

Interview Guidelines

Alexander v. Plato, transl. Christoph Tonfeld, ed. Alexander Freund

Note: These interview guidelines were developed for a European oral history project on forced labourers during the Nazi period (A. Freund).

Preliminary Remarks

Interviews preferably should provide interview partners with the space to tell their story as they wish to present it. From our perspective, these are life story-based memory-interviews that should help interviewees to activate their memories, which after all date back a long time, are overlaid by many new experiences, and which they have worked through by themselves or in communication with others. The interviews focus on those interviewees' experiences that the respective research project explores; but the interviews also ask about those experiences' pre-history and consequences as well as their processing in the context of diverse familial, societal and political situations and circumstances. We should always consider that these conversations may be very strenuous and even potentially re-traumatising for some of our respondents.

The following guidelines should help us to choose interview partners, to carry out potentially comparable interviews, and to react appropriately to problems.

The choice of interview partners

In most countries there are good possibilities to find interview partners. According to theme and time, many potential interviewees have already organised themselves (e.g. in associations or clubs), provide social services among themselves, or have established contacts with political or other relief organisations. Some groups have organised themselves internationally. Through these we can also try to address relevant persons with our wish for an interview. Other means of contact include appeals in newspapers or via broadcast, in magazines of relevant organisations, or through the so-called snowball scheme, which leads us from one person to further interview partners. Some university institutes may have already conducted interviews with appropriate persons and thus will have no difficulties to establish contacts with other potential interviewees.

The goal should be to interview a diverse group of respondents, even if we will not succeed in establishing representativeness. We should nevertheless strive to select a group of interviewees that corresponds to the past composition of the group in regards to gender, national and social origin, religious orientation, mode of persecution, of deportation, of work (in the countryside, in industry, etc.), of camps, of liberation, of homecoming, and of later experiences. We know, of course, that we can interview only those who were young at the time, thus we should strive to reach as many older age groups as possible.

The central coordination site, i.e. the Institute for History and Biography, Distance University of Hagen, will attend to establishing a preferably extensive representativeness in the international composition of the respondents.

Preparation for the interviews

The interviewers should obviously have read as much as possible about the special subject in general and in their respective countries in particular. They should have at least a rough understanding of the circumstances in which the respondents had to live at the time, including the general conditions such as war time, National Socialist persecution, the concentration camp-system and others; and the concrete conditions such as their family of origin, work, personal persecution, etc.

As important as this knowledge is for the interview, it should not be displayed in such a way that interviewees may get the impression that we already know so much that they do not need to tell us anything else.

After collecting names and addresses of the interviewees, we should call them – given they have telephone – or write a letter to them, briefly describing the project and asking them to agree to an interview, preferably at their home. In doing so, they should be prepared that we are going to record the interview.

We will have to tell the interview partners at an early stage that the interview is going to last several hours, and that we need their written consent to the archiving and usage of their interview for reasons of archival rights (the so-called letter of consent which we will give to the interviewers).

The technical preparation is important as well: In general, we use analog audio-cassette-devices and not digital ones; because - contrary to the digital ones – for the same analog cassettes there are play-back devices for the transcription of the interviews and – not to be underestimated – fast copy machines, too, with which at least two cassettes can be copied at the same time in 20-fold speed. Furthermore, in our experience, mistakes are more likely made with digital than with analog recorders. A further reason for the choice of analog recorders is that there does not yet exist a common format among the different producers. Tests in our data processing centre have demonstrated a long duration for analog ferrum cassettes while so far we do not know about the durability of digital media – regardless of the missing international agreement on common formats. More important than a good recorder is an outstanding external microphone. Under no circumstances should internal (built-in) microphones be used.

For video interviews, we favour the usage of BETA SP formats, either analog or digital. BETA still is the international format for television- and exhibition quality. Mini-DV-devices do not meet the quality standards which are necessary for later usage of the interviews in films, television documentaries, exhibitions, etc.

Attitude

Our interviewees are normally very old, perhaps ill and traumatised. We should signal before the interview that we know that the interview might be exhausting for them, that they may not be able to sleep well afterwards, that we will come to their homes, potentially over two sessions, that we can have breaks, if they wish, to spread the strain. Sometimes it might even be useful to tell them: “We know that it will be difficult to touch on these memories, that there might even be tears. Nevertheless, let us please do this interview, to bear testimony to this persecution.” We can offer consolation to the interviewees, if that seems to make sense, by sitting next to them, we may put our arm around them, we may switch off the recorder and, whenever they wish, offer to take a break. After a while, though, we should ask them whether we may continue. In most cases, however, it is not particularly helpful for our interview partners if they, conversely, have to console us.¹

If we notice during the conversation that the interview partners feel very bad - in whatever respect – we should seek help from people who are more professionally trained than we usually are, or from institutions which are locally available.

The interviewers themselves should be aware that social competence is one of the essential qualities of an interviewer, that they have to combine empathy with serious interest in the interviewed persons and their stories, that we have to make appropriate decisions in tense situations. This has turned out almost always to be the most important thing: to show clearly and authentically that we are really interested in the persons and their experiences.

On the other hand, we should keep in mind that our interviewees’ lives consisted not only one role, i.e. the role of the victim, that it consisted not simply of suffering and tears, but bore many other facets. At the same time, it is difficult for the interviewers to maintain their attentiveness and their analytical capabilities despite all potentially horrendous stories, to ask, for example, for the origin of a piece of information or to clarify contradictions in the reports and to be able to conduct the interview as a whole.

The Interview

The interview we conduct is a so-called semi-open, narrative life story interview. That means: The interviewees initially have the opportunity to present their stories and their experiences in any way they wish, taking as much time as they wish, without being interrupted by us. Only after this open phase will we ask questions with the help of a list of questions that should not, however, be simply asked one after other but used whenever the interview situation calls for it. Questions should lead to further stories rather than simple “yes” or “no” answers. Therefore, the conversation should ideally be conducted in three or four phases:

First (open) phase

In the first phase, we ask the interviewee only one question: “Would you, please, tell me (us) your life-story?” After that we intensely listen to the interviewee without disturbing him or her, until they give us a sign that they wish to be asked a question. Of course, all the interviewees know that we are particularly interested in a specific topic, that is, their experiences during a specific time period. But we do tell them in advance that we also want to find out about the

¹ We are no therapists and should therefore find out before the interview addresses of people who could be consulted for relevant support in the respective town or region. Victims groups have themselves provided such aid facilities in almost every country.

history before and after these events and experiences so that we and the descendants become acquainted with what happened before, to learn where they come from, their family background, their educational and vocational careers, their knowledge of Nazi persecution before their own personal persecution, etc. It is obvious, too, why we are interested in what happened after, namely to learn about the consequences of those events or, in the case of traumatized people, the long-term effects – mostly health-related – of their experiences. We also want to learn about later family life and work life as well as about the positive or “offers for coping” or other means of dealing with these experiences. Despite asking about the “before” and “after,” the interviewees will nevertheless emphasize the topic in which we are particularly interested.

The aim of this first open phase is that the interviewees can stress and inter-relate the areas, connections, and details of their story in any way they wish. The interview is a dialogue, we will never be neutral, but we can give the interviewee as much room for their own narratives and constructions as possible. They may, indeed, narrate in spontaneous chains of associations – without being interruptions by questions. We should not ask any suggestive questions or generate clear expectations. Even if we know that we cannot achieve neutrality, that the interview is a dialogue, in which we produce certain assumptions – due to the sheer fact that we belong to a different generation, that we want to document something for later generations, etc. – we should still act neutrally, but empathetically.

If the interviewees happen to tell their story only cursorily along some dates, or if they cannot speak coherently for fear of their past, we should “switch” and instead ask, sooner rather than later, if they preferred that we asked questions. But we should not be too impatient. Normally, the respondents tell us a lot without us having to ask a single question. In any case, we should clearly indicate our interest in their stories.

Second (clarifying) phase

In a second phase we start asking questions, but only to clarify points we did not understand or to clarify obviously wrong dates or even of clear misunderstandings, wrong formulations etc. This allows interview partners to correct these unclear points themselves. This is often a very short phase, and if there are only one or two clarifying points we should directly continue with the third phase. If the interviewees are tired or exhausted and circumstances allow for a second session we should at least have a break here or continue the conversation on the next day. In this case we could listen to or watch the recording at home (or at our accommodation when traveling) and find out, for the next day or rather for the next phase of the interview, which items from our questionnaire have already been answered.

Third phase (open questions)

Even without a break or a prolonged interruption interviewers have to decide after the second phase which essential areas or questions from our questionnaire are left and in which order they should be put. This is a neuralgic point of the interview because it is always difficult to decide when a question can be regarded as answered and when not. It is, of course, easier if you can do that at home or after listening to the interview than immediately during the interview.

After thoroughly or spontaneously clarifying this problem, in this third phase we should ask questions or address complexes which are listed in the questionnaire. However, even in this asking phase it still holds true that we should not ask questions clinging strictly to the questionnaire or follow the questionnaire too closely. You should have the questionnaire in your mind, not on the table, so that you can apply it according to the situation. You should ask in a way that evokes stories, anecdotes, and episodes that make the interviewee describe persons (friends, relatives, policemen, guards, superiors etc.), conflicts, hierarchies, or routine procedures like the course of a day at work or in the camp, the day when they were arrested or deported, the way the transport took, the day of arrival, and so on. Such concrete stories and descriptions unearth and bring to light more of the interviewees’ former attitudes, feelings, concerns, and fears than if we asked directly for their former attitudes and opinions. Here, as well, suggestive questions must be avoided.

Fourth phase (critical points)

Preferably at the end, not before, you should or could speak to the interviewees about critical points you may feel urged to mention. If we know that we can do that at the end, we will generally be more relaxed in the previous phases and are not permanently about to try to voice our different or rejecting attitude. With perpetrators, you will mostly not find it difficult to mention critique or refusal, but only too early, because we do not want the well to run dry after

we have only just found it. It might be more difficult with concentration camp inmates, forced labourers, or other victims of persecution. But with them, too, there will appear political opinions or even racist beliefs, maybe collaboration with perpetrators which you want to contradict. The normal reaction on the part of the interviewers is mostly that they hardly dare to mention those attitudes or former modes of conduct or openly discuss them – be it for embarrassment or for fear of the reaction of the interview partners, or be it out of general sympathy for our interviewees who we know suffered greatly. Another common reaction is to take an opposing stance towards the respondent early on, maybe even too early. So, please, stay patient without any hasty judgement on the one hand and courageous on the other to ask, only at the end of the interview, for clarification of certain attitudes that you reject.

Post-processing

After the interview, write a short protocol that summarizes how the interview came about, its prehistory, the atmosphere during the conversation, persons who were present at the interview, the main topics of the conversation, and peculiarities in the biography or in the narrations of the interviewees. In this short protocol, write about the problems of the interview partners, your emotions and the interviewees' difficulties.

Furthermore, write a short biography of the interview partner, describing essential life stages, the story of persecution, as well as family background.

Finally, fill out a data sheet, in which quantifiable data for a relational data bank are supplied. This data sheet enables us to search for persons or groups, for example, according to certain criteria. The interviews have to be transcribed into the respective national languages, the video interviews translated into German, as well.

Some remarks on interview techniques

Life story interviews

Ideally, the interviews should be life story oriented, even if we are mainly interested in a special experience, i.e. only a limited period of time. The main reasons for this have already been mentioned: The national, social, and familial origin and education as well as the religious or political orientation also played a large role in the experiences in which we are specifically interested. These factors also played a role in the way in which the interviewee dealt with this experience afterwards. Thus it will make a difference, for example, whether one experienced persecution from a religious or political perspective; whether one did not feel Jewish but was treated as a Jew by the Nazis; whether there were gender specific persecutions etc. We also, of course, need to get testimonies about whether and how this persecution affected the further biography in multiple ways, i.e. health or psychological problems, loss (or gain) of family or friends, lessons or changes in one's religious or political orientation, practices of remembering and forgetting, social or communicative surroundings, and coping processes in the post-war period. Some other facts should be made known to posterity, for example, partners, children, later career etc.

If interviewees happen to be too weak or want to share only one or two hours with us, then we should depart from this basic life story principle and quickly get on to targeted questions.

Different memories and different accesses to memory in interviews

We have to be aware that memory is overlaid or even displaced by more recent experiences and events. Memory is influenced by cultural forms of narrating, communication and talking about dreadful memories, about proving oneself and personal failure. It is also influenced by the way a society deals with the past (you just have to compare Israel, Germany, and Russia regarding the history of National Socialism), by the language we use, and by traditions in different communities. Among others, this is one reason why the interviews should be conducted by people from the same country in the national language.

Perhaps even more important is that memory is not one monolithic system, but, according to current memory research, consists of different "memories" which are "networked" with each other. Roughly summarized, there is a memory for numbers and facts and an episodic memory for biographical developments and experiences. In my experience, it should be attempted to assist the interview partners in finding access to these different memories and to their mutual influence. For instance: If you ask for names or dates in a story of persecution or in a specific conflict, you might initially meet insecurity or a failing memory. However, if you ask for the story of persecution or for this conflict, most of the interviewees can tell a lot about the constellations of

and reasons for the conflict. And while talking to us, a lot of the names, places or dates may recur to them.

That means that during the course of an interview we have to address these different memories alternately instead of permanently targeting a certain memory with the same questions. As we are trying different accesses we get more data, stories, and “material” that may be important for our analysis. We have to learn to vary topics, to help activate certain recollections from different angles and by stimulating different memories. Other recollections will then be “swept along,” and perhaps former attitudes and fears will become clear.

Thus, at one point in the conversation we should ask for photos, photo albums, letters, documents, certificates, diaries etc. Such visual material as well as reports and certificates often prompts recollections. Diaries lead to other ways of talking about former attitudes and fears and the language of the past. Such documents and pictures are usually at home; hence, that is where we should preferably conduct the interview. Furthermore, in the privacy of one’s own home the interviewees mostly feel more secure.

It is of utmost importance - to emphasize this point again - that you not only inquire about experiences but evoke stories, anecdotes, episodes, descriptions of people, and courses of actions (routine as well as exceptional ones). Only in this way can we help the interviewees to remember, by stimulating their different memories and the connections among them. This will make it more likely to learn about earlier attitudes.

Memory-interviews are characterized by a contradiction: On the one hand, we know that we can get at past experiences only through today’s memory, through retrospective reconstructions of history, through a “digested” past. On the other hand, we want to have as much information as possible about the factual history of the Nazis’ racist and repressive system. We must be aware of this contradiction. We must take the memory of our interviewees seriously even if we can’t believe a story or certain dates our interviewees report; in any case, we should not interrupt or correct the stories prematurely or indeed argue with the interview partners. Patience is one of the major virtues, even if a story is told twice or three times. Mostly, such “repeat stories” are “success stories,” i.e., they are told because the interviewees could emphasize something or they met with approval within their social environment when telling these stories. They often have a punch line and a conclusion. Therefore, they might show us something about the environment of the interviewees.

Finally the supreme command holds true: Our interviewees should get the impression during and after the interview that they are part of a late but still slightly not too late, important documentation project. After the interview, we should contact them at least once, perhaps even several times. Each interview partner should receive a copy of the recording.