Singer (1919–2005), whose life story (personified by a figure named Karl Berger) has been famously documented by Austrian writer GERHARD ROTH in *The Story of Darkness*. Translated by HELGA SCHRECKENBERGER and JACQUELINE VANSANT, Riverside, Ca. 1999 (GERHARD ROTH, *Die Archive des Schweigens*. Band VI: *Die Geschichte der Dunkelheit*. Ein Bericht, Frankfurt/M. 1991). There are several sisters of her father still living in Vienna. Her aunt, Ilse Aichinger, had been married to renowned German writer Günter Eich (1907–1972). Their first child, Clemens Eich (b.1954), was a well-known German and Austrian actor and writer before his untimely death in 1998.

²⁾ Beside these personal influences, on the main page of her “Work” tab she notes: “Strong influences are film and photography, theatre, sculpture, and Central European culture. As a child I watched the filming of *The Third Man* at Shepperton Studios. I have for a long time been influenced by the Austrian sculptor Fritz Wotruba, as well as by the work of John Berger, Rebecca Horn, Bill Viola and Tapies.” In this part of her self-presentation she refers neither to “Vienna” nor to “Austria”. Apart from different genres of art or media, the only general cultural reference she points to is “Central European culture”, thus opening the influence of “Austria” out into a wider space (and time) frame.

If one has a look at the subtabs of her webpage dedicated to her “Work”, one can see that in pursuing this aim Ruth Rix’s art of memorizing reaches out way beyond what oral history can tell. In her artwork she also relies very much on paper documents such as early photographs. Through those documents she focuses on the final stages of the Habsburg Empire rather than on the later period of persecution. The subtabs dedicated to her “Work” are also aligned backwards. After “Recent Work” (2017–2018), a series based around “Hut, Figure & Wood” (1985; 2015–2016³), and a series of paintings she created as artist in residence in the Heinrich Böll cottage on Achill island, Co. Mayo, Ireland (“Achill Paintings 2013”), the list contains a subtab named “Dzadzu”. In our context it is the centrepiece of her artwork in which she traces her ancestors’ history back to the beginning of the 20th century. The “Dzadzu” series dates from the period between 2000 and 2010, when Ruth Rix finally started offering “House Studio Tours, Phoenix Brighton”, a “studio show of work on the theme of family and memory”, as she explains on her website. On the “Home” tab of her website, beside a recent picture of the artist herself, there is also a photo of the wall in her studio in Brighton which includes a huge panel reaching from left to right, with significant parts of the “Dzadzu” series covering most of the wall. As the artist herself explains:

These works came out of the blurred boundaries between my early memories as the child of refugees, and the collective memory of the family. I tried to link the gaps due to separation, dispossession, deportation and death.

My mother Helga Michie escaped to England on the last kindertransport from Vienna, leaving her twin-sister Ilse Aichinger and other members of the family back in Austria. Some of the family were deported to Minsk and murdered.

I chose the shadowy figure of Dzadzu, my great, great grandfather, to explore, and perhaps to organise, the fragments of memory.⁴)

For a spectator who is only interested in her artwork, this short explanation accompanying the series does not seem strictly necessary – expressive as they are, the paintings and collages speak for themselves. But if we treat this brief introduction as part of her work, we are encouraged to ‘read’ Rix’s project as another form of ‘life-writing’ with a double motivation: aiming on the one hand to, as she herself puts it, “link the gaps due to separation, dispossession, deportation and death”, and on the other to link the artist’s early childhood memories with the collective memory of her family. It is only here, in the specific context of her “Dzadzu” series, that Ruth Rix speaks out the names of her mother and

³) This series includes two paintings dedicated to Ruth Rix’s grandfather, the father of the Aichinger twins, Ludwig Aichinger (1882–1957), ›Ludwig Reading‹ (2015; oil on board 10 × 15), and ›Ludwig II‹ (2016; oil on canvas 24 × 33).

⁴) <<http://www.ruthrix.com/#!dzadzu/a5yu7>> [26.06.2019]

aunt. And only here she explicitly recounts what happened to “some of the family”. In the “Dzadzu” series there are a few archetypal motifs, that recur regularly, such as the staircase (which at times merges with a female figure), or a dog originating in Tarkovsky’s film ›Stalker‹ (1979). But most prominently in her project Rix approaches the “collective memory of the family” by tracing the fragments of memories she inherited.

As was and is still the case with many refugee families, very often photographs were all that remained of the family’s former possessions. These pictures are handed down from one generation to the next, while the accompanying dates and stories are passed on orally. There are only fragments left by that process, and very often the individuals depicted can no longer be easily identified. The events associated with these images remain uncertain and it becomes more and more difficult for the heirs of the documents to reconstruct them. Rix seeks to link her own memory fragments from the time of the war and her early encounter with Vienna to the few material *tradita* and the stories of her surviving relatives, most explicitly in one of the earliest paintings of the “Dzadzu” series, the ›Staircase‹ (2000; oil on canvas 65 × 55 cm).⁵⁾ In her project Rix refers to different categories of testimonies: to family documents in the possessions of her mother and aunt, such as letters and photographs; to oral accounts from surviving relatives; to literary works by Ilse Aichinger, which contain the author’s own testimony; and to secondary contexts that Ruth Rix extracted from the testimonies herself, such as the legendary local character “dear Augustine” from Vienna, a survivor *sui generis*, who also figures in some of Aichinger’s texts.⁶⁾ As a focus for her discontinuous ‘narration’ Rix chooses “the shadowy figure of Dzadzu, my great, great grandfather”, whom she refers to by the family moniker “Dzadzu” in corrupted Slavic. Her seemingly incoherent series of single works, paintings, or collages serves as a platform “to explore, and perhaps to organize, the fragments of memory”. In combination with the “early memories as the child of refugees”, the project at the same time becomes the ‘life-writing’ of a consciousness that must emancipate itself from the situation of those who

5) Cf. “The staircase I glimpsed in a ruined building in Tel Aviv is fused with the one I played on in a London boarding-house, and that of the family flat in Vienna before the war, which I visited amid the ruins of the city in 1948. It also reminded me of watching filming on the set of *The Third Man*, perched on a stool.”

6) A fictitious character and local hero from Moritz Bermann’s book ›Alt-Wien in Geschichten und Sagen‹ (1868) which can be traced back to the historical person Mark(u)s Augustin who lived in the second half of the 17th century and famously survived a fall into a plague pit. Aichinger refers repeatedly to him, most prominently in her novel ›Die Größere Hoffnung‹ in the chapter “Das heilige Land” (The promised land), in: ILSE AICHINGER, *Werke in acht Bänden*, Frankfurt/M. 1991, p.74 and passim. Here “der liebe Augustin” (dear Augustine) appears as one of three travel companions the children encounter on their (imagined) trip in the coach (alongside Columbus and David).

escaped. It is an attempt to integrate the fragments of inherited testimonies into a larger context, eventually making them part of a tradition which would go beyond the catastrophe.

Considering Rix's "Dzadzu" series, we recognize that she is not handing down the history of a successful family. Again and again we encounter the figure of a frightened, running dog, the traumatic icon of a history of loss and destruction as found in ›Dog & Paper Trail‹ (2010; collage 30x42cm). It is the history of a Jewish family whose ancestor once migrated from the Caucasus Mountains to Central Europe; whose members were at home in the former Austrian Empire, and who were later exposed to persecution and extermination during the Nazi period. Ruth Rix tries to approach her unknown ancestor, whose image has been lost, through the photograph of his son ›Jacob‹⁷⁾ (2010; mixed media on paper, 59x81cm), who, as Ilse Aichinger put it, had been lucky enough to pass away in time, unlike his wife Gisela, Ruth's great-great-grandmother, who, along with her children Felix and Erna, was deported to Minsk and lost her life under unknown circumstances.⁸⁾ It is not *them*, however, the victims of the Holocaust, whom Ruth Rix turns to in the first instance. It is their father and grandfather she approaches in her work: "My great-grandfather Jacob who died just before the war. I tried to pull him away from his photograph to use his less-formed image to shape his father Dzadzu."

Here the outline and void image of her great-grandfather Jakob serves the artist as a frame to figure out the lost image of "Dzadzu", Jakob's father. Rix thus deliberately shifts the perspective on the relationships between the members of the family. While she is going far back in her search for "my great-grandfather" and the lost image of his father – of whom she knows only from hearsay – this point of view not only enables her to work her way back up the chain of the family's history; it also turns around the perspective on the future of those who are now lost. This happens even more strikingly when, in another approach to the same image, Rix incorporates a photograph kept by her mother Helga inside Jakob's head. In this collage, ›Jakob's children‹ (2010; collage 30x42cm), the same figure serves as an imagining of what was yet to come. Rix again merges Jakob's profile with the profiles of some of his relatives, this time his children, by using a negative print of a photograph once taken by her great-aunt Klara: two of the children in the photo are in fact the very great-uncle and great-aunt of Ruth's that were later deported. The negative print suggests that the image itself has not yet been developed. It documents a state prior to the

7) The website uses both spellings "Jacob" and "Jakob". In quoting the titles of the artworks I keep to the original spelling.

8) ILSE AICHINGER, *Film und Verhängnis. Blitzlichter auf ein Leben*, Frankfurt/M. 2001, p. 23.

later catastrophe of their lives. In Ruth Rix's work it is like a dream, a vision still preserved in the head of their father Jakob.

The surviving photo keeps the children's images in a curious state: they are dressed up and acting as though they are going on a trip in a coach, a trip which from a later perspective might be understood symbolically as an attempt to escape the nightmare of history. In this respect the capturing of the scene (whose actual context family memory has not passed on) strongly resembles a chapter that Ilse Aichinger sketched out in her novel ›Die größere Hoffnung‹, which was first translated into English by Cornelia Schaeffer as ›Herod's Children‹ (1963).⁹⁾ It seems that both Ruth Rix and Ilse Aichinger are referring to the same document in order to recollect memories of their family members as well as to reflect on their disappearance. In shifting the perspective to the fathers, however, Ruth no longer perceives the children as the persecuted ones, exposed to the violent will of the anti-Semitic ruler – “Herod's children”. Rather, in recollecting the true generational chain, she restores their place in history as being the children of Jakob, namesake of the progenitor of Israel. It is the very image of this figure of Jakob which in Ruth Rix's ›Dzadzu‹ series provides the frame for her working through history: it allows her both to cross-fade the image of her great-grandfather with that of the former Emperor Franz Joseph (the symbolic ‘father’ of the nation of Austria whose silhouette on horse-back pops up in her series again and again), and to bring it into relation with the dispersed fragments of the lives of his children or with torn letters (fragments from the history of the family's separation at the time of the war) in ›Jakob and Torn letter‹ (2010, collage 21 × 30 cm).

The photograph used for ›Jakob's Children‹ had been a *traditum* within the Aichinger family for decades. It was only recently published on the cover of a new translation of Ilse Aichinger's novel ›The Greater Hope‹ by Geoff Wilkes (2016).¹⁰⁾ The book came out not with an English-language fiction publisher, but with the German publishing house Königshausen & Neumann that is otherwise specialized in research papers in the Humanities. It was the Australian Gail Wiltshire, former theatre director and author of a book on Aichinger, who made the publication of Wilkes's new translation with the Würzburg publisher possible.¹¹⁾ She herself contributed an afterword in which she reads Aichinger's novel decidedly within the context of the Aichinger family history and in which she explicitly points out the connection between the family photo, the family tree, and the novel. There is no proof, however, that Ilse Aichinger

⁹⁾ ILSE AICHINGER, *Herod's Children*. Trans. by CORNELIA SCHAEFFER, New York 1963.

¹⁰⁾ DIES., *The Greater Hope*. Trans. by GEOFF WILKES, Würzburg 2016.

¹¹⁾ GAIL WILTSHIRE, *A Spatial Reading of Ilse Aichinger's Novel ›Die größere Hoffnung‹*, Würzburg 2015.

herself ever intended her book to be read closely in regard to her own family's history. On the contrary: being herself a witness forever traumatized by the humiliation, persecution, deportation, and murder of the Jewish people of Vienna, her own close relatives and friends included, in her novel she did rather more than just keep the memory of her loved ones alive – the latter being a rather intimate task. Aichinger's novel, which she had written down quickly and ardently in the aftermath of the War, had to literally play out a "greater hope" against the humiliation of mankind, against the corruption of the mind, against the barbarism of the German Nazis and all conflicted people. It was not only about the fate of her family; it was about humanity.

2. *The greater hope of the children and the leap of emancipation*

As was already mentioned, Ruth Rix's mother Helga had escaped Vienna by fleeing to England in July 1939. After the start of the war, she was cut off from virtually all news regarding her relatives; there were only a few letters with a strictly limited word count delivered via the Red Cross, which took months to reach their destination. News of Ruth's birth reached Vienna a whole nine months after the event. News of the deportation of her grandmother, aunt, and uncle reached Helga in the form of a void – their signatures were missing on the letters she received.¹²⁾

The family's situation was traumatizing to Ilse Aichinger as well. While her twin sister Helga was sent to England, Ilse remained in Vienna in order to protect the life of their Jewish mother, who was safe from deportation only as long as she had a "not purely Jewish" child to support. Ilse was forced to watch in silence as her relatives were put into trucks and deported over Vienna's Schwedenbrücke – while the Austrian citizens cheered. Her relatives were taken from her before her eyes, lost to her sight forever. This vanishing that she witnessed became the constant theme of Ilse Aichinger's own existence – again and again she speaks of a longing to vanish and disappear – as well as a foundation for her later writings. Proceeding from autobiographical remarks to that effect by the author herself, scholarship on Aichinger notoriously tends to comprehend her

¹²⁾ NIKOLA HERWEG, "Ich schreib für Dich und jedes Wort aus Liebe". Der Briefwechsel der Zwillingsschwestern Helga und Ilse Aichinger, in: RÜDIGER GÖRNER, CHRISTINE IVANOVIC, SUGI SHINDO (eds.), *Wort-Anker Werfen. Ilse Aichinger und England*, Würzburg 2011, pp. 27–43; SUSANNA BROGI, *Kommunikative Überlebensstrategien im Exil. Der Briefwechsel von Helga Michie und Ilse Aichinger*, in: GERMAINE GOETZINGER und INGE HANSEN-SCHABERG (eds.), *Auf unsicherem Terrain. Briefeschreiben im Exil. Edition Text + Kritik*, München 2013, pp. 73–82.

work within the frame of a “poetics of disappearance”.¹³⁾ Yet the ambivalence of this ascription should not be overlooked. Again it is the perspective of children that seems to be of the utmost importance here. Just looking on and not being able to interfere with what is going to happen characterizes the state of ‘being a child’. In Aichinger’s novel, her female protagonist Ellen learns to outgrow this state step-by-step, while at the same time adopting the biblical injunction “become like little children” (Matthew 18:3), rather than adopting the position of adult followers of or collaborators with the perpetrators.

›Die größere Hoffnung‹ describes in a simple but very affecting way the successive and continuously accelerating steps of exclusion, persecution, and deportation during the Nazi regime, using as an example a group of children and adolescents on the verge of adulthood in Vienna. Without ever following a narrowly autobiographical concept, the novel very clearly ‘processes’ the experiences of the author during those years.

It was only decades later that Aichinger made a comment in a very different context that could be connected to her first novel. In a personal memoir, she recounts an event from the war that I would like to quote here:

Es war an einem frühen Vorfrühlingstag an einer Mauer der inneren Stadt, nahe dem jüdischen Tempel, nahe der Residenz der geheimen Staatspolizei und nahe von Adalbert Stiflers ehemaliger Wohnung in Wien, an dem ich auf einem der unverkennbaren Anschläge, die die zum Tode Verurteilten anprangerten, zum ersten Mal die Namen der weißen Rose las. Ich kannte keinen dieser Namen, aber ich weiß, daß von ihnen eine unüberbietbare Hoffnung auf mich übersprang. Das geschah nicht nur mir. Diese Hoffnung hatte, obwohl sie es uns möglich machte, in dieser Zeit weiter zu leben, doch nichts mit der Hoffnung zu überleben zu tun.¹⁴⁾

It was the execution of the brother and sister Hans and Sophie Scholl on February 22, 1943, that Aichinger supposedly learned of that day – news that for her became an “insurpassable hope”.

In her short account, Aichinger names the time and place of a crucial experience both very explicitly and very generally. The precise location can be understood paradigmatically – the Jewish synagogue at Seitenstettengasse 4 in Vienna’s First District is juxtaposed with the Hotel Metropol at Morzinplatz, which housed the headquarters of the Gestapo; at the same time, the adjacent apartment building (Seitenstettengasse 2) retains the memory of a long-dead

¹³⁾ Cf. Aichinger’s ›Journal des Verschwindens‹ in her volume ›Film und Verhängnis‹ (cit. Fn. 9); see also CHRISTINE IVANOVIC, Ilse Aichingers Poetik des Verschwindens, in: Symposium. A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literature. Bernhard, Aichinger, Grünbein, Kehlmann, and Jelinek: Literature and Austro-German Cultures of memory (Guest editor: KARL IVAN SOLIBAKKE), Volume 63, N° 3 (Fall 2009), pp. 178–193.

¹⁴⁾ ILSE AICHINGER, Kleist, Moos, Fasane, Frankfurt/M. 1987, p.32.

representative of Austrian literature, yet another figure of a symbolic father, the writer Adalbert Stifter, who, like Aichinger's own father hailed from Linz.

Two concepts appear in this passage that are key for Aichinger's writing in general: "Hoffnung" (hope) and "springen" (leaping). Both are central figures for her, appearing as early on as her novel. The phrase which gives the novel its title, ›Die größere Hoffnung‹, is first mentioned in a note dated a month after the execution of the Scholls and written down on a scrap of paper that has been preserved as an insert in Aichinger's wartime diary. In the note, the author writes:

Die Hoffnung ist alles, diese größere Hoffnung, die die Dinge aus dem Schwankenden hinaufreißt in die brennende Existenz des guten Willens.

21. März 1943¹⁵⁾

It seems appropriate to combine both these passages and to interpret the news of the Munich resistance group as a 'trigger event' that not only allowed those who were faced with the prospect of a violent death in Vienna to survive spiritually, but also became the origin of Aichinger's later testimonial writing. This is also mirrored in the use of an expression that will turn out to be the decisive figure of the novel: the leap. The text itself ends with a leap, when the protagonist Ellen finds herself on her way "to the bridges" in a burning Vienna, endowed with the task of delivering an unknown message. As she eventually decides to make that final leap, she is torn apart by an exploding grenade. These quotations from an earlier period help to confirm that the circumstances given shape within the novel derive from Ilse Aichinger's own life story – and can therefore be read as a testimony motivated by her own life history.

Aichinger imbues her text's testimony with authenticity, but she does not achieve this by writing autobiographically. The validity of the novel's depiction stems from the (hidden) reference to news of how the White Rose attempted to resist the Nazi regime – at the cost of their own lives. As can be garnered from the preserved note and her later retelling, it was that news that instilled in the person and later the author Ilse Aichinger that "greater Hope" – a hope greater than the hope for mere survival – that would later become the title (and theme) of her novel. Testimonial life-writing – bearing witness to what happened to people like Ilse Aichinger at that time in that place and, equally, to what was done to oppose it – has found its ethical importance for her. What comes to Aichinger as the shocking realization of that moment, she connects with the aspect of decision, as it is described so passionately by, for example, Kierke-

¹⁵⁾ Cf. for a further elaboration of this context CHRISTINE IVANOVIC, *Ilse Aichinger in Ulm*. In: SPUREN 93. Marbach a. N.: Deutsches Literaturarchiv (2011).

gaard. In reference to Lessing, Kierkegaard illustrates his fundamental view of the “incommensurability between a historical truth and an eternal decision” by prominently referring to the image of the leap:

Understood in this way, the transition in which something historical and the relation to it become decisive for an eternal happiness is a μετάβασις εἰς ἄλλο γένος. Lessing even says, “If this is not what it is, then I do not understand what Aristotle has meant by it”, a leap both for the contemporary and the non-contemporary. The words are as follows: „Das, das ist der garstige breite Graben, über den ich nicht kommen kann, sooft und ernstlich ich auch den Sprung versucht habe.“ Perhaps that word *Sprung* is just a stylistic turn of phrase.¹⁶⁾

In Kierkegaard’s argument, “the leap is the category of decision”¹⁷⁾. For Aichinger’s hero Ellen, it is the decision to free herself and pass over into another state of being, thus reconnecting with the children who were fellows of her earlier days and who have already been murdered.

Regarding Aichinger’s novel, there are two aspects that bear special mention. Firstly, Aichinger left no doubt, both within her novel and in her later comments on it, that it is a text that gives shape to the very real historical situation she experienced; at the same time, however, she deliberately chose the form of the novel over that of an autobiographical report. Thus she does not explicitly mention the ‘trigger event’ for her own writing within that text, but instead chooses to emphasize the structural element that connects the two – decision as a leap. This in turn makes her text something more than mere testimony – that is, a simple recording of what happened – by imbuing the action with an ethical dimension following the news of the White Rose resistance. Secondly, what I call the ‘trigger event’ here, the personal recollection of seeing notices of the Scholl siblings’ execution, remains, for the moment, historically unverifiable. No research in any historical archive has unearthed any evidence that there was such a public notice at the time; indeed, according to several experts it seems highly unlikely that there was.

Connecting the concepts of Place – News – Hope becomes a guiding mission, generating a template of survival that was crucial at the time. In the novel, that template then generates a testimony of its own order, making Aichinger’s text both an authentic life history and a historically relevant testimony that expresses the experience of the terrors of that time. It does not limit itself to describing real, personal, experiences of the consequences of the edicts and procedures imposed by the ruling Nazis, but instead attempts to grasp the very

¹⁶⁾ SØREN KIERKEGAARD, *Concluding unscientific postscript to the philosophical crumbs*. Ed. By ALASTAIR HANNAY, Cambridge 2009, p.83f.

¹⁷⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

essence of the entire situation that resulted from those actions. That includes the news of the Scholls' execution and the "Greater Hope" instilled by it: the decision for a leap out of the fray – at the cost of one's own life. The testimony of that "leap" as a monument to the decision it embodies becomes a historical reality for Aichinger, a reality that she manages to express in her novel even beyond the confines of that particular epoch.

3. *Where I live: Language and the house of being*

Aichinger is highly regarded as an author whose early and late works are read in the context of the Shoah. The discourse of her texts regularly contains references to her own life history. Key events include the separation of her Jewish mother and her non-Jewish father before the 'Anschluss' of Austria; the separation of the twin sisters; the deportation and murder of her grandmother, uncle, and aunt in May 1942; her survival in Vienna with her mother; the difficulties of continuing to live as a survivor of the Holocaust, the "weiter leben", as Auschwitz-survivor Ruth Klüger famously put it in her own report;¹⁸⁾ her passion for cinema that she developed in her later years and through which she sought to exercise the art of disappearance in order to find a connection to those who disappeared. However, it must be noted that very few of these events are explicitly discussed within her texts. Most of this information comes from Aichinger's late texts: some of it is found in parts of her book ›Kleist, Moos, Fasane‹ (1987), but most of it in works written from the age 70 upwards and published after the millennium, such as ›Film und Verhängnis‹ (2001) and ›Unglaubliche Reisen‹ (2005).

Aichinger's oeuvre as a whole can be seen as life-writing and, as I outlined earlier, it entails the avowed aim of giving testimony. However, the double perspective given by her extraordinary position as one of a pair of identical twins has been perceived only recently – despite its undeniable presence throughout her texts. A popular thesis is that her sister Helga Michie was the original impetus and point of reference for Aichinger's writing.¹⁹⁾ But her sister's own situation has so far been largely ignored. Although she retained extensive connections to other Austrian refugees in London, her emigration meant a language shift from German to English. She did not create a literary oeuvre that compares in extent and renown with that of her sister – but she did write: original poems in German and in English, some of them published in various

¹⁸⁾ RUTH KLÜGER, *Weiter leben. Eine Jugend*. Göttingen 1992; revised English edition: *Still Alive*, New York 2011.

¹⁹⁾ Cf. HERWEG, *Briefwechsel* (cit. Fn. 13).

journals in England and Germany, as well as a number of literary translations from German into English. It was only in her later years that Helga Michie began her graphic work, creating a respectable body of work consisting of about 150 distinct graphic pieces that have been shown in several exhibitions. A monograph documenting and commenting her works was published in 2018.²⁰⁾

Helga Michie's position as a Holocaust-refugee in England was a very different one from that of the Viennese survivor Ilse Aichinger. She is an alien. Her language connects her with other refugees from Austria, but it is different from the language of the country in which she has arrived. Because as a refugee she had to leave behind her home and hope to find a new one elsewhere, she attached particular importance to the house.²¹⁾ Younger emigrants especially show a vital interest in establishing a new home – in the sense of shelter as much as in the sense of appropriating a new language and making it into a *conditio sine qua non* for processing their new existence. On the other hand, the 'mother tongue' is often retained as a symbolic home. Hannah Arendt is a prominent example of an author who produced her most important publications in an appropriated, alien language, but nevertheless kept an emphatic relationship to her mother tongue: "Für mich ist Deutschland die Muttersprache, die Philosophie und die Dichtung" (For me, Germany is the mother tongue, philosophy and poetry), and "Es gibt keinen Ersatz für die Muttersprache", (Nothing can replace the mother tongue) she famously confessed in her 1964 interview with Günter Gaus²²⁾; all that she has left of Europe is her language. Derrida, who was critical of Arendt's remarks on her (German) mother tongue, asked in 1997 in his seminar on hospitality (*De l'hospitalité avec Anne Dufourmantelle*):

What in fact does language name, the so-called mother tongue, the language you carry with you, the one that also carries us from birth to death? Doesn't it figure the home that never leaves us? The proper or property, [...] a mobile home? But also an immobile home since it moves about with us?²³⁾

On the other hand, he explicitly points out the experience of the alien as an alienation of ultimately even one's own language:

"Displaced persons", exiles, those who are de-ported, expelled, rootless, nomads, all share two sources of sighs, two nostalgias: their dead ones and their language. [...] On the other hand, exiles, the deported, the expelled, the rootless, the stateless, lawless no-ads, absolute foreigners, often continue to recognize the language, what is called the mother tongue, as

²⁰⁾ HELGA MICHIE, *I Am Beginning to Want What I Am. Werke / Works 1968–1985*, ed. by CHRISTINE IVANOVIC, Wien 2018.

²¹⁾ Cf. the documentation of her work *ibid.*

²²⁾ GÜNTER GAUS, *Zur Person. Zeugen der Geschichte*, Berlin 2001.

²³⁾ JACQUES DERRIDA, *Of Hospitality. Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to respond*. Translated by RACHEL BOWLBY, Stanford 2000, p. 89.

their ultimate homeland, and even their last resting place. [...] If it [the language] seems to be both, and by that very fact, the first and the last condition of belonging, language is also the experience of expropriation, of an irreducible exappropriation. What is called the "mother" tongue is already "the other's language".²⁴⁾

One of the testimonies of life history from that time is a photograph that has survived – and, in this context, is quite remarkable. It shows Helga together with her little daughter Ruth, on the balcony of her house in London. To the right of her is a small cross with a handwritten legend: "Hier wohne ich" ("I live here"). The photograph was sent as a message to her sister Ilse in Vienna. It marks the confident gesture of a young woman who has not only arrived in a new home, but has also *created* a new place of living. The presence of her daughter Ruth also indicates a shift in her self-perception from "being a child" to being an "I" who may also perceive herself as the begetter and the protector of a new life, with a little pride and a full sense of responsibility. The picture does not show the apartment itself as an intimate, personal interior space – but rather the position of the home within the city space, the street, the building. The home is viewed from outside, identified by the lively figures on the balcony – who in conjunction with the note and the apartment itself become one single entity. Helga herself, meanwhile, occupies a transitional space: neither truly inside nor out, neither on the ground nor in the air. A classic constellation, almost reminiscent of the balcony scenes in Kafka's novel of exile, ›Der Verschollene‹. Through its connection of writing and image, the photo-message also reproduces another classic setting: the proclamation from a balcony. "Hier wohne ich" is the final act of coming home as well as of verbal appropriation, though it still remains in the transitional space of the balcony, and therefore fragile and precarious. Helga's inscription on the photo that turns the occupation of a space into an expression of one's own emancipation is no less programmatic here than the famous sentence said to have been uttered by the Austrian foreign minister Leopold Figl after the signing of the Austrian State Treaty from the balcony of Schloss Belvedere: "Österreich ist frei!" (15. Mai 1955).²⁵⁾

In 1963 Ilse Aichinger published a short story that could be seen as a counterpart to this document. The title ›Wo ich wohne‹ ("Where I live") also became the title of the collection that text was published in.²⁶⁾ For Aichinger, that

²⁴⁾ Ibid., p 87, p.89.

²⁵⁾ Cf. also Aichinger's related short story "Zweifel an Balkonen" (Doubt on balconies) and its reading by CHRISTOPH LEITGEB, *Untergrabene Balkone: Zum Verhältnis von Unheimlichkeit und Subversion in einem Text aus Ilse Aichingers „Schlechte Wörter“*, in: ARVI SEPP, GUNTHER MARTENS (ed.), ›Gegen den Strich.‹ Das Subversive in der Deutschsprachigen Literatur nach 1945 (= Literatur: Forschung und Wissenschaft, Bd. 26), Berlin 2017, pp. 71–84.

²⁶⁾ ILSE AICHINGER, *Wo ich wohne. Erzählungen, Gedichte, Dialoge*, Frankfurt/M. 1963.

phrase is no less programmatic than the exclamation on Helga Michie's photograph. The deictic "here", however, is transformed by Aichinger into something ambivalent that can be interpreted as either an interrogative or a relative. While Michie takes possession of her London apartment through the exclamatory message to her sister, the protagonist (of uncertain gender) in Aichinger's story experiences quite the opposite: her own apartment keeps sliding down floor by floor, until it is finally below even street level (it could be noted here that Helga's photograph shows a facade that does not quite join with the perspective and takes on a noticeable slant – or a slide downwards). This development may not end in dispossession – her apartment is neither taken from her nor does she flee from it – but it does result in social isolation: all the other persons moving through the building (and at times through her apartment as well), such as tenants and the cleaning woman, seem oblivious to the change described in the story and behave as they always do. But the narration leaves no doubt that the apartment itself is actually changing position and that it is not merely a figment of the protagonist's troubled mind. A comparison of Helga Michie's inscription on the photo-message with her sister's story reveals yet another difference regarding the self-perception of the "I". The liberated exclamatory "I" at the end of the short note by Michie ("Hier wohne ich"), finds itself stuck in the middle of "Wo" and "wohne" in the title of Aichinger's story. Being neither mother nor child, and more and more stripped off its social relations, the single "I" finds itself encased in the downwards sliding apartment. It experiences itself as isolated and hidden, neither emancipated nor liberated or even recognized by the outer world – it only speaks out through the text.

Aichinger's strange short story could well be read as a reaction to the photograph from England. On the other hand, considering the emotional conjunction of language and the feeling of home under the conditions of an existence in a foreign space, Aichinger's story might be read in relation to the language in which people 'live': while it remains 'livable' in principle, its position in the social whole has changed dramatically. The conditions and possibilities of communications have undergone a shift, and the relationship between the protagonist and her environment is damaged.

This in turn creates yet another context of importance for Aichinger's writing. In 1947 a much-discussed letter was published, which Martin Heidegger had written to the young French philosopher Jean Beaufret a year previously. The letter, entitled "On Humanism", shows Heidegger's attempt at a first commentary after the war.²⁷⁾ At the very beginning, he writes:

²⁷⁾ See among others one of the first reviews by MAX BENSE in *Merkur* 3 [1949] H.20, pp. 1021–1026.

Die Sprache ist das Haus des Seins. In ihrer Behausung wohnt der Mensch. Die Denkenden und Dichtenden sind die Wächter dieser Behausung. Ihr Wachen ist das Vollbringen der Offenbarkeit des Seins, insofern sie diese durch ihr Sagen zur Sprache bringen und in der Sprache aufbewahren.²⁸⁾

Language is the house of being. In its home human beings dwell. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home. Their guardianship accomplishes the manifestation of being insofar as they bring this manifestation to language and preserve it in language through their saying.²⁹⁾

Aichinger's story ›Wo ich wohne‹ bears witness to an existence in the Holocaust as well as its continuation in the Post-Holocaust. It serves as a testament to a language that has become a home that threatens to obliterate those contained within it. What the Jewish people experienced under the Nazi regime required at least something this drastic in order to be expressed, and it becomes even more drastic because it also contains an answer to Heidegger's much-discussed phrase.

Half a century later, in 2005, Ruth Rix creates the media collage ›Storeys‹ (2005; mixed media & collage, 38 × 37 cm). In that picture, the author's niece explicitly references the short story "Where I live". It is an "image of the uncertainty of boundaries", explains the artist on her website. The photograph, with its geometric elements and figures, shines through the artwork, including the markings of the writing and the repetition of the black, white, and blue colours. Through this, Rix expresses the connection between home and language – unmistakably present in the title ›Storeys‹ which bears more than a passing resemblance to the word "stories". The word alludes to the sinking apartment as much as it refers to the aspect of passing-on, a transference of experience in the form of a story – a story that also contains a close connection between 'story' and 'history' (expressed by the same word 'Geschichte' in German). Ruth can no longer pass on these stories through language. If you consider "Language [as] the house of being", the aforementioned "uncertainty of boundaries" refers equally to the borders of language.

4. *Being a child jumping out of the fray*

A short entry in Franz Kafka's notebook, dating from around 1920, comes to mind, ›Er‹ (He), famously interpreted by Hannah Arendt in her essay ›Between

²⁸⁾ First edition in: MARTIN HEIDEGGER, *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit*, ed. by ERNESTO GRASSI, Bern 1947. Quote from MARTIN HEIDEGGER, *Gesamtausgabe*, Bd. 9 *Wegmarken*, ed. by F.-W. VON HERRMANN, Frankfurt/M. 1976, p. 5.

²⁹⁾ MARTIN HEIDEGGER, *Letter on Humanism*. Translated by FRANK A. CAPUZZI, in: *Pathmarks*, ed. by WILLIAM MCNEILL, Cambridge 1998, p. 239.

Past and Future³⁰ – written at around the same time as Aichinger's story. In her comment Arendt reads Kafka's text as an allegory for history, for the struggle between past and future: "He has two antagonists", Kafka writes, "the first presses him from behind, from the origin. The second blocks the road ahead." At the end of Kafka's short entry we encounter an idea which resembles the end of Aichinger's novel: "His dream, though, is that some time in an unguarded moment – and this would require a night darker than any night has ever yet been – he will jump out of the fighting line [...]"³⁰)

Out of a historical "night darker than any night has ever yet been" Ilse Aichinger, Helga Michie, and Ruth Rix created an almost invisible connected artwork that can never be understood without this reference to the experiences of persecution, extermination, and refuge.

Faced with the impossibility of re-assembling the history of her dead ancestors, of those who were displaced, disappeared, or destroyed, Ruth Rix developed a pictorial language that takes the fragments of family memory and recombines them in order to be able to pass them on once more. Being a child of refugees, she finds herself encouraged to trace what has been lost and to investigate. She "inherits" fragments of memories that echo in her own experiences and impressions. She takes these fragments and creates an amalgam with objects from her family history, from the history of Austria – the dominant figure of Emperor Franz Joseph – but also from archetypal figurations of trauma (the dog, the destroyed staircase).

In her works, Ruth Rix passes on and transforms inherited traumatizing images of terror and persecution. Just as Ilse Aichinger does in her novel ›Herod's Children‹, she allows memory to emancipate the children from persecution, to let them step out into another way of existence. Instead of deploring the brutally sacrificed children she succeeds in reinstalling them as ›Jakob's children‹, as the heirs of their ancestors, and thus as her own ancestors, too. In integrating the fragments of her family's memory into a complex artwork in her studio here and now in Brighton, she offers them another home. She thus recovers a history that no longer relies on linear memory, or coherent language. "Dzadzu" is the linguistically corrupt memory fragment of an ancestor that once came from a Slavic region. The points of connection are missing, and so the unreconstructable outline of Jakob is amalgamated with another prototype of history: the emperor Franz Joseph appears in his subject, while the subject becomes the

³⁰) HANNAH ARENDT, *Between Past and Future. Six Exercises in Political Thought* [1961]. With an Introduction by JEROME KOHN, New York 2006, p. 7.

³¹) Cf. on her website („Recent work“): ›Snow & Sky, 2017, digital print 29 × 41 cm; ›Snow Clearer, 2017; collage & mixed media on paper; 42 × 29 cm; <<https://www.ruthrix.com/recent-work-1>> [26.06.2019].

striking image of the Emperor. In the collage ›Franz Joseph & Augustine‹, yet another Viennese character becomes an alter ego of the great-great-grandfather: “Augustine, a legendary figure from medieval times, wanders into the frame much as Dzadu wandered into central Europe from the Caucasus.” The family history is joined with the collective history of the cultural space from which the family once originated (“Central Europe”), a representative space that is blended with an individually marked location (for this picture, Rix again used the negative of a photograph taken from a window of her grandmother's apartment: a man stands on the roof of the building across the street, shoveling snow).³¹)

In Aichinger's texts, however, language itself remains the place of action. Language is a testament to disappearance, to destruction, but also to the “Greater Hope”. In Aichinger's writing the children, however lost, are not pictured as such. There is a strong driving power in the young woman Ellen to overcome what is going to destroy them. It is the child who bears the greater hope, the child being situated at the threshold between past and future; a hope that has to be fulfilled in the one step only necessary to “jump out of the fighting line”.

Searching for lost family members and lost memories, Ruth Rix – who for her lifetime has been the child of refugees and Holocaust survivors – finally found a way of following Aichinger's hint. As she uses her inherited testimonies – documents as much as stories – to generate pictures, she passes the *tradita* on. But at the same moment she also takes on the demand to “jump out of the fighting line” through transmitting their history by the way of her art. Ruth Rix did not turn the inherited testimonies of her family's fate into a coherent story fixing them into a well-shaped tradition. Moreover, in looking at her pictures, we ourselves become witnesses of the sinking experiences as they turn into latent images of trauma that require tradition to be generated anew – a task that is up to every individual on his or her own. Or, in the words of Walter Benjamin: “In every epoch, the attempt must be made to deliver tradition anew from the conformism which is on the point of overwhelming it.”³²)

³²) WALTER BENJAMIN, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, in: WALTER BENJAMIN, *Illuminations*. Translated by HARRY ZOHNS. Edited and with an introduction by HANNAH ARENDT, New York 1969, p. 258.

