Family-Memoirs – About strategies of creating identity in Vienna of the 1940s. By example of the family of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

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My talk will be about one of the most quoted sources concerning the biography of the well known austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who studied philosophy in Cambridge and later became professor of philosophy at Trinity-College: The family memoirs written by Hermine Wittgenstein, the sister of the philosopher, in the years 1944–49 in Vienna.\(^1\) The Typescript is so far unpublished, with the exception of the section concerning Ludwig Wittgenstein\(^2\), and was never contextualised as a whole. To use the *Familienerinnerungen* as a historical source it’s firstly necessary to picture the relevance of family memoirs from the perspective of recent theories about memory culture. Secondly it is to ask about the general historical background of the literary genre family memoirs as such, about the intentions and functions of this genre as well as its origin.

Specifically related to the Wittgenstein memoirs I want to follow the thesis, if they can be read as an example of a strategy to create identity for a bourgeois family in Vienna in the nineteenforties. Finally and fourthly, I want to ‘proof-read’ one argument made by Hermine Wittgenstein by comparing it to arguments of Ludwig Wittgenstein in his writings. Owing to their differences in living conditions, character and experiences, they have different approaches towards a geographical and emotional concept of home.

1. My starting point is the recent discourse of Cultural-studies relating to memory culture, which regards family memoirs as a telling object. What is the reason for this enormous interest in this narrative type? Since the nineties the Renaissance of the term ‘memory’ can be observed. Everywhere there is discussion about museums, memorial places and monuments. The sociologist Pierre Nora called these monumental representations of a national memory *lieux de memoire*, places of memory.\(^3\) During the process of identity-construction, individuals like collectives, relate themselves to such places. I want to analyse the Wittgenstein

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1 Wittgenstein, H. (1948), *Familienerinnerungen (Fam.Er.,1)*, Typescript, Vienna.
*Familienerinnerungen* as such a *place of memory*, but focus on a way of narrative representation, which is perhaps less characterised by a national than by a transnational aspect. The concept of the nation is still a dominating reference point and got recently attention again in the current debate about establishing a national museum in Vienna. This discussion raised questions about Austria's national or supranational past, about kollektiv and individual needs and the relation between public and private matters. As the tradition of museums in Austria shows, local museums had always been founded on a strong regional concept, but were ideological based upon the Habsburg-idea of a Multi-people-state, *Vielvölkerstaat*. Therefore the museums were set up to experience this plurality and heterogeneity. So, if we regard the genre of family memoirs, metaphorically speaking, as a museum of private references, it’s interesting especially related to this particular ideological background, to look at the origin and the tradition of family memoirs, in order to see preferences and hierarchies in representing memory.

2. To explain this I will give a small historical overview about the genre of family memoirs. Like autobiographies, diaries and letters they belong to individual strategies of memory. Forerunners of family memoirs were genealogical tables, family chronicles and the house books of the late Middle Ages. It was not until the 19. century that there was a quantitative and qualitative rise of family memoirs. Now the family became more and more important, and the family memoirs became a popular literary feature. According to a study by Miriam Gebhardt, family memoirs developed as an active strategy for a concept of private identification alongside the collective conception of nation in the 19th century: With the process of becoming bourgeois and individualisation the family became a place of the intimate, and the family memoirs became an instrument for becoming aware of these new family-values. Around 1900 the discourse about collective national memory couldn’t satisfy the individual any more, the increasing complexity of life demanded a more individual orientation. Examples of this are the subjective memory models of Sigmund Freud and Wilhelm Dilthey, as well as the huge number of published autobiographies. As we see, the habit of writing family memoirs is an historical phenomenon, which became

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important in the transition period between the traditional collective and the modern individual memory. The theoretician Maurice Halbwachs first mentioned a collective family memory (Familiengedächtnis) in the nineteen-twenties. But it needed the 'narrative turn' in science in the eighties for subjective and selective sources such as family memoirs to be accepted as historical sources. Only then did his theory get a broader audience. As Halbwachs says, family-memories are only symbolic and variable, because they concentrate only on certain events and choose certain people. Because of this they do not tell us anything about historical details and family reality, they just design the past from the view of the present. This makes it important to examine the construction of the narration – in particular, to be aware of omissions, stresses and breaks – which tells the whole story. In this regard we shall see that the Wittgenstein memoirs tell us less about that family’s history than about Vienna in the 1940's.

3. Here it is helpful to look more closely at the Wittgenstein memoirs and their style: The memoirs are part of a autobiographic tradition, which was mostly addressed to the family, and not published, or just in a small number for private purposes. Next I refer only to social factors, which determine the representation, not to cultural ones (such as literary models like the famous memoirs of Moses Mendelssohn, William of Kuegelgen etc.). We can say of Hermine Wittgenstein’s memoirs, what the culture historian Peter Gay said of diaries as being „a bourgeois style of thinking“. Although at the beginning she states the fact that she can only illustrate „straws“, by which she means fragments, her traditional effort to create linearity and continuity presents an illusory and bourgeois attitude. Along with this goes her description of childhood and youth as milestones in a process of developing characters – as well as descriptions of family visits, stays at the country seat, of Christmas and other celebrations. Max Weber described how festivities and ceremonies, all this acting apart of

7 Gebhardt, M. (1996), p. 188.
11 Fam.Er., p. 1.
everyday-context, express cultural memory and grant identity within a social and religious group.

On the first view the Wittgenstein memoirs are apolitical, descriptive and a perfect example of bourgeois navel-gazing. But the historical rekontextualisation shows, how the surrounding 'spirit of that time' was dictating the memoirs. They present a very individualistic approach to history, without considering any contexts. Only the description of Karl Wittgenstein shows someone who is also taking an active part in Austrian history. The entire family memoirs are – with a few exceptions, which I will deal with – characterised by endearment, virtue and social commitment. Its more a product of the 19th century style of writing, then of the nineteen-forties. You feel the will for harmony in every line; which is a possible reason why the family would not like to see the memoirs published. Out of this friendly framework drops in particular the description of the year 1938, when Austria was annexed to Germany under the rule of Adolf Hitler; it’s an historical break, which had an important impact on the family. 1938 is one of the four aspects I will focus on, which I think are particularly relevant for Hermine Wittgenstein’s strategy of creating identity, namely the reference to the german origin of the family, the generation-conflict between sons and father, the reference to the neglected jewish origin and to specific characteristics in austrian history like the year 1938 – the turningpoint of the memoirs; visible in the change in style as in her consciousness to write history. I will not quote a lot, because it’s a German text, but I will summarize some of her arguments.

Hermine Wittgenstein starts the family memoirs by mentioning the horrible circumstances of war, and the threat of decline, and dedicated the memoirs to the younger members of the family. Then she starts to describe her grandfather William Figdor, a salesman in Vienna, and his family, which was jewish, but felt as she writes as Austrians and were also regarded as such by others. Even though she later writes of the year 1938 that she had no notion of her Jewish origin, it seems to be exactly the motive for her recording the family history. Similarly she emphasizes the integration of her grandfather Hermann Wittgenstein, a german salesman, marrying Fanny Figdor and moving to Vienna in 1859, and the immediate link to the large German community in Vienna. Also the son Karl Wittgenstein, the father of Hermine and Ludwig Wittgenstein, is regarded as a typical German and not a typical representative of the Habsburg-monarchy. Karl Wittgenstein was brought up in Vienna, but went to America, had one of this typical careers, came back to Austria and founded with all his new knowledge the austrian steel industry. For this the Wittgensteins were also called the ‘Carnegies’ of Central Europe before the Great War. This success-story was sharply critised by the Viennese public. Karl Kraus called him in his

12 Fam.Er., p. 3.
13 Which means to be part of an aristocratic or bureaucratic system.
famous magazine *Fackel*, a big German capitalist\(^{14}\), and *The Worker newspaper* an „American“\(^{15}\), because of his aggressive and inconsiderate business-methods. The daughter Hermine called it just the „unaustrian“ character of her father. She pictures him as a generous patron of arts and a secret benefactor of the socially weak.\(^{16}\)

Out of this drops then her very emancipated critique of his education-methods and of his denial of the artistic abilities of his sons.\(^{17}\) Although the success of his steel-emporium was most likely due to his empathy and knowledge of human nature, there was no such sensitivity regarding the family. One example is the fate of the eldest son Hans. The father expected to be succeeded by him in his business. But Hans, since his earliest childhood, had nothing but music in his head. His ambition to make a living out of it had to be kept secret, even though the family cultural life was largely shaped by the 19th century, with its patronage of arts, the private music circles, reading evenings and theatre performances. The daughter regards the education-methods of the father as a lack of understanding, but she does not see the general underlying conflict, a generation gap in a most pronounced form. Karl Wittgenstein was completely devoted to the value-systems of two ages, the traditional one of the 19th century and the 20th century one dominated by engineering, technology and the belief in progress.\(^{18}\) To be a musical genius or an american businessman, these seemed to be the only alternatives. This had to lead to conflicts.

Ludwig Wittgenstein himself had internalised this conflict. He started to study engineering, but turned to philosophy, and said about this: „My father was a business man, and I am a business man: I want my philosophy to be business-like, to get something done, to get something settled.“\(^{19}\)

Here I want to follow the idea, if Hermine Wittgenstein’s strong identification with the family (despite the contradictions) can be regarded as an attempt to harmonize these conflicts? Her writing of family memoirs in itself demonstrates, how much the family is present in her consciousness. Just as the sentimental melody of the Habsburg monarchy formed the basis of a common Austrian cultural understanding; so despite their „unaustrian“ character the Wittgensteins soon belonged to the richest and most prominent of families under the monarchy, and they understood themselves despite these contradictions to be part of it –

\(^{14}\) Kraus, K., *Die Fackel*, 1900, Nr. 31.
\(^{15}\) Arbeiterzeitung, 26.1.1899.
\(^{16}\) Karl Wittgenstein subsidised the founding of the Secession in Vienna, the Wiener Werkstätte, Gustav Klimt u.a..
\(^{17}\) Fam.Er., p. 102.
seen in their focus on tradition and nostalgia. So the family-mansion in Vienna was the place of a cultural circle, primarily musical, around Clara Schumann, Johannes Brahms, Josef Labor and Gustav Mahler. Hermine Wittgenstein identifies herself in particular with the paintings of Rudolf von Alt. She mentions her intention to enumerate the painting collection in the appendix just to give an idea of the spirit of her family. A similar good impression of this spirit is her description of the former Austrian Habsburg Monarchy, where she describes a large country, with its geographical differences, and a people, most of whom had no idea what the monarchy really was like, because of its dimensions and its plurality. In this we can see that she identifies herself very much with this historical background of the k.k. monarchy at the end of the 19th century, with the plurality of languages, of constitutions and cultural symbols. It was this complexity as well as the growing consciousness of identity within peoples, which threatened the existence of the monarchy, fallen apart in 1918, and became the basis for an individual and collective memory in the successor-states, as we see, when afterwards Hermine Wittgenstein refers to the little Austria of today, with Vienna and some little counties around.

Her link to Austria of today becomes clearer with the description of the Anschluß of Austria to Germany in March 1938 – the stilistic turningpoint of the memoirs. Now she tries to be very detailed and chronologically exact in order to present an objective picture of the past. Here is obvious, what Guy Miron called the writing with a „double consciousness“: the togetherness „of the point of view of the author, and the imagined point of view of the „other“, to whom the memoirs are addressed“. It’s her way of legitimizing her own way of living and her decisions, but also to ensure understanding by her descendents. She describes in great detail her ignorance about her Jewish origin. So she tells how one morning her brother Paul mentioned the fact that they were Jewish, but that it meant nothing to her, apart from her idea that perhaps some people would not longer greet her.

Hermine calls it a missed opportunity, not to have applied for the citizenship of Liechtenstein in the year 1934. Also she is ironic about her meandering, harmless descriptions of the inter-war years. In all this she depicts her seclusion from society, due to her socialisation and the exclusiveness of her circles (as shown by

20 Fam.Er., p. 77.
21 Fam.Er., p. 130.
23 Fam.Er., pp. 152.
25 Fam.Er., p. 156.
the 22 private teachers for eight children). In this we can see that she identifies herself more socially than nationally. But nevertheless she pictures her attitude towards Austrian citizenship as an emotional one: As, when she describes how much she and her brother Paul disparaged those people who changed their citizenship just because of materialistic matters. Also she mentions Paul’s position as an Austrian army-officer and her brother-in-law, an Austrian state-pensioner, as well as the beloved habit of spending holidays at the countryseat Hochreith, and doing some hunting there.

Though she first mentions an Austrian-patriotism associated with cultural matters, typical for the bourgeois class, she now identifies her family with an Austria, typified by a system of bureaucracy and a certain life-style. What we can see here, was also a wishful thinking, because the reality was already different: Ludwig Wittgenstein had received British citizenship in 1938, the brother Paul had gone to America in the same year and received citizenship in 1946, the sister Margarete had already been American citizen since her marriage in 1905. Margarete was the one who had the idea to put all special activities of the family members together to apply for arian-status in Berlin. But only after a financial deal with the national bank was the grandfather classified as arien.

Jewish origin forms the beginning and the end of the Familienerinnerungen. Although this played a relevant role in the creation of the memoirs, it does not mean that it was of any importance for the family. The reaction to the year 1938 rather confirms the thesis of the art historian Ernst Gombrich, „that the notion of Jewish Culture was, and is, an invention of Hitler and his fore-runners and after-runners“. The longing for roots seems above all to be a response to the presence of the National Socialists and their forced directions from the outside.

4. This dominant argument can be briefly ‘proof-read’ by comparing it to some thoughts of Ludwig Wittgenstein in his manuscripts, diary and letters. Ludwig Wittgenstein had considered his Jewish roots already at the end of the nineteen-twenties in his manuscripts. It is a bizarre parallel that he thought at the same

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27 Fam.Er., p. 155.
29 These are conversations Wittgenstein had between 1931–36 with some friends and members of the family, about some personal facts, he wanted to be broader known, for example his Jewish origin. Cf. Somavilla, I. (Ed.) (1997), Wittgenstein Ludwig,
time (1929) about writing an autobiography. But his autobiographical search – which remains only a very fragmented one – follows an exclusively moral and ethical demand for clarity and truth about himself and presents just his individual need. It has no historical dimension at all like the family memoirs, which are the result from turmoils outside. The family memoirs clearly represent the need for legitimacy, by means of creating a unique social identity (the ‘Wittgensteins’) and following a concept of roots (German origin) and of home (‘we Austrians’); firstly associated with cultural matter, later with a system of bureaucracy, but always it’s about a certain lifestyle. As Wittgenstein letters concerning the changing of his citizenship demonstrate, it is only the loose connection with the Austrian cultural tradition, which Wittgenstein accepts as a guiding principle for himself.

To sum up: It always makes sense to ask about impacts from the outside. As we have seen the genre of family memoirs explains itself historically by following the public trend of identification with a private one in the 19th century, and later around 1900, increasingly as an individual response to the inadequacy of the collective consciousness. The Wittgenstein memoirs reflect this tradition. Their nostalgia and sentimentality are a reference to the 19th century style of writing, and with this a response to modern ambivalences and the feeling of loss in the post-war period. On the other hand they can be seen as an attempt to oppose the helplessness of the state (of Austria annexed by Germany) with a private strategy of identity and concept of legitimacy, and in this as an individual answer to the dictation of the collective.


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