

ARTICLE

Performing Family Identity, Memory and Hybridity in the Works of Eva Menasse

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This essay examines family identity, memory and hybridity in Eva Menasse's novels *Vienna* (2005) and *Quasikristalle* (2013). The question of identity—an individual's age, ethnic background, gender, nationality, qualities, beliefs and values—presents as the key issue in all Menasse's literary works, including the short stories in *Lässliche Todsünden* (2009) and most recently, the essay collection *Lieber aufgeregt als abgeklärt* (2016). Another recurring theme is the memory of the Shoah, its effects on families and relationships between Jews and non-Jews, which always seems to linger in the background. Thirdly, the author often focuses on differences between Austrians and Germans, as well as the way each treats their Jewish minorities. Finally, hybridity, i.e. the existence between two or more poles, as well as shedding light on a character's story and a character's circumstances through other characters' perspectives are central to Menasse's approach to writing: Thus, the author examines the hybrid nature of (1) (Jewish) family identity; (2) Jewishness in general; (3) after-effects of Nazi policies on post-war (family) life in Austria—the 'Alltagsfaschismus'—and Germany; (4) differences between Germany and Austria and encounters between Austrians and Germans; and (5) gender, i.e. the way female family members are often overlooked in family narratives, as well as conditions of woman/motherhood in the 20th and 21st centuries.

'Ihr Vater ist Jude, Ihre Mutter Katholikin. Sie begreifen sich nicht als Jüdin, aber auch nicht als Nicht-Jüdin.' Menasse explains: *'Ich habe mich mein ganzes Leben lang mit dieser Frage herumgeschlagen. Und ich habe gelernt, dass ich mich für keine der beiden Seiten entscheiden kann, sondern dass ich eben die Mischung bin. Und das gefällt mir auch, weil ich mir von beidem das Bessere nehmen kann – immer das, was ich davon verstehe.'*¹

¹ "Den Namen weitergeben." Interview by Ayala Goldmann. Jüdische Allgemeine. 16.4. 2015. <http://www.juedische-allgemeine.de/artice/view/id/21995> [accessed July 23, 2016]. 3.

I. Family Identity, Memory and Hybridity

This essay examines family identity, memory and hybridity in Eva Menasse's novels *Vienna* (2005) and *Quasikristalle* (2013). The question of identity – an individual's age, ethnic background, gender, nationality, qualities, beliefs and values – presents as the key issue in all Menasse's literary works, including the short stories in *Lässliche Todsünden* (2009) and, most recently, the essay collection *Lieber aufgeregt als abgeklärt* (2016). Another recurring theme is the memory of the Shoah, and its effects on families and relationships between Jews and non-Jews, which always seems to linger in the background. Thirdly, the author often focuses on differences between Austrians and Germans, as well as the way that each treats their Jewish minorities. Finally, hybridity, that is, the existence between two or more poles, as well as shedding light on a character's story and a character's circumstances through other characters' perspectives, is central to Menasse's approach to writing. Thus, the author examines the hybrid nature of (1) (Jewish) family identity; (2) Jewishness in general; (3) after-effects of Nazi policies on post-war (family) life in Austria – the 'Alltagsfaschismus' – and Germany; (4) differences between Germany and Austria and encounters between Austrians and Germans; and (5) gender – in other words, the way female family members are often overlooked in family narratives, as well as conditions of woman/motherhood in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Eva Menasse's texts deal with people: where they come from, where they are going, their families, their friends, their love lives, friendships, successes and losses, joys and tragedies, strengths and weaknesses, fears, pains and sins. These topics are woven together by using the search for identity within and outside of the family as an encompassing frame. This essay examines Menasse's first two novels in the context of the family identity theory discussed below.

A great deal of scholarship suggests that narrative language contributes to the construction and display of our sense of who we are, our identity. By narrating one's experiences, one arrives at an understanding of the self as a whole. Some scholarship argues that we eventually become the autobiographical narratives by which we narrate our lives.² Narrative language reveals our presuppositions (implicit meanings), permits multiple perspectives (different prisms through which we can view the world), and allows subjectification (reality can be filtered through the consciousness of protagonists in the story).³ Deborah Schiffrin argues that 'stories are resources not just for the development and presentation of self as a psychological entity, but as someone located within a social and cultural world'.⁴ The form of our stories (their textual structure), the content of our stories (what we tell about) and our story-telling behaviour (how we tell stories) are all sensitive signs not just of our personal selves but also of our social and cultural identities.⁵ When our socio-cultural expectations change, Schiffrin observes, 'so too do our perceptions of identities'.⁶ According to Schiffrin, the family provides our first set of social relationships. Here we learn to relate our experiences to other family members as we listen to their stories.

Narrative performance theory, as developed by Langellier and Peterson, suggests that not only do families *tell* stories but story-telling is one way of *doing* family.⁷ In Langellier and

² Bruner, Jerome. 'Life as narrative.' Arien Mack, ed. *Social Research. An International Quarterly* Vol. 54, No. 2: pp. 11–32 (Summer 1987): p. 15.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴ Schiffrin, Deborah. 'Narrative as Self-Portrait: Sociolinguistic Constructions of Identity.' *Language in Society*, Vol 25, No. 2 (June 1996), p. 169.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁷ Langellier, K. M. and Peterson, E. E. 'Narrative Performance theory: Telling stories, doing family.' In: D. O. Braithwaite and L. A. Baxter (eds). *Engaging theories in family communication: Multiple Perspectives*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE. 2006, p. 100.

Peterson's view, the way that families perform stories can be 'telling' because it reveals how families operate. Narrative performance theorists analyse how family narratives preserve ethnic, relational and social history of the family and its members. These studies show that family identity evolves, as family members adapt and construct their stories of the family, as well as individual members of the group. Furthermore, this theory suggests that family identity is not only an internal relational process but also one that develops externally when family members construct their identity within the context of cultural conditions. In other words, families define themselves not only by expectations of the family as a personal and private entity but also according to the expectations of the culture in which they exist.⁸

Dena Huisman, in her examination of public performance of private family identity through family story-telling identifies five themes of cultural identity in family stories, which seem useful for our analysis of Menasse's work. The first theme focuses on a family's ability to overcome obstacles and challenges. Huisman finds that families tend to negotiate telling stories about imperfections in the family group while presenting themselves in a positive light to themselves and to a broader public audience. She finds that families use laughter and humour to minimize the risks of being seen in a negative way. In Huisman's second theme, the family is defined as a private island. Thus, families describe themselves as 'close-knit groups of people who engage in family-exclusive rituals, enjoy playful interactions and teasing as a group, and value extended, as well as nuclear family connections'.⁹ The third theme focuses on stories about how ancestors built family identity and affected the family group for the better. Family members idealize family members, particularly male relatives, while female ancestors are rarely mentioned. Here, the importance of gender in maintaining family group identity emerges. While women are expected to be care givers and to provide support for the family, men are honoured for doing the same. The fourth theme – 'families follow Culture's Rules (or don't)' – highlights how world events, religion, race and ethnicity impact family identification. The fifth and last theme describes families working together in a formal business setting, through a family business or business partnership.¹⁰

Menasse's texts and her statements in the interview conducted for this project reveal the author's ongoing search for her family's as well as her own identity: the impact of historical events on her family's life, her career choice, her decision to leave Vienna to live and work in Berlin, her role as a writer and her self-understanding and experiences as a woman in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Born into an Austrian family of Jewish/Catholic descent in 1970, Eva Menasse was a teenager when Kurt Waldheim became president and not only he but the whole country of Austria was put on an international watch list. Following outside pressure, Austrians, who for almost half a century had rather conveniently described themselves as Hitler's first victim, were suddenly forced to face their country's and their families' role and participation in Hitler's crimes against humanity. Menasse's first novel, *Vienna*, thematizes the effects of this national earthquake on the Austrian mind, and on the dynamics within her own family. Marja-Leena Hakkarainen argues that historical events often bear more significance in Jewish family novels: 'In *Vienna* wird der Zusammenhalt der multi-ethnischen Familie durch historische Ereignisse und Debatten bedroht, wie etwa durch den arabisch-israelischen Sechstagekrieg, den Historikerstreit und die Anti-Waldheim-Kampagne.'¹¹

During the 1990s and early 2000s, Menasse studied history and German literature and had a successful career as a journalist, writing for the Austrian news magazine *Profil* and the

⁸ Ibid., p. 108.

⁹ Huisman, Dena. Telling a Family Culture: Storytelling, Family Identity, and Cultural Membership. *Interpersona. An International Journal on Personal Relationships*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2014), 6f.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 7–10.

¹¹ Hakkarainen, Marja-Leena. 'Generationendialog und Erinnerungsarbeit.' *Gegenwartsliteratur: ein germanistisches Jahrbuch*, Vol. 15 (2016), p. 266.

Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) in Frankfurt, as well as a correspondent from Prague and Berlin. For the *FAZ*, Menasse reported on the trial against Holocaust denier David Irving. Menasse quit the paper to write *Vienna*, which was published in 2005. Two years before its publication, she also left the city of Vienna and has since lived and worked in Berlin as a freelance author.

Sharp observations about Austria and explanations of the country's peculiarities are things that Menasse does as brilliantly as her half-brother Robert Menasse (born 1954).¹² The latter is often mentioned as part of a group of writers who were born within 10–15 years after the end of the war.¹³ Despite a considerable age gap, authors such as Doron Rabinovici (born 1961), Vladimir Vertlib (born 1966) and Eva Menasse (born 1970) are sometimes considered part of this group as well. This is in part due to their Jewish background but also because they – like their older colleagues – expose and criticize Austrians' failed attempts to properly deal with the Nazi past. Rabinovici, Vertlib and Eva Menasse are commonly referred to as the third generation of post-war writers.¹⁴ Sometimes, their responses can be heated;¹⁵ more often, however, they take a less aggressive, softer stance than their older colleagues. This is especially true when it comes to narrating their own families' stories. Todd and Hillary Herzog's essay on Doron Rabinovici's text 'Nach Wilna' in this collection underlines this argument rather well. In our interview, Eva Menasse states: 'Ich glaube, das zeichnet die dritte Phase und die dritte Generation, d.h. ihren Umgang mit der Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus aus: Man stellt vorsichtig Fragen, man geht sanfter an die Sache heran.'

When asked what her family had to do with her decision to become a writer, Eva Menasse states:

Das hat vielleicht damit zu tun, dass in meiner Familie Sprache immer besonders wichtig war. Mein Vater und mein Onkel waren bzw. sind sehr talentierte Redner. Bei uns wurde eine eigene Sprache gesprochen, ein eigener Jargon. Diese Sprache ist gekennzeichnet von einem ganz feinen Sprachwitz, mit dem ich großgeworden bin, und der mich geprägt hat.¹⁶

Eva Menasse's genealogical research started in her twenties. She felt compelled to find out more about her father's and uncle's childhood and youth. She only knew that they had grown up in England. As children, Menasse and her siblings were 'spared' the dramatic background of their father's and uncle's exile. As a young adult, Menasse undertook journalistic interviews with them. Many times, she recorded their surprisingly short responses, a few memories here, small scenes there. They did not, or, as Menasse later realized, *could not* tell her what seemed

¹² Cf. Robert Menasse's essay collections: *Erklär mir Österreich* and *Land ohne Eigenschaften*.

¹³ This group includes second-generation Austrian-Jewish writers Robert Schindler (born 1944) and Ruth Beckermann (born 1952) but also non-Jewish writers Elfriede Jelinek (born 1946), Thomas Bernhard (born 1931), Josef Haslinger (born 1955), Josef Winkler (born 1953) and Christoph Ransmayer (born 1954), who thematize the (post)-war years in their works and generally take a critical, direct, and in some cases, angry stance. This has led the Austrian media to bestow upon some of them the negative label 'Nestbeschmutzer'. Especially Thomas Bernhard, Josef Winkler and Elfriede Jelinek have been criticized for fouling the nest, i.e. the social, economic and political systems which comprise family, job environment, village, city, company and state in which they live. The related idiom 'das eigene Nest beschmutzen', i.e. to speak negatively about one's family or the community in which one lives, has been documented since the late middle ages. Second-generation post-war authors often criticize their parents and teachers, as well as politicians and other public persons in their works. Their fictional characters are rarely able to forgive and remain angry and disappointed to the very end.

¹⁴ Müllender, Yannick. 'Generationenkonzept in zeitgenössischen-jüdischen Romanen.' *Journal of Austrian Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (2013), p. 23.

¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G1-pPjmoNc8>.

¹⁶ Cf. Interview.

particularly interesting to her. They were unable to tell her what she wanted to know because the events of their Nazi childhood and youth had traumatized and silenced them.

Faced with these gaps in her father's and uncle's stories, Menasse started to read books about mixed marriages, the *Kindertransport*, about the life of Jewish child exiles in England. This research went on for years without a clear understanding or intention that its outcome would ever turn into a fictional work. The only motive for Menasse was to learn more about her family history, particularly the part of it that had not been shared by living family members. She wanted to imagine what their lives had been like:

Ich saß also auf diesem Berg von historischem Material plus einigen persönlichen Interviews, und je weiter ich gekommen bin, um so weiter bin ich von meiner wirklichen Familiengeschichte weggegangen, ins Allgemeine hinein. Bis mir klar wurde, ich werde keine Familienchronik aus diesem Material schreiben. Aber der Stoff war da, groß und verführerisch, und da wusste ich dann an irgendeinem Punkt, daraus machst du jetzt einen Roman.¹⁷

II. Vienna

The result of her research, Eva Menasse's first novel, *Vienna* (2005), is the story of an Austrian family of Jewish/Catholic descent. According to Julia Freytag, Menasse's (family) novel does not only focus on the family's history but also on the difficult position of the grandchildren's generation: 'Wie können die Enkel von dem erzählen, was ihnen *nicht* erzählt wurde und was sie *nicht* wissen, was verschwiegen, ausgespart und verdeckt geblieben ist?'¹⁸ In addition, it poses the questions: How do we experience our family? How does this experience differ from that of other family members? How do we position ourselves within our family and its story? How do family members perform family stories and how does the family perform within the culture where it is placed? What is our family's identity and how is our own identity shaped by it?

When the female narrator in *Vienna* confronts her uncle with the halachic definition of Jewish religious affiliation, she finds that whether and according to whom or whose laws he is Jewish seems oblivious to the uncle's understanding of his identity. What matters is that according to Hitler, he was a Jew. As a teenager, he therefore had to leave Nazi Vienna on the *Kindertransport* to England, where he spent several years in exile. As a young adult, he fought in Burma on the British side. After the war and accompanied by his Burmese wife, he returned to Vienna, perceived by his family of origin as a cold English gentleman. The uncle's idea of his identity is solely based on his individuality. He refuses to understand himself as part of a group. Rather, as Armin Weber has pointed out, the uncle's identity is based on his life experiences, how he coped with them, and to what extent he was in charge of what happened to him.¹⁹ The other main protagonist in *Vienna*, the narrator's father, responds to his childhood trauma with the answer: 'Very well, thank you.' He insists on a positive outlook on life, which earns him the name 'uncle Sunny'.²⁰ The grandparents' and great-grandparents'

¹⁷ Prangel, Matthias. 'Normale Familie. Ein Gespräch mit Eva Menasse.' http://literaturkritik.de/public/rezension.php?rez_id=11709. [accessed 21 July 2016]: p. 1.

¹⁸ Freytag, Julia. 'Wer kennt Österreich? Familiengeschichten erzählen. Arno Geiger *Es geht uns gut* (2005) und Eva Menasse *Vienna* (2005).' *Nachbilder des Holocaust*, 2007, p. 111.

¹⁹ Weber, Armin. 'Jedes einzelne Bild nur ein Mosaikstück? Zur Funktion des Erzählens in Eva Menasse's Werken.' *Weimarer Beiträge. Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft, Ästhetik und Kulturwissenschaften*. Wien: Passagen, 2015, p. 50.

²⁰ *Vienna*, p. 375.

fate during the war, the uncle's and the narrator's father's ability to overcome the obstacles and challenges of a difficult childhood and their ways of dealing with their childhood experiences of persecution and exile impact the family identity. In *Vienna*, finding one's place within the family story becomes a defining mandate for the act of keeping memories alive. This applies both to the novel's narrator, as well as to Eva Menasse herself. By imagining what could have been her ancestors' lives, by interpreting what her living relatives were not openly or explicitly telling her, by filling in the gaps with historical information, Eva Menasse did what the title of our collection proposes: She read between the blood lines.

Vienna's protagonists are seen through the eyes of a nameless female narrator. The novel is built around an endless number of anecdotes, funny stories against a sad, dark and tragic family background, stories about family members who were separated from their parents as children (the narrator's father and uncle), died in exile (the narrator's aunt), were subjected to antisemitism and forced labour (the narrator's grandfather) or died in concentration camps (the narrator's great-grandmother). The entertaining light-heartedness of the anecdotes, which is infused by the famous 'Wiener Schmääh', serves as a contrast to their content – that is, the tragic and repressed events of war, exile and death. These stories are the glitter glue that holds the family together over decades, over generations. Moreover, they help to shed a positive light on the family, especially its male ancestors, who are praised for their strength and perseverance during difficult times. According to Langellier and Peterson, 'good stories produce good families'.²¹ The story-telling at family events keeps dead family members alive and awards them the aura of long gone film stars. They thus constitute what Mona Körte has referred to as 'Totenpflege'.²² Family members often argue about the accuracy of an anecdote and about how it should be told. They even dress up and act out, and thus perform stories of the past.

Whereas the narrator's uncle and father, who were sent away as Viennese Jewish children, reject the notion of Jewishness as part of their identity, other characters, especially the narrator's brother, wrestle with the fact that they are considered partly Jewish ('Halb- und Vierteljuden'). The narrator's brother joins a self-help group (*Mischlinge 2000*) for members of the third post-Shoah generation, who are searching for a Jewish identity outside of religion. As Hakkarinen points out, 'Mischlinge' refers to children with a mixed parentage and thus to an 'unhappy, rootless existence between the cultures' but also responds to what recent scholarship has termed cultural hybridity: 'It is noteworthy that the term implicates an ongoing process, which opens new avenues but may also be painful for the subject. [...] The painful negotiations of the half-Jews and quarter-Jews in *Vienna* ironically dispute the post-ethnic ideology, which claims that identities are based on free-individual choice.'²³ *Vienna*, as the English title of Menasse's novel evokes, is of course a diverse city. This diversity is mirrored in the narrator's diverse and difficult family. The grandmother was a German from Sudetenland, the grandfather a Polish Jew. The narrator's father and uncle emigrate to England, their sister Katzi dies in exile in Canada. Upon their return from England, the father marries a Polish Catholic, while his brother chooses an English Jewish wife. For the longest time, the humorous anecdotes bring Jews, Catholics, Protestants and their English, Polish and Austrian wives together. Finding one's place in this family seems at times as challenging as it

²¹ Langellier, K. M. and Peterson, E. E. *Storytelling in Daily Life. Performing Narrative*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004, p. 40. Cited in Marja-Leena Hakkarinen. 'Melange of Memories', p. 480.

²² Körte, Mona. 'Die Toten am Tisch: "Familienromane" nach dem Holocaust.' In: *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*, Vol. 27 (2008), p. 581.

²³ Ahokas, P. 'Ethnic life writing in an era of postethnicity: Maxine Hong Kingston and Alice Walker at the millennium'. *Ethnic Life Writing and Histories, Genres, Performance and Culture*. Ed. R. G. Davis, J. Aurell and B. Delgado. Lit. Verlag Berlin, 2007, 240. Cited in Hakkarinen, 'Melange of Memories', p. 479.

has been for Jews to assimilate in the multi-ethnic city of Vienna. The arguments around the question of who is and who is not Jewish enough strike a discriminatory, hostile tone within the family, but they are also present when individual family members try to find their place as Jews in post-war Austrian culture.

The heated discussions about what constitutes Jewishness finally escalate into a family war among the cousins and result in the dissolution of the extended family. At the end of the novel, the narrator, the scribe of the family story, realizes that with the passing of the grandparent generation and because family members have moved away and therefore no longer share a permanent physical presence, the family stories will die and that without them the family will become unglued. What had brought them closer for decades now creates an ever-growing distance between them. In the end, even the famous 'Wiener Schmääh' cannot stop the territorial argument over who is entitled to claim Jewishness as part of their identity. Consequently, each family is diminished to its own nuclear state, its own private island.

For the uncle's niece and her generation, the so-called third generation, the Jewish question, though no longer a matter of life or death, becomes the most important aspect of their identity. Being Jewish represents the link to Jewish family members of previous generations, who live on in family anecdotes that are told and retold at family events. Not being Jewish means being disconnected and excluded from the family story. Therefore, the narrator and her half-brother feel lost, angry and disoriented when their cousins (who have a Jewish mother and therefore consider themselves 100 per cent Jewish according to Halachic law) classify them as not Jewish enough. The narrator is accused (by both her brother and her cousins) of confusing individual identity with factual belonging.

Ich schrie mit der Kraft der Verzweiflung heraus, was mir als unwiderlegbar erschien: Die Verschickung der beiden Kinder und ihre Rückkehr zu fremden, gebrochenen Eltern, die Hundemarke des Großvaters, die Überschwangersarbeit, die nach Theresienstadt abgereiste Großmutter, genüge das nicht, um für diese Kleinfamilie im Jahre 1947, da war mein Vater zurückgekehrt, eine klare Identität als Juden als Verfolgte zu konstituieren?²⁴

The importance of work and family identity is a recurrent topic throughout *Vienna*. The grandfather's Jewish parents came from Poland to the 'Mazzesinsel', the Viennese district of Leopoldstadt. The grandfather worked as a travelling salesman, specializing in wines and spirits. Due to his successful business, the family soon moved to a much fancier part of the city, Döbling. Shortly before the Anschluss, the narrator's grandparents are forced to leave their house to move back to the Jewish area. During the war, the grandfather is sent to carry out forced labour while all his children are sent away to survive in exile. Upon his return from England, the narrator's father becomes a soccer star and a national hero. After he retires from soccer, he opens a business and deals with sports teams from Eastern European socialist states, but he prefers to spend time on the soccer field, on the tennis court and in restaurants. His brother, the narrator's uncle, works in a bank until he starts dealing with some shady business men. He becomes rich but quickly loses his fortune. His wife removes stickers from Israeli oranges before selling them to socialist countries and ships Czech bicycles to Haifa. Family members do not work well together and work is generally not talked about as a positive experience or opportunity for the younger generation to learn about a good work ethic. Instead, opportunities to be successful seem warped by the anti-Semitic tendencies present in Austria during but also after the war.

²⁴ *Vienna*, p. 385.

While the 'Opferlüge', the every-day anti-Semitism and the lingering effects of *Austrofaschismus* on family life in post-war Austria, as well as the question of Jewishness, are key to *Vienna*, the differences between Austrians and Germans, as well as questions relating to the female experience become more central in Menasse's second novel, *Quasikristalle*. As an acute observer of the German-speaking world around her, Menasse continues where Franz Xaver Krötz left off with *Die Piekfe-Saga*. I would argue that there is currently no other writer in the German-speaking world who matches Eva Menasse's sharp observation and wit in capturing the differences between Austrians and Germans. She is at her funniest in her descriptions of her life as an Austrian in Germany. She finds herself and places her protagonists between Viennese *Angstlust*²⁵ and *German Angst*.²⁶

Although the narrator of *Vienna* is a female voice, and female characters such as Tante Gustl, the grandmother, Tante Ka and the kleine Engländerin play essential roles in the novel, the male protagonists, such as the father, the brother, the uncle and the male cousins, are the main story-tellers at family events. As listeners and commentators, the female family members generally remain in the background. Dichotomies and questions of hybridity and identity abound in Menasse's descriptions of differences between men and women, in both the private and public spheres. Thus, the author's development as a writer can also be observed by the way she sharpens her view of past and contemporary female life in the German-speaking world of her childhood, youth, adulthood and motherhood. Menasse explains that her text functions as a commentary of how she sees the world, and a woman's place in it:

Wie ich es sehe, stehen die Frauen, wenn bei irgendwelchen Zusammenkünften diskutiert wird, immer noch im Schatten ihrer Männer. Die Männer reden in der Öffentlichkeit, die Frauen tun es zuhause. Es gibt nur wenige Frauen, die auch nach außen ihren Mann stehen, und ich kann nur sagen, dass in meiner Kindheit in den siebziger Jahren die Rollenverteilung eindeutig so war, dass die Männer die Witze gemacht haben und die Frauen zuhause gekeppelt haben. Die Männer hatten die Möglichkeit, mit einer gewissen Leichtigkeit auf die Welt zuzugehen, spielerisch mit ihr umzugehen, während an den Frauen der Kampf ums Überleben hängen blieb.²⁷

Finding her own place within the family also meant creating an identity for the rest of the family. Nowadays, as the author revealed in our interview, when the Menasses do not remember a particular anecdote, one of them will suggest: 'Geh, schau' im 'Buch von der Eva nach.'

III. Quasikristalle

Nein, Berlin ist mir [...] nicht unheimlich, weil es keine Verbindung mit meiner Familiengeschichte gibt – also auch keine bösen und unangenehmen Geheimnisse. Die Verbindung ist einzig und allein historisch, weil die antijüdischen Gesetze hier erdacht und gemacht worden sind. Aber davon abgesehen hat mein Umzug nach Berlin damals, vor über 15 Jahren, erst einmal Freiheit bedeutet. Leere. Eine Projektionsfläche, auf die ich schreiben konnte, was ich wollte. Mir mein eigenes Berlin erschaffen. Das hat mir

²⁵ Menasse, Eva. *Lieber aufgeregt als abgeklärt*. Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2016, p. 91.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

²⁷ http://literaturkritik.de/public/rezension.php?rez_id=11706 [accessed 23 July 2016].

*ermöglicht, meine eigene Familie zu gründen, halbwegs unbeeinflusst von dem Erbe und dem, was für mich daran auch erstickend ist.*²⁸

Quasikristalle (2013) accompanies female protagonist Xane Molin from her teenage and student years in Austria to her move from Vienna to Berlin, where she runs a successful PR company, marries a German academic, suffers through infertility treatments, becomes a step-mother and a mother until her return to Vienna as an old woman. As an Austrian living in Germany, Xane delights and annoys her German and Austrian friends with quizzical observations about their respective nationally and culturally determined idiosyncrasies.

Menasse borrowed the title for her second novel from the world of chemistry. Readers are as surprised by the turns Xane's life takes, as chemist Dan Shechtman must have been, on 8 April 1982, while performing an electron diffraction experiment on an alloy of aluminium and manganese. By orienting the alloy in different directions, Shechtman discovered a monster in the world of crystallography, a structure that appeared to contain five-fold symmetry axes, which cannot exist in strictly periodic structures. In 2011, Shechtman won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry for discovering such quasi-periodic structures, which became known as quasicrystals.²⁹ In her adaptation and interpretation of Shechtman's findings, Menasse seemingly hands her readers a kaleidoscope. Looking through it, we see bits of glass (Xane's life). Her story is told by different characters, in continually changing symmetrical forms, reflected in two or more mirrors, set at angles to each other. In an interview with Gerald Sommer, Menasse explains her approach: 'Ich habe hier eine Biographie, die zerschneide ich in möglichst disparate Schnipsel, und das auch noch über einen Zeitrahmen. [...] Wie eine Kamerafahrt um einen Menschen herum, und ich zeige ihn in ganz verschiedenen Situation.'³⁰

Each situation constitutes a chapter, which is told from the perspective of a person who has crossed Xane's life: Judith, a girlfriend from the early teenage years; Bernays, an academic and organizer of Auschwitz tours; Ludwig Tsocho, Xane's Catholic, ultra-conservative and voyeuristic landlord; Judith's little sister Sally, a single mother, who meets Xane in Berlin; Dr Heike Guttmann, Xane's infertility specialist; potential love interest Nelson, survivor of a civil war turned ambassador against war crimes; Xane's step-daughter, Viola; Martin Kummer, Xane's German employee; Xane's aging father in Vienna; Krystyna, one of Xane's oldest friends in Vienna; Shanti, a researcher whose work focuses on abuse in senior residences; and finally Amos, Xane's son, whose letters to his mother upon her decision to move back to Vienna conclude the book. *Quasikristalle* ends with Xane's return to her hometown of Vienna as an old woman. At the end of our interview, Menasse speculated that by sending Xane back to Austria, she was trying to convince herself that Vienna might not be so bad after all. Xane's own voice, the thirteenth perspective, only features in the seventh chapter – in other words, the one in the middle of the book, when Xane has reached mid-life and is going through a crisis.

As a text that incorporates the family topos and performs family, *Quasikristalle* offers a survey of different family models, a sort of status report of family life in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. We encounter the orthodox family set up – father, mother,

²⁸ Gruber, Julia (2017). Interview with Eva Menasse. Modern Languages Open. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.136>.

²⁹ Cf. Ron Lifshits: By orienting the alloy in different directions, Shechtman discovered a monster in the world of crystallography, a structure that appeared to contain five-fold symmetry axes, which cannot exist in strictly periodic structures. In 2011, the Nobel Prize for Chemistry was awarded to Dan Shechtman for discovering such quasi-periodic structures, which became known as quasicrystals. <http://www.tau.ac.il/~ronlif/quasicrystals.html>.

³⁰ Sommer, Gerald. 'Wichtig ist mir [...] die Lücke. Ein Interview mit Eva Menasse im Dezember 2012.' In: Francois Grosso et al. (eds). *Doderer-Gespräche I*. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2016, p. 602.

child(ren) – but also a patchwork family, burdened by divorce and custody battles, single mothers, a violent father, a father who lost his wife and children through war crimes, divorced and widowed women who cannot find a partner, while an entire chapter (chapter 5) is dedicated to the topic of family planning. Here, Xane's experience with infertility is told from the perspective of a fertility specialist.

Regarding the family narrative themes as defined by Huisman, *Quasikristalle* portrays families who are often unable to overcome obstacles and challenges. Right from the start, in chapter 1, Xane's best friend Judith has a troubled family life. In the same chapter, a single mother has to deal with her young daughter's death. Much later in the book, Xane's own teenage step-daughter Viola rebels against Xane's rules and is highly critical of her step-mother. She even tells on Xane when she sees her step-mother embrace another man, and thus causes a rift between her parents. Viola's chapter also contains a part that describes her meeting with her birth mother, who had abandoned her children to find herself in India. Families are shown as private islands who try to keep others out: Xane's childhood friend Judith attempts to hide her father's violent behaviour and her mother's insanity, as well as their decrepit housing situation; her sister, who encounters the adult Xane in Berlin, hides the fact that she has a child and is broke; Xane leaves her nuclear family and moves to Berlin where she becomes a step-mother and struggles with becoming a mother herself. Xane's father, but not her mother, provides one of the many voices that describe Xane. Again, the male ancestor is given more importance in sharing insights into Xane's character and her life story.

World events, religion and ethnicity are mentioned in the novel as well. The Jewish identity question, however, takes a back seat, with the exception of the second and third chapters. Xane is half-Jewish, and is said to have a prominent Jewish godfather. A whole chapter (chapter 2) is dedicated to her participation as a young student in an excursion to Auschwitz. The guide, Bernays, who is a half-Jew himself, feels attracted to Xane, whom he describes as 'ein klassischer Fall halbjüdischer Doppelhelix, ein schwer auflösbares Geflecht aus Angst, Schmerz über unklare Zugehörigkeit, ironischer Distanzierung und Selbstüberschätzung'.³¹ Bernays finds the Austrian retirees, who finally venture out to see Auschwitz, the reason why their fathers and grandfathers had to undergo denazification, particularly unbearable. He reminds them not to pick up teeth or bones as souvenirs. Xane provokes the entire group by portraying the concentration camp as a charitable institution: 'Herr Professor, rief sie, meine Kollegen und ich haben hier etwas entdeckt, das die Forschung revolutionieren wird. Ein Swimmingpool! Das ist der letzte fehlende Beweis, wie gut es den Juden hier ging. Ansprechende Umgebung, beste Verpflegung, sportliche Ertüchtigung.'³²

The Austrian 'Alltagsfaschismus' also features in Chapter 3, which is told from the perspective of Xane's Viennese landlord, Catholic animal-lover Diplomingenieur Ludwig Tschoch. Xane gains his trust and access to his personal space, films him as he feeds his angry ferret Adolf, and photographs his crucifix, only to later create a critical film, a 'Film ohne Worte. Österreichische Impressionen' about him and his family's questionable by-standing in the deportation of a former Jewish tenant, which is aired on Austrian public TV. Again, as during the Auschwitz excursion, Xane provocatively points out how Austrian fascism has survived since the Second World War into the present and manifests itself in contemporary Austrian society.

Age, gender and nationality dominate the rest of the book as elements that define Xane's identity. The seventh chapter provides a look at Xane's inner life, giving an emotional

³¹ *Quasikristalle*, p. 73.

³² *Quasikristalle*, p. 82.

perspective. It is the only chapter told from the viewpoint of a first-person narrator. Here, Xane fills the gaps left by other chapters, takes stock and provides a status report of her own life: her marriage, her friendships (her friends are referred to as the 'eigentliche Familie'),³³ her experience as a wife and (step-)mother in particular, and her insights into the female existence in general. 'Ich lebe so, wie ich es immer wollte', she reflects at the beginning of the chapter. Her thoughts about her marriage, about being faithful to her husband Mor are intersected by her get-together with her old friend Krystyna, who is about to cheat on her husband. While observing her giddy, feverish friend and pondering what leads couples to cheat on their spouses, Xane recalls some shaky moments in her own marriage – such as her postnatal depression, which led her to empathize with women who kill their babies. She remembers the lack of lightness, the unpleasantness of postpartum marital sex, and her own and her husband's occasional temptations to stray from the path of fidelity. She ponders her relationship with her older step-daughter, who causes marital strife. Inspired by and slightly envious of her friend's amorous adventure, a large part of the chapter is comprised of Xane's pessimistic musings about women in contemporary society.

Unlike the narrator in *Vienna*, who is obsessed with finding out about her family's past, Xane is not interested in idealizing the past. In fact, more than two thirds of *Quasikristalle's* plot are situated in the present and the future. Xane realizes that previous generations of women – such as the women in *Vienna* – were bound to marry the wrong man (the very first) and that 'iron convention' saw to it that they remained married. Nowadays, Xane observes, women have and make choices. They separate from their partners, but as a result, they might not have one for when they reach old age. For a long time, Xane's Austrian friends, 'die eigentliche Familie', remain loyal after her departure, but Xane repeatedly tests her friends' patience. When she experiences a personal crisis and contacts her Austrian friends to ask for shelter, she is disappointed to find that they refuse to give it to her. Xane's best friend Krystyna seems envious of Xane, who left Vienna as a young woman (Krystyna's own dream) and became the 'UNO-Sonderbotschafterin für Deutschland'. Krystyna remembers having felt surprised and almost hurt when Xane hurriedly left Vienna: [Sie] verkündete, in Wirklichkeit seit Jahren aus Österreich weggewollt zu haben. 'Sie brach alle Zelte ab und zog nach Berlin.'³⁴ Krystyna recognizes that Xane, who never fails to tell her Austrian friends that Germans are much better Democrats, that German newspapers are more sophisticated, German politicians less embarrassing and German soccer incomparably good, does the same to Germans: 'Allerdings belehrte sie auch die Deutschen. Die Botschaft war jedes Mal: Wo Xane war, war es am besten.'³⁵ Thus, Xane's hybrid existence as an Austrian in Germany is illuminated by both Germans and Austrians at different times and by different characters throughout the book.

Menasse's 'Kopfgeburt' Xane feels confident as an Austrian when she settles in Berlin. As Menasse writes elsewhere, 'Nirgendwo kann man so von Herzen Österreicher sein wie in Deutschland.'³⁶ Martin Kummer, one of the German employees in Xane's PR agency, wakes up after an event, and blames his hangover on his Austrians co-workers: 'Es liegt an den Österreichern. [...] Die sind allesamt Alkoholiker. Nirgends trinkt man so viel wie bei denen. Und drauf sind sie auch noch stolz.'³⁷ At work, Martin often feels at odds with the Austrian work ethics. 'Dass diese Österreicher andere, gröbere Sitten hatten, hatte Martin gleich beim ersten Versuch erlebt. "Jöö, ein Bedenkenträger, grölte Topic"', the other Austrian in the

³³ *Quasikristalle*, p. 361.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 361.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 362.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

agency, when Martin objects to a project.³⁸ About Xane, Kummer says: 'Ihre Waffe war ihr loses Maul. Anders als die meisten, nahm sich Frau Molin das Recht, alles zu beurteilen und zu kommentieren. Darin fühlte sie sich völlig frei von Konventionen oder Höflichkeit. Ob das seriös war, war eine andere Frage. Vielleicht war es typisch österreichisch.'³⁹ A third perspective is provided by Sally, Xane's Austrian childhood friend, who runs into Xane at a party in Berlin. Sally, a single-mother, who, to save money for a babysitter, drugs her child with Valium before she goes out to party, admires and envies Xane, who is only a few years older than her but is happily married and already owns her own company. Whereas Sally struggles professionally and personally, Xane seems to thrive and to be in control of her life. Xane is also confident and speaks a German that Germans understand; she corrects Sally when the latter uses the Austrian German expression to order a 'weißer Spritzer'. Xane explains to the puzzled waiter that what Sally wants is a 'Weißweinschorle'.⁴⁰ Confident as an Austrian among Germans, Xane is comfortable to be 'die Mischung', that is, the *mélange*, to use another typical Austrian idiom for what Germans would simply call 'Milchkaffee', who is at home in and ridicules both cultures and speaks both varieties of German.

Menasse's writing is informed by her upbringing in Vienna in her Jewish/Catholic family with its particular jargon and humour, her exposure to Austrian anti-Semitism during a time when Austrians had to acknowledge their responsibility for war crimes during National Socialism, which coincided with the time she was coming of age (the 1980s), her professional career as a journalist, her move from Vienna to Berlin, and her insights into the conditions of female life, including the experience of infertility. Whereas she perceives Vienna as eerie (like an aunt who scares her in a dark basement), Menasse has said that she feels safe and unburdened by her family's past in Berlin. As readers, we come to understand that her life experience, as opposed to her father's, is one of speaking up and making herself heard. Knowing her situation, we are able to grasp where she is coming from as well. Like her protagonist Xane, Menasse herself feels liberated in Berlin: from her family's history, as well as the Austrian national history but also from the Austrian way of dealing with life and people. As cultural hybrids, the author Menasse as well as her protagonist Xane take the best of both worlds and always the parts that they understand best.

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³⁸ Ibid., p. 311.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 315.

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