

Walking a Mile in Viktorija's Shoes

Resilience, (Post-)Memory and Affordances

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Introduction

Autograph books are also called friendship books, scrapbooks and commonplace books, and they date back to the Sophists in old Greece, however, it is not until the 15th century that they become part of vernacular culture.² Often created during periods of transition, friendship books offer a source of companionship, support, and bonding with normative values of society.³ Their pages offer space for personal feelings as well as for conventional greetings expressed in short signed messages. Nowadays, Purikura – friendship books that combine pictorial and verbal messages – are very popular in Japan⁴; while feeds and boards in social media could be considered the digital version of friendship books. Sometimes, friendship books find a final destination behind protective glass in museums and archives as representations of collective understandings of political, social and cultural values of times past. However, in this paper we confront the content and form of a very special friendship book that has remained private for over seventy years even though its wider relevance is undeniable. This friendship book serves as a testimony of women's experiences with practices of dehumanization, resistance and resilience. We argue that this memory book provides a place for nurturing relational resilience in two ways: a) the process of writing is used as a practice which enables the capacity of connection between women after the time of the exposure to »life and

1 With heartfelt thanks to our mentor and friend Dr. Anne Byrne for her guidance, support, and enthusiasm on this project.

2 Cf. Katzev, Richard D.: *In the Country of Books. Commonplace Books and other Readings*, Leicester: Troubador Publishing 2009, pp. 13–15.

3 Cf. Herzog, Hanna/Shapira, Rina: »Will You Sign My Autograph Book? Using Autograph Books for a Sociohistorical Study of Youth and Social Frameworks«, in: *Qualitative Sociology* 9/2 (1986), pp. 109–125.

4 Cf. Chalfen, Richard/Murui, Mai: »Print Club Photography in Japan. Framing Social Relationships«, in: Elizabeth Edwards/Janice Hart (eds.), *Photographs, Objects, Histories. On the Materiality of Images*, London/New York: Routledge 2004, pp. 166–185, here pp. 166–167.

death- situations, and b) the friendship book enables development of post-resilience for its owners and other readers through postmemory and affordances.

The friendship book as a space of relational resilience

A beautiful, tiny, handmade autograph book rests on my hand. This tiny notepad is shy and with good reason. Its inscribed pages hold memories of abduction, incarceration, forced labor, suffering, war and death. Commemorations of war are collectively revisited as a platform for national histories. Individual experiences of war are neglected as if tucking away those lived experiences could make them vanish. For the first time in over half a century, this tiny autograph book stumbled across a visual researcher. My job was to document each of its pages so that they could live long after their already crumbly pages disintegrate. When turning the pages, I lightly pinched the corners, but I could still not avoid producing some more paper shreds which landed on the grey carpet of my office and tormented me from there. Objects are marked through successive moments of consumption across space and time.⁵ Social relations existing in and through material worlds. Words written in confinement and now confined to disappear.

Figure 1: Tiny and fragile. The book is full of cracks, crests, textures. It exerts experience. It feels very personal and at the same time, collectively significant. © Patricia Prieto Blanco.



⁵ Cf. Edwards, Elizabeth: »Beyond the Boundary. A Consideration of the Expressive in Photography and Anthropology«, in: Marcus Banks/Howard Morphy (eds.), *Rethinking Visual Anthropology*, London: Yale University Press 1997, pp. 53-80.

A notebook of the smallest size, wrapped in a worn-out dark cloth with printed colorful flowers, is left on a kitchen table, attracting my gaze. I turn page after page and scan short messages all dedicated to the same person. My mother rescued this tiny object from oblivion when my grandparents' house was sold. She believed this little object should belong to me. My grandmother Viktorija brought this autograph book as a souvenir⁶ and a memory of her stay in the Ravensbrück concentration camp. When asked, her children, my father and my aunt, found their mother's experience too difficult to talk about. They were not interested in keeping this object, this remnant. This autograph book entered my life as a gift. I was in the middle of my doctoral research questioning my ability ›to keep going‹. This object became my own source of comfort, my personal ›mană‹. And now I hold it. I know close to nothing about this period of my grandmother's life. Can this object help me in reconstructing Viktorija's and other women's lives in Ravensbrück camp? I show it to colleagues, a visual researcher and a sociologist. We photograph it to preserve it. We look at it again and again. In remaking the book, moving from one format to another, we continue to regard it, separately and together.

We argue that the friendship book is a testimonial object, a space in which women's written texts live in perpetuity. The book contains 52 messages, 49 written in Slovenian, one in Russian and two in Czech, signed by women from Ravensbrück concentration camp. The messages to Viktorija, orientated to past, present and future can be categorized as: 1) messages of command, 2) messages of freedom, 3) messages of suffering and sacrifice, 4) proverbs, and 5) promise (keeping in touch) messages. The messages foreground women's strong relationships and solidarity with each other while in the camp. We know that relationships with other prisoners is a factor in women's survival.⁷ These solidary relationships enable processes of personal and relational resilience.⁸

6 Cf. Hirsch, Marianne: »The Generation of Postmemory«, in: *Poetics Today* 29/1, pp. 103–128.

7 Cp. Vode, Angela: *Spomin in pozaba* (Zbrana dela Angele Vode; knj. 3). Ljubljana: Krtina 2000, p. 252.

8 Cf. Jordan, Judith V.: »Relational Resilience in Girls«, in: Sam Goldstein/Robert B. Brooks (eds.), *Handbook of Resilience in Children*, New York: Springer 2005, pp. 79–90. Jordan claims resilience is not an individual process based on internal traits and suggests that it can be developed through human capacity to connect with other people. As such, resilience is a relational activity which people can develop through growth-fostering relationships. This approach, deriving from relational-cultural theory, considers the importance of bi-directional, growth promoting connections for people's coping and resilience.

Map 1: Ravensbrück was ca. 1100 kilometers away from ›home‹.

Source: »World Maps« (no date).



The accounts in Viktorija's autograph book were written close to or after the liberation of Ravensbrück on April 30, 1945. Women organized themselves in small groups and travelled back home via two routes. Places and dates inserted in the autograph book help us in reconstructing Viktorija's journey back to ›ordinary life‹. Three key moments in this journey are highlighted in the autograph book: first, the evacuation of Ravensbrück concentration camp forcing prisoners on a death march on April 28, 1945; second, being caught between the German and Soviet gunfire on April 30, 1945; and third, celebrating the end of the war in Fürstenberg on May 9, 1945. From the evidence of the book, it is likely that Viktorija travelled with the second group of Slovenian prisoners from Germany to Slovenia via Dresden, Prague, Vienna and Graz to Maribor.⁹ From there Viktorija returned home at the end of June 1945.

⁹ Cp. Kavčič, Silvija: Preživele smo in spominjamo se. Slovenske jetnice v koncentracijskem taborišču Ravensbrück, Ljubljana: Publicistično društvo ZAK 2008, pp. 151–153.

Figure 2: The paper feels almost like a fabric and it creases around the sides. The irregularities hint towards past actions, decisions of use. The pages are full of traces. © Patricia Prieto Blanco.



Viktorija, the owner of the book and my grandmother, documented exact dates and events prior to the liberation of the camp. The first pages of her book relate to the last days in the camp:

On April 28 our way to a new concentration camp in Malchow had begun. On April 29 we managed to escape. We survived two nights and one day between open fires. The night from April 30 to May 1 was a game between life and death. The liberators arrived on May 1 at half past nine. That was the most beautiful moment [in our lives]. (Wüstrow, May 8, 1945)

This opening account situates the book within a narrative of relational resilience and resistance that women showed just before and during their journey back home. They formed relationships and relied on their own resourcefulness, improvisation skills and bravery.¹⁰ We argue that these relationships can cultivate connections through practices of mutual empathy, mutual empowerment, and the development of courage – the building blocks of relational resilience.¹¹

On the book's pages, the female survivors document their addresses and names, along with messages about their common suffering in the camp, their resistance and survival of the Nazi regime, and their way back to freedom, home-

¹⁰ Cp. S. Kavčič: Preživele smo in spominjamo se, p. 153.

¹¹ Cf. J. V. Jordan: Relational Resilience in Girls; cf. Hartling, Linda M.: »Strengthening Resilience in a Risky World. It's All about Relationships«, in: Women & Therapy 31/2-4 (2008), pp. 51–70.

land, and home. Written accounts demonstrate that sharing the experience of returning home proves to be important for them. A simple line, as for example written by Vika, helps us to visualize this:

Remember our common travelling back home. (Vika)

The texts in this friendship book provide an insight into the here and now of these women in a moment of liberation and freedom. They carry the messages of survivors, of the freed ones. Well-known Slovenian proverbs and poems are part of the women's reminiscence of the known and anticipation of the future. The chosen proverbs refer to ideas of spring, health and freedom. One of them, belonging to one of the greatest Slovenian writers, Ivan Cankar, indicates women's wish to return to the known, ordinary space:

Country you are like health!
Cankar (Marica)

Further analysis of the autograph book will reveal these women's return to life, not to the Yugoslav version they had left, but to a Socialist Federal version of it.

Viktorija, etymologically meaning victory, was born on December 19, 1908. She was one of the four daughters brought up by her father Andrej after the death of his wife Marija. During the Second World War, Viktorija lived in her hometown, a small village based in the Soča valley located in current North Western Slovenia.¹² As a response to the occupation, the Liberation Front of the Slovene nation was founded at the end of April, 1941.¹³ The Liberation Front was supported by those families who from the 1920s on were adversely affected by the Italian Fascist occupation, specifically in the Primorska region in Slovenia.¹⁴ Women in particular supported partisan units through the collection of money, arms and sanitary material or in distributing messages about the position of German forces. Viktorija was involved in such activities in her local village. Due to her engagement with the partisans, she was imprisoned three times. After the last imprisonment in June 1944, she was sent to the Ravensbrück concentration camp where she stayed till its liberation on April 30, 1945. This part of Viktorija's life has never been spoken about to me, her granddaughter.

¹² The Kingdom of Yugoslavia was invaded by the Axis powers on April 6, 1941 and divided into different occupational zones.

¹³ The Liberation Front was formed by a group of parties and movements, including the Communist Party of Slovenia, Christian Socialists and left wing of Sokol.

¹⁴ Cp. S. Kavčič: *Preživele smo in spominjam se*, p. 45.

The postmemory¹⁵ effect may also be the reason why Viktorija's memory book remained tucked away for decades. This object must have been very close to her body while in Ravensbrück and during the journey back home. However, once home, the memory book was tucked away, perhaps responding to Viktorija's emotional need of privacy and intimacy in relation to her experiences in the camp.¹⁶ The memory book evidences those experiences in making them tangible, attainable, thereby arguably surfacing some aspects of the Real, in a Lacanian sense. At the same time, this very same memory book is a testimony of individual – Viktorija's – and collective – the women's in Ravensbrück – resilience. A question about the trans-generational character of resilience thus arises: is there such a thing as post-resilience? If so, can it be both encapsulated and triggered by non-human actors?

Viktorija's book is about 2×3 inches. It has 76 pages, 52 textual entries, and countless creases and wrinkles. It is covered with fabric featuring a vivid floral panel on a black background. Running through the spine, the book features a white, blue and red braid. The pages are grainy as the paper is highly texturized. When running your fingers through them, sometimes one feels the indentation of the text. Some messages are written in pencil, some others in both charcoal and ink. It is a fragile object. Its pages shred easily, its covers are unraveling, its pages have darkened, and its messages are fading. Its materiality is the synergy of at least 52 life stories, many geographies and some socio-cultural and historical contexts. Viktorija made this book at a time of transition in her life: emotional, geographical, political and clearly vital. What expectations, hopes really, did she and her fellow prisoners have for the book? What were their collective and subjective responses to the object and to the cultural expectations attached to it? The mediating role of the book's materiality¹⁷, and the women's interaction and interactivity with it, matter in the context of individual and collective resilience.

15 Hirsch clearly states that the generation of postmemory involves active investment (cp. M. Hirsch: *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 107), a practice through which events of the past are made relevant for the present. Through (photographic) objects, second generations learn and acquire memories of the first. Although they never experience first-hand what the (photographic) objects capture or represent, the second generations experience the revisiting and reminiscing that first generations go through when looking, touching, smelling and sharing (photographic) objects. This process, which is repeatable and repeated, and thus, a practice in its own right, allows members of second generations to create borrowed memories of their own. These memories are a mix of the moment encapsulated in the (photographic) objects shared with them, as well as of the practice of sharing.

16 Cf. Bachelard, Gaston: *The Poetics of Space*, Boston: Beacon Press 1958.

17 Cp. Verbeek, Peter-Paul: »Artifacts and Attachment. A Post-Script Philosophy of Mediation«, in: Hans Harber (ed.), *Inside the Politics of Technology. Agency and Normativity in the*

In inquiring the affordances¹⁸ of Viktorija's memory book, we foreground processes and decisions of use, thereby accessing fragments of 52 voices of individual and collective nature as they animated the book with their lives. This approach highlights the distribution of agency between humans and non-human actors, thereby building onto an approach of epistemological relevance.¹⁹ In doing so, the influences of mediation in human acting stresses the reciprocal nature of action as actors »afford each other their existence and their capabilities«.²⁰

The women's concentration camp in Ravensbrück²¹ was built two months prior to the beginning of the Second World War, in May 1939. It contained women only.²² When arriving to the camp, the Nazi officers took all property from the women, including their clothes, and shaved their heads.²³ We assume that Viktorija, as many other women, had to wear a red triangle on her shoulder, which distinguished political prisoners from other prisoners, including Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, »asocials and habitual criminals.²⁴ Numbers were engraved on women's wrists, and Viktorija could not separate herself from the number 45412 ever again. After her arrival to the camp, she was allocated to Block number 9.²⁵ Most of the women were forced

Co-Production of Technology and Society, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2005, pp. 125–146, here pp. 133–134.

18 While acknowledging the history of affordances as a conceptual term, in the context of the memory book, Ritchie's more recent definition clarifies the point of departure. Affordances are »primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used« (cf. Ritchie, Jeff: »The Affordances and Constraints of Mobile Locative Narratives«, in: Jason Farman (ed.), *The Mobile Story. Narrative Practices with Locative Technologies*, Oxon: Routledge 2014, pp. 53–67), however, »the potential and actual uses of a thing depend on all of the design and decisions that make up that thing« (*ibid*). Richie's work utilises affordances to explore mobile locative narratives, or in other words, location influenced narratives in movement. Arguably, Viktorija's book also responds to affordances of location – it was created in a Nazi concentration camp – of movement – it has travelled and it represents a geographically diverse group of women each of them sharing and with their own narrative.

19 Cf. Latour, Bruno: »Technology Is Society Made Durable«, in: *The Sociological Review* 38/1 (1990), pp. 103–131; cf. Knorr-Cetina, Karin: »Sociality with Objects. Social Relations in Postsocial Knowledge Societies«, in: *Theory, Culture and Society* 14/4 (1997), pp. 1–30; cf. Fayard, Anne-Laure/Weeks, John: »Affordances for Practice«, in: *Information and Organization* 24/4 (2014), pp. 236–249.

20 Mol, Annemarie: »Actor-Network Theory. Sensitive Terms and Enduring Tensions«, in: *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, Sonderheft 50 (2010), pp. 253–269, here p. 265.

21 The camp was located 80 kilometers from Berlin, close to the town of Fürstenberg.

22 It is estimated that 130.000 women of different nationalities, religious groups and political beliefs were imprisoned there (cf. S. Kavčič: *Preživele smo in spominjamo se*).

23 Cp. A. Vode: *Spomin in pozaba*, p. 228.

24 Cp. Helms, Sarah: *If This Is a Woman. Inside Ravensbrück: Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women*, London: Little Brown 2015, p. 25.

25 There were 32 blocks in the Ravensbrück camp.

to work inside the camp or in the Siemens factory. Everyday women walked to the factory which was located next to the camp. The only official document²⁶ of Viktorija's imprisonment in the camp received from Ravensbrück museum states that she worked for Siemens-Halske.²⁷ Siemens used slave labor to make electrical components for V-1 and V-2 rockets.²⁸ Was Viktorija involved in producing parts for the German war industry? How did she manage to deal with daily exhaustion?

Collectively, the experiences of Yugoslav survivors of Nazi concentration camps have been mostly forgotten. While those experiences are substantially formative of individual and of collective identities – in the family, among camp survivors –, the selective and conscious access to the past provided by the Communist regime after the war ensured a process of institutional and culturally-collective suppression. »Cultural memory exists in two modes: first in the mode of potentiality of the archive whose accumulated texts, images, and rules of conduct act as a total horizon, and second in the mode of actuality, whereby each contemporary context puts the objectivized meaning into its own perspective, giving it its own relevance.«²⁹ Women's stories of survival have not corresponded with heroic narratives of liberation and victory of the newly established political regime. In the society of heroes there was no room for victims. Questions about women's moral integrity, survival strategies utilized, and suspicions that women may have collaborated with Nazis, circulated in postwar society.³⁰ »Survivors found that nobody back home wanted to hear about the camps, both in the East and West (of Europe). In the East they were accusing survivors of collaborating with fascists, while for example in France resistance was considered as men's business.«³¹ The legitimacy of the new regime was partially constructed through the narrative of heroic victory against the Nazis and Fascism, a discourse that is challenged by the stories of witness and survival emanating from those who survived concentration camps. Viktorija's book may be a map to explore Yugoslav's and Slovene's *Speichergedächtnisse*³².

26 Almost all gathered documentation on Ravensbrück was destroyed by Nazis prior the arrival of the Red Army which makes it hard to reconstruct life in the camp (cf. S. Helms: If This Is A Woman).

27 The factory was located beside the camp and it was organized in the same type of barracks as the camp so it was protected from the air raids (cp. A. Vode: Spomin in pozaba, p. 298).

28 Cp. »Holocaust Online«, May 5, 2019, <http://holocaustonline.org/siemens/>.

29 Assmann, Jan: »Moses the Egyptian. The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism and ›Collective Memory and Cultural Identity«, in: Jeffrey K. Olik/Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi/Daniel Elvy (eds.), *The Collective Memory Reader*, New York: Oxford University Press 2011, pp. 209–216, here p. 214.

30 Cp. S. Kavčič: Preživele smo in spominjamo se, p. 14.

31 S. Helms: If This Is a Woman, pp. 641–642.

32 Both Maurice Halbwachs and the Assmanns approach memory as a metaphor for a complex combination of remembrance, transmission, tradition, storage and oblivion. Cf. Halbwachs,

Remembering the women, remembering the camp

Figure 3: The inner space of Viktorija's memory book is not open to just anybody (after Bachelard 1958). © Patricia Prieto Blanco.



This tiny object was randomly left on the kitchen table as a remnant of the past.³³ Viktorija did not hide it or throw it away, but she kept it in a visible place for other people to encounter. Why did she leave the object behind and how does this book from the past fit into the present and future? ›Open this book, read it and you will know that I was there.‹ I imagine her unspoken words. Can we learn something from her experience?

Reading women's accounts reveals themes of sacrifice and suffering, messages presented as purposeful and oriented toward the future and liberation. Even though their accounts refer to physical and psychological torture, they do not position themselves as victims in the written accounts. Suffering is rewritten as purposeful and meaningful, part of a process of securing freedom. Vode describes how longterm imprisonment had strengthened women's wish to be free;

Maurice: Das kollektive Gedächtnis, Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer 1985; cf. Assmann, Aleida/Assmann, Jan: »Das Gestern im Heute. Medien und soziales Gedächtnis. Funkkolleg Medien und Kommunikation«, in: Konstruktionen von Wirklichkeit, Studieneinheit I, Studienbrief 5 (1990), pp. 41–82; cf. Assmann, Jan: »Erinnern, um dazuzugehören. Kulturelles Gedächtnis, Zugehörigkeitsstruktur und normative Vergangenheit«, in: Kristin Platt/Mihran Dabag (eds.), Generation und Gedächtnis. Erinnerungen und kollektive Identitäten, Opladen: Leske + Budrich 1995, pp. 51–75; cf. Assmann, Aleida: Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses, Munich: Beck 1999.

33 Cf. Agamben, Giorgio: Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive, New York: Zone Books 2002.

to see land, trees and grass at home again.³⁴ As written by Metka, suffering and sacrifice are purposeful as they enable women to start a new, free life in their old homes.

Sacrifice and suffering lead us into a new life! Golden freedom – it opens the door to our homeland...It is really hard to live over here (in the camp), but it is easier if you know why you are suffering (Metka).

Reading this quote makes us believe that women do not only make suffering purposeful, but they develop an empathetic relationship through suffering. As argued by Jordan, mutual empathy provides an opportunity to develop connections and to make a significant effect on each other.³⁵ In this regard, a common experience of suffering leads to the development of stronger relationships among women, which constitute a community in which resilience resides. This quote also demonstrates the importance of memory and remembering in the process of establishing supported vulnerability. To remember other women in the camp; their shared experience of suffering and mutual empathy is one of the core messages discovered in this friendship book.

Returning back home to a known place and to be remembered are in the center of women's written accounts. Berta's short, but assertive voice saying »Remember me in freedom also!« addresses both the owner and other readers of the friendship book, with an instruction to remember her name and her experience in the camp. A friendship book is a souvenir and a testament to specific periods of past times, present times and future times for those who created it. As a testimonial object, this friendship book provides the women with an opportunity to recall their firsthand experiences in the camp in the first instance. The messages can also be read as a promise that the women will keep in touch and meet again in each other's homes:

I cannot wait to meet you again in your home, Viktorija! (Tonca)
Remember me after returning home to Idrijca valley. And come to (visit) me at the mountain. (Pavla)

All these aspects of remembering make us think that to memorize a particular event, shared experience and connections that developed inside of the camp and on the way home are at the core of a relational resilience-building-process. One last aspect that needs to be considered in connection to relational resil-

34. Cp. A. Vode: Spomin in pozaba, p. 234.

35. Cf. J. V. Jordan: Relational Resilience in Girls.

ience is a collective courage women shared as a coping strategy and survival technique.

Women's accounts demonstrate that courage and acts of bravery were crucial to surviving life in captivity (e. g. It is better to die then to suffer in slavery!). As written by Anka, only courage helped them to survive the war and to walk towards freedom:

Together and forever we left (the camp) with our raised heads and walked towards our new future. Remember we were never defeated and that's why we are the winners of this battle. (Anka)

A closer reading of women's accounts suggests that concepts of resistance were drawn upon as a daily coping mechanism in the Ravensbrück camp. Todorov says »that one must act to have a better chance for surviving [...] taking steps to assure one's survival is already a first act of resistance.«³⁶ Resistance was grounded in an imaginative act, for example, in some instances the reality of suffering and the threat of death in the camp was overlaid with idealized anticipation of a future, reunited with family and friends in a free homeland. Refusing the reality of the present while invoking an idealized future appeared to be an effective survival strategy. Jeannie Rousseau, a French survivor of Ravensbrück, said: »You can refuse what is happening or go along with it. I was in the refusal camp. You simply cannot accept some things. Certain things.«³⁷ Compliance with the camp rules or »going along with it«³⁸ can be also considered as an act of resistance which increased women's chances for survival. This aspect of resilience is also present in Viktorija's memory book as Marija's message evidences:

Remember Viktorija how only behind the wire we realized how beautiful our homeland is, behind the wire in a foreign country we realized what the meaning of freedom is – that is the reason we dealt with the suffering in the camp so bravely. Because through this suffering we can build new life for ourselves and our beloved ones (Ravensbrück, May 11, 1945).

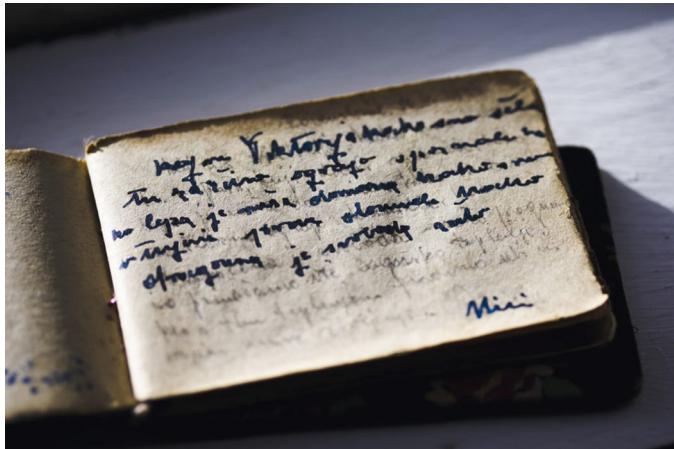
³⁶ Todorov, Tzvetan: *Facing the Extreme. Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1999, p. 214.

³⁷ Cited in S. Helms: *If This Is a Woman*, p. 651.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 657.

A (dis)affective container

Figure 4: Viktorija didn't allow her peers' messages to disappear. But who was she doing this for? © Patricia Prieto Blanco.



Outside of the concentration camp, Viktorija's memory book becomes an instrument of postmemory. Exploring the idea of transference and endurance at the core of Hirsch's term, earlier in this paper we pointed out towards a transgenerational conceptualization of resilience. The analysis of Viktorija's memory book has offered some answers in this respect. The analysis of Marija's message and others in the book has pointed out towards an understanding of relational resilience that also expands the single experience. Furthermore, the voice of Viktorija's granddaughter has hinted towards a process of transference that occurred when the memory book was passed onto her. She then started to perceive the memory book as a source of comfort – or support – when facing challenges herself:

Viktorija could never imagine that I will use this booklet to nurture my own resilience when experiencing personal challenges. The book was passed to me when I was in the middle of my doctoral research and when my own durability and persistence were under scrutiny. I often used the object as a source of support. I believed that it will give me strength or some sort of a magical power. I held the booklet, browsed through the pages thinking how these women coped when exposed to uncertainties of unimaginable horror. My situation was incomparable to theirs, yet, at the time this challenge was major for me. I started to look for information on Viktorija's stay in Ravensbrück by writing emails to the Ravensbrück museum and other services which could provide any evidence about Viktorija's life in the camp. I still vividly remember the day when I submitted my doctorate thesis, which was also the day when I received the last email stating: »We

have not been able to trace any further information about your grandmother's time in Ravensbrück.« I took the booklet in my hands and murmured to myself: this personal object speaks for all the documents. It speaks in the name of the survivors.

From the photographs, Viktorija's tracings of the fading and penciled messages can be discerned. When or for what purpose she did this, we do not know. What did she recall and feel when inking over the messages written by her companions, years after they were written? Did these messages comfort her, allowing her friendship book to trigger memories of survival, collective resistance and resilience? At this crossroad of temporalities, a question we posed above emerges again: can resilience be both encapsulated and triggered by objects? If so how?

Objects, particularly photographs, can be understood as containers of (dis) affect³⁹ as well as having lives of their own.⁴⁰ Like photographs, Viktorija's memory book is full of traces. The messages, the ink, its crumbly pages, its colorful cover, all its material elements are externalizations of experiences expressed through both writing and the process of wear and tear of the object itself. These traces evidence Viktorija's past life in time such as her real and recalled relationships with others, shared ambitions, conditions of work and incarceration, feelings of belonging and not belonging in the space of the camp. The indexical nature of messages, handwritten by fellow prisoners, conveys a sense of certainty, durability and connectivity for those who encounter the object, seven decades later. Viktorija and her companions are tangible to us, and, to some extent, still visible. I would like to highlight the processes of sharing and the moments of exchange precipitated by an inanimate actor, namely the memory book. The object is aesthetically beautiful and very powerful in that it allows for feelings of resilience, resistance and trauma to be activated when we encounter it. The accounts of our own encounter with it have illustrated the force encapsulated in Viktorija's notebook. This force and the traces populating its pages allow me to see the notebook as an image and I remember that: »Images come between the world and human beings. They are supposed to be maps but they turn into screens. Instead of representing the world, they obscure it until human beings' lives finally become a function of the image they create.«⁴¹

39 Cf. Edwards, Elizabeth: »Photography and the Material Performance of the Past«, in: *History and Theory* 48 (2009), pp. 130–150; Edwards, Elizabeth: »Objects of Affect. Photography Beyond the Image«, in: *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41 (2012), pp. 221–234.

40 Cf. E. Edwards/J. Hart, *Photographs, Objects, Histories*; cp. Wright, Christopher: *The Echo of Things. The Lives of Photographs in the Solomon Islands*, Durham: Duke University Press 2009, pp. 126–132.

41 Flusser, Vilém: *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, London: Reaktion Books 2000, pp. 9–10.

This book is profoundly photographic because of its precision, tangibility and ambiguity. The controversy of its materiality, present and future reminds me of Edwards understanding of photography as »[a] visual metaphor that bridges the space between the visible and invisible, which communicates [...] through a lyrical expressiveness.«⁴² The expressiveness communicates, explores and articulates a response by taking the viewer outside of the frame, thereby revealing what has not been visualized on the image⁴³ or, in this case, in the textual entries.

We suggest that the affective dimension of photographs after Edwards⁴⁴ is also present in this memory book and it is through its crumbly pages, its colorful cover and its re-inked messages, that a place of (dis)affect emerges. The mediating role of the materiality of this memory book is perceived as a place⁴⁵ of (dis)affect. As a residence of both transgenerational resilience and postmemory, this place of (dis)affect is both a source of comfort and companionship as well as of horror and trauma. This double character of Viktorija's memory book responds to the relational nature of affordances⁴⁶: »[t]he way in which affordances are systematized and ultimately made proper to things derives from the relationship between people, things and other people«.⁴⁷ Importantly, Graves-Brown does not restrict agency to human actors but hints towards an understanding of objects as containers of (dis)affect, whose properties »are animated by their passage through the lives of people«.⁴⁸

Subject and object »constitute each other in their interrelation«.⁴⁹ Although each subjective involvement is unique – different embodied experiences –, a sense of transfer and connection across generations is generated when interacting with the very same object: Viktorija's memory book. We suggest that its materiality leads to (dis)affectively mediated experiences of transgenerational resilience. Viktorija's memory book connects generations and their experiences of resilience in an intimate way. The affordances of the memory book, activated by material and contextual elements, are contingent in the place of (dis)affect, inhabited by the interaction with the object. We suggest that comfort – for Viktorija as well

42 E. Edwards: *Beyond the Boundary*, p. 58.

43 Cp. *ibid.*, p. 59.

44 Cf. E. Edwards: *Objects of Affect*.

45 Cp. Moores, Shaun: *Media, Place and Mobility*, Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2012, pp. 8–25.

46 Cp. Gibson, James Jerome: *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1979, p. 137.

47 Graves-Brown, Paul: »Introduction«, in: Paul Graves-Brown (ed.), *Matter, Materiality and Material Culture*, London/New York: Routledge 2000, p. 6.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

49 P.-P. Verbeek: *Artifacts and Attachement*, p. 136.

as for her granddaughter – was triggered through an interaction with the object itself – its materiality –, which in turn may have awoken dormant – but embodied – memories of connection and empathy with others – fellow Ravensbrück survivors, and Viktorija herself.

Conclusion

Figure 6: Walking a mile in Viktorija's shoes: still in motion. © Patricia Prieto Blanco.



Women's accounts written just before, during and straight after the liberation of the Ravensbrück concentration camp are testimonies of survival and hope. This autograph book serves as a place where women's voices live endlessly. These 52 accounts can be categorized in 5 types of messages: of command, of freedom, of suffering and sacrifice, proverbs, and messages that are promises to keep in touch. All these themes found a place in this little booklet. In line with Jordan, we recognize that the friendship book provides a place within which practices of relational resilience are nurtured. The process of writing⁵⁰ has been recognized as a common practice of individual coping in times of war. However, as we argue in this paper, a cacophony of women's voices presented in this friendship book extends the idea of resilience beyond the individual, by namely understanding resilience as an ability to connect with others (women). Relationships of contact, support and care, are built and nurtured through practices of mutual empathy,

⁵⁰ Cf. Litoff, Barrett Judith/Smith, David Clayton: »Writing is Fighting, too. The World War II Correspondence of Southern Women«, in: The Georgia Historical Quarterly 76/2 (1992), pp. 436–458.

mutual empowerment, and (en)courage(ment).⁵¹ As shown here, women's experiences with suffering may provoke empathic relationships and empower women to move on and look towards a brighter future. The act of remembering is at the core of this process: remembering the horrific past and other women in the camp is a command frequently inserted in this friendship book. It makes us think that this is the only place which allowed women in Ravensbrück concentration camp to express their agentic role and personal identity. At a time and location where they were dehumanized, and their names and surnames replaced with numbers forcefully engraved on their wrists, this booklet emerged and became a place where all 52 women could still be themselves, both in their individuality as well as in their commonality.

A novel finding retrieved from women's written accounts, is that relational aspects of resilience assist acts of resistance. It can be argued that an act of survival serves as an ultimate proof of human resistance and resilience. It also indicates that resistance was part of coping processes which women used to refuse the reality of their present. As shown by Helms, compliance with the camp rules can be considered as an act of resistance as it increased women's chances to survive. Resistance can be an imaginative act, compliance with rules or refusal of the inhuman conditions to which women were daily exposed to in the camp. Several messages focus on life beyond the camp, hopes to life in freedom at home/home-land, and imagining to see the sun again. In this context, resilience can be read as a mode of resistance⁵² showing that women were alternating between both processes in order to survive in the camp.

Furthermore, applying Hirsch's concept of postmemory to the study of resilience, this paper has evidenced the trans-generational character of resilience and how it is interwoven with the mediating role of the materiality of Viktorija's book. Arguably, post-resilience can be stored by non-human actors and triggered as human actors animate the non-human/the object. What Hirsch's work does not cover in great extent are the absences in the generation of postmemory. What happens when the second generation does not engage with those objects but the third does, as it is the case here? Does the object retain links to the memories of the past? As argued throughout the paper, Viktorija's memory book in fact encapsulates some force. The book is animated through the lives of Viktorija's daughters and a visual researcher and as such it becomes a remnant of the past which, with its smell, its crumbly pages and its fading messages, propels action as this paper attests. As the book is animated through the lives of Viktorija's granddaughter and a visual researcher, it becomes a remnant of the past – with

51 Cf. J.V. Jordan: Relational Resilience in Girls.

52 Cf. Bourbeau, Philippe/Ryan, Caitlin: »Resilience, Resistance, Infrapolitics and Enmeshment«, in: European Journal of International Relations 24/1 (2018), pp. 221–239.

its smell, its crumbly pages and its fading messages – which propels action as this paper attests. What about the lack of investment in itself? Could the refusal of active investment also give rise to memories about the past? Could one perhaps talk about absence-based memories of the past?

Instrumentalized as a tool of relational and transgenerational resilience, Viktorija's memory book allows for the development of a growth promoting relationship across generations. Viktorija's memory book functions as a (dis)affective container enabling the remembrance of past experiences of coping and resilience as well as their relevance for current and future challenges. It is through an acknowledgement and exploration of the material qualities of the memory book that such a conceptualization of the memory book emerges, and it follows the findings of a thorough in-depth content analysis presented above. Marija's message and others in the book reveal that relational resilience also expands the single experience. Furthermore, Viktorija's granddaughter used this memory book as source of comfort – or support – when facing challenges herself.

The narrative fragments elicited through the analysis of the 52 entries in the book as well as of the book's own presence, through its materiality and affordances, has started to reveal memories from the past that differ from the national discourse of heroism prevalent in the society after the end of the war. In order to advance, further digging in the *Speichergedächtnis*, as attested by Kavčić's work, is necessary. Access to institutionalized memories of Ravensbrück will allow to further outline the relevance of the narratives of these 52 women in shifting dominant discourses.

Viktorija tried to preserve the writing and thin pages from decay and I strive for the same. I nearly don't dare to touch this 74-years-old object. I am exhausted trying to find out, understand, and interpret its past. I smell and smell. I turn page after page as carefully as I can, and I am amazed with Viktorija's persistent attempt to keep these messages alive. I imagine how she tries to copy every single word by following the curves of the letters written by other women. These imaginary pictures are provoked by this little booklet, the tiniest I've ever seen. I imagine how she tried to smuggle it out of the camp thinking about possible places in which the object may remain hidden. Did she make it in one of the Siemens' premises where she was forced to work? I smell it again and again, as I would like to transmit the courage and the will to survive to myself. I pretend that I walk in Viktorija's shoes and reconstruct her way back home. I try to remember women's names and I wonder how they looked. I use the materiality of this object to recreate my vision about their life in the camp and their journey back home. I close the book and I think about the owner. I didn't know Viktorija very well, but somehow, I feel closer to her now.

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