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“WHAT EXACTLY MAKES A GOOD INTERVIEW?” EDUCATIONAL WORK WITH VIDEOTAPED TESTIMONIES AT _ERINNERN.AT_

Los Angeles, September 2005. We, that is Markus Barnay, Albert Lichtblau and myself, spent a week selecting interviews for *_erinnern.at_* |1 from the over 52,000 videos to be found in the inventory of the *Shoah Foundation* |2. At that time, working with eyewitness testimonies was still a relatively young branch of Holocaust education. And for *_erinnern.at_*, it was early years as far as the development of teaching materials was concerned. The project for which we travelled to L.A. was in fact the organisation’s first. We were looking for what we considered good interviews with links with Austria, from which excerpts were to be edited for teaching purposes. In the course of a very intensive week, our discussions continually returned to one and the same question: What constitutes a good interview in this context?

A lot has happened since then. The Shoah Foundation interviews have long been made accessible at a variety of locations, including the Universities of Vienna und Salzburg. With its pioneering projects on the use of eyewitness testimonies, the Shoah Foundation regularly provides fresh stimulus in what has become a mature and highly multifaceted field. *_erinnern.at_* has also come of age and now has a well established place in the Austrian educational scene – with a significant contribution made in that context by the teaching materials developed on eyewitness testimonies. 2008 saw the publication of the DVD *The Legacy* for teachers and learners – with interviews that had been selected in the course of our research in L.A. and augmented with extensive learning modules. That was followed in 2011 by the DVD and online platform *New Home Israel*, which was based on thirteen interviews conducted by *_erinnern.at_* with former Austrians living in Israel. Currently

(spring 2017) two further products are being developed which are again centred on eyewitness testimonies. ¹³ The question of the “good” interview is a leitmotif of these projects.

I should like to approach the question as an educationist via an indirect path. Reflection on what constitutes a good interview is closely connected with the objectives pursued with eyewitness testimonies. These objectives can be derived from the didactic principles that guide *_erinnern.at_* when preparing such testimonies for use. In the following, some of those principles are first explained and illustrated with the help of examples from the teaching materials produced before the question of the “good” interview is finally addressed.

Let me preface the discussion by saying that, in the normal case, a project is begun by defining the topics to be covered in the interviews. At this level, the question of what constitutes a good interview is easily answered; the requirement is simply to find testimonies that address the topics selected. But then the question of the “good” interview has to be answered at the next level. And in that case the answer calls for fuller treatment.

1. Active Involvement versus Passive Consumption

The teaching materials discussed here centre on videotaped testimonies given by eyewitnesses, by people who suffered persecution under the Nazis. Like an evening spent in front of the television, however, films, documentaries and also eyewitness testimonies are always a temptation – to adopt the attitude of a passive consumer. No wonder, then, that they are popular with teachers and learners alike. The learning modules that accompany the interview excerpts, on the other hand, deliver ideas for responding to what has been shown and thus stimulate a more active response on the part of the viewer. The activities involved promote a greater degree of involvement without running the risk of emotional overload. The results of a current research project, for example, show that augmented, i.e. more active involvement with the eyewitness videos helps viewers achieve a better understanding, while intense reactions like anger or shock decrease in the course of interaction (Bibermann et al. 2016: 43).

Although no systematic evaluation has as yet been made of the teaching materials developed by *_erinnern.at_* for use with the eyewitness testimonies, it can be concluded from feedback to date that teachers like to show the interviews but make only little use of the supporting modules. With regard to the DVD *The Legacy*, the gist of the feedback is that the input provided is attractive but too extensive or unstructured and therefore requires excessive preparation time on the part of the teachers. But even a greatly reduced input with a focus on just the essential aspects, as in the case of *New Home Israel*, seems to have little impact on the user response. So are we left with passive consumption in spite of all the stimulus delivered? In this context, a new approach has been adopted for *Escaping the Holocaust*, a learning app that is now being developed, which guides the viewer's involvement through a 90-minute unit culminating in a finished product (album, email) so that viewing and doing are closely interlinked. Experience with this app following its launch in the spring of 2018 will show whether the strategy has been successful.

2. Tuning in to the Source

“Talking heads won't hold viewers' attention.” That comment is often made and heard with regard to responses to eyewitness testimonies (Shenker 2015: 39), but it is not confirmed by the experience of *_erinnern.at_*. Pupils are definitely willing and able to concentrate on interviews as long as thirty minutes. They do better, however, when they have been given an opportunity to prepare by tuning into the source. All the modules in *The Legacy* begin for that reason with a section entitled *Meeting the eyewitnesses*, with exercises designed to prepare users for the interviews:

“The following exercises show you how you can respond to the eyewitness testimonies as a specific type of source. You will hear someone relating their experiences during the period of National Socialism. In the subsequent assignments you will be able to practise something that sounds easy but in fact requires great concentration: careful listening and looking in order to understand what is being said and how.”

Here is an example of how pupils are helped to tune in to a long sequence: They first hear a one-minute excerpt with just the audio track, concentrate on it and then make a note of their impressions. Then they are shown the video of the same one-minute excerpt with the audio track switched off and again are invited to make a note of their impressions. This exercise serves to sharpen users' perceptions, to help them register not just the content of the narrative but also the style, including facial expression and gesture, and nuances and tone of voice. In the process they will perhaps become motivated to work on longer testimonies – even though the pace may be diametrically opposed to their normal reception habits.

3. Expressing Reactions

The eyewitness testimonies can trigger a variety of reactions and a wide range of emotions. Many viewers are impressed, moved or saddened. Some feel personal dismay. For others, they are a source of hope, for example when Gertraud Fletzberger¹⁴, who had to flee to Sweden as a child, serves as a positive source of identification for refugee children in the classroom today. Others react with anger, like when Jehudith Hübner, a former Austrian living in Israel, who speaks about the murder of her parents and little sister and concludes with a vehement “I shall *never* forget what the Austrians did [...], *never* will I forget!” (Film “Verhältnis zu Österreich”, approx. TC 4:50). That upsets many pupils, who feel personally targeted as Austrians. Sometimes young people are irritated, bored or simply indifferent – but are not prepared to admit it. Eyewitness testimonies relating to National Socialism and the Holocaust come with a powerful moral charge, and for that reason pupils often feel under pressure to react “properly”, to empathise with the eyewitness. Or, as one pupil put it by way of apology in the follow-up session: “I feel bad about it because I don’t feel bad about it.” The important thing is that pupils, whether they feel moved or indifferent, should have an opportunity to react to what they have seen and define their positions, to express their opinions and emotions. All the teaching materials developed at erinnern.at contain an invitation to do just that. “What was my most

powerful feeling, my strongest reaction to what I saw and heard?” That is what it says in all the modules of the DVD *The Legacy*. In the *New Home Israel* project, the assignment is slightly more nuanced and has proven successful with the sequence with Jehudith Hübner:

“Watch the video again. This time concentrate on the reactions and feelings it releases in you. Choose a reaction or feeling that you would like to tell the others about and write down a word for it on a slip of paper.

Then all the slips will be laid out or posted in the classroom so that everyone can study them. Have a class discussion on the following:

- Do you have any questions with regard to any of the reactions?
- Has anything else struck you?
- Are any of the feelings or reactions particularly frequent?
- What could the reasons be for that?”

Formulating one’s own reactions to the video can be the point of departure for further work on various aspects and for clarification of any problems. Considering, recognising and formulating one’s own reactions is also a form of training for empathic listening, because people who are able to recognise and formulate their own feelings can usually do so with others’, too (Keysers 2014; Wiseman 1996).

4. Taking Responsibility for One’s Own Learning Process

One of the teaching principles defined on the website at www.erinnern.at is formulated as follows: “As thinking and acting individuals who independently acquire historical awareness, learners must be taken seriously. Only then will they be able to further develop their sense of values.”¹⁵ Taking learners seriously is also about trusting in their ability to assume responsibility for the learning process themselves. The learning modules are accordingly designed to consistently give pupils a choice of the interview or sequence they want to work on further, where they want to go into greater depth. Opening up scope for autonomous action for learners is particularly important in the case of

a subject that is so highly charged at the moral level and thus so constricting. A good way to begin a session with eyewitness testimonies is to lay out childhood photographs of the eyewitnesses in the room. The pupils select a photograph that appeals to them and then put questions to the person in the photograph and explain why they have chosen that particular photograph. After that, either they watch the eyewitness's video portrait ¹⁶ individually, which serves as a point of departure for more detailed involvement with the topics raised, or the class as a group chooses the interview they wish to work on together. From experience to date, it is clear that the freedom to choose and formulate one's own questions and thus discover one's own interests greatly increases pupils' willingness to commit themselves to work on the testimonies. In most cases, discussion of the selected photographs reveals links with the pupils' own lives: A family photograph becomes a reminder for a pupil of grandma's family album, which they would leaf through together. Or pupils ask themselves about the hopes and dreams the girl in the photograph – who is the same age as they are – may have had and see just how much they resemble their own. That creates links between the past and the pupils' lives in the present.

5. Presenting the Source (as) Faithfully (as Possible)

After the research trip to Los Angeles, there were differences of opinion within the project group on the extent to which the selected interview sequences required editing. Some members of the group felt that we should also include longer sequences,

“preferably uncut and unedited, complete with the interviewer's questions, the silences [...] That gives the pupils a much better insight into the idiosyncrasies and complexity of the source [...] and pupils also realise that these testimonies [...] are not always gripping, well structured and well narrated episodes.” (email Maria Ecker to Werner Dreier, September 2005)

Other members of the group were concerned that such an approach could deter the pupils because it is so far removed from their reception habits and

they might not be able to follow such a narrative. We finally opted for a trial to test pupils' reactions to one of the sequences of the type discussed: Richard Schoen, born of a Jewish family living near Vienna, talks about the murder of his brother during the November pogrom. He speaks slowly, hesitantly and often struggles to find words as if he were talking about it for the first time. As he speaks, he is fully immersed in the events of that night. The interviewer's questions and interruptions can also be heard. Richard Schoen's testimony is not stringent, not "documentary style". And yet (or perhaps because of that) it was found in the test phase – and has since been confirmed in many teacher training sessions and workshops at school – that the pupils were moved and responded strongly to this sequence in particular. In the meantime it has become a kind of key sequence that stands for the strategy of *including* interview sequences which remain close to the source and have not been cut to produce a smoother and shorter narrative. The example of the Richard Schoen sequence also reveals the potential of testimonies in which a narrative mode develops that Lawrence Langer calls *deep memory* (1991: 1–38). Unlike *common memory*, which refers to a controlled, chronological style of narrative, moments of deep memory are characterised by a more "authentic", less structured, more immediate style of remembering and narration, one that has a more direct impact on the audience (Shenker 2015: 5). The two narrative modes can also overlap, with a seamless transition between the two. A current project, for example, includes an interview with Gertraud Fletzberger, who was forced to flee to Sweden as a child with her sister and brother in 1938. Their mother followed about a year later. The narrative, which has been told many times and is otherwise logically presented and chronologically structured, has just one break in it: at the point where the mother rejoins her children in Sweden and Gertraud's sister refuses to go to her mother.

"And that was so terrible for my mother. She has never forgotten that. That gave her such pain; it was unforgettable. I mean, I only mention that here. When my sister – 70 I think she was, yes, when she was 75 or 70, at all events it was a big party. My brother was there from Sweden and so on and it was a big party, and her foster brother was also there. [...]

And her foster brother, as is usual in Sweden, gave a speech on my sister's birthday and among other things he said how happy his family had been when the little girl came and how nice that was and how much . . . And my mother jumped up from her seat and ran out of the room, and I ran after her because I could imagine what the problem was. She was crying like a baby [her voice breaks]. Just because of those words. That, that's how awful it was for her." (Interview with Gertraud Fletzberger 2014)

At that point Gertraud Fletzberger goes back in her narrative to the time they were in Sweden and continues in the chronological order from where it broke off. Her mother's anguish is communicated in her words, facial expression and tone of voice. The pupils become witnesses to a very private moment, which gives them the uncomfortable feeling of intruding in a situation that is too personal. At the same time, these discontinuous narratives – discontinuous at the level of content or voice – are a valuable learning tool because of the deep insights they offer into the (often quite disparate) ways in which eyewitnesses remember events in their lives and how they narrate them. In edited and polished sequences, such insights may be lost or at least blurred.

6. Analysing with Empathy

What may seem at first sight to be opposite poles – sober analysis and emotional empathy – can in fact coexist. That is demonstrated by Katarina Bader in her book *Jureks Erben* (Jurek's Legacy 2010), in which she reflects on her relationship with a survivor of Auschwitz with a combination of empathy and analysis. In her book, the author seeks answers to the question why Jurek always tells the same stories and why he tells them in the way he does. A current project at _erinnern.at_ contains an interview with Bader in which she speaks about the how and why of narratives: Stories that are often told are ground down, become smooth and rounded; survivors protect themselves (and their audience) by adopting a humorous style or formulating a positive outcome. Bader's book provides a framework for suggestions for learning that also help pupils adopt a reflective approach and a critical eye for the source so that they can develop an awareness of what is narrated and why and

how, and what the factors are that influence a narrative or interview. Such a deconstructive analytical approach can also offer protection. The exercises provide space for withdrawal where the narrative threatens to become emotionally overwhelming. It was one of the declared goals of *_erinnern.at_* from the start to include proposals for deconstruction with all teaching materials. But it is essential that analysis of the source should not detract from the message, from the fact that human beings are speaking about their lives and from the powerful emotional quality of their accounts. Or, as Katarina Bader (2017) puts it in the interview:

“I consider it very important that we always see the achievement [of narration] even when taking it all apart. [...] For me, the two belong together: analysing the narrative and admitting the emotions at the same time.” 17

So what Makes a Good Interview?

To what extent are these principles useful with regard to our original question? What really constitutes a good interview for educational work with eyewitness testimonies? No single answer will be valid in every case; it will depend very much on the teaching goals pursued with the individual project. The more clearly they are formulated, the easier it will be to identify those interviews or interview sequences that serve the teaching goals best. In the educational context, the point made so neatly by a participant in a World Café workshop applies: “(Even) a bad interview can be a good interview for education.”

On the other hand, the above principles promoted by *_erinnern.at_* do permit a number of specific answers to be developed, four of which are presented in the following.

First: If pupils are to become involved on an autonomous basis, formulating their questions and interests independently and assuming responsibility for their own learning process, the first requirement is a varied range of narrators and sequences for them to choose from.

Second: If learners are to adopt an active response to what they see and hear

from the eyewitnesses, if they are to develop opinions and hold positions of their own, it clearly makes sense to include sequences that are controversial and disturbing. They are catalysts with the power to provoke pupils into formulating an opinion and becoming more deeply involved with what they have seen.

Third: If pupils are to employ a deconstructive approach to eyewitness testimonies, a good sequence is one that offers as faithful a view of the source as possible such as unedited excerpts that also include the interviewer. Another useful strategy is to employ sequences from several interviews with one and the same person that were held in different years so as to show how narratives change over time, how they are smoothed through repetition and how they are influenced by the audience in the individual case.

Fourth: If the goal of a project is to promote the ability to listen and empathise, use must be made of sequences that encourage concentrated listening and looking, for example sequences in which immediate and “authentic” memories and narratives (deep memory) are displayed. Also, involvement with a testimony takes time. That is an argument for the use of longer sequences and against the fragmentation of eyewitness testimony – even if that runs counter to young people’s reception habits.

Linz, May 2017: The Education Working Group is discussing the criteria to be applied in the project to the selection of interview sequences. That leads once again to questions relating to goals and good interviews just as it did twelve years before. Have the answers changed in the meantime? Yes, insofar as they are now more well-founded – with the benefit of years of discussion and reflection, a process that will continue to receive fresh stimulus through the continuous exchange of experience with teachers, learners and colleagues.

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- 1 The full name of the association is [_erinnern.at](http://www.erinnern.at). *National Socialism and the Holocaust: Memory and Present*. On behalf of the Austrian Ministry of Education, [_erinnern.at](http://www.erinnern.at) supports Austrian teachers in their teaching on National Socialism and the Holocaust.
 - 2 Today: USC Shoah Foundation. The Institute for Visual History and Education.
 - 3 1) Interviews conducted by [_erinnern.at](http://www.erinnern.at) with the “last” Austrian eyewitnesses, a learning website on the model of *New Home Israel*, www.neue-heimat-israel.at. 2) A learning app called *Escaping the Holocaust*, a joint project of the University of Applied Sciences in Lucerne, the Vorarlberg University of Applied Sciences and [_erinnern.at](http://www.erinnern.at). The interviews are taken from various collections.
 - 4 Interview conducted by [_erinnern.at](http://www.erinnern.at) (interviewer Georg Traska) with Gertraud Fletzberger, October 2014.
 - 5 www.erinnern.at, accessed 11 May 2017.
 - 6 A video portrait is a short documentary on an eyewitness lasting between about seven and ten minutes. See the video portrait of Jehudith Hübner at: <http://www.neue-heimat-israel.at/home/jehudith-huebner>.
 - 7 Interview conducted by [_erinnern.at](http://www.erinnern.at) (interviewer Albert Lichtblau) with Katarina Bader, March 2017, Salzburg. This and the interview with Gertraud Fletzberger are expected to become available at www.erinnern.at in spring 2018.