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"Who do these victims belong to?"[1]
Co-memoration in Katja Petrowskaja's *Maybe Esther* (*Vielleicht Esther*)

This paper examines Katja Petrowskaja's *Maybe Esther* (2018) [*Vielleicht Esther* (2014)] which reflects on the intertwined histories of twentieth-century Europe and addresses the discrepancies between different memory discourses. The autofictional stories collected in the book link different landscapes, cultures, and memories thereby connecting individual and collective history as well as time and space. I argue that the text makes manifold use of strategies of co-memoration, e.g., in its telling of Babi Yar. The description of the site of the massacre conceptualises a palimpsestic topography that continually exposes new mnemonic layers. Like the palimpsest that simultaneously conceals and foregrounds its individual textual layers, Petrowskaja's narrative technique reveals a place shaped by different historical events that are at the same time present and absent. Her text sheds light on the traumatic past of the place that cannot be denied and should not be forgotten. The presented stories thereby stress the urgency of remembering the past in order to gain a new perspective on a common future. The paper elaborates on these narrative strategies of co-memoration that offer new ways of visualising the various layers of mnemonic entanglement.

1 Introduction

When it comes to the notion of postmemory in German-language literature, Katja Petrowskaja's autofictional novel *Vielleicht Esther* (*Maybe Esther*), published in 2014, is probably one of the first examples that comes to mind. The Berlin-based author Petrowskaja was born in Kiev in 1970. Her successful debut *Maybe Esther* is written in German – a language that is not her mother-tongue. The autofictional stories collected in the book merge individual with collective memories, family history with official historiography, thus utilizing a common pattern of transgenerational family novels. Perrone Capano refers to *Maybe Esther* as an example of a "faktual-fiktive Textform[]", a "multi-perspektivische[n] Montagetext[]" (Perrone Capone 2018: 234). Through the research of her heritage, the narrator tries to piece together the puzzle of her multicultural family history. Her search takes her, amongst other places, to Warsaw, Vienna and Mauthausen, thereby creating a multidirectional space of memory. As Sabine Egger states, *Maybe Esther* "envisages different modes of remembering from a second- or third-generation Jewish *and* post-Soviet point of view." (Egger 2020: 3)

Maybe Esther has gained much attention, particularly in the context of intercultural research. It has been analysed as example of minor literature (Weiss-Sussex 2020; Ekelund 2020), in regard to multilingualism (Rutka 2016; Eckart 2015) and contemporary Jewish literature – more precisely contemporary female Jewish literature (Dubrowska 2017; Weiss-Sussex 2020), to name just a few of the research approaches applied. In this paper I do not want to add another reading of Petrowskaja's text that elaborates on the different topics she incorporates in her book; my interest is not in the personal history of the author-narrator. Rather, I am concerned primarily with the text as part of a memory culture. As the different papers collected in this special volume *Literature and Memory – Transphilologial Readings* show, literature offers the discursive space to compare and contrast traumatic experiences. I wish to focus on the concept of co-memoration and analyse how the convergences of different memories is thematically but most of all stylistically realised in the

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[1] Petrowskaja 2018: 171.

novel. My argument has a two-fold approach: I aim to show how the focus on Auschwitz as a metonymy of the industrialised extermination of the Jews and cipher for the Holocaust is widened by co-remembering other places of mass violence and in a further step, I seek to demonstrate how co-memoration becomes visible by models of universal belonging and incorporation of the histories of others into its own history. Before I go into these aspects, however, I would like to discuss structural aspects of the narrative process, referencing the existence of certain stylistic as well as structural features and specific metaphors that realise co-memory in the field of contrasting memories. The highly interesting question as to whether certain aesthetic strategies are predisposed to contrast and compare different histories and memories is often neglected in the well-established field of literary memory studies.

2 Palimpsest

One of the most prominent metaphors for processes of memory is the palimpsest. But I do not want to focus on the palimpsest only as metaphor but rather on its use as narrative strategy. I argue that *Maybe Esther* – like many recent novels – operates with the palimpsest as an aesthetic strategy to conceptualise places shaped by heterogeneous memories that transcend contemporary national borderlines.[2] Already the first sentences of Petrowskaja's text, that are presented in the voice of a first-person narrator, reveal a palimpsestic structure. In the introductory sentences of the novel, we encounter the narrator at the Berlin railway station, ready to set off on a journey eastward.

> I would rather have set off from elsewhere than here, the wasteland around the train station that still attests to the devastation of this city, a city that was bombed and reduced to ruins in the course of victorious battles, as retribution, it seemed to me, seeing as how the war that had been steered from this very city, an endless blitzkrieg with iron wheels and iron wings. That is now so far in the past that this city has become one of the most peaceful cities in the world and pursues this peace almost aggressively, as if in remembrance of the war. (Petrowskaja 2018: 1)[3]

Petrowskaja's description of Berlin has a temporal scope which does not only consider the visible present landscape but also changes in history. For the narrator, the place is shaped by different layers; the presence cannot be understood without the past. But at the same time there are no visible marks of the violent history. The expression "it seemed to me" foregrounds an element of personal involvement, stressing that different layers may only become visible to some people.

Whilst on her journey to the East undertaken throughout the course of the book, the narrator's interest lies in tracing the past. But, as the example of the Warsaw ghetto shows, the present cities and places mostly do not show any visible signs of the past. Instead: "The route through the ghetto: a department store, an office building, a health club, a Westin hotel, small shops, a hair salon, an Internet café, a bakery, a

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[2] According to Julian Osthues' analysis the palimpsest metaphor is not only closely linked to Memory Studies, but also widely used in Intercultural Theory because of its ability to express opposites and incongruities (Osthues 2017).

[3] "Es wäre mir lieber, ich müsste meine Reisen nicht hier beginnen, in der Ödnis um den Bahnhof, die immer noch von der Verwüstung dieser Stadt zeugt, einer Stadt, die im Lauf siegreicher Schlachten zerbombt und ruiniert worden war, als Vergeltung, so schien es mir, denn von dieser Stadt aus war der Krieg gesteuert worden, der tausendfach Verwüstung verursacht hatte, weit und breit, ein endloser Blitzkrieg auf eisernen Rädern, mit eisernen Flügeln. Das ist nun so lange her, dass diese Stadt zu einer der friedlichsten Städte der Welt geworden ist und diesen Frieden fast aggressiv betreibt, als eine Form der Erinnerung an den Krieg." (Petrowskaja 2014: 7)

ruin from some time or other, another hotel." (Petrowskaja 2018: 90)[4] Like the palimpsest that simultaneously conceals and foregrounds its individual textual layers, Petrowskaja's narrative technique reveals a place shaped by different historical events that are at the same time present und absent. A palimpsest is a spatial metaphor that differs from other spatial metaphors such as the network by its geological approach, expanding not in a horizontal way (as networks do) but rather vertically. The spatial merges with the temporal. Similar to the ancient palimpsest, where existing textual layers are scraped off to make way for new inscriptions, landscapes are also characterised by the continuous (re-)inscription of stories and memories. In the narrator's opinion the palimpsestic structure of many places demands a choice: "As a tourist entering the city, you have to decide which catastrophe you are basing your visit on, Warsaw uprising or ghetto, as though there had been two Warsaws, and some people think that there really *were* two, separated by time and space." (Petrowskaja 2018: 91)[5] Literary examples that operate with a palimpsestic narrative technique stress the view that every place consists of numerous historical layers. Important for my argument is the fact that Petrowskaja's act of narration establishes places that show a palimpsestic structure with multiple entanglements of space and time.

Surprisingly, there is no explicit mention of the palimpsest as a metaphor in the book, even though we encounter a scene with the description of a palimpsestic writing technique. The narrator describes the "root-like scribbling" (Ekelund 2020: 5) of her grandmother Rosa, who used to write her memoirs: "She often forgot to move on to a new sheet and wrote several pages' worth on the same piece of paper. One line ran into the next, and another one lay atop earlier writing like waves of sand on the beach, obeying a force of nature, tangled up in the interlaced and interwoven pencil scribblings." (Petrowskaja 2018: 52)[6] Petrowskaja chooses not to give a name to the obvious palimpsest metaphor for her grandmother's notes, but instead compares the pencil lines first to a sandy beach and makes then use of a textile metaphor. According to her, the scribbled lines look like lace, the interwoven words and lines are made of "Ariadne's thread" (as the chapter title states) and refer to the semantic field of needlework and textile metaphors, which is widespread in memory texts, a field that only recently gained attention amongst literary scholars (Ekelund 2020).

3 Babi Yar

The most obvious use of a palimpsestic technique is in chapter 5 of Petrowskaja's book that focusses on the massacre at the ravine of Babi Yar in Kiev. The family history of the narrator is closely linked with Jewish history. Yet, the name Auschwitz that acts as a metonymy for the Holocaust in Western European memory discourse is not mentioned. Instead, the narrator uses the name Oświęcim. Godela Weiss-Sussex points to the fact that Petrowskaja's "use of the location name

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[4] "Der Weg durchs Ghetto: ein Kaufhaus, ein Bürogebäude, ein Wellness-Zentrum, ein Westin-Hotel, kleine Geschäfte, ein Friseur, ein Internetcafé, eine Bäckerei, eine Ruine aus ungewissen Zeiten, noch ein Hotel." (Petrowskaja 2014: 103)

[5] "Als Tourist muss man sich entscheiden, mit welcher Katastrophe man die Stadt betritt, Warschauer Aufstand oder Ghetto, als hätte es zwei Warschaus gegeben, und manche meinen, es habe tatsächlich zwei gegeben, getrennt durch Zeit und Raum." (Petrowskaja 2014: 104)

[6] "Oft vergaß sie, ein neues Blatt zu nehmen, und schrieb mehrere Seiten auf dasselbe Papier. Eine Zeile ragte in die nächste hinein, eine weitere legte sich darüber, sie überlagerten sich wie Sandwellen am Strand, einer Naturkraft gehorchend, verknäulten sie sich im Bleistiftgekritzel, gehäkelte und gewebte Spitze." (Petrowskaja 2014: 61–62)

Oświęcim […] instead of Auschwitz, conveys her resistance to the formulaic." (Weiss-Sussex 2020: 9) Anna Rutka argues in a similar way that Petrowskaja's narrative procedures break up routinised and ritualised Holocaust remembrance (Rutka 2016: 96). Following these interpretations, the refusal of the name Auschwitz as a much-used cipher opens the way to refer to the actual place. The text thereby re-contextualises "the Holocaust in its specific local environment" (Egger 2020: 3). A description of a visit to the memorial of the camp site in Oświęcim stays a blank space, afterwards the narrator is not able to remember any details. This inability to remember could be a sign of the traumatic effect of the visit, but I would argue for a deeper meaning: the place and name of Auschwitz in its formula-like fixed meaning for the Holocaust remain peripheral. This poetic approach allows an opening for a more comprehensive view of the Holocaust, a widening of the scope of Holocaust remembrance. As such, Auschwitz is co-remembered by other significant places of mass violence. One of them is Babi Yar as a historical site of genocide. The name Babi Yar as the site of "one of the largest mass executions of the Holocaust" (Egger 2020: 6) is mentioned already on page 19 – the first reference to Oświęcim is supplied much later on page 48. The narrative technique of the book does not foster a substitution of one place with the other but rather supplements mental representations of the Holocaust. This widening can be described by the umbrella term "Ko-Erinnerung/Co-memoration" introduced by Henke and Vanassche (2020: VIII). Petrowskaja does not compare or link the Holocaust to other genocides or events of mass violence, but instead links well-established places like Auschwitz to less-known places of violence and thereby addresses blind spots in the history of the Holocaust. In accordance with Henke's and Vanassche's understanding of the term 'co-memoration', comparing in Petrowskaja's literary work means to show the differences between experiences as much as the commonalities. The description of the history of Babi Yar is a counter-narrative to Soviet historiography (Hausbacher 2020: 205). The massacre at Babi Yar was not only erased from Soviet history, but also from the German memory-discourse (Egger 2020: 6). This is surprising, since the massacre of the entire remaining Jewish population in Kiev on September 29 and 30, 1941 was reported in the *New York Herald Tribune* as early as November 1941 and a Soviet commission began investigations after the Red Army liberated Kiev in 1943. However, the report sent to Moscow was rewritten there by the official side to conceal the fact that mainly Jews were killed. Instead, the report referred to 'Soviet citizens' (Sapper / Weichsel 2021: 3). The official commemoration policy did not include the remembrance of individual groups of victims; the war memoirs should commemorate the suffering of the entire Soviet people, thus eliding ethnic differences. Only after Ukraine's declaration of independence in 1991 was the Babi Yar massacre officially recognised as a crime specifically directed against Jews (Hrynevyč 2021:75). During the Soviet era, the heroes rather than the victims of the war were to be commemorated, so that the massacre was met with silence. Petrowskaja explicitly mentions this fact in her book: "For a full twenty years, there was no mention of the massacres here in Babi Yar, no monument, no marker, no sign. Killing was followed by silence." (Petrowskaja 2018: 168)[7] The layers of the palimpsest were withdrawn from sight and even in the presence of her visit to the place in 2011 it proves difficult to find any traces of

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[7] "Zwanzig Jahre lang gab es hier in Babij Jar keinen Hinweis auf die Massaker, kein Monument, keinen Stein, kein Schild. Dem Töten folgte das Schweigen." (Petrowskaja 2014: 189)

the past: "When I look for the majestic ravine today […], I cannot find it." (Petrow-skaja 2018: 168)[8] The site, which was secluded on the outskirts of the city at the time of World War II, is now located in the middle of the city, but the visible surface does not reveal its history. On the contrary, the place has been transformed into a park and is filled with everyday life: "Did it happen here? People are out walking, chatting, gesturing with their hands in the sun." (Petrowskaja 2018: 165–166) But the narrator is equipped with historical knowledge that affects her perception of the present moment. The palimpsestic depth of the place reveal the different layers of time in front of her inner eyes and blurs the perception of her surroundings:

> I do not hear anything. The past swallows up all the sounds of the present. Nothing more comes along. No room left for anything new. I feel as though these walkers and I are moving on different screens. […] Would I prefer it if Babi Yar now looked like a moonscape? Exotic? Toxic? All people – consumed by suffering? Why don't they see what I see? (Petrowskaja 2018: 166)[9]

Petrowskaja's text sheds light on the traumatic past of the place that cannot be denied and should not be forgotten. The text mentions the exact numbers of the victims – as exact as is possible – and lists the different groups of victims, that were killed throughout the course of time: after the two-day massacre of nearly the entire Jewish population of Kiev in 1941, Babi Yar was continually used as a place for mass killings.

> The killings went on for two years: prisoners of war, partisans, sailors in the Kiev fleet, young women, more Jews from the region, passersby who were apprehended right on the street, three complete gypsy camps, priests and Ukrainian nationalists […]. According to various calculations, between 100,000 and 200,000 people were killed in Babi Yar. (Petrowskaja 2018: 166)[10]

Her description of the mass murders consists of a list of victims. As I have shown in previous work, the stylistic device of the list has a democratic value because it levels differences (Wetenkamp 2020: 239). In my reading, the use of lists is a second method of stylistically realising co-memoration in literary texts. A list puts words in a paratactic structure, not in a hierarchically one. In this paratactic structure every element of the list has the same value. Petrowskaja's list unites Jews, partisans, prisoners of war, with "passersby who were apprehended right on the street" and thereby points to similarities instead of differences. By using the technique of the list, different groups are put in relation to each other and it is made clear to the readers that the crimes continued and did affect more than one group of victims. At the same time, emphasising the diversity of the victims is important in order not to group them together as Soviet citizens, as the official narrative of the

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[8] "Wenn ich heute die majestätische Schlucht suche […], kann ich sie nicht finden." (Petrowskaja 2014: 189)

[9] "War es hier? Die Menschen gehen spazieren, reden, gestikulieren in der Sonne. Ich höre nichts. Die Vergangenheit schluckt alle Laute der Gegenwart. Es kommt nichts mehr hinzu. Kein Raum mehr für Neues. Mir ist, als ob diese Spaziergänger und ich uns auf verschiedenen Leinwänden bewegen. […] Wäre es mir lieber, wenn Babij Jar nun wie eine Mondlandschaft aussehen würde? Exotisch? Giftig? Alle Menschen – vom Leid zerfressen? Warum sehen sie nicht, was ich sehe?" (Petrowskaja 2014: 186)

[10] "Zwei Jahre lang wurde hier getötet: Kriegsgefangene, Partisanen, Matrosen der Kiewer Flotte, junge Frauen, weitere Juden aus der Region, Passanten, die von der Straße weg festgenommen wurden, drei komplette Zigeunerlager, Priester sowie ukrainische Nationalisten […]. Nach verschiedenen Berechnungen sind in Babij Jar zwischen hundert- und zweihunderttausend Menschen getötet worden." (Petrowskaja 2014: 187) Bert Hoppe, after reviewing trial records and documents of the German occupiers, assumes about 65,000 victims murdered in Babi Yar (Hoppe 2021: 22).

Soviet government pretended. Hrynevyč states that Babi Yar is a focal point of Ukrainian memory conflicts (Hrynevyč 2021: 82). The tension of conflicting memories is already expressed in Ivan Dzjuba's speech on September 29, 1966, on the 25th anniversary of the Babi Yar massacre, reprinted in 2021 in the journal *Osteuropa* (Dzjuba 2021).[11] In this speech he refers to Babi Yar as the common tragedy of the Jewish and Ukrainian people. Under Stalin, both Jewish and Ukrainian cultures had been suppressed and the rapprochement of the two cultures had been prevented by deliberately fueling prejudice. In order to overcome this, the history and culture of the respective other had to be known and made aware (Dzjuba 2021: 118–119). What he calls for in his speech is an act of co-memoration:

> Die Juden dürfen Juden sein, die Ukrainer dürfen Ukrainer sein im tiefen, umfassenden und nicht nur im formalen Sinne des Wortes. Mögen die Juden die jüdische Geschichte, die jüdische Kultur und Sprache kennen und darauf stolz sein. Mögen die Ukrainer die ukrainische Geschichte, Kultur und Sprache kennen und darauf stolz sein. Mögen sie die Geschichte und Kultur des jeweils anderen, die Geschichte und Kultur anderer Völker kennen und sich und andere als Brüder achten. (Dzjuba 2021: 121)[12]

But at the actual site of Babi Yar the victims are not remembered as a whole. Instead, in the course of time most groups have received their own individual memorials. As the narrator in Petrowskaja's book states: "Ten monuments, but no shared memory; even in commemoration, there was no end to selection. What I am missing is the word human. Who do these victims belong to? Are they orphans of our failed memory? Or are they all ours?" (Petrowskaja 2018: 171)[13] The lack of a common memory narrative is expressed. It becomes apparent that her text is geared towards establishing a strategy of universal belonging that claims every victim as part of one's own history regardless of pre-existing family ties. Looking at this last quote, I want to point out a difference between the German original text and Shelley Frisch's translation. In the original text, the word "our" (unsere) is divided by a dash. "Oder sind sie alle – unsere?" (Petrowskaja 2014: 191) In my reading, this graphic representation of a pause gives emphasis to the word "unsere" and initiates a reflection process amongst the readers. It poses the question of how victims of the past belong to the history of every human being. This question has paramount importance for the narrator and is central to Petrowskaja's poetics.

4 Universal Belonging and Differentiation
In the chapter about Babi Yar the narrator recalls a conversation with a friend, who used to visit the ravine every year on September 29[14]:

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[11] On the importance of the speech cf. also the paper of Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern (Katja Petrowskaja's brother) in the same journal (Petrovsky-Shtern 2021).

[12] The Jews may be Jews, the Ukrainians may be Ukrainians in the profound, encompassing and not simply in the formal sense of the word. May the Jews know and be proud of Jewish history, culture and language. May Ukrainians know and be proud of Ukrainian history, culture and language. May they know each other's history and culture, the history and culture of other peoples and respect themselves and others as brothers. [translation LW]

[13] "Zehn Denkmäler, aber keine gemeinsame Erinnerung, sogar im Gedenken setzt die Selektion sich fort. Was mir fehlt, ist das Wort Mensch. Wem gehören diese Opfer? Sind sie Waisen unserer gescheiterten Erinnerung? Oder sind sie alle – unsere?" (Petrowskaja 2014: 191)

[14] Hrynevyč elaborates that visiting Babi Yar on the anniversary of the massacre became an identity-forming ritual for many Jews in the 1970s and 1980s. At the same time, other Ukrainian citizens joined the visits. On the one hand as an expression of solidarity, on the other hand as a sign against the Russian state power and national memory politics (Hrynevyč 2021: 70–71).

> Many years ago I asked David, a friend who made it a habit to go to Babi Yar on that
> day every year, whether he had relatives lying here. He told me that this was the stu-
> pidest question he had ever heard. Now I finally understand what he meant. It makes
> no difference who you are and whether you have loved ones to mourn here – or did
> he just want it to make no difference? – for him, it was a matter of decency. (Petrow-
> skaja 2018: 164)[15]

The belated insight that it makes no difference whether a person is related to those killed at Babi Yar or not enhances a sense of universal belonging the narrator tries to establish in the text. Right at the beginning of her search for the family history, the narrator is obsessed with lists and starts her search for family history by tracing lists in the yellow pages and death records. In the description of this search, we encounter the above-mentioned reflections of the levelling effect of lists:

> Some of my relatives' names were so common that it made no sense to look for them.
> It would have been a search for people who happened to bear the same name, because
> in the lists they all appear together, next to one another like neighbors, intermingled,
> and mine cannot be distinguished from hundreds of others with the very same names,
> […]. The more of the same name there were, the less likely was the chance of finding
> my relatives among them, and the less likely the chance was, the clearer it became to
> me that I had to consider each person on the list one of my own. (Petrowskaja 2018:
> 19–20)[16]

By using the term "mine" (die Meinigen) in opposition to "others" (den Fremden), the narrator points to a separation line she is not willing to draw. But along the pages, she keeps coming back to the separating term "die Meinigen". Just like she stated about her friend David that he maybe just wishes that a personal connection to the victims of Babi Yar makes no difference, it seems that the narrator is trying to establish a sense of universal belonging, to "build a community beyond her immediate family" (Egger 2020: 5) that is in fact hard to achieve. Sabine Egger points to the fact that in Petrowskaja's text "[b]inary concepts of […] belonging are merely moved, not completely dissolved" (Egger 2020: 15). Belonging still seems to be linked to genealogy. According to Osborne, the moral dilemma regarding the memories of others is "thrown into starkest relief upon her [the narrator's, LW] encounter with Babi Yar" (Osborne 2016: 265). The visit to Babi Yar becomes a starting point to a changed attitude, a testcase for a different perception and description:

> I'd like to speak about this walk as if it were possible to keep silent that also my rela-
> tives were murdered here, like a person in the abstract, a person per se, and not just as
> a descendant of the Jewish people to whom my only connection is the search for miss-
> ing gravestones, as if it were possible to go for a walk as such a person at this odd
> place called Babi Yar. […] There is something that brings me here because I believe

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[15] "Vor vielen Jahren fragte ich David, einen Freund, der immer an jenem Tag nach Babij Jar ging, ob er Verwandte hier liegen habe. Er sagte mir damals, das sei die dümmste Frage, die er je gehört habe. Erst jetzt verstehe ich, was er meinte. Denn es ist unwichtig, wer man ist und ob man hier eigene Tote zu beklagen hat – oder wünschte er sich, dass es unwichtig sei? – für ihn war es eine Frage des Anstands." (Petrowskaja 2014: 184)

[16] "Einige Namen meiner Verwandten waren so weit verbreitet, dass es keinen Sinn hatte, nach ihnen zu suchen. Es wäre eine Suche nach Gleichnamigen gewesen, denn in den Listen stehen sie alle untereinander, nebeneinander wie Nachbarn, durcheinandergemischt, und die Meinigen sind nicht zu unterscheiden von Hunderten anderer, die genauso hießen, dabei wäre es für mich nicht möglich, die Meinigen von den Fremden zu trennen wie den Weizen von der Spreu, es wäre eine Selektion gewesen, und ich wollte keine, nicht einmal das Wort. Je mehr Gleichnamige es gab, desto geringer war die Chance, meine Verwandten unter ihnen zu finden, und je geringer diese Chance war, desto klarer wurde mir, dass ich alle Aufgelisteten zu den Meinigen zu zählen hatte." (Petrowskaja 2014: 27)

that there are no strangers among victims. Here, everybody has someone. (Petrowskaja 2018: 164)[17]

In her remarks, she makes it clear that every resident of Kiev must have known at least one of the dead of Babi Yar; they were former classmates, neighbours, members of the extended family. In light of these connections, it is not appropriate to pretend that the crime and suffering committed in Babi Yar is no-one's business: "I have never understood why this misfortune should always be the misfortune of the others." (Petrowskaja 2018: 165)[18] From the insight that the horrors of the past concern us all, a new attitude can be derived: the recognition that belonging can also be actively chosen.

The question of belonging affects not only the narrator but also the following generation. During a visit to a museum the narrator is asked by her daughter in front of the chart with the Nuremberg laws: "Where are we here? Where are we on this chart, Mama?" and, in an internal monologue, the narrator admits:

> I, too, ask myself questions of this sort, where am I on this picture, questions that shift me from the realm of imagination into reality, because avoidance of the subjunctive turns imagination into recognition or even statement, you take another's place, catapult yourself there, into this chart, for example, and thus I try out every role on myself as though there was no past without an *if*, *as though*, or *in that case*. (Petrowskaja 2018: 36)[19]

This "trying out every role on her own" may be interpreted as the poetic essence of the book. The aim is not to relate only to her ancestors but to try to feel with every person, every victim. To assume every role means to put herself into their places, either by going to the physical locations (Egger 2020: 9) or mentally by imagining every detail of their lives and telling their stories. Taking different positions and views is inherent to the concept of postmemory, since, as Hirsch notes, it is a process of creation: "Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation." (Hirsch 2012: 5) The problem this poses has already been pointed out for other texts (Long 2006: 148f.). But does Petrowskaja's proposal to try out each role also present us with ethical difficulties? Do we have to ask whether everyone should be allowed to take on the roles of victims and perpetrators? Can the concept of "trying out every role

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[17] "Ich möchte von diesem Spaziergang so erzählen, als ob es möglich wäre zu verschweigen, dass auch meine Verwandten hier getötet wurden, als ob es möglich wäre, als ein abstrakter Mensch, als Mensch an sich und nicht nur als Nachfahrin des jüdischen Volkes, mit dem mich nur noch die Suche nach fehlenden Grabsteinen verbindet, als ob es möglich wäre, als ein solcher Mensch an diesem merkwürdigen Ort namens Babij Jar spazieren zu gehen. Babij Jar ist Teil meiner Geschichte, und anderes ist mir nicht gegeben, jedoch bin ich nicht deswegen hier, oder nicht nur. Irgendetwas führt mich hierher, denn ich glaube, dass es keine Fremden gibt, wenn es um Opfer geht. Jeder Mensch hat jemanden hier." (Petrowskaja 2014: 184)

[18] "Ich habe nie verstanden, warum dieses Unglück immer das Unglück der anderen sein sollte." (Petrowskaja 2014: 185)

[19] "[…] da fragte mich meine Tochter in lautem Flüstern, wo sind wir hier? wo sind wir hier in dieser Tabelle, Mama? Eigentlich müsste man die Frage nicht im Präsens, sondern im Imperfekt stellen und im Konjunktiv, wo wären wir gewesen, wenn wir damals gelebt hätten, wenn wir in diesem Land gelebt hätten – wenn wir jüdisch gewesen wären und damals hier gelebt hätten. Ich kenne diesen mangelnden Respekt vor der Grammatik, auch ich stelle mir solche Fragen, wo bin ich auf dem Bild, die mich aus der Welt der Vorstellung in die Realität versetzen, denn die Vermeidung des Konjunktivs macht aus einer Vorstellung eine Erkenntnis oder sogar einen Bericht, man nimmt die Stelle eines anderen ein, katapultiert sich dorthin, auf diese Tabelle zum Beispiel, und so erprobte ich jede Rolle an mir selbst, als gäbe es keine Vergangenheit ohne irgendein Als-ob, Wenn oder Falls." (Petrowskaja 2014: 45)

on her own" be read as a non-appropriative mode of identification, a way of appropriating the history of others, or does it conceal the insight that the distinction between perpetrator and victim cannot be clearly drawn and that we must all take responsibility for the events of the past, that we all are "implicated subjects" (Rothberg 2019)? Weiss-Sussex interprets Petrowskaja's choice of the German language for the book – a language that is connected foremost to the former enemy – as a step "in overcoming the dichotomy of perpetrators and victims, and in creating a common history of suffering" (Weiss-Sussex 2020: 12). Literary discussions of the Holocaust mostly focus on the memories of the victims, and there are only very few examples of perpetrator memory. Petrowskaja's approach tries to merge these memories, to consider them equally. This is another way of co-memorating.

Literature has the unique potential to explore such thoughts and programmes and by using the licenses of fiction to address the ethical and political implications of such constellations. The "questionable nature of such an approach from an ethical perspective" (Egger 2020: 10) is made apparent by the narrator. "She continuously struggles to find a coherent frame in which to bring together different stories and perspectives, gradually accepting both its fragmentary and fictional nature as an essential feature of her narrative" (Egger 2020: 10). Lemberska notes that Petrowskaja's literary work is not merely the development of a counter-narrative, but rather the development of a new form of memory that makes use of various narratives (Lemberska 2017: 160). By presenting a variety of life-stories as the result of her research, she does not present a uniform narrative of memory, but emphasises the fragmentary and ambiguous nature of every (national) memory.

One explanation for this sense of universal belonging could be a geographical and historical one, possibly emanating from her upbringing within the framework of socialist culture. As the narrator states at one point, her education was shaped by the introduction of a forced belonging to a wider context: "I had grown up in the family of the Soviet Union sister nations; all were alike, and all had to learn my native tongue, but none had to learn prayers. All belonged to our We." (Petrowskaja 2018: 43)[20] This quotation shows a strong sense of equality that may differ from Western European mindsets. (Forced) equality is mentioned several times throughout the text. Even when some of her classmates' family names point to Polish heritage, it is not the cause of differentiation, because "we were Soviet children all the same, with the same haze surrounding our family histories, which may have been the very reason for our sameness." (Petrowskaja 2018: 79)[21]

5 Conclusion

Looking at European landscapes and memories, it becomes obvious that there is no common or uniform underlying structure or history. On the contrary, the European memory landscape consists of many different and at some points even opposing histories that all need to be accounted for. By conceptualising (memory) landscapes as palimpsests, literary texts can make visible the manifold overlays of history and stories as well as the different layers of time and place. The palimpsest expresses a

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[20] "Ich war in der Familie der Brudervölker der Sowjetunion aufgewachsen, alle waren gleich, und alle mussten meine Muttersprache lernen, Gebete jedoch nicht, zu meinem Wir gehörten alle." (Petrowskaja 2014: 51)

[21] "wir waren aber sowjetische Kinder, alle gleich, mit dem gleichen Nebel in der Familiengeschichte, der vielleicht gerade die Voraussetzung für unsere Gleichheit bildete." (Petrowskaja 2014: 91)

non-linear understanding of time, the realisation that the visible present always contains the past. Techniques of listing and palimpsestic descriptions are narrative and rhetorical strategies of evoking 'co-memoration' in literature and thereby offering new ways of visualising the various layers of mnemonic entanglement.

Petrowskaja's text questions the dominant narratives of Western European memory discourse and makes clear that many events can be viewed from at least two different angles, that one and the same event can be given different attributions. This is expressed, for example, in the date of May 9: "the day of liberation, the day of the victory over fascism – and those of us who are from over there, from the other side, will always say, the day of victory" (Petrowskaja 2018: 159).[22] What is clear from this example can also be applied to the entire text and is also true for a larger corpus of texts. *Maybe Esther* is paradigmatic for a discourse that is expressed in several literary works of post-Soviet Jews: they complement the discourse of memory prevailing in Western Europe with their own emphases (Lemberska 2017: 150) and thus delineate new transnational forms of memory.

This approach not only challenges the Western European memory discourse, but also changes the prevailing memories in the post-communist Eastern European countries. A prerequisite for EU accession for these countries was the recognition of the established canon of European memory politics, with the Holocaust as a central component. This led in part to resistance and active processes of narratively replacing the history of the Holocaust with national memories (Subotić 2020: 4). Subotić even speaks here of "episodes of memory inversion" (Subotić 2020: 6). Literary texts that proceed in the sense of co-memoration and exhibit different ways of looking at and experiencing the past can exhibit new ways of understanding. Co-memoration could be applied by understanding the Holocaust as negative founding narrative of Europe and the GULag as semicircles, which need to be brought together to conclude a circle of totalitarian experience at the heart of Europe (Leggewie/Lang 2011: 24). The aim is not to standardise the discourse of memory, but rather to allow different stories to coexist equally. In addition, *Maybe Esther* also expands Holocaust discourse by focusing on sites of violence such as Babi Yar and their histories. As Egger declares for many literary examples of contemporary German-language literature, Petrowskaja's text "opens new 'Eastern' or post-Soviet Jewish perspectives on Holocaust memory" (Egger 2020: 3). In dealing with different memory cultures Petrowkaja's text does not establish a "hierarchy of suffering" (Rothberg 2009: 11) between the different memories but rather shows that contemporary memories are constructed in transnational processes.

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[22] "am Tag der Befreiung, am Tag des Sieges über den Faschismus – und wir dort, von der andere [sic] Seite, werden immer sagen, am Siegestag" (Petrowskaja 2014: 180).

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