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refugee experiences during the First World War**

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Internet: www.pedocs.de

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‘I will tell you what a refugee story is’:
Reconstructing (post-)memories of refugee experiences
during the First World War

Jolien De Vuyst

Ghent University, Belgium

Angelo Van Gorp

University of Koblenz-Landau, Germany

Abstract

In popular media, humanitarian accounts, and registers, Belgian refugees were well-documented. However, this article argues that those sources often have a dehumanizing effect or deprive the refugee of its agency. Oral history and postmemories are important sources that allow to include refugees’ perspectives and the particularity of their experiences. With that aim descendants of Belgian refugees in Birmingham were interviewed. We have inquired how the refugee stories and family histories were transmitted inter-generationally, how the descendants (re-)constructed and (re-)interpreted their family history, and what the personal significance of those memories was for the descendants today. Although the three cases under scrutiny are not representative for all Belgian refugees, the article concludes that the inter-generational transmission followed a unique pattern. This transmission as well as the (re-)construction and (re-)interpretation are subject to several contextual influences. It is also demonstrated that the descendants are still strongly emotionally engaged with this family history and in some cases even expressed an interventionist voice.

1. Introduction: From ‘Poor little Belgians’ to documented Belgians

One of the highly publicized aspects of the First World War was the invasion of Belgium by the German army (De Schaepdrijver, 2005; Green, 2014). During the first war months, British newspapers were widely reporting on the Belgian refugees that were continually arriving on the British shores. British media often focused attention on the violent actions of the German army. Many journalists tried to interview

Belgian refugees to retrieve eyewitness reports. *The Daily Chronicle* (1914, September 24), for instance, reported on a refugee's 'pitiful story,' mentioning that "Germans were practicing the most horrible cruelties on women and children ... She [a refugee woman] had seen a German hack a child's head with his bayonet while on its mother's arm."¹ This indicates how, as Purseigle argued, "on their arrival as well as in the course of their settlement, refugees functioned as vehicles for the dissemination of images of brutality and suffering" (2007, p. 435). The representation of the Belgian refugees was, in other words, inextricable from the German atrocities and, thus, must be understood from this viewpoint (Purseigle, 2007; see also Harris, 1993). Images of refugees were often connected to their plight:

No account can ever be given of the mental tortures they have suffered at the spectacle of their homes and farm lands made desolate by pillage, rapine, and murder. The elderly among them look sad and weary, as if unable to comprehend the tragedy which has uprooted them from their homes; yet transfigured by a pathetic dignity.²

In official reports of refugee relief organizations this discourse was also reproduced. In their first report, the War Refugees' Committee Birmingham and District (WRCB) dedicated a section on the "histories of some of the Refugees."³ This committee also gave its interpretation of the Belgians' despair and focused especially on their feelings of loss. They referred to the Belgians as "a bewildered Belgian group, whose greatest fear is lest their pathetic packages – all that they now possess in the world – should be lost." They received "refugees of all kinds – men, women, and children – with their pitiful little bundles, representing all their worldly goods."⁴ Within this humanitarian discourse a strong focus was also on the gratitude the Belgians showed towards the citizens of Birmingham. This combination of representations is best illustrated by the following quote of a Belgian priest, referring to the colors of the Belgian national flag:

Black is typical of the terrible days through which our country is passing, and the depth of sorrow into which we have been plunged; red, is the blood that has been shed; but golden is the kindness of the British people, and never can the Belgians forget the generosity and warmth of their reception.⁵

As is often the case within narratives of 'the refugee,' women and children were especially emphasized (Gatrell, 2013; Malkki, 1996). This not only happened in images, but also in the descriptions of the Belgians. A striking element several newspapers reported on, were the many offers to adopt Belgian orphans, clearly resulting from the atrocities propaganda. On 9 September 1914, *The Birmingham Post* reported that "offers have been made by sympathetic people to adopt orphan children, but up to the present children who have been deprived of their parents have not been sent to Birmingham."⁶ Why that was the case was explained by the image of 'the Catholic mother:'

Children who are orphaned or desolate are not easily to be found. Many of the kind friends who are ready to devote themselves to the little ones do not realize the strength of the family bond that unites these exiles. The Catholic mother will not separate herself from her children. ... Relations hold together, so that children who have lost their parents fall naturally to the care of uncles, aunts, and cousins, failing brothers and sisters. Friends are united in the ties that misfortune knits closer, and family friends would at once protect and shelter the children of any who had perished.⁷

Although the many collective and personal representations that were articulated provided useful information into how British society welcomed the Belgians, the creation of the 'Poor Little Belgium'-image must be handled with care. These depictions are often biased and underpinned by a propagandist rhetoric. Belgian refugees were a propaganda tool used as a justification and to encourage public support for the British war effort (Jenkinson, 2016). Those who stayed behind and were under German occupation painted a different image of the Belgian refugee. A poem, entitled 'Complainte des Francs-Filés en Angleterre' is an indictment to those that fled. It sketches an image of the Belgian who fled to England as a coward, abandoning their 'dying' country, now being in a safe haven, profiting from British charity (Amara, 2005).

The Belgian refugees were the largest refugee group to enter early 20th century Britain and were comprehensively documented during their stay (Myers, 2001). Many official records on Belgian refugees are preserved in archives. This is the result of the British state formation which effected new relationships between the state and civil society. In this period a whole range of bureaucratic tools was developed, especially with regard to the management of immigration (De Vuyst, Myers & Van Gorp, 2021). Official archives can be important sources of information, yet these registers and bureaucratic documents often have a dehumanizing effect (Ewence, 2018; Gatrell & Nivet, 2014). This fact was already recognized by de Jastrzebski, in 1916 when he presented his research on the register of Belgian refugees.⁸ The report read that:

[the relief workers'] work at Somerset House on the register had not been work done in personal touch with the refugees at all. As a matter of fact he had endeavoured to avoid that altogether. To him the refugee was an abstraction on a card. He did not want to imagine the refugee as a human being at all. (de Jastrzebski, 1916, p. 158)

During the Great War the *War Refugees Committee Birmingham and District* (WRCB) was established to accommodate and care for the Belgian refugees residing in Birmingham. Many of the WRCB's documents, such as a Belgian refugee register and the reports of committee's meetings, are kept in the *Birmingham Archives and Collections Service*. However, these archival sources tend to solely focus on the refugee relief work organized by the WRCB. Consequently, the personal story behind the recorded individuals' names is lost. Their identity is narrowed to their

refugee status and they are represented almost exclusively as subjects of need. These registers thus silence the refugees' voices and deny them any agency (Rajaram, 2002; see also Marfleet, 2007). The WRCB noted, for instance, that the Froumy family "ought not to require assistance" and that help was sought to guide "these friendless girls."⁹ Furthermore, their registration in the local police register of aliens gives us biographical information and factual knowledge on when they entered Birmingham or where they lived and worked.¹⁰ Yet, these sources were mainly intended as a tool for state management and control, and thus exclude refugees' perspectives and any particularity of their refugee experience (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Rajaram, 2002).

In order to transcend this partial and dehumanizing picture Gatrell has developed the concept of 'refugeedom.' He defines refugeedom as "a matrix involving administrative practices, legal norms, social relations and refugees' experiences, and how these have been represented in cultural terms" (Gatrell, 2017, p. 170). In this article, we want to elaborate especially on that last perspective to provide a more holistic viewpoint on the Belgian exile. It is argued that "a new dimension is given to history" when life experiences of individuals are acknowledged as sources (Thomson, 2003, p. 24). Oral histories are, thus, important sources to include those perspectives that are often missing from the archives (Portelli, 2003; Thomson, 2003). The strength of the oral-history-method lies in its emphasis on memory as a process.

This approach enables us to move beyond collecting memories as an alternative way of collecting historical data. Instead of focusing solely on the content of the oral sources, it enables us to understand the (re-)construction, personal importance and the underlying meaning of stories and the influence of present experiences and events on past memories (Abrams, 2017; Ritchie, 2015; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Schneider, 2008; Hodgkin & Radstone, 2003; Portelli 2003). Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'postmemory' is of utmost importance in this regard, as we could not collect direct and personal memories of the war refugees and have interviewed the descendants of Belgian refugees instead. 'Postmemory' refers to those experiences, memories and their emotional content that are passed on from a generation to their children and grandchildren. This 'narrative inheritance' adds another dimension to this research, as it also entails the familial construction and transmission of memories as well as how the next generations make meaning of the family past (Hirsch, 1996, 2001, 2008; Mitroiu, 2018; Ziino, 2010).

In this study, we focus on the oral-history-account of the descendants of three Belgian families that lived in exile during the First World War: the Van Schoubroeck, Andries and Froumy families respectively. Based on oral-history- and postmemory theories and the interviews with descendants, we address three main questions: How were the refugee stories and family histories transmitted inter-generationally? How

did the descendants (re-)construct and (re-)interpret those stories and memories? What is the personal significance of those memories or, to put it differently, why does it matter to them today? These questions are discussed in the sections 4 to 6 respectively. Before tackling the questions, however, we first discuss the methodology of oral history and postmemory as well as related ethical issues (section 2) and introduce the three selected cases (section 3).

2. Methodological framework

2.1 Oral history and postmemory

Oral history is centered on the stories, experiences and histories of people that are often hidden from history. Interestingly, this method enables researchers to record factual information about events from an individual's perspective. However, and more importantly, it allows researchers to not only "reconstruct the history of an event but also the history of its memory, the ways in which it grows, changes, and operated in the time between then and now" (Portelli, 2009, p. 24; see also Abrams, 2017; Perks & Thomson, 2003). This focus on the active process of memory construction opens up different ways to study the underlying significance of these life narratives. This is exactly what, as Portelli argues (2003, 2009), makes oral history different. The subjectivity that is inherent to the oral-history-method is a unique element. It enables researchers to create insights in an individual's perspective, the memory construction and meaning-making process of their past. It focusses also on what they think is important, how the past is implicitly and explicitly extant in the present and how to understand the individual's story in its sociocultural context (Abrams, 2017; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Thomson, 2007; Portelli, 2003).

However, many memories are on the verge of disappearing as valuable first-hand testimonies pass away together with the rememberers (Hodgkin & Radstone, 2003). This is also the case with the Belgian exile: it has been over 100 years and all refugees have died. Although memory is fragile, it can nevertheless become an 'inheritance.' Witnesses of an event can pass on their memories of and connections to that event to their descendants. Jan Assmann (2008) has termed this memory 'communicative memory.' According to him, the family unit is crucial in the transmission of these affective memories in everyday interaction and communication. However, he argued this specific form of memory is transmitted across three communicating generations and consequently spans a limited time period of 80 to 100 years (see also Hirsch, 2008; Hodgkin & Radstone, 2003). From this perspective, it places the uncovering of the affective and personal memories on the Belgian exile in an urgent situation as they are close to disappearing permanently. To retrieve some of the refugees' experiences and memories, we have interviewed descendants of Belgian refugees.

In this study, the concept of postmemory offers an interesting view on the descendants' stories. Postmemory is a complex and mediated form of memory that has been passed down to next generations through the stories, images, behaviors and even silences they grew up with. This transmission of memory is complex, indirect, fragmentary and conflicting (Hirsch & Spitzer, 2003; Hirsch, 2001, 2008; Mitroiu, 2018). Although postmemory entails a generational distance to a direct memory, the personal connection to it is very deep (Firat, Şannan, Muti, Gürpınar & Özkaya, 2017). The postmemory theory has been developed in relation to the experiences of second generation Holocaust survivors. It thus focusses on their relationship with the traumatic memories of their parents and relatives (Hirsch, 2001, 2008; see also Mitroiu, 2018). However, we want to broaden this concept, as it is also applicable to further generations, in this case the third generation, which bears witness of other – not necessarily traumatic – historical events (see, e.g., Jenkinson, 2019).

2.2 Ethical considerations

It is important not to disregard the ethical considerations and involvement of the researcher in this study. Recording an oral and postmemorial testimony is an intimate event that can only be produced by a collaborative effort. In other words, the narrative is the result of a 'dialogue,' which is co-constructed between the interviewer and interviewee (Portelli, 2003). Producing a meaningful narrative is only possible when there is a level of trust and interviewees open up about vulnerable matters, which can be positive, but also negative, as well as emotionally difficult (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Consequently, the researcher has to accept and take a moral and social responsibility for rendering private stories public (Kevers, Rober & De Haene, 2018). This trust and responsibility is illustrated by one of the descendants saying "I'm just going to leave it in your [i.e., the first author's] good hands."¹¹ However, an informed consent informed descendants on the purpose of the interview and the broader research frame, their voluntary participation in the study, on the possibility to decline answering any question, and on the option to anonymize (which they immediately declined), adjust or delete any information. This also secured the reciprocal relation after the interviews had taken place.

Interviewing them about their family histories was undeniably an intervention in the descendants' lives. Consequently, certain factors have had an impact on the oral history accounts. First, who the interviewer was and their perception of her, especially the descendants living in America and having a visitor from Belgium, was decisive. Mia, for example, when being asked what message she wanted to spread with her grandmother's story, related this to the interviewer's person, as she said:

You are the next generation, what a blessing that you have this interest, this perspective, the world will be fine as long as there are people like you. (McLelland, M., 2018, March 4, personal Interview)

She also articulated some of her prospects about this research:

I actually have really enjoyed this entire experience of sharing this information with someone who is interested ... I am so looking forward to the next chapter when you finish this, and where it goes, and following it, because this is not a static piece of paper, this is something that is going to generate more discussion and I want to follow that, I think it will be very interesting. (Ibid.)

The presence of the first author incited many questions from the descendants about her person, how she had discovered them, or how her interest for this topic started. It also influenced their telling, (re-)shaping, (re-)constructing and (re-)interpreting of their story and memories. This was also reinforced through asking them questions about matters they might not have considered before, by providing pieces of new information to all descendants about their family or by contextualizing some misunderstandings. For some, this may have changed the perception on their families.

3. The refugee stories

We have interviewed three descendants of refugee families that stayed in Birmingham during the First World War. These three cases were quite different. One family returned to Belgium after the war ended and remained there. In two of our cases, however, the families migrated to the United States. In what follows, we briefly introduce the three refugee stories.¹²

3.1 The Van Schoubroeck family (Annick)

The Van Schoubroeck family was a well-known middle-class family in the small Flemish town of Herentals. Julien Van Schoubroeck was the owner of a textile factory and belonged to the city's Catholic elite. When the First World War broke out, he decided to leave the country with his wife H el ene and their two children, Gabrielle and Joseph. They arrived in Birmingham on 6 September 1914, which was early in the war compared to most refugees. The Van Schoubroeck family was accommodated in the headquarters of the WRCB, where they assisted the committee in their refugee relief. The family welcomed newly arrived Belgian refugees, acted as interpreters and mediated in conflicts. Joseph remained quite reticent about his time in Birmingham. Upon contacting his daughter Annick she responded with: "One thing I know for sure, my grandfather has never been in England."¹³ Annick was surprised that her grandfather cooperated in the refugee relief work, as this did not chime with the image of the patronizing, stern and cold-hearted person her family always

portrayed him to be. She confided that her family would not believe the stories we would tell. Annick could only recall a story about her father she had heard from her siblings. Joseph, being taught in an English school, had won a prize for an English task. The teacher was annoyed at the other students because “how could it be that the refugees know better English than the Brits?” Annick also had several English children’s books in her possession, which must have been Joseph’s Christmas presents.

3.2 The Andries family (Eileen)

Joseph Andries, who was orphaned at the age of three, experienced some of the German atrocities. His uncle was burned alive in his house, and Joseph was captured by German soldiers when he went behind enemy lines to retrieve his bicycle. After he was released, he went to Antwerp where he was reunited with his family. They sailed to Dover, then were sent to London before settling in Birmingham. During the war, Joseph integrated in Birmingham society. He learned English, obtained a job at the Birmingham Small Arms factory, developed a love for the Aston Villa Football Club, and met his future wife in the local Catholic community. Joseph and Kathleen always claimed they were married on 12 October 1917, but Eileen, their granddaughter, later found out that they were actually married on 12 October 1918, merely four months before the birth of Joanna, Eileen’s mother. Their marriage was what she called a ‘shotgun wedding,’ as they were obliged to marry. Late in life and after Joseph’s death, Kathleen confessed to her granddaughter that Joseph sexually assaulted her, resulting in her becoming pregnant and having to marry each other. After the war, they returned to Belgium. However, because Kathleen was not able to adjust to the Belgian lifestyle, they decided to migrate to Boston.

3.3 The Froumy sisters (Mia)

The third person we have interviewed is Mia, granddaughter of Irma Froumy, who was the second oldest out of a family of eight children. It remains unclear why exactly the Froumy family decided to flee Belgium. One document refers to her family being destitute, while the story Irma herself told, was about her having to leave Belgium after being discovered smuggling Allied soldiers. Whatever the case, in 1915 five sisters were able to flee in two groups. Irma, Virginie and Aline arrived first in Birmingham on 9 March 1915. They were reunited with their sisters on 20 November in the same year. The Froumy sisters never talked about their time in Birmingham. Nevertheless, the pictures that survived create an image of their lives in England. They were able to attend social events, had printed several personal Christmas cards to send to family and friends, and obtained employment at the Southall Mills. In 1919, the sisters returned to Belgium. After one month, however, Irma returned to

Birmingham to do a roundtrip with her English friends. Eventually, this trip turned out to be the start of many travels around the globe. Yet, she often travelled back to Belgium to visit her family. Irma had a cosmopolitan lifestyle before settling in Pennsylvania to help care for her grandchildren. Her brother and three of her sisters also emigrated to America.

4. Inter-generational transmission

4.1 The uniqueness of transmission

The transmission of memories is, in a way, as important as their content. How certain memories have continued to exist also provides an insight in their creation (Ziino, 2010). It can be stipulated that in every single case the inter-generational transmission of the refugee story occurred through a unique mixture of storytelling, pictures, artefacts, documents, habits, and songs. In the three families in this study, one was aware that family members had been refugees in England. In each family the period of exile was discussed to a greater or lesser extent. Strikingly, however, little details were provided on their stay in Birmingham. In the case of the Van Schoubroeck family, they only had access to some artefacts or anecdotes that reveal their families' exile. Also, as previously mentioned, when he was doing calculations, Annick always heard him count in English. It was also talked about between siblings. The descendants of the families that emigrated to the United States could recall some more details. Often memories were triggered by certain stimuli such as time, place or other multi-sensory inducements (Bloch, 2018). Eileen recalls her grandfather repeating over and over again "the day he was going to die," and especially when they approached 20 August "he would talk about that all the time."¹⁴ Photographs, documents, certain periods and even a hunger for certain types of food were an incentive to him and the foremost means to start reminiscing on his past life in Belgium and England.

Nevertheless, in most cases of the families' stories, the absence of the storytelling and narrative gaps are quite central. Certain documents and photographs then act as important "carriers of memory" (Bela, Garda-Rozenberga & Zirnīte, 2016, p. 70). The significance of photographs is that their relation to the past is more direct, as they in a way materialize that past (Dutka, 2016). Photographs have the capacity to "diminish distance, bridge separation, and facilitate identification and affiliation" (Hirsch, 2008, p. 116). To Mia, the documents and pictures she inherited from her grandmother and great-aunts are invaluable:

I'm blessed to be able to have access to this. I had no idea. When I would visit my great-aunts and things, there were some pictures out but they were always the same photographs and there was never any mention that there was a box of wonderful photographs and

memories of their times and they just didn't really display it. (McLelland, M., 2018, March 4, personal interview)

It was only after the death of her grandmother and great-aunts that she discovered those artefacts and learned more about their time in England. At our request, Annick, for her part, was totally surprised that she retained certain documents of her father's time in Birmingham. She was unaware that it was in her possession, as she was still processing her parents' death. It had been too difficult to go through the inheritance.

4.2 Contextual influences

As mentioned before, what is narrated and remembered is situational. In postmemories certain contextual influences can be identified. A first factor is 'gender.' The three descendants we have interviewed were women. Women are referred to as "bearers of significant traditions, keepers of memory within the family for future as well as past generations" (Noakes, 2018, p. 614; see also Ziino, 2010). All descendants in this study cherished their familial memories but also the materials that were left to them. Annick, for instance, treasured her father's books as they represent Joseph's memories. Annick did have a strong relationship with her father but her grandfather passed away when she was only two years old. The bond of her older siblings with their grandfather was troubled. In Mia's and Eileen's narratives their close relationship with their grandparents stand out. For a certain period in life, they lived together with their relatives. In Eileen's case, her grandfather apparently did not have a good relationship with his children. Yet, he and Eileen did have a good bond, due to her fascination for his stories about Belgium. His storytelling was their way of bonding.

In other words, the family relation is important in the transmission of memories. Yet, strong connections can also incite a 'double wall of silence,' where generations maintain a non-verbal agreement to silence certain painful or emotional memories and experiences (Bloch, 2018; Damousi, 2012; Smart, 2011). The social class the family belonged to might also have impacted the narrative inheritance. The Van Schoubroeck family was a prominent middle-class family. Finding refuge in Birmingham most probably entailed a loss of status, which impeded the narration of this experience. At the same time, it also could be that emotional subjects were simply not a topic of discussion in this middle-class family (Bloch, 2018; Sharma, 2009; Hirsch, 2002).

Another contextual influence that cannot be ignored is 'location.' It is argued that memory is strongly tied to physical places or 'sites of memory' (Hodgkin & Radstone, 2003; see also Mitroiu, 2018; Nora, 1989). Added to the refugee stories of Mia's and Eileen's grandparents, is also their own 'migration experience.' Having

migrated to the United States after the First World War, enabled talking about family roots. The stories of the grandparents often followed three steps: first, there was an elaboration on the motives for leaving, second, there was the journey to the new country, lastly, focus was laid on the integration and settling in a new home. This is also termed as the ‘migration saga’ (Bela et al., 2016). When going into detail about their grandparents’ migration saga, both Eileen and Mia considered their refuge in Birmingham as the reason for eventually leaving Belgium. Next to this, memories often are colored by national narratives. Throughout their stories, the American descendants strongly focused on the opportunities their grandparents had, and took with both hands, to succeed in life. They both gave indications of the ‘American Dream’-narrative. America was perceived as the country of opportunities, where one could pursue one’s aspirations, freedom and prosperity (Jillson, 2004; Cullen, 2003). Eileen recalled that her grandfather always said that they thought that in America “the streets were paved with gold.”¹⁵

4.3 From the private to the public scene

Another aspect we want to discuss is not the inter-generational transmission but the transmission of the descendants’ stories to the researcher. In the three cases, the descendants had their artefacts on display. Starting from these documents, pictures or objects, they were able to tell the family narrative. A consequence of this retelling is that it reshapes the (post-)memories from a private, family story to a public one. Not only did our respondents want to bring this story out, it was their way of giving the story a permanent character. By making it public, it is recorded and more sustainable (Wouters & Aerts, 2014; Ziino, 2010). In particular the American participants showed this agency.

Disclosing their family stories and rendering it public was only possible because the descendants felt they could do this. They were able to tell the story in its fullness and include sensitive subjects and some family secrets (Smart, 2011; McNay, 2009). The reason why they felt they were able to do this, was that most people who are the subjects of their emotional stories and secrets have passed away. Consequently, bringing their stories in public will do no harm or will not make any family member upset. Mia pondered:

They have passed on and I don’t need to feel the hurt from the scandal. (McLelland, M., 2018, March 4, personal interview)

Eileen took it a step further and believed that the integral story needed to be told,

because you can’t tell the story without putting the bad parts to it, otherwise it makes absolutely no sense. (Buckley, E., 2018, March 1, personal interview)

5. Construction, deconstruction and reconstruction

Remembering and storytelling is an active process that depends on more than dialogical co-constructions. This active process enables the (re-)construction, (re-)framing and (re-)interpretation of memories and postmemories and is not only affected by contextual influences. The gender, age, life story and family situation of the rememberer (Bloch, 2018; Noakes, 2018; McNay, 2009; Sharma, 2009), as well as the social, cultural and historical community context and even the nation has its influences on an individual's (post-)memories (Bloch, 2018; Granata & Sarcinelli, 2012; Hodgkin & Radstone, 2003; Nora, 1989). In the interviews some of these effects became apparent. A first, distinct feature within the interviews was the way the family story was reconstructed for an 'outsider.' In the three cases, the descendants tried to create an understanding of their ancestors' personality. They emphasized the character picture of their grandparents, as they assumed it a prerequisite for a better understanding of the family's history. This character picture was drawn through a focus on the childhood and by recalling various anecdotes. Small stories highlight the traits of their family members and especially bear witness of their friendliness, quirkiness, loving character or wittiness. Mia told about Irma:

She enjoyed life. She really was very full of life sort of person who did not seem to have any problem getting through life ... She had such charisma that you were drawn to her, you wanted to be around her because she was that interesting. (McLelland, M., 2018, March 3, personal interview)

Such character pictures were also bound up with the refugee story. Annick explained that the English influence on her father's character was strongly noticeable, as he was always a gentleman, very distinguished and often wore tweed suits.¹⁶ Such details add an extra dimension and a personal layer to the story, but also show clearly the descendants' respect to their grandparents.

5.1 Making sense of the narrative gaps

Despite the availability of material and immaterial resources enabling the descendants to reconstruct their grandparents' life stories, many gaps remained in their narratives. The silences are unquestionably difficult to interpret, yet, the descendants tried to make sense of them. Not only is memory often fragmentary, some parts of the (refugee) story may have been too traumatic to talk about. Still, the narrative gaps are important components of the life story and might indicate that this exact period entailed many difficulties or struggles for the participants' ancestors (Bloch, 2018; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Hirsch & Spitzer, 2003). Mia's grandmother and great-aunts never testified about their flight to England and Mia believes that "it would have probably been a very traumatic journey and frightening and I would not think

they would want to dwell too much on it.”¹⁷ However, in all three cases other explanations were also mentioned as to why some parts of the story were suppressed.

Joseph Van Schoubroeck, for instance, elaborated much more on his experiences during the Second World War, which led Annick to believe that his uncommunicativeness about the First World War had much to do with his age. Being only seven years old when the war broke out might have complicated the memories about his time in Birmingham. Mia expressed a range of explanations for the silences. The Froumy sisters did not speak of that time, as they did not like talking about it: “It was not a topic of discussion.”¹⁸ Next to this, she also found an explication in the sisters’ life period and a flaw in memory:

But they didn’t talk about – they talked very little about the actual time there [in Birmingham] but ... it could’ve been because of the time frame, that they were there in the early 1910s and when we’re talking to them it’s the 1980s. They may not have remembered all that well to be honest. (McLelland, M., 2018, March 3, personal interview)

Yet, the character of her grandmother helped to make sense of some silences:

She was not a depressed person (laughs) and she always moved forward, and she had some difficult times that we now know how difficult they really might have been – you would not have known that if you’d met her at the time. She didn’t present herself that way. (McLelland, M., 2018, March 4, personal interview)

This positive attitude, next to being a characteristic trait, might also have been a coping mechanism. Being positive about the past and a strong focus on the future are strategies of self-protection from the difficult situations they survived. Withholding this information might also have been a way not to burden children and grandchildren with those experiences (Bloch, 2018; Ritchie, 2015). Accordingly, silences serve a certain purpose: because it was too painful to talk about or because one was ashamed of that part of their life. Nevertheless, exploring narrative gaps sometimes reveals family secrets. This might have a great impact, as the disclosing of a secret might result in a de- and reconstruction of the family narrative and even elicit a reconstructive reflection on the descendants’ own identity (Smart, 2011; McNay, 2009). In Eileen’s case, the silence of her grandfather’s time in England and the subsequent migration to the United States had been reframed when after his death it was revealed that he might have sexually assaulted her grandmother:

I think the reason he was circumspect about his time in England was because of the situation with my grandmother. And this is kind of racy and I – I’m not sure, but she told me, after he died ‘Grumpy raped me’ now maybe he did and that may have, you know, certainly – she was very prudish so I have no reason to doubt that. And I think that was, I think he – In many ways he didn’t go back to Belgium because he felt this was a punishment for what he had done ... People would allude to it but it wasn’t until I was an adult and I was running all their finances for them and taking care of their affairs that I was like ‘oh hey it really was

true.’ ... So, I think that probably really had a huge impact on what happened to their lives.
(Buckley, E., 2018, February 28, personal interview)¹⁹

Although painful, it did not damage the memory of her grandfather, but rather served as the explanatory context to the motive to migrate to the United States. It also helped to explain why he did not return to Belgium, in spite of him being extremely nostalgic and homesick. It was, in other words, what Smart defined as an “epiphanal event” that determined the reconstruction and rewriting of the family story (2011, p. 548).

5.2 The quest of the family past

Not only the disclosing of narrative silences and family secrets may add another layer of knowledge to family memories, also the descendants’ proactive attitude, especially recurrent in the American descendants, led to the discovery of new information or other secrets and, consequently, a re-narration of the family’s history. In a way, they were trying to retrieve information through alternative ways, for it is impossible or very difficult to ask other relatives. This alternative knowledge is important because it helps to understand the family history as well as their own identity (Bloch, 2018; Ritchie, 2015; Schneider, 2008). Fortunately, developments within the family-heritage sector and the digitization of archival documents has contributed to their individual research. Some descendants were able to find personal information on their family members. The disclosure of, for example, passenger lists enables to track itineraries of relatives. Birth certificates are also becoming increasingly easier to consult. This led Eileen to the discovery of the birth certificate of her grandfather. On the certificate it also states the employment of the parents. It was in that moment she discovered that Joseph’s father was not station master, as he always told her, but a day laborer. Belgian newspapers are also available online, which helped Mia to find out that her great-grandfather was desperately trying for years to find jobs for his daughters. Based on the many advertisements she has found in newspapers, she concluded that the Froumy sisters must have had a good education – as they were able to speak both Dutch and French – and that they were happy and had it good at home. Especially Mia’s proactive attitude was very strong. She felt that there was a story that she *had* to uncover. In her case, it can be stipulated that the search for her family’s history turned into what Mitroiu refers to as “the quest of the family past” (2018, p. 20). Mia even calls it an obsession:

There’s more to the story, I just – I don’t know where to look next, but I, you know, will have a look. What I like about – maybe I’m very patient with this, but I can be patient because I knew none of this twenty-five years ago. I knew, you heard this or you heard that, you know your grandmother is from Belgium, you’ve been in Belgium, great! Okay, that kind of is okay for some people, that’s enough, oh we went to the house where she grew up, okay, let’s go, moving on, and they never have any more interest in that, obviously this

created an obsession in my life that now I need to know everything about everybody and all their relatives (laughs). (McLelland, M., 2018, March 4, personal interview)

5.3 Not a refugee story?

Turning to the consultation of personal archival information, general knowledge on the First World War has helped to contextualize family memories. By seeing pictures and reading documents and stories of that period, they also reinterpret the story of their grandparents. Annick and Mia never considered their families as refugees. Annick and her husband didn't realize it was "that much of a refugee thing"²⁰ before they learned about our research project. In this regard, Mia elaborated that her grandmother said that they went to England, but:

she never used the word 'refugee,' it wasn't – she didn't define it that way. When we're looking at these pictures of the refugee camp and the conditions, it's not the experience that they had ... There were newspaper articles and they only showed this foreworn looking family in drab clothing holding their belongings like tied in a cloth and looking cold and tired and hungry. And contrast that with the photographs of these young ladies who even six months after they arrived are having their photograph taken in a studio wearing what looks to be quite stylish clothing ... It didn't look like the situation that many others were suffering. (McLelland, M., 2018, March 4, personal interview)

Eileen's grandfather spoke of himself as being a refugee. Nevertheless, when she organized his funeral and the pastor referred to her grandfather having been a refugee her mother was furious. She explained this as follows:

She had this perception for a refugee family, she was thinking of *displaced persons* from Eastern Europe coming over to the United States in World War Two, so she really didn't like that word. (Buckley, E., 2018, March 1, personal interview)

This clearly shows how refugeedom always is socially, politically and economically contextualized and can shift its meaning (Gatrell, 2017, 2013). The descendants referred to their family members being very grateful to the English for the help they received. Joseph Andries, for instance, talked about *Madame Cadbury*, how she welcomed them at the train station, and how lovely and wonderful she was. Based on the source material available to them, Eileen, Mia and Annick did believe that their relatives remembered their time in England as something positive. In Eileen's words: "But it seems most of the time he was in England he seemed to have a very, very good time."²¹ This is a counter-statement to the understanding of displacement as solely traumatic. Irma's story testifies of an exile opening up new avenues in life:

Once she discovered travel, she wasn't willing to give it up ... Herent [her hometown in Belgium] would have been torture. Probably it would have been fine if she had never left. She never would have known, but when she left and saw [New York], it was more interesting. (McLelland, M., 2018, March 4, personal interview)

6. Significance of the family past for the present

6.1 Identity

It is crucial not to undervalue the significance of the descendants' family past. It became a large part of their daily lives. When exploring why the recalling and retelling of their family's history matters to them, several reasons can be indicated. A first, important aspect is that (post-)memories are an inextricable component of the identity construction (Abrams, 2017; Bela et al., 2016; McGeough, 2012). Talking about their ancestors' life stories is a performance of their identities. This manifested itself each time in a unique way. For one it meant as much as showing who one was, while for the other it meant the opposite. Throughout the interview, Annick hinted several times how her father, and consequently she as well, seceded from the upper-class identity of her grandfather. She referred to a very different attitude in life:

My father's motive was to never look down upon a person who had it difficult in life. You don't disdain them, you go to them to help them. (Van Schoubroeck, A., 2018, February 2, personal interview)

Her grandfather was really attentive about his status, but Annick claimed that her father made an active choice to not be like that. She praised her father for that and said she learned a lot from him.

Eileen's and Mia's narratives reveal how a family past also produces a complex process of identity construction. Both born and raised in the United States, they have an American nationality and identity. Nevertheless, it is established that families play an important role in identity construction. In other words, these descendants did not only 'inherit' family narratives but also a sense of family or national identity (Bloch, 2018; Mitroiu, 2018; Abrams, 2017; Firat et al., 2017; Smart, 2011; McNay, 2009; Hirsch, 2008; Hodgkin & Radstone, 2003). Their grandparents always displayed their Belgian identity. Both Mia and Eileen grew up with families talking about the Belgians being the best or the smartest. Nevertheless, they simultaneously also dissociated with it:

It was perfect [in Belgium], but it's better here ... and here, I think, could have been anywhere. But they were just bringing the best part of Belgium with them. (McLelland, M., 2018, March 3, personal interview)

Both Mia and Eileen strongly felt connected to Belgium and identified almost in the same sense as Americans, Belgians, and Britons, as they also had British relatives. With regard to the Belgian identification, Mia, who had visited Belgium in her childhood, explains:

I definitely identify with it. Oh, absolutely. Having gone there when I was younger, that it was never this big foreign. Oh, I don't know what that's like, it was a wonderful experience, I was there for enough time that, you know, it felt good. (Ibid.)

Nevertheless, a sense of the rootless nostalgia became very apparent throughout Eileen's narrative (Hirsch & Spitzer, 2003). She had never travelled to Belgium, yet, her case is a testimony to how "images of lost homeland ... can be passed down generations, summoning up loyalties and nostalgia" (Hodgkin & Radstone, 2003, p. 12). She acknowledges that "for many, many years I really became caught up in Grumpy's Belgian narrative."²² This feeling was created by having a close relationship with her grandfather, growing up with his habits (e.g., learning about 'Sinterklaas' or 'Kermis'),²³ cooking Belgian meals and listening to his abundant stories about Belgium. She strongly engaged with her grandfather's feelings of loss and homesickness:

You know, Grumpy would take out these pictures and look at them all the time and I felt very sad for him that he was so, he missed Belgium so much. (Buckley, E., 2018, March 1, personal interview)

In her family, to a certain extent they also distanced themselves from other Americans, calling themselves 'the outsiders.' This resulted in a feeling of not fitting in, because Eileen said she didn't feel like a 'regular.'²⁴

6.2 Recognition

In all three cases, the descendants had a strong emotional engagement with their (post-)memorial family past. By imparting their story with a wider audience, they were also asking in their own manner for recognition. This recognition was requested for several aspects of the family's history. When asking Eileen about the message she wanted to spread by sharing her grandparents' story, she related this to the history of Belgium. She elaborated on this topic and it became clear throughout her reasoning that this was also a message her grandfather must have handed down to her:

What I want to show is how brave the Belgian people were when their little country got invaded by a juggernaut and how they fought back with very poor odds and they didn't give up ... That's really important for me. For people to understand that these were people who were forced out of their homes, no notice, given a new haven in another country, did their very best to help that other country and then said, okay, we want to go home now and rebuild our country. And, that's I think a unique story in twentieth-century wartime ... You know, all of the World War One posters: Plucky Little Belgium that's what I want – I'm starting to cry – but that's what I want to impart in this by telling my story, that they fought hard, they were very brave and they did their best in everyone's interest. (Buckley, E., 2018, February 28, personal interview)

This strong point might have come straight from her grandfather. Strikingly, she focused on the image of 'Plucky Little Belgium' and not 'Poor Little Belgium.' This could be interpreted as a reaction against the depiction of Belgian refugees as helpless victims and trying to give them their voice and agency back. Yet, Eileen added

another layer to this postmemorial message. She believes the current views on Belgium are rather negative. By imparting her family's history she wanted to overcome those wrong convictions:

A certain part of the world, that is other Europeans, you may have heard, think very poorly of the Belgians ... 'Oh, Belgium is dirty' and yeah other people say oh, you know, they're the biggest joke in Europe. Well, I don't think that's true ... And there are some people who don't even know what Belgium is ... They were able to create this unique culture that had a huge influence on the world. (Ibid.)

In these examples it becomes clear how personal reminiscences also contain some sedimentations of national narratives, both at the time of the event (cf. the propaganda image of 'Plucky Little Belgium') as later in life (cf. defending a positive image of Belgium in the present). This demonstrates how personal (post-)memories can be influenced and shaped by national and political memory or national war myths (Mitroiu, 2018; Abrams, 2017; Firat et al., 2017; Ziino, 2011; Assmann, A., 2008). Mia focused attention onto how she received the many pictures and documents. Ziino argued that the way these pictures "have survived and been transmitted is as important as their content" (2011, p. 139). It is remarkable to consider how some of those documents and pictures were brought to England, Belgium and the United States and survived two world wars. It invoked for Mia also a kind of 'duty of memory' (Firat et al., 2017):

I think it's a little bit of a form of respect as well, toward the family, not to forget ..., I think it's a nice memorial, because they never had children, nobody would look them up. This is my way of memorializing that family near and far that has passed away. (McLelland, M., 2018, March 4, personal interview)

Mia believed also that it is crucial to follow her past family members' example:

I would say, create conscious memories of what is happening in your life, because at some point you will be the past relative. (Ibid.)

She thus set a high value to her inheritance, asking recognition for the way materials were kept by her family members and spreading the message to do the same. Furthermore, all descendants asked recognition for the person their (grand-)parent was. To that end, the character picture they sketched of their family members had a useful purpose. In Annick's case, for instance, she said that it was important to her that others know how sweet her father was and that she and her siblings all learned so much from him. A significant part of the search for recognition the descendants expressed was seeking acknowledgment for the difficulties their relatives had to endure in life and during the First World War. Mia expressed it as follows:

The story of these five sisters who ended up wartime in Birmingham and their lives then went different ways for a few years and that one photograph, well there they are in the 1980s back together, four of the five, one died, but four of the five that went through that and

everything in between, and still survive, is an extremely powerful statement about the human condition. (Ibid.)

This is a testimony to how they did not focus on the victimization of their ancestors by expressing their admiration for their strength and agency. Eileen also connected the personal story of her grandfather to the broader story of Belgium in the First World War. It was to her imperative that this war and refugee story is also incorporated into other historical narratives:

What I was trying to impart was that my grandfather's story wasn't a trivial one, that it was an unusual one. And it – the story is worth telling and again to the larger point, that the story what happened to Belgium in the First World War, is worth repeating and we can't forget it ... And that's the most important thing to me, that people, most people have no idea that this ever happened. And I don't want it to be forgotten. (Buckley, E., 2018, March 1, personal interview)

6.3 Interventionist (hi-)story

For these descendants it was not only seeking recognition for their relatives, family past or (post-)memories, but they also connected their past refugee stories to the present refugee situation. They also formulated questions about the present based on past experiences. Mia stated:

It's not different from today. It's the same human frailties that cause this to happen again. (McLelland, M., 2018, March 4, personal interview)

In other words, the current refugee 'crisis' is reinterpreted through their lens of refugee past. This attests to the fluidity of past and present experiences and memories. Not only do current events or new information reshape stories of the past, but the past also generates opinions and the women's viewpoints of today (Bloch, 2018; Ritchie, 2015). This was especially true for the two American descendants. Both women advocated to humanize the discourse around refugees. In that regard, Mia argued that:

we tend now to look at all world events through colored lenses with whatever political, religious, academic viewpoint you want to be heard, but if you drill down to the most local level ... I think it's so intensely personal if we could take away all the lenses and look at each individual group ... It would make it less political. It would take away a lot of the baggage around the word 'refugee,' it would make it a lot easier for everybody to open doors and break down walls and find long-term solutions rather than only look at the negatives or short-term solutions and the consequences of making a yes or a no – But for me more importantly is, how do we fix what caused it? (Ibid.)

Obviously, those memories still matter today, and not just to them. Such stories about the past can be used in multiple ways (Schneider, 2008). In the interviews, the American women were clearly taking ethical practices from their historical back-

grounds and bringing it to current situations. Making an active use of their family history enabled them to educate others. Eileen gave an example of how she used her family past in an interventionist way. Eileen was a member of her local church's governing body. At a certain point, they were given the opportunity to temporarily accommodate an Afghan refugee family the father of which had worked at the American embassy. However, there was a lot of resistance against this proposal, as there were many prejudices against Afghan Muslims. Eileen reacted:

I said 'I'm ashamed of you – I will tell you what a refugee story is ... Why are you coming to these conclusions based on one or two data points when you are not looking at ...' – I was just shocked and I – I got very worked up about it and I got them to, well other people were with me but I told – I said: 'I'm from a refugee family let me tell you what it's like, and what it really means.' I was very glad that I was able to do that but again that speaks to why we have to educate people ... For tolerance and also to be able to understand that they're human beings too ... We need to know what happened in the past but it's important to then relate it to what happens in our world and how we understand things. (Buckley, E., 2018, March 1, personal interview)

7. Concluding reflections

Although the conclusions drawn from these three cases are not representative of all families of Belgian refugees during the First World War, these stories do provide us with some interesting insights. Firstly, by looking into a representation of the Belgian refugees' experiences, we can go beyond images of Belgian refugees in contemporary media or in the administrative and bureaucratic information on the Belgians' displacement found in official archives. It adds a fresh personal dimension to what can be found in those sources and it serves to complement the image of the suffering refugee with testimonies of their strength and agency. This way, it brings us a step closer to a proper understanding of the 'refugeedom' of the Belgians. There remains, however, a need to develop this further from a comparative perspective (see, e.g., Bramwell, 2021; Hancock, 2021; Gatrell & Zhvanko, 2017; de Zayas, 2006). Secondly, this study sheds a light on the uniqueness of the transmission of inter-generational memory and how it is impacted also by, for instance, family bonds, narrative gaps and location. It equally provides us with some insights into how the family past and postmemories are (re-)constructed, (re-)narrated and (re-)interpreted throughout life and how new information and discoveries or phases of life might be an influence on the narration of family stories.

In the given cases it is also demonstrated how a historical event such as the First World War can still influence an individual's identity and certain viewpoints, opinions and perceptions more than a hundred years later (Sharma, 2009). This is an indication of the significance of postmemory, which is at the center of this article. This

approach could be utilized by researchers looking at both the experiences of Belgian refugees in other countries and at the memories of various displaced populations retained by descendants (see, e.g., Noakes & Pattinson, 2013; Ugolini, 1998, 2004). It is equally an indication of how those women continue to be emotionally engaged to their family's histories. This engagement, however, was extended beyond their personal lives and homes. Especially in the stories of the American descendants, there was also an interventionist voice.

This also shows how the 'refugee cycle' is not confined to the refugee generation but can be inherited and imposed on later generations through the act of storytelling and postmemorising. They clearly struggled with finding a public forum, a public space and place to be able to talk about their refugee and migration backgrounds and to place these experiences within a broader, national or historical narrative. In the Belgian context, the history of the Belgian refugees during the First World War was silenced (Marfleet, 2016; Amara, 2017). In the British context, they also were "soon gone, long forgotten" (Jenkinson, 2016, p. 101). Moreover, stories on 'the hospitality tradition' and past generosity of Britain are often instrumentalized into an argument of exclusion (Kushner, 2017; London, 2000). Yet, these women have been able to fill in some of the gaps that were left behind by the silencing of the Belgian refugees in Belgium and provide us with another standpoint and an alternative usage of this story: that of seeing 'the refugee' as a human being, which opens up a more generous attitude towards them. In other words, our interviewees brought forward a strong and hopeful message.

Notes

1. 'Refugee's Pitiful Story.' *The Daily Chronicle* (1914, September 24). Birmingham Archives and Heritage Service, War Refugees Fund (Birmingham and District), MS 652-16.
2. *The Times* (1914, September 22). Birmingham Archives and Heritage Service, War Refugees Fund (Birmingham and District), MS 652-16.
3. War Refugees' Committee Birmingham and District (1914, October). *War Refugee Committee Report*. Birmingham Archives and Heritage Service, Birmingham Institutes, F/3.
4. Respectively *War Refugee Committee Report* (1914, October). Birmingham Archives and Heritage Service, Birmingham Institutes, F/3 and *War Refugee Committee Report* (1915, October). Birmingham Archives and Heritage Service, Birmingham Institutes, F/3.
5. *War Refugee Committee Report* (1914, October). Birmingham Archives and Heritage Service, Birmingham Institutes, F/3.
6. *The Birmingham Post* (1914, September 9). Birmingham Archives and Heritage Service, War Refugees Fund (Birmingham and District), MS 652-16.
7. 'Children of Belgium. Family Affection.' *The Daily Telegraph* (1914, September 18). Birmingham Archives and Heritage Service, War Refugees Fund (Birmingham and District), MS 652-16.

8. de Jastrzebski conducted research on the register of Belgian refugees, in order to study whether the Belgian refugee population in England was representative of the pre-war Belgian population. He therefore analysed the registered parameters of age, place of origin, and occupation.
9. *Allocation Committee. Minute Book July 1916–Dec. 1917* (1917, June 27). Birmingham Archives and Heritage Service, War Refugees Fund (Birmingham and District), MS 652–13.
10. The West Midlands Police Museum holds a *Register of Aliens*, which was the official, obligatory registration of foreigners. It recorded the aliens' personal details, such as official name, place of birth, occupation and date of arrival.
11. Buckley, E. (2018, March 1). Personal interview.
12. The interviews were conducted by the first author.
13. De Peuter, B. (2018, January 23). Personal communication on Facebook.
14. Buckley, E. (2018, March 1). Personal interview.
15. Buckley, E. (2018, February 28). Personal interview.
16. Van Schoubroeck, A. (2018, February 2). Personal interview.
17. McLelland, M. (2018, March 4). Personal interview.
18. McLelland, M. (2018, March 3). Personal interview.
19. 'Grumpy' was Eileen's nickname for her grandfather.
20. Van Schoubroeck, A. (2018, February 2). Personal interview.
21. Buckley, E. (2018, February 28). Personal interview.
22. Buckley, E. (2018, February 27). Personal interview.
23. 'Sinterklaas,' or Saint Nicholas, is in parts of Belgium believed to be the patron saint of children. Annually, on 6 December, children receive presents from Saint Nicholas. A 'Kermis' is a fair.
24. Buckley, E. (2018, February 28). Personal interview.

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