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# Remembering Višegrad: Memories of Childhood and War in Saša Stanišić's *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone*

In his debut novel *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone* (2015, *Wie der Soldat das Grammofon repariert*; 2006)[1] Saša Stanišić tells the story of young Aleksandar, who is forced to flee from war-torn Višegrad in Bosnia-Herzegovina to Essen in Germany in 1992. He is the son of a Serbian father and a Muslim mother, who experiences a beautiful childhood until the year 1991, when his beloved grandfather Slavko dies. In the same year that the grandfather dies, the carefree old world also ends. In 1992 Višegrad is occupied by the Serbian military forces and ethnic cleansing begins. After he escapes to Germany, Aleksandar must adapt, learn a new language, and establish new roots. When he is settling in, he describes his feelings about his old and new hometowns as follows: "I feel as if one Aleksandar stayed behind in Višegrad and Veletovo by the Drina, and there's another Aleksandar living in Essen and thinking of going fishing in the Ruhr sometime" (S2, 121). Two places that are wide apart in time and space are connected in this quote to illustrate Aleksandar's multifaceted identity, as he feels at home in Essen, but at the same time he wishes to keep alive the memories of his youth and his nostalgic longing for Višegrad. To do that he begins to remember and retell stories in the way that his late grandfather did. These two aspects mean that Stanišić's novel can be read as a story about a lost Bosnian childhood before the Yugoslavian civil war, and concurrently, as a coming-of-age novel that deals with issues of migration and migrant identities in Germany.

When *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone* was first published in Germany in 2006, transnational literature[2] had already been established in German-

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**1** The editions of the novel used in the present article are: Stanišić, Saša. *Wie der Soldat das Grammofon repariert.* Munich: Luchterhand, 2006 (marked with the abbreviation S1 and page number in the text) and Stanišić, Saša. *How The Soldier Repairs the Gramophone.* Trans. Anthea Bell. London: Pushkin Press, 2015 (marked with the abbreviation S2 and page number).

**2** The terms *transcultural* and *intercultural literature* are also used in German, with *intercultural* being the older term. *Transcultural literature* is now more commonly employed, and it is often con-


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speaking Europe as a separate phenomenon. This concept was traditionally applied to authors who, "by choice or because of life circumstances, experience cultural dislocation, follow transnational life patterns, cultivate bilingual or plurilingual proficiency" (Dagnino 2015, 1), and who describe the experiences of cultural minorities and seek cultural synthesis in their writing (Chiellino 2007). Haines (2008, 135) argues that part of that literature has taken the Eastern Turn in recent years. She means by this that the number of authors from Eastern Europe and former Yugoslavia, who have settled in German-speaking countries since the fall of communism or just before it, and for former Yugoslavia since the break-up of the country, has increased substantially. Furthermore, as Isterheld (2017, 149) points out, the writings of these authors quickly became popular because of their engaging, lively storytelling when they present the quite unordinary lives of the migrants. The migration of people from Eastern Europe after 1989 has consequently brought with it the travel of memories, as those migrants brought their stories with them and successfully distributed them in German culture and society through their writing.

According to Haines (2008, 138–139) the transnational literature from Eastern and South-Eastern Europe implicitly projected a collective subject that was united by memories of Soviet and post-Soviet times, and sometimes by a common mission to enlighten and inform Western readers about the history of their Eastern neighbours. This resulted in their works having a large amount of similar stylistic elements, including inventive use of the German language, humour in depictions of the communist past, and the incorporation of cultural stereotypes to illustrate their adaptation to the West and their nostalgic recollections of a childhood before 1989. The authors who migrated from Eastern Europe after 1989 thus not only share common experiences but also employ similar approaches to writing to make their narratives accessible to Western readers, particularly when they write in German instead of their native tongue.

It can consequently be asserted that a new form of transnational memory emerges within the nation state, in this case, Germany, as a shared space, where, as Erll (2011, 11) highlights, different memory forms and practices continuously evolve across temporal, spatial, social, linguistic, and political boundaries. Similarly, Rothberg (2014, 129–130) explains that in contrast to transcultural memory, which merges historical narratives that arise from the intersection of diverse cultures, transnational memory is the remembering of events and experiences at a broader, international level, often involving individuals from various countries

sidered synonymous with *transnational literature.* In this article, the term *transnational* is mainly used as an overarching label encompassing all three concepts.

who share and preserve their collective memories. The influx of new narratives, or what Rothberg terms "new imports of mnemonic material" (2014, 130), therefore generates novel forms of memory through migration, shaping the recollections of both migrants and the residents of the destination country. Given that, Rothberg (2014, 133) then proposes the notion of *thickening* of a place as histories and memories are blended, which facilitates the formation of new cultural linkages that result from migration.[3] Thickening can here be understood as the presence of different transnational layers of memory that may lead people to tell their own personal and unique story using other memories, stories, and models of remembrance that are already in circulation. This in turn can influence what is actually remembered and in which form that memory is presented to a broader audience (De Cesari and Rigney 2014, 12). How migrant authors convey their personal memories might be influenced by the experiences of their fellow migrants and by the new local culture, in our case German. Similarly, they contribute unique perspectives to German literary culture, creating nuanced narratives in their works on specific topics such as historical events.

One constantly recurring motif in the works of Eastern Turn authors is childhood, which is mostly connected to nostalgic memories of a carefree past that builds a contrast to the difficulties of everyday life in a new country. It must be emphasised that the motif of childhood also plays a very important role in German-language literature and culture. The literary approach to childhood as the stage of life when a person's personality and behaviour are formed has been developed in various genres and strands since the time of Goethe. However, the representation of childhood has changed in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, because alongside Goethe's model of childhood idealisation that sees the child as the embodiment of purity, innocence, and serenity (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2005, 166–174), autobiographical literature in German now describes the childhood years as an ambivalent phase of life as well. Moreover, the topic of overcoming trauma, particularly from war, has appeared in literary descriptions of childhood since the late twentieth century (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2005; Vaguet 2019, 9–22). The descriptions of childhood and youth represented in literature are therefore affected by various cultural and collective factors and also by social and political issues (Cardell and Douglas 2015).

In this chapter, I am interested more specifically in autobiographical writing about a past childhood that takes the perspective of the child. The child's perspective can be seen as a separate genre – a type of literature that has a specific form, content and style that are mostly tied to audience expectations (de Geest and van

**3** Rothberg refers to Aydemir and Rotas 2008, 7.

Gorp 1999, 42–44). In literature, the child's perspective can be particularly effective at helping readers to understand and empathise with the experiences of others, especially their experience of war and other catastrophes. The child's perspective might thus be seen as a cultural memorial form, a model of sense-making, which carries certain universal meanings (Erll 2011, 13), makes possible a translation between individuals and groups, and enables empathy for the past of a foreigner.[4]

Stanišić's semi-autobiographical novel *How the Soldier* vividly portrays the harrowing impact of the civil war in former Yugoslavia from the perspective of an adolescent. Stanišić was born in Višegrad, Bosnia and Herzegovina, to a Bosniak mother and a Serbian father, and fled to Germany with his family in the spring of 1992, escaping the horrors of the Bosnian War. Stanišić most probably draws upon his personal experiences in this novel, crafting a poignant narrative that captures the devastating effects of war through the eyes of a child. Recent literary research has often linked *How the Soldier* to transnational literature in German (Aumüller and Willms 2020, vii; Haines 2008, 136–137; Steinberg 2019; Uca 2019). Even though the idea of labelling authors with a migrant background as representatives of their native culture, who serve as intriguing and quite unique additions to the domain of German literature, has been criticised by Stanišić (2008, 193–196) himself among others, Stanišić does indeed deal in this novel with a particular linguistic and cultural situation that is based on his experience of migration (Aumüller and Willms 2020, viii), reprocessing certain shared images and experiences of the socialist past and of the lives of the migrants in Germany (Erll 2011, 12–13). This novel can be read concurrently as a fictional childhood autobiography that is intended to raise the awareness among the readers of certain catastrophic events. Given this, the present chapter examines how Stanišić retells his memories of the socialist past and the Bosnian war through the lens of a childhood story, and how his memory work enriches the narrative landscape, contributing to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of historical experiences, and thereby enhancing the thickening of collective memory in Germany within the literary context.

## Childhood in pre-war Višegrad

This section analyses Stanišić's novel *How the Soldier* as a depiction of Bosnian childhood. It discusses how its composition and the use of certain shared transna-

**4** I would like to thank Anja Tippner for this idea offered as a comment to my paper at the conference "Mnemonic Migration: Transcultural Transmission, Translation and Circulation of Memory Across and Into Contemporary Europe" on 28 April 2022 in Copenhagen. For the idea of the genre as a mnemonic carrier, see also Laanes and Meretoja 2021, 3.

tional images and ways of describing the past in the East might be helpful in making the experience of being a child in pre-war Višegrad more understandable for readers in the West.

This novel can be read as an autobiographical narrative written by the protagonist Aleksandar Kršmanović (Uca 2019, 186). It consists of different stories that form an inconsistent, fragmented assembly. In these loosely connected stories, the narrator Aleksandar recalls different memories and tales from his childhood in Višegrad, and between them appear diverse other texts such as lists, newspaper clippings, school essays or imaginary letters.[5] Lange (2008, 23) notes that a childhood autobiography often has a fragmented structure in which fleeting memory images are shaped in loosely connected small stories, as an outcome of which another, distant, childlike self appears. However, a childhood autobiography usually has little psychological interest in one's own childhood, as it is rather a confrontation with personal or collective contemporary history, presenting an alienated view of the historical and personal circumstances of the past (Lange 2008, 211). Douglas (2010, 20) states that childhood autobiographies are products of and confrontations with the collective ways in which the past is remembered, constructed, and made intelligible within a culture. A fictional autobiography might thus also contain a blend of memory, experience, and real history (Roberts 2002, 140–141). This form of autofiction can be found in numerous examples of German literature (Vaguet 2019, 15–22); more specifically, a number of other works of the Eastern Turn are also composed as collections of loosely connected stories or even anecdotes that together form a complex representation of a topic, such as a depiction of the author's childhood memories (Heero 2009, 222). In this way, Stanišić's account might also reflect real time and events in some detail from pre-war Višegrad that describe events that actually happened to the author himself for example, and provide a perspective that we can use as a source for cultural and historical research as well as for memory studies, even though we are dealing with an autofictional work that interprets historical events through a literary prism (Roberts 2002; Wagner-Egelhaaf 2010, 196–199).[6]

In recollecting the stories of his childhood, Aleksandar sometimes endows life in Višegrad with nearly a mythic quality, as the town appears in *How the Soldier* as a place that hosts nostalgic memories of youth in the form of nostalgic flashbacks, making a "place of longing" (Heero 2009, 217), a feature familiar from the writings

**5** The structure of this novel has been analysed in Previšić 2009, 201–202, and Karpenstein-Eßbach 2010, 34–36.

**6** Contemporary scholarship has increasingly focused in recent years on various types of personal documents and life-writing, including autofictional ones, as the political perspective of late socialism has been replaced by cultural studies, see Mrozik and Tippner 2021, 5.

in German of many transcultural authors. Pre-war Višegrad appears as a construction that exists only in the memories of Aleksandar, as a collection of remembrances of a picture-perfect childhood world, where "everything was all right" (S2, 137), grandpa Slavko was alive, and the boys could go fishing in the Drina river without any obstacles. In the narration, the lost home comes back into existence and telling the story helps to give a palpable shape to the imaginary place of longing. In contrast to the "places of longing", there are also "everyday places" in transnational writing in German, which mostly describe a new home in a new land and try to explain unknown circumstances (Heero 2009, 208). When Aleksandar depicts his everyday life in Germany and his memories about the lost home in Višegrad, the longed-for past and the cruel present therefore blend with one other: "I miss the moody Drina, Asija, apparently there's a river here, it's called the Ruhr, but I don't think just every watercourse that happens to flow along deserves the name of river" (S2, 120). Višegrad in the past can thus be seen as an ideal place, in contrast to life in Essen where Aleksandar's father is forced to work on the black market and where his mother has a backbreaking job in a laundry and "has lost the ability to see things in a good light" (S2, 119). This situation is countered by nostalgic memories of the past as a place of longing and refuge.

It must be noted that the author uses the perspective of the *experiencing I* in the first part of the novel to describe events as they are perceived by Aleksandar and as they unfold in the present of the past (Bal 1997, 19–20). When the young narrator visits the abandoned house after Slavko's death, he shares his immediate reactions: "Grandpa's apartment. I take a deep breath. The kitchen. Fried onions, nothing left of Grandpa. Bedroom. I press my face against the shirts" (S2, 16). The life in Višegrad is also depicted through the tales told by different people who Aleksandar knows from his childhood and whose stories he recounts. There are different voices. Some stories are told by Aleksandar's contemporaries. His friend Zoran for instance recounts how Milenko Pavlović, known as Walross, discovered the adultery of his wife (S1, 93–99). The narrator re-tells stories in his text that have been passed on through communicative memory (Assmann 1988, 10–11; Assmann 2008, 111); he has heard these tales in the past and they are now evoked in the course of the process of remembering that past. Here again, Stanišić has an affinity with other authors of the Eastern Turn such as Wladimir Kaminer and Vladimir Vertlib, who both draw on the oral tradition of telling anecdotes that was widespread in the former Soviet Union (Heero 2009, 222–223).

As Haines (2008) noted, authors from Eastern backgrounds may identify themselves as "ambassadors" of the pre-1989 era. Certain writers, like Kaminer, who are influenced by pop literature may then opt to commodify their cultural knowledge and use exoticism as well as humour strategically as a marketing strategy (Haines 2008, 140). Isterheld (2017, 182–183) shows how cultural clichés are applied on pur-

pose: to entertain the readers, but sometimes also to expose those clichés and national stereotypes. Exploiting such clichés might serve the aim of making the stories about the Soviet past seem more tangible, and hence more marketable, in the literary world of the West (Haines 2008, 139). To some extent this idea also applies to Stanišić. When he describes the exuberant Balkan festivities linked to plum-picking in the village of Veletovo, he uses well-known images as the harvest and the opening of the new privy are celebrated with all the neighbours being summoned (S1, 38), plenty of food laid on (S1, 40 – 41) and a five-man band playing engaging music (S1, 41). Stanišić deliberately employs an exaggerated cliché while simultaneously distancing himself from this image, indicating his awareness of its potentially stereotypical nature by letting Aleksandar's uncle who works in Germany state dryly: "Abroad they think we have parties here the whole time […]" (S2, 26). However, when we read the depictions of Balkan life in Stanišić's account, we sense a certain criticism beneath all the happiness and nostalgia. Haines says that by using the "child narrator, who then matures into a reflective adult, Stanišić peels away the veneer of ethnic harmony in pre-war Bosnia to reveal the deep tensions underneath and the fragility of the provisional order" (2008, 146). The happy party in the plum-picking scene is suddenly interrupted by an armed soldier. This gives a presentiment of the upcoming war and shows how another cruel reality creeps slowly into Aleksandar's world and intimates the horror to come (Rock 2012).

The question of how Tito is evaluated in the pre-war Yugoslav world also arises in the novel. Josip Broz Tito (1892 – 1980) built a very powerful cult of personality around himself, developing his own style of dictatorship called "Titoism" (England 2018, 67). Tito's popularity reached cult status in the 1950s, when it resembled a religious fervour. He meticulously crafted a sophisticated, aristocratic public image, and he was portrayed as a hero in various media. This cult persisted well into the 1980s and Aleksandar's childhood (Perović 2011, 131 – 132; Troncotă 2015, 124; Lazarević Radak 2020, 289 – 290; England 2018, 72, 77– 81). In the post-war Balkans the memories of Tito have led to "Titostalgia", "derived nostalgic images and feelings, 'invented' positive memories and inclinations of individuals and groups" (Velikonja 2009, 299 – 300).

Tito is consequently for young Aleksandar not a dictator, but a mythological, omnipresent figure who continued to live despite his actual and symbolic death. He is everywhere: on television, in films, in festivities and, of course, in educational spaces:

> Tito lived on longest in our textbooks. History, Serbo-Croat, even maths couldn't get along without him. The distance from Jajce to Bihać is 160 kilometres. A Yugo drives from Jajce to

> Bihač at a speed of 80 kph. At the same time Josip Broz Tito is walking from Bihač to Jajce at a steady speed of 10 kph. At how many kilometres from Jajce will they meet? (S2, 61)

Despite this naive and childish view, there is also a subtle criticism of the cult of Tito, presented here from a humorous perspective. To hide the fact that he cannot solve this maths puzzle, Aleksandar thematises its illogicality: "I protested that obviously you couldn't have a Yugo and a Tito on the same road at all, because if our President had wanted to go for a walk, the road would have been closed to everyone else. As a safety precaution, I added, and I for one would have welcomed it" (S2, 61).

Aleksandar shows how critical voices were muted in his childhood, however, without actually commenting on it: "A new teacher once got so angry about Tito's life as told in the history textbook that he could be heard from the corridor, shouting away in the headmaster's office. I am a historian, he shouted, not the presenter of a children's story hour on TV!" (S2, 61). The next day, Aleksandar's grandfather visits the school to call the history teacher to order: "Out in the corridor, we were able to hear my grandpa's voice, but not the historian's" (S2, 62).

Despite the glimpses of oppression, Aleksandar describes his childhood in the communist era as a relatively normal period of life, a feature shared in common with other authors with Eastern European roots writing in German. The political element and the criticism of the circumstances of the era are not excluded from the texts, but they are somewhat softened by the child's perspective. Svetlana Boym's concept of "reflective nostalgia" (2001, 41–50) might be relevant here, as Kodzis-Sofińska (2021, 247–248) has applied it to early works by Wladimir Kaminer. Reflective nostalgia dwells on longing and loss, and the imperfect process of remembering. It can be ironic and humorous, but it is different both from restorative nostalgia that aims to rebuild the past and from the "Ostalgia" that is often associated with aestheticisation of socialist reality (Kodzis-Sofińska 2021, 246). Reflective nostalgia combines longing with critical thinking. In the context of Kaminer's work for instance, the humorous, nostalgic, and exaggerated depictions of Soviet life are replaced by clear criticism of the "East" in his later novels such as *Uncle Wanja Comes* (*Onkel Wanja kommt,* 2012) (Kodzis-Sofińska 2021, 247–257; Kaminer 2012, 5–16). A similar approach can be seen in Stanišić's work. Nostalgia prevails in *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone*, but there is also a gentle, covert critique of the socialist system. Višegrad as the "place of longing" is presented in a fragmented form, with different voices and stories from the communicative memory used alongside the immediate perspective of young Aleksandar. In Stanišić's novel *Where You Come From* (2021, *Herkunft,* 2019) however, we see less of other peoples' perspectives or of stories circulating in the communicative memory. The focus of the narrator is on his personal memory and his family history,

which functions as a medium for critical observations of Yugoslavian history (Stanišić 2019, 11–35).

The representation of a Bosnian childhood in Stanišić's *How the Soldier* draws both on the local, German, literary tradition of using the child's perspective, and on the transnational, Eastern European, memories circulating in the German-speaking literary scene. By doing this, the novel becomes a transnational text that transcends both geopolitical and transcultural boundaries. It effectively merges with the stories of other migrant authors from the Eastern Turn, creating a hybrid narrative that enriches the German-speaking literary landscape. Taking Rothberg's concept of thickening (2014, 136), "thickening the text" in the context of Stanišić's novel signifies the process where the narrative becomes more complex and multilayered by incorporating diverse perspectives and memories, by interweaving local and transnational literary traditions with migrant experiences from the Eastern Turn, and by blending personal experiences with German frameworks both literary and commemorative.

## Višegrad during and after the war

The next section examines how the Višegrad massacres in 1992 are depicted from the viewpoint of a child in Stanišić's novel, and how the immediate perspective of a child might differ from a distant view of an adult. It also discusses how certain transcultural memorial forms and templates, such as references to Holocaust memory and its well-known motifs such as "writing against disappearance"[7], are deployed to portray the catastrophic events in Višegrad.

The attacks in Višegrad by Serbian paramilitary troops began on 6 April 1992, but the situation escalated after 19 May 1992 when Serbian armed forces attacked and destroyed a number of Bosnian Muslim towns and villages. Hundreds of civilians in Višegrad were killed in random shootings. Every day people were shot on the famous bridge on the Drina and their bodies were dumped into the river. Many of the Bosnian Muslims were arrested and detained. The Serb soldiers raped many Muslim women, and beat and terrorised non-Serb civilians. There was widespread looting daily and non-Serb homes and property were destroyed together with the two Bosnian Muslim mosques in Višegrad (*United Nations International Criminal*

7 "Writing against disappearance" [S*chreiben gegen das Vergessen*] refers to a series of artistic and educational projects in Germany and Austria to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust and raise awareness about the dangers of fascism, racism and antisemitism. The exact origin of this term cannot be specifically attributed as it has become a widely recognised concept in literature and cultural discourse.

*Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia*; *Višegrad Genocide Memories*; Vukušić 2021, 66 – 67).

The Višegrad massacres are depicted in the first half of the novel through the baffled eyes of a sensitive child, and through his spontaneous, immediate descriptions of various events and his somewhat naive comments. The perspective of the child switches in the second half of the novel, which now looks to preserve and convey memories from the detached and analytical viewpoint of an adult. In the beginning, the war is something distant for Aleksandar and his friends. They know what is happening as they observe how the adults listen to the news of the war on the radio (S1, 107), but they are not yet aware of all the horror. However, war and violence are soon a part of their everyday life. The children quite naturally integrate everyday events into their activities as Aleksandar and his friend play war games, including acting out the gruesome attacks of Serbian soldiers (S1, 103 – 105). As the Serbian paramilitaries march in, we see the outbreak of brutality, shooting and killing through Aleksandar's eyes in fragmented but very detailed images or even photographic impressions of various events that border on flashbulb memories delivering a good recall of the details because of the personal impact of the dramatic scenes. The details of a flashbulb memory are remembered particularly well because there is a link between the personal history of the person remembering and world "History" (Roberts 2002, 136). Aleksandar's flashbulb memories are thus very vivid and enduring, picturing his experiences in great detail. Interestingly, the visual impact of the images in his memory is amplified through his sense of hearing, as there is almost never silence in the images of wartime Višegrad but constant noise from the war, the noise of shooting, shouting, rampaging, swearing, and screaming. Moreover, the violence is often accompanied by music, and Aleksandar mentions in his account the loud singing of the Serbian soldiers (S1, 119). Serbian troops under the command of Milan Lukić often moved around in Višegrad in broad daylight in vehicles with music blasting from their cars (Vukušić 2021, 75 – 76). The presentation of these memories gives the impression of these pictures being immediate, describing what Aleksandar as an "experiencing I" instantly saw, heard, and felt (Bal 1997, 19 – 20).

In the description of the violent invasion of the Serbs, we perceive the narrator's anger, his instinctive desire to resist, and his helplessness. Aleksandar witnesses Serbian soldiers celebrating after taking the town by drinking alcohol, singing, and dancing, and by repairing a looted gramophone, which is described as an act of violence:

> He's dragging a gramophone along behind him, he's taken hold of it by its horn and lifts it over the threshold as if taking a goose to be slaughtered [...] The victor with the biggest

> head in the world puts the pick-up arm on the record, but nothing happens. Don't you dare! he shouts, hitting and kicking the gramophone. (S2, 100)

When the gramophone is up and running, the party begins; at the same time, a war rape is committed:

> The soldier with the gold tooth sings along too, the one who wanted warm bread, the one who held Amela's hands in his and tipped them into the dough. He comes out of Amela's apartment, the song on his lips, his shirt unbuttoned. Amela is kneeling behind him with a veil of wet hair over her face. (S2, 101–2)

Aleksandar does not comprehend everything, as he naively thinks that the soldier visited Amela to get some bread, but he instinctively feels that what is going on is wrong, unjust, and devastating. He wants to help but is not able to do so: "If only I were a magician who could make things possible. I'd give objects the gift of defiance; banisters, gramophones, guns, the napes of necks, braided hair" (S2, 102).

Young Aleksandar intuitively perceives the horror but cannot really put it into words. Moreover, he seems to try to fit it into his concept of normal in some way. When he and his friend see the heap of defiled class diaries in the destroyed school building, they don't think about the damage caused by the war; instead, they want to find out what grades they got in the oral exam for Russian. Looking at the diaries smeared with faeces they settle for a mark of four in the written part of the exam, "which is kind of alright" (S2, 104). Such scenes in the novel have been interpreted as comic, as Uca for instance argues that one of the key reasons for Stanišić's popularity is his use of humour in his portrayal of trauma, a common theme in both Bosnian and German contemporary culture. Humour in its various forms, especially dark humour, may provide a welcome break from the monotony of trauma and may be a political statement in its own right (Uca 2019, 188–189). This argument seems to hold only partially as we also seem to be dealing with the incompatibility of the perspectives of the adult and the child here. The view of an adult is deliberative, but a child's account consists of more incoherent, photographic memories. A very young narrator consequently does not usually contemplate what they see in these photographic images that are stored directly in their memory (Assmann 2006b, 131, 145). This sincerity and naive directness may seem comic or entertaining for adults but it hides the darker side of an unprocessed experience within it.

When Stanišić describes the devastated city through Aleksandar's eyes, he often uses pictures or vocabulary connected to well-known images from the Second World War. When he comments on the destruction of his school by the Serbian troops for example, Aleksandar notes: "The way our school looks, we won't be

needing those [pencil sharpeners] again" (S2, 104). In the middle of what had been the teacher's room Aleksandar and his friend observe "[…] mountain of red volumes, shabby class registers. […] [T]here's a huge pile of dried shit on top of the mountain, with two flies making rectangles above it" (S2, 104). The motif of the heap of tattered books may echo the book burnings by the Nazis in 1938, evoking the uncivil nature of the act of demolishing libraries and books in general. As the books in Višegrad are class diaries, this image can also be interpreted as the deliberate destruction of an archive and hence of a collective memory (Brunow 2015, 37–38). Several libraries, including Bosnia's National and University Library and the Sarajevo Oriental Institute were shelled and burned by Serbian forces in 1992. Riedlmayer (1995, 7–8) notes that libraries holding documents of Muslim heritage were targeted for destruction in an attempt to eliminate the material evidence of the existence of the different ethnic and religious traditions that were once shared as a common heritage in Bosnia. This attitude is also evident in Stanišić's novel where the class diaries are not burned but rather defiled, which is an even worse fate. Another example of the use of such images is Rabbi Avram's story of the destruction of a synagogue, most probably the one in Višegrad (S1, 100–102). In this story, the property of the synagogue is thrown into a lake and the rabbi is tortured and humiliated. The Višegrad synagogue was built in 1904–5 but was plundered in 1940 by German troops who turned it first into a storeroom and then into a stable for their horses. This story told by Rabbi Avram can be seen as an example of communicative memory, which is created through everyday interaction and has the historical experiences of contemporaries as its content (Erll 2005, 113). Moreover, the Rabbi's narration is placed immediately before the description of the entry of Serbian troops into Višegrad. Stanišić is thus using a story from the Second World War to illustrate another war that is taking place fifty years later, loading both these events with the same severity.

It should be noted here that Rabbi Avram's story can be seen as an additional layer in the evolving cultural and traditional remembrance of the Holocaust in Germany, helping thicken the collective memory in the context of memory and migration. As Rothberg explains, the *Neighbourhood Mothers project*, which was held in 2009 in Berlin to involve female Muslim immigrants in learning about Holocaust remembrance in Germany, showcases how immigrants engage with Germany's past not in order to integrate or conform, but to establish their own identity in relation to a national history that is marked by violence against others. Through collaboration with non-immigrant partners, these initiatives create new, culturally rich memories that blend local and global influences, and challenge conventional models of collective memory by breaking free from nation-state boundaries (Rothberg 2014, 134–142). In his novel, Stanišić skilfully interweaves Aleksandar's personal experiences with collective memories. Notably, including the Rabbi's story

not only makes the novel richer and deeper, but also makes a bridge to connect the individual ordeals of the characters to a broader, transnational historical framework, drawing parallels between the experiences in Višegrad and the Holocaust. This narrative technique beautifully embodies the essence of Rothberg's concept of thickening (2014, 134–142), where memories are layered, resulting in an account that delves deeper into the understanding of both personal and collective pasts.

Another motif that is relevant for Stanišić in this context seems to be the idea of "writing against disappearance". In German-language literary studies this motif is usually found in texts that strive to stop the past being forgotten and trauma suppressed (Tippner 2004, 74), and that are mostly autobiographical or autofictional prose by or about Holocaust survivors that aims to keep the memory of the Shoah alive. Today, the term is also used for various educational and art projects that serve to commemorate the Holocaust.[8] However, the idea has also been adapted for writings that deal with traumatic losses in other historical circumstances and with ways to prevent them being forgotten or suppressed.[9] The motif appears in Stanišić because in his account Aleksandar passes on what he perceived in 1992 in Višegrad. As Assmann (2006a, 263) notes, this kind of narrative focuses less on describing concrete events and more on telling what it felt like to be in the centre of those events. Aleksandar shares how he experienced war and violence as a child, providing very personal insights and, concurrently, targeting the strategies and impulses of forgetting and denying.[10] The child's view thus fits well for describing the events in Višegrad in May 1992 and thereafter, as the child witness simply tells the truth as he knows it without any adornments and emphases on the entire horror he experienced. In this regard, Stanišić's novel can be seen as a memory site for Višegrad, which is often overshadowed by other, better-known locations like Srebrenica (Viejo-Rose 2013, 133).

Familiar images appearing in Stanišić's novel like a ruined library or a demolished synagogue could be seen as him employing transcultural memorial forms. These forms, as described by Laanes (2021, 43), serve to express and comprehend

**8** The artist Margarete Rabow for instance has developed a memorial campaign in which many people can take part. The names of the victims of the Shoah in a city, a region or an entire country are written on the floor in a public space with white school chalk, and the action is streamed live and documented on film. See Rabow 2020 and *Schreiben Sie mit!* (no date).

**9** A French-German cooperation project "Rwanda–Ecrire par devoir de mémoire" (in German "Ruanda – Schreiben gegen das Vergessen") for example, dealing with the depiction of the genocide in Rwanda in the literary works of African authors. See for example Kopf 2010.

**10** The issue of denying war crimes is still relevant in the present day since there is enduring discussion about guilt and the diverging visions of what happened in Bosnia in the 1990s. See David 2020.

novel and challenging experiences; they can be seen as a tool for cultural translation that enables individuals both to grasp their own experiences and to convey those experiences effectively to others (Laanes 2021, 44; Assmann 2006b, 187–188). Erll has explored the concept of "mnemonic forms" (2011, 13–14), such as symbols, icons, or patterns of memory, that enable repetition and carry significant meaning, and are an aid in interpreting new and different experiences. Stanišić employs these memorial forms through his young narrator, Aleksandar, to confront and comprehend the horrors of the past. This dual purpose aids Aleksandar in processing his trauma while providing a relatable framework for understanding the collective devastation in Višegrad. By sharing his experiences, he lets readers empathise with the impact of war and displacement, thereby contributing to a broader and more profound understanding of the past.

Alongside the use of memorial forms connected to the Second World War there are certain other transcultural motifs that are understood in many cultures around the world. The cruelty of the invaders is shown in a scene where Aleksandar and his friend witness the soldiers shoot at a dog for entertainment, betting who can hit it more accurately (S1, 122). Animal cruelty is often seen as a predictor of future violence against human beings, including crimes of assault, rape, murder, and arson (Hovel and Macias-Mayo 2018). The scene of extreme violence on a smaller scale against a much weaker being without a voice of its own predicts the violence to come against human beings on a much larger scale. As the scene is set at the very beginning of the Bosnian war, it implies the future progression of the war; later in the same chapter a horse is shot and his owner humiliated, showing how the violence escalates very quickly.

Stanišić alludes to historical events by using fascinating references to world literature or to well-known cultural concepts. The entrance of the Serbian forces into Višegrad for instance is presented using the vocabulary of a wedding procession: "Outside, a wedding party broke the silence, hooting horns. […] Bearded bridegrooms in camouflage jackets and tracksuit trousers drove past. Cross-country vehicles hooted, heavy trucks hooted. An army of bearded bridegrooms drove by, shooting at the sky to celebrate taking their bride, our town" (S2, 90–1). The imagery of the town being likened to a bride with the Serbian troops as bridegrooms celebrating their conquest might portray a nationalistic understanding of the country as a woman to be won, emphasising the symbolic connection between the nation and its land, which is often depicted in gendered terms. This image may furthermore represent the violation of the town, or the bride, by the invading forces, highlighting the brutality and sexual violence that often accompanies wartime occupations (Laanes 2021, 49–51). This scene can also be read as a more specific reference to the Sarajevo Wedding Attack on Sunday 1 March 1992, which is commonly referred to among Bosnian Serbs as the Bloody Wedding.

On that occasion, a Bosnian Serb wedding procession in Sarajevo's old Muslim quarter of Baščaršija was attacked, resulting in the death of the father of the groom and the wounding of a Serbian Orthodox priest. The attack took place on the last day of the referendum on the independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina from Yugoslavia and is sometimes interpreted as one of the events that caused the civil war to escalate (Troncotă 2015, 125).

The strategic use of memorial forms, familiar cultural symbols, and the concept of "writing against disappearance" in literature not only facilitates understanding but also serves as a powerful tool for confronting historical traumas. Stories like Aleksandar's might then encourage dialogue and understanding between different communities and perspectives, and help in exploring paths toward reconciliation, addressing questions of justice, forgiveness, and coexistence. In the second part of the novel, which takes place about ten years after the escape from Višegrad, Aleksandar re-writes his story about his childhood and the story of the war. This process can equally be seen as a reappraisal of what happened in 1992, and as an attempt to find a way to reconciliation.[11] Interestingly, Aleksandar's earliest memories are once again given as photographic images of various occasions such as state festivities (S1, 167), fishing with neighbours (S1, 182), playing chess, and talking to grandpa Slavko (S1, 186). However, Aleksandar as an adult also remembers, next to the beautiful moments, the events that testify to the underlying hostility, like the brutal exclusion of Francesco, a foreign engineer, who was suspected of being gay (S1, 188–96).

To find out what really happened, Aleksandar eventually begins a Google search on 11 February 2002 about the events in Višegrad on 6 April 1992, intending to reconstruct the facts (S1, 212). In the process, more and more memories resurface and the boundaries between probability, truth, and fiction become blurred. For this reason, Aleksandar decides to go back to Višegrad to reassess his memories and to find an "objective" truth (Rock 2012, 6–7). In Višegrad, he finds that people have been marked by the war in different ways. His visits to familiar places activate more and more painful memories, but at the same time, Aleksandar feels a growing desire to reconcile. This is once again expressed in the various stories contained in Aleksandar's second account (Oberpfalzerová, Ullrich and Jeřábek 2019, 5–6), which can be seen as a conscious reconstruction of memory in interaction with others (Assmann 2006b, 123). To show that one injustice cannot be ruled out by another for instance, he tells a story from his friend Kiko about

**11** In recent years several projects, promoting storytelling by the victims of the Bosnian war as a way to find empathy as well as to reconcile with the traumatic past have started. See Oberpfalzerová, Ullrich and Jeřábek 2019, 14–15.

the games of football played by Serbian and Bosnian soldiers on the battlefield during a ceasefire (S1, 232–53). Even though reconciliation is a long process for him, he is taking the first step by simply accepting that, like the water of the Drina river, time cannot run backwards (S1, 311–12). Integrating diverse memorial forms like well-known images and the child's perspective, common motifs like "writing against disappearance", and thickening narratives with shared cultural symbols in literature can therefore not only enrich the storytelling experience and deepen the reader's understanding of the past, but can also foster understanding, empathy, and reconciliation.

## Conclusion

The migration of people from Eastern Europe to Germany after 1989 brought not only their physical presence into German culture and society, but also their stories and memories through the literary accounts. Issues of identity, belonging, migration, and memory are central to many of these works and resonate with readers who have experienced similar challenges in their own lives or in the past of their nations. These memories then travel and transform over time and space, and are shaped by individual and collective experiences as well as by their cultural contexts.

The German literary landscape has in recent decades emerged as a significant platform for Eastern European memories, contributing to the thickening of the cultural context as defined by Rothberg (2014). In this chapter, the concept of thickening has been examined as a process that involves the integration of various transnational layers of memory into a specific cultural context. Thickening thus transforms the way that stories are woven, enhancing their depth and breadth by incorporating a multitude of perspectives and memories.

Stanišić's novel *How the Soldier* provides a compelling example of the impact of thickening on personal storytelling and cultural memory. The novel is an illustration of mnemonic migration as it portrays in German the experience of a young boy forced to flee his war-torn hometown in Bosnia and seek refuge in Germany. Stanišić weaves personal experiences together with collective memories of the Bosnian war, Holocaust memory, and Eastern European history and culture. To bring Aleksandar's story closer to German readers, Stanišić applies different literary conventions and transcultural memorial forms that can provide a means of understanding and a way of representing historical events and transcultural experiences. The most important of those is the perspective of the child, as Aleksandar's story is mostly told from the point of view of a child. A child's perspective is easy to understand in different cultures because the emotions of a child and

their reactions to war, violence, or displacement are often similar across different cultures and contexts. The child's perspective can thus help to bridge the gap between different societies by delivering insights about complex historical events. Additionally, memorial forms linked to Holocaust memory in German-language culture are used to explain Aleksandar's experiences in Višegrad in 1992, such as "writing against disappearance". Blending these diverse elements in the novel creates a layered and multifaceted narrative, reflecting the historical and cultural influences on individual storytelling. Stanišić's *How the Soldier* is thus an example of mnemonic migration as it tells a historically specific personal story that crosses linguistic, national, and cultural boundaries.

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