

In Search of a Name. Memory Movements

Helga Krook

Translated from German by Ian Bild, in collaboration with Dana Johnson

Minnesrörelser, Memory movements, is the title of my doctoral dissertation in literary composition, published in 2015 as six separate books, contained in a box. It is a study of inherited and hidden memories, *minnen* in Swedish, mainly memories that might be encountered geographically and symbolically, that no one personally bears or can express any more. Memories that are not one's own, that do not even come from the country in which one grew up.

The Questions / How can one work with historical family material for documentary purposes within the field of artistic research? What can artistic research in the field of literature illuminate? These questions were my starting point when I began my doctoral studies in Literary Composition at the University of Gothenburg. I had collected extensive historical and biographical material: family documents, diaries, photos, archival records. I had also made a series of lengthy interviews with my mother, Martha, about her childhood in Germany during World War II. I had staged the interviews as a fictional journalist, objectively and empathically. These memories were so emotionally charged for her that we had to, as it were, meet as strangers. Some of the questions that arose from the interviews were difficult for her to answer, for example my question about the name of her father's sister, who, my mother heard as a child, sadly died of pneumonia during the war. Her father, my grandfather, was killed in the war. The only person of this generation still alive was the widowed wife of the younger brother. In a phone call, she unexpectedly mentioned something about murder, and died two weeks later. I then travelled several times to Dresden to find out the name and the story of my great-aunt. Eventually I discovered in the Saxon State

Helga Krook is a poet, translator, and essayist. She has published five collections of poems, most recently *Puppe Doll Chrysalis*; essays on various literary subjects; and translations of works by, among others, Rilke, Ausländer, and Tsvetaeva. Her dissertation in literary composition, *Minnesrörelser* (Memory Movements), was published in 2015. She lives in Stockholm and teaches creative writing at the Linnaeus University. **Ian Bild** is from London and currently resides in Worpswede, Germany. He is a translator, maker of film/radio documentaries, and owns Worpsweder Antiquariat. **Dana Johnson** is a visual artist and translator who lives and works in Stockholm.

Archives a file of over one hundred pages of documents about her. She had been diagnosed with schizophrenia and had been a victim of the forced sterilization and euthanasia programs during the Third Reich. Her name was Ilse.

In Germany, this is certainly not an untypical story. In an exhibition on Nazi Euthanasia organized in the Topography of Terror Documentation Center in Berlin in 2014, one could learn that in many German families forgotten family members are only recently being found and remembered by grandchildren, grandnephews, grandnieces. Just four years ago a permanent information and remembrance site for victims of the euthanasia killings was set up at Tiergartenstraße 4, where the headquarters of the organization under the code name T 4 had been located. The organization coordinated the mass murder of psychiatric patients and disabled people in nursing homes in Germany and Austria, by way of starvation, medicaments or in gas chambers. Here the perpetrators learned the killing technique that was used on an inconceivable scale in the death camps in occupied Poland.

The City / Why did I start with these interviews, with these questions? It has to do with my own family background, but also, I think, with the city of Berlin, where I lived for periods of time in the 1990's and beyond. There was something in the mood then, in the streets where the traces of the war were still very visible, and the city still noticeably divided. Many of the houses and bombsites appeared to me as witnesses. The people I got to know, in the city's backyards, immediately awakened something in me; it was a form of recognition. Even though I grew up in Sweden, a land hardly affected by the war, I felt more at home in Berlin than in Stockholm, and I was deeply impressed by the growing culture of memory in the city. There was a clear desire to remember, to take responsibility for the Nazi crimes and to seek further knowledge about the histories of the victims.

Speaking and Being Silent / The material I had collected before I started working with the project was far too comprehensive. It posed many different and difficult questions that I was unable to answer, not on a personal level nor within my previous artistic practice. I had to place them in a larger context, deepen the research into the subject, find places, people, memorabilia, memorial sites. This search was about the story of Ilse; it was about a German family through which a deadly sharp divide had been drawn; about the children in this family and their children. It was about a society in which the Holocaust was only seemingly far distant. It was about the silence and the legacy that continued to affect generation after generation.

I wanted to examine opposite poles of meaning arising from the material, such as boundary/boundlessness, document/fiction, ruin/reconstruction, daughter/daughter, madness/madness... also speech/speechlessness, where the silence of one can become the voice of the other, and vice versa. I wanted to consider the

relationship between remaining silent, being silent and speaking. If remaining silent tends towards concealment, I thought, being silent could be both a suppression and a space for multiple truths that do not have to compete with each other. Speaking or writing could be an opportunity for liberation but could also risk utter negation (for example, if the voiceless are not given a voice in the text).

I did not want to write a novel, a story that from the outset has a focus, foreground, background. I did not want to invent the unknown person that Ilse was. It seemed to me that she would then only be abused again. I wanted to explore how I could narrate these fragments, documents, childhood memories, and above all this *absence* of memories, without having to accommodate to any literary genre or market.

As if an as yet unknown form of itself would grow out of the investigation. How could I tell, in documentary form, about the lives of people who I had never met? Recount memories that I had never had? Can memories that do not exist be passed on to the next generation? What is a narrative, what must it contain (main characters? minor characters? dramaturgy? identification?), what must be sacrificed? What does it mean to work with authentic documents that, as with Ilse's medical records, systematically rename or conceal the reality? What does it mean to explore and relate the story of another person about whom there are no longer any memories? Whose story is it then? How could I truthfully recount the memories of a little girl in wartime during which she was swindled of the truth? How does the already-narrated affect the not-yet-narrated? What does it mean to tell of a German family in the midst of a society that was completely steeped in the persecution of Jewish citizens and was silent about the Holocaust?

Minnesrörelser can be described as a literary composition of a narrative problematic. Not a dissertation as we know it, maybe a para-dissertation. Or rather a performative narrative experiment that has not been concluded. Not a novel, rather fragments. The books in the box are created between two different national histories and languages. The texts are mainly written in Swedish but one is in German. Throughout *Minnesrörelser*, German quotes are left untranslated. It is fundamentally a bilingual work.



Listening and Seeing / The first years of the project, I felt deluged. I wanted it that way; as if all the voices and traces in the material that I was working on could be awakened to a renewed existence. I wanted to listen to all the voices. Not silence any of them, not be a writer who selects main characters. Finally, I realized that I could not carry on like that. I started to wander around, at first in Berlin. Don't drown—move! Don't listen—see! You might not know what you're looking for, but be so wide open to what you don't know, that you discover something that is somehow intimate... After a few months, I found I had written a lot of short texts,

which all had to do with the landscape of Berlin memory. But that strategy was still not enough. It suffered from the same boundlessness.

I was in danger of becoming either a scientific dilettante or an artist who was deprived of her artistic resources by the academic framework. I was also well aware that there had already been an unmanageably large amount of writing, narration and film about this historical period.

The Names / Finally I gave up my own name. From the five letters of my first name I created five freelance authors, all the same generation as me. I turned myself into a commissioner and later into a reader, playfully adopting the well-known sentence by Roland Barthes in *La Mort de l'Auteur* that the birth of the reader is to be paid with the death of the author. These were the directives given to the five authors: read and listen to all the material, identify yourself with my position and biography, then write what you want based on the material, provided that you decide for yourself what a documentary stance might be.

Reading and Writing / Once the authors submit their contributions, I thought, I will be reborn as a reader, and they will slip into the background (that is, will become even more shadowy than before). Reading their writing, I will be able to collect new material and perhaps gain a new point of view from which I can continue to write. "The true reader must be the extended author", writes the 18th century poet Novalis in the *Blütenstaubfragmenten* (Pollen Fragments). According to the literary scholar Stephan Porombka, who has taken up this idea, texts are enlarged and perhaps also written further by the reader, who in this case becomes an author, who later becomes a reader of other texts... There is no death here, only onward reading, onward writing.

The Scope / With the birth of the five authors, a scope was created in the project between different writing practices. This method of working with the material seemed more suited to its inherent diversity and complexity. It was not possible for me to be a single voiced author or researcher. The further the five authors moved away from each other and the more pronounced their different directions grew, the greater the freedom for each to write out of her own limitations and status as outsider. This freedom, in turn, was necessary for something to be told that I did not already know. For there to be surprises. And, of course, so that the conventional claim to knowledge, legitimacy, research, transparency inherent in the term dissertation, could be problematized.

Minnesrörelser is an experiment, as I did not, as it were, plan or control what was written in the project. This strategy was necessary to make writing within the project possible at all.



Minnesrörelser box and books, photographed by Sara Mannheimer.

The Books / Each author gets her own book, which bears her name as the title. The five authors are not five distinct characters, as for example in a theater play, although they have different attitudes and different writing practices. Hilde Lindroth is a translator and the one who is following Ilse's traces in Dresden and the different Saxonian institutions where she was confined. Linda Beel is a kind of essayist or flâneur, who mainly moves around in Berlin and Dresden and observes how differently the cities deal with their past; she wonders about Dresden's sister city, she travels to Prague and to Terezín (Theresienstadt). Greta Wiedrow is a critic and analyzes the source material: the difficult interviews between mother and daughter. Anja Nachaum writes poetry, for example a long suite in which the words of Ilse, who lived in Dresden near the Elbe, flow unheard into the sea. Her brother Paul, a naval officer, is standing on a warship in the port of Cuxhaven and does not catch the words as they pass by. Elise Adrian is, I think, a film editor. She deals with the language in Ilse's file, that of the doctors and the Dresden governmental department for "Hereditary and Racial Care", a performative language that simultaneously implements and obscures crimes. She also studies examples of nationalistic and crypto-racist sentences in a schoolbook on German grammar written by Ilse's father.



Falling Apart / Elise Adrian's book "collapsed": out of 80 pages, only 25 remain. Some of the other authors' texts have ultimately also been more-or-less destroyed by way of discontinuations, blank spaces or gaps, for example Greta Wiedrow's analysis of the interviews, "A Kind of Adrenaline Sharpness", and Linda Beel's essay "Dresden Documents: A Territory". The tensions in the project grew too great, something, or a lot of things, happened that I had not been able to foresee. The different voices were thereby partially fractured.

Claudio Magris writes in *Danube: A Sentimental Journey from the Source to the Black Sea*: "Time is not a single train, moving in one direction at a constant speed. Every so often it meets another train coming in the opposite direction, from the past, and for a short while that past is with us, by our side, in our present." Metaphors and realities also intersect in countless places. In an apartment in Dresden Neustadt in the summer of 2012, Linda Beel plans a trip to Auschwitz, while, through the open window, she hears the trains passing close by. She knows that many transports left for the extermination camp from the Neustadt station. Her trip to Oświęcim will be abandoned later in Prague due to a sudden illness. She lies in her hotel room and cannot move.

Is Linda here an author of a text called "Dresden Documents" that is soon going to fall apart, or is she a character *malgré soi* in a literary composition, or is she me in a still ongoing in-real-life memory narrative that the project *Minnesrörelser* happened to set in motion? In the hotel room, it's not an issue.

In the end, after I had read all five contributions, I truly became a reader. It was as if I had seen too much through the five-fold perspective, maybe a kind of literary "schizophrenia", if you will. As in a wide-angle perspective. I also realized that I was the heir to these stories. This was traumatic. It would change me and had already changed me. Anja, Linda, Hilde, Greta and Elise knew all this, but their status as strangers had protected them somewhat during the writing and their names had protected me. Now I realized it all the more and it became much more real.

The Fragments / "When the aesthetics of disintegration is applied in relation to this historical reality, the need for disintegration turns out to be a matter of ethics", reads one of my notes as a reader. Linda Beel often adopts a parallel between architecture and narration, and the chapter on the newly reconstructed Neues Museum in Berlin is a gateway text in her long, early essay "Memory Landscape". Her initial vision of an overriding narrative has to be given up, a narrative where everything in the collected material can be placed in a much larger context, the only context that might account for the smaller stories. In her broken Dresden essay, she calls herself a memory moth, one of millions gathering in memory places, cities and museums. Elise Adrian's collapsed speaking exercises called "short sentences" resemble the tiny pieces in the Fragmentarium of the Neues

Museum that cannot be reintegrated into the whole because they are unknown or irrevocably lost.

Later I wondered if traditional literary genres somehow protect us from seeing too much at once. We always have to expand them from the inside so that they do not restrict us too much, but the limitations and artificiality also allow us to dig deep, thanks to the unlimited freedom offered to the writer of fiction.

Minnesrörelser could only be published as a kind of ruin.

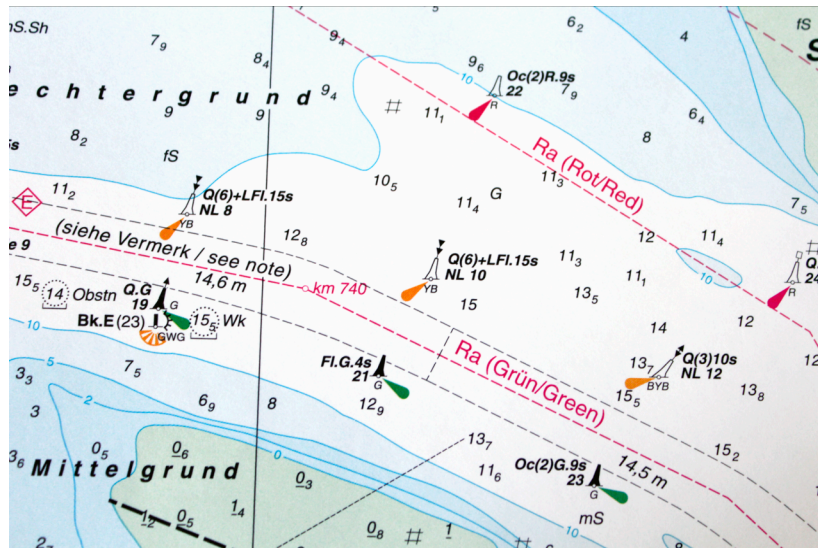


Understanding and Moving On / “Every word casts a shadow”, Anja Nachaum wrote in a text that she withdrew. In her analysis, Greta Wiedrow suggests that the most important thing could be that the text moves on and that the author does not struggle to understand or to delve deeper. Otherwise the text runs the risk of drowning, of getting lost, because understanding is a downward spiral, in which she, Greta, sees no end.

As if understanding and moving within this project would become opposites. I could not have imagined that before. Not to lose the ability to move: perhaps that is the five authors’ ultimate achievement. Due to their non-kinship with the people in the material, they are more likely to write from their own viewpoints. They can write about what it is like to be the bearer of memories that are not their own but which they have adopted. They can leave traces of movements in search of pathways.

The French historian Pierre Nora coined the notion *lieux de mémoire*: places, sites, things, customs encompassing memories. “Perhaps”, to quote the summary of *Minnesrörelser*, “the different texts by the five authors are rather like places *in place of / au lieu de* lieux de mémoire, places where the search for memory goes on and the searching itself is being investigated. Many of the texts in fact deal with walking around in a city or following a river.” The kinship of the Swedish words *myrning* and *mun* (estuary and mouth) emerges in the suite “Wattenmeer ist jetzt Welterbe” (Wadden Sea is now a World Heritage Site) by Anja Nachaum, in which Ilse’s words are lost at sea. Details of the nautical chart of the Elbe estuary are shown on the inside of all the white covered books.

There is no stated order in which the books should be read. Readers can navigate their own way through the work. The books can be read in different ways and are probably often not read. They can also leave the box individually and not find their way back, in which case the dissertation gradually disintegrates. What remains is only the box, the shell, the empty system.



Inside cover image of the Hilde Lindroth book, photographed by designer Fredrik Arsæus Nauckhoff.

Writing Oneself Silent / Even I, the commissioner and reader Helga Krook, am given my own book in *Minnesrørelser*. There I refer to different perspectives on the subject of remembrance, but nowhere do I overtly reveal that I have fictionalized the writing or recount what I ultimately experienced when I personally became the heir to these histories. I did not openly explain this documentary meta-story since the existence of the five authors was a *sine qua non*, and the work is a literary creation; and because I had, so to speak, written myself into silence.

There is, in contrast to conventional dissertations, no neutral level of statement in the work; the discursive is included in the composition. Not to confuse or fool anyone; just because the only way for me as a debutant in artistic research faced with this collected material was, as I have said, to work within a kind of play, behind a threadbare, hopefully transparent veil of fiction, that allowed for five different ways of writing. Likewise, I discovered that I was only able to handle the consequences of this project of remembrance within the game; one that had to be played as sincerely, as truthfully as possible.

The Ground and the Territory / In a passage quoted in the book bearing my name, Giorgio Agamben refers to the Austrian poet Ingeborg Bachmann in her Frankfurt Lectures. She "claims that poets are precisely those who 'make the 'I' into the ground of their experiments, or who have made themselves into the experimental ground of the 'I'". To open oneself up to a place could be to open up to the testimony of the place, Linda Beel ponders at the border of the

Vltava/Labe/Elbe. To be completely invaded, to *become* a place, would be to lose one's ability to think freely, speak freely, to perceive a map and exchange it for another. It would be to bear witness in an unrecognizable language.

Reading and Writing / Each author has also bequeathed her own archive, a corpus, so to say, of secondary documentary texts and drafts, some of which have been published in various contexts under the authors' own names after the dissertation itself came out. Who continues writing now, three years after the publication? How did the work with the project affect my voice as a poet? Will the authors return to my name? The question of authorship, after the five-voice compositional experience, is still an open one.



The Manifesto / During the disputation of my thesis, I realized that instead of an abstract, I should have written and should have been allowed to write a manifesto. Firstly because an artistic work seldom allows bit-piece knowledge summarized at various levels; secondly, because a dissertation adopting a literary composition is something new, a hybrid, an unknown genre that, I think, should also not become a genre. Consequently, the mutual relationship between reader and author is in this case not characterized by familiar expectations.

Thus, the manifesto:

1. This dissertation in literary composition is a literary composition.
2. It is possible to tell damaged and wounded stories.
3. It is not possible to tell about painful subjects in a cold academic light.
4. A story can be part of a dialogue with a listener. If the listener does not hear, the story does not exist.
5. This dissertation is a twin.
6. This dissertation is a ruin.
7. If this dissertation is an attempt that must fail, it is all about failing decently.
8. These books want to create a luminosity in which storytelling can take place. The light casts a shadow where stories gather that requires a warmer, darker light.
9. Close to its estuary, the river is at its widest and the other shoreline is difficult to see. Is that the shore of the novel?
10. These books are six requests to participate in a larger conversation.

Voices / When I talk about *Minnesrörelser* in seminars, I always ask if there are six persons in the audience who would like to read extracts from the books by the five authors and the reader. Then they could appear in different voices. As readers, I say to the six, you might sense something of the commission given to the fictional authors, you might chance upon memories and stories that are not your own. It's not about reading as beautifully as possible, it's rather about the voice. About the embodiment. Moving through a text. Being a stranger.

This Is Not the End / *Minnesrörelser* is an open work, a photograph, as it were, of movements that stop for a moment for the dissertation, and then continue. How and in what way, I am still discovering. This essay is also part of that process.



Author Note

I am very grateful to Tanja Schult for supporting my work with this text and for editing both the German and the English version. My sincere thanks also to Ian Bild and Dana Johnson for translation and discussions, to Michael LeVan for editing the final version, and to Sara Mannheimer and Fredrik Arsæus Nauckhoff for photos.

References

- Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive* (in Italian 1998), translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Zone Books 2002.
- Roland Barthes, "Der Tod des Autors" (in French 1968), übersetzt von Matias Martinez, in F Jannidis, G Lauer, M Martinez, S Winko, *Texte zur Theorie der Autorschaft*, Reclam Verlag 2000.

Helga Krook, *Minnesrörelser. Elise Adrian, Linda Beel, Hilde Lindroth, Anja Nachbaum, Greta Wiedrow*, Valand Academy, University of Gothenburg, Autor förlag 2015.
Claudio Magris, *Danube. A Sentimental Journey from the Source to the Black Sea* (in Italian 1986), translated by Patrick Creagh, FSG Classics 2008.
Stephan Porombka, “Für wahre Leser und erweiterte Autoren” in Stephan Porombka and Olaf Kutzmutz, *Erst lesen. Dann schreiben*, Luchterhand Verlag 2007.

Note: Quotes in this text are from the references above, except for quote by Novalis translated by Ian Bild and quotes from *Minnesrörelser*, apart from the summary, translated by Dana Johnson.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike International 4.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>; or, (b) send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 2nd Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA