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Ink on Silence
Dealing with the past through images, objects and music in *Love looks away* and *Belonging: a German Reckons with History and Home*

Abstract

Writing about the Holocaust means negotiating with silence and investigating the repercussions of a trauma that never stopped affecting our present. The process of historical recognition from the perspective of a third-generation artist implies the reconstruction of the past through objects, photographs and documents, written and visual evidence. Through the analysis of two contemporary German graphic novels – *Love looks away* (2008) by Line Hoven and *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home* (2018) by Nora Krug – this essay will identify the multiple compositional techniques and aesthetic strategies in order to understand how drawing, text and photography converge in a single effort to untangle History, either micro or macro, in order to understand what came before and after significant historical events – and perhaps even explain why those events occurred.

1. The weight of inherited memory

If, as Lukács states, "Every form is the resolution of a fundamental dissonance of existence" (1988, 26) that the artist attempts to exorcise through the creative act, writing about the Holocaust is a challenge. The artist must present what is often unpresentable, and to do so, must resort to every narrative form capable of investigating the "longest shadow" (Hartmann, 1996) of a trauma that is still affecting our present. My analysis starts in the conflicting combination of memory, subjectivity and autobiography as represented in two third-

generation German graphic narratives[1] related to the traumatic experience of becoming aware of the Nazi past: Line Hoven's *Liebe schaut Weg* (2008), translated in English as *Love looks away* (2009), and Nora Krug's *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home* (2018). Both narratives are hybrid and transmedial; two investigations into the family past conducted through an unofficial historiography and constantly crossed by the question of the possibility of knowing and finding a balance – even an unstable one – between understanding and guilt, judgement and acceptance, emotions and clarity. The two authors step into the narrative of the family past by choice; they purposefully want to reconstruct the history of their grandparents and uncles, perished long before the authors' conscious awareness, whose lingering presence exists only as photographs and family accounts. My argument is that through some specific formal and narrative strategies, the two graphic narratives share an ethically oriented purpose, i.e., to question the gaps of the official history by weaving documentary research and graphic setting. Historical reconstruction is a highly controversial field of research because the portion that relies on memory includes by its very nature elisions and omissions. Hence, memory studies require a transdisciplinary perspective and a method of analysis that help us to understand how we deal with the past through the interpretive lens of our contemporary framework. While those born right in the aftermath of the Second World War grew up dealing with the 'silence of fathers' (see Viart, 2009) and experiencing a "mirrored" trauma, the inherited trauma that they received from their parents via postmemory, third-generation artists and writers will carry on a tenacious quest to get around the silence that enshrines the past. They will adopt an 'archaeological perspective' (see Bertoni, 2004), turning themselves into researchers to fill the gaps and put together the scraps of the past. In other words, the posthumous reconstruction of the past often starts

1 In this essay, I will use the definition 'graphic narratives' instead of 'graphic novels', sharing Hillary Chute's point of view as expressed in *Graphic Women. Life narrative and Contemporary Comics.* Chute states: "Graphic narrative designates a book-length work composed in the medium of comics. [...] the most riveting comics texts coming out right now are not novels at all. Instead, even as they deliberately place stress on official histories and traditional modes of transmitting history, they are deeply invested in their own accuracy and historicity. They are texts that claim nonfiction status or choose, as Lynda Barry's invented term 'autobifictionalography' well indicates, to reject the categories of nonfiction and fiction altogether in their self-representational storyline" (2010, 3).

with the discovery of a material and symbolic patchwork of traces: objects, photographs, written and visual evidence used to create a unified narrative out of fragments "seized haphazardly" (Aarons 2016, 5).

These are the stories of artists who belong to the so-called "generation of postmemory" (Hirsch 2012) and feel the need to investigate the lives and responsibilities of characters whom they had known only as grandparents, great-grandparents, or uncles. These relatives are absent protagonists, ghosts with whom the authors entertain a lonesome dialogue. Authors can only draw information from the relics of these personalities submerged by history: objects, photographs, and letters. To those relics the author can only add hypotheses and considerations about what could and could not have happened. So, the story of a life becomes a plurality of divergent stories and personal experiences. The effort to reconstruct an identity through a few objects often results in a melancholic *modus narrandi*, which engages both the empathy of the artist and the reader. The author's empathy detects connections and omens in objects and places and reads the world as an endless source of signs that accumulate until they become unbearably heavy.

Considering the approximation of a story that can be only imaginatively reconstructed, the third generation is caught "in the abyss between [the] imperious need to speak and the prohibition on speaking" (Raczymow 1994, 102-3) and faces an ethical problem, that is: "by what right could I speak" (Ibid.).

Raczymow points out the anxiety coming from a sort of 'appropriation' of memories. Nevertheless, the diachronic distance does not necessarily mean a lack of value in the quality of memory, but only a difference from survivor memory. As Hirsch states:

> The term "postmemory" is meant to convey a sense of both temporal and qualitative difference from survivor memory, its secondary or second-generation memory quality, [and] its basis in displacement, its vicariousness and belatedness. Postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through representation, projection and creation – often based on silence rather than speech, on the invisible rather than the visible. (2001, 9)

The tension between the need to bear witness and the fear to speak is what Vita Fortunati recognizes as the fundamental 'task' to bridge past and present (see Fortunati et. al. 2008, 18). By using the term 'task' she highlights the importance of listening and telling, two tools necessary to move back and

forth between micro-history and macro-history. Listening and telling have an extremely important cognitive function, because they constitute a form of self-analysis, and therefore a "painful therapy" (Ibid.). This therapeutic research in the past often brings to light censored, intimate and unofficial memories. This sorrowful process took place in Germany not only for the children and grandchildren of Holocaust victims, but also for those who had families involved in the crimes of the Nazi regime. German novels of second and third generation are often an effort to understand and unbury episodes removed from both official and personal history. As one scholar has stated,

> Although contemporary German novels have become increasingly transnational and globalized in terms of theme and content, German history continues to be a favoured subject. Graphic novels are particularly suited to represent both transcultural and historical themes by way of their inherent mutual dialogue of text and image, which can in turn complement or contradict one another (Raedler 2016, 171)

The controversial history that Germany lived until the end of the twentieth century shaped the ways individuals and institutions negotiate with the legacy of the past. Through multimodal storytelling, *Love looks away* and *Belonging* engage with the national past in order to portray its complex events. Published in 2007, *Liebe schaut Weg* (*Love looks away*) is the first book by the German illustrator Line Hoven. The book's five episodes depict the history of the German-American family of the author from the 1930s to the 1970s, with a particular emphasis on the 1940s and the love story of her grandparents, inevitably related to the historical events of the Second World War and the Nazi regime. Although the Third Reich appears only in the background, the artist shows how the war left indelible marks both on those who experienced it and on the following generations. The artist explores the concept of 'identity' and how it is often defined by cultural stereotypes by embedding her own family's biography into the historical context. The title of the graphic memoir is already meaningful and polysemic: the word 'love' that usually implies care and attention is followed immediately by 'looks away'. This construction may relate to the desire to look away from a painful familiar past. According to Lloyd, the German verb *wegschauen* "can also have the sense of 'to turn a blind eye to', suggesting that the familial bonds that bind us will enable us to look away from the crimes of the past and forgive" (Lloyd 2021, 58).

Like Line Hoven, Nora Krug was born thirty years after the end of the Third Reich. She grew up in the shadow of the conflict, carrying the weight of the untold family secrets. *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home*[2] is the result of meticulous and at times distressing research. Published in 2018, the book is the result of several years of documentary and archival investigation that swings between remembrance and historical contradictions. In an attempt to reconstruct family history from both the paternal and maternal branches, the writer comes across a series of forgotten characters, submerged by history. She researches her heritage by unearthing personal documents that reflect the life of a whole generation. In one of the opening pages of the book, she writes:

> Though my parents weren't religious, they occasionally took my brother and me to church on Sundays when we were children, so that we would grow up believing in something. [...] Even though I didn't understand why JESUS DIED FOR OUR SINS, the concept of INHERITED SIN – as the Germans call ORIGINAL SIN – and of having to bear the consequences of another generation's actions seemed familiar, and I swore to Jesus that I would accept it. (Krug 2018, 17)

Krug's impressions as a child come from a series of concepts spread in Germany during the denazification period (1945-1951), such as *Erbsünde* (inherited guilt) and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (the struggle to overcome the past). By describing her school years, the author conceptualises the idea of cultural trauma, which Jeffrey Alexander defines as it follows:

> Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. (Alexander 2004, 1)

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2 It is interesting that the title of the US version is different from the translated versions. Whereas the German title is *Heimat: Ein deutsches Familienalbum* and the British one is its translation *Heimat: a German Family Album.* In French, the subtitle has been changed in *'loin de mon Pays'* and Italy the book has been translated only with *Heimat*. In this article, we will use the title of the US version considering that it has been the first one published and thinking that the subtitle 'German Reckons with History and Home' is more suitable to express the point of view of our research.

In order to show how such a cultural trauma affected her generation, Krug includes in the text some pages of an exercise book from her 11th grade (Fig. 1) describing how her teachers tried to cope with teaching the national past:

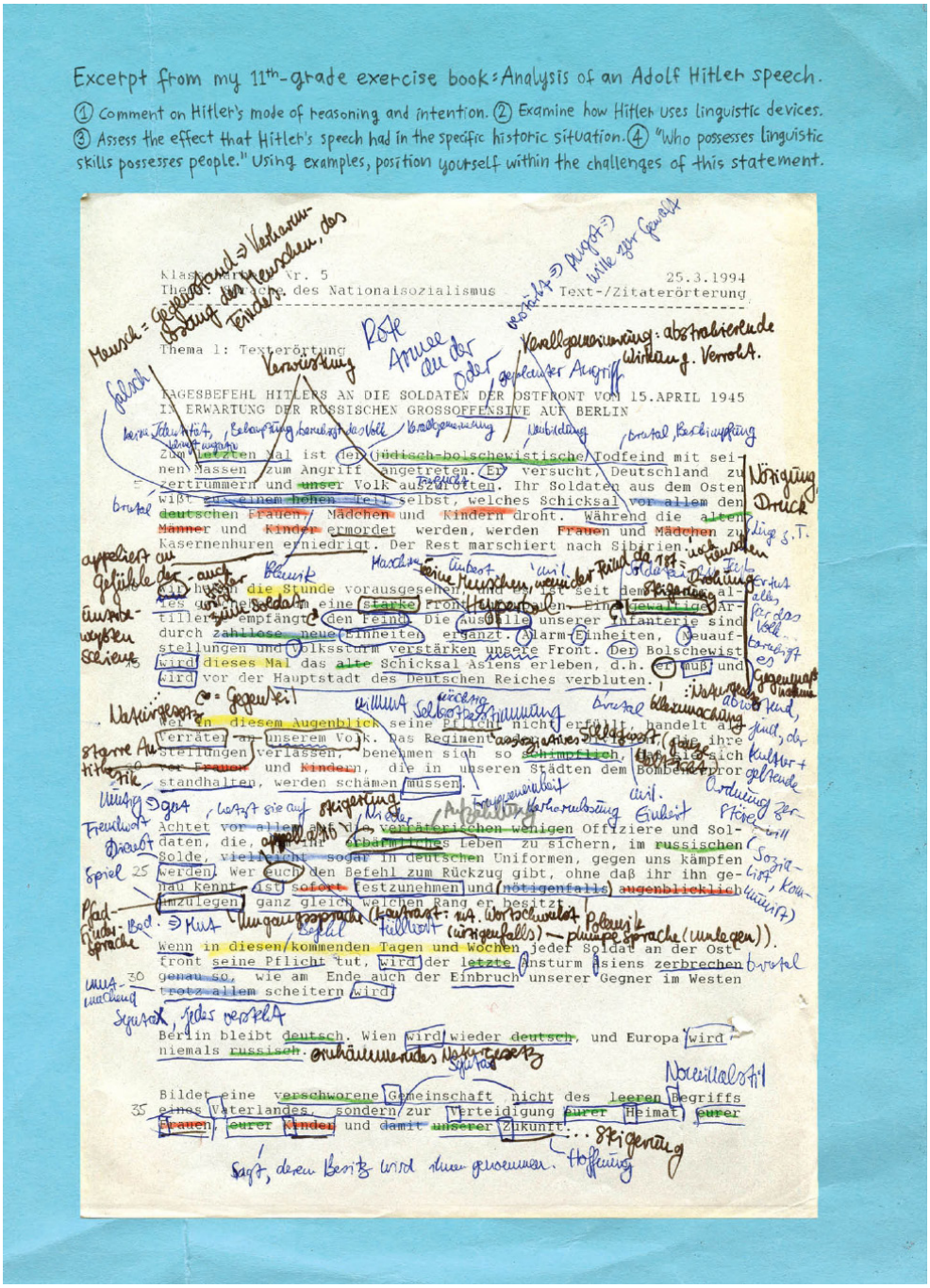

Fig. 1

> We analysed Hitler's speeches alliteration by alliteration, tautology by tautology, neologism by neologism. [...] We learned that our language was once poetic, but now potentially dangerous. We read Schiller but didn't learn to love him as we loved Shakespeare. We struck the German words for HERO, VICTORY, BATTLE, and PRIDE from our vocabularies. We avoided superlatives, and we used the word ZUSAMMENGEHÖRIGKEITSGEFÜHL, the sense of identifying with a group and believing in an idea larger than oneself, when defining American cultural identity, but not our own. [...] We learned that VERGANGENHEITSBEWÄLTIGUNG means "coming to terms with one's political past", but felt that it really defined "the process of struggling to come to terms" with it (Krug 2018, 24-25)

Since her childhood, dealing with guilt becomes part of both her sense of belonging to her nation and being part of her generation: "we felt that history in our blood and shame in our genes" (2018, 25). However, this insurmountable shame is an abstract notion, a taboo subject both in family discussions as well as in everyday life and school. Nora Krug complains about the lack of information and the cultural gap in the education of her generation, writing about a silence that is not merely personal or familial, but is broader: social, historical. The illustrator moves to the United States soon, but even from this 'safe distance' (2018, 36), she cannot get rid of the weight of a past that does not go away. She understands that – as a German living abroad – she is not only representative of her own family, but also of her country and her country's political past. However, the physical distance also arouses a different feeling in her: homesickness. Being a German among non-Germans leads to the urge to explore what really happened from a new perspective. Moving away from that same country whose burden is too heavy, the writer sums up her disorientation in the sentence: "How do you know who you are, if you don't understand where you come from?" (Krug 2018, 28). The opening words of Line Hoven's book have a similar function. The author quotes Woody Allen in the very first page of the book: "I wondered if a memory is something you have or something you've lost..." (2009, 4-5). *Belonging*, as well as *Love looks away* are the tangible answer to these questions; as Krug states at the end of the second chapter, the only way to find her lost *Heimat* is not by 'looking away', but looking back:

> Move beyond the abstract shame and ask those questions that are really difficult to ask – about my own hometown, about my father's and my mother's families. [...] To return to my childhood, go back to the beginning, follow the bread-crumbs, and hope they'll lead the way home (Krug 2018, 46)

2. Scratching the Surface

In the last few decades, in the wake of the incredible success of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980), a new aesthetic of self-representation has emerged. This 'graphic turn' is a symptomatic key to grasping the reconfiguration of contemporary subjectivity. Comics, traditionally confined to a marginal sphere of the humanities, started to be considered an important source for historiographical research. From the second half of the twentieth century, the comic strip extended its creative field to new themes, showing "an increasing confidence in the expressive possibilities of the medium" (Groensteen, 2006, 15) and shifting – from an aesthetic and narrative point of view – from 'serial' to 'authorial'. According to Brancato, the contemporary cultural sensibility and the relationship between individual and society find a narrative representation in comics:

> [...] or rather in a conception of the comic strip in which the author is the centre of the story, in a very literary sense, and tells stories animated by an autobiographical tension which, however, often overflows into the field of historical exploration (Brancato 2017, 121).

Graphic narratives seem particularly suited to manage the overlapping of different temporal levels and, because of the synesthetic contamination of different narrative languages, they have become one of the most flourishing cores of today's writing. Contemporary authors are now more than ever able to write non-narrative histories using the cross-discursive form of comics. In her book *Graphic Women* (2010), Hillary Chute investigates this growing field of comics' self-representation, stressing that often the starting point of contemporary narratives are traumatic experiences. This does not mean that the identities of the authors are exclusively defined by trauma. She underlines the force and value of graphic narratives, a medium that "draws to tell" (Chute 2006, 200) probing "how and why the stories these authors both tell and show could not be communicated any other way" (Chute 2010, 2). In other words, the multimodal storytelling that graphic narratives enable opens up new ways to explore and portray historical events. The ethical importance of images in the trauma-transmission has been pointed out by Didi-Huberman in her *Images in Spite of All* (2008):

> The "truth" of Auschwitz, if this expression has any meaning, is neither more nor less *unimaginable* than it is unsayable. If the horror of the camps defies imagination, then *each image* snatched from such an experience becomes all the more necessary. If the terror of the

camps functions as an enterprise of generalized obliteration, then *each apparition* – however fragmentary, however difficult to look at and to interpret – in which a single cog of this enterprise is visually suggested to us becomes all the more necessary. (Didi-Huberman 2008, 26)

In the last few years, we witnessed a real 'graphic syndrome' (see Gamzou, 2019): many second or third generation memories have emerged in the field of graphic memoirs and have contributed to reshaping war narratives from the perspective of authors placed at the point of transition between lived experience and cultural memory. Limiting the field exclusively to Germany, Lloyd recognizes that only in recent years have, several German-language graphic narratives have been published that explore fascism and Second World War from a 'German' perspective:

In the last twenty years specifically, there has been a turn from a focus on collective responsibility for the atrocities committed under Nazism to a more pluralistic view, which encompasses a broader range of memory and experience. First and foremost, space has been made for accounts of German victimhood and suffering during Second World War (Lloyd 2020, 49).

In the case of two "historio-metagraphics" (see Polak, 2017) such as *Love looks away* and *Belonging*, the narrative is not simple and linear: silence, ellipses, pauses play a crucial role. The discourse is discontinuous and non-sequential and the unsaid is sometimes more important than what is displayed on the page. In *Belonging*, the narration is often intertwined with the author's process of writing the book, including the artistic and ethical dilemmas she faced. This approach shows clearly the ethical and testimonial value of the research she faced, adding her contemporary knowledge to the fragments of the past. In both Hoven's and Krug's books, each narrative feature carries essential information: the graphic form contributes to and conveys the meaning of the text. *Love looks away* is entirely in black and white, the lines are highly stylised, and the strong contrasts give the page an oppressive feel. The definition of "coffins of memory" (Chute 2006, 202), as Spiegelman defined the structure of his pages, fits perfectly Hoven's style.

According to Gamzou, the choice of black and white is meaningful because "Instead of emphasizing the production and artifice involved in the representation, this unrealistic lack of colour has come to signify the gravitas of testimony, the truth associated with memory and experience" (2019, 228).

The story is both realistic and metaphorical: environments, objects and clothes are simple, clear, but extremely detailed. The characters' faces rarely

show emotions. These visual tricks ensure that the reader does not fall into easy emotion or commotion. (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2

Line Hoven uses a special technique called 'Scraperboard' or 'Scratchboard'. It is a technique similar to woodcutting: the artist does not add ink to the page; on the contrary, she starts to scratch on a completely black surface until she obtains the drawing. The scraperboard becomes an epistemological instrument in the hands of Line Hoven stressing the physical effort to dig into the past and, at the same time, underlines the impossibility of distinguishing between reality and fiction. The graphical structure of the work implies a "sensual" practice

and in this way "expresses history" (Chute, 2016, 4). This technique incarnates what Raedler defined as 'tension art':

> *Liebe schaut weg* displays the salient structural feature of a system of multi-polar tensions, which encompass the black-and-white presentation of the scraperboard medium, German versus American language and culture, utopia versus reality, closeness versus distance, and autobiographical versus historical content. The larger scheme to which these tensions contribute creates a reflective meta-level on which the author presents these factors in opposition (Raedler 2016, 172).

An example of the tension created by the apparently simple design of Hoven's book is the end of the first part: a double page represents a photo album (2008, 21-22). We see a photo of Erich Hoven (the author's grandfather) and his wife, Irmgard, on their first wedding anniversary, a photo of their children and a flower pressed between the pages of the album (Fig. 3).

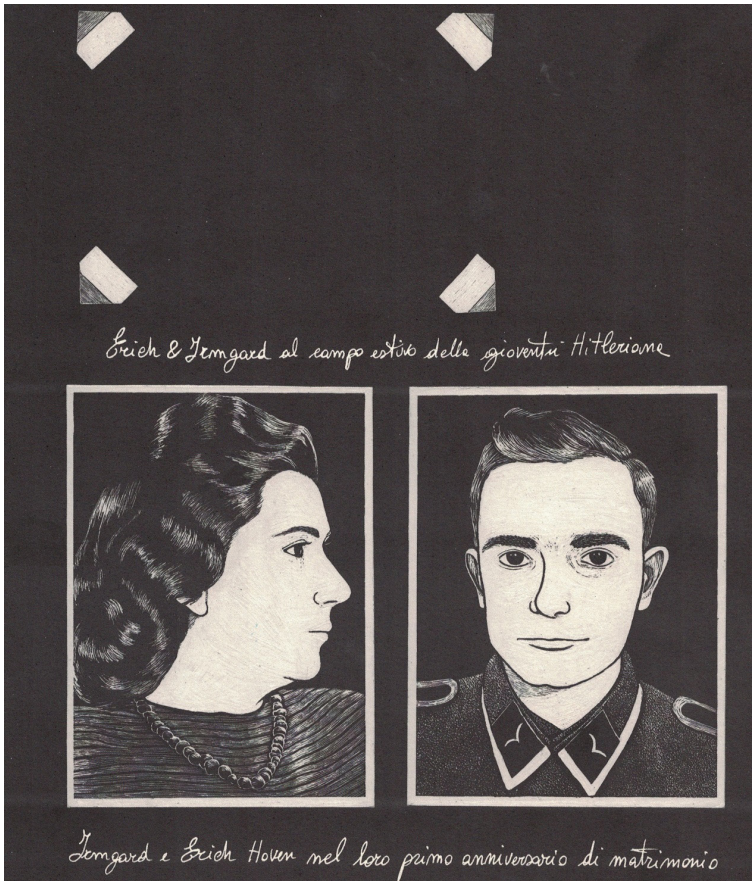

Fig. 3

We notice that a photograph has been detached from the album because of four empty mounting squares. Significantly, the caption states: "Erich and Irmgard at the Hitler Youth Summer Camp" (20).

As pointed out by Nancy Pedri, photographs inserted in a graphic narrative "function in a similar fashion to reinforce the narrative's claims to truth, highlighting and making forcible the objective, realistic and accurate portrayal of self in a way that words and cartoons alone would be hard-pressed to do" (Pedri, 2014: 251). In this particular page, the absence of the photograph becomes a symbol. On the one hand, it represents the struggle to deal with the past; on the other hand, it shows the insufficiency of the documents to give a complete picture of what happened. The missing photograph is part of a chapter of the family past buried and deliberately forgotten. As Hoven's father Reinhard later explains, referring to his parents' failure to share the experiences of the war, he is not able to say exactly where did his parents meet: "Oh, I don't really know the whole story... I think it was in the Hitler Youth, in a summer camp or something... They don't talk about it, really. It was a long time ago..." (75). Hoven tries to show this self-censorship mechanism hiding the historical background in the empty spaces and recalling the violence of the Third Reich only through small symbols and details like the missing picture.

Comparing Line Hoven's narrative style to Nora Krug's, we can state that the first uses a narrative 'by subtraction' whereas the latter uses a narrative mechanism 'by addition'. If one looks at Nora Krug's previous works, one will notice a certain thematic and stylistic coherence: her previous short stories are nearly always war biographies. In her 2012 short graphic story "Kamikaze" Krug switches from photographs to drawings still maintaining a classic comic-strip structure (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4

Conversely, most of *Belonging* does not stick to the traditional panel format; the drawing often dissolves into a fragmented and distorted form that displays the free associations of memory (Fig. 5).

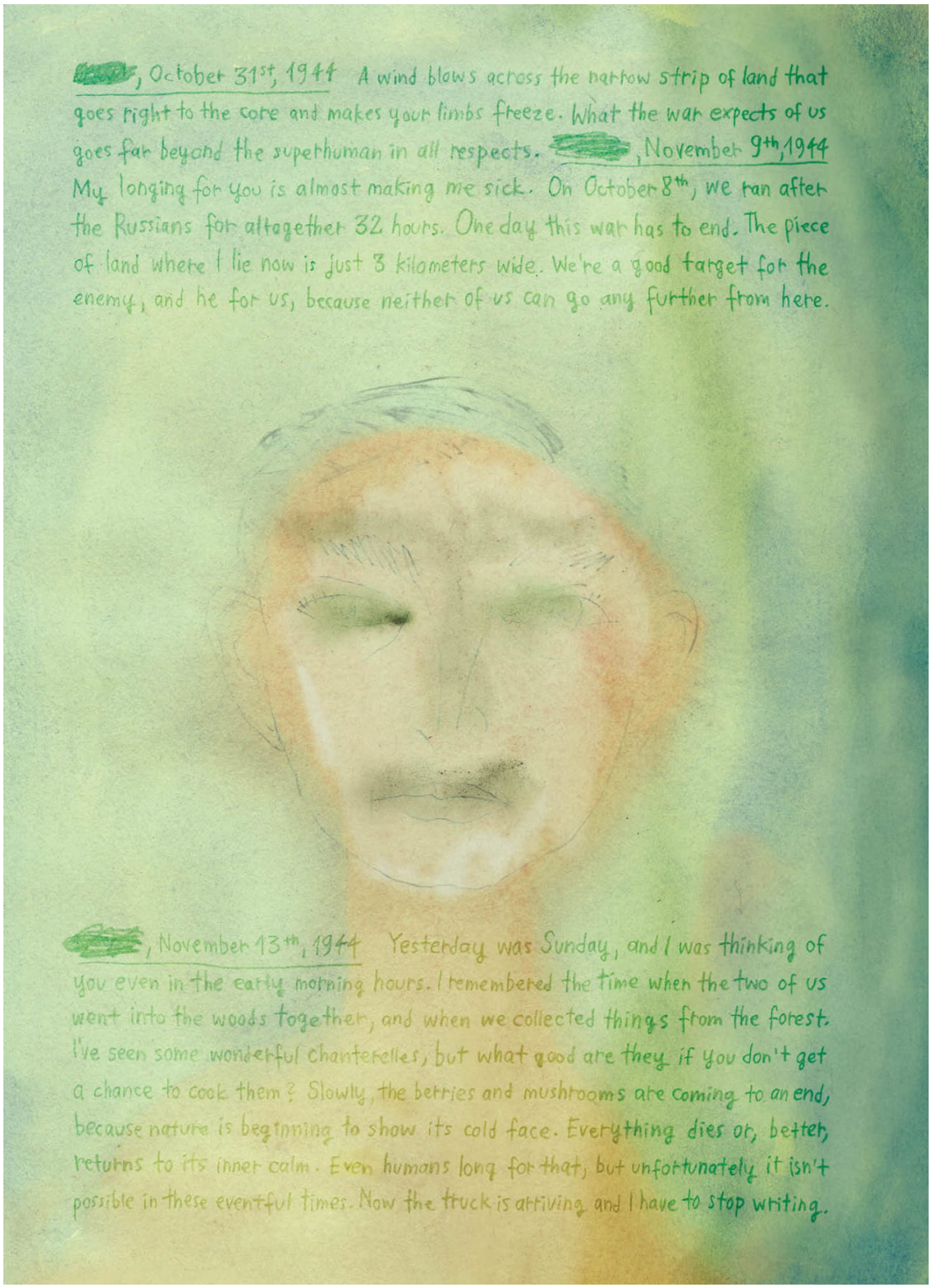
[redacted], October 31st, 1944 A wind blows across the narrow strip of land that goes right to the core and makes your limbs freeze. What the war expects of us goes far beyond the superhuman in all respects. [redacted], November 9th, 1944 My longing for you is almost making me sick. On October 8th, we ran after the Russians for altogether 32 hours. One day this war has to end. The piece of land where I lie now is just 3 kilometers wide. We're a good target for the enemy, and he for us, because neither of us can go any further from here.
[redacted], November 13th, 1944 Yesterday was Sunday, and I was thinking of you even in the early morning hours. I remembered the time when the two of us went into the woods together, and when we collected things from the forest. I've seen some wonderful chanterelles, but what good are they if you don't get a chance to cook them? Slowly, the berries and mushrooms are coming to an end, because nature is beginning to show its cold face. Everything dies or, better, returns to its inner calm. Even humans long for that, but unfortunately it isn't possible in these eventful times. Now the truck is arriving and I have to stop writing.

Fig. 5

Through an artisanal and typographic process, Krug perfectly combines the density of the iconic dimension, alternating it with writing. The fragmentation and the heterogeneous nature of materials render the author's effort to reconstruct the history. Furthermore, the editing process becomes crucial for the work to unfold gradually; it reveals the author's thinking and research even before she finishes the work. The use of this 'scrapbook technique', i.e., the use of paper cutouts, leaves the author the freedom to jump from past to present, real and poetic, documentary and imaginary. As in *Love looks away*, the narrative space is organised in 'boxes of memory'. Krug's work is a graphic anatomy of memory examined through its own mechanisms. The author allows the reader to collect clues and build hypotheses on the traces of the past through a graphic that breaks down the construction of history into tiny images, into shreds of the past that have unexpected resonances and that maintain a dialogue with the invisible present. The result is a storyline that overturns the traditional criteria of anteriority and posteriority on which a narrative is typically constructed. Nora Krug writes a metanarrative work in which the problem of representability of the past through language and images is explicitly communicated to the reader; she often underlines the importance of the visual dimension of memory, especially when it is connected to history and historical transmission. If the research of meaning is the pivot of the work, the montage become its visual embodiment. The constant semiotic exchange between text and image has not only an aesthetic value, it shows a possible order among a multitude of possibilities. The woman's silhouette on the cover of the book is a recurring theme throughout the book; what seems to be no more than a tribute to Caspar David Friedrich's 1818 painting, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* is rather an example of a long visual tradition that seems to run through German culture across the centuries. Krug shows the reader this cultural *topos* by disseminating through the text a long genealogy of postcards and private photos she found during her travels in Germany (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6

Looking at the group of pictures it seems that this visual composition is one in which Germans have always identified. The stunning difference in proportion between the wanderer and the immensity in front of him is a contemporary *Sehnsucht*, a metaphor for the writer's challenge.

When pictures are part of the narrative, they not only have an aesthetic or thematic value. Scott McCloud thinks that through the alternation of images and text, the reader becomes "co-creator of the narrative" (McCloud 1993, 68) because his or her imagination is involved in a complex cognitive experience in which imagination should fill the empty spaces between one page and another. The presence of photographs also creates a tension between moment and duration. Photographs, those "nomadic things that [have] only a small chance to survive" (Sebald 2006, 24), are fascinating objects that are fragile on the one hand and epiphanical and unquestionable on the other. When placed in the middle of a tale, they ask for a pause during the reading process. In an interview in 1996, W. G. Sebald compares the cognitive function of figurative art, literature and music; he states that figurative art has the enormous advantage of being able to escape time, of being able to build a barrier against what is

ceaselessly being lost. “Figurative art is static; literature and music, on the other hand, are dynamic, dragging towards the end. Inserting images into a text is also an attempt to somehow, at least for a moment, resist the inevitability of the end” (see Sebald 2011, 140). Both authors play with the ‘truth’ told by the documents and the photographs. In *Belonging* and *Love looks away*, photos are not simulacra, but instead they take on a documentary meaning only when inserted into the narrative mechanism. By redrawing the documents (Hoven) or transforming them (Krug), photographs and documents work as a trace of the past. Hoven inserts highly realistic scraped paper documents throughout the comic (Fig. 7).

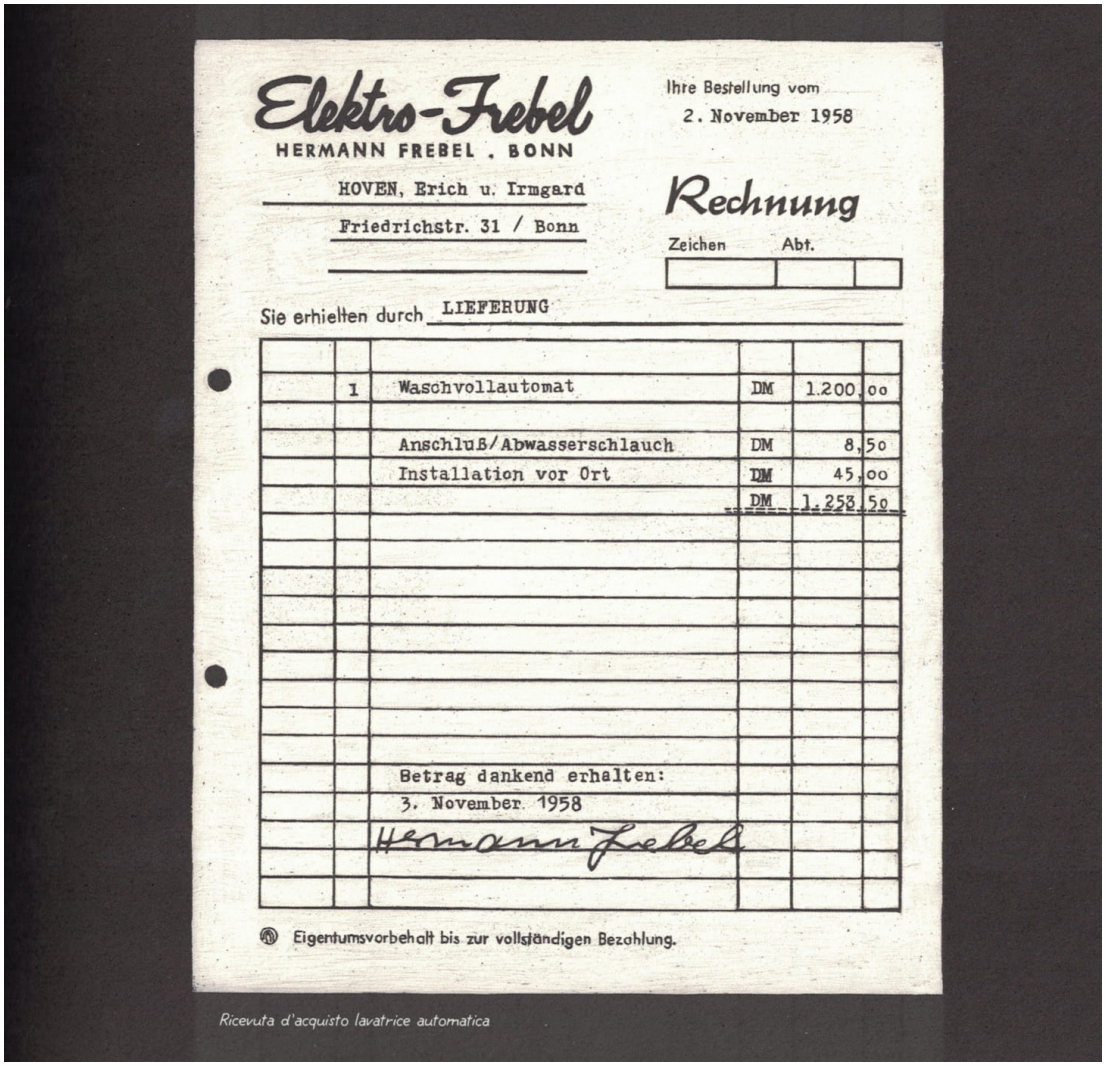

Fig. 7

According to Raedler's interpretation, the "deliberate ambiguity in the production process speaks to the complexity and intricacies of the graphic novel's content despite its outwardly and simple aesthetic appearance" (2016, 175).

On the other hand, Krug uses real documents and pictures; the peculiarity is that the author does not leave the photos inviolate, but breaks them down, colours them, interferes with them, exposing her memorialist and witnessing dimension. While researching information about her grandfather, the way Krug represents him changes according to what she discovers (Fig. 8).

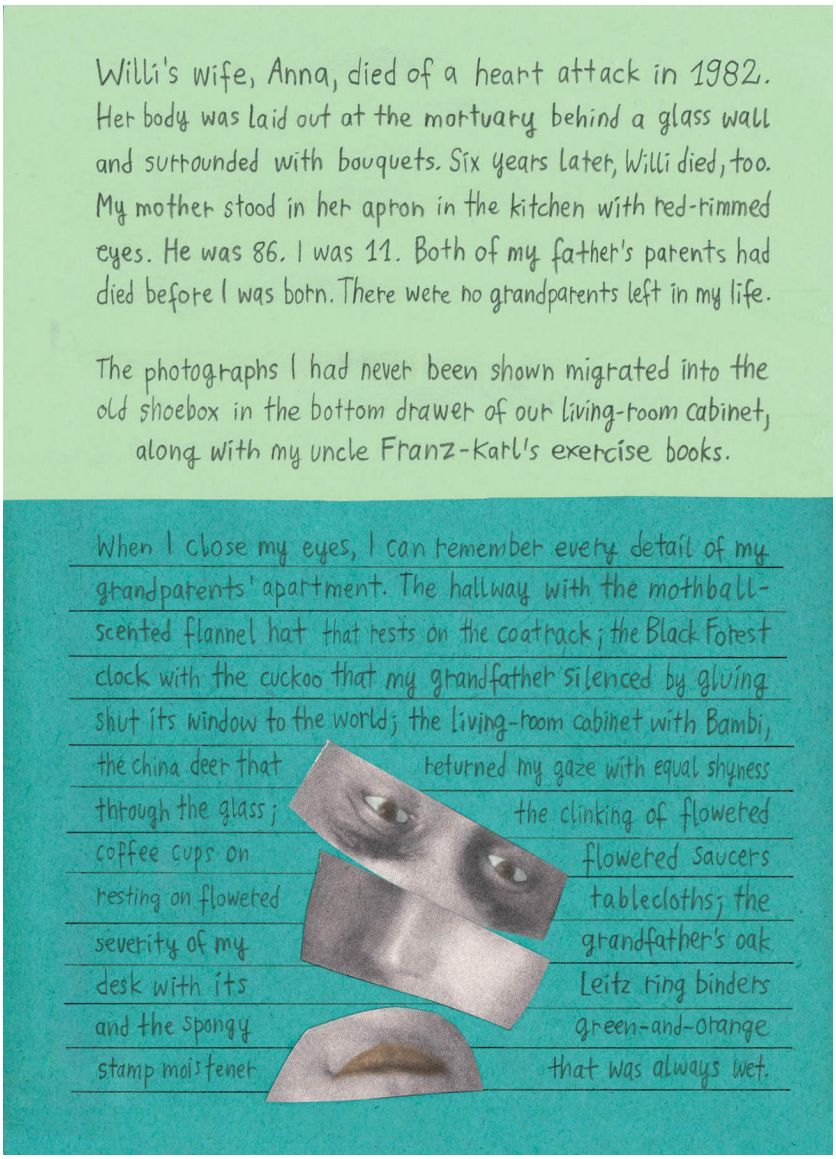

Fig. 8

Her grandfather's pictures do not merely serve as information for the reader, but also as "affective and thus connective sites of identification" (Cvetkovich 2008, 120). By destroying and recollecting the pieces of her grandfather's picture, Krug shows the reader the *punctum* (see Barthes, 1982) of the photograph, e.g., the emotional aspect hidden in a photograph by which the spectator is irrationally affected.

3. Paper Sounds

As we mentioned in the beginning, both Krug and Hoven reanimate the ghostly memories about war perpetrators by digging up relics from a chronologically distant past but describing them through a sense of complicity and accountability. According to Grujić and Schaum (2019), this process helps creating a feeling of 'post-home'. While photographs and documents can recall a memory of the past but require the effort of memory to be affective, music is characterised by its technical reproducibility, which is why the acoustic memory works in a different way. Starting with Proust's Vinteuil *Sonata*, musical-sound perception and the theme of listening have become frequent topics in literary works. In twentieth-century literature, sound phenomena open up a new dimension of access to the unconscious. In the course of time, illustrators have developed many tricks to overcome the apparent absence of sound in comics, starting with onomatopoeia. Both in *Belonging* and in *Love looks away*, music plays a very special role. In Hoven's book, the first chapter is dedicated to the childhood of the author's grandfather Erich. The pre-adolescent boy is portrayed as walking with his friends through the streets of Bonn accompanied by the sound of drums. Erich seems satisfied in his Hitler Youth uniform, but his thoughts – graphically represented in the balloon – refer to something else. The next page reveals the subject of Erich's thoughts while he stares at himself in the mirror: the child is in the process of building a radio. Suddenly, a wave of musical notes explodes from the radio and surrounds Erich, who assumes an ecstatic expression. In a much smaller rectangle, on the next page, the voice on the radio announces, "That was Overture No. 7 by the Jewish composer Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy" (2008, 17). As soon as the music stops, Erich finds himself shocked to discover that his radio works, and that he has not only just listened to an English-language station (totally illegal in Nazi Germany), but he has also listened a piece by a Jewish composer (Fig. 9).

Fig. 9

On the following page, the image in which Erich looks at himself in the mirror in his uniform is repeated, but this time his smile turns into a macabre grin. The reflection in the mirror repeated twice points to the moment when Erich seems to doubt his belonging to Hitler's youth. This doubt is not accompanied by any linguistic signal, but it is only interpreted by the reader through the child's reaction to the forbidden music. Hoven's technique, i.e., drawing of the stave, is only one of the ways of representing music in comics. In this case, a reader that cannot read a stave will not be able to imagine the real music

the character is listening to. The notes on the pentagram lose their musical value (in terms of solfeggio) and take on a value that derives exclusively from the context, namely 'music'. The contextual and narrative importance of the music is only given through the voice of the BBC speaker and later by the reaction of the character. Overwhelmed by his own feelings, Erich prefers to tell his friends that the radio he has been working on is broken. The sequence takes place as Erich's comrades walk down the street and the words "Jew" are written on the shopwindows. Erich is portrayed again a few instants later, but this time he is marching in the opposite direction to his comrades. The musical experience tells the reader a story: that of his inner distance from the values of Hitler's youth and the recognition of two discordant parts of himself. This is another aspect of Hoven's 'tension art', according to Raedler's interpretation: "essential information hides in those gaps: the violence of the Third Reich and the Holocaust are only very indirectly hinted at by way of the Yellow Star (...), which may go unnoticed by many a reader, and through Mendelssohn's music (...) which could only be listened to illegally" (Raedler 2016, 185).

In *Belonging*, Nora Krug uses another of the narrative possibilities of a graphic representation of music: a kind of musical *ekphrasis*, i.e., the description of music through words. The second chapter entitled 'Forgotten Songs' describes two experiences (again, in this case, two similar drawings show two different moments) that inspired the author to investigate her family's past. The first chapter opens with a double-page drawing of a skyline. The author, who has just moved to New York to study, meets an old woman during a party on a roof:

> It was one of my very first encounters in New York City. [...] I didn't know anyone. No one knew me. Everything was possible. An elderly woman sitting in a lounge chair had overheard our conversation. 'Where are you from?' she asked me. 'I'm from Germany'. 'That's what I thought'. 'Have you ever been to Germany?' I asked. 'Yes. A long, long time ago'. She avoided eye contact. And then I understood. She went on to tell me about how she had survived the concentration camp because one of the female guards had rescued her from the gas chamber sixteen times at the last moment. [...] A Familiar heat began to form in the pit of my stomach. How do you react, as a German, standing across from a human being who reveals this memory to you? I remained silent. 'That was a long time ago' she finally said. 'I'm sure things have changed. You seem like someone who was raised by loving parents'. I nodded (Krug 2018, 6-9).

Inherited guilt continues to plague Krug whenever someone brings up her German origins. Over the years the relationship with her heritage changes,

her identity becomes only a fading memory, but continues to be important in her daily life. The physical and chronological distance changes her ''being German'' into ''feeling German''.

> After 12 years of living in America [...] I feel more German than ever before. The longer I've lived in my Caribbean neighbourhood in Brooklyn, the more I find myself scavenging American thrift stores for the green-stemmed Riesling glasses, the vine-branch corkscrews, and the cuckoo clocks I would never have thought to buy in Germany. [...] From this safe distance, I allow myself to see the loss it once endured. And yet, the longer I've lived away from Germany, the more elusive my idea of my identity becomes. My HEIMAT is an echo, a forgotten word once called into the mountains. An unrecognizable reverberation. (2018, 36)

Twelve years later, the artist is again on a rooftop in New York; she is now a well-known author and has not returned to Germany for a long time. This time she is not listening to the story of a Holocaust survivor, but to a man singing Schubert's WINTERREISE. "And this time, with its longing for love and nature and death, with its melancholy and its unembellished beauty, my native language evokes longing, rather than shame" (Krug 2018, 31). The music[3] brings Krug back to the beauty of her mother tongue and to a metaphorical 'before' evoked by Schubert's notes, a feeling out of time, or rather a 'time regained'. We mentioned at the beginning of our analysis that the lack of transmission of testimonies from one generation to the next results in a void in memory, but it is perhaps more accurate to say that it also causes a gap in identity. For Nora Krug, German cultural self-censorship is a real violence against the generations of innocent people who came after the generation of perpetrators. Mastering the past does not mean forgetting the cultural life and identity of a country that consists in music, symbols, art and all the cultural machinery that the Nazis manipulated and for this reason today continues to be negatively impacted.

3 Both authors were invited to participate to a conference called *Ferocious Ink: A Conversation between Line Hoven and Nora Krug* and had a long chat during which they discussed the education they grew up with during the Eighties. The interview took place shortly before the publication of *Belonging* and Nora Krug talks about her desire to produce an audio book containing – in addition to the graphic format – a musical soundtrack of German *Volkslieder* in order to appeal synesthetically to all senses of the reader. The audio book was published in America shortly after the incredible success of the book.

4. Postmodern Madeleines

In both books, the stories of the maternal and paternal family alternate in each chapter. In *Love looks away*, the bilingualism of the family is represented using two different fonts, including grammatical errors from both sides of family when they try to communicate. In *Belonging*, on the other hand, the two narrative lines are distinguished using two different colour palettes. The maternal branch is recognisable in the family tree at the beginning of the book by the nuances of green. The paternal branch instead (whose family tree is placed at the end of the book) is painted in shades of orange. Another stylistic aspect shared by both books is that at the end of each chapter there is a page displaying an object. Hoven divides her book in five sections. Every chapter begins with a blank page except for the drawing of an item that belongs to the family's archive, i.e., a Hitler Youth identity card (7), an ice-skating ticket (23), or an invoice for a washing machine (45). These objects reveal to the reader a near past that seems very distant; they are containers of a familiar and cultural identity and pieces of collective history. Hoven finds these objects and transforms them into "affective history" (Polak 2017, 14) by drawing them on the page. These apparently useless documents help the reader to understand the historical-generational context in which the narrative takes place. Hoven's scratchboarded objects are highly detailed and can easily be confused with real objects. Through this method, "they succeed in fostering a critical engagement with the 'truth' of the text and its depiction of history" (Raedler 2016: 175). In *Belonging* we witness a similar process: Krug's investigation is constantly interrupted by two inserts, the first is *Things German – From the notebook of a homesick émigré*, and the second is *Flea Market finds: From the scrapbook of a memory archivist.* It is a sort of 'Museum of Innocence', a collection that Remo Ceserani defined as: "an omnipresent, omnivorous and almost libidinal historicism, which tries to reduce the past to a museum of photographs and a collection of press clippings and simulacra" (Ceserani, 1997: 142). The objects listed by Krug and Hoven are postmodern madeleines, shards of consumerist culture and fragments of a generational imaginary that are invested with nostalgic lyricism and act as catalysts for the reader's empathy. For Krug, some particular objects compensate for the lack of information about the past; certain 'things' are the only evidence left of the forgotten German culture. The comforting and domestic objects listed by Krug seem to be an antidote to the seriousness of the story: these simple drawings refer to some of the clichés

associated with the German people and reflect the way in which the conflicting aspects of an identity reveal themselves in the finest detail. An interesting example is the first listed object, the *Hansaplast* band-aids (Fig. 10).

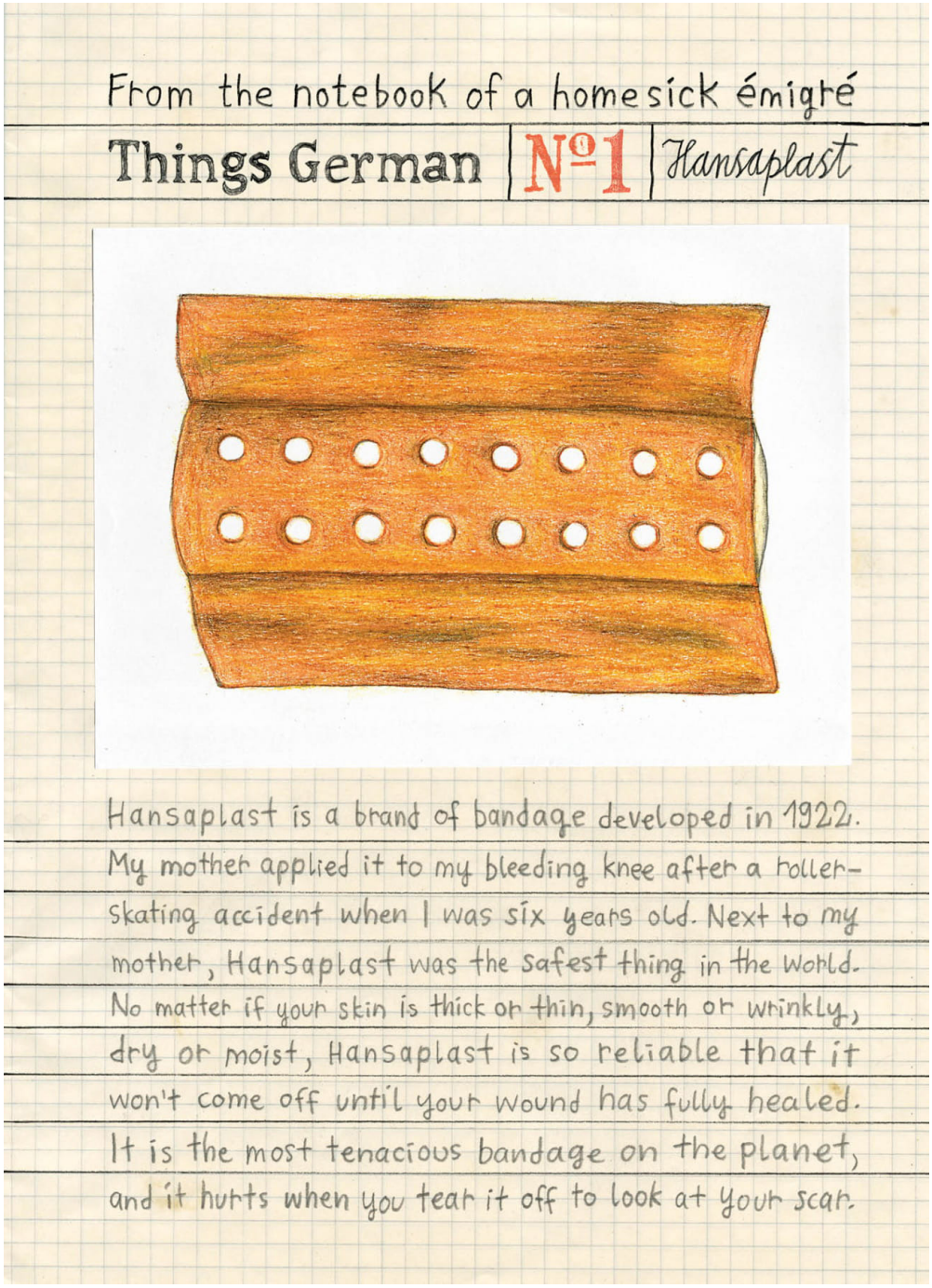

Fig. 10

As pointed out by Grujić and Schaum:

> Already on the first page, we read that the homeland invokes safety by means of the mother tongue and of the mother herself. It is lived through every-day objects and the cosiness they provide, such as the bandage or the hot-water bottle as staple of German household. Connected to these objects, a feminine trope (motherly care) plays a central role. 'Next to my mother, Hansaplast was the safest thing in the world' (2019, 202).

The scent of dried flowers and yellowed leaves that one breathes among the most touching pages of the book is on the one hand a nostalgic 'poetics of things', but on the other hand a suffocating catalogue that evokes stories from the past but cannot change them. It is no coincidence that the last page of *Belonging* is the drawing of one last highly metaphorical object, the Uhu glue: "Even though Uhu is the strongest glue available, it cannot cover up the crack" (Krug 2018, 262).

5. Conclusion

The two texts we examined are part of what Lynn Kutch defined as the "delayed process of German cultural acknowledgement" (2016, 1). Although they address the past, both books are about the present. The apparently messy structure helps the reader to understand that history is not a sequence of facts, but instead is a sequence of decisions made by individuals. There is an inseparable link between events and responsibilities. In both works, there is no catharsis for the living or the dead, the *Heimat* is not a physical place, but instead an abstract concept that exists only in memories. Are the books two autobiographies? The authors do not really appear as characters but can only draw the lines that lead to their research. According to Arfuchs:

> The biographical value – which, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, presupposes the ordering of the narrator's life and, correlatively, that of the addressee, but also the necessary ethical aim of life in general – is not the only one to count. To this must be added what we might call the memorial value leading to the present of the narrative, whatever the medium, the recollection of a past with its symbolic and often traumatic charge in the individual and/or collective experience. (Arfuchs, 2011: 165).

In both books, the autobiographical aspect does not count. What matters are the narrators' efforts to reflect on the past through the lens of our present, a process that attempts to make a coherent sense of a confused historical recollection. The concept of narrative identity provides a different entry into storytelling, not only considering them in relation to their semiotic, linguistic, or visual potential, but also in their ethical dimension. In this sense, the works of Nora Krug and Line Hoven move away from the constraints of historiography; the possibility of understanding the history of the present through memory is not only linked to trauma, but above all to the power of empathy, which is an attempt to recover – even partially – the affective and wounded dimension of the experience. The traumatic events of the twentieth century made us all aware of the importance of understanding the past in a critical way; we cannot look at the past only considering the official memory of different nations, but also by that of individuals and their particular histories. Helmut Peitsch (1998) described this concept through a battlefield metaphor: nothing is neutral and everything must be re-examined. Therefore, many memories – those of winners and losers, both public and private – must be considered. As pointed out by Aarons:

> Undeterred by silence and sanctions against such a pursuit, third-generation narratives reveal attempts to comprehend, give voice to, and demystify the 'unimaginable', unrepresentable fracture of the Holocaust, remarking a place for the Shoah's necessary imprint in the twenty-first century. [...] Ironically, given their place in history, a contemporary generation is prepared 'now to know', to begin again the uncontained incomplete, and ongoing process of discovery and narration. A third wave of Holocaust transmission is poised to fill in the gaps of narration and representation, affective gaps as well as gaps in knowledge. (Aarons 2016, XIII-XIV).

Despite the complexities and difficulties of both discovery and transmission, third-generation Holocaust representation clears the path from memory to history through its therapeutic dimension and ethical value.
The power of the comic medium in this field is that comics are a slow, visual medium, both in their laborious production and in readers' perception. According to Raedler, "readers observe static life situations that enable them to reflect upon these situations. The addressing of the reader is reflection oriented. He is not prompted to come up with a solution to the puzzle but rather to try to understand the present conflict" (Raedler 2016, 187). We saw that comics

could show a historiographical potential proving that each narrative form carries an ethical value with it and the hybrid forms – even in a fluctuating way – always weave the individual with the collective because, as Kundera so aptly put it "the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (Kundera 1981, 11).

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