Are sins of past generations inherited? Theoretical reflections on concepts of collective guilt and collective responsibility along with the analysis of their influence on today’s Germany decision-making

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ABSTRACT

The author of this paper tries to answer the question whether sins, wrongdoings and injustice done by past generations are inherited. The article presents theoretical reflections on the concepts of individuality and collectivity and their relationships; the themes of collective guilt and collective responsibility and the difference between them and the role and importance of collective memory, not only in context of heroic acts but also in the context of shameful past and misdeeds. The scientific theory is compared with empirical research results on today’s Germany decision-making policy in relation to Second World War tragedy. The presented theoretical background and analyzed material gives base to draw conclusions and answer the hypothesis set at the very beginning.

Keywords: collective guilt, collective responsibility, collective memory, shameful past, Second World War, today’s Germany decision-making policy, individuality and collectivity

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to discuss the more and more frequently asked question about guilt and responsibility of nowadays generations for sins and wrongdoings of past

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generations. The question itself has been asked for thousands of years. The deliberations over the idea of inheriting the guilt of the fathers can be found in ancient philosophers’ works, Bible, written and unwritten laws and journalistic discussions. In Europe the subject is primarily dominated in reference to the Second World War and the heritage of the guilt by the Germans, in the USA it is mostly discussed in the context of slavery and the white privilege concept, in Australia it refers to the relationship between Aborigines and White Settlers (Pedersen, Beven, Walker and Griffiths, 2004). Above mentioned examples show that no matter on the historical circumstances, the concepts of collective guilt and collective responsibility occur around the world and seem to be always up-to-date regardless the time past since committed sins or injustice. Recently the theme was also brought up in the discussion after Angela Merkel’s support and warm welcome of the Syrian refugees in Germany. The German openness to the refugees was partly (besides political and economic reasons) explained as a way of warming the image of today’s Germany as an open and tolerant nation. However, Mike Bird notices that it is surprising how relatively little Germany’s war experiences have been mentioned in reference to German refugees policy. On pages of Business Insider, Bird states that events of Second World War are crucial in understanding today’s German view of asylum and refugees, and why it presents such a different point of view to other European countries. He explains that Germany still has a sense of guilt for the Second World War and the Holocaust, which caused huge wave of refugees. Bird also claims that: “The younger generation of German voters was born 50 years after the war, but the sense of collective responsibility remains with the older generation, which in other countries tends to be more anti-immigration”.1 The author of this paper agrees with this thesis partially and will try to prove that the sense of collective responsibility does not refer only to people somehow directly affected by the historical events (in this case Second World War) but can be carried from one generation onto another.2 This article presents gathered opinions on collective guilt and responsibility and their influence on today’s Germany decision-making, as well as theoretical (scientific) explanations supporting analyzed material, author’s opinion and finally given answers to hypothesis set at the beginning.

2. DISCUSSION: ARE SINS OF PAST GENERATIONS INHERITED?
THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS ON CONCEPTS OF COLLECTIVE GUILT AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY ALONG WITH THE ANALYSIS OF THEIR INFLUENCE ON TODAY’S GERMANY DECISION-MAKING

2. 1. Methods and analyzed material

The author of this paper collected opinions of journalists and experts on Germany refugees open policy and media silence on sexual assaults on women in the New Year’s Eve

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2 This paper is a continuation and development of the author’s theoretical research on collective memory, collective guilt and collective responsibility. The author’s scientific plans are to conduct empirical research in this matter to support presented theoretical discussion with adequate results and to answer the question whether young (today’s) generation of Germans carry the sense of collective responsibility for the Second World War events.
2015 attacks in Cologne and other German cities as well as the 21st century Internet users’ comments on concepts of collective guilt and responsibility. The author also looked closely on the above mentioned events, studied their origin, course of action and consequences. The analyzed material was then compared with theories presented by scientists researching the concepts of collective memory, collective guilt and collective responsibility. Based on the clash between theoretical deliberations and empirical analysis of gathered material the conclusions were drawn.

2.2. Is individual really individual?

One may ask the question: Why should I take responsibility for the sins of the past generations. Even if those were my father’s sins, why should they burden me? I am not my father and therefore I cannot answer for his actions. I am an individual and I should be judged only for my individual deeds or misdeeds. Such questions and comments (and also those of much stronger language) make almost 90% of all comments under the video posted on the Internet by the Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion on collective guilt and responsibility, which only shows how important and at the same time controversial this topic is. But is there really such thing as individuality? This seemingly easy question in fact is far more complex. To answer it, let us first look at the biology. When googling lifestyle of animals, one can easily notice that animals mostly live in groups just like humans, and it does not matter whether one take a look at insects, birds or mammals. It is very difficult to find an example of an animal living in a total solitude. There are species that may not live in a herd, but instead they live “in pairs” that is they mate for life. Finding an example of an animal that “would choose” life in a total solitude and separation from others is a little time consuming as many species may “like” solitude life but they still get together for some periods of time for instance to travel or raise offspring. The example of a solitary living creature is black rhinoceros, although it must be stated that such alone lifestyle refers only to males. Discussed examples seem to prove that living in a “society” seems to be a natural thing. And that leads us to the thought that collective is more natural than individual. Now one may argue that one is an individual and should be treated as an individual and living in a society does not change or affect that fact. But actually it does affect the individuality a lot and even makes the scientists to question the concept of individuality itself - what will be showed in further part of this work.

2.3. Individual and collective memory as a base for reflections on above mentioned question of individuality

How much individual is one’s memory? The answer to this question can be found in reflections of French social scientist Maurice Halbwachs who claims that my memories are reminded to me from the outside, and the society I am a part of which at the time gives me the means to reconstruct them [the memories], provided that I address them and accept (at least for the time being) the society (of which I am a part of) way of thinking. French thinker then writes “I believe that the mind reconstructs the memories under the pressure of society” (Halbwachs, 1992). So even if somebody was left on a deserted island still the memories he/she carries or the way he/she thinks would be influenced by society one was a part of. Not

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3 The Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion (also known under various previous names) is one of the oldest human rights organizations in USA, [http://www.miroundtable.org/index.html](http://www.miroundtable.org/index.html)
only that, even the language that one speaks, affects directly the way of seeing the world. Funkenstein explains this theory, he claims that not only does individual memory affect collective memory but also collective memory affects individual memory. Even the most personal memories are not detached from the social context. The language itself, the religion or the sense of belonging to a community modifies the way the individual perceives the world, and thus modifies or rather puts the way of remembering into the social context (Funkenstein, 1989). Based on that, one’s individuality is very much restricted and collectivity seems to be more imminent than one may think or feel. Paul Ricoeur seems to share this thought, French philosopher also writes that social frameworks are no longer just an objective concept and become an intrinsic part of the reminder process (Ricoeur, 2006). Communities, in other words, give definitions, values and structure through which one goes to understand and appreciate the meaning of a given event. Jan Assmann writes about cultural memory, which includes cultural objectivization that is language, institutions, cultural symbols etc. (Assmann, 2010; Zerubavel, 1996). What is more to support this theory, Halbwachs claims that there is no objective individual memory as the memory is always dependent of the social context. Even autobiographical memory uses the character of narrative formed in a given society, and the individual experiences are not and cannot be separated from collective events. Even perception itself is marked by the belonging of an individual to a given society. And even recalling personal memories is not an objective representation of events and facts (Kansteiner, 2002). The consequence of this approach is that one can see how memory works to create a community life in the first place but also how community life affects one’s “individual” memory which based on above deliberations seems to be no longer as individual as one may think.

2. 4. Do I have an obligation to remember? – reflections of collective memory and responsibility

Further reflections will prove that being a part of society gives one not only the privilege but also creates obligation both to remember and take responsibility for the actions of particular society, included the past deeds. Ricoeur sees the duty to remember as a connection between the past, the present and the future. The scholar writes that the obligation to remember, consists not only of having a deep concern about the past, but also of passing the meaning of the past to the next generation. The obligation to remember is not a compulsory or legal order, but rather the obligation of being responsible for the dead and the legacy left by them (Ricoeur, 1999; Schuman and Scott, 1989). Ricoeur claims that one [one as a member of particular society] has the debt to the past of which one also has a duty to remember and to respect the unfulfilled hopes. That is why we (as individuals) have to take responsibility for the broken promises that others have made on our behalf. Which means that we are responsible for the ancestors, whose actions have led to the suffering of others (Hall, 2007). The attribution and acceptance of blame or its denial is an inherent feature of international conflicts. When one nation is injured by another, its representatives identifying with the victims usually invoke apologies or compensation (McGarty, Pedersen, Leach, Mansell, Waller and Bluc, 2005; Brown, Gonzalez, Zagefka, Manzi and Cehajic, 2008; Cehajic-Clancy, Effron, Halperin, Liberman and Ross, 2011). One may argue that assuming responsibility for historical wrongdoing for a state and its agents should be treated differently than assuming responsibility for state misdeeds by an individual, especially when these are committed independently of one’s will or even before one’s birth (Conrad, 2003). Here it is
worth emphasizing that as individuals we are independent but at the same time we belong to society, we retain our distinctiveness but at the same time we are responsible both for the tradition that gave us legacy and for those who were before us. Recognizing own responsibility for the past is a part of living in and belonging to society. Memory of bad deeds, unfulfilled promises and immoral behaviors from the past teaches us the future. Cherishing memories of good deeds from the past stretches the good into the present. Hence, despite the distance between the past, the present and the future it is possible to create a common identity for the generations of past, present and future due to the fact that memory goes beyond the duration of human life. What is more, it has also been proved that a sense of personal continuity through time is related with better mental health and personal well-being (Sani, Bowe and Herrera, 2008). Therefore the way from the individual to the community leads the individual through the experience of another person, who shares this experience with the community, being the same time in the community. In his book Jeffrey K. Olick cites Chick Perrow’s words: “we live in the society of organizations” and states that no matter what kind of organization or movement we take into consideration (small, local, and haphazard or large, national, and professionalized) it is always clearly seen how important both for leaders and participants are stories about their origins, trajectories and purposes. By analyzing how much a particular organization invests in stories, it can be easily assumed how important such stories are. Which only proves that no matter whether it is a micro group or macro group, the history and memory seem to play very important role. It appears inevitable that telling stories is crucial in creating one’s identity with the group. No matter if we think about family, organization, formal or informal movement or even the whole nation, stories help understand not only the history of origin but they also show turning points and teach a valuable lessons on how to learn from mistakes and look into the future (Olick, 2007). The perceived continuity between a group’s past and present can be a psychological resource that provides confidence in the group’s future vitality. The research has proved that discontinuity of the group’s past can undermine the perceived vitality of the future, thereby increasing the need to preserve current collective identity (Jetten and Wohl, 2012). But what if the stories are not only about heroic and honorable moments. What if the stories contain shameful periods and sinful actions. Then how do they affect creating one’s identity? Does, and if yes, how the relationship between the Nazi past and the German present affects nowadays contexts and actions? Individual identity is created in the social frameworks. Social frameworks are based on history and collective memory. That is how the collective guilt and responsibility are maintained (actively and consciously or passively and unconsciously).

2.5. The difference between collective guilt and responsibility

Although collective responsibility and resulting from it attempts of redress and compensation can be seen only in good light, there is a risk of failure of judgement and lack of protection of society’s own interests when collective responsibility is mistaken with unfounded collective guilt. The example of which is going to be analyzed in later part of this paper but is mentioned here to introduce the subject of the difference between responsibility and guilt. Responsibility is voluntary whereas guilt is not; guilt is an emotion whereas responsibility is not. Guilt comes from acknowledging a crime or a sin whereas responsibility comes from compassion, with its inherent motivation to improve, appreciate and build relationships, or to protect and compensate to the victims or if the victims are no longer alive to show compassion to those who carry on the memory or even bear the burden of the victims.
Tim Wise seems to capture the difference between collective guilt and collective responsibility when he answers the question asked during one of his addresses: “As a white male should I feel guilty for the sins of my father’s?” Wise answers: “No, you should feel angry and you should feel committed to doing something to address this legacy.” He compares this commitment to the one we (as a society) have towards the pollution of the environment. Although I (as an individual) may not cause any serious harm to the nature, and I may be not individually responsible for the toxic contamination of water or soil, once again individually I may be innocent of that but still someone (a member of my society) did the harm to the environment and because we as society collectively are living with this legacy now, we need to take responsibility for it. So it is not about feeling guilty but rather about taking actions based on being responsible. Guilt is what one feels for what one did. Responsibility is what one takes because of duties towards society – past, present as well as future. And because I am not to blame for what had happened, the feeling of guilt does not make much sense here but in order to live an ethical life I have to take the responsibility for past actions (although not cause by me individually) (Narveson, 2002). By taking collective responsibility society (as group of individuals) show and cultivate deeper values which allows to seek for mutual understanding of those who carry the burden of perpetrators and those who carry the burden of victims.

However opposite points of view were also presented in the reference to difficult German history. Andreas Hillgruber states that if Germany was to be a healthy nation, it should mourn the German army on the Eastern front, not the victims of the “final solution” (Bartov and Omer, 2003). The same point of view seemed to be promoted by conservative Kohl’s government. Chancellor Helmut Kohl himself many times stated that Germany could not be reduced to the years of Nazi rule. Nevertheless, Habermas claims that Nazi crimes are not the barrier to creation of healthy nation. He emphasized many times that Germany must face those terrible years of their history.

To explain Germany’s war inheritance, the term German collective guilt was introduced which refers to the notion of collective guilt attributed to the German people for perpetrating the Holocaust and starting Second World War. The concept of German collective guilt as a psychological phenomenon was introduced by Carl Jung in his essay in 1945. Swiss psychoanalyst asserted that the German people felt collective guilt (Kollektivschuld) for the atrocities committed by members of German society (Olick and Perrin, 2010). Martin Niemöller and other church representatives accepted shared guilt in the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt in 1945 (Stuttgarter Schuldbeekenntnis).

Karl Jaspers, famous philosopher and psychiatrist, also delivered lectures to students in 1946, which were later published under the title “The Question of German Guilt” (Isaacs and Vernon, 2011). It is worth mentioning here that from psychological point of view (modern psychology) individuals can feel guilty for harm caused by members of their group, even if the individual did not personally cause harm (Mackie, Silver and Smith, 2004; Smith, Seger and Mackie 2007; Doosje, Branscombe, Spears and Manstead, 1998; Gilbert, 2002). After the

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4 Question asked from the audience during the speech on racism and the concept of white privilege.
5 T. Wise, Guilt or Responsibility, online video posted by The Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhOh_EGe4fY access: 14.10.2017]
6 German anti-Nazi theologian and Lutheran pastor, one of the initiators of the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt, signed by leading figures in the German Protestant churches. The document acknowledged that the churches had not done enough to resist the Nazis.
Second World War, the British and US occupation forces tried to impose the guilt by public campaigns, which included posters showing concentration camps victims with slogans “These Atrocities: Your Fault!” (Olick, 2003).


Gesine Schwan and Jurgen Habermas raise the question of inheriting the guilt. On one hand guilt cannot transmit itself across generations, but on the other hand “the psychological and moral consequences of treating it with silence harm even the subsequent generation and the basic consensus of a democracy” Schwan explains (Schwan, 1997). That is why, the author of this paper suggests that today’s Germany experience collective responsibility rather than collective guilt. Guilt as it was stated earlier is very much connected with emotions, and that explains why the feeling of guilt was so strong during the years immediately after the war when German generation was directly affected by the war; when the victims or their families were there to give testimony about the terrifying events of Second World War. And that is why British and US occupation forces could “impose the guilt” on German civilian citizens (even those not supporting Hitler’s policy) and make them feel guilty for the Nazi crimes.

However, more than 70 years later it is hard to expect the feeling of guilt from the generation who was born long time after those tragic events. The author’s opinion is that
although guilt is no longer present in today’s German generation, it does not exclude the collective responsibility one should still take for the past.

2. 6. Today’s Germany decision-making policy and the constant shadow of Second World War tragedy

For many observers the similarity of Syrian refugees with those of the Second World War is obvious. That is why so many eyes look closely at today’s Germany decisions. The Atlantic magazine publishes comments explaining how Merkel’s refugee policies remain popular due to the association to the memory of the Holocaust and Second World War. Petra Bendel⁷ admits that “German citizens know that the regulations of the Geneva Refugee Convention stem from the historical experience with Jewish refugees fleeing the Holocaust after World War II (…) [and] many Germans were refugees themselves”.

Further, in the same article Bendel’s words are supported by Kathleen Newland⁸ who states that “Germans are acutely aware of this historical stain and (…) [they] are very eager to make clear that they’re not that country anymore”.⁹ Bloomberg comments that although Germany is the moral leadership in the response to the refugees problem, the phrase itself German moral leadership “may sound strange to many ears, with the role the country played in two world wars and more recent indignation over the tough stance it took towards Greece’s debt woes”.¹⁰ Over just few weeks, Germany and its chancellor, Angela Merkel, have managed to achieve huge international image makeover. Six months before Merkel’s open door policy, the German magazine Der Spiegel published photoshopped picture of Merkel as a Nazi commander on the Acropolis (picture below) due to her relentless conditions and policy towards Greek crisis help program. For many, German uncompromising politics towards the whole euro zone’s debt crisis created connotations of dictatorship. Germany are once again seen as a dictator, however, this time not military but European Union’s economic dictator.¹¹

It is worth mentioning here that whenever chancellor Merkel makes unpopular political decisions newspapers (both German and foreign) easily portrays her as the Führer (Leader) of Nazi Germany – Adolf Hitler. It must be stated clearly that such a comparison is not only in bad taste but is mostly offensive to all the victims of Holocaust. None of Merkel’s political decisions (no matter how tough and unpopular) could be compared to Hitler’s actions.

This is also a very good example on how easily the burden of Second World War tragedy is used against today’s Germans. One thing is to criticize government, which is fundamental right of freedom of speech, but abusing the memory of one of the biggest tragedies in the world history should be forbidden by international law. Collage of photos below show Angela Merkel with characteristic mustache, Nazi uniform, swastika sign and paraphrase of words placed above the entrance gate of Auschwitz concentration camp.

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⁷ German political scientist
⁸ Senior fellow and co-founder of the Washington-based Migration Policy Institute
After this image deadlock, Germany’s policy shifted on the European migrant crisis. “Germany’s open-door policy in migrant crisis casts nation in a new light” informs the Los Angeles Times.12 “Angela Merkel hailed as an angel of mercy” announces The Sydney Morning Herald.13 Only in the first half of 2015, Merkel’s government received over 200 000 applications for asylum and by the end of 2015 Germany provided shelter for more than 1 100 000 immigrants.

It is worth mentioning that when a far-right and neo-Nazi demonstration against a refugee center grew violent on 21 August 2015, the chancellor was sharply criticized in German papers for her late and tepid response, which shows that the effort to change the image comes not only from German government but the media likewise play huge role in

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creating portrait of tolerant and caregiving country.\textsuperscript{14} Sebastian Płóciennik\textsuperscript{15} also claims that besides economic and demographic aspects the moral ones matter and should not be overlooked. “They help the victims of the war and at the same time, by inviting people from the territories embroiled in armed conflict to Europe, Germany improves its image in the world. By accepting refugees, they compensate for the sins committed by the Nazis and decrease the crimes committed by their people in the past”. Płóciennik also sees the instant image makeover, he reminds that during the resolution of the economic crisis in Greece, Germany imposed on Greeks tough conditions regarding help and because of that were accused of brutality and egoism.

They were even accused of attempt to dominate the Old Continent again as a clear reference to the tragic consequences of Second World War. Thanks to that Germany’s image in Europe was damaged. But in his opinion, today few people remember it because of the actions related to refugees welcome policy. There are pictures of refugees with posters “we love Germany” in the media (pictures below), and Merkel is admired in the world for brave decision to open borders.


\textsuperscript{15} DSc Sebastian Płóciennik, Polish Institute of International Affairs
Picture 4. Collage of photographs and graphics showing gratitude towards Germany and chancellor Angela Merkel for her open door policy for refugees (source: google images search: “angela merkel” + “refugees”).

The German image abroad certainly gained and even the emerging from time to time information on attacks on asylum seekers houses cannot break the positive presents to the public. Marta Szuster also sees German openness towards the refugees in historical background. She says: “Germans still carry the burden of responsibility for the war. A Pole can say that he or she does not want foreigners, but every German knows that such words should not fall off of one’s mouth”. German values have evolved, and openness and a lack of xenophobia are now issues of national pride.

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17 Councilor from the municipality of Mescherin
18 M. Madejski, Czemu Niemcy przyjmują uchodźców?, published online 09.09.2015 (author’s own translation) [http://biznes.onet.pl/wiadomosci/swiat/czemu-niemcy-przyjmuja-uchodzcow-angela-merkel-nie-jest-glupia-i-mysli-tez-o/ng9m5m access: 11.10.2017]
**Picture 5.** Photo collage of Germans warmly welcoming refugees (source: www.dailymail.co.uk).

**Picture 6.** Photo collage of German football fans sending inviting messages to refugees during matches of different sport clubs (source: twitter.com).
2.7. What happens when collective guilt is confused with collective responsibility?

The problem of understanding or rather misunderstanding the earlier mentioned difference between collective guilt and collective responsibility can be seen in the reaction of German media to the sexual assaults on women in Cologne and other German cities on New Year’s Eve of 2015. What strikes the most is lack of information on those crimes both in German television and newspapers due to wrongfully understood concept of political correctness.

The silence in the media in this case was the method of not losing the relationship with refugees as well as carefully built image of open and tolerant Germany – the opposite of the Third Reich. Most of the media did not report about the events until January 4 or even 5. What was silenced in national channels and newspapers was widely discussed in the Internet showing people’s anger and confusion about the whole silencing thing.

During the New Year’s Eve celebrations of 2015, there were mass sexual assaults, 24 alleged rapes, and numerous thefts in Germany, mainly in Cologne city center. There were also similar incidents at the public celebrations in Hamburg, Dortmund, Düsseldorf, Stuttgart and Bielefeld. Police reported that 1200 women were sexually assaulted and estimated that at least 2000 men were involved. Chief Prosecutor Ulrich Bremer stated that “the overwhelming majority” of suspects were asylum seekers and illegal immigrants who had recently arrived in Germany. All of the incidents involved women being surrounded and assaulted by groups of men on the streets. Police also reported that Germany had never experienced such mass sexual assaults before. The German Federal Criminal Police Office said that the incidents were known in some Arab countries as “group sexual harassment”.

An explanation of the media silence can be the Nazi complex. It seems that Germany are so afraid of making any mistake, any move that could be associated with racism, lack of tolerance or violence against other nations that they “forgot” to protect own citizens by truthfully informing them about the situation. Anne Zielke comments that first statements from the police were not only surprising but most of all they were false: “We do not know...”

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20 M. Eddy, Reports of Attacks on Women in Germany Heighten Tension Over Migrants, published online 05.01.2016 [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/06/world/europe/coordinated-attacks-on-women-in-cologne-were-unprecedented-germany-says.html access 27.09.2017]
25 in Arabic: taharrush jamai
27 Anne Zielke was an editor in the features section of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung, for which she also worked as a columnist. From 2003 to 2004 she was a correspondent in Brazil. Zielke also works as a lecturer at the University of Hildesheim and lives in Cologne.
who it was but it was not any of the refugees”. However, it turned out that there were refugees (who came to Germany after Angela Merkel’s open door policy announcement) involved. Zielke adds that “Germany has big problem with morals” which she explains as the fear of being perceived as not tolerant. Later she claims that: “There seems to be a higher good in Germany, higher than dignity of human being. They want to protect people from being racist. There is always an underlying assumption that Germans are racists. So they have to be educated by politicians and by the media. The worst fear that some or many journalists may have is that they are getting the applauses from the right corner. So they are even prone not to publish facts that might help the extremists”. The media silence did not stem from compassion and collective responsibility but rather from irrational and falsely imposed feeling of guilt – strong emotion that creates fear of being compared to Nazi again, emotion that leads to putting on the first place public image rather than own citizens’ good and safety.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The privilege of remembering the good times is also connected with the responsibility to remember the bad periods as given society was shaped by both. Shameful events from the past create tensions and prevent building peaceful relationships with nations who suffered the injustice from the hands of previous generations. To solve the problem one needs to name the problem not just run out of it or, using every day saying, put it under the carpet. Denial of the wrongdoings, injustice, harm or sins does not make them disappear. It only creates the false impression and illusion of the society spirit. It also may serve as a propaganda used for manipulating the confused people.

But it never leads to peace, understanding and forgiveness. Habermas uses the image of history as a supermarket: “We cannot pick out what is just convenient to us; on the contrary, democratic societies must deal with the negative aspects of their past, especially when victims of earlier atrocities are still alive” (Habermas, 1990). Not acknowledging the ugly past means that the community cannot build strong future. It is a common knowledge that people learn from mistakes but here the problem is even more complex, it is not only about learning from past mistakes, but the only way to put an end to the conflicts (both internal and external) and to solve social issues is to work through the inconvenient truth. John Paul II, during mass at the Jose Marti Revolution Square, repeated the words spoken by Jesus Christ: “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free“.

The Pope was a great supporter of the thesis that truth is rooted in freedom and there is no freedom without truth and the need for freedom is the goal of every human being. According to John Paul II, truth is the essence of human existence and dignity and that is why one is obliged to strive for the truth. He also stated that without truth there is no distinction between good and evil. Truth is not only intellectual knowledge of reality, but it is also the knowledge about humans and their transcendent nature, their rights but also duties, their greatness but also limitations. Due to the fact that today’s Germans are still living in the shadow of the Second World War-the burden they are trying to release from, it seems well-

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28 Interview with Anne Zielke, hosted by Philippe Assouline, posted 19.01.2016 by the LipTV [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Hu4S66gsfg access: 27.09.2017]
29 Havana, January 25, 1998
30 John 8:32
grounded and important to promote the motto “Wahrheit macht frei”\(^{31}\) (the truth will set you free) as a manifest and open cut off from the Nazi heritage.

In the end, the author would like to present her own answer to the question stated at the very beginning: Are sins of the past generations inherited? In my opinion, they are not. Neither sins nor guilt is or should be inherited. However, passing time should not limit the collective responsibility and the attempt to compensate to the victims or their legatees the harm and injustice done by past generations, which is as much beneficial for the “morally wounded” as for those who take responsibility and try to do the justice. I can only hope that I managed to prove this statement in the above discussion.

References


\(^{31}\) Nazi used the paraphrase of those words and the slogan “Arbeit macht frei” (work sets you free) was placed above the entrance gate of Auschwitz concentration camp.


