

# Shadows and Silences in Göran Rosenberg's Memoir: Jewish Postmemory in the Swedish Welfare State

KARIN FILIPSSON

**ABSTRACT:** This article, winner of the 2022 Marna Feldt Graduate Publication Award, explores the concept of postmemory in relation to Sweden's cultural memory of World War II. Through an analysis of Göran Rosenberg's memoir "Ett kort uppehåll på vägen från Auschwitz" (2012), translated as "A Brief Stop on the Road from Auschwitz," this article investigates how the representation of postmigrant identity and belonging relates to revisionist historiography regarding Sweden's positionality during World War II. Furthermore, this article illuminates how exploring the postmemory trauma of the children of Holocaust survivors is relevant to the current discourse in Sweden's contemporary transcultural society.

**RÉSUMÉ:** Cet article, gagnant du Prix Marna Feldt de publication pour diplômé [graduate], explore le concept de post-mémoire dans la mémoire culturelle de la Seconde Guerre mondiale en Suède. À travers une analyse du mémoire de Göran Rosenberg "Ett kort uppehåll på vägen från Auschwitz" (2012), au titre anglais "A Brief Stop on the Road from Auschwitz" [Un court arrêt au retour d'Auschwitz], cet article examine comment la représentation de l'identité et de l'appartenance post-migratoires se rapportent à l'historiographie révisionniste sur la position de la Suède durant la Seconde Guerre mondiale. De plus, cet article illumine comment l'exploration des traumatismes post-mémoriels des enfants de survivants de l'Holocauste est importante à l'heure actuelle dans la société transculturelle de Suède.

Karin Filipsson is a PhD student and teaches Swedish in the Department of Scandinavian Studies at the University of Washington. Her PhD project explores postmigrant Swedish literature; particularly the connection between cultural memory and postmemory narratives.

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öran Rosenberg begins his memoir *Ett kort uppehåll på vägen från Auschwitz* (2012; *A Brief Stop on the Road from Auschwitz* 2015), the story of his father's escape from the Holocaust and his subsequent life in Sweden, with the following ambiguous statement: "Jag hade länge föreställt mig att han kom över Bron eftersom det är Bron som är porten till Platsen" [For a long time, I imagined him coming over the Bridge, since the Bridge is the gateway to the Place] (2012, 7). Rosenberg ends the sentence by revealing the unreliable nature of his own narrative, "men han kan naturligtvis inte ha kommit över Bron eftersom han måste ha kommit med tåget söderifrån" [but of course he can't have come over the Bridge because he must have arrived from the south] (2012, 7). Thus, from the start, Rosenberg crafts a narrative which conveys the unpredictable nature of memory and the power of imagination. He describes a dream-like journey into the abyss of remembrances, effectively emphasized by the description of the spectacular but perilous Bridge: "Bron är en alltigenom hotfull passage, ett kallt skelett" [a truly ominous passage, a cold skeleton] (2012, 7). The Bridge marks the actual entrance to the city Södertälje where Rosenberg's father gets off the train from Auschwitz and starts his new life in Sweden. Moreover, the Bridge serves as a gateway not only to the city and to a life in freedom but also to Rosenberg's venture into his parents' past.

This article examines how postmemory (the relationship of the second generation to powerful memories of their parents) in *Ett kort uppehåll på vägen från Auschwitz* relates to Sweden's cultural memory of World War II as well as to the contemporary discourse on postmigrant identity. Furthermore, the article explores how issues of identity and belonging are portrayed in postwar literature and how this relates to revisionist historiography regarding Sweden's position during the war. Through a close reading of Rosenberg's memoir, I discuss how the text exposes gaps and cracks in Sweden's national consciousness regarding the welfare state and how this has bearing on the current discourse on Sweden's wartime policies. Anne Ring Petersen and Moritz Schramm argue that the intensified migration and globalization which characterize the world today present new challenges to our imagination and modes of representation. They discuss how using the term postmigration is a way to "direct attention away from "migrants" and "people with a migration background" as objects or subjects of interest, and towards society as a whole" (Petersen and Schramm 6). The following questions which inform my discussion about the significance of post-memory narratives in relation to Sweden's cultural memory and national consciousness: "How do contemporary artistic narratives contribute to the "storying" of post-migrant and transcultural belongings?" (Petersen and Schramm 2). Reading *Ett kort uppehåll på vägen från Auschwitz* in relation to Sweden's contemporary discourse on post-migrant

identity illuminates the changes in the cultural memory of the war which has been deemed by historians as the moral narrative.

Tragically, Rosenberg's father never manages to make himself feel at home in the new Place. Rosenberg writes: "Jag tror att hemlösheten är ett underskattat helvete för sådana som du" [Homelessness is an underrated hell for people like you, I think] (Rosenberg 273). The contradiction between the prosperity of the growing city with its trains, bridges, and factories and his father's inability to find peace within is emphasized by Rosenberg's statement in his description of the Place: "Kriget har varit bra för Södertälje" [The war has been good for Södertälje] (2012, 85). Rosenberg alludes to the contradiction of two truths being equally correct: his parents' horrific experiences of trauma which they never fully recover from and the fact that this city, the Place, is prospering financially thanks to Sweden's wartime policy of concessions.

Rosenberg returns throughout his narrative to his parents' silence about their past, their journey and their memories. The vivid description of the Bridge at the city entrance acts as a metaphor for stepping into his parents' story as he treads through the 'postmemory' of their experiences. This is emphasized when he recounts his recurring nightmares: "I mina mardrömmar faller jag oupphörligen från Bron" [In my nightmares, I'm incessantly falling from the Bridge] (Rosenberg 2012, 8) which implies the danger of falling too deeply into his parents' nightmarish memories as he embarks on a journey into their past. However, in the next sentence he claims: "I mina mardrömmar når jag också fram till andra sidan" [In my nightmares, I also reach the other side] (Rosenberg 2012, 8) which serves as another example of how his narrative is construed of contradictions and ambiguity. Ultimately, the narrator states: "Att ha överlevt Bron är ingen garanti för överlevnad" [Making it over the Bridge is no guarantee for survival] (Rosenberg 2012, 8) which suggests that despite arriving in Sweden and reaching freedom and physical survival in the welfare state, Rosenberg's father does in fact not survive after crossing the Bridge to the Place.

By opening the story with the double metaphor of the ominous bridge as a passage and a skeleton, Rosenberg evokes our collective cultural memory of the Holocaust and sets the tone for the story of his father's unbearable and unimaginable journey from the concentration camp. Through a combination of journalistic investigation of his parents' history and fragments of real and/or imagined memories, the text creates a suggestive narrative which conjures a sense of mystery as if the writer is telling a story which cannot—yet must—be told. Marianne Hirsch states: "Postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (106). Furthermore, Hirsch defines postmemorial work as an attempt to 'reactivate and reembody' distant social and national structures through individual and familial forms of expression (111).

Thus, the study of postmemory entails the assumption that the generation after those who have experienced trauma carry remembrances of these events as they have been transmitted to them through images, stories, and behaviors “so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right” (Hirsch 107). In the first paragraph of *Ett kort uppehåll på vägen från Auschwitz*, Rosenberg successfully creates the impression of an ambiguous narrative which is construed of a patchwork of memories while also inserting parts of letters, photographs and medical records in the recounting of his father’s story.

Eva Hoffman describes the nature of wartime memories: “The memories—not memories but emanations—of wartime experiences kept erupting in flashes of imagery; in abrupt but broken refrains” (6-9). Similarly, through the recounting of his parents’ story, Rosenberg will bear witness to their horrific experiences. In his depiction of the Place, he writes: “Där öppna sår av betong och asfalt, motorvägskaruseller och hamnterminaler med tiden fläkts upp ligger skärvorna fortsatt orörda” [Though over time, open wounds of concrete and tarmac, highway interchanges and port terminals have scarred the landscape, the fragments still lie there untouched] (Rosenberg 2012, 41-42). The intense description of the scarred landscape and the untouched fragments highlights the underlying theme of Rosenberg’s narrative. He embarks on a journey to expose the wounds, scars and untouched – untold – fragments of his parents’ and simultaneously, his own story by bearing witness to the past through the postmemory of being the son of Holocaust-survivors.

According to historians, Sweden’s position during World War II changed from a patriotic policy of small state realism, which successfully managed to keep the country out of the war, to an increased humanitarian effort which saved many lives. Johan Östlund claims that the national argument, which prevailed in the national consciousness for decades, was that “being a small state, Sweden had no choice but to tailor her responses to aggressive German power” (180). By way of a strong military defense and consistent trading concessions with the Germans, Sweden maintained its neutrality during the war. Östlund describes Swedish post-war narrative as a patriotic, self-righteous argument in favor of a successful welfare state. He claims that this narrative sought to perpetuate the idea of Sweden as a “neutral, democratic and flourishing country” (191). In addition, Östlund states that Swedish prime minister Per Albin Hansson declared the success of Sweden’s wartime policy in a way that asserted that “the whole Swedish social order and way of life was superior” (181). This nationalistic self-image prevailed in the Swedish cultural memory for decades after the war and the idea of a selfless, idealistic welfare state remained the prevalent Swedish self-conception until the moral narrative of the 1990s.

Kent Zetterberg argues that the main objective of Sweden’s political policies during the war was “Sweden’s peace and survival” (4). In addition,

Zetterberg discusses the changes in Sweden's political strategy during the last two years of the war when their policies were "transformed from indifference to activism" (4). Furthermore, John Gilmour argues that Sweden's policies during the war and its failure to deal with ensuing ethical issues has led to controversies and contradictions which persist in today's discourse. He claims that Sweden's immigration policies after the war can be viewed as an attempt to atone for war time events (Gilmour 94). Consequently, this paper explores how Sweden's inability to recognize the moral implications of its position as bystander during the war and the reluctance to confront the duality in its national consciousness is conveyed in postmemory narratives such as *Ett kort uppehåll på vägen från Auschwitz*. Rosenberg portrays the ignorance and the danger inherent in the position of the bystander on several occasions in his text. For instance, in the chapter called *The Carousel* he explains the universal prevalence of the apathetic bystander: "Inget nytt detta naturligtvis, att människor förmår leva som om ingenting har hänt också när de mest fruktansvärda saker händer runt omkring dem" [Nothing new there, of course, it's well known that people are capable of living as if nothing's going on even when the most atrocious things are happening around them] (2012, 71). Moreover, he describes the overflowing train that he imagines his father traveling on through the Warsaw ghetto. It is a train packed over the limit with Jewish prisoners like his father and the way Rosenberg describes the cars as originally made for cattle effectively brings forth the horror of the journey:

Tåget, med de låsta boskapsvagnarna till bristningsgränsen fyllda med ännu levande människor vars ögonvitor ibland kan lysa fram genom de förseglade luftöppningarna, far på vanliga järnvägsspår genom vanliga städer befolkade av vanliga människor som ibland tittar upp från sina vanliga sysslor för att se efter vad det är som passerar förbi. (2012, 86)

[The train, its cattle cars bursting with living people—the whites of their eyes are occasionally seen glittering through the sealed air vents—travels on ordinary railroad tracks through ordinary towns inhabited by ordinary people who occasionally look up from their ordinary activities to see what it is that's passing by.]

In addition, Rosenberg juxtaposes his reflections on his immigrant parents' experience of loneliness in Sweden with a description of how the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto could hear the laughter from the carousel in the nearby amusement park:

Ni är mycket ensamma, föreställer jag mig. Ensamma som människorna i Warszawas ghetto när de hör musiken och skratten från karusellen i Krasin'skiparken. Ensamma som de sista människorna i en värld som inte längre finns och som människorna i den värld som finns redan har glömt. (2012, 85-86)

[You are all very lonely, I imagine. As lonely as the inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto when they hear the music and laughter from the carousel in Krasin'ski Park. As lonely as the last people in a world that no longer exists, and which the people in the world that now exists have already forgotten.]

By creating a textual connection between the experience of the people living in the Warsaw ghetto and his father's inability to feel at home in the new Place, Rosenberg illuminates the similarities between the silence of the bystanders in Warsaw and Sweden's silence during the war. In addition, this passage in the text points towards the devastating silence and darkness of his father's depression at the end of his life.

Our understanding of history is fluid and with regard to World War II we are currently at the end of what Marianne Stecher-Hansen describes as the communicative memory, which generally has an 80-year life span, whereas the cultural memory of institutions and texts continues to live on and creates our common narrative of history (2). Thus, a rewriting of the past can affect our cultural memory which is an important part of how we view the past as well as the world today. Stecher-Hansen poses the following question: "How do some histories become and remain "active" in the working cultural memory of a nation or social group?" (4). Rosenberg's memoir is an example of a text which simultaneously reveals memories of past familial trauma and contextualizes his family history within a broader framework of social and national guilt in the postwar welfare state of Sweden. Eva Hoffmann speaks of the language of the family as a place where the expression of the trauma of the past is displayed through nightmares, illnesses, tears, and sighs. (10). She describes the experience of postmemory as "memories—not memories but emanations—of wartime experiences kept erupting in flashes of imagery; in abrupt but broken refrains" (Hoffman 9). In Rosenberg's text, the recurrent theme of fragments, shadows and silences in the narrative relates to the unreliable, unpredictable nature of memory as well as the silence encountered by his father as an immigrant in postwar Sweden.

*Ett kort uppehåll på vägen från Auschwitz* is a conversation about memory, about the limitations of memory as well as about the significance of memory. Rosenberg repeatedly reminds us about the unreliability and fragility of his own

as well as his father's memory. In fact, he openly challenges the book's title in the beginning of the chapter called *The Wall*, suggesting that the narrative is as much fictitious as it is documentary. For example, he admits that he makes an independent decision to place his father's story in the specific location of the concentration camp at Auschwitz, implying that the real-life location is unknown: "Jag bestämmer att du stiger på tåget i Auschwitz" [I decide that you get on the train at Auschwitz] (Rosenberg 2012, 45). Thus, he suggests that his story is full of uncertainty and as fluid as the essence of memory. Shortly thereafter in the text, he addresses his father directly through the narrative and asks his permission to tell the story in a certain way: "Kan jag skriva att du stiger ombord på ett av de sista tågen från ghettot i Łódź till selektionsrampen i Auschwitz-Birkenau?" [Can I write that you board one of the last trains from the Łódź ghetto to the selection ramp in Auschwitz-Birkenau?] (Rosenberg 2012, 45). In this way, the narrative implies a playful approach to the boundaries between reality and fiction. More profoundly, the inherent ambiguity of the text questions the borders between life and death and between father and son. Consequently, Rosenberg challenges the genre of the memoir by transcending the boundaries between himself as the omnipotent narrator and his father as the subject of the story. In addition, when Rosenberg momentarily steps away from recounting his memories and asks his father for permission, he creates an illusion of traveling through time and crossing the border between life and death; perhaps by means of another Bridge or by climbing over the Wall.

In tandem with telling the story of his father's journey, Rosenberg tells the story of himself as the son of survivors. Using the metaphor of the Wall, he admits that he is incapable of overcoming the wall of silences and shadows which is a part of his father's experience. In fact, Rosenberg explicitly explains to the reader why he has chosen to begin the story when his father gets on the train, thereby avoiding delving into the terror that was before that: "Jag försöker börja den tidigare men misslyckas. Bortom ghettot reser sig en mur som jag inte kan tränga förbi. En mur av mörker och tystnad. Nästan inga skärvor alls" [I try to begin it earlier, but I fail. Beyond the ghetto looms a wall I can't get past. A wall of darkness and silence. Almost no fragments at all] (Rosenberg 2012, 68). This narrative decision emphasizes the unimaginable and unspeakable horrors that his father went through before getting on the train. Also, it confirms Hirsch's definition of postmemory as inherited trauma through generations. In fact, I suggest using the term "familial memory" to describe the particular form of postmemory as described in *Ett kort uppehåll på vägen från Auschwitz*. Hirsch asks: "How, in our present, do we regard and recall what Susan Sontag (2003) has so powerfully described as the "pain of others?" How can we best carry their stories forward without appropriating them?" (2). Rosenberg captures his father's silence and refusal to speak about his past through frequent references to shadows, silences and fragments in the text. In

addition, he illuminates the elusiveness of his father's journey and suggests that the undertaking of telling his story is next to an impossible endeavor: "Du har inget sagt och jag har inget att tillägga" [You have said nothing, and I have nothing to add] (Rosenberg 2012, 48). When Rosenberg recounts his father's letters to his fiancée, Rosenberg's mother, he notes that his father is omitting any brutal details from his experience in the concentration camp: "Du skriver inte om det som ingen ändå kommer att förstå. Du skriver inte om det outhärdliga" [You don't write about things no one's going to understand anyway. You don't write about the unbearable] (2012, 136). In short, this speaks to the inherent impossibility of describing the horrific truth.

Subsequently, throughout the narrative, Rosenberg depicts his father's increasingly difficult struggle against the silences and shadows that haunt him and which eventually, in combination with the intense experience of loneliness and homelessness in the Place, will lead him into a bottomless and irrevocable abyss of depression. His father is depicted as consumed by anxiety and restlessness in a state of never-ending transit. Rosenberg repeatedly returns to the overarching theme of silence in the story as he describes his parents' reluctance to share their experiences with him: "Men de berättar inte. Där det en gång måste ha funnits en plats som den här finns nu bara tystnad. Tystnad och skuggor" [But they tell me nothing. Where there must once have been a place like this one, there is now only silence. Silence and shadows] (2012, 42). The image of the Bridge invokes the narrator's attempt to cross the unseen bridge to reach the fragments of his parents' untouched, disconnected memories as he embarks on a journey to reveal the scarred landscape of their story to the world. Similarly, Rosenberg's narrative consists of fragments and eruptions, imagined or broken memories intertwined with excerpts from his father's letters, photographs and, in the end, medical records. He concludes the chapter called The Place with the declaration that all that is left are silences and shadows, disconnected fragments: "Vilka skärvor av en sådan plats som än ligger gömda någonstans, och ingen människa lever utan sådana skärvor, så har någon eller något alltför omsorgsfullt krossat dem, och alltför djupt grävt ner dem, i alltför breda stråk av mörker" [Whatever fragments of such a place lie hidden somewhere—and no human being lives without such fragments—someone or something has crushed them all too carefully and buried them too deeply, in too-wide expanses of darkness] (Rosenberg 2012, 42). Thus, Rosenberg becomes the witness to his parents' lives and our guide as he writes his way through their trauma, unveiling their stories and their fragmented memories from the abyss of darkness which holds the silence of the survivors.

Gilmour describes the national consciousness in Sweden in the 1980s and 1990s as a time of reckoning with the country's position during the war as a "hangover similar to survivor's guilt" (13). He explains how this period of reversing the idealistic, patriotic cultural memory of small state realism into a



moral narrative came about “following the revelations about the industrial extermination of Jews and others, Sweden could be accused of ‘not doing enough’” (Gilmour 93). Furthermore, Hirsch discusses how postmemory is experienced by children of survivors despite the fact that they are not the actual survivors and do not have the lived, embodied experience of their parents’ trauma. She explains how the second generation of survivors may feel those memories or experiences “transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (106). Towards the end of the book Rosenberg speaks for both himself and his father as he reflects upon the sense of guilt inherent in the disposition of the survivor. This is poignantly expressed by Rosenberg as he describes how his father is incapable of reconciling himself with his own survival: “Ja, att ni rentav har en skuld att sona för att just ni lever” [You may actually feel that you need to atone for being alive] (2012, 248). This guilt reflects Sweden’s contemporary process of re-visiting their ambiguous moral position during the war. Rosenberg ponders the question that might have haunted his father: “Varför jag och inte de andra?” [Why me and not the others?] (Rosenberg 2012, 248). He reflects on the experience of the survivors, “Det är naturligtvis också en outhärdlig tanke som förr eller senare måste trängas undan för att överlevnad ska övergå i fortlevnad” [Naturally, it’s also an unbearable thought, which has to be pushed aside sooner or later if surviving is to turn into living] (Rosenberg 2012, 248-249). Subsequently, in his portrayal of the shadows and silences which overtake his father’s life in Sweden, Rosenberg effectively points towards the collective guilt of a society who refuses to acknowledge the lived experience of the new citizens in a country who will not speak about its past. This is ambiguously expressed in Rosenberg’s poignant statement “Du har inget sagt och jag har inget att tillägga” [You have said nothing, and I have nothing to add] (2012, 48). Is he speaking to his parents or is he reflecting on the collective, communicative memory of the Swedish postwar society which has failed his father and presumably many others like him? Once again, Rosenberg emphasizes the unreliable nature of memories as stories and he reminds the reader to question the narrator of the story as well as the Swedish narrative of its involvement in the second world war.

In the last chapter, titled “The Shadows,” Rosenberg painstakingly describes his father’s time in the Swedish mental hospital Ulvsunda during the latter part of his life where he tries, to no avail, to express his feelings of fear to the doctors, “Så du gör dig mödan att berätta om de nya hakkorsmålingarna världen över som oroar dig och som ger dig en osäkerhetskänsla fastän du säger dig vara medveten om att du inte har något att vara rädd för i Sverige” [So you make an effort to tell them how worried you are about the new Swastikas daubed all over the world, which make you feel insecure even though you know you have nothing to fear in Sweden] (2012, 278). Despite his father’s efforts to find help and solace, his shadows are overpowering him.

In Rosenberg's narrative, the Swastikas that his father sees "all over the world" might be an expression of his father's depression mixed with his memories from the war, but it can also be read symbolically as an expression of his father's experience of alienation in the Swedish welfare state. Furthermore, in Rosenberg's rendition of his father's experience at Ulvsunda the imaginary aspect of memory as a narrative is revealed again. Rosenberg's suggestive narrative leaves the reader to wonder whether these are actual notes from the doctors' journals or if Rosenberg is imagining his father's thoughts, "att du på vägen till Ulvsunda funderade på att kasta dig framför tunnelbanan innan du kastade dig i sjön" [that on the way to Ulvsunda you were considering throwing yourself in front of an underground train before you decided to throw yourself in the lake] (2012, 278). The repetitive, long stream of consciousness-like sentences enhances the emotional intensity of the narrative leading up to this statement: "Men framförallt berättar du om horisonten som inte riktigt vill öppna sig. Om den lilla staden som vänder dig ryggen. Om den ofullbordade resan vidare. Om nödvändigheten av att resa vidare, över bron åtminstone" [But above all you tell them about the horizon that will not open up. About the little town that's turning its back on you. About the onward journey that's still unfinished. About the necessity of moving on, if only over the bridge] (Rosenberg 2012, 278). Rosenberg returns to the haunting question of how the horizons never open up for his father despite the social security and freedom in the Swedish welfare state. Although he has crossed the bridge and escaped the horrors of the Holocaust, the shadows of the past seem to paralyze him into a state of non-living which eventually leads to his tragic suicide while staying in the mental institution. Through the portrayal of his father's experience of alienation in the Place which symbolizes Sweden's postwar society, Rosenberg points to the difficulties entailed in the process of trying to adapt to the Swedish welfare state.

Rosenberg believes that it is the shadows that kill his father and he emphasizes that those shadows are not on the inside but on the outside. They are the shadows of the Holocaust: "De kommer utifrån och hinner ikapp dig och sänker dig i mörker" [They come from outside and catch up with you and surround you with darkness] (Rosenberg 2012, 281). His father tragically fails to survive his survival and ultimately passes on the burden of remembering the past to his son who becomes the witness and the narrator of his parents' story. Rosenberg's memoir forces us to reconsider the narrative of Sweden's national consciousness of the war and the cultural memory of Sweden's wartime policy: "Ni kan bara blicka framåt om världen blickar tillbaka och erinrar sig varifrån ni kommer" [You can look forward only if the world looks backward and remembers where you come from] (Rosenberg 2012, 249). Thus, Rosenberg suggests that the reason his father is unable to go on living after having survived the Holocaust is the recurring silences and shadows and the misguided

attempts to bury the past, both in the case of his father's experiences and in the case of the Swedish cultural memory of the war.

Thus, in *Ett kort uppehåll på vägen från Auschwitz* Rosenberg conveys the importance of remembering the past and re-discovering the embodied experience of people who might have otherwise been forgotten: "Men ni kan heller inte leva vidare om ingen ser och förstår vad det är ni har överlevt och varför ni ändå lever vidare" [Nor, however, can you go on living if nobody sees and understands what it is you've survived and why it is you're still alive, in spite of everything] (2012, 249). Therefore, revisiting the memories and the experiences of Holocaust survivors have bearing on current discussions of 'utanförskap' (outsiderness) in Sweden's transnational society. This opens up interesting areas of future research regarding the significance of postmemory studies to the contemporary discourse of postmigrant identity and how this relates to the moral narrative of Sweden's policies during World War II.

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