

PREFACE

The *systematic* treatment of eyewitness testimonies from survivors of the crimes of the National Socialists has not entered into the standard repertoire of historical science. Still less has it found a place in classroom and extra-curricular education in many countries. With the spread of oral history as a discipline to the German-speaking countries and above all with the growing willingness in Germany, Austria and Switzerland in particular to face up to the criminal past of the Nazi regime, increased efforts have been made to identify, preserve and process this treasure of memory as a further source of historical knowledge in addition to the classic documents. At the same time, there was growing consternation at the realisation that the last survivors of Nazi crime, who were able to bear personal witness to their experiences, sufferings and coping strategies, would soon be dead. All that also corresponded with a much belated shift in focus in society and politics to the victims themselves, who wished – after decades of mainly public denial of the wrongs done to them – to receive due recognition and increasingly did so. Through facing up to past events and the establishment of a memory culture at the individual level, the anonymity of a million-fold evil was given a face and a voice. And it was not merely fortuitous that these developments were strengthened and focussed in the context of the political debate on the long rejected calls for compensation for the victims of Nazi crimes, namely the many millions of slave labourers and concentration camp inmates.

In 2000, the German Bundestag decided that the public *Foundation “Remembrance, Responsibility and Future”* (Stiftung “Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft”, EVZ) had been established by a federal law not only to pay so-called symbolic compensation to former forced labourers and other victims but also (*quote from the law*): “to keep alive the memory of the injustice inflicted on the victims [of National Socialism] for coming generations”. In the first few years, the *EVZ Foundation* fulfilled this commitment primarily by supporting personal encounters between victims of National Socialism and

young people. At the same time it was clear that, in the foreseeable future, it would no longer be possible to pass on memories in this way. Following the example set by other institutions (for example, the *Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies* launched in 1979, the *USC Shoah Foundation* interviews initiated by Steven Spielberg in the 1990s and *Yad Vashem*), the Foundation set up an international project in which former slave and forced labourers were asked about their life histories. Between 2005 and 2007, almost 600 interviews were conducted in 26 countries. In cooperation with the *Freie Universität Berlin*, these interviews were later prepared for the digital archive *Forced Labor 1939–1945. Memory and History* and were made available to the public for research, training, and educational and media purposes. During this process of coming to terms with the past, the Foundation’s intention was not to brush over the crimes and systemic relationships in favour of promoting undue identification with the testimonies of former victims of National Socialism. Nor would it have been possible to analyse and understand the dynamics of Nazi rule solely from the perspective of the victims. The aim was rather to open up an additional perspective or even different perspectives of former victims which are essential to understanding the history of National Socialism, perspectives which for various reasons and many decades had played only a subordinate role in research and education. One particular challenge we face today, therefore, is to uncover the wealth of documented victim perspectives while at the same time avoiding any exaggerated elevation of the testimonies. The reports of the survivors are not “final” truths. The “status” of the testimonies – what do they stand for? – is one of the basic questions of educational work with these documents. Moreover, we are aware that even personal memory is not a fixed narrative but changes over time. Subjective memory follows current public discourses in order to validate its relevance. Despite that, even changing subjective narratives can claim authenticity, which makes them attractive for educational purposes. They also open the door to further important questions – about perpetrators and structures, about the scope for independent individual action, about the possibility of resistance, about individual responsibility and so on. In this

respect, the perspective of the victims is indispensable. With this in mind, the EVZ Foundation decided at an early stage to make younger people aware of this rich collection of biographical interviews through various educational formats. As time goes on, young people will have less and less direct contact with this history through family members, or no contact at all, and their lives today are fundamentally different from those of the victims in the first half of the 20th century. Together with its partners, the *EVZ Foundation* has developed online teaching materials, taking selected interviews from the digital archive *Forced Labor 1939–1945. Memory and History*, putting them into context and preparing them for educational use. This kind of educational material is already available for the Czech Republic, Germany and Russia and is currently being prepared for use in Poland. Clearly, the conditions for the educational use of these materials are different in the former “victim countries” – the territories occupied by the Nazis – than in the former “perpetrator countries” and different again in, say, the USA. They accordingly have to be adapted to the different conditions and contexts – cultures of remembrance, national debates and education systems – so that the finished materials differ from country to country. In recent years, the EVZ Foundation has also encouraged academics to undertake research into the various and demanding aspects of integrating testimonies of survivors into education work in accordance with sound pedagogical principles, and an international conference entitled “Preserving Survivors’ Memories” was held in Berlin and the results were published in 2016 ¹. The conference was organised in cooperation with *Freie Universität Berlin* and the *USC Shoah Foundation*. It drew attention to a number of challenges:

- We are still at an important turning point – the transition from “communicative” to “cultural” memory. The latter can no longer draw on exchanges with living eyewitnesses. The simple act of documenting as many life histories as possible was in itself an important step in this transition. But it would be naive to believe that by making testimonies available for future generations the job is already finished.

- Cultural memory will be “digital memory” in many important respects. That involves strategies of digital selection and evaluation techniques, which will have a growing impact on what will be remembered.
- We have to be aware of the performative power of those media on which cultural memory relies. Simply speaking, the medium influences the message.
- Finally, we must also address the challenges that arise when video interviews are embedded in different educational formats and environments, for example at memorial sites or in museums or classrooms.

To address this last issue further, the EVZ Foundation invited partners to develop secondary ideas and concepts for an international workshop in 2017 on “**Video-taped interviews**”. The team from *_erinnern.at_* undertook to hold a workshop on the subject, **to explore and to develop quality criteria for such interviews** and afterwards to prepare a publication in our “Education with Testimonies” online series | 2 . This is the result. The various contributions clearly demonstrate that, in the interest of sound didactic methods and results based on systematic working and scientific principles, it is necessary to adopt a multidimensional, critical and yet also open approach. In terms of methods, a distinction must be made between the treatment of existing eyewitness testimonies (in this case mainly interviews) on the one hand and the demands to be made of other (new) eyewitness interviews on the other. That is exactly what is meant by “to explore and to develop quality criteria”. One thing that is clearly needed – as with all historical sources – is a source-critical approach to the eyewitness testimonies. They are just *one* – albeit special – historical genre. As sources, they must be treated much like autobiographies – with one significant difference in that they are the result of a communicative process involving an interviewer. Subsequent analysis of eyewitness interviews to be found in existing collections or archives shows that the setting has a decisive influence on what is remembered and communicated – even to the extent that one and the same person will remember or address different aspects from one interview to the next. This relates to

the principal questions concerning such interviews: do these eyewitness testimonies constitute objective formulations or subjective memories of historical events, or are such interviews a (psychological relevant) medium, as it were, for the necessary process of coming to terms with past experiences and sufferings? Or do they represent a medium for the eyewitnesses to reach a longed-for audience – and today achieve “recognition” – after so many years of silence? And how to avoid conducting new interviews in which the interviewees present conditioned memories and simply say what they think people want to hear? Experience shows, for example, that interviews given by witnesses in criminal cases involving Nazi war crimes will differ from those conducted in the context of reconstruction of family biographies. In broader terms, the question is therefore about the definition of authenticity and truth that such interviews (can) represent. Clarification of all these questions, as the essays in this collection clearly illustrate, does not in itself provide a blueprint for the appropriate – i.e. insightful, enriching and also responsible – educational application of eyewitness testimonies. The use in the classroom of the classic sources relating to National Socialism has already involved many cases in which unreflected confrontations with piles of corpses of Nazi victims have not exactly provided an educational experience but rather have led to rejection and incomprehension. The systematic use of videotaped eyewitness testimonies in extracurricular education and especially in the classroom, too, is at a comparatively early stage, and there is still need for further development work, but the results to date are encouraging. The advantage of this medium for adolescents in particular is that they do not have to begin by studying the abstract mechanisms of a regime but rather are able to consider a life-story at the micro-level as a key to history great and small. It is the objective of the EVZ Foundation to facilitate such educational processes and to experiment with these formats, which make it possible to understand history and the actors. In order to safeguard the quality of these educational processes, this requires ongoing reflection on the methods employed, on their strengths and weaknesses. That applies to both educational work and the production of additional interviews. I hope that the various

contributions to this collection will help point the way in responding to some of the above-mentioned challenges.

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- 1 Apostolopoulos, N., Barricelli, M., Koch, G.(2016). *Preserving Survivors' Memories. Digital Testimony Collections about Nazi Persecution: History, Education and Media*. Berlin: EVZ.
- 2 In the last few years, under my political guidance, the EVZ Foundation has supported a large number of international projects on the subject of eyewitness testimonies from victims of National Socialism and also produced a related series of publications. To access the publications, see <http://www.stiftung-evz.de/handlungsfelder/auseinandersetzung-mit-der-geschichte/bildung-mit-zeitzeugnissen.html>, accessed 21 September 2017.