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**Intergenerational transmission of World War II family historical  
memories of the resistance**

**Aline Cordonnier<sup>a</sup>, Pierre Bouchat<sup>ab</sup>, William Hirst<sup>c</sup>, and Olivier Luminet<sup>ad</sup>**

*<sup>a</sup> Psychological Science Research Institute, UCLouvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium*

*<sup>b</sup> Équipe PErSEUs, UFR Sciences Humaines et Sociales, Université de Lorraine, Metz, France*

*Department of Psychology, New School for Social Research, New York City, USA*

*<sup>c</sup> Department of Psychology, New School for Social Research, New York City, USA*

*<sup>d</sup> Fund for Scientific Research (FRS-FNRS), Brussels, Belgium*

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Author Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Aline Cordonnier, Psychological Sciences Research Institute, UCLouvain, 10 Place cardinal Mercier, 1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, or by email at [aline.cordonnier@uclouvain.be](mailto:aline.cordonnier@uclouvain.be) or by phone at +32 (0)10 474470.

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“The authors confirm that the manuscript adheres to ethical guidelines specified in the APA Code of Conduct as well as authors’ national ethics guidelines.”

“Upon acceptance of the manuscript, data will be shared on OSF on request.”

### Abstract

Collective memory of historical events can be transmitted across generations not only through cultural memory but also through communicative memory, that is, transmitted by people who have lived through these particular times. Yet, few studies have examined the temporal horizon of a particular type of communicative memory: family historical memories. In this article, we examine the intergenerational transmission of memories from the Second World War in families with an ancestor who resisted during the German occupation. We interviewed 20 French-speaking Belgian families over three generations. During these individual interviews, participants narrated an anecdote about their ancestor and the resistance. Then, for the middle and youngest generations, we provided a short cue related to the story chosen by the oldest generation and enquired whether they could tell us the story in their own words. Memory transmission was analysed through two processes: retelling and recalling. Our main result revealed that there was a loss of details across generations, but not complete oblivion. We also found some instances of family myth transmitted across all generations. This study provides evidence that family historical memories fade away after a generation or two, even when these memories describe historical events deemed important for family and society.

Keywords: Autobiographical memory, family, historical memories, collective memory, communicative memory, intergenerational transmission, World War II.

### **Intergenerational transmission of World War II family historical memories of the resistance**

On December 16<sup>th</sup>, 1944, the Third Reich launched its last major offensive on the Western front in the densely forested Ardennes, situated on the borders between Belgium, France and Luxembourg. A few months later, an armistice was signed, putting an end to the Second World War (WWII) in Europe. Now, seventy-five years later, the Second World War is slowly disappearing from living memory as the number of people who still have autobiographical memories of this period is rapidly declining. Yet, studies have shown repeatedly that WWII is still seen as one of the most (if not *the most*) critically important event in recent history, regardless of respondents' age (Bobowik et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2009; Schuman & Scott, 1989). If collective remembering of historical events can have major impacts on groups and individuals in terms of identity (J. Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; Liu & Hilton, 2005), political attitudes and preferences (Bouchat et al., 2020; Rimé et al., 2015), and their interpretation of the world around them (Schuman & Rieger, 1992), it is crucial to understand what different generations know about the war as they continue to list it as a historically important event.

We are interested here not in what different generations know about the facts concerning the war, but how much people know about their relatives' experiences in the war. With a personal connection, a historical event can become alive, give personal relevance and as a result, have a greater impact on how one views the event and its consequences. We focus on one aspect of WWII that would likely be transmitted across multiple generations. During WWII, Germany occupied Belgium for four long years. This occupation took its toll on the population and is often viewed as forever changing the fabric of Belgian daily life (Brown et al., 2012). Of particular note are the 150,000 Belgian citizens (around 3% of the population between 16 and 65) who,

through small acts of defiance or broader engagement within the various resistance networks, opposed the enemy from the inside (Maerten, 2013). This resistance to the German occupation is clearly a source of pride for both those who participated in it and the nation as a whole (Conway, 2012). We want to study here what younger generations in Belgium know about their parents', grandparents', and great-grandparents' resistance experiences.

### **Useful Distinctions Within the Field of Collective Memory**

This exploration of intergenerational transmission of historically relevant personal memories engages several critical distinctions in the field of Memory Studies (Hirst et al., 2018). These distinctions might not represent differences in kind but, at least at present, are useful heuristics to separate events that have been experienced (either directly or indirectly), from events we have learned from others, either through everyday communication or through formalised or institutionalised sources.

The first distinction is between lived and distant historical memories (Hirst & Manier, 2002; Hirst & Merck, in press). *Lived memories* refer to memories of historical events occurring during a person's lifetime that affected the collective identity of the rememberers or their communities. The remembered event does not necessarily have to be directly experienced. It only needs to have occurred during one's lifetime and shaped collective identity. *Distant memories* refer to all other cases of collective-identity-shaping memories. When memories are transmitted across generations, they go from being lived to distant. With respect to the present concerns, lived historical memories are more likely to include personal, that is autobiographical, recollections (Muller et al., 2016, 2018; Stone et al., 2014). In the case of distant memories, they involve personal memories of a previous generation, for instance, the memories a grandchild has of his grandparent's war experiences. These memories appear to fade over generational time.

The second distinction is between communicative and cultural memory (J. Assmann (2011); J. Assmann and Czaplicka (1995)). This distinction refers to *the mode of transmission* collective memories can take. Cultural memory deals with the disembodied forms of memory transmission, such as monuments, books or commemorative practices. It is institutionalised, formalised and stabilised. It is not limited in time and we can hypothesise that, with regards to WWII, it will presumably allow memories of the war to be maintained for thousands of years to come. Communicative memory exists at a more reduced time scale, as the mode of transmission is mostly based on everyday communications. It is neither formal nor stable; it exists within individuals and their idiosyncrasies. We have found two general ways of defining communicative memory in the literature. The first and probably the most common one includes any memory transmitted through personal communication, such as “a joke, a memory, a bit of gossip, or an experience” (J. Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995, p. 126). One frequent cited example of this mode of transmission involves family memory (A. Assmann, 2009, p. 213). The second, more recent definition focuses on communicative memory as *living historical memories*, in other words, widely shared societal recollections of important events that remain alive through communicative processes (Liu et al., in press). Within this study, we will rely on the former definition.

The concepts of lived versus distant memories and communicative versus cultural memories overlap, but there is not a one-to-one correspondence. Lived memories can consist of both communicative and cultural memories, as memories of 9/11 clearly do for many Americans, whereas distant memories tend to mostly be cultural memories but may still involve communicative memories, as in the case of intergenerational transmission. Family historical

memories transmitted across generations would be examples of *distant, communicative* memories.

The degree to which communicative memories are expected to be retained across generation may be limited. Assmann suggested that they may be passed on for about 3 to 4 generations, that is, up to 80 or 100 years. Such multiple generational transmission should be particularly true for lived historical events deemed highly important or relevant either for the group or for the individual (Liu et al., in press; Svob et al., 2016). In this paper, we provide empirical evidence that can be brought to bear on Assmann's claims concerning the temporal horizon of communicative memories, as measured through family historical memories.

### **Intergenerational Memory Transmission of Family Historical Memories**

Sharing autobiographical stories and memories is common among family members. When parents share their past with their children, it is often to create bonds between family members and maintain a sense of family identity (Bietti et al., 2019; Fivush et al., 2008; Fivush et al., 2011). Some of these family memories can become *vicarious memories*, which are “recollections people have of salient life episodes that were told to them by another person, such as a friend or family member” (Pillemer et al., 2015, p. 234). Vicarious memories have been predominantly studied within the field of trauma (Cohen & Collens, 2013) and, in the case of historically relevant memories, often, in relation to the Holocaust (Hirsch, 2012; Zeitlin, 1998). However, few studies have examined the intergenerational transmission of family historical memories across multiple generations and outside the context of the Holocaust. Two extant studies are particularly relevant to the present endeavour.

Welzer (2005)'s study on descendants of former members of the National Socialist German Workers' Party highlights how memories with a negative connotation are often



remembered in a more positive light by later generations (see also Muller et al., 2016; Muller et al., 2018; Zaromb et al., 2014). In this seminal work, Welzer examined what three generations knew about family events from the wartime period in Germany. He found a phenomenon of *cumulative heroization* – where the family past was ameliorated from generation to generation – in two thirds of his participating families. Younger generations not only asserted that their grandfathers had not been Nazis, even when their grandfathers indicated that they had previously discussed their involvement in the Nazi party with them, but some participants recounted stories that “heroized” their grandfathers' acts. For example, a story where the grandfather explained they “never bother them [talking about some Jewish neighbours]” became a story of “they rescued a couple of Jews” for the following generations. This heroization process therefore goes further than a simple tendency to selectively remember positive events over negative events in order to maintain a favourable image of the group, as suggested by Social Identity Theory (Sahdra & Ross, 2007; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

A second relevant study by Stone et al. (2014) reveals that transmission of historical memories across generations is fairly limited. Stone et al. (2014) conducted interviews across three generations of French-speaking Belgian families. Individuals described all they could about four different topics that occurred during or after WWII. For each event supplied in their narratives, participants indicated the source of their knowledge (autobiographical memory – communicative memory – cultural memory). The youngest generation knew very little of their grandparents' war experience and instead discussed events they had learned through cultural sources. Their findings replicated an experiment conducted by Schuman and Scott (1989), who found that people who experienced the war were more inclined to provide personal stories to explain why WWII was an important event while younger generations would discuss the war in

its general context. In both studies, communicative memory seemed to be limited to a single generation.

Together, these studies provide interesting findings about communicative memory across multiple generations. Whereas Welzer's study (2005) found some form of transmission on emotionally evocative events, although transformed in a more positive light, Stone et al. (2014) highlighted that the temporal limit of communicative memory might not be as long as Assmann proposed. However, they differed on the way the memories were probed and the relevance of family stories. Stone et al. (2014) focused on how generations differ in the way they retell stories related to certain topics of WWII. They did not specifically ask for personally or family relevant memories, so they could not directly compare how participants recalled particular stories from their family past or even estimate how much each generation knew about it. They also used families from the general population who might not have had many noteworthy memories to pass down to the next generations, as none of them were notably involved in any direct way with WWII. As for Welzer (2005), he used an open-interview style that led him to examine both how participants retold their ancestor's involvement during the war and how different generations recalled the same story. He did not systematically trace the flow of memories from one generation to the next, making it difficult to see both what and how a memory is transmitted.

### **The Present Study**

The aim of the present study is to further examine the intergenerational transmission of WWII events by focusing on the particular case of families with an ancestor who resisted against German occupation. In the first phase of the study, we specifically contrasted memories elicited when participants from different generations were asked to retell a personal memory of a family member who had lived during the war and fought in the resistance. Although there were no

constraints on what memory a participant could offer, presumably it is one that came readily to mind. In this sense, it may be viewed as a salient or important memory. Then, in the second phase, we asked participants to recall the retellings provided in Phase 1 by either the resister themselves or children of the resister who were alive during the war. To guide this more directed query, a cue as to the desired memory was provided. Following Marsh (2007), we refer to the response to the open-ended questioning in Phase 1 as involving *retelling*; we refer to the response to the more directed question as involving *recalling*.

We expected that family historical memories associated with the resistance might have a particular place in family memory and thus, better withstand the passing of time, thereby providing a strong test of the extent to which memories can be transmitted across generations. Furthermore, the design allows us to contrast retelling and recalling of intergenerational memories within the same family. That is, we can probe not just whether a younger generation knows something about their relatives' resistance experiences, but whether they also know about a memory deemed salient or important enough by those who lived during the war that they offered this memory in Phase 1 of the study.

By contrasting retelling and recalling, at least three possibilities arise. First, a member of a younger generation does not spontaneously mention the memory offered by the oldest generation in Phase 1 and then fails to do so when cued in Phase 2 and asked to recall that memory. Second, again, a member of a younger generation does not spontaneously mention the oldest generation memory in Phase 1, but can recall the memory when asked to do so in Phase 2. Finally, a younger generation spontaneously mentions the retold memory of the oldest generation in Phase 1. When one sees this occurring across several generations, one might claim that the anecdote has reached the status of a "family myth" and, as such, may hold an important place

within the family history and identity (Fivush & Merrill, 2016). As our participants come from families with a history that can be seen as pridetworthy by society, we expect to find that some form of communicative memory is transmitted across generations.

## **Method**

### **Context of this Study: The Transmemo Project**

This study is part of an interdisciplinary project involving historians, political scientists, and social and cognitive psychologists who examined the intergenerational transmission of memory in families with an ancestor who either resisted during WWII or was judged for collaboration after the war in Belgium. Together, we constructed an interdisciplinary method that included questionnaires and semi-structured interviews allowing researchers from the different disciplines to analyse the data according to their field's tradition of research. For this study, we focus on a subsample of participants composed by the *French-speaking* families who *resisted* during WWII<sup>1</sup>.

### **Participants**

Twenty families agreed to share their memories with us. We interviewed three members of different generations in 18 families. For the other two families, we were unable to set up a meeting with the third person – in one instance, a member of the middle generation, in another instance a member of the youngest generation. Therefore, the number of participants in each generation is not the same. We had two main criteria for our families: they had to be the descendants of someone who resisted during WWII (but that person did not need to be officially

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<sup>1</sup> The reasons for this selection are twofold. We selected only French-speaking participants because of historical particularities in the way memories of resistance are discussed in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium combined with the complexity of analysing narratives in a non-native language. We also only selected participants from the resistance group as we could not get enough complete (3 members) families in the collaboration group, due to the existence of a taboo about disclosing family links with the collaboration within French-speaking Belgium.

recognised for their acts) and the oldest generation interviewed had to have some personal recollection of the war (lived memories), so in other words, they had to be born in 1936 at the latest to ensure they would have been old enough to form autobiographical memories of the war (for a discussion on generations within the field of collective memory, see Schuman & Scott, 1989).

In most instances, the resister in the family had died, though their children had been alive during the war and thus may have been personally privy to the resister's actions. In four families, we had the chance to meet with the person who resisted during the war. One consequence of this unique opportunity was that it created an imbalance within our sample. For these families, the three generations we interviewed were thus the person who resisted the German occupation during WWII, their child and their grandchild. For the other 16 families, the generations interviewed were the resister's child, grandchild and great-grandchild. To integrate this discrepancy into our analyses, we categorised them not according to their relationship with the person who resisted during WWII, but according to whether they were the oldest – middle – youngest generation interviewed, as was done in Stone et al. (2014).

The logic behind this decision was that all participants from the oldest generation had formed lived memories of WWII and could provide autobiographical stories from that time. With regards to the resistance, children were often witness to their parents' actions or had developed vicarious memories about that topic. See Table 1 for a comparison of demographic details by types of grouping.

Families were contacted via word of mouth, research team members' personal contacts, social media and through advertisements in the CEGESOMA<sup>2</sup> newsletter. We allowed families

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<sup>2</sup> CEGESOMA is a research and documentation center under the direction of the State Archives of Belgium and our research partner for this project.

to select the participating members as long as they were over 15 years of age and did not suffer from any memory-related disorders.<sup>3</sup> Participants provided informed consent in accordance with the Ethics Committees of UCLouvain (psychology) and UGent (history), and with the conventions at CEGESOMA.

Table 1  
*Demographic Details of Participants Depending on the Classification Type*

	n	Sex (F – M)	Mean age (SD)	Age range
Classification in relation to age				
Oldest generation	20	12 – 8	87.07 (4.14)	82-96
Middle generation	19	8 – 11	58.89 (5.30)	49-69
Youngest generation	19	9 – 10	28.95 (7.40)	17-39
Classification in relation to the resister				
Resister	4	1 – 3	94.25 (1.71)	92-96
Resister's child	20	12 – 8	81.55 (9.91)	54-92
Resister's grand-child	19	8 – 11	52.68 (11.02)	24-66
Resister's great-grandchild	15	8 – 7	27.60 (7.11)	17-37
Total	58	29 – 29	59.02 (24.94)	17-96

## Procedure and Materials

About a week prior to the face-to-face interview, participants received a questionnaire in the mail. We focus here on two questions from that questionnaire. The first one asked participant to evaluate their level of knowledge about their family's WWII past, compared to other family members, on a scale ranging from 1 (significantly less than other members) to 5 (significantly more than other members). The second question asked whether it was a frequent topic of discussion within the family (1 = not at all frequent; 5 = extremely frequent).

Interviewers usually met with participants in their home. The interview was done individually and tape-recorded. There were four main subsections to the semi-structured

<sup>3</sup> About 40 % of our participants lived in the Brussels-Capital Region while the rest mostly lived in the different parts of Wallonia (the French-speaking part of Belgium). One participant lived in Flanders, but in a suburb on the outskirts of Brussels and with a high density of French-speakers.

interview: (a) family relationships, (b) family historical knowledge, (c) sources of their knowledge and (d) conclusion. The question examined here is the first question asked in the second section (family historical knowledge) and will be referred to as “the anecdote”. Before discussing what participants knew about their family history of what happened before, during and after the war, we asked them to narrate a single story/anecdote in relation with G0 and the resistance. If they asked for clarification, we said something along these lines: “If you only had time to tell us one particular story or one anecdote – maybe the first that comes to mind – about [name of G0] in relation to what he/she did during the war and the resistance, what would this story be?” We accepted all stories that had any connection with what the person or their parent had done to resist as well as its consequences.<sup>4</sup> The following step depended on the generation.

If the participant was from the middle or the youngest generation, we compared the main topic of their anecdote with the one from their parent/grand-parent (the oldest generation). If the topic was the same, that was the end of the questioning. If the topic was different, we provided a short cue related to the story chosen by the oldest generation (for example “a story about maps”) and asked the participant if they knew that anecdote. If they did, we asked them to tell us all they knew about the story in their own words. If the first cue was not enough, we provided more details to see if it would help the recall. Afterwards, we moved on to the next part of the interview. Thus, for the oldest generation, we only recorded one anecdote, whereas for participants of the middle and youngest generations, we possibly recorded two anecdotes: the first one they chose to tell us and the second one that was recalled after receiving a cue.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In some rare cases, the participant narrated a story that was clearly not about the resistance. For example, one participant described his father’s return from the “18 days’ campaign”. In these cases, we simply requested a new anecdote.

<sup>5</sup> We tried to avoid probing during this part of the interview. When participants only provided the main idea of the anecdote, we would simply ask if they could recount it in their own words. Occasionally, we would ask for clarification if a detail was unclear or show empathy (these were sometimes, after all, very emotional memories).

Finally, we asked participant to indicate how important it was for them to know their family's war history and how important it was for them to transmit it to following generations on a scale from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (extremely important).

### **Coding**

Each anecdote was transcribed verbatim. We investigated the level of elaboration by calculating the length of the anecdote (overall word count) and by estimating the level of details. The level of details was coded on a scale from 0 to 3 (see Zaman & Fivush, 2011 for a similar coding scheme). A score of 0 (no details at all) only applied to the middle and youngest generation. It indicated that they did not know the anecdote chosen by their parent/grand-parent. (the younger and middle generations always supplied a memory in Phase 1). A score of 1 (few details) was given when the anecdote only contained the single main idea, action, or event and the coders could not tell from what was said, for instance, the time, location or the circumstances of the action, e.g. "I don't know the circumstances of his arrest. [...] He went to work one day and never came back.". A score of 2 (some details) was given when the anecdote contained some details about the story, such as the time, the place, or supplied and not just a single action or event but a sequence of events that began to form a more complete story, e.g. "He told me that he was sleeping next to the windows and that he saw the first German come to get his father. [...] I think they searched up to the attic. Dad said it was early in the morning." Finally, a score of 3 (many details) was given when the anecdote contained a sequence of events, along with detailed descriptions of the setting, the circumstances, and even the motive, e.g. " I think she was supposed to be carrying detonators, I think. That were in a crate on her bike, with straw [on top] so they wouldn't move. And I think she must have taken a cobbled path. [...] She was stopped by a German sentinel [because] they were doing some shooting exercises on the road. So, he held



her bike. She always says there was a big hairy hand on her handlebars. There you go. So, she probably felt some strong emotions because she knew she was... in the business and... well, she had detonators with her."

Furthermore, each anecdote was coded for specificity as either relating to a specific episodic event (i.e., something that happened at a particular point in time and in a particular place, and lasted a few minutes or a few hours) or relating to a general event (e.g., the time spent in a camp). Anecdotes were also coded for their valence as either being more positive or ending on a positive note (e.g., helping others or a humorous anecdote) or more negative (e.g., the death or the arrest of someone).

The coding scheme for the level of details was applied by three independent judges. They first learned the schemes by coding together the first 23% of the anecdotes and then independently coded the other 77%. Fleiss'  $\kappa$  is equal to 0.86, which is considered almost perfect (Landis & Koch, 1977). Two independent judges also coded 25% of the anecdotes for their specificity and valence with almost perfect agreement (Cohen's  $\kappa$  between 0.87 and 1).

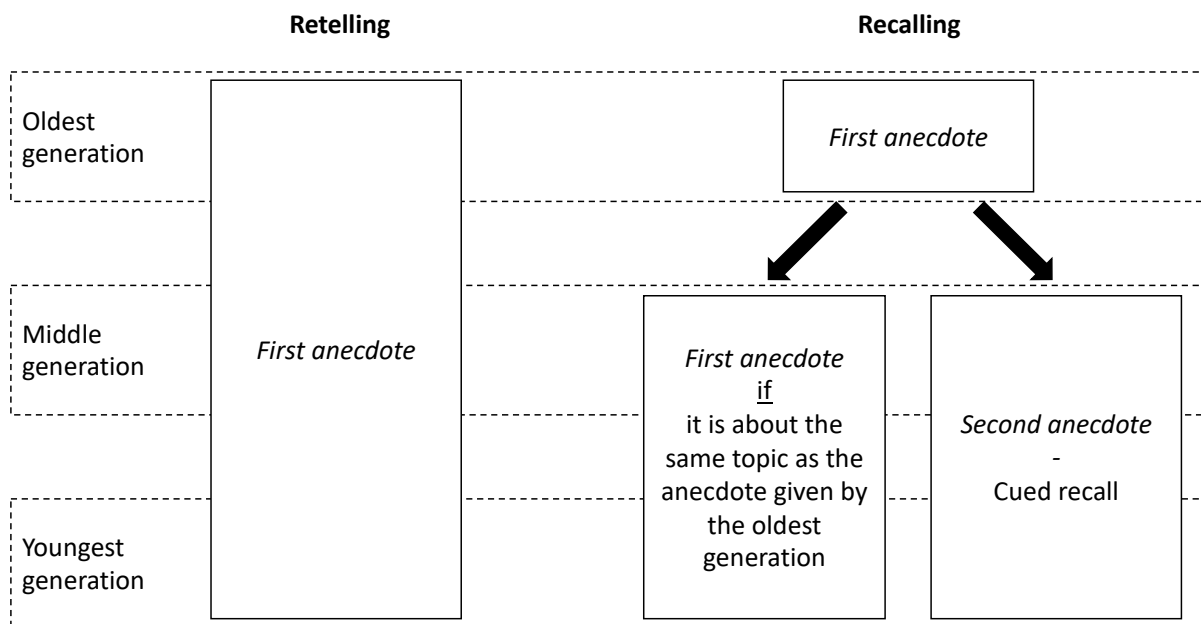
### **Data Analyses**

Analyses were done over two steps. First, we examined the narrative dimensions of the first anecdote participants told us in order to study the *retelling* dimension of intergenerational transmission. The goal of this analysis was to shed light on how much detail participants can provide when they choose the story they want to tell (see Figure 1). We ran analyses of variances (ANOVAs) with the level of elaboration of the first anecdote (word count and level of details) as dependant variables and the generation (oldest-middle-youngest) as the independent variable. We also conducted ANOVAS with the specificity and valence of the chosen anecdote as random

factors and the level of elaboration as a dependant variable to examine the effect of the type of anecdote on its elaboration.

In a second step, we investigated whether participants could recall the oldest generation’s anecdote, even if they did not spontaneously retell it. Hence, for the middle and youngest generations, the anecdote analysed here is the one that is on the same topic as the anecdote originally provided by the oldest generation, generated either spontaneously as the first anecdote or as a cued recall (see Figure 1). To fully examine this transmission, we conducted ANOVAs with the level of elaboration of the recalled anecdote (word count and level of details) as dependant variables and the generation (oldest, middle, youngest) as the independent variable.

Figure 1. Representation of the data used for the two analyses: retelling and recalling.



## **Results**

### **Anecdote from the Oldest Generation**

Before we delve in our intergenerational comparisons, we first want to briefly describe the anecdotes offered by the oldest generation. We included in this group both those individuals who resisted and those who were children during the war. Three members of the resistance discussed instances associated with the idea of doing something unlawful that could or did get them arrested. One discussed being “hunted” by the Gestapo but avoided capture, one explained how she was arrested and the last one described his escape from a concentration camp. The fourth participant talked about an act of resistance (attack on a German truck) with a funny twist at the end. With regards to the anecdotes described by the participants who were children during the war, we found similar themes. One of the main themes was undoubtedly linked to the arrest of their parents. Most children have autobiographical memories of that instance and for some, it was the last time they saw their mother or father alive. A second common theme is that of particular acts of resistance, such as distributing clandestine newspapers, helping the Red Cross, hiding people or transmitting messages. In these cases, children often witnessed their parent’s involvement. One last major theme describes time spent in concentration camps, but that topic was less present within the oldest generation. It would seem, then, that the anecdotes provided by children of the resisters involved autobiographical memories of their parents and their parents’ involvement in the resistance. Moreover, the topics both the resister and their children engaged with were similar.

### **Retelling an Anecdote**

#### ***Level of Elaboration***

Even though participants chose the story they told, we found a main effect of the variable

generation: length:  $F(2, 55) = 6.75, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .197$ ; level of details:  $F(2, 55) = 5.84, p = .005, \eta_p^2 = .175$  (see Table 2). Planned  $t$ -test showed that participants from the oldest generation used significantly more words and provided more details than the middle and youngest generations (all  $p < .05$ ); however, the middle and youngest generations did not differ significantly ( $p > .05$  for length and level of details). Both indicators of elaboration are highly correlated ( $r = .642$ ). These results show that, unsurprisingly, people with lived memories of the war could provide more details and talk longer about their past than the following generations. A closer examination of the data shows that for the middle generation, the distribution is fairly flat, with one third of anecdotes containing many details, one third containing some details and the last third only few details. On the other hand, the majority of participants from the youngest generation could only provide an outline of the story.

Table 2

*Contingency Table, Means and Standard Deviations of the Level of Details and Length of the First Anecdote as a Function of the Generation*

Generation	Level of details			<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> ) 95% CI	Length <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> ) 95% CI
	1 (few details)	2 (some details)	3 (many details)		
Oldest generation (n = 20)	3 (15%)	2 (10%)	15 (75%)	2.60 (0.75) [2.28, 2.95]	264.55 (171.33) [184.37, 344.73]
Middle generation (n = 19)	7 (37%)	6 (32%)	6 (32%)	1.95 (0.85) [1.54, 2.36]	127.05 (88.46) [84.42, 169.69]
Youngest generation (n = 19)	10 (53%)	4 (21%)	5 (26%)	1.74 (0.87) [1.32, 2.16]	140.74 (110.60) [87.43, 194.04]

*Note.* The unequal number of participants in each generation is due to the recruitment problem explained in the Participants section.

*Type of Anecdotes*

For the majority of our participants (72%), the anecdote they first suggested related to a specific event and not a general one. There were no differences across generations. In terms of valence, there were almost as many positive (45%) as negative events (55%), with a consistent ratio across all generations.

ANOVAs ran with the specificity as fixed factors showed that general events tended to be described with fewer details than specific events;  $F(1, 56) = 5.15, p = .027, \eta_p^2 = .084$  (see Table 3). However, when running the same analysis but with the word count as dependant variable, we did not find a main effect of the specificity ( $p = .272$ ). We also ran ANOVAs with valence as fixed factors. We found that positive events tended to be described in more details than negative events;  $F(1, 56) = 6.65, p = .013, \eta_p^2 = .106$  (see Table 3), but once more, there was no significant effect when using the word count as dependant variable instead of the level of details ( $p = .161$ ). This discrepancy indicates that using the word count might not always be reflective of the level of details actually present within a narrative.

Table 3  
*Contingency Table, Means and Standard Deviations of the Level of Details of the First Anecdote as a Function of the Type of Anecdote*

Type of anecdote	Level of details			Length	
	1 (few details)	2 (some details)	3 (many details)	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> ) 95% CI	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> ) 95% CI
General	9 (56%)	3 (19%)	4 (25%)	1.69 (0.87) [1.22, 2.15]	145.56 (98.76) [92.94, 198.19]
Specific	11 (26%)	9 (21%)	22 (52%)	2.26 (0.86) [1.99, 2.53]	191.67 (154.07) [143.65, 239.68]
Positive	6 (21%)	5 (18%)	17 (61%)	2.39 (0.83) [2.07, 2.72]	210.54 (133.28) [158.86, 262.22]
Negative	14 (47%)	7 (23%)	9 (30%)	1.83 (0.87) [1.51, 2.16]	149.47 (145.10) [95.29, 203.65]

### *Similarities Across Generations*

Finally, it is worth noting that the middle generation suggested the same anecdote as the oldest generation 6 out of 19 times (32% of the time), while the youngest generation suggested the same anecdote as the oldest generation 4 out of 19 times (21% of the time). However, the fact that middle and youngest generations proposed spontaneously the same story as the oldest generation did not affect the amount of details provided. For the middle generations, two participants who recalled the same story as the oldest generation got a score of 3, two participants got a score of 2 and two participants got a score of 1. For the youngest generation, two participants got a score of 3 and two participants got a score of 1. This pattern suggests that even when an anecdote seems to have been transmitted across generations, details of the story are lost along the way. Interestingly, there was one case where all three generations spontaneously told the same story. The oldest and youngest generation received a score of 3 and the middle generation received a score of 2. This was a story that was told recently at Christmas time about how the family fled to France. Interestingly, the sharing of the story was initiated by the great-great-grand-daughter of resister who had just learnt about WWII at school.

### **Recalling an Anecdote**

#### *Level of Elaboration*

As we did with the retelling data, we found a significant main effect of the variable generation, both for length:  $F(2, 53) = 7.47, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .220$ , and for level of details:  $F(2, 53) = 15.03, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .362$  (see Table 4). Planned *t*-test showed that participants from the oldest generation used significantly more words and provided more details than the middle and youngest generations (all  $p < .05$ ). The middle generation provided more details than the youngest generation ( $p = .003$ ); however, there was no significant difference in the number of

words used ( $p = .158$ ) even though each generation only used approximately half of the words compared to the previous one. This discrepancy between word count and detail when comparing the middle and youngest generations is interesting, notably because, as was also the case for retelling, both indicators of elaboration are highly correlated (.675). We suspect that the discrepancy arises because there is a bimodal distribution in the level of details for the youngest generation. Most members either did not know the anecdote or could only provide the general outline of the story, but three of them could explain it in great detail. This complex pattern of results underscores the point made above. Namely, word count may not be the most precise measure when it comes to estimating how much people know about past events.

Finally, we found the presence of what we could consider a “family myth” within three families. In these cases, all interviewed participants knew the story and could tell it to us with many details. The first case occurred in a family where the oldest generation was the resister himself. His anecdote was about how they attacked a German truck. What seemed to matter to the following generations, however, was the twist of the story: a passer-by who accidentally got shot in the buttock received some money for his trouble by the Resistance leader and said “for that amount, you can shoot me in the other cheek.”

The second case described an anecdote where the oldest generation participant – who was a child during the war – was sent by her father to transport some detonators to the local Resistance leader. The girl was stopped on her way by Germans who were doing exercises in the nearby field. Luckily, they did not search her. She explained having a very vivid memory of that event. Her daughter indicated that this was an anecdote often told to the family.

The last case described how the daughter of the member of the resistance learned of her father’s death (shot by the Germans) in the newspaper on her 8<sup>th</sup> birthday. The story was filled

with strong emotional language and details. Younger generations indicated that it still affects their mother/grand-mother every year on her birthday.

Table 4

*Contingency Table, Means and Standard Deviations of the Level of Details and Length of the Recalled Anecdote as a Function of the generation*

Generation	Level of details				Length	
	0 (no details)	1 (few details)	2 (some details)	3 (many details)	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> ) 95% CI	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> ) 95% CI
Oldest generation (n = 20)	0 (0%)	3 (15%)	3 (15%)	14 (70%)	2.55 (0.76) [2.19, 2.91]	244.50 (162.63) [168.39, 320.61]
Middle generation (n = 19)	1 (5%)	5 (26%)	7 (37%)	6 (32%)	2.00 (0.91) [1.51, 2.39]	140.67 (131.32) [70.61, 196.97]
Youngest generation (n = 19)	8 (47%)	6 (35%)	0 (0%)	3 (18%)	0.87 (1.15) [0.31, 1.45]	78.06 (97.04) [29.98, 126.61]

### *Loss of Details Across Generations*

The oldest generation mostly told stories with many details, although not all of them did (see Table 4). As their version represents what the next generations might have heard, we need to consider the amount of details the previous generations provided when telling their version of the anecdote in order to truly measure the “loss of details” across generations inside a particular family unit. Thus, we have created a *loss of details ratio score* by subtracting the score a younger generation received from that of the older generation within the same family and then dividing that number by the older generation's score. For example, if the oldest generation received a score of 3 and the middle generation received a score of 2, the loss of details ratio score is 33% ( $[3-2]/3 = 0.33$ ). Results show that, on average, there is a limited loss of 17% ( $SD = 51\%$ ) between the oldest and the middle generation and a large further loss of 61% ( $SD = 44\%$ )



between the middle and the youngest generation. These results show a certain preservation of knowledge between the generation who experienced the war and their children, followed by a rapid decline. Indeed, as seen in Table 4, by the last generation, most participants either had never heard of the story or barely knew of it.

### **Knowledge, Frequency of Discussion and Perceived Importance**

Table 5 provides a summary of the means and standard deviations of measures of knowledge of the family past, frequency of discussion within the family and perceived importance of knowing and transmitting these stories. We found a difference between the generations regarding their level of knowledge of the family past, Welch's  $F(2, 32.06) = 7.18, p = .003$ . Games–Howell post hoc test show that, on average, the oldest generations indicated having a better knowledge of the family war past compared to the youngest generation ( $p = .003$ ). There were no other significant difference. However, all generations equally indicated that the family past was a somewhat frequent topic of discussion ( $p = .290$ ). These results indicate that some form of transmission of these family historical memories was present within all families. Finally, all generations indicated that it was fairly important to know and transmit family stories, but it seemed less important for the oldest generations than for the others; know:  $F(2, 52) = 4.07, p = .023, \eta_p^2 = .135$ ; transmit:  $F(2, 52) = 8.81, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .253$ .

Table 5

*Means and Standard Deviations of Question Items Depending on the Generation*

Questionnaire item	<b>Generation</b>		
	Oldest generation <i>M(SD)</i> (n = 20)	Middle generation <i>M(SD)</i> (n = 19)	Youngest generation <i>M(SD)</i> (n = 19)
Level of knowledge of family past	3.90 (1.20)	3.28 (0.83)	2.89 (0.47)
Frequency of discussion	2.45 (1.23)	2.83 (1.10)	2.28 (0.83)
Importance to know	3.69 (1.18)	4.47 (0.70)	4.39 (0.78)
Importance to transmit	3.56 (1.15)	4.68 (0.58)	4.47 (0.78)

### Discussion

The main aim of our research was to examine how communicative memory of family historical events was transmitted across multiple generations. We studied this communicative transmission through two remembering processes, labelled here as *retelling* and *recalling* memories. First, we asked participants to choose an anecdote about their ancestor in relation to the resistance and *retell* it in details. This anecdote was then transcribed and coded for level of elaboration. As a second step, we tested whether the middle and youngest generations could *recall* the same anecdote as the one provided by the oldest generation. When necessary, they received a short cue relevant to the anecdote and had to narrate the story in their own words. Once more, narratives were transcribed and coded for level of elaboration.

When examining the *retelling of an anecdote*, the oldest generation could tell an anecdote that contained many details about the event, such as where or when it happened, who was involved and what were the action that occurred. The middle and youngest generations, however, could only provide some details. Even though there was no statistical difference between these two generations, a closer look at the data shows different distributions. In contrast to the middle generation – two thirds of which provided some or many details about their retold event – more than half of the youngest generation could only offer an imprecise outline of the event they chose to share with us. Despite this impoverished retelling, younger generations could still remember a story, showing that some communicative memory had passed through three generations (J. Assmann, 2011). That is, in contrast to Stone et al. (2014), when there was a story that presumably captured part of a family member's heroic past, memories about this particular event were transmitted across several generations and not just one.

Consistent with their heroic nature, we also found that when the stories about the past had a positive spin to it, they were more likely to be known in more detail than if they had a negative connotation. At the individual level, we know that we tend to remember positive events in more detail than negative ones (D'Argembeau et al., 2003). Furthermore, positive narratives are more often used to enhance bonds with other people or increase self-knowledge, two important functions of family story sharing (Rasmussen & Berntsen, 2009). At the societal level, positive memories might be used by a group to acquire or maintain a positive social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). It is therefore not surprising that positive events are not only more likely to be transmitted across generations, but also better retained.

When examining *the recalling of an anecdote offered by the oldest generation*, we found that the middle generation knew the anecdote told by their parent and could provide some details about the event. Only one participant of that generation did not recognise it. For the youngest generation, we had a bimodal distribution: the majority knew little of their family past but three participants were capable of telling us the complete anecdote in great detail. Surprisingly, we did not get the same results when looking at the number of words of the narrative of the recalled anecdote. Despite their strong correlation, both indicators of the level of elaboration are not identical. Consequently, word count measures might not always be reflective of the level of details actually present within a narrative and instead might be more dependent on the individual narrative style (Pennebaker et al., 2003). Alternatively, our coding might be less sensitive due to its limited number of levels.

It is worth noting that we found three cases that could be considered “family myths”, where all generations interviewed could tell a particular story with many details. These three “myths” were different in content: one was a narrative of a dangerous – yet heroic – act that was

a close call but had a happy ending; one was comical; another traumatic. What they have in common is they all described anecdotes with a strong emotional content that happened directly to the older generation participant (who were either adults or children during the war). This means that younger generations heard the story directly from the source and usually more than once. Analyses of conversational practices within families could also provide some indication as to how the family past is generally discussed and what is emphasised. Follow-up analyses on the five families examined in Stone et al.'s study show that the role endorsed by each member of the family during conversation affected the amount of details shared (van der Haegen et al., 2020). We can also speculate that these family myths serve particular functions within the families' collective memory, such as strengthening family social identification or explaining a person's behaviour (e.g. why grandma does not like to celebrate her birthday as it reminds her of her father's death). A study on the intergenerational transmission of flashbulb memories of 9/11 showed correlations between children's social identity as Americans and their knowledge of their parents' flashbulb memory, indicating that this particular historical memory had an important role within the family and collective (Meyler et al., 2020).

To conclude, historical family memories associated with the resistance appear to be transmitted across more generations than found by Stone et al. (2014), suggesting that the content of the memory may matter. But we also need to emphasise that many participants from the youngest generation did not know the retold memories of the oldest generation. And what they did remember spontaneously did not have the same level of detail as we observed in the middle generation's memories. In this regard, combined with Stone et al.'s findings (2014), our results provide some evidence that communicative memory in the form of family historical

memory may have a shorter life-span than initially suggested by J. Assmann (2011), even in instances when the chances of finding robust intergenerational transmission are maximised.

However, understanding the processes that lead to intergenerational retention and forgetting of family historical memory is no easy task as it sits at the intersection of autobiographical, family and historical memory. First, we need to consider the individual level, both from the perspective of the person sharing the memory and the recipient. Autobiographical memory as well as vicarious memory are critical in the construction of the autobiographical self of the individual. As Wang (2013) argues: “there is no personal history that can be separated from the histories of the family and the community” (p. xii). All instances of family sharing serve a goal and intentions behind communication can impact what is being told (Bietti, 2010).

Beyond the functionality of these communications, the transmission process itself affects memory retention. Research on the serial transmission of stories shows that loss of details is almost unavoidable and that schema-consistent details tend to be transmitted better than schema-inconsistent details, particularly when the teller is trying to create coherence within the narrative (Lyons & Kashima, 2006). When applying these findings to our research, one could speculate that the personal anecdotes chosen by the oldest generation might not always fit the younger generations’ representations of this historical time, leading to greater transmission loss. For example, acts of resistance that might have seem less “heroic”, such as going out after curfew to protect local potato fields from thieves or marking important points on a map, were less known by the youngest generations than stories of defying or confronting German soldiers. Finally, retention is contingent on the function that particular memories hold for the individual (Hirst & Echterhoff, 2012). In our study, even though participants from all generations indicated that their

family historical past was fairly important to them, we suspect that the functional role of this memory differs from one participant to another.

In addition to the individual level, we also need to consider the collective level associated with historical memories, how they fit within social representations of history and the particular cultural context of Belgium. We found that family memories of the resistance during WWII tended to be fairly specific and idiosyncratic. They captured a moment in the life of a loved one that might be more telling about the personality of the individual than about the way the resistance is socially represented. Conversely, living historical memories of historically important events are widely shared within society, not just in the family. Perhaps for this reason, they tend to be more general and abstract, especially when distant (Schuman & Scott, 1989). This divergence between the two types of memory might be particularly important in our case study. Belgium has always struggled to create a unified collective memory of its past (Luminet et al., 2012) and WWII resistance is no exception. In the words of Conway (2012): “Divided between themselves and without significant support from the state or from the principal political forces, the Resistance forces largely failed to insert themselves into the post-war pantheon” (p. 175). Even though one might view the difficulty Belgium faces as mainly a concern with cultural memory, the absence of strong cultural narratives about the war may have influenced the transmission and preservation of communicative memory, here captured by family stories.

Along similar lines, and building on Halbwachs’ (1950) and Bartlett’s (1995) assertion that the maintenance of memories relies on their use for the present, we suspect that younger generations might not perceive these memories as central to their group identity or their comprehension of the world. In a study on generational evolution of intergroup attitudes in Belgium, Rimé et al. (2015) found that younger generations of Belgians saw important past

events very differently from older generations. For example, they found a lower consensus within the Dutch-speaking younger generation of when the linguistic conflict started in Belgium. They explain their findings in relation to the current changes in the social context of the country. Even though this study focused more particularly on between-group comparisons (French- and Dutch-speaking Belgians) of generational changes, their findings highlight how collective narratives can fade away with time.

Clearly, more in-depth study is needed. We only asked for a single anecdote from the oldest generation. In a few cases, the anecdote chosen by the oldest generation seemed rather obscure and might not have been a good representation of what had been transmitted throughout the generations. Future studies using a similar design could attempt to collect two or three anecdotes from the oldest generation in order to increase the chances of finding communicative transmission. Furthermore, contrasting the different narratives by setting up a family dialogue might provide some elements of responses as to why communicative memory seems to be limited to the first generation. Finally, future research could attempt to examine the role of cultural memory in informing the transmission of communicative memories related to historical events.

In summary, we explored how family anecdotes about the resistance during the Second World War were transmitted across three generations. We found evidence that communicative memory existed beyond the first generation. Grandchildren of those who lived during the war could still provide some anecdotes about the war, although the narrative usually contained limited details. Overall, intergenerational transmission of family historical events faded away after one or two generations, even if participants indicated that, for them, it was very important to know these family stories of the resistance and transmit them to the following generation.

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