

Article

Genealogical Memory and Its Function in Bridging the ‘Floating Gap’

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Abstract: The concept of genealogical memory is commonly presumed to be synonymous with family or intergenerational memory. However, this paper asserts the necessity for a more detailed examination, seeking to refine and contextualize these notions from a genealogist’s perspective. Exploring the focal point of this study, genealogical memory unveils distinctive characteristics that warrant meticulous scrutiny. Foremost among these characteristics is its intentional nature and inherently reconstructive essence, enabling the recollection of long-deceased ancestors and contemplation of their fates. Consequently, genealogical memory proves invaluable in bridging the ‘floating gap’ between communicative and cultural memory, as posited by Jan Vansina’s conceptualization. The primary objective of this article is to comprehensively explore and structure the concept of genealogical memory, with a particular focus on the genealogist’s role as a memory-maker.

Keywords: genealogical memory; family memory; intergenerational memory; genealogists; family history; communicative memory; memory making; floating gap; cultural memory

1. Introduction

In fact, from the moment that the family is the group within which we pass the major part of our life, family thoughts become ingredients of most of our thoughts. Our kin communicate to us our first notions about people and things. [...] family has its own peculiar memory, just as do other kinds of communities. Foremost in this memory are relations of kinship.

(Halbwachs [1925] 1994)

In recent decades, there has been a rising interest in memory, paralleled by an increasing societal focus on commemoration and remembrance. Unlike history, memory is characterized by informality, a lack of specialization, reciprocal roles, and thematic instability (Pentzold 2009). It is marked by an emotional charge owing to its autobiographical nature, whether referring to an individual, family, or broader community. Consequently, it shares an intimate relationship with the present through the personal and collective acts of remembering (Smith 2006).

One of the most distinctive yet poignant aspects of memory is its ephemeral nature. Memories in an individual’s mind often undergo shifts, with different events or their details assuming varying levels of importance, and some memories being displaced by others. As time progresses, memories may become blurred and distorted, while others, especially in old age, may resurface with intensified strength. It is during such moments that many individuals become acutely aware of their own mortality and recognize the imperative to preserve the chain of history (Stallard and de Groot 2020). There emerges a sense of duty to pass on memories as a legacy to the next generation, contributing to their perpetuation and safeguarding. In this manner, family memory is formed—an intangible heritage distinct to each family, and further unique to each member. Each individual does not inherit a singular authorized set of memories from their ancestors, but rather diverse memories marked by the subjectivity of those who transmitted them. These memories are



Citation: Parowicz, Izabella. 2024. Genealogical Memory and Its Function in Bridging the ‘Floating Gap’. *Genealogy* 8: 1. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy8010001>

Received: 30 November 2023

Revised: 11 December 2023

Accepted: 19 December 2023

Published: 22 December 2023



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subsequently processed, recalled, and interpreted by each recipient in a highly personalized manner, potentially differing significantly from another family member who may have heard the same narrative. In this way, a cultural process unfolds at the microscale of the family, whereby the microculture develops as individuals from subsequent generations re-engage with the accumulated family heritage (Mannheim [1927] 1959).

Family memory often manifests itself in family traditions, cherished and passed on from one generation to the next. This can be seen, for instance, in the way Christmas is celebrated, recreated from year to year, the specific dishes prepared within a particular family for that festive evening, or the ethical and moral values through which ancestors distinguished themselves—values one desires to pass on to descendants. These traditions are further manifested in a set of attitudes, assumptions, and norms unique to each family. Based on these foundations, family members assess the world around them and their position within it (Reiss 1987). Simultaneously, as noted by Halbwachs ([1925] 1994), these family traditions are ‘not without relation to the personal qualities of those who create and maintain them’. In other words, the bearer of memory and tradition in the older generation must appreciate it and wish to pass it on to the younger ones, while the latter must be open to receiving it and also recognize its significance¹.

Families, naturally, differ in the extent of information and memory they possess about preceding generations (Green 2013); moreover, not every family has individuals committed to exploring, preserving, reconstructing, and actively transmitting it to the next generation. This responsibility is typically shouldered by family historians or genealogists. Their role extends beyond merely recording and transmitting what is preserved in communicative memory; they persistently endeavour to discover and meticulously reconstruct what has been forgotten, rendered unknowable, or obliterated by the passage of time. Their aim is to recall, reconstruct, and consolidate—essentially, to engage in the process of memory-making (Evans 2023).

This article is dedicated to the exploration of this particular type of memory—genealogical memory—purposefully reconstructed by genealogists. Remarkably, this category of memory has not undergone systematic analysis until this point. The subsequent sections will therefore elucidate the distinctions among family memory and genealogical memory. This will be followed by an examination of the position of genealogical memory in relation to Assmann’s concepts of communicative memory and cultural memory, along with an exploration of the role played by genealogists or family historians in reconstructing and (re)making this memory, thereby bridging the ‘floating gap’, a term introduced by Vansina (1985). Lastly, a case study will be presented to demonstrate the potential of genealogical memory in the creation, supplementation, and enrichment of cultural or collective memory.

2. Family Memory

As Švaricková Slabáková (2021) has noted, despite the dynamic evolution of memory studies in recent decades, family memory, in contrast to other forms of collective memory, has not received extensive scholarly attention. The same author (2019) concedes, however, that intergenerational family memories have recently garnered increasing interest from scholars in the humanities and social sciences fields. Notably, this research has been predominantly focused on the examination of intergenerational memories related to the Holocaust and the Second World War, but also to, e.g., orphans, illegitimate children, or members of Stolen Generations (Evans and Curthoys 2013). Švaricková Slabáková (2021) further observes that family memory is often treated as a self-explanatory term, leading to limited efforts to define it (e.g., Green and Luscombe 2019; Barnwell 2019). In apparent contrast to the notion of the self-explanatory nature of the concept of family memory, Shore and Kauko (2018) point out its ambiguity. They note that the term can refer to memories of family held by anyone or memories of anything shared by family members. They suggest adopting the term to characterize the intersection of these two concepts, with the former broadly designated as ‘family reminiscing’ and the latter labelled as ‘intergenerational narratives’ (Fivush 2008). This article primarily emphasizes the latter

facet of family memory, while acknowledging that for something to be transmitted across generations within a family, it must initially be remembered and narrated by at least one of its members.

In the endeavour to clarify the pertinent terminology, it is valuable to commence with Halbwachs ([1925] 1994), who observed that the family is defined by ‘the idea of kinship relationships’ among its members. This implies a sense of belonging to a group where one’s position is not determined by personal feelings but by rules and customs that predate one’s inclusion, such as through birth, marriage, or other means. Engagement with the familial group generates memories, whether individual or collective, pertaining to the group and events significant to it. Consequently, Jones and Ackerman (2018) characterize family memory as ‘a form of collective memory, representing the memory of a group that surpasses the personally remembered experiences of its individual members’. Family memory is, in a sense, autobiographical, according to Nelson and Fivush’s (2004) definition, as it involves ‘explicit memories of events that occurred in specific places within one’s past’, assuming that the term ‘one’ refers to both the family as a whole and its individual members. While family memory aligns with both individual and collective memory, it resides at the crossroads of what Olick (1999) distinguishes as ‘collective memory’ and ‘collected memories.’ Olick defines ‘genuinely collective memory’ as being grounded in ‘public discourses about the past as wholes or narratives, and images of the past that speak in the name of collectivities’. On the other hand, ‘collected memories’ encompass the cumulative individual memories that, when shared within a group, transform the collective into a ‘mnemonic community’ (Zerubavel 1996). When mentioning ‘collected memories’ and ‘mnemonic communities’, it is important to recognize that within any family, there is rarely a unanimous perspective on a specific ancestral event. This is especially true when the event significantly impacted the individual’s life, as well as the fate of their immediate family and descendants (such as enlisting as a soldier or emigrating). Current viewpoints are naturally shaped by an understanding of what unfolded after the specified event or the ancestor’s decision—a knowledge that was not available to the ancestor before that particular event occurred.

Erll (2011) emphasizes that family memory is fundamentally intergenerational, emerging from continuous social interaction and communication among grandparents, parents, children, and grandchildren. Family memory can be transmitted vertically (often skipping a generation, from grandparents to grandchildren) as well as horizontally or ‘diagonally’—from the perspective of a family tree, involving siblings, cousins, aunts, or uncles (Portelli 2021). Especially in oral communication, stories or anecdotes from the family’s past are reiterated, allowing later generations who did not personally engage in the discussed events to partake in this memory. This shared memory, in turn, becomes a crucial constitutive element in the formation of family identity (Smith 2006).

Family memory consists of communicative elements, such as family stories and inherited knowledge, as well as cultural elements, including heirlooms and rituals (Assmann 2011). It is declarative (or explicit), subject to explicit recall and articulation (Anderson 1976), and concurrently episodic, encoding the recall of events (Tulving 1972). Narratives of the past, anchored by landmark events (Shore and Kauko 2018) such as birth, deaths, family tragedies, and celebrations, but also family holidays and other recurrent events, transmitted from older to younger generations are subsequently examined and contextualized by the latter (Palmberger 2016). They entail the reconstruction of information across generations as part of a group negotiation (Barclay and Koefoed 2021; Dragojlovic 2015). As Hirsch (2008) aptly notes, ‘this received memory is distinct from the recall of contemporary witnesses and participants.’

Consequently, memory narratives are not static; instead, they are actively moulded by both narrators and listeners, as well as those who support, verify, or challenge the story’s contents (Portelli 2021). Family memory is invariably situated at the confluence of individual and collective realms, as well as between private and public processes of recollection (Böhling and Lohmeier 2020). This interactive dynamic, embedded in intrafamilial communication, stands as one of the pivotal factors contributing to the formation of

a unified concept of family memory (Shore and Kauko 2018). Intergenerational memories that remain vibrant within a family are metaphorically stored in a framework, a virtual database of social memory from which they can be retrieved in the future (Yakovleva 2020). Accordingly, Jones and Ackerman (2018) conceptualize the transmission of family memory as both a process and a product, encompassing the activities of remembering and the artifacts constructed through this remembering (also see Yakovleva 2020).

Many authors (Halbwachs [1925] 1994; Amadini 2015; Erll 2011; Maček 2018; Smith 2006) emphasize the necessary emotional dimension of family narratives—a tension linked to a family memory that triggers interest or excitement, extending beyond a single family member to establish a collective sense of identity and connection spanning multiple generations. Without such an emotional dimension, familial events or individuals (ancestors) are prone to being forgotten or considered unworthy of recall.

Family memory is not a consistent, coherent, or linear chronicle of events; rather, it is fragmented (Keppler 1994) and comprises communicated episodes selected on a random and unintentional basis (Švarícková Slabáková and Sobotková 2018). Narratives are shaped by individual differences in storytelling abilities, organizational efforts, and social influence. Essentially, not all family members contribute equally effectively to the generation of family memories (Shore and Kauko 2018). Ricoeur (2004) astutely notes that memory's inability to capture every detail imposes constraints on the act of recounting. The idea of achieving a comprehensive narrative is inherently unattainable. Selectivity, then, becomes an intrinsic aspect of any narrative. He is echoed by Filipowicz (2022), who points out that even the most diligent and faithful narratives can only capture a fragment of the past, as the inherent nature of the past being irretrievably gone complicates accurate reconstruction, sometimes rendering it impossible. Remembered, the past is inevitably less than it actually was, yet simultaneously more, given that we reconstruct it with knowledge of what transpired subsequently. Consequently, narrated pasts almost always diverge from the reality of what the past was. Filipowicz (2022) highlights various factors that play a significant role in family memory, including: the 'self-representation of the reminiscing subject' and their adopted attitude; the 'epistemic community', which seeks to ensure coherence and identity within the intimate memory community known as the family; the 'aesthetics of nostalgia or pathos' that seek to idealise the past; and the 'sense of fulfilment' derived from accessing and sharing the past. Additionally, the fallibility of memory introduces an element of anachronisms and falsifications. A certain form of falsification takes the shape of family myths, defined by Ferreira (1963) as entrenched beliefs about the past (events or ancestral figures) collectively held by family members. These myths can harbour a distorted representation of family reality (Pillari 1986). Such myths, regarded as sacred narratives (Dundes 1984), often fulfil a protective function, primarily in terms of ontological security, centred around the family's sense of self (Bartoszewicz 2023) or a preservative function that enables the family community to uphold the status quo (Ferreira 1963; Ostoja-Zawadzka 1999).

A crucial aspect of family memory is its temporal scope. As highlighted earlier, family memory is fundamentally intergenerational, with older generations transmitting what they themselves remember to the younger ones. Consequently, many scholars (Erll 2011; Welzer 2010; Welzer et al. 2021; Green 2018; Švarícková Slabáková 2021) position family memory within Assmann's (1992) framework of communicative memory, which posits that personal memories can be transmitted over approximately three to four generations (approximately eighty to one hundred years), and the communicative memory ceases with the demise of its final carriers. Within this temporal framework, family narratives are not only transmitted but also suppressed. This suppression may arise from the embarrassment linked to specific family secrets (Stallard and de Groot 2020; Evans 2023) or the enduring impact of traumas. Individuals, especially those who directly experienced or were emotionally confronted with such traumas (such as having to grapple with a father's Nazi past), might find themselves unable or unwilling to share memories of these experiences with the broader family (Welzer et al. 2021). In this context, Todorov (1995) highlights the susceptibility of memory, stemming from the ease with which one can transition from the 'partial' (French:

partielle)—which is evident and unquestioned—to the ‘biased’ (French: *partiale*)—raising doubts about the overall validity of the testimony. Consequently, most witnesses appear to adhere to an unconscious principle in their accounts, formulated by Todorov as follows: We primarily remember the good we did and the hardships we endured. Unpleasant events, those that challenge our perception as either hero or victim, tend to fade from recollection.

Family memory, considered as an area of communicative memory, is characterized by continuous temporal dynamics. As older generations pass away and new generations are born, eyewitnesses to certain chronologically earlier events cease to be present. The memory of these events and the people associated with them gradually fades and, when passed on to successive generations, becomes distorted until it is ultimately forgotten. Simultaneously, new memories continue to be generated, consistently enriching family memory while displacing narratives that are increasingly less relevant to the currently living family community. Given the perpetual shifts in the timeline of family memory, I propose referring to it as a shifting memory.

3. Genealogical Memory

The concepts discussed above regarding family memory, as viewed by memory researchers and anthropologists, particularly with regard to its temporal dimension, may not fully encompass the perspective of genealogists. Genealogists firmly believe that family memory is not obligated to perish with its last custodian; rather, it can and should be revived or reconstructed (Parowicz 2023). Even in the face of a break in the transmission of memories, the next generation has, to certain extent, the ability to rediscover and breathe new life into it. This process is facilitated by uncovering letters, diaries, documents, or press reports, aided by the widespread digitization of collections in various archives. Hence, this section of the article will focus on the concept of genealogical memory. By this term, I aim to encompass not only family memory, as discussed earlier, but also the memory that pertains to a period beyond the collective knowledge and communicative memory of presently living generations.

Before delving into that, it is worthwhile to examine how this concept is construed in the literature. A brief overview reveals that few endeavours have been made to precisely define it, and scholars utilizing it have employed it in diverse contexts. Baussant (2006), Huell (2020), and Chivallon (2014) associate the term ‘genealogical memory’ less with the familial domain and more with the consciousness of ethnic groups or communities regarding their origins, encompassing shared experiences such as exile or descent from slaves. Cinnamon (2005), in exploring the migration of African clans, employs the discussed term within the context of constructing social spaces.

Robinson (2020) defines genealogical memory as the recollections of the oldest living generations, spanning approximately three generations, effectively equating it with the family (communicative) memory described in the preceding section. Balée (2021) similarly interprets genealogical memory as the ability of an individual to recall the number of generations of ancestors, extending this capacity to as many as five or six generations. Assmann (2006) highlights the marginalized position of women in intergenerational genealogical memory, noting their lesser remembrance compared to men, attributed in part to the traditional practice of changing names upon marriage until recent times. However, the author does not provide a detailed explanation of how she conceptualizes genealogical memory, particularly concerning its temporal framework, in her reflections.

Kowalczyk-Pyrzduk (2008) highlights that genealogical memory, defined as an awareness of ancestral lineage, was particularly prevalent among noble families. For these families, knowledge of the lineage was not solely a matter of state ideology but a crucial aspect for confirming their noble status or securing a high position. The author underscores that noble coats-of-arms, shared within specific family or kin, served as external symbols of genealogical memory. Railaité-Bardé (2018), whose research is also centred on nobility and its genealogical consciousness, investigates the significance of glorifying various battles and the pride derived from the involvement of ancestors in shaping the genealogical memory of

the nobility. [Sagnes \(2004\)](#) equates the notions of genealogical and familial memory without explicitly defining them. Instead, she associates both with the genealogist's endeavour to reconstruct family history beyond three generations and communicative memory. She underscores the significance of older, enduring traces (such as family tombs) in shaping family identity and fostering a sense of 'roots'. According to [Minicuci \(1995\)](#), genealogical memory does not constitute a distinct type of memory, separate from individual, domestic, collective, or historical memory. It is, instead, the amalgamation of all these memories organized around genealogies, serving as guides and supports in situating people and events in time.

The latter approach appears to most accurately encapsulate the essence of genealogical memory. It encompasses all that the genealogist manages to ascertain about their ancestors through the typically extensive process of research. This includes not only information obtained from contemporary relatives but also the entirety of archival research and material culture, serving to validate or supplement the oral transmission from said relatives or extending into the more distant past.

What sets genealogical memory apart from family memory is its methodical and purposeful approach to collection and preservation. Family memory, situated within a communicative framework, captures and imparts, on a sporadic basis, the recollections retained by individual family members. These memories are interwoven into the familial narrative, which is inherently fragmentary and, at times, chaotic as it is passed down through generations. As highlighted earlier, the fleeting nature of memory leads to certain recollections becoming hazy or displaced, particularly with the passage of time and the succession of generations. In contrast, genealogical memory goes beyond merely recording and documenting oral transmission; its aspiration is to validate and complement it through the examination of existing documentary sources. This endeavour is accompanied by the recognition that oral transmission, preserved in communicative memory, while inherently unreliable, may contain crucial hints enabling the clarification of remembered family events. It is through this process that, often only in light of the historical context, these events begin to be comprehended. As [Yakel \(2004\)](#) rightly notes, 'genealogy and family history are as much about seeking information as they are about seeking meaning'. Memory narratives extend beyond mere descriptions of the past. They provide an evaluative and explanatory perspective on the past, and their meaning is contingent on the circumstances surrounding the act of narrating, as well as on the narrator themselves. The significance of family narratives is not solely derived from shared experiences but is equally shaped by the interpretative framework that lends meaning to those experiences ([Shore and Kauko 2018](#)). Family (i.e., intergenerational, communicative) memory bears and conveys memories, while genealogical memory perpetuates, restores, and imparts meaning to them. By its inherent nature, genealogical memory is considerably more comprehensive than family memory, whether documented or residing solely in the mind of the genealogist as a result of their research and interpretive efforts. It is not a matter that will be spontaneously recalled in its entirety and informally shared through successive generations. Genealogical memory revolves around the meticulous recollection of as much family history as feasible and as accurately as possible, focusing not only on the most captivating, incidental, anecdotal narratives but also on those less emotionally charged but crucial for preserving the family's historical narrative. As highlighted by [Raczyńska-Kruk \(2022\)](#), 'genealogy over-accumulates memory'. [Kuhn \(2002\)](#) echoes her sentiment: 'Memory work (...) is potentially interminable: at every turn, as further questions are raised, there is always something else to look into'.

The preceding reflections give rise to another characteristic of genealogical memory, namely, its inherently reconstructive nature ([Barclay and Koefoed 2021](#)). Remembrance should not be construed as a faithful reproduction of the past; as noted by [Halbwachs \(1980\)](#): "[A] remembrance is in very large measure a reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present, a reconstruction prepared, furthermore, by reconstructions of earlier periods wherein past images had already been altered." It is appropriate to

discuss the reconstruction of memory in this context, as [Robinson \(1999\)](#) observes that this process is shaped by current modes of understanding. Simultaneously, it is fitting to refer to memory restoration, signifying that a long-forgotten, deceased ancestor re-emerges in family memory and, along with their reconstructed history, can endure in it for generations to come. Genealogical memory can be thus referred to as memory produced by genealogists ([Evans 2023](#)). In this context, [King \(2000\)](#) appropriately observes that the significance of the prefix 're' in reconstruction, denotes an action that occurs 'again', 'afterwards', or 'for a second time'. It implies both repetition and the reinterpretation that time naturally imposes on one's understanding of the past.

It is worth considering the specific role that genealogical memory plays in [Assmann's \(1992\)](#) concept of cultural memory and communicative memory. While the latter term, communicative memory, was explained in the previous section of this article, cultural memory, on the other hand, encompasses fixed points in the past, stored in symbols, celebrated festivals, or written records that continuously illuminate the evolving present. According to [Assmann \(2011\)](#), cultural memory, while blurring the line between myth and history, is not primarily concerned with the history recreated and recorded by historians. Instead, it revolves around the past that is remembered and can be reclaimed as 'our' past, signifying a shared past within the entire community, such as a familial one.

In essence, cultural memory is more about awareness of 'our' past than concrete knowledge of it. This perspective aligns with the aforementioned interpretations of genealogical memory put forth by scholars such as [Baussant \(2006\)](#), [Huell \(2020\)](#), and [Chivallon \(2014\)](#), who position it as an awareness of ancestry, encompassing aspects like slavery, emigration, or clan origins. Simultaneously, the insights of [Kowalczyk-Pyrczuk \(2008\)](#) or [Rilaité-Bardé \(2018\)](#), emphasizing ancestral awareness in noble families, underscore that in all discussed cases, the focus is not on precise knowledge of ancestral history but on identity constructed through an awareness of 'our' past. However, asserting that genealogical memory exclusively aligns with cultural memory would be as incomplete and inaccurate as aligning it solely with family memory. It is crucial to recognize that the establishment of this identity, derived from historical awareness of one's roots, is contingent on specific circumstances. For instance, in an emigrant family, a family name may aid in determining the country or region of origin, while noble surnames can facilitate identification with a specific noble family and its historical legacy. Conversely, distinctive facial features or skin colour associated with a particular race can confirm descent from a specific ethnic group, fostering a sense of solidarity and belonging, especially among groups that have faced historical persecution. Simultaneously, in numerous instances, contemporary individuals find it challenging to pinpoint this "our" past that bestows upon them a historical consciousness of their own origins.

Clearly, there exists a gap between what is retained in the family's communicative memory and the cultural memory and historical awareness of roots and ancestry. This temporal interval has been characterized by [Vansina \(1985\)](#) as a dynamic or shifting 'floating gap' that moves along with the passage of time. Drawing from his experience in African societies, where the preservation of the community's past relies heavily on oral tradition rather than written archives, Vansina notes that beyond a certain timeframe, recalling specific event details becomes challenging. Consequently, narratives become more generalized, often tracing back to the origins of each social structure through references to cultural or forgotten heroes. During this phase, information becomes denser but takes on a different nature, marked by formalization in memorized speeches, accounts, epics, songs, and tales. This institutionalized knowledge is primarily communicated through performances on specific occasions. As the temporal extent a social structure can remember moves forward with succeeding generations, Vansina aptly terms this intermediary period the 'floating gap'. [Zalewska \(2014\)](#) refines the characterization of this gap by describing it as a 'past devoid of representation'.

The gap in question is often not readily apparent to individuals within the communities concerned, but it is typically conspicuous to researchers. In his analysis, Vansina himself

cited family history research as an example where the ‘floating gap’ is noticeable, observing that, at times, recent past events and origins are blended together in genealogies, forming a continuous succession of a single generation. Vansina further observes that the reliability of genealogical records diminishes in the last two or three generations before that of the oldest members of a community. However, during this period, the records are not solely focused on lineage and connections; they also provide unstructured information on births, marriages, and deaths, albeit at a significant cost of effort. These documents essentially represent historical gossip rediscovered and can be quite reliable, particularly when cross-referenced with changes of residence, which are additional data remembered in life histories along with demographic information. Concerning deeper genealogies, their characteristics often provide insights into which segments can be utilized for dating purposes.

Certainly, the ‘floating gap’ stands as the paramount domain of genealogical research, necessitating exploration beyond the confines of family memory to unveil, interpret, and reconstruct long-forgotten events and the identities of ancestors obscured by oblivion. These endeavours culminate in the reconstruction of genealogical memory—a conscious, purposeful, and reconstructive recollection—bringing individuals or entire generations previously shrouded in darkness back to awareness.

Hirsch (2008), discussing the ‘temporal delay’ in intergenerational remembering, coins the term “postmemory” to underscore the “uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture”. While Hirsch’s research primarily addresses the inter- and transgenerational transfer of trauma and its enduring impacts, I propose that the term ‘postmemory’ could also be applied to the dimension of genealogical memory related to the ‘floating gap’. In this context, the connection to the past is not directly facilitated by recall but rather by engaging in research, imagination, projection, and memory (re)creation.

Thus, genealogical memory serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it contributes to bridging the ‘floating gap’ by aligning, wherever feasible, with the cultural memory of the past, often correcting or supplementing original, potentially erroneous or incomplete perceptions. Secondly, it aids in narrowing the ‘floating gap’ along the timeline. Efforts by genealogists effectively document aspects currently within communicative memory, preventing their complete displacement from family consciousness, i.e., family memory. Consequently, the paramount significance of genealogical memory lies in advancing and deepening both family communicative memory and cultural memory, crucial not only to familial identity but also to the broader community. In other words, genealogical memory can be characterized as a storage medium integral to both cultural memory and the communicative memory within a family.

4. Genealogists and Their Role in Memory-Making

The preceding discussion is worth augmenting with an examination of the role and significance of genealogists. Evans (2023) points out that there persists a prevailing perception of a certain ‘inferiority’ or ‘amateurism’ associated with family history research conducted by individuals lacking formal historical training. Simultaneously, a distinction is often drawn between ‘professional’ genealogists, typically engaged in research for a fee, and ‘amateurs’—family historians—motivated by a desire to uncover or redefine their own identity, explore their ancestors, or understand their role in society (Durie 2017). According to Savolainen (1995), a family historian is an individual who pursues practical information with the goal of investigating issues related to family connections and identity. In contrast, a genealogist, seen as operating at a more advanced level in this field, seeks orienting information and therefore delves into information concealed within vital records, obituaries, and official documents.

This proposed distinction between a genealogist and a family historian, as well as the boundary between professionalism and amateurism in this domain, is questionable and somewhat ambiguous. A dedicated family historian will diligently explore all available sources in archives, including digital ones, offices, and courts. Conversely, a thorough genealogist will not overlook the wealth present in family archives—documents and

photographs. Instead, they will utilize these archives as the foundation and starting point for further research. Not everyone researching their family history aspires to be a writer or chronicler. Yet, even if they analyse and reliably document their findings in non-narrative ways, they still deserve the title of family historian.

On the other hand, a genealogist providing commercial services usually gains their training in the profession by meticulously searching for their own roots. While it may seem that most commercial genealogists focus primarily on gathering data about clients' ancestors, concentrating mainly on available metrics and other documents, many would be open to evolving into the historian of someone else's family if compensated for their efforts. Therefore, the distinction discussed above might be considered from a financial perspective. A family historian, typically a member of the family in question, possesses the necessary genealogical tools and motivation. They willingly invest their time and financial resources into this activity, often spanning many years, without expecting remuneration. However, suggestions that such individuals should not be labelled professional genealogists or that genealogists should not be referred to as family historians lack sufficient justification. In any case, these individuals can be identified as "kin keepers", functioning not only as researchers, collectors, and interpreters of family history but also as a form of institution or memory leader responsible for maintaining existing family ties and establishing new connections with other relatives or individuals valuable for ongoing research (Raczyńska-Kruk 2022; Rosenthal 1985).

It is also pertinent to contemplate the criteria distinguishing a 'professional' from an 'amateur' in genealogy. Should this determination hinge on formal historical or genealogical training, or perhaps on the requirement of remuneration for services provided? The majority of individuals involved in genealogy are self-taught. For most genealogists, their engagement does not transform into a revenue-generating activity but rather falls under the category of 'serious leisure'—a lifelong hobby that requires the continuous acquisition and application of specialized skills, knowledge, and experience (Fulton 2006; Stebbins 2007). Certainly, an amateur is characterized as an individual who is in the early stages of genealogy, lacking competence, determination, and the drive to acquire the necessary skills and utilize available tools, as will be elaborated upon below. An amateur may also refer to someone lacking the ability to uncover the truth or verify family transmissions based on documented evidence. However, pinpointing when an amateur genealogist transitions into a professional is not a matter of a single moment but rather an ongoing process spanning many years, marked by accumulating diverse experiences and surmounting various challenges. The breadth of skills required in this transformation is underscored by the fact that genealogy intersects with and incorporates at least 45 academic disciplines, including social history, (historical) geography, anthropology, migration studies, computer science, genetics, heraldry, palaeography, and numerous others, drawing synergies across them (Jones 2007; Herskovitz 2012). A professional genealogist should possess a comprehensive understanding of these domains, enabling them to conduct independent and dependable research into their own family history. Proficiency in specific knowledge and skills related to a particular country or region is often required. For instance, a professional genealogist in Poland, which endured Russian, Prussian, and Austrian partition for 123 years (1795–1918), must be adept at deciphering records in four languages: Polish, German, Russian, and Latin. Additionally, they should be capable of reading texts in the Russian alphabet and the old German alphabet (*Kurrentschrift*/German cursive).

In the absence of formal requirements for individuals providing genealogical services commercially, and considering the numerous highly experienced genealogists who dedicate their lives to researching their family history without seeking financial remuneration, I propose defining a professional genealogist as someone who, through self-assessment and peer recognition, attains a level of proficiency in using genealogical tools and methods, along with a degree of experience and research integrity that justifies payment for such services and the resulting quality of research outcomes. This suggestion is limited by the

inherent subjectivity of self-assessment and the inclination of individuals to either overstate or underestimate their own value and accomplishments. Additionally, it presupposes that a highly experienced genealogist, driven by a substantial passion for exploring family history, would entertain the idea of outsourcing research to a third party or venturing into entrepreneurship in this field—an assumption that may not align with the reality. Nonetheless, such a self-assessment, validated by peers, could offer an approximation of the expertise necessary to be recognized as a professional genealogist.

Drawing from my 36 years of experience in genealogy and my role as an academic specialized in heritage preservation, albeit without a formal academic background in history, I observe that professional historians may not possess or fully employ the diverse and extensive toolkit that genealogists utilize. For instance, while recently working on a biographical book about a prominent Polish figure from the first half of the 20th century, I was able to establish or clarify numerous aspects of this individual's life that previous biographers, well-reputed historians, had overlooked or merely speculated upon, mostly due to alleged inaccessibility or non-existence of data. One crucial aspect in confirming these facts was the genealogist's standard practice of not only focusing on the character under examination but also delving into the destinies of their relatives and connections. It was through this perspective that an understanding of the protagonist's fate, events, and life choices became possible. Moreover, the genealogist often directs attention toward sources of information distinct from those routinely accessed by academic historians. For instance, they meticulously examine family archives associated with the subject of investigation to unveil any concealed information. Additionally, they diligently pursue all relevant official documents, such as metric deeds, which may contain additional insights or be accompanied by supplementary records. Genealogists, delving into microhistory defined as "the history of hitherto obscure people" and concentrating "on the intensive study of particular lives" (Lepore 2001), can thus serve as invaluable collaborators or contributors to biographical research projects. The latter quality of genealogists, namely their ability and perseverance to explore and reconstruct, even if only partially, the biography of a long-deceased ancestor, becomes crucial in their memory-making endeavours. As noted by Evans (2023), academic historians should recognize the value of such collaborations, leveraging their expertise to facilitate the process of memory-making by genealogists.

Every genealogist or family historian embarks on their journey by tapping into family memory. Before delving into documents, scheduling appointments at state or church archives or seeking additional information from various sources, they initially aim to establish fundamental facts based on family communicative memory. This involves gathering information from parents, grandparents, and other older relatives who are alive and able to share details such as names, dates of significant events, ancestral professions, places of residence, and other pertinent facts. The initial efforts to construct a family tree rely heavily on what is still recalled within the family community. This task necessarily involves engaging with family narratives. As highlighted by Hiles and Čermák (2008), narratives allow one to perceive human experiences as socially situated and culturally rooted. Additionally, the events recounted in narratives are situated within a dual context. On one hand, these retold events exist within the context of the overarching story, and on the other hand, there is the discursive context of the specific occasion when the story is retold. The narrative context should therefore be understood as articulated in these two dimensions. Consequently, the work of genealogists undoubtedly falls within what Hiles and Čermák (2008) term "Narrative Oriented Inquiry".

The genealogist continues to draw upon family memory in the later stages of their activity and, moreover, actively stimulates it among family members. When verifying initial information obtained through oral transmission from relatives with documentary material, the genealogist often discovers data that interviewees were previously unable to recall, such as a grandmother's maiden name, her place of birth, or the names of her parents. Confronted with this newfound knowledge, interviewees' memories are often

revitalized, enabling them to generate new associations and provide the genealogist with additional facts that were previously unarticulated.

A parallel phenomenon unfolds when elderly family members are exposed to vintage photographs. It may transpire that the interviewed older family member recognizes their own great-grandfather in a photograph—even if they never had a personal encounter with him—making them potentially the sole living individual able to do so. The photograph, a fixture in their childhood home, triggers memories. This yields three advantages for the genealogist: firstly, invaluable confirmation of the identity of the long-deceased person in the photograph; secondly, the genealogist becomes a guardian of the capacity for facial recognition of this person, capable of passing it on to future generations; thirdly, collaborative exploration of photographs with older relatives may unearth additional layers of family memory, eliciting recollections of crucial facts or anecdotes about the person in the photograph. These insights can prove pivotal for subsequent research. This demonstrates that, especially concerning personal memory and family photographs, genealogists are continually racing against time; it cannot be overstated how crucial it is to persuade the oldest surviving family members to identify as many individuals depicted in old family photographs as possible. Otherwise, the ability to recognize these individuals will be irreversibly lost once the relative still capable of doing so passes away or experiences amnesia.

Moreover, family histories, whether conveyed orally or documented, are intricately intertwined with national or local history, offering context to the experiences of ancestors (Barclay and Koefoed 2021; Švarícková Slabáková 2019). The professional genealogist will therefore aim to delve into and comprehend this context, often shedding new light on the fate and life choices of an ancestor. Once again, enlightening older family members on historical matters of which they themselves may have had little knowledge and indicating a connection between historical events and the fate of the interviewed, long-dead relatives provide an additional opportunity to unlock the memory potential of the interviewed family members. The genealogist who diligently verifies the facts of family history often finds themselves in the position of rectifying family memories. In this process, the genealogist assumes the role of a hermeneut, involved in the restoration, recollection, and interpretation of meaning. This hermeneutic engagement also includes an element of suspicion, aiming to demystify meaning and unveil the illusions and even falsehoods present in consciousness (Ricoeur 1970). This might involve dispelling a family myth that has been nurtured over generations, centred around a specific ancestor or event. The revelation of new or rather forgotten facts about ancestors can elicit various reactions within the family, including disappointment, cognitive dissonance, denial, and a diminished interest in family history (Welzer et al. 2021).

The aforementioned stages of the genealogical inquiry illustrate how the genealogist relies on family memory and, through their own discoveries, actively enhances its richness. By meticulously retrieving and documenting family memory, the genealogist establishes some kind of its repository (Stallard and de Groot 2020) or becomes themselves such a repository. Thus, family memory, preserved and continuously enriched by the genealogist's efforts and discoveries, can be further communicated to other family members, both contemporaries and future generations. What is more, the genealogist, by documenting, preserving, and further communicating memories from departing generations of ancestors and relatives, counteracts the shifting nature of family memory, extending it for generations to come.

When a genealogist extends their research beyond the temporal boundaries set by the family's communicative memory, they consequently lose the substantial and mnemonic assistance of their relatives. However, this typically does not demotivate the professional genealogist; on the contrary, it serves as a motivation for them to strive even harder. Frequently, the most significant and sometimes the only attainable achievement is the mere discovery of the surnames or first names of older generations of ancestors, recorded with diminishing care or precision as one traces back through time in metric books. The survival of these records depends on their resilience against fires, inundations, or the turmoil of

war. The genealogist enhances the family's genealogical memory by reconstructing, to the extent possible, the identity of yet another generation of ancestors. This act of discovery becomes a potential subject of memory for the broader family. The genealogist revives the memory of long-forgotten ancestors through a process that involves rediscovering information about an ancestor, reconstructing their fate, thus humanizing the past (Evans 2021, 2023), constructing or restoring memory of that ancestor, and disseminating this memory to others.

Indeed, certain ancestral discoveries have the potential to extend beyond the mere restoration of the identity of a long-dead and forgotten ancestor. This is particularly true for individuals who held a certain public profile due to their profession, social rank, or involvement in historical events, the memory and knowledge of which are preserved in documentary form. In such instances, the genealogist has the opportunity not only to revive the memory of the name of the subject but to render it more vivid and dynamic through comprehensive research. This is, of course, feasible for professional and experienced genealogists with analytical and synthetic skills, enabling them to investigate the fate of an ancestor thoroughly within the context of available historical sources. In recent years, the growing availability of digitized archives and digital library resources, such as old newspapers, has proven to be a valuable aid for genealogists. It should be noted that the variations in the level of prominence among individual ancestors or branches of ancestors often result in the genealogist, typically engaged in multilinear research, concentrating on those branches of the family or those figures that can be explored in greater detail due to source availability. This, in turn, leads to the construction of simpler, unilinear genealogical narratives (Zerubavel 2012) and creates a disparity in the level and richness of genealogical memory concerning specific individuals or branches of the family.

Investigative pursuits in genealogy contribute to the sharpening of a detective's acumen, as genealogists develop the ability to discern seemingly inconspicuous details from the history of a region or country that wielded significant influence over the daily lives of ancestors and their decision making. Consequently, genealogists often gain knowledge across various disciplines. For instance, they may delve into the history of military uniforms to comprehend the context of their ancestor's service or the battles in which they participated. When faced with instances of epidemics impacting their family, genealogists are inclined to explore diseases such as smallpox or cholera that left a profound mark on their family history. The genealogist scrutinizes the living conditions of their ancestors, their occupations, and how these roles situated them within the social hierarchy. In cases where an ancestor unjustly lost their landed property, the genealogist may delve into historical legal knowledge by examining the statutes that led to the dispossession of a specific social group. Hart (2018) emphasizes that these topics might not have piqued their interest had it not been for genealogy. The unique historical knowledge amassed in this process significantly influences the identity of those immersed in genealogical research.

As a result of these investigative efforts, it becomes possible to perpetuate the genealogical memory of the ancestors in question through a credible narrative, rather than merely basic, if at all complete, personal data. Such a narrative may be of interest not only to family members but also to wider audiences demonstrating an interest in the historical period, historical events, or the history of a particular location. Hence, the reconstructed genealogical memory of an ancestor whose fates were explored in detail carries the potential to contribute to the cultural memory of a community. In this manner, the genealogist assumes the roles of creator, bearer, and potential disseminator of genealogical memory.

5. Case Study: Dr Leopold Goeppner (1766–1824), One of Europe's First Vaccinators

The ensuing case study delves into my genealogical research conducted between 2021 and 2022. Leveraging the growing availability of digitized archival material, I successfully identified and confirmed the identity of one of my direct seventh-generation ancestors, Dr. Joseph Leopold Maximilian Norbert Goeppner (1766–1824), who served as a district physicist in Schwiebus (Polish: Świebodzin). Initially, the establishment of my familial

connection was simply rooted in the discovery of the birth record of one of his sons, my great-great-great-great-grandfather Carl Valentin August Goeppner (1798–1869), whose identity was previously known to me. However, driven by the medical profession and public role held by Leopold Goeppner, I attempted to uncover additional information about him. The outcomes achieved within a relatively brief timeframe exceeded my initial expectations. While a comprehensive account of his life is detailed elsewhere ([Parowicz 2022](#)), this case study focuses on the key facets of his life necessary to elucidate the impact of genealogical research in (re)constructing genealogical memory. Furthermore, it elucidates the influence of genealogical memory on both family (communicative) memory and cultural memory, specifically how it contributes to historical awareness of a figure long forgotten within the relevant community.

5.1. Dr Leopold Goeppner's Family

He was born on 4 June 1766 into a fairly prominent Roman Catholic family, the son of Philipp Goeppner, a princely tax official (German: *Rentmeister*) in the service of Duke Peter von Biron, ruler of the Duchy of Sagan (Polish: Żagań), and his wife, Maria Joanna Goeppner, née Król or Krul. Leopold Goeppner was one of six brothers and sisters. Philipp (1755–?), the eldest, entered ecclesiastical life as an Augustinian monk, while Carl Wilhelm (1758–1814) took on the responsibilities of *Rentmeister* in Sagan, succeeding their paternal figure. Friedrich Alexander (c.1769–1814) and Ignatz Ernst Thaddaeus (c.1770–1844), the later siblings, moved to the Warsaw area during the Prussian annexation and began careers as building inspectors, architects, and surveyors. Leopold's only identified sister, Albertine Josephine (c.1775–?), married Carl Seidel, a pharmacist in Sagan.

The Goeppner family lived in Silesia and Prussia, in what is now the border area between Poland and Germany. The maternal lineage suggested by her maiden name implies possible Polish origins, exposing Leopold Goeppner to the dual cultural influences of Polish and German heritage. When he came of age, Leopold married Joanna Maria Anastazja Kuglińska, a Polish woman. Over successive generations, particularly within my branch of the family, there was a complete assimilation of Polish cultural practices.

The Goeppner brothers underwent extensive academic training and pursued specialised professions. Leopold Goeppner's education began in Breslau and culminated in the award of a doctorate in medicine from the University of Halle in 1791 ([Goeppner 1791](#)). One year later he was appointed district physician in Schwiebus (Polish: Świebodzin) ([BLHA 1792](#)), a position he held until his death on 28 November 1824. Leopold and his wife Joanna had at least four children, of whom two sons, including my aforementioned ancestor, reached adulthood.

5.2. The Nature of Dr Leopold Goeppner's Work

Leopold Goeppner's role as district physician, charged with overseeing the health and sanitary-epidemiological concerns of his assigned region, seems to have been a typical one for his contemporaries ([Instruction 1776](#)). It was an important and demanding post, covering not only human welfare but also animal welfare and the state of the soil, water, and marshes. As well as running his own medical practice, Goeppner oversaw the activities of local surgeons, barbers, midwives, and apothecaries. He also interacted with the judicial authorities in criminal cases, which included conducting coronations and autopsies ([Zerndt 1909](#)). Among the challenges he faced was dealing with the recurring epidemics that ravaged the areas under his jurisdiction ([Początek 2012](#)).

In 1816, Goeppner's responsibilities were greatly expanded by the amalgamation of the neighbouring districts of Schwiebus and Züllichau (Polish: Sulechów). This meant that he had to oversee two larger towns and three smaller ones, almost 100 villages and the administration of some 30,000 inhabitants in an area of about 20 square miles ([Dzwonkowski and Szyłko 2007](#)). In addition to these administrative duties, Goeppner occasionally contributed scientific articles to medical journals based on unique cases encountered in his medical practice ([Kurze Nachrichten und Auszüge 1817](#)).

5.3. Dr Leopold Goeppner's Visionary Role in Vaccination and Vaccine Promotion

The outstanding contribution of Leopold Goeppner's work was his pivotal role in advocating and implementing smallpox vaccination. The landmark discovery, originally made in 1796 and published in 1798 by the English physician Edward Jenner (1749–1823), showed that milkmaids infected with harmless cowpox remained immune to smallpox—a disease that had historically been a major cause of death, with numerous complications such as blindness and disfigurement among survivors (Bennet 2020). Jenner's revelation marked a significant milestone as the world's first effective vaccine against an infectious disease.

News of Jenner's discovery gradually reached medical centres across Europe. On 31 July 1801, the King of Prussia issued a decree supporting a widespread vaccination campaign (Bécu 1803). Leopold Goeppner, however, preceded the royal decree by several months and began vaccinating children in the Schwiebus district on 24 April 1801 (Ungnad 1801). His two surviving sons, August, aged 2.5 years, and Carl Wilhelm, aged less than three months, were the first recipients of the vaccine, which was brought from Berlin. Dr Goeppner used the cowpox lymph formed in the vesicles on their arms to inoculate other children in the area (Goeppner 1804).

News of the vaccine's efficacy spread quickly, prompting farmers to advocate vaccination of their children when they observed that those who had been vaccinated remained uninfected. At the same time, opponents of vaccination, driven mainly by fear, superstition, or prejudice, witnessed a significant number of deaths among their unvaccinated offspring, whose vaccinated peers remained healthy. Leopold Goeppner meticulously documented his vaccination efforts in a diary, noting that all of his patients came through unscathed and without any serious side effects (Goeppner 1804).

He demonstrated remarkable speed and efficiency in his vaccination efforts. By December 1803, Leopold Goeppner had vaccinated nearly 1250 people in his district, about one twelfth of the local population (Goeppner 1804). This was in stark contrast to the vaccination rate of one in one hundred and thirty for the whole of the Kingdom of Prussia during the same period (Gins 1963). Goeppner's vaccination efforts were therefore ten times more effective than the national average.

Leopold Goeppner's reputation as a plague saviour extended beyond his local area; he received requests to carry out vaccinations in areas far from his district and was praised for his work by colleagues in Berlin, Breslau, and even Paris (Friesen 1804). In 1814, he was the only doctor in his region to be awarded the highest state honour for the considerable number of patients he had successfully vaccinated (Amts-Blatt 1814).

Recognising the potential benefits of a novel vaccine earlier than many of his contemporaries, Dr Goeppner faced opposition, including from fellow doctors, and public prejudice (Goeppner 1804). In particular, he demonstrated courage and vision by choosing to vaccinate his surviving infants with a relatively unfamiliar substance, potentially sparing them from death or severe health complications (the estimated mortality rate for smallpox ranged between 10 and 20% of the population (Abramson 1801), with survivors often experiencing severe scarring, blindness, deafness, or other significant impairments (Bennet 2020). Recognising the audacity of this step is crucial given that both proponents and opponents of vaccination at the time lacked the benefit of extensive experience or research.

5.4. Dr. Leopold Goeppner's History: Impact on Family Knowledge and Memory

Leopold Goeppner died in Schwiebus on 28 November 1824, almost two centuries ago. All his grandchildren were born after his death. Over time, his presence has been entirely erased from the family's collective memory. It is highly probable that the last generation to retain any residual memory of him was that of his great-grandchildren, including my great-great-grandmother, Anna von Turska, née Goeppner (1869–1930). His descendants from the sixth to the ninth generation are alive today. The rediscovery of his character, facilitated by my investigation into his biography and a reconstruction of his accomplishments, has revitalized his presence in the family's genealogical memory after a period of at least 90 years of complete obscurity. Especially his achievements as one of the first vaccinators

in Europe, discovered precisely during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, elicited an emotional response and considerable interest among family members who sought to learn about this exceptional ancestor. This revelation has sparked the genealogical imagination (Zerubavel 2012) among numerous descendants of Dr. Leopold Goeppner, leading them to ponder whether their very existence is indebted to his decision, 220 years ago, to vaccinate his small, sole surviving sons. It is anticipated that, at the very least, a fragmentary account of his accomplishments will enhance the family narrative, thereby contributing to his placement in the family's communicative memory.

The significance of uncovering Leopold Goeppner's life narrative extends beyond his direct descendants to include his non-descendant relatives. As previously mentioned, two of his brothers pursued careers as architects, geometers, and building inspectors in and around Warsaw. Their progeny, who now carry the polonised surname Gepner, continue to reside in the region. Within this lineage of the Goeppner/Gepner family, individuals have contributed to various fields, such as art, military service, civil administration, and medicine. Notably, two prominent ophthalmologists emerged from this family: Bolesław Gepner (1835–1913) (Grzybowski and Pactwa 2021a), and his son, Bolesław Ryszard Gepner (1863–1923) (Grzybowski and Pactwa 2021b). Additionally, a military doctor and psychiatrist, Tadeusz Marian Gepner (1882–1929), further enriched the family's professional legacy (Błaszczuk 2021).

Within this branch of the family, several individuals have actively engaged in genealogy. However, it was only through the exploration of the reconstructed history of Dr. Leopold Goeppner that they discovered the medical traditions of their family dating back to the 18th century. My genealogical research, coupled with information exchange with family historians from the Gepner family, has not only contributed to expanding the understanding of the Goeppner family's roots but also prompted a re-evaluation of the previously reiterated family thesis regarding their Kurland origin (Łoza 1932).

5.5. Dr. Leopold Goeppner's History: A Contribution to Regional Cultural Memory

As mentioned above, Leopold Goeppner started vaccinating much earlier than most of his contemporaries in Europe. As far as the territory of present-day Poland is concerned, only three have been identified who started vaccinating against smallpox during a similar period. Dr Jacek Dziarkowski (1754–1828) began vaccinating in Warsaw in June 1801 (Dziarkowski 1802), and Dr August Bécu (1771–1824) also started a vaccination campaign in Vilnius around 1801 (Dziennik Wileński 1825). In the same year, Dr Wojciech Jerzy Boduszyński (1768–1832), a professor at the University of Kraków and a doctor in the Tarnów district, began offering vaccinations (Majer 1844). Dr. Leopold Goeppner, a provincial physician, stands out as one of the very first, and perhaps—the impossibility of proof acknowledged—the absolute first vaccinator in the territory of present-day Poland.

The revelation of Dr Leopold Goeppner's vaccination activities coincided with the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which touched almost every aspect of people's lives, including health, emotions, and information. Given the timeliness and relevance of the topic, the reconstruction of Goeppner's story has attracted considerable attention beyond the family circle. In particular, I decided to share my discovery with the community of Świebodzin (formerly Schwiebus), where Leopold Goeppner devoted 32 years of his life.

The director of the Regional Museum in Świebodzin showed great interest and enthusiasm when he received information about the recovery of the identity and biography of this important town figure from the depths of oblivion. After his retirement, he facilitated my contact with his successor, which led to an initiative aimed at restoring Dr Leopold Goeppner's place in the collective memory of local society. In pursuit of this goal, contact was made with the management of two hospitals in Świebodzin, the priest of the local Roman Catholic parish, and the municipal and district authorities. All these institutions and individuals strongly supported the idea of commemorating Leopold Goeppner. The commemoration is planned for November 2024, the 200th anniversary of his death. The event will be multi-faceted to ensure broad participation and to sustain public interest and

remembrance in the long term. Planned activities include a public lecture, the publication of a brochure devoted to the character of Dr Goepfner, and an exhibition to be covered by local, regional, and possibly national media. It has also been decided to name one of the city's streets or squares after him and to erect a commemorative plaque detailing his achievements.

It is currently uncertain how the series of events planned for November 2024, aiming to restore the figure of Dr. Leopold Goepfner to the collective consciousness and memory of the inhabitants of Świebodzin, will be received. Predicting public reaction and interest in this topic, especially in the aftermath of the extremely challenging years of the COVID-19 pandemic and considering the diverse attitudes toward the offered vaccination for this virus, along with the various emotions surrounding the vaccination campaign, its restrictions on the unvaccinated, and the social ostracism they faced, remains challenging. Whether an attitude of indifference or possibly dislike will prevail among the inhabitants of Świebodzin, less than five years after the outbreak and almost two years after the end of the pandemic, remains to be seen. However, it is highly probable that they take pride in the fact that their fellow countryman, the former district doctor, was one of the pioneers of vaccination against infectious diseases in what is now Poland, the former Prussia, and the entire European continent. In the latter case, the product of genealogical memory—the reconstituted memory of my long-forgotten ancestor potentially valuable to the cultural memory of the town and the region as a whole—can have a significant emotional impact by reinforcing the local community's sense of continuity and belonging (Smith 2006). The proposed exhibition, publication, and, most importantly, the commemorative plaque dedicated to Dr. Goepfner, by virtue of their materiality (Figlio 2003), are expected to render them more persuasive, impactful, and enduring tools for ingrain his character in the collective memory of the local community, providing a tangible and lasting dimension to this memory, as a *lieu de memoire*—an anchor point to epitomize and commemorate the character in question and his achievements (Nora 1989; Assmann 1992). Moreover, the ceremonial act of collectively commemorating the individual in question, facilitated through a form of ritual performance (unveiling the plaque), will enable the embodiment of the past (Connerton 1991).

6. Conclusions

We live in the era of a 'new culture of memory' (Rosenzweig 2003), characterized by 'horizontal networks of interactive communication that connect local and global' (Castells 2007). An analogous connection that further enriches this emerging culture of memory can be identified in the communication between individual past and collective presence. Genealogical memory, the intangible heritage of each family, is oriented toward the present and constructed and regulated from the perspective of the present (Ashworth et al. 2007; Halbwachs [1925] 1994). It represents that which we hold jointly (Lowenthal 1998). Therefore, the pivotal significance of family history research resides in its capacity to afford individuals opportunities to engage with their heritage, allowing them to delve into the complexities of the past and providing avenues for reassessing and questioning collective and national memories (Evans 2011). Engaging with family memories also provides an opportunity to incorporate marginalized, long-dead, and forgotten individuals into historical narratives to "insert familial microhistories into global macrohistories" (Evans 2023). Personal stories are given significance and interwoven with national narratives, granting agency to individuals when their memory work becomes part of the collective, even national memory (Evans and Curthoys 2013).

Certainly, a thorough exploration of one's family history, accompanied by a proper acknowledgment of the broader historical context, contributes to a more profound understanding of social history and the global past (Martone 2022). Genealogical memory, developed and reconstructed through genealogical research, unveils information about ancestors not encompassed by a family's communicative memory and often neglected or insufficiently explored in the conventional historical narrative. This memory holds the

potential to bridge the ‘floating gap’ and be equally productive as academic scholarship in shaping historical perspectives for the broader public (Evans 2011), especially within communities with specific interests, such as a professional group or the residents of a town. Nevertheless, stories must meet three criteria to be tradable: they must be open and fragmentary, allowing room for additions by the listeners; they should be relatable to the listeners’ own experiences; and finally, the narrative situation itself must have an experiential character, carrying emotional significance in its own right (Welzer et al. 2021). In other words, closing the floating gap relies on engaged recipients. It is therefore evident that not every reconstructed family history is likely to genuinely contribute to the collective or cultural memory of a community, provided that it can be situated within a broader network and bear significance for historical interpretations (Böhling and Lohmeier 2020). To achieve this, a set of conditions must be predominantly satisfied:

- The identified ancestor ought to possess a public profile, demonstrated through their profession, role, or accomplishments.
- This individual should be distinguished by participation in historical events that hold relevance for contemporary individuals or are significant for the history of a particular locality or region.
- The revelation about this ancestor should be marked by timeliness and topicality, capable of eliciting emotions in today’s audience.
- Ideally, an individual’s memory should be grounded in a tangible representation (*lieu de mémoire*), capable of amplifying its emotional impact and eliciting responsiveness (Smith 2006).
- Last but not least, the discoverer, typically the genealogist, should demonstrate commitment, perseverance, and a readiness to share the recorded content from genealogical memory with audiences beyond their immediate family. Additionally, the genealogist should strive to cultivate community interest in this information.

By bridging the ‘floating gap’, genealogical memory advances toward both cultural and communicative memory. It has the potential to enhance cultural memory, bestowing a collective cultural identity upon a broader community (Assmann 2008). Simultaneously, it serves to substantially enrich and extend the communicative memory within a specific family. This is achieved by introducing narratives of ancestors and their destinies that were previously forgotten into oral familial communication. However, there may be no one inclined to engage with and preserve this memory, whether within the family or beyond, such as a local community. As Frie (2017) observes, every society constructs collective memories that emphasize certain elements of the past while overlooking others. In this sense, collective memory cannot be separated from social and political developments or from the interests of each succeeding generation. Hence, in certain, hopefully infrequent instances, the genealogist, faced with disinterest from relatives, may discover themselves as the lone pursuer of truth and custodian of family secrets (Stallard and de Groot 2020).

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Note

- ¹ This phenomenon is, as a matter of fact, not exclusive to families but extends to various communities that share a common point of reference and values. For instance, the last surviving participants in the Warsaw Uprising (1944), who are now approaching or surpassing the age of one hundred, are increasingly conscious of their role as departing witnesses to history. They are treated as such by younger generations of Varsovians and Poles at large, who exhibit a growing enthusiasm to preserve every fragment of memory from this departing generation.

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