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TESTIMONIES IN THE DIGITAL AGE – NEW CHALLENGES IN RESEARCH, ACADEMIA AND ARCHIVES

During the past seven decades, tens of thousands of Shoah survivors have told their personal experiences within the framework of various research projects. From the early post-war voices of David Boder (1949; 1950), the central historical commissions in the American and British zones as well as Poland (see Jockusch 2012), the questionnaires and interviews of the *World Jewish Congress* in Romania (Gidó and Sólyom 2010) and the Hungarian *National Committee for Attending Deportees (Deportáltakat Gondozó Országos Bizottság DEGOB)* (Horváth 1998), through Annie Lauran's pioneer but largely forgotten reports in 1974, to the monumental holdings of the *Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies*, the *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive*, the *Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive* and the archive *Forced Labor 1939–1945. Memory and History* at the *Freie Universität Berlin*, large collections of testimonies and personal documents have come into being. Many of the survivors who gave interviews between 1945 and 1947 reappeared three or four decades later in the new interview projects. They retold their stories; in other words, they were able to take part in discussions about their testimonies and try to articulate their opinion and criticism (Matthäus 2009). In the past decade, most have passed away. The memory communities of the catastrophe will soon cease to exist, turning the living testimonies into historical materials of the archives. Nowadays, this represents the most important milestone in the remembrance of the Holocaust. The other fundamental change has been brought about by the digital revolution and especially the public accessibility of the World Wide Web in the early 1990s. On the path to the digital age, the archives recognised

the new challenges early on, and from the 1990s onwards they started to digitise their collections. Today, almost all prominent testimony archives offer online access. The new technologies caused a revolutionary change in the perceptions of time and space. “The place-specific learning that historical research in a pre-digital world required is no longer baked into the process” (Putnam 2016: 377). Increasing reach and speed by multiple orders of magnitude has many advantages and disadvantages. The research conditions can be more egalitarian, open or cost-effective with digitised sources than they were for classical historical research in the archives. Many scholars who cannot travel widely or spend months in different research sites can now conduct comparative or transnational studies with the help of online access. However, digitisation projects were initially mainly in English followed by other Western languages, and digitised testimonies in other languages have not reached the same level of transnational visibility and recognition. Therefore, international collections in English or with English search engines may be overrepresented, not only in comparative but also in micro studies or in national historiography written by Western scholars.

1. The Archival “Turn”

The new concepts of archiving have challenged everyone involved with the “labour” of testimony: the interviewers, the interviewees, the institutions and the public. In principle, as Aleida Assmann said:

“an archive is not a museum; it is not designed for public access and popular presentations [...] There is, of course, some order and arrangement in the digital archive, too, but it is one that ensures only the retrieval of information, not an intellectually or emotionally effective display. The archive, in other words, is not a form of presentation but of preservation; it collects and stores information, it does not arrange, exhibit, process, or interpret it.” (2006: 270)

In an ideal-typical sense, this is true, however analysing the mission statements and institutional development of the audiovisual archives of the Shoah, the forms of preservation and presentation, the goals of commemoration

and psychological healing, the ways of retrieving information for decent historical research, or the displays of emotion in mass education and artistic projects, that is, the use of testimonies in archives and museums, these institutions appear wildly mixed. Moreover, testimony archives differ from regular archives in that they have a special “collect-yourself” character. Stephen Naron cites Richard Brown and Beth Davis-Brown (1998: 22): “Archives are the manufacturers of memory and not merely the guardians of it.” Naron points out that testimony-archives usually do not inherit and collect materials produced by other institutions or people, but they have “the unusual distinction of being an archive that produces itself” (see Stephen Naron’s article in this volume, p.43). So, researchers should, in principle, plan and design the whole workflow at the very beginning of their testimony project and make decisions as to which interview method and what technology to use for which target groups in conducting interviews, and how these will then be archived when the interview phase of the project has been finished – not to mention that not only the recording and archiving technologies can undergo revolutionary changes over time but also basic scientific concepts of testimony. No wonder that, simultaneously with the establishment of digital oral history archives, a new wave appeared on the horizon of Holocaust research, and testimonies have become frequent sources of mainstream historical investigations. The landscape has changed and massive efforts have been undertaken to integrate memories of the Holocaust in history writing, not just out of respect for the survivors but also because there are historical events for which oral testimonies and written personal memories are our only sources.

2. New Risks Using Testimonies in History Writing:

Fragmentation and Decontextualisation of the Collection

Historians, psychologists, sociologists, activists, etc. all have their own goals and motives to collect and record testimonies *en masse*. These motives can include, as Boaz Cohen (2006: 141) writes: a) commemoration, b) telling the Jewish story of the catastrophe, c) bringing war criminals to justice,

d) confronting painful questions and e) fighting political battles, which may all automatically determine (“frame”) the whole process of recording and collecting. A testimony functions as a social construction, in which individuals are always entangled in their stories. As Paul Ricoeur points out in his magnificent book on time and narrative:

“We can see how the story of a life comes to be constituted through a series of rectifications applied to previous narratives, just as the history of a people, or a collectivity, or an institution proceeds from the series of corrections that new historians bring to their predecessors’ descriptions and explanations, and, step by step, to the legends that preceded this genuinely historiographical work. As has been said, history always proceeds from history.” (1984: 246)

For oral historians and interviewers, it is evident that conducting even an ordinary life history interview without mentioning any traumatic event is not simply a speech act but a “labor” (Shenker 2015), a “making” (Greenspan 2014) on both sides, which has an unusually direct emotional impact and is always mediated by frame conditions (Laub 2009). In the strict scientific analysis of a biographical account, scholars implicitly confront the complexity of the material and the frames of the interview, for example the interview situation, the movements in time and place, the changes of topics and styles, the dynamics of story-telling and, last but not least, the limits of self-representations, which also determine the limits of giving a meaning to the story. It is not possible here to expansively discuss the huge problems of transmissions from voice to transcript and from transcript to translation (Matthäus 2009). As Sylvia Degen writes:

“for the professional translators, intensive research and supplementary explanations were a self-evident component of their translation work to make the testimony understandable to young recipients.” (see Sylvia Degen’s article in this volume, p. 70)

Both the intended function, for example, education or exhibition, and – particularly in the case of the Holocaust – the sensitive question of authenticity

make translation a substantial stage of preparing, conducting and editing personal accounts. However, authenticity is also a construction. From the scientific point of view, a testimony is always a real-time performance that is highly influenced by the expectations of both interviewee and interviewer, therefore it needs special methodological tools for converting it into history writing, museum representation or educational material. Listening to someone's trauma used to belong to the realm of psychotherapy. The use of personal documents and accounts in psychology has had its own tradition since Sigmund Freud, Gordon Allport and others. Historians often illustrate their "objective" narrative with "subjective" fragments from ego documents. However, in studying memoirs, diaries, autobiographies etc., refined methodological reflection has become more common within literary criticism, intellectual history and anthropology, but has been rather neglected in history writing. A number of historians are still learning how to deal with these types of often painful and very complicated stories. All these conditions pose a giant risk for the integrity of both the collections and the individual interviews. Lack of information about the original goals and motives of collecting and recording testimonies can result in misinterpretation of the personal story or simplification of its inner dynamics. Testimonies from witnesses and survivors can lose their complexity and plausibility in short educational or museum film clips, or by being reduced to an illustration of a historical event in the chronological or topical order of the exhibition or curriculum. Or, conversely, by focusing only on the frightening episodes, the excerpt from a testimony can increase blasphemous or voyeuristic attitudes in visitors' subconscious. In the following chapters, I will describe some impressive new techniques for using personal accounts. As we will see, a wide variety of techniques is employed, which range from intuitive and phenomenological approaches, through qualitative ones to computational, quantitative methods.

3. New Techniques of Using Testimonies in Holocaust Studies

3.1 Intuitive Methods

In his book *Remembering Survival. Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp*, Christopher

Browning (2011) uses hundreds of ego documents. The book discusses the history of the Starachowice camp in Polish territory, where between 1942 and 1944 thousands of Jews were forced to work. “My methodology”, he writes in the introduction, “is to accumulate a sufficient critical mass of testimonies that *can be tested against another*” (Ibid.: 8). Although the method of “testing” each testimony against another made Browning’s research programme a bit puzzling (who decides which testimony is the most relevant? from which perspective?), his precise analysis of each case, his empathetic voice and his self-criticism probing and sometimes also reaching the limits of historical reconstruction of a “fact” convinced his readers of the virtue of this kind of history writing. He was not frightened to say that his writing was often based on fragmentary evidence and remained speculative. He also emphasised some of the pitfalls, such as the emergence of “repressed”, “secret”, “communal” and “public” memories, which are hard to reconnect to the experienced past. Besides reconstructing the factual micro-history of everyday life in the Starachowice camp, Browning systematically discusses the above mentioned meta-levels of social memory. Case by case, he shows how different survivor groups had first invented and then sustained their own common version of remembering an event; how public – mediatised – memory restructured and visualised this event, converting an inner picture of personal memory into a common picture of remembrance; how repressed memory sometimes broke out in the interview and, last but not least, how secret topics were told years later. Browning also uses his earlier knowledge of postwar trials to illuminate the dynamics of social memory and the victims’ continuous struggle to have their credibility recognised. In the end, the book traces the universe of the “camp culture”, the wide spectrum of the struggle for survival, and touches on painful questions such as the resistance, the *amidah*. As he concludes: “words such as ingenuity, resourcefulness, adaptability, perseverance and endurance [are] the most appropriate and accurate” (Ibid.: 297) for describing resistance in the camp. The genre of Browning’s book is a kind of *re-enactment* of history: his agents struggled for survival between 1942 and 1944 and they are still struggling for recognition of their testimonies. Borrowing the vocabulary

of literature studies, one can read the new historiography of the Holocaust invented by Browning as a *docudrama* script.

3.2 Qualitative Methodological Approaches

It is common in psychological and sociological research into the testimonies of Holocaust survivors and other oral or biographical interviews that in the case of large testimony collections specific analytical methods need to be used. One of the most frequent techniques is to implement *socio- or psycholinguistic applications* in both manual and software-based procedures of qualitative data analysis. Just as the research aims differ fundamentally from those of historians, so these methods have their limits in history writing. The advantage of qualitative data analysis is that it deals with the testimonies as complete visual, oral or written bodies, thus making it difficult for the researchers to “cherry-pick” from the personal accounts and cite them capriciously without any methodological consequences. An increase in the capacities of digital archives, enabling users to do sequential or thematic searches among and within the interviews, has created a serious risk that illustrative excerpts taken out of their original context will provide documentary evidence for a particular historical argument. However, sequential analysis or thematic comparison can also underpin high-quality historical research. Anthropologists have invented two fruitful methods for constructing theory through data analysis. *Grounded theory* begins by collecting qualitative data. These are analysed until the ideas embodied in the text become explicit. These ideas are coded and the codes of similar contents are grouped in concepts and categories. These categories may become the basis for a new theory. Another ethnographic method also seems useful for historians working with a large quantity of testimonies: the *extended case method* asks for “generalisable” findings. ¹¹ Researchers analyse a particular social situation in relation to the broader social forces shaping it. They seek “further elaboration of the basic study of case material because they deal with a sequence of events sometimes over quite a long period, where the same actors are involved in a series of situations” and “the extended case study analysts have to trace how

events chain on to one another and how, therefore, events are necessarily linked to one another through time” (Small 2009: 22). Similar methodology was used in a research project on Hungarian-Jewish slave labourers in Vienna (Frojimovics/ Kovács 2015; see also Kinga Frojimovics’ article in this volume).

Historians dealing with the testimonies of Shoah survivors have hardly ever applied these methods. Unfortunately, most historians have no intellectual links with sociologists and do not feel the need to check their results against a larger body of qualitative studies asking similar questions. For many, however, this may become a critical issue. The discussion of the emerging new topics of Holocaust studies, for example, everyday life in the camp or in the ghetto, children’s testimonies, the social history of forced labour under the Nazi regime, spatial experiences, the meanings given to particular places, informal networks among the deportees, survival and resistance, experiencing violence, etc., for which testimonies may be the only source, need high research standards.

3.3 The Statistical Representation of Suffering

Let me offer just two examples of this aspect, both found in articles on the Hungarian Holocaust: one from social-psychology, the other one from history writing. A group of American psychologists described how elderly survivors living in Hungary evaluate their lives in the context of the multiple socio-political upheavals they had experienced during the past seven decades. They interviewed 104 people in Hungary and compared their findings with earlier studies of 166 survivors who had emigrated to the United States and 184 survivors who had emigrated to Israel after the Second World War. Altogether, they analysed 454 interviews. After reconstructing complex demographics – survivors’ social and family life, their psychological well-being outcomes, etc. – they concluded:

“findings support expectations about more negative psychological well-being outcomes among survivors living in Hungary, a country where they were victimized during the Holo-

caust and where they subsequently experienced serial political trauma. [...] The structural barriers to coming to terms with legacies of the Holocaust were far less evident among survivors who had a chance to build new lives in the US or in Israel.” (Kahana et al. 2015: 320)

One might ask whether it is worthwhile conducting such a giant interview project and complicated socio-psychological analysis to come to this trivial conclusion.

My second example is a work on the protocols of the Hungarian DEGOB (National Committee for Attending Deportees, *Deportáltakat Gondozó Országos Bizottság*).¹² These documents from more than 5,000 survivors in Budapest are one of the largest collections of early testimonies worldwide. A promising young historian, Ferenc Laczó (2016: 100), raised the following questions in his article: How did Hungarian Jewish survivors categorise, represent and assess the concentration camps? How did they retrospectively describe the condition they were in while there? and How did they narrate the liberation of the camp? He also asked how the two crucial specifics of the Shoah – the death camp and the gas chamber – were articulated. Without clarifying his methods, he said he had conducted qualitative analysis.

Since the film *Schindler's List* (1993), social scientists, philosophers, educators, filmmakers and museum experts have been heavily discussing whether the direct representation of the gas chamber violates the ban on images (*Bilderverbot*). Behind this question lies a complex philosophical debate that I cannot adjudicate here. Imagined witnessing represents a crucial moment in understanding history, whether in a book or an exhibition – and it cannot be avoided either in academia or education. However, it is still doubtful if a statistical analysis of testimonies referring to experiences of the gas chamber can help readers understand the extermination of the Hungarian Jews. Laczó starts his analysis with the following statement:

“despite all the substantial complications related to leaving one’s testimony of the gas chambers, altogether over two hundred interview transcripts include explicit references to this most notorious Nazi means of annihilating European Jewry and contain concurrent

descriptions of them. On the other hand, in light of the fact that more than half of the 3,666 DEGOB records relate, among others, personal experiences in Auschwitz-Birkenau, this does not appear like an exceedingly large number.” (Ibid.: 126)

However, at the end of the chapter he concludes:

“The DEGOB interview collection shows that a substantial number of Hungarian Jewish witnesses were able and willing to articulate crucial details of their horrific knowledge shortly after their liberation.” (Ibid.: 133)

Unfortunately, these results are also mostly insignificant, as statistical verification cannot estimate the suffering of the victims. Is being statistically representative a relevant criterion in assessing the memory of the gas chamber? I am afraid the answer is, no, it is not. Can we learn something about the gas chambers from the testimonies? I am sure, yes, we can.

3.4 Excursion: Probing the Limits of Representation with the Help of Testimonies

Let me illustrate this dilemma with the role and meaning of the testimonies in the film *Son of Saul* (2015) by the Hungarian film director László Nemes Jeles. In this film, personal accounts found a new voice in the age of “post-testimony”. Nemes Jeles credits as his sources *Des voix sous la cendre: Manuscrits des Sonderkommandos d’Auschwitz-Birkenau* (2005), and the memoir by Miklós Nyiszli, *I Was Doctor Mengele’s Assistant* (2001), but his inspiration might well also have come from memoirs and personal accounts ranging from those by Primo Levi (1991; 2015) and Imre Kertész (2006), through the interviews in Claude Lanzman’s *Shoah* (1985), up to the very controversial “Sonderkommando” photographs.¹³ As the French philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman (2015: 6) wrote in his 25-page open letter to Nemes Jeles, in the montage of the testimonies a *conte documentaire* (documentary tale) comes into existence, “a monster. A necessary, coherent, beneficial, innocent monster”. Nemes Jeles and his colleagues had not

only read and visualised or imagined the testimonies but also listened to them; more precisely, they staged what they had read and imagined about the infernal noise of screaming, crying, howling, slamming and squeaking that the witnesses had heard in Auschwitz-Birkenau and later very often mentioned in their testimonies. Yet, the personal accounts of suffering from these sounds did not represent an important historical source. Nemes Jeles returned to this sensory evidence of the Holocaust. In the first minutes of the film, the viewers hear the slamming of doors, the sifting through possessions, the grim cacophony of a death camp, which makes it impossible for them to get involved emotionally in the series of events they are watching. “When the film begins, Saul has already died as a subject, an independently thinking and feeling self: there is no one to identify with.” (Ban 2016) We are after a cold shock – under the weight of apathy. All our higher emotions and ethical dispositions were destroyed. The film creates a monstrous distance from the well-known Holocaust iconography of the movies and, after a while, opens a space for radically new ethical-emotional attitudes. In this empty space, the dead subject of Saul is recovering his soul. At the moment when Saul witnesses the murder of a boy who had survived the gas, he makes a commitment that he will give the boy a proper Jewish burial. The film shows how he tries to pursue this goal with passion. After 70 years, in Saul’s long and tragic road of performing his mission, the testimonies of the Shoah survivors spring again into existence.

4. Conclusion

One might suspect that I hesitate to quantify qualitative sources in such a sensitive research topic as the history of the Holocaust. Even if I did, that could not slow down the new tendency of quantification in history writing, although I hope quantification will have its own limits. Here, I have described the very first approaches in this field and suggested some methods that may help raise more exact questions that historians want to answer, and help decide on the advantages and disadvantages of gathering data from the testimonies. The digitisation of testimony collections, the public accessibility of

archives, the globalisation of Holocaust studies and new curriculum developments in schools, universities and museums will fundamentally challenge the old techniques of history writing and strengthen the need for methodological reflections in the years to come.

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- 1 The Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich recently launched a new education project, *Near but Far – Holocaust Education Revisited*, relying on reflective grounded theory as a method, however they do not analyse testimonies. See: http://www.en.holocaust.didaktik.germanistik.uni-muenchen.de/about_us/methodology/index.html, accessed 2 June 2017.
- 2 Between summer 1945 and spring 1946, a number of returning deportees gave personal accounts of their suffering to the DEGOB. The protocols were facilitated by a questionnaire and a topical interview. These were not always identical and the answers also differed according to the interviewers. As the website of the DEGOB protocols emphasises, “although the material of the DEGOB protocols forms a unique historical database, the information that can be garnered from them must naturally be treated in accordance with the appropriate source criticism. We are talking about several thousand oral history documents, so the general rules relating to the examination of personal recollections must be applied to the DEGOB protocols as well.” The editors listed a huge amount of frequently contradictory facts in the protocols adding the

following: “These considerations serve to warn potential researchers and readers that ‘hard’ facts offered by the survivors (dates, numbers, names) must be treated at arm’s length and, where possible, cross-referenced with other sources”, see <http://degob.org/index.php?showarticle=201>, accessed 12 September 2017.

- 3 On the “Sonderkommando” photographs see for example http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/newsletter/29/photographs_sonderkommando.asp, accessed 7 October 2017.