

# Contemporary Witnesses and the Historical Profession: Remembrance, Communicative Transmission, and Collective Memory in Qualitative History<sup>1</sup>

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*This article provides an introduction to the theoretical, methodological, and practical approaches to oral history in Germany. It explores the influence of German history and historiography on the development of oral history in Germany as well as questions of individual and collective memory. It describes in detail a three-phase interview technique that is widely used in German interview practice and that von Plato expanded to include a fourth phase. The article focuses on the importance of subjectivity and the significance of experience in oral history. It argues that the analysis and interpretation of subjectivity is central to the practice of oral history and to the writing of the “history of experience.”*

## Introduction: A Simple Story

Twenty years ago I interviewed Mr. Cronenberg. Born in 1900 into the working class and drafted into the navy in 1918, he presented himself as a participant in both the soviet revolution in Wilhelmshaven and the Kapp Putsch, as a communist in the Weimar Republic, and as a member of the resistance in the Third Reich. He was introduced to me as an “authentic witness of the November Revolution” at a school where he was describing that revolution in vivid detail to the senior classes. During the 1970s he had become a popular contemporary witness, first in the west, where during the 1960s he had struggled for recognition as a resistance fighter, and then also in the east, because in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) he was also respected as a witness of the November Revolution and of the resistance.

It took me two interviews to learn that it is extremely questionable that he experienced the November Revolution as an eyewitness or that he was an active resistance fighter. I researched his real history and the one he told himself. As a biographical researcher I found both to be interesting and worthy of

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on a presentation at the conference “The Contemporary Witness as the Natural Enemy of the Historical Profession?” that took place at the end of January 2000 at the Institute for History and Biography at the Fernuniversität Hagen (Distance University of Hagen) in Lüdenscheid. Published as “Zeitzeugen und historische Zunft. Erinnerung, kommunikative Tradierung und kollektives Gedächtnis in der qualitativen Geschichtswissenschaft—ein Problemaufriss,” *BIOS. Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung und Oral History* 13 (2000): 5-29.

historiographical interpretation. Yet I also needed to find out if he was uttering “falsehoods” and to ask why he told his story differently from the way it appeared to me in other sources, including his own letters. But, as a sub-contractor for memorial institutions, I was torn. In the end, did it really matter for museum tours or for teachers if Mr. Cronenberg himself experienced what he described? Was it not more important that he possessed “qualifications as a professional contemporary witness” and that, at schools, memorial sites, and museums, he could present, in a lively manner, with an aura of authenticity and commanding emotional involvement, in twenty minutes what was to be conveyed to students or to visitors on a tour?

The story of Mr. Cronenberg includes four elements that point to the theme “Contemporary Witnesses as Natural Enemies of the Historical Profession.” At first glance it seems to be only a question of credibility, even the credibility of contemporary witnesses, which appears to be posed differently for historical research and for commemorative sites or schools. Yet the problems manifested so simply in the form of Mr. Cronenberg reveal a deeper complexity: the stories he told, whether invented or not, reveal something about him, the environment of the 1970s and 1980s, and, above all, the expectations placed on him. They demand historical interpretation – and this by academics, who are themselves bound by their time, generations, political-ideological orientations, etc.<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Cronenberg has since died. The museums commemorating the Kapp Putsch no longer exist. Nor does the whole milieu of the 1970s and 1980s in, for example, the schools and universities where he happily and regularly appeared – not in the west, but especially not in the east, where after 1989 almost all relevant local heritage museums disappeared along with the GDR.

Germany is a prime example of the fact that the case of the “Cronenbergs” is not just a question of credibility. It is a question much more of the significance of subjective memories and subjective sources in general, of self-constructed biographies in a time that has difficulty with the perspectives of the past, of the meaning for a new age of past experiences in a milieu that is gone, of the social and intergenerational debates about the past, and of the views of the past and even the presence of the past today. If, instead of Mr. Cronenberg, I had selected a survivor of Auschwitz, different sympathies and identifications, cautions and inhibitions in dealing with the credibility of problematic memories, would have arisen immediately. If I had selected a forced labourer, the current debate over compensation would have come into play. If I had selected a refugee, with his old traditional costume, political associations of a different kind would have shaped the interpretation. Which contemporary historian would dispute that these

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<sup>2</sup> I too listened to Mr. Cronenberg in those days, with great sympathy and, at first, uncritical interest.

considerations or “political correctness” might influence him or her in the choice of subject, the treatment of the theses, or the whole analysis? Too often the (contemporary) history of the last century has been newly written or rewritten.

What significance does this have for historical scholarship and for work relating to commemorative sites? How do historical scholarship, the testimony of contemporary witnesses, the audience, the pedagogical intentions, and media presentations influence one another? In attempting to answer these questions, I will touch not only on fundamental questions about subjective sources and questions of individual and collective consciousnesses but also the relationship between memory and reality in interviews and interview techniques.

### **The Debate Over Subjective Sources**

The debate over the “Cronenbergs” is not new. Whoever works with subjective remembrances and especially with the questioning of contemporary witnesses moves on swaying decks and manoeuvres his ship between Scylla and Charybdis, between two large groups of critics. On the one side are those who as a matter of principle reject both questions about the significance of subjectivity in history and subjective sources of memory and restrict themselves to “traditional” sources such as official records. On the other side are those who do use subjective sources, though only as a snapshot of their time, while denying their ability to provide information about the reality of the past.

### **Scylla or the Traditionalists**

Since the arrival of historicism there has been a debate in the historical profession over the significance of subjective sources, especially subjective personal evidence. By subjective personal evidence is meant a variety of quite different sources. First is all self-produced documentation such as diaries, photograph albums, private films, accounts of significant events (such as wars, [political] crimes, arrest, escape, or imprisonment), letters, school essays, autobiographies, and similar items, which were produced at different times in relation to the events but produced by the same person. In addition there are reports and statements by others, statements by contemporary witnesses, and later written or oral testimonies, also varying in their temporal relationships with the events, developments, or persons being studied. Furthermore, the sources are frequently in the form of dialogues produced after the time under examination, for example, interviews, whether as videos or voice recordings.

Much of the criticism that is levelled against subjective sources could also be levelled against every other source, in particular against official records, which

were created by government authorities or administrative bodies for specific reasons. The main points of criticism that need to be taken seriously were and are:

- As subjective sources, they reflect only the memories of an individual and do not permit generalization that can be applied beyond the individual being interviewed.
- They originated to serve particular interests.
- They are mainly sources, which, like autobiographies, are created long after the events described in them and frequently have a legitimizing purpose.
- Nothing is so deceptive as memory or remembrance that has been overlaid by new events and experiences.
- Oral sources, moreover, were created mostly in dialogue with others who are preponderantly also the interpreters and who thereby create their own sources. At best, they say something about the time of their creation and the views of the participants, the codes to their perceptions, their repudiations, or their personal identifications.

I would like to deal with these points of criticism in more detail and discuss the problems that regularly arise in the use of these sources and, with some examples, also what has been achieved through these subjective perspectives.

### **Misunderstandings?**

Part of the aforementioned criticism, which is clear to everyone who has for any time dealt with the “experience” or significance of “subjectivity,” is based on two crude misunderstandings. One is the idea that work in the history of mentalities is concerned primarily with the exact memory of specific events and their recall. The second is that historians of mentality approach the sources uncritically, identify too closely with them, and possess a naïve belief in their veracity. This part of the criticism collapses when we note the direction of investigation and the goals of such research. After all, it is precisely “subjectivity” in history that is the concern here and for this one requires particular sources that can convey to us something about this subjectivity. Whoever criticizes the subjectivity of the sources should actually be criticizing not the sources but the subject matter itself as insignificant. To do so, however, would be more than questionable because it would imply the elimination of one, if not the, essential element from history, namely people dealing with the pressures and opportunities of their time, their views, and their experiences, and finally to neglect the analysis of those experiences. It is exactly Germany that has become an extreme example of what constricts the political culture and what is lost in the study of history when personal experience and the confrontation with history are ignored. For example, the decades following the Second World War and their political culture were shaped in part by the debates over the relationship with the National Socialist

past. The end of the Weimar Republic, the rise of National Socialism, and the preparations for the Second World War would be incomprehensible if one did not include as explanations the “national shame” of the defeat in the First World War and the rejection of the Treaty of Versailles and the various reparation agreements by broad segments of the population. Many modern historians have dealt with such themes, whether at a political-administrative level in regard to the *Vergangenheitspolitik*,<sup>3</sup> i.e. the politics of amnesty and integration of Nazis in West Germany in the 1950s, or at other levels of transmission including subjective ones.

### **Analysis and Transmission**

In most research in the history of mentality the issue is thus not the precise remembrance of events but rather the analysis of earlier experiences. Nevertheless it is mostly the mind and especially its poor ability to remember exactly that is the crucial point of the criticism of subjective sources. The memory, it is said, is not a very reliable authority and its content is buried and altered by later experiences and analysis, by further examination, and by a new social environment. Indeed this is the crucial point: the memory is a sensitive instrument and its efforts are difficult to interpret. We live in a tangle of old and new experiences that determine our current attitudes and values. Although we do not always remember accurately, without those many layers of experience we are not only without a past but also presumably without any orientation in the present, without an ability to judge, and without emotional empathy and connections. Thus, despite a lack of precise remembrances, we speak not only of individual memory but also of a collective memory, even of collective mentalities in whole societies. Every individual, politics, advertising, and journalism takes such memories and mentalities into account. Justifiably? Or are these phenomena – in the sense of a positivist judgement – not scientifically comprehensible? The answers to these “simple questions” present the historical profession with basic problems – and by no means only the historians of mentality.

Contemporary witnesses are not only witnesses of their own individual and varying lives and how they view these. They also have a current environment, commonly referred to as “the culture of memory.” This milieu helps to shape their experience, structures their presentation, probably also their memory, and gives them recognition and affection, for which some show their gratitude in their own way through their presentations. Mr. Cronenberg is only a particular example of this. Moreover the memory is verbalized in narrative forms that present patterns,

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<sup>3</sup> Norbert Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik. Die Anfänge der Bundesrepublik und die NS-Vergangenheit* (München, 1999); Peter Reichel, *Politik mit der Erinnerung. Gedächtnisorte im Streit um die nationalsozialistische Vergangenheit* (München, 1995).

so to speak, that go beyond the individual. These patterns include growing up with fairy tales and legends, lessons in the composition of essays with introduction, development, and conclusion, and our ways of telling jokes, of self-presentation and of self-explanation without too obvious self-praise. Even the ways in which shares are invested or articles are written derive from particular traditional structures.

Therefore, since Maurice Halbwachs, who already dealt with questions about the social determinants of memory in the 1920s, one speaks not only of the individual but also of the collective memory.<sup>4</sup>

### **From the “Communicative” to the “Cultural Memory”?**

The historical sciences (but also, and especially, the museums and commemorative sites) have a stronger connection to contemporary witnesses than it appears at first glance. The conceptualization of the creators of exhibitions on National Socialism, for example, in many cases originated in an environment still closely tied to that of the contemporary witnesses. Historians are also constrained by language, values, emphases, etc., their class or gender, and their generational background. These lead at least some of them to describe the transfer through participants and eye witnesses as “transmission through communication” as put by Elisabeth Domansky and Harald Welzer, thus further developing terminology by Aleida and Jan Assmann.<sup>5</sup> In this context the term “communicative remembrance” means more than transmission by contemporary witnesses. “By ‘communicative remembrance’ they (the Assmanns) understand both events and the related strategies of remembrance, upon which the collective ‘agrees’ through a complicated process of discursive strategies.”<sup>6</sup>

The collectives referred to here are, for example, families, milieus, parties, even nations, but also specific groups whose motivation is the special remembrance of suffering and persecution or of accomplishments and heroic deeds. These considerations help to shape the memory. Later, memory that was

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<sup>4</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *Das Gedächtnis und seine sozialen Bedingungen* (Berlin, Neuwied 1966 or in paperback Frankfurt/Main, 1996; orig. 1925).

<sup>5</sup> Compare in particular: Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandel des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (München, 1999) (this book had appeared only shortly before the writing of this article and therefore hardly figures in the discussion carried on here). See also Aleida Assmann and Dietrich Harth, *Mnemosyne. Formen und Funktionen der kulturellen Erinnerung* (Frankfurt a.M., 1991); Jan, Assmann, “Assmann, Kollektives Gedächtnis und Kulturelle Identität,” in *ibid.* and Tonio Hölscher, *Kultur und Gedächtnis* (Frankfurt a.M., 1988); Jan Assmann, *Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, 2., durchgesehene Auflage (München, 1997 (1992)). See also Jan Assmann, *Religion And Cultural Memory: Ten Studies*, transl. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005)

<sup>6</sup> Elisabeth Domansky and Harald Welzer, eds., *Eine offene Geschichte. Zur kommunikativen Tradierung der nationalsozialistischen Vergangenheit* (Tübingen, 1999), 20.

first intended as individual remembrance is stripped of the certainty that makes it a purely individual one. After all, we remember in reference to collective authorities of socialization, within a framework of collectives that accept memories or perceptions and confirm or reject them, and we recount experiences in narrative forms that themselves structure memory.

Therein lies the deeper complexity of our problem. And it becomes more complex in the course of time when the dominant collectives – not only the contemporary witnesses – change or when new collectives take shape, which at the time of their creation could have little to no influence on the memories. Succeeding generations do not have the same set of values or the same breadth of experience as the contemporary witnesses. Every person has the feeling that as he becomes older he or she represents authentic experience. It is, therefore, distressing when “the” history, i.e. the history presented on television or in exhibitions, appears strange or hostile to those who experienced it. For first-time contemporary witnesses<sup>7</sup> this is sad enough. For regular contemporary witnesses it must be even more upsetting, a devaluation of their experiences, a death before death so to speak.

How much must the anxiety of contemporary witnesses increase when the following generations without old ties to past friends, comrades, or the nation become involved in the evaluation of the recent past? An example is the reaction to the exhibition “Crimes of the *Wehrmacht*.”<sup>8</sup> After all, both suffering and heroic deeds create a personal awareness of being special representatives of historical reality. In many respects, therefore, contemporary witnesses certainly make the work of commemorative sites or historical scholarship difficult. It is precisely the emotionality of the witnesses, which can be a helpful element in the didactics of commemorative sites, that is known to complicate both scholarly research and commemoration. One has only to think of the competition between concentration camp survivors and former prisoners of Soviet camps for exhibition space at memorial sites where both experiences are to be documented. The case of former

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<sup>7</sup> For the historiography these “virgin contemporary witnesses” should in my opinion be distinguished from the professional contemporary witnesses as much as eyewitnesses are from the “secondary contemporary witnesses” or the accounts created immediately after an event are distinguished from those remembered later.

<sup>8</sup> [Note by editor, A.Freund: Originally titled *Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944* ("War of Annihilation. Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941 to 1944"), this travelling exhibition (1995-1999) by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research evoked strong reactions among its 800,000 visitors in Germany and Austria. While historians agreed that the German army "was involved in planning and implementing a war of annihilation against Jews, prisoners of war, and the civilian population," the general public was astonished and, in some cases, resentful, to hear that the *Wehrmacht* was not "unblemished." See Hamburg Institute for Social Research, *Crimes of the German Wehrmacht: Dimensions of a War of Annihilation 1941-1944. An Outline of the Exhibition* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2004) [http://www.verbrechen-der-wehrmacht.de/pdf/vdw\\_en.pdf](http://www.verbrechen-der-wehrmacht.de/pdf/vdw_en.pdf) (Accessed 20 June 2009).]

prisoners of special camps also shows how views change according to dominant public opinion and influence memory. During the 1950s and even among Social Democrats, such prisoners were popular witnesses against the Soviet Union during the Cold War, but with the policy of *détente* came a change so that many former inmates of special camps no longer told even their children about their imprisonment, so as not to be suspected of having been Nazis. Their bitterness at this change alters their memory. In the west they even feel like a “group of victims” that has never received any respect, not even in the 1950s, even though many of them were mentioned in newspaper articles and spoke on the radio. In general, research on this subject has been a perfect example of investigations of the history of mentality, which produces results through the comparison of subjective sources and at the same time illustrates the problem in Germany of speaking of an “agreement” on collective “remembrance strategies” in oral memory. Actually – and I hope to bring owls into this Athens of theoreticians – it is the disunity and conflict of various collectives, each with its own traditions and myths sustaining its identity, that catch the eye here and it is the brevity and temporariness of an agreement on strategies of remembrance that characterize the Germany of the twentieth century, with the various interpretations of the First World War, National Socialism, the division of Germany, the two dictatorships, or the Cold War. But perhaps this split only makes the need for agreement and the pressure for consensus inside the individual collectives more pressing to allow for agreement, however brief, on the demonstration and presentation of objects and rituals and, thereby, to make progress towards the “cultural memory.” “As ‘cultural memory’ they (the Assmanns) term those objects and rituals, in which such (remembrance) strategies manifest themselves.”<sup>9</sup>

What time periods are being considered here? One can really speak of an “agreement” in relation to such “manifestation” in the memory of a culture only after a longer period of transmission and ritualization, when these manifestations have retained the same content for generations. One has only to think of the memories of the Second World War. Until now there have been only agreements and ritualizations that vary according to milieu and generation. The large museums and memorial sites cannot even agree on how to present the conflict and the irreconcilability of memories. To me, however, the communicative and especially the cultural memory both appear to be a demonstration of a theory of long waves in a society or a culture.

Aleida Assmann herself correctly describes the cultural memory as a “memory that extends over epochs, that is supported by normative texts” and the communicative memory as “usually a memory binding three generations through orally transmitted remembrances.”<sup>10</sup> She cites<sup>11</sup> Reinhart Kosellek who, in

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<sup>9</sup> Domansky Welzer, *Eine offene Geschichte*, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume*, 13.



looking at the Shoah, wrote: “With the change in generation there is also a change in the way the subject is viewed. The *contemporary* experience-rich past of the survivors becomes a *pure past* that has removed itself from experience... With the disappearing memory the distance becomes not only greater but also changes its quality. Soon only the files, enriched by pictures, films, memoirs, speak.”<sup>12</sup>

One does not know if Kosellek describes this “change in quality” neutrally as a transition whereby every quality retains its own claim or whether he simply means that the new quality is the real progress toward knowledge, which would place into question contemporary history as a whole. He appears to mean the latter in the following quote: “The moral shock, the veiled defensive purposes, the accusations, and assignment of responsibility in the writing of history – all these strategies of coming to terms with the past lose their political-existential associations, they fade away to the benefit of individual scholarly research and analyses guided by hypotheses.”<sup>13</sup>

Assmann asks herself, rightfully in my opinion, if “history” “(must) first ‘die’ in the heads, hearts, and bodies of the affected before it can rise as knowledge like the phoenix out of the ashes of experiences.”<sup>14</sup> According to Assmann, therefore, objectivity would be “thus not only a question of *methodology* and critical standards but also of *mortification*, extinction, the fading away of suffering and shock.”<sup>15</sup> In the case of the Shoah it appears at the moment to be almost the opposite. The further away the Holocaust is, the more alive it becomes. She continues, “While particular types of memory are seen as being in retreat, such as the learning memory, the educational memory and, with regard to the Shoah, the memory of experience (still living witnesses – A v. P), other forms of remembrance such as that of the media or politics appear to be increasing in significance.”<sup>16</sup>

One can add that, even with the acceptance of Kosellek’s idea, this change from the “experience-rich, contemporary past” to “pure past” itself must remain or become a subject of historical research.

In this brief explanation it is already clear how strongly “history and memory,” “experience and contemporary history” are linked, how fundamentally the transitions from communicative to cultural memory challenge contemporary history, and what would be lost if the “experience-rich past,” with all its

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<sup>11</sup> Her first concern is that today one speaks of a crisis of memory, for example, as put by Pierre Nora, *Zwischen Geschichte und Gedächtnis* (Berlin, 1990) “as a disconnection of the present from the past” (13).

<sup>12</sup> Reinhart Kosellek, “Afterword” in Charlotte Beradt. *Das Dritte Reich des Traums* (Frankfurt a. M., 1994), 117-132, cited in Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume*, 14.

<sup>13</sup> Kosellek 1994 (cited by Aleida Assmann 1999, 14)

<sup>14</sup> Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume*, 14.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

“strategies for coming to terms with the past,” did not itself remain or become an object of research. Indeed, part of such research is the documentation and analysis of the memories of those still living and their transmission into “the pure past,” which then would no longer be so pure. Contemporary witnesses no longer simply die; today they have a long afterlife in the media. Their testimonies become part of a medial “culture of memory” and influence even more the collective memory in Germany.

Thus the historical profession must concern itself with the significance of memories, traditions, heritage, and even collective myths. Why did the legends of the Battle in the Teutoberg Forest in 9 A.D. become so powerful only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when a sense of national community developed? Why was even the workers’ movement seized by the wave of “nationalist upheaval” in 1923 after the occupation of the Ruhr by French and Belgian troops and a Communist functionary named Radek was impelled to go the grave of a German nationalist bomber named Schlageter? What is the significance of the complicated relationship of Germany with Jews and Russians since 1945? Why do the crimes of National Socialism define so decisively the contemporary debates in the political culture, although the end of their virulence has already been predicted frequently and organizations “opposed to forgetting” were established, so that even today it is possible to “make politics with remembrance?”<sup>17</sup>

### **Excursus: Examples from Research: Political Fractures in Germany and Their Analysis**

As has been noted,<sup>18</sup> in the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, research in the history of mentalities has been carried out in various fields and has brought to light particular findings:

- for example, in intergenerational questioning, i.e. in relation to “the transfer of experience” between generations in such areas as continuity and change in childrearing styles, value systems, educational goals, etc., or in more specialized subjects, such as the effects of persecution, flight, and expulsion or the general traumatization of the following generations;
- in questions about political changes, in particular those relating to National Socialism, denazification, internment as a prisoner of war, and similar subjects, as well as private life in the GDR;

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<sup>17</sup> The original phrase “Politik mit der Erinnerung” is the title of a book by Peter Reichel; see footnote 3 (translator’s note).

<sup>18</sup> Alexander v. Plato, “Erfahrungsgeschichte - von der Etablierung der Oral History,” in Gerd Jüttemann und Hans Thomae, eds., *Biographische Methoden in den Humanwissenschaften* (Weinheim, 1998).

- in the investigation of both individual and collective patterns of coming to terms with the past or the significance of collective myths;
- in research into the relationship between the sexes, the establishment and significance of the gendered division of work, or relationships within the family generally;
- in asking questions about secularization, religiosity, and piety or biographical disruptions in political or ideological attitudes and orientations in general;
- in investigations of changes in the life course and life history, in particular historical developments, such as the social rise and fall of a family and its significance or qualifications in old and new occupations (for example after 1945 or after the turning point of 1989/90<sup>19</sup>);
- in general questions about different cultures of memory, for example in the east and the west and their effects.

Less successful was research aimed at the reconstruction of events and processes through oral history examinations. In fact, this raises questions about our minds' capacity for remembering, the possibility of describing a memory, its images, and its emotional dimensions in words.

### **The History of Experience of National Socialism**

After the war historical research on National Socialism in the Federal Republic of Germany [FRG] was at first dominated by political history, followed later by the "Ideology of Fascism" ([Ernst] Nolte) and then social historical elements. At almost the same time came the history of the resistance and research on the victims of National Socialism. Finally, not until the early 1980s, the silent majorities under National Socialism moved into view. As Lutz Niethammer observed almost programmatically at the time, "the people" were missing from the debates over continuity or discontinuity as though they had not been born until after 1945.

Now, through later oral questioning about people's life histories and their interpretation, one has learned exactly what critics said could not be found out through these "legitimizing" personal accounts, through a "false" memory, or through oral history. Oral history has provided insight into those elements of National Socialism that appealed to various people and groups at the time, the other side of fear, pressure, or terror. In this way it was still possible after such a

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<sup>19</sup> Compare the various subjects from quantitative research on everyday experience, in particular from the project "Lifecourses and Historical Change in the Former GDR" of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development (Max-Planck-Institut für Bildungsforschung) by Hans Ulrich Maier, Martin Diewald, Johannes Huinink, Heike Solga, and others since the beginning of the 1990s.

long time to find out more precisely the success of National Socialism that is not adequately explained by terror.<sup>20</sup>

Only a few years before, the television program, "Holocaust," which described the Shoah in a very subjective, understandable way, had an enormous effect in Germany. The documentary film, "Shoah," by [Claude] Lanzmann had a similar significance for intellectuals; it too attempted a history of experience, a collection and analysis of "testimonies" of the survivors.

Germany had already demonstrated several times in the 20<sup>th</sup> century what happens when one neglects the analysis of earlier experiences in political culture and education. From today's perspective, the 1950s in West Germany are seen not only in terms of the unifying effects of Adenauer's politics or as the years of the economic miracle but, contrary to what most people would have thought then, also as a time of dull refusal to come to terms with the crimes of National Socialism and to reject those crimes themselves. Today the 1960s are seen as a time of upheaval around exactly this question. The German historians of that time would have sharply rejected such a view. And for the GDR today the mendaciousness and false heroism in its "official antifascism" is a subject for discussion that would have been rejected by GDR historians of that time.

After the *Reich* [Imperial Germany], the Weimar Republic, National Socialism, Allied occupation, and division into two German states, it was necessary for people to reorient themselves according to new political developments. Only in retrospect was the significance of such reorientation for the later political culture and the collective memory in contemporary history or education recognized. Since the Lamprecht debate around the turn of the previous century, whoever dealt with this subject as a contemporary historian was always vulnerable to being criticized for working "subjectively," for using imprecise sources uncritically. And I suspect that the resistance to such research always had something to do with this German history and the involvement of the main representatives of the historical profession and large sections of the public in political history.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The relevant literature has become copious since the project "Life Story and Social Culture in the Ruhr 1930 to 1960" (LUSIR -Lebensgeschichte und Sozialkultur im Ruhrgebiet 1930 bis 1960) begun in 1980: Lutz Niethammer, ed., "Die Jahre weiß man nicht, wo man die heute hinsetzen soll." *Faschismus-Erfahrungen im Ruhrgebiet* (LUSIR vol. 1) (Berlin-Bonn, 1983); *ibid.*, ed., *Hinterher weiß man, daß es richtig war, daß es schief gegangen ist.* "Nachkriegserfahrungen im Ruhrgebiet" (LUSIR vol.2) (Berlin/Bonn, 1983); *ibid.* and Alexander v. Plato, eds., "Wir kriegen jetzt andere Zeiten." *Auf der Suche nach der Erfahrung des Volkes in nachfaschistischen Ländern* (LUSIR vol. 3) (Berlin/Bonn, 1985).

<sup>21</sup> Alexander v. Plato, "Geschichte und Psychologie - Oral History und Psychoanalyse," in *BIOS - Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung und Oral History* 11 (1998): 171-200.

## Reorientation in Germany after 1989

Reunification demonstrated again that historians could not be indifferent to the way in which memories of the GDR and the old FRG appear and continue to make themselves felt. Since 1989, the population of the two Germanies has been experiencing something similar to what happened after 1945: People had to reorient themselves after the political rupture, not only politically but also, and especially, in their everyday norms. The “inner unity,” the “wall in the heads,” and similar problematic formulations make no sense at all if they are not imbued with the different experiences in the West and the East; when the differing experiences, “cultures of memory,” or the differing “cultural memories” are not examined; when the life changes, the self-assurances that follow the uncertainties caused by the far-reaching change in everyday norms, and the process of coming to terms with such change are not considered.

Here is an example. When we in the Institute for History and Biography at the Distance University Hagen began at the end of 1991 to research the theme “Home and School in the GDR” and to produce films on the subject, we quickly discovered a “secret consensus.” Only a year after reunification, former GDR teachers who at first had been supportive of the West German school system, again, or for the first time, saw the GDR schools in a very positive light. It also became clear that parents who had attended GDR schools lost their expertise in relation to their children who were attending schools now. For example, they saw educational issues with reference to their experience with polytechnic secondary schools and, therefore, completely differently from west German teachers and parents. At the same time this research shows that the two sides – home and school – in their relationship to issues of the GDR-period are related in a way that does not appear in the school records. None of these questions could have been answered through documents alone. To every “scholar of experience” it is immediately clear that, in this, as with similar questions, it is necessary to use a variety of methods, that the concentration on one method, namely the examination of documents, would be misguided, since these issues can not be examined only through the analysis of files. Nor, of course, can they be examined only through the analysis of interviews.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> As we nevertheless formulated such questions and problems for a research proposal that would explain the various methods to be used, from documents to interviews, one expert declared that the school records yielded enough information and we should restrict ourselves to those. This is one example of how intolerantly some scholars deal with questions relating to the history of mentalities and how strongly some believe in documents – and of all things in relationship to the GDR where there is a huge gap between the reality of the records and the reality of experience. Compare: Alexander v. Plato, ed., *Die DDR in der Erinnerung, Studienbrief der Fernuniversität Hagen* (Hagen, 1999).

## **Charybdis – or the Purists of Modern Discourse**

The other fundamental criticism of remembrances as historical sources, which thus also resorts to the basic criticism mentioned above, always sees the asking of questions, such as the life history interview, as artefacts. These artefacts, it is claimed, repeat only the contemporary view of history and either negate every historical reference to past reality or make it impossible for scholars to understand it. At first this criticism<sup>23</sup> seems credible, since of course every oral history interview is an artefact in the sense of being a newly created source. And it is almost pointless to emphasize again that most life history interviews concern themselves simply with experiences, coming to terms with the past, and with later views of the past. With this understanding, I will discuss in particular those aspects of criticism that reject the tangible relationship of memory to past reality as a historical source or are indifferent to what “truth” or “reference to reality” is expressed in these memories.

One could make it easy for oneself and start by repeating an earlier observation: Contemporary witnesses nowadays do not die like they did in the past. They have a long afterlife in the media. Their testimonies are no longer only written documents and statements but are preserved for the future through recordings, films, or the “placing” of their stories on the Internet. Thus they quickly become historical sources at the same time as the narrative itself. Vast, once unimaginable capacities for information storage create huge archives that are always and everywhere accessible and provide contemporary witnesses with a long, long life as historical sources. Almost immediately after its production, the artefact “interview” also becomes a historical source at least for an understanding of the time of its creation. As a result the problem of criticism shifts in time, into a new past. The interview can be used by all critics of the methods of qualitative questioning in historical scholarship as a source for a time that has now passed.

But the problem is naturally deeper. The Spielberg Foundation’s “Survivors of the Shoah” is an example of the way in which a funded group of contemporary witnesses can determine or alter images of the past and their presentation well into the future. This problem is not new either: the special demands of the first real mass public, the millions visiting the world fairs in the nineteenth century, led to a change in the ways history was presented. In order to satisfy this mass audience, working methods and tools, clothing and dwelling types, mores and customs, etc. became subjects for historical presentation and

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<sup>23</sup> Harald Welzer sees himself as a representative of this criticism.

finally also objects of the historical study. Previously these areas had been left to ethnology and anthropology.<sup>24</sup>

What does it mean, if today, and even more in the future, a public of millions not only sees something in an exhibition but collectively develops a relationship to commemoration and to scholarship through contemporary forms of entertainment, through “infotainment” or “edutainment,” that brings new life to its old, medially saved contemporary witnesses, that can present them in new ways, puts them into current “modern” contexts, and structures these anew? The historical profession will see this problem “as a vision of horror” but will not be able to shut itself off from it. Rather, it will have to develop methods to understand these new relationships to history and its sources in their new medial effectiveness. Not only will the images of history shape memories even more strongly than before, they will lead to a new criticism of sources; for the reality of written records, that today already reveals clear differences from the reality of how choices are made, will take on even more a life of its own with the development of other forms of decision-making and how these are documented or not documented.

### **Remembrance and its “Factual Content”**

Let us deal with the last, most difficult, even if not the most crucial problem of the history of mentality: the problem of precise remembrance in interviews that take place after the remembered events. Differently from the discipline of social psychology or school that is represented by, among others, Harald Welzer, historians must naturally also be concerned about the credibility or factual content of the testimony of contemporary witnesses, if only to be able to interpret the “consistency” of a specific statement or the contradiction between an “untruth” and its roots.<sup>25</sup>

Fritz Schütze is considered the father of the theory which postulates that past reality is mirrored in interviews conducted some time after the experience. There is hardly a sociological, biographical investigation that does not refer to it either positively<sup>26</sup> or negatively. Schütze himself offers several points where criticism can be made of a mechanical theory of the reflection of past reality, although he himself at decisive points speaks only of a “homology” between past

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<sup>24</sup> Alice v. Plato wrote about these ethnological and museological “detours of historiography” in *Geschichte auf Umwegen. Massenpräsentation, Ethnologie und Geschichte auf den Pariser Weltausstellungen des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Phil. Diss. Universität Hannover, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> That would not be uninteresting for Welzer’s research as well, since only then can one determine “codes,” upon which interviewers and interviewees sometimes agree, contrary to “the” reality or even contrary to the remembered reality. Some of Welzer’s work concerns this matter.

<sup>26</sup> Primarily because of Schütze’s development of interview techniques.

reality and its recapitulation in narrative interviews.<sup>27</sup> But the concept of homology does not make matters easier because in the natural sciences it tends to mean “congruity,” while in philosophy it is more likely to mean “correlation.” And “correlation” is in its imprecise classification more appropriate to our problematic subject, though contributing only marginally to its clarification. At the beginning there is an experience, an event, a person, a development, or a conflict; from these come reports and narratives in writing or in life history interviews, which need to be interpreted – in this case with a view to the truth contained in them. But what is the relationship between memory and the interview? Are there interview techniques that make it possible to broaden revelations, verify them better, or even to stimulate the memory?

### **The Entangled Memory and the Entanglements in the Interview**

The art of the interview consists of, among other things, not leaving an essential, even life-changing event, or a key experience without a context, but rather putting them into a network of relationships, descriptions, episodes, and information to make possible sophisticated and extensive interpretation through a variety of approaches. Why? In my experience, there is a relationship between the qualified diversity of an interview, which is produced by the interviewer or the interview partner, and the stimulation of the interview partner’s ability to remember. With the increasing number of my interviews, it has also become clearer to me that interviewers can improve the capacity for remembering through techniques and experience, reduce the pressure for self-justification on the part of the interview partner, and often lay out a complex web of information about the life history for later analysis. This fundamental thesis must be explained, and will be explained by means of a few examples, beginning with a simple one.

#### *Example A*

In answering a question about the events of an industrial conflict involving the union thirty years ago, a man could not give the names of those who participated but was able to describe the substance and course of events. Gradually, while

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<sup>27</sup> Fritz Schütze, “Zur Hervorlockung und Analyse von Erzählungen thematisch relevanter Geschichten im Rahmen soziologischer Feldforschung” in Arbeitsgruppe Bielefelder Soziologen, eds., *Kommunikative Sozialforschung* (München, 1976); *ibid.*, “Prozeßstrukturen des Lebenslaufs,” in: Joachim Mathes, Arno Pfeifenberger, Manfred Stosberg, eds., *Biographie in handlungswissenschaftlicher Perspektive* (Nürnberg, 1981), 67-156; *ibid.*, “Kognitive Figuren des autobiographischen Stegreiferzählens,” in Martin Kohli, and G. Robert, eds. *Biographie und Wirklichkeit* (Stuttgart, 1984); *ibid.*, *Das narrative Interview. Kurs der Fernuniversität Hagen* (Hagen, 1986); *ibid.*, “Kollektive Verlaufskurve oder kollektiver Wandlungsprozeß,” in *BIOS - Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung und Oral History* 2 (1989): 31-110.



telling me about this conflict and giving precise answers to my questions, he remembered the names of the participants. These were confirmed partly in the records of the workers' council and partly through elaboration by the interview partner. Details included even the historical background and life stories of these persons, such as officer's rank, membership in the NSDAP, or their behaviour toward forced labourers. Questions relating to research using memory were immediately raised. Does one remember differently in different areas of one's memory? Can these differing areas activate one another? Are there special capacities for remembering one's youth in old age but a reduced ability to remember more recent events?

### *Example B*

A businessman, who occupied a high office in his industry's association during the National Socialist period, kept silent about his membership in the NSDAP. At the same time he was able to describe in great detail and with pride how useful his contacts from his time as a functionary were in the rebuilding of his company and its removal from the list of industries to be dismantled in accordance with terms imposed by the Allies after the war. This removal was made easier for him through the distribution of responsibility within his family. All this information revealed more and more his own culpability, which he himself realized. Finally – even if only in the third interview – he “admitted” his membership in the NSDAP. The linkages in the exceedingly comprehensive interview that touched on so many aspects of his life must finally have penetrated the personal “protective wall” that he had built and maintained through clever jokes and obvious criticisms of the NSDAP, as well as his shame for having joined this “plebeian,” coarse, brutal party.

### *Example C*

In the first hours of our life history interview, a minister in a city of the then still existing GDR attempted, with political circumspection and diplomacy, to avoid mentioning his persecution and humiliation by the leadership of the SED (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*- Socialist Unity Party of Germany) and Ministry of State Security (Stasi) surveillance. He succeeded until a conversation that I carried on occasionally with his wife. She recounted how jealous she had been when a secretary of the rectory, who had been assigned to him by the city, made blatant advances to her husband. Even worse, while the minister's wife was absent the secretary had laid herself in the man's bed. The minister then dismissed her. During the following part of the conversation the minister and his wife talked themselves into a rage, which appeared to me to be

the surfacing of her indignation and jealousy. They then mentioned further actions, torments, and outrageous attacks on his reputation through the SED locally and also by the Stasi. The dams had burst and could no longer be mended by any subsequent revisions. The minister could shape the form of the disclosure but not the interpretations based on my own wider knowledge. Of course it was only after reunification in 1989 that this persecution by the Ministry of State Security could be documented through records. From this interview arise more questions relating to research into memory as well as to my thesis. Emotions and earlier feelings can themselves be remembered; they stimulate other areas of memory and lower the threshold of inhibition and reflection that consciously or unconsciously restrict the memory. With all memories, as with recollections of emotions, it is a matter of mental experience: a specific smell or the taste of food can be remembered and described and in turn stimulate other remembrances.

#### *Example D*

In my hometown, a small village in Lower Saxony, interview partners told several variations of a story about the crash of a bomber at the beginning of 1945. The core of these reports is as follows. During its return from a bombing mission over Berlin, a British bomber crashed in the vicinity of the village. Before its crash burning pieces or released bombs fell and hit a farmstead. While many of the villagers gathered at the crash site, the farmstead began to burn. Everyone then ran there and helped the farmer save his belongings. I heard a great deal about “the great quantities of ham, bacon, and sausages” that the farmer had secretly produced and stored (and now had to distribute extensively to the villagers in order to “keep the secret”). I heard a great deal about outrage at the Allied bombing and even more about everything that was saved from the bomber, from parachute silk to the bomb and wing parts, which were put to all kinds of uses, such as building boats and rafts. But I heard little – and this only when requested – about the British bomber crew. What happened to them? The explanations that I heard, mostly secretly but also sometimes from drunken contemporary witnesses at various shooting festivals, were completely different: sometimes there were no survivors at all; sometimes there were two; sometimes five. In one story the crew members were locked into the fire hall overnight and “turned over [to the authorities] in accordance with proper procedures.” In another story “one was still alive and died” on the way into the village. In a third version there were two survivors, of whom one died and one survived the war as a prisoner of war. In most of the other accounts, there was hemming and hawing but nothing was actually said. I learned something about “speaking and silence” in a village community, about black market butchering, and even more about the relationship

with the enemy, but, in the end, I learned nothing concrete about the crew of the crashed British bomber.

Years later I asked a village woman about the forced labourers in this village. She told me how varied the treatment of the labourers was, how bad at Farmer XY's, on whom the freed Poles avenged themselves in 1945, but how well treated were others who were entirely happy to survive the war in complete peace in Germany. One example was Stanislaus, known as Stani, who was especially popular among the female members of the community. He was good looking, with a mischievous laugh and, above all, the ability to perform riding tricks and equestrian vaulting. He once rode through the village, high on a large workhorse performing a one-armed handstand, once lying backwards while smoking, etc., etc. Suddenly she said, "You can see how good he had it here in that he even kicked to death his own allies." I was speechless. In this version of the story Stani had kicked the British bomber pilots with his "heavy boots" until they were dead. This woman knew that I was interested in the story of the bomber; I had asked her about it many times before. Never had she mentioned Stani's murders. On the contrary, she had described him as a personable, even educated man in his mid-twenties. Fourteen days after the interview she asked me not to publish this story with her interview. She said she was not sure if it was true, she did not want to hurt anyone, since she had mentioned other villagers who had been present and had not intervened, including herself.

Now which version is correct? Here in this context is another observation that, at the same time, asks a question of the research into memory. One frequently hears in life story interviews something about which one has asked no question or something that was not mentioned, was even kept secret, in response to a question specifically about it but is divulged in another context. Remembrance apparently operates in this way: habitual constraints on memory are, for whatever reason, built up in relation to specific events but are less effective in contexts where there are no such habitual constraints, allowing information about those events to be revealed. Two personal structures of legitimization came into conflict in this interview: that relating to the confession of a crime, in this case of murders, during the Third Reich; and the emphasis on the good treatment of most foreign workers by the "simple people" in the countryside.

Which version should one consider more important? First of all, these varying statements broaden the material to be analysed and the approaches for further analysis. They also increase the ability to verify information through other interviews and other sources. Finally the plausibility of specific assumptions becomes firmer as well. In this case, other contemporary witnesses became more "open" after the village woman told her version of the story and confirmed her account. Some remained silent or did not remember. One of those who

corroborated this account presented himself as an eyewitness and directed me to another still living person who was also present and could confirm this story. Such information had previously been completely absent in this community of silence.

### **Excursus on “Good” and “Bad” Interviews. Some Basic Hints for Interview Techniques**

Several basic assumptions about the quality of historical interviews arise from the points mentioned above.

The interviews must be organized as life histories and touch on diverse areas and themes of a life. One reason for the aforementioned criticisms and misunderstandings is that many historians carry on “expert interviews” in that they ask about very specific events or narrow themes. Especially then are they confronted by inadequacies of memory, and their criticism of the subjectivity grows, without their actually having examined “subjectivity,” i.e. questions of experience and coming to terms with history. As a result we, i.e. the staff of the Institute for History and Biography, always carry out life history interviews, even when the goals of the interviews are narrow. These are carried out in order to evoke and spin a narrative web, which also includes the periods before and after and as many areas of the life story as possible, so that interpretive possibilities increase, and later points of view and earlier experiences can be placed in relation to one another. It is hoped thereby to stimulate the memory and discover the ways in which interview partners have come to terms with their history, all of which permit as complete an interpretation as possible.

The half-open narrative life history interview has come to be made up of ideally three typical phases that, as much as possible, I expand into a fourth.

First comes the free-wheeling part, in which the interviewer asks a general question, such as “Could you tell me your life story?” Then to a large extent he remains in the background. This holding back is intended to allow the interview partner to construct the complete story of his or her own life. How does someone structure a life story and why? Are key experiences referred to as changes in direction in order to give meaning to a change in life? Are there patterns of narration that serve as a model in this life history, whether consciously or unconsciously? Are these professional life stories or Wilhelm Meister imitations, describing with slight exaggeration the current situation as the necessary end and fulfilment of a purposeful life? Or are they rather shifting, determined by force and coincidence, snippets of time and fragments, à la Robbe-Grillet? Where are the main emphases? What is seen as secondary? Where has something been left out, that later after further questioning reveals itself to be very significant and why?

This holding back in the first stage also has goals that are not based in an attempted “neutrality” of the interviewer. Nevertheless this alleged neutrality becomes a main element of the criticism that it is impossible to pretend that a dialogic context was not immediately established with the start of the interview and that it did not shape the whole interview. This is certainly correct but overlooks the fact that constant interruptions of the responses to the first general question prevent the development of self-constructions of life and thus reduce the analytical possibilities. Most people have a picture of themselves and their lives, with which the history of experience is concerned and about which those interviewed wish to speak – regardless of differences between the interview partner and the interviewer, whether in age, hair length, sex – which could hardly lead to “neutrality.” Interruptions make the flow of narration peter out, a flow, which would be significant for the analysis. Schütze is correct when he speaks of the interview partner’s “pressure to tell” that wants to fulfil itself. Everyone who has conducted life history interviews will have learned this. This discovery is also confirmed by the fact that the conversation situation changes when an interviewer departs radically from any perception of neutrality and, for example, denounces the anti-Semitism of an interview partner. The interview partner’s wariness then increases, even to the extent that answers are henceforth given only in accordance with the expected “political correctness” – a basic error in an interview, at least one with a historical goal. It is not, however, all that easy to abandon every idea about neutrality, whose rationale sometimes appears to me to be a new version of the radical beginnings in the oral history debates of twenty years ago, when there was already talk of “the interview as artefact,” though this was rapidly elaborated or revised with advancing experience.<sup>28</sup> Only with very narrow research goals – for example research into the effects of such intrusions and interruptions – could one brush aside all these experiences.

A second phase of the interview allows immediate follow-up questions relating to details that have not been completely understood. This second phase would be followed by a third, in which the prepared list of questions would be used – not in the sense of the strict sequence of a questionnaire but in accordance with the conversational context. The main problem here is always determining the point at which a question can be considered answered or at what point the partner considers it answered. This problem should be discussed by the research group.

I would add another, fourth, phase, a “conflict” phase, as far as possible toward the end of the interview. By this I mean a stage when the differences between the interviewing partner and the interviewer are discussed, for instance, to return to an earlier example, criticism of expressed anti-Semitism. Such an

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<sup>28</sup> Compare the methodological article, which is still very much worth reading, by Lutz Niethammer, “Fragen - Antworten - Fragen. Methodische Erfahrungen und Erwägungen zur Oral History,” in Niethammer and v. Plato, eds., “*Wir kriegen jetzt andere Zeiten*,” 392-445.

argument over differing opinions, over the responsibility of the person either in general or in specific situations that have been described, exonerates the interviewer where there might be revulsion against “perpetrators” or an overidentification with victims, etc. The question of the honesty of the interviewer in relation to the interviewee is always problematic. Keeping one’s views and judgements to oneself, even perhaps “furtively,” can lead to arguments. Does one always, when asked to, really turn off the tape recorder? In such a situation interviewers know that later in this fourth phase they can take a position on differing or contentious views or opinions. As well it is easier for those who later analyse these interviews to understand the attitudes of the interviewers or interpret their inadequate reactions to the interview partner’s “shocking” statements as “temporary mimicry.” It is my experience that in this fourth phase the conversational situation redevelops itself and new interpretations are created – another indication that so-called neutrality cannot be achieved completely but nevertheless has a certain relevance.

Often such problems do not even occur, especially when the interviewer succeeds in showing a great deal of interest, presenting contemporary witnesses as an essential source, demonstrating (sincerely, not “underhandedly”) curiosity about the life story, and above all by stimulating a willingness to follow the path into the past together. The ability to communicate such an attitude appears to me as essential an interview qualification as, and above all, social competence, expert knowledge paired with an almost helpless appearing professionalism, curiosity, and empirical openness to diverse points of view, judgements, and interpretations.

Here are a few more tips. Only seldom should there be questions about attitudes and opinions or the dates of events, etc. Instead there should be stimuli that elicit anecdotes and stories, descriptions of people, friends, family members, colleagues, bosses, daily routines, conflicts, relationships or, above all, concrete accounts of specific days, for example, when one first went to work, first met one’s later love, or was arrested or transported, etc. It has been shown that one is more likely to learn about early attitudes through such “detours” than through direct questions, the answers to which commonly demonstrate current superimpositions and perceptions.

Stories should also not be interrupted even when being repeated because “repeated stories” become more elaborate with each telling and focus on particular points because they have apparently met with “success” with listeners. At the same time, therefore, they allow for conclusions about earlier attitudes, perhaps also about the early “audience.” For example, a soldier, who was very young in 1945 and who, at the age of seventeen, had voluntarily joined the Waffen-SS, told me four times in the course of three interview sessions the story of a bet that he had made in the summer with his work colleagues. I bet, he said or words to that effect, that we will find not a single Nazi in this business, no one

who admits to having been a Nazi. The bet was for a crate of beer. You won't believe, he added for me, what a crate of beer was worth then. And, sure enough, they found not a single Nazi in this huge firm. But in fact he had heard them shout "Heil" when Mussolini was with Hitler at Krupp's. "After all I knew the master who was a Nazi and bullied the foreign workers, he even shot one. But I, I myself could not hide. My tattoo remained." It took a great deal of my patience to listen to this story, which he told me again years later, a fifth time without batting an eyelid. But, after all, there was something new: the tattoo and its permanence.

Helpful is the use of other personal documents such as report cards, private letters, or photo albums. It is precisely the last that for many reasons stimulate further memories. Photos have a different feeling and inspire other remembrances, while the captions on the photos are a source in themselves, since they were mostly written earlier. Finally the differences or agreements between the stories told previously and these documents reveal themselves.

One reason for carrying on interviews in the home of the interview partner if possible is that these documents are close at hand. Another reason is that the interview partners become more confident, less nervous, behave as hosts, tend therefore to be more helpful and generous, and see the interview more as their own.

Additional interviews with couples, families, or groups have also shown themselves to be helpful, both for stimulating stories and for the construction of a "common memory" or for the correction of one by the other and vice versa. Moreover, they appear to me necessary for questions and events for which there are no other sources.

In all cases, interviewers should prepare reports of the sessions in order to be able later to judge their own attitudes, such as their opinions of the interview partner, their view of the home and its furnishings, which are not visible or audible, or the atmosphere of the conversation.

The study of folklore has revealed many "types of narration," whose characterizations provide ideas for both the interview and for the interpretation.<sup>29</sup> It appears to me that such types could be adopted and expanded in historical analyses. For example, there are the constantly repeated stories and images that serve the "self-understanding" of families, groups, or entire segments of a population in a precarious situation. There are also "outsmarting stories" about the weak opposite those in power (for example, the Nazis, the Allies after 1945, or the West Germans after 1990). They distinguish themselves in my opinion mainly in that that they fit a common emotional situation, are therefore adopted quickly

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<sup>29</sup> As one of the first historical examinations, see Albrecht Lehmann "Erzählen eigener Erlebnisse im Alltag. Tatbestände, Situationen, Funktionen," *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 74 (1978): 198-215 and *Erzählstruktur und Lebenslauf. Autobiographische Untersuchungen* (Frankfurt/New York, 1983).

and passed on – often as an individual’s own experience. The “Persilschein”<sup>30</sup> stories are examples of this: “All of a sudden everyone had hidden his Jew, like Mr. XY, who was a ‘golden pheasant,’<sup>31</sup> but then after 1945....” Another example is the jokes about the ignorant Allies whom one could outsmart just as quickly as the dumb West Germans after 1990 in the former GDR.

## Summary

In my opinion, a “good” interview must be characterized by the following: through different approaches it stimulates various remembrances and expands the whole set of stories, references, controls, and interpretations and thereby increases the plausibility of a specific assumption and improves the possibility of finding falsifications or confirmations through other sources. The interconnections of different levels, contents, and stories about specific events, developments, and persons in interviews correspond – this is my thesis – to the description of research into the various “memories” of a person and their interconnections with one another.<sup>32</sup>

## Critique of the Critique and Its Dangers

Critics of the use of subjective memories as a source in history sit in a glass house, for the narrow reliance on written sources, in particular on official documents, is today more problematic than it was a few decades ago. In a time when the records are not only edited to improve appearances but have also been rendered less significant by the telephone, videoconferencing, and pictures or photographs, emails, and the ability to erase large databases quickly and unnoticeably, the centrality of documents has become even more questionable than it already was.<sup>33</sup>

The reliance on written sources alone is – one must emphasize this again and again – in danger of neglecting subjects in a seemingly positivistic way, for

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<sup>30</sup> Denazification certificate. Persil is a German brand of laundry detergent (translator’s note).

<sup>31</sup> *Goldfasan*: golden pheasant, satirical term used for Nazi party officers (translator’s note).

<sup>32</sup> Hans J. Markowitsch was also invited to the contemporary witness conference to deal with these questions. His presentation – in essay form – can be read here in this issue of BIOS. His description of the various areas of memory (the episodic-autobiographical and its knowledge system or declarative remembrance) and their interconnectedness appear to me to correspond to the discoveries from the interviews and the examples referred to here. A significant exception is that in our interviews it appears that dates and facts are more likely to be “forgotten” than biographical occurrences. And one question remains: in Markowitsch’s statements affective experiences sometimes strengthen memory and sometimes inhibit it, for example in the case of traumatized persons.

<sup>33</sup> A well known example is the erasing of all the files of the office of the Chancellor after the replacement of the Kohl regime 1998.



almost all historical sources are subjective or are written by subjects that live and work in a constellation of interests. Here is revealed the dishonesty of many historians who, on the one hand, with their preference for documents behave as though they can stand in the tradition of positivism but, on the other hand, know very well that their sources do not allow for even the appearance of a natural science methodology. Furthermore, most of the research that is based on official documents and uses them uncritically is “oriented towards authority.” Here is one example. If in research on Soviet special camps in Germany one relied only on Soviet documents, it would be obvious to everyone that this would make the Soviet view absolute. Because of the shortage of similarly complete files from the other side, the memories or early accounts of prisoners are the only corrective. Otherwise it would mean that whoever produced and possessed the records has the power to control what was transmitted or how the past was described, in this example, the history of prisoners in Soviet camps after 1945.

On the other side too there is the danger that those who work with subjective remembrances use their sources without the appropriate checks, some of which have been referred to here. But this danger has diminished, since a variety of methods have been adopted in the research into the history of experience. I often miss these with traditional historians.

At the same time, proximity to those being questioned creates other dangers, such as overidentification, mostly with the victims of historical events or other representatives of political-historically recognized groups (worker activists and resistance members for Social Democrats and Socialists, “strong women” for Feminists, members of popular movements for critics of the GDR, etc. etc.) However, a strong aversion to specific groups and their representatives (“perpetrators,” those who co-operated informally with the Ministry of State Security of the GDR, etc.) can lead to the premature development of a thesis, promote politically correct interpretations, and reduce the critique of sources.

There is a real hermeneutic pitfall that occurs today less often than twenty years ago. Today qualitative research does not naïvely accept the statements of those being questioned as “the” reality; nor are the topics modified in order to support historical assumptions. Subjective memories or life histories were previously used much more frequently than today exclusively as evidence for a thesis that had been developed using other sources and less as independent sources for answering specific questions in the subjective analysis of historical experiences. Nevertheless, the trap still exists frequently for realist historians, who are familiar with neither the strengths nor the dangers of hermeneutic sciences.

## Concluding Remark: On the “Uncertainty Principle”<sup>34</sup> in Qualitative Historical Research

It is an epistemological given that for each type of research a specific methodology must be found. The analysis of history, the collective memory or collective myths about the past, the relationship between politics and political-social historical change and individual life stories or biographical (re)-constructions are the main areas in which personal remembrances and particularly oral interviews (also those of a quantitative nature as used in research into biographies) must play an important role. These can also be sources for the reconstruction of facts, sequences, and events in history where there is a shortage of other sources or as controls and correctives for other methodological approaches.

The history of experience thus confronts the great problem that, as in all sciences that concern themselves with the subject and its relationship to society, there is an “uncertainty principle” in the relationship between the individual (with his or her memories, personal views, life courses) on the one side and groups, milieus, or entire societies on the other. This “uncertainty principle” cannot be eliminated, since only this or that detail can really be seen “with certainty” and at the same time is itself influenced by scientific techniques. But there are approaches<sup>35</sup> from one or the other side. On one side is quantitative research into the life course, from earlier representative cross-section examinations that capture general changes in approaches and attitudes, but without the dynamic and the circumstances of individual life stories. On the other side are the explanations revealed through the causes of the changes in the individual life stories and related earlier experiences and through the course of their lives with all their turning points and key experiences.

Together both points of view help us perhaps to view these historical changes as broadly as possible. Participants in qualitative (and quantitative) research must be aware of the problem of the “uncertainty principle.” As a rule in the history of experience, it will not be possible to achieve representativeness<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> I first made use of this concept in 1983. It is vulnerable to criticism and necessarily incomplete and open. Alexander v. Plato, ‘„Ich bin mit allen gut ausgekommen.“ Oder: War die Ruhrarbeiterschaft vor 1933 in politische Lager gespalten?’ in Niethammer, ed., *Die Jahre weiß man nicht, wo man die heute hinsetzen soll*. 31-66, here 59.

<sup>35</sup> In my opinion, this approach permits the adoption of this concept from natural science, more precisely Heisenberg’s quantum physics.

<sup>36</sup> In qualitative research one must consider the determination of “representativeness” differently from that in quantitative research. Almost all “researchers of experience” must assume a “degree of saturation” at a particular number of interviews, after which no further fundamental types of analysis and attitudes of the group being questioned are revealed. I have already discussed these points in my article “Geschichte und Psychologie.”

through the choice of interview partner alone, except in the examination of small groups and their current views. However, as far as possible, interview partners should represent the greatest variety of experience, even contradictory experience, to make it possible to examine the broadest possible range of experience by sex, attitude, ideological, religious and political orientation, life experiences, and social group. In the analysis the relationship to other research, in particular to quantitative inquiries and research in life courses, should be kept in mind and vice versa.

It is known that not only contemporary witnesses but also we members of the historical profession reconstruct history anew, whether on the basis of subjective memories or on the basis of documents. Though contemporary witnesses have difficulty with their remembrances and we historians with their interpretation, we have similar difficulty with the interpretation of documents. These too require special knowledge for their interpretation and that also “becomes obsolete.” After all, who, for example, can understand the differences in documents – let’s say – between the central committee or a district or municipal authority of the SED in the same way as those who were involved? The language, in this case “Party German,” appears almost the same from a distance in time or the passage of time has allowed the differences to disappear or minimizes them. This too is a transition from contemporary history to history, from “a past full of experience” to “pure past” and this transition is similarly complicated for the analysis of almost all sources. When they criticize the study of experience, some critics appear to want a 100 per cent congruity of “past reality,” memory, and narratives. But which historical source of any kind could achieve this?

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