



(AN)ARCHIVE

CHILDHOOD, MEMORY, AND THE COLD WAR

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## 2. ‘I Wanted to See the Man with that Mark on his Forehead’:

### A Historian, Her Childhood Experiences, and the Power of Memory

*Pia Koivunen*

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This chapter discusses the use of one’s own memory as a source in historical research. As a historian who has employed interviews, memoirs, travelogues, and diaries in my research, I now put my own memory to a test and examine how using my own memories differs from studying the memories of others. The chapter explores my memories of Mikhail Gorbachev’s visit to Finland in 1989 and compares them with other sources, such as interviews with classmates, contemporary print media, photographs, and film material of the event. In a dual role of researcher and the researched, I demonstrate how lived experiences are supported by narrative elements and, in the end, how powerful memory can be.

*On an autumn afternoon in October 1989, a nine-year-old girl left school and headed toward the downtown. Accompanied by her classmates, she soon reached the square in front of the town hall and started to wait for the world-famous guest who was going to visit her home town that day. This guest was Mikhail Gorbachev, the leader of the Soviet Union, who had traveled to Finland for a state visit. The girl and her friends eventually witnessed the Soviet leader arriving at the town hall, surrounded by thousands of enthusiastic spectators. The actual event was quickly over and she left home.*

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As a historian of the Soviet Union and the Cold War, I have often contemplated my own relationship with the Cold-War world. Born in 1980, I was six years old at the time of the Chernobyl nuclear accident, nine years old when the Berlin Wall was torn down, and eleven when the USSR collapsed. Since the beginning of my research career, I have heard ‘real’ Cold-War contemporaries, such as former diplomats, emphasising their insider knowledge of the period and half seriously questioning the ability of those who had not lived through that period to understand its spirit and peculiarities. These comments have made me think about my position with regard to the Cold-War era. I lived during the years that were historically defined as the Cold-War period, but did I experience and understand the Cold War in those years? Was I a contemporary in the most serious sense or an outsider, someone to whom that period was ‘a foreign country’?

Over the years, I have worked on Cold-War history but also on memory and experiences. I have tried to understand how other people lived back then. How did they think about and experience bipolar antagonism; did they even come across it in their daily lives? I have been exploring diaries, travelogues, and memoirs to ascertain how people related to the battle between the two societal systems and the dividedness of the world but also to shared values that bypassed ideological, political, and other boundaries. All this thinking has been reflected upon and filtered through my own perceptions, experiences, feelings and family history, even if I have not written it into my works. In my childhood, for example, I faced and experienced numerous aspects and consequences of the Cold-War world without realising at the time what they were or where they came from. One such issue was the clear-cut division between socialist and non-socialist sports organisations.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, I came up with a topic for my doctoral dissertation—Soviet cultural diplomacy and the World Youth Festivals—while browsing through my grandfather’s

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1 The division between socialist and non-socialist (or working-class and bourgeois) sports and other hobby associations goes back to the late nineteenth century and is, thus, older than the Cold-War era. However, this division became an instrument of Cold-War world politics in Finland and elsewhere; therefore, I also consider it to be a feature of the Cold War.

photographs from a youth festival held in Bucharest, Romania in 1953. All of these questions and pondering led me to think about the role of insider knowledge/contemporary knowledge/participatory knowledge of the past and to search for a Cold-War memory of my own. And then, at the right moment and in the right context, I found it. I was that nine-year-old girl who went to see Gorbachev in 1989.

This chapter is an extraordinary and very unusual personal experiment, which seeks to combine my scholarly interest in studying memory and my own memories of Gorbachev's visit to Finland in the late 1980s. I seek to examine how personal memory influences research and how it is different to study one's own memory than that of others. How does personal memory interact with one's choice of research topics? What does it feel like to interrogate one's own memory? And, what are the mechanisms through which we create stories from unorganised glimpses, feelings, smells, and bodily sensations to recall the past? I use my memories of Gorbachev's visit as the primary data and analyse them together with other sources, such as interviews with other witnesses to the event, contemporary media sources, documentary film material, and photographs. In conducting this exploration, I seek to examine the power of using one's own memory, its potential and its limits, as well as to observe the process of remembering. Let the exploration begin.

## Background

Historians in their scholarly publications rarely draw explicitly on their own memories or experiences. This is partly due to the fact that historians were relative latecomers to the research practice of reflecting on one's own position and background. Until the 1960s, an ideal historian was a detached, objective observer, one who attempted to reconstruct the past by drawing on written materials, preferably documents held in official archives. This 'traditional' history-writing by 'traditional' historians considered oral history and memory to be unreliable sources: people might lie, exaggerate, misremember, or be selective in what they recount. In the search for information on actual happenings; usually wars, diplomacy, and power struggles; stories based on oral narration

were thought to be of secondary significance or even of no use at all (Abrams 2010; Kalela 2012).

Since the linguistic turn and the interest in everyday life, women's history, and the history of minorities from the 1960s onwards, the methodology in historical research and the hierarchy of sources have changed a great deal. It is nowadays widely acknowledged that strict objectivity is unfeasible, that a researcher's own subjectivity influences the way of doing research in many respects. Explicating one's position and background as a researcher has become part of the research process. Instead of focusing on the history of great men, historians today are increasingly interested in how ordinary people in the past felt, experienced, and lived their lives. (Abrams 2010). Moreover, subjectivity, once considered the weakness of sources based on memory, is now regarded as their key element. As oral historian Alessandro Portelli (1998) has pointed out, subjective narratives do not necessarily add much factual information about past events, but they do reveal what meanings people attach to the past, what emotions they associate with it, and what kind of psychological effects it has left on them.

Even though historians today are more likely to examine their own positions and to deem memory valid material for research, it is not a common practice to turn to one's own memory. On the contrary, some historians may still consider the use of their own memory or experiences to be odd, unscientific, and, however interesting, risky. This became very clear in 2017, when, for the first time, I discussed the topic of Gorbachev's state visit at a history conference in Finland. I had included my classmates' and my own experiences in the presentation. At that moment, the idea of employing my memories as sources had not crossed my mind. However, I thought it would be transparent to reveal my relation to the topic because this particular memory was the reason for my initial interest in the subject. While the response was largely positive, one comment from an elderly historian cut the air. After hearing my presentation, she declared that she was not at all interested in the experiences of myself and my classmates and that she was worried about how I could raise any scientific interest in my case.

This senior colleague seemed to be implying that our own memories are not an appropriate starting point for research, not to mention scientific material to be examined. Reading between the lines, her commentary also seemed to suggest that we historians should not be too close to our subjects; we should instead keep separate ourselves and the topic we study. It is often thought that a certain temporal distance is essential for historians to be able to see the past with a clear perspective; one's own past, following this rationale, would be far too close. The notion of distance may also describe the relationship between the recent practice of historians positioning themselves in their work and to the still-unconsciously-prevailing idea of the historian as an objective researcher who avoids subjectivity. Despite criticisms of purely objective research and its abandonment in many fields of research, this once noble ideal seems to be sitting surprisingly persistently on our shoulders and whispering in our ears.

While remaining open to exploring new ways of doing research, even searching my own memory, I nevertheless share that senior colleague's concern about generalisation—a point also raised in autoethnographic research. For example, Anderson (2006) has pointed out that, while delving into one's own memories can bring fruitful insights, the risk remains that self-analysis fails to elevate these memories above personal, individual descriptions. Without the necessary context and broader cultural, social, and political framework, individual memory remains merely individual memory and does not make a broader contribution to the study of cultural and social memory. Any kind of memory narrative, whether it is another's or one's own, must be analysed deeply and set in a broader context.

## Memory

Memory is studied in a number of fields, and much has been written about how to theorise memory. There are different types of memories (individual, collective, social, political, cultural memory) and ways to approach it (Arnold-de Simine and Radstone 2013). Using one's own memory as research material raises multiple questions with

regard to epistemology, research ethics, and research practices. Here I mention a few aspects that I find important when examining our own memories.

First, remembering is a communicative practice. Regardless of the form of remembering (interview, questionnaire, memoir, collective biography, individual/collective memory), narration of the past is always communicated to an audience. Moreover, remembering is connected to the cultural and social world of the narrator and is born out of the needs and interests of the present (Abrams 2010). In examining other people's memories, the researcher is dealing with oral or written narratives and is positioned as an outside observer of the narrator and the events being narrated. This stance changes when one starts to analyse one's own memories. The distance narrows down as the researcher becomes both the observer and observed and contributes an insider's narrative of the events under scrutiny (Anderson 2006). But what happens in such cases to the communicative nature of memory? Is there still a dialogue between the observer and the observed, and how can one be sure if the reflections on the research subject are produced by the self who is remembering or by the self who is conducting the analyses? To summarise, from a methodological perspective, is it different to examine one's own memories?

Susanne Gannon (2017) has argued that the reduced distance between researcher and researched is a positive factor, considering it to help in the comprehension of the underlying meanings of the memory narrative and of the changes in the power relations between the knowing subject and the subject to know about. Silova et al. (2018), in their study of socialist childhoods, suggest that using one's own memories can work as a strategy to challenge earlier modes of knowledge production by raising aspects that otherwise would not be studied. However, they also acknowledge the possible risk that, when shifting from the child in the past to the researcher in the present, one may suppress some parts of the experience to construct a coherent story from the fragments of memory.

A second difference between examining one's own memories and those of others concerns the wider access available with the self. While we usually work with oral or written accounts produced by others, in



examining our own memories we can revisit them more thoroughly. In order to explain this difference further, I approach memory from a specific angle. Some scholars make a distinction between memory as a neurophysiological capacity to recall the past and as a process of narrating (writing or telling) that past. For example, Miettunen (2014) distinguishes between memory (what a person can cognitively remember) and remembering as a process by which a person produces a narrative of the past based on memory and other elements (see also Arnold-de Simone and Radstone 2013).

This way of dividing memory comes close to what the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (who is much quoted in studies in the history of experience) has argued about experience. In his theory, experience is divided into two types: *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, both of which can be rendered as 'experience' in English. Dilthey understands *Erlebnis* to represent non-verbal, non-interpreted experience and uses *Erfahrung* to name the verbal, processed, and interpreted form of the experience (see, for example, Eiranen 2015). He distinguishes, that is, between lived and reflective experience.

A similar distinction could also be applied to memory. One type of memory exists in the mind/body and another type assumes different shapes when reflected upon for the purpose of recounting to others. When we examine others' memories and experiences, we can only access the narrated, verbal forms of their memories, while the non-verbal form of memory is beyond our reach. In examining one's own recollections, however, a researcher can also access the non-verbal, non-narrated layers of memory and can compare these with the narrated forms of memory. Therefore, theorising memory in this way can be fruitful.

There is, nevertheless, an ethical concern that requires particular honesty on the part of the researcher. No one else can access the non-verbal memory 'living' in the mind/body, so the researcher should be honest and open in the research process (see Anderson 2006; Winkler 2018). Honesty and openness are naturally required in any field of research, but special consideration needs to be given in this kind of self-analysis. Unlike other people's written or oral memory narratives, which, at least in theory, are available to other researchers, one's own memory (in its complete, dual form) is a

source that the self-researcher alone can access. The question could be raised whether the study of one's own memory requires it to be narrated prior to analysis. Even so, verbal articulation of the memory does not deprive the individual of the option to consult and revisit the 'behind-the-scenes' part of the memory at any time, adding new information, meanings, and interpretations to the story already told. This is something a researcher cannot do when working with the memories of others.

## From Experience to Research

How did I end up studying my own memory? After completing my doctorate on Soviet cultural diplomacy and the World Youth Festivals, I began to search for new research topics. While attending a seminar in 2014 about the end of the Cold War, the memory of the visit by Gorbachev to Finland activated in my mind. I gradually became interested in state visits in general and the various ways they were used as a form of cultural diplomacy.

Without knowing what I would eventually do with the topic, I decided to start collecting materials on Gorbachev's (and other Soviet leaders') visits to Finland. One of my first actions was to write down my memories of Gorbachev's visit. Initially, I had no plans to use my memory as a source itself, but, knowing how vulnerable memories can be to external factors, I thought I should write mine down before consulting any other materials and without learning things from other sources. There is no right or wrong remembering since the lived life flows through us, leaving signs in our minds and our recollections. However, I wanted to document my memory narrative of my experiences of Gorbachev's visit before collecting other materials and embarking on research which might influence my memory or my narrative. I, therefore, sat down and wrote about the visit as I remembered it in June 2016—27 years after the event had taken place.

I later recalled that this was not my first revisitation of this memory. In 2010, I attended a conference of the International Council for Central and East European Studies in Stockholm, Sweden. Gorbachev was invited there as the guest speaker, but, in the end, he could not travel due to health issues. His name activated my memory, and I remember

mentioning his visit to my hometown to a few colleagues at the conference but cannot recall what exactly I told them then. At that time, I only remembered the event but was not interested in it in terms of research.

Between 2016 and 2022, I gathered a variety of sources alongside my other research projects. I read official protocols of the visit in the National Archive of Finland, browsed through the documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the materials stored in the city archive of Oulu. I visited the Gorbachev Foundation during a research trip to Moscow and consulted the collections of newspaper and magazine articles compiled on the event as well as memoirs of politicians and diplomats. I also established a Facebook group to locate possible interviewees. In 2019, on the thirtieth anniversary of the visit, I organised a small exhibition entitled 'Gorby is coming—are you ready?' in cooperation with the Northern Ostrobothnia Museum in Oulu in October–November 2019 (Koivunen 2019a). The local newspaper *Kaleva* (Kaitasuo 2019) published an article prior to the exhibition to encourage people to recall the visit. Over thirty people sent me their written memories and/or an agreement to be interviewed. I even sent a letter to Mr. Gorbachev himself telling him how the memory of his visit had caused me to mount a small exhibition to commemorate the event. He did not reply.

Based on the aforementioned materials and their analysis, I wrote two peer-reviewed articles about memory and the popular reception of Gorbachev's visit to Finland, excluding my own memories. I found it too difficult to incorporate them because it would have required a different kind of methodological discussion, one that positioned myself both as a researcher (outside observer) and as a participant (observed) in the study. Including my own memories would also have complicated the anonymisation of my research data. I had decided to anonymise the interviewees and faced the choice of either also anonymising myself, which would have been dishonest, or including my own name, which, as the only one, would also have seemed an odd choice (Koivunen 2019b; Koivunen 2022). While I have not published anything based on my own memories until now, I have discussed the use of one's own memories in three conference papers (the annual convention of the Association for Slavonic, East European and Eurasian Studies 2017, the conference of

the International Oral History Organisation 2018, and the 'Childhood Memories' conference organised as part of the Reconnect/Recollect project in 2021).

This chapter or, rather, this methodological experiment, is based on a long and, at times, slow process of gathering materials, understanding the possibility of employing one's own memories, and daring to work with them. The main impetus to employ my own memories came from a workshop organised by Zsuzsa Millei, Nelli Piattoeva, and Iveta Silova. They had published an edited volume on the use of collective biography, autobiography, and autoethnography in the study of socialist and post-socialist childhoods (Silova et al. 2018; see also Millei et al. 2022). Fascinated by their book, I wanted to try this method myself and signed up for the workshop that they held in Helsinki in 2019. In that workshop, we experimented with various scholarly and artistic methods for exploring our childhood memories, attempting to reconnect with the child self and childhood agency. This was done by (re)telling memory stories and discussing them in small groups. Inspired by Silova et al. (2018), I began to deconstruct and explore the layers of my memory. As part of this process, I systematically compared the fragments of my memory, my classmates' interviews, the film material from the USSR, contemporary print media, and photographs taken during Gorbachev's visit to Oulu in 1989.

## Background to the Visit

Before delving into my personal memories, I briefly present some background explaining the context of my remembered experiences. During the Cold-War period, Finland was not a socialist society but was tied to the USSR through a formal policy defined in the Agreement on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Understanding, signed in 1948. Because the Soviet Union had such an enormous impact on Finland, its leader's visit to the country was a long-awaited event. Gorbachev had come to power in 1985 and, since then, the Finnish President Mauno Koivisto had invited him several times for a state visit in order to discuss Finland's position in the new era of *Perestroika* and *Glasnost*. When the visit finally took place on 25–27 October 1989, it was the first time in

fifteen years that a Soviet head of state officially visited an adjacent capitalist country.

For the Finnish political establishment, the most important outcome of the visit was that Gorbachev, in his speech at the celebration organised as part of the official protocol in Helsinki, finally acknowledged Finland as a neutral Nordic country and, thus, became the first Soviet leader to do so. Neutrality had been one of the key foreign-policy formulations that, for years, Finnish politicians had been unsuccessfully trying to include in the renewed Agreements on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance. Neutrality was both a pragmatic tool to allow Finland room to maneuver with the East and the West and a way of asserting Finland's national identity in the Cold-War world (Aunesluoma and Rainio-Niemi 2016; Ritvanen 2021).

In addition to political talks, Gorbachev's visit also included negotiations on new business contracts, a visit to the Finnish parliament, and a famous phone call to Moscow with one of the first Nokia mobile phones Mobira Cityman 900 (later known as Gorba—the Finnish nickname for the general secretary) (Ritvanen 2021). Gorbachev's visit provided a wonderful showcase for Finnish technology but, most importantly, it demonstrated that the USSR was changing politically. It also signalled a new, more open, and freer era for Finland. For, despite its independence, Finland had been politically under the influence of its giant Eastern neighbour since the end of WWII, for example, without hope of joining Western military and economic alliances such as NATO and the EEC (Aunesluoma and Rainio-Niemi 2016).

While the state visit to Helsinki and the negotiations that would take place there required lengthy and meticulous preparations, Gorbachev's brief visit to Oulu, a city in Northern Finland, was organised at very short notice. Information about the extra visit was announced less than a week before Gorbachev flew to Helsinki. According to the Finnish press, the Soviet leader himself had asked for a trip to Oulu because he wanted to see the 'Technology Village', a high-tech centre located there, and to network with local companies. Finnish newspapers speculated that Gorbachev was planning to use the high-tech complex as a model for building something similar back

home. His choice of Oulu came as a surprise, especially to bigger cities in Southern Finland that were keen to host Gorbachev after the official tour in Helsinki.

In Oulu, Gorbachev was welcomed by crowds of smiling and cheering Finns. Newspapers wrote about the ‘Gorbachev fever’ that had taken over the small city and its residents (*‘Sinitakit tuskailivat kun Oulu hullaantui’* 1989). Thousands of locals gathered at different locations in the centre and at the university, where the honoured guests were expected to make an appearance. Among the cheering crowds, there were also a lot of schoolchildren, who, according to a local newspaper, had come there ‘with or without permission from school’ (*‘Mihail ja Matti Oulussa’* 1989).

During the less than two hours that Gorbachev and his wife were able to spend in Oulu, they had time to shake hands and talk with ordinary people, see a music performance in the city hall, take a short tour around the ‘Technology Village’, and talk to university staff and students. Gorbachev, at the time, was one of the most popular (if not the most popular) heads of state in the world, especially outside his own country; he gave exactly what people expected of him, demonstrating that he was the man who would change the Soviet Union, who would truly foster peace, and who would reunite the world that had been divided into two blocs.

## My Memory Stories

My experiences relate to the last part of Gorbachev’s visit in the Northern town of Oulu. Shortened and translated from Finnish, the first written version of my memory goes like this:

*It was autumn, the snow had not yet come. The classmates and I knew that Gorbachev was coming and our teacher had let us see the visit, if we wanted. Those who stayed in the school would have a chance to leave early some other day. A few girls from my class and I left school to go downtown after the morning classes and lunch (don’t remember who they were). We positioned ourselves in front of the city hall, where there was already a rather big crowd waiting. The area was marked with ropes. There were a lot of media present. We spoke with a Russian journalist and a cameraman, probably from Soviet Karelia because they spoke Finnish. They asked us something, I cannot remember what exactly,*

*but I do remember that we shouted 'Karelia back' (Karjala takas). I left with the impression that the cameraman filmed us and we were excitedly frightened that we might end up on television. Probably not. Perhaps it was shown on Soviet television.*

*Eventually Gorbachev's car arrived, and we saw a glimpse of them and the Finnish presidential couple. We were not interested in (the Finnish) President Koivisto, instead we tried to see the birthmark on Gorbachev's forehead. That was the thing to see. The situation was over very quickly compared to the time we had waited for it (Koivunen 2016).*

The second and the latest of my written memories is from a conference paper which I wrote for the ASEES 2017 convention.

*It was October 1989. I was nine years old and had just started the third class in elementary school. One day our teacher told us there would be an important visitor to our little town Oulu: the leader of the neighbouring country, Mikhail Gorbachev. The teacher said we could choose either to go down to the centre to see Gorbachev coming to the city hall, or to stay at the school and get one day off later. A few classmates and I decided to go and see what was going to happen around the city hall. I cannot remember too many details, for example, with whom I went there, but I do remember the feeling that something big was happening and the enormous crowd that started to gather behind the ropes dividing the area between the audience and the main scene on the square right in front of the city hall. I had not seen so many people at one place before.*

*It took some time before the show began. While we were waiting for Gorbachev to arrive on the scene, a couple of Soviet journalists and a cameraman—possibly from Soviet Karelia because they knew Finnish—started to talk with us. I cannot recall exactly what they asked us. I only have a bit of an uncertain memory of us, schoolgirls proclaiming in front of the camera: 'we want Karelia back!', referring to the area Finland had lost to the Soviet Union after the Second World War. I do not remember having been afraid to talk with the representatives of the Soviet media back then, nor do I remember any kind of fear or negative feelings while they supposedly filmed us. I only later realised how risky saying anything like that would have been just a couple of years earlier, before Perestroika began. Finally, big black cars started to flow to the restricted area and we saw the man we had been waiting for. The guy with that thing on his forehead (Koivunen 2017).*

The first of these reminiscences was originally in Finnish and meant for my own personal use only. The second one was integrated into a conference paper, talking more generally about the popular perception of Gorbachev's visit.

In these two memory stories, I recall the same event and we can already see variations in how the narrative is constructed and what contextualising elements I have used in the different versions. While in the first version, I had tried to remember as much as I could and as accurately as I could, the second version contains more elements seeking to explain and contextualise the memory for an international audience. For example, I felt that I needed to explain the shout 'We want Karelia back' (or, more precisely, 'Karelia back') within the reminiscence to make its meaning more understandable. Also, I explained why I was not afraid to talk to the Soviet film crew, having later acquired an adult understanding that there were some topics that, perhaps, should not be talked about with Soviet journalists. Moreover, I sought to make the second telling more of a story by adding bridges and comments not included in the collection of fragments and visual glimpses that comprise what I remember of the event.

These additions and contextualising elements aptly demonstrate what many scholars have already pointed out: memory narratives may vary depending on the language, audience, and time; in other words, each telling of a memory can be different (Keightley 2010). The main difference between studying other people's memories and my own is that, when examining my own memory, I can more easily see what is added for the sake of the story and what things, emotions, reflections, and senses I actually recall.

## Deconstructing the Memory

When I started to revisit my personal memories of Gorbachev's visit for the purposes of research, the first thing that came to my mind was, why on earth did we go there? Did we really understand what turbulent times we were living in at that time? Did we know how important a figure Gorbachev was, and, if so, what constituted our understanding of his importance? Besides these politically oriented, analytical questions



produced by an adult and a researcher, I could not stop wondering with whom I had shared the moment in front of the city hall. Being unable to answer this simple question gave me an unpleasant sense of the limitations and difficulties of consulting my own memory. Was this project worthwhile at all?

While reading and looking at the rich collection of sources I had compiled, I started noticing interesting contradictions. Some small details did not quite match with the flashes I had in my mind. I also received joyful surprises when I found something I had not been able to remember. One of those happy moments of discovery was a film that a friend of mine found through a Russian colleague and sent to me in June 2017. It is a two-part documentary, archived on the website of a Russian film company, about Gorbachev's visit to Finland in 1989. The first part covers his activities in Helsinki, and the second shows his stop in Oulu. In the second part of the film, there is a fleeting moment that, though it lasts no more than one second, contains crucial information. That short clip offers a glimpse of four girls within a huge crowd of people, standing in the front row behind a rope waiting for the Gorbachevs to arrive (Net Film 1990). There we were, three classmates and I, watching the event, unable to imagine that one day this frame of film would end up on something called a website and be accessible to the whole world.

This brief moment in the film gave me a lot of material to compare with my memory and allowed me to expand the story. It resolved the puzzle of which classmates had accompanied me on the day: the short clip revealed their identities by showing their faces. I recognised the other students and was then able to contact them in order to learn more about our shared experience and whether, like me, they considered it something of an adventure.

The film was significant for me in other ways. Until then, I had been remembering and visualising the event from my own perspective. Suddenly, I was able to see it through other eyes, those of the Soviet film crew. The child in my mind who remembered the event instantly acquired a kind of objective existence when she appeared on the film. I was better able to distinguish the child-me from the adult-me, and, in this moment, I allowed myself to become a subject of my research.

Comparing my memory and the short clip enabled me to see, concretely, how memory captures some parts of lived life and ignores others. I assume that the second of the film in which we appear depicts a moment in time that is later than the one that survives in my memory. What I can still visualise happened earlier, the square was not so crowded and it was long before the Gorbachevs arrived on the scene. One can only guess why my memory retained the earlier moment and not the one shown in the film. It may be that unusual and unexpected things are more easily retained in memory than ordinary and predictable moments. Our chat with a Soviet film crew was something spontaneous and singular, whereas waiting for a long time amidst a large crowd of people at such an event was foreseeable and made up of a series of indistinguishable (non)happenings. Consequently, the former is part of my memory, while the latter is not.

The short clip also gave me a feeling of certainty, a small proof that I had indeed been there to see Gorbachev's visit and also confirmed my assumption of our having been filmed by the Soviet crew. It was not merely a child's fantasy or imagination. This proof was not important for me as a researcher, but it was for me as the one remembering and narrating the past. While I was sure I had been there, I still felt relieved that there was another source showing that I was not wrong. Doubts about the authenticity of one's recollections is not uncommon. Almost everyone with whom I talked about their childhood experiences of Gorbachev's visit at some point in the interview mentioned uncertainty about their memories. Some started by saying that they remembered hardly anything, and some even refused to be interviewed because they thought they had nothing to tell (Koivunen 2019b). As an interviewer, I have tried to convince people to tell their stories even if they claim to remember only very little or are not sure if they remember the past correctly. As an interviewee, however, I was suspicious about the authenticity of my own memory. I was not able to avoid this feeling, despite having a scholarly awareness of the limitations of memory and not being interested in authenticity so much as in ways of remembering the past.

One small detail I firmly recalled and was later able to authenticate was that Gorbachev's visit happened on a Friday. This was one of the first details I checked when I started this journey. It was important for me to confirm the day of the week even though, dismissing it as trivial, I never included it in my written memories. The reason why I remembered it as happening on a Friday was that it was the end of the school week, and I connected the event with the feeling of free time and not having to go to school the next day. This timing may also explain why I have no recollection of talking about the visit with my classmates: by the time we next convened in school on Monday, we probably had other things that happened at the weekend to talk about.

In one of the conference papers I gave on this topic, I wrote that seeing the film would probably ruin my memory, that, ever afterwards, I probably could not help imagining the four of us being there together. But actually, the film did not affect me like that. Seeing it neither supplemented nor changed the fragments of memory in my mind. I now know with whom I attended the event and can add this knowledge to my memory narrative, but I still do not remember the classmates in the memory stored in my mind.

## Memories in a Dialogue

After discovering who my 'partners in crime' had been, I contacted them and managed to arrange (separate) interviews with two of those three classmates.<sup>2</sup> Interviewing people who had been in the same class, heard the same instructions from the teacher, participated in the same events, and shared the same atmosphere was especially enlightening. Finding the classmates made the project closer to a collective endeavour rather than a lonely journey. I did not engage them in the analysis or writing but dialogues with them widened the possibilities for interpretation and collective remembering.

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2 The following analysis is based on two interviews that I conducted with the two classmates who were with me in the short clip filmed by the Soviet film crew in October 1989. The interviews were conducted in August 2017, and I deliberately withhold their names to allow them some anonymity, even if this is not entirely possible.

So, what did I find out by interviewing two old classmates? Of course, all three of us told quite different stories with some elements in common. From a memory-studies perspective, this is nothing new or revealing. What was unexpected about studying my classmates' memories in dialogue with my own was that it involved an emotional aspect. As a historian who has worked with memories and experiences before, I knew that people may remember the same moments and lived experiences differently. Still, on an emotional level, I hoped my classmates' stories would confirm my remembered experience. I was especially curious to find out whether they also recalled us shouting 'Karelia back'. As the person remembering, I had a strong emotional attachment to the story, and I wanted this detail, in particular, to be validated as true.

Discussing Gorbachev's visit with different people who were there provided new perspectives and new ideas on what kind of an event it was and could have been. Both the classmates with whom I talked wondered how much deliberate guidance there had been from above to get as many school children as possible to the town centre. According to their memories, our teacher had been clearly in favour of our going and experiencing this momentous event. One of my classmates thought that our teacher underlined the historic significance of the visit and created an atmosphere that made participation seem appealing. I do not remember it like that.

It never occurred to me that we might have been pushed or encouraged to go and see Gorbachev. As I recall, our teacher said we could go or stay at school and those who did not go could get some hours off later. In my second memory from 2017, I wrote that the teacher said there would be an important visitor in our town, but when I (re)visit my memory, there was no such a thing. It is also missing from the first memory narrative, wherein I only refer to the two options offered by the teacher.

Something else that I do not remember but my two classmates do is making little paper flags of Finland and Soviet Union. At first, this appeared to me a minor detail about which I had nothing to say. But as I started to study my own thinking, I found myself doubting whether my classmates were telling the truth (as if 'the truth' even mattered here). I have no memories whatsoever of making those

flags, but, then again, I do not remember most of what happened in the past. Still, I feel that I am not entirely convinced of this and am inclined to believe my own memory rather than those of two other people.

Although this is only a minor observation, it gives me a slightly uneasy feeling about how I as a historian evaluate my sources in general and how my relation to the objects and topics studied influences the ways in which I assess the information coming from different sources. I have seen photographs of Gorbachev's visit to Oulu, where schoolchildren and even kindergarten children are waving Soviet and Finnish flags on the streets, so it is possible that we, too, had flags. In the short clip in the Soviet documentary film, however, we do not have flags in our hands. It is common in remembering to combine elements from different times and events that were not actually related. Making flags was so common in elementary schools that it is highly likely that my classmates' memories of making and waving flags are actually related to some other event.

One element of our experiences and memory stories that is partly shared is the presence of the Soviet film crew. Neither of the other two recalled us saying 'Karelia back'. That was, to be honest, a little disappointing for me, since the 'adult I' had hoped to find support for this recollection because it seems such a surprising and somehow incongruous part of the story. It feels disconcerting that I do not remember more profound thoughts or feelings related to saying 'Karelia back' to the journalists, although I am very confident that I did say it. In fact, I believe that the unexpected and 'out of the blue' nature of this glimpse of memory is the very reason why I remember it. It seems implausible, yet something I could not have invented afterwards because it does not make my memory story any more coherent or understandable—quite the contrary.

Moreover, before interviewing the classmates who attended the event with me, I was led by own memory to imagine us as politically conscious students. We could have been aware of the broader context of Gorbachev's visit, especially about the talks about returning those parts of Karelia that Finland ceded to the Soviet Union after World War II. But this was not the case. The interviews with my classmates suggested that we had no recollection of discussions about Karelia,

or any other political debate of that time, not to mention the broader framework of the Cold War. Yet, the return of the ceded territory in Karelia was a big issue. Regularly featured in the Finnish media in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was a topic that a child could easily pick up and relate to the leader of the Eastern neighbour. During my interviews with my classmates, it became clear that each of us only remembered a single political event from early childhood, if anything. For example, one recalled the murder of the Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1986, an event she had been very curious about. I recalled the execution of Romania's head of state, Nicolae Ceaușescu, and his wife Elena in 1989, because a couple of friends and I included the topic in a recording of 'our own news' program on a cassette. The lost status of Karelia was, thus, not among the topics we were interested in, and it remains a mystery how I happened to recall it in my memory. My classmates, however, remembered the presence of a film crew and the feeling of being filmed. One of them said that she was sure we would end up on the evening news on Finnish television, and the other one said she might have told the people at home that we had been filmed. These mentions confirmed my own memories of the presence of the film crew.

Instead of remembering us as politically alert children, my classmates raised ethical concerns over the political purposes of the event. They asked why children had been encouraged to take part in such a political celebration and pondered whether we had been used as propaganda tools. Neither interviewee recalled having had any negative thoughts about the Soviet Union or even understood the political situation in the world at that time. With the wisdom of hindsight, they thought they had been living in a comfortable bubble, without much knowledge about the world surrounding us. In comparison to myself, my two classmates reflected much more on the historical significance of Gorbachev's visit. They recalled having understood back then how momentous the event had been, one of them mentioning that our teacher had highlighted the event's importance in an attempt to persuade us to go and witness the visit.

What was certainly less historically significant but of sufficient interest to the three of us that we all commented upon it was the best-known visual characteristic of the Soviet leader. We all knew who

Gorbachev was and we could recognise him by the birthmark on his forehead, or the 'spot on his head', as one of my classmates put it. The other one recalled him as 'the relaxed chap, who had a large nevus'. I boldly called the birthmark 'a thing' in my memory stories and noted that we had seen it.

After revisiting my narrated memories and the stored memory in my mind dozens of times and looking through numerous photographs produced by Finnish media houses, I came to the conclusion that this part of my story was not based on stored memory but was an element constructed by my adult mind. When writing my first memory story in 2016, I probably assumed that we must have been interested in seeing Gorbachev's birthmark because, as children, it was among those few things we knew about and associated with Gorbachev. It is also likely that I mentioned seeing the famous birthmark because it could authenticate my story, serving as proof that the person we had seen was really and truly Mikhail Gorbachev. Moreover, I may have wanted to add it for the sake of the story. Seeing the main star makes a nice climax, and using a visual symbol adds more to it. And, of course, it is possible that we actually had seen his birthmark. However, I do not remember the moment of seeing Gorbachev at all. There is no trace of seeing the man in my stored memory. Furthermore, in all the photos taken in front of the city hall, Gorbachev is wearing a hat. In all probability, we could not have seen his forehead and the famous mark.

For the purposes of studying memories in general, it does not actually matter if we saw Gorbachev's birthmark or not. What matters is that I wrote that way and made the past meaningful to myself by mentioning the birthmark. In this chapter, it is, nonetheless, worth noting the discrepancy between my recollections and other sources because it is relevant to the use of one's own memory in research. Because I have had the privilege of revisiting the memory in my mind to check if I remember the things as I committed them to paper, I have been able to identify those parts of my narratives that are more likely constructions introduced to comply with methods of storytelling. Studying one's own memories enables us to dig much deeper into human experience and the process of remembering than other types of sources; it illuminates the ways in which the mind

makes connections between the lived past and the narrated past in the present.

## Conclusion

In October 1989, on a Friday afternoon, the nine-year-old girl went home. She did not know it at the time, but the memories of this occasion lived on to eventually become an inspiration for her work. It would, however, take more than twenty years for her to even mention it to anyone (or that is how she remembers it) and more than twenty-seven years before she would start exploring the event that left traces in her memory.

Working with my own memory has been a rewarding, surprising, and instructive adventure. It has taught me about the mechanisms of memory and narration but also about the affective aspects of individual memory. This little experiment has shown me how powerful a tool memory can be and how it can generate so much new knowledge when activated, encouraged, and put into dialogue with other sources. It has also demonstrated how close we can be to our research topics even if not studying our own memories. When studying the contemporary world or recent history, scholars are, in many ways, embroiled and entangled with their subjects. Irrespective of the nature of the sources, a researcher cannot entirely distance herself from the research subject nor from the ways in which she or he explores it.

After deconstructing my memory stories and recognising the little additions which had entered my stories to make them narratively coherent, what remained was a few fragments. I remember that the visit happened on a Friday. I have a visual memory of us standing behind the rope and talking with the Soviet film crew. I do not remember with whom I was there, but I do remember having said 'Karelia back'. I remember wondering whether we would end up in the film or not. I remember that we waited for Gorbachev to come. I remember black cars, but I have no visual memory of seeing him.

These fragments may seem useless, marginal, and totally insignificant. However, without these tiny fragments I might have never become interested in the Cold War, state visits, and



Gorbachev, not to mention the scholarly works on Gorbachev's visit. Of course, I might have developed this interest anyway, but it is hardly a coincidence that a person who has experienced an event writes articles and organises an exhibition about it. Moreover, these fragments become extremely powerful when put together with others' memories and other types of sources. By collating my own memory with other sources on the same event, it became possible to locate discontinuities—places where memory ended and the story was continued with the help of imagination, reasoning, additional knowledge or collective memory. Together they form a much richer and denser picture of the past and can produce knowledge that would not otherwise have come to light. Instead of failing to capture the authenticity of the past, memory keeps the past alive through the people who narrate their memories in a way they find important and meaningful at that moment.

In this experiment I acted in two roles—those of observer and observed—which made the process very different from the usual research work I do. At times, it was difficult to separate those roles and to know whether it was the observer or the observed who was reacting and reflecting. This difficulty could probably be overcome by working only with narrated (written or oral) memory stories, but I very much wanted to analyse what was happening in my mind even if the two roles were sometimes bewildering and confused. My confusion became evident in the reactions and reflections that I noticed during the process, some of which were quite contrary to my scholarly training. An unexpected outcome of the study was the strong emotional attachment that I discovered I feel towards the fragments of my memory. Besides a general curiosity to know more, I approached the interviews with my two classmates with an expectation of finding confirmation for some parts of my own story. Although I had worked with memories and experiences before and knew that people remember past events differently, I still expected confirmation from them that the things I remembered had happened and were meaningful for them, too. I have also noted how, as a result of the long process of revisiting my memory, my story has become more important and more meaningful to me than it was before the memory was activated and I started to work with it.

In terms of the mechanism of memory and narration, this experiment has enabled me to see beyond the articulated memory. When working with others' memories, we are always working with the verbal and narrated forms of memory without access to the memory in mind, the fragments, flashbacks, recollections as they are before they are told to others in the form of a narrative. Exploring my own memory and comparing the written memory stories with the fragments in my mind allowed me to see how the non-verbal material is translated into a coherent story through narrativising and contextualising (see Keightley 2010). Each time of (re)telling the story, it takes a different shape depending on the audience, the cultural and social environment, and the political climate. The experiment also showed that it is not only the narrated memory that changes. I noticed that when challenging the memory with other sources (interviews, newspaper articles, photographs, etc.) new parts of the memory were activated; I could remember things that, earlier, I had not.

Finally, this chapter shows how our interest in knowledge production is related to our pasts, our experiences, and our memories. The urge to know and study comes from somewhere; it is situated in various larger and smaller moments in our lives, some of which we might forget for years until they find the right moment and are revived.

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