

Remembering Forced Labour. A digital interview archive and the future role of testimonies in education and memory

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Introduction

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”.¹ It is dedicated to remembering the more than twelve million people that were coerced to work as forced labourers for Nazi Germany, while their voices and their memories are being passed on to further generations of scholars, students and pupils.²

Since January 2009, a web-based archive platform has been 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.

The collection has been presented with some comparative historical analysis on the 2006 and 2009 “Beyond Camps and Forced Labour” conferences.³ Moreover, working reports of the interview teams with first tentative interpretations of their testimony samples in the corresponding national or group-specific context have been published in the book “Hitlers Sklaven”.⁴ These studies are analysing how personal experiences and individual patterns of memory connect to, are influenced by or contradict collective narratives and national cultures of remembrance in different European and non-European countries. Hopefully, many other historical issues will be tackled when the interview archive is used in the future.

This paper, however, concentrates on the role of former forced labourers’ testimonies for educational programmes in schools and memorial museums. The task of preparing the testimonies for teaching purposes does not only impose technical challenges, but raises more general questions about future ways of remembrance. Why should German students in the 21st century learn about the history of Nazi forced labour? Can this process of learning help to understand the importance of human rights in today’s post-industrial society? How can we make video-taped memories come alive in classroom? What role can survivors’ testimonies play in the lives of a generation growing up with the internet, but without living eyewitnesses of World War II?

First, the paper gives a short overview of the collection’s content and describes the ongoing project of creating a digital interview archive. Then it puts forward some ideas about making sense of Nazi forced labour when teaching history today. Finally it examines the potentials and risks of using audiovisual testimonies in education.

Genesis and Content of the Interview Collection

The digital archive “Forced Labor 1939 – 1945. Memory and History” is based on a collection of 583 narrative interviews with former concentration camp inmates, prisoners of war and ‘civilian’ forced

1 See <http://www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de>.

2 The term forced labour is used in a broad sense here, comprising bonded work under German civilian, military, police or SS control.

3 See the papers of by Alexander von Plato, Christoph Thonfeld, Gelinada Grynchenko, Margalit Bejarano and Piotr Filipkowski in the 2006 proceedings and Christoph Thonfeld in this volume.

4 Alexander von Plato/Almut Leh/Christoph Thonfeld (Eds.): *Hitlers Sklaven. Lebensgeschichtliche Analysen zur Zwangsarbeit im internationalen Vergleich*. Wien/Köln: Böhlau 2008.

labourers. The collection was created between 2005 and 2006 within the project “Documentation of Biographical Interviews with Former Slave and Forced Labourers”. Historically versed and personally committed interview teams from 32 different institutions conducted the interviews and prepared the accompanying materials. The methodological instructions and guidelines were set up by the Oral History expert Alexander von Plato. The coordination of the collaboration project, financed by the Foundation “Remembrance, Responsibility and Future”, was in the hands of the Institute for History and Biography at the FernUniversität Hagen.⁵ Among the 32 interview projects were academic institutions like the Yale University or the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences as well as experienced project groups from non-governmental initiatives like Memorial Moscow, Berlin History Workshop or *Živá paměť* Prague.⁶

These interview teams conducted 192 video and 391 audio interviews in 27 countries. The comprehensive life story interviews took three to four hours on average; most were conducted in the interviewees’ homes in their native or everyday language. Apart from the actual audio and video tapes, the collection contains photos, documents and further accompanying material. Nearly all interviews were transcribed and characterised by datasheets, interview protocols and short biographies; about 150 video interviews have also been translated into German. Over 4000 scans of personal documents and historical or current photographs supplement the recordings of about 1900 interview hours.

Most of the interviews took place in the Ukraine (82), Poland (82) and Russia (70).⁷ Due to some two person interviews, a total of 590 witnesses were interviewed, 341 men and 249 women. Nearly half of them are women. Their ages range from 65 to 98 years. 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.

Some examples can hardly show the wide variety of witnesses and experiences in the collection: Valentina K. was a Belorussian kitchen helper in Reutlingen, Germany. Her mother actively supported the partisan campaign, which led to the arrest of mother and daughter in February of 1944. Valentina was tortured during the interrogation and deported a few days later to work in Germany. Her mother was sent to France. The Ukrainian Wasyl B. was deported to Bavaria in 1942 as a forced labourer in a metal factory. Instead of returning to the Soviet Union, he emigrated to the UK via Belgium in 1948. According to him, this was the best decision he ever made.

Emilia B. was deported from the Polish region of Zamość in 1943. She had to work at Pertrix battery factory owned by the Quandt family. Feeling homesick in the barrack camp in Berlin, she started writing poetry. The Pole Jerzy Cz. was deported to Flossenbürg Concentration Camp during the Warsaw Uprising in 1944. He had to perform forced labour at a satellite camp near Dresden. As a “displaced person” he remained in Germany after 1945 before emigrating to the UK in 1947.

The Czech Miroslav D. was sent to work in a steelworks in the Austrian province of Styria in 1942. After several escape attempts he was imprisoned in two labour education camps. After the Prague Spring he was expelled from the Communist Party in 1969. Shain A., a Macedonian Roma, was discriminated against as a Gypsy. At the age of 13 he was arrested by Bulgarian soldiers and forced to work in a mine where he suffered a serious accident. He gave a very lively audio interview in his house in a settlement near Skopje. The Frenchman Paul Ch. was sent to Germany in 1943 for Service du Travail Obligatoire (STO). In Lower Silesia he worked in a munitions factory, as a forest worker, in a cardboard factory and in an aircraft plant. After the war he ran a textile company. The Italian Jew Liliana S. escaped to Switzerland in 1943, was sent back by the Swiss police and then deported to Auschwitz. There she survived the selection and worked in a metal factory. The Hungarian Jew Eva B., too, survived Auschwitz as a child. She emigrated to the USA after the war.

⁵ See <http://www.fernuni-hagen.de/geschichteundbiographie/>, <http://www.stiftung-evz.de/>.

⁶ More information on the interview teams can be found on the website <http://www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de/> and in Plato/Leh/Thonfeld (Eds.), *Hitlers Sklaven*.

⁷ Other countries: Belarus 42, Czech Republic 40, USA 30, Israel 28, Slovenia 24, France 21, Romania 17, Hungary 15, Croatia 12, Spain 11, Slovakia 11, Serbia 11, Norway 11, Netherlands 10, Italy 9, Bulgaria 9, South Africa 8, Lithuania 8, Germany 8, Bosnia 8, Moldavia 6, Macedonia 6, England 6, Latvia 5.

Creating a Digital Interview Archive

To create a digital archive out of this interview collection, the Foundation "Remembrance, Responsibility and Future" started a cooperation project with Freie Universität Berlin and the German Historical Museum. After finishing the task of financial compensation to former forced labourers, the Foundation "Remembrance, Responsibility and Future" has initiated and financed several remembrance projects, amongst them the digital interview archive "Forced Labor 1939 – 1945", which at Freie Universität Berlin is managed by the Center for Digital Systems (CeDiS) and the Chair for Eastern Central European History. Whereas CeDiS, the Competence Center for E-Learning and Multimedia, is digitising the interviews and developing an interactive online platform as well as educational materials, the Chair for Eastern Central European History at the Institute for Eastern European Studies is coordinating the translation and the scholarly indexing of the interviews. The German Historical Museum ensures the conservation of the tapes and integrates excerpts from the interview collection into a multimedia station located in its permanent exhibition.

The cooperation project was initiated in autumn 2007. Its most important tasks are archiving and digitising the material, setting-up an online platform, translating and indexing the interviews, developing learning scenarios and producing educational material.

Meanwhile, the German Historical Museum has accomplished the inventory and the permanent storage of approximately 2000 audio and video tapes and their accompanying materials under optimal conservation conditions in the museum's film archive. Selected interviews have been integrated into a multimedia station. Since January 2009, every visitor can watch interview sequences and get additional information on forced labour from the screens in the museum hall of the German Historical Museum in the centre of Berlin.

The Center for Digital Systems (CeDiS) at Freie Universität Berlin has digitised the video and audio tapes in a one-to-one process using the DIGAsystem software by David Systems. Qualitative post processing takes place without cutting or changing the content. The data formats Broadcast WAVE (for 391 audio interviews) and DV (for 192 video interviews) are commonly used intermediate formats. For the online platform, the files are being transferred to an internet-compatible format (Audio: MP3, Video: MPEG4 Codec H264 and FLV onVP6).

CeDiS is also developing an interactive web-based archive platform. After registration, users can access interviews, transcripts, the available translations, short biographies, photographs and documents and further information. Since January 2009, a first German language version is online for scholarly use. A variety of research options gives access to the interviews and supplementary materials. In a second, more elaborated and bilingual version of the platform, researchers and students will be able to search the interviews for specific passages or experiences, and then view or listen to the research results online. In addition, features supporting collaborative work (web 2.0) are planned.

The Chair for Eastern Central European History at Freie Universität Berlin is coordinating the translation and indexing of the interviews. Thus far, approximately one-quarter of the interviews have been translated into German by the interview teams themselves. For easy use in educational and research settings, the interviews in 25 foreign languages will be entirely translated into German. The cataloguing and thematic indexing will permit detailed and targeted researches according to a variety of search criteria, which will lead directly to individual sections of the interviews.

Developing Educational Material

As other testimony archives, the "Forced Labor" project, too, is developing teaching and learning material. Biographical short films and an interactive DVD will facilitate the use of the interviews within regular history classes, during project days and visits to memorial sites.

According to the different curricula of the German Bundesländer, forced labour is a possible but not compulsory subject when teaching the history of Nazi dictatorship. Following a decade of intense public debate about financial compensation, the history of forced labour has found its way into some text-books, but in general is still a rarely touched subject. Only on a local level, various educational materials have been developed to help teachers presenting the issue.⁸ The interview archive now aims

⁸ See the data base of educational material at http://stiftung-erz.de/fonds_erinnerung_und_zukunft/zwangsarbeiter_und_andere_ns_opfer/datenbank_unterrichtsmaterialien/.

to deliver learning material and suggestions helping to convey the memory and the history of Nazi forced labour to young people. A detailed concept of the educational material is still being elaborated; thus the following outline can only be a provisional one.

Three learning scenarios will be suggested: The “basic” module can be used in normal history lessons, where the teacher will show and discuss an introductory documentary and one of five short biographies that condense an exemplary interview into a 20-minute short film. The “project” module is aimed at interactive partner or group work in the computer room or in memorials and museums during a project week. The “presentation” module helps students to prepare their own presentations for exams in 10th or 12th grade.

Short films and interactive learning tools will be made available on DVD and online, accompanied by a teacher’s handout. They will focus on the biographical approach adequate to the specifics of the collection. By suggesting creative tasks and interactive learning methods, the educational material wants to support the learners in developing historical competences instead of just teaching facts and figures. It aims to deepen the understanding of testimonies in comparison with other historical sources. Students shall recognize patterns of collective and individual, even traumatic, memories in their historical and geographical context. At the same time, the learning package gives an overview over the history of Nazi forced labour, the different experiences of various victim groups and the witnesses’ individual biographies. The core questions are: How have the witnesses experienced occupation, deportation, forced labour and liberation and how do they convey their memories today?

The learners will be aided in developing a multiperspective view on history. The use of testimonies supports narrativity as a principle of historical education: Only he who can narrate history has understood history. Thus the material wants to foster the students’ abilities to pass on their own opinions and findings through a – usually media-supported – presentation to their peer group.

Forced Labour in Historical Education

For several reasons, German pupils and students in the 21st century should learn about Nazi forced labour. The exploitation of more than twelve million people for German war economy is an important aspect of the history of National Socialism. It touches topics such as Nazi racial policies and their public acceptance, the war economy and their profiteers, or the violence of dictatorship and occupation. Within a general human rights education, studying the history of forced labour supports the ability to recognize the importance of and the dangers to human rights, especially in the fields of work, migration and discrimination. It might even induce learners to get engaged in defending human rights today.

The different experiences of forced labour demand – and support – a differentiated and multiperspective examination of history. The living conditions of the forced labourers varied depending on status, work location, origin and gender. Civilian forced labourers had more freedom than prisoners of war or concentration camp inmates. Forced labour in mining and construction was far harsher than work in private households or in agriculture. In the occupied territories the conditions were quite different from those in the Reich. Women suffered additional harassment.

Thus, the term “forced labour” encompasses quite different forms of labour service – from deadly despair in an extermination camp to self-conscious migrant strategies in a rather normal, although forceful and war-time migration context. These diverse experiences are mirrored in the individual recollections of the survivors which have to be watched and understood individually. A collection of victims’ testimonies, however, obviously is limited in giving evidence about the perspective of perpetrators and bystanders. This side of the medal, which cannot be neglected in teaching especially in Germany, needs additional material and commentary.

Following the overall de-industrialisation, the witnesses’ descriptions of their work routines, typically in agricultural or industrial areas, give an insight into a period in the history of labour, which the pupils cannot imagine anymore, although it was still experienced by their grandfathers. Studying historical forms of forced labour can make the learners think about the relevance of work in today’s society with its structural unemployment and ongoing public debates about compulsory work for welfare recipients. For many students, unemployment is a well-known experience of their parents and a threat to their own future. Forced labour under dictatorship can be a starting point to discuss the role

of labour for the individual young person in a democratic society. In this broader context, Nazi forced labour should be compared – not equated – to other modern current forms of slavery and exploitation.⁹

Forced Labour and German Society

Forced labour was deeply integrated into the daily war routine of German population and bureaucracy. It was organized by an array of different institutions from police stations and labour agencies to tax authorities or health and pension insurance offices. It was much more visible in the Reich than the Shoah or the war crimes in the occupied countries. Every German saw hungry foreigners in the barrack camp around the corner, on their daily way to work through cities and villages or at the workplace next to him.

Over the last two decades, many local initiatives have researched the locations of camps and factories, often in connection with efforts to aid former forced labourers in getting their documents for compensation. Sometimes, remaining campsites preserved more or less authentic within the daily life of German neighbourhoods were marked by commemorative plates or turned into memorial museums.¹⁰ Encounters with visiting survivors were often used for collecting testimonies.¹¹ For several cities, the historic places of forced labour have been documented in interactive maps on websites that prove the ubiquity of the phenomenon and allow searching for traces in one's own street, company or school.¹²

Testimonies of former forced labourers can make these often very ordinary, everyday places come alive. Sixty years after the war, many interviews reveal astonishingly accurate details about the factual history of forced labour, including names and attitudes of Germans involved.

Often, the witnesses talk about how much space German camp guards, foremen, colleagues or neighbours had to act towards the forced labourers, and how differently the individuals used these room. To highlight these moments where individuals could behave in various ways within the historical framework of dictatorship and war is one of the goals of a human rights oriented historical education. Through these points of contact the archived material allows manifold educational approaches to the overall history of Nazi society and World War II. Furthermore, the witnesses' accounts of deportations and the terrors of the bomb war can be connected – and contrasted – with similar stories passed on through the generations in German families.¹³

Forced labour introduces the students into the often neglected areas of economic and social policies of the Nazi regime. It raises questions about those who benefited from dictatorship: In the “fascist class state”, as the Marxist interpretation called the Nazi system, the companies could expand their production capacities through forced labour, which later helped to bring about the German economic “miracle”. In “Hitler's people state”,¹⁴ average German workers were promoted to foremen and overseers. It were the forced labourers who maintained not only arms production, but also the agricultural supply, which helped considerably in securing support of the regime during the war: Unlike other European peoples, Germans did not feel much hunger until the liberation of the forced labourers in 1945.

The forced labourers' discrimination was systematically organized by special legislations and followed the ethnically graduated Nazi race hierarchy: People of Slavic descent were especially discriminated against. Romani (Gypsy) as well as Jewish slave labourers became victims of

9 Cf. Marc Buggeln: Were Concentration Camp Prisoners Slaves? The Possibilities and Limits of Comparative History and Global Historical Perspectives, in: *International Review of Social History* 53 (2008), p. 101-129.

10 For example the Documentation Centre on Forced Labour in Berlin-Schöneweide: „NS-Lager entdeckt“. Zwangsarbeiterlager Schöneweide wird historischer Lernort, ed. by Förderverein für ein Dokumentations- und Begegnungszentrum zur NS-Zwangsarbeit in Berlin-Schöneweide e. V., Berlin 2006. Cf. Martin Schönfeld, Von der Abwesenheit der Opfer zu einer späten Erinnerung. Denkmale für Zwangsarbeiterinnen und Zwangsarbeiter in Berlin, in: *Zwangsarbeit in Berlin 1938-1945*, ed. by Arbeitskreis Berliner Regionalmuseen, Berlin 2003, pp. 281-309.

11 Cf. the data base at http://stiftung-ev.de/fonds_erinnerung_und_zukunft/zwangsarbeiter_und_andere_ns_opfer/datenbank_kommunale_begegnungen/.

12 Cf. for example for Cologne: http://www.museenkoeln.de/ausstellungen/nsd_0305_zwangsarbeit/, Münster: <http://www.muenster.de/stadt/zwangsarbeit/gesamtkarte.html>, Braunschweig: <http://www.vernetztes-gedaechtnis.de/>, Berlin-Kreuzberg: http://www.kreuzbergmuseum.de/mu_unter/zwangsarbeit.

13 For the importance of family narrations see Harald Welzer, *Grandpa wasn't a Nazi. National Socialism and the Holocaust in German Memory Culture*, New York: American Jewish Committee 2005.

14 Götz Aly, *Hitler's Beneficiaries: Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State* New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007 (in German: „Hitlers Volksstaat“).

“extermination through labour”. The everyday practice of this discriminatory hierarchy proved the contradictions but also the widespread acceptance of the Nazi “race state” in the German population. Its historical analysis can hopefully support the development of critical historical orientation and may even result in an engagement against new forms of racism.

Forced Labour and European Memory

The “Forced Labor” archive is a German project with an international scope. Surviving witnesses from 27 countries recount their experiences of forced labour. The multilingual archive illustrates that Nazi forced labour was a European phenomenon. At the same time, it is present in different ways in the various national cultures of remembrance. In Germany, for example, victims from Eastern and South-Eastern Europe are hardly present in teaching and public memory so that many students believe that Germans made up the majority of Nazi victims.

Forced labour is a complex, often traumatic element of history in an increasingly interconnected Europe. The witnesses talk about subjects as diverse as traditional antislavism, occupation policies in exterminatory war, forms of collaboration, but also the post-war Sovietisation of Eastern Europe or the political foundations of Western European societies. Thus, individual recollections from various countries allow an international perspective towards German and European history.

The international debate about the compensation for former forced labourers has proved how relevant history still is for the relationship between Germany and its neighbours. This controversy showed how collectively shared historical interpretations are influencing social identity and current policy, especially within the process of European unification. Regarding forced labour, the national memorial cultures in Europe seem to differ considerably, compared to the gradually internationalised remembrance of the Shoah. The different national narratives and the individuals’ difficulties to be represented in them are reflected amply in the testimonies.

In the age of globalisation and European unification, the history of forced labour must be seen not only as a part of World War II and Nazi persecutions, but also as a part of a history of labour, migration and racism. It must be contextualised – comparing carefully and distinguishing meticulously – within the history of the “century of the camps” as the 20th century has been called.

Aspects of – mostly forced – migration are an important issue in teaching the history of forced labour, especially when regarding the migratory background of many German pupils. The testimonies reflect individual experiences of alienation and proletarianisation, the lodging in barrack camps, exploitation and discrimination at work and in society. There are continuities of discriminating labour and migration regulations dating back to the 19th century which were being revived in post-war migrations of the West German *Gastarbeiter* or the East German *Vertragsarbeiter*. Labour camps continued to be in use after the war for different groups of refugees and migrants. In 1955, only 10 years after the liberation of Nazi forced labourers, companies started to recruit Italian migrant workers and were urged by the press not to treat them in the way the Italians had been treated during the war.¹⁵

Vivid Testimonies for Education

Many victims of Nazi persecutions never had an opportunity to tell their experiences openly to the public. Only after decades, some found an interested audience. They underwent the effort and often re-traumatising pain of a narrative interview in order to pass their story to future generations. If educational work succeeds in making these witnesses heard in the future, it fulfils an – often clearly pronounced – desire by the former forced labourers.

The educational programme of the “Forced Labor” archive tries to live up to this moral appointment. It wants to give a voice to the victims, portray them as actors and give them back a part of their dignity taken away by Nazi Germany. Securing the testimonies is also of considerable importance to the witnesses’ relatives who sometimes follow the project with interest. Some of them are engaged in memorial and educational activities themselves.

Obviously, the collection of interviews is a specific non-representative selection: 60 years after the war only few former forced labourers who had been very young at the time were able to give their

¹⁵ Handelsblatt, 21.9.1955, quoted by Ulrich Herbert, *Geschichte der Ausländerpolitik in Deutschland. Saisonarbeiter, Zwangsarbeiter, Gastarbeiter, Flüchtlinge* (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, Schriftenreihe, Band 410), Bonn 2003, p. 206.

testimonies. This selection is especially problematic with groups that suffered the strongest persecution: A vivid testimony of a Jewish Auschwitz survivor or a surviving Soviet prisoner of war must not obscure the exceptionality of surviving mass murder.

Personal recollections of survivors or people affected by forced labour can convey history to young people in a lively way and therefore have been used a lot in history lessons, museum programmes and memorial events alike. Though sometimes running the risk of spectacularisation and emotionalising, these encounters have proven very successful in teaching the Shoah or the history of forced labour.

In the future, however, direct encounters with witnesses of the World War II will not be possible anymore. Written or tape-recorded accounts have to take their place. They cannot fully substitute a personal dialogue with a living person, because they lack the motivating authenticity and the moral authority of surviving witnesses, which is important not only for the students but also for teachers or memory workers.

For this same reason, however, written or videotaped testimonies give the user more leeway for a critical assessment and an individual interpretation of the testimony as historical source. Teachers can contextualise and prepare the testimonies for the pupils' level of knowledge without having to face the organisational and moderating challenges of inviting a camp survivor into the class-room. Students can ask questions they would not dare to put forward in the presence of this person, although many questions about personal feelings and experiences can not be answered by any other person than the witness himself.

Educational work with interviews faces two goals often conflicting: It wants to inspire a vivid appropriation of the material but also guarantee a respectful treatment of the testimonies. In school as in research, it is necessary to extract and analyse single parts of the multi-hour interviews following specific questions, but the teacher must always try to convey the totality of the testimony and the respect for the integrity of the witness' biography. In the limited time of regular school classes, this is obviously a difficult task.

Teaching with testimonies must provoke questions, give hints and create learning environments, without pointing a finger. Empathy or compassion can be a starting point for a process of active understanding, if it can prevent paralysing emotionalisation. When listening to memories of Nazi camp survivors, of course emotion is accepted, but it is not the goal of the lesson.

Watching and Listening to Testimonies

The accounts of personal experiences, fears and dreams, lived by the witnesses as youths, facilitate the approach for today's pupils. At the time of World War II, most interviewees were school children or young adults. Teachers' experiences with Anne Frank's diary or with the forced labour motion picture „Das Heimweh des Walerjan Wróbel“ prove that students can learn the outlines of history on the basis of concrete accounts of leaving school, separation from their parents, personal discrimination, but also resistance, friendship or love.

These experiences, told in simple everyday language and available on audiovisual media, are easily accessible to students, even to the growing number of pupils with reading difficulties. The personal accounts do not need long explanations, but activating tasks and interactive work opportunities. With adequate questions and proper methodical guidance, pupils will be able to determine and select specific narrations, cut them and put them together to own short films which can be presented and discussed with their peers.

Multimedia programmes allow a multisensual perception. The monitor, however, is privileging the eyes as sensual organ. On the other hand, the voice of the witness is the basic source of the historical narration in a video-taped testimony. The user interface and the whole learning situation must be organised in order to facilitate listening as the core learning activity. The current audio book boom proves the chances of an auditive narration in a time of sinking literacy. This is extremely important for the “Forced Labor” collection, which – different from other collections – comprises almost 400 audio interviews. They must be translated, however, before they can be used in the field of education.

The multilingual diversity of the testimonies poses a challenge to their use in education – what should a 15-year-old German do with a four-hour-interview in Ukrainian? In multilingual learning groups, however, it opens up new approaches: Children from migrant families can demonstrate their language abilities, bilingual schools can find foreign-language source material about German history.

Whereas a scholarly analysis of interviews mostly relies on the transcribed text, for a medial and educational use, the witnesses' pictorial presence and filmic charisma is extremely important. Already, a video with old people talking does not fit watching customs of the MTV generation. Their media expectations and usages must be taken into account, but can not be a guideline. Not only is it important to avoid a passive sit and watch attitude, it is also important to avoid a voyeuristic or aimless clicking approach. Educational material must give inspiration and help to other, more active forms of learning. The testimonies can support tracing the paths of forced labourers in the neighbourhood or lead to visiting a memorial at a former camp site. The experience of authentic sites can contextualise the testimonies, whereas the testimonies make the sites come alive.

Analysing and Interpreting Testimonies

Audiovisual testimonies bear a strong promise of telling the truth, but are indeed a highly complex historical source. The memories being told are based on decades of elaboratory processes influenced by the individual biography, the national or societal culture of memory and the concrete setting of the interview. These processes have been analysed by Oral Historians over the last decades. They have to be identified and analysed while examining the testimonies with the students.

This deconstruction must, however, not discredit the witness as unreliable, but instead make clear that history – even when based on governmental files or other written sources – always is a narration and an interpretative construction of the past. Many witnesses are perfectly aware of their subjectivity and are reflecting on their memory processes and narrative patterns in their interviews.

Narrative biographical interviews make the contextualisation of Nazi forced labour vivid and self-evident. Obviously, the life-stories do not limit themselves on the war years in Germany, but reflect different kinds of biographical break-ups and continuities as well as individual and collective patterns of remembrance or oblivion in Germany and in the interviewees' countries of origin or residence.

It is important to question the role of the interviewer as well. His physical presence makes interviews a form of testimony directed by others – much more so than written accounts.¹⁶ Even historical experts and experienced Oral Historians often cannot avoid to interrupt or misinterpret and kind of “de-rail” the witnesses in their accounts.

The situation in which the interview is being recorded must be taken into account as well. Some photographs in the collection show the massive technical installation of cameras, spotlights and other electrical equipment being stuffed into the usually small apartments of poor and aged people in Eastern Europe. These pictures can convey an impression of the psychological pressure of the actual interview situation.

Interviews show the witnesses not only as suffering victims, but also as creating actors of history. They also reflect, however, the limited perspective of the individual. They do not allow an analysis of historical structures and complex systems. Therefore, education must take an exemplary approach to the issue. It aims at understanding the historical context of the testimony but cannot convey detailed and verifiable factual knowledge of all the different aspects of forced labour. Although trying to give a historical overview, teaching should also be making aware of the fragmentary character of the testimonies – and of history in general – and avoid a canonisation of memory.

Other Digital Interview Archives

At a time when soon there will be no more living witnesses of the World War II and the communicative memory yields to cultural memory, many testimony collections are being digitised. They can benefit from the new technological possibilities, namely the massively enlarged data capacities in storage and download. The institutions involved are very different in nature: Since 2006, the Visual History Archive of Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation is accessible in Europe at Freie Universität Berlin, where also educational programmes and materials are being prepared.¹⁷ A selection of interviews from the Fortunoff Archive at Yale University has been prepared and made accessible

¹⁶ For examples of written testimonies cf. Berliner Geschichtswerkstatt (Ed.): *Zwangsarbeit in Berlin 1940 – 1945. Erinnerungsberichte aus Polen, Weißrußland und der Ukraine*, Erfurt 2000; *Ich werde es nie vergessen. Briefe sowjetischer Kriegsgefangener 2004-2006*, ed. by Kontakte-Kontakty e.V., Berlin 2007

¹⁷ <http://www.vha.fu-berlin.de/>, <http://college.usc.edu/vhi/>.

for students at the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin.¹⁸ Interesting online presentations were set up by the Memorial de la Shoah and by the National Audiovisual Institute in Paris.¹⁹ Whereas most of these archives focus on survivors of the Shoah, some smaller projects have compiled and prepared online collections of testimonies about antifascist resistance in Europe, about local history in Cologne or about post-war immigration to Germany.²⁰ Several initiatives support students to conduct and present interviews themselves making the most of newly developed collaborative web tools.²¹

In that sense, the creation of the “Forced Labor” archive is part of a general digitising movement of testimony archives. In order to exchange each other’s experiences a discussion between these archives should be developed. Apart from the manifold historical, technical and pedagogic problems in the digital and educational preparation of testimonies, the debate should also reflect about the projects’ own selection and presentation decisions: Which new collective memory patterns are we constructing with these archives?

Abstract

National Socialist Germany created one of the largest systems of forced labour in history. More than 60 years after the end of Nazi regime, only a few former forced labourers remain to recount their experiences. To preserve and present these testimonies is the aim of the digital interview archive “Forced Labor 1939 – 1945. Memory and History”, run by the Foundation “Remembrance, Responsibility and Future”, by Freie Universität Berlin and by the German Historical Museum. Since January 2009, a web-based archive platform provides access to nearly 600 life stories of former forced labourers from all over Europe. The paper gives a short overview of the collection’s content, the creation of the digital interview archive and the preparation of educational material. Then it puts forward some ideas of how to make sense of Nazi forced labour when teaching history today and examines the potentials and risks of using audiovisual testimonies in education.

Biographical note

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