The Role of Memoirs in Questions of German Collective Identity in Z. Şenocak’s
and V. Vertlib’s Novels

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SUMMARY

“Doesn’t immigrating to Germany also mean immigrating to, entering into the arena of Germany’s recent past?” Turkish-German author Zafer Şenocak poses this question in his essay “Germany – Home for Turks?” (1990). His novel Gefährliche Verwandtschaft (1998) offers a literary examination of this matter by discussing the role of recent German history, especially the Holocaust, in contemporary German identity. In Germany, history is read as a diary of the “community of fate” (Schicksalgemeinschaft), the nation’s personal experience, to which “Others” have no access, according to Şenocak in an interview with Tagesspiegel in 1995. This conception of history, as ethnic, collective memory, was tied to the question of collective German guilt for National Socialist crimes. Yet history also plays a key role in the question of whether a country is open for immigrants.

My thesis deals especially with the following issue that is central to discussions of German collective identity: If National Socialism and the Holocaust occupy such a prominent position in the German collective identity, what does that mean for the immigrants? Conversely, might the true integration of immigrants create a new understanding of German collective identity and lead to a “positive symbiosis?” My thesis explores this question through the analysis and comparison of two novels written by immigrant writers: Zafer Şenocak’s Gefährliche Verwandtschaft and Vladimir Vertlib’s Am Morgen des zwölften Tages (2009). Both novels employ memoirs to bring these issues together and to rethink the idea of multicultural Germany.

In Zafer Şenocak’s Gefährliche Verwandtschaft, protagonist Sascha Muhteschem feels trapped in his triangular Jewish-German-Turkish heritage and conducts a close
SUMMARY

analysis of each seemingly distinct identity using his grandfather’s memoirs as a point of departure. Vladimir Vertlib, a German-speaking Austrian writer of Russian-Jewish descent, deals in his work *Am Morgen des zwölften Tages* (2009) with Germany’s long-standing political and cultural connections with the Middle East. His protagonist, Astrid Heisenberg, has a great fascination for the Orient, Muslim men, and her grandfather’s past, with which she too engages through reading (and in her case transcribing) his memoirs.

Interestingly, both novels make use of memoirs to introduce historical events into the storylines, to connect the past and the present, and to loosen the German collective memory from its hegemonic framework thus encouraging a theoretical analysis of human memory. The memoirs also play a central role in the protagonists’ negotiation of their complex identities. Moreover, they bring the collective and personal memories together.
1. Introduction

“Doesn’t immigrating to Germany also mean immigrating to, entering into, the arena of Germany’s recent past?” Turkish-German author Zafer Şenocak poses this question in his essay “Germany – Home for Turks?” (1990). In Germany, history is read as a diary of the “community of fate,” the nation’s personal experience, to which Others have no access. This conception of history as ethnic, collective memory was tied to the question of guilt after the crimes of the Nazis. Yet history also plays a key role in question of whether a country is open for immigrants (Yeşilada 53). My thesis deals with the following question that is central to discussions of German collective identity: If the memory of National Socialism occupies a prominent position in the German collective identity, what does that mean for immigrants? Conversely, might a true integration of immigrants create a space for them in the German collective identity and result in a “positive symbiosis,” replacing the term “negative symbiosis” that Dan Diner adopted from Hannah Arendt in his 1986 essay “Negative Symbiose: Deutsche und Juden nach Auschwitz”, in which he proposed: “For both Germans and for Jews the result of mass extermination has become the basis of how they see themselves, a kind of opposed reciprocity they have in common, willy-nilly” (Behrens 32)? Şenocak’s novel Gefährliche Verwandtschaft (1998) offers a literary examination of this matter by touching the sensitive topic of the role of recent German history, namely the Holocaust, in Germany’s contemporary identity.

Vladimir Vertlib, a German-speaking Austrian writer of Russian-Jewish descent, deals in his novel Am Morgen des zwölften Tages (2009) with Germany’s long-standing political and cultural connections with the Middle East. Written in the first decade of the
21st century it engages with the continuing “Leitkultur” debates, especially the place of Islam in Europe. Both novels make use of fictional memoirs and a mixing of authentic and fictional characters to introduce historical events into the storylines, to connect the past and the present, and to loosen the German collective memory from its hegemonic framework. The memoirs play a central role in the protagonists’ negotiation of their own complex identities, bringing collective and personal memories together.

The protagonist in Şenocak’s novel, Sascha Muhteschem, feels trapped in his triangular heritage (Jewish-German-Turkish) and explores each seemingly distinct “identity,” using his grandfather’s memoirs as a point of departure. The text was published in a time of fundamental changes in Germany: most notably German reunification and the radical liberalization of citizenship laws. A chapter in German history came to an end and all Germans – those from the East, the West and immigrants – would have the chance to share a common future. In *Am Morgen des zwölften Tages* Vertlib tells the story of Astrid Heisenberg, whose daughter doesn’t know about her mixed German-Iraqi heritage. After her failed relationship with Khaled, an alleged Iraqi refugee, Astrid has yet another unhappy affair with a Muslim man from Afghanistan. Feeling lost in her fascination for the Orient, she delves into her grandfather’s notes from the Anglo-Iraqi War. The unsuccessful series of liaisons between Astrid and Muslim men can be read as an insinuation of Islamophobia in the Western world, which links to the negative stereotype about relationships between Muslim men and Christian women. Both texts employ memoirs to bring these issues to the fore, ask readers to rethink the idea of “multicultural” Germany, and bring the national collective memories together.
2. Theoretical Approach: Cultural memory studies

The search for identity is a common topic of German-language migrant literature, which has become more prominent since the late 1980s, when national boundaries became physically and mentally more flexible. Zafer Şenocak’s Gefährliche Verwandtschaft (1998) and Vladimir Vertlib’s Am Morgen des zwölften Tages (2009) both employ fictional memoirs in order to make their protagonists confront the past and apply it to their present. They research both personal and collective historical events and represent ipso facto the juxtaposition of “collective” vs. “collected” memories. “Collected memory” is socially and culturally imprinted individual memory. It is associated with the process of collecting: the individual memory collects various elements of the socio-cultural environment, processing it usually from one’s own perspective. “Collective memory,” however, means the cultural objectification, social institutions and practices of social reference to the past that are metaphorically referred to as “memory” (Ollick in Erll and Nünning 250). The “collected” memories are presented in the novels with help of personal notes, photos, diaries, and memoirs that get analyzed by the protagonist throughout the novel, and give a reflection of personal memories. The central question in both novels is whether it is possible for individual immigrants or people with hybrid backgrounds to come to terms with their complex identities and to integrate into a single
nation; to feel at home despite all the obstacles, xenophobia, minority complexes, “dangerous relationships,” feelings of belonging to more than one nation, and consequently strong feelings of alienation. Ultimately, how does one negotiate between one’s own history, collected personal knowledge, and collective histories?

Summarizing the theoretical discourse on collective memory over the last several decades, Erll acknowledges that “cultural” (or, if you will, “collective,” “social”) memory is a multifarious notion, a term often used in an ambiguous and vague way (Cultural Memory Studies 1). She calls it a “transdisciplinary phenomenon” or “multidisciplinary field” (Cultural Memory Studies 1). She defines cultural memory as “the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts (...) ranging from individual acts of remembering in a social context to group memory to national memory with its invented traditions, and finally to the host of transnational lieux the memoire such as the Holocaust and 9/11” (Cultural Memory Studies 2). Pierre Nora introduced lieux de memoire in a multivolume work of the same name, featuring French “sites of memory” used to order, concentrate, and secure notions of France's past. It is connected with the idea that the collective memory of a social group (for Nora the French nation) crystallized in specific locations (Erll, Nünning, Young 10). Over the past two decades a new wave of cultural memory studies emerged, conceptualizing the relationship between culture and memory, in order to consolidate it into a more coherent discipline. Erll concludes that “literature and film can have effects on both levels of cultural memory: the individual and the collective” (Cultural Memory Studies 397). She further explains that the “cultural mind” is in many ways a “medial mind:” patterns derived from fictions shape our idea of
reality and our memories. In my readings, I will focus on the medium of literature and its influence on the relation between individual and collective memories.

The new wave of cultural memory studies that emerged in the 1980s has much to do with how the past is remembered. Erll explains that there are different modes to remember the past (see Erll, Cultural Memory Studies 7) and therefore, our memories (individual and collective) of past events can vary significantly (see Erll, Cultural Memory Studies 7). The past is not just given but it has to be continually re-constructed and re-presented. It has to be passed on. “Forty years after the Holocaust the generation that had witnessed the Shoah began to pass away. This effected a major change in the forms of cultural remembrance. Without organic, autobiographic memories, societies are solely dependent on media to transmit experience. More generally, the shape of contemporary media societies gives rise to the assumption that--today perhaps more than ever--cultural memory is dependent on media technologies and the circulation of media products to transmit experience” (Cultural Memory Studies 9). In her chapter “Power of Fiction: Novels and Films as Media of Cultural Memory” Erll clarifies that fictions, both novelistic and filmic, possess the potential to generate and mold images of the past that will be retained by whole generations. Meanwhile, historical accuracy is not one of the concerns of such “memory making” in novels and movies; instead, they cater to the public with what is variously termed “authenticity” or “truthfulness” (Cultural Memory Studies 389). Although fictional, the family memoirs the protagonists are engaged with contain many authentic elements that refer to the past events and consequently shape cultural collective and individual consciousness.
2.1. **Halbwachs’s *La Memoire Collective* (On Collective Memory)**

“All (complex societies) regularly write their dominant national mythology redesigned to reflect change of power, political interests and contemporary taste (...). The past is a key battleground for the clash of cultural identities,” writes Leonie Naughton about film production after the fall of Berlin Wall (243). Media, practices, and structures as diverse as myth, monuments, historiography, ritual, conversational remembering, configurations of cultural knowledge, and neuronal networks are now subsumed under the wide umbrella of “cultural memory” (Erll, Nünning, Young 1). Cultural memory has been a highly controversial issue ever since its very conception in Maurice Halbwachs’s studies on *memoire collective* (esp. 1925, 1941, 1950). His contemporary Marc Bloch accused Halbwachs of simply transferring concepts from individual psychology to the level of the collective, and even today scholars continue to challenge the notion of collective or cultural memory, claiming, for example, that since we have well-established concepts like “myth,” “tradition,” and “individual memory,” there is no need for a further, and often misleading, addition to the existing repertoire (Erll, Nünning and Young 2). Yet Maurice Halbwachs and other theorists’ (such as Aby Warburg) work in this realm remains pertinent. Discussions about collective memory resurfaced in the last fifteen years in what has been called a “Halbwachs-Rennaisance” (Saar, Echterhoff 7). “Collective memory,” sometimes referred to as “cultural memory,” is recognized as an integral part of national collective identity. It is inevitable that individuals and groups regularly go back to their shared history and examine it from various perspectives, considering its relevance for the present. According to Erll, Nünning and Young: that memory and identity are closely linked on the individual level is a commonplace that
goes back at least to John Locke, who maintained that there is no such thing as an essential identity, but that identities have to be constructed and reconstructed by acts of memory, by remembering who one was and by setting this past Self in relation to the present Self (6).

It is not so much that individuals are defined by the past events of their home countries but that they become a part of the collective when they are born into a nation, and are inevitably associated with its past, both good and bad. For Germans, this has entailed inevitable association with Germany, its past, and the compulsion, even for generations born decades later, to engage with this past. Charles S. Meier examines this in *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (1997) where he poses the question: “What consequences have inflamed from the German debate known as *Historikerstreit*” (preface)? The discussion considers the ongoing and central issue of how a nation should deal with its brutal past in the present and the future: “The debate revealed that German intellectuals were divided over how centrally their country’s acknowledging past aggression and genocide should underlie political consciousness” (Maier, preface). Maier provides a detailed reaction to the “historians’ conflict” that focuses on the character and significance of Nazism, and broke out in West Germany in 1986, contributing at the same time to grasping of how Germans are still trying to incorporate the Third Reich into a vision of a democratic future, into a tenacious national identity for Germany. Rudolph summarizes the role of history: “And should history provide orientation, awaken pride and self-consciousness, and thus become a starting point for “identity” and “national consensus” – or is its task much more one of unsettling (...), and sharpening our vision for the future” (Rudolph in Maier 9)?
If Germany is obligated to remember its inherited responsibility for how its elected
government committed crimes against humanity several decades ago, it is worth
examining the power and processes of human memory and collective vs. individual
memory. In his seminal work *La Memoire Collective (On Collective Memory)* written in
1939 and published in 1950, Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945) argued for the social
determinism of memory and against his contemporaries Henri Bergson and Sigmund
Freud, who saw the power of human memory as a purely individual process. According
to Halbwachs, every personal remembrance is a collective phenomenon. Halbwachs
argued that people create the collective through active participation in culture and social
undertakings. He advocated for the socio-genesis of individual memory (Echterhoff, Saar
8). The social interaction, communication, exchange of facts, dates, memories, ideas,
national history, and everyday cooperation lead to a collective past, present, and future.
Because the individual is always confronted with and constantly influenced by the
collective, both family history and personal memories are considered a collective
phenomenon.

According to Halbwachs, belonging to a group means becoming a part of its
collective. Therefore, one can extrapolate that newcomers from a different nation would
have to be included into the (German) national memory in order to become integrated.
According to Halbwachs, it is not memory itself but the combination of group
memberships, the resulting memory forms and contents that introduces differences in
individual memories (Cultural Memory 16). Although collective interpretations of the
past do not have to coincide with the individual memories, they inevitably stimulate each
other. Of course, all individuals belong to more than one group, and there are also various groupings in one community: familial, religious, ethnic, professional, etc.

In this major text on collective memory Halbwachs examines human memory processes, demonstrating that people observe and interpret history from a personal perspective but are at the same time not excluded from public thought. According to Halbwachs, from the moment when one enters a group and is capable of identifying him- or herself with it, merging his or her own past with its past, he/she has both the responsibility and right to be a part of the group’s collective identity: “We must from this moment on never have lost the habit and capacity to think and remember as a member of the group to which we all belonged, to place ourself in its viewpoint and employ the conceptions shared by its members” (Halbwachs 26).

According to Halbwachs, the processes that govern and manipulate collective memory can be highly selective and reconstructive, driving memory to the fictional level. Even the most personal memories are constantly affected by the collective ideas (Halbwachs 49). In The Collective Memory Halbwachs discusses the relationship between historical memory, autobiographies as such, and their apparent contradiction. That contradiction can be found in Vertlib and Şenocak’s novels. The protagonists themselves, who engage with their grandfathers’ texts never participated in or witnessed the historical events that they analyze and interpret from their personal and current perspectives. The memoir writers too, portray personal observations of historical events. Halbwachs describes “autobiographical memory” as making use of the historical memory; the former is, however, a personal form of the latter (Halbwachs 52).
Memory – both collective and individual forms of it, including memorializing and traditions of remembrance – has been studied extensively. In the German historical context it has been especially prominent in discussions about “Vergangenheitsbewältigung.” “Vergangenheitsbewältigung,” which can mean both “Geschichte verarbeiten” (to process history) or “Vergangenheit verdrängen” (to suppress the past). At the two far ends of the spectrum, some wish to close the chapter of National Socialism in German history and view past events exclusively as history with no further pertinence for the present, whereas others want history to be constantly taught and remembered and for it to be a part of German identity and public policy. In *Vergangenheitsbewältigung in Deutschland: Die Auseinandersetzung mit der NS-Diktatur in Politik und Justiz* Peter Reichel traces the process of Vergangenheitsbewältigung from denazification through the Nürnberger Processes, the Auschwitz Trial and the “Verjährungsdebatten” (limitation debates), up to the controversies surrounding the Holocaust Memorial and compensations for forced laborers. He examines how Germans have dealt politically, legally, and morally with the Nazi past. He notes that it wasn’t until 1985 that a leading representative, People's Chamber President Horst Sindermann mentioned for the first time the millions of Jewish “victims of the German people” and a “barbaric anti-Semitism” (Reichel 207). Reichel claims that the second era of Hitler dictatorship, which is called the second story of the Nazis, had begun after May 8, 1945. It is the still ongoing, contentious process of guilt management and guilt repression; of political change; of mourning, commemoration, and public remembering; of the historiographical interpretation and reinterpretation; and of invention and storytelling (Reichel 9). The second era of Nazi dictatorship means the
detachment from the past and an obligatory integration of history in the post-war consciousness.

The relationship between collective and personal memory is very strong and natural, just as its communal nature. Jeff K. Olick, whose key contribution within memory studies is the distinction between “collective” and “collected” memory, comments on the link between collective and individual cultural memory: “Two radically different concepts of culture are involved here, one that sees culture as a subjective category of meanings contained in people’s minds versus one that sees culture as patterns of publicly available symbols objectified in society” (336). All individuals belong to some kind of a community, or even multiple subgroups, and actively participate in “group remembering.” What happens then, when groups come together or merge, if new constellations come to existence, and if repressed or formerly “dangerous” relationships reenter the discussions? How much space is there for new perspectives in the national collective memory? Do, for example, Turks, Muslims, and Jews have a place in German history and a new German identity; and if so, might they even create the possibility of a new “positive symbiosis” as opposed to a “negative symbiosis”? The memoirs in Şenocak’s and Vertlib’s novels serve to bring these issues together in the authors’ rethinking of the idea of a multicultural Germany.

While memoirs and autobiographies are both first person accounts of the past, the genre of memoir tends to be more concerned with personal memory: while autobiographies make use of documentary records, which are precisely selected and interpreted, memoirs are, almost by definition, literary representations of memory. And so, like memories, they may be inaccurate or willfully distorted. Memoirs are
representations of memory, not of history (Kihlstrom, “Memoir”). John F. Kihlstrom, a psychologist who strives to use the theme of memory in order to connect psychology to the other social sciences and to the humanities, describes memory in his online commonplace book devoted to the human ecology of memory, as a biological function, which enables to learn from experience. It is also a unique skill, that allows people to learn, move back to the past, and connect the present and the future. “Autobiographical memory is a crucial component of the individual’s personality and identity. It is a body of shared knowledge and memory that binds together dyads, groups, organizations, institutions, societies, and entire cultures” (Kihlstrom, “Memoir”). In that sense, referring back to the central question, one can come to the conclusion that immigrants, independently from their willingness to do so, will be confronted with the national collective memory of their host country. They need to become familiar with it in order to successfully integrate into the new culture and understand its mechanics, concluding in “positive symbiosis.”
2.2. **German national identity**

In their book *Der Nationalsozialismus. Die Zweite Geschichte: Überwindung, Deutung, Erinnerung*, Reichel, Schmid and Steinbach trace the phases Germany went through in their postwar consciousness about Nazi dictatorship, on the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany. They describe how the two states that were created after the unconditional surrender of the German armed forces and shaped by the war aims and experiences of the victorious states, saw themselves challenged by the need to deal with the Nazi dictatorship. There were different answers to the question of the causes of Nazism depending on the occupation zone (7). The recent collection *Beyond Political Correctness: Remapping German Sensibilities in the 21st century* examines a set of issues related to the German past, its national identity, and its current collective perception of itself. Focal points in the essays are: the relationship between German history and German national identity; the question of who is allowed to write and talk about the recent German past; and last but not least, how much space there is in the German national identity for the personal and collective memories of immigrants. The essays concentrate on the turn of the 20th to the 21st centuries, a time in which people were hoping for a fresh vision for the future. This is also the time in which the two novels I am analyzing were published. Both novels make use of memories and memoirs to cross the boundaries between time, space, and individual perspectives. They mix the past with the present in order to find a balance between the two in a country where discussions about its past happen on a daily basis.

In “Challenging Notions of Post-Wall German Identity: Minority and Migrant Voices” Jennifer Michaels explains that “since 1990, Germany has been struggling to
define a new post-unification national identity and to integrate minorities and migrants into this identity” (185). After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 Germany had to face many challenges: formulating a new German identity that included citizens from the East and the West as well as minorities and the recent migrants, while taking into account Germany’s National Socialist past. The liberalization of German citizenship laws in January 2000 led to discourses about intercultural identity, multiculturalism, and hybridity (187). There is a conflict between the values of integration and the preservation of cultural identities. Namely, whereas the government wants immigrants to integrate into German culture, many immigrants and Germans fear losing their cultural identities. Michaels elucidates that the presence of minorities in Germany, as well as literature written in German by minorities and migrants, contribute to constantly redefining German identity, implying that it can never reach a “fixed” state, for it is very flexible and multidimensional. Michaels maintains that cultural difference should serve as “mutual enrichment” (197) rather than something that needs to be suppressed. She concludes that “such (transnational) texts challenge Germans to rethink their own identity” and promote flexible intercultural identities (200).

In “Repositioning German Identity,” Christine Anton examines “the quest for a viable, distinctive and stable German sense of self” after German reunification (1). Although Germany today is far from being xenophobic, its shadowed past is still being constantly recalled. The author explains that in the 70 years since the collapse of Nazi Germany, the Federal Republic of Germany has succeeded in building a progressive and open-minded society (Anton 2). However, Germany’s identity crisis still exists, and the question whether it should call itself a “country of immigrants” is a pertinent one. And if
so, to what degree should immigrants be forced to integrate and give up their own cultural identity? The reality of immigration compelled the German government to introduce an Immigration Act in 2005. Despite a normalized policy towards immigration, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the reunification, and the end of the Cold War the process of Germany’s “Vergangenheitsbewältigung” (dealing with the past) continues, albeit with new emphasis. Germany today is debating about whether German guilt has reached “a saturation point,” responsibility for the past events the nation bears now, and the balance between Germany remembering its moral obligation, while also being able to acknowledge German suffering during the NS period.
3. **Analytical part: Immigration issues in Germany**

In the two novels that are the basis for my thesis, memoirs serve numerous purposes. They function for the protagonists as a distraction or even escape from the reality. They serve as a kind of therapy. They are mysteries to be solved. They operate as links to the past and the family, to one’s origins. They are a source of information and advice. They are fragments that have to be put together and analyzed. They are very personal notes that nevertheless lead to “bigger,” collective questions. The reason the protagonists engage with memoirs written by their grandparents is similar. They both have problems in their personal relationships and feel othered in the country they live in – Germany. Both are constantly reminded of their origins and family ties. Sascha is a German with both a Turkish and a Jewish background. Astrid is German with a deep fascination for the Muslim world. Her grandfather fostered her fascination with the Orient already in her very early years. Both protagonists feel caught in a “negative symbiosis” – a term proposed by Dan Diner that suggested the impossibility of a positive and productive relationships between Germans and Jews after the Holocaust. Diner declares that since Auschwitz a German-Jewish symbiosis can finally be discussed, but it has become a negative one for both Jewish and non-Jewish Germans. He claims that Jews live in Germany in a “negative symbiosis” to German culture, aware of and forced to deal with their own difference from the “German” (Diner 1). I propose that this term is also applicable for Turkish-German and German-Muslim relations, for these immigrants created the biggest minority groups in Germany, and their presence is very essential in the immigration dialogue, especially at the time when discussions about immigration in Germany became more open, including many negative voices.
Two years ago, in 2010, Chancellor Angela Merkel made a clear statement about the failure of multiculturalism in Germany: “This [multicultural] approach has failed, utterly failed,” she said in Potsdam during a meeting of the youth organization of her Christian Democratic Party in 2010 (Moore). The Chancellor’s comments appear to be directed at the Muslim community and Germany’s 3 million Turkish immigrants, who began to arrive as “guest workers” (“Gastarbeiter”) to fill labor shortages during the 1960s and ’70s (Moore). Her statement appeared also in response to controversial anti-immigrant commentary only two weeks earlier by one of her coalition partners, Horst Seehofer, the conservative governor of the southern state of Bavaria. Seehofer induced an enraged reaction from Germany’s Turkish community when he told the magazine Focus, “It's clear that immigrants from other cultural circles, like Turkey or Arab countries, have more difficulties... we don't need any more migrants from other cultural groups.” Seehofer said Germany should first “deal with the people who already live here” and “crack down hard on those who refuse to integrate” before opening the doors to further immigration (Moore).

Despite recent reforms, Germany still has some of the toughest immigration and citizenship laws in the European Union. For immigrants already residing in Germany, receiving citizenship is just as hard; they must have lived in the country for eight years, prove knowledge of the language, pass a test, and prove full, self-sufficient employment before they can become naturalized citizens (Westervelt). On the one hand immigrants feel that they have not been permitted or encouraged to integrate, on the other hand there have been accusations that immigrants have simply refused to integrate: they don’t learn the language and don’t respect German traditions. Moreover many immigrants have,
according to Merkel, no sympathy for the democratic system, freedom for the individual, equal rights for women, and equality for everyone. Despite the fact that immigrants are oftentimes a source of problems, they at the same time bring various advantages to the society. Immigrants are welcome in Germany, Merkel claims, there just have to be new ways to live successfully together, a two-sided effort that should come from the immigrants, government, and population. I will argue that letting “outsiders” comment on and become part of German identity and history will create a new opportunity for living side by side in one country, despite one’s heritage and historical relations. It will also help to rethink traditional notions of German collective identity.

On the occasion of Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27, 2013 Angela Merkel said that Germany has an enduring responsibility for the crimes of National Socialism. And the responsibility needs to be remembered and passed on from generation to generation (Deutsche Welle). From my perspective, it is important not only for Germans but for everybody who lives in Germany. Affiliation with a nation inevitably means being a part of its collective, which needs to allow for “newcomers” to actively participate in it. In the past decade German recent history is discussed more openly; there is a greater access to the archives, and consciousness about what happened and cannot ever happen again is constantly growing. “Gastarbeiter-” and “Ausländerliteratur,” German literature written by foreigners, a literary precursor to the texts that I examine, became increasingly visible for German society in the 1980s and 1990s, coinciding with a revival of discussions about German national identity. Suddenly the “outsiders,” new members of the society, started taking perspectives on and expressing opinions about
German society, eventually addressing the question of their own place in Germany, especially in relation to its history.
3.1. **Zafer Şenocak and Vladimir Vertlib**

Zafer Şenocak and Vladimir Vertlib are both German-language authors with immigrant backgrounds, with a Turkish and Russian-Jewish heritage, respectively. Writing from a standpoint influenced by at least two cultural perspectives, they both deal with similar topics, namely, they are concerned with the inner and outer peripeteia of immigrants, different time dimensions (past, present, and future), a personal search for identity, life “between cultures,” as well as the struggle between collective and personal identities.

Both authors include memoirs in their works, pointing to the question of how fiction, fact, memory, personal experience, and history intersect. According to Vertlib, whose earliest texts derived from his own life story, every fiction has an authentic foundation and every autobiographical text contains fictional elements. Notably, both protagonists also reach to the grandfathers’ past. It seems like both Sascha and Astrid have known and remembered their grandparents much better than their parents. The figure of the grandfather functions as a link between the past and the present. The grandfather is a pillar in family history, a source of important information and support in the processes of self definition and looking for one’s identity. On the one hand, it is the protagonists’ own choice to reach to the manuscripts and to be confronted with the past, on the other hand the past seems to intrude into their lives via the memoirs. Due to their complex heritage, the confrontation with their families’ pasts seems to be a part of their destiny.

Zafer Şenocak, widely respected as one of the most outstanding intellectuals and most complex writers of Turkish origin in Germany, was born in Turkey as the son of a journalist and a teacher. Şenocak spent his first years in Ankara and Istanbul, and in 1970 the family moved to Munich. In addition to his literary work he has translated texts from Turkish into German. In the nineties, Şenocak provided important theoretical contributions to the German-Turkish dialogue in Germany. He is a realist, whose approach towards integration and multicultural Germany remains skeptical. He cites the influence by his father, a critic of Kemalism who protested the lack of free speech in Turkey, ultimately leaving Turkey as a result. In interviews with the ESI (European Stability Initiative) Şenocak expresses support for the idea of multicultural communities, but he acknowledges that the locals don’t always tolerate the presence of immigrants, who in turn fail at integrating because they do not identify with the new culture. He sees the “integration deficit” as a result also of an education system that is still not prepared for immigrants (ESI 2006). In his essay “Germany- Home for Turks?” from late nineties, Şenocak elaborates on the idea of “no integration without citizens’ rights.” Until 2000 German citizenship was based on genealogical criteria and so even Turks born in Germany were not granted the status of a citizen. Since 2000, the new, more liberal law makes it somewhat easier for foreigners resident in Germany on a long-term basis, and especially their German-born children, to acquire German citizenship.

With the novel *Gefährliche Verwandtschaft* (1998) Zafer Şenocak examines the convergence between individual and collective history and memory, delving into the connections between Jewish, German, and Turkish identities in Germany and how each
of them influences the German collective identity. The author is a figure representing a
dialogue between the three different cultures. The protagonist is of mixed Jewish-German
and Turkish origin. The legacy of his grandfather's notebooks prompts him to confront
the past of his family and therefore the German-Jewish-Turkish history as well as the
controversial identity politics in Germany imposed after 1989, after the fall of the Berlin
Wall. A chapter in German history came to an end, and all Germans – those from the
East, the West and immigrants – would have the chance to share a common future. Since
unification in 1990, Germany has witnessed a blooming revolution in the confrontation
with memory, visible in an essential increase in novels, films, autobiographies, and other
forms of public discussion that engage with the long-term effects of National Socialism
across generations. Family genealogy and specifically memoirs are employed in the story
in order to investigate the divergent history of Jews in Turkey, Jews in Germany, and
Turkey’s own history of genocide, Turkey’s and Germany’s past alliances and what this
means for Turks, Jews, and Germans in Germany today and for Sascha as an individual.
Şenocak looks at these three groups in Germany from a strong historical, personal, and
critical perspective. The author illustrates in the text an intense search for personal vs.
collective identity by Sascha, the literary figure, but Sascha’s search for identity is
illustrative of questions that Şenocak also asks in his earlier and later essayistic work. At
the literary level the text illustrates Sascha’s personal struggle with his own mixed,
“dangerous” national identity. At the metaphoric and historical level the novel deals with
complex relations over time between Turks and Germans, between Jews and Turks,
Germans and Jews, affinities and kinships that are called dangerous.
The novel touches upon the dichotomy of on the one hand being “othered” by German society while on the other hand being on an inner search for one's roots. Sascha with his Turkish-German-Jewish background lives in between cultures. In an interview with Tom Cheesman, Şenocak admitted that in this novel he applied fiction to examine the debate about what it means to be German, Turkish or both, and to demystify that meaningless notion of living in between the cultures, and he said “I tried to show that the ‘in between’ happens always inside of a person” (Şenocak in Littler 360).

In the following paragraphs I examine Sascha’s tendency to view the past, the present and his identity through the lens of his grandfather’s notes. Also, I will discuss the ways that the history of Turks, Germans, and Jews are represented in Zafer Şenocak's novel Gefährliche Verwandtschaft and in the memoirs that are included in the text. Moreover, I focus on how Şenocak seems to undermine prevailing dichotomies, especially Orient vs. Occident. In the 1990s Şenocak wrote several essays addressing immigration and the relationship between Turks and Germans in Germany. Gefährliche Verwandtschaft can be read as a pendant to his essayistic work. Germans are portrayed in the novel as a part of the Western World, the Occident. Turks, in turn, are characterized by Germans as “oriental.” Şenocak writes in an essay from 1993 that Turkish immigrants have never been viewed as citizens of Germany despite their long residence there but rather as guests, who never fully assimilated (Atlas des tropischen Deutschlands 12). Şenocak emphasizes throughout his work that Turkey straddles, geographically and culturally, the border between Europe and Asia. Time shifted parallels between the minority history of the Jews and the Turks. Şenocak observes that after more than thirty years of Turkish history of migration to Germany, the majority of German society
considers the Turks as “Others,” mainly due to religious difference, in spite of increasing assimilation. Similarly, Sascha expresses the opinion in Gefährliche Verwandtschaft that “the Germans have learned nothing from their history […], now they have brought the Turks into the country although they do not even get along with the Jews” (GV 7). Changes could be brought through a “trialogue between Christians, Jews and Turks,” meaning “between Christians, Jews and Moslems (GV 89), as the German-Jewish-Turkish narrator reflects; for without the Jews, the Turks stand in a dichotomous relationship with the Germans, and thus in the “footsteps of the German Jews of the past” (GV 90). And so in the novel we see Germany divided into Muslims, Christians, and Jews; all of whom are involved in an identity competition instead of identity conjunction. Or maybe the competition will result in a positive merger?

Sascha asks “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the most German among all of us in the country – in Germany” (GV 90)? A resolution of the German-Jewish dichotomy by incorporating the Turks into the constellation, could save both Germans and Jews from their traumatic experiences as well as from the constant guilt discourse. In accordance with German and Turks’ long and relatively quiet common history in the Ottoman Empire to the contemporary presence of Turks in Germany, Germans and Turks should now rediscover the existence of the Jews, not only “as a part of German history, but as part of the present in which they live” (GV 89). The border line between the past and the present is illustrated in many respects as very fragile in the text. Today’s situation has roots in the past. For Sascha, however, history is a very dry matter and even momentous events like the reunification of East and West Germany don’t mean much to him. After the reunification of the East and the West, even as a citizen of Germany born in
Germany, he couldn’t identify with the general excitement and euphoria and felt very excluded. To him nothing changed and people were putting their hopes into illusions: “Irreale Dinge sind in Deutschland genauso viel Wert wie reale” (GV 19). Instead of focusing on “history,” he works his way through the past via the personal memories of his grandfather as portrayed in his memoirs and the ones he embellishes and invents intentionally: “Ich hatte längst beschlossen das Leben von meinem Großvater nicht zu rekonstruieren sondern zu erfinden” (GV 38). For one, he doesn’t understand the memoirs, which are in Turkish written in Cyrillic script; secondly, he might be afraid to know the truth about his grandfather.

Sascha rediscovers his mixed heritage through an experiment with reinventing his grandfather's life history. Sascha’s mother, a Holocaust survivor, hid the history of the Holocaust from him and wanted her son to be only German, in order to facilitate his life and avoid living a life “in between” three cultures and thinking of Germany as a country of perpetrators. His Turkish father, in turn, never insisted on focusing on his Turkish ties. Both of Sascha’s parents died in a car accident. Deprived of access to his Jewish and Turkish heritage, already as a child he asked questions about his multifaceted backgrounds, and he never stopped being interested in his heritage. He even collected hundreds of documents and pictures from the period of National Socialism, building a collection of 520 documents. This way he made up for the lessons about the National Socialism that his mother didn’t want to teach him. After he inherited his Turkish grandfather's notebooks from 1916-1936, he discovered (or perhaps invented) his grandfather’s participation in the genocide of the Armenians in the years 1915-1916. His
identity seems to depend on his understanding of the grandfather, one that the notebooks might challenge.

Sascha doesn’t understand the Cyrillic alphabet well enough to be able to comprehend the content of the notebooks. However, at first he refuses to give them to a translator either. He prefers creating his own version of the history rather than delving into their intimate and maybe incomprehensible details. Even though these are not his own memories that he is analyzing, he can strongly identify himself with them and he needs them in order to deal with the present and the future: “Erinnern ist schmerzhaft. Erinnerung ist die einzige Wunde im Menschen, die sich nie ganz schließt. Dabei ist sie nicht tödlich. Im Gegenteil, die Schmerzen, die sie verursacht, geben dem Leben schärfere Konturen” (GV 47).

Sascha is a writer, and in the process of rewriting the memoirs he slowly invents his identity. However, this activity doesn’t come easily to him, for he doesn’t accept the traditional approach of looking through archives and translating the memoirs. He is an observer, a “translator” of reality and “inventor” of various perspectives. Sascha demonstrates ignorance of the facts, but at the same time he easily gets obsessed with them. Because of his struggle with his hybrid identity, he has a fascination with the history of countries with which he is connected directly or indirectly. Consequently, he collects old maps and analyzes their history and the geographical shifts. This has also to do with how we view national identity: if borders shift and change, so can identities. He wonders how the Turks, Greeks, Armenians, Bosnians, Bulgarians, Assyrians, and Georgians have managed to live together for eight hundred years. In his opinion the problem began when the “foreign teachers” came. Those who experienced the world
started to categorize the nations and draw borders between them. Sascha learns about the “oriental” countries and the history of the Ottoman Empire. When we meet him at first he is disoriented and alienated. He even says: “Man ist wie ein Gast auf der Welt” (GV 18). Since he has lost his family, who might have built the foundation for his identity, he feels like a vagabond in the world, with no center.

Sascha disapproves of viewing history from just one perspective. From his point of view history as we know it from our textbooks is very unilateral. His wife Marie, who is German, produces a documentary movie about Talat Pascha – a Turkish mass murderer. Because she doesn’t have any ties to the Turkish culture, her occupation with and negative representation of Pascha bother Sascha immensely. He is critical of her use of exclusively “Western” sources: “Du drehst einen Film über eine historische Persönlichkeit, die umstritten ist, da musst du verschiedene Perspektiven einnehmen können” (GV 16). His childhood experiences of being deprived access to his own history explains his defense of Talat Pascha and his ambiguous coupling of writing and power relationships. Therefore, Gefährliche Verwandtschaft can be also read as a critique of moral relativism. From the protagonist’s point of view, it is only through creative writing and a broad reading of history that one can approach his hybrid identity. He doesn’t believe in an objective truth and is aware of his subjective view of the world. Zafer Şenocak uses Marie to explore the “true” value of documentary films.

Sascha comments frequently on the triangular relationship between Germans, Jews, and Turks in Germany; and he provides a solution for their improved coexistence. Namely, they have to recognize both their mutual history and their differences, and Germany has to learn from the past and create space for the immigrants in its own
collective. In his collected essays *Atlas of Tropical Germany* from 1993 Şenocak argues against both assimilation and against segregation and ghettoization. Instead, he argues for a perspective of a multicultural society, with full citizenship rights and the acceptance of difference(s), which requires a change in one’s own consciousness and a new definition of identity in terms of postmodern and post-national relationships. In *Gefährliche Verwandtschaft* he admits ironically: “Bekanntlich sind Dreieckbeziehungen am kompliziertesten,” (90) and Sascha is a personification of that statement. And so, Germans, Turks and Jews, are put in the novel into a constellation that works against the usual constellations. Usually Germans and Jews are put together, especially looking at their past experiences, and Germans and Turks, looking at their present “problematic” situation. The connection of Turks and Jews isn’t a common topic for a discussion in contemporary Germany.

Sascha is also pushed to look for his identity by those around him. Even his wife wanted to find an apartment in the multicultural but mostly Turkish neighborhood in Berlin-Kreuzberg, so that he feels “at home” (GV 21). At one point he admits: “Ich hatte keine Identität. Damit hatten die Menschen in meiner Umgebung zunehmend Probleme” (GV 47). Until he is able to describe his identity, people surrounding him will make sarcastic comments about it. Although Sascha’s identity leads him to be skeptical of dichotomies, he recognizes their existence. Sascha then admits that if today the question is asked, who is “the most German” in Germany, one looks at the Turks. They seem to be the “boundary” of being German or not. Yet Jews who want to see themselves as German discover the Turks in the mirror, for they are the most current reflection of German immigrant issues (GV 90): “In Deutschland entsteht jetzt ein Trialog zwischen
Deutschen, Juden und Türken, zwischen Christen, Juden und Muslimen” (GV 89). Each party has to recognize and realize the existence and ties of the other with Germany.

Another striking aspect of Sascha is his status as a grandson of victims, survivors, and perpetrators. He seems to be very interested in portraying Turks in Germany in a negative light. Then, at the end of his experience with the memoirs, from his grandfather’s personal notes, he finds out about his ties to perpetrators of the Armenian genocide. At the same time, he glorifies a cosmopolitan Turkey, where Jews were at home. The fact that he juxtaposes the experiences of the Jews during the Holocaust (or even the entire history of anti-Semitism) with both the discrimination against Turks in Germany and with the Armenian genocide can be viewed as problematic. However, he is working through existing frameworks that see Jews and Turks as victims and Germans as perpetrators. Yet he is German, Turkish and Jewish.

In “Guilt, Victimhood, and Identity in Zafer Şenocak's Gefährliche Verwandtschaft,” Margaret Littler describes the novel as a critique of post-unified Germany, that went from the stage of cosmopolitanism in the seventies to the resurgence of nationalism in the two decades afterwards. The German nation began to suffer in this period from a collective amnesia about the Holocaust. Littler examines the causal relationship between history, integration, and genocide. She argues that people with such a complex background as Sascha’s cannot remain “normal” and become naturally obsessed with their family’s past. The author also explains that with so much unprocessed history (the Turkish government still treats the issue of the Armenian genocide as a taboo topic) on collective and individual levels it is impossible to construct a coherent identity. Can we then be surprised at all that Sascha is advocating for a more nuanced
view? Whereas his parents always rejected talking about the past, he prefers to create the truth, instead of looking for it in the archives. History and collective memory he treats as something one can easily manipulate, suppress and interpret falsely. He prefers collected memory, such as his grandfather’s memoirs, over collective memory as written down in the historical archives, suggesting memory’s inherently fragmented, collected and individual character. Littler views the novel also as a critique of moral relativism. Instead of criticizing the acts of Hitler and Talat Pasha, Sascha justifies them. He sees the problem not in the events themselves but in present times and people’s inability to deal with their past. In an interview in the Berlin Tagesspiegel, entitled “Can we compare Turks and Jews, Mr. Şenocak?” Şenocak suggests that “the dissolution of the ethnically defined historical concept” can bring a relief for Germans historically rather negative self-perception, which is both important for helping shape the future of German immigrants, especially the third generation, as well as for the peaceful development of the nation state (Yeşilada 53).

Gesa Zinn explains in her essay “Identity Narratives in Zafer Şenocak’s Gefährliche Verwandtschaft” that subjectivity shapes Sascha’s selective memory. Zinn identifies three “post-identity” stories (by Sascha, Sascha’s grandfather and that of Germany). Sascha lives with his wife Marie in Berlin, a city in a paradoxical state where the past and present “rub against each other” (GV 68). Marie and Sascha met in the United States, both as teachers, both having the same hometown and speaking the same language. Interestingly, what they also have in common is their mutual fascination with Turkish history. However, Sascha has familial ties to Turkey and creates his own version of that history. His wife in turn doesn’t have anything else in common with Turkey than
an intellectual interest and interprets it also very subjectively. Due to Sascha’s identity crisis a sense of alienation is very much present in both his relationship with Marie and the environment. Sascha even gets a book from a friend explaining how to live as a foreigner in Germany.

In the end Sascha decides to take his grandfather’s notes to a translator who will decipher the Cyrillic script. However, the texts must be sent to another specialist, who is both Orientalist and Slavist: “Die Sprachfähigkeit eines einzigen, mir völlig fremden Menschen könnte die dunklen Stellen in meiner Herkunft aufklären” (GV 116). For Sascha this is the decisive moment in his life. He even says that this one person, the translator will change his life forever and cure his blockage as a writer of hybrid heritage, living in Germany. Moreover, he blames his hybrid, complex and unprocessed identity for not being able to write freely and be a good writer. He has been collecting thoughts that he was writing down for years. He divided them into “Erinnerungen” and “Erfindungen.” However, he was not able to use them, for they were as scattered as his thoughts. Now he knows his grandfather’s story and is able to write his own: “Ich muss in eine leere Wohnung ziehen, die ich langsam mit meinem Leben fülle” (GV 132). After having found out the content of his grandfather’s memoirs, he is ready to start off on a new life.
3.3. **German relations to the Arab World**

Before I proceed to the analysis of Vertlib’s novel, it is essential to take a look at German relations to the Arab World, now and during World War II. In *Germany and the Middle East: Interests and Options* (2002) Volker Perthes presents the results of the work of a study group established at *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* (SWP), the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, in Berlin. It is a project of the group members of the German parliament representing different parties, diplomats, and academics. The aim of this undertaking is to “trigger and enrich the debate in Germany, and between Germans and their international partners, about Germany and the Middle East and about what contribution, if any, can and should be expected from Germany in the region” (Perthes, Foreword). According to Perthes, the Arab perception of Germany is broadly characterised by a certain tension between the disappointment with post-World-War Germany's pro-Israeli stance and a deep sympathy for Germany (129): “Arab thinkers have, for better or for worse, frequently made use of German political philosophy and political ideologies” (Perthes 129). Germany's history and its economic and technological achievements are admired in the Arab world. However, oftentimes, the situation as seen the other way around is totally different: “Germans do not reciprocate the sympathies that the Arab world has for them to the same degree” (129). It doesn’t mean they are entirely disinterested, but the relations are underdeveloped. The German-Arab relationship he calls “A one-sided love affair” (129).

To come to grips with the “Middle East story” in Vertlib, one has to understand the mixture of historical and fictional characters in the novel. Sebastian Heisenberg is a fictional figure. However, his actions can be compared with the biography of Fritz
Konrad Ferdinand Grobba (1886–1973), who is best remembered for being a German diplomat during the interwar period and World War II. Details of his Anglo-Iraqi involvement can be found in Lyman’s *Iraq 1941: The Battles for Basra, Habbaniya, Fallujah and Baghdad* (2006). From October 1932, Dr. Fritz Grobba was assigned as the German Ambassador to the Kingdom of Iraq and was sent to Baghdad. Grobba was speaking both Turkish and Arabic. Oftentimes he touched upon Arab nationalism and expelling the British from the Middle East. He commemorated an Arabic version of Adolf Hitler’s *My Struggle* (*Mein Kampf*) and soon Radio Berlin began its transmission in Arabic. On April 1, 1941, Rashid Ali, Iraqi Prime Minister and members of the “Golden Square” led a coup d’état in Iraq. In the meantime, Rashid Ali’s supporters had been informed that Germany was willing to acknowledge the independence of Iraq from the British Empire. On May 2, 1941, after much tension between the Rashid Ali government and the British, the surrounded forces at RAF Habbaniya under Air Vice-Marshal H. G. Smart initiated pre-emptive air strikes against Iraqi forces throughout Iraq and the Anglo-Iraqi War began (Lyman 60). On May 3, German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop advised Hitler that Dr. Fritz Grobba be secretly returned to Iraq to administrate a diplomatic mission and guide support to the Rashid Ali regime. Grobba was to come back under false name “Franz Gehrke.” Grobba’s assignment was to be sent to Iraq along with a military mission commanded by the High Command in the Armed Forces (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*, or OKW). On May 16, Grobba met in Baghdad with Colonel Junck, Rashid Ali, General Amin Zaki, Colonel Nur ed-Din Mahmud, and Mahmud Salman. The group was in unison with a number of priorities for *Fliegerführer Irak*. Finally, *Fliegerführer Irak* was not successful in making the impact planned by the
Germans. RAF Habbaniya was not taken by the Iraqi ground forces, and whether or not the Germans stopped the British Army flying column Kingcol was not important (Lyman 68). On May 30, Grobbra himself fled Baghdad, and in the end Grobbra successfully escaped to Nazi Europe (Lyman 68).
3.4. Vladimir Vertlib’s *Am Morgen des zwölften Tages* (2009)

Family history, dangerous liaisons, and complicated relationships contained in memoirs is also the main topic of *Am Morgen des zwölften Tages* by Vladimir Vertlib. Here, however, the main character, Astrid, knew and had a close relationship to her grandfather, Sebastian Heisenberg, a respected Orientalist. His memoirs portray his travels in May 1941 together with a German delegation to Baghdad to advise the Iraqis in their uprising against the British, and to expand the Baghdad-Berlin axis. There is more to the story and his mission, however, that hides under the surface of the big picture. Although Sebastian Heisenberg is a fictional character, other figures who appear in the memoirs are authentic. The story shows how German nationalism and Pan-Arabism were related to each other through anti-Semitism and how this common history influences today’s German-Muslim-Jewish relationships. From the perspective of an ordinary woman, a librarian, who lives in a fictional town in southern Germany, Gigricht, and who enters into relationships with Muslim men that end in misfortune, Vertlib touches on stereotypes towards the Muslim community in Germany and Islam’s role in German history as well as Germany in the present time.

Vladimir Vertlib is a Russian-Jewish immigrant, who acquired Austrian citizenship in 1986, lives in Salzburg, and writes in German. Already when he was 14, he wrote a diary, writing down every observation in order never to forget. However, he was also using imagination when making these observations, which suggests his understanding of the very personal and fictional nature of memoirs and diaries. Later on, he translated the notes into German, changing some parts or removing them completely. He used them later as a basis for his first book *Abschiebung* (1995). Published in 2009
Am Morgen des zwölften Tages, it deals with the Muslim minority in Germany, the question of the role of women in Muslim families in Germany, and the constant suspicion of terrorism directed towards Muslim communities. The big topic of the novel is the juxtaposition between the Orient and the Occident in everyday life in Germany, as well as in religion and culture, but also the historic ties between Germany and the Middle East.

Vladimir Vertlib tells the story from a woman’s perspective, Astrid Heisenberg, who was traumatized by an Arab man Adel, and links her story with that of her grandfather. The novel starts off with a provocative scene, where Astrid, a single librarian and mother of a nineteen year old Paula, meets an Arab man who makes her an intimate offer that she accepts immediately: “Gnädige Frau, wären Sie bereit, mit mir zu schlafen?” (Vertlib 7). Astrid has a long-standing fascination for Muslim men. Almost 20 years ago, when she was 19, she met Khaled, the father of her daughter, with whom she spent 11 romantic days and nights. Although she planned a future with him, on the morning of the twelfth day he disappeared, and she never saw him again. She concealed the story of her daughter’s heritage from her, so that she could presumably have an easier identity and life. The “relationship” with Adel doesn’t work out either, for it comes to a “clash of civilizations“ or rather a clash of attitudes when Adel finds out in bed that Astrid has her period, which in his understanding as a Muslim man renders her unclean. Astrid feels hurt again and looks for help in a therapeutic group for women abused by Muslim men, “Weisser Halbmond.”

Anytime Astrid feels disoriented in her life she flees into the basement of her apartment, where she stores the notes she inherited from her grandfather, who infected
her with the fascination for the Orient. Before he died he asked her to take care of and transcribe the memoirs. She is transcribing the war diary of her grandfather, an enthusiastic Orientalist and supporter of the Nazi Regime and ideology. During World War II he worked for the Reich’s Propaganda Ministry and wrote a book in which he presented a “fascist perspective on the world of Islam.” He was hoping for posthumous rehabilitation by his granddaughter, to whom he entrusted his notes from the Anglo-Iraqi War, a war in which the Nazis fought side by side with the Iraqis against the British occupation.

On the one hand the grandfather’s memoirs help Astrid to get distracted from her everyday problems; on the other hand they give her an opportunity to dive into the oriental world that she feels so drawn to. Vertlib says that he created the character of the grandfather after he decided to introduce this historical dimension to the novel. His intention was to historically examine the position of Islam in the Western world and the argument behind Islamophobia as well as stereotypical thinking about Muslim people as fanatics and dangerous terrorists (Schobel, “Berührungsangst Vladimir Vertlib: Am Morgen Des Zwölften Tages”). Interestingly, the further Vertlib went back into the past, the more similarities he found between the two groups, namely the imperialist and racist Germans and those proto-Islamists back in Egypt or Iraq, who through their nationalist and religious rhetoric put their own world in terror (Schobel Schobel, “Berührungsangst Vladimir Vertlib: Am Morgen Des Zwölften Tages”).

The novel has been criticized by literary critics for being overloaded with plot and information through telling two different parallel and content-rich stories, one of a young woman struggling with her private problems and the second one of her grandfather
struggling with his political views. “Words are like a curtain,” says the novel, and so the grandfather sees himself as a “servant of the history that kept him in its mouth” (Vertlib 11). It brings another important question to light: how much choice did he have in his actions? His story is about a Nazi expedition in Iraq during World War II, in which the author applies historical knowledge to create an accurate picture of the Middle East seventy years ago. Astrid’s situation and her grandfather’s memoirs lead to what Vertlib wanted to accomplish: to find the origins of Islamophobia in the juxtaposition of the Orient vs. the Occident in the past and now. Memoirs connect the past with the present and often provide a context for the present problems. For Astrid they also function as therapy and an escape from reality. On the other hand side they seem to be addictive too.

Astrid has many memories from childhood about her grandfather. Their relationship has always been very close and intense. Now as an adult woman she hangs her grandfather’s portrait in a Wehrmacht uniform above her bed. She respects him and at the same time she mentions that you cannot choose your fathers or grandfathers (Vertlib 18). The grandfather was even more important and influential in her life than her mother. As a child she used to flee to her grandfather in order to listen to his oriental stories. During his lifetime he never went into the details of his travels to the Middle East, for he wanted to save the “hard truth” for afterwards and let his granddaughter process his story after his death (Vertlib 76). He only gave her an outline of his adventures and missions abroad, thus always remaining a hero to Astrid. He was a famous and respected leader of the Institute of Ethnology at the university in Girsch. He was a great professor and academic, whose lectures, books, and articles have been remembered and admired for years (Vertlib 31). Allegedly, he was an opponent of National Socialism and an expert of
the oriental world. His first book was about the parallels between Pan-Arabism and the unification movements of Germany and Italy in the 19th century. Ironically, at the end of his life he became a victim of his lack of ideology. He wrote an essay, in which he protected Islam from accusations of Islamism. The grandfather hopes for posthumous rehabilitation by his granddaughter.

The manuscripts written by the grandfather that Astrid stores in the basement of her apartment consist of five hundred pages of notes, reflections and memories, which Astrid inherited in 1988. He was hoping that she would transcribe or rewrite them and maybe publish them at some point. Every time Astrid feels lost, confused or lonely she goes down to the basement and works on the memoirs. This tendency shows how unorganized her life is and how little she is able to cope with the present: “Menschen, die ihre Kellerarbeit ständig aufraeumen, haetten ihr Leben nicht geordnet. Sie stiegen lieber in den Keller hinab als in die Tiefen ihrer Seele” (Vertlib 46). Through organizing, transcribing, reading, and rewriting her grandfather’s notes she has a feeling she is putting her own life into order. One can say they function as therapy, escape from reality, and a means to satisfy her fascination for the Orient. Even though the notes are hard to decode, she continues with the hard work. She starts living through the notes, through her grandfather’s memories: “Die Erinnerung ist manchmal wie ein gutartiger Tumor. Er tötet nicht und hat dadurch viel Zeit um zu quälen” (Vertlib 37).

Her grandfather’s fascination for the Orient, its history and philosophy comes from an encyclopedia he received for his 10th birthday. From then on he was broadening his knowledge about the Arab world and dreaming about traveling it. During World War II, as an expert in the Orient he was responsible for writing reports, providing information
and giving advice during important meetings. Germany assumed the role of a teacher/protector in the Middle East during their mission there, introducing itself as friend of the Arabs and opponent of all the enemies of the Arab world. Paradoxically, Hitler wrote negatively about the Muslims in his book *Mein Kampf* and yet they still praised him as their hero and their hope for a better future (Vertlib 91). If National Socialism played a core role in German collective identity and Arab nationalism in the Muslim collective identity, shouldn’t then the cooperation of both groups, Germans and Muslims in Germany be achievable? The understanding of having a common history and similar experiences in the past can be helpful in building the multicultural Germany today, avoiding the failures from the past and looking into the future. How does Vertlib bring all these topics together on a literary plane?

In his lectures *Spiegel im fremden Wort*, Vertlib discusses various approaches and theoretical topics in his literary career. He comments on the intersection of reality and fiction in his writing: “Die Wirklichkeit erschien mir oft als karge und trockene Oberfläche dessen, was ich als eigentliche Wahrheit hinter der Wirklichkeit zu erkennen glaubte. Es war nicht allzu schwer, zu dieser Wahrheit vorzustoßen. Ich brauchte sie nur erfinden [...] Phantasie war eine ernste Angelegenheit. Manchmal versuchte ich mir vorzustellen, was geschehen wäre, wenn ich in bestimmten Situationen anders reagiert hätte. Dann fügte ich Traumsequenzen oder kleine Zusatzerzählungen ein” (23). And so he writes based on true historical facts with an addition of fiction, which is usually his personal commentary. It is a realistic storytelling, which brings the “collected“ and collective memories together, showing that they are usually interwined, meeting in the “border area“ (Grenzbereich), where Vladimir Vertlib feels at home, in the in-between.
Vertlib comments: “Meine schriftstellerische Heimat ist der Grenzbereich, die Gleichzeitigkeit und das Nebeneinander“ (Spiegel im fremden Wort. Die Erfindung des Lebens als Literatur). This “Grenzbereich”/border area suggests the reality of many immigrants, who in their minds live in between their home country and host country, the past and the present.

In “Poetics of the Gruppenbild: the fictions of Vladimir Vertlib,” Brigit Haines discusses Vertlib’s special ability to transcend boundaries in his works and represent otherness, thus juxtaposing different subjects, time spaces, voices and moods. Very cleverly he connects the present with the past, creating a “group picture“: “the past appears in the light of the present, the present as a mirror of the past and several “time spaces” in a group picture” (Haines 236). The group picture can then be compared with memory and the process of writing history. Namely, the ratio between the collected and the collective memory is important because the one is interpreted through and influenced by the other. It is similar to the group picture, in which ambivalent discourses are put side by side in order to find a compromise. Brigid Haines describes Vertlib’s works as polyphonic texts, the putting together of heterogeneous and incompatible material, suggesting also multiple voices. To see the world as entirety, Vertlib argues, one needs to imagine and see all the content at the same time and then guess its relationship in the cross-section of a single moment (Haines 239).
4. **Conclusion**

If National Socialism is a crucial part of German collective identity, then finding a common ground or looking back at common history and the true integration of immigrants might lead to a positive symbiosis and common collective identity. Vertlib discusses in his novel the difficult relations between East and West; between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam; the confusion between the cultures; and the proximity of love and hate with the help of personal stories. The stories lie in explosive times: the Middle East at a crucial stage of World War II and Central Europe and its Muslim immigrants after September 11, 2001. The potential for conflict is sharpened, both in world politics as well as in personal relationships, here in particular between German women and Muslim men. Şenocak in turn, takes a closer look at the Holocaust and its impact on how Germany sees itself. National history plays a key role in the question of openness to others. He takes this position as one of the currently most important representatives of the second generation of Turkish immigrants in Germany, by asking the central question: “Doesn’t immigrating to Germany also mean immigrating to, entering into, the arena of Germany’s recent past?“ (“Germany- Home for Turks?” 1) In the interview with Tagesspiegel (April 13-14, 1995) Şenocak accused Germans of a conception of history as “ethnic collective memory,” as a “personal experience of the nation,” to which others have no access. History is, to be sure, not only the past. It also represents continuity. Does the labor of remembrance recognize it all? Germans remain tied to the crimes of the Nazis, to the question of guilt, although in place of remembrance we are witnessing rather a “packaging of history,” meaning memorial speeches and rituals (Yeşilada 53). Oftentimes, we hear that it’s time to process the history and put it behind, or that it has
been already processed and put back where it belongs, in the past. In order for the multicultural Germany to function, the history discussions and international relations have to be open and ongoing. It doesn’t necessarily mean a fixation on history. It means normalization in the past-present-future dialogue, common interest for the future, and creating a broader and more flexible definition of collective identity.
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