

FORCED LABOR 1939 - 1945 MEMORY AND HISTORY

A Digital Archive
for Education and Research

A cooperation between the Foundation "Remembrance, Responsibility and Future", Freie Universität Berlin and the German Historical Museum

“Forced Labor 1939 – 1945. Memory and History” commemorates over twelve million people that were forced to work for Nazi Germany. Almost 600 former forced labourers from 27 countries tell their life stories in comprehensive audio and video interviews. Since 22 January 2009, the digitized interviews are accessible on the internet at www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de.

National Socialist Germany created one of the largest systems of forced labour in history. Not until 60 years after the war did the debate over compensation help to revive the memory of the long-forgotten victims of forced labour. While the survivors strive for a living remembrance in the country where they lost their youth, historians increasingly ask about individual and collective patterns of memory. Today, however, only a few survivors remain to recount their experiences. To preserve and to present these testimonies to a wider audience is the aim of the digital interview archive “Forced Labor 1939 – 1945. Memory and History”.

Since January 2009, a web-based archive platform is providing access to nearly 600 life stories of former forced labourers from all over Europe. The collection of narrative interviews was compiled in 2005 and 2006 by the Institute of History and Biography at FernUniversität Hagen. In a joint project, the Foundation “Remembrance, Responsibility and Future”, the Freie Universität Berlin and the German Historical Museum aim to safeguard and provide easy access to these multilingual audio and video interviews and accompanying materials for research and education purposes.

With the aid of modern internet technology, schools and memorial sites, educators and scholars are able to work with the interviews in a variety of ways. On the website www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de, registered users can access interviews, transcripts, translations (available for about 150 interviews), short biographies, photographs and further information. Biographical short films and additional teaching material facilitate the use of the interviews within regular history classes, during project days and visits at memorial sites. Selected interviews have been integrated into a multimedia station within the permanent exhibition of the German Historical Museum.

The collection contains 583 comprehensive life story interviews with concentration camp prisoners, prisoners of war and “civilian” forced laborers. In 27 countries, mainly in Central and Eastern Europe, 192 video and 391 audio interviews were undertaken in the native languages of the witnesses. Most of the interviews took place in the Ukraine (82), Poland (82) and Russia (70). In addition to prominent survivors such as Jorge Semprún, members of “forgotten” victim groups such as Bosnian Roma (Gypsies) or forcefully “Germanized” Poles also tell their stories. About one-third of the interviewees were “slave labourers” in concentration camps; 134 witnesses were Jewish survivors, 46 Sinti or Roma.

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