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## DISTANCED BY THE SCREEN. STUDENT HISTORY TEACHERS AND VIDEO ARCHIVES OF SECOND WORLD WAR INTERVIEWS IN THE NETHERLANDS

Introduction: Pedagogisation of Memory

Since the 1980s, an inevitable but clear problem has loomed surrounding the “cultural memory” (see Erll/Nünning 2010: 1–18) of the Second World War: the disappearance of the (ageing) witnesses. Many oral history collections have been created throughout the western world, and ten thousands of witness accounts have been preserved as audio and video recordings. Parallel to this quest to preserve individual war memories, there has also been an increasing effort to transmit these memories for “storage” in the minds of future generations. I have referred to this process as the “pedagogisation of memory” (Hogervorst 2010) – the transmission of memories about the Second World War and accompanying moral values on to younger generations as a crucial way of preserving and giving meaning to the past and, therewith, in creating and sustaining identities. The digital revolution has intensively influenced these practices of collecting and transmitting witness memories. Many interview collections can now be accessed, searched, and compared online, across institutional and national borders. In this article, I discuss the use of such an online interview portal created in the Netherlands. As I will argue, the use of this portal and teacher beliefs about the educational value of such portals indicate both continuity and change with regard to the transmission of witness memories. I start with an overview of current educational practices in the Netherlands concerning traditional and online witness testimonies about the Second World War, introduce my research project on the use of video testimonies, and then present the main findings.

## The Second World War and the Use of Witnesses in Dutch History Education

Contemporary history has been part of the Dutch curriculum since 1968, with the Second World War and the Holocaust as set topics. This was the result of major educational reform, but especially due to fundamental changes in the cultural memory of the Second World War. Until then, the national narrative in the Netherlands recounted the bravery and fortitude of the majority in a country under siege. The Holocaust played a minor role and Jews were not recognised as a specific group of victims, neither by the Dutch government nor by former resistance organisations (Berkel 2017). Since the 1960s, the image of collective heroism has gradually been replaced by another narrative: that of the Dutch as “guilty bystanders” of the Holocaust. As in other countries, the victims of the war became key figures in the memory culture. Because of traditionally limited government interference in education in the Netherlands, there are no directives on how to teach specific historical topics. As part of the 1968 educational reform, and especially following revision of the history curriculum in 2007, critical thinking skills have become an important part of history education. Nonetheless, oral history is rather uncommon in Dutch history education, including history teacher education. It is thus mainly because of the interest, initiative and networking of individual teachers that Dutch pupils might encounter oral testimonies. One of the few institutionalised practices regarding oral history in Dutch education is the *Landelijk Steunpunt Gast sprekers (LSG)*, a government-supported organisation that coordinates and promotes witness visits to primary and secondary education. Launched in 1999, LSG has seen an ever-increasing demand for witness lectures, rising to 1,125 in 2010 and 1,816 in 2016. Most of these lectures were given at secondary schools (47%), but nearly as many took place in primary schools (44%). LSG currently offers 223 guest speakers. Of these, 85 were children during the war (born between 1930 and 1940), 34 (19%) were born before 1930 and are now 86 years or older, and 50 were born during or shortly after the war. Most (110) are Jewish, who either survived in hiding (79) or in concentration and extermination camps (31).

LSG has recently started to work with second-generation guest speakers, including children of collaborationist parents (8).<sup>11</sup> The LSG puts great effort into training the guest speakers, and monitoring and evaluating their presentations. However, the educational goals, results and opportunities of using witness guest lectures should be subjected to more thorough investigation. Two general observations can be made at this stage: the fact that students are impressed and ask questions – which is strongly encouraged – seems to indicate the success of these lessons. Furthermore, it seems that the witness talks generally function as “extracurricular” illustration of the usual textbook-based lessons about the war.

### From Witnesses to Video Testimonies

In 2007, the Dutch government launched a four-year support programme to collect and preserve the heritage and memories of the Second World War. Supported initiatives included several oral history projects, which were made accessible in 2013 through an online portal, *Getuigenverhalen.nl*.<sup>12</sup> It provides access to about 500 video interviews in Dutch, tagged by themes, such as daily life, persecution, resistance, or war in the Dutch East Indies. Most of these interviews are searchable at fragment level through indexed key words in the transcripts and videos. The portal is hosted by the *NIOD Instituut voor Oorlogs-, Holocaust- en Genocidestudies (Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies)*. So far, no educational programmes have been developed around this collection, although this might change in the near future. However, in 2015 NIOD started a small teacher training initiative, in which secondary school history teachers are introduced to *IWitness*, the online educational platform of the *USC Shoah Foundation* in Los Angeles.<sup>13</sup> *IWitness* gives access to a selection (1,500 interviews in various languages, including 14 in Dutch) of the Shoah interview collection in an open but supervised community of teachers and students. These video interviews can be searched as well, using English search terms. In 2015, the Dutch organisation for the commemoration of the Second World War, the *Nationaal Comité 4 and 5 Mei*, explored the use of “filmed interviews” in formal education, based on

expert interviews and a questionnaire. 14 More than half of the 210 respondents said they used filmed interviews in their lessons. Responses suggested that documentaries and television series were also considered to be “filmed interviews”; 45% said they would use filmed interviews if there were no longer any living witnesses (and of these, 66% worked in primary education and 28% in secondary education); 27% would invite a second generation witness or an expert, or tell witness stories themselves, or visit a museum or former camp, or a combination of these. So there seems to be a willingness among teachers to use video testimonies, although this is not seen as the only option. The relatively large number of teachers saying they used video testimony might be due to the fact that those surveyed were teachers from the organisation’s network, who therefore had an interest in the Second World War and knowledge of relevant teaching materials. My inquiries among Dutch secondary school history teachers during several workshops on video testimonies that I conducted or attended at various institutions showed three things: they were mostly unfamiliar with online video archives, they were positive when told such collections exist, and it was quite unlikely that they would use online video interview collections in their teaching in the near future. They were more inclined to continue their usual ways of teaching about the Second World War, such as taking their students to memorial sites, showing (fragments of) films such as *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann or *Schindler’s List* by Steven Spielberg, and/or inviting witnesses in their classroom – “as long as they are still out there”. There seems to be a transition phase in which museums and archives have anticipated the absence of the witnesses, but the intended users are mainly continuing their existing practices of teaching with live testimonies.

### Online Interview Collection as Barometer of Contemporary Cultural Memory

In my research project, I am studying the use of video testimonies in classrooms, museums, and online, in order to better understand the changes and continuities in contemporary cultural memory and underlying assumptions

about the role and value of witnesses and their testimonies. I use the online interview collection *Getuigenverhalen.nl* as a means of inquiry, analysing the site's content, its use and its users through internet statistics, an online questionnaire and a focus group interview with (student) history teachers, as well as observing interaction with the website as users select interview fragments they would use in a lesson about the Second World War. The project is part of a broader research programme about war heritage in popular culture at Erasmus University Rotterdam, to which I contribute on behalf of the Open University of the Netherlands. | 5

The internet statistics and the questionnaire generally match my findings among history teachers: there seems to be an interest in such collections, but also a lack of familiarity with how to use them. Only a few respondents identify themselves as a teacher or a student, and relatively many users (not only teachers and students) do not find what they were looking for. The search function is often not used, and the most watched interviews are the ones highlighted on the homepage. This indicates that users might need clearer instructions about how to search the collection, and how to interpret the results. Internet statistics also show that when key words are entered users will stay on a particular page (interview) five times longer than during an average site visit without a site search, which is usually under three minutes.

A focus group interview with student history teachers offered an opportunity to get a more in-depth view on the use of the portal, and – to a scholar of cultural memory more importantly – on users' selection criteria for relevant material from the abundant reservoir of witness testimonies available. In the final part of this article below, I will describe the setup of these interviews and reflect on the first findings.

### Testimony as Illustration of Textbook History?

I conducted a focus group interview with 14 students of the international course on Holocaust education at the history teacher-training department of the *Hogeschool Arnhem Nijmegen* in the Netherlands. Nine of the participants came from the Netherlands, the others were from Austria (two),

Belgium (two), and Ireland (one). Participants, male and female, all in their early twenties, were asked to explore an interview collection through an online portal. They were divided into four subgroups. Subgroups A and B, both consisting of Dutch-speaking students, were asked to work with the Dutch web portal *Getuigenverhalen.nl*. The international students in subgroups C and D were asked to use *IWitness*. All were told to select two interview fragments they considered suitable for a lesson about the Second World War, and to formulate two learning objectives for this lesson. Subgroups A and C chose fragments from an interview I had selected for them. This was an interview with a Jewish man talking about his experiences in hiding as a child. Subgroups B and D had to choose an interview themselves, and select two fragments. In this way, I could not only assess the selection process of the interview fragments, but also the participants' use of the specific website and its search tools. I asked subgroups B and D to spend a maximum of 45 minutes searching for a suitable interview, and both succeeded. The plenary discussion after completion of this assignment focused on the participants' assessment of the content and educational value of the fragments they had found. During the discussion, three criteria emerged as having been important in selecting the fragments: they needed to be "about children" or things "pupils could relate to"; they needed to have a high density of topics and places known from the school curriculum, or that addressed "real war history", as one participant put it; and lastly, they needed to contain stories that "pupils would remember" or that would "make an impact". Thus, good witness stories needed to be familiar (children's perspective, textbook history) and extraordinary at the same time. | 6

The same double educational function ascribed to witnesses could be seen in the reactions in the second discussion topic: Why use testimonies? Participants felt testimonies added a "human dimension" to "the facts", by which they meant emotions, but also anecdotes or specific individual situations that affected the experience of historical events. "Otherwise you might as well read a book" or "tell it yourself", they agreed. So, according to these students, adding the kind of insider information that a textbook cannot of-

fer can make the past more interesting and more understandable. However, they indicated that these personal accounts needed to stay fairly close to the textbook narrative. “Then you know what they say really happened,” one participant said, and others agreed. Participants appeared to consider that witness testimonies did not just illustrate textbook history; in their view, the textbook and the witnesses mutually confirmed historical reality.

### Distanced by the Screen

In this way, the exploratory focus group interview indicated both continuity and change regarding the (intended) use of video testimonies compared with live guest lectures. Video interviews were also regarded as illustrations of textbook history/the regular curriculum. However, the video screen separating the witness from the students allowed them to take a more critical stance towards the witness as a historical source. This indicates an important difference between live and video testimonies: it is doubtful to what extent such epistemological questions regarding subjectivity and reliability would come up during a live guest lecture by a witness. This observation corresponds with the outcome of a large intervention study recently conducted in Germany under Christiane Bertram’s guidance, about learning results from history lessons based on testimonies in different formats: printed, video, and live. The students who had attended the live witness lecture scored lower in tests of historical thinking than those who had watched the same testimony on video or read it in print (Bertram et al. 2017). In my view, the focus group discussion also highlighted the students’ unfamiliarity with historical sources other than texts. The epistemological questions regarding historical sources, and their relation to “real war history”, should be asked when using any source, of course, including history textbooks, upon which the students seemed to rely quite strongly. Depending on context, learning objectives and educational level, this could be a great advantage of working with video testimonies, whether or not combined with live guest speakers. Teachers should perhaps evaluate witness guest lectures together with their students, which would be a suitable occasion to add critiquing sources to the

discussion. We do not know to what extent this is being done. The marginal role of oral history in Dutch history education suggests teachers may lack awareness of the opportunities such evaluations could offer (apart from time considerations).

Another difference between live and video testimonies concerns diversity and student-guided learning. Participants did not address this in the group discussion. In traditional witness lessons only one person is invited into a classroom, after which lessons continue as usual. With video testimony, students have a whole reservoir of different people available, with different experiences and possibly varying perspectives on what they lived through. Interview portals thus offer the opportunity to not only illustrate or confirm knowledge obtained from history textbooks but also to supplement or challenge existing ideas. Video interview portals also permit a more student-guided approach, rather than a traditional teacher- or witness-guided history lesson. The fact that these advantages of video testimony collections did not come up in the discussion might point to the participants' lack of familiarity with such collections.

Further investigation is needed, but this might be a first step towards a more reflexive, comparative way of engaging with testimonies in history education in the Netherlands, as a valuable means both to learn about the past and to evaluate how historical knowledge comes about. This would not only be important for enhancing students' critical thinking skills, it would also do more justice to witness testimonies as historical sources with their own value.

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- 1 Landelijk Steunpunt Gast sprekers (2017) *Oorlogsverhalen in de klas. Resultaten van een online enquête over ervaringen en wensen van docenten met betrekking tot gast sprekers*.
- 2 See [www.Getuigenverhalen.nl](http://www.Getuigenverhalen.nl), accessed 10 November 2017.
- 3 <http://www.niod.nl/nl/iwitness-project>, accessed 2 August 2017.
- 4 Nationaal Comité 4 en 5 mei (2015). *Ooggetuigen in de klas. Onderzoek naar gebruik van gefilmde interviews met ooggetuigen van WOII in de klas*.
- 5 The project is called Live/life stories. The use of video testimonies in education, museums and online is part of WAR! Popular Culture and European Heritage of Major Armed Conflicts at Erasmus University Rotterdam: <https://www.eshcc.eur.nl/english/rei/>, accessed 2 August 2017.
- 6 Focus group interview, Hogeschool Arnhem Nijmegen, Nijmegen, 31 May 2016.