

## Marianna Missiou

University of the Aegean, Rhodes, Greece  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9021-2530>  
missiou@aegean.gr

# Intergenerational Transmission of Historical Events

## The Duty to Remember and Nostalgia in French Picturebooks about Refugees of 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Conflicts

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Major 20<sup>th</sup>-century conflicts feature extensively in children's literature and are often discussed from diverse perspectives. Since memories of past conflicts gradually fade as witnesses pass away, the child's role as a third-generation memory receiver becomes essential in memory transmission. This article explores French picturebooks that portray the experiences of ethnic groups fleeing 20<sup>th</sup>-century conflicts. These fictional narratives draw on historical events as a collective legacy, highlighting childhood memory fragments, nostalgia, and the duty to transmit memory from generation to generation. This article's principal aim is to investigate how the transmission of historical memory intertwines with nostalgia and intergenerational relationships in both visual and verbal forms. It also explores how family history can serve as a pretext for collective history.

**Keywords:** 20<sup>th</sup>-century conflicts, refugees, intergenerational relationships, memory transmission, nostalgia

This paper investigates the links between the intergenerational transmission of family stories and of historical facts. It further examines how the transmission of history connects to the triggering and transmission of nostalgia by looking at three French picturebooks<sup>1</sup> on the Armenian and the Romani genocides and Mussolini's totalitarian regime.

These major conflicts that defined the 20<sup>th</sup> century left indelible marks, causing turmoil, destruction, and leading to the displacement of populations. As the current

<sup>1</sup> The picturebooks analysed were originally written in French. The English translation of all the quotations is made by the author. Of the three picturebooks discussed here, only *La robe rouge de Nonna* [Nonna's Red Dress] is paginated.

generation did not directly experience these historical events, the intergenerational transmission of collective memory emerges as a crucial mechanism in shaping its attitudes towards and perceptions of war (Svob et al. 2016).

Children's literature performs a crucial function in providing the younger generations with a historical memory of past wars and conflicts, illustrating how those events influence the present (Savsar 2018: 410). A substantial part of such books focuses on providing information, aiming to describe the hostilities and playing a key role in transmitting values, while emphasising the lessons children can draw from them (Delbrassine 2011). Children's literature often uses a sense of wonder through one of fiction's most effective narrative tools: building suspense. Frequently, a question posed in the mind of a fictional child serves as a catalyst for the plot, as a character's silence in response to such inquiries or situations can effectively generate tension and suspense. Regarding harsh facts, challenges arise from the unspeakable secrets and the pervasive silence surrounding them, particularly in determining what children should or should not be told. According to Baer, this encapsulates the larger issue of "how we talk with children" (2000: 379). Ultimately, the age and developmental stage of the child play a crucial role, thus prompting consideration of the adult reader's role as a mediator and co-reader.

Children's literature on war and conflict assumes the role of a "memory guardian" ('veilleuse de mémoire', Schneider 2020) with the duty to help readers not to forget. This echoes Paul Ricœur's notion of the "duty to remember" ('devoir de mémoire'), which he defines as "the duty to do justice, through memories, to another than the self" (2004: 89). He refers to the ethical and moral responsibility that individuals and societies have to remember and acknowledge past injustices and atrocities, so as to understand fully their impact on the present, work toward preventing similar events in the future, and distinguish the proper uses of memory from its abuses. According to Ricœur, politically, we have a duty to tell, and because of that duty, we must say what happened in the past and keep traces of events because there is a general tendency to erase them (415). He delineates three kinds of traces left by past events: documentaries based on supporting evidence, affective impressions on the soul, and cerebral traces as corporeal, cerebral, and cortical imprints (15, 32). These traces can serve as a basis for constructing narratives, which allow us to make sense of the past and understand history. They are even more critical when traces are credibly preserved for younger generations.

Memory, history, and forgetting are interrelated concepts. Ricœur argues that forgetting is not simply the absence of remembering, but rather an essential part of the process of remembering and an active process that shapes how we understand and construct the past (2004: 414). Furthermore, he relates the concept of "forgetting" to the duty of memory (ibid.). In Ricœur's words: "it is against this forgetting that we conduct the work of memory ('œuvre de mémoire') in order to slow its course, even to hold it at bay" (426). He explores the concept of forgetting through the lens of a complex and dialectical relationship between "forgetting through the erasing traces" and "a backup forgetting, a forgetting kept in reserve" (413–414, 417). The latter refers to

the preservation of memories through alternative means, a forgetting that preserves the past, often in the absence of visible traces (430, 434). Furthermore, Ricœur states that “testimony constitutes the fundamental transitional structure between memory and history” (21). The link between memory and history is the witness’s testimony in the form of the declaration “I was there” (148, 182).

In the above context, the fictional character assumes the responsibility of carrying out the process for the preservation of history and memory. As Anne Schneider states, the fictional child “becomes a memory carrier, responsible for connecting the past and the present and reconstructing wounds. As the main character in war fiction in children’s literature, he [she] is both a witness and an actor, rewriting history, sometimes through mythification and imaginative reconstruction” (2014: n.p.).<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, when such literary works reach their intended audience, they influence the construction of the collective memory, which is, in part, an amalgam of individual memories derived from various sources, including testimonies, discussions, and readings. These individual memories contribute to the broader memory of a group or social group, shaping and defining its identity (Halbwachs 1980: 51).

### **Generational memory, nostalgia, and literary texts**

Understanding the role of families, social groups, and generational dynamics in shaping individual memories and integrating them into collective memory is essential for comprehending how historical narratives are constructed and sustained over time. In the context of children’s literature, the theme of family memory, which involves intergenerational exchanges, emerges as a critical transmission factor (Mietkiewicz and Schneider 2007).

Literary texts, as argued by Astrid Erll (2014), serve as significant markers of generational identity and memory, aiding in our understanding of how different generations remember and relate to their shared past. Anastasia Ulanowicz (2013) explores the representation of “second-generation memory” within contemporary children’s literature, further emphasising the role of literature in exploring and transmitting generational memory. She explains that the term “second-generation memory” can be understood in two ways (2013: 10). Firstly, it exists at a critical crossroad where collective memory intersects with individual experiences. Secondly, it relies on the capacity for mimetic thought and action, which is particularly evident in children. This latter type of memory depends on intergenerational relationships between witnesses and their children. Ulanowicz uses the term in a broad sense to encompass intergenerational encounters and the resulting memory production that those encounters enable. She includes individuals with no biological connection to survivors who draw on their exposure to cultural artifacts to create genealogical ties to previous generations. According to her, the reiteration and reinterpretation of previously articulated memories concerning a new generation of readers are well

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<sup>2</sup> Translated from French by the author.

suiting to children's literature, which can represent such memories effectively. She adds that literary works intended for young readers have the common goal of creating a lasting imprint of the recent and traumatic historical past in the consciousness of a new generation of readers (2013: 11). Similarly, Mateusz Świetlicki (2023), elaborates the importance of children's literature in the transmission of generational memory. He argues that historical fiction goes beyond entertainment or education. It builds a bridge between past and present, fostering a "next-generation memory" (2023: n.p.). This memory transcends personal experience and connects readers with distant events, revealing their ongoing relevance. He uses the metaphor of "planting seeds" to describe historical fiction's impact in cultivating a lasting and evolving understanding of history – an understanding that requires active engagement to blossom into a collective memory.

Memory is closely related to nostalgia, though their relationship is complex and multifaceted. Nostalgia serves as a coping mechanism, helping individuals deal with challenging emotions or situations by recalling positive memories (Wildschut et al. 2006). Nostalgia is also a way for people to connect with their identity and personal history and feel a sense of continuity and belonging (Sedikides et al. 2008). Svetlana Boym's study on nostalgia underlines its role in the interrelationship between individual and collective memory. Her work highlights the dual nature of nostalgia, differentiating between "restorative nostalgia", which attempts "a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home" (2001: xviii) and reflective nostalgia, which is the longing itself, "the dreams of another place and another time" (41), "the individual and cultural memory" (49).

In literary texts, nostalgia enables us to understand how the past shapes the present and can be used to understand and critique how we remember and imagine the past (Rudaitytė 2018). This is evident in some literary works focused on 20<sup>th</sup>-century conflicts, where child characters, haunted by images of exile and war, vividly experience nostalgia. For instance, in Singaporean children's literature, children are presented within social and physical landscapes, evoking nostalgia for times and places they view from a later moment in time (Kong and Tay 1998). Frankish and Bradbury (2012) explore the process of storytelling for the next generation, particularly within societies that have undergone political traumas – in their case, in post-apartheid, post-conflict South Africa. They suggest that the act of telling stories involves not only the narratives themselves but also active silences and nostalgic articulations, intentional gaps in stories, and the expression of longing for past experiences.

### **Grandparents, grandchildren: making bridges across generations**

In historical picturebooks, the intertwining of family stories with a historical backdrop enables readers to engage in a more personal exploration of history, connecting with it at an emotional level. It is often the case that older generations are depicted as the storytellers, holders, and guardians of family history and help younger generations identify as part of a lineage (Muxel 1996: 22; Segalen and Martial 2019: 252–276). These

picturebooks prioritise grandparents over parents as primary witnesses who transmit firsthand memories. Moreover, in children's books, grandparents are frequently portrayed as warm, affectionate figures who create lasting memories with their grandchildren (Mietkiewicz and Benoît 2002). This bond is marked by a natural ease (Kornhaber and Woodward 2019: 20), while, as shown within popular media narratives, the relationship between the two generations establishes interchangeable characteristics between them (Joosen 2018). Yet, such depictions may idealise grandparents and parents, diverging from reality, as often seen in children's literature. Stories that obscure or gloss over these familial roles may not be appealing to a wide readership. Consequently, narratives may shift focus away from parental figures, potentially diluting central themes, especially those related to historical phenomena (Gray 2014).

### **French picturebooks on the intergenerational transmission of historical events**

The theme of the picturebooks analysed here is the flight of ethnic grandparents due to 20<sup>th</sup>-century conflicts. These grandparents left their countries of origin and relocated to France. Certain events ground the books' narratives in overlooked harsh historical facts.

*Le trou* [The Hole] by Annie Agopian (writer) and Alfred (artist) concerns the Armenian genocide. A young boy, through his mother's narrations, progressively discovers his grandfather's origins and the history of the Armenian people. Between 1915 and 1916, the Armenian genocide resulted in the killing of an estimated 1.5 million Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire. The forced displacement of Armenian populations caused victims to die from individual killings, massacres, systematic exposure, illness, epidemics, and starvation (Kévorkian 2011: 629). The protagonist's grandfather in *Le trou* was born in Kharput, a region that endured the above atrocities. According to the Armenian National Institute (n.d.), from May to September 1915, Armenians in Kharput faced arrests, persecutions, and mass killings. The remaining population was forced to flee the city. The brutality was horrific, with bodies from Kharput Province floating down the Euphrates River to Jerablus, and roads littered with the corpses of women and children. These facts resonate in *Le trou*.

*Le Fil de Soie* [The Silk Thread] by Cécile Roumiguère (writer) and Delphine Jacquot (artist) deals with the Romani genocide. While there are no precise death figures, estimations vary between 96,000 to 500,000, with the likely figure exceeding 200,000 (Weiss-Wendt 2013: 1). The German SS *Einsatzgruppen* killed thousands of Roma in occupied Soviet territories, and deportations and executions continued in Germany's satellite countries.<sup>3</sup> In 1942, Heinrich Himmler ordered a European-wide deportation of Roma to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where the vast majority perished (Weiss-Wendt 2013: 2). *Le Fil de Soie* intertwines historical reality with its narrative, suggesting that the protagonist's grandmother may have evaded a similar fate. While there are no

<sup>3</sup> Italy, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia, among others, were occupied by Germany.

direct references to this community, the verbal and the visual texts contain allusions, such as songs and attire, that typically align with their cultural identity (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1.** Subtle allusions to Roma cultural identity through attire in *Le fil de soie* [The Silk Thread] by Cécile Roumiguière (text) and Delphine Jacquot (images) © Éditions Thierry Magnier, 2013.

**Sl. 1.** Suptilne aluzije na romski kulturni identitet putem odjeće u slikovnici *Le fil de soie* [Svilena nit] Cécile Roumiguière (tekst) i Delphine Jacquot (slike) © Éditions Thierry Magnier, 2013.

Roumigièrè's own experiences, growing up with Romani friends and working in their bakery, inspired her to write *Le Fil de Soie* as a tribute. Though acknowledging her outsider perspective as a *gadji*, her choice to avoid explicit references is to spark young readers' imagination. She aims to evoke empathy and stimulate children to explore the depicted culture further and to learn about the tragic Romani genocide in WWII.<sup>4</sup>

Lastly, *La robe rouge de Nonna* [Nonna's Red Dress] by Michel Piquemal (writer) and Justine Brax (artist) recounts the establishment of Mussolini's totalitarian fascist state in 1922 in Italy. Between 1926 and 1943, Mussolini's fascist police state crushed political, religious, and social opposition. Like the Nazi regime, it targeted perceived enemies, such as communists, atheists, and ethnic and religious minorities. Mussolini was supported by the Church and during his regime a document proving that a person was a good Christian was necessary for getting a job. As the regime imposed suffocating surveillance and control on selected groups to force compliance with the government's ideology, many subversives lost their jobs, and they had to look for employment and housing elsewhere, fleeing to other countries (Ebner 2011: 80). In *La robe rouge de Nonna*, grandma's father, being a "senza Dio" (without God, atheist) (12), lacked the necessary documents, and the *Camicie nere*, Mussolini's paramilitary "Blackshirts", denied him work and marginalised him.

Concerning the age of the audience, the themes, images, and narrative devices of the books make them crossover readings. As Sandra Beckett asserts, picturebooks, "more than any other genre, can genuinely be books for all ages" (2013: 1).

### **The prefaces as testimony, and the urge to remember**

The prefaces of the three French picturebooks are, to a certain extent, a trustworthy testimony. They attest to the authenticity of the narrative, because the authors are connected to and affected by the historical facts described within the stories. Children are expected to trust the storytellers and authors, especially because the story is told by their parents, grandparents, or other authority adults. As a result, as written in the prefaces, the narratives are believable even to young readers. Michel Piquemal, the author of *La robe rouge de Nonna* claims in the preface that he was inspired by a true story told by his friend, Isabelle Chatellard. Isabelle herself explains: It is "[...] a true story that happened to my grandmother when she was still a child in fascist Italy. I told it to Michel, who in his turn wanted to pass it on so the memory would remain". The same intention is also highlighted in *Le trou*. It is further strengthened by the Armenian origins of the author, Annie Agopian, and by a note by the Blue Cross of the Armenians of France: "This picturebook had to be brought into the light of day. We deliver it as an act of memory transmission and a symbol of hope for everyone who is a victim of oblivion". In fact, Agopian was commissioned by this humanitarian organisation, which had received funds from insurance policies held by Armenian victims of the genocide in Turkey and expressed their intention to create a publication for young readers on the Armenian genocide.

<sup>4</sup> Through private communication (27 July 2024) with the writer Cécile Roumigièrè.

Both prefaces, though different, declare their commitment to the duty of memory. *La robe rouge de Nonna* emerges as a collaborative effort between friends, while *Le trou*, commissioned by an institution, takes on a more formal perspective. Nevertheless, both function as a reminder of the importance of remembering, and challenge the reader to engage with and come to terms with the past actively. This becomes an important aspect in the analysis undertaken throughout this paper: how the duty to remember is transmitted, through clear and rational means or through the emotional charge generated by memory and nostalgia, or both.

### **Inscribing younger generations in a lineage**

Perry Nodelman suggests that to understand an image we need to examine visual conventions such as the use of lines, shapes and colours (1996: 219). The images in the analysed picturebooks use these visual elements to metaphorically represent the intergenerational bonds within families – such as to show the position of child characters within their family lineage. In *Le Fil de Soie*, the relationship and continuity between generations are symbolically shown by a thread linking Marie-Lou to her Romani grandmother, Mamilona. The image on the double-spread page bleeds off the top edge. Readers see a human chain holding hands stretching across the pages (Fig. 2). Colourless figures on the left page indicate past generations, which in their faded presence give the sense of a bygone era. As the chain extends to the right page, the characters become vibrant and colourful, representing the present generation. The girl, positioned underground, symbolically embodies the roots of the family's transcendence and continuity.

As Marie-Lou begs her grandmother to reveal her secret, Mamilona's enigmatic response hints that the answer might already lie within the girl. Their dialogue contrasts with the visual text. The words intentionally keep the secret hidden, maintaining a sense of mystery and encouraging Marie-Lou to find the answer herself. On the other hand, the images clearly depict and communicate the generational bond between the two characters and their ancestors, revealing their deep relationship and ties. This counterpoint provides "alternative information" (Nikolajeva & Scott 2001: 17), prompting readers to make connections.

Similarly, in *Le trou*, the mother tells her son about his ancestors both from the maternal and paternal sides. However, the visual representations of the maternal and paternal lineages are not illustrated in the same way. While a family tree with numerous branches/persons represents the maternal lineage, only three faces, nested within each other, represent the paternal lineage, tracing the relationship between the young protagonist, his mother, and his grandfather (Fig. 3). The contrast underlines the grandfather's lack of identifiable family roots and highlights his status as a stateless and genocide survivor, notably ending up in France.



**Fig. 2.** A chain of generations: from the faded past to the vibrant present, united by roots of continuity and transcendence. A double-page spread in *Le fil de soie* [The Silk Thread] by Cécile Roumigière (text) and Delphine Jacquot (images) © Éditions Thierry Magnier, 2013.

**Sl. 2.** Naraštajni slijed od izbljedjele prošlosti do ustreptale sadašnjosti, sjedinjeni u korijenju nastavljenosti i transcendentnosti. Dvostranica u slikovnici *Le fil de soie* [Svilena nit] Cécile Roumigière (tekst) i Delphine Jacquot (slike) © Éditions Thierry Magnier, 2013.



**Fig. 3.** The paternal lineage: the young hero, his mother, and his grandfather in *Le trou* [The Hole] by Annie Agopian (text) and Alfred (images) © Éditions du Rouergue, 2010.  
**Sl. 3.** Očinska loza: mladi junak, njegova majka i njegov djed u slikovnici *Le trou* [Rupa] Annie Agopian (tekst) i Alfreda (slike) © Éditions du Rouergue, 2010.

Last, in *La robe rouge de Nonna*, the dress symbolises the connection between generations. The protagonist's grandmother once wore it as a young girl. By donning her own red dress, the granddaughter symbolically connects to the past, allowing her to feel a sense of continuity with her family's history and embracing the legacy passed down to her.

### **“Tell me why?” as a trigger to avoid oblivion**

The phrase “Tell me why?”, addressed by children to their grandparents, becomes a catalyst to talk about their families, history, and events that remain hidden in memory folds. Ricœur's concept of “backup forgetting” (2004: 414) is used here, not to obscure or deny the past, but rather to preserve and transmit historical memory. In *Le trou* there is a dynamic unveiling of details of past events. The title itself evokes a memory lapse. The Armenian grandfather died, taking his memories and unspoken events with him. The family's past is buried in the descendants' deeper memory hole, which is also buried in the collective memory hole. The story starts with the mother, accompanied by her son, applying for passports. The municipal employee informs them that no records certify the naturalisation of the Armenian grandfather of the child and father to the mother, who arrived in France at the age of three. That caused the boy to question: “How did a three-year-old manage to find himself stateless as my grandfather did?” In the image that accompanies the Town Hall episode, the mother is depicted in tears, which are transformed into a water line; at the end of the line stands her Armenian father, the line symbolising the link between past and present (Fig. 4). The confrontation with her father's past evokes a sense of nostalgia and reveals the depths to which she had repressed her family's history.

The desire and right to know about family history is also illustrated in *La robe rouge de Nonna* when the little girl asks her grandmother: “Nonna, why do you only sing in Italian?” (8). The grandmother explains and transmits hard historical and personal facts to her granddaughter. She speaks clearly about the story of the family. When Mussolini came to power, the family became a target of the Blackshirts. After the fascists attacked her (a young girl at that time), her family decide to leave the country. She has not forgiven them for the humiliation she suffered. She uses swear words to speak about the fascists, calling them “dirty rats” and “pieces of shit” (15). Furthermore, the images reinforce these characterisations through visual allegories and images that strengthen the danger that the fascists represent. For example, the dark red and black background and the low-angle perspective reflect the rise of fascism, with Mussolini's Blackshirts depicted as menacing black wolves.



**Fig. 4.** Tears become a waterline, linking the boy's mother to her Armenian father in *Le trou* [The Hole] by Annie Agopian (text) and Alfred (images) © Éditions du Rouergue, 2010.

**Sl. 4.** Suze postaju vodeni tok koji povezuje dječakovu majku s njezinim armenskim ocem u slikovnici *Le trou* [Rupa] Annie Agopian (tekst) i Alfreda (slike) © Éditions du Rouergue, 2010.

A different approach is used in *Le Fil de Soie* when the granddaughter, Marie-Lou, insists: "Please Mamilona, tell me your secret". Marie-Lou feels both the desire to understand her grandmother and the anguish of awakening her hidden pain. The grandmother remains stubbornly silent, inducing her granddaughter to discover, by herself, a past which cannot be told, but should not be forgotten: "There are things that words can't express, my Lou. My secret, I've already given it to you. One day you will find it; you won't need anyone for it". The reader gradually realises that the book provides answers in fragments, revealed page by page through the images. Indeed, all the colourless stitched patterns adorning the book's left-hand pages are more than decoration; they are fragments of the grandmother's past waiting to be pieced together, such as a pattern that is inspired by the barbed wire of the concentration camp from which the grandmother, then a young girl, escaped (Fig. 5).



**Fig. 5.** A pattern that seems like mere decoration is revealed to be the barbed wire of the concentration camp from which the grandmother, then a young girl, escaped in *Le fil de soie* [The Silk Thread] by Cécile Roumiguère (text) and Delphine Jacquot (images) © Éditions Thierry Magnier, 2013.

**Sl. 5.** Otkriva se da uzorak koji se čini pukim vezenim ukrasom predstavlja bodljikavu žicu koncentracijskoga logora iz kojega je baka, tada još djevojčica, pobjegla u slikovnici *Le fil de soie* [Svilena nit] Cécile Roumiguère (tekst) i Delphine Jacquot (slike) © Éditions Thierry Magnier, 2013.

At the end of the book, these pieces are gathered together in the lining of the doll's wedding dress, a precious gift offered to the granddaughter (Fig. 6). The verbal narrative is from an external perspective and may seem to simply echo the stitched motifs: "A caravan, a family [...], the father playing the violin. Standing, the mother sings. The caravan on fire, soldiers [...], a high chimney [...] the mother pushes her daughter under the wire... a girl alone... [...]". Although there is no clear indication of time, place, or causality, the words "high chimney" and the motif shown in the image, universally recognised as a symbol of the Holocaust, anchor the story in a specific historical context.



**Fig. 6.** Individual stitched patterns, fragments of the grandmother's past, unite in the lining of the doll's wedding dress in *Le fil de soie* [The Silk Thread] by Cécile Roumiguière (text) and Delphine Jacquot (images) © Éditions Thierry Magnier, 2013.

**Sl. 6.** Pojedinačni vezeni uzorci, fragmenti prizora iz bakine prošlosti, sjedinjuju se u podstavi lutkine vjenčanice u slikovnici *Le fil de soie* [Svilena nit] Cécile Roumiguière (tekst) i Delphine Jacquot (slike) © Éditions Thierry Magnier, 2013.

This complete “narrative isotopy” (Van der Linden 2007: 120) of the visual and verbal content emphasises the scene’s emotional weight. Furthermore, the visual and verbal ellipses protect young readers, because unspoken words are not articulated, and explicit pictures do not show.

To summarise, the questions raised by the fictional children function as catalysts, causing stories to unfold, memories to be articulated, and nostalgia to be shared. It is through memory transmission that nostalgia is triggered, and vice versa.

### Documentary traces and nostalgia triggers

In the picturebooks discussed here, the past leaves both documentary and affective imprints on the memory, which are subsequently revived and conveyed to readers. Moreover, nostalgia extends beyond an act of memory because it encompasses an emotional dimension (Sedikides et al. 2015: 200). In what follows we illustrate the mechanism through which this interplay between memory, nostalgia, and history manifests itself.

### Documentary traces

In *Le trou*, after deciding to go deeper into the memory hole of their family’s past, the mother and son sit together, poring over old photos, books and family records. Their shared curiosity and affection are palpable as they delve into their family’s history tapestry. The books, records and photos constitute documentary traces the boy’s grandfather carefully left for the memory to be transmitted. In the image, they are depicted sitting close to each other, next to a bookcase, which symbolises the memory bequest from the grandfather and its propagation to younger generations through knowledge, while lending credibility to historical events. The book does not shy away from harsh facts; on the contrary, it addresses them openly, through words and pictures. The young narrator realises that his grandfather, a survivor of the massacre, had “one chance in 1,500,000 deaths”. The image accompanying the text shows black skulls flooding a red page on which the grandfather stands alone as a three-year-old (Fig. 7). It eloquently visualises the ratio between the one survivor and the masses of people who perished, the absurdity of war, and the lack of value of human life.

In another totally black double spread, a few words, written in white as a caption, emphasise further the seriousness of the historical fact. They summarise what should never be forgotten: “24<sup>th</sup> April, 1,500,000 deaths. First genocide of the 20<sup>th</sup> century”. The young boy describes in his own words the horror of the information he extracts from his grandfather’s documents. The boy’s juxtaposed words, such as “[...] Turks... Kurds... rivers of blood [...] the crash of exploding skulls [...] the smell of burnt flesh... atrocious howls [...] cries of children and babies”, are visualised on a double white and black splash page, with clear references to Picasso’s *Guernica* and its symbolism (Fig. 8).



**Fig. 7.** One survivor against the masses lost in *Le trou* by Annie Agopian (text) and Alfred (images) © Éditions du Rouergue, 2010.

**Sl. 7.** Jedan preživjeli nasuprot mnoštva izgubljenih u slikovnici *Le trou* [Rupa] Annie Agopian (tekst) i Alfreda (slike) © Éditions du Rouergue, 2010.



**Fig. 8.** References to Picasso's *Guernica* illustrate the Armenian Genocide. A spread in *Le trou* by Annie Agopian (text) and Alfred (images) © Éditions du Rouergue, 2010.

**Sl. 8.** Referencije na Picassovu sliku *Guernica* ilustriraju genocid nad Armencima u slikovnici *Le trou* [Rupa] Annie Agopian (tekst) i Alfreda (slike) © Éditions du Rouergue, 2010.

The Armenian genocide and Picasso's *Guernica* share analogies in their portrayal of innocent civilian suffering and senseless destruction. For example, in the book's image, we can recognise Picasso's horse howling in pain, the grieving woman holding her dead baby, and men lying down, reminiscent of the man's figure in *Guernica* holding a sword. Several skulls, skeletons, and hanged men further enhance the image, reinforcing the description provided in the verbal text. The use of double-page spreads is not without importance: they bring the subject of the Armenian genocide to the forefront, depicting it prominently and making it a central theme.

Looking at the books, photographs, and documents left by the Armenian father and grandfather, the two protagonists – mother and son – engage in memory transmission beyond the simple transfer of historical information. As they examine these documentary traces, they also relive and recreate past moments of affection, connecting with their ancestors' experiences and emotions.

### Affective traces

*Le Fil de Soie* illustrates how embroidery on a wedding dress can gradually reveal affective traces of the past, representing family history and memories of childhood. Embroidery functions as a means of expression, enabling the grandmother to reveal her life story and the unspoken secrets that lie within. Each stitch becomes a channel for preserving and conveying personal experiences and emotions. Through this process, embroidery transforms a simple object into a remembrance vessel. The embroidered doll's wedding dress is a tangible artefact, inviting the little girl to engage with her grandmother's narrative woven into the fabric. The braided motifs serve as a reminder of the Roma deportation and carry the weight of that collective experience. The book's final colourless page shows the granddaughter between pieces of cloth and threads, with her grandmother's hand on them (Fig. 9). The granddaughter herself becomes a braided motif showing that memory transmission has been accomplished.



**Fig. 9.** The granddaughter as a braided motif: completion of memory transmission in *Le fil de soie* [The Silk Thread] by Cécile Roumiguère (text) and Delphine Jacquot (images)  
© Éditions Thierry Magnier, 2013.

**Sl. 9.** Unuka kao isprepleteni motiv: završetak prijenosa sjećanja u slikovnici *Le fil de soie* [Svilena nit] Cécile Roumiguère (tekst) i Delphine Jacquot (slike)  
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## Music

Nostalgia is evident when Mamilona hums “Ederlezi” in *Le Fil de Soie* and when Nonna croons “Bella Ciao” in *La robe rouge de Nonna*. The songs’ meanings and messages function as memory transmitters. “Ederlezi” is an emblematic song representing the Romani people and their culture, connected with the Bulgarian and Serbian Feast of Saint George. The song has evolved over time, becoming a cultural expression celebrating diversity in different contexts and countries. “Bella Ciao” has become an anti-fascist anthem, a global symbol of freedom and resistance, connected to various social and political movements worldwide. It is probable that young readers may not be familiar with these songs. But this is precisely why the authors incorporate them in their work; they aim at introducing children to these songs and their significance, as they are closely tied to the history, traditions and values that they wish to impart. This is particularly evident in *La robe rouge de Nonna*, where, at the end of the book, the lyrics are presented in Italian, accompanied by their French translation (36).

Music can evoke what Boym refers to as “auditory nostalgia”, as “the song or melody transcends its musical dimension and becomes a personal memory, transporting the listener back to their origins” (2001: 4). This provocation of auditory nostalgia is exemplified by Mamilona attending the circus performance with her granddaughter and becoming overwhelmed with emotion, “her eyes full of tears”, as “Ederlezi” plays, and when Nonna explains to her granddaughter before she sings “Bella Ciao”: “[...] when I got older, songs started returning to my memory. My Italian heart started beating again” (34). The repetition of her father’s revolutionary song serves as a connection to her roots, acting as a reference point and a nostalgic emotional refuge as she yearns for the family life in Italy and endeavours to introduce that life to her granddaughter. These instances are inseparable from the characters’ emotional states and the deep bond both women maintain with their origins and past experiences.

## Language

After territorial displacement, people occasionally experience nostalgia for their *terra patria* and have a desire to return to their mother tongue (Pestre 2015). The language of origin is typically the first language of migrants, which they use with their families. Their experiences before departure from their country of origin are absorbed and recalled in that language. The grandmothers in the examined picturebooks, while they now speak French, still hold memories of their mother tongue and can recall words and sing songs in their native language. For example, in *La robe rouge de Nonna*, the story emphasises the grandmother’s Italian origin, using Italian phrases and, mainly, the repetition of her father’s revolutionary song. Indigenous words or expressions<sup>5</sup> represent linguistic nostalgia, exhibiting a longing for the language of origin. The old woman refers to herself as “macaroni” (8), a term identified as a “keyword” in Pageaux’s (1989) imagological terminology, representing the imagery associated with the cultural

<sup>5</sup> Such as: “Amore, amore, figlia mia!” (8), “Capito, ragazza?” (10), “L’Italia è la nostra patria !” (18).

other. This keyword becomes part of her identity, and she recalls it with nostalgia. Furthermore, younger generations can be linguistically nostalgic for their ancestors' language. The mother in *Le trou* nostalgically recalls her late father's language and regrets not learning Armenian. This is also the case of the granddaughters in *Le Fil de Soie* and *La robe rouge de Nonna*, who wish to understand the lyrics of the Romani and Italian songs that are incomprehensible to them. That longing for a language that is now about to be lost simultaneously functions as memory transmission and a stimulus to be informed about the history and culture of one's origins.

### Aspects and places of everyday life

Sometimes, emotional bonds are formed between grandparents and grandchildren in specific locations or "feeling places" (Kornhaber and Woodward 2019: 141). Similarly, the grandparents easily recall places where they formed emotional connections with their grandparents (ibid.), highlighting the nostalgic significance of these "feeling places". This idea emphasises the emotional and nostalgic ties between family generations.

For the granddaughters of the three picturebooks, the kitchen and sewing room are places of emotional attachment between them and their grandmothers, "feeling places" where they spend time, engaging in an act which is of emotional significance to them. In *La robe rouge de Nonna*, the conversation occurs in the kitchen. It is the most "prominent feeling place" where meals are prepared, tables are set, families gather, and strong familial relationships are created (ibid.). In the image, the kitchen is dominated by red, with the child wearing a red dress and her grandmother in a dress adorned with red. The colour red symbolises the warmth of Nonna's kitchen, where information is passed down from grandmother to granddaughter. Simultaneously, in the kitchen, the old woman transmits to her granddaughter family memories and nostalgia for her youth in Italy.

In *Le Fil de Soie*, apart from the sewing room, one of the most impactful moments takes place at the circus, where Mamilona chooses to celebrate her granddaughter's birthday, an act with deep significance. On this day, Mamilona thinks that her granddaughter can comprehend her past and understand the importance of remembering. Besides, the circus holds great importance for Mamilona as it represents her youth and her cultural heritage. Indeed, the Romani people have a historical association with the circus, as they have had a notable presence in it (Gasche 2022: 236). At the circus, on her granddaughter's birthday, Mamilona's eyes are filled with tears, as the memories of her past come flooding back. In this poignant moment, the circus acts as a trigger for her nostalgic emotions, reminding her of the cherished moments and memories she wants to pass down to her granddaughter.

References to aspects of everyday life may also evoke nostalgia in new generations. Morris Holbrook argues that "[i]t does seem plausible that one could identify nostalgically with people, places, or things from a bygone era that one has experienced only through books, films or other narratives" (1993: 103). In *Le trou* the mother and

son read books about Armenian culture and history. The young boy develops nostalgic emotions, as shown in his own words: “The pages of the books overflow with sighs of flutes and the silences of churches; aromas of cakes, honey and spices [...] flocks of lambs [...] flowering apricot trees, highlands and lakes”. The nostalgic feeling challenges him and his mother to go further and look backwards at the Armenian grandfather’s and father’s lives, respectively.

## Memory objects

Material objects often trigger nostalgia. They become “memory objects” (*objets mémoire*), helping to remember significant “places, persons and events” (Turgeon 2007: 26) while structuring social life and memory itself (Turgeon 2007: 30). In *La robe rouge de Nonna*, the story of the dress illustrates the role that objects can play in triggering nostalgia. The dress is a physical reminder of the childhood of the protagonist’s grandmother and the traumatic events she underwent during the fascist regime, evoking emotions of joy, nostalgia, and pain. Worn by the grandmother as a young girl, the dress carries memories of her childhood when she lived in Italy with her parents, but also of the atrocities inflicted upon her during the fascist regime. The red colour of the dress outraged the fascists, who stripped naked the young girl in the middle of the street, a humiliating and traumatic experience. Red also symbolises the communist flag and represents her father’s political identity, a communist worker and atheist, who often sang revolutionary songs. The red colour of the dress is also synonymous with power and strength, blood, danger and revolt, symbolising the passage from childhood to adolescence, from ignorance to knowledge. It is no coincidence that both characters, grandmother and granddaughter, are wearing red dresses. That choice unites the past and the present and symbolises the transfer of the grandmother’s memories and nostalgia to the granddaughter, who seems to assimilate them and make them her own. Both the trauma and the nostalgic life in Italy, still in Nonna’s heart, are transformed into a mandate to remember.

Domestic female crafts, such as embroidery, have traditionally been associated with women’s household roles and hold deep cultural significance. Embroidery can be a powerful nostalgic trigger for women, allowing them to connect with their heritage and the cultural traditions passed down through generations. Hwei-Fen Cheah (2014) showed the importance of traditional Italian embroidery, known as *biancheria*, in the lives of Italian-Australian women as an Italian identity marker, a means of maintaining a connection to their Italian heritage, and a heritage passed down to future generations. The details of the *biancheria* also hold sentimental value, intensifying the nostalgic feelings (49–50). As a traditionally domestic female craft, embroidery is a nostalgic trigger that leads women to experience what Victoria Tedder calls “commemorative nostalgia”, associated with the work done by women who have gone before (2019: 252).

*Le Fil de Soie* illustrates the intergenerational connection between grandmother and granddaughter through the act of sewing. Sewing becomes a space where fabrics, memories and nostalgia intertwine. Mamilona creates a wedding dress for a fashion

show, along with a miniature version for Marie-Lou's doll as a birthday gift. The verbal text describes Mamilona losing a ribbon from the wedding dress, prompting a search with Marie-Lou. However, the accompanying images provide significant information through colour, object placement, and composition (Nodelman 1996: 218, 231). For instance, the grayscale image on the right-hand page depicts an overhead view of a round table with a pincushion. Beneath the table, the hem of a skirt and legs hint at a girl hiding. This figure represents a younger Mamilona, symbolically connecting her past and present selves through the act of sewing. The adjacent coloured page portrays the present-day Mamilona working at a table with colourful fabric scraps (Fig. 10).



**Fig. 10.** The piles of fabric on the girl's shoulders symbolise her duty to carry forward the memory in *Le fil de soie* [The Silk Thread] by Cécile Roumiguère (text) and Delphine Jacquot (images) © Éditions Thierry Magnier, 2013.

**Sl. 10.** Hrpa tkanine na djevočinim ramenima simbolizira njezinu dužnost da dalje prenosi sjećanje u slikovnici *Le fil de soie* [Svilena nit] Cécile Roumiguère (tekst) i Delphine Jacquot (slike) © Éditions Thierry Magnier, 2013.

Significantly, Marie-Lou is also pictured under the table, with the fabric scraps seemingly piled on her shoulders, as she searches for the missing piece needed to complete the work. The contrasting directions of their gazes are symbolic. Mamilona looks to the left, suggesting a glance back to the past, while Marie-Lou's face is turned to the right, signifying the future. The scattered fabric pieces represent fragments of Mamilona's memories and visually unite the two characters. The missing piece symbolises the unification of memories, while the piles of fabric on her shoulders represent the burden the child must bear to ensure the long thread of memory is carried forward. Mamilona's creation of the wedding dress evokes nostalgia for her own wedding, underscoring the emotional power of embroidery in connecting with personal memories. Because marriage customs in various cultures carry symbolic meanings, the wedding dress functions as a passport, establishing identity and allowing the free passage of intergenerational memories. Sewing becomes a way for the two women to preserve memory while simultaneously experiencing a profound sense of "commemorative nostalgia" (Tedder 2019: 252).

## Conclusion

The analysed picturebooks weave together historical documentation, family stories, and nostalgia. These elements act as seeds of historical awareness, shaping young readers' memory by introducing them to the experiences and emotions of past generations, often through the lens of grandparents, who were refugees. Grandparents become the storytellers and protagonists of their family history, transmitters of the devastating memories of 20<sup>th</sup>-century conflicts for their grandchildren to inherit.

Nostalgia can be an important bridge for transmitting memory across generations. It can bring children and their ancestors closer, fostering a shared sense of cultural heritage, handing down family stories and memories, and creating a sense of continuity across generations. This connection enhances our understanding of nostalgia's impact on both individual and collective memory. The recollection of sensory experiences, emotions, references to everyday life, material objects, and cultural practices is a reminder that nostalgia is not always a simple longing for the past but can also be a complex emotion encompassing both positive and negative experiences. While nostalgia can bring comfort and a sense of familiarity, it can also evoke painful memories and emotions, reminding us of the struggles and hardships of past generations. Nostalgia creates a personal connection with the past, fostering empathy for grandparents and making history relatable. This connection reinforces the "duty to remember" (Ricoeur 2004: 89), while acknowledging a lost past without attempting to recreate it. These picturebooks do not aim to present a detailed or complete historical account but mainly to critically reflect on history's significance and impact. As a result, younger generations construct their "post memories" based on an understanding of "the fragility of space, their suspicion of the notion of home and a mediated relationship to this lost world of yesterday they inherited from grandparents" (Hirsch and Spitzer 2002: 274). This transmission of memory and nostalgia may lead them to view the past as a source of inspiration, imagination and hope for a better future.

The picturebooks achieve a balance between rational memory transmission and emotional charge. They acknowledge that transmitting history and cultural heritage extends beyond historical facts and events. It involves emotions, values, and an affective connection to the past, which strengthens family bonds between grandparents and grandchildren. By sharing stories and experiences, families personalise the “duty to remember” those who suffered, ensuring their memories remain alive. The emphasis on emotion suggests that a purely factual approach to discussing war and conflict is insufficient. An aesthetic approach becomes indispensable for as long as it engages readers and conveys the complexity of these issues.

By combining history, memory, and nostalgia, historical picturebooks empower younger generations to ensure that deportations, flights, expulsions, massacres and other atrocities are not consigned to oblivion again. Ultimately, these stories guide us to move forward without denying the past, but instead keeping memories in a peaceful place in memory.

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## **Marianna Missiou**

Sveučilište Egejskoga mora, Rodos, Grčka

### **Međugeneracijski prijenos povijesnih događaja: dužnost sjećanja i nostalgija u francuskim slikovnicama o izbjeglicama iz oružanih sukoba tijekom 20. stoljeća**

Veliki sukobi tijekom 20. stoljeća u velikoj su mjeri zastupljeni u dječjoj književnosti te se često obrađuju iz različitih gledišta. Kako sjećanja na prošle sukobe postupno blijede s nestankom svjedoka, djetetova uloga kao primatelja sjećanja treće generacije postaje ključna za njihov prijenos. U ovom se radu istražuju francuske slikovnice koje prikazuju iskustva etničkih skupina koje bježe od sukoba tijekom 20. stoljeća. Te fikcijske pripovijedi oslanjaju se na povijesne događaje kao kolektivnu baštinu, naglašavajući fragmente sjećanja iz djetinjstva, nostalgiju i dužnost prijenosa sjećanja iz naraštaja u naraštaj. Pokazuje se kako se prijenos povijesnoga sjećanja isprepliće s nostalgijom i međugeneracijskim odnosima u vizualnom i verbalnom obliku. Također se otkriva kako obiteljska povijest može poslužiti kao povod za nastanak kolektivne povijesti.

**Ključne riječi:** sukobi tijekom 20. stoljeća, izbjeglice, međugeneracijski odnosi, prijenos sjećanja, nostalgija