

Shared memory? Young Muslims and the history of the Holocaust in Germany.

A memorial project by Burak Yilmaz

A case study by Sophia Isabel Baur

1. Introduction

This case study deals with the topic of antisemitism among young Muslims in Germany and especially in Duisburg, North Rhine-Westphalia. Many of these young people who grow up in a migration environment face a so-called memory conflict between their family narratives and their socialisation through the German education system. This difference is particularly evident when it comes to dealing with anti-Semitism in German history education and traditional hostility towards Jews in Muslim communities.

Taking this fact into account, my case study touches various levels of research and analysis: I will outline them before I deal with the special core of my case study, the memorial project *Young Muslims in Auschwitz* initiated by Burak Yilmaz in Duisburg in 2012. In his project, Yilmaz tries to overcome anti-Semitic narratives by doing educational work with young Muslims and raising awareness about the issue of anti-Semitism in his community.

Memorial sites, so tells us a well-known definition, are authentic places that witness history and help to create a collective memory (cf. Assmann 2008). By opening these sites to the public, they help to bring the past to mind and ask how to learn from the past for the future and take responsibility. In this context, the project *Young Muslims in Auschwitz* will be used to investigate whether visiting memorials such as Auschwitz can help to break down traditional anti-Semitic narratives from Muslim family traditions in Germany. In addition, the case study attempts to shed light on whether memorial site tours help to promote dialogue about heritage and to understand it as a common heritage shared by all Germans or all people living in Germany and feeling as Germans.

Given that sensitive communication becomes very important here, the case study proposes that specific educational work with cultural heritage can help to reflect on different narratives such as family or national memories. In this way, cultural heritage can even help young people with an immigrant background to develop a transcultural identity. On the other hand, if conflicting narratives about family or national memories are not addressed, young migrants are often unable to build a sense of belonging to the country in

which they live. In this case, the cultural heritage of the families and that of the receiving countries is not harmonized but perceived as a contradictory heritage.

In this case study, I take a closer look at the prevention of an anti-Semitic development within the young Muslim community in Germany. Today, anti-Semitism can still be present, and this presence can arise from their perspective because of the built up enemy images as mentioned above. Anti-Semitism among Muslims is a present concern that largely originate in the Middle East conflict. Even today, many Jews around the world are blamed for Israeli politics in the Middle East conflict (cf. Deutscher Bundestag 2011). Here it becomes clear that only an appropriate and neutral mediation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in an educational setting can help to prevent anti-Semitism.

At this point it is important to say that the migration society in Germany can be described as very heterogeneous and cannot simply be lumped together. Muslims from Arabic and Palestinian society have great reservations and prejudices against Israeli Jews because they hold them responsible as perpetrators in the conflict between Israel and Palestine. This form of anti-Semitism can be summarized up as Israel-related anti-Semitism in which Israeli politics are criticised by associating them with anti-Semitic stereotypes (cf. Hößl 2020). Methodologically, my case study focuses on analysing sources like the website of Burak Yilmaz, film clips available on YouTube and an expert interview with Burak Yilmaz, recorded during the students' workshop of our project in August 2020. Apart from my primary sources, I use secondary literature to embed my results.

2. Young Muslims in Germany: national versus family memory

There are many theoretical approaches to researching and describing memories, which is why it is necessary to select from them specifically. One of the best-known researchers in Germany is Aleida Assmann, who works a lot in the field of the collective memory (cf. Assmann 2018, 2016, 2014, 2013). In terms of the case study, it is important to gain an understanding of terms like concepts such as the national and the family memory within the German migration society. Assmann describes family memory as "[...] an important but still largely underestimated part of world history who enables new approaches to it" (Assmann 2007, p. 90; my translation). Memories are shared within families over many generations and the descendants build empathy towards their relatives' past and therefore adopt their views on certain topics (cf. Assmann 2007). It is important to note that a

family memory is based on handed-down personal narratives, which often receive an individualized description in the tradition. In contrast, national memory as a form of collective memory is based on a larger entity such as that of the country of immigration. Collective memory is concerned with "memory processes and examines the memory of or in groups." (Moller 2010, p. 85, my translation). This memory is shared through institutions or corporations that "use memory signs and symbols, texts, images, rites, practices, places and monuments" (Assmann 2008, my translation). It is based on historical reference points that represent it – or in a mythicizing or in a trauma reprocessing form. In this sense, a national memory "no longer has any involuntary moments because it is intentionally and symbolically constructed. It is a memory of will and calculated choice" (Assmann 2008, my translation).

What does this theoretical distinction mean for this case study? A lot of the young Muslims who participated in Yilmaz' project live in Duisburg-Marxloh where the proportion of migrants count about 76% (cf. Stabsstelle für Wahlen und Informationslogistik 2020). Many of the immigrated Muslim families in Duisburg-Marxloh, a so-called deprived area, live in a very small environment in which they experience traditional or religious worldviews (cf. Postel 2018). In this small environment, they pass their cultural values and family memories which, even in the third or fourth generation, contribute to the forming of a cultural identity that differs significantly from that of the host country and is oriented towards the tradition of their family's country of origin.

In Duisburg in particular, this structure can be seen in some neighborhoods which are often characterized by poverty due to the rising unemployment rate in Duisburg since the 1970s, which was caused by a structural change through the steel crisis. These neighborhoods are home to Turkish people, former guest workers who mostly remain among their own kind (cf. Yilmaz 2020). The proportion of foreign residents in Duisburg was more than 50% of the total population at the end of 2019 (cf. Stabsstelle für Wahlen und Informationslogistik 2020). It can be assumed that due to the high number of immigrants in Duisburg, it is possible to speak of a social problem proceeding from an individual itself. This problem has also its origins in societal parameters such as social tolerance, acceptance and legal framework conditions. Even though most of the Muslim citizens in Duisburg-Marxloh are descendants of guest workers from Turkey, some of them also come from the Middle East. As Kurds or Arabs, they have experienced flight and expulsion. Young Muslims with such a background grow up in Germany with a family memory

that preserves these experiences as traumas, but also as very old stereotypes such as anti-Semitism. They influence the cultural identity formation of many young Muslims (cf. Yilmaz 2020).

At the same time, young Muslims of the second, third or fourth generation, born and raised in Germany, learn German history in school. However, to this day, the representations of German history in many textbooks still refer to the ethnically or territorially defined German nation and do not sufficiently reflect the fact that Germany has become a country of immigration since 1945. This leads to fewer opportunities for students with migrant background to identify with German history and sometimes even to exclusionary mechanisms, such as in the case of the Holocaust: children with a migrant background are not always able to follow the narrative of a collective German responsibility for the Holocaust - often their shared (family) history with the country does not begin until after 1945. In addition, history teachers are not always sufficiently sensitized to address students with a migration background in their classrooms: "Cultural heterogeneity plays a rather subordinate role in history lessons." (Völkel 2017, p. 7, my translation). History didactician Bärbel Völkel believes that different origins can lead to conflicts that can be addressed by culturally sensitive history teaching (cf. Völkel 2017). Thus, history school lessons sometimes reinforce identity conflicts instead of resolving them through education. Nevertheless, German migration researcher Naika Fouroutan emphasizes that more and more people with a migration background claim a belonging to German culture and a collective German identity. It is to be done through a "[...] symbolic, identifying and cultural" participation in the central goods and resources of society in which one's own socio-cultural backgrounds want to be represented (cf. Fouroutan 2019, p. 16f., my translation). This demand is articulated especially by young Muslims who want to be considered in the German community and its memory with their own transcultural Germanness (cf. Fouroutan 2019, p. 16f). Fouroutan's research and Assmann's categories lead me to two observations: First, young Muslims with an immigrant background are often confronted with a social history that makes it difficult for them to define their own affiliation. Secondly, young Muslims sometimes live with stereotypes from family memory that additionally shape them. This is where the project *Young Muslims in Auschwitz* initiated by Burak Yilmaz comes in. His project, which is now being presented, is based on the problem of the conflicting narratives of family and social memory for many young Muslims.

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3. Burak Yilmaz' memorial project *Young Muslims in Auschwitz* (2012ff.)

Burak Yilmaz, born in 1989, grew up in Duisburg-Marxloh which is a very diverse neighborhood. He studied German philology and Anglistics in Bochum, graduated with a Bachelor of Arts and works since then in Duisburg as a pedagogue in schools and youth centers as well as a conductor of a theatre group called *Die Blickwandler* (Yilmaz, n.y.). Furthermore, he is committed as a pedagogue in the center for commemorative culture in Duisburg (Yilmaz, n.y.). His focus is on the field of anti-Semitism, racism and memory culture in the social environment for multiplier education by young Muslim migrants of the second, third or fourth generation in Germany (Yilmaz, n.y.), and he tries to create an exchange within these groups. He is also committed to creating more awareness for opening up the culture of remembrance within the migration society. Furthermore, Yilmaz tries to connect the events during National Socialism with the local history of Duisburg and to convey the destruction of Jewish communities during the Holocaust. In this way, familiar places take on new meaning for the young people and history becomes tangible.

Yilmaz initiated his project *Young Muslims in Auschwitz* in 2012 while he was working in the club *Public Youth Work* in Duisburg where he had a lot of discussions with young Muslim in the age from 16 to 20 years. The male teenagers came from Turkish, Kurdish or Arabic immigrant families now living in Duisburg Marxloh. They have different perspectives on memorial sites like Auschwitz which are linked to mixed feelings between anger and grief (cf. Alexiou 2019). Having conversation with the teenagers, he discovered their deep struggles with the question of their identity and, in particular, whether or not they can call themselves German (cf. Yilmaz 2020). For Burak Yilmaz, the moment of enlightenment to initiate the project was the experience of a youth who was not allowed to participate in a field trip with his classmates to visit a concentration camp:

There I had a lot of discussions with men about the topic of identity, manhood, different views on sexism, equality and within these conversations about manhood. There was always the part of what is our identity, are we Germans or who is allowed to be a German. Some youngsters came from school and told me their teachers are going to visit a concentration camp and told them that they can't go with them because they are Turkish and Auschwitz has nothing to do with them. (Yilmaz 2020)

The family memory can also have an exclusionary character if traditional behaviour and value codes are incorporated into the identity formation of young Muslims in Germany. The concept of honour and masculinity which they deal with in their everyday lives, also derives from this memory. It is considered honorable to be dominant, and the use of violence is permitted for this purpose. "Antisemitism is also something honourable between them. If you show empathy you seem weak." (Yilmaz 2020). Honor is particularly important for the young people because its loss affects their strong male identity.

The project idea of *Young Muslims in Auschwitz* takes up all these aspects. But how to get to the teenagers? Yilmaz began by talking to them about their family memories, family stories and their biographies. In the process, he found out "that there is a huge desire within the young Muslims to talk about topics like antisemitism, racism and sexism because in our education system these topics don't have that place to reflect on them" (Yilmaz 2020). He also began to talk about cultural differences through socialization and existing Jewish prejudices. "I have worked in migrant families who are super liberal, educated but I also had youngsters who learned the Charta of the Hamas when they were young and learned about all the religious fanaticism which is linked to it." (Yilmaz, 2020) During this work, Yilmaz learned about a wide variety of socialization of the Muslim community.

On the other hand, many Germans have a one-sided view of Muslims in Germany, often with negative associations. "If we talk about Muslim communities in Germany, it is really a one-sided discourse, always linked to violence or negative things." (Yilmaz 2020). For the project, it was therefore important to leave both perspectives – the migrant one and the perspective of the host country – out of the equation in order to create a new open space for discussions about experiences, In this space, young people could deal with different challenges, such as those of being German *and* Muslim, or to live a successive change in values between older and younger migrant generations (cf. Yilmaz 2020).

The memorial project *Young Muslims in Auschwitz* therefore combines different approaches and questions: On the one hand, it tries to offer young adults the possibility to

deal with their identity and self-image, and on the other hand, to reflect on anti-Semitism during a joint trip to one of the most important memorials of the Holocaust, the Auschwitz concentration camp. During this trip, the teenagers can reflect on what they have learned about the Holocaust in their families and at school. In the process, confronting the authentic site usually debunks anti-Semitic stereotypes from family memory. The visit can lead them to doubt their families' narratives and learn to reflect on the reasons for the different perspectives. At school, the history of Judaism in Europe is often reduced to the event of the Holocaust, while today's Jewish culture in Germany, Europe and around the world is usually disregarded.

Some of the young people in Yilmaz's project first met Jewish people during their visit to Auschwitz. Some of them reported on their experiences and feelings at the memorial in a short film posted on YouTube. In it, for example, Mehmet describes how he was overtaken by mixed feelings of anger and sorrow at the same time because visiting the memorial site in Auschwitz made him realize how he is caught in the middle of having empathy with the assassinated Jews and feeling the suffering of his own family due to their experiences during flight and expulsion at the same time (cf. Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Nordrhein-Westfalen 2016). The young male Muslims feel a certain impuissance due to the history taken place in Auschwitz because it is difficult for them to define their role within the setting. For Al-Harith, the camp experience changed his mind in the sort of that he started realizing about the current importance of the topic and fearing that radical right-wing tendencies nowadays are able to expel the young men from their home in Germany (cf. Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Nordrhein-Westfalen 2016). For the educational project it was important to look back on the history but also reappraise the meaning and the current fears of the young male Muslims nowadays.

Both through the memorial, which shows the consequences of aggressive anti-Semitism and its worst consequences in history, and through the encounters with Jewish people, the young people gain a new and personal approach to this topic. According to Yilmaz, conveying the history of the Jews is also so important today because racism and anti-Semitism are still lived. "These dialogues are important because after meeting Jewish youth, it becomes normalized." (Yilmaz 2020). The visit to the Auschwitz memorial thus promotes a specific learning of history and at the same time a critical reflection of a traditional anti-Semitism. The visibility of the injustice and cruelty of exclusionary ideologies in Auschwitz promotes the understanding process of the young people. With

pedagogical support, they can also reflect on and openly express the stereotypes they have learned in their families. It becomes clear that seeing the bigger picture is one of the first steps to dissolving reservations and strengthening collective learning for shared memories in the field of anti-Semitism in Germany.

4. Knowledge through heritage? From exclusion to inclusion in education

Yilmaz's project work aims at education. It helps to initiate debates within the community of young Muslims, as well as individual reflection processes. Young Muslims are confronted with two attributions: On the first hand, they experience an attribution from the outside, the host country, in that Muslims are often judged by their religion and associated with a willingness to use violence and even terrorist actions. Individuals experience a stereotyping of their person through such attributions from the outside. On the other hand, there is an attribution from within, their family communities, when the history of their "origin" is conveyed to them and the emotional attachment to this culture and its values is forced upon them. This also includes traditional anti-Semitism, which is at odds with the self-image of today's Germany. Would it make sense to make visits to Auschwitz compulsory for all schoolchildren in order to break the mechanism of these attributions and anti-Semitism? Burak Yilmaz answers this question with no: Such a compulsory visit would weaken the intrinsic learning motivation of young people (cf. Yilmaz 2020).

Furthermore, it is important to deal with these topics in a consciously designed pedagogical framework. This is not only about acquiring cognitive knowledge about the Holocaust, but also about relating what is learned to personal and family memory. Therefore, after visiting the concentration camp in Auschwitz, it was important for the young adults to process their experiences and impressions in the protected space of the group, to talk about the facts and their personal backgrounds (such as the middle east conflict).

After the youngsters came back, they had a lot of mixed emotions, so it was very important to talk about it especially when it came to creating the theatre play 'coexist' dealing with the experiences they made. (Yilmaz 2020)

Together with Burak Yilmaz and other drama teachers they wrote the theatre play "Co-exist", which premiered in 2016, in which they playfully processed the perceived divide between family and German memory narratives without passing judgment. The play was performed at various schools all over Germany. The main challenge was to encourage the young German Muslims to see themselves as part of German society and thus also of

German history. In this context, it was important to realize that being German also means dealing with different images of being German. It was about realizing that one has a common history with other Germans that is important for one's own actual and future life.

5. Conclusion: Towards a transcultural identity?

The project *Young Muslims in Auschwitz* tries to build a bridge to overcome the gap between family and national memory and to build a shared memory that broadens the perspective of young people, especially on the issue of anti-Semitism in Germany. Cultural heritage, as something tangible, receives the function of transferring authenticity of historical facts, also revealing injustice and refuting antisemitic stereotypes.

While approaching the contradicting narratives, a dialogue emerges which is considered a prerequisite site for understanding history as a common heritage and for gaining a transcultural identity to which the young people feel they belong on all levels. All in all, regardless of the fact that anti-Semitism as a traditional hatred is still a major problem in all parts of the world, the project can be summed up as an educational advertisement and a successful way of prevention to create a common heritage within the young migration society in Germany.

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