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VOICES OF SURVIVORS AT SITES OF PERPETRATORS. EDUCATIONAL APPROACHES TO VIDEO TESTIMONIES AT THE TOPOGRAPHY OF TERROR DOCUMENTATION CENTER

The former headquarters of the Gestapo, the SS High Command and the Reich Security Main Office is now one of the most frequented places of remembrance relating to the history of National Socialism in Berlin. The exhibition at the documentation centre is focussed on the site of the perpetrators and the central institutions of the SS and the police in the “Third Reich” and the crimes they committed throughout Europe. The perspective of the victims is accordingly largely absent from the exhibition. As a corrective, the documentation center organises temporary exhibitions ¹ and, as part of its educational programme, a series of seminars entitled *Voices of Survivors at Sites of Perpetrators*, which picks up on the contents and photographs shown in the permanent exhibition and contrasts them with the video testimonies of survivors.

The goal of the interactive media seminars is historical learning based on a critical approach to sources, in which young people – in line with Saul Friedländer’s “integrated historiography” (2007) – recognise the differences in the perspectives of perpetrators, victims and bystanders and interrelate them. The offering is targeted at groups, mostly youth groups and schools classes with pupils (age: 14 and older). It lasts about five hours and includes parts of the permanent exhibition. The seminars were developed and tested in the framework of a cooperative project by the *Center for Digital Systems* at the Freie Universität Berlin and can be booked free of charge in the framework of the documentation center’s educational programme. ²

The seminars are designed to connect the visit to a “perpetrator site” for the youngsters with a historical learning process based on the memories of survivors of Nazi persecution and to relate it to their own present-day lives. The topics dealt with involve different periods in the history of National Socialism and shed light on various phases of persecution. A further component of the programme is a specific contrast between the documents of perpetrators and victims. Following an explanation of the overarching framework, this paper presents the individual seminars and shows which different approaches to learning with video testimonies at a perpetrator site can be implemented.

Voices of Survivors

The seminars are based on life story interviews taken from two oral history collections: the *Visual History Archive of the USC Shoah Foundation*, whose extensive collection comprises interviews on a multitude of specific events, and the online archive *Forced Labor 1939–1945. Memory and History*.

In all the seminars, thematic learning is combined with a biographical approach. A **video film** helps to introduce the pupils to usually four different eyewitnesses. The video focuses on the survivors’ origins and their childhood and youth and often ends with the onset of persecution. Thus information is provided on various aspects of the time leading up to the actual subject of the seminar whilst the participants get to know the diverse biographical origins of the survivors and their memories of a phase of life that offers the adolescents their own starting points. In most cases the initial response within the group takes the form of a lively discussion as the pupils communicate their various impressions and reflect on the testimony. As a second step, the introductory video offers them a basis for the subsequent choice in the working groups of the narrative they wish to focus on.

At the Site of the Perpetrators

A short tour of the exhibition is provided to illustrate the framework and historical context of the seminars. Following an introduction to the sites,

namely the Gestapo headquarters and the Reich Security Main Office in Wilhelmstrasse and Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse, the pupils have an opportunity to take a more detailed look at certain sections of the exhibition with the support of questions designed to guide their enquiry. That helps them establish a common basis of knowledge on central aspects of a perpetrator-centred narrative of National Socialism and make their own observations, which they will be able to develop further in the course of their visit.

Beyond this common framework, the five seminars differ with regard to the sources used and the specific objectives and integrated visitor activities. To a certain extent they can be considered representative of different focusses in the use of video testimonies for educational purposes. The following approaches are covered:

- a) biographical learning and the personal approach,
- b) focus on local history,
- c) analysis of the interconnection between memory, interpretation and reflection,
- d) comparison between video interview sources and other media such as photography,
- e) video interviews as a source of information on the actors' choices and their freedom of action in a decisive historical situation, and finally
- f) comparison between different contexts and meanings of bearing witness.

The Story after Survival: Women from Ravensbrück Concentration Camp
 In its choice of sources, the seminar about women in Ravensbrück is relatively low key and particularly suitable for secondary school classes. The focus is on **biographical learning and the personal approach** to the video testimonies of four survivors. As they were sent to Ravensbrück at different times and had to wear different insignia, the video provides information on key aspects of the history of Ravensbrück concentration camp and National Socialist ideology. As a point of departure, pupils are asked the deliberately generalising question whether women were perpetrators or victims under

the National Socialists. They are then encouraged to study photographs in the exhibition and in their subsequent discussion on the testimony of the persecuted women to consider whether the women would have seen themselves as victims. The debate can also touch on the question of the current use of “victim” as a pejorative term among young people in Germany today.



Creating a Poster about Women from Ravensbrück Concentration Camp; CeDiS, FU Berlin 2015

Deported from Berlin. Jewish Survivors Tell their Story

The second seminar addresses the significance of deportation from Berlin in the history of the persecution of the Jews in Germany. In Berlin, deportation to the ghettos and concentration and death camps in Eastern Europe began in 1941. The victims were sent to Litzmannstadt (Łódź), Minsk, Riga, Kowno, Warsaw and Auschwitz. The last wave of deportations took place in the

framework of the so-called “Factory Campaign” in February 1943. Only very few Jews were able to go into hiding and survive in Berlin until the end of the war. On the basis of video interviews with Berlin Jews, the young people learn about their biographies and are confronted with fundamental questions such as the deported Jews’ knowledge, premonitions and fears concerning their destinations and the decisions the narrators made on the basis of their extremely limited freedom of action. In this case the seminar combines two approaches: The **focus on the local history of Berlin** is linked to the question of people’s knowledge, playing an important role in all four narratives. Narrations around the question what somebody knew at a certain time allow for a closer study of the **interconnection between memory, interpretation and reflection**. In a last step the young people are encouraged to adopt a completely different perspective and ask themselves what they (want to) know about cases of persecution today and what conclusions they draw for themselves.

The Warsaw Ghetto. Contrary Perspectives

The approach in the third seminar, which is based on the history of the Warsaw ghetto, has a focus on the **comparison between video interviews and photography as sources** and is designed to promote critical media literacy in the participants. For many years photography was a defining medium in the public perception of Nazi crimes. Images like the piles of corpses photographed in Bergen-Belsen were untypical of the method of extermination employed by the National Socialists and yet influenced the idea people made of it worldwide (Brink 1998). The point of departure in this seminar is the iconic photograph of the boy with the raised hands, being deported from the Warsaw ghetto (Hamann 2011). The pupils see the photograph in the exhibition, where it includes a reference to the perpetrator Josef Blösche, who is also to be seen in the photograph. In the course of the seminar, various photographs from the Warsaw ghetto are shown and questions asked about the conditions under which they were taken. Similar motifs are also to be found in the video interviews with the four survivors,

but their narratives form a counterpoint to the photographs: Key questions, which are prominent in the video testimonies, play no role at all in the photographs: the causes of hunger, the murders, the course of events and their consequences up to the present day.



Watching Interviews – Jewish Self-Help in the Warsaw Ghetto; CeDiS, FU Berlin 2016

Memories of an early Pogrom in the Provinces

The goal of the fourth seminar is to discover how the ethnically defined perpetrator society was able to develop in a rural environment and how the perpetrators, the victims and the other local residents behaved during the pogrom. Here **video interviews – along with other types of sources – serve as a source of information on the actors’ freedom of action and decision-making in the context of antisemitic violence.** This seminar deserves a

slightly more detailed presentation for a better understanding of an approach that is both multi-perspective and action-oriented.

On 25 March 1933, in broad daylight, men of the SA and police rounded up all the male Jews in Creglingen in Swabia and tortured them in the town hall. Two of the Jews died from their injuries shortly after (Naser 1999).

The seminar begins with a video interview, in which Margot Lemle, the daughter of one of the two murdered men, describes her childhood and life in Creglingen (as not free of controversial situations but as a kind of multicultural coexistence). In the second video she begins her narrative with the following words:

“Very soon, on a Saturday, on 25 March 1933, a lorry arrived carrying SA men, ‘political Nazis’. They carried out a pogrom in Creglingen so terrible that it hardly bears telling. I’ll keep it short, so that it’s easier for you to bear.”¹³

The video thus begins with a personal note, which is a strong pointer to the importance of the audience for the narrative.

As that was one of the first pogroms under the National Socialists, the police conducted enquiries, but they were soon abandoned. What remains are the statements made to the police closely after the events by perpetrators, victims and eyewitnesses. After the war, the case came to court at the initiative of a number of Jews who had emigrated from Creglingen, and questions were again put to perpetrators and witnesses. In addition, a record exists of the written testimony made by Margot Lemle in 1943 and two video interviews from the middle of the 1990s with Margot Lemle and Erna Stein, whose father barely survived the beatings.¹⁴

The sources accordingly differ considerably with regard to the context in which they were created, their perspectives and the time lapse since the events. They show the differences in the accounts of those early antisemitic acts of violence, bearing in mind that the perpetrators were also questioned by the police. One of the leaders of the pogrom, for example, confesses openly to a hatred of Jews. That calls for a careful introduction to the sources

so that pupils understand their contexts and moreover their ideological implications. In this respect, reflection on the form of the statements made often provides a good point of departure. One striking aspect is the standard pattern of the statements taken from witnesses in 1933, in which no blame is attached to the local head of the NSDAP. The young people are encouraged to choose and study a number of documents, also with regard to the different recipients of the various sources. A common thread in the multi-perspective sources, especially with regard to the non-Jewish population of Creglingen, is the question of the response of the individual citizens, which includes accounts of approval and tumultuous support on the one hand and the case of a shopkeeper who stepped in to rescue a Jewish acquaintance on the other. In a jigsaw teaching strategy ¹⁵, pupils work on the principle of the division of labour to reconstruct and discuss the diverse attitudes and behaviour of nine different actors. The exercise requires the pupils to decide whether to attach most weight to the memory of the victims, the problems confronting the eyewitnesses or the question of perpetration. Regardless of their choice, many groups also focus on the aspect of the aftereffects and the extent to which this early pogrom impacted the subsequent lives of the persecuted individuals. The video interviews help them recognise to what extent even the early history of National Socialism impinges on the present.

Witnesses in the 1963–1965 Auschwitz Trial in Frankfurt/Main

This last seminar is aiming on a **comparison between different contexts and meanings of bearing testimony**. The central question is: What were the survivors able to bear witness to in court what were they expected to say and what was the significance of their appearances for their life stories? As the main sources, this seminar is based on the court testimonies of four witnesses, which are available as audio files ¹⁶, and the videotaped memories of the same individuals forty years later taken from the archives of *Forced Labor 1939–1945* and *the USC Shoah Foundation* ¹⁷.

In the exhibition, the pupils are introduced to the history of the concentration camps and the question of prosecution of the perpetrators after 1945.

The focus here is on the perpetrators in the post-war period, the failure to face up to the past, the trials and the acquittals.

By way of biographical background, the **introductory video** in this case focusses on the memories of a Polish intellectual, who had to stop studying law when the Germans marched into Austria, and a Polish-Jewish artist, who suffered as an illegitimate child from discord in the home. The pupils choose one of the four witnesses and form groups to listen to their testimony at the Auschwitz trial in the form of 15-minute tape recordings. In this phase of the project, most of the young people demonstrated a surprising level of concentration in working with the audio format without any visuals: All they have is quite literally the *voices* of the victim, although they also hear the judge, the interpreter and in some cases the accused perpetrators. The pupils can study how the testimonies of the witnesses are influenced by the situation in court and by a mode of questioning which, in accordance with German criminal law, was directed only at the question of whether the accused had personally committed the crime. ¹⁸ The survivors are clearly at pains to satisfy the juridical demands made of their testimonies with detailed and differentiated accounts. But they also go beyond the limits of procedural law when they speak of the murders of friends and relatives or of other crimes committed and of other perpetrators, who are not on trial. The confrontation of perspectives is tangible in the recordings of the trials: Perpetrators take the floor; they intervene and place themselves on a level with the court by asking witnesses further questions or sharing the judge's scepticism with regard to a statement made by a witness.

The interviews filmed decades later offer valuable insights into the ways the witness coped with the trial and the importance they attached to it in retrospect: In one video interview, Anna P. describes her fears and the nightmares she suffered after meeting the accused Perry Broad in the corridor of the court. For Stan Kaminski, his court testimony became a "very important element" in his life: "It was a turning point." He calls his appearance in court a second liberation ¹⁹ and describes how he subsequently moved from Poland to Frankfurt in West-Germany. To that extent, the ways in which the

witnesses came to terms with their experiences in court in later life reflect the diversity of the survivors' active responses.

In a two-day project, the young people produce a short radio documentary complete with introduction, transitions and their choice of excerpts from the recordings. The wide range of sources is the key to a manifold experience of learning through research with regard to the dimensions of testimony: the juridical dimension involving the pursuit of justice and a commitment to the murdered victims, the historiographic dimension of the documentation of crime, and the personal dimension of a life-story narrative, in which – in addition to the lingering impacts of the events – meaning-building interpretation plays an important role.



Anna Palarczyk, Witness in the Auschwitz Trial, Interview Archive Forced Labor 1939-1945

Conclusion

Treatment of the holocaust as a largely accomplished, anonymous annihilation project will continue to present difficulties, not only in the field of history education. The perpetrators' documents and photographs provide information on the ideology and system developed by the National Socialists and on their crimes. In the educational context, they can and are meant to encourage reflection on the aftereffects of ideological patterns (Messerschmidt 2016). The video interviews with survivors cannot and are not meant to represent the murdered millions but, from highly subjective perspectives, they focus on the crimes of the National Socialists and their impacts. For that reason, the question of testimony with its diverse dimensions, contents and formats has proven particularly useful in work with voices of survivors at sites of perpetrators.

In her widely acclaimed article, Annette Wieviorka sees a connection between the role of the witness in the Eichmann trial and in the present, in which the eyewitness has become a medially determining factor because "at the global level, individual narratives and opinions often replace analysis" (Wieviorka 2000: 157). That can be seen as a challenge to develop educational methods in which work with interviews does not rely on "playing with emotions" but where the same importance is attached to video interviews as to other sources.

In all the seminars in the *Voices of Survivors* series, young people have shown a particularly positive response to the personal style of the introductions based on videotaped interviews relating to childhood, youth and origins. Good results have also been achieved with different types of documents on focussed events with a strong local element, which offer scope for independent interpretations. What is important is to give young people enough guidance and time to hear, contextualise and interpret the sources. The various levels of analysis discussed above overlap in the video interviews, and it takes time to process such a wealth of content. That is an argument for working with the medium of the video interview in the framework of a setting that offers a few hours for research-based learning.

Strictly speaking, it is not possible to consistently reduce the five seminars in the series to just one level of treatment. The video testimonies open doors to the past but that is not all: They also raise questions of the aftermath in the narrators' lives and the processes they adopted for the construction of meaning. Through the visible image of the narrators with their facial expressions and gestures and the feelings they reveal, the video testimonies have an emotional impact on the audience, but they also offer scope for analysis with regard to the type of source and the retrospective character of the narrative and its implications. Above all, they offer such a wealth of content that insights are triggered into countless historical constellations and modern attitudes are challenged.

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- 1 As illustrated by the first temporary and travelling exhibition organised in 2010: “The Face of the Ghetto. Pictures taken by Jewish photographers in the Litzmannstadt ghetto”.
- 2 In addition to Tanja Seider, Katharina Obens and Dorothee Wein, Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann, Deborah Hartmann, Tanja Kinzel, Bernd Körte-Braun, Claudia Krieg and Verena Nägel also contributed to the design and implementation. To book a seminar, go to <http://www.topographie.de/?id=275#1234>, accessed 10 April 2017.
- 3 Margot Lemle, Interview 35895. Visual History Archive. USC Shoah Foundation. (Portuguese original; translated and subtitled in German for the seminars).
- 4 In addition to Margot Lemle, see also Erna Stein, Interview 9326, Visual History Archive. USC Shoah Foundation.
- 5 For information on the jigsaw teaching technique, go to <https://www.jigsaw.org/>
- 6 In the meantime, the *Fritz Bauer Institute* has kindly made the recordings of the trial available online at <http://www.auschwitz-prozess.de>, accessed 30 July 2017.
- 7 From the interview archive *Forced Labor 1939–1945*, www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de (13.05.2017): Yehuda B., Interview 27.09.2005, za 398; Anna P., za 401, Interview 08.07.2005; Imre G., za 402, Interviews 24.09.2005. Dagi Knellessen conducted the interviews in the “Zeugen im Auschwitz-Prozess” collection for the Fritz Bauer Institute (Knellessen 2008). From the *Visual History Archive* of the USC Shoah Foundation: Stan Kaminski, Interview 16420.
- 8 The role of witnesses in civil criminal law with the onus to prove that the accused personally committed the crime differs from their role in the Eichmann trial held three years previously (Wieviorka 2000).
- 9 “I have felt that I am without hate, without a desire for revenge, nothing.” Stan Kaminski, Interview 16420, Visual History Archive. USC Shoah Foundation.