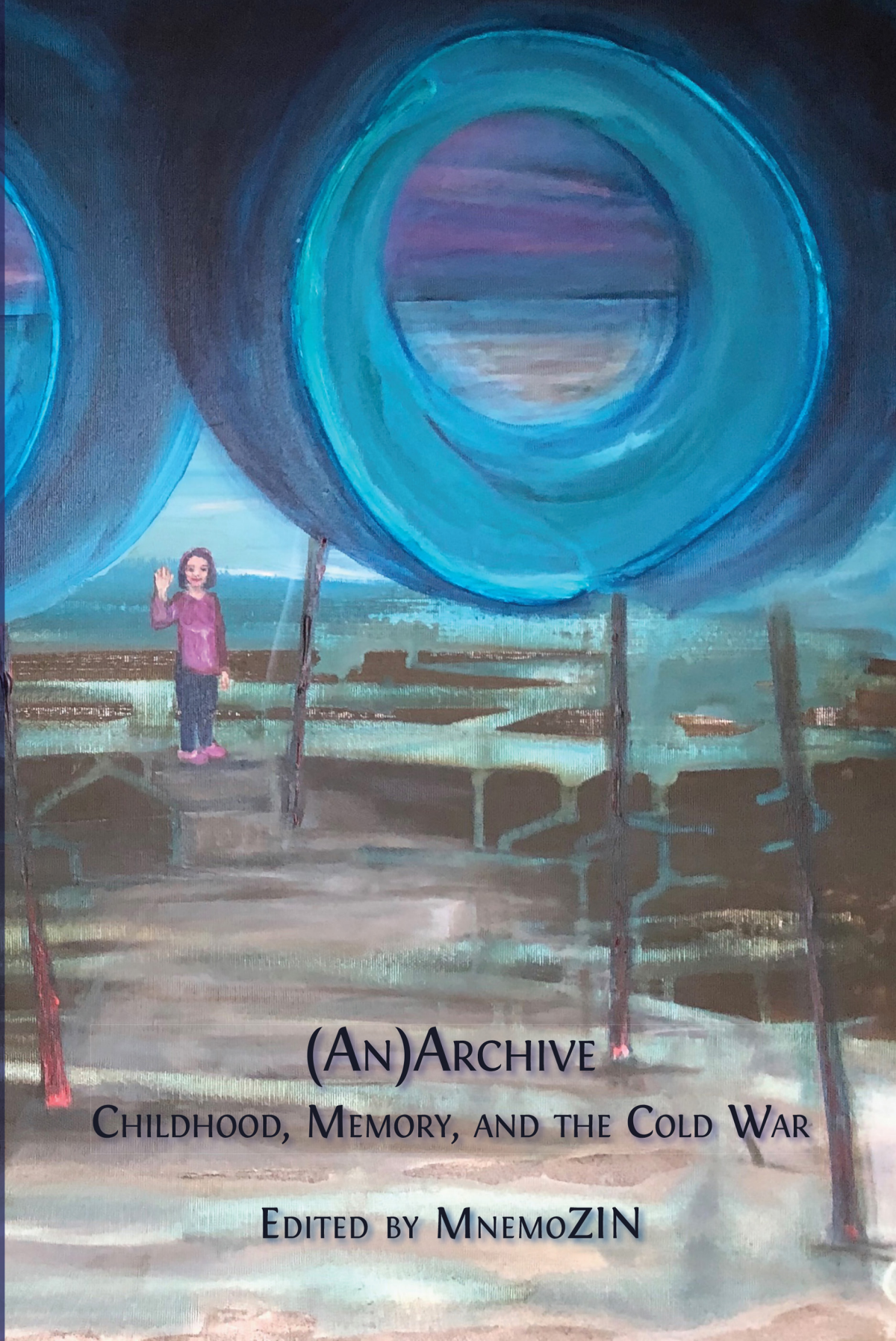

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Childhood, Memory, and the Cold War

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9. Mysterious Cotton Pieces:
Childhood Memories of Menstruation

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This chapter explores the memories of menarche of three girls who grew up in socialist countries in the 1980s. We use Kopytoff's theory of the cultural biography of objects and Rogoff's theory of guided participation to intimate the girls' ways of knowing and practising menarche in relation to objects and significant others. Objects carry cultural meanings and, as such, taught girls about practices and feelings associated with menstruation and helped them to navigate their periods. The memories analysed here demonstrate that girls' everyday experiences in state-socialist and capitalist countries were quite similar and that children on the Eastern side acted as knowing subjects rather than passive victims of 'indoctrination'.

Menstruation and menarche (the first menstrual period) are deeply personal experiences and cultural phenomena. As such, they have attracted considerable attention in research, including how girls come to know and practise menstruation from their own perspectives (Burrows and Johnson 2005; Orringer and Gahagan 2010; Piran 2020). Menstruation as a biosocial and cultural phenomenon is often associated with secrecy, shame, and fear, and this is consistent across different geographical contexts (Uskul 2004). These associations have been attributed to the institutionalisation of the menstrual taboo by major patriarchal religions (Patterson 2014). Menstruation is also a biological marker of the end of the female human's juvenile period; bleeding and abdominal pain signal the arrival of her reproductive stage. In traditions such as

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Hinduism and Judaism, menstruation is codified within larger coming-of-age and purity systems that have been instrumental in controlling women's sexuality and in constructing women as 'bearers of tradition and responsible for the wellbeing of the family, society, and religion itself' (Cohen 2020, p. 126). With the nineteenth-century development of patriarchal medical discourses came a perception of women's bodies as medical maladies and of women as incapable of properly handling menstruation without medical surveillance (Patterson 2014). In modern societies, medicalisation objectified the human body in general, but the female body became subject to further objectification, with girls themselves looking at their bodies as objects of beauty and sexualisation (Kovácsné and Szeverényi 2006). As Brumberg (1998) argues for the US context, perceptions of menarche shifted in the twentieth century: what had been a maturational event turned into a hygienic crisis that required the intervention of the medical field and sanitary-product industry, the latter contributing to the commercialisation of young women's bodily processes. Feminist writers point to misogyny as the source of the negative perceptions of menstruation (Steinem 2020). They have exposed the role that religious and medical discourses, perpetuating menstrual stigma and commoditising women's bodies in capitalism, play in silencing a positive and open menstrual dialogue (Patterson 2014).

Despite cultural and social changes, menstruation remains a taboo in public life. A 'menstrual etiquette' requires women to hide any evidence of menstruation (Laws 1990), and the appearance of commercially sold menstrual products reinforces this message (Ginsburg 1996). Even the term menstruation is replaced with a range of euphemisms, such as 'aunt', 'period', 'the curse', or 'being on the rag' (Ernster 1975; Ilnicka 2020). The surrounding secrecy and silence in modern societies often leave young women unprepared for their menarche, which puts them at risk of having a possibly challenging, negative experience. Young girls from different cultures tell about fears of leaking and being discovered, of being ashamed, of being sick, or even of dying as a result of their periods (Burrows and Johnson 2005; Donmall 2013; Sommer 2009). The shame of menstruation and the perception of menstruating women's bodies as deficient are perpetuated by advertisements that, while bringing the issue to the public sphere, links women's emancipation with the use of products that make their bodies socially acceptable and reinforces the need for women to have

a 'blood-free ... body' (Sitar 2018, p. 784). However, menstruating bodies often leak or 'bleed through', revealing the menstruation and initiating action. The negative social perception of menstruation, in which menstrual blood is viewed as an abomination that taints women's femininity and differentiates them from the normative male body, leads Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2020) to interpret it as stigma. Menstruation is not talked about publicly, except under specific circumstances, such as in private settings, biology classes, or a doctor's office (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2020). Consequently, women go to great lengths to conceal it (Ginsburg 1996; Koutroulis 2001), and menstruation remains 'more like a hidden than a visible stigma' (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2020, p. 184), one associated with shame, dirt, and disgust (Burrows and Johnson 2005; Koutroulis 2001). Mothers can play an important role in the negotiation of menstruation's onset (Lee 2008; Uskul 2004). As Donmall (2013) explains, 'menarche is a crucial time of both identification and separation/individuation from the mother, which may be made more or less difficult by the mother's own experience of menstruation and/or feelings about her femininity' (p. 213). This is reinforced in the memories we explore; they suggest that mothers are sometimes the people children feel least able to confide in about menstruation.

Acting as a counterforce to shame and stigma are feminist menstrual activists. They draw on cultural and spiritual perspectives that range from the essentialist to the radical as they engage in a variety of actions to reclaim menstruation as a significant, valuable, and positive experience. Their work has included interpreting menstruation as a source of embodied knowledge and power, challenging the pathologisation of women and the medicalisation and commodification of their bodies, reclaiming menarche and the menstrual cycle as a rite of passage and a source of pride and community, and drawing attention to the roots of menstrual stigma (Bobel 2010; Bobel and Fahs 2020). Menstrual art (Fahs 2016; Green-Cole 2020) has also contributed to the increased public visibility of menstruation outside of the commodification framework. Studies about menarche carried out in Western societies demonstrate that the experiences of menarche are changing. Lee (2009), for example, found that predominant view of the onset of menstruation during the 1980s was negative, associated with shame, embarrassment,

and unpreparedness; whereas, later, it was regarded with ambivalence or even as a positive experience.

In this chapter we explore menstruation through the analysis of childhood memories written by women who were growing up in state-socialist countries during the 1980s, a time when consumer products, including menstrual hygiene products, were scarce (Feinberg 2022; Sitar 2018; Ulč 1989). The lack of female hygiene products could be interpreted as a geopolitical message concerning the status of women in states purportedly devoted to gender equality. Slavenka Drakulić (1992), a Croatian feminist writer, recalls:

> The big midtown auditorium at CUNY was almost filled. I was to give a paper on the [...] subject: women in Eastern Europe. But before I started my speech, I took out one sanitary napkin and one Tampax and, holding them high in the air, I showed them to the audience. 'I have just come from Bulgaria', I said, 'and believe me, women there don't have either napkins or Tampaxes—they never had them, in fact. Nor do women in Poland, or Czechoslovakia, much less in the Soviet Union or Romania. This I hold as one of the proofs of why communism failed, because in the seventy years of its existence it couldn't fulfill the basic needs of half the population.' (p. 124)

The shortage of menstrual hygiene products as a consumer good was compounded by their cultural invisibility. While in some state-socialist countries, newly available sanitary pads and tampons featured in advertisements (Sitar 2018), in others they gained this kind of public visibility only after the turn to a market economy. Poland, for instance, aired its first TV commercial for sanitary napkins in the early 1990s, and the decision to do so stirred great disconcert (Lamek-Kochanowska 2020). The perception of menstruation as a private matter that should be kept secret was perpetuated in handbooks on sex education for adolescents. For instance, a popular Polish self-help book for girls, though providing a thorough introduction into the physiological dimensions of menstruation and menstrual management, emphasised that 'it is not good manners to flaunt this "ailment" of yours. Menstruating is a personal and intimate matter' (Kobyłecka and Jaczewski 1991, p. 25). It also urged its readers to make 'a colourful, unembarrassing pouch' for menstrual-care products as it is 'unhygienic' to carry them loose and 'it can always happen that someone knocks down the school bag,

the content scatters and [...] nothing terrible happens but it can be a bit unpleasant' (ibid., p. 95). Moreover, although sexologists and other experts provided sex education (some even fairly progressive) in youth magazines and handbooks, the popular media still constructed an ambivalent or negative image of changes related to puberty (Kościańska 2021; Stańczak-Wiślicz et al. 2020). The result was that mothers and daughters almost never discussed menstruation nor issues related to sexuality and the body (Ilnicka 2020). At best, some mothers might have provided the relevant literature but left their daughters to read and apply the information (Korolczuk 2019). In this way, the sense of secrecy surrounding menstruation was retained even in the family environment.

The childhood memories of menarche we explore are set in this socio-cultural context. The limited availability of menstrual-hygiene products and their near-invisibility in public life restricted girls' exposure to open communication about the phenomena of menstruation. Nevertheless, girls still encountered a variety of menstrual objects at home, and these inspired conversation about associated practices, gave hints, and ignited imaginations. We suggest that, by paying attention to and interacting with menstruation-related objects and other people's way of handling them, girls developed understandings of menstruation and its practices as well as of culturally prescribed feelings about these, including shame. Before introducing the memories, we turn next to the theoretical frame we use to highlight object-relations and their roles in sense-making.

Exploring Menarche through Childhood Memories

The memory stories analysed in this chapter exhibit the themes commonly identified in menstruation research, such as feelings of shame, embarrassment, disgust, and fear; a sense of the need to retain secrecy about menstruation; and the consequent use of a range of concealment practices. However, rather than taking up these well-researched themes, we are interested in what these stories tell us about how girls know and practise menarche in relation to objects and significant others. We acknowledge the particular situatedness of the events in the countries of the Eastern bloc (namely, Poland, Latvia, and Hungary) during the late-socialism period (1980s) by focusing on the experiences and objects that are present in the memories and those that are absent. We explore how

the girls learn by paying attention to the ways in which their mothers and other women handle menstruation and by carefully investigating, experimenting with, and sensing menstrual-management objects.

The theoretical framework for our analysis draws on Kopytoff's (1986) theory of the cultural biography of objects and Rogoff's theory of guided participation (Rogoff et al. 1989). Kopytoff assumes that, rather than functioning univocally as commodities, objects can be imbued with various meanings and functions that change in time and space, thus they have their own histories. In complex societies, he observes, 'publicly recognised commoditization operates side by side with innumerable schemes of valuation and singularization devised by individuals, social categories, and groups' (Kopytoff 1986, pp. 79–80). Individuals can reiterate public-use or commercial discourses around objects, but they can also use them to serve their own needs or desires, thereby changing the objects' functions and meanings. Objects accumulate such classifications and reclassifications over time. For example, since antiquity, cotton wool has been used to provide warmth and comfort in the form of clothing and blankets. With the invention of machines to create cotton pads and balls, however, cotton wool acquired a protective function; it started to be used in medicine to cover wounds, as wrapping in the transportation of breakable items, and in the beauty business for cleansing and sanitary products (Baines 2015). The expanding industrial use of cotton wool during the twentieth century inspired a variety of personal uses as well. As the memories of menarche explored here will show, children notice objects and take in both their 'official' and 'unofficial' meanings.

Children learn in a variety of ways. They may be explicitly taught in educational settings but also by books and the media. However, they also obtain information more implicitly, by observing others; this is the method by which they most often find their way in social life. We emphasise the learning about culturally important activities that takes place in pairs or groups, that is, when children watch or act together with their more-experienced peers. This indirect style of learning is complicated and often incomplete, hence the recognised need for explicit instruction (Rogoff et al. 1989) on already complex topics (which led to the inclusion of sex education in schools). Children learn informally in shared activities via participation or 'keen observation of

events directed to others' (Silva et al. 2010, p. 898). Although Rogoff et al. and Silva et al. focus on such learning-through-watching as it occurs in indigenous communities of the Americas, they maintain that it occurs in all communities. We suggest that children might learn this way in all situations, but especially those that involve taboo subjects or those from which they are excluded and so must participate secretly. What children learn through observation of their peers and others orients their actions when somewhat unexpected events arise, such as the menarche. Children also observe objects, exploring and repurposing them as they learn from them. Through the analysis of memories, we aim to show how children might learn about menstruation through keen observation of the people and objects around them and how this learning prepares them to act when menarche occurs.

We selected three memories of menarche that we shared in a collective memory workshop (Davies and Gannon 2006) held in Berlin in 2019 as part of the Reconnect/Recollect project. Participants were asked to respond to the prompt: 'Bring a childhood memory about secrets'. Because everyone in the workshop was about the same age, we surmise that the events these memories recount took place during the 1980s. The workshop was structured so that, after each individual shared her memory, the group explored it through questions that helped other participants make sense of the experience. It is noteworthy that, in the subsequent rewriting of their memories, individuals added details of bodily texture, object descriptions, and sensations to the stories. In the process of sharing, questioning, and rewriting the memories in a group setting, they ceased to belong just to the individual and became collective. This shift was marked verbally in the stories as authors switched from the first to the third person. We were surprised that three of us brought memories of menstruation to this workshop, so we decided to explore them further in this chapter by asking how they relate to the geopolitical context of the Cold War and its particular conditions within the three former state-socialist countries in which their authors grew up.

We contrasted and juxtaposed the memories, paying special attention to the protagonists of the stories and to bodies, objects, and their relations, as well as to liquids, smells, emotions, and affects. Our exploration can be conceptualised as an 'analysis through discussion'

(Gordon et al. 2000; Lahelma et al. 2014; Millei and Lappalainen 2020). Being both insiders and outsiders of cultures helped us to notice similarities and differences in the stories, especially those related to geopolitical and economic contexts. We combined the theories and the literature about menstruation and menarche with our interest in the historical and geopolitical differences of experience. We identified actions as these occur in relation with others, and we identified objects laden with meanings and emotions. Aware of how objects and social relations interplay in a symmetrical manner, we sought to attribute equal importance to both. Sørensen (2013) explains that a focus on socio-material processes 'highlights "doings" in contrast to "sense"' (p. 118), that is, it draws attention towards the situation and its events, which can cause emotions and intuitions to be overlooked, and emphasises children's keen observation and 'doings' in those events. Applying this principle helped us to look holistically at how humans, objects, spaces, feelings, and affective relations contribute to children's knowledge of (and knowledge of how to act in) the partly unexpected and emotionally intense situations of menarche and menstruation.

Menstruating

The three memory stories featured here provide insights into the ways in which young girls experience their menarche. They specifically focus on how objects and affects entangle in these experiences, which we indicate in the sub-headings of the analysis below. We include excerpts that particularly illustrate this entanglement, but the full stories can be found in the online memory archive of the Reconnect/Recollect project (https://coldwarchildhoods.org/memories/). The title of each story is given at the end of its excerpt.

Re-signification and Affect

They had never talked about menstruation or sex or the body at home; she only learned about it at school. But she knew well what to do when on her period. Her teacher had talked about it, and she knew where her mom kept the cotton wool. She tried using it herself, but she didn't like that too much. She had also noticed how her mom would regularly put a piece of blood-stained cotton wool

in the coal stove which they had in the kitchen, sometimes to burn it right away, sometimes just to keep it there until it was the time to light the fire. Sometimes she would even take the used cotton out of the stove just to see what it looked like and then put it right back in with the feeling of repulsion. The blood on the cotton had dried and turned brownish, and she found it disgusting. ('Blood on the Sheet' n.d.)

This memory tells of two parallel sources of information about menstruation. The girl learns about it at school but also through keen observation of her mother and through the re-signification of objects associated with the process: the cotton wool, blood stain, and coal stove. She explores the objects marked with brown bloodstains, and feelings of repulsion and disgust emerge. Would she be disgusted by her own blood? And, is it the blood itself that disgusts her or the realisation of the menstrual process that came through observation of this new use for cotton wool? Watching her mother burn the stained cotton without talking to her about it, the girl learns to associate menstruation with concealment. The used cotton wool is put in a place deliberately meant to be out of sight, where it can be destroyed without a trace. Disposal of these signs of bodily functions coupled with the mother's silence about the process surround menstruation with a sense of secrecy even within the family (Koutroulis 2001). Would the girl's experience change if there were other objects involved, objects with other uses and with other kinds of affective charge? Would visibility of and easy access to sanitary pads or tampons place menstruation in a different light? Would seeing TV commercials for 'Always' lend it the intended glamour, for example, or would seeing dozens of brands of pads displayed on drugstore shelves make it seem ordinary? Perhaps not, as the mother made the cotton wool disappear in silence, she might do the same with those commercial products, too.

The sight of bloody cotton wool and the silence around it makes menstruating repulsive and disgusting to the girl. She may liken the dried blood, brownish on the shrinking cotton, to dirt and, therefore, associate menstruation with uncleanliness (Burrows and Johnson 2005; Koutroulis 2001). The experience foreshadows the forthcoming experience of menarche, signifying it as dreadful even before it happens.

Blood, Pain, and Fear

The day the girl got her first period, she thought she was going to die. It was right after she got back from school and her parents were still at work. The girl was at home all alone. In pain. Something was wrong, but she was not quite sure what. An unfamiliar pain in the stomach—extending into her lower back—the pain she had never felt before. […] *Then the blood. Both on her panties and on the toilet paper. The feeling of horror that something is really really wrong.*

What was happening to her? Was she dying? Life cut so short. Her parents' expectations never met. Panicking, she tried to call her mother at work, but there was no answer. She was going to call her grandmother next. If she did not answer, she would have to call the neighbors. Oma picked up. The girl began to speak, her voice trembling and her tears running down her cheeks: 'Oma, I think I am dying. There is blood in my panties and it is not stopping. I am in horrible pain, too. I think I am going to die. I am afraid. I am so sorry'.

Oma responded calmly, with a smile in her voice—a smile that could be felt through the telephone line. It was the girl's first period! 'Period? What is it?' the girl asked. Oma explained. Perplexed, but finally relieved and now more relaxed, the girl knew then that she was not going to die that day. Period. ('Not Going to Die. Period.' n.d.)

The girl is overwhelmed by the pain and blood of her menarche that she experiences while home alone. She panics. The sight of blood and feeling of pain might be taken by the girl as an injury to the body; they give her a feeling of horror and evoke a fear that her death is imminent. Her concern is for herself, as she seeks help to deal with the potential injury, but it is perhaps even greater for the others who might suffer as a result of her loss. In trouble, she reaches out to her mother and then grandmother, perhaps instinctively knowing that they are the ones who can help in this case, as girls in various cultures do (Uskul 2004). She makes contact with the supportive grandmother by phone and receives an explanation and reassurance. The sudden onset of pain, the blood on the panties and toilet paper, the feeling of incapacitation due to assumed injury, and the accompanying overpowering emotions make the menarche an immense experience. This is not unusual. As Fahs (2016) notes, the first encounter with one's own menstrual blood can create 'an oddly paradoxical association of death and life simultaneously intertwined' (p. 35), as it opens the reproductive phase of a woman's

life. The memory story continues as the girl links her grandmother's explanation with other observations:

As the news began to slowly sink in, fragments of information she learned before (but never pieced together) began to slowly assemble in her mind:
An older girl in her school choir, leaving a puddle of red blood on her seat after she got up to sing one day.
Her little dog Čina in heat several times a year, sometimes leaving traces of blood on the floor and furniture.
An older friend refusing to swim one day when everyone else was swimming.
A 'Soviet Encyclopedia of Young Woman' given to her a few months before, but never opened.
Mysterious cotton pieces and pads periodically left by someone in the bathroom.
Periods.
Now, the girl had one too.
Not going to die.
Period. ('Not Going to Die. Period.' n.d.)

The girl had stored up some keen observations—of blood on the choir seat or furniture, pieces of cotton left in the bathroom, girls not swimming for some reason, being given a book about young women—that now acted as clues about significance of menstruation. Triggered by her new experience, they flooded her memory to help her make sense of her blood and pain. She perhaps overlooked, ignored, or misunderstood these observations when she first made them. At the time of menarche, however, the realisation that this happened to others, too, brought calm. The girl regains her sense of control and finds a new place in the world, among other women.

Trouble-Making Objects

She woke up in the morning; it could have been Saturday. She had gotten her first period a few months ago. Her mom didn't know about it, or at least she had never revealed it to her. She tried to break the secret and tell her about it. One day she went to the kitchen where her mom was doing something, lingered there for a while gathering her strength, but there was something in her mom's reaction to her presence in the kitchen that turned her back. [...] *She would always sneak out of the bathroom carrying a used pad in such a way that nobody would*

notice it, and then hide it somewhere in her room and burn it only when nobody was home to get rid of the evidence. But that morning when she woke up, she realised that there was blood on the bed sheet. The fact that she had gotten her period could not be hidden any longer, and the thought of the imminent act of disclosing something that she knew was not supposed to be talked about made her nervous. She felt she had to tell her mom about it; she knew her mom would notice it. ('Blood on the Sheet' n.d.)

Taking another excerpt from our first story, blood on the bed sheet becomes a proof or a witness of the girl's menstruation, problematically forcing her to reveal her secret. She has tried to talk about menstruation before when it involved only the staining of cotton wool but remained silent, and her mother, too, remained silent while disposing of her own stained cotton wool. The blood stain on the sheet, however, is very different. Even if she became quite experienced with hiding and burning blood on the cotton wool or a pad, she could not destroy the bed sheet in the same way: it needed to be cleaned by an expert hand, her mother's. The secrecy surrounding menstruation in the home makes it probable that the girl has had no experience of what her mother would do in this case. Unaccustomed to talking about blood stains with her mother, she is uncomfortable about being compelled to do so now. The blood on the sheet works in complex ways, therefore, simultaneously forcing the girl to act and inviting her to take control rather than passively waiting for mother to find the stain. Though pressed to reveal that she has started menstruating, she may be relieved of the burden of secret-keeping. The blood on the bed sheet may be simultaneously doing her a service and a disservice.

In contrast to the other memory wherein the girl reaches out to her mother and grandmother, here, the sense of secrecy and disgust prevents this girl from speaking and compels her to hide both the fact of her menstruation and its physical evidence. Another girl, in our third story, does the same:

She was in her unique pair of jeans bought in Yugoslavia on her family's regular cross border shopping trip. [...] *She was sitting in the 3.a primary class's school bench in a border town in Hungary, first row just before the teacher. She felt a sudden rush of warmth between her legs. Her underwear has a brown line already. She saw it when she went to the toilet in the morning, and now this* [...]. *Hopefully it is just drops of pee. If it was blood,*

it might have soaked through to colour the pants. She already hid one pair of those precious pants with blood marks between the legs. She hid it up in the cupboard's top shelf in her room, way way in the back so her mother doesn't find it, rolled up disappearing in the middle of other grown out clothes. Mother liked cleanliness. She pre-washed every item before she put the clothes in the washing machine. She asked when she found the underwear with the brown line: is this blood? The girl explained she could not hold the poo, so it got coloured. It sounded not too believable, who poos in pants at her age, but better than admitting the blood. She could not have borne her mother's look again, examining the stain, and asking more questions. What if she would find out, even the thought of that made her body shrivel. The solution remained a piece of toilet paper wrapped around the bottom part of the underwear. A tear off of the cotton wool placed in her pants would show. Skirt, that might hide it, but she could not wear those. The other problem is where to dispose of the cotton wool so her mother doesn't find it. The toilet paper did not work the time when the other pair of jeans got bloody. Oh, I hope mother never finds that bloody one, when she cleans. ('Blood on the Pants' n.d.)

Although toilet paper had soaked up a little blood and could be gotten rid of easily by flushing it down the toilet, it could not protect her clothing from an increased flow of blood. Her stained pants attest to her menstruation and, as such, must also be somehow disposed of. As in the previous memory, the daughter's relationship with her mother has prevented her from revealing her menstruation. She hates to be found out and goes to great lengths to gain control over the repeated situation. Clothes partly become her ally, by covering the blood, but they also create the risk of exposing the signs of her period. Blue jeans, underwear, and toilet paper keep the blood from revealing itself. In socialist countries, jeans represented the ideological power of the West, and Levi's, Wrangler, and Lee were everyone's top choices. Youth wanted to emulate the look of film and rock stars. This girl's pair had come all the way from Yugoslavia, but others were either smuggled or sent by relatives who lived in the West (Stearns, 2017). That she would hide the precious blue jeans, therefore, shows the severity of what is at stake: the girl would rather give up the soiled jeans by hiding them in the top of the cupboard than make the arrival of her period known to her mother. This is reinforced by her lie that the stain on the underwear is faeces and not blood. She considers it the lesser of two evils to be

shamed by poo—opening herself to being labelled as a baby or disabled person, or simply disgusting—rather than by menstrual blood. The mention that she was not able to wear skirts perhaps indicates that she was not fully comfortable with the female fashion assigned by society. If so, menstruation, another aspect which makes her body more female, might be adding to her feelings of discomfort.

The focus in this excerpt is on disguising menstruation from others but also from herself. Because the bloodstain is irregular and brown, she can identify it as poo and, in this way, can cause the evidence of what is happening with her body to disappear in the washing. If the blue jeans, blood, and stained toilet paper can be out of sight, outside the range of recognition and discovery, the period can also be out of mind. As the girl who experienced pain, this girl might want the menstruation to go away, so it does not happen to her. And, like the other girl with the bloody bed sheet, she also actively seeks ways to make the evidence disappear, trying to refuse any thoughts associated with the period. All of these young women might be feeling the stigma of the menstruating woman (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2020), but blood and its trace, the brownish stain, operates differently in this story. In line with Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, the stain 'signifies not the living, life-giving, pulsating, alive woman (as actual menstrual blood might do) but, rather, the decaying, dying [...] woman' (Fahs 2016, p. 35). The girl refuses to become comfortable with her blood, to identify it with a kind of life-giving and life-taking female identity. In the Lacanian psychoanalytic tradition, the emergence of subjectivity is linked to an understanding of genital difference that happens in a phallocentric discourse. Thus, it is a masculine and perhaps biological discourse that informs the ways in which young girls understand what is happening to their bodies and how they form their identities, which might lead them to a refusal of their body and their genital configuration (Irigaray 1977). This experience is also shaped by the role of the mother—her discourses, actions, and subjectivity—and the child's attitude and construction of a female identity (Donmall 2013). The menarche is a time of intensive feminine subject-formation; it is underpinned by a separation from the mother even as it is overshadowed by the mother's experiences and feelings about her own womanhood.

With the onset of menstruation, girls find themselves balancing between childhood and adulthood, trying to find the right place and identity for themselves. Womanhood comes with the stigma of 'mess, dirt and shame, potentially reflective of feelings about sexuality' (Donmall 2013, p. 213). The three girls in our stories negotiate this liminal state differently. They either actively take steps to make signs of their evident entry into womanhood disappear (and reinterpret them as a non-gendered excretion), or give in to the overwhelming anxiety, fear, and pain. Feeling themselves petrified, half-dead, and exposed, they are unable to take any other action than seeking an adult's assistance in an attempt to comprehend their changed bodily and mental state. The menarche appears as a power that takes something away from the girls, be it their ability to move freely and feel healthy in their bodies (Piran 2020), or precious items, such as blue jeans now stained with blood. With the experience of menarche comes then the challenge for the girls to negotiate loss. Girls also learn that menstruation carries within it the possibility of failure. Since bleeding cannot be controlled, 'women learn to see menstruation as inherently disappointing, frustrating, and difficult' (Fahs 2016, p. 36).

Objects and Refuge

She approached her mom; she was standing in the door to her room, embarrassed and uncomfortable, her mom in the hallway, so they were talking across the doorstep, and she was sort of hiding behind the door frame, in the safety of her room. She told her mom that she had gotten her period. She made it sound as if it had happened for the first time. Revealing the secret of having kept it secret for so long was unimaginable. Her mom told her, matter-of-factly, seemingly emotionless, that there was cotton wool in the bathroom that she could take and use. The girl reacted as if she hadn't known and was just learning about it, even though she felt so experienced already and completely confident how to go about her period. ('Blood on the Sheet' n.d.)

The door frame, standing between rooms, represents liminality. Talking across the doorstep crosses the borders between revelation and secret-keeping, acknowledgement and denial, becoming a woman and remaining a child. The way the girl physically approaches her mother is also symbolic of the half-hidden truth in her disclosure:

although she admits to having a period, she does not admit that she has kept secret both her menstruation and all the observations and emotions associated with it. In this way, the secrecy of menstruation is partially maintained. Positioning herself in the liminal space by the door frame, between the openness of the corridor and the safety of her own room, she is out there, visible to her mother, but also hiding from her, keeping her distance, securing her own space. There is no crossing of the doorstep, no physical contact, no revelation of the complete story, no emergence of the girl as both competent and vulnerable, independent and not wanting to be alone, able 'to share her experiences with her mother as a growing adolescent whilst still receiving comfort as a child' (Donmall 2013, p. 209). The door frame enables the girl to retain her strong, knowledgeable, independent self, rather than identify herself as a daughter relying on her mother. The process of 'identification and separation/individuation from the mother' (ibid., p. 213) that happens at menarche is manifested here in the girl's acquired independence and self-reliance in handling menstruation, the limited communication about menstruation between the girl and her mother, and in their physical separation emphasised by the door frame and step. Standing in the doorstep also represents the threshold of the transition, and what this change might produce for the child. Maybe there is joy in keeping a secret of her own, in the feeling that she holds adult knowledge while still being a child. Maybe there is joy in belonging and relating in a new way to her mother in this shared secret. If so, revelation of the secret may cause this joy to dissipate.

Although the mother offers a few instructive words, her emotionless response to the situation upholds the silent taboo around menstruation. The memory suggests that, in the absence of words, a complex affective landscape exists between the mother and daughter. Both probably suspect that the other knows more, and yet they both decide to keep quiet. The negative affective charge of menstruation and the secrecy surrounding it encourage reticence. Menstruation has been like an elephant in the room that no one sees; however, by acknowledging its existence with the minimum of words, both feel eased. The mother does not need to talk about menstruation and the girl can keep her experience a secret and retain her innocence as a child. At the end of the day, the girl knows how to manage the situation anyways.

Objects and Menstruation

In this chapter, we set out to explore childhood memories in which narrators tell about their experiences of menarche and menstruation within the geopolitical context of the late Cold War. Rather than focusing on children's sense-making, which is the dominant way of exploring children's construction of knowledge, we paid attention to objects and the ways girls keenly observed their female counterparts. We wanted to show that even when explicit knowledge is not offered by mothers, teachers, or different forms of media, children learn about menstruation. They learned about it by noticing objects that carry cultural meanings. As these objects gained new uses or disappeared in order to conceal their use, they also helped the girls to navigate their periods.

Researchers increasingly consider childhood memories to be a productive way of studying childhood. As a method, it overcomes concerns that adults are less able to intimate children's experiences in research and therefore not well positioned to interpret their actions and words and takes advantage of the fact that every researcher was once a child (see Horton and Kraftl 2006; Hohti and MacLure 2022; Silova et al. 2018). However, working with memories has its own concerns. Memory stories are not close recreations of events and include the interpretations of the narrators that draw on knowledge they have accumulated during their lives (see, for example, Burman and Millei 2022).

As the overall Reconnect/Recollect project seeks to explore childhood experience within the geopolitical context of the Cold War, we set out in this chapter to study menarche and menstruation in relation to geopolitics and the relative unavailability of menstrual products across some state-socialist countries. The longing for these products one might expect to see does not appear in the memories studied here. Moreover, it is also apparent from our analysis and the review of literature that the menstruation experiences recalled in these memory stories are very similar to those of girls in 'western' countries and in other eras of the twentieth century. Although 'the Cold War' carries the assumption of great divides, these observations of similarity offer evidence of the opposite: the divide, at least in terms of children's experiences, may have been largely imaginary. The assumption of difference might be cultivated by public figures and researchers who understand divisions in ideological

terms and view children as objects of ideological socialisation. These memories demonstrate not only that children's everyday experiences across state-socialist and capitalist countries were quite similar but also that children on the Eastern side were knowing subjects rather than victims of so-called 'indoctrination' (Silova et al. 2018).

The absence and silence of the mothers in these memories contributed to secrecy around menstruation. In socialist states, policies of compulsory employment, which were linked to women's liberation and equality, caused most mothers to be absent from the home during work hours. How this imposed maternal absence shaped girls' experiences of the menarche and menstruation in state-socialist countries requires further research. Here, we can only discuss some tentative relations by drawing on previous research. First, menarche and menstruation are portrayed as an experience that the girls go through on their own and that is usually not shared even with other women. This observation is in line with research that demonstrates the secretive character of menstruation as something that is kept in hiding, not spoken about, a taboo (Ginsburg 1996; Laws 1990; Piran 2020). Mothers did not seem to prepare the girls (enough, if at all) for the eventual experience. Previous research shows that unpreparedness and mothers' indifference toward menarche contribute to girls' negative experiences of the onset of menstruation (Uskul 2004). However, the girls in the memories analysed were also able to mobilise menarche in agentic ways that brought forth the feelings of independence and competence. And, perhaps because mothers might experience menstruation as a stigma, which they themselves need to hide, and as an uncomfortable topic related to sexuality to discuss especially with children, they might expect children to learn through keen observation rather than through direct conversation.

Second, although female emancipation featured prominently on the agendas of Eastern European communist-party ideologues, it was narrowly construed and, in general, failed to remove mechanisms of male domination (Fodor 2004). The mechanics of menstruation might be covered in a 'Soviet Encyclopedia of Young Woman', for example, but not the feelings or identities it might evoke. Some women used the phrase 'bleeding through', 'giving language to their menstrual blood that has crossed a barrier, pushed through a boundary, ruptured the existing social order' (Fahs 2016, p. 38). As in the excerpt where the

girl stood in the door frame that represented the boundary between the binaries of adult and child, woman and girl, public and private, girls have bled through not only their literal underwear and pants but also 'transformed the boundary between public/private, self/other, and animal/human' (ibid.). The phrase 'bleeding through', if proudly accepted in public, represents the rupturing of the existing social order. However, that 'bleeding through' is associated in these memories with shame might indicate that secrecy around and the hiding of the female body's secretion of blood remained the general practice despite the egalitarian intentions of state socialism.

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