

**Trilogy** - A German History Project -  
by Susanne Schleyer and Michael J. Stephan

**Part I** "ASSERVATE. Chronik einer deutschen Familie 1907-1997"  
(Exhibits. A German Family Chronicle 1907-1997)

**Part II** "BUENO! Alemanes en Argentina, 2000"  
(Bueno! Germans in Argentina, 2000)

**Part III** "SOLOGUBOWKA / Russland"  
(Sologubowka / Russia)

Among others, these exhibition projects were sponsored by:  
Ministry of Culture Thüringen, Germany; Federal Center for Political Education (bpb), Bonn, Germany; Agfa Photography Sponsorship Program; Deutsche Gesellschaft e.V., Berlin, Germany; German Academic Exchange Service - DAAD, Bonn, Germany; Goethe Institute Buenos Aires, Argentina; Federal Cultural Foundation, Halle, Germany; Goethe Institutes at St Petersburg and Moscow, Russia.

What is history but the sum of individual stories? Sixty years after the end of World War II and German National Socialism, the last witnesses of these times are nearly gone. Susanne Schleyer and Michael J. Stephan set out to search for traces, aiming to come up with a way to ask questions on an artistic and subjective level that would challenge the mechanisms of communicative memory.

The Trilogy primarily consists of images and sounds taking reference to each other, as the artists attempted to counter verbal expressions and their invariably inherent (inward, moral) judgments, cast also and particularly by witnesses themselves, with a chiefly unbiased aesthetics. A picture lends new meaning to sound, and sound interferes with the visual rhetoric of images.

By way of unobtrusive, silent, but all the more mind-opening imagery, three strikingly associative works confront viewers with questions waiting just outside the range of conscious awareness. A context emerges that allows for contradictions to surface that a workaday mind will steer clear of. Precisely for this reason, it seems important to let the pictures communicate among themselves. New connections arise – the three parts are intended to interact and join forces. Reaching beyond the occasions and causes they were individually linked to in the past, they combine to show a geography of soulful feeling. Tacitly, a message is conveyed, an insight nearly devoid of words: To be connected through the heritage of war.

With all three parts, historic pictures and photographs specially produced for these exhibitions were used along with sound collages from interview sequences. Taken together, these elements form an artistic, fictitious chronicle of the history and memories of a German family whose members have been dispersed across the earth. In Argentina and Russia, we meet a community of victims and perpetrators and are presented with the entire range of their emotional ambivalence.

**Part I Asservate. Chronik einer deutschen Familie 1907-1997**  
(Exhibits. A German Family Chronicle 1907-1997)

Susanne Schleyer's grandfather. A deep taboo kept the family from looking at the unthinkable: Photo albums were replete with blank spaces and traces of retouching. Thus, the artist began her investigation and compiled a fictitious three-dimensional family album, creating symbolic, photographic encounters and juxtapositions of three generations in four different social orders. Loosening of ties to original context creates a language system that prompts onlookers to probe the arrangement of images in his or her personal microcosm of family life.

**Part II BUENO! Alemanes en Argentina 2000.**

(Bueno! Germans in Argentina, 2000)

In keeping with their move away from personal experiences towards fictitious story lines, Schleyer and Stephan now left their private spaces behind. The general feeling of sadness voiced in "Asservate" prevails, but further down the road, the distance now becomes near. While "Asservate" draws on German photo albums, "Bueno!" was produced directly on-site in present day Argentina: The artists visited German immigrants in Buenos Aires. Worlds away from ordinary German family life, ruptures became visible that immigrant life can never reconcile. Here, however, the past was not kept secret but reinvented. New old pictures are seen in these albums. Tall tales, mystification of personal backgrounds: What in Europe has become a far away past, was preserved and upheld at the other end of the world. Jewish refugees, non-denominational leftists, economic adventurers who had fled the places of their existential plight, and, not least, outright National Socialists. A motley collection of victims and perpetrators. The black box of Argentina's German minority brightly reflects the different eras of German history by upholding shock-frozen replicas of the past.

**Part III Sologubowka. Russland.**

(Sologubowka / Russia)

The initial private investigation was followed by one that dealt in concrete terms and general concepts. Working on the third part of the Trilogy, the artists focused their attention on the symbolic order of German history. From the start, individual stories were now history. On account of its orientation towards German and Russian forms of ideological memory, this last project clearly has a political edge to it.

In the fall of 2000, Europe's largest war cemetery was consecrated in Sologubowka, a small village near St Petersburg. This enormously large graveyard hosts only a single symbolic grave commemorating hundreds of thousands of Soviet victims. The artists attended Germany's official celebrations, which German Wehrmacht veterans had also joined. They watched Red Army soldiers and Russian civilians participate in memorial rituals, talked to people, and again produced photographs and sound recordings. All this was combined into cogent, forceful tableaux, which also comprise photos from German and Russian photographic archives. The latter were shot not without propagandistic intentions of portraying everyday life inside and outside of the Leningrad Blockade. Removed from their original context, classification of motifs according to nationalities seems next to impossible. The victim recognizes his likeness in the image of the perpetrator who, in turn, sees himself in the role of the victim. An oppressive canvas imagery emerges along with a new angle on the heritage of war.

**The Trilogy:**

Just as with stacks of blueprints, the Trilogy uncovers elevations, sectional views, full shots, and close-ups of individual stories, biographies of generations, and lost or hidden details of family histories. The visual memory of Germans in the 20th century unfolds before our eyes.

That which collective memory still segregates from one another is merged and filed in an "archive of memory" that stands as the Trilogy's key element.

Susanne Schleyer und Michael J. Stephan  
 Berlin, 2004