

## Collective Remembering

This interdisciplinary study explores collective memory as it is presented by official *producers* (such as textbooks and media) and reflected by *consumers* (group members). Focusing on a case study of Russians and Russian immigrants to the United States and their memories of seminal events in the twentieth-century Russian collective past, Isurin shows how autobiographical memory contributes to the formation of collective memory, and also examines how the memory of the shared past is reconstructed by those who stayed with the group and by those who left. By bringing together historical, anthropological, and psychological approaches, *Collective Remembering* provides a new theoretical framework for memory studies that incorporates both content analysis of texts and empirical data from human participants, thus demonstrating that methodologies from the humanities and the social sciences can complement each other to create a better understanding of how memory works in the world and in the mind.

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# Collective Remembering

*Memory in the World and in the Mind*

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*The Ohio State University*



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Dedicated to my daughter Polina

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## Preface

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While conceptualizing and working on this project I often thought about my daughter, to whom I am dedicating this book. This book is on collective memory, especially the collective memory of a nation, something that my daughter and I can share only partially. I often feel that I unintentionally have deprived her of memories that I have refused to pass on. I wanted to give her a fresh start in a country which was supposed to become her home country.

She did not have a say in the choices her parents made for her by moving her from Russia as a five-month-old baby and, later, as a six-year-old child from Israel. Going through language learning and forgetting (Hebrew), always feeling incompetent in her mother tongue (Russian), and not always “at home” with her dominant language (English), she lacks sufficient memories from her childhood, which often was interrupted due to switches to a new language acquisition process. At some point I have become the source and the sacred container of her memories, helping her to remember certain instances from her childhood and early adolescence. Despite being raised in a bilingual/bicultural family, my daughter noted that we, as her parents, rarely talked about Russia or our Russian past or, at least, rarely talked about it in a positive sense. When I left my native country in 1990, I left behind the great things that I would miss as well as the ugly things I preferred to forget. It was often hard to tease the two apart, and subconsciously I chose not to pass on any of those memories to my only child. As a parent, I struggled not to bring too much negativity into those memories and thus completely avoided talking about my Russian/Soviet past.

My daughter, raised and fully educated in the United States, seemed to have never developed a strong sense of identity as an American, and in her early 20s she wanted to visit Russia in search of her own identity and the collective past that had never become hers. I had a strong need to be next to her on that trip; I wanted to introduce her to my roots and my past. However, on a trip to our native St. Petersburg, she felt foreign when surrounded by cold unsmiling strangers speaking her home tongue; even

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her mother, as close as we are, started feeling foreign to her. That trip was as important to me as it was to her. But I did not realize that through exposing her to my past, I was not bringing her closer to that shared past. Shortly after the trip, her art installation inspired by the visit of Russia was chosen for a solo artist exhibit in Manhattan. Ironically, the theme of the exhibit was *Rootlessness*.

I find it ironic, for through much struggle in two immigrations, I have tried to give her a new life and new roots in a new country without instilling any of the unpleasant memories that often defined my pre-immigration past. I was not the first parent to be wrong. As an artist, my daughter has developed a strong interest in collective and individual memory while studying it from an angle different from the one I am taking in this project. At some point her artist's statement was reduced to a single word: MEMORY. She and I talked a lot about memory while I was working on this project; we exchanged ideas and approaches, and often read the same books and articles. I hope that one day she and I will collaborate on an interdisciplinary project on memory that will involve art, social science, and linguistics. It may become *the* ultimate project of my career and *the* ultimate gift that I can leave for her. Until then, I hope that through my academic works I will be able to share some memories that as a parent I failed to share with my daughter.

I dedicate this book to my dear daughter Polina, a gifted artist, an amazing person, and a beautiful young woman.

## Acknowledgments

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