The location of transcultural memory in Vikram Seth’s memoir Two Lives (2005)

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ABSTRACT
This article seeks to investigate the different dimensions of transcultural memory; it particularly scrutinises it with reference to travelling, dialogic and postmemory. The aim of such an approach is to discuss transcultural memory in relation to migrants, expatriates and exiles, highlighting the ways in which their memories tend to cut across national, cultural, ethnic and geographical borders. Having addressed the transcultural turn in the field of memory studies, I closely examine transcultural memory in Vikram Seth’s memoir Two Lives in order to address broader issues of diasporic identities and the coming together of Indian and European histories within a memory narrative. Set mostly in Germany and England, Two Lives recounts individual histories—at first parallel, and separated, but later intertwined—of Seth’s great-uncle Shanti Seth and his German-Jewish wife Hennerle Caro. These two lives, I argue, serve as a historical document, revealing how family histories turn out to be a unique manifestation of “global memories” such as the Holocaust, the Second World War, or the partition of India. The article, hence, demonstrates that as the narrator chronicles overlapping family histories, he makes the reader imagine transcultural memory as a constant process of change and discovery rather than a permanent condition. Finally, I maintain that Seth’s work, with its tale of human dialogue across cultural barriers, provides a new perspective on memory, culture, history and territory as shared, overlapping and intertwined.

Every story is a travel story—a spatial practice. (Certeau 1984, 115)

Introduction
In Vikram Seth’s memoir Two Lives (2005), memory traces are found in a trunk left in an attic full of letters, “a small cobweb-covered tan-coloured cabin trunk with wooden ribs and dull brass studs […] It contained a trove” (Seth 2005, 186) with which the author’s great-aunt Henny left Berlin during Nazi Germany for London in July 1939: “Its contents were added to over the next decades” (Seth 2005, 187). As the author is busy “mining the contents of the trunk” (Seth 2005, 188), he treats them as talismans; I often dip into them. If only they could speak and tell me where they have been, what hands have held them, what insight or faith or peace they have brought and to whom, how they survived a bitter and desecrating time and by what circuitous means and ways they have come down to me, a quasi-agnostic Hindu. (Seth 2005, 190)

These travels and travails of memory are what appear to become central to Seth’s imagination as he writes a book about his relatives. In his review in The Guardian, titled “Journey to the Heart,” Blake Morrison claims, “[m]any authors have commemorated one or other of their parents; an obsessive few have commemorated both. But surely no author until now has written a whole memoir—and a long memoir at that—in commemoration of a great-aunt and great-uncle” (2005). Seth himself describes it as “a double biography, an intertwined meditation, where the author is an anomalous third braid, sometimes visible, sometimes not” (2005, 491). What is most striking in Seth’s autobiography is the fact that the life stories of his aunt and uncle as exiles and refugees are inextricably intertwined with the larger history of the British Empire, World War II, and migration. This family memoir, thus, appears to be a modern odyssey of love and hate, war and peace, loss and gain, native and migrant condition, cosmopolitan citizens and transnational identities.2 Finally, although the book is written for both the Western and the Indian audience, it tends to present an Indian perspective on the Holocaust, showing how the memory of the Holocaust enters an Indian family history on the one hand and how an Indian diasporic writer imagines it in a family memoir on the other.

This article sets out to discuss the different dimensions of transcultural memory in Seth’s memoir Two Lives. The concept of transcultural memory in the present context hangs mainly on three pegs: travelling, dialogic and postmemory. Since several studies address culture, history and territory as overlapping in the wake of cross-border interactions (see for example Said 1993, 48), I aim to critically investigate transcultural memories.
of migrants as they move between cultures and nations, countries and continents, languages and ethnicities, finally embracing a global, cosmopolitan identity; indeed, these people on the move are likely to have several cultural connections, identities or plural histories, making the very notion of belonging an ambivalent terrain. In an act of transcultural remembrance, Two Lives addresses broader issues of diasporic identities—Indian and Jewish, the entanglements of Indian and European histories, the representation of the Holocaust in Indian literature and last but not least the significance of family albums and diaries as media for mapping global networks of remembrance.

Travelling, dialogic and postmemory: defining transcultural memory in the age of migration and global mobility

Why transcultural and when?

More recently, it has been argued in the field of memory studies that “the dynamics of cultural memory cannot be studied within the bounds of one culture or society, but rather migrate between and across such boundaries in a way that requires the development of new models and concepts” (Craps and Vermeulen 2012, 224; see also Assmann and Conrad 2010; Butt 2015). These words point to the transcultural turn (see Bond and Rapson 2014; see Crownshaw 2013) that can be indicative of “the third wave” in memory studies (Erll 2011, 4), following the first wave initiated by Halbwachs (1992) and the second one with works by Pierre Nora (1989) and Assmann and Czaplicks (1995). In fact, the growing interest in transcultural memory can be seen as part of a larger movement currently taking place in academia towards “transcultural studies” (Erll 2011, 8). Due to the fact that “mixes and permeation” (Welsch 1999, 197) are fundamental to culture on the move, a considerable number of travellers and migrants may experience hybrid forms of cultures today, which are vividly reflected and documented in contemporary literatures of and about memory networks.

Within memory studies, transcultural concepts tend to surface directly and indirectly in several significant studies, differentiating often the transcultural from transnational memory (see De Cesari and Rigney 2014) with the former having a focus on the cultural sphere whereas the latter more on the national one. For instance, Daniel Levy’s and Natan Szaider’s innovative study The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age (2005) has sparked interest in “cosmopolitan memory” whereas Michael Rothberg’s Multidirectional Memory (2009) has initiated a new discussion about understanding the Holocaust in the discourse of globalization and decolonization. Both these works define memories that seem to draw upon the transcultural context. Also, works like Diaspora and Memory (2007), edited by Marie-Aude Baronian et al or Memory, History, and Colonialism (2009), edited by Indra Sengupta Frey open up new memory avenues or “places of memory” that appear to dovetail memory studies with postcolonial and diaspora studies; consequently, they seem to showcase transcultural memory connections from various perspectives in the present era.

There is yet another way in which the recent discourse in memory studies reveals cross-cultural and cross-border preoccupations. For example, photography, which often accompanies auto/biographical narratives, as a form of transgenerational memory cutting across geographical, cultural and historical borders are dealt with in Marianne Hirsch’s Family Frames (1997) whereas the process of communicating parental memories, located in distant continents, to their children is termed as postmemory (2008) by her. In the specific case of the memoir under discussion, postmemory tends to be closely intertwined with transcultural memory for two reasons: first, the memoir demonstrates the process of experiencing the past of the older generation as the author delves into “the trove” of his deceased aunt Henny; second, the very process of experiencing that past makes the author not only re-imagine it but discover individual, family and national histories across distant cultural and geographical divisions.

Keeping these new trends in memory studies in view, I aim to demonstrate that if we wish to understand the history of migrants, exiles, expatriates, refugees and of “travelling cultures” (Clifford 1997, 46), memory needs to be seen from the angle of cross-cultural encounters in our “runaway world” (Clifford 2003). Thus, for my purposes I set out to focus on transcultural memory both as a theoretical and methodological tool and how it overlaps with other terms such as postmemory and dialogic memory in the discourse of memory studies.

Memory in the world of moving cultures and shifting identities

First, transcultural memory as a form of “migrant memory”—as “memory on the move” is evocative of the worldwide phenomenon of cultural plurality as a consequence of global mobility. Astrid Erll, therefore, defines transcultural memory as “travelling memory” (Erll 2011, 15), highlighting memoires as not fixed entities like culture but rather in constant flux. According to Erll, “Memories do not hold still—on the contrary, they seem to be constituted first of all through movement” (2011, 11). Hence, travel—both temporal and spatial, mental and physical—remains a significant component of transcultural memory whose location is as disparate as its carriers, which is noticeable in Two Lives.

Second, transcultural memory in the context of the memoir is also postmemory as the reader notices how memories of migrant and diasporic communities are also
transmitted to younger family members. Consequently, transcultural memory includes transgenerational memory—a memory handed over willingly or unwillingly to a new generation, which Marianne Hirsch defines as “The Generation of Post Memory” (2008, 103–128; see also 1997). In other words, the aspect of migrant and transgenerational memory tends to combine transcultural memory with postmemory. According to Hirsch, postmemory describes the relationship that “the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (2008, 106). She adds that these “experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (2008, 107). Recalling someone’s past by “imaginative investment” is what is crucial in Two Lives in which the author becomes both the chronicler and witness as well as carrier and transmitter of memory that actually belongs to his German-Jewish deceased aunt. Indeed, his treatment of memory tends to dissolve temporal and spatial distinctions, making him take on the role of someone who refashions and communicates others’ memoirs.

Third, transcultural memory implies intertwined histories and shared memories to come to terms with a supressed past; hence, it makes us think of the interactive aspect of memory, namely memory as not locked in an isolated domain, but memory that mobilises communication, unveiling, in short, sharing hidden and forgotten experiences. The practice of sharing traumatic memories across national and cultural divisions to close wounds opens up the possibility of what Aleida Assmann has termed “dialogic memory.” Assmann’s model of dialogisches Erinnern, as opposed to a monologic character of national memory of European nations, looks at an increasingly united Europe sharing a common history and memories (2013, 196–197). In Seth’s Two Lives, dialogic memory emerges on three different levels: It takes place at the personal level as the author engages in a dialogue with his own and his family’s past, but it also occurs at the temporal level through the reading of old letters, and at a spatial level through Seth’s pilgrimage to places of memory in India, Germany, Italy, and Israel. These interactive, dialogic memories tend to intersect with Hirsch’s ideas of postmemory and memory narrative (1997).

Three dimensions of transcultural memory in Two Lives

Perceiving Two Lives and two worlds

Divided into five parts, and set mostly in Germany and England, Two Lives recounts individual histories—at first parallel and separate, but later intertwined—of Seth’s great-uncle Shanti Behari Seth (or Shanti Uncle) (born in 1908 in Biswan and died in 1998 in London) and his German-Jewish wife Hennerle Seth née Caro (or Aunty Henny) (born in 1908 in Berlin and died in 1989 in London). The author came to know them closely when he came from Calcutta to attend university in London in 1969. He was only 17 and his great-uncle and aunt were both 61. It is during the “eleven longish interviews over five months, between June and October 1994” (Seth 2005, 51) with his 85-year-old widower uncle that Seth is able to find out how many events and intellectual currents of the 20th century intersected with the lives of Shanti and Henny. Like his great-nephew 40 years later, Shanti left India as a young man to study in Europe. Although he spoke no German, he was accepted at a dental institute in Berlin and subsequently lived in several lodgings there, the last of them the flat in Mommsenstrasse, owned by a Mrs Gabrielle Caro (known as Ella), whose elder daughter Henny was initially against the arrangement: “Nimm den Schwarzen nicht” [‘Don’t take the black man’] (Seth 2005, 81), she warned her mother. But later on, the same “black man” became her life-partner. As a foreigner in the Third Reich, Shanti was prevented both from practising dentistry and from carrying out postgraduate research, so, in 1937, much against his will, he moved to Britain for good.

The Caros who were Jewish felt increasingly threatened in Nazi Germany. Due to her lover Hans’s influential father, Henny managed to escape from Germany a month before the beginning of World War II to stay with a family called Arberry in London. Her mother Ella and sister Lola were murdered in the concentration camp at Auschwitz whereas her brother Heinz left for South Africa, after having “run through the funds that were intended to help his sister and mother get out of Germany” (Seth 2005, 294). Indian but still a British subject, Shanti served in World War II and lost his right forearm at the battle of Monte Cassino in Italy. Shanti and Henny finally got married in 1951, making the reader unsure if it was a marriage of love or convenience or simply necessity.

While Shanti had always been in love with Henny, she apparently agreed to marry Shanti only after her fiancé Hans had married someone else—a “Polish Christian girl” (Seth 2005, 254) as Henny declared in despair. Hans was “what was called a Mischling; his mother had been Jewish” (Seth 2005, 104) as Henny states in a letter. The reader discovers that he abandoned Henny for being a Jew to conceal perhaps his half-Jewish identity. But Hans was her true love, “an attractive young man, a student of economics” who “enjoyed the finer things in life” (Seth 2005, 82) and whose father Herr Mahnert ran the Mannheimer Life Insurance Company where Henny worked as a secretary before losing her job on the basis of her
Jewishness. However, she wrote in a letter that she was ready to marry Shanti because of his sympathy with what I have inwardly gone through and what will never again be erased (Seth 2005, 375).

Henny’s story is one that Seth did not expect to be able to tell in detail: not only was she reticent about her past, but after she died, a grieving Shanti destroyed all her photographs and mementoes. One trunk in the attic escaped his notice, however, and its contents—mostly letters—gave Seth access to a world she refused to discuss even with her husband. These letters enable a journey to understand Henny’s family history as they take Seth to Theresienstadt and Auschwitz, where Henny’s mother and sister perished, and also to the world of Henny’s Jewish friends as they reported fleeing to different regions of the world.

As the major life events of Shanti and Henny are remembered side by side through interviews, letters and pictures, Two Lives connects memories of two large global diasporas, Indian and Jewish. Seth’s work recounts the history of a hybrid couple who is no longer simply associated with either India or Germany but virtually inhabits what Homi Bhabha terms as “third space” (Bhabha 2004, 55) signalling a form of cultural diversity integral to the diasporic condition. Although the memoir begins with Shanti Uncle, his move from India to Germany and then to Britain and especially his challenges as a migrant in different countries, it is the deceased Henny’s letters and postcards that become the total sum of Seth’s memoir, especially her Jewish past. Seth himself claims that much of his book “deals with the questions of Jewishness” (2005, 356). However, Henny’s Jewishness is one aspect that she has tried to suppress and even dismiss as much as her past in Germany. Despite their long friendship, the author’s mother states, “[i]n fact, we didn’t even know that she was Jewish for quite a long time” (Seth 2005, 387). This is why Anna Guttmann in her book Writing Indians and Jews (2013) claims that “Henny’s Jewishness and all that it entails [...] spills uncomfortably into a text whose original purpose was to recount the life of a hybrid and unusual South Asian subject” (65).

Arguing from an opposite vantage point, Anita Desai has criticised Seth for dwelling too long on Henny’s letters and for saying nothing about the freedom struggle in India or the partition of India and Pakistan (2006). Desai seems to overlook the fact that Seth’s interest in the Jewish history, as Guttman rightly argues, is a way “to move towards a globalised and cosmopolitan sense of South Asian identity that transcends the nation-state” (Guttman 67), meaning thereby Seth reflects on the Holocaust in the memoir in order to demonstrate how such a historical tragedy is no longer confined to a strict national border but turns out to be a significant part of his family history and thus becomes part of the Indian diasporic literature produced by a migrant writer like Seth, as mentioned above. Therefore, Seth dedicates a huge part of the book in explaining and understanding the Holocaust; he expresses the view in the memoir that the Holocaust is little or not known to the Indian audience as European history is not taught in detail at Indian schools, concluding that “[t]hroughout my schooling in India, Germany—and indeed, Europe in general—had been largely ignored” (2005, 339). Two Lives seeks to give an Indian perspective on the Holocaust, especially as Seth narrates his horror at the events just like an unfamiliar Indian would, hitherto unexplored in such detail in any other work of Indian literature.

**Transcultural memory as travelling memory**

According to Erll, “[t]ravel is the basic process of memory. Transcultural memory results from literal and non-literal travels through dimensions of culture—the movement of people, but also of materials and media, of forms and practices, and of the contents they carry” (2017, 6). Regarding Vikram Seth’s Two Lives, transcultural memories are the result of travel in three dimensions: first, Henny’s and Shanti’s autobiographical memories (as preserved in photos and expressed in their letters and diaries) are the result of transnational lives; second, Seth, the author, actively brings the protagonists’ memories together and mediates them in the form of a biographical narrative; lastly, for the reader, the act of reception becomes an active and imaginative process of transcultural remembering.

Seth’s travels in the past of his deceased aunt are particularly intriguing as she is not there to share her story whose Jewishness as stigma and the loss of her family in her absence seem to have traumatised her to such an extent that she is unable to find words to share her painful story. This apparently unfinished task is taken up by Seth in his memoir. By investigating and elaborating on his aunt’s Jewishness and her life in Berlin, Seth tries to understand Jewish identity before and after the Holocaust. Only through the letters he finds in the “trove” does Seth discover different aspects of Henny’s Jewish family and their circle of Jewish and non-Jewish friends. Before Henny’s immersion into her English lifestyle, the Caro family “never thought of themselves as anything other than German” (Seth 2005, 84). Seth further underlines their non-Jewish cultural affinities by telling us that they celebrate “Christmas” and have mostly “non-Jewish friends” (2005, 85). Henny’s German-Jewish identity merges with a new kind of English middle-class life in London, just like Shanti’s Indian identity had merged with a German identity in Berlin. Even in London, Shanti speaks German at home with his wife as a language of everyday life. Hence, they
live a transcultural life that involves “flexibility and agency” (Hoerder and Hébert 2005, 24).

Seth discovers that Shanti has never faced racism in England (or has not cared to take note of it like Seth’s brother Shantum in Leicester during his studies), although Shanti has had active interactions with all kinds of people due to his profession. Like Henny, for whom her first home in Berlin seems to be a place of no return, Shanti never goes back to his ancestral home in India. He first makes Berlin his home and then London. Henny happily abandons her German passport “stamped ]” (Seth 2005, 401) and becomes a British citizen whereas to the author she remains a very German woman, the characteristics of which he sums up with three adjectives: “brusque” (2005, 6), “reticent” (2005, 185) and disciplined, with a “clockwork lifestyle” (2005, 396). Pondering over Henny’s and Shanti’s cultural condition as exiles, the author particularly questions their sense of belonging, which remains a highly ambivalent and bewildering strand in the memoir:

Where did Shanti and Henny belong, if not in the world of a family or a circle of friends? Which country did they belong to? Not Germany any more, not India. Nor did they have a refuge in the religions of their birth. Both Hinduism and Judaism are somewhat ‘social’ religions, in that dogma and belief are less crucial in practice than rites of passage and social relations. But their religion or the comforting society of their co-religionists did not cocoon either Shanti or Henny ... all underwritten by a certain style of middle-class Englishness more or less naturally absorbed, though at no early age [...]. Thus these two of the many rooted exiles of the twentieth century passed the years and decades of the latter half of their lives feeling neither very much at home nor very obviously foreign in a land that could be seen as either coolly indifferent or blessedly uninterfering, even tolerant. (2005, 400–401)

“Two lives” as a potent symbol of travelling cultures, mobility and metamorphosis appear to take the overtones of all those lives that are lived between the interstices of cultures. Seth declares: “Shaken about the globe, we live our fractured lives. Enticed or fleeing, we re-form ourselves, taking on partially the coloration of the new backgrounds. Even our tongues are alienated and rejoined—a multiplicity that creates richness and confusion. Both Shanti and Henny were in the broader sense exiled; each found in their fellow exile a home” (2005, 403).

Seth, like his relatives, straddles multiple cultural associations (Asian and European), which endows him with the capacity to write from various perspectives. For Seth, writing about the two lives of Shanti and Henny “has been a voyage not only round their histories but also a sort of pilgrimage of their geographies” (2005, 492). Indeed, the author both as a tourist and a pilgrim of his relatives’ two lives wants “them complexly remembered” as these “lives were cardinal points for me, and guide me still; I want to mark them true” (2005, 498). It seems that through these lives, which cannot be easily anchored in a specific cultural or national location that Seth seeks to comprehend himself and the world around him.

Closer to the end, the reader virtually becomes a globetrotter like the author to complete the puzzling fragments of memory whose sites the author feels compelled to visit in order to make them tangible—to “mark them true.” The reader is taken on a journey to Biswan in 1989, the hometown of Shanti where the author comes across the dilapidated ancestral house of his uncle; to Monte Cassino in 1994 where Shanti lost his right forearm in the Second World War; to Berlin at Bleibtreustrasse, which was Henny’s home until she migrated to England in 1939 as well as her mother Ella’s and sister Lola’s until their deportation to Theresienstadt and Auschwitz in 1945. By touring and paying homage to these scattered geographies of memory, Seth brings the entangled strands of his uncle’s and aunt’s histories into more intimate contact. In this way, Two Lives stages a dialogue between the documented and the imagined past—a dialogue that becomes a narrative of return (see Hirsch 1997, 22). At the same time, Two Lives not only demonstrates different ways of archiving scattered histories and of connecting cultures through multiple routes of memory but is emblematic of the underlying histoire croisée—“crossed histories in the plural,” in the words of Werner and Zimmermann (2006). Crossed histories are, indeed, the raw material of transcultural memory.

Two Lives as a work of transcultural memory as travelling memory is also a way of giving tribute to the suffering and resilience of people from different places of the world who have survived the most terrible events of modern history silently. Hence, Seth as a writer, feeling responsible for those forgotten, ordinary people, mentions in a 2005 interview: “When you write about people who did not make any great impression on the history of the world [...] people who ‘rest in unvisited graves’, as George Eliot said, then you are free to dwell on those parts of their lives that a conventional biographer cannot” (Adams 2005). Additionally, the text enacts transcultural remembering in yet another way: it demonstrates how migrants from India and Germany remember their distinct pasts and how their memories cut across traditional notions of belonging to one single culture, country or ethnicity. Embodied in the memories of Shanti and Henny, Two Lives reveals new mnemonic configurations as individuals caught permanently between multiple cultures and languages.

Transcultural memory as combined with postmemory and dialogic memory

Transcultural memory in Two Lives is rendered post-memory; in other words, transcultural memory in the
context of this memoir is inseparable from postmemory and vice versa. This can be understood on two levels: first, as the author transmits the “shared as well as unshared memories” of both Shanti and Henny, he begins to actively take part in their past as though their memoirs had become his memoirs; second, he shares his view on their memoirs and thus starts to piece together their experiences imaginatively. As he narrates these memories by delving deeper into Henny’s letters and diaries, he not only increasingly becomes a part of their lives but also demonstrates the practice of writing what Hirsch calls a “memorial book” (1997, 246). Further, he even seems to undergo a kind of experience that Hirsch terms “connective postmemory” (2012), a combination of transgenerational memories with transnational ones. Seth inherits Henny’s legacy of a silent and suppressed past bit by bit whose darkness tends to cloud his imagination beyond words. Consequently, he confesses to having felt a strange abhorrence towards German language and heritage, which he has adored all his youth as this language was actually a potent means of connecting him with his aunt who changed the author’s status from “‘my husband’s nephew’ (2005, 12) to “my nephew” (2005, 12) whereas for Shanti Uncle, he became “Söhncchen,’ or little son” (2005, 12). In this way, Seth not only shares the memory of the Holocaust as part of his family archives but his own arduous process of documenting it with the reader.

However, Seth manages to overcome this conflict, which eventually helps him to experience acceptance and healing. Therefore, transcultural memory in this memoir is also a way of coming to terms with a traumatic and tragic past, the dimension of which connects it with dialogic memory, further discussed in the following. The memoir itself “is deeply concerned with different ways of coping with the burden of memory, especially with the burden of things left unsaid” (Escherle 2013, 109). Henny tries to cope with her past by not talking about her Jewishness and her family’s brutal extinction in the concentration camp. She suppresses her memories, saying that “it’s no good going into the graveyard” (Seth 2005, 433). In contrast, the author attempts reconciliation with the past by breaking the silence and by reimagining the killing of Henny’s mother and sister in the concentration camps in order to close a dark chapter of Henny’s family. Seth also faces the past by visiting shared sites of memory as sites of mourning in Berlin, in Italy and even in Israel, where he comes across the records of Holocaust victims including Henny’s sister Lola, which appear to give him the courage to face it as the most atrocious phase of human history.

Indeed, the author not only reports the past he finds documented in letters and diary entries, but he also begins to re-member, re-imagine and re-create it, particularly in the part which describes the deportation and elimination of Henny’s mother Ella and her sister Lola. The author adopts the modal auxiliary verb “would” almost throughout part three of the book (see also Rüggemeier 2016):

After selection, Lola would have entered the electrified barbed wire precincts of the women’s camp. Her head would have been shorn, she would have been made to strip, she would have been disinfected, and a number would have been tattooed on her forearm. Any property she had brought from Berlin would have by now been taken off the train to ‘Canada’ […] Now the clothes she had worn would be taken away and she would be given striped clothing and clogs. This she would wear for the rest of her life—a few more weeks (Seth 2005, 222).

The author continues imagining while adding: “Lola’s naked body, grotesquely contorted, possibly broken-boned, her face blue and unrecognisable and bleeding from mouth and nose” (2005, 225) would have been dragged out of the furnace room. Through his imaginative intervention, the forgotten protagonists of history, such as Henny’s family members, come back to life within the pages of the memoir. By re-collecting, Seth is also able to re-imagine the plight of the victims of the Holocaust. In other words, by speaking on their behalf imaginatively, he seeks to give them a role in a larger historical narrative.

Vikram Seth’s distinct ways of documenting, rewriting and presenting the past demonstrate how transcultural memory, combined with postmemory, can emerge from family archives. Seth understands himself as “a sort of family archivist” (2005, 52) who tries to capture every detail of his great-uncle and -aunt’s past with the help of the cabin trunk he calls his “trove.” The contents of the “trove” open up a broad perspective on memory and history—a perspective that moves beyond placing memory and history within the narrow confines of national or cultural borders. The “trove” is, indeed, an image and artefact of global memory, for its contents connect personal memory to familial memory and to the global memory of the Holocaust. Christopher Rollason (n.d.), therefore, observes that “the life-stories of diasporic Indians—of both Shanti and Vikram Seth—become part of a larger world-historical mosaic, in which Indian history has its autonomous dynamic yet is inextricably bound up with other countries’ histories and with the whole global system” (no date, 5).

Transcultural memory also overlaps with dialogic memory just as it does with postmemory. Before looking at the connection between dialogic and transcultural memory, it is important to keep in view that postmemory and dialogic memory tend to share several aspects especially as both forms focus on intergenerational and interactive memory. While
elaborating on dialogic memory, Aleida Assmann, emphasises, "[m]emory exists [...] also as embodied memory that is communicated between three to four generations living together and interacting in a synchronic relationship" (2015, 202). She adds, "[t]his generational memory is not only transmitted from generation to generation but also periodically challenged, questioned and refuted by the younger. In this way, generational memories are exposed to continuous conflict and contestation within the society" (2015, 202). However, it is to be noted that whereas postmemory may not necessarily be contested by the younger generation, dialogic memory is interrogated by them. Additionally, dialogic memory also differs from postmemory due to the fact that dialogic memory particularly underlines what can be learned from the past by sharing traumatic and violent events as part of a mutual past. This pattern of dialogic memory seems to be reflected in transcultural memory. While providing the frame of dialogic memory, Assmann points out:

Memory is double edged. It can both serve as medium for reconciliation, peace making and coexistence on the one hand and for rekindling conflicts by refuelling hatred and revenge on the other. Whether it moves in one or the other direction is, of course, a matter of the social and political framework within which it operates. If we are interested in the positive potential of memory for mutual understanding and peace building, we therefore need to understand better the frameworks that determine the benign or malign quality of memory. (2015, 199)

There is yet another dimension of dialogic memory, namely memory as changing and evolving, which connects it with transcultural memory and distinguishes it from postmemory. Assmann reminds us that "memory is transformative" (2015, 199) as it can create a space of sharing memory however traumatic, thus, it is instrumental in connecting rather than simply disconnecting—healing rather than blaming. Assmann makes an important observation while defining dialogic memory as she states that the "intergenerational dynamics is a central factor in changing the course of memory. A common and even normative pattern in Western cultures is the revolt of sons and daughters against the hegemony of their parents" (2015, 203).

These three prominent aspects of dialogic memory, explained by Assmann, namely how memory is evoked to learn from the past, how it is used more for healing rather than blaming and how memory can be transformative are conspicuous in Seth’s memoir as he rethinks and reconfigures memory. Certainly, his perception of memory not only shifts from a monologic to a more dialogic structure, but it also urges the reader to acknowledge historical violence, suffering and trauma within a frame of literature so that such a scale of tragedy may not be repeated again. The author writes:

Shanti and Henny’s lives almost coeval with that arbitrary unit, the twentieth century. Both were born in 1908; Henny died in 1989, Shanti in 1998. Many of the great currents and movements of the century are reflected through the events of their lives and those of their friends and family: the Raj, the Indian freedom movement, post-Independence India; the Third Reich; the Second World War; post-war Germany, including the division of Berlin and the blockade and airlift; the emigration of Jews from Germany in the 1930s (with some of Henny’s friends going so far afield as Shanghai, South Africa and California); the Holocaust; Israel and Palestine; British politics, economics and society. Many powerful ‘isms’—imperialism, Nazism, anti-Semitism, racism, conservatism, liberalism, socialism, communism, totalitarianism—worked through (and sometimes battered) their lives or those of their family and friends. I felt that a picture of these individual lives would be complemented by glimpses of their century, even if these glimpses were mediated by the opinion, perhaps opinionatedness, of the author. Indeed, the lens also turned around upon its wielder, for this book is memoir as well as biography. (2005, 491)

His memoir, hence, becomes a historical document as it invites us not to forget the violent past like Henny but engage with remembering in order to share painful memories and to learn from the traumatic events. Finally, Seth triggers a new way of sharing memory as changing and transforming through literature as a medium of transcultural memory, particularly as Henny’s memories reach us in a new form through the literary filter of the author.

The author looks at both Shanti’s and Henny’s unusual lives as a metaphor of reading the past in light of the present—our present from which we do not seem to have learned anything. For the world is still dominated by violence and unrest. The author links the aforementioned events to the twenty-first century, which to him still reeks of racial hatred and wars. During his visit to his uncle’s and aunt’s house in London after their death, Seth comes across a sign which “mentions the Jewish holocaust in the context of more recent events in Cambodia, in Bosnia, in Rwanda, and goes on to explain the single word above the arch: ‘Lezikaron. The meaning refers to the importance to looking forward as well as remembering the past.’ As I walk back to the tube, I consider the word in the context of an evil century past and still more dangerous one to come” (2005, 499). For the author, the dialogue with the past entails a dialogue with the present and future, just as a dialogue with the past of two lives is likely to entail dialogues with many other lives, whose sacrifices and sufferings the reader is subtly reminded not to forget. Dialogic memory is, hence, a struggle both against
forgetting and repeating. At the same time, dialogic memory is an attempt to remember how others are implicated in “one’s own” memories.

Conclusion

Two Lives has been acclaimed by several critics for its globalised, cosmopolitan standpoint. Jonathan Yardley (2005), for instance, introduces Seth as “a genuinely international man, the personification and embodiment of globalism” (2005). For Pankaj Mishra, Two Lives can “claim our attention largely because […] [it] serves to remind us how people, ideas and inspirations travel across a world knit together” (2005). Mala Pandurang pays a tribute to Seth for exhibiting “multiple locations, multiple affiliations” (2001) in his works. However, one of the major strengths of the book is its unique contribution to presenting overlapping cultural histories by remembering ordinary lives in the midst of extraordinary circumstances, and by acknowledging the role of these lives in documenting and narrating both global and family history. Rollason (n.d.), who calls Two Lives a “literature of global protagonism,” is therefore justified in claiming, “[t]he lives recounted, be they Shanti’s, Henny’s or Vikram Seth’s own, all have a transnational and transcultural reach” (no date, 4). Indeed, Two Lives traces the predicament of diasporic and of migrant conditions. Through his relatives, Seth is able to imagine a transcultural community, which is defined by displacement, hybridity, and flux.

By reading the Holocaust transnationally and considering a German-Indian family history as important to our understanding of collective memory in and beyond Europe, Seth is able to present a portrait of cosmopolitan, entangled lives, which unfold in modern networks of remembrance. In fact, Seth’s work, “characterized by movement and metamorphosis,” (2015, 279) as Melanie Heydari claims, presents mnemonic landscapes (whether Henny’s Berlin or Shanti’s Biswan) as “contact zones” (Pratt 1992, 6) in which elements of travelling, dialogic and postmemory as three major aspects of transcultural memory shed new light on reading migrant lives and diasporic communities lived beyond linguistic, ethnic, cultural, religious, geographical and national borders from a global, cosmopolitan perspective.

Notes

1. For Anne Rüggemeier, Seth’s double biography belongs to the category of “relational autobiography” (2014) in which the autobiographer concentrates on someone else’s story. According to Rüggemeier in her essay “The Autobiographer as Family Archivist” (2016): “The reading and writing of autobiography as an attempt to construct a life from diverse hints and sources is represented in relational autobiographies through family root trips, interviews, the gathering of personal and official documents and the evaluation of diaries and autobiographical manuscripts” (web).

2. Two Lives can also be read as a work of "postcolonial witnessing", namely the representation of Holocaust in Indian literature in English, whose direct or indirect portrayal we have come across in Anita Desai’s Bauengarten’s Bombay (Desai [1988] 1989) or in Amitav Ghosh’s In an Antique Land (Ghosh [1992] 2012) (see Craps 2013).

3. Edward Said reminds us, “[n]o one today is purely one thing” (1993, 336) since culture, either the host or the migrant one, cannot be stripped of “the other echoes” (1993, 336).

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